You know you've got problems when Frank Castle is lecturing you on the importance of friendship.

Or: how Matt's broken leg becomes the least of his concerns.

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.
opportunity to explore some of the things I couldn’t in *True Colors* due to the constraints I put on the story structure.

Hope you enjoy!

Update (06/01/2018): This fic is currently being translated in Mandarin by the lovely sandunder. Check it out at [It Takes a Village (翻译/Translation)](https://takethatvillage.tumblr.com/). Sandunder also created a fantastic image for the fic that you can find [here](https)!
The beautiful banner you see before you was made by trappedinathoughtbubble.
Cheek on the floor, mouth full of concrete and blood, three broken ribs, and his left leg won’t move. Frank Castle shoves him in the shoulder, barks, “RED!” and Matt’s centre of gravity spins so far out of whack there’s no use focusing. He’s churning as much as the air, so his perception is clouded to shit. He’s really, truly blind, and his cheek is on the floor, he spits blood out of his mouth; it hurts when he breathes, and his left leg still won’t move no matter how much he pulls.

He kicks with his right leg. The motion is slow, weighted, because the blood’s running too thick and too much in his veins. His leg stops moving, but it takes forever for his nerves to communicate with his brain. First, that there’s something under his right foot; second, that there’s something on top of his left leg.

Matt pulls: hard. Heat prickles below his left knee in warning, but he doesn’t give up until the sickening drowse of shock sends his head back onto the concrete.

Frank is not impressed. He shoves Matt again before thundering away. Storming Frank tugging at wood and metal in the blackness. Matt can’t get a read on it, not through his blood-muddled brain and the horrifying numbness in his left leg.

“What happened?” which is easier to ask than where they are or what they’re doing there, though he doesn’t have answers for either.

“Support beam collapsed and brought the ceiling down on you,” Frank’s heartbeat breaks rhythm for a second or two before resuming its steady march. He grunts, something shifts, and Matt’s brain flashes red, red, red. There’s pain and screaming and only some is Frank telling him to focus. The rest is him.

Frank’s hands are huge and hot on his back, “You tryin’ to pull your God damn leg off, Red?”

No, but it’s a damn shame he can’t since the pain from a forced amputation couldn’t possibly be worse than what’s happening now. Matt stops tugging though, not because of Frank’s warning, but because pulling isn’t doing any good. He gives one final kick with his right leg and shockwaves knife into the area below his knee. “Get it off me,” he tastes bile and doesn’t swallow; the vomits coat his mouth so he can bark, “Get it off me, Frank!”

“I won’t be able to lift it much,” Frank admits tiredly. His heart is doing that thing again: not the strange tachy-two step signalling an impending loss of consciousness – that’s Matt. Frank isn’t saying something, and it’s interrupting his normally stable circulation. He rises, assuming a position in the darkness that Matt prays is helpful. His feet shuffle on the concrete, and his hands bend around the wood, knuckles grinding, “I’m gonna count to three.”

“Why…why don’t you count to ten, Frank? Or maybe…maybe fifteen? Hell, give me twenty. I think I’m starting to like this,” Matt buries his face into the concrete, heaving wave after wave of dusty air into his lungs. The fire is intensifying, rising up his thigh with every passing second, but it’s not the pain making him want to beat the crap out of Frank. It’s not the shock lapping at the edges of his consciousness, beckoning him to rest. (Rest, Matthew. You need rest.) It’s the thought he can’t abide, the idea and the terrifying uncertainty of what lies under that beam. Maybe this is a nightmare. Maybe the support beam hit him in the head, and he’s lying comatose while Frank shouts for him to focus the fuck up, Red. Don’t know if they’ll get another chance at this.

“THREE!”
Frank strains. The beam lifts. Pain shoots into Matt’s thigh like a bullet coming out of a gun. He feels his eyes peeling back into his skull, feels his consciousness draining out of him, but he catches himself at the last minute. There’s work to do. He yanks hard at his left leg, so hard the limb can’t catch on the beam as it moves. So hard his foot is too far away to get caught when Frank finally lets go. So hard he barely hears the wet, slurping sound his leg makes across the concrete.

Screaming again, distant this time. Pained and horrified and fading fast. Frank interrupts with more jostling. “RED. RED. RED,” he shouts, as if he can see into Matt’s bloodstained mind and the inferno on a collision course with his consciousness.

Rest, Matthew. You need rest.

Happy reading!
Somewhat Damaged

Chapter Summary

You know you’ve got problems when Frank Castle is lecturing you on the importance of friendship.
Or: how Matt’s broken leg becomes the least of his concerns.

Chapter Notes

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Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

Two things about this chapter – one, several of the elements will become clearer as the fic progresses, most notably how Matt and Frank ended up in the basement in the first place (though I’ve left hints). Second, I in no way advocate to conduct impromptu surgery in the sterile kitchens of local businesses, nor am I suggesting that this is what happens in sterile kitchens afterhours. Definitely support your local businesses.

I am so happy for the feedback on this fic! Thank you, readers! Your excitement is gratifying. I hope that you enjoy this next installment. Cheers!

“Tear a hole exquisite red
Fuck the rest and stab it dead”

~NIN, “Somewhat Damaged”

Red passes out from bleeding out, and Frank grabs the nearest tourniquet he can find: a belt from one of their assailants, a slight man lying unconscious amidst the rubble. Frank wraps up Red’s thigh above the knee, buckles it, and then twists until he can’t, until Red is shaking from the agony but blood isn’t pouring out of his suit.

Tying off the tourniquet, Frank takes a moment to survey the damage. Not to Red, to the building. The place was already a shithole, a derelict tenement in need of demolition, but the
collapsed ceiling really seals the deal. The old crates and tubes from whatever fucked up voodoo was happening down here have been crushed by a deluge of wood and plaster that took out their assailants. The only thing in tact in the giant warhead-shaped urn in the corner, the one inexplicably lined with red silk. Three of the five men Frank followed here are hidden under piles of rubble. The other two are wrapped around bullets upstairs.

They’re all Fisk’s guys. Got the fat man stitched into their cheap clothes and expensive guns. Frank hasn’t a clue what they’re doing here. All he knows is that Fisk is interested in the Japanese’s properties now that they’ve gone AWOL, and being that Frank is interested in Fisk, he followed the five gents here. He should have known the Devil would be waiting for them. Red seems to be putting in a lot of overtime lately, and Fisk is a special case for the devil as much as he is for Frank.

Frank confiscates the three men’s weapons so he can put bullets in each of their skulls. One batch, two batch; penny and dime - Jesus, Red is really fucking out. His only movement is to shiver from blood loss as the gun goes off. Frank grabs a cell phone from one of the recently deceased and hits redial. “Pick up,” he prompts them, returning to Red’s side to check his pulse. Frank flips the devil over. He got a new mask, one that covers his whole face, or so it seems until Frank prods. Turns out Red has simply grown a beard instead and not a short one either. Several days’ worth of growth to go with his several days’ worth of kicking ass and taking names. Whoever he was outside the mask when they first met, Red obviously isn’t anymore.

Frank shoves his fingers when the cowl curves over Red’s neck. He’s cold and clammy to touch, and his heartbeat’s thready, weak in the worst way. Frank withdraws his hand. “Pick up,” he orders the phone, and the dial tone finally cuts out.

“They fuck do you want?” he’s asked by way of greeting.

Frank replies without missing a beat, “A doctor, man.” He quickens his breathing, feigning terror, “The fucking devil ripped up half our crew. I got the other half bleeding out here.”

The guy on the other line is skeptical as hell, but he’s not bright enough to hang up. These are the lowest rungs of Fisk’s criminal ladder: five guys scouting one of the Japanese’s old properties for who knows why and one idiot who wonders, idiotically, “This isn’t Marty. Who is this?”

“I’m the guy who’s keeping Marty’s insides from becoming his outsides. I need a doctor, man, come on!” Frank lets his voice stretch into a whine of desperation. It’s the easiest part of his performance. Red’s shivering is starting to weaken as much as his pulse. Frank is getting a little desperate. “Who’s working tonight and where?”

No way Fisk doesn’t have a doctor on call for shit, some skeezy bastard with a licence, without – doesn’t matter, so long as they’re trained. Probably working out of an old warehouse with hand-me-downs from closed hospitals. Frank props the phone between his ear and his shoulder so he can heave Red into a lift. He groans audibly so his struggle can be noted by the guy on the other line. “God damn it, don’t you quit on me,” Frank says, giving Red a shake while he’s at it. “Don’t you quit on me, you bastard.”

“We got a guy on forty-first you can see.”

But he can’t be just any guy, Frank knows, not with Red’s leg in such shitty shape. He can hear the bones grating as the limb flops against his chest. Frank feigns greater agitation as he prods for this doctor’s credentials, “This guy any good?”
“He’s good enough,” the man on the other line snaps.

“Marty’s not gonna make it with ‘good enough’.”

“That’s Marty’s problem. Maybe Marty shouldn’t have gotten his ass handed to him by the freak with the horns.”

“Listen, man,” Frank stalks out of the ruined basement, up the short climb of stairs to the gutted first floor. “We walked into a fucking trap, alright? The devil was already here. He pulled the ceiling down on us. I need some guy who isn’t going to fuck up Marty’s leg any more than the ceiling already did.”

A sigh. A hushed argument. All good signs. Clearly, there’s another doctor on call, someone better. Frank quickens his pace in anticipation. He’s rewarded with, “Vanelli’s. Back door. Doc’s got one on the table already, so you’ll have to wait your turn. Hope Marty has that long.”

“Me too,” Frank agrees, hanging up. He tosses the phone back to Marty, who lies face down amidst the rubble, half his face splattered across the floor. Fisk’s getting sloppy with the hired help. Frank can only hope his doctor at Vanelli’s doesn’t fix broken bones the way the guy on the phone gives out information, or else it’ll be the second time Fisk has really screwed him over.

As a pre-emptive strike against the fat man, Frank takes a grenade off his belt on his way out the tenement door. He takes the pin out with his teeth and tosses the explosive back over his shoulder. Fisk wants to know what was so special about this building? He’s going to have to dig through the fire to find out.

The explosion is muffled by the dank, water-logged basement, but Frank feels the reverb under his feet as he moves to his car. Whatever supports were left fall down. The tenement collapses into smoke and embers. Neighbours finally wake up, coming out of their doors to see, and Frank reaches his vehicle before someone says, “Call 9-1-1.”

Red hits the back seat without waking. He moans, particularly when Frank elevates his leg on his bunched-up duster. He waves a fist into the seats and drops his other arm to the floor. Defensive maneuver, Frank recognizes, lethargic as it is. Blood continues to drip out of his boot onto Frank’s hands and jacket. His leg lies at an odd angle that Frank doesn’t bother to straighten. He simply closes the door and heads to the driver’s seat, swearing inwardly because damn, Red might lose the leg. Red might lose the fucking leg. And not because of his stupid decision neither: because of Frank’s.

There are loads of things that Frank can abide, but that shit’s not one of them.

Vanelli’s back door is guarded by a one-man army making slow rounds of the building. He lets Frank park before he reaches for his weapon, yet another mistake for Fisk’s hired help. The fat man might rule the roost in Super Max, but he sure as shit isn’t the biggest fish in Hell’s Kitchen, not
Frank draws the silenced Beretta out of the holster under his arm. “One batch, two batch; penny and dime,” he hops out of the driver’s seat and is halfway through being told not to park there when he’s recognized. Psycho with the skull on his chest: that’s him.

“Oh, shit,” the gunman quickens his pace to aim. He’s not fast enough, not by a longshot. Frank pops off a single shot to the man’s face, and his corpse flops to the ground. Blood mists over the plastic curtain shielding the closed delivery door.

Frank throws open the back door of the car, gets Red heaved over his shoulder, and hauls ass towards the entrance. It’s locked: one of the first and only good ideas these crews have had tonight, but Frank pounds and gets someone to open it a crack. They get a shot to the face for their trouble, and Frank gets Red inside.

The delivery bay is empty, but it won’t be for long. There are footsteps in the next room that echo against the gray concrete walls. The bay smells like old blood, plastic, and rust. Vanelli’s is the one of those heirloom butcher shops, passed down for multiple generations, and it looks to have resisted modernization. People still unload the delivery trucks by hand here, and the meat gets carried off to the kitchen through the metal door across the way.

A thin strip of light beams from under the door. Frank listens carefully. He counts one pacer, and he waits until the doorway is clear before storming in. One batch, two batch…the light blinds him momentarily, the white and chrome of the kitchen reflecting the stark fluorescent lighting, but Frank finds the silhouette he’s looking for and plants a bullet in its skull.

The man hits the floor, revealing a makeshift OR behind him. Vanelli’s kitchen is a solid space for bloodshed. Sanitary kitchen that’s easy to clean and loaded with knives? Frank wouldn’t be surprised if it doubled as a torture chamber. Surgical tools are arranged neatly on the counters. A body lies prone on the metal carving table, feet hanging off the edge. He’s got an IV in his arm and the doctor’s hands in his abdomen.

Thank goodness she’s wearing a mask: Frank’s bullet sent cast-off over the doc’s face, enough to completely cover her right eye. Her left eye gazes steadily at Frank, and her surgeon’s hands are steady inside her patient, but her efforts to hide fear give it away just as easily as showing it. She’s terrified in spite of – or perhaps because of – trying not to be.

“You armed?” She doesn’t move. Frank shakes his gun hand for emphasis, “Answer the question: are you armed?” She shakes her head three times, measured strokes, yet another illusion of calm that she doesn’t feel.

Frank nods, “I’m coming over there. I find out your lying, you don’t live through this. You try and call for help, you don’t live through this. Only way you walk out of here is if I let you. Know that.”

She does, nodding with the same impeccable self-control. Her hands tremble slightly for the first time since Frank entered, but they freeze again shortly after.

Frank holsters his sidearm and charges over. He hooks one arm around Red to hold him steady. The other goes to work. Tearing out the current patient’s IV and blood transfusion. Grabbing him by the leg and dragging him gruffly off the table. The doctor’s hands pop out of his open abdomen. They hover in the empty space, scarlet palms open in horrified surrender. Meanwhile, her patient hits the floor. Blood shoots out of his open wound from the impact, He moans, slack-jawed and suffering, a pathetic hunk of meat. Not worth the bullet, not when he lapses
Red spills off Frank’s shoulder onto the table. His jaw hangs open. One of his arms is pinned under his back. Frank works to free it. He’s taller than the last guy, Red, so Frank shifts him until his broken leg is completely supported. Not gonna make much difference if he loses the thing, but Frank has already done his part in getting it broken. He is not going to give the doc another reason to hack it off.

And shit, it’s going to be a miracle if the leg stays attached. Red’s calf is bulging under his body armour, stretched to capacity as the body floods the area with whatever fluids it has available. His shin could be fucking powder inside, and then what? The devil of Hell’s Kitchen floats around on one leg?

Frank can’t think about that. He rubs his hands over his head. Turns away and walks several paces. Deed’s done. No use worrying about it now. “Get yourself cleaned up, doc,” he tells her. “Got a new patient for yah.”
Doc gets cleaned up in careful silence and Frank double-checks the perimeter. He locks doors, checks windows, and takes an inventory, checking intermittently that Doc hasn’t reached for a phone and that Red is breathing.

“What happened?” she asks, tugging on a fresh pair of gloves.

“What ceiling fell. Crushed his leg,” Frank tosses his head towards the injury.

She comes to stand next to the table in a clean apron and glasses; glossy black hair pulled into a low ponytail. Serious to the point of overcompensation. She holds her gaze on Red’s chest as she offers a penlight to Frank. “Check his pupils,” she says quietly. Her eyes flit towards the mask to tell Frank why she isn’t doing that herself.
He takes the penlight. She moves immediately and sets to work on the leg, her back to Frank and the face she doesn’t want to see.

“You think your ignorance is going to save you?” he asks.

Doc stiffens. Her ministrations continue, but the way her shoulders drop and back straightens say that was her hope, yes.

Frank holds her in his peripheral vision. No need – she’s focused on her task of removing Red’s boot, the whole time trying to ignore him, trying to ignore how close his hand is to holster, how quickly a bullet can be in her brain. He fiddles for the edges of Red’s mask and has to unzip his armour in order to find it. Face to face with the devil in the bare fluorescent light, Frank notices how unsettlingly opaque the eye pieces in Red’s mask are. No wonder people think he’s a devil, fighting with shit like that in his line of vision.

“Maybe your lack of curiosity has saved you in the past,” he comments, finally loosening and lifting the mask from Red’s face, “but when this is over, I’m not going to be the only one with a gun to your head. That guy I threw off your table has friends who’ll want to know how he bled to death on the floor.”

Doc says nothing. She tears off Red’s boot, snapping the coagulated blood gluing it to his foot, and sets it on the counter next to her. The sock follows. She probes Red’s gray foot for a pulse. Red doesn’t react, not until Frank tugs at his mask. That’s when he lashes out.

The attack is over as quickly as it begins. Frank catches a forearm to his neck before he can pin Red’s flailing arms, but the tapping of legs against the metal table are what kills the fight. Red gasps, cries, shakes. He pushes against Frank’s grip, thrashing weakly in all the directions opposite his shattered leg like a compass needle on a frantic search for north.

“Easy, Red,” Frank shuts Red up before he can yell. The devil can be so damn vocal when he’s trapped.

Red lists his head away from the sound, or maybe he’s still trying to distance himself from his leg. The limb is rattling on the table as the Doc tries to cut at his armour. Her scissors aren’t doing much against his pant. She reaches for a scalpel and tries with that.

“Where are we?” Frank forces him to lie back. Red twitches his broken leg pointedly, gasping again in pain. “Who is that? Who are you?”

“We’re in a butcher shop. Doc’s trying to get a look at your leg, but she can’t cut through your armour.”

“No, she won’t be able to,” Red admits breathlessly.

She gives up but continues holding herself with Red’s head out of sight, “We’ll have to remove the tourniquet.”

“Better do it fast. I think…I think an artery’s been severed.”

Frank raises a brow, “You a doctor, Red?”

“No, I’ve…I’ve got a feeling…” since he is breathing rapidly despite his best efforts to stay calm. Sweat collects on his beard, pouring through the gap between his face and mask.
“If it was severed, you’d have bled out by now,” Doc informs him. “Partially severed is possible, but that’s not common with a crush injury. Your armour isn’t broken.”

The devil bristles. His tone goes from pain-stricken to icy, “My armour is knife proof. Blunt force is going to break the skin before it breaks the suit.”

Doc nods, twisting her head towards the counter. She changes the subject to a more productive one, “Cognition sounds good. How are his pupils?”

“They’re fine,” Red declares twice: firmly to Doc, even more firmly to Frank, who doesn’t buy it.

“Severed artery’s one thing, Red, but you took a hard fall onto a stone floor. Not going to save you from bleeding to death only to have you lapse into a coma.”

“No.”

“Wasn’t asking.”

Frank holds him down. Easy task with blood loss depleting Red’s reserves. The devil’s scrambling very quickly disintegrates into ragged breathing, then a pained gasp when Frank leans over his chest. “Broken ribs?” Frank asks, receiving a shaky nod in response. He’s careful not to jar them when he moves back. The doc isn’t interested, but he plants himself between her and Red for cover. Give the devil a little bit of privacy as he lifts the mask.

He knows the face. Or maybe it’s his brain playing tricks on him? No, Frank swears internally, up and down, he knows that face. The sullen tilt to the head, determined purse of thin lips, broad forehead, neatly parted hair: he’s so familiar to Frank, but the memories are harried, confused. He’s a bystander in Central Park the day of the shooting. He’s an inmate at Super Max. He’s one of Fisk’s cronies. Jesus, who is he – cop? Judge? Juror? Lawyer? Lawyer.

Frank almost drops the mask in shock. The fucking lawyer, the blind one who led the way into the hospital room. The one whose voice sounded so God damn familiar, but Frank couldn’t place him because he can’t place anything with his memory. Not his family, not the devil of Hell’s Kitchen. He’s stuck in the now, staring at this kid in a Hallowe’en costume. The kid who handled himself in a fight with ninjas – who handled himself in a fight with Frank – is blind. Right?

One hell of an act if he isn’t: marching around with a cane, favouring his ears over his eyes so much of the time. At the moment, Red’s gazing down and to the left. Either he’s purposefully avoiding Frank’s stare, or he has no idea where Frank’s stare is. His pupils look even though, suggesting the bruise on his cheek and forehead is a surface injury. A quick flash of the penlight doesn’t make him flinch. Red’s eyes don’t react to the light.

Frank marvels in spite of himself, not wanting to give the game away to the doctor but needing to ask just the same, “Your uh…your eyes working, Red?”

“As well as they can,” Red replies darkly.

Frank returns the mask to his face and rises to his full height. Doc turns around at last, waiting for the prognosis. Frank assures her, “Pupils are fine.”

Doc starts gathering supplies from a plastic tote in the corner. “Take off his chest piece,” she
says between glances at sterile equipment.

The ribs can’t feel good as Red rises into a sitting position. Neither can his leg, twitching against the metal carving slab, but he holds it together in stony silence. He reaches for the zipper on the spine, fighting a moan. The sound rises out of his throat as a broken and snarled thing, more pained and broken than if he screamed. Frank rolls his eyes and grabs the zipper for him. The devil’s armour unpeels from Red’s skin. He helps push the sleeves from his arms before Frank eases him back onto the table.

Red’s scars are waxy in the kitchen light, and they rove his chest up and down, side to side, along diagonals. This is when they’re not blossoming like flowers on the top of his shoulder or his hip. There’s a long one, deep and hooked and ugly on his abdomen; two more under his clavicle. “You got a girlfriend, Red?” Frank scoffs.

“Do I look like a guy who has girlfriends, Frank?”

Yeah, actually, he does. In his cheap suits with neatly parted hair, sunglasses and a cane. Red has girlfriends. Frank almost mentions Karen, a person whose name he can remember, but he stops himself before he can give out personal details. “Just wondering what you tell them,” he scoffs.

The Doc takes over before Red can answer. She arrives at the table ready to start an IV. One look at Red’s arm tells her there’s no need to tie off. The veins are bulging on his forearm. Two seconds and the IV butterfly pumps a small spurt of blood onto the floor. She attaches the sack of saline, discarding the bag used on her previous patient to make room for the new one.

“You have any allergies?” she asks, opening a fresh syringe.

“No,” Red replies.

“Ever had anesthesia before?”

“I don’t need anesthesia. I can take it.”

The answer is rehearsed, so Frank knows Red isn’t posturing. Doc continues prepping her injection using the contents of the vial in her pocket. “No, you can’t,” she says, drawing a sizeable amount of liquid into the syringe.

“I’ve had bones set before.”

“Setting bones is one thing. I’m suturing an artery. Probably going to have to close a split laceration on your calf. This is before I remove a piece of tissue from your leg to give the muscle room to swell, resulting in an incision that won’t be closed for up to five days depending on the inflammation,” she stares into the devil’s eyes, unable to meet the Punisher’s. Frank has to admit she’s good. Been working around criminals long enough to know which ones to tough talk and which ones to clam-up around. “I’m going to be digging around in your leg for at least an hour. You can either pass out from the pain or take your chance with the meds. Your choice.”

Red’s fear is louder than hers. His shaking takes on a nervous energy, so much so that his bottom lip quivers, “What are you giving me?”

“Fentanyl.”

“Show me.”
She does, for all the good it does Red. Frank reads the label for him and gives him a nudge to the wrist as a confirmation. Which is, Frank realizes, exactly what Red wanted him to do. “Give it to him.”

Doc punches the injection, tosses the needle into the sharps bin on the counter, and moves swiftly to Red’s leg in anticipation. She’s right to hurry. Seconds after the injection is administered, Red is melting into the table. The last of the tension drains out of his shoulders. His head falls to the side as his shuddering ceases, muscles sagging. Even the devil’s glossy eyes go dim as he fades out.

What the hell is his name? Frank tries to remember. Frederick? Franklin? No, that was the other one. The nervous one. The one who did a half-decent job of lawyering before Frank fucked it all up. This one had a biblical name. Michael? Mark? The fuck was it, Frank? Come on.

“We don’t have much time,” Doc snaps him to attention. “I need you to loosen the tourniquet and tighten it again once his pants are off.”

Frank nods, mute. He rounds the table, wrapping his hands around the buckle while Doc deals with the latches and zipper on Red’s waist. Weird not to see the kid squirming when he’s touched. To see the empty husk of the devil spilled out across the table like an armoured bloodstain. Doc rolls his pants down until they hit his thighs, and Red only moans softly, the wrongness registering in his chemical haze.

“Got you, Red,” Frank reminds him quietly, and Red’s sounds go from angry to exasperated. Clearly, Frank’s presence is no more welcome than the hands working their way over his legs.

The skin is pink above the tourniquet, rubbed raw from the pressure. Frank tugs the strap of the belt out of the knot he created. He unclasps the belt without untwisting it, knowing he’ll work faster that way.

Doc takes a deep breath. She finishes tugging the pant leg down as far as it will go on Red’s right leg. Then, “Now,” and Frank unwraps the tourniquet.

For a long moment, the kitchen is filled with the sounds of Red gasping, of his blood spreading across the table, of the Doc straining against the inflammation to free the injured area. She uncovers his thigh, and Frank hurriedly replaces the tourniquet before side-stepping her to take over. He has the pants off in one fierce tug that rattles the broken bones inside Red’s leg.

Red is silent. Frighteningly so, given the sight of his leg. His calf has ballooned to inhuman proportions, the skin mottled with bruising and popped blood vessels. The skin has split along the back of the shin, a huge gash cutting almost to the bone draining crimson no matter how tight the tourniquet is.

“Help me roll him,” Doc says, taking Red by the shoulders. Frank minds the kid’s leg, cradling it in one hand as he lifts with the other.

Lisa broke her leg once. Bad fall from a trampoline. Only Frank was overseas when it happened, so he couldn’t have held the limb in his hands like he’s doing now. He couldn’t have lain her limb down gently so the doc can tend to it. Lisa had a face that looked like Red’s leg in the end. A bright red hole of shredded meat surrounded by bursting skin. That’s what little girls are made of.
Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

This chapter exploded, but I think it covers everything I need it to. My outline has a series of arrows, checkmarks, and scratches. That’s a good sign, right?

Readers, I am so happy you’re enjoying this! Thank you for stopping by! I hope you are all having a great week!

“My demons are begging me to open up my mouth. I need them mechanically make the words come out. They fight me, vigorous and angry, watch them pounce. Ignite me, licking at the flames they bring about.”

~Halsey, “Hold Me Down”

There’s an awful lot of blood in Matt’s body and not all of it’s his. A good percentage of it pumps into his right arm, hot and heavy. He doesn’t need to follow the tube to see who’s attached to it, but he does. Unsurprisingly, Frank’s murder-hand wraps around Matt’s wrist and sets his arm back on the table.

“If I don’t remember, then I don’t remember what’s been said.”

He feels submerged inside. Once too empty, now too full of blood and platelets and salt water. His skin has trouble holding it all in, and while his shin is splayed wide open, nothing seems to be escaping. The doctor has her hands in there. Metal claws the muscle open; a scalpel to sheer away the tissue. She drags a long strip of something off his bone and leaves an open stretch of molten rock to gnaw on his senses.

The pain slips away the more he tries to focus. He knows it belongs to him, that those slashed nerves are attached, but hurt is fickle and fleeting. First his leg, then his spine, then his skull, then his chest, and then gone. Away, far away, and Frank’s checking his pulse as the doctor applies a deft row of stitches where the metal used to bite.
She says, “I’m not a bad person.”

Frank doesn’t respond. Hears her, sure. His trigger finger twitches on his leg, the tendon flaring with life to fire. He says nothing though, so the doctor tries again, louder this time, “I’m not a bad person.”

His trigger finger doesn’t tap this time, but that’s because it’s not trained to fire more than once, “Never said you were, Doc.”

“You said you were going to kill me,” she notes. “You only kill bad people.”

“You gonna tell me you wouldn’t deserve it – doing what you do? Patching up pieces of shit so they can keep being pieces of shit?” Her heart staggers through the next couple of beats. Frank presses on as if he can hear her feeling guilty, feeling worthy of punishment. “Thought you took an oath or something: do no harm. You fix these guys and they go out and hurt more people. That’s… that’s messed up, Doc.”

Matt rolls his head in Frank’s direction, mouthing, “Stop. Stop, Frank.” He gets a hand on his brow for the trouble before his head’s rotated in the opposite direction. Perception spins. The drugs leave him in circles and bursts. He’s swept out of awareness again to the sound of Frank: Frank spewing words like animals from the wheels of a car, “And you, what? You got a family? You got friends? The mob’s gonna kill them unless you do this? Nah. Mob docs like you, you’re not coerced. That doesn’t make you a bad person, just you make bad decisions. First for getting involved with the mob, second for being good enough to have me show up at your door.”

She goes quiet, quivery. “Please,” she begs, “Please don’t kill me.”

Frank says nothing. Does nothing. He’s still next to Matt, blood transfusing from his arm.

The doctor continues working. Her hands are strong at his ankle and knee.

A sickening, multi-syllable crack echoes in Matt’s ears like a gunshot, and the pain is back. The pain is furious, the pain is everywhere, and he is gone.

Matt wakes and the doctor is gone too. The scent of death is pooled around his feet, wafting up from a cold, dead carcass on the floor in a cloud of blood and GSR. He can’t make out any heartbeats but his, fast and fearful under his naked chest.

“Frank,” his voice has bloated from the extra fluids pulsating under his skin. He’s sopping, an old sponge, and that’s without the lingering anesthetic tugging his senses out from under him. “Frank…God damn it, Frank…”

Rising. Or falling. Matt’s not sure which, only that he’s moving in the sole direction he can, and movement is awful. The mask slides off his sweat-soaked face. His chest throbs. The area under his knee stings profoundly, reverberating off the plush dressings over the length of his shin. He tries to measure the incision in inches, and when that fails, he counts the seconds he spends listening, feeling. He loses track of that number too. Only when he stops concentrating does the answer bubble through his cloudy perception. Ankle to knee, his skin throbs gently. Ankle to knee, posterior to anterior: a poorly drawn cross of broken flesh.

Matt places a shaking hand on his knee. Nausea and pain rove through him from the touch.
He doesn’t recognize the limb or his sense of touch, but that’s him. Expertly held together by thick bandages and two pieces of repurposed lumber while his doctor lies dead on the floor.

“FRANK!” he swallows hard to keep from vomiting. “You didn’t…you didn’t…tell me you didn’t…”

The door bursts open for a maelstrom of bullets and bloodshed. “Doc said you might be waking up.” God damn it, Frank sounds almost cheerful. His respiration’s elevated. Killing does that to him.

Matt shoves off the table, body on autopilot. His right foot catches him when he hits the floor, thank God, because his arms are of no help. Neither is his left leg, all fifty tonnes of it, which drops like an anchor and rages the whole way down.

He grabs Frank. He doesn’t know how he grabs Frank – the laws of physics are playing tricks on him or maybe he’s playing tricks on them – but all of a sudden he’s back on the table, the wind knocked out of him. Broken ribs claw into his lungs. His hands are wrapped under the straps on Frank’s bulletproof vest, and he can’t let go. “Why’d you do it Frank?” he demands gruffly, tossing his legs. “Why? Why’d you do it? What the hell did she do to deserve it?”

Frank groans. At least, Matt thinks he groans. Hard to tell over spluttering and screaming of lungs as much as nerves. What Matt does know for certain is that he gets pinned. Frank wraps an arm around his knees, “Take it easy, Red.”

“She saved my life! She saved my fucking life!”

His voice cuts out. Bile rises in his esophagus. Matt resorts to punching to get his point across. He hits mostly air until chance lands his knuckles into Frank’s trachea. Frank grabs his broken ribs in retaliation. What little air Matt has left emerges as a thready scream before Frank plants a hand on his mouth to shut him up. He doesn’t need his mouth though; Matt continues throwing punches and landing them, but Frank absorbs them like he did the bullet in his brain. The man collects hurt for ammunition and fires it all back into his enemies.

“You done?”

Matt is not done. He lays into Frank’s face and shoulders, ignoring the rising insistence of his leg to STOP. Stop, please stop. “You’re a piece of shit, Frank!” he gets shoved back onto the table. His leg screams, burns, and tears. Not because of Frank, shockingly. Because Matt won’t stop. He can’t stop. Not even when Frank arm bars him.

“Stop it, Red,” that’s an order. “STOP IT! You come quietly or I make you. You choose.”

That’s not a choice, not for Matt. He snarls, chomping into Frank’s arm. Frank groans this time, a sort-of non-verbal “have it your way”. He releases Matt’s neck and Matt hurls himself at Frank with everything he’s got.

Up becomes down. Matt can’t explain it, but instead of landing on Frank, he ends up back on the table with an arm around his neck, head slammed against the Punisher’s chest. He can’t find purchase with his legs, wrapped as they are in Frank’s arm. Not to defend himself but to protect Matt’s leg: Matt’s useless, ballooning broken leg, twitching behind him as he punches and elbows Frank with the little strength he has left.

He almost sounds bored, “Stop, Red. Fucking stop.”
But Matt can’t stop any more than he can breathe. The futility of the situation feels far away, buried under the miles of Punisher blood pounding in his skull, the agony of his leg, his fucking leg, the one he didn’t lose, but it hurts, it hurts so much. Almost as much as the sound of her voice in his ear, “I’ve got you, Matthew,” as he flitters into the red, white, and black.

Distantly, he’s aware of Frank’s arm loosening on his neck, of air slowly filling his lungs. His legs slowly descending to the floor, the left one in absolute agony. A hand hovers in front of his mouth checking for breath. Matt moans weakly, sensing he’s being pulled away.

“You’re okay, Red. You’re okay. Jesus, fuck, you’re fine,” Frank warbles, pacing unsteadily. Matt doesn’t know who he’s trying to convince. He hears Frank tug at the corpse at the foot of the table for clothing that gets draped on his back a second later.

Matt takes that as his cue to pass out.

The car swaddles Matt’s hearing nicely, soothingly. He opens his eyes a crack to the patter of rain on the windows, the swish of windshield wiper blades, and motion that matches the inertia of his thoughts. He isn’t nauseated or dizzy here. He can place himself on the back seat, tucked under Frank’s duster, his left leg bundled and elevated by his armour.

He’s been drugged again. Light enough so he barely notices, or maybe that’s the car, but he’s drifty and sleepy and not at all bothered by being Frank Castle’s passenger despite being strangled into unconsciousness.

Speaking of Frank, “You didn’t….” his mouth is dry. Matt licks his lips, tries again, “You didn’t have to kill her.”

Frank releases a small, nearly inaudible breath Matt didn’t know he was holding. The lightness of his drugging takes on new meaning. Frank was worried about the dosage. Not the strangling: the dosage. He hides his concern with his rocky demeanour, “Never have to kill anybody, Red. I get to. I choose to.”

Matt’s tearing up. Damn it, the meds. The exhaustion. The subtle boil of torn muscle and open skin under his knee. “You feel good about that choice? Young doctor, saved my as….”

“Don’t remember her lifting that beam off your leg or hauling your ass across Hell’s Kitchen.”

“She saved my life!”

“She did a good job on that leg of yours, I’ll give her that. Even offered to stitch you up when the swelling goes down.”

It’s a barb and a good one, revealed strategically when Matt’s not capable of doing much by way of fighting back, “She didn’t deserve to die, Frank.”

Frank scoffs, “She deserve to live? Paying off med school by patching up pieces of shit who go around putting more people in the hospital? Hell of a business model, Red.”

Matt perceives her vividly thanks to the magic of pain meds. Her fear palpitating the room.
Her careful, measured tone. The gentleness of her fingers probing his muscle. The way she begged, quietly, so as not to be a bother. Tears creep into his hair, and he can’t stop them, can’t wipe them away, can’t anything except hate his leg, hate himself, hate Frank. He tears his mind out of the memory, from the doctor’s shuddering voice, by asking, “Where are we going?”

“You got some place you gotta be, Red?”

His heart pangs with longing for a moment. Only a moment. Because it’s better this way.

“No.”

“No more vigilantes to defend? Witnesses to treat as hostile?”

He purses his lips, “Not since you, Frank.” And they wouldn’t be having this conversation if he’d done his job right the first time.

Frank doesn’t notice him stewing, or more likely, he doesn’t care. He’s too busy being impressed, “Helluva a thing. How long you been blind?”

“Longer than I could see,” Matt shifts his head deeper into the seat. The leather upholstery budges, cradling his scalp. He absorbs the bump of the axle through his hair.

“And someone still taught you to fight the way you do?”

Matt isn’t having that conversation, “What did the doctor say?”

Before she died. Before Frank killed her.

“Doc said you’re non-weight-bearing,” among other things – ‘please, please don’t kill me’ being the most notable for Matt. “Not to mention full bed rest until your leg’s closed up. You got someone you can stay with? Anyone who knows about you?”


“No.”

“That law partner of yours?”

“No.”

“Your secretary?”

“No. There’s no one, Frank.” He likes the sound of that, there being no one. It’s familiar, like a punch to the gut or a cold-clock to the jaw. Frank’s steely silence hits him with the same brute force, and Matt needs to get out of the car. The stagnant air, the gentle motion: he’s complacent, docile, and he can’t be either of those things when he’s already at a disadvantage. He brushes the duster off his shoulders, wincing from his broken ribs and the dead person’s shirt he’s currently wearing. “I’ve got a place.”

“Not taking you there, Red, not if you don’t got help to go along with it.”

“Since when do you care?”

“Worked my ass off to save that leg of yours. Last thing I want is for that to go to waste by
dropping you off at your apartment,” Frank descends back into military-grade silence. Matt’s leg is his new job, and there’s no getting between a Marine and his work. He breaks out of his quiet, though, to ask, “You serious? There’s no one I can call?”

“No.”


“All your talk about…about hope and second chances, your God damn Santa Claus approach to fightin’, and you do this by yourself?” Frank laughs. His laugh is ugly, uncanny. All the makings of a laugh but none of the levity. “The hell happened to you, Red. The hell happened to you.”

A statement, not a question, one that cuts closer to the truth than Matt cares to admit. “Where are you taking me?”

“My place,” Frank says.

“You have a place?”

“Yeah, I got a place.”

“Where is it? Where uh…where are we now?”

“North on Malcolm X,” and Frank leaves it at that.

Matt tries to guess, “Harlem?”

“For now.”

He doesn’t panic. The drugs don’t let him. “You gonna tell me where we’re going?”

Nothing. No change in his heartbeat, no pangs of guilt over kidnapping him, nothing: Frank Castle might as well be a statue in the driver’s seat. Matt draws a deep breath, still not panicking, not thinking about how the city is passing him by and he has no way of knowing where they are or how they get there. He focuses on committing the motions to memory. Frank turning right sharply. A bridge. They’re in the Bronx. Matt huffs for breath, feigning nausea, “Can you uh…can you crack a window, Frank? I need…I need some air.”

Frank reaches back. No automatic windows on his car; he grunts his way through rolling the handle. Rain and chill sail into the cabin. Matt smells the Harlem River giving way to urban smells: old buildings, crumbling edifices; steam and sewer. South Bronx under heavy rainfall. He hears the car passing buildings but can’t get a good read on their height, and it’s been raining too long for the temperature to give anything away.

Matt reaches a hand weakly to close the window again. A few useless tries later, Frank’s hand reappears. He rolls the window back up.

Right, two blocks, left, four blocks…or was it three blocks? Matt shakes his head, but his thoughts don’t clear. The motion, the warmth, and the drugs conspire to send him off to sleep again no matter how much he refuses.

His leg comes to the rescue, aching powerfully in anticipation just as Frank turns into a gravel parking lot. Matt hisses, gripping his broken ribs for support and lifting his leg as much as he’s able to save it from jostling. “Almost there,” Frank tells him, but an eternity goes by before the car is stopped.
Matt doesn’t get a chance to think about fighting. The door opens above his head. Frank grabs him by the shoulders and drags him out of the vehicle into the pouring rain. He’s instantly soaked, but Frank still wraps him up in the duster before helping him away from the vehicle.

“There’s a step there,” Frank says. Matt tries to find it, but his senses are muggy, cross-cutting between rain droplets on skin, thunder in distance, Frank next to him, leg burning, leg ripping. He stops short and collapses against the withered brick of Frank’s apartment building. Groans warp into tiny screams. The muscle is punching its way through his skin, and God, God, please. God, please. Matt hasn’t a clue what he’s praying for, only that God intervenes.

Frank grips him under the arms as he sags. The rain mercifully covers up his weeping, but Frank knows. His pulse is turned down low, a pallbearer’s march. He pushes the door open, and Matt allows himself to be ushered inside.

Frank slings Matt’s right arm back over his shoulder, mostly dragging him over the chipped tile floor. A staircase catches the echo of their footsteps, and Matt blearily makes out the gentle thump of other heartbeats. Frank has neighbours. Two, maybe three of them. One cooking Italian and another playing warped Bach on a squeaky turntable.

The step appears at his toe. Matt’s head drops. His hand finds the bannister. Every inch of him, every cell, is gutted and raw, but instead of crawling onto the floor and dying, he gets up. One step, two steps – clinging tighter and tighter to Frank along the way, holding less and less of his own wretched weight. Pain blots out the world for several beats. His groaning and cursing intermingled with Frank’s insistence that it’s fine, he’s fine, almost there. God damn it, Red, breathe. And when he thinks he can’t handle it anymore, when he thinks he might die in fire and fury on the stairs, Matt hits the landing and walks some God damn more.

A door opens down the way. Matt’s ear tucks towards it, less an act of will and more a result of exhaustion. He can’t get much more than a staggered breath and a racing heart before the door closes again. Cello Suites skips on the turntable, then restarts.

Matt bites down on his lower lip, the secret heavy on his tongue. Someone saw them. Someone saw them and are pretending they didn’t.

Frank stops suddenly, fumbling in the pocket hidden under Matt. He draws out a key, unlocks the door, and pulls the dangling Matt inside.

No sooner is the door bolted behind them, Matt’s good leg gives out, having decided that this is as far as it goes. “Not here,” Frank tells him, pulling him a few steps further until Matt falls gracelessly onto a canvas sling. A military cot with a military pillow and blankets that feel like shrapnel on his hands.

Get up, Matty: work to do. But he’s not getting up. His arms lie there, his legs lie there, he lies there until Frank strips the duster off his shoulders. Until Frank manhandles him onto his back. Until Frank gets his mangled leg elevated. Blood races back into his chest and head. Matt reels in the contours of Frank’s ramshackle space, dizzy and blind and wheezing.

“I’ll be back,” Frank tells him.

“I’m fine,” Matt stammers, lying. Too late. Frank’s gone. Out the door and back into the rain to struggle with the creaking doors of his vehicle.

The room steals his ragged breath and remains hidden, inaccessible. Matt jerks his head, hoping to get a better angle, but the space is so Frank, so fucking Frank, that it keeps all its secrets.
He’s left alone with his pain, no idea where he is in the apartment. No idea where the apartment is in the Bronx. He’s stuck on the second floor of a walk-up wearing pain and a corpse’s clothing, a crushed leg and Frank Castle for company.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

The surgical procedure performed on Matt is called a fasciotomy. In crush injuries, a small section of the fascia tissue is removed to make room for the limb to swell. Based on my research (which is amateur at best), it’s the best chance to restore full mobility to a crushed limb and is most commonly performed on shin fractures.

I am not a doctor; I just write about them in fanfic. I strive for as-close-to accuracy as possible while reserving the right to hand-wave as the story demands. As such, medical professionals, I beg pardon and forgiveness for glaring inaccuracies.

Frank has a few tics in this chapter to compensate for his brain injury. I don’t want him to read as unintelligent; the character is obviously very bright. I was merely aiming to express how lost he can get. Please let me know if there are any errors of narration that can be improved for his depiction.

Readers, lovely Readers, I so enjoyed the feedback from the previous chapter! I especially enjoyed the speculation about the doctor’s fate. Thank you so much for joining me in this fic! I’m afraid there’ll be about ten days between now and my next update thanks to work. Please enjoy this chapter until then! Cheers!

“Loneliness is a place that I know well. It’s the distance between us and the space inside ourselves. And emptiness is the chattering in your head. It’s the call of the living And the race from life to death …and I know Yeah, and I know What you feel.”

~Annie Lennox, “Loneliness”

Doc gave him a list, and Frank rereads it to shit, till the square of paper is rumpled and glossy with use. A tear appears across the middle. He solves the problem by taping the note to the wall.
above Red’s head, next to his IV.

He’s not an idiot - not an idiot. He gets lost sometimes is all. Head’s a noisy place since the carousel, and he can’t let Red become part of the fireworks constantly erupting inside his skull, not when the kid’s leg might start rotting off.

That’s actually part of the note. One of Doc’s bulleted points has to do with the wound turning black. Frank remembers because it’s an automatic Abort Mission. He’s dropping Red off at the hospital and letting them figure out how a lawyer from Hell’s Kitchen ended up in the Bronx with an infected crush injury.

He made a supply run on the way home last night while the kid was conked out in the backseat. The doc’s kit had most of what he needed for the first twenty-four hours, but because of the procedure – fascia, fascio, fash-whatever. An –otomy of some kind – she didn’t close the surgical site completely. Red’s muscle puckers out of the incision, secured in place by a loose row of stitches. Fitting that she works out of a butcher’s shop; Doc left Red’s leg looking like a roast corseted in black butcher’s cord. Dressings have to be changed 2-3 times a day with saline soaked gauze so nothing sticks. The wound has to be closed up within 5 days’ time or else Abort Mission. Get Red to the hospital.

The rest of Doc’s note includes numbers: milligrams of Fentanyl and antibiotics, the hours to administer; flow rate of saline; how long the leg needs to be elevated and immobile for; how long Red needs to stay immobile for. That’s where Frank gets a little blurry. Details get lost in the firestorm he’s got in his head. Like how he knows his family’s dead but can’t remember what they ate for breakfast that morning; how Lisa’s eye colour is a mystery but her begging to be read to every night replays on an endless loop. The dose he gave Red in the car last night weighed on him until he heard the kid wake up in the backseat, and he triple-checked the dosage on that. Frank’s brain doesn’t do details unless they’re staring up at him through the scope of a gun.

The leg has to be elevated and immobile for at least a day if not two, and Red proves himself to be a wormy little shit. A steady diet of Fentanyl can only slow him down. He sleeps for a while after each injection, but eventually he starts moving. He twists on the cot, pushes the blanket off his shoulders, tugs back when Frank tries to remove it completely. The blanket is all Red’s wearing, Frank having stripped him down for convenience, and the way Red shirks it off before burying himself in it makes Frank think he’s got a fever. One touch of his forehead, though, with Red swerving as if to dodge a blow, tells Frank the kid’s not sick. He’s fucking annoying is what.

At one point the blanket snakes around his good leg from all his squirming, and Red digs in his heel to stop Frank from freeing him. He grumble – fucking growls, as if berating Frank to back off, get his own blanket. This one is useless and uncomfortable but it’s fucking his.

“You got it, Red,” Frank backs off, but he isn’t two steps away before Red is shivering, gasping; his fingers curling sluggishly at the edges of the twisted blanket that Frank just finished trying to give him. Frank has half a mind to let him struggle back to sleep until Red starts flexing the thigh muscles on his broken leg to move. His gasping turns into keening, and that’s when Frank returns to save the poor kid. He drapes the blanket over Red, who immediately falls back into druggy stillness, exhaling in relief.

A few seconds later, the blanket is on the floor. Red tries and fails at turning onto his left side. Frank sits beside the cot and watches him collapse from the effort. His eyes swing rapidly under his closed lids. He works his mouth in frustration, releasing a series of low grumbles and moans. Then he’s back under, so deep that he doesn’t move when Frank replaces the blanket up to his waist.
Frustrating as the kid is, Frank knows the feeling. He’s antsy as hell waiting out Doc’s orders. Coffee makes it worse, as do the reports from his police scanner, but there’s nothing else to do with Red on the move. The wound looks healthy. Red’s foot has strong circulation. Nothing turns black or smells rank. Urine’s clear, so no kidney damage. His broken ribs are set neatly with tape. Frank can’t bring himself to risk Red ruinating it all in a drugged haze, even if it means planting himself by the cot to watch the blanket wrapping around Red’s good leg again.

The alarm on his phone goes off. Frank grabs the pre-loaded syringe and injects the contents into the kid’s IV line. Red fades. He seems to drain out of a hole in his chest, curling slightly inwards before disappearing. One his hand flops across his waist, fingers limp, and Frank doesn’t know if it’s to pull the blanket closer or push it away.

It’s dark when Red breaks out of the spell. He kicks his good heel into the frame of the cot, drawing himself into a sitting position. He fumbles for a handhold at his sides, behind him, above him, finally finding the window frame with a clumsy grip. The muscles in his arm strain, but his face is open, shockingly vacant. Whatever doubts Frank had about Red’s eyes are gone. The kid stares sightlessly, meaninglessly, while he fumbles for words with a slackened mouth.

“Red,” Frank moves to stop him, but Red’s body does the work for him. His sudden change in elevation sends blood shooting back into his leg while the effort sets off his broken ribs. Red hugs an arm around his chest – bad idea, one that lands him back on the cot with a twisted yell.

One hand flies to his face, scrubbing hard, like he’s trying to clear the blindness out of his eyes. The other screws up into the blanket until the tendons pop out of his arm. Every exhale brings another desperate, ragged huff. Frank checks his alarm: Red’s next dose isn’t for a while, but Doc’s note has a point about managing breakthrough pain. He gets a needle, draws the dosage. “Hang in there, Red,” he pops the needle into the IV, “I got you. I got you.”

Red looks about ready to drive his hand through his eye sockets and out the other side of his skull. Nevertheless, he begs, “No. No more, Frank. Please. Please, no more.”

Frank gives him a second to change his mind. Red doesn’t. He carries on with his breathless pleads of no more and please until Frank withdraws the syringe from the port. He recaps the needle, then grabs Red’s free hand out of the blankets, shoves the syringe into his palm, and guides him to the windowsill. “In case you change your mind,” Frank says.

Red nods in thanks, releasing the syringe. He pulls his hand back towards his broken ribs and gets his breathing under control. His shoulders peel away from the cot, curling upwards in self-defence. Frank sighs, “Got no interest in hurting you, Red,” but the kid answers by tugging the blanket slightly higher on his waist. He’s embarrassed, not to mention uncomfortable. The second he lets go of the blanket, his arms tense at his waist. He picks softly at his wrists and forearms.

“Narcotics’ll stop itching soon,” Frank reassures him.

“Yeah,” Red agrees. He digs his hands into his waist to hold them steady. “Where am I?”

“My place.”

“Yeah, but…but where in your place? I can’t…” he tilts his head this way and that by degrees only. His lip quivers in spite of his self-control. “Describe it to me.”
Frank looks around. What the hell is there to describe? “Four walls, a ceiling; couple windows…”

“Way to help me out here, Frank.”

“Don’t know what you’re expecting, Red. You need to know how many paces to the front door, that sort of thing?”

“I don’t want to be here. You should have…take me home,” he stacks his face into a series of resolute lines. “Take me home.”

As soon as possible, Frank thinks. He looks towards the mount of flesh, bone, and bandages elevated at the bottom of the bed. “You want me to describe something? Your calf muscle’s looking to fall out through your skin. You can’t get out of bed for the next twenty-four hours.”

The kid’s eyes are impassive. His mouth, however, is shaking. Fuck, he looks young. Fear takes the bravado right out of him. Frank takes that as a sign that he’s finally getting it, “You wanna leave after your leg’s sewn up, I’ll take you anywhere you wanna go. But you better have somebody to wait on your hand and foot. Doc said you’re non-weight bearing.”

“I’ll get crutches.”

“Jesus Christ, Red, you listening to yourself? You’ll get crutches,” he scoffs. Because crutches will make it all better. “You’re gonna clean up after yourself too, I bet? Shop for yourself? Take your meds? You didn’t scrape your knee. Your leg was crushed. Doc had to cut part of it out to get the circulation back in your foot. You’ll be back on your ass and in a hospital if you go home alone.”

Red’s mouth stops quivering. He tilts his head toward Frank, glowering effectively despite his gaze being fixed away. Bravado gone, replaced with something dark, something wicked. Frank caught a glimpse of it on the roof that night, and here it is again, rawer this time, angrier. “Yeah, and what the hell do you care, Frank? This is what you wanted, isn’t it? You wanted me out of your way? Well, I’m out, Frank.”

“This isn’t what I wanted,” not exactly. Frank has to admit that the kid’s a fucking nuisance in and out of the suit, but a crushed leg is a shit way to bench a decent fighter. Not to mention the fact that he’s the reason for it. “I wanted you to give up your little crusade yourself. Kind of expected you to after what happened with the Japanese. But there you are on their turf, following Fisk’s guys.”

“I wasn’t following Fisk’s guys.”

Not the answer Frank was expecting. “What the hell were you there for, then?”

Red isn’t about to say. He zips his mouth up tight, almost doesn’t answer, but his face sags in resignation a second later. “I was looking for someone.”

He might as well have not answered.

Frank is about to ask who when Red looks to him, “Those men in the basement – they work for Fisk?”

“He’s got a few groups in the city. Found a few of ‘em poking around in the Japanese’s old properties.”
Red sighs, “He’s mobilizing.”

“That would be my guess,” Frank agrees. “Only matter of time before he’s out of Super Max.”

“Great.” Red stares into the ceiling. He shakes his head slightly, not at Frank this time. This is all self-loathing. Resentment for his injured leg, for being stuck in bed, for not protecting the city. Frank recognizes the expression all too well; he’s wearing a similar one on the inside. Resentment for getting Red into his mess, for having to keep him here, for not taking care of Fisk in Super Max when he had the chance.

“Say it, Frank.”

For a second, Frank worries he already has, and Red’s looking for him to repeat himself. “Say what?”

“You want to say something. Say it.”

“You a mind reader, Red? That how you get around so well?”

Red shakes his head, laughing darkly, cynically. “I’m a lawyer. I’m used to figuring out who wants to talk and who doesn’t. You got something to say, say it. I’m not going anywhere.”

Frank considers it. Telling him the truth about the basement. Red obviously doesn’t remember or, if he does, hasn’t assigned blame yet. Sure, ceilings fall, but this one wouldn’t have landed on Red if he hadn’t leapt under it. If Frank had listened instead of standing there, shooting.

“Just can’t get over you not having anyone,” he says at last.

“People change, Frank.”

“Yeah, but I never took you for changing. You lose your girl in the fight with the ninjas a while back,” and boy, she was his girl, that red-clad dame on the rooftop who died in his arms that night. Frank knows that expression too, the one Red makes now, like the air’s been pulled straight out his chest. His nerves lit up like fuses for an explosion that never comes. Somebody like her dies, setting a spark that burns and burns and burns, and it’s a hard contest as to what would be worse: to have that fire of her death go out, or to have it keep burning.

Frank sighs, detaching himself from the firestorm in his brain. The gunfire, Lisa’s open face, Frank Jr. in pieces, Maria…he gets back on topic, “Your firm goes under.”

“No thanks to you,” Red remarks pointedly.

“Don’t you pin that shit on me. You walked into my hospital room falling apart. That partner of yours – what’s his name? Foghorn? Foggy? He didn’t want to be there. The only people who wanted my case was you and your secretary. And you weren’t there, Red. Too God damn busy playing half-assed vigilante,” Frank can’t believe he didn’t put the pieces together then, in the hospital room. His voice sounded so familiar. But it didn’t seem possible that a blind guy could do all the shit Red could. “You were itching to get the hell out of that partnership.”

Red says nothing. In fact, he says the exact opposite of nothing. His silence is deafening. He draws the air out of the room with his anger. Good. Let the kid seethe. Frank’s guilty of a lot of things, but screwing up Red’s rinky-dink law firm ain’t one of them.

“And don’t you go saying that it was to help me,” he adds. “All that shit you said while I
was on the stand. You wanted to help yourself. Make yourself feel better about what you do.”

“I don’t feel bad about what I do.”

“But you sure as shit feel bad for you,” Frank notes, “especially now that you’ve got no one.”

“Oh, like you’re one to talk. Who the hell do you have, Frank? Whose cot would you be lying on if it had been your leg under that beam?”

Fuck, the lawyer’s back, lunging his way out from the Fentanyl drowse holding the devil at bay. “I didn’t ask to be alone.”

“But you are. We both are,” and fuck, Red hates himself for that most of all.

Frank can’t say he likes himself much for that either. “Yeah,” he stares at Red’s busted leg, the one he helped bust, “ Fucking alone together.”

Happy reading!
Human

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I’m free, I’m free! The school year is over, and my holidays are beginning! As a result, I’m looking forward to resuming a regular writing schedule. Thank you for your patience!

I allude to some of the less savoury aspects of narcotic use in this chapter. They’re vague, but I feel compelled to warn you, dear Readers, in case you are a bit squeamish.

I appreciate all of the feedback I received about Frank’s depiction last chapter. I will definitely be going over his final speech to Matt; I felt that it worked, but it clearly needs some tailoring to clarify exactly what his intentions were. Dear Readers, I am truly grateful for your kind patronage. I hope all is well! I hope you enjoy this new installment!

“I can turn it on
Be a good machine.
I can hold the weight of worlds…
But I’m only human,
And I bleed when I fall down.
I’m only human,
And I crash and I break down.”

~Christin Perri, “Human”

Cold first, then warmth: water sluices over his chest and shoulders, and for a moment, he has an impression of the tiny bathroom. The tub rots into the floor over a snarl of copper pipes. Mildew and mould collect in the crannies, and the water is so hard that calcium wafts through the air, filling Matt’s teeth with mineral grit.

He focuses, though, and the impression vanishes. He’s swept easily into the wake of the hard-tilting fluid of his inner ear. All the stillness, the silence, replaced with a tremulous pounding in his chest and screeching from the walls. He balances head on the tap to stop spinning; closes his eyes, finds his breath, but the world vortexes out and away from him. The only constant is the sharp
burn from his calf as dressings unpeel from the exposed muscle.

“Use it.” Stick tells him, and Matt does, tugging at the lance of agony until he’s back in the
bathroom, slumped in a shallow bath of hard water. His broken leg is elevated on a makeshift
plywood shelf at the tub’s back corner so his surgical wound can be drenched in sterile saline.

His broken ribs tell him to ease up on his breathing before Frank can. They’re stiff and
aching and unhelpful. They cloud him. The fires in his mind’s eye grow hazy, smearing on the
insides of his skull like rock paintings. What’s more is he is content to let them. Matt can’t muster
the strength for anger or frustration, though he’s aware of both simmering away inside of him.
Adrenaline mounts to a fist in his stomach and sucker punches his respiratory system into overdrive.

Matt tosses his head, lost again. The tap is cold comfort on his temple.

“Talk to me, Red,” Frank urges. “You alright?”

Short answer: no. No, he is not okay, and the longer he lies like this, the less okay he is.
Somewhere beyond the haze of narcos and pain, the disorientation brought on by blindness, Matt
becomes aware that he is naked. His embarrassment climbs with every revelation that follows. His
skin no longer stinks of dried sweat. His abdominals burn from latent cramping. He vaguely
remembers being carried here. He shifts his arms to give himself the illusion of privacy, of dignity.
It doesn’t help. All he does is remind himself of all the crap that has to have been going on when
he’s been out.

Frank makes it worse, as usual: “Ain’t got nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“Shut up, Frank.” Better yet, never speak again. Go away, disappear into the blackness
along with everything else. Matt shrinks as much as his battered body will allow. He’s always been
acutely aware of the difference between being blind and feeling blind. One weighs on him; the other
preys on him. He feels the latter now with renewed vigor. There’s a whole world in the blackness
acting on him, and he has no chance of fighting back like this.

Frank stops what he’s doing to toss a damp washcloth over Matt’s groin. Matt almost tosses
it back: almost. Frank isn’t going to give him a second chance for coverage. He gets the washcloth
now or never.

The sense of exposure amplifies. Frank isn’t staring. He is fixated on redressing the leg. But
he’s right there, Frank Castle, and he’s been there for more than a quick wash in the tub. And his
heart rate doesn’t change for a second. He is a march towards entropy in common time.

Matt balls his hands into fists. He bites his teeth together and his jaw muscles stings louder
than his leg from the strain.

Frank makes it worse some more, “Don’t know what you’re so nervous about.”

He can’t articulate everything that he is nervous about, so he says again, exhaustedly, “Shut
up, Frank.”

“I kept you out for two days. Starting to stink. Narcos blocked you up the whole time, and
you finally took a…”

Matt bucks his leg, shutting Frank up and getting him to back off in the process. The motion
kills him, but it pales in comparison to his mortification. Every inch of Matt wakes up at once. He
slams his fists into the sides of the tub. He takes a kick at Frank’s face when the bastard tries to pin
his mangled leg down. He huffs and puffs and shoves himself hard into the front of the tub. The tap juts into his neck, and he is seated upright for the first time since having his leg crushed.

The vertigo alone is horrendous, but Matt is at the mercy of a body he doesn’t recognize. Injuries crop up out of the ether, joining his leg and ribs. Suddenly it’s not enough for him to hyperventilate. He has to groan and grunt through several breaths to get himself under control.

Frank’s presence is a boon to the whole process. The way he sits there, hunched over the leg, a stable constant beyond the chaos of Matt’s body. Unfazed and unbroken. “I know this is shit, Red, but you’re not doing yourself any favours by fucking your leg up some more.”

Matt seethes. He knows that. The knowing is what makes it terrible. “How long am I non-weight bearing?” he asks instead of the more terrifying question, “How long am I here?”

“Not as long as you will be, keep fighting like you do.”

“God damn it, Frank…”

Punisher’s prodding the leg again, laying out a neat layer of damp gauze over the open wound. The sting gives way to a cool sense of relief. No infection. The incision smells pink and glossy, salty with saline. Frank’s done a good job. “You’re gonna need a doctor again to close this up. We’ll see what they say.”

“You going to kill this one too?”

Frank doesn’t answer. He opens a fresh package of sterile equipment – bandages by the smell of things, and tells Matt, “This is gonna hurt, “ before it hurts. Matt jumps against the tap so hard he nearly breaks another three ribs. He returns to his senses slumped into the corner of the tub. Water laps around his tired forearms, cooling quickly. Frank is tying off the bandage on his leg so gently and so loudly at the same time. His heart is beating double time. Actually, he has two hearts beating out of sync.

“Still with me, Red?”

Matt figures out what he hears, “Somebody’s coming.”

“Figures,” Frank snaps off his gloves, tosses them aside. Matt doesn’t listen for where they land. He follows the footsteps bound for the apartment, the ones Frank goes to meet.

“Are you armed?” Matt asks. He doesn’t get a response, and his hearing is all over the place. He misplaces Frank amidst rattling pipes, footsteps, and creaking floorboards. “Frank, are you armed?”

The bathroom door latches. Matt’s perception clarifies as the vibrations pass through the walls. He is alone, immobilized, and Frank is out there very likely with a gun to his neighbour’s head.

“Get up, Matty: work to do.” Dad’s voice this time, more galvanizing than Stick’s. Matt gets himself back into a sitting position and forces himself out of the tub.

He barely gets to the rim before the strength in his arms gives out. There’s not enough water to catch him. Matt hits the bottom of the tub with enough force to knock the wind out of him. He tries again though, damn it. The inertia of the fall is such that he can twist onto the edge of the tub and hang there for scant seconds before he’s lowering into the tub again.
His leg. His stomach. His weakness. Matt lies in a pathetic puddle of all three, trying and failing to find his breath amongst them. He can’t help himself from reaching, but his arms won’t do what he needs them. The muscles won’t tense without shaking. His fingers loosen.

Voices reach him. The neighbour’s heartbeat goes at the speed of hummingbird’s wings. She speaks in a rapid whisper, one that gets muffled between Frank and his front door. Frank, however, is loud and clear: “Yes, ma’am. No, ma’am. My idiot brother, ma’am. Got himself in with the wrong people. He’s staying with me till he’s back on his feet.” Matt waits for the tell-tale click of the hammer pulling back, a chamber rotation. He sniffs for metal. Nothing strikes him but the copper piping. Either Frank doesn’t have a gun, or Matt is too useless to find one.

The Stick in his head suspects it’s the latter. “Pussy,” he adds.

Matt can’t disagree. He catches his breath in time for the front door to close, but he’s still shaking as Frank traipses through the apartment outside the bathroom. He folds his arms across his chest to generate stability. There isn’t much to be found. Matt scrubs the tears out of his eyes before they can fall.

It’s never been this bad. Not after Nobu. Not after the Hand. Frank shooting him in the head had less of an impact than this.

The door opens. Matt drops his hands back to his side and forces his gaze towards the ceiling, projecting what he hopes is nonchalance. “You didn’t kill her,” he states flatly, though if he’s honest, he is asking a question.

A towel hits him square in the chest. Matt catches it before the water can. “Not going to kill my neighbours, Red,” and unless Matt’s mistaken, Frank is disturbed by the suggestion. Offended, even. What the hell kind of monster kills their neighbours?

“Yeah,” Matt laughs, “You’re all heart.”

“Nothing about the heart. What’s the worst thing she sees, she looks in this place? Some scarred, squirrelly kid with a bashed-up leg. Big difference between this and a chained-up vigilante on a rooftop.”

He forgets that it all looks the same to Matt. “She got a name?” he asks by way of a distraction.

Frank doesn’t have to think about it, “Rina. Lives on the far end.” Probably the one who spied them staggering in together but was careful not to give herself away. Matt breathes a sigh of relief that he didn’t know he was holding. Somewhere in the druggy span of two days, he was worried Frank’s kill count would be getting higher. “There’s two others: Al or something, and uh… Melvin? Martin?”

The names dissipate as soon as they’re spoken, irrelevant in a way Rina’s isn’t. Men don’t feature in Frank’s memory the same way women do. Matt isn’t aware of him ever having killed a woman.

Besides the doctor, that is.

“They know who you are?”

They must. Frank’s image has been a mainstay on news networks since his trial and escape. The fact that he maintains a residence is surprising. Matt can’t sense major differences in his physical
appearance. Frank, however, sets the story straight, “If they do, they must not care much.”

“She sounds scared,” Matt tells him.

Frank chuckles, “Nah, she’s just shy. She can’t carry a conversation, but she’ll cut your eyes out soon as look at you. Little while back, two guys followed her home from work. She slashed up their faces before I could get to them.”

“Great,” his stay in Homicidal Hotel gets better and better. No wonder the neighbours haven’t called the cops. Frank might be the least dangerous person in this place.

“She let ‘em live,” Frank offers.

“Did you?”

Frank answers by appearing at Matt’s side and taking him by the arm. The callus on his trigger finger aggravates the Fentanyl itch burning around Matt’s IV port. Of course he didn’t let them live. Matt lets Frank sling his arm on the back on his neck. He flexes his bicep, curling his forearm into the suggestion of a stranglehold as Frank moves to lift him.

He stops a second later with a choked cry. His leg. His stupid leg. His stupid, burning leg swells with blood. The splint creaks as the shredded muscle expands, and Matt’s hearing fixes on that instead of his own wretched grunting.

The horror continues when Frank tries to carry him again. Matt pins a shaking fist on the man’s chest, towel clasped firmly in his fingers, to stop him. He swallows hard against his flustered gag reflex and holds another cry inside his mouth. With his free hand, Matt slings the towel around his waist. Then he shifts all his weight to Frank and hops out of the tub.

He pukes something hot and sour onto the floor, and the smell stays with him every awful hop towards the bathroom door because he can’t breathe hard enough to compensate for his broken leg. Frank switches sides at one point to give him space to elevate it, but Matt’s thigh can’t bear the strain. He has to balance precariously on the edge of the board holding his leg together, dragging it across the tile, praying it doesn’t get caught in the chips.

“Swear to Christ, you fuck up that leg-“

Matt can barely speak, but that good ol’ Murdock blood won’t let him stay silent even as his leg tears itself apart from the inside, “I’m not gonna…not gonna…”

“I’ll pick you up again, Red.”

“Move, Frank.”

They do: out the door, around the corner, back onto the cot that smells of a twisted, sick version of Matt. Naturally. He doesn’t want to land in the near solid cloud of two-day body soil, but his body doesn’t give him a choice. His leg needs to be elevated or else it is going to chew itself off at the knee. The muscle is shoving against his incision to make an escape.

Senses fail. His brain melts from black to scarlet to bright, bright white, and an eternity passes before another fire joins the mix, this one liquid and blooming in his arm. Matt comes undone, muscles loosening. Groans weakening. The white goes dim, pain receding, slipping out of focus in a quiet rush along with everything else.

A hand sweeps over his face. Not Frank’s: his own. Matt didn’t notice he was moving. His
bones have detached from one another. God damn Fentanyl. How much more can Frank possibly have?

Frank doesn’t answer, mostly because the question wasn’t spoken aloud. He spreads the blanket back over Matt. Funny – the blanket is softer than Matt remember, not to mention a completely different fabric, and its floral scent covers the more acrid smells coming from the cot.

“This isn’t yours,” he slurs dumbly.

Frank avoids the matter entirely, “You think you can eat something, Red?”

Matt abandons the trail of thought but not the blanket. He twists his good foot against the fabric, relishing the smooth chill of cotton on his skin. No more of that spiny, polyester monstrosity Frank kept him covered with for the past two days. “Depends on what you’re offering,” he replies.

The shrug is audible, “Soup.”

Figures. There’s so much metal in the apartment, Matt can’t tell canned goods from munitions. “No, that’s alright, Frank.”

“Suit yourself.”

He pops open a Tupperware container. The smell that comes out is fresh. Nothing chemical or processed about it.

“You cook?” Matt kind of had Frank pegged for a military rations kind of guy.

“Once,” but not anymore. Like so many other things.

The answer finally oozes through Matt’s brain, “Your neighbour brought you soup.”

Frank does that strong, silent thing he does, where he almost disappears from Matt’s perception. His heartbeat lingers, but his body heat drops. His personality vanishes. The same mortification that had Matt beating the bath tub winds Frank up so tight he becomes a terrifying absence in the room.

Matt makes it better: “Yeah, I’ll have some soup.”

Slowly, the absence refills.

Next thing he knows, Frank stops the empty mug from falling out of his hand. Matt falls back onto the cot in a doze. Soup and Fentanyl – what a dizzying combination. His head swings back and forth on the pillow to alleviate the spinning in his skull.

He feels better. Less anxious about waking up to new pain. More settled.

The blanket rises up to his neck. ‘Matt rests.

The fuzz of a police scanner draws his awareness.
“…Foley and his guys again…trespassing…said they were looking for a place to get drunk.”

“Aren’t they always?”

“I told them to get lost. Saw them headed down forty-second towards the waterfront.”

“What was the address again?”

The answer gets lost under the sound of Frank donning his Kevlar vest.

Punisher is getting geared up.

Happy reading!
Blood

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I have been writing Daredevil fanfic for a little over a year now, and in that time, I have done a lot of harm to Matt Murdock. Nothing permanently damaging, mind you, and my predilections for comfort mean that he always has help. But I’ve hurt him. I’ve hurt him in a lot of ways.

I don’t think I have ever hurt him this much before though. New personal best going on right here. I mention this because the original ending for this chapter was happier. Well, the damage was strictly physical. That’s happier, right?

This chapter took a lot of hard work (hence the delay following my excited, "All I’m going to do is write!" post last week). Writing these characters together is a pleasure. I hope I can do them justice.

Readers, lovelies, thank you for your unerring support on this. I’m glad you’re so invested. I hope you enjoy this chapter! Cheers!

“I’m the kind of human wreckage that you love.”

~My Chemical Romance, “Blood”

“Frank.”

Christ – here it comes. “Go back to sleep, Red,” Frank tightens the straps on his Kevlar. The skull beams from his chest between three empty holsters, which Frank fills with his custom colts. “You won’t know I’m gone.”

“I’ll know,” Red draws his hand into a fist on the quilt. “You’re making a mistake.”

“Usually am with you. Have to be more specific.”

“Foley and his guys…”
“Fisk’s guys,” Frank corrects him. “No way they found one of the Japanese’s old properties by accident.”

Though that’s exactly how Frank found it. This one never came up in his research. He got the intel by accident: one sick, twisted accident. His eyes flit back to Red’s splinted leg. Wound’s clean, he reminds himself mentally, returning to his corkboard. Wound’s clean and swelling’s down, so he must be doing something right. That incision can get closed up soon, and then they can figure out where Red’s going from there.

He looks back to his map of Hell’s Kitchen, an organized mess of pushpins and sigils, occasionally question marks. Tickets to the carousel in the upper corner, picture of Maria and the kids underneath. Frank meets their frozen stares with one of his own. A promise that this shit isn’t going to happen again, not on his watch.

Red sighs behind him, exhausted. “They probably didn’t,” he admits, and Frank takes a second to realize that he’s being agreed with. He might have found this address by accident, but the four idiots from the radio didn’t.

Frank doesn’t let that admission stop him. He deliberates between the sawed-off shotgun and his machine gun. Four guys, pretty small-time by the sounds of things: Frank goes for the shotgun and a hunting knife. “So what am I wrong about?”

“Going after them.”

Frank scoffs, “Conjecture, counsellor. Been wrong before, in your opinion, about shit way worse than trespassing.”

Red struggles to stay on topic. The way his breath hitches and his good foot shuffles under the blankets; the way he scrubs at his druggy face like he can force the disorientation through his pores. Frank gets sparks of waking up in the hospital like that. His voice, desolate and crackling, “Take me home. Take me home,” to a nurse with a deer-in-the-headlights stare who nods shakily and says he’s sorry, so sorry, it’s going to be alright.

He counts bullets into a pouch until the gunfire in his head goes quiet again. Red’s speaking helps ground him in the apartment, about the only thing Red’s speaking is good for: “I know them. Foley and his…his crew, if you can call it that.”

“You know them?”

“I’ve defended them.”

“Figures,” Red’s an idealist in and out of his costume. “Bet you’re wishing now you let the DA put their asses away.”

That’s not the point, not for Red, though he’s having a lot of trouble putting words together to form sentences. His speech slurs, “They’re four desperate guys looking for quick cash. That’s all.”

“Not helping their case, Red. Fisk’s got nothing but quick cash for people.”

“They’re not the Dogs of Hell’s Kitchen or the…the cartel or the Irish.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t like me going after them neither.”
“They’re nothing, Frank. Lowest of the low, bottom of the barrel. Even if they are on Fisk’s payroll, they probably…they probably don’t know that they are,” Red catches his breath. He clutches his broken ribs for support. Frank angles his head out of the way, not wanting to look. Not wanting to see. He has to go out tonight. The hotter Fisk’s trail, the colder his pursuit. He can’t let the fat man slips through his fingers, even if Red looks like thirty-seven kinds of shit.

“They do or they don’t: I’ll know soon enough,” Frank finishes suiting up. He grabs his duster and his keys. He heads for the door.

Red’s on the move, clumsy but determined. He props up on one elbow and spends a long moment swaying, trying to orient himself. His eyelids droop. Skin hangs off his bones, the muscles having liquefied from the Fentanyl. He looks so young with the blanket pulled up to his collarbones and the hair mussed down over his brow. Frank rolls his eyes, “Seriously, Red? Lie down.”

“Frank, please.”

That begging tone hits him right where it hurts. Guilt over Red can’t touch him there, not when Lisa’s staring at him with what used to be her face. “The fuck do you care, Red? The fuck do you always care? And don’t give me that crap about these being good people. You’ve got four guys wasting their lives doing shitty things around Hell’s Kitchen. It doesn’t matter who they’re doing it for: they’re doing it. So I’m gonna go and do what I do.”

Red lets Frank’s words simmer in the apartment, or maybe he doesn’t have a good answer considering he says, “These are good people.”

“Oh, Christ…” they may as well record this so it never has to be said again, “Let me hear it, Red. How many wives and kids will they be leaving behind?”

“Yeah, they’ve done some stupid shit, maybe for Fisk…”

Frank fires on all cylinders. Fucking Red’s got his foot on Frank’s pedal and is slamming him all the way to the floor. “These aren’t stupid people doing stupid shit. This is Fisk. This is Fisk wrapping the city in a chokehold.”

“I want to see him gone more than you do-“

“And you know who doesn’t do stupid shit anymore? Kitchen Irish doesn’t do stupid shit. Fucking cartel doesn’t do stupid shit. Dogs of Hell don’t do stupid shit. And not because the devil came and handed their asses over to the cops!”

“-because the system works, Frank! It can work! I’ve seen it!”

“You’ve seen it. You’ve seen people go away to prison and come back changed, come back good, Red, that’s what you’ve seen? Because it ain’t what I’ve seen. I’ve seen Wilson Fisk running the prison where you put him away. I’ve seen a District Attorney enter a bargain with three gangs for a hit on my family. Now four drunks are trespassing some more, pissing their lives away for a piece of shit convict looking to destroy the city. And you want to tell me the system works: well, shit, Red, you really are blind.”

Red looks about ready to burst, he’s trembling so bad. His muscles are tense with everything he can’t find the strength to say. The edge quavers in his voice, the fight in his stance is waning from his lying there. Fuck, he is lying there despite every effort to strike back. Kid’s hardwired to do one thing and one thing only, and his busted leg is getting in the way, “I won’t let you kill them, Frank.
Not Fisk, not the people he hired.”

Frank lets go of his fight too, redirects it towards the four men he’s hunting in Hell’s Kitchen. Fucking Red looking like a kicked God damn puppy, stuck in bed because of a fight he didn’t start that Frank just had to fucking finish. “What the hell are you going to do about it, Red? You’re geared up like you’re ready to go and do what you do, but we both know that’s not going to happen. You’re drugged up. The only thing you’ve eaten besides saline in the past two days is a mug of broth. Your left leg is held together by a plank of wood. All you’re gonna do is lie there.”

And it is killing him the same way it killed Frank to lie low after catching a bullet with his brain.

He lets the silence stand for a few moments out of respect, but with almost an hour between him and Hell’s Kitchen, Frank doesn’t let it stand long, “I left you a syringe on the windowsill. You take it when you need it.”

Amazing how quickly the spark comes back, how quickly it snakes down the fuse, and explodes when there’s something that can be done. Red nabs the syringe and chucks it clear across the room. He sets his face to stone, folds his arms over his waist, but all it does is reinforce the pout he’s trying to hide.

Frank shrugs. Fine. No skin off his back. Kid wants to be in pain? Let him be in pain. Let him scream until the neighbours call the ambulance. Let him think of a good explanation for how he got here, how the devil-suit got here. Let him see how the system really works. “See you in a bit, Red.”

Kid’s last words on the subject are delivered like an epitaph, “You’re as bad as Fisk, Frank.”

“No, I’m worse.” The thought makes the firefight in Frank’s head damn-near peaceful, homely. There are monsters in this world, and he is the biggest, baddest monster of them all.

Matt barely hears the door locking over the pounding of his heart. Adrenaline surges, but like the rest of him, it can’t get off the cot. He lies there exactly like Frank said he would, because it’s all he can do.

He refuses to believe that: honest, he does. He’s fighting as hard as he can, working against the drowsy pull of meds, the fluff in his skull. Dad insists, “Get up, Matty,” and Stick calls him, “Pussy,” and Matt tries his damnedest. By the time Frank is trotting downstairs, Matt is sitting up. His IV is torn out. He grabs his left thigh and moves to suspend his injured leg long enough to balance his right leg under him. He isn’t fast enough though. He loses grip; his palms and thigh are too damn sweaty. The weight of the splint carries his broken leg straight into the floor.

There are no words, no fucking words.

There’s fire, nausea, and a scream Matt catches with both hands on his mouth. Vomit splashes in the back of his throat. He pitches forward with a barely concealed roar. Then there’s an agony that makes his whole body sweat, shake, and be sick. The bones are grinding. He can hear the broken tips of his shin playing the muscle fibres like a harp, staining his thoughts the colour of embers with every pluck. Punching the cot doesn’t make it better, but it sure as hell doesn’t make it
worse. Nothing could make this worse.

Nothing except standing, which Matt finds himself doing a second later. He balances precariously on his good leg, bogged over in a hunch from the sudden rush of blood to his broken one. He moves his hands off his mouth to catch his breath. Bile and saliva hang off his bottom lip; he swipes them aside, refocusing. Not on his leg, no matter how much it rages; not on his head, no matter how much it spins. Matt listens for Frank’s footfalls, praying they haven’t gone far.

He can’t hear them: they’re gone.

Panic rushes through him. He might have passed out when his leg hit the floor, lost Frank as easily as he lost consciousness. Frantically, Matt scans the apartment building: heavy metal, kettle boiling, wind whistling, Rina chatting in her anxious rush, Frank responding. He stopped to talk, thank God: “…laying down. I won’t be gone long. You keep an ear out for him? Something happens, you call that number.”

Not my number, Matt notes. Not the hospital either. A private number. Someone else to deal with him. Frank’s apparently thought of everything. One wrong move on Matt’s part, and he can deal with Frank’s associates. He has to act now or never then. Nothing he do after Frank leaves will bring the Punisher back home except the blood of Foley and his crew.

Matt hops closer to the wall before he falls over. Focus, he wills himself, because there’s too much, too much of everything. The sensory overload is bad enough without his thoughts battling for attention. Stick and Dad urge him to action with their own respective mantras, but Matt isn’t sure what course of action to take. He’s naked save for a blanket in a strange apartment. One cellular signal he can detect threads after Frank on the stairs; Frank, who is scant steps away, able to charge back on a moment’s notice to administer another dose of Fentanyl.

The neighbours have phones. Matt can detect several buzzing away in the middle unit. Rina has one with her in the hallway chiming with an incoming text. The ringtone is standard. Android. Touchscreen. He could ask to use it, but she would have to dial, and she’s probably going to need an explanation about the 9-1-1 call he’s asking her to place. To say nothing of the fallout from Frank encountering the police on his mission, or the police tracing the call to his current location.

The police scanner could work…if Matt knew how to use it. He can piece dials and buttons through his fuzzy perception, probably get a frequency straight to Hell’s Kitchen. Frank is almost at the front door though. He has no time. He needs to act and act fast and he can’t breathe can’t walk can’t think c’mon, Matty. C’mon, Matty, work to do.

Metal screeches against bricks behind him. Matt turns his ear towards the bathroom to listen. The screech becomes a rattle, lending some dimension. Metal extends along the entire outer wall of the apartment building. Matt thinks drainpipe or gutter at first, and his inner-Stick scolds him for being an idiot. A rattle that deep isn’t caused by a narrow band of metal. There’s an awning, a platform, on the outer wall, one that runs almost to the front of the building.

And, as luck would have it, there’s a window in Frank’s bathroom leading directly to it.

Matt moves so quickly that he falls hard onto his right knee, left leg stretched out behind him. Chipped tile cuts into him. His broken bones jerk out of alignment. Matt bites back a scream, senses sputtering. (Don’t pass out. Please, please, God. Don’t let me pass out.) He grabs the sink and lunges for the window frame. He fumbles with the latch, throws the window open. His right leg wobbles under him; Matt folds himself out the window.

Nighttime. Sunset, actually. Matt can tell from the cool cut of breeze on his face and
shoulders, the soft trickle of traffic, the absence of sunlight on his cheeks. He reaches down to find a
rusted overhang built along the outer wall. A fire escape. His weight causes it to creak, but he can’t
feel it buckle. It’ll hold him, and he senses a flight of stairs nearby to take him into the parking lot.

There’s not a soul around the building for a good block save for Frank Castle, throwing open
his car door. “FRANK!” Matt yells, committing to a dive out of the window. He uses his arms to
control his descent, rolling onto his right side to protect his left leg from the window. “FRANK,
STOP!”

Pain slows him. Matt’s heart drops out of adrenaline rush, circling the drain along with his
perception. His body thinks he’s lying down and coaxes him into it actually, but Matt hears Frank’s
car door slam and he’s crawling like a slug on the rusty covering. “This is your plan,” Stick notes
disappointedly. Matt ignores the old man. Plan? What plan? He doesn’t have a plan. All Matt
knows is what he has to do: stop Frank Castle.

He gets back on his foot. His left leg pulses hotly, angrily, bones no doubt seriously askew,
but the dragging is slow going with all the extra weight.

The engine roars to life. “No,” Matt tugs the blanket more tightly around him to get it out of
his way. He hops along using the wall for balance. Frank’s tires send gravel spraying across the lot
as he peels out. Matt works faster, pumping his right leg as hard as he can, but he can’t compete
with a car on two legs, let alone one. Frank rips out of the parking lot and is gone, leaving only the
soothing sounds of nighttime behind him.

As if on cue, Matt’s right knee buckles, and he catches himself. On his broken leg. The
thigh twists one way, his foot twists the other. A volcanic erupts below his knee. All of a sudden
he’s a puppet on cut strings flung flat on the metal floor, and God, the good Lord Almighty, answers
his prayers. Matt doesn’t pass out. The pain is excruciating. His thoughts churn in shock, the smell
of blood grows thick in the air, but he doesn’t pass out.

Instead, the good old Murdock blood has him pushing himself back up to standing. He never
makes it, but making it’s not the point. For Murdock’s it’s all about the trying. Matt tries to get back
up.

Traffic’ll be quiet now. Frank will make good time crossing the city. In less than an hour
he’ll have Foley and his boys on meat hooks, and Matt will be here.

He’ll be here.

Matt yells. Throws a good punch into the wall of the building, hard enough that his knuckles
split and more blood fills the air. He drops back onto the platform and stays there.

Helplessness builds a fortress inside him. His insecurities mount faster than he can punch.
No amount of mental mantras help either. Apparently he is not better than this or stronger than this.
He is not a God damn warrior built from the stuff of Spartans. He is a dumbass punching a wall as
Frank Castle drives off into the night to kill. “That's what you are,” Stick chides him, “That's all you
fucking are.”

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

This chapter…this chapter was a lot of hard work. There was so much I wanted to include, even more that I needed to include...and so, like most of my writing, it ended up being so much work that I cut it into two. Unfortunately, that means that you'll need to wait for the next chapter for clarification. Fortunately, it means that my next installment is already mostly written. Yay!

Once again – not a doctor, but I write about them in fanfic. Apologies for the poetic license and hand-waving necessary to prevent infection/a trip to an actual hospital.

Readers, thank you. Thank you so much for your enthusiasm and encouragement. The response to the last chapter was overwhelming. I hope that this fic continues to hold your attention. Cheers!

“Got a secret.
Can you keep it?
Swear this one you’ll save.
Better lock it in your pocket
Taking this one to the grave.
If I show you than I know you won’t tell what I said.
‘Cuz two can keep a secret if one of them is dead.
Yes, two can keep a secret…
If one of us is dead.”

~The Pierces, “Secret”

“Get up.”

He can’t.

“Get the fuck up.”

Matt tried: he can’t. He so much as thinks about moving and his broken bone, the one peeking through his skin, spurts more napalm into his bloodstream. He isn’t going anywhere. He is going to sit and shake on this rusty fire escape, and if someone doesn’t come soon, he is going to
bleed to death.

It’s not a good sign that the thought doesn’t bother him. The shock has wrapped his impending death in batting and silk, and Matt has to work extra hard to keep his thoughts from resting there.

“Get up.”

He shoves Stick out of his head along with the thought of dying. Dad has to go too, but for different reasons. “I’m here, Matty. It’s me, it’s Dad,” followed by the warm press of Battlin’ Jack’s fight-battered cheeks against his hands plays Matt into a frightening state of calm. He can’t be calm. He needs dry-mouth and shivers, pain and nausea. He needs them to break through his disorientation so he can hear the front door opening and footsteps slashing through the gravel parking lot.

A bag of trash hits the ground. The sound of her terrified heartbeat fills the quiet parking lot, a perfect match to Matt’s own thready pulse. She smells the way her blanket used to, before it was covered in his blood.

Matt can hear Rina dialing as she rushes up the stairs. Not Frank, he recalls: the mystery number. Some unknown third party coming to deal with him. He resists the urge to swear even as Rina’s footsteps jar his compound fracture on approach. There’s enough bile and f-bombs collecting in his throat to drown the Bronx if he opens his mouth.

He smells anger and tears and not all of them are his. He doesn’t blame Rina for one second when she dashes past him towards Frank’s apartment window. Her quiet voice is lost beneath the echo of her footfalls, but Matt picks up on a few things. “I can see his bone,” she tells the person over the phone, but there’s a surprising lack of horror in her voice. Anger is more like it: not for Matt, for the bone. The bone had one job, and it can’t do that right. “There’s blood everywhere. Hurry. Whoever you are, hurry.”

Great, Matt thinks to himself. Not even Rina knows who she just called. Could be a doctor, or it could be a butcher school drop-out who learned just enough about anatomy to hack off a leg.

Shock muddles his brain to pudding, meting the world into water. Rina wades towards him. She drops a stack of towels at his side. “This is going to hurt,” she tells him, her Russian accent finally emerging to make the word ‘hurt’ sound a dozen stories tall. Matt is about to say he can take it, but Rina doesn’t give him the chance. She shoves one towel into Matt’s mouth, another over his naked bone saying, again, “This is going to hurt.” And her pronunciation of hurt is resigned this time, accepting, which twists Matt’s stomach more than the sharp flare of agony as she applies pressure to his wound or the ache in his jaw from biting down on the towel. Rina and pain are old friends, and while they haven’t always seen eye to eye, they still have each other’s back.

“Don’t pass out,” Rina tells him, and Matt’s own, child-voice agrees saying, too loud and too clear, “Murdocks always get back up.” He is going to get back up, because Matt doesn’t know how to stay down. He doesn’t know how to give in. He has to get back to Hell’s Kitchen, and he has to finish what he started in that basement, and he has to beat so much shit out of Frank Castle. He plays chicken with the pain for what feels like an eternity, still not passing out, before a car rolls into the parking lot.

A door opens and slams. Footsteps tread quickly towards the fire escape.

The pressure on his leg loosens. Matt loosens with it. His body droops. He fishes the drool-slick towel out from between his teeth and throws it away. His breath comes in rapid gasps and
never seems to be enough. “Who is it?” he tries to say, but the words are whisper-soft and dissolve the second they leave his mouth.

Rina’s fingers hover over his ear, pirouetting through the air, but she never touches him. She can’t bring herself to touch him, so she mimes curling his hair behind his ear. “You’re going to be fine,” she states matter-of-factly.

Matt forces himself to focus on the clattering coming up the fire escape. He reads the space for details and gets stabs of familiarity. Of Claire. Of neopreme and antiseptic. Hands with surgical stillness. A substantial kit that tinkles with metal and glass at every step.

The knowing doesn’t vanish: the closer she gets, the more Matt recognizes. He shuts his eyes so he has a reason to ask, “Who’s there?” and the answer becomes clearer. This is how they met: his eyes closed, brain slipping into unconsciousness. The answer hangs on the tip of his tongue, no matter how impossible.

Her exasperation billows in Matt’s awareness like the flurries in a snow globe, carefully contained but wreaking havoc below the surface. He can feel her gaze fixed on the inferno that used to be her impeccably conducted surgery. “I suppose I’m your doctor,” she releases a tiny, almost imperceptible sigh. All her hard work is bleeding out. “This is the second time I’ll be setting your leg.”

Matt can’t believe it’s her, “I thought…I thought he killed you.”

The doctor can’t disagree with him, “I thought he would kill me too.”

“How did you…?” he changes his question: it wouldn’t be up to her whether she lived or died. “Why didn’t he? What stopped him?”

“I’m still useful,” she kneels down to inspect his injury. Rina almost goes into arrest from the proximity. The doctor doesn’t notice. She focuses solely on Matt’s leg, “Looks like I might stay that way.”

The text message comes at the south end of Harlem: an underexposed photo of bloody bandages straining to contain a peg-shaped bulge. Frank doesn’t get it, not with his crappy flip-phone’s shitty resolution. Thankfully, another picture comes showing Red doing his best impersonation of a corpse followed by a text: He needs a transfusion.

He claps his cell phone shut. Counts to ten, makes it to three before another message arrives: Unless you know another universal donor?

Fucking Red.

He phones her. It’s what phones are for, not this messaging shit. “The hell happened?” Frank asks, though he has a few ideas. A better question would be what the hell was Red thinking, but there’s no way Doc’s gonna know the answer to that.

She can’t answer the question he’s asked either, “I don’t know. Your neighbour called. He was on the fire escape.”

“How bad is he?”
This is one he should be able to answer, but the Doc does it for him, “Bad enough for me to text you.” Lord knows she isn’t going to do that unless absolutely necessary. She lucked out with the Punisher once: instead of getting wrapped around a bullet, the Doc ended up in a cab with the order to lay low, wait for a call. She’s not sure he’s going to let her go again.

“Fuck, Red,” Frank tears into a u-ie that miraculously doesn’t get him pulled over. He can’t help himself. Four assholes in Hell’s Kitchen are getting off easy tonight. And as much as Red’s an idiot, geared up is an understatement for what Frank’ll be if the kid dies instead of them.

He walks into the apartment to find an operating theatre unfolded on his bathroom floor. Doc’s sterilized the place as best she can with antiseptic and a plastic sheet, but there’s not enough ammonia in the world to make his shitty bathroom meet hospital standards. Red is going to need some heavy antibiotics after this.

A dose of common sense would be good too. His leg is a fucking disgrace. The exposed bone is the least disturbing part of the scene. Bruising abounds. Swaths of burst capillaries break for patches of impossibly white skin. The incision, formerly pink from good treatment, is now bright red, inflamed: a crimson maw snarling with black butcher’s cord teeth and a bone for a buck tooth.

“Christ Jesus, I told him,” Frank mutters, tearing off his coat, his Kevlar, his weapons. He makes a deadly stack of Punisher shit outside the bathroom door. “I told him that wound was open.”

He can’t figure out who he’s saying it for: Doc knows; Red’s out. Red’s really out. He’s clammy and ashen, flopped limply on the floor like a shucked clam. Blankets cover his chest, right leg, and left thigh to combat shock, and he isn’t shirking them off or squirming away from them. He barely flinches when Doc gives his ankle an experimental twist: works his jaw a little, nothing more. Even his shivers seem subdued.

The stillness of the scene is unnerving. Frank’s antsy, the way the Doc is maneuvering the exposed meat of Red’s leg. “How much Fentanyl did you give him?”

“Usual dose,” Doc replies without lifting her eyes from her work. She can’t hold Red’s thigh and his ankle at the same time. “Supplemented with midazolam. A sedative.”

“You tell him that’s what you were doing?”

“No.”

Figures. As if Red would have consented to being put under. Frank can’t say he blames her. He would have dosed the kid if he knew this is what he’d be coming home to.

Doc gives up on the break for a second, running a wrist over her forehead to clear the perspiration. Hauling Red’s wiry ass into the bathroom couldn’t have been easy. “I’ll leave you with more in case he tries to take off again.”

Oh, won’t Red be thrilled: nothing the kid loves more than meds. Maybe if the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen wasn’t dumb enough to try and give chase with an open surgical wound, Frank might turn her down. Recovering from a compound fracture is going to slow Red down, but there’s no stopping stupid once it gets going. “You want a hand there?”

She nods, out of breath from exertion or fear or a combination of the two. She makes room for Frank at Red’s ankle, “Have you done this before?”
“Once,” and the guy walked again. Like a drunk trying to carry a beach ball between his ankles, but still: walking. To be fair, they were taking fire when the guy went down, and none of them had solid medical training. Shitty as his bathroom is, Doc knows what she’s doing, and they have all the time in the world to get Red’s leg right. Or fuck it up more: whatever comes first.

Doc grips Red’s knee with both hands. Her fingers barely wrap around the whole joint, but Frank sees the tendons popping out on her knuckles, the strain in her forearms. She’s got one hell of a grip. He takes Red’s ankle in his hands, locks eyes with the Doc. First time since they met that she doesn’t look away. The job overpowers her fear. She nods to him; Frank pulls, twists, and the bone pops back under the skin.

Gasping. Not the Doc, who leaps back to the incision armed with gauze and other instruments. “Red?” Frank can’t believe it: the kid’s eyes are open, glassy, and he breathes in short bursts. Frank moves to get a grip on him before his tossing starts, which it inevitably does. Head first, then shoulders, slow as molasses and uncoordinated, but enough that Doc’s brow has taken to furrowing as she fights to get everything lined up.

Frank glares at her, “Thought you said he was out.”

“Conscious sedation. I can’t put him out completely without respiratory support.”

“So he’s aware?”

“Vaguely.”

“But he can’t do anything about it.”

Doc says nothing. She’s pressing her bloodied thumbs onto Red’s calf to check that the bones are lined up, and he’s spun his left cheek into the floor because of how good it must feel. “Midazolam is an amnesiac: he isn’t going to remember this. But he can respond to commands,” she tells Frank, who already has a hand on Red’s cheek to keep the kid from crushing his skull against the tile.

Responding to commands would be a nice change. Frank pats Red on the face. Kid’s got his face screwed up tight, and he’s whimpering weakly. “Red. Red! Hey, eyes on me, Red. Eyes on…”

Frank’s stomach balls itself into a fist. Eyes on him or not, Red can’t see. He can’t fucking see. This bathroom is a black hole of shit and mould, and he’s being manhandled in the dark by strangers, and he’s in pain with all this crap in his system…fuck, he deserves to freak out more.

Frank gives Red the gentlest shake he can, and he tries to be nice. Tries to remember what being nice sounds like. “You’re okay, Red. Doc’s fixing you up. You go back to sleep?” that’s a God damn order. “Go back to sleep.”

Red’s breath starts to even out, but he doesn’t fall back asleep. He keeps his eyes open. They don’t come anywhere near Frank’s; they flit across the ceiling as he struggles to put together the remainder of his senses.

His tongue flicks at his front teeth. He’s trying to talk.

Frank gets closer, “What is it?”

“The…the…air…”
Yeah, yeah: Frank knows. It stinks. He pats the kid’s shoulder, tapping him out. There’s no fight left and Red’s got nothing left to give if there was. “Go back to sleep, Red.”

“...there.”

“What?”

“She’s there. She got it.”

“You sure?”

Red gives what looks to be a nod, and by doing so, he knocks his eyes level with Frank’s. The stare has power behind it despite Red’s obvious lack of vision. He’s not accusing Frank: he’s challenging him. Red knows something that Frank didn’t want him to know, something empowering. Something the drugs can’t make him forget.

And then he’s out again: eyes rolling back to whites, jaw going slack, breathing in a chemically ordained rhythm. Frank releases his head back onto the floor, the final look on Red’s face emblazoned into his memory. “Kid says you’re there.”


“He says you’re there. Everything’s in place.”

“How does he know that?”

“He just does.” The same crazy way he knows whether or not someone’s coming from half a building away or how to take out a fuck-ton of killers without sight. Frank’s not sure he believes it even having seen it, but Red hasn’t been wrong yet. “Sew him up. I’ll get a transfusion started.”

Doc writes two new notes: one of supplies, another of reminders. She loads a syringe with midazolam and jots the dosage down on a piece of paper for Frank. “It’s not an analgesic,” she reminds him, “so there’s no pain relief. You would only use it to subdue him.”

Frank shoves the capped syringe into his pocket for the time being. God damn it, Red better not make him use it. He is getting dumped at the first clinic Frank sees if that happens.

Blood brings the colour back to Red’s skin. He starts to look like his idiot self again. Frank detaches the transfusion line and staunches the injection site on Red’s forearm. The kid is warm, warmer than he ought to be with shock. Frank slides the back of his hand against Red’s forehead. Fever. Because he wasn’t out of his head enough.

“That’s normal,” Doc tells Frank, punching some liquid Tylenol into Red’s IV. “His temp should come down by the time he wakes.” Which could be soon, the way she tells it, though the blackout from the meds can last several hours after. Frank expects the worst. He expects rolling, kicking, bitching, and forgetting, because Red has made this a pain in the ass so far. Why would he start easing up now? He doesn’t move a muscle when Frank carries him back to the cot and gets him settled in, but is somehow still an unmanageable nightmare of limp, dangling limbs.

The new lists replace the old, tattered one in Red’s corner. His new IV takes the place of the old. Things look to be settling back into the routine they’ve established, a thought that grates on
Frank’s limited patience. He and Red are going to have a chat when the kid wakes up about what will and won’t get his ass handed over to the police.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Doc asks.

Frank looks up, not understanding. He wasn’t looking for anything with Red. Oh, she means the address, the one Foley and his boys were trespassing on tonight. The address she gave him in a last ditch effort to save her life the night they met. The address Frank would have been scouting if not for Red’s idiocy. “Not yet. Won’t for a while with him.”

“Sorry.”

“No need to be sorry, Doc.” She didn’t tell Red to take a stroll on his broken leg, fuck up all her hard work. She also isn’t under the gun tonight, so there’s no need to try and bond with the Punisher. Hell if Frank has the words to tell her that though. She’s as smart as she wants to be, she’ll figure it out in time.

“I’ll be back in two days when the swelling goes down,” Doc says, confidence wavering near the end of her statement. The mark of a good mob doc: never expect to be coming back.

Frank doesn’t want to put her totally at ease, “You lie low, Doc. Lots of dangerous people’ll be looking for you.” And he won’t be able to leave the apartment to come deal with them if Red insists on being pissy about what needs to be done.

“I will,” she promises, confidence returning that at least Frank Castle won’t be one of the people gunning for her.

Happy reading!
“We’ve become a big business.
Oh, a galaxy merger.
The two of us a big bang…
The irresistible force met the immovable object”

~Jane’s Addiction, “Irresistible Force”

The first time Matt wakes, the whole world comes crashing down on him. He pulls his head back into the pillow. Sounds flood him, the big and the small set to the same volume in his ears. “You’re fine, Red,” Frank booms over the flood. “Go back to sleep.” Remarkably, that’s all he needs to fall back out of awareness.

Next time, the dark is quiet, less menacing. A heartbeat thunders dimly nearby. Matt reaches out waiting for Dad’s bruised face to meet his outstretched fingers. Instead, his hands are guided back onto his stomach. “You’re fine, Red. Sleep. Jesus…”

The time after is worse. Matt breaks through a veil of sweat and fire to find that he can’t remember. He goes from the fire escape to the cot with the hours lost in between. He knows there was pain and heat and chatter, but nothing’s stuck. The details have drained out of him. For once, his brain is really and truly black.
“No, no, no…” Matt moves to sit up. There’s only one explanation: he’s been drugged, deeper this time, and it’s changed things. The sounds and smells that used to make sense don’t. He can’t focus. He could be anywhere. They could have done anything, whoever they are.

“Red.”

“What did you do?” he takes a swing. The drugs make his punch sloppy and weak, caught easily by Frank, whose hands seem to engulf Matt’s. God damn him. God damn him and his apartment. Matt’s already stuck here, and the bastard has gone and taken his memories captive too.

His struggling continues in spite of Frank restraining him, guiding him back down. “Listen up, Red. Doc gave you something extra that you haven’t come out of yet.”

Of course she did. On whose orders, Matt doesn’t have to guess. “What did you do? What did…?” his leg feels thicker. Where did the rest of it go?

“We fixed what you did,” Frank gives him a solid push, and Matt ends up back on the pillow, not happy about this. Not happy. “Yeah, yeah,” the Punisher grumbles, “Sleep, Red.”

He does.

The fog finally clears and takes up residence in the other parts of Matt’s body. His joints are stiff, he can’t flex his muscles, and every part of him is heavy, really heavy. Sounds filter through his ears from the Bronx waking too. A construction crew starts work. Restaurants prep for breakfast. One of the neighbours slams their door and takes off down the stairs for work.

“Morning, sunshine,” Frank sips at his sludgy coffee. “You with me?”

Matt nods once. He can’t muster the strength for his head to make a return trip. His lets his jaw fall open. Words are lined up to go on his tongue, and they come out in a rasp. The dryness of his throat won’t let him speak.

Frank tucks a hand behind his head, and Matt’s whole brain lights up with emergency alarms, klaxons; bells, whistles, sirens. There’s a lot of nerve endings on his scalp that he didn’t know he had. Trust Frank to agitate them all. Matt puts up a good fight; one thing he’s never weak enough to do is struggle. The rim of a cup is pushed up against his lips despite the effort, and Matt takes a few sips of metallic water before being lain back down.

He tries again to speak, succeeding this time, “The hell did you give me?”


Matt draws several breaths to quell his wicked case of the spins. “She…did this?”

Frank makes a sound to affirm, “Wasn’t too happy none, you fucking up her hard work.”

“Yeah, that makes two of us – ach!” his experimental toe-wiggling earns him a sharp flare of pain, but at least he knows his bone is set properly. He might get out of this with full mobility. “She did a good job.”

“You helped.”
It bothers Matt that he can’t confirm. The blackout eats away at him. He lays in silence, allowing Frank to elaborate. “I heard blindness causes your other senses to compensate, but shit. Doc couldn’t tell when your bones were in alignment. You could. You weren’t conscious and you could.”

Matt ignores the comment about his altered mental status. He draws the quilt further up his chest. Another donation from Rina, this one unbloodied. His fingertips play across the stitches and fabrics, a meager distraction from what happened last night. What the hell did he say? What did he do?

Frank gives nothing away. His awe over Matt’s abilities is as regimented as his frustration over Matt’s behaviour.

Matt changes the subject, “Foley and his guys?”

“Alive,” Frank says, none too happy about it.

Relief floods him. Matt releases the breath he’s been holding since Frank took off, “You didn’t kill the doctor either.”

“Never said I did, Red.”

“Never said you didn’t.”

“You believe me – I said I didn’t?”

“…no.” But Matt thinks it would have been nice to know. The continued survival of people around Frank is useful information, as are the number of corpses he collects. There was definitely a corpse in the butcher shop that night. The fact that it wasn’t the doctor registers as bittersweet. “She’s saved my life twice.”

“Don’t make that into a good start. I’m not going to keep her alive so she can save your dumbass.”

“Then why are you keeping her alive?” Matt demands. He loses grip on his vocabulary for a second from how easily his thoughts twirl. Her death has weighed on him for three days whether he’s been aware or not. “There are…there are plenty of doctors…in this city. Plenty of people you can threaten and then disappear.”

“She had information. Addresses mainly. She did some research for the Japanese a while back: epidemiology or some shit.” Matt parks up at that. He pays extra close attention to Frank, waiting for signs of guile. Of suspicion. He receives none. Frank chats on, “Why the hell they need an epidemiologist for their operation is beyond me. Doc too, but she claims they were on the verge of some major breakthrough before they disappeared.”

Matt’s mouth is dry again. Hope has his heart clawing against his sternum, desperate to cut and run back to Hell’s Kitchen. Back to her. “The doc say what it was?”

“She said she doesn’t know. They didn’t tell her. Research only.”

“You believe that?”
“I do,” Frank says, sounding like he believes a lot of things about the doctor that he didn’t before.

Matt finds his breath, willing it back under his control. He can’t afford to lose his cool. “Did…did she say where they went?”

“If she knew, she would have gone with them.” Another sign she doesn’t know much about the Hand’s activities: they wouldn’t leave someone important behind for Fisk to find.

Excitement dissipates as quickly as it comes. Matt settles into himself, quieter. The Japanese’s major breakthrough and disappearance can only mean one thing in his mind, and it is the best news he’s heard since the doctor was alive. “Thank you,” he tells Frank, “for letting her live.”

Frank finishes his coffee, dropping his Styrofoam cup onto a table next to the bed. Glasses clink when he does. Matt guesses vials of medication. “Said it yourself, Red: plenty of doctors in this city. I didn’t do it for you.”

He didn’t even do it so much for the information. Matt knows the Punisher has ways of finding hidden addresses, tracking down people who don’t want to be found. He also knows a thing or two about women in Frank’s life: not only do they tend to survive, they tend towards Frank. Rina brings him soup and soft blankets. She calls the random number he gives her and stays with his supposed brother until help arrives. And Karen…

Matt’s thoughts go astray. He doesn’t want to think about Karen. Her hands on his tie. In his hair. Telling him that the Punisher isn’t all bad. That maybe his killing people is a good thing.

He gets back on topic, “Thank you for not taking me to the hospital then.”

“Yes,” about that. “Don’t get used to it, Red. You do anything like you did last night, it won’t be the hospital where I leave you. It’ll be the nearest precinct with your devil costume stapled to your chest. We clear?”

Yeah, he’s clear, but Frank isn’t, so Matt spells it out for him, “I am not going to let you kill people.”

“Don’t have much of a choice in the matter. I got work to do, and I’m not looking for your permission any more than I am to be held hostage by your busted leg.”

Boy, Frank sure has a funny way of showing it. Matt laughs, “Why am I here, Frank?” He’s been too fuzzy to wonder the past couple of days, but he doesn’t have a better answer now that his thoughts have cleared. “I’ve been nothing but trouble for you. Why keep me around? And don’t tell it’s because I don’t have anyone. That’s bullshit, Frank, and you know it.”

Oddly enough, Frank doesn’t fire back. He answers calmly, coldly, like he’s been putting the words together a while, “My fault your leg’s busted, Red. Mine. You told me that ceiling was coming down. I heard you shouting over the gunfire, but I kept on shooting. Next thing I know, you tackled me in the chest, and the whole God damn building came down on you.”

Matt isn’t sure what he’s hearing. The words don’t have a matching sensory correlate in his brain, “I don’t remember.”

“Well, I do,” and Frank’s pissed at himself for it. Punisher doesn’t make dumbass mistakes like that; he saves that shit for the Daredevil.
“I don’t remember,” but the memory isn’t erased in the same way last night is. Three days injured, drugged, dozing, leaves Matt’s recollection of the basement atrophied. The details slip-slide through his brain space, escaping his grasp when he tries to put them in order. Gunfire is a given. The ceiling would have creaked and splintered before it came down. Matt remembers waking up on the floor better than how he ended up there. But warning Frank sounds exactly like something he would do. Pushing Frank out of the way? Doubly so.

“You’re here ‘cuz I put you here,” Frank declares. He sounds weird without the pride of his convictions. Matt’s leg is absolutely his fault, but he gets no satisfaction from having benched the Daredevil. The break is a stupid mistake, one Frank intends to fix. “I’m sorry about that, Red. Should’ve moved out of the God damn way.”

“I thought you didn’t hear me,” Matt realizes. He was shouting and Frank was shooting, and he thought his warning was unclear.

So he jumped.

“No,” Matt hates having this conversation. The meds make it hard not to think about the people he wants to see - Karen, Foggy, her. That he wants to see people bothers him enough. “No. There’s no one.”

Frank doesn’t press – he doesn’t care. “Then quit your bitching. Not keeping you here forever. Get back on your feet – without killing yourself, I’ll take you home. Mess that leg up, I take you to the precinct.”

“What if I stop you without messing my leg up?” Matt asks.

“Jesus…” Frank gets up and walks away.

The footsteps stop. Matt props himself up slightly to give the illusion of meeting Frank’s gaze. He wishes he had his glasses. He doesn’t like the way his irises creep to the lower left corner of his sockets, the way he can take aim with every other part of his body except them. He waits for the telltale spike of frustration in Frank’s pulse or, worse, the slow, sympathetic crawl of a heartbeat. He heard it before, in the butcher shop, when Frank first got a look at his eyes, and he does not want to hear it again.

He doesn’t: Frank has physiologically stopped giving a shit about his eyes. Matt wants his glasses back with renewed vigor. He thought pity was bad, but Frank’s desensitization means that his eyes have been open a lot. He’s been seen, known. The Punisher knows him.
Matt tucks his head into his shoulder slightly, “I probably would have jumped anyway: knowing you heard me or not.”

Apparently, Frank doesn’t know him that well. “Jesus, Red…”

“That ceiling could have killed you.”

“That ceiling could have killed you. So…what? Better you than me?”

Matt doesn’t think about it like that: “Better my leg than your life.”

“Your math sucks, Red.”

Except it doesn’t: “You’re still here.”

“Yeah, I am,” and he can’t figure out why that’s a priority for Daredevil.

The police scanner fizzes on; radio chatter eases into the space. Matt revels in the clarity. His senses fall back in line, cooperating after days of garbling details. Sound ripples off of the walls, furniture, and clutter. Matt smells oil, metal, gun powder, canvas; below that, sweat, ink, dried blood. He lets it in, lets it all in, eagerly collecting the details. Frank’s desk and the tools hanging above it are on the opposite wall. Crates of munitions are stacked in lines at the foot of the cot. There’s an old, moth-eaten foam mattress in the far corner that is heavy with Frank, obviously where he’s been sleeping when he can. Canvas wafts from the space near that. Canvas and stuffing, suspended from a rusty chain in the ceiling. All of it heavily laced with skin, sweat, and blood.

Matt makes a fist on his chest, the smell painfully clear to him: punching bag. An old school one from a prior tenant, though Frank’s fists have been all over it.

“…Murdock’s place?”

He shuts out the space, honing in on the police scanner completely.

Mahoney’s voice comes on the radio, more frustrated than usual, “Negative, dispatch. Nobody’s gone to check in on Matt Murdock.”

“Franklin Nelson called this time.”

The name hits Matt like a punch to the chest.

Sounds like it hits Mahoney the same way: “Did he file a missing persons report?”

“No. Neither did that Page-girl from the paper when she called.”

“Then you can tell them both to deal, dispatch. The NYPD is not –“ his cell phone rings in the background, “Oh, hell, no. Hold, dispatch. Got Foggy Nelson on the line.”

Brett doesn’t broadcast his side of the conversation with Foggy. Matt imagines how poorly it goes.

He flexes his left thigh, wondering what the cost of rolling onto his right side would be. He wants away from Frank and the ensuing conversation. His broken bone burns in polite, “Fuck off.” Matt stays put begrudgingly.

Frank, as per usual, rubs it in, talking over dispatch’s next comment about an unrelated
“Foggy Nelson…that your legal partner, Red?”

“Yeah,” Matt says through a partially locked jaw. He wants out. Every inch of him, every cell in his body, wants out: of this conversation, of this apartment, of this identity. He wants to disappear in the devil and never come back. He wants Matt Murdock to never have existed.

“Former legal partner.”

“Takes a lot of guts to call a courtesy visit into the NYPD.”

One thing Foggy and Karen have in spades is guts. Matt retreats from the conversation as best as he can physically, rolling his head towards the wall. “Yeah, well, I haven’t been home for three days,” and he really didn’t think anyone would be missing him, least of all the best friend he shoved away and the ex-girlfriend who’s pissed at him. Calling the cops seems a little extreme though. Are they looking to turn him in? How the hell do they even know he hasn’t been home?

Frank is purposefully silent. “Whatever you want to say, don’t,” Matt warns him.

Mahoney comes back on the radio, “All units, be advised: Foggy Nelson is an asshole.”

“10-4, detective,” someone replies with a laugh.

A warmth creeps through Matt’s chest, one he ignores, though he can’t help but wonder what the hell Foggy said to Brett. Shortly after, Mahoney radios in that he’s checking out suspicious activity on Matt’s street. “Better go check it out,” Mahoney says, not at all thrilled about the situation.

“So you got nobody, huh, Red?”

Matt can’t wait to get back on his feet and answer Frank’s question properly. With his fists. For now, “Shut up, Frank,” will have to do.

Surprisingly, Frank concedes. “Alright,” he replies, dropping into his desk chair, “Matthew.”

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

This chapter took me so long. I thought I knew where I was going to end up, but I couldn’t write it. It took me two days of writing crap to realize that my expectations didn’t fit the characters. Writing in the *Sunshine-*verse helped. FeralMatt really clarified what how Matt would react here.

Readers, the response to the last chapter was overwhelming. I loved hearing your theories and insights. It’s huge and humbling to hear from you. Thank you so much. Hope you enjoy this one!

“Speak plain he said, but didn’t see
He acted that way
And held me like a cup.
Fill me up then pour me out
Therein lies the doubt.
We have the same feelings
At opposite times.”

~Feist, “The Bad In Each Other”

Hard to tell the time in Frank’s apartment, but Matt guesses evening. Warmth pools on the back of his hand when he touches the windowsill, and this time, it’s from the opposite side of the building. He hears Rina climbing the stairs; her ballet flats scrape away at the floor. Her sighs and shoulder-creaks speak of a long day at work. She hasn’t locked her apartment door behind her before her music starts playing.

One, two, three heartbeats. Four, including his. Matt strains to find the fifth, the executioner’s march inside Frank Castle’s chest, but it’s not to be found. “Frank?” the apartment doesn’t mask sound very well. Frank should be audible if he’s close. Matt tracks the noises outside. The parking lot is quiet. Traffic bustles on the streets. Frank has left the building.

Matt can’t believe he missed it. He scrubs the sleep out of his skin. Today’s been better, cognitively speaking. He asked Frank to decrease his meds, and the Punisher obliged him. Matt
meditated more than he slept. The steady pain in his leg gave him a point of focus outside of Foggy, Karen, and the NYPD. But he has no recollection of Frank suiting up, of the door shutting, of the locks being bolted. His brain is a little muggy from Fentanyl, though it’s not as bad as the previous couple of days; he hasn’t blacked out from sedation. He was simply that asleep.

He sniffs, searching for Frank’s Punisher gear. The dry, synthetic smell of Kevlar hovers around the desk. It could be the iconic bulletproof vest Matt hears about in the news, or it could be one or many vests that Frank has in his murder-wardrobe. The same goes for the overwhelming scent of gun metal. Frank’s arsenal is so extensive that he could clothe himself in weapons and Matt would still be drowning in munitions. There’s no telling what he left the apartment for, only that knowing Frank, it can’t be good.

There’s also no conclusive evidence as to when Frank will be back. Matt finds a cup of water on the nightstand next to a sandwich. Below that, taped to the side of the table, Matt finds a crumpled piece of paper that definitely wasn’t there before. He runs his fingers over it, discovering a series of stab wounds. Little bumps on the page that his brain starts to translate before he realizes it’s supposed to be braille.

Tenw ouw. No, that’s not right: went out.

Matt drops his hand, “Thanks, Frank.” That clarifies everything.

He unpeels his back and shoulders from the cot, taking his time by necessity, not choice. His muscles are starving for activity – a workout, a spar, a fight. They don’t care as long as it doesn’t involve lying down. Matt stretches as best he can. He pulls himself into a sitting position no higher than his leg. Frank left a loaded syringe on the windowsill again, but Matt has no desire to use it. Between his flimsy pillow and lingering dizziness, he can’t sit much higher than his leg anyways.

The sensations are clearer when he’s propped up. More blood fills the injured limb, and Matt follows the rush in his arteries to map the injury. The initial cut, a horizontal swipe on the back of his calf, has knitted. He’s barely aware of it aching under the fiery sting of his surgical incision, a straight line of sutures and shorn muscle from just above his ankle to just belong his knee. Inside is a mess. Matt feels his muscle swell. The areas where the bone scraped through the skin are frayed and plump up to the consistency of ground meat.

One more day, he focuses. The doctor is coming by in one more day, and the second she says he can be up and moving, he will be. Straight out of Frank’s apartment. Back to Hell’s Kitchen. For now, he waits for the fire to settle into embers, for the pulses of agony to become fewer and further apart.

As they do, he becomes aware of…something. Hard to describe with the layers of bandages securing a board to the inside of his leg, but there’s a weight localized on his ankle that shouldn’t be there. Matt’s first instinct is to reach, but his body won’t bend that far, not with his head spinning. He nudges his right foot over, bumping into cold, jangling metal in the process.

Matt folds over. “No, no, no…” He ignores the roar of his broken leg for the roar in his head, the one that gets louder as his hands take hold of a chain. He follows the links to one of the munitions cases where it’s looped and padlocked to the handle. The other end is secured in a similar fashion to the ankle of his broken leg.

He flops back on the cot. Breathes for three counts. Holds it. Exhales. Slams his fist against the wall to stop it from closing in on him, but there’s no amount of punching that can keep the apartment from folding around his ribs. All that ground he claimed with his senses this morning, the distance between himself and the far side of the space (Frank’s bed, punching bag, the doorway
to the kitchen): gone. Matt has a few inches of chain between his broken leg and a munitions container.

As if he was going to try to move again.

Upon self-reflection, Matt relents. Okay, as if he was going to mess his leg up again.

More skepticism he can’t shake, and this time, it’s not even his. It’s skepticism that sounds like Foggy clearing his throat, smells like a bloody apartment, sutures, and antiseptic. Skepticism that chills Matt to the core because he hasn’t been thinking about what happens when the leg finally heals – if the leg finally heals. And that would be the only thought on Foggy’s mind. Getting off the cot isn’t going to bring Frank back. It’s not going to un-murder a person. Getting off the cot is going to put him at risk, and if Frank’s serious enough to chain his leg, he’s serious enough to take Matt to the precinct.

It’s the God damn principle of the thing, though, that shakes Matt out of resting. Frank wants to chain him up so he can go out killing? Fine. Matt won’t mess up his damn leg, but Frank sure as shit isn’t going to get away with this.

Weird being back in Hell’s Kitchen during daylight. Frank’s used to working into the midnight hour, under cover of darkness. That’s when his targets come out to play. He wants to be recognized at night. That split second when the fuckers see the skull on his chest or his soldier’s mug bearing down on them: it’s the time of Frank’s God damn life.

He’s not quite so keen on being recognized now. Sunset paints Hell’s Kitchen into an inferno – red, yellow, orange. Combined with the glare off the Hudson, Frank feels like he’s under a spotlight. Feels like everybody’s under a spotlight actually, but not everybody’s face is on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted or makes a regular appearance on the news.

He keeps his hood low, his head lower, his shoulders curved in, hands in his pockets. His single colt and knife are discretely hidden by the bulk of his sweater. Nobody gives him trouble, not even the on-duty cops in their cruiser as he stalks past on his way into the church.

Confession runs after mass, so while the office is closed, the priest is too occupied to notice Frank breaking and entering. The milling parishioners head straight for the pews. A few kids trot past, eyes locked on their cell phones. Frank takes a stand by the locked office door. When the lobby clears, he turns, blocking the door knob from view. The lock picks easily. Frank slips inside, and with the door shut behind him, there’s no way for anyone in the church to know he’s there.

The secretary’s desk is immaculate, and the church is old school. All their parishioners are in a rolodex. Frank spins along until he hits M, then it’s a matter of flipping, flipping, flipping until ta-dah. Address and everything. He jots the information down on a post-it, pockets that, and spins the rolodex to cover his tracks. Then he’s gone from the office, out the front door, and back into his car.

Shadows are getting long. Frank parks in an alley where dusk has already fallen. He maps out the exits – one at either end that he can reach with the car and a maze of pathways he can take on foot. There are plenty of routes for him to getaway if someone notices Frank Castle’s returned. Escaping on foot would hurt his schedule, but better, tonight, to be evading custody than fighting the NYPD. The devil’s not going to jump in and take the heat if things go sideways this time.

He circles the block, running recon. The old bar on the corner is beginning to fill up.
Patrons who have been there since early in the afternoon hang off of barstools as the bartender, tough old broad, slings beer and hard liquor. No wine, no cocktails: not at this joint. The red fluorescent name buzzes in Frank’s ear as he walks past, the sparking fuse to a doomsday device. This is one of those end-of-the-world type places that Hell’s Kitchen is famous for; makes sense for it to be right around the corner of Frank’s destination.

The apartment has keypad entry next to a heavy-duty metal door. God damn, he expected security to be tighter than the average walk-up, but Frank’s impressed. Didn’t think this kind of shit would be affordable on a public defender’s salary. He blows past the entrance, skirting glances across the walls and roofs. No way is the front door the only way in. There’s gotta be a fire escape or rooftop access that can’t be seen from the street, perfect for a guy to sneak in and out at night.

Nothing on the building he’s scoping out, but the neighbouring properties frame a vertical playground. Their fire escapes merge into jungle gyms. Drain pipes for monkey bars. Open dumpsters below to break falls. Ideal for ninjas looking to perfect their parkour and over-qualified vigilantes to pretend they’re supernatural creatures.

Frank makes it to one roof only to discover there’s a ladder leading to the fucking rooftop he wants on the building across the way. “Fuck it,” he grumbles, not having time for this shit. There’s still an hour between him and the Bronx once he finishes. He takes a run for the ledge, jumps, and heaves himself up.

From there, it’s picking the lock on a door. Frank charges in, expecting a service entry, but he’s standing on a loft in somebody’s apartment.

Somebody’s empty apartment, by the sounds of things.

When he’s sure it’s vacant, Frank heads down the stairs into the living room. The place is open concept. He can survey the whole kitchen from where he stands. The bedroom doesn’t have a door; just a sliding panel that looks to have fallen off its hinge and never been repaired. There’s not enough stuff in the place to make a mess, but Frank gets the impression the apartment hasn’t been lived-in for a while. The tenant pays rent. They sleep in the bed. They eat, they take out the trash. But they don’t live here. This space is a staging area.

Frank can’t believe his luck, at first. Then it occurs to him this isn’t luck. An apartment with direct rooftop access would be a priority. And while this kind of space would normally rent for a fortune, the giant-ass billboard pumping light through the open living room windows makes it a steal.

He surveys the bookshelves. The spines are blank upon first inspection, but when Frank gets closer, he sees the braille marks. A fine layer of dust has been collecting on top of them. Smear marks on the shelf say that cleaning’s a dying routine. More evidence this apartment is a base of operations, not a home.

It wasn’t always like this. The living room has enough furniture for visitors. The surplus of dishes in the kitchen says that company used to come over. There isn’t the ghostly presence of dishes at the table or toys left out from playing like Frank remembers from his house. There isn’t the anticipation that people will be home from the carousel soon. Frank’s family was stolen from him; Red chose this absence. Still, Frank walks through the apartment like he would a cemetery, aware that the dead are underfoot.

He’s said it before and he’ll say it again, especially standing in the kid’s apartment, “The hell happened to you, Red.”
Frank finds a gym bag and empties it. Nothing much inside but hand wraps, a mouth guard, and a towel. He replaces the hand wraps and leaves the other shit in the bottom of the closet.

Sweats, t-shirts, boxer briefs, socks: Frank stuffs them into the bag. Shit, the kid’s small. He probably just makes lightweight with his armour on; featherweight when he’s in civvies. Red’s two-piece suits look like the ones Frank wore to church in his teens. They hang neatly in the closet, tagged in braille, starting to smell musty like the rest of the place. Frank closes the closet doors, leaving them to get mustier still. Red’s going to be living casual for a while. As it stands, he’ll need the left leg cut open on his sweats to accommodate whatever hardware’s going to be holding his broken bone in place while it heals.

The cell phone on the nightstand is long dead. Frank grabs it and the charger. Who the hell is Red gonna call – the cops? They’ll want him for questioning too, and with Fisk mobilizing, the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen isn’t going to want to be in custody. Nah, Frank trusts Red not to screw them both over. It’s the people clambering to find Red that Frank thinks about. Eventually, a missing persons report is getting filed, and if the NYPD thinks they’re being harassed now, they ain’t seen nothing yet. Better give Red the opportunity to get in touch with Miss Page and that Nelson guy before things get out of hand.

Frank slings the packed duffel off the unmade bed. He’s about to leave when an unnatural gleam catches his eye. The sheets have a sheen in the billboard light. Frank runs a hand over them. “Silk sheets, Red? Jesus…” if only people fucking knew: lean, mean devil of Hell’s Kitchen – on a public defender’s salary: a recently unemployed public defender, no less – comes home to sleep on silk sheets. The decadence is astounding, especially since it’s not part of the performance. These sheets are for Red. Well, a girlfriend, maybe, but Frank’s since amended his thoughts about whether Red has girlfriends. He has women he dates, who might get a tumble in the silk sheets, but they don’t get to see the man in the mask.

Maria used to say she knew exactly what she was getting when she married Frank, and she told him every day until the day she died. Frank didn’t believe her then, but he wants to now. He wants to think there wasn’t a mask between them. That she didn’t die with questions burning her up as well as bullets. He can’t imagine Red wants people to die like that either, but Red’s probably not thinking about other people. He’s obviously not thinking about himself.

Frank grabs the sheet suddenly, without even thinking about it. He stuffs it into the bag before he can change his mind.

The bathroom’s the last stop. Frank grabs the toothbrush, the brush, and the electric razor. He glances at the contents of the shower. Shampoo and conditioner, Red, really? Christ. Frank is about to grab the bottle of shampoo but can’t. He can’t. The sheet serves a practical function. Shampoo and conditioner – unscented and hypoallergenic – is crossing a line into fucking ridiculous. Frank hits the lights. Silk sheets and premium hair care for a guy who catches bullets with his face. Who doesn’t have people over to his apartment. “Makes no God damn sense.”

Frank shoves a few books in the bag before zipping it closed and bounding up the stairs to the loft. He exits across the roof, down the ladder this time, and then reaches the ground using the snaggle of fire escapes, windowsills, closed dumpsters, and other debris. The wind whistles through the alley. Storm’s brewing. People’ll be staying in tonight. Frank hopes that includes Fisk’s guys. He doesn’t have time to hunt. Red’s probably awake and bitchy about getting chained up. Frank considers them even: he’s pretty bitchy about Red re-breaking his leg.

He stops just shy of the car out of pure instinct, his body acting before his brain can articulate
that *he’s being watched*. Frank checks his surroundings. Rooftops: clear. Fire escapes: clear. Windows: clear. Alleyway: clear. His hand stays poised above the colt though, because that awareness doesn’t go away. Whole lotta hiding places out there, and no matter how dark or vacant the space looks, Frank isn’t alone.

Can’t be the cops. The NYPD is incapable of stealth. Frank can’t see Miss Page or the Nelson guy hiding out either. Whoever has eyes on Frank is trained for this. They don’t make a sound. He thinks he sees a flash of clothing move between fire escapes, but it’s gone before he can confirm, swallowed up by the night.

Frank gets into the car. He tosses the gym bag in the passenger’s seat. The alley is quiet and still around him. Frank doesn’t trust it. He peels out as quickly as possible, roaring into the street.

He catches sight of it in his rear view mirror: a shadow bounding over the rooftops after his car. During a leap between buildings, the streetlights reveal billowing red robes and the hilt of a weapon before the darkness swallows the figure up again.

Frank runs the next red, then takes a hard left at the following intersection, weaving through oncoming traffic. The figure stops, stranded on a rooftop behind Frank’s escaping car.

Another shadow appears after less than a block, faster this time. Frank hits another red light and takes a right, then another left. The Hudson Parkway is dead ahead, and no matter how fast his pursuers, they don’t have enough power to follow him all the way to the Bronx.

Sure enough, the chase is over by the time Frank gets into the Upper West Side. He heads north, then takes the i-95 back into the Bronx. The whole time, his mind is putting together counter-measures, because not only are the Japanese still in Hell’s Kitchen, they’re looking for Red.

Frank bounds up the stairs to his apartment – keys in one hand, duffel in the other, all geared up to face Red’s pathetic wrath about the chain. News about the Japanese sentries staking out his apartment might shut him up. Red seemed to know less about their activities than Frank but was more desperate for information.

But the only wrath waiting for Frank inside the apartment is his own. He closes the door behind him and locks it. He tosses the duffel onto his desk. His body runs hot and cold as he surveys the room, and the first words out of his mouth are, “What the fuck did you do, Red?”

Red is a pale, shivering heap at the foot of the cot, half covered with a quilt. His leg is elevated on an ammo can – the same one Frank chained it to before leaving the apartment. He’s surrounded by several more cans, all of them empty. Ammo gone. And while he sucks back air like a dying man, looking like absolute hell, his lips are curving into a fucking smirk that Frank is going to carve off his smug face.

Especially when Red slumps even lower on the wall and says, breathlessly, “Well, I didn’t mess up my leg again.”
Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I tried something a little different with this chapter. Rather than provide a whole scene dedicated to what Matt was doing while Frank was out, I interspersed his narration with exposition. I wanted to save everybody from a flashback. I hope this is effective. Also, because this chapter is from Matt’s perspective, there are some gaps in his knowledge. I can’t see him knowing a whole lot about ammunition.

I decided Frank’s assault rifle of choice would be the M16, so all my research is based on that. His ammo cans (which I mistakenly referred to as munitions cases last chapter – apologies) are carrying loaded magazines because he likes to be prepared. As a Canadian and a non-soldier, I know very little about assault rifles. I sincerely apologize if my research is poorly represented or flat-out inaccurate.

Speaking of being Canadian, my internet history over the past week has probably been flagged for its numerous searches about assault rifles, which are illegal here. Canadian government, I beg pardon: what I searched, I searched in the name of fanfiction.

Readers, sweet readers, thank you. I meant to get to Karen in this chapter, but Matt’s actions with the bullets means she won’t be around until next time. Your patience and support are most gratifying. Thank you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Give us a tantrum
And a know-it-all grin
Just when we need one
When the evening’s thin…
‘Cuz you’re working at building a mystery
Holding on, and holding it in
Yeah, you’re working at building a mystery
And choosing so carefully.”

~Sarah McLachlan, “Building a Mystery”
The bathroom door opens, unleashing a noxious cloud of ammonia. Matt’s already drunk more than his fair share of the odour. He gags: nothing comes up. His stomach’s painfully empty, and the muscles surrounding it were unprepared for the day’s activities.

His leg is so broken. The bones are still in alignment; Matt was careful with them on his way out of bed or to and from the bathtub. Yet his whole body voices unanimous disappointment from his head to his toes. He has pain in uncharted territories, places his body had to invent to communicate how broken he is, and they’re nowhere near as loud as his leg.

The only happiness he feels is from the rage he senses building in the bathroom, where Frank’s furious heartbeat is stomping its hooves like a bull ready to charge.

“Ammonia…weakens brass,” Matt points out, gagging on the word ‘ammonia’. He dumped the whole bottle into the tub with some warm water and the contents of the munitions cases. Dozens of magazines, Matt can’t remember how many exactly, are staring up at Frank from a shallow pool.

Frank gets the tub draining. Then he clomps out of the bathroom on a warpath.

Matt eases his broken leg off the metal case he’s using for elevation, bringing the splinted limb to rest on the floor. He pushes himself into a sitting position against the wall in preparation for a fight. As if he’s capable of fight. “Your…your ammo might still be usable. Might not.” Military ammo has probably changed a lot since the late-1800s, when ammonia was first discovered to cause the cartridge to split. They might be able to withstand the soak, but Frank probably won’t want to take the chance by firing them. “You should call your supplier-“

The attack comes seemingly from nowhere. Matt springs into action too late and too weakly to stop Frank from driving a forearm into his neck and pushing him up the wall. He unleashes the remaining hell in his limbs – punching, prying, hitting – but there’s not much left. He’s done too much heavy lifting what with the empty munitions case, the chain, his broken leg, and those magazines. Hauling them to the bathroom and back again.

In short order, Frank pins Matt’s right hand. He absorbs blows from the left. They’re nothing. Matt is nothing to him.

“You think this ends with you, Red,” Frank speaks in measured tones. He has lectured while strangling people before. “You think I drop your ass off at PD and that’s that. No more Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. They ship you off to SuperMax with all the guys you put away-“

Matt doesn’t listen to the details. He’ll manage; he’ll make it. He doesn’t need to think about prison. His brain flashes instead back to the routine he’s been following, the one that got him through over an hour of lift, hop, rest, gag, hop away. Opening the munitions case attached to his ankle felt, at the time, like the worst part. Frank half-buried his under the others to ensure he wouldn’t escape. Matt had to heave three metal cases onto the floor before prying open the lid on his. He took the magazines out, stacking them on the cot, and the smell of brass got him thinking about whether Frank has ammonia. And what the chances are that it’s nearby.

Turns out it’s a lot closer than Matt thinks. Ammonia trickles into his lungs. Matt coughs. His thoughts return to the present where the rest of him is floundering. Frank’s loosened his grip just enough for him to breathe.

“You’re not gonna pass out on me, Red,” he says. His voice is a shower of sparks on Matt’s face and upper chest. “You gotta get this through your God damn head: this starts with you. You go
to SuperMax, Wilson Fisk’s gonna give you hell. And out here? The NYPD is going to want to talk to everyone you’ve ever had contact with. That’s Nelson, that’s Karen; that’s your neighbours, your landlady, your parish priest.”

Frank crushes Matt’s windpipe again. The world on fire burns up the last reserves of oxygen in his brain. Matt tosses both arms against Frank’s, who couldn’t care less about the weak blows. “Anybody who might’ve known or should’ve known about your secret identity. And once they start asking, who else is going to want to know? You’ve pissed off a lot of people, Red. A lot of people who aren’t going to buy that your lawyer friend didn’t know what you were doing at night. That your secretary wasn’t in on the secret. This starts with you, Red, and it doesn’t end until the lives of everyone you know are up in flames. Do you understand me, Red? Tell me you understand.”

Frank loosens his grip. Matt’s shaking serves as a nod; the nerves in his body have gone raw, and his broken leg is a flaming battering ram at the base of his thigh. But he doesn’t believe it. Foggy, Karen, Lantom: they all have plausible deniability and access to good counsel. They’d have protection. He’s kept his distance so they could be protected.

His eyeballs are cresting inside his skull. “I get it, Frank.”

A sigh, an eye roll, an unspoken, God damn it. “No, you don’t.” Frank tears his arm away and Matt falls. He hits the ground with his right hip to spare his broken leg. “You don’t get it, because if you did, you wouldn’t be fucking up shit for yourself. You wouldn’t be begging me to drag your ass to the NYPD.”

“You have wanted me out since I got here…” Matt tries to say more. He can’t: sweat drains out of him, mixing with the ammonia to create a corrosive pool lapping his skin. He wants to be sick. He wants to be sick everywhere. His abdominals thrust up, rearranging his insides until his stomach is in his mouth. “I did you a favour.”

Pain is everywhere, decentralized from the impact: tearing up and down his limbs, stomping through his muscles, scraping over his nerves. Hard to tell what belongs to him and what he’s absorbing from Frank, whose body is radiating with personal indignation. Matt becomes vaguely aware that Frank has stopped pacing.

“Oh, what is it, Frank?” he doesn’t get an answer. The space where Frank is standing has the sensory qualities of a black hole. “Are you upset? Go ahead… go ahead and hand me over to the cops. I am so sick of your God damn duty bullshit.”

Frank cuts right to the chase, “You’re an idiot, Red.”

Matt shoves a hand against his still-knitting broken ribs. If this is about the worst-case scenario Frank spelled out for him, he hopes he passes out. “Thanks.”

“You want to lecture me about duty when you’re pushing people out of the way of falling ceilings?”

“What I do I just do,” Matt growls, only too happy to feed Frank’s words back to him.

Frank kneels and takes him by the broken ankle. The coal fire in Matt’s leg gets stirred up to a blaze. Distantly, beyond the sound of his groaning, Matt hears the chain rattling away from his leg. Frank’s unbound him. “Yeah, you just do. Got no sense of consequence, Red.”

“You’re right – I’ve got no sense of consequence. Me. I’m not the guy out there murdering people!”
Matt reclines onto the floor. Having to carry that empty case every step of the way – *every step* – to stop the chain from pulling on his broken leg has drained him. Even after it was emptied, the damn thing weighed a tonne. Eventually, he had to put it on the floor and use it to rest his broken leg on between hops. He’s only too happy when Frank picks up the cases and carries them away.

The ammonia was under the sink. Why he remembers that now is a testament to his exhaustion. Matt replays his work: unburying the case tethering him to the cot, emptying the magazines from the case. Disconnecting his IV tube without removing the port. Hopping to the bathroom. Filling the tub. Then he hopping back to the cot for the magazines. He could only carry a few at a time, Frank had so many. Too many for him to move all of them, but Matt’s pretty sure he got most of them submerged. Pretty sure. He can’t tell because there are more bullets in the apartment. His mouth is full of them: big and small; brass, steel, and copper.

He finally dumped the ammonia into the tub and high-tailed it out of the room before the fumes could get to him. Like they’re getting to him now.

Matt lifts his head off the floor, deploying the only question he has left before Frank hauls him off to the precinct, “Who was it tonight, Frank?” The Punisher’s pulse is one pissed-off tempo. *Good.* Matt rubs it in as best he can from the floor. If this is the last thing he does, he’s going to make it count. “Was it Foley and his boys, or some other group of desperate guys making a bad decision? Who were you hunting, Frank?”

Something heavy hits the wall to his right. The smell of canvas and sweat breaks through the clouds of ammonia, sending an icy chill through Matt’s veins. He reaches out even though he doesn’t need to, even though he knows what he’s going to find, even though he doesn’t want to find it. He doesn’t want to know. He doesn’t want to be known.

Frank has no time for his ignorance. “I was hunting you. Mission accomplished.”

Matt’s fingers close around the strap on his gym bag. The contents are primarily fabric. Laundry detergent and silk drains out through the zippers. “You were in my apartment,” he says dumbly, trying to make it sound right. It doesn’t: not the idea or the physical evidence of it actually having happened.

Frank, still seething, says, “Did you a favour, Red: now you don’t have to go to the cop shop naked.”

“How did you find where I lived?”

“Your address is on file at St. Matthew’s.”

The cold is worse than the pain, less forgiving. Matt gathers himself against it. “You were at my church.” That statement doesn’t sound right either. “How did you…?”

“You told me, that night on the roof? Got real excited about me knowing the name of the church. Makes sense though – Hell’s Kitchen kid, last name Murdock. Good little Irish Catholic boy who dresses up like the devil to beat the shit out of bad guys,” Frank scoffs. “Sounds like something out of a comic book.”

Matt would kick himself if he had the strength. It sounds like a whole series of rookie mistakes, actually, from him tipping his hand about faith to Frank breaking into his apartment. He was being careful, covering his tracks, turning Matt Murdock into a dead end. Trust Frank Castle, fellow dead end, to be able to find a road back there.
He leans over and unzips the gym bag, waiting for the other shoe to drop, only to find reality’s worse than any ulterior motive. Frank brought him an overnight bag with clothes, his cell phone, some books, toiletries, his sheet.

Matt closes the bag. The cold running through him solidifies into a big guilty knot in his stomach. He thought he wanted to puke before? He really wants to puke now. “I thought you were out killing,” he says dumbly.

“And soaking those magazines in ammonia – that was gonna stop me? I don’t need bullets to kill, Red. All killing needs is a person who’s alive when you get there and dead before you go. Besides, I got more bullets.”

“Yeah,” he winds up for his big closing argument, “but not those ones.”

“Well done, counsellor. Tell me more about how you know so much about consequence. You got about three minutes before I’m dragging you to the car.” Frank’s trigger finger taps against the top of his desk like he’s firing off a round. The sound echoes from the drawer beneath where he’s striking. Matt tries and fails to read the contents before Frank is speaking again, but there’s clearly something important in there. “While you’re at it, you’re going to tell me why the Japanese are looking for you.”

Matt doesn’t want to plead his ignorance, but he doesn’t know what else to say, “The Japanese are looking for me?”

“Had a few of those ninja-bastards chase me up the Hudson Parkway after I left your place. The ones who attacked you and your girl.”

Wishful thinking isn’t helping, but what other explanation is there? Matt has been clinging to the idea secretly for so long that when he smelled her in his apartment, he thought he was making it up. He can’t tell Frank that though. “I don’t know,” he says, tugging the blanket higher on his body. “Nothing.”

“Nothing,” Frank scoffs. “It’s nothing, than I got no reason to keep you around. I’ll drive you to the precinct right now.”

He means it. He hauled ass over the Hell’s Kitchen as a courtesy. Grabbing Matt’s stuff. Going through his apartment. Matt isn’t sure he can muster the thanks when the Punisher’s seen where he lives. He tries to assemble a response that doesn’t sound crazy, “The woman they killed.”

Frank knows, “Your girl.”

“She wasn’t anyone’s girl,” Matt corrects him. “She was…important to them.”

“So they were looking for her?”

“No. I think she’s…” there’s no other way to put this, “I think she’s looking for me.”

A pregnant pause, long enough for Matt to retract what’s been said, before Frank reminds him, “She’s dead, Red.”

Matt says nothing.

Frank adds, “You carried her off that rooftop.”
He did more than that: “I went to her funeral. I saw her buried.”

“The dead don’t come back, Red.”

“Tell that to the man that killed her. He burned to death in front of me.”

Strange to hear Frank’s respiration change, to sense his temperature dropping. He’s so stable that Matt picks up on the shift immediately. “What makes you think she’s alive? Aside for…aside for her killer.” Who Frank is not convinced burned to death, thanks very much.

Matt doesn’t have any other choice but say it aloud. Frank’s trigger finger is over top of that drawer and its mystery contents. His car keys are in the pocket of his hoodie; Matt can hear them jingle. If she is out there looking for him, and he’s placed under arrest, there’s more at stake than a trip to Supermax and fallout for Foggy and Karen. The Hand are going to tear through the cops with extreme prejudice.

“I…smelled her. In my apartment. Like she’d been there recently.” He can’t afford a question about how he smells people, so Matt distracts Frank from asking, “It’s why I went to the basement that night. I thought she was going to be there.”

Frank does not take the bait, “You smelled her?”

“Yes,” Matt shirks away from Frank’s pointed stare, slumping against the wall. He doesn’t want to talk about this. Frank has already seen inside his apartment, picked through his personal effects. He’s seen things Matt didn’t trust Foggy or Karen to see. And he grabbed the sheet. Frank’s a pragmatist; he grabbed what was necessary, but he made a point of grabbing the silk sheet.

Frank interrupts Matt’s mortified inner-monologue, “I’m gonna need a little more than that, Red,”

He already has so much, especially compared to the nothing Matt has on him. “You said blindness causes other senses to compensate. My senses compensate.” There. That’s it. That’s all Matt’s giving him.

Again, Frank doesn’t fall for the distraction. “Just how stupid do you think I am, Red? I’ve seen you: you’re a blind ninja who can hear people coming a mile away and sense when his broken bones are back in place. Your senses don’t just compensate. Your senses are…something else.”

He might not have the words to describe them, but Frank’s putting it together. His silence washes over Matt and corrodes worse than the ammonia. “If the Hand’s looking for me-“

Frank stops him, “The Hand?”

“The Japanese. The ninjas. They’re known as the Hand.” Frank signals his skepticism with a small shift in his weight and a soft grunt, but please, Matt, do go on. “If she is alive,” he doesn’t want to use the word ‘if, but Frank’s having a hard enough time believing him as it is. Matt knows she’s alive: he knows, “and she’s got the Hand looking for me, they’re not going to leave Hell’s Kitchen until they do.”

“They care about Fisk?” Frank asks. His heart picks up to a please, say no pace. Evidently, he wants Fisk all to himself.

“No,” Matt can’t think of a reason she would care. Unless Fisk came after him, of course. Then she might slash Fisk’s throat and offer up his corpse in tribute. “But if they’re still in Hell’s Kitchen when Fisk leaves Supermax, they’re going to have their hands full.”
Frank’s heart settles back into rhythm, vengeance assured. “They’re not the only ones.”

“No, they’re not.” The whole city is going to have their hands full when Fisk gets out.

“This…the Hand – they gonna come knocking on my door?”

Matt smirks, “You scared, Frank?”

“I’m pissed off, Red. You fucked with my ammo and got ninjas coming after you.”

“No really going to be your problem, is it? You hand me over to the police?”

Frank’s trigger finger moves off the top of his desk. He’s silent, considering. Matt tries to read him and comes up with nothing. He’s a man of his word, Frank Castle, and he did promise the precinct, but he’s also a man of action. His standing around has to serve a function.

“Get dressed,” he finally orders.

Matt sighs. He digs into the contents of the duffel bag again, finding a cluster of t-shirts shoved in the bottom. He grabs one, tugs it on. The layer of sweat hugging his skin protects him from the abrasiveness of the cotton. That’s not a good thing. “Might make it harder for you to staple my body armour to my chest if I’m dressed,” but to be fair, Matt’s never stapled body armour to someone before.

“Not taking you to the precinct, Red. Got a tub that needs cleaning.”

The ammonia has diffused into the apartment. Matt can’t imagine what the bathroom smells like. “Isn’t that a bit of a half-measure?” he asks.

Frank’s glee is fucking audible as he struts off to the bathroom. He’s only too happy to feed Matt’s words back him. “I was thinking it was more like a second chance,” he says sardonically, “Little bit of hope that I don’t want to snuff out.”

The shower runs the whole time Matt struggles with his underwear and sweats. His shirt is soaked through with perspiration when he finishes, making the apartment smell that much more miserable. His leg feels like absolute hell, the perfect accompaniment to the astringent air.

Frank joins him and, without saying a word, slashes off the bottom of Matt’s left pant leg open with a knife, freeing the splint and swollen limb. Then he helps Matt up – still not saying a word – and gets Matt up and into the bathroom.

Gagging against broken ribs is all Matt knows besides the slippery-sour odour of ammonia permeating every cell on his body. He retches nothing, just hangs his jaw as his abdominals spasm. Frank sets him down next to the tub. Water spritzes from the shower against his face, reviving Matt to his agonies. His leg is still broken – surprise, surprise – and has taken to chomping on his knee. His ribs ache with every breath.

A cold shock starts in his forearm. Matt’s thoughts clear; his pain sharpens. Frank’s reattached his IV, and the sudden rush of saline is dizzying. He didn’t realize how dehydrated he was.
Frank turns the shower off. “Don’t suppose you’ve ever handled ammo before, Red.” He isn’t waiting for an answer, thank God. He pulls a magazine out of the bottom of the tub. Matt listens to the water splashing. He can sense trace amounts of ammonia inside on the bullets. Frank’s fingers are singed with irritation, but he doesn’t take notice.

He shoves the magazine into Matt’s right hand. Matt hisses. Traces of ammonia sting his palm. Frank ignores him, grabbing Matt’s left hand and forcing Matt to touch where the first round is peaking. The round is the length of his palm, meant for an assault rifle. Matt seethes; he can’t feel any splitting along the cartridge. The brass doesn’t feel any different in his hands at all.

Frank has to know that too, but he doesn’t mention the cartridge casing. In fact, Frank hasn’t mentioned the bullets much. Matt can’t remember them from when he was being strangled, and that was Frank at his most geared up. They must not be damaged. Or maybe they’re not what Frank’s actually pissed off about.

“Each magazine holds thirty rounds,” Frank draws his attention back to the bathroom. “Looks like you got about thirty magazines in there. You’re lucky unloading these things goes faster than getting them into the tub.”

“Yeah, lucky,” Matt scoffs.

“Got no one to blame but yourself, Red.”

He doesn’t disagree. “What do I do?”

Frank puts a coin in Matt’s left hand, a quarter by the feel of things, and guides Matt through the motions. Depress the coin down the side of the topmost bullet, through the centre of the magazine. One round after another falls out onto a towel he’s lain on the floor.

“Toss the magazines. Lay the cartridges out to air dry.” Frank is about to leave him to it, but takes a second to ask, “You need anything?”

Fentanyl is sounding really good right about now. A huge dose of it. Knock him straight out of this ragged, raw state his body’s in. Matt shakes the thought out of his head, “No.”

“Your leg can’t be feeling great.”

“I’m fine.” He’s not, but Frank has seen too much of him. Relief opens him up; pain helps close him down.

Frank doesn’t argue. He stands up and walks out of the bathroom.

Matt slips on the next bullet. The magazine drops onto the towel. His hands shake madly, clouding his senses as they spring to trace the frantic air currents. But the world on fire isn’t in his head anymore: it’s in his leg, and it’s hotter and fiercer than his impressionistic view of the world ever was. Tears drain out of his eyes, and Matt struggles to hold back a sob.

He snaps back into action suddenly, working on pure instinct: snatching the magazine off the towel before continuing. Round after round falls out of the magazine.

Dimly, Matt’s aware of Frank taking a step out of the bathroom doorway. How long he’s been standing there, Matt doesn’t know.
Chapter End Notes

Matt’s actions are based off something I learned in a history class about British ammunition in the late 1800s reacting to ammonia from horse urine. The cartridges split, causing the powder to dampen, rendering the bullets useless. According to my research, ammonia may or may not have adverse effects on contemporary ammunition depending on the concentration and the exposure. I say may or may not because the message boards were undecided. Some current gun owners do use ammonia-based solvents to clean corroded bullets; others refuse. Contemporary ammunition has been treated against splitting, particularly military-grade ammunition, which is why, as Matt clears the rounds at the end of this chapter, he can’t feel any damage.
**Hurt**

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I apologize for the delay between updates! I meant to have this chapter posted last week after updating *Never Let Go*. Unfortunately, I had a lot of trouble with the structure. Providing comfort is not Frank Castle’s first instinct and receiving comfort is not Matt’s forte, so I had to work and work and work with this to get it post-able. I was also traveling this weekend, limiting my writing time. Anticipate my next updates for later next week when I have returned home!

Readers, lovely readers, I am so grateful when I hear from you. I’m so happy that you’re enjoying the fic! I hope you continue to do so. Thank you so much! Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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“What have I become, my sweetest friend?
Everyone I know goes away in the end.
And you could have it all
My empire of dirt.
I will let you down.
I will make you hurt.”

~Johnny Cash, “Hurt”

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Gotta hand it to Red: never a dull fucking moment. The stunt with the bullets is his usual blend of brains, balls, and obliviousness. Yet another half-measure from the devil of Hell’s Kitchen, one more reason keeping him here is a shitty idea. At least this one doesn’t reek of Red’s self-righteousness. That’s desperation wafting out of the bathroom, desperation and weakness masquerading as bravado. Frank can tolerate that shit; he understands that shit. But hell if he’s going to abide the idiot-devil taking everyone down with him.

So if Red wants to sit there in agony, fine. Frank lets him. It’s only a matter of time before the kid can’t work. He’ll drop another mag and won’t be able to pick it up from his shaking or crying, and when that happens, Frank is going to make him ask – nicely – for his fucking meds. Drill two lessons into the dumbass’s head with one consequence.

The kid doesn’t stop though, not even to take a break. He falters a bit, but bullets trickle steadily onto the towels that Frank’s laid out. The magazines hit the floor one after another after
another. A glance into the bathroom shows Red crumpling. His skin’s a shade of white that belongs in a morgue. Sweat drains off his face and collects in his ratty beard. But he’s a man on a mission. No matter how bad he hurts, Red grabs another mag from the tub.

Frank knows the job’s done, then, when the clinking stops. That last round ejects, the mag and coin hit the floor, and Red’s panting gains in volume till it echoes through the tiny space. Sounds like he’s been holding his breath the whole time. Frank knows the feeling; he bates his breath in anticipation of a conversation. He’s rewarded with the sounds of skin scraping over tile, of Red groaning in pain, and the inexplicable sound of him hopping out of the bathroom.

He gets to the doorway and makes a good show of pulling his eyes the rest of the way open. But there’s a vacancy in his stare from more than just blindness. Red isn’t awake. He checked out a long time ago, let his brain fly on autopilot, and the rest of him would be checking out too if he wasn’t so God damn stubborn. Amidst gasping for breath, he tucks his IV port tightly against his chest. The bag of saline hangs over his shoulder. For all the good it’s doing: saline’s shooting straight from his bloodstream out his pores.

There’s a long moment where he teeters between the wall and the floor – lost, profoundly lost. He tracks the space with his ears as his face furrows with poorly suppressed terror. His senses must not be compensating like they usually do, however they usually do. The kid hasn’t lost himself in the apartment; he doesn’t seem to be aware there is an apartment.

Frank tucks himself back inside the kitchen and tells himself it serves the kid fucking right. Should’ve taken the meds. Shouldn’t’ve fucked with the ammo. Should’ve stayed in bed. And no amount of blind, puppy dog eyes is going to get Frank to leap at helping him. Although so help the kid, he fucks that God damn leg up again…

“Eight paces to your right,” Frank tells him. “Watch out for the table.”

Red’s barely audible over his breathing, “Thanks.” The splint drags into the hardwood on his hop of shame back to the cot. Frank hears the table rattle. Red bites back a curse. He stands there – hunched over, shaking, falling apart faster than he can pull his shit together.

Frank stops watching again. Doesn’t know why he started. His memories are kicking up dust. He’s watching Lisa’s first steps and Frank Jr. nursing wounds from football and him, Frank, dazedly working his way through a shitty motel room. Brain lit up like a combat zone as he tries to figure out why he’s not at home. He asked to go home. The nurse brought him home; he remembers being at home. But where’s Maria? Where are the kids?

Scrubbing his head helps spread the weight of the bullet around his brain. Kids are dead. Maria’s dead. Home’s gone, burned. And the shock he remembers from that shitty motel room was a long time ago. Frank knows who he is now. Knows what he has to do. He wishes he could say the same for Red, but the kid clearly hasn’t found the thing that fixes him yet.

He has found the cot. That’s something. Frank stands in the doorway again, staring at Red’s shokcy, shivery form as he tries to find a comfortable position with his ravaged body. He gets his leg propped up, his head on the pillow. A storm rumbles in the distance, jostling the window panes and what little resolve the kid has. Red hisses. The silk sheet twists through his hands in a fight to get the pain under control.

Frank waits for him to reach to the windowsill and be disappointed. The Fentanyl injection is on the desk, along with the midazolam, because the pain has to be bad. Red’s leg is back to the size it was after the initial break. He isn’t going to sleep with the storm jangling his nerves all night.
Good thing silk doesn’t break easily. Red tears at the sheet, hoping if he just pulls it enough, if he wills it enough, relief will come.

He doesn’t reach for the windowsill. Not once.

Red draws another shuddering breath, “Night, Frank.”

“Night, Red,” Frank replies.

The kid’s breathing evens out eventually, and he slips into that silent state he’s been maintaining, the one where he’s not awake but he’s not asleep either. He rouses with every rumble from the storm, gasping, grasping at his left knee. And every time Frank thinks this is it. The kid’s tapping out. The storm builds, dragging Red’s agony right along with it. But the kid gets his breathing under control and fades away again. Until the next thunderclap.

Frank grabs a few winks. He wakes to the departing storm and Red’s staggered breathing. “Morning, sunshine.” The kid doesn’t answer. Frank gives him an affectionate tap on the left foot. Red chokes on his next breath.

It’s time. It’s been time forever now. But the kid puts his fucking brave face on and breathlessly replies, “Morning, Frank.” He slips back into controlled silence.

The stench of ammonia has cleared. Frank gets the dry rounds back in the ammo cans; punches some antibiotics into Red’s IV. He showers, shaves, dresses. Brews a pot of coffee. By then, the sun’s coming up. Neighbours are moving. Rina’s knocking at the door.

She takes a step back when he answers and drops her head, building a wall between them with her platinum blonde hair. There’s a stack of Tupperware in her arms that she hands off to Frank. It weighs almost as much as Red does and smells heady, rich.

“I was cooking. I made too much.” She always makes too much, ever since Frank respectfully declined the first meal she brought him when he moved in. Her blustering explanation continues, “I have so much, and I don’t have room. This will go to waste, and I eat…eat…not as much as this. I don’t need this. Please take this. And if you won’t eat it, feed your brother. He is…” she grows stern. Well, as stern as a woman like Rina can get without a knife in her hand. “He is tiny. And you have not left for groceries. Not that I…not that I was noticing. It’s your business. But your brother needs food. He is injured. And small. And so many scars on him. And he is alright, yes? The doctor, she was able to fix his leg?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Frank nods to her. Rina nods back in place of commenting how good that is. Much as she can babble, Rina wastes little breath on social niceties. Frank tilts the stack of containers in gratitude. “I’ll make sure he eats. Thank you.”

“You eat too,” she decrees.

“Yes, ma’am,” he doesn’t try to turn down Rina’s cooking because it isn’t good or he isn’t hungry. There’s a mounting debt between them, one Frank can’t hope to repay in full with how little Rina requires of others. “Thank you.”

Rina nods once more and skitters back to her apartment. “You have a good day. Tell your brother to have a good day too.”

“You too, ma’am. Thank you.”
No sooner is the door shut than another conversation begins: “Frank.”

Red’s eyes aren’t open. His muscles are screwed up tight under his sweat-dampened clothing. A faint tremor bounces through him from head to foot to head. The ammonia’s left his hands chapped, cracked, and bright red. Frank can’t help but say a silent hallelujah. The kid has finally found his way to some common fucking sense. Frank sets the Tupperware on the desk and palms the syringe. “What do you need, Red?”

The kid still hasn’t opened his eyes. Maybe he can’t; that would hurt too much. The rest of him quivers, raw and exposed. Nerves shredded to shit from lying there in agony. “Can I have a bath?”

Frank puts the syringe down. “Yeah, I’ll get it started.”

He marches off, taking his damn time with it: finding Red a dry towel, getting the water just right, arranging the slab of plywood in the bottom corner for the broken leg. When that’s finished, he paces, biding his time for Red to say it. Fucking say it, Red. Because fifteen hours without pain meds is more stupid and useless than the shit with the bullets.

Frank’s impatience is thinly veiled when he steps out of the bathroom. “All yours,” he tells Red, who is still lying prostrate on the cot. Who’s eyes still aren’t open. The kid has his right hand spread on the wall with enough force to leave a dent. Tendons pop out of the back of his left hand too, which is drawn into a fist on the side of the cot.

His face screws up tight. Lips peel between his teeth. His eyelids are clamped shut. There are tears pooling in his hair, mingling with fresh sweat. Most alarmingly, however, is the complete lack of self-consciousness he’s showing. He doesn’t notice Frank is staring. He can’t.

When he finally does, Red slams his fist into the wall. He catches the cry before it can leave his throat. “Can’t move, can you, Red?” Frank says quietly, and the wall takes another punch in reply. Red’s mouth cracks open, releasing a small, strangled sound, one that sends Frank back into the bathroom.

He has a good yell welling up inside him to match the screams welling up inside Red, but that ends poorly. Red’s not a boot Corporal. Yell at him, force him to do shit, and Red’s first instinct is to disobey especially if it’s for his own good.

So Frank swallows his rage – for now. It’s gonna come out swinging if Red gets surly, and Frank’s going to let it because the kid has no one to blame but himself for this. No one. He runs a washcloth under cold water and walks back out to the cot. Without saying a word, he gets Red into a sitting position. He dodges the weak blows to his arm and face. He clamps the cloth to the back of Red’s neck and forces the kid to hold it there. Then Frank folds Red’s right leg up so it’s next to his face. “Breathe,” he says. “Slow it down, Red. Just breathe.”

Red’s face crumples. “My right leg…it won’t…”

Frank knows, “You’re exhausted. Worked yourself too hard for too long.”

“I can do this,” and he believes it so much that anyone else might too.

“Not like this. This isn’t the shit you walk off.”

“I have walked off worse shit than this.”
“Yeah, and look where some of that got you: chained to a rooftop.”

Red scoffs. It almost sounds like a laugh. His next breath is slower, more measured. Shaky as hell, but that’s expected with unmanaged pain. “I can’t. I can’t think straight with them. The meds...they...” Red shoves the cloth more deeply into his hair. The chill helps. “I need to be able to focus. I need to do that.”

“You focused right now?” Frank calls bullshit on that. No way Red’s focused up after hurting this long.

“It’s worse with the drugs.”

Frank calls bullshit on that too. “Doc’s comin’ back tonight. You talk to her about what you need. Meantime, you gotta take something. You’re gonna kill yourself, you keep this up.”

“I can’t. I can’t, Frank.”

He stays on course. “You asked me whose cot I would be lying on, if it was my leg that got busted? Shit, Red, best case scenario, you’d haul my ass back to your apartment and use your fancy ninja skills to get me to take the meds. I don’t like ‘em more than you do.”

Red’s voice gets quiet, somewhat ashamed. His left hand plays across his twisted silk sheet. “I thought that’s what you were going to do. Kind of...kind of surprised that you haven’t.”

“Makes two of us. I’m tired of your shit, but I can only save you from yourself for so long.”

“Thank you.”

It takes Frank a second to realize that he isn’t being thanked for refusing to save Red from his own stupidity. The fact that he’s being thanked it weird on its own without considering that it’s the sheet and the clothes and the effort he’s put in that Red actually appreciates. “Yeah, don’t...” he scrubs the right side of his head, rising from the cot. “Don’t mention it.”

Red nods. A violent tremor runs through him. Tears edge into his voice. “Give me...give me the stuff. The meds.”

Frank grabs the syringe.

“Not...not too much,” Red begs.

“You tell me when.”

The kid offers his left arm. Holy Mary, Mother of God – Frank can’t believe it. No arguments, no backtalk, no sparring. He pops the needle into the port and slowly depresses the plunger. The effects are immediate. Red sags against the wall. His right hand drops from the cloth; his right knee falls back on the bed. His eyelids flutter. The tension in his body drains. A few errant tears stream down his cheeks - in relief this time. “There, there,” he sighs, head dangling from his neck, “Right there. Right there, Frank.”

Frank nudges a little extra into the kid’s vein. Just a little. He withdraws the needle and pops the cap back on. “You still wanna wash up?”

Nodding. The second his IV is disconnected, Red rolls towards the edge of the cot. Jesus,
this shit again. Frank cuts him off. “Nice try, Red.” He picks the kid up, all hundred-and-nothing pounds of him, and carries him into the bathroom. The sudden change in altitude knocks Red right out for several seconds. His head rocks hard against Frank’s shoulder. “I’ve gotten pretty good at this.”

Red’s looking green and gaggy as he comes round. He chokes on several breaths as Frank gets him settled on the bathroom floor. “Don’t…don’t say that.”

“I go too fast?”

Red shakes his head. He swirls a finger through the air, “Ammonia.”

Frank sniffs. Between the breeze and his shower, the smell of ammonia’s gone. For him, at least. He gazes down at Red. “You still smell that?”

“Compensation,” Red sighs unhappily.

“Understatement,” Frank counters.

He earns another nod from Red, “You have no idea.”

Pain medication doesn’t make Red less of a pain in the ass. He’s a different kind of pain in the ass. He is well-intentioned but unhelpful. Anti-helpful, actually. His attempts to get undressed counter Frank’s attempts to assist him. He ends up more clothed than not by the time Frank asks, “You doing this or am I, Red?”

The kid ducks his face in shame, or maybe it’s exhaustion dragging his head towards the ground. “You.”

“Lift your arms.”

Thirty seconds later, it’s done – shirt, sweats, everything - and Red is lowering himself into the water. “Told you I was getting good at this,” Frank says, balling up the soiled clothing for laundry. Actually, he was good at this once. Once upon a time.

Red is disassociating or falling asleep or both. His words slur as he speaks, and he has to balance his head against the tap to hold it upright. “Don’t get used to it. I’m getting…I’m getting back on my feet.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Frank breaks out the first aid kit. He tugs on a pair of neoprene gloves. “You’re tough shit, Red.”

He dives right into changing the dressings on the leg, checking intermittently that Red is breathing. The Fentanyl might have taken the edge off getting into the bathroom, but it’s not doing much for unraveling the bandages. Red’s shaking as his incision is unpacked. There’s no infection, but the swelling and redness are back up. Frank douses it all in saline solution. Doc’s going to have a fit when she sees it. “Need to get some ice on this.”

Red nods, looking dazed. He fumbles for the bar of soap on the edge of the tub, trying to take his mind off Frank prodding at the initial injury on the back of his calf. He scrubs at his face, his arms, his chest, but the movements are jerky. The lethargy from the Fentanyl is gone, replaced with the frenetic energy from earlier.
He reaches for the taps, twisting until he gets the water running. “I got it, I got it…” he dismisses Frank’s attempt to help, shoving his head under the stream. His mouth opens wide and eyes scrunch up tight. The whistle of the pipes masks his shout of pain.

When he emerges, the expression has drained out of Red’s face, and his head hangs in blissful defeat, water curving over his neck and shoulders. He breathes in long strokes: five counts in, five counts out, repeat. He’s moving in slow motion compared to the rush of water and Frank’s movements, but he looks utterly at peace with the world.

“Red?”

Time catches up to him. The kid lifts his head to rest against the tap once more. He reaches blindly along the wall, searching. When he doesn’t find it, Red does something funny: he sniffs. “No shampoo, Frank?”

“No hair, Red.”

The kid considers the bar of soap. He really has to think before he puts it into his hair and swipes a few times, working up a lather. The look on his face rivals that first smell of ammonia. It gets worse, the longer he spends washing his locks. He shoves his head back under the tap to rinse. “Not your fancy, hypoallergenic, organic stuff…” is as close to apologizing as Frank gets. And on that note, “What’s the devil of Hell’s Kitchen need with silk sheets and designer shampoo?”

Red tears his head out of the running water. He turns off the tap. “I like nice things.”

“No, you don’t,” because if that were true, it wouldn’t be just silk sheets and shampoo. It would be fancy track suits instead of threadbare tees and sweats. And the attitude – nice things come with a superiority complex that a scrappy kid like Red doesn’t have beyond his morality.

“I like nice sheets.”

Frank keeps his reaction as neutral as possible when he regards the skin on Red’s chest, arms, and scalp turning faintly pink with irritation. It’s not allergies or compensation. It’s soap wreaking havoc on the devil of Hell’s Kitchen. “Yeah,” Frank agrees, “I can see why.”

Matt waits for the follow-up questions he senses brewing from the bottom corner of the tub. They never come. Nothing does. God, he can’t have misjudged Frank Castle this much, and yet the man they call the Punisher isn’t pressing the advantage of Matt’s dulled inhibitions. If Frank asked him now, the explanation would tumble out of him. He’s already given most of the secret away. He doesn’t really have a good reason to keep it a secret save for the fact that it’s the one thing he can still call his.

He’s grateful when Frank doesn’t ask. God, he’s exhausted. The Fentanyl doesn’t begin to cover it. There’s a deep-seated ache simmering under the druggy numbness coating his awareness. He hurts from how tired he is. It’s not just his leg looking to let loose when the medication wears off. More distantly, Matt senses fear: he was jarred out of meditation so easily and so often. He feels phantom vibrations from the storm in his bones and the hard tug on his broken leg of a ceiling he caught for Frank Castle, and he can’t concentrate. The medication doesn’t dull the memories; the agony finds him easily through the haze. Matt can’t ask for more.

Frank doesn’t offer. He does his duty: tossing Matt a towel when the tub drains, helping him up as he dries, getting him back to the cot, reattaching his IV. The single-mindedness is grating. Matt bristles from the attention. He doesn’t know what to do with Frank’s interest, how to interpret
it. Silk sheets aren’t required to help his leg heal, and Frank would be perfectly justified in dropping him off at the precinct. The Punisher isn’t capable of empathy or guile. There’s the mission. Matt’s a mission. But he’s more than a mission?

God, he’s tired. He doesn’t bother with a shirt. Briefs and sweats, then he lies down again. Frank drapes a bag of frozen vegetables next to his propped-up leg. The cold stops Matt in his tracks, a perfect blend of awful and perfect. “Gotta eat something first.”

“Not hungry, Frank.” Matt wants to sleep.

“Not asking.” Frank places a mug in his hand. More soup. Apparently, Rina did stop by this morning. Matt thought her visit was a pain-induced hallucination.

It’s more than broth this time. Thick egg noodles and shredded pieces of chicken, dimes of carrots. Parsley and onion. The salt and heat are exactly what his body wants. Matt’s thoughts swirl, the harsh ache of exhaustion fizzes. He puts the mug on the table. “Thanks.”

Frank takes the mug, replaces it with something else. A small item humming with an electrical charge and a microprocessor. It informs Matt that he has five new voicemails (his maximum) and one hundred and fifty-seven messages (a personal best) and a slew of updates for his apps.

“I’m going out,” Frank already has a jacket on. “Take care of some stuff.”

Matt can’t tell if he has a gun. He can’t be bothered to care. His senses are spinning, reeling at the thought of one hundred and fifty-seven messages and the looming threat of pain, pain, pain.

“You need anything?”

“No.”

A loaded pause. “Listen, Red, I don’t want to dose you before I go-“

“I’m done, Frank.” He is. War’s over. Fires have ceased.

Frank appreciates that. The way his posture loosens suggests he wasn’t looking forward to another surprise from Red today. “Needle’s on the sill. Low dose. You take it when you needed. I’m not going long. Need a couple of things for your leg.”

He doesn’t say good-bye. He’s out the door, down the stairs, and walking out of the parking lot. No car today. Matt closes his eyes, follows the swirl of his thoughts past the nagging conclusion that Frank is leaving for a reason. That Frank put the phone on the table for a reason. He isn’t going out to kill; he’s giving Matt some privacy.

Matt double-taps for his voice mail and presses the phone to his ear.

“Matt, it’s Karen. Hi. Look-“

He deletes it. He deletes it and tears the phone away from his ear because her voice, her voice drains through his ear like boiling water and he deserves the burn. He wants that pain, not whatever she has to say.

Unfortunately, the next message is from her too: sorer, angrier, “Look, I know that we haven’t spoken, and I know that hurt you-“
Foggy this time: “Matt, quit being a dick, pick up your God damn phone, and call Karen.”

Karen: “God damn it, Matt.”

“…click…”

Matt isn’t ready for the text messages. He half-considers turning his phone off or throwing it across the room. They shouldn’t be calling. They have plenty of people in their lives to call, to worry about, and Matt isn’t one of them. Not anymore. He sets his phone back on the table.

He breaks so quickly, so messily. Fingers crashing onto the table, scrambling for purchase. Heart quaking in his chest. Limbs spilling at odd angles as he tries to get the phone to his ear. Her number is still on his speed dial. His phone is ringing, ringing, and Matt wills don’t pick up, don’t pick up, don’t pick up. Be at work, be in a meeting, be nursing a hangover: just don’t pick up.

“Matt!” his ear seers. “Matt, where the hell have you been?”

Matt forces himself to respond, “Hi, Karen.”

Happy reading!

Chapter End Notes

Thousandsmiles did some awesome fanart for this chapter, which can be found here: Hurt.
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I spent most of the hiatus between seasons of Daredevil writing about the deep love between Matt and Foggy. I admit was a little strange to have the first person he calls be Karen, so the conversation here took several rewrites. Hence the delay in posting. For those of you eagerly awaiting Foggy’s arrival, don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten him. He’s coming.

Thank you, Readers, for your wonderful support! I love writing in this fandom. The feedback is great. You are great. Please enjoy!

“And I am feeling so small.
I was over my head.
I know nothing at all.
And I will stumble and fall.
I’m still learning to love,
Just starting to crawl.”

~A Great Big World, “Say Something”

Karen speaks in a near whisper, her voice tight with desperation. Most people would be relieved, but Karen knows who she’s talking to: “Matt, where the hell have you been?”

Matt avoids the question. There’s a great swell of anxiety rising in his chest over the subject of where, stronger than the Fentanyl fuzz. “How did you know I was gone?”

“What does that matter?” her tone knifes into his skull carving God damn it, Matt-s and how could you-s into his ear canal. It’s a lot like the last time they spoke actually, when Karen’s shock gave way to horror. She stormed out of the office with carefully concealed rage saying that she needed time. How much time, Matt still doesn’t know. Karen isn’t ready to speak to him. He can hear it. Even over the phone, he can hear it. “You have been gone for almost a week. We were going to file a missing persons report if we didn’t hear from you.”
Matt tries again to dodge the issue of where. Where, indeed. “Who’s we?”

Karen is not falling for that shit, “God damn it, Matt. I thought you were past the point of keeping secrets.”

“I thought you were…past the point of talking to me.” So there. Guess that makes them even.

The phone line fizzes with an angry rush of breath. “You lied to me. You lied to me for months! And you pushed Foggy-!” Karen stops, sensing. She releases another enraged huff of breath through the phone. He successfully derailed her, and she needs to get back on track. “Where are you? What the hell is going on, Matt?”

He gives up picking a fight for the simplest answer. “I’m fine, Karen. I’m safe. You don’t…you don’t need to worry about me.”

“Why did you even bother calling, then?”

Matt sighs. She is going to hang up on him, and he is going to deserve it. “I don’t want you and Foggy calling the police.”

Amazingly, Karen doesn’t hang up. She leads the charge, “You made us a part of this. Whether you like it or not. And you do not get to decide when we back off.”

“I thought you both already had. I told Foggy. I told him to leave this alone. And you did a really good job of that all by yourself.”

The comment leaves Karen utterly speechless for a long, painful moment. The only sound worse than her furious voice is the silence buzzing between them. Matt can hear her mouth clamped shut and the ferocious pound of her heart. God damn him: she had every right to walk away, and he doesn’t want to be an asshole. This is why he wanted to talk to her voicemail.

“Wow,” Karen breathes, awestruck. He exceeded her douchbag expectations, and Matt assumes they were pretty high given her allegiance with Foggy. “That is…that is rich coming from you. After you spent months keeping this from me. How would you like me to react, Matt? You want me to cheer you on from the sidelines? Patch you up when you’ve been beaten down?” she scoffs, because that doesn’t save people from Matt Murdock. “I loved you, and Foggy loved you, and you chased us both out of your life like we were nothing.”

They weren’t nothing. “You…you aren’t nothing.”

The words hang between them in the electrical static. Karen doesn’t drink in his compliments. She scrutinizes them, suspicious, wondering what the catch could possibly be when they’ve lost this much already.

Matt doesn’t want her knowing how dark this gets between them. He had to chase Foggy away tooth and claw. He can’t do that again. “What day is it?”

“You don’t know what day it is?”

“No,” the anxiety is mounting. Matt chases after his breath as tears burn in his eyes. “What…what day?”
The edge drops out of Karen’s voice, and it’s worse. It’s worse than the rage. Her words trickle over his skin like summer rain, pooling at the base of his spine in a tender cradle. “You don’t know where you are, do you?”

He lashes back, praying for anger on her part, “I am… I am safe. I’m okay.”


Her warmth flashes up his spine. Matt squirms away from it. He can’t. He can’t. “Yes, I’m… I’m still in the city. I know which borough, but I can’t… I can’t have you coming looking for me. It’s… I’m not alone, Karen.”

“The old man… Stick…”

“No, he’s gone.”

“Do you know who you’re with?”

“I can’t tell you.” Karen isn’t likely to turn Frank over to the police, but Foggy is, and Matt isn’t capable of mediating Frank’s surrender to the NYPD. Nobody is.

“Tell me where. Foggy… Foggy knows people. We’ll find you. We’ll come get you.”

Matt can’t. “What day is it?”

Karen relents, “It’s Sunday, Matt.”

Five days. He’s been out for five days. Stuck in a place he doesn’t know with Frank Castle for five days. “Lantom is going to worry.” Church has been the only place he hasn’t cut out of his life.

The scoff from the other line lets him know how ridiculous his concern is. How ridiculous Matt’s concern always is. He doesn’t care about not knowing where he is or that the friends he chased out of his life are worried, but his parish priest better not be fretting. Karen thankfully doesn’t have to mention any of that out loud. “You say you’re safe. This person you’re with – are they holding you there? Are you coming home?”

Matt can’t see Frank backing out on that one. “Eventually.”

She gives up and goes for broke, asking, “Can we meet somewhere, Matt?”

They can. He is capable of meeting people. But he doesn’t want… he shouldn’t… There’s a reason Foggy and Karen aren’t a part of his life, and though the broken leg complicates things, Matt can’t abandon the mask. Fisk is going to break out of prison. Innocent people are going to die. Nevermind the fact that he can’t get out of bed. “I’ll let you know.”

“God damn you, Matt,” Karen hisses. Matt accepts her scalding tone with worthy resignation. “Why did you bother calling? This doesn’t make me want to file a missing persons report any less.”

“It’s not that. It’s… not the person I’m with, it’s…” the fact that he can’t move without pain, that he’s on bed rest, that his leg is falling apart. She doesn’t need to know. “It’s fine.”
“It’s never been fine.” She allows the obligatory suffix, “…not with you,” to go unspoken. “Look, the day you told me about…the mask, you said you were done keeping secrets from me.”

“I am. I wanted to be. But something’s happened, Karen, and it’s fine, I promise…”

She stops him. Matt barely recognizes the tone. Karen gets authoritative with unruly clients, but she’s never had to deliver him an ultimatum. “Agree to meet me. You name the place and the time, and I will be there. Otherwise I am calling the NYPD, and I’m getting Foggy to hire that menace PI who does dirty work for his firm, and we will tear up this entire city looking for you.”

He isn’t sure if he’s in love with her or terrified of her. It’s probably both. “Alright, I’ll meet with you. But I will have to get back to you, Karen, about when and where.”

“I will give you until tomorrow.”

“That-“ Matt is having visions of the doctor putting him on another week of bed rest. God, he doesn’t want to do this. He wants to be alone: they need to leave him alone. “I’ll call you tonight.”

Her silence tells him she’s not expecting much. Matt knows exactly how she feels.

“I’ll talk to you then,” Karen says instead of what she actually thinks.

Matt catches her before she can disconnect, “Karen.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell Foggy-“

She cuts him off sharply, “You tell Foggy.”

And she hangs up.

Matt lets the phone drop from his ear. The quiet of the apartment is overwhelming. Air and electricity buzz in a faint fuzz of white noise. It’s a lousy distraction. Matt prods at his phone angrily.

He sends an SMS: I’m fine. Also: I called Karen.

Matt tosses his phone back on the table. He doesn’t get a response – he isn’t expecting one, not really – but his hearing hone:s in on his phone like it’s the good old days instead of the bad new ones.

He waits, and the inevitable nothing occurs.

Frank returns to a quiet apartment. The cell phone’s moved on the nightstand. Thank goodness Red can take a hint. Now neither of them have to talk about it: not the cops checking in on Red or the people who bullied the cops into doing so. He knew Red was lying about not having anyone. Kid has plenty of people he’s looking to avoid right now is all, which is why Red clams up and doesn’t say a God damn thing. No small talk to try and learn more about Frank, no big talk about how wrong it is to kill people. Nothing about ninjas or resurrected girlfriends.

The kid takes to using cooperation as a distraction. He eats and drinks what Frank gives him. He accepts help when he has to relieve himself. He says please and thank you and sounds
sincere. And Frank would be relieved if he didn’t know better. Cooperation is a captive behaviour, one he thought was beneath Red. The kid ran his mouth while in chains with a gun to his head. Loathe as Frank is to admit missing Red’s semi-conscious fits, his sarcastic comebacks, his God damn self-righteous, moral high-horse bullshit; his anger and his discomfort, at least those were real. Red was there, present. Now he’s going through whatever motions he has to in order to get by and get away.

It’s not the meds. Red takes the bare minimum. He props himself up as high as his pillow will allow and lays there, concentrating hard against the meds pulling his eyes back into his skull. When his eyes do close, it’s not in chemical sleep. Red’s breath is five counts in, five counts out. Measured. Even.

Frank is a little surprised when the silence is broken about mid-afternoon: “You uh…you box, Frank?”

He looks up from the dismantled colts he’s been cleaning to check the kid. The life’s worming its way back into Red. His colour’s back, and his voice sounds involved, connected. Whatever bad feelings he was nursing this morning seem to have dissipated. He’s trying, at the very least.

Frank decides that he can try too. A little. He opens his mouth to respond only to have Red cut him off, “Let me guess: once.”

Cheeky little shit. Frank briefly considers asking when was the last time he spoke to Miss Page and the Nelson guy. Let me guess: once. But this ceasefire shit is boring, and Red’s obviously not looking for a fight. His question about boxing isn’t deep or profound. There’s nothing to be gained by the answer, no judgment he can level.

Frank plays along, “Started when I was a kid. Never did much with it. It was something to do with my hands when I wasn’t pulling the trigger.” He lets that hang, triple dog daring Red to come at him. Red doesn’t; it’s a fight for another time. “I don’t have to ask if you do. You dressed up your bob and weave with a bunch of ninja shit, but you box.”

Red’s quiet again. Not captive-quiet, more nothing-else-to-say quiet. Frank doesn’t let it stand. He’s got an in, a civil one, and he’s taking it, “You start boxing before or after you went blind?”

“I could’ve been born blind, Frank.”

“Yeah, but you weren’t,” the way his eyes move tell Frank they were good for something once upon a time. “How old were you when you went blind?”

“Nine.”

“What happened?”

“An accident,” and then, quickly, to avoid more conversation about his lost sight. “I learned how to box before. My dad…my dad was a boxer.”

“Any good?”

“He could be,” the way his voice trails off strikes a chord in Frank. He recognizes the tone all too well. Red’s dad is dead.
Red weaves past the anticipated how-did-it-happen, “He never wanted me to fight though.”

“Papa Murdock wouldn’t approve of the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen?”

A laugh, a light one, “No, I think the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen was exactly his style, just not…not with me wearing the mask.”

“He wanted a lawyer?” it comes out like an insult; Frank doesn’t mean it to, not with the ghost of the kid’s old man hovering, but he can’t help it. Lawyers leave a bad taste in his mouth. Fucking Reyes. Fucking justice system. God damn Red and his idealism. Life isn’t a boxing ring or a comic book. The bad guys shouldn’t get to come back for a rematch.

Red’s smarting more than he lets on, “He didn’t want me to become him. He wanted something better.”

“Dads always want better for their kids.” Frank certainly does. Hell, he doesn’t have to be their dad to not want his kids ripped apart by three gangs and a crooked DA. But he can’t waste his time on the better that could have been instead. Those thoughts are long gone, because there is no instead for Lisa or Frank Jr. There’s no instead for him or Red or Papa Murdock. There’s what happened. There’s what is. “I take it ninja training wasn’t your old man’s idea?”

“No,” Red’s tone goes deep and dark and foreboding. Evidently, ninja school is a more protected subject for Red than his dad’s death.

Frank bides his time. Eventually they’re going to have a few more words about Red’s undead ninja girlfriend, and the truth about Red’s style is going to come out. “Why’d you start fighting?”

“I wanted to protect people.”

“You couldn’t do that as a lawyer.”

Red absorbs the jab and asks, “Why’d you join the military?”

Another distraction. And here Frank thought they were having a conversation the way normal folks do. Whatever Red’s running from must be pretty damn big for him to stick to such basic questions.

“I just did, Red, but my old man never had a problem with me fighting,” Frank gets them back on topic. He’s sick of this pussy-footing shit. “Is that what you think you’re doing right now? You protecting people, that it, Red? ‘Cuz it sounds like some people are pretty worried about you. Calling the cops like that, being a dick to detectives…”

Red’s counterattack ain’t half-bad. It certainly gives Frank pause when the kid notes, “Are you…are you lecturing me about friendship?”

Frank isn’t responding to that. The hell does he know about friendship. “You’d rather be on my cot than with the two people ballsy enough to ask the NYPD to check-up on you. That’s messed up, Red.”

He expects an argument, a low-blow, a comment about his family. Red gives him none of that. It’s not a captive behaviour. Red isn’t submitting to Frank or trying to appease him. He sags into the cot, genuinely defeated, because he, Daredevil, couldn’t agree more with what the Punisher’s said.
And that’s really messed up.

“She wants to meet,” Red states, thoroughly defeated. “Karen. She’s...she’s going to call the police if I don’t.”

“You tell her about your leg?”

“No.”

“You tell her where you are?”

“I don’t know where I am, Frank.”

“You know enough.”

Red turns his head towards the window he can’t see out of, and it’s an admission that yes, he probably does. Enough that Miss Page could find him if she tried. “No, I didn’t.”

Frank sighs, relieved on one hand, but knowing that Red didn’t do it to protect the Punisher from discovery. He did it to hide himself away. Frank isn’t going to give him that option. “After the doc checks you out, you give her a time and place, Red. I’ll get you there.”

“Thanks.”

Again with the gratitude: for the offer, not the prospect of meeting with Karen. Red sounds absolutely raw, bristling. His ear twitches in the direction of his phone. Frank half-expects it to go off, the way the kid focuses on it. “Yeah. Don’t mention it.”

Doc arrives in the evening. She’s fresh from rotation at the hospital, still in her scrubs. Her ponytail has slid onto her neck and is fraying. She keeps tucking loose strands of glossy black hair behind her ears; the locks fall again, framing her face. Frank thinks she’s nervous at first, fearful. He is about to ask what’s got her spooked when her shoulders slump forward. Her energy is from exhaustion, nothing more.

Frank gives her a cup of coffee. She doesn’t turn it down. Tosses it back like a shot, in fact. She returns the empty mug to Frank, “Thanks.” Doc turns her attention to the leg. “Swelling’s up, but I don’t smell infection.”

“It’s fine,” Red informs her.

She drops her bag, takes off her coat. The ID flips around: Sato. Frank tucks the name away for later. “You tried walking on it again.”

“I hopped.”

“Swelling can shift the bones out of alignment.”

“They’re fine.”

“So you’ve said,” and she believes him, or at the very least doesn’t question him about it further.

“No drugs,” Red says softly. How he knows she has the needle out catches Frank. It’s
eerie. The twilight glow from the window and low light in the apartment makes Red’s blind, averted stare appear supernatural.

Doc hasn’t caught on to Red’s game, or maybe she hasn’t asked. She has learned the valuable art of what questions are relevant. It doesn’t matter to her that the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen is blind so long as she outlasts the men gunning for her. She looks at Frank for direction. He gives her a curt nod. Kid wants pain, let him have it. Doc places the needle on the table.

Her ministrations are quick, though Red’s face makes it look like she took her damn time. He doesn’t scream. Doc carries on professionally, “I would need an x-ray to be sure of how the bone is healing. The wounds are clean though. You need to stay off your feet for the swelling to go down. No hopping, no hobbling. The leg needs to be elevated.”

“Yeah,” Red is barely with her. He clings to consciousness with a vengeance. “When can I get back on my feet?”

“You’ll need a cast, a walking boot. That will allow you to ice the area. You’ll also need crutches,” Doc finally looks at Red’s eyes. She looks like she’s about to say something before thinking better of it, especially when Red senses her staring. She gazes back to the leg. “It’ll be a while before you’re weight-bearing.”

“How long is a while?”

“Eight, ten weeks – give or take.”

Red scoffs, “No.”

“Yes,” Doc challenges him, “and that’s if you don’t need another operation. The cast itself needs to stay on for twelve to sixteen weeks, also give or take.” Frank’s banking on ‘give’ for Red, and he bets the doc is too.

The kid isn’t getting it, “Is there a cast-“

Frank isn’t indulging this shit. “Doc says you’re off the leg, you’re off the leg,”

The kid seethes. His breathing gets harsher, taking on all the makings of a growl. “We’ll see.”

“We won’t,” Frank decrees, ignoring the Red’s pout. To the doctor: “He’s off the leg.”

She nods in thanks. “He can use the crutches to get around, but he – you –“ she addresses the sulking Red, “You need to keep the leg elevated as much as possible. Use ice to reduce the swelling. Take the pain medication as necessary.”

Frank waits for Red to speak up about the pain meds, but the kid is worlds away from the conversation. Plotting his next attempt at walking or running or ninja-ing, no doubt. Fuck, the kid is a master in self-destruction. “You got anything lighter than the Fentanyl, Doc?”

“I have Tylenol-3s. With codeine.”

“No,” Red insists. “No narcotics.”

“You will be in agony.”
Red says nothing. He withdraws himself from the conversation in silent ultimatum.

Frank handles negotiations from there. “We’ll take whatever you got.”

“I’m not taking it.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Frank can’t believe they’re having this conversation. They’re men. Grown men. And Red might be a delinquent, but damn, not everything needs to be a fight. “Now say thanks to Doctor Sato.”

Red says, “Thank you,” but his terseness lets Frank know it’s not surrender. This is far from over. This is twelve to sixteen weeks of total fucking misery for them both.

Doc senses that too. She casts a glance to Frank. He nods at her in approval of what Red’s said. She looks back at Red, fingers flexing towards her coat and kit. She is itching to get the hell out of the apartment before the war breaks out. “You’re welcome.”

The doctor’s words echo in Matt’s brain. Twelve to sixteen weeks is three to four months: give or take, give or take, give or take. And so help Frank if the bastard tries to give him T3s. Matt is sick of the narcotic haze. He’ll take the agony. He can take the agony.

As if in response, a fiery tug of pain snaps him out of meditative calm. The doctor’s gone, but Frank is in the kitchen brewing an umpteenth pot of coffee. Matt catches himself hissing, gripping at his left thigh. Fear grips his heart hard. The smell of the pills on the table burn at his nostrils. He already took Frank’s last Aspirin, but there’s a T3 waiting for him next to a cup of water if he needs it.

He doesn’t need it.

“You tell your secretary you’re going to meet her?”

Matt gets his breathing under control. The break gnaws on his muscles. “Doc said I needed to keep my leg elevated.”

The coffee machine sputters. It’s barely finishes when Frank yanks it off the hot plate and pours himself a cup. “Don’t want the NYPD knocking on my door, Red.”

“She won’t,” Matt wrenches at his leg. He counts to eight as he inhales. His exhale only lasts three beats from the deep burn in his calf. Clearly, his leg knows Karen better than he does.

Frank emerges from the kitchen on a direct path to the table. Matt snatches his phone away. “The hell is stopping you. You scared for her to see you like this?”

“She’s scared for you. You scared for her to see you like this?”

“Screw you, Frank!” the anger steals his voice for twelve to sixteen weeks. “You don’t know anything about this.”

“I know that girl isn’t bluffing. She is going to call in whoever it takes to find you, and that’s if she doesn’t start digging through the city herself. You know she loves you, Red? Karen?”

Second time in twenty-four hours that Frank is talking about feelings and friendship, and this time, he’s doing it with direct reference to Karen. Matt’s head spins from more than just pain. “How
do you know that?”

Frank’s turn to dodge the question. “Tell her you’ll meet her next week at your place.”

“How do you know that, Frank?” Matt demands.

“You got your secrets, I got mine,” Frank pokes at the phone in Matt’s hand. The motion comes as a surprise. Matt is lost in his own confusion, his own mortification. Karen said she loved him; he assumed that meant as a friend. Frank makes it sound like it’s more than that. “Call her. Or I will. And take those God damn pills while you’re at it.”

Frank walks away, sipping at his coffee. Cold sweat almost causes Matt’s phone to fall out of his hand. He unlocks his phone, but he doesn’t call. He double taps for SMS. God damn Frank. God damn him to hell.

“See you next Sunday. My place,” Matt narrates. His phone reads the message back to him. He sends it.

He hasn’t set his phone on the table when he receives a reply: I’ll see you then. Followed swiftly by: Foggy will too.

Matt throws his phone on the table. He bites back a cry of pain from his mangled limb and breaking heart. “Great.”

Happy reading!
Nobody's Home

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

My writing process usually has the story ending as Matt embarks on the road to recovery. This chapter marks uncharted territory for me. I sat for days writing crap wondering, “Where do I go from here? What is this ‘plot’ the characters keep referring to? Isn't this the part where Foggy shows up and saves everybody with a speech?”

I realized about halfway through this chapter that Matt is scared. I thought, at first, I was channeling my own fears about mismanaging this fic (and fear runs strong with me, so I don’t rule this out), but the more I worked, the more the reaction made sense for him. Matt is the man without fear because he doesn’t give himself time to think of all the terrible things that could happen to him. Being stuck at Frank’s apartment for a week facing a conversation he doesn’t want to have - without an outlet - struck me as the ideal conditions for him to experience fear. I tried to keep this as in-character as possible for him (and Frank).

Readers, I write this every time because it cannot be said enough: thank you. Your kind support, your insights, your interest – it’s what keeps me going. It’s what brightens my day. Thank you so much. I hope it’s nice where you are.

“I’ve got wild staring eyes
I’ve got a strong urge to fly,
But I’ve got nowhere to fly to.
…when I pick up the phone
There’s still nobody home.
I’ve got a pair of Gohills boots,
And I’ve got fading roots.”

~Pink Floyd, “Nobody’s Home”

The difference between Red’s behaviour after the phone call in the morning and the text message at night is the difference between getting shot and getting set on fire.

Frank has seen both. Guys who catch bullets stew for a while about what they could’ve
Red’s not good at burning. Kind of funny for a guy who is so damn good at setting himself on fire. He twitches and shuffles, Karen’s most recent text message prodding him more deeply than his broken leg. He turns his phone off and shoves it in the open duffel under the cot. And just when Frank thinks Red’s in for another fifteen hour standoff against proper pain meds, the kid nabs the T3 and swallows it dry.

He drops back onto his pillow, twitching on the outside from how badly he’s flailing on the inside. Burning is, all told, one of the worst ways to go. His motions seem random at first, but as the kid settles into sleep, Frank notices him turning his head deeper into the pillow. Angling his ear towards the phone he worked to bury as if he’s expecting it to go off again.

It dawns on Frank that Red’s attentiveness isn’t for Karen. He talked to her on the phone this morning, and then waited for the blow of someone else’s call. She’s the bullet. That Nelson guy? He’s the bomb.

Matt comes to appreciate the T3s. He certainly prefers Aspirin for focus. His mind is less a world on fire than a pool of embers occasionally punctuated by a burst of sound or smell. A haze of codeine surrounds his perception, thin enough that he doesn’t notice its presence until he’s lost his thoughts in it.

The pain is better with the pills though. His leg throbs dully, shuttered from him, and worry ceases to eat away at him through the fugue. He passes hours comfortably, mostly in control (for which he’s grateful), especially once his leg is set in the walking cast. Frank brings one home the following day along with a pair of crutches. Sato arrives the day after, and no sooner is Matt’s leg inside the boot, he is up and moving around the apartment.

“Thank you,” it feels like the first time he’s really said it to Sato after everything she’s done. After the shitty conditions she’s had to work through in order to do it.

Sato gives nothing away in her tone or respiration. This is another day in the OR for her. She packs up her things in preparation to leave. “You’re welcome. Remember to elevate and ice it.”

That won’t be difficult. Being upright for a few minutes causes spikes of pain to break through the narcotic mist gathered in his mind. Matt returns to the cot and undoes the Velcro straps holding the boot to his calf. Frank drapes an ice pack over the injury without being asked.

Matt takes to wandering the day after. Frank gives him the space, but he retreats only as far as the parking lot. His sounds carry faintly under the door: car hood lifting, doors slamming, boots crunching over gravel. Matt wishes he would go. The fight’s over. There’s nothing for Frank to worry about. After Sunday, they can part ways until they cross paths in the field twelve to sixteen weeks from now.

Karen will probably stay with him. She won’t want to, but she’ll do it. Her compassion knows few bounds. Matt trembles in pre-emptive revulsion at the prospect of being pitied, of being a charity case, which he supposes he is now that they aren’t friends.

He staggers through Frank’s space, distracting himself. The apartment is narrower than
Matt’s perception initially suggested. Thank God Frank isn’t cluttered. The crutches catch on the munitions stacked neatly along the walls of the apartment as it is. Matt can’t imagine working his way through a mess, not with his senses dulled and distracted by the haze.

There are three windows in the living area, all thrown wide open in an effort to catch the autumn breeze. They fail miserably in their attempt. Matt listens for the draft, waits for his skin to prickle from the drop in temperature and paint his world of embers into floor plan. The impression wisps and vanishes. He’s left relying on touch, so the crutches have to double as his cane on his lap around Frank’s place.

It’s slow going. Matt stops at the far wall to catch his breath. Pain stabs into his left thigh. His right leg, meanwhile, aches from sudden use, and his arms tremble from exertion. Perception turns from smoke curls into television screen static. Matt braces himself against the wall until his bearings return.

His other hand finds the punching bag and instinctively balls into a fist.

Knuckles itch. The canvas helps. Matt gives the bag a small tap, then another. It’s grounding: the impacts, the vibrations, the clank of chain. The devil wakes up and comes out to play.

“Get up, Matty. Work to do.”

Matt tears himself away from the punching bag and forces his bad intentions back to their dark hiding places. One thought springs on him from within the fog: he isn’t ready. For any of it. Not taking on Fisk or Hell’s Kitchen, Elektra or Karen and Foggy. The Punisher. He’s facing questions on Sunday he doesn’t want to have answers for, concern he can’t accept, friends he doesn’t want. Meanwhile, Elektra is looming, Fisk is mobilizing, Foggy’s in danger, and his break is screaming to be brought back to bed. It hurts. Every inch of him hurts, including the dark places where the devil hides.

He hobbles his way quickly through the apartment and drops onto the cot. His mind reels, knowing full well what’s hiding in the haze. Stick finds him then, and the old man cusses Matt out for being a pussy. Warriors don’t run. They face the pain, the indecision, the fear head-on. Matt wishes he had that kind of stamina, but the brilliant part of codeine is that his brain doesn’t fixate. It ambles away from Sunday, bloody Sunday, and onto other things.

After a longer rest than he intends, Matt rises. He follows the opposite wall this time, stopping by the desk. Frank’s set-up is similar to his Hell’s Kitchen apartment. The corkboard is a snarl of pushpins, strings, and photographs. Matt traces a hand over what he knows is a map, but the paper is so cheap the ink bleeds through the page. He has no indentations to follow, just the shift in coloured inks. Grainy blue for the rivers, sharp black for street names, powder gray for the roads. He suspects its Manhattan based on the jumble of activity on the lower left side. He needs a narrator to discover more than that. Matt’s focus shifts. He smells new cardstock in the corner of the board. Ticket stubs. These ones have indentations. Matt gets through tracing out ‘Central Par-’ before recoiling in sympathy. Apparently, Frank still goes to the carousel. One of the most wanted men in America ventures to Central Park to pay his respects to his slaughtered family.

Matt bravely, masochistically, stretches his hand back to inspect the space beneath the ticket stubs. He finds a photograph and bites back an apology for the Castles, Frank included. He died as much as they did that day, and it’s no doubt their faces smiling up at his outstretched hand.

The desktop is organized chaos. A journal, a pen, and a small collection of tools lie beside the police scanner. Matt fumbles for balance against the desk, dizziness washing over him from the
sound of his fingertips plunking against the surface of the desk. It’s the same sound Frank’s trigger finger made the night with the ammo. Instinctively, Matt yanks open the drawer. There’s a stack of legal pads, some pens, a discarded shell casing; a stash of paperclips and a staple remover shoved into the back corner. Useless, all of it, particularly given the context. Whatever Frank had hidden in there, whatever he was so eager to lay hands on that night with the ammonia, it’s gone. He knew better than to leave it for Matt to find.

“Matthew.”

He sits up on the cot, hyper-focused, because he smells her. The scent of her perfume lingers on the air in the apartment. It flutters against the tip of his tongue in a soft cloud. The aroma is warm, living, melded with the smell of her skin.

Matt listens, waiting to catch hold of her heartbeat. To have her hand smooth on his cheek, a smile breaking over her face as his name crashes from her tongue again: Matthew, Matthew. He receives nothing. The apartment is quiet around him. Frank’s still out, neighbours are sleeping, and Elektra isn’t there.

The smell is gone. Hard to tell if it was ever there in the first place or if he imagined the whole thing, since her taste lingers on his tongue. He keeps waiting for her to appear in front of his outstretched hands. The atmosphere grows murky and hot against his skin. He can’t breathe; he needs air. He shoves the blanket off his lower half and tumbles towards the fire escape window.

He doesn’t bother with crutches. The walking cast is light: itchy as hell, but Matt no longer has to drag his broken limb across Frank’s weathered floor. He can easily swing the leg up and over the window sill, allowing it to dangle while he braces himself with his thigh. He gets his right leg onto the landing and slips out.

Nighttime greets him in a cooling embrace. Matt sinks into it. He lets the Bronx flow into him uninterrupted, and gradually, his tension eases. Elektra’s ghost vanishes, usurped by the sounds and smells of the city. Sirens whine in the distance, traffic hums, life warbles. He isn’t home, but if he blanks his mind, if he allows his perception to generalize into a single stream, he imagines standing on his rooftop, Hell’s Kitchen unfolding around him.

Karen and Foggy waiting in his apartment.

Matt scoffs, snapping out of it. His brain is a mess of conflicting emotions, useless emotions. He wants to go home; he wants to get out of the city. He wants to see them, Karen and Foggy; he wants to see her. He needs to be rid of Fisk; he needs to intervene between Fisk and the Punisher. Matt would say this must be what purgatory feels like, but in purgatory, the destination is clear. Here and now and for always, really, Matt doesn’t know where he’s headed.

Time passes. A car pulls into the lot. Frank’s back. Matt didn’t even know he was gone. The car door slams, and Frank stalks across the gravel towards the front door, but at the last minute, he rattles up the fire escape stairs. “That you, Red?”

“Yeah,” Matt sniffs for GSR and is relieved to find Frank’s clean. Then he remembers the ticket stubs on the corkboard. The apology burns on the back of his tongue. Nighttime is the ideal time for a fugitive to pay his respects.

“You alright?”

Matt nods. “Needed some air.”
“You sick?”

“I’m fine.” A little nauseated. He’s burning up from his dream, nothing more. He swats Frank’s hand away when it moves to check his temperature. Frank’s other hand appears through his hair while he’s distracted. The gesture is as much diagnostic as it is obnoxious. Matt scrubs to get the feel of the Punisher’s fingers off his scalp.

Frank climbs through the bathroom window. “Why so nervous?”

Matt scoffs, “I’m not nervous.” He’s terrified. There’s a difference.

“Uh huh,” doesn’t Frank know it. “How long you been up?”

“A while.” Matt isn’t watching the time. His phone has been off, and he has no intention of turning it back on until the danger of being found is passed. Karen and Foggy may not be able to trace his device, but they don’t have access to the same resources as the Hand. “How long were you gone?”

“A while. You eat something?”

“I’m not hungry.” His stomach is pretty upset actually, churning away inside him.

“You know, for a guy who sneaks around on rooftops looking for a fight, takes fucking nothing to get you worked up.”

Hearing it spoken aloud bristles Matt to the bone. He doesn’t bother trying to deny it. What would be the point? Frank’s got a bone, and he won’t stop chewing till he hits marrow. “I’m good at sneaking around on rooftops. I’m not…I’m not good at…” he spirals his hand. The words are there in his brain, vivid and raw without the haze of codeine, but the pathways between them and his tongue are rotted from lack of use.

Frank doesn’t press. He can fill in the rest of that statement pretty well. Neither of them are very good at that. He re-emerges on the fire escape, surveying the night alongside Matt. “You getting around okay?”

“Yeah. Can’t stand for more than a couple minutes,” for reasons his leg is currently describing to him in excruciating detail. Matt ignores the limb. “I’ll be ready to go on Sunday.” Ready to return to home and the great uncertainty lying in wait for him there.

“You planning on going to mass?”

“I wasn’t making plans,” but now that Frank mentions it. “I’d like to go. I should go. But I don’t think I can sit through it this week.” Embarrassment rushes through him pre-emptively. He gets enough pity from the parishioners as a solitary blind man, let alone one with a newly broken leg.

Deafening silence interrupts his train of thought. Frank isn’t bothered by it, but Matt is. He’s too busy reeling through the little things Frank’s done, the gestures that are too personal to be part of the Mission. Mass isn’t part of Matt’s recovery. Frank has no reason to offer getting him there except that he knows it’s important for Matt.

Matt doesn’t want to think about it. Frank is the least contrary person Matt’s ever met. For him to act outside of his nature is unsettling. For his gestures to be a part of his nature is even more so. “Thank you.”
Frank accepts the thanks with a singular nod. He hurries on to other topics, not wanting to think about it either. “Then, what? You’re back home to meet with Karen and Nelson? Figure out what’s going on with this…the Hand?”

“Yeah,” Matt’s throat closes up. He prays Frank doesn’t ask him what happens next. He doesn’t want to talk about what happens next.

But secretly, he does. He has to ask, because the not-knowing is eating away at his insides. “Frank,” Matt stops him from going back into the apartment. He sifts through the words to find the ones that make the most sense while giving the least away. “Karen and…Foggy, they don’t…” he restarts. “I meant what I said about not having anyone.”

Frank’s gaze is pointed, sharp. He stares all the way through Matt’s eye sockets into the hurricane in his mind. “Don’t need to convince me, Red,” because Frank is already convinced of the opposite.

Matt clarifies, “I can’t have anyone if Fisk is planning his escape.”

Hard to tell if Frank gets it. His posture reveals nothing. His respiration is equally difficult to read. It isn’t until he taps at the windowsill, preparing to take his leave of this shit, Frank reveals he’s understood. His rare, inexplicable kind of thoughtfulness rears its scary head one last time. “You let me know what you want to do Sunday.”

They both know this has nothing to do with what Matt wants. His decision about what happens after Sunday is going to have everything to do with what he can live with. Matt thinks he already knows what the answer will be, but he doesn’t want to say it out loud. The thought – ephemeral, unarticulated – brings him relief, and that’s scary in its own right.

Sunday comes faster than Frank expects given the whole lot of nothing he has to do at the apartment. Watching the kid make laps of the tiny space and learning how to handle stairs stretches the days into weeks. He takes leave of the place as much as he can - working on the car, checking with contacts, watching the deserted carousel spin - and it still feels like forever.

Saturday night sees Red tossing and turning on his cot. He lists towards his powered-off phone still hidden under the bed in the hopes that it might go off. Meanwhile, Frank makes a plan of attack for the Kitchen tomorrow. He’s going to have a couple hours to kill in the neighbourhood, potentially all night depending on what the kid decides.

Fuck, that came as a surprise: Red’s lame attempt at asking for sanctuary. Distance. After all his bitching to go home, he wants to be anywhere but there. The same kid who runs headlong into brawls with the Irish mob can’t bring himself to face old friends. He’d rather stay with a guy called the Punisher to, what? Get strangled some fucking more? Yeah, and Frank’s the one with brain-damage. Right.

As far as being kidnapped goes, though, Red’s less of a shit come Saturday than he was in the first few days of his stay combined. He’s got a smart mouth on him, that’s for sure, but there’s been no talk about killing or hope or morality. He doesn’t do the sullen-captive thing. Once, they
have a conversation about Papa Murdock’s boxing career, and it’s so close to being normal that
Frank has to leave the apartment for a while. Remember what is and what isn’t and give Red a
chance to do the same.

There’s advantages. Having the devil in the apartment means Frank doesn’t have to run into
him on the street, and the kid’s connections to the Foot or Hand or whatever the Japanese are calling
themselves is worth exploiting for a while. The matter of the leg weighs on Frank too. Ten days out
of invasive, butcher-shop surgery and a compound fracture, there’s still so many ways Red can mess
up his recovery. Karen, bless her, is a powerhouse, but Red’s propensity for self-destruction is his
fucking superpower. Her patience has gotta be wearing thin. Nelson’s definitely not up for
caretaking. He isn’t up for communicating by the sounds of things – or lack thereof. And trusting
Red with his own well-being is like trusting a chimp with a hand grenade. Frank gives him a day,
one day by himself before everything turns to shit.

Frank catches a few hours of shut eye on Saturday, waking before dawn to find Red already
up, dressed, and pacing. “Neighbourhood’s not going anywhere,” Frank tells him before rolling
over and dozing some more. Normally, he wouldn’t, but this might be his last chance to test the
kid’s patience. He’s gotta make it count.

He takes his sweet time with everything - coffee, shower, shave, dressing - waiting for Red to
snap. The moment never come. The kid lounges on the fire escape, too keyed up about what’s
coming to worry about what’s happening. Hell, Frank’s time-wasting might register as a bit of a
blessing. The longer Red’s here, the longer he isn’t there, with them.

The drive is quiet but quick. They’re in Hell’s Kitchen and outside Red’s apartment in under
an hour. Frank gives the kid his number and watches him save it in his phone. “Call me when
you’re done,” he says. Red nods, pocketing his cell. He fumbles for the handle to open the door.
Hard call whether it’s blindness or nervousness. The latter seems to exacerbate the former for Red.
He props himself up on crutches and stands in the open door for a long moment, getting his
bearings.

Frank offers a last bit of assistance, “Five paces ahead to your keypad. You good for the
stairs?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I’ll call you later, Frank.”

Red shuts the car door behind him and moves quickly to his apartment door. Frank doesn’t
stick around to watch. He pulls into traffic, making a hard right at the corner.

It hits him suddenly at the next stop light that Red’s duffel is still at his place. Neither he nor
Red thought to bring it this morning, because they both knew where it needed to be.

The apartment doesn’t feel like his. Matt senses the ghost of himself under layers of must and
dust if he really focuses, but he’s a fading presence. He has been for a while. A few more days and
he would have vanished completely.

He showers forever, relishing the soft water, the unscented shampoo. The heat relaxes him,
draws his focus on the present. He is here and he is alone and he has nowhere to be, nothing to do.
Karen and Foggy are going to come over, see that he is fine, and then they are going to go away
again. Today, he is the day he ties up loose ends, not creates more of them.

It’s still more comfortable to wear sweats and a tee than his suits. The walking cast is too large for him to fit actual pants overtop. Matt dons a hoodie and a thick pair of socks to pull the outfit together. His radiator is taking its sweet time heating the place after almost two weeks of being unused.

He settles on the couch, leg propped on several pillows. The pressure continues mounting under his skin despite the elevation, throbbing in time with Matt’s heart. He only took Aspirin today, and it is doing exactly what Sato said it would for his pain: nothing.

Matt distracts himself by scanning the building. He doesn’t expect to hear puffs of breath coming from his rooftop during the day, but deep down, he hopes to. Her whisper thrills through his mind, catching on the ‘t’ in his name. Matt-hew. Matt-hew.

They were going to disappear together once, back when they thought death was their only option, and he honoured that wish as worst he could. Elektra seems to have followed suit, vanishing almost as poorly as he did, taking residence behind the veil until when, Matt can’t decide if he wants to find out.

He picks up his phone. “Call Karen.” The device complies. She’s answers quickly. “I’m here.”

“We’re on our way,” she replies, and then, before she disconnects, “Yes, we. We are, Foggy.”

Happy reading!
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Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

Apologies for the delay in posting! There is a lot going on in this chapter, and I did not want to make a mess of it. I hope – I HOPE – that this lives up to the expectation being built into the story. I hope that the characters sound true to their season 2 selves.

I feel like addressing the tension between Foggy and Matt, since it didn’t exist in their final conversation during season 2. I didn’t question it when I started writing this fic. In my mind, there was always tension. There was anger and hurt and betrayal despite that cordial parting of ways in the season finale. I think I’m channeling a lot of what I’d built into my headcanon between these two. I can find canonical evidence to support my reasoning, and I will be delving into that more as the story progresses, but this chapter draws as much from the show as the themes of my previous fanfics. I hope that this is believable.

Readers, readers, readers: you’re lovely. You’re wonderful. You keep me coming back when I think I’m too tired to keep writing. Thank you for not giving up on this fic. I hope you enjoy this. Cheers.

“You can get addicted to a certain kind of sadness
   Like resignation to the end, always the end
So when we found that we could not make sense
   Well, you said that we would still be friends,
   But I’ll admit that I was glad it was over.”

~Gotye feat. Kimbra, “Somebody I Used to Know”

Chapter Fourteen

It takes them forever to arrive, and yet the pair of heartbeats in the hall appear too quickly. Matt goes from hating the knots in his stomach to wishing he had a moment more alone with them. Just him and his nerves and his pain, waiting out the Schrodinger’s cat knocking at his apartment door.
His last interactions with Foggy and Karen play through his head. Foggy, at peace with the dissolution of Nelson and Murdock, packing up his half of the office. Sad but not regretful. Karen, increasingly on edge from fear and betrayal. Matt told her everything: about Stick, about Elektra, what little he understands about the Hand. He told her about his abilities, about the mask, why he kept it a secret. Karen had listened patiently, her heartbeat oscillating between a murmur and a gallop. The smell of tears building steadily in the air despite her best efforts. Then she quietly admitted that she needed time, and Matt said he would give her all the time she wanted.

That was over a month ago, and it would have likely been longer if he hadn’t gone missing.

Matt gets himself propped onto his crutches. He pats down his pockets, searching for his glasses, forgetting that he hasn’t worn them since before the break. Karen knocks again. “I’m coming,” but not without his glasses. He wants a wall against them, Karen and Foggy, so they can’t see him lying by omission about who he’s been staying with for the past ten days.

His glasses on still on the kitchen counter where he left them. Matt’s skin recoils from the sensation. They feel strange against his face, clamping against his nose and hooking around his ears. Even before bunking with Frank, he hasn’t been wearing them. He hasn’t needed to wear them. After closing down the office, Matt switched to freelance, primarily online. Work he could do from home on his own schedule. Just enough to pay the bills without interfering with the mask. How Karen knew he was missing would have required some digging on her part. Matt left the same day she did. God only knows who Frank dug out from under that beam.

Karen and Foggy certainly don’t. Her breath hitches when the door opens, and Foggy’s heart enters a familiar I-knew-this-was-a-bad-idea rhythm. “Matt,” Karen breathes. The tray of coffees and paper bag of bagels she’s carrying start to shake. Matt backs down the hall to get out of their way. She doesn’t move. “Oh, my God, Matt…”

“Hi, Karen,” her heel finally cuts a clean A-sharp on the hardwood. Foggy’s loafers pad softly behind her. He smells different. He moves differently too. No more ill-fitting jeans and second-hand tees for Foggy’s weekend apparel. He’s wearing a button-down shirt and pressed slacks under a jacket so new he forgot to take the tags off. They scratch between layers of clothing as he walks. His wardrobe costs more than they made in all their time at Nelson and Murdock, and he doesn’t seem the least bit ashamed of it. Well, maybe a little, when he comes into Matt’s proximity.

“Foggy,” Matt nods.

“Matt.”

The way Foggy says it, his name, with forced aloofness, is a warning shot down Matt’s spine. They agreed separation was for the best. They left on what could almost be called positive terms. Yet Foggy’s seething in secret. He doesn’t want to be here, Matt’s broken leg be damned, and Matt can’t ask why without getting them off to a worse start.

Karen’s hand is moving towards his shoulder; Matt dodges the touch, hobbling back to the couch. “I uh…I take it you two have been doing well?”

“Well, we’re both walking on two feet, Matt,” Karen charges towards the living room, galvanized by the sight of him. She puts the coffees and bagels on the coffee table before moving to help Matt get settled on the couch. He reassures her that he’s got this, he’s got this, as he gets his throbbing limb elevated onto the stack of pillows he made. The sutures pull against the swelling in warning that he never do that again.
Matt draws a steadying breath. “I’ll be back…” he forces himself to speak through the broiling agony in his calf. “I’ll be back on two feet again before you know it.”

Foggy hasn’t moved past the hallway arch. He’s maintaining as much physical distance as he can given the circumstances. “You see a doctor?”

“Yeah,” Matt replies.

“A licensed one?”

“Yeah,” so there, Foggy.

He isn’t convinced, “In a hospital?”

Matt shrugs, “Close enough.”

Foggy scoffs, “There’s no ‘close enough’ to a hospital unless you went to a hospital-“

Oh, God damn, here it comes. Matt tries to put a stop to him before Foggy can really get going, “My leg is fine.”

Too late: “-and we all know you didn’t go to hospital, because you never go to a God damn hospital-“

“I can’t go to a hospital, Foggy.”

“-and you’re not staying with Claire, so-“

He shouldn’t know that. Matt tries his best to glare at Foggy, knowing full well it’s never worked but needing to do it anyways. “Oh, Claire? You called Claire? I thought you were staying out of this.”

“You’re right. I was. I need to stay out of this.”

“Foggy!” Karen stops him mid-turn to leave. She casts a glance between the two of them, breathless from their recent exchange. “Would you come in here, please?”

“What’s the use, Karen? You really think he is going to tell us anything? About how he broke his leg or where he’s been for the past ten days or who he’s staying with? He agreed to meet with you so you wouldn’t file a Missing Persons Report.” Hard call as to what infuriates Karen more: that he’s accusing her or that it’s true. Matt’s palm itches to take hold of her hand, to anchor her against the realization that she’s been duped. He pulls his hands onto his stomach to keep from reaching.

Foggy continues his tirade unabated, “Mission accomplished, Murdock! Looks like you’re not missing. We won’t file that report. Get well soon. The city needs you or something.”

He charges towards the apartment door.

Karen clatters after him, whispering at him the whole way about how he needs to be here, she can’t do this alone. “He listens to you.”

“I can hear you,” Matt reminds her. She clams up immediately but pats Foggy on the shoulder to redirect him back into the living room. He marches in and plants himself in the arm chair across from the couch.
“How did you break your leg?”

“Foggy,” Karen implores him. She doesn’t want it to be this way.

None of them do, Matt least of all, but he has to side with Foggy: this is the way things are between them. The room is overflowing with hurt feelings and skin-crawling discomfort. Best to press onward. “How did you break your leg?” Foggy demands.

“A building collapsed.”

“Thought you could sense that kind of thing.”

“I can,” but damn, he wishes Foggy didn’t know that. “I was pushing someone out of the way.”

“Who?”

Matt shakes his head, “It doesn’t matter.”

Wrong answer. He should have said he doesn’t know. “It doesn’t matter” is an obvious code for “I don’t want to tell you.” Now Karen’s taking after Foggy. She sits down on the table next to the tower of pillows supporting Matt’s broken leg. She picks up a coffee for herself more to give her nervous fingers something to play with than to drink. “Who?”

Matt buckles under the weight of their stares. There is a short distance between who he saved and where he’s staying, and he isn’t ready for Foggy and Karen’s judgment, their continued interrogation. “If I tell you—”

“No,” Foggy shuts him down.

Fine. “Frank Castle.”

There’s a flicker of time where Karen’s heart shudders before resuming business as usual. Matt catches the sound by accident. He isn’t listening to her specifically. He’s reading the room, trying to figure out the best way to dodge a logical accusation about whether Frank’s the person with whom he’s currently staying. But the tremor in Karen’s respiration reminds him of the one she wore after putting Fisk away. She has buried her secrets deeper than a hole in her apartment wall. Evidently, she stowed some of those secrets away with Frank Castle for safekeeping, or maybe he was with her when they were born.

She hides her mysteries so well. “…Frank Castle is still in Hell’s Kitchen?”

Matt almost blurts out, “No.” He stops himself before digging himself a deeper hole. “I guess.”

Foggy is no longer bullshitting people for Matt’s benefit and takes the liberty of asking, “Why would Frank Castle stick around in Hell’s Kitchen? He’s still public enemy number one in New York. The FBI are never going to take him off their Ten Most Wanted list.”

“Not that he deserves to be on there,” Karen mutters.

“He is a mass murderer, Karen,” Foggy says, stunned.

She fires back, “Well, Matt is a vigilante.”
“I’ve never…I’ve never killed anyone.”

“He’s never killed anyone.”

They say it at the same time, like it’s the old days. Nelson and Murdock for the defence, your honour. Matt turns his senses onto Foggy and takes brief shelter in the protective march of Foggy’s pulse, in the warmth he exudes. It’s gone too soon, and Matt shivers on the couch.

Karen hangs her head in defeat. She didn’t really mean that. Not entirely. “What were you and Frank doing together?”

“We weren’t together,” Matt replies. “I was checking out a disturbance. He was tailing some guys. We ended up in the same basement, and the ceiling came down.”

“And broke your leg?” Foggy asks.

“Yeah,” Matt agrees. He can tell from Foggy’s tone this is leading somewhere and has no desire to follow. Nothing good comes from where Frank Castle’s concerned. He decides to save Karen and Foggy the question. “Frank…he uh…he saved my life.”

“He get you to the doctor?”

“Yeah,” among other things: splinted the leg, put Matt up while he recovers, put up with Matt’s shit while he recovers. Jesus, now that Matt thinks about it, Frank hasn’t killed anyone since they became roommates, and only once was not for lack of trying.

He prepares to go on the defensive, but neither Karen nor Foggy put two and two together about where Matt’s been. Their concern is more for the injury. Karen flicks at the rim of her coffee cup, inquiring, “How long are you in the cast?”

“Twelve to sixteen weeks,” he says. “Maybe longer.”

Foggy’s ensuing eye-roll is more comforting than condescending. He and Karen both know it’s going to be longer.

Probably why Karen’s next words are, “You can come stay with me. Until you’re back on your feet. Both of them.”

“No, Karen-“

Even Foggy joins in, “Karen-“

She turns on him, “He can’t-“ she remembers Matt is in the room with them. “You can’t stay by yourself. Heightened senses be damned. You come home with me. My house is all one level. What? Why are you both shaking your heads?”

“Because that is a terrible idea,” Foggy declares.

Matt finds a gentler way of saying it, “I can’t, Karen. You have a job and a life. I can’t…I won’t come in and mess that up for you.”

“You wouldn’t be messing it up, Matt.”

He levels his glasses in her direction for the illusion of a hard stare. Karen succumbs inasmuch as she keeps talking. “You can’t do this on your own.”
“I’m not on my own,” Matt answers.

“Who are you staying with, then? Foggy said he phoned your nurse friend, Claire, and she hasn’t heard from you,” Karen’s voice trails off, bearing a sadness and hurt that Matt’s gone so far from them. She swallows, gathering her resolve. “You should be with friends right now, Matt. And as far as I know, all your friends are in this room.”

“Friend,” Foggy corrects her. “All your friend are in this room.”

Karen slams her coffee onto the table and shoots up to her full height. “God damn it, Foggy,” she hisses, marching away from them both.

Matt tracks her heels in a small circle on the far end of the apartment. Her respiration is elevated, and she’s burning up by degrees with frustration. “Karen,” he has the words lined up and ready to go about how this isn’t Foggy’s fault. He’s the one she needs to be mad at. But with Foggy sitting right there, seething, watching Karen draw a circle in the floor with her high heels, Matt stays quiet. They agreed it was for the best, and it is.

Karen disagrees: vehemently. “I thought if we were all honest with each other, things would be better.”

“They are.”

Foggy glares at him for across the room. For two people who aren’t friends, they’ve certainly maintained a habit of saying things at the exact same time.

Matt continues, “This is better, Karen. You both…you both deserve better than the mask.”

“Yeah, and what about you? Don’t you deserve better?”

“The city.”

“The city – screw the city, Matt. We thought you were dead! You could have been dead! Instead, you’re holed up somewhere with a broken leg. And Foggy, stop acting like you don’t give a damn.”

“I don’t give a damn,” Foggy states flatly. His heart powers through a few beats in worry – maybe he does give a damn – before settling into the angry rhythm that Matt’s come to know so well. “No, I don’t. I used to. I used to give a lot of damns. The kind of damns that get a guy to crawl out of bed at three o’clock in the morning and nurse his dumbass vigilante-friend back to health after he’s beaten half-to-death in a screwed up quest to save the city. And then said vigilante-friend told me where I could shove those damns. I am all out of damns to give.”

Matt snaps at him, “Then why did you come here, Foggy?”

“I’m here for her. Karen. Because she is my friend and she is worried about you.”

“So why are you so pissed off?” he senses Foggy’s shock. “Since we’re not giving damns about things, I guess you don’t give a damn if I listened to your heart.”

“I will break your other leg, Murdock.” He means it too.

Matt decides to go down swinging, “Why are you so pissed off?”

Foggy really doesn’t want to say. He leans back in his seat, quietly fuming. His body shifts
subtly towards Karen. That’s why he doesn’t want to say: his reasons are going to upset Karen.

“I didn’t want to come here,” Foggy lies by half. The anger simmering away beneath his shaking exterior is for more than getting dragged to Matt’s apartment. “And now that I am here, your leg’s broken, and I have half a mind to drag your dumbass back to my apartment and make sure you’re back on your feet in twelve weeks. But I wouldn’t be getting you back on your feet. I’d be saving the devil of Hell’s Kitchen.”

Foggy finishes speaking, and it’s hard to tell that he was lying in the first place. His body isn’t ridden with traces of dishonesty. Everything Foggy’s said is the raw truth, just not the whole truth, and Matt is cut deeper by his former friend’s tone than the throbbing pain in his leg. Those late nights with Foggy tending to him, the mornings of having fresh blood cleaned off his head before rolling into the office, Matt comes to understand anew. He really thought Foggy hated the devil on principle. He wanted to believe that Foggy’s anger was fueled by a righteous, legal code. Turns out, Foggy hated the devil because the devil was getting his best friend killed.

Matt hangs his head, grateful that his glasses are covering his eyes. He can’t let them know he’s dying on the couch. “You don’t have to worry about me,” he admits quietly, hoping that Foggy won’t agree with him.

A fool’s hope, as always. “I don’t,” Foggy retorts. “I worry about Karen.”

“And I worry about you,” Karen reapproaches. “So come and stay with me, Matt, please?”

“Karen, I can’t. I’m sorry, but I can’t,” her heart is doing that thing. That horrible flutter of utter desolation like the world is falling to pieces and there’s nothing she can do to stop it. Matt tries to put her back together, “I’m fine. I promise, I’m fine.”

“At least let me know the person you’re staying with,” she relents, dropping back onto the coffee table. “You said it wasn’t that old guy, Stick. Is it someone he trained?”

“No.”

“Is it someone you knew from the orphanage?” Karen pleads, fishing for clues.

Matt shakes his head, “I’m fine.” Foggy’s respiration starts to spike. “Just trust me when I say that I’m fine.”

“No way,” Foggy’s laugh is bitter, breathless. He scrubs at his face.

“I’m fine,” Matt says over the thunder of his former friend’s heart.

“No. No way, Matt!”

Karen tosses her head between the two of them, “What is it?”

“He is such a hypocrite, that’s what. He is – you are! You are such a hypocrite.” Foggy launches himself out of his chair and paces in front of the windows.

“One of you tell me what the hell is going on!” Karen snaps breathlessly.

Matt tells before Foggy can, “Frank Castle. I’m staying with Frank Castle.”

Karen’s heart does a sad little dip. Shock tightens her voice to a shrill whisper. “Frank? You’re staying with Frank?”
“He saved my life,” Matt offers. “I’d be dead if it wasn’t for him.”

“You’d be walking on two legs if it wasn’t for him too! Among other things!” Foggy points out.

Matt doesn’t care what Foggy has to say. He’s too busy listening to Karen’s shallow respiration, the way her heart rate leaps inside her chest to match Foggy’s furious pace. How quickly she switches from fear to anger. She has to get up and pace too, scoffing as she does, “You are such a hypocrite.”

He is, but that’s beside the point. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

“To the hospital. To the police!” Foggy declares. “Anywhere except home with a guy who hangs people from meat hooks!”

“I couldn’t get to the police. I passed out after it happened. I woke up in a butcher shop with a mob doctor about to do surgery on my leg. Frank…he kept me out for the next two days. I didn’t. I didn’t know where I was.” A cold rush of shock runs through his veins as he tries to retrace the route they took this morning. There’s so much city between his place and Frank’s that he’d never be able to retrace. “I still don’t know where I was.”

Foggy says nothing. He slows his pace in front of the windows in an effort to not give a damn. To remind himself that this is all Matt’s stupid fault. He is not to sympathize with the broken man he used to call a best friend and partner.

Matt doesn’t blame him. He sits on the couch sullenly and waits, instead, for Karen, who is reeling from the information. Her compassion takes a backseat to her amazement. “So you save his life, and then he kidnaps you, and when you get your cell phone back-”

She has to know he considered calling the police. “We have seen what he can do to people who come after him.”

“We’ve seen what he can do to you,” Foggy jumps back in on the conversation, “or do you not remember getting shot in the head?”

Karen waves a hand to pause the conversation on that point, “He shot you in the head?”

Matt winces, glowering in Foggy’s general direction. There’s some things he didn’t tell Karen. Taking a bullet to the head, courtesy of Frank Castle, was one of them. “I was wearing my mask at the time. The bullet…” but she isn’t listening. Karen is too damn angry to hear. She draws a deep breath, begging the universe for strength. Matt gets back to the original topic of their conversation, “I couldn’t call the police without exposing myself as the man in the mask. And Frank…Frank saved my life.”

“After you saved his,” Karen notes, calming somewhat.

“Yeah,” Matt agrees, relishing the sound of her heart rate decreasing. That is, until he recognizes the sound as resignation. Karen is resigned to this: his risks, Foggy’s anger, their relationship in shambles.

Nobody says anything for a long time. For them, Matt supposes it’s a silent eternity, but for him, it’s a bitter opus. Controlled breathing, softly boiling anger, piteous stares at his leg; speaking of, the damn thing is screaming. Matt feels the pain throbbing in his ears, rattling his molars.
“I take it Frank didn’t drop you off with any beer,” Foggy notes glumly.

“No,” Matt replies with a sigh. He could use a beer. His leg could use a keg or two.

Karen gives a small, bitter laugh, and tries to turn it into a joke. “They do call him the Punisher.”

Foggy gives a short exhale through his nose: the closest approximation of a laugh that he can muster. He returns to his chair. He grabs the paper bag and digs for a bagel, handing one to Karen and tossing one to Matt. “In lieu of beer,” is all he says.

Happy reading!
We Used to be Friends

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

Wading through the emotional landscape of season two has been, simultaneously, one of the most valuable and exhausting experiences as a writer of fanfiction. It’s honestly one of the reasons I stuck to one-shots for so long. As a result, I am not mincing words when I say that this chapter kicked the crap out of me, and even after all my read-throughs, edits, and agonizing, I’m left with this lingering feeling that there’s more work to do. But that is for a later chapter.

Readers. Lovely Readers. Amazing readers. I’m sorry for the long break between chapters. I’m sorry for the radio silence on my part. There is nothing I enjoy more than hearing from you, and I usually like to respond to everyone in a timely manner before my next post. I didn’t mean to go so long without updating. I hope this chapter was worth the wait. I’m looking forward to posting more soon! Cheers!

“It’s something I said
Or someone I know
Or you called me up
Maybe I wasn’t home.
Now everybody needs some time
And everybody knows
The rest of the lines
In everybody else’s show.”

~The Dandy Warhols, “We Used to be Friends”

Breakfast gives them a chance to regroup. Foggy’s coat comes off. Karen’s shoes are kicked to the corner. Matt’s leg throbs. He eats less out of hunger than distraction. The anger stewing from the armchair is louder than his injury.

Karen peppers the silence with questions, and Matt does his best to appease her. He isn’t hungry. The pain in his leg is. It gnaws a jagged path through his body until fire is the only thing Matt feels.

No matter how subtle Karen tries to be, her inquiries aren’t benign. “You said you knew what borough you were in? Where is Frank now? What has he been doing while you’ve been at his
place?” Matt gives her what he can: that Frank has a second-floor walk-up. There’s a few neighbours he’s never met. He’s been too drugged up to know exactly what Frank has been up to, but her asking means that the Punisher hasn’t punished lately. His activities are nothing if not newsworthy.

She finally comes out and demands to know where the apartment is. Matt sighs in defeat. He doesn’t want to lie to her, but he can’t give her the whole truth either.

Foggy, miraculously, comes to the rescue. His bagel is half-finished on the table. There’s a fire burning through his hunger too. “You don’t want to know that.”

“You don’t want to know that,” Karen snaps, harsher than she intends if her heart rate is any indication.

“No, I don’t, and neither should you,” Foggy stops her before she can tear a strip off him. “And it has nothing to do with my not-caring about Matt. It has everything to do with what happens to you, Karen, which is…” he hesitates, loathe to admit what’s really going on, “…which is something Matt must care about too.”

“Frank Castle wouldn’t hurt me,” Karen declares.

“Okay, it’s scary that you believe that. Downright terrifying, in fact. But that’s not my point or Matt’s point, I don’t think. What are you going to do if he tells you what borough Frank’s in?” Foggy doesn’t give her a chance to lie, though Karen’s about to. She’s got a flimsy delusion resting on the tip of her tongue, ready to let loose, one she promptly swallows when Foggy adds, “You’re going to go investigative journalist on him until you find Frank’s apartment.”

She gives nothing away, not to Foggy, but to Matt, Karen’s disappointment at being known fills the room. She forces herself to breathe through Foggy’s accurate prediction of her endgame: “And even if you don’t roll up to Frank’s front door pretending to have just been in the neighbourhood, knowing where the Punisher is – knowing where Matt is – puts all of you in jeopardy.”

“Puts you in jeopardy too,” Matt adds. Trust Foggy not to mention that, to place Karen’s well-being before his own.

Foggy plays off his selflessness as anger for being part of the Daredevil’s circle – “Yeah, don’t remind me” – but the way he takes to pacing again is proof he hasn’t been thinking about himself. He’s been thinking about Karen. Heaven help him, Foggy’s been thinking about Matt.

Karen doesn’t notice. She would say something if she did. “Hogarth wouldn’t let them take you in, Foggy. She’d want you for Matt’s defence.”

Matt waits for Foggy to shut down that line of thinking: that he would take on Matt’s defence. Surprisingly, Foggy doesn’t. “It’s not the cops I’m worried about.”

“The cops have nothing to suggest you two were involved,” Matt notes. “There’s a lot of dangerous people in Hell’s Kitchen who won’t believe that though. Even more who have it in for the Punisher.”

Karen can’t dispute that. As much as she’d love to double-dog dare the criminal element in Hell’s Kitchen to bring it on, she’s outgrown enough of her naïveté to think better of it. Her body shifts between them, Foggy and Matt, disquieted by their ability to harmonize despite their animosity. She flicks the rim of her coffee cup, plotting, growing more and more frustrated as the
impossibilities of their situation dawn on her. Her heartbeat spirals out of control. “So we’re supposed to just sit here and let you disappear with the Punisher?”

Before Matt can point out the obvious fact that he has been disappeared for a month without Frank’s help, Foggy huffs in disbelief. “Why is that only troubling for you in relation to Matt?”

“He didn’t shoot me in the head, Foggy.”

The lameness of her excuse doesn’t hit until after she’s said it. Her efforts to deflect are weakening in the face of Frank Castle. Matt empathizes - Frank has that effect on people – but Karen isn’t an idiot. She knows better than him or Foggy what kind of fire Matt’s playing with by being in Frank’s company.

Foggy doesn’t bite. Yet. He still credits Karen’s idealism for her ardent defense of the Punisher, not whatever happened to give Frank insight into her feelings about Matt. “Uh, he didn’t try to shoot you in the head specifically, because shotguns aren’t known for their precision.”

“He wasn’t aiming for me,” Karen retorts, because her first excuse wasn’t lame enough. Her respiration is a flurry of conflicting emotions. She needs the spotlight back where it belongs. “He was aiming for Matt. And Matt’s the one going back to stay with Frank. Willingly.”

He hates the way she says it: out loud, as a fact. When Matt goes through the motions back to Frank’s apartment, he doesn’t have to acknowledge all the reasons it’s the wrong thing to do. “He knows who I am, Karen,” as if he would call the police otherwise. “There’s a bag full of my stuff at his place, along with my armour. The cops would never catch him, but he’d make damn sure they caught me.”

“No, that’s not it,” Foggy snarls. He points his finger on an imaginary point that Matt is trying his best to hide under a worst case scenario. “Don’t you pin this on him, and don’t you dare pin this on us. This is about that crazy devil of yours.”

“Why is that such a bad thing, Foggy?”

“Because it’s not right, Matt! Not what you do or what the Punisher does is right!”

“The law isn’t-“

“Yeah, yeah, the law isn’t enough. I get it,” Foggy throws his hands down on the back of the chair. He has an argument here, but it’s about as lame as Karen’s he-wasn’t-aiming-for-me nonsense. “Can we at least agree that what you do isn’t enough either? Not this vigilante business or whatever you want to call what Frank Castle does?”

Matt hesitates. He told Foggy once before: he is done apologizing for who he is. “Agree to disagree.”

Foggy throws his hands back into the air and wanders into the static of Matt’s skull. Pain has finally started tearing into his focus. Won’t be long before he’s a shell on the couch. He has to put a stop to Foggy’s next argument before it comes. “Things are happening in Hell’s Kitchen.”

Karen is gentle, exasperated. From the understatement as much as the resentment brewing in the apartment. “You’re going to have to be way more specific.”

“I don’t know the extent of it yet,” Matt tells her, buying himself some time to think of a better reason than his ill-advised visit with the criminal Kingpin of Super Max. He’s stricken with
the vivid and all-too-plausible idea of Karen scheduling a meeting at the penitentiary and landing herself on Fisk’s hit list as well. Frank provides him with an excuse. “The night my leg…” Matt doesn’t want to say it. Yet another dose of reality he can’t put into words. “Frank was tailing some guys. He said they worked for Fisk.”

“You believe him?” Foggy asks.

Karen doesn’t have to ask. Her questions are focused on the logistics instead of the validity of Frank’s claim. “How is Fisk running operations from Super Max?”

“It doesn’t matter, Karen,” and truly, it doesn’t. They’re never going to cut off Fisk’s ties with the Kitchen. “What matters is what he’s trying to do. Fisk running operations is going to set the other players on edge.”

Foggy scoffs, “Punisher running operations is going to set them on fire. Literally.”

“And the devil of Hell’s Kitchen is down for the count,” Karen adds half-heartedly.

“Down,” Matt insists, “but not out.” There has to be things he can do on one leg to make lives difficult without getting killed. Hell’s Kitchen needs him. Foggy needs him. Fisk isn’t going to let his quest for vengeance go. In fact, the devil’s absence will likely call for an acceleration of the awful things Fisk’s planning for the lawyers who put him away. And that’s before the Punisher gets involved.

“Yeah, not out,” Foggy scoffs. Matt can tell his leg is being scrutinized. The fire inside him gets hotter and more pronounced the longer Foggy stares. “Not yet.”

The static in Matt’s skull masks the anger and worry he senses buzzing away in Foggy’s corner of the apartment. Or maybe he doesn’t sense that at all: maybe he misses that. He feels residual echoes of ice packs and sutures, Aspirin and Foggy. Always Foggy.

“If Fisk is back, he isn’t going to let us go,” Matt states quietly. He doesn’t want to prompt the question about how he knows this; he wants it to sound like a logical suspicion. “You need to watch out for him, Foggy.”

Foggy’s accusing tone masks his concern. “What about you?”

Matt isn’t interested, “You have more to lose.”

“Yeah, I do, but it also means I’m harder to get to,” Foggy’s gaze passes over Matt’s leg again. “Guess it’s a good thing you have the Punisher.”

“Yeah.”

Foggy groans, “I’m being sarcastic.”

Matt isn’t. He wishes he was, but he isn’t. “Yeah.”

Muttering, “God damn you, Murdock.”

“Even I heard that,” Karen scolds him half-heartedly. She sounds worlds away from their current conversation, lost in thought.

“Wasn’t trying to hide it,” he drops back into the arm chair,
Matt is prepared for this, “It’s fine, Karen.”

“No, it’s not fine, Matt,” the atmosphere in the living room jitters from her own frustration. Adrenaline and tears make for a heady combination of scents. She is a whole new kind of worried. Her heart is on a wild ride inside her chest.

“What is it?” Matt asks.

She doesn’t know what to say, or she doesn’t want to say it. The silence stands for a good, long while. Matt can practically hear her ideas colliding. “There’s been…disappearances. People have been going missing in Hell’s Kitchen. Starting around the same time that you disappeared.”

Foggy’s voice is soft and sad for her sake, “Karen thought you were one of them, once she found out you hadn’t been home.”

“Better than assuming he was dead,” Karen snarls, because that was obviously Foggy’s assumption. His heart clomps guiltily through the next several beats.

“That wasn’t my only assumption,” but it was definitely the first.

Matt stops them. His mind is already reeling from the information. “You think Fisk is responsible?”

“I didn’t,” Karen replies. “I don’t…think I do now, but it’s plausible. The men who have gone missing, they’re small fish. Guys with records, yeah, but small-time stuff. Theft and assault, mainly. Some of them had former ties to Fisk’s operations, and I recognized a few of the names as former clients.”

“Cops haven’t reported a suspicious string of missing persons,” Matt would have heard about those on the police scanner. Unless the person doing the taking was better than the cops.

Karen tosses her head. “I have contacts in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Criminals,” Foggy declares.

“Some of them, yes, but at least they’re willing to talk,” she declares. Karen Page for the defence, your honour. “And they’re scared right now. Whoever is responsible for this is careful. There’s no trace. Which is why the cops haven’t reported it, and why I’ve had trouble tracking it.”

“Almost like the people or person responsible has military training,” Foggy says.

Karen rebukes his suspicions immediately, “Or that they have greater resources.”

Matt sides with her, “When Frank makes people disappear, the cops know about it. I would know about it.”

“Would you?” Foggy prods him. “You said he kept you out for two days. You don’t know where you’ve been.”

“No,” Matt places Frank at the apartment as often as he can in his memory. There are gaps from his medication, but that serves as confirmation of Frank’s presence. He hasn’t gone out while Matt’s been impaired, and when he does, it’s never long enough to disappear someone from Hell’s Kitchen. “It’s not Frank.”
“You think it’s Fisk?” Karen asks. She does. Or she wants to.

“No,” this doesn’t sound like Fisk either. “Fisk is careful. His name used to be a well-kept secret, but he doesn’t have that kind of power in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“So who do you think it is?”

How Foggy knows that he already has an idea is unnerving. Matt wishes they were strangers, that they couldn’t read each other like open books. That Foggy’s respiration didn’t scream insight into Matt’s thoughts, and Matt didn’t give himself to Foggy away so easily. So eagerly. “I don’t know,” Matt lies, leaning back into the couch as if he doesn’t. His stomach churns. His heart races. The rooftop is empty, silent, but phantom breaths ripple down Matt’s spine.

Turns out it’s Karen, whose heart is already racing to figure out who is responsible. “Fisk would have the resources.”

“But not the motives,” Matt points out. “Why would he cause his own people to disappear?”

“Maybe he’s planning something. Building an army. Plotting an escape from Super Max.”

“Karen,” Foggy moans.

“What?”

“Investigating a string of mysterious disappearances is dangerous enough without the suspicion that it might be a man we had a hand in sending to prison. Like on a scale of one to Matt-is-rooming-with-a-professional-mass-murderer, that goes all the way up to eleven.”

“I’m not going to bury my head in the sand, Foggy!”

“That’s not…that’s not what he’s saying,” Matt knows because he wants to say the same thing to her. “You need to be careful, Karen. You need to make sure that whoever this is can’t get to you too.”

“I don’t need the devil to protect me,” she states flatly.

“Good, because the devil can’t protect you.”

“Thanks, Foggy.”

Foggy doesn’t engage. “The devil’s out. Punisher’s…punishing. Fisk is on the loose. And some rando is picking small-time felons off the street without leaving a trace. Instead of taking your requisite two-steps towards danger, can you please observe at a safe distance for a while?”

“And…what? Let this happen? We’re the only ones who know this is happening,” Karen reminds them.

Matt groans. He can’t believe he’s about to do this, but Karen isn’t about to back down from the unknown, lethal as it may be: “What if I asked Frank to look into it?”

Not for the first time, Matt wishes for silence. Instead, the room is a hurricane of sounds, each more horrified than the next. Foggy’s pulse reigns supreme amidst the cacophony. He is waiting for Karen to supply a response, but God help her, she’s considering it. “No!” Foggy’s body temperature drops and then rises with his rage. “Absolutely the hell not!”
He waits again for back-up: none is forthcoming. Karen is mulling over the option quietly, muscles tensing as the lack of options dawns upon her. Foggy groans before starting another furious lap around the apartment. He stops beside the couch, hurling his words directly at Matt. “I can’t believe you.” He corrects himself, including Karen, “I can’t believe you two! The man is a lunatic mass-murderer! He has taken shots at both of you! And instead of locking him up, you want to give him more reasons to rip Hell’s Kitchen apart!”

“What do you want, Foggy? You don’t want me investigating missing persons-”

“I don’t want you getting hurt, Karen! Which is something I can guarantee will happen if Matt invites Frank Castle to use this neighbourhood for target practice!”

“I don’t have to invite him,” Matt points out.

“That doesn’t mean you give him something to shoot at,” Foggy declares.

Nobody moves or speaks in the apartment for a long time. Foggy’s right, of course. Karen knows it. Matt definitely does. He has no intention of introducing Frank Castle to the people responsible for making Fisk’s cronies disappear. But he can’t tell Foggy that without allowing Karen to stay on the scent, to wander into the darkness that even he, Matt, doesn’t fully understand. So he stays quiet, cradling her heartbeat in his skull against the screech of pain in his calf.

He almost doesn’t notice the sounds of fabric swishing. Of footsteps traipsing behind the couch.

“Foggy!” Karen calls after him.

“I did what you asked me to do, Karen! I came here, made sure he was alive. I’ll even keep up my end of the deal: I won’t file a missing persons’ report. But if Frank Castle starts blowing up Hell’s Kitchen on some yellow-brick quest for what he calls justice, you better be the next one who disappears, Murdock.”

He heaves a final, shuddering breath, seething the whole while with old hurt and new fury. The apartment rocks with every remaining footstep before rattling as the door slams in his wake.

Karen sets the living room shaking by trembling. She dusts off her lap, starting to rise, “I don’t want you to tell Frank about this.” Matt thinks she’s going to leave too, but Karen ends up standing in the living room, lost, while Foggy charges off down the street. She drops her face into her hand, cradling her temples for a few seconds before scrubbing her palm against her skin. “You shouldn’t tell Frank about this, I just…I can’t stand by and let Wilson Fisk or anyone else tear this neighbourhood apart again.”

“None of us can,” but that’s not the point. Fisk is bad enough all by himself without someone else playing a terrifying game of hide-and-seek. “You can’t do this alone, Karen. Foggy’s right.”

She hums, “Foggy’s right. Of course, he’s right.” And then, because it has to be asked, “What happened between you two? You…you wanted to make things right with me by showing me the mask. Why didn’t you try to make things right with him?”

“There’s nothing to say,” Matt admits.

“God damn it. God damn both of you,” Karen jabs a stockinged foot onto the floor, unable to contain how pissed off this is getting her. Matt empathizes. She directs her next comment towards
the broken leg throbbing next to her. “I mean…God damn you slightly less because of your leg.”

“Thanks,” Matt replies glumly.

She gives nothing else away. “Can you blame him – or me – seeing you like this? Knowing where you’re going? That you’re going there willingly?”

“It’s not the broken leg,” or the fact that he’s staying with Frank Castle. Foggy is pissed off about more than those things.

“The broken leg doesn’t help.”

No, the broken leg only hurts. Matt changes the subject, “How did you know I was missing?”

Karen’s heart returns to its usual rhythm. They’re back in familiar territory. She takes a seat on the arm of the couch. “Wasn’t easy. You’re hard to track these days.”

Matt doesn’t disagree. Abandoning his day job and civilian life has given him more time to perfect stealth as the devil. “You’ve been tracking me?”

“For the paper.” Her heart says otherwise, patting away in her chest. Karen doesn’t let her deception stand. “For me. I thought it might help me…understand.”

“Did it?”

“I…don’t know, maybe…understanding wasn’t what I was looking for?”

“What are you looking for?”

Karen is telling the whole, sad truth. “I don’t know.”

Matt wishes it was different, and yet, the unknown comes with greater comfort than Karen abandoning him at the apartment with Foggy. She’s here. She’s searching. Those secrets she has buried inside her are stoking her curiosity as much as the revelation about his abilities. “Let me know when you do.”

Her hand hovers over his knee for a long moment. Matt absorbs the heat from her palm through his sweatpants. He waits for her to pull away; she doesn’t. She lays her fingers onto his knee. There are words, so many words. Her lips are loaded with them, but she doesn’t say a damn thing. Maybe she’s already said them all to Frank.

There has to be something he can do on one leg, something that keeps her and Foggy safe.

“What time is it?”

Karen reaches for her purse. She digs in the pocket for her phone, activating the Lock screen. “1:45.” The phone drops back into her bag, sticking against leather (wallet) and clanking against plastic (TASER) on the way down. “Let me guess: you have to meet Frank.”

He listens carefully to her respiration, measuring what he knows about Karen lying with her telling the truth. Hard to believe she handed him the lie on a silver platter, but there it is, waiting for him. “Yeah. 2 pm. I’ll take a cab.”

“I’ll drive you.”
Matt expects as much, “You need to be gone before he arrives.” He can’t have her following him: not where he’s going with Frank and definitely not where he’s going now.

The rooftop is still silent.

Karen sighs, “You call me, then, tonight. From Frank’s.”

“Don’t look into these disappearances,” Matt counters.

“Call me.”

“Okay.”

Karen concedes, “Fine.”

Her lying only bolsters Matt’s resolve to go. He has work to do.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

After almost abandoning this chapter thrice, I finally cobbled together a draft that works…I think. This is my first time writing the character who Matt visits, and I really hope the depiction here fits with the show, especially given Matt’s very visible injury.

I am also eager to share the ending of this chapter with you all. It feels new for me (this whole fic feels very new to me, sorry. I sound like a broken record), and I hope it’s effective. Obviously, there will be more in the next chapter to clarify exactly what is happening, but I really tried to hit the right balance of too much and too little.

Readers, lovely readers, please enjoy. It’s a pleasure to hear from you. I appreciate the feedback and your support. I may be away a little longer between updates for work (first term reporting – what a thrill!), but I’ll be back with another installment as soon as I can. Cheers!

“I know I’ve heard that to let your feelings show
Is the only way to make friendships grow
But I’m too afraid now…
I’ll put my armour on.
Show you how strong I am.”

~Sia, “Unstoppable”

Something about Karen’s car sets Matt on edge. He can’t put his finger on it, unfocused as he is, but even at full strength, her acquiring the vehicle never sat right with him. Karen’s pulse fluttered when she told him that it was windfall from Ben’s death. She wasn’t lying; she just wasn’t telling him the whole truth.

The car doesn’t strike Matt as having been Ben’s. This is a luxury vehicle, smooth and quiet. Impractical for a reporter looking to brush shoulders with Hell’s Kitchen criminals. And when Matt breathes deeply, he catches a familiar scent. The car’s previous owner lives on despite
Karen’s attempts to clear them with industrial solvents and a potent air freshener. She wouldn’t try to cover up Ben.

Karen senses his suspicion and says nothing, anticipating that he’ll ask the first question, that she’ll have a lie to distract him when he does. Matt briefly considers broaching the subject, then he dismisses the idea. He doesn’t have the strength for it on top of everything else. The Aspirin he took before leaving his apartment is doing less for his leg than the pills he took this morning. Not to mention that if there’s one thing Karen’s proven, it’s that when she intends to keep a secret, she’s going to keep that secret.

Unless it’s from Frank Castle.

Matt definitely doesn’t say that aloud.

“There’s a bench outside of St. Matthew’s.” He’ll take a seat under the pretense of waiting for Frank and give Karen the impression that she can tail him back to where he’s staying.

She makes it too easy for someone who worships the truth. “Call me,” Karen demands before allowing him out of the car. It’s not fair that she’s holding him to his word when he can’t hold her to hers, but if all goes well in the next hour, he won’t have to; these disappearances will stop. Karen won’t have anything to investigate except the location of Frank’s apartment, which is a whole other can of worms Matt doesn’t have the stomach to think about.

“Tonight,” he promises. “It…” Too many words fill his mouth at once. Confessions, apologies, explanations. Warnings: for her and for Foggy. He ends up settling on something clichéd for the sake of time, “It was good to see you, Karen.”

Blood floods her cheeks. Her voice is light, lilting. “It was good to see you too.”

The ghost of her palm warms the back of his hand. Matt runs from the memory of the touch. He takes hold of his crutches and throws open the door. “I’ll call you tonight.”

“Tonight,” because a deal can’t be said enough where they’re concerned.

“Bye, Karen,” he hobbles away almost too fast for his leg to properly carry him.

Sitting down under the glaring afternoon sun, leg throbbing, Matt’s nauseated. He almost pitches over onto the concrete in a pain-induced delusion that the ground is going to swallow him up. But Karen is watching. She hasn’t pulled away from the curb. If he stands, she’ll know he’s leaving; if he falls, she’ll have reason to wait.

Matt waves to her, sensing the traffic isn’t what’s holding her up, and she still takes her sweet time entering the lane. He forces his senses to stay with her, making sure he’s out of her line of sight before rising, moving as quickly as the crutches will allow across the street and into the crowd.

By the time he hears her car returning from its trip around the block, Matt’s gone.

The rooftops pose new threat to him. Matt’s hearing is tangled in the sound of his own respiration. He can’t help but groan with every step, urged by the strain of the walking cast against his ballooning broken leg. The shell moans, panels grinding, and his skin throbs painfully. Almost there isn’t good enough. He needs to be there, be done, before he gets dragged into something he is prepared to deal with.
He really hopes the Hand isn’t watching. Bad enough the slow, plodding hearts of by-
standers as he wove a crooked path down the sidewalk; to have his enemies – or whatever they are
now – see him like this makes Matt want to give up then and there. Toss his crutches in the
dumpster, take his chances on his right leg. He’s gotten limper since he ducked into the alley where
his only witnesses are the pigeons, roaches, and three stray cats. The smell of the workshop grows
stronger as he presses on, but he still has to stop. He has to prop himself against the wall between the
dumpsters and cry and breathe and pray this isn’t the moment Elektra decides to reveal herself. That
he can take a second or two before getting back in the ring.

Stick’s voice swirls inside his head. Matt shuts the old man out. He grits his teeth, draws his
strength, wipes a hand across his face. Tears and trash make for an awful combination. The only
thing missing is blood, Matt muses.

He turns, planting his crutches on the ground before swinging himself back on track.

Fire erupts in his broken leg.

Matt recoils, gasping. The first dumpster catches him before he can hit the ground. The
smell of blood pours down his throat, copper-sweet amidst the heavy odour of garbage. He did it; he
spoke too soon as usual, and now his thoughts are an electrical storm. His senses scramble to piece
together an explanation outside of his potentially bleeding to death.

God, he missed it: a piece of metal and wire jutting out from the base of the second
dumpster. Slender and hooked to compliment the gaps in Matt’s cast. Like it was designed to tear
him open again. How bad, Matt can’t tell. The smell of blood is everywhere. Pain is everywhere.
His surgical incision burns as a whole, masking his newest wound.

He grips his phone, punching at the home button, but he’s deaf to the device and unable to
feel it vibrating over his own trembling. Can’t call Karen without giving away his location. Can’t
call Foggy because of the fight. Can’t call Claire because she won’t make it in time. Can’t call
Frank because Matt would rather bleed to death.

No choice left but to check the damn thing out by hand and hope he doesn’t pass out in the
process.

It’s brutal. Matt’s brain blots out, flashbangs in; he holds himself upright on one crutch and
grips the other in the crook of his arm. He traces a line down the front of his cast, stopping when he
feels blood. The wound trickles: steady but slow. Probably popped a stitch or two. Not life
threatening then, thank God. There’s time to dress it later.

Matt tugs the gap in the cast closed and applies pressure as best he can – don’t pass out, don’t
pass out, don’t pass out. Vomit splashes in the back of his throat. He rises, slowly. Shakily.
“C’mon,” Dad urges him. He takes another step forward, carefully this time. “C’mon, Matty.”

Once more, Matt finds himself unsure of where to begin. The decision to come here was so
obvious, he didn’t consider why he was doing it. Or what he would do when he got here.

Melvin’s workshop doesn’t help. The clutter of inventions in various stages of completion
and their composite parts are difficult to track and measure. It’s no wonder Melvin got the jump on
him during his first visit. This place is an extension of Melvin. It’s alien territory. Quite literally, in
fact, since Matt has caught the tell-tale scent of extraterrestrial metal on each of his visits. No
technology: the government was careful to get that off the street as quickly as possible following the attack. Melvin does have a small collection of scrap metal stashed away for when he figures out how to use it.

A tremor runs through Matt from his head to his feet. He swallows a few times, clearing his throat before he speaks to keep from vomiting. He needs this done. “Melvin.”

Melvin does a double-take. Unusual for him, given how focused he is on the work, but Matt supposes it has been a while since they last spoke. The broken leg definitely comes as a surprise.

The mechanic springs into action, heart hammering in relief. “You’re a sight for sore eyes,” he declares as he scuffles over to where Matt’s standing. Metal grinds against concrete behind him. He’s dragging something – a chair? A stool? Matt tries not to let his relief show from under his hood. An easy task when Melvin actually touches him, inviting him to get off his feet. He guides Matt over to the chair, but he doesn’t go so far as push him into it. He waits for Matt to feel it out for himself, talking the whole while. “Heard you went missing. Wasn’t worried about it at first: figured you had your reasons, but you must’ve heard the talk. About Fisk being back in town.”

Matt doesn’t want to sit. He wants to stand, meet Melvin face-to-face, but his leg is calling the shots. He sits. He controls his breathing. He tries not to show how good it feels to not have to hold himself up. “Yeah, I heard. He hasn’t…he hasn’t sent anyone here, has he? He hasn’t bothered you?”

Because it’s his fault if Fisk did, if Melvin’s been strong-armed back into the Kingpin’s employ. Matt can’t believe he showed up expecting to ask for help without considering that as a possibility.

“Had a guy around here last week sometime,” Melvin admits. “I told him to get the hell out of my shop. I don’t do that stuff anymore, you know that.”

Matt hangs his head. If only it were that simple, that easy, to get rid of Wilson Fisk. “Melvin, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Melvin certainly isn’t. He busies himself with dragging over a toolbox and placing it slightly to the left of where Matt’s sitting. He builds a pile out of old newspapers, grimy coveralls, and a cushioned chest piece on top. Matt understands without being told, and he mutters, “Thanks,” as he sets his broken leg upon it. A few tears run out of the corner of his eyes in relief. Melvin pretends not to notice, but his heart bleeds for the devil. Compassion runs deep with him. “You look like you’ve been busy.”

Matt laughs humourlessly. “That’s one way to put it.”

Melvin continues pleasantly as he starts digging through his workspace for God-only-knows-what. “Besides,” he grabs another toolbox, this one smelling of antiseptic and fresh dressings. A first aid kit. “I’ve had help. Day after Fisk’s guy, your uh…your friend shows up. The uh…” the kit opens with a squeak. Melvin digs around inside it for fresh dressings and the right words, “Uh… the lady you were here with when you picked up the club.”

The toolbox closes. Melvin returns. Matt isn’t paying attention. He’s gone cold. The words freeze to death in his mouth. He lifts his head slightly beyond the cover of his hood listening, waiting. They can’t hide forever, her minions. Her army. Her. Everything living has to breathe.

Dear God, she’s alive.
“Hey,” it’s the second time Melvin’s said it now, but the first time Matt’s heard. “Your leg’s bleeding. I can take a look at it for yah.”

Matt nods ones dumbly. He winces out of shock as Melvin undoes the Velcro straps on the cast. No amount of gentleness stops it from hurting. “What did she…” he has so many questions. Too many questions. He hasn’t a clue where to start. “Did she say why she was here?”

Melvin lifts the cushioned tongue of the walking boot off Matt’s mangled leg. Blood fills Matt’s mouth. He swallows, he blinks. The scent crashes down on him in a wave and nearly washes him into senselessness. He follows Melvin’s voice out of his stupor. “Said she was looking for you. Wondering if I knew where you were. I told her I hadn’t seen you.”

So she sent one of the Hand to watch his apartment. Matt counts his breath through Melvin’s ministrations, eyelids fluttering. Brain a series of flashbulb memories: her heartbeat coming to an abrupt halt, the warmth leaving her, the damp earth settling to rest at her grave, the smell of her – alive, well – in his apartment before the snap of his leg and pain, pain, pain.

“So sorry,” Melvin says for the umpteenth time. He’s got Matt by the shoulder to keep him from falling. The strength’s left him, drained clean. Antiseptic has a hold of everything else from Matt’s nose to his hearing. Melvin’s cleaning methods are more broad strokes than Frank’s. The stinging in his leg is slow to subside. “I should’ve warned you. Wound isn’t looking too pretty though. Bout as red as your armour.”

Matt can’t smell anything besides the antiseptic cooling over his mangled skin. “Warning would’ve made it worse,” he admits. His body is already in some kind of shock over Elektra. “What else…?” C’mon, Matty. He wants to sleep. He wants to give into the soft drowse edging on his perception. Dad, insistently: c’mon, Matty. “What else did she say?”

“She asked if I knew anything about where you might have gone. I told her no,” Melvin makes sure Matt can hold himself up before returning his attention to the wound. “Then she wondered if there was anyone who might’ve taken you. I told her Fisk had sent a guy over, and he probably wouldn’t have made it to my doorstep if you knew about them.”

In case he’s already passed out and dreaming this exchange: “You told her about Fisk?”

“Yeah. Told her that you and I worked together, looked out for one another.”

Matt thinks he knows the answer to this question, but he wastes his breath asking anyways, “What did she say?”

“She said she would look into it,” Melvin replies. “She said she would look after me too. Make sure I stayed safe, that Betsy stayed safe.”

Something about Matt gives away the mood. His face, perhaps, or the slouch of his shoulders, or the fact that he’s gone numb to his leg over the frigid realization that Fisk is becoming the least of his concerns. He doesn’t realize Melvin is packing his popped stitches with fresh gauze until, “Hey, that’s good, right? She’s good?”

Matt wonders if it’s still lying when he doesn’t know the truth. “Yeah, that’s good, Melvin,” he forces himself to believe it for Melvin’s sake. He tells himself that it is true, given that Melvin’s still here, that Betsy’s alright, and that Fisk isn’t breaking down the door. Elektra has to be doing some version of good in the world.
Probably a similar kind of good as Frank Castle.

“Did you make anything for her, Melvin?” and, if so, did she order in bulk? Matt’s mind reels at the thought of Melvin helping to outfit the Hand under the belief that Elektra is like the Daredevil. A belief that he helped foster by bringing her there in the first place – damn it. Frank’s right: he is an idiot.

“Yeah, she did, actually,” Melvin finishes taping a new pad of gauze and rewraps Matt’s leg in the cast. He taps a case sitting on the shelf nearby, locked and reinforced against intruders, too small for an army of ninjas. Elektra’s order was strictly personal by the sounds of things. “Some body armour tailored for her. Tried something new with it and got it even lighter than yours. She wanted a pair of sais too. Almost done. You wanna see? They’re really something.” Melvin is already moving for them, a spring in his step at the opportunity to show off.

For the first time in hours, Matt’s hearing fixes on a point and stays there. The prongs of Elektra’s new sais sing as they travel from the workbench towards him. And the sound is so faint, so delicate, that Matt’s sure only his hearing would be able to pick it up. Her enemies would never hear her coming. Frank’s words rumble in his brain: “They say you don’t hear the bullet that gets you.” Well, only Matt would hear Elektra getting him. Fitting.

He reaches for them, daring his fingers to run along the delicate metal shafts, stopping when they hit the hilt. “They weigh nothing,” Melvin states, which is what Elektra would want. She favours agility. “Perfectly balanced. I mean perfectly.” Matt takes the weapons into his hands, marveling at how empty his grasp feels. Melvin continues, “They’re unbelievably strong though. And sharp. Those points could cut through body armour.”

“You do good work, Melvin,” Matt says, rolling the sais into his lap. “Very good.”

“You think she’ll like them?”

“She’ll love them.” Elektra never met a blade she didn’t love. Briefly, Matt considers taking them with him when he goes, a way of getting her mind off Fisk and his cronies, but he relinquishes the sais to Melvin again. Elektra’s ability to do good has always come second to her own desires. Matt can’t trust her to leave Melvin alone if her new weapons vanish. “When is she coming back for them?”

“I told her tomorrow. Which is good. I need an extra night with them, get ‘em just right.”

Tomorrow. She’s so close and so far away. Matt wonders if Frank will bring him back to Hell’s Kitchen then. If the Hand hasn’t spotted him today. He hasn’t heard them looming over Melvin’s workshop, but he hasn’t been hearing much. “You tell her I was here. Tell her…”

To call me. To find me. To come get me. We’ll run away together like we promised.

No, they can’t. Fisk is coming, and Elektra causing his cronies to disappear isn’t going to dissuade him from pursuing Foggy. Matt sighs, “Tell her I was here. Tell her I’m alright. Tell her to back off Fisk.”

“Yeah, I will,” Melvin promises him.

“There’s something else,” he almost hates to ask, what with having lied to Melvin tonight about trusting Elektra. But he has to, all the more because he’s lied to Melvin. “The doctor said I’m non-weight bearing. I can’t be, Melvin. I need something that will let me walk again.”
Melvin is already working. He surveys the leg, humming lightly in contemplation of the mechanism that will put Matt back together again. “Where’s the break?”

“Mid-calf.”

“When did it happen?”

“Ten days ago.”

Melvin sighs, scoffs, “Don’t know why you’re up and moving around so soon. No wonder it’s not looking so pretty.”

“It’s not feeling pretty.”

“I can’t brace the leg at this stage, not without doing more damage. In a few weeks though, I could fit you with some kind of rig. Something that would…bear the weight for you, hold the bones in place, give you some mobility. I can even build something better than what you’re wearing in the meantime, that’s for sure.”

Matt releases a breath he’s been holding since the ceiling hit him. He shifts his leg, reminding himself that there’s more he needs to thank Melvin for than a better brace. There’s the chair, the foot rest, the first aid. The small kindnesses that Melvin gives so freely. “Thank you, Melvin.”

Melvin nods, accepting and dismissing the gratitude in the same instant. It’s bizarre after ten days of living with Frank, who spends a long while after every thank you waiting for the other shoe to drop. Melvin’s openness is refreshing, “Well, this is what we do. We look out for each other.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean what are friends for, right?”

Matt isn’t sure he’s the best person to answer. He offers a half-hearted, “Yeah.” That sounds like the response he’s supposed to give. Truthfully, he’s at a loss. He hasn’t done anything to deserve Melvin’s kindnesses, and yet here he is, asking for a handout, unable to fulfill the one promise he did make. In fact, he’s failing at his promise so miserably that an army of ninjas is out there making people disappear because of him.

He says it again, “Thank you, Melvin.” Because he doesn’t know what else to say. He doesn’t know what the hell friends are for, never having been a very good one.

Clouds are rolling in as he leaves Melvin’s. Rain approaches. Matt hears the wet crinkle of droplets on the Hudson. Not enough time to get back to his apartment, nor any reason to go back there, really, so Matt opts for the church. Doors are open at Sundays for parishioners. He can see Lantom while he waits for Frank, maybe have a latte. And a stronger painkiller than Aspirin.

He scours the rooftops on his way. Focusing his hearing beyond the sidewalk makes him clumsy. He bumps into people and apologizes profusely, trying to let the muttered comments roll off him along the way. “Watch where your fucking going,” and, “Jesus, are you blind?” cut deeper than they should, deeper than they would if he wasn’t preoccupied with Elektra and the Hand; with Fisk; with Karen and Foggy and shit, Frank has had the whole day to play in Hell’s Kitchen. Matt has
barely given him a second thought.

St. Matthew’s can’t appear fast enough. The old stone building is grounding, calming. Matt takes in the gentle acoustics created by the bell tower, the way the walls block the sounds from the street and offer respite from the city bustle. He bides his time on the steps, removing his phone from his pocket to call Frank.

He goes to voice mail. The church offers no comfort for that. “I’m at St. Matthew’s,” and Matt doesn’t bother asking where Frank is. What the Punisher’s doing. The answer is sure to disappoint him.

The phone stops vibrating in his pocket. Frank splashes water on his face and wrings his hand under the tap a few more times. The last of the blood spirals down the drain. He watches it go.

There are droplets on his sleeves, his collar, a patch on his shirt. Frank scrubs the excess with the last piece of paper towel from the dispenser. No fucking use. There’s a print of a guy’s face in the centre of his chest made of blood, snot, and saliva. The only thing he can do is zip up his jacket to his neck, toss his hood on his head, and leave the shitty restroom.

Should have brought a change of clothes. Still broad fucking daylight, still a God damn fugitive, and he’s still got the kid for company. The kid who smells ammonia and his dead girlfriend, who fights better without sight than most guys do with; who can hear for fucking miles and…and…Frank stops at the driver’s side of his car. Gets his shit together, because this isn’t Red’s fault. The hell does he care what the kid thinks about killing. Frank did what he came to Hell’s Kitchen to do. Not the first time he’s made a mess. And if Red doesn’t like that, well, there’s always people he can call. Hell, there’s gonna be people he needs to call. Kid lost his shit when Frank hung the cartel from meat hooks. What Frank’s just seen, what he’s had to do, that mess he left behind in the warehouse?

He scrubs his head, loosening the blood residue left behind by his harried rinsing. Mist sweeps in, chilly and biting, from the Hudson, and the firefight in his brain quiets. Slows. Frank’s thoughts regroup. He’s made messes before. He’s cleaned up other people’s messes before. Mobs, gangs, cartels - they always find terrible ways of dismantling people. This is the same shit, different day.

Frank scoffs at himself. Yeah, same shit. For him. But Red? Shit. He’s been dangling from the ledge for a while. This is bound to knock a few more of his fingers loose, and Frank does not want to be the only one around when he finally falls.

Speak of the devil, Frank finds he’s got one missed call from Red on his phone. The kid’s message is clipped, but clearly, he survived meeting with Nelson and Page. And if he’s at the church, he’s not bleeding to death on his rooftop or taken captive by ninjas.

Frank shoves his phone back in his pocket. Fucking ninjas.

Red being at the church buys him a few more hours in the Kitchen. He can run down a few more of Fisk’s guys. And if they’re really lucky, Frank’ll get to them first.
Happy reading!
Warpath

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2. This chapter also contains some violence, references to torture, and gore.

This chapter is shorter than my other posts for two reasons – one, I am in the middle of writing report cards, and my stamina is shot. Two, I wanted to contextualize the final scene of the previous chapter without cutting back to the church at the end. My plans for Matt went beyond the scope of this installment. Plus, I kind of liked writing a kind of day-in-the-life chapter for Frank.

I still feel the need to apologize, because Readers, kind Readers, lovely Readers, you’re amazing. I’m so excited to share this with you. Thank you for your enthusiasm, for your insights, for your time and energy. It’s truly a pleasure to write in this fandom with such wonderful people. I hope you are all doing well, and I hope you enjoy this chapter. Cheers!

“Baby, you drive me so crazy.
Baby, you drive me so crazy.
Baby, you drive me so mad,
You got me runnin’ round town
Like a woman on a warpath.”

~Ingrid Michaelson, “Warpath”

Frank’s first stop upon dropping off the kid is a water tower four blocks south. He perches against the rails, surveying Hell’s Kitchen from above. He has other errands to run, people to see, but he needs to get his bearings. Being chased by ninjas on his last visit really threw him. Last thing he needs today is a tail. Actually, the last thing he needs is to get back to the kid’s apartment and find Red grappling more of those ninja-bastards, broken bone hanging out of his cast, because that seems the more likely scenario.

Motion abounds. Frank filters through the inanimate stuff: the laundry flapping on the lines, the sway of shutters and power lines; steam and smoke billowing along the horizon; fans spinning slowly in rusty vents. There’s an urban beekeeper harvesting on a nearby rooftop. A woman strings Christmas lights around the access door in preparation for a party, her left arm balancing a toddler
against her hip. Red’s roof, whether Frank spies through his scope or not, is empty. Nobody’s watching the kid’s apartment today.

Frank lowers his gaze. Checks his phone. Been up here for a half hour thinking somebody might show and nothing. No sign of ‘em. Ninjas must work night shifts. Either that or the trail’s gone cold, what with Red being gone for so long. Frank pops the scope back into his pocket. He casts one last glance at the city unfolding around him, staring Hell’s Kitchen dead in the eye. Those ninja-bastards aren’t gone; they’re in hiding. Hard enough being a fugitive without a mask. Frank can’t imagine wandering around in broad daylight, trying to be stealthy in robes and katanas.

Still, Frank can’t be too careful. It’s a big, bad world out there. He’s got to look out for himself. Who the hell else would he be on the rooftops for?

The motel on 37th makes a shitty cup of coffee, but Frank buys one and takes a seat on the bench outside. There’re other places to buy coffee, better places, but the servers at this one never look him in the eye. They hand him the cup, take his loose change, and get on with their day. No care for the fact that they were two feet away from Public Enemy Number One.

Rousseau comes when she comes and sits as far away from him as she can on the bench. She has a cell phone in one hand, a Starbucks in the other, and sunglasses covering what little of her face isn’t obscured by the scarf she’s wearing.

“Long night?” Frank asks the ground. The way her shoulder slouch away from him tells him as much. Rousseau doesn’t give two fucks about subterfuge or secrecy; she reacts to the day she’s having, not to him.

“When isn’t it?” She laughs but there’s no humour in it. Rarely is with Rousseau. Born and raised in Hell’s Kitchen and almost half her life doing social work for sex workers. It’s a miracle Rousseau knows what a laugh is let alone what it’s for. “One of my girls got cut. I was watching her face get sewn back together at Metro General most of the night. She’s resting up at my place, but she’ll be hitting the streets again tonight.”

Frank forces himself to take a sip of his coffee. To stay sitting on the bench. Fuck, he’s been laying down on the job. Some of the girls in Rousseau’s caseload are still in their teens. “She say who did it?”

“No. Was scared I was gonna tell you.”

“I don’t go after working girls.” The ones who have a place to go, Frank gives them bus fare. The ones who don’t, he gives piece of mind. Usually. When he’s not babysitting.

Rousseau nods curtly, gratefully. “Which is what I told her, but hell if you don’t go after the ones who hire ‘em.”

“I go after the ones who cut ‘em up,” Frank tells his cup of coffee.

“I’m not the one with the problem,” Rousseau sighs. “Up to me, I’d have a list for you every God damn day. But my girls are stuck in the shit. Forced into the business and can’t leave, chose the business but can’t stay, and either way, they end up getting hurt. By the Johns you end up killing or the pimps pissed their girls aren’t getting business with the Punisher around.”

“You can stop giving me names.”
“Like that would stop you,” Rousseau’s smirk slashes across the folds of her scarf. Some warmth returns to her voice. Always does where her girls are concerned. “Nah, the way I see it: least I know what you’re aiming at so I can get my girls out of harm’s way. Besides, some of them like you. Think you’re a hero.”

He tosses back another mouthful of coffee, relishing the burn in his throat. Takes his mind off his skin crawling away from that word. Hero. He’s not a hero. Ain’t no such thing as a God damn hero. He does what he can for those that need it. Plain and simple. No need to sugar coat it.

“The hell have you been anyways?” Rousseau hazards a look at Frank then, checking to see if he’s been cut up too.

“Busy.” Seems weird using that word though. Frank’s had busy weeks in Hell’s Kitchen, but almost two weeks stuck at home shouldn’t feel as frantic as they do. All that time he’s spent with Red – as nursemaid, babysitter, drill sergeant, roommate - play through his brain on fast forward. Lots of blood, sweat, and tears to get to this moment, sitting on a bench in Hell’s Kitchen like it’s any other Sunday. “Busy.”

“Yeah, I hear that,” Rousseau takes a sip of her coffee. “Heard you been on a tear.”

Frank wishes. “Where’d you hear that?”

“The girls. They hear things. Heard that people were disappearing more than usual. People affiliated with Wilson Fisk.” Certainly sounds like him, but Frank hasn’t been this far out of the Bronx since dragging Red home. Somebody’s been doing his job for him. Won’t Red be thrilled.

“I told them if it was you, they’d know it. And then this morning, one girl calls and tells me she does know it. Said she saw something at the docks that scared her absolutely shitless. A guy. Living. No hands, she tells me. Lips, nose, and eyelids gone too.”

“You call the cops?” giving her no indication of whether it was him.

“I called you. No hands, no face, and from what my girl tells me, no trace? That’s a mob move, a new one, and a scary one too.” Rousseau’s voice takes on a harsher quality, more defensive. “Besides, my girl’s got two strikes, one for assaulting an officer. Last thing I need is her dragged in for questioning.”

Frank finishes the rest of his coffee. He crumples the cup, tosses it into the trash. “Where?”

“Pier 90.”

He rises, burying his hands in the pockets of his hoodie. He tugs a few bills from the bundle of cash he’s carrying, hands them off to Rousseau. She glances at the money, grimacing. Surveys the street to make sure they’re not being watched before snatching the cash slipping it into her sleeve. Frank tucks his hand into his pocket again. “Your girl who got cut – keep her off the street.”

“Yep,” Rousseau looks back at her phone.

“You call when she talks.”

“I’ll let you know,” and she’ll be only too happy to.
up and park next to the rusty warehouse. He’s alone, but it feels like he shouldn’t be. This place has seedy underbelly written all over it. During the day, this place probably hosts covert meetings between cops and their CIs, reporters and their sources; at night, arms dealers and traffickers set up shop, and working girls have the shit scared out of them by multiple amputees.

He makes sure he’s armed before he goes into the warehouse.

Frank finds blood. Ground floor, barely hidden amidst the old shipping crates. Light cuts through the weather-worn slats of the wall to give him a decent view. The spatter’s fresh, and it gives credence to the girl’s claim that the guy was missing his hands. He lost something, what with this kind of mess. Frank catches a whiff of burnt flesh too: cauterization. The guy got cut and then burned to keep him from bleeding to death. Explains the trail on the floor. Droplets mainly, but drag marks appear about six paces into the shadows. The guy fell, caught himself on bloody stumps, got back up to fall again, left to survive with his wounds.

The floor shows little sign of the assailants. Rousseau’s girl wasn’t kidding about no trace. Frank finds scattered dust around the blood spatter, but the mob, they usually leave cigarette butts or cartridge casings or footsteps. Careless things, because it’s not like they ever get prosecuted in this town. But there’s none of that here. Swishes on the floor aren’t mob tracks.

He turns. Light cuts across the top of the crates. Frank stops, examining the edge. There are breaks in the dust. Places that have been cleared by, what? A hand? He checks the top and finds the same smears as on the floor. Footprints. One of the attackers was standing up here. A larger point of impact suggests they dropped from the ceiling.

Frank checks the rafters colt-first. Then he scans the warehouse floor, moving slowly in anticipation of movement. Shadows leaping behind crates in his periphery or the swish of robes in the dark, that kind of thing. He’s left disappointed. They’re not here, thefuckers, and they have every reason to be. Bloody crime scene with no trail to follow: this isn’t some mob hit. It’s Red’s fucking ninja friends come to play.

They’re long gone now. Abandoned their game of reverse hangman before the fun could really begin. Before Rousseau’s girl could interrupt, since they let her live too. They hell were they playing at, then?

He follows the trail of blood through the silent warehouse and finds his answer. The man they were carving is slumped in the corner. His mutilated face hangs in prayer over the bloody, burned stumps where his hands used to be. Frank can’t tell if he’s breathing; it’s for the best that he isn’t. Lot of slashed nerve endings in the wrists and face. Lot of time spent bleeding out, alone.

Frank approaches, kneeling. He holds a hand under the guy’s exposed teeth and collects nothing but stagnant air. His fingers pick at the blood-crusted collar around the guy’s neck. Shirt’s open. Skin’s cut underneath in long strokes. Frank opens the corpse’s clothing to get a good look.

The guy’s head shoots up. His lipless mouth peels open in a wretched, broken scream. Frank snatches his hand away just as the man grabs him by the collar of his jacket.

Frank pulls away, whipping his colt up, but the guy is on him, ploughing face-first into Frank’s chest. The contours of his skull are easily measure without his nose or lips getting in the way. One strike to the shoulder dislodges him, but he’s quick to strike again. Adrenaline is a hell of a thing. Frank has to pistol whip the guy to break free. One batch, two batch…Frank lets the bullet finish the line for him. The shot from the colt comes as a fucking mercy. The bullet hits between the guy’s lidless eyes, one more bloody, gaping hole on a face of bloody, gaping holes. He hits the ground with a wet slap on the concrete.
Cold blood splatters everywhere. Frank absorbs the spray to his face and upper chest. The corpse is spread out on the floor below him, open and exposed. His shirt is open now, revealing a series of rakes across his chest. Frank tilts his head this way and that to make it out. The slats of light through the walls makes it difficult to read, and the thick cover of blood obscures what look to be letters. He holsters his colt, lowering, and scrapes the coagulated mess of blood and flesh away to read.

He finds one word carved through the pectorals: FISK.

The ninjas were sending a God damn message. That’s why they left this guy alive to be found.

Frank shakes the human goop off his hands. “Fucking ninjas.” Wilson Fisk is his prize. He fucking earned Fisk. They want a turf war in Hell’s Kitchen; he’ll give ‘em one. Ninjas can withstand a lot of things – fire, stabbing – but far as Frank can tell, they don’t come back from bullets.

He’s about to rise when the guy’s wallet catches his eye. It’s hanging there on the edge of his pocket, waiting to be found. Guess the eyelids, nose, and lips were for torture, then. This guy’s identity was as much a part of their message as the calling card they left in his chest. Frank tugs it free. Flips it open.

Shuts it again. Stares. Light cuts the floor into pieces. Frank peels his wet t-shirt off his chest, the skull impressing left by the man’s face cool and drying. Smelling of tears and sweat and blood and snot. He swipes at the spatters of blood on his face and neck, making a bigger mess because there’s more on his cuffs, his sleeves, his pants…

Fuck it.

Frank opens the wallet again, running a bloody finger over the face in the driver’s licence. Hard to tell that it’s the same guy – the wretch on the floor and the man in the photograph. But the hair matches, as does the build. Yes, sir, this is one Ian Foley lying on the ground. No doubt the same Foley that Frank was gunning for over a week ago. The same Foley that Red re-broke his leg trying to save.

He closes the wallet. Tosses it back to Foley. “Wouldn’t have done it like this,” Frank mutters, rising, feeling awfully stupid for trying to reassure a corpse. But it’s true, it’s fucking true: he wouldn’t have done it like this. He would have worked over Foley and his boys last week but good and put their asses in the ground, sure, because that is what small-time shit like Foley and his boys deserve. They would reap what they sow. Not this. This psychopathic bullshit. This is what Fisk has coming to him.

Red should have let him go. Hell, he should’ve left Red bleeding to death on the fire escape. There’s work that needs doing else the ninjas are gonna do it for him, and they’re gonna do it wrong. Frank puts a hole in one of the crates as he storms past. The impact jars him out of his menace. This isn’t Red’s fault. He, Frank, should have gotten out of the way of that ceiling, freed himself up to take care of this mess instead of leaving the ninjas to make a bigger one.

Storm’s coming in low and slow off the Hudson. The clouds are having a hard time saying goodbye to Jersey across the river. Frank ducks into the restroom by the foreman’s office. He can’t go around in broad daylight like this. People recognize him too quickly with a face full of blood. Not that washing up is going to do much against Red.

Fucking ninjas.
Frank throws on the tap. He stares at his bloody self in the cracked mirror.

The skull is heavy on his chest.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.
This chapter is also a little spoiler-ish for Luke Cage.

Apologies for the delay between updates! I though report cards were cutting into my writing time, but the weeks that followed were far busier. Amidst it all, I had a difficult time figuring out where, exactly, this chapter was going, but it gradually became apparent to me. Best of all, I got to include a character I have been meaning to add for a while, whose proposed scene has since been reworked. I hope that I've communicated the motivations in that scene well.

I am working under the assumption that Matt didn't converse with Lantom as much - or at all, really - during season 2, since the priest is presented as an invaluable voice of reason in season 1. Lantom is therefore really only aware of the events up until his conversation with Matt in "Penny and Dime". I have written Matt as keeping him him in the dark about Elektra. I also realized, rather happily, that this conversation between Matt and Lantom in this chapter was an unintentional throwback to themes I had worked with previously in the Hannibal fandom. That was fun.

I should also mention here that I do have comfort planned in this fic after this. Like actual comfort. Pinkie-promise.

Readers, dear Readers, I can’t thank you enough for your kind support! I hope you enjoy this chapter, and that you are all doing well. Cheers!

“Come, please, I’m calling.
And, oh, I reach for you.
Hurry – I’m falling. I’m falling.
Show me what it’s like
To be the last one standing
And teach me wrong from right
And I’ll show you what I can be
Say it for me, say it to me…
Say it if it’s worth saving me.”

~Nickelback, “Savin’ Me”
Lantom places a latte on the table beside him. Matt wraps his thumb and forefinger around the mug. The heat takes his mind of his leg, elevated on a chair. Reopening the wound has taught the injury new ways to scream.

The question pops out of his mouth before he can stop himself, “Do you have any Aspirin, Father?”

“I have something stronger than that, you really want to take the edge off,” Lantom tells him.

“Aspirin’s fine,” Matt says, trying to sound confident. Hard to tell if he succeeds. Lantom isn’t about to believe anything he says with Matt looking as bad as he thinks he does. Humour seems like a safe bet: “Besides, I don’t think whiskey would mix well with my antibiotics.”

Lantom misses the joke, “Wasn’t talking about whiskey. Got some leftover codeine from tearing my rotator cuff earlier this year.”

Matt can’t say yes. “No, thank you, Father.”

A sigh, a deep one. Lantom’s backed into a corner: “I can’t help but wanting to insist on it, Matthew. You really don’t look well.”

He doesn’t feel well. His head aches, his stomach’s upset, there’s a cold sweat breaking out across his arms. Convincing Lantom not to call the ambulance was a hard sell. Matt can’t see that conversation going well a second time. Besides, the Aspirin he took at the apartment is doing nothing. He nods his assent, “Thank you,” and Lantom stalks off to get the medication.

When he’s alone, Matt lets his weakness show. He catches his face in his hand, scrubbing under his glasses. His eyes are watery, achy. The sweat from his brow makes them sting. He grips his left knee, begging the muscles to release, but pain begets pain, and he has been let his hurt grow unchecked for too long. Not to mention that smell, heady and sour, clinging in the back of his mouth. Him. Shaky, shivery, sweaty him. He turns to face the latte to spare himself the shame.

God, it’s been so long since he smelled espresso. He takes a sip, and his stomach tenses, unhappy. But he needs the flavour. He needs the texture. He needs a tether to the way life was, a reminder that there is a world outside of Frank’s apartment and the holy mess brewing in Hell’s Kitchen.

Lantom strengthens the gravitational pull in the room. He presses the pills into Matt’s right hand, introduces a glass of water to the left. Matt utters another thanks, swallowing the tablets and all the water. His stomach is momentarily appeased. Guess it’s dehydration he’s feeling as much as stress and sick and pain. Matt rubs at his left thigh again, waiting for the medication to kick in so his body can uncoil from the tangled knot he’s becoming.

“Your friend was by, looking for you,” Lantom opens. Not the first thing Matt wants to hear when he’s so on edge, but there’s a comfortable distance here, in the church. The seal of confession creates a separate space for their conversation to take place. “Hadn’t seen him around for a while.”

The distance vanishes. Matt is swept back into the thick of it, “Foggy?” He expected Karen.

Lantom doesn’t elaborate. He doesn’t see the need. “I started fearing the worst. So did he.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” Matt tries to remember if he apologized to Foggy for the same. The thought probably hadn’t occurred to him.
The apology is unnecessary. Lantom isn’t looking for apologies; he’s looking for an explanation. “Where have you been, Matthew?”

“I’ve been staying with someone.”

“Not a friend,” Lantom knows all his friends. Well, the people Matt used to call friends.

Matt searches his vocabulary for the right word to describe his relationship to Frank. He wonders if one exists: in any language, not just English. They had a connection to each other that was damn near impossible to define. “No, not a friend,” friends don’t strangle other friends into unconsciousness. They do grab silk sheets on supply runs though. “Not…not really. An acquaintance. I…” Matt abandons finds just one word, “I saved his life, he saved mine.”

“Someone like you.”

“Yeah,” except, “No.”

Lantom clarifies, “Someone who operates outside the law.”

“Yes.”

Both their vocabularies are at a loss. Lantom searches for a bare minimum and comes up with, “An ally?”

“Ally is a strong word, Father,” of that, Matt is absolutely certain. “Our motives are…our motives are similar, I think, but our methods are completely different.”

“He prefers peace to punches?”

“More like he prefers bullets to punches.”

Lantom’s heartbeat triples. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat under the weight of exactly who Matt is talking about. “My God, Matthew.”

All he can do is nod in response. “Yeah.”

The sense of security drains from the room. All of a sudden, the Punisher is there, with them, looming over every word, creeping through the silence. Lantom gets his respiration back under control. He folds his arms across his chest to help. The certainty drains from his voice, “You saved his life, he saved yours?”

“Yeah,” but that’s not the half of it, not by a long-shot, and Lantom sure as hell knows it. Matt can hear him wading through the assumptions about Frank’s character, piecing together a portrait of a man who hangs people from meat hooks but tends to a fellow fallen vigilante. Or maybe Matt’s projecting that into Lantom’s silence. “We were in the middle of a firefight. I broke my leg pushing him out of the way of a…a falling ceiling. He hauled me out, found me a doctor, took me back to his place to rest up.”

“This isn’t the first time he hauled you out of a fight,” Lantom notes. “That stake-out with the NYPD. With Grotto.”

“Yeah,” Matt swallows the lump in his throat. “That was different. He wasn’t…he wasn’t looking to save my life then. He was looking…looking to see how far I’d go. How far I’d go to…to save a life.”
Lantom sees right through him, “He wanted to see you go as far as he goes.”

Matt feels his refusal with new freshness. The line drawn between himself and Frank presses into his chest like the chains from that night, and he wears the weight poorly, buckling. “Yeah. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t. What he does is wrong, Father. I know that. But he didn’t have to drag me out of that basement or…or find me a doctor or not hand me over to the police. He didn’t have to keep me alive.” Not that night in the basement or that night on the rooftop.

“Are you asking me to divine the reason of a man called the Punisher?”

“I’m asking for clarity,” Matt’s head buzzes with more than indecision. Laying this to rest will free his thoughts to tackle Elektra or Fisk or Foggy or Karen or that smell, that sour smell undercutting the damp wafting from his broken leg. The one that reminds him *something is wrong* with every breath.

Matt dismisses the fear. His leg relaxes. He doesn’t have to fight against his nerves anymore, and the church is kind of his senses. The walls block out the sounds of the street. The latte returns to buffer his nose against the sour smell wafting up from his wound. He could hide here, claim sanctuary, just for a little while. He revels in Lantom’s quiet, secure in the knowledge that the priest will have an answer for him, or at least a question he hadn’t considered before.

He snaps out of his reverie when Lantom says, “Aside for an obvious trade of a life for a life, someone who considers killing a punishment saves another man’s life for one of two reasons: one, that man does not deserve punishment.”

Matt buys that to some extent. He’s heard the resignation in Frank’s voice, the underlying tone of, “You are not worthy.” Matt might piss Frank off, but he hasn’t earned a bullet yet. More than that, punishment rings redundant for Frank with regards to Matt. There’s not much to do that Matt hasn’t already done to himself.

He dismisses the thought. Pity doesn’t drive Frank. If Matt’s worthy of punishment, Frank would have punished him already. Bottom line. “What’s the other reason?”

There’s a quality to Lantom’s voice as he speaks, something Matt hasn’t heard in a long time. A light in the darkness. An improbable sound of *hope*. “They’ve found something in that man worth saving.”

Matt dismisses that explanation outright. “There’s nothing about me the Punisher considers worth saving.”

“All due respect, Matthew, but you’d be the poorest judge about the qualities of yourself worth saving.”

He has to laugh. It keeps him from vomiting.

Lantom continues, “Besides, I think the more interesting question is what is it about Frank Castle that you’re trying to save? I assume that’s why you haven’t turned him over the police yet.”

“He can tear through the police,” Matt offers in his defence. Weakly. He folds his arms across his chest for heat.

“He has torn through the police,” Lantom corrects him.

“Yeah,” Matt shakes out his arms, too hot all of a sudden. The room bites at him through his
sweat-dampened hoodie and sweats. “But he’s not the devil, Father. He’s a man who lost everything, lost himself. I have to believe he can find his way back to that again.”

Lantom gives Matt a very long, very serious glance. “He isn’t the only one.”

Matt doesn’t dignify that with a response. He hasn’t lost everything. He chose to do away with it all. “What do you think I should do?”

The priest sighs. He thinks it’s perfectly obvious what needs to be done. “I think you need to get as far away from this man as you can, Matthew. You’re debating his motivations, but what about your own? You say you’ve been at his place since your injury. Where is that? Do you know?” He doesn’t wait for Matt to answer. He doesn’t have to. “And despite being in close quarters with him, you’ve had to come to me to discern what his intentions are.”

“There is nowhere else for me to go, not now.”

“Lying is a mortal sin.”

Matt corrects himself, “There is nowhere else I can safely go.”

“Safe for whom?” as if Lantom doesn’t know the answer.

“For the people I care about,” Matt spells it out for him. Heaven help Karen if she takes him under her wing with the Hand on the loose. If following the story doesn’t get her killed, harbouring Matt might. He’s already taken a risk coming to the church hoping ninjas don’t attack in broad daylight.

“Need I remind you that you’re at a disadvantage.”

“He’s had me at a disadvantage before.”

“Not like this.” Lantom’s gaze crawls over him, cataloguing his pallor, his trembling; the way he’s been gradually tilting away from the conversation. The fact that he accepted something stronger than Aspirin returns to haunt the conversation anew. Matt’s disadvantages are so clearly displayed it’s a wonder they haven’t called them out by name.

Lantom is careful to soften the blow of his next words, saying, “There are a great many things about you worth saving, Matthew. You need to ask what about yourself is Frank Castle trying to save. More importantly, you need to ask if it’s a quality you already possess or one he hopes to cultivate.”

“You think he can coerce me to kill?”

A chill passes through him. The room is bitingly cold. Something is very wrong.

Amidst this, Matt senses Lantom shaking his head. “No, but I think you are in a position to be coerced, far more than you were on that rooftop with Grotto. You’ve gone through a lot of changes lately. Distanced yourself from people who remind you of why you started your mission in the first place. I don’t believe that you would ever take a life, but I know how easy it is to be coerced when you have no one left to remind you of who you are.”

Matt allows himself a smirk. As usual, Lantom has found a way of commenting on things he knows nothing about: Elektra’s resurgence, the final promises to one another, how easy it would be to slip away and leave Hell’s Kitchen for the reaping. “I have you,” he states, certain of that much.
Lantom hums, skeptical. Of himself as much as Matt. “You need to be careful, Matthew.”

He nods, but not in agreement. It’s his second mortal sin of the conversation. They both know being careful isn’t Matt’s forte.

Staring. “You really don’t look well.”

“I’m fine…” but the words sound too light and too loose coming from his slackened, sick jaw. Matt tries again. “I’m fine, Father.” He taps the pocket with his phone in it as if there’s a call or text waiting for him. “Besides, I won’t be here much longer.”

Another hum, more knowing this time, but Lantom isn’t pressing. “I’ve got a couch in my office. You ought to lie down.”

“Are you coercing me, Father?”

“No,” Lantom rises from his seat. “I’m telling you. Get a move on before that codeine really kicks in.”

Matt reaches for his crutches, unable to refuse.

“Matthew.”

He snaps awake, disoriented. Hot. The air has condensed into a swamp while he slept, and it wears on Matt like a second skin. He drinks in mouthful after mouthful and never seems to break the surface. No way to read his surroundings beyond the oppressive weight of the atmosphere.

His heartbeat is a throbbing baseline. He waits for Elektra’s to emerge through the haze, but there’s nothing but the wet mouthfuls of sour air, of saliva curdling in the back of his throat. Commands fumble in his brain. They lose their way en route to his arms, hands, and fingers, and every second he spends lost, Matt gets sicker and dizzier. He’s drowning on the outside, burning on the inside, and this is wrong. So wrong.

Matt rolls onto his side. If she was there, her hands would be all over him: forehead, neck, shoulders. “I’ve got you, Matthew.” But he’s alone. Lying on a couch in Lantom’s small office. The priest’s heartbeat filters dimly through the walls from a long way off, and Matt can’t hear another breath besides his own.

He draws his arms up to his chest to get himself back under control. To centre himself in this space. Lantom’s office is wooden and creaks like an old ship as rain falls in sheets outside, generating a hum that swaddles Matt’s hearing. The church is empty. The streets churn with traffic. Matt pries his phone from his pocket and double taps for the time. His sweaty fingers slip over the screen, but he eventually learns it’s early evening. He has no new messages.

The thought that he’s been abandoned is first and loudest in his brain, and Matt can’t conceive of a good reason to shake it. Frank doesn’t have a reason to come back for him. Hell, it’s easier for the Punisher to leave him behind. Mission’s over. Matt’s mobile, and there’s people who can see him through the rest of his recovery. No need to bunk with the devil anymore.

Matt gags. He inches until his head is on the arm rest of the couch, but he can’t escape. The smell is back, heavier from sleep, and he tastes more than sweat and fever. His screaming leg has
unleashed a cloud of sour, rotting meat. Alarm klaxons blare dimly through his knee and thigh: infection. He has an infection.

He holds a fist to his mouth to hold back a cry. The tears are already flooding down the sides of his head into his damp hair. Matt scrunches his eyes tight to get rid of them as quickly as possible, cry the last of them so he can get to work. Work to do. His other hand fumbles with his cell phone only to freeze up when the voice activation service comes up. Matt has no idea what the hell he is going to do. The best Frank can manage is call Sato, but they’re both going to know that treating an infection in the field is idiotic. Matt needs a hospital. He’s needed a hospital since that ceiling fell on him.

More tears. Matt slams his fist into the back of the couch. He can’t go to a hospital. Nevermind the explanations, the legal fallout. The Hand has no problem storming Metro General. He may as well take to the streets and wait for one of Elektra’s sentries to pick him up, disappear into the ether and whatever she has planned for them. If there is a plan. She hasn’t tried to make direct contact with him. Her interests lie wrapped up in disappearing Fisk’s people. No telling what happens after the Hand take him, disadvantaged and coerce-able as he is.

He sits up, unable to contain a shout in agony. His leg, his God damn leg, hurts worse than the night on the fire escape. The fever isn’t a buffer; it’s an enhancer. Matt’s focus slip-slides away from the softness of the church to the sharp edges of the infection seeping under his skin. Fire stabs through his veins. Hurt is a manacle on his broken bone. His head spins, thoughts corkscrewing down, down, down. Matt grabs the back of the couch to keep from falling. He clutches his cell phone to his chest. There has to be something he can do. Some way he can fix this before Frank arrives – if Frank arrives – and drops him off on Metro General’s doorstep so more of their nursing staff can be killed by ninjas.

The number is buried in his phone. Matt tries to say her name, but his voice breaks. He has to scour his call history from weeks ago to find her. He listens to the ringtone, praying he doesn’t hear the next one. Praying she picks up.

Her voice has always had a way of carrying him out of panic, but tonight, it’s especially soothing. Matt’s mixed her up with the phantom sensations of Elektra’s touch, and he immediately hates himself for it. “Matt Murdock,” she sounds pleased and apprehensive. These calls are never free. “Long time, no speak.”

“Hi, Claire.”

“You-“ she holds the word for an extra syllable to emphasize how bad this is, “do not sound good.”

First time ever he doesn’t immediately say, “I’m fine.” Matt can be honest with her. “I’m not. I uh…I’ve got an infection.”

Her tone switches from friendly to clinical in a second. “How bad?”

“I don’t know.” He’s never had an infection before. More than that, he’s never had an injury this complicated before.

Claire sighs, “Gotta be pretty bad, you calling me.”

Matt concedes, “Yeah.”

“You can try cleaning it, but it depends on how deep it is. And how far the infection’s
progressed. Are you alone, Matt?”

Lantom isn’t far, but he is definitely phoning an ambulance if Matt calls for him now. “Yes.”

“Describe the wound to me.”

He considers how honest he should be with her. Tell the truth, her only advice might be to hang up so he can call the ambulance. Lie and her advice might be meaningless. Scrubbing at a two-week-old surgical incision and the fractured bone underneath sounds like a worse idea than a slow death from septicemia.

Matt braces himself against the back of the couch for her disappointment. Claire never pulls punches with him, a fact for which he’s grateful, but his leg is doing a good enough job reminding him how stupid he is at the moment. “I had a…procedure. My leg was crushed. The doctor set the bone and took out a piece of tissue-”

Claire stops him, “Your leg was crushed, and then someone gave you a field fasciotomy?”

His leg booms and crashes from Claire’s support. Matt grips his knee to shut it the hell up. “The surgery isn’t the problem. L…L…L…” He can’t finish a sentence that starts with those words. Matt amends his previous statement. “I won’t be able to stop them.”

Claire scoffs. Always a rock and a hard place with Matt Murdock. “Well, you won’t be able to do much of anything, this goes untreated. What about this…doctor who did your surgery?”

“I don’t know her number.” Matt heaves a shuddering breath. “Can you come take a look at it?”

Matt knows before she responds that she can’t or that she won’t. Her answer takes far too long in coming, a beat or two more than it would if she were going to reluctantly agree. He interrupts her, “Please, Claire. I’m sorry. I wouldn’t call if there was anyone else.”

“I know,” she stops him, and Matt’s suppressed rambling causes more tears to spring into his eyes. He knows where this is going. “Look, I’m not in Hell’s Kitchen anymore, Matt. After what happened at the hospital, I came home to Harlem. By the time I get there, you will need a hospital. Or the morgue.”

The quiet of the church is no longer comforting. It’s lonely. Matt reaches out with his hearing to reassure himself this isn’t the case, but even Lantom’s heart is difficult to hear. Claire’s gentle breathing trickles down the phone line, and in his blindness, Matt perceives her drifting further
and further away.

“Matt?” she asks.

Distantly, he’s aware of another voice coming through on the line. A man’s voice. The words are muddled, but he’s asking a question. Matt pieces together that he’s asking Claire if she’s alright.

Matt wonders if he ever did that. It probably never occurred to him once she was out of harm’s way.

“Thanks, Claire. I’ll let you go.”

Briefly, she considers stopping him. Holding him on the line for a few more seconds. Lord knows, Matt wants her to stay with him. What happens after they disconnect is a terrifying mystery. But the man is asking Claire another question. She returns. “I’m sorry, Matt.”

“You have a good night.”

“Matt,” she’s using a tone that Matt has never heard her use before. “Please. Please go to a hospital. Give them a fake name. Get them to place you in protective custody. Call your lawyer-friend-”

Fear grips him in a vice and crushes the last of his breath from his lungs. “Goodbye, Claire.”

He hangs up.

The quiet that follows, the terror that claws into him, the all-consuming panic of what happens next, makes Matt think of the first night on the rooftop with Frank. Of his crystal clear perception – just for a moment – of what he would feel if he pulled that trigger and took Punisher down. Grotto would still be alive, behind bars. Hell’s Kitchen would be safe. But he would never be able to go home again. He would conquer one horror and unleash a world of others upon himself.

So Matt does what he does best: he takes this situation upon himself. Points the gun where it belongs for a change. He calls Frank and goes to voice mail. Good. “Don’t bother coming to get me, Frank. I’m gone.” Then he shuts off his phone, tossing it onto Lantom’s desk, grabs his crutches, and gets the hell out of there.

Lantom calls to him. Matt blocks the priest out. He has no time, no time at all, before sunset comes and the Hand emerges and they come bursting through the windows. He charges for the front doors with all his remaining strength, growling and groaning the whole way but never stopping. Never thinking about stopping. His leg grows heavier, his arms grow weaker, but he has work to do.

Work to do, Matty. Work to do.

He has to stop at the final pew before he passes out. His breath is coming in short bursts. His head spins. Matt loses one crutch when he grabs the back of the pew for support. The church disappears around him, sucked out in a vacuum of space that leaves him untethered, unbalanced, free-floating in a giant, black void.
His right leg buckles. He lands on the seat of the pew and struggles to gather his senses. Taste – sour, hearing – scrambled, touch – sweaty, slick. Unable to read the vibrations as coming from around him or inside him.

Lantom’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder. Matt grabs the priest by the forearm. “You have to leave,” Matt says. Footsteps appear on the steps towards the church’s front door. The Hand has abandoned all sense of stealth. He pushes at Lantom. “Go. Go, Father. Go. You have to.”

The door opens. It’s too late. Lantom doesn’t let go of Matt’s shoulder even as the figure approaches.

Another hand comes to rest on Matt’s opposite shoulder. Matt tastes blood and GSR and rainwater, and he lets out an enraged shout. It shouldn’t be possible for this to get worse, but there he goes again: failing.

Happy reading!
Running Up That Hill

Chapter Summary

Summary: You know you’ve got problems when Frank Castle is lecturing you on the importance of friendship.

Or: how Matt’s broken leg becomes the least of his concerns.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I’m never sure how much of the writing process to include in these notes. Inevitably, I mention something. Typically, it’s an apology for taking so long or for elements of a chapter that I’m not sure work. This time, I just want to get it off my chest that I struggled a lot with this chapter. First, I was trying to include too much (pretty typical, actually), and second, these three characters were colliding in ways that I didn’t predict. I drew maps of this chapter, many maps, and none of them followed the path I ended up taking while writing.

I learned things while working on this chapter that I should have learned a long time ago. Things like The First Draft Doesn’t Have to Be the Best Draft and When in Doubt, Just Write the Scene You’re Thinking About Instead of the One You’re Avoiding by Thinking About It. I’m simultaneously embarrassed and humbled to still be learning, all the more because of the six or seven rewrites this chapter went through.

Okay, actual notes about this chapter: I quote Placebo for the lyrics even though “Running Up That Hill” is originally a Kate Bush song. I like Placebo’s cover for the fic better, simple as that. There are a lot of Catholic references in this chapter, not all of them positive, and I apologize if people are offended. My intention was to reflect the character’s views. Frank maintains what I’ll generously call a tempestuous relationship with the church.

“You don’t want to hurt me,
But see how deep the bullet lies.
Unaware that I’m tearing you asunder.
There is thunder in our hearts, baby.
So much hate for the ones we love.
Tell me, we both matter, don’t we?”

He makes a parking spot behind the dumpster of the church, hidden from view on the street and the rooftops. Then he steps into the rain, letting it quell the firefight going on in his head.

Rain washes the blood spatter on the backs of his hands, wrists, and cuffs. Rivulets of red run down from his collar. Frank didn’t bother to wash up after he came across the second body, this one strung from the ceiling like a chandelier. The third was nearby, about as alive as Foley. Crawling away on bloody stumps with less than half a face: Frank put a bullet in him far too late to be considered mercy.

He takes his time with the walk. Red’s antsy, obviously, but Frank needs to think. He’s got a bloody, beaming FISK scrawled across the inside of his skull. An invitation from the Hand for a jailed kingpin to come out to play. He should be happy: having the Japanese incite Fisk’s departure from Super Max is a good plan, so long as he gets to Fisk first. But Frank sees that bloody scrawl of the Fat Man’s name in his head, feels Foley’s bloody face print rip into his chest, and his bitterness swells.

This is his fight. His. And it’s not supposed to be fought this way.

“Para bellum,” Frank tells himself. “Para bellum…” Prepare for war. The drill sergeant made them repeat it like a prayer in basic. Course, Sarge included the proviso, “Si vis pacem…” If you want peace. But Frank’s not sure he wants peace anymore. Not sure peace exists outside of bullets and bloodshed. Good thing the Hand and Fisk think the same.

The firefight comes back as soon as he enters the church and stares death in the face. The kid’s circling the drain. He gives Frank a shove that’s nowhere near as strong as it should be. And when that fails, he tears himself out of Frank’s grasp and nearly pitches back onto the pew. Thank God the priest doesn’t let go of his other shoulder. Red swings unsteadily in the old man’s grasp, muttering whispered thanks in between a haggard explanation of, “I was leaving. I have to leave.”

“You kiddin’ me, Red?” Frank sets the back of his hand on Red’s brow and neck. The kid rebuffs him. Typical two-fold uselessness from the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, trying to hide and trying to fight at the same time. Frank gives him a small shove, the dumbass. “I can feel you burning up from here. Could fry an egg on your forehead, Red”

“I’m calling an ambulance,” Father declares. He casts a glance at Frank – for permission? Nah, the old man knows who Frank is, but he doesn’t toe anybody’s line except the big guy upstairs. He’s got more to say about Frank but thinks better of it. Red’s his priority at the moment. As well Red should be.

Frank digs his cell phone out of his pocket and hands it to the priest. “Here.” Father takes it, flips it open. He tilts his hand a little to focus his vision before dialing those three magic numbers.
Red, who’s corpse-coloured and can’t fucking stand, swats the phone out of Father’s grasp. The priest directs his gaze skyward: Lord, give me strength. He holds his gaze there as Red stammers, “No. No hospital. I go to the hospital, people are going to die.”

“You’re dying, Red,” Frank snarls. This is the one thing Sato warned him about the most: infection. Automatic abort mission, take the kid to the fucking hospital. Father’s on board with the plan. He sets about collecting the phone from where it’s fallen on the pew.

Red disagrees. He shakes his head, lips pursed, and he may as well say, “Nuh-uh,” because it’s all Frank hears when he looks at Red. Hopeful idealism and delusion of will got him into this mess and, by God, they’re going to get him out of it. Frank finds himself looking skyward, though it seems like the Big Guy isn’t in the mood for answering prayers at the moment.

The kid shoves at Frank, “Get…get out of here.” He gestures towards the priest and reframes his argument: “Get Lantom out of here.”

Frank shoves him right back. Gently. Doesn’t take much to flop the kid against the pew, boneless and shaking, face twisting out of sight as he struggles to give orders. Or hide his tears. Or both. Fuck, he’s always pushing. He’s always fucking pushing. “You got him, Father? Ride with him to Metro General?”

Lantom nods once, phone in hand.

“We have to get away. They’re…they’re coming, Frank. They.” Red swats at Lantom again when the old man tries to dial. This time, the priest is faster. He catches Red’s hand to stop him, placing it gently on the back of the pew, and holds it there. Holds Red there. G-O-D is going to have to tear the devil of Hell’s Kitchen out of Father’s cold, dead fingers.

Red lifts his tear-streaked, sweat-soaked, ashen face. His Adam’s apple bobs. He’s trying and failing to swallow his weakness, and yet, at the same time, he’s looking straight at Lantom so the sight of him can keep the old man at bay. “I can’t go to the hospital. And I can’t…I can’t stay here. They’re looking for me.”

Lantom hesitates before hitting ‘Send’. “Who?”

Frank has a pretty good idea. Thank goodness they’ve moved their focus from Red to the Kingpin. “They’re hunting bigger game than you right now.” Red’s shaking his head. Fuck, he’s delirious. Frank offers him greater explanation without spilling his guts entirely. They got no time to talk about what Red’s zombie ex- and her ninja army have been up to. “Got their sights set on Fisk.”

Red huffs, “They think he has me.”

“Why would they think that?” Doesn’t make a damn bit of sense, what with one of them spotting Frank leaving the kid’s apartment last week. Maybe they were checking to see if they had competition in the neighbourhood for Fisk.

“They got some information. A…a friend of mine. Of the devil’s. He had his suspicions after I disappeared.”

“He a friend to the Hand too?” Frank demands. If so, no wonder Red’s ready to cut and run. The ninjas are going to be headed straight for them.

“One member in particular, yeah.”

The bodies piling up in Hell’s Kitchen – faceless Foley and the two others Frank stumbled
across that afternoon— they take on new meaning. Show of force, yeah, but not for the city. For Red. She’s looking for Red, and she’s giving Fisk a sneak-peek at what’s gonna happen if Red doesn’t get returned to her soon.

“I go to a hospital, I wait here with the two of you, people are gonna die,” Red directs his attention to Lantom. “This is…this is the same group that cut through Metro General a month ago, Father.”

The priest shakes his head, sighing in resignation. In defeat. He closes the phone he was so desperately dialing and performs another prayerful eye-roll. “Dear God, Matthew.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry…I’m sorry, Father.” Red buries his face in his hand, biting back a fresh scream. “I shouldn’t have come here. I’m sorry.”

Frank scrubs his head, “Ain’t got nothing-“

“You have nothing-“

“-to be sorry about.”

“-to be sorry for, Matthew.”

Lantom shoots him a meaningful look. Frank dodges the stare, scrubbing harder against his scalp. Not like he said anything interesting: the kid doesn’t have a damn thing to be sorry for, and while they’re wasting time on his apologies, Hell’s Kitchen is winding up for another swing. Red’s infection is working its way into his bloodstream. His ninja friends are closing in. Frank paces unsteadily between the pews, channeling his thoughts into a decisive order.

“You tell your friend where you were going?” he asks.

“No, and my blood trail has probably washed away.”

Frank barely contains a groan of exasperation. Surprise, surprise: the kid left a blood trail. No wonder he’s in the state he is now.

Red flushes brighter from embarrassment and shame. As if he can hear all the silent ways Frank is shouting his disapproval. The next time he speaks, Red sounds like an entirely too-human version of himself. “You both…you both need to leave. Please. I’ll be fine. I’ll be fine, I promise, Father.” As if the old man asked out loud. Red attempts to reassure him some more. Badly. “She doesn’t…she doesn’t want…”

His ragged breathing swallows up the rest of what he’s trying to say. He lets out a small, sad laugh that quickly turns into a cry. “I don’t know what she wants.” And that makes the inevitability of her taking him so much worse than simply, “I know she will hurt you though. Both of you. If you try and stop her.”

Frank has a good, “Fuck off,” lined up in his mouth for Red’s self-sacrificial bullshit, house and man of God be damned. Kid already took a ceiling for him. Now, he’s willing to hand himself over to ninjas who cut people’s faces off for the sake of his priest and the man he wants arrested. “So you’re going to sit here and wait for her, that’s the plan?”

“I am. You’re not,” Red declares.

Before Frank can give him what-for, Lantom chimes in: “I’m not leaving you, Matthew.”
He means it. Ninjas could come crashing through the stained glass windows. They could hack off his hands and clear off his face, and Father would stay at Red’s side throughout it all.

Red breaks and recovers so quickly that Lantom probably doesn’t see it. “You have to, Father.”

“Was I asking?”

Feisty. The kind of feisty that gets a person killed. Not by Red, obviously, who shuts right up to search for a better response. Frank has one ready to go. Half-assed as Red’s argument is, delirious as he might be, he has the right idea. “The second he walked into this place, he marked it. Even if we leave, they’ll be coming here, asking questions. You like your face where it is, Father? You’ll leave.”

Red hangs off his every word. “What do you…what do you mean?”

Lantom knows exactly what Frank means. He’s old-school, this priest. Stared evil in the face too many times to be blinded by its opposite. Frank meets the old man’s stare with one of his own. He’s seen evil too. Better yet, he came prepared with more than a cross and a lie.

The kid starts to rise. “I shouldn’t have come here. I shouldn’t have…you both need to leave. I’ll leave too. Get them off your trail.” he fumbles for his crutches. One is well out of his reach on the floor, and the other, while easy to grab, remains elusive.

“Oh, for the love of-” Frank stops himself from saying the Lord’s name on instinct. The situation goes from dire to embarrassing, and Red is still trying, trying so damn hard to be a fucking hero despite how ridiculous he’s being. The priest seems to have drawn the same conclusion. He tries to help, but even he is stunned that this is happening. That someone as sick as Red is still fighting when he’s got nothing left to fight with. Muscles shot; motor functions out of control. Sweat draining out of him, causing him to slip against the crutch and the pew.

His crutch hits the floor. Red stays swaying on his right leg, looking so blank, so empty, so lost. The kid who takes blind leaps into firefights has no sense of his bearings. There’s nowhere left to go, no path left to tread, and no strength to do so even if there was one. And it’s worse than embarrassing. Frank takes the kid’s hopelessness like a bullet to the gut. “Sit down, Red,” he says, twisting away.

Lantom has to swoop in. He has to guide little, lost Red back onto the pew. The kid can’t muster the thanks, can’t find his way to it. He lowers mutely and hugs his arms to his waist. When he faces the Altar, the effigy of his Lord and Saviour dying on the cross reflects on the lenses of his sunglasses. Then his head drops in exhaustion. Lantom holds a hand on his shoulder to make sure he doesn’t fall over. Checks the kid’s pulse while he’s at it.

“Please, go, Father,” Red says softly. “Please.”

The old man says nothing. He shoots a glance at Frank out of the corner of his eye. No wonder the threat of losing his face hasn’t hit: he’s already got one devil in his church making a move on the kid.

Frank tugs at the collar of his t-shirt to unstick the blood from his chest. Can’t go to the hospital with the ninjas trailing Red; can’t leave him here to get swept off by his psycho-zombie ex. Can’t let the old man get his hawkish face trimmed off in the process. “I got him, Father. I’ll take care of it.”
“Him.”

For a second, Frank thinks the priest is referencing the Son of God, but then his brain catches up with him. He concedes for the sake of speed, “I’ll take care of him.”

The old man doesn’t move. He folds his arms across his chest. The image of the Passion looms over his shoulder. “I know the ways you take care of people,” and Lantom sure as shit ain’t letting Frank take care of Matthew that way.

“You know that’s not what I mean: I’ll take care of him,” Frank says, stronger. They don’t have time for this shit. “Get him patched up and back on his feet. Won’t let anyone else lay a hand on him: not ninjas, not Fisk, nobody.”

Lantom doesn’t move his icy stare from Frank, but the slight shift in his posture means that he is giving very serious thought to getting the hell out of here. “What’s your plan?”

“Got a doctor in Hell’s Kitchen. We’ll find some place safe, lie low; she’ll work on the leg.”

Lantom tilts towards Red, “That true?”

“Yeah. You can…you can trust him, Father.”

“Lying, Matthew.”

“You can trust him about this.”

“With you?” Lantom isn’t convinced.

Frank scoffs, “You like your other options better, Father? Stay with him, those ninjas show up: you’re dead quick if you’re lucky. Get to wait for me to come finish you with a bullet if you’re not.” Red starts to ask him what he means again, but Frank ignores him. “Take him to the hospital, same thing. More people. I’m the only chance he’s got to getting out of here alive. The only chance you got to ever seeing him again.”

Christ, the old man could stare a cold, hard fact in the face and find it lacking. “At what cost?” he asks, and then, in case it isn’t clear enough what he actually means, “At who’s? You’ve got blood on your hands already tonight.”

Christ, he’s making this heavy going. “Gonna have his on yours, we don’t hurry this up.”

“Frank.” Red’s voice regains some of its usual gravel.

Frank abandons the fight. Stares down Christ on the cross with all the fire and brimstone he can muster. “You have my word.”

Kind of strange the way Lantom speaks so casually as the voice of God comes out of his mouth. “I have your word that what?”

FUCK. “Nobody else dies tonight,” Frank spells it out for the old man, “Not the kid, not anybody. You have my word.”

The priest goes to make some kind of sarcastic remark about lying to a man of God and all that, but Red chimes in: “He’s telling the truth, Father.”
First thing the kid’s said that Lantom puts some stock in. Not that Red’s the one who gets his nose rubbed in it. His glare is for Frank and Frank alone. “I have your word. But the second he is well, I expect to see him again.”

Frank bristles from the threat, an empty one ne’er as he can tell. “And what if you don’t, Father? What are you gonna do if you never see him again? Say your rosary?”

The old man doesn’t buckle. He shoots a glance skyward, and this time, he is seeking permission. He already has the strength he needs for this conversation. He wants God to give him a pass on what he’s about to say. “Prayer without action isn’t faith: it’s cowardice.”

“Couldn’t agree more, Father.”

“Then you know I won’t be sitting here waiting for the Lord to intervene on my behalf. Matthew shielded you from that ceiling. I have shielded you from the NYPD. You’re here by our graces, not the Lord’s.”

Frank scoffs, “There a point to all this, Father?”

Lantom shrugs. The intensity in his tone vanishes, but the promise is implicit in his nonchalance. “Not if I see Matthew again, there isn’t.”

“Jesus…”

“Language.”

The words are out of Frank’s mouth before he can stop them. “Sorry, Father.”

“Don’t apologize to me,” Lantom’s smirk is implied, “Not my house.”

Frank tears his eyes from the crucified Lord. He finds the kid, locks his gaze on his giant, glaring failure. “You’ll see him again, Father. You have my word on that too.”

A hum – appraising but skeptical. Frank misattributes it to the statue of Christ before realizing it’s Lantom. The priest backs slowly away from Red. “Your word,” he says again, finding the statement itself lacking. He pats Red on the shoulders one last time before leaving the pew.

The priest’s retreating footsteps get lost under a weak laugh from Red. “Sorry, Father,” he parrots wetly. Saliva’s thick with sickness. “You sure you’re not still a Catholic, Frank? Because you sound like one.”

Frank doesn’t dignify that with a response. He intends to follow Lantom, make sure the old man isn’t about to phone the police, but he needs to make a point with Red first. For all the good it’s done so far to tell the kid to stop moving. “You down for the count? Or are you waiting for the next bell?”

“I’m down,” Red snarls, the word leaving a sour taste in his mouth. “Go…go make sure Lantom gets out. Have him…have him call when he’s somewhere safe.” Frank moves to leave, but Red isn’t finished with him. “You should…you should go too, Frank.”

“Told your priest I would take care of you. Gave him my word. You tryin’ to make a liar out of me, Red?”

A sad smirk appears on Red’s ghostly face. “You did that all on your own.”
“Not yet. So far, the only liar in this church is you.”

Red asks, “And if the Hand shows up?”

Frank trails after the priest. “Pray they don’t.”

Happy reading!
Sucker for Pain

Chapter Summary

You know you’ve got problems when Frank Castle is lecturing you on the importance of friendship.
Or: how Matt’s broken leg becomes the least of his concerns.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I have to say a huge thank you for those who responded to the last chapter. I was very, very worried that the chapter didn’t come together, and I was hugely humbled by the enthusiastic response. I’m looking forward to having more between Lantom, Frank, and Matt in the future. I hope you are too!

I originally thought the contents of chapter nineteen, twenty, and twenty-one of this fic would be one chapter. Because I clearly don’t know how words work. On the bright side, dear Reader, this means that the real cliffhanger won’t be coming until the next installment, likely around New Year’s.

I’m going to be celebrating with family for the next couple of days, so I wish you all a happy/merry time with you and yours, doing whatever you’re doing.

Readers, you have made this whole writing process so wonderful. I hope you enjoy this chapter. Thank you so much for your kind support and readership. Cheers!

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“I’m devoted to destruction,
A full dosage of detrimental dysfunction.
I’m dying slow but the devil try’na rush me.
See I’m a fool for pain, I’m a dummy.
Might cut my head off right after I slit my throat.”

~L’il Wayne Et. Al., “Sucker for Pain”

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There’s a hand cupped under the back of his head. Too large to be Elektra. Too callused to be Foggy. Too careful for Frank.

But it is Frank holding him, making Matt’s scalp clench and hairs stand on end. Matt twists to escape – to the right first, until his cheek hits Frank’s fingertips and it’s worse, so much worse; then to the left until his ear hits Frank’s thumb and that’s terrible too. He tries to rise instead, but the rest of him isn’t much help. He’s sick and tired, nauseated and dizzy. He crawls up an inch before falling a mile back into the Punisher’s waiting palm.

The closeness is suffocating. Matt feels his breath bouncing off Frank, feels Frank’s breath bouncing off him. His glasses are gone again, and he can’t back away when he’s lying down. He can’t push Frank aside. His skin crawls, but he lies there in the palm of Frank’s hand. If he passes out, it’ll be bad, but staying conscious means being present and aware of his own uselessness. He’s a puppet, Frank’s got his strings, and there’s work to do. *Work to do, Matty.*

*You need to rest…*

*Work.*

Matt closes his eyes. Breathes into it, the burn. Proximity is the worst, the hardest. The infection is going to kill him, but he’s going to live through every agonizing second of being this close to Frank Castle. Of being *held* by Frank Castle. Of receiving the opposite of violence from Frank Castle.

Takes forever, but Frank’s hand finally slips out front under him, replaced with a bundle of fabric. A pillow of polyester, and below that, vinyl: raincoat. Smelling faintly of Lantom. Matt vaguely remembers Frank wrapping it around him before they left the church. He opens his eyes to the darkness, ignoring the way his brain conjures a fiery phantom from Frank’s body heat.

His leg is a persistent screech inside the haze of fever.

*Work to do.* “Lantom get out okay?”

“Yeah. He called a few minutes ago while you were out.”

“You gave him your number?” That doesn’t make sense.

“No, he gave me your phone. Found it on his desk when he was grabbing his stuff. Least you got that part of your getaway right.”

Matt wiggles his shoulder blades. A metal surface greets him through the layers of his clothing. He’s lying on a sturdier table than those in the church commons. “Where are we?”

“East side. Animal hospital.”

His nose takes the bait and starts sniffing out details, none of which Matt wants to smell on top of the sour stink of his infected leg. “You called Sato?”

“Yeah, she’s on the way. Needs to pick up a few things.”

Matt clenches his teeth to keep them from chattering.

“You cold?”

“I’m fine.”
Frank is already leaving the room.

“Damn it, Frank: I said I’m fine.”

The operating room is insulated. When the door closes, Matt has only his sounds for company. Heartbeat, blood throb, stomach twisting, breath heaving. He has to really focus to find Frank’s footsteps, even more to catch breathing. If the Hand appears – if they’re already here – he has no way of knowing. They could get the jump on Frank easily. Cut him up. Storm in here. Matt rolls slightly, testing his mobility. He can’t move much, maybe sit if he tries, but there’d be no use in that.

The door reopens. Frank barely suppresses a groan. “Stand down, Red.” Fabric unfolds, and there’s suddenly a blanket draping over his chest. The scant weight is enough to pin Matt to the table.

Gratitude hurts. Matt says thanks just the same. Under his breath, weakly, but he may as well have shouted with the way Frank’s respiration climbs after it’s said. Matt saves them both the torment: “You checked the place?”

Frank appreciates the change in subject. “Top to bottom. If they’re here, they’d let us know by now.”

There’s more. Something Frank isn’t telling him, something Matt half-remembers from the church along with the smell of dried blood and mucous. “What did you…what did you mean? What you said about Lantom’s face…what did you…?”

Frank wants to say. His pulse says as much. But he gives his respiration time to settle before replying, “Didn’t mean anything.” He starts digging through a bag of supplies. The taste of gunmetal is surprisingly faint under an array of recyclable plastics. Pills clatter inside containers. Liquid splashes in bottles. Frank picked up some provisions for their wait. “You should drink something.”

Matt’s throat stings from thirst, but he focuses. “Frank.”

The seal on the bottle snaps. Frank rounds the surgical table. Matt inches away to find a vantage point, a comfortable distance, but there’s no amount of distance from the Punisher to make this comfortable. Not when he’s this out of sorts. He gets himself up on his right elbow. Vertigo muddles his conception of Frank’s closeness. Matt catches the bottle with his shaking left hand before Frank can get it to his mouth. It doesn’t save him from having Frank catch the back of his head again.

Matt wriggles his scalp out of Frank’s grasp. He almost vomits in the process, but Frank takes the hint. He lets Daredevil win this round, mostly, putting his hand on Matt’s shoulder instead. It’s less awful. “What did you mean?” Matt demands.

“Got bigger shit to deal with right now.”

“What happened today? What are you not telling me?” Frank’s heartbeat enters that unfamiliar rhythm of indecision: tell or don’t tell. Matt scoffs. He uses the last of his strength to smirk. He thinks it works; Frank’s pulse starts rattling like a snake about to bite. “You know I’m not going to drink until you tell me.”

“Grow up, Red,” Frank commands him.
Matt commands right back, “Tell me.”

Frank gives a small puff in disbelief. They’re actually having this conversation, then. Matt half-expects him to walk away in disgust. But Frank abandons his silence a second later by saying, “Your girl and her ninjas? They’re on a tear. Carved up three of Fisk’s guys – eyelids, lips, nose, hands; feet on one of them – and left ‘em to bleed to death with their boss’s name cut into their chest.”

Matt doesn’t get to ask a follow-up question. The drink he was battling is suddenly at his lips. He gets a solid mouthful of chemicals before Frank pulls the bottle away. Sports drink, blue flavoured. Matt cringes from the taste. Salt and sugar residue coats his teeth. That wretched taste is going to linger in the back of his throat, sparing him the flavour of his infection but masking sensory details that might be important. Like how many donors actually contributed to the blood on Frank’s shirt. He says three; that seems low.

The electrolytes help though, as do the fluids. Some of the clarity returns to his thoughts. “You found them…these men?”

“Put two of them out of their misery,” Frank admits. He thrusts the bottle back towards Matt but gives him the option of turning it away this time. Matt doesn’t; using his grip and Frank’s, he takes another sip, smaller this time so he doesn’t offend his raging stomach. “Thought they were starting a turf war. Guess she’s looking for you. Wants to give Fisk a taste of what happens if she doesn’t get you back.”

Matt needs to lie back down. He presses against Frank’s grip on his shoulder, head falling back out of weakness. Frank catches him before his neck wrenches, laying Matt back to rest on Lantom’s jacket. Matt is too distracted to feel the burn this time. Or say thanks. The echo of Elektra’s murderous heartbeat is too loud and too close in his brain. She killed that boy in his apartment like it was the only thing she knew how to do, like she had been waiting to kill him her whole life. God, she wouldn’t have a member of the Hand hack Fisk’s men to pieces. She’d want that pleasure for herself.

“Why wait?” he finally asks aloud. “She’d been in my apartment two weeks ago. She could have approached me then, but she didn’t. Why?”

“She’s your girl.”

“She’s nobody’s girl,” and even if she was, Matt wouldn’t have an answer.

Frank shrugs. “Maybe she didn’t really want to see you.”

“Didn’t want to see me then, but she’s willing to start a war with the Kingpin to get me back?”

“She came back from the dead, Red. Who the hell knows if she’s even the same person? And if she is, you think about how shit that would be – dying for somebody, then being alive again? Having that sacrifice mean nothing?”

He is speaking from experience. There are parts of Frank that are rotting in the desert sun, remnants of bartering with a God who didn’t keep up His end of the deal. Matt tries and fails to perceive those qualities in Elektra. She wears her regrets like jewellery, beautiful and threatening. Coming back to life would embolden her. She would prance into Matt’s apartment as proud as she pleased.
Unless she’s not Elektra anymore.

But then why is she targeting Fisk for him? What the hell does she want?

Neoprene snaps against skin. Velcro rips open. Tiny explosions rumble through Matt’s leg. He groans, tensing. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

Frank scoffs. “Not good, Red.”

He keeps talking. Filter’s gone, burned up by the same heat wafting throughout his body. “Must be bad. You wanting to call the ambulance.”

“You not wanting to,” Frank adds. That’s just as good evidence for how bad it is in his opinion. “Deep breath,” and he actually waits for Matt to take one before opening the cast and peeling it off of Matt’s leg.

Matt holds his scream in the back of his throat through clenched teeth and a tense neck. A second ago he couldn’t hold himself upright; now, his shoulders curl forward, his spine stretches out, his fist pounds into the table. The agony tears through his wounds, rips through his skin, coils around his broken bone like barbed wire. And when he finally draws a breath, the air is polluted with infection. He’s drinking puss, blood, inflammation; sweat and dirty gauze.

He slaps a hand over his mouth, swallowing hard once, twice, three times. Frank swats at his wrist to clear a path to his mouth and nose. “Breathe, Red. Come on.” Matt tries to rip the blanket in half instead as he counts himself down. Five counts in, hold for three; five counts out. Don’t throw up, don’t throw up, don’t throw up... He lays there gasping. Frank’s grip on his left thigh loosens; Matt didn’t realize he was being held.

A monotonous, feminine voice chimes through his sickening haze: “Karen, Karen, Karen…”

“Damn it,” Matt kicks with his good leg, jostling his bad leg, and as he groans in pain, Frank curses.

“Really, Red?” he demands, pinning Matt’s bad leg down again by the thigh.

“She’ll know something’s wrong,” Matt struggles to breathe. “I have to...I have to answer.”

“Now. You wanna talk to her now.”

“Karen, Karen…”

Matt grits his teeth, wheezing, searching inside himself for the right answer. Yes, no hell no. The compulsion to destroy his phone is strong, no matter how useless it would be. “She isn’t going to stop unless I answer.”

“She isn’t going to stop if you do.”

He is going to throw up. “Give me my phone, Frank.”

Before Matt can catch his breath or find his voice, Frank has snapped off a glove and picked up the phone. “Here,” Matt reaches for it, but all he receives a gentle push from Frank to lay his arm back down. Then Frank double-taps the screen of the phone. The call connects, and Karen begins speaking.
“Matt?”

Frank waits for the kid to shout, to throw a punch, to jostle his God damn broken leg or take off running a-fucking-gain, but Red’s gone absolutely still. His breathing is quiet suddenly. There are tears in his eyes, sweat beading along his hairline. The harsh lighting in the OR makes him look dead. Frank gives him another second to crack; he doesn’t. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen lies there in silence, allowing Frank to field the call.

Great. He hasn’t a clue what the hell to say besides, “Ma’am.”

He hears the phone rocking in her hand. Karen’s voice goes up a pitch in surprise. “Oh, my God: Frank?”

Their last interaction – her: defeated, accusing, lost – blurs in Frank’s brain with the destruction of his family home. Karen Page followed him to the end only to discover they were headed in opposite directions. The revelation about Red can’t have come as a welcome surprise.

The quiet from the other line tells him she doesn’t know what to say either. Karen takes a long-ass time to formulate a rather underwhelming, “How…how are you?”

“Busy.” Red’s face twists guiltily as Frank speaks before turning away. “You?”

“Busy.” Her voice sounds wrong. Too guarded to be natural. Busy is an understatement for them both. Shit’s going down in Hell’s Kitchen, and she’s taking it upon herself to see it right. As usual. “Uh…is Matt there?”

“He is,” and by the looks of it, Red’s accepted his fate. He rolls his head back towards Frank to greet catastrophe head on. Frank reaches out to touch his wrist – not this time, Red – but the kid pulls his arm away from the approaching touch. Fever gives his movements a clumsy sharpness.

Karen takes a breath, steeling herself against the answer to her next question. Frank can’t tell if it’s because of him, Red, or both. “Can I talk to him?”

Frank puts his back to the kid, no intention of putting him on the line. Red has enough problems. “Yeah, I’ll wake him.”

“He’s asleep?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, then…I don’t…don’t wake him. That’s alright. Let him…let him get some rest. He probably needs it.”

Red releases the breath he’s been holding, as if he can hear Karen’s side of the conversation. Which he probably can. Frank presses the phone tightly to his ear, casting a sidelong glance at Red. “Probably.”

“He really doesn’t know when to quit.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Frank thinks he can see the makings of a sad smirk cross the kid’s face.

She pauses, considering her next words very carefully, weighing whether or not to even speak them aloud. “I uh…I asked him to come stay with me today.”
“Uh huh.” Bet that went over real well with Red. The hell did he give her as an excuse? No way he told her about the ninjas.

She sighs. Nope, not ninjas. Karen would mention those. She believes the reasons are personal. Which they are, but the ninjas don’t help. “Not that I don’t appreciate everything you’ve done, but uh…I just thought…he would benefit staying with someone…else. Someone…lower profile. Someone who knows him outside of the mask.”

Frank almost lets it slip that he’s gotten to know Red pretty good over the past little while. The more the kid tries to close himself off, the easier he is to read. But Frank isn’t up for the fallout, not from Karen and definitely not from Red. He stays on course with the heart of the matter. “Not my call to make,” he says.

“It’s not a call Matt’s ever going to make. Not on his own.”

Sounds like a lamentation and nothing more, but Frank already feels her voice wheedling its way through his brain. He’s been implicated. Karen has planted a seed. Unintentionally, at least to her, though Frank knows she’s smart enough to see that her complaining about Murdock might inspire him to act. Twelve hours ago, he would have agreed whole-heartedly. Common sense tells them both that staying with Frank is a dumb move.

Common sense tells Frank that’s also not his call. Ninjas got no reason to come after her at the moment. Best to keep it that way. “Real pain in the ass, this one,” he notes.

Karen scoffs. “Yeah.”

Red’s expression is halfway between and a laugh and a cry. Frank turns the volume down on the phone, takes a few steps away from the operating table. Tries to think of words that won’t take shots at the kid’s character. He’s already sweating out; Red’s gonna die of dehydration if he cries.

As if she can hear him, as if she knows that Red is silently falling to pieces behind Frank, Karen then asks, “He is…alright, isn’t he?” Frank’s about to feed her Red’s old standby – “He’s fine” – before she presses, clarifies, “I don’t just mean physically, I mean…he’s been grieving. He’s been alone. He’s badly injured.” She doesn’t say it outright, but they’re both thinking how fucked up it is that Frank’s the one minding the kid given all this too. “He can be a real asshole. He’s been a real asshole, but that doesn’t mean...that doesn’t mean he isn’t a good man. How is he, really?”

Karen’s fishing. She always is, but this time, she’s already got a bite. She isn’t asking for an answer; she wants his validation on something she already knows about good men grieving alone. Or maybe it’s more than that. Frank shudders, her defeat coming back to him from that night in the forest when he closed the door in the face of her redemption  Maybe she wants assurances that Red isn’t following on Frank’s path.

“I think you just answered your own question,” he replies.

She breathes, gearing up for more, but the truth of what he’s said sinks in and Karen quiets again. “You can be a good man too, Frank.”

“When I’m not being a real asshole?”

For a second, his addled brain conjures the perfect picture of her. Cheeks flushing with colour, blue eyes gleaming, jaw tensing as her mouth struggles between a smile and a frown. The gravity of the situation returns and drains the picture out of Frank’s thoughts, but Karen was there.
He remembers her. His brain isn’t a total shitstorm.

Best of all, she hasn’t given up on him. Not entirely. “Thank you for taking care of him, Frank. God knows he won’t do it himself.”

Frank listens to the ragged exhale from behind him, the one that comes in place of a scream. He hangs his head. No telling if that scream is for Red’s leg, sickness, or heart, though Frank’s had a part in fucking up all three. He scrubs at his scalp. The itch runs as deep as the bullet from her gratitude. From her hopefulness. “Take care of him,” the priest says. “You can be a good man,” she says. Meanwhile, the kid’s better off waiting for God to answer some of Lantom’s prayers than for Frank to be a good man.

Still, he says, “Yes, ma’am.” Because the fight’s not over yet: not for him, not for Red. Ain’t throwing in the towel when they’ve both got strength for a few more punches.

“…doesn’t mean he isn’t a good man.”

Matt lets his stinging eyes slip closed but refuses to give himself away more than that. No matter how low the volume gets, how far Frank tries to get from him, Matt’s hearing finds Karen’s voice in a vice-grip, refusing to let go. He doesn’t want to talk about it, though: her steadfast belief in his goodness (or, as he later learns, Frank’s). He’s lying again, dying again, being an asshole again. She might not take his call when he finally gets the strength to phone her back.

Karen certainly expects him to call her. She tells Frank as much before disconnecting. Matt disconnects too, letting the heat carry him out of awareness as Karen’s half of the conversation replays faintly in his skull.

Matt returns to the sound of the door locking, lights switching on; neoprene stretches over steady fingers, a mask distorts her breathing into a rasp. Surgical tools are unwrapped and laid out over the counter. Saline suddenly runs cold over the length of his mangled calf.

He closes his eyes, holds his breath, pretends it’s Claire pressing on his sutures. His daydream can last as long as Sato’s silence, which is a good, long time. She has patience that would put saints to shame and a focus that makes Matt’s skin crawl faster than Frank laying his head down to rest.

Speaking of Frank, Matt’s right arm itches when he appears nearby, preparing a fresh bag of saline for an IV. He turns his attention back to Sato. “Sorry,” he says, twitching his right foot in apology.

Her heart doesn’t break rhythm and her voice remains dispassionate as she says, “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were doing this on purpose.”

“Are you sure you know better?”

She misses the joke. Because there isn’t one. “I’m going to have to reopen the wound to clean it.”

Matt knows where this is headed. “Don’t put me under.”

Frank takes his forearm out from under the blanket. The chill in the air bites against Matt’s damp skin. He doesn’t catch the elastic tightening around his bicep until Frank has tapped one of his veins with a needle. “Stop, Red.”
“I need to be able to hear,” Matt tells them both. “I-“ the fresh saline entering his arm cuts him off. He shakes on the table with new chill, struggling for focus. “You need rest, Matthew,” plays alongside Dad’s curt, “Work to do, Matty. Work to do,” and he can’t do either. He can’t. He can’t, but he must. He has to. He is the only one.

He stops Frank from interrupting further. “These ninjas...they’re quiet. You won’t know they’re here until it’s too late. You can’t put me under.”

Frank’s heartbeat roars. “Not keeping you awake, Red.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“You’re damn right I don’t. She is going to be digging around in your leg-“

“You have to track them by their breath-“

“-for who knows how long-“

“-in this room, the next room-“

“-and if you think I’m gonna stand here-“

“-on the roof! The next...the next block over!”

“Oh, what, and you can?”

Here it comes: “Yes! I can hear them, Frank!”

“Bullshit, Red.” But Frank believes it. Deep down, he believes it. His heart hammers out of control because he has to do something about it. “Seen you hear a man coming up the stairs, pick out opponents in a fight...”

The air in the room weighs a tonne. Matt slings breath after breath out of his tired chest, the explanation stealing his remaining strength. There’s too much, and they don’t have time. Sato has to start cleaning the wound. Sooner she does that, the sooner he doesn’t have to be in pain. He settles on the abridged version, “My senses...they’re heightened. With focus, I can isolate sensory details: sounds, smells, tastes, touches.”

Frank whips away from the table. He scrubs at his head vigorously. “Bullshit, Red. Bullshit...”

“You’ve seen me do it. You’re seeing me do it,” Matt struggles to think of an argument that will convince him. “I can hear your heart, Frank. I know the difference between when you’re at ease and geared up.” He certainly knows now with Frank’s respiration spiking. “I can smell the blood on your t-shirt, the gunshot residue on your hands, the...the...” he sniffs, focusing. “The water from where you tried to wash up.”

A chill runs through him from more than just fever. Frank tried to wash up. The Punisher tried to clean himself up. Matt can’t figure out what that means.

Meanwhile, Frank continues pacing. Scrubbing his head. Charging around the damn operating room. His heartbeat is relentless, a wild stallion. In disbelief? Matt shakes his head. He doesn’t want to say it out loud, but her words are right there on the tip of his tongue. “Before she hung up, Karen thanked you for taking care of me. Because...” he chokes a little. The pain in his
leg, already unbearable, is about to get a whole lot worse. “…because it’s not like I would do it myself.”

Frank’s pacing slows. His pulse begins to follow. He brushes a hand one last time over his head, thoughts churning. “Put him out,” he orders Sato. “Now. Put him out.”

“God damn it, Frank, you won’t be able to hear them coming!”

“And you will, her digging in your leg? And…and so what if you do? You’re plan’s the same here as it was in fucking church. You hear them a block away, you want me and Doc to cut and run? That’s what you think we’re gonna do? What I’m gonna do?”

“It’s what you have to do!”

Frank’s body rumbles on the spot. Guilt rising. Duty mounting. “Gave that priest my word, Red. I’m not leaving.”

“You gave Lantom your word you wouldn’t kill too,” Matt laughs so hard he cries. “Gonna be a liar one way or another tonight, Frank. At least if you leave, you’ll be alive.”

Back to Sato: “Put him out.”

“Frank!”

She is working on loading syringes, heart hammering away in her chest. Sato hasn’t made it this far by being stupid. Cutting and running at the first sign of trouble sounds like a solid course of action. But she’s caught between a gun and a hard place. No choice.

Matt sees weakness and exploits it, “You are sentencing her to death, Frank. Maybe you don’t care about killing ninjas, but if she’s here and they come, she’s gonna die!”

The Punisher’s heartbeat wavers for a second. A second. And when it returns to course, it still sounds funny no matter because he doesn’t have a choice either. Matt listens to the funny tremble in his respiration. It resonates no matter how hard Frank tries to sell his next line. “She was sentenced to death the second I dropped your ass on her table. She’s living on borrowed time.”

“THAT’S BULLSHIT, FRANK! YOU GAVE LANTOM YOUR WORD!”

“Had to end sometime…”

Sato moves. The smell of the meds in the syringe gives her location away. Matt tears out his IV port. Blood spurts out of the fresh hole on his arm. He scrambles off the table, but gets caught by Frank and pinned.

The needle burns in his thigh; Frank’s hands burn where they touch. Matt grabs Frank by the wrist and lets the fire spread. “You’re an asshole.”

Frank shoves him back on the table. The drugs sweep through him, a wave of sickening drowse carrying him far away.

“Yeah, so are you,” Frank intones. Blackout.
Happy reading!
Happy New Year, everyone (who considers January 1 the start of a new year)!

I am very excited to be posting again. I enjoyed my holidays at home with friends and family, so I feel refreshed and ready to start finish what, in my mind at least, was only supposed to be one chapter. I’m also hoping that my building anticipation for a cliffhanger in this chapter doesn’t render the cliffhanger unexciting.

Usually, I like to post and hope the writing speaks for itself, but I wanted to call attention to the first section of this installment to say that the scrambled-ness is intentional. Whether or not it’s effective at conveying what I hope it conveys is another story.

Readers, dear Readers, I really appreciated all the feedback and discussion I got on the last chapter. It’s very gratifying and humbling to hear from you, to know what you’re enjoying, to read your insights, and see where I can offer clarification. I hope you enjoy this chapter. Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“He played himself.
Didn’t need me to give him hell.
He could be cool and cruel to you and me…
I want to give him pain.
I’m a roman candle.
My head is full of flames.”

~Elliot Smith, “Roman Candle”

The OR is stifling. Frank’s head buzzes with fresh gunfire. Geared up. He’s geared up, and the kid called it based on his heartbeat alone.

Frank calls it based on a bunch of things. His ears are ringing. Electric current runs through him. A fresh course of adrenaline makes skin strain over his muscles. Anger hooks in the back of
his throat so thick he can taste it, metallic and bloody. His heartbeat amps up steadily throughout, jabbing in his throat like fists on a punching bag. He can’t stop listening. The rhythm’s double time from his resting pulse, which Frank knows by rote. Spent a lot of time just him and his pulse in a nest, waiting to take the damn shot.

Jesus, he spent a lot of time just him and his pulse and Red in the apartment. On that rooftop overlooking the Dogs of Hell. He’s been exposed this entire time: breathing, heartbeats, footsteps. Kid has hearing in spades. Frank tested him the night on the roof: thumbing back the hammer too quietly for the old man, but Red heard it clear as day. Same way he heard that phone call from the table even though the volume was way down.

So, what, that’s how all his senses work? When he focuses? Frank’s mind reels through the evidence. The pieces of the puzzle that didn’t fit together until now: Red retching from the day-old smell of ammonia; him helping to set a bone in a drugged stupor; him smelling the water Frank used to wash up or listening to Frank’s heartbeat.

Or, hell, him fighting blind against one man, dozens of men. A whole God damn ninja army.

Frank gets the kid laid out to go under the knife and charges out of the OR. He stalks down the hallway towards the front office. The building’s quiet, still. Doors and windows locked. Under the desks, clear. Ceilings, clear. Corners, clear. There’s a kennel in the back filled with quiet mewling, the occasion whine, some chirping. It’s locked too, and there are no windows inside; Frank checks to be sure.

He inspects the perimeter through slats in the blinds. Streetlights reveal an empty parking lot to the front, a vacant loading dock and alley to the sides, and a quiet waterfront behind. The rooftop’s empty by the looks of things too, a black line of shadow under a hazy stream of blue light.

Frank tugs his hand away from his sidearm. He stares down the darkened corridor, the one that’s as empty when he first checked it. Just like the rest of this place. God damn it, what the hell is he doing? All this talk about isolating sensory details and heightened senses and that bull. Reading his God damn heartbeat. Promising a priest that he won’t kill when they have fucking ninjas on their tail. Frank can’t believe it. This isn’t him; this is the kid. The God damn kid. He marches back to the operating room, cussing internally the whole way.

The OR is dark when he returns. Frank glances through the small window on the door. Sato has shut off all the lights save for the adjustable overhead lamps, and she’s stationed them above Red’s leg to work. Some of the glow reaches the kid’s slackened face and reflects off his perspiration. He doesn’t flinch when Sato presses her scalpel into his infected calf.

Frank waits till she’s withdrawn her tools from Red’s injury before pounding once, loudly, on the door.

Sato starts. She lifts her head and levels a stare at Frank through the dark, her eyes as glossy and jet as her hair in the low light. Frank pays her little mind. He’s got eyes for Red, whose head shifts on the table in his direction.

“Too easy, Red.” Frank waits till Sato is back at work before slamming his hand against the wall. The thick walls muffle the sound in the hallway. They must buffer the OR completely. Sato certainly doesn’t start this time. She is fixed on the leg. And the kid’s head stops moving towards the door, instead coming to settle in the opposite direction. He hasn’t heard a damn thing.

Frank releases a breath, one he didn’t want to admit he was holding, and lets himself back
“Are they really after him?”

Sato asks the question as if she doesn’t give a single damn about the answer, as if her asking is strictly for his benefit. But there’s a small tremor in her voice that tells Frank she likes her face where it is and would hate to lose it.

He gives a curt nod, clarifying, “They’re after the people they think took him, and they’re pissed they don’t have him back.” The bloody skull on his t-shirt scratches against his chest. Frank tugs on it. “He telling the truth? These guys are so quiet you have to track them by their breath?”

“I don’t know about that.” Sato pries another stitch from Red’s leg. She deposits it into a small metal bowl with the others. The kid shifts his head, moaning. Frank waits; Red settles back down. He doesn’t flinch the next time Sato clips a suture from his calf. “They weren’t quiet when they attacked Metro General and took those patients.” She draws her next breath slowly, hesitating. Fear runs deep with Sato. “Killed that nurse.”

“No telling they’ll even show up tonight,” Frank replies. He took precautions: the worst route out of Hell’s Kitchen through Midtown. Track that, ninjas. The animal hospital’s on the East Side, out of their territory, and the car’s parked covertly about a block away. Sato didn’t cab to the door either. She got dropped off and hoofed it to the side entrance where Frank let her in, and there was no one on her tail then. Besides, the Hand can’t know that she’s even involved with them.

Sato doesn’t buy it. She didn’t think the Punisher would show up on her either, and that hardly stopped him. Her voice is cool and quiet, the same way it was when she begged Frank for her life that first night: “What happens if they do?”

Frank takes quick stock of how many promises he has made tonight, especially the one where no one else dies. Not Red, not Red’s Doc, nobody. He wants to tell her that he’ll take care of it, which he will. He God damn will. But Doc needs to get used to the idea that in a contest between her and the kid, she’s collateral damage, at least the kind that Frank can accept.

“Get us out of here, Doc,” is all he says.

Sato gets back to work in silence. Frank goes back to staring at the floor.

There’s more of Red’s flesh to discard. The infection ran deep, Sato tells him, packing the whole area with antibacterial ointment and saline-soaked gauze. She then runs some bandages around Red’s leg to hold everything in place. “Between debridement and the antibiotics, his temperature should start coming down soon.”

“Then we can leave.”

She blinks when he says ‘we’. Her jaw quivers under her surgical mask, but her voice is a flat line: “Yes.”

Frank nods, taking his leave while she packs up. “Thanks, Doc.”
A twitch runs through every muscle on the kid’s body. Frank stops, listening, imagining a puff of breath waiting outside the door. All he hears is Red. “Mmm…tomorrow…” the kid works his jaw lazily, chewing through his next couple of words. His hand shifts by his side. Frank waits, but the kid doesn’t settle this time. He lifts his chin. His eyes open a crack, and he says, “I’ll…I’ll do it tomorrow.”

The muscle in his leg thigh tenses. Sato pins him by the knee pre-emptively while continuing to work with her remaining hand.

Frank comes to the rescue. He takes hold of Red’s wrist, hoping the kid will isolate that sense more readily than sound alone. He doesn’t, not immediately. Frank finds the kid’s pressure points and squeezes lightly. Red’s leg stops twitching. He tilts his ear towards Frank. Now that he has the kid’s attention, “Tomorrow, Red. Do it tomorrow.”

Red’s brow furrows. His eyes slip shut. He tugs his arm away from Frank and fails at freeing himself. Frank has to release him so he can flop his hand onto his waist. Then he slips back under with a sleepy, “Not you.”

The small window in the door shows nothing but empty darkness beyond.

Frank scoffs, challenging the kid, “Then who.”

Red doesn’t give an answer.

Frank's blood is buzzing for coffee. He can stop on the way home, stock up on the last couple things for Red. Meanwhile, he loots through the drawers and cabinets in the room for sterile tools and equipment, fresh gauze and dressings. Bags of saline. The duffel he brought nearly splits at the seams from everything inside it.

Caffeine withdrawal hits a fever pitch. Frank finishes zipping up the bag. They must have a coffee maker in this place. Doc could probably use one, too, after she finishes cleaning up.

Frank’s about to leave and Red gets vocal again. Sputters his way through a couple consonants with none of the eloquence of earlier. The sweat on his face as thickened. He looks like a wax figure held too close to the flame. When he moves, he seems to leave parts of himself in puddles on the table.

“It’s just the midazolam wearing off,” Sato reminds Frank.

Shit - this again. Frank stands his ground, hoping it’s a short spell and he doesn’t have his face groped again. Moreover, that Red doesn’t go through four or five false starts before he finally snaps out of the spell.

The kid rewards Frank’s patience by flopping his hand off the table. Frank approaches. He replaces Red’s lifeless arm back under the thin blanket. His fingers trail over the kid’s palm; it’s clammy, but the heat from his wrist is unreal. Red’s burning alive, hotter than the church.

Frank places the back of his hand against Red’s neck with more force than he intends, but the kid doesn’t seem to mind. If anything, he seems more comfortable with the show of force than he does with any other kind of contact. “Shit,” Frank moves to Red’s forehead, smoothing his palm gently over the brow. He takes his hand away before the kid can try to shake him off, which Red tries to do a second later.

“Fever’s up.”
Doc breaks pace with her work and grabs the thermometer from her kit. Red anticipates the movement, twisting his head away from her. “Easy, kid,” Frank holds him down by the forehead while she shoves the end of the thermometer in his ear. Red thrashes uselessly. He doesn’t have the strength. His best defense besides squirming is a series of soft “nuh” sounds, failed no’s if Frank ever heard them. He only stops when Sato retracts the beeping thermometer and Frank releases his head. His face twists in anger. When he gets his hands on them…

Frank rolls his eyes, pats him on the shoulder, but before he can speak, he catches sight of Sato’s face. Her eyes widen infinitesimally at the results before narrowing. She purses her lips into a thin, furious line.

“1-0-5,” she pronounces the numbers with surgical precision. “His fever has hit one hundred and five.”

Frank doesn’t have to be a doctor to know how bad that is. He only has to watch Sato stare daggers into the air above Red’s chest. Just in case that’s not enough, though, she fills him in on the prognosis, “105 degrees and higher can cause brain damage.”

No. He double-dog dares her to say it to his face. Sato meets his stare with her own but says nothing. “Give him more antibiotics,” Frank demands.

“I can’t.”

Unacceptable. “You gave him something for the fever last time.”

“For a hemolytic reaction. An anti-pyretic won’t help if he’s septic.”

Frank tears the blanket off Red and gathers his hands together. He starts to move the kid into a sitting position. “We’ll run him under cold water. Bring his temperature down.”

Sato stops him. “Not if he’s septic.”

Can’t bring him to the hospital. Inviting those ninja-bastards to kill another nurse and disappear the kid like they have Fisk’s people in Hell’s Kitchen. “No way. No God damn way.”

The kid moans, itching to get loose. Frank releases him, unable to contain a growl when he feels Red shivering, hears Red keening softly. He has to look away when Sato intervenes on the kid’s movement. Red is trying to draw himself weakly into the closest approximation of a fetal position his dying self can manage, and that spells disaster for his already disastrous leg.


“How is he going to explain this?” she asks.

“He’s going to tell him it was me. I’ll confirm.” Call the precinct like a psycho, cuss out Murdock and his old firm for failing so spectacularly. Exactly what the cops in this town think the Punisher would do. They won’t believe he let someone live, but they’ll want to believe he fucked with a blind lawyer. Looks good for their manhunt. “Pack up your stuff. Take a cab. He’ll meet you at Metro General.”

Sato nods shakily, terror finally bubbling to the surface, but she doesn’t question him for a second. She dons her coat, slings her kit, and starts out of the OR.
“Hey, Doc,” he stops her. Sato has nothing to gain by calling the police now, not unless she’s prepared to go down with them. And Sato is nothing if not interested in her own self-preservation. But it’s not Sato he’s concerned about. “I’m going to be watching you and him. You aren’t going to get the chance to so much as breathe a word about the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. Not to the NYPD and not to your former employers.”

“No one would believe me,” she notes. Her surgeon’s hands shake, and the motion catches Frank by surprise. Sato buries them in her pockets, self-conscious, “I’ll take care of him.”

He nods, then tilts his head to gesture her out.

She takes a step towards the door but then whips around. “This…this isn’t your fault.”

Frank tears his eyes from the dying kid and fires his gaze at Sato. She meets his stare, and there’s a sadness in her eyes that he can’t place. That he can’t figure out. He’s seen her focused, he’s seen her scared, but here, now, she looks sorry. And not because she couldn’t save Red. Sato takes too much pride in her abilities as a surgeon for that. No, she must be sorry Frank couldn’t save Red.

He dismisses her. “I know it’s not my fault.” Two weeks in his shithole apartment, and the wound stayed fresh as a daisy, but one day in Hell’s Kitchen and it’s burning Red alive. Damn right it’s not his fault.

Sato nods. She looks like a completely different person. Guilt drains the intensity out of her features and leaves her vacant. “It’s not his fault either. Fasciotomies leave wounds that are prone to infection. You both did well, keeping it clean for this long.”

Now she really has to go. Frank feels geared up by a different kind of energy, a similar fury to the few seconds he remembers from the carousel when the bullets started firing and his little girl was shredded meat in his arms. “Get going. Go.”

Sato finally departs. Frank sets about gathering Red for transport. The kid rouses as he’s lifted into a sitting position, his eyes bleary, the lids drooping. His head falls into Frank’s shoulder and stays there, searing through the bloodstained t-shirt. “What’s happening? What…?”

Frank keeps his voice low, following Sato’s footsteps towards the side door. Red’s doing the same. He rocks his head, a pathetic effort to clear the fog. “Oh, she’s scared.”

“Yeah, well,” Frank doesn’t blame her. She has a lot to be scared about with the kid coming to her front door. Even with the Punisher to blame. “She should be.”

Red’s awareness ebbs and flows. On his way in, he notes, “You’re scared too,” and then slips away.

Frank waits till he comes back to point out, “Not scared, Red.”

“Tell that to your heart.”

The little shit is smirking. Dying and smirking. Frank shakes him, “Stop listening to my heart.”

“Sorry, Foggy…”

Frank scoffs. “You listen to your friend’s heart too. Shit, Red.” No wonder they aren’t
speaking. The kid fizzles out of awareness again. Frank lets it go. They got better things to do. “You’re going to the hospital. And you’re telling them this was me. All of it.”

“Not gonna do that, Frank.”

“Damn it, Red, stop fighting me. You tell ‘em it was me. Tell ‘em I thought you were a shitty lawyer, and I broke your leg for being such a smartass.”

“You don’t keep people alive,” Red reminds him.

“Tell ‘em the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen dragged your ass away from me, then. That’ll get you into protective custody, maybe keep those ninjas out of Metro General.”

“It’ll never work.”

Frank wraps him up in Lantom’s coat. “Gonna have to ditch this before you get there.”

“Frank-“

“This is how it has to be, Red.”

“Frank,” Red manages to grab the collar of his bloody t-shirt and draw it into a tight fist. He lifts his head, swaying the whole while, until Frank grips him by the back of the neck. The touch galvanizes him, shocking him momentarily out of his fevered haze. “I don’t know if I’m coming back.”

Frank releases the kid’s neck, letting his head drop. “Ah, Jesus, not this…”

Red struggles to get his head upright, “I need you to-“

“It’s not the end, Red.”

“The Hand is going to take me, and Fisk-“

Everything he tries to say next gets lost in a retch. Frank dodges the spew. He holds Red to keep him from falling off the table. When it’s over, he lays Red down, lets him rest a spell while Frank grabs his bag off the counter.

He shouldn’t be surprised when Red continues speaking. Shouldn’t be, but is, because the bell is tolling. Red should be out. “Fisk is planning to come after me and Foggy.”

Frank empties the medical supplies out of his duffel. He won’t be needing them. He grabs the kid’s phone off the counter and pockets it. Once done, he dons his coat and swings the bag over his shoulder, ready to leave.

Red is still talking. “He wants us destroyed, Frank, for putting him in prison, and once he’s out, he isn’t going to stop. Elektra…if she’s going after Fisk now, she isn’t going to let that happen to me, but Foggy…Foggy doesn’t know it’s coming.”

That gives Frank pause. “Why the hell not?”

The kid shakes his head sadly. He wears guilt way better than Sato does. It comes naturally to him. “Because I didn’t tell him.”

“You didn’t tell him? Jesus, Red, what the hell kind of asshole doesn’t tell their best friend
his life is in danger?”

“I thought I could protect him,” Red’s jaw shakes violently. He bites down on his lower lip. Tears eek out of his red-rimmed eyes. “I thought I could protect everyone, but I…” His next few breaths are rapid-fire. The sounds of Red steeling himself against the painful truths he’s been avoiding: all million and fucking one of them. “I can’t stop you from going after Fisk. I won’t be able to. But please, please, Frank, please protect Foggy.”

“You should’ve protected him yourself. Told him what he was up against.”

“I know.”

Frank picks at his bloody t-shirt. Scrubs at the bullet in his brain. Hears himself promise Red’s priest that no one else dies tonight; promise Lisa tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow…STOP. He charges over to the table, hauling Red up into a sitting position.

“Frank, please. Please!” The kid’s fingers are scalding as they ball into his t-shirt and twist. “You’re going after Fisk anyways. His men will be coming for Foggy. Keep an eye on him, please. Please, Frank.”

“You’ll tell him yourself. Which is what you should have done.” Frank takes him by the back of the head and give him a small shake. “I got you, Red. You hear me?”

“But if they do-“

“I got you.” He means it. Absolutely.

Frank braces one arm against the kid’s back and catches his legs with the other. The heat is shocking against Frank’s forearms. Two degrees shy of brain death, and all Red can think about is a stupid decision he made and saving his friend’s life. Fuck, he doesn’t even fight back when Frank lifts him off the table.

There’s a snap of electricity cut short. The lights in the room shut off, and the building in plunged into darkness.

Frank lays the kid back on the table, nabbing a colt from its holster the second his hand is free from under Red’s legs. He can hear the side door opening, but there are no accompanying footsteps. And Frank would know: Sato left the OR door open behind her.

Oh, shit: Sato.

The image of her stricken face under the raw OR light beams amidst the chaos in Frank’s head. Guilt. Fear. He should’ve known. Should’ve fucking known. Took his gun away from her head for a second, and she calls her old ninja pals.

Frank’s eyes are still adjusting to the dark, but he remembers where the door is well enough to take aim.

Red stiffens below him, listing hard towards the sounds only he can hear. “They’re here,” he whispers. His whole body shakes. “I can…I can hear them. Frank, you can-“

“Stop, Red.”

“You can still get out the front. They want me. They only want me.”
Frank places his hand on Red’s sternum. “Stop.”

The kid’s voice quavers, “I don’t know how many of them there are.”

It doesn’t matter. He has enough bullets for them all.

Red tugs away from Frank suddenly, gasping for every breath. “Oh, God. Oh, God…”

Frank understands immediately. He moves his gun away from the doorway and takes aim at a target that will actually give Red’s girl some pause before she attacks.

He points the gun at Red. The barrel fits neatly under his jaw. And the kid – the kid leans his head up, right at home on the mouth of gun.

Frank gets his breathing under wraps, stacks his face into flat lines, but he knows his heart is an uncertain rumble. He rubs a hand over Red’s cheek in case the kid isn’t listening.

“We need to talk,” he finally tells the darkness.

A fine point of metal comes to rest at the base of his neck. Fucking behind him.

“Yes,” she agrees, “Let’s.”

Happy reading!

Chapter End Notes

Thousandsmiles drew some awesome fanart for the end of this chapter. You can find it here: Roman Candle.

Thank you!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I remember writing Lantom's chapter and thinking it was smooth sailing from there. That I had learned the last skill I needed to write this fic. Nope! I am still learning. This chapter is brought to you by, "It is not necessary to explain absolutely everything in one chapter." Also, "Everything needs to serve the narrative. This isn't a one-shot h/c fic," and, "You have done that exact thing like five chapters before. It was barely clever then. It's really not clever now."

This chapter and the next work in tandem; they were written to work together. I say that now because there are gaps in this chapter created by Matt’s narration and the conversation he has that will be filled in during the next installment. I hope my staggering the updates is effective instead of confusing. Actually, I hope it’s effective confusion. Matt’s perspective is one of confusion. And there’s a lot in this chapter to cover.

I was originally going to save this chapter for another two days, but frankly, if I don’t post tonight, I am never going to post it. I am just going to reread it to hell, agonize, and then implode or something. Also, I miss the Ally. I’ve been spending more time with this chapter than him, and I live with him. I’ve been living this chapter. It's time to let you see it. Time to get on fine-tuning its sibling.

Readers, dear Readers, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate your time, your readership, and your support. It is such a pleasure to hear from you. Thank you so much! I hope you enjoy this chapter.

“Don't care if he's guilty, don't care if he's not, He's good and he's bad and he's all that I've got. Oh, Lord, oh, Lord, I'm begging you, please, Don't take that sinner from me.”

~The Civil Wars, “Devil’s Backbone”

The universe begins unraveling the moment Matt catches breathing in the hallway, but it tears
apart at the seams when she finds him. Elektra, warm and living, the sound of her heartbeat charging through the dark unmasked, borne proudly into battle for him to hear. She breezes through the open door of the operating room just as Frank’s gun finds its way under his chin.

“We need to talk.”

Her sai’s near-silent song cuts short when the point makes contact with the back of Frank’s neck. “Yes, let’s.”

Matt tries to speak amidst his gasping. “Elektra...” he hasn’t used her name in ages, not out loud. His tongue almost refuses to pronounce it. He’s aware of how wrong her life is no matter how relieved he is to have her back. “Elektra, let him...let him go.”

She purrs just shy of a growl, and Matt’s veins flood with cold water. He’s wanted to hear her again so much that even a threat will do. “Put the gun down.”

Frank definitely growls, “Get that thing off my neck.”

Matt’s focus wavers, the inadequacy of his respiration finally catching up to him. Heart can’t pump fast enough, blood can’t run hard enough, breath can’t get deep enough, he can’t do enough, and if he does try and slow down, he’ll pass out for sure, and these two will still be fighting. “Both of you. Put your your weapons down.” Frank’s pulse enters new levels of geared-up while Elektra’s sai bears deeper into his neck. Matt tries to growl too. “Elektra.”

“If he kills you, I’m killing him,” she declares, because that is more than fair, Matthew.

Matt shakes his head. The motion nearly propels him out of consciousness. “He isn’t-“

But Frank interrupts, “You kill me, I’m killing him.”

“You keep arguing, you’re both going to kill me,” Matt snaps. He has to chase his next few breaths for the outburst. “Put your weapons down. Put...” the five mouth-breathers in the hallway catch his attention again. “Put all the weapons down.”

Nothing happens. Nobody moves.

Frank tosses his shoulders, “Ladies first.”

Elektra digs her claw in deeper, “Age before beauty.”

Matt’s eyes slam shut and don’t reopen no matter how hard he tries. What little feeling he had in his limbs vanishes.

“Red?”

“Matthew?”

Oh, now he has their attention. “Put ‘em...” but his mouth slackens. Senses follow. Matt doubles his efforts, because the gun is still at his neck and he can’t breathe. “Let him go, ‘lektra. Please, just let him go.”

And that’s it. That’s all he’s got. Awareness pulls away from him in an icy rush. Blood drains out of his skull. Matt follows, spilling off the table: skin first, then muscles, then bones, until his thoughts are pooling around his frantic heart balanced precariously on the mouth of the gun. He
feels water rising. Storm’s brewing on the fringes on his senses: lightning flashing and thunder rumbling, but it passes him by. Weapons finally get lowered in some order or another. Matt can’t tell who stands down first. And then the voices sweep over him as he sinks below the surface.

“Wake up, Matthew.”

“Stay with me, Red.”

“I’ve got you~”

“-got you, Red.”

_I got you, Red._

The echoes of Frank’s heartbeat roll through Matt, a steady volley of explosions, a battle inside bone, skin, and sinew. They appear at a distance though, which is strange since Matt’s ear is slammed between his head and the space below Frank’s collarbone. The rest of him is pinned just as close, folded over Frank’s forearms in a carry that nauseates Matt with familiarity. His helplessness is becoming routine.

Frank’s respiration artillery is too, but Matt’s used to being a part of the chaos instead of held at a safe distance. It’s probably his broiling brain unable to focus with his declining blood pressure; his senses getting as many hits as they can before the bell. But the thought nags at Matt that Frank protects what’s his, and war is the one thing he has left to call his own. He’s not looking to share: not with the devil, and definitely not with Elektra.

War rages on in Matt’s head even as he’s lain to rest, his ear sliding away from Frank’s explosive heartbeat. The rhythm continues hauntingly, undercutting the voices, the motion, the beautiful reappearance of Elektra’s own heartbeat. There is rattling and booming. An engine rumbles. Two more pulses emerge. Hands with a familiar surgical steadiness start unzipping his hoodie, placing leads across his chest.

Punisher’s heartbeat comes back with a mighty vengeance by Matt’s ear. He is a discordant bassline to the chaos surrounding Matt.

“Bang,” Frank says.

Doors slam. Matt passes out.

Waking. Chilled. Cold packs sting against his fever-hot skin. His respiration has mercifully slowed. Fresh oxygen pummels his mouth and nose. Matt doesn’t want it. His lips are chapped; his throat is dry. But his arms won’t move. There are cushioned bands around his wrists.

Panic spikes. Senses return in a rush. Motion and clamber surround him. Talking Matt can’t understand. His arm is filled with needles, tubes. Filtered air grates against his nostrils and throat. He scrapes his face against his shoulders to get the mask off.

Hands appear, pushing the mask back where it belongs. Matt bucks at them, kicks. His ankles are restrained too. “Frank,” he demands, but he’s drowning under the rush of oxygen. The mask has to go. Matt digs his face into the pillow to dislodge it. He tries again, louder, “Frank!”
He didn’t think he could breathe any faster but he has to. The walls are closing in on him, crushing his flapping chest. He’s alone. He’s surrounded by people, surrounded by her, but there’s the hand on his sternum is a ghost, a phantom anchor, one promising him got you, Red, got you as it fades. Then Frank’s gone. And Matt can’t call for him, can’t ask if he’s alright, can’t do anything except ride the last adrenaline spike for all it’s worth.

“Don’t hurt him,” he begs through the activity. She’s there, listening. He can sense her. “Please don’t hurt him. You have me. I’m the… I’m the one you want. Just… just let him go. Let him go.”

Elektra’s heartbeat treads gently next to Matt’s ear. Sounds like a victory march. Her voice is a balm against the torpor. “Shhh… shhh, Matthew.”

“Where is he? What did you do to him?”

Her palms unfold under the back of his head, cradling his scalp. Matt sinks into her without thinking, without realizing. She’s the only one who’s ever known exactly how to hold him, and she’s alive. She’s alive and she’s there and her hands, her hands are perfect, and Matt doesn’t realize he’s made a mistake until the mask is moving back over his nose and mouth.

“It’s alright,” she soothes, catching him when he tries to move away. An edge creeps into her voice, and it’s hard not to take it personally when Elektra Natchios promises retaliation. She’s giving the medical staff one hell of a warning. “No one’s going to hurt you, Matthew.”

How quickly she forgets how much she has hurt him in the past. How quickly Matt forgets, the way her fingers curl under the back of his neck, rubbing soft circles into his skin.

“Where’s Frank?” he asks her. The darkness in front of his eyes is insufferable. She is right there, hovering. No way she can’t hear him.

Her fingers press just a little deeper. Matt’s eyelids flutter. He loses track of his anger. This time, she might not hear him, his voice is so quiet: “Where is he? Where…?”

She combs her fingers through his hair. He’s gone.

Silence, perfect silence, gives way to the light rustle of silk; stockinged feet across a hardwood floor, a carefully controlled heartbeat. The gentle ringing of sunlight passing through a window pane leads him to the tide pools of warmth on his skin.

Matt smells goose down, mahogany; fresh soap and shampoo. He’s been bathed, but the memory’s gone. Lots of them are. There are fragments, sensations, but when he begins piecing through them, he’s caught in an undertow, pulled into the cold, wet dark. He pushes through the currents of hands and voices, the tumult of being moved; the terror over having blacked out – of having been blacked out again; Frank’s gone. And that’s where her perfume finds him. What’s it called? Caron Poivre. One of her favourites. A light cloud of it following those footsteps on their slow trek around the room.

Oh, God.

He closes his eyes, pressing the lids together so hard they hurt. He needs that, the pain. Gets him out of this lush space he’s lying in: king sized bed, fresh-cut flowers, and clean sheets. Designer drugs in his IV drip that don’t cloud his senses or aggravate his stomach. A glass of cold, filtered water on a nearby table instead.
Breathing slowly brings his memory to order. From Elektra’s heartbeat appearing in the hallway to the feel of a gun pressed against his chin. A hand on his cheek in apology. “We need to talk,” Frank said. “Yes, let’s,” she replied, and then Matt sinks back under the waves. He gets lost in the sensory details that did stick, but there’s no sense of chronology. No sense of focus. There’s sound and fury; there’s helpless rage. Especially when a loud slam took Frank’s heartbeat away, locking Matt up with the sound of his own ragged breathing and desperate cries don’t hurt him, don’t hurt him, please. Just let him go. You have me. I’m the one you want.

The footsteps continue a path towards the singing glass. Matt stops them with one question. “Where’s Frank?”

The way she says his name breaks him in two. Matt hides it well. He shifts onto his elbows, lifting himself higher on his pillow, testing his limits as much as he pushes them. He wants distance; he wants a defence. His arms shake; his head spins. This is aftermath, recovery, and all the inconveniences that come with that.

But his focus has returned. He takes stock of the room and its surroundings as he rises—anything to keep his mind off the footsteps approaching him. Off the nagging thoughts about where Frank is, what’s happened to him, oh, God, she’s alive. The city hums outside the wide window. The river is close. Pain twinges in his arm from an IV and in his left leg when he moves, a dull ache wrapped in microfibers and some kind of lightweight polymer. No trace of the infection. New stitches dot the length of his calf, smelling salty-sweet and healthy through fresh dressings.

She sits down on the bed next to him, though, and Matt’s centre of gravity changes to her. Always her. He perceives every inch of her sharply, intimately, no matter how he tries to focus around her. The smell of her, the sound of her heart beating, the heat from her hand as it runs over his right thigh, everything appears in high resolution. No buffers from fever or fear. She’s there, she’s real, she’s alive, and those fissures Matt nurses from their time together, those long cracks that he thought he buried with her, burst open.

His voice cracks when he tries to ask again. “Where’s Frank?”

“Oh, Matthew.” She hasn’t heard him over the sight of tears streaming down his cheeks. He pulls away when she reaches to catch them with the backs of her fingers. Embarrassment burns in his bones even as his skin aches to be near to her. He might be dreaming. He has dreamt about her since she was killed, and it always feels real until it isn’t, until he’s waking up alone with the chill of her fingertips on his face and her distinctive whisper in his ears. Until he’s struck by the memory of her life slipping away.

Matt sits very, very still. The last time she was this close, they were fighting the Hand. The last time she was closer, she was dying. He almost doesn’t want to ask, is afraid to get the answer. But the absence in his memory weighs on him as much as it does here, now, in a room alone with her. “Where’s Frank?”

Her soft sigh gives him hope that Frank is alright. Bored: Elektra’s bored, and she wouldn’t be bored if she was making something up. Her voice is painfully gentle, too, but Matt suspects that’s everything to do with him. He’s climbing the walls to get away. Waters are rising around him again of an awful sort. “I don’t know. Taking shots from a clock tower in Hell’s Kitchen, I expect. He was positively giddy to learn that my interest in Wilson Fisk began and ended with you.”

The hurt is easy to suppress given how small it feels next to Matt’s other agonies. “You let him go?”

“Yes, Matthew.”
“No, no, don’t,” he begs. The way she says his name, it’s so…so raw. So real.

She continues gently, her hand finding Matt’s wrist in the plush duvet. He accepts the touch because it’s better than her touching his face. “He’s fine. I can have him brought here, if you’d like to see him.”

Rage bubbles up from his stony veneer. “You keep your ninjas away from him.”

The accusation bristles her: her ninjas, really. She gets her bitrate back under control. “You’ll be in touch later then.”

He absolutely will. Make sure his memories of Frank’s heartbeat falling silent are from their separation, keep Elektra from sending the Hand on his tail. “He better answer.”

“He’s fine,” Elektra assures him. Her pulse backs her up. It bears none of the thrill of the hunt, of causing pain. If she had killed him or given the order to have him killed, Elektra wouldn’t be able to hide her excitement. But she must sense he doesn’t believe her, because she goes on the defensive. “He is. He rode with you to our medical facility. He waited until you were stabilized, and then he left.”

Matt doesn’t give her the pleasure of further argument. His vague memories and her respiration verify the story, but that doesn’t assuage his fear. “Where’s my phone? I want to call him.”

She sighs apologetically, but that doesn’t stop her from sounding patronizing. “I don’t have your phone.”

Frank must still have it. Matt takes that as a good sign: surely Elektra would have returned it if she confiscated it from Frank’s corpse. Still, “He didn’t leave a number?”

“Was he supposed to?”

Hurt registers in the wake of her words, small and irritating. A splinter he can’t dig out. “No.” Frank isn’t supposed to do anything, but Matt thinks it’s strange to be suddenly out of touch. He’s unmoored, adrift. The room swells with a screeching emptiness punctuated only by her. Her, her, her.

He presses, hoping to elicit another reaction. “Did you tell him how to get in touch with me?”

Elektra shrugs. “He didn’t ask. He seemed eager to be going after Fisk again.”

Her heartbeat stays its course. Matt conceals his disappointment. Frank’s nothing if not eager to pursue Fisk, and insisting he promised or should give a damn sounds childish, needy in ways that Matt can’t bring himself to be. Frank doesn’t owe him; if anything, he owes Frank. And he isn’t Frank’s responsibility no matter what the past few weeks have taught him. He’s challenged the Hand alone before; he’ll do it again.

“How long-“ no, he doesn’t want to ask that question yet. She’s so close, it’s suffocating. He can’t ask anything about her. “How long have I been out?”

“Matthew.”

Again with the name. Matt grabs the headboard and pulls himself onto his pillow. Elektra
catches his forearm; he moves away, finds her hands at his biceps instead. “Three days,” she rubs the tension she finds there. “I had the doctors sedate you through the worst of it rather than restrain you.”

He struggles to breathe, to stay calm. Three days. Frank’s three days gone and he’s been lying in a coma getting manhandled by the Hand and her and God knows who else. “Where am I?”

How can she sound so calm about this? This isn’t any other conversation. This is the first time they’ve spoken since he put her in the ground. “My apartment. Upper West Side.”

“And the Hand? Where are they?”

“Elsewhere.”

“For now.”

“Matthew.”

“Elektra, just…” he listens, can’t hear them breathing. She, on the other hand, is wonderfully close. Beautifully close. Matt’s face quakes. “How long…how long have you been back?”

More tears on his cheeks. He reaches to clear them aside, but she catches them along with his fingers. He doesn’t pull away; she has always known exactly how to hold him. “It doesn’t matter,” she whispers. Nothing matters.

But it does matter. All those moments since she’s been back until Matt caught scent of her in his apartment were a betrayal. He should have held out hope. He should have prepared for her coming. He should have looked for her harder, found her before the Hand did. Run away with her like they planned where no war would ever find them.

Matt focuses on the facts, reviewing the case at hand. It’s his only defence against his spectacular failure. “I remember the sound of your heart stopping. Your…your last breath…” It still plays on his fears now. Every time she exhales is for the last time, the last time, the last time.

Her fingers appear at his chin; Matt shakes them away. “Matthew.” He doesn’t want her to see him like this, falling apart.

“I buried you.”

She closes the distance between them. Her heartbeat presses lovingly against his chest with every beat. “I’m here, Matthew. I’m right here.”

The heavy, down pillow stops him from moving further back, and Elektra crashes into him like a tidal wave. Matt tugs a cry back inside his mouth before it can fill the room. “I should have been there. I should-” and then, because she’s ruffling his hair again, “You were in my apartment.”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Elektra sighs. The answer isn’t easy. Matt’s struggling to find the right questions let alone think of possible explanations. She finally settles on, “I didn’t want you to know what I was doing. Who I was with. Why I was back.”

There’s more. Her quiet is loaded with greater possibilities. The Hand is just the simplest of her fears, the easiest to communicate, the most palpable.
He forces himself to smile. To share it like an old joke. “We were going to run away together.”

“We still can, Matthew!” she grips him. “As soon as you’re able: Tokyo, Paris, Milan—“

God, he almost believes her: that they’ll disappear into the world together, free from their responsibilities, free to be themselves. “Wherever the Hand is established.”

“The Hand is established everywhere,” she curls a lock of his hair behind his ear. “They’re an army that stretches around the globe. They’ll be there. They’ll always be there.”

“Then you know where I’ll be standing,” he admits sadly.

Elektra withdraws from him, and Matt feels the air drawing away from him too. This isn’t the way she envisioned their conversation happening. “You don’t have to fight them. They’re mine. They follow me. They’ll do exactly as I say, when I say it.”

“They’ll let you go?”

It’s cruel, and he doesn’t want to be cruel, not now, but she needs to know this isn’t something she can dismiss. The way she rubs his arms sadly, easing him back on his pillow, tells him as much. These violent delights have violent ends, and Elektra Natchios is a master in the art of violence. “It wouldn’t be difficult to stay.”

He almost believes that too, on her part at least. The sworn loyalty of a ninja army is a temptation too hard to resist for Elektra. “They brought you back from the dead.”

She lowers her voice, unwilling to admit this to him or herself. “They let me be who I am, Matthew.”

Matt’s heart rams itself into his throat, choking him momentarily. He forces himself to breathe, to speak. To reason with her. Remind her of who she is, who he knows she is. “They let you be who they want you to be.”

Elektra echoes his tone, reasoning with him right back, “Maybe that’s who I am.”

Matt barely contains his exasperation. “You wanted to be your own person.”

“And I am. I am my own person.” She hesitates before adding, “With a ninja army at my beck and call.”

“You’re alone against a ninja army…”

“I’m not alone. I have you.”

He withdraws his hand from hers. It hurts from how little it hurts to touch her. From how much he wants to touch her. Run his hand along her wrist and find her pulse, let it stab against his fingers. Let her have him. “You said you wanted to be good.”

“And I was good. I still am good. On my terms.”

More cruelty, but if Matt doesn’t say it now, he isn’t ever going to: “Is that what you’ve been doing with Fisk’s men? Being good?”

Elektra’s heart skips a beat. She straightens: hurt. Offended, even. “I was trying to find
“You cut their faces-“

Her indignation rises. “I thought they had killed you. Or worse, that they hadn’t.”

Matt stops her, “That they’d carved my face off?”

She ignores him. “Do you know what Fisk has planned for you, Matthew? Not the devil: you.”

“I can’t imagine,” and he doesn’t want to.

Elektra spares him the details but not the implications. “I don’t have to. They told me. Screamed it at me, actually.” And as sardonic as her voice sounds, her heart is fluttering excitedly in her chest. A warmth spreads through her that finds Matt under the layers of silken bedding. It’s the surest sign she didn’t have Frank killed; she isn’t bored about what she did to Fisk’s men.

Matt gets them back to the issue at hand, “Before you killed them.”

She scoffs, “I left some of them alive.”

He sighs – she’s missing the point. “After carving off their faces.”

She makes a sound like, “You would bring that up,” as she rises from the bed. “I didn’t know what to do. You were gone. Fisk was sending men around Hell’s Kitchen. And I hadn’t told you I was back. I thought I would never get the chance. The Hand had already been in conflict with Fisk before; they were eager to challenge him again.”

“Using their war to serve your agenda doesn’t make it right.”

“It doesn’t make it wrong. The Hand are going to attack Fisk. And Fisk deserves to be attacked. You can’t deny that.” Matt doesn’t try. Saying, “Not like this,” opens up a discussion he isn’t ready to have because, “Besides, I’m not the only one. Your friend, Mr. Castle, is waging a war with Fisk too.”

Matt already has a defence ready. “I told him the same thing I’m telling you: this is wrong, Elektra. You’re both wrong.”

She makes a sound, like a sigh but more dismissive. A non-verbal agree-to-disagree without the amenable compromise. Elektra lacks the humility to truly accept their difference of opinion. She and Frank seem to share the same delusion that he’ll eventually come to their side though. “Fisk wants to destroy you.”

“He can try,” Matt replies.

Elektra tries a different tactic, moving back towards him. Matt holds himself absolutely still and waits for her to touch him. Then he agonizes when she won’t. Even with Frank in the wind, with her leading an enemy army, he welcomes her completely.

What comes is better than a touch and loads more painful. “I meant what I said, Matthew. About us running away. Spend our lives outrunning the Hand, the Chaste. Leave Wilson Fisk to Frank Castle. Pave a road of justice and destruction wherever we go.”

Her preternatural sense for when he’s most receptive to wishful thinking would be more
effective if Matt could believe it. He shakes his head. “Everything’s different now.”

“I’m not,” she says, “You’re not. We promised each other once.”

“I have work to do here,” he replies, kind enough not to mention that she’s a part of it. Elektra Natchios, the Black Sky, leader of the Hand.

She hears him loud and clear nonetheless. “I don’t want to go to war with you, Matthew.”

“Then don’t.” Matt doesn’t want to go to war with her either, but her silence tells him they don’t have a choice. He deflects, saves that trauma for another time. “It’s more than that though, Elektra. More than the Hand.”

“Fisk.”

He nods, giving her that much at least. “I have to stop him on my own. My way.” Before the bastard can get to Foggy. Before Frank can get to Fisk.

“Hmm…’’ she ponders thoughtfully, then dismisses the conversation outright. Verbally, at least. Matt hears it simmering away under her skin. He lets it go. Lets it all go. The pillow is soft, his brain is reeling, and she is running a hand over his shoulder again at long last. “It could be my way. Just this once.”

Like pulling a trigger. Matt tenses. “Elektra.”

She scoffs. Bored again. Unable to have any fun whatsoever. It's still endearing, and Matt hates himself for it. "He’s yours, Matthew. Well, he will be. If you can get to him before Castle does.”

Matt supposes that’s true, loathe as he is to admit it. “Leave him alone, Elektra.”

“Absolutely, Matthew. I already have exactly what I want.” Her heart trots at the thought. Different enough from her excitement over murder, but not so different that Matt doesn’t want some distance between them.

She softens again. “Are you hungry?”

“No.”

“I’ll get you anything you like.”

He shakes his head, allowing his exhaustion to show. “I’m not hungry. I’m going to rest a bit.”

Elektra combs hand through his hair. “You’re eating later.”

“Yes.”

She runs her hands over his cheeks. Matt catches them as much to stop her as to hold her. One contrary son-of-a-bitch to the bitter end, especially where she’s concerned. Elektra plants a tender kiss on his brow, lingering there for several breaths. Long enough for Matt to fall apart and barely pull himself back together.

“I’m so glad you’re alright.”
He nods, breaking their contact. Elektra slinks away. “Me too.”

She closes the door behind her. Matt waits for the sound of a lock but doesn’t hear one. Not a prisoner, then, or at least afforded the illusion of freedom. He tracks Elektra’s footsteps down the hall towards a larger space, one that echoes every step.

He breathes himself into meditation, praying to find clarity there amidst all this. Elektra being alive, him waking in yet another strange apartment; the Hand being so nearby; Frank being so far away. God damn it, Matt tries to reason with himself, but the hate is still there, the painful sting of Frank ditching him for a clear path to Fisk. Frank dropping him at the first opportunity despite Matt’s pleas for sanctuary. Now he’s a prisoner, no matter how well-treated, and Frank is in the wind. And the more Matt tries to visualize nothingness, his brain swirls through memories, the haze of infection to must dust, and metal; gun powder; cheap soap and Rina’s quilt. Footsteps charging across a decrepit floor and unintelligible monosyllables that pass for conversation. A heartbeat that’s more brutal warfare than circulation. Bring torn from terror’s grasp by murderer’s hands and told, in no uncertain terms, “I got you, Red. Got you.”

Matt reaches for his sternum, gasping. The ghost of Frank’s hand weighs heavily, protecting what’s his.

Happy reading!
Castle

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I am just going to stop including my inner turmoil, hand wringing, and abject terror from my notes. I’m sounding like a broken record.

This chapter runs parallel to the previous one. I overlapped some of the scenes with Frank’s perspective and composed them in tandem. Having him and Elektra butt heads gave me a lot of pause. There were no less than three alternate endings to this chapter during development, and of them, this was the only one that could have happened. I wrote Frank into a corner against the Hand, against Matt’s senses and Elektra’s appeal to him, and I hope that comes through.

Speaking of Elektra – there are those of you who pointed out that all is not as it seems with her, but one thing that I don’t doubt is her affections for Matt. There’s some of that in here amidst the other Elektra bits.

…which gave me the most trouble, and I owe Dichotomy Studios a huge thank you (speaking of broken record) for help in that regard.

Know this, Readers: know that I appreciate the time and energy you take to read this fic and the insights you provide in your feedback. I’m so lucky to share this fandom with you, and I really hope you continue to enjoy this fic.

“If you wanna break these walls down,
You’re gonna get bruised.”

~Halsey, “Castle”

“Red?”

“Matthew? ”

Something’s wrong. Kid’s a series of misfires. His eyes are shut, breath’s coming in short gasps, and his attempt at speaking is little more than a series of twitches through his mouth followed by raspy words.

Frank shoves at the sai. “Put it down.”
“You first,” she snaps.

“She put it down or he gets put down.”

Her veneer strengthens. The kid is tightening the murderous knot she’s tied herself into. “You put him down, you die.”

“I’m not gonna have to.” Red is doing all the work for him. The kid isn’t even trying to talk anymore. His jaw is hanging limp on its hinges, and he pants like a dog for every breath. Blood pressure’s dropping. Or he’s ramping up for a seizure. Or his brain is finally cooked but his body’s fighting on, always pushing, stubbornly refusing to believe it’s the end.

Frank drops his gun. In the same instant, the sai leaves his neck. He moves, grabbing the coat from the under the kid’s head and moving it to his feet. “Stay with me, Red. Stay with me.” Hell if he knows what a fasciotomy is or how to straighten a broken bone perfectly, but when guys got like Red in the field, docs always put their feet up, knocking their blood back to the important parts of their bodies.

Red doesn’t slow his breathing none, but the colour zips back into his face and neck. Not brain death, then. Low blood pressure. His girl comes to stand at the head of the table. “Wake up, Matthew,” she begs him. “Wake up, I’ve got you. I’ve got you-“

Frank shuts his mouth. Same words are pouring out of him in a whisper, in a God damn prayer – “Got you, Red. Got you.” He picks up the gun, shoves it back in the holster. She wants to kill him, she would have done it already. They got bigger shit to deal with: the kid’s on his way out. “You got a vehicle?”

The girl – Elektra? Hard to tell what it was – she doesn’t take her eyes off Red. Her fingers are curving over his temple with a tenderness unbefitting the edge in her voice, “And a private medical facility.”

Frank comes up to Red’s side, preparing to lift him again. “I’m coming.”

A sick, condescending smile lights Elektra’s eyes through the darkness. She brushes a hand through Red’s hair in the most delicate threat Frank’s ever seen. “No, you’re not.”

He gets one arm looped under the kid’s scalding shoulder blades and the other under his knees. Red rocks limply from the movement, and his girl takes her damn hand back. “You’re not gonna stop me.”

“I won’t have to,” she scoffs, giving her head the slightest of nods to invite the other shadows into the room. A katana is unsheathed behind him.

Frank keeps his eyes on the real threat. Not the weapon: the hand that wields it. Elektra is elegant, poised, cutting against the dark like the natural born killer than she is. Frank lowers Red slightly. If they do take his head, he doesn’t want the kid to fall. “He wakes up, you feed him some line about me leaving.”

“Something like that,” Elektra replies coolly. The katana sings in the air behind him, stopping short of his neck. She plays coy through it all, as if the ninja isn’t under her control. “It wouldn’t have to be a line if you walked away.”

“No, ma’am, but I’m not walking away. So, what, you tell him I turned tail? Ran?” Frank scoffs. She hasn’t thought this plan through. About as short-sighted as Red, this one, but blinder by
half where it counts. “You might say it just fine. But maybe you’re breathing’ll be off. Maybe… maybe that heart of yours’ll beat just a little too fast. And he’ll realize that the same dame who hacks off people’s faces probably didn’t just let me walk out of here alive and well.”

Elektra’s smile wavers. Yeah, yeah: got you there, sweetheart. The katana lowers from his neck and gets re-sheathed. For now.

Frank finishes prying the kid away from her. “I’m coming with you.”

The ninjas take the colts and put them in the duffel, and Frank lets them because nobody makes a move on the damn kid. Even Elektra stays hands off. “Very well,” her eyes say, followed by a slight tilt of her head: “All in good time.” Frank lifts Red off the table without taking his gaze off her. She wants to come at him, he is gonna be ready.

There’s a nondescript van waiting at the loading bay, the back doors wide open with a gurney waiting between them. No seats in back, and a partition separates the driver from the passengers. There are kits of medical supplies packed tightly on one side. The light from the cab reveals two more ninjas waiting in the alley. That makes seven total, including the five behind Frank. Quite the little party Red’s Girl brought with her and not a one of them in robes. Guess those are for rooftop stakeouts. Tonight, they’re dressed in white shirts, collars popped, with leather jackets, katanas peaking over their shoulders.

They inch towards Frank when he emerges, expecting he’ll relinquish the kid. Like hell he is. Frank adjusts his grip on Red so he can tighten his hold without cutting off the kid’s air supply, send him a message through the fever that the ninjas aren’t getting a hand on him.

He lays the kid down on the gurney. Red is still breathing funny and knows it, too. He inhales and tension rolls through his muscles. His face becomes a series of spasms, the makings of a confused expression. Or an investigative one: as if he can figure this out, figure out what’s wrong with him, even though his eyes are rolling back into his skull under his closed lids and the tension drains out of him anew with every exhale.

They load him into the van. Frank helps. It’s strategic. Grabbing the top of the gurney means they can’t lay hands on him. Means he rides with Red, regardless of the look he gets from Elektra. She has to settle for the second best spot in the vehicle, and she ain’t thrilled. When she pulls the shroud from the lower half of her face, her lips are a thin line.

Footsteps approach outside the van, heading around the back. Frank steadies himself. The sound of them makes him draw a fist against his bent knee as he sinks onto the floor. His other hand curls around an imaginary grip, trigger finger tightening. One batch, two batch - he instinctively seeks out his duffel and finds it hanging around the arm of one bored-looking lackey lingering in the alley out the back of the van. For the best, Frank figures. Red needs a doc, and a shot from his colt at this range would be a stretch to fix even with ninja resurrection magic.

Sato seems well-aware that she’s being threatened. She comes into view and steps inside the vehicle with her head tilted low, eyes on Red, a look of shameful submission. Another ninja follows close behind, for her protection or Elektra’s, Frank doesn’t care. Nobody’s going to be able to protect them from him when he finally makes his move.

Doc gets right to work with Red, from the opposite side of the gurney as Frank. Throwing open the kid’s hoodie, cutting his t-shirt in half, and attaching leads across his chest. Frank waits till she’s leaning over Red’s chest, till she’s damn good and close, till she has nowhere to look but his trigger finger.
Then Frank makes a promise: “Bang.”

The van doors slam shut behind them.

They make good time across the city. Frank traces their route: west to Midtown, then north to the Upper West Side. Meantime, he wordlessly assists Sato for Red’s sake. She hands off a bag of saline; he hooks Red up to it. She unpacks a portable oxygen tank; Frank straps the mask to Red’s face. She punches a couple syringes into the IV port; Frank catches the kid’s arms when they start to flail.

Elektra asserts herself so gently at first, but then Red’s hand is out of Frank’s, wrapped in a cuff that was tucked under the rails of the gurney. Looks like a plusher version of the straps they put him in at Metro General. Frank lunges to undo the restraint. “Cause more problems that way,” he tells her.

“I know,” she continues binding Red’s other wrist, “but he can’t be sedated until his blood pressure is back to normal.”

Sato gives a single, small nod, quietly noting, “She’s right,” before buckling Red’s right ankle to the gurney.

Frank doesn’t bother wasting another glare on the Doc. He eyes Elektra, who grips Red’s bound hand lightly in hers, eyes locked on the kid’s limp fingers, his gray skin. She is torn between disappointments at the moment, and the restraints are definitely one of them. For a brief moment, she looks like the rest of them: a little lost, a little afraid, a little human.

She catches him looking, though, and the expression vanishes, replaced with a wicked wildness Frank recalls from the OR. Her last stake in humanity is lying on the gurney. Hell ain’t gonna have nothing on this broad if Red gives up the ghost tonight.

Frank knows the feeling.

Can’t see any landmarks or street signs when the van’s back doors open again, but Frank guesses they’re somewhere in the 70s or 80s based on the travel time. He grips the gurney upon exiting, making sure he doesn’t lose track of Red amidst the great rush of medical personnel. They sweep the gurney into the ground floor of a stone building, through a set of heavy double doors. There’s a large examination room on the left, visible through a massive window running almost floor to ceiling. Metal tables and counters, bulky overhead lights, and a whole team of masks and scrubs. Sato steers Red with an immediacy that speaks her knowing the place. She’s put people back together here before.

“Ah, ah, ah,” Elektra grabs Frank by the wrist before he heads in, dislodging his hand from the gurney.

He tosses her off, grabs the gurney again. “I’m going in there.”

“No, you’re not,” she replies, nabbing him again, faster this time. She’s stronger than she looks. “Not like that you’re not. Blood on your shirt. On the back of your neck. You’ll
contaminate the room. Watch from out here.”

She makes it sound like a request, but her lethal entourage moves into formation around him. Frank’s options aren’t between the hallway and triage; they’re between the hallway and a body bag. And realistically, “You wouldn’t want to get in the way.”

But she would. Elektra’s already backing towards the room, stripping her gloves as she moves. A nurse opens the door and ushers her inside, no doubt with a fresh pair of scrubs waiting. Jesus, what’ll the excuse be next— they don’t have his size? Frank sighs, eyeing the throng of guards mingling around him. The one with his duffel waits by the exit, a human coat check. Frank gets the senses he could walk over and get his shit back and be on his way, no questions asked.

He rubs at the back of his neck. The bleeding’s stopped; wound’s superficial. A rare injury that won’t leave a scar. He glances between the ninjas to keep count on his way to the window, taking a place on the far side so he has a solid vantage point. There’s six total, each armed with a katana, and they’re on their best behaviour. Lingering with tiny smirks as Frank focuses on Red.

Hard to see the kid behind the activity surrounding him. Medical personnel billow around the gurney in the exam room beyond the glass. They’ve stripped away Red’s sweat-soaked clothing. Another bag of fluids joins the saline on the IV stand, an antibiotic drip most likely. The leg is exposed, a blanket drawn, portable oxygen detached and replaced with a stationary machine. Ice packs get stacked around his extremities.

Red’s hand tugs against the restraint. His right leg tosses. Frank grumbles, glaring at his guards instead of the kid’s fluttering eyelids. Red is awake. He is awake and alone, being mauled by doctors from an enemy organization. He thrashes against the gurney, bucking his oxygen mask. The docs can’t keep up with him. Sato’s giving orders from her place at his leg, and she isn’t being listened to.

“He’s going to sleep through this,” Frank mutters, allowing the futility to sound in his voice loud and clear. It’s not like Red hears him through the walls and the activity. Through Elektra flowing through the crowd. She takes hold of Red’s head, holding it steady, and though she’s wearing a surgical mask, Frank can see her mouth moving, delivering, no doubt, a steady stream of sweet nothings to her ailing ex. Red’s hypnotized. He drinks in everything she tells him so deeply that he doesn’t thrash when someone fixes the oxygen mask on his face.

Frank folds his arms across his chest to keep from throwing a punch against the glass. His insides writhe. This isn’t Red, Frank reminds himself, but that doesn’t soften the sight of Red’s eyes eventually falling shut again, of his body going limp, of every part of him finally submitting.

Meanwhile, Elektra continues to stand over him, cradling his head. She throws a glance out the window at Frank.

A smile lights her eyes. The same fucking smile she wore in the animal hospital OR.

Then she looks back down at Red lying right in the palms of her hands.

The energy in the room follows Red’s lead, quieting and slowing. Gradually, the ice packs get removed. The leg is redressed. His face falls towards Frank. Takes a minute to tell it’s him: the kid looks so damn vacant. The sight causes a shock to run the length of Frank’s spine. He straightens, stretching his neck. Reminding himself how long it’s been since the carousel and the Irish when he was strapped to a hospital bed, when he was struggling to crawl out of the hole they put him in.
Adrenaline spreads through him, jolting him out of the memory. Elektra finishes conferring with the remaining doctors and heads out of the room. She joins him in the hallway after trading her scrubs with a lackey for a sleek, black trench coat. She doesn’t have her sais, but she’s not unarmed. Her men in the hallway stand at attention, waiting for the order.

Frank holds her in his periphery, eyes trained on the docs in the room. They’re still moving, gathering supplies. One tucks another blanket around Red while Sato puts him back on a portable oxygen tank.

“He’s responding well to antibiotics,” Elektra tells him, vying for attention. Frank doesn’t give her the pleasure. She continues diplomatically, “The doctors were able to get his temperature down and clear the infection from his bloodstream without the use of dialysis. He’s going to be fine, so long as he doesn’t relapse. He needs to be closely monitored in a clean environment to keep that from happening.”

Sato draws a strap loosely over Red’s chest and another over his legs. Transport prep. Frank makes a fist and breathes through the frustration. He’s suddenly very aware of how surrounded he is and that the ninja with his weapons-duffel is still waiting at the doors and that they are approaching the end of the line.

She’s polite about it, which pisses him the hell off. Frank can’t stand a sore winner, but there’re notes of genuine gratitude in her voice where she says, “Doctor Sato tells me I owe you a thank you.”

“Don’t owe me nothing,” Frank replies. He refuses to look at her even as she draws nearer. He’s here for Red. He’s following Red.

Elektra shares his reasons. “She also tells me you have no quarrel with me or my… organization.”

Frank sees through the line. Sato’s attempts at self-preservation know no bounds. For all it’s going to do her: good deeds don’t stop bullets.

“You’ll have no quarrel from me for Wilson Fisk,” Elektra notes. More information from Sato, no doubt. A way of getting him off the scent – of her, the Hand, and Red. “He’s all yours – with my blessing, I might add. A show of gratitude for everything you’ve done for Matthew.”

“Won’t he be thrilled.” The only get-well-soon present Red’ll be more disappointed about than being kidnapped by ninjas.

Elektra isn’t listening. She is digging. Sato gave her information, and she’s smart enough not to ask Frank directly to do the same. “Naturally, I’ll forgo a call to local authorities about your whereabouts.”

“It’s your medical facility. You tell the cops anything you want.”

He waits for her to mention his apartment. Sato must have given her that.

Elektra says nothing, and it’s impossible to tell why. It could be he’s called her bluff. She doesn’t want to explain Frank’s arrest to Matt – to Red. She’d like Frank to go freely, of his own volition.

But her silence is calculating. She has planned for this moment and the ones that follow. She isn’t calling the cops because Frank might still be useful. He might still have a purpose. At what, Frank can’t know. Fisk isn’t her priority, and she has to realize that he isn’t going to simply let Red
go.

She abandons pretense with a smirk - condescension disguised as politesse. “Frank – may I call you Frank?”

“No.”

The smirk turns into a full-blown smile. “Castle, then. Or perhaps Mr. Castle is more to your liking.” The gurney is almost ready; Red hasn’t moved a damn muscle. He’s really fucking out. Frank steps away from the window. Elektra blocks him. “Your presence here is no longer needed. Matthew will be coming with me for the duration of his recovery. I’ll see to it that he receives the best possible care.”

“I told you I wasn’t leaving him,” Frank reminds her.

“That would be a first,” Elektra replies. “Why break with tradition?”

He looks at her with new eyes, “The hell does that mean?”

“Everybody always leaves Matthew.”

Frank scoffs. He doesn’t. Can’t seem to cut loose from the kid come hell or high water. “You speaking from experience?”

Elektra’s stare narrows. “I died for him. I didn’t abandon him: I was taken from him. And despite all that, I came back for him. I came back and saved him.”

She doesn’t believe most of what she’s just said. But it’s not about what she believes: it’s about what Red believes, and she’s damn right that the kid is going to see her resurrection as some kind of divine providence.

But that’s not all he’ll see: “You came back and carved a bunch of people’s faces off. Made a whole bunch more disappear. You think—” Frank lines up for a real good shot right where it hurts, ending this. “You think he’s going to want you. That he’s going to love you because…because you’re the one who came back for him, you’re the one who save him. And he’s gonna…what? Stand by your side and be King of the Ninjas or some shit?”

Her laugh is terse, tightly wound, like a blade being drawn. “Matthew would never join the Hand. And I’d never ask that of him.”

“You wouldn’t have to ask though, would you? Not the type of girl who does a lot of asking.”

“I’m asking you,” she says curtly, “to leave. Last chance, Castle.”

They’ve been through this. “What’re you gonna do when I don’t?”

Elektra’s solution is elegant in its simplicity. “I’m going to walk away.”

He’s not about to die, then; she would want that honour herself. He’s about to be inconvenienced. “You got another thing coming.”

“I could say that same to you,” Elektra replies sweetly.

Again, she hasn’t thought this through: “Kid’s gonna see right through your shit. Been cutting and running from everyone lately. He’s gonna make damn sure to get the hell away from
you.”

Her confidence is astounding. “He never could before.”

Fisk has never threatened Red’s best friend before, but hell if Frank’s going to tell her that. He leaves Red to break the new, shatter the girl’s expectations in one fell swoop. Gonna sound way better coming from him. Crush the pretty minx’s ego right quick. “He’s leaving you, sweetheart. And when he does—""

Elektra sighs exhaustedly, “You’ll be waiting. You. The Punisher.”

Frank flexes his wrists, his knuckles, his neck. He takes stock of his opponents dotting the hallways. None of them have drawn their weapons. The one with his duffel has disappeared. Time to walk away has definitely passed.

He’s got two behind and four in front, lingering around the exit where Sato’s starting to head with Red’s gurney. The heavy double doors open. A few of the lingering medical personnel help Sato guide Red out of the building into the night.

Fucking sun isn’t out yet. Hell night’s still on.

“Let’s get on with it, then.”

Elektra draws a pair of long gloves out of her pocket, pulling them on gracefully over her hands as she walks towards the activity at the end of the hall. She doesn’t acknowledge his having spoken or moved; can’t lie about what she doesn’t know. “Good night, Mr. Castle.”

The first blow comes towards his back. Frank dodges. He catches the ninja by the neck, shoves the bastard into the wall, punches him, and drops him to the floor. Then there’s another two ninjas, one on either of his arms. Frank kicks the wall, throwing the three of them back on the floor.

He’s up first, racing towards the exit. The door is swinging shut. Elektra just left. An engine is running outside. There’s still time before they get away. Still time.

A fuse ignites in a deep line beneath his shoulder blades. Blood spatters on the crisp, white wall to his left. Frank hears the blade after the fact, when his knees hit the floor, when his skin opens in a gasp, and heat streams down his back. By then, he can track it, katana singing as it swings out of the way of the next attack.

Five versus one. Shitty odds, but Frank makes due. He get his ass up and starts throwing punches, kicks, blocks. He grabs one ninja by his yuppie fucking collars and uses the dumbass as a meat shield against his buddies. He takes another by the neck, tossing him like a tonne of bricks into two others. Another comes up bobbing and weaving until his friends join back in, grabbing Frank by the arms and throwing him on the ground to get kicked from all sides, all directions.

Frank rolls. He grabs at the feet. He snaps one ninja’s ankle and tosses him backwards. He kicks another in the knee, in the waist, lands a punch across the ninja’s face that knocks him flat. But he’s thrust into the wall by three of them, the fuckers. The katana sings out in stunning soprano. Frank, in the midst of trying to break the arms that have him pinned, gets the hilt of the weapon snapped against his nose before the point of the blade shoots towards his neck.

The katana stops just below his Adam’s apple, piercing the skin. He moves, he dies; the choice is his. Has been since she showed up. This is the only way it was ever going to play out, and Elektra knew it. She bided her fucking time and got exactly what she wanted.
Frank snarls. “Yeah, go on, go on. Go on, kill me. Because it’s the only fucking way you’re going to stop me. Two can play at this fucking game. I’m coming back. I’m coming back.”

The engine peels away from the building. The katana finally leaves Frank’s neck, and the ninjas yank him off the wall. They drag him, kicking and fighting, further into the building.

He wakes up hitting the pavement. Sunlight screaming down on him, blood oozing out of his swollen face, his lacerated back. Frank drags his head off the concrete, a long stream of bloody mucous trailing out through his lips as he does.

His duffel lands next to him.

Frank looks up. They’ve dropped him on the waterfront; literally hauled his broken, bloodied ass out of the trunk of a town car and thrown him on the ground. One of the ninjas slams the trunk; the other makes a disgusted sound at the sight of Frank. They both walk back to their seats and have driven off before Frank lifts himself off the pavement.

Oh, how fucking nice of them: dropping him off outside Pier 90, literally fifty feet from a slew of cops and cruisers. Frank grabs his duffel and starts off, trying to hide his limp and his pain, his broken face – more recognizable, thanks to his mugshots, than his healed one. Shit, shit, shit – he doesn’t look behind him. He hoofs it across 12th Ave and doesn’t stop until he’s got some cover in an alley.

Frank digs through his bag: everything’s in there, because they can’t have the Punisher picked up without his custom colts. He digs through the shit, searching for anything. Some ideas. He needs shelter. He needs bandages. He shifts his shoulders, wincing. Blood sluices down his back. Shit, he needs stitches, and he can’t stitch up his own back.

He digs for his phone in the bag. Fucking thing’s dead. There’s another: Matt’s. Red’s. The kid’s. It still has battery power, but hell if Frank can use it. The thing talks at him every time he hits a button instead of doing what he needs. Frank chuckes it back into his duffel. Where the fuck is he gonna go. Where the fuck.

Shit. There’s only one place he knows in Hell’s Kitchen. One person he knows won’t turn him in to the hospital or the cops. One person who loves Matt Murdock more than she hates the Punisher.

Shit.

Frank zips up his bag. He starts walking.

Happy reading!
The door to her building has been upgraded. When Frank was last here, he picked the lock easily. He had full access to the building, catching those cops at her door completely off-guard. He doesn’t bother trying it today. The landlord must have put in a call to national security for that door and deadbolt. Or maybe a certain reporter argued on behalf of the tenants after her apartment got shot at, and her lawyer-friend backed her up.

Good for her; bad for Frank. He takes cover where the steps to her apartment meet the wall and waits.

Eventually, the front door opens. Plain, dumb luck has her heels snapping against the concrete. She’s down the stairs and hailing a cab before the door slams behind her.

Frank inches out from his hiding spot just as a cab pulls up. “Karen.”

She starts, turns; one hand flies into her purse while the other slams against the cab, fumbling for the door handle. That look in her eyes catches Frank off-guard. Always has. Fear isn’t usually
an advantage in a fight, but for Karen, fear is strength. Fear is power. Once her hands are shaking and her lips are trembling, adrenaline lights a spark in her eyes and there is literally nothing she won’t do. Frank saw it that night he came to her apartment, when she pointed that gun in his face. She would have killed him. She would have pulled that God damn trigger, he didn’t do what she said. For Karen, being afraid is the hardest part. Everything that comes after is easy by comparison.

He raises his hands again today for her to see, but Karen doesn’t stay afraid for very long. She stops reaching for her purse, knocking on the roof of the cab instead before stepping away from it. Frank hides his face as the vehicle pulls away.

The worry has returned when he looks back. She’s finally taking it in: his bloody knuckles, his swollen face, his solitude. “Where’s Matt?” she asks.

Frank keeps his hands raised despite the blood oozing from under his shoulder blades. The movement has split open what few scabs have managed to form on his back. His vision shimmies, shakes, and Karen seems to glow. “We go inside first?” He might fall over.

Karen throws her hands up and shoots her gaze away from him, towards the ground, eyes blazing with fresh rage.

“He’s alive,” Frank offers.

“For now?” she counters, glaring at him, her lips pursing into a dagger. She softens upon looking at his bloody, broken face again. “God damn it, Frank…”

Frank doesn’t want to do this on the street. The conversation or the passing out. “He’s fine. Physically, he’s fine, and he’s going to stay that way.”

Karen scowls at him. Her head shakes in a series of tiny no-s. This is Murdock they’re talking about, and Frank’s the fucking Punisher. Karen rightfully throws her hands up again in furious surrender before marching back up her steps, discretely gesturing for him to follow.

The holes in her drywall have been patched and repainted; her windows have new panes. Karen locks the door behind him. Frank drops the duffel in the corner. His hand then falls against the wall and stays there, collecting his weight.

He pushes himself upright and forces himself to let go, to stay the course. Concussion, blood loss, bruises; aches and pains and exertion: Frank knows these things. He trusts these things. “Place looks good,” he says as if his head isn’t a swollen meat sack. As if they’re two old friends.

Karen moves towards her couch to drop off her bag, kicking off her heels along the way. “Not the first time I’ve needed my drywall patched,” she replies in a stern tone. Frank wonders if this isn’t the first time someone shot up her place, too. Her voice goes soft suddenly. Rage quits simmering and takes up residence in her tone like cold iron, “Jesus, Frank, your back-“

He checks the carpet where he’s stepped, worried he’s left a trail of blood. He hasn’t. She’s finally gotten a look at his wound, is all. Karen takes him by the shoulder. She pushes him gently to get a better look at the cut. Her hand falls away to cover her mouth. The shock drains the colour from her face.

Frank stops her from pointing out the obvious bad news. “Needs stitches. You got sewing thread? A needle?”

“A medical licence?” Karen adds forcefully.
“Nah. Just pop a couple knots in there. Keep me from bleeding to death.”

She scoffs, knowing as well as he does that bleeding to death isn’t the worst of their problems. Still, she moves to the writing desk nearby, digging through one of the drawers until she retrieves an old cookie tin. Maria had one like that. Didn’t even sew, but she had it filled with needles, bobbins, ribbons, and small scraps of fabric. Lisa liked to play with it; she’d sew badges she’d give away to friends and family. Made him one that looked like Cap’s shield when he shipped out. Damn thing faded in the desert sun and eventually unwound, but the idea of it is so clear in his head that Frank sees stars on the edge of his vision.

“What the hell happened?”

He blinks. Karen digs through the tin’s contents. She finds a wheel of needles and a thimble and several plastic-wrapped collections of threads. Complimentary personal sewing kits from motels. “On the phone last night, you said Matt was sleeping. You made it sound like everything was fine.”

“Lot’s happened since then,” is all Frank can say.

“Fisk?”

Frank hums, shakes his head. His mouth tastes cottony and feels that way too. She’s going to have to hurry. No universal donor is coming to save him.

He waits for Karen to open the bathroom door before stepping inside. There’s barely enough room for one of them, let alone two, but neither are about to let Punisher’s blood stain the carpet. Frank’s already taken a big risk by coming here. He can’t go leaving a trace.

Karen puts the needle and thread on the counter of her sink. She sidesteps out of the tiny space. “I need to call my editor,” she says, “but then you are telling me everything.”

Everything. Frank wonders where the hell to start. How he lied about the infection, why he lied about the infection; that there’s a secret organization that call themselves the Hand who can bring people back from the dead? He lets the chaos in his head settle to a productive din, breathing through the rolling barrage of thoughts - got you, Red and tomorrow. Tomorrow, baby. I’ll read it tomorrow. Daddy’s tired…

STOP.

Frank follows Karen’s voice away from Lisa’s childish pleading. She speaks quietly with her editor in the other room, feigning illness: “Sorry, Ellison, that I didn’t call sooner. Thought I could work through this.” The lie prompts Frank to make himself useful. He pulls off his ruined t-shirt, swallowing a grunt as his shoulders pull against the open slash on his back.

Shit, he looks bad. Fucking ninjas did a number on him. The katana left a clean slice through his skin, a pair of thin, curling lips under his shoulder blades. Too shallow to reach his spine but deep enough to make him think twice about moving much. The rest of him is a smattering of bumps and bruises. A few cuts where the skin snapped from their laying into him. No broken ribs, but there’s a growing ache when he breathes from swelling. This is topped off by his face, which is a disaster. Two shiners in the making, a cut on his left cheek, split lips, and a broken nose, which Frank waits to straighten until Karen is off the phone.

There’s a series of tiny cracks that build into an explosion. Frank growls, huffing through the pain like a bull about to charge. Blood drains over his lips into the sink below him. He gets the
water running, washing the traces of it away before splashing some on his face and scalp.

He opens his eyes and Karen’s there, offering him a towel. Frank takes it, scrubbing at his face, neck, and head. She grabs a first aid kid from under the sink and hands him other things: gauze and steri-strips. As he finishes with his face, “What happened?”

“What do you know, about Murdock?” he doesn’t want to waste time on an explanation about Elektra if Karen already knows. “He tell you about what he does, how he does what he does?”

She shifts from foot to foot, her eyes widening briefly from just how much she knows. “He said he told me everything.”

That’s helpful. Or not. Red doesn’t know the definition of forthcoming. “He tell you about his girl?”

“Elektra?” Frank gives her slight nod between bracing the swollen arch of his nose with steri-strips. Karen toes the floor of her bathroom, thinking. “Yeah, he said they…met in college and dated for a while. He…” her voice goes quiet. Frank glances at her, worried it’s his hearing that’s the problem. Turns out it’s Karen struggling to find words. “He told me it was over. That it had been over for a long time. She…Elektra…had been trained by the same man who trained Matt, apparently, but she wasn’t…she wasn’t like him.”

Kid has a knack for fucking understatement. Frank lets her continue, splashing water in his mouth to wash the bloody mucous out of his throat. “She was killed in a fight with a-” Karen sighs, searching for words again, but this time they’re words she can believe instead of words she can accept, “-a secret, ancient ninja army. One that Matt admitted he didn’t fully understand.”

Frank stops pulling punches. “They took him.”

Karen pauses, trying to catch up with the conversation. “The secret, ancient ninja army?”

“And his girlfriend,” he adds.

“The one who was killed?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not-“

“Shouldn’t be, no,” Frank pushes past her to take a seat on the edge of the tub. He lets his slashed back drain into the basin behind him. Karen waits for further explanation. Frank sighs, recognizing the interrogating tactic even if he can’t appreciate it. “When you called last night, he was sick. Leg got infected.” He can see her shock and fury in his peripheral vision, the way her head twists atop her neck to survey the magnitude of what he’s said. Frank keeps talking, tries to make the pile of shit he’s in seems smaller. “Doc couldn’t get his temp down. She sold us out. Called in this ninja army and Murdock’s undead girl.” He gets to the conclusion. “They took him.”

Karen draws a breath. One of her bony hands balls into a fist, and Frank readies himself to catch the swing she’s about to take at him before it lands. Except that she’s not about to take a swing. She’s just pissed, chest heaving with rage.

He nods, taking it, “I’m gonna get him back.”
Karen storms out of the bathroom.

Glass clinking and a cupboard door slamming is his only response. Frank drops his hand into his hand, letting the skin stretch apart further on his back. The sting blasts through the murkiness of shock as it settles in, lets him face Karen head-on when she stomps back into the bathroom. She has a bottle of whiskey in hand. Cheap shit. The top’s off and on the counter in a second.

Frank shakes his head, relishing the burn from his back. Pain is a better anesthetic than liquor. “I don’t need that,” he informs her.

“No for you, asshole,” Karen replies. She toasts him before taking a long pull straight from the bottle. She slams the bottle down, grabs her needle and thread, and steps into the tub. Fear is the hardest part; it’s all downhill from there for Karen. “You are lucky I was a member of 4H in high school. Now keep talking.”

There’s not much more to tell, but Frank stops looking at their conversation as a fact-finding mission on Karen’s part and more of a staying-conscious mission on him. No, he doesn’t know how the ninjas brought her back. Yes, it was definitely her; Murdock even confirmed it. No, she hasn’t killed him; she wants him alive.

The conversation ends when the pain finally catches up with Frank. When he can’t deny that there is a needle diving in and out of an open flap in his skin, that Karen’s blood-slickened fingers slip and pinch and burn. He shifts forward, propped on his arms propped on his knees. Walls are melting, floor’s bobbing; his fingers have gone cold. Lisa’s voice is back in his head, and he can’t understand what she’s saying, but the tiredness is back. His bones ache with an exhaustion he hasn’t felt since before the carousel.

“What do you think she wants from him?” Karen asks.

Frank has to remember what ‘him’ they’re talking about first. He ends up answering to avoid the phantom rumble in his head of tomorrow, baby girl. I’ll read to you tomorrow. “Hell if I know.” He doesn’t really care much about finding an answer. Red’s Girl obviously isn’t in for killing the kid, but that doesn’t mean shit. This is a broad who plays the long and the short in equal measure, who takes her secrets to the grave. They’ll know what she has planned when her plot is underway.

Sensing the conversation is over, Karen grabs the whiskey again. She pours it over her handiwork, and the sting of the whiskey helps drown out the sound of Lisa’s laughter as the carousel takes her around again.

The subsequent silence swells with Karen. Her uncertainty meets his apathy to the point where he’s surprised that she speaks first. “Thank you,” she smooths a hand over his upper back. Her fingertips peel a fresh cut over his shoulders. “Thank you for staying with him, Frank.”

He gets his ass up and away from her. The dizziness, the chills: they hit Frank like old friends, spurring him forwards. He scrubs his head, grabs his shirt off the floor, every intention of putting it back on. Getting back out there. “My car’s in the East Side,” he tells her. “You give me a ride, you never have to see me again. I’ll get Murdock back and get gone.”

Karen rolls her eyes. She throws on the tap in the tub, washing her hands and feet and the porcelain. His blood turns the water baby pink.

Frank speaks up; she probably didn’t hear him. “I said-“
She shuts the taps off. “I heard you, Frank.”

“Let’s go, then.”

Karen towels off her hands and feet. “You said he was sick, right?”

“Getting better by the hour,” Frank says, hating that it’s a threat as much as reassurance now. The better Red gets, the more likely his girl is to take him away.

Karen makes a good point nonetheless. “She isn’t going to risk taking him out of the city, then. She’s going to want access to doctors and medical supplies, things that leave a trail. One we can follow without rushing off into broad daylight when there’s a very large reward for one of our arrests. When you just had your ass handed to you in a fight.”

“Trail’s getting cold,” Frank reminds her, but the line sounds hollow, tinny. The acoustics of the bathroom mess with his hearing or maybe it’s those injuries, the ones Karen keeps talking about, catching up with him.

“The trail’s already cold, but it’s not going anywhere. And you’re in no position to start following it.” He feels the blood-crusted t-shirt pulling against his hand. Karen’s wrapped her fingers around it. She isn’t letting go. “Besides, I can call around while you’re washing up.”

Frank shakes his head. “No. No. You see this? You see what they do?” he makes sure she’s looking him straight in his mangled face. His ballooning nose and raccoon eyes, split cheek and lips: not a look he wants for her. “This ain’t the half of it. I did not come here to drag you into this.”

A smile – exasperated with disbelief – appears on her face, “You have used me as bait!”

Jesus, they can’t do this now. “Still sore about that, huh?”

“You put me right in harm’s way! So don’t you dare tell me to stay out of this.”

Frank shakes his head. “You do not get involved in this.”

She yanks the bloody t-shirt out of his hand and acts like she hasn’t heard him. “Wash up and get some rest.”

The intensity in her eyes, the way she stands her fucking ground, it’s so much like Maria – like Lisa – that Frank gets lost. He has one yelling and the other screaming, doors are slamming. Neither one for starting fights but, boy, could they end them with sound and fury and gunfire’s blazing, and they’re in pieces. They used to dig in their heels till the earth hit their knees when it came to a fight, but suddenly they’re in pieces on the ground.

He blinks and finds Karen a step further away from him, drawing breaths like she’s only just realized who she’s been challenging, who she’s convincing to stay. Frank takes a step back, too. He brushes his newly stitched back against the bathroom door for clarity. “You don’t get near ‘em. You don’t ask questions, you don’t go snooping.”

“Yes, fine,” Karen declares. Of course she understands him. In the most literal possible terms.

“I mean it,” he growls at her. “You don’t do a damn thing.”

“Fine,” she snaps, storming out of the bathroom. She returns with a fresh towel. His blood-sullied t-shirt is gone. “Wash up.”
Frank accepts the towel mutely. There’s a word for this. He’s said it before, heard it said a thousand times since the kid moved in, but it’s impossible when she’s looking at him. Big doe eyes and platinum blonde hair; freshly plastered drywall looming behind her. He pushes the memory of bullets chewing up her apartment, his hand in her hair, her frantic gasps of breath on his neck, his racing thoughts of not this time. Not this time, you fucking bastards. He pushes all that shit back where it belongs only to have it meld with newer memories he can’t shake so easily. Red’s sweaty fists wrapped in his bloody tee, staggered breathing, and a stricken, desperate plea to save Foggy.

Christ, it’s like the kid goes looking for falling ceilings to push people out from under.

“Thanks,” he mutters, needing to close the damn door to give them some distance. His gratitude isn’t simply for the towel.

Karen nods in response. She shifts uncomfortably and seems to want the door closed as badly as he does. “I’m putting on some coffee. You want some?”

Frank sighs. Best news he’s heard all day. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

The feeling is similar to the one at the hospital after the Irish: this muggy, druggy haze. Storm clouds and fog. World’s gone soft, warm, and dark. Stuffy. He can’t breathe through his nose. Frank drags his face across the surface of a pillow; he waits for a response and receives none. Whoever he hears out there isn’t watching. They’re moving across a tiled floor. Digging through drawers. Opening and closing a heavy metal door.

He used to wake up like this. When he came back. Jet-lagged and tired, kids running him wild, he’d collapse into bed for most of the afternoon and wake up to Maria in the kitchen. Dinner in the oven. But the house is on fire. He made it that way. And Maria – well, whatever’s left of her – is six feet underground.

Frank rises off the pillow in one swift motion. Pain sparks through him, breaking through the haze. He reaches for his gun but can’t find it. Ends up punching at the night table and nearly takes out the glass of water there. He’s already got the target in his sights across the room, because that’s how he operates. That’s how his eyes work. He aims, he fires, then he finds something else to shoot at.

Jesus, it’s a good thing he doesn’t have a gun. It’s Karen he’s staring down. Standing in her kitchen wearing oven mitts and a shocked expression. He’s lying on her bed. Shit, why is he in bed? He grips a fistful of the blankets bunched around his waist. “How long I been out?”

Karen rips off her oven mitts, “Couple hours.” Frank comes to vaguely recall his lengthy shower followed by a string of coffees and some plain toast, most of which they consumed in silence. At some point, she started working through files on the couch. Frank took the bed to catch a few winks.

She points to a steaming casserole dish on the stovetop. “I made dinner.”

Frank isn’t sure. The sun’s down. He should be heading out. Can’t exactly do that with what little clothing he’s wearing though. The t-shirt is long gone. Pants, too. He traded those for a bedsheet. Karen took them and his socks for the laundry. He’s about to ask – he has to ask. He doesn’t want to, but there are gaps. There are always gaps in his memory when it comes to the little shit. But he never has to pose the awkward question, because he spots a pile of clothing folded at the foot of the bed.
“I ran out while you were sleeping. Picked you up some things. I think it’s the right size.”

The response pours out of him automatically: “You shouldn’t’ve done that.” Risking enough by harbouring him, and now she’s made a supply run: single woman picking up men’s clothing in his size. Frank rises with the sheet wrapped around his waist. There’s streaks of blood on it and her pillowcase. Shit. More trace. “Shouldn’t’ve have done that.”

“Cops would have been at my front door by now.”

“And these ninjas would have been at your throat.” He grabs the stack of clothing, searching for cover. Her apartment has none. The whole thing is open concept. He can see her, she can see him. Bathroom seems so damn far away, one long walk past her, through her space. But if he paces at the foot of the bed one more time without saying something, without doing something, the ninjas had better get their asses in here. He can’t take this shit.

Karen seems to feel the same. She finally realizes this is happening, straightens, nods twice, and then turns around to face her stove.

Frank makes quick work of the process. Tears into the new package of briefs and socks; unfolds the pants – his, cleaned and dried; rips the tags off the new t-shirt and hoodie. Pulls everything on. When he’s done, he walks over to the edge of the kitchen. Karen turns back around.

“Everything…uh…” she gives him a once over. “Everything fit okay?”

She can see that it does, but Frank doesn’t blame her for asking. The obvious question spares them the other concerns. “Yes, ma’am.”

Karen nods, backing up. “Uh, it’s chicken casserole. Nothing…nothing fancy, but…you should eat something. You’ve only had toast and coffee since this morning.”

Frank nods in return. Sure, food. Then get the car. Then get out of her life. Then get Red.

He ought to have known something was up. Karen had to clear papers and folders off her couch so they could sit down to eat. She moved a legal notepad with coiling script from her coffee table. An open laptop with several tabs open sat on the kitchen counter. She turned the sound off, but e-mails continue arriving. Frank inhales his meal the second it’s offered, but she sits there five solid minutes during dinner and takes to staring at the surface of her coffee table with a guarded, guilty look in her bright blue eyes.

Frank rolls his eyes. She may as well have it tattooed on her forehead.

“I know you told me not to look into this-“

He puts his fork down. Let’s the clatter of silverware on the table end that thought right there. “I meant it.”

“She paid us,” Karen insists. She grabs one of the folders from where she stacked them and opens it to a page of numbers. Transactions. The last days of Nelson and Murdock, attorneys at law. Frank pulls the folder towards him, eyeing the single highlighted entry. A massive credit to the account made shortly before his trial.
“Elektra hired Nelson and Murdock. She wanted legal representation, Matt told me, while she investigated some of her father’s old business dealings.”

Frank considers this. He eyes the transaction more closely. “Orpheus International. Probably a shell corporation.” Red’s Girl doesn’t strike him as a CEO in more than name only.

“Very much a shell corporation. One that was acquired shortly after Elektra’s death by the Roxxon Corporation along with several of her other financial assets.” She moves to flip over the financial record and must notice the look on his face. She thinks it’s about the Roxxon connection, but Frank seethes because she’s digging herself into this shit with Red.

Karen doesn’t consider that. She’s got eyes for the hunt and only the hunt. “I know, I know! It sounds like a stretch. But Roxxon has always had shady dealings. It’s entirely possible they’re affiliated with something like the Hand. And...and…” She flips the first record over to reveal a stack of papers, handwritten notes mainly, along with map of Manhattan she’s started to mark with x-s and circles. “Roxxon owns a slew of property holdings throughout New York, but particularly in the Upper West Side. Business spaces, residential units-“

“Private medical facilities,” Frank adds, regarding her steadily. He focuses on the pain in his back, the slow and steady burn, instead of the pressure exploding through his chest from the sight of her.

Karen folds her hands over her knees, preparing for her closing argument. “Look, maybe I can’t...fight ninjas or hear heartbeats or put on a mask to fight crime, but you don’t need that. We need to find Matt, and I am very, very good at finding things. Let me...let me do this.”

Frank sees the trap coming a mile away. He continues eating. “You’re not really asking me,” he scoffs.

Beside him, Karen finally picks up her plate and starts on her dinner. “No.”

Happy reading!
“Disarm you with a smile
And leave you like they left me here
To wither in denial
The bitterness of one who’s left alone.”

~Smashing Pumpkins, “Disarm”

Elektra’s apartment is a penthouse suite, the dimensions of which remain a mystery even once Matt becomes mobile again. He uses the crutches as a cane, tapping out a narrow hallway outside of his room. It brings him left to the master bedroom, right to the kitchen, living, and dining area.

The whole space resists reading. Where Frank’s apartment was cluttered with sensory stimuli, a disorienting mess of sounds and smells and drafts, Elektra’s space is carefully controlled. The air is filtered and temperature is consistent. Sounds are muffled. Matt makes out the ghostly scents of service staff lingering in the space, but Elektra’s smell is the strongest. She is deeply embedded in every nook and cranny. This has been her home for a while.

What’s worse is the calculated nature of it all. Matt wanders into the master bedroom, larger and grander than his, and the smells become frenzied. The air tussles with competing aromas – sly perfumes softening the Tiffany-blue tang of jewellery; a few outfits, their tags still attached, mingle with the cloud of fresh bed linens, cast aside. Elektra was deciding what to wear between silk, satin,
Matt’s t-shirt prickles at his skin suddenly in alarm, the smell cloying his nostrils. The open bedroom door takes on new meaning. He retreats back down the hall.

There’s a terrace attached to the kitchen and dining area, one that wraps around the corner of the building. Matt lets himself out into the city’s torpor. His excitement fades almost as quickly as it appears. The penthouse is so high up that he has no sense of depth, no sense of distance. He can’t hear a ninja breathing down his neck from the rooftop any more than he can place which direction the roll of the Hudson is coming from.

Matt re-enters the apartment, buzzing with frustration, with anger, unable to shake the feeling of ropes tightening around his arms and chest. The sense that he’s imprisoned in more than just body the longer he’s in the apartment. Elektra has had four days to decide which doors to leave open, which doors to lock; what to wear, what to leave lying on her bed.

He avoids the couch where Elektra is currently lounging to make a lap of the sitting room. It’s massive; he aches all over by the time he’s halfway around. But Matt perseveres. He wants to know this place. Where the weapons are; where the exit is, how many people are waiting on the other side; how many more tenants there are in the building and if they’re affiliates of the Hand: everything. Matt wants the lay of the land.

Eventually, he finds what he’s searching for: the front door. Elektra hovers in his perception, feeling closer than she is by how locked down Matt’s senses feel. His focus keeps leading back to her, always her.

“Matthew?”

He plays with the handle. The doors are unlocked, but that hardly means he’s free to go. Muffled sounds of activity play on the other side. Matt catches the aromas of shoe polish, leather jackets, and folded steel. “We’re under guard.”

“Naturally.”

“From someone coming or someone going?”

She avoids the bait just as she’s done since he awoke. Instead, Elektra shrugs. Matt rounds on her, glowering.

Elektra’s face pinches. He can hear her brow furrowing, the slight purse in her lips. He remembers the nuns at St. Agnes’s making similar expressions when one of their charges was being willful. “Oh, don’t look at me like that, Matthew. You’re not a prisoner; you’re a patient. A terrible one. Three surgeries in two weeks. It’s like you don’t want to be able to walk again.”

“So I’m free to go.” He wants to hear her answer and the heartbeat that goes with it. The flurry of her pulse as she rushes to keep him contained.

“Of course!” but Elektra finds a loophole, as usual. “When you’re suitably recovered.“

“According to whom?”

“The doctor.”

She is always happy to defer authority to people she can control. Matt listens to Elektra’s hands playing against the rich embroidery on the throw pillows. He stifles his irritation; God, she
could pretend she isn’t enjoying this. She definitely plays innocent well enough.

Elektra shuts down his unspoken accusation, “I’m not holding you captive.”

“But you are holding me for the time being.”

“As you recover? Absolutely.”

“That’s not—” he isn’t going down that road with her. It’s a trap he refuses to play into. “You know that I’m not staying here.”

She huffs, disconsolate. “That’s gratitude for you.”

“I’m grateful. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done. But I told you before: I won’t be party to this.”

Elektra abandons his line of argument for logic. “What is your rush to be out of here? You’re not going to be fighting Wilson Fisk like that. Not going to be fighting anyone like that.”

But this isn’t about him; it’s about the people making a play for his city, about the ways they intend to do it and the ways he has to stop them no matter what state his leg is in. That includes her.

Matt tells her as much: “You will.”

Elektra scoffs, “I don’t have anyone to fight right now. The Hand are standing down, awaiting orders.”

He taps a crutch against the door. Footsteps tread gently across the carpet towards him from the outside. “They’re armed,” Matt notes, recalling the short burst of steel that came through the crack in the door.

“They’re a ninja army, and I’m the Black Sky! Their Chosen One! Of course they’re armed!” Still, Elektra shrugs, “I made it clear they’re not to use their weapons on you.”

“Just on people trying to get into the building.”

“People trying to get on this floor,” Elektra nods to him knowingly. “I hope you’re not expecting someone.”

He matches the barb with one of his own: “You are.”

Her heart beat elevates ever-so-slightly, loath to have given part of the game away. She unfolds her arms, though, and stands up from the couch, causing her pulse to return to its resting rate. “I don’t want us interrupted by anyone,” she allows him that much at least, before adding, “You nearly died, Matthew. I won’t have that happen again, and I’ll use any resources in my power to make sure it doesn’t.”

When it’s clear he doesn’t want that more than staying here, Elektra softens her tone to one of genuine understanding. “You’re not party to anything,” she promises. “I keep telling you, Matthew. I have everything I want.”

“What happens when you don’t?”

He’s happy she doesn’t bother to answer. Having it said aloud will compel him to do something both foolish and necessary. There has to be something he can do, somewhere he can go,
someone he can call. But Frank’s in the wind; if he is coming back - if - the Hand is poised to stop him, and Matt doubts Elektra gave her guards the same orders for dealing with the Punisher as they did Daredevil.

The doctor arrives, and Matt can’t help but be surprised by the sudden change in atmosphere. Sound cuts through the controlled quiet. He makes out the muffled sound of an elevator opening, of footsteps padding down the hall. A draft rushes into the sitting room, giving Matt an impression of the space beyond the front door. Three ninjas stand in wait. Armed, dangerous. They can’t be all of them, merely the ones set to defend this floor.

The door closes, cutting him off so abruptly that Matt relives all those untethered feelings from waking here. Thankfully, he finds a new point of focus quickly.

“Doctor.”

Sato makes her way slowly into the sitting room. She sets her kit on the coffee table near where Matt’s leg is resting. Her heartbeat is an unrepentant march in her chest despite the tension building throughout her body.

He lets the silence stand between them. The longer he does, the more her nerves tighten. The shallower her respiration becomes. She holds her tongue while pulling on fresh gloves, arranging and rearranging items from her kit.

She reaches for his leg; Matt moves it out of the way. He checks that Elektra’s heartbeat is still in the master bedroom before asking, “How long?”

Sato plays oblivious. “How long what?” It’s a bad fit on her, especially given how much she knows. Being privy to Matt’s confession has made her second guess her reactions. Work is the only thing that comes naturally, and she isn’t getting the chance to use it as a buffer for fear.

“How long have you been working for the Hand?” Matt listens to that heartbeat of hers for leverage. “I’ll know if you’re lying to me.”

Her pulse enters a light jog. Hard call as to whether it’s out of insincerity or fear. “I didn’t want to come back. I wasn’t going to ever come back.”

“How long have you been working for the Hand?” Matt listens to that heartbeat of hers for leverage. “I’ll know if you’re lying to me.”

Her pulse enters a light jog. Hard call as to whether it’s out of insincerity or fear. “Since Sunday.”

“This time,” Matt challenges her.

She takes the correction in stride, drawing a few measured breaths to calm herself down. “I didn’t want to come back. I wasn’t going to ever come back.”

“Then why did you?”

Sato has a hard time conjuring the words necessary to explain herself. Finally, she whispers, “I couldn’t let them go back to Metro General.”

Her heartbeat flutters from the half-truth. There’s more to the story than just that. Matt presses, suspecting the real cause of her mutiny even if she won’t say it aloud: “You’d rather work for them?”

She snaps, “I’d rather the devil I know than the one I don’t.”

“Rather a sword to your neck than a gun to your head,” is more like it.
“I can anticipate the sword better than the gun.”

He tries to form a counterargument, but there isn’t one. What is he going to say - that Frank wasn’t planning on killing her? That Frank isn’t going to kill her now that she’s betrayed him? The best Matt can muster is, “If you think the Hand will give you protection from Frank, you’re wrong.”

Sato doesn’t react. She must not be banking on protection. Maybe she doesn’t need it.

Matt’s blood runs cold. “What happened to Frank?”

Sato’s tension mounts. Her next breath is a small one. Matt feels a sickening twist of relief and dread in the same miserable instant. “I don’t know.”

“Is he alive?”

“I…don’t know.”

And there is pain in not-knowing, real gut-wrenching horror inside her. Certainty would give her peace of mind, but Sato seems to have enough grounds to fear for her life from more than just the army of ninjas.

Just like Elektra sees fit to post guards outside the apartment door.

Sato continues, “He rode with you and stayed during your treatment, but I don’t know what happened after we left the facility.”

It’s the first truly honest thing she’s said this whole time.

Matt combines Sato’s explanation with what Elektra told him. His memory is a mess of jagged edges and smoke. Moments of clarity crumbling into hazy recollections. But that hand on his sternum – he feels that so damn clearly. The expectation on both Sato and Elektra’s parts is equally palpable. Frank Castle is alive and free and quite possibly coming for them.

He can’t…he can’t think about that. It doesn’t make sense. None of it does. Frank Castle doesn’t stay just to leave. He doesn’t stay. He wages efficient, bloody wars: gets in and gets gone. Sato has good reason to be afraid if he’s gunning for her.

Matt’s mind springs into action: “Did they take his phone?”

“I don’t know.”

“Did they take yours?”

Sato’s pulse takes off in a sprint.

“Doctor-“

But Elektra is strolling down the hallway, commenting about what they should have for dinner that evening. Sato makes quick work of removing Matt’s cast, pretending that this is what they have been up to the entire time. Her pulse gets as close to its resting rate as it can once she settles into routine.

Elektra rubs him on the shoulders. Matt is careful to relax under her grip, to give nothing away that she can use against him. Frank might be coming after Sato; he doesn’t want to give the
Hand a reason to join in the hunt.

“His leg looks good,” Elektra comments. “Maybe it’ll stay that way this time?”

Sato gives a small, curt nod. It’s the best she can manage with so many enemies at her throat.

Matt wants another opportunity to talk to her, but he doesn’t get the chance. Elektra already gave them the opportunity to get reacquainted. She stays, supervising as Sato changes dressings, making pointed small talk. Everything that comes out of her mouth is a thinly veiled reminder of who is in charge, who’s calling the shots. Matt isn’t the only one who feels it. Sato’s respiration remains slightly elevated the whole time. Her pulse is a fearful tremble in her chest, not to mention a stunning case of déjà vu. Him on her operating table, her life on the line: this is how they first met.

…and yet it’s different somehow. Sato begged Frank to spare her. She bartered for her life. The fact that she doesn’t try that with Elektra tells Matt everything he doesn’t want to know.

He wants her phone so badly he almost asks for it before she goes, but Matt has already gotten Sato into enough trouble. He can’t ask her to make the call for him without bringing Frank to Sato’s door. So he settles on, “Take care of yourself, Doctor.”

“You too,” she replies.

The second the doors close, Matt turns to Elektra. He doesn’t have to say a word. She heaves a gargantuan sigh.

“You can stop acting like I’m going to kill everyone who steps foot through that door. Or have them killed for that matter,” Elektra laments.

He counters, “I will when I trust you’re not going to do that.”

She can’t help but laugh. “Could I ever do anything to convince you?”

“No, probably not,” especially not after what she’s done to Fisk’s men.

“Everything I’ve done, I’ve done for you, Matthew.”

The fact that she truly believes that leaves Matt reeling. He keeps waiting for her to be lying, keeps waiting for her façade to drop, but Elektra can be so terrifyingly unguarded at times. She offers her neck so easily, too easily, and Matt’s seen it be a sign of submission as many times as it’s been a trap.

Either way, Elektra wins.

Matt meditates away from the eerie stillness of the apartment for a few hours before his memories catch him, unbidden. He thinks it’s Fogwell’s at first. Work, sweat, and leather aged to perfection, jabbed to life with every new punch that hits the bag. But then there’s metal and gunpowder, a cot that smells like his sheets and his sickness, rusty pipes and calcification, and Matt has to get the hell out of his headspace before it eats him alive.

This isn’t different, he tells himself, shaking the last Frank’s apartment out of his thoughts. This isn’t worse. There is no golden age of his being kidnapped: Elektra’s methods are just a softer, dressier version of what he’s already lived through. She’s Frank with history and capital, nothing more.
He grabs his crutches, hobbling away from the screaming doubts inside his skull. Lantom’s conversation about influence mingles with the Punisher’s oath that no one else dies tonight, and Matt’s strange belief that Frank was telling the truth.

Dinner is served on the couch so Matt can stretch his leg. He isn’t hungry, but antibiotics make him queasy on an empty stomach. He forces himself through the meal so that he can stave off infection another day.

Elektra gets up suddenly, mid-bite, and disappears into the kitchen. She returns with two glasses, one smelling of agave and the other reeking of amber and malt. A tumbler is pressed into his hand. Matt almost puts it down on principle, drug interactions notwithstanding. Elektra doesn’t let him.

“Oh, have a drink with me.” She plops back down on the couch next to him, her leg pressing into his by something akin to accident. Her tequila smells sweet by comparison. “It’s barely a finger. You won’t even notice you’ve had it.”

Her glass taps against his. Matt hesitates before taking a drink. He can’t deny the appeal, though drinking with her brings him back to an uncomfortable place, one where he is aware of the strings she’s pulling. Of the fact that she was dead but is no longer.

Elektra nurses her drink, seemingly reveling in the emotional chaos she’s created for him. She makes it worse: “It’s been so long since I had a drink with someone.”

Matt takes a sip that engulfs him from the inside. Warmth washes through him, easing the tension in his muscles. He asks again, “How long have you been back?”

This time, the answer matters. “A few weeks. The Hand didn’t give the ground long to cool.” She wraps two fingers around his wrist gently, like she’s checking for his pulse. “Left me with one hell of a scar. Want to see?”

Matt doesn’t so much give permission as fails to stop her. Elektra guides his hand to her waist, then up, under her loose, cashmere sweater to a line of scar tissue on her abdomen. Matt’s fingers shake; they still remember what her blood felt like as it rushed out of her body. His heart waits in pain for hers to beat, convinced this is the end.

“What was it like?” he doesn’t want to know. Doesn’t want to ask. Shouldn’t ask. It isn’t for him to know. And yet, “What was it like to die?”

Elektra holds his hand to her waist, letting her warmth seep through him. The silence between them billows like a fog above a rainy street, unforgivingly cold. “It was like…falling asleep. A deep, dreamless sleep. A perfect sleep. It didn’t hurt, Matthew. I wasn’t afraid. I was with you.”

He’s barely noticed moving towards her, placing his other hand on her side to brace himself. Her breathing is the only thing keeping him afloat. “And after? What…what happened after?”

“I woke up.”

“No, no,” oh, God, her heart rate is speeding up. Matt grips her, trying to slow her down. He wants to hold onto this as long as possible, the moment before he asks the question. Elektra removes one hand from over his and presses it to his shoulder blade. “Before that. After…” he stumbles over the words. “When you were…”
She hasn’t slowed down. Her pulse is a worried rattle, a dreadful patter in her chest. Not from deception: from the lack of it. Elektra is on the verge of breaking a painful truth to him.

“There was n-“

“Stop.” She tries to continue; Matt shushes her again. He listens hard, forcing his hearing through the concrete walls. The elevator doors are definitely opening. “Someone’s here.”

Someone unexpected, if Elektra’s pulse is any indication. Their hands fall away from each other. She rises from the couch. “Time to leave,” she takes Matt by the hand. He hops onto his good foot, swinging his left leg off the table, but he doesn’t move away from the couch. He’s too busy listening to the thin popping sound ringing out once, twice, three times; there are two dull thuds, some groaning, a crunch of impact. Stomping follows. Weapons jangle. Combat boots pound against the floor.

Matt positions himself in front of Elektra as the front door swings open.

She unleashes a disappointed sigh through her nose. The ninja in the doorway has a similar response. Of course, he also has a gun to his head, one that prods impatiently when the silence reaches its pitch.

“Say it.”

The ninja’s scowl is audible, but he does as he’s told. “There’s a Mr. Castle here to see you.”

Then his kneecaps get shot out from under him.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

This chapter owes a great deal to Dichotomoy Studios, who came to the rescue when I got stuck on a patch of dialogue. The conversation really clarified what had to be said here. Thank you for the help!

This chapter was originally going to be from Frank’s POV, but I ran with Matt’s for a little longer, so there are definitely questions about the restraint that’s being shown here. I’m looking forward to exploring the aftermath of this as the story progresses. Nobody is going to take what happens in this chapter lying down.

Readers, dear readers, I so appreciate the wonderful support I receive from you! Thank you for the discourse in the comments section. You are lovely. Please, enjoy!

“I’d be better off red.
If all the things I’ve learned would just fall out of my head
’Cause a blade of bluegrass left a scar on my neck
And it ain’t quit hurting yet.
I’d be better off red.”

~Angaleena Presley, “Better Off Red”

Frank gives the ninja a solid kick to the face on his way into the apartment. The pained moans from the doorway cut short, but there are heartbeats thrumming slowly amidst the Punisher’s footsteps. The three ninjas are unconscious in the hallway. Not dead: unconscious, injured, but alive.

Matt waits for the other shoe to drop; it doesn’t. Ninja pulses continue to tread softly in his ears, undercutting the hard-hitting bassline of Frank’s respiration. The smell of blood washes into the apartment, prompting Matt to close his mouth against the taste. It doesn’t go away: Frank carries the scent with him, along with the smoky, peaty aromas of gunpowder and lead. He’s still armed, and his sights are set in their direction.

“Put the gun down, Frank,” Matt orders him.
“We alone?” Frank asks.

He flicks the gun in the direction of Elektra’s head as she bobs up over Matt’s shoulder. The movement stirs up the scent of blood again. Matt picks through the castoff, counting donors. He smells one in particular, aged. The smell is ruddier, headier, and when the scabs bind to sutures or steri-strips, it becomes something else entirely. Splintered, almost. Punctuated. Like sparks from a campfire stinging his throat as he breathes.

Matt tries to ask. Elektra interrupts him, “Plenty more where that came from.”

Frank doesn’t shoot her. Wants to: the muscles in his arm tense, his tendons pull, but he never lets the motion reach the trigger. Matt hisses for her to shut up, slipping an arm to her side so he can push her out of Frank’s sights. Hard to move on one leg, but he manages, using Elektra for balance.

“Wasn’t talking to you,” Frank circles around them, drawing nearer. “We alone, Red?”

“Yeah,” Matt replies quickly. The taste of blood splashes onto his tongue. Aside for the ninja carnage in the hallway, most of what he senses on Frank is from Frank from a few days ago. Sunday, bloody Sunday. “Put the gun down.”

“Yes, Frank, put the gun down.”

“Elektra,” Matt snaps. God damn it: she doesn’t have to hear Frank’s heart charging to know how damn close he is to pulling the trigger. She can see him closing in, a shark in bloody waters.

“What? He can put the gun down, can’t he? Unless there’s someone else he’s planning on shooting.”

And she would just love that. One bullet would resolve this mess they’re in so quickly. “Go on then. Get on with it.”

Matt holds his position in the line of fire. “He’s not going to shoot you.” But Frank’s pulse is damn difficult to read when it’s geared up. No telling what the hell he’ll do, only that he’s going to do something. Matt tries harder to reach him, “You’re not going to shoot her.”

She chimes in again, loving this. Revelling shamelessly. “Exactly. What would be the point?”

“Elektra!”

Frank keeps him guessing. “Won’t have to, we get the hell out of here.”

Elektra wraps a hand around his shoulder, another on the side of his neck. She releases a small, airy laugh when Matt shrinks her off, insisting, “He isn’t going anywhere. Especially if you shoot me.”

“He’s coming with me.” Regardless of whether Frank shoots her apparently.

“He isn’t going-“

Matt interjects, “You injured, Frank?”

The apartment descends into awkward quiet, unconscious ninja-hearts pitter-pattering around the homicidal rage billowing in the living room.
Elektra is nonplussed even as her breathing flutters. She takes the liberty of answering for Frank, “I suppose he does look as if he’s been in a fight. But there are an awful lot of guards in this building, Matthew.”

“Four days ago.” Those sutures sure weren’t there before Sunday night. “He was injured four days ago.”

She shrugs innocently. Her fingers trickle down Matt’s spine. “Well, I didn’t fight him.”

The blankness in front of his eyes is infuriating. He gets none of the softness from her performance, only the cold, calculating thrill of her vindication against his back. “I didn’t,” she asserts again, more convincing this time.

Matt’s disappointment bubbles up in his chest. He tracks his senses around Frank to pick out the injuries: sputtering breath says broken nose, broken capillaries and bruises run hotter than most of the skin, the blood trail centers largely on his back from a sutured laceration. Frank has been through the ringer. He stayed with Matt and got his ass handed to him, and the three ninjas in the hallway are still alive, and none of this makes any sense except Elektra shirking responsibility.

Her fingers brush the inside of his wrist. “Matthew.”

He tears himself away from her. The motion nearly sends him to the floor. Frank takes a step towards him but doesn’t get to him before Elektra does, and before Matt can say or do anything, the gun is back in play.

Elektra beams in victory. Suddenly, it seems amazing that Frank hasn’t taken the damn shot. That he would resist putting a bullet in someone who had him beaten. Someone for whom death is a non-issue. Maybe he sees it as a waste of bullet. Maybe he sees it as a waste of time. Maybe it’s not about Frank at all. Those heartbeats from the hallway definitely aren’t for his benefit, and neither is keeping Elektra unscathed.

Matt deflects, the rawness of it all too much to bear. He extricates himself from Elektra’s grasp. “Are you alright, Frank?”

The slight hitch in Frank’s respiration, that familiar stutter in his heartbeat, it brings Matt right back to the apartment in the Bronx. To those please-s and thank you-s that Frank didn’t know how to abide. The common niceties that give Frank’s gunning for kneecaps a serrated edge inside Matt’s skull. The sigh that follows brings Punisher back. There’s still a gun involved after all. “Yeah, Red. I’m good. You good?”

Matt nods mutely. He can’t actually muster the words with Elektra’s breath coiling around his spinal cord.

“Alright, so what’s the plan, then?” she chirps, peeking over Matt’s arm. Frank charges for her. Matt shoves her back behind him. “You’ve stormed the palace, found the fair damsel un-distressed. Now it’s off to some seedy underbelly for another case of septicemia?”

Him: “Elektra.”

Her: “Frank?”

Frank: “Red.”

“I’m a little surprised you’re even here,” Elektra continues. “Can’t have been easy playing
nursemaid to this one for two weeks if the Punisher had to hang up his vest to do it. I did you a favour, taking him off your hands.”

“You had him beaten,” Matt restates. He blocks out the sound of Frank’s pulse struggling to stay on beat. Something about getting beaten, about Matt’s fixation on his being beaten, inspires the same irritation in the Punisher as a thank you.

“I did nothing of the sort. I was with you.” And she was. Her tone, her respiration, it’s a promise. She isn’t lying to him.

But the unspoken truth is burning against Matt’s esophagus. Old blood and sutures. Frank’s heartbeat resuming its machine gun fire. “They’re your ninjas.”

She doesn’t deny that, but she talks around it. Her voice becomes severe, indignant. “Matthew, I was with you. I wasn’t going to leave you. What happened after that was up to him.”

Matt pulls away from her. He doesn’t leave Frank’s line of fire, but he can’t bring himself to be in her reach. “You said he left.”

“He did leave!”

She isn’t lying, which makes it worse. Matt struggles to hold himself upright as his leg spasms. “I can’t believe you…”

“I said he was fine, Matthew. And he is. He’s fine!” but the way she coos afterwards promises he might not stay that way. “Aren’t you, Frank?”

Frank doesn’t shoot her. He moves, grabbing a handful of Matt’s shirt and giving it a tug. “We’re getting out of here.”

Elektra lunges into action. Matt shoulders Frank off and out of the way, using the momentum to knock aside Elektra’s hand as it approaches. He fights her off, gently at first, but she’s so damn fast. She’s always been so damn fast. Eventually, he gets her by the wrists. Her pulse is jackrabbit-quick under his palms, a hummingbird slamming against the walls of a cage, and her respiration only becomes more unruly when Frank tries to enter the melee.

“Frank, no!” Matt tosses his head. He catches the Punisher’s elbow to his brow for the trouble. Then Frank’s twisted a fist into the collar of his shirt and is pulling him back, out of harm’s way. Neither strike is hard enough to knock him off his foot, but that war-drum heartbeat tells him that won’t last. The broken leg only buys him so many small mercies.

Elektra seems to sense that too. She weathers their exchange of blows with the thinnest amount of patience. The power in his muscles never wavers. Like Frank, she’s one twitch shy of pulling the trigger, of unleashing hell, but also like Frank, she stops just shy of following through. One bullet tilts the scales in her favour; any more fighting tilts the scales in Frank’s.

Nevertheless, Matt doesn’t dare let her go. He can’t let himself trust her, not for a second. Not even as her voice gets firm and earnest: “I didn’t want us interrupted.”

Frank sneers, “That worked out real well for you, sweetheart.”

Elektra’s heart starts into its homicidal pace. “Shut up,” Matt snaps, sighing when Frank’s heart amps up to match it. “And get off me. Give us a minute. One God damn minute, Frank!”

“Ain’t got a fucking minute, Red.”
“We could have plenty-“

“Stop, Elektra!” Matt’s skin crawls. He doesn’t want to be near them – either of them – when they’re like this. When they’re gnashing their teeth and bearing their claws and ready to rip each other’s throats out. He shoves Elektra to the side, yanks himself out of Frank’s grip, dodges Frank’s rebound, pushes at Elektra one more time…

Then his right leg gives out completely, and Elektra is using his grip to pull him towards her, and Matt can’t stop himself. He physically can’t stop himself from crashing into her. Not without propping his broken leg on the floor.

Distantly, he’s aware of motion: metal sweeping through the air beside him – the gun lowering at last. An arm hooks around his back and tears him upright. Matt reacts. He drops one of Elektra’s wrists, slams his hand against Frank’s face, and pushes away.

But Frank doesn’t let go. He keeps his arm on Matt for support. And he doesn’t have to say it; the words are etched into Matt’s brain. *I got you, Red.*

For a long moment, the only heartbeats he hears belong the unconscious ninjas in the hallway. The promise to Lantom has long passed. But there they are, those heartbeats. Gradually, Matt leans onto Frank’s arm until he isn’t falling over anymore. He releases Elektra’s other wrist dumbly.

She draws a few steadying breaths to keep from launching herself at Frank. Her restraint is audible. “May I get his crutches or will you try to shoot me for that too?”

Frank doesn’t dignify that with a verbal response. Matt can feel his glare through the blackness though. It causes Elektra’s heart to skip. Hardly the same thrill as murder, but she’ll take pleasure where she can get it.

She gets Matt propped up on his crutches, taking advantage of the proximity to touch him a few more times. Matt isn’t paying attention. He’s listening to the pull of sutures in Frank’s back, counting them. Wondering if there are more stitches than ninja heartbeats scattered throughout the apartment building. Wondering how they got here, to this moment, with Frank all but dragging him out of the Hand’s custody. A clear shot at Fisk, and Frank came here instead. Came here and let the ninjas live.

The buzzing in his head reaches a fever pitch. Matt hacks away at it decisively, but he keeps coming back to those heartbeats and how they don’t make sense. How none of this makes sense, and despite that, or perhaps because of it, he trusts it anyways.

Matt shuffles back on his crutches. Towards the door. Those heartbeats. “I’m going to go.”

“Fucking finally,” Frank moves to leave too.

Elektra’s voice comes back, softer and more desperate. “Matthew, no.”

“I told you I wasn’t staying.”

“And I told you that you don’t have to. But don’t leave like this.”

Frank snarls, “He’s not staying.”

Matt softens the blow, “I’m not staying *like this.*”
The confidence returns to her voice. “But you’ll stay with the Punisher?” Her laugh is low, caught in the back of her throat under the claws of everything she could say. “Trading an army of mass murderers for an army of one mass murderer – quite the hypocrite, aren’t you?”

“Youre ninjas are still alive.” Nope – saying it out loud doesn’t make it any more believable. Matt has to listen to the garden of resting pulses blooming in the hallway.

“I’ll send their regards to the Irish, the cartel, the Dogs of Hell…”

She’s distracting him. Matt doesn’t let her. “And how many have the Hand killed, Elektra, in this city alone?”

“Then there’s no difference, is there? Except with me, you might actually walk again.”

“He’s walking away right now,” Frank points out.

Matt could punch him. Instead, he turns back to Elektra. “Why is it so important for me to stay? What do you want from me?”

Elektra’s heartbeat winds down to a slow, sad crawl. She opens her mouth to speak but never gets the chance. Behind them, Frank heaves a sigh. “Jesus, Red, what the hell does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

“Those bastards I left in the lobby are gonna start waking up and calling their friends soon.”

So there’s more. More than the three that Matt would hear. He tries not to give Elektra the satisfaction of seeing him leaning towards Frank, of seeing him interested, but she notices immediately. Her pulse flares. “Better get going,” she says in clipped, measure tones. “Wouldn’t want to keep the Punisher waiting.”

He ignores her. Ignores Frank. “Tell me why.”

She lowers her voice to a conspiratorial purr. “I tell you, will you stay?”

“No.”

Elektra’s smile hits the world on fire like so much gasoline, but her heart isn’t in it. Matt senses her facial muscles trembling, forced into an expression they don’t feel. Her face falls a second later. “I told you I wanted to be good.”

He sees where she’s going with this and no. No, he won’t. “My staying won’t make you good. It can’t. You have to…” the heartbeats from the hallway knead against his back. They undermine what he’s about to say or confirm it or God, he doesn’t know, “You have to want that for yourself.”

“I do! I do. But I can’t do it alone, not with the way I am. Not with…the Hand.”

“Red.”

Her pulse is a promise. It’s steadfast and loyal and everywhere, crashing down upon him in waves. “You make me better, Matthew.”

“Red!”

Elektra has her hands on him again, on his waist and at his cheek. “Please, Matthew.”
“God damn it, Red.”

Punisher gears right back up again. This time, he’s ginning for Matt, who can’t think. “Just a second, Frank.”

“You fucking with me? She’s playing you! She’s been playing this whole time!”

Her heartbeat says otherwise. “Please.”

Frank tugs Matt by the scruff of his neck away from her and takes the place between them by force. Matt perceives them, flared and furious, two cobras about to strike. But they never do. It’s a battle of silent promises that next time, this is different. Next time, Matt won’t be there. Next time, it ends bloody.

“You listen to me,” Frank growls, “you’re only standing here because I know God damn better than putting one between your eyes. But you lay another hand on him, and he’s the last thing you touch.”

Elektra’s heartbeat doesn’t break pace. “It’ll be the last thing you do.”

Matt rubs at his sternum with one hand. He grabs Frank by the shoulder with the other. “Stop this.”

Frank says it quietly, in a single breath: “God damn it, I will drag your ass out of here, Red. And I’ll put another bullet in each of those ninjas on my way out.”

“Say the word, and I’ll stop him, Matthew,” Elektra replies sweetly.

Her words are cold water on his senses. Matt feels awakened once they’re said. It’s a push, a soft one, but between the two of them, he’s toeing the edge, so it’s enough to send him falling. Matt follows the coppery taste of Frank’s sutures back to reality. He comes round so she can look him in the face when he speaks. “You already tried that once. And you won’t ever do it again. You’re going to leave him alone.”

“The Hand won’t.”

“Let ‘em come.”

Matt elbows Frank in the side to shut up and gets grabbed by the collar again. He uses his forearm to break free. “You and the Hand. You leave him alone. You leave this city alone.”

She makes a sound that sets Matt’s blood to boiling. A soft, sweet sigh for the soft, sweet, broken thing before her. He rips that sound right out of her: “If you ever want to see me again.”

Elektra immediately falls silent. “This isn’t over.”

“No. But I’m leaving. Goodbye, Elektra.”

He knows she hasn’t taken her eyes off Frank as she says, “I’ll see you later.”

They leave her in the sitting room, alone. Phone disconnected. Defeated in ways she hasn’t even begun to express but will be sure to, soon, in lurid, brutal detail.

Frank lets Matt leave first but after determining Elektra isn’t going anyways, he trails closely.
He nudges when there’s a body or a pool of blood to avoid, for which Matt is grateful. The smell is so overwhelming he can’t navigate. There is gore louder than even the sound of heartbeats and blood drops around him.

They don’t say a word until the elevator doors are closed around them and they’re headed towards the ground floor.

Matt starts, “She isn’t going to let this go.”

Frank has gone back to being a brick wall. Non-presence. Inhuman. “Don’t expect her to.”

The hum of the elevator swells between them. Matt puts a stop to it. They have come too far for Frank to disappear now.

“You didn’t kill them.”

Frank says nothing. Even his heartbeat seems muted.

“The ninjas,” Matt reminds him. “You didn’t kill them.”

A sigh brings Frank down to a disinterested rhythm. “She’s just going to be bring ‘em back anyways.”

“Wasted a lot of ammunition.”

No answer. Frank’s heartbeat struggles to feign apathy. The beating climbs the walls to get the hell out, get anywhere but here. Abort mission.

Matt rubs it in. “Didn’t quite put them in the ground.”

Finally, a reaction: “You want me to finish the job on my way out?”

Matt leaves it alone; he got what he wanted. Besides, there are more pressing questions to ask. “How did you find me?”

Frank stays as cryptic as ever. “Long story.”

“Why did you find me?”

The elevator amplifies Frank’s respiration. It’s a different sort of geared up, somewhere between incredulity and alarm. Matt feels Frank giving him a stunned once-over, starting at his feet. By the time Frank’s looking him in the face, what started as a question has solidified as a sad, statement of fact between them.

“Told you,” Frank says quietly but with no less force, “I got you, Red.”

They reach the ground floor. The doors open, and a torrent of blood gushes in, carrying with it the gentle rumble of unconscious heartbeats.

It’s too much, this. The ninjas left alive. Elektra unscathed. Frank responsible for all of it. Matt braces himself before he can leave the elevator. Frank gives him a minute, then presses a hand to Matt’s shoulder to direct him out of the building.

There’s only one thing left to say, and Matt doesn’t dare say it too loudly. The world is a fragile place. Delicately balanced and threatening to topple at any moment. “Thank-“
“Don’t thank me.”

Matt nods. “Good to have you back, Frank.”

Groaning. “That’s code for ‘thank you’.”

Happy reading!
Drumming

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I don’t actually have a lot to say about this chapter except that it surprised me. I usually go into writing dialogue with a very specific end in mind; I have to, otherwise characters won’t say anything of value. But then something got said that completely derailed what I thought was going to happen. I hope you enjoy it.

Readers, dear Readers, you are wonderful. I love hearing from you. Thank you so, so much for the support! I hope all is well! Cheers.

“There’s a drumming noise inside my head
That throws me to the ground…
I swallow the sound and it swallows me whole
Till there’s nothing left inside my soul
As empty as that beating drum
But the sound has just begun.”

~Florence + The Machine, “Drumming Song”

After. The after’s always unsettling. Dust settles, air clears, fires die down, and Frank takes stock. What’s he working with? What’s changed? What’s next?

Red seems to have the same idea, he’s just bad at it. The car drive back to the Bronx is anything but quiet. No more dumbass questions like that one in the elevator. Kid’s got practical concerns. But as nice as it is to know that the kid can strategize, or try to, his efforts are aggravating.

“You’re sure Sato didn’t tell them about your apartment?” Red asks when he’s told where they’re going. Frank replies that yeah, he’s sure, and wants that to be the end of it. He doesn’t want to talk about Sato. But Red powers through like he has a fucking quota to meet. “How can you be sure? What are you going to do with the car? How did you find me? Have you spoken to Lantom? Pull over: I want to know if they’re following us.”
“Calm your shit, Red,” Frank says for all the good it does. He checks the rear-view mirror again and sees Harlem’s silhouette growing smaller behind them. “We’re clear.”

Hard to believe with the way Red acts. He’s out of the car before it stops to search the apartment parking lot, dodging attempts to herd him inside. Frank gives up and leaves him wandering. Nothing on the rooftop but cold air and moonlight. There ain’t no way the ninjas got into the apartment while they were gone, not without repercussions. The building is just as shitty as he left it. So Red can hobble around all he wants until he’s sure that for now, at least, they’re free.

Frank takes the steps two at a time to his apartment door, gets inside, sets about disarming the place. Unfastening tripwires from the windows and the doorknob. Red’s waiting outside on the fire escape by the time Frank finishes. The kid looks harried and haggard at the same time, slouched on his crutches. But he doesn’t bother to come inside. He grips the rail, facing down the night. Ready to pounce. Frank exits out the window to join Red for a few moments in the aftermath.

The cold gnashes its teeth, full and furious with, as usual, everything the kid isn’t saying. Everything Frank isn’t saying. It’s too damn hard and useless to shake the feeling that the war’s not over, that it’s never over. One battle begets another. And that’s good. That’s grounding. Let’s you know you’re alive to fight again. But it also leaves people standing on fire escapes waiting for ninjas that aren’t coming.

“She isn’t going to stop,” the kid states in his defence.

Frank hopes this is the last obvious fact the kid wants to voice tonight. Probably isn’t. God damn lawyer. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

The kid doesn’t say a thing. There’s nothing to say. They both know. Instead, he stands, shivering. Frank does the same. Lying in wait while the night does the same.

Takes for-fucking-ever for him to go inside, and when Red finally does, it’s not even by choice. He’s got that crumbling look on his face, the stone expression flashing embarrassment, fear, pain. His chin dips intermittently towards his broken leg as his lips curl like he’s about to chew the limb off. “Can I have an Aspirin?” he asks quietly.

An Aspirin. One. Singular. And the way he speaks, he’s making the tallest order in the world. Even after everything that’s happened. Maybe because of everything that’s happened. Red doesn’t want to ask for more when he’s already been given so much.

Frank doesn’t want to hear it. He shoves two T3s at the kid with a glass of water and looms until he stops making that fucking face and takes the damn pills.

Whole lot of not-sleeping happens. Frank checks through his most recent text messages, fiddling with the menu to delete the images he finds there. Grainy photos of Elektra’s apartment building including the exterior, the foyer, the elevator, and the penthouse floor. The pictures were a clear map of every guard inside her place. All Frank had to do was bring enough ammo; the images led him straight to Red.

He finds the text that preceded them, the one with Elektra’s address, and he deletes that too. The name of the sender burns into his retinas. He snaps his cell phone shut and tries to ignore the urge to go back out again. There’s no use in starting the hunt, which is precisely why the pictures got sent when they did. But the thought nags that the fight isn’t over. If this was any other night, he’d be out there.
Can’t leave the kid, though.

Red tosses and turns on his cot. He occasionally sits up, listening hard. Rubbing at his face and hair like a fussy kid about to meet the boogeyman. Frank stops reminding him, “Nothing out there.” Not like it’s doing any good. Eventually, Red’s reserves do give out. That measured breathing he’s so fond of settles into a sweeping rhythm. When Frank starts getting up to face the day, the kid’s lying on his stomach. His silk sheet spills out from the base of his neck like a cape.

Frank doesn’t waste time. He grabs his coat. The stitches on his back pull from the movement, stinging hotly. He leaves the apartment, blue in the pre-dawn glow, expecting Red to wake up from the sound of the door latching, the locks snapping. But the sleepy creaks of the building are the only thing waiting for him on the landing.

He descends the stairs quietly. Heads out the front door and makes a point of checking the fire escape on the way to the car. Nothing. The bathroom window is shut. Front door’s locked. Red must really be out.

The neighbourhood is quiet. Frank takes a drive around the block, inspecting the rooftops, window sills, and fire escapes. He keeps his building in view, monitoring its stillness for any signs of life. There aren’t any. The ninjas are obviously licking their wounds after having so many of their knees shot out from under them. Red’s Girl is going to have them out in full-force, and her next move is going to be harder to predict than her first. But the Bronx is gonna notice a bunch of white-collar ninjas spider-crawling over the walls of their buildings in broad daylight. They got some time, at least.

He parks with his apartment in eyeshot. Whips out his phone. Hits redial.

Karen answers immediately. “How is he?”

“Fine. Sleeping.”

She releases a breath. Settles back onto her pillows by the sounds of things. “I wish you called me last night.”

Frank’s glad he didn’t. Red doesn’t know of Karen’s involvement, and Frank wasn’t going to have that fight with the kid waiting for his ex- and her ninjas to bust through the ceiling. Last thing Frank wants to hear is how much danger everybody’s in with Elektra around. That he, Frank, should have kept Karen out of this, kept everybody out of this. How Red had this covered by his broken self. Blah, blah, blah.

“He wasn’t much for talking,” is what Frank says instead. “Sure he’ll want to talk to you in a bit.”

Karen sees right through that shit. “Yeah, right. He’s not going to want to talk to anybody.”

She sighs and he feels it: exhaustion. A current of it, flowing under his energy and attentiveness, straight from her through to him. But where hers is from four days of work, Frank’s is from the sudden absence of that. He doesn’t get tired when he’s on a damn job. He gets tired when he isn’t. When he comes home from a tour, when the Blacksmith is in pieces, when Red’s back in the apartment and the ninjas are down for the count. That’s when Frank feels four days of no sleep, chasing leads. Subsisting on Karen’s shitty coffee and take-out. Waiting for a barrage of images he couldn’t know were coming, so he could shoot his way through a small army of ninjas to leave the queen sitting pretty, planning her next move.
His apartment building is quiet in the distance. A decaying lump of bricks in the pale, autumn dawn. Not a soul in sight.

“What happened?” Karen asks. “Elektra, is she…?”

“Alive.” The word leaves a foul taste in his mouth.

“I was going to say ‘after him’. Is she still after him?”

Nevertheless, Frank’s answer has brought some of life back into her voice. He’s glad that she doesn’t make him talk about it. “I don’t think she ever won’t be.”

“He can’t stay with you forever.”

“No.” Hell no, fuck no. Frank shifts in his seat, skin crawling from the thought. He’s got shit to do. “I told him until he’s back on his feet.”

Thankfully, she doesn’t point out that they’re after him; he’s well aware. “That could be months.”

Don’t remind me. “You got a better idea?”

Karen flusters. She doesn’t. Even her standby of having Matt come back to Hell’s Kitchen falls by the wayside and remains an unspoken wish. “Okay, but what then? He comes back to Hell’s Kitchen? Tries to fight a ninja army on his own?”

“What do you think he’d be doing right now, he didn’t break his leg?” Christ, sometimes everybody forgets who this kid is, the things he does. Elektra tries to convince him to stay; Karen tries to guilt people into helping him. Meantime Red’s doing exactly what he’s always been doing, and damn it, there’s no stopping stupid once it gets going. “Being here buys him some time. I’m not letting anything else happen to him. Not letting anything happen to his God damn leg.”

He mutters the last bit. Doesn’t mean to. It’s the leg. It’s always been about the stupid leg.

White noise buzzes softly between them. Karen is still on the line. He can hear her shuffling around in her blankets, rising to face the day. God damn it, he doesn’t want her to ask, but Karen’s a dog with a bone. She doesn’t stop till she reaches the marrow. “What are you planning on doing?”

“Whatever it takes.” What else?

“Does Matt…?” she doesn’t know how to ask this question, and neither does Frank. He leaves her to sound it out. Karen, to her credit, realizes she already knows the answer. “Matt isn’t going to let you do…what you do.”

“He’s not going to have a choice.”

“Well, what did he say yesterday? I take it you didn’t just walk into Elektra’s building. She can’t have been unguarded.”

The images in his phone play through his head. Seven in the lobby. Three in the hallway to the penthouse. A map of carnage straight to the kid. Karen got him to the address, but those texts got him inside.

Frank chases her off: “I took care of it.”

“And Matt didn’t-“
“He didn’t say anything.” Except “Thank you. Thank you, Frank, for not killing those fucking ninjas” in so many fucking words.

Karen’s disappointment registers through the white noise on the phone. It grates against Frank’s eardrums, an ambient, nattering hum. He’s struck by that look on her face, the one before he closed himself in with the Blacksmith. The light fading from her eyes, the strength draining from her face. May as well have been her in the shed with him, the way she was torn apart.

Frank bangs a hand on the steering wheel. Oh, Jesus, she’s going to hear it from Red anyways. “I shot ‘em in the kneecaps.”

She has to work her way back into the conversation. “You…left them alive?”

He is not answering that directly. God damn it, this was a mistake. “Even if they weren’t last night, they would be by now.”

But the line is more tired than he is. Frank’s aware of the shift in Karen’s mood. The call takes on the same self-satisfied air as the elevator he shared with Red last night. What’s more is the lilting buzz coming from her end of the line, one that speaks softly of vindication.

All due respect to Karen, though, Frank needs them to both lay off. It’s not gonna happen again. “Fucking ninjas can resurrect themselves. Put one in their head or one in their knees, it’s all the God damn same. Besides, I’m getting another chance at ‘em.”

Karen takes a long time to answer. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything.” Don’t say a God damn word. Kid’s going to wake up and start with the questions again, and for fuck’s sake, one bullet, one kill. One bullet, one kill. Not next time, this time. Every time. The second he has a shot, he takes it. “I gotta go. Murdock’ll call you later.”

“Frank-“

He hangs up on her. The phone is heavy in his hand. He chucks it into the passenger seat – “One bullet, one kill” – and gets the car going – “One bullet, one kill” - and makes another trip around the block before heading home.

Red’s on the fire escape when he gets back. Rina is on her way out the front door. She’s dressed for work in a rumpled sundress, a blue cardigan hanging loosely from her bony shoulders. Cream-coloured bag under one arm. Her blond hair looks white under the sun. She gives Frank the slightest of waves on her rapid walk past him towards the bus stop. He waves back without looking at her.

“Um, Frank?”

She has mostly stopped in the parking lot. One foot at a time, though, she’s inching away from him, no matter how resolute she appears to want to stay in one place. Frank makes out her sharp profile beneath the plaits of her hair. She’s giving him the slightest of glances.

“Ma’am?”

Her hand rises between them defensively. “It’s none of my business, I’m sorry-“

Frank sighs. “Ma’am…”
The rest of it spills out of her, “-but your brother is on the fire escape, and it’s chilly outside, and he’s been sick, and he doesn’t have a jacket. Or a sweater. And I’m sorry. I thought you should know.” She whips around, back towards the bus stop, and practically runs away from him. “Have a good day.”

“You too,” Frank mutters in her wake.

“Oh.”

He looks up, Rina has turned around one more time and is pointing to her head. “He could…” she gestures to her scalp some more before tugging her hands into a polite knot on her stomach. “His hair, it is…” she thinks better of it. Waves dismissively. “Nevermind. Forget it. I’m sorry. Good day.”

Frank shoots a glance between the fire escape and Rina’s retreating form. He gives his mind a minute to quit sputtering. Lets go of the one bullet, one kill thing; the stuff about Red’s ex; that proud silence on the phone with Karen that sounded too much like reclamation; Rina’s concerns about Red and how they’re his concerns now even though it’s the leg. It’s supposed to be about the fucking leg.

He marches up the fire escape stairs to find Red there in sweats and a t-shirt, leaning against the rail. Crutches at his side. Hair in disarray. “I’m not cold,” he says by way of greeting. Because of course he could hear Rina. His brow furrows. “Everything alright, Frank?”

Guess it isn’t just Rina he’s hearing. “Quit listening to my heart.” Frank dips into the open window, stalking through his bathroom all the way to the far side of the apartment. He’s almost at the punching bag before he circles around, scrubbing at his head. At the one bullet, one kill that took Frank Castle away. Red’s in the bathroom window when Frank looks back.

“What is it, Frank?”

“Told you to stop listening to my heart.”

“I don’t have to listen to your heart to know something’s wrong. Where were you this morning?”

“Don’t. Don’t do that, Red.”

“Do what?”

As if he doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing. As if he has no idea. God damn it, no. Frank can’t. He walks to the kitchen. He shoves and slams and prods until the coffee’s brewing, hoping it’ll end the conversation.

The counsellor makes his way to the living room to continue. He’s gearing up for a real defence by the sounds of things. Frank gets himself geared up too. Fucking lawyers.

“I’m sorry, Frank.”

That gets him. Gunfire and explosions light up inside Frank’s skull. He rounds the corner, charging the kid. “What the hell did you say?”

“I’m sorry.”

The words make as much sense as the sickening crater blasting open in Frank’s chest. It’s D-
Day inside him, everywhere. Sand and blood and bullets, and it takes everything, fucking everything, to hold himself together while his body tears itself apart. “What the hell do you mean? What the hell do you mean, you’re sorry? Sorry for what, Red? You’re sorry for catching that ceiling on your leg? For finding the doc that sold you out to your ex? For almost dying more God damn times than I can count—"

“Yes, Frank! I’m sorry! I’m sorry for all of it!”

“You take that back, Red.”

“I’m not going to take that back.”

He advances towards he kid, closing that last little bit of distance. It doesn’t feel close enough. There’s no getting closer than he already is. “You take it back!”

Red doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t buckle. He rises to his full height, perfectly at home at the mouth of a loaded gun. “I’m not going to take that back!”

Frank pulls back, pacing. He’s got trenches running through his limbs and his chest is No Man’s Land and it’s blaze of glory time but the only thing getting shot are fucking kneecaps and that’s unacceptable. Unace-fucking-ceptible. These ninjas get a tomorrow, as many tomorrows as they God damn please. Red should be happy. He should be gloating. Instead, he’s apologizing.

Said it before, Frank’ll say it again: “You’re an idiot, Red.”

The kid nods. Accepting. “Yeah, I know.”

Why isn’t he fighting back? “An idiot, Red.”

More nodding. “Yeah.”

Frank spells it the fuck out for him. “You’re apologizing to me for saving my life.”

Red gives a small toss of his shoulders. “Apologizing for messing up your life, actually,” he offers.

“You’re not making any fucking sense. Messing up my life…” Frank finally says it out loud, the thing that has him burning. “You got me doing exactly what you’ve wanted.”

That thought does not seem to have crossed Red’s mind. “I’ve put you in danger. Brought you into this.”

Frank balls his hands into fists. “I brought you into this.”

The tendons in Red’s arms twitch to attention. He isn’t making fists, but he can be any time. “I should have made you take me to the hospital.”

“Got your ass captured by ninjas sooner.”

“Saved you from having your ass kicked by ninjas.”

“Oh, and left me to kill Fisk. Didn’t think about that, did you, Red?”

The way he sidesteps that talking point is the only answer Frank needs until Red states, “You don’t want me here, Frank.”
Frank scoffs, fists unclenching. He drifts out of Red’s orbit. “You don’t want to be here.”

“I’m sorry.”

The shelling inside Frank goes quiet suddenly, and he finds himself listening. Really listening. His brain connects the dots from Red’s initial “I’m sorry” to “You don’t want me here” to finally “I’m sorry”, and Frank has to retreat. He wanders back into the kitchen. The distance is necessary, a relief even, because Red repeats himself, “I’m sorry, Frank.”

“Shut up, Red.”

Miraculously, the kid does as he’s told.

Frank grips the edge of his countertop and pulls until the bundles of energy knotting up his shoulders finally gives. He nabs the coffeepot, pours himself a cup, dodging the onslaught of things he doesn’t want to think about. Shit about as useless as Red’s apology and twice as hard to shake.

He comes back to find Red still standing there, waiting. The words finally come to Frank then. “Got nothing to be sorry for, Red.”

“Frank-“

“Wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for me.”

“I decided to push you out of the way. I re-broke my leg. I wouldn’t have gotten an infection if-“

Frank stops him before he can get to the parts with the ninjas. “Apologizing make you feel better?”

“I want to make this right.”

“Does apologizing make this right?”

Red’s brow furrows. He looks so young, too young. Frank never wants him to take off his glasses again, especially when he rolls his eyes in miserable defeat. “No.”

“Then stop. You make this right by getting better. Keeping your girl off my ass till you are.”

“She’s not-“

“Yeah, yeah: not your girl.” Frank takes a drink of coffee. Jesus Christ, that’s not the point. “You get back to what you do, I get back to what I do-“

“You don’t have to go back.”

The rage is knotting up in his shoulders again. Frank dismisses it. No use throwing punches over shit like this. He knows who he is. “I never left. That shit last night isn’t me, see? Put on a good show, is all. And the show’s over.”

Red starts looking like a grown-up again. Worse than a lawyer. He’s got the resoluteness of a priest. “I don’t believe that.”

“I don’t care what you believe.”

Frank finishes his coffee. Heads back to the kitchen for another. Gonna be a long fucking
day. Red’s eye roll – incredulous this time – nips at his heels.

“You got your ass kicked for me.”

The slash on his back flares into a fresh burn. “Didn’t get my ass kicked.”

A laugh, a light one. “You got your ass kicked.”

Frank isn’t going to waste a punch on that shit neither. “They worked me over a bit.”

The kid smiles knowingly. “I’ve gotten my ass kicked enough to know it on other people.”

“Well, those senses of yours are misfiring, you sense one on me.”

“Your dressings need changing.”

“I’ll do it later.”

“My dressings need changing,” Red sighs, loathe to admit this next bit, “And I can’t do that myself.”

Frank comes to the doorway of the kitchen again. He’s being played, he must be, and that alone almost sends him packing. But Red’s got his head bowed, his shoulders curled. He’s on the defensive. Manipulation really isn’t his style.

The anger Frank’s been holding onto drains out of him cautiously. He says it again to himself: manipulation really isn’t the kid’s style.

He sighs, nodding. “I’ll get the kit.”

Happy reading!
Shelter

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I feel like a lot of this fic has been about striking a balance, especially with Frank. It’s one of the reasons I ended up staying with his perspective here. There are questions that only Matt can answer, but those, I felt, could wait. I found the dialogue here worked better from Frank’s POV.

I had to estimate Matt’s ages for some of the events mentioned here. If I’m mistaken, please let me know and I will make corrections. I’m also aware of what the show implies about his mother; I have my own theory. I may or may not explore it in this fic.

Readers, dear Readers, you are lovely and amazing, and I don’t deserve all the kindness and support I’ve received since I started posting. Thank you! Please, enjoy!

“I’m a hurricane.
I’m a freight train.
Ain’t the right way,
But it’s the only way I know.
So when my bones come tumblin’ in
I did it to myself.
Will you still let me in?”

~Dorothy, “Shelter”

The kid’s trying to get his breathing in line, but it’s a wasted effort. Counting is no match for his leg. The rhythm deteriorates. Five counts in and his breath catches on broken bone.

Frank refuses to wait for the smartass remark he knows is coming: “What is that?”

“What’s what?”

“That thing you do with your breathing: what is it?”

Red flinches, purses his lips. He tries counting again with his eyes closed this time.
“Meditation,” he says on a measured exhale.

Frank unpacks the layer of damp gauze from the incision. The wound looks really good for five days out of its third surgery. The stitches aren’t pulling quite so hard, meaning the inflammation’s down. Things are pink and red along the side of the kid’s leg. Bruising from the compound fracture is in full bloom, but without the weeping and seeping of infection, even that looks promising. The initial wound, the slash on the back of Red’s calf, it’s knitting up nicely too.

He gets his heart back in line before scoffing. Fucking ninjas can bring themselves back from the dead, but they can’t fix a broken limb. Frank douses the whole thing with saline. The temperature of the liquid helps Red find some relief. “Your dad teach you that?”

“No.” Red struggles for breath amidst a small laugh. “Meditation wasn’t really his style. The man who trained me: he taught it to me. Said it would...harness my focus, manage pain, help me heal.”

“How’s it working out for you?”

“Right now? Not great.”

Frank drapes the incision with a layer of wet gauze. He smooths it flat. Red gets to a three-count rhythm. Small victory.

“You do the same thing, you know,” he says in a tone approaching conversational. Gone is that pop psychologist tone of a man trying to bond with his captor, which makes it sound all the stranger to Frank’s ears. It should be a powerplay; it isn’t. “When you’re...when you’re looking down the barrel of a gun? Your heartbeat slows right down. Could keep time with your breath.”

Frank doesn’t want to hear that. He rebuffs, “What’d your dad have to say about that? You listen to his heartbeat too?”

He only meant to shut the kid up, but Frank’s shot to kill. Red can’t play it cool enough to hide his wounds. “Yeah, I listened to his heartbeat. I couldn’t really stop myself then.” His voice gets really quiet, “He didn’t know.”

“Excuse me?”

“He didn’t...” Red gets his voice back to a normal volume, “My dad, he didn’t know. I never told him about it.”

Why the hell is Frank not surprised? Won’t tell his best friend that Fisk is out to kill won’t tell his dad he has supersonic hearing. Frank opens a roll of bandages and starts wrapping them at Red’s ankle, balancing Red’s shin on the length of his forearm to support the break. Red tries to hide his gasp; Frank directs his focus away from the break.

“Your mom, she...”

Another kill shot. “Stop, Frank.”

“Just asking.”

“No, stop. Stop.” His leg shakes in Frank’s hand. He reaches out for it, breath in disarray, fingers trembling. Frank stops trying to wrap the damn thing up and eases the limb down.

Takes Red a long time to get back to being verbal, but his first words are, “I never knew her.
“My mom.”

The tone isn’t quite as final, as grave, as the one he reserves for his dad, but that doesn’t mean anything. Plenty of reasons why Murdock didn’t meet his mom. Frank starts wrapping the kid’s leg up in bandages again, this time pausing between rounds to let the limb rest and give Red a chance to breathe. He runs interference when the kid gets too quiet. “She dead?”

Red stiffens, his only defence, but he doesn’t tell Frank where he can shove that question. He says, “Yes,” and that’s the end of that, but Frank’s responds with, “Fair enough,” because he’s knows a lie when he hears one.

He doesn’t bother asking about Dad. Red’s playing with the wall and locking his jaw, trying to look as dangerous as possible while he’s in repose, his injured leg balanced like a newborn along Frank’s forearm. He comes back to the conversation with a swing of his head. Sunlight reflects the moisture in his lower lashes. “You uh…” he sniffs, wipes his eyes, “You popped some stitches.”

“Shit,” he didn’t realize. Frank starts unwinding the bandage, searching as he goes for a breakthrough bleed.

“No, no – you. Your back.”

Frank twitches, running a diagnostic. The sting of the wound is more pronounced on one side, but it’s the blood that gives it away. He feels heat oozing over his skin. “You hear that, Red?”

A laugh, a small one. Guess the kid finally hears how ridiculous he sounds. “I smell it.” And then, because what he’s said isn’t ridiculous enough: “You got a needle and thread in that kit of yours? I can stitch it back up.”

Frank gets back to bandaging. “Seen you do some crazy shit, Red. And all due respect? But I’m not about to let a blind man go poking a needle into my back.”

“There are other ways to see.”

“No, there isn’t.”

A smile breaks over the kid’s face: honest, matter-of-fact, a little smug. “Bet I can do a better job than whoever did ‘em in the first place.”

That’s not exactly a ringing endorsement. Karen’s stitches are slapdash: some too deep, others too shallow; some spaced too far apart while others are too narrow. Red can’t possibly do worse, even working blind. But still. Kid can’t work a needle and thread with his hands shaking like that. And even if he was steady, there’s a difference between throwing a punch and stitching someone up. “I’ll take care of it.” Couple of steri-strips, he’ll be fine.

They’re quiet again until Red’s leg is back in the cast and resting. He lies on the cot, recuperating. His hands gradually ease into stillness. The one untangles from the sheet and the other lowers from its spot on the wall. Meantime, Frank gets cleaned up. Balls up the bag of bloody gauze, bandages, and gloves for disposal. He throws the saline- and sweat-soaked towel from under Red’s leg into the growing pile of laundry on the far side of the room.

He grabs the scissors and steri-strips from the first aid kit. Heads into the bathroom, tearing off his t-shirt, slashing at the dressings wrapped around his upper chest. Blood streaks down from under his right shoulder as he lifts the bandages. Stitches jut out from the wound in an underbite that’s a few inches in length. Frank shoves a hand towel against the area and sets about clearing a space for the adhesives.
The blood runs too damn quickly, and when he tries to reach, the wound’s mouth pulls open wider in mockery.

Frank throws down the steri-strips. He keeps the towel pressed to his back with one hand, grabs the scissors with the other, and marches out of the bathroom to Red, who is just sitting there on the cot. Back against the wall, hands folded in his lap, a resting expression on his face that threatens to give way, any second, to a smirk. He’s silent as Frank digs through the first aid supplies for gloves and a suture kit. He plays blind when the shit is shoved in his face, only responding when Frank says, “Fucking get on with it, Red.”

Christ Jesus, the kid doesn’t have to smirk for Frank to know it’s there. Every move he makes and the way he makes it – him grabbing the stuff, him moving to the edge of the cot, him snapping on the gloves and opening the suture kit – it’s so precise, so defined, conducted with so much fucking patience. Like listening to “I told you so” played on a continuous loop.

Frank tries to shut the silent mockery up by grabbing the chair he was using before, when he was dressing Red’s leg, and moving it. Bringing it right in front of where Red’s sitting and slamming it down against the floor. But God damn if that doesn’t make Red’s pride swell louder. If that doesn’t make the gleam in his eyes brighter. Frank can feel the smirk against his back when he lowers into the chair. The wise-ass slash on Red’s face making friends with the wise-ass slash on his back.

Frank wraps his free arm over the chair back. He keeps the other looping around his chest, staunching the blood flow, while Red gets his ass ready. “Say a God damn word,” he dares the kid. “You say one God damn word-“

Red doesn’t. He pushes the towel and Frank’s hand away from the gash, and he gets to work. He clips away at the torn sutures and peels them out. His fingers trace over the length of the wound, checking for other stragglers.

He sniffs once. Checking for infection? Frank cranes his neck to look. Kid’s got a look of wonder on his face, like he’s seeing God in the break of Frank’s skin. “Elektra wasn’t trying to kill you,” he notes.

“I noticed that,” Frank replies, easing his head back round.

“The Hand coats their weapons in poison. Only a few people know the antidote. You would have been dead days ago.”

The minx must have had one katana cleaned off just for him. “Lucky me.”

“Who stitched you up?” Red asks.

Couldn’t have asked that damn question before, when Frank was working on him instead of the other way around. “Why?”

The kid chuckles. “Because they did a terrible job. Stitched up your back like they were sewing a hem.”

“You know a lot about sewing hems?”

“Know a lot more about sutures.”

“You get your ass kicked that much.”
Another chuckle, but the kid makes no attempt to deny it. “I used to-“ he goes back to where
the sutures popped and sticks the needle in, “-used to stitch my dad up after his fights.”

“Before or after you went blind?”

“Both.” The skin pulls together. Frank plays through the motions in his head, matching
them up to Red’s movements. Fine – the kid knows what he’s doing. Jesus. “He used to give me a
shot of whiskey beforehand. Straight from the bottle. Make sure my hands were steady.”

“You asking for a drink?”

“You got one?”

There’s a bottle of bourbon somewhere in the apartment. A dust-covered holdover from the
previous tenant. No point in getting it out though. With the way Murdock’s working, the stitches’ll
be in before he gets a drink. “How old were you?”

“Don’t know,” another stitch goes in. “Eight, I think, the first time.”

Frank considers the thought. It’s too easy to imagine Red as a kid, small for his age, holding
a whiskey bottle with two hands. Pinkies in the air as he pulls his boxing-dad back together.
Coughing and crying, “How can you drink that, Daddy? How?” when he snuck a sip of beer – no,
wait. That’s Frank Jr. Eight years old and curious, not eight years old and providing first aid.

“He died when I was ten…but I had gotten pretty good at this.”

Frank notices. He lowers his right arm off the chair back to make the skin easier to work
with. The pull from the stitches feels stronger where Red’s been working. “Sorry,” he says, because
that’s the only thing to say.

Red’s quiet. He works another couple of stitches. “Yeah,” he’s sorry too.

They let the silence stand for a while, Frank especially. Respect for Red’s Old Man.
Respect for Red. Raw deal, losing Dad that young; Mom out of the picture. Lisa and Frank Jr.
would have been fine if he’d died on tour. Maria held down that house like a fort. But ten-year-old
Red, blind as shit, would have gone straight into the system.

Frank has to get away from the thought. Bad enough he can’t shake tiny Red giving his dad
stitches, now he’s reliving those groggy moments in the cemetery after the Irish. A helluva Marine,
he’d told the kid, and that was before he knew about dear, dead Dad.

“It was Karen,” he says.

The kid stops. “What?”

“Karen. She stitched me up.”

“You went to Karen?”

The thought of Red as a kid – giving his dad stitches, sipping whiskey out the bottle,
struggling as a ward of the state – recedes. Frank revels in the tension building behind him. “Didn’t
have another option. Got my ass dropped off by an active crime scene. Cut up, beat up, had to act
fast.”

Another stitch goes in, and Red pulls it a little too tight. “You tell her what happened?”
Frank doesn’t bother answering, because they both know he told her. Walked up to her house with a broken nose, bleeding to death from behind, *without Red*: hell yeah, he fucking told her.

“You shouldn’t have told her.” Oh, here they go. Red punctuates the sentence with another stitch. “Elektra knows about Karen. She’ll find her. And Karen… she won’t leave-” tug, “-this-” tug, “-alone-” tug.

“Not your call,” Frank informs him coolly.

The tugging stops. Red stops. He struggles to find the right questions. “Did she help you find me? Damn it, Frank, does she know what Elektra’s address is?”

“She pointed me in the right direction.” Red ties a knot in enraged silence. Frank spares him another second of worrying about Karen’s future. “They’re not going to trace it back to her, Red. She’s got no reason to go snooping around with you out of there. Besides, I had help getting into the building.”

“What do you mean?”

Frank rocks his shoulder blades, testing the sutures, trying to shake that chill crawling up his spine from the kid. Telling Red won’t make him less worried, but it will give him piece of mind about Karen. “Sato texted me. Mid-afternoon, yesterday. Sent me the address and pictures from inside Elektra’s place. You done?”

The kid’s lost in thought. “Sato texted you?”


Red trims the thread and needle. He rips off the gloves, balls them up for the trash. Frank leaves him sitting there, caught between seething and curious. He grabs a fresh roll of bandages from the kit and goes back into the bathroom for his discarded t-shirt.

“Why would she text you?” Red asks again, genuinely curious.

“Don’t care, Red.” Not going to save Sato one way or another. Besides, what’s really important is that, “Your girl put a target on my back, not hers.” And Frank’s really hoping he doesn’t have to race the Hand to get to her. He also adds, for Red’s benefit, “Not Karen’s neither.”

The kid’s not done yet. “But why text you? Sato wouldn’t want to open herself up to that kind of suspicion from you or Elektra.”

“Oh, Jesus – the hell does it matter, Red?” Frank stands in front of the bathroom mirror. He grabs his last hand towel from under the sink and cleans the blood of his back, catching a glance of the stitches in the mirror. Well, God damn, the kid’s work isn’t just better than Karen’s: it’s fucking immaculate. Neat, spaced evenly. Frank’s acutely aware of how secure the sting is on his right side versus the loose tear of stitches on his left.

He tears into the roll of bandages. Pulls the white fabric across his upper chest, easing it behind him. Red appears in the bathroom doorway. The bandage falls from Frank’s hand at the same time and streams towards the floor. He manages to grab it before it hits, but it tangles in his hand, transforming into a knot. There’s no way to get the wound dressed like this. Wordlessly, Frank hands off the bundle of dressings to the kid. He holds one end to his chest; lets the kid work out the kinks in the rest of it.
“Everything that Sato did was to save her own life. Helping you put her at risk with the Hand,” Red notes, detangling the strip of bandage. “You should put some gauze on this.”

“She wanted to save her life, she shouldn’t’ve sold your ass to the Hand,” Frank declares. “And it’s fine. Wrap it up, Red. Let’s go.”

“You put a gun to her head,” Red remarks.

“I took the gun away from her head,” Frank corrects him. “Won’t make that mistake again” The kid starts pulling the bandage flat over Frank’s back and passes it around to his front. Frank rolls it over his chest, then hands it back.

“I was dying, and I was the only reason you were keeping her alive. She didn’t have a choice, not if she wanted to survive.”

“Said it yourself, Red: people always got a choice. And don’t say you’re going to stop me from doing what I’m gonna do. Going to save the life of a God damn mob doc who handed your ass over to a ninja cult: I get it.” Frank cusses under his breath, “Probably going to catch the fucking bullet for her, you get the chance…”

Red’s head bobs low between his shoulder blades, but Frank can feel it, that fucking smirk. Darker this time, like he’s telling a bad joke. It’s gone when his face returns over Frank’s shoulder in the mirror.

The bandage is tied off. Frank grabs his t-shirt off the floor and tugs it over his head. He isn’t out of the bathroom when Red pipes up, “She saved my life.”

“Ain’t nothing. Lots of people been saving your life lately.”

“She sent you pictures of the guards,” he adds. “Obviously didn’t tell Elektra about this place.”

Frank almost pauses on his march. Almost. The memory of Sunday night emerges, unbidden. His conversation with Elektra. Sato’s assurance that his interests lay with Fisk, not the Hand. Frank continues walking until it’s gone. Doesn’t change a thing: not what’s happened or what he’s gonna do.

“You should eat something,” he calls back from the kitchen, changing the subject.

“She probably saved your life too,” Red replies, sounding downright cheery.

Frank stays his course: “And take your God damn antibiotics! Don’t have a doctor on call anymore.”

Silence. Christ, the kid better not be working up to some smartass remark. “Got me, Red?” And so help him, he says anything other than yes or no.

“Yeah,” Red finally says without a trace of his usual attitude. “I got you.”

Frank waits. Nothing happens. Kid’s being sincere, or at the very least, he sounds like he is. It’s enough that he’s not talking about Sato or ninjas or anyone else Frank hasn’t killed. “Good.” He pours himself another cup of coffee.

Food shuts Red up for a while. He digs into one of the containers that Rina dropped off the
week before, barely taking the time to reheat the contents, and then pops one of the mammoth capsules from the bottle Frank left on the nightstand. The bottle of T3s, identifiable to Red by sound or weight or some other sense of his, goes ignored. Kid settles into a seated position on the cot, legs stretched out in front of him with his back against the wall. He’s in for more of that meditation, and Frank leaves him to it. Trash needs to be taken out. Car could use some work. Anything to get out of the damn apartment for a while.

Red’s in the same position when Frank comes back a couple hours later, but he hasn’t been meditating the whole time. His glasses have found their way onto the nightstand along with his cell phone. They’ve been living in one of Frank’s duffels since Sunday night; Red would have had to do more than meditate to find them and get them in order. The phone is even plugged in, charging. Like he actually intends to use it.

Frank walks past, but he throws a glance over his shoulder to make sure he sees what he thinks he sees. The bottle of T3s – it was on the far side of the table before. Now it’s closer to the cot, and Red’s water glass is mostly empty.

He gets out of the room. Stands in the kitchen in silence, lost in the unfamiliar sight of a newly-clean Tupperware container sitting next to the sink. He has to take a second, remind himself that he didn’t wash this one, that it’s Red’s doing. For some reason, that makes it stranger, though: the dish. It combine with the meds and charging cell phone and the quiet kid to fill him with this useless anticipation. Wasted energy.

Fuck, he’s tired.

He splashes some water on his face, scrubbing it into the bristles of his hair. Dries himself off with the dish towel Red left hanging through one of the cupboard handles. Then Frank walks out of the kitchen and drops onto the mattress waiting for him outside the doorway. He doesn’t fall asleep. If Red pops out of meditation from hearing ninja-breathing, Frank’ll be up and at ‘em. But he follows the thought of dishes to the morning of the carousel. To Lisa elbowing his hand at the breakfast table so he’ll look up and see her smiling.

Frank holds that thought: Lisa beaming at him like the summer sun on Central Park. She’s going to be blood and pulp soon, spilling out of his arms. So Frank thinks about dishes. He thinks about the table. He thinks about the kitchen and the house. And he lets Maria, Lisa, and Frank Jr. hover in his periphery, just slightly out of focus, where the bullets whizzing through his brain can’t touch them.

The cot creaks. Furniture rattles. A foot hops across the floor towards the far side of the apartment. The bathroom window claps open. Red’s headed outside.

Frank gives himself a few more minutes, just a few more minutes, but the chill from the breeze breaks upon his back. He rouses, grimacing. Bones aching and stiff, back burning. This is why he doesn’t take breaks. Gives pain a chance to find him. He stand up, stretching out. The cool air helps. It bites through the tension in his limbs and sends goosebumps shooting down his arms.

He heads towards the cot. The kid’s shit is still packed in a bag underneath. Frank digs through the contents, finding only t-shirts and books inside. He leaves it. Heads to the far corner of the apartment where he keeps a cardboard box with a few articles of clothing inside. Frank grabs the first hoodie he finds, then marches double-time to the bathroom.

Red’s looking his way when he sticks his head out the window. Frank balls up the hoodie and tosses it. He doesn’t wait to see if the kid catches it. He ducks back into the apartment and beelines for his bed, fully intending on catching a few more winks before Red really gets going.
Before they need to worry about the ninjas coming out to play.

It’s a while later before the kid comes back into the apartment. Frank opens his eyes as a burly shape crawls through the bathroom window: Red’s wearing the damn hoodie.

Happy Reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

I remember when I started writing this fic. I made myself the same promises I always do with multi-chapter works – to keep it light, to limit my focus, to produce chapters an average of 2500 words in length. I have broken all three of these promises, and while I don’t regret it, I look back at the mindset with which I started this fic and think, “Aw. How ridiculously naïve,” because this is what always happens.

I feel that I should mention Foggy, Karen, and Lantom are coming back soon, since I’m realizing how many chapters have passed since they last made appearances!

The song for this chapter is less a song and more an aural response to the book *House of Leaves* by Mark Danielewski, one of my all-time favourite books. I thought it was a fitting chapter title, since this is Matt’s second exploration of Frank’s world. The alternative title for this chapter is another Poe song, “5 & ½ Minute Hallway”, which also references *House of Leaves*. I highly recommend the album (and the book).

Readers, dear readers, lovely readers: thank you, as always, for your kind support, encouragement, and insights. I hope you enjoy this chapter! Cheers!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I thought you should know
    Daddy died today
He closed his eyes and he left here…
    He sends his love
He wanted you to know
    He isn’t holding a grudge
And if you are you should let go
Pick up, pick up please…? hello?”

~Poe, “Exploration B”

Fogwell’s appears in a haze of metal, must, and sweat. Knuckles clap against leather. “Matty.” Dad scrubs his hair and gives him a kiss on the forehead. His voice thrums across Matt’s
nose, his cheeks, his eyelids, but there’s no accompanying sound. Matt can’t hear, can’t make out
the words; he lets the feeling of his dad speaking rain down on him.

His face is damp when he wakes up. Tears leave a salty taste in the back of his throat.
Scrubbing at them is complicated. The blanket has wrapped around his hands and head. Actually,
Matt sniffs, fabric pulling at his cheeks as he rolls over: it’s a hoodie. He fell asleep in a hoodie. He
fell asleep in Frank’s hoodie.

Matt pulls back at the sleeves. He brushes back the hood. Frank’s apartment swirls into
focus around him – metal, must, sweat, Fogwell’s. Dad’s voice pitter-patterring across his skin. Matt
curls back onto his side towards the wall, blocking out the sounds from the apartment. He replays
his father’s voice, reassuring himself that it’s still there, in his memory. That he hasn’t forgotten it.

“You awake, Sunshine?” Frank asks from the kitchen.

Matt waits for Dad’s voice to come in, loud and clear – “Wake up, Matty” and “I’m right
here, Matty” – before he answers, “Yeah.”

“Hit the hay pretty hard last night.”

Eventually. Matt spent an awful lot of time lying awake, straining to hear ninja-breathing
through his own pain and questions, but he suspects Frank already knows that. He counters lightly,
“You’re one to talk.”

“Yeah, well.” Frank goes quiet again. It’s not like him to be bested so easily, but he isn’t
about to open up about the four days he spent devil-hunting. Must not be in the mood for that
conversation.

Matt isn’t in the mood either. Let Frank keep his secrets; it makes no difference what his
motions are. Better that Matt doesn’t know. Besides, once the dream dissipates, he’s left a little
queasy, dizzy, shaky. The T3s are wreaking havoc on his system, twisting his guts into knots and
depleting his focus. He folds an arm across his abdomen in hopes that the heat will ease the sick
feeling seeping through his chest. He knows better than to take the pills on an empty stomach, but he
didn’t want to hobble through the apartment in the middle of the night. Not with Frank sleeping by
the kitchen doorway, permanently on the verge of waking at any moment.

And really, Matt shouldn’t have wanted to take the pills at all. Nevermind that his leg trades
agonizing pain for a deep-seated itch, one that starts at the broken bone and swells through his skin
into his molars. Forget the twenty-four glorious hours he spent on designer drugs at Elektra’s feeling
nothing at all: not a twinge, not a cramp. He can handle this. He has to handle this. There’s work to
do.

Work to do, Matty.

He reaches for the windowsill, prying his hand out of the too-long sleeve to catch sunlight
with his knuckles. It’s mid-morning by the feel of things. The windowpane is cool with an autumn
breeze. Matt grips the sill for leverage, easing himself into a sitting position.

Frank emerges from the kitchen, sounding better. He was a bit of a mess yesterday: that
heartbeat of his was slightly elevated. Adrenaline compensating for fatigue, spiked with evasive and
offensive maneuvers. Bobs and weaves around the things he didn’t want to talk about. Now,
Frank’s back to that stable, resting pulse, a rhythm Matt uses as an anchor against his dizziness.

God, his stomach hurts. Matt tucks his arm tighter into his left side, refusing to let it show.
The performance works. Frank doesn’t miss a beat. “Got some stuff to do around town today,” he says. “Switch up the car, grab some provisions, that kind of thing.”

“We or you?” Matt asks.

That first pronoun, ‘we’, causes Frank to take a small step back from the conversation, gain some distance. Matt is too tired to roll his eyes. He gets looking up, his eyelids bob, and then he’s lowering his head, silently willing Frank to say something – say anything. The claustrophobia from before is gone, replaced with a new and unsettling comfortability, and they both know. And neither of them are saying anything about it.

Frank plays it casual, but his heart is hitting a beat just above normal. “Not leaving you here to get snatched by ninjas, Red. ‘sides, fresh air? Sunshine? Chance to stretch your leg? Do you good.”

Matt can’t deny the appeal, but he isn’t about to agree. Frank wants to pretend nothing’s changed: that’s fine. Two can play at that game. “I have a choice?”

“No.”

There it is. Matt heaves his legs off the cot, lifting himself into a sitting position. Blood fills his leg, ballooning inside his cast, and he can’t stop himself. He groans, grabbing the wall for balance.

Frank’s pulse goes funny. A kind of low-key agitation from the sight of what, Matt can’t figure out. Pain doesn’t set Frank off any more than exertion. He sounds like he did with the Irish, when the Devil showed up. He didn’t plan for this. He doesn’t have a manual for this. Whatever it is.

Matt scoffs. Welcome to my world, Frank.

Fresh bandages and a change of clothes get Matt feeling halfway to normal. He takes his antibiotics with a few bites of a protein bar, guzzling water the whole time to uncoil his abdominals. No more codeine: Matt weathers the spasms in his leg by gritting his teeth, shoving his glasses on his face, and heading for the front door.

He’s stopped on his way out by the hoodie getting draped over his head and shoulders. Frank slinks past him, closing the locked apartment door behind. “Cold out,” Frank mutters. He trots down the stairs before Matt can respond.

The building is quiet otherwise. Matt expects Rina to be peeking through a crack in her apartment door, but she’s not home. Gone to work, Matt suspects. The one person Frank might perform for isn’t around, so there’s no reason to shove the hoodie his way except for the fact that it’s cold and Frank doesn’t want him to be.

Same reason he gave Matt the hoodie in the first place.

“Little cold never hurt anybody,” Matt states. It sounds like something Frank would say, before they ended up here.

Frank matches with a tone torn straight from the night with the Dogs of Hell: “Put it on or I make you put it on.” His heartbeat flakes for a second before settling back into its confident pace. He’s back to never doubting himself, not for a second, and Matt’s first instinct, his only instinct, is challenge accepted.
Then Frank’s out the front door. Matt’s alone. The hoodie is heavy in his hands, loaded with a bunch of misplaced memories – Fogwell’s and Dad softening the smell of Frank’s heavy artillery. They’re little comfort here. He doesn’t understand; he wishes he could. But every time he tries to put the pieces in order, he finds he’s missing the most important part of the puzzle.

He puts the hoodie on and makes his way down the stairs.

Frank’s errands are scattered throughout the Bronx. The first meeting is a short way south of the apartment. Walking distance for Frank, but Matt’s grateful for the ride. He’s told to wait in a tone that suggests he might not, that he might try something instead. Matt abides; he waits...with the window rolled down. Frank’s footsteps trail off into the city clatter. He stops, cuts short a man’s greeting by pulling something out of his coat. A note. He’s letting paper do the talking for him.

He doesn’t hide it either. The second he’s back in the car, Frank rubs Matt’s face in it. “You get all that, Red?” to which Matt responds, “Screw you, Frank.”

They drive northeast. Matt basks in the sun the whole way. He rolls down his window more, dragging his hand around the frame. The neighbourhood sparks against his open palm, alien and not. He measures the Bronx against Hell’s Kitchen and finds himself aching at the comparisons. The river is muted here, enmeshed in brick and metal. Sirens seem equally muffled by the aging neighbourhoods.

Tendons crush around leather. Matt twitches out of his reverie: Frank’s hand is tightening on the steering wheel. His pulse amps up to Punisher proportions.

“Wonder what those are for,” Matt mentions.

Frank adjusts his grip on the wheel. He doesn’t wonder. Sirens are sirens. “Same shit, different borough, Red.”

Matt wants to say more about different shit in a different borough, about ninjas being alive, but he’s suddenly crushed under a wall of metal that overtakes the entire car. Frank pulls into a lot where the wind is slashed to shreds. Rust abounds. Matt swallows hard against the taste of iron, of steel, of aluminium and copper. A thick aftertaste of grease and motor oil settles in his mouth.

The second the car stops, he climbs out, dons his crutches, and backs away into a stack of old car parts. “Watch your step,” Frank says, his voice tattering on the scrapheaps. The sound of his car door slamming sputters against the sharp metal around them. Matt’s hearing meets a similar fate as he searches for focus. Sounds flares at random volumes with no sense of depth or dimension. They’re in a scrapyard, an auto wrecker, and Matt hopes to never be return to one again.

Voices and heartbeats appear. Two men, one barely out of his teens and the other about Frank’s age. About Frank’s build. About Frank’s everything: they speak in the same military-grade monosyllables, their voices melding into one long guttural scratch. Their hearts beat to the same time they have ever since basic training. Keys and cash change hands. “I’ll have it brought around,” the man says, clapping Frank on the shoulder. Then the teen hops into the car and drives it towards an open lot Matt can hear nearby.

“Old friend of yours?” Matt asks.

“No.” They’re two men with service records, nothing more.
A different car gets brought around. More monosyllables are exchanged. Frank catches the new set of keys when they’re tossed to him. Neither Frank nor the older man say good-bye to each other beyond a slight nod of their head, one Matt only picks up on because he’s fixating. He’s wrapped up in questions that Frank won’t ever answer, if they’re even questions that can be answered.

Their third stop is conducted with the same detached air of their first two. Frank leaves the parked car, without bothering to warn Matt to wait this time. He disappears into a small shop. Ancient by the smell of things. Too old and small for good security. Exactly the sort of place the Punisher would restock. Matt spends the whole time lost in thought, replaying the previous meetings over in his mind.

He makes a fist and releases, makes a fist and releases, coercing the blood from pulsing in his skull.

When Frank returns to the driver’s seat, he has a bag with him, one he tosses into the back of the car.

Matt ignores the pounding of his heart. The sun burns hotly on his cheeks as the car pulls away from the curb.

“May as well spit it out, Red,” Frank urges in that same, detached tone he’s been using all day. The tone that tells Matt he couldn’t care less: about his contacts, about anyone.

“Just wondering how you do it,” Matt admits, releasing a fist one last time. Blood drains back into his leg and stays there, stinging.

Frank doesn’t bother with inflection. “Do what.”

“Build this network of people and not give a damn about any of them.”

“I give a damn that they do their job.”

But that’s all. “Not if they live or die.”

“Everybody dies,” Frank says dismissively. “Giving a damn never stopped that from happening before. Sure as shit won’t now.”

Matt doesn’t argue with that. If giving a damn was all it took to save lives, Punisher and Daredevil would both be out of work. Still, “You’re not worried about people coming after them? Your contacts?”

“Nothing to worry about. Other people sell ammo and cars. There’s always someone looking to step up.”

“That’s why it didn’t scare you to see your buddies die overseas,” Matt says in understanding.

Frank tosses his shoulders a little. The stitches on his back scrape against the bandages. He is what he is, and he isn’t about to make excuses for that now regardless of what’s happened, what he’s done.

Matt sighs, grateful for his sunglasses. The names flood him, racing through his brain like a prayer. All the numbers he won’t call, the people he can’t speak to, the people he’s saved and the ones he hasn’t, and the ones who are better off without him. God, this would be so much easier if
nobody cared. If he could breeze through the way Frank does, without holding on or worrying about being held on to. “I wish I could do that.”

Sigh. “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then what the hell’s stopping you?” Matt scoffs, but Frank doesn’t let him alone. “You already ditched your best friend and your girlfriend. Don’t owe nothing to nobody. Give ‘em up. Let ‘em go.”

He is never hidden enough, not anymore, and he never really was from Frank. “It’s not that simple.”

“Not that fucking complicated.” Frank shifts a little more in his seat as he draws a conclusion. Matt waits for the admonishment the observation that he doesn’t get to have it both ways. Life’s better without attachments, without masks.

Frank doesn’t bother with any of that though. He draws a deep breath, grounding himself. “You don’t wanna be like me, Red.”

Matt lets the screech of his leg drown out the warning in Frank’s words and the chill flooding through his veins. Frank is stating a fact. He is promising that one bad day is coming. But he also sounds like he's cautioning Matt not to go looking for it.

His leg seethes, eager to be elevated, and rising above that is the smell of Frank’s hoodie come to cold-clock his thoughts back to childhood. Matt rubs at his thigh. “The people you get, the ones you keep around, they’re all good for something. What am I good for?”

The silence that follows isn’t nearly as fraught as Matt anticipates. Frank seems to buzz with energy on the outside, but his respiration couldn’t be more resigned. He’s given the question some very serious thought lately. He’s had to, with everything that’s happened.

Frank’s heart rate flares for just a second before resuming its regular pace.

“Pain in the ass, Murdock. You’re a God damn pain in the ass.”

Matt cracks a smile. He can’t help himself.

The car rolls into the apartment parking lot. Matt hisses, lifting his leg off the floor of the car to keep the limb from jostling on the gravel. Frank can’t park fast enough, and even when the vehicle stops moving, Matt punches the door. He hurts. He hurts so God damn much.

Frank kills the ignition. Matt diffuses into the muffled quiet. He lets his focus drift, his senses broaden. The city passes through him like a cloud. Meanwhile, the tangle of thoughts preys on him. The why and the how and the what comes next. Frank and the wounded ninjas. Karen asking him to stay with her. Foggy and how all he ever needed was his friend…

Matt focuses on his leg. The pain isn’t quite as bad there.

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Evening creeps softly through the apartment. Rina’s footsteps signal its approach, her weary walk up the stairs to her apartment better than an alarm clock. Matt doesn’t have to check the
windowsill for heat to know the shadows are getting long.

He eases himself into a sitting position, wincing from his aching abdominals. The codeine is no longer to blame. This is tension unraveling. His leg gnawed at him throughout meditation, leaving his muscle tight.

Matt nestles back on the cot till he’s in the corner breathing. Rolling air in and out of his lungs, running through his senses. Frank is audible through the open bathroom window. He’s working on the car. The neighborhood whistles, wails, and clamors around them. Night is approaching, and with that the threat of ninjas, not to mention the sad truth that he isn’t going to make it with unmanaged pain.

His teeth chatters. He clenches his jaw, his neck, his shoulders, his fists. Breathing. He can do this. He is the only one who can do this.

A hot rush of pain flares up through his leg and stays there, burning, a taste of what’s to come. Matt launches off the cot. He gets up on his one leg. Moving’ll help. Take his mind off the monster chomping below his knee.

He has to lean against the kitchen doorframe when he gets there: left leg in agony, right leg shaking. Every inch of him refusing to sink to the floor, to Frank’s mattress. He staggers a little, catching the counter for more balance. Clean Tupperware scatters under his trembling hands; Matt reorganizes it into a stack. The remnants of Rina’s cooking waiting to be returned.

He abandons one crutch. Takes the Tupperware with the other. Gritting his teeth against his leg, Matt gets back across the apartment. He grabs his sunglasses from the table, shoving them onto his face, and then steps out into the hall.

Rina has Chopin playing. The needle scratches occasionally on the surface of the record. Footsteps scuffle over the withered floorboards.

Matt knocks. The needle skips on the record player. Rina hisses in Russian and gives the machine a small hit, restarting the music. For a long moment, she stands in wait. Finally, her footsteps pad over to the door. “Who’s there?” Rina demands.

“It’s…” Matt hesitates, unable to remember if Rina knows his name. She probably doesn’t. She only seems to know him as one thing. “…Frank’s brother.”

Rina unlocks her door and rips it open as far as her security chain will allow. Matt can hear her heartbeat racing, her breath comes in short, terrified bursts. Her voice, despite its smallness, is sharp and incisive. “Frank said you were sick.”

Matt nods. “I was.”

Her heartbeat settles a little. Her tone, however, does not. “He was worried about you,” she states accusingly.

The thought doesn’t fit. Matt rejects it outright. “Frank doesn’t…really worry about people.”

“You’re his brother. He wanted you well.” That’s enough for Rina to use the word ‘worry’. “It is good that you are back.”

Matt sputters through the next several seconds, brain fizzling with new questions. He wants to ask her more. He wants evidence. He wants an argument, a case. What does Frank’s worry look
like? This could be strictly an assumption on Rina’s part. In fact, that’s probably all it is. Brothers look out for each other; in her mind, Frank’s brother has been ill. Ergo, worry.

He holds out the stack of Tupperware. “I wanted to return these. Thank you. You’re a good cook, Rina.”

Rina’s heartbeat climbs. “It was nothing,” and then, “I made too much,” and finally, “I’m sorry.” Matt can feel the pointedness of her stare on the stack of her own dishes as she weighs the risks of unlatching the chain from the door. Her mind is made up after giving Matt another once over. She has to know he isn’t a threat.

She closes the door, unlatches the chain, and reopens it just enough to reach an arm through, collect her dishes, and draw them back inside.

Matt waves to her. “Have a good night, Rina.” Then he turns, heading back towards Frank’s apartment.

Her heartbeat skyrockets. The words erupt from her mouth in a jumble: “You need a haircut.”

A series of apologies spill out of her mouth. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, but…your hair. It’s getting…it’s so…I’m sorry. You need a haircut. You could really use a haircut.” Her voice sinks almost into a whisper. “…sorry.”

Matt breaks into a sad smile. The normalcy of Rina’s statement is cutting. She isn’t asking questions about how he broke his leg or how Frank got beat up or if they’re actually related. “It is getting a little long.” He laughs lightly. “Maybe I’ll get Frank to shave it off.”

Rina shakes her head so violently that the whole building trembles. “No, no. I know girls. I keep the books at a salon. They cut your hair. They do a good job. If you…if you want. Only if you want.”

A fist draws up tight in his chest. Matt hangs his head, grimacing. He’s come so far, disappeared so much, and the simplicity of her offer manages to knock the wind out of him. “I’ll think about it. Thank you, Rina.”

She’s nodding, about to close her door, but she rips it open again. Then goes to close it. No - she has more to say. “Don’t let Frank shave your head.”

Her heartbeat is a terrified jangle behind the door. She can’t believe she said that out loud. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be-“

She slams the door.

Matt senses her heart fluttering, anxious, horrified. “Thank you, Rina,” he says again before hobbling away.

The night table catches him when he stumbles back through the door of Frank’s place. Matt’s careful not to spill the full glass of water there. His fingers thread through the pill bottles, rattling them. Antibiotics make a deep, dense chatter; the T3s sprinkle in their container, and a third set of pills crumple against each other. Matt picks up the container, running his hand along the
outside. He unscrews the top and gets a strong whiff of Aspirin.

He’s thrown back two of the capsules and the entire glass of water before it occurs to him the bottle wasn’t there last night. That the water glass was near empty before he lay down that afternoon.

Matt hobbles around, taking in the things he didn’t think to before. The punching bag is flush with fresh scents. Some of his clothing has been returned to the duffel under the cot while he rested, and it’s freshly laundered. The Aspirin and water on the night stand seem like the last of the surprises until Matt goes into the bathroom. He sniffs out a new bar of glycerin soap in the tub. Cheap but gentler than the caustic stuff Frank had in there last week.

Matt’s hearing fixes on Frank in the parking lot. Car sounds good, but he isn’t taking it anywhere. No ninja hunting or other punishing. Frank hasn’t left the apartment. He hasn’t left.

Understanding bubbles up against the roof of his skull. Matt staggers back to the cot and slumps down on it, breathless and unsettled and fighting, fighting the whole time: the smell of the apartment, of the hoodie he’s still wearing, of the small things that should have gone unnoticed. Frank is here, at the apartment, lingering in the parking lot and hovering at the desk and staying awake at night in case ninjas arrive.

And Sato knew that’s where he would be. She wasn’t looking to buy good graces with the Punisher; she was looking to distract him, so she helped him get Matt back.

Matt tucks himself back into the corner, elevating his throbbing leg on the cot as he does. He draws an arm tightly around his waist, pinning down his reeling stomach. Sato knows. And Rina knows. And Frank must know, at least in part, though Matt suspects Sato’s true motivations are still a mystery to him. Bad enough that she played the Punisher, but Sato did it without really playing him at all.

The sound of Frank returning along the fire escape, through the window, gets Matt to uncoil from the corner. He combs his fingers through his shaggy hair, struggling against the sleeves of the hoodie the whole time. It’s supposed to help him look at ease. Frank still sees right through him. “What?”

“Nothing.” The reply is too quick. Frank’s heartbeat starts up in alarm. Matt deflects. “Thank you.”

Frank shrugs. “Didn’t do nothing, Red.”

Matt does his best to stare Frank down, to get him off the scent and break through his ridiculous, bullshit defences. “Thank you, Frank.”

“Don’t.”

“Really,” he speaks more forcefully this time, fuelled by the thought that this is different. This isn’t business-as-usual for Frank Castle. He might drift through contacts and hold his network at arm’s length. But Sato isn’t currently being hunted. The ninjas and Elektra are still alive. The devil of Hell’s Kitchen is laying low with the Punisher, who isn’t currently winding up for a punch. “Thank you.”

Frank tromps off to the kitchen, scrubbing at his head, pulse taking off in a frustrated gallop. Grumbling under his breath the whole way that he didn’t fucking do anything, so give it a rest with the pleases and thank you-s, will yah? Christ fucking almighty, he thought they were past all this.
He ends his tirade by asking, “You take too many of those T3s, Red?” As if there’s no Aspirin on the night stand. As if he didn’t put it there.

Matt allows himself a smirk. He feels like he’s earned it. The expression fades quickly. He doesn’t want to undercut the sincerity of this, no matter how oblivious Frank insists on being. “I just really appreciate everything you’ve done.”

“Shut up, Red.”

But Frank’s tone is resigned: no bark, no bite. His pulse falls back to a resting rate, at ease. He pours himself a cup of coffee and re-emerges. “You take those dishes back to Rina’s?”

“Yeah.”

Frank disassociates. His whole body goes quiet as he disappears from the apartment. Rina.

Matt invites him back into the room. “She had a message for you.”

“Hm?”

“You’re not allowed to shave my head.”

Frank tosses back his coffee. He drops the cup on the desk and moves back through the apartment towards the cot. Matt gets himself propped up, ready to fight, and ends up tangling with Frank’s hand when the bastard ruffles his hair.

“Don’t make me,” Frank says, disappearing into the bathroom. He takes the threat with him when he goes.

Happy reading!

Chapter End Notes

Matt’s line – “I wish I could do that” – gave me some apprehension while I was writing this. It seemed out of character for him to idealize aspects of Frank’s methods. However, given his conversation with Claire before the Hand’s attack on the hospital, his relationship with Stick at the end of season 2, and the damage he does to his friendships both in the series and this fic, I thought it worked for him here. He isn’t considering the full ramifications of separating himself entirely from the people he wants to save. Moreover, I thought it provided a contrast to what’s happening between him and Frank in the story.
Near to You

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

These particular lyrics have been playing in my head when I’ve tried to name the past couple chapters. I resisted using them: “Near to You” is a break-up song, a deeply intimate one, and while these lines worked, the rest of the song didn’t seem to apply outside of a romantic context. I have been trying to find songs that work as a whole instead of piecemeal. But the melody fit too nicely, and this chapter had so many walls coming down, I felt I could justify using this track.

Readers, dear Readers, thank you so much for your kind support and attention. I could not have made it this far without you. You can look forward to some Karen, Foggy, and Lantom in the next two chapters. Cheers!

“He and I have something different
And I’m enjoying it cautiously.
I’m battle-scarred. I am working oh-so-hard
To get back to who I used to be.”

~A Fine Frenzy, “Near To You”

Nighttime cools the world on fire. Sounds billow. Scents sharpen with chill. Matt lets his mind wander through the cityscape. Through the Bronx’s dark corners and alleyways, up and down the streets; chasing cars and conversation. Music throbbing in clubs. A party in a nearby apartment. Classical wafting over from Rina’s. Sirens in the distance. Police scanner buzzing behind him.

The bathroom window slaps open. Matt jerks out of his reverie.

“Hear anything, Red?”

Matt can’t help but smile. “I hear lots of things.”

Frank steps out onto the fire escape, joining him. “How far you reach with those ears of
“Depends on the volume. And the height. I can hear more then higher up I am.”

“Doesn’t make a damn bit of sense.” Frank half-sits on the windowsill. “How you do what you do with the senses you got.”

“It’s best not to think of it as four senses,” Matt replies quickly. He stops shy of delving straight into the world-on-fire speech, trying to reformulate his perception in a way a guy like Frank will understand. “Probably better not to think of each one doing a separate job. Sound isn’t just something I hear; it’s something I feel. I can calculate distance, dimension, density, stability. I can track my opponents. Smell and taste help too. They complete the picture. Depending on where I am, the city has a particular scent, a rhythm.”

“You know you’re in the Bronx?”

An ache blooms in Matt’s chest. “I know I’m not in Hell’s Kitchen.”

He waits for Frank to cut into him with some line but nothing happens. The nighttime stands between them peaceably.

Matt basks in the calm – the scratch of the police scanner melding with the fizzling of Rina’s music on the far side of the building; the sirens in the distance (robbery? Murder? Assault? Their destination is too far to tell). He draws his perception back to the fire escape. “Your senses do the same thing, they just have visuals to correspond to. Figure as a sniper, you depend on sight.”

Surprisingly, Frank answers: “Making a shot’s not just about seeing. Gotta consider distance, wind speed, and direction. Ammo changes things too.” He mentions that last bit as an afterthought. Frank’s clearly got ways of working any bullet he’s given into his enemies. “Got pretty good at measuring all that. Can’t tell me it’s the same though, Red. Met plenty of people who can’t do half the shit you do: blind or not.”

Rina changes the album; Mozart begins to play. Pebbles scatter in the parking lot from a passing breeze. The rooftop looms silently overhead. “I’ve had training,” Matt states.

That isn’t the end of it for Frank. “Training can’t get you to hear ninjas breathing from two blocks away.”

Matt smirks, vaguely remembering his shout into the darkness of the animal hospital. “I may have been exaggerating,” he concedes.

“No by much,” Frank says with certainty. “Training helps, but you said your senses were heightened? How?”

Matt toes the question’s edge carefully, acutely aware this this is about the change things. His senses always change things. “It was an accident.”

“Accident?”

“Yeah. I got these…” He considers lying. Decides against it. There’s nothing left for him to hide. “…these chemicals spilled on me when I was a kid. Burned my eyes, left me blind, but all my other senses became heightened.”

“How’d that happen?”
Matt gives a small laugh. He sees exactly where this conversation is going to go, can predict
Frank’s reaction clearly. “There was this truck loaded with barrels. I saw a man about to be hit by it,
so I pushed him out of the way.”

A groan. “Don’t give me that shit.”

“It’s not shit.” He laughs some more at the symmetry of it all. “That’s how it happened.”

“How old were you?”

“Nine.”

“Jesus. Diving in front of cars at nine. You started young.”

Matt turns the conversation around. “When’d you learn to shoot? Take it you started young
too.”

Frank doesn’t answer. Not at first. When the quiet drags on, he admits, “I nodded.” Then,
“Can’t pick up everything can you?”

The thought that he’s been tested passes briefly through Matt’s head. “No. Not everything.”
He fights back, reminding Frank this isn’t the first time he missed something. “I didn’t pick up on
the bullet you cracked off my head.”

“Picked up on plenty before that.”

Matt appreciates the acknowledgement. “Yeah.”

Frank pauses in a silent ‘don’t mention it’ before continuing. “Who the hell trains a kid to do
shit like this? Couldn’t have been you dad’s idea.”

“No. No, my dad…” Matt presses his spine tightly against the withering brick of Frank’s
building, hoping for support. He finds little. His world transforms so quickly from a Bronx
apartment building to an alley in Hell’s Kitchen. Blood and brain cooling on the concrete around the
corpse that used to be his father. He pulls himself back on the thread of Frank’s heartbeat. “After
my dad died, I ended up at St. Agnes’s. An orphanage. My senses were out of control. They were
going stronger. I almost ended up in an institution. The sisters there found this guy – blind, too.”

“Like you?”

Matt hesitates. There are too many ways to answer that: yes, no, I don’t know, actually more
like you, Frank. “He was born blind,” so no, they’re nothing alike. At all. “He trained me. Taught
me how to control my senses, how to fight, how to survive.”

The fire escape trembles; Frank’s shaking his head. “Seen people who fight to survive, Red.
That’s not what this guy taught you to do.” He does well not to say it out loud, the stuff that Stick
obviously intended Matt to be able to do. “You ever find out why?”

“Not at the time, no. He finally came back to warn me about the Hand and this…ancient
war, but…” Matt bites his bottom lip. He didn’t mean to say ‘but’. Frank doesn’t need to know all
this.

Too little, too late: Frank asks, “But what?”

Matt shoves his spine into the wall again, relishing the scratch of brick on his spine. “He left
when I was still a kid. Before he could finish my training.” He forces himself to laugh a little, ripping the sound of his chest into the frigid air before scuttling deeper into the hoodie he’s still wearing. Stick coming back does nothing to ease the sting growing inside him. Matt offers the next bit as a distraction. “Half-training for a half-measure…”

Frank doesn’t take the bait. “He left?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t…I wasn’t the warrior he wanted me to be.”

He waits for the judgment that must be coming, the judgment Frank already made that night with the Dogs. What he gets is worse. Frank’s answer is ambiguous as hell: “That’s shit, Red.”

Matt doesn’t know what to say, so he says nothing.

Nights pass with no ninjas, but Matt listens. He plants himself on the fire escape for hours, the cold eating away at his strength and nerves. Frank joins him. He brings coffee. Matt can’t stomach the way Frank brews it, but there never seems to be a lot in the mug he’s given. Enough that he can hold it for warmth and venture the occasional sip.

They don’t talk much, but when they do, the conversations are less fraught. The few times they wound each other, it’s intentional and mild, the verbal equivalent of a spar. Once, Frank gets him to start listing off the things he can hear, and it turns into a contest: “A cat in the next alley? Shit, I can hear that and the drunk taking a piss in the lot north. Heightened senses, my ass…”

“I guess you can smell the bourbon he’s been drinking too?” Matt snarks.

Frank scoffs. “Don’t cheat, Red.”

“Who’s cheating? Unless you can’t name the song he’s humming.”

“‘Danny Boy.’” Frank’s good. The drunk’s humming changes key so many times that Matt has a hard time identifying the melody. “How much change he got in his pockets?”

Matt resists the urge to smile. “None. Those are peanuts from the bar. Which you would know if you were listening instead of looking.” And then, because his honour is at stake, “Who’s cheating again?”

They’re settling in for the long crawl into morning when the game ends. Frank sits on one side of the window nursing his umpteenth cup of coffee. Matt lounges opposite, his leg itching and tense from cold, but he doesn’t want to go inside. He misses the night, misses being outside, misses being useful. Crawling onto his cot in the morning is the worst feeling in the world, because he knows he has a whole day of nothing ahead of him.

Matt rubs at his left thigh, trying to ease the tension there. “Why’d you become a soldier?” he asks.

The answer sounds automatic – “I just did” - but Matt knows better. Frank’s heartrate is stable and steady when he’s ignoring things, when he’s disassociating. Now, it’s slightly elevated. Curious. He’s searching for answers amidst the city torpor. “Nothing to know about me, Red. I mean it: what I do, I just do.”

“I don’t believe that. You didn’t wake up one morning and decide to serve.”

“Didn’t have to. Made that decision long time before I shipped out. Just needed an outlet.”
“That why you married your wife? Became a father?”

“Never questioned it for a second.” But even Frank knows that’s a lie. His heart races at the mere suggestion of doubt. He slams his empty coffee mug onto the fire escape, adding, sternly, “Didn’t know different at the time. Figured the war was out there, not waiting for me back here.”

Matt wraps his fingers through the grate, makes a fist, and pulls, pulls until his whole arm hurts. Until the urge to say he knows how that feels goes away. What a shitty, pithy way to commiserate. He doesn’t know. He can’t. And it doesn’t matter, because Frank won’t ever admit it.

“I told you my dad made some money by throwing fights.” Matt ignores the way Frank’s heart detaches from the conversation. Better that than geared up. “He agreed to do it in this one fight, probably the biggest of his career: Murdock vs. Creel. He didn’t…want me to know that was the plan, but I overheard. And the night of the fight, I said something…something about Murdocks always getting back up. Because that’s what I wanted him to do. He was always telling me to be better, and I thought maybe, maybe I could do that for him too. Help him be better?”

“…because he’s selfish. He’s so God damn selfish. Dad was doing his best trying to put food on the table, and it was never enough for him…"

Matt draws a shuddering breath against his sputtering. He can’t stop now. Only way out of Hell is through it. “So during the match, Dad doesn’t go down. He rails on Creel. Just unleashes all hell. Knocks every kind of shit out of him.” Frank makes a sound, like a scoff but lighter, and if Matt didn’t know any better he’d say it was a laugh. “And I was so proud, you know? Listening on the television. Everybody’s shocked. Everybody’s stunned. My dad’s a hero, and I always knew, but now everybody else does too.”

Cold bleeds through him on the inside. He’s the pavement under Dad’s corpse as much as he is the hand touching Dad’s face in the dark. The world on fire can’t interpret death as anything but an absence, a void, which is fitting and awful and Matt wishes he didn’t do this. What a stupid olive branch to extend to a man who held his daughter’s mutilated body in his arms. “They found him in an alley near our house. He took a bullet to the head. You say you never hear the bullet that gets you? Well, I heard the bullet that got him. I still hear it.”

The spot Frank occupies becomes dead air, radio silence. He’s drawn himself up so tight that all Matt can do is listen to his heart, an ominous thunder of carefully restrained rage. His voice is a low rumble far, far away, rising out of that sunken place inside Frank. “First time I ever heard shots fired was that day in the park. They’re the only shots I hear.”

Seems odd to filter through the night sounds after Frank speaks. Everything is muted, and there’s a phantom ringing in Matt’s head from recent gunfire. He gets his head back in the game, counting heartbeats and breaths, and is surprised to find when he finishes that he isn’t tearing at the fire escape anymore.

Frank, similarly, has loosened his hands. He draws a breath in preparation to speak, but he releases it without saying anything.

Matt nods. He hears Frank loud and clear.

Matt wakes up the next morning under-slept and groggy. Head full of fuzz, eyes rheumy,
joints stiff. Frank warns him not to get his ass out of bed. “You’re making yourself sick.” Matt’s about to say he’s fine, but Frank cuts him off. “You’re not fine. Get some sleep.”

He tries, laying on his back, to find his breath, but his throat is dry. Breathing stings. The Aspirin is hard to find. His senses refuse to play fair, casting a wide net when he needs them here, in his corner of the apartment. He finally gets two capsules and swallows them along with the glass of water that’s now a permanent fixture on the table. As he returns the glass to the nightstand, he accidently nudge his cell phone.

Matt’s hands shake under the weight of his obligations, but he doesn’t dare retract his hand. He fingers the edge of the device lightly. He charged it up a few days ago but hasn’t touched it since, the prospect of finding a missed call from Elektra too foreboding. But Karen deserves a call, as does Lantom. Claire, too, should probably hear that he hasn’t died. And there are so many things he needs to tell Foggy.

Foggy.

Matt curls up on his side away from the table. His leg burns from the movement but settles into a familiar ache as he stills. He wraps his arms around his stomach and drags his head across his pillow, centering himself. Meditation is easy; maintaining it is difficult. No sooner is he in his own headspace than the nagging fears return to him. The wars still yet to be fought play themselves out in his head. Elektra coming for Frank, Fisk coming for Hell’s Kitchen, Fisk coming for Foggy…

He gasps – head aching, chest pounding.


Matt doesn’t feel fine. He thinks he smells her, Elektra, but that can’t be the case. Must be a dream. Sure enough, he cycles his breathing and finds the familiar smell of the apartment coming back to him.

“What time is it?” he asks.

Frank’s response is characteristically vague. “Afternoon.”

“Early or late?”

“Middle.”

Matt stifles a laugh, a bitter one. He could start phoning, then. Karen is good about answering her cell at the paper. Lantom will be in his office. He can leave a voicemail for Claire. And Foggy…

Foggy.

Matt’s stomach churns. He buries his head more deeply into his pillow and rounds his spine until his forehead touches the wall. He can never quite seem to bend himself to be as small as he feels.

“I have to go back to Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Yeah.”

That answer surprises him. Matt uncoils himself slightly and lifts his head to face Frank. “Yeah?”
“Made a promise to your priest that he’d see you again, Red, one I intend to keep. Kept all the other promises I made to the old man.” Frank gets up from the desk and paces around to the far side of the apartment, popping off two punches onto the bag as he moves past. “You tell your old legal partner that Fisk’s gunning for him too?”

Matt returns his head to the pillow and curls up tighter despite the hurt roving through him. God, he’s tired. “Not yet.”

“Send that shit off in a text message or something. Ain’t gonna do him any good to have you stewing about it.”

“No, I gotta see him. I should have told him a long time ago.” He forgoes the thought of actually trying to contact Foggy. He’ll do it; he always does, especially if it scares him. “The Hand are well established in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Ninjas are going to be on my ass, Red. Not yours.” Frank lifts something off the floor – metal, jangling: toolbox – and brings it back to the desk with him. He digs through until he finds what he’s looking for, then drops back into his chair. Matt finally gets a whiff of some of what he’s working with, and the awful smell unravels him. Hard to be tense about a conversation with Foggy when he’s lying in such close proximity to homemade explosives.

“Elektra will be there.” He’s overstating the obvious, but the dangers seem so much larger with everything the leg has put him through. “She’s been biding her time.”

Frank has already considered this. His heart marches calmly through the forgone conclusions. “You go to St. Matthew’s. Church is your turf. She isn’t going to start shit there.”

“But what about after I leave? That puts Lantom at risk, Foggy at risk…”

“That puts her at risk.” Frank twists at his screwdriver until metal crimps against metal. He moves on to another, then another, building a small army of tiny bombs. “You keep forgetting, Red, if it was just about keeping you, she’d’ve done that after nabbing your ass from the animal hospital. Gotten you the hell out of dodge and made good and sure you couldn’t get back. She attacks your priest or your partner, you’re not coming home with her.”

Matt assumes this next bit is part of the growing pile of unspoken shit he and Frank have been amassing together, but it needs to be said: “That goes for you too.”

Frank’s pulse climbs for a second or two before he can stop it. “Yeah, well, I pissed her off.” He sounds a little proud of that fact and is quick to hide it. “Besides, can’t imagine you’re keen on what I do when her ninjas show up.”

There’s no answer that quite works except, “I’m not keen on people’s faces being cut off.”

“Better of two evils, then?”

“No.” Matt doesn’t have a name for it, but it’s not that. Words fail him. His brain’s muggy with details – nights spent on the fire escape, days spent indoors, waiting for a downpour of Elektra’s vengeance on Frank that he has little hope of even helping to fight off. There’s a patch of explosives growing nearby. Yet the smells in Frank’s apartment bring Fogwell’s to life around him. Dad’s voice comes into his head clear as day. The gunfire in his head is similar to the one in Frank’s.

He jerks awake, having fallen asleep at some point. Behind him, Matt can hear Frank working away on his arsenal. Without missing a beat, he mutters, “You’re fine, Red. Get some fucking rest,” and he preps another bomb.
Matt settles back into a doze, the thought that this really isn’t the time to be feeling safe overwhelmed by the scary truth that safe is exactly how he feels right now.

Happy reading!
5 1/2 Minute Hallway

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 2.

Apologies for the delay between updates. I do most of my writing on weekends, and my past couple weekends have been busy! Not to mention I struggled with everything that needed to go into this chapter and who, exactly, the narration needed to follow. I eventually stuck with Frank, but I have the final scene written from Matt’s perspective too. I may post that snippet on my Tumblr; I may not. There are certain things in it that I really liked writing, though I have to admit that sticking with Frank was far more dramatic.

I must also apologize to those of you eagerly awaiting the return of Foggy, Karen, and Lantom. I’m sorry: there was so much I wanted to do with this chapter, that it is entirely Matt and Frank again. But I promise they’re coming, and they’re coming soon! And I’m so sorry!

I mentioned the song for this chapter back in “Exploration B”. The “5 1/2 Minute Hallway” is a reference to Mark Danielewski’s novel House of Leaves (a novel I highly recommend).

Readers, you are the best. I can’t express how much I appreciate hearing from you. I hope you are all having a wonderful day! Until next time – cheers!

“When you’re living in a hallway that keeps on growing,
I think to myself
5 more minutes, and I’ll be there
…But there’s more to this story
Than I’ve been letting on.
…I’m in your hallway, standing on a cliff,
And just when I think I’ve found the trick,
I’m tumbling like an echo
‘Cause there’s only so far I can go.”

~Poe, “5 1/2 Minute Hallway”
Frank gets a parking spot at the front and waits, passenger window rolled down so the kid can find him. The car gives him some cover against the milling passersby. They’re not looking him in the eye: this is New York after all. But his luck is going to run out eventually with the kid drawing him out in daylight like this. Only so much shadows and a hood can do. Maybe he oughta start wearing a beard, grow his hair out, get a fucking mask like Red.

He hates that, putting distance between himself and who he is. His fugitive status is a sign he’s doing it right. He isn’t looking to get caught again, sent back up shit creek to the Fat Man, but disguising himself feels wrong.

The door on the shop swings open. A rail of a dame steps out, pale as Rina, her hair the same shade of maroon as her lipstick. She holds the door for Red, who’s looking like his old damn self again. His hair’s neatly cut and styled. Less a sick ten-year-old, more a straight-talking public defender. The woman swipes a hand through his shorter locks, appraising her own handiwork with a comment and a smile.

Red chuckles uneasily from the contact. The back of his neck lives up to his nickname, going the colour of his devil suit. It might not be so noticeable if he hadn’t been cultivating an unruly mop on his head for the past couple weeks.

He’s still flushed when he takes a seat on the passenger side. The woman who held the door stays on the sidewalk, lighting a long, black cigarette. She raises her lighter to Frank without really looking at him; he nods back and rolls up the passenger window.

The kid breathes a sigh. The colour disappears from his neck. He runs a hand along the right side of his head, testing the length. Grimacing a little with uncertainty. His hair’s shorter than Frank remembers from court. But Red seems a lot more himself with it cut, even if he is worried about it. He finally looks like a God damn grown-up.

“Say it, Frank,” Red urges somewhat defeatedly.

Frank pulls out of the parking space. “Should’ve just let me shave it,” he teases.

The back of Red’s neck flushes pink. He shifts in his seat, quietly admitting, “It is shorter…”


The kid laughs lightly. He stops reaching for his hair.

Now that that’s settled: “Anywhere else you need to go?”


Frank doesn’t have to ask what for.

There’s a hole in the wall place that sells used LPs and CDs. It’s in a basement, no security cameras. Just a guy behind the counter pouring through a stock to be shelved.

Red handles the stairs with his crutches like a pro now that he’s got a job to do. Once inside, he stands and waits. Frank’s turn to the take the lead.

Frank doesn’t have to be told what section: “Classical’s this way.” He keeps his footsteps loud and measured across the chipped hardwood floor. Red follows. He comes to stand beside the shelf, giving Frank full view of the small selection. Dusty plastic bags cloak the fraying covers of
well-loved LPs.

“What are you looking for?” he asks.

“What do they have?”

About three rows of names Frank can’t pronounce. “Bunch of old guys with orchestras.”

The kid scoffs: helpful. “See any Vivaldi? Debussy?”

Frank flips through the titles. He finds the Vivaldi but, “No Debussy.”

“What about Chopin?”

“No.”

“Chopin is spelled with a ch-.”

“I know how to spell Chopin, smartass.” Frank glances from where he’s digging in the S-s to tug the record out of its spot on the shelf from under the Cs. “They put it in the wrong spot.”

Red barely conceals his smirk. “What’s the track listing?”

Fifteen titles, most of them nondescript. “Tell me which one you want.”

“One of the nocturnes. Rina’s copy skips.”

“Nocturne No. 2. That one?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know,” Frank parrots, shoving the record under his arm with the Debussy. “Can list off a bunch of dead guys but not their songs. Not much for classical, are you?”

“Not as much as Rina,” Red replies. “More than you, I take it.”

Frank shrugs. “I don’t mind classical. Given the choice, I’d probably pick a different kind of classic though.”

He searches for rock, funk, R&B, bluegrass; his eyes lock on the adjacent Folk section and he scans it, letting the names jog his memory. John Denver, Joni Mitchell, Don McLean: Maria’s favourites. Her singing voice comes back to him, all smoke and throat. He tabs through some of the records, scrolling through the radio in his head. “Annie’s Song” from the first dance at their wedding; “Yellow Taxi Cab” when she was soothing one of the babies back to sleep; “American Pie” on road trips. By heart. Acapella. Every verse in the right order.

He stops on one, unable to continue. Brain flooding with a voice, higher pitched this time.

“What’d you find?”

Frank flicks at the corner of one of the records. “Bob Dylan. ‘Blood on the Tracks.’”

“Good album.”

“Lisa used to like Bob Dylan.” He used to like Bob Dylan. And that about sums it up; it has
to. He doesn’t know how to describe the way she took to his music. A little girl singing “Tangled Up In Blue” as she ran a brush through her hair in the morning or “The Times They Are A-Changing” while she was doing her homework.

Frank taps the record some more, trying to stop her voice from fading away. “Knew the songs better than I did, she…she did this impersonation sometimes? Started doing it for every song she heard. Singing like Bob Dylan. Made me…” He freezes on the next word, not sure he wants to give this world the pleasure of knowing how much he fucking misses his baby girl. Frank lowers his voice then. For the kid’s freakish ears only: “Made me laugh. Sounded too damn much like the real thing.”

The voice in his head continues after Frank releases the record. He doesn’t have the words, only the pictures, the sounds, the feeling. They all resist naming. Lisa elbowing him at the breakfast table; Lisa tugging on his arm as she’s about to go to bed at night. He glances back at Red, trying not to notice the kid’s face, the small, sad smile there. Grateful, almost, for the memory. Frank finds he doesn’t mind the look. Not anymore.

He pulls his hand from the record. “Anything else?”

“No.” Red’s expression gradually recedes. It eventually hardens into that battle-ready face he wore in the mask, in court. He holds out his hand. “Guy at the counter is looking at you.”

“How can you tell?”

“His pulse keeps spiking. You should probably go.”

Frank nods. He passes off the records and a couple of bills before leaving.

He checks to make sure, when Red gets to the car, that the kid didn’t do something stupid like buy the Bob Dylan. Seems like something he would do to be nice. But Red arrives with the two records for Rina and nothing more. He already gave Frank enough back in the shop.

Back at the apartment. Frank grabs the plastic bag of stuff from the backseat; Red takes the records. Now it’s just a matter of getting Rina to accept them. Leave ‘em in the hallway or bring ‘em by when she’s home, Rina won’t touch them. But once they’re in her apartment…

Red heads towards her unit once he’s up the stairs, the records clamped tightly in one hand against his crutch. Frank watches him slide them, one by one, under the crack in her door.

Can’t figure out his own shit to save his life, but the kid’s a fucking mind reader sometimes.

Frank tosses his bag onto the desk on his way into the flat; Red locks the door behind them. They head in opposite directions to defuse the place. Frank starts at the far window, detaching the tripwire there. Red makes quick work of the window beside his cot and the bathroom. Nothing’s rigged to bring the building down, but it’s enough to slow an undead ninja trying to get into the place. It doesn’t seem like they’ve had company. Red wouldn’t sink onto the cot the way he does, looking remarkably at ease, if there’d be an intrusion.

The kid’s lost in thought for a while, long enough for his calm to leave him. For his hand to go back to the back of his neck, testing the length of his hair some more. Frank rolls his eyes: not this shit again. When he’s sick it’s one thing, but Christ, at this point, Red’s looking to beat himself up. Spend the next twenty-four hours worrying about being back in Hell’s Kitchen before he takes even one step in that direction.
Frank grabs the bag off the desk and chucks it at Red before that pained expression crosses his face.

“What’s this?” Red shoves a hand into the bag.

“Shit for you to wear tomorrow.” Frank catches a flash of blue in his periphery. Red’s got the contents of the bag in his hands. Frank scrubs at his head, whipping towards the kitchen as he does. “Not sending you back to your priest in a tee and sweats.” The old man can judge the mission all he wants, but Frank’s done a world of right by him and the kid both.

Red’s lips are pulling at the corners, and his eyebrows are rising. Frank can see it so clearly in his head now, that look. Knowing where it comes tears him up between leaving the room and standing his ground. There’s so many ghosts between them, but leaving would dishonour the memory.

Hell if it’s not twisting Frank up though. The usual firestorm of bullets in his head replaced with the certainty that it’s no wonder the kid’s all pleases and thank you’s for the slightest courtesy. It’s no wonder he clings to such a dumbass faith in the common good. He’s got a bullet in his head from that froze him at ten-years-old, and yet there’s no hard feelings when he’s rooming with the guy who popped another one in that direction decades later.

“I have clothes at my place,” Red says.

Frank comes back to reality. “Your girlfriend know about your place?”

The kid hates to admit it: “Yeah.”

They can both fill in the blanks. Red’s apartment is fair game in a way that the church isn’t.

“It’s blue.” Frank doubles back, wandering towards the bathroom dismissively. “The shirt.”

“You guessed my size?”

Had to. Sweats and tees aren’t exactly telling for sizes on button-down, collared shirts. But instead of that, Frank says, “Kids’ clothing only comes in three sizes.”

Red laughs. He puts the clothing back in the bag. Frank prepares to shut the bathroom door on the kid’s thanks, but none is forthcoming.

Instead, he gets: “We can’t all be built like brick shithouses. What are you – part-tank?”

Frank shakes his head. “Just a guy, Red.” He doubles back, ruffling the kid’s too-short hair a little and earning a small hit in response. Red glares through his sunglasses; he’s getting formidable again. Frank backhands the kid’s scalp lightly as a warning. “But I guess everything seems bigger when you’re so damn small.”

Red fixes his hair. “Wasn’t too small to haul you away from the Dogs of Hell.”

“I blacked out. Could’ve hauled my own ass into that elevator.”

The kid gets defensive: “I knocked you out. Twice.”

“The wall knocked me out,” Frank scoffs.

“Because I put you into it. Tiny-me got the jump on the big, bad Punisher.” Red pauses for
effect. Then he stays paused, likely because it returns to him, the reason why they were fighting. The air gets pulled out of his chest in one big gust. He twists his head away from the conversation, expression flattening.

“Twice,” he says in a tone struggling between anger and acceptance. His shoulders broaden in anticipation of throwing a punch. The motion leaves him grasping at the bag of clothing in his lap defensively. Torn between the extremes.

But then the fight slowly drains out of his shoulders for another time. Red nods in resolution, having made his decision. He draws the clothing a little tighter to his chest. No twisting or turning for Red. There’s here, now, this choice, this chance.

It’s no wonder. No fucking wonder.

They’re on the fire escape poking at more of Rina’s reheated cooking when she gets home. Red’s listening; he tilts his ear to catch the sounds of her return. “What’s she doing?” Frank asks. “What’cha hear?”

“She’s at her door.” Red inches a little closer to the bathroom window. “Lock’s giving her a bit of trouble. Hinges squeak.” A smile starts to form on his lips. “She’s…just standing there. I think she’s…” He pushes himself closer to the open window. The smile fades. “Oh, she’s scared.”

He goes quiet. Guilty? Jesus, better not be. This whole thing was his idea. Frank shoves another bite into his mouth. “She’s not still standing there,” he says in dismay.

Red shushes him, brow furrowing in confusion. Sounds aren’t making sense. “She…picked them up. But the door just closed and opened a couple times. I think she’s…” he jumps a little in surprise, then settles back against the wall.

“What?”

“She slammed her door.”

“Oh.”

A few minutes of eating and Red perks up again. Frank stares at him. “She coming over here or-“

The fucking kid shushes him again.

Frank throws down his fork into the container. “Christ Jesus,” he mutters in a near whisper. “That fucking quiet enough for you?”

Red rolls his eyes. He turns until his sunglasses are on Frank in the illusion of a stare. He doesn’t say a word; he doesn’t have to. The silence is quickly filled with music radiating from Rina’s apartment. A track Frank hasn’t heard her play before. A somber piece for violins.

“I thought I heard the needle on the turntable,” Red snarks. “Would have known for sure, if I was able to focus.”

Frank hisses for him to shut up.

Red shoots him another glare with his glasses. “Why? Are you having a hard time focusing, Frank?”
“Having a hard time doing anything with your bitching.” Frank pokes a little more at his food. “Which is this? This the Vivaldi?”

“Yeah.”

Frank considers it for a while. “It’s good,” he finally says.

Red nods, at peace. Listening.

Neither of them say anything more.

The kid springs up in his sleep and shoves himself into the corner at the head of his cot.

Frank wraps his hand around the .45 at the head of his mattress and waits. He peers through the darkened apartment for shadows, shapes, the suggestion of movement. The only thing he sees is Red, slinging breaths in and out of his lungs like a dying man. Skin blue and glistening with sweat from the moonlight coming through his window.

He falls back on his pillow to get his breathing back under control. Frank loosens his grip on the weapon. Nighttime dulls and blunts again before his eyes, the apartment spiralling back into a doze.

“Frank?”

Oh, Jesus, he’s done it: spend one day reassuring a sick kid the ninjas aren’t out to get him, and Frank’s now on-call at all hours of the night to do it some more. He breathes slowly, feigning sleep.

“I know you’re awake,” Red tells him.

A sigh. Frank’s earned that much. “Stop listening to my heart.”

“What’s it like to die?”

Frank opens his eyes. The apartment comes back into harsh focus. Sharper edges, shinier gunmetal; the skull on his vest stares back at him from where it’s slung over the back of the desk chair. “Go back to sleep,” he says.

“Not tired.” Of course not. “What’s it like?”

The lumps in his pillow jut into his skull at odd angles. Frank punches at them a little to flatten them. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Your medical file said-“

“Lotta things.” Injuries from the line of duty, from an enemy’s fuck you to the Geneva Conventions, that drill to his foot from the Irish.

But the kid presses. “You flatlined. What did you see?”

He shuts his eyes, grits his teeth, and tugs himself loose from the snarl of bullets erupting inside his head, the ones that land him in a hospital room gripping a nurse’s scrubs begging that he wants to go home. “Was dead, Red,” he declares forcefully. “Didn’t see shit.”
Red shuffles on his cot under his bedding. He’s starting to curl up against the wall again. “You think…” he puts himself back into a straight line. “You think that’s all there would have been? If you didn’t wake up?”

Frank’s recollections are blackness bookended by bullets and that nurse, that terrified nurse. Take me home, take me home. But there’s no home and no Lisa, no Frank and no Maria. “I think that’s all there was.”

“You think that’s what it was for your wife and kids?”

Anger rolls through him like an approaching storm. *It better fucking not have been.* “Big guy in the sky isn’t rolling out the red carpet at the pearly gates for someone like me, Red. The shit I’d done…the shit I didn’t do…” So much shit he didn’t do. Didn’t read to Lisa, didn’t make love to Maria, didn’t save them. Didn’t. “There being nothing was better than I deserved. Don’t want to think that’s the last thing…that’s what was waiting for my family when they died. But let’s say your God’s real. All-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing, merciful God. That God kills my wife, kills my kids—” Red says something. It sounds like Blacksmith. Frank doesn’t care. His rage stampedes out of him. “—and then let a piece of shit like me live to kill more people. Doesn’t even give me a glimpse of the fire and brimstone He has waiting for me. He sends me back. Talk about second chances. This is my second chance, Red. And if there is a God, He had to know this is what I would do.” ”

Red has gone very quiet. The only sound he makes is to curl a little closer to the wall. Good. That’s settled. Frank tucks himself back in for the rest of the night, trying to ignore the swell of the dead between them. Maria, the kids, Red’s old man: all sentenced to an eternity of darkness and silence. No real justice, no real judgment, not for them or the bastards that took them. Death being the absolute end.

“Tell you one thing,” Frank growls, “that bastard better have carried my wife and kids in the palm of His fucking hand up to the pearly gates.” Or else. He settles back onto his pillow, anger disintegrating as Frank takes himself back to his kitchen. The plates, the chairs, the light from the windows; family in his periphery. The illusion lasts for a while; Red doesn’t interrupt with anymore of his questions.

Frank opens his eyes. The kid has gone very still on the cot, curled up in a half-moon towards the wall, but the way he breathes signals that he’s still awake. “You ask your girl what she saw?”

The answer comes quickly. “Yeah.”

“You wake her up at three o’clock in the fucking morning to do it?”

“No.”

Frank scoffs: *lucky me.* “What’d she say?”

Red shakes his head. “She didn’t say anything.”

“Nothing?”

The word sends a shiver through Red. “No, she didn’t…she didn’t get a chance to finish. You showed up.”

Frank settles back onto his pillow. Guess that means Red’s only answer to the question is
his. God damn it, the kid asked. What the hell was he supposed to say?

“Well, she would know better than me,” he offers tiredly.

There’s something in Red’s tone, something defeated and twisting, but that’s them lately in a nutshell. He swallows. Hard. “Yeah.”

“Maybe it’s not…” Frank sighs, forcing himself to go back to sleep. End this conversation quick. “Maybe it’s not shit you get to take with you, Red. You only get to keep it when you’re gone.”

It’s an answer they can both abide for now. For the sake of all the ghosts in the room. Red gradually stretches out one leg and then the other, uncoiling himself from the wall. “Yeah.” He returns to his meditative breathing. “Yeah, maybe.”

Frank is so close to sleep when Red asks, “What’s the last thing you saw?” The kid’s voice nothing more than a whisper, as if he knows he’s intruding.

The image comes, but it’s not what he expects. Not the carnage from the carousel. He sees, for a second, this record of his life beyond the bullets and the bloodshed. Beyond the theatre of war. He barely recognizes himself amidst all the light, all the joy. But there he is putting a ring on Maria’s finger in the church at their wedding; and there he is getting handed a pink bundle of baby Lisa in the hospital the day she was born; and there he is shaking Frank Jr.’s little infant hand when he met him from the first time.

It’s probably imagined. Probably his brain’s way of padding the nothing. But it’s true for the moment, so Frank tells Red, “I saw my family.” And he realizes, when he hears Red huddling up against the wall again, that he isn’t just speaking for himself. He’s speaking for Red’s Dad too.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

As with the previous conversation between Lantom and Matt, things got a little Hannibal-y here. I’d apologize, but I don’t know that I’m necessarily sorry. I love Hannibal, and I’m happy to be influenced by it.

This chapter was another installment where I thought I knew where I was going only to discover I had gone off the map. Lantom and Matt’s conversation gets pretty heavy in parts with regards to religion. I’ve tried to depict Lantom as being devout but realistic; he seems like the sort to understand that his faith is a leap, one not everyone is willing to take. This chapter is designed to discuss elements from this story only.

Last Thursday marked the one year anniversary of my posting this fic. It’s officially the longest fic I’ve ever written and the longest time I’ve spent working on one story. And I need to post a HUGE thank you here to you, Readers, who’ve been here for one chapter or all thirty-two; who take the time and the energy to come out, to give this a read. To leave kudos and comments and support. Thank you. I couldn’t have made it this far without you, and I certainly wouldn’t be able to stay without your kindness. Thank you.

“I did my best, it wasn’t much.
I couldn’t feel, so I tried to touch.
I’ve told the truth. I didn’t come to fool you.
And even though it all went wrong
I’ll stand before the Lord of Song,
With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.”
~Leonard Cohen, “Hallelujah”

Daytime blunts the thoughts that kept Matt awake the night before. He leaves some on the cot when he rises, washes more of them away with a shower, and hides what little remains of his doubt under new clothing. Frank’s estimates about his size are fairly accurate; the shirt and pants
would probably fit if he hadn’t lost weight.

Which Frank takes the time to point out, of course. “Small enough to begin with, Red, and there you go getting smaller.”

“I’ll be sure to tell Lantom you’re not feeding me,” Matt snarks.

He hits a nerve. Frank’s heart rate climbs. “Gonna tell him I keep you chained up and caged—“

There is too much going on today that Matt doesn’t want to deal with to fight over a bad joke. “I’m not going to lie to my priest.”

Frank’s pulse stays elevated. In fact, it continues to climb incrementally. The truth, Matt realizes, is much more damning, and Punisher obviously didn’t think of that when he was trying to save face by putting Matt in new clothes.

“I don’t tell him everything,” Matt admits. He listens to Frank retreat from the bathroom doorway and goes back to smoothing down his hair. He tries not to sound too interested or smug when he asks, “Did you tell your priest everything? Once? When you were a Catholic?”

No answer.

Matt finishes up in the bathroom. He tugs at the hem of the shirt. Tucked in would look more presentable, but he doesn’t want to call attention to his depleted muscle tone.

Damn it, he has gotten smaller.

He places the toe of his cast against the ground and holds it there, reintroducing it to gravity. The weight of his thigh passes through the break. He draws the limb up after only a few seconds, light-headed from the strain.

Twelve weeks, Sato said, but Matt can’t wait that long to be on two feet again. He needs to start working out. Get to fighting. And the only way he knows how to do any of that is one he can’t go at alone.

“Frank?”

“God damn, yes, I used to tell my priest everything, Red.”

Matt stifles a small laugh. He can’t resist smiling. “That’s not…” no, he won’t give it away. “Everything?”

Frank’s heartbeats march in a straight, orderly line. Too controlled to be the whole truth but too slow to be an out-and-out lie. “Everything he needed to know.”

“You tell him about…when you came back?” Matt clarifies, shuddering inwardly: “From overseas?”

A slower, more somber pulse follows. “I stopped going to confession by then.”

Matt grabs his crutches. He steps out of the bathroom. The living area in the apartment feels emptier. He reaches out with his senses, finds a couple of the ammo cans are gone. The surface of the desk is cleared. Frank’s bulletproof vest is gone too, its telltale scent hanging faintly in the air along with the sulfuric tang and explosive spice of his now-absent munitions.
A different breed of regret fills Matt, more unnerving than his inner turmoil over having dared to ask questions the night before. He strikes down the sensation as much as possible with rationalizations: he knew this was coming, he doesn't have a choice, Frank has a right to self-defence, they wouldn’t be in this mess if it wasn’t for him. But nothing fills the empty spaces that ammunition used to occupy. Nothing quite covers the sensation of waters rising, of drowning from the inside out. Matt’s conscience has always been too big for his own skin.

Frank is packing up the rest of his stuff across the room. A notebook clamps shut, pages chattering, before it’s shoved into a bag filled with metal and gunpowder. Ne’er as Matt can tell, Frank hasn’t even looked up. This is who is he, and nothing’s changed.

*Nothing.*

“What is it, Red?”

Matt stops searching for a word to describe what he’s feeling and focuses instead on Frank’s question. Yes, there is, but he can’t ask for it. Not with what Frank has already planned.

Frank’s heart rate climbs from bored to something else: righteousness? Regardless. “This was the way it was always gonna be.”

Forget words. Matt peels through his options. He can’t fight. Frank already let the ninjas live once; he’s not going to do it again, and Matt has nothing to leverage for them if they start on the Punisher today.

But there is one life he can save. For now. Give her a stay of execution at least. She isn’t going to be looking for Frank, after all, but Frank’ll sure as hell be looking for her.

“Can I make a request?” Matt asks.

“Be a fucking miracle if you didn’t.”

“Don’t go after Sato today.”

Frank winds up for a rebuttal noisily – heart crashing, zipper ripping shut, footsteps across the hardwood towards the desk. Matt stops him in his tracks. “Sato turned me over. I deserve a fair shake at her, to bring her in for the work she’s been doing.”

“Bring her in to make a deal with the district attorney –”

“To let her do the right thing.”

“Like she did with you?”

Matt avoids the useless argument. Frank isn’t going to see reason. He’ll see cause and consequence, and their agree-to-disagree will end with Sato dead. Instead: “I’m asking you wait until I’m back on my own two feet. To give me a shot.”

Frank’s respiration hits a familiar pace. He’s interested. “Yeah, and what then? What if I get to her first?”

“You do what you do, and I…” Matt swallows hard. Damn it, Frank doesn’t have to do this. He’s proven as much. “And I do what I do.”

“You’d take her life in your hands.” He doesn’t sound surprised, just disappointed.
“You put my life in hers,” Matt reminds him, “Twice.”

“Don’t owe her nothing, Red.”

“It’s not about what I owe.”

The simplicity of the answers disarms Frank, leaves him unmoored for several seconds. The waters inside Matt stop rising. He takes a deep breath and returns his senses to the room, catching the decline of Frank’s heartbeat from interested to something else. Something similar to what he beating across the room last night.

“Till you’re back on your feet,” Frank promises. And Matt believes him. “I won’t look for her. But if she finds me—”

Matt nods. It’s enough. Hell, it’s almost too much. He grips his crutches tightly for support. The words pile up on his tongue and this time he doesn’t turn them away, even though he’s about to cross a line, one he never thought he would dare. One he never thought he would want. But he needs help, and Frank is the only one he can ask for it, and maybe, just maybe, it’ll turn out different. It will be better.

“There’s more.” No turning back now. “There’s somewhere else I need to go in Hell’s Kitchen. After the church.”

“Where?”

Here’s the tricky part: “I have to go alone.”

“You know, you warning me you’re doing dumb shit in advance doesn’t make it less dumb.”

“It’s not dumb.” Risky, not dumb, but more importantly: “It’s necessary.”

“For what?”

“For me. To walk again.” Matt is happy to bolster his argument by adding, “You don’t have a doctor on-call anymore. This is one less thing to call a doctor about.”

Frank feigns nonchalance right down to his respiration, but just by asking, he gives something away. “The alone part. That necessary too?”

“Yeah,” Matt replies. For so many reasons, Elektra being chief among them. “But I will need some…interference. The place I’m going, it’s being watched. Protected by the Hand.”

“You asking me to do what I do?”

Matt backtracks. “I don’t like what you do, Frank.”

“But you’re asking.”

“I’m pointing you in the right direction to engage the Hand, something you’re already planning to do.” And he’s leaving it at that, occupying himself instead with holding together the fragile trust, the shaky hope, that they are both better men.

Frank hums in mild disbelief. “But you’re asking.”
Matt doesn’t correct him: “You gonna help me or not?”

The answer is given through the sound of a war drum filling the apartment. Frank’s heart accelerates past interest into geared up. The rhythm presses against Matt’s sternum like a promise.

Leaving is different this time around. Matt tenses his quaking nerves till they’re steady and holding fast against his fear. No need to pace or wring his hands. He keeps the mission in mind. He pops a few Aspirin tablets into one pocket, jams his cell phone into the other, and heads out the door.

The way into Hell’s Kitchen is peppered with strategy: with Frank’s military monosyllables, his pragmatic single-mindedness. Where to go, where not to go, contingencies and back-up plans. What little he says sounds vague, but Matt can sense the detail behind it, the things Frank lets go unmentioned because he knows the ins and outs so damn well. He’s got the forest and the trees worked out.

They arrive at St. Matthew’s. A weekday afternoon means the church is quiet, quieter still around the side where Frank drops him off.

“Something happens, you call.”

It’s said to the driver’s side door in an aggressively apathetic tone. Matt grabs his crutches and hops out on the passenger’s side. “You too,” he says. “I’ll be in touch. Take care of yourself, Frank.”

A small hum is all he gets in response, but again, Matt can sense the details behind it.

Lantom’s heart fills the church cafeteria with a tinny beat. It’s pleasantly surprised, grateful; a worried instrument played weary that’s finally been brought relief. Matt hangs his head low, hoping his ears will follow. That they’ll find one of the ambient sounds – water in the pipes, the muffled footsteps outside, drafts wafting into the church’s vast, empty spaces. But Matt’s fixed on Lantom, the quickness of the priest’s pulse beneath his steady exterior, because it reminds Matt that sometimes faith is rewarded.

Doubt and guilt inevitably reappear, and once again, Matt’s a sinking ship. Water rising over the bulkheads of the bad decisions that placed Lantom in a position to worry. Shouldn’t have gotten sick, shouldn’t have gotten his leg broken, shouldn’t have driven everybody out of his life.

“Shouldn’t have asked. It’s not him to know.”

“Frank sends his regards.”

Lantom draws a slow breath through his weariness, steeling himself. “I’d be happy to tell him where to send them.” Matt laughs lightly, neither dismissing Lantom’s words nor accepting them. “You’re looking well.”

“He’s taken good care of me.” Matt hesitates to explain the full extent of Frank’s care where the Hand is concerned, but he doesn’t want it to go overlooked. No matter that it means nothing in Frank’s eyes. “He kept his word to you.”

“No killing for one night.”

“Not just one night.” Matt lets the spike of Lantom’s pulse rush through him. Faith rewarded is such a fragile thing. There isn’t enough hope to stop the worry that the ground is about
to fall out from under you. “And not for lack of trying. Or opportunity.”

“Where is he now?”

There goes the ground. Matt crashes headlong into guilt and indecision, terror and panic. He has asked what should never be asked, allied himself with a man called the Punisher, and there is nothing. *Nothing*. He swallows hard, mouth having gone painfully dry. “I don’t know.”

“Is he coming back for you?”

Lantom’s question is rather general, but Matt finds that time doesn’t matter. Today, next week, from now until his leg is healed (and a small voice inside him nags that it may be beyond that) the answer is, “Yes.”

“Is that his choice or yours?”

“I think it’s a little of both.” He absorbs Lantom’s sigh the way he would an explosion. “We…understand each other. We don’t agree, but…we understand.”

“That’s a long way to come from being kidnapped and having nowhere else to go.”

“There is nowhere else for me to go. Nowhere that’s safe.”

“And Frank Castle,” Lantom’s skepticism colours the whole room unsettlingly yellow, “he’s safe.”

Strange how every other belief is shaking and uncertain save for that one, despite Matt having empirical evidence to the contrary.

“When you were here last, you were wondering about his motivations. What have you come to understand about them?”

Matt was hoping his having nowhere else to go would be explanation enough. He isn’t quite sure how to articulate what’s happened, to justify Frank’s actions from the night at the church until now. “Frank Castle is a man with a strict code. A man who always pays his debts.”

“And your leg makes him indebted to you?”

God, it sounds so stupid coming from someone else’s mouth. Matt flinches from his own idiocy. “It’s more than that. More than the leg. More than…more than a debt.” Their previous conversation comes back to him through the haze of his memory, specifically Lantom’s determination about Frank’s motives. Matt speaks for himself: “There are parts of Frank Castle worth saving. He can still be a good man, Father.”

Although what’s the point? What the hell is the point?

*Nothing.*

Lantom’s heartbeat dances an exasperated tango through the empty cafeteria. “Has it occurred to you, Matthew, that you have an easier time finding redeemable qualities in the Punisher than you do in yourself?”

He purses his lips against the thought that *he has no redeeming qualities*. “What happens when we die, Father?”
The sudden shift in his line of questioning rouses Lantom. “That’s not for me to say.”

“You’re a man of God.”

“Exactly, Matthew: a man. Not God. What happens after we die is for Him to know.”

Matt can’t hold himself still. He shuffles in his seat, pins and needles jabbing at the underside of his skin. “What if there’s…what if there’s nothing out there?”

“Matthew.”

“What if this is it? This life?”

Lantom’s answer is breathtaking in its simplicity. “Then this is it.”

The quiet that follows is deafening. Matt interrupts in with a sharp laugh, the vocal equivalent of a punch to everything that’s currently eating him alive from the inside. “Then what?”

“Nothing, I suppose.”

Matt drives his point home: “Then what matters?”

Lantom gives a small shrug. His calmness is startling; Matt’s blood pressure gets higher and peaks when the priest tells him, “Everything.”

“Even without…” Matt forces himself to say it, “Without God.”

“What’s happened, Matthew?” Lantom continues in a measured tone. He wears his heartbeat to match. “What happened after you left the church that night?”

Matt can’t burden Lantom with that, but trying to ignore the concern in the priest’s voice or the rattle of his pulse hurts. He takes in every sensory detail he can from the Lantom like so many wounds, gradually feeling his anxiety dissipate, replaced with that familiar sense of guilt. He lets his voice get as small as he feels. “I was trying to help people, to protect them, by apprehending the guilty. To give them another chance in the hopes that they would make amends. That they would do good. Because they can, Father.”

“You’re looking to spare them from eternal damnation.”

“I’m looking for them to spare themselves, to seek redemption.” To be better. To choose to be better. “I worry it’s built on a lie.”

“Lie implies a knowledge of the truth. Faith, by its very nature, resists that kind of confirmation. We can’t know for certain, Matthew, what’s out there.”

“But some can know better than others. People who have been there.”

Lantom leans closer to him. “How sick were you, Matthew?”

Matt shakes his head. Jesus, this was easier with Frank, and nothing should be easier with Frank – nothing. But Frank’s been there. He understands this, accepts this. Lantom can’t possibly. “I’m not asking from my experience. I’m asking from others’.”

That Lantom doesn’t believe him is an understatement. The priest’s respiration becomes a deathly serious series of prayers, prayers that may never be answered. “Memory and perception are
for the living. If there is an afterlife, there’s a soul. And souls wouldn’t need memories or perception where it’s going, and more than that, brain wouldn’t know what to do upon their return.”

Déjà vu all over again. The temperature in the room seems to drop. Matt is overcome by a calm that’s as contrary as his current circumstances. “You don’t get to take it with you.”

Lantom gives a slight nod. God, if only he knew who he was agreeing with.

Matt never gets the chance to mention it. “And really,” Lantom asks, “what does it matter?”

The question knocks the wind from him. Matt means to interrupt, but Lantom charges ahead. “If there’s something or there’s nothing, we still have to find a way to live with each other. That redemption you want people to find isn’t strictly for their afterlife; it’s for this life. Which means it all matters, Matthew. Everything. Good, evil, and everything in between.”

He didn’t think his voice could get any quieter, but Matt can’t speak above a whisper. His throat is closing in. “But what if there’s nothing there?”

“All the more reason for people to do good now,” Lantom replies.

Matt places a hand on his stomach, trying to untwist his gut. To remind himself that he didn’t know for certain what Elektra was going to say, and that maybe Frank is right. Maybe it isn’t the shit you get to take with you.

“Would it change anything if you knew?”

“It would change everything,” Matt utters with certainty.

Lantom shakes his head. “That’s not what I mean. Would you stop doing what you do, giving people a chance at redemption, if you knew there was nothing out there?”

Matt knows what the right answer is, but he hesitates to say it aloud. It doesn’t sound right in light of nothing, and even if it is, he might be lying, might be saying what he wants instead of what’s true. What’s real. Really, he’s hobbling around on one leg letting Elektra carve up the city, letting Frank take a beating for his sake; putting people in danger over his own stupid, necessary crusade.

But it’s right. It’s right even if there is no heaven, no hell, no God. He’s already lost so much and still believes beyond any shadow of doubt that grace and mercy and compassion are essential. “No,” he admits softly, “I wouldn’t stop. I won’t stop.”

The answer brings both his pulse and Lantom’s to a slower pace. Matt has to know, “Is that wrong of me, Father?”

Lantom’s heartbeat cradles him. “Intention doesn’t matter in a Godless universe.”

The thought that intention and circumstance don’t matter to Frank shatter Matt to the core, but he holds fast to what he felt this morning when he asked for help. To the thought that everyone can be better. That they need to be better. “And if God exists?”

“The intention must be to live by His example, for goodness sake, not for the sake of salvation,” Lantom replies. “I’d be more concerned if your answer did change.”

Matt releases a breath he didn’t know he was holding, letting the thought percolate in his head as he does. Right and wrong as absolutes flies in the face of everything he holds dear, but for a moment, he needs them to be still, be solid. He needs them to exist even if nothing else does.
Inadvertently, he circles back to the question he couldn’t answer earlier about what he understands of Frank’s motivations. About what the Punisher could possibly find worth saving in what he believes is a Godless universe.

Lantom eventually retreats to his office, and Matt takes a seat in the nave to wait. The hallowed space of the church is soft on his senses. Light, warm scents diffuse on the air. Comforting things like candle wax and flame, dust motes on sunbeams; old stone and dense wood. Sounds become more silken, wafting up into the rafters instead of overcrowding the pews. Everything’s an offering. Everything has meaning, purpose, tradition.

There are two heartbeats lost in prayer on either side of him: an older woman on her knees, rosary jangling from her fingers as her whisper rushes skyward; the other, a younger man, silent and inert, offering nothing but thoughts and soft breathing to the saint on the prayer card he scrapes against the back of his hand.

Matt isn’t listening when the doors open. The sound calls to him, of course. It rumbles through the quiet, swishes, and then quakes shut, blocking out the traffic and pedestrians outside. Matt corrects when he turns his head; he doesn’t want to look eager, but he also doesn’t want to look as interested as he feels. His senses have gone from dispersed to fixed, the way they do on rooftops when he’s in the mask. From the whole city to one scream, so too do his senses contract from the whole church to Foggy Nelson.

Happy Reading!
Million Reasons

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I’m in the throes of report cards here, but I desperately wanted to get this chapter posted before I get lost in the end-of-year festivities at the school for the next week. Unfortunately, this chapter refused to come together neatly or swiftly. It was one of those installments I poured through with a fine-tooth comb, which seems to be a grand tradition of this fic. But this one…this one was different, because I’ve wanted to write Foggy again forever only to realize, again, that post-s2 Foggy is a different character. It was uncanny putting him and Matt in the same room. The song for this chapter was a no-brainer. I had it picked out since the album was released, my brain demarcating it immediately as Foggy and Matt’s theme.

Readers, sweet Readers, you are the best. Thank you so much for your kind support! I hope that this chapter works for you. Please, enjoy!

“And if you say something that you might even mean,
It’s hard to even fathom which parts I should believe.
‘Cuz you’re giving me a million reasons, about a million reasons…
When I bow down to pray and try to make the worst seem better,
Lord, show me the way to cut through all this worn out leather.
I’ve got a hundred million reasons to walk away,
But…Baby, I just need one good one to stay.”

~Lady Gaga, “Million Reasons”

Matt shifts down the pew a little, dragging his crutches with him, to make room. Foggy takes a seat as close to the arm rest as possible, lest someone think he’s there to see Matt. He’s wearing another new outfit, the tags taken off this time. New cologne too, something exponentially more expensive than the aerosol stuff he would bathe in at Columbia.

He is still carrying his old satchel. Graduation gift from Mama Nelson. Foggy wouldn’t part with that for the world.

“Thanks for coming,” Matt says by way of a greeting.
“I wasn’t gonna,” Foggy replies.

“What changed your mind?”

Foggy hasn’t finished saying her name when Matt joins him: “Karen.”

“She said you were sick.” And Foggy’s heart cares even if his tone doesn’t.

Matt dismisses his concern: “I’m fine.”

A sigh. A heavy one. “Here we go again.”

“Foggy –“ They have more important things to deal with.

“We’re not friends anymore, Matt!” Foggy says in a harsh whisper. “You have no reason to lie to me. Although why you’d lie to your friends makes no sense. So knock it off!”

He stops, taking a minute to calm himself. Matt can hear the rising pulse of the old woman to their left; she must be shooting Foggy one hell of a stare.

Foggy gets back on track. “You told Karen the truth.” He adds the next part wistfully, “You told Karen everything.”

Matt hears it again; that angry rush of adrenaline, that righteous march of Foggy’s heartbeat. “Is that what this is about?”

“What what’s about?”

“Why are you so pissed off?”

Foggy unleashes a sharp sound in response to his language. “We are in a church, Matt!”

The old woman shushes them harshly.

“Sorry,” Foggy replies quickly.

“Sorry,” Matt adds afterwards.

The old woman’s heart settles back down.

Matt tries again, without the profanity: “Why are you so angry?”

Foggy is still shifting uncomfortably in his seat from being chastised. “I’m wasting a perfectly good evening. What did you want to say to me?”

“I want to know why you’re angry.”

“Your text said you had something to tell me.”

To be fair, his text message also said, “Please,” and, “This is important,” but Foggy didn’t respond to those. Matt finally gave up and simply gave Foggy the time he would be at the church. Thank goodness Foggy told Karen so she could enforce the meeting. Matt anticipated waiting for nothing.

Foggy continues, “I know why I’m angry. Tell me what I’m doing here.”
“So you are angry,” Matt says, vindicated.

Foggy groans – loudly this time. He reaches for his bag. “I’m leaving.”

“It’s Fisk.” Matt waits until Foggy is settled back on the pew before continuing. “He’s mobilizing in Hell’s Kitchen.”

“Thanks, Captain Obvious. Way to tell me something I already know.”

The next part comes too quickly for what Matt assumed would be the hard part. “He’s planning on coming after us.”

There’s a long pause where Foggy is thoroughly unreadable. His pulse rises and then dips back to normal. He draws several breaths without speaking, and then, on an inhale, says, “Okay.”

Matt waits for more and nothing comes. “Okay?”

“Is that all?”

“Is that…? Foggy, are you even listening?”

Barely. Boredom turns his usually expressive voice into a detached monotone. Matt listens carefully to Foggy’s head shifting back and forth under the collar of his shirt as he looks around for the exit. The conversation is over, and he fell for it. Again. “You think a guy we put in prison is planning on coming after us.”

“Not think,” and now, Matt falters, having finally hit the hard part. He forces the next words out of his mouth, “I know.”

Foggy’s respiration climbs to a frustrated pace. Anger sharpens his consonants. “Your new friend tell you that?”

Matt lets the explanation pour of him before he changes his mind: “I went to go visit him. Fisk. After Castle escaped. And he told me – “The activity on the end of the pew stops him. Foggy’s heartbeat springs into action, hammering a series of fuck you-s in his direction. Matt begs, “Foggy.”

Foggy’s whole body tenses up to hold in an outpouring of obscenity. “I don’t know why I’m even surprised!” he hisses in near-silence. “And I don’t even get to yell at you for this, because you just had to ask me to meet you in a church!”

“I wanted to tell you. I was… I was going to tell you.”

“Stop lying to me, Matt! If you were going to tell me, you would have told me already, or better yet, before! When I could have told you that visiting Fisk was a terrible idea! And you could ignore me like you always do!”

Matt can’t believe this: “It’s terrible for me to know what he’s planning?”

“You know.” Foggy folds his arms across his chest, amplifying the sound of his enraged breathing. “I didn’t. And still wouldn’t, probably! Why didn’t you say something when we met at your apartment?”

There are so many reasons, and Foggy won’t want to hear any of them. Certainly not, “I
hadn’t almost died then,” or, “Frank didn’t tell me to tell you at the time.” So Matt sticks to the truth. The universal truth. A truth set in stone the moment he and Foggy became friends. “I was trying to protect you.”

“You can’t protect people when you’re keeping secrets. And if you can, I wouldn’t know, because it has literally never happened. You just end up hurting people.”

“I’m sorry for that, Foggy.” Among other things. So many other things.

His apology registers: Foggy’s heart doesn’t change gears that quickly for anything except an apology – a genuine apology – from Matt. But then his pulse starts right back up again, the same way it did after Fisk and Nobu, or when Matt owned up to the shit storm Elektra as causing during Frank’s trial. Foggy’s first instinct might be forgiveness, but he’s prepared himself for Matt. “…and I’m the idiot who keeps putting it all on the line without knowing what I’m getting myself into. I trusted you, Matt. I trusted you when you asked me to start up our firm and when I found you bleeding to death in your apartment –”

Matt begs and doesn’t care who hears it: “Foggy –“

“- and when you told us to take on the unwinnable case because Frank Castle deserved a defense.”

“He did deserve a defense.”

But that’s not the point for Foggy: “Meanwhile, you’re sneaking off to visit Wilson Fisk behind my back, behind Karen’s back! While our careers are in the toilet, while we’re losing cases, while we’re worried about you!”

How many times does he have to say it? Apparently, once more. With feeling. “I never asked for that.”

Foggy’s voice floods the church all the way to heaven: “Because you didn’t have to! That’s just what friends do!”

Nobody tells Foggy to shush after that, but he’s aware of the irritation buzzing from both sides of the church. Of the distant sound of Lantom’s office door opening and the priest emerging for a seemingly benign patrol around the church. Matt sits up straighter in his seat as Lantom enters the nave. He tries to look confident and isn’t sure if he’s successful. Lantom is impossible to read.

The priest’s presence is enough to unnerve Foggy. He adjusts the strap of his satchel angrily on his chest in preparation to move if Lantom approaches but continues, his voice returning to a whisper. “You want to protect me, but you never tell me what you’re protecting me from. You never give me a chance to help you or fight back with you.”

“Because I know what the answer is gonna be.” Matt follows Lantom’s footsteps moving towards the alter where they finally stop at the podium, lingering. Looming. “You want me to give up. To stop fighting.”

“Stop fighting…this way.” A pregnant pause follows. Foggy eventually explains, “I’m pointing at your broken leg.”

Matt sighs, silently begging Foggy to see past that. The leg hurts. And it hurts more knowing how much he can’t do, how much he has to do to save the city. “The law didn’t stop Fisk. He’s running Super Max. The inmates, the guards…Castle didn’t escape from there. Fisk had him
released.” The swell of Foggy’s respiration threatens to knock Matt off-track. He focuses on the words coming out of his mouth, on the argument, the same way he would in front of a hostile jury. “When he’s ready, Fisk will let himself out. And the law won’t be able to put him away again.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.”

“You can’t –“ but Foggy stops himself, biting down on his lower lip to hold back another yell. The futility of the argument dawns on him and he returns to a stronger point: “You should have told me this, Matt.”

“I can’t…” Matt fumbles for his explanation. “I can’t put you at risk.”

“But that’s what you do! Every time you don’t tell me what I’m up against!”

He tries, one last time: “I’m telling you now, Foggy.”

Foggy sighs relentingly. Yes, he supposes that’s true. Hell if he wants to admit that though.

They’re silent long enough for Lantom to leave his post and retreat to the room behind the alter. The church quiet circles around them, a penance for Foggy’s earlier outburst. He finally breaks his silence with, “I need to get on the phone with…everybody in law enforcement. Get Super Max back under control.”

“You do that, Fisk’ll be out of Super Max tonight, and Frank will turn the city into a warzone looking for him.” Foggy inhales sharply; Matt cuts him off before the tirade can begin. They both know that’s what is going to happen. “I don’t like it anymore than you do, Foggy –“

“I can’t do nothing.”

Matt swallows hard, the same feeling having solidified in his throat. “The safest place for Fisk to be – to protect the city, to protect you – is on that island.” One less threat to deal with, at least until he, Matt, can hold his own in a fight.

Foggy draws and releases several breaths, seething. Angry, uselessly so and unable to deal with it. Matt empathizes.

“What does Fisk have planned?” Foggy asks eventually.

“It’s big,” Matt says. “He said he’s going to destroy us. It’ll be strategic.”

“Always is with Fisk.”

“Yeah. Watch your back, your family, your bank accounts, your job –“ things, Matt realizes, he either doesn’t have or abandoned since Elektra’s supposed death, “- everything.”

“You tell Karen?” Foggy’s heart patters in suspense. Of what exactly, Matt doesn’t know. Matt puts him at ease, “He isn’t threatening Karen.”

“Just us.”

“Yeah.”
Foggy maintains a shaking grip on his satchel, but he doesn’t move from the pew. “That’s something. That just leaves…everybody else we care about.”

The use of the pronoun catches Matt off-guard. He figured Foggy would take the opportunity to point out how he doesn’t care some more. Evidently, the threat of death puts things into harsh perspective. They both have at least one person they care about who won’t be happy that Fisk is pursuing them, even if she isn’t a direct target.

Matt doesn’t mention it. Instead, he says, “You need to be careful.”

“I know I’m going to regret asking this, but what about you?”

Concern bristles him. “I’ll be fine.”

“Oh, right,” Foggy grumbles, “your new friend.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

Matt leaves no room for argument. “I mean I’m going to get back on my feet. I’ll take care of it. I’ll –” He chokes before he can say more. Or maybe there’s nothing to say. This morning he was asking Frank for help because he can’t. He can’t take care of it. But with Foggy he plays the party line. “I’ll be fine.”

Foggy takes the bait but comes full circle, back to the point Matt doesn’t want made, “Who’s to say Fisk isn’t going to make a move before then? You heard Karen. His people are going missing.” He shudders and offers the next bit as a prayer for the poor bastards: “Getting hacked to pieces.”

“Still?” That surprises him. Nothing’s come up over the police scanner in Frank’s apartment. And Elektra wouldn’t continue her crusade against Fisk when she could focus her energies on Frank.

“No,” Foggy says, putting Matt’s mind at ease before adding, bitterly, “Not since you told your new friend about it.”

Matt comes clean about that much, at least. “I didn’t tell him.”

Exasperation hangs thickly from Foggy’s end of the pew. “Whoever it was stopped after that Sunday.”

“Yeah, because they found what they were looking for.”

Foggy claps a hand on his satchel for emphasis. “You know who they are. Of course you know who they are. You probably knew the whole time and never told us.”

“I didn’t know until that night.” There’s a long, loaded silence that follows where Foggy’s respiration bears down on Matt, pushing and pulling at the explanation building between his teeth. Matt lets loose. “It was Elektra, Foggy. She’s the one who’s behind the mutilations and the missing persons. She was going after Fisk because she thought Fisk had me.” He doesn’t give Foggy a chance to interrupt. “I know it sounds crazy, and I can’t explain it, but she’s alive. I was with her.”
Just when Matt thinks Foggy can’t get any more worked up, his former friend’s voice tightens into a sharp whisper, “She’s alive?”

“Yes.”

The whisper grows ever sharper, “And you went with her?”

“My leg, it…it got infected. Frank tried to get me to the hospital, but Elektra got to us first.” Matt leaves it at that, expecting another round of questions to crop up. But Foggy’s working at shoving his rage down, down, where it belongs, because what the hell good is it anyways? It’s not like he’s ever going to know the truth. And Matt holds onto the sound of barely concealed fury, of betrayal. That sound is more than he deserves.

“Why?” Foggy asks at long last. “Why do you keep doing this?” He shakes his head disapprovingly, the scratch of his collar against his neck punctuating every sorry thought he has. “I walked away, Karen walked away…and you…” He struggles to find the words. “You know we wouldn’t’ve known you were gone? If you’d died or just disappeared?

Matt’s mouth is too dry to speak, partly from sadness. Mostly from anger. They aren’t supposed to care. “Yeah.”

Foggy makes a sound – sharp, cutting, a non-verbal equivalent of yeah, right. He turns in his seat and gestures for emphasis. “I really tried to stand by you, Matt. The number of times I covered for you and stitched you back up. I believed in you.”

He wants to hear Foggy say it. He wants to hurt. “What made you stop?”

The sounds of Foggy shuffling in his seat tell Matt that he’s hurting too. “The fact that you won’t. Not for anything. Not even your own life.” Foggy pauses, letting his rage fill him again. Seems to be ebbing and flowing with sadness. “I thought you’d come back. That you’d get rid of the suit. But you got shot in the head and kept going. Your friends leave, and you kept going. You broke your leg and it gets infected, your ex-girlfriend comes back from the dead, you’re living -” his voice gets extra quiet, “-with Frank Castle –“

“Because this is who I am,” Matt states. “With or without the mask. With or without my leg. It’s who I am, Foggy.” God, why is that so hard to understand? He draws a shuddering breath and centers himself within the hallowed cradle of the church. He un-balls the fist he’s drawn, counting. Thinking. Reasoning. He hasn’t been asked to apologize lately. He hasn’t been asked to explain himself. Frank takes him as a given.

The thought causes Foggy’s angry heart to no longer hold much sway. Matt is caught up in a swell of certainty he doesn’t dare put into words. “You want to believe in something? Believe that. I will never stop fighting for this city. For you.”

“I didn’t ask for that,” Foggy snaps under his breath.

“You didn’t have to.” Two can play at this game. “That’s what I do.”

Foggy’s angry heartbeat resists the steady stream to heaven and stays fixed on Matt, hot and furious. An assault from all sides that Matt accepts for as long as Foggy chooses to stand there. Which is a while. He’s building up to something, trying to put the words together or determine whether they’re worth uttering in the first place.

Uncomfortable as it is, Matt doesn’t interrupt. He wants the Schrodinger’s silence to last. He
wants them to stay in the church forever, frozen in uncertainty and anger but safe. God, Matt can deal with being hated so long as Foggy is safe.

He isn’t sure if Foggy feels the same. He can’t tell what Foggy’s feeling, actually, and is even more confused when his former friend starts speaking again.

“You told Karen everything.”

The words leave Matt cold. Chilled to the bone. He can’t move or think or speak. They’re back to the beginning with nothing. He clings to the tenuous moment after Foggy’s spoken, as things suddenly begin to make sense.

Foggy continues: “You might not want her permission, but you wanted her to understand.”

“Do you want me to tell you everything?” Matt asks. He isn’t sure he can deliver, knowing what Foggy tends to do after confession.

Just as well. Foggy’s answer is simply, “I couldn’t believe you if you tried.”

Matt tries one more time: “Could you ever understand?”

The moment between his question and Foggy’s answer is filled with the sweet, sweet sound of a slow heartbeat, the warm glow of proximity, of familiarity. Their fight lies elsewhere, in some other universe with some other people. This time, this place, they’re still friends, still partners. Matt recognizes the feeling too late as hope.

The soles of Foggy’s shoes creak against the tile floor, itching to be on their way. But he stays to say, “I don’t want to understand. I want you to sort your life out, Matt. Stop rooming…” he lowers his voice, inching closer so he can whisper more softly. “Stop rooming with serial killers and zombies. Get better. Get back to your life. You can still…be a lawyer. Stop Fisk legally. Stop Frank Castle legally.”

God help him, Matt doesn’t even try to imagine what that would look like: Nelson and Murdock back together, a combined front against the storm. But he does struggle under the weight of the choice about where he belongs. It feels new, more real, here in the church with Foggy than it has in the past weeks. He hasn’t worn the mask, but he hasn’t had to: Elektra and Frank know that the devil’s always there.

And they accept that.

Foggy sighs dismissively as if sensing he’s lost Matt. “Or don’t,” he growls, overcompensating. “Hop back down the rabbit hole with your wacko devil costume and your merry band of psychos. But leave me the hell out of it.”

Matt draws his arm across his stomach, a clutch for balance against the sudden loss of uncertainty. They could have gone on in silence and allowed the contradictions to exist simultaneously. But they’re sitting side-by-side, breathing the same air, hearts beating nearly in tandem, and Matt’s never felt more alone.

He listens as Foggy’s heartbeat streams skyward into the great abyss above them.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I have learned more about writing prose from this fic than any of my earlier works, but one lesson that never seems to sink in is how much I can actually fit in one chapter without sacrificing character beats or thematic elements. Once again, I thought I could fit about two chapters into one. So instead of writing a behemoth chapter, I broke it down into shorter installments.

…and I’m not sure if I’m even putting them in the right order. I’m shuffling the decks on this one and hoping it comes out right. Apologies, in advance, if I ruin everything and, to save face, the next chapter ends with a meteor destroying the Earth. If all goes well, though, I’m actually really excited for what I have planned in the next installment. It’s one of the reasons I had so much trouble fitting everything into this one.

As with previous chapters, Frank’s POV is coming next and should clarify some of the action in this chapter. By the way, Foggy is coming back. I promise he’s coming back.

Readers, you are darlings. Thank you for your kind support as I plug away at this fic! I hope you enjoy this one. Cheers!

“Like a prayer that only needs a reason,
Like a hunter waiting for the season…
   The more I stray, the less I fear,
And the more I reach, the more I fade away.
   The darkness right in front of me,
Oh, it’s calling out, and I won’t walk away.”

~Imagine Dragons, “Rise Up”

It ends in a whimper, not a bang, the same way it ended at Nelson and Murdock so many weeks ago. The quiet speaks of their mutual admission of defeat. Of disagreement. Foggy rises from the pew. Matt thinks, at first, that maybe he shouldn’t follow, but he has no intention of staying much past Foggy’s departure. He gathers his crutches and negotiates his way into the aisle.

Foggy has taken a step or two away, but he lingers until Matt is safely untangled from the narrow seats before moving again.

They make their way to the front of the church, the silence growing lighter along the way.
Evening gives the breeze a fresh bite. The world on fire shifts between white and indigo in a cheap mental mock-up of the twilight sky. It only adds to Matt’s sense of anticipation. Pausing outside the main entrance, toeing the edge of the church steps, he can’t shake the sensation of an imminent plunge into the unknown. He gets the same vertiginous freedom on rooftops before leaping into fights. The only real difference is the retreating heartbeat next to him: Foggy ambling off into his own separate unknown.

“Take care of yourself,” Matt says.

Foggy stops. He takes a long pull of the thinning air between them and holds it, a new tell for when he’s trying not to speak. The words emerge anyways. “You too,” and he isn’t about to say the rest, but then, “Don’t…don’t call me again.”

Matt isn’t sure how to respond. “Wasn’t planning on it.”

“I mean it. Don’t.” Foggy grips his satchel in an effort to keep from saying more. The effort fails. “My life’s being threatened. I don’t need to be an accessory for you or your new bestie on top of that.”

There’s another loaded pause. Hopefully the last. Matt has places to be, people to visit, especially if Foggy doesn’t want to be contacted again.

“Jesus,” Foggy sighs, “you two are becoming friends, aren’t you?”

Matt balks, incredulous. “What makes you say that?”

“You haven’t corrected me.”

“Because it’s ridiculous.”

“Yeah, it is. You and him. Friends. Ridiculous.” Foggy trots down the last of the church steps. He already has his hand up to hail a cab, one that arrives promptly.

Matt tries not to look too eager as he trails down the rest of the steps in Foggy’s wake. The devil stirs inside him. Adrenaline runs soft and subtle in his blood. God, he’s missed this: the moment right before the leap, when he doesn’t know how he’ll hit the ground only that he must. He wishes he could put that into words for Foggy, the utter necessity of the mask, not just for his own sanity but the safety of the city. That he can’t only makes Matt more certain of himself. Maybe Foggy will never know how important the devil is, but just because no one’s watching doesn’t mean it’s not worth doing.

“Good-bye, Foggy.”

“Bye,” Foggy says dismissively as he hops into the cab.

Traffic swells; the cab waits at the curb. Matt doesn’t. He dips right at the bottom of the steps and disappears into a swath of pedestrians heading around the corner. He lets the flow of foot traffic carry him away.

The thrill of movement, of menace, masks his pain but not his exhaustion. Matt pauses behind one of the trees along the sidewalk. He needs a minute to catch his breath; he’s been out of the game for too long and the rush is overwhelming. He’s spinning, swirling, falling. The ground warbles unsteadily beneath his feet.

His hearing catches up to him from where he left it outside the church entrance. It creeps
slowly away from Foggy’s cab, bringing with it the sound of his old friend’s shocked heartbeat and an exasperated hiss of, “That God damn ninja bastard,” before slamming the door.

And that’s all it takes. Matt smirks, revitalized. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and hits Frank’s number on speed dial.

The front door of the church opens. Foggy’s cab pulls away from the curb. Matt has one ear on it as it rolls through the intersection and putters down the block. His other ear listens to a car pulling up to take the cab’s place.

The line connects. Frank says something, but Matt isn’t listening. His ears are back at St. Matthew’s where someone is making their way down the steps. Too spry for Lantom or the old woman. It’s the young man, the one with the prayer card. His footsteps barely make a sound across the sidewalk. He hops into the car that just pulled up, the one that’s almost as quiet as he is, and Matt’s blood starts racing. The new car – luxury, high-end – pulls into the lane and follows in the same direction as Foggy’s cab.

“Foggy’s got a tail,” Matt states over the phone. He bites back a groan as he does. His awkward hobble along the sidewalk is infuriatingly slow. He can’t move and hold the phone on two crutches. Matt discards one crutch against the church’s cast iron fence. He takes off again, phone pressed against his ear, wincing as the remaining crutch stabs into his left armpit. “I’m after them, Frank, can you…” The jabbing pain throws off the balance to his senses, blurring his focus. Foggy’s cab fades into the fuzz of traffic in the distance, as does his pursuer’s luxury car.

Screw it - Matt props the other crutch up too, dropping his left leg onto the pavement experimentally.

The cast hasn’t touched the sidewalk when Frank’s voice rumbles over the phone. “I will shoot your leg off at the fucking knee, Murdock, you don’t pick up those crutches.”

Matt grabs his recently discarded crutch, cursing as he does, “They’re getting away.”

“No, they’re not.”

Less than a block from where he’s standing, a straight stretch from the church’s front entrance, Matt hears the pop of a silencer. A bullet rips sharply through the air. A tire bursts. Rubber screeches, horns blare, bumpers crumple against each other. Matt lowers the phone from his ear, piecing together the ensuing rush of smells into a coherent picture of an exploded tire and a minor car accident.

Sound bounces between the buildings, exposing the rooftops, their accesses, and a water tower looming on the far side of the street. The perfect place for a sniper’s nest.

“Get moving, Red,” Frank urges over the melee of sounds. Honking and yelling, cursing; car doors opening and slamming. Further off, traffic flows smoothly. Matt is certain that Foggy’s cab is among the stream.

“Who are they, Frank?” he asks, charging across the road.

“No, they’re not.”

Matt takes a hard right towards the alley, hyperaware of the rooftops looming overhead and the possibility they might not be as vacant as they sound. The traffic jam is dimmer here, swallowed up by the narrow lanes between the buildings. “What the hell would they want with Foggy?”
“Probably thought you were in the cab. They won’t for long. Just spotted one on the roof headed your way. Better hurry up before his friends show.” There’s a wild thrill in Frank’s voice as he adds, “Not aiming for kneecaps tonight.”

Matt hangs up the phone and shoves it into his pocket. Damn, he should have grabbed his other crutch. It’s slow going with just one, carefully negotiating his balance and pain threshold, perception and reaction. If the ninja from the rooftop comes after him now…

Another pop, barely audible over the din of traffic. The bullet makes a wet *snicht* upon hitting the target. Then there’s a limp tangle of flailing limbs falling headlong off the roof. It lands several paces ahead of Matt, crunching against the hood of a dumpster before sliding to the ground.

Guess the devil isn’t the only one who’s happy to be back.

Melvin’s workshop can’t appear soon enough. Matt’s arm is killing him from supporting his weight. His leg is a mess of wild nerves flaring discordantly. He heard Frank popping off another two rounds en route; it’s only a matter of time before more of the Hand appears and shots from the water tower won’t be enough. This needs to go fast.

Matt waits until he’s absolutely sure Melvin is alone before revealing himself. He keeps to the shadows, feeling exposed. He’s always come with a hood or a mask. Today, he has sunglasses and a pained expression. Hardly a face he wants associated with the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.

“Hey.” Melvin pushes a rolling chair towards him, one Matt uses for balance instead of for sitting. If he gets off his foot, he isn’t getting back up. “Was wondering when you would be back. You look better.”

“I feel better,” Matt agrees. He listens hard, unable to distinguish breathing from the building’s ancient plumbing. The popping he hears is just as easily a tool in the shop as it is Frank’s rifle. “I know you don’t like to be rushed, but I need a new cast, Melvin. I need…I need to be back on two feet again.”

Amidst the clutter and disarray of the workshop, Matt senses Melvin shaking his head. “Can’t do that. I’m sorry. That break needs a few more weeks before it’s weight-bearing, even with the rig I’m working up.”

“It’s fine.” Matt gives the limb a small twist to unkink the muscles, to ease some of the pressure under his current cast. Besides, they talked about this last Sunday. When Melvin promised him something lighter, something sturdier. Something that he could use to move again. “It’ll be fine.”

More head shaking. Melvin wanders back to his desk, retrieving an envelope from there. “It won’t be. Got the x-rays to prove it, you want to see.”

Matt’s blood runs cold. He steadies his grip on the rolling chair to keep from shaking. He gives nothing away, no sign of alarm, even though goosebumps are shooting up his biceps and ice water’s flooding his veins.

The exposed rolls of x-ray film leave a sour taste into the back of Matt’s mouth. It’s the perfect complement to the twisting in his gut. He accepts the images for all the good they do. It seems appropriate to see only blackness since that’s all he remembers of having his leg x-rayed.
Matt holds the film open in front of him, feigning a calm he can’t feel. The three days of blackout at Elektra’s apartment feast upon his nerves with renewed vigour. Meanwhile, Melvin’s fingers trace over the image. “Break’s about mid-calf,” he states confidently, speaking with a level of expertise reserved for his inventions. “Loads of tissue damage. Your surgical incision is still healing. When your Doc says you’re low-weight bearing you can start working that muscle again, but I’m not putting you in a rig today. Gotta give yourself time to heal.”

“We talked about this, Melvin: I don’t have time,” Matt tells him. He wonders if that isn’t Elektra’s play here with the x-rays: to remind him how useless he is. To galvanize Melvin into keeping the cast from him.

Melvin shrugs, taking the x-rays back. He returns them to their envelope and slips them on top of one of his tool chests. The smell of paper is quickly overwhelmed by metal. “I need time, you want this brace working.”

Matt almost asks about the cast again, but Melvin takes his place at the work table in the centre of the shop. More metal, lightweight; screws, nuts, and bolts; sparks fresh on the air from a welding gun. Whatever the contraption is, it’s raw and bare, nowhere near completion.

The rig shifts a little on the table. Matt’s world on fire flickers with contours: two long metal rods suspended on a series of clamps to make a frame about the size of his shin. The smell and shape give Matt flashbacks to medieval torture devices.

Melvin puts his mind at ease. “There’ll be padding, especially on these clamps around your ankle and thigh, but it’s not going to be comfortable. Won’t be able to wear it for too long either, since it’s going to cut into your circulation. Basically, the whole thing is going to redistribute your body weight away you’re your broken bone. Got these bands above the knee and at the ankle. These rods are going to act as your shin.”

More motion. Matt’s leg twinges painfully from the sound in warning. He jostles the limb, shutting it up. Melvin continues, patting a longer, narrower brace inside the larger frame. “This is going to hold your bone straight. I’m trying to give you as much mobility as I can, especially in the knee, but you’re not going to want to do much more than balance with it.”

It’s more than Matt hoped. Being back on two feet again means getting back to Hell’s Kitchen, keeping the Hand away from Frank and Fisk away from Foggy and every wicked little thing away from the city. “Thank you, Melvin.”

“You’re welcome,” Melvin replies. He wanders away from the table. “Come back and see me when you’re low-weight bearing. You’ll be able to try it on. Till then, you should get around just fine in that new one I made for you.”

Oh, thank goodness. Matt was beginning to think he imagined Melvin promising him a cast before the rig last time. “Where is it?”

Melvin’s heartbeat jumps in surprise. “She didn’t give it to you?”

Matt begins probing the dark spots in his memory again, waiting for something to come loose. Nothing does. The cast he got at Elektra’s is better than his first walking cast, but it’s not a Melvin Potter original. And it couldn’t possibly be. Melvin works fast, but he can’t manufacture something like that in a matter of days.

Blood pools in his broken limb, hot and heavy. Ominous. Matt adjusts his grip on his crutches. Amazing how quickly chills can turn to heat, shock into rage. “You gave it to Elektra.”
“She came by a couple days ago.” Probably when she brought the x-rays. Long enough after he left the penthouse to have recovered and be ready for a trip back into Hell’s Kitchen. For him to be more than sufficiently annoyed by hopping around on one foot. “Said she would give it to you. It’s light as a feather. Extra stability and cushioning. Make sure you check with your doctor first, but it should get you moving faster.”

Matt withdraws his hand from the rolling chair, letting all his weight dangle on the one crutch. The burn in his shoulder is the least he deserves for being so stupid. Of course, she would come back to Melvin. Absolutely she would take the cast. And Matt’s going to follow, as he always does. What else can he do?

“Hey,” Melvin’s heart speeds up a little, “that’s all right, right?”

“Yeah,” Matt forces himself to nod, to exude a certainty about Elektra despite the quivering of his insides. The guilt clawing inside his chest. Anger flooding his limbs.

Melvin settles by degrees, his pulse slowing. “Something happen between you two?”

They do not have time for that. Matt summarizes, “I’ve been staying with someone else. That’s all.”

Melvin’s nod registers through the din of his workshop. It’s so damn resolute. “Good you have friends to help you out at a time like this.”

Matt has no better idea how to respond to that now than he did with Foggy. He lets it go, lets it all go, tries to forget what the Punisher’s doing on Melvin’s doorstep. What he asked Punisher to do. What Elektra is doing. Instead, Matt says, “You do good work, Melvin. Thank you.”

“You give my regards to Elektra, when you see her?”

He lets the devil reply, “Will do.”

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I originally had a scene planned in this chapter for Karen and Frank. I chose to cut it for narrative reasons. It really broke up the action between this chapter and the previous one and didn’t, I feel, contribute meaningfully to the story. I may post it on Tumblr or save it for a later chapter. I do want to apologize to you, dear Readers, since I want to include more of her.

Thankfully, the extra time I took on this chapter meant I was able to talk myself off the ledge I was freaking out about last time. This installment ends where I intended, and I so hope you enjoy it.

Readers: I can’t thank you enough for your kind support. Thank you for giving this fic your time and your energy. I wouldn’t make it this far without you. Cheers!

“I dine with the blood on my hands,
Thrive when I’m beatin’ the man…
Never get caught,
Just get out and hit it again…
In a world riddled with conflict,
Hate that you need me…
You’re gonna deploy me in the end.”

~Skylar Grey, “Wreak Havok”

There’s a space just below Frank’s shoulder where the kids would lay their heads. He remembers telling Lisa in particular that God carved out a place just for her, the perfect size and shape of her face. A space she found every time she hugged him. A space he tried to fill with the strap of a pack or the stock of a rifle while he was overseas, but neither seemed to fit quite as well as her. Frank took shots with a gun that felt right in his hands but was just a placeholder on his shoulder.

Then he got home. Walked into Lisa’s classroom, got his little girl in his arms, and he waited for that feeling of completeness to come back to him. Except her face didn’t fit below his shoulder anymore. And she kept trying to put herself back there, to tuck herself away in that hollow beneath his collarbone, but she didn’t belong. She was too soft, too beautiful, too living. And Frank found
himself thinking, as he pushed her away from him with promises of tomorrow, tomorrow, baby, I promise that maybe she never fit. That there isn’t a part of him that doesn’t belong in combat and never was.

The Barrett rests so damn easy against him. Kicks like a fucking mule, but Frank wants that. He was made for catching kickback, for standing his ground, for staring down a scope at ninja-fuckers on the lam and God damn Red putting his crutches down.

Jesus – the fuck does he think he’s gonna do? The fuck? Frank snarls through the speaker phone and hazards one last glance that Red’s picking his leg back up again. Then Frank lines up his shot at the car. Over the edge of the landing on the water tower. Skirting past the edge of the roof into the small window between it and the top of the vehicle’s wheel well. He shakes, the wind picks up, fucking car hits a pot hole, the round is going to ding off the body of the car. But Frank’s got it all worked out: he knows his hands don’t shake, wind’s been done for the past couple hours, and he scoped out the street for pot holes without even thinking.

Under his breath, it comes: “One batch, two batch, penny and dime –“

He sends the bullet home.

His heartbeat paws steadily in his ears the whole time.

Frank takes a knee as the tire pops, as the car swerves. The ninjas squeal into a parked car. Another vehicle stabs into their back bumper. A third car gives them a nudge before stopping, but not before the street floods with honks and shouts.

Frank whips back to Red. Kid’s got one crutch and stands, waiting. Commotion doesn’t mean much when he can’t see it. A quick order and assurance that it isn’t Fisk gets him moving again. Off the beaten path, down the alley to wherever the fuck he’s going. Frank checks the activity on the street before following Red again. One ninja’s behind the wheel trying to get the hell off the road; his buddy has disappeared.

Good. Frank stays low, turning his attention from the accident at his 3 o’clock to the Red’s path at his 12. Got incoming on the rooftops there: a silhouette breezing through the ever-darkening shadows in the twilight, dressed from head to toe in black robes. Red can’t disconnect the call fast enough; Jesus, he’s getting cheeky now that he’s moving again. Frank checks the activity on the street before following Red again. One ninja’s behind the wheel trying to get the hell off the road; his buddy has disappeared.

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Two more on the rooftops. One from the left, hiding out around Red’s destination. The other emerging seemingly from nowhere. Ghosts without the God damn fog, these ninjas. Frank gives them a little time before he dispatches them. He breathes through the heady rush of pride, of certainty – this is right. This is the universe as it should be and he helped get it there. One batch, two batch, penny and dime: two more dead ninjas on a rooftop.

He puts the rifle down. Grabs the knife off his hip as he descends the ladder from the water tower onto the roof. Footsteps echo up the stairs inside the rooftop access. Frank puts his back beside the door and waits.

The ninja who disappeared from the street busts out, brandishing a short sword. Frank grabs him around the neck from behind, kicks the weapon out of his hand. The ninja retaliates: he kicks back, slamming Frank into the door frame. The laceration on his back snaps open in the centre. Blood runs with rage in a hot line down his spine. Frank tugs until the ninja’s scalp in the space that Lisa used to lay her head, and the insult to her memory spurs Frank into action. He stabs the ninja’s
insides until they’re liquid and streaming from his open chest, then hurls the body back down the stairs for the next ninja to find.

Steam runs faintly off Frank’s blood-covered hand and blade. Sun’s hanging low. Light pollution and smog obscures the starlight. The laceration across Frank’s back burns steadily, and the space below his shoulder is cold, empty. Hollow in a way that won’t ever be filled.

Footsteps rattle up the concrete steps towards him. The other ninja from the street has come to play.

Frank goes to work.

New York’s finest arrive on scene while Frank’s finishing. He wipes the ninja blood off his hands, packs up the rifle, and gets the hell back to the car before the boys in blue can close off his exit or figure out which building he was shooting from. Red calls just as Frank peels out of the parking garage. He’s growly, pissy. Rankled by something, and it better not be the ninjas Frank just put down. Thankfully, the kid doesn’t say much. He gives Frank an intersection away from the cops and then hangs up.

Shit. If he starts a fight about this…

Frank grips the wheel tightly. Watches the rooftops, but they’re empty. Cruises past the church, tilting his head away from the officers on patrol. From Red’s discarded crutch. Guess it’s a good thing the kid’s planning on getting around easier since it’s too much of a damn risk to get out and grab it.

He hasn’t been getting around easy tonight though. Red looks like shit when he drops into the passenger seat: pale and wane and perspiring. Him being pissed off doesn’t help his appearance. If anything, the fire in his eyes calls attention to how out of shape he is.

Frank pulls the car away from the curb. Jesus, the heat’s rolling from the passenger seat. The kid’s fuming fills the whole vehicle. “You asked,” Frank reminds him.

“She took it.”

He hates the fucking pronoun game. ‘She’ is easy enough where Red’s concerned, but ‘it’ could mean fucking anything. Frank sighs. “What’d your girl do now?”

Red snaps, “She’s not my –”

Frank shuts him up. “She’s your problem.” And his problem, God damn it. “What’d she take?”

“A cast. The man who makes my armour built me something better than what I’m wearing. It’ll get me to being low-weight bearing faster. Elektra took it.”

“Your guy, he can’t make you another?” Frank asks.

It’s not that simple. Of course it’s not that simple. It’s Red. “I told him I would keep him safe. That he’d do good work for a good cause.”

“So you introduced him to Elektra?”
Red shakes his head. Disappointed. *In himself.* “I tell him she’s untrustworthy or give him any reason to suspect it, and Melvin will take action against the Hand.”

And regardless, Red’ll find a way to make it his fault in the end. Should’ve protected this Melvin guy, should’ve never introduced him to Elektra, should’ve saved Elektra…Christ Jesus. Frank sighs. “She call?”

“No.”

“She will.” She didn’t take the cast to hide it; she took it to get to him.

Red knows this. Hates it. His whole body’s wrecked with rage, with disgust. Beat the shit out of him, shoot him in the head, and he gets back up. Hell, he forgives you for it, ‘cuz he chose the fight. But put him in chains, take away his options, bend him or break him to your will, Red gets plumb mad-dog mean. The waxy pallor of his skin, the visible weakness in his limbs: that’s the real costume. Not a man in boy’s pyjamas; he’s a devil wearing a person-suit.

Frank can’t help but nod in acknowledgement. This is the Red he wants to see.

---

Frank parks the car, rolls the windows down. Gets out and pops into an diner, order two cups of coffee. Waitress doesn’t even look at him; she’s got her eyes on the television. Shots fired in Hell’s Kitchen. Three bodies found so far. Punisher suspected. There’s his ugly mug on screen, a grainy shot from the courtroom, along with a recap of the shit he did to the Irish.

Other customers might leave without tipping; Frank leaves a ten. Her distraction lets him walk back to the car without causing an alarm. Red’s eased into the night some. He still looks like something’s about to crawl out from under his skin, but he’s controlling himself. Got his game face on. He takes the cup of coffee when Frank offers it even if he doesn’t start drinking.

He’s cool even when his phone springs to life in his pocket: “Unknown. Unknown. Unknown.” Red puts the coffee down, whips out of the device, double-taps the screen to accept the call. The line connects to the soft purr of the minx’s breathing, to the thin curve of her smile. “Hello, Matthew,” Frank hears faintly, just as Red shoves the phone against his ear.

“Where are you?” Red growls.

Elektra’s voice is an ambient ringing from the passenger side of the vehicle even through Red’s white-knuckled grip. She isn’t telling Red where she is; she’s talking around him in circles. But she manages to prompt a, “Stay away from Foggy,” and it’s the most serious threat Frank’s heard come from the kid’s mouth. Gotta say he’s a little impressed. Back at the penthouse, Red was so desperate to please, so ridden with guilt to be leaving. He might finally be pissed off with her.

“You didn’t leave me much choice,” Red snarls. Then, “What do you want, Elektra?”

That should be the end of it, but fuck if it is. Elektra’s just getting started. Some more back and forth follows: “Why’d you take the cast?” and “Don’t pin this all on me!” Frank grumbles between sips of his coffee for Red to get the hell on with it, and the kid rolls his eyes, muttering an exasperated, “I know. I know!” to Frank.

“If you know, then get on with it,” Frank demands. Red’s face screws up tight in response. Elektra’s voice is coils sweetly like smoke between them. Fuck it – he’ll do it his fucking self. Frank puts down his coffee and moves to snatch the phone away.

Red hops out of the vehicle, yammering on as he does. Arguing. Engaging with her. Frank
picks up his coffee again. “Making a mistake, Red. Best to just hang up the phone.”

“Stop, Frank,” Red hisses, and then, into the phone, “You too. Where are you?”

Frank huffs. “She’ll call back.”

The kid shoves a hand through the window and gives Frank the finger, withdrawing before Frank can snap the finger off at the knuckle.

“Ridiculous,” Frank cusses under his breath. Red’s giving her exactly what she wants and then some, since they’re going to meet with her. Going to give her an audience for the fucked up shit she has planned to lure the kid back into her orbit. He kicks open his car door and joins Red on the passenger side just as the call comes to an end.

“What’d she say?” Frank asks.

Red answers, surprisingly without moving back into the car, grabbing his crutch, and hopping off alone into the night. Progress. “She wants to meet.”

“What?”

“My apartment.”

“Alone,” Frank guesses.

“Both of us,” Red corrects him. “She…invited both of us.”

Okay - “That’s a trap.”

“Yeah.”

The bullet tickling his brain becomes an itch, becomes a scratch, becomes a splinter. Frank scrubs away at it, trying to think clearly. Wrap his head around the ins and outs of Elektra’s new game. The apartment’s open concept, top floor; Red’ll sense a cavalry. He could send the kid in alone through the front, clear the roof and drop in from above.

Nah, too easy. She’ll see it coming. She’s seen it coming. It’s why there won’t be ninjas on the roof or in the apartment. They’ll be close enough to drop in but far enough that Red can’t sense.

Kid’s got the same thing on his mind. He must. Been silent a long time.

“What’s the plan?” Frank asks.

“I go alone.”

Of course. Red makes it sound like a suggestion, but that’s for show. He’s given serious thought to ditching. Frank reminds him, “This is a play for you. She isn’t giving you a reason to walk away again.”

“It’s a play for both of us,” Red declares. “She isn’t going to let you walk away again.”

“Don’t you go looking for another ceiling to catch. Not some old man standing in the way of a truck, Red. This is about you. I handle my own fight and…” the bullet twinges in his skull. Frank uses his knuckles to undo the knot. “…make sure you handle yours.”
He looks away before he sees Red tilting towards him in interest. Changes the subject. “We go in together, we leave together.” The kid nods, but it’s not enough. Frank leans up close, lets Red feel the full weight of what’s being said. “You don’t play her games, you play yours. You get the cast. We get out.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Whatever needs to be done,” Frank says, mapping out the kid’s apartment in his head. The windows, the points of entry, the surrounding buildings. Pressure points. Hiding spots. Barricades.

Red smirks in warning. Reading his damn mind. “I like my apartment, Frank.”

Frank nods. “Probably got insurance then.”

A sigh. “Yes.”

Best news he’s heard all night. “You might need it.”

Windows down, car rolling slowly through the street, Red notes that the rooftops sound clear. No ninja breathing around his apartment building. Frank can’t see anyone, but he still doesn’t like it. No way she came alone, without back-up. No way she’s sitting pretty up there in the kid’s apartment by herself.

He arms himself before leaving the car: a piece in his shoulder holster, another at his ankle. A knife at his waist. One more piece in his hand, tucked under the cuff of his coat sleeve. Red stops him from taking an explosive with a stern, “No.” Frank shrugs. “Suit yourself.” Means he has to lay hand on the minx, she wants to pick a fight.

They climb the stairs, Red in the lead. Sensing nothing. No ninja heartbeats, no ninjas breathing, nothing amiss. Neighbours accounted for. Guess the kid’s no explosives rule was a good call. Not that Frank’s going to admit it aloud.

Red stops at his apartment door, listening. Frank surveys the hallway in silence. Waiting. Expecting. Nothing happens. The apartment building is clear, as expected, meaning whatever and whoever Elektra has planned is on the other side of the door.

Knuckles come to rest softly against his arm, drawing his attention. The kid holds up two fingers: two heartbeats. He points, giving Frank an indication of where they are. Nothing left to do but head in.

Elektra’s voice streams through the door, a pleasant mix of silk and blade. “Door’s unlocked, boys. Come on in.”

Red meets Frank’s stare head-on, every sense fixed and waiting. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. Frank draws a steadying breath, readying his weapon. “Let’s not keep her waiting.”

The lights are on – for his benefit, Frank realizes. His. To give him a perfect view of the space. Because, it dawns on him, this is a trap. But not for Red: for him.

He rounds the corner into the living room where Elektra presides over the apartment from the arm chair.
Doctor Sato stands next to her.

Happy reading!
Colors Pt. 1

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I have nothing to say about this chapter. Actually, that’s not true. I have a lot to say, but brevity has never been my strong suit. If I start, I won’t stop, and I think I’ll let this speak for itself.

Readers, I can’t thank you enough for sticking around on this story. I couldn’t have made it this far without your kind words and support; your time and your engagement and your energies, thank you so, so much. Please, enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You were red,
And you liked me ‘cuz I was blue,
But you touched me and suddenly I was a lilac sky,
And you decided purple just wasn’t for you.”

~Halsey, “Colors”

“Art is not what I create.
What I create is chaos.”

~Halsey, “Colors – Stripped”

Frank grabs the God damn kid by the collar of his shirt before he can put himself in the line of fire. Which he tries to do the second they enter the living room.

“Don’t,” Red mutters, tearing himself free.

Frank gives nothing away. Puts his heartbeat nice and steady like his breathing. Holds his hands by his sides, the barrel of a gun pointing out from his sleeve. Not thinking about the kill, not thinking about the kid, not thinking about anything. Occupies himself with details, calculations. The thickness of the drywall, their visibility through the living room windows; the distance from Elektra and the katana she has hanging from the back of the chair.

Sato. Her strength (decent) and her speed (low) and her potential for retaliation (growing). She’s going to have to step it up from conversation if she wants to stand a chance in this room.

Speaking of… “This it?” Frank asks. He isn’t looking for interruptions. Red nods. They’re
alone.

Elektra regards them coolly. “Sorry to disappoint you—” she’s not, “—but I thought you’d enough excitement for one day.”

“We have.”

“Speak for yourself, Red. The day ain’t over yet.”

Frank waits for another move on Red’s part, but the only thing the kid’s done is changed his expression. That compromise they made is written all over his face: if Frank finds her first. Well, Frank shrugs, he fucking found her. Finders fucking keepers, Red. No matter that Elektra delivered her straight to him. This can’t count as a broken promise if Frank puts a bullet in the doc right now.

Unless Red leaps into the line of fire and takes the shot for himself.

Frank stops. Takes stock. Reminds himself who the real enemy is. Sato is going to die easy; she obviously isn’t a priority for the Hand if they’re dangling her as bait. Elektra, however, is playing several games at once with this new move. She’s positively glowing: basking in baby blues and pinks from the billboard swirling through the window while the living room lamplight paints her face gold.

“Spoken like a man who loves his work,” she purrs.

“Elektra,” Red warns her.

To Frank: “Why don’t you put the guns on the table?”

Fat. Fucking. Chance. But it’s not really an offer anyways. The guns aren’t a threat to her and she knows it. “Why don’t you make me?”

Elektra laughs, “Oh, I’d love to! But we both know how Matthew feels about us fighting.”

“I’d say he’s pretty used to disappointment.”

“Frank, put the guns on the table,” Red says.

Frank gives a few seconds of mock consideration while his heart slows down before simply stating, “No.”

“Maybe he’s waiting for you to ask nicely,” Red’s girl chides him. “Or maybe he knows you’re not quite as attached to your no-killing rule as you once were, Matthew.”

“Elektra—”

“Your double standards are getting stronger,” she continues in brisk, pleasant tones. “I kill a ninja to save your life, save both our lives, you tell me to get the hell out of yours. But Mr. Castle, here, dispatches five sentries responsible for reconnaissance and defence, and you’re thick as thieves.”

“You’re just going to bring them back from the dead.”

Damn, it’s the most convincing lie the kid has ever told. Frank almost believes him as he says it. The level of dismissal in his voice, the contempt, it’s drawn from the dark place inside Red, the place that leaves him at the tender mercies of monsters and men and what he sees as varying
degrees of wrong.

Elektra counters perfectly. “Not everyone affiliated with the Hand gets brought back.”

Sato’s spine straightens. What little colour she has drains out of her face. The verbal battle between Red and Elektra rages on:

“Where’s the cast?” he demands.

“What’s your hurry?” Elektra repartees. Her words hit Frank square on his mending nose, and he whips his face out of the line of fire. “Surely you don’t have other people to visit, places to go? Matthew saw all his friends today.”

Fuck this shit. “Anywhere but here,” Frank mutters, detached from the conversation. Then, before Elektra can say more, “Quit wasting time. Said it yourself: no fighting. Give him the God damn cast.”

Elektra folds her arm across her chest sternly, and her voice descends into a delicate pout. “I want the doctor to put it on him.”

Sato’s body floods with new fear. Frank almost shoots her and Elektra both on principle. “Oh, for fuck –“

“It’s why I brought her.” Lie. “She can inspect his wound while she’s at it, make sure it’s not infected again.”

“He look like he’s got an infection to you?”

“I’d have to ask the doctor,” Elektra replies sweetly.

Sato doesn’t disappoint. “…I’d have to look at the wound.”

“Don’t do this, Elektra,” Red says. He lets the desperation show in his voice for her benefit, no doubt, because the next stage is crucial. He knows what’s coming. “Give me the cast.”

“Tell him to put the guns down.”

…blah, blah, blah. Jesus, the two of them. Frank isn’t listening. He catches sight of Sato as she slips a hand into her coat pocket, feeling for something. The impression in the fabric is quick and fleeting, but Frank already has an idea of what’s in there.

He lets his pulse soar. He shoves the gun out from his sleeve, raises his arm, and –

“FRANK, NO!”

- bang.

Matt throws a punch at Frank’s face and lands it just after the bullet leaves the gun. Sato cries out. Matt’s crutch clatters onto the floor. His head spins from the momentum. He goes to catch his weight on the ball of his other foot when he remembers about the break. How he’s already had one compound fracture and isn’t looking to get another and he really should have factored his broken leg into his assault.

That none of this occurred to him before he threw the punch is probably what Foggy was
talking about at the church earlier.

He compensates for the terrible decision by making a different one, grabbing Frank by the coat lapels and dropping off his weight onto Frank’s chest. The clumsy tackle takes effect in slow motion. Frank’s knees give out by degrees. “Guess I’m not so tiny after all,” Matt wants to say, but then they’re on the hardwood.

Shocks rattle through his bad leg; Matt stacks himself on his good one and winds up for another blow. Frank’s fist wraps into the buttons of his shirt; Matt rebuffs him with a punch to the face. But Frank won’t be deterred. He puts his other hand on Matt’s left knee to secure the broken leg. With his fist, he lines the knuckles over Matt’s sternum and pushes. It’s the makings of a punch without any of the force. The controlled pressure, the slow motion. Speed isn’t the goal and neither is power. “Listen,” Frank tells him in a voice so low only he could hear. He gives Matt’s chest another nudge. The motion is accompanied with a mantra in Matt’s head: _got you. I got you, Red._

So Matt listens: hard. To the rattling of metal on the hardwood – Frank’s gun, dropped; close enough that it wasn’t thrown in their melee. Frank simply let it go, freeing up a hand to balance the broken leg. Elektra’s heart is a jazz rhythm, giddy at the violence she’s witness to, and beside her there’s soft gasping. A tremulous rattle of air over a shuddering body. A heartbeat that’s wild with pain and terror but shows no sign of stopping anytime soon.

Matt gathers details from his other senses: the fresh scent of blood on the floor, heady and rich, but no accompanying bone or viscera. Rattling through the floorboards indicates movements. Rubber soles of sensible shoes, the kind a doctor would wear on rounds, squelch against his apartment flooring.

Elektra rises from the armchair at last, stalking around to get a better look at what Frank’s done. Sato scrambles away; breath coming in sharp gasps. The sound Elektra makes sets Matt’s blood to freezing with how cold it is. “Nice shot,” she says sharply. “Unless, of course, you were aiming for her head.”

Frank gives nothing away, not outwardly. He jabs his knuckles tightly into Matt’s chest and holds the broken leg still. “Abdomen hurts more.”

“And is that all you’re going to do?”

“No.” Another nudge to the chest: to Elektra, it looks like emphasis, but Matt senses more.

Elektra coos, parodying sympathy. Matt senses her lowering, then there’s more blood, and Sato’s groaning. “Keep pressure on that, Doctor. Seems the big, bad Punisher seeks retribution for your betrayal. Shall I give it to him?”

“I did everything you asked,” Sato pleads, her voice a near whisper.

She cries out anew. “I wasn’t talking to you,” Elektra scolds. “Matthew?”

Matt lunges against Frank’s grip. “ELEKTRA!” His nails scratch against the floorboards and his broken leg screeches from the motion. Frank shoves him in the direction of his good leg; Matt lands on the floor.

“Well, Matthew?” Elektra asks as Sato quiets. “Now that you’re all for killing members of the Hand, what’s one more?”

“She’s not…” but she is. Sato’s allegiances to the Hand have solidified by this point,
regardless of why she came by that decision. Nevertheless. Matt hops onto his good leg and makes his way painfully across the room. It’s slow going. “She’s not some mindless drone!”

Elektra’s heartbeat is a rallying cry. “So those ninjas deserved it because they can’t think for themselves, but she can and still chooses to serve the Hand-”

“And what about you, Elektra?” Matt demands. Frank is approaching from behind, gun restored to its rightful place in his grip, and by the sounds of his heart, the next shot isn’t going to be for a kneecap. Matt holds his position in the line of fire. “You know how to be good.”

“So I need to die in order to square with your precious morality?”

“No, you have to choose.”

Elektra’s voice becomes a harsh whisper, a blade for his ears only. “They brought me back to life. What choice do I have?”

“The same choice as her! You’re-” a faint sound appears. Fingers scraping against fabric. Sato tries to get control of her breathing. Matt keeps an ear on it but continues, “You’re both under threat, Elektra, to do the wrong thing and live, or do the right thing-“

“-and die.”

“-and fight,” Matt corrects her. Plastic clacks. He struggles for clarity, but the sounds are too faint amidst the chaos of desperation surrounding him. Sato’s heartbeat can’t get any faster. He tilts his head away, toward the thunder of footsteps. The Punisher slows to a halt. “Let her go, Elektra. Please. Do the right thing. Whatever she’s done…she doesn’t deserve this. She can choose to do better. You can choose to do better.”

Elektra’s heart becomes a slow march inside her chest. Matt holds onto the sound for dear life, letting it drown out the smell of blood on her hands and the rapturous happiness with which she greeted this brutality. He’s successful until her next question, “And what about him? Where do his choices rank with regards to your precious morality?”

“It’s the same.”

She isn’t listening. “You know he’s going to kill her. This was a practice shot.”

“He doesn’t do practice shots.”

“I don’t do practice shots.”

Their answer comes almost in unison, and the way their voice comes together, a tenor and a gravelly bassline, plays against the acoustics of the room with twisted perfection.

Elektra smirks sadly. Matt knows, because he’s wearing the same expression on his face. Their respiration is out of sync. “Let her go,” he orders.

But he’s lost her. The way her pulse falls out of stride with his, the way she recedes from the world on fire. It’s the night with Roscoe Sweeney all over again, only this time she stays right there in front of him as she goes.

“What a coincidence,” she says, voice oozing with lilting menace, “I don’t do practice shots either.”
“ELEKTRA.”

The smell hits Matt, faint but oppressive, of the item Sato has finally drawn from her pocket. A wave of nausea runs through him, fresh as that night in the animal hospital. He rushes, thoughts jumbling. Words in disarray. The need to save Sato and protect Elektra reach a point of conflict where the best Matt can muster is saying their names.

They both move too quickly for his senses: Sato with her needle, Elektra with her hands. Matt tumbles into their fray, putting himself in front of Sato to defend her against Frank. Fresh blood spills out of her abdomen. She slumps against the wall, but her heart raging defiantly against the threats in the room.

Elektra, meanwhile, tears the newly emptied syringe from her shoulder. Her pulse is succumbing to the contents. She punches Matt in the arms, wrestling with him. He defends himself as weakly as possible.

Frank moves into a better position.

“No,” Matt tells him, letting the devil out in his tone. “You do what you do, I do what I do, Frank. You so much as point that gun in her direction, and we’ll see just how badly I can fuck up my leg.”

Pretty badly by the feel of things. His leg is in agony.

“That’s on you,” Frank snarls.

“You sure about that?”

He doesn’t have to focus for Frank’s heartbeat to reach him, that war drum across the room, but doing so lets Matt hear the exact moment he knows that Frank is standing down. The moment he goes from geared up to at ease.

Matt turns his attention back to Elektra. She twists away from his touch, hurt and disgust radiating off her in waves. Her features flutter: eyelids, lips, hands, legs. One by one drifting away.

He begs one last question of her: “Are they coming, Elektra? Are the Hand watching?”

The sound of her pulse unfolds below him like a lotus flower. Matt has half a mind to ignore her, the answer is so obviously a trap, but like all of Elektra’s games, it’s one he has to submit to. “I told you I came alone, Matthew,” she whispers with her last moments of consciousness. Distantly, he feels her shifting until her waist is lying flat under his palm, the scar left by Nobu’s blade perfectly evident under his sensitive fingers. A gesture just for him. Matt tries to pull his hand away, but he sits there, frozen, rapt. Deserving of her wrath. “I came alone.”

She passes out.

Matt’s aware of Frank sighing. “What?” he demands.

Frank’s reply is simple: “Fuck.”

Frank puts Elektra to bed while Matt tries to staunch Sato’s bleeding.

“You hear anything, Red?”
Matt simply replies, “No.” He doesn’t hear anything that is of any concern to Frank. Elektra must have been telling the truth about coming alone.

He doesn’t know what to do with that.

The air is compressed between him and Sato, a solid wall of heat and iron pulsating with the shocky tendrils of her pulse. He helps her take off her coat, balls it up, and presses it to her left side. The bullet ripped a hole just over her hip, and the scent of metal from the wound tells Matt there’s no exit. The bullet is still inside. A superficial wound, considering the shooter.

*Got you, Red.*

Sato gestures weakly to the bathroom. Her hands retain their surgical stillness. “The cast is in there,” she says, arm falling back to her side. Frank moves quickly to retrieve it. Meanwhile, Sato puts her other hand on the coat and pushes until a groan escapes her.

“You got that?” Matt asks.

“Yeah, I got it.”

Matt lets go. “That needle – you had that for her?”

Sato shakes. *No.* Matt understands: it was for Frank.

Frank makes a sound from the bathroom. A scoff. His pulse goes into that spiral of irritation, of disappointment.

“What is it?” Matt asks.

“It’s red.”

“What is?”

“The cast.” Frank emerges from the bedroom bringing the smell of Melvin’s lab with him. “It’s red.”

The smell of fresh body armour settles Matt’s nerves. Melvin must have used the same materials as the suit for the exterior.

Sato makes a similar observation, earning another disappointed grunt from Frank. He disappears back into the bathroom and proceeds to dig through the cabinet under Matt’s sink for who-the-hell-knows-what. “Red as your fucking costume,” he says, “All it’s missing is a pair of horns.”

“You don’t wear horns on your foot,” Matt says. *Obviously.*

More irritation. The digging stops and the cupboard slams. “You better not take this as an invitation.”

“You better not give me a reason,” Matt growls.

“Your leg isn’t ready to carry your weight,” Sato rasps. “It needs another four to six weeks minimum.”

Frank goes to say more on his way back into the living room. Matt hears his mouth open and
his pulse thrums in warning – but Matt stops him before he can speak. Footsteps are coming up the stairs. Perfectly audible, non-ninja footsteps. Matt raises a hand to his mouth. Sure enough, the footsteps come to stop at his apartment door.


Sato’s blood has gone cold on his hands, calling the rest of this mess into harsh clarity. Gunpowder and Frank Castle and Elektra; Doctor Sato and her wound. A cast made out of the devil’s body armour. Foggy and Karen badgering the NYPD for days to come and check on him.

“One minute, Detective.” Matt needs a minute. More than a minute. But he’s already rising back to his full height on a leg that barely supports him so he can hop over to the kitchen and wash the blood off his hands. Mahoney’s got a partner with him, one who’s pacing on the spot, looking for action in the right place.

Matt points in Sato’s direction and murmurs as sternly as he can, “Don’t you touch her. Don’t you dare touch her, Frank.” His only response is the sound of the lights switching off. The mere knowledge of darkness brings out the calm in him. His leg grows stronger on his way to the kitchen sink. He washes his hands quickly, then heads to the front door.

Frank’s heartbeat lingers at the bedroom doorway, but the second Matt opens the door to talk to detectives, he can hear it slinking towards Sato through the dark.

Matt can only imagine how this looks for Mahoney: him, his left leg hidden behind the door, standing guard at the threshold of a darkened apartment. The partner was antsy enough without the visual, but he starts flicking at the clasp on his holster double time when he looks at the space.

Mahoney plays it cool. His heartbeat competes with Frank’s for steadiest rhythm. “Evening, Murdock.”

Frank, by the sounds of it, is just standing there in the living room, lording over Sato as she bleeds. Matt makes a fist around the door handle. This had better not have been his plan from the beginning. “Detectives.”

“Got a noise complaint from your neighbour. Said she heard a gunshot.”

Matt shakes his head. “No gunshot here, detectives. I did have a –” he points into the darkness, scrolling through his furniture for something that would replicate the sound, “-bookcase fall over while I was cleaning.” The lie unfolds in his brain so clearly and so perfectly that it leaps out of his mouth before he can think about how it sounds. “I’ve been out of town.”

“Yeah, the whole precinct heard about you being out of town,” Mahoney says tiredly. “Had your friends burning up the phone lines trying to figure out what had happened to you.”

“I’m sorry, Detective. I didn’t think I needed to tell people I was going.”

“Neither did I, but try telling that to Foggy Nelson.” Try telling anything to Foggy Nelson is what Mahoney means to say. “Where were you, you don’t mind my asking?”

There’s a faint whimpering sound from the living room. Neither of the detectives hear it, but Matt does, loud and clear. He wishes there was some way to tell Frank to knock it off, but he’s got no ground here. Invite the detectives in, they all go down. Punisher kills Sato for crossing him or the Hand does it for hurting the Black Sky. Ninjas launch an assault for Elektra’s honour. And he
makes Fisk’s job a whole lot easier by getting sent to Super Max all by himself…

So lie, Stick snarls at him. Nut up and lie.

First time he ever has to thank Stick: “I’ve been doing outreach through the church with some orphanages in the state. There’s a child in Albany – blind – who’s been having trouble adjusting. They thought I might be able to help.”

“You got people at the church that can confirm this?”

Matt raises a brow. Mahoney’s heart isn’t really in this line of questioning, and even if it was, he’s gotta do better than that to rattle a public defender. “Do I need to, Detective?”

The partner flicks at the snap on the holster one more time. It’s a gesture Frank must hear, because his pulse booms, nearly drowning out the detective’s voice when he speaks, “Awfully dark in there, Mr. Murdock. There a reason all your lights are off?”

Mahoney pulse shoots up, pissed: “He’s blind, Mike.”

Behind him, Matt can hear Frank’s heart hammering at a similar pace as he whispers, faintly, “He’s fucking blind, asshole.”

Mike recovers quickly. The assholes always do. “You mind we come inside, Mr. Murdock? Have a look around?

Sato stops breathing. Frank approaches her.

“Please,” she whispers. “Please…I…”

“Only way you leave is I let you,” he reminds her.

Matt can’t help his hand from shaking on the door. He puts on his best public defender’s voice again, “Actually, I do, Detectives. I-” Sato’s breath hitches. Frank’s hand is clamped over her nose and mouth. The faint scent of tears breeze down the hallway. The sounds of their struggle are such that only Matt can hear. He responds the only way he can: by knocking his bad leg against the door, rattling the broken bone. Playing his pain for focus, for fury.

“It’s all right, Murdock,” Mahoney interrupts him. Irritation stretches his voice thin. He and Mike are going to have a conversation about this in the car. “It’s not necessary. The NYPD have more important things to deal with tonight.”

“Two detectives on a suspected gunshot duty does seem like a little much.”

Mahoney sighs. “Been by your place for less lately, Murdock.” But he wanted to make sure Matt was all right, with there being other gunshots in the neighbourhood. His pulse says as much. “You have a good night.”

“You too,” and just in case there’s any confusion about who he’s speaking to, “Brett.”

He closes and locks the front door to the sounds of the detectives’ retreat, Mahoney grumbling on the way downstairs, “You call yourself detective, Mike? Geez…” Matt’s hobble down the hall is excruciating. His swelling’s up. His leg jostles wetly like an overfilled water balloon. But there are still three heartbeats in the apartment. There are still three heartbeats…

Crack. Bones snap.
Only two heartbeats left.

“No.” Matt tears at the wall. He swings his broken leg for leverage no matter how much it hurts. “No, Frank…”

Frank isn’t anywhere near Sato by the time Matt gets into the living room. He’s retreated to the windows, his body an aural landscape of solemnity, of duty. There’s a giant glaring silence beside the armchair that used to be Doctor Sato. She’s already getting cold, fading from the world on fire.

…happy reading.

Chapter End Notes

Thousandsmiles created some beautiful fanart for this chapter. You can find it here.
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Summary: You know you’ve got problems when Frank Castle is lecturing you on the importance of friendship.

_Defenders_ was a grand old time, wasn’t it?

I wish I could say that travels were to account for how long this chapter took, but I had difficulty approaching the fallout of the previous installment. I got the characters into something season two didn’t prepare me for, and while this whole fic seems like an exercise in that, I never get used to my own sense of utter bewilderment at where this fic has gone.

Writing from Frank’s perspective was one of those surprises. There are gaps in this chapter, purposeful ones, because he has a habit of letting things stand in his periphery. I hope those moments are evident without being heavy-handed. Matt is coming back in the next chapter.

Readers, dear Readers: I don’t tell you enough how grateful I am for you, and even more than that how lucky I count myself for the readership that I have. Give yourselves a big pat on the back. Thank you so much. Enjoy!

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“You’re dripping like a saturated sunrise.
You’re spilling like an overflowing sink.
You’re ripped at every edge but you’re a masterpiece
And now you’re tearing through the pages and the ink.
…and he’s blue.”

~Halsey, “Colors”

Detectives haven’t hit the streets. Explains why Red’s so quiet. He’s waiting to be in the clear before he attacks. Can’t risk exposure by grappling with the Punisher when there’s a corpse in his living room.

Frank wants a second – one God damn second – of stillness. Of silence. One second without that billboard light cutting across his visions, those shadows lurking from every corner; without listening to Red’s argument about morality playing through his head on repeat. One second to appreciate that he can’t hear gunfire right now. One second to revel in a job well done.

But there’s no time. Red’s Girl made sure of that, put them in close quarters so no matter who got the Doc, Red would have a good swing at them.
“Nothing else for it, Red,” Frank tells him. “You’re thinking she could have walked out of here, but to what? I gave her my word. And even if I didn’t, your girl—”

Red isn’t quiet, but he’s fast. Cops must be too far to hear him clunking from one side of the room to the other. Frank dodges the first blow. He’s primed for the second. Red still manages to grab him by the collar and rattles off another series of punches. They’re weak; he’s got no foot to pivot on, and so help him, he fucks up that leg again…

Frank grabs the kid before he can. He puts a fist through Red’s defenses, drives it up and into Red’s Adam’s apple; hooks his arm over Red’s shoulder and his hand behind Red’s neck. Then Frank pulls back and Red struggles. With only one leg for balance, tugged onto a hard angle, the kid’s swings start to lose momentum. Hard to keep up an attack when he’s almost dragging on the floor.

He lets out a yell like that one from the night with the Dogs, like Frank’s got him in chains. And it’s can’t just be the fist on his throat he’s railing against: it’s the girl, it’s the dead doc, it’s the broken leg, it’s the neverending shitshow of his life story.

I fucking get it, Red. “If it wasn’t me, it was your girl or those ninjas,” Frank promises. The kid has to see that.

“That’s not why you did it,” Red snarls at him. “Don’t try and justify this to me, Frank. She wouldn’t be in danger if—”

“If she hadn’t been at that butcher shop. If she hadn’t been deep in the shit.”

Red yells again and jumps, getting his good foot back underneath him. Frank takes advantage. He takes the first from Red’s throat and catches his left knee, yanking the limb off the ground as he shoves the kid backwards. Red catches him by the shirt, but Frank drops forward, bringing Red straight down onto the hardwood floor. The kid rails on him anew. Frank tugs himself upright, Red’s broken leg slung over his arm for protection. He jostles the limb a little for emphasis that the kid can’t feel through his temper. “Jesus.” Frank groans. This has to fucking end.

He puts one foot on Red’s chest. Drops his knee onto Red’s good leg to pin it. Somehow manages to keep the God damn broken limb from getting mangled in the process. Fuck. “Listen to me, Red.” The struggle below him continues. Frank digs his foot a little deeper into the kid’s chest, gritting his teeth and pursing his lips and God damn, Red still putting up a fight so good it’s not his broken limb that has to worry. He’s gonna break an arm trying to get free.

And then he’s still. Scary still. Drawing back into himself, less on retreat than a chance to regroup. He did that on the rooftop, too. Slip into silence before he came back swinging. Frank gets an exit strategy in order as he speaks. “You listening?” No response save for Red’s ragged breathing. The level of control he’s demonstrating is tissue thin. Frank’s working with milliseconds. “Those med’s aren’t gonna last forever—“

“Fuck you, Frank.”

He keeps talking, “- and eventually the ninjas are going to come looking for your girl.”

“Get the hell off of me.”

Frank’s heel drops a little deeper into Red’s chest. He tightens his grip on the kid’s broken leg. “Gotta get rid of that body.”
Red squirms underfoot, unraveling into a fresh fight. “No.”

“Nothin’ else for it,” Frank mutters. He looks at the Doc’s corpse, crumpled against the wall, head flopped on a broken neck. “You want to explain to the cops how it got here?”

“We can’t…we can’t just destroy her body.”

“I can.” Ninjas mystic powers are no match for the Hudson. Hardest part will be getting Sato’s corpse to the car. Can’t risk being spotted by going out the front door; he’ll have to haul the body across the roof, down the fire escapes.

He looks back to find Red making that face, the one where he’s trying to keep all his righteousness bottled up against the cold hard facts. Because he knows, just as well as Frank: “You leave her here or drop her at the cops, those ninjas or your girl finds her. And they work their crazy magic on it, bring her back.”

“She’s nothing to them.”

“But she’s someone to you,” Frank reminds him. “Your girl knows it. You think Sato got dragged here just for me?” Now he has the kid’s attention, because he’s right. They both know he’s right. And Red’s pissed, but he’s starting to see reason, starting to see himself in all this. “They’ll bring back Sato as many times as your girl needs. No amount of hope’ll change that. You want to do right by the Doc, you get rid of what’s left of her so there’s nothing for the Hand to find. No blood trail, no body.”

Kid’s bottom lip is quivering something fierce. Trying to build a rebuttal, no doubt, or put together some other plan. Too lost in thought to launch a counter-attack.

Frank eases up on detaining him some, makes it a little easier for him to breathe. “You know I’m right, Red.” He lowers the broken leg to the floor and steps back, releasing Red as he rises to his full height. The kid pulls himself into a sitting position against the coffee table. Seething. Not enough skin of his tiny frame to hold in that rage boiling away inside him.

Leaving Red to it, Frank begins looking for something to wrap the body in, something that doesn’t belong to Matt Murdock. Something the Hand won’t notice is missing when they come by the place for Elektra. He goes to the kitchen and digs under the sink for garbage bags.

“Why didn’t you just kill her?” Red asks.

It’s weird: the way the light cuts across his face, the direction he’s turned his head, Red’s looking at Sato’s corpse. Got his eyes full of her. Frank tears his gaze from the sight and gets to ripping garbage bags down the seams, ignoring the glow of Red’s skin against Sato’s slumped form in the shadows. “I saw the needle in her pocket. Gave her a push to use it.”

“That wound was shallow.”

“Yeah, well,” Frank makes a pile of plastic sheets on the counter, “Couldn’t have her going into shock before she put your girl out. You got duct tape?”

Red doesn’t answer. “You used her.”

The anger runs through him, hot and fierce and hungry. He didn’t get his fifteen seconds of ceasefire after he killed the Doc, Red sure as shit isn’t getting a conversation. “I’ve been using her the whole time. Duct tape, Red. Let’s go.”
“That night at the animal hospital –“

“Jesus Christ, Red."

But the kid’s got a point to prove. “- you let her go.”

“I was letting her go to Metro General to get you admitted under a fake name, not to call in her old friends on the ancient ninja brigade.”

“And if she’d done that,” oh, fuck, the kid’s using sarcasm; now it’s serious, “you’d’ve let her live, wouldn’t you, Frank?”

“Stop, Red.”

“She was terrified from the moment you walked into that butcher shop –“

“She had every reason to be.”

“- and no reason to think that you’d ever let her live.”

“Don’t make excuses. No fucking excuses.”

“She didn’t have a choice.”

Frank slams the cupboard he’s searching. “And who’s fault is that, Red? Who’s fucking fault is that? I didn’t put her in the butcher shop. I didn’t sign her up to do work for the Hand.”

“No, you just put a gun to her head.”

“You’re God damn right I did. And I would’ve put a God damn gun up to the head of anyone else in the city if it meant saving your life.”

Something crosses Red’s face, something more than just the billboard light. A twinge. An expression. It’s gone as quickly as it appears, but Frank needs to clear the image of it from his head. Wash the fucking words out of his mouth about things he’ll do to save Red’s life. “I told her the only way out of this was doing exactly as I said, and I said to keep you alive and keep her damn mouth shut. Not my fault she wanted to fuck up one of those two things. Now, where is the fucking duct tape, Red?”

The kid tosses his head towards the cabinet along the wall. “Bottom drawer, right hand side.”

Frank storms over to it. “Why you gotta make everything so difficult.”

Red lets out one angry laugh and parrots him snarkily. “Why do you gotta make everything so simple.”

Sato’s corpse cleans up quickly. Frank wraps her up in plastic and secures the sheets with tape. The blood on the floor is all that’s left of her.

Fight seems to have drained out of the kid some. He’s inching up onto his good foot, ear poised in the direction of his new cast. Frank gets up, retrieves the damn thing. “Don’t waste your breath telling me you can do this yourself,” he growls, but Red’s not looking to waste anymore of his
breath on Frank. He sinks back onto the floor, brooding, and Frank’s content to leave him to it.

The old cast comes off, revealing sweat-damp dressings mottled with dried blood. Red’s surgical incision reminding them that not nearly enough time has passed since his third operation to be running around Hell’s Kitchen. The limb’s so swollen that there’s no comfortable way to bind it even with the new cast’s lightness. The Velcro straps cut into Red’s injuries, and he winces despite his fury.

Jesus Christ, the red of the thing. Might as well be wearing his costume again.

Frank finishes with the cast, gets back to standing. “You got bleach?” Red shakes his head. “Ammonia?”

Another shake of the head. Figures. But Red gets himself up and moving. “Vinegar,” is all he says by way of explanation. Takes him a couple hops to balance himself out. The new cast is a lot lighter than his old one, that and his leg can’t be feeling too pretty. He traces an uncertain path around the sofa using his hands to guide himself more than Frank’s ever seen him do. The blank expression on his face is easy to ignore until the billboard light sweeps across him. Red’s bottom lip looks thinner than usual, because he’s biting it. He’s biting on his lower lip.

Frank stops him from going any further. “I’ll get it.” And then, under his breath, “The hell you think you’re gonna do – help? How are you gonna haul a bucket across the room on one leg? Jesus, think.” And even if he does that, the kid’s just gonna fuck it up anyways, muddle those delicate senses of his with vinegar and bloodstains. “Where?”

Red shrugs once, and the anger in his movement fills the whole room. He mutters the location. Frank checks out the window on his way past to find the detectives’ unmarked car gone.

“You got a jacket or something with a hood, grab it now,” he orders, pulling some cash from his pocket and shoving it at the kid. “Then you head out the front door. Take a cab –“

“I’m not leaving.”

Frank understands immediately: the kid’s not leaving Elektra. “Would’ve done her before the Doc if I was gonna kill her.”

A scoff, a light one. Barely audible. “You let Sato get her out of the way for you.”

“And why the fuck you think I did that?”

The question is out of his mouth before he really thinks about it. And rather than try and explain it away, Frank lets the silence stand. He shove the bills back in his pocket. Grabs the rest of the shit to clean up the blood. Sets a bucket to fill in the sink and mixes it with the rest of the kid’s vinegar. The kid lingers at the fringes of his vision.

Frank shuts off the tap. “She’ll stay here. Sleep it off.” Red doesn’t move. “You’re gonna be riding with a dead body, you stick around.”

“I’m already an accomplice,” Red notes darkly. “What’s accessory after the fact?”

“Fair enough. You still need a hood to cover up that blubbering face of yours.”

Red springs up from the couch and hops down the hallway towards his front door. The scowl on his face is easier to stomach than his pout.
Frank nabs the bucket from the sink along with a towel and stays focused on the task of sopping up blood. Red’s audible behind him, hopping back from the front door. He’s a black spot in the shadows until the billboard light sets his cast alight. Bobbing in Frank’s periphery, he sounds like he’s unlatching and tugging at a section of the wall. A latch opens. Hinges squeak. He gathers what sounds like fabric into a backpack, and then he’s out, pushing the wall shut again to lock it.

Damn. Missed that when he came by the apartment.

“Got yourself a little devil-cave, Bruce Wayne?” Frank asks.

Red takes a seat on the couch. “I’ve still got some secrets.”

“Uh huh.” Right. He’s not an open book. Frank finishes up with the last of the blood on the floor. The air reeks of vinegar, and there are still swirls of pink visible in the surface from the billboard light.

He grabs a towel and mops up the mess, then disposes of the rest of the evidence: washing out the bucket and tossing the bloody rag and towel into another garbage bag. He takes in one hand, heaving Sato over his opposite shoulder. He casts a glance at Elektra, makes sure she’s asleep on the bed, before starting up the stairs to the roof. “Five minutes. I’ll meet you outside of that dive bar on the corner.”

“Yeah,” Red agrees.

Sigh. That tone. Resignation as deception; he makes it so God damn easy. “You’re not coming.”

A bigger sigh. Kid’s thought about this obviously. “Where else am I gonna go, Frank?”

Less a question than a statement of a sad fact. Frank adjusts his grip on the corpse over his shoulder. “Told you from day one, you wanna go…”

Red slows it down for him, but all the meanness in his voice ain’t for Frank. “Where else am I gonna go?” A scoff, and then another sigh. “I can’t…I can’t risk anyone else.”

“Then don’t,” Frank fires back. He’s about to say more but Red cuts him off.

“I’m safest with you.”

The silence Frank wanted, the one he was craving, comes crashing down on him with an almighty vengeance. No gunfire in his head, no flashes of phantom explosions. No Maria, no Lisa, no Frank Jr., no nothing. Just Red’s quiet voice and his utter, terrifying sincerity. “I’m safest with you.” The man who just broke a woman’s neck in his living room, who took out five ninjas earlier, who cracked a bullet off this kid’s head what feels like an eternity ago and has strangled him multiple times since. They’ve both said how fucked up this is, but it’s even more fucked up now.

Frank can’t look at the kid, the sad expression of resolve on his face in spite of everything. “Dive bar,” he says, “Five minutes.” And then, for who knows what reason, “Don’t make me come looking for you.”

The menace creeps back into Red’s voice: “Thought you said if I wanna go –“

Jesus. Fucking. Christ. “Don’t make me come looking!”

And Frank gets the hell out of there before either of them can say more.
Frank hauls ass across the rooftop; Sato’s corpse ain’t so light anymore. Once he gets to the stairs, it’s easier. The weight is good for his momentum. The final drop is difficult to negotiate. He can’t risk the noise with everything happening in Hell’s Kitchen tonight. Instead, he carries her down on his last jump, absorbing the hard jut of bones against his shoulder.

He slips the body into the trunk behind some equipment. Closes it up and locks it. The city swells inside his head then, filling all the empty spaces, drowning out the kid’s confession. Drowning out his promises, every one of them. They should have quit a long time ago, but Frank looks back and can’t figure out where it would have made sense. How they would have justified it. With him being such a dumbass lately and the kid trying so fucking hard to save everyone.

He drives around the block, scanning for unmarked cars or more detectives. They must have fucked off, gone to check on those ninja corpses scattered around the church. The rooftops are clear. Whatever else Red’s girl said, she came alone. It’s the kind of psychotic confidence he expects from Red, but there Elektra goes proving two can play at that game.

Five minutes, the kid’s not there. The dive bar has an empty front. Neon lights sizzle in the window: Josie’s. Frank scans the alley on his drive past. Still nothing. “Fuck, Red, don’t make me. Don’t make me.” He drives around the block again and it’s still nothing. The kid isn’t walking out of his front door. Maybe he hasn’t left the apartment. Or maybe he has and fucked off into the night on one leg.

One more circle, and suddenly, there Red is, dipped into the alley with his hood pulled low, one crutch clamped under his arm. He hobbles towards the vehicle and sinks into the passenger seat, His face is turned towards the door and stays that way, hidden, at least directly.

His reflection in the window says more.

Don’t ask. But out the words come: “The hell happened?”

“Nothing.”

Frank grabs the kid by the shoulder and twists him around. Red allows Frank a good view of his profile and nothing more. “What is it, Red?”

Red doesn’t even fight himself loose. He stays in Frank’s grasp. “Nothing. Let’s go, Frank. Drive.”

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I meant to post this last night, but this chapter was the challenge that kept on challenging. I tried a bunch of different things, nearly scrapped most of it in a fit of delirium last night; went to bed thinking there were four things I needed to change in the morning and only remembered two of those things when I woke up…

This was in addition to the difficulties I had finding the right song for this chapter. Initially, I debated between Lifehouse’s “Broken” and Ed Sheeran’s “Save Myself,” but neither seemed to fit Matt’s state of mind, to say nothing of the fact that I already had a chapter called “Savin’ Me.” Later, I picked Mo Kenney’s “Unglued” (and that song is brilliant. Please, please check out Mo Kenney). That song ended up getting cut when this chapter turned into more of a training montage.

I had finally settled on Eminem’s “Till I Collapse” when I changed the ending of this chapter, thereby necessitating a different song. At a loss and at my wit’s end, I went to Spotify and typed in “Try.” Sure enough, the first song had everything I needed from the melody to the lyrics. I can be really and truly daft sometimes.

Readers, I had to say a big, huge thank you to each and every one of you for giving this story your time and efforts. I couldn’t do this without you. Cheers!

“Where there is desire there is gonna be a flame.
Where there is a flame someone’s bound to get burned.
But just because it burns doesn’t means you’re gonna die.
You gotta get up and try.”

~P!nk, “Try”

Matt breathes as slowly and shallowly as possible. He can’t recognize his apartment through the brutal landscape. There isn’t a safe place for his senses to land. Blood and vinegar make for a wicked combination of smells. The sound of Frank’s footfalls on the rooftop is amplified by Sato’s corpse slapping against his back with every step. Matt tries to mask the sound with his heartbeat, but if he lets his respiration get as quick as Frank, he’s going to run from the apartment, and there’s nowhere for him to go.

He counts the minutes using Elektra’s breathing as a guide. Five minutes, Frank told him, meaning Matt really ought to be standing. He should be heading down the stairs if he wants to be on
time. But not a single part of his body is prepared to carry him down to that car with Frank Castle in the driver’s seat and a corpse in the trunk.

Of course, he isn’t prepared to wait for Elektra’s army to show up either.

Matt pulls his cell phone out of his pocket without really knowing why. He has no one to call. The device vibrates in his hand from unchecked notifications: one new voice mail, one missed call from Foggy.

*Oh, Christ, not now. Not now, Foggy, please.*

Matt unzips his backpack and shoves the phone deep inside, burying it along with the rest of his guilt. Slinging the pack over his shoulder, he gets up and onto his crutch.

A soft hum emerges suddenly from the bedroom. Elektra shifts on the pillows into a more comfortable position and sighs. Her voice emerges, soft and lazy, like she’s waking from a pleasant nap. “Is the doctor dead?”

Matt doesn’t answer; Elektra hums again, deeply and contentedly. “I smell vinegar. Someone’s been cleaning up bloodstains.”

“Why did you bring her here?” Matt demands.

Her voice is low, groggy. All the makings of honesty without the actual honesty. “I wanted to know that you were all right.”

“You could have done that yourself.”

Another sigh: beleaguered. Fine, if he wants to play this way. “I wanted to show you.”

She slips into silence, feigning sleep, her heartbeat a coy murmur from the bedroom. Matt digs a fist into the arm rest of his couch. “Show me what?”

“…who he is.”

“I know who he is.”

Elektra clarifies, “Who he really is.” She draws a languid breath, bringing her heart rate back down to an unreadable pace. “I thought if you knew he wouldn’t change, you’d leave him. But I failed to anticipate how much he’d change you.”

“I haven’t changed.”

“Oh, haven’t you?” Elektra’s gaze creeps under his skin. “The Punisher killed six people today, five of them at your behest.”

He tries to move and doesn’t. “Good-bye, Elektra.”

“You’ve just helped him dispose of the sixth.”

“I didn’t want her to die! I tried –!”

He stops himself. This is what she wants, *exactly* what she wants: she wants him to stay. Matt wipes the errant tears from his eyes. “Look, if you want to fight with me –”

“I don’t want to fight you.”
“You’ve got a hell of a way of showing it.”

“We could save each other, Matthew. Me from the Hand, you from Frank Castle.”

He scoffs, suppressing his doubt, his fear that she’s right. Maybe he really is changing. “And who’ll save us from each other?” She doesn’t answer, because there is no answer. There is no future for them together. There’s no future for him and anyone. “You brought her here to die, Elektra.”

“You brought Castle out to kill,” she notes.

Matt’s anger overpowers his guilt. Temporarily. The guilt is always there. “My leg isn’t going to be broken forever, and the second I’m back on two feet, you and Frank Castle and the Hand are getting the hell out of my city.”

She snuggles into his pillow with one last hum. He hears the smile creeping across her face as she slips back into sleep. “We’ll see.”

Matt hobbles a few more steps towards the door before she adds, “Oh, and by the way, Matthew: that conversation we were having back at the penthouse?” Yet again, his body won’t move. He absorbs the blow of her next three words with his back before he gets the hell out of the apartment.

The sound of her parting promises haunt Matt on the lonely, painful walk to Josie’s. He’s reliving it when he sinks into the passenger seat of the car. When Frank asks him what’s wrong, it’s all Matt can do not the start a fight then and there.

“Drive,” he orders, and mercifully, Frank does as he says.

“Matthew.”

He jerks awake. No trace of Elektra save for the voice in his head, and that’s drowned out by the sounds of the city. The Bronx is still asleep.

Frank marches through the apartment, out the door, and down the stairs. The sound of the car starting rips through the morning like a gunshot, and Matt winces, nerves snapped and fraying. He curls up tighter on his side – arms around the waist, knees against the wall, running as much tension as he can through his muscles to bear the brunt of what he’s done.

He can hear the corpse in the trunk; he swears he can hear it. They didn’t ditch her on the drive back. Must be where Frank’s off to now. Matt pieces through the sounds. Sato’s weight must make some kind of change in how much power the engine has to exert or how the car’s parts rest together as a whole. And he wants that, deserves that much at least. The sound, the smell. Sato’s death weighs on every other part of him; his senses shouldn’t be immune. They feel unbearably light in comparison to the rest of him.

But the vehicle vanishes into the soundtrack of the city along with any remaining trace of Sato, and Elektra’s voice comes back to him from last night. Matt unravels to face the apartment. Artillery fumes ripple in the air above him. He drops his face into the pillow, focusing on the scent of his pack under the cot. Home radiates faintly through the canvas and cushion.

He reaches, checking the zipper for signs of intrusion despite knowing Frank wouldn’t leave any. Despite knowing that Frank wouldn’t, period. Full stop. Matt winces again from the weight of that knowledge. Once this unspoken fact, now this glaring reality, solidified and articulated, that there are lines that Frank doesn’t cross when it comes to…when it comes to…
Matt unscrews his expression and shoves his forehead onto the pillow, waiting for the phantom chains across his chest to loosen. Somehow making it harder to breathe helps. Fighting for air makes it better. He doesn’t stop until only the now-familiar weight on his sternum remains. Then he stretches through the zippers into the backpack. He finds his prayer book for support, leather soft as down feathers from age. In his head, he’s reciting prayers, a myriad of them, one after another, against the onslaught of shit from last night.

God, what a shitty night. What a relentlessly shitty night in an endless parade of shitty nights. Vinegar and blood from the hardwood. Frank charging o’er the rooftops with a corpse flapping against his back and chest. The voicemail from Foggy he can’t bring himself to listen to. Elektra in the bedroom. His heart this frantic tick amidst it all. He screwed up. Damn it, he screwed up.

Matt releases his grip and digs deeper, taking hold of Dad’s robe. The red of it screams up his fingertips as loud as it did the day Dad brought it home. God, he doesn’t deserve it. Doesn’t deserve any of it. The robe is stupid. It’s needless, an indulgence. But Elektra loves other people’s indulgences. She loves undermining them, loves proving just how needless they are. And everything he does is an indulgence to her. Dad’s robe, Sato’s life: stupid, needless indulgences.

Matt wipes the tears from his face on the pillow. He stops biting his lower lip before he draws blood. God damn it, he was there. He was right there. He could’ve saved her; he should’ve saved her. Fuck his leg, fuck Elektra, fuck Frank, fuck excuses - he should have.

His hand dips further into the bag, nails chipping along the wood of his old clubs on their trip to his old pants and shirt. The old bandana he used as a mask.

He should’ve saved her; he should’ve stopped Frank instead of asking him for help.

And next time, he will.

A few hours of meditation quiets his broken limb enough that Matt can make a lap of the apartment. There’s a good twenty-or-so feet between him and the far end to work his good leg. The fire escape stairs will help too, though his injury throbs at the thought. A clear path runs through the centre of Frank’s place, perfect for working his core, and then there’s the punching bag rife with Punisher smell that Matt can’t wait to get his fists on.

He resists. For now. Without the crutch, the new cast messes with his equilibrium, tricking his senses. He can feel the sides of the cast hugging around his injury, considers it added bulk, but when Matt moves, he overcompensates. It’s his own weight that he’s competing against, not the cast. His first few hops nearly land him into the desk.

It takes several laps for him to get his bearings. By then, he’s shaking. His head spins. The swelling around his break is still up from yesterday, so his leg is a steady fire under the cast. Matt forces himself back up, but he can’t make it to the kitchen. His right leg refuses to move no matter how much he burns, well aware it won’t hold his weight for another lap even for an ice pack. Matt sighs, compromising. He hobbles towards the bathroom, gripping the wall tightly to carry his own wretched weight.

The bath is so good it’s awful. Hot water gives his guilt new weight, new intensity. Matt feels it rush through the skin to press upon his bones, and it’s holding him together as much as it’s tearing him apart. He’s more undone when he finishes, guilt compounding instead of washing away, but at least when Frank gets home, Matt wears nothing of his workout.

Not that Frank’s looking. He pops into the apartment to fill his thermos with coffee, not
stopping once on his trip to the kitchen. He says, “Evening, Sunshine,” in passing.

“Fuck off, Frank,” Matt snarls.

He thinks he catches Frank sighing. The sound’s so quick, Matt can’t be sure. “Will do,”
Frank replies. He gets his coffee and leaves.

It’s like that for days – a greeting and a nickname of increasing condescension from Frank, a
curse from Matt. Then silence. No more late nights on the fire escape. No more swapping stories
about fights or family. Frank’s out: in the parking lot working on the car or off doing God knows
what around town. He takes most of the heavy artillery from the apartment with him. Matt keeps an
ear out for sirens. Listens to the police scanner and checks his phone for news. Whatever Punisher is
up to must be slipping under their radar though, or maybe he’s building up to something.

All the more reason, Matt thinks, to work.

Recovery is slow, painful. Every day he manages to be back on his feet, he spends another
off, shrunk into a ball on the floor or sprawled on the cot learning. Tracing new aches to their source,
figuring out how to work his body without his left leg. Pushing his anger down, down, down inside
him when he faces another setback. When he slashes his forearm on a hard fall into the desk or
wrenches his right ankle when he lands funny heading down the fire escape stairs.

He’s getting there. He has to be. His appetite is back, his swelling is down, his clothes start to
fit better. One night, Matt ventures out on the fire escape and manages to get himself up onto the rail.
He shakes and rattles but eventually finds his balance with one foot on the rail and one hand on the
edge of the roof above. The change in altitude is dizzying, and he wants to stay up there forever with
the Bronx crashing through him in waves. Wants to dive headlong into the torpor and let it wash him
towards the sirens in the distance.

Frank’s footsteps head into that bathroom, and the inside of Matt’s skull goes red. He balls
one hand into a fist, swearing inwardly that the only way he comes down is if the bastard makes him
come down. But the window slams shut with a mutter of, “Fucking freezing.” The bathroom door
closes. The shower runs so hot that Matt feels the steam through the bricks at his back.

The next day, alone again, it’s the pace that bothers him. The slow pattern of hop, stand, hop,
stand: there must be a better way. Only his calf is broken; the thigh can still pull weight. So Matt
hops, lowers, the meat of his right leg burning from the exertion of holding himself steady. He props
his hands on the floor to alleviate some of the strain. Then slowly, tentatively, with every sense fixed
on his broken leg, Matt lowers his left knee to the ground.

A wail of pain builds below the knee where the muscle pulses against the break. Matt recoils
as if scalded, half-expecting Frank to pop out from the kitchen grumbling about shooting his shin off
at the knee. Yet after a very long, very slow throb that ripples all the way to his scalp, Matt calls his
body’s bluff and tries again. Fire builds in his calf with the added weight on his knee. He pays
careful attention, ready to pull back before the muscle shifts the bone.

But then the pain stops rising, and Matt’s balanced perfectly in a crouch.

He holds the position for longer than he’s able before easing himself off his foot and laying
back on the floor. Sweat drains out of him. He can’t stop shaking. Pain renders his legs dead weight.

Dad’s voice comes back to him, loud and clear: “Get up, Matty. Work to do.”
Matt makes the sign of the cross and gets back up.

His right foot shakes underneath him, and the whole apartment sharpens into focus. The chain holding up the punching bag screeches in his ears.

Matt lays the first punch into the bag using his approach to generate some power. The leather is chafed and raw and covered in Frank: his knuckles, his blood. There’s a thrill in breaking up the scent for a second, in sending it scattering. And when it comes back, when it’s Frank in front of him instead of a bag, Matt punches again, this time with his left.

He takes it slow, pacing himself against observations of his limits. Paying serious attention to the differences in each blow, what muscles he’s moving, where he’s generating power from. Minding that he doesn’t twist too far on his ankle, that he keeps his wrists straight. The burning in his right thigh that once seemed sentimental becomes a full-fledged fire, a desperate scorch to stop. But Matt finds a rhythm staying in one spot, by adjusting his height. Can’t bob and weave on one leg, but he can dip into a crouch, come back with a jab. Try his hands at crosses and uppercuts.

Frank killed her. The bastard killed her in cold blood with his bare hands and left her to rot in a trunk until morning before dumping her in the river.

Matt lets out a yell. He sweeps his next fist up into an overcut, one that comes down exactly where Frank’s face would be on the bag. The blow lands; the bag jerks back, chain clanking. Air rushes to fill the space the bag once occupied, sparkling with particles of Frank, of leather, of sweat, of work, of the Devil himself. Of the devil unleashed.

That moment between the blow landing and the fight ending: it’s bliss.

The bag swings back to centre with a squeak of chain, and Matt drops. First to his knee, where he rests a bit, chest heaving for breath. Then he lands on the floor, sliding back until his shoulder blades hit the wall. His broken leg pulses with red heat. His shoulders and arms and fists aching gratefully in the aftermath. The blood on his knuckles from where the bag bit back fills Matt with a grim satisfaction.

He takes a cold bath this time, anger seeping out of his pores until the water’s warm and his insides are ice. His knuckles sting as he lifts himself out. Nothing a little meditation can’t fix, but bare-knuckle boxing clearly isn’t the best idea if he’s looking to be his old self again.

The clothes under the bed are all worn, laundry service having ended the same time Frank and him stopped talking. Matt slips into the least-worn pair of sweats and scrounges for a shirt. The cleanest he can find is a hoodie, and one sniff explains why: it’s Frank’s. He’s worn every shirt except Frank’s since Sato was murdered.

Matt crumples the sweater into a bundle and chucks it back where it belongs, back to Frank’s side of the apartment. He runs his hands through the inside of his duffel, shuffling the books to scoop out handfuls of Punisher-polluted air until he catches a whiff of home again. Home without the stink of vinegar, without the copper tang of blood. Before. He wants to go back to before, when he was alone.

He checks the side pockets. One’s empty. The other smells faintly of Fogwell’s. Shit – more Frank to clear out. Matt rips at the contents and makes to throw them across the room along with the hoodie, but he’s caught by the slight scent of his own sweat. They’re his hand wraps. Frank must have grabbed them along with the clothing.
Matt’s hands drop into his lap. The rest of him drops straight through the floor. He clings to his hate, his rage: it’s justified, it’s right, but it’s also gone. Slipped right through his fingers from the gaps in his fists from trying to hold onto hand wraps and silk sheets. There are lines Frank doesn’t cross and lines he does, and try as Matt might, he can’t help tripping into them, struggling himself straight into knots.

He drops the hand wraps across his lap and buries his face in his hands, scrubbing his hair, grounding himself in the present. Frank murdered Sato, and he murdered her because that’s who he is. He murders people. He isn’t going to change, he isn’t going to get better, and Matt’s an idiot for thinking otherwise. All hand wraps prove is that Frank didn’t clean out a gym bag properly before he filled it with clean clothes and a silk sheet.

Stupid, needless, an indulgence. One Frank mocked but didn’t destroy.

Matt swipes at the night table, knocking it to the floor. Glass shatters. Water dribbles through the cracks in the hardwood. Pill bottles clatter. The hand wraps ripple and snap when they’re tossed into the mess.

He grips the edge of the cot, taking it with him when he rises. It’s not enough to dump the bedding; Matt has to flip it. He has to tear at the frame until the whole bed is dismantled, until his corner looks how he feels. But none of the ripping or the punching or the yelling is enough. Matt’s left swaying amidst wreckage of his own, every wound having been self-inflicted.

The thunder of his own heart takes on a soft echo. Another heart, lightning fast, thrums from outside the front door. Matt listens to the rush of hesitation rifling through the air. Rina’s arm rising, falling, rising, falling. Hazarding a knock only after hissing a curse at herself in Russian. “Hello? You’re making a lot of noise. I’m…I’m…” her heart speeds up, reeling before settling at last on, “…I’m sorry.”

Matt has no idea how to respond. He starts by running a hand through his still-damp hair, palms bristling from the spikes of his too-short locks. The air coils with dust and sickness; sweat and splinters. Floor chipped from him throwing the furniture into it; pill bottles, broken glass, and water everywhere. “I’m sorry, Rina. I’ll keep it down.”

She shuffles on the other side of the door, shoes scratching against the floorboards nervously. Gearing up for a complaint? No, Rina’s heartbeat is a-flutter for an entirely different reason. “Are you…is everything all right in there? Do you…did you fall or…? It’s not my business, but…”

Her worry seeps under the door like an incoming tide, pooling around Matt’s bare foot. “I’m…” but the word won’t come. None of them do: not fine, not okay, not all right. He swallows hard and tries again, reaching as he does to tug one of his hoodies out from the mess he’s made of the cot. The fabric is ripe with scents, but at least it will cover the bruises mottling his chest. “I just…I knocked something over.”

Rina mutters another apology along with, “It sounded like you were fighting,” as Matt searches for his glasses amidst the pill bottles on the floor. He finds them at last, throws them on his face, and hops to the door.

A piece of broken glass splits through the bottom of his foot. Matt nearly faceplants into the door from the sudden shock of pain. He grabs the handle and heaves himself upright, groaning as the shard sinks deeper into his skin.

He opens the door to keep from screaming.
Rina’s heart breaks the sound barrier. She takes one very large step back into the hallway.
“I’m sorry.”

Matt holds out a hand, trying to put her at ease. Her terror pulses against him. “No, I’m sorry. I’m -“

“Your business is your business, I just –“
“- having trouble getting around today."
“- I was thinking you had fallen, and last time you fell, you nearly bled to death –“

He sighs. “I am sorry for that too.”

Rina can’t hear him. Matt can barely hear himself over the terrifying rush of her circulatory system. “- and Frank is going out so much. I wanted to be sure.”

“I’m fine, Rina.” There it is: the word that failed him earlier, back now that she needs to hear it. “I’m all right. I’ll be -” he shuffles, just barely suppressing a grimace as the glass cuts through the meat of his foot. “-I’ll be more careful.”

One of her heels moves back even as she’s taking a step forward. The horror in her heart subsides briefly, entering that decisive rhythm Matt vaguely recognizes from the night she found him dying on the fire escape. “Your foot is bleeding.”

“It’s fine.”

“There is broken glass on your floor.”

“Yeah, I stepped on some. It’s fine. I’m fine. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

Rina huffs, dissatisfied in a way that resists Matt can’t internalize. She isn’t angry with him. She raises a hand towards the door and takes another cautionary step back. “I can...I can help with that. Your foot.”

Matt sighs. His hand shakes at the thought of closing the door. Rina’s heartbeat moves over the skin of his face and neck, a soft caress of vibrations, and slowly, it dawns on him how long it’s been since he’s spoken to someone. Since he’s been close to someone.

The smell of artillery overwhelms his pathetic, desperate need for company. He pushes the door slightly, his heart sinking for the knowledge that Rina won’t come back. She’s too scared and too skittish to risk rejection a second time. “I’ll take care of it, Rina. Thank you.”

“I can help,” she insists. “Sorry, please, just...I can help.”

The pressure in his foot mounts. Matt feels the strength in his leg wavering. He could lock her out, Rina won’t press, but then what? She calls Frank? Matt can’t stomach the thought. Frank coming home to find him reinjured, to find the apartment in disarray. Cot in ruins, broken glass on the floor. The ensuing conversation plays out in Matt’s head as a series of huffs, groans, and eyerolls. Punisher dipping into the kitchen to refill his Thermos before marching back out the door for more murder and mayhem; smug in the knowledge that the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen doesn’t have a leg left to stand on. Nowhere to go, no one to turn to.

His throat balls up into a fist so tight Matt can’t swallow. The best he can manage is to give
Rina a small nod before letting the door swing open.

Happy reading!
Over You

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

The word ‘flurrious’ appears in this chapter and is not a typo. Well, I mean, technically it is, but I kept hearing that word in my head when thinking about Rina’s heartbeat, so I used it.

I originally intended to have this chapter posted Friday in celebration of my birthday; unfortunately, this installment came with a great deal of resistance. First with Matt and Rina’s conversation, which occupied me for several days, and then came my indecision about the conclusion. There were no less than five possible endings for this chapter, one of which I really, really wanted to include, but it just didn’t make sense. Thankfully, I think the ending I went with will make what happens next a more logical development.

Readers, dear Readers, I can’t thank you enough for sticking with this fic. I wouldn’t be this far if it weren’t for you and for your kind words and your insights into the characters and your just generally being awesome. Know that. Thank you.

“Maybe if I tell myself enough
Maybe if I do”


The piece of glass in Matt’s foot is a far cry from a compound fracture, but Rina’s attitude towards both remains the same. Her skittishness takes a backseat. She targets the injury with broad strokes and programmed efficiency. Matt’s guided into Frank’s rolling desk chair. Rina grabs towels from the bathroom, Frank’s kit from under the sink, and plants herself on the floor. She doesn’t bother with gloves or tweezers. She fits her tiny fingers under the lip of the glass, reminds Matt that this will hurt, and then yanks. Glass shreds against the muscle; fresh droplets of blood slap against the floor.

Fear takes hold of her heart again, and Rina’s voice is meek once more. Her head twists, agitating the air, as she no doubt surveys the mess he’s made. “You must have fallen a lot.”

Matt nods. The piece of glass pops out of his foot with a squelching sound that turns his stomach. His blood rushes hot and cold in his veins with embarrassment.

Rina clamps a towel against the wound, hard. Her dainty thumb is a needle straight through Matt’s foot. “The records…” she says quietly. “You and Frank…you don’t have to do that. Not that I’m ungrateful. They’re just not necessary.”
“You don’t have to cook for us,” Matt notes.

She is quick to reply, “I cook too much.” But after a long moment of knowing silence passes between them, Rina continues, “You are healing. You need your strength. Frank, he... he usually has these... these packages. Military rations. MREs?” Matt can hear Rina’s face twisting in disgust. “No good.”

She unclamps the towel from his foot, inspecting the wound. A sigh escapes her. She presses the towel to his foot and his foot to the ground. “Put pressure on that,” she says, rising. “It shouldn’t need stitches, but I can call your doctor to be sure.”

“No,” Matt says, sharper than he intends. He softens his voice before speaking again to keep from frightening Rina. “I’m sure it’s fine. Thank you.”

Rina believes him, or at the very least she doesn’t press. Her heartbeat starts rising again the second the job’s done, but instead of running, Rina looks for another task. She heads to the kitchen, starts digging through cupboards.

It’s too much. Matt moves to get up. “Rina, you don’t have to –”

She returns with more supplies: an ancient dustpan and broom. “There is glass on the floor.”

“I can get it.”

“No! No.” He senses her hands between them gesturing. Rina’s terror is palpable, so much so that Matt has a hard time discerning if she wants him to stay sitting for his own protection or hers. Likely both. “You stay. Keep pressure on that. I get the glass.”

Matt stays seated for her sake. He listens to her movements: the slash of the broom across the floor, the trickle of glass gathering into a pile, the patter of her heartbeats. Work only takes the edge off her proximity to him. Rina still clears the path to the door first and foremost, giving herself an easy getaway.

She takes care of it all: the glass, the water, the pills, the nightstand; the cot, the clothes, the quilt. She even forces the window above the cot open, letting in a fresh stream of breeze. Matt’s foot has knitted by the time she finishes. Rina wraps the wound in a bandage, smoothing down the edges of the medical tape as she secures the binding.

He’s about the thank her, but Rina’s off and moving, muttering a litany of apologies and Russian phrases and something about the fridge being empty under her breath. She moves so quickly that she slams the apartment door shut behind her, prompting her to issue an apology from the hallway. Her footsteps flutter back to her apartment.

The order Rina leaves in her wake punches Matt in the stomach. Bandaged foot, clean space, fresh air. If she only knew. If she only knew the things that he had done, the people he helped put down, the body he helped Frank hide. And now he’s throwing tantrums, attracting the neighbours to come coddle him. “You want her to change your diaper too?” Stick asks, prompting Matt to climb back onto his bleeding foot and hobble to the cot.

She’s sorted everything. The backpack’s under the pillow, the duffel is in the middle stuffed full of dirty clothing. Quilt and sheets are folded neatly at the foot of the cot. Matt eases himself down, back into the space, waiting for the floor to fall out from under him or the ceiling to crash down. Nothing happens. Chill splashes against his back on its way in from the window revealing the sparseness of the apartment, the vacancy. Matt’s whole body fills with a familiar ache of home,
because the space reads like a smaller version of his flat in Hell’s Kitchen. His own solitary corner of the world made all the more solitary with Frank’s absence.

Matt pulls his hands off the cot before he can tear it apart again.

Rina returns and puts a hot plate of food in his lap. Red meat in the drippings, potatoes and carrots and garlic. Nothing fancy, but the richness of the smell sticks to Matt’s insides, a poultice around those wounds he’s let fester.

He feels a wry smile creep across his face despite himself. “I can cook,” he tells her.

“‘There is nothing here to cook,’ Rina replies. She paces unsteadily to and from the door, her heartbeat telling her to run as the rest of her tries to stay. Eventually, she compromises, taking a seat in Frank’s chair. Away from Matt but with a clear path out of the apartment if she needs.

The loose fabric of her shirt twists and creaks between her fingers in a struggle to find purchase. To find stability. Matt isn’t the only person who hasn’t had company in a long time.

He finds a fork on the edge of the plate: heavy and ornamental. Real silverware, a little tarnished with age, probably inherited from the same person who stitched together the quilts Rina’s been lending him. Matt pokes at the plate, identifying things by texture before taking a bite.

Conversation comes slowly. Matt doesn’t know where to begin, if he even should begin. Rina’s nervousness eventually compels him to ask, “How long have you known Frank?”

“Since he moved here.”

“Did you recognize him from…before then?”

Rina’s hands stop playing, coming to rest in her lap. Her heartbeat doesn’t let up, but her breathing slows, projecting a calm she doesn’t feel, an innocence she can’t claim. The life drains out of her voice. “He must have one of those faces,” she replies.

Matt’s heard her tone all too often: from the interrogation room. Rina has all the airs of a cornered suspect. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean…” but what the hell did he mean? He’s supposed to be Frank’s brother.

“So act like his God damn brother,” Stick scolds him.

“He and I,” Matt begins, searching for words and finding the truth fits oddly well, “aren’t close, and with the stuff on the news, I never thought he’d have neighbours, let alone neighbours who’d cook for him.”

Rina’s heartbeat settles somewhat. Takes Matt a long second to realize that he’s smiling. She straightens in her seat, shaking off her earlier performance. “I know he is a good man. That he protects people.” After a pregnant pause, she adds, “He protects you.”

Matt plays chicken with that same sense of dread from when Rina left the apartment, the one that speaks of quiet and abandonment and erasure. But the catastrophe he’s waiting for never arrives.

He takes another bite rather than speak.

Rina waits until he’s finished chewing before asking, “Sorry, but…why are you and Frank not close?”
There are too many reasons. Matt settles on the easiest. “We’re just very different people. We always have been.”

“Then-“ but Rina stops herself, reconsidering. She tries again, faster this time, “But you are – I’m sorry, just that…you are staying with him. Close or not, he brought you here. Twice, he brings you back here.”

Brought him here, fed him, cleaned him, tended to his injuries, got him silk sheets and books and clothes and killed the doctor. “Yeah,” Matt agrees, taking another bite.

“Maybe he wants different?” Rina offers.

Matt shakes his head. “He doesn’t want different.”

She flinches. “Sorry…”

“No, no, Rina, don’t be. I’m sorry.” He prods at what’s left of the meal on his plate, sighing. Directing his anger back where it belongs. “I’m sorry.”

It takes her a long time to come back to the conversation from where she’s fled, and when she does, Rina’s voice is almost a whisper. “Maybe he needs different.”

Matt lets the accusation drain out of his voice before speaking. “Does he seem different to you?”

She shrugs. “He did when you were gone.”

“You said he was worried.”

“He was worried. Focused. He wanted you back, and he wanted you well. He…I can’t explain, and it’s not my business,” and she’s sorry for ever bringing it up according to her tone, “but he was different. For Frank, he was different. Being alone…it changes people, especially when they lose somebody close.”

Matt holds the bite of food in his mouth, on-guard against the sour taste building in the back of his throat. Frank’s furious explanation of, “To save your life,” plays on repeat in his head amidst a torpor of other thoughts. Of Dad, of the Castles, of Foggy and Karen, of Elektra. Because Rina is right: it isn’t simply being alone. Frank and him haven’t been alone for a long time. It’s loss, and more than that, knowing what you’ve lost, that changes people.

But what the hell did Frank lose when he was taken by the Hand – a mission? What the hell are they to each other anymore? Matt forces himself to swallow and sits there, not speaking, the answer arriving in the form of a feeling akin to wings unfolding in his chest, each stemming from pressure on his sternum where Frank’s taken hold and refuses to let go.

Rina stays to watch him finish everything on his plate. She takes the dish from him before he can get up to give it to her. “You rest,” she says, backing towards the door. “I will come by again if Frank is not back. If it is not trouble.”

Matt shakes his head, a little bewildered to have her leaving after so much time in the same room. “It’s not trouble. Just don’t trouble yourself.”

“It’s no trouble for me.”
He pulls himself out the tailspin they’re dragging each other into with a sincere, “Thank you, Rina. For everything.”

His hand is working its way out, looking to shake hers, but Matt remembers Rina’s skittering heartbeat at the last second and stops. He raises his palms in surrender before making a point of putting both hands in his lap.

The posture draws Rina out of her terror. Her footsteps scratch across the floor back towards him. Matt senses her hand in the air, the faint floral scent of the perfume on her wrist, coming towards his head. She rethinks the motion at the last second, moving down for his shoulder; rethinks that too and simply retracts. Matt hangs onto the sensation of her body heat on the air for as long as he can. He buries his other thoughts quickly before Stick’s voice can find them: that it’s been too long, too damn long. That he misses it.

Rina inches out of his reach, stammering, “Your hair. It’s short.”

Matt nods. “Shorter than usual.”

“It looks good.”

The sound of her heartbeat fills the room like a flock of doves. Matt breaks into a wild smile. “Thank you,” he says.


She races out of the door so fast it slams behind her. Matt hears her apologizing again from the hallway on her way back to her own apartment. The sound of a needle scratching on vinyl follows, then Chopin fills the building and drowns out the vacancy of Frank’s apartment.

Meditation is easy to achieve afterwards. Matt sinks out of awareness to a calm headspace. Dark and warm, pulsing softly with his own heartbeat. He doesn’t start when the rolling barrage of footsteps hit the stairs, interrupting Vivaldi. He simply blinks, shuffling around on the cot to get his good foot on the floor. His right foot stings and pulses from the wound left by the glass, but the deeper muscle tension is gone, replaced with a comfortable looseness, a flexibility, that hasn’t been there for a long time.

Matt waits for the door to fly open, for Punisher to come inside and find the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen waiting for him. He waits for the fight he’s been craving. But no sooner has Frank hit the landing then Rina’s music stops. Her door opens at the far end of the hall. Footsteps scurry out, a pair of cheap ballet flats slapping on the floor. Rina stops, her voice bouncing off the curtain of hair she uses to hide her face. “Uh, excuse me? Frank?”

Amazing how quickly his pulse shifts. From a march to a resting rate, Frank has nothing but patience for Rina. “Ma’am?”

“Uh…I just thought you should know…your brother, he…”

Frank’s heartbeat climbs by degrees. “Ma’am?”

“…he fell.”

The last vestige of control drains out of Frank. He rounds, heartbeat roaring into action, and practically charges through the door into the apartment.
Matt’s wears his smirk on the inside, but he lets Frank know it’s there. “Hi, Frank.”

He forces himself to feign nonchalance as Frank’s respiration bounces between enraged and relieved. Matt bars his mouth against the flood of questions and accusations rising in his throat. He revels in the satisfaction of pulling the Punisher out of attack even as doubt blooms inside him as to whether it was an attack that brought Frank charging into the apartment.

Frank paces off the last of his energy, a scribble of frustration in the world on fire: palm scratching against scalp, heart pounding through his chest, footsteps knocking against the floorboards. He finally comes to a stop by the desk, and his heartbeat sinks into a rhythm of carefully controlled frustration, one Matt recognizes all too well. It’s been his soundtrack since breaking his leg.

“Red,” Frank replies casually.

Rina is in the doorway, her flurrious heartbeat cutting the tension between them like a knife. “He has a cut on his foot, but he is all right. He said he didn’t need a doctor.”

“Not that we’d have a doctor to call anyways, right, Frank?” Matt asks.

Frank changes the subject: “Only got one foot left. The hell did you do?”

Punisher’s pulse is a steady throb of why-I-oughttas that only fuel the strength behind Matt’s glower. “I’m fine.”

“He fell,” Rina provides. “There was some broken glass. I clean.”

Again with the change in subject: “You trashing the place, Red?”

Matt is ready to reply, but Rina injects, “He fell.” Her heart scrambles into her throat. Matt listens to her struggling to swallow it back down into her chest. Frank must be looking at her, and regardless of how he’s doing it, Rina is terrified. Her voice goes soft. “He fell. He’s fine, but he fell.”

Frank’s withdraw from the room is so gradual that Matt’s confident he’s the only one who feels it happening. The room goes from static to stable with a few deep regimented breathes – in, out, in, out. “Thank you,” Frank says at long last, scrubbing his head as he does. “For lookin’ in on him – thank you. You shouldn’t have to do that.”

That last part is directed at Matt. A whole sentence made up of shrapnel and barbed wire that digs under his ribs the way Stick’s voice scrapes inside his skull – “Pussy.”

Rina’s presence is a balm. She holds fast between them, her nervous energy forcing them both to cool their heels. The whole atmosphere in the room changes a second later when she stammers, “Also, your fridge is empty.”

“Empty?”

Rina responds with a racing heartbeat and emphatic nodding and a quiet, “Yes. Empty. No food. He should have food. Not from packages. It’s….” her voice gets even quieter. “…it’s not my business.”

Matt flashes her a soft smile, aware just as she is of how hollow her words sound. Rina places a hand on the doorway, probably to keep from fleeing back to her apartment, and hurls one last quiet statement to the room. “And he should not be alone so much.”
There. She’s finished. Rina digs a heel into the floorboard in testament to her seriousness right before she apologizes under her breath.

Frank’s bearing down on him; Matt’s senses prickle from the friction. Heartbeat, breathing, the placement of his feet on the hardwood floor, his stillness. A collection of tiny sensory details that scratch at Matt little by little, until finally, like emery to a match, he ignites in a shrug against the sensations.

The self-satisfied thrum of Frank’s heart follows. “No, he shouldn’t be.”

Rina’s more than a little shocked at having been listened to. Her nod is a stern slash through the air. “Well, good day.”

“Ma’am.”

“Rina,” Matt tells her retreating form. He marks the sound of Rina’s door closing, of her music resuming. Of her backtracking through the apartment until her heart is pressed up behind the door in anticipation.

The apartment billows in her wake, atmosphere churning. Two fronts colliding into a storm.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

The song choice for this chapter was deliberate. On October 17, lead singer of the Tragically Hip and Canadian national treasure Gord Downie passed away from cancer. I grew up in a household where the Tragically Hip was played constantly. There was a lot of love for this band and even more for their brilliant frontman, and I couldn't help but commemorate Gord Downie's artistry by using his work in this fic.

I think this chapter nearly destroyed me. I don’t know why. All I know is I’ve had a tension headache for the past forty-eight hours. My jaw hurts from grinding my teeth while I sleep. Every waking more has been some serious mental blacksmithing to figure out what the hell it needed to say, and like always, it took way more words than I thought it would to end up where it needed to be.

It feels worth it, of course. This whole fic is worth it, and not in the least because of all of you wonderful readers out there, your wonderful feedback, your support. I wouldn’t have the stamina to get through every new installment of this fic without you. Sorry this one took so long! I hope you enjoy it!

“We lay down seething, smell our pillows burn, 
And drift off to the place where you’d think we’d learn. 
Do you think I bow out ‘cause I think you’re right? 
Or ‘cause I don’t want to fight? 
…Oh, go ahead and fight.”

~The Tragically Hip, “Fight”

Frank tracks his gaze over the kid. From the strip of fresh bandages on his right foot to the chafing on his knuckles; the way his sweats cling to his legs, his hoodie grips around his biceps.

“The hell were you doing?”

“Rina’s listening,” Red warns.

Yeah, he figured. Way she caught him on the stairs. Way she covered for the kid’s hurt foot. “She’s waiting for a fight. We fighting, Red?”
A laugh. A smile. Nothing but menace backing both. “You tell me. We fighting?”

Frank’s mouth runs on autopilot while the rest of him falls in line. Adrenaline surging, heart pumping, veins pounding. “Just say the word. You just say the God damn word.”

The kid says something. Doesn’t matter what it is. The very sound of his voice is grating. It’s a triple dog dare for Frank to do his worst even though Red hasn’t got a leg left to stand on. “You wanna start a fight? I will end it. I will end it so fucking fast.” One good knock to the head is all it would take. Or maybe that syringe of midazolam, finally put that to use. Frank’s still got the loaded syringe and Doc’s notes on the dosage. Red can sleep off his hissy fit with a little help from the dearly departed. Wake up in chains until he learns to take better care of himself.

Red doesn’t take the bait though. He springs up onto his cut foot instead, wincing freely, and hobbles out of the room. Frank doesn’t wait around to watch him leave. He storms off to the kitchen and gets a pot of coffee going, ears trained on the slap of Red’s palms against the wall as he climbs out onto the fire escape.

The bathroom window slams shut behind him.

Frank peels open the refrigerator. Shit, the damn thing really is empty. He eases the door shut and turns to survey the clean containers stacked on the counter. Doesn’t make sense: he took inventory, ran calculations, figured the kid had enough food for another day or two at least with the way he was eating. But Red’s just full of surprises lately, not in the least being his appetite. Those bloody knuckles he’s nursing, his bandaged foot; couple of days ago, he was icing swollen ankle and sporting blood stains on his sleeve. Frank’s barely seen him out of the apartment except to hobble laps up and down the fire escape stairs. All of it paints a pretty pathetic picture of what’s been going on since the Doc got hers.

Making his way across the apartment, Frank stops at the sight of a hoodie in the corner on his side of the flat. His hoodie, the one that the kid’s all but lived in since Frank first flung it at him, has been returned. Frank bundles the fabric into a ball, crushing his palms into the teeth of the zipper. He maintains his vice grip across no man’s land into the kid’s corner.

He anticipates a reaction. A knock on the window, a “Fuck off, Frank,” a something. Kid’s been a ray of sunshine since the Doc, and Frank’s abided the fuck you-s and the occasional go fuck yourself out of respect for the damn leg. But grabbing the duffel of dirty laundry punctuates Red’s silence, his outright refusal to respond, because he’s listening. He’s gotta be.

Frank tries his damnedest to get his ticker cussing in the kid’s precious ears as he digs for straggles of clothing under the cot. There’s nothing left to grab except the backpack Red filled that last night at his place, and Frank has the strap in hand before he’s thought about what he’s gonna do.

He slides the backpack across the floor. Lets it catch on splinters, peel against the fraying hardwood, make as much damn noise as it possibly can. This is bullshit. No more tip-toeing, evasive maneuvering, fucking sit-on-the-fire-escape-and-mope shit. Buck the fuck up and get on with it, Red. Come on and stop me.

The zipper rips open. Frank eyes the window. He thinks he sees Red’s fingertips at the sill, but it must be a trick of the light. There’s nothing. By the sounds of things, the kid hasn’t even bothered to stand up let alone creep inside for round one.

Frank closes the bag. Shoves it back under the cot. He takes the duffle over his shoulder, lets it run over the knitting katana wound across his back. Quiet overtakes him, and the gunfire in his skull provides a rolling bassline to Red’s hissy fit, to his own poorly contained temper. They’ve got
weeks between them and Red being back on two feet, and Frank sure as shit isn’t about to blow a month of sweat and blood and fucking not-killing ninjas because the dumbass is looking to take a ride on his moral high horse.

There’s plenty of time for them to fight this out. Till then, it’s business as usual. Till then, it’s the mission. Till then, it’s all about the leg. The dumbass attached to it can wait.

Frank leaves the kid to his pity party. He has a cup of coffee, puts a load in the wash, makes a run for provisions. Fuck, kid went through Rina’s cooking in half the time he should have. Got the metabolism of a teenager. Good match for his personality.

Groceries come first, couple of essentials, followed by a stop at a pawn shop. Frank nabs a copy of Debussy’s Greatest along with an album from Moussorgsky that’s practically new. He gets to the counter to find the guy staring him dead in the eye, mouth set in a hard line, the sort of line they drill into you from basic. “You need anything else, sir?” he asks. Frank shakes his head, hands off the cash. Gets a, “Thank you, sir,” when collecting his change that can’t just be for the purchase. He gives the guy behind the counter a nod, one that weighs on him all the way back to the apartment. Gratitude reminds him of the work that isn’t getting done thanks to his babysitting the Fucking Toddler of Hell’s Kitchen.

Red’s still on the fire escape when Frank pulls into the lot. He’s got his coat at least, but he’s huddled up, face concealed under the hood, as if fleece is a good defence against the chill. Frank slams the car door extra hard at the sight, rolling his eyes at the tiny flinch of Red’s shoulders from the sound. Not meditating, then. Just sitting in the wintry afternoon, being cold and bitter while listening to the city and wishing he was somewhere else.

Frank brings everything inside. He restocks the fridge and cupboards, organizing the items separately so Red can navigate them by touch. He puts on a fresh pot of coffee. Grabs the records. Heads out of the apartment, making sure he doesn’t hesitate on his way out the door at the sight of the bathroom window.

He considers knocking at Rina’s and giving her the credit she deserves for dealing with the devil in person, but he isn’t looking to scare her anymore than she’s looking for thanks. Nevertheless, Frank still finds himself standing there like an idiot, one arm hooked around two chafed albums while the other braces him against the door frame. Jesus, what was he thinking, leaving for days on end? Sure, he dodged a fight with the kid. Didn’t have to ditch Sato’s body with Red in the passenger seat bitching about the sanctity of life. But none of that means shit. He knows – he fucking knows, like he knew from the moment they met, the only person Red wants to beat the shit out of more than the bad guys, more than *Frank*, is himself.

The records slip easily and quickly under the door. Frank about-faces and high-tails it out of there, but he isn’t more than a few steps away when the records shoot back out across the floor.

“I appreciate the gesture, thank you,” Rina says from behind her locked door, “but it’s not…it’s not necessary.”

“They’re not from me,” Frank says.

Rina’s door swings open a few meager inches, snapping against the security chain. Her pale face and hair appear, ghostlike, in the crack. “I told your brother –“

“People tell my brother lots of things. He’s not too good at listening.” God damn, the irony of that statement when Red’s probably hanging off every word of this exchange from his frigid post on
the fire escape. “Owe you a lot more than records, ma’am, for what you did. What you do. Couple records make him feel better at least.”

Rina shrugs, dipping her face behind the doorframe. “I make too much,” she says.

Frank nods. “Yes, ma’am. And we appreciate it. Thank you.”

She glances at the records on the floor. “These are from him?” Frank nods. She twitches a little, torn, then enters a crouch. One of her thin, pale arms snakes out of the crack in the door and draws the records inside. She returns to her full height. “Thank you.” She corrects herself. “But please tell him no more. I mean it. Please.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rina nods. She goes to close her door, but she stops herself with one more question that barely registers for Frank. Those words - delivered softly, no less – he can’t hear them over the din in his brain. His answer is automatic. “Yes, ma’am. I’m all right. Thank you.”

Whether she believes him or not, the result is the same. Rina nods once, delivers a final thank you under her breath, and closes the door. Frank heads back to his apartment, counting the sound of her locks latching with every step. Swear to God if Red says anything. If he pokes his head in through the bathroom window to bitch about records, about being used as an excuse, Frank is locking him out on the fire escape until his leg’s healed.

All’s quiet at the apartment though. Frank pours himself a fresh cup of coffee and stands, strategizing, wondering what Red’s end-game is before remembering that Red never has an end-game. Kid lives by the seat of his pants, skirting the edge of disaster at every opportunity. He’s gonna lock himself on the fire escape, and so help him, Frank has to drag his frozen ass in, save him from hypothermia.

Frank tosses back the coffee, the burn in his throat a good match for the boiling in his blood. *Fuck.* He’s fucking… He slams his mug down on the counter and charges through the apartment.

Red appears suddenly. He throws open the window and climbs back inside. Without missing a beat, Frank tears into a hard right for the front door and leaves. As if that was his plan the entire time.

They survive the night and following day in tenuous silence on opposite sides of the apartment, breaking only for brief verbal melees. “You got something to say, just say it,” followed by a boring repartee of, “Not saying anything.” “Oh, you got nothing to say?” “No. Nothing. But it sure sounds like you do.” When they’re actin’ civil, they end with a mutual agreement of, “Fine.” When they’re really pissed, they bring out fuck and all its cognates, and one of them storms off to the fire escape to cool their heels.

Night comes. Frank takes a drive. Creeps past alleys, scopes out late-night diners and clubs, dodges a cluster of cops outside of a seedy motel. Snowflakes swirl on the breeze, sparkling orange and yellow under the streetlamps, an iridescent blue in the exterior lights on the buildings. His mind wanders through the war he isn’t fighting and teaching Frank Jr. how to skate on the outdoor community rink and God damn it, he shouldn’t be out here. He blames Red for evading the situation, but he isn’t much better.

Just…what the fuck does the kid want him to say? He isn’t sorry. He wouldn’t take it back. Would have done the Doc in sooner, he knew about her plans. Red’s looking for a fight he can’t
win, and under normal circumstances, Frank would oblige him, but he’s a mess, God damn it. He’s a floundering mess who holed up in an apartment, ate his feelings, smacked around the punching bag some, and then cut his only good foot. Fuck, Red.

Frank comes back into the lot from the back this time, creeping past the empty fire escape. Window’s open. Weird. He parks and climbs the stairs, slipping in through the window. Bathroom, living room, kitchen: Red’s gone.

Frank stalks around, listening for the tell-tale hop of the one-legged devil. Ceiling creaks. Window panes rattle in the glass. Frank heads out to the fire escape and surveys the lot, the surrounding streets, mind reeling through calculations about just how far Red could have gotten. But none of it adds up. It’s stupid for Red to run now. No, he’s still on site.

Frank slips back into the bathroom and charges towards the front door. Maybe Rina…? He stops. Listens again. There’s that creaking sound. Not from the floor: from the ceiling. Frank’s never heard the wind do that.

An itch spreads through the back of his neck, across his knuckles, straight down his trigger finger. He eyes the patch of ceiling above his head. Oh, hell no…he darts back onto the fire escape, hops onto the railing, and lifts himself onto the ledge of the roof for a look.

Rooftop’s empty. Because of course it is. The devil’s crept away. Sure enough, just as Frank’s hopping down, he hears the door to the apartment slam shut. He slips back into the bathroom to find Red shedding his coat. “Went for a walk,” he says, and the sheen of sweat on his brow, his chapped fingers and cheeks - they definitely confirm he was outside, that he was working out. But as he settles onto his cot for meditation, Red seems oblivious to the fact that the window next to him is slightly ajar. Or maybe he knows he can’t reach for it without giving the game away.

Frank pretends not to notice.

He heads out before Rina leaves for work the next morning. Walks past Red pretending to sleep and drives away from the apartment. When his car’s engine is sufficiently masked by traffic and distance, Frank parks, backtracks on foot. Swerves into an alley, hops on a dumpster, scales a rickety fire escape, and plants himself on the roof with a perfect view of his building in the distance.

Frank doesn’t have to wait long for movement. For Red to creep up from the fire escape and start into what looks like a dance routine. Frank watches him crouch, bend, and flow, weight shifting between his three remaining limbs. He’s up there for over an hour before the work catches up with him, and he collapses onto his back in the cold. Sweat gleaming in the pale sunshine. Face pale, chest heaving from the exertion. He slams his fist into the cement with what looks like frustration and pain and whole bunch of other shit.

Frank drops his gaze. He closes his eyes, opens them; keeps reliving that rude awakening in the hospital after the carousel. A nurse with deer-in-the-headlight eyes. “Take me home, take me home...” but there’s no home, not without Maria and Lisa and Frank Jr. And as Frank drops a fist onto the rooftop ledge, it strikes him that he isn’t alone in that feeling. More than that, their reactions are pretty much the same. Red isn’t throwing himself a pity party; he’s preparing for war.

Next run for provisions Frank does is a little more direct. Red’s bulking up, trying to make weight? He’s gonna need carbs, protein, anything to build mass. Frank starts gradually increasing their stores in the kitchen, substantiating the meals Rina drops off with shakes and bars that Red doesn’t question, just guzzles them back like the bottomless pit he is.
Observation gives Frank patience; proximity gives him opportunity. Running recon on Red comes with so many fringe benefits. He figures out how to mask his sidelong glances. Starts measuring how close he can get before the kid gets wise to his presence. Figures out the sorts of things that disorient Red or distract him: when the washer runs, when one of the neighbours cranks his music, when traffic’s bad, the kid’s perception gets a little jumbled. Can’t track footsteps or heartbeats. He forgets that he’s being watched and Frank catches glimpses of him engaging in some one-legged ballet across the apartment.

He gives Red a few days with long stretches to spar on the roof. One day the kid even brings out his sticks, those damn Billy clubs, the ones he wields as accurately as Frank handles bullets. Must have grabbed those from the hideaway in his apartment. “The hell are you doing, Red?” Frank asks quietly, testing Red’s ears. If the kid can hear, he doesn’t react. He’s too busy whipping those clubs against the rooftop, catching ’em when they fly back towards his hands.

Frank takes notes. Copious notes. Fills up an entire notebook to prepare until Red’s moving on one foot better than two, and that’s when Frank’s patience disappears. Goes up in flames like so much gasoline. And he finally heads home.

Rina’s out; Frank checks to be sure. Nothing’s gonna happen tonight if she isn’t.

The apartment is dark, still. Cut with strange shadows now that Frank’s cleaned house. A chilly breeze comes in through the open bathroom window.

Frank pours himself a cup of coffee in a Styrofoam cup. Can’t risk giving the kid a weapon, but he wants a cup of coffee before shit goes sideways. He steps outside, takes his place at the rail, stretching out so that his legs are in the way if Red tries to go back inside. Which Red doesn’t. The kid sits and glowers, looking more comical than menacing with his frostbitten cheeks and chapped lips. Hands folded against his chest to keep from getting cold. Those clubs of his are probably hidden under his arms. Shoulders bulky under his jacket from all the new muscle he’s been putting on. Those pants he’s wearing, they’re new. At least Frank’s never seen them before. Jet black and skin-tight and stitched up in places. Sweats would have done just fine for this. Why the kid thought he needed to get dressed up special for a fight is beyond Frank.

That Red doesn’t get up is unnerving too. He looking for an invitation? Frank stares at the coffee in his cup, rifling through the words he’s chosen one last time before speaking. He took his time with this. Measured what he’s about to say against what he knows about Red, what he’s come to learn from watching him.

“I was gonna let her go,” he says. “The Doc. She did what I said at the animal hospital. Didn’t know it at the time, but I knew it when she showed up with the Hand.”

Red shuffles uncomfortably against the wall. He’s biting on his lip so hard, his skin’s gone white. His right leg tenses under the thin fabric of his black pants. “Stop, Frank.”

Frank gets back to regarding his coffee, drinks a bit, not wanting any of it to go to waste. Like hell he’s gonna stop. Kid put himself back together for a reason. Frank isn’t going to let that go to waste. “I said I choose to kill people, but I don’t choose who needs killing. They decide that for themselves. And Sato was a lot of things, but being mourned ain’t one of them no matter how good a job she did on your leg.”

Red says nothing. Frank finishes his coffee. He twists the Styrofoam cup he’s using in his
hands before crumpling it and chucking it to the trash heap below. “Killed her for you, see?” He looks at Red through the corner of his eye, every other part of him pretending he’s not really looking. That he isn’t ready for this. “She died for you, Red. She died ‘cuz of you.”

He doesn’t even see it coming. Spent all that time learning, memorizing, figuring out the kid’s weak spots, his sometimes literal blind spots, and Frank still finds himself thrown through the bathroom window. Glass stabs into his back, his shoulders, his scalp; blood runs hot down his spine and spatters on the floor. He looks up to find a silhouette standing in the broken window frame. No horns, no face, nothing but darkness, but Frank knows that stance, knows that shadow. It’s the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen come out to play.

“Fucking finally,” Frank says, unpeeling himself from the floor. “Let’s go, choirboy.”

The Devil obiges him.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Most of this chapter came together during my Punisher marathon on Saturday. I was worried the show would conflict with the way I’ve depicted Frank here, but it turns out the biggest challenge was keeping Matt’s voice consistent. I kept editing his narration for Frank-isms that had snuck their way into his chapter.

I keep thinking I have this story blocked out, and then I go and write a chapter, and the break comes before I get to the stopping point I had planned. I suppose this means you’re stuck with me for a little longer than I planned, Readers. I hope you don’t mind. I also hope you like this installment. It went from being infuriating to one of my favourites. The writing process on this one teetered constantly between love and war.

I was so sure this chapter would be called “Issues.” I had the track picked out (check out the cover by Walk Off The Earth!), had the lyrics jotted down, but then I heard this song, and oh, God, this song. Everything about it fit so damn well. That bassline, those lyrics. I hope you agree.

Readers, dear Readers, thank you for your support and encouragement, especially after last chapter. I felt awful for having kept people waiting, but I’m pleased to have hammered this chapter out so quickly. A happy Thanksgiving to my neighbours to the south! Please, enjoy!

“Guess I’m contagious. It’d be safest if you ran.
Fuck, that’s what they all just end up doing in the end…
Take my arm, break it in half….
Take my head and kick it in.
Break some bread for all my sins.
Say something. Do it soon. It’s too quiet in this room.
I need noise.
I need the buzz of a saw.
I need the crack of a whip.
I need some blood in the cut.”

~K.Flacy, “Blood in the Cut”

This isn’t the fight he was looking for. Frank’s absence presented the perfect opportunity to
don the black suit again, to go on patrol. Investigate those sirens that have been haunting him night after night, the ones he can finally chase.

But damn, this fight’ll do. Matt’s knuckles are singing from throwing Frank through the window. Clubs hang cool and ready at his sides. His biceps itch, eager for more. Anger warms him against the cold better than his jacket ever could. The world on fire burns hot and red and hungry inside his mind’s eye, sparking with every crunch of glass, with Frank’s groans. The Punisher’s heartbeat is an invitation, and it would be rude to walk away, to not give him what he wants, what he deserves.

Matt hops into a crouch inside the Frank-sized hole through the window. He’s careful to avoid the hunks of broken glass and splintered wood still decorating the frame. Carefuller still to lower himself slowly into the ring, to give Frank a good look at who he’s dealing with. There’s no hint of surprise in Frank’s respiration, but that doesn’t mean anything. He wanted a fight and now he’s getting one. Matt intends to let him know that was a bad idea.

He gives Frank the first few swings, testing out his balance, but then one club makes it into the fray, then the other, and before too long he’s landing blows of his own. Across Frank’s face twice, to Frank’s stomach once, straight up and under Frank’s ribs. That hit’s enough to get the Punisher off him, and Matt drops, rolls, comes up behind, and starts in again with everything he’s got.

Shoving Frank into the bathroom wall seems to send the room up in flames. Sparks fly with every strike. Frank lands a couple hits on his shoulders and to his stomach, but the blows land on Matt like fire. He barely feels them. Fire can’t burn a devil; fire makes a devil stronger.

He grabs Frank by the shoulders and throws him again. God only knows where he finds the momentum on one leg, but Matt gets Frank into the opposite wall. Blood and sweat spatter against the hardwood from Frank’s fingertips. He cracks his knuckles and yells on his way back for more.

Christ, he’s fast. It’s easy to forget with Frank being as big as he is. Matt’s edge goes straight out the window along with one of his clubs when Frank smashes through his defences. The other club gets kicked into the tub. Matt ends up on his knee in a chokehold, broken leg slung to the side. Instinctively, he pulls at his broken limb, trying to protect it; Frank doesn’t give the leg a second thought. His heartbeat is wild and raging, geared up and ready for war, but not once does he press the obvious advantage.

Matt kicks his good leg out from under him, twisting, and then lets his body weight do the rest. Frank’s ready for a lot of things but apparently, not that. Not the added weight from training. Slamming into the floor makes Matt’s head spin; his perception dulls. The bathroom goes from world-on-fire to a billowing cloud of smoke. He rolls out of the way of Frank’s foot stomping down towards him.

He hops back onto his good leg with Frank reaching for him. Matt drops again, onto his left knee this time, a manoeuvre that’s met with an unexpected reaction on Frank’s part: familiarity. Expectation. Hell, there’s a flicker of amusement the next time he grunts into action. Fuck, Frank knows: he’s been watching.

Matt rolls through the doorway into the living area and is back on his feet just in time for round two. Let Frank watch; he’s still got a few surprises. His arms never fall from a defensive position as Frank fights him back, back, back into the desk. Matt falls – hard. The police scanner slides off the tables and crashes against the floor. He swings one hand away from his face, nabs the lamp from the desktop, and swings for Frank’s head.
He’s caught before impact. Frank twists the lamp out of Matt’s grasp, but his tiny victory is short-lived. Matt starts throwing punches: at Frank’s shoulders to drive him back, then two to his face, one for either cheek.

Frank spits out a wad of blood. “Stop doing that.”

“What?” Matt hits him again. “This?”

Frank grabs him by the neck and shoves him onto the desk. Matt hears the joints creak as he flails, fighting for purchase. “Stop twisting your leg like that. Gonna blow out your knee.”

Matt digs an elbow into Frank’s arm until he’s released. He rises back to his full height, stunned to find that Frank lets him. That Frank even takes a step back from him before assuming a fighting stance.

For a moment, Matt’s rage clears, revealing a steady burn in his right thigh, a warning that he’s overdoing it. But then the rage comes back, stronger and harder, because Frank doesn’t get to make that call. He doesn’t get to know that. It isn’t his leg, it isn’t his injury, it isn’t his call. “I don’t need help kicking your ass.”

“Need all the help you can get to not kick yours in the process. Don’t make this easy for me, Red.”

Matt drops one of his shoulders. “I won’t.” He dives into Frank’s waist and brings them both to the floor.

The sound of impact gets lost in ensuing tangle of punches and blocks, swipes and jabs. They’ve got their hands twisted in the front of each other’s shirts, holding each other in the fight, as if they’ve got somewhere else they’d rather be. As if there’s anyone else they’d rather be with, anyone else they’d rather be fighting. Frank tries to knock him to the right; Matt won’t budge. His left leg screams as it twists under his weight, but he refuses to give Frank any ground.

Frank claws more deeply into Matt’s shirt, fingers stabbing at Matt’s heart. He pulls them close, so close that the vibrations of his voice are nails running over Matt’s face and neck. “Don’t you mess up that fucking leg, or I swear –”

“You swear, what? Frank?”

One sharp tug. Matt pitches forward, forehead smashing into Frank’s, then he’s slammed over to his right.

He gets back up only for Frank to throw him down again. Blood spatters out of his mouth across the hardwood, and Matt careens through a series of useless sensory cues. The smell of sweat, cold wafting in from the busted window. Pain everywhere. He dips right on instinct, thinking he can dodge a blow; unfortunately, the swing is a ruse. Frank throws another punch from the opposite direction. There’s a sharp snap of a blow, a spark of more than fire through his skull, and Matt’s perception cuts out.

A series of kicks catch him by surprise, and without time to focus, Matt flounders back to consciousness. He tumbles forward, out of Frank’s reach, trying to orient himself. Frank grabs him by the ankle and yanks him back. Matt twists, refusing to go easy. The move helps him break free, and using his back for leverage, he kicks Frank twice: once in the chin and once in the chest.

Then he’s moving, crawling. Hands scrambling around the edges of the desk, falling onto the
cool, busted metal of the police scanner. Matt hops back onto his foot. He digs his hip against the desk for balance. His hands are still on that scanner, lifting; shoulders straining from the weight. He throws it towards Frank’s footsteps. The damn thing misses – mostly. More of Frank’s skin snaps. He yells, stumbling back from the impact. The scent of his blood is fresh and sweet on the air.

“Really, Red?”

“You talking or fighting?” Matt snarls.

Fighting, evidently. Frank’s back on him in an instant. Grappling, choking, barring, locking. Matt’s thoughts fall silent; his body works on autopilot, slipping this way, twisting that. Frank isn’t the only one who’s been watching: Matt knows the bastard’s respiration, the way his muscles pull under his skin. He would know Frank in a warzone, in grief, in this apartment or across the city or anywhere the hell else the bastard wanted to challenge him.

Block, chop, swing, crouch, jab. Frank gets him by the scruff of the neck and puts his face into the desk once, but before he can manage a second, Matt punches him in the windpipe, then he punches Frank so hard across the face that the apartment shakes.

Frank yells, his words thick and wet with blood, as he slams Matt across the face. Matt hits the desk. The top cracks from the impact. Or maybe that was a rib. He’s seeing having a hard time breathing. Frank grabs a handful of his hair and drags his head up to listen. Punisher’s bloody lips smack against his ear. “Quit. Twisting. Your Only. Good. Knee.”

He grabs Matt under the arm, looking to drag him back up, but Matt refuses. He goes to the floor instead, taking some of the weight off his right leg by balancing on his left. He hooks an arm behind Frank’s knee and pulls, jumping back up as Frank hits the floor. Then in one swift movement, he drops again and drives his left knee into Frank’s chest.

Shockwaves rattle through his broken limb; Matt lets out a cry. But this is it. This is the end. He can hear it in Frank’s heart, in the way the bastard stops dead. He can’t do shit in this position. Not without risking the leg he cares so damn much about.

The surprise is audible in Frank’s respiration. Matt plays through the pain, through the nausea, asking, “What are you gonna do now, Frank? Huh?” Punisher doesn’t budge. He breathes steadily through his bloody nose, fury written into every detail coming off his body. Every twitch of his muscles, every ragged breath he takes.

Matt gives him no sign of the final blow, not with how quickly he winds up for it. He swings hard and fast and sure into Frank’s temple.

Not fast enough, though.

Frank snatches him by the wrist. Twists his arm hard in the socket. Matt grits his teeth, refusing to give Frank the satisfaction of a scream. He gets his good leg under him and pulls away, hard, but not before Frank digs his fingers into a pressure point. There’s a sharp sting. Matt recoils, his left leg screaming and right arm feeling freshly broken from how Frank’s touched him.

He tries to shake off he sensation as he backs away, but whatever nerves Frank’s aggravated don’t let up.

“Told you,” Frank says, rising. He spits out another mouthful of blood. “Don’t you fuck up that leg.”
Matt hits the desk. His right arm swings, burns, and throws off his balance. He breathes through the phantom chains across his chest and the sting of ropes against his back. His head is full to bursting with blood, muffling the wretched blows of their heartbeats. Stick’s voice natters in his head with all manner of insults, of promises. *This fight is fucking over and he’s got you now and what do you think the Punisher’s victory dance is gonna be? Chain you up? Knock you out? You think you’re gonna be crawling across rooftops or chase after sirens now, shithead?*

His thoughts cut out suddenly; his blood runs cold. The sirens. The city. *His* city. He has to protect his city.

Dad’s voice comes through loud and clear: *Get up, Matty. Work to do.*

As his fists clench, his arm throbs, his leg screams, Matt’s senses constrict to a fine point. No distance, no depth, no space between. Frank’s respiration blends with his into a bloody, brutal scribble. A blaze at the heart of the apartment. Their heartbeats smash together, wild horses the two of them. Sound slashes and collides, but it’s in a rhythm that Matt recognizes, a rhythm that matches him, fits him. No longer discordant. His heart’s playing the same song as Frank’s.

He sets his jaw, lips unrolling across his bloody teeth. Then his head goes low, his shoulders go high, and his fists come up.

Frank’s heart hammers away because *he sees it.* Sees what’s coming out from under Matt’s skin, and that geared up heart of his hits a pace Matt’s never heard before. “Come on, Red,” he says. “Come on, come on, come on…”

They go at each other, and Matt doesn’t bother with blocking. He sidesteps a little, lunges through Frank’s offence. And he starts throwing punches. His right arm throbs from Frank’s move with his pressure points. It feels like it’s breaking anew with every punch. But he lays into Frank with everything he’s got left in his working left and burning right: for Sato, for Grotto, for Hell’s Kitchen; for the friends he’s lost and the leg he’s broken and the arm that burns through every punch; for everything he has done and everything he has failed to do.

Matt unleashes his overcut with a yell, brings Frank to his knees. But he’s still upright, so Matt hits him again. He’s content to hear Frank slamming into the floor, to hear Frank’s face dragging, bloody and swollen, on the hardwood. Matt winds up for one more punch. He waits for Frank to get up, and when that doesn’t happen fast enough, he helps: grabbing Frank by the collar of his shirt and pulling him into position.

His final punch brings the whole apartment down around them. His knuckles sing. Frank hits the floor, unconscious. The walls crumble and ceiling collapses, and the fire, at long last, goes out.

Matt staggers back towards the desk. He takes a seat on the edge, shaking. From adrenaline and cold and nausea and *pain.* So much pain. But throughout all that, the cataclysmic din of what he’s feeling, of what he’s hearing, of his heartbeat and Frank’s heartbeat – separate rhythms again, at last – Matt finds something. A quiet, dark something that’s as close to peace as he’s ever been.

The guilt comes quickly. Matt recognizes the pull on his insides, their rise to heaven suddenly weighted and falling down, down. He eases off the edge of the desk and drops to his knees, groaning from the impact that he makes no effort to slow. He crawls forward, stopping only when he reaches Frank’s side. Still shaking, Matt brings his bloody left hand moves to Frank’s shoulder, which he holds for a long time.
Happy reading!
Light Me Up

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I was saving this track for a later chapter, but then this one patch of dialogue happened and I knew there was no other place for this song to go. “Light Me Up” has been with me from the beginning of this story, and I’m so happy I finally got to use it as a chapter title.

This chapter took me a while. I wasn’t quite sure how to communicate the emotional fallout from the last installment, and while I am very proud of the first section in this chapter, I played around with the rest of it. My planned ending was originally a cliffhanger; I did away with that to preserve the overall tone and give you wonderful readers a breather. More excitement coming up in the next chapter!

Readers, Dear Readers, I could not have done this without you. Thank you for your unwavering support, your wonderful insights, your time and your patience. You’re all near and dear to me. Thank you. Please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And you don’t hold back, so I won’t hold back.
And you don’t look back, so I won’t look back.”

~Ingrid Michaelson, “Light Me Up”

Skin’s tight. Skull feels thick. Having trouble getting his eyes open, and when he does, everything is blurry. Smudged like a finger painting. Room’s quiet, so Frank gives himself a minute, then tries sitting up.

Blanket on his chest. He pushes it down, stopping briefly to take stock of the bandages on his left wrist, on his right hand, across his upper chest and back where the window got him. Steri-strips hold together the worst of his lacerations. He glances over his shoulder to find – Jesus, he’s on his mattress. Kid beats the ever-living shit out of him, tends to his wounds, and then puts him to bed. All on one broken leg and another that he better stop twisting.

“Red?” but the sound won’t come out. Frank’s throat is too dry. He draws his legs and starts to stand. He doesn’t make it more than halfway before his knees give out and his head spins and thank goodness the wall doesn’t move ‘cuz otherwise he’d be back on the damn bed. A useless lump in Rina’s quilt, a glass of water and Aspirin placed nearby – Jesus, Red, really? He do this for all the shitbags he beats up in alleyways, too? It’s like the kid’s never won a fucking fight before.
Irritation gives Frank enough stability to get up. The air’s heavy with warmth. Radiator’s been turned up to combat the winter wafting in from the bathroom. Sounds like the shower’s running too. Mist plumes out from under the bathroom door, intercut with light and shadow. Red’s scuffling around inside. Better not be bleeding to death.

Frank grabs a shirt, tugging it overhead slowly thanks to the swelling in his joints, the aching in his limbs. He takes the quilt and, on his way across the room, tosses it back onto Red’s cot. He gets to the bathroom without falling. Doesn’t bother knocking; the kid knows he’s up and around. He lets himself in to cold, to mist, to snow, to sparks. Walls stained a murky yellow from the city light reflecting off an overcast sky. Frank’s a little lost in the mix of sensation. He focuses on the shit he can see: glass fragments and wood splinters swept into a corner, the window frame torn to shit. Four jagged sides cutting harsh against the empty parking lot and darkened buildings. Snowflakes bluster on the breeze, sparking red and yellow and white against the dull, light-polluted sky. Frank’s struck by the sudden urge to sniff for smoke, for char. From where he’s standing the city looks like it’s on fire.

He moves slowly into Red’s orbit, taking a good look at the kid. The firelight from the window brings out the bruises around Red’s eyes and cheeks, the abraded skin on his neck. He’s still standing on his right leg, so he must not have twisted that knee out. Much. He shakes a little on one leg. The look on his face says that he isn’t feeling too pretty, but him not feeling pretty isn’t unusual. Could be anything that’s got him looking the way he does.

Frank doesn’t say anything. He takes the duct tape and starts making strips. Red stretches the garbage bag across the open window and holds it there. Frank starts taping the edges down.

Snow billows around them, glinting like shrapnel in the light. Frank keeps expecting heat from the look of it, but the chill cuts satisfyingly into his swollen features. He glances at Red, watches as the kid’s eyes close with relief too. They made a mess of each other on a night perfect for icing bruises.

Frank rises back to his full height, needing to get away. “Look, what I said –“


But it’s not. They’re still in this until it’s understood that - “It wasn’t your fault.”

“Frank –“

“You wanna blame someone, you blame me. You wanna hate someone? You hate-“

“I don’t! I don’t…hate you, Frank.”

Frank damn near snaps. He doesn’t buy that shit for a second. But one look at the kid stops him. God damn, Red’s not lying. That tone of his voice, his slouched shoulders, his defeated stance. He won the fight and still loses, because he can’t bring himself to hate a guy who’s truly worth hating. A guy who broke his leg and killed his doctor; a guy who put him through hell. How does he do it? Nobody’s that good. Nobody.

Red’s catching snowflakes on his cheeks, his lashes, his hair. They melt when they hit his bruises, flashes of white vanishing into the ruddy red of injury. His fingers play against the edges of the garbage bag, the expression on his face shifting as he drifts. Away from Frank, out of the Bronx, to that place that Frank saw when they were fighting. Only this time nothing comes out to replace him. The kid’s just gone.
Frank reaches, touching the kid’s shoulder. Gets shirked off for the trouble, so he tries again, this time to the back of the kid’s neck. Red shifts back; Frank gives a little, but he doesn’t let go. He rubs his hand up, down, letting the short bristles of Red’s hair trickle under his palm. Red halts. Puts his hand on Frank’s shoulder as if to push away but doesn’t. The life returns to his eyes. He comes back to the trashed apartment. Back to the snow and light and fire.

“I don’t hate you,” he says again, quieter this time but no less serious.

Frank lowers his voice to match. He speaks so soft the snowflakes don’t melt as they breeze past. “Don’t go hating yourself neither. We made a deal: you do what you do, I do what I do.”

Red’s lips curl ever-so-slightly. “I should have stopped you.”

“I wasn’t gonna let you. That’s on me too, Red. This whole fucking thing, it’s on me. You put that shit where it belongs tonight. Stop trying to take it back. Hm?” He rubs at the back of the kid’s neck again. Red lowers his eyes, closes them a little, retreating. Frank tugs him back into the conversation. “All this shit. It’s on me.”

Red shakes his head softly. His eyes drift back and forth like he’s reading a book only he can see, trying to find the sweet spot between the lines where this goes back to being his fault. “That’s not –”

“*It’s on me.*” Frank loosens his grip. Lets his fingers smooth over the nape of the Red’s neck till the kid hangs his head. Having him looking away makes the next part easier. Frank leans in, holding his gaze over the slope of the kid’s scalp. He puts his voice down to a whisper. “You’re a good kid, Red. You put that shit where it belongs: you put it on me. It’s on me. I got you, Red. I got you.”

And with that, Frank retracts his one hand. He goes in with the other from the front this time, ruffling the kid’s hair. Red’s reaction time is way down, or maybe he doesn’t want to react. Doesn’t wanna run or hide or even fight. Doesn’t wanna dignify that shit with a response. No matter the reason, Frank goes to step back, only to find that Red’s hand hasn’t left his shoulder. The kid’s grip is loose enough that he could pull away, but Frank can’t bring himself to do it. The lightness of the touch, the seeming expectation that he will leave — *everybody always leaves Matthew*, has Frank standing his ground.

He hooks an arm around, puts his hand on the nape of Red’s neck again. Gets the kid balanced against him, gets himself balanced against the kid, and stands there for a bit, looking out the window at the world on fire.

Red breaks the quiet. His whisper is warm on Frank’s bruised cheek. “Don’t ever do that again.”

There’s so much shit floating between them, so many disagreements, that Frank has to ask, “Don’t do what?”

“What you did. To Sato. Why you…” Red’s voice gives out. He swallows, hard, his face quivering, but he doesn’t retreat from the conversation. “Don’t ever do that again.”

Frank’s trigger finger taps at his side. He heaves a sigh that carries his revulsion, his rage, right out with it. He’s tired. His head hurts. And Red…Jesus, the shit the devil thinks he’ll do. Ain’t gonna change a thing. They both know damn well there’s no never again for the what and why surrounding Sato’s death.
No use in saying that shit out loud though. The way Red hangs his head means that he gets it without being told. Frank wonders what gives it away: his heart, his respiration, the reflexive tap of his trigger finger – *one batch, two batch*. Whatever it is, Frank doesn’t have to say a word. Red’s honouring his code by saying never again; Frank sure as fuck is gonna honour his.

He gives in to the ringing in his ears, the throbbing in his temples, that steady throb of gray matter inside his skull. Watches the snowflakes spark on the breeze, the smoke and fire of the overcast sky and yellow light. Looks familiar. The world burns long after the battle ends, but eventually the flames go out. The night goes dark. And the ones that make it, they pick up and move on to the next fight.

They get the rest of the window covered in silence. Cold still creeps in, but there ain’t nothing to do till morning. Frank turns the shower off. Expects to find Red cleaning up the piles of busted window off the floor but the kid’s gone. Slipped out while Frank’s back was turned. He’s sitting on the cot when Frank emerges, bent over his knees like the weight of the world might finally be wearing him out. He has the bottle of Aspirin in one hand, two tabs in the other. He tosses back the meds dry and throws the bottle to Frank.

Frank shakes the bottle in thanks, following Red’s lead. He takes the pills, puts the bottle back on the nightstand. “Your dressings need changing.” It’s a statement, not a question. Frank’s already grabbing the kit before Red responds, and he’d still be grabbing the kit regardless of what came out of the kid’s mouth. As it stands, Red just nods, and pretty soon they’re settling into the old routine. Red sits with his back against the wall, left leg stretched out in front of him while his right folds under the window sill. Frank drags over his chair and hunkers down over the casted limb.

After tugging on a pair of gloves, Frank rips open the Velcro, slips his arm in, and carefully lift Red’s broken leg out of the cast. The bandage is soaked with sweat; some blood and discharge peek through the layers of dressings. The skin underneath is mottled purple, green, and yellow, but for all the inflammation and irritation, the incisions are clean. Pink and glossy. Healthy.

He grabs a pair of scissors, catches Red’s nod in his periphery while explaining himself: “These sutures are about ready to come out.” They’re so in sync that everything seems out of order, but Frank understands. He does: he gets it. And Red does too, even as his breathing stutters, as his eyes drift towards the wall and his lips purse together.

Frank starts clipping stitches; the snipped threads slip out. The laceration stretches in their wake. Skin’s tougher than it looks. Breaks so damn easily one minute, holds fast the next.

A wash of saline, a layer of antibacterial ointment, and a wrap of fresh bandages, all conducted under cover of soft breathing. Frank slips Red’s leg back into the cast but stops the kid from closing the Velcro straps. “Put some ice on it,” Frank says, grabbing a fresh bag of cold packs from the kit. He cracks one, drapes it over Red’s left leg; he cracks another, puts it up to Red’s face. He cracks the third, reaches, and Red’s already putting his right leg down without any back-sass or bitching. Frank puts the cold pack onto the kid’s right knee, darting his eyes away from Red’s face – the grateful blink and slight sigh - to the shadow he casts on the wall.

He starts running at the mouth: “You’re still trying to pivot like you got two feet on the ground. Gotta move your damn foot more. Keep your ankle and knee in line with your toes.”

“Hard to punch and balance with one foot off the ground,” Red notes.

“Then bring ’em down to your level. Seemed to do just fine with your left knee.”
“Seemed to do just fine on one foot.”

Yeah, sure: “With someone reminding you to watch your form every couple hits.”

“Should’ve spent less time worrying about me-“

“Not this again. This ‘you didn’t have to do that’ bullshit. Pretty fucking clear that yes, I had to do that.”

The kid continues: “- and more time worrying about getting your ass kicked.”

That smirk. That fucking smirk. Pulling at the corners of his smart fucking mouth even as his lips tremble, his eyes glisten. Red is really, really trying. More playing through the pain from the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.

Frank scoffs, shakes his head, watching the gleam in Red’s eyes grow the longer he looks away. “The hell is this you’re wearing? You get this from your place with those clubs of yours?” Red doesn’t answer; Frank scoffs. Of all the secrets for him to keep. Especially now. “Been through the ringer before tonight.”

“Yeah.”

There’s a long row of stitches on the abdomen that match up perfectly with the hooked scar on Red’s waist. “Jesus, don’t tell me you wore this fightin’.”

“I wasn’t gonna.”

“Self-preservation really doesn’t mean shit to you, does it?”

“Conventional body armour would have slowed me down.”


“Keeps me going,” Red says darkly, tiredly.

The best Frank can manage in response is a scoff and, “You bleedin’ anywhere else?”

“No,” Red replies. He blinks tiredly from behind the cold pack on his cheek before offering it to Frank. “You could use this too.”

“Got some bags in the freezer I can use.” He gets up, snaps off the gloves. Pushes his chair back to the desk, heads for his own bed. “You get some sleep.”

“Frank?”

“Hm?”

Red hesitates. Takes his sweet time thinking up what he has to say. Long enough that Frank’s looking at him, this pale form slouched against the wall. Fresh from a fight that he won, but you’d never know it: ice packs on both legs, hands tucked into the pockets of his hoodie, those bruises on his face amplifying the heaviness of his expression. Whatever he wants to say is eating him up more than the order he gave in the bathroom.

So when Red says, “Good night,” Frank doesn’t press, doesn’t pry. He nods in understanding. “Yeah, good night,” he says dismissively and heads to bed, a little surprised to find
that Red doesn’t come out with what he wanted to say in the first place. Frank doesn’t blame him though. Would be weird, all things considered: Red saying, “Thank you.”

Dawn comes around. Frank brews coffee on autopilot. Comes to his senses with that first sip of joe. He tosses back some Aspirin for the lingering headache and nausea, then gets to work. He hauls the busted police scanner down to the trash. Kid’s Billy is half hidden in a snow drift; Frank retrieves it, powder snow dusting up from under his hands. Ground’s fit for reading tracks.

Frank climbs up the fire escape stairs to look at the window. The plastic swells and loosens with the winter breeze. He sips at his coffee, thinking.

The door to the building opens, slams shut. Red hobbles around the corner. He’s back on one crutch and hating every second of it, wincing every time his red leg wobbles up another step.

He doesn’t say anything, just comes to stand in the same silent consideration of the window. Frank offers him the Billy, which he accepts, grasping it tightly between his hand and the handle of his crutch.

“Frame’s busted on one side,” Frank notes. He nudges Red’s free hand in the direction of the window, letting the kid feel it for himself. “Gonna have to strip the whole thing, re-insulate.”

Red retracts his hand. He’s got an apology written all over his face, but he must know better than to say that shit aloud. “You don’t want to board it up?”

“Be a waste. Means the apartment’s only got one exit.”

“One entrance.”

“Ninjas ain’t gonna use the front door. Fire escape provides too many tactical advantages not to have access. Besides, I board off the fire escape, how are you gonna climb on the roof?”

“Got four other windows, Frank.”

“Four other windows that land you flat on the concrete. Not gonna happen.” Frank tosses back the last of his coffee. “We’ll fix it. Take a couple hours, once we get the pane, then we’ll be back up and running.”

Red gives a slight nod, then his head twitches away from the conversation. Towards the front door to the building. “Rina’s coming.”

“Shit,” Frank says. He runs a hand over his face, tracking bruises, wondering which side is worse. They’re both bad. Red gives just as good with his right as his left. He puts his back to the rail as the soft tread of her boots crosses the pavement. He nudges for Red to do the same; the bruises aren’t much better on his face.

Rina chucks her bag of trash into the pile underneath them. She’s paused for a moment under them, steps back towards the entrance, but then, “Um…good morning?”

Frank turns slightly, keeping his face turned up and away from her. The look on Red’s face – Jesus, Frank could go at him all over again. “Morning, ma’am.”

“Morning, Rina,” Red adds.
“Uh…” Rina moves to get a better look, putting a mittened hand over her brow to block out the sunlight. “I’m sorry but…what happened to your window?”

“Nothing that can’t be fixed,” Frank replies, glancing at the kid.


Frank tries to laugh it off, his mind reeling. Desperate for a plausible story, one that explains the window and how they both look like hammered shit. “Damnedest thing, ma’am. Damnedest thing. Some guy broke into my place last night. Roughed us up a bit. Chucked me clean through the window.”

“Little guy, too,” Red adds.

“How the hell would you know he was little?” Frank demands.

“You’re not the only one who was fighting last night.”

Rina is visibly reeling. She drops her hand from her brow, mouth agape, trying to put together what’s she’s being told. “You were in a fight?”

“It’s been taken care of, ma’am, don’t you worry. My brother and I, we…” Frank clamps a hand on Red’s shoulder, “We gave ‘em hell.”

“You are all right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

For a second, Rina looks about ready to ask more questions, but then her mouth closes. Her lips set themselves into a thin line. She nods once at Frank, once at Matt. Conviction wavering because she’s staring their lie straight in the face. She steps forward, steps back, face pinched against a torrent of questions, accusations, lectures. But she finally says, “Well, good day,” and then departs in a flurry of snowflakes. The door to the building crashes shut behind her.

“She doesn’t believe us,” Frank says knowingly.

Red shakes his head, a slight smile on his face. “No.”

Frank sighs, regarding the bottom of his coffee cup for a time as the cold soothes his bruises. His swirl of thoughts is broken by a laugh from Red.

A small laugh. But a genuine one.

“A guy broke in?”

“Shut up.”

Red’s heart isn’t quite in the banter – yet. “That was the best you could do.”

“You got something better? Didn’t hear you helping out any.”

Red gives on final scoff and then sighs, “She doesn’t deserve this.”
Frank shakes his head, at a loss. “She’s not accepting anymore records neither.”

They spend the rest of the day licking their wounds in relative peace. Red meditates; Frank runs some errands. Tracks down an old window pane and building materials, some groceries and medical supplies. He returns to a flurry of activity in Rina's apartment: her footsteps skittering across her kitchen floor as the smell of home cooking wafts out. All seems wrong without music.

Frank double-times it back to his apartment and finds things are strange there too. Red’s asleep on his cot, his crutch balanced close-by. Cell phone on the table: powered off. The bottle of Aspirin has been swapped out for the T3s, and he’s icing both legs. Got a bag of vegetables nestled in his open cast for the broken leg; a cold pack balanced on his right knee.

Frank sets down his bags. He untangles the quilt so it covers Red’s legs, then goes back to work. He hasn’t even reached the kitchen when Red shifts in his sleep, tangling the blanket all over again.

Happy Reading!

Chapter End Notes

I’ve had, over these many chapters, commenters asking if this fic was going to ship Matt/Frank. I said no, at least not explicitly. This fic would foreground their relationship, but it would remain pretty solidly Gen.

As a Fic-Mas present to those of you looking for something a little extra, though, I wrote a one-shot alternative scene that fits at the first text break in this chapter. It’s smut. Pure, unadulterated smut. And if that’s something you’re into, please enjoy it with my blessing! If it’s not, you lose nothing by dodging this link and enjoying the fic as is. Cheers!

Light Me Up: The Smut Edition
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I think I need to compile a playlist as this fic winds down. I keep finding tracks that speak to the characters, and with only nine (or so) chapters remaining, I won’t be able to fit them all.

I mention that Matt started training with Stick at 12; I may be mistaken about the timeline on this. I lifted a few details from The Punisher for this chapter, specifically about Maria’s Sicilian background, as well as her and Frank cooking. There’s also a line in here that I attribute to Stick, about where he got his name, that's from an earlier ficlet I wrote (“Stick Comes Back” from Just in Case).

Readers, dear Readers, I say this every time, but I would not be here if not for you. Thank you for all your kind support, your time, and your patience. Please enjoy this installment! Cheers!

“I always felt that it was wrong
To lay my world in foreign hands,
…And not so long ago I seem to think
That I had the whole thing figured out
Only to find myself
Trapped at the heart of someone else.
But now I finally see the other side
And just in time before I let it pull me in again.”

~George Ogilvie, “Foreign Hands”

“You wrenched that knee of yours pretty good.”

Matt manages his disappointment at Frank’s observation. He is holding himself together as best he can. “Worth it - getting you beat.”

Frank makes a hum that sounds like a, “Yeah, right,” on both counts – the knee and the beating. He’s too busy hefting the window in the frame for a proper rebuttal, but his quiet stings more. Almost as much as Matt’s right knee the more he tries to help.
He relays a litany of excuses – that he rested it, iced it, medicated it, and somehow the damn thing’s worse today than yesterday. All the while reason plays with a Frank Castle-level of dryness through his head. Swelling can take up to seventy-two hours to reach its peak. He knows this and is still pissed off to find it’s true.

Matt presses a hand against where the window hits the frame, holding it in place as Frank fits screws on a drill. The winter reaps hell on his fingertips; it intensifies rather than soothing the heat in his knee. Frank can’t budge him out of the way fast enough. Matt braces himself against the fire escape rail and aggressively accepts the pain in the lamest, most desperate meditation he’s ever performed.

The sound of a window pane sliding open and shut draws him back to reality. Frank gives a small huff of approval. “Good as new.”

“Needs a frame,” Matt notes. He senses Frank nodding, but the longer he goes without saying anything, the more Matt notices everything that isn’t being said. All those things he used to ignore or rebuke ringing crystal clear in the diminishing space between them.

He forces his right leg to straighten. Unpeels his frozen hands from the rail. Makes himself look ready to work.

Frank throws the window open and then stands there, waiting.

Matt tries to wait too, but ultimately, he gives-in before his knee can. He slips into the bathroom; Frank closes the window behind him.

Snow insulates the building. The sounds of the city are denser, deeper. They spread out from their source and come to Matt obscured. Footsteps bleed together; traffic congeals into a paste. Frank’s heartbeat drums against the new windowpane while Matt’s own crashes in his ears. Sirens and screeches arrive blunted, barely registering even with focus.

Matt closes his eyes and breathes, but his mind won’t slow. Thoughts work to fill the quiet, quicken the stillness, to give him mobility when he has none. The dull thud of a hammer against the outer wall is the last straw. He gives in, at last, to the flurry of mental detours plaguing him. God, how long has it been? Since he got here, since he stopped counting the days? There’s a stretch before Sato’s death where he just…he doesn’t know. And he’s spent so much time fighting since – in his head, in his heart, in real life, that he’s lost track. Of everything, it seems, not just time. His anger’s a memory. Sato’s death is a dull ache rather than a stab of fury. And Frank is…Frank is…

Matt grabs the windowsill and sits up. Refocusing. Pushing himself through that sputter of words – Frank is, Frank is – and the impossible certainty that accompanies them to the world outside the apartment. Elektra, who feels worlds away. The Hand, who seem to be a lifetime ago. The city’s gone quiet, and without the police scanner, he’s got nothing. No news about Hell’s Kitchen. Home. Lantom and Karen and Foggy and damn it, Foggy.

Matt’s heart sinks. He reaches for his phone and listens for the umpteenth time to the notification that he has one new message. Easy to ignore while preparing for battle, but now he has nothing, no one, no excuse. He toes the ledge, hoping his fingers will make the decision for him. They don’t. Matt’s left listening to the white fuzz of the phone line, the automated voice asking if he’s still there before relaying instructions for how he can listen to the message.

He deserves it. Whatever Foggy left on his voicemail: he’s earned it and then some. So why can’t he bring himself to hit play? He wallows in what feels like cowardice – what is cowardice.
Running away from Foggy, avoiding his responsibility, that’s the very definition of cowardice. Especially if it feels okay, if it feels right.

The hammering stops. The bathroom window flies open. Matt drops the phone from his ear. He listens as Frank steps inside, kicking snow off his boots and dropping his tools and blowing into his hands against the cold. The window slams shut behind him.

“Are you still there?” Matt’s phone asks him again.

Frank strides past, shedding his coat along the way. His heartbeat elevates in surprise though his voice never achieves a tone beyond disinterested. “Calling someone, Red?”

Matt shakes his head. He ends the call, puts his phone on the table, and sinks back down onto the cot, twisting onto his side as he does. “No.” He pre-empts Frank’s next statement with, “I’m fine. I’m tired.”

It’s the truth. Not the whole truth, but it’s as close as he cares to get. Frank’s heartbeat settles back into a fixed march, suspicious but willing to let that suspicion stand. He must be tired too. He walks to the kitchen. Pops open a cupboard, the fridge. His heart is a ticking clock. One beat in front of another. One breath and then another. Matt catches himself falling into step with the rhythm. Certainty unfolds through him, aching but comforting. Like a strained muscle finally relaxing, an infection draining. Hurt cresting before relief.

Gradually, he’s aware of having unraveled at some point. Of having rolled onto his back. Of the surest, steadiest heartbeat fortifying the walls of the apartment, building a stronghold and keeping the watch. As much reassurance as a rallying cry for Matt, who finally sinks into the deep meditative dark.

Hands on his wrists: Matthew. Through his hair, over his cheeks: Matty. In his face, up close and scolding: Matt!

Matt jerks awake, sitting up. He scrubs a hand over his face, his neck, his chest; he kicks the ice pack off his knee, swings his legs off the side of the cot, and nabs his crutch. His right knee stings as he rises, but he can’t rest. He won’t rest. He needs to move.

The apartment’s gotten thick. Air’s taken on weight. More than the heat blasting from the radiator. Matt breathes hard through a heady blanket of basil, tomato, eggplant; salt and steam and starch. Pots boiling, pans sizzling. He ignores the way the room spins, the way he seems to float through an atmosphere where every breath feels like a first bite.

Frank’s voice emerges from the haze. “You awake, Red?”

He thinks so, “Yeah.”

“You hungry?”

Matt’s stomach replies before he can. He puts a hand over his waist, muffling the sound. “I could eat.” His brain finally catches up with the situation. “You cooked?”

“Didn’t have much of a choice. You weren’t gonna do it. And Rina’s already mad about the fight. Not gonna poke that bear by feeding you MREs or protein bars.”

Matt suppresses a smile. Give Frank the Irish mob or an army of ninjas, it’s a party. Pit him against a tiny, timid neighbour and panic ensues. “She wouldn’t have to know.”
Frank scoffs. “She would with you being the shitty liar you are.”

“I’m not going to tell her.”

No response save for a dish clattering onto the counter. Frank loads it up with ingredients and marches it out of the kitchen. Matt finally catches up with the situation just as a plate is shoved into his hand. “You take this over to her. She’ll take it from you.”

“I don’t think she’s going to take it from either of us.”

“She’ll take it from you.” And then, because he’s not so sure anymore, “Tell her I made too much.”

Matt takes a deep breath of what Frank’s made, marveling a little at the smell of it. Balanced flavors, perfectly seasoned. That Frank cooks doesn’t surprise him so much as Frank cooking well. “Smells delicious.”

“Pasta alla Norma,” Frank replies, as if the name means anything to Matt. “Don’t you bring that plate back.”

Matt steadies himself on his one leg and gets to stepping.

Without music, Rina’s apartment is a quiet shuffle of footsteps and a heartbeat like hummingbird wings. The footsteps stop short when Matt knocks. The heartbeat gets faster.

Matt recognizes the sounds all too well. He knocks again. “Rina?” One of her feet slides in the direction of the door but otherwise she stays rooted to the spot. Matt tries, reaching out to her as best he can. “It’s uh…Frank’s brother. It’s Matt.” His name sounds strange coming from his own mouth. “It’s Red.” Still strange, but slightly less so. “Frank made dinner tonight. Too much. He…I…we were wondering if you might want some. I’ll just…leave it here. By the door.”

He puts the plate on the floor, lingering for a moment after doing so to bear witness to Rina’s thrumming heartbeat. “Have a good night, Rina,” he tells her, then hobbles back to the apartment. He puts his back against the door as he closes it, giving his knee a break while he listens.

“She take it?” Frank asks.

Matt raises a hand and shushes him. A chain lock unlatches behind him. The deadbolt clicks. Rina’s terrified heartbeat spills onto the landing, nearly drowning out the sound of her picking up the plate and drawing it into her apartment.

Her door slams shut. The locks snap back into place.

“Yeah,” Matt tells Frank, “She took it.”

Later, when they’re digging at their own plates, Matt hears the tentative scratch of a needle on vinyl. Debussy begins playing quietly through the apartment building.

“I think that means she likes it,” Matt notes.
Frank releases a sigh, a non-verbal, “She better,” but not, Matt suspects, because of the effort put into the meal. A home cooked dinner is Frank’s Hail Mary apology, his final blaze of glory. If this didn’t work, nothing would.

The music is turned up a little louder. Matt takes another bite. “Who taught you to cook?”

“Mom started. Didn’t really care about it then. Maria, though…her family’s Sicilian. No getting anywhere with her without knowing my way around the kitchen. Had to learn fast.” Frank works his way through a few more bites before adding, “She used to make this. One of those heirloom recipes, see. Came over with her grandmother from Sicily.”

Warmth pulses through Matt. He carries the plate in his lap with greater care. “It’s good.”

Frank tosses his shoulders, his heart a somber tick in his chest. A countdown clock resigned to its fate. “Hers was better.” He stabs at his plate, shovels through a few more bites. “What about you, Red? You cook?”

Matt smirks. “Yeah, I cook. No heirloom recipes, but I can put together a meal.”

“Your dad teach you that?”

“Dad taught me how to open cans and follow instructions.” Hands ghost along his face from the memory. Matt tries his damnedest not to send them scattering. “I had to teach myself if I wanted anything different.”

“Must have wanted something different a lot, once your senses started compensating.”

Heat bursts against the insides of his cheeks. Matt tilts his head away, chewing the bite he’s taken longer than he has to because his stomach’s churning. That sense of relief unfurls through him anew, and he finally has a word for it. Nice. It’s nice, damn it. It’s nice to be understood. “Not at first,” Matt says. “House rules: I ate what we had. But the older I got, the stronger my senses got. I started training. I could taste everything that had happened to my food. Chemicals, if it had been processed. Dirt and bacteria from being handled. I had to learn how to cook for myself.”

“Training taught you that?”

Matt nods. “Yeah, the guy who trained me, first day I met him –” he shouldn’t be talking about this. Frank doesn’t need to know. He doesn’t want to know. But his pulse taps expectantly, the story already having begun. Matt’s gone too far to stop. “He took me out for ice cream. Helped me focus, showed me all the things I hadn’t tasted before.”

“How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

Frank shifts in his seat, fingers flicking along the edges of his plate. He’s utterly unreadable until, “The hell kind of asshole is this guy.”

The metrics of Frank’s morality walk a razor’s edge between horrifying and comical. Matt’s riding the same blade, split down the middle between guilt and that certainty. A jab about killing Sato festers in his throat. Frank and Stick aren’t the same kind of asshole when it comes to kids, but there’s no doubt in his mind they would agree about murdering Sato.

Probably for the same reason.

“This asshole got a name?” Frank asks.
Matt’s mouth hooks itself into a smirk. “Stick.”

Frank grumbles. “Don’t give me that shit.”
“No, that’s his name: Stick.”

Another beat passes between them, one Matt recognizes as an opportunity to change his answer. He holds his expression, impassive, until Frank finally accepts that he isn’t being messed with. “Jesus, Murdock. Used to think your life was like a comic book? You’re life is weirder than a fucking comic book.” He stabs at his dinner a little more, his heartbeat wild and erratic. The fork hits the plate. “Stick? Really? The hell kind of a name is that?”


Frank picks his fork back up suddenly and goes back to his meal, the joke not so funny anymore. The joke not a joke anymore. “The hell kind of asshole,” he says and leaves it at that. Whatever else he thinks about Stick is expressed through the furious tapping of silverware stabbing into porcelain. Matt hears each one accompanied by a silent but certain, “BANG.”

Nighttime comes; the city calls to him. Matt reaches into his bag and makes a fist around his thin black shirt, unleashing a cloud of sweat and bruises into the air. His knee throbs in warning. There’ll be none of that tonight.

He pushes the suit down into the backpack and rises, shaking, onto his throbbing knee. The muscle burns steadily. Matt grips the wall, easing some of the weight off the joint. It’s not enough. He sits back down on the cot, rubbing at his thigh to ease the strain. One more night, he decides. Meditation, ice, rest, and tomorrow he’ll be ready. Matt lies down, a balling up a hoodie under his knee to elevate it. He falls asleep so quickly his dreams blend seamlessly with reality. His phone asks him if he’s still there, but Matt can’t reach it, not with his wrists pinned and Dad’s hands on his face and Foggy shouting at him, “Matt!”

His leg is stiffer when he wakes. Matt takes Aspirin dry and forces himself to stretch, to get the joint warm and working. He can’t spend another twenty-four hours cooped up inside.

He meditates badly throughout the day. Reads when he can’t focus anymore, but the words blend together on the page. The walls close in; Matt braces his arms against them to give himself some room to breathe. He forces every muscle in his leg to relax, to rest, but the tension just grows.

Dusk comes. His right leg burns under his sweats. Matt doesn’t bother changing. He makes the short, painful hobble to the fire escape and plants himself on the landing, furious with himself. The bitter bite of metal on his thighs is penance for getting himself stuck.

He tracks through the soundscape. Voices swim and cascade around him. He draws them in, one by one, hanging onto them, as if hearing them, bearing witness, will stop the bad from happening.

The bathroom window springs open. Matt’s focus snaps back, coming to revolve around Frank’s boots hitting the metal landing. His near-silent huff as he reaches down, bruises pulling. The scent of coffee hits Matt square in the face. He takes the mug that’s being offered, wrapping his hands around it. “Thanks.”

Frank says nothing. He goes to stand by the rail, nursing his own cup of coffee. Matt tunes him out easily now; there’s no walls to contain him. Nothing about his respiration or form or smell
that speaks through the natter of the Bronx. Matt sinks into the haze, free floating through footsteps, tires on pavement, laughter; hustle and bustle.

Glass cracks. Matt perks up. He follows the sound down a side street, through an alley. Voices ebb through a newly shattered window.

He puts the coffee down. Grabs the rail of the fire escape.

“What is it, Red?”

“A fight.” He parses through the voices. “Man and a woman.”

“Where?”

“Close.” Matt pulls himself upright. His knee throbs the whole way and stubbornly refuses to straighten. He’s cussing himself out when a cry pierces his ears. The dull smack of knuckles against flesh fills the air followed by a threat.

He can’t check the assailant’s heartbeat for deception, and he doesn’t have to. The tone tells Matt everything. “He’s gonna kill her.” He doesn’t bother with his crutch, just hops towards the stairs.

Frank tosses back the rest of his coffee. Shit. Matt moves. He grabs Frank by the arm. Frank tears himself away. Matt tries catching him again and fails miserably, his knee issuing a warning shot as he twists too much. His leg flashes hot while the rest of him goes cold. The shakes hit him hard and fast. Another shout hits his ears from the fight. The surrounding area is quiet. Where are the cops? Has nobody called them yet? And even if they have, they aren't going to make it in time.

He braces himself against the rail of the fire escape, gets his leg in line, and tries. He tries so damn hard. His leg can burn and his head can pound and everyone he’s ever loved can rage against him that this is a stupid idea but he has to do something.

His knee makes it to the edge of the stairs and no further. Matt feels it wavering, on the verge of giving out. He clings to the fire escape rail, praying with every breath that the fight stops. That the cops get called. That he makes it down the stairs. Nothing happens. He still holding fast to the rail when Frank emerges from the apartment: pistol in one hand, a phone in the other. He shoves the former into the front of his jeans, the latter into Matt’s sternum on his way past. Matt almost drops it trying to nab Frank again.

“You call me up,” Frank says, tossing on his hood. He takes the stairs two at a time. “Let me know when I’m getting close. Which direction am I headed?”

Matt slams a hand into the fire escape rail. “Don’t do this, Frank.”

“Where’m I goin’, Red?”

“Frank!”

Combat boots hit the parking lot. “Clock’s ticking,” Frank reminds him casually.

The fight drags on in the distance. Furniture crashes. Matt lets out a small yell as he slams his back into the outer wall of the building. Brick scrapes against his back as his knee gives out under him and he sinks into a sitting position. Then, heaven help him, he makes the sign of the cross and points, “That way.”
Happy reading!
Once he gets Frank headed in the right direction, Matt hangs up, cutting short the Punisher’s barbs about not calling the police. He knows the cops won’t get there in time. And since they’re overstating the obvious, he’s also aware the state of New York doesn’t have any laws against tracking cell signals. Thanks, Frank.
The weight of his phone against his chest hurts. Matt draws more sound his way, using the pressure to help slow his breathing, to sharpen his senses, to hold onto the sounds of the fight. To keep the weakening cries from falling silent. As if him hearing is any help at all besides him letting someone else know that a person’s life is in danger.

And, of course, that someone just had to be Frank Castle.

He isn’t going to do it. He won’t. Or so Matt tells himself, listening to Frank’s boots crunch across the snow-covered pavement. They take the steps outside of the residence two at a time and then kick the door off its hinges.

Dear God, what has he done?

The fight stops; the whimpering of the victim doesn’t. “What the-?” the assailant asks, right before a gunshot explodes through the night.

A scream follows: the assailant. He drops to the floor with a thud.

Matt springs up against the wall, heart in his throat. He can still hear grunting. Frank’s shot was non-lethal. Shoulder, maybe. Or kneecap. Incapacitating but hardly life-threatening, at least not in the short-term. Matt forces himself to quiet, fixing every ounce of his hearing on the grunts and groans. This guy is going to have to pry himself out of Matt’s clutches if he wants to die tonight no matter how many bullets Frank decides to unload.

Frank’s footsteps thump across the floor in a parody of his heartbeat, and then everything goes quiet, so fantastically quiet. Matt’s fixed himself too hard; he pulls back, collecting sounds anew, but even the victim’s keening seems out of reach. The Bronx is white noise, snowy static; the fire escape rattles in time with Matt’s tremors.

An apology forms in his mouth, heavy on his tongue. Sharp against his chapped lips. Matt doesn’t dare speak it aloud. He digs his knuckles into the grate of the landing. Every breath he draws feels stronger and more controlled, a calm descending upon him that seems incongruous with the present save for the certainty that the quiet will end and no one will have died tonight.

He lances his fingers through the fire escape. The cold metal bites at his palms, stinging more brightly and more sharply than the wait.

Another of the assailant’s screams rips through the night. The world on fire inside Matt goes wild, satisfied and righteous, having known all along that scream was coming. Blood squelches; a bone snaps. The now-downed assailant retches and whimpers.

Frank snarls, “You say it, you piece of shit. You say it right now.”

One more scream, followed by, “I’m alive! I’M ALIVE!”

Frank throws a punch, cutting short another scream. “Fucking right you’re alive.”

Matt untangles his fingers from the fire escape landing. Frostbite tingles all the way to his bones. “Right,” he whispers, wrapping his arms around his stomach as his conviction retreats and the hollowness inside him blooms anew. There are questions he could ask, but they all seem so small, so insignificant, and the answers are out there in the unintelligible grumble of Frank’s voice as he speaks to the victim, in his footsteps away from the chaos.

Frank covers his tracks and keeps out of sight on his way back to the apartment. Sirens are
audible in his wake; nothing like gunshots to get the boys in blue moving. Sure as hell aren’t gonna move for a shitbag beating the crap out of his girlfriend.

He takes a scenic route, purposefully weaving a path the cops won’t be able to follow. Giving himself time to process. Leaving the asshole alive isn’t sitting right. An itch too deep to scratch.

For now.

Just for now. He’ll go back. Put a bullet where it belongs. One bullet, one kill. Tomorrow. Tomorrow, baby. I’ll do it tomorrow.

Fuck.

Frank stops. Shoves a hand under his hood to scrub at his head, the other tightening around his weapon. They’ll be loading up the ambulances. Shot to the kneecap’ll keep the guy in a hospital bed for a while, but eventually, he’ll be out. And warnings don’t stick with fuckers like him even if they are borne on the back of a bullet. That’s why they have to die. Waste of time, energy, and ammo marching back to do what should’ve been done a long fucking time ago. Should’ve killed the bastard. Gotta kill them before they get to do what they do the first time, every time.

And he will. He fucking will. The Devil isn’t going to be looming over his shoulder forever. Only a matter of time till he’s back to business as usual.

Frank comes around the building from the front and takes the fire escape stairs two at a time. Red’s sitting where Frank left him, wearing an expression neither proud or sorry for himself. Best Frank could hope for, honestly. Better indifferent than splitting hairs about why this one lives and Sato dies. They’ve been through all that, though Frank’s more than happy to swing a couple of punches in reminder. He walks past, dips into the apartment to disarm, and doesn’t re-emerge till he’s got a fresh cup of coffee in hand.

He comes to lean over the rail, basking in the cold. Sky’s a series of pinholes in a black wall while the moon’s a slab of cold silver. The silence stands, thank Christ. Guess that’s one perk of playing by the Devil’s rules: he keeps his fucking mouth shut.

For a while, at least. Red can’t keep that tongue of his from wagging forever. “Was that really so hard?”

Frank almost chokes. He forces the coffee down his throat, lips pursing so hard they end up clamped between his teeth. He snaps, “You’re God damn right it was. Waste of time. Waste of fucking time.”

“You don’t have to kill.”

“Bullshit – I didn’t have a choice.”

“You always –“

“Jesus Christ, Red, I am playing by your precious rules right now, all right?! Making sure that leg doesn’t get busted, you tryin’ to kick my ass every ten seconds over the sanctity of life.” Frank hits his mug against the fire escape rail. “I kill, you give me shit. I don’t kill, you give me shit. Make up your fucking mind.”

Kid’s quiet and not in a pouty way. An impassive way. He isn’t bothering to argue; doesn’t think he has to. Frank reeks in the grating silence, pulse rising. Red can’t mean that shit, not two days
out of a fight over him killing. “I let one piece of shit get away by cracking one off his kneecap—"

“You didn’t kill those ninjas.”

“Ninjas come back from the dead. I’m just gonna have to kill them again.”

Red scoffs. “That isn’t why you let them live.”

Frank knows where Red is going with this and puts a stop to it quick. “I killed the doc, Red, don’t you forget that.”

But Red isn’t talking about Sato. Like any lawyer, he’s picking up only on the evidence that fits his argument. “And my leg isn’t the only reason you let that guy live tonight.”

“You’re damn right. That guy out there? Couple of weeks from now, when you’re back in Hell’s Kitchen, he’ll be out of the hospital. And I’m gonna march over and finish him.”

Red scoffs, shaking his head. “And if he isn’t beating his girlfriend anymore?”

“Shouldn’t’ve done it the first time,” Frank growls. “Guys like that – they don’t change.”

“You’ve changed.”

“Situation’s changed. I meant what I said: only reason he’s still alive is so he can die another day. And the day you’re gone, so is he. Nice going away present for you. Little celebration.” Waste of ammo, really, but the deed’s as done as it’s getting tonight. Frank lets it go. Lets it all go. Fuck Red and his fucking goodness. A good man would have done what it takes regardless, not pandered to some self-righteous idealist.

Frank downs the rest of the coffee, letting it scald him all the way into his stomach. His blood’s already boiling. “I’ll take him out before I get back to Fisk,” he says, double-tapping his mug against the rail. One batch, two batch. “When I get back to Fisk…”

Damn, he hasn’t thought about Fisk in a long time. Been too caught up with Red and related Devil drama. Speaking of: “Guess I’ve got your girl and her ninjas to deal with too.”

“I’ll deal with Elektra,” Red says. Promises, really, the way he shifts against the wall and sets his mouth all serious. “And with you.”

“Can’t even let me enjoy you being gone?”

First genuine smile he’s seen on Red’s face in weeks: the menace in his grin is unmistakeable. His eyes blaze in the streetlamp light. “You’re not gonna get rid of me that easy.”

Frank scoffs. “Yeah, ain’t that the fucking truth.”

The smile recedes, but it’s still audible as Red says, “Thank you.”

“The hell you thanking me for? It’s that asshole out there should be thanking me.” He wraps his hands around his empty mug, capturing the last of the heat through his bruised knuckles. Grinds swirl at the bottom of the cup. The quiet nags, begging to be broken.

Frank glances over at his shoulder at Red just to check. The kid’s still there. For now.
Red’s leg is still in recovery the next day. Frank can tell from how antsy he is. The apartment buzzes with the kid’s eagerness; in between bouts of meditation, he’s hobbling onto the fire escape, tumbling around the roof, slamming his fists into the punching bag. Puts Frank so much on edge that the second evening rolls around, he grabs a gun and the car keys. He throws a coat at the dumbass’s head.

The dumbass catches it. “Where are we going?”

“Out.”

“Where?”

“A place.”

“Frank.”

“Just put that fucking coat on and come,” Frank growls. “Bring your phone, too.”

He leaves the apartment before Red can grill him some more. By the time he’s halfway down the stairs, the kid’s trailing behind him on one crutch.

Frank drives, parks. Gives the kid a couple of directions before hopping out of the vehicle. He pulls himself up onto the first landing of the fire escape and is working on getting the stairs lowered when Red appears on the railing like a fucking spider monkey. He’s already broken a sweat, but the streetlight nocks against the red of his sunglasses. He smiles sharply through the shadows. Then he’s climbing, jumping, favouring his arms over his legs, and God damn, he wants to race? Frank’ll give him a fucking race.

The devil’s finesse is there in the movements, but Red’s noisier than usual, struggling through the motions. Frank catches up with him on the third landing and paces himself. He can hear the wet slap of the kid’s palms on the cold rails. The breakneck pace is quickly waning into simply breakneck the further they get from the ground.

Frank grabs him by the arm when his hand slips off the next rail. Yanks him over the rail and drops him rather unceremoniously onto the landing. The kid grunts in frustration. He assumes he’s been sabotaged instead of saved. Good. Frank puts as much distance between him and the devil as he can, but hell if they don’t end up on the roof at almost the same moment.

Without his crutch, Red drops onto the ledge of the rooftop and sits, heaving air in and out of his lungs. He’s pale. Even his cheeks are blanched, cutting a harsh line against his beard. But it doesn’t take long for his head to start turning, for him to cast his ears out to the city. A web of tics emerge across his face. His mouth breaks open slightly. His breathing slows right down. Jesus, he looks like he’s hearing the city for the first time.

Frank keeps from talking. He lets Red have the moment. The cityscape is a snarl beneath them, growing brighter under the darkening sky. Lights and streets, traffic and pedestrians, the apartment building in the distance. No signs of trouble from where he’s standing, but he’s not listening to breathing two blocks away or whatever Red’s doing.

“What do you hear?” he asks suddenly.

Red comes back to the rooftop. “Nothing.”

“Yet,” Frank adds.
“Yet,” Red agrees.

Franks puts a foot up on the edge of the rooftop and looks down at the street below. “So how does this work? You just stand around on a rooftop till you hear something?”

“Stand around on several rooftops, actually.”

“What do you listen for?”

“Raised voices, mainly,” Red says, giving a small shrug, “Screaming, crying-”

“Sirens?” Frank offers cynically.

Red shakes his head, averts the lens of his glasses towards the street. “By then it’s usually too late.”

Used to be shit like that was gratifying; it sounded a lot like the devil admitting defeat. But the swell of satisfaction is gone, replaced with a sense of solidarity, and all Frank mutters is, “Ain’t that the truth.” He sighs. “Then, what? You follow the sound? Jump off the damn rooftop into a fight?”

That smirk. “The fight is rarely on the rooftop.”

Frank looks down at the sheer drop to the street below. He makes out aged sills, window frames and boxes, grates, wires; nothing that would hold a grown man’s weight or slow their descent. The rest of their surroundings are equally unhelpful. “How the hell’d you get down?”

“However I can,” Red says with a shrug.

“You don’t plan it out?”

Another shrug. Jesus Christ, of course he doesn’t plan it out. “If I know the building, I can. If I don’t, I figure it out on the way down.”

“How would you do it from here?”

Red rises like he’s gonna demonstrate, and maybe that’s his intention, but thankfully, he keeps his foot flat on the roof and settles for pointing. “The streetlamps are a problem, not to mention pedestrians. I’d want to come down by the alley. Use the Billy to take out the light buzzing overhead. After I unhooked it from the doorknob-” he gestures towards the rooftop enclosure, “-or the ledge. Or whatever I used to keep from splattering on the pavement.”

“What if you didn’t have your club?”

The kid cracks into a real smile. His cheeks and ears turn the same colour as his suit. Whatever is about to come out of his mouth probably sounds stupid as all hell, and Red’s revelling in the mere thought of it. “Then I hope those windowsills aren’t as loose as they sound.”

Frank keeps his eyes levelled on the street. “And if I threw you off as you are right now?”

Red lets out a laugh. “Better have a good plan for yourself then, because I’m taking you with me.”

He sits back down on the ledge again, hands tucked into his sleeves like a kid. A chuckle –
soft, warm even – emerges a second later. Frank bristles, smirking a little himself. “What, you’d like that? You’d like dragging my ass down with you?”

“No, no.” Red wraps his arms around his waist, tucking the sleeves together. Frank can hear him rubbing his hands together against the cold, an action he’s trying to hide from how quietly he’s working. “It’s…that’s how I learned, actually. The guy who trained me, Stick—“

“Fuck.” Frank kicks his foot off the ledge of the building.

Red lets out another God damn laugh. “-he’d throw me off. Let me figure out how I was gonna get down.”

“You gotta be fucking kidding me.” The bullet in his head burns; Frank swats at it, unable to get the image of a kid, a fucking orphan, taking a dive off a roof. And Red sitting there chuckling doesn’t make it any better. Sounds like a favourite memory of his instead of the nightmare it was.

Eventually, only the city is talking. The sounds tick like a clock towards the inevitable. Red raises a brow and breaks the quiet. “I’m guessing you’re not going to let me go running across the rooftops or jumping into fights.”

“Wouldn’t call what you do right now running,” Frank declares, “but no.”


Oh, Christ Jesus: “Don’t say it. Don’t you fucking—“

That. Fucking. Smirk. “I was gonna say don’t fall. Long way down for someone who—“

Frank gives Red a shove right to the middle of his chest, livid when he finds that the kid doesn’t retaliate. Instead, he lays into Frank’s touch, leaning back over the sidewalk. The gleam on the lens of his sunglasses is snuffed out, and his expression goes dark, serious. Knowing. Frank glances down to Red’s hands, but not even they betray his calm. They stay clutched in his lap, ready to spring if the shove gets any harder. One would go to the wall for the handhold, and the other, Frank has no doubt, would wrap itself round him, hold the fuck on, and never let go.

The nerve of the fucking kid. The will in him. Frank almost knocks him off the roof on principle, just to see how far he can push, to see how far Red’ll let him take this. But he already has the answer: Red’s gonna take this all this way to the ground, and then he’s gonna get back up and take more. And he’s dragging Frank off this roof with him when he goes because he wants the same God damn thing in return.

Frank lets him go exactly as he is, hanging over the street. He steps back and Red follows until he’s sitting upright. “Stay on the line,” Frank mutters, heading towards the fire escape.

He doesn’t need the kid’s help to find the break-in. The pawn shop isn’t far from the nest. Four guys, none of them particularly well-armed. Bunch of petty thieves. Frank sleepwalks through the raid. No rush of blood to his head, no hard hit of adrenaline. He kicks in the door despite the idiots having unlocked it. One batch, two batch, penny and dime: he takes out a few kneecaps, a shoulder, and then, because this no-killing bullshit is boring, Frank knocks a bullet off the side of the last guy’s head for a challenge. Leaves a long gash in the guy’s scalp before the round lodges itself in a far wall.
One of the idiots has their wallet on them. Frank reads off the guy’s name and address before chucking the damn thing into its owner’s pained face. “See you later,” he says, then leaves without making any of them scream.

He whips out his phone as he’s walking away. Calls Red, who answers quick enough. Thank Christ. The tomorrow, tomorrow, baby cycles on an endless loop inside his head. “You’re gonna develop a reputation, you keep using a gun.”

“You got somewhere I need to be, Red?” He doesn’t want the night to be over. Even half-assing this shit is better than sitting at home with his thumb up his ass doing nothing. No way Red isn’t thinking the same, especially not as he tells Frank about a nearby purse-snatcher.

Frank hangs up. Holsters his gun. He’ll do the next one with his fists, and he’ll make sure Red hears it.

Happy reading!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I’m sorry for the delay between updates! This chapter was nothing but trouble from the very beginning. A mess of indecision the whole way through. I was on rewrite #187 when I circled back to the song, “Portions for Foxes.” Like “Near to You,” this song kept coming to me as a possible source of inspiration, but unlike “Near to You,” it wasn’t the lyrics that fixed in my brain. It was the melody. The four or five chords that make up the first two lines of this quotation were, improbably, the help I needed to get this chapter done. Thankfully, the lyrics worked nicely too. “The Worst Way” by Donovan Woods is also perfect. Please check out that song as well.

Speaking of songs, I am putting together a playlist for this story. If that’s something that interests you, I’ll be posting the Spotify link everywhere I can, lol.

Also, continuing with the theme of Beguile Learns Basic Writing Skills Well After She Should Have, the lesson I learned from this chapter is that sometimes a scene that you are saving for later is best used sooner and can even save you from writer’s block. I feel like I’m going to need to produce a whole volume of debriefing material after this fic finishes.

Readers, dear Readers: you are my sun and my moon and I couldn’t do this without any of you. Thank you so much for your patience and kind support. Hope you enjoy!

Cheers!

“’Cuz you’re just damage control  
For a walking corpse - like me.  
Like you.  
‘Cuz we’ll all be portions for foxes.  
Yeah, we’ll all be portions for foxes.”

~Rilo Kiley, “Portions for Foxes”

Returning home in the dark becomes their new normal. Frank heads straight for the kitchen, shedding his coat along the way, on a mission for ice. Red grabs the kit if necessary, and they meet in the washroom to clean up. Frank’s shirt comes off; he splashes water over his head and neck. Plugs the sink, fills it with water, and pops in the ice to soak his knuckles. Meantime, Red goes to work, suturing and dressing the remnants of a night well-spent.

The first couple times, they don’t say a damn thing, but eventually there’s a night when Frank
gets cut up more than usual. Some asshole hacks up his arms with a knife, and even though Frank’s counting on the silence, Red just has to go off at the mouth about it. He sensed that knife from three blocks away: how the hell didn’t Frank see it coming? Frank tells him where he can shove that shit. And then that’s a norm too. The volley of barbs, teasing. Red pointing out something he could have done better; Frank reminding Red about catching a bullet with his face or that beam he took to the leg on purpose.

Frank has no idea how many nights it’s been, how many robberies they’ve broken up or fights they’ve stopped or gangs they’ve busted, when Red’s banter suddenly weakens, the beats delayed, like he’s got his mind on other things. Not the streets: his head would be turned further away, towards the window. It’s not the laceration on Frank’s shoulder that’s got him clammed up neither. His eyes are resting softly on the far wall as the makings of a smile undercut his attempts to look serious.

“We make a pretty good team,” Red admits.

Oh, Christ. “Don’t get sweet on me now.”

“Just saying.”

“It’s temporary. Get it? Temporary.” Frank goes to cuff the kid on the side of the head but doesn’t get far. Red catches him quick, just itching for any kind of a scuffle. Frank comes at him with the other hand. He gets a quick jab to the side of the neck for his trouble and is barely fast enough to nab a handful of Red’s hair. He’s looking shaggy again, Red. Been a while since he had it cut.

Frank pushes the kid’s head away, releasing him. “Not gonna be standing around on rooftops forever.” Speaking of: “How’s your leg? You about ready to be putting weight on it?”


“Sounds solid? How does a bone sound solid?”

Another shrug. “It doesn’t grind anymore.”

“Grind?”

“It doesn’t scratch either.”

“Jesus.” Why bother asking? Not like this shit makes any sense. Frank eyes the kid over his shoulder, keeping his curiosity under wraps as best he can. Red’s got his face back on the task at hand, but his eyes are red-rimmed and sunken. His shoulders hang loosely across his spine. Looking at his hands gives an illusion of readiness, but in reality, Red is a million miles away and drifting.

The kid comes back to himself; Frank lowers his gaze, gets back to scrubbing the blood off his neck. “I know a nurse. In Harlem,” Red says, tossing a wad of bloody gauze into the bin. He proceeds to tidy the kit. “I’ll call. See if she can check it for me.”

Water dribbles in long, cold lines down his back. Frank scrubs at the hairs rising on his neck, the freshly shaved bristles needling at the fresh cracks on the sides of his fingers. Red dips behind the slope of his shoulder and breezes past, sending another shiver down his spine, one Frank pushes aside with renewed purpose. “Your girl know about this nurse of yours?”

Red drops onto the cot. “No.”
“Any way for her to find out?”

“Not likely.”

Frank grabs a towel and dries the water running down his back. The chill doesn’t go away. In fact, it bursts into an itch across his shoulders, down his arm, into his trigger finger. He tries to shake it out. Fails. Him being out there might be enough for Red, but it isn’t enough. It’s not enough till they’re dead, till they’re all dead. Temporary. This is temporary.

He slaps the towel back onto the rack. Nabs his shirt off the floor. Makes a point of not looking at the kid on his way out of the bathroom. “Name a time, name a place, I’ll get you there. Sooner you’re back on your feet, sooner I don’t have to play Devil anymore.”

Flopping onto his mattress feels like victory, especially with the silent apartment surrounding him. Frank sighs his way out of awareness, towards the light and warmth of the old kitchen. Unbothered by the question about where the plates were or what Lisa was saying or how Maria looked. He’s coming home, getting back to himself. This whole nightmare with Red is going to be over.

“Frank?”

Not over fast enough. Frank groans. “Not saying shit about shit. Jesus…could’ve asked me anything you wanted thirty seconds ago.” He punches at his pillow and obviously isn’t going to be getting any sleep soon, so he rolls slightly, fixes his sights on the kid. “You wanna know what happens after death? I’ll be happy to give you a peek.”

The kid cracks into a smile. “No, no.” He sighs, long and heavy. “Elektra’s been quiet for a long time.”

The ghost of Red’s hair passes over Frank’s palm. Shaggy again. Been weeks since he had it cut. Rina’s gonna natter about it again. Frank rubs his hand against the blanket. “Biding her time. What’s her next move, you think? She coming to the Bronx? Waiting for you to come back to Hell’s Kitchen?”

“Elektra would plan for both,” Red notes.

Frank hums in assent. She’s a clever girl, Elektra. Probably working a couple angles on Red’s disappearance. “Gonna have to play it pretty safe with you.”

“But not with you.”

“Yeah, well.” Frank figures this is as good a place as any to end the conversation. Not like Red’s saying anything new. He shoves his head into the pillow. “She doesn’t know me as well as she knows you.”

“We should start planning.”

“Planning?” the word sounds wrong even coming from Frank’s mouth in the context of this conversation. Him and the devil, they don’t make plans outside of *when your damn leg gets better*. Also, “Since when do you want to come up with a plan?”

“Since when do you not?”
“Never said I didn’t. But I’m not the guy who likes throwing himself off rooftops.”

“I don’t like throwing myself off rooftops.”

Yeah, fucking right he doesn’t. Frank’s seen that very literal devil-may-care smile cross his face so many times since their first patrol together. Nothing Red loves more than throwing himself into the shit. “The only plan we need right now is the one that’s already in place: she or her ninjas show up, they get one hell of a fight. And that’s if they show up. You want anything more than that, you gotta be back on two feet.” Frank smashes the lumps out of his pillow before shoving his head back into it. “Not going to war with some half-cocked, one-legged dumbass whose only plan is a hope and a prayer, that’s for sure. And those ninjas? We do ’em my way. None of this half-measure bullshit against the zombie army. Clear?”

Red’s small huff is a we’ll see about that in a thin disguise. “Clear.”

“Now,” Frank lays down, “You got any other questions?”

“No.”

“No? Nothing about death or the afterlife that you’re gonna wanna know after I conk out?”

The way Red chuckles – Christ. Frank rolls his eyes, bracing himself for another sad story in the endless saga of tragedies from Red’s life. How’d you learn to fight, Red? This blind guy used to beat the shit out of me with a stick. How can you jump off rooftops without a plan? Because I used to get thrown off them. Why do you care so much about this city? ‘Cuz my dad was shot to death in an alley after I tried to help him be a better man.

Sure enough: “I…I got the answer to that, actually.” Red lifts his legs onto the cot, turning and laying back and distancing himself from the conversation. Frank rolls away too until he’s facing the wall. He catches Red’s words against his back. “Turns out –“ another laugh, dark and forced. The kid doesn’t sound at all like himself, “- turns out there’s nothing.”

Shivers creep down Frank’s spine. He holds himself still. “She said that?”

Seconds ago, he was giving Red shit for being able to hear a broken bone, but now Frank hears him swallow thickly from across the room, hears the small sigh he releases, the creep of his eyes making a sweep of the ceiling in search of heaven. “Yeah.”

“When?”

“After you left my apartment. That night…that night you killed Sato. She woke up.”

Frank lines up another punch at his pillow but changes his mind, opting instead to mold it. “She’ll say anything. Anything to get under your skin.”

“Yeah.”

His action gathers in intensity. “Wants to rattle your cage.”

Dismissive, “Yeah, yeah.”

Frank forces himself to stop. He draws a deep, steadying breath, wondering what the kid hears from him in this moment. What the hell is giving away? What’s Red taking without him even
knowing? He slams his head against the pillow once, twice. The damn thing feels wrong. The whole room feels wrong. He shifts onto his back, shoving his newly sutured shoulder into the floor for the burn. The stitches pull hot towards his shoulder and oddly cold where they intersect with scar tissue from the katana slash across his back.

“She'll say anything,” Frank says, receding from the conversation to the tune of his heartbeat. “You remember who you are, Red. What you stand for. Don’t let her take that away from you.”

Another laugh, lighter this time. “Now who’s getting sweet?”

Frank scoffs. “Not being sweet: I’m statin’ facts.”

Dawn comes creeping, damp and gray. Red’s up and at ‘em. His bed’s disheveled: bedsheet kicked to the floor, quilt wrapped in knots against the wall. Robe out of sight. Probably didn’t sleep a wink last night. Now he’s hobbling around on the roof. His voice carries through the ceiling, muffled but intense. One-sided conversation. He’s on the phone.

Frank puts his back to the sound, his muscles aching and stiff. Blood pounds hard against the scabs on his knuckles. It is too damn early for this shit, whatever this shit is. But the sound of Red’s voice doesn’t let up. He’s unleashing all kinds of hell. Words trickle like shell casings and spatter across the roof. An endless barrage of menacing declarations about the city, its people; the things Red will and won’t do. What he does and does not regret about “that day at the church.”

His law partner – Nelson. Must be: he’s the only other person who knows about that day at the church besides the priest, and no way in hell Red’s raising his voice like that to a man of the cloth. Frank allows himself another groan; no response from the kid above. Must not be listening.

There’s a brief pause in the tirade, but it’s not an opportunity for rebuttal. Hell no: Red’s taking a deep breath before closing arguments, which he delivers like a sharpshooter. He puts the last couple rounds where they’ll really hurt. Then the call ends and Red takes another minute up there on the roof to seethe.

Frank takes that as his cue to get up and put the coffee on. He’s pouring two cups when the bathroom window opens. Red comes in with the winter wind, slamming the window shut before hobbling over to his cot. He rips off his coat in time to accept the cup of coffee Frank hands off on his way into the bathroom.

The kid scalds himself taking a drink, but it’s that kind of morning. “Harlem,” he says, wincing. “Tomorrow night. She’s working at a clinic, but she’ll see me after hours.”

Frank nods, feigning ignorance with disinterest. “That what you were yelling about?” he prods.

Red takes another drink of hot coffee rather than answer. Burning on the outside so he might as well be burning on the inside too. Yep, definitely yelling at Nelson.

That frenetic energy follows Red the whole day. He chomps at the bit, geared up with nowhere to go. His eyes get sallower, shoulders saggier. Frank puts him through paces to wear him out but never once suggests that they take this one off. No way Red’ll listen. Best to just power through, let him burn off the last of his reserves.

Frank drags his squirrelly-ass along on some errands. Red fidgets in the passenger seat while Frank passes notes or speaks in monosyllables. He orders some new ammo, arranges a new
safehouse. Doesn’t trust taking too much of his shit out of storage. Never know when Red try to fuck with his artillery again. Besides, he’s only gonna be in the Bronx for a couple more weeks at most.

Nighttime comes. Different neighbourhood, same action. Red picks up on a couple fights, a break-in. Frank finishes busting up some faces and is wiping the blood off his hands, expecting a call that doesn’t come. Red’s normally punctual about that sort of shit – no rest for the wicked and all that - but time ticks by and the call doesn’t come and fuck, there is no way he isn’t doing something stupid.

Frank double-times it back towards the kid’s location, sighing as the sounds of a fight reach his ears. He rounds the corner to catch a guy that Red’s thrown out of the brawl. Frank snaps the guy’s arm and knocks him out before helping to take care of the rest. One guys is already unconscious, sprawled on the ground with a busted nose and blackening eyes. There are two others on Red, who’s holding his own against them on one God damn leg.

Red goes low, dropping one guy onto his level with a kick to the knee. Frank nabs the remaining assailant and slams his face into the brick wall, then into the dumpster. He lets go and Red takes over, wrapping the guy into a lock that lands them both on the concrete. Frank steps over them to get at Red’s guy, slithering away on the pavement towards a knife that he or one of his friend’s lost in the fight. He swoops in, stomping on the guy’s hand to break it. He picks up the knife, rolls the guy, and puts the blade into his shoulder.

Should go into his neck. Should go into his fucking neck.

Frank rips the knife out. He wraps a fist around the handle and doesn’t stop punching until Red grabs him by the wrist, twists his arm back. The knife clatters onto the pavement. Frank turns and wrenches a hand into the front of Red’s coat, winding up for a punch with one hand while driving his knuckles into Red’s sternum with the other.

Red moves so fast he’s a blur in the dark. Frank matches the kid’s hits with everything he’s got: blow for blow, bruise for bruise. They’re gonna go free, these guys. That’s four more Marias, four more Lisas, four more Frank Jrs. Four more that Frank’s helping go free.

A police siren cuts through the thuds of their punches. Frank pulls back, and he doesn’t have to tell Red to do the same. They slip so freakishly easy to business as usual, to their new normal. A race to the car followed by a winding route to the apartment. Fuming in silence the whole way there. Frank heads to the kitchen for ice; Red grabs the kit. They meet in the bathroom.

Impossible to tell who starts. Sentences weave, accusations overlap. Words hemorrhaging from their mouths like blood from punctured lungs. Frank pushes Red onto the ledge of the bathtub, dodging and bucking Red’s efforts to lay hands on him. Doesn’t stop Red in the slightest. He keeps trying, always fucking trying. “I was doing what’s right,” Frank insists, slipping away when Red tries to grab him.

“Yes, you were! You were doing what’s right!”

Frank grips Red by the chin. The knife to the neck would have been what’s right. “Bullshit.” He winces and jerks away when the kid’s fingers drag against his bloody forehead.

“You’ve got it backwards, Frank!”

He can’t stand for that shit. He pokes and prods; Red grips and blocks. Frank restrains; Red fights. They get their hands all over one another, and when the dust finally settles, Frank grips ice to the bruises he put on Red’s cheek and Red’s applied steri-strips to the cut he put in Frank’s forehead.
The words keep coming, an endless cycle of them, over and over. Frank feels them leaving his lips, hears them spilling out of Red, but they’ve stopped making sense. Everything’s wrong. They never should have let it get this far. Should’ve dumped the kid at Karen’s or left him with Elektra or, hell, Frank goes further back. He should’ve skipped town after burning his house down. Let the ninjas put Red in the ground the same night as his girl.

But what the hell good is that? They’re here, now, right in the shit, and Red’s hand is over his, getting a grip on the ice pack. The heat from the kid’s palm lingers in Frank’s skin no matter how quickly he gets away. He eases back onto his haunches, the bullet in his brain nagging, overwhelming the promises of temporary with tomorrow, baby, tomorrow. Shit, he really believed that once, or at least he never questioned it. That there’d be a tomorrow for his baby girl.

Frank scrubs at his scalp. “I’m tired, Red,” he admits. One look at the kid reveals he’s not the only one. Red’s a mess. Drained out. Slumped on the ledge of the tub with an ice pack against his darkening face. Frank lines his hands up, building a bridge of his arms over his knees. He stares at the tunnel created between his forearms, fists, and thighs towards the floor. “Tired of not being who I am. Not doing what I do.”

“That’s not who you are.”

“Yes, it is.”

“You don’t have to be that way.”

“Yes, I do.”

Red’s next breath flutters a little, an agree to disagree if Frank ever heard one. “I’m tired too,” is all he says, and Frank believes it. Believes that every night Red spends standing on the roof instead of fighting is as bad as every piece of shit Frank lets keep their pulse. They’ve been living lies, the two of them, and there’s nothing more exhausting that pretending to be something you’re not.

Frank tries not to think that, tries not to think about how the last time he felt this time, he was at home with the kids, with Maria.

He stands; Red follows, flopping a little when he moves like he can only get one limb working at a time. Frank nabs the kid before he drops; he rolls his eyes at the small fight he receives for the trouble. Red wastes what little energy he has left trying to get away and has to catch himself just shy of becoming dead weight. Together, they weave an unsteady path towards the cot.

Red slumps down, swaying but sitting. Shit, his eyes give everything away, the way they drift lazily around the room, unfixed and at a loss. Can’t look at him when he’s like this, when he’s struggling and out of his depth and about to get swallowed up. Frank nudges him in the direction of the pillow. “Lay down, Red.”

Miraculously, the kid does as he’s told, shuffling back until he’s laying down. His eyelids are bobbing like two ships taking on water. He pats his head against the pillow a couple of times. Gets comfortable on his back before rolling onto his right side and starting the process over.

Frank puts the quilt over him, up to his shoulders. Is content to leave Red there twitching and shuffling, but the sound is maddening. All this activity, this fighting, and the kid can’t even hold himself upright. “Stop, stop.” Frank puts a hand on his shoulder. Not to restrain, just to…hold there. Remind Red where he ends and the world begins. Give him a limit, draw a line, and let him know nothing’s crossing that till he’s good and ready to fight back.
Red bucks against the touch because of course he does. Nothing he likes better than testing his limit. Never met a force he didn’t rail against; never saw a ledge that didn’t inspire him to leap. Frank doesn’t change tactics. He doesn’t lay another hand on the kid or increase the strength of his grasp. He holds the line. And Red, he adjusts. Gets himself settled under the weight and goes real quiet and soft and still.

Best believe he’d snap up quick if Frank decides not to play nice.

Frank leaves his hand past those first moments of sleep, past Red getting good and out. He eventually drifts back, shaking the kid’s body heat out of his palm on instinct, unsurprised when it stays. The kid’s a stain. Can’t shake that shit out.

He stops suddenly, eyes caught on something dark bleeding out from under Red’s pillow. Ah, fuck, he’s hurt, isn’t he? He isn’t just exhausted; he’s hypovolemic, and he didn’t say shit because he never does. And Frank didn’t notice ‘cuz they were too busy smacking each other around. He puts his hand into the patch of black and breathes a sigh to find its fabric. More silk. He gives a tug and looses it from under the pillow, the garment spilling out over his hands.

Sleeves, collar: it’s a robe. There’s patches on the back, letters. Frank twists it under the moonlight. Lowers it almost immediately. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. He bundles up the robe and puts the damn thing back where he found it. Nearly wakes the kid up doing it; has to put his hand back on Red’s shoulder to tell him it’s fine, it’s fine, go to sleep. Then Frank goes to his chair and takes a seat, rubbing hand hands on the thighs of his jeans to get the shit out of him. As exhausted as Red, if not more.

Happy reading!
Wait For It (Pt. 1)

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

After so many chapters of struggle, I was shocked to find this one came together as quickly as it did! Especially with Matt being such a hot mess of emotion!

I cited this chapter's song lyrics to the singer, not the songwriter, in keeping with my previous chapters.

I did some research on whether an ultrasound can be used to check if a broken bone has healed. Sites suggest that yes, it can; however, if my research is incorrect, I beg pardon with medical professionals out there. In my defence, Claire is canonically a wizard with medical technology.

Speaking of Claire, I have her dating Luke, but I have given very little consideration to the timeline between these series or the events of Luke Cage. I hope this isn’t distracting.

Readers, dear Readers: thank you so, so much for your kind support, your wonderful responses, your engagement. Please enjoy!

“(Wait for it, wait for it, wait for it)
I am the one thing in life I can control
(Wait for it, wait for it, wait for it)
I am inimitable. I am an original.
(Wait for it, wait for it, wait for it)
I am not falling behind or running late.
(Wait for it, wait for it, wait for it)
I am not standing still: I am lying in wait.”

~Leslie Odom Jr., “Wait For It”

The clinic is a work in progress. Matt can smell its having been vacant in the damp concrete. Piercing through the shroud of abandonment, though, is a kind of warmth that comes with labour. This is a place where the hours of operation are a list of suggestions, where the candle gets burnt at every end. Where the resources are limited but everybody knows how to improvise.

Matt comes around to the side door as instructed, slowing once to track sirens a few blocks
over. People are scattering. Chain-link fences rattle. Footsteps smack against the pavement. No sounds of Frank in pursuit. Strange.

Strange.

Burying the feeling sends Matt’s heart into the pavement. He knocks at the door and prays for a quick response. Soft-soled shoes tap against the chipped tile instead; the footrace in the distance plays on Matt’s nerves. He draws himself up tight against the rumble of his own pulse through the asphalt. Things aren’t strange: they’re fine.

The door lets out a weary sigh as it’s opened, or maybe that’s Claire. She sounds tired, but not the kind of tired she was at Metro General, run ragged from disciplinary ER shifts. This is purposeful, meaningful exhaustion. This is the kind of exhaustion she likes.

“Kind of expected you to come climbing in through the window like old times,” she greets him.

Matt gestures to his crutch. “Not really up for much climbing lately.”

“Like that would stop you.”

“Touché.” He’s probably been doing more climbing on one leg than he did on two. “You sound good, Claire.”

“I feel good.” she replies, letting him inside. Matt follows behind her through a store room into an examination room buzzing with old electrical work. The fluorescence and antiseptic mixes into a harsh, sickly green odour, a kind of washed-out teal smell mixed with the aged tile. “You look good too. Aside for the shiner.”

“I feel good.” Well, better. Comparatively speaking. Matt keeps all that to himself. He comes to a stop in the middle of the examine room, parsing through the astringent swirl of chemicals.

Claire helps: “There’s a bed just to your right.”

Matt nods in gratitude. He knew there were beds but not where. The room feels a lot louder than it should with only two people inside. “How long have you been here?”

“Couple weeks.” She grabs a cart. Wheels squeak across the floor towards his bedside. Claire comes to a stop and snaps on a pair of gloves. “Had to rattle a few cages for funding, take on a few volunteers, but we’re open: 8 to 4 officially. Twenty-four hours if we could have it our way.”

Matt gets himself up on the bed completely, stretching out his legs. “Maybe someday.”

“Yeah. Maybe. If only there were a vigilante nurse who could see multiple patients at once.”

“Isn’t that you?”

She laughs. “Nah, I’m human. One who knows my limitations.” Her voice drifts away from his chest, towards his leg. “Nice cast.”

“Thank you.”

“Not exactly subtle, is it?”
“Subtlety’s not really my thing.”

She gives another laugh. Starts undoing the straps on the cast. He lifts out his leg and lays it on the bed. Claire’s heart plods through the next several beats at the sight. “This is going to leave one hell of a scar,” she notes with a sigh.

Matt shrugs. “One more for the collection.”

“Two more.”

Oh, right – the split in the back of his calf from where the beam hit him. Forgot about that.

Claire finishes her cursory examination, lowering his leg back onto the bed. The muscle aches from her touch, but the bone is silent, holding strong under the throb. She flips a switch for the machine on the cart. Portable ultrasound machine. “You said this was a crush injury?”

“Started that way, yeah.”

“Then what?”

“What do you think?”

She releases a breath, unsurprised. They both know this injury has never truly been the ceiling’s fault. She nabs a bottle off the cart and gives it a hard shake, knocking the contents towards the nozzle. “This is gonna feel cold,” Claire warns, alerting Matt’s skin to the sensation. The gel hits him with an icy shock, soothed only by Claire’s hand working it over his shin.

Matt releases his next breath slowly, trying to wrangle his thoughts to order. He keeps circling round certain details of Claire’s touch - her long fingers, her taught knuckles, the smoothness of her palms. Her hands are everything Frank’s aren’t, and it’s unsettling how he searches for points of comparison. How he waits for the heat of Frank’s palms, the prickles of calluses, and how, in their absence, he’s overwrought.

He buries the feeling as Claire presses the ultrasound probe to his leg. The murky swirl of the machine sends soft vibrations through his aching muscle.

Claire stares at the machine, her pulse slightly elevated, hard at work. “Shout out to your surgeon. Whoever it was did a great job.” Her sigh is more impressed than exasperated. “That bone is set perfectly.”

“Well, she had to open it up three times, so –“

She is giving him a look, one that washes over his face like a spray of cold water. Matt beams. Been a while since he got glared at without the threat of homicide.

The probe runs through the gel over the break, scanning. “She open it up three times in the field?”

“Only twice. Third time was in a medical facility.”

His confidence wavers, stomach churning at the thought. The medical facility. Elektra’s hands on the back of his neck. Perfect and cool and thoroughly different from Frank or Claire’s.
If she notices, Claire doesn’t say anything. Too engrossed by what she’s seeing on the monitor. She shuts off the ultrasound with a heavy sigh, pulse a disappointed thrum in her chest. Matt sinks into the gurney; he can’t help himself. The undercurrent of her dismay is too damn strong. He’s dragged right down into the swirling current of what her heartbeat tells him: he isn’t ready. The bone isn’t set. He’s stuck, and he’s tired, and Frank’s tired, and Elektra is out there, and the city – his city – needs him.

Claire rubs a wrist across her forehead. “I know I’m going to regret saying this, but it looks like you can start putting some weight back on it.”

Matt’s body floods with adrenaline. He springs off the bed right then and there. Claire puts hand on his shoulder. “Not your full body weight and not for long periods of time. You really should be working with a physiotherapist, make sure you don’t mess anything up.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Go easy on it or you won’t be. This kind of healing still takes weeks, and you don’t want your surgeon to have to open it up again.”

The excitement dissipates somewhat. “No.” Can’t have his surgeon open up his leg ever again.

Claire switches off her gloves and shuts off the machines, rolling the cart away. Her respiration is still a long, slow crawl, a far cry from the elation he’d detected when he arrived. Matt tries to swallow the hurt at hearing the hollowness in her voice. Claire’s way of distancing herself. “How’d you get here? Do you need a ride?”

“No, I have a ride. Thanks.”

“Didn’t think you and Foggy were on speaking terms.”

“We’re not. Not really. I…” cold sweat prickles between his shoulders. He’s been waiting for this line of questioning since he got off the phone yesterday, but Frank’s not the sort to pry into that kind of thing. Not anymore. Matt accepts the cast when Claire offers it to him and slips his leg back inside. The plush interior pricks his skin, eager and ready to be free. An explanation tumbles out of his mouth. “We had a fight. An argument.”

“An argument.”

Matt tries again: “A disagreement.”

Better. Claire is curious: “About?”

How to describe it? “Defensive manoeuvres.”

“You’re not going to elaborate about that.”

“No.” Foggy’s voicemail was lecture enough.

Claire releases a breath. “I’m seeing someone now. Guy kind of like you. Can do incredible things. Fights for his city, but he doesn’t shut people out.”

Matt hardens himself against what she’s said, letting her words run right off him, but under his skin, the statement teams, brewing. Stewing. Not the statement he expects either. “I didn’t shut
Foggy out of anywhere he wanted to be.”

“You know he worries about you. He’s called me a bunch of times wondering where you are, how you’re doing. That doesn’t sound like somebody who wants to be shut out.”

“Letting Foggy in doesn’t stop him from worrying.”

“No, it shouldn’t. Friends worry about each other. And that worry used to mean something to you.”

Matt grips the edge of the mattress until the tendons strain against the backs of his hands. He twists, dropping his legs down the side, letting the blood settle into his feet. “It means something to me.”

Claire has no doubt. She is resolute. “I believe in what you do, Matt, but you can’t do it alone.”

“What choice do I have?”

He almost asks it. Almost. The words are lined up, on his tongue, ready to spill out if she presses him. And, God, it’s so true, so painfully true, that he wants to know. What the hell choice does he have? All these people saying he shouldn’t be alone, he can’t be alone, no one makes it on their own, but they don’t stay, not with the way he is, or they can’t stay, not with the way they are.

Instead, Matt says, “I can’t do this with him. He wants me to stop. He thinks I should fight legally. He thinks that should be enough.”

“It should be.”

“Yeah, but it isn’t.”

“Maybe someday it will be.”

“But it isn’t. Not yet.” Matt flashes her the makings of a sad smile, trying to bolster the sound of her pulse as she distances herself from him again. “I haven’t turned my back on the hope that it will be better someday, only on the idea that I need to change who I am for that to happen.”

“I’ve told you to change.”

“You’ve never told me to be someone that I’m not.”

“I have told you to be safe. That’s kind of the same thing.”

Matt nods along. Yeah, fair enough. “I have been doing just fine without him.”

Claire regards him steadily; he can feel her gaze hitting him square in the face. She speaks in that tone, the one that wants to provide good, objective counsel but knows different, knows better. “Maybe you have.” She must see him deflate at that, even as her heartbeat refuses to give her away. “But it takes more than stitches and surgery to do what you do. The city that you’re fighting for, it isn’t just an idea. It’s flesh and blood; it’s people. And people are easy to love at a distance. But the ones that know you, that love you – the real you, not the idea of you –“

“The mask isn’t the idea of me.”
She keeps talking, “- they’re the ones that define you. They’re who changes you, for better or worse. You need to remember who you’re fighting for.”

“I can’t keep people around for inspiration. I can’t…” and that really is the end of the sentence – just that: I can’t – but Matt is giving so much of himself away in the conversation, so much of what he can’t articulate. The things that claw and gnash and tear away from the core of him. Claire doesn’t deserve this, dealing with his mopey, pity party bullshit, and Matt can’t stand how the thought comes to him in Frank’s guttural snarl.

He retraces the steps of the conversation. “It isn’t fair.” God, he’s such a child. Of course, it’s not fair. None of it is. Life isn’t fair, and he knows this, but it’s never bothered him quite like this before, not in this context. He has to be more specific. “Foggy, Karen, you –“ Frank, Elektra, Lantom, Dad “- deserve better.”

“You don’t think we believe that too? For you?”

Claire makes it sound like a suggestion, but that makes it worse. “I’m fine,” Matt says.

He hears her nodding, feels that crawl of her jaw through the air on the back of his neck.

“You think my guy should cut me loose? Spare me the pain of losing him?”

Matt beams. His insides are crumbling away, but the thought of someone trying to get rid of Claire? “I don’t think he could if he tried.”

She huffs, smiling appreciatively but sadly. “Could say the same about Foggy.”

Their phone call buzzes away inside of him, trapped in that same festering pocket of everything else he can’t face. Foggy’s voicemail, angry and embittered about Frank taking shots outside of the church, the same voice that answered the phone when Matt called. At the time, the fury spoke the loudest, and Matt matched Foggy’s tone, blow for blow. But sitting in the clinic, Claire’s heartbeat murmuring across the way - the gentle warmth of it – slow footsteps crossing weathered wood, the lone survivor on a storm-battered ship - suddenly it’s the quiet of the phone call that speaks louder. Foggy, on the other line, listening to him, crying faintly under the tirade.

Matt drops off the gurney onto his one good leg. He positions his broke leg under him, easing more and more weight towards the ball of his foot. The floor greets him, solid under foot, then a spark of pain when the muscle realizes what’s happening. He immediately withdraws, but his point of focus is fixed on finally. Finally, he is back on two feet. So what if it hurts: the right thing always hurts. His leg, his heart, Foggy…right things, they hurt.

Right?

“Thank you, Claire,” he says.

Her hand, her bare hand – tender but tough, hard-worked but relieved – comes to rest on his shoulder. Matt holds himself at an angle away from the touch, all the better to absorb Claire, to hold onto her for as long as he can.

She slips away too soon, always too soon. “Take care of yourself.”

He nods to her, forcing a smile he doesn’t feel. His broken leg lowers and touches the floor, sparking his senses fresh with a finally he doesn’t feel either. “You too.”
Matt pretends he’s meeting his ride a block south of the clinic to slip out of Claire’s sight. He perches on a rooftop, shoulders up against the cold. Hands in his pockets, fingers on his right playing across the screen of his phone in anticipation. Frank told him to call, and he will, but not yet.

He takes his time riding the ebbs and flows of Harlem. Foot traffic is light. Cars rumble down the street. Jazz music pulses from an underground club as a bassline doofs and pounds from down the street. A heartbeat passes on the sidewalk below – a man, big guy, broad-shouldered with hands bouncing inside the front pocket of his hoodie. He comes to stand next to the front door of the clinic to wait.

The door rattles as it opens. Matt rises slightly from his hiding place, listening, poised to throw on his hood and hop down if need be. The man’s pulse quickens as Claire steps out. She slams the door, checks the lock, and then her heart is quickening too. Blood rushes to her cheeks or maybe that’s his, Matt’s, as he sinks back down on the rooftop.

He focuses on the music, on the buzz of electricity, on the voices from the line-up outside a club. Still, Matt can’t help overhearing the sound of Claire’s hand being held, of her footsteps being matched. Of the low voice asking, “How’s your friend?” and Claire hesitating, her scarf swishing against her neck as she surveys the rooftops.

“You’re not gonna-“ the man cuts off midsentence as if signalled. “Okay,” he decides, “How are you?”

Claire’s reply consists of holding his hand more tightly and saying, tiredly, “I’m good.”

They fade into the cityscape and Matt lets them, hating himself for not providing Claire with more privacy. All his talk about people deserving better, and here he is eavesdropping on her and her new boyfriend.

He pulls his phone from his pocket and unlocks it, but then he sits, stewing in a wave of indecision. Call Frank. Go back to the Bronx. Or maybe go straight back to Hell’s Kitchen, let him work out rehabilitation on his own. Not like there’s anything tying them together. His proposing a stand against Elektra seemed more realistic before last night. Now, Frank’s debt is more than repaid, and they both have work to do.

The prospect of returning home compels Matt to act. He calls Frank, spares just enough time to relay that he’s finished, then disconnects, dragging the sounds and smells of Harlem close as a balm against his insides.

“Call Foggy,” Matt tells his phone, but he doesn’t get to the first ring before disconnecting. He buries his hands in his pockets, clutching his phone so tight the screen might snap. He hops to his right foot, plants his left on the ground, and presses. The bone holds but not without pain. He is going to need to rebuild the muscle in his calf before he’ll be getting too far.

Frank’s car pulls up outside the clinic. The familiar smell of exhaust wafts across the rooftop. Matt grabs his crutch and is off the roof, tumbling across the lid of the dumpster to land in the alley before he remembers that he doesn’t need it. He lifts himself off the damn thing, reveling in the joy of being free, of being almost his old self again.

Finally.

He goes to put the crutch in the dumpster. Where it belongs really, and definitely where it’s headed when he gets home to Hell’s Kitchen. Seems like a waste to have to lug the damn thing around.
The car rolls up to meet him at the mouth of the alley. The passenger window between him and Frank comes rushing down. “You hit your head on your way off that roof? Haven’t been on that leg in weeks. You’re low weightbearing. At best. You bring that crutch and get your ass in the car.” Frank continues grumbling as the window rolls back up. “Still hopping around on one foot…Jesus…”

Matt draws the crutch away from the lid of the dumpster as Frank commands, but he doesn’t prop himself on it. He puts his left foot on the ground in front of him and half-steps, mostly-hops the five paces to the waiting vehicle. His leg muscle’s screams grow with intensity the whole way, but he makes it and sinks into the passenger seat. He’s greeted by the ticking timebomb of Frank’s heartbeat, the sound of his muscles tensing under his skin, the implicit threat of violence bearing down on him from the driver’s seat.

“And get that smirk off your face,” Frank growls.

No way in hell, Matt thinks, tossing the crutch in the backseat.

Heading across the Harlem Bridge into the Bronx brings some of the chaos inside Matt to settle, at least until Frank takes them off course.

At first, Matt thinks he’s trying to obscure the route back to the apartment, but rolling down the window reveals them entering a different neighbourhood. Industrial. Warehousing. The scene of metal runs heavy from a nearby scrapyard.

“Where are we going?” Matt asks.

Frank doesn’t answer, not even as he pulls into a gravel lot and parks the car. He shoves Matt’s crutch at him before leaving the vehicle.

Matt joins him in the lot, listening. Errant snowflakes spark against his skin, carried on the breeze from a metal roof, ringing softly in the cold. The building before them is long, stretching back into a dark infinity. Broken glass rattles in high windows; winter wind wheezes through the vacant rafters.

He follows the scrape of Frank’s footsteps towards squeaking hinges and a rusty door. Inside reeks of tarps and wooden crates undercut by metal and oil and the spicy-tang of gunpowder. Frank’s cache of weapons, the ones from the apartment, safely stowed since he murdered Sato.

The smell turns Matt’s stomach. He treads as lightly as he can into the space, saliva curdling with every puff of dust that hits his lips. Frank slams the door behind him, and despite the broken windows up at the ceiling, the air on the ground is stagnant, thick with war.

“What are we doing here?” Matt asks.

Frank has slipped amongst the stacks. His voice breaks and bounces off the walls of the space. “What do you think?”

He draws a hand over the nearest crate, the tingle of explosives radiating into his palm. “I think I’m going to start dismantling weapons, you don’t wanna tell me what this is.”

Takes Matt a second to figure out the acoustics to track Frank with how deep he’s gotten. “You said we needed a plan. I started planning.”

Matt leans his crutch against the wall. He hops onto a tool chest, skips lightly onto a pile of
weapons cases, and jumps up to get himself into the rafters. He lifts his head until his hearing clears and the space opens and the echo will be the loudest. “This is an armoury.”

Frank keeps talking, stalking. “Not quite.”

The wind chooses that moment to gust, painting a clear portrait of the warehouse. Rough terrain loaded with potential hiding places. Frank’s weapons cache to build traps. Block off the windows and the rafters won’t rattle, concealing which beams are safe and which aren’t.

Matt swings across the ceiling, coming to the centre of the room. When he mentioned a plan, he assumed for storming Hell’s Kitchen. “This is a battlefield.”

Frank’s voice appears from below him. “Got the Bronx cops on the horn about someone fitting your MO. Knew from the beginning: it’s only a matter of time before they show up.”

“There’s been no sign of the Hand in the Bronx. Elektra would be here by now if she knew where I was.”

“Don’t know what to tell you, Red. Your girl didn’t become Queen of the Ninja Cult for nothing.”

Elektra’s voice finds him, then, out of memory in a spiral of winter. “You’ve never been hard to find.”

Matt slips away from the ghost of her, swinging onto one of the larger, wooden crates. He looms, catching the sudden spike in Frank’s heart rate straight to his chest. Big, bad Punisher wasn’t expecting little Daredevil to sneak up on him.

Give Matt hope that the ninjas will feel the same way.

“Let’s get to work,” he says.

Happy reading!
“[He] doesn’t hesitate.

He exhibits no restraint

He takes and he takes and he takes…

He changes the game

He plays and he raises the stakes

And if there’s a reason he seems to thrive

when so few survive, then God damn it,

I’m willing to wait for it.”

~Leslie Odom Jr., “Wait for It”
parking lot, the roof. He bounds up and down the stairs. When his right knee wobbles, he sits, gathers himself, and then gets back to it. Sets Frank’s teeth on edge after a while, the way Red just goes and goes and goes. All hours of the day and night, taking breaks to meditate and sleep and eat – fuck, he eats - before he’s back at it again.

They start spending more time at the warehouse. Frank leaves a trail of breadcrumbs for Red’s girl to follow. Nothing so obvious that it looks like a trap, but the fake name, money trail, and rumours about vigilantes are bound to catch her eye. Coming and going from the apartment in the dark covers their tracks, decreases the chances that the ninjas are going to follow them back there instead.

At the warehouse, Red bounds from floor to ceiling, boarding up windows and slinking across beams; Frank on the ground, building defences, asking questions about the enemy. Every time he thinks shit can’t get any crazier, Red starts off about some new ninja nonsense, confirming that the parade of crazy is only gonna march on where the Hand are concerned.

Frank’s digging through one of the toolkits, waiting for an answer about how the old bastard Stick fits into the story, when a screw hits him in the back of the neck. The ceiling creaks ominously above him, but the kid’s playing with the echoes. No way of telling if the metallic moans are his footfalls or the wind or the wrath of God about to rain down.

“Everything alright up there, Red?” The, “Yeah,” he receives in response sound neutral enough and comes not far from where he’s working.

Shadows churn. Frank stares them down. He crushes the screw in one hand and the quiet with the other.

“Sorry.”

The kid doesn’t sound sorry. Begs the question about why he apologized at all.

Sure enough, couple minutes later, another screw snaps against Frank’s back. Hits too hard to have just fallen.

“You working or messing around?” Frank demands.

“Just checking the stability on these beams.”

Frank grabs a pair of pliers and slams the toolkit shut, issuing a long, loud creak overhead. Red’s shifting position, trying to perceive around the sound and make out the details with those wild senses of his.

Heartbeat thundering – in his ears as much as Red’s, no doubt – Frank picks up his coffee. Muscle memory takes over. Taking a sip puts his respiration nice and even, gives him the opportunity to scan the rafters without giving anything more away to Red. Nothing in front of him. No clumsy shadow with a bum leg lumbering through the dark. Kid must be hanging back, putting himself out of sight. Silence rings loud and clear in Frank’s ears; Red ain’t moving no more. He’s waiting for a reaction, and Frank knows exactly what’s gonna happen in Red doesn’t get one.

The ceiling brews, and Frank lets it. He takes another sip of coffee. He grips the pliers tights in one hand. He puts down his cup and enters a roll just in time for a small block of wood to make impact where he was standing.

There’s no apology this time, not even a fake one. Red’s voice comes from everywhere and
nowhere, because of course it does. Of course he found the one part of the ceiling with the best acoustics. “You’re gonna have to be faster than that, Frank!”

“Ninjas aren’t gonna be chucking shit at me from the ceiling,” Frank snarls. He tosses the pliers onto his work bench to cover the sound of him nabbing the Para he stashed underneath.

The weight of it in his hand’s all wrong. Empty. The fucking clip is empty.

“You’re right,” Red notes. “They’ll do worse.”

Frank chucks the gun into the rafters, letting it knock and clatter and mess with the devil’s ears. “You fuck off with that patronizing bullshit, Red.” Frank paces forward, drawing the kid out as he heads towards another hidden piece. This one even the kid hasn’t found; it’s sporting a full clip. “Faced a hell of a lot worse than ninjas. You think about what you’re gonna do, they show up? They had your ass once before. Only thing that stopped ‘em was me.”

That keeps Red from saying more, but a sigh echoes across the ceiling. A kind of non-verbal, “If you say so.”

A chill rushes down Frank’s spine. He whips around to catch the devil straight to the chest. Frank shoves the gun between them on their way to the ground, lining up a shot to Red’s heart.

The concrete catches him. Frank grips Red to him through the shock of it rattling against his skull. He twists the gun under the kid’s breastbone. The devil’s smirk grows wilder.


Kid laughs in his face and returns to the rafters, but not before saying, “So are you.”

God damn it, he is.

Frank’s dead the next couple of times too. Red finds new and increasingly creative ways to get the jump on him. Leaping off crates at the warehouse, through one of the windows at the apartment. There’s no pattern or warning. Sometimes Frank hears the scuff of a foot or a puff of breath; occasionally, it’s the absence of sound that tips him off. Red’s so quiet he takes all the noise in the room with him before tackling Frank to the floor.

Surprise attacks on the devil are damn near impossible now that Red’s senses are working full throttle. Frank grills him on what gives an attack away and gets the dumbest shit in response. “You breathing rattled against the dust” or, “Your foot shifted a few inchest on the floor” or, “Your trigger finger twitches when you’re about to attack.” Makes the excuse of, “Your heartbeat,” sound downright normal, and really, fuck that. Best Frank can do is run distraction. The echoes in the warehouse are great for Red’s subterfuge, but they also reap havoc on his senses. Frank makes a point of tracking down some sonic grenades for when this is over.

Eventually, Red bores of the game. The hell else is new. He gets all quiet and listless at the warehouse. Barely says a word on the way back to the apartment. Second the sun goes down, he slips out for what Frank thinks is a lap of the parking lot only to be gone for almost an hour. Frank is about ready to take a drive and look for his ass when he hops back up the stairs.

He’s down to using only his right leg again. His hood is pulled halfway down his face. A fresh smattering of red gleams on his chin. He takes off his gloves to reveal mashed and bloodied
knuckles.

Red goes the bathroom sink running; Frank throws in a handful of ice cubes. The kid sinks his hands all the way to the bottom of the basin, pink swirling up from his wounds.

“Good thing your girl hasn’t shown up yet,” Frank notes.

“I’ll be ready,” the kid replies darkly. In case there’s any doubt.

“Hm.” Still standing on one foot, but sure, he’ll be ready. Frank scrubs at the kid’s hair even as Red bucks against him. “If you say so, hero.”

Red takes the next night off. Won’t admit to why, but the ice pack on his leg says it all. He’s moody and pissy and the worst kind of company, so Frank ditches for a bit. Takes a drive, makes a couple calls, arranges some things for transport, comes back when the kid’s sulked himself to sleep.

Pain in the ass: the kid and the waiting game. Frank knows both too well, so the first thing he does after coming home is replace the ice pack on Red’s leg and tug the blanket a little higher, up to Red’s shoulder. Then he gets some shut eye. Gotta be ready. Tomorrow night’s gonna be busy.

Frank packs a couple things when they leave the warehouse the next evening and drives to a solid vantage point. The kid doesn’t question the detour. He hops out of the vehicle and immediately starts up to the roof.

He’s climbing easier than before. Using his left leg some, but he’s saving himself for what’s coming.

“You hear that?” Frank asks as they settle in against the cityscape. He starts assembling the Vanquish as the kid listens.

“You mean the four guys on the ground floor?” Red leans slightly over the rooftop ledge.

“Yeah, I hear them.”

“They armed?”

“Does it matter?”

Frank scoffs. No, it doesn’t. He plants the Vanquish legs on the rooftop ledge and adjusts the scope so he can see. One door, two windows: all of them possible exits where Red’s concerned. He dips between the possible targets, making a wager with himself how many times he’ll get off a shot before the kid finally takes them down. “Well, what are yah waiting for: go flush ‘em out.”

Red balks. He buries his hands in his pockets and eases all his weight onto his good leg, no intention of going anywhere. But no sooner has he opened his mouth to say as much than he clams up. He sniffs, then he’s shaking his head, smiling. “We’re gonna talk about this later,” he says, tugging his hood over his face and leaping off the roof.

Frank doesn’t hear him hit the ground. Next thing he knows, he’s putting rubber bullets against guys’ kneecaps to keep ‘em from getting away from the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.

Nighttime seems a whole different war from the day. Red isn’t lurking in the shadows, launching sneak attacks. At night, the war’s out there in the city. During the day, they got no one else to fight but each other.
Weird how the dark can be so revealing like that.

They’re back on the fire escape. Well, Frank’s back on the fire escape. The kid’s slinked onto the roof and perches overhead like a fucking gargoyle.

“Why rubber bullets?” he asks.

Frank stares into the bottom of his coffee cup, oddly at ease: with the question, with not answering. He lets Red do his lawyer thing of filling the silence with speculation, allowing every dumbass explanation the kid comes up with to roll off his back into the darkness. There’s no truth to any of it. Can’t prove shit.

“Sounds like you already got your answer,” Frank replies.

Red lines up for another attack. “You hadn’t used them yet. Makes no sense for you to start now.”

“Times change.” People don’t, but times do. There are fights coming that require bruises instead of bloodshed, at least for a little while. “Don’t you worry, Red. I’m packing lead for when your girl’s ninja army arrives.”

He polishes off the rest of his coffee, waiting for the attack, but nothing comes. Red actually shuffles slightly away from the edge of the roof. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, the Daredevil, drawing himself away from a leap and a fight. He just sits there, uncertainty written all over his damn face. Not a new look from him, but definitely a new context. Red’s never uncertain where killing is involved.

“Don’t tell me I wasted my time tonight, Red. Don’t you fucking say that.” The rubber bullets weren’t his first choice, nor were the kneecaps shots, but out of respect for the leg and being this close to on his own again, Frank’s willing to tow the line. God help the devil, the devil says it isn’t necessary. Bullshit it isn’t fucking necessary.

Red nods slowly to himself, coming to some conclusion up there in the shadows. The look of uncertainty slips away until the only sign of it is the occasional quiver in Red’s chin. “I told you one of the Hand burned to death in front of me. Guy called Nobu. The only way I could track him was the sound of his weapons. His body didn’t make sounds, not anymore. Not after so many centuries.”

“Oh, fuck.” Here they go with the ridiculous ninja shit again. Frank rolls his eyes and puts his back to the kid. They aren’t gonna fight; they’re gonna have storytime.

“It’s the same for other members of the Hand: I couldn’t track them by a beating heart, because they didn’t have one. I had to follow their breathing.”

“So what’s the problem, then?” Frank casts a glance over his shoulder towards the kid, too frustrated to look him straight-on. “They ain’t alive. You can’t get pissed off at killing something that’s already dead.”

“Not all of them are dead,” Red admits. “One attacked my apartment: a boy, couldn’t have been more than sixteen. I could hear his heart beating. He was alive.”

“Was?”

A pause, a loaded one. “Elektra. She killed him.”
Frank considers this. “The Hand bring him back?”

“No. He was taken care of.”

*Like Sato.*

“Whatever the Hand does to bring people back from the dead,” Red continues, “it doesn’t bring them all back.”

“So as long as they don’t have a heartbeat…” Without finishing his sentence, without turning around, Frank knows Red’s nodding. Might not get to take the vision of the afterlife with you, but hang onto your heartbeat or even the devil’s of hell’s kitchen don’t have compassion for you.

Frank huffs, a cloud of his breath vanishing into the night. “What does that mean for your girl?”

The answer fires out of Red at top speed: “Elektra has a heartbeat.” But he sighs a second later, muttering under his breath. “She has a heartbeat…” Doesn’t make sense, that. Why she gets one. Why she gets one and the other ninjas don’t.

“You said she was special,” Frank offers.

“Yeah.” Kid doesn’t sound convinced that’s the whole story though. Doesn’t help, Frank suspects, that they’re both asking the same question to themselves: if it would really make a difference, her having a heartbeat or not.

Frank turns round but still can’t bring himself to look at the kid, only at the slash of the lamplight against the bathroom window. He knows what the answer would be, it was Maria they were talking about. Or Lisa. Or Frank Jr. Heartbeat or no, family’s family. Full stop.

He looks up at long last, takes in the image of the kid with one ear on the city, his crumbling face settling into new resolve. “Couldn’t’ve told me this before I stormed your girl’s penthouse?”

Red laughs.

“All those ninjas got off easy.”

“There were a lot of heartbeats in that building.”

“But you don’t know how many weren’t there.”

“All the more reason,” Red insists, the joke no longer funny, “not to take the risk.”

Frank doesn’t accept that. “I can’t hear heartbeats, Red.”

“I can.”

Unbelievable. “You’re gonna tell me who I can and cannot shoot in the head? No. No, fuck that.”

“I’m already going to have to be telling you where the ninjas are, you don’t figure out how to track their movements.”

Frank moves towards the bathroom window. “Fuck, this again...”
“I’ve gotten the jump on you over a dozen times, Frank. And I’ve got a broken leg.”

He puts down his coffee mug on the window sill. Jumps from the rail of the fire escape landing to the ledge of the roof and pulls himself up to where Red’s waiting for him.

They sleep late the next morning. Frank does some running around. Finalizes the details for his next move. Won’t be able to return to the apartment after shit goes down with the ninjas, and he isn’t about to let Red know where his next safehouse is what with the kid getting back to his old self again.

He takes his time with everything. Efficiency’s great, yeah, but it’s been a long time since he hasn’t been beholden to some self-sabotaging dumbass with no sense of consequence. Being untethered is a luxury: bit of a mindfuck, actually. He comes and goes and doesn’t have to think about the shit Red’s getting up to when he’s gone.

They go out that night, and after their first takedown, Frank falls back. Red disappears into the night, and even though it feels like there oughtta be, there isn’t a sense that Frank needs to follow. He packs up his nest, runs some recon, makes some notes about shit to do in the warehouse, then goes back to the apartment.

Stillness greets him, and Frank stands for a moment, struck by the thought that he’s seeing the space for the first time. He rented for the mission, for floorspace. Barely gave it more than a passing glance before handing over a bundle of bills to a manager who hasn’t visited the property since. Now there’s hardwood where the weapons would be. Two beds where there used to be one. Two coffee cups on the desk, two towels in the bathroom, two sets of clothes stashes in bags, two. God, that line between them in the beginning, the one that Frank couldn’t shake, it disappeared somewhere along the way without him noticing, and now it’s back. It’s loud. It’s blaring. Not because the kid is there, but because the kid isn’t.

He turns on the lights. The room comes into soft focus, dispelling the edges cast by the shadows. Frank can move into the space, reclaim it a little. Coffee mugs into the kitchen. The Vanquish in its case covering up the hardwood. Can’t quite shake the feeling though. Guys he knew lost all sorts of things overseas: hope and faith, sure, but arms, legs, and everything in between. Swear to God they could still feel ‘em too, even years later. Get a rush of cold over a hand left rotting in a desert or a twitch in a leg chewed up and spat out by an explosion. Used to think it was nonsense, Frank did, but now he’s walking through the apartment feeling something that isn’t there. Feeling absence.

The bathroom window is thrown open. Footsteps trod unevenly across the floor – one heavy, the other light. Frank comes in, throwing on the light, to find Red sitting down on the edge of the tub. Blood drips freely over his shaking right hand. “Guy had a knife,” he explains as Frank gets a towel pressed against the wound to his bicep. “I didn’t move fast enough.”

Frank grabs the kit. He swats Red’s hand away. The cut’s a deep swipe into the muscle. Kid winces when Frank tears open his sleeve. “Could’ve just taken my shirt off.”

“This ain’t a shirt. It’s a patchwork quilt, all the times you stitched it back together.” Frank preps a needle. He digs into the kid’s arm, earning a smaller wince over the first suture than he does from ripping the shirt. “You cut anywhere else?”

“My side.” Red gestures to a thin slash south of his ribs. “That one doesn’t feel very deep.”

“How’s the leg?”
“It’s good.”

That’s the truth. Would’ve said ‘it’s fine’ otherwise. Frank knots off the last stitch, trims the thread. He douses the whole area in peroxide and then covers it with some gauze held by a strip of tape. Kid isn’t lying about the slash on his side; the bleeding’s already stopped. Scabbing has started to form.

Frank heads to the kitchen. The coffee cups are where he left them in the sink; he rinses them out. The sound of Red hobbling around fills the whole apartment, causes the floorboards to creak and the walls to moan and brings the building to life.

They meet on the fire escape. This time, Red’s hunkered down like he used to, one leg stretched out in front of him. His cast open so the cold air can reach his injury. He holds up a hand to accept the coffee Frank offers him; the sleeves of his hoodie fall loosely and baggily around his arms. Because it’s not his hoodie, Frank realizes. It’s the fucking sweater from weeks ago. The Devil took it back.

Evening at the apartment the next day gets interrupted by a knock on the door.

Rina stands, head bowed under a curtain of her hair. Hands folded in front of her as one foot hangs back, heel fixed in the direction of her apartment. Frank gives her the time she needs, offering, “Ma’am,” while holding his ground at the door.

She composes herself. Mostly. Her hands rattle against her lap. “Things have been happening,” she begins. “At the shop, the clients, the girls, they talk. They say people have been getting hurt. Bad people.” And then, quietly, “It’s none of my business.”

Frank fixes his gaze on the sharp part in her blonde hair, waiting. If this is a warning, they need to leave, grab the few bags of their shit and go. And they need to make sure Rina has somewhere to lay low for a while, because if the NYPD so much as tries to bring her in for questioning, they got another thing coming.

Rina isn’t hesitant about warnings though, despite her skittishness. This isn’t that. “One of the girls at the shop, Annika, she was attacked last night. He ex-boyfriend He had a knife. He had been drinking. He was going to kill her.” She pauses, the severity of that statement knocking the air out of her chest. “He would have killed her.”

She doesn’t say more. The air between them grows heavy with what happened instead, neither of them needing to put it into words. There are rules in their building, boundaries. Questions that don’t get asked, lies that are never exposed. The less they know about each other, the less they owe each other, the better.

Frank offers her a nod: neither an act of apology or understanding, simply acknowledgement. He broke the rules. Brought Red into the building, brought the ceiling down on them all. “Ma’am.”

She doesn’t take a step back then. Wants to and would under normal circumstances, but ultimately doesn’t. Her friend is alive, and the man who tried to change that is in the hospital. So Rina offers a grave proclamation. “You come for dinner tomorrow. Both of you.”

“No, no,” she’s already fed them for months now, “That’s not necessary, ma’am, really.”

But Rina is already walking away, nodding as she goes. Less for Frank than for herself. An attempt to convince herself that this is necessary, that she can do this. “Yes, you come. You both
come. 6 o’clock.”

Her apartment door slams shut behind her. Frank listens to it lock, needing that sound before he steps back into his own apartment. Red’s sitting there on his cot still, eyes shut and breathing measured, seemingly world’s away, but God damn it, Frank knows better.

“Don’t you start,” he snaps.

Without missing a beat, Red replies, “I didn’t say anything.”

Happy reading!

Chapter End Notes

...so I wrote more smut.

If you’re interested in a spicier rendition of what Matt and Frank get up to on the rooftop before sleeping late, check out Wait For It: the smut edition.
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

…and this story is still six chapters away from ending. Because nothing has gone according to plan and I’m pretty sure that’s okay. *fingers crossed*

I need to send a big thank you to that-dude-I-married, who let me use his laptop while I shop for a new one. Not having a period key is one thing, but hell if I don’t use the letter ‘k’ every other line. (My ‘k’ key has also died.)

This chapter is easily one of the longest in the fic, but whenever I tried to condense it, I only ended up saying more. I had a rule since the beginning that every chapter had to do something, specifically for the characters. I didn’t know what exactly this chapter was going to do until I started writing it. The narration ended up jumping between Matt and Frank more than other chapters, and I have a feeling this was a symptom of how the story shifts into the finale. There’s so much about the two blending before this, and all of sudden, they’re overlapping, weaving.

I think there’s some fine-tuning to do; however, if I try to do that now I’m going to have to break this chapter up, because I will spend another thousand words with these two doing normal things like normal people, lol.

Finding a song for this chapter was also tough. I needed a track that signalled the shift that was coming. I originally wanted lines from “The Last Time” by Taylor Swift, mostly because of the way that song sounds, but even I know better than to include the words “This is the last time, I won’t hurt you anymore,” where Frank and Matt are concerned. This song, “In the Blood,” has been so influential that I nearly changed the title of this fic to reflect it.

Readers, dear Readers, thank you so much for your kind support and patronage. I wouldn’t have made it anywhere near this far without you. Please, enjoy!

“...How much of my father am I destined to become?

Will I dim the lights inside me just to satisfy someone?

Will I let this woman kill me, or do away with jealous love?

Will it wash out in the water, or is it always in the blood?

I can feel the love I want, I can feel the love I need,

But it’s never gonna come the way I am.
Could I change it if I wanted, can I rise above the flood?

Will it wash out in the water, or is it always in the blood?"

~John Mayer, “In The Blood”

The journal lies open on the desk between them. Frank looms; the kid sits, thinking, one arm resting on the edge of the desk. His fingertips are smudged with ink from reading.

Jesus, his senses. He put together text and diagrams with his fingertips, catching every detail.

“Hardest part will be getting her here,” Frank says. “She isn’t going to just come when you call.”

Red flashes a smirk. “Maybe if you call.” But then, he adds what they’re both thinking, “Better to make it seem like her idea.”

“She calls you.”

“Or she calls you.”

“Hm.” Frank considers the play. Can’t look staged, else the minx is never gonna come, but they need to be public enough to get her attention, to give her a reason to reach out.

Only reason she’s gonna do that is sitting right in front of him.

“What?” the kid asks.

God damn his respiration. Can’t keep nothing from this kid. Frank slams the journal shut between them, providing cover. “Thinking about how many of your limbs I’d have to break, ‘get your girl to come running.’”

“She’d never believe it.”

“Gonna have to give her something new to believe, then.”

The kid’s intruged. He turns a little in his seat, regarding Frank with the sort of intensity that screams all his senses are in on the action. “What do you have in mind?"

Lots of things. Head’s a busy place: gunfire and explosions and carousel music; Lisa tugging on his arm; that sense of impending loss permeating the apartment. Frank focuses on the mission.

Only the mission. He stakes his heartbeat and his breathing, his blood pressure and anything the fuck else Red can hear on the God damn mission. “Means I’m going back to regular ammo, the next time we take to the streets. What happens after that –“

Red follows along: “- will definitely get her attention.”

“- and give her a reason to call.” Frank snatches up the journal, crushes it in his hand and never lets go. The mission. “She has to believe it.”

“What’s not to believe?” Statement, not question, and delivered with a smile no less.

“Can’t hold nothing back,” Frank adds.

“We’ll need witnesses.”

Smirking. “Damn. We’re usually so subtle.”

Frank gets the hell out of the conversation before he says more. “Better get your cell phone charged, Red.”

“For tonight?”

“Tomorrow. We strike tomorrow.” He turns away before the full impact of Red’s grin can hit him. “Got plans tonight.” Before the kid can say anything: “I don’t wanna hear it.”

War, he gets. Baiting people into fights? That, he understands. Dinner at Rina’s? Shit. He’ll take the ninjas.

Matt bides his time in the hours leading up to dinner. Frank’s running a short-fuse, and the only thing riling him up more than constant reminders about dinner is pretending dinner isn’t a big deal.

So Matt showers. He shaves. He dresses. The blue shirt and slacks Frank got him for the meeting with Lantom makes another appearance, inspiring another satisfying flare in Frank’s respiration.

He waits till Frank’s knocking on Rina’s door before muttering, “We don’t have to do this.”

“Shut up.”

“I can tell her you’re sick.”

“God damn it.”

Matt keeps digging as the locks come undone: “Tell her someone broke into the apartment again.”

Frank’s heartbeat flares. “Would you shut your fucking-“

Rina swings the door open in such a way that she can hide behind it. Her heart rattles inside her chest like a caged bird. “Hello,” she says quietly. “Please uh…come in.”

Matt gestures for Frank to go first. He listens to the slow intake of breath, the scratch of gritted teeth, the unspoken, “Fuck you, Red,” before Frank makes his way across the threshold.

Beneath the smells roving from Rina’s kitchen, Matt makes out aged wood and fabrics, bone china and tarnished metal and orange oil and dried flowers. History and memory carefully contained and even more carefully maintained. There’s no war here, no conflict. Rina’s fortified her apartment with memory, keeping the dangerous world at bay.

He stays in Frank’s wake, but the air inside the apartment is so still, so densely packed, that he can’t get a fix on the dimensions of the space. Even the music seems diffuse, easing through the walls rather than around them. One more veil that Matt’s senses can’t penetrate.

He reaches, taking hold of Frank by the shoulder, his own heartbeat hammering in his fingertips while Frank’s slows to a low rumble beneath them. The action rouses Frank’s from his
forced calm, draws him out of whatever dark corner he’s retreated to. “Take a step there,” he mutters. “Door’s swinging from your right.”

Matt moves as he’s instructed, feeling the door whisk past as it closes. Rina’s heartbeat hits him full force, disorienting instead of revealing. “Thanks.”

Frank hums curtly. *Don’t mention it.* He draws Matt forward slowly as if he can feel Rina’s heartbeat too. They move out of the entryway, into what Matt assumes is a living room.

Rina skitters away behind them into the kitchen, hands ripping across her skirt.

Matt offers, “Can we help with any-“

She cuts him off. “No! No. You stay there. You sit. You stay.” She hisses a series of Russian epithets under her breath along with a rush of, “Sorrysorrysorry, stay there.” The oven opens and closes. The smell of meat leaps through the apartment. Her feet scuffle in frantic circles, on the search for relief.

Frank is shockingly, unsettlingly calm. On the outside, at least. Matt tugs on his shoulder, trying to put her at ease. He whispers, “Where do we sit?”

“There’s a couch over there.” He corrects himself. “Straight ahead. Looks like she’s got a dining table too. Can’t you hear it or something?”

_Funny, Frank._ Matt’s funny too: “I can hear how fast your heart’s beating.”

“That tell you where the coffee table is? ‘Cuz you’re about to get walked into it.”

Matt smiles wryly. He can’t tell the coffee table from the hardwood in this space, but hell if he’s gonna let Frank know that. “Just don’t hit the record player on your way past.” The smell of vinyl pools near their feet, along with the dusty metal of the turntable and the buzz of an electrical socket beneath the slow, steady pulse of music.


Feels wrong, being here. Got Rina hiding out in her own kitchen. Got the kid hanging off his shoulder, lost. Got stacks of cash into his pockets, cutting into his legs. Can’t stash them just anywhere neither. He doesn’t want Rina to find them till after their gone.

Everywhere Frank’s eyes go, there’s more of Rina, more of the life story she’s never told him, stuff he doesn’t need to know. The photos on the table – tiny blonde haired girl in a flowing white dress dancing on her toes; a woman in a fur coat with Rina’s hair, staring fiercely at Frank through snowflakes (*Mother? Aunt?*). Further in, there’s a threadbare couch and a dinged-up coffee table with one leg balanced on a folded newspaper. A stack of number puzzle books sits on the corner next to a sheet of calculations. A shelf with an antique clock, a chipped teacup and saucer filled with dried flower petals, a scuffed Matryoshka. Lace doilies on the tables. Hand-stitched, probably. Brought over in a suitcase (stop). Rina has enough of an accent; she came here as a kid (not important). With Mom or whoever’s in the picture (dead? Estranged? The hell does it matter. It’s irrelevant. Move on.)

Her dining table stands out, occupying Frank’s attention before he puts together that it’s not for dining. There’s a dress form tucked away in the corner, the start of a bodice pinned into place. A
small stash of fabrics is folded beneath. She whips up her quilts at that table. By hand. Quilts that Red bleeds on ‘cuz she’s kind enough to share ‘em.

Glass taps against the kitchen counter. Rina makes a sound like a drowning woman finally surfaced. Frank draws the kid’s hand off his shoulder and puts its on the wall. He walks around the corner, past the table and the sewing stuff, to the doorway of the tiny kitchen.

“Ma’am.”

Rina doesn’t meet his stare. Steam from the roasting pan ghosts around the sharp angles of her body. She presses a hand against the skirt of her dress, fingers cutting across the blue flowers dotting the fabric, then reaches for the string of pearls on her neck. The other hand is glued to the counter next to a sweating bottle of vodka that’s never been touched until seconds ago.

They should go. They should never have come. Got shit to do, plans to lay before tomorrow night. Frank opens his mouth to tell her they’re leaving, but Rina tugs her hand from her pearls and cuts him off with, “Do you want a drink?”

Her eyes never leave the floor.

Frank finds himself staring in the same spot. “Yeah, I could use a drink. You want a drink, Red?”

The kid’s smile. Not even a smirk: a real-life smile. And his voice goes soft and slow like he’s bearing witness to something beautiful and they should never have come. Red’s enjoying this too damn much.

“Yeah,” Red says, using the wall as a guide through the apartment, “I’d love a drink.”

Rina throws open her cupboard, nabs a few shot glasses, and gets pouring.

Frank takes Matt’s next drink away from him. Straight out of his hand. “Had enough,” he says, and he isn’t wrong: Matt’s already nursing a buzz. The vodka’s gone straight to his head, loosening his tongue and playing with his perceptions in a surprisingly good way. The density of the air no longer bothers him, nor does the stillness. Sitting at Rina’s table, surrounded by warmth, senses muzzy but secure, grounded, it’s a good feeling. He has Frank’s solidity on one side, providing its own gravitational pull even as Rina’s atmosphere comes to rest ever-so-gently on his skin, ebbing slightly with her movement and that flutter of her heartbeat.

The plate of food Rina puts in front of him hits him square in the face, different than the day she saved him from Frank’s apartment. This time he’s remembering, memory slip-sliding, thinned out from the vodka like the blood rushing through his veins: Karen, Foggy. After that first win for the firm. St. Patrick’s Day. Late nights pouring over case files at the office, each others’ apartments. Room’s quiet. Why? Matt scrolls through the sounds that remain only to realize it’s because he isn’t talking. He tries to cover with compliment about dinner, but the room seems so big, his voice seems so small, and the moment is taking too damn long while at the same time, time’s slipping away from him. This is it: who the hell knows when he’ll be sitting at a table like this again? And will he ever want to?

Frank claps a hand against his shoulder, snapping him out of it. “Had enough? More like had too much. Figures you would be a lush.”

“He’s been sick,” Rina offers from where she stands at the end of the table. “Why are you…?”
Please, start. Eat.”

“Waiting for you, ma’am.”

“We’re waiting for you.”

They say it together, their voices overlapping and weaving, an unbreakable thread running through the iron atmosphere of Rina’s apartment.

She nods, shakily. “Okay, yes…sorry,” and flees the dining room for the kitchen.

“Nothing to apologize for, ma’am,” Frank says to her retreating form. Then he’s back at Matt. “You alright, Red?”

Liquor’s settled all Frank’s sounds into a series of flat lines and meagre rumbles. Matt turns his head away as the blood rushes into his cheeks. “Yeah, I’m alright. You alright?”

Frank gives a short hum and takes the shot. The stolen shot. Matt’s shot.

Once Rina’s sitting, the table gets real quiet, real fast. The fragility is all too palpable for Matt, even as the apartment holds strong around them. As Frank’s heartbeat makes brutal promises that sound silly at a dinner table. The heartbeat doth protest too much.

Matt ventures, trying to escape his urge to laugh. “Where did you learn how to cook?”

Rina pokes demurely at her plate. She’s a frenzy of sensory details; Matt’s surprised when she answers, “My aunt.”

“That the woman in the photo over there?”

Matt raises a brow at Frank, surprised to hear him finally joining the conversation, even posing the question as disinterestedly as he did. The question seems off, not at all for Frank’s benefit. Matt tightens his grip on his silverware and pushes the realization away.

Rina’s pulse skyrockets as her movements soften, as she goes into hiding. “No.” Then, with a sharp inhale almost like a gasp, “My mother. Before I was born. When she was a dancer at the Bolshoi.”

Frank gives her a minute before asking, “You dance?”

He knows the answer or gives the impression of knowing. For Rina’s benefit. Matt told her stories to keep her from feeling interrogated; Frank asks for information she’s already given to do the same. Correction: he asks for information that she’s already given to him.

“Once.” Rina says simply. She and Frank went to the same school of conversational evasion tactics. “Before.”

The tone in Frank’s voice changes suddenly: casual. Inviting. Affable. None of that Punisher menace or condescension. “When’d you come to New York?” Matt replays the words over and over in his head, the way Frank said them, and again, time’s too fast and too slow. Past overlain with present disintegrating into future. This was Frank Castle and will never be Frank Castle again.

Rina’s heartbeat gradually begins to slow. “Thirteen years ago. I come with my aunt.” There’s a gap in the story nobody at the table dares speak about, one the same size and shape as Rina’s mother. She presses on with the conversation. “She used to work at the salon. They sponsor.
But I…I don’t like to cut hair…or talk to people. Not that I don’t want…not that you are…I just…” She draws a steadying breath. “It’s complicated. People…they’re complicated.”

Change you when they’re around, change you when you’re gone: yeah, Matt thinks, complicated is a good way to put it. He stops himself from nodding too late, of course; there’s a faint thrum of curiosity coming from Frank, who’s chewing at such a conspicuous rhythm there’s not doubt Rina’s words resonated with him too.

Matt sees an in and takes it: “Frank doesn’t like talking to people either.”

“I like talking to people just fine,” Frank lies through bites of food.

“Sometimes he doesn’t say a word to me all day.”

Rina can’t hide her shock: “You don’t speak to him?”

“I speak to him plenty, ma’am.” And then, to Matt, rougher: “I speak to you plenty. And if I don’t, it’s ‘cuz you’re already talking.” Back to Rina: “Says too much, this kid. Doesn’t even think about it, just starts running his mouth.”

Matt gives a small laugh, trying to keep it light. “Don’t have to think about it. You can figure it out as you go.”

“No idea what you’re getting yourself into.”

“Could say the same to you. Things don’t always go the way you plan.”

Frank’s whole body speaks of rage and something else, something that goes unspoken and unnoticed, something he’s hiding in plain sight. “Things don’t always go your way neither.”

“So…you balance each other out.”

The barb for Frank dies in Matt’s mouth. His senses fix on Rina, who continues shakily, still reeling from the previous exchange, “It’s good. It’s good to have people for balance. People who…who make you whole.”

Matt can’t stand the stricken silence afterwards. How it claws and teems with ghosts, with the worst-kept secrets and poorly laid plans. It’s so painfully obvious what he and Frank are thinking, and yet it also isn’t. They’re both trying to play hands without acknowledging what they’ve been dealt. And Rina doesn’t deserve to be undermined for any number of reasons, but certainly not in her house. Not at her table.

So Matt latches onto the only thing he can think to say: “They’re the ones that define you. Who change you. For better or worse.”

Frank’s respiration drops into a slow, plodding crawl. He stabs at his plate a few times but doesn’t take another bite.

Rina, for once, doesn’t retreat: she’s bolstered. She puts down her cutlery and reaches, her nimble fingers lancing around the bottle of vodka. She refills the glasses. When she picks hers up, it’s to toast. “To-“ She hesitates, terror griping her. Her heart is a frantic rattle in her chest. Rina draws a breath and soldiers on, “To the ones that define us.”

Matt takes up his glass and clinks it against hers. “To the ones that define us.”
Frank joins in, torn between reluctance and eagerness. “The ones that define us.”

Rina, her heart pounding in a funeral dirge, adds a quiet, “Nostrovia,” and then they drink.

Dinner winds down. The vodka wears off. Rina keeps putting more food on their plates, and Frank sure as hell isn’t going to turn her down anymore than the kid is. They end up polishing off most of a roast only for Rina to throw the rest into containers to take back to their place. Can’t ask a question without apologizing, can’t volunteer information without being evasive, but Rina isn’t going to take no for an answer where feeding them is concerned.

Fine: two can play at that game. Actually, three can. Red sends Rina into the living room on the pretense of putting on another record; she leaps to the task, giving Frank the opportunity to start washing up. He runs the water to drown out the sounds of him opening the cupboard, unloading the stacks of bills from his pockets to a place they won’t be found for a while.

Rina rushes back to the kitchen as he finishes. “You don’t have to do that,” she says: about the dishes, she realizes, not about the money. She has no idea about the money.

“Yes, ma’am, we do,” Frank replies. “You sit. We’ll clean up.”

She wants to object. Part of her needs to object. But there’s two of them and one of her, and Rina isn’t going to pick a fight. She sits down at the table and plays her fingers uneasily across her frayed, lace tablecloth to the music.

Takes her until they’re done to put her at ease. Rina rises.

“Look, we’re uh…” Frank scrubs at the side of his head. The words were just there a second ago. The fuck did they go? The sight of Rina’s hands folded at her waist, her tiny features peering out from under a veil of blonde hair, they bring Frank’s thoughts to silence. There’s nothing to say. No use in mentioning that they’re leaving. That’ll make her more suspicious, more likely to find the money before they’re gone. “Thank you. For dinner. For everything.”

“Thank you, Rina,” Red adds.

She offers a small shrug. “Thank you. Both of you. For everything.”

Nods circulate from one to the next, and that’s that. It’s understood.

Red takes his shoulder again on the way to the door. Rina heads through the living room. She sets about unbolting her myriad of locks, then holds the door for them to leave. Red’s hand tightens on his shoulder on their way into the hallway, and he doesn’t let go till they’re back at the apartment.

At first, Matt thinks he imagines it, but as Rina’s hand slips off his shoulder blade, as the door closes behind him and locks tightly, he realizes she touched him. As if she knew tonight was likely her last chance.

Similarly, he doesn’t let go of Frank till they’re in the apartment. Till they’re drifting around, listless, eventually retreating to the fire escape. The music from Rina’s apartment plays long into the night, and they’re almost afraid to interrupt, but when they finally do, it’s like they have all the time in the world.
They clean out the apartment the next day. Red fits his stuff into his duffle, gets that into the trunk of the car along with the folded-up cot. Helps dismantle the bulletin board and toss out anything they won’t need. Frank gets his kit together in short order. Most of his shit’s at the warehouse. He’ll toss it into the car for a quick getaway, ready to move onto the next safehouse.

Midday, Frank leaves. He goes to the warehouse and does the last of the prep. Clock ticks towards evening. Thinks he might go crazy before the sun’s finally down and it’s time to go to work. He puts on his vest. He packs up the Vanquish, couple ammo cans. Real shit, this time. None of those rubber bullets. Gotta put on a good show.

There’s security cams in the neighbourhood they’ve chosen. Couple traffic cams too. Frank nests, scanning the streets, waiting. Patient as fuck ’cuz the Devil ain’t gonna disappoint. Too much riding on tonight for Red to decide something different than what they’ve agreed.

Sure enough, he’s waiting less than hour when the Devil finally shows. Well, not so much the Devil: the people he’s chasing. Couple of guys he set on the run. Maybe he busted up a robbery or interrupted an assault. Whatever he did, the Devil’s got ’em running down the street. Passersby are drawn to their shouts. Couple people have their cell phones out, filming what’s happening, texting their friends. One calls the cop. Whole bunch more start calling when Frank fires the first round, catching one of the guys at the ankle.

He’s about to fire again when he’s grabbed from behind. “Speak of the devil.” Frank mutters, hopping right into the fight. Punching, kicking, throwing; the Devil, at one point, slams him into the rooftop ledge, giving the whole street a look at the skull on his chest. Then they’re tussling back across the roof, hitting each other as hard as they can.

The first cruiser is screeching on scene when the Devil’s defence fails. Frank lands a solid hit to his chest, another to his face. The kid goes limp against the rooftop. “Good,” Frank says. He packs up the Vanquish and carries it in one hand, throws the kid over his opposite shoulder, and hurries off the roof.

He lets the cops catch a glimpse of him before disappearing.

Radio burns up with reports of the Punisher in the Bronx. Cops are on the horn about him kidnapping someone.

Frank sits at the warehouse, Red’s cell phone on the desk in front of him. Patience gone. He wants the call. Needs the God damn call. And she will, she has to. Kid’s in trouble. He’s at the mercy of the big, bad Punisher.

The phone comes to life: “Unknown…unknown…unknown.”

He lets it ring ‘couple times. Answering too quick implies he was waiting. When he does, he pretends he swears a little, feigning ignorance about how to operate Red’s phone. Then, casually, as if he’s not expecting anyone important, “Murdock’s phone.”

Elektra can barely contain her excitement. “I take it Matthew’s unable to answer?” Frank doesn’t answer; he lets the minx fill in the blanks herself. Makes it easier to lie when he knows what truths he’s working with. “Strange that you would be taking his calls. Especially after your cute little skit for the NYPD.”

“Not a skit.” Not with the way they were punching at each other.

She sighs as if they’re old friends who simply haven’t spoken in a while. “What do you
want?"

“Not about what I want. It’s about what you want.”

And right there, he senses her swaying on the line. Suspicion doesn’t trump desire for Red’s
Girl. Nothing can. The charm drains out of her voice. “Put Matthew on the phone.”

Frank leans back in his chair. “Can’t do that.”

“Because he won’t speak?”

“Because he can’t. Kid’s out cold. I dosed him.” Frank gives her a little more of the truth, in
case she doesn’t want to believe him. In case she needs a reminder about how he got the chance to
lay hands on her sweet Matthew again. “Doc left me with a syringe of shit, case he ever wanted to
run away again. You want to talk to him, you come and get him.”

“How stupid do you think I am?”

“Stupid enough to think we have time for this conversation. Those drugs aren’t gonna last
forever. He’s gonna be a lot harder to take when he’s awake.”

Elektra’s sass returns full force. “I could say the same to you. Matthew’s always a lot harder
to take when he’s awake.”

She lingers on the line, silently demanding *what’s in it for me?* Frank concedes, it’s gotta be a
pretty sweet deal for her, letting Red make his life difficult. But even she has to know there’s limits.
Maybe not to Red, but for people like them, people who believe in taking lives for whatever reason,
it’s amazing how quick lines get drawn.

People make things complicated.

Ain’t hard to feel what he’s saying. The frustration, the anger. It’s all right there, built-in,
hard-wired from his many encounters with the God damn Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. “Kid’s been
making my life difficult for a long time. You leave him with me, he’s gonna do what he does, and
I’m gonna do what I do. And what I do is everything I can to make sure he doesn’t make shit
difficult for me anymore.” He growls the last bit, remembering, back at the beginning, the walls
closing in. “Broken leg was a good start.”

Elektra laughs. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Frank puts that certainty into his voice, the knowledge that yes, he would break
Red’s other leg, his arms, his ribs. That the kid would let him, or at the very least, the kid wouldn’t
have a choice. Beating the shit out of each other is what they do best. “You want to leave him to
make trouble, but the longer you wait, the less of him’s gonna be left to pick up.” He gives her the
address, and then, “Come and get him.”

Frank hangs up. Shuts the phone off.

From the ceiling, Red asks, “You think she bought it?”

“I think she’s coming,” Frank says.

Happy reading!
"No more games, Imma change what you call rage.

Tear this motherfucking roof off like two dogs caged."

~Eminem, “Lose Yourself”

Hard to imagine what the kid hears when the ninjas finally arrive. If there are heartbeats on the rooftops or simply puffs of breath, Frank doesn’t hear a damn thing. First it’s just the two of them in the warehouse, then suddenly it’s the six of them, the eight of them, the twelve of them. Shadows spill through the windows, filing across the rafters, so quiet that if he wasn’t watching, Frank wouldn’t have heard them.

The door is torn from its hinges. Elektra steps boldly over the trip line, proud as she pleases, a small army in her wake.

“Sawed off shotgun?” she notes of the trap on her way in, “Cute. Surprised Matthew let
you get away with that.”

So is Frank, honestly, but they both knew she’d sweep right past it. They both knew they had to put on a good show.

She marches forward like she owns the place, like it’s hers to keep or destroy as she pleases. Her gaze cuts the bins and boxes down to size on a hunt. Kid’s foot catches her eye at last; it’s slung across the floor in her sightline, but Elektra doesn’t move. She stops one of her ninjas from moving forward too. Doesn’t want to place herself at risk, but hell if anyone else is touching Red.

Frank peers down his scope, shifting between the ninjas, playing eenie-meenie-miney-mo with their shrouded faces. Could pop off three of ‘em before their buddies on the ceiling find him. More if everything goes as planned.

There’s a series of commands that Elektra silences with a single look. She stalks a slow line towards Red, scanning the warehouse, a smile teasing on the corners of her lips. Yeah, enjoy it while it lasts, sweetheart.

“Come on now, boys,” she urges, “let’s not play games. It was fine for the NYPD. The Punisher versus Daredevil! Makes for a good viral video. But this is such a waste of our time.”

The sight of Red gives her some pause; her smile falters, fades. Neither of them held their punches on that rooftop, so there’s bound to be some blood on his lips, some bruising around his eye. Even the way he’s arranged his legs gives the illusion of him having been hobbled.

Elektra shoots a glance around the warehouse, torn. She’s decisive enough to come here in full force, armed, but the sheer magnitude of their shit show hits her full force. Fucking finally, Frank thinks. He’s been living this nightmare for months: suspicion, rage, frustration. Keeping his guard up only to realize, too late, that his defences have already been penetrated. Can’t defeat the ocean by wrestling with waves, all you get is sopping wet, and here they both are, him and her, miles from shore, drawn in by a steady tide and gentle currents into the open water only to realize that’s not the sky in front of them. That’s a fucking maverick. That’s the wrath of God come to swallow them into the deep.

It’s satisfying, watching her. Vindicating, actually. To watch from a distance as Elektra stares doom straight in the face, dares it to do its worst, and then rushes forward to meet it.

“Matthew.”

Red doesn’t move; Elektra draws nearer. Frank’s anger slashes his vindication to pieces. He puts a little more strength on the trigger.

The kid speaks suddenly, feigning grogginess. His voice is soft, feathery, brushing along the walls of the warehouse to Frank’s ears. “They don’t have heartbeats.”

Elektra beams by the sounds of things: “I couldn’t have you detecting our arrival, now could I?”

Red’s voice goes low, plunging all the way to the devil’s depths of hell, and God damn, it’s almost enough to make the drowning worth it. “Oh, Darling,” that wild smirk of his comes back with a vengeance, “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Frank starts firing.
Matt finally recognizes it: the weight he’s been feeling. Denser than guilt, less nauseating, but frustration fills him with pins and needles. His whole body’s a live wire. And it’s only lying on the floor under Elektra’s heartbeat that he finally recognizes what it is.

Inevitability. The three of them, this, it’s inevitable.

He waits for Elektra to touch him before rousing. Gives her a second to change her mind with a performance of weakness, one she really should detect, and maybe she does. Maybe they all know the part they’re playing so well that the artifice becomes authentic. Or maybe they’re so used to chaos they make it look like fate. Whatever the reason, Elektra doesn’t pull away from him, and after letting Frank know to open fire, Matt takes her by the arms and throws her aside.

The Vanquish is loud, its acoustics augmented by Frank’s hiding spot. He set up shop inside a tower of crates near the back of the warehouse. Insulated the walls to mask the sounds of his respiration. He aims through a thin slat that nullifies any effect of his suppressor beyond protecting his own ears. One batch, two batch, penny and dime: the ninjas can’t move fast enough to dodge. Frank’s too good of a shot in any terrain, let alone his own. The bodies slap against the concrete, telling Matt exactly where he doesn’t want to be. He draws Elektra further into the stacks so she doesn’t get in the line of fire. So she doesn’t go after Frank. So the ninjas don’t interrupt.

“Cute little partnership,” Elektra snarls, trapping him in a lock with his arm twisted up his spine. Matt slips out easily, knocking her over so she can’t catch him again. She comes back sharper and faster in response. “Cute little clubhouse too. If I’d stuck around after Roscoe Sweeney, would you have shacked up with me? Or would I have to break your leg first?”

Matt dives at Elektra; she grabs him around the waist, and he lets her spin him so he hits the floor first. But he’s careful to nab her before she can do more. “I forgave you for Roscoe Sweeney.”

She winds up for a blow. Matt throws her to the side but, while free, isn’t fast enough to gain any distance before she is on him again. Punching, kicking, evading. His new bulk is deadweight against her lightning quick movements, her ability to slip through his senses and reappear.

A blow to his face gives him the opportunity to nab her by the wrists, to hold her before him. “And I forgive you for Sato.”

“I’m not the one who killed her.”

“You brought her to be killed.”

Elektra rips her arms out of his grasp. “Is that what makes you such a hypocrite?”

“These ninjas aren’t alive anymore.”

“I’m not alive anymore.” The sound of carnage rages in the background. Frank, dropped out of his nest to join the fray, works a handgun and knife. Blood spatters; shell casings tinkle against the floor. “Is that what you’re planning to do to me?”

An ache bursts forth from the centre of Matt’s chest, the phantom twist of Frank’s grasp meeting the hold Elektra’s had on him since they day they met to tear him apart. “You’re not like them.”

She lashes out at him again. “Like hell I’m not. Killed Sato. Tortured Fisk’s men. Had your
dear friend Frank beaten.”

He ignores the ecstatic flurry of her heartbeat overlaying the sounds of Frank dismantling ninjas in the background. Puts his arms up as best he can to keep from being completely immobilized by her next lock, one that sees him on his knees, her arms around him, heart pounding into his spine. He presses his cheek towards hers, and there’s a murmur of something in her chest, a momentary rattle. Barely a flicker, but a flicker nonetheless.

“You came back; they didn’t.” Matt swallows, hard, the lump in his throat unbearable. Elektra, alive. Elektra, breathing. Elektra, against him. He stops fighting to get out of her grasp and, instead, tucks towards her more closely. The murmur in her chest takes over even as Frank’s war wages on behind them. “You said you wanted to be good. You have that chance now. Tell them to stop. Tell them to leave.”

Another charge goes off above them, then another. Beams clatter to the floor around them; ninjas land hard against the crates. Frank roars as another small explosion rocks the furthermost corner of the warehouse.

Elektra shakes her head softly, soothed by the sounds of the battlefield. She pulls at his limbs. Matt’s right arm screams in its socket from how she’s twisted it, while his legs burn under him, the strength threatening to give out. He grits his teeth and forces himself to see this through. He can do this. Even as she admits to him, “They’ll never let me go.”

“As if they could stop you,” Matt reminds her, his lips brushing against her cheek. He’s having trouble breathing under her constrictions. “You’re Elektra Natchios. The Black Sky.” He laughs then, the sound twisted and terse from pain radiating up from his legs. “Stuff of Spartans. Best damn warrior Stick ever trained.”

Elektra goes to laugh, but the sound dies in her throat. She holds her face skyward, and it seems, then, that her grip might loosen. That she might let him go, let them all go, and this little war of theirs might end.

Her lips brush against his earlobe. She whispers, “What does it matter, Matthew? What’s the point? Of all of this?”

Strength refills his limbs, and Matt starts fighting back fresh. “To do better.” He frees himself from Elektra’s grasp, rolling forward. He rises back to his feet. She’s still kneeling on the floor, her heart a somber beat in her chest. “So do better.”

Took out eight with the Vanquish. Three with the Sig Sauer before it got knocked out of his hand. Four with the knife. He broke the jaw on one and set the bone with a grenade; sent him running into the depths of the warehouse towards some of his buddies.

They nick him a couple times, but the vest holds against their swipes and slashes. And ain’t none of ‘em getting close enough to stab him.

Frank stalks forward through the stacks. He nabs the Para from where he hid it. The weight of it in his hand is right, good. Don’t know why Red fucked with his guns in the first place. Ninjas are far more concerned in lobbing his head off. Hard to do that with a bullet in their brain.

He takes a second when he can, letting the sounds of the warehouse thunder around him. The Hand isn’t nearly as quiet as Red was during what passed for training in here. Their robes swish and snap, their footsteps scuffle. He pops off a round at the shape flying overhead. Another beam
from the rafters lets loose. Frank dodges that and goes low, dodging a katana swipe to his neck. He sends the knife home into the ninja’s leg, twists, yanks it back, then thrusts up so the blade pops through the guy’s jaw into his brain.

No chance to grab it before he’s fighting again, before he’s barrelling through them, the fuckers. Fuck, he hates ninjas. He never fights ninjas again, it’ll be too damn soon. They’re all Red’s problem from now one.

He’s back by the workbench when he gets a brief moment of calm. His brain runs calculations: got a couple on the rafters, can’t tell how many from all the smoke; two coming from the front, two coming from the side. The fuck are they coming from, at this point? Another explosion rocks whichever ninja was dumb enough to come through the remaining window. Fire forces the others to bottleneck through the stacks, headed his way. Red and his girl are off on their own – fuck. Frank unloads the rest of his clip and swipes a hand under the desk for his other Para. He takes off towards where he last saw them, finds the two of them headed his way.

They’re not fighting. The hell are they up to?

Frank puts the gun on her. The kid steps in the way. “Stand down, Frank. It’s over.”

“It’s not over.” No. Not like this. Not while the undead army’s creeping around. Now while psycho ex-girlfriend over there is calling the shots. She peers over Red’s shoulder at him, eyes narrowed.

Ninjas hover around where they’re standing. One move and their Chosen One loses her pretty face. Frank stares her down as he reminds the kid, “We had a plan.”

“Plans change.”

“People don’t.”

“People can.”

“Not leaving here with any of them still standing.”

Elektra steps out from behind Red. Frank keeps the gun on her as she moves. “Very well,” she says with a toss of her head. The signal has the ninjas lower their weapons, has them stand down.

A wicked smile spreads across her face.

Christ Jesus, he thought Red was fast: Elektra’s faster. Frank blinks and her coat’s open, her hand’s outstretched. A sai whips through the air, landing hard and fast through a ninja’s chest. By the time Frank glances back, Elektra’s got the collar of her shirt pulled over her mouth and nose, she’s got her other weapon drawn, she’s targeting members of her army. Some of them hesitate at first, but it doesn’t take long for the Hand to shift their aggressions towards her. Elektra doesn’t give them a choice.

Red flies after her, the two of them falling into perfect step. Frank holds them in his periphery as he fires, as he fights. Can’t let Red’s Girl get out of sight, not now that she has her claws out. Can’t let Red get stupid, end up with another busted limb. The kid seems to be holding his own next to Elektra: accommodating, anticipating, adapting, same as he did when it was the two of them, him and Frank. But where then Red mimicked that bloody brawler style of a prize fighter, tonight it’s hard to tell the difference between him and the ninjas. Hard to see the difference between him and
The clip empties. Frank switches to his fists. He lays into a ninja’s face until the nose is pulse, the lips are torn, his knuckles are scrapped. Grabs another by the shoulders and puts his legs to work – knee, foot, thigh. Suddenly Red’s there. Back-flipped over or teleported or whatever. “Don’t need help,” Frank says, and Red replies, twisting around behind him to deflect a slash to his spine, “Sure, you don’t.”

Elektra rejoins them. “Still want to finish them all off?”

“Not like this,” Frank grumbles. He pushes Red towards the door of the warehouse, still hanging open on its hinges. Time to get rid of the evidence and get the hell out of dodge before the cops show up.

He dismantles the tripwire before shoving the kid out of the door. Elektra strides past him coolly, hot on Red’s heels, casting a sidelong glance his way as she passes by. Frank tugs the sawed-off shotgun from where it’s hanging over the door, ripping the wire off the trigger. Then he punches the timer on the wall. Steps out. Slams and locks the door behind him.

And they run.

The explosion rocks the ground. Smashes against Frank’s eardrums. He risks hearing loss to nab Red by the scruff of his shirt and guide him back on course when the noise knocks him around. No time to waste, not with the noise they’ve been making. Fucking unimaginable that the cops haven’t arrived yet, but they’re definitely on the way.

They come to a halt once they’ve reached civilization again, when the building provide cover from the streets. Car’s not far, but Frank’s not about to let Elektra know that. She wanders slightly ahead towards the glow of streetlamps, her shadow a curving wisp in the dark. Her breath barely makes a cloud on the winter air. Red stands nearer, catching his breath, both feet firmly on the ground.

Frank rolls her eyes; kid’s lips are tugging up at the corners. “This fun to you, Choirboy?”

Red shrugs. “Fun for you too, Frank.”

Not fun: necessary. But Frank doesn’t disagree anymore than the kid does. Had to put a dent in the ninja army tonight.

Elektra turns around sharply. She pulls the shroud from the lower half of her face. “Must say, boys: you certainly know how to show a girl a good time.”

Frank slips a finger onto the trigger of the sawed-off shotgun. “Night’s not over yet,” he notes.

“Don’t pretend like you’re going to shoot me too,” Elektra coos.

“Who’s pretending.”

Red steps in the way. With his back to the girl. He stays in the way when Frank tries to move around him. Stands his ground when Frank gives him a push, planting more and more weight on his mending leg. “Stand down.”

“Get the hell out of the way.”
“Put the gun down.”

Like hell. Frank takes a step back. Can barely see Elektra’s face through the dark, but he knows her smile when he feels it. The curve of her lips cut a fine line across his abdomen, spills his guts on the pavement. The hell does Red stand being near that? The fuck does he do it – putting himself in the way of falling ceilings and pointed guns, rapists and thieves and killers? Guess having a bleeding heart makes it easier to be cut open.

“This your choice, Red?” Frank has to ask. Didn’t spend weeks planning for a trip through hell for the kid to decide to stay there.

“This is always my choice,” Red replies.

Frank huffs, disappointed in himself. Kid’s not going with her, then. Just standing in the way.

He drops his finger from the trigger.

Red’s stance loosens. He offers the slightest of nods in thanks.

Then Elektra shoves him out of the way.

Frank’s finger hops back on the trigger. He swings the gun to where Red once stood, firing. Elektra kicks the weapon out of the way as the hammer hits the shell. Shot spatters. Some catches her in the bicep and shoulder, but most hits brick and concrete. The gun hits the ground.

Instinct sends Frank’s left hand in front of him, ready to fend off her next attack, but through the din of his blood pounding in his ears, the ringing of her sai as it leaves its sheath, he hears Red rushing toward them. “Elektra, no!”

Frank changes course. Left hand to the kid’s chest to hold him back. Right hand swings to catch Elektra by the wrist.

Snict.

The breath leaves his chest. His vest seems too tight. Cold seeps into his veins. Somewhere, the kid cries out, but he sounds so far away. The world has contracted. Now it’s only her and him, him and her, and the pain is coming. A scream builds through the nerves in his side. Frank balls a fist and throws one last punch, vision cutting to black.

Elektra dodges. She comes in real close, whispering in his ear. The words garble, fade to smoke inside his skull. A pulse of pain in his side, then another: Lisa elbowing him at the breakfast table with a smile on her face, Red’s fevered chest under his knuckles begging for his friend’s life, his own shitty mantra, “Tomorrow. Tomorrow, baby.”

He holds fast to the bitch’s wrist, digging into her pressure points, never once looking away from her face as he does. No way she’s getting her sai back. No way she’s leaving him to bleed out in an alley. No way she’s putting his death on Red’s hands.

The kid seems to have the same idea. He rips Elektra from her own weapon and launches into her with fists and fury. Fuck the ninja shit; this is the Devil that Frank knows, the brawler, the fighter.

Frank ambles over to join, sai still peeking out of his side. Blood chills as it collects in the waist of his pants. He tears Elektra out of Red’s path; she slams her palm into the hilt of the sai,
knocking it even deeper. Frank goes back for more, a little wiser this time. He blocks when she tries to hit him, lands a blow to her face.

She whips back, lips curled in a bloody smirk, her hand heading straight for the sai. Red senses the motion and moves to defend.

Elektra retracts her hands at the last second, and instead kicks Red’s broken leg out from under him.

Frank grabs her by the throat and shoves her against the wall. He places his other hand on the end of the sai, holding it fast against her efforts to pull it out.


Elektra wraps her delicate hands around his wrist. Beaming through the darkness.

Red throws himself into the fray, landing heavily against Frank’s injured side. Pain lets loose and runs rampant, a stampede through Frank’s chest, his shoulders, his arms. The strength leaves his hand. Elektra breaks free. She’s about to do more when the sirens cut through the night, drawn by the sound of the shotgun. "Later," she promises him, running a short distance down the alley before vanishing towards the rooftops in a flurry of acrobatics.

Frank takes a step towards her, but his body refuses to go any further. Red appears under his arm, and Frank instinctively puts him in a headlock. “The fuck are you doing, Red? The fuck are you doing?”

“Saving your life,” Red says, tearing himself out of the lock. He puts Frank’s arm over his shoulders and starts limping out of the alley.

Happy reading!

Chapter End Notes

For those interested in a more explicit version of the events in the alley:

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Oh, my gosh, I thought the Rina chapter was long, but this chapter ballooned. Again, I considered dividing it, but with this, there just wasn’t a suitable break in the events without mucking up the pacing of the finale.

There was a moment, during writing, when I thought my ending was going to completely change, but I decided against it, since I’d already written a fic similar to what I was visualizing. I’m happier with the way the chapter turned out. Without giving away too much, there’s been a lot of moments for Frank to exert his agency and show how much he’s developed. Matt is more flexible, so it doesn’t always show when he’s changing, but he makes a choice here that I thought was really significant. It’s a choice that really altered the tone and the beats in this chapter.

Readers, dear Readers, I thank you. I thank you so, so much. I hope that you are well. I hope that you’re excited. Four more chapters after this! I hope you enjoy!

“Well, [she] was runnin’ after us, I was screaming, ‘Go, go, go!’
But with three of us, honey, it’s a sideshow.
And a circus ain’t a love story. And now we’re both sorry.
(We’re both sorry)
…You were drivin’ the getaway car,
We were flying’, but we’d never get far.
Don’t pretend it’s such a mystery:
Think about the place where you first met me.”

~Taylor Swift, “Getaway Car”

They speed through Harlem.

“Turn, here,” Matt says, to no avail. Frank continues heading south. “There’s a clinic —“

“No going to a clinic.”

“Where are we going?”

No response. The heartbeat in the driver’s seat gets wrapped up in a heady, bloody void. Matt presses his knuckles into the window pane, icing them, distracting himself from the white heat in his leg, from the twisting in his guts. “You can’t just rip that sai out and put yourself back together.” Still no answer. Damn it. “A couple sutures and some Aspirin aren’t going to fix this,
Frank. You need a doctor.”

“Need you to shut up,” the void says, then, after a few ragged huffs of breath, “Need you to let me do what needs doing.”

Matt presses his knuckles even harder into the window. “She doesn’t need killing.”

“Sure as shit doesn’t need you protecting her.”

“I wasn’t protecting her. I was stopping you.” There’s a difference.

“And who’s gonna stop her, Red? You think about that?”

“I tried,” Matt says darkly.

“You tried.” A scoff. “You sent her ass right back to her ninjas and whatever the hell else she’s got planned.”

“All the more reason for you to go to a doctor.”

“And lead her right to their door? Have an army of ninjas show up at your friend’s clinic? You want that?”

“I want you –“

Frank huffs dismissively and continues as if Matt hasn’t spoken: “No way in hell. She wants to come after someone, she comes after me.”

Matt wonders if that’s why he can’t smell bowel. It’s not like Elektra to miss. Killing Frank obviously wasn’t the goal of the attack, but debilitating him somehow, that sounds exactly her style. He tries again, “Where are we going?”

He thinks Frank isn’t going to answer until, “Safehouse.”

“You’re just going to let a blind guy go digging around in your abdomen.”

“Should’ve thought about that, before you got between me and her.”

“I did,” Matt snarls. He got held back. Remember, Frank?

The void in the driver’s seat seethes.

Twenty minutes pass, maybe thirty, and they pull into a back lane. Frank’s out of the car in a flash. Matt follows as quick as he can, but dragging the dead weight of his left leg gives Frank a solid lead. Stairs? Shit. Frank’s charging upward, blood dripping every step. Matt heaves himself up using the bannister.

Frank unlocks the door to a unit, disarming the traps he’s put in place as he does. Matt slips inside; he closes, locks, and arms the door behind them. Water damage wafts through the walls. The building smells of musty carpet, cigarette smoke and animal urine and old shoes. People lived here once but no longer, and the building’s stuck in limbo between development or demolition. Matt slinks further inward to find the space has been rewritten with Frank’s artillery. Bombs and bullets. A one-room war to go with a one-man army.

The steady cycle of ragged breathing nearby catches suddenly, hurbling Frank out of the
“Frank.” Matt hurries, catching Frank on his way to the floor.

There’s a trail of copper behind them: a mixture of blood and chalk; the point of the sai raked a ditch in the drywall from where it sticks out of Frank’s back. “Kit’s in the corner,” Frank mutters. His hard consonants slur from blood loss. He clamps a hand in the front of Matt’s shirt before Matt can retrieve it. Knuckles shake against Matt’s sternum. He feels Frank’s fight for consciousness rattle to the top of his head and the tips of his toes.

“You duffle’s in the trunk of the car,” Frank adds. He shoves the keys at Matt with his free hand. Matt handles them dumbly, his fingertips numb. That cramped knottiness in his guts gives way to a sinking hollow.

Frank’s heartbeat staggers its last several paces. “You get this thing out of me. You patch me up. You get the hell out of here.”

Matt grabs him. Shakes him. “I’m not –“

“You get the hell out of here,” Frank orders.

Then his hand drops off Matt’s chest and he passes out.

The kit’s loaded with a bunch of leftover supplies from the leg. Some of it’s helpful: gauze and suture kits; ointment and antibiotics. Some of its not: vials of medication that Matt can’t identify, dosages he can’t measure. He can find a vein by touch but stabbing it’s a whole other story. That means no IV for Frank, no transfusion, no painkillers. Just Matt tugging at Elektra’s sai. His desperate, unspoken prayer: please, God. Please, let him live.

His focus is punctuated with small blessings. The sai isn’t laced with the Hand’s poison. The blow didn’t puncture any of Frank’s internal organs. Elektra hit a sweet spot above his hip, stabbing through muscle. Painful but not life-threatening. Matt cleans the wound tract. He sutures the exit wound hurriedly. He can’t get the needle threaded for the entry wound. His bloody fingers slick over the thread. The needle slips out of his hand. Matt curses. He grabs another suture kit and rips into it and finally gets Frank’s front closed up.

Antibiotic ointment. Gauze. Bandages. Matt scans through the apartment. Past Frank’s pulse, low and slow but holding steady; through the haze of ammunition. Matt finds a stash of bottled water under a workbench in the corner. The case is half-hidden under a tarp covering the contents of the desktop. Circuitry, electricity – radio? Whatever. Matt grabs the water. He cracks one, forces some down Frank’s throat along with antibiotics and Aspirin. Then he pops an Aspirin for himself and, without missing a beat, he heads for the car.

He returns, heavy laden with their duffels and the last of the supplies. The sound of Frank’s pulse is a relief. Matt loses himself in the sound as drops the bags. He unfolds his cot from the Bronx apartment and hauls Frank off the floor and onto the bed. There’s no blanket and the baseboard heating’s taking forever, so Matt improvises. He balls Frank’s jacket into a pillow and drapes his own over Frank as a blanket.

He surveys the space though there’s no real need. Frank’s shuttered up this safehouse the way he shutters up everything in his life. Walking around the upstairs landing reveals a trapdoor to
the attic, one that’s been nailed shut. The faint scent of gunpowder wafts down, telling Matt he doesn’t want to force his way up or force his way in.

Two bedrooms, one bath, windows boarded up in each. Wires criss-crossing the ceiling with no discernable destination. There’s a terrace off the master bedroom; Frank’s boarded it up, too, for security reasons and strung up some traps that Matt can’t untangle. He thinks, at first, it’s his senses that are the problem, but then it registers that there’s nothing to sense. No gunpowder, no explosives. Whatever’s rigged in the room runs quiet, present only in absence, giving Matt the distinct impression it’s designed for someone other than the run-of-the-mill intruder. Designed for someone who’s arrive from the roof rather than the street, someone who’d kick the door in first and ask questions later.

Someone who’s never been inside the room before, who wouldn’t know what to expect.

Matt gets the message loud and clear – come through the back door, he wants to bust Frank’s ass. He adjusts the strap of his duffel, storms back downstairs, and gets the hell out the same way he came.

Accessing the roof from the outside isn’t difficult. Matt navigates a hurried path up the iron rails, drain pipes, window sills, and eavestrough. Then he throws himself into the sharp bite of winter nighttime, into the loose, open air of a cloudless sky. Heat billows from chimneys and exhaust pipes, but the world on fire is embers doused in impending snowfall and a frigid breeze off the Hudson. Sounds come in crystal clear; Matt can sift through the rattle and bustle, the conversations from passersby, and suddenly, his heart is aching in his chest. The hollow pit in his guts is filled up by one thought: home. He’s home. He’s back in Hell’s Kitchen.

Matt eases into the city. Every step towards the edge of the rooftop brings greater clarity. The streets unfold around him, pathways unraveling from the sounds and smells, all of them leading him back to his apartment. Little dangerous to be heading there tonight with the Hand and Elektra on the prowl, but there are hiding places. Sheds, rooftop accesses, abandoned buildings, places where he can lay low, get out of the cold, keep an ear out for Frank, rest his leg.

Damn it, his leg. There’s a great swell of pain in the shape of Elektra’s boot that shoots all the way to his bone. Matt shuffles back, grimacing. His right knee bobs; he catches himself, but the damage runs hot and cold in his veins. Strength gathers and fades in his limbs. He sinks onto the rooftop ledge in spite of himself, and no sooner is he sitting than the great chasm opens up inside him anew. The city splits down its core, swallowing up the sounds, the scents, everything, leaving Matt on the fringes of nothing. There’s nothing.

Matt throws a fist into the brickwork once, twice, three times before he stops keeping count. A groan looses itself from his lips. Tears well up in his eyes, blood pushes against the underside of his skin, and Matt sits, and he breathes, focusing. Focusing. Hell’s Kitchen is still there behind him, around him, and it’s not going anywhere, not if he can help it.

But he should’ve known. He should’ve known what Elektra was planning in the alley. Should’ve known that she couldn’t be trusted. He should’ve trusted Frank’s instincts, should’ve known that Frank would…should’ve known Frank…

Matt’s senses stir. The city comes back to him, the road home. He’s only a couple of blocks from his own apartment, he’s on a straight stretch with the church. Midtown chatters away in front; the Hudson behind. No other strategic advantages beyond the location, and really, anywhere in Manhattan would do in a fight with the Hand. Yet Frank chose this place, this abandoned brownstone in the middle of Hell’s Kitchen, as his next safehouse. He chose traps that can’t be detected. And his choices walk the same infuriating line between coincidence and significance as
everything else Frank does, but given the choice between the two, Frank is always going to choose significance. Don’t get to take nothing with you, so everything here and now has to mean something.

“Fuck you, Frank,” Matt says. He gets back to his feet, hauls his duffel over his shoulder, and heads back inside.

The sound of the door slamming rouses Frank. “Thought I told you to get the hell out of here,” he mutters.

“Yeah,” Matt replies, throwing his duffel to the floor. An insurgent force against the odour of Frank’s artillery. “You did.”

Less a question than a statement, but one delivered with as much malice as Frank can muster: “So?”

Matt sits down, elevating his leg on the bag. Tears prickle in his eyes – relief, this time. He wipes them aside. “So you want me the hell out? You’re gonna have to throw me out of here yourself.”

“God damn it, Red.”

Matt unstraps his cast, releasing his leg and solidifying his staying there. Frank’s heartbeat soars from across the room. He shuffles around on the cot. Matt holds his ground, waiting for boots to tramp across the floor, for that first good swing. But no matter how geared up Frank’s heartbeat is, he doesn’t get up off the cot. He can’t. Pain or vertigo hold him there until he’s out again, his final sigh promising they’ll discuss this later.


“Want you to get lost,” Frank says predictably. His efforts to minimize the sounds he’s making are useless. Matt hears every catch of his breath, every grunt and groan, as he struggles to hold gauze and wrap bandages at the same time. Lord only knows how the process turns out. Frank certainly doesn’t narrate, nor does he ask for the assistance he needs. He eventually lays back down on the cot and pretends to sleep even as his heart hammers away in his chest like a wild dog in a crouch, about to attack.

Matt offers him antibiotics. Frank nabs at them and takes a swing, one Matt dodges. The pills hit the floor, and when Matt tries to go after them, he gets caught by the neck. He manages to escape, but Frank cuffs him across the cheek for the trouble. “I got it.” No thanks to you. Then Frank groans, twisting on the cot towards the floor.

Matt pushes him back on the cot. “You’re going to rip your stitches.”

Frank pushes right back like he’s gonna rip Matt’s face off, and he doesn’t stop till he’s grunting. Matt feels the damp, cold rush of sweat breaking out across Frank’s skin as if it’s his own. He snatches a fresh capsule and presses it to Frank’s hand; Frank recoils, his sneer audible, but he’s clutching the pill nonetheless. He lays back onto the cot, anger ill-contained by his steady, scraping breath.

“We’ve still got some T3s, if you need them,” Matt says.

Frank snaps, “I’m fine,” even though he isn’t. His pulse is elevated; blood swims thinly
through his veins. Nothing to do but sleep and yet sleep’s the last thing on Frank’s mind.

Matt rolls his eyes. He gathers together the pills and the water and places them on the cot where Frank can reach. Then he limps back towards his side of the room.

He whips around and catches the bottle of pills when it’s chucked at his head.

Gasp.

Matt springs up against the wall. He didn’t mean to fall asleep. He winces, his shoulder tight in the socket, his bones painful in his skin. The fight with Elektra come to the fore.

“Frank?” The gasping quiets. “Frank, are you alright?”

“Fuck off, Red.”

Matt rolls his eyes. “Good. Glad you’re okay.”

He’s about to stand up when, “Why’re you even here, Red? Not keeping an ear out for ninjas. Not playing medic. You looking to answer the door when your girl comes knocking? Give her the grand tour?”

The barb doesn’t work, because they both know it’s bullshit. “Making sure she doesn’t show up and finish your ass off.” Matt talks over him. “And she wouldn’t have the chance to do that –“

“- if you hadn’t been standing in the fucking way!”

“- if you hadn’t gotten in my way!”

“Oh, you want to be the one lying here, that it? Didn’t get enough of my hospitality when you broke your God damn leg? ‘Cuz I’d be happy to give you a taste of this.”

That does it: “No, you wouldn’t, Frank! You know God damn well that’s not what you’re gonna do!”

Frank huffs and puffs. His heartbeat sputtering. Blood loss and pain catching up with him. Matt holds onto the sounds, cradling them between his ears. Hoping they’ll settle back down, that the pain and weakness will overwhelm them. That he’ll remember them later, when this is all over - stifled grunts and stiff fabrics; the bristles of his hair against the pillow; the heat from Frank’s palms, his fingers easing out of fists.

Then the present catches up and Frank is sitting upright. Matt groans. Damn. More shit he should’ve seen coming. “You’re going to rip your stitches.”

Poor choice of words. Frank’s feet hit the floor. He gets himself standing with the help of the wall.

Matt rolls his eyes, the smell of copper flooding his nose. He’ll remember this too. “Now you’ve ripped your stitches.”

Footsteps thud slowly across the floor towards him. Frank carves an inevitable warpath even as his body quakes and crumbles on the way, fizzling Matt’s spatial sense. Blood drops spatter against the weathered tile, a trail of red that traces back, back, through their respective histories.
Matt rises onto his one good leg. He lets his other hang, burning and throbbing, toe brushing the floor in case he needs to balance.

He pretends not to notice how close Frank gets. Pretends that he’s surprised when the hand twists into the front of his shirt. His reaction’s too late; he can tell from the stutter in Frank’s heartbeat, that weird mix of anger and uncertainty and anticipation. No idea what he’s going to do, only that he’s going to do. They both are.

The air swells with everything they could say, the truth and all their evasions from it. Matt knows the script too well by now. “You fight me later,” he starts, only to get tugged by Frank and told, “I fight you now.”

“Later,” Matt promises. “I’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Better not be.”

Matt speaks quietly, trying to keep the room from tumbling down around them, “That’s not what your pulse is saying.”

“How do you know? How the hell do you know that’s what my pulse is saying?” Frank doesn’t sound like himself. The wetness of his voice, every letter dripping, saliva thickened by blood loss. Matt leans closer as Frank rips at him. “I didn’t want this. I didn’t ask for this. I said till you’re back on two feet; you said till we beat your girl. But there’s no beating her your way, Red. And if you’re so good at listening to people’s pulses, you have to know that.”

“She didn’t kill you.”

“Not for lack of trying.”

Matt leans in closer. “You don’t miss; neither does she.”

Frank’s heartbeat falters and redirects, charging ahead with a new strategy. “I had my hand on hers.”

“And you, what?” Matt laughs. “Let her stab you in the hip instead of the heart?”

“I had my hands full at the time.”

Matt shouldn’t be able to feel eyes on him, but Frank’s gaze is a shot through the skull, through the chest. The question bubbles up on Matt’s tongue like blood from a punctured lung, but he can’t. He can’t. There isn’t an answer in the world he’s ready to hear – not a lie, not the truth – as to why Frank held him back.

He leans back on his heel and Frank follows. “God damn, I didn’t want—“ and Frank’s heart leaps into his throat, blocking his next word, his next breath; his head dips limply atop his neck. Matt catches him by the arms as his weight shifts from one limpening leg to the other. Gradually, he draws Frank down until they’re both on the floor together.

Frank still has him. Hell, Frank has him even tighter. He’s going over the ledge and taking Matt with him. So Matt goes. He lays Frank down, then and only then peeling Frank’s hand from the front of his shirt. He slips his hand inside the thin gap between Frank’s fingers, meeting Frank’s grip with his own till their fists are bound up in each other.

Gradually, Frank’s strength wanes; his heartbeat slows. “Tomorrow,” he mutters,
“Tomorrow, tomorrow…”

Matt tightens his grip, holding on and never letting go. Dad’s voice is going in his head – work to do, work to do – but the urgency’s gone. Bleeding’s slow from Frank’s ripped stitches. The work that needs doing is being done right now.


The sunlight feel gray against his skin, murky and diffuse, for which Matt’s grateful. He’s not sure he could tolerate the crisp, diamond chill on his skin, that magnified brilliance of a cloudless sky. The city sounds strange enough as it is. People going about their business, traffic unceasing, and all the while there’s a war going on behind the scenes. Elektra and the Hand, Fisk in Super Max, the denizens of thieves, murderers, drug dealers, and other criminals.

Frank sounds normal. He’s up and moving around, this time with greater success than his charge earlier in the day. Matt hears him tugging at the tarp on the desk, hears him clack and tap and spin some things. Grainy radio static becomes audible, followed by an interplay between dispatch and patrol cars.

Guess Frank got another police scanner to go with his new place. Guess he doesn’t have to worry about someone breaking it now.

Matt creeps down the back of the house, pops through the back door. Voice weave on the police scanner: codes, protocols, SWAT, Queens. More presence in absence; the vagaries speak to the magnitude of the situation. Matt comes to stand at the threshold of the war room, across from Frank, whose respiration perfectly understates the conversation coming through the scanner.

“What’s happening?”

“Prisoner transfer,” Frank replies.

Matt doesn’t ask questions: he states the obvious. “Super max.”

“Yeah.”

No, please, God, no.

“Fisk.”

A long silence. Frank’s unavailable for comment, having seeped out of the room at some point. Matt’s left to his own devices. “How could he arrange transfer that quickly?” He would have known if Fisk was planning to leave the island. Frank certainly would have known. No, this has to be recent. Last night recent. “What happened?”

Frank’s silence makes sense suddenly: he doesn’t know. Matt reaches for his duffel and pulls out his phone. No sooner is it powered up than the notifications pour in: missed calls, text messages, news alerts. Voice mails from Karen, Foggy, and private numbers. He almost throws the damn thing across the room.

“Doesn’t matter,” Frank decides.


Matt puts his phone to sleep again. “Fisk owned Ryker’s. Guards and inmates. How the
hell was there a riot?"

“You really asking that question?” Frank thunders away from the police scanner, advancing on Matt. “Less than twenty-four hours ago, we were beating and blasting the shit out of an ancient ninja army and your wacko ex-girlfriend. Now there’s a prison riot where guards and inmates end up dead, Fisk’s getting his fat ass off the island, and you’re asking how that happened.”

“You sure about that, choirboy?”

Matt shuffles back slightly, away from the jabs of Frank’s respiration against his chest and neck. “Elektra isn’t going after Fisk.” She’s simply used the Hand’s grudges for her own personal gain. “But she’s hoping you will.”

Frank’s silence takes on a horrifying new weight. “You’re not,” Matt says, listening hard for a reaction he can’t detect. Frank’s blotted himself out of the world and left only the march of his heartbeat behind.

“Hard to lay a trap with a prison transfer. Lotta road to cover.”

“Ninjas, Frank,” Matt reminds him.

“And with her on my tail?” Frank shrugs sharply, continuing as if Matt hasn’t spoken. “Two birds, one stone.”

“You’re in no condition to fight.”

Frank’s already strategizing around that part. He comes back with, “And what happens, I don’t go, Red? Her ninjas want Fisk in the ground. It’s a trap for him as much for me.”

“So don’t go. I’ll go.”

“You’ll go.”

“I’ll go. I can get through to her, Frank. I can-“

“Me getting stabbed, that was you getting through to her?”

“That’s why you’re not going.” Matt hates the way he sounds: begging, pleading. Desperate. He puts the mask on, lets the devil out. “I am.”

Frank is an infuriatingly blank space. He stretches his left leg, pressing his foot into the floor releasing a long creak that preys on Matt’s senses. “I go, I fight. Fisk dies, ninjas die, your girl…” he doesn’t say it, but that comes as little comfort to Matt. “You go, you fight. Fisk lives, is transferred, escapes. Gets killed by ninjas.”

“Gets justice.”

“I can’t take that chance.” Frank moves back towards the desk. “I’m going.”

The world on fire burns hotter inside Matt. He stands, planting both feet on the floor, barring the doorway. “Then I’m going with you.”

“To get in my way? Nah. No more. It’s over.”
“It’s not over.” Not for them.

Frank scoffs. “Don’t do this, Red.”

Now who’s begging? “Not doing anything, Frank.”

And just like that, Frank’s back in the room, all of him. Rising temperature and roaring heartbeat and both legs as firm on the floor as Matt’s. He yanks open the desk drawer, slams it shut again, then he marches forward, on a collision course with Matt.

Matt steps forward to meet him. He swings with his right, his left. Goes in with his legs. Frank keeps his injured side out of reach and relies on grapples, locks, one that Matt slips through. He comes around behind Frank and throws his fists towards Frank’s skull. Frank whips around at the last second and tackles him to the floor.

A blow to his stab wound doesn’t deter him: Frank’s on a mission and Matt ends up with his left arm pulled so high on his back the bone is millimeters from being dislocated. He tips forward to ease the pressure and Frank wraps an arm around his neck, then tugs him back while pushing him down. Matt can’t unfold his legs underneath him. He can’t free his left arm. He throws his right fist into Frank’s forearm over and over, but he’s still getting air. He can still breathe. “You call this a chokehold?” he laughs.

Frank bites down near Matt’s ear. His teeth clamp into plastic and pull, freeing something thin and metal and oh, God, Matt’s stomach twists into a knot from the smell. The smell that shoots ice into his veins and narrows his perception to pinpricks and speaks of a blackness so complete Matt almost pukes right then and there.

Last night, on the phone to Elektra, Frank talked about a needle, one Sato left him, and his heartbeat was a straight line as he spoke. All this time, he’s had a trump card, one he alluded to – God, that night with the ammonia, Frank was fingering the desk drawer. He was thinking about it even then – but he’s never used it. Not when Matt was training, not when they were fighting. Not until now.

“No,” Frank says. This isn’t a chokehold.

Then he stabs the needle into Matt’s thigh.

Matt finally gets his left arm free and elbows Frank in the same place Elektra stabbed him. But the damage is done. The needle’s out. A sour cold something is swirling through Matt’s thigh, catching a lift on his bloodstream. “Why?” he asks. “Why would you…why did you keep it?”

“Because I know you,” Frank says from where he looms.

The blackness in front of Matt’s eyes begins expanding, swallowing up his remaining senses. He has minutes before he’s out.

Better make the best of them. Frank knows him so well, he’ll be expecting this.

Matt whips around and attacks.

Happy reading!
I don’t remember the last time a chapter for this fic came together as quickly as this one did. It’s not simply a matter of length, either. I flew through this chapter. I had written it so many times in my head since this fic started that it was easy to put it onto the page. It's been two years since I started posting *It Takes a Village*. I couldn’t have made it this far without any of you, Dear Readers. Thank you for joining me for this long haul, this crazy adventure. Enjoy this chapter! Only three more to go!

“I guess you better go and get your armour.”

~Jordin Sparks, “Battlefield”

Chains twist around him. Motion brings the air crashing down overhead. Matt struggles, but sleep’s bound to him, and try as he might, he can’t get unbound. He sinks deeper under the weight of the restraints, till the musty basin of canvas surrounds him, till the room pushes at his shoulders and catches his hands and reassures him, “Matt, take it easy. Shh…it’s okay. It’s okay.”

Soft voice. Soft hands. Soft wrists. Matt pulls at the fleeting sensory cues, receiving sparks of textures, scents, and sounds before his perception diffuses into smoke. Fighting drains his reserves; his hearing cuts out for several long, dark moments. Is he still in the trunk of the car? No, that was a long time ago. Matt retraces his steps through the fight in the warehouse, the fight in the alley, his mind pausing on the wet snap of Frank’s body around Elektra’s sai. Her voice – low, husky, coiling like smoke, the words lost under the sound of his attack.

Then Matt rushes back into a grapple with a wool coat and scuffed up shoes; with cheap shampoo and cheaper soap.

Heartbeats ram against Matt’s ear drums, and it takes him hearing his name again to finally figure it out. He tugs his arms away even as he tightens his grip. “Foggy?”

That voice: “Lie down, Matt.” The slight push to his biceps. Matt starts to do as he’s told. He falls more heavily into the grip at any rate, his strength draining as Foggy holds strong and sees him back onto the cot.

Dizziness obscures the room. Matt fixes his senses on Foggy, his chest aching with familiarity, with difference. Frank Castle’s heart never stepped so lightly; his grip always left bruises. “What are you doing here?”

“Castle called me.”

Matt’s focus wavers. He can’t keep his thoughts and perceptions clear at the same time.
“Called you?”

“Yeah. Said you were trying to go after Fisk, but you were in no condition to do it.” Foggy tugs the blanket back up to Matt’s shoulders. The warmth is almost enough to put Matt back to sleep. “He wasn’t lying.”

Matt huffs, marveling at how easily Frank makes his own truth. He nudges the blankets off his shoulders with arms that feel too heavy for the rest of him. His senses seem to recede with it, riding the edge of the blanket like debris in an outgoing tide. “And you just…you came?”

Eyeroll. A powerful one. The centre of gravity in the room rolls from the floor to the ceiling. “No. I almost didn’t take the call. And then I almost hung up because the Punisher phoned me. You remember – the guy who blew up half the city and then declared in a court of law that he wouldn’t stop blowing up the city? The one who shot you in the face?”

“Was a long time ago…”

“What?”

Panic races through Matt. He remembers himself. “Nothing.”

Foggy gets back on track. “I didn’t just drop everything and rush over here. I had to really think about why the hell I would do something like that. Why the Punisher would call and tell me to do something like that.”

Matt senses he’s being asked a question, one he can’t answer. Calling Foggy doesn’t make sense, not with how well and firmly he’s been dosed. “I don’t know.”

He doesn’t listen for if Foggy believes him or not, and Foggy doesn’t give him much of an opportunity. “Do you know where we are?” Foggy asks. “Do you know how many bullets there are in this room?”

“Lots.”

“Lots!”

“Explosives, too,” Matt adds.

Foggy slaps a hand against the frame of the cot and stands up, furious. His heartbeat isn’t so light on its beat anymore. “Why? Why do you always do that? Why do you always make it worse?”

The tone in Foggy’s voice, the one of genuine hurt, of betrayal – it doesn’t matter that it was a bad joke that caused it, Matt can’t stop the giant pang of guilt putting his abdominals in a vice grip. “Sorry. I’ll stop.” There’s more. Something else he’s supposed to say. Foggy’s respiration lies in wait. “I don’t know why he called you. I’m sorry that he did. I’m sorry that you came.”

Now it’s Foggy’s turn for guilt. He stops walking, his volume dropping low, dropping quiet, as if there’s a volume where Matt won’t be able to hear how bad he feels. The accusing tone comes back as quickly as it disappeared. “Have you been in Hell’s Kitchen this entire time?”

“No. We got here last night.”
“Just in time for Fisk to arrange a transfer.”

Damn it: Fisk. Matt’s mind plays catch-up with the last things he remembers before passing out. Most of his memory is the sting of floor against his kneecaps and Frank warbling boredly for him to stay down, Red. “That’s not…” Matt struggles out of the thought before he can feel the blackout again, that terrifying curtain over his remaining senses. Shit, it’s still happening. His memory of what Foggy’s said diffuses. Matt clings to the current topic of conversation. “We didn’t know that was going to happen.”

Foggy’s heart charges out of hiding. “Did you have something to do with it?”

The force of the question knocks the air clean out of Matt’s chest. “How could you ask me that?”

“Did you?”

“No!” but Foggy doesn’t buy it. Matt clarifies. “Not…not directly.” He works frantically against the rising tide of Foggy’s retreating footsteps. “It was Elektra. We fought her last night.”

Accusation gives way to understanding. “There was an explosion in the Bronx. That was you?”

Matt sighs with gratitude. “Yes.”

“She got away.”

“Yes.”

“And then she went after Fisk?”

“So that we would go after Fisk.”

“You just used the word ‘we’ five times to talk about you and Frank Castle!”

Matt rolls his eyes, his memory improving. “Four.”

A Foggy-shaped burst of energy in the world on fire splits through the dank haziness of Matt’s senses. “Stop doing that!”

“What do you want me to say?” Matt asks lazily, his jaw slackening. God, he’s so tired, and he can’t afford to be tired. Fisk’s transfer is probably well underway. All-out war has probably broken out on the rooftops as the Hand seeks retribution for what happened in the Bronx.

“I don’t want you to say anything,” Foggy snaps, and Matt’s hearing is back on him again. “You said everything you needed to over the phone.”

Matt wills himself not to go there. To the raised voices and the muffled sounds of Foggy tearing up. “What time is it?”

Miraculously, Foggy lets his attention be diverted. “Little after eleven.”

“Fisk’s transfer?”

“Underway. Finally.” Foggy heaves another sigh. His shoulder slump inside that new,
expensive coat of his. “Wasn’t enough red tape to keep him at Super Max. Not after the riot this morning.”

Matt sits up. He stays his course even as the world careens unsteadily around him. “I have to leave.”

“Of course you do.”

He swings his feet onto the floor, but he stops himself from rising. Something’s missing. Something’s wrong. Matt reaches, patting down his left leg. The cast. His cast is gone. He scans the room in search of it and comes up with nothing.

Damn. “He took it.”

“Who took what?”

“My cast. Frank took it.” Matt buries his face in his hands. Even though the haze of sedation, he can hear the warning screech of his bone inside his skin, feel the impression of Elektra’s boot where she knock his foot out from under him.

He doesn’t have time. For any of it. For the pain or the drugs or Frank’s games or Foggy’s feelings. “I have to go.”

Foggy catching him by the arms gives him an excuse to sit back down on the cot, but Matt was headed that way anyways. His thighs aren’t ready to hold his weight, and he can’t shake that anchor around his neck, the one dragging him down, down, down…

“Stay down,” Foggy says, and Matt quakes when he does. “You’ve been out since I got here. Completely insensate. What the hell happened? Did he-?”

“Frank gave me something.” Matt waves a hand before Foggy can get too carried away with the confession. “I’m fine. It’s fine. It’s wearing off. Moving’ll help. I have to go.”

“He drugged you.”

Why is Foggy so hung up on that? “I’m the only one –“

Another eyeroll flips the room again. “Who can save the city.”

Matt grabs Foggy before he can walk away: “The only one who can stop this! You really think Fisk is going to get transferred to another prison? This is an opportunity for him to escape. And that’s if the ninjas and the Punisher don’t tear this city apart trying to get to him first.”

“And who’s fault is that?”

“You’re right. It is my fault. So let me fix it. Let me fix all of this. Fisk, Elektra, the Hand, Frank – all of it.”

Foggy tears himself out of Matt’s limpening fingers and walks away from him.

“Foggy, don’t –“ Matt bites down on his bottom lip. Hard. Waking himself up and shutting himself down at the same time. Damn it, Foggy, don’t…what? Don’t walk away? Don’t take this personally? Don’t be like this? Every way he could possibly end that statement makes him an idiot, and he is an idiot. He’s an idiot for letting this get so out of control.
“I’m sorry.” The words are out of his mouth before he can stop them. Tears well up in his eyes. Matt grips his knees to keep from falling back into the wall, to remind himself that the world is a still, still place even as his head spins round and round. He can’t hear Foggy’s footsteps, can barely make out Foggy’s heart over the wet thrust of blood into his skull. The strain of his emotions bobbing on the surface, unable to be buried beneath the chemical fugue.

“I’m sorry,” he says it again, but Foggy’s still retreating the same way he did when he found out about the mask. The same way Frank retreated when things got messy, useless, needy. Matt grips the frame of the cot, mentally promising to tear this safehouse down when the night’s over. He’s going to tear down all of Frank’s safehouses and all of Elektra’s properties. He’s going to make sure they have nowhere else to go in this city.

Just like him.

And Foggy – Foggy can go back to his new life, his new job, his new coats and shoes and girlfriend, but before he goes, he’s going to have something torn down too. “I’m sorry for the phone call. Not what I said but…but for how I said it. You…you didn’t deserve that.”

Matt can feel Foggy’s eyebrows moving into that inverted V shape right before he says, bewildered, “You think this is about the phone call?”

“What…” Matt wracks his brain. “What else would it be about?”

Gesturing: violent gesturing. Matt can’t figure it out until, “You can’t even stand up right now!”

“I need…”

“What? What do you need?”

Do I have to spell it out for you? and don’t make me say it flash through Matt’s brain in brilliant, burning letters. “Help,” Matt snaps, “I need help. I can’t…can’t do this alone, but this is something I have to do. Please. Help me fix this. Help me make this right.”

“Help you fight a war. One you’re in condition to be fighting.”

“But one only I can fight. Fisk and Elektra’ll burn through the cops; Frank is going to burn through them. All three of them will burn through the city. You know that. I have to go. Now.”

“And do what? How are you supposed to help the city like this?”

Matt has no idea. The thought of trying overwhelms any actual plans. His mind is sluggish to respond when he tries to think of possibilities. “The suit and mask are in my duffel. The man who made them for me, he’s been working on a brace for my leg. Take me to him. I’ll make my way to the East Side from there.”

“You. Can’t. Stand.”

“So give me a ride to the East Side!”

Foggy takes a deep breath, and Matt can hear what he’s about to say before he doesn’t say it. Just as well, since if they start on the subject of what the hell is wrong with you, they’re going to be there all night.
“You wanted to be involved,” Matt reminds him.

“It’s too late for that,” Foggy warns.

“But it’s not too late for this. There’s no law that can stop the fight that’s coming, not without help. So I’m going. And you might be able to hold me back right now, but eventually these drugs are going to wear off, and the city is going to be caught in a crossfire and more people are going to get hurt. And there won’t be an opportunity to being people to justice: not Elektra or Fisk –“

“Or Frank?”

Matt sighs. Swallows. “Or Frank.”

“You really think you can help if you go now?”

The devil emerges: “I think Frank Castle called you for a reason, and I don’t know what it is, but right now we are doing exactly what he wants.”

Foggy doesn’t say anything. His heartbeat hangs squarely in the room, a persistent thump-thump-thump that won’t give up, even when Matt’s given him nothing but reasons to do so.

He groans then, loudly. “Why? Why do I want to do this for you!?”

“Because Frank Castle doesn’t want you too.” Foggy scoffs. Matt offers another answer more forcefully: “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

It’s the wrong answer: “Driving you to your death is not the right thing to do!”

“I am not going to die!”

“You don’t know that!”

“Neither do you!”

“Wilson Fisk? Ninjas? Your ex-girlfriend, the NYPD, and the God damn Punisher?! Against one drugged-up guy with a broken leg.”

“Who else is there? Who?”

“You are such an asshole.”

“I said I was sorry about the phone call.”

“This isn’t about the phone call!”

“I’m sorry that Frank dosed me. I’m sorry that I broke my leg. I’m sorry about the riot at Super Max, that Fisk’s being transferred. I’m sorry about Elektra and ninjas and the attack on Metro General and…and Nelson and Murdock and Frank’s case. I’m sorry for all of it, Foggy! I’m sorry!”

Matt gasps sharply, the tears a cold shock on his cheeks. His saliva thick in the back of his throat. His head spinning, his limbs heavy, his guts churning. He claws at his cheeks, drags his aching, spinning head out of his hands, but looking gathered and feeling gathered are two very different things. Especially with Foggy Nelson’s Little Engine That Could heartbeat in his ears racing forward, forward, forward, still holding on, still fighting the good fight. Still there, in the room with him.
It’s worse, somehow. God, why is it worse?

“Help me.” Matt says it to distract himself, and it works. His entire being falls in line behind the thought. His city is in trouble, and he is going to save it. “Help me make this right.”

Foggy’s heartbeat is his only response.

Happy reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

Oh, my gosh, there’s only two more chapters. Two. I can’t believe it. I’m anticipating a finish date in mid-July, if all goes well.

Part of me wants to reread this chapter another thousand or so times, but I’m cross-eyed and in the midst of report cards and it's not getting better at this point, just differently worded. LOL.

Some music for this fic was a struggle to find. I scoured lyrics for the right words. Sometimes I searched strictly based on title. However, this track has been on my Spotify for months. It was one of those serendipitous finds from CBC Radio 2 (a station that never fails to supply songs for this fic). “Why We Fight” by the Fast Romantics speaks to so much of Frank and Matt’s relationship. I’ve been itching to use this track, to write this chapter, for so long, and now it’s finally happened, and there’s only two more chapters after this oh, my God…

Readers, dears Readers, you are my sun and my moon. You are everything. I would never have made it this far without you. Thank you. Please, enjoy.

“Now every morning when I wake up,
I put another bullet in my coffee cup.
   Oh, come on, darlin’ –
   There’s a war on our t.v.
But it’s alright: in our bedrooms, we are free.
   Deep in the guts of me
   I love you violently
   Until the dawn’s early light.
   This is why we fight.”

~The Fast Romantics, “Why We Fight”

Frank has eyes on the Queensboro Bridge, on the traffic blockades. He slipped through the police perimeter in a stolen uniform, passing himself off as one of the ESU snipers on the rooftops. Five that he can see. No, four. Three. Two.

None. The snipers vanish, snuffed out by shadows.
Frank pulls away from his scope. He slips his hand off the rooftop ledge towards his sidearm. Shot at her is worth a shitstorm with the NYPD, not that there will be one. Those snipers on the neighbouring rooftops didn’t take themselves out.

If she sees him move, she doesn’t do anything about it. Her eyes creep down his spine, a blade all their own. No footfalls, no puffs of breath. Only way to know she’s creeping is from the chill rustling through him. “Flying solo tonight, Mr. Castle? Quelle surprise.”

Frank steps back from the ledge, gun at the ready, to find Elektra standing pretty on the ledge to his left. The wind catches her ponytail, the panels of her armour. She draws the shroud from the lower half of her face revealing the cut of her smile and unleashing the furious hunt in her eyes.

He scans the shadows around them just to be certain, but he doesn’t waste much time. Doesn’t have to. Elektra tells him to relax: “Just you and me tonight. The Hand will mind the perimeter, make sure the NYPD doesn’t interrupt. They’re looking forward to this, particularly after I told them what you did to their brethren at the warehouse.”

“More where that came from,” Frank says, tensing his finger on the trigger. The Hand running interference means there’s no reason to play it quiet: he isn’t gonna kill the NYPD, but he is gonna lay waste to every ninja on the planet if it’s the last thing he does.

Elektra hops off the ledge of the rooftop to take a stroll. “Would have thought Matthew would join you.”

“He wasn’t up to it.”

She laughs. A wild gleam lights her eyes. Tonight is turning out better than she expected. “No, he wouldn’t be, would he? Not after you got through with him.”

Frank doesn’t say anything, certainly not how after he got through with him, the devil couldn’t stand. Couldn’t talk. Couldn’t move. Kept trying to do all those things, of course, rising only to fall. Knees snapping against the floor with every attempt to fight. Never gets easier, seeing a fighter like Red on the ropes, knowing you’re the one that put ‘em there.

Wonder if she ever felt like that. Like she broke something. Devil’s never been played nice with a moment in his sad, sorry life, and she definitely dealt her fair share of blows.

Elektra raises a brow, intrigued. She passes a gaze around the surrounding rooftops. “Did you tie him up somewhere? I bet Matthew loved that. Nothing he likes better than being in knots.” Her voice lowers to a conspiratorial whisper. “The tighter you hold him, the more he likes you. And you’ve been holding onto him very tightly.”

“He’s been holding on to me,” Frank corrects her. Then, before she take another shot, “Jealous?”

She tosses her head, but there’s a deliberateness to her movement that turns the action into a confession. “He wasn’t holding onto you when you stormed my penthouse.”

“But he came running right back. No matter how hard I try to get rid of him, the Devil always comes back to me. Hell,” he tracks a gaze across on her zombie face, the better to see her expression twisting with disdain, “I killed the doctor and that didn’t get rid of him. He do that for you? Come running back after you put someone in the ground? Don’t tell me you’ve never done it.”

“The doctor was nothing.”
“Nobody’s nothing to him, sweetheart. Figured you knew that by now.”

Elektra scowls at him. Her eyes narrow to blades. Then she cools, stretching a long leg to move in a slow circle around him. Off the ledge, into the ring. “It’s so easy, isn’t it?”

She waits for him to ask what; Frank doesn’t give her the satisfaction. He fires on her. The prongs of one sai wrap around his hand, dislodging the gun. He reaches with the other towards his ankle, but Elektra lobs a blow to his stab wound. Then to his neck. Then the gun’s gone; Frank loses track of it in the blur of Elektra’s movements.

“Matthew plays dumb, seems soft,” she says as Frank kicks himself to his feet, catching her by the wrist before she can stab him. Elektra uses his momentum against him. She tugs him forward, twists, then flips him over her shoulders, back onto the roof. “He goes through life like the walking wounded. You can’t decide if it’s better to put him out of his misery or put him through more of it.” They’re grappling. She punctuates her sentences with blows to his head, his chest, his stab wound. Blood bursts under his vest, draining into the waist of his pants. Frank gets his licks in where he can, but fuck, she’s fast. Faster than Red by half. “And he lets you do it. He lets you hurt him. So he must be stupid. He must be soft. And what’s the use in destroying him?”

She wraps an arm around his neck and slips the point of the sai into his armpit, into that place where the vest stops. Delicately, patiently, she drives her point home. Frank tugs at her hair, her neck, her face, the white heat lancing through his chest.

“Wait long enough, you think,” Elektra hisses in his ear, thoroughly unfazed, “and the world will destroy him. He lets it, just like he lets you.”

Frank is fighting with her when she vanishes. She simply slips into the air, taking her weapon with her, and she doesn’t reappear until he’s back on his feet.

She doesn’t kill him. The hell doesn’t she kill him? Fuck, she came here to talk, didn’t she?

“But he doesn’t break.” Guess they’re talking. “Not ever. Not from you, not from the world. And the misery that once seemed so appealing no longer holds its sway. Best to stop it. To deflect the misery. He says not to kill—” Frank deflects a blow, “so you don’t.” He punches her; Elektra lets the blood stream from her split lip, “He begs for mercy, and you give it. Suddenly, without even realizing, you’re bending, you’re breaking. And you’re letting it happen. You’re letting him do it.”

She skids to a halt and turns, her delicate profile cutting a harsh line against the city. Battle-hardened eyes and cheeks like blades, brow relaxed in contemplation. Frank stops, his body numb despite the adrenaline, despite the pain, and something like hopelessness rises up inside him from tilting at this fucking windmill, from going to war with the ocean. He wanted to know if she felt it, that sense of being out to sea, adrift, and all the while she wanted to know if he felt like he could have, would have, should have destroyed the kid when he had the chance. Back when he believed the stupidity was just stupidity.

Frank half-expects Red to drop in at that moment. Make some smartass remark playing on his fucking nickname. The stillness that follows is disappointing. And it’s disappointing that he’s disappointed.

“I don’t break,” he says.

Elektra shoots him a sidelong glance. She’s disappointed too. “That’s what I thought too, before I died for him.”
“So, what? That’s why I’m here? To die for the Devil?”

The look on her face: the sour purse of her lips, the glint of steel in her eyes. Disappointment for a whole other reason. She’s all but spelled it out for him, and he still doesn’t know what the hell she’s talking about.

The lights of Fisk’s prison transport spark into view on the far side of the bridge. Elektra cools and eases back into the night, her head tilting towards the sniper rifle. Frank glances between her and the weapon, to the lights in the distance. Their shared resignation lingers. This war isn’t a war at all. It’s a fight to see who gets to drown the other before the Devil shows up to reap whoever’s left.

Frank stalks forwards, dragging one foot behind him. Elektra on his left, Fisk approaching down the street to his right. She’s too fast for him to take them both with the rifle, and Fisk’s transport isn’t going to wait for a fight. He gets one or the other.

“You’re wrong,” Frank says, taking up his post by the rifle.

“How so?” Elektra asks.

“Dying for the Devil - that’s not breaking.”

The tires of the police escort and the prison transport: he makes a good show of tracking them, counting. Matter of seconds till they’re over the bridge. Two minutes till they’ve passed by his perch and are out of range.

“One batch, two batch; penny and –“

Frank whips the rifle around to where Elektra’s standing. She’s advancing on him with a drawn sai.

_CRACK._

The rifle slams to the side, bullet firing into the darkness. Sparks fly from where a metal rod makes contact with the gun barrel. The Billy club ricochets, slapping into Elektra’s flying sai before soaring back to the shadow falling from the adjacent rooftop.

Elektra’s joy lights up the rooftop and fuck, she gives the kid a lead-in with, “Speak of the devil.”

The Devil lands in a crouch, rising. His horned silhouette blots out the stars in the sky. The red of his armour beams from the streetlight bouncing off the snow. “And he shall appear,” he says.

Frank can’t even be bothered to roll his eyes. He’s disappointed again, differently this time. Less acutely. “Fuck, of course he does.” Then he grabs Elektra and they start on each other.

The Billy slams back into the rooftop near Frank’s feet. He ignores it – a mistake. The club flies back to Red, but the wire, the God damn wire, lopes around his leg and rips him off his feet. Frank skids across several feet of rooftop, scrambling for purchase, for Elektra. He abandons his efforts, rolling, turning his attention back to Red.

The kid strides across the rooftop on two feet, weight balanced evenly. No sign his limbs have ever been broken. Frank spots the hardware running between his left ankle and knee because he knows to look for it. Red’s armourer does good work. The piece he constructed fits over the Devil suit, splints running up both sides of the leg held in place with several bands. Solid enough for Red
to walk, but the kid still favours his fists when he dives into the fight. He battles Elektra back with punches and blocks, finally getting the better of her with a kick to the chest she doesn’t anticipate.

Frank takes his time coming up behind the kid, gauging. He tests a few blows, bolstered by Red’s staggered reaction time. “Looking a little tired there.”

Red grabs him, wraps around him, and they drop like a tonne of bricks. Can’t see what his eyes are doing through the mask, but Red’s hands are shaking at his sides, struggling to remain fists. “I’m managing.”

Elektra springs from the side; Frank tugs Red down and out of the way before she pounces on them. “Not well enough.”

Red tears himself out of Frank’s grasp, catching Elektra when she makes a dive for Frank. Shit, they’re mirror images of each other. Less a fight than a fucking conversation. And just like in a conversation, the kid draws her in, draws her in, draws her in, till there’s no one else but them on the rooftop. Till her attention is fixed on him.

Frank double times it across the roof. He latches onto the rifle. Lines up a shot on the first cruiser in Fisk’s convoy. He doesn’t say it, doesn’t give Red a chance to break from his shit with Elektra. It’s a silent one batch, two batch, penny and dime; a faint, “NO, FRANK!” from behind him, then three shots in rapid succession.

Tires blast out from under vehicles. One cruiser whips into the other. The armoured vehicle slams into the escort vehicles. If Fisk had guys on the street, they’d be rushing out in the open now; no one does. The Hand has the whole route under lockdown.

Darts bring the officers down. The ninjas ensure he’s got no competition from other snipers to worry about. Air support’s fluttering back around. He hasn’t got much time. Less when Red gets to him, grabs him by the back of his vest and rips him around. Frank punches him, knocks him back. The kid doesn’t give much ground. Not that there’s much to give when Elektra thrusts herself back into the fray.

Immediately, Frank switches tactics. And so does Red. They’re on her, one running offence while the other runs defence. Frank’s efforts to kill Elektra thwarted by Red; his efforts to deflect Red thwarted by Elektra. At one point, Frank has the dynamic ninja duo in his grip; Elektra has one hand in Red’s face and the other on Frank’s neck; Red’s grabbing her and Frank’s arms.

“For fuck’s sake, this is the dumbest –“

“Then stop,” Red tells him.

“You’d better,” Elektra says joyfully. Her eyes dart around Frank to the street. A loud pounding echoes from the vehicle. “Sounds like Wilson’s about to make his escape. You don’t go fast, the Hand will have no choice but to do your job for you.”

“Frank, no.”

“Frank, yes.”

“Oh, Jesus…” the two of them. Frank gets the fight going again by kicking Elektra. Red immediately intervenes; Frank swings the kid’s ass around till his boots hit the rooftop ledge.

He should stop. But even as the thought’s occurring to him, Frank can’t. He pushes, and the kid lets him push, and God damn, the fucking minx’s voice is in his head: he lets you do it. Red
lets him push, so Frank pushes. He pushes past the rage for the fucking Devil and the people that make him, the people that define him. The city, Red’s city. This fucking city. The same God damn city that took his wife and kids, that took Red’s dad, that took Red’s girl; that damn near took Red a couple of times. The city opens up beneath Frank, a great gaping maw that narrows to a pinprick in the centre of Red’s snarling face.

A hand on his bicep, an arm around his neck. Frank pushes and Red lets him push, lets him push until Frank feels his centre of gravity tilting the slightest bit forward. Then the Devil’s face dips. Light hits the glassy red sockets of his eyes. His left foot hits the rooftop ledge.

Red smirks.

He kicks.

He takes Frank over the ledge.

Frank goes with him.

The fall doesn’t come immediately. There’s a moment’s hesitation when Frank’s feet leave the ground but gravity has yet to take hold. Red’s hands are occupied. He has no defences against broken bones, nothing. He’d sooner take the fall than risk anyone’s safety.

Even Frank’s.

Frank tells himself it’s the ease of the attack. When that doesn’t work, he thinks of the mission. By the time he runs out of excuses, time’s caught up with him. The city has them both and drags them straight down towards the concrete. Frank shifts a hand around the back of Red’s neck; he thrusts the other into Red’s chest, striking the soft spot under the shoulder instead of sternum.

Red looses the arm from the back of his neck and gives Frank a firm shove. His Billy zips into action, clanging against something above them. Gravity tears Frank off Red, slamming him into the concrete; the Devil swoops overhead, dropping into a crouch a short distance away.

Frank doesn’t waste time unpeeling himself from the pavement. Doesn’t think about pain, ignores the blood running down the back of his neck, the twisting of his guts. He throws himself at the fucking Devil. Fists and feet, anything to break through the kid’s lightning quick defences. Nothing works. “Couldn’t just let me have him. Couldn’t just lie your ass down.” Frank finally lands a blow to the kid’s stomach, earning a satisfying gasp in response. Red falls limply into Frank’s grasp, winded and disoriented. Frank leans in close. “Couldn’t just stay with Nelson.”

A smirk: bloody, dazed. “He drove me. Couldn’t wait to leave.”

“Makes two of us.”

Red laughs. “That why you called him? So he’d get rid of me?”

“So I could get rid of you.” Frank tears his hands off the kid, scalded. Stained. Fuck, the Devil. The fucking Devil. Took him straight to the ground. Makes it more satisfying, then, when the kid’s smirk vanishes. Frank sees it clearly in his mind’s eye, the face under the mask. Sees the twist of hurt, of betrayal, of guilt. Worse than a broken leg, than a murdered doc. All of it directed at Frank.

Guess his heartbeat didn’t give him away this time. Tell the kid his real reason for calling
Nelson, Frank knows exactly where all the rage is gonna point itself, and he wants the Devil all for himself.

The expression comes back into the kid’s face: resolve, this time. He launches into Frank’s chest as metal screeches over brickwork. Elektra hits the dumpster and tumbles into the fray, and fuck if it isn’t a repeat of the rooftop. Killing blows interspersed with defensive manoeuvres. Elektra’s quick jabs, Red’s punches and blocks. She loses one sai to the kid but manages to keep the other. Frank navigates their motions with brute force; it’s his only advantage against all the ninja shit.

It works for the most part. Red’s reserves eventually give out. Frank gets him in the jaw and Elektra sweeps his legs, knocking him out of the fight. She takes his place, fast enough and strong enough to make up for Red’s absence. Her sai cuts through his vest, slashing open the skull. Frank boots her sai-wielding hand into the brick hoping to break it; Elektra grabs him by the back of the head with her remaining hand and slams him into the same wall.

Frank recovers to a throbbing skull, a bloody brow, and Elektra’s claw under his jaw. He whips the sai away. Elektra laughs. “You point that at me, you better be willing to use it.”

She bares her teeth when she smiles. “Oh, I am willing. But I already told you.” She leans in, lowers her voice to a whisper, and this time, now that he’s not being stabbed, Frank hears her loud and clear: “I’m going to watch him destroy you.”

Heat rushes up through his chest like a fucking hydrogen bomb. “Keep watching,” he dares her.

She’s about to, but a yell suddenly breaks from the street. A yell they both recognize.

Frank’s whole body goes cold.

“Matthew,” Elektra whispers.

They both take off running.

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Happy Reading!
Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

After several massive rewrites, it became apparent that these events needed two separate chapters. Since the beginning of this story, I’ve really tried to give the emotional beats space, to let them stand on their own, and there’s A LOT of beats landing – literally and figuratively – so I divided the action between two chapters.

Also I’m going to need an epilogue.

So my original projection of only two chapters left is inaccurate. There’s actually three chapters left after this one. Oy. On the bright side, most of the next chapter is already finished. I just need to fine-tune the chaos that comes with writing an all-out war (for those playing the home game, that’s surprise #857 in this story).

Readers, dear Readers, it has been an absolute pleasure to have you on this journey with me. I am still aiming to finish this fic by the end of July. I do hope you enjoy this chapter.

Cheers!

~Imagine Dragons, “Warriors”

Matt’s cheek drags against the ground as he lifts himself up. He relishes the small nip of cold, the clean kiss of concrete. He centres his thoughts there, in the chill, away from the oil slick of his thoughts, the quicksand sink of his perception. Melvin warned him the brace would be uncomfortable, but the clamps at his knee and ankle hurt, throb. His attention gets caught, as poorly circulated as the blood in his shin.

He pushes himself up without really thinking, muscles sore with fatigue but drawn to the sounds of Elektra and Frank’s melee; the distant shouts of cops cut short by katanas and snapping bowstrings. The pounding on the street has stopped, replaced with a trundle of heavy footsteps, a behemoth of polyester and prison detergent looking for cover from the tufts of ninja breath bearing down from the rooftops.
War in every direction. Matt twists between them, weighing his options, but then a bowstring snaps from the rooftops above, an arrow shatters against the pavement near the lumbering giant in the street. And if that’s not an invitation, Matt doesn’t know what is, because he’s running. Praying that Elektra and Frank don’t kill each other. Praying the ninjas take some mercy on the cops. Praying walking target Wilson Fisk manages to find cover.

Fisk’s heart is a drum line with its own set of acoustics. Like Frank, it spikes and dives on a dime, but unlike Frank, the sound of Fisk’s heartbeat funnels through his neck, and his whole bassline gets a tinny twist. The sight of the Devil causes an immediate change in rhythm.

“You!” Fisk shouts. “I was told you were dead!”

“You were told wrong,” Matt says, leaping into action. The Hand fires down around them from both sides of the street, so he wrangles Fisk out of the way.


It’s not like the prison. Matt wasn’t prepared then, not for the lunge of Fisk’s heart or the sudden explosion of power from across the table. And even then he couldn’t respond, not as Matt Murdock. But as the Devil, Matt slips out of Fisk’s grasp. He follows the slash of arrows on the air, smirking when he notes the sudden change of the arcs, the frustrated recalculations of ninjas. Orders to contain or kill Fisk competing with orders not to harm the Devil.

Matt’s blood goes warm, and the warmth blankets the pain in his leg, and every pump of his heart, pull of his muscle, snap of his knuckles; every close call, every narrow gap between Wilson’s hands and the ninja’s arrows, they becomes his prayers. Matt plants several punches on Fisk’s abdomen, kidneys, thighs. He runs the Billy wire around Fisk’s neck and tugs, hard, away from an arrow.

They tuck behind a bus stop on the far side of the street. The plexiglass gives them some cover, but that doesn’t stop the Hand from trying to break it. Matt hears their breath streaming off the rooftops like the run-off from a bullet-riddled water tower. Some travel to the surrounding streets, holding down the perimeter against the NYPD. Others hold a perimeter around him and Fisk.

Fisk reaches; Matt dodges, realizing too late that Fisk’s leg is headed his way. A strong kick lands him on the pavement, knocking the breath straight out of his lungs. He tears hard on the Billy, earning a sputter and a tilt from Fisk. Matt uses the time to scramble out of range. The move works until Fisk charges forward and drops his foot hard onto Matt’s chest.

Ribs crunch. Matt lets out a yell. Fisk’s heart rains down upon him from above. “I was going to save you for last. Destroy your cops and your judges, your lawyers. Before I raze your city to the ground!”

Matt yanks the Billy hard to the left. Fisk chokes on those words. “Poor planning, Wilson. You want the city, you have to go through me.”

Fisk lets out a choked bark of a laugh, the snapped leg irons on his ankles clinking as he winds up for another blow. “With pleasure!”

Dodging the stomp is easy. Dodging the next is not. Matt drags his legs out of the way, but Fisk still captures his left ankle under the soft sole of a prison-issue shoe.

The brace stabs into his leg.
Matt refuses to scream. He puts all the pain and rage into the fight for his leg: tugging at the wire on Fisk’s neck, kicking Fisk with his good leg. The pressure on the brace increases with the rest of Wilson’s weight, threatening to snap the hardware, threatening to twist the leg, threatening to break him anew. Fisk absorbs the impact, shockwaves rippling through his gigantic form, giving Matt the clearest sense of their growing proximity. Goliath bearing down on David.

Matt bucks at last, diving for Fisk, and takes a punch to the face for his efforts. The Billy is knocked from his hand. The concrete catches him. Glass trickles down from the cracked bus stop. Another arrow strikes the plexiglass, threatening to bring down the structure around them. Thankfully, Fisk lunges, and while Matt fights against having his neck grabbed, his left leg is freed, and the brace holds strong.

He’s slammed against the Plexiglass wall of the bus stop. Silence pervades from the streets. No breath, no heartbeats. Concrete and brick hold him and Fisk in their standoff. Matt can’t even hear the sounds of the police in the distance anymore.

Matt grips Fisk’s wrists, his hands so pathetically small. His kicks lost in the girth of Wilson Fisk, and with the structure crackling behind him,

“I intended to take my time with you, Devil. To really earn my happy ending. But I suppose I’ve waited long enough. I delayed gratification even as I was punished for waiting. Punished for my patience. Punished even now by the filth you’ve allowed to thrive in your city!”

Fisk punctuates the words by punching Matt’s broken ribs, and pain knocks Matt’s attention out of the bus stop, away from the dull ache of his own wretched heartbeat (he did let them thrive, he did) to the thump of footsteps breaking across the street. The death rattle heartbeat and huff of respiration thundering through the shattered glass wall behind him; next to that, whisper-soft movements, stealth breathing. Trained, callused fingers gathering a firearm from a drugged cop’s holster accompanied by a sai singing on the chill breeze.

The mask hides the sadness in his eyes, revealing only the smirk as it twists across his features. Fisk’s heartbeat doubles. Matt presses his weight against the crackling wall of the bus stop. “This isn’t punishment,” he declares.

Behind him, filtering through the spider webs of cracked glass comes the low rumble of Frank’s voice: “One batch, two batch-“

Matt speaks over the thunder of Fisk’s heart. “It’s hope.”

“-penny and dime.”

The first bullet finds the exact mark where the cracks meet. It snaps through the glass, searing a path along Fisk’s neck. The second bullet hits Fisk in his exposed side. He grunts, grip loosening, and Matt bashes Fisk’s arms away. He lands two feet on the ground – both legs throbbing from varying degrees of pain and fatigue – and Matt wrestles Fisk to out of harm’s way before Elektra arrives.

Matt defends against her as best he can, but there’s a difference in fighting Elektra. She doesn’t ever pull punches. Intends to kill every time she enters the ring. But she moves through him with such cruel and effective brutality. A complicated cruelty. She tosses him over her shoulder to get at Fisk.

Frank, meantime, has come around from the other side of the bus stop, and he’s moving with the same kind of purpose as Elektra, suffering none of Matt’s efforts to deflect against him.

Because she is holding a place for him. Elektra Natchios, the Black Sky, living weapon of the Hand, stabs her sai through the meat of Fisk’s arms, his legs, his sides. Non-fatal blows, all of them. Her final act is to drive her weapon home beneath Fisk’s shoulder. He roars, flailing from the hips into the nearby building, into he streetlamp, trying to knock her off. Elektra’s too fast and too cunning for all that. Her fingers squelch tightly against the pommel of her sai, and she wields the weapon like a joystick, driving Fisk this way and that with torn skin and shredded muscle. Fisk’s rage fuels her excitement; God, she loves this game, loves to have her claws dug into so many people at once. Fisk dancing, roaring; Frank joining the brawl. Matt trying to fight his way between them and getting forced back.

Matt retrieves his Billy. Throws it. Gets the gun out of Frank’s hand before Frank can finally use it. Elektra knocks the Billy aside before it can return to him, so Matt rushes the three fighters, his senses calibrating, searching for the spot between them. He dives, finds his way, and lands inside the ridiculous tangled knot of human violence. The blows taking on a whole new frustrating oscillation between death strikes and iron clad defences. Matt can’t predict what he’s getting into: he grabs Frank mid-killing stroke and nearly takes the Punisher’s fist to the face when Fisk inserts himself into the fray. They both switch targets and each punch Fisk together.

The fight rolls back into the street. Matt retrieves his Billy. He tumbles through Frank and Elektra’s defences. He grabs Fisk and uses Elektra’s sai to drive the mammoth man the same way Elektra did, gulping mouthfuls of blood as he does. There are holes up and down Fisk’s arms from Elektra. A cauterized gaze across his neck from Frank. Fisk’s racing pulse starts sending off alarm bells in Matt’s head. The more pissed off he stays, the more blood he loses, the faster he dies, even without Frank and Elektra’s help.

Something’s thrown behind him: Matt can’t tell what with all the noise Fisk is making. He throws a few punches, knocking Fisk senseless. Then he turns his attention to cover. Swaying on his feet. Head spinning. So tired. Hurting in places he didn’t know he had. Fisk’s heart hammering into his spine, Elektra’s clawing at his insides, and Frank’s – God damn it, Frank’s heart is a steady volley of gunfire. Unceasing war.

Matt’s blood really turns to ice when he senses the gun. Purposefully hurled close enough for him to ear, far enough for him not to be able to do anything about it. Frank’s calluses graze over the handle. Elektra hovers in near silence, the transaction complete. She aimed for Fisk’s shoulder when she could have had his heart and Frank aimed to graze Fisk’s neck when he could have had his head, and they did it for the same reason and for very different ones.

The street becomes so clear to Matt in that moment: the traps laid and the strings pulled; the orders given and the promises that hang in the balance. The bonds between them, fragile and yet unshakeable, are giving way to the weight of the violence they’ve wrought. Elektra and Frank advance, side-by-side, a tenuous alliance that threatens to shift at any moment, especially when Elektra issues a signal that brings the Hand into the street. Bowstrings draw taut; blades sing on the winter air.

Cover. They need cover.

The prison transport doors rattle in the winter breeze.

Matt drives Fisk as close as he can get, dodging the advance of ninjas, the lightning-fast motions of Elektra. The back of the van sits in his senses as a hollow void, an echo chamber for soft ninja breathing and Frank’s gruff respiration. Matt lines Fisk up and moves to kick him through the
open doors on the back of the van. He doesn’t think about the move, doesn’t have the time. There’s too many of the Hand around to really consider how much pain it’s going to cause, kicking at Fisk. He just does it, the loss of life looming: just raises the limb and gets to work, only to have Fisk grab his leg.

His left leg.

Frank doesn’t hesitate. Of course not. It’s the leg. It’s the God damn leg.

BANG.

The bullet rips a fresh hole through Fisk’s arm. He wipes out, recoiling. Matt kicks him into the back of the transport, slams the doors, and tangles his Billy wire around the handles. Ninjas grab at him; Matt battles them off and hurriedly tugs the wire of the Billy taut. More shots ring out, bringing the ninjas down around him, but then Fisk charges from inside the van, bashing into locked doors. Matt’s knocked back, straight into Frank’s stampeding form.

He hits the ground. Frank hits the door, laying into the Billy wire with his free hand. It’s disorienting, all the sound, all the motion. Ninjas teeming around the van, Fisk yelling and Frank roaring, the wet slap of meat echoing from inside the transport vehicle. Blades and bows at the ready, but they’re lying in wait. When Matt focuses to discern why, all he notices is Elektra stalking the street towards him, proud as she pleases.

Matt springs on Frank to get his attention, knocking him into the doors of the transport in the process. Frank launches back but stops short, choking. Fisk has reached through the crack in the doors to wrap his meaty hands around Frank’s neck.

Adrenaline surges through Matt. He throws himself into the door, knocking it shut on Fisk’s wrists. There’s another yell from inside the van, vindicating this time, especially when Frank pulls free and rolls out of the way.

Matt grabs the Billy and tugs, hard, locking the doors shut just as Fisk rams them again. “I will murder every last one of you!” he roars, throwing himself into the doors like a battering ram, body slapping wetly with every thrust. “I’ll kill your armies! Your families! Every last person who has ever heard your names!”

“Shut up, Wilson,” Matt says with a sigh. He turns around to face the two looming heartbeats behind him along with the cloud of undead respiration. He and Frank almost immediately end up in another tangle of blows. Elektra lunges, and Matt finds himself moving with Frank to hold her off. Then the alliances shift again, and Matt battles them both back, brawling them into the pavement with the last vestiges of his strength.

He rises unsteadily to his own two feet, head handing briefly from the weight of them. The armies of them: Frank, Elektra, Fisk, the Hand. He’s surrounded, completely surrounded. Blood drips out of his mouth, under his suit. Every breath hits his broken ribs; every step throttles his mending leg. But he holds the line between them and Fisk, God damn it. He holds the line even as the ninjas creep atop the van, bows drawn and ready to fire; katanas singing on the air. He holds the line as Fisk threatens him and pounds at the door and bleeds to death; as Frank curses him with one round left in the chamber; as Elektra says, gently but firmly, “Get out of the way.”

Matt draws his hands into fists at his sides. “No.”
Happy reading!
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I don’t know what to do.

I’m writing this note while the chapter’s fresh. I usually take a night to digest, run through some last minute edits, and respond to comments. But it’s done. This chapter, whatever changes get made, it’s finished, and I don’t know what I do.

Readers, dear Readers, you’ve given me so much. I hope this chapter gives back. Thank you. Enjoy.

“I’m an apostrophe.
I’m just a symbol to remind you that there’s more to see.
I’m just a product of the system, a catastrophe,
And yet a masterpiece, and yet I’m half-diseased
And when I am deceased
At least I go down to the grave and die happily…
Whatever it takes
‘Cuz I love the adrenaline in my veins.
I do what it takes
‘Cuz I love how it feels when I break the chains.”

~Imagine Dragons, “Whatever It Takes”

“No.”

Frank rolls his damn eyes. Kid’s swaying on his feet, vastly outnumbered. Attacked from every side. And there he is, ready for the next round.

The ninjas lunge. Frank moves; there’s one on the roof of the van, arrow poised for the kid’s head. Elektra puts a stop to that shit. She takes a small but bold step forward and the Hand backs off. Most of them train their weapons on the rocking door of the transport.

But Frank doesn’t stop. He lets out a yell and tackles Red into the doors, and they duke it out for several beats. “You wanna die for him, is that it? Is that it, Red?”

He isn’t smirking, but he ought to be, the little shit: “You wanna kill me for him?”

Frank clocks his head into the van. Red sways on his feet, knocked senseless, and Frank
grabs him, wrapping him up in a headlock. He puts the gun in the only direction the bullet’s gonna make a difference: under Red’s chin.

“You won’t,” Elektra snarls.


He doesn’t loosen the headlock in the slightest, so the only thing that emerges from Devil’s crushed windpipe is a wheeze. Sure, the kid’s putting up a fight, but Frank’s not caving. He lowers his voice for the Devil’s ears. “I’m sick of this shit. Sick of ninjas. Sick of getting sidetracked. Sick of you. Nobody’s nothing should not protect a piece of shit like Wilson Fisk. It fucking shouldn’t, Red.”

The fat man launches another attack from the inside of the van, body slapping wetly against the doors. Blood spatters through the crack onto the pavement beside Frank, reigniting Red’s fighting spirit.

Frank boots Red to the back of the knee, knocking the kid even deeper into the headlock, putting more weight on the barrel of the gun. Must hear the fucking trigger, ‘cuz Red lightens his struggle. He wraps his hands around Frank’s forearm and holds on tight, never lets go, and fuck. They’re going over the edge together.

Silence reigns. Even Fisk goes quiet. A glance to the van doors sees his bloodshot, bulbous eye peering through the dark. The deep rumble of his voice emerges from the blackness: “What are you waiting for, Castle? Shoot him.”

“You wait your turn,” Frank hisses. Then he puts as much strength as he can into choking the kid out. His thoughts spiral when his efforts fail. Would be so easy. One batch, two batch, penny and dime. Pull the damn trigger. Red’s head explodes into pulp. The bullet knocks against the inside of his bulletproof costume. No more Devil of Hell’s Kitchen. Not ever. Ninjas couldn’t even bring him back from that shit, could they? Show him the great pile of nothing in the sky before dragging his ass back to life? Turn Red into one of them. One of hers.

The feel of the kid’s fingers on his wrists comes back to him. Frank’s arms strain from the weight of Red in his arms. Ain’t so little anymore, Red, not now that Frank knows where he comes from, knows the shit that made him who he is.

Frank crushes his face into Red’s dopy helmet. Nearly stuffs a horn in his eye from how hard a hold he’s got on the kid. He adjusts his grip, savouring the expression on Elektra’s face from the two of them locked together. Elektra, eyes aflame, lips crushed in a thin line: Frank wants to hold onto that sight for the rest of his God damn life, however long that happens to be.

He stares her right in the face as he leans in close to Red’s ear. “I got you, Red. I got you,” Frank declares raggedly. Loud enough that she can hear. Harsh enough for her to worry. Heart pounding hard enough that even Red might believe he’ll take the shot. She orchestrated this little nightmare, but she isn’t calling the fucking shots anymore, because he’s got the one shot that matters.

Fisk lets out an engaged roar and begins slamming into the van doors again. He rams the doors at a slower pace but shows no sign of stopping, no more than any of them.

“You tell your ninjas to stand down,” Frank orders. Fuck, why hasn’t the kid passed out yet?
“The Hand demand retribution,” Elektra says.

“I’ll give it to ‘em.” He easily dodges a blow to his face from Red, who is still fucking conscious and still fucking fighting. The door knocks him in the back of the head when Fisk rushes it again. “You still got shit with me after that, you take it out on me. But it’s you and me. Get him –“ Frank yanks the kid’s head for emphasis, “- the hell out of here.”

The fury drains from Elektra’s face and her eyes go shockingly cold. Debating. Calculating. Christ, he wants to know what her heart’s doing, what she’s thinking. If she buys this. If she sees how perfect an out he’s given her. She isn’t gonna have to give the order by choice, after all. She can do it for Red. Everything she does tonight, she can do it for Red.

Frank pulls the trigger down till it’s a hair’s breadth from firing to really get her attention, letting his breath huff and puff into Red’s ear - got you got you got you…

Red’s knees start to buckle. Thank Christ.

“Open the door,” Frank orders her.

Elektra’s face hardens, every feature shifting into blades before his eyes. She tilts her head ever-so-slightly, and the ninjas respond. They lower their damn weapons. One of them, his eyes go wide, breaking rank to express his surprise. Over who gets to kill Fisk or Red’s continued survival or Elektra’s sudden appearance at Frank’s side: who the hell knows. Who cares? The ninja does as he’s ordered, moving to the head to the pack.

She comes to the back of the van, and Frank twists the kid between them as far as he can without exposing himself to the ninjas. Elektra unravels the Billy from the door handles. Red falters. Frank whips the gun aside. He shoves the kid, hard. Sends him stumbling, dazed, into the waiting pack of ninjas. But it’s not that easy. Red comes round swinging, putting his full weight into the blow.

Pain explodes through Frank’s cheek. He’s thrown to the side. Blood splashes onto the pavement from his mouth. Red lets out an enraged yell when the ninjas grab him. Freaky sight in the streetlamp, the devil doubled over in a coughing fit, growling through a ravaged throat as he gets hauled away by so many black clad figures. A disobedient demon getting dragged back to hell. Arms outstretched towards Frank and Elektra and the rattling doors, as if salvation’s pushing through rather than Wilson fucking Fisk. Wilson Fisk, who’s shouting over the fight, “I will show mercy to the one who kills him!”

The Devil’s yell drowns out Fisk’s ramblings, and it’s the yell that gets Frank. That mix of anguish and anger. Heard the Devil holler like that a couple times since Grotto and it never fails to bottom him out. Doesn’t help that the kid’s hands end up behind his back, that he stamps against the pavement to stay put only to get dragged back, boots scraping against concrete. That fucking leg threatening to snap like a twig from how hard the Devil’s pressing down on it.

One of the ninjas flips their katana round: blade down, blunt-side forward. He goes to punch Red out, but damn it, they took too long. Red’s all fired up. He ducks. The punch hits one of the other ninjas. Red gets an arm free, grabs the newly dazed ninja by the head and uses him as a fucking weapon. He smashes the ninja into the others. Jesus, the scrap in this kid. The sheer will. Frank lets the sight of him kicking ass hover in his periphery as he and Elektra get the Billy off the back of the van. The two halves of the Billy snap back together, and Elektra swings the weapon down by her side.

They get the back of the van open. Fisk charges forward, but Elektra is so fast. She lays
him flat like he’s nothing, then sweeps a hand towards the fallen Kingpin in invitation. “He’s all yours.”

Frank hops into the back of the van.

“STOP!” Red lunges, but he’s got no leverage against the ninjas.

“Have they not gotten rid of you yet?” Frank demands.

Red lets out a cry, knees connecting with the pavement. But he’s fighting. Always fighting. “Elektra, stop this. Let him go. Let Frank go. Let the cops go.”

She sighs wistfully. Like what a beautiful dream he’s given her, what a lovely idea, but it’s not going to happen. But she’s got a good head on her shoulders. Elektra knows what is, what was, what never will be, and Red’s unspoken promise of take me instead no longer holds sway. It isn’t enough to simply have Red. She needs Fisk dead, and she needs Frank to be the one to do it.

Frank has no intention of letting her down. Bullet in the fat man is just as good as a bullet to the kid’s head. Serves the same function. Meets the same damn end. They always agreed to this when the leg was healed, and the leg is fucking healed. The Devil’s back to doing his dumbass Devil shit. Let the world chew him up and spit him out for his compassion and his mercy and his hope. Let her have him, Elektra wants him so bad. Let her listen to his whining and his bitching about widows and orphans, about second chances and Santa Claus. About how tonight wasn’t her fault, about how she can do better. How he forgives her.

The gun slips in Frank’s sweat-covered hand. He tightens on his grip on it, fits it perfectly into his palm, under his fingers. It’s on me, he tells himself. All this shit. Fuck Red and his forgiveness. Frank was made for this. Shoulders built for rifles; hands built for pistols. Whole body designed to kill. Fisk’s death belongs to him.

As if he can hear, Red shouts another, “NO!” He puts his whole body into it, by the sounds of things, calling out more bullshit as he does. Frank blocks him out. Blocks it all out. It’s him and Fisk, and it’s always been him and Fisk. Then it’s him and Elektra. Then it’s him and the rest of the ninjas. Him, alone, as it should be.

The fat man jerks back into consciousness on the ground. He coughs, sputters. Attempts to rise. Frank kicks his ass down onto the floor of the van. Aims the gun between Fisk’s eyes. Tracks a line down to Fisk’s bloody mouth. He’s earned the bullet as much as Frank’s earned the opportunity.

“One batch, two batch –“

A dull thud of impact sounds from behind him. A body hits the pavement. Frank glances over his shoulder to see a stroke of red slung across a sea of black. The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen finally down for the count.

The hairs on the back of Frank’s neck prickle up. Goosebumps run down the length of his arm. He tightens his finger on the trigger. “One batch, two batch –“ and nothing happens. It’s quiet. There oughtta be noise, oughtta be fight. Oughtta be an idealist in a Hallowe’en costume looking to intervene. Jesus fucking Christ, Frank takes a minute to fume, because in his mind there oughtta be the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen.

“I’ll show you how a bullet works best,” says Frank, taking aim again. Could put the bullet in her instead. Crack the fat man’s neck. Get a front row seat to the Devil being chopped limb from limb by the zombie ninja brigade, ‘cuz there ain’t no way Elektra isn’t taking him with her when she goes.

At that moment behind him, Red lets out a groan. His boots scrape softly against the pavement, so softly the ninjas don’t change what they’re doing. So softly the ninjas don’t sense him coming until he attacks, red and pissed, in Frank’s periphery, and in the midst of his last stand, a silver shock of a blade comes towards his back.

The ninja, the surprised one, breaking rank. Disobeying orders.

Frank shoves a toe into Fisk’s side. “Not this time, you piece of shit,” he says, whipping the gun around to the attacking ninja.

Elektra is already off and running by the time the bullet hits. The ninja’s head snaps back in a firework of blood, and the sound of his katana clattering against the pavement is lost in the ensuing battle.

The fight comes in fragments. Single sensations that collect and snowball. Starting slow then rolling faster and faster.

His fist connects with a ninja.

The crack of a bullet. Heat rushes past his ear.

Pain in his leg – from the shot? No, this is a throbbing ache. This is swelling, strain.

Frank’s boots hit the concrete. The van doors slam behind him, knocking Matt’s senses back in the present just in time for the Billy to slap into his hand. He’s about to rush the Punisher when Fisk’s heartbeat registers. He isn’t dead. Why isn’t he dead?

Elektra slashes past on a charge. She’s scooped up a katana from one of her own and weaves it through the air on approach. “Seems we’ve forgotten who we belong to,” she says reproachfully before tearing into her army.

Matt falls into step beside her. Punching and weaving. Sidling up to her as she curses out the Hand, reminds them who she is. Reminds them who the Black Sky is. He’s aware of Frank on the attack, straight into the eye of the storm. Bowstrings snap; arrows crack against the pavement. Frank cusses under his breath that he hates the fucking ninjas, and he’s only too happy to grab another gun from a drugged cop and

one batch, two batch, penny and dime

his way through the Hand.

“Couldn’t just let me have him,” Frank says angrily. “Couldn’t just get the hell out of here.

Matt scoffs, chucking the Billy to take down the archers. One of their weapons drop. Another pitches off the side into Frank’s hands. “ Couldn’t just shoot me in the head,” Matt parrots, catching his Billy on its return flight. “Couldn’t just kill me when you had the chance.” He bashes a ninja across the back of the head. “How many times have you had the chance now?”

BANG.

Another bullet rushes past his head, catching the ninjas that’s come up behind him. Matt recoils, disoriented. Is he dreaming this? Is he still passed out? The fluid in his inner ear won’t stop churning and bubbling. Fisk’s heartbeat sounds so loud. Elektra’s voice rushes to and away like a
tide — “You live for me. You die for me. That’s all you do.”

The battle crashes over him, and Matt sinks back into muscle memory. He throws another couple of punches, knocking back another member of the Hand as far as he can before his arms fall at his sides. The ninja quickly recovers, lunging forward, and Matt braces himself for the blow. He can ride it out. Take the ninja to the ground.

A rolling barrage of a heartbeat appears. The ninja gets grabbed. He chokes from the grip on his neck. Then there’s a crack, a thud, and the all-out assault of Frank Castle’s respiration pounding straight through the armour into Matt.

For a second, he surfaces again. Breaks through the veil of adrenaline into the cold, crystal-clear present. His blood runs hot, skull throbs. His own heartbeats gather inside of his chest, pressed tight with Frank’s, locked up inside him by the thought that Fisk is still alive and Matt doesn’t know why.

A ninja appears with a puff of breath and a stroke of steel. Matt pushes Frank out of the way of the blade before they both turn and take him down together, Frank delivering the final blow. He grabs Matt by the shoulder when it’s over, and Matt grips Frank’s wrist, riding Frank’s strength all the way onto his feet.

He pats Frank on the shoulder a little harder than good-naturedly. “Thanks.”

“Fucking —” Frank goes off under his breath as he charges back into battle.

Matt stays with him, trailing in the wake of that heartbeat, that right swing, that mean left hook. He runs interference, busts a couple of jaws, a limb here and there. He breaks from Frank when a ninja tears open one of the van doors. Matt twists the ninja’s knee but misses the katana swinging towards Fisk’s prone leg. Frank doesn’t miss, however. He barrels into the melee, shoves the ninja back and fires saying, “If I don’t get him, you don’t neither.”

“You could though,” Matt says.

Frank damn near shuts the van door on him.

“Aw, don’t get sweet on me now.” Matt stays on Frank’s heels like this isn’t the last time he ever does. Like this is another night clearing buildings and chasing down thieves. Like Frank’s got rubber bullets in that gun, and they’re gonna patch each other up later, trade war stories on the fire escape. Drink shitty coffee.

“Ain’t gonna be here forever, Red.”

An arrow springs into the air towards them. Matt takes Frank and Frank takes him and they roll each other out of the way. Then Frank’s back on his feet firing, and Matt’s senses lose him in the chaos, fixing on Elektra instead. She’s locked in combat with one of her own, one the remaining few.

She cuts the ninja down at the knees. “You don’t have any right to question my orders,” she points out.

The ninja growls from under his shroud. “You are our weapon.”

Matt releases the breath he’s been holding. He can’t bring himself to listen, but his ears seek out the squelch of the blade thrust through the ninja’s chest. Elektra, heart racing with terror and excitement, overjoyed that he said it aloud, that he put it in no uncertain terms, so she could say, “I
am nobody’s weapon."

She yanks the katana from the ninja’s chest and cuts off his head.

Matt rushes to join her as a command cuts through the sounds of the battle. The air churns and swirls before streaming away into the nights. “What’s happening?” Matt asks, and is chilled when Elektra’s heartbeat answers for her. The thrill of her kill gives way to confusion. She doesn’t know.

He listens hard to the rooftops, to the side streets, scrolling through Frank and Elektra’s sounds to a long channel of breaths racing off into the night.

The fighting with the cops ceases in the distance and he understands: they’ve left. The Hand are gone.

Radios screech. Cops shout. The ninjas are in retreat, they’re falling back. Streets are clear. The teams finally get on the move, down side streets, through the alleys. Sirens blaring and boots pounding on the pavement. Yelling. Tactical equipment clacking and clunking. Every available officer from every available unit headed straight from the fallen transport vehicles.

Matt races back to the van. Elektra grabs him on route by the neck and pushes – “COME ON” – causing him to stagger a few steps before he stops, locking his knees.

“I’m not leaving,” he says, centering himself within the chaos by using her breath and Frank’s war drum heartbeat as guides. The Punisher looms nearby with a loaded gun. Not that he needs it. Not for Fisk, whose heart has grown very, very weak. His pulse is a tender crawl, a mewling thing.

Matt backs away from Elektra as if scalded. “I’m not leaving.”

She shoves him. “Fisk is getting what he deserves! He owned that prison. Your precious system made him king of his very own criminal castle, and you want to send him back there?” She huffs, disgusted. “You talk about justice and morality, but you want to save his life. Save Frank Castle’s life.”

“Save your life,” Matt notes.

Elektra lets out a low laugh, a dark laugh. “I thought we couldn’t save each other.”

“No, but you can save yourself. Now. By going. Finish what you started here.” The cops are moving fast. Any second the first ESU team is going to be storming the street. Frank will finish his slow march towards the van, kill Fisk while he has the chance. Get sent back to Super Max having killed the Kingpin. “You are nobody’s weapon. Prove that.”

She hits him in his broken ribs. Matt staggers back a pace, gasping. He deflects when she tries to hit him again. Can’t help but notice Frank isn’t returning to the melee. He’s standing there, infuriatingly blank. Infuriatingly quiet.

Matt grunts. He tries to stop himself from shaking. “It’s the right thing to do, Elektra.”

The sound she makes: disgust. The notion that there is a right, that there’s a way to measure it and keep score, disgusts her. Rather than argue the point, then, she attacks: “How will you protect your precious city from behind bars.”

Matt pushes her back. “By putting Wilson Fisk back where you can’t get to him and he
can’t get to anyone else. By being there the next time a riot scares him into leaving.”

“The Hand will have control of the city.”

“The Hand will try. But there will always be people fighting. There will always be people trying.” God, he could say their names now, out loud, like a prayer. Foggy at his new law firm, Karen at the Bulletin, Claire with her clinic. Rina, terrified, who musters the courage to staunch blood loss for a stranger and challenge the big, bad Punisher with politesse. “There might only be one Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, but there is a whole city of people looking to defend against injustice. And you can be one of those people,” Matt tells her. “You keep saying that none of this matters, but it does. All of it. Especially if there’s nothing else.”

Elektra tries to break from him again. Matt doesn’t let her. “Go get them.”

“What about him?” She gestures towards Frank. “If he leaves, will you?”

Frank grumbles. A blank slate. A monster buried deep in a cave. God damn it, if he were any closer, Matt would punch him, shake him. Drag him back to the street kicking and screaming.

“I’d never know,” he admits.

“Three blocks or thirty is all the same to your ears,” Frank mutters in reply.

A wave of pure revulsion rushes through Matt. He forces his legs to stay steady beneath him, to stand tall against Frank’s cynicism even as it leaves him feeling physically ill. “I’m that simple.” Even now, after everything, he’s still the dumbass who stood under a falling ceiling, the pathetic, deluded half-measure. Nothing but trouble from start to finish.

“You’d take him to prison with you?” Elektra asks him.

Matt answers, “We could share a transport.” Can’t punch Frank, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t going to get his licks in somehow. “Maybe even be cellmates. What do you say, Frank?”

“I say fuck off, Red.”

“He’s lying,” Matt says with a smile.

Frank’s heartbeat is a steady, disappointed march, a Marine cadence. “Jesus, they better send your ass straight to solitary.”

“I’ll see your sorry ass there.”

“You won’t see shit. It’s fucking solitary.”

Elektra’s own pulse soars. Unbelievable. “You wouldn’t allow yourself to be arrested.”

“I’ll leave when you do,” Frank says, resolute as ever even as Matt’s senses flutter between them. He blinks under the mask, focusing, focusing. Something’s happening. More than the low murmur of Fisk’s heartbeat tapping against the inside of the van. More than the lingering fuzziness from the blow he took to the head. It hits so many of his senses at once and yet seems to hit them not at all. Akin to the way allegiances shifted during their fights. Frank and Elektra go from being discordant tracks, two incongruous scores playing at the same time before suddenly coming together in a twisted harmony.

The heel of Elektra’s boot claps against the pavement; Frank’s own tromps in affirmation.
Then Elektra’s clutching at Matt’s cheek in parting, her lower lip trembling, and Matt can’t hear her say another word. He just can’t. *This is it*, it’s over. She can finally be free. The Hand means more to her than Wilson Fisk.

He pushes at her. “Go.”

She holds him just a moment longer and her hand still drops too soon, always too soon, and she disappears into the night.

There’s a long beat. Chaos from every side street. Wind running through the cityscape like an exasperated sigh. Fisk’s sad patter of a death knell fades into the background. Matt listens to Frank next to him, still armed, still fighting. How fitting that their last moments together are going to be stuck in a standoff over the fate of a man like Wilson Fisk.

Who’s still alive.

“You could still go,” Matt tells Frank. There’s a path over the rooftops that could easily lead someone with Frank’s training to freedom. That sniper rifle’s waiting, ready to take a shot as Fisk is loaded into an ambulance. After Matt’s in cuffs.

“You going?” Frank asks.

Matt laughs. Shakes his head. “No.”

“Hm.” They scan the street. “You hear the cops coming?”

 Yep.” From all over the place.

“That one of them humming Metallica?”

The question throws Matt. Frank’s heartbeat is still this perfect bassline: dispassionate, unfazed. This is any other night, any other war. But sure enough, Matt listens, and past the thunder of bootheels storming the streets from every direction, the screech of tires, and rattle of weapons, there’s one member of the ESU humming as he marches on their location.

“Enter Sandman,” Matt says.

Frank grabs him by the back of the neck and yanks him till they’re chest to chest. The sole surviving soldiers planning their last stand. The heaviness in Matt’s heart finally hits him full force, and he holds onto it. He holds onto the ache, the honesty, the rawness, and ugliness. He anchors himself under Frank’s hand, in front of Frank’s war-torn heart. Let it be the last thing he feels before the cops get them, before they rip the mask from his face and put him in chains.

“Till you’re sure he’s safe, right?”

Matt nods, slowly. “Yeah. Till I’m sure.”

Frank tugs at him for emphasis. “You mean that?”

A rush of cold passes through Matt from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. “You know I do.”

Frank seems to vanish again. Worse this time. His hand drops. He steps back. And he takes all the air with him as he walks towards the first wave of cops coming onto the street.
There’s shouting. Weapons aiming. They radio for back-up; they’ve got the Punisher in their sights. “Yeah, yeah,” Frank grumbles, dropping to his knees in front of them. “You got me.” And they do have him. Arms tugged behind his back, zip tie to his wrists.

There are scant seconds before the crowd hits the streets, before the helicopter is there, spotlight blaring. Matt uses every single one of them to run, to dodge the gunfire, to latch the Billy onto an awning and heave himself onto the rooftop.

Then he runs.

Happy reading!
Ain't Easy

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the characters and concepts in this story are the property of Marvel and their related affiliates. This is an amateur writing effort meant for entertainment purposes only.

I knew this chapter was coming before I really knew where this story was going to end. Way, way back in the earliest days of this fic, I planned for this chapter to happen, and I planned for it to be happy, comforting, wonderful.

But then fifty chapters of this story happened, and the happy, comforting, wonderful chapter I planned got complicated, got fraught. I no longer had such a neat and tidy resolution here, and as frustrating as the writing process was, I’m quietly proud of how this story has come together, of how much deeper the relationships have become in it.

There is a final installment coming by mid-August to round everything off. For now, I hope you, dear Readers, enjoy this chapter!

“Loving it higher stays.
Lovin’ until we hate.
Pushin’ until we break
I hope your heart don’t disappear.
Lovin’ you ain’t easy.
It’s fire and then it’s rain.
It’s fire and then it’s rain.”

~Elijah Wood x Jamie Fine, “Ain’t Easy”

Fog settles in low and thick atop Matt’s thoughts, and he becomes aware that he’s in the backseat, Devil at the wheel, running and flipping, lassoing and sling-shotting across town. The Hand are long gone, as is Elektra, as is Frank, but he’s following something.

He stops, taking a second to get himself back under control, but suddenly, he’s spinning. His body stings and aches and burns. Tears and sweat comingle, scalding under his mask before freezing in the stubble on his chin. His stomach rollicks, bile sloshing against the back of his throat, knocking hard against his diaphragm that staggers through its motions. Breath comes too quick and then not at all.

The Devil pushes him down, down into the backseat of the vehicle, warm under a leather duster, leg elevated on his armour, thoughts spinning and churning with the idea of fear. The notion
that this should be terrifying, but it isn’t. Not with the Devil driving.

Not with the Devil driving.

Hell’s Kitchen pierces the haze, but Matt is still a passenger when his hand wraps around the handle on his rooftop access. When he spills onto the landing of his cold apartment and closes the door behind him. He stumbles down the first few stairs, takes a tumble down the last of them. Knocks his already knocked head around some more, but that’s okay. He’s okay. He’s fine. He tears off his mask. Tosses it aside. Lets the cold lick at his sweat-soaked hair, ease some of the heat raging through him. He really can’t catch his breath; his ribs sting and stubbornly hold their position. His vocals go from ragged grunts to thin squeaks. Not good. Aspirin. He needs Aspirin. Some ice. Work to do, Matty. Get up, Matty.

But he won’t. His legs won’t. They’re throbbing limbs full of blood and pain. Matt fumbles at the brace in a peace offering. The mechanism is spring loaded. He yanks a dial or presses a switch or something. God, he was hardly listening when Melvin put it on him. Couldn’t hear over the screech of pain under his knee and around his ankle. And it’s going to hurt when it’s free, too. Hurt and swell. He should get the suit off as quickly as possible. He might not be able to once the circulation is back.

Work to do. Get up, Matty.

His hands are shaking too bad to grab the zipper.

His head’s spinning so bad he has to sit down.

His chest hurts so bad he can’t breathe.

His fist hurts when he punches the wall.

When he punches the wall.

When he punches the wall.

He should be out there with Elektra.

He should be out there with the police.

He should be out there with...

His fist drops to his side. His hearing cuts out. He waits for the blackness of the room to stop churning. Waits for the adrenaline to ebb. The apartment recedes, opening up into more and more blackness, until the whole world is an empty hole and he’s alone at the heart of it.

Matt tries again for the zipper, groaning. The sound gives him company, filling up the vacant crannies of the space. He unzips to his mid-back before his broken ribs stop him. Before his sound cuts out and he’s alone again, and he grips the step and tells himself he can breathe. He can breathe. He’s fine. He’s fine he’s fine he’s fine

“Hell of a night, huh?”

Matt jumps up to his feet. Nearly busts the bannister doing it. Gradually, the sound of his heartbeat yields for another. Latent scent of Greek salad and Old Spice. Leather shoes and a new coat. “Foggy? Wha…?”
“Yeah.”

“What are you doing here?” Matt gulps. He can’t figure out where Foggy is: kitchen, couch. The whole space sounds the same to his ears. He straightens, everything under control. Everything fine. “I’m fine.”

“Didn’t ask, but okay. You’re fine.”

Foggy makes his way through the apartment, dragging a plastic case. An echoey box? The first aid kit. Must be a first aid kit. Matt sinks back down onto the step, his eyes rolling back in his skull as he does, and Foggy’s heartbeat flares – he notices. And it’s worse. The noticing is always worse.

“You didn’t have to come,” Matt says, trying to sound stern even with the pinched sound of his own breathing.

Foggy notices that too but refuses to comment. “I didn’t know where else to go,” he replies, arranging the supplies at the bottom of the stairs. “I couldn’t go home. I couldn’t go to work. I couldn’t face Karen. So… I came here. I’ve been here the whole time.”

“Waiting for me.”

“Waiting for something.” Foggy’s hand appears at his back; Matt pushes himself forward, reaching around to help, but his hands don’t reach or they fall or they’re swatted away. The rest of the zipper comes down with no help from him. Foggy yanks the suit open around his shoulders. Down his arms. “I thought the cops had you for sure.”

“So did I.” Matt wraps his arms around himself the second they’re free. The chill from the apartment isn’t so nice anymore; it stings. The shivering starts and doesn’t stop no matter how hard he tries.

He distracts himself, distracts Foggy: “They uh… they got Frank.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah.” Yeah, he supposes it is. Frank went willingly. No fighting, no violence. Handed himself over to the cops. To kill Fisk. That’s why he did it. He wants to kill Fisk.

The suit comes to his waist. Matt stands, shaking, gripping the hem of his briefs to keep them from coming down as Foggy pulls. He sinks back down, stopping Foggy from going any further. The brace is holding the rest of the suit in place on his leg. Matt reaches. “Here, you have to –”

“I see it,” Foggy swats his hand away.

Matt groans. God, he wants this night to be over. “Twist it?”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I think it’s – “

Foggy heaves a massive sigh and presses down hard. “Here.”

The brace pops open.
Matt thinks he yells. *Thinks.* He certainly feels the sound ripping out of his throat, but what he hears is the blood rushing back into his veins and the suit stretching around the swelling limb and the smack of his head against the step. Foggy’s fingers tear at the suit. He’s begging it to come off. Matt pulls back, helping him along, and finally, mercifully, the suit spills onto the floor. Sour, reeking of sweat, blood, and tears.

The leg is holding. Swollen, painful, stiff at the ankle, but the bone is solid. Particularly with the growing inflammation making Matt’s limb hot and tight. Better than a damn brace.

Foggy cracks a couple ice packs, his heart doing things that Matt doesn’t care to read—spiking in anger before petering off resignedly. The cold of the ice packs is bitter, one clamping down like an upper jaw while the old injury chomps up from within like the lower. He’s lost for a couple minutes, senses fixed on that agony, rousing only when his respiration has fallen in line with Foggy’s own. When they’re breathing at the same mournful pace as the other.

“Thank you,” Matt says. He winces from the subtle increase of Foggy’s heartbeat as a response.

Foggy, to his credit, tries to cover up his aggravation: “You’ve got broken ribs?” Matt nods. “Lift up your arms. Let me see.”

“You can’t just take my word for it.”

“You’ve got blood on your lips.”

Matt’s brain muddles through the connections Foggy’s making. He wipes his mouth.

“From getting punched in the face, not a punctured lung.”

Foggy’s pulse gets a little faster and plays like the *Jaws* theme as he cracks another ice pack and tosses it into Matt’s lap. Matt picks it up and holds it to his busted ribs, his stomach sinking as the pack oozes into the shape of Fisk’s shoe and Elektra’s fist.

Frank didn’t go for his ribs.

“Anywhere else?” Foggy asks.

Matt shakes his head, sending the apartment spiralling. He fakes his way through the nausea and disorientation. “No. No, I’m fine. Thanks, Foggy.”

That ought to be the end of it. Certainly seems that way when Foggy stands, when he stalks several paces through the apartment, but he lingers, his heartbeat holding Matt in suspense. Foggy’s pulse is even faster now, circling in the bleak murk of the apartment, and Matt has to remind himself that this isn’t a predator about to attack. This is Foggy. He has survived Foggy.

“You don’t have to stay,” Matt offers. “You can go.”

The heartbeat gets faster still. “Is that what you want?”

“Isn’t that what you want?”

Foggy doesn’t answer. He doesn’t know what he wants.

Matt doesn’t know either. He used to: all Foggy’s tics, his tells, seemed so clear, but Matt’s head is throbbing, his thoughts are thick and as swollen as his leg, and tonight’s been such a mess, such utter chaos, that Foggy’s uncertainty seems small by comparison. “I’m fine.”
“Again, I didn’t ask.”

“Then what do you want, Foggy?” They’ve covered the highlights, the “You don’t have to be here” talk and the undercurrent of animosity swirling around the “I hate that you’re a vigilante” discussion.

Foggy still doesn’t know. His body is a scribble of conflicting timbres. Him trying to sound accusatory sets Matt even more on edge: “I thought you were gonna die.”

“Well, I didn’t.”

“But I thought you were.”

“And I didn’t.” Is that what this is about? “Your conscience is clear. You can go home.”

“God damn you, Murdock.” Matt rolls his eyes. They’ve definitely had this conversation before. “I’m not here out of guilt. Not everybody does shit out of guilt.”

Matt almost lets that stand between them out of sheer exhaustion, but he can’t. Not after tonight. “I never asked you to do this.”

“You asked me to drive you to your armourer. To the East Side.”

“And then I told you to go. Which you did.”

“Yeah, I did. But not before I left a dent in my steering wheel because I thought it was the last time I was gonna see you!”

Matt’s eyes burn. He bites down on the insides of his cheeks so hard the blood drains out of his skull. Anger fuels the fire of his senses, gives them a burning kind of clarity. Puts Foggy into harsh contrast with the chilly void of his apartment. “I never…” but he’s already said that. They’ve said all this. “What do you want from me? And don’t say you want me to stop. Because I’m not going to stop. And I’m not going to apologize.”

“Yeah, I know that part. Okay? I get it! But you’re not the only one who can’t quit shit that’s not good for you! I tried! Every time you came back, I walked away! But one stupid phone call from the Punisher – THE PUNISHER! – and I’m right back here.”

“You’re still here.”

“Yeah.”

“So am I, Foggy. I’m…” Matt chokes. Anger vanishing. Never really there in the first place. His lower jaw rattles so hard that he almost bites through his lip trying to stop his teeth from chattering. “I’m still here,” he musters. “I thought it was the last time I was going to see you too.”

“Then why did you go?” Foggy asks, his voice cracking.

Matt shudders against the chill of more than just the apartment. “Because this is who I am,” he says. “Because it doesn’t matter what I want. What matters is that you’re safe. That the city is safe. That even people like Wilson Fisk are safe.”

“You matter.”
He shakes his head, skin crawling from the tone of voice that’s being used. No, he doesn’t.

“You matter.”

That’s more like it: anger, Matt knows. Anger, he can handle. “I don’t matter,” he says quietly. Peacefully. He shuffles his feet to dodge the overflow of Foggy’s heartbeat streaming across the floor. The sound grows, thumping about Matt’s ankles, his knees, his thighs, his chest. It’s cacophonous suddenly, gathering strength from beyond Foggy, from beyond the apartment.

Matt gathers the ice packs from his leg and chest. “Go, Foggy. I…I can’t. Just go. Go,” he says, managing, somehow, to get onto his right leg. He hops through the concussive waves of heartbeat towards the bedroom.

Foggy speaks; Matt ignores him. He’s too busy following the floor careening under his foot, dipping suddenly at an odd angle. Matt tries to put the devil back in the driver’s seat, but it’s too late. His knee is buckling. He puts a hand out to steady himself and the wall churns under his palm like an upset stomach. Like his upset stomach. Pure heat rushes through him, soaking his shoulders in sweat. He drops against that wall (get up, Matty). He careens toward the floor (work to do, Matty). He stands unsteadily, left arm outstretched for balance. The right hangs, hand balled into a fist at his side.

He opens his fingers. Brings the hand to the back of his neck and holds it there. The fingers not quite big enough, palm not quite warm enough, grip not quite strong enough. Still, the touch is enough to bridge the gap in his frenetic thoughts. To reach back through this shitty night to Frank, to Frank gripping him, to Frank walking towards the waiting flood of cops.

Matt’s hands slips off his neck back to his side. His other arm drops. He follows, legs turning to jelly. He draws his back to the wall, his arms to his waist, and stretches out his stupid broken leg until he’s sitting on the floor.

The apartment seems so empty all of a sudden. So huge and so empty, and the calamitous tremor of guilty heartbeats makes the whole space seems huger and emptier, loaded with a kind of anti-presence. That sense of something so aggressively non-existent, so desperate to disappear, haunting every corner, seething with words only Matt can hear.

Don’t you say a God damn word, Red.

It’s fine, Red.

I got you, Red.

Matt releases a breath, centring himself, letting the apartment exist as a feeling somewhere between comfort and dread. And the feeling fills him up, puts his eyelids shut, brings his thoughts to settles, because that’s his real home. Right there. On the edge of what’s safe, about the fall headlong into a fight.

Foggy finds him, appearing as if by magic at his side to grip his shoulder, to drag him off the wall. “No,” Foggy growls, “No, no, no. Wake up, Matt. Come on.”

Matt’s insides crumble. He rocks on the waves of Foggy’s pulse and the lingering ghost of a war drum radiating through his chest, rattling his breastbone. His head wants to hang. His brow lands on Foggy’s bicep, is shuffled over to Foggy’s shoulder. He gets back to the wall, dodging Foggy’s touch as much as possible.
“I can’t,” he says finally, jaw chattering. “I can’t do this. I can’t.”

“What? What can’t you do?”

The words are right there, right on the tip of his tongue, neatly arranged into sentences and everything, but Matt can’t bring himself to speak them. He can’t bring himself to hide his resistance either. He needs to say it, but he hears how they sound, those words. He hears how pathetic and lost and weak they are, especially in the larger context of tonight.

Foggy shakes him. “Jesus, Matt, would you say it? Please?”

Matt closes his eyes. Stick’s voice is blaring inside his skull about how pathetic he is and the only logical solution is to spit it out, all of it, the horrible truth: “I can’t watch you leave again. I can’t. So if you’re gonna go, please just go. Now. You won’t hear from me again, I promise.”

There’s more. There’s so much more, but Matt doesn’t want to waste time. He already has Foggy inching back from him. Already has that distance he wants, the distance he needs, even as his body burns from the thought of listening to Foggy’s retreating footsteps, to another door slam, to another person walking out of his life. God, how does Frank do this? How do any of them do this alone?

Foggy doesn’t let go of his shoulders even as Matt’s prying himself away. “How do you think I feel every time you go out in that suit? And even when you come back, I’m just waiting for you to go again!”

“So go,” Matt insists. “Just go.”

But Foggy doesn’t go.

Tears stumble down his cheeks. Matt doesn’t bother wiping them away. More words on his tongue. This time he doesn’t try to hold them back. He puts more and more of his weight on the wall, his head falling back by the crown till he’s staring skyward into blackness.

“I’m tired, Foggy,” he says, speaking in echoes and unable to stop himself, “Have you… have you ever been tired?”

Foggy’s voice is soft, softer than it’s been in months, and Matt feels like he’s on fire. Like he’s burning. “I’m tired right now.”

“No…” but the words fail him. Matt doesn’t have the vocabulary. Doesn’t have the strength. Doesn’t have the balls to take the rug out from under Foggy and let him know that it is hard to face yourself, harder still to live as yourself, and harder than all that when the world needs you – you know it needs you – but refuses to make a place for you.

God, it was easy with Frank, and nothing’s easy with Frank. But Frank knew tired. Frank knew done. Frank knew about getting knocked down, about being alone. And while Foggy has caught glimpses, he can’t know. Can’t know unless he’s been there.

Matt wipes at his face. He draws his arms around his sides. The shaking’s starting up again, and holding himself too tightly makes his ribs sting. Quietly, he takes them back to common ground.

“Can I have some Aspirin?”

Foggy sighs. Disappointed. But he says, “Yeah. Sure,” and goes over to the cupboards, releases a small, almost imperceptible sigh of dismay, but retrieves the Aspirin. He grabs a glass of
water, too, and brings them back to Matt.

The Aspirin goes down easy. Water helps ease his muscles, release them from cramping. Foggy doesn’t linger. He moves through the apartment, checking through the closets, shuffling the blankets on the bed. Matt listens but doesn’t track; he can’t bear the uncertainty in the heartbeats, not knowing where they go from here. It would be so much easier if Foggy just left.

But Foggy doesn’t leave: he comes back, arms heavy-laden with supplies. The discards ice packs from the stairs and – Matt sniffs – a bag from the bedroom. The duffle from Frank’s, the one with his stuff. The one he doesn’t remember taking from the safehouse.

Foggy must notice his confusion. “I grabbed your stuff. I was going to just leave it here, but…”

“But you stayed.”


“Thanks,” Matt says, wincing when Foggy’s heart rate refuses to acknowledge he’s spoken. Suppose it’s good that he’ll be dressed when Foggy finally goes. He doesn’t think he can move from his place on the floor, and falling asleep, undressed, in a cold apartment seems apropos for the way his night is going, but that doesn’t make it appealing.

Foggy doesn’t help when he says, “You’re wrong, you know. You do matter.”

Matt winces again as the fleece of the hoodie prickles against his sweat-slick skin. He manages the zipper by himself out of pride, of purpose. He isn’t going to argue the point with Foggy further, because no, when it comes to the city, when it comes to the people, he doesn’t matter.

Foggy releases his umpteenth sigh of the night and actually has to walk away. Matt rolls his eyes, conceding that fine, he’ll argue, he’ll argue if that’s what will make Foggy go faster, but Foggy cuts him off. “You’ve lost weight.”

“No, I –“ but the sleeves contradict him, hanging past his wrists, as the rest of the hoodie bulks around his chest and shoulders. Matt picks at the fabrics, confused, trying to place the hoodie by texture, by scent. There’s a lot of him in the fabric, but below that, faded, is dust and must, coffee and rusted meta and nighttime. The misplaced memory of Fogwell’s, the perfectly placed memory of Frank.


“I take it this is yours too?”

Takes Matt a long moment to identify what’s being offered. Foggy has to clarify. “It’s a cast.” The old one, the first one. No longer smells like him, but the Velcro straps take Matt back to the beginning.

His leg’s not ready. Matt already has a hell of a time getting the sweats on using only one leg. “I need to ice it, Fog,” he says.

“Yeah, but we gotta go.”

He’s almost afraid to ask. “Where are we going?”
“My place.”

“Foggy –“

“No. I don’t want to fight about this, alright? I dropped you off tonight! I did that! And it was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but I did it.”

“I said you could go,” Matt say. “I told you to go.”

“Where? There’s nowhere I can go where I don’t care what happens to you! Even the Punisher knows it!” Foggy draws a series of steadying breaths, and suddenly, his uncertainty, his resignation, it turns into resolve. “I hate that you do this to yourself. I hate that you can’t see how important you are, how much you matter.”

Matt fingers the cuffs of the hoodie. He absorbs the blows from Foggy’s pulse. “I’m beginning to see that.”

Foggy’s temper becomes a simmer. Acceptance or resignation, Matt can’t and doesn’t try to tell the difference. Either answer guts him. “You need someone, Matt. You can’t do this alone. And I’m not ready to accept that’s who I am, but I do know I am not leaving you here.”

The black hole of the apartment swells around them. Matt’s ears ring from the emptiness, from the cold, from the quiet. He shakes his head, hurting. Angry. At once denying that he can’t do this alone and then accepting that it’s true, God, it’s true. He can’t do this alone. He has to rely on former friends and the Punisher because he’s so incapable. Sitting on the damn floor while Foggy puts the cast on his leg. As if he’s actually going to leave. As if there’s anywhere for him to go, anywhere he belongs. People like him, like Frank, like Elektra: they all end up bloody and alone in the end, and it’s better that way. Better to dip in and out of people’s lives, to come and go as a phantom, as a devil. Better to stay here, on the damn floor, than let Foggy find a shoe for his good foot, help him up, drape a coat over his shoulders, and walk him towards the door.

Better. But the voice that follows Matt out of the apartment reminds him you don’t wanna be like me, Red.

Happy reading!
“I may put you on a pedestal, but I’m not your fall from grace.
   Maybe I enjoy the punishment.
   Maybe I enjoy the chase…
When there’s no one on your doorstep
   When there’s no one to deny
And when there’s no one in the darkness,
   I think you’ll finally realize:
That it was me that held you hostage
   And it was me that held the key
And it was me that made you happy
   And it was me that set you free.”

~Goo Goo Dolls, “Use Me”
Karen. He didn’t say. And I didn’t get the chance to ask before he collapsed on the couch and fell asleep.”

There’s a pause in the conversation where Foggy is whispering so quietly, Matt can’t hear. Foggy comes back with a stage whisper: “I’m trying to keep him from hearing us, because he probably can!” Footsteps advance towards a door behind the couch. Matt lies very still. Pretends to be asleep, even though Foggy probably can’t see him.

The ruse works for the most part. Foggy’s heartbeat isn’t so convinced, but he releases a sigh nonetheless. “I’m worried about him. He shouldn’t be alone, but I’ve got voicemails piling up. 9-1-1 texts to get my ass down to the station straight from Hogarth.”

Karen likely says similar. Matt imagines her toeing the boundary of police tape, listening hard for loose-lipped officers, her body thrumming with scrutiny and curiosity, picking apart the party lines as quickly as they’re fed to her. Foggy confirms Matt’s suspicions with an almost inaudible, “No, I know you’re busy. He just…he shouldn’t be alone.”

There’s pause for a question, one Foggy answers: “He’s sleeping. At least, I think he’s sleeping. He should be sleeping.” Foggy sounds like he needs to be sleeping, but he’s going to the station. He wouldn’t be so worried if he wasn’t. It’s the right thing to do, too, and Matt’ll tell him so, if Foggy doesn’t leave.


The call ends with Foggy’s worried pulse, his cell phone shaking in his hand. He grips the door frame and crushes it in his grasp. “Okay,” he whispers, shuffling around his room for belongings. “Okay, okay, okay…”

The door closes between them. Matt twists towards the sound, broken ribs catching inside his chest. He wheezes, gripping them, holding onto the pain while he distances himself from Foggy’s anxious heartbeat.

God, he should have stayed at his apartment. His stupid moment of weakness, pathetic pleas while he lay on the floor, and now Foggy’s spun up. Worried about him, worried about Karen. There’s nothing to be worried about, Matt wants to say. Karen’s fine. The city’s fine. But he doesn’t, not even as Foggy comes into the living room and touches his shoulder and softly, so softly, “Matt? You awake?”

Matt doesn’t give an indication for how long. “What is it, Foggy?”

“I have to go to the station. Hogarth’s gonna fire me if I’m not there soon. You gonna be okay here by yourself?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course. Don’t worry.”

Foggy is already worried. He pats Matt’s shoulder; the palms of his hands are warm, plush. Soft skin and blunt nails, and Matt’s grateful when it’s gone, when Foggy’s tucked the hand into the pocket of his coat. He says something about the layout of the apartment, “Take care of yourself,” and then he’s gone.

Matt listens to Foggy’s retreating footsteps as long as he can. They disappear sooner than he expects, muffled by thick concrete. The walls absorb everything. Matt can’t pick out the neighbours. He can barely hear the sounds of the city from how far up they are. The glass of Foggy’s
patio door rattles in its frame, a high-pitched approximation of Foggy’s worried heartbeat.

He should go. He shouldn’t have come in the first place. Matt pushes the blankets down to his thighs and sits up, groaning from the pain in his chest. His leg moans, threatening to scream. The draft from the balcony door beckons on his cheeks, blue and frosty, swirling from pre-dawn traffic. A walk would be nice. Pop by the station on the way to Frank’s now abandoned safehouse where he’ll rest up for a few days, track down Elektra, dodge Foggy’s calls.

Foggy.

Matt groans again, chest throbbing. He eases back onto the pillow, curling away from the broken bones. He can’t quite make it to his side, but the back of the couch rises up in front of him like a wall. He draws his right leg up till the knee touches, reassured by the solidity of it, how it looms over him, how it intervenes between him and the rest of Foggy’s apartment.

His eyelids sink: he’s tired. He’s so tired. And he’s sorry that he’s so tired. Sorry to Foggy. Sorry to Karen. Sorry to Frank. His eyelids close and his jaw hangs and the strength leaves him, lulled by the litany of his apologies. Comforted by the thought that he’ll be alone for a while. He’ll rest a bit. Just a bit. Then he’ll go.

Sounds in the kitchen wake him. Lights buzz in their fixtures. High heels clack against the floor. Plates clatter – one, two, three – followed by cutlery – one, two, three sets. A paper bag pops open and take-out containers make their way onto the counters. Chow mein, vegetable fried rice, sweet and sour sauce, chicken.

Matt rises from the pillow: thoughts cloudy, muzzy. Dizziness mounting. Pain in his head and chest a dull throb as he slowly wakes up. He lets Karen’s motions bring him around. There’s a novelty in her pulling lids off take-out containers, in food that’s been bought and paid for, in the coffee machine not brewing behind her.

“Smells good,” he says.

Karen stops. Matt feels her looking at him. He flashes a small, almost imperceptible smile. “Hi.”

She straightens, putting on a good show of maintaining composure, but her fingers give her away, playing, as they do, over the edges of the take-out containers. Her heart doesn’t help matters. Still, she plays it casual. “Hi. Good sleep?”

“Yeah. What uh…what time is it?”

“Uh…” Karen rotates on her heel, searching for a clock, before whipping her phone out of her bag to check. “Six-thirteen.”

“PM?”

“Yeah.”

Matt reels. He slept the day, and he could easily lie back down and sleep through the night. He pulls his legs off the couch, gets himself into a sitting position. His ribs burn, his head spins, but he barely notices over the chill of the day being gone. His chance to leave, gone. Now Karen’s brought dinner. Soon Foggy’ll be home. They’ll worry and question him, and Matt doesn’t have answers, at least none that they’ll understand.
Karen summarizes for him, “You had one hell of a night,”

“Yeah,” Matt agrees. “Hell of a night. How’s…” He stops himself. It’s not the right name, the one he’s thinking, just the first one that popped into his head. “How are you?”

“Stressed. Worried. How are you?”

She’s honest with him; Matt can be honest with her. Mostly. “I’m tired.” He can hear her nodding. “But I’m okay.”

“You’re almost back on two feet.”

“Almost.” He doesn’t know what else to say. “Frank told me about what you did. When I was with Elektra. Thank you.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I was…”

“Busy.”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like you’ve been busy.”

“Actually,” he realizes what she’s done too late. He’s revealed himself, and the expectant tone of her pulse, the confidence in it, forces Matt to clarify. “Last night was a surprise. The riot at Super Max, Fisk’s transfer, the standoff – Frank’s arrest, it was all a surprise.”

Karen lets that stand between them. “So what kept you busy?”

Matt doesn’t know what to say. Things? Stuff? Damn it, this is why he should have left. He isn’t ready to talk about recovery at Frank’s or the fact that he asked for it. He asked to stay. After Elektra, after Sato, after everything, he wants to stay. “Broken legs take a while to heal.”

She’s quiet, considering the answer from all angles, and Matt does too, wondering where she will find it flawed. What point of attack is Karen going to adopt next. He’s surprised when she releases a sigh. “Yeah, they do.” Her arms slip down her chest, back to her sides, and she takes a step towards the counter lined with food between them. “You’re probably hungry. You should eat something. I brought Chinese?”

Food sounds like a good idea. A better idea, at least, then talking. Matt rises from the couch, pausing till the room stops spinning. Then he hobbles around to the counter, his leg accepting the small bursts of weight he puts on it without much complaint. “Thank you, Karen.”

“Yeah.” She isn’t really listening to what he’s saying. One of her hands sweeps against the edge of the chow mein carton before clamping onto the edge of the counter.

Matt can’t bring himself to serve. There’s not enough space for him to move with all the stuff she doesn’t want to say.

“I’ve missed you,” Karen finally says.

That isn’t the half of it, not by a long shot, but Matt’s grateful she started small. “I missed
you too.” He doesn’t feel it quite, not yet, but the longer he stays in her orbit, the more her absence becomes apparent to him. He hasn’t spoken to her for longer, now, than she hadn’t spoken to him.

“Why didn’t you call? We knew where you were, who you were with. We could have…” she stops herself, not really sure of what she could have done, only that she could have. Matt doesn’t interrupt. He’s been here too many times, listening to her heart as she struggles to speak aloud her fears, her doubts, her frustrations.

“There was nothing you could have done,” he offers.

“It’s so easy,” she says, pausing to make words out of what she’s feeling, “to get pulled into his world. You know you shouldn’t, you try to keep some distance, but –“

“Karen –“

“- but you stay.”

“He didn’t make me do anything that I didn’t want to do.” The words are out of his mouth so fast, Matt has to check them, make sure they’re true. And they are. For the most part. There are some things he didn’t want and Frank had to make him. Frank had to make him take his medication and make him go easy on his leg and make him take care of himself.

Karen doesn’t need to hear that. She’s already heard enough. Her hand comes away from the counter. Her breathing slows. Matt follows the logic of his confession, dismayed to find it contains everything he didn’t want to say and Karen didn’t want to ask.

Frank didn’t make him do anything means Frank didn’t make his stay, means Frank didn’t make him not call, means Frank didn’t make him go out last night.

Matt tries to ease the damage he’s done: “I was already in his world, Karen. I’m always a part of it.”

He senses her nodding after a time, her heart a guilty murmur. “I guess we didn’t give you another option.”

That’s not… “That’s not your responsibility.”

“It’s not Frank’s either.”

Matt presses a hand to his side to stop his stomach from tying itself into a knot. They said that, didn’t they? In the beginning? God, they said a lot of things in the beginning that didn’t turn out to be true. “No, but try telling Frank that.”

Karen gives a small laugh. “Yeah, that’s true. God…being around him. Every time. Like in the hospital after his arrest or…or when he was looking for you: I just…I remember this feeling. Not during, but after. Like I was waking up. Like I was coming out of something.”

Matt thinks about the hoodie draped over the side of the couch. How claustrophobic pillows are now and the strangeness of Foggy’s smooth hand and Rina saying Frank was different. Different when he, Matt, was gone. “Yeah.”

Karen’s gaze doesn’t prick her senses this time. She looks at him in agreement, in understanding. “He’s so intense,” she says, half-admonishingly, half-awestruck.

They stay like that for a moment, lost in what only feels strange in its absence. Karen
returns first, her heartbeat perking up on the other side of the counter. She takes a plate from the stack and hands it to him. “You must be starving. Let’s eat.”

Matt accepts the plate with a smile. A real one. “Yeah. Let’s.”

Foggy returns near the end of Prime Time, his temper audible in his footfalls. He opens the door with wild abandon, like he’s making a dramatic entrance on a sitcom. He even pauses as if for a laugh track, taking his time to inspect the scene. Liking what he finds if his heart is any indication. He slams the door shut behind him before he starts speaking. "Well, I'm doing it."

"Doing what?" Karen asks without looking up from her typing. The shame of his idleness hits Matt full-force, sandwiched between the intrepid reporter and high-powered attorney. He tries to sit up from where he's reclining on the couch, but post-concussive symptoms put him right back on the pillows.

Foggy undoes his scarf and strips off his coat with flourish. "I was requested." He tosses his satchel on an empty countertop. "Personally requested!"

Matt senses Karen putting it together about the same time he does. "Frank requested you as his attorney?"

"He did. Said I did a bang-up job last time. Would do an even better one now that I'd ditched my partner." Foggy seethes. He tromps away from them, grumbling, "It's not funny."

"It's a little funny, Fog," Matt says.

Foggy groans. He continues with his tirade, marching over to the counter where Karen left the food to fix himself a plate. "Hogarth encouraged it. Anything to get the Punisher as a client! I swear, he doesn't smile, but Castle was proud of the whole damn thing. He took responsibility: the attack on the convoy, the attempt on Fisk's life…” Foggy doesn't even bother to reheat his plate. He comes around and drops into the chair nearest Matt. "You know it was actually going well? As well as it could? But then the feds showed up with all sorts of accusations, and Frank almost flipped the table. He was cuffed and shackled, but he would have flipped that table. Probably thrown it at somebody."

"What accusations?" Karen asks.


"With the Hand?"

"With the Devil of Hell's Kitchen." Foggy shovels a few bites of food into his mouth before adding, with a roll of his eyes, "And the Hand. Well, they called them the ninja-bastards. But mostly Daredevil."

"That's ridiculous," Karen says.

Matt swallows the lump in his throat. He sinks back onto the couch, digging his neck against the top edge to distract himself from that creeping sensation under his skin. From the coil of Frank's voice in his head: Don't you say a thing.

"Yeah, they'll never stick." Foggy says, calmer now. "But the suggestion of it. It was like that day in court. Big, bad Punisher." He levels a stare at Matt, exhaling as if preparing a question, but then thinks better of it. Thank God. Matt is trying to breathe normally, sit calmly, like he has no idea
what Foggy is talking about.

Big, bad Punisher. Challenging a fed at the accusation of terrorism…for the Devil of Hell's Kitchen.

"I guess I should be thankful," Foggy continues. "This whole transfer thing with Fisk has people asking questions about staffing and security at Super Max."

"That's good news," Karen agrees.

"Yeah," Foggy agrees. He releases a breath he's probably been holding since that morning. The truth finally hits him. "Yeah, it is."

Matt guesses this might be the right time. "How is-"

"Just answer me one thing," Foggy interjects, "and whatever you say, I won't get mad. I deserve to know. You owe me this. Did you two plan this?"

Matt almost wishes he could say yes to ease Foggy's frustrations, give him somewhere to lay all his anger. Alas, "There was no plan, Foggy."

"No!" Foggy stretches the word into a moan.

"Frank makes his own plans."

"You were living with him! You blew up a warehouse with him!"

"Yeah, but…not this. There was no plan for this."

Foggy's heartbeat is kind of stunned by the assertion. He runs his hand through his hair and out, back to the edge of his plate. "You really didn't know he was going to turn himself in."

Matt's body goes cold. "I didn't know till he did it." His heart sinks. Big, bad Punisher. "That's usually how it is with Frank."

Foggy and Karen are understandably busy in the fallout. Matt lends himself where he can, but the limits are clear for him, defined by his friend’s professions. Karen only knows what happened in the streets; Foggy can’t talk about what happens with him and his client. He doesn’t hear from Elektra, but he doesn’t hear from the Hand either, and that tells him everything he needs to know.

A lot of the time, Matt’s alone at Foggy’s, meditating. Stretching his legs. The break leaves some lingering pain, but waiting out his head injury is less pleasant. He maps the ins and outs of the apartment, treks further and further each day, always careful to be sitting on the couch when Foggy or Karen return.

Claire comes. She checks his leg and reminds he’ll need to take it easy. That he’s lucky he isn’t debilitated and seems to have dodged permanent nerve damage. “Got somebody looking out for you,” she says, otherwise keeping her verbal commentary to a minimum. Her non-verbal cues fill the apartment. Her heartbeat a series of warm judgments. She doesn’t ask about what happened on the East Side and Matt doesn’t tell her. But she does touch his shoulder on the way out of the apartment, and when she does, Matt puts a hand over hers.

“I’m glad you’re alright,” she says. “Stay that way? For a little while?”
The usual cheeky responses don’t come. “Yeah,” is all Matt says, and Claire gives a small puff of breath, a laugh only he can hear, before leaving. She knows what’s coming.

He gets himself back in order, gradually asserting himself as Matt Murdock. Financially, occupationally, mentally. Trying to fill out the shape of his old life is like wearing an old suit that doesn’t quite fit anymore. There are questions he didn’t ask with Frank, things he didn’t have to do, it seems surreal to do them now. Silly things that break the illusion of his being fine, that gets heartbeats asking what the hell happened to you?

“Can you not climb on the balcony rail? My neighbours think you’re a suicide risk.”

“How long have you been breathing like that? Are you okay? Is it your ribs?”

“I have a dishwasher,” of all things, throws him off the most. Matt gets caught between passing off dish-doing as a thanks and trying to remember if they’ve had this conversation before. If he forgot about the dishwasher or didn’t think to ask because of where he’s been.

He gathers information about Frank carefully to avoid follow-up questions, the subtle flare of Foggy’s pulse. Curiosity more than frustration, now, but Matt can’t help feeling revealed. Exposed. Treasonous, almost. Frank’s world is so intensely private, so fortified, and none of the time Matt spent in it helps Foggy, neither legally nor personally. Doesn’t help Matt, either. Best to leave it where it belongs. Trust that Foggy is doing his job, that Frank is better at keeping his mouth shut than he is.

Little frightening, then, when Foggy broaches the subject. They’re on the balcony. Matt got there first, needing the air and the motion and the sound. He’s got an itch developing beneath his skin, the devil rousing in his veins, and thinks tonight’s the night. Tonight, after Foggy is asleep. He’ll check in at the station. He’ll head back to his apartment. All part of becoming his old self again.

The balcony door opens and shuts. Foggy steps out into the night with a, “Damn, it’s cold!” Matt’s about to usher him back inside when a coat hits his shoulders. “Here,” Foggy says, and, when Matt protests, “You don’t need pneumonia on top of broken ribs.”

“Thanks,” Matt replies, slipping his arms into the sleeves, raising the collar around his neck.

Foggy comes to stand beside him at the rail, his body shaking from the chill, but there’s no accompanying frustration or irritation. He isn’t upset to be hunching his shoulders, sinking deeper and deeper into his scarf and coat. In fact, it’s kind of like old times. The two of them, hanging out. Not fighting.

Looking back on the conversation, Matt isn’t sure what triggers Foggy’s question. If it’s his comments or Foggy’s deft skills as an interrogator that finally prompts, “What was it like? Living with him?”

For all his worrying about the question, Matt finds he doesn’t have an answer. “I don’t know. It was what it was.”

“What did you guys do?”

“I recovered.”

“Oh, come on,” Foggy says without an ounce of anger in his voice. His pulse hammers away excitedly, with interest, with thrill. “You were living with him. I take it you weren’t binge-watching The Office together.”
“Of course not,” Matt replies. “Frank didn’t have a tv.”


“Police scanner.”

“Police scanner!” Foggy groans, having lost the guessing game.

“One of the neighbours used to play classical records.”

“He had neighbours?”

Too close, too close. Now Rina’s involved. Matt draws Foggy to a different topic. “I rested. He didn’t.”

“Did you fight?”

“Yeah, we fought, but…”

“But what?”

He didn’t mean to say ‘but,’ but it’s too late to go back. Matt senses they’ve reached the limits of their conversation. The fights in the beginning blur together in his mind; the fight with Sato seems so long ago. Even the fight for Fisk oscillated between against Frank and with Frank, alongside Frank. A fight that won’t come as a comfort to Foggy, a fight that will push. And unlike Frank, it’s a wrong move to send him and Foggy hurtling over the edge.

“But I was waiting for my leg to heal,” Matt says, “and Frank, he let me do that. He wanted me to do that.”

Foggy’s heartbeat stays in a calm, collected line. Thinking. Making connections. Matt braces himself for the smartass remark that’s sure to follow, but Foggy comes back with a poised, “Don’t we all, buddy. Don’t we all.”

Matt turns to face Foggy, blood warming. The ‘buddy’ gets him first and forever, followed by the slow stroll of Foggy’s pulse, the companionable quiet around them. Something’s happened, and he tries to find what, but the machinations elude him. They’ve been so careful with each other, the both of them, that the shift must have come from elsewhere, a place Foggy won’t or is legally forbidden from speaking about.

“Did he…” but Matt doesn’t ask that question. He can’t. He doesn’t have to. Of course Frank did.

Gradually, the ease of the moment takes hold of Matt again. No uncertainty. No questions. They’re not thinking about it, Matt suspects, or maybe they’ve forgotten, for one blessed moment, about what’s happened. Maybe they’ve gone back to the beginning. Maybe they’ve started something new.

He only breaks the quiet when Foggy’s shivering grows more intense. “Come on, Foggy. Let’s go inside.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re freezing.”
“Yeah, but…” Foggy buries himself even more deeply in his jacket. “But this is nice, okay? I’ll freeze for nice.”

Matt eases himself back onto the rail, trying not to analyze his comfort. Trying to take it as a given that they’re doing this, him and Foggy, standing outside on a cold night, enjoying each other’s company. Trying not to enjoy it too much, knowing that he plans on leaving. Knowing Foggy knows that he plans on leaving. They have a long way to go.

But they don’t have to get there in a single night.

Foggy lets out a groan: for himself, Matt realizes. “Okay, I have to go inside.”

“I’ll come with you,” Matt offers.

“No, no, you don’t have to.”

“I want to, Foggy.”

Foggy pushes open the sliding glass door. He hesitates, holding the moment, on the edge of something himself. Matt waits for the distance to emerge between them again, for the walls to go up. For it to become so much easier and so much harder to walk away tomorrow.

But, “Okay,” Foggy says, the moment passing. Matt steps towards the door, reaching for the frame to guide himself back inside. Instead, his hand meets Foggy’s, or Foggy’s meets his, and Matt’s led to the place on Foggy’s bicep, the place that carries him through crowds and busy streets. The place that brings him home.

“Watch your step.”

Matt does and follows Foggy out of the cold.

The night of Frank’s transport to Super Max is cold too.

Matt feels the chill pulsing through the suit. Breathing hurts his mending ribs. He can’t be out long; the threat of pneumonia is too great. Also, he has a feeling Foggy will check-in on him, and while he’s past the point of explaining himself, he isn’t ready to be questioned about this. He gets the sense that they’ve worked through it, or as much of it as Foggy thinks they need to work through.

But it’s not over. Not for him and Frank.

He slips past the officers standing guard, through the tangle of snipers’ gazes. Knocks a security camera away from the back exit. He lands on the back of the transport van. Two of the waiting officers don’t notice, but Brett and Frank do. Brett, who’s waiting close to the precinct door, fills up the alcove with his exasperation, while Frank, shackled in the back of the van, may as well bark, “You kidding me with this shit, Red?” Because that’s all Matt hears.

Brett tells the two officers to go grab some coffee. He turns on Matt with a glare. “You bring company tonight?”

Matt stays standing on the back of the van. “Those ninjas weren’t with me, Detective.”

Yeah, yeah, Mahoney’s pulse says. His eyeroll bounces off the walls of the precinct. “What do you want?”
“I want a moment with your prisoner.”

“What’d I tell you, Detective?” Frank says from inside the van. His whole body seems to emit a low growl, a rumble of pure menace amplified by the chains they think will hold him. “Devil’s obsessed with me. You don’t give him what he wants, he’s gonna follow me all the way to Super Max trying to talk.”

“He should be riding with you to Super Max,” Brett says. “You two should be sharing a cell.”

Frank scoffs. “Now you’re just teasing him.”

Matt softens the edges of his voice, lets himself become halfway human. “Please, Detective.”

Brett takes a second to check on the security at the end of the lot, make sure that his ass isn’t gonna be on the line. “You got a minute,” he says and steps into he precinct, hovering by the door in case this goes sideways.

Matt hops down beside the van, sticking to the shadows, but he gives Frank enough view of his masked face that the Punisher’s heart flares up. Even in chains, Frank’s ready for a fight.

“You okay, Frank?” Matt asks.

Frank’s heartbeat starts rising in disbelief. He speaks in that old tone: arrogant, condescending. Offended. The way they first met. And yet his question walks the same fine line of plausible deniability that the hoodie and the silk sheets and the location of the safehouse. There’s a whole world in his question, a world only they know.

“That it? That’s why you came down here? To ask if I was okay?”

Matt plays along. “One reason, yeah.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s the other? Make sure I ride all the way to Super Max?”

They both know he doesn’t have to do that, but Matt doesn’t say that aloud. Instead, he says, “Wanted to say thank you. For everything.”

The cuffs on Frank’s wrists shimmy and shake. Matt expects the scrub of Frank’s callused palm over his scalp, but Frank resists the urge, settling into his predatory pose as if the Devil doesn’t know a damn thing about him. As if the devil can’t hear that rabbit-on-the-run heartbeat of his or the pulse of blood filling the tips of his ears or that almost imperceptible softness in his voice. “Don’t mention it.”

“You take care of yourself.”

Frank straightens in his seat. His war drum heartbeat comes back, slow and steady and patient. An army waiting in ambush. A weapon buried in the earth, itching to be uncovered and borne into battle. “Not gonna be in for long,” he promises.

Matt smirks. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Yeah, yeah, looking forward to it.” He really is. Geared up Frank can’t wait to get his ass
out of Super Max. On his own terms this time. Matt feels him turn and fix a long, hard stare on the Devil’s face in the dark.

A phantom hand creeps over the back of Matt’s neck. Knuckles pierce the armour and dig into his sternum.

“Get the hell out of here, Red,” Frank says, dragging his eyes back into the van. “Didn’t get my ass put here to be sharing a transport with you.”

The Devil’s smirk smolders in Frank’s brain like a God damn brand even after he slips away in the darkness. He tries to wipe it away, but the cuffs keep him from scratching that itch. Now he’s got a bullet and the fucking Devil inside his skull. Noisy place, his brain, and it only gets noisier with Red’s voice, with Red’s words. Thank you. Won’t be saying thank you next time. That’s for damn sure.

Detective…Mahoney? He comes back outside with the two other officers. Got a cup of coffee in his hands. Cophouse coffee. Shit, Frank would do one of his life sentences for a cup of coffee right about now. He fixes his face straight ahead though, not wanting to show them. Not wanting them to see.

The doors fly open. Another cluster of officers stream out. Frank casts a glance heavenward, waiting for the footsteps he can never quite hear, the excited puff of breath he always seems to miss, the tug of fancy body armour he might be imagining. He hears nothing. Red’s swung off into the night to chase sirens. To beat up the bad guys. To protect the city. His city.

Good. Good riddance. Frank’s been waiting for this moment a long time. It’s his. He earned it. Isn’t looking to share. Doesn’t want Fisk looking elsewhere else either. Wants the Fat Man looking right at him.

“Let’s go, Mr. Fisk,” Mahoney urges.

Fisk moves slowly, his injured legs barely capable of supporting his weight. Takes a couple officers to physically load him, in chains, into the back of the van. He slumps on the bench opposite Frank, torso hulking over his legs. Fat man’s wearing bandages. Looking pale. Veins pulse through his lily-white, tissue skin like something that hadn’t evolved to be out in the sunlight.

Couple of the officers take their seats in the vehicle. They don’t seem to care as Frank leans forward, as he makes his hands into fists in his lap. “Hello, Wilson.”

Fisk lifts his head, his ghostly white face contorting into a sneer. “Castle.”

Mahoney slams the doors to the van.

Bang.

Happy reading!
It Takes a Village was born in a group chat started by the inimitable Momentum Deferred (please go read her stuff). The brainstorming session included a number of people whose names and usernames I no longer have a record of. What I do remember is that I was feeling burnt out, and they were there to help me get started on this piece.

Since then, I’ve been fortunate to receive support and kindness from the good people on the Daredevil discord. I’m so happy to belong to a fandom with such wonderful members! I do need to thank Dichotomy Studios, who reached out when this fic was in its early stages and has become, in many ways, an integral part of my writing process: wise counsel, friend. I also need to point fingers of admiration/gratitude at bluesyturtle, the brilliant darling, another without whose intelligent discourse and friendship I would not be here (go read her stuff right now, too, please). One final shout-out to trappedinathoughtbubble (aka tea-understands) on Tumblr, whose kind messages of support and check-ins and comments always brightened my days.

I was so pleased to have people contact me to translate this fic: Daladya on FF dot net started a French translation. You can also find a Chinese translation from sandunder. Sandunder also gifted me artwork based on this piece. I am so grateful for sandunder’s work and enthusiasm and support.

To that-dude-I-married, for understanding how much this fic means to me, for understanding how much writing means to me. Oh, and for letting me use his computer when this fic killed my keyboard.

And finally, Readers, dear Readers, I say this with every chapter, and with every chapter, I mean it: I would not be here, over two years and fifty chapters later, if not for you. Your support, critiques, and insights made it so easy to come back again and again, to tease the story out of these characters.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank you. Thank you so, so much for helping to make this story possible. It has been a real pleasure sharing this work with all of you. I really hope that you have enjoyed it, and that you keep finding things that you enjoy reading online! Cheers!

Works inspired by this one: Triptych by DichotomyStudios

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