Shadowboxing
by kristen999

Summary

It doesn’t matter how many times you fall – what matters most is how many times you get back up. Steve Rogers knew this lesson far too well and it was one Matt Murdock had endured all his life. With both men at their lowest, could a chance friendship bring each of them to their feet again?

Notes

I was hit with the idea for this story early in the summer and it consumed many of my nights. I have no idea how often this premise has been tackled in the fandom, but I hope it’s an interesting exploration of both characters.

Thank you so much to my beta Amanda for her constant encouragement, suggestions, and for being an overall awesome person. You rock and I could not have written this without your help. I also wanted to give a special thanks to Amy for being a constant sounding board.
Steve wore a baseball cap most days. It was a throwback from his youth when he cheered for sports teams who charged twenty five cents a ticket, now used out of a need for anonymity. It worked for those random moments on the streets, walking past people with his head down, never giving direct eye contact whenever possible. He wasn’t a spy like Natasha; Steve couldn’t blend into a crowd, not when his image had been plastered on everything from bed sheets to cereal boxes. But he’d always found a way to manage and, now that he was a fugitive, it was a necessity.

He was lucky that most published pictures of him were in his mask and uniform.

Not that most people who recognized him did much more than ask for an autograph or picture with their cell phones. While the debate about enhanced superheroes still raged in the media, either it didn’t register to the average citizen that he was a criminal, or they didn’t care. Mostly, they tried to offer him food or a place to stay, even a beer.

On the occasion he noticed someone look at him in suspicion, Steve would find a place to duck inside then exit out from another direction. He did his best to avoid security feeds and law enforcement which felt wrong with every fiber of his being. He kept communication with his network of allies to a minimum, at once silently acknowledging and ignoring the impact his reclusiveness would have on Sam, and did whatever it took to keep a low profile.

After spending some time in Wakanda he started to feel useless, for the first time in years Steve was a man without a team or a direction in life. He felt empty inside, stagnant, unsure of his next steps and unable to do anything to help Bucky.

Hiding was never his style.

So, he decided to return to the States; to avoid detection he made his base of operations in Hell’s Kitchen. If hanging out with a bunch of spies had taught him anything, it was to hide in plain sight.

Still, he longed for normalcy, just for an hour or two, even though he didn’t quite know what that was anymore. It used to be playing cards while listening to Glen Miller, leading a platoon into Nazi territory, or strategizing against terrorist operations in Avengers Tower. But now….

What he’d give to eat a hamburger and simply chat with friends – if he had those anymore.

Steve sighed, shaking himself out of his sorrow, and continued his late-night walk toward the darkened gym on the outskirts of the city. Fogwell’s was aging and derelict; he couldn’t help a small laugh under his breath at the irony.

“This should work.”

He’d make sure to thank Natasha for the suggestion and for speaking to her contact on Steve’s behalf so he could use it at night.

Steve swung open the door, the hinges creaky and loud. He was hit by the smell right away: mildew, body odor, and violence were ripe in the air. The walls were a dark green and every few steps there were old, framed posters for fights featuring long-forgotten names of boxers from the past.

Steve realized with a pang he missed places like this: a gym lost in time, like him. Bucky had brought him to Goldie's Boxing Gym to train before enlisting and while Steve hadn’t spent much time
punching a bag during the war, he’d sought solace in places like these after being rescued from the
ice. Long nights spent with a heavy bag, rare hours lost in the motion instead of drowning in
memories.

In a way, boxing reminded him of home: a time when moral convictions were black and white, when
things were simple, but mostly, boxing provided focus and a physical outlet. He walked toward the
back, pausing when he heard the familiar sounds of fists against leather.

“By the way, if you run into another guy in the middle of the night, don’t worry about him,” Nat had
told him. “Larry said one of the neighborhood regulars, Murdock, uses the equipment and
apparently he’s picky about privacy, too.”

Steve stood in the shadows, hesitant, watching as another man beat a heavy bag.

Murdock stopped pummeling the bag for a moment, his rapid breaths loud in the quiet gym. He gave
Steve the briefest of acknowledgments, a quick nod before continuing his workout.

Weighing his options, Steve moved toward a bench, setting down his duffle bag. He kept a cautious
eye on his companion while he removed his tools: scissors, gauze and tape. Steve wanted to lie low,
but Murdock didn’t seem to care, and technically, Steve was a guest here.

Steve started wrapping his hands, beginning with the left wrist, twisting the gauze around the thumb,
inside the fingers. He watched Murdock practice an array of punches, noting he was using a maize
bag, one filled with corn. Prolonged sessions could damage your hands; Murdock must be an
experienced boxer.

Steve rolled his shoulders then his neck, stretched his arms behind his shoulder blades to warm up
the muscles. When he felt ready, he started with a speed bag, the bag snapping back and forth with
every punch. It wasn’t about developing strength; it was all about hand-eye coordination, rhythm and
speed.

Steve strung a bunch of punches together, all connecting dead-on, the sound and feeling in his bones
satisfying. Using the speed bag could really be hit and miss on some days, but tonight, his muscles
were working properly and he had a good tempo going, pounding the crap out of the small, leather
bag.

It was zen.

That was, until Steve got into it a little too much, losing himself in keeping his hands in constant
motion and the bag went flying off the hinges, landing with a thunk at the other end of the room.
Great. He was already drawing unwanted attention to himself. Wiping the sweat from his forehead,
Steve looked behind his shoulder to see if Murdock had witnessed it, only to realize he was standing
in the gym all alone.

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Steve enjoyed the ritual aspects of boxing. Wrapping your hands was governed by rules and
regulations, done quickly and efficiently, it was a simple art form. As Steve taped the knuckle pad,
he heard the front door of the gym open up, preceded by an odd tap, tap, tap sound.

He glanced over as Murdock walked inside; he was dressed in grey sweat pants and a black t-shirt, a
duffel bag slung over his shoulder. It was the first time Steve actually was able to get a good look at
him. Murdock was in his late twenties, lean muscled, and he used a red tipped cane and wore dark
red tinted sunglasses.
Huh, he was blind.

Murdock stopped in front of where Steve sat on the bench; there was an uptight weariness about him. Steve had seen posture like his before and knew it could just as easily have been from lack of sleep as from something else.

“Do you need to use the heavy bag tonight?”

The question caught Steve off guard, and he glanced at the two large ones hanging from the ceiling in the far back. “Yeah. Is that okay?”

“Actually, the left one’s pretty dead.” Murdock quirked his lips into a smile as if amused by something. “It took too many beatings. It’s getting replaced at the end of the week, but the right one is still in good condition. Maybe try that one?”

“Are you sure?” Steve didn’t want to mess with anyone’s routine.

“I’ll use the wall bag.”

Steve looked over at a flat red bag attached to the wall; it had an overhanging thick ledge at the top of it. “Is that good for uppercuts?” Murdock raised an eyebrow at him in question. “I, um…like to box, but I’m not an expert with all the equipment.”

Steve was proficient in many fighting techniques, it came naturally thanks to the serum, but it didn’t mean he was versed in all the tools.

“A wall bag like that one can help work with angles and sharp changes of your feet.” Murdock relaxed while he spoke, the tension in his shoulders easing. “Since the bag doesn’t shift it forces you to incorporate a lot of movement from side to side; otherwise it’s pointless since it’s an immobile target.”

“Nice. I might practice on that later.”

“Sounds good,” Murdock said and made his way toward the back, swinging his cane in quick arcs on the floor.

Steve finished taping up his hands and headed toward the heavy bag. Hopefully he wouldn’t break this one and raise suspicion with his companion. It was actually nice to have a normal conversation with another person -- even if it only was for a few minutes.

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The days morphed into one another. Steve walked around the city at night, memorizing roads and alleyways, scoping out various possible escape routes. For the first couple of weeks, he just went through the motions, knowing deep down inside that such stagnation was a sign of melancholy.

But the days he went to the gym were ones he looked forward to, and for the first time since he’d started going, Steve actually engaged in a conversation with his nightly companion during a break.

“Are you serious?” Steve asked as he chugged some water. He’d spend a good hour in a zone, working every inch of the new heavy bag, breaking it in without destroying it. “You think the brand of a glove really matters?”

Murdock sat on the other end of the bench, his shirt soaked with sweat from his own relentless exertion, fingers tapping against his cane, his fidgeting telegraphing a much deeper sense of
restlessness. “Every brand type distributes the weight across the boxing glove differently. Some offer more protection for your fist, others more protection for your wrist. A 14 ounce glove from Grant or Ringside offers far more padding and protection than a 16 ounce glove from a crap generic company like Century or TKO.” He took a long drink from his water bottle. “And always make sure your gloves fit right with your hand wraps on.”

Steve laughed at a memory of Bucky ranting and raving one night after training about hand-wraps. Murdock looked over at him in curiosity; it was intriguing how much emotion Steve could read in his expression despite those red glasses. “My friend, he used to get really worked up about coaches who insisted boxers practice the perfect hand-wrapping technique.”

Murdock nodded his head in agreement chuckling to himself. “Let me guess, they insisted if you wrapped everything just right it could help guarantee a knockout?”

“Exactly! There were these ringside artists, ‘hand wrap masters,’ Buck called them. They’d go to these kids and charge them a nickel to wrap up their hands for them.” Steve shook his head at the memory. “It was all snake oil.”

“Snake oil?” Murdock laughed, seemingly amused by the lingo.

“Yeah, there’s no magic wrap technique,” Steve said with a roll of his eyes. “If you do the basics and do them right, that’s all you need.”

“That sounds really ….”

“Really what?” Steve challenged and caught himself too late. Murdock wasn’t one of the Avengers, he wasn’t aware of Steve’s true age. He didn’t know him at all.

“Snake oil is an unusual colloquialism. Not that there isn’t any wrong with that.” Murdock smiled, his grin fading when he stared at the floor in thought. “My old man would have agreed with you; the only special hand-wrapping that went on took place behind closed doors.”

The kind involving wetting the gauze or even worse, adding cement between layers. “Cheating ruins the integrity of the sport.” Steve growled.

Murdock batted the handle of his cane between his hands while he spoke. “Not to mention it’s attempted murder.”

It was Steve’s turn to look over at Murdock, inquisitive at his choice of words, curious what Murdock did in the real world when he wasn’t beating up leather bags at three in the morning. But a selfish part of Steve didn’t want to give up his little slice of ordinary, two guys shooting the breeze, not worried about things like U.N. resolutions or how to keep the world safe from future global threats like alien invasions when he couldn’t even walk down the street in broad daylight.

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Steve read novels, hard covers, and lately, a few textbooks on military strategy used in the Vietnam War. During the day he’d study law and try to wrap his head around the Accords and any loopholes that could be exploited in the future. It would take an entire legal firm to take on the task of finding weakness in the resolutions, but then someone needed to hire one. Maybe Steve could find a way to it covertly, or maybe he should stop caring.

He watched movies, ones he got to choose without a vote, finding them entertaining for the most part; although he still preferred documentaries. But it helped keep his mind off the news about his ongoing status as a fugitive—as did his training regimen, although it was difficult to create complex
routines while remaining incognito. Fogwell’s fit the bill in the meantime.

Steve was on his two hundredth push-up when he noticed Murdock walk inside and go toward his usual spot in the back. Steve jumped to his feet and cleared his throat to signal he was there. “Hey, um. It’s me.”

Murdock stopped a few feet away from him, looking in Steve’s general direction. “Hi.” He rested his hands on cane and stood, as though waiting for something.

Realizing the awkwardness, Steve shook his head. “I’m Steve. I guess if we’re going to be keeping the same hours for working out, we might as well each have a name to a face.” Murdock smirked and Steve grimaced at his poor choice of words. “I mean, well…”

“I’m Matt, and it’s nice to have a name to the voice, Steve.”

Steve smiled at the nonchalant way Matt took the whole fudged exchange before noticing the heavy bruise along his face. “What happened to your jaw?”

Matt touched the bruise. “Oh. That’s what happens when one of you co-workers leaves your office door ajar after you close it.” He shrugged. “I didn’t notice until it was too late.”

“That sounds inconsiderate of them.”

“It’s a new job, we’re still getting used to each other.”

“You must keep late hours,” Steve said unable to keep his curiosity at bay.

“I wish,” Murdock said with good humor. “I work at a community outreach providing legal aid.”

“You’re a lawyer?” That would explain the formal way Matt spoke all the time.

“Yeah, but don’t hold it against me.”

Matt had charm and charisma; it worked well for him. It was hard not to admire someone who could charge rich people a thousand dollars an hour for their time, yet chose to contribute to his neighborhood instead.

“Helping others sounds like something we should all aspire to do,” Steve said with full sincerity.

It was obvious that Matt didn’t take praise well by the way he looked away for a moment before returning his attention back to Steve. “And you?”

Steve was caught off-guard by the question, although it was par for the conversation. “I’m in between jobs at the moment.”

“Well, if you need some help, I could always pass along your resume to one of my job counselors.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m… I’m not looking for anything right now.”

The ease in which he lied bothered Steve, but then the casual deflection in Matt’s tone told him the other man wasn’t totally forthcoming about himself either. They were two guys who paid to use an aging boxing gym after hours when there was a twenty-four-seven fitness center a few blocks away. Instinct told him to be suspicious, but Steve was weary of second-guessing himself.

“You okay, Steve?” Matt asked.
“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to space off like that.”

“I think we both have a lot on our mind. That’s why we come here.”

“Yeah.” It dawned on Steve then how much he’d come to enjoy his nocturnal workouts. Not to mention the conversations in between.

Without another word, Matt continued his way toward the red heavy bag and Steve figured he had another eight hundred push-ups in him for the night. And because Matt wouldn’t be able to see him, Steve could get away with doing more if he wanted to.

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Steve always migrated toward the bench in front of the boxing ring to take a breather in the middle of his nightly session. It was one of the few places to sit down, but usually, he’d go there when it looked like Matt was slowing down and about to take a break. On occasion, they would both remain silent, lost in contemplation, although Steve often wondered what Matt was listening to when he’d tilt his head and focus with such intensity.

More often than not, they would engage in idle conversation and as the days and weeks passed, they veered into deeper topics, the discussions lasting longer.

Sometimes, Steve got the impression that Matt felt as alone in the world as he did.

It was four in the morning; a heavy downpour pelted against the metal roof, the rain overflowing one of the gutters by the sound of things. Matt sat with his elbows on his knees, face scrunched up behind his glasses as if in deep concentration.

The man’s posture and expression was closed off, yet for an inexplicable reason, Steve found a need to talk. “Why do you love it so much?” he asked.

Matt lifted up his head in surprise, the immediate frown softening as comprehension dawned. Steve wondered what Matt had thought he’d asked him at first.

Matt removed his glasses; Steve was surprised at the haunted expression that lingered in the man’s sightless eyes. He’d seen that look before, in the eyes of men who had seen the darkness inside others, inside the world, and still struggled with it. Had he always been blind, Steve wondered?

“Boxing can provide a way to deal with our fears,” Matt said after a beat. “And with the right supervision; it can be done in very manageable increments.”

“Like the first time getting in the ring.” Steve remembered that fear, and Bucky encouraging him as he struggled with climbing over the ropes for the first time.

“That’s a part of it,” Matt agreed. “The ring is the formal place for competition and practice, but it’s more about the progression of the journey. Usually in the first sparring session, a rookie will forget everything they’ve learned and just flail away.”

Steve nodded then remembered that Matt couldn’t see it. “Right, because they haven’t learned the mental component yet.”

“Exactly. If they stick with it for a few months, their fears diminish and they begin to see things in the ring that their emotions blinded them to before. They become more at home with feeling afraid.”

Matt paused, working his jaw, slipping his glasses back on. “Fear’s painful, but it can be faced, and in time a boxer learns not to panic about the blows that’ll be coming.”
“With experience they build courage.” Steve tried imagining what it would be like to navigate the world without sight and the fortitude that would require.

“Courage is the mean between foolhardiness and cowardice,” Matt quoted.

Steve remembered reading that line during one of his late night studies. “Aristotle?”

“He said courage is a matter of exercising the right action through the use of reason - thus, it’s courageous to run at times or take action at times.” Matt’s lips were pensive, his voice an octave lower as if sharing a deep secret. “Aristotle may have defined the word courage, but boxing enables us to have and use it.” He looked over at Steve, his gaze a bit off. “When we get into the ring with our fears, we’re less likely to succumb to them when doing the right thing demands taking a hit.”

Matt’s line of reasoning worried Steve a little: not everything had to resort to violence. “There’s a difference between physical and moral courage,” he reminded him.

“And I agree. The willingness to endure physical risks is not enough to guarantee worthiness; but I think it can contribute to the development of moral virtue.” Matt cleared his throat, seeming a little embarrassed at the passion of his argument. He laughed, looking chagrined. “I must really sound like a lawyer now.”

Steve held up his pointer and thumb close together. “Just a little bit,” he said with a smile, feeling a better about the change in Matt’s tone.

“What about you? What is it about boxing that you admire?” Matt relaxed, resting the back of his head against the wall. “And don’t dodge the subject; no one beats a heavy bag with such ferocity and focus like you do unless there’s more to it than a way to release stress in the middle of the night.”

Steve bit his lip as he was hit hard with the memory of being skinny and frail, of the sounds of snickering behind his back, at the cruel words that hurt far more than being hit and thrown down to the ground. He remembered following Bucky’s instructions in the ring, about using his speed and agility, the importance of ducking and weaving, of digging deep down inside to last long enough until his opponent made a mistake.

Steve’s heart beat faster. “Boxing is about rising from the canvas when you’re knocked down, holding on when you’re being pummeled in the corner, and surviving to fight another day. It’s fighting with everything you have, all your heart, and all your skill and ability, and then embracing your opponent when it’s all over because he’s done the same.”

He took a deep breath against the ache behind his breastbone, years of long-buried feelings pouring out, raw and unfiltered. “In boxing you battle yourself and the hand that you were dealt from the day you were born. You battle critics and those who tell you that you’ll never make it. You battle your size, your intelligence, your speed, your age, and most importantly, your will.”

Growing up the 1930’s, Steve remembered how people struggled to pay for bread and meat, his neighbors willing to take any odd job that came their way.

“I think it demonstrates passion and sacrifice, a sport for those who come from nothing and risk their lives to support their families and prove to the world that they exist. It’s an opportunity to achieve something great for those who might have no other way.” Steve swallowed against the uncharacteristic wave of grief ignited by ghosts from his long-ago past, of Bucky standing up against those who bullied Steve during the day, then spending hours at night teaching Steve to do it for himself. “It’s the chance to become a hero, for those who otherwise have no one or nothing to root for.”
When the wave of emotion finished crashing into him, Steve wiped a hand over his face, cursing at himself for losing himself in the past and doing so in front of another person. Taking a few deep breaths; he waited for the adrenaline rush to fade, so he could collect himself and apologize to Matt for the meltdown.

Except when he finally looked over, Matt’s head was bowed and his shoulders shook. It wasn’t until he searched Matt’s face for signs of pain that Steve noticed the wet stains down his cheeks.

Steve reached over and touched Matt’s arm, tentative. “Hey, are you all right?”

Matt jerked away from the touch and stood up. “Yeah, I’m…I have to go.”

Steve was unprepared for the swiftness in which Matt grabbed his duffle from the floor and unfolded his cane, his body already retreating before Steve could gather his wits. His first instinct was to go after him, but Steve was caught between his desire to help and respect for Matt’s need for privacy.

He watched Matt navigate his way toward the front door with impressive speed, his cane barely brushing the floor. But Steve couldn’t risk Matt rushing out late at night while he was distracted and upset. Steve raced through the gym, yanking open the door and rushing outside, only to find an empty sidewalk.

Checking both sides of the street, he jogged around, searching the alleyways and surrounding buildings, but Matt wasn’t anywhere in sight. He listened for the noise of his tapping cane, his serum-enhanced hearing able to stretch for blocks. Nothing. Steve had no idea how Matt could have disappeared like that without a sign of a taxi. The subway was down the street, so it was possible he’d taken it home when Steve was searching in the opposite direction.

Steve was at a loss, he wanted to apologize, but he was unsure what happened. Maybe he could do some research into Matt, find out what had triggered the reaction? Of course that was something that only people like Clint or Natasha would do, most definitely Tony, but Steve couldn’t reach out to any of them, not that he should.

Damn it, he wasn’t supposed to be attracting attention upon himself, not making friends with people, let alone contemplating researching their backgrounds out of worry.

Seeing a patrol car turn onto the street, Steve had no choice but to go back into the gym to grab his stuff and leave, his guilt festering with every step.

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It took Steve much longer to persuade himself to begin researching Matt than it did Google to retrieve the results. He sat in the corner of a library and sipped coffee while he searched.

The internet was filled with articles regarding Nelson and Murdock, the two law partners responsible for the Department of Justice indictment against crime lord Wilson Fisk. Steve remembered reading that as part of a daily SHIELD briefing. People were impressed someone of Fisk’s stature had been brought down by civilians; Steve was even more awed given the lack of resources and the young age of the lawyers, but he’d never paid attention to their names.

Steve’s respect for Matt grew exponentially.

The most recent search results were focused on a high-profile trial defending a mass murderer; Steve remembered reading about that as well. They called the guy “The Punisher”. He hadn’t been in New York at the time, but Frank Castle had made it into SHEILD’s files and onto their radar. After absorbing the information about Fisk, Steve was perplexed as to why Matt had served for Castle’s
defense.

There wasn’t anything really new after that; a few ads for the fledgling firm, then a blurb from a couple of months ago about Foggy Nelson making partner at another practice. Steve wondered what had caused the partnership to dissolve.

But it was Matt Murdock’s past that yielded the most search results. Steve’s instincts had been right; Matt had not been born blind. In fact, it appeared he’d sacrificed his vision while saving a civilian. Steve scrolled on, grinding his jaw as the search painted a sad and grisly picture.

The murder of a local sports legend provided even more headlines in various degrees of respect and tabloid thrash.

“Battlin’ Jack Murdock,” he read out loud, feeling like an insensitive jerk. Matt’s dad had been gunned down, leaving Matt an orphan.

Even though Steve didn’t need to read anymore, he felt obligated to find out the rest of Matt’s story.***

It was earlier than usual in the evening which meant more people were out on the street; Steve kept the hood of his jacket up as he quickly entered Fogwell’s. The gym didn’t remain open past nine at night, mainly because there weren’t enough employees running the place and even fewer patrons. While the upkeep of a gym’s equipment should be a priority, there simply wasn’t enough cash flow for such care.

It was part of its charm, Steve thought with a smile.

He headed toward the red heavy bag in the back that was supposed to have been replaced almost two months ago. It was Matt’s favorite; he always used it whenever Steve saw him, making him wonder if there was something sentimental about it. During the last few nights, Matt had walked past it and used the one further in the corner.

Walking up to the red bag, Steve gave it a token punch, noting how little resistance it returned. After a quick examination, he noticed a couple small tears in the soft leather. That would kill a bag, he knew.

He’d suspected as much, which was why he’d come prepared. Digging through his duffel, Steve pulled out some scissors, fishing line, and a thick needle and started stitching up the tears. It was tedious working through tough leather, but Steve sealed the holes then used strips of duct tape to protect them.

Once he was done, Steve tested the bag with his bare knuckles, pleased that it gave back the proper tension. By the time he packed-up his stuff and began his routine with the sped bag, he noticed Matt had arrived, dressed in black sweats and sweatshirt, a butterfly bandage over his right eye. Steve couldn’t help but wonder if the injury was another work accident or from something else, filing it away for later.

Matt paused momentarily at the entrance before dropping off his stuff on the nearest bench and walking over. “Hey.” He fidgeted with the handle of his cane, obviously struggling with his words. “Hey, I um, fixed that heavy bag,” Steve said by way of greeting. “You were right; it was really beat.”

Matt raised his eyebrows; it was hard to tell if it was in surprised relief or in bemusement at the way
Steve handled the uncomfortable situation. Either way, he walked toward the bag and ran his fingers over the tape.

“Thank you.”

“I sewed up the rips. It should hold up for a few more months.”

“That’s good; it’ll probably take Joe that long to find the funds to replace it.”

“How about we test it out?” Steve said. “See if I actually knew what I was doing.”

“Sure.”

Matt folded-up his cane and he set it and his glasses on the bench with the rest of his stuff. Shedding his sweatshirt, he taped his hands with impressive speed. “You ready?”

Steve grabbed the bag to keep it steady, bracing his weight with a slight bend to his knees. “Go for it.”

Matt was a pro, calm, working his punches; he threw combinations, putting a little pop here and there…but mostly, he was serene.

From their conversations—and from watching him over the past several weeks—Steve knew that Matt was all about technique and rhythm, maintaining a steady flow on the bag, his punches small and hands at chest level. Steve hung onto to the bag, able to keep it steady much longer than most people, allowing Matt to reach a meditative training state.

Steve could almost hear the tranquility of Matt’s mind as he breathed through his routine.

The silence of the empty gym was broken only by the sound of Matt’s taped fists against the leather and his steady puffs of breath. It didn’t occur to Steve that the quiet might actually be stretching thin until Matt stepped away from the bag, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“You could yell something if you wanted,” the slighter man grunted, a smirk to his voice. “I don’t need to see you.”

Steve snorted, feeling put in place. “All right.”

It’s been a while since he’d been in a position to motivate another person and Steve relished the idea of matching Matt’s energy, and maybe catch a glimpse of him with his guard down. Steve had witnessed Matt unleash impressive power before, and one thing was for sure – he was holding back now.

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Steve sat on the floor, his back against the ring, Matt on the bench, each enjoying a water break. Steve felt good, riding a wave of endorphins from acting as Matt’s bag coach. He rolled his neck a few times to keep the muscles loose.

Matt gulped down the rest of his water, emptying the plastic bottle; he looked relaxed, thoughtful. Patting the space beside him until he found his glasses, he slipped them back on, and then looked in Steve’s direction.

“I’m sorry about my reaction the other night. You’re one of the few people I’ve ever met who understood the beauty of this sport and why it means so much to me. It…,” he paused, clearing his
throat. “It reminded me of someone.”

Steve knew Matt was referring to his father, recognized the heartbreak in his voice, but he did not let on to the fact. Steve still hadn’t allowed himself time to grieve for Peggy.

He also understood what it meant to be viewed as the underdog and fight for every inch of respect; going from an orphan to graduating first in his class at Columbia Law School was not unlike fighting his way into the Army in Steve’s mind.

“You know maybe next time we could spar a little,” Steve suggested, knowing he could pull his punches. Matt thinned his lips, pulling his head up as though hesitant, but Steve preempted any argument. “You might be a lawyer, but I think you missed a calling as a coach.”

Matt grinned. “All right. Maybe next time we’ll go a round or two. But I can’t promise I’ll teach you much.”

Steve thought about all the decades that passed him by while he’d been under the ice and returned the grin. “I think I still have plenty to learn.”

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Steve still received updates from his underground network; Sam left intel in prearranged drop-areas outside of Hell’s Kitchen with reports on major Hydra movement and an update on T’Challa’s activities. The last set of intelligence had been a shoebox filled with notebooks (flash-drives could be tracked or loaded with viruses) including the latest military research deprogramming techniques for brainwashing.

Steve continued his own research at internet cafes so his searches couldn’t be traced, but nothing he or Sam uncovered was extensive enough to help Bucky. There’d been a post-it note from Natasha that was simple and to the point. Find and talk to Banner.

But even if he could find Bruce, Steve couldn’t risk exposure for either of them, not yet. Maybe never.

Steve still found himself going through the motions, sleeping, eating, and getting the required amount of exercise. He’d work his way through the next volume in A History of American Law and look up at the clock with no idea what time it was, or even what day.

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It was difficult to avoid all the current news, but eventually Steve was no longer part of the headlines. Neither was the hunt for The Winter Soldier or even a mention of anything to do with enhanced people with powers. Even Tony wasn’t featured on the front page. There was the occasional mention of the local vigilante of Hell’s Kitchen, but New York was full of them and Steve couldn’t keep up with them all.

There’d been a SHIELD discussion about observing this particular one: Daredevil. A file had been created, but then things had heated up with Bruce and Tony playing with AI gods and things got re-prioritized.

What did dominate the papers was the opium epidemic, not a new flashy drug or pharmaceutical cocktail. Nothing ever changed, Steve thought, even Hitler used amphetamines.

Desperation brought desperation and while ODs were on the rise, so were muggings, robberies, assault and a rising gang war to control the supply and distribution. He squinted as he read the latest
It was the first time in the last couple of months that Steve wondered how he could just stand around in a hoodie and do nothing.

He shoved open the door to the gym, the need to punch something making him charge inside, and dump his stuff on his usual bench. He was breathing rapidly, his muscles twitching, fists curling involuntarily. Maybe he’d run a few hundred laps around the place first….

***

Steve stood over the red bag, the chain that had been holding it up broken in two pieces. He was pissed at himself, breaking something that he’d be so proud to repair.

Rubbing his sweat-drenched forehead with his forearm, Steve glanced around the empty gym. There were plenty of times when Steve had worked out alone, allowing him to go all out without needing to hide his abilities. But now….

He hadn’t seen Matt in a week and he couldn’t help thinking about sky-rocketing crime.

***

Steve replaced the chain the next night (thankfully he’d had the forethought to leave a note for Joe about his intentions to fix it) and started inspecting the rest of the equipment the night after that, repairing things that had been neglected far too long. The third ring rope at the bottom, the broken titles in the floor near the locker room, even the sink in the men’s room.

On Monday morning, Steve grabbed the paper and read about a DEA raid of an abandoned warehouse that resulted in a major shoot-out that spilled into the neighboring apartment complex. While the bad guys had been caught with the aid of Daredevil, there had been over a dozen civilian and police officers injured. It had marked the second week in a row for non-stop drug violence.

Steve stared out the window of his apartment at people going about life blissfully unaware, or in sheer defiance of the danger surrounding them. A year ago Steve would have been on a mission, oblivious to such a crime wave; today he struggled with what, if anything, he could do about it.

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That night marked the tenth day Steve had walked inside the gym without seeing Matt around. It was close to four in the morning and he thought about forgoing the work-out and staying up so he could call the community center in the morning to see if the other man had been at work, when he saw the object of his worry come through the backdoor.

Matt marched inside, chucking off his jacket, tossing it in the corner of the room without regard, his breathing harsh and rapid. Most people would back the hell away from someone so obviously angry, but Steve wasn’t that person.

“Hey Matt, it’s Steve.”

Matt didn’t startle at the sound of Steve’s voice he just cast a weary look in his direction before dumping his duffle to the floor and pulling out the materials to tape-up his hands. It was hard not to notice the fading bruises on Matt’s forearms and the fresh one on his cheek.

“I’ve been concerned about you,” Steve told him.
"You shouldn’t have," Matt said with a grunt.

"I’ve just been reading about all the recent drug violence and —"

"And figured a blind man couldn’t avoid being a random victim of crime?"

_Ouch._ Steve grimaced. “I deserve that. I’m sorry. I have this bad habit about worrying over the well-being of my friends.”

Matt froze at Steve’s words and he clenched his jaw, the muscle there bouncing back and forth. “Fair enough.” Standing, he stared at Steve through his red glasses as if sizing him up, his whole body radiating barely-restrained tension, as if he’d been wound-up for weeks without sleep. “You mentioned something about sparring last time. You up for that now?”

Steve nodded forgetting himself again, grateful for the accepted apology. “I think a few rounds would be a great source of stress release.”

“Good. I’ll even try to take it easy on you,” Matt said with an undercurrent of sarcasm.

Steve walked over toward his stuff and called over his shoulder, “I’ll be very disappointed if you actually do.”

***

It’d been a while since Steve had worn gloves; when he’d sparred with the Avengers, he just taped-up his hands. The leather felt heavy around his fingers making them feel clumsy. Steve kept his hands up, chest level, circling the ring in a backwards step that felt oddly natural.

Matt was only a couple inches shorter than Steve, giving him a good reach. As Matt parroted Steve’s movement around the ring, he cocked his head to one side and Steve realized with fascination that he was listening for movement.

Steve was an expert in hand to hand combat, judo, and boxing. His strength and reflexes were super-human, but he knew how to hold back in these types of situations.

After a minute of studying his opponent, Steve took the first punch, the motion sweeping wide, his posture telegraphing the attempted hit. Matt stepped away from it with ease and shot him an irritated, ‘are you kidding me?’ glower.

It was obvious Matt was keyed up, and not just from being in the ring. Anger radiated from him, in his bunched shoulders and clenched his jaw, the aggression rolling off him in waves.

“Are we going to just circle each other or are you going to take a real swing at me?” Matt challenged.

Not waiting for an answer, Matt opened up with a fast strike, pivoting off his front foot, testing Steve’s guard. He continued striking with imposing speed, keeping Steve on the defensive but unable to make a solid connection.

Steve retaliated with straight jabs, aiming for the solar plexuses. Matt avoided his strikes with some remarkable foot work, and Steve returned to a defensive posture with his hands up.

It became clear rather quickly that Matt was a highly-trained fighter, and despite his blindness, could probably knock out a typical opponent on skill alone. But Steve was an enhanced soldier; he remained cautious and would not allow himself to get sucked into Matt’s emotions and injure him by
accident.  

“Do you want to talk about what’s got you so pissed off?” Steve asked.  

“No.”  

Matt followed his answer with a burst of energy. Using distracting techniques, he struck outside Steve’s field of peripheral vision in an attempt to trick him into blocking high while he simultaneously threw a jab at Steve’s ribs. Steve jumped back, avoiding both hits as he was forced into a corner turnbuckle, leaving him with nowhere to go.  

He figured that must have been Matt’s plan all along as he landed a punch to Steve’s jaw. It was a glancing strike, but still retained a lot of power. Steve began to re-think his plan about remaining on the defensive.  

Steve thumped the side of Matt’s ear with a quick strike, forcing the other man to back off enough to give Steve room to maneuver into the center of the ring.  

“Maybe you could tell me about those bruises on your arms or the cut from a couple weeks ago?”  

Matt gave his head a shake and glared in Steve’s direction, his eyes hitting just over Steve’s shoulder.  

“I know it’s easy to dismiss,” Matt’s voice was a growl in between gasps for air, “but when people leave things on a flight of stairs, or move a piece of furniture, it can leave a mark when I run into it.” Matt shifted his stance, fists up at his chin, eyes dropping to the right as something dark shifted in his expression. “But don’t worry; it’s the least of my problems.”  

Steve didn’t buy it. Matt wasn’t that clumsy, he was acutely aware of his surroundings. He had to be; it was his way of life. Not only that, Steve had seen it in the way the man moved through the gym, was seeing it now in the way Matt squared off against him in the ring.  

“I think you’re craftier than that,” Steve countered. “Maybe you’re sick of being pegged as helpless when you’re far from it and you try to take on more than you can handle.”  

Steve was starting to suspect that Matt was simply too proud to admit he’d been mugged more than once, targeted because of his disability.  

“Or maybe some people have lived in a make-believe world for so long that they’ve forgotten what it’s like in the dirt with the rest of us,” Matt snapped.  

Before Steve could react to the surprise barb, Matt came at him like a freight train. He was powerful and agile, his gloved hands blurs of red. Steve’s reflexes kicked in and he pivoted away from each swing, bouncing on his feet.  

But Matt was fast, connecting a hit below Steve’s eyebrow, then following up with a left cross, pivoting with his hip to shove power into an impressive double punch to the side of Steve’s face.  

Okay that kind of hurt.  

Matt didn’t stop, picking up the pace with a furious combination of jabs. Steve bobbed and weaved out of the way and just when he thought he noticed a pattern, Matt changed-up the style of his next punch. His uppercut was powerful; a driving fist that struck under Steve’s chin and Steve allowed his head to snap back as not to injure Matt’s hand.  

Matt went for the win, going for another powerful uppercut that exposed his right side. Steve dodged the punch and smacked Matt in the mouth, hitting him with a light thump instead of a devastating hit.
that could’ve broken his jaw.

“Stop taking it easy on me!” Matt growled.

Steve closed in on Matt, trying to crowd him, and cuff him on the nose. But Matt ducked under it, and then surprised Steve by shoving him hard to the side with his forearm and elbow. Steve had to keep himself from using Matt’s own momentum to throw him out of the ring out of instinct.

Instead, he retreated into the corner, panting heavily. “What the hell were you talking about earlier?”

“Nothing.” Matt shook his head once, then rotated his neck. “I’ve had a crappy week.”

“Was that before or after someone hurt you?” Steve asked, staring at the blue and green defensive bruises on Matt’s arms.

“It doesn’t matter,” Matt snapped, his lips pulling up in a near snarl. “What I do in my life is my business, and people need to accept that fact.”

“Where is all this hostility coming from?”

Matt dropped his chin, lifting his hands so that his reply slapped against his gloves. “We’re in a boxing ring. This is me managing my anger.”

“Fair enough.” If Matt was looking for a fight, Steve would give him one.

Steve lunged, striking high with his right fist. Matt knocked Steve’s hand away at the wrist then stepped forward, his back foot pivoting as he slammed his own gloved fist into Steve’s chest.

When Matt went for a right-cross, Steve slipped underneath it. Stepping sideways, head low, Steve swung his left fist around, driving it straight into Matt’s ribs. Matt grunted, bending over from the strike and Steve decided to end this little match before he really hurt him.

Steve dropped his weight low and pivoted onto his back foot while thrusting his left arm and hip upwards. But Matt’s hand came down and knocked Steve’s arm sideways, his other fist slammed into Steve’s nose.

Matt grabbed Steve by his shoulders and drove his knee toward Steve’s stomach, but he stopped short as if changing his mind. Steve used the mistake to his advantage. He grabbed Matt’s knee and pulled him off balance and knocked him down when he kicked the leg Matt was left standing on out from under him.

That was an aborted Muay Thai move; where the heck did Matt learn that?

Steve watched Matt roll over and scramble to his feet with impressive speed, head tilted to the side. He stood at the edge of the ring, sweat pouring down his face, a fresh bruise blossoming at the corner of his mouth, looking like he wanted to brawl until he dropped.

“Matt, who the hell are you pissed at? Me, or someone else?” Steve demanded.

“I’m pissed at….” Matt glared at Steve than shook his head in anger, yanking at the laces of his gloves with his teeth. “I’m pissed at the only person who deserves it.”

“And who is that?” Steve pressed.

Chest heaving, Matt ripped off his gloves and tossed them to the ground. “Me.”
It was after dawn when Steve walked out of the gym, duffle slung over his shoulder as he watched all the early risers. People hurried up and down own sidewalks, some ducking into coffee shops, or heading to the subway; others were dressed in sweats for an early morning jog. It was the hustle and bustle of everyday citizens starting their day, each with purpose, even if it was just to earn a paycheck.

It made Steve feel hollow.

He inhaled a long breath and held it for a few seconds, slowly releasing it, his thoughts like film clips in his mind.

Atop of the bridge of the helicarrier, exchanging blows with Bucky, furious leg strikes and fists, smashing his friend with the might of his shield. Bucky’s vacant stare as he buried a knife into Steve’s shoulder, Steve’s regret when he bent Bucky’s arm back until it snapped.

All that anger, all that confusion.

“You’re James Bucky Barnes and you’re my friend.”

Buck had broken through it all, smashed apart that internal prison, only for Steve to put him back into another one. And despite all the resources of SHEILD and access to the most brilliant minds, Steve was, and continued to be, powerless to do anything to about it.

He’d failed as soldier and even worse as a friend.

Steve turned his head and stared back at the aging gym, unable to forget Matt Murdock’s face in the ring; the raw anger simmering just beneath the surface, and what’s more, a familiar grief in the other man’s eyes.

Steve recognized a person in pain when he saw one.

He remembered being in boot camp, working from dawn until night to serve his country, only to be sidelined over and over again. He wasn’t that skinny kid anymore, yet he’d been forced aside again while bad things happened to people he gave a damn about.

And if Steve couldn’t help the only friend he’d made in the last couple of months, then what good was he?

***

Steve needed recon. He was fairly certain even Natasha would qualify going to the community center where Matt worked as gathering intel. He’d called earlier posing as a receptionist for a doctor’s office to verify an upcoming appointment, only to discover that Matt had called in sick for the day. After what he saw last night, this didn’t surprise Steve, which is why he decided to canvas the place.

Wearing thick-rimmed glasses and baseball cap, he showed up at the reception desk and waited for the middle-aged woman to acknowledge him.

“May I help you?” She asked without looking up.

“I’m looking for Matt Murdock.”
“He’s not here today.” She briefly made eye contact with him returning her focus back to her computer, her painted fingernails loud against the keyboard. “Did you have an appointment?”

“Um, no, I’m a friend of his and I was just dropping by.”

The receptionist finally looked up at him and she scrunched-up her eyes in suspicion. “A friend of Mr. Murdock’s?”

“Yeah, from Law School. “

“None of Mr. Murdock’s friends have ever stopped by here before.”

“Well, I was in the area and thought I’d take a chance and surprise him.” The receptionist still eyed him in doubt. “You know how Matt can be. He tends to keep to himself.”

“Yeah, he does. It’s a shame, really. He’s one the most courteous people I’ve worked with.”

“Don’t forget charming,” Steve said, plastering on pleasant smile of his own.

She returned his grin, resting her fingers on the top of the counter. “He can be.”

“You should have seen the effect he had on our professors.” Steve laughed and she chuckled with him. Feeling like he’d built some flirtatious rapport, he continued with his questions. “What about Foggy, does he ever stop by?”

“Mr. Nelson? Um, no, and we don’t mention his name anymore, it makes Mr. Murdock…prickly.”

The law school friend and firm partner was now completely out of the equation and a sore subject. What had caused such a major rift?

“No phone calls from anyone else, either?” Steve asked.

“Not unless you count the people who want him to take their case. Despite the whole Frank Castle thing, he still has a rep from the Fisk indictment.”

It sounded like Matt didn’t have friends; then again, Matt never spoke about people during their chats. Between a day job and late-night sessions at the gym, it didn’t seem like there was enough time for an active social life. It painted a very lonely and depressing picture.

With the lobby filling with more people, Steve decided to make his exit before he drew any unwanted attention to himself. “I’ll just stop by another day, thanks for the help.”

Grabbing a pen, the woman looked over at him. “I can’t let you into his office, but I can leave him a note.”

Steve didn’t bother to ask her how Matt was supposed to read it.

The phone began ringing, two lines lit up at once, and Steve waved her away. “Don’t worry; I’m sure I’ll see him soon.”

***

Steve didn’t require much sleep; his biochemistry kept him at the highest levels of peak performance. It didn’t take much to recover from day-to-day activities. He couldn’t pace in his tiny apartment, so he went outside during the early evening, hoping a walk around the perimeter of Hell’s Kitchen would keep his mind occupied. His body burned with too many endorphins.
The hitch-pitched scream of sirens pierced through the normal buzz of the city, followed by screeching car horns. Steve listened to the wail of several more alarms, police and emergency vehicles all racing through the city and from the sounds of things; it was near the new high rise going up on 4th and West.

It wasn’t until he started jogging that he heard the rat-a-tat-tat of automatic gunfire; Steve kicked into high-gear and ran full-tilt toward the noise.

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It took four minutes to arrive near the construction zone and smack -dab in the middle of the chaos. There were eight police cars parked haphazardly on both sides of the street. Steve counted four unconscious people on the sidewalk and three others sporting various injuries being cuffed and dragged toward patrol cars. There were two SUVs filled with dozens of bullet holes, a busted fire hydrant spewing out water, and a cargo van on fire.

“Sir! Move away for your own safety,” someone yelled at him.

Steve spotted a broad-shouldered officer pointing at him and a second cop approaching him from the side. “Sir, please, for your own safety, you need to go.” A female patrolman grabbed his arm and began escorting him away before he could say anything.

“What happened here?” Steve asked, obeying.

“Some gang-bangers fighting over turf.”

“Is anyone hurt?” Steve’s eyes scanned the bodies sprawled on the pavement.

“Only the bad guys.”

There was a hotel across the street and several apartment buildings near-by. Given the range of most assault rifles and the number of rounds they could fire per second, it was a miracle there were not dozens of casualties.

Steve kept the brim of his ball cap over his face, avoiding eye contact. “Looks like you guys got here just in time to prevent things from spreading to the surrounding neighborhoods.”

“Yeah, well the devil of Hell’s Kitchen left them gift-wrapped for us.”

Steve stopped for a moment upon hearing that bit of news. “Daredevil?”

The officer gave him a glare and he continued walking.

“Got a glimpse of him for the first time when I arrived. Dude’s fast.” Steve craned his neck to peer toward the east alley as he walked toward the safety zone being set up by the newly set-up barricades. “If you’re really trying to find him, try looking up,” she told him.

Confused, Steve stared at the rooftops in interest. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

***

Steve went to Fogwell’s after leaving the police scene. He’d climbed up a few fire escapes and wandered around the rooftops of the city, finding a new perspective about his new home. He didn’t spot the devil, not that he expected to.

It was late, after two in the morning, and Steve felt weary, a deep-seeded exhaustion from the very
marrow of his bones. He didn’t know what to make of his low-energy levels, especially given the fact he hadn’t done anything physically taxing in months. Yet, it took effort just to force his feet to move inside. With a sigh, Steve walked toward the bench and stared at it, wondering if he should turn around and go back to his apartment or sleep.

“My dad won twenty-four times in the ring and lost thirty-one. He knew how to take a lot of punishment and how to deliver it.” Matt walked from out of the shadows in the back corner, resting his cane in front of him. His hair looked damp from a shower and he was dressed in grey sweatshirt and dark track pants. “That’s one thing about the ring: it’s the most honest place to take a beating. But it’s what you learn from that thumping that matters.”

“And what’s that?” Steve asked, watching the other man carefully.

“To know yourself. Know when you’re off your game and recognize why.”

“If I remember correctly, you were doing pretty well.”

“I was angry, and I took it out on you.” Matt tipped his head slightly, addressing the floor. “I’m sorry.”

“Look,” Steve sighed, ready to find some balance again, “we don’t know each other very well, but I know what it’s like to be the viewed as the underdog and having everyone in the world assuming you can’t do certain things when you darn well can.”

“Like avoiding being a victim of a mugging?”

Steve felt like he walked into that, but Matt wasn’t playing fair considering all the evidence of his recent injuries. But before Steve could interject, Matt folded up his cane and sat heavily on the bench, his lips a flat line of discontent.

“I understand why you think that, though,” Matt began, looking an inch off Steve’s shoulder, his fingers curling and uncurling around the folded cane. “You’ve had some experiences of your own at being the underdog.”

Steve felt a stab of unease in his chest while he kept his voice even. “What are you talking about?”

“I know who you are, Captain.” Matt brought his chin up. “I’ve known almost since the first day.”

The admission left Steve feeling like he had stepped on a landmine. He needed to sit down. He settled on leaning against the platform of the ring, near Matt. “You have?”

“I may be blind, but I make up for it in other ways. Not to mention,” Matt’s lips tipped up slightly in a small grin, “it’s not every day you meet a guy named Steve who is currently unemployed, can do eight hundred push-ups in a night, and mixes up his lingo from time to time.”

Steve had seen Matt’s observation skills first-hand; he should have never underestimated them, but he still felt like he was crossing a potential minefield given the ramifications. “You’re a lawyer.”

“A defense attorney.”

As if that made a difference? Steve wasn’t in the mood to play games in semantics. “I’m a fugitive. Don’t you a legal obligation to turn me in?”

“I prefer to turn in criminals,” Matt said matter of fact.
“And you don’t think I’ve broken the law?” Steve wasn’t a legal expert, but he knew Matt was dancing around a very fine line and now he couldn’t help wonder if it was because of some hidden motivation.

“I didn’t say that,” Matt tipped his head to the side, somehow communicating more with his body language than he did with his words, “but I do think there are some major issues with the legality of certain documents.”

Steve considered Matt’s carefully constructed sentence. “You’re talking about the Accords?”

“I may have recently read them in detail. Could have even taken some notes.”

“You took notes.” Steve began wondering if Matt thought he was ticket to the big time again, another trial of the century. “Were you hoping to take me on as a client?”

Matt’s head shot up at the bite in Steve’s words, his expression hurt. “I was hoping,” he paused, his hands curled tightly around his cane, “that maybe I could help out a friend.”

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Steve stared at Matt, a wave of guilt crushing him as he remembered standing between Tony and Bucky, forced to choose between his present and his past. He’d picked one over another, and lost them both.

Friendships took time to develop, to nourish, they could not be artificially created. It was no wonder they were always at risk of neglect.

Steve appreciated the olive branch Matt had extended, for two people who didn’t have a lot of friends, this new found bond felt genuine. He leaned against the base of the ring. “What’s your opinion regarding the Accords?”

“I have a lot of opinions regarding them, but I suspect you’re more interested in my legal interpretation?”

Steve shot him an impatient glare for the smartass reply before he realized Matt couldn’t see it. “I’d like both.”

Matt worked his lower jaw in thought. “To begin with, an accord is not a law or Constitutional Amendment. Not to mention that the United States cannot enact a law to willfully violate the rights of United States citizens.”

Steve reflected back to the volumes he read of *A History of American Law*, Matt’s words striking a familiar chord as he processed the direction of his thinking. “Congress can pass a law, but it can still be Unconstitutional.”

“The Accords were agreements between foreign countries to have an un-elected panel at the United Nations approve what missions the Avengers could go on.” Matt bounced the end of his cane in thought while he spoke. “While I kind of agree that there are significant legal issues with people who have enhanced powers entering foreign countries without any legal authority, violating anyone’s civil rights is not a solution to the problem.”

“Like due process,” Steve replied, following Matt’s breadcrumbs.

“That’s a major one, not to mention mandatory conscription.”

Steve frowned, puzzled. “It’s the duty of every male citizen between age eighteen and twenty-six to present themselves for registration.”

“Correct and it’s within the President’s power to draft all male Avengers for military service.” Scrunching up his face, Matt looked over in Steve’s direction in question. “I’m assuming that the Avengers are similar to the members of the Special Forces who work for agencies like the CIA?”

“The Avengers are autonomous,” Steve said with some uncertainty. There were always power struggles going on between the government and secret organization. “Kind of.”

“Which I’m sure doesn’t exactly make the higher-ups very happy.” Matt stood and started pacing in front of Steve, his head tilted slightly upward in deep contemplation. “But even if the Avengers were an official armed body to the United States, you’ve already served in the Army during WWI.” He stopped short in front of Steve. “You can’t be re-drafted and neither can any other human male
Avenger over the age of twenty-six.”

Steve shook his head. “But, we haven’t been drafted.”

Matt pointed the handle of his cane at him, his face lighting up in excitement as the tone in his voice kicked up a notch. “But mandating any human with enhanced powers to be registered and deployed according to the orders of an un-elected United Nations panel sounds a lot like involuntary servitude, which would violate the 13th Amendment.”

Steve’s heart rate picked up, matching Matt’s enthusiasm, a new hope stirring in his chest at the possible implications. “Some friends of mine, a few Avengers; they were imprisoned and kept on a floating jail in the middle of the ocean.” Steve didn’t mention the fact that he had broken them out.

Matt’s eyebrows arched up in surprise. “Without a trial?”

“None.”

And the Secretary of State had been complicit with it.

Anger mixed with a predatory glint flashed across Matt’s features; the man had to be feared by prosecutors in a courtroom. “Then they were imprisoned without a right to counsel. Not to mention being confined on a submarine prison would deprive anyone accused of a crime of the writ of habeas corpus, which requires a person in custody to be brought before a Court.”

Steve nodded with Matt’s argument, his late night readings of law falling into place. “Not to mention the 5th Amendment, which protects people from being deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process.”

“At the very least.” Matt leaned his cane on the floor, a ghost of a smile across his face. “I think you missed a calling.”

“Since I’m currently unemployed, I tend to read a lot.” Steve considered Matt, thinking back to his carefully tailored words about interpretations of the law and his own opinion. “So what else have you been thinking about?”

The corner of Matt’s lips twitched and he resumed his circuit of pacing in front of the bench. “That big fight at the airport I read about between the Avengers. The side you lead was arguably done out of self-defense, because of the Unconstitutional enforcement of the Accords, and the UN’s rush to judgment to have Mr. James Barnes shot on sight instead of arrested.”

Hearing about one of the worst days of his life—forced to fight his teammates, his friends for the life of another; for Bucky—be easily stripped down to a basic legal argument made Steve’s stomach twist into knots.

“Exactly,” Steve said forcing his voice to remain even while the rest of his body trembled.

Matt stood beside Steve, his voice expectant. “And now?”

It was hard to contain the bitterness in Steve’s voice when he spoke. “We’re both fugitives.”

“Mr. Barnes should still have had his day in court to argue his case, opposed to being locked away without a trial.” Tentative, Matt reached out and laid a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “We should allow due process to happen, allow the law to work.”

Except Bucky wasn’t locked away, he was in a far worse place: a prison Steve helped put him
inside. He could never wipe away the memory of Buck’s resignation to his fate in Wakanda. The only way to keep Bucky safe, to keep the world safe from him, had been to put under again.

“It’s not possible.” Bucky was a walking time bomb, a killing machine without a control. “My best friend was brainwashed into the perfect assassin by Hydra. That’s hard to defend.”

Matt kept an even-keel expression upon hearing the last sentence; in fact, it seemed only to make him more determined when he stared in Steve’s direction through his glasses. “Don’t the Avengers stand for law and justice and not just an active military arm of a government body? Don’t you think they should stand up for basic constitutional rights?”

But they were too far gone; the look of pain in Tony’s eyes after witnessing the recording of his parents’ death, the shock and defeat after Steve thrust his shield into the reactor in the armor of Tony’s chest. James Rhodes’s spinal injury. Friendships and families utterly torn apart.

“It’s too late for that.” Steve’s voice finally cracked. “The damage has already been done.”

“It’s never too late to stand up for basic rights, Captain.” Matt squeezed Steve’s shoulder. “If we don’t fight for those, than what’s the point?”

“I’ve spent my entire life defending this country.” Steve would die protecting his home. “I’ve never backed down from a fight, but what if you’re saying is true, there won’t even be trials for anyone. I won’t be able to help people who need it.” He licked his lips, his chest aching. “And Bucky will never know freedom.”

Matt dropped his hand and looked at Steve in challenge. “How are you helping your friends now? Some of the Avengers are wanted criminals and you’ve been forced underground.” Shoulders taut, voice rich in moral conviction, Matt didn’t let up. “If things can’t be done at first through legal means, than begin with the media. If Mr. Barnes is not guilty because of extenuating circumstance then build the case in the forum of public opinion. Leak information about top-secret prison ships and evil brain-washing programs.”

“Use the media to gain sympathy for an unsympathetic figure.” Steve admired Matt’s tenacity, but he wasn’t certain of the possible outcome. “Like you did with Frank Castle?”

It was the first time Matt’s face darkened. He took a few steps back, the grip around his cane tight enough to break it. “That defense would have worked if it wasn’t for my screw-up.”

Steve didn’t know all the details of that case; he needed to rectify it very soon, because it was still unclear how a person of Matt’s moral character could with good conscious take on that case. “And you would have been okay if a mass murderer had gone to psych hospital instead of jail?”

“I believe in fairness in a world that isn’t just black and white.”

But that was the type of world Steve had been brought up in, one he still clung to.

“You’ve talked a lot of about your legal opinion, but you’ve haven’t given me your personal one yet.”

The air in the room felt tight with tension. After the last few years, he was sick of double talk; Steve wanted honesty and open dialog.

Matt’s diaphragm expanded up and down as he took three long breaths, while the fingers around his cane uncurled into a more relaxed grip. “I think government agencies that are allowed to conduct top-secret genetics programs creating god-like super beings and that billionaires who create giant evil
robots should have some form of regulations given the impact of their actions. While the Accords are Unconstitutional, there has to be room for compromise.”

Compromise was an art form Steve excelled at the least and may have cost him the most.

Looking over at Matt, he studied the lines of his face, at the beginning of a fresh bruise near his temple that’d been hidden by his hair. Steve watched the extreme focus Matt exerted to control his breathing and calm an anger still teaming at the surface of his words, and the physicality of his movement.

“You mentioned during our sparring match about how some people have lived in a make believe world so they long they’ve forgotten what it’s like to be in the dirt with everyone else,” Steve recounted. “Is that how you feel about the Avengers?”

Matt jutted out his chin, his voice clipped. “I told you, I was angry and I took it out on you.”

It was quite the understatement.

Releasing a long breath, Steve let out a small whistle. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but you’re always pretty angry. You attack that heavy bag like you’re trying to avenge the world.”

“Nice change of subject,” Matt replied still sounding defensive.

“Not really. We say things in the heat of the moment; usually it’s the most unfiltered type of honesty from our brain. It might be raw and embellished but it’s there.” The more Steve contemplated the sparring match, the angrier he became at the possible ramifications. “You got into the ring with me knowing I was a highly-trained, enhanced soldier. I’ve taken on everything from mutant squid to giant alien armies. I could have seriously injured you.”

“You didn’t though.”

It was a weak response and Steve couldn’t believe it came out of the same person who’d just mounted such a strong case a few minutes earlier. “Because I held back, I pulled my punches and that made you even more furious. You told me to stop taking it easy on you. You tried egging me on, knowing if for one second I slipped up; I could have really hurt you.”

“Or maybe I just wanted a real challenge.”

“I may not be blind Matt, but there’s a difference between wanting an opponent to treat you as an equal in the ring and knowingly stepping into a fight you hope you’ll lose.” Steve felt a pang in his gut as he remembered how ferocious Matt had fought and his unwillingness to back down. “Is that the reason why you’re always sporting bruises? Are you so angry that you’re doing things to hurt yourself?”

Staring at the floor, Matt shook his head, lips pursed. “You’re making a lot of assumptions, none of which are true.”

“Then enlighten me. You’ve known my identity for a couple of months; what else have you been hiding?” Steve had seen Matt in the ring, what he was capable of when backed into a corner. He didn’t want to create new barriers. “Look, I’m sorry if it feels like I’m pushing you. All I want to do is help. Please, let me.”

Matt’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed hard, his mouth opened and closed twice before words formed, harsh and full of grit. “There are people who need far more help than me. Hell’s Kitchen might not be under attack by monsters or robots, but that doesn’t mean her people
aren’t fighting against threats of poverty and crime that destroy families.”

He sucked in a ragged breath, the ache in his voice cutting Steve to the core. “They’re crying for help every day and sometimes…sometimes it’s…it’s deafening.”

***

Steve had never spent much time on the roof of his building until now. He took a deep, cleansing breath of night air. The studio he rented was above a pizza joint, the scent of cheese and fried meat often wafted through the walls at night. Lethargy plagued his muscles, like he’d been hit by an energy-draining weapon. He hadn’t slept in almost three days; his brain felt sluggish, but going to bed was far from the agenda.

He leaned against the outside wall of the stairwell, trying to clear his conscious from tonight and the mounting guilt from the last few months, all combining into an oppressive weight of regret. Staring at the sunrise, he clenched his jaw, mortified at himself as his thoughts drifted back to Matt’s broken confession hours before.

\textit{Matt clutched his cane and stared at the floor, body strung tight with tension.}

\textit{Steve reached out a hand to touch his shoulder.}

\textit{Matt side-stepped away, his voice taut and controlled. “It’s late, Steve. Maybe we should both call it a night.”}

\textit{“I don’t mind sticking around.”}

\textit{“I mind.”}

Another wave of helplessness hit Steve and it created an inability to say anything else constructive. “Okay, I’ll…I’ll see ya later.” Steve hesitated a moment before walking away.

\textit{Steve glanced back to see Matt standing in the shadows, vibrating with pain that Steve didn’t know how to treat. Matt’s hurt ran too deep to be managed with basic first aid and the hollowness inside Steve threatened to swallow him whole.}

He was sick of feeling impotent. Steve had walked away from Tony in the bunker, broken and in pain, just as he walked away in Wakanda, and again with Matt last night. He scrubbed a hand over his face, feeling every year of his body for once. He’d failed so many people; he would not fail another friend.

***

Steve had saved all the files from his searches in the library onto a flash drive for access later. It was annoying that he couldn’t be actively online but at least he still had his laptop.

It didn’t take long to compile a list of articles regarding the Frank Castle trial before Steve started sorting them into chronological order. He scanned through exposés, in-depth legal analysis, and dozens of contradictory opinioned articles. Over the course of many weeks people viewed Castle from a deranged blood-thirsty psychopath to a victimized war vet taking the law into his own hands.

Well, not everyone, but some—even a few in law enforcement. “Enough to garner some empathy,” he muttered.

And all because of what came out of the trial; Frank Castle’s achievements in the military, the murder
of his family, hints of cover-ups and evidence tampering. For the most part it seemed Matt’s law partner, Foggy Nelson, had been the driving force for the defense, Matt largely absent except for a failed closing argument regarding morality and the murky lines surrounding the definition of a hero. While it seemed as if Matt’s closing statement had been branded a failure, most conceded everything fell apart because of Castle’s deranged outburst.

Where did a man without friends go during the biggest case of his life? What happened to the passion and conviction for law Steve had witness first hand, arguments that still permeated his brain and created hope and stirred up self doubt at the same time?

Steve chewed on Matt’s words, the raw honesty of them. Certainly SHIELD had an army of lawyers on retainer; Tony employed an entire law firm. Why hadn’t any of them asked for an injunction, or gone to court, or done a million other legal things to battle something so riddled with glaring issues? Where was their courtroom showdown of the century?

Had he and the Avengers done such terrible job of defending the public that they’d lost the people’s confidence? It was a question that still plagued him.

The Battle for New York and the fight against Ultron that had resulted in civilian casualties, but….

Steve and the people he’d called friends during those altercations had done everything in their power to protect the innocent, to prevent collateral damage that occurred so often in war. And there were no mistaking things; they were at war, against Hydra, against all those seeking to destroy and take over the world.

In battle there were losses.

Rhodey would never walk without aid again; Clint couldn’t see his family because he, Steve, Sam, Lang, and Maximoff were all wanted criminals.

They had all volunteered for a cause…but had it been the same one as Steve’s?

Steve shook his head. It had been the right thing to do.

Clint used to say that hindsight was twenty-twenty. If the mood of the public began shifting after New York, then the injuries of civilians and police officers resulting from helping Bucky escape had just been too much for the average person to deal with. The very people Steve had sworn to protect.

Bucky deserved to be protected, too. He deserved to be treated fairly under the law. Steve sighed because the voice in his head sounded an awful lot like certain lawyer by day, boxer by night.

Steve scanned the articles on Frank Castle again, noticing a recent one from the other day chronicling his exploits against the recent drug war. The vigilante had killed at least three top lieutenants of one of the gangs and blown up a city garbage truck being used to bring in a major shipment. And there was actually a debate between two news editors if he should be praised for it.

Maybe Matt was right; maybe the path toward freedom was through the media. The ocean consisted of low and high tides, riding the waves of popular opinion, and nothing changed opinion like the news. He just needed to figure out how to use it to his advantage.

And in the process, find out how to break through Matt’s protective barriers and help him.

***

One of the things Steve had forgotten about living alone was needing to go to the grocery store.
Because of his need for anonymity he went out late at night, preferably to the corner store with the busted security camera.

Given the fact that the city was embroiled in violent crime, it shouldn’t have surprised Steve when heard signs of one in progress. Dressed in civilian clothes and on the FBI’s most wanted list couldn’t still the instinct to run down the alley and toward the sound of gunshots. Grabbing the lid from a trashcan, he rounded the corner of the next building and right into a street fight.

Several meters at the end of the alley he spotted Daredevil facing off against four men.

Steve was a soldier; he knew to attack only during an opening. He didn’t want to get in the way or distract Daredevil; at the moment, Steve would only be a hindrance. He bided his time, poised to help if needed.

A guy in a leather jacket swung a crowbar at Daredevil’s head. Daredevil ducked under it, and then from a crouch, delivered a strike to the abdomen of the same man. The punch was devastating, wielding enough power to fracture the lower ribs. Leather Jacket doubled over and fell to the ground, stunned.

“Come on, Spike, kill him!” A thug with a shaved head yelled at his buddy.

Spike was two hundred pounds of muscle and Skinhead was lanky and tatted-up. They stood side-by-side, a serious tactical error. Daredevil swung his baton so hard it knocked both their weapons out of their grip. Both guys screamed, cradling their hands.

A third guy with squat shoulders and a face of a bulldog, tried to sneak up behind the devil while his back was turned. Daredevil grabbed Skinhead by the shoulders and spun him around and smashed his head into the alley wall. Using the momentum from the spin, Daredevil kicked Bulldog in the chest, knocking him to the ground.

Spike stared at the devil, massive body shaking in rage. He pulled out a five inch blade from a holster at his hip. “I’m going to gut you wide open.”

And he lunged.

Daredevil kept Skinhead immobile with one arm wrapped around his throat and knocked the knife out of Spike’s grip with another swing of his baton. Then he grabbed Spike by the hair and kneed him twice in the face.

Skinhead clawed at Daredevil’s arm and he responded by flipping him onto the ground with a twist to his shoulders.

Too bad it wasn’t the end to the ruckus.

“You knocked out my teeth!” Spike screamed as blood poured out of his mouth.

Daredevil ignored him and knelt beside Skinhead who tried to get up. The guy had to be hopped up on something. Daredevil ended the thug’s attempt to rise with three vicious punches to the face.

Daredevil was brutal and effective. Steve kept his distance, willing to step in if needed, but instinctively knowing it wasn’t his fight. He watched Spike help Leather Jacket stagger to his feet and the two were stupid enough to try to jump the devil while he was busy rendering their buddy unconscious.

Steve was about to shout a warning when Daredevil shot up to his feet and elbowed Leather Jacket
in the nose, breaking it by the sound of things.

Staring at the devil, chest heaving, Spike held up his meaty fists in front of his face. He bellowed like an animal before he charged. Daredevil side-stepped him with ease and struck him in the mouth again with a killer uppercut.

If his jaw wasn’t broken before, it was now. Spike rolled around on the ground, moaning in agony.

Face bloodied, Leather Jacket swayed on his feet and reached into his pocket for something. Daredevil stared at the motion, mouth turned flat, unimpressed. He leaped up in the air and swung a leg into the side of his head. Leather Jacket dropped to the ground and didn’t twitch.

Breathing hard, Daredevil turned around and tossed his baton, the weapon connecting with Bulldog’s forehead with a crack. Steve hadn’t even noticed the guy had regained awareness until he rolled to his feet and drew his weapon.

All four criminals were unconscious with various injuries. Steve thought about calling 911, but he didn’t have a phone. Instead he watched Daredevil pat down and check their pockets seemingly annoyed at not finding something.

Steve had a split second decision to make; he doubted the Devil of Hell’s Kitchen cared about turning him in. “Daredevil,” he called out.

Daredevil didn’t look over at him. “The police are on their way; they’ll take care of these guys.”

Seconds later, Steve could hear a faint siren in the distance. Impressive. “I just want to talk.”

“I don’t.”

Maybe Daredevil didn’t know who he was and that Steve wasn’t seeking some fan boy conversation. “Listen, I’m Steve – “

“I know who you are, but I don’t really have the time to play tour guide.”

Steve wasn’t in the mood to deal with a smart ass. “Then don’t give me one.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

Daredevil took off around the corner and Steve dropped the trashcan lid and chased after him, closing in on him in seconds. He stayed on Daredevil’s heels down an alley between two close buildings.

Before Steve could get close enough to grab an arm or shoulder, Daredevil planted a foot on the left side of one building then launched himself upwards. His feet alternated between each brick surface like he was climbing steps. He scaled to the top like it was a piece of playground equipment and disappeared over the roof.

Steve didn’t stop to admire the feat and followed close behind. He climbed up the east wall using the cement in between bricks and a drainage gutter for foot and handhelds, thinking he hadn’t this kind of a workout in a while.

***

There was an art to everything in life, studying another person’s technique was one of them. Steve had extreme speed and agility on his side and he kept a good pace with the devil.
Daredevil leaped over one air conditioning unit at full tilt, and then another.

There was a speed and fluidly to his movements, suggesting an ease with urban environments and familiarity with the city.

Steve followed suit for hundreds of meters. He vaulted over chimneys, avoided power lines and satellite dishes. There was no straight path from point A to point B. Every impediment was in random places and consisted of various heights and sizes.

It took good form and practice to flow from one obstacle to the next, to the point where there might as well not be any obstacles at all. Daredevil created his own path as he ran with ease.

Making consecutive jumps was a challenge. It took power and skill because it was difficult to maintain momentum between them.

They were ten stories high and Steve followed Daredevil onto a ledge, running down the narrow lane. “Seriously, I only want to talk!”

Daredevil answered him by leaping from the ledge onto the building three stories below. Steve stood there and watched him race and jump across three different rooftops and out of sight.

“Okay…maybe another time,” Steve said, wondering exactly where he’d ended up in the city.

***

Steve was an analyst; learning from every engagement was a necessary part of being a soldier.

Daredevil was highly skilled with impressive reaction speed; he definitely was good at fighting. Steve recognized some jiu-jitsu and taekwondo.

And his punches -- that uppercut, the speed of his fast strikes. Those seemed familiar.

Steve paced inside his cramped apartment. A fighter always developed a signature, something unique to the swing or angle to the punch.

That knee to the face was strikingly similar to the time Matt tried to use it against Steve in the ring then thought better about it. Like it was instinct and he tried to hide it. Muay Thai was a combat sport; a boxer could easily adapt to its more aggressive techniques adding elbow and leg strikes.

But who had taught Matt? He didn’t even go to the gym during the day. Steve had a thought, but it was a long-shot. A very big long-shot.

He pulled up all the articles on Nelson and Murdock, dating back to the Fisk case. Steve wanted a specific one, a legal analysis that has lead to the indictment. There. Buried in the details. The bad cop who’d turned state’s evidence, the one that Nelson and Murdock had represented. The cop had been saved by Daredevil earlier that night.

And many of the files Nelson and Murdock had used in their investigation into Wilson Fisk had been given to them by Daredevil.

“When did a law firm investigate crime lords?”

Steve stared at all the saved file on his hard drive. Did Daredevil use Nelson and Murdock as his contacts? How much interaction did he have with them?

Did Daredevil teach Matt some of his moves?
Matt was a blind lawyer who took on hard-luck clients while sporting a huge chip on his shoulder. Anger issues, childhood trauma, a proud man confronted with a society that labeled everyone who was different. Maybe teaming up with a vigilante appealed to someone like Matt, helping him deal with all the pain he felt from a city he’d loved so deeply.

It wouldn’t be the first time someone like Daredevil took on a pupil and it would definitely explain some of Matt’s minor injuries. But was Steve jumping to conclusions?

And if he wasn’t, then Steve wanted a word with the Devil’s of Hell’s Kitchen.

***

Steve got some sleep before another round of sirens brought him back onto the streets the following night, three fire trucks and a dozen police cars headed toward a giant warehouse blaze on the west-end of town.

He hurried down the street, stopping at a red light, searching out the best route to take.

“Heard The Punisher blew up where those animals have been cooking all the crack on the street.” A guy with grey, thinning hair and glasses took a drag from his cigarette. “Hope he blew away some of those dealers along with everything.”

“How do you know it was The Punisher?” Steve asked.

“Buddy of mine called me and said he saw him walk out of building right before it went boom.”

“And you’re okay with what he does?” Steve kept the question carefully casual.

The guy shrugged. “He gets shit done that the cops can’t.”

“Even if he’s dangerous?”

“Life’s dangerous, buddy,” the grey-haired guy huffed, taking a last drag on his cigarette. “I could walk outside and get hit by a car. The Punisher kills the bad guys and that’s good enough for me.”

Steve watched the guy crush his cigarette on the sidewalk with his boot and stride away. Steve picked up the butt and threw it in the thrash can when he noticed a missing person’s poster taped to the side of the can. ‘Gina’ was a fifteen year old girl with strawberry-blonde hair and a giant smile with the tiniest gap between her teeth. Last seen going to a friend’s house three blocks away.

Steve had to temper the flare of anger in his chest at all the injustice in the world.

_It was the reason why you used to put on the uniform every day._

Another set of sirens wailed close by, this time the police cars were going in the opposite direction of the fire. Pulling the hoodie up around his face, Steve started jogging in the same direction as the police.

***

His shield and body armor were buried underground in a spot away from the city in a specially-crafted box Thor had given him for his birthday. Even The Hulk would have a hard time breaking it open without the key. Sam had gone through a lot of trouble of getting it back for him, even if Steve had thought he didn’t deserve it, but he had it, and Steve didn’t trust keeping it close by in case he was ever arrested.
As he walked toward the scene of a shooting, Steve began wondering how much longer he could allow it to remain hidden.

Standing by a bus stop, he watched the police cordon off the area around a body bag in the middle of the street. Glancing around, he noticed another missing poster for Gina plastered on the inside of the bus shelter away from the crime scene.

“That’s my granddaughter,” a soft voice said next to him.

Steve turned toward an older woman who was only tall enough to reach his shoulders. Her sweater was covered in worn-out fuzzies, and she carried a bag of posters while holding a roll of tape. “If you see her, there’s a phone number you can call.” She pointed at the info at the bottom of the poster to emphasize things.

“I’ll keep an eye out for her.” He glanced back at the poster, memorizing her facial features. “What was she wearing last?”

“I don’t know,” she said, biting at her already chewed and broken nails. “Her mother doesn’t remember. She’s too busy trying to steal my pain medication out my bathroom to care.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Several moments of silence passed and he cleared his throat. “I’m Steve, by the way.”

“I’m Julia,” she said, falling silent before looking up at him in the eyes. “It’s a disease you know. Drugs. Starts with pills the doctor gives you then just eats you away.”

The way she spoke was incongruously candid, given the situation.

“It’s a terrible illness,” he said. If Gina came from a broken home, maybe she’d tried to find her own way out. “Is it possible she went to a friend’s house?”

“That’s what the police said, but they’re wrong. She wouldn’t run away, not without telling me,” Julia said with a fiery conviction that Steve believed. “She calls me every Thursday night after Jeopardy. She’s never missed a call, not even on her junior prom night.”

Steve studied the poster again. It didn’t display a leader of a terrorist cell or a wanted assassin; it was the face of a young girl, someone with her whole life in front of her.

Every night Steve listened to the sound of sirens. Emergency workers sent to save the suffering and dying, police officers trying to prevent a crime and often arriving too late. It was an endless cycle of violence and misery that made people like Matt Murdock punch a heavy bag in the middle of the night and cry in empathy for his home.

But this missing girl, Steve could act; he could do something to find her.

Julia gazed at the face of her granddaughter and her face clouded over in despair. Steve touched her shoulder. “I’ll help you look, I promise.”

“I got Mr. Hernandez from the laundry mat and Mrs. Flores who lives down the street to put up posters.”

Steve smiled and squeezed her arm. “I’m sure between the four of us; we’ll cover a lot of ground.”

“And don’t forget the Daredevil,” she said, patting his arm in return.
“You spoke to him?”

“I saw him on top of the roof of Mrs. Andrews’ building last night. I called out to him, said if anyone could find my Gina, he could.” Julia shook head in exasperation. “He could have broken an ankle leaping off the roof like that.” Then her face brightened in hope. “But he took my posters, promised he’d help.”

Steve made a point of grabbing several of them. “I think you’ve got a good team on your side.”

***

The odds of finding a missing girl went down significantly after the first twenty-four hours, let alone five days. But if Steve couldn’t spend an evening searching for her than his shield should stayed buried. He put up a few posters as he walked, hanging them at eye level and using enough tape it make it annoying to remove.

The air grew cold with a strong wind and moisture prickled at his cheeks. For a moment Steve thought it might rain, then he realized he was nearing the docks along the Hudson River. It was hard not to smell the polluted river from here. Tugging the strings of his hoodie, he picked up speed, wanting to do a quick circuit around the warehouse, when he saw a black SUV park down a side street.

The vehicle was nondescript and did nothing to warrant scrutiny, yet something in his gut told him to observe it. He watched out of the corner of his eye while tacking another poster to a utility pole as three men unloaded from the vehicle, each one carrying a large duffle bag.

All three were broad-shouldered, built, and dressed in dark clothes. Steve would bet most of Tony’s fortune that those bags concealed weapons. He stepped inside the bus shelter, knowing they wouldn’t be able to see him between the darkness and the alcove.

The lead guy screamed military, sporting black BDUs, and corralling everyone into a circle. “We’ll wait for the signal,” Steve heard from his position, thanks to his serum-enhanced hearing as the man spoke in low, hushed tones, “then outflank the target while he’s busy with the other boys. Hayes, use suppression fire. Runco and I will take out the target.”

His subordinates looked like pros, alert and calm. Hayes wore glasses and had shorn blonde hair. Runco was older, in his mid-fifties with a grey ponytail.

Steve searched for an inconspicuous spot to walk toward to continue observing the group when the sound of AK27s and M16s erupted the night. He snapped his head toward the sounds coming from the other side of the warehouse near the docks.

“That’s our cue,” the Leader said. The others removed assault weapons from their duffels and inserted clips of ammo. “Hit the bastard hard and hit him fast.”

Steve marched over to the black-painted metal bus bench and broke away one of the slats. He’d sworn an oath to protect people and he would damn well do it.

***

Steve strode forward, his voice loud and commanding. “You have five seconds to drop your weapons and leave.”

All three men turned around, their expressions bewildered.
Steve started counting. “Five, four, three….”

The first two guys raised their weapons and Steve tossed the metal slat at them. The piece of metal struck Hayes’ wrist and ricocheted into Runco’s arm, both rifles clattering to the ground.

Steve rocketed at them. He struck Hayes in the face with a right hook-left cross and laid him out.

Fingers dug into his shoulder as someone tried to grab Steve from behind. He snatched the person’s wrist and turned around, twisting the arm at a ninety-degree angle until it snapped.

Runco dropped to his knees with a shout, cradling his broken arm. Steve pivoted on his feet to go after the last guy, only to find a M4 aimed at his chest. As soon as the Leader’s eyes zeroed in on Steve’s face, they went wide in recognition.

Steve took advantage of the moment and grabbed the end of the barrel, yanking it out of the man’s possession. Then he cracked him in the side of the head with the rifle butt.

The gunfire by the docks grew heavier and more sporadic; it sounded like all-out war. Steve needed intel before he moved away from this group. Hayes was the only one still conscious and Steve grabbed him by the shirt collar, lifting him to his feet.

“What’s your mission? What am I’m running into?”

Hayes laughed in Steve’s face. “A blood bath with The Punisher.”

***

Steve ran full-tilt around the warehouse, pinpointing the sounds of each weapon to anticipate the approximate position of the shooters, and by the sounds of things the number of attackers had dropped from more than a dozen to maybe six since the battle had first started.

Steve came around the side of the of the four-story warehouse and onto a large loading zone. He scanned the area.

Two shooters lay flat on top of a blue shipping container and two others stood behind a giant crane for cover. All four fired at a figure who was using the underbelly of a flat-bed truck for cover.

“Daredevil,” Steve muttered, surprised.

Not who he had expected. He needed to re-evaluate the situation and alter tactics.

Eight bad guys were in various states of unconsciousness in the twenty meters between the crane and the three-ton truck. Two bad guys stood in front of the radiator grill of the flat-bed, shooting hundreds of rounds of under the truck. But wherever they fired, Daredevil was six steps ahead of them. He bounced around like a human pinball, from the left side, to on top of the flat bed, onto the right side.

Daredevil used one of the tires to launch himself three feet high and onto the hood. He swung his billy club, the weapon splitting into two pieces from a steel cable, and bashed one of the attackers in the face. Then he did a forward flip off the hood, over the other gunman’s head, and landed behind him, cracking across the back of the head with the club.

Bullets sliced through the air, missing where Daredevil had stood seconds before. He used his club as a grappling hook, the end wrapping around the lattice boom of the crane that reached over twenty meters high, then Daredevil swung above the gunmen who were using the crane for cover.
Steve knew the devil had his end of things under control, so he set his sights on the two remaining shooters on the blue shipping crate, who continued to rain down heavy fire.

He raced toward the container and took a running leap, landing on top of it.

The fist shooter stared up at him like gaping fish. “What the hell?”

“Oh, just evening up the odds,” Steve said.

It took one punch to render the man unable to get back up again. His buddy took exception to Steve’s actions and swung his M6 forward at Steve’s head. Steve ducked under the rifle, grabbed the shooter by the shoulders and swung him off the container.

Heart pounding, Steve searched the loading zone for Daredevil, and found him walking away at a fast clip, the two remaining bad guys from the crane moaning on the ground.

“Wait!” Steve shouted at the devil’s back, his voice bouncing off the metal surfaces of the loading zone and landing back at his feet.

Steve jumped down and gave chase to the retreating Daredevil. It only took a few seconds to catch up to him passed the shipping containers and over toward the docks by the water’s edge. Steve was mindful of his proximity, and kept enough space between them. “I told you, I just want to talk.”

It was the first time he had a chance to study the red body armor, noting the detailed craftsmanship that spoke of skilled design. Not to mention the wear and tear from regular use. Steve searched for any other nuances, noting the exposed skin of Daredevil’s jaw and recognizing an odd familiarity.

“Fine,” Steve relented, when Daredevil didn’t reply. “How about a few questions. Like what the hell happened here?”

“It was an ambush.” The vigilante’s voice was low, rough.

Steve tried to keep his irritation at bay. “Yeah, I figured that. But why?”

Daredevil didn’t slow down, but there was a definite weariness to his movements, like he maybe was a bit banged-up from taking on a dozen armed hit men. Alone. “I don’t know, but they weren’t after me. They were after Frank Castle.”

“The Punisher.” Steve still needed a few more details. “And you just happened to show up instead?”

“I was after something else. It was a case of wrong place, wrong time.”

No, that wasn’t the whole picture.

“Will you stop?” Steve was tired of playing cat and mouse. “You can jump buildings and leap rooftops, but the only thing around here is a river. And I guarantee I can out-run you on a flat surface.”

Daredevil paused, releasing a heavy breath and slowly turned around, keeping his distance. The two men stood unmoving, the waves of the Hudson slapping the edge of the pier having a calming effect after so much adrenaline.

“Look. Why not come back with me?” Steve nodded toward the warehouse still in the distance. “Like I said, I only want to talk and it looks like maybe you could use a break.”

“I said I didn’t want to—“
Daredevil suddenly cocked his head and then lunged toward Steve, the vigilante’s body jerking as a bullet tore through him, knocking him backward into the water below.

Everything seemed to move as if in slow motion, though Steve knew in reality it lasted only a thousandth of a second.

“Damn it,” Steve cursed.

The Avenger in Steve wanted to go after the sniper, but the soldier in him simply couldn’t leave a man to die. He jumped into the river, the cold water stealing his breath.

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Chapter three

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Steve broke the water with his hands, diving deep, searching for Daredevil. The depth of the water even this close off the docks could reach fifteen feet. If Daredevil was severely injured or knocked unconscious, he could drown.

The water was murky with pollution, debris, and fuel run-off. It burned Steve’s eyes, but he continued looking.

He did a quick sweep of the immediate area, but without knowing which direction to go, it was hard to tell where to continue searching. Did Daredevil sink or find his way back to the surface?

With a large kick, Steve returned to the surface, careful of presenting himself as a target for the sniper. Given the fact the gunman had hit his objective; he had more than likely evac’ed from the area.

Steve paddled in place, scanning the river in desperation for his quarry when he spotted Daredevil break through the water and suck in a giant gasp for air. Panting, Daredevil floundered for a moment while trying to float unsuccessful on his back.

“Stay there; I’m coming to you!” Steve yelled.

Daredevil snapped his head in Steve’s direction. Steve reached the other man in seconds, scissor kicking in place. “Grab a hold of my shoulders. I’ll tow us back toward the docks.”

“The shooter?” Daredevil gasped, his voice no longer holding the effected rasp, but instead tight with pain.

“He bugged out,” Steve told him. Just because he wasn’t a hundred percent certain didn’t make it a lie.

Daredevil cocked his head to one side as if he was weighing his options. Suddenly Steve realized he recognized the gesture, the jaw line, the listening.

And everything else clicked into place.

While part of Steve grappled with the realization, the other part had more pressing concerns. “You’re putting us both at risk if you don’t grab a hold of me.”

That propelled Daredevil into action and he wrapped left arm around Steve’s neck as Steve began swimming toward the nearest dock.

His charge didn’t say a word while he held on, Steve kicking hard until he reached one of the dock piles. “I’m going to climb out of the water and onto the platform, and then I’m going to pull you up.”

He waited until Daredevil exchanged his hold from Steve’s shoulders to dock pile before Steve stretched out his arms to grab the edge of the wooden pier. Then with some effort, he pulled himself out of the water and onto the dock.

Chest heaving, Steve got his bearings, then lay on his belly and reached out his arms. Daredevil grabbed Steve with one hand and Steve pulled him out of the river, the other man crawling onto the
“I hate to say it,” Steve panted, “but we should probably keep moving.”

Still out of breath, Daredevil propped himself onto his knees and listened. “We’re clear.”

Based on the fact he knew when to dodge bullets, Steve believed him. “Once we get to some relative safety, you’re going to have to tell me how you do that, Matt.”

Steve didn’t even count it as a win when Matt didn’t argue the validly of his statement.

***

Steve felt exposed out in the open, but that was the risk associated with evaluating a teammate’s ability to travel. Daredevil—no Matt, not Daredevil, Matt—got into a sitting position and tried to stand.

Steve pressed a hand on his shoulder to keep him still. “Where are you hit?” It was hard to tell with the red body armor and weather conditions.

Matt breathed rapid, shallow breaths. “Upper right shoulder.” He sucked in another gulp of air, forcing his words through gritted teeth. “Through and through.”

“We need to get you to the nearest hospital.”

“No.” Matt shook his head once.

“This isn’t the movies,” Steve protested, frowning down at the other man. “That bullet could have damaged an artery, nerve bundles –”

“It didn’t. It went high.”

“Matt.”

“I know…you don’t have any reason to trust me…but please try.”

Steve hesitated. Matt’s voice was thin and punctuated by quick gasps for air, but his words were solid. They would both probably get arrested, but Steve couldn’t allow that to cloud his decision.

“I’ve been hurt worse. I have a med-kit at my place.” Matt grabbed a hold of Steve’s forearm and pulled himself to his feet, grunting. “Please…there are bigger stakes at hand.”

Steve made his decision. “Here, wear my hoodie. You’re like a walking neon-sign in that suit.”

Removing his sopping wet jacket, Steve draped it over Matt’s shoulders, and helped him get his arms through the sleeves. Matt stiffened when he tried lifting up his right arm, so Steve draped it over his right shoulder and finished zipping it up, making sure the hoodie covered Matt’s head.

“Okay, where to?”

Matt made a point of standing to his full height and started walking unaided. “This way.”

***

Despite a million thoughts and questions running through Steve’s head, he remained focused on the primary goal of getting to safety. There hadn’t been a chance to examine Matt at the pier, but the man
was bound and determined to shrug off any support, though his steps had been increasingly unsteady in the past few minutes.

Steve understood pride and he was aware of Matt’s need for self reliance, but he kept close, knowing perseverance could only get you so far. After walking down two more alleys and over three blocks, Matt wavered on his feet and leaned against the wall.

“How much further?” Steve asked, hoping the answer was close-by.

“It’s this building.” Matt pushed off the wall. “Normally I’d enter from the roof….”

But tonight they’d have to go through the front entrance; hopefully luck was on their side.

Steve helped open the heavy door then stopped short when he saw the number of stairs. “What floor do you live on?”

Matt rested most of his weight on the first post of the stairwell and gave him a wan smile. “Top floor.”

Steve glanced up the eight flights then back to Matt, who looked ready to collapse, and made a command decision. “Get your keys out.”

“I…I keep the keys in the doorframe,” Matt replied his words heavy.

Steve nodded, then he grabbed Matt and lifted him over his shoulder in a half-fireman’s carry. “This is for efficiency’s sake,” he counted Matt’s gruff bleat of protest. “You can yell at me for this after we’re inside your place.”

***

The whole trip up the stairs took about a minute and Steve put Matt down immediately once they were inside. Matt traced the edge of the hallway wall as he walked slow and deliberate toward his kitchen. Steve scanned the studio, finding a couple of lamps to switch on. His shirt and jeans were soaked through from his impromptu swim in the Hudson, making him shiver in cool air of the studio, but Steve had a mission.

Matt kept his right arm pressed against his chest and all but dragged a medium size black leather bag from a closet. He dropped the med kit onto the floor beside a coffee table, then after a few clumsy one-handed attempts, he took off his helmet.

Despite being aware of Matt’s duel identity, it was strange to see his face from beneath the mask, his gaze off a few inches when he looked over in Steve’s direction. He was still Matt, though. Still the guy who’d taught him the differences in boxing gloves and told stories about the moonshine operation in the old neighborhood. Still the guy who met him at four in the morning for weeks on end to punch his way through a world of stress. Still the guy who offered Steve a different view of the world than any of the Avengers had been able to.

He was Matt Murdock the lawyer, Daredevil, and Steve’s friend.

So, Steve did what a friend should, pulling out a pocketknife and making quick work of wet hoodie. Then he helped Matt remove his suit, unfastening the hidden clasps of the jacket portion and peeling it carefully off of Matt’s wounded shoulder, leaving the body armor on the floor. After stripping down to his boxers, Matt’s knees folded as if of their own accord and he collapsed against the cushions of his sofa.
Steve had seen this before: an injured person strung out on the adrenaline rush but otherwise aware and ambulating. Then the endorphins bottomed-out.

Steve grabbed the black medical bag and gathered bandages, sutures, tape, and scissors. “You’ve been doing this a while. Don’t you have anyone who helps you when you’re injured?”

“I do…but she’s kind of…on a sabbatical right now.”

Steve arched a brow at his friend. “It’s not a good strategy to go out without proper back-up or medical faculties.”

“Hey, I was doing pretty well until…I got distracted.”

It was meant as a joke with zero accusation, but Matt’s words struck Steve to the core at the unintended implication. Steve had been a distraction. But there wasn’t time for guilt; Steve had to push those thoughts away. “What about friends? Is there someone I should contact?”

Matt’s expression clouded and he shook his head. Steve didn’t press the issue; not yet.

Steve moved until he knelt beside him. The front of Matt’s chest was stained red; the bullet hole was the size of a quarter and bleeding sluggishly. He reached for the black bag. “I hope you haven’t needed to use this much.”

The scars across Matt’s abdomen and torso—some thin, white, and old, others puckered, angry, and way too recent—told him the answer without Matt having to say a word.

Steve dug through the bag as reality sent a cold shudder down his spine. This was similar to battlefield triage. There wasn’t a jet on standby or access to a high-tech medical facility.

A bullet could penetrate the body, the slug and the resulting shockwave damaging tissue, muscles and other structures in its path. Matt hadn’t been shot by a small caliber handgun, but by a larger, higher-velocity weapon. The only thing saving him from being torn apart had been the body armor.


Matt squeezed his eyes closed, his face grimacing in concentration. “The bullet missed the subclavian artery, but it tore through the trapezius muscle.”

Steve couldn’t waste time wondering how Matt could self-diagnosis to such a specificity. “Did it fracture any bone?”

“No.”

“I need to look at your back.”

Matt twisted sideways and bent over the arm of the couch, but Steve had to hold him up to keep him from tumbling forward. Not a good sign. Steve peered over and grimaced. The exit wound was larger and an inch lower than the entrance wound. It was leaking blood at a faster rate; the back of the sofa was already stained with a wet patch.

Steve pressed a large bandage against the cavity and taped it in place. He needed to clean out and stitch-up each wound, but he needed to stem the bleeding to one of them first.

Matt lay back against the sofa, his face greyer than it’d been seconds before, sweat rolling down his face. Steve needed to stabilize him.
“If you have healing powers, now would be a good time to use them.” Matt gave him a deprecating smile. Right. Steve searched the bag again with a frown. “Where are the pain killers?”

Matt didn’t answer and Steve looked over to find his head lolling to one side against the back of the sofa. “Hey! None of that. Now, I asked you a question,” Steve demanded, patting Matt’s cheek with the backs of his fingers, drawing the other man’s eyes open once more.

“Don’t have any.”

Steve rubbed a hand over his face in frustration. Seeking out a lopsided fight in the ring was begging for punishment, but fighting for justice on the street without a way to manage pain in the aftermath was reckless. “I have to sew up a two holes in your shoulder. It’d be easier if you weren’t in agony.”

“I’ll…hold still.”

For a moment, Steve’s mind flashed to an eighteen-year-old too scared to crawl out of his fox-hole after an all night shelling, an Army Captain screaming with his arm blown-off, a kid from Iowa with two bullet holes in his chest, stoic and silent-his eyes full of fear. He’d been unable to help any of them, prevent their pain, their suffering.

Yet, here now, with this friend bleeding out in front of him, real help could be a phone call away….

Steve shook his head against the raging self-doubt and tried to remain focused.

He put on a pair of latex gloves from the leather bag, wishing it was better stocked. There wasn’t any saline, or quick clot, no medication of any kind. It wasn’t a real med kit, just something thrown together from the local pharmacy. If Matt continued with being Daredevil, Steve would make sure he kept a military-grade survival kit.

Steve mentally went over his game plan with such limited supplies, noting Matt had gone silent again.

“How are you doing?” When Matt didn’t reply, Steve nudged him in the arm. “Come on, talk to me. I don’t care about what.”

Matt rolled his head to one side, his gaze at the ceiling. “Your clothes…smell like pepperoni and sausage. Pigs were from farms in Jersey.” He licked his lips. “You live near a…a crappy pizza joint; they use cheap skim milk mozzarella that’s been frozen for months.”

Steve’s eyebrows rose subconsciously. “Nothing about the crust?”

“Pre-made dough…the yeast is outdated.”

Steve used the distraction to search for disinfectant or antibiotics, but couldn’t find any. He couldn’t close up the wound without debriding it. There had to be something in Matt’s place that he could use.

“Hey. Do you have any sugar?”

Matt actually laughed. “Yeah, in the kitchen. Second cabinet on the right. I’d make you some tea, but you know…..”

Steve took a detour first. He went toward the bedroom, did a quick search, and found a folded up blanket at the foot of the bed. Grabbing it, he threw it over Matt, making sure it covered him from the waist up and tucking it under his legs to keep him warm.
Going into the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator, searching the contents until he found a half carton of orange juice and a bottle of Gatorade. Steve grabbed the bag of sugar, a spoon out of the drawer, and brought everything over.

“Try to drink some of this before I get started.”

Matt accepted the juice with a shaky hand and took a few sips before resting the carton on his stomach. “You’re going to pour sugar into the wound.”

“Come on, keep drinking,” Steve encouraged, watching Matt lift the carton to his lips again. “Have you ever rubbed sugar into a ham?”

“I don’t cook much that…isn’t a sandwich or doesn’t…require a microwave.”

It was Steve’s turn to laugh. “Yeah, well this is a very old, but successful method. The sugar liquefies inside and coats the wound, preventing bacteria from getting inside. Then it pulls the moisture from the infected tissue, leaving the bacteria dead or too weak to do much havoc.”

“Something you learned from the war?”

Matt’s question brought back a barrage of memories: mortar fire, the heavy scent of cordite, and the screams of the dying. Steve swallowed against the bile in his throat.

“I went on a lot of rescue missions. Some of the guys, some of them would be caught behind enemy lines for days or weeks. They did what they had to survive.” Steve opened the package of sugar, remembering the day he and Bucky ran into the remains of a unit from the 8th Infantry. Men broken and bleeding, yet waiting for their next orders. “Believe it or not this method has been used by the Chinese for hundreds of years. Bucky showed me how it worked.”

“Wait. You and…Mr. Barnes served together?”

It took a moment for Steve to realize that fact wasn’t common knowledge. Everyone knew about Captain America, but nothing about Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes.

“Yeah, we both part of the same unit.”

Despite not being able to see, Matt conveyed his remorse through the sadness in his eyes, and frown of his mouth. When he spoke, it was with more strength than he actually had. “I’ll help you figure something out. Explore every option.”

“I know you will.” But they’d been wasting precious time. Steve took a deep breath. “You ready?”

Matt gave a curt nod.

Steve knelt beside Matt and poured the sugar inside the wound, Matt’s fingers digging into the side of the sofa. He’d hoped Matt would pass out, but instead he hovered on the very edge, his body strung tighter than a bow, panting in pain.

Steve gave Matt a moment to recover, supporting the back of his head with one hand while helping him drink the rest of the juice. He knew they had to keep going.

Steve threaded the needle with the surgical line and began sewing closed the bullet hole, talking the whole time about the best pub in London to keep his and Matt’s mind occupied. At some point he registered Matt’s strained, almost-frantic breathing had started to even out. By the time he reached the final stitch, Matt had succumbed to unconsciousness, his body mercifully lax on the sofa.
Thank goodness. Steve still needed to suture the larger, more problematic hole in the back of Matt’s shoulder, and the longer he worked, the longer it would take to stabilize him. Steve looked down at his blood-covered hands and at rapid rise and fall of Matt’s chest and wondered not for the first time that night if he should call Tony.

Avengers Tower was only a few miles away.

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Steve had learned a long time ago to stand by the choices he’d made, to always go with the first decision because nine times out of ten, it was the right one. He wouldn’t allow another friend to be imprisoned.

It took twenty minutes to debride and stitch up the wound in Matt’s back. With Matt unconscious it was easier to move him onto his stomach for the procedure—not to mention all the manhandling required to apply the pressure bandages in place and bind them tight with medical tape. After what seemed like forever of inflicting torture, it felt good to turn Matt back onto his back so he would be at least somewhat comfortable when he woke up.

Steve took a minute to clean up all the medical waste, disposing it into a large plastic garbage bag that he would throw away later. He walked over and picked up the Daredevil suit to get it off the floor when he noticed a thick rolled-up paper stuffed inside the baton holster. Curious, Steve pulled it out and stared at the familiar missing “Gina” poster. Sighing, he gathered up the suit and put it on top of the kitchen table and out of the way.

He debated the idea of moving his friend to the bedroom so he could rest when he noticed Matt opening his eyes.

Steve grabbed the Gatorade and knelt down beside the sofa. “Hey, it’s Steve. Do you remember what happened?”

“I…was shot,” Matt said, matter of fact, swallowing roughly. His mouth had to be Sahara-dry. “Shot with a SR-25 sniper rifle.”

That was more specific than Steve was going for. “Do you know at what range?”

“About…f-four hundred yards.” Matt tried moving further up on the sofa, but thought better of it after only a few seconds. “The shooter was positioned on the roof of the warehouse; he was six-one, about one hundred and eighty pounds, early forties.”

“Do you remember anything else distinctive about him?”

“Smoked…Marlboro Reds. Was a professional; his heartbeat never rose above sixty beats per minute.” Matt shook his head, annoyed. “Should have noticed him sooner.”

“Your reaction is the reason why you’re still alive.” Snipers always went for the headshot. “Not to mention you were occupied talking to me.”

“Shouldn’t have mattered.”

Steve wasn’t going to debate the subject and placed the Gatorade bottle in Matt’s left hand. “You really need to drink this. And when you’re done, let’s see about getting you into something warm.”

Shock was still a risk factor, not to mention infection, but Steve would deal with one issue at a time.
It didn’t take long to find a fresh set of warm clothes from Matt’s bedroom; each drawer was organized by the article of clothing. Steve helped Matt sit up so he could slide the sweats on and the two of them navigated Matt’s arms into the sleeves of a heavy, grey sweater. Matt’s skin was cold to the touch, so Steve threw the blanket on top of him for good measure.

Matt lay on the sofa; his limbs sprawled out across the cushions, a few pillows supporting his head. Steve placed four Advil into Matt’s palm. “This is the strongest thing I could find around here.”

Matt popped the pills into his mouth, drinking half of the Gatorade bottle.

Sinking into the sofa, Matt looked over at Steve, his eyes heavy with exhaustion. “Thanks.”

“It’s not every day that you discover your buddy is a lawyer by day and fights crime by night.” He shrugged, almost self-consciously. “Then again, it’s not like I have room to talk.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, especially after you learned that I was aware of your identity.” Matt played with the edge of the blanket. “It was just….”

“Nice be treating like a normal, everyday person. Yeah, I get that.” Steve relished his rare moments of privacy, and the way Matt had never treated him any different over the last couple of months. “Although, you had to know I would eventually figure it out. It’s a small city.”

Matt looked like a man who was prepared for a fight and didn’t know what to do when there wasn’t one. “You’re not angry?”

Steve sat on the chair opposite of where Matt lay on the sofa, trying to parse out everything in his head. For now, it was best to keep things simple. “No. You don’t owe me anything, Matt. And while we’re past the point of me earning your confidence enough to reveal your other identity, I hope to earn more of your trust in the future.”

Matt sipped on his Gatorade; it was a stalling technique based on the heavy sense of concentration in his wrinkled facial features. “It’s funny; I actually know what you look like.” He gave Steve a wan smile. “I had a poster of you on my wall next to Muhammad Ali when I was a kid. I have to imagine what all my friends look like, but not you.”

It was an unexpected response to Steve’s statement, a reaction of pure sentiment that Steve wasn’t sure what to do with. He cleared his throat, needing to evade. “Mind telling me happened on the docks?”

“I was following a lead on a missing girl there.” Matt took a deep breath, the new bruise along his jaw accenting his ashen pallor. “I didn’t expect to run into a small army. They were waiting for Frank.”

“Why?”

Matt’s eyes kept fluttering close as he spoke, his voice growing heavy, words slurring. “He’s been… making inroads… destroying their operations. They should have brought… more firepower if they were trying to go after him,” he mumbled.

But Steve still needed answers. “What about the girl?”

“Dead end,” Matt practically whispered, his head lolling to the side.
Steve touched Matt’s arm, then saw he was asleep. Pressing his fingers to Matt’s wrist, Steve monitored his pulse, finding it a little too fast for his taste. He checked his watch; it’d only been two hours since the shooting.

They were in desperate need of supplies. Steve was reluctant to leave, but those were the tough choices in life. He didn’t have his baseball cap and his hoodie had been cut to pieces. Maybe Matt had something large enough for him to wear so he could go out?

Steve started to go into Matt’s bedroom when he heard someone at the door. He froze, glancing at Matt who was still passed out on the sofa and back at the continued knocking that grew louder.

Walking down the small hallway Steve hesitated in front of the door, listening to a female voice on the other end.

“Matt, it’s Karen. Come on, let me in. You called me, remember?” She knocked even harder. “You broke your promise about giving me space by insisting that this was important, so if you don’t answer this damn door...,” her voice faded. Then she pounded harder. “Damn it, Matt!”

“You better let her in, or she’ll wake up the whole building,” Matt’s rough voice came from the sofa. He licked his lips. “She knows. It’s okay. I invited her last night. I just...kind of forgot.”

So. She was one of Matt’s friends that he had pushed away. This had all the hallmarks of a very sensitive situation.

He went over and unlocked and swung open the door. Steve frowned at a woman whose jacket was drenched with rain, her hair sticking to the front of a face. Her expression darkened in suspicion upon seeing Steve, a stranger, standing in Matt’s apartment.

“What the hell?” she said.

Steve gave her one of his most apologetic smiles. “Um, hi.”

***

It felt like a stand-off for a moment, Karen glared at Steve, eyes flicking from him to the inside of the apartment.

“Where’s Matt?” she demanded.

“He’s on the sofa,” Steve said, backing away to make room.

Karen stepped inside. “Matt?”

“Over here, Karen,” Matt said, his voice thin with pain and exhaustion.

Steve closed the door and followed her at a respectful distance. Karen paused, noticing the Daredevil suit on the kitchen table before making her way into the living room. She stood in front of the sofa where Matt lay, fiddling with the strap to a large leather satchel slung over her shoulder, exuding weariness and anxiety.

She glanced back at Steve; her eyes narrowing at him in more confusion than mistrust now, before she turned toward Matt. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve had...better days.” Matt’s voice was low, almost a growl, though there was no heat in it.

Her face clouded over with frustration. “This isn’t the time for your deprecating behavior. I don’t
want to hear how you fell down the stairs when we both know that’s not the truth, given your night-time activities. Please don’t –“

“I was shot.” Matt closed his eyes as if trying to draw strength to continue talking. “I’m sorry for not calling.”

“Shot?” Karen placed the satchel on the floor and moved closer, worried. “How bad?”

“I’ll heal.”

Matt’s deflection didn’t seem like the best way to handle things. Karen went from apprehensive and hovering to stiff and guarded.

Steve stepped closer and raised a hand in placation. “He was shot in the shoulder with a high-powered rifle. But with a lot of rest, he should feel better.”

Karen’s face paled and she brushed some of her wet hair back in a nervous gesture, looking down at Matt. “Don’t you think you’d sleep better in your bed?”

Matt looked at her, perplexed. “Maybe?”

“I’ll help,” Steve said. He assisted, bending down so Matt could wrap an arm around his shoulder. Steve stood; pulling Matt up, looping a hand around his waist until he was somewhat steady on his feet.

Once he felt Matt’s legs lock into place, he transferred Matt’s left arm from around his shoulder to Karen’s. Steve didn’t say a word, not wanting to add any more strain to the situation.

Karen wrapped an arm around Matt’s back, taking a surprising amount of his weight and limped him toward the bedroom. Looking down at Matt’s bare feet, her voice took a protective tone. “You’re not wearing any socks.”

“They got wet.”

“Your feet need to stay warm or the rest of you will freeze.”

Steve turned the other way, ignoring their conversation and giving them some privacy. Matt never spoke of Karen, but it was obvious they were close; tension like that only existed between people who cared for one another. Her name, though, rang a bell.

Weariness suddenly swam forward, reminding Steve that it had been a long time since he’d sat down, let alone rested. He glanced at the sofa in longing, wondering if it was as comfortable as it appeared.

The sound of a door sliding closed brought Steve’s attention back to a very displeased person in front of him.

Karen squared her shoulders in challenge. “A living room is not a substitute for a hospital.”

“No, it’s not. But it’s the best we have.”

“For you or for Matt?”

Steve stood tall in defense of his character. “I evaluated the situation, knowing what was at stake. I would never endanger another person for my own sake –“
“Look, I’m sorry,” Karen said, cutting him off. She covered her mouth with her hand, sucking in a steadying breath. “It’s been a really crappy day and even a worse night. I didn’t even want to come over, but Matt’s messages were…insistent.”

Steve’s curiosity was piqued. “What were they about?”

“The first few were concerning my connections to other national newspapers, and then it was about collecting all known public opinions regarding the Avengers and voting records on constitutional issues for the current U.S senate.” She crossed her arms and gave him a weary half smile. “No small task by the way.”

“Sounds like it.” Steve was cautiously optimistic this could turn into a normal conversation. “When did he request that?”

“About a month ago.” Karen wrapped her hands around her wet jacket. “I put it off for a while then started gathering data when I wasn’t writing at night. I admit I was baffled by his request…until now that is.”

Steve ducked his head, then looked her in the eye again. “That was a month ago. You said he started to get more insistent?”

Her expression softened. “He called me three times last night wanting to know if I could dig up everything about a Gina Murphy and her family. Any scrap of information I could get my hands on.” Karen chewed on her lip. “I saw she’s fifteen. Is she in trouble?”

“She’s missing.” And Steve didn’t even know where to start looking for her.

“Is that the reason why Matt got hurt?”

It was a good question; one Steve didn’t think he had the full picture yet. “I’m not sure.”

“For a superhero, you’re not very resourceful.” Steve raised an eyebrow in question and Karen snorted. “I didn’t recognize you at first. I’m used to your face being covered-up by the mask. But yeah, it’s hard not to notice when you’re upfront and personal.”

“You’re right though, I’m not in a good position. In fact, I need your help.”

“My help?”

“I just need you to stay here so I can go out and get some supplies.”

“What kind?”

“Gauze, medical tape, stuff for protein shakes. Iron supplements, Gatorade, and most importantly,” he paused, clearing his throat. “Wide-spectrum antibiotics.”

Karen gawked at him. “So, Captain America thinks he can just waltz in a pharmacy at three in the morning and ask for a few medical supplies, oh and by the way, some antibiotics without a prescription?”

“That was the plan.”

“Well, it kind of sucks,” Karen said with a roll of her eyes.

Steve crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you have a better suggestion?”
“Yeah, me. I’ll go out and get what Matt needs.”

“How?”

“A reporter never gives away her sources.” With a slight twist of her lips indicating an almost-smile, Karen bent down and grabbed her purse and started heading toward the door.

“Wait.”

Steve wandered toward the closet Matt grabbed the medical bag from and started going through the hangers, noting the tags written in Braille attached to each one.

After searching for a moment, he grabbed a long black jacket and handed it to Karen. “Here, you’re already soaked.”

“Um, thank you.” Karen removed her wet coat and exchanged it with Steve for Matt’s dry one, bundling inside. “That was thoughtful.”

“I’m sure Matt wouldn’t want you to go out in this weather without it.” Steve waved his hand in the direction of the satchel. “Do you mind if I take a look at your notes?”

There was a slight hesitation before Karen nodded. “Knock yourself out. But you might need a pair of headphones.”

Karen closed the door behind her and Steve stared at her retreating form in confusion.

***

Steve was careful to keep everything he took from leather satchel in the same order as it was when he pulled it out. There were five sets of folders with newspaper articles and hand-written notes and five microcassettes. Steve stared at the cassettes in confusion before wanting to smack himself in the face with one of them. “You have a very short-term memory, Rogers,” he muttered.

Each cassette tape had a strip of black masking tape with a different number of holes cut into each piece. He rubbed his finger across them, touched at such simple consideration.

Looking around, Steve spotted Matt’s laptop and a mini recorder with the headphone beside it. Inserting the cassette, he put on the headphones while grabbing the file labeled Tape- #1 Newspaper Contacts.

“Hey, Matt,” Karen’s voice filtered through the earpieces. “Each tape corresponds with all my notes. You said you can read print type if you focus, so I included them just in case you wanted to go back over things. Um. I’ve only been on the job for the last four months, but since the case with Frank, I’ve made a few contacts with the New York Post, Chicago Tribune, and the Boston Globe.”

Steve slipped off the headphones and increased the volume loud enough to still listen while thumbing through some of the other folders, Karen’s voice growing annoyed at one point.

“I don’t know what case you’re researching that you want information about my press contacts, or why you want to know which reputable reporters and online magazines specialize in government conspiracies…. And by the way? Using the word reputable and conspiracy in the same sentence is an oxymoron, Matt.”

Steve listened to her voice, thinking about her name and why it had pinged on his radar. Then he glanced at the various newspaper articles. Karen Page was a writer for the Daily Bulletin. He’d read
some of her exposes uncovering corruption in city hall. She’d been instrumental during the Frank Castle and Wilson Fisk cases.

Not to mention she’d been the third unofficial member of the recently dissolved law firm of Nelson & Murdock.

She’d been on his list of friends to look up regarding Matt, but given the circumstances of their meeting last night, nothing had clicked in his head until now. He looked down at all her notes; she was a very thorough researcher.

There were charts of voting records and public opinions regarding the defeated measure for the Enhanced Human Registration Act, the Slovakian Accords, and one he’d never heard of before: the Revision to Executive Order 12333. A book with the same title was stuffed inside the leather satchel; it was over three hundred pages long. There was a post-it-note attached to it: You need to find a way to read this.

Steve stared at the book and at one of the other folders simply labeled, Gina Murphy. He left the book on the kitchen table, turned off the digital recorder, and took the folder with him toward the sofa to begin reading.

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There wasn’t much information on Gina Murphy in the files. Her mother, Kelsey, had been arrested about a dozen times in the last six years, everything from check fraud to felony possession of prescription narcotics. They lived a small apartment, but did not receive government assistance because of Mrs. Murphy’s record. Steve wondered where the father was in all of this.

Gina was an honor’s student in her sophomore year, but her grades had slipped the last few months. Two weeks ago she’d been suspended for three days along with a few seniors for trespassing on school grounds on a Sunday night. Steve was very curious where Karen had obtained all of these records.

An echo of a siren drew his attention outside and Steve realized it was just before dawn. It was time to check on Matt.

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It hadn’t taken long to boil some water and mix in the right amount of salt to create a saline solution. After thoroughly washing his hands and putting on a pair of latex gloves, Steve had slid open the bedroom door and carried everything he needed in two quick trips back and forth. He could tell Matt was awake by the stiff way he held himself under the covers.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asked.

“Like someone filleted my shoulder with a fireplace poker.”

Matt’s voice sounded rough, but strong, and he seemed alert given the pain he must be in.

“That was quite a specific description.” Steve sat on the edge of the bed and picked up a pair of scissors. “Please tell me you haven’t been stabbed with a poker before?”

“I haven’t, but I can imagine that this is what it would feel like.” Steve reached to take Matt’s pulse, but he pulled away his wrist. “My vitals are fine. Heart rate slightly elevated, blood pressure a little low. All within normal range given the circumstances.”
Matt unzipped the front of his hoodie and slid it off his torso when Steve took out a pair of scissors from the medical kit. Steve cut away the dressing to the front of Matt’s shoulder and threw it in a plastic baggie, relieved to find very little active bleeding. He changed gloves again and soaked a piece of gauze in the pot of saline solution and patted the sewn incision, removing any dried blood.

“Did, um, Karen say anything to you?” Matt asked, holding his body rigid while Steve worked.

“Not much, other than reprimanding me for not taking you to the hospital.” Steve finished cleaning the wound before starting to redress it. “She left me some notes that you’d requested.”

“Can you bring them in here?”

“No.” Matt glared at him and Steve refused to acknowledge it. “You need to sleep.”

Matt pushed himself up further in bed until he was half was sitting up. “And if we were in opposite positions, would you accept that?”

“An injured soldier knows when he’s a hindrance to an operation.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

Steve knew better than to try to argue with a lawyer. “Can you turn onto your stomach so I can get to the exit wound?”

Using his hips and lower body to do most of the work, Matt rolled over onto his belly. “Did she bring anything on the missing girl?”

“We’ll talk about it in the morning.”

“It’s five thirty-five. I think that counts.”

Steve looked at the vestiges of pre-dawn light from out of the bedroom window and shook his head. He never questioned Matt regarding his abilities, it didn’t feel like it was his right, but Steve was a curious guy. “Okay, how do you know that?”

“Atmospheric pressure,” Matt mumbled.

Right. Because that explained everything.

Steve repeated the wound care procedure, removing the old dressing and cleaning the incision. More blood had seeped through the stitches, but given the larger size of the hole it wasn’t necessarily a dangerous sign. As long as Matt was careful. Steve cleaned the incision and applied a fresh bandage.

Matt grunted when he moved onto his back again, his eyes squeezed closed, chest heaving until his breathing evened out again.

“We both need to rest.” Steve handed Matt another four Advil and a bottle of water. “We can discuss things only after we’ve each had enough time to recharge.”

“Is that an order?” Matt asked, downing the pills.

“If it needs to be.”

Steve left the water on the nightstand and removed the bag of medical waste. Matt wasn’t under his command, but maybe he needed someone who could challenge him to keep him in line.
If that was the case, then Steve had no problem with taking on that role.

***

A soft knock woke Steve up, and for a second, he didn’t know where he was. Looking around, he realized he’s fallen asleep on Matt’s sofa; the book Karen had left was on the floor where it must have fallen. He glanced at his watch; it was almost ten in the morning.

He heard Karen’s voice asking to be let in and Steve hurried and opened the door to find her carrying four plastic grocery bags and while balancing a tray with Styrofoam boxes.

“Here, let me,” Steve said, taking the tray.

Karen dumped the bags onto the kitchen floor and removed the coat Steve had given her to put in the closet. “I, um, think maybe you should put this somewhere else?” she said pointing at the Daredevil suit that Steve had hung up.

“I will as soon as Matt tells me where it’s stored.”

She rubbed a hand over the body armor in hesitation before hanging up the jacket. Steve was glad he’d taken the time to clean the blood from it a couple of hours ago.

Karen had changed into a sweatshirt and jeans, looking more comfortable, but her eyes gave away an exhaustion of staying up all night and into early morning. Steve wondered if she had gotten any sleep at all.

The smell of eggs and biscuits made his stomach growl and Karen shot him an amused smile. Steve counted it as progress. “You didn’t have to bring breakfast, but thank you.”

She started making coffee, showing a familiarity of where everything was kept in the kitchen. “Well, you had a long night, and Matt needs to eat something substantial if he’s going to get better.”

“‘You went to the Farmer’s Market?’”

Steve turned around at the sound of Matt’s voice as the other man walked with deliberate steps into the living room, holding his arm close to his side, his entire body stiff. He still wore the heavy sweatpants and hoodie Steve had helped him into last night, except now his feet were covered by thick green socks. Matt moved toward the kitchen and patted the counter until he found his red glasses and slipped them on.

Karen watched him walk toward the table and she gave him a smile. “Where else am I going to find organic scrambled eggs and fresh biscuits?”

Matt glanced at the Styrofoam boxes and beamed, his face lightning up. “And you brought homemade strawberry jam.”

“Well, I know your aversion to fast-food and stuff. And since I couldn’t find a ‘Sorry you were shot’ card, I thought this might be better.”

“Thank you, Karen.”

Karen nodded, then she laughed; Matt gave her a tight smile, like they were sharing some bad inside joke. It was a quiet moment, one that made Steve think of Peggy, and how much he missed her charm and easy camaraderie.
Matt sat in one of the chairs with the ease of an arthritic, old man. Steve helped clear the table of stuff while Karen pulled out containers of heavenly smelling food. She and Matt began eating while Steve took care of the rest of the groceries.

He put away a six-pack of Gatorade, what looked like half the produce department of a grocery store, fresh packed soup, and protein shake powder. Steve found a pharmacy bag full of medical gauze and tape, relieved to find a large tube of Neosporin ointment.

“The antibiotics are in the small brown paper bag,” Karen told him while eating a biscuit.

Steve found the bag, holding it up in surprise. “You were able to get some?”

“Yeah, Augmentin? It’s supposed to be pretty strong.”

Matt paused, his fork an inch from his mouth. “From where?”

“I have my sources,” Karen said, playing coy. Matt gave her a disapproving frown and she shook her head at him. “Don’t give me that look; it’s not like they’re painkillers.”

Matt pointed at the bag in Steve’s hand with anger. “But you got those, too.”

“I wasn’t looking for them. They were offered, and I thought you could maybe, actually take them.”

Steve pulled out two unlabeled prescription bottles; he arched an eyebrow at Matt. “Don’t tell me, you could tell what it was from atmospheric pressure?”

“I could smell the oxycodone coming from the Percocet in the left bottle.”

Steve studied the amber bottle. “You know these would probably help you recover faster.”

“I’m not trying to play a macho card.” Matt exhaled a heavy breath. “Pain meds make me fuzzy in a very unpleasant way.”

Steve had enhanced senses because of the serum, but he could only imagine how someone at Matt’s level could be affected by drugs that affected the central nervous system.

Karen continued to look at Matt in a mix of awe in confusion. “What about all those nights you must have gotten injured and you still showed up at the office?”

“I meditate; it helps.”

Karen gave Matt a look of disbelief. “You must reach a pretty powerful level of Zen.”

Matt smiled. “Something like that.” Finishing breakfast, he pushed his plate away, crumbling the napkin with his fingers. “Do we have any leads on Gina?”

“Nothing from the files Karen gathered on her,” Steve said everything he’d read still fresh in his mind. “She was a straight-A student until the last couple of months when her grades dropped and started to get into trouble.”

“So, there was a change in social and behavioral patterns,” Matt contemplated, still fidgeting with the napkin.

“What lead were you following at the docks?” Steve asked. He’d never gotten the full story.

Something flickered across Matt’s facial features; it was hard to tell from his glasses. The muscles in
his jaw tightened, the lines in his mouth thinned out, and his voice dropped an octave as he spoke. “I was tracking a low-level distributor who reportedly uses teenagers to sell his product because they don’t get charged as adults if they’re arrested. A source told me he’d recently *employed* a young girl matching Gina’s description.”

“A source?” Karen asked.

Matt looked over at her, unapologetic in his silence to her question. Karen bit her bottom lip, obviously struggling not to confront him to elaborate.

Steve had witnessed Matt’s brutal methods in his quest for justice, the need to leave certain things in dark alleyways and not as conversation around the kitchen table. But they had to move on before the conversation derailed. “Did you find this distributor?”

“I did.” Matt scowled, shaking his head in disappointment. “But he didn’t kidnap Gina.”

Karen watched Matt in interest. “Could he have been lying?”

“He wasn’t. I can tell.”

Matt said the last part with such conviction that Steve believed him. And based on the nervous glance Karen shot him as she sipped her coffee, so did she.

But something still bugged Steve about Matt’s story. “If you tracked this guy to the docks, why didn’t you wait until he was alone, and not with over a dozen heavily armed men before confronting him?”

“Because I overheard one of them say it was an ambush for Castle.”

Karen’s eye went wide and Steve glared at Matt in disbelief. “You went on an all-out offensive because a drug gang wanted to go after a mass murder?”

“Are you outraged that I took them on, or that I went after them because they were going to kill someone you don’t think deserves defending?” Matt challenged.

“Both,” Steve said, curt.

Matt cocked his head at Steve, raising an eyebrow at him in a dare, Steve realizing how easily he’d been manipulated in such few words. And maybe that was what Matt wanted, to have Steve question the perception of someone that everyone else had accepted as a monster. Exactly how most people viewed Bucky.

Steve was impressed at how Matt exposed his own personal bias toward Castle. He still wasn’t convinced the Punisher had been worth it; then again, maybe that was the problem.

“And if Castle was the sniper?” Steve asked.

“He wasn’t. I know his heartbeat.”

Karen made a *whoa* expression with her eyes and mouth, and Steve reminded himself that Matt Murdock was more than met the eye and not someone to underestimate.

“Like I said, I had things under control.” Matt sat back against his chair and changed the subject. “Do we know anything about the day Gina disappeared?”

“I couldn’t get my hands on a police report,” Karen said, looking frustrated. “My source at the
precinct is on vacation and the front desk sergeant couldn’t locate it when I asked him about it.”

“We need to talk to the grandmother and Gina’s classmates.” Matt discarded the napkin he’d torn to shreds, revealing knuckles that had been bruised punching people for answers he still didn’t have. “We need to find out what happened the day Gina disappeared. When was the last time anyone saw her? We need names and locations.”

“We?” Karen challenged.

“Karen,” Matt said exasperated.

“Don’t even start. I’ll talk to Gina’s friends and get some answers.” Karen rose to her chair and stared at Matt. “You need to recover.” Then she set her sights on Steve. “And you need to make sure he doesn’t do anything more than meditate.”

Steve started to protest, but Karen held up her hand. “The last thing a missing girl needs is to have half the police force out looking for Captain America because you got recognized in broad daylight. Stay here. Use the computer and find some more leads.”

Karen gathered her things and was a whirlwind as she exited the apartment, leaving Steve bewildered. He crossed his arms and looked over at Matt who seemed to be listening to her movements outside.

“Well, we’ve got our marching orders.” Steve tossed the antibiotics at Matt and he caught the bottle one-handed in the air. “Let’s see how good you are at following them.”

But Steve knew the answer to that question, and based on Matt’s defiant posture, it was going to be a demanding assignment.

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Steve was surprised when Matt didn’t give him any push-back about taking it easy.

“I’m going to meditate,” Matt had said, swallowing his antibiotics. “It’s going to be a long night.”

It wasn’t a lie; the chances of finding Gina were slim, but it didn’t matter. The hollow place inside Steve’s chest had started to stir, turning an empty void into a kernel of warmth, a flame of motivation and drive. There were still tyrants in the world, genocide and famine, diseases and war. People died every day in the street, but for some reason if they could find this one girl, could help this one person….

He powered on Matt’s laptop, thankful the other man had been proactive enough to give Steve his password before going to meditate.

Trying to find a lead on a missing person’s case on the internet was daunting. Social media was still odd to him; it was like putting a personal journal out for the world to see. When he was a kid, people hid those thoughts in a locked dairy stuffed under the bed.

He found Gina’s Facebook page, but it was mainly filled with pictures and the things Sam called memes. Her page didn’t have many original posts, but it had a ton of heart symbols and comments about movies and music. Then those became less frequent over the last month. He found a picture of Gina and her boyfriend, then a post about their break-up two weeks ago. Steve grimaced about sharing such a thing where anyone could see it.

But there was nothing else. No indication of what was going on in her life, who she was hanging out
Something Matt had said got him thinking and Steve searched public records for recent arrests involving minors for drug offenses. “Twenty in the last two weeks sounds like a lot to me.”

Steve searched the same time period a year ago. Nine.

Maybe he was onto something.

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There were only so many crime reports Steve could read until they blurred together into meaningless words. It wasn’t until he heard the sound of the door slide open did he realize he’d fallen asleep at some point. Five hours had passed.

Matt entered the living room still guarding all his movements as he walked, his right arm held close to his side. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Steve replied. “How’s the shoulder?”

“It still has two large holes in it.” Matt’s eyes were puffy and sleep-heavy, but his voice was clear, less a tightrope of pain, more a determined balance. Maybe meditation worked for him. “But I’m starving and I heard that shake concoction you made earlier.”

There’d been no way to avoid the noise of the blender.

“Being hungry is good. Means your body needs energy for healing.” Steve took a moment to relax against the sofa. “You should take the iron supplements, too.”

Matt raised an amused eyebrow at him and Steve laughed at himself. “Sorry. The Tower had some crazy-advanced medical faculties, which meant some of my team mates thought they could just skip recuperating.”

Steve frowned at the memory of both Nat and Clint trying to complete a mission with five broken bones between them.

“Sounds like they were quite the handful. I appreciate the thoughtfulness.” Matt shook out a few iron pills and poured a large glass of the shake. “I understand the protein powder, kale, blueberries, bananas, and yogurt. But why almond butter?”

“It’s packed with protein.”

“I didn’t even know I had almond butter.”

“I think Karen grabbed the jar by mistake.”

Matt paused in front of the counter at the mention of her name, expression downcast. “Yeah, she seemed tired. I want her to go home and sleep when she returns.”

Steve was never going to get a better opening and he sat up straighter. “I take it she had a hard time accepting what you do?”

Matt swallowed two larges gulps of his drink, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. “That was part of it.”

“Or was it more about keeping it a secret?”
“That was another part.”

“But not the whole reason,” Steve pressed, remaining seated so as not to come off as aggressive.

“No.”

Matt didn’t elaborate. He stood there, tension radiating off his shoulders, hand curled around the unfinished shake.

Steve didn’t have a secret identity; everyone knew who Captain America was. He didn’t have family or friends who could be used as leverage. Being a soldier, then an Avenger, was what he did; it was his life…until now.

Putting on a mask, bearing arms to protect others was a calling, a deep-seated need to right any number of wrongs: to seek justice, to appease guilt, or even get revenge. It was easy to lose sight of the reason, to be consumed by pain. By vengeance.

“It’s hard to do this thing all on your own,” Steve stated. Matt didn’t comment and Steve sighed, desperate to reach out, to find a way to help heal all that anger. He stood up, his pent up energy brewing inside. “Teamwork counts. Support on and off the battle field matters.”

Matt took a step away from the counter. “I work alone.”

“You don’t have to. And you don’t have to be alone.”

Matt flinched at that. He shook his head, curling his hands into fists, his voice thick and heavy. “Yes, I do. No distractions, no liabilities,” he said like a mantra.

Steve was appalled at how easily a core aspect of his principles could be so easily dismissed. At the lengths he’d gone through to protect those he cared about, the ache he still felt from the loss of those he’d do anything to make whole again.

“Friendship isn’t a liability,” Steve said his voice a low growl, moving closer to the kitchen table. “I guarantee some of your friends are stronger than you give them credit for.”

Matt rubbed absently at his shoulder. “And some of them only want to be friends with Matt Murdock.”

“Then allow Matt that friendship, that privilege,” Steve challenged, raising his voice; and leaning against the counter across from Matt.

But Matt stared in Steve's direction. “I’ll always wear two suits, and that is something I’m not sure you’ll ever be able to understand.”

Matt walked toward his closet and opened the door, hands tracing the outline of his body armor. Bracing his arm against his chest he knelt on the floor and struggled to drag an old trunk.

Steve didn’t offer to help; he simply got up and walked over. Because that was what friends did, no matter how heated things became. Kneeling, he grabbed the right handle, the two of them pulling it out.

Matt bowed his head and rested his hand over the top of the chest. Clearing his throat, he opened the trunk, revealing a red and gold-trimmed boxing robe folded inside the middle with a set of worn gloves sitting on top. It was the well spring.
“This was your dad’s,” Steve said, studying the relics from Fogwell’s.

“This is where I normally store the suit. Seems fitting,” Matt said, waving his hand over the boxing gear. “These are the only things I have left of him.”

“And you honor his memory.”

“What?”

Guilt could be the strongest motivator in this world. Steve knew it well, and he wore it like a badge. “Your dad fought the only way he knew how. He used his fists to put food on the table and you use yours to protect others.”

“He sacrificed everything for me,” Matt said his voice broken.

Guilt also lied, deceived, and the guilt Matt carried was immense.

“Hey,” Steve said, resting a hand on Matt’s arm. “You’ve sacrificed for this city. You’ve risked your career, you’ve pushed away everyone you care about to keep them out of harm’s way—even if that’s not what’s the best for them or you. You’ve spilt blood.”

Matt’s voice shook when he spoke. “My f-father….”

Steve gave Matt’s arm a squeeze and the muscles tightened beneath his palm. “Your dad died at a young age; it doesn’t mean you need to follow in his footsteps.”

“I’m not trying to,” Matt replied, tension snapping the words against the air like sparks.

“No, you’re trying to defend your city. But did you ever stop to ask yourself how many more people you could protect if you just let others help you?”

Matt stared over Steve’s shoulder, the muscles in his jaw twitching, pain, anger, remorse, darkening his expression. Those emotions, that internal conflict was what drove people down dark paths, Steve knew, dominating every choice in life.

Matt stood up and took the Daredevil suit off the hanger then laid it over his father’s boxing robe and gloves, and closed the lid.

Squaring his shoulders, he stood in front of Steve, exhaling a long breath. “Did you find out anything about Gina during your research?”

Steve decided to go with the switch in topic, for now. “Not much, but I think your source was right, a lot of the drugs are being distributed on the street by minors. It makes me wonder how many more missing teenagers could be involved.”

“There’s an online database for missing person’s records.” Something shifted in Matt’s posture; a sort of giving in. Steve brought his chin up, exhaling slowly at Matt’s next words. “We could begin there; see if we can find any type of pattern.”

Steve nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

They had started out looking for Gina separately – now they would do it together.

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There’d been an uptick of thirty percent in missing children in the last few months, but the disappearances didn’t seem to follow any specific pattern. The kids ranged in age from ten to sixteen and went missing on random days and from different neighborhoods. They didn’t even have the same school in common.

Steve rubbed a tired hand over his face and put the pen he’d been using to write notes down on the coffee table. “I think we should take a break. Clear our heads.”

Matt pulled out the ear bud he wore in his left ear to listen to the audio convertor for the internet. He frowned and began tracing his fingers over the cover of the folders Karen had left for the third time in the last hour. Unsatisfied, he patted around the surface of the kitchen table, his face scrunching up in confusion when he found the book that was next to the satchel.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a paperback copy of Executive Order 12333. Karen left a post-it note about reading it. I got to page ten before I feel asleep last night.”

“Oh, good. I’m glad to have the full transcript.”

Steve got up from the sofa to stretch his legs and walked over to where Matt sat by the table. “It’s kind of odd that a presidential executive order is available to read.”

Matt sat further back against the chair, resting a hand against his injured shoulder. “It’s because of the freedom of information act, not to mention Executive Order 12333 has been around since 1981 when President Reagan first issued it.”

“I read that in the preference.” Steve wandered into the kitchen and filled up two glasses of water. Then he brought them over and set them on the table. “It was an order that defined covert action as both political and military activities that the U.S. Government could legally deny. It was granted exclusively to the CIA.”

“And for a while, the CIA was the sole government agency allowed to conduct covert action. The CIA doesn’t report to congress, they only report to the president.” Matt took his glass of water and drank half of it. “Then 9/11 occurred and it was amended three times over ten years. It named the Director of National Intelligence as the head of all intelligent operations, not to mention granting the Intelligence agency a new set of powers.”

“Like Special Activities.”

“All covert action, including paramilitary operations.”

Steve followed along with Matt’s line of logic, surprised where it was going. “You think that this Intelligence Agency controls SHIELD?”

“I think a few select people do. SHIELD doesn’t report to the CIA, right?”

“I don’t think so. Fury always reported to some shadow group. But even if these people are part of a secret sub-set intelligence agency, how does that impact the current situation?”
Matt used the edge of the table to stand up, grimacing with the effort. “Because if the Avengers serve under any U.S intelligence agency, even if it’s for only certain missions, than there’s a conflict of interest.”

“Between the Accords….”

“Between a U.N. resolution and a presidential executive order.”

“I can’t believe the amount of holes you’ve discovered in such a short amount of time.” Steve was baffled by the amount of illegalities associated with a thing responsible, in part, for tearing his life apart. “Why wasn’t this explored? Don’t these types of things go up for debate more?”

“Public opinion, international pressure.” Matt walked toward the living room, his movements still stiff and in obvious pain. “Not to mention something tells me that there is a legal document we’re not privy to, probably classified, something specific to the Avengers. Executive Order 12333 was amended again in 2013, but there’s no record of the additional authorities it granted. That transcript was published four years ago.”

Steve grabbed the book, looking for the print date. “How do you know that? You smell the paper?”

“That, and Karen mentioned it on her tape.”

“You’ve really done your homework,” Steve said, impressed. And grateful.

“I told you, I want to help.”

2012 was the year the Avengers had been officially assembled. Maybe the U.S government had been trying to find a way ever since to control them and the Accords conveniently became the first step.

“The Accords were meant as a way for other countries to have a say about Avenger activity on their soil,” Steve said, thinking out loud.

“Which is their sovereign right,” Matt interjected and took a seat on the sofa, sinking into the cushions with labored effort. He took several deep breaths. “I’ve always supported a basic set of regulations governing Avenger rules of engagement.”

Steve folded his arms across his chest, aware that there was a difference of opinion on the matter, not to mention an obvious contradiction from a guy who sought justice in the courtroom by day and in the streets at night. “But that doesn’t change the fact that the Accords are illegal.”

“There are several aspects of that are Unconstitutional.” Matt stretched out his legs, looking every bit of a man still recovering from a major gunshot wound. He removed his red glasses, resting them on his stomach, his voice quiet and worn as he closed his eyes. “It’s just too bad that the lawmakers and Avengers…were so unwilling to sit down and draft out a compromise.”

Steve looked away from Matt who had drifted asleep, regret and what-if’s a terrible stranglehold across his chest. He hadn’t had time to navigate political red tape, or explore any other options, not with a kill order out on Bucky.

Steve had a made a choice and he’d find a way to live with it, and find a way to make up for the continued fall out.

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Steve waited a couple of hours before rousing Matt awake to change his bandage. The stitches had
held and there was very little bleeding. The skin showed no sign of infection and Steve felt like they had gotten lucky thanks to modern and ancient medicine. He cleaned the incision again, redressed the wound, and handed Matt more Advil and Gatorade.

Matt sat on the edge of the sofa and pulled up the zipper to his hoodie to cover up his chest, his gaze off into the distance as he tilted his head to the side.

“What do you hear right now?” Steve asked curious.

“The electrical current of power lines, water through seven hundred feet of pipe. Ms. Heighmeyer is taking a shower next door and using about six gallons per minute. Her drain is clogged with soap residue. Thirteen people in the building are wearing sneakers; Adidas and Nike are the most popular, six others are barefoot, two are in high-heels, and the rest have on slippers. Not to mention four cats and two dogs are up and walking around.”

Taking another sip of his drink, Matt looked an inch past Steve’s shoulders. “Everyone’s voice has a unique pitch and tone, kind of like fingerprints. All the conversations in here overlap with each other, competing with the noise from their TVs and stereos. Discussions about the news, a heated argument over who was supposed to do the laundry, Gary on the first floor has sleep apnea based on how loud he snores, and Tyrell just found out his grandmother passed away from cancer.” Matt looked down at his sock-clad feet. “He just put on headphones and is blasting a very angry rap song with distorted bass levels.”

Steve closed his eyes, trying to take in a fraction of what Matt did even with his own enhanced hearing, only catching the humming noise from the refrigerator, muffled conversations, and a door slamming closed from the floor below.

“So, you hear everything within this building down to the streets?”

“And everything next door, across the street, and down the block. But I can filter everything out, layer by layer. It just takes concentration. A lot of it.” Matt glanced toward the window. “Karen’s here. She’s paying the taxi driver right now.”

Matt grabbed his glasses from the coffee table and slipped them on.

Steve didn’t have time to think about the sheer magnitude of stimulus that was generated by a whole city on a daily bases and what type of focus was required to make living tolerable.

He walked over and opened the door before Karen even knocked. “Hey,” Steve greeted. “I had a hunch it was you.”

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Karen had changed into a light grey sweater and a different pair of jeans; she looked more rested. “Sorry it took me so long, I ended up sacking out on my sofa for a few hours.”

Matt stood up and walked to the middle of his living room, still wearing dark sweatpants and a hoodie, two days of scruff covering his face. “No need to apologize; you needed to sleep.”

“And did you? Sleep that is?” Karen asked, looking at Matt’s rumbled appearance.

“A few times.”

“Good.” Karen gave him a brief smile before carrying her box over to the kitchen table.
Matt didn’t move or say anything after the awkward small talk and Karen busied herself unnecessarily with a few files from the box.

It was up to Steve to move things forward. “Did you learn anything while you were out?”

“Well. Not much.” She gave her box a cursory look before folding her hands across her chest. “I talked to her grandmother. She said that Gina’s mother had left to go on another bender last week, and the grandmother talked Gina into staying with her, but then Gina disappeared.”

“Did she mention anything about the mother’s dealers?” Matt asked. “Did they ever come by or cause trouble?”

“The grandmother didn’t mention anything, but she lives on the edge of the Kitchen. When I spoke to some of Gina’s neighbors, the older woman across the hall told me that strangers started coming in and out of the apartment at night.” Karen pulled out several opened envelopes. “I also found these in the mailbox. Tons of late bill notices and at least two utility cut-off notices.”

Matt smirked and Steve took the offered bills from her hand. “You stole her mail?”

“They were sticking out of the locked box,” Karen said with a guilty smile. “I kind of felt it was public domain.”

Matt leaned against the back of the sofa. “Gina’s mom was in deep debt, using, and her daughter was about to move in with her grandmother.”

“The chances of her running away are pretty slim.” Steve began pacing while he spoke. “Maybe one of the dealers grabbed Gina for collateral or to put her to work.”

“Put her to work?”

Karen looked at him, disturbed, and Steve realized how his turn of phrase could be misinterpreted. “Oh, I meant, selling drugs.” He gave Karen the rundown on the number of minors being arrested for distribution and the increased rate of missing children.

Steve resumed pacing while Matt remained perched against the sofa, head bowed in thought. Karen curled her fingers around her mouth, the three of them contemplating scenarios.

“Maybe if we knew what type of drugs the mother was using, we could narrow down which dealers to track?” Karen suggested, sounding unsure.

“What about the day Gina went missing?” Matt asked, moving from the sofa to take a seat in one of the kitchen chairs. “Do we know any more details about that?”

“Yeah, she was at her doctor’s.” Karen said. “She has a standing appointment every month.”

“For what?” Matt asked.

“Gina was born with a heart murmur, but it was starting to show signs of something called…,” Karen rifled through her box and pulled out a piece of paper. “…a growing aortic stenosis. She started seeing a cardiologist and the last time anyone saw her was at the doctor’s office.”

Matt’s head popped up with intense interest. “A heart murmur? Do you have her medical records by chance?”

“No. Why?”
Matt stood up with a grunt and paced in front of the kitchen table. “We’re talking about a birth defect that is a narrowing of the left ventricle of the heart.” He stopped mid-pace; arm held tight against his side and looked over at Karen. “Foggy’s aunt had one.”

“I don’t know much about the condition. I could look it up.” Karen pulled out her phone and started typing, scrolling for a few seconds. “Here it is. In aortic stenosis, the opening of the aortic valve becomes narrowed or constricted. This narrowing keeps the left valve from opening fully, reducing blood flow to the body and making the heart work harder.”

Matt nodded along as she spoke. “Yeah, it has a harsh feel, kind of a crescendo-decrescendo shape.”

“It has a shape?” Steve asked inquisitive. It almost sounded like sonar, which was fascinating to him.

Karen waited for Matt’s answer as he stood between them, face screwed up in thought.

“It’s hard to explain, but the closing and opening of the valves have this grating quality, the left artery is louder than the right.” Matt gave a half hearted shrug with his good shoulder. “It makes a...a moving shape when I hear it.”

Karen watched Matt with a mix of awe and incomprehension. She pushed back an errand strand of hair away from her chin. “You notice how loud a person’s blood flows?”

“If I focus on it, especially when a defect has such an impact on the sound.” Matt stood in thought, lips pursed together. Then his whole posture changed; he stood straighter and Steve saw a distinct shift—the same determination Steve had seen in him before he started going at the heavy bag. “I’m heading to the roof.”

Steve knew exactly what Matt planned to do; he wasn’t sure it was possible, even given the younger man’s abilities. Then again, Steve had witnessed a person morph into a giant green man and a young woman shield him from explosives with the power of her mind. He had faith in the impossible.

“Do you really think you can find Gina through Hell’s Kitchen?” Karen asked, stepping toward him. “You’ve never even met her; to, you know, memorize her heartbeat.”

Matt stopped long enough to put on a pair of sneakers from the closet, and then he started up the staircase, trailing a hand against the brick wall. “I won’t know unless I try.”

***

There was a bite in the wind; it stung Steve’s cheeks and made him huddle beneath his shirt and the pea coat he grabbed from the Matt’s closet. Karen wrapped her arms around her middle despite the long jacket she wore. They moved slowly forward, the moon and stars were not visible because of lingering cloud cover making it difficult to spot dings and potholes in the cement surface of the roof.

Matt however, walked across the rooftop with practiced ease until he reached the ledge and stared out over the city.

Not for the first time, Steve was struck with the idea of Matt using a type of sonar to create an image, although he knew it was more complicated and overwhelming than that. How far would he need to stretch his senses to narrow down a single sound, using how many filters?

Matt jumped onto the narrow ledge and walked toward the east wall without thought. At any other time it’d seem like he was showing off, but Steve knew the rooftops were Matt’s domain.

Once Matt reached the corner, he stood, cocking his head like a bird, tilting it from the left side then
Steve almost held his breath even knowing it wouldn’t be of assistance, but wanting to do something, anything to help.

Karen kept her distance, casting glances in Steve’s direction, the two of them expressing the same thoughts without saying a word. Should they talk? Sit down? Remain still?

Matt’s exhales were loud in the night air, his breathing rate rising in tempo, the muscles along his jaw flexing with effort as he bowed his head. If a stranger were to walk out right now, it’d appear as if he was contemplating jumping.

But after a moment he hopped down, and sat on the surface of the roof with his back to the corner, his face cast in shadow as he stared at the ground.

Resting his forearms on his knees, he seemed to be meditating on his quest, one minute stretching to the next, until he shook his head in frustration. “There’s too many,” Matt growled.

“Too many heartbeats?” Steve asked.

“Heartbeats, voices, a damn bar brawl breaking out on 5th and West.” With some difficulty, Matt rose to his feet, annoyed. “It’s a constant bombardment.”

“Exclude the bar fight,” Steve told him. “Get rid of all the angry, intoxicated sounds.”

Matt took off his glasses and slipped them in the pocket of his hoodie, his gaze faraway.

“Now, filter out slow heart rates,” Steve continued. “And all those really fast ones, those are babies and small children, block them out.”

The rise and fall of Matt’s chest slowed, his shoulders easing from their stiff posture. He stood inert, time stretching unforgiving and slow. “I…I can’t find her.”

Karen inched closer to Matt and rested a hand on his shoulder. “You said a murmur had a crescendo-decrescendo shape. That it’s harsh. Gina’s heart pumps blood louder in the left ventricle than softer with the right.”

Matt nodded his expression blank. He lifted his head up and to the right, brow furrowing. “She’s…,” he licked his lips, his face a mask of pure focus. “She’s near West 57th Street. Beyond 12th Avenue. I…I can’t narrow it down any further.”

Steve had memorized the map to Hell’s Kitchen; that was almost twenty blocks away, on the outskirts of the city. He patted Matt on the shoulder. “You did enough.”

Matt rested his gaze at Steve, giving him a weary half grin. “It’s a start.” He looked from Steve to Karen. “Thank you.”

“You did all the work,” Karen told him.

Pulling his glasses from the pocket of his hoodie, his hands shook a little as he slipped them back over his face. Then he carefully wrapped his arms around himself as if for the first time realizing it was cold, his whole body started to shiver. “And we still have a lot more to do if we’re going to get her back.”

***
Steve sat on the sofa with Karen; both of them listening to Matt, who sat perched on the edge of the loveseat across from them.

“We should go out tonight and determine Gina’s exact location. Recon the situation.”

This wasn’t a surprise for Steve to hear; whether Matt or Daredevil, his new friend was a man of action, and Steve doubted he made such decisions on a whim. “Could you determine any other details about the location or the number of other people?”

“Matt already said he could only locate her within the two blocks; I think that’s pretty accurate.”

Steve looked over at Karen and saw a fierce protectiveness in her eyes and probably a little fear at what they were discussing. Matt had forced her away from his life; this type of situation was probably very new.

“And it’s gives us a starting point to conduct surveillance, but I’d like to know what we might be up against.” Steve looked over at Matt. “You said up on the roof that we still have a lot more work to do. Did you detect something that gave you concern?”

Matt curled and uncurled his fingers like he missed holding and fidgeting with his cane. “I detected close to another twenty heartbeats, maybe more, but it was hard to tell if they were a few meters or a few hundred meters from Gina.”

“But you suspect she’s surrounded by a lot of people?” Steve asked.

“I’d bet on it.”

***

Steve gathered a few bottles of water and Gatorade from Matt’s refrigerator, wondering if Matt had anything to carry them with.

Karen grabbed the drinks from the counter and started putting them in the file box, answering his unspoken question. “Do we need anything else?”

Matt stood near the counter, looking uptight and irritated. “I still don’t think this is a good idea.”

“You know I can take care of myself,” Karen told him. “I’ve been doing it for years without the need of super serums or enhanced senses. Besides. This is recon.”

“Not every recon goes well, Karen. The situation could get deadly in seconds.”

Karen looked to the ceiling before continuing with him. “You’ve been shot Matt, or did you forget that?”

“I’ve gone out in far worse condition.”

Karen threw her hands up in the air, but Matt didn’t seem to notice or acknowledge her frustration. He walked to his closet and opened up the chest storing his suit.

Karen looked over at what Matt pulled out and she placed her hands on her hips and glared at Steve. “You’re the head of the Avengers; could you please talk some sense into him?”

Steve tried not to flinch at her choice of words.

Matt took out a black backpack and began transferring pieces of the red body armor inside it,
ignoring Karen’s pleas. The man was the epitome of stubbornness.

“You know that thing still has two bullet holes through it?” Steve pointed out.

“There’s no time to get it repaired tonight, it’ll have to wait until later,” Matt replied.

It wasn’t exactly a good answer.

Steve looked between them, the whole situation feeling like déjà vu, the need to step up and take charge was pure instinct.

Walking until he stood between them, he pitched his voice loud. “This is a joint operation. We need each other in order for it to succeed and that includes trust.”

Steve stared at Matt, knowing the other man was aware of it. “Karen is the only one legally licensed or able to drive. We can’t afford a screw-up because we get pulled over for a random stop or traffic violation.”

Then he glanced at Karen. “We can’t locate Gina without Matt and a good soldier will never enter a potential battle without the proper gear or protection. If things get hairy, he needs to be Daredevil, and that armor is for his protection as well as everyone else’s.”

Steve held himself tall. “We follow my lead and if things go sideways, I take point, and everyone heeds my orders. Is that clear?”

Matt lifted his eyebrows in challenge. “Is that how the whole being a team thing works?”

“I’m not injured and I’m not a civilian. By default that makes me the team leader.”

“Or maybe you just like being in charge.” But there was no malice in Matt’s tone.

Karen picked up the heavy backpack with the Daredevil suit, slung it over her shoulder, and waited. Matt nodded his appreciation at the gesture without argument.

Seeming satisfied, Karen gave Steve a hard stare. “And what about you?”

The question took Steve by surprise. “What?”

Matt grabbed his cane from a spot against the wall. “I think what Karen is trying to say is that Steve Rogers isn’t bullet proof and maybe he needs some proper gear as well.”

***

It took half an hour to drive to the location where Steve’s stuff was buried and despite his desire not to waste time; he felt it was his duty to ensure the safety of the people with him.

He’d picked a construction site that was held up in legal issues regarding zoning; the place was surrounded by a chain fence and usually didn’t attract much foot traffic. Using a storage locker had been another idea, but Steve had been too paranoid about SHIELD finding it even if he’d paid in cash.

Steve had insisted that Karen and Matt wait for him at a diner a few blocks away; he needed to slip in and out alone. It didn’t take long to locate the half dug-up basement and he found a shovel then jumped into the shallow ditch.

It felt good to work up a sweat again, digging into the soil, stretching his muscles. Adrenaline fueled
how he attacked each slam of the blade, increasing the size of the hole, creating piles of mud and dirt all around him. Minutes ticked away and Steve worked at a breakneck pace, obliterating the ground, sweat stinging his eyes.

When his shovel clanked against metal, his heart leaped into his chest.

His hands scrambled with the Asgardian chest, hefting it out of the ditch. His pulse thrumming, he pressed the symbols embedded in the top and the lid opened. It felt like a vise had squeezed his chest; the sheer emotions at seeing the familiar red, white, and blue Vibranium steel, were overwhelming.

How many times had he used it against the greatest monsters of men, shielded comrades-in-arms and complete strangers—until he wielded its astonishing power against his own friends?

He could still see Tony’s bruised face as Steve slammed it into his metal suit.

It was like a crack in a dam and his eyes welled up from too much loss. Steve rested his forehead against the metal, his chest heaving. He ached for his former teammates, for Sam and Tony, Clint and his family, for the injustice and pain that still tortured Bucky. For all the years he’d lost with Peggy.

“It’s not how many times you get knocked down that counts, Captain. It’s how many times you get back up.”

Steve lifted up his head to see Matt standing on the outskirt of the ditch, holding his good hand out for Steve to grab.

Steve took Matt’s wrist and he walked up the muddy incline, carrying his shield with him. Matt wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulder, lending strength and compassion. It was a solid and grounding feeling, one that shored him up until Steve physically calmed.

“Thank you.” After taking a moment to regain his composure, Steve wiped at his face. “Weren’t you supposed to stay at the diner?”

Matt gave him a half smirk. “I might have been monitoring your progress.”

“And Karen?” Steve asked.

“She wasn’t about to be left in the car,” she said, coming out from the shadows. “Sorry. I wanted you two to have your moment.” Then she placed a hand over her mouth in awe. “Is that…is that your shield?”

Steve held it up for her to see and she reached out, tentative, and rubbed her fingers over it. “I just got shivers. Oh Matt, I wish you could see this.”

“I remember what it looks like,” Matt said, his tone nostalgic.

“Would you mind carrying it to the car?” Steve asked. “I need to grab my suit, just in case I need it later.”

Even though Matt’s glasses hid most of his features, Steve could feel the honored surprise of his reaction. Mindful of his friend’s injured shoulder, Steve put it in Matt’s left hand.

Matt gripped the shield by the top handle, raising it up in admiration. “It’s amazing.”

Steve smiled, looking from Matt to Karen, his heart beating in rare moment of pride. “Now, let’s go
find a missing a girl.”

***

Steve sat in the backseat so that Matt could help Karen navigate as they approached their destination. It was a quiet ride, there were fewer cars on the road, and it didn’t take long for them to reach West 57th street.

Karen slowed their speed, casting glances in Matt’s direction, her hands tight around the wheel.

“Head toward the docks,” Matt told her.

“Are you sure?” Karen asked.

“Yeah.”

They crossed 12th Avenue and went toward the river, five blocks from the ambush where Matt had been shot. “We’re nearing the piers,” Steve said, he could smell the lake.

Matt stared out the open passenger window, listening, his face obscured by shadows. “Gina’s in the factory off of Pier 96.”

“I’ve never driven out here,” Karen said, following the road around the curve. “Is there a good place to park out of the way?”

“There’s a vacant gas station south of the factory,” Matt told her. “It should provide us some cover.”

There were few working streetlights, giving them a strategic advantage. Karen found the gas station and turned into the darkened parking lot. They all got out of the car; Steve followed Matt as he walked toward the edge of the parking lot and faced the three story building across from them. The factory took up most of the block, a looming structure of cement and brick, perfect for concealment.

“What do we have?” Steve asked, looking for a sitrep.

Matt walked while he spoke, his demeanor composed and assessing. “There are three guards outside, two of them are roaming. Another twenty men are inside, all heavily armed with assault rifles and handguns.”

“That’s a lot of firepower.” Steve scanned the factory. “I wonder what they’re protecting?” he said half-heartedly. It was always about weapons or drugs.

“Amphetamines, thousands of pounds.” Matt paused frowning. “And a lot of…chemicals. Mostly Polyvinyl chloride, highly modified by chlorination.”

Karen raised an eyebrow in astonishment. “I’m going to have really re-think wearing perfume around you, Matt.” Then she stared at the industrial plant. “Why would drug dealers care about manufacturing industrial chemicals?”

“So they could mask the odor of their product when they transport it out of the city.” Steve shook his head, they were getting sidetracked. “What about Gina, did you locate her inside?”

Matt didn’t reply, and Steve looked over at him, staring. “Matt, can you—“

“She’s there, in the center of the building in some type of storage room. There’s no easy way to reach her…or the others.”
“The others?” Steve repeated, surprised.

“There are four other children with her.” Matt swallowed, his voice stressed. “Gina’s the oldest.”

Five children and a warehouse of bad guys was already a complicated operation without an injured teammate.

Steve went over several strike scenarios, calculating the odds, as Matt wandered down the sidewalk.

“They’re packing all the meth to be loaded onto a ship that’s headed for Brooklyn tonight.” Matt turned toward Steve. “We have to get them now.”

Matt didn’t even wait for Steve to reply before he headed toward the car to open the trunk.

“Do I need to remind you that teams have to work together?” Steve said to the back of Matt’s head. “That includes decision making and discussing things like strategy.”

“We can talk while we suit up.”

Matt retrieved his body armor from the trunk while Karen seemed torn between helping him and listening to Steve.

Steve knew from experience, this was the most challenging lesson about team building: getting the lone wolves to realize the benefit of partnership.

“We don’t even know if we’re headed inside at the moment. If we take the time to stop and evaluate things, we might discover a less dangerous opening. But we can’t make a risk assessment if we go off half-cocked.”

“There’s a…a sense of urgency going on in there…. Something bigger than I can put my finger on.” Matt unzipped his hoodie to change. “You have to trust me when I say we have to go in now.”

Steve had faced alien invasions and mythical monsters, but he knew never to underestimate an enemy. He trusted Matt regarding his own limitations; he’d obviously gone up against many foes with varying degree of injuries. But, while he watched Karen help Matt put on his gear, Steve couldn’t stop thinking about the high level of risk.

Steve weighed their narrow options when an explosion went off in the distance. He spun around in time to see the outline of flames a mile away.

“What the hell?” Karen exclaimed.

“That’s the warehouse district on the east side,” Matt said, his voice shaken.

Steve searched for the source of the explosion, focusing on the flames, but there were too many buildings in the way. He expected Matt to fill him in what he could sense, but instead, Matt had turned toward the factory as he fastened the last tab of his chest armor.

Confused, Steve scanned the front of the factory and watched the guards talk frantically on their walkie-talkies, only catching bits and pieces of their conversation.

“Can you hear them?” When Matt didn’t answer, Steve looked over at him in concern. “Matt.”

“The factory…it’s rigged with explosives.”

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“Matt, are you sure?” Steve listened for any discussion from the guards about a bomb, straining against all other outside noise.

“I just searched for signs of explosives and could smell the pentaerythritol tetranitrate.”

Karen walked over to stand between them. “What about a timer?”

“They really only use those in the movies,” Steve explained. “Most explosives are on a short delay or trigged by a cell phone.”

“Do you think whoever blew up that other building is on their way here?” Karen asked.

It was a valid question and Steve didn’t have an answer.

“There’s no way of knowing. But we don’t have a choice,” Steve said, addressing them both. “Matt and I are going in. But we need to use earwigs to communicate at all times, and Karen, you’ll need to keep us updated on all outside activity from here.”

“I can do that,” Karen said.

Steve gave her a box of communication devices from the kit he’d buried with his shield. She handed Matt an earwig while fiddling with her own.

Steve finished suiting up and inserted the last com in his right ear while Matt put on his helmet. This was Steve’s calling, what he’d been doing for most of his life, why he put on the suit.

“Matt, I need you to lead me to the bomb and provide back-up. Karen, if you see another vehicle pull up, radio us and go in the opposite direction. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.” Karen crossed her arms over her chest and stared both Matt and Steve down. “But if someone drives up here, promise me you guys will get the hell out of there.”

“We will,” Matt said in his raspy, Daredevil growl. “Once we get those kids.”

***

The lack of light provided great cover as Steve ran toward the side of the plant, keeping both he and Matt out of sight of the guards, who were now huddled at the front entrance.

One of the first rules taught in boot camp: never stand together in a close group.

Steve threw his shield, the metal edge smacking the first guard in the head, the angle and momentum causing it to connect with the second guy. By the time the third guard could aim his weapon; Steve punched him in the face.

“The front area is the packing part of the facility. It’s filled with conveyer belts and dozens of drums of Polyvinyl chloride. There are four guys inside, three loading the containers onto a pallet truck, and one driving it.” Matt paused, clenching his jaw. “There’s a fifth man and he’s dousing the room with gasoline.”

“They plan on blowing up the building themselves after they evac.” Were they trying to cover their tracks, or had they planned on killing five young witnesses, too? And what was with the explosion on the other end of the city? Steve shook off the distracting thoughts. He needed to focus, now. “Can you give me their exact positions inside?”

“Yes. But the better question is …how good is your vision in the dark?”
Steve could visualize Matt’s half smirk. “Good,” he answered.

“Great. Because I just located the circuit breaker; enter when I give you the signal that I’ve turned off all the lights.”

Matt opened the door and vanished inside before Steve agreed. Communication skills were clearly something they needed to work on. Steve listened to all the movements inside, envisioning the layout.

“Now,” Matt spoke through the com.

Steve used the back of one of the large conveyer belts for cover; the men inside the packing area were too preoccupied with yelling at each other about the sudden darkness to notice him.

The conveyer belt took up the length of the long room, and he kept behind one of the support stands. Even from where he stood, Steve could smell the burnt plastic coming from the Polyvinyl chloride being distributed along the conveyer belt and the open containers waiting to be sealed. The barrels were probably the perfect things to conceal any signs of meth during transport.

Polyvinyl chloride was toxic and nothing to be played around with, yet the goons using it weren’t even wearing any protective clothing or safely goggles.

A beefy guy sat in the seat of forklift shouting at the others. “Damn it, Gomez, turn the damn power back on!”

“Screw you, Roach. Got my hands full, here!” Gomez screamed back, shaking a red container, the floor around the barrels covered with gasoline. “I’ve only got half this area covered and I need to finish the rest. Ask one of your bozo the clowns and see if they’re capable of finding the light switch.”

Steve wondered how much of the factory had already been doused with accelerant. The gas fumes were pretty damn strong; hopefully Matt had learned to ignore such odors. Aware that Matt was perched in the rafters above him, Steve whispered he was attacking.

He threw his shield, knowing the angle would clip the first two guys standing by the barrels. After his shield knocked over his first two targets, Steve ran over and kicked the third guy in the jaw then retrieved his shield from the floor.

“Holy crap!” Gomez said and dropped the container of gas on the floor as he reached for his sidearm.

Steve heard the *chink* of metal cable extending as Matt swung the end of his billy club into Gomez’s face from his perch above.

Roach released the safety on his AK-47 and Steve leaped out of the way before the man started shooting. But the AK-47 was knocked out of Roach’s grip by the slam of a metal baton.

Steve climbed on the front of the forklift and Roach leaped out of seat and onto the ground. Steve jumped down and kicked the rifle Roach was scrambling for out of his reach. Snagging the baton that lay next to it, Steve tossed the weapon high in the air for Matt to catch.

Roach pulled out a knife, but he stood, gawking in the dark.

“*Reinforcements are coming,*” Matt’s voice came over the com. “*Four more bad guys.*”
Steve had heard them approaching and began mapping out their trajectories. “Can you locate the bomb?” When he didn’t hear a response, Steve spoke louder. “Daredevil?”

“Steve…There’s two explosive devices. They’re in opposite locations.”

Steve deliberated fast. “We’ll split up. You can lead me to the first bomb over the com and I’ll walk you through disarming yours.”

“That’s not going to work.”

Steve rolled his eyes. Of course that plan had one major flaw. “All right, we’ll take out the reinforcements first.”

Talking to Matt must have given away his position because Roach lunged at him with the knife. Steve sidestepped the charge and whacked the man on the back of his head with a chop of his hand.

“Steve, the bad guys have stopped right outside the corridor. They’re fanning out.”

Steve held up his shield, prepared to charge, when he heard ammo clips being loaded.

“Do you really think after dealing with the Punisher and the Devil’s of Hell’s Kitchen, we wouldn’t be prepared?” One of the men outside the door yelled.

“Get down!” Matt yelled over the com.

Steve dove to the floor, covering his head with his shield, as hundreds of bullets ricocheted around him. The bad guys weren’t aiming at anything specific; they just sprayed the room in hopes of hitting their targets in the dark. They didn’t seem to care if they shot one of their buddies by accident.

But they would run out of ammo soon, Steve knew, and he would try to take advantage of the opening. “As soon as they re-load, I’m going on the offensive,” he radioed to Matt.

There was a break in the bombardment and Steve rose to his feet. At that moment, the room lit up with emergency lighting.

He watched as one of the men facing him pulled a pin out of a grenade and threw it just as three others fired at the rafters over Steve’s head in attempt to shoot at Daredevil.

Steve jumped up in the air and slammed the grenade out of the way while another goon threw a second one toward the barrels of chemicals.

Steve heard the explosion, and a split-second later, he was thrown by the resulting shockwave and fireball.

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Steve’s world faded in and out with the sound of gunfire, the smacking of fists against flesh, and the thud of a body hitting cement.

A female voice kept yelling in his ear and he tapped his com to reply. “Karen?” he groaned.

“Steve! Are you all right?”

He opened his eyes and they felt like someone poured acid into them. He squeezed them shut as they watered uncontrollably. Steve coughed, his lungs seizing in a fit, the back of his throat and the inside of mouth rubbed raw.
“Karen,” he rasped, rising to unsteady feet. “Have you heard from Matt?”

“No! He won’t answer me.”

Steve forced his eyes open, the world a smear of darkness and the sensation of burning. There was a burst from an AK-47 to his right, about six meters away, followed by the snap of bone and a shout of pain.

He felt someone come up behind him and Steve swung out with his elbow. It was caught in a solid grip, motion halted.

“It’s me,” Matt said in his right ear, his voice rough.

Matt handed Steve his shield and Steve attached it to the magnetic harness on his back.

“Come on, we have to keep moving.” Matt grabbed him by the arm and began shoving him forward. “Three meters ahead then turn right.”

Steve gained his bearings the more he walked, noticing how Matt leaned heavily on him. “Are you injured?”

“I’m fine.”

Matt yanked on Steve’s arm when he almost walked into a corner. His eyes still burned from the chemical vapor in the air and Steve felt like he could swallow an entire truck of water.

“Okay, here we are,” Matt told him, a hand on Steve’s back moving him forward. “Bend over, use this emergency eye washer.”

A stream of water sprayed his eyes and Steve opened them wider in relief.

“If you were anyone else…you would have suffered a traumatic brain injury…. But your eyes will only super-heal if you rinse them out,” Matt panted, out of breath.

Steve heard the sound of people approaching, but Matt was already moving. “I’ll be right back.”

“Wait,” Steve growled, moving his head away from the faucet.

“No.” Matt grunted, pain cutting a ribbon of tension through his gruff voice. “You’ve got one job… and that’s to disarm the bombs…. Now rinse your eyes.”

Matt moved away, staggering a little. Steve continued cleaning out his eyes until his vision cleared.

He heard Matt’s baton in the air, heard it striking a target, then the sound of punching and kicking.

Wiping the remaining water from his face, Steve blinked several times, following the sounds of the fight into the corridor. By the time he reached the source of the battle, all he could hear were the rough; rasps of heavy breathing and the sounds of the fire from the front area of the facility. It would spread soon.

He saw Matt use the wall for support, his knees shaking as if his legs were about to give out from under him.

Steve ran over, grabbing his arm to help keep him steady. “Matt,” he whispered, keeping his voice low. He turned the other man to face him. “How bad is it?”
Matt pressed his forehead against Steve’s chest, still gasping. “I might have…popped some stitches.”

Steve didn’t waste a second; he took Matt’s good arm and wrapped it around his shoulder, ignoring Matt’s groan. “Okay, focus. Can you lead me to the bombs?”

“Go down the hallway…toward the maintenance room.”

Matt kept up better than Steve expected; the smaller man used him for support, but his feet were steady. “How many men are left in the building?”

“Six. The explosion killed three guys…and I took out four more of their buddies.”

Steve entered the maintenance room and immediately spotted the explosive device.

The bomb was large with almost fifty pounds of dynamite; it could blow-up half the building and was well-designed, with anti-tampering mechanism including a series of switches that could either disarm it or cause it to explode.

“Damn,” Steve cursed, uncharacteristically.

“That bad?”

“Yeah.” Steve shook his head at how professional it looked. “An amateur didn’t build this.”

“Can you…cut the wires or something?”

“I wish,” Steve said, studying the components. “The point of a bomb is to explode so the makers usually hide the wires.”

If he were alone or if the blast radius were smaller, Steve would just use his shield to deflect the explosion. But that wasn’t an option. He pulled out a Swiss army knife, trying to figure out where to begin without tripping the sensors or activating the detonator.

“Maybe if I could separate the blasting caps from the rest of it….”

“What do you need?”

“Normally the best way to disarm a bomb is a controlled detonation.” Something they couldn’t do. “The second most common method is to use liquid coolant to freeze the motion-sensing fuses and find a way to stop the detonator.”

Matt scanned the room and stared at something in the corner. “What about an air duster?”

Matt lurched toward a cabinet and fumbled with one of the doors. He found a can and almost dropped it when it slipped through his obviously weakening grip.

“I’ve got it.” Steve grabbed it and inwardly cursed the serum-enhanced senses that allowed him to hear Matt’s increasingly rapid heartbeat. “This might work.”

Taking the can of compressed air, Steve walked over and sprayed all the components with the cooling vapor.

“We’ve got company coming,” Matt announced and before Steve could say anything, he disappeared around the corner.

“Damn it,” Steve cursed.
Matt had already dragged Steve to safety and fought-off several men, ripping open his healing wound in the process. Steve had smelled the blood beneath Matt’s suit; he was furious that there wasn’t any time for triage.

Steve almost crushed the nozzle, emptying the whole can of air duster onto the sensors and the electronic trigger device.

Taking a deep breath, he used his pocket knife and pried away the first blasting cap.

One down.

He repeated the process with the second blasting cap, exhaling heavily; without a trigger there couldn’t be an explosion. Steve crushed them with the heel of his boot. Removing his shield from his back harness, Steve ran toward the sounds of another brawl.

He entered a hallway with all the ceiling light fixtures smashed-out. Steve leaped over an unconscious man slumped on the floor and entered the fray of an on-going fight.

Matt ducked a fist aimed at his face and swept a leg under his much larger opponent, knocking him down. But his momentum was too much for Matt to control and he staggered into a wall, only sheer willpower seemed to be keeping him on his feet.

Matt’s opponent rose to his feet, six foot two and two hundred pounds of muscle. Growling, the man lowered himself like a football player and charged.

Steve stepped in front of Matt. The guy’s shoulders crashed into Steve and the rest of his body crumbled into a heap from the impact. Steve didn’t waste time with him, aware another bad guy was trying to sneak up behind him.

Knowing every second was of the essence; Steve spun around and punched the other man in the sternum. The bone cracked beneath his fist and the man gasped, clutching his chest before collapsing.

Matt made his way toward Steve, using the wall for support. Blood dripped from his mouth and his breathing was strained. “We’ve got…to keep going. Grab the kids….”

Steve took Matt’s left arm and slung it over his shoulder. “We’ve got to find the second bomb.”

“It’s too late,” Matt wheezed.

“Bone? Lopez?” A voice squawked from a walkie-talkie Steve noticed lying on the floor. “Come in, over!”

“Too late for what?” Steve asked, dragging Matt along.

He didn’t need to ask where they needed to go; Steve could hear the children screaming through the cement walls.

“To the vigilante nuisance crawling around in my warehouse,” the same voice spoke from one of the radios. “I hope you burn in hell.”

Steve held Matt up by his chest and leaned him back against the wall for support before the concussive force of fifty pounds of explosives went off.

Matt screamed as the walls shook, reaching up clumsily to try to protect his ears, the vibration of the
explosion ringing through Steve’s teeth. He kept Matt upright until the detonation ended, feeling the thrum of his friend’s frantic pulse until the rumbling subsided.

He listened hard for sounds of the children, his own heart pounding when their sobs finally reached his ears.

Steve could feel Matt shaking; and knew his friend was injured and hurting, but they had to keep going. He grasped Matt by the shoulders, forcing the stunned man to focus on him—his voice, his presence.

“Matt…Hey, hey. Listen. We’ve got to finish this mission.” His hand slid up to grip Matt’s blood-covered chin. “Do you understand?” Steve asked in between his own harsh breaths.

Matt pushed himself painfully upright, gripping Steve’s shoulder hard until he was somewhat steady on his feet. “We have five minutes…until a fire engulfs this entire building.”

***

Steve followed the muffled sounds of the children’s screams through the walls while helping Matt down the hall. The south entrance was still on fire from the grenade and the bomb had consumed the east section.

“Matt, do we have anymore bad guys to worry about?” Steve asked.

“The last four are…outside loading the…meth onto trucks.”

Steve promised himself he’d never rest until they were all behind bars.

Smoke filled the corridor, the temperature skyrocketing every second from the nearing flames. He anchored Matt; kept an arm around the other man’s waist, taking some of his weight as they sprinted down the hall at the fastest pace possible.

Steve didn’t need to look up to see the flames begin to appear in the rafters above them. Cement walls were great barriers, containing the fire so it wouldn’t spread to other buildings while trapping it inside, causing the fire to seek out oxygen in the large empty sections above their heads.

Sweat rolled down the exposed areas of Steve’s face; the fumes burned his eyes. But the office was only a few meters away, the shouts of the kids and their pounding fists against the door the only things he focused on.

Steve let go of Matt, who followed slowly behind him, one hand pressed against the wall for balance. Steve ran toward the heavy, metal door. “We’re here to help. Stand away from the door!” he yelled.

The frantic pounding ceased and Steve kicked the door, knocking it off its hinges.

Five young teenagers rushed out, tear-stained and scared, all of them frantically staring at the flames behind him, frozen in fear like rabbits.

“Come on, follow us to safety!” Steve yelled, trying to corral them.

Two girls stared up at Steve, one of them ten or eleven years old, the other one with familiar strawberry-blonde hair, looking petrified. “Are you kidding me?”

The three boys looked ready to bolt. If they ran away from Steve, they could get lost and separated.
“Gina,” he said, addressing her, the growing heat literally sucking away the air in the hallway. “Listen, I know you’re scared, but your grandmother sent us. We’re here to help. But we have to go now!”

“My grandma knows Captain America?” Gina said dumbfounded.

“Whoa,” one of the older boys said. “And Daredevil.”

Matt came out of the darkness, looking very like the demon his persona was meant to project. “The fire’s moving. We have to run!”

“Everyone grab the hand of the person next to you.” The kids obeyed, hanging onto every one of Steve’s words. “Good, now Gina, take my hand and you…,” Steve pointed at the oldest boy.

“Joey,” the teen responded.

“Joey, grab Daredevil’s hand.”

Joey stared at Matt in horror, then at the flames, and quickly took Matt’s wrist.

“Don’t let go of your buddy,” Steve instructed and started running toward the back of the building.

“This isn’t summer camp,” one of the other boys muttered.

The group ran down the hall, the temperature inside felt like an oven. It was a race against combustion. The fires were spreading – producing columns of hot gas toward the ceiling, collecting and seeking more oxygen.

For a normal person, it would be hard to see through the darkness and growing smoke. But Steve had incredible night vision and he led them toward the back loading area. The children were quiet except for their heavy breathing and occasional sobs of fear.

Steve felt Matt behind him, keeping up with the frantic pace, the only sign of his injury the grunt and groans he was unable to keep at bay. Steve didn’t know how Matt stayed on his feet--active meditation, adrenaline, or pure will power--but he thanked the heavens that he did it.

Joey started coughing, and one of the other two girls began to drag behind, forcing Steve to slow down.

“I…I can’t breathe,” Gina cried.

Steve wrapped an arm around Gina’s shoulders, urging her forward. “Just a little further, honey.”

The flames traveled horizontally along the ceiling, faster than they could run, a thick layer of heated air, moving downward.

There was a faint whimper and a shout from behind. Steve glanced back in time to see Matt pick the youngest boy up and off the floor and almost topple over in the process.

Joey grabbed the kid by the shirt collar and slung him arm over his shoulder so Matt wouldn’t have to carry the child. “I’ve got Eli,” he told Matt.

Gina and her friend screamed and Steve returned his attention to in front of him. He watched in horror as the flames leaped down and toward some of the remaining crates in the loading area.

A wall of fire blocked their escape.
The youngest girl wrapped her arms around Gina, crying, while Gina whispered, “It’s okay, we’re okay.”

Gina put one of her arms around Steve’s waist, the two girls huddling against him.

All three boys crowded together against Matt, and he faced Steve, the two men not wanting to say out loud what they needed to do. Steve knew his suit was fire resistant, and he guessed so was Matt’s.

Unclasping his shield, Steve held it out in front of him, prepared to order the children to fall back behind him and run–

But the words died on his lips at the sound of a harsh whooshing. A white cloud cut through the flames and a figure in a dark trench coat emerged with two fire extinguishers.

“What the hell are you waiting for?” the guy yelled. “A damn invitation?”

“Frank,” Matt muttered.

Steve didn’t care who he was; he focused only on the escape the man provided, and grabbed the hands of two of the girls. He looked over at Gina to find her trying to console her distraught friend. Bending over, he picked up the smaller girl and held her against his chest.

Steve looked at Gina and her other friend. “When I say now, I want you to run.”

Matt gathered the boys and moved toward Steve. “We’re ready.”

“Enough screwing around,” Frank growled. He turned around and sprayed the growing flames with both nozzles, creating an escape.

“Now!” Steve yelled as he and the girls ran through the path Frank had created.

Karen was waiting outside, holding up another fire extinguisher. But when she noticed that none of the kids were on fire; she dropped it; and started helping guide the children to safety.

Gina and her friend collapsed to the ground, Karen covering them with a blanket. Steve carried the other little girl outside and lowered her to the grass as flashes of light almost blinded him.

He looked up to see bystanders taking pictures, the little girl hugging his neck. Steve saw Gina out of the corner of his eye as she whispered, thank you.

Steve ignored the camera flashes and the distant sounds of sirens, and he turned around to help the others, only to find no one behind him. Unclasping his shield, he started to run into the burning building when the other children rushed out…alone.

The three boys huddled with Gina and her friends, all of them coughing and hugging each other.

“Where’s Matt?” Karen yelled.

Picking up the extinguisher she’d dropped, Karen looked ready to charge back toward the building when Frank Castle stormed out, dragging Matt at his side. He ignored Steve, Karen, the kids, and the unexpected array of amateur paparazzi and hauled Matt—who seemed to be unconscious or nearly there—along with him.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” Steve yelled, following them.
“Well, Red is kind of bleeding out,” Castle shot back over his shoulder. “So, unless you want me to drop him off at the nearest ER, I’m taking him to my place.”

“Like the hell you are,” Steve growled.

Castle walked toward a beat-up black, four-door truck and stood in front of it, leaning Matt against the truck bed and holding the smaller man up using his shoulder against Matt’s chest while he opened the driver’s door. “I’ve got blood and supplies stored at my place. You could be useful and take Red’s suit off and place pressure on the wound while I drive. Or, I dunno; you could just stand there like some grunt.”

“You can trust him, Steve. He won’t hurt Matt.”

Steve stared at Karen, unsure what to be more bewildered by: the fact she trusted Frank Castle, or that she gave away Matt’s identity.

Castle snorted. “Don’t worry Captain; I know about Red’s secret. He was my lawyer.”

“I’ll stay with the children,” Karen said, putting a hand on Steve’s shoulder, staring at Matt in fear. “Go with Frank.”

Steve willed his adrenaline and nerves to calm down as he glared at Castle. “You make one wrong move and I’ll lay you out.”

Steve carefully took Matt from Castle, Matt’s head lolling on Steve’s shoulder as he took all of his weight. Matt groaned from the movement and mumbled something unintelligible under his breath.

“Only a few more steps,” Steve told him.

Karen hurried and opened the back passenger-side door as Steve got Matt in the back, the wounded man all but falling against the seat.

“We did good buddy,” Steve said as he removed Matt’s helmet, his friend’s completion ashen under the smears of blood and soot. “You just have one more mission and you had better complete it.”

***
The drive to Castle’s place didn’t last long, or maybe Steve had been too busy to notice. With Matt sprawled on the bench seat, Steve crouched next to him, his shield clinking against the roof of the truck as he moved. It took several attempts open the top part of Matt’s suit and peel most of it away so he could provide first aid.

Steve grabbed the two t-shirts Frank had tossed at his head to use against the wounds Matt had ripped open. He applied pressure to the front of Matt’s shoulder with one and used Matt’s weight to stem the bleeding against the folded-up shirt to the larger wound in his back. Matt barely made a sound as he slid into unconsciousness.

Steve was glad his friend wasn’t awake to feel what had to be an overwhelming amount of pain and stimuli, but seeing him so unresponsive made his pulse rate jump in worry.

The truck came to a screeching halt and Castle jumped out the front seat and ran over to yank open the back door. “I parked in the back of my place. It’s a studio above a laundromat so no one’s around to notice. Take him up the stairs; I’ll get the things we need.”

There wasn’t time to be gentle, so Steve hauled Matt out of the back of the truck and carried him over his shoulder as he took the stairs leading up to Castle’s place two at a time.

Castle’s place was barren except for a cot, a kitchen table, and a series of police scanners and too many weapons and cases of ammo to count.

“You can put him on the bed roll,” Castle said, carrying over a large medical case.

Steve laid Matt down, careful of his head. Then he finished removing the upper part of Matt’s suit, freeing his arms from the sleeves. Digging around the case, Steve found some dressings, ripping them open with his teeth.

It was déjà vu all over again, except this time he had a full military-grade medical kit to work with. After putting on some gloves he found a package of quit-clot to help control the bleeding and an actual irrigation plunger with saline to clean out the wound.

Castle made himself useful by setting up an IV stand and sliding on a pair of latex gloves. Palpating Matt’s wrist, he found a vein and inserted the IV, then hung up a bag of fluids. Steve monitored his every move out of the corner of his eye.

With the bleeding under control, Steve began to remove the rest of the popped stitches.

There were large smears of blood staining the front of Matt’s chest and Castle stared at them with a scowl, resting his fingers at the pulse at Matt’s throat. “He needs volume.”

Castle went to his refrigerator and returned with a package of blood plasma, cutting-off Steve’s protest before he even had a chance to speak. “Don’t worry, it’s O-negative.”

But that wasn’t what bothered Steve. “You keep blood plasma in your kitchen?”

“Hazards of the job.” Castle set-up a blood plasma IV and inserted the catheter on the inside of Matt’s elbow. “I’ve told Red he needs to stock up, too. Not that he listens.”
“The two of you have a lot of late night conversations, do you?”

It was hard for Steve to picture the likes of Castle and Matt having much in common.

Castle snorted. “Something like that.” But there was something about his tone of voice that made Steve wonder if he was wrong.

After irrigating the wound, Steve took a breath before grabbing the sutures. Looking down, he noticed Matt’s eyes were halfway-way open, his fixed pupils staring vaguely in Steve’s direction.

“Hey. You’re awake.”

Matt licked his lips, his voice whisper-thin. “Kind of.” Then he sucked in a breath, panicked, and tried to sit up. “What about…the kids?”

Steve laid a hand on Matt’s shoulder to keep him still. “Easy. They’re safe. We got them all out.”

Matt groaned, crumpling back against the bedroll.

“Listen,” Steve began, knowing he was in for a fight. “I’ve got to stitch you up. There’s some pain killers here and –“

“No. Told you…don’t use those.”

“Stop being a pain in the ass and take the damn morphine,” Castle grunted from the kitchen, where of all things, he’d actually started brewing coffee. “It’ll make all our lives easier.”

“You’re…all heart, Frank.”

Castle rolled his eyes while he poured the whole pot of coffee into a large thermos. “And you’re acting like an idiot. Doesn’t the Bible preach against masochism?”

It took all of Steve’s patience not to go over and smack Castle with his thermos, instead he spoke to Matt. “We found Gina, she’s safe. Her friends are safe. Karen’s safe. There isn’t anything else for you do tonight. You’re not going to protect this city if you don’t recover properly.”

Matt closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “Yeah, okay.”

Steve was surprised at how quick Matt accepted his advice, solidifying a hard-fought trust.

Castle walked over with an ampoule of morphine and stabbed it in Matt’s bicep without warning. Matt flinched at being injected and weakly swatted at Castle, his response time compromised by his injuries. But as the drug took effect, the pain lines in Matt’s face slackened and his whole body went lax against the bedroll.

“Now we can all have some peace and quiet,” Castle mumbled.

“You know, you’re a real jackass,” Steve growled at Castle while he started re-stitching the first wound.

Castle laughed. “That’s an improvement; most people think I’m an asshole.”

***

Steve paced back and forth trying to figure out to contact Karen, realizing he didn’t even have her phone number or a way to call her. He looked over at Matt who slept on the bedroll, hooked up to
blood and saline, blissed out on morphine. Steve went over and dropped a blanket on top of Matt to help keep him warm since he was still wearing only the lower half of his suit.

“Looks like you made the news,” Castle spoke from where he sat in front of his kitchen table. He turned his laptop around to show him the screen. “Very heroic.”

Steve watched a video of him emerging from the burning building, carrying the little girl whose name he didn’t know. The headline above the streaming news report read: Captain America Rescues Kidnapped Children from Devastating Fire.

“It was like something out of the movies,” a young teen exclaimed excitedly. “Who knows what would have happened if Captain America wasn’t there.”

There were more eyewitness reports, people praising his and Daredevil’s efforts, calling them heroes. Karen appeared on screen, giving an incredible account of the rescue, two dozen reported flocked all around her.

He felt a little relief seeing that she was safe and that the children were all receiving treatment at the local hospital. Steve would try to find a way to send her a message in the morning to let her know he and Matt were okay.

Castle sat at his kitchen table, searching the internet, taking notes in a yellow paper pad. The man was physically imposing, gruff, and thankfully not very talkative. Steve wandered the sparse studio, noticing a bulletin board hanging on the wall with surveillance pictures of various people, dates, times, and other information written next to each person’s face.

“How did you know to come to the factory?” Steve asked, studying the intel.

“It was always on my agenda; I just got a little sidetracked on the other side of town.”

Steve stared at Castle with dawning realization. “You’re the one who blew up that warehouse a few minutes before Matt and I went into the factory.”

“It was already rigged to explode. I let it blow-up after I interrogated some of my targets.”

“Your targets?”

“Scum in a rival gang. I’ve been trying to figure who’s been yanking their chain.”

Steve didn’t want an elaboration on his methods, but he was curious if Castle had learned anything useful.

“Do you know who was behind it? Those bombs were sophisticated and not cheap to make.”

“Same mysterious person who bombed the warehouse tonight. Someone’s trying to take out the competition.” Castle propped up his feet on the table. “When I got to the factory it was already on fire. I figured it was Red causing problems; it wasn’t until Karen almost ran me over with her car trying to get my attention that I found out you guys were trapped inside.” He laughed, taking a sip from his thermos. “Imagine my surprise to hear The Devil’s of Hell Kitchen was teaming up with Captain America.”


Castle took out his M9 Beretta and checked the chamber, acting fidgety. “I didn’t think the choir boy could find an even bigger do-gooder. Guess I was wrong.”
Steve had been ridiculed by people far worse and more vindictive than Frank Castle.

“For the record, he took a bullet in an ambush meant for The Punisher,” Steve growled, jerking his head where Matt slept, a rare anger simmering to the surface. “You murdered a bunch of gang-members and their buddies were out for blood. Yet he stuck around, not wanting you to walk into a trap.”

Castle swung his feet off the table, resting his weapon on the table to gawk at Steve in the face. “I kill those who need to be taken out. You either destroy the enemy or they destroy you. That’s something you should know a lot about.”

“Don’t compare my military service to the crimes you commit,” Steve said with barely-contained irritation.

Castle sat back in his chair, nonchalant. “I don’t waste my time comparing myself to anyone. I do what I think needs to be done. So do you, so does Red. I don’t agree with your weak-ass methods; you don’t agree with mine.”

He shrugged and stared at his Beretta, his voice taking on a far distant, reflective tone. “I don’t claim to be the smartest man around, but there’s one thing I’m sure about. There’s no shortage of assholes out there and that’s why I’m here.” He looked over at Matt and shook his head, his voice filled with grudging respect. “I told him once that he was one bad day from becoming me. I still think he’ll cross that line, when all the pain and anger become too much to control anymore. But you know what? I kind of hope I’m wrong.”

Castle spun the laptop around, showing tonight’s headline about a drive-by killing of a mother and her child. “See, I think this world needs The Punisher; it needs someone who’ll dispense pain.” Then he scrolled down, the screen displaying pictures of Steve from tonight with the children that he and Matt saved. “But the world also needs people like you and him. They need their heroes and they need their hope, even if it’s fleeting.”

Steve stared at Castle, his words a punch he hadn’t seen coming.

***

Castle loaned Steve a black thermal shirt and jeans to change into, then cleaned up his place. Steve spent the rest of the night and morning studying the notebooks Castle had compiled on every gang, crime organization, and vigilante in New York; some of the man’s observations were oddly intriguing.

Thankfully, even Castle required sleep, leaving Steve alone with his thoughts and hundreds of news articles regarding last night’s events.

He stopped reading after the tenth opinion piece and started eyeing all of Castle weapons, wondering how many were unregistered, when he realized Matt was moving around.

Steve wandered over where Matt had propped himself against the wall, looking groggy but alert. “Morning. You slept for over eight hours. How are you feeling?”

Matt stared up at him, his hair ruffled in every direction, the blanket sliding down his shoulders. “I’m hungry.”

***

Castle had gone to the corner store to grab something and never returned. Steve wasn’t too
heartbroken over it. There was a note on the bulletin board: *Left the keys to the truck in the glove box; I’ll find another ride.*

“He’ll return to grab his stuff and find another hideout. He has a dozen all over the place,” Matt remarked.

Steve risked driving long enough to grab food before going to Matt’s place.

Matt went into his bedroom while Steve carried a duffle bag he’d borrowed from Castle to carry the Daredevil suit. He set the duffle down and opened the closet door, pulling out the trunk and opening it.

Staring at the boxing memorabilia, Steve picked up one of the worn red gloves with great care. He’d only meant to make room for the suit, but now he couldn’t help admiring the aged soft leather. It was over twenty years old and had been oiled and well taken care of.

Matt walked over after changing into a different hoodie. “That was what my dad wore during his last bout; he won by knockout.”

“I imagine it was some fight,” Steve said, putting the glove back.

“He was supposed to take a dive.” Matt stared down at the floor, his voice a low quiver as he forced words past his throat. “But he didn’t…he wanted me to hear him win.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“He didn’t have to.”

“Maybe he wanted to win,” Steve offered, standing up, opposite the smaller man.

Matt vehemently shook his head. “He put all his money on himself. Then he made sure it went into an account set up for me.”

“His last act in the ring was of a father, not a boxer. It was his choice, Matt. You’re not responsible for his death.”

“It…it doesn’t make the pain go away.”

Steve swallowed against the familiar grief, realizing that perhaps he’d always wanted to help Matt, to fix him when he couldn’t with Buck. But now, Steve realized in satisfaction, he’d made a true friend.

Steve wrapped an arm around Matt’s good shoulder and held onto him as years of sorrow gave into full body trembles of grief. “It never does, buddy,” Steve said, supporting his friend through far too much regret. “But it’s what we do with it that really matters. You’ve taken that hurt and gone out there and laid it all on the line to help others.”

“Sometimes I’m not sure if it really makes a difference,” Matt whispered into Steve’s collarbone.

“It does.” Steve gripped Matt by his upper-arms, pulling him back into a full standing position so he could speak to him face-to-face. “It has to all those people you’ve saved from harm. It comes from putting people like Wilson Fisk behind bars and believing that even Frank Castle deserves a fair trial and that kids like Gina get a chance to grow up.”

Matt looked at him, listening, and Steve made sure every word counted. “But you have to be careful. I’ve seen what pain can do, how twisted up inside it can make you. It can push you into some pretty
Guilt and regret created people like Baron Zemo, a man so consumed he’d set out to destroy the
Avengers, killing dozens of innocent people, and emotionally torturing Bucky. The same thing had
almost consumed T’Challa and filled Tony with so much pain. Vengeance was a soul killer.

Matt shook his head. “I put on a uniform that looks like the devil….”

“Putting the fear into bad guys can be a good thing, but when all the pain gets too big, it can be
blinding.” Matt quirked an eyebrow at his choice of words, but Steve couldn’t help thinking about
Frank Castle. At the genuine fear he had about Matt one day losing himself in all that anger. “I’m just
saying that sometimes even good people can get lost in their grief and make poor judgment calls.”

Matt stepped back, his posture calmer and his voice steady. “I won’t.”

“You went in the boxing ring with me with the intent of trying to goad me into a real fight.”

“I don’t know what my true intent was that night.”

“Exactly my point,” Steve said. Matt didn’t even recognize his own behavior. “Boxing is fought one-
on-one. Like I said, you don’t have to follow in your dad’s footsteps. We worked well last night. As
a team.” He quirked his mouth into a thin smile. “Although we could improve on the whole
communication thing some more.”

Matt matched Steve’s grin. “I’ll be sure to work on that for next time.”

Steve gladly didn’t point out the slip in Matt’s words.

Matt went over and finished putting his suit away, closing the lid. Steve helped him slide it back into
the closet.

“I can stay here a few hours,” Steve said. “It’s not problem.”

“All I’m going to do is meditate.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” Matt said, sounding as tired as he looked.

Steve debated arguing with him, but he knew there was something to Matt’s mediation techniques
and his ability to heal. And despite wanting to ignore the thoughts in his head, Steve probably need
to regroup and think.

Matt walked over and rummaged through a drawer in his kitchen and returned with a cheap cell
phone. “I have an extra burner. My number is already programmed into it.”

When Steve left Matt’s apartment he drove around the city once before abandoning the truck near an
overpass. It felt good to walk, even if Steve wasn’t sure where he was headed; it was nice not to hear
any sirens for the rest of the night.

***

Steve returned to where he’d previously buried his shield and opted to take the Asgardian chest with
him to his place. He was certain that SHIELD had already sent out agents looking for him after that
news report—Steve was sure he spotted a few of them walking near one of the subway entrances—
so he’d rather keep things close by. He found a rusty grocery cart to carry it in to keep up
appearances. He pulled up the hood of a jacket Matt had given him and blended into the background of people the average person ignored.

Steve passed several newsstands and bought a few different papers using the quarters he found in the jeans he’d borrowed. Steve mainly wanted to have something to read, but with a slim hope that the police had discovered something regarding the bombings.

But the only thing the articles were focused on was the daring rescue, one headline catching his attention: *Are Captain America and Daredevil the Avengers of Hell’s Kitchen?*

Rubbing a hand over his face, Steve stared at the chest where his shield was now stored, still unsure where he stood in a world that changed faster than he could keep up with.

***

His burner phone rang three days later; it was Karen. Gina’s grandmother wanted to speak to him. Steve couldn’t say no.

***

Steve wondered if meeting people in alleyways would become a norm in his life as he walked behind a local grocery store that had closed an hour ago. He’d spotted a black SUV a few blocks away, but the driver had been going in the opposite direction. Steve knew Hell’s Kitchen would soon be filled with agents, all seeking a single target.

He heard Gina’s grandmother approach, her heels clicking on the ground as he came around the corner clutching her purse. She wore a flowered dress and a light green sweater, looking like she was headed to church. He couldn’t help the warm feeling in his heart knowing she had dressed up to come here.

Karen walked behind her unable to contain a smile. The older woman stood in hesitation and Karen placed a hand on her shoulder. “Julia, this is Captain Steve Rogers.”

Before Steve could say a word, Julia ran toward him, her arms barely able to wrap completely around his waist. “Oh, bless you Captain Rogers; bless you for finding my granddaughter.”

For such a tiny woman, Julia packed a lot into her hug. Steve embraced her slim shoulders as she buried her face into his hoodie as she thanked him over and over again. He held her as her words muffled into tears against his chest.

After a moment, Julia pulled away, wiping at her eyes. “Look at me, blubbering all over you. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, ma’am.”

Julia stared at him as she pulled out a tissue and dabbed at her face. “I still can’t believe you and Daredevil found her.” She looked around the alley and back at Steve. “Is he around? I want to thank him, too.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him,” Steve said, but suspected it wouldn’t be necessary.

“Please do; please tell him I could never repay him. Gina is all I have left.” Julia shook her head, upset, balling up the tissue. “I’ve bailed her mother out of jail, supported her through rehab, but drugs took her away from me a long time ago. I couldn’t lose my grandbaby to them too.”
“Do you know why Gina was taken?” Steve asked.

“To sell drugs on the street and pay off her mother’s debts,” Julia hissed. “Those animals.”

Composing herself, she smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress. “Thank you again, Captain Rogers. And thank Daredevil when you see him again. He may look like a demon, but he’s a savior.”

Julia went over to where Karen had waited a few steps way out of respect and the two of them walked away, Karen waving back at him.

Steve stood there until they were gone and turned around to face the shadows. “I really hope you’re not suited up.”

Matt walked around the corner. He was dressed in sweats, sporting his red glasses and gripping a cane in his left hand since his right arm was in a sling. “Not tonight.”

“Are you actually going to take a week off?”

“Until my shoulder completely heals.” Matt cleared his throat. “I promised Karen.”

Steve could tell that Matt wasn’t happy about it, but a good soldier was never satisfied about being grounded. Steve was hopeful that having one of Matt’s friends back in his orbit would continue to have a positive influence. “Good. Because I know you overheard that conversation. You do amazing work, people need you, but not without support.”

And even as he spoke his thoughts out loud, Steve realized he’d never be able back-up his own words. Not the way he could, or should, not when he had to meet any of his friends in secret.

“Speaking of support,” Matt said. “I was wondering if you mind stopping by my place. There’s someone I want you to meet later tonight.”

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Steve walked six blocks passed Matt’s building with the intention of doubling back when he spotted two people scouting a nearby alleyway. He could tell they were agents by the way they walked with precise, rigid steps.

He didn’t have Matt’s level of hearing, but Steve could still listen to a conversation taking place across the street. Ducking into a bus stop shelter, he pulled out the burner phone Matt gave him and pretended to be playing on it.

“We’ve canvassed the city for the last week, he’s probably skipped town by now,” one of them said.

The second agent shrugged not persuaded. “Then we’ll keep searching until we find something that tells us where he went.”

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Steve arrived at Matt’s apartment a few hours later, unsure what to expect when he entered. Karen greeted him and Steve followed her toward the kitchen table where Matt sat in a chair across from a guy he’d never met before.

“Oh my God, he’s here,” the other man said, jumping to his feet.

Matt smirked then stood up; his arm held close to his chest by his sling. “Hey, thanks for coming.”
Then he waved at his eager buddy. “Steve Rogers, meet Foggy Nelson.”

Steve was taken aback. So this was Foggy, Matt’s only good friend until recent events. The man Matt didn’t even like talking about with his co-workers at the community center. The fact that Matt had reached out to bring Foggy here was a big deal.

Foggy bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, sporting a huge grin as he nervously pushed back the long hair that kept falling in his face. “Hi, you’re Steve Rogers, which of course you’re aware of, being Captain America and all.”

Steve held out his hand for Foggy to shake. “Nice to meet you.”

“Do you see this?” Foggy looked over at Karen with such enthusiasm it made Steve grin. “I’m going to shake Captain America’s hand; maybe you should take a picture.” Foggy returned his attention to Steve again, his smile even larger. “Which of course, I’m perfectly calm about.”

Foggy still didn’t actually reach out to take his hand, so Steve did it for him, and then waited on Matt or Karen to elaborate further.

“He’s shooting you an expression of expectation,” Foggy said to Matt.

Karen chuckled and Matt matched her good-natured laugh. Steve had never seen Matt so content and relaxed. Camaraderie looked good on him, reminding Steve that Matt and his friends were all in their late twenties. They were young with their whole lives ahead of them, making the reasons why Steve agreed to come over all the more important.

Matt leaned on the back of his sofa. “I called Foggy yesterday and asked him meet us to help Karen and me analyze public opinion regarding your status as a fugitive.”

“I’m a partner with a law firm that has started specializing in cases dealing with vigilantes,” Foggy said with eager fanfare.

Matt looked at the floor with sudden interest, the muscles around his jaw tight with tension. Karen crossed her arms over her chest, the recent chasm between them still obviously raw and painful. Foggy’s excited disposition dampened and he cast a quick glance at Matt before looking over at Steve with a forced smile. “I came despite my better judgment and Matt’s poor attempt at using code words to disguise why it was so important that I drop everything I was doing and head over. Although next time,” he said, looking at Matt. “Try showing up at my place with beer and pizza first. That might grease the wheels better. And mentioning that you’re hanging out with an Avenger.”

“I’ve noted it for the future,” Matt said with dry humor.

“Anyway,” Foggy continued, still bouncing on his feet. “Matt and Karen filled me in on the PR campaign they’ve begun and we’ve discussed the possible next steps for a long-term movement.”

Steve felt a like he’d missed something important. “What PR campaign?”

“I think we can turn all the publicity surrounding the rescue into something positive,” Matt stated. “We’re in the middle of a twenty-four news cycle, all centered on you and the children we saved.”

“There’s even a social media petition to have the warrant for your arrest overturned,” Karen said in excitement. “It’s has over a million signatures already.”

“Which of course, the federal prosecutor is totally opposed to,” Foggy interjected. “But that’s not the
point.”

“The point is that people are asking questions again, there’s a massive uproar why one of the country’s greatest heroes is a wanted man,” Matt said, sounding very much in lawyer mode. “And the one thing I’ve learned is that public opinion is a pretty powerful force, especially during an election year.”

Steve started putting the pieces of the puzzle together; these people had gone this route before. “You’re thinking if half the city could support someone like Frank Castle then….”

“It should be easy to get them to demand that the charges be dropped on you and your other teammates,” Foggy said. “Relatively speaking of course.”

Steve was astonished that these three estranged friends had been brought together on his behalf. “Do you really think manipulating the public and media could create such results?”

“Have you seen how some people are elected in this country?” Foggy rebutted with a shrug.

Karen closed ranks around Steve, moving to stand next to him, her voice and expression serious. “And with my contacts with other newspapers, I think we could apply the right pressure to those in Congress who’ve been friendly toward The Avengers.”

Steve still couldn’t believe his ears. “I don’t know what to say.”

“All we need is a go-ahead to proceed,” Matt said, waiting on him.

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

Matt cleared his throat. “That’s not exactly a ringing endorsement.”

“I’m sorry, it’s great, and I can’t thank you enough.” Steve spread his arms to indicate everyone in the room. “All of you.”

“I hear a but coming,” Foggy said.

“But I need to leave the city for a little while.” Steve hated to deliver such news after all their hard work. “There are SHIELD agents all over the place and I don’t want to lead them to any of you.” He wouldn’t put any of them in harm’s way.

Steve felt a wave of disappointment in the room. Matt hid his emotions the worst, his mouth a flat line.

“I could work out a way to stay in communication,” Steve offered, knowing how hard it was for people like he and Matt to form new bonds. “I don’t think it should be more than a few months.”

Foggy nodded at Steve, his earlier enthusiasm evaporated. “Of course the drawback of so much attention about you being in Hell’s Kitchen was bound to draw out extra by law enforcement.”

“I’m sorry, I mean, this really means a lot,” Steve said with full sincerity. He never thought he’d feel this kind of gratitude again. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“Are you headed out tonight?” Karen asked.

“There are a few things I need to do around here first.” Like going after drug dealers who’d tried to kill them and the children. “But yeah, probably. In fact, I really should get going.” The longer he remained, the harder this would be on all of them.
“I’ll walk you out,” Matt offered.

Steve watched Foggy and Karen as they went through the files on the kitchen table, Foggy throwing a ball of paper at Matt’s head which he caught with his left hand without turning around.

“Showoff,” Foggy complained.

Steve could imagine the force of nature the trio must have been during their law practice.

Steve stopped in front of the door and took in the scene and tried to push away the accompanying ache it caused inside his chest. “Take it from me, cherish your friends. They’re your strength, not a weakness.”

Matt shifted his attention back toward Foggy and Karen, his voice rough, posture taut. “It’s going to take a while; there are a lot of burned bridges remaining.”

“Then rebuild them,” Steve said, squeezing Matt’s arm. “Make them stronger than ever.”

“And what about you? Who’s going to have your back out there?”

For all his preaching about support, Steve knew he wasn’t doing a good job of leading by example. “I’ll figure it out. And if I get into a bind, I’ve still got your cell.”

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It took ten days for Steve to track the meth going in and out of Hell’s Kitchen through the Hudson Bay into Ontario—which was not exactly a known Mecca for drug trade, except if the route provided easy distribution throughout Canada and into South Dakota, Minnesota, and Montana. Shipping lanes were kept under the least surveillance. Perfect for drug trafficking.

Steve stood by a railing of the small freighter he’d snuck aboard and surveyed the cargo bay below.

“Windsor isn’t the most exotic city I’ve ever traveled to,” a familiar female voice said from a hatch behind him.

“I figure Rome was more your speed,” he said, turning toward Natasha.

“Rome’s overrated; I prefer Hong Kong or Mykonos.” Natasha stood beside him and gestured at the sixteen people lying on the cargo floor with their hands and feet tied up. “Friends of yours?”

“Just a bunch of drug runners.”

“Yeah, I’ve been tracking all the ones you keep leaving gift-wrapped for the cops over the last week. Didn’t New York have enough of them?”

“I can’t seem to find the leader, so I figure I’d take out every part of his organization.”

Steve planned to make good on his promise of tracking down those who’d left five children to burn to death while leaving a nice trail of breadcrumbs for those tracking him to follow—out of Hell’s Kitchen.

Natasha leaned on the wall, unimpressed. “Did you get tired of tag-teaming with the devil?”

Steve wasn’t in the mood to play games. “What do you want, Nat?”
“Stark was suspended when he entered the Ukraine without permission from that country’s government.”

Steve sighed; the Accords were already backfiring. And he wasn’t very surprised that even while a fugitive, Natasha would find a way to get back into the game.

“Don’t give me that disapproving look,” she said with a sigh. “You know someone has to keep an eye on Tony in that tower. I’ve been kind of lending him a hand from time to time.”

Steve didn’t argue with that. He was glad Nat had Tony’s back. “And I’ll ask you again, what do you want?”

“Well, while Tony is busy dealing with house arrest, there is still this possible chemical weapons factory and the prospect of it being used against civilian populations.”

“Are you asking me to go with you to destroy it?”

“Actually, Clint and I are going to do it off the books, but he kind wants to return to his family some day.” Natasha never battled around the bush. “He’s a little tired of living underground. Oh, and Wanda’s kind of taken up residence in Tibet and – “

“What do you want me to do?” Steve asked frustrated.

“When is the last time you felt like you had a purpose?” Natasha asked with a surprising amount of candor. “Did saving those children remind you at all why you picked up your shield again? You certainly don’t have a problem wearing the uniform when busting drug dealers.”

Steve didn’t have an answer; he’d felt a familiar adrenaline rush of what it meant to carry the mantle of leadership again, to help others and feel the pride of service again.

Until SUVs filled with SHIELD agents started to arrive, posing a new threat to the people he’d began to care about.

“The last time I checked, the U.S.—not to mention most every international government—considers me a criminal. And even if they didn’t, I’m not sure I would ever want to lead the Avengers again.”

“No one said you had to, but if you’re so disillusioned about the government then do something about it.”

Steve crossed his arms and tried ignoring the fight Nat was stirring inside him, a growing ember that he’d carried with him ever since he and Matt had rescued Gina and the other children.

“You want me to take on the government?”

“There’s more than one way to fight, and I’ve never seen you back down from one.”

This was the second time Steve had been challenged to re-enter the battlefield by an unlikely source. He looked over at the cargo bay and stared at the men responsible for poisoning so many lives, knowing there were more like them waiting to take their place.

If the Accords continued to be amended, how long before all Avenger action was dictated by those who never experienced having boots on the ground? How many innocent people would suffer as a result?

And if they were never challenged, how would Steve ever be able to find the psychiatric help and
support Bucky needed to be well again?

“Do you really think I stand a chance?” Steve asked his voice uncertain.

“I don’t know, but you’ve got a hell of a lot of people on your side, and a very unusual PR team to thank for it.”

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It was after three in the morning when Steve entered Fogwell’s; it still reeked of sweat and old shoes. He couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face when he walked inside. As he rounded a corner, Steve noticed a poster on one of the walls, it was water stained and peeling, but the words were still legible.


Steve bowed his head a moment out of respect before he continued further inside.

He heard the familiar slap of taped hands against old leather, and Matt’s harsh breathing in his attempt to exorcise his demons.

Steve wandered toward the hundred and thirty pound bag and grabbed the back of it to hold it still.

Matt skipped back a few steps, his chest rising and falling with every lungful of air. Sweat rolled down his face, the black shirt with the sleeves cut off soaked through, a tell-tale sign of how long he’d been at it.

“Long night?” Steve asked.

“The sun’s not up, so it’s not too bad.”

But Matt had kept busy based on the headlines Steve had seen over the last few weeks. “I read about that arsonist you caught, nice job.”

“And I heard you dismantled our mysterious international meth operation.”

“*International* is pushing it a bit. I still haven’t found the person in charge of it.”

“I’ve come up empty, too. But he can’t hide forever,” Matt said in a voice bordering on a familiar growl.

Steve had no doubt about that. “How’s the shoulder?” he asked, gesturing.

“It’s good.” Matt rolled his arm several times, his range of motion looking strong. “I did about two weeks of physical therapy with it.”

Steve looked on impressed, especially given the basic first aid used to treat the gunshot wound. “Did that involve punching people?”

“No, actually Karen recommended someone to me. The spouse of someone who works at the paper she writes for.”

Steve raised an eyebrow, pleased. “And how’s it going repairing all those bridges?”

“Rebuilding takes time, but we’re making progress. Foggy and I even went out for Thai the other
day. It was nice.” Matt went toward the bench and grabbed his water bottle and took a long drink. “It helps that we’re all working on the same long-term project.”

Steve had monitored the ongoing news reports and various articles; it was a constant topic on the Facebook. “I’ve seen the opinion polls; you guys are doing a fantastic job.”

“There are even a few rumblings about the formation of a congressional legal committee as a result. Maybe in a few weeks, we’ll see some real pressure on the Federal D.A. to review the charges.”

“Actually, I came here to talk to you about that.” Steve took a deep breath. “I want to turn myself in. I want a trial.”

Matt’s jaw dropped as he stared at Steve. Then his features smoothed into understanding. “You mean you want to put the Accords on trial.”

“You said it yourself; parts of them are Unconstitutional, not to mention they’re in conflict with a Presidential executive order.” Steve was tired of being part of any type of subterfuge. “I want everything the public isn’t aware of out in the open.”

“Including brainwashing programs used to train people into assassins against their will.”

Steve would never stop working to help Bucky. “Do you still think that can be leaked using Karen’s press contacts?”

“After the response she’s received to her editorials?” Matt sported a genuine grin. “Yeah, I think that’s very possible.”

“I’m glad she’ll continue to be involved, because I want you to represent me.”

“Me?” Matt patted the bench until he found his glasses and put them on. “I’ve only been practicing law for two years, and the last couple of months at a community outreach center.”

“Not to mention the force behind putting Wilson Fisk in jail and the defense of Frank Castle, the trial of the century the last time I checked.”

“That was when I was part of Nelson and Murdock.” Matt began peeling the tape off his hands. “And I don’t know if you’re aware of it, but I wasn’t really around for most of that trial.”

“Then maybe you can work something out with Mr. Nelson’s law firm, or whatever you lawyers do.” Steve had no doubt that Nelson and Murdock’s defense would be a tour de force.

Matt threw away the rest of the tape and placed his hands on his hips as he stared at Steve. “You’re really serious.”

“I’ve never been so serious in my life.” Or more determined; Steve had found a battle he felt was worth fighting with everything he had. And for the first time in months, he had the energy to wage it. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be an Avenger again, but I sure as hell want to make sure my teammates, my friends, are free to do so, and without being handcuffed by illegal documents.”

“I still think the principles for the Accords are sound, there are just certain aspects that need to be amended.”

“Which I think makes you the perfect person to defend my case.” Steve smiled thinking back to one of their late night conversations. “I could use someone to help me learn about the art of compromise.”
“You know my attendance record for big cases like this can be a little spotty.”

“And if I’m out on bail, I might be able to do something about that, too.” Steve had enjoyed working with the Devil from Hell’s Kitchen to keep the city safe. “So what do you say Mr. Murdock, will you take my case?”

Red gleamed off Matt's glasses as he held out his hand. “It would be an honor, Captain.”

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Fini-

A/N:
Thanks for taking this ride; I was really nervous about posting in what is still a pretty new fandom for me. This started off as a Steve and Matt meet and bond over boxing and took off from there.

This is a standalone story and it ended at a natural point in my head. I’ve only dipped my toes in the Marvel universe and I have no idea where the muse will take me next. I’ll probably stick around Hell’s Kitchen for a while, but who knows. :)

You can hang out with me here :) http://thekristen999.tumblr.com

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