

I'm home .

It's the middle of the summer . Or the end of it . I can't really tell , but the air feels hot around me .

Some TV show is playing in the background , the words ineligible for me to understand . Not that it matters ; I was never much of a TV person except for cartoons , anime , or the occasional sports game . Go Buffalo Bills .

I'm on my phone , though I can't really decipher what I'm looking at . My brain tries to anyway . It comes up with faces that can't be made out , faces that speak words I can't understand on a screen that I can't see even though I'm looking right at it . I'm curled up on the couch , buried underneath blankets despite the heat .

Though that's all disregarded when dad comes home . I spring up to my feet and immediately greet him with a tight hug , even though he warns me for the hundredth time that running across the wooden floor will make the neighbors upset . I don't care though . If being happy to see my dad creates a noise complaint , then so be it .

He tells me about his day at work as he takes his jacket off and silences his radio ; a silent indication that he's focused on being home instead of worrying about what's going on at the station . Even a cop like dad knows how to spend time with his family .

I loved how balanced he made everything seem . It's what happens when you do things by the book like he always encourages me to do . You'd think I'd learn to do it by now , but some of us are later bloomers than others .

Even so , he loves me for who I am . He makes sure to tell me everyday before he goes to work and I go to school . How old am I if I'm even thinking about going to school .?

Eh . It doesn't matter . It doesn't matter because I'm more concerned about whether or not dad's going to suggest lasagna monday again like the corny old geezer that he is . Every single Monday , without skipping a beat , he comes home and immediately gets to cooking the same weekly dinner . It's part of his very intricate routine .

But it doesn't matter , because I actually like lasagna . I can already taste it against my tongue , the warm , gooey meal being one of the very few consistent things in my life . I made sure to pass on lunch at school so I could eat a big plate of his cooking tonight , just to make him feel extra appreciated .

Though that doesn't matter either . Because as dad walks to the kitchen to prepare for tonight's meal , I see a bomb thrown into our window , rolling across the floor before detonating soon after . All I did was raise my arms over my face , which was apparently more than enough to leave me unscathed from the blast .

My dad , however , wasn't so lucky . No , once I uncover my face , I see his mangled figure buried underneath a heap of rubble . I try to scream for him but the words get lodged in my throat , finding it extremely difficult to get a single syllable out . I run to the window in hopes of seeing where the bomb even came from .

And that's when I see a familiar red suit on the other side of the hole blasted into my dad's apartment . A red suit worn by a man with red hair and red tinted glasses . Hell , even the smirk on his face was red , idly tossing another bomb up and down his hand .

*I once again try to scream , yell , say **anything** that conveys my anger , my pain . But instead of saying what I want to say , the world ends up speaking for me . Literally . Voices upon voices clamor over each other for a desire to be heard , growing louder with each interruption before it turned into a full blown shouting contest . I can't think , can't focus , hands gripping my hair like my head would split wide open if it didn't .*

That's when I see another explosion in the distance , one on a more catastrophic level than the one in my home . The blast engulfs the horizon and quickly spreads to the buildings and skyscrapers in the background , getting closer and closer to me with every passing second

I try to move , but I can't . My feet are frozen in place , being held down by a weird sludge - like substance , ensuring I don't escape my fate . The shockwave approaches me , my body anticipating the incoming blast .

Except it never hits me , because I finally wake up right before impact .

A gasp .

Azure hues shoot open , immediately blinded by the ironically dim light above her . Her head was pounding as if someone had taken a jackhammer and repeatedly dug into her skull . She blinked , trying to shake off the disorientation that clung to her like a thick fog . Easier said than done , of course .

The cold , sterile light above her was too bright , harshly illuminating the small concrete cell she found herself in . Panic set in as she tried to move , only to realize her wrists were shackled to the metal bed frame .

... there's only one place she can imagine that she's at .

The Raft.

An infamous legend whispered in the underbelly of New York's criminal world . A supermax prison designed to hold the worst of the worst — people like her.

Or at least , people like Ghost - Spider , whose identity was now known to New York .

Gwen's heart raced as memories of the previous night slammed into her . Frank Castle , the Punisher , had ambushed her at the very moment she got home . One moment she was swinging back to her hideout , the next she was face planting into the front window of a car . And how could she forget the blaring sonic wave that disrupted her senses .?

Castle was relentless , ruthless , Gwen getting a proper taste of his violence when she got an even better taste of the gravel that makes up New York's streets . And how could she forget his favorite go - to attack .? The infamous stun baton , one that definitely wasn't street legal . Ironic for a police captain . Of all days she could be captured , it just *had* to be at the beginning of Septe —

Gwen was supposed to see A2 today .

Dammit , dammit , *dammit* , **dammit** . Gwen couldn't *afford* to be captured right now . She promised to bring A2 food today so they could actually eat something like a human does . The plan was to get corndogs & pizza as a backup in case A2 didn't like the former of the two foods .

She couldn't miss it . She **couldn't** make A2 feel abandoned like she said she wouldn't .

Footsteps echo in the hallway outside her cell , slow & deliberate . There's a jingle of keys followed by a metallic clang of the heavy door opening , which sent a shiver down her spine . She tries to sit up , but it's only then that Gwen notices the restraints that bite into her wrists , keeping her anchored to the bed .

“ Gotta be kiddin' me , ” she whispers to herself , watching as her current biggest fan steps into the room .

Castle's presence fills the small space with an oppressive weight . He was dressed in his usual black attire , the white skull on his chest stark against the dark fabric of his upper clothing . His expression was unreadable , but his eyes — those cold , unfeeling eyes — were fixed on her with a predatory focus .

“Morning , Stacy , ” he said , his voice as rough as sandpaper .

Gwen glared at him , refusing to show any fear despite the circumstances . “ Didn't know pieces of shit knew how to talk . Congrats on your evolution , Frankie . Maybe you'll grow a *brain* next . ”

Castle's lips curled into something that wasn't quite a smile . “ Seems like I had enough of a brain to take you in . You were too busy hiding , playing superhero , or pissing off to whatever place your portals take you to notice me . ”

Gwen clenched her fists , the metal cuffs digging into her skin . “ Is *this* what you came here for .? To laugh at me .? To gloat about being the one to take down Ghost - Spider and reveal her identity .? That what you want .? Because **man** , is that petty of you . ”

“ What *I* want .? ” He stepped closer , his shadow looming over the blonde . “ I already *got* what I wanted . You . Out of the way , where you can't hurt anyone else or terrorize this city . ”

“ I don't hurt people , Castle . I **save** them . ”

A scoff . “ Save them .? You think swinging around the city in a mask with a psycho alien or whatever the shit you have , getting into fights with lowlifes , makes you a hero .? Someone to be looked up at .? Get fuckin' real . You're just another criminal hiding behind a costume . ”

“ Oh , and suddenly *you're* not .? ” Gwen shot back , snarling at the officer . “ How many people have you killed in the name of your twisted sense of justice .? ”

Castle's expression hardened . “ More than you , if we're really having a dick measuring contest . I do what's necessary . Unlike you , I don't leave loose ends . I don't let people die because I'm too weak to do what has to be done . ”

Gwen's stomach twisted in a bundle of fiery rage . She knew he was talking about George , her father , who had died because she couldn't reveal her identity as Ghost - Spider in time to save him . Not to mention he was a pawn in Matthew Murdock's game of gaining her attention . The guilt was something she carried with her every day , a weight she couldn't escape .

But she wouldn't let Frank of all people use it against her .

“ You think you're *better* than me .? ” She asks , her voice sharpened with venom . “ You're just a thug with a gun . Hiding behind some self - righteous crusade and using it as an excuse to exercise police brutality doesn't change that . ”

Castle leaned in , his face inches from hers . “ Maybe you're right , Stacy . But *I'm not the one in chains , am I .?* ”

Gwen's jaw tightened , growing more pissed off with Frank by the nanosecond . He was right , & they both knew it ; he had all the power here , all the leverage , all the city on his side & who knows what else . She was at his mercy , & that fact gnawed at her , fueling a helpless anger .

“ You won't get away with this , ” she said , her voice low but firm . “ People will come for me . ”

“ Please . No one’s coming for you , Stacy , ” Castle replied , stepping back & folding his arms across his chest . “ You’re in the Raft . This place is airtight . No one’s getting in or out without clearance . ”

He let that sink in before continuing . “ Your trial’s set for the end of the week . They’ve postponed all other cases just for you . Aren’t you a special one . ? ”

Gwen’s breath caught in her throat , her heartbeat suddenly sounding louder than it already was . A trial . . . they were really going through with it . She could only imagine what kind of sham this trial would be . A public spectacle to make an example out of her , to show the world what happens to vigilantes who step out of line .

“ W — What are you hoping to accomplish . ? What do you even gain from this . ? ” she asked , her voice tinged with desperation , the emotion also making itself known on her face . “ You think locking me up will change anything . ? There’s *always* going to be people like me , people who fight for the right reasons . ”

Frank’s glare was unwavering , cold as ice . “ People like *you* are the problem . You think you’re *above* the law , that you can do whatever you want because you’ve got powers and technology . But you’re no better than the scum you put away . You’re just another criminal, and it’s time you paid the price . ”

Gwen struggled against her restraints , her frustration boiling over . “ I’m not a criminal . ! I’m trying to *help* people . ! To make people feel less alone , more *alive* , more like their *genuine selves* . ! ”

“ And you’re doing a **piss poor** job of it , ” Castle snarled . “ The city , those people — they’re safer **without** you . I’m making sure of that . Now quit your crying and save it for the judge . ”

He turned to leave , but paused at the door , glancing back at her . “ Enjoy your last few days of freedom , Stacy . You won’t be seeing much of it after the trial . ”

With that, he walked out , the door slamming shut behind him , the sound reverberating through the small cell .

Gwen slumped back against the bed , her mind racing with too many incoherent thoughts . She was trapped , isolated in one of the most secure prisons in the world , with Frank Castle of all people overseeing her downfall . The odds were completely stacked against her , but she wasn’t about to give up . Not yet .

She had to find a way out of this , to clear her name and prove that she was more than the mask she wore . . . much , much easier said than done , but . . . but she had to *try* .

Unfortunately for now , all she could do was wait . Wait & hope that an opportunity would present itself before it was too late .

Hopes & dreams . . . it’s all she had .