

Lifeline

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Lifeline

by [Sholio](#)

Summary

A flashbang leaves Frank temporarily blind and deaf while attempting to rescue hostages, including David.

"I'll get him out," he'd told Sarah, four hours earlier.

Right now Frank didn't even know if he could get himself out.

*

There were twenty-some-odd hostages at the U.N. Conference on Cyber Security on the fortieth floor of a downtown Manhattan office high-rise, and one of them was David Lieberman, because of course he was.

From a building across the street, Frank looked down on a colorful kaleidoscope of flashing police lights, the glare of Klieg lights, raking car headlights and milling people. He crouched down as a news chopper swept over. It was a circus down there. With something this high-profile, there would be three or four alphabet agencies along with local cops, all of them duking it out for jurisdiction.

And none of them could do a damn thing, none of them were *going* to do a damn thing; it was a bunch of strictly by-the-book minds running herd on the kind of crisis where nothing ever went by the books. Madani had as much as admitted it, when he'd talked to her earlier. "People are going to die, Frank," she'd said.

She hadn't quite been able to bring herself to say outright, "Do what you do." He didn't blame her. Things *could* go sideways -- he didn't have backup, he didn't have any sort of official mandate for this, and if things went wrong, a *lot* of people could die and it'd be his own damn fault.

But he knew, and he knew she knew, that if he walked into that circus and offered to help, he'd get blown off. He was a former jarhead who occasionally did off-books jobs for the FBI, one step up from a mercenary (and barely even that; the word "hitman" had been thrown around in his hearing once or twice) as far as most of them were concerned.

She also knew what he was capable of.

Frank adjusted the strap of the assault rifle across his shoulder, passed a quick hand across the assortment of grenades and ammo at his belt, and then unslung his rope and looked for somewhere to anchor it.

He'd learned a few tricks from Daredevil, whether Matt meant him to learn or not. One of those tricks was that people in Manhattan rarely looked up.

Moments later, one roof over, he'd busted the lock on the access door and was in the stairwell.

*

It was a flashbang that did it -- he thought. Maybe some kind of homebrewed one. Afterwards it was hard to say, because he took it full in the face and then fell down half a flight of stairs.

He'd already taken out one of their guys, figured out what floor the hostages were on, and ended up tangling with a couple more guys in the stairs a couple levels down. Things were going pretty good, which was why of course it went to shit in a spectacular way.

He managed not to shoot himself during the fall -- small favors -- and fetched up ... somewhere, so disoriented he wasn't sure which way was up or even if his face was still *there*. His face (eyes, forehead) was a hot mass of searing pain, the world gone to red swirls and blackness and agony, a high-pitched ringing in his ears and nothing else. Instinctively he tried to touch his face, found tender skin and the hot, wet stickiness of blood.

Unseen assailants' hands closed on him out of the spinning darkness. He lashed out in a (literal) blind panic, knew he took down at least one of them -- the familiar feeling of cartilage crunching, of someone's knee dislocating, all of it eerily silent. He got a hand free to draw a handgun -- couldn't use the rifle, not like this -- and knew he got off a couple of shots; he felt the gun buck soundlessly in his hand.

A sudden explosion of heat and pain felt like someone had kicked him in the stomach. He didn't realize he'd been shot until he curled his arms around himself in instinctive self-defense and found the front of his shirt wet with blood, his shirt sodden in the gap between the tac vest and his belt.

Something smashed into the side of his head and drove him to the floor. He tried to struggle to his feet and couldn't, registering only in the aftermath that someone's hands were clamped on his arms and a knee was buried in the small of his back, holding him down. His gut throbbed like the ache radiating from a rotten tooth. He didn't know how to defend himself. Couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't even tell which way was up with dizziness swirling around him.

He expected the next thing would be a bullet in the brain.

But it wasn't; instead they twisted his arms behind his back and hauled him up with a searing wrench of agony. With his balance screwed up like this, he couldn't tell how vertical he was, but his face was no longer on the floor and someone was holding him by his pulled-back arms. Breath and spittle flecked his face: someone yelling questions at him. A fist slammed into his stomach in the general vicinity of the bullet wound with a rush of white fire, a flamethrower straight to the gut. The pain ignited new swirls of white and red in the not-dark behind his eyelids.

Odds were good that they were going to kill him, right here and now, if he couldn't answer their questions -- which he couldn't, having no idea what they were even asking. The one thing that might make them not kill him was thinking he was helpless, knowing *why* he was

helpless. That might make them keep him alive 'til he could answer their questions, which would give him a chance to get some of his own back.

"I'm deaf and blind, assholes," he rasped into the dark. It was eerie, feeling his throat vibrate and not being able to hear the sounds; it made him want to repeat himself, not quite able to believe that the words were audible to anyone else. He worked his jaw, hoping it'd bring back some kind of sound, but instead there was nothing but ringing in his ears and stabbing pain at the hinge of his jaw. "You hit me in the face with that goddamn --"

An open palm hit the side of his face, snapped his head sideways. He had to spit out a mouthful of blood to continue.

"Can't hear if you're asking, but it's just me alone. I'm a free operator. It's just about the money, see, the job. I'm not with the FBI, not here for any kind of ideological bullshit, just got hired by one of the families to get a hostage out --" He was talking fast, almost babbling, not sure of how much he'd be able to get through before they stopped him, not sure if they were even now gearing up to shoot him. "But I'm fucking useless now, you know? Eardrums are busted, can't see a goddamn thing, and I *can't fucking answer you*, got no idea what you're asking --"

Another punch to the face silenced him, and then a gloved hand pressed against his mouth, a message he didn't need to be able to hear to understand.

He shut up and waited. The hand went away. He didn't say anything. The gut wound burned. His shirt and the front of his pants were soaked with blood that he became aware of, slowly, as it cooled below body temperature. He didn't know what they were doing around him, and that was the worst part. If he was merely blindfolded, there would still be voices and the sounds of people moving nearby; if he couldn't hear, he could at least see. Losing both at once was the fucking worst. It felt like he was floating in space. The dizziness came and went in waves, making it hard to even tell if he was still upright. No ... the hands holding his arms were keeping him that way. The fact that he was so disoriented he couldn't even tell *that* much scared the shit out of him.

There was sudden heat on his face. Near his cheek. What the hell ... something on fire? No, he thought, a cigarette lighter, probably. He could smell it, the crisp sharpness of flame and lighter fluid.

They were testing him. It's what he would have done with a prisoner, too. He tried not to pull his head away, although he knew someone had an open flame close enough to his cheek that he could smell the tiny hairs crisping.

A sudden hand settled on his forehead and he jerked away. The hands on his arms gave him a rough shake. Frank realized his breath was coming faster; he couldn't help it. He hated how fucking scared he was. He hadn't realized it would throw him off this badly, not knowing what they were going to do next or what direction it was coming from.

Rough fingers scraped the burned skin around his eyes and peeled an eyelid back. It *hurt*. Instinct made him flinch back, trying to screw his eyes shut. He couldn't honestly tell if his eyes were open or closed; there was nothing but red-tinged blackness. The unforgiving hand

got another grip and Frank tried to twist his head away. They didn't like that. Something hard smashed into his cheekbone. Animal instinct made him keep fighting, teetering on the edge of raw panic. He didn't even have a rational reason for it; he didn't know what they were going to do, didn't know how much vision he had left and was terrified to lose even that much if they --

Pain burst in his skull, once, twice. He reeled, lost in a world of dizziness and darkness. The hand was on his face again. It felt like they'd ripped his eyelid off -- he couldn't fucking *tell* -- there were swirling colors and not-colors, and maybe a dancing pale blur, as of some kind of light source, but he couldn't tell through the pain splitting his head open. And then the hands let his head go. His eyes burned like they were full of sand. He thought they were shut again, but it was hard to be sure.

"Satisfied, assholes?" he managed to grind out. He could feel blood trickling down his chin. He wondered if you knew when you got shot in the head -- would it feel like a punch, like heat, like the gut wound? Or would it just be ... nothing.

Instead he was roughly stripped of every weapon on him -- at least everything they could find, and they were damned thorough; the only one they missed was the knife sewn into his boot -- and then handcuffs snapped shut on his wrists and unseen hands hauled him to his feet. His legs wobbled under him, pain ripping through him every time his abdominal muscles tensed to take a step. The floor seemed to tilt under him, although the dizziness seemed to be improving a little, even if the hearing loss wasn't.

He wasn't sure how long they made him walk, though there was at least one flight of stairs involved. He tried counting steps at first, but discarded it as pointless; he didn't have a good enough mental map of the building for it to be meaningful.

So he stumbled through a dark and spinning world, trying desperately to make enough sense out of it to figure out how to get *out* of this, trying to shake the feeling that the world stopped beyond the tips of his fingers. Dizzy and shaking with shock and pain, nauseated, scared, he was flung to a hard floor and for a minute all he could do was take slow breaths, trying to get his equilibrium back, at least as much as he had left of it. Just lying down, having the solid floor at his back, was a help at getting a grip on the spinning world.

Which of course was when strange hands descended on him and pulled him up into something like a sitting position. This was less rough, but it was still people touching him, at least two different people, strangers' hands all over him. He wrenched himself away, pressing his back against a ... wall? Floor? It hurt like fuck. He thought he was sitting up. Probably.

"Stop!" he barked out, the word torn from his throat to fall into the silent void. The hands jerked away, vanishing into the nothing that was, right now, everything beyond his own body. He took a couple more deep breaths. That hadn't been the terrorists, those light fleeting touches. That was someone, or someones, trying to help. It didn't really matter. Strange hands coming out of all that nothing and touching him was scary as shit no matter who it was, especially with his hands cuffed like this; he couldn't even touch *back*, couldn't stop them from touching him.

Doesn't matter, you gotta stop panicking, Frank. You need help or you're gonna bleed out and be no good to anybody.

A tentative hand brushed his shoulder lightly and moved down his arm.

"I can't see you," Frank made himself say, turning his head in that direction. No clue how loud or how quiet he was speaking; no way to know if his words were even comprehensible. He could tell the bruising around his mouth was making it hard to get his tongue and lips to work, just not quite sure how bad it sounded from the outside. "Can't hear you either. Flashbang got me. One of you tell me, is there a David Lieberman here?"

The hand on his arm started to move away, then settled again, and staying in light contact with his sleeve, it slid up to his shoulder, then a thumb touched his jaw and the entire hand moved to rest the palm against his cheek. Staying in contact the whole way, so he'd know it was the same person, a level of consideration he wasn't prepared for.

And with that, he knew. He wasn't entirely sure how he knew, but he knew. It was the familiarity of the way those hands touched him, coupled with a lack of the firm confidence of a medical professional. There was a way people touched strangers and this wasn't it.

"David?" he said.

The hand stayed on his face. Then there was a movement, a brush of air against him, and something pressed against his arm and shoulder -- it was someone else's shoulder touching his, he thought, just before something tickled his cheek. It wasn't until a staccato huff of breath brushed across his cheek -- someone saying something -- that he realized what he was feeling was hair. David's hair: David's temple resting against Frank's.

Well, Frank's hands were cuffed, so it wasn't like there was much else he could touch anything with at the moment, other than his face.

Frank let out a shuddering breath. He hadn't really been sure ... the status of all the hostages was unknown, that was the thing. He just hadn't been *sure*.

"You okay?" he asked.

David nodded, his hair brushing the side of Frank's face and ear: which was what made Frank realize exactly why David had gotten himself into such close physical contact. David was always quick on the uptake, a fact that Frank was profoundly grateful for.

Just as he'd had that thought, David's head pulled away.

"Hey, don't go anywhere," Frank said, and he meant it to come out more like an order, but he felt the way his voice cracked in the middle of it.

David patted his cheek and then did a reverse of the crabwise way he'd handwalked up Frank's arm, this time off his face to his chest. Frank's vest was tugged on by something else: David's other hand, or someone else's hands. Frank tried to force himself not to react to that.

He concentrated, instead, on the pressure of David's hand against his upper chest, a sort of wordless *I'm here*.

It was the most fucking helpless he'd ever been in his life. Nothing he could do except submit. Every instinct told him to fight back as hands opened his vest. He didn't. He felt wet, clinging fabric pulled away from the gut wound.

David's hand flexed against his chest, the fingers tightening briefly.

"Yeah, I know, I got shot."

It was incredibly weird having a conversation this one-sided, especially with David. He could imagine David yammering on the other side of the barrier of silence between them -- probably hadn't shut up this whole time, in fact, and he hoped that David at least had the sense to keep it down and not get their captors' attention on them. Too much to hope they were locked up somewhere the hostiles weren't. He guessed there were probably guards around somewhere.

More movement around him. He was getting better at noticing that, those subtle little brushes of air, wafts of perfume (there were several people around him, he thought, including at least one woman) ... and he was caught off guard by what a vast relief it was to have *some* tangible way of telling that the world beyond his own body was still out there.

Seconds later, he was distracted from thinking about any of that by white-hot agony just above his belt. Something pressing into the gut wound, he figured distantly, as a cold sweat prickled his back.

Don't pass out. Don't pass out. Don't fucking pass out, soldier!

He kept his teeth clenched to keep from muttering it out loud, and also because that way he could make sure he didn't scream, considering that the only way he could even tell if he was screaming right now was by the lack of vibration of his throat ...

David patted his chest a few times in rapid succession.

"Oh yeah," Frank gritted out, to answer the question he wasn't sure if he'd been asked, "I'm absolutely fine."

Like all else, his comment fell into a void. If David laughed, or looked worried, or said something else, Frank had no way of knowing.

David moved a hand up to his face and began to poke around the vicinity of his eyes. "Don't," Frank said sharply, and David's explorations stopped. For a minute. Then his hand moved over to Frank's ear and Frank felt David's fingers brush across the bruises under his cropped hair and hesitate on his neck -- snagging on something sticky, which was the first time he'd realized he was bleeding from the ears. That must look kind of alarming from the outside. Frank tried a couple of times to shrug him off, then gave up and put up with it until David's hand moved down to rest on his shoulder.

For a little while, nothing much else happened. David's hand stayed on his shoulder, and the pain slowly muted itself, not exactly to manageable levels, but at least to the point where he wasn't having to throw all his willpower into not screaming or passing out. The wall propped him up so he wasn't in much danger of falling over, although he kept feeling like he was slipping sideways and having to move his cuffed hands and touch his fingertips to the wall to reassure himself that he wasn't actually moving; it was only the disorientation of the darkness coupled with whatever the flashbang had done to his inner ear.

The other thing that turned out to be strangely, horrifyingly hard to tell was whether he was slipping into unconsciousness or not. There was no way to *tell*. He had been vaguely aware, before all of this happened, that anytime you pressed your hand or your foot against something, you stopped noticing it after awhile ... but he had never been quite so consciously and continuously aware of it as he was right now. David's hand, for example: it only took seconds for Frank to stop being aware of its light pressure unless David moved or unless he moved against David. When he rested his fingertips on the wall to assure himself that *it* wasn't going anywhere, he quickly stopped being able to feel that either; it didn't help that his hands were going numb from the cuffs.

The detached feeling was a little like being drugged. He found himself grateful for the pain because at least it let him know he was awake and not slipping into a coma. He tried to focus on his breathing, keeping it steady, one breath at a time.

He needed a plan. Goddammit.

Partly just to give himself something to focus on, he tried twisting his wrists against the cuffs, experimenting with his limited range of motion. He really needed to get those off. There were a few tricks he knew for doing that; he just wasn't sure if he could perform any of them at the moment, given his limitations.

David's hand moved suddenly and vanished from Frank's perception as David took it off his shoulder. Frank tried to jerk after him, was brought up short by a white-hot stab of pain in his abdomen. Someone touched his chest from a different direction (not David, probably), then vanished into the nothingness when Frank flinched away with an involuntary growl.

Fingers closed on his arm and he flinched from that, too, until there was a flutter of fingers against his sleeve and the hand moved down his arm with that darting motion he'd started to associate with David.

"Careful," Frank muttered. What he meant was, *When you let go of me, I don't know where you went, dick*. He just couldn't quite figure out a way to put it into words that he couldn't hear.

David's light, quick fingers explored the handcuffs and the skin underneath them -- bruised and abraded from Frank's struggles with the cuffs, he could tell, but the pain when David touched it was so much less than the pain everywhere else that he barely noticed.

After an initial round of exploration, David didn't make any effort to get the cuffs off. He merely curled his hand around Frank's arm and rested his fingers against Frank's wrist, where they continued to flutter lightly against Frank's skin. David's nervous habit of tapping his

fingers on things had been, at times, the world's most fucking annoying thing when Frank was cohabiting with him in the bunker, but it was oddly comforting now.

With absolutely nothing else to concentrate on except the pain in his gut and the constant flutter of David's fingers against his wrist, it still took him a little while to notice that David's tapping was variable yet oddly consistent. At first he thought David was tapping out the pattern to a song Frank couldn't hear, but then it fell into place when he realized what David was doing.

FRANKFRANKFRANK --

Morse code. Jesus Christ. David knew Morse code. Of course he did. There probably wasn't a code or a signaling protocol in the world that David didn't have some familiarity with.

It had been long enough since Frank had learned it that he had to struggle to dredge up the memory of each letter. He wriggled his fingers, and felt the warm touch of David's other hand, curling around his own so that the half-numb fingers of Frank's cuffed right hand rested against David's palm. Carefully, painstakingly, Frank tapped: M-O-R-S --

David's fingers fluttered against his wrist. One firm tap, one light, two firm. Y.

Frank tapped out: S-I-T-R-E-P.

David didn't do anything, his fingers still. Which could mean one of several things: he didn't understand the actual letters (Frank was pretty sure he was screwing up an occasional tap here and there), he didn't know what Frank was asking, he was distracted by something else, he didn't know how to explain one letter at a time in Morse code ...

Actually, the last one was a pretty big problem. Specific questions might go better. Frank thought about exactly what he'd need to know if someone was explaining to him over the radio for an op, and then he tapped out carefully:

HOW MANY

He couldn't remember how to do a question mark and was still hesitating on whether to add the word HOSTILES (one painstaking letter at a time) when David's fingertips tapped a few times. It took several repetitions of the same sequence for Frank to realize the answer was being given in numerals instead of letters.

7

Well, that wasn't too bad ... was his first thought, until reminding himself that he was blind, deaf, and handcuffed. Still, could be worse.

David's fingers were moving again.

2 HURT

He thought about tapping out the question and then just decided to ask it. "Is that seven counting the --"

The hand cupped around his fingertips wrenched away and slapped over his mouth instead. Frank tensed instinctively, which sent liquid fire rippling through his abdominal muscles (where someone, apparently not David, was still pressing down). He didn't fight back, and the hand slowly let go, vanished into nothing and reappeared cupped around his cuffed hands.

CLOSE, Frank tapped. Damn it, what was a question mark anyway?

David apparently either didn't understand the question or decided to answer the other one first. 7 TOTAL.

WHERE

HARD 2 DESCRIBE

David had to repeat that one before Frank got the whole thing. *Don't mix letters and numbers like that, dipshit*, he wanted to say, then decided to just roll with it.

CLOSE 2 US

5 YARDS?

Aha, *that* was a question mark: 2 short, 2 long, 2 short. Frank memorized it for future use.

He was also reminded that David was absolute shit at estimating distances. Five yards in David-speak could mean anything from a few feet away to halfway across the room. Also, was that just one or most of them or ... goddammit. He needed his *eyes!*

Even while he was thinking this, David twisted around -- they were in close enough contact, this time, that Frank could feel David moving against his shoulder -- and grasped Frank's hand firmly just above the wrist while pushing up his sleeve. Then he began to run his fingertip lightly over the inside of Frank's arm.

It was slow, deliberate, and tickled slightly as David's finger brushed across the hairs on Frank's arm. He couldn't figure out *what* the hell David was doing, but there was clearly studied intent behind David's careful movements. As David traced out a complex array of straight, smooth, right-angled lines and single taps, Frank realized that the fucking lunatic was *drawing a map on Frank's arm*.

It wasn't an easy map to visualize, since Frank was having to hold the entire thing in his head. David seemed to realize this and repeated lines frequently, tracing them over and over. In the middle of this, he appeared to notice that he hadn't explained what he was doing, and he paused to tap out, MAP.

Frank nodded, remembering finally that David could still see him nod, even if he couldn't see David.

But mostly he was trying to memorize David's map. He still had no way to estimate distances (and given the source, wasn't sure he would trust David's assessments anyway) but he got the basic picture. They were in a large room with two exits (ballroom? he thought; conference

room?). David indicated with little taps what Frank eventually figured out was probably a guard at each exit, two near the main cluster of prisoners, two more a little ways away.

Frank jerked his arm and turned his hands up (he had to get these goddamn cuffs off) until David got the idea and moved a hand where Frank could finger-tap on him. 6? he tapped, utilizing his newfound discovery of question marks, and when David didn't seem to get it, WHERE?

WHAT?

OTHERGUY. He tapped "7" a couple of times to drive the point home.

He could all but hear David's "Oh" in the brief twitch of his fingers. OUT, David said.

So they had patrols sweeping the building, as well as they could manage with limited manpower. Frank tapped, WHICH HURT?

?

He made more of an effort to separate out his words. WHICH HOSTILES HURT?

Another nonverbal "Oh." David sketched the broad outlines of the room with his fingertips. The injured hostiles, he indicated with taps, were one of the exit guards and one of the ones in the farther-away twosome.

Which mean they had two healthy guys guarding the hostages. Given their limited manpower, it's what he would have done. Goddamn fucking competent terrorists. He tapped out carefully: HOW MANY HOSTAGES? Madani had given him an estimate, but those were always unreliable, subject to unexpected additions and subtractions.

There was a pause, and Frank noticed David's hand jerking slightly and rhythmically as he (presumably) counted under his breath. Under normal circumstances, David's tendency to talk with his whole body was, by turns, irritating and kind of endearing and *really* irritating, but in this case it was actually pretty useful.

17, David tapped.

Madani's estimate had been high. Could just be bad intel. Could be the hostage-takers had already shot some people. ANY DEAD? Frank tapped.

N

Bad intel, then. Still, seventeen people was a hefty number to shepherd around in a crisis situation, especially given that Frank still didn't know how he was going to take out any of the hostiles, let alone get these people out of here.

Shooting was out. No way. What was he going to do, use David as a seeing-eye dog for aiming with a gun he didn't even have at the moment? Under the best of circumstances he wasn't sure if shooting blind would get results, and there was too much risk in a room full of civilians.

Knives might work, if he could get close enough. He couldn't take out six armed guys that way, though, not in an open room with little cover.

Or could he? The barest bones of a plan started to come to him.

LIGHTS, he tapped.

? was David's reply.

LIGHTS OUT LEVEL FIELD

UR STILL DEAF
ALSO HANDCUFFED

Frank hadn't realized it was possible for a person's hands to *feel* sarcastic. Somehow David managed to get that across. After a pause, David tapped CAN U HEAR AT ALL?

NO

But it might not be entirely true. He was starting to think he *did* hear something other than ringing. There was crackling when he moved his head, a little like having his ears blocked in a bad cold.

He flatly, adamantly refused to even think about the possibility that this might be permanent.

NEED CUFFS OFF, he tapped. IDEAS? He was getting faster at this, and faster at decoding David's responses; he hardly needed David to repeat himself at all anymore.

I CAN PICK LOCK, David came back promptly.

Huh, definitely not a skill he'd expected David to have, but David kept surprising him that way. GOT PICKS?

U DONT?

Frank scowled in the general direction of where he assumed David's head was, but then a thought occurred to him.

VEST CLIP

?

CLIP ON VEST

NOT HELPING

Frank gave up on trying to type out an explanation that would have probably taken five minutes one letter at a time. "You hear this okay?" he said in what he hoped was a whisper, and felt David jump before tapping Y. "Safe to talk this way?" Another Y. Good enough.

"Tac vest's got clips for clipping on guns and shit," he presumably-whispered. "They took my gear but not the vest. Pull off a clip, see if you can twist it straight. Jimmy the lock with it."

Even before he was halfway through the explanation, David's hands had already vanished from Frank's arm and were now fumbling at his vest with weird little tugs. This seemed like the sort of thing David ought to be good at, Frank thought, with his monkey hands and tendency to fiddle with electronics.

After the tugging on his vest stopped, for a minute or two there was nothing but little movements against his arm as David worked on something. Then David reached around behind Frank.

Wait, the idiot was doing it *now*? Frank elbowed him, then when that didn't stop the tugging and poking at his wrists, rolled his body around so that he body-checked David into the wall. That hurt a *lot*, but it was worth it. He felt a hand on his other arm, briefly, from one of the other random hostages surrounding him.

But it was David's agile fingers that grasped his wrist and tapped out a question mark in six firm, annoyed taps.

David had obviously forgotten that he had to have his hand or some other part of his body in contact with Frank's hands for Frank to answer back in Morse code, so Frank maybe-whispered, "Okay to talk?"

Y, David tapped.

"Soon as you get my hands free, we're on a clock. We gotta be ready to go."

OK WHAT NEED?

Just that. No hassles, no complaining. Who would've thought he'd ever be this glad to have a goddamn *spook* in the field with him?

"Can you think of a way to cut the lights?" Frank whispered. "So they can't get 'em back on, not for awhile."

Hesitation, with David's fingers tap-tapping lightly and aimlessly on Frank's wrist as he thought. Then: MAYBE

"Whole plan depends on that. I know it won't be easy."

More hesitation. Thinking? Talking to the others? Frustration rose up once again at his inability to know what was going on around him. Then David tapped: YES

Frank blew out a breath and decided to trust him. "When the lights go down and I move, your job is to get them to safety. Do you know the way out of the building?"

WHAT ABOUT U

"Wasn't the question. Do you know the way out? Can you get them there?"

WAIT BRB

Frank was still trying to decode that last part when David's fingers moved across his forearm and drew something on the inside of his wrist. A circle. Two taps. A curved line. He had to repeat it a couple of times before Frank managed to put it together and realize that David had just drawn a goddamn smiley face on his arm.

He extended his middle finger.

David patted his arm, withdrew his hand, and vanished.

Frank focused on his breathing and tried not to wonder too intensely about what was going on, instead focusing on going over David's crude map in his head, fixing (as well as he could) the locations of everyone in the room and every step he'd need to take. Once he started moving, he was going to have to move very fast and get everything right on the first try. He would have no opportunity afterwards to find David again, so all the intel he was going to have for the fight, he'd need to get *before* the fight.

And the targets would be moving too.

If only he could goddamn *see*. Just for a minute. Just enough to get an idea of how far away everyone was, how heavily they were armed, how big the room was -- damn it, there was so much he didn't know. So much he *needed* to know. Getting the information out of David would take forever and would undoubtedly be full of holes.

Could he see at all? Was it possible? His eyes were still closed, lashes matted together with blood. The darkness was not completely dark; it was filled, instead, with the colored blotches and squiggles that fill the space behind anyone's closed eyelids. And he'd had some sense of light and shape when his eyes were open before. The damage might be superficial.

He tried peeling his eyes open. It hurt like hell; it felt like his lashes were being ripped out in clumps, and his eyes *hurt*, that vicious sand-under-the-lids kind of pain. He couldn't help thinking of corneal burns and wondering how much additional damage he was doing.

But there *was* light. Tears of pain splintered it into prisms. There were shapes: dim, fuzzy, patterns of light and dark. He blinked, trying to ignore the scraping pain.

Because he *could* see ... painfully, dimly, blurrily, but after the total darkness, any reprieve was like a drink of water in the desert. He saw in jerky blinks, sharp stabs of too-bright light and sand-on-corneas pain, in those brief periods he was able to squint through blood-soaked lashes before he had to close his eyes again. He made out the bent-over head of a woman (he thought it was a woman; long hair, anyway) holding some kind of towel or jacket against his gut wound. Other people nearby, sitting on the floor, made a patchwork of dimly glimpsed colors and shapes. Farther out, the world was even less clear, nothing but indistinct patterns of dark and light, but movement let him know where the two nearby guards were, and he had to clench his teeth on a breath of relief: he might not be able to see much, but now he knew how far they were.

Keeping his eyes open, even for brief, painful glimpses of the room, took a massive effort; instinct was to squinch his eyes shut against the pain and the light. He was afraid he was doing more damage with every blink. But closing them was, in its own way, just as hard -- allowing darkness to close its jaws around him.

Still, with those brief glimpses and the help of David's sketch-map, the layout of the room took solid shape in his head. He was confident he could take those nearest two, and by the time he did that, he ought to have the others' attention. And David could get the rest out in the meantime.

... where the hell *was* David, anyway? He didn't recall seeing him, but he hadn't really been able to see well enough to recognize individuals, even someone as distinctive as David. Idiot better not be about to get himself shot ... and just as he was thinking that, a hand closed lightly over his wrist and he jumped.

SRY, David's quick-moving fingers tapped. OK READY

Frank decided not to ask for details. It was a room full of tech geeks, after all; he probably wouldn't understand half the details of whatever the hell they'd come up with.

"Cuffs," he murmured.

Instead of doing anything with the cuffs, David simply held Frank's wrist for a minute. Frank wasn't sure what the holdup was -- not sure how to proceed? Talking to someone? He tried a brief squint at the world, but all he got was hazy shadow-shapes: not helpful.

Then David tapped, UR HURT.

Frank snorted a laugh; he couldn't help it.

David smacked his arm and then tapped, CAN U DO THIS?

Frank hesitated to reply. David wasn't wrong; the lives of the hostages, David's included, were riding on this.

But the alternative was to wait until the agencies outside the building came up with a plan, and Frank had little trust that their plan wouldn't involve either a long wait or the loss of life that was practically inevitable with any invasion strategy. He was the one on the scene.

YES, he tapped.

David's fingertips hovered above Frank's skin; then he tapped out, TRUST U.

And while Frank was still dealing with *that*, David went to work on the cuffs. He hadn't been exaggerating; he really *could* pick locks. Frank was going to have to ask him about that later. He wasn't exactly good at it -- there was a certain amount of poking and twisting -- but eventually the cuffs snapped open, and David slid them down Frank's hand and away. Frank twisted his hands and flexed his fingers to get the blood flowing again.

David touched his wrist and tapped, WAIT.

Frank stilled, and then slowly moved his leg where he could reach the top of his boot. With his leg tucked under him, he picked at the loose seam on the top of the left boot until he could get his fingertips on the hilt of the knife he had hidden there. Six inches of combat-ready carbon steel slid out into his hand.

He peeled open his eyes again, squinting painfully at the impossibly bright, frustratingly blurry world. He was fairly sure the hostiles hadn't moved much from where they'd been before. He was going to have to hope so.

READY, David tapped.

The lights went out; the red haze turned black.

Frank was up and moving in that first instant, lunging forward. His legs almost didn't hold him for the first stride, pain ripping through his abdomen before he managed to shut it out and keep going, and in the next step he tripped over something soft and human-shaped. Frank smelled perfume: one of the hostages, in erratic movement, not where she was supposed to be. He didn't waste time, just shoved her out of the way and kept going.

He slammed into another human-sized obstacle, felt sudden reaction and hooked his hand into a combat vest, making sure what he had was the enemy and not a civilian. The person he had hold of tried to knee him in the groin and at the same time he felt the cold steel of a gun barrel slide past his arm, so yeah, not a civilian. Frank unceremoniously knifed him in the throat and went for the approximate location of the second target.

The second one made it easy for him: they were moving his way and stumbled into him. Combat vest, gun oil -- not a hostage. Frank knifed this one, too, and as hot blood sprayed his wrist and arm, he felt for weapons and got a handgun out of its sheath. Should've done this on the first one. Hadn't thought of it.

He'd already lost track of exactly where he was in the room, let alone where everyone else was. What little he could see was no help: darkness and random, blurry flashes of light. Muzzle flare? Moving flashlights? He couldn't see enough to know. He'd just have to hope that David was busy getting the hostages out and they weren't getting massacred around him.

At every moment he expected to feel the concussion of a gunshot he couldn't hear. It hadn't happened yet, so he kept moving, boots skidding on the floor.

Two down. Where were the others? He aimed for what little light he could see, on the assumption that if there was light in here, the enemy had it, and got blindsided (literally) by someone coming out of the nothing to his right.

They both went down, grappling. The other guy managed to pin the hand Frank had the knife in, but Frank brought up the one with the handgun, pressed it into the gap just above the combat vest, and pulled the trigger twice. The guy jerked and rolled off him.

Frank lay on the floor for a minute, gasping. Hand to hand with a gut wound didn't feel good.

Three down, four to go.

He struggled to his feet, and just then the lights came back on, a sudden red haze when his eyelids were closed and blinding whiteout when he cracked them open. Frank froze, exposed, with nowhere to go. He didn't even know where the walls were, let alone if there was anything to hide behind.

Well, he'd made a damn good run of it.

No one shot him, but someone touched his arm. Frank spun in that direction, knife down and back and ready to bring forward, raising the gun --

That hadn't been an attack. Against all his instincts, he made himself hold still, and when he was touched again on the wrist, he knew whose light, fluttering fingers those were.

STOP, David tapped as fast as possible. At least Frank was pretty sure that's what it was.

"What's happening?" Frank panted. He felt like he'd taken a red-hot poker to the gut.

FBI DROPGUN

Frank took a slow, painful breath. He trusted David. He did it, opening his fingers on the gun and holding it by two fingers. He couldn't just let it fall; there was a bullet chambered. Instead he went down slowly to a painful crouch -- David went down with him -- and laid the gun and the knife on the floor.

LAYDOWN, David said. FBI SAYS. SORRY.

Hell, he didn't blame 'em. If he'd been on a team that'd breached the occupied floor to find an armed, blood-covered man shooting someone, he'd have done the same thing; he was just lucky they hadn't decided to take him out first and sort it out later. Frank felt David moving with him as he stretched out facedown, keeping one hand lightly encircling Frank's wrist.

He was prepared for it, but it still made him jerk when firm, not at all gentle hands started patting him down. David's grasp on his wrist tightened. The thought occurred to Frank that they were probably holding guns on him -- that David had walked into a circle of guns to communicate with him.

He didn't know what to do with that.

"Hostages okay?" he muttered.

OUT, David tapped. ALL OK.

"Good job."

U TOO, David tapped. U IDIOT.

"Fuck you too, asshole," Frank muttered, and David's entire arm jerked in a way that made Frank think he might have laughed.

After an interminable minute or twenty, Frank was allowed to sit up and David's quick-moving fingers on his wrist let him know that the FBI no longer regarded him as a combatant (well, at least that was what he assumed FBINOTTHREATOK meant). After that, medical personnel descended on him and he was transferred to a stretcher. David stayed with him throughout this process, keeping one hand on his wrist and translating as necessary. Frank wondered what the hell the FBI was making of all of this and then decided he didn't care.

Cool air brushed his face: he was out of the building. Someone squeezed his shoulder on the opposite side from David. By now he had enough people touching him that he almost didn't jump. Almost.

MADANI, David informed him.

Madani patted his shoulder and then her hand withdrew and she went off to do, he assumed, FBI things.

EMTS, David tapped. CANT COME WITH. He started typing out what was probably the start of "ambulance" but Frank stopped him, putting his other hand over David's -- funny how much of a relief it was just to be able to do *that*, without his hands tied behind his back.

And ... he wasn't really sure where to go from there, wasn't sure what to say to the person who had been his voice in the dark. "Thanks" didn't really seem to cover it. Instead he just held David's hand for a minute, 'til David let go and patted his arm and was gone into the dark void beyond Frank's fingertips, and he felt himself getting transferred and strapped in for an ambulance ride.

*

Hospitals sucked at the best of times. Being in a hospital when his world stopped at the ends of his fingers was, basically, hell. The one respite was that sounds were starting to come back, although it was a mixed blessing. Everything was still indistinct and hard to make out, but he was able to hear sharp sounds -- items clattering, phones ringing, equipment beeping -- and understand the nurses if they spoke loudly and clearly. Mixed blessing because, while it made it harder for people to sneak up on him, it didn't make it impossible, except it was even more startling because he didn't *expect* to be startled, and meanwhile he jerked at every sharp, loud sound that filtered through his perception, able to hear them but not see them. And when a guy had just gotten out of abdominal surgery, jumping at anything *hurt*, goddammit, drugs or not.

He wasn't there alone for very long, though. The first person to show up after he got out of recovery who wasn't a nurse came in a sharp rattle of heels and a waft of perfume.

Frank turned his head her way. He was never, ever going to underestimate Daredevil being able to do what he did. That shit was *hard*. "Karen?" he said.

The heels stopped. "They said you couldn't hear or see," she said, or at least he thought she said; the ringing in his ears still obscured the finer nuances of people's voices. She sounded unsure in a way that was unlike her, which reminded him that he probably looked like twelve kinds of hell.

"It's coming back. Just gotta speak up." He held out a hand on top of the sheets.

The quick tap of her heels completed her approach to the bed. "I'm going to touch you now," she said, and then laid her hand on his, which made him remember that she was used to dealing with a blind guy. Hell, this was probably old hat for her.

"How are the, um ..." She might have made a gesture; he wasn't sure. She gave a little laugh. "Your eyes."

Frank raised the hand not holding hers to touch the bandages on his face. It was total darkness now, devoid even of hints and swirls of light, which was oddly harder to deal with than knowing he *could* open his eyes if he wanted to. "Docs said my sight ought to come back just fine once they heal. So that's what I'm doing now. Letting 'em heal. Bandages ought to be off in a few days."

Karen huffed out a relieved-sounding breath, and he decided not to mention some of the more alarming things they'd said, "risk of corneal scarring" and that kind of shit. It was gonna be what it was gonna be.

She stayed with him for awhile, talking mainly about work -- a feature story she was working on, a lunchroom dispute with co-workers. Stupid everyday shit. He liked it; he especially that she felt like telling him about that kind of stuff. She kept her hand on his most of the time, not really holding it, just resting her hand there, so he knew where she was.

A nurse came to bring him lunch, and Karen got up to leave without Frank having to tell her that he didn't want her to watch him feeling his way over the tray and fumbling with what turned out to be a sandwich and a bowl of carrot sticks -- finger food, decent of them, but still, he didn't want to figure out eating-while-blind with Karen right there. And she seemed to understand that. She left with a press of her fingers on his wrist and a swish of perfume.

His other visitors showed up later, when he was just starting to hit the point of terminal boredom. He'd messed around with the remote for the room's TV a little bit earlier, got a comedy where he couldn't see what was making people laugh, and a political talk show where he wanted to shoot the talking heads within the first five minutes of pundit points, and pushed buttons 'til he found the one that turned it off. After that there was nothing much to do except try to sleep, until he heard a quiet babble of kids' voices not too far off, and then David whispering very loudly, "He can't hear you *or* see you, so don't touch him all at once, okay? And I know what he looks like, but don't worry, it looks a lot worse than it is --"

Tempting as it was for Frank to just keep his mouth shut and let David dig himself a deeper hole, he decided that he wasn't going to jerk around the kids. "Hi, David," he said loudly. "Hey, kids. Sarah there?"

"How the heck," David said, over the chorus of hi's from the kids. "No ... no, she's at work. She'll be by later. Kids, no -- don't pile on him --" Frank had already felt the bed dipping, which allowed him to steel himself enough not to jerk away when hands smaller than David's or Karen's found his hands and arms.

"Can you actually hear me," David asked, "or have you just been saying 'hi, David,' to empty air for the last two hours?"

"It's coming back. Still kinda fuzzy, but I can hear you okay if you don't mumble."

"I was whispering," David said. The bed dipped again under adult-heavy weight, next to Frank's legs. After a moment, one of David's hands settled lightly on Frank's ankle.

"No, you weren't, Dad," Leo giggled, and there was a snorted laugh from Zach, which at least told him which one of them was which. He'd been pretty sure the smaller, stickier hands were Zach anyway.

"Give him the thing," Zach whispered in a similar key to his dad's "quiet" voice. "Do you have the thing?"

"I've got the thing," Leo declared, and there were rustles. "We brought you something, Frank. Hold out your hands."

Frank obligingly held out his hands. Memories of his own children -- still more bitter than sweet, but tinged with painful affection -- made him smile, knowing what was dumped into his palms could be anything from a live frog to ... hell, he didn't even want to speculate.

"We opened it for you," Zach said, as several items that were angular and crinkling tumbled into his hands. "So you didn't have to guess."

He still had to guess, because he had no idea what this was. It felt like ... kids' toy blocks, maybe? Wrapped in plastic that crinkled when he fingered it.

"Leo, you dummy, you didn't take the plastic off," Zach said, and Frank's palms were suddenly lighter by at least one of the items, over the top of Leo's "Hey!"

"Zach, don't call your sister a dummy," David said, and at that point Frank's lap was abruptly half full of kids, grabbing at the remaining pieces of the -- toy? whatever it was. "Kids! He can't see you. Don't grab him -- Leo! Stop pushing your brother!"

"I wasn't!" Leo said. "Tell Zach to stop hitting me!"

"I wasn't!"

"Kids! We're in a hospital, keep it down -- Zach, don't grab things from your sister -- Leo, let go of Zach, *now*."

Things calmed down eventually, and what still felt like (now-unwrapped) wooden blocks landed in Frank's lap. He picked them up and fingered them. "Give me a hint here."

"They're puzzles," Leo said from very near his shoulder, while someone's hand plucked the one he was holding away from him. The kids' utter lack of concern about touching or startling him was actually, once he got used to it, a little bit relaxing; they just didn't worry about it, incorporating him naturally into their casual roughhousing. "Like, you know, those wooden ones that you take apart and put together? The mind-game things."

"We thought you still couldn't see or hear," David spoke up from the foot of the bed. "So we figured you'd be bored, and we stopped along the way so the kids could pick out something for you to do. We came up with the idea of puzzles you can do by feel."

Frank had no idea how to deal with the warm feeling in his chest, and no idea what was showing on his face, especially with all the bruises and bandages. He groped for another of the wooden pieces in his lap. "I dunno, you guys. I'm not good at puzzles even when I can see 'em. Don't be too disappointed if I can't get these to work."

"It'll be just like field-stripping a gun," Leo said brightly. "You should be good at it."

"How do you even know what field-stripping a gun *is*?" David demanded, in full protective-parent mode.

"I can google things, Dad!"

Frank managed to choke down laughter enough to say, "I might need some help with this."

"We'll help you," Zach said eagerly.

Small hands moved over his own, guiding his movement on the pieces. It was really more the kids putting it together with Frank just along for the ride, but hell, it was a lot better than listening to a football announcer when he couldn't see a damn thing happening on TV. He'd rather listen to Zach and Leo's voices bickering as they argued about what piece went where and who was giving Frank too much help.

David mostly sat it out, but his hand stayed on Frank's leg, and every once in a while he tapped his fingers idly and Frank found himself looking for patterns in it, although there weren't any.

"Yeah!" Zach crowed. "There you go! Here, feel." He curled his sticky little hand over Frank's, and ran Frank's fingers over a wooden shape with a lot of points and edges. If it had gone together into anything useful, Frank couldn't tell.

"Okay, kids," David said, rising from the bed. "We gotta get home for dinner. I brought them here after school," he added for Frank's benefit. "Sarah's working late or else she'd be here too."

There was a chorus of complaints in kid voices, marked in particular by Zach's, "You mean we have to wait for you to *cook something*?"

"Look. Here." There was rustling. "Run and grab something from the vending machines, *one* thing each, got it? Leo, I'm putting you in charge of making sure of that. I'll meet you down

there as soon as I talk to Frank for a minute."

"Got it, Dad," Leo said, and she hugged Frank, smelling like soap and bubble gum. (It hurt, but he managed not to show it; he didn't want her to stop.) "Bye, Frank. Get better soon."

There was a cautious little hug from Zach as well, and then the kids clattered out, trailed by a final order from David to "keep it down, there are sick people here!"

Frank realized he was grinning. He groped around in his lap until he found the puzzle, and he felt for the bedside tray and put it carefully there.

"So," David said, "how is the ..." and there was a brief pause which was probably David gesturing and then some kind of David expression when he remembered Frank couldn't see him, "... everything? When are you getting out?"

"Tomorrow, probably." Frank repeated the same thing he'd told Karen about bandages off in a few days, most everything back eventually, et cetera.

"Most?" David said.

"Better than none."

"Uh ... yeah. I guess so."

"Hey," Frank said, to head off any further potentially awkward questions, "how d'you know how to pick a handcuff lock, anyway?"

David laughed. "After *someone* zip-tied me to a chair, and given the general direction of my life lately, I decided it'd be a good idea to learn a little bit of escape artistry. Courtesy of Youtube, I can now snap zip-ties, pick handcuffs, and open a car trunk from the inside."

"You've still got a few things to learn. Carrying lock picks, for example. Can't pick locks if you've got nothing to pick them with."

"What, not even a word of, 'well done, David, good job getting the cuffs off, David'?"

"Good job getting the cuffs off," Frank said. "Really. Thanks."

"Uh ... well, thanks for getting yourself shot and blinded rescuing me." David cleared his throat. "Really, that's sort of ... above and beyond, you know."

"Why don't you go feed your kids before you embarrass us both."

"Yeah," David said. "Look. Not sure quite how to ask this, but you know, we've got a guest bedroom. It's gonna be easier if you have somebody around when you get out -- right?"

Frank wanted to laugh, he wasn't sure why. "What's Sarah think of that?"

"She was the one who suggested it."

"Look, I appreciate the offer, but --"

"No, listen, Frank." David sat down suddenly on the edge of the bed right by Frank's hip and laid a hand on his chest, like he'd done back when they were prisoners and David was Frank's lifeline to the world. "You saved my life, okay? And yeah, it's not the first time you've done that, you're the whole reason why I can go home to my family every night, but let's just move right past that to how you're going to stay with us while you get better and that's non-negotiable, got it?"

"Does Frank get a say in this, David?" Sarah's light, laughing voice asked from not too far away, and oh hey, that was actually the first time today that someone Frank knew (as opposed to random nurses) had managed to sneak up on him; he'd been too focused on David to notice her come in. From the way David jerked, Frank could tell she'd also managed to sneak up on the guy in the room who had five fully functional senses, but then, David's situational awareness was shit.

"Hi, honey." David rolled the other way, his weight lifting off the bed. "The kids are down at the vending machines."

"I know, I found them. Hi, Frank." Her hand touched his shoulder -- light, cool, somehow very different from Karen's -- and she kissed him briefly at the temple, just above the bandages. "Thank you for bringing my husband back to me."

"Said I would," Frank said gruffly.

"I know. I never doubted you for a minute." She patted his shoulder. "Don't let David talk you into anything. That being said, you are more than welcome to stay in our guest bedroom as long as you like. Not only is it not an imposition, but it would be wonderful to have someone around when the kids get home from school, with David working full-time again."

"Wait a minute, you're volunteering him for babysitting?" David said in clearly audible disbelief.

"I'm just saying, I'm not inviting him to sit around the house without helping out now and then. And I want to reiterate that it is entirely up to him, which someone else around here seems to have left out." There were quiet little rustles that let Frank know she'd softened the words by reaching out to David.

"I don't want to impose," Frank said, although that wasn't quite the problem, not completely. That house with its family photos and children's voices ... he'd been there as a guest, but he wasn't entirely sure if he could stay there. He didn't fit in that world anymore.

"Frank --" David began, sounding exasperated.

"Just think about it," Sarah interrupted. "No need to decide now. We'll pick you up when you're released, and before you say anything about *that*, there's no point in you dealing with cabs when we're right here. It's the least we can do. And then we'll take you where you want to go."

Having the pressure off was a relief; the whole thing felt suddenly easier to deal with, the idea of staying with the Liebermans much less panic-inducing. "That'd be nice," Frank said simply. "Thanks."

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