

doMINION

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/23507011) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/23507011>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	inFAMOUS (Video Games)
Relationship:	Original Female Character/Original Male Character
Character:	Cole MacGrath
Additional Tags:	Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con , Protection , Hiding , Good versus Evil , Chaotic Good
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-04-06 Updated: 2021-02-24 Words: 91,742 Chapters: 22/?

doMINION

by [JennCvice](#)

Summary

Six months into the quarantine of Empire City, Cole MacGrath continues with his reign of terror, choosing to lean into the infamous villain he has become. There are two ways past the blockade. A woman, a lucky lottery winner, is about to escape the hellish climate, when she encounters some Reapers. A conduit steps in to help. He might be the city's last hope. Evil Cole, OCxOC.

The Conduit

Hello, readers!

I loved paying "Infamous" on my PS3, when it came out. I just recently replayed it (for, like, the eighth time). Although I usually follow the "good" storyline (I'm a rule-follower), I am fascinated with the idea of what would've happened if they'd continued the "evil" plot past the ending of the first game. Who becomes the hero, when the hero becomes the villain? In the sequel, it picks up from a more neutral/good standing.

So, here is a weird, romance-in-a-time-of-apocalypse type story that I'm writing mostly for me. If you happen to enjoy it, too, please leave me a quick comment to let me know. Considering it came out over ten years ago, I'm assuming this story will not receive many views. That's okay. I'll just be happy to get this story out of my head!

Also, a trigger warning: I am writing this as I obey my governor's instruction to stay inside during the Coronavirus pandemic. "Infamous" deals with a similar situation. Although their quarantine is not my central theme, it is a necessary plot point. I'll admit, it's cathartic to write about my characters dealing with their own isolation, as I wait for a return to normalcy.

Thank you, stay safe, and happy reading!

Jenn

Cole MacGrath: the infamous supervillain. Seemingly born out of an explosion he may or may not have caused, he was the epitome of the phrase "power corrupts." It started off minor, with him zapping innocent bystanders in a park to ensure that he controlled the food rations distributed by the military.

After the explosion in the Historic District of Empire City, a plague continued the wave of terror, making the rest of the country fearful of its spread. Empire City, all three of its large districts, was quarantined with martial law as the only real peacekeeper. Initially, desperate to escape the crumbling city and their confinement, a rally of protestors had broken through the initial barricades on the Stampton Bridge, the only way off the island metropolis.

Of those who were close enough to watch the disgruntled crowd without wishing to participate, many claimed that a single bolt of light hit one of the armed guards from somewhere inside the protesting group. The panicked militant force opened fire on the entire area, killing many of the unarmed people and fully inciting a riot. Past the initial barricade, no one made it out alive. Men, women... no one was safe.

And, thanks to Cole, no one *was* saved. Except for himself.

The quarantine placed a hold on everything within Empire City. Rent and utility bills went unpaid, with the government claiming a plan was being formulated to pay out of the national

treasury for everything having to do with the disaster. No one was evicted, no utilities were shut off. Everything was stagnant. The military flew in rations, but the scarcity mindset of the city's occupants sent everyone into a frenzy when a plane flew overhead.

Essential workers, altruistic healers and protectors, continued their work unpaid, promised that they would be rewarded once the quarantine was lifted and assets were no longer frozen. Mostly, people did one of two things: walked around the city streets or stayed in their dwellings.

Before the quarantine was officially put into place, within the days following the explosion, all families with children under the ages of eighteen and pregnant women were evacuated and relocated. The origin of the catastrophe was something called a "ray sphere," although that fact wouldn't come to light until months later. What *was* apparent, was that, whatever caused the explosion, also caused a paralyzing virus. Some were immune. The "conduits." People with a special gene that possessed super-human abilities that had somehow been recently unlocked. Some who contracted it showed little or no symptoms. Some died within the hour. It originated from the blast site in the Historic District, where survivors pulled themselves away from the destruction only to pass out and die as they fled.

The virus started out as a cough, rough and dry. For those who succumbed, it ended with wheezing, hacking up blood, and vomiting. It decimated the population, but it was not strong enough to take everyone that it afflicted. It did, however, linger in the air, permeating Empire City and creating a problem for evacuating residents without having them bring it outside the confines of the barricade.

Once the virus was known, the quarantine was immediately put into place. The only way in and out of the city was the Stampton Bridge in the Neon District. It had garrets in place to warn away any unauthorized personnel. The waters surrounding the islands were also controlled by a naval blockade. Those who risked escape by sea were shown no mercy.

Specialists, vaccine scientists and researchers, rushed to create a viable vaccination for what was temporarily known as the Empire City Virus, or ECVi, spoken "Ee-Cee-Vie." Medical professionals in the city were too busy with continuous triaging of patients to focus their efforts on a cure.

All three districts quickly became war-zones. A gang known as the Reapers, once a small crime element, took over the Neon District and its black market. The Dust Men formed in the Warren, the poorest district of Empire City with a mostly transient population. A mysterious man named Kessler mobilized his secretive group, the First Sons, to protect their territory from anyone outside of the Historic District. Their turf wars and destructive missions sent wave after wave of casualties, innocent and guilty alike, into the emergency rooms and makeshift trauma centers that struggled to keep up.

After the erection of the quarantine, there were two lawful methods for leaving Empire City: pregnancy or lottery. Every week, a random selection of citizens was announced over the news network USTV. There was room for only one hundred and twenty people in the monitored facilities past the quarantine. One hundred and twenty names were listed on a Monday, with the understanding that those lucky people needed to be present on the Stampton Bridge at three in the afternoon that Friday. If you weren't there on time, you

forfeited your spot for at least six weeks. If you were there, but a woman arrived with a positive pregnancy test, she was automatically given one of the rooms to wait out the duration of the virus' incubation period. If everyone selected was present, there was a choice to make: volunteer to stay behind and lose your spot for a month but be guaranteed exit a month later, or refuse and hope to still be taken through the barricade. If there were no volunteers, the authorities "randomly" chose who would stay behind. It was as if you hadn't shown up at all, forfeiting your spot and flung back into the lottery with at least a six-week wait...if not longer.

Predictably, there was a huge influx of pregnancies in the first six months. Most of the initial lottery winners were turned away at the bridge because of those desperate women who showed up with proof from their doctors and a readiness to take another pregnancy test to confirm their condition. The outrage this sparked was met with a campaign to "Unite Under Pressure," the idea that Empire City was only in a temporary crisis. Help was coming. A cure for the virus. Economic restoration. From the ashes, there would be rebirth. Don't run, rebuild.

The amounts of pregnancies declined, then, with women wishing to stay with whomever or whatever they held dear.

It was within this campaign of hope that Cole rose through the ranks. His powers scared everyone. Shooting blasts of electricity out of his hands...leaping from the tallest buildings and sending a static-filled shockwave out from his landing...draining anything electrical of all of its energy. He could scale buildings, catapulting himself from ledges and sills, run across wires, and ride trains.

He had the makings of a hero...except for a soul.

Fearful of his power, and finding out that he was at the epicenter of the blast, he was initially called a terrorist. Instead of trying to prove the citizens of Empire City wrong, he had leaned into the role. His actions went from selfish to cruel. Once, he used to ignore those who cried out for help. Now, he usually took advantage of the injured or sick and sucked out their remaining energy to recharge his own.

It was terrifying.

He fought with everyone: the Reapers, the Dust Men, the First Sons, Kessler, and the police. No one was safe. If you dared to so much as yell or throw a rock at him, he would kill without a thought.

At the end of it, most of the factions, lawful and criminal alike, were reduced to skeletons of their original sizes. The few police officers left were all undercover, now. The police stations were boarded up, with officers now doing more vigilante work than anything else. The Dust Men were mostly eradicated. The First Sons were completely eliminated. Not one of Kessler's followers survived the final battle with Cole.

The Reapers were an interesting story. Their leader, Sasha, was insane. She used a mind-controlling agent to direct her horde of outlaws. Some were original gang members. Some were recruited, feeble of mind, and easily drawn into working for a group that they believed

would provide them with protection. Others were kidnapped and forced into ingesting the same tar-like formula that Sasha had also consumed, driving them mad. A group of rabid, unhinged followers.

After Cole had removed Sasha from the situation, the Reapers mostly disbanded for a while. Those forced to join were released, treated and detoxed in the hospitals, then returned to their lives... forever haunted by what they had done in the name of the Reapers.

A man named Zeke took over, determined to pay for sins that only he knew. His number one goal: kill or immobilize the terrorist Cole MacGrath.

Under this mantle, recruitment for the Reapers skyrocketed. Some were still self-serving miscreants, but many just wanted to take back their beleaguered city. Zeke coordinated all of their efforts, hiding in different safe houses, always on the run. Those in his inner circle knew that Cole had it out for him. And they knew why.

Surprisingly, Cole seemed to find the newly-rebranded Reapers only slightly annoying. He killed them off like flies in a flooded house: not the main concern, but something to deal with, when convenient. As for Zeke, he had opportunities to kill him. Threats were made, by both parties, but neither followed through.

It was a Friday, months into the quarantine, when a single Reaper conduit made his way across the rooftops of the Neon District. He was scouting, his white, hooded, trench coat flapping behind him. Cole hadn't been sighted in weeks, leading to the hope that he was currently granting their district a break and causing havoc for the Dust Men.

Reaper conduits were granted more freedoms and authority over the rest of their comrades. They all wore the same uniform, to be instantly recognizable to other Reapers and their main adversary: the bio-terrorist, Cole. The white trench coat had black ribs painted on its sides, which, paired with the skull balaclava masks they wore, created an intimidating appearance.

The rest of his uniform was black: gloves, pants, and steel-toed boots. In Sasha's day, the Reaper conduits were, like their powerless brethren, unable to focus on anything but the will of their maker. Most conduits, then, neglected to wear shoes of any kind, ultimately bandaging up their abused feet to their knees. The mummified look was the most disturbing aspect of their macabre vestments.

Although he could override the decisions and orders of any Reaper wearing the typical red hoodies, due to his solitary nature, he preferred not to work alongside any of them.

The blast had activated his conduit gene, but it manifested powers very different from Cole's.

He could bend, manipulate, and weaponize light. Refracting light around him, he could camouflage himself within his surroundings, reappearing when he desired, which made it seem like he had teleported from one spot to another. He could store up light, using it all in a flash or beam to blind and disorient those around him. And, when absolutely necessary, he could produce a directed shockwave that could either incapacitate or kill anything in its path, depending on the strength of his opponent.

Like all Reapers, he was also armed. Conduits, already possessing super-human abilities, were only given a single assault rifle, but with plenty of ammunition. The weapon was slung behind his back, ready for use against Cole, who showed invulnerability to anything weaker. He couldn't remember the last time he had fired it, but it was primed and ready for action. Either be vigilant, or be ready to welcome death.

He leaped easily from rooftop to rooftop, the closely-packed downtown Neon District packed with tall buildings. Occasionally he saw one of his comrades, lower men on the totem pole, stationed on the roofs. They used to have men on every roof of the district, but their numbers had been stretched too thin to waste so many men on surveillance.

Below, hidden in alcoves and alleyways, were groups of three to five reapers with varying levels of expertise and firepower. The weather had progressed from spring to summer, and now they were in the midst of fall. It was breezy, chilly, but not cold enough to huddle around dumpster fires. In their hoodies and long pants, most were perfectly warm. Better than a few months ago.

The lone conduit made his way toward the Stampton bridge, wondering if he would find Cole causing more trouble. The terrorist showed no desire to leave Empire City, his little kingdom, but he often disrupted the evacuation proceedings to prove his point: the only true authority figure of Empire City was Cole MacGrath. Cole's taste for blood wasn't as excessive as it could be, but his bullying nature was not to be disregarded.

The figure clad in white stopped on an empty roof, atop one of the tallest buildings in the bustling area. He stopped and surveyed his surroundings. First, the skyline. Cole's favorite way to make an entrance: from above. But there was no sign of the yellow and black signature jacket against the dreary colors at the top of the city. Next, below. Cole was so overpowered, he recklessly dove into opportunities to fight. It took more than a few gun-toting henchmen to make him turn tail and run. That was why the Reapers had developed a more sophisticated ear-coms system than the walkie-talkies that were previously used. Reinforcements were mobilized as soon as there was a Cole sighting. If they could get ten or so men to Cole's location, or fewer men and a conduit, there was a stronger chance that the Reapers would win that battle.

A random woman caught his eye. She was attractive, from what he could tell. Long hair, mostly down her back, that was a medium brown at her roots gradually lightening to caramel-colored highlights toward the tips of her hair. Hairstylists and barbers were not employed, at the moment, so most hairstyles were either left to grow out or were amateurly attempted at home. He couldn't see her face, but she had a fair complexion. Slightly tanned, in the warm sunlight. She wore an olive-green jacket over a plain white t-shirt, with dark, fitted jeans tucked into beige, flat boots. She was thin, not sickly, but it seemed most everyone had lost weight due to the rationing. Over the outfit was a crossbody purse, and she walked with a purpose toward the bridge.

Either she was picked, or she's pregnant, he mused. Most women presenting themselves to the front of the line because of pregnancy tried to be more obvious about it, though few of them showed physical signs of the life growing in them.

Probably picked in the lottery, he assumed. She was dressed smartly, with the single, small bag persons leaving were allowed to have, and clearly looking her best. He could tell that she was working the other angle: "I'm not pregnant, but I'm pretty, and I want off this island. Please don't condemn me to another six weeks in this hell-scape!"

As he watched her, there was a sudden loud commotion from east of his location. He looked over to see people on the street screaming and running from something still unseen. The panic worked its way down the sidewalk like a wave, with people shouting about the coming danger to those in front of them.

"It's Cole! IT'S COLE! RUN!!!"

He stood and stole one more glance to the brunette woman. As she realized what was going on behind her, her flight or fight reflex spurred her to hide from the impending danger. She ducked down the next alleyway, and the conduit gritted his teeth in dismay.

Bad move, he chastised her in his mind, *you should have kept running toward the bridge*.

He was supposed to run toward the danger, toward Cole. Reinforcements were being called to a location not far from him, but he turned off the communicator in his ear and ran, instead, toward where the young woman had disappeared. He shielded himself from onlookers, preferring not to announce his position. When he was in the alley, he listened for any sign of life.

"LET ME GO!" a female voice screamed at the end of the corridor.

A few of his fellow Reapers had also ignored the call to arms. Three of them, tucked away from the street, surrounded the defenseless girl. They taunted her, pulling at her clothing and purse, forcing her back into a corner.

I shouldn't have to do this, he narrowed his eyes. *I should be fighting Cole to save the Neon, save Empire City...not ignore the bigger threat for these three assholes*. He knew what would happen to her, which meant he only had one choice, really. He made himself visible and started to run toward the end of the alley, about to call out to the wretches, when he stopped abruptly.

He felt it. He'd felt it before, and he knew what was coming. The tingling in the air, the tiny hairs on his body sticking straight up... He cloaked himself, again, and braced for the impact. At the end of the alley, the three men and one woman looked up when they felt and heard the air crackling around them. One of the jerks had his hands on the lapels of her jacket and had pulled it off of her shoulders.

Cole landed before any of them could exclaim. The shockwave hurled their bodies into the brick walls around them, and they crumpled into heaps on the ground. Where the conduit stood, hidden, he was knocked off of his feet, but not seriously hurt. He recovered quickly and stepped cautiously toward Cole, not wanting to arouse the terrorist's attention.

Cole took his time, sauntering toward each Reaper with a smug satisfaction. They were too weakened to stand, but they flailed wildly when he restrained each of them and drained them

of their life forces. Cole's hand over their mouths only slightly muffled their agonized screaming.

When the madman got to the woman, he did a double-take and crouched down next to her. She, too, was too weak to move, and she looked close to the brink of passing out. Her body was flat on the ground, face up, with her legs sprawled. Her hair covered most of her face. Cole reached with one hand and moved her long tresses to the side, so that her entire face was exposed. He studied her, while she looked up at him.

From where the conduit stood, he couldn't tell if she was terrified or delusional, but he could hear her let out a pained moan and try to move away.

Cole responded with a sinister smile. He placed both hands on her chest and sent light electric shocks through her body. The woman's eyes flew open, and she sat straight up, stared at the man in front of her, then fainted from the trauma of it all.

Cole grabbed at the purse, still amused. He pulled out a wallet and then the driver's license. For a moment, he read the identification, then pocketed the card and returned the wallet to the purse. He stood over her and paused, before murmuring something quietly. Then he climbed the building, grabbing onto the frames of the windows and hauling himself up with an assured grace.

When he was out of sight, the conduit breathed a sigh of relief and uncamouflaged himself. He made his way over to the woman, trying to avoid seeing the bodies of the Reapers. They were scum, but he wasn't sure they deserved the torture they endured. She was still passed out, looking almost serene.

This was his first view of her face. She was remarkably pretty. High cheekbones, a defined chin. Her face showed no wrinkles, so he guessed that she was in her twenties. Her lips were a neutral shade and quite glossy. She had some makeup on, from what he could tell. Her skin was too artificially smooth. Blush, a small amount, just enough to give her a pleasant glow. No color on her eyelids, save for some black liner and mascara. Her brows looked sculpted, but not filled in.

There was something else about her...something familiar.

He contemplated what to do. He, too, felt backed into a wall.

Not many options, here.

He gathered her in his arms, and her jacket righted itself on her shoulders as he did so. He cradled her and focused on refracting the light around them both. It wouldn't be easy, but he could make it to his apartment.

At least he could save one person today.

The Lottery Winner

Hello, readers!

In case you were wondering, I am picturing a young Olivia Wilde in my mind, when writing about my female protagonist. I kind of see a darker, more serious version of Ryan Guzman as "the Conduit." It's strange, writing original characters who are the main characters of the story. I felt like I needed to cast actors into the roles, before I could effectively write.

I have completed my fanfic, "Her Heart's Desire," a POTO/LND story, and I am using "doMINION" to give myself a little break from "Delivered Unto Evil" (a BtVS fanfic, which still has a long way to go). Because very few people will pay attention to this story, I will be posting whenever I feel like it. Honestly, this is more of a form a therapy, during this long period of social/physical distancing.

Stay safe, stay healthy, and happy reading!

Jenn

She stood in front of the mirror, using the last of her foundation to color her skin evenly. Six months. It was simultaneously unbelievable and completely evident that half a year had passed with Empire City in a full lockdown. Almost the entire duration of the quarantine, she'd been on her own. She had little use for makeup.

The blush lightly dusted her cheeks, as she strove to look healthier, more glowing...than she felt. A little on her nose, a little at the top of her forehead. Let others think her rosy complexion reflected a bubbly persona. A happy-go-lucky young woman.

She *was* lucky. That much was true. With only one hundred twenty citizens of the three-district city pulled from a hat, or however the lottery was run, on a weekly basis, she was amazed her day had actually come.

A quick glance to the clock on the wall showed that she had two hours to get to Stampton Bridge. She thanked higher powers that she was in the Neon District. It would've been nice to have a car, though. Or a connection to someone who had a vehicle.

The last time she had tried to hail a cab, she had barely escaped being assaulted by the driver.

Still, walking to the bridge would be a long walk. *Better than those poor bastards in the Warren or in the Historic District*, she reminded herself. That was why the announcement was made on Monday, she supposed. It gave the lottery winners the rest of the week to figure out a strategy to make it to the checkpoint.

And then, freedom from the quarantine. Eventually. She heard from the "Voice of the Survival," an anonymous television personality who hijacked local stations to give withheld

information to the masses, that once you were behind the barricades, lottery winners were sequestered to individual rooms in a makeshift hospital for a week; that was how long it took for the virus, ECVi, to work its way through your system. After that, you were free to go wherever you wanted.

A week in a single room sounded like heaven, compared to what she had experienced in Empire City. It wasn't even her hometown. She wondered, as she applied the liner and mascara to each eye, if there would be any pregnant women seeking expedited evacuation at the cattle call on the bridge.

Probably, she assumed. It was a good strategy. When the city adopted the "Unite Under Pressure" mantra, she had felt only one thing: relief that less women would be arriving in droves to take over lottery spots. As the weeks and months passed, and she wasn't chosen, pregnancy didn't seem like the worst idea. But, despite the temptation of escape from the hellscape, the prospect of sleeping repeatedly with a stranger was not worth the trauma. She doubted she would be a one-and-done success story.

Most of her days were spent indoors, not daring to go outside. There was too much evil permeating the city. In the Neon District, the Reapers caused chaos. The current wave of thugs seemed to have a newly noble calling: kill the bio-terrorist, Cole MacGrath.

She shivered, as a fearful chill rose up in her at the thought of the first "conduit" to arise.

Neutral lipstick and a shiny gloss were the finishing touch. Her long, brunette hair was blown out into voluminous waves. She frowned at the last of the caramel-colored highlights that were now only on the bottom half of her tresses.

First thing I'm going to do on the outside: change my look. Reinvent myself. Start over!

She thought about curling her hair, giving it a more polished touch.

No, she inwardly argued, staring at her reflection. *Don't try too hard. Don't be too obvious. I'm the girl next door. Approachable... innocent... memorable when you see me, but forgotten when you look away.*

She removed the robe and discarded it on the bathroom floor. In the single bedroom of her apartment, she dressed in equally nondescript clothing: a plain white t-shirt, dark, slim-cut jeans, her tan boots, and a utilitarian green jacket. Everything was fitted, but not in an especially showy way.

Attractive enough for you to notice me positively, but not give me any hassle.

She hated thinking of everything so cynically, but she had been conditioned to do so all her life.

One final sweep around the apartment she'd called home for seven months. Her building was one of the newest and nicest in the district. The rooms were all still pristine. White walls, hardwood floors, granite counters, all-new appliances. Everything that she had ever wanted.

She took that first month off from finding a job, having just arrived at Empire City, and took her time picking out the décor to make the empty space a home.

And, in a month, everything had changed. The explosion. The virus. The quarantine. She hadn't left fast enough, and, as a result of her hesitation, her home had become her prison. The knick-knacks and artwork, once painstakingly debated over, were useless. Worthless.

All that mattered was getting out.

She grabbed her messenger purse from the kitchen table and checked its contents. Wallet – including ID, her phone and charger, a small cosmetics bag that held first aid materials, and a plastic sandwich bag that held her favorite pieces of jewelry. She thought about the picture in the frame on her nightstand. Should she bring that, too?

One more glance at the clock. An hour and a half to go. *I need to leave.* She wanted to arrive with plenty of time to spare.

She left without a second thought. No picture, no keys, no reason to lock up behind her.

Starting over means leaving the past behind, she told herself. *I'm out of here!*

There were no neighbors in the hallway to greet her as she strode by. No one on the elevator, either. She passed the mailboxes in the lobby, empty for months, and pushed through the door to the street.

Many people were milling about. A few looked like they actually had somewhere to be. She was one of them. But none of them headed for the bridge. A tiny, niggling feeling of guilt surfaced in her heart, but it was quickly squelched.

I don't belong here. I never did.

She grew up in the care of a distant relative. An "aunt," or whatever, of her birth mother. She was unwanted from the start, she assumed. Her earliest memories were of her Aunt Cindy stating as much. "Aunt Cindy" found taking care of a toddler too tiresome, and then came the foster homes.

She bounced around in the system until she aged out. Some families were nicer than others. None felt like home.

She became used to being what people wanted, what others were looking for. She adopted the different personas like camouflage, but the façade never lasted long enough to get her what she wanted. Not until she met him.

The sun was shining, but there was a chill in the air. Thank you, autumn. Her boots comfortably traversed the sidewalks. Every so often, a car would pass. She wondered where they were headed. If not to the bridge, then where? And why bother?

The streets weren't exactly packed, but there was always more foot traffic on Fridays. Evacuation days. Until now, it was the day of the week that always found her inside, hidden away. Probably, if she admitted to it, due to her own resentment of the lottery winners before

her that were given permission to pass the blockade on Stampton Bridge without being shot up with more holes than swiss cheese.

She thought about what had brought her here, to Empire City, as she walked toward her liberation. The circumstances had hardened her, and she wondered if she would ever truly be able to move past her experiences in the quarantine. How long would it take, this time, for her to open up her heart? To soften into the loving person he had patiently waited for her to be?

Block after block, traffic signal after traffic signal, she trudged her path.

I'll be there in thirty minutes, she calculated. I've walked this route before. Thirty minutes. Then, I wait on the outskirts of the crowd. Don't make it obvious how desperate I am to leave. Stay back for another thirty minutes, watch for others to arrive, then come to the forefront fifteen minutes before they start calling names. Early, but not obnoxious. Present at the right time, waiting patiently for roll call. Having my ID ready to show. Easy-going. If some girls show up, they won't take my spot. I won't volunteer to stay behind. Not another month of this. I won't be expected to volunteer, anyway. It should be someone older, someone who is grittier. Sweet, docile, obedient... they will choose someone difficult, someone whom they resent, either consciously or subconsciously. Not me, though. I'm the ideal candidate. It's my time.

The bridge was visible, over the tops of the city buildings. Less than a mile to go.

She heard the screams from far behind her, used to being hyper-aware of her surroundings. But she kept walking. *NO*, she screamed in her mind to the commotion behind her. *Not today. NOT TODAY.*

The shouts were being flung closer to her direction, like a terrifying domino effect. Now she could see people running, passing her, away from the alleged danger. Not necessarily toward the bridge, but just...away. From right behind her, she heard a shout.

"It's Cole! IT'S COLE! RUN!"

The proximity, paired with the panic, made her realize that she had to do something. As she saw the throngs of people pass she recalled something the Voice of Survival had said in one of his telecasts: the only thing, other than Reapers and police, that will definitely bring Cole to your location is a big crowd.

The sidewalks were overrun, and many started to run down the middle of the road, unconcerned about being run over. It was mayhem. As if Godzilla was on a rampage. She made a quick decision, while stopped and being jostled by careless pedestrians. She ducked into an alleyway and prepared to wait out the chaos.

Cole never stayed anywhere for long, that much she knew. His presence didn't necessarily throw a wrench in her plans, but she would probably be walking straight up to the authorities, now. She was grateful she had allotted extra time, in the first place.

She couldn't hear anything, outside of the increasingly hysterical screams coming from behind her. Although she hadn't taken this particular route before, she wondered if it would

empty out onto a familiar avenue. Maybe she could make up some lost time.

Her determination to reach her destination, a lack of familiarity with her surroundings, and the cacophony of people fleeing a monster were the cocktail that led to her detriment.

In the shadows, figures emerged, before her eyes could adjust to the lack of sunlight streaming down through spaces between the brick buildings. She heard their footsteps fall in line behind hers, but she didn't stop.

"Where are you going?" a male voice called out to her.

She ran.

There was a fork in the road, a spot where the alley ended at another building, and it continued to either the left or the right. As she slowed to avoid running into the wall, adjusting her trajectory to take the path that led to the right and in the direction of the bridge, she felt a hand grab her hair and latch on.

She screamed with pain, but she knew it would hardly make it out of the alleyway, let alone be distinctive amongst the screams in the main streets.

Having stopped her from fleeing, the hand let go. Before she could continue running, her assailants blocked her exits.

Reapers, she thought, as she paled.

One was only a little taller than herself, spindly and shuffling his weight back and forth on his feet. He blocked the way she came. On her right was a larger man, standing straight and trusting that his hulking body was enough to intimidate her. That was the direction she had been running to. On her right, the smallest of the three patted the assault weapon slung on his side and began to box her further in.

All three wore the tell-tale Reaper uniforms: the red hoodies, some painted with white skulls on the hood, black balaclava masks, black pants, and whatever shoes they happened to own. All were armed to the teeth.

She cursed her luck. This was going to be bad. Very bad. And she couldn't fathom a way she would walk away unscathed. In her mind, she went through the various scenarios, trying to minimize the damage she would receive.

When her back was against the wall, they took turns taunting and grabbing at her. One went to grab her purse, while another grabbed the lapels of her coat and pulled it off her shoulders.

"LET ME GO!"

At that moment, as they surrounded her, she looked past them, back to where she had originally run from. A person was there. At the end of the alley. A tall figure clad in a long white coat. But, in the next instant, there was no one there. She wondered if her mind was already creating delusions to cope with the overwhelming fear she felt.

And then she felt something...strange. The air crackled, with tiny explosions. Like static electricity, but growing in intensity. Her limbs froze, and she felt the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck stand on end. She looked up and the men surrounding her looked up, too.

A man was falling. From out of nowhere. He was crouched, as if he had jumped on purpose. The only thing that she could make out, from her viewpoint, was that, within the red bolts of lightning were black and yellow vestments. *Cole*.

Far from feeling saved from the Reapers, she didn't have the time to scream. The terrorist landed, but all she could see was a flash of light, before a wave hit her and pushed her further up against the wall. It felt like she had been flattened with an anvil. Something humorous, like a Bugs Bunny cartoon.

But she couldn't bounce back like Wild E. Coyote. She felt her body sway and collapse upon itself. Her legs flailed out in front of her, and she was suddenly on her back. The pain in her torso was suffocating, but her limbs were completely numb. Her hair fell over half her face, and she could only barely see Cole walking to a body in the alley.

The evil man grabbed one of the Reaper's faces and a muffled cry was heard, along with a sickening, slurping, crackling noise. The restrained hoodlum flailed wildly, perhaps compulsory, as visible lines extended from the victim's body to Cole, and Cole's chest puffed out with renewed energy. When he let go of the man's face, there was no movement.

He did the same to the others, although she couldn't see it happen. But she definitely heard the distinctive sounds. Both remaining Reapers sounded as if they were having their insides scooped out with a medieval torture device.

There was silence, and she found herself relieved. This was another way to escape. Death. It was coming. Either from Cole murdering her or him neglecting her. Either way, she wouldn't make it out of this alley alive. It wasn't what she wanted, but at least she would be freed from the quarantine. From life.

And then he was standing over her. He bent down. First, he moved the hair on her face out of the way, tenderly, like a lover would do. He looked at her as if she was someone he knew. Maybe from a previous life. He was staring too intently, obviously looking for differences.

The encounter scared her more than the Reapers cornering her in the alley. His stare was too penetrating. Too sinister. She felt her weakened heart drop, knowing for the first time, on a personal level, why it was dangerous to intercept Cole MacGrath. With the remaining strength she had, she tried to scoot herself away from him, but the motion flooded her with new pain.

She cried out...and he smirked. Then he grabbed her chest. Not in a sexual manner, but with the tips of his fingers digging into her white shirt. She felt light electrical pulses flow through every part of her body.

When he released her, she had a headache, but no other pain. Her eyes opened widely, and she sat up reflexively. The Bride of Frankenstein, her mind randomly asserted. Then, she saw

Cole, and her body buckled under the continuous fear coursing through her veins. Physically, mentally, emotionally, psychologically, she was too broken to stay conscious.

Her last thought, before blacking out, was a childish one: that a hero would come to her rescue.

No...such...thing...

Eventually, her eyes flitted open. The headache was the first thing she felt, and it caused her to close her eyes and place a hand on her forehead. She sat up slowly, her other arm helping her arch forward with the support of her elbow, then her hand bent at the wrist. She was surrounded by warmth and softness. She had awoken from a dream. A terrible nightmare. She was in her bed, and it was the day of the lottery.

When she opened her eyes, the first thing she saw was a skeletal face staring back at her.

She opened her mouth to scream, but the figure was instantly at her side, covering her mouth and shushing her.

"You can't scream, here. It's not safe," the deep voice spoke at a reasonable volume, while slightly muffled. "If someone hears you, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop what follows."

Another Reaper!

This one was wearing a white trench coat, with black on every other part of his body. Including the terrifying skull mask. The only human aspect of his face was his eyes, a light brown within the black eyeholes of the mask. The skin around his orbs was tanned. Or just darker than her own.

Under the black glove that was firmly against her mouth, she slowly closed her lips to swallow. Her mouth was dry.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I'm leaving my mask on so that you can't identify me to police or anyone else. I only brought you here because I didn't know where else to take you. Do you understand? You can leave. But you *cannot* scream."

She nodded slowly, still showing her terror in her eyes. He pulled the glove from her face and remained seated at her side. Clearly, he didn't trust her. Not that he had a reason to.

"What time is it?" Her voice cracked oddly. She sounded ill. Unrested.

The man next to her hesitated. "It's...Saturday. Morning."

She began to wail, and he placed a hand over her mouth again. He forced her back onto the pillow. He held her there firmly, but not roughly. She cried into his hand, given no other choice.

Six more weeks! No, she despaired. At least six weeks. More likely, I'm trapped here until they remove the quarantine!

Her cries turned into coughs, and the action caused her throat to burn. He released his hand and she took heaving breaths of air, starting to hyperventilate. He pulled her back to a sitting position, then lightly patted her back.

"Calm down," he ordered. "Focus your breathing."

She tried to do so, but she desperately rasped out "water."

He nodded. "You're probably dehydrated. I can't let you jeopardize your safety, trying to run before we have an agreement. Can you stand? Can you walk with me?"

His words confused her thoroughly, so she concentrated on the questions. She nodded back, still coughing hoarsely. He helped her out of the bed, and she faintly registered that she was wearing all of her clothes, save for her shoes. Her boots were by the door, placed neatly and with purpose. She passed them on the way to the faucet in the kitchen.

He led her to the sink, and she took handfuls of water into her mouth, before he handed her a cup from the nearby cupboard. She filled it to the brink and drained half of it. She held the plastic cup in her hand and breathed deeply, finally feeling her heart begin to rest its rapid rhythm. Then, he led her to his kitchen table and pulled a chair for her to be seated. He sat next to her, his chair pulled further away from the confines of the table, so that he could quickly stand.

"I've always wondered what would happen if Cole tried to heal someone," he pondered aloud. "I'm not sure he's ever attempted it, although he did seem to know what he was doing." She drank and set the cup on the table with both hands. "It makes sense that you would be dehydrated. He sent waves of electricity through you. Enough to repair without doing more harm, but immediately evaporating a substantial amount of the water in your system."

She finished the water and looked down at the empty cup. She didn't say anything.

"You can have more, but it's best you wait. If you drink too much too quickly, you may end up vomiting."

She looked up, then. "What do you want from me?" She didn't attempt to hide the suspicion in her voice.

He rolled his eyes and sat back in his chair. "I don't *want* anything from you."

"You're a Reaper."

"I'm also a conduit," he cheekily added. Her eyes widened with the new information, but before she could speak, he continued. "Most of us are banding together to fight Cole. Save Empire City. And there are those who...take advantage of their power."

"You don't?"

"I try not to," he shrugged. "I was coming to pull those three assholes away from you, but I had to hide, when Cole came charging in."

"I think I saw you, at the end of the alley," she admitted.

"Probably."

"What happened, after I passed out?"

"I brought you here, and you slept for about..." he looked to the clock on the microwave behind her, "nineteen hours."

She leaned forward and placed her elbows on either side of the empty cup, letting her hands cradle her pounding head.

"Ughh," she groaned into the space between them. "I need to go home."

"That's not possible."

Him

The conduit expended most of his energy, getting the girl back to his apartment. Camouflaging the body he held, along with his own, was more exhausting than he anticipated. Towards the end of the journey, the shielding around them wavered, with passers-by giving a multitude of reactions to the shimmering effect that appeared to glint in the air.

He was surprised enough, when he watched Cole heal the young woman. It was wholly unexpected. On the walk back to his place, he realized why she looked familiar.

Trish, wasn't it? The name of Cole's girlfriend. A nurse. *Trish...Dailey?*

When Zeke had rallied the Reapers, old and new, he had explained more about the terrorist's past. He showed them a picture, projected on the screen in their meeting room, larger-than-life, of a woman named Trish Dailey. She was Cole's girlfriend, before the blast, and then a shaky ally, after losing her younger sister, Amy, one of the first people to die from the virus.

Although she feared the powers her former boyfriend wielded, Trish occasionally called upon Cole for help, for the greater good. Each time he helped her, he had the chance to redeem himself, but he never rose above his selfishness. He chose the easiest, most destructive means of getting the job done. Forcing civilians to close valves to pipes that contained water contaminated with Sasha's mind-control agent, so that they were adversely affected by the backpressure of tar that splashed on them...instead of Cole. Electrocuting the tar kegs attached to various water towers, to overhaul the mechanism and flood the poison into the system, instead of using a blast wave to explode the mechanism and face the consequences of being covered by the substance. Using his powers around civilians without considering their safety, or trying to minimize the damage caused.

And it came to a head, when Kessler kidnapped Trish and gave Cole a choice: save her or save six doctors. The bodies were hung off steel beams, restrained with their arms behind their backs and dangling twenty stories above ground, attached to the top of two different buildings set too far apart for Cole to save all seven. Bombs counted down on both buildings, strategically placed to destroy the scaffolding and send the hostages to a plummeting death. Cole had immediately raced toward the building that held only one hostage, the face covered with a similar brown sack as the rest of the terrified people in Kessler's game. But, arriving in time to save her, a cruel twist was revealed: it was another woman. A doctor. Cole yelled in fury and desperation, as the bomb detonated and sent six people on the adjacent building plunging down, including Trish, who screamed his name in complete terror. When he was by her side, he attempted to lessen her injuries, but she died...after cursing the man he had become and letting him know how ashamed she was of his selfish nature.

Cole was bad before. After Trish's death...he was evil. Sadistic.

The woman in this conduit's arms had similar features to the deceased nurse. Approximately the same age. Fair-toned, cat-like eyes, thin brows, medium brown hair. Her build was similar

to what Zeke described, too. About five and a half feet tall, slim. He was sure that he wasn't the only one in the meeting that grasped the fact that Zeke knew the dead woman better than he was willing to admit.

He imagined being Cole, so filled with rage, regret, and agony over the loss of a loved one who died without loving him back. The barbarian took the woman's identification. Cole had her name, her address...and he stole it. The conduit didn't know what Cole had whispered to the woman, as she lay unconscious in the alley, but he had a vague idea of what it might be.

Arriving at last, he closed his door behind him and took her to his bed to let her sleep off her exhaustion. He pulled back the covers and lay her down, removing her boots and purse and then covering her up. She showed no sign of stirring, so he took his time placing her bag out of sight and her shoes by the door, then walked to the window in his living room that still had sunlight streaming through.

Unlike Cole, who could recharge his powers through any electrical channel, including human, he could only absorb his energy through exposure to light. Sunlight was best, and, even through window panes, he began to revitalize. If sunlight wasn't available, he could also absorb artificial forms of light, with varying degrees of success.

He meditated, standing at the window, contemplating how best to handle what life had thrown his way. He didn't want to frighten her, but he knew that would be inevitable. He had to protect himself, as well as her. She couldn't see the man behind the mask. And, being a part of the faction that she had just been cornered by, she wouldn't be able to distinguish his intentions from those of the lewd thugs who accosted her.

He checked on her, intermittently. Her vitals seemed stable, enough, each time he counted her pulse and watched her breathing. He didn't sleep, worried that her condition might worsen. He knew she would be better off at a hospital, but it provided too many variables he couldn't control. He was, after all, still considered to be a criminal element. A Reaper. A gang member. He didn't want to fight his way out from capture around innocents. And, once she was discharged, she would inevitably go straight to her home. And Cole knew her address.

Morning came, and he used the sunlight streaming through the bedroom to give him enough power to override his lack of sleep. He sat back in the single chair, pulled closer to the bottom edge of the bed, and resumed his watch.

After hours of daylight, the woman finally started to stir. She held her head in obvious pain, and he presumed the headache was brought on by dehydration. *Tiny pulses of electrical current flowing through her body. That would definitely evaporate a lot of water quickly.*

When she opened her eyes, she went to scream, but he was easily able to stop her from doing so. He used a calm but firm voice, stating firstly his reason for silencing her.

This building is full of people. Some of them could be Reapers. Some of them probably were. After all, he was one.

Although there were some Reapers who shared their identities with friends and team members, most used aliases to conceal their true selves. Zeke had reinforced this concept,

letting them know that it was too late for him to conceal his name, but that they, and all new recruits, needed to be protective of their lives in and out of uniform. Code names were used on missions, and aliases served as a way to grow closer with like-minded members without compromising their privacy.

He led her to his kitchen to get water. She was weakened, but in overall good health. Her movements were slow, but she didn't limp or complain of pain anywhere on her body.

He sat across from her at the kitchen table, a small, but functional set he had purchased years ago, before Empire City had collapsed in on itself. She had rather stunning eyes, an almost translucent shade of grayish-blue, with a touch of light green surrounding the pupil. He made small talk, as she drank the rest of her water, musing aloud about his theories for Cole's newest ability to heal. When she finally spoke, she asked him what he wanted from her. The question insulted him, for some reason, even though he had expected it.

He did his best to separate himself from the Reapers who had just scared her, and then she asked him what had happened while she was blacked out. Not sure if sharing everything Cole did was the right move, he edited that part of the story out and briefly explained how she had ended up in his home.

When she stated that she needed to return to her home, he knew that he needed to tell her more.

"That's not possible," he asserted.

She looked at him, again, with narrowed eyes. The effect was like looking upon an irritated tiger. "You said that I could *leave*."

"Cole took your identification. I couldn't see it, exactly, from as far back as I was, but I think it was a driver's license?"

She frowned and whispered. "I just got it in the mail, before the postal service was stopped."

"Then he knows where you live. You can't go back there."

She looked at him skeptically. "How do I know you didn't take it?"

He narrowed his eyes back at her, tired of her presumptions, justified though they were.

"Because I already *have you* here. If I was the type of person you're accusing me to be, why would I need to know where you live, too? Why would I bother stealing your ID, when I can write down the information and replace it without you knowing?"

She bit her lip and didn't answer the mostly rhetorical questions. "Then, if I can leave, where do I go?"

He leaned toward her, placing an elbow on the table and resting his chin on his fisted hand. She pulled away from the table completely.

"A relative's home? A friend? Maybe a coworker? It can't be a neighbor, though. I doubt Cole is prepared to scour the Neon, but I'm pretty sure he'll be upset if you aren't in your home and

will look everywhere in your building. Do you have addresses or anything that he could find to get to you?"

She shook her head, looking distraught. "I'm...I'm new, here. I moved here with my boyfriend, about a month before the blast. I wasn't working. And I wasn't really focused on making friends. I don't even know any of my neighbors."

He sighed and sat back, again. *Now, what?* "Where's your boyfriend, now?" *Please don't let him still be at their home, worried about her... or possibly already dead.*

She fidgeted in her seat and for a moment, he thought she might cry. Instead, he was surprised to see her wipe all emotion from her face.

"He disappeared. After the blast. About a week or so after. I'm not sure what happened to him. It's not like he was the only one."

He nodded sympathetically. Between the blast and the plague, and without governmental assistance, everything had been at a standstill. There were thousands of missing persons, with no resolution for any of the cases.

"Were you on your way to the evacuation?" he asked, curious as to whether his assessment of her had been correct.

Anger flashed, momentarily, before she was once again a statue. "Yes," she gritted out.

"Well, I'm sorry that you missed your opportunity to leave," he stood and headed past her to the island in his kitchen. If she tried to run past him to the front door, she wouldn't get far. "Are you hungry?"

"We're in the middle of a quarantine, surviving on MREs and non-perishables," she bit back. "I'm *always* hungry."

He kept an eye on her, her back to him, her head facing the window. He hesitated, but was determined to give her some kind of nourishment.

"Any food restrictions? Dairy? Allergies?"

She swiveled in her chair and gave him a disbelieving look. "What do you have that's dairy? The stores haven't had anything perishable in months!"

He backed up to his refrigerator and opened the door, to let her see its contents.

"Milk?! Is that butter?" she marveled and stood, walking closer and gaping. "Do you have... are those carrots? Apples?! Where did you get all this?"

"The head of our operation, a man named Zeke, he was able to work out a supply chain the government's still unaware of." She gave him a judgmental look, and he explained further. "There's not enough to feed all of the Neon, let alone Empire City. Our goal is to stop Cole. Once he's taken out, the government will be able to more-effectively distribute rations, and, once a vaccine is created, the quarantine will be lifted and life will return to normal."

His eyes glinted, and he hoped that she could recognize the smile behind them and hear the kindness in his voice. "If anyone is in true need, and if the hospitals are unable to help, whether it's medical or nutritional, we see to it that they're taken care of. We can't save everyone, but we *are* trying."

She grabbed an apple and bit into the crisp skin. He watched her enjoy the fresh fruit, his smile widening behind the mask. He wished he could take it off.

She took another item from the fridge, a small wedge of cheese, and returned to the table. He closed the appliance and followed her, grabbing the empty cup to refill it. She took the water from his hand, when he brought it to her, without a thank you.

"Where's my purse?" she asked with a full mouth.

He leaned against the wall, opposite from her. "It's in my apartment. Cole left it open, when he returned your wallet. I saw the phone and charger. I didn't want to take it out, but I couldn't have you use it. You understand that, right?"

"Of course," she replied, her voice laced with sarcasm. "And when do I get that back?"

"You can have it now, but not the phone. Not until we have a plan. I don't need police or any other type of trouble showing up to my door."

"We still *have* police?" she scoffed.

"They're mostly hidden, none of them wear their uniforms, anymore," he conceded. "And, like us, they're usually doing vigilante work. But they don't believe any of the Reapers are ultimately on their side. Even when we swoop in to save them by pulling Cole's focus. They have the law, and we don't carry badges."

She took a bite out of the cheese, and furrowed her brow in thought. "Why did Cole save my life? Why would he take my license?"

"Yes, those were my questions, too, when I watched him in the alley. He's never healed anyone before. Except..." he paused. She needed to understand the seriousness of her unique situation.

"Except for what? Who?" she snapped impatiently.

He let the disrespect slide, still needing to build trust. "Except for his girlfriend."

"His girlfriend," she spoke flatly. Repeating, not questioning.

"A nurse from here, named Trish Dailey. She died, months ago. Dropped from a building by that guy Cole killed, Kessler. Cole tried to save Trish, but apparently he was only able to delay her death by a couple of minutes."

"How do you know all this?"

"Intel within the Reapers. Most of it from Zeke, actually. I'm fairly certain he knew her personally. I think I saw her from time to time, too, before all of this, but I didn't know her."

She ate what was in front of her, and he watched silently, happy to take a break from the onslaught of questions. He folded his arms.

"You didn't answer me," she finally said.

He thought back and remembered her two initial questions. What had started the tangent. *She's observant, I'll give her that.* He took a deep breath and chose his words carefully.

"You look very much like her. Like Trish." Her eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't interrupt him. "If I had to guess, Cole saw you and saw the same thing. He saved you, because he couldn't save *her*."

She paled.

"As for why he took your ID," he continued, "I'm not exactly sure. But I doubt it's for anything good. Do you really want to go home and take that risk?"

She shook her head, staring past him.

Good, he said to himself. *Now, we're getting somewhere.*

He stood upright and uncrossed his arms. "Can I trust you not to scream, if I move further than five feet away from you?"

"Sure," she shrugged out the answer.

Not good enough. He bent down, beside her seat, and looked up at her. She slightly leaned away from him, enough to clearly let him know that his proximity was unwelcome. But he didn't budge.

"I live in an apartment building, and it is filled with people. Most of them are probably normal, like you. Some of them could be Reapers. Some could owe a favor to or wish to gain a favor from Cole." He looked at her pointedly, as he stood to tower over her. She kept her eyes downcast. "If you scream, it may not be help that arrives, do you understand that?"

She looked up, then, indignation all over her face.

He sighed. *So much for trying not to scare her.* "I am *trying* to protect you," he softened his tone and backed away, not wishing her to feel trapped. "And I don't want to have to fight whatever may break down the door, to keep you safe."

"Why do you care about what happens to me?" Her words were fraught with apprehension, skepticism.

"Because, despite the way I am dressed, I'm not actually a monster," he vaguely answered.

He walked away from her, then, confident that he'd made enough of a point to earn at least a little compliance. When he returned from his bedroom, he brought her the missing purse.

She took it without a word and searched through her belongings. She seemed satisfied with finding everything in place, until she dug out her wallet and found that he had been telling the truth. No driver's license. She frowned and pushed the wallet back inside.

When she looked up, he was next to her and holding out his hand. Waiting. She glared back and didn't move.

"The phone, please," he politely demanded. "You can keep the charger, I just need the phone."

She gave him a sour look and didn't move.

"It's only for now, only until we can figure out somewhere for you to go. I promise to return it," he placated her.

She played nice, and he nodded his thanks and took it back to his room. He placed it in his gun safe, in the corner of his closet, then returned to find her examining his front door. He admired her tenacity, but it did nothing to help their precarious relationship.

Seeing how many locks he had on his door, and probably realizing that the process would take too long to escape without drawing his attention, she huffed and returned to the living area. He was already seated on his couch. She tentatively came closer, but she remained standing.

"So..." she dragged out. "Where are you taking me? Where am I staying? And how long until I can go home?"

"You tell me. You're the one claiming you have nowhere to go. No friends? No one at all? What about your boyfriend? Did he have friends or family here? Any coworkers?"

"He'd just started at a new job," she replied despondently. "He hardly knew any of them, let alone introducing *me*. And he wasn't from here – Empire City – either. No friends, no family. It was supposed to be us starting our lives...getting married, someday..."

He watched her finally lose her composure. Tears flowed in controlled streams down her cheeks, but her voice didn't waver. She stopped talking before it did. He swallowed and forced himself to speak gently.

"If you have nowhere to go, you can stay here."

She laughed at the suggestion, which, at least, stopped her from crying. It was not happiness, it was bitterness. He let her catch her breath, waiting for an intelligible response.

"Well, that's just perfect. Stay with my kidnapper for exactly how long?"

That's too far, he heard a voice growl within him. His entire body tensed from the implication.

"I am NOT a kidnapper," he hissed through clenched teeth. "*Everything* I have done was to protect you. If you had a place to go, I'd *gladly* escort you there. Or not. I *could* just escort you out of my building and you could take your chances with an *actual* madman who knows where you live."

She paused, and he used the reprieve to calm down. But he meant every word.

"Okay, I'm sorry," she contritely reached out to him. His anger melted at her tone. "Thank you for your offer. I accept."

She walked nearer to him and sat on one of the reclining chairs flanking the couch.

They both stared at the television on the wall, as if it was on.

"Do you want to watch something?" he offered.

"I don't care," she replied honestly.

He, too, was indifferent, but the silence in the room was too awkward to rest within. He began to mentally scroll through the options they had. The news? *Too depressing*. A movie? *Perhaps*. *What would she-*

"How long, do you think, until it's safe for me to go home?" she whispered.

He sighed. "I'm not sure. You're asking me when I believe Cole will just give up on finding you. You look like his dead girlfriend. He hasn't been seen with anyone else, since, which makes me think he's not over her, yet."

She looked at him, and he saw that she was begging him for a clearer answer.

"He doesn't know everything you've told me: that you're new to Empire City, and you have no contacts. Even if he believes you're staying away from your home...I don't know...maybe in a month?"

"A month?!" she choked out.

"Sooner, obviously, if we can stop him. If you want to go home, that's the most realistic timeline I can give you. I'm sorry if it's not what you wanted to hear, but that's the best I can do."

She nodded slowly, her eyes staring at the floor rug in front of them.

The silence continued, and he couldn't stand the tension any longer. This was supposed to be *his* haven. He flipped on the news to see if there was any new coverage of the bio-terrorist, an advancement with a vaccine, or new evacuation protocols.

He'd anticipated bringing her in, letting her recover, explaining why she couldn't go home, then sneaking them back to the street and watching her walk toward her sanctuary. If he'd known that she had no one to take her in...

...I still would have saved her.

Her

She couldn't remember the last time she had seen a full fridge. It took her a moment to fully take in the sight, admiring the fresh ingredients and the variety of foods. The only apple-flavor she experienced in the quarantine came in a generic breakfast bar that was supposed to be a meal in itself. She grabbed the apple first and couldn't stop herself from biting into it immediately.

She wanted to moan pleurably, after breaking through the skin to its juicy contents, but she restrained herself. In her peripheral vision, she saw the Reaper's eyes squint with a hidden smile. She grabbed a small wedge of cheese, knowing she would finish it off, without caring what kind it was. *Beggars can't be choosers*, she remembered the old adage.

She turned away from him and returned to her seat at the table. His hand dipped over her shoulder from behind her, and he lifted the empty cup from in front of her. She heard the sounds of him walking to the sink to refill it, and then he was behind her, again, holding the filled cup within her reach. She took it quickly and set it back in its spot, wanting to finish the food first.

When she inquired about her purse, he admitted he had it. After a small confrontation, in which he told her she looked like the terrorist's dead girlfriend, she felt the color drain from her face.

I remember him standing over me. Cole, he just... stared at me. I've never felt so petrified.

And everything finally made sense, as to why she couldn't go home. Why this *Reaper* wouldn't let her go home. If there was any chance Cole was waiting for her there, or waiting to ambush her when she returned, she was willing to wait. But she cursed, inwardly, the decision she'd made to leave the front door unlocked.

He stood straight, and she noted how tall he was. She was taller than average, at five-foot seven, but *he* was taller than David, it seemed. If David was just under six feet, this man was at least six-foot three or so. He was trim, from what she could tell. The trench coat slimmed at his waistline, and it didn't look like the sleeves were constricted by large muscles. The black pants gave nothing away, but he certainly looked fit.

He wasn't a conduit all his life. Who was he before the blast? She started putting pieces of evidence together. He wanted something from her. *Everyone wants something*. She just had to figure him out and work that angle.

He asked if he could trust her. When she agreed, her answer was somehow unsatisfactory. He had knelt down next to her, and she had automatically leaned away. He told her that he was trying to protect her. That he wasn't a monster. She wanted to roll her eyes, but she knew better.

He left the room, heading into the bedroom she'd woken up in. When he emerged with her purse, she'd let out a relieved sigh and taken it. Everything was there. *Wait a minute*, she

remembered. She pulled out her wallet and searched the contents. Money, but no ID. *Dammit, it really is gone.*

She looked up, after having placed the wallet back inside, and he was standing over her with his hand outstretched. Palm up. Waiting.

"The phone, please," he said to her. "You can keep the charger, I just need the phone."

How generous, letting me keep the charger. She glared at him in response.

He promised to return it, and she relented. *He wants me to trust him. Trust him?!*

When he left the room, back into the bedroom, she heard various clicks and clanks. She stood, having finished her modest meal, and waltzed over to the door. But, when she saw how many locks this paranoid man had, it made her heart drop.

Two, three, the chain makes four...and a sliding lock at the very top.

He passed behind her and she followed soon after. In the living room, he sat at the end of the couch. She approached, but kept conservative distance between them. She asked, again, about where she would go, but he threw her questions back in her face, asking if her boyfriend had any contacts she could call on.

David had just been accepted into the Empire City Fire Department. His dream job. She was ecstatic for him. When he suggested moving in together, she tried her hardest to not accept too quickly. Not that he would've cared. It was more of a self-preservation thing, for her. They would start over in a new city, with new lives intertwined in a hopeful future.

They had crossed the Stamptan Bridge to the bustling metropolis, eager to settle down.

Seven months later, and she was now desperate to make her way back across. To start over, again. But, this time, alone.

She was surprised to feel tears leaking out of her eyes. That wasn't supposed to happen. She clammed up and attempted to banish the emotion. *At least it'll make me more sympathetic. I'm no threat...I'm just a scared little girl. He wants to protect me? Let him think I want that, too...*

"If you have nowhere to go, you can stay here."

The laughter came out as equally unscripted as the tears. A by-product of losing her cool.

"Well, that's just perfect," she blurted out. "Stay with my kidnapper for exactly how long?"

The words were out and she instantly regretted them. He was *mad*. Mad at her.

"I am NOT a kidnapper!" he practically snarled. Then he went on a mini-tirade about how gentlemanly and heroic he had been, finished with a mild threat of how he could throw her out.

He thinks he's the hero. He honestly thinks he is my savior, not my kidnapper. Why don't I take him up on his offer and tell him to let me go, then? I can find someplace to lay low for a couple of days. I can go sleep in one of the makeshift women's shelters downtown. Or I can move around, sleeping here and there. Take a nap at the library. Sneak into a hospital or movie theater. Something. Just a couple of days, and then I can go back home.

She darted a quick glance to the kitchen.

But this place has food. Good food. He hasn't tried to force himself on me...yet...maybe... maybe I can stay here...

"Okay," she broke the awkward silence. "I'm sorry. Thank you for your offer. I accept." *He wants me to trust him...*

She moved closer to where he sat and chose to join his space by sitting in an armchair at the end of the sofa. She noticed that it reclined, but she didn't want to be in a reclined position around him...again. Too suggestive. Too comfortable. He stared straight ahead at the blank television screen on the wall. She hoped his silence meant he accepted her apology.

"Do you want to watch something?"

The question caught her off-guard. *When in doubt, and as long as it won't get you into too much trouble...tell the truth. Truth breeds trust.*

"I don't care."

He did nothing, still staring at the screen. She hesitated asking what she needed to know, and she knew the importance of choosing her words with consideration.

"How long, do you think," she whispered innocently, "until it's safe for me to go home?"

He sighed and finally looked over at her. She tried to play up her innocence with a doe-eyed expression.

"I'm not sure. You're asking me when I believe Cole will just give up on finding you. You look like his dead girlfriend. He hasn't been seen with anyone else, since, which makes me think he's not over her, yet."

Well, that was wholly unexpected. This has escalated from Cole being fascinated with me to him being possibly obsessed with me. Because I look like some dead woman named Trish?

She was musing about how much of a doppelgänger she was for this Trish, when he continued. The silence on her end must have led him to believe she expected more of an explanation.

"...I don't know...maybe in a month?"

"A month?!" she let fly. *Shit, I didn't mean to do that, either. This whole situation has me completely on edge. Get it together!*

He said something to cushion the bad news, and she nodded her head slowly, staring into the void and not really hearing him. Eventually, he turned back to the television and put on a news channel.

I will NOT be here for a month, she assured herself.

It was unnerving, sitting in the same room with a gang member. Not just any criminal. A Reaper. *A Reaper Conduit*, she reminded herself. *He has guns, he has powers...but what powers does he possess?*

He sat on the sofa, relaxed, despite his uniform looking incredibly uncomfortable. The long trench coat folded in thick creases, not meant to be seated in. He even wore the clunky black boots. His long legs were spread out, and now she could see that his lower appendages were more muscular than they'd appeared when he was standing.

Still in her jacket and jeans, she was slightly warmer than she wanted to be, in the apartment. It was comfortably heated. But, if he wasn't taking off any layers, neither was she.

He has to be sweating underneath...especially with that mask. I wonder what he would be wearing if I wasn't here? What does he look like?

The apartment was spacious, as new as hers, and equally furnished. Neutral tones, with splashes of cool tones in pillows and paintings. No magazines on the coffee table. A book. One of those big books that people keep on coffee tables but show absolutely no signs of use. The cover was a black-and-white picture of a black camera being held up against a white wall by a gray-skinned hand. Photography. Kind of generic.

No houseplants. No personal pictures. Odd. *Maybe he hasn't lived here long, either*. There was a tall bookshelf at the end of the room, against the wall that either led to another domicile or the outside of the building. The books were different sizes and styles. It looked like a mish-mash of fiction, nonfiction, and textbooks. She couldn't read any of the titles, from where she sat.

He noticed her looking in his direction, and she saw his eyes dart over to see if she needed anything. But she turned her head toward the window and he said nothing. They were high off the ground. Judging from the view she could see, they were high enough that she could go ahead and cross a window escape off the list of ideas.

I need to build trust. Ask him about himself...don't push too hard. Don't let him deflect too much. Share similar experiences, if it comes up naturally, but don't let him shift the conversation onto you. Start with getting his name. Use it frequently. People like that. It makes them feel closer to you than they actually are. Be agreeable, but not robotic. I've already shown I can be difficult. Disagree, occasionally, so that your personality doesn't shift too dramatically from what you've revealed, but only when it doesn't matter or offend.

"Are you going to wear your Reaper gear whenever you're around me, for this entire month?"

He glanced over. His eyes, the only part of his body that was visible, were curious. She smiled playfully. His head ticked to the side, slightly. He was trying to read her. *Dammit*, she

cursed. *Too abrupt of a mood change.*

"I mean," she continued, rambling to insinuate nervousness. "It doesn't look very comfortable. And you know what I look like. I was wondering if you were going to return the favor. I would feel less frightened of you, if I saw a human face instead of a skull with eyes."

He returned his attention to the news. "No, I don't think I'll have to conceal my face for a month. But you won't be seeing it today."

"Can you tell me your name? Or *a* name?"

"You can call me Apollo, if you'd like."

"Your name is Apollo?" she teased him lightly, flirtatiously...subtly.

"No, it's not. It's my mission name. What I go by, with the Reapers."

"Why did you choose it? Or was it chosen for you?"

He held a hand out his hand, held in a fist, then he let it burst open to reveal a burst of light. She gasped, but then a strange glimmering effect shimmered over his forearm and hand until they were no longer visible. She could only see his upper arm and elbow. The body part twisted, making him look like an amputee.

"Apollo," he repeated. "God of light. I was asked to come up with a call sign, and that is what I came up with."

His arm was fully visible, again. She was genuinely stunned, but she needed to keep the conversation rolling. *No more awkward pauses. Don't act fearful. He doesn't want me to fear him.*

"No Greek god had power over one particular thing. Apollo was also the god of music and poetry, too."

He nodded, his eyes creased in amusement. "That, and much more."

"Are you a poet, as well? Or a musician?"

"Neither," he shared. His tone was lighter, happier.

"And do you have any connection with the sun? I seem to recall Apollo was the god that pulled the sun through the sky on his chariot."

"That was Helios, actually," he corrected. "But I do get energy from the sun. Or other light sources, when needed."

His attention was fully on her, and he was obviously enjoying their conversation. *Now, to dig a little deeper. Show genuine interest and concern.*

"When did you...change? Become a conduit? How did it all happen?" She leaned toward him, staring intently with as much compassion as she could muster.

He muted the television and shifted in his seat to face her. He leaned his knees on his elbows.

He's mirroring me, she recognized. Does he know what he's doing, or is it subconscious?

"After the blast, I rushed to the scene. We only heard Historic District, not a precise location. Not at first. It took me a while, but I made it there. I was only exposed to the radiation for a couple of hours, but I began to feel changes before I made it back to the Neon."

"Why did you go to the blast site, in the first place?"

He looked down. *Too far*, she chided herself.

"I'm saying what I want to say about it, for the moment. Considering we just met today, I'm not ready to share every detail." He looked up. He wasn't angry or sad. He was serious. Firm. "Can you accept that?"

"Of course," she whispered. *Look desirable. Don't throw yourself at him, but make him think you wish to be closer.* She crossed one leg over the other, toward where he sat. She leaned into the arm of the chair, as close to him as she could get without changing her seat. The new position accentuated her curves.

To his credit, he didn't give her body any obvious sexual attention.

"I was sent home from my job, and I came home, to here, and crashed. I woke up two days later, feeling...different. It's hard to explain."

"Where were you working?"

He shook his head and continued, ignoring her probing question.

"I never went back to work. I'm probably counted as one of the missing. But my powers... I couldn't control them, at first. It took weeks, just to learn the basics. I joined the Reapers because there were others like me. Conduits. We trained together. Sasha used her mind-controlling agent crap on us and, suddenly, we were her lieutenants."

I remember hearing things about Sasha.

"Who was she, exactly? What was she like?"

"She was insane. Obsessed with Kessler, for some reason. If she could have had us go to war with the First Sons, we would have. But having the Warren between us and them...we tried to fight through the Dust Men, instead. They were tougher than we assumed. A bunch of ragged, garbage-wearing soldiers, but they were led by a man who was some kind of engineering genius. If Sasha was less hellbent on controlling everyone, she would've seen the benefit of joining forces with the Dust Men to fight Kessler. Apparently, their leader hated Kessler, too."

"I didn't see much of what was going on," she admitted. "I stayed in, too scared to be in the streets with Cole and Reapers everywhere. It felt like I heard gunshots every day, for a while. How did you make it out of all that fighting still alive?"

"I have..." he hesitated, and she could tell he was trying to rephrase his answer. "When I absorb light, I can heal minor injuries. Cole does the same thing with electricity." She nodded in understanding. "And I know when to retreat. Sasha used us conduits sparingly. We mostly supervised the teams of Reapers or did reconnaissance missions. Now that Zeke is in charge, he uses more strategic means of fighting Cole. And what's left of the Dust Men."

"Does this Zeke guy expect you to check in, any time soon?"

He studied her, and she felt antsy and self-conscious under his gaze. She wondered if her question led him to believe she wanted him to leave.

Well, I do, she inwardly smirked. But he doesn't need to know that.

The pause was brief, with him answering quicker, in reality, than it felt in real time.

"I will, eventually," Apollo coolly shared. "It's a tight operation, but there's plenty of us ready to fight."

After that, they had fallen into a more comfortable silence. The conversation they had was enough of a building block, she surmised. It would take more of that, laying brick after brick, until he would be willing to leave her unsupervised. She had a good idea of what he wanted from her, now.

I'm the first civilian he's saved. He wants to be credited for his heroic act, but I'm the only one who can give him that sense of satisfaction. That metaphorical pat on the back.

They watched the news for a while, until it became too dreary to stand.

No idea of when a vaccine would be ready for distribution. Still the same "positive" outlook. It was in the works, and it would be done "soon." A report on how the virus was seemingly created out of the radiation of the newly-discussed "ray sphere," and how the virus hung in the air, on their bodies, in their systems, until further away from the detonation. Like, *many* miles away.

No change in the evacuation protocols.

Light coverage on Cole, as he had a tendency to act out on negative news reports. Nothing about the Reapers or Dust Men, who were largely ignored by the media outlets for being gangs.

At the end, as the meteorologist shared the week's weather, all sunny skies with light winds, she turned her head toward Apollo.

"What movies do you have?"

He asked her for a genre, and she asked to watch a comedy.

Laugh together. It lets one's guard down. Sharing laughter automatically makes us associate with people, believing our similar senses of humor belie a stronger underlying connection. Hmmm...that sounded like a disturbing excerpt from a textbook...

"What's your name, if you don't mind my asking?"

This was a turning point. A shift of power. She could choose to withhold it, showing him that she wasn't gullible. Or, she could give it to him, truthfully, taking another step closer toward his inner circle.

"Catherine. Catherine Lynd."

"Catherine," he repeated, nodding.

It was strange to hear her entire name in casual use. David, like every guy she'd dated before him, called her "Cat." A not-so-sly reference to her eye shape, as well as a shortened moniker.

He gave her three movies to choose, and she went with the one that was unfamiliar to her. She wanted her reactions to be genuine, to have him watch her enjoy something brand new to her.

When it ended, they left their seats together and went to the kitchen. He asked her what she felt like eating, for an early dinner. She was already exhausted, her body still needing to recuperate from the trauma it endured, and she could tell that he was looking forward to sleeping, as well.

The only thing she wanted to eat were more fresh items. He took her request seriously and made them salads. To do so, he removed his gloves and set them aside. Then, he rolled up his trench coat sleeves. She saw more of his tan skin, lean and sculpted, looking young and toned, with short fingernails and the bottoms of a couple of tattoos with intricate designs that she couldn't make out. She filed every piece of information away. There was no telling which little detail might come in handy at a later date.

She enjoyed her salad thoroughly. Before the quarantine, when food was plentiful, she rarely picked a salad over anything else on the menu. Now, she practically craved it. They ate across from each other at the kitchen table, making small talk in-between bites about the places they missed the most in Empire City. What they imagined it would be like to visit their favorite places, again, once the restrictions were lifted.

More solid foundation to work on. He's lived here way longer than me. Is he from here? She wondered.

After dinner, he took their plates and went to clean up his kitchen. She nonthreateningly walked away from the apartment's exit, back to the living room, to more closely examine the contents of his bookshelf.

Espionage fiction...some classics...a few religious texts...books specializing in Greek mythology...DIY instructionals for minor home renovation...schoolbooks on subjects like

engineering, architecture, and biology...spiral notebooks set intermittently within the largest volumes...car- and photography-centric magazines... Kind of a random plethora of knowledge.

Apollo, she pulled to the focus of her thoughts. She placed a finger on one of the books on Greek mythology and pulled it into her waiting hand. The cover wasn't intimidating. She recalled enjoying learning about the Greeks and their pantheon of gods in school.

She turned around, book in hand, and made her way back to the kitchen. Apollo was standing at the sink, still loading his dishwasher with the dirty plates from dinner. His back was to her.

"Do you mind if I turn in? I know it's still early, but I'd really like to read and relax in bed. Is that okay?"

He halted his chore and faced her. "Yes, of course."

He walked with her to the single bedroom, and, for a fleeting moment, she worried that he was going to try to join her. But he went straight to a dresser drawer, pulled out a shirt and sweatpants, and handed the garments to her.

"I know wearing my clothes isn't ideal, but it'll have to do, until I can get some more clothes for you." He gestured out the door. "I think you saw the bathroom, before. It's right outside, a little further down the hall. Below the sink, I have extra toothbrushes and some of those travel-sized toiletries. If you need anything more, let me know, so that I can be on the lookout for those items."

He started to leave the bedroom, his bedroom, but he paused at the door.

"Goodnight, Catherine."

"Goodnight," she responded without a thought. It was expected, and too customary to forego.

He closed the door behind him and she looked out the window, holding the clothing. The sky was approaching twilight. Still light. She looked down to the sweatpants and t-shirt. She didn't want to put them on, but sleeping in her jeans would be worse. She'd worn the same outfit for over twenty-four hours straight.

She dressed quickly and quietly, not able to restrain herself from fearing him barging in on her mostly nude. The two items were comically large on her comparatively petite frame. When she was clothed, she breathed a sigh of relief and carefully draped her clothing across the same chair that he had occupied that morning.

I left my purse on the kitchen table...great job, Cat.

She exited the room as quietly as she could, not wishing to arouse his attention. He was back on the sofa, still in full gear, watching a different news special. She crept closer, reaching the table without making any sound.

But, once she picked up her purse and its contents, something inside of the bag shifted and let off the slightest of noises. It was enough to make Apollo snap his head in her direction.

He stared at her, but didn't say anything.

"Sorry," she fumbled. "I forgot my purse. Goodnight."

She did a quick pivot and was back to the room within twelve paces. She threw the purse onto the chair and walked back out to the bathroom. She didn't look in his direction. Having her own toothbrush was a small mercy, but it felt awkward to place her orange brush next to his blue one in the holder.

Nothing to be done about that, she thought. Gotta keep building trust.

Her makeup was mostly smeared off, but she splashed a good amount of cold water on her face to remove any of the remnants. She grabbed the towel on a ring nearby to pat her face dry. The towel smelled familiar. Fresh, clean, and male. She placed it back on the ring and left the bathroom.

She barely cracked open the book, before her eyes already began to feel heavy. Before she could make a plan for tomorrow, she fell asleep with the book opened and sprawled on her chest.

Apollo

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her. He watched her explore the room from her seat, clearly not interested in what played on television. Truthfully, he wasn't either; it was the same old lies on USTV about how the citizens of Empire City were miraculously thriving in quarantine.

She was staring at him for a while and he met her gaze, wondering if she was waiting for him to speak. But, as soon as their eyes met, she turned her head and watched the window behind him. He swiveled his own head to the wall to his right.

Probably just looking at my bookshelf, he surmised.

She abruptly asked him whether or not he would keep his Reaper uniform on when around her for the duration of her stay. The question threw him off. *Why does she care what I'm wearing?*

Something in her eyes glinted, at his silence. Then she had added clarity. *The mask is intimidating, there's nothing surprising about her wanting to see my actual face.*

He'd given her the best answer he could. He would remove the mask, let down his guard. But not today.

And, most likely, not any time soon.

When she'd asked for his name, he was pleased. He gave his call sign, prepared to do so. No one had used his birth name in...well, in seven months. Her light teasing was unexpected, and that's when he started to pay closer attention to the woman he'd just offered shelter to.

She'd asked for the origin of his name, and he'd shown her a couple of the powers he'd refined over the past months in the quarantine. Thankfully, she didn't show any signs of fear. Since he had given her a wider berth, she no longer seemed as skittish or panicked. He knew better than to trust her after only a few hours together, but she was, as far as he could perceive, acclimating to the temporary setback in her life.

The conversation continued, with her asking him about developing his powers. Becoming a conduit. He'd muted the news and devoted his time to her, telling her everything.

Everything that he was *willing* to tell.

"Why did you go to the blast site, in the first place?"

His mind automatically retraced that devastating day, answering the question for him.

No, no...not yet...

"I'm saying what I want to say about it, for the moment. Considering we just met today, I'm not ready to share every detail. Can you accept that?" He didn't mean to sound so unrelenting,

but she needed to know that he would be truthful, if not completely transparent.

"Of course," she'd answered, while shifting into a new posture.

Not quite right, he thought. She's beautiful, and she knows it, and there's something else there. Some kind of damage or hurt that she is hiding behind flirtation.

He felt a little like he was being pulled into a trap. Not in a tremendous amount of danger, though. More like the fear of scaring away a timid animal. The fear was that he would do or say something to make her recoil. And she was waiting for it to happen, consciously or subconsciously.

They progressed from him leaving work, to joining other conduits in the Reapers, to being controlled by Sasha.

"Who was she, exactly? What was she like?"

It was like being around a Siren. Having her sweetly sing in your ear, distorting the world around you, until you were dashed upon the rocks.

He still answered honestly, if slightly edited.

"Does this Zeke guy expect you to check in, any time soon?"

She wants to know when I'll leave.

"I will, eventually. It's a tight operation, but there's plenty of us ready to fight," he had answered her with measured words.

Silence rose, again, but not with as much tension as it had previously held. He unmuted the television and let the news reports fill-in the void.

They started to discuss a movie to watch, when he circled back to an important subject.

"What's your name, if you don't mind my asking?"

When she didn't answer immediately, he wondered if she was going to give him a fake name. Whatever she said, he would adhere to it. It's not like she had *his* real name.

"Catherine. Catherine Lynd."

"Catherine," he had reinforced. *Probably her actual name, if she was willing to add her surname. Or, who knows, she might have multiple aliases. Not Katie, not Cathy. He studied her face for a moment. Her eyes. I'll bet more than one person has called her Cat. Or Kitty. She doesn't like nicknames, though. She wants to be called by her full name. By me, anyway.*

The movie she'd picked was one she hadn't seen, according to her. A cheesy comedy. Nothing earth-shattering or thought-provoking. She was still in the same pose: her breasts accentuated by her arms being folded underneath them and her legs crossed at the knee. During the course of the film, she'd tucked her legs upon the seat of the chair.

He saw everything, out of the corner of his eye, but he was careful to stare straight ahead at the screen.

Regardless of what she's actually thinking, I doubt she wants a strange man ogling her. Especially one she has to live with for a month.

The credits rolled, and they both stood together to stretch their legs. He started to walk to the kitchen, to start a meal, and he felt her fall in-step behind him.

They ate a light meal, neither wanting heavy stomachs to sleep on. He turned away from her to pull the bottom of his mask up over his lips. When she was done, he grabbed her plate, along with his, and cleaned up his kitchen. She headed back toward the living room, and he turned to face her sink.

Does she want to watch something else? Another movie? Is she looking at my books? Watching out the window?

His speculation ended, when she suddenly spoke up behind him.

"Do you mind if I turn in? I know it's still early, but I'd really like to read and relax in bed. Is that okay?"

He spun around to face her and nodded. "Yes, of course."

I don't regret my decision, but sleeping on my couch for a month is going to suck, he reflected on the assumption that she would take his bedroom. Only a month. It'll be nice to have someone else in the apartment for a while.

He escorted her to his bedroom, pulling a shirt and sweatpants from his dresser. When he handed them to her, he saw her reluctance to take the items. *Not much I can do right now, he thought. It's this or nothing.*

Her responding to his goodnight made him smile in his mask.

He returned to the kitchen, to finish loading the dishwasher, then he went to the couch.

I can't sleep like this.

But it would have to do. He contemplated knocking on the bedroom door and getting out a change of clothes for himself.

Not tonight.

He turned the news coverage back on. It was background noise, really. It wasn't long before he heard a soft jingle from the kitchen table. His head whipped in that direction.

Catherine was looking up from the table, frozen, bent slightly forward and holding her purse.

"Sorry, I forgot my purse. Goodnight."

It hit him harder than he expected, seeing a woman wearing his clothes. She was attractive. Even more so in his shirt and sweatpants. They hung off of her lithe form, baggy, with the pants bunched or rolled up, so as not to fall down from her narrower hips. It was seeing her in a new look, a less put-together, less-calculated ensemble. It crumbled the façade she was desperately trying to use as a shield. It made her more vulnerable...slightly.

She returned to the bedroom, pausing at the doorway to throw her purse inside, and then walked to the bathroom. He studied her, not caring if she saw him watching. But she never looked over at him. When she closed the door, he turned back to the screen on the wall.

Still, his attention was on the noises on the other end of his apartment. Familiar, but not recent. Running water, brushing sounds, a flushing toilet, the water running a longer amount of time, the towel ring creaking from movement...and, then, the door opening, the light switch being flipped, feet padding to the bedroom, and the door closing behind her.

Haven't heard that in a long time. Too long...

He waited for a couple of hours, flipping restlessly through channels, and, hearing nothing from the bedroom, he stood. He pulled his laptop from its hidden spot under the couch. Internet usage was extremely limited under the quarantine. Because the government was footing the bill, they had limited each citizen to only one hour of usage a day. It accumulated for the week and reset on Monday mornings. He had used about half of his allotment, but he didn't need much time tonight.

Catherine Lynd. L-I-N-D? L-I-N-D-E? L-Y-N-D? Ah...there she is. The first thing that came up with her name, in the search results, was the official quarantine website. Her name was on the most recent list of lottery winners for evacuation. *I should've just checked here, first.* There was nothing about her absence. Not that there would be. In two days, there would be a new list on the main page, with one hundred and twenty new names.

He returned to the search results page and scrolled through. He was no tech wizard, but the internet was invasive enough to provide all of the information he needed. A current address.

Strangely enough, there was little to be found of her personal life online. He guessed she was either a private person or a paranoid person. Maybe both. *Definitely guarded...*

He jotted down the address, but he knew the building she called home. An apartment similar to his, actually. When he had been hunting for a residence, he had visited that area, but chose something closer to his workspace.

The laptop went back under the couch.

It was almost completely dark. Twilight. He soaked up the remaining vestiges of light on the horizon and opened the window. He would expend a good deal of energy on this errand. Hopefully not all of it, though, if things went according to his plan.

When he had moved in, the window didn't open. He had two locks on the front door. Before the quarantine was in full effect, he had altered both. More locks, to combat possible rioting and looting. A window that could open and provide another form of entry or escape.

His powers had lent him an unexpected benefit.

Cole was able to use his electric current to hold himself up in the air, gliding around the rooftops with ease.

Apollo could temporarily solidify light. It was his most draining ability, but he only needed to make it to the next rooftop. He used something similar against Cole, cutting streams of light through the ground to physically injure him. Now, he concentrated and materialized an unseen bridge. If someone was really trying to see it, they might notice a faint glimmer. Like a heat haze in midair. He darted up and across from his open window, concealing himself and using up even more of his reserves.

Once out of view, he dropped the cloak and let the bridge disappear into nothingness. He ran and jumped across the various rooftops, occasionally needing to grab on a fire escape to pull him to higher ground. Approaching her building, he came to a halt and watched the entrance from his perched position.

Usually, he thought things through very meticulously. Now, he found himself at a bit of a loss for what to do next. He'd left his home with two objectives: see if Cole had been to Catherine's apartment and not be seen by the terrorist. He scrutinized the window. He knew what floor she was on, as well as her apartment number, but he didn't know which side of the building it was. And he wasn't sure what he would do to properly evaluate if Cole had already visited.

Can't go to the ground. Can't really see anything from here, though. Should have brought binoculars or something... Which apartment is hers?

He counted the windows vertically, up from the floor, then watched the windows on that level. It was dark enough, now, that most of the windows on the building emanated at least a little bit of light. Most of them had blinds or curtains drawn. He needed more information. There was no avoiding it.

He took off his coat, the mask, and the gloves. He placed everything in a pile, right where he stood. Now, in a black shirt, pants, and boots, he carefully maneuvered down the side of the building, choosing to descend into the alleyway. Before the quarantine, he'd worked out, but his skills in parkour were nothing compared to Cole's.

Waiting in the alley, he studied his destination. Outside the entry was an intercom box. He contemplated waiting for a tenant to arrive and attempting to catch the door. Instead, he ran up to the box and reviewed what he'd say.

One of her neighbors. Not anyone on her floor...too close. They might know more about her than I do. He pressed the numbers 7-0-2.

No answer.

He tried 7-0-3.

"Yeah?" a gruff voice on the other end of the intercom called out.

"Hello? Sorry to bother you, but I'm worried about my girlfriend, Catherine? She lives in 8-0-7, and she isn't answering."

"I'm not letting you in, dude. Piss off!" The line disconnected.

Fine. Fair enough. Onto 7-0-4.

The sounds of the intercom connecting then immediately being disconnected.

Come on...I just need one... He dialed 7-0-5.

"Yes?" It was a woman's voice. Older, most likely.

"Hi, there! I'm sorry to intrude, I'm trying to get a hold of my girlfriend, Catherine. Catherine Lynd? Lives in 8-0-7? I'm worried about her. She hasn't returned any of my calls, and she never showed up to the lottery yesterday. She was one of the winners. Would you mind letting me in, please? I want to make sure everything's okay."

The line was still connected, with only light crackling coming through. In the static, he heard hesitation.

"Um...what did she look like?"

"Long brown hair, fair-skinned, about five and a half feet tall? She has beautiful cat eyes."

"Hmmm...and what apartment did you say she was in, again?"

"8-0-7?"

Another pause, then, "I hope she's okay." A click and a buzz.

He grabbed at the door and ran in. He went through the first floor, past the mailboxes and elevators. Into one of the stairwells at the end of the hall.

On the second floor, he walked to where 2-0-7 was situated. He stood outside the door, completely silent, and well aware that he needed to hurry before he caused any of the tenants undue stress.

Okay, it's opposite from where I stood. Need to grab my gear and reposition myself.

He left the building, crossed the street, walked to the back to the alley, used the fire escape, and found himself back where he started. Once his Reaper uniform was intact, he jumped down the line of buildings until he arrived where he needed to be to see the exterior of Catherine's apartment.

The lights were off, but most of the blinds were surprisingly up, with no curtains obstructing his view, either. There was no sign of Cole, but one of the windows caught his attention. No glare. With this new vantage point, every window reflected back at least a small amount of the moonlight. Except for one. *No glare means no pane.* Unless Catherine was in the habit of leaving her windows open, Cole had been there.

He might still be there, for all I know. Probably assumes she went to the hospital or a friend's home. Might give up or get bored after a few days. Might not.

There was nothing more to do tonight. He couldn't risk going one-on-one with Cole. Her clothes would have to come from somewhere else. And now he knew...his instinct was right. Catherine couldn't return home. Not while Cole posed a threat.

As he traveled back to his own dwelling, he reminded himself of a mission Sasha had sent him and two other reapers on. They were forced, mindlessly obeying, because of the chemical she'd sprayed on them. The three Reaper Conduits joined with Cole, the man they had previously fought. He was under Sasha's influence, as well. They'd wreaked havoc on a police station, completely destroying it with their combined powers.

He hated that he still had the memories of him being a brainless assassin. But it was humbling, too. That was the one good aspect to come of his being controlled like a puppet. He knew what it was like to be evil. To watch innocent people around him suffer directly from his actions.

A part of him felt very confident, based off his many interactions with the terrorist, that he and Cole were evenly-matched. The problem was that Cole was ruthless. He didn't care about who was caught in the crossfire. Apollo had killed civilians, not purposefully targeting them, but in recklessly using his powers to win in a firefight. He couldn't risk that, again. Not while fully conscious and under his own volition.

Back into his own apartment, he closed the window behind him and immediately looked at his surroundings. Everything was as he'd left it. The bedroom door was closed, as was the front door, with all its locks in place.

He removed the trench coat, relieved to have the heavy, cumbersome material off. He threw it over the chair Catherine had previously occupied. He removed the belt from his pants and placed it on the chair, as well as the black gloves. He sat back onto the couch, took off the black boots, and placed them neatly on the floor.

Wearing the balaclava mask was not going to be comfortable, but it was necessary, for the time being.

He lay down on the couch, facing the rest of the apartment.

The two occupants both slept soundly, in their separate spaces.

He stirred first, paranoid that he would sleep through her waking and coming out. Relieved to find the locks on the door undisturbed and the bedroom door still closed, he sighed tiredly. He rose and walked to the window. The sun revitalized him. It was early. Not too early, though, the clock dictated.

He didn't know what to expect from Catherine today. Yesterday, he'd expected hysteria, denial, terror...or a combination of those and more. She had shown some fear, in the beginning, but her mood had changed to quite congenial, but the end of the night.

The door clicked to his right, and he looked over to see her emerge in her white fitted shirt and slim jeans. No jacket, socks, or shoes. He had his black socks on, but the rest of his garments were where he had placed them the night before.

"Um, morning," she called out in greeting.

"Good morning," he responded in kind.

She looked around the kitchen, her eyes landing on his coffeemaker. "Do you by any chance have coffee? Or tea? Something with caffeine?"

He walked over to join her in the kitchen, heading straight to where he had disposable packets, tea bags, and sweeteners. He pulled the drawer beneath the coffeemaker out and gestured back to her.

"Help yourself," he offered.

She walked to the drawer but stopped short. He took the hint and backed away.

A little skittish, again, today. Not as brave as she was last night...

She grabbed one of the disposable pods and placed it in the coffeemaker's spot, clearly used to doing so. Then, she paused. She looked over at him and he nodded to the cabinet door above where she stood. Understanding his wordless instruction, she opened the door and removed one of the many coffee mugs.

While the coffee brewed, she pulled two sugar packets out of the drawer and grabbed the milk from the refrigerator.

"It's been *months* since I've had coffee," she joyfully smiled.

He nodded, although she didn't see.

"Tea. The only caffeinated item included in the ration packs. Not anything fun, either, just plain old herbal tea," she muttered, mostly to herself.

He didn't answer, this time, letting her take a seat at the table and pulling items from his small pantry.

"I have a couple kinds of cereal, bread for toast," he told her. "What would you like?"

"Toast sounds good."

He made enough for both of them, bringing out a tub of vanilla yogurt to add onto their simple breakfast. He sat with her, pulling up the bottom of his balaclava to eat. The bristles of facial hair breathed, feeling better out in the open than stifled under the mask.

He saw her slyly looking at him, not wishing to be noticed. He finished quickly, wiped his mouth with a paper towel, and replaced the mask.

"Did you sleep in that thing?"

He knew what she was referring to. No point in asking her to elucidate.

"Yes."

"You could at least keep the mask up at the bottom, like you do when you eat. I've seen that much of you already. Your voice wouldn't be as muffled, and it would feel less constricting, probably."

"It's not made for that," he answered plainly.

She shrugged and finished her plate. When she finished, he quickly grabbed all of the dirty dishes and placed them in the sink to rinse and load.

"You're one of the cleanest guys I've ever met," she remarked. He could hear both humor and disbelief in her tone.

"It's a habit I've picked up from living solo."

"Have you always lived alone?"

Probing. Like last night.

"No." *I don't need to lie to her, but she doesn't get to know everything about me.*

She sat back on the chair and used a hand to massage a sore spot at the back of her neck.

"Did you know Apollo was also the god of healing and plagues?" she asked.

Another abrupt conversational change. It's like she's trying to either keep me on my toes or throw me off.

"I did," he said and finished the chore. He moved back to the island, instead of the chair at the table, and leaned against it to face her.

"You don't think that's a little bit strange, using a name that's associated with *plagues*?"

He folded his arms in a reflexively defensive movement. "Apollo is associated more with the sun and light, than with anything else. You read more into it, to know that obscure fact," he pointed out.

"Hmm," she dismissively replied. "So...what do we do today?" She looked away and raised her eyebrows curiously.

"More of the same, unfortunately." He stood away from the countertop and walked back toward the living room. "I have other books, movies, video games..."

"Do you have a computer?"

He hesitated. "Yes," he smoothly admitted. "What would you use it to do?"

"Does it matter?" she frowned, narrowing her eyes at him.

Considering my laptop has a bunch of personal information on it, I'd say so.

"Forget the computer and focus on something else to entertain you, Catherine."

She went silent, obviously unhappy with his refusal.

I'll make another account. Fortify all of my passwords and give her an alternate sign-in, he made the mental note. Tonight, after she's asleep. She can use it tomorrow.

He sat on the couch, again, rolling his shoulders back. After picking up the remote to turn the television back on, Catherine joined him in the room. She seemed reluctant, especially when she noticed her former seat no longer open. But he didn't feel the need to move the items. There were plenty of other seats.

She did sit, choosing the other single-seat armchair at the far end of the room. He sat on the far right of the sofa, which meant they were much closer to each other than they had been last night. As close as they could be in different seats.

He noticed that, this time, her body was more reserved. Less casual.

"Whatever happened to that one guy, the Voice of Survival? I can't remember the last time I heard one of his broadcasts. He seemed like he was actually trying to *help* the city," she said.

"He was taken out by the First Sons," Apollo informed her. "I didn't mind him, but Zeke actually hated the guy. Blamed him for being one of the catalysts for Cole going bad."

"Cole had evil in him, either way. Your boss, Zeke, can't blame the Voice of Survival for that."

"We all have evil within us," he whispered. He still didn't look over at her.

Catherine

Catherine sat with her hot mug of coffee. She was in a stranger's home, but she wouldn't refuse a luxury like this. The drinkware was black, standard, boring. Just as featureless as the man sitting across from her and the home she was currently trapped in.

As they ate breakfast together, she stole covert glances to the bottom half of his face, visible to her for the first time.

Strong jaw, dark-brown stubble, nice teeth...too straight and white to be naturally so...he's had braces. No scars, lips slightly chapped. His hands are taken care of, too. Well, for a typical guy, anyway. Nails are short and neatly trimmed, no scars.

She was careful not to linger, to not let him know what she was doing.

Later, after they were done, she had questioned him about wearing the mask with the bottom half off of his face. He had practically brushed the idea away. *Not like the police could do much with a sketch of someone's lips and chin.*

Like the end of their dinner last night, he was quick to grab their plates and clean everything at the sink. She pointed it out, not as a compliment but as an observation. He said that it was a newly-formed habit from living alone.

"Have you always lived alone?" she lightly asked.

He had hesitated in his answer, which was now a typical thing for him to do. "No."

The way he had said it made her think one of two things: either he was young, quite young, and he equated the question to either family or a roommate living situation, or he had, at one time lived with a girlfriend, fiancée, or maybe even a wife.

I know this guy's straight. The way he looks at me, sometimes...there's interest there.

Her neck was sore from sleeping on the unfamiliar bed. She rubbed where it ached, hoping to soothe the pulled muscle.

Keep talking. Don't let it get awkward. Be personable, friendly. Make him like you.

And so she'd brought up his nickname, again. Apollo. God of Plagues. *Weird choice, dude.* Rather insensitive, really, seeing as it was a virus that was responsible for keeping them all imprisoned in Empire City.

He'd explained that away, too, and she begrudgingly agreed that he was right about Apollo not really being known for some of his other monikers...*Sun and light, music and poetry, healing and plagues, prophecy, knowledge, architecture, archery, beauty...what wasn't he known for?*

Everything was going fine, until she asked to use his computer. He'd instantly become guarded.

Guess that's a no. Maybe he thinks I'll use a maps site to find my location, then email the police with my location. She truly thought about that for a second. Well, touche. I can't blame him for not wanting me near a computer.

Another way to earn his trust: don't act interested in the computer.

Still, she couldn't help but make a list in her mind of all the possible places he could hide a laptop or tablet. She would be checking the bedroom more thoroughly, at the next chance, too. There was that safe in the closet...maybe in there?

He left the kitchen and went back to "his spot" on the couch. She joined him, having nothing else to do. She wanted to sit in "her spot," in the chair furthest from him, but his trench coat and accessories were thrown on top of it. She glared at the items, then at him. He didn't get the point, so she rolled her eyes and sat in the other chair. It was closer to him, but at least it was an independent piece of furniture, compared to sharing the couch.

When he turned on the television, it was still on USTV, the round-the-clock news station. It reminded her of something. Someone. Someone who wasn't afraid to tell the news as it really was. As depressing as it was.

"Whatever happened to that one guy, the Voice of Survival? I can't remember the last time I heard one of his broadcasts. He seemed like he was actually trying to *help* the city."

Apollo's eyes didn't change within the mask. He stared into the screen ahead of him, while she stared at him.

"He was taken out by the First Sons," was the emotionless reply.

Catherine winced. Whoever the broadcast-hijacker was, he couldn't have been older than her. The First Sons were the most vicious of the three district gangs. The Dust Men were crazy, choosing their victims at random and by convenience. The Reapers were more dangerous, but they generally were little threat to those that stayed out of their way and their business. The First Sons, though...they were better armed than their rival gangs, and they saw anyone who wasn't one of them to be inferior. They killed indiscriminately. Everyone, anyone.

Thankfully, Cole had prioritized killing off the First Sons, once he zeroed in on their leader, Kessler. The Historic District was actually the most peaceful, of the three. No Dust Men or Reapers had been able to take hold of the final district, due to it being Cole's regular stomping ground.

"I didn't mind him," Apollo continued, "but Zeke actually hated the guy. Blamed him for being one of the catalysts for Cole going bad."

"Cole had evil in him, either way," Catherine had automatically responded. "Your boss, Zeke, can't blame the Voice of Survival for that."

"We all have evil within us," he had whispered back, still staring at the nonsense on the news.

I forgot, I'm talking to a Reaper, she mentally hit her forehead. *Yes, we all have evil. But when you develop powers, you have a choice: be the weapon or be the shield.*

"How old are you?" she blurted out, eager to change the subject and squelch the silence.

"How old do you think I am?" he had asked her in return, with all seriousness in his voice.

"Twenties?"

His eyes creased on the sides. Smiling. "Yes."

"I'm twenty-three," she shared. "Now that you know my age, will you please tell me yours?"

"I'm twenty-eight."

"Are you *really* twenty-eight, or is your alias, Apollo, twenty-eight?"

He chuckled, seemingly amused. "I didn't have a whole bio to go with the name, but, yes, I'm twenty-eight."

"Are you from here? Born and raised, as they say?"

He paused. "Yes."

"I'm from Seattle. Well, Seattle area. A small suburb."

"You're a long way from home," he pointed out. He leaned back into the sofa and finally gave her his undivided attention.

"It was never really home," she shrugged. *Do I tell him more? Reveal the tragic backstory? Play on whatever compassion I can rile up within him?* The thought of having to dredge up her past was too unappealing. She abandoned the idea for another day.

"Why did you and your boyfriend move out here, then?"

"His work," she explained. "We met in college. He was a couple of years ahead of me. He finished and I dropped out, to move with him where he was going to be working. Dumb, I know. I always thought I could go back and finish."

"You still can," he encouraged her.

"Kind of hard to enroll when the closest university is outside the barricade and all of the online colleges require more than one hour of your day online."

He nodded sympathetically. "This won't last forever. One of two things will happen: a cure for the vaccine or the eventual evacuation of all of the city's inhabitants."

She shook her head in defiance of his optimism. "My best shot was getting out when I was picked in the lottery. No, actually, my *best* shot was leaving during the initial evacuation,

after the blast...before the virus became apparent and the whole city was put on lockdown." Inside, her heart clenched in its cavity, as the anger spread through her core. "But my dumb ass had to wait on a man who went out one day and never returned."

There was the initial blast in the Historic District. It took out six blocks immediately, around the detonation site, and fires and lightning storms ravaged the surrounding area. Within a couple of weeks, there was martial law and the gangs rose up to take advantage of the dire situation. They all preyed upon the fear of the populace. Many people disappeared. Some were found as bodies on the street.

David left their apartment, one day, going to work. He never returned. Catherine held up hope that he was detained or in hiding...or maybe too busy helping others to remember to check in with her.

Warnings came to evacuate, and many did. She wanted to. Her gut told her to run while she could.

Instead of listening to her instincts, she waited for David. And she missed her opportunity to leave.

The old her would have left within the first twelve *hours* of losing contact with her boyfriend. David had changed her. She had fallen so in love with him that she had moved with him twice and reserved him a spot in her future. It had cost her too much.

A week into the quarantine, she was mourning her life, her loneliness. She went to bed exhausted, not knowing how to go on the next day. In the morning, she found a very full refrigerator and a packed pantry. The stores were already experiencing shortages, and there was talk about the military having to deliver rations. She was set for months, with everything that was there.

She felt elated, when she saw the food and realized that it must have been David. He was alive! He was okay! He was going to come back! ... But then she saw his key on the kitchen counter. And she knew.

He'd left her on purpose, for some unfathomable reason. Vanished. And, now, she was truly on her own. Again.

"I was picked for the lottery, too," Apollo spoke up.

She had been running around from memory to memory in her mind, unaware that she was still part of a conversation. She looked at him, surprised to find that they had something in common: lottery winners that hadn't evacuated.

"It was one of the first weeks," he told her. "I have no idea how my name came up. I'm still convinced that the 'random selection' generator or whatever they claim they're using is all bullshit."

"Why didn't you go?" she asked, a little more forcefully than she meant to sound.

"I was signed up with the Reapers, freaking out over how to control my powers." His voice betrayed his sadness over the ordeal. "Besides, it was one of the first few weeks. I would've been booted, with all of...with everything going on. I didn't bother to go."

"You didn't even *go*?"

He shook his head and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He was closer to her, but she acted like she didn't care.

"No."

"If your name is called, again, will you go this time?"

"No," he answered a little too readily. He didn't need to mull over his options, apparently.

"Why not?" she pressed.

"Because I won't. I have my reasons. Let's leave it at that, for now, okay?"

Sheesh, she thought. *This guy...every time he starts to tell me anything interesting about himself, he forces me to drop the subject.*

"Do you ever go outside, like just for a walk, as...you? Not as...I mean, not in your Reaper uniform?"

"I used to."

"Before taking me in?"

"No, it's been a while. Months."

She furrowed her brow. "But, you can go invisible. Why can't you go hang out in the park and get some fresh air?"

He sighed, as if burdened by the prospect of answering her. "For one thing, Cole can detect me, even if I'm cloaked. If he's not looking for me, it's all good. But, in the event he chooses to scan his surroundings and I'm there, plain clothes or Reaper uniform, he can find me. I think he can pick conduits out from non-conduits, somehow. I went out once in plain clothes, for a walk in the park, just like you said. He found me, sitting on a bench, next to the fountain. We fought, a bunch of people were hurt, and I barely made it out of there. And going 'invisible' uses up a lot of my energy. I try to use it in spurts. I drained all of my energy, getting the two of us here, without being seen."

"Why couldn't you recharge, while out in the sun and using up power?" she skeptically questioned.

"To pull in light, I need to focus and kind of...turn off my powers. It would've made us visible, and I didn't want to put us in a vulnerable position."

Something clicked inside her mind. *Us*? "Did you make me invisible, too?"

"Yes."

"How? How do you do that?"

"I'm not really making us 'invisible,' it's more like sending out a thin layer of light that covers me, what I wear, and whatever I'm holding or touching. The layer refracts light, like a mirror, and it conceals me." He reached out to touch her bare arm and she leaned away. He stopped, his arm still in mid-air. "May I?"

She nodded, only a little frightened. She sat straight up again, hinting that she wouldn't pull away from him. He lightly touched her hand. She felt his skin touch hers, but she didn't feel anything else. As she watched, his hand and her entire arm disappeared. She gasped and pulled her hand away, not out of fear but out of amazement. She wanted to see if she could hold it in front of her face.

But, as soon as his hand left hers, her arm was immediately visible. She frowned, upset that she had been overeager in her desire to experiment. She looked at him, her hand suspended in air in front of her face. His hand was back on his leg.

"Do it again," she directed.

He smiled. She could tell from his eyes. They looked kinder. He knew what she wanted, and he gently encircled his fingers around her petite wrist. The same undetectable sensation. A glimmer, and then her hand was gone. She stared through it, wiggling fingers that she could feel but not see, and her mouth went agape.

"That's crazy," she whispered.

He let her go and sat back on the couch.

"Are you as powerful as Cole?" she asked seriously.

"I don't know," he answered.

Is he being modest? Does he really have no idea?

"Have you tried rallying all of the Reaper Conduits to fight him at once? You might be able to kill him."

He sighed, again. "A lot of us died fighting him, before Sasha, and then fighting *for* him, when Sasha had control over all of us. Eventually, when Zeke rallied us back together, there weren't enough of us to mount an offense. We've been focused on defense and recruiting, for now."

"Sasha controlled Cole?"

"It seemed like a weird, *quid pro quo* relationship, to me," he cautiously said. "It didn't last long."

Quid pro quo? Who actually uses that? Was this guy a lawyer before the quarantine?

"You sound pretty well educated," she smoothly complimented. "Did you go to college?"

"I did." A slight smile in his voice. Pride.

"Where?" *Good job with the light, positive conversation, Catherine!*

"ULNM. University of Louisiana New Marais."

"Louisiana? Wow. So you know what it's like to be on the other side of the country, too."

"Yes," he nodded. "But, I returned home, when I was done."

"So, if you're from here, do you have family here? A girlfriend?"

She felt the change ripple through the air. It became awkward, again. *How am I going to get to know this guy, get him to trust me, when every other question I ask is too much for him to take?*

"I'd rather not get into that part of my personal life." He stood and walked toward the kitchen.

"Are you ready for some lunch?"

Catherine looked at the clock hanging on the wall of the living room. It was already well past noon. She followed him into the kitchen and stood at the island, as he searched through the refrigerator's contents.

Lunch was a silent affair. Apollo did remove the bottom of his mask, again, to eat.

He might be pretty good-looking, she pondered. His arms are nicely toned. Tight black shirt... like one of those workout or athletic shirts...shows that he's not super muscular, but he's more fit than the average guy in his twenties. David may have been shorter, but he was jacked. Guy worked out like it was his religion. Apollo is taller, leaner.

They finished and, after his ritualistic cleaning, he went to stand at the window. Catherine walked back to the bookshelf and reexamined her options.

Spy novels, not so much...lots of classics...Wuthering Heights, The Great Gatsby, Catch-22, Fahrenheit 451...it's like a repeat of mandatory literature from school days...

"Did you read all of these?" she asked. She still read the spines, her eyes away from him.

"No," he replied simply.

Oliver Twist...hmm...

She took a seat on the open chair and opened the novel she'd selected. Before long, Apollo was back on the couch. He had his right forearm on the armrest, and Catherine could see the majority of his tattoo below the sleeve of his black shirt. A blazing sun, with a drawn archery bow within its right half, ready to shoot an arrow out of the sun and toward its trajectory. Artistic, but no color. Professionally done, and it showed.

On his left forearm, holding the remote for the television, was another tattoo. This one, she had seen the bottom of, before, when he rolled up the sleeves of his white coat. It looked like ink spots and blotches, with black tentacles splayed behind gnashing teeth. Messy. Now, she could clearly see that it was the Reapers' insignia. Terrifying.

"It was kind of a mandatory thing," he explained, without her having to ask. He must've noticed her staring at his arms. "The Reaper tattoo was the first, and I used my call sign as inspiration for the second. After that, they left me alone."

Sun, archery, light...yeah, that's pretty obvious. What did he mean by 'they left him alone'?

She skipped over that thought to bring up another.

"Do you have any others?"

"No," he shook his head, looking at the blank screen on the wall in front of him. "Do you have one?"

"No," she stated. It was a lie, but he wasn't going to be seeing hers, anyway, and she didn't want him asking questions about them.

He turned his head toward her, then. "Have you read *Oliver Twist* before?" he asked, changing the subject in a rare show of control.

"Nope," she looked down at the book. "Have you?"

"Once. In high school."

"I was in the musical version, in high school," she admitted. *Tidbits of personal information. Draw him in, lightly flirt. Build trust.*

He leaned forward in the seat and placed the remote back onto the coffee table. "Who did you play?"

"I was just one of the chorus kids. Because I was one of the taller girls, I was kind of a background townsperson. I didn't like it very much." She scrunched her nose at the memory of performing onstage.

"Why did you do it?"

"Elective credit, for graduation requirements...and it got me out of the house for a couple of months' worth of weeknights."

"Hopefully you enjoy the book more, then."

"Did you? Enjoy it?"

"No," he said without guilt. "But I didn't enjoy any of my English classes."

But you're such a wordsmith. Ha ha ha. "Ah," she finished out the conversation.

Catherine opened the book back up, and Apollo put in a video game. She glanced at the screen and saw that it was a first-person-shooter type. *David liked those, too*, she inwardly rolled her eyes. She kept her attention on her book, and the two of them kept at their separate activities for hours.

Eventually, they ate dinner. This time, when they were done, she stood and helped him clean his kitchen.

Easy conversation, proximity, willingness to chip in... keep this up, I'll be out of here by the end of the week.

Staying in contact with a Reaper seemed like a bad idea, but it didn't stop her from weighing the idea in her mind. *He's shown he's not going to hurt me...so far. He also has access to better food. I don't know...maybe, until this whole quarantine is lifted, or until I am picked through the lottery, again...maybe we can be friends. It might be useful to have someone as powerful as him to call on, if I need something.*

She excused herself after the cleanup, and went to the bedroom for some privacy. At the door, she stopped, before closing him out for the night.

"Um, do you want, like, clothes to sleep in? Or do you need anything from your room, before I turn in?"

"Yeah, that would be great," his deep voice answered. He walked from the kitchen into his bedroom, passing her by.

She watched him pause, then walk straight through the room to his dresser. He pulled black socks, a pair of blue gym shorts, and a dark grey hooded sweatshirt from the various drawers where all of the items were neatly kept.

Well, that'll certainly be a different look from his Reaper uniform. If he keeps that skull mask on, though, it'll be too weird.

He left the room, and she stayed inside, shutting him out. The sun had set, and Catherine took the time to fully relax.

In the beginning, before their internet had been severely limited, everyone had taken to the online platforms to give their two cents for how to cope in isolation. Meditation, yoga, prayer, journaling...everyone had a suggestion for keeping one's mental health intact. Catherine had tried everything. She *did* enjoy stretching her muscles and letting her mind wander down avenues of daydreams.

She changed back into the sweatpants and t-shirt from Apollo's wardrobe, then turned off the light and sat on the ground, stretching her sides and thinking about what her life would be like outside of quarantine. Where would she live? Her brain landed on a conversation from earlier.

New Marais? She'd never lived in the South. Kind of a party town, wasn't it? Perhaps somewhere nearby, then. Close enough to join in the action, far enough away for it not to be a

daily nuisance.

Stretching out each of her muscle groups, she felt a pleasant soreness and lengthening from the process. It would help her sleep deeply...hopefully too deeply to dream.

When she left the room to get ready for bed, Apollo glanced over, then returned his attention to a different video game that he was now playing. Some kind of racing game, she supposed, based off of the low revving sounds coming from the speakers. He hadn't yet changed into the new set of clothes he had just taken.

She brushed her teeth, splashed some cold water on her face, and looked at her reflection. She needed a shower. *In the morning*, she promised herself.

Back in the bedroom, she lay down and picked the mythology book back up. She'd left *Oliver Twist* on her seat in the living room, but she preferred reading about the tangled webs between the various Greek deities. Last night, she only read through the pages devoted to Apollo, before she fell asleep.

Hades' abduction of Persephone... She reread the familiar story. Her thoughts strayed to the man, dressed in black, with a skull mask. *Little too on the nose, there*, she dryly reflected on her own circumstances. *But Hades wouldn't let Persephone leave. Apollo would. Will. A month? That's a worst-case scenario. One week, tops.*

Catherine drifted off to sleep, content that her story's ending would be much happier than that of poor Persephone.

AN: Regarding the mythology of "The Rape of Persephone," I know there are many, *many* interpretations of Persephone's levels of participation and happiness in her marriage, but I am assuming this large volume of Greek mythology would have only a bare-bones version of the story. Catherine reads it, assumes Persephone was a prisoner for the portion of the year she spent with Hades as his unwilling bride.

His Concerns

Hello, few people who read this story!

Slow burn, huh? I'm just trying to set everything up so that the groundwork is done. Because of the back-and-forth with the narrative perspective, it's taking twice as long to move the plot along. Hahaha...when coming up with the concept of how I was going to write this, I didn't think of that being an obvious pitfall. Ah, well. I *really* enjoy switching from Apollo to Catherine, so that I can interpret their reactions and motivations separately.

Three more chapters, or so, until a major plot point.

Happy reading!

Jenn

His conversations with Catherine were more than enjoyable. To connect with someone, after months of solitude. *It's been too long...*

He was very much aware that their talks revolved around shallow subjects: age, birthplace, school years. They were both treading cautiously. But he felt a twinge of guilt, whenever he had to stop himself from giving her more candid answers.

"I was picked for the lottery, too," he had shared.

Catherine was still distraught over having missed a chance to escape the quarantine. She seemed the type, to him, that would've rushed out of the city as soon as possible. But then she'd explained her reason: her boyfriend. She sounded bitter, not merely saddened by her love's disappearance. Just a single sentence, though, not too much information given as to why she no longer pined over a man she'd moved across the country for.

When she'd heard him say the unexpected statement, he noticed that he'd recaptured her attention from wherever her mind had wandered to after lamenting her missed opportunities to leave Empire City.

"It was one of the first weeks," he continued. He'd rambled a bit, after that, about how he was surprised to be selected, because he felt the whole process was rigged. He still felt that, actually.

"Why didn't you go?" She sounded mad. No, more than mad. Indignant. As if his refusal to leave at a time of crisis and uncertainty had, somehow, negatively impacted her.

Clearly that's not the case, Catherine. Or we wouldn't be sharing pleasant conversation in my home. Who knows what would've happened to you? The Reapers were the least of your worries, in that alley.

"I was signed up with the Reapers, freaking out over how to control my powers," he had smoothly countered. He didn't want to fire back. He wanted to present the facts without sounding defensive. "Besides, it was one of the first few weeks. I would've been booted, with all of-" *the pregnant women that were showing up at the bridge on a weekly basis, at that point. Can't say that. Too insensitive.* "With everything going on. I didn't bother to go."

The talk became even more strained, at that point. She became increasingly agitated with every answer he gave her. No, he didn't go to his evacuation call. No, he wouldn't run from Empire City, if given the chance. *No, I don't need to tell you why.*

And then, again, she had switched the conversation on its head; the flip in subject was so drastic, he was only able to react as a way to keep up with her.

"Why can't you go hang out in the park and get some fresh air?" she eventually asked.

Shortly after becoming a conduit, he joined the Reapers. There were others like him. They struggled together, trying to figure out how to both restrain and flex the powers that had newly arisen.

He was considered missing from work. One of many. There was enormous guilt, in not returning. Every time he left the apartment, he worried that he would see someone he knew. Hoodies, hats, sunglasses...he found himself doing every cliched version of "hidden in plain sight."

None of the conduits shared their personal lives with each other. They were in a gang. They had powers that defied explanation. Fighting Cole, fighting sometimes within their ranks, keeping one's information confidential was common sense. To those that had anything worth keeping secret, anyway.

His identity hidden behind both a mask and a false identity, Apollo went to the park, once, in regular clothes. Cole was not considered a threat to the general public. He wasn't outed by the Voice of Survival as a terrorist, yet. Him zapping the crowd during a supply dump within the first two weeks was foreboding, but no one had died at the scene.

Apollo sat on a bench, people-watching and staring at the man-made pond. He'd been to Memorial Park often, before the blast. He'd never sat at that particular bench, though. It was peaceful; it was everything he'd hoped for. People walked by him without so much as looking at him. Just as he began to think about leaving, he felt himself being blown back by a shockwave.

Cole was zeroed in on him, staring at him intently and raising a hand to shoot bolts of electricity from his hands. Apollo remembered that feeling, simultaneous wonder and horror, at being the focus of Cole's wrath. A woman was standing too close to them, and she was blown away, too, by the wave of energy. She'd landed in the pond, but she had trouble standing to her feet. Cole was erratically firing at him, and one of the blasts hit the water. Apollo watched as her body went rigid and then fell prostrate...unmoving.

Those nearby but uninvolved screamed and scattered in different directions. Apollo attempted to go invisible, but Cole narrowed his eyes and, in the next few seconds, could

somehow see him clearly enough to fire at him. More people were hurt, as Apollo ran. He was unarmed, and he felt less confident that he could best Cole without the psychological armor his Reaper uniform provided.

Cole chased down Apollo through Memorial Park, but lost track of the fellow conduit when they reached the city streets. Reapers were positioned on the tops of every building, back then, and the hail of gunfire was the sole reason Apollo was able to escape the terrorist.

After that, Apollo never left the cover of a building without being in full Reaper gear. He always had to assume that Cole could find him.

He finished telling a snippet of his experience with Cole, then switched over to how he had concealed the two of them from the alley to his apartment. Talking openly about his powers definitely held Catherine's interest. Being honest with himself, he felt a surge of pride in hearing how impressed she was with his abilities.

Unlike many other conduits, Apollo instantly grappled onto his powers and the expansion of their limits. The only thing that was a hard line for him was not hurting others.

Sasha hadn't corrupted the minds of the Reapers with her mind-controlling agent until a month after she took over. After she sprayed them with the toxic substance, they were hell-bent on following her orders. The lowest, weakest members were fodder. The tar affected them so drastically, they were no longer able to verbally communicate. Most vomited, even as they attacked Cole. The Conduits fared better, having some sort of natural resistance with their evolved senses.

Apollo remembered the things he did, but, at the time, he was unable to stop himself from complying with Sasha's will. And, when she wasn't calling him to action, he was a zombie. Going through the motions of the most basic means of self-preservation. When he needed nourishment, he ate directly out of his fridge. When he needed first-aid or to improve his hygiene, he did what was necessary for him to survive. And when he needed nothing, he sat on his couch, staring at the wall, or slept.

Now, months after Sasha was claimed by the First Sons, months after her toxin wore off, Apollo was sitting next to a young woman, doing his best to humble brag about himself. He reached toward her with one hand, but she withdrew from him. He chastised himself.

Come on, man, really? She's only been here a few days.

"May I?"

When she nodded, he gently placed his hand over hers. She sat with both arms in her lap. It took concentration, but he was skilled in this particular power, he used it so often. He flexed the force-field of refracted light over her skin, up to her elbow, as he had displayed the day before. She gasped in surprise and pulled her hand away from his, up to her face.

He had just explained that he needed to be in contact with the object or person he was concealing, but she held up her hand like she was disappointed that it was visible. He placed his hand back on his knee.

"Do it again," came from her lips.

He smirked confidently, pleased with her growing trust in him. He reached over, again, holding her small wrist easily in his larger hand. This time, he only had his hand and hers concealed. She stared at where her hand should be, amazed. He could feel the musculature in her wrist move underneath her skin, as she moved her invisible fingers.

"That's crazy," she whispered.

He released his grip and placed his hand back on his knee. They were still less than three feet from each other, but he made sure not to encroach upon her any further.

"Are you as powerful as Cole?"

Probably. But, being a part of the Reapers, hopefully I'll never have to find out.

"I don't know," he said, instead. *Better not to go there.*

Eventually, they landed on happier topics. College. He'd taken the opportunity to leave the state, traveling to Louisiana for a brand-new experience. ULNM had one of the best programs in the country to help him advance in the career path he'd chosen.

"So," she lightly probed. "If you're from here, do you have family here? A girlfriend?"

He was thankful that she couldn't hear his heartbeat. It was racing in his chest.

"I'd rather not get into that part of my personal life." *Now, it's time for me to take back the reins of this conversation.* He stood up and headed to the kitchen. "Are you ready for some lunch?"

An uncomfortable silence settled in. He felt guilt, shutting her down, but he was used to keeping his life sectioned off.

They ate, he cleaned, he recharged at the window, and he felt Catherine pass behind him. She perused the bookshelf to his left.

"Did you read all of these?" she called out.

I wish I could say yes...kind of embarrassing. All of this time in isolation, and I've hardly picked up a book.

"No," he admitted.

Some of them aren't even mine...

She removed a book from its place on the shelf and went to be seated in the armchair. He soaked in the sun's rays, breathing in deeply. When he joined her, he collapsed onto the couch in bliss. He let his head fall back, finally feeling relaxed. That moment passed, when he looked up to find her staring at his arm.

The tattoos weren't his idea. His mom would've been furious, to see her boy's arm marked up. His father wouldn't have cared. While his friends were getting tattoos in high school, he never so much as mentioned the idea. Honestly, he didn't care, either way. He knew one thing for certain: he wouldn't rush to get one for the novelty of it. If he had a tattoo, it would *mean* something. It would have significance.

It was a sick joke, then, that it had been a part of his initiation into the Reapers. He had to get their logo permanently inked into his body. One way in, blood; one way out, death.

I got something significant, all right.

The second, symbolic of his call sign, was done with a bit more fraternal solidarity. He and four other conduits went together to have their camaraderie celebrated. It was nice to belong. Even if they didn't share more than battle stories and strategies.

He let her know as much, and she was strangely accepting of his tactical response.

"Do you have any others?" she asked.

"No," he said truthfully. He looked at her and made a leap. "Do you have one?"

"No."

Mom would've appreciated that about her, he thought with amusement.

A short discussion about the merits of reading *Oliver Twist*, and then more silence. Catherine read, Apollo gamed.

The time flew faster than he expected. He didn't notice how much the room's natural light had darkened. He stood up and stretched, then turned a light on for her to read by. No thank you, again. He frowned at went to the kitchen to figure out a plan for dinner.

Is she upset with me? What's in her head right now? Or is she really just engrossed in that book?

Dinner came and went, but he was happy to see her join him in the cleanup. They stood near to each other, handling serving pieces back and forth. An effortless partnership. He liked it. He could get used to that. But he was scared to dwell on that idea, because it wasn't feasible.

Keep getting attached and see what happens in a month. You'll end up losing what's left of your heart, idiot.

When she left for the bedroom, he was surprised to hear her call out to him.

"Um," she started with uncertainty in her voice. "Do you want, like, clothes to sleep in? Or do you need anything from your room, before I turn in?"

"Yeah, that would be great," he answered reflexively.

Walking into his room, he saw that it was already changed. He paused to take in the slight alterations to his living space: a purse on the sole chair in his room, her jacket thrown over the chair's back, his unmade bed looking messier than he would've allowed, the pillow askew and indented, and the clothes she was about to wear to bed laid across the pulled-back covers.

He forced himself to quickly complete the task. Grabbing some clothes, he left his own bedroom to return to the couch. Before he could wish her a good night, the door closed. He thought about calling out, anyway, but decided to leave her at peace.

With her secluded away, he walked over to his bookshelf. It had been left untouched for too long. She chose *Oliver Twist*, a book that he'd held onto through the years. It was a classic. He was supposed to appreciate those, right? He'd told Catherine that he disliked his English literature classes.

I hope I didn't come off as some uncultured jerk. I like books.

He looked at his collection of action-themed fiction.

Granted, my tastes are somewhat single-minded.

He took the game out of the console and replaced it with another favorite. He'd already thrown the newer clothes on the sofa next to his seat, but he couldn't change into them, yet.

After playing for a couple of hours, Apollo heard the tell-tale click of the bedroom door opening. Catherine was in his clothes again, and he quickly refocused on the brightly-colored screen in front of him. He heard the bathroom door close, the same familiar sounds of her getting ready for bed. The door opened again, but he didn't look over.

When the bedroom door shut, again, he sighed to himself. He missed the exchange of good nights. Silly, but poignant. *Oliver Twist* rested on the chair next to him.

He finished the race he was still in the middle of, turned off the console and television, and stood up to stretch. Looking over to his bedroom, there was no noise coming from within its walls. He needed a shower, but not until he was sure she was asleep. Not until he was sure she wouldn't try to leave his apartment.

Would she? Even now? I feel like she trusts me more every day. Would she leave, if given the chance?

He sat back down and grabbed the book. He flipped it open to its first pages, reading restlessly. After rereading the same paragraph five times through, retaining nothing, he placed it on the coffee table and stood.

If she chooses to leave, it's her decision. She's not a prisoner, here. I'm just trying to protect her.

But I can't protect someone and hold them against their will...can I?

He went to the bathroom, grabbed a towel, and walked over to the small, stacked laundry unit. One by one, each item he was wearing was placed in the washer, except for the

balaclava, along with an appropriate amount of detergent for the load. He wore the towel around his waist, just in case Catherine emerged unexpectedly. If he was alone in his apartment, however...

The mask was only off for the minutes he spent showering and grooming himself. Not that anyone would appreciate his work. She would see his jaw, though, so he supposed it wasn't all for nothing. He ran the mask under warm water in the sink, then wrung it out as much as he could.

His toothbrush was in its normal spot. A lowball glass in the back corner of the counter. And, next to it, another.

...way too long.

After his nightly routine was done, he exited the bathroom quietly. Bedroom door shut, check. All locks still in place on front door, check. He walked in the towel, wet mask in hand, and removed the cleaned clothes from the washer and put them in the overhead dryer, along with the mask.

There was no plan for what to do, if she came out of her room and saw him unmasked. He went to the outfit he'd left on the sofa. The hooded sweatshirt might be effective, in hiding most of his face, if needed. Before he put on the shorts he swore softly at forgetting to grab a clean pair of boxers. There was no helping that out, now. He put the shorts on, then the black socks. He sat and picked the book back up, trying to progress further into the pages. Time passed slowly, but he knew that to be his own fault. He was on edge that she might see him. He was waiting to hear the dryer click off.

It did, and the second it was no longer running, he hustled over to the machine and retrieved the mask to conceal himself. The other items were collected and he placed them flat on top of the rest of his Reaper costume.

He needed to check in with Zeke.

That would be the test, then. That would give her ample opportunity to leave, if she so desired.

Tomorrow.

Tomorrow, he would see how much she actually trusted him.

He placed the book back on the chair she vacated, then turned off all the lights and slept solidly through the night.

In the morning, he woke to her looking at him from across the room. He sat up quickly and swung his legs to the side of the couch, rolling his shoulders back to wake his body.

"Good morning," he spoke with a throat-full of imaginary gravel.

"G'morning," she replied cordially. "Can I take a shower?"

He squinted his eyes, within the mask. "Of course."

She paused, obviously uncertain of what to do.

"Do you have, like, any women's soap or shampoo? Can I get a towel?"

"Everything is in the bathroom, under the sink and in the drawers," he nodded toward the bathroom. "I don't have anything specifically for women, but you can use mine. I'll go out today to get some more things for you. Toiletries, clothes, whatever else you need. Do you need any medications?"

"You're going out?" she asked with restrained curiosity.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "Like you said, I need to check-in with Zeke. I'll get some stuff for you, while I'm out."

"I can't come with you? Pick out what *I* want?"

"I'll be leaving as a Reaper. I can't make us invisible the whole time. One of two things might happen: Cole or a police officer. The other Reapers would leave you alone, but if I have to worry about protecting you, people will get hurt. *You* might get hurt. Or worse. I won't fight an officer, but if you go with one of them, where will you go? You'll be in the same position you are, now."

Her face hardened. He stood and walked closer to her. He realized how ridiculous he probably looked: standing in his clothes, but with the skull mask still hiding his face.

"This is temporary, Catherine," he reassured her. Her cool gaze was steeled. "Please, if you don't have a place to go and *stay*...somewhere you know you'll be safe from Cole...please, just stay here. It's not forever."

She turned on her heel and went straight to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

He sighed and removed the bottom of his balaclava to eat a quick breakfast. After that, he changed into his Reaper costume and placed the communication device back in his ear. He didn't turn it on.

There were no sounds from the bathroom. *Odd*, he thought, *what's she doing in there?*

He left the apartment through the window, leaving it open for his return. If she saw how he exited and entered, why would it matter? The locks on the door were in place, and his place was one of hundreds of thousands throughout the city. A needle in a haystack.

As soon as he was on the neighboring rooftop, he turned the earpiece back on. There was little chatter. Various Reaper units were checking in with their placements. No one was asking for him. And no Cole in sight.

That's a good sign. See you soon, Zeke.

Her Plan

Catherine woke fully refreshed, feeling better than she had in days. The window in the bedroom was barely lit by the first minutes of sunrise. She arched her back, rolling her head back with the motion and letting it roll along her shoulders. Her hair was a mess, but there was only so much she could do without a shower and a brush. She ran her fingers through the tangles slowly, trying to tame her locks into a more manageable style.

Satisfied that she was ready to leave the privacy of the bedroom, she quietly opened the door and tiptoed in her socks to the kitchen. She expected to see Apollo already awake and ready to greet her.

Instead, she could see his form lying on the couch. He was on his back, one arm over his head and leaning on the armrest for support. His head was all the way to one side.

First, she looked over to the door. The exit. All the locks were in place, of course. He *said* he would let her go. She scrutinized each individual lock, giving them a thorough examination without actually touching anything. There was no need to go. Not yet. He had been decent to her. But she hated feeling caged in. She always needed to know she had a way out. That had been the most difficult part of her time in quarantine: not having the freedom to leave.

She finished looking at the door and walked closer to him, moving slowly, until she was standing on the opposite side of the small room, between the coffee table and the wall that held up the television screen. Once in place, she studied him.

He's attractive, enough, she credited him. Nice body, very...manly. Still has that stupid mask on, though.

She was hungry, thirsty, and she was aching for a shower. But she didn't wake him. She took her time, assessing the scene in front of her.

Clothes laid out on the chair. Everything looks clean. When did he wash his clothes? Is that a pair of boxers?

She saw the copy of *Oliver Twist* sitting where she'd left it. Apollo began to stir, so she returned her attention to him.

He opened his eyes, set within the mask, and they widened immediately at seeing her. He sat up with a jolt, throwing his legs until his feet were firmly planted on the floor. She just stared, mildly amused at his flustered countenance.

"Good morning," he said, his voice thick with sleep.

"G'morning," she casually answered. "Can I take a shower?"

He squinted his eyes at her, as if she had asked him to do a backflip in the middle of his living room.

"Of course," he finally responded.

Great, she thought. Now what? I need shampoo, soap...a towel. I need to wash my clothes.

She'd asked him about the hygiene products, and he had given her permission to use his. *I guess I can smell like a man for a day or two.* Then, he'd offered to somehow get her women's products, including clothing.

"Do you need any medications?"

She shook her head. "You're going out?"

"Yeah," he said. An honest, unreserved answer. "Like you said, I need to check-in with Zeke. I'll get some stuff for you, while I'm out."

How does that work? Does he break into stores? Most everything is closed. Do the Reapers have some sort of supply cache?

I want to see.

"I can't come with you? Pick out what *I* want?" *That sounded brattier than I meant it to be. Oops.*

He'd explained, a little too fervently for her taste, that he wouldn't be able to protect or conceal her with his powers; he also laid blame upon her if anyone was hurt in the process of him escorting her to and from the apartment. He mentioned that he wouldn't hurt a police officer, but that, if she went with the police, she still wouldn't be able to return home.

She thought about everything he'd said for a long minute. *We leave, I get hurt, or someone innocent gets hurt, because of the off-chance we run into Cole. Or, if an officer sees me with Apollo, he's forced to ditch me, but then I either take my chances returning home or I have to figure out a place to lay low...*

He stood and walked toward her. It was a bit unnerving, seeing him dressed in blues and grays, but with the skull balaclava still covering most of his head. Only his light brown eyes were visible. His gaze was soft, underneath the intimidating mask.

"This is temporary, Catherine," he soothingly spoke. "Please, if you don't have a place to go and *stay*...somewhere you know you'll be safe from Cole...please, just stay here. It's not forever."

What if he's right? She thought about the danger Cole posed to her. What if Apollo is right? What if it's not safe for me to go home? What happens if I run straight toward more danger?

It was a lot to think about. She didn't want to do it in front of him. They were becoming too friendly, for her liking. The way he had so nonchalantly used her name...as if he truly cared about what happened to her, in the long run.

She left his presence and went to the bathroom. Closing the door behind her, she barricaded herself in the small room. She'd always valued her privacy. Sometimes, growing up in foster

care, the bathroom of whatever house she was in was the only place where she could be alone.

She stared at her reflection. Everything about her *looked* healthy. Her eyes were bright, her skin mostly unblemished, and her weight within normal standards. She'd probably even gained a couple of pounds, because of the well-stocked refrigerator. Besides the food, though, what was another reason to stay? She didn't need the company. She needed privacy. She didn't need his home. She had her own. His books and movies? She preferred her own collections.

Protection?

She only needed protection if there was a genuine threat looming over her. But, if he was right...if Cole was transferring his unresolved issues from a dead girlfriend onto her...

Light sounds from outside the door made her somewhat aware of what Apollo was up to, on the other side of the apartment. When it was completely silent, she cracked open the door.

The first thing she saw was the living room window open. *How in the world...* She walked out and examined the frame. None of the large living room windows were supposed to be able to open, on these high-rise residential buildings. She knew it was against some code, because she'd asked the manager of her own building about it, before moving in. *Apollo must have rigged this up*, she reasoned. *But, how does he use this as an exit? Can he FLY, too?!*

She left the living room and returned to the bathroom, stealing a look at the front door and the intact locks.

As promised, she found all of the items she needed for a shower in the cabinet under the sink. She sighed with pleasure at the hot water beating down her neck and back. A generic all-in-one type shampoo was perched on a ledge in the corner of the shower stall. She picked it up, opened the container, and smelled its contents. *Smells like man, all right*. Woodsy, with a crisp minty scent cutting through. The shampoo, the equally-generic liquid body wash. She finished cleaning herself and grabbed the towel from the hook nearest to the shower.

She noticed there was another towel hanging, too, a little damp to the touch, when she reached out to see if Apollo had, indeed, showered last night. After drying off, she wrapped the towel around herself and thought about what to do. She looked at the clothes she'd worn in. His.

She bit her lip and went to the bedroom. The window was still open, the locks on the front door undisturbed. No Apollo. She grabbed her clothes, including her underwear, then gathered the loaner outfit from the bathroom. The stacked laundry unit was simple enough to understand. Everything went in together. No point in separating everything out into different loads. She started the washer and returned to his bedroom. Her bedroom. For now.

A part of her hesitated, wondering if it would be better to wait for him to return or for the washer and dryer to complete their cycles. *He's given me his clothes, already. I need something clean to wear. I'm not walking around naked in a towel.*

She pulled new clothes from his drawers, and then set to work trying to detangle her wet hair as best as she could with her fingers. He had a little hair gel under the sink, so she used a tiny amount in her palms to lightly coat her hair. It would air dry into loose waves.

Once she was dressed and finished in the bathroom, she walked back to the door. One by one, she unlocked each of the mechanisms. There were five. She knew that there couldn't have been more than two, when he moved in. *Just the deadbolt and lock on the knob. Pretty standard.* There were three others. Two different sliding locks and a chain at the top.

When they were all open, she took a breath and opened the door to peek out. The hall was quiet. It was still relatively early, she supposed. In her building, hardly any of the residents milled about or left the security of their homes. Maybe his was the same. She looked up at the number on the outside of the door. *1204, wow...twelfth floor? We are high up.* Seeing the apartment number made her think of something else. *I don't think I've heard any noise coming from above us. Is this the top floor of his building? Or is the apartment above this one empty?*

She leaned back into the apartment, but she left the door cracked open. Her boots were still standing side-by-side. Ready to go.

But what if he's right?

She closed the door. One by one, she placed all of the locks back to their protective positions.

He left me alone. This is a good sign. There will be other opportunities. If I leave now, and I need help...I can't afford to burn bridges, right now...

She went to the sofa and sat down. As she reached for the remote on the coffee table, the strong smells of the shampoo and the soap wafted in front of her. It was on her, from her shower, and it permeated the couch that he'd slept on. Where she sat.

She recalled, after David's disappearance, purposefully smelling his cologne, his shampoo, his body wash...all of the products that were exclusively his. Shirts he had worn and were still in the laundry basket. They smelled like *him*. At first, the aroma-triggered memories were comforting. She used the shirts as pillow covers, falling asleep and imagining he was near. When the scent faded, she sprayed his cologne on her pillow. When that finally faded, she made a decision.

She'd dumped the cologne, his shampoo, his soap. Everything that she was using as a crutch. She threw all of his belongings into suitcases and storage bins. But she couldn't bring herself to remove the picture of the two of them on her nightstand. It was the only visible reminder of the man whom she had once been so hopelessly in love with.

Now, being surrounded by a new male scent...it was a little painful.

She pushed the stirred feelings out of her mind and turned on the television. She watched the news without absorbing any of the worthless information. When the washer finished its cycle, she placed everything in the dryer and then returned to the couch.

Another hour passed, and her clothes were ready. That was when she registered her stomach rumbling. She hadn't yet eaten anything, and it was almost lunchtime. The fridge was, by far, her favorite thing about the apartment. She took her time figuring out what she wanted to eat. She settled on making herself a sandwich. A real, deluxe, deli-style sandwich. Lettuce, tomato, pickles, turkey, provolone cheese, sliced bread. So many luxuries that she had lived without for months. Paired with coffee, it was the perfect meal.

She cleaned up after herself, after eating, then removed the clothes from the dryer. Everything was folded and taken back to the bedroom. She placed his sweatpants and shirt into their respective drawers, then placed the remaining pile of her clothes on the chair, on top of her purse. She quickly took off her pants, put on her clean underwear, and then put the bottoms back on.

Now, what to do. The television was still on, so she went back to the couch and sat down. She flipped through the stations and settled on a documentary about tigers living in captivity.

Apollo returned within the first hour of the program, but not at the window, like she expected. A knock at the door made her jump, but she quickly left the sofa and went to see who could be. There was a peephole, thankfully, but it looked like the hall was empty. Then she saw a shimmer in the air.

She undid all the locks and barely opened the door. In the next instant it flew all the way open, and she backed away from the path of entry. Apollo reappeared, just as his demonstration with her hand yesterday. He was carrying a bag in one hand, and he used his free hand to close and lock the door behind him.

Safe inside, he handed the bag to her and went to the living room to remove his trench coat. He glanced at the television as he did so, then threw the white coat over the same chair.

Catherine separated the handles of the large canvas bag to see what it held. *Some tops, another pair of pants.* She jostled the bag and saw more underneath. *Some toiletries. Underwear. He bought me underwear?* The size seemed accurate, too. *A couple of sports bras. Safe bets.* It looked like he'd even grabbed a handful of feminine products as well. *Nice, but I won't be needing those for a couple weeks, or so.*

"Where do you get all this?" she asked him.

"Supply chain. Some of the Reapers are women. Some are conduits. They need stuff, too."

"There are female *Reapers*? Where were *they*, when I was trapped in the alley with your comrades?"

He approached her slowly, narrowing his eyes, then leaned against the kitchen island to take a breath before answering.

"Every organization has its outliers," he defensively said. "The Reapers are no different. We're no longer under Sasha's influence, and we're trying to focus our efforts on taking back Empire City. But, yes, there are going to be bad eggs in any large group of people."

Fine, I'll let that go, she told herself. *I don't need to be creating tension between us.*

"Do you know any of them?" she innocently diverted the conversation.

"The bad eggs?"

"No, the women."

"Yes," he stood as he answered her. "Two of the conduits are women."

"Do you...work with them closely?" she lamely tried to continue on this vein. *Keep it light.*

He shook his head. "I mean, occasionally we all try to gang up on Cole. I only know their nicknames and their basic powers."

"What are they called?"

"Razor and Aura."

"Nice nicknames," Catherine nodded, trying to imagine the women behind the call signs.

"What can *they* do?"

"Razor can manipulate metal, to an extent, and she can harden her skin until it's impenetrable. Aura makes people hallucinate. On weaker, impressionable minds, she can significantly alter their moods and exert some control over their actions."

"Hmmm...interesting."

"Anyway," he concluded, "there's some soap and some other stuff in there." He nodded once toward the bag already in her hands. "I did my best with sizing. Sorry I forgot to get that from you before."

He walked away from her, back to the living room, and stood in front of the window with his eyes closed.

Recharging? It was all still a little too surreal for her to take in. She pictured him plugging himself into the wall, like her phone charger. She stifled a giggle, thankful that the tiger documentary was on and playing over the silence.

Catherine went to the bedroom, to go through the bag more thoroughly. She took the clothing out, held up each piece, then refolded and placed them in a pile on top of the dresser. Two long-sleeved shirts, one navy, one a cream color, another t-shirt, this one black, black leggings, and black yoga pants. A pack of briefs, basic, no-nonsense colors. *Guess he doesn't understand panty lines.* A pack of sport bras, all a light grey. Everything was functional, and it would all work for her. She was grateful that his mind hadn't drifted toward dressing her up for *him*.

She took the bathroom items, still in the canvas bag, and went to place them under the sink. They would be hidden from sight, unless she needed to use them. She placed the canvas bag

there, too, thinking that it would be handy for carrying all of the items back to her own apartment.

Apollo was at the window, but, when she came toward him, he looked over to acknowledge her. They sat together in the living room, he on the sofa, she on the chair next to him. He left the documentary on, and they watched it in relative peace.

The week went on like this, with polite interactions, light conversation, meals, cleaning, and activities either shared or in solitude.

Apollo explained more about his power, how he was able to leave and return through the window. He left two additional times: once to get groceries and once on a scouting mission that he'd been ordered to do. Apparently, Zeke sent him to his former home, an older apartment complex on the other side of the Neon, near the Fremont Bridge that led to the Historic District. And, specifically, the rooftop of the building that Zeke had outfitted as a hang-out spot. Apollo hadn't found much, as he reported to both Zeke and to Catherine. Some burnt generators, a few planters with no sign of plant life, and a destroyed television set.

At the end of the week, Catherine was done. The lack of personal space, having to constantly steer the conversation toward shallower topics, not having her own stuff...her patience waned. It had been a week. As private as her building was, she worried that one of her neighbors might barge through her unlocked door and take whatever was left behind. She needed to salvage what she could. Now. Not in another three weeks. By then, surely everything would be missing.

Apollo was on the sofa, after they'd shared lunch. He was playing his racing game, mindlessly directing his fictional car around a coded racetrack. Catherine was still in the kitchen, finishing her glass of water.

She cleared her throat once. Then twice. He picked up on the fact that she was trying to get his attention, so he paused his game to look over at her.

"Um, I've decided to go ahead and leave," she told him directly. "It's been a week and I need to get back to my apartment. Thanks for helping me out, but I think I can take it from here. Can I get my phone back, please?"

In the bedroom, she already had all of her clothes piled and ready to go. The canvas bag was still in the bathroom, under the sink, but she could easily grab it and place everything inside within minutes. While he opened the safe in his closet to get her phone.

He was holding the controller, sitting on the edge of the sofa, but her announcement made him place the controller on the table in front of him and lean back into his seat.

"You can't go back, yet," he said without apology. "A week isn't nearly enough time. For all we know, he may check back weekly to see if you're there. That's why I said a month. I think, if my instincts are right and he checks weekly, three weeks of seeing no sign of you will make him think you're not returning."

Okay... well, that's the first I've heard of that little theory.

"What if I just go to my apartment, take a quick look around, grab a few things, lock my door, and come back?"

He stood and walked to where she was in the kitchen. A few feet away from her, he stopped.

"No," he said more firmly.

"Why not? You said I could *leave*," she challenged him directly. "What are the chances that, being at my apartment for fifteen minutes, I'll run into Cole? Come on!"

"I have more to worry about than just the slim chance you'll run into Cole," he coolly responded. "First, I have to trust that you'll not turn my location over to anyone. Just because you haven't seen my face doesn't mean you can't identify me. You know my powers, my age, my affiliation with the Reapers. And, once you leave here, you'll know my address."

"If you were going to let me go that first day, if I had somewhere to go, what were you going to do to protect your address? Take me out the window?"

"That wouldn't work," he retorted. "It would expend too much of my energy at once, creating a path for us, concealing us both, somehow getting back down to the ground. I was going to blindfold you, conceal us, then take you through my building to the street. Once you were too far to be able to figure out where we'd started, I was going to let you go and disappear."

"Fine," she rolled her eyes. "But that's not-"

"I'm not finished," he interrupted her. Her brows shot up in both offense and surprise. He'd never interrupted her, before. "Second, I don't trust that you'll return. I think, once I give you back your phone and you leave for your apartment, you'll find that, after 'fifteen minutes' without incidence, you won't have anything to fear. And, if you're wrong, your best-case scenario is Cole harassing you. Your worst-case scenario is that he'll either rape you, torture you, kill you, or abduct you. Possibly all of those." He was raising his voice, now, which didn't go over well with her.

"H-he hasn't done any of that...he's not known for any of...that..." she sputtered out. *I saw him torture those Reapers in the alley. He killed them. And a ton of other people. But rape? Abduction? I would've heard-*

"You're right," he acquiesced. "I haven't heard about him doing more than killing and torturing Reapers or any of his other enemies. Most of the innocent civilians who have died by Cole's hand were in his way. He killed them more out of convenience, to plow through them to get to someone else." She looked down and tried to slow her breathing. "I've *never* seen someone who looked more like his girlfriend than you. I've *never* seen him take anything from anyone. Not a hat, not a phone, not a wallet. Why would he take your ID if he didn't intend to use it?"

Souvenir? No, that's dumb. Don't say that. She stayed silent to take in his words.

He backed off, returning to his seat on the couch. The game was still paused, and he didn't pick up the controller.

What else can I do? She fretted over the amount of control she had lost. Was it worth it, to be protected, if you felt like you were a caged animal? What worried her the most was what she had to do to regain some control in this situation. There was only one thing she could think of. A similar thought to the one she'd felt when cornered by the Reapers in the alley.

Just get through this...do what has to be done...so that you can come out the other side...scarred, but free...

She went to the bedroom and changed from what she was wearing into her white t-shirt and a borrowed pair of his boxers. No bra, no socks.

One time, and I'm out of here. It's my one bargaining chip.

She left the room and found Apollo reengaged in his racing game. He didn't look over at her, but she walked timidly over to him. Reaching the couch, he looked up when he realized that she was about to sit. His eyes were full of both amazement and suspicion. She sat down, with one leg curled under her, facing him.

The game continued without his participation, and his car was soon totaled and disqualified. The screen flashed the words "GAME OVER" and gave him the option to start over or return to the main menu.

She felt fairly certain that, if he wasn't wearing the cowl, she would be able to see his jaw drop.

"I wanted to thank you, properly, for saving me. You're a good man, Apollo," she spoke softly. As she leaned toward him, she slid her arm across the back of the couch.

He leaned away from her.

"Of course I would come back to you," she practically purred. Her other hand grabbed the controller from his hand and placed it on the table, further leaning over his lap. His hands were frozen in place, as if they still held the piece of equipment. "And why would I turn you in? You're my hero."

Here I go... get through this, come out the other side...

"What do I have to do to get you to trust me?"

He Fights

He did his best. Picking out clothes and essentials for Catherine was more difficult than he assumed it would be.

If I could have brought you with me, I would have, Catherine.

The warehouse that housed the Reapers' supply didn't have anything fancy. No recognizable brands. Everything was generic, basic, and bargain-priced. He grabbed and filled an empty bag that he'd found. *Brush, soap, shampoo, deodorant...I probably need to get her some menstrual stuff.* He pulled a few clothing items out and put them in the bag, too. *She probably needs underwear...geez, I feel like such a creep.*

Finished with the chore, he left the storage center, passing other Reapers right and left. He'd already checked-in with Zeke, who had dismissed his radio silence with little care. He was given an assignment for later in the week.

He took his path back, atop the roofs of the Neon, until he was standing on the building next to his. He looked through the window, into the living room of his apartment. Through the opened glass, he could see the back of a brunette head sitting on his sofa. He let out a breath that he didn't realize he was holding.

She stayed.

Getting down to the window was unnecessary. She could open the door. He made his way down through the alley way, holding onto the bag. He concealed himself the entire time, while descending, then to the entrance of his building, through the lobby and elevator. There was no one to run into; since the beginning of the quarantine, he had rarely run into any of his neighbors. But he didn't want to be caught, nonetheless, so he remained invisible. He knocked at his door, hoping Catherine would be discerning enough to figure out it was him on the other side. He could drop the façade, if needed, unless someone else came into sight.

He heard the locks being disengaged, and then the door opened slightly. Not waiting to see what she would do next, he pushed his way through and revealed himself. After securing the entry, he handed the bag to her and walked to the living room to take off his trench coat. The television was on, and it played a strange documentary about the lives of tigers in captivity. He glanced at it and then returned to the kitchen, where Catherine still stood with the bag he'd given her.

They shared a mostly-amicable conversation about the broad classifications of Reapers, and he'd taken a defensive position when she'd complained of not having female Reapers to save her from the alley.

Aura probably would've intervened, but Razor would have ignored the miscreants in favor of attacking Cole. You were lucky I was there.

"Anyway," he transitioned, "there's some soap and some other stuff in there. I did my best with sizing. Sorry I forgot to get that from you before." He left her to her own devices and went to the window to fortify his energy.

She left the kitchen, too, and he tried to block out the sounds of her rustling in his bedroom and bathroom. The sunlight was rejuvenating as always. If he'd been alone in his apartment, he'd be able to meditate effectively, bringing about a sense of calm. Having someone always nearby, he couldn't completely drop his guard enough to bring about the peaceful atmosphere he needed in his home.

Get used to a new normal. Temporarily, anyway.

They settled into a comfortable routine. Waking, eating either separately or together, watching television, reading, meditation, light conversation. Most of it was similar to what they had done before, under the harsh restrictions of quarantine, but there was someone nearby to be considerate of, now.

He had to leave the apartment twice more, within the week, and both times he felt the same apprehension that he would come back to find her gone. Instead she acted interested about where he had been and what he had seen. One trip was just a quick errand for additional groceries. The second was a reconnaissance mission to what he found out was Zeke's old place. A mess of pizza boxes, beer bottles, and destroyed generators and entertainment equipment.

She asked more about his powers, and he shared what he could, given that she seemed genuinely intrigued. Did he train alongside other conduits? *Yes*. Could he fly? *No*. But how did you go out of the apartment through the window? *Manipulating energy around me into a temporary platform or path*. He'd even demonstrated some of his other powers for her. Nothing that would call attention to the other tenants or put them in any danger.

It was midday, at the end of the week, when things changed between them.

He sat on his sofa, controller in hand, while Catherine was standing in the kitchen. After she'd cleared her throat loudly...twice...he paused his game to give her his full attention. To tell the truth, he preferred talking to her over any solitary activity.

"Um," she started, "I've decided to go ahead and leave."

Well, I wasn't expecting THAT. I told her a month-

"It's been a week and I need to get back to my apartment. Thanks for helping me out, but I think I can handle it from here. Can I get my phone back, please?"

He placed the controller onto the coffee table and sat back. *This will not go well...*

"You can't go back, yet," he plainly stated. There was no point in beating around the bush. She needed to know where he stood. He gave his reasons for why he felt so, and he thought he saw a flash of understanding within her eyes.

"What if I just go to my apartment, take a quick look around, grab a few things, lock my door, and come back?"

She still doesn't get it.

He stood up from the couch and walked over to where she stood.

"No," he emphasized, again.

"Why not?" she complained. "You said I could *leave*." She continued with a short tirade.

He took a breath and told her the truth. *I trust you...but not that much. You could turn me in, you know enough useful information to help identify me. Or, you might run home and never return. Cole will get you. I KNOW IT. STOP FIGHTING ME ON THIS.*

Eventually, Catherine seemed to back down. He'd thrown out the worst-case scenario to her. She hadn't been ready to hear such disturbing ideas, but Apollo felt that he truly had no choice. Putting such frightening thoughts in her mind hurt him, too, but he didn't show it. He left her alone, walking back to his spot on the couch. He saw her still standing in the kitchen, out of the corner of his eye, but her demeanor was altered. She looked worried.

When she went to the bedroom, he refocused on his game, picking up where he'd left off. She exited the room shortly, but Apollo didn't look over. He faintly registered her coming closer to him, but he didn't actually pay her any attention until she was beside him, about to sit on the couch.

He looked over at her and no longer cared about the fate of his avatar in the racing game.

Catherine plopped down in an absurdly adorable way, her body flush with his. Her white t-shirt was taut enough against her torso that he could see her nipples through the fabric. She had on a pair of his boxers, but they'd been rolled up at the waist until they showed the majority of her creamy thighs. Her hair, long and wavy, was messy and full along her shoulders.

She pouted prettily at him. "I wanted to thank you, properly, for saving me. You're a good man, Apollo." As she spoke, she leaned closer to him, running her arm along the couch's cushion behind him.

He reflexively leaned away, suspicious. *What is this...*

"Of course I would come back to you," she smiled flirtatiously. The hand not on the cushion behind him reached down to remove the controller from his hands. He let her do so, frozen and wary. "And why would I turn you in? You're my hero." Her words were silky and purposefully seductive.

I'm a Reaper. As she's pointed out on many occasions. I know what I am. I'm no hero.

"What do I have to do to get you to trust me?"

The controller back on the table, she moved to place her hand on his chest. He caught her wrist with his hand and held it away. He narrowed his eyes. *Too far, Catherine. How dare you try that on me...*

"If you're offering sex, then know this: I won't let a sexual relationship cloud my judgment," he said seriously. He looked her up and down. *That's what she wants, right? Or, at least, what she expects from me.* "I won't lie to you," he admitted, smirking under the mask, "I've thought about you in bed, but never as a payment."

He threw her hand away, and she let it drop to her lap. The seductive expression was hardening more and more, by the minute.

"If you want to add sex to our list of activities," he continued, "I'm all for that. But it won't get me to trust you. Trust takes time. And I'm pretty sure you already *know* that." He nodded, seeing the anger arise in her eyes. *She's not used to being rejected.* "A month," he repeated. "Three more weeks. No sooner. Not a day earlier, unless Cole is wiped off the map of Empire City."

She huffed and sat back into the sofa, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Catherine," he spoke soothingly, now. "I thought we had an agreement."

She nodded stiffly and stood. He watched her storm off, back to the bedroom, without giving him another glance. This was the littlest amount of clothing she'd worn, around him, and he stared appreciatively at what she had offered.

What happened to you? What made you think that was a good idea? He wondered at her sudden use of her body to bait him. *How far is this going to set us back?*

She didn't reappear for the rest of the day. He waited for her, in preparing dinner, but there wasn't a sound from her side of the room. He left her alone, hoping that her seclusion wasn't an indication of what the next three weeks were going to be like.

In the morning, however, an astonishing turnaround. Catherine emerged from the room, wearing a sports bra underneath the white shirt and the yoga pants, instead of his boxers. She walked straight to the kitchen, where Apollo was grabbing milk for cereal. He'd heard the door open, but he didn't look in that direction.

"Good morning," she timidly offered.

He raised an eyebrow, but refused to meet her eye. Milk jug in hand, he walked to the counter to pour it onto the cereal already in the bowl.

"Good morning," he responded tersely.

"I'm so sorry, Apollo...about last night? I'm sorry. I was feeling a little...caged in?"

He gave her a look and pulled the bottom of the mask up to eat.

"I don't appreciate you equating my keeping you safe from a known terrorist to imprisonment in my home." He wasn't trying to be especially accusatory, but he made his point with his much lower register.

Catherine sat demurely at the table, her hands clasped and resting on its flat top. "I know," she spoke with contrite embarrassment. "I'm so sorry. Can we forget that happened, please? I don't want things to be awkward between us."

He put a spoonful in his mouth and nodded. *It sounds like she means it.*

The rest of the day was quiet. They spoke little, only doing so when communication was actually necessary. At the end of the night, they both sat in their original spots: Catherine in the one open armchair that didn't have his Reaper uniform flung onto it, and Apollo settled on the sofa. The news was on, with the anchorwoman assuring Empire City and the rest of the country that a vaccine for ECVi was soon to be in mass production. Only the most gullible viewers would believe such a thing. The proof in her statements would be valid when they heard it from more than just USTV.

The rest of the week was better. Gradually, the easy conversation returned. Catherine had given up on reading *Oliver Twist* for days, and she'd asked Apollo for a starting point with his favorite series of novels. He'd happily shared a couple of options, depending on where her interest piqued, and she was reading the first of a five-book series. She'd done her laundry, again, as had Apollo. He was also adjusting to sleeping on the couch, finding himself sleeping in later than he ever had before.

He still wouldn't let her see his whole face. Nor was she allowed to use the laptop. He brought it out only at the very end of the night, when she was definitely asleep. He checked it nightly, knowing that, without wearing his communicator at all times, Zeke would contact him through an encrypted message.

It was close to the end of the second week of Catherine's stay that he received such a message. She was in the bedroom, and Apollo hadn't heard a sound from that side of the apartment in hours. He'd pulled the laptop from its hiding place, pleased that Catherine had yet to find it or bring the issue of using a computer back up. When he saw the Reaper icon in the corner of the desktop screen, he clenched his jaw and clicked.

{ReapEr TaRget Indigo BUrning Throne IntO Night...A5Save}

It was an easy enough cypher, really, but the key was knowing the matching password.

RETRIBUTION, he thought to himself. *Antonym, five letters, opposite of save.*

A blank line below the riddle flashed. He only had three tries to retrieve the information, but he didn't need more than one. There had only been one occasion where Zeke's riddle had proven to be undecipherable. And he'd just put on his communicator to retrieve the message audibly.

MERCY KILL, he typed. The screen flashed, then showed the unlocked message:

[Apollo, meet at the docks by Jefferson Tunnel. Saturday. 2230. Strike on Shanty Town, eradicate remaining DMs, possibly draw-out Cole. Mandatory. All hands. – Z]

He only had seconds to commit the information to memory. *10:30pm on Saturday night, near Jefferson Tunnel.* The message glitched, then erased from his computer. The laptop went back to showing his normal desktop setup...no Reaper logo in sight.

Two days, he thought.

He hadn't left Catherine by herself once, since she had asked him at the end of the previous week to leave.

Not like I have a choice. I'll just have to go and hope that she has enough faith in me to stay here.

The next morning, he let her know of his upcoming absence.

"All night?" she'd asked over her cup of coffee.

"I'm not sure," he'd answered honestly.

"What are you doing?"

"Going into the Warren."

"Going after the Dust Men?" she'd said with fear and awe laced within her words.

He nodded solemnly. It wasn't going to be an easy fight, but it wasn't necessarily an all-out war, either. "They've been...irritating, in our goal to neutralize Cole. And that's without a true leader. They've had random conduits that have taken control, from time to time, but mostly they seem to act without purpose. We need to take them out before they become more than just a nuisance."

"Are you scared of what might happen?" She looked worried, biting her bottom lip.

Worried for me? Worried for the fate of Empire City?

He smiled at her, and she returned it gratefully, being used to seeing the tell-tale glint in his eyes.

"I've lived this long," he said lightheartedly. "None of the conduits in the Warren are as powerful as ours. They don't seem to have any desire to develop their powers in creative ways. Besides, we have numbers on our side."

The day progressed and tension mounted. He could tell she was struggling to keep a calm disposition. She was near him more than usual, following him where he went in the apartment, wanting to join him with whatever activity he was doing. They worked out together, watched a movie, talked...she even tried out two of his video games. They'd laughed together as she had done her best to learn the controls of the first-person shooter, only to shoot wildly at any humanoid thing that appeared onscreen.

On Saturday, she was less dependent upon him for entertainment. Until he'd put on his full Reaper uniform, it was any other day between them. A good day. And then, as he started to dress, she'd suddenly appeared beside him, watching.

"What happens..." she started, "if you don't come back?"

Now she's back to thinking of her own welfare.

"What happens to you, you mean?" he called out knowingly. He wasn't agitated by the question. It was practical. "You'll have my apartment to yourself, I guess," he joked. She gave him a cynical look and he sighed. "If I don't come back here, I still want you to take my advice and stay here for another two weeks. After that, it's up to you. I'm sorry to say that you'll have to go back to the military MREs and rations. I don't trust any of the other Reapers enough to let you contact them. And Zeke...I'm pretty sure that, given the chance, he'd use you as bait.

"You can stay here as long as you like," he continued. "Or you can go back and forth between here and your place, if you want. My key only locks the deadbolt, and it's on a nail next to the safe in my closet. I haven't used it for months."

"Will you take off the mask, before you go?" she innocently asked with a smile.

He put on his black gloves, one at a time. "I'll take it off when I get back," he promised.

"Deal," she smiled wider.

He was, once again, head-to-toe in his black gear. He put the final piece of his outfit on, the white trench coat, and he let the hood cover the majority of his head. He stood and watched her watching him. She tentatively took a step closer to him. He looked over to the clock on his microwave. Nine forty-five. It was pitch black outside, and it was time to go. His apartment building was quite close to the Jefferson Tunnel, being across the street from Fisherman's Wharf. It wouldn't be more than a twenty-minute commute for him, but he liked being the first one there. Assessing the situation and coming up with contingencies for whatever could be sprung upon him.

As he walked to the window exit, he heard her fall in step behind him. He didn't look back, unhinging the window and opening it fully.

"You can close it behind me, if you like," he told her. "Just don't engage the lock, okay?"

"Apollo?"

He turned around to face her. She was closer to him than he'd realized. She stepped up to him, going up onto her tiptoes, and placed her arms around his shoulders. He accepted the hug, somewhat stiffly, and whispered into the air behind her.

"I'll be back soon. Probably while you're still asleep."

She pulled away and nodded. "Good luck."

He left out the window and headed straight for the tunnel.

Zeke hadn't been kidding; the Reapers were definitely all amassed for this mission. They mostly stayed in hierarchal groups, before all heading through Jefferson Tunnel and into the Warren District. All of the Reapers, conduits and non-conduits alike, moved like shadows through the streets, going down familiar alleys and behind buildings. This wasn't their first attack on the Dust Men. And, lucky for them, the streets at the late hour were almost completely deserted. The Dust Men, when their numbers were mightier, used to have encampments all over the Warren. Now, dwindled down to the dozens that were left, they made the decrepit Shanty Town, a mess of corrugated metals, mismatched wood planks, and other makeshift supplies, their base of operations.

It went according to plan.

Until Alden Tate revealed himself.

The elderly conduit was the original leader of the Dust Men and a former member of the First Sons. Ousted from the latter by Kessler himself, Tate had vowed revenge, but was beaten to the punch by Cole. Cole had fought his way through Tate and his followers to reach the Historic District. Zeke had it, on good authority, that Tate had been thrown, during his battle with Cole, from the remnants of the North Empire Bridge.

Everyone assumed he was dead within the waters surrounding Empire City. And he'd been gone, completely off the radar, for a good four months, at least. There was no way to anticipate that he would be both alive and as powerful as he had ever been.

And mighty he was.

What the Dust Men conduits lacked in creativity, *he* had in spades. With decades, almost a lifetime, of honing his powers, he was too much for the Reapers to handle.

The amount of Dust Men, too, had significantly risen. With Tate back at the helm, there was no doubt that he had lured more residents of the Warren to join him.

He used his telekinetic powers to throw objects with minimal effort. He looked more amused than concerned, Apollo saw.

"I hear the fat man is your leader, now," the old man shouted at anyone who could hear. "What a waste of talent you all are! If any of you have a brain, throw down your weapons, join me, and *I* will lead you to destroy Cole!"

None of the Reapers took the offer, too suspicious of Tate's offer. None of the Dust Men looked ready to show mercy to defectors.

The war raged on for hours in the former city park, with both sides taking turns to regroup and mount a better offense. Apollo saw Razor focus in on the more powerful Tate, trying to crush him with various scraps of metal strewn about, but he deflected each attempt. Tired of her attacks, he muttered "what a waste," then threw a shard back at her before she had a chance to protect herself by hardening her skin. She fell to the ground with a gaping wound.

The loss of a conduit to the enemy was sobering. It *never* happened. Reaper Conduits occasionally lost to Cole. Not as much, anymore, though. They were careful. Mindful. It was better to retreat and live to face him again, than to keep fighting until the bitter end.

The Reaper Conduits, Apollo included, made the executive decision to pull the Reapers out of the fray. Tate was too strong. And, now that there were more Dust Men to contend with, it would be irresponsible to continue with a plan that was hatched under different assumptions. Over the coms, the orders were to retreat. Zeke, somewhere safe in the Neon, agreed with the decision and seconded the order.

But, as they retreated, the Dust Men followed.

It was a small mercy, at least, that Alden Tate did not leave Shanty Town.

The firefight continued in the streets, behind buildings, parked cars, dumpsters, and within the alleys. The Reapers ran back to the tunnel, convinced that the Dust Men wouldn't pursue them past the limits of the Warren. As they ran, they lost more men and women by the minute. When they reached cover, they would fire back, trying to provide support and protection for the Reapers that were out in the open.

In the tunnel, there was no time to rest. The Dust Men pursued them into the limited space. Apollo called out to his fellow conduits, and they formed a barrier between their fellow Reapers and the rival gang that pursued them. He and the others used their powers to repel the Dust Men back. The assault was successful, without Tate there to bolster their confidence, and the Dust Men retreated back to their own turf.

Apollo and the others fled throughout the Neon. Everyone dispersed, some seeking medical attention, most running toward their safe havens or homes. Apollo contacted Zeke, through his earpiece, and made plans to meet up the following night to talk about the new variables in the Warren.

Dawn was not yet on the horizon, but enough time had passed to make the break of day approach rapidly. Apollo used light sources wherever he found them, on his way home. Streetlights, storefronts, neon signs...even a string of decorative lights. He took the limited wattage from each source and used it to heal himself of the bullet holes and grazed paths that raked over his body. Nothing would come close to the charge he would get from the sun, though, but that would have to wait.

He made it back to the roof of the adjacent apartment complex to his. It was dark inside, from what he could see, but he was relieved that Catherine had left the window propped open. Using the last of his energy, he made his way across the alley, through the window, and into his living room.

He had nothing left. After removing his coat and throwing it on the chair, he collapsed on the sofa.

When he'd first stepped into the apartment, he *had* noticed that his bedroom door was closed.

He did not notice, however, that all of the locks on the front door, save for the deadbolt, were disabled.

He did not notice that Catherine was nowhere within the apartment. And it would be hours before he was made aware of that fact.

She Flees

Even as Apollo leaned away from her, Catherine could tell that he was far from disinterested in her flirtations. But, as she'd started to touch him, he'd suddenly grabbed her by the wrist and held her hand away from his body.

Her eyes widened, a little, at the halting of her advances. She looked up from his chest to his eyes which were slits within the skull mask. *Uh-oh. He's mad. He's mad?*

"If you're offering sex, then know this: I won't let a sexual relationship cloud my judgment," he told her with extra diction. Before she could respond to that, he very obviously looked her up and down with a certain longing in his hooded eyes. "I won't lie to you, I've thought about you in bed, but never as a payment."

He threw her hand away from his side of the couch and she placed it in her lap. Now *she* was the angry one.

"If you want to add sex to our list of activities, I'm all for that," he said nonchalantly. "But it won't get me to trust you. Trust takes time. And I'm pretty sure you already *know* that." He nodded at her, but she just glared hatefully back.

What the hell is wrong with this guy?

"A month," he reminded her. "Three more weeks. No sooner. Not a day earlier, unless Cole is wiped off the map of Empire City."

She exhaled loudly and folded her arms, falling back into the sofa. *Then kill him, already! There's, like, a whole ARMY of you Reapers. Take him out and let me go home! And I recall him saying "maybe a month." Now, what, it's definitely? When did that-*

"Catherine," he said gently, and she brought her eyes back to his. She regretted giving him her real name. If she hadn't suspected him going through her wallet, she would have made something up. "I thought we had an agreement."

She nodded, slowly and stiffly, then she stood. She walked swiftly toward the bedroom and shut the door behind her. Pacing the floor for a minute, she reeled at the replayed conversation in her head. She grabbed a pillow from the bed and screamed into it.

Oh, I'm such an idiot! Why did I tell this guy as much as I did? I know better than that! And look where it got me. Trapped in this stupid apartment, and unable to leave! If I were home, I could come and go, if I wanted to. Why didn't I just lie and tell him that I had a friend I could stay with? Fucking Reapers! Fucking Cole! The next time Apollo leaves, I am GONE!

She sat on the bed, her legs crossed and the pillow in her lap. The sun was still relatively high in the sky. It was hours until dinner.

He said he wouldn't be influenced by sex...but what man isn't? Maybe it's still worth a shot? I could convince him that I'm just wanting to be close to someone in these difficult times. He'll let his guard down. He'll trust me more, after, and then I get my phone out of his safe and leave. Maybe stay "friends."

Something in what he had said to her, something about how adamant he'd been...made her pause and rethink her strategy.

He will leave, again, eventually. He said trust takes time. Fine, I'll act like I have all the time in the world.

The night ended without her leaving the room. Not even to brush her teeth. In the deepest recesses of her mind, she knew that she couldn't bear to face him. Not yet, anyway. She curled up and read more of the Greek myths within the book, ignoring the pangs of hunger and thirst.

Perhaps due more to boredom than actual exhaustion, she finally fell asleep.

In the morning, she awoke to find that the room was almost fully lit by the sun shining through the single window. On his nightstand, the digital clock told her that it was breakfast time. Her stomach corroborated that idea.

She rose and stretched, her mouth tasting dry and stale. Groggily, she left the bed and went straight for the door. When she looked down at the handle, she realized she still wore the boxer shorts. *That won't do. Can't remind him, visually, of what happened last night.*

The boxer shorts were discarded on the floor, and she put on a new pair of underwear and the yoga pants. One sport bra under her white shirt later, she was ready to face Apollo.

As soon as she'd opened the door, she saw that he was already up and preparing breakfast for himself only. He didn't look over at her, although she knew that she'd made enough noise to alert him to her presence. She walked over to the kitchen and decided to break the tension.

"Good morning," she said as bashfully as she could.

He still didn't look over, but he returned the greeting.

He needs more than that. I need to apologize. I can't believe I have to apologize for throwing myself at a man. An unmarried, single, straight man. Unreal. There really is a first time for everything, isn't there?

"I'm so sorry, Apollo" she started off. "About last night? I'm sorry. I was feeling a little..." She'd spoken before figuring out how to end the sentence. "Caged in?" she finished, hoping that he would take the flimsy excuse.

He glowered at her. *Guess not, then.* Pulling up the bottom of his mask to eat his cereal, Catherine stared at the strong jawline. A fleeting thought passed through her mind of having his jaw pressed against her neck, against the curve of her hips, against her thighs, planting feverish kisses.

"I don't appreciate you equating my keeping you safe from a known terrorist to imprisonment in my home," he countered her apology, and she was successfully shaken out of her previous musings.

She sat at the kitchen table and kept her eyes on him. "I know," she softly replied. "I'm so sorry. Can we forget that happened, please? I don't want things to be awkward between us." *I don't want to start this process over.*

He nodded, between bites, and she felt relief wash over her. *Not starting over, then. Just a small step back.* She stood and walked to the coffee maker, right next to where he stood. The proximity didn't seem to irk him as it did last night.

All right, then. It's a truce, for now.

But, as the week wore on, her plan to stay detached from him, while simultaneously regaining his trust...backfired. In a way.

He was, actually, forgiving. Ready to move on. He didn't hold the incident over her head. And he didn't revisit the idea of them jumping into bed as a means of distraction from their even more isolated version of quarantine.

She found herself imagining spending the entirety of the month with Apollo. Good food. Good company.

He was kind. Unassuming. If he hadn't continuously worn the skull balaclava around her, she wouldn't have associated him with the Reapers at all, at this point. He'd done nothing to harm or take advantage of her.

They started working out daily together, sharing favorite techniques and routines. She found herself watching his body and paying attention to the details of its workings. The muscles rippling under the skin of his calves. His biceps flexing and relaxing within the simple act of performing a pushup. How his skin glowed with a thin sheet of sweat that never beaded up to fall, but merely formed a slight sheen.

She asked for a reading recommendation, figuring that dipping her toe into the waters of action-packed fiction was worth a shot. He was delighted, she could tell, that she genuinely wanted his opinion on a first read. At times, they chose separate activities, and she pushed through the somewhat predictable spy novel. Every night before bed, she read as many pages as she could, until sleep took her.

There was a part, deep down, that was dismayed that he hadn't left the apartment all week. But she didn't have the same determination to leave him and return to her lonely way of life.

Friday morning, she called out a greeting and went straight for the coffee maker. He responded in kind, but his words were less lighthearted and more serious than she was used to hearing. She shrugged off the tone, as he sat on his sofa, and finished preparing her morning addiction. When she sat at the table, he stood and immediately sat across from her.

Has he been up for a while? Did he already have breakfast? I suppose I could offer to make something for us. How many eggs are left-

"Tomorrow night, I'm required to meet up with all the Reapers," he said, with his eyes leveled at her. "It may...take a while."

"All night?" she'd asked.

"I'm not sure."

"What are you doing?"

"Going into the Warren."

Oh, shit. That means... "Going after the Dust Men?"

The Reapers were dangerous, even under new management, but the Dust Men...they were completely insane. Always heavily armed, they killed anyone or anything around them that moved. Even at the end of the alley, that fateful day two weeks ago, Catherine knew she had a reasonable chance of leaving the encounter with the Reapers injured, traumatized, but alive. If it had been Dust Men that had cornered her...not a chance in hell.

Apollo nodded to answer her question.

Anxiety crept up inside her.

He gave her some additional details, trying to tilt the scales in favor of the Reapers. Nothing of what he said, factual or not, quelled the mounting worry within her. She couldn't help it. She found herself following him throughout the day. If he was in the kitchen cooking, she was helping. If he was on the sofa, she was next to him, with no aim to seduce.

David had a love of video games, too. She'd tried to watch her boyfriend play a few times, but it never held her interest. And when he'd offered to show her how to play, she'd refused. There was always something else she preferred doing.

With Apollo, and in quarantine, she gave video games their long-overdue shot. He was a patient teacher. And when she mostly ended up button-mashing her way through, he laughed and congratulated her on any small accomplishment. They joked and teased each other, back and forth, in a semblance of flirtation.

Saying good night, Catherine went to the bedroom with a pit still residing in her stomach. She lay on the bed, staring at the flat, dull ceiling. Her mind played horrific cinematic versions of the outcome of tomorrow's fight.

She realized something: she cared about what happened to Apollo. *Shit.*

That'll be it, then. Meeting Apollo was a fluke. I won't find anyone else who'll have my back. Not until I can leave this fucking city. Please let him come back. I'll be here. I will stay.

Her night was restless, for the most part. Full of disturbing images and dreams. Dark thoughts.

Saturday morning, she forced herself to act more normally. The day passed like any other. Back into their healthy routine. They made dinner together, cleaned up, and sat to watch the news. Unafraid of sharing his space, she'd made the couch cushion next to his her new regular spot. True to his respectful manner, he'd never crossed a line, and he was content to merely coexist next to her.

She left the couch, mid-program, and went to change into her night clothes. It was getting late. When she left the bedroom, the television was off and he was grabbing the various pieces of his Reaper uniform. It was going to be a cold night. He already had on the black pants, but he removed his olive-green tank to put the tightly-fitting black shirt on.

Catherine went to stand closer to him. She flushed, a little, at seeing him without a top, but the color drained just as quickly from her cheeks, thinking about what the coming hours held in store.

"What happens..." she began, "if you don't come back?"

"What happens to you, you mean?" He sounded slightly hurt, she thought. "You'll have my apartment to yourself, I guess," he joked.

She narrowed her eyes at him. He sighed as if to apologize for not taking the situation seriously. He sat back down and began to put on his socks and boots, taking his time. She remained standing and staring down at him.

"If I don't come back here," he continued, "I still want you to take my advice and stay here for another two weeks. After that, it's up to you. I'm sorry to say that you'll have to go back to the military MREs and rations. I don't trust any of the other Reapers enough to let you contact them. And Zeke...I'm pretty sure that, given the chance, he'd use you as bait."

Asshole, Catherine thought. She didn't know this Zeke character, but she was certain that she would like him even less in person than she did now.

"You can stay here as long as you like," he generously offered. "Or you can go back and forth between here and your place, if you want. My key only locks the deadbolt, and it's on a nail next to the safe in my closet. I haven't used it for months."

That's handy. I assumed that's what that key was for. Glad to hear I was right.

"Will you take off the mask, before you go?" she blurted out. She was smiling nervously, wishing to take back the question, but also wanting to see him. Her heart fluttered in her chest.

He stood and reached past her to grab his black gloves. He was smiling, as he looked at her. She knew when he smiled. He put one glove on at a time and confidently answered. "I'll take it off, when I get back."

"Deal." It wasn't ideal, but she forced herself to give him a winning smile. *I trust you.*

The final piece: the iconic white trench coat. He smoothly threw it over his shoulders and placed the hood over his masked dome. She wondered what his hair looked like. He stared back at her, waiting for something from her.

The last two times he left the apartment, I wasn't around to see him go. And, when he returned, both times, I didn't really focus on him. This is the first time, since that first morning I woke up in his bed, that I'm seeing him in his full Reaper gear. Really seeing him. Not a passing glance. Not on his way in to take off his coat. Now he's on his way out. To fight. To kill. As a Reaper. And he wants to know what I think about that.

She took a step toward him, to show him that she was no longer afraid. His eyes warmed, but then he shifted his gaze to the clock in the kitchen. Whatever it read, behind her sight, called him to action. He went to the window and opened it. She followed right behind him, wondering what to do.

"You can close it behind me, if you like. Just don't engage the lock, okay?" He said it without looking at her. She nodded, and he didn't see.

"Apollo?"

He faced her, then, hearing her call his name. Not his name. *What is your name? You know mine.*

She was fairly tall, for her sex. But she still needed to go up on her toes to encircle her arms around his hooded neck. The coat's material was stiff and thick, but she held onto him until he returned her embrace.

"I'll be back soon," he spoke softly. "Probably while you're still asleep." His voice was calming. She wanted to believe him.

They stepped apart from each other and she nodded, as if she was reassured. He left in the next instant, invisible until he appeared on the rooftop in the distance, running and jumping along the high road.

She bit her lip.

What to do.

Apollo would be gone for hours. As would all the Reapers, surprisingly. Reapers versus Dust Men. A war in the Warren. And where there was that much chaos, Cole would inevitably be drawn to the battle, too.

This would be the safest the streets of the Neon would be, for a while.

It was the best time to go check on her apartment. Grab the keys, grab some clothes, lock the door. Or, if it was ransacked, take whatever she could salvage and say goodbye to the nicest place she had ever lived. Either way, it didn't matter. In and out. She was going to return. And, hopefully, Apollo would return to her, as well.

She grabbed the key from the nail, not dwelling on her cell phone lying in the locked safe nearby. *He'll come back. I'll see his face. He can give it to me later. Whatever.*

She grabbed her green jacket. *Should I put clothes back on or stay in my pajamas? It doesn't matter. In and out. There and back. I won't see anyone, anyway.*

Her boots were by the door. She put them on, disengaged all the locks, and stepped through the door for the first time. The moment passed anticlimactically. There wasn't a soul or a sound in the hallway. She closed the door behind her and locked it as quietly as possible.

1204...1204...1204...

She walked swiftly down the empty hallway, to the empty elevator, and out of the empty lobby. She was relieved to see that, unlike her building, this one didn't require a code to enter. *Must be an older building?*

Outside, the street lights shone down on stillness. Some ambient sounds of life could be heard: crickets, conflicting genres of music being blared out different windows somewhere far in the distance, the very occasional engine of a car.

She started walking, trying to figure out exactly where she was. David had taken her to several landmarks, in their first month in Empire City. He wanted her to see all of the best parts of the city. She didn't walk far until she saw docks in front of her. Down the road to her right, she saw a familiar sight.

Is that...Fisherman's Wharf? Dammit. Not only am I going the wrong way, but I'm on the other side of the Neon! Okay. This is okay. Plenty of time. It'll just take longer than I thought.

The street she was on was also familiar, and it would eventually lead to her own apartment building. She thought about the different routes she could take, while walking, trying to figure out the quickest way to go. When she reached the junction that would take her to the Stampton Bridge, she decided to backtrack the way she intended to go, when on her way to the lottery round-up.

It was about six miles, or so, she guessed. But at least she was not interrupted. *If everyone in the Neon knew what was going down tonight, I'll bet there would be street parties for hours. Too bad.*

She arrived at her building and punched her code into the speaker box next to the lobby door. It buzzed for a few seconds, allowing her to open it and make her way through. Just as it was two weeks ago, there was no one to run into in any of the community or public areas. There wasn't a sound coming from behind any of the doors. Not surprising, though, as it was now almost the middle of the night.

Her door was open, and she wanted to kick herself for leaving her belongings so exposed. *Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. What the hell was I thinking? I should have locked up behind me, taken the keys. They could've changed the locks later and billed me.*

She entered and shut the door behind her, locking herself in. The extra measure made her feel safer. When she turned around, everything was dark. The windows let a little moonlight shine through. Enough to see the outlines of her furniture. She walked around everything, not wanting to turn on any lights, if she didn't have to.

At the entrance to her bedroom, she froze. The curtains lightly billowed around the edges of the window, moved by an unseen wind.

I didn't leave that open...

"Welcome home," a low, raspy voice called out behind her.

She spun around, grabbing the door frame to steady herself. Her heartbeat escalated quicker than it ever had before.

Cole was only a few feet away from her, blocking her exit, and glaring darkly into her eyes. He wore the same black and yellow leather jacket that he had worn since day one. Apparently, before the blast, he was a simple bike messenger. Now, he wore it like armor. His hair was neatly buzzed to the same short length all over his head. His skin was a sallow, greyish tone, and he had tar stains all over his jacket and black pants. Similar black stains reached around from the back of his head like tentacles, and Catherine momentarily mused that they looked more like tattoos than tar.

He smirked and let his eyes wander all over her body. His eyes flashed red when they met hers, again. She swallowed and took a deep breath, willing herself to act more confident than she felt.

"I'm...I just needed to get a few of my belongings," she calmly stated.

Cole stepped closer, tilting his head and watching her like a starved vulture. Catherine wanted to step back, but she didn't want to be trapped in her bedroom; she stayed firmly in place, waiting for an opportunity. Any opportunity.

"Please," Catherine begged pitifully. *He wants me to be afraid.* "Please, can I go?"

"No," he barely murmured through his closed smirk.

"I know that, um..." she tried a different tactic. "I mean, I've heard that I look like...someone who you knew?"

"Yes," he nodded, his eyes looking more crazed. He took another step toward her.

She gulped, again. He was inches away, now. He hadn't touched her, yet, but he was close enough for her to see the many scars on his face and neck. Even in the darkness. And he smelled. Body odor, singed hair, and ash.

I have to try...

She pushed past him and ran for the front door. She heard a laugh behind her and then the sound of an electrical charge. In the next instant, she was knocked to the ground, prone and

unable to move. Footsteps made their way to where she'd fallen, along with the sounds of leather folding and creasing with movement. She saw his shoes and then he bent down and grabbed her by the hair, so that her face tilted up to his. The pain was awful, but she couldn't do more than hiss.

"You'll only be paralyzed for a few minutes," he told her. "Your body can't take many of these shocks, so you really don't want to try me again."

He released her hair and walked away. Just as she began to feel her extremities reawaken, he returned and bound her hands behind her back with some kind of fabric. Then, he roughly rolled her onto her back. He stared down at her, his eyes once more raking over her body. He grabbed a roll of duct tape and ripped off a relatively small piece. He bent down once more, and slapped it over her mouth, then pulled her up to her feet to stand against him.

He guided her, pushing her ahead of him, through the bedroom door, into her bathroom. He sat her onto the toilet seat and opened up one of the many vanity drawers. She noticed he wasn't rifling through, trying every drawer, looking for something, asking her for a location... he knew what he was getting and where to find it.

How long has he been here?

Scissors. Long, silver, sharp, and quite expensive. She'd purchased them at a time in her life when she wanted to cut bangs herself. They'd sat, untouched, in that drawer, since the day she had unpacked and put them there.

Cole held them up, appreciatively, then made his way to her. He grasped her by her chin and smiled down at her. She closed her eyes, expecting to feel the blade sink into her throat.

Instead, he pulled her hair out of its pony tail and shook it free around her shoulders. He grabbed half of it in one fist and cut it right above her shoulder. Then he moved to the other side and did the same.

What the hell?

She was breathing heavily, confused and panicked. The glue from the tape over her mouth left an acrid taste on her lips and teeth. He threw the scissors back in the drawer and turned on the sink. Catherine looked down and saw her locks strewn on the tiles, the only evidence that her hair, at one time, had highlights.

He brought over handfuls of water and slapped them onto her dry hair, wetting and running his fingers through her shortened mane. She closed her eyes tightly during the strange assault, and her eyes teared when he mercilessly pulled at knots that inevitably formed. He stopped and stepped away from her, and that's when she squinted open her eyes.

He looked pleased. The reaction was surprising, so Catherine turned her head toward the mirror. Her dampened hair was naturally curling, and now it appeared to be inches above her shoulders.

"I love you, Trish," she heard him say. She turned to look at him, horrified.

The Savior

Hello, readers!

This story is for mature readers, only. I originally intended to keep it teen level, but... nope. I've already used some profane language, and we're going to start digging into what Cole put Catherine through. Nothing overly explicit, but it *is* mature subject matter.

This chapter is shorter than the rest, and that was unintentional. I read through it repeatedly to figure out a way to add more, but it was all in vain. It ends where it needs to end, and, as goes the pattern I have set, Catherine will be our central character in the next chapter.

Hope you are safe, healthy, and mentally well!

Happy reading!

Jenn

Apollo didn't wake until he felt the sun's rays shine on his weary body. The direct light began to renew him, although he needed hours to fully repair the damage done during last night's epic fight. He sat up slowly, groaning, acutely aware of every injury he'd acquired.

It took a while for everything to register. If sunlight was shining through the window, it was late morning. If it was late morning, Catherine should already be up.

But he hadn't heard anything. No doors opening or closing. No coffee maker.

And he didn't see anything. The door to the bedroom was still shut. No one in the bathroom. No cups or plates out. Everything looked exactly as it had when he left last night.

11:13 in the morning.

He stood in mild agony. The nerve endings fired electric currents of pain. The endorphins in his system that had enabled him to make it home were clearly used up, and he felt everything.

He walked towards the bedroom door, wanting to check on her. Barely glancing at the front door on the way there, a new jolt of energy and endorphins flooded his body.

No...

The deadbolt was locked. Which meant she had taken the key.

He didn't allow himself to dwell in his pain, as he rushed back to the chair to grab his long white coat.

Please don't let me be too late...

There weren't many options available to him. He had to conserve his energy. No invisibility. No light manipulation. No rooftops. He had to get to Catherine's apartment. Most of the Reapers would be indoors, resting. He didn't need to worry about the few that would be out in the Neon. He DID have to worry about running into armed police officers in civilian clothing.

And, of course, Cole.

Apollo could only hope that he'd been wrong about the demon of Empire City. Maybe he'd leave Catherine alone. Maybe he'd wait to pounce. *Maybe she's still alive.*

To run on foot, on the ground...it would take too long. He jumped in front of the first car he saw driving down the street. Most civilians knew the difference between Reapers in orange and Reapers in white. But, when the car didn't stop, he threw a small flash of light in the driver's direction, to temporarily blind and disorient him.

The car screeched to a halt, as the driver slammed his brakes and held his arms up to his eyes. Apollo jumped out of the way, then strode straight up to the driver's door. It opened, and he gave a menacing growl to the frightened man.

"GET OUT!"

Incapacitated by his fear, the driver froze and blinked against the blindness he was still grappling with. Apollo had no time to waste. He grabbed the man and pulled him from his seat. The driver rolled onto the unforgiving pavement and scurried out of the street.

Apollo heard vague cries of alarm from various pedestrians in the vicinity, but, thankfully, there were no gunshots or shouts for him to stop. He climbed in the car and barely shut the door before pressing the gas pedal to the floor. He drove recklessly, only down streets that gave him enough room to pass slower vehicles. The horn was used liberally. An occasional pedestrian was run off the road, and traffic signals and road signs were mostly ignored.

Reaching her building, he gritted his teeth in frustration. He forgot that her apartment complex had an entry code for added security. There was no time to go through another charade. He stopped the car, left it idling in the street, and ran to the same alley that he knew held a fire escape that would lead him to a roof. It took several minutes of climbing, then jumping to the roof where he'd first spied the windows of her home. A different window was open, this time, and he could tell in the broad daylight that it led into her living area.

There was no Cole to be seen, from this angle. And he wasn't anywhere on the horizon.

Maybe she fell asleep. Maybe she's inside. Maybe she chose to open the window...

Using more energy would deplete his body and make him more vulnerable to his injuries. But he had to be sure she was safe.

Conserving as much of the little power he had left, he remained fully visible, while crossing through the air on a single streak of hardened light. He dove through the open window, as

what he'd materialized became unstable. The somersault caused an incredible amount of pain, but he couldn't show that.

Coming to his feet, Apollo shakily stood and surveyed the large room. It was a mess. His heart dropped. Wrappers, cans, bottles, littered around the apartment. Scorch marks on furniture and on the walls. Dirt and grease on the floors in high-traffic paths.

He treaded quietly, checking every corner, walking toward what he assumed to be the bedroom door. It was closed, and there was no noise behind it. When he opened it up, he heard a woman let out a muffled whimper.

Catherine was huddled against her bed's headboard, a white sheet crumpled around her body and crying with her eyes closed. A single piece of duct tape spanned over the entirety of her mouth.

"Catherine," he said softly.

Her eyes immediately popped open and she looked over in disbelief.

He rushed to her side and saw that she was naked underneath the bedsheet. She had angry red marks that were sure to form bruises on her arms and around her throat. He pulled the sheet down on her backside, seeing that she was bound at the wrists with a thin scrap of fabric. The material was soaked with burgundy blood. He took out a pocket knife that he always kept on him. The binding was easily cut, followed by his merciless ripping off of the tape. Catherine cried out in pain.

"We need to leave. Now," he warned her. "When was Cole last here?"

She moaned with a raspy voice. "He...left...I don't know. Maybe...twenty minutes? I...can't tell... Not long."

Apollo went to the closet and grabbed the first reasonable clothing items he saw.

"You need to dress, and we have to get out of here before he comes back."

Unless the car was miraculously still outside, he needed to think of an alternate way back to his place. He threw the items on the bed and watched as Catherine gingerly moved; she was in obvious pain, especially her lower half, by the looks of it. With one hand, she supported her trek to the edge; the other hand held the sheet up to her chin, desperate to regain some semblance of control.

"Do you have any of your boyfriend's things? I need a change of clothes and a backpack to hold my Reaper uniform."

She nodded, picking up a bra and trying to put it on while covering her nakedness simultaneously.

"Backpack...under the bed. There's...a box...top of closet," she struggled to say with her hoarse voice.

He reached for the bag, first, getting on his hands and knees to look under the bed. As he reached for the silhouette of something black, his eyes saw a picture frame that had clearly fallen to the floor.

OH MY GOD...

He shook himself out of the thought, pulled out the bag, and strode to the closet. On the top shelf was a box, as Catherine said. He yanked it down, not caring if it was destroyed in the process. Clothes practically exploded out of the cardboard, and he grabbed at the first long-sleeved shirt and sweatpants he found, then turned toward the bathroom to change and give her privacy.

On the tiled floor in front of him were locks of her hair in messy piles.

He stuffed his Reaper coat, gloves, and pants in the backpack. Down to his underwear and black shirt, he put on the black long-sleeved shirt, staring down at the bold, red lettering within the Florian cross: FDEC. He quickly put on the grey sweatpants, which were a little short for him, but fit snug along his waist. After his shoes were back on, he slung the backpack over both shoulders and fastened it to lay tightly behind his body. Then he turned to face Catherine.

She was in a bra and underwear, trying to pull up the black leggings. More red marks were visible, as well as blood stains on the insides of her thighs. She struggled to pull on the material, wincing and straining in the process. Her newly cropped hair hung over her face like a curly sheet. He hesitated for a second, before going over to her.

"Can I help you?"

She looked up, and he saw the defeat within her empty eyes. He waited until she nodded, then pulled the pants up around her waist. When she went to pick up the shirt off the bed, he motioned for her to wait. He hurried back to the closet and grabbed a zippered hoodie.

"This'll be easier. Sorry."

She nodded, again, and he held it up for her to put each tender limb through. He zipped it to her neck and grabbed her a pair of slip-on sneakers from her closet.

"No time for socks, we have to hurry. Where's my key?"

Catherine's head turned toward her green jacket, torn and discarded on the floor.

"Top...pocket. Right."

As she slipped each foot into its corresponding shoe, he removed the key and grabbed for one more thing and hastily placed both items in the backpack, as well, in a front pocket.

"Your...mask," she breathed out.

He didn't have time to smile. To reminisce about how he'd hoped to finally show his face to her. To do a slow reveal. No jokes. No time.

He yanked it off, and, in the same moment, used his other hand to run his fingers through his hair to tame it back down. The backpack was twirled along one shoulder, along his midsection, and he shoved the mask inside. Then he righted the accessory and looked at her.

"Let's go," he ordered. He held a hand out to her, and she took it, but she couldn't match his longer strides.

He pulled her along, not allowing her to set a slower pace. She cried and he clenched his jaw at the pitiful sounds.

I can't be gentle, right now. I need to save her. It's either pain or death.

They made it to the front door, despite her awkward limp. Once it was closed and they were in the hall, he dared to say more.

"I can't carry you, I'm sorry. And I can't conceal us, either. We have to walk. Just to a station, though. We'll be safe on the train."

"I saw...your...wounds," she panted out with her voice cracking.

"You saw some of them," he corrected.

He pulled her roughly into the elevator and she gave him an emphatic "ow." *No one but us. Small mercies.* They descended and he continued.

"I don't have much left," he explained. "I know you're hurting. We can collapse and tend to our injuries once we're back at my place. I need you to push yourself, Catherine. Can you try, please?"

"Yes," she agreed with a whisper. "I was...coming back. To you."

"You shouldn't have left," he angrily snapped back at her.

She didn't respond, but she hung her head in obvious remorse.

The elevator reached the main floor and he pulled her out. She limped at a faster speed, finally realizing the urgency of their flight.

The building was behind them, and they were suddenly made very aware of how they looked in public.

"We have to act natural," he murmured to her. "Stand up straight, and try to control your limp. We can do this. It's only six blocks. Come on."

He adopted a calmer demeanor, standing up to his full height, ignoring his pain, and holding her hand as if they were lovers. She did her best to mirror his act, standing a little straighter and taking a deep breath.

They no longer looked like a struggling duo. The stares ceased. And they made their way toward Breward Station, with less attention from passersby. It seemed to take hours, but they

reached their destination. Catherine was walking with more strength, and her tears had subsided.

They stood on the walkway of the station, waiting for the train to arrive, and having no idea where it was at that moment. At the beginning of the quarantine, the trains were shut off and their movements were controlled by the Reapers. Apollo could recall a rather gruesome plan of Sasha's that involved using a train car full of hostages to try and make demands of the authorities. He hadn't been a part of that scheme, thankfully, but Cole had, in an uncharacteristically heroic move, saved everyone. When the hostages were released, one tried to revolt against their rescuer. The terrorist, truer to his nature, zapped the ungrateful man right there at the station and sent the rest of the crowd scattering. A cruel act, but also the liberation of the train system in the Neon.

A roar pealed out above the cacophony of city noise. Then a pillar of lightning pulsed down to earth from the sky. Catherine and Apollo could see it above the awnings of the open-air station.

They both froze, realizing where the mayhem originated. Their eyes searched for another sign of Cole. Hopefully, his ire would either subside or stay far from their current position.

Screaming on the streets. Coming closer. Another shout, but not an unintelligible scream of fury. A word: Trish. More lightning. This strike looked only a few blocks away.

The train won't stop, if the conductor sees Cole. He'll plow through.

Apollo took the backpack off and grabbed his coat and mask from inside. He thrust the bag to Catherine, who took it from him reflexively. She looked at him with honest confusion. Before she could question him, he spoke, while putting on both the mask and the coat. The train wasn't in sight, yet, but he needed to hurry. It wouldn't stop if it saw him, either.

"Take the Fisherman's Wharf exit. Can you get back to my apartment from there?"

She nodded, dumbly.

"The key is in the front pocket. Get inside, lock all the locks, and I'll be back as soon as I can get away."

He started to leave, and she stopped him.

"Don't...we can...take the train-"

"No time to argue, do as I say," he commanded her. She swallowed and his resolve melted a little, seeing her so helpless. "I need to draw Cole away. Do you trust me?"

She nodded, and he turned away from her and ran down the steps that they had only used minutes ago.

At street level, he was no longer visible to the train operator. People fled from his path, either scared he would hurt them directly or that they would be drawn into the crossfire. He

regretted leaving from his apartment too quickly to remember his gun, locked up in the safe. *Dammit. That would've been helpful, with basically no power left.*

He ran toward another streak of unnatural lightning. Another yell for Trish. Closer.

She looks almost exactly like her, now. The hair. He's calling for her. For Catherine. But he's calling her Trish. Sick fuck. I need to lead him away from the station. Opposite direction. Need a place to hide. Somewhere he'll be at a disadvantage. Not too many power sources. The park? There's water. Not a lot of structures to hide behind. Might be my best shot, though...

He ran toward the trouble that people were running *from*. Some didn't register him at all, too scared of Cole to be bothered to mind their surroundings. Some saw him, and the panic in their faces was visible before they either ran by or changed their paths.

Cole was in the middle of the street, raging. Shooting charged rockets at cars, throwing shockwaves repeatedly, randomly letting blasts of electricity hit anything or anyone around him. Then, his energy depleted, he stopped at a grouping of parked cars to recharge.

NOW. I have to do it now, before he's fully amped up.

He ran behind Cole, staying a good distance, and ready to lead him in a chase.

"Hello, terrorist," he called out with his dark voice taking on a cheerfully sarcastic tone.

Cole stopped in the middle of a charge and spun around to face whomever dared to call him by that name.

His identity revealed, Apollo took off in a sprint towards Memorial Park. He could hear Cole firing bolts of lightning behind him. Some of the shots came close, as Apollo zigged and zagged his way through alleys and behind whatever cover he could temporarily use. The villain became sloppier with every new power he'd acquired, relying on chaotic damage to achieve his goals instead of focusing on precision. There was little chance of Cole stopping to fully renew his power; the electrical conduit knew, from previous encounters, that if a Reaper conduit escaped his sight, it would be difficult to track them back down.

Apollo reached a large courtyard between buildings. No cover. He sent out a flash of light to blind Cole, and it mercifully worked to keep the distance between them.

Two more blocks. One major street, then I'm at the park.

Crossing the busy road was surprisingly difficult, as more pedestrians and cars crowded the open space. He knew there would be police officers nearby. They tended to congregate both nearby and within the park, blending in with the general populace. Apollo didn't wish them to be in danger...

But, maybe...just this once...I've protected them. I've come to their aid. Before the blast. After the blast. Maybe I've earned their help, unwittingly and unwillingly given, but a distraction to make my escape, nonetheless.

Just this once...please...

He ran into the greenery, where the only electrical sources for Cole to feast on were the lampposts and small path lights.

Apollo shot another blast of light, the weakest of his abilities, and the only one that he could use without the consequence of using up stored energy.

A gun shot rang out, then another. Then a multitude. Three officers made their way to Cole, but he sent a single shockwave their way and all three were knocked off their feet and incapacitated.

Not much help.

He ran toward the stone bridge. Cole couldn't see him behind stone of any kind. He knew that. He was sure of it. He used the last of his energy and dashed to the center of the stone walkway, cloaked himself in refractive light, then jumped over the side and rolled underneath the archway, landing in the thick grass. He stood and limped to the stone wall of the arch, no longer invisible, but hoping that Cole would assume he was truly gone.

It took a couple of minutes. Then, a shout of frustration. Then, crackling in the air. The hairs on the back of Apollo's neck stood on end.

SHIT.

The same shockwave upon impact that he had felt at the end of the alley. The same day he'd first seen Catherine. Both he and Cole, actually. But the place of impact was closer. Cole landed only about ten feet from him. Apollo was pushed back into the stone wall of the arch, crushing his already fragile system. Cole smirked at having made the right decision.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked Apollo.

Apollo opened his mouth to speak, under the mask, but the wind was still knocked out of him. He took strangled breaths. Cole didn't seem to care that he didn't receive an answer.

"Nah, never mind," he continued. "You're done." He sneered and held up a hand aimed at Apollo's head.

The Saved

It lasted most of the night. Sometimes, Cole was sweet. Tender. But it was all rooted in psychopathy. Most of the time, it was torture. Punishment. Punishing her because she looked like his dead girlfriend. Punishing her for not actually being Trish.

He never used her name. She was never Catherine. He only called her Trish. But he knew the difference.

She thought she heard him apologize, once.

She'd screamed into the tape until her throat seized up. Her mouth was dry, and the acrid flavor of the adhesive was the only thing she could taste. After the first few hours, she was unable to cry. He'd left her arms bound the entire time, which was unnecessary, really. What chance did she have against a conduit? Her fingers tingled from the lack of circulation, at times. Periodically, she would flex and wiggle them, almost relieved to have something to focus on. Something to control.

I shouldn't have left...I shouldn't have left...why did I leave? Why couldn't I wait? What was worth coming back for? What did I need from here so badly that I couldn't stay away for two more weeks? Apollo was right. I just want to leave! Apollo doesn't know where I live. I told him my name. Does he remember my last name? If he looks in my purse, he'll find it on one of my cards in my wallet. Can he find my address? Will Cole kill me before I can be rescued? Will Apollo be too mad at my leaving to rescue me? I wish I hadn't left...

Cole rested, at times, allowing her brief reprieves from his cruelty. She supposed conduits might not need as much sleep as normal humans. Or maybe Cole had insomnia, for all she knew.

The apartment had been too dark for her to see her surroundings clearly initially, but, once he turned on the bedroom light, she saw the clutter in her room. Trash on the floor, empty bottles on the nightstand. No sign of her picture with David. The bed was unmade and disgusting, when he'd thrown her onto it. She'd left her bed as it looked when she'd awoken on the day of her lottery call. Now, the linens wrinkled and the fitted sheet was pulled off of one of the corners.

He's been living here. Sleeping here, she realized.

He finally left the apartment with a threat.

"I'm coming back. Don't try anything cute, or you'll see me when I'm truly angry," he warned. Before he closed the bedroom door, he lowered his gaze at her battered body. "I can be kinder to you, if you don't try to fight this. But," he said with malice, "if you try to escape, I will hunt you down and kill you in the slowest, most painful way you can imagine."

Her eyes were already closed, and she only heard the bedroom door shut in the wake of his leaving. He didn't wait for her to acknowledge his terms.

He gets his way.

She thought about what she had to do to pacify the beast. They were thoughts similar to what she had gone over in her mind in Apollo's apartment. *Play nice. Be loving. Make him think I want him. Let him be in control...until I can get away...* It hadn't worked on Apollo, though. Then again, Apollo wasn't a beast.

Lost in her thoughts, she'd heard a loud noise, like a body rolling on the floor in her living room. She hastily grabbed the top sheet with her bound hands, using her teeth to pull up the material. Steps from the living room toward the bedroom door, barely audible, despite her hardwood floors.

She sat against the headboard and tried to curl herself into nothingness.

The doorknob turned and she squeezed her eyes shut, whimpering into the tape.

"Catherine?" a gentle man's voice called out. Cole had never called her Catherine. Not once.

Her eyes flew open at the realization and she turned her head to see the figure in her doorway.

It was *him*. Apollo. But it couldn't be.

He hurried to her side, crawling on the bed. She saw him recoil from her nakedness and abused skin. But, in the next instant, he'd pulled out a pocket knife and cut her bindings. The blood started to surge to her hands, but they were still limp and weak. Before she could dwell on the pain in her extremities, he'd yanked the tape off her mouth. She cried out in pain. *Why that's enough to hurt me, after all I've been through...*

Apollo asked when Cole had left but, truthfully, she couldn't be sure. It didn't feel like much time had passed. She told him as much, with a predictably scratchy voice. He left her side, then, and went straight to her closet to pick out clothing for her. A light pink t-shirt, black leggings, a pair of underwear, and a bra were thrown to the end of the bed. She started to move toward the items, but every movement was agony. One hand held the white sheet up to her chin, the other helped her hobble toward her destination.

"Do you have any of your boyfriend's things? I need a change of clothes and a backpack to hold my Reaper uniform," he said without ceremony. It was not a time to mince words.

She'd told him where to look, while trying to maneuver her upper body into the bra without losing too much of her modesty. While she muddled through, he grabbed the backpack from under the bed, yanked down the box with the remainder of David's clothing from the top shelf of the closet, and grabbed a couple of things to wear.

With his back to her, she dropped the sheet and worked more earnestly at getting dressed. He removed his coat and she saw the first of his injuries. Stripes of blood, mostly clotted into scabs, bruising and puncture wounds. *Are those...did...was he shot?*

She remembered that he'd been at war with the Dust Men. A wave of guilt overtook her. *He's hurt. Really hurt. Conduits can heal themselves, he told me. Why didn't he heal himself?*

"I need to focus and kind of...turn off my powers," he had said. She thought to the times she'd watched him standing at the window, bathed in sunlight and quietly soaking up energy.

He hasn't had time. Because he had to come after me, she thought, grimly.

While he faced away from her, she pulled on the underwear he'd picked out and then grabbed the black leggings. Bending over to pull on each pant leg was more difficult than it should have been. Her sense of balance was off, and she struggled to get them up to her knees. Apollo, done with changing into her boyfriend's clothes, was now next to her.

"Can I help you?" He sounded sincere. And she didn't have much of a choice, if they had a chance to leave the apartment before Cole returned. She nodded to accept the help, and he pulled the leggings all the way up without her needing to bend over.

She started to turn, to pick up the pink t-shirt on the bed, he motioned for her to wait and walked back to her closet. He grabbed her light blue hooded jacket and she sighed with relief. Much easier to get on. He even helped her into it, zipping it fully to the neck. It was strange to wear it with nothing but a bra underneath, but at least it covered her. He then picked out slip-on sneakers and placed them on the floor in front of her.

"No time for socks," he explained. "We have to hurry. Where's my key?"

She'd already been thinking of the key to his apartment. She nodded in the direction of where it was mercifully still hidden. Cole hadn't searched her. He'd just torn each clothing item off and discarded it on the floor.

"Top...pocket. Right." *God, it hurts so much to talk!*

Apollo went for the key, and she put on each shoe. When she looked up at him, he was zipping up the front pocket of the backpack, separating the key from his clothes in the main area. *Smart*, she credited him.

Except for...

"Your...mask," she whispered out.

He pulled it off quickly, smoothed down thick brown hair, and stuffed the accessory in the largest section of the backpack. Before she could react to the face she'd been waiting to see, he willed the moment away.

"Let's go," he said forcefully. He held his hand out and she took it without reservation. He pulled her along, and she kind of limped behind him, pain shooting from her groin through her midsection. Her legs hurt, too. Every movement felt like someone was pummeling her with boulders.

She cried from the pain, but Apollo didn't look back. Through the apartment, past the front door, which she was able to grab closed with her free hand.

"I can't carry you, I'm sorry," he said plainly. Her mouth opened in surprise. "And I can't conceal us, either. We have to walk. Just to a station, though. We'll be safe on the train."

"I saw...your...wounds," she breathed out. She sounded so weak.

"You saw *some* of them," he'd thrown back in her face.

He's worse off than I thought. And he'd yanked her into the opened elevator. She couldn't help shouting out in pain. But they were inside, and they were alone. He pressed the button for the lobby, and she stared at his face.

Handsome. I thought he might be. Straight hair. Looks like it's coarse. Probably longer than he likes it, unless he cuts it himself. Messily flattened on the sides of his head, sticking in different directions on top. Not unattractive, though. Thick brown brows, smooth skin, except for the stubble on the bottom half of his face. He could grow a nice-looking beard, if he wanted to. Looks good with a five-o'clock shadow, though. Everything fits together nicely. It's nice to see-

"I don't have much left," he spoke up. She understood what he meant. No energy. No power. "I know you're hurting," he sympathized with her, and their eyes met. "We can collapse and tend to our injuries once we're back at my place."

That sounds wonderful.

"I need you to push yourself, Catherine," he continued. She liked hearing her name. HER name. "Can you try, please?"

"Yes." Then she paused. *Does he know? He needs to know...* "I was...coming back. To you." *I'm sorry.*

"You shouldn't have left," he snapped, and turned his gaze to the descending elevator's screen that showed where they were.

She dropped her head and stared at the tile on the floor.

When the doors finally opened, he pulled her out and she clenched her teeth in pain. But she forced herself to keep her word. *Push through it.*

As soon as they were on the street, they attracted stares from everyone around them. They probably saw an abuser dragging his victim along. And that was most definitely not the case. She blushed, feeling horrible for not helping paint the correct picture.

He paused and his eyes darted between her and those around them. "We have to act natural," he said, only loud enough for her to hear. "Stand up straight, and try to control your limp. We can do this. It's only six blocks. Come on."

She saw him take deep breaths to calm down, and he heeded his own direction, standing up straight himself. He released her hand, then took it again, interlacing their fingers in a more intimate appearance. She did the same, standing straight, taking deep breaths. *PUSH THROUGH THE PAIN.*

They continued toward the station. She was thankful he was with her. At least one of them knew their way around the Neon. As they moved, the adrenaline surged within her, and she

was excited. They were going to make it. She would never go through that again. Cole would never find her. Apollo would make sure of it. She could trust him.

Up the stairway that led to the elevated train's station. Standing on the walkway where, eventually, the train would stop and go through the familiar motions of letting passengers on and off.

As they stood and watched the tracks for the train, there was a shout. A very angry shout. The sound of utter outrage, followed closely by a continuous stream of lightning that pelted the earth towards where her apartment stood.

We're six blocks away. He doesn't know which way we went. We're fine.

Another stream of lightning. Closer. The first signs of people running from wherever Cole was at that moment.

He could have asked any of the people on the street outside. They were all witnesses. Maybe he found out which direction we headed off in. He knows the Neon! He'll realize we're at the train station!

She looked both ways, down the track. It didn't matter where the train came from or which way it was traveling. They just needed it to come NOW.

Apollo took off the backpack and opened the main zipper. He removed his coat and mask, then pushed the backpack into Catherine's arms. He put the mask on first, and something in the pit of her stomach fluttered. It was strange, seeing him as she had known him for the past two weeks, but wearing David's clothes. When he covered the FDEC shirt with his Reaper coat, the flutter stopped. *This* was Apollo.

"Take the Fisherman's Wharf exit. Can you get back to my apartment from there?"

She nodded. *I've taken it once, before. And, I remember, I went the wrong way from Apollo's apartment and saw where I was, in relation to the wharf.*

"The key is in the front pocket. Get inside, lock all the locks, and I'll be back as soon as I can get away."

Get away? Get away from...Cole. Oh, no.

He turned to leave her and she called out.

"Don't! We can...take the train-"

"No time to argue," he cut her off. "Do as I say."

Her heart sank, and then she saw his eyes. They changed. She saw the remorse for snapping at her.

"I need to draw Cole away," he explained. "Do you trust me?"

Yes. She wanted to say it. She wanted to say more. Instead, she simply nodded. He turned away, again, and she murmured a quick prayer to higher powers for his safety.

In the distance, growing closer to the station, she heard the sounds of destruction on a grand scale: clashing of metal, sonic booms, screams of terror. It stopped, momentarily, and she wondered if everything was going to be okay. But the noise started up again. Not as loudly. Electrical shocks that resounded through the air, but growing fainter. Moving away from her.

She hadn't been paying attention to the tracks, but the station began to hum and vibrate from the oncoming train. It was coming from the opposite direction, though. She needed to change platforms. As quickly as she could manage, she ran down the stairway near her and up the one across the street. As she climbed, the train stopped and opened its doors. A few people passed her on the stairwell, and she ran toward the closest train door...as it started to close.

She made it, barely. She took one of the many empty seats and plopped down in relief.

Fisherman's Wharf, she repeated in her mind. *Then, I head South for a few blocks, then make a left where I came out last night.*

Catherine looked down at the opened backpack on her lap. She closed it and hugged it to her chest. *David and Apollo. David's bag filled with Apollo's things. Weird.*

Her eyes closed and she let the swaying of the train's movement calm her frazzled nerves. She was still hurting, but she was okay. She would be okay. Apollo made sure of that. The automated conductor called out the different stops.

"Approaching Fisherman's Wharf. Please stay seated until the train begins to slow. The doors will open once the train comes to a complete stop. Depart quickly and orderly, so that oncoming passengers have enough time to enter. Thank you for using ETS."

Catherine stood and walked slowly toward the door closest to her. She wondered where Apollo was.

He said he needed to lead Cole away, and then he said that he'd be back as soon as he got away. He won't try to fight. Maybe he'll lose Cole. Maybe other Reapers will come to help him...

The train slowed and then stopped, and Catherine was the only passenger in her area to exit. No one waited to board. She made her way out of the station, taking the stairs back down to the street level.

Nothing around her gave her any indication of danger nearby. She took advantage of the calm atmosphere and walked slowly to Apollo's apartment building.

Blocks to go...almost there...

She opened the door of the building and pushed the elevator button. Twelfth floor. 1204. In front of his apartment's door, she took off the backpack to hold it against her chest and dig for the key.

Front zippered pocket, she recalled him saying.

The key was there. So was something else. She pulled out the picture and mindlessly went through the motions of opening the deadbolt. She walked through the door, took out the key, closed it, reengaged all the locks.

Walked to the bedroom, putting the key back on the nail. All while staring, dumbfounded, mouth agape, at the picture.

Her and David. She dropped the backpack on the floor and sat on the bed. Her favorite picture of the two of them. Just a simple picture. He held the camera at arm's length, a brick wall behind them. They were smiling their biggest, happiest smiles. He'd been hired for the Fire Department of Empire City. His dream job. They went out to celebrate in downtown Seattle. A happy memory.

The only thing in her whole apartment, *their* entire apartment, that held his essence.

She'd looked for it, when Cole was hurting her. Catherine thought it might bring her comfort. But neither the photograph nor the frame were visible. She assumed it had been destroyed. She would never see it, again, and it added a new finality to that chapter of her life. The best chapter of her life.

Why did Apollo have this?

The chances of Cole placing the single photo in the backpack that was stored under the bed were too slim. It had to be Apollo.

But why?

She placed the photo on the nightstand, kicked off her shoes, then cried herself to sleep.

Apollo's Confession

Cole's right arm was outstretched, the fingers of his hand splayed and held statically in place as if he was gripping an invisible basketball in front of him. He was perfectly poised to deliver a head shot of electricity toward Apollo, ending the other conduit forever.

Out of breath and beaten up, the Reaper used his last form of offense.

Apollo didn't need to breathe or use up energy that he didn't currently have, anyway. He sent wave after wave of blinding light straight into Cole's eyes. The terrorist shot out one wild current of electricity from his hand, but it flew way off to Apollo's left. Then, both of his arms crossed over his eyes, waiting for a reprieve to strike again.

But Apollo gave him no rest. He staggered forward, making the flashes of light as overwhelming to Cole's senses as he possible could. As Apollo limped toward the electrical conduit, Cole reflexively stepped back.

Just as Apollo had hoped.

His first choice was Cole giving up on pursuing him, but his back-up plan was Cole's greatest weakness: water.

Cole moved backward on unsteady feet, with wave after wave of light forcing him away. When his first foot stepped in the water of the man-made creek under the bridge, Cole's arms dropped and then tensed, the electricity in his body making him shake uncontrollably. Apollo fell to his knees where he was, waiting for the creek to eliminate his competition.

Eventually, Cole fell face-forward. Onto the grass and out of the water.

Damn.

Cole was only temporarily knocked unconscious. He would be back on his feet at any moment, looking to drain any source of electrical power to recover.

It was tempting, *so tempting*, to finish him off. But the last thing Apollo needed was to push his luck. Catherine needed medical attention, and so did he. If he'd had the time to put on his earbud to communicate with the Reapers, he would've just called them out to the scene and let them finish off the knocked-out conduit.

As it was, this was a time to retreat. To tend to his wounds and Catherine's. And to live to fight another day.

The sun was out and shining brilliantly. Apollo stepped out from under the bridge's shadow. He took in deep breaths. He was close to home, actually, having lured Cole through the city and cutting a straight path from one end of the Neon to the other. Only a few blocks to get to his apartment, once he was out of the park.

He did need enough energy to make it up to his window, though. He'd told Catherine to lock the door behind her, and he didn't want to show up in his Reaper gear. Bad for his anonymity in the building, bad for Catherine and keeping her safe.

Apollo ran out of the park, needing to limp, but not wanting to show any weakness. Police and even the very people he was trying to protect in the city might try to stop or engage in combat with him, especially if they saw how injured he truly was. He suffered in silence, running toward his home; he didn't run into any officers, or any that were willing to compromise their disguise, anyway. And the people he ran by in the street ran from him as they ran from Cole, completely terrified of the power they knew he yielded. Unaware that the last thing he wanted to do was hurt any of them.

The remainder of his strength was leaving him, as he arrived at his address. He climbed onto the strategically-placed dumpster under the fire escape on the building next to his, finally standing on the roof that looked down onto his apartment. He couldn't see Catherine anywhere in the one large window that showed a sliver of his kitchen and the majority of his living room. He guessed that she had succumbed to her exhaustion and trauma, most likely in his bedroom.

He removed his coat, laid it on the ground, and lay on top of it. If he'd been in swim shorts, it would have been sunbathing. But this was some necessary recharging. Just enough to make it over the chasm between the buildings and into the window without being seen.

Cole seemed to replenish his energy quickly, compared to most conduits. Paired with his reckless attitude toward the welfare of innocent bystanders and his ruthless desire to destroy anyone who opposed him, it made facing him one-on-one a terrifying notion.

An hour later, Apollo felt slightly better. Within him, his body was slowly stitching itself back together. More so than that, he could detect the small reserve of energy that he'd been able to replenish. He grabbed his jacket, cloaked himself in light, and solidified a bridge to his window.

It was unlocked, as he'd expected, and the first thing he did, upon entering, was to check the front door for a clear sign that Catherine had made it back.

This was unnecessary, though, as his bedroom door was open. She was lying down, seemingly in a deep sleep. That was good. The rest would start to heal some of the trauma that Cole put her through. He thought about shutting the door, giving her the added privacy.

Cole closed the bedroom door. I don't want her to wake on a bed and feel claustrophobic.

Apollo removed the mask, no longer needing to conceal his identity from her, and placed it and the trench coat on the chair next to the couch. He removed his shoes and quietly placed them by the front door. Where her boots had been...

He needed both sleep and the sunlight. Both would help to revitalize him. He opted to grab a throw pillow from the sofa and lie down on the floor. It was definitely a compromise. He was in full light from the large window, and it would last for hours. His sleep would suffer, and he

wouldn't be able to absorb as much of the rays as he'd like, but it was a relatively happy medium. A little of both.

When he lay down, he realized that he still wore David's clothes...

SHIT... Why did it have to be him? Why did it have to be her?

Sneaking into his bedroom to get a different outfit might wake Catherine. He was stuck, for now.

He yielded to his fatigue, falling asleep on the floor, in the sunlight.

What woke him from his rest was the lack of sun. It was late; the sun had already descended below the skyline of the high-rise buildings in his neighborhood. The sky was still bright enough, though. At least a couple of hours before sunset.

At the same time that he wearily stood to his feet, he saw Catherine's silhouette head into the bathroom. The sounds of retching. A flush. Then the faucet running and stopping. She emerged wiping her wetted lips over the sleeve of her zippered hoodie, but froze when their eyes met.

"Are you...better?" Her voice was less raspy than it had been. It was thickened from her sleep.

"Yes," he replied honestly. He was sore, but he could sense that all of his minor injuries were completely healed. *I'm not 100%, but at least I can function for the rest of the day.*

She nodded. "I...need to ask you-" she said, but then hesitated- "why did you...take my picture?"

Take her picture? ... NO. Take THE picture. Her and...

"I knew your boyfriend," he grimly admitted.

She looked unsteady on her feet, then. Her body swayed in the doorway of the bathroom, and she grabbed the frame for added balance.

"Why are you still wearing his clothes?!" She was trying to yell, but her vocal chords were too fatigued to do so. Even saying the full sentence with such strength had robbed her of breath.

Regardless of her limited ability, Apollo was back to square one. He couldn't have her making too much noise. He rushed to her side, trying to move her back into the bedroom. She pushed against his chest, trying to push him away, but he grabbed her around her waist and lifted her from the floor. As she fought against him, he walked her into the room and released her. She automatically moved back from him, until her knees buckled against the edge of the bed. And, still, she refused to be near him. To be vulnerable. She rolled to the opposite side of the room and stood to face him. Her rescuer.

I just saved you...I risked my life...

"How...*how* did you know David?" she hissed out. She looked at Apollo with distrust.

And, with one picture, everything we've established...is gone.

"David," he whispered. He said the name with fondness. More to himself than to her. "He looked like a David."

Catherine's resolved faltered, a bit, hearing the warm tone in Apollo's voice. Not trusting, but needing to know more.

"I didn't know him by his real name, of course," Apollo clarified. And then, it hit him. *She knows nothing.* "I knew him by his call sign."

"His 'call sign,'" she repeated flatly. "What call sign? What are you talking about?"

Apollo took a deep breath and sat on the bed. It'd been two weeks since he'd been able to use it. Now, he sat against the headboard. It left plenty of room for Catherine to leave the room, if she wished. He hoped she wouldn't. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the aforementioned photograph, laying on the nightstand next to the far side of the bed.

"He was a Reaper-"

"You liar!" she spit. She was furious, now. "He would NEVER. He was a FIREFIGHTER. A good guy! He helped people! He wasn't some...thug!"

Apollo grit his teeth together, forcing himself to restrain himself from releasing the vitriol coursing at the back of his throat.

"So was I," he responded through a clenched jaw. Catherine's mouth dropped open, both confused and insulted on behalf of her former lover. Before she could say anything, though, Apollo continued. "I was a firefighter for FDEC for five years."

She looked wary, but also determined to connect the dots spinning within her head. "That's how you met David?"

"No. We didn't know each other before the blast. I let that little fact about myself slip, and he shared that he, too, was a firefighter in the Neon. We were in the same battalion – the entire Neon is a single battalion – but we were at different stations."

Catherine was obviously perplexed. She took a moment to assimilate that information, then shook her head.

"No, no...David wasn't a Reaper. He would *never* want to hurt people."

"Neither of us joined to hurt people," he refuted her statement. "We did it because we were trying to grapple with our powers."

"Powers..." she said with a whisper. Then, realization dawned on her. "He was a conduit?!"

"He went by 'Reach.' He could touch objects, people, or himself, and he could instantly transport whatever or whomever it was to a different location."

Catherine's face was blank. Disbelieving. Apollo let the silence fall between them. There was a question coming. Many, most likely. And he could hardly blame her.

"You're...hold on. David," she struggled to complete the sentence, "was...like you? But he made stuff disappear? What?"

"I don't know how else to explain it. I mean, all of our powers are out of some crazy sci-fi movie. Reach, David, could teleport. We met, as conduits, trying to cope with our newfound abilities. It was like..." He ran a hand through his hair, formulating an appropriate simile. "Being thrown on a surfboard in the middle of a wave. But you can't get to shore. The safety of shore isn't an option. You're just...stuck in the ocean. At first, you're pummeled by the power. Overwhelmed. And, when you understand that you're literally in a 'do or die' situation, you make a decision: master the wave. Stand and use the momentum of the power within and around you. Control it. Control it or perish. Or worse...watch as those around you perish."

He looked at her hard, then, trying to get her to understand his meaning without having to say more. But, of course, he knew that there was so much more to say.

"We trained together. Learned together," he stressed. "We kind of knew, instinctually, that we could count on each other. We shared our stories of how we'd first learned we had these special abilities within us."

Catherine shifted her weight on her feet and crossed her arms, antsy...but listening.

"Reach, er, David," he corrected himself, "said that the first instance was a couple of weeks after the blast. He woke up, went to the kitchen, grabbed his favorite mug, and it disappeared right out of his hand. He said it scared him so shitless, he left in the clothes he was in and without telling his girlfriend. On the street, he stopped to catch his breath, dropping to his knees, and a young man, some kid stopped to help him. The kid started to pick him up, but, when David put a hand over his, the kid was gone."

She bit her lip and looked ready to cry. "What...what happened to him? The boy?"

"We found out, the next day, his body was washed up on the shoreline next to Stampton Bridge."

Her chest heaved and a hand flew up to her mouth. The other wrapped around her waist.

"He found his way, as I did, to the Reapers. They already had conduits in their ranks. They promised to help us figure out how to tame our powers. They gave us shelter, resources, and a place to hide. And, believe it or not, when you go through what we went through, that's exactly what we needed. To hide."

Catherine dropped her arms and knelt on the bed, then tucked her feet and sat at an angle facing Apollo.

"So there we were. Scared, confused, and grappling with what our futures held. I'd already gotten my Reaper tattoo. I watched David get his. I didn't know much about him. We were careful to protect our private lives. I accidentally told him I was a firefighter, and he told me he was one, too. Still green."

She needs to know. Even if it makes her hate me. More than she probably already does.

"I, uh," he started. Swallowed. "We heard talk, from credible sources, that the newly-enacted quarantine would be stricter and longer-lasting than the news was trying to tell us. David was worried about you. He wanted to make sure that you would be okay. I told him-" Apollo cleared his throat at an awkward moment- "that, if it were me, I would take my girl a shitload of groceries and leave my key on the counter. Don't raise her hopes that you're coming back...just in case he didn't."

Catherine narrowed her eyes at him. "*You* made him leave me?!"

Apollo shook his head. "I didn't *make* him do anything. He took my advice. And, to be honest, I'm glad he did. I'm not lying when I said I would've done the same."

"Whatever," she cattily answered. "What happened? What happened to him? Is he dead?"

Apollo's mouth was instantly dry. He licked his lips and swallowed against a lump that had suddenly appeared in his throat.

"Just as we were mastering our powers, Sasha took control," he explained. Catherine seemed unimpressed with the change in the story. "You have to understand, with Sasha controlling us, we were like puppets: we only existed when she was pulling our strings. When she didn't need us, we only performed basic, survival actions."

"At first, we were fighting Cole. Then, for a period of time, Sasha had control over *him*, too. But it wasn't the same. She suggested ideas, and he *willingly* followed through. We conduits were her elite soldiers. She sent us on missions with Cole, to cause chaos and destruction. Our number one objective: protect Cole. Sasha had big plans for him, apparently."

"One of the earliest missions with him, we were ordered to destroy a police station-"

"I remember that," Catherine barely breathed the words.

He continued as if he hadn't heard her. "Cole barreled in. We all did. The officers were more prepared than we'd anticipated. Heavily armed, turrets in several locations, spread out and hidden. Once the carnage started, there was no stopping until one side was obliterated. At one point, we were flanked. Six officers behind us, trying to keep us in the center of the street, where they could rain bullets onto our location. I don't know exactly how it happened, but I saw Reach place his hand on his chest and teleport to Cole's location. I think he was trying to get Cole to safety, but he was shot multiple times before he could do anything. Reach, David, fell."

It had taken more out of Apollo than he'd thought it would, retelling a story that haunted him. Catherine was crying. Steady streams of tears down both cheeks. She hadn't sniffed once; her

lips didn't quiver.

"How...how did you know what he looked like, then?" Her voice wavered and cracked. Aside from the tears, the sound was the only other aspect that betrayed her emotion.

"We had a rigid policy. Still do, actually. We don't allow any Reapers to be identified. There's several reasons why. Primarily, it's because most of us don't want to die known as gang members. Back then, it was more to protect our anonymity and mystery. I knew David as Reach. He died, and Razor and I carried his body back to our headquarters. We removed all of the Reaper clothing, including the mask, and then dressed him in plain clothes. I saw what he looked like, but I couldn't grieve him. I was a hollow version of myself."

"What. Happened. To. The. BODY. HIS BODY," she ground out every single word with venom.

"He was taken, not by me, to the Warren. That's where we took our dead," he said softly. Apologetically. "I thought someone would call you..."

She angrily wiped the tears from underneath her eyes.

"So, you're telling me that my boyfriend left me for my own good, died in order to save the life of the man who just tortured and raped me for hours and hours, then was dumped in the Warren for all of his trouble?"

"None of that should have happened. I'm sorry it did," Apollo truthfully stated. "There was so much we couldn't control. Then. Now. I hope you can eventually understand that."

She wasn't looking at him, now. He could see it in her eyes. *She's shutting down. She wants to be alone.* He sighed and threw his legs over the side of the bed. He stood and walked for the door. Before he left, he remembered he had one more thing to relate.

"David knew he couldn't go home. At least, not until he knew you'd be safe...from him. He talked about you, you know. Here and there. Nothing too revealing."

"What did he say?" Her eyes were still trained on her lap.

Apollo smiled. She was starting to reminisce, he knew...he wondered what memory popped up.

"He told me that he'd just moved to Empire City for work. He'd moved with his girlfriend," he shared. "And he bragged about you being the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. He said that you were a force. Strong. Stubborn. Wonderful. He wanted to be with you forever."

She smiled wistfully and placed a hand over her heart.

"He loved you, Catherine," Apollo gently consoled her. "And that's why I took the picture. You need to keep it. You deserve to have it as a reminder. Don't hold his mistakes against him. Everything he did was to protect you."

She did look up at Apollo, then. A small smile. A small showing of gratitude. It wasn't what she'd wanted to hear, but it was a relief to know the truth. It was a relief to tell it, too.

He walked through the door and pulled it mostly closed. His throat was still dry. He got a glass of water from the kitchen and chugged the whole amount down. After a second glass, he placed it on the counter and left the kitchen. The bathroom was unoccupied, so that was his next destination.

The first things he saw in the mirror were the large red letters: FDEC. He had the same shirt, once. Several, actually. After he'd been sent home from work, he'd never returned. Upset that his powers made him a liability, he'd grabbed every piece of clothing and thrown it into a cardboard box, similar to the one he'd found in Catherine's apartment. A quick trip to his station, a walk he used to enjoy, and the items were dumped unceremoniously outside the entrance.

No one came after him. No one came to check on him.

They knew better.

The shirt that he now wore, David's, was almost new. There were no cracks in the applied letters. No fading or peeling. Most of Apollo's were threadbare, having been worn a copious amount of times.

He shook his head at his reflection. He'd neglected to get a change of clothes, while he'd been in his room. It felt wrong to go back in. She probably needed privacy. Especially after what Cole did to...

His heart pounded in his chest, thinking back to how he'd found her.

He closed the door to the bathroom and stripped, throwing the clothes onto the counter. A shower would give him a burst of renewal. The hot water steamed up the small room quickly, and he took the time to look over the damage that was still visible on his body. He didn't look too bad, actually. Another few hours of recharging, and he would be back to normal. His normal, anyway.

The bathroom was still full of steam, when he stepped out of the shower, and he used his towel to wipe down the mirror. He shaved his face and styled his hair. It was done more to pass the time, then to impress Catherine. She already knew what he looked like.

She needs to shower, too, he thought. And I need to see if there's any wounds that need treatment of any kind. She hasn't even changed. Odd. Do I wait for her to make those decisions? I should probably leave her alone for the rest of the night. I doubt there's anything life-threatening. We would know, by now.

He put the clothes back on, at least feeling fresher underneath. The bathroom door opened, and he emerged with what was left of the steam.

The hot shower reminded him that he was still parched. He had another glass of water, then an epiphany. *She needs water. After Cole shocked her, in the alley, she was dehydrated. She*

needs water.

He filled a new glass and took it over to her. The door was shut, interestingly enough. He wondered if she was changing. Or sleeping. He didn't want to disturb her. But he heard her run into something in the room and swear.

He knocked tentatively and waited. She cracked open the door and looked surprised to see him.

"I thought you might like some water?" he lamely offered.

She opened the door further, showing him that she still hadn't changed. One of her delicate hands pointed to the nightstand. It held a full glass of clear liquid.

"I got it while you were in the shower," she pointed out, with a single eyebrow arched.

Should I ask to get different clothes?

As he thought the question, he saw her look straight ahead to his shirt. David's shirt. She stared at it for a few seconds, and Apollo waited to gauge her response. When she looked up at him, she opened the door wider to invite him inside.

He entered and placed the second water glass next to the first. His next aim was to get clothing from his dresser.

"Stop, wait!" He heard her call out. "Just. Can you do something for me, please?"

He couldn't help but be confused by her stopping him. "What do you need?"

She'd started this conversation, but now she seemed too uncomfortable to continue.

"Catherine?"

She pulled him back to the bed. "Can you...can you just...lie down for a moment? On the bed?"

"What-"

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to seduce you, or anything. I know this sounds weird. But..."

...the hell... he finished in his mind.

"Can I just pretend, for just a few minutes? Can I pretend..."

"That I'm *him*?" he said with a distasteful attitude. "How about I leave you the shirt and grab one of my own?"

"No," she firmly refused. She moved closer to him, until her body was aligned with his. She blocked the exit. But her eyes. Her eyes pleaded.

He shook his head, disgusted with himself for caving into her sick wish. When he was on the bed, he knew what was going to happen next. And it would only benefit one of them.

But if it's what she needs...or what she thinks she needs, anyway...

She lay down next to him. Flush against him. He was on his back, while she curled into his side. She nestled under his arm, which he then placed over her shoulder. One of her arms was underneath her, the other hesitantly came to rest on his chest. Feeling her touch there, he felt his breath swelling his chest fuller than before. The side of her knee gently perched on his thigh.

He closed his eyes and willed the time to pass.

This is wrong...

But it was only for a few minutes. They passed by slowly.

And then, time was up.

Her breathing was deep and even. He looked down and saw that her head was craned up towards his. Her eyes were shut, peacefully. There was no tension in her body. Occasionally, a muscle would give off a light spastic tic, a sign that she was falling into a deep sleep cycle. Possibly dreaming. Hopefully not. He doubted that her dreams could be pleasant ones, so soon after what she'd been through.

He shut his eyes, again, and eventually sleep claimed him, too.

Catherine's Confusion

"I love you, Trish," Cole said.

Nice sentiment. But she wasn't Trish. Trish was dead, and Catherine was terrified that her own death was imminent.

She sat on the toilet, her cut locks littering her bathroom's tile floor. Her wrists were tied behind her back, her mouth taped over. She looked up at the evil man standing over her. His eyes were...strange. Clouded with memory. The expression was oddly blank, but there was something in the depths of those orbs. Longing, perhaps. Disturbed, definitely.

Cole grabbed one of her arms and lifted her from her seat, dragging her from the small room straight into her bedroom. He threw her on the bed, and she landed on her side. She struggled to roll away from him, but he easily subdued her. As he pulled off her boots and pants, she realized what came next. Not death. Not yet.

She screamed into the tape. A muffled version of a cry for help. And Cole...emotionless, as he stripped away every other scrap of clothing.

Catherine woke with a start, sitting up and expecting her breath to catch in her throat, hindered by tape over her mouth. But her lips parted freely. She jerked her head in different directions, trying to figure out where she was. She was trapped! She was...wait...the door was open. And she was in a different room.

Her frantic breathing slowed, as she took in her surroundings. Apollo's apartment. His room, his bed. Not hers. He'd saved her. Cole wasn't here. Her arms were locked and her hands fanned upon the bed to support her upper body. She leaned forward and pulled her hands into her lap, cradling her wrists. Because she could. The red marks were slightly darker. There were flecks of her blood all over.

She ran to the bathroom and shut the door behind her. Her aim was to wash off the blood, but seeing it made her remember everything at once. It made her sick. She dropped to her knees and threw up into the toilet. There wasn't much in her stomach. Just bile. Her body made her heave until she was dry.

She flushed the sickly yellow substance out of sight, then went to the sink. She washed out her mouth, her face, and her hands. She was still disgusting. Disgusted and disgusting. Her reflection looked terrible. And she'd thought she looked like a mess the morning after her failed evacuation.

Obviously, she needed a shower. But she was scared to remove her clothes. Scared to see more evidence of what she'd been through. Her wrists...that was already too much. To see the rest...

She opened the door and absent-mindedly wiped the excess water from her lips onto her sleeve. Before she left the bathroom, she locked eyes with Apollo, who was across the living

area. She froze in the doorway.

He was wearing David's clothes. DAVID'S clothes. She remembered, then, seeing Apollo change in her apartment. The wounds...

"Are you...better?" she asked tentatively. She sounded tired. She was tired. And her throat burned.

"Yes," he simply answered. She nodded without reason.

The mask was off. They weren't running for their lives. They were staring at each other.

He's attractive. But he's wearing David's clothes. I hate this. Why?

"I...need to ask you. Why did you...take my picture?" she asked hesitantly.

"I knew your boyfriend," he admitted to her.

I knew he was going to say that. I knew when I saw the picture. Who packs a random picture for a person they hardly know, when lives are at stake? No one. He knew, too, that it looked suspicious. He expected me to ask.

Catherine wasn't sure when her legs turned to jelly, but she knew the next question that was boiling in her brain. She grabbed hold of the door frame and took a breath.

"Why are you still wearing his clothes?!"

She meant it to come out forcefully. Accusingly. She meant to sound strong. But she didn't anticipate Apollo rushing her, picking her up, and carrying her back into the bedroom. She pushed against his chest, but he only put her down once he had successfully maneuvered her inside. She backed away and ran into the bed. It was wrong. All wrong. She panicked, again. Seeing him standing over her and her being on a bed. Different bed, different man...but her body automatically sent her into flight mode. She rolled across the bed and stood on the other side.

"How," she started. "*How* did you know David?" Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she tried to control her breathing.

"David," Apollo quietly repeated. Odd. He sounded unfamiliar with the name. "He looked like a David."

He looked like a David?

"I didn't know him by his real name, of course," he explained.

What? What name would David give him?

"I knew him by his call sign."

"His 'call sign,'" she'd muttered back, venom in the back of her throat. "What call sign? What are you talking about?"

Apollo sat on his bed. She thought she saw him dart a quick glance to the picture of her and David still sitting on his nightstand.

"He was a Reaper-"

"You liar!" *No. You bastard. NO. Don't you dare...you didn't know him, after all. LIAR!* "He would NEVER. He was a FIREFIGHTER. A good guy! He helped people! He wasn't some," she paused and scrunched her nose in distaste, "thug!"

"So was I," Apollo revealed. He sounded bitter. She didn't care if she'd hurt his feelings. But the admission did surprise her. "I was a firefighter for FDEC for five years."

The rest of the conversation was filled with tension and release. A tug-of-war of information.

David was...a conduit. And a Reaper. He had a whole other life, separate from her. Apollo knew him as 'Reach.' Stupid name. There was too much truth in Apollo's words. Too much that sounded exactly like David.

Catherine was uncertain about moving across the country, but, as long as she was with David, she felt the journey was worth it. Straight out of college, he'd been accepted into FDEC's fire academy, and he was ecstatic. He'd worked his butt off, and it was all coming to fruition. An eight-week expedited process, due to his already having earned his bachelor's degree in both fire science and ecology. The idea of a cross-country relationship was too distressing to both Catherine and David. The simplest solution was for her to drop out of college and move with him. To support his dream. She was certain everything else would fall into place.

And, for that first month in Empire City, it was bliss. David was excited every day, when he came home. He only had a month before he would be assigned to a permanent spot in a station.

When the blast uprooted the lives of everyone in the metropolis, all of the recruits were pushed through to permanent placements immediately. With so many fallen firefighters in the Historic District, some volunteered to head toward the chaos. Those who wanted to remain in the Neon, David included, were still sent to the site of the explosion to assist in the rescue and cleanup.

The days he worked in the Historic District, David did *not* return happy. Catherine couldn't imagine the horrors he was seeing. She did her best to be silently supportive: greeting him at the door, making him meals, holding him at night.

But then, two weeks after the blast, while Catherine slept, David left. That wasn't so odd. It was that he'd never returned. She'd called his work number, left a message. Someone called her back from the same number to tell her that David had never reported for work that day.

She was flabbergasted. What could've happened to him? He was a big, strong guy. But there were so many disappearances...daily. So many dead...daily. Murmurs of a virus linked to

radiation from the blast were circulating. She'd called his work twice more, to see if they knew anything. The same person from before called to give their condolences and a promise to fill her in with any new information.

David was just...gone.

Apollo filled in the gaps of her knowledge. But hearing what had happened to her love behind the scenes...it wasn't enough. Everything made sense, logically, but she couldn't marry the two sides of the story.

Apollo accidentally letting it slip that he once was a firefighter and David sharing that he, too, was one. *Yeah, that sounds like him. He was so proud that he was a firefighter. His life-long dream, since he was a boy...*

David accidentally using his newfound power, after weeks of working in radioactive ruins, and causing something to disappear from their home. Accidentally responsible for the death of an innocent young man who was trying to help him up. *David would've been horrified. And he definitely would have done whatever it took to keep me from suffering the same fate.*

Apollo suggesting that David buy Catherine as many groceries as she could handle and then leaving them and his key in the apartment. Leaving her. That piece of information was hard to swallow. *David would've looked up to this guy. Older, more self-assured, more experienced. He took the advice and followed it to the letter. Because of Apollo.*

Apollo and David under Sasha's control. Her sending them with Cole to destroy a police station. Their orders. David giving his life to save Cole's. Dying needlessly. As a villain. A Reaper. Apollo carrying her boyfriend's body from the annihilated station, redressing him, and leaving him to be dumped in the Warren. A no one. Another casualty.

I hate Apollo. I hate David. I hate Sasha. I hate Cole. I hate ALL OF THIS!

Catherine was crying, now, and sitting on the edge of Apollo's bed. He was still sitting up, his back against the headboard, his legs outstretched. He looked...comfortable. Despite his words. She wiped away the moisture from her cheeks.

"So," she finally spoke. "You're telling me that my boyfriend left me for my own good, died in order to save the life of the man who just tortured and raped me for hours and hours, then was dumped in the Warren for all of his trouble?"

Apollo winced. *Not so comfortable with me throwing all of that back in your face, are you?*

"None of that should have happened," he lamely offered. "I'm sorry it did. There was so much we couldn't control. Then. Now." She looked away. "I hope you can eventually understand that."

She heard him sigh and leave the bed, on his way out of the room.

"David knew he couldn't go home. At least, not until you'd be safe," he hesitated, "from him. He talked about you, you know. Here and there. Nothing too revealing."

She was staring into her lap, trying to picture David's final moments in their apartment. Being so close to her, but not reaching out. *Reach*, she remembered derisively. *Stupid name*. "What did he say?"

"He told me that he'd just moved to Empire City for work. He'd moved with his girlfriend." Apollo's voice was warm. She could tell he was smiling. "And he bragged about you being the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. He said that you were a force. Strong. Stubborn. Wonderful. He wanted to be with you forever."

That hurt her heart. The descriptive words. *Beautiful. A force. Strong. Stubborn. Wonderful*. They were sweet. Too sweet. Not like David. It was the first time Apollo told her something about David that didn't reconcile with what she knew about her boyfriend. David might have complimented her to his Reaper friend, but there's no way that he was that eloquent.

She placed a hand over her heart and wished for the words to be true. But she knew them to be fabricated. By Apollo.

"He loved you, Catherine," the man at the door said. "And that's why I took the picture. You need to keep it. You deserve to have it as a reminder. Don't hold his mistakes against him. Everything he did was to protect you."

When she looked up at him, she saw that he was already watching her. She smiled. Not all of it was verbatim from David's mouth. Apollo was sugar-coating it, to be sure. But David *had* protected her, in his own way.

Now, Apollo was doing everything *he* could to protect her. Including preserving her memory of David.

He left the room and pulled the door until it was almost shut. She heard him in the kitchen and then the shower. She glanced over at the picture.

I almost took it with me, two weeks ago. I would have left it, a second time, if I had seen it before leaving the apartment this morning.

She eventually went to the kitchen to retrieve a glass of water, to soothe her aching throat. Getting up and walking was still hard. She felt a stabbing pain between her legs. And painful pressure in the center of her back. There were so many injuries hidden beneath the leggings and hoodie. She was sure of it.

The shower stopped running, and she hastily poured a glass and tried to smoothly shuffle back to the room. It didn't help much, but she made it back and closed herself in. She sat with her glass on the bed.

When she heard him knock, she looked up in surprise. *What does he want?* She placed her water on the nightstand and barely opened the door.

The smell of him instantly overwhelmed her senses. His soap and fresh scent pushed past her and invaded her space. He was tall, handsome, clean-shaven, and...still wearing David's clothes.

"I thought you might like some water?" he asked innocently.

She wordlessly opened the door wider to show him the full glass sitting on the nightstand. He looked at it, and his face fell...in a charming, sheepish way.

"I got it while you were in the shower," she informed him. Her breathing was heavy. She stared down at his fire shirt. FDEC. David was so proud to wear that long-sleeved shirt. It was his new favorite. He hardly had the opportunity to wear it, before...

She opened the door fully, and he stepped through to put the extra glass next to hers. Then, he walked toward his dresser. As he was bending down to the drawer, she called out without thinking.

"Stop, wait! Just. Can you do something for me, please?"

He stopped and looked at her with confusion. "What do you need?"

It was so sincere. So heartbreakingly sincere. He stood, ready and willing to help her. Protect her. Did she dare?

"Catherine?" he prompted her.

She crossed to where he was and grabbed his hand, pulling him toward the bed. "Can you... can you just...lie down for a moment? On the bed?"

"What-"

She saw the reservation in his eyes, but she pressed forward. "I'm sorry," she interrupted him. Embarrassed, but determined. "I'm not trying to seduce you, or anything. I know this sounds weird, but...can I just pretend, for just a few minutes? Can I pretend..." She trailed off, not wanting to say the final few words of the sentence aloud.

"That I'm *him*?" Apollo finished for her. He was clearly not onboard with the idea. "How about I leave you the shirt and grab one of my own?"

That's not enough...

"No." She stepped up next to him. Against him. She needed the shirt, yes, but she needed a man to fill it.

He glared down at her and she looked up at him. *Please*, she internally begged. *Please, just give me this.*

She saw the moment, in his eyes, when he gave in. Without looking away from her, he settled back into the bed and lay on top of the covers. That was fine. It was just for a few minutes. She cuddled into him, lying on her side. He placed a comforting arm over her shoulders, and she cautiously placed a hand on his chest. *Yes, this is what I need. The gentle rhythm of breathing. The rising and falling of a healthy chest underneath the soft fabric.*

She carefully repositioned her head on his shoulder to look up at him. His eyes were closed. He didn't look comfortable, but she didn't care. It was selfish of her to make this request, in the first place, but she was relieved he complied. She needed to feel safe.

Sleep overtook her, and she didn't wake until the room was completely brightened by daylight.

Her eyelids blinked open and Apollo was looking down at her, all seriousness. He appeared to be studying her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, for a greeting.

She paused and used the time to stretch, pulling away from being in such an intimate position.

"Um," she began, her voice sounding thick with sleep. "I'm sore from sleeping against you. Did I not move at all?"

"No, you didn't."

She stretched, again, and realized. "I'm..." *How do I put this? I don't feel like I've been raped repeatedly by a super-powered monster. It feels like a dull pain. My back...feels better. My wrists...* She looked at her wrists, and the darkening red ligature marks were only a faint pink. *How...?*

"Do you feel better?" he prodded. *Needing to know...why?*

"I do," Catherine whispered. "Did you...do something?"

"I tried to expand my powers. I tried to conduct some of my healing through your body," he said and sat up. "I was looking at your wrists, to see if it was having any effect. I hoped it would...do more."

She was astounded. "Thank you," she whispered, also sitting up.

He moved to leave the room, saying something about getting them breakfast. She was too flabbergasted by how her health had improved, that she didn't pay Apollo any mind.

She left the room, too, turning to use the bathroom, but Apollo was already inside. He finished quickly enough, and he gave her a puzzled look as she ran through and shut the door behind him.

Once alone, Catherine unzipped the hoodie and crumpled it onto the floor.

The marks were everywhere. Jagged lines from electrical current. Circular patterns of burns. Bite marks. She could faintly see where Cole's handprints held her by her throat. The bra came off and she saw more bites. More bruises. All a lighter pink than they should've been, but still present. Turning around, in the center of her back was a small, angry, red circle. A fingerprint burned over and over again into her skin.

She shuddered, remembering that particular method of torture.

Her leggings came off, next. She'd used the restroom. She knew what she'd find down there. Handprints on her thighs. Bruises and more bites. And more jagged scorch marks. They, too, were better than they'd been. But not gone. And certainly not forgotten.

She stood, naked, in front of the mirror. Shorter hair and all. She'd survived. But she worried that, even if Apollo was able to erase all the physical evidence...would she still see the scars? The bruises? The bites?

She jumped in the shower, eager to wash every inch of her body. It went from steaming hot to very cold, as she stood and scrubbed. Her hair. *He cut it.* Her body. *He hurt it.* Her face. *He ignored it.* When she finally turned off the water, her teeth were chattering and goosebumps were all over her skin. She quickly grabbed a towel and removed as much of the moisture as she could.

Catherine *felt* cleaner. And that was something. The mirror was still fogged up, so she couldn't see if there was a physical change. Probably not. She used the generic lotion and massaged it into her sore body. She brushed her hair without mercy, fine with feeling the pain of forcefully pulling out the tangles. She was sure her hair was a ragged mess, with the haphazard way he had cut it, but, thankfully, it was long enough to tie it back. Out of sight, out of mind.

But the rest of her...

She didn't want to put anything on that she'd worn into the bathroom. But she had few options. She decided to wear the towel as a skirt, with the hoodie concealing her top half. The other three items, underwear, leggings, and bra, were thrown in the small waste bin.

When she exited, Apollo was washing off his plate at the sink. She felt a niggling feeling of guilt at taking so long in the bathroom. He mentioned fixing her breakfast. And she was starving. But nourishment had to wait.

She ran into the bedroom and changed into some of the clothes Apollo had picked up for her. Familiar items that had never seen the inside of her apartment. She saw David's clothes in the laundry basket, and her eyes widened with surprise. She hadn't noticed that Apollo had changed.

Now...what to do with the gray sweatpants and FDEC shirt...

Catherine grabbed the sweatpants, but hesitated when she touched the shirt. Ultimately, she left it in the basket and took the hoodie and sweatpants out the door.

Apollo noticed her throwing away the two garments in the kitchen trash can, but he said nothing about it.

"Can I make you something?"

"Yes, please," she practically begged. "I don't care what, I'm starving."

He nodded and turned to the refrigerator. He ended up making her a deli-style sandwich, seeing as it was already midday. She sat at the table and immediately dug into the dish; Apollo accompanied her, taking an empty seat.

"I missed a meeting with Zeke, to follow up about our altercation with the Dust Men," he informed her. "So, I'll have to head out this evening to meet up with him."

"What happened in the Warren?" she asked as politely as she could, with a mouthful of sandwich.

"The Dust Men have recouped some of their numbers. Their leader, an insanely-overpowered conduit named Alden, is alive and recruiting. We went in with the wrong strategy, Razor was killed, and we had to retreat."

Razor...Razor...that's a conduit. A female one. He mentioned her before. "Razor? How did she die?"

"Impaled by an object that she was trying to hurl at Alden. It shouldn't have happened. We should have bailed as soon as we saw him."

Catherine was oddly pleased with how candidly Apollo was speaking to her. She appreciated knowing the outcome of the battle. Maybe he wasn't all that mad at her, anymore, for leaving. She paused to finish chewing, before saying her piece.

"Thank you, again, for saving me. And thank you for healing me, too."

Apollo leaned back in his chair and looked pained.

"Why didn't you trust me, Catherine? I was trying to protect you. Why did you leave in the first place?"

She pushed the rest of the sandwich to the side, to cross her arms over the table and lean forward.

"I did trust you," she argued. "Every Reaper was going to be in the Warren. The Voice of Survival told us to stay away from Reapers and Dust Men, because Cole would inevitably join the fight! I thought it was the safest time to go, pick up a few things, lock up and leave! I never thought he'd be *living* in my apartment! How could I have known- How could I have known that he-" Her voice steadily raised in pitch until it cracked on that final word and left her hyperventilating.

Her head fell down, and she felt close to fainting. Apollo appeared behind her, rubbing circles on her back and speaking calmly to her.

"Slow your breathing, Catherine. Catherine? Look at me." She couldn't, so he tilted her head up to meet his gaze. "Take a breath with me, okay? Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale...inhale... Keep going. Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale..."

She felt the haze leaving her mind, and her heart began to slow its frenzied pace.

"Please don't go, tonight!" she blurted out. She was looking directly into Apollo's eyes, and his calm demeanor shifted into surprise.

"I won't be long," he quietly said. "A few hours at most."

She nodded, dumbly.

"I'm sorry I made you...do that...last night," she stammered through.

"It's fine," he answered gruffly, suddenly pulling away and crossing to sit on the couch. He picked up the controller on the coffee table and was soon lost in one of his video games.

Catherine finished the sandwich, placed her plate in the dishwasher, and went to sit next to him. Apollo visibly tensed at her proximity, but he relaxed within seconds. She watched him play, staring at the action on the screen and finding herself successfully diverted.

The rest of the day and evening was dull and boring. Both of them needed the mental break. They hardly exchanged a dozen words, between the two of them.

When it was time for him to go, Apollo began to don his Reaper uniform. He'd removed it from the backpack, but it still had holes and rips that would have to be left until a later repair date. As he dressed, Catherine watched the transformation from man to Reaper.

"You shouldn't be a Reaper, Apollo," she told him outright.

"Shouldn't I?" he teased back. He kept dressing, but became more serious. "We're stronger together. More people, more guns, more resources."

"Yeah, I get that...in the beginning," she countered. "But you're also grouped together with those jerks who were in that alley. The first time you saved me. That's not strength. That pulls you down. You can't be a *good* Reaper."

"I'm doing my best," he muttered, placing the balaclava over his head. He sounded disinterested in the conversation.

How do I make him understand? This isn't coming out the way it should...

"What I mean is," she corrected herself and licked her lips nervously. "You're too good to be a Reaper. You could be more."

"More," he repeated sarcastically, putting on the final article: the white, full-length, hooded jacket.

"You could be more than just the Reaper conduit that saved my life. You *could* be a hero."

He froze and met her eye.

"You could be the hero that Empire City so desperately needs," she continued. "We have Reapers, Dust Men, and Cole tearing this place apart. We need someone to believe in, Apollo. And it could be you."

He turned away, choosing not to respond to that. He opened the window, but turned around a final time to face Catherine.

"I'll be back in a few hours," he promised, again. "Try to get some sleep."

She nodded and turned toward the bedroom, hearing his coat flap in the wind and out into the night.

Not David

Sunlight barely glinted through the bedroom window. Morning sun. When he'd leased the apartment, Apollo was given a discounted rental fee, due to the undesirability of having a bedroom that sunlight immediately streamed through at the break of dawn.

He didn't mind, but his girlfriend at the time hated it. But, as his was the sole name on the lease, it was his decision. His money, his choice. Blackout curtains helped, but when she moved out, he took them down.

After acquiring his powers, quitting his firefighting job, and joining the Reapers, the sun was his alarm clock. As soon as the rays of light hit his body, he could feel the natural surge of energy that came from his conduit gene automatically ordering his system to harvest and transform the light into usable power or heal whatever afflictions ailed his body.

He felt Catherine's form alongside his own. Her leg was no longer over his thigh; sometime in the night, she moved it off to rest parallel her other one on the bed. But her face was still tilted up to his, and her hand still rested atop his broader chest.

Apollo visually examined her, taking into account the deep red bruises on her wrists and around her neck. At the time of her rescue, he had noticed her battered body, but his mind wasn't able to categorize every physical sign of trauma. He was focused on removing her from the apartment. Now, he couldn't help but imagine the horrors that Cole had inflicted upon her. The monster had even cut her hair, to fetishize her looks into a closer resemblance of his dead Trish.

It was a strange feeling, having light, especially sunlight, touch his body. It felt like a warmth that radiated from his core outward. It rippled through every appendage like a comforting caress. That and, being male, meant that he usually woke up erect and aroused. Having a beautiful young woman lying against him did not alleviate the pressure.

He took deep breaths, thankful that she was sleeping peacefully, and focusing on the healing within his own body. As his own system regenerated, he began to wonder.

I've never tried it before. It shouldn't hurt her. It doesn't hurt when I conceal her in refractive light. Maybe she'll sleep through it. It might not work, anyway, I don't want to get her hopes up. I'll be careful. Best-case scenario, it works; worst-case...it does nothing. I'll be careful...

He concentrated and led the healing energy through his body, visualizing it streaming from his core to his arms, feeling the warmth culminate within those two limbs. One hand was still around Catherine, holding her protectively. The other was at his side, but he gently brought it up to rest on her hand on his chest. The power kept surging through his arms, past his elbows, bottling up in his hands, and then releasing somewhere around his fingertips.

There was no light, no shining beam that cascaded over her body or through her skin. He frowned and, using the hand on hers, he gently lifted it up into the air, so that he could see the

marks around her wrist. He supposed the angry ligature marks looked slightly less red. He focused more intently on her wrist and saw the marks lighten in front of his eyes.

Okay, that must be doing something good. Maybe it's like my body. Maybe I have to concentrate on a certain area to heal that particular injury.

He frowned, again. He placed her hand back where it was on his chest.

Obviously, I can't touch her anywhere...there.

Instead, he watched her, still pushing energy through his fingertips and hoping that her body would receive the healing where it needed it most.

Eventually, her eyes fluttered open, then widened at seeing him staring at her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, without any context.

She pulled away from him, and he let go of her shoulder, allowing her to roll away and stretch. Without her next to him, his body's healing power washed from his hands back into his torso, accumulating and creating a reserve for later use.

"Um," she sleepily began. "I'm sore from sleeping against you. Did I not move at all?"

"No, you didn't," he simply answered her. *But how do you feel, Catherine?*

"I'm-" she started to add to the conversation, but she suddenly looked too surprised to speak. She moved the sleeves of her hoodie up and examined one wrist, then the other.

Tell me. "Do you feel better?" Did it work, or is it only skin-deep?

"I do," she barely whispered, obviously confused. She looked suspiciously at him. "Did you...do something?"

"I tried to expand my powers," he explained, hoping she wouldn't be mad with his taking the liberty to do so while she was asleep. He hadn't thought about that being a possibly violation before now. "I tried to conduct some of my healing through your body." He sat up, but kept his eyes locked onto hers. "I was looking at your wrists to see if it was having any effect. I hoped it..." *would lessen the pain from Cole sexually assaulting you* "...do more." He clenched his jaw to force his mouth closed.

"Thank you," she quietly responded, pulling herself up on the bed to also sit up.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and stood, his back to Catherine. He moved to leave the room, while speaking.

"I'll make us some breakfast. Even if you're not hungry, you need to eat something. It'll help your body heal...physically. I'll make some toast."

She didn't say anything to him, but, in fairness, he hadn't asked her a question. Most likely, she was still reeling from everything, including waking up next to him and hearing that he'd

been experimenting on her while she slept.

But first, he needed to use the restroom. His mouth was dry and he definitely had sour morning breath. When he finished, Catherine was right on the other side of the bathroom door. She pushed past him and he left her alone. The door shut swiftly behind him, leaving him feeling oddly discarded. He walked away, only barely hearing the sound of a long zipper being undone.

He ate his breakfast and left his plate at the table. Apollo heard no noise coming from the bathroom, and he couldn't help but wonder what Catherine was still doing inside. Finally, the sounds of the shower reached his ears, and he used the opportunity to grab his own clothes from his bedroom.

Reach's – no, *David's* sweatpants and FDEC shirt were placed in the laundry basket in the closet, more out of habit than a purposeful act. He changed into a pair of his own, correctly-sized black sweatpants and a loose-fitting t-shirt, then went back into the kitchen.

Long shower, he thought. Better use the privacy to check in.

He went straight to the laptop, barely hidden beneath his sofa. Opening it up, his lips automatically pursed in a thin line when he saw the Reaper logo in the top corner. He clicked.

{S5Ice...TargEt MaP EnSured Tonight}

Opposite of ice, TEMPEST, synonym, five letters...

He pinched the bridge of his nose between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He hated this method of communication, but he hated wearing the com in his ear much more.

FIRESTORM.

[Apollo, you failed to check in. All conduits are called to meet tonight. 2030. Warehouse in North Beach. Mandatory. – Z]

The message glitched and then erased from his screen. He placed it back under the couch and stood, expecting Catherine to be done at any moment.

But the water ran for an hour, before finally turning off. He grabbed his plate from the table and brought it to the sink, not wishing to appear like he was waiting to see her emerge. He heard the bathroom door open and her footsteps that led quickly to his room.

When she came out fully dressed in a black tee and charcoal gray yoga pants, he was standing at the kitchen's small island.

"Can I make you something?" he offered.

"Yes, please. I don't care what, I'm starving."

A sandwich it is, then.

Once they were both seated at the kitchen table, he was reminded of something.

"I missed a meeting with Zeke, to follow up about our altercation with the Dust Men," he explained. "So I'll have to head out this evening to meet up with him."

She'd spoken between bites of her food to ask more about what had happened, and he shared as much as he could. It was a perversion of the normal "sharing one's day with one's partner," and the familiarity of it all made him uncomfortable.

And then she'd thanked him. For both saving and healing her. And the words spilled from his lips without thinking of how callous they would be only a day after her ordeal.

"Why didn't you trust me, Catherine? I was trying to protect you. Why did you leave in the first place?"

As soon as he'd asked the blaming questions, he wanted to take them back, but she pushed the remainder of her sandwich away – the sandwich he'd made for her – to answer. She'd babbled her reasons in an increasingly raised voice, until she was silenced by her heightened anxiety.

He'd soothed her, the scenario similar to ones he had encountered as a firefighter, calming the person afflicted with anxiety who was worried it could be something much worse.

"Please don't go tonight!" she'd unexpectedly let out.

"I won't be long. A few hours, at most," he'd said matter-of-factly.

She'd nodded and apologized, again. This time, for using him as a substitute for her lost love. But he was tired of hearing apologies. Especially from her. It was a new Catherine. No longer as cocky and confident in herself. Not trying to manipulate him or play to his ego.

Cole had broken her spirit, and, now, all she could do was apologize.

It wasn't right.

"It's fine," he'd brushed the apology off. *Callous, again. I'm not trying to be. But she shouldn't be apologizing...not after what she went through.*

He played video games. She eventually joined him, sitting beside him on the sofa. She watched the gameplay as if she cared about the fictional characters on the screen. After that, the time crept by slowly, with the two of them mostly avoiding one another.

It was terrible. The rapport they'd built with each other within two weeks of their shared isolation was not present in the hours leading to nightfall. He couldn't do anything to fix... anything. He could only give her space.

Later, he changed back into his Reaper uniform, preparing to leave for North Beach. He'd noticed Catherine standing nearby, but he focused on his task until he heard her speak.

"You shouldn't be a Reaper, Apollo." The words were completely out of the blue.

He inwardly chuckled. *Still the bad guy.* "Shouldn't I?" he'd playfully thrown back at her. She didn't immediately respond, and he could see out of the corner of her eye that she was sincere. "We're stronger together," he'd said with a shrug. "More people, more guns, more resources."

"Yeah, I get that," she'd pressed on, "in the beginning. But you're also grouped together with those jerks who were in that alley. The first time you saved me. That's not strength. That pulls you down. You can't be a *good* Reaper."

That stung. He'd done everything he could to help her. He'd gone above and beyond, having no idea what he'd gotten himself into. And he didn't regret it. And he didn't resent her for what he knew to be out of her control.

"I'm doing my best," he said with a tick in his jaw. He pulled the mask over his face, as she watched. *I need to get going...*

"What I mean is," she continued, clearly exasperated over something. "You're too good to be a Reaper. You could be more."

He chuckled under his breath, grabbing his white coat from where it lay on the chair. "More," he muttered derisively.

"You could be more than just the Reaper conduit that saved my life. You *could* be a hero." She stared into his eyes and took a step toward him, completely serious. "You could be the hero that Empire City so desperately needs. We have Reapers, Dust Men, and Cole tearing this place apart. We need someone to believe in, Apollo. And it could be you."

His heart beat at a rapid rate in his chest, a drum reverberating in its cavity.

Cole had immense power. *So do I.* Cole could heal others, if he wanted to. *So can I.* Cole struck fear into the hearts of his enemies. *So could I.*

The Reapers were a small militia determined to kill Cole.

The Dust Men were a group of transient misfits that were also seeking to kill Cole.

Alden hated Cole.

Cole was one man.

Apollo was one man, too. And flying completely under the radar. A nameless Reaper Conduit. A nuisance. A gang member.

Was she right? Could he be more?

He turned to the window and unlocked it, preparing to leave. Once it was open, a light breeze sifted into the apartment. He hesitated before leaving and faced Catherine a final time.

"I'll be back in a few hours. Try to get some sleep," he advised her. Then he exited, without waiting for her to say anything more.

It was only seven-thirty. He had an hour to make it to the docks in North Beach. As per his usual, he would be there before anyone else arrived. The sun had set an hour ago, and the city was bathed in cool moonlight that highlighted his white trench coat. If anyone was out, which they shouldn't be, they would definitely be running from his path in fear. If Cole was out, Apollo and all other Reapers would become beacons to target. Hopefully, every Reaper Conduit would show discretion in getting to the designated meeting spot.

Surprisingly, though, the warehouse was NOT empty, when Apollo arrived.

Zeke and Aura were standing in the middle of the large space, and they looked as if they were expecting him.

"Thanks for showin' up, this time, Apollo!" Zeke said with a sarcastic smirk. Aura stood silently, watching the two men.

"I know you saw that I read your message," Apollo pointed out to the Reaper's leader. "Are we even waiting on anyone else to arrive?"

"Of course not!" Zeke folded his arms on his chest. When he had first joined the Reapers, he'd worn ridiculously loud Hawaiian shirts with his khaki shorts. No matter the weather. After being easily spotted and targeted by Cole, Zeke had adopted the much more discreet black-on-black ensemble. "But, after you were a no-show last night, I figured I had to make our meeting a little more formal and a little less optional!"

Apollo sighed. He had two objectives: excuse his absence and give Zeke a reason to let him lay low for a while. And he needed to achieve both without involving Catherine in any way.

"I ran into Cole near Breward Station, yesterday," he shared truthfully.

Zeke's eyes popped open. "That was YOU?"

"Yeah. I was still hurt from my fight with the Dust Men, and I barely got away," Apollo smoothly related the tale. "After that, I needed rest. *Badly*. I went home and focused on healing. Sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I didn't have my earpiece on me."

"Did you engage him, or did he engage you?" Zeke gave Apollo a discerning look, clearly trying to reconcile information that he possessed with whatever else the Reaper Conduit had to share.

"The terrorist was in the street, yelling Trish's name and electrocuting everything in his path." At the mention of the name, Zeke flinched and Apollo noticed. "I ran to see if I could help draw him away from the street, led him to Memorial Park, and was barely able to force him back into a creek."

"You didn't finish him off?"

Apollo shook his head. "I didn't want to risk it. One more shock, even from touching his unconscious body, and I would've died right there."

Zeke was grim. "Not to be unappreciative of your work here, Apollo, but you sure would've made everything easier in the Neon if you had DONE YOUR JOB." The last words were gritted out through his bared teeth. "Or if you'd had your damn COM in your damn EAR, you could've called for backup!" He ran a clawed hand briskly through his thick head of brunette hair, in a frustrated gesture. "I heard about a Reaper sparring with Cole yesterday, through talk in the town, but when I didn't have a report from one of our own, I didn't know *what* to think. I should've known it was *you*."

Alongside Zeke, Aura looked equally disapproving. Apollo could only see her eyes, but they were narrowed directly at him. Before he could say anything to defend himself, Zeke continued.

"So, you ran *toward* Cole, trying to be all heroic, almost died, but suddenly decided NOT to be all noble when you had the chance to take him out?"

"Yeah," Apollo agreed, the anger within him bubbling to a boiling point. "Isn't that what we're supposed to be doing? Protecting the Neon?"

"No, you dumbass! We're eliminating our enemies! Cole! The Dust Men! Alden! They're the top priorities. Let the people take care of themselves! We're doing everyone a favor, going head to head with the *real* baddies in Empire City. We don't have *time* to do stupid heroic acts, at the cost of our mission! I'm not willing to lose a conduit to a one-on-one match with Cole because the dolt thinks he's some sort of hero!"

"Especially after losing Razor," Aura finally spoke up. Her voice was soft, but Apollo could hear the rage within it. Zeke didn't look over at her, but he let her have the last word in the tirade.

"I'm sorry about that, but, speaking of Razor," Apollo quickly turned the conversation toward a different topic. "What do we do about the Dust Men, now that Alden's back?"

Zeke placed his hands on his hips and pivoted in place. "Dammit, I don't know. That freak's a champion at stayin' under the radar. Nothing in our intel even *hinted* at that son of a bitch being back on the map. This is *not* good, man. What's your impression of what went down the other night? Aura, here, already gave me her take," he nodded toward the Reaper woman, then stood still. "And she told me about Razor's death," he acknowledged quietly.

Safer ground. I'll let him know what happened, then suggest we all lay low for a while. I'll have time to watch over Catherine's recovery...

"It's clear that Alden's been back for a while," Apollo began. "Long enough to put together another one of his mechanized suits and to recruit more Dust Men. His minions are as sloppy and incompetent as ever, but their sheer numbers and munitions were what drove us to retreat. No idea where they get their weapons, but if we could cut off their supply, it would make all the difference."

Zeke nodded, impressed, as he appraised Apollo with a heightened respect. "And Alden? How do you suggest we handle *him*?"

"I suggest we *don't*. He's still got a vendetta against Cole. Cole may not know that Alden is back, yet, but, once he does, they may just destroy each other. Or at least their fighting might weaken one or both of them." *We can hope*, Apollo thought. "The closest the Dust Men have come to crossing into the Neon was when we fought them on Roosevelt Bridge, all those months ago. They stick to the Warren. But, with the First Sons and Kessler no longer posing a threat, they might try to come into our territory. We need to go on the defensive, for a while, until we're ready with a new strategy."

"Why did Razor die?" Zeke asked abruptly.

The question threw Apollo off enough to make him pause.

"There were too many Dust Men in the yard," he said, flustered. "I know *I* was focused on providing cover for our non-conduit members. Several of our conduits were busy fighting those mech-based conduits of Alden's. I saw Aura and Razor attack Alden..." *Come to think of it...* "Aura, were you able to do anything to him?"

She lifted her head slightly, seemingly miffed by Apollo's questioning of her abilities.

"He's a powerful conduit," she reiterated, as if anyone in the warehouse needed reminding of that face. "I couldn't even *touch* his mind," she bitterly muttered.

"We should've pulled back, as soon as we saw him," Apollo asserted, as a way to apologize for her losing her friend.

The three stood silently, nothing to hear in the cavernous space. Not even a cricket.

"Can we take him down, next time?" Zeke asked both of the conduits.

Aura looked to Apollo, curious to hear him answer. Apollo took the cue and spoke for the both of them.

"I think so, yes. He's just one man. I don't care how powerful of a conduit he is. He only has telekinesis. If we coordinate an attack with all of our conduits, we can defeat him. But," Apollo lowered his enthusiastic tone to a more serious mood, "that's only if we can separate him from the Dust Men and his *own* conduits."

Zeke nodded thoughtfully, contemplating something. "Defense, for now?"

"Defense, for now. Everyone needs to recover from that night," he confidently stated. *Including Catherine*. "Rotate cells of eight to ten Reapers next to Jefferson Tunnel and Roosevelt Bridge. Maybe even Fremont Bridge, just in case the Dust Men decide to use Historic District to enter the Neon. Keep a conduit or two on rooftops in the city. One looking down on Archer Square, one on the wharf side of Memorial Park. Vapor and Prank can camouflage themselves. And they didn't sustain as much damage as the rest of us, from what I saw. They can take the first shift."

Aura didn't disagree with anything said, and she met Zeke's eyes for a minute to let him know that she approved of the plan.

"All right," their leader said to Apollo. "But if you're needing to rest, then REST! No more playing hero, Apollo, you got me?" Apollo nodded tightly. "And keep your damn com in your ear, WHERE IT BELONGS!"

The meeting ended with that last chiding, and the trio took turns leaving the facility. Aura first, then Apollo, with Zeke being the final one to lock up. Or, as Apollo was fairly sure, wait for the two of them to leave and then settle in for the night somewhere in the warehouse. Zeke had safe houses like this one all over the Neon. Some were apartments, some were offices, some were empty buildings. All were abandoned.

When Apollo took his turn to exit, he didn't see Aura anywhere. For being a petite woman, she was incredibly quick and agile. Her powers didn't include going invisible, but she could make the average passerby blind to her presence.

He headed straight for Memorial Park, not wanting to possibly lead a tail to Catherine. In the open area of the park, he turned all the way around himself, searching his perimeter for any sign of Aura. Satisfied that she was on her way back to her own home, but not foolish enough to gamble Catherine's safety on his hunch, he concealed himself and ran for the alley behind his building.

As he approached his apartment, he saw that the living room light was still on. He didn't reveal himself until he was through the window, where he saw an anxious Catherine lying on the sofa.

"Catherine?" he called out softly to her. He began to remove his coat, as she jumped up to face him.

"You're back!" She sounded relieved.

"I said I would be," he said the words kindly, but he worried they came out wrong. The jacket was thrown on chair and he set to work on the gloves.

She stood a few feet away from him, dressed in a pair of his long pajama pants and the same black shirt she'd been wearing earlier that night. She shifted her weight back and forth nervously, with her arms folded over her chest.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"How did it go?" she asked back, skipping over his own question.

He threw the black gloves on the chair, as well, then pulled off the skull balaclava.

"It was fine," he shrugged. He sat down on the vacated sofa and pulled one boot off and then the next. "It was Zeke, Aura, and myself talking about what we're going to do, next."

"What are you going to do?"

He shook his head, concentrating on removing his shoes and not on her. "You don't need to know every detail. What's important is that I can stay here for a few days, before going out,

again." The black combat boots were placed next to the couch, and he stretched his back and legs.

When he looked over at her, she was standing and facing him, still anxious. An awkward pause settled between them, and he stood to walk toward the bedroom.

"I'll get some clothes, since you're awake, and then I'll sleep on the couch, okay?"

She didn't say anything, behind him. *Whatever*, he answered himself. He was too tired to address her further.

He grabbed a pair of basketball shorts and an old t-shirt, then left the room and went into the bathroom to change and finish his nightly routine. Once he was done, he opened the door and almost jumped at the sight of Catherine waiting right outside for him.

"I couldn't sleep," she whispered with a shudder.

He froze in the doorway, knowing what came next and not trusting himself to react properly.

"Can you please," she paused with substantial uncertainty. "Can we sleep in the bed, again? One more night? I'm sorry... I know how it sounds, but I slept so well last night. I felt...safe. I tried to sleep, while you were gone... I... I just can't. Please?"

I can't keep doing this, Catherine. I'm not your security blanket. I'm not a teddy bear.

"Fine," he automatically answered, in direct opposition to the thoughts racing through his head.

She went to the bedroom, and he walked back to the living room to turn off the light. He'd locked the window, when he'd entered his home, and there was nothing left to do but follow her to his bed. Again.

You can't keep doing this, man. It's not good for either of us. She's going to become too dependent on my help, and I'm...

He liked her. He was attracted to her. A part of him liked the idea of having someone depending on him. Someone to hold. Someone to be his.

But this wasn't the time or place for that kind of relationship. And getting her hopes up would be cruel...especially if he didn't return home. She'd been through that once, already, with David.

In the room, he immediately looked toward the picture featuring her and the man he'd known as Reach. It was still on the nightstand, but she had, at some point, flipped it over. Now, it only showed the white backside of the developed film. Catherine was already lying in bed, looking up at the ceiling. Apollo slowly slid in next to her, trying to move the bed as little as possible. He lay down on his back, adopting the same position as the previous night, and she scooted against him again. A head against his shoulder. A hand over his heart. A body alongside his.

Calm down, he told himself. And her, too.

She said I could be a hero...

And he dreamed of that. And her.

Not Mariah

Catherine watched Apollo disappear into the night to meet up with Zeke in some secret location, leaving the cozy apartment unbearably empty. She looked around and wondered what to do to occupy her time. It was still relatively early in the evening.

Video games? *HA!* Watching a movie? *Nah, not in the mood.* Another book? *Not tonight.*

She felt antsy, alone in the space usually occupied by two.

Truth be told, there was only one thing she really *wanted* to do, and now was the perfect opportunity to do it.

She searched through the bookshelves in the living room, first. She'd noticed the textbooks and binders, but they'd never interested her. Probably leftover from his college days. One of them stood out, though, now that she was paying attention... Neither a textbook nor a binder. A photo album.

It was at the bottom corner of the shelving unit, nestled between the wooden side and a few inch-wide solid-colored binders. A deep crimson red with gold accents on the spine. No title. No place of reverence. She pulled it out from its place, sitting cross-legged on the floor and opening it on her lap.

The first picture was of Apollo with a young woman. Apollo was younger, too. *I could've seen his face much earlier, if I'd just thought to look through this.* The woman was beautiful, with caramel skin, large brown eyes, and dark hair that flowed in waves around her shoulders and flowing down to her waist. One word was written below the picture: US. It was surrounded by hearts.

Catherine flipped through the pages. Pictures of him and the woman, obviously a girlfriend, taken within the span of their young love. At a baseball game, cheering. A kiss shared, awkwardly angled as though the camera was held at the end of his arm. In front of a movie theater.

There were pictures of his family, too, from what Catherine could tell. Apollo strongly resembled his father. There was a picture of the two of them sitting on a sofa together, watching a football game on television. It was supposed to be a candid shot, but Apollo gave a sly look out of the side of his eye to the photographer. A pretty posed portrait of an older woman, probably Apollo's mother, the girlfriend, and a younger woman. A sister, perhaps? Apollo had his mother's lighter eyes. His sister had lighter features, too, like the mother. *She looks a lot younger than Apollo, at this point. I wonder how long ago these were taken...*

No dates at the bottom of any of the photos. No written-in explanations of where or when the moments were captured.

She kept flipping through the album. It was strange to see Apollo so happy. She'd never seen him smile this big. He was a serious version of himself, now.

Apollo and the girlfriend at a park, taking a multitude of pictures around the playground and on a grassy field nearby. Them at a party. Them at a restaurant celebrating her birthday.

Catherine suddenly had a strong desire to know the woman's name.

And her wish was granted as, at the end of the album, a short note was scribed.

N & M 4 EVA!

Love you,

Mariah

Mariah...

N? Must be Apollo's name. Starts with an N? Nathan? Nick? Norman? Ned? Noah? I can't think of anything else that begins with N. Maybe it's something weird?

She flipped the album back to the beginning and examined each picture, now that she had a name to go with one of the faces. They looked genuinely happy, this Mariah and Apollo. Not the kind of fake happiness sometimes modeled by couples trying to appear picture-perfect. Mariah was obviously the photographer, between the two of them. There were a couple of shots she'd taken of Apollo by himself. One was at the end of Fisherman's Wharf at sunset. There were no pictures of Mariah by herself.

Catherine eventually placed the album back into its spot, making sure that nothing was out of place.

That's when it occurred to her... *There's no pictures of anyone in his apartment. Why not?*

But an answer came just as easily. *He's a guy. They don't think of those things. He barely has anything on his walls. David didn't think about putting up pictures, either. I was the one who put that frame by our bed.*

A quick glance to the clock in the kitchen showed that more time had passed than she would ever have assumed. She looked out the window to a sky that was illuminated by moonlight and yawned.

After brushing her teeth and using the restroom, she went into the bedroom. She'd left the light on in the living room, for Apollo to easily make his way back inside. The bedroom, like the rest of the apartment, was dark. She took off the yoga pants and hesitated with what to wear to bed.

It was getting colder. This time of year, she'd loved wearing David's flannel pajama pants to bed. He'd always complained that there was never a clean pair for *him* to wear, but she knew he was just teasing her. He'd used the excuse to spoon her and share her warmth. Apollo had lent her clothes before. She was sure he wouldn't mind. She rifled through his dresser and found a pair of his pajama pants. They were comically long, as he was taller than David, and she could only roll them at her waist a few times before the rise was used up.

She left the bedroom door open and lay down, trying to get comfortable. After a few failed positions, she sat up and decided to meditate, desperate to achieve a calmer state before falling asleep. Overall, it wasn't her best session, but the focused breathing and relaxed mind *did* help her. She lay back and pulled the sheet over her. Her breathing deepened.

Cole rolled off of her, panting and clearly sated. She was crying into the tape on her mouth, and she curled into a ball, facing away from him.

It was a horrifying experience, having someone make love to your body, without your permission or participation, and without ever looking at your face. He'd come close, a couple of times, but he'd chosen to either push her cheek to look away from him or just bury his head in the space next to hers on the pillow.

He'd heard her cry. That she was sure of, because he'd tried to shush her on several occasions. While he...

He'd cut her hair to look more like this 'Trish,' a woman who, although dead, Catherine began to pity. She couldn't imagine being the object of affection of a monster like Cole. But after finding her in that alley, waiting for her to return to her home, the haircut, calling her by his dead lover's name... Cole didn't want to look at her. He just wanted to use her body to pretend.

But maybe now that he'd gotten what he wanted from her...maybe he would let her go?

She would run straight to Apollo. He would help her. He'd keep her safe. Apollo would never do this to her. He'd proven that, over the past two weeks. He'd-

"I know you're not her," Cole's gravely voice spoke above her thoughts and tears. "But I don't care, anymore."

She felt the bed move, as he shifted his weight, sitting up and leaving the mattress. He walked around the bed and headed to the bathroom. When he was within her view, she closed her eyes. But soon she heard the sounds of the toilet being used and then flushed. The water from the tap. Footsteps coming toward her.

She clenched her eyes tighter, when a hand grabbed her chin and held her in place.

"Look at me," he ordered.

She didn't. The grip tightened and she whimpered.

"LOOK AT ME!"

The rage-filled words scared her into obedience. She opened her eyes and saw that he was crouched down at her bedside, directly at her eye level.

He stared into her. Through her. With that same penetrating, studying gaze that she remembered from the alley. She thought she was terrified of him then. Whatever was going on in his head, he seemed to calm down and was now looking at her with keen understanding. It did nothing to comfort or assure her.

"I'm sorry," he simply said. And it actually sounded sincere, coming from his twisted mind. "I'm sorry for you, that you look like her. And I'm sorry for me, that you're not her."

He let go of her chin and stood to tower over her.

"But you're here," he continued. As if she didn't know that. "And I'm sorry...but I won't let you go."

After that admission, his demeanor changed. He was no longer the flat, emotionless shell of a man that had lost the love of his life. He was angry and resentful. His face twisted into a cruel smirk and he grabbed her, with one hand, by her neck.

Catherine awoke with a start, sitting straight up in bed and holding onto the invisible hand that she felt around her throat. The dark room showed no signs of life, other than her own. Her breath shot out forcefully from her parted lips, and the intake of air was just as desperate. She rolled out of bed and through the open door, her body led to the single lit area in the apartment like a moth to flame.

On her way to the living room, she glanced at the kitchen clock. It was ten o'clock. Hopefully, Apollo would be home soon. She sat on the sofa, in the place he usually occupied. Her body was still tired, but she feared the nightmares that might come, if she gave into sleep. Eventually, though, the silence and stillness of the room pulled at her. She lay down on the sofa and prayed that Apollo would return before Cole haunted her dreams.

She could barely hear the clock on the living room wall ticking. It was almost hypnotic, lulling her body into a trance. The apartment appeared hazy, through unfocused eyes. She was going to fall asleep soon. She didn't want to, yet.

Other sounds were present, though muted in the background. A palette of white noise. A slight creak of the window. Footfalls on the apartment floor. A couple of steps.

"Catherine?"

She heard the familiar voice and was quickly on her feet, fully alert. And relieved. He'd set to work on taking off his Reaper uniform, starting with his coat.

"You're back!"

"I said I would be."

In the back of her mind, a thought was forming. *I slept last night. With him next to me. I don't remember dreaming. Not at all.* The conclusion she came to was humiliating. She needed him to comfort her. Again. She recalled his reaction to being used that way the morning after. She didn't want that awkwardness, again, but she really needed the sleep.

"Are you okay?" he asked her with a cautious curiosity.

Stall. Change the subject. Give me some time to figure out how to ask...that.

"How did it go?"

He'd finished removing the Reaper accessories, until he was only wearing the black pants and undershirt. He didn't share much, keeping his future plans with Zeke a secret, while stretching and making himself more comfortable in his own home.

Catherine couldn't tell if he was through talking or if he'd paused their conversation, but she felt the tension settle over the both of them. He stood and nodded once in her direction, as he made his way toward the other side of the apartment.

"I'll get some clothes, since you're awake, and then I'll sleep on the couch, okay?"

She let him pass by her, without indulging any of the ideas rolling through her thoughts.

Grab his arm. Call out his name. Ask him where his family is. Kiss him. Follow him.

Instead, she stayed rooted in place. He went into his bedroom, picked out a couple of clothing items, then went straight into the bathroom. She walked up to the closed door.

How do I ask him, again? I don't want him getting the wrong idea. Or make him angry. It's selfish, I know it is. I've only known him for two weeks, we're not best friends or anything.

And the door opened, she recognized that she was out of time.

"I couldn't sleep," she said honestly. He was stopped, blocked in place, by both her words and her presence at the entrance to the bathroom. "Can you please," she hesitated. "Can we sleep in the bed, again? One more night? I'm sorry...I know how it sounds, but I slept so well last night. I felt...safe. I tried to sleep, while you were gone..." She shuddered, remembering how the nightmare replayed a terrifying moment, one of many, from her time with Cole. "I...I just can't. Please?"

He gave her a stern look, disapproving, but he acquiesced. "Fine."

She walked into the bedroom, but he didn't follow. The photograph of her and David was still on the nightstand, and she felt oddly embarrassed at the sight of it. She flipped it over, not truly understanding why. She lay down on the bed, waiting. Staring at the ceiling and wishing to already be asleep.

Soon, Apollo returned to his room, lay down on the bed and let out a deep breath that he'd obviously been holding. She rolled over on her side, placing her body flush against his, and instantly felt the relief of his body heat and solid form.

In the morning, she would be apologizing. Again. But, for now, she would sleep untroubled.

No dreams.

No nightmares.

No fear.

She briefly awoke before daybreak, slightly stiff in the position she was in. Not wishing to disturb her sleeping partner, she deftly moved her limbs around the slumbering Apollo. He

stirred, slightly, and she froze until he was breathing deeply. She was still pressed to him, but moving her limbs allowed for blood to freely flow and remove the aching feeling.

She enjoyed this too much. Sleeping next to a man with whom she felt safe. Six months of being on her own. Wondering why life kept dealing her lemons then stealing the lemonade. Nothing good lasted long enough. Apollo wasn't hers, either.

Just a body.

It won't last, she thought, and drifted back into her dreamless sleep.

Her cheek was against his chest, the crest of her head cradled within the space near his neck. The room was fully lit, now, and she tilted her face up to look at him.

"Would you like me to try healing you, again?" were the first words out of his mouth.

His expression was serious, pensive almost. She tried to imagine him smiling widely at her, like the younger version of him seen in the photo album.

"Sure," she groggily replied. "And good morning, by the way." Yawn.

He gave her a small grin and returned the politer greeting. Then he set to work, gently taking her wrist with his free hand and examining it. She watched, too, interested to see a new ability of his.

It was the same sort of... shimmer that he used to cloak her. But, it didn't refract the light to conceal her. This was like a heat haze, like the air over hot pavement, glistening over her skin. Barely visible. Inside, she felt warmer. Flushed. As she stared at her wrist, the ligature marks lightened until they were gone. Completely gone.

She sat up, surprised, as Apollo let go of her hand. Needing to see the difference, she compared her wrist to the one that had been against the bed all night. She dropped the healed wrist and looked expectantly at Apollo. He nodded and did the same to the afflicted wrist, so that it, too, was free from damage.

"That is amazing," she whispered reverentially.

"I can do more," he offered, "but, unless I know where you are injured, it will take a great deal of time and energy to heal...everything."

I don't want him to know...everything. But there's something else that stands out, that I would like to be gone...

Catherine tilted her head up and placed a hand at the marks on her neck. "Here?"

Apollo sat up fully and hesitatingly placed both of his hands on her neck, over Cole's handprints. She flinched at the weight of his hands on her skin, and he pulled away.

"I'm not sure there's another way I can help, if I can't touch where...where you're hurt," he tactfully finished.

She nodded and sat up on her shins, leaning toward him to silently give him permission. He placed his hands on her neck and she felt the process begin again. Warmth. Healing. She studied the feel of his fingers, his palms, so gently laying on the area. She swallowed and there was no constriction or pressure. It took about fifteen minutes, but she was sure that it had been as successful as her wrists, by his triumphant countenance at the end of it.

Just as she was going to apologize, he spoke.

"I can't do that, anymore," he said softly but firmly.

"Heal me?" she answered in confusion.

"No," he looked at her and smiled. "No, not the healing. The...sleeping."

"Yeah...I'm sorry about that."

He sighed and stood up to face away from her. "I'm going to the bathroom, then getting some breakfast. You can meet me in the kitchen, if you'd like. Or not."

Apollo left the room, after that. They did meet for breakfast, this time, and she asked him more about the Reaper Conduits he knew. What were their code names and powers? Did he trust any of them? Did he feel like the Reapers and their leader, Zeke, were truly trying to save Empire City? The conversation was lighthearted enough that Apollo talked freely, and, by the end, there was an unspoken truce.

The rest of the week passed with relative ease. As if they were back to their normal selves. She hadn't asked him to heal her again, nor had she invited, demanded really, him to sleep next to her. He was back on the couch and she was back in his room. The only new aspect of their sleeping arrangement was that she left the door open.

She had nightmares, but she handled them quietly. She was still hurting, physically, but she suffered in silence.

At the end of the week, she'd felt familiar cramping, and she prayed that she would have her period. A few days later, it came. And so did the relief. Cole had raped her repeatedly. But he had only hijacked her body temporarily, and she would not be forced to endure the added trauma of an unwanted pregnancy. Even if it meant a ticket to freedom outside of Empire City.

Her mood lightened considerably after that good news.

Apollo had to leave the apartment a couple of times, during the week. Once, to take a surveillance shift. He came back without a scratch and had no news to deliver to either her or Zeke. The second time, he'd refreshed their groceries and picked up a couple of cold-weather clothing items for her.

He'd set up his laptop to give her her own account. It was left out on the kitchen table, now, most of the time. She liked to use her one hour a day to watch videos or reach out to school

friends online. At the same time, he'd returned her phone. The added freedoms only came after a serious discussion on what she could and couldn't share with others.

She'd learned just how important it was to listen to Apollo.

The fourth week of her time with him brought a new fear to light. Originally, this would have been her last week with her host. If she hadn't ignored his warnings.

I don't want to go back.

It was a Tuesday morning, when she reluctantly brought up their agreed timeline.

"It's the fourth week," she quietly reminded Apollo, right after sharing a breakfast hampered by awkward silence. He looked at her, from across the table, leaning back in his chair and awaiting clarification. "Originally, you said...you said that I would be going home after a month. I mean, I asked how long I would be staying with you, and you said about a month...or something. I can't remember how you said it, but I remember that you said a month," she babbled.

"Yeah, I remember that, too," he nodded. "I intended for you to stay away from your apartment that entire time, too." One of his dark eyebrows raised to give him a cynical look. "Do you *want* to go back?"

"No," she answered, a little too quickly.

Apollo smiled and returned to a more relaxed state. "Then, I guess we'll go on as roommates, for however long we can stand it, or until the quarantine is lifted."

"Or until my name is called, again," she smiled back.

He looked uncomfortable, then. Clenching his jaw and clearly holding back what he wanted to say.

"What?" she probed.

"We, Zeke and his contacts, have it on good authority that," he paused and took a breath, "if you miss your chance at evacuation, your name is washed from the system."

She stared at him blankly. "What?"

He looked sympathetically back at her. "There's millions of people in Empire City, Catherine. I'm sorry, but they only give you one shot to get out of here. There's never been an instance of someone missing their departure time and being picked by the lottery again."

"That's not right," she shook her head, her eyes narrowed. "I mean, I get that it takes more than six weeks, but that can't be true. We would've heard. SOMEONE would notice." He shook his head sadly back at her. That made her angry. "There has to be examples of people who were picked twice. It's been almost seven months. They said- they SAID-"

"*They* lied," he stated, as if it was an irrefutable fact. "They've been lying about everything, haven't they? The frequency of supply drop-offs, living conditions within Empire City, how close they are to developing and distributing a vaccine...even the nature and origins of ECVi are mostly fabricated."

She'd stood, then, and left the common area for the solitary bedroom, closing the door behind her.

It took a couple of hours for her to stop seething at the new information. She'd hoped, with little expectation of luck, that she would be picked again for the lottery. It was a small chance, maybe, but there *was* a chance. Wait six weeks, and your name is back in the pot. Now, she'd been told that there was NO chance of leaving Empire City before the end of the quarantine.

If she thought it couldn't get any worse than that, she was about to be proven wrong.

Apollo left at the end of the week for another surveillance mission somewhere within the Neon. That was all Catherine was told. He'd said goodbye, left in the middle of the day, and she'd occupied herself with snooping around the apartment, taking advantage of the long absence to learn more about Apollo.

She figured, after rifling through drawers in every part of the house and finding nothing of personal significance, that he must have either thrown away a bunch of stuff or stored it within the still-locked safe. Probably the latter, given how guarded and private he was about his background.

There were things she wanted to know. His name. Why he wanted to become a firefighter. What happened to his family and girlfriend. What he planned on doing when the quarantine lifted.

And those were just the questions at the forefront of her mind.

When Apollo failed to return, her thoughts became panicked.

Night fell, with no sign from Apollo. He'd promised to be back by dusk, and now the sky was completely dark. She stared out the window anxiously, imagining a black- and white-clad tall figure leaping over the rooftops or suddenly appearing on the neighboring building's roof. She stood there until her feet began to ache. Dinnertime had come and gone, but she wasn't hungry. She went to the bathroom, got ready for bed, and assured herself that she would hear the sounds of his return at any moment.

The moments passed.

She stayed awake until just before sunrise, waiting on the couch. At times, she'd had to force herself to breathe slower, to calm down. Meditation didn't help, but pacing seemed to do the trick. She paced, she watched, she sat. And the cycle continued.

Daybreak came, with overcast, gloomy weather. It was going to rain. She thought about making coffee, but the idea of more pacing, watching, and sitting was enough to make her

stomach turn.

He was okay. Apollo was okay. Because he had to be. He'd done everything he could to protect her. He wouldn't leave her now.

She would close her eyes, relinquish control over her body's natural desire to rest. She would let the exhaustion claim her.

When she woke up, he would be back.

He would apologize.

Any minute now...

Apollo's Epiphany

Here Apollo was, again. Lying in bed, *his* bed, with Catherine sleeping peacefully pressed into his side. *I can't do this...*

She woke shortly after he did, and his mind instantly switched to a more clinical wave of thinking.

"Would you like me to try healing you, again?" *I waited, this time. I hope you respect me for that. I hope you'll trust me, now, Catherine... I think I've earned your trust.*

She cocked a single eyebrow at him and let out a yawn. She had moved in the night, again; but she wasn't completely separated from his body, when she stretched slightly more into his own solid form. He clenched his jaw and tried to distract himself from his growing arousal. She'd given him an affirmative answer, then added on a "good morning," which guilted him into returning the gesture.

"Good morning," he said with an earnest smile.

One arm was trapped under Catherine's, so he used his free hand to gently pick up her still-bruised wrist. The redness and irritation were lighter, but still present. He concentrated on pulling the healing energy he used the previous morning. The same pathway of energy pulsing from his core through his hand and out toward his fingertips. He focused even harder, specifically willing the injury to receive the mysterious healing power he had only begun to flex. The redness cleared, second by second, until her skin was once again a creamy, unblemished sight.

Finished and satisfied with the result, he released his hold on her wrist, as she sat up in bed. She marveled at the change, holding up her other wrist to compare his work. He took the time to move the arm that had cradled her to his side. The blood flowed to that appendage, now that her neck no longer restricted its path.

In the next instant, she was holding out her other wrist to him, looking at him with eyes that conveyed both need and bold expectation. He nodded and complied, healing the second afflicted wrist and erasing the damage that Cole had done in tying her hands so callously behind her back.

"That's amazing," she whispered. His heart had swelled a bit, with that compliment.

"I can do more," Apollo let her know. "But, unless I know where you are injured, it will take a great deal of time and energy to heal...everything." He'd started out the sentence innocently enough, before realizing toward the end that her most significant injuries were most likely internal. And private.

Catherine tilted her head up to the ceiling, then, but kept her eyes trained on his face. She put a single hand to her throat, where handprints were still visible. Cole's. Apollo had noticed them every hour, but tried not to stare. Now, given permission, he openly studied the marks.

The only obvious measure that suggested Cole's hands was the thickness of the bruising all over her neck. There were a few lines that struck away from the thick band of red. Fingers. Not just one instance of strangulation. Many. Different positions of his hands on her neck.

Grabbing her. Controlling her. Wanting to hurt her. The wrists...those were the consequence of him subduing her. He hardly grabbed her by the arm or hands. He grabbed her by her neck. Barbaric.

"Here?" she'd asked quietly.

Her plea roused him from his thoughts. He sat up in the bed and leaned toward her, as she sat kneeled beside him. He started to bring his hands up, but wondered if he needed to place his hands over the marks Cole had left. He ended up doing exactly that, but when Catherine flinched, he let go and sat back.

"I'm not sure there's another way I can help," he explained slowly, "if I can't touch where..." – *Cole touched you* – "you're hurt."

She nodded and leaned in, herself, to close the distance between them. His hands barely covered the thin skin on her neck, and he set to work immediately.

I basically just told her that I can only heal what I can touch. Idiot. She won't be asking, again, now that I've healed her most visible injuries.

The bruises on her neck were surprisingly stubborn, taking a longer time to lighten and heal. It took a considerable amount of time to finish the job, but, eventually, there was no trace of Cole's hands. On that part of her body, anyway. Apollo's mind briefly flitted to other areas of her skin, wondering if Cole had branded her in any other way.

He finished and sat back, resting his hands on his abdomen.

"I can't do that, anymore," he spoke with finality. *I can't be your substitute for David. It's not fair, Catherine. To you or to me.*

"Heal me?" was her unexpected response to his boundary. Her face showed her confusion.

She doesn't get it. She's not even on that wavelength, Apollo realized. He smiled to reassure her.

"No. No, not the healing," he clarified. "The...sleeping." His smile waned, awkwardly.

She blushed and looked down. "Yeah," she agreed quietly. "I'm sorry about that."

Apollo sighed and got out of bed. *I didn't mean for her to feel like she needed to apologize. I just wanted her to know that it would be different, moving forward.* Guilt washed over him, and he walked to the door. He called out, as he left the room, to let her know that she was welcome to join him for breakfast.

The morning continued, with Catherine joining him at the kitchen table and enjoying the omelet he'd made her.

"So," she carefully segued, after complimenting his culinary skills. "You've told me about David, and Razor...and...what was the other girl's name?"

"Aura," he'd answered. He leaned back in his chair. His plate was empty.

"Okay. So what are some of the other conduits like? What can they do? Can any of them do what you can?"

It was a lot of questions at once, but Apollo obliged her curiosity.

"There's another guy, yeah," he thought about another conduit. "He goes by Gleam. He can control light, kind of like I do. But, more like Aura, his bending of light is only an illusion. I can make my powers physically manifest, using them like a weapon, if needed. Gleam can camouflage himself, too. And there's another conduit, Glare. He picked his name after meeting Gleam. They're...close. Glare can use light to temporarily blind everyone around him. He also happens to be a black belt in taekwondo, so he's got that going for him. The two of them probably are the most similar to what I can do."

"Who else is there?"

He continued telling her about the other Reaper Conduits, and the conversation eventually shifted into talking about the shifty organization itself.

"Do you trust any of the other Reapers? Zeke?" she asked. "I remember you mentioning that you didn't want me to try to find any of them, if anything happened to you in the Warren."

"I don't trust anyone completely," Apollo answered honestly. "The other Reapers...they're not all bad people. But even those who are good have their bad moments. And Zeke...he's willing to overlook a lot of screwups to reach his ultimate goal: neutralizing Cole."

"But you trust them enough to fight alongside of them? *For* the Reapers? *For* Zeke?"

He hesitated. "Yes," he finally said, a little too forcefully. "Enough to join their cause to take Empire City back from Cole."

"If that's their plan, your plan, then what happens when Cole's dead? What happens when the fighting stops and the Reapers are on top?"

"Empire City will be safer," he confidently stated. "Most of us will probably step down and let the police handle the peacekeeping. Supplies will be more evenly distributed, and the hospitals won't be dealing with the deaths and injuries from Cole's carelessness."

Catherine stared at him, and he tried to read the blank expression. She nodded slowly, eventually.

"Is that what you've been told, or is that what you *believe* will happen?" Her question was genuine, without derision. She really wanted to know.

Before Apollo could answer, she popped up from her chair and grabbed their empty plates.

"Never mind!" Her tone was utterly different than it had sounded seconds ago. She was bubbly and light, now. "Let me clean our plates, real quick, and let's watch a movie!"

He dropped the subject, at her request, and rose to cross the room. He took his regular seat on the couch, and she sat in the armchair. A safe distance. A friendly distance. He took it as a sign that she understood that she'd crossed a line.

That night, she'd wished him a good night and went to sleep in his bed. No invitation. No pleading. He was back on the couch. Probably for the best.

At the end of their third week together, her mood lightened considerably. Apollo noticed a tampon wrapper in the bathroom garbage can, and he, too, breathed a sigh of relief. For two reasons: Catherine wasn't carrying a child as the result of her rape and she wasn't upset about the fact that her lack of being pregnant meant that she was still stuck in Empire City until the quarantine lifted.

Apollo finally prepared his laptop for guest use. He set up a separate account on the sign-in screen; something that, once she signed in, could be personalized to her tastes and preferences. And with nothing from his own account, except for the downloaded programs. She was grateful, but he gave her a stern look before handing over the new form of entertainment.

"You have to be careful with this," he said seriously. "Don't share anything about me with anyone. If I were you, I'd be very careful about your online presence. You're assumed to be missing or dead. Cole knows your name. Don't give away anything that might jeopardize our location. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she'd sincerely answered. "Of course."

He'd handed her the laptop, then, and she'd sat at the kitchen table to customize her profile. Leaving her only for a moment, he was impressed with how much she was able to accomplish in his short absence. She'd already set a customized background, restructured her online browser, and signed in to an email account. He held out her phone and she looked at it in surprise.

"The same goes with this, okay?" he made it clear.

She nodded and took it from his hand. When she pressed the menu button on her phone, the battery was dead. She frowned at that, but she placed it on the table and refocused on the plethora of junk emails.

"Be careful with what you say about the quarantine, from rations to deaths to all the violence," he warned her. "If you end up on some NSA watchlist, it'll make things a lot more difficult."

"Yeah, I kind of figured Big Brother would be checking on negative press coming from Empire City," she muttered.

At the beginning of their fourth week, she'd acted more agitated than usual. He'd let the side-looks and awkward exchanges slide, figuring that something was on her mind. He found out how right he was, when she admitted that she was nervous about going back to her apartment.

Four weeks. I mean, she has a point, but that was before I had to rescue her from Cole. You can't ever go back there, Catherine. I'm sorry...

But then the conversation had soured, when she'd mentioned the possibility of being picked for the lottery, again. He'd shared the information Zeke had learned from his contacts outside of the city.

He regretted his honesty.

If she'd gone by, week after week, without knowing the truth, she would've chalked it up to bad luck. Poor odds.

Now, she was mad at him. As if it was *his* fault. She'd stormed into the sole bedroom and closed the door behind her. He rolled his eyes and went to sit at the kitchen table. He'd been out of the apartment a couple of times, but he was due for another surveillance shift. He logged onto his profile, and looked for the Reaper logo in its usual spot in the top corner. Nothing, yet. He browsed online, looked up international news headlines, then signed off and went to bed.

In the morning, Catherine was back to normal. Not quite as chipper as she'd been last week, but much friendlier than her previous night's self.

Two more days went by, with Apollo waiting for Catherine to go to bed to check for a message from Zeke. And, finally, there it was. He clicked the Reaper logo and sighed.

{Not IndicatinG tHorough sTakeout...A3Fix}

He shook his head. From the first time he'd met Zeke, he could tell that the new leader of the Reapers had been waiting to be relevant his whole life. There was a pompous, arrogant side of the overweight man. Although Apollo believed Zeke's heart to be in the right place, there were too many signs that Zeke had been preparing for his moment to use everything he'd seen in action movies. The cipher was a dead giveaway. Apollo knew Zeke wrote them himself. There were easier ways to encrypt a message.

NIGHT, antonym, three letters, opposite of fix. Easy. DAYBREAK.

The message flashed on the screen.

[Apollo – Surveillance Sunday from 1300 to 1800, top of TransFund building, overlooking Archer Square. Wear your damn earpiece. – Z]

A quick surveillance mission. Nice. And then he'll leave me alone for a week, hopefully.

The next day, he shared the information with Catherine.

"How long will you be out?" she asked.

"I'll be back before nightfall," he'd assured her.

Two days later and he left for the building on the other side of the Neon. Although he left early, per his usual, the idea of trekking on rooftops around Memorial Park seemed too much of a hassle. While doing surveillance, he'd be resting on the roof of the familiar business building in full sunlight. He could recharge for the five hours he'd be there. He'd recharge, report to Zeke, then head home.

Easy.

Apollo cut through the park, staying hidden as much as he could from wandering citizens, but having to cloak himself the majority of the time. By the time he was on the roof of the TransFund building, one of the tallest skyscrapers in the city, he had used up a large amount of his stored energy. He perched at the edge, thankful for the breeze that cooled the air and made wearing the layers of his Reaper uniform bearable.

The sound of a door opening nearby snapped his focus toward the back of the building. Apollo knew about the rooftop entry, of course, but he didn't expect anyone to be using it. Zeke stepped into the light, out of the darkness of the stairwell, and Apollo's breath slowed.

As Zeke approached, he called out.

"Hey, Apollo!" Zeke sounded jovial, but Apollo chose not to return the greeting. When the Reaper leader was only feet from the conduit, he spoke again. "Glad to know we can still count on you to show up for your shifts, at least."

Apollo narrowed his eyes at the thinly-veiled insult. "I have my earpiece in. You could have let me know you were on your way up."

Zeke's face lit up with a condescending smirk. "Now that I CAN'T count on. Sorry, man. You know, you're the only one on the team that I *always* have to send messages to! Very annoying," he chuckled, though, lightheartedly. "But, I have to hand it to you. You always figure 'em out without having to check in audibly. Smart man!"

"So what's up, Zeke?" Apollo was already wishing Zeke away, which would only happen once the conversation ended.

The older man shuffled his feet and looked over Apollo's shoulder, toward Archer Square.

"We're waiting on one more," Zeke said.

Apollo bit back a huffed breath. *Aura? Probably.*

There was a slight...tingle...in the air. Static electricity.

From static thrusters.

Cole's ability to float long distances by pushing against the atmosphere's electrical field.

Apollo wildly looked around himself, then backed away from the oncoming Cole. He thought about running, but he looked over at Zeke to see if his leader needed protection.

Zeke, however, seemed unfazed. Unsurprised by Cole McGrath arriving to their location.

Cole landed and shot a menacing look to Apollo before approaching Zeke.

"Well? I'm here, Zeke," the terrorist's gravelly voice called out.

"Yep," Zeke acknowledged.

"What's going on?" Apollo rounded on them both, realizing that this was a meeting that had been arranged behind his back.

"Who's *this* guy?" Cole cocked his thumb at the other conduit, but spoke to Zeke.

"That's Apollo," Zeke answered. Apollo gritted his teeth, upset at being out of the loop and furious with Zeke. "We need to talk, Cole, and I think it's only fair that I have someone with powers to stand beside me."

Cole crossed his arms, looking wary and bored. "What else is there to talk about, Zeke?"

This is...casual, Apollo thought. These guys know each other. Or, at least, at one time, they knew one another pretty well. What the hell is this?!

"Alden's back," Zeke whispered. He looked...sad. Regretful.

Cole, however, looked murderous. "NO. No. He fell in the water. He's been gone for months. MONTHS."

"Apollo?" Zeke asked, and two sets of eyes settled on the only masked face on the rooftop.

"Yeah," Apollo confirmed. "Yes, Alden is back. We saw him. He killed one of our conduits."

"Good riddance," the terrorist sneered in Apollo's direction. Apollo clenched a fist, but Zeke waved at him to calm down.

"I sent the Reapers to Shanty Town two weeks ago, Cole," Zeke pulled Cole's line of sight back to the shorter man. "Alden was there, strong as ever. We went in to eliminate the Dust Men, but we had to retreat."

We? Apollo raged. Zeke did nothing more than coordinate the attack. He pushed through orders without knowing what he was sending the Reapers into. *It's your fault Razor is dead, you sonofabitch.*

"Bold move," Cole raised his eyebrows appreciatively. "I haven't been in the Warren much, lately. Still...why do you think Alden is keeping a low profile? That old relic could've gotten my attention by now."

"I'm pretty sure he's been workin' on recruiting," Zeke informed Cole. When Zeke looked to Apollo, Apollo found himself mindlessly agreeing with the man, still dumbfounded that he was in the middle of this conversation. "He lost to you last time, Cole. He won't risk callin' attention to himself if he's not ready to face you." Zeke looked at Apollo, again. "Did Alden leave Shanty Town? Follow you guys back through the Warren?"

Apollo thought for a moment, before answering. "No, he stayed behind. I never saw him out of Shanty Town."

"Great," Cole quipped sarcastically. "So, you want me to leave your boys alone for a while and take back the Warren? It's hardly worth fighting for."

"No," Zeke shook his head. "I was hopin' that we could team up. Fight him together! He almost bested you, last time, and he'll be harder to beat, now that he's learned from his mistakes. He won't underestimate you, again, Cole. But, if you're backed up by the Reapers..."

"Then I'll get to be attacked from behind, too!" Cole laughed at the absurdity of Zeke's suggestion. "What kind of fool do you take me for, Zeke? Huh?"

"No, no!" Zeke vehemently disagreed and held up his hands in a placating gesture. "I promise. A truce for the duration of our team-up against Alden. We want him gone just as much as you do."

"I really doubt that," Cole shot back. His eyes turned to Apollo. "What was your little nickname, again? Apple?"

"Apollo," the Reaper conduit gritted out with narrowed eyes.

"And what can you do?"

Apollo looked to Zeke, who nodded expectantly. Twisting his forearm to face his palm upward, he crafted a ball of light into his hand. He stared down Cole, as he did so. Cole's face hardened and glared back.

"I remember you," Cole growled out. "The park, two weeks ago. I almost killed you. You almost killed *me*, but then you ran." He tilted his head in deeper thought. "That was the same day..."

He took a threatening step forward, toward Apollo, and bolts of electricity poured out of one hand to wrap around his leather-clad arm.

"You came out of nowhere," Cole continued, speaking through his bared teeth. "You distracted me from finding her!"

"Findin' who?" Zeke interjected, clearly confused and wanting to know why the mood had shifted from terse to all-out volatile.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Apollo flippantly stated, bringing both arms down and trying to save as much of his power reserves as possible.

"She escaped," Cole kept his gaze on Apollo, ignoring Zeke's question. "I don't know how. I wasn't gone long enough for her to do it, without help. There was a box of men's clothes that was opened and gone through. The ties were evenly cut. She had help! Was it you?!"

"I saw you tearing up a city street and putting lives at stake!" Apollo hissed back. "I provoked you to get you away from that neighborhood and the crowds of people you were going to hurt, if not kill!"

"COLE!" Zeke finally yelled. "WHO THE HELL ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

The sadistic conduit let his attention linger on Apollo for a few seconds longer, evaluating his competition, before finally answering Zeke.

"There's a girl here in the Neon, Catherine Lynd. Looks just like Trish, Zeke," Cole explained. Zeke looked astonished and then remorseful. "EXACTLY like Trish. Beautiful..." Cole's eyes clouded over at the unseen thoughts in his mind.

Apollo's gut wrenched with rage and an overwhelming desire for vengeance. But he forced himself to remain calm and unaffected. Now was not the time. Not yet. But Cole's day was coming.

"And?" Zeke asked with a terrified whisper. "What happened? What...what did you *do*, Cole?"

The terrorist blinked rapidly to bring himself out of his haze. He glared darkly at Zeke.

"I want. Her. BACK."

Zeke pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows at the more-unstable-than-usual version of his former friend. "Apollo?" Zeke slowly turned toward his lieutenant. "Do you know this chick? This Catherine... Catherine..." He looked back to Cole. "Catherine who, again?"

"Lynd. Catherine Lynd," Cole bit back.

"Yeah, okay," Zeke nodded and returned to his previous question. "Do you know her?"

Apollo stared directly into Zeke's eyes, prepared to lie as convincingly as possible. "I have no idea who she is. I just know that I needed to step in before people got hurt."

Not even a beat passed, before Zeke addressed Cole. "You see? He's just a do-gooder, Cole. A wannabe hero." Zeke's face fell, then. "He's kind of what...what I *hoped* you might turn into."

"I'm no pansy," Cole said with an air of disgust. He looked to Apollo, to see if the insult landed, but Apollo was done with both men. The white-and-black Reaper took a few steps back, as if to distance himself from the rest of their dealings. Cole gave a slight smirk and turned back to Zeke. "I'll tell you what, old friend. You want me to scratch your back? That's fine, but I'm going to ask you to return the favor. I'll help you fight Alden, if you'll help me find Catherine."

"Well, how the hell am I supposed to track her down?" Zeke complained.

"You have the Reapers to help you," Cole pointed out, giving a side-eye to Apollo. "She's in the Neon, somewhere. I don't care how long it takes. Find her, bring her to me." His eyes flashed excitedly. "And, I'll tell you what. I'll sweeten the deal on your end."

Zeke nodded, "I'm listening."

"Once Alden is dead and I have Catherine back, I'll surrender the Neon to you."

SHIT.

"What does *that* mean?" Zeke asked, skeptically.

"It means," Cole clarified, speaking slowly. "I will leave the Neon alone, completely, and I promise not to set foot on your turf without your permission. It may not be all of Empire City, but, admit it. It's what you're *really* fighting for."

SHIT. SHIT. SHIT!

Apollo saw the acceptance in Zeke's expression before the man agreed to Cole's terms. There was nothing spoken, but Zeke was the first to thrust his hand toward the space between them. Cole grabbed hold and shook with a dastardly smile. Zeke looked just as corrupt, at that moment.

How do I conceal Catherine? What if Zeke sends out Reapers door-to-door? I need to warn her. I need to figure out –

Apollo wasn't paying attention, when Cole brought his hand up to send out a shockwave.

"But I still hold this jackoff responsible," Cole said to Zeke, but spoke about Apollo. "He dies today!"

The shockwave pulsed from his hand, before Apollo could respond. It sent the other conduit flying backward in slow motion, off the ledge of the skyscraper, and down toward the street below. The last action Apollo took was to use his own blast to slow his descent, directing a blast of energy toward where gravity was pulling him, right before he was going to hit. For a mere microsecond, he was floating, suspended about nine-tenths of the way down. Then he fell, again, and there was nothing to cushion his fall. He vaguely heard the sounds of screams around him, but they sounded distorted, as if they were under water. His vision blurred to red, then black, as he lost consciousness.

He woke up groggily, feeling as if he was coming out of a coma. The light around him was too bright. It instantly gave him a headache. He groaned, but he couldn't move any part of his body. He looked around, but his vision was foggy. And, in the white haze, a figure emerged, slowly coming into detail.

"Hey, man!"

Zeke. Too enthusiastic. Too much.

"You back, buddy? You gave us quite a scare, there! Actually, I'm amazed you're still alive. Either you had some quick thinking on the way down, or you're way stronger than any of us thought," he finished the sentence and laughed heartily.

"Where...am I?" Apollo barely got out. His voice was a raspy whisper.

"Warehouse. North Beach," Zeke said with an obvious smile. But at least there was no laughter. "I called on a few of our boys in the area to help me drag you here." The room darkened considerably, then, and Aura was now alongside Zeke, glaring purposefully at him. He suddenly looked sheepish and added, "Aura helped, too."

Apollo couldn't feel most of his body, so he asked, "my mask?"

"Still on, compadre," Zeke reassured the injured man. "I respect you too much to go and betray your trust like that. I told Cole as much, after he blasted you off that roof. Said, DAMMIT COLE! THAT'S ONE OF MY BEST MEN!...We did take your coat off, though."

"Why...why can't I...move?"

"Had to sedate you to let your body heal. You're welcome, by the way. We only brought you out of your resting state to ask you a couple of questions."

"How long...?"

"You've been out for two days, amigo."

"Two...DAYS?" Apollo felt his hand twitch, and in the next instant it felt like pins and needles were stabbing the newly-moved area. He did his best to ignore the pain. *Catherine! I've been gone for two days? I have to get back...*

"If we could figure out a way to help you heal at night, the whole process might've been easier. But we tried everything: lamps, flashlights surrounding your body, neon and fluorescent lighting flooding the space. Nothing worked! Nothing but the sun, really. You only seem to get better during daytime."

"I...need to...go..." He pushed with all of his might to lean up in the cot that he was on, but he only managed to briefly move his head.

"Now, that's enough of that!" Zeke chided. "I've answered your questions, saved your damn life. It's time for you to answer mine!"

Apollo was actually puzzled. *What does he want to know?*

"First off, you weren't tellin' the whole truth, back there, to Cole, were you?" But Zeke plowed right through, without waiting for Apollo to respond. "Don't try to tell me otherwise. I covered for you, tellin' Cole you were a hero and all that. But you *did* lead Cole on a wild chase, weak and not ready for a fight, for what reason?"

Zeke bent down and looked Apollo straight in the eye. "Tell you what, Apollo. If I had just helped someone escape, and that someone had no powers, the first thing I would do would be

to get them on the train and have them take it to the other side of town. And then, if it got a little too hot, I'd try to take Cole away from the train, toward the middle of the Neon." He gave Apollo a knowing, superior smirk. "We looked up Catherine Lynd. We know where her apartment is. And, son of a gun, if we look at where you and Cole ended up, it kinda looks like you might've done exactly what I would've done!"

Zeke leaned back up. Aura looked mildly interested, but in no way invested.

Apollo's voice was coming back to him. "You're...crazy...if you think...that I had...this whole plan..." The words were still broken, but they were getting noticeably stronger.

"AND," Zeke interrupted, "even if I believe that you were truly bein' a good Samaritan, although a stupidly unprepared one, there's another little problem. We keep track of everything you take from the warehouses. Food, drinks, clothes, toiletries. Can't have anyone takin' more than their fair share. And you've always been very predictable, except for the past month. When you've been takin' twice as much food as normal, as well as women's clothing and products. You start datin' someone special in this past month, or so? Could it be a... Catherine Lynd?"

Whatever drugs were still lingering in his system were certainly helping Apollo. He could now feel how relaxed his face was. He narrowed his eyes and looked at Zeke with indifference.

"I don't know...who Catherine Lynd is. I do know...that my personal life...is my own. And if I'm suddenly...getting stuff for a woman I've recently reconnected with, I feel like I should be allowed to do that. I shouldn't have to explain my...wanting to hookup, while...in isolation."

The paragraph was as much as he could handle in one sitting, and he took in large breaths to compensate.

Zeke was skeptical. Aura was slightly more amused by the conversation.

"If we find her, we can end this," Zeke pressed on.

It won't stop, you fool. But I need to leave. I can't disagree or make him more suspicious.

"Fine," Apollo gritted his teeth. He wanted to appear unhappy about abandoning his noble morals, but also be in solidarity with Zeke. A loyal Reaper. "Then let's send out teams to search for her."

Zeke looked at Aura, who kept her eyes on Apollo. "I'm already a step ahead of you," he hinted, without looking at Apollo. "Aura, put him back down. One more day of sun, and he should be healthy as a race horse." He turned back to Apollo and radiated a big smile. "See you soon, hero!"

The large man left the room set up for Apollo's recovery, and Aura looked down at Apollo. Her face was still indifferent toward his suffering, but she paused to listen to him speak.

"Aura, please! I can't stay!" Apollo pleaded. His limbs were slowly coming alive, and he knew that he would be leaving as soon as he was able to be upright. But not if Aura didn't let him go. There was no way he could fight her, depleted and still injured from his fall. "You *know* I can't stay."

She regarded him with a cocked head, but a bored expression. "Is it her?"

"Who?" he asked, feigning ignorance. She gave him a hard look. She wouldn't easily buy his deception.

He had a choice: continue to bluff or tell her the truth and hope for mercy. It wasn't an easy decision. It felt like an unwinnable scenario. If he pissed her off, she would knock him out and he'd be another day behind. But only a day. But it might be too long gone to save Catherine from Zeke's search parties. If he told her the truth, she might turn on him. Give the information to Zeke, who might try to torture the information out of him, for all he knew.

He took a breath and looked deeply into Aura's eyes. "Yes," he admitted quietly. "Yes, it's her."

She nodded and stepped back. "Then leave. And don't fail her."

Apollo wanted to feel relieved, but he didn't trust Aura enough to believe that she had given him a green light. She sat on a chair across the room, waiting patiently for him to get up. It took several minutes for him to be able to sit up on the cot. He looked over at her, breathing hard, as he slowly dragged his legs to one side.

"What do you think happens, after we finally take out Cole?" The question popped up in his mind, lingering from Catherine's inquiry over a week ago. At the time, he'd given her his own assumptions. He wanted to hear Aura, another Reaper, say the same answer.

"Why?" was her apathetic reply.

"Humor me," he shot back, knowing he was pushing his luck. "What are you going to do?"

Aura stared back at Apollo, obviously thinking.

"I'm going to be a Reaper and follow Zeke's orders. Or whomever else is in charge," she shrugged.

"But..." he began, "Cole will be dead, or, no longer a threat, at least. What are we going to do, as Reapers?"

She stayed silent, and Apollo knew that either she was hesitating to answer or was genuinely pondering his question. The latter seemed highly unlikely, seeing as she had recently taken to staying close to Zeke's side.

She knows something.

"Has Zeke said anything?" he gently prodded. The feeling was returning to his limbs. He was fairly certain he could stand, although he knew the action would make him ache all over.

Aura's eyebrows hitched up, within the eyeholes of her mask.

"The cops have been decimated," she led off. "The quarantine won't end with Cole's death, you know that. We'll take control of the entire city." She stopped herself abruptly, as if she was about to say more.

"Martial law?" he whispered.

"Better us than anyone else."

"I just want this all to be over," Apollo shook his head. He stood and Aura stood, too. He grabbed his coat and rolled it into a ball under his armpit. When he went to leave, she blocked his exit and he stopped in his tracks.

"You may *think* you're a good guy. A *hero*," she cruelly taunted him. Then she pulled up the sleeve of her white coat to reveal her Reaper tattoo. "But you signed the same contract as the rest of us. 'One way in, blood; one way out, death.' And don't you forget it, Apollo."

Aura let go of her sleeve and the garment righted itself back into position. She backed out of Apollo's path to let him leave.

He thought about that conversation and its implications for the two hours it took for him to return home.

Catherine's Trust

Catherine was staring out the window, waiting for any sign of Apollo. Occasionally, her mind would play cruel tricks on her. A shimmer out of the corner of her eye. A glint on the horizon. But the day passed without his return.

Twenty-four hours after he was supposed to be back, familiar feelings settled in the pit of her stomach. Confusion. Restlessness. Anxiety. Fear. Mingled together to form a frightful cocktail of emotion that she hadn't felt since... Since David had disappeared, really.

The hours slowed, as she found herself staring too often at the clock, any clock, willing Apollo to arrive and ease her trepidation. And yet, although the day passed by at the speed of frozen molasses, she was still surprised to find that sundown had finally occurred.

And no Apollo.

She bit her nails, then she bit the skin around her nails. A couple of them bled, her chewing mangling the cuticles.

At nightfall, she remembered that she hadn't eaten that day. All of that time spent watching the time tick by, and not thinking to take care of herself.

When a knock sounded at the door, her heart leapt in her chest. Who could be on the other side? Apollo?

Not Apollo?

She peered through the peephole, silent as a mouse, holding her breath until she could let it out in either a sigh of relief or a shallow catch of terror.

And it was him.

Thank God, she thought as she sighed.

The locks, every single one, were unlocked in their turn, and a weary Apollo made his way across the threshold and into the apartment. He staggered past her, and she forced herself to look away, as she relocked them inside. He collapsed on the bed, not caring that it was dark out and they would be sleeping soon. She followed. He'd thrown a wadded-up ball of clothing, his Reaper coat, onto the floor.

He needs the bed. His bed. I'll take the couch, no biggie. What the hell happened?

Thoughts overlapped in her mind, and she bit her lip and silently pondered what to say.

Did Cole hurt him? Where was he? This can't happen, again. Do I let him rest? Are we in danger? Can I help him, in some way? Probably not. He healed me...how long will it take for him to be back to normal? Will he be okay?

His eyes were closed, but he turned his head toward her and squinted them open. She sat at the edge of the bed, so that her face was closer to his.

"We need to talk," he said without ceremony. His voice was weaker than usual, perhaps, but, judging solely by the strength of his tone, he wasn't as hurt as he appeared to be.

"Now?" Catherine questioned back. "Can't you, like, take some time to heal, first? Are you okay?" She wanted to ask more, but successfully stopped the bombardment of questions in the back of her throat.

"No," he insisted. "You need to know that the Reapers are looking for you, too. Not just Cole."

Apollo noticed her tense, as her back straightened in her seated position. "They're out in teams right now, I'm sure of it. Checking everywhere in the Neon. EVERYWHERE. I'll tell you more, but we need a plan, first. Then, I need to recharge. After those two things, I'll tell you everything."

She nodded, dumbly, screaming internally.

"We have two problems," he continued, still lying down and looking up at her. "My identity as Apollo and the fact that they're specifically searching for *you*. I have-" he took a breath and allowed it to create an awkward pause in the one-sided conversation. "I have nowhere to hide you. But," he faintly smiled. "I think we can kill two birds with one stone."

"I have no idea when the Reapers are going to get here. I don't know if they'll be here within the hour or if it'll take a week. That's why I need to rest and recover. When they get here, you need to put on my coat. My Reaper coat." He looked toward the edge of the bed, but his head didn't follow. "My mask is in one of the main pockets. Put it on whenever you hear a knock at the door, and then," his expression sobered into a deadly serious look, "you stay by my side. I'll do my best to shield you, so that you can't be seen. And if I fail...I'll do my best to-"

"Keep me safe," she finished quickly and softly. She nodded, again, and she felt her eyes grow hot with tears. She kept nodding, unable to stop, too frightened to be able to move on to a different emotion. It was a lot to take in. And Apollo had told her so little. *Probably wouldn't be able to handle any more than what he just threw on my plate. Listen for a knock, rush to put the coat on, rush to him...*

"I need light-" he cut himself off, this time, reaching a hand toward the fan on the ceiling.

Catherine looked up, ceasing her nodding and watching for what Apollo would do. The bulbs in the four lights surged momentarily, then they dimmed until they were out. When she looked back to him, he gave her a small smile of reassurance, then closed his eyes.

She wanted to stay. Just lie down and be near him...like before. But she worried that he wouldn't heal as quickly with her close by. She looked up, again, at the fan. Clearly his power had burnt out the bulbs. Did he have more? Should she look?

Figuring that her looking for new bulbs for the bedroom light was at least something productive to do, she left the room. She left the door open, in case she needed to check on him. As soon as she was out of the bedroom, she remembered his instruction and returned to grab his Reaper coat from where he had discarded it. She took it to the same chair that he had often thrown it over. *The mask....cowl...thing is in one of the pockets?* Needing to make sure that was true, in case it had accidentally fallen out, she felt for the knit fabric in the front right pocket and pushed it further down into the cavity.

The search for lightbulbs proved to be unfruitful, but it kept Catherine from dwelling on her brief reunion with Apollo. She had cereal for dinner, washed her face, and went to lie down on the couch. Every light in the apartment was off, and she hoped that the darkness would, somehow, place Apollo's home into a void that would fall off whatever map the Reapers were using to hunt for her.

Weird thing to wish for...

For the second night in a row, she slept poorly. A combination of the new sleeping arrangement, her concern for Apollo's health, and her heightened paranoia that tried to convince her that every little noise outside the apartment was a party of Reapers coming to drag her away.

Apollo awoke before she did, and Catherine found him meditating on floor of the living area, right behind the couch she slept on and within the rectangular patch of pure sunlight that poured through the largest window. She saw the back of his head, as she sat up on the couch. She got up to use the restroom, then came back out and glanced at the clock on the microwave. It was late morning. Later than she'd anticipated. He saw her reenter his space and he rose from his seated position, but stayed in the sun. Catherine walked over and sat at the kitchen table.

"We still need to be ready for the Reapers," he said calmly. He opened his eyes and looked over to where she sat, although he remained seated in the sunlight. "But I can tell you what happened, if you want to know."

She sat up, tensing. "Of course I want to know," she matter-of-factly stated.

"Zeke arranged a meeting with Cole, without letting me know beforehand," he shared. "I have no idea why he wouldn't give me a heads-up, but it is what it is." He stood, with concerted effort. Clearly, he wasn't at peak condition. Catherine waited patiently to hear him continue.

"Zeke was trying to form an alliance, or something, with Cole. He suggested we all team up against Alden-"

Catherine's face must have betrayed her confusion, because Apollo cut himself off to explain.

"Alden's the leader of the Dust Men," he clarified. "Cole...he kind of...recognized me. He remembered that we fought on the same day that...that I found you."

A shiver went up her spine.

"Cole couldn't really piece it all together, but he made a demand of Zeke: the Reapers needed to find you and give you back to him," he said, as his jaw ticked. "And, if they did, Cole would agree to Zeke's terms. And more."

He looked as though he wanted to say more, but he paused instead.

"Okay..." Catherine slowly let out the breath she didn't know she was holding. "What are you not saying?"

Apollo regarded her, and it made Catherine wonder what she looked like, in that moment. Did she look as terrified as she felt? She was trying to reign in her emotions as much as possible.

"Cole offered to leave the Neon," he finished.

"Leave the Neon?" she questioned in confusion. And then it dawned on her. "Like, leave it alone permanently? Leave it to the Reapers?"

Apollo nodded and finally left his patch of sunlight to walk toward her.

"But Zeke – if he knew what happened – would he really turn me over to-" She wanted to say the name, but it seemed to be stuck in her throat. Apollo sat down.

"Do you remember me saying that Zeke might use you as bait?" he said seriously.

Catherine shook her head. She honestly didn't recall Apollo using those words.

"Well," he continued, anyway. "I did. And I still think that. Bait or bargaining chip. I'm not sure which. He might feel horrible about having to do so, but I really believe that he strongly follows the mantra of 'the ends justifies the means.' If I'm wrong about Zeke, then I'm wrong. But I'm not willing to take that chance. Are you?"

Her head dropped at that logic. She didn't know this Zeke guy. She didn't know anyone here, except Apollo, and he'd already proven himself to be a protector.

If Apollo thinks it's a bad idea to plead my case to Zeke...I guess I don't want to go there.

"Why didn't you come home," she plucked the question from her mind, "after meeting with... them?"

"Like I said, Cole recognized me," Apollo grimly reminded her. "He may not know *our* connection, but he blames me for attacking him as you were escaping. He blasted me off the damn roof. I almost died. Zeke had me dragged to one of our safehouses."

"How did you find out about Zeke sending the Reapers out to find me?"

Another hesitation. *I know that*, it clicked in her brain. *David used to do that, too, when he didn't want or know how to say something that might upset me.*

"I woke up in the warehouse with Zeke and Aura in the room," he calmly related. As if it was hardly news. "He mentioned what was going on, about the searches. I knew I needed to get out and warn you. Come up with a plan." He tilted his head slightly back. "As soon as I could, I slipped out and came back here."

She'd asked a few more questions, after that, but Apollo had little more information to give her. She abandoned her quest for answers and went to lie down on the bed, anxious to sleep comfortably. She was hungry, but not to the point of wanting to make the effort to eat before resting.

Days passed in the one-bedroom apartment. Apollo returned to the couch, and he had successfully recovered from his injuries. His attitude brightened, as Catherine could tell that he was now confident that he held enough power to see his plans through.

At first, every foreign noise was alarming. For both of them. A creak in the hallway outside the door, or a knock within the context of a television show; anything and everything made their hearts skip a beat and Catherine start to grab the Reaper coat from its home on the chair.

And, of course, as soon as quarantine life lulled them back to its dull routine, that was when the Reapers came calling.

The first knock they heard was down the hall. Apollo heard it, but Catherine was blissfully unaware, until she saw him startle and turn off the television. He stared at the door and waited. Another knock sounded, and, this time, she heard it, too. Closer. Demanding.

She was already on her feet, grabbing for the Reaper coat, to throw it over the lounging clothes she had on for the day. Needing to be sure, once again, she plunged her hand into the pocket where she had last felt the mask. It was there, but that knowledge brought her no relief.

Another knock. Closer, still.

"Are you sure it's them?" she whispered.

He nodded and came closer to her. "They'll be in teams," he whispered, as well. "Two, hopefully...but possibly more. They'll want to check everywhere you could be hiding, then they'll move on. Lots of area to cover. I don't think it'll take long."

She shook in the long coat, and then she felt him wrap his arm around her. She leaned into the hug and felt tears burn behind her eyes.

This could be it. I might be taken. Or maybe Apollo would be able to fight them off? But how many teams are here? What if I'm killed in the crossfire? Could Apollo heal me before I die? If they take me to Cole, will Apollo be able to find me, again?

"Stay calm," he whispered into her ear, quieting her frazzled thoughts. "Stay quiet. Trust me. We'll get through this."

"We'll get through this... we'll get through this... we'll get through this..." David's favorite saying.

Her heart flipped in her chest, and she nuzzled further into David's...no, Apollo's solid form.

Another knock at a door that had to belong to a next-door or across-the-hall neighbor. Deep, muffled voices. The apartment building was expertly insulated, if not much of the nearby conversations could be heard. Especially given that the poor tenants were most likely having orders barked at them. A loud banging sound could be heard, farther away but on the same floor. Then a crash sounded out, and the banging ceased.

"They'll be breaking into every home," he softly explained. His voice tickled the skin under her ear. "That's why it wouldn't help for us to just not answer the door."

And then it was their turn.

The rapping knock was heard on the door of their domicile. Apollo took Catherine by the hand and led her straight toward the danger. When they reached the door, he turned to look at her and adopted a determined countenance. She felt nothing, like the last time he had held her wrist and made it invisible.

She looked down, panicked that it wasn't working.

She saw nothing. No feet, no legs, no body. Nothing.

He smirked confidently and pulled her behind him, resting his hand, holding hers, on his hip.

It had taken too long, and whomever was on the other side of the door grew impatient. They knocked again, even louder, shaking the whole door within the frame.

"OPEN IT UP, OR WE'RE BREAKING IT DOWN!"

Apollo took his free right hand and began the process of undoing the many locks.

"Hold on!" he called out in response. "Takes a minute to unlock it!"

And when the door was ready, he opened it. Catherine couldn't see who was there, and she didn't want to press her luck by peeking out from around Apollo.

"We're coming in!" a male voice announced.

He stepped back, bumping into her, and she stepped back, too. That's when she saw two Reaper grunts enter her only haven.

"What's going on?" Apollo sounded agitated. *Which is perfect, because I know he must be.*

"We're looking for someone," one of them muttered.

Catherine couldn't see, still standing behind Apollo, who left the door open and walked slowly toward the kitchen. She noted that he was standing in a spot that allowed him to be

close enough to the door but also within view of everything in the apartment.

"Okay, well, I'm the only one here-" he started.

"Just shut up and let us do our job," a different voice interrupted. "*Bitch!*"

"Got some women's clothes and stuff in here!" the first man called out from the bedroom. Catherine looked over and saw a hefty Reaper man rifling through the contents of the dresser drawers.

"Who do *those* belong to?" sneered the second Reaper, the one closer to Apollo and out of Catherine's view.

"My girlfriend," Apollo replied without hesitation. But he sounded...stiff.

"And where is she?"

"She's dead. Happened in the blast," he finished quietly.

Catherine wondered if that was true. *Mariah...*

"She was all the way in the Historic District?"

"I'm *from* the Historic District," Apollo shot back, anger creeping up in his tone. "So was she," he whispered to follow up.

"Then why do you still have her stuff?"

"Do I really have to explain why I would want to keep her stuff around *our* apartment?"

"No," the large Reaper chimed in, exiting the bedroom and coming closer to the conversation. "We get it. Sorry."

His partner, clearly the more antagonistic of the two, strolled to the opposite side of the apartment. Catherine saw a thinner man, shorter than Apollo but taller than the Reaper who'd checked the bedroom. He opened the entertainment center's main cabinet and took his time examining the contents.

"I don't have a person stashed in there," Apollo called out to him, irritated.

"Shut the fuck up!" the lanky Reaper called back.

"We're looking for *this* girl," the Reaper in front of Apollo informed him.

Catherine pressed her face up against her protector's back, wanting desperately to hold onto him for her life. He lightly squeezed her hand in response.

"I've never seen her," Apollo shrugged. Catherine looked up and saw Apollo's head swivel to the left, to locate the other Reaper in the apartment. "Hey! What the hell, man?"

"Call it an inspection fee," the rude man replied.

There was little said, from any of the three men in the room, after that. Thankfully, the Reapers did, in fact, leave. Apollo slowly backed up, and Catherine did the same, to effectively escort the unwanted visitors out of the apartment. The two men continued down the hallway, and, soon after, were heard knocking on another door.

Apollo shut the door behind them, and Catherine pulled away. She didn't realize that she was looking down, until she saw herself instantly become visible. He turned around, at the loss of contact, to face her.

"Keep the coat on," he whispered. "Just in case."

She nodded, fearful that even the smallest feminine sound would result in Reapers breaking through the door to get her. Apollo walked leisurely to the couch and sat back down. Catherine followed, quick on his heels, anxious to stay close to the man who could wield light as a weapon. When she sat right next to him, he looked briefly at her out of the corner of his eye. Then, he reached for the TV remote on the coffee table. He changed the channels until they were watching a cooking show.

Catherine watched, wishing that she could lean into Apollo. But nothing in his body language suggested that her doing so would be welcomed. She wanted comfort. For him to put his arm around her and hold her, so that she could truly calm down.

Screw it.

If he didn't like it, he could push her away.

She picked up the arm that was closest to her with both hands and moved into the space underneath it, against his side. Her head leaned against his broad chest and the arm fell into place along her shoulders.

Before he could comment, she spoke.

"Will this happen, again?" she barely breathed out. "Will they come back, again?"

She felt the chest take a deep breath and exhale. Some tension, at least, seemed to release in that small action, and Apollo accepted the more intimate position.

"I don't know." His voice was no longer a whisper, having the television on to mask some of the apartment's noise, but he did speak quietly. "Either Cole will have to accept that finding you proved to be impossible, or Zeke will keep sending out teams until you're found."

"Did you really have a girlfriend who died in the blast?"

Another long-drawn breath. *That's fair... my question came out of nowhere.* Catherine prepared for Apollo to shoot her request for information down, as he had done so many times before.

"Yes," he admitted. "Well, an ex-girlfriend, technically. We broke up years ago."

"I saw the album in your bookcase," she confessed, as well. *It feels like a confession.*

"Mariah?"

A little stiffening of muscle underneath her.

"Yes."

"Can you tell me about her? Please? Take my mind off the city-wide manhunt out to get me?"

A sigh. A signal that he was going to give into her pleas.

"We met in high school. In the Historic District," he clarified. "I wasn't lying to that guy, just now. I grew up in the Historic District. So did she...Mariah. We dated, on and off, for a couple of years in school. My parents and sister...they uh...they loved her. I was accepted into ULNM, and I couldn't wait to get away. I kind of tried to keep things together with Mariah for that first year, but we broke up when I came home for the summer.

"Three years later, I graduate with my Bachelor's, move back up to Empire City, and I start the process of applying to ECFD. I knew my sister stayed friends with Mariah, and I wasn't mad about it. And with her coming over to visit, we kind of...fell back into that easy routine of being together. But I didn't," he stopped and ran his free hand through his hair in a frustrated gesture, "I didn't...want it to...go anywhere. When I was finished with fire academy, I hoped I would be placed in the Neon. That didn't happen immediately, so I stayed with my parents in the Historic District, saved up a bunch money, and I kept dating Mariah. When the opportunity came to transfer battalions, I came here. I thought Mariah and I would end things, with my move, but she wanted to move in with me."

Catherine wasn't looking up at Apollo to see his facial expressions, but she could hear that the pause was due to his hesitation.

"It didn't last long," he continued. "She left after about six months. Back to the Historic District. I was relieved. But, I mean, I felt bad. The first few times visiting home were...awkward. Mariah was almost always there. My mom never asked me if I was dating anyone new, she just encouraged me to get back together with Mariah. My sister understood better, I think. And Mariah...she was willing to give me some space, but I think she also figured that I would eventually want her back.

"The morning of the blast, I was supposed to go meet my family for a barbeque. My sister texted me that morning to let me know that Mariah would be there. So," he sighed in obvious emotional pain, "I decided not to go. I wasn't in the mood to have to see Mariah. I lost everyone I loved that day. I rushed over and stayed in the blast radius for hours, hoping that I would find one of my family members still alive, somehow. Or Mariah...because I didn't realize how much I cared about her until I lost her forever. I loved her, I just didn't want the pressure of...what came after that."

Yeah, I get that, Catherine thought privately.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, as she looked up to his face.

Apollo met her eyes and gave a strained half-smile. When she sympathetically smiled back, his eyes focused in on her lips. Her heart picked up its pace, instinctually recognizing the emotional pull that was drawing him toward her.

He didn't have far to reach, when he leaned down to kiss her. For the split second that it took, she wondered if she should stop what was coming. He'd just poured out his heart, for the first time, and she knew that he was reacting more to his own trauma than to herself.

But the part of her that still craved comfort didn't ultimately care.

She met the kiss with equal fervor, slowly rolling her upper body to parallel his. Deftly, she moved to straddle his lap. The heavy, stiff coat did nothing to help her, and, as she shrugged it off, she felt his hands grab the lapels and pull it off her shoulders. She heard it fall on the floor at their feet, collapsing on top of itself. Her focus remained on their locked lips, as the kiss deepened and inflamed her body.

As soon as the coat was off, Apollo had sprawled his large hands on the expanse of her back, pulling her even closer. She initially placed her hands lightly at his collarbones, but now she gently pushed them up and over his shoulders. Her fingers brushed against the short hairs at the back of his neck and he responded to the caress by moaning appreciatively into her mouth.

Despite the danger looming over their heads, they found a way to distract themselves.

N and C

Hello, readers!

Well, this story has stretched on longer than I originally envisioned. It is coming to a close, though. Only a couple of more plot points to hit. I wanted to remind you that this story is rated M for "mature," and this chapter contains adult content.

Thank you for your continued interest and happy reading!

Jenn

Apollo remembered feeling immense relief at seeing Catherine open the door. *She's okay.*

He remembered making it to his bed and pretending to be stronger than he felt, so that she wouldn't worry too much about his weakened condition. *I'm okay.*

The conversation was a blur, but apparently he'd gotten his point across without turning her into a hysterical mess. That was something. *We're going to be okay, Catherine.*

He didn't remember much, when he woke to sunlight streaming through his bedroom window. He was alone, in his bed, which felt...odd. As the light warmed his body, he breathed in and let the wave of healing energy flow freely. Although he wanted to stay in bed, he figured that he should probably check on Catherine. Biting back a groan, Apollo lumbered from the room, through the open door and immediately saw her on his sofa.

Even in her sleep, she looked worried.

His Reaper coat was on the chair where he had become accustomed to throwing it. Plenty of rays were streaming through the larger living room window, so he sat in the sun's path with his back against the couch and closed his eyes.

He heard her sit up and then walk across the apartment. If she noticed him, she didn't give any indication, so he continued to focus his energy on healing himself. When the bathroom door clicked open after a few minutes, he opened his eyes to finally address her, while she nervously approached to sit at the kitchen table.

"We still need to be ready for the Reapers," he began. "But I can tell you what happened, if you want to know." *Well, most of what happened.*

And he'd given her an edited version. If she'd known everything, how Zeke had successfully connected Apollo to Catherine, and that Aura definitely knew that Catherine was under Apollo's protection... that was for Apollo to worry about.

Eventually, Catherine had left the room to sleep on the bed. Apollo had an urge to follow her, be near her, but he stopped himself with a reminder to check his computer. If Zeke truly knew

that Catherine was with him, there would be a message on his computer. Zeke would request or demand a meeting. Apollo doubted that the Reaper leader would let him go too far off leash, now that Apollo had slipped away early. But there was no message. No Reaper logo on the screen. Radio silence. For now. Perhaps Aura was more honorable than he'd assumed.

Catherine slept and Apollo recharged. He felt immensely better, by the end of the day, and no sign from the Reapers gave him added mental rest. He still stirred at any foreign noise, but he tried his hardest not to disturb his roommate.

The next day, he'd been even more composed, still recharging, still healing. They stayed quiet, most of the time, using only hushed voices intermittently when verbal communication was necessary. Most of the day, Apollo stood at the window, looking for a red or white hooded figure darting around the streets below.

Maybe I'm wrong? Maybe Zeke was bluffing?

The day after that, their voices were less dampened. They joked, watched a comedy to take their minds off of the serious situation they were trapped within. Apollo showed off some of his favorite light tricks. Things that wouldn't draw too much attention...or cause damage to his home.

At the end of the week, there were no more whispers. Their fears had dwindled, and Apollo finally felt back to his peak health. Every day, he checked the computer, sometimes in front of Catherine, but never revealing that he was looking for a message from Zeke. And, every day, his computer screen looked normal. Nothing. *I guess Zeke dismissed the idea of my harboring Catherine. And Aura...she had my back on this. I'll owe her one.*

But still, without making a big deal about it, Apollo had become vigilant about cleaning up after Catherine. Anything she touched, ate from, drank from, doodled on, read, wore, cleaned herself with... he was the one to stash it, toss it, clean it, or hide it. If she noticed his actions, she must have chalked it up to him trying to be a hyper-organized or anal-retentive living partner.

Apollo was watching a car aficionado show on television, when he heard a noise that shot ice through his veins. Catherine, seated at the kitchen table and playing with the laptop, froze, too, when he stood and turned off the TV. He stared at the door, hoping that the sound was either a one-off thing or straight out of his paranoia. But then another knock sounded out, closer, and Catherine jumped up and closed the laptop. She rushed to the coat, put the oversized item on her smaller body, then shoved her hand in one of the pockets.

Another knock...*getting closer, now...*

"Are you sure it's them?" she asked in a panicked whisper.

He moved to stand right beside her. She shivered and he both confirmed her fear and tried to dispel her worry. When she shook even harder, he enveloped her in a strong hug.

"Stay calm, stay quiet. Trust me," he pleaded softly. "We'll get through this."

Something he'd said had triggered her in a strange way. She nuzzled his chest affectionately and deeply breathed him in. He didn't have time to dwell on the reaction, when another knock rapped through the hallway outside. *They're basically here. Let's get this over with.*

Another banging, some shouting, and then the sounds of a door being broken down. Catherine pulled slightly back from his chest, in her confusion.

"They'll be breaking into every home," he spoke under his breath, leaning down to her ear. "That's why it wouldn't help for us to just not answer the door."

When it was their turn to face the Reapers, Apollo took her left hand in his left hand. Awkward, but it would put Catherine's front against Apollo's back. Even if some of the illusion faltered, she would be mostly hidden behind his larger body. He pulled her toward the knocks on his apartment's front door, then stopped to conceal her. When he could no longer see her, he gave a pleased grin in her direction to let her know that it had worked. The hand holding hers went to his waist, forcing her to step right up to his back, and he answered an even angrier knock and an accompanying yell.

"Hold on!" he responded. *Dammit, all of the locks...* "It takes a minute to unlock it!" *Especially with only one hand...*

The door opened and Apollo saw two Reaper grunts in their red hoodies push their way through. He had to step back quickly, and he felt relief course through him at Catherine's readiness to move in time with his cues. Before following the men past the entryway, he stole a glance at both ends of the outside corridor. There were more teams on the floor. Apollo saw at least six men, with some still unseen in the dwellings they were currently searching.

Damn, that's a lot of Reapers. Even if none of them are conduits, that's a lot of firepower to get through... But, if everything went well, hopefully there would be no need for a firefight.

Apollo left the door open and carefully walked he and Catherine to the space between the bedroom and the kitchen.

"What's going on?" he lightly demanded, playing the part of disgruntled citizen. He carefully examined both men. He didn't know either of them, as far as he could tell.

"We're looking for someone," the shorter and stouter Reaper answered with apathy. He gave the apartment a cursory glance, then headed straight into the bedroom.

His partner, a thinner, taller man stayed next to the kitchen table, eyeing the closed laptop.

"Okay," Apollo spoke to purposefully distract the duo from their task. "Well, I'm the only one here-"

"Just shut up and let us do our job!" the lankier Reaper yelled at Apollo's intrusion. He held his submachine gun at his waist, pointed at the apartment's resident. "Bitch!" he taunted, for added measure.

Apollo narrowed his eyes. *I would make you eat those words, if I wasn't hiding my identity... maybe I will, someday.* He watched the more insolent invader more closely, trying to categorize any and every distinguishing attribute about the asshole.

"Got some women's clothes and stuff in here!" the less-incendiary Reaper called out to his partner from the sole bedroom. Apollo looked over and saw the man searching the contents of his dresser drawers.

They really are being thorough.

The snarky Reaper took a step toward Apollo, who was taller but unarmed. "Who do *those* belong to?" the hooded man accusingly jeered, trying to further intimidate.

"My girlfriend," Apollo reflexively answered. And, in that moment, he knew exactly what to say to waive off their suspicions. *Awkward as hell, but it should do the trick.*

"And where is she?"

"She's dead. Happened in the blast."

I hope I don't have to explain this later...

"She was all the way in the Historic District?" the insensitive Reaper skeptically questioned.

"I'm *from* the Historic District," Apollo gritted out, doing his best to keep his cool. "So was she."

"Then why do you still have her stuff?"

This prick...

"Do I really have to explain why I would want to keep her stuff around *our* apartment?" Apollo finally taunted back, relieved to have a viable reason to be rude to the jackass interrogating him.

The first Reaper emerged from the bedroom and gave his partner a hard glare. "No," he spoke up to quell the verbal sparring. "We get it." Looking back at Apollo, he gave him a sympathetic nod. "Sorry."

Apollo nodded, too. Slightly abated by the portly Reaper's attempt to rein in his comrade. And said comrade rolled his eyes at the kinder response and strode into the living room.

What the hell, man? I've answered your questions. There's no way to see her, and there's nothing left to check. Get the hell out! What are you...my video games? REALLY?!

"I don't have a person stashed in there!" Apollo yelled across the room.

"Shut the fuck up!" the nosy Reaper shouted back.

"We're looking for this girl," the shorter Reaper stepped forward and held up a photo to Apollo's face.

Catherine closed the little distance between herself and Apollo, so he gave her hand a light squeeze to comfort her in her anxiety. The photo was obviously from Catherine's newest driver's license. Her hair in the picture had the caramel highlights which, months later, would be grown out to the very ends of her now-chopped hair. Whether Zeke had procured the identification photo from Cole or from some type of government employee or hacker...

"I've never seen her," Apollo asserted, hoping he sounded authentic. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other Reaper stand and start walking toward them. He had fished something out of Apollo's entertainment center. One of Apollo's newer video games. "Hey! What the hell, man?"

"Call it an inspection fee."

Apollo looked to the more reasonable Reaper, silently appealing for him to get his partner in check. But the man was no help, shrugging off the delinquent behavior.

"What do you think?" the thief asked his partner.

"I think we're done here," the other one said. "Let's move on. Got a lot of ground to cover, before checking in." Then, he addressed Apollo. "There's a reward, for anyone who finds this chick. If you see anyone who even looks a little bit like her, you can either bring her or the information to the old cannery warehouse at North Beach. Got it?"

Apollo nodded, still glaring at the man who was about to walk out the door with his possession. *Focus*, he told himself. *He's leaving with a video game, not Catherine. Chill out.*

He backed up slowly and felt Catherine do the same behind him, moving silently in her bare feet. She must have gripped the coat with her one free hand, to stop it from dragging on the floor around her. The two Reapers walked toward them and then passed by and out the door. Apollo watched them go to an apartment two doors down, noting that there were now fewer Reapers in the hall.

As soon as he'd closed the door, Catherine pulled her hand away from his and became fully visible. He turned around to see her and gave her a serious look.

"Keep the coat on," he instructed, "just in case."

His heart was racing, and he needed to calm down for Catherine's sake. He could easily see that she was more than shaken by the encounter. The only thing that he could think of to do was to return to exactly what he had been doing before the Reapers' visit. Moving back to sit on the sofa, he felt Catherine follow him.

Apollo sat on the couch, and he expected her to sit next to him. But he didn't expect her to practically be connected to his side. He glanced over at her, but she looked so nervous...he chose to find something else to distract her. Flipping through the channels with the remote, he

found a cooking show. He knew she liked to watch them, although she wasn't much for cooking, herself.

Almost as soon as they had settled on watching the light-hearted program, Apollo felt his arm being dragged up and over her body, so that she was leaning further into his side. He let his arm drape across her shoulders, instinctually, although he hardly had a choice to do anything else without making things even more awkward. She rested her head against him, and that was it. They were now cuddling on his couch.

"Will this happen, again? Will they come back, again?"

Probably, yeah. If they don't find you on the first sweep, I doubt Zeke will let it go. I know, now, Cole won't.

Out loud he said, "I don't know." And then he gave her a mixture of both the truth and a lie.

"Did you really have a girlfriend who died in the blast?"

He took a deep breath. The question, while abrupt, was understandable. And she deserved some truth, after he'd kept so much from her.

"Yes," he slowly admitted, thinking of Mariah. "Well, an ex-girlfriend, technically. We broke up years ago."

"I saw the album in your bookcase. Mariah?"

Well, I knew that would happen. I should have hidden it. Why, though? There was no point in hiding it. No names, except for hers. Just glimpses of my past. No need to protect the dead.

"Yes," he breathed out.

Catherine wanted to know more. And, desiring to help her in her terror, he actually agreed. He told her of how he'd met Mariah. Going to college, then returning to find himself falling into dating the woman of his family's dreams. Admitting his relief at being transferred to the Neon, and hoping that the move from his neighborhood would finally end that chapter of his life...which included Mariah. Deciding to back out from the barbeque, and the immense guilt that followed.

"I loved her, I just didn't want the pressure of...what came next," he'd finished off his story, feeling as though he sounded incredibly callous.

"I'm sorry," Catherine whispered, and, finally, looked up at him.

Her beautiful eyes, such a unique, gray-blue that looked like mist over murky waters. He forced himself to smile, both as a thank you for her condolences and a reassurance that he had made it through the majority of the grieving. She smiled back, and his eyes looked down to her pale pink lips. *Such a sweet expression.*

And he gave in, this time, to what he desired. He bent down to kiss her, hesitantly, hoping that she wouldn't pull away. Yet, at the same time, knowing that, if she didn't stop him, he

wasn't strong enough to do so. His worries instantly melted away, with how quickly she'd responded. Her lips pressed strongly against his, and his eyebrows ticked up and then back down with genuine surprise.

When she rolled over onto his lap, he felt the bottom of his Reaper coat, still on her lithe body, wrap around his knees. He grabbed onto the lapels, and he was pleased that she was already trying to remove the heavy garment. The kiss continued through all of this, with him now holding her protectively, but not too tightly. Not as tightly as he wanted to. She'd bitten lightly on his lower lip, while skimming her fingers over his shoulders and neck, and that was it. The fire was stoked. He'd given her a guttural moan of satisfaction and moved his own hands to less-chaste parts of her body.

One of his hands gripped the back of her neck, holding it in place so that he could more voraciously assault her mouth. The other appendage trailed down her back to grip one of her buttocks, fondling it with a gentle caress. His lips moved to her neck, to kiss a favorite spot of his: the sensitive skin behind the earlobe. She'd voluntarily leaned her head further, to fully expose the spot for him to taste. Then, she'd rocked into his lap and moaned through closed lips. A beautiful hum.

The hand on her neck went to steady her upper back, while the hand on her ass moved to hold her in a seated position, as he rose from the sofa. He stood in place and pulled himself only slightly away, holding her and waiting for her to look back at him. She did, and her lusty eyes searched his own. She went to kiss him, again, her elbows rested on his shoulders, while her fingers lightly scratched and pulled at the skin at the back of his neck.

With one determined kick, the Reaper coat was moved from his path, and he carried her to the bedroom. *I love this apartment. Straight shot, nothing in my way.*

The bed received them both, with him placing her delicately down, like she was to be revered. He hovered over her, locking his arms to keep from falling on top of her. Her hands went to the bottom of his shirt, and lightly pulled up. He took the hint and grabbed the back of his collar to pull the t-shirt up and over his head in one graceful movement. It was thrown to the floor and her hands had immediately, greedily rubbed the musculature all over his upper body in hasty exploration.

When he'd kissed down her neck, she'd arched into him and whispered a single word. "Off." He stopped to pull off the black t-shirt she had been wearing. The simple sport bra, one that he had picked out for her, was waiting underneath. Before he could contemplate what to do with it, she'd leaned up and he'd given her ample room. She crossed her arms under her chest, bolstering her breasts, then grabbed at the bottom of the bra to miraculously twist the thing up and off.

God, that is so sexy. How do girls do that? I already can't wait to see it, again.

And his eyes feasted on what she had uncovered. Pert, small breasts with hardened nipples that showcased her arousal. He smiled at her and claimed her lips with another kiss, letting his hands traverse the soft mounds. Mostly, he let her actions dictate their sensual dance, and he enjoyed every minute of it. She'd pushed against him and turned her body toward the center of the bed, until she lay atop his half-naked self.

He grabbed her ass fully, this time, although she still wore the light gray leggings. His passion was rewarded with her sitting up, astride his lap, and coyly showing off her beautiful body. He smiled with darkened eyes, enjoying the view and trying to memorize as much of her as possible. She, meanwhile, hooked both of her thumbs onto either side of her pants and began to tantalizingly inch them down.

Needing more leverage to pull them off, Catherine let herself fall off of him and roll onto her back beside him. Apollo chuckled at the silly act, and he rolled on his side to face her, propping himself up with one elbow. She removed her underwear at the same time, stripped bare and gave him a look to let him know that it was his turn. He left the bed, opting to stand to relieve himself of the sweatpants and boxers he was wearing. Once the pants were a crumpled pile on the floor, he crawled on top of her.

Catherine wasted no time in letting a hand wander down to find his erection. Her directness reminded Apollo of when she had offered to sleep with him within the first week of their meeting. He took in a breath and held it for a moment, before exhaling. *Slow down...*

He lay next to her, instead, which meant she was no longer able to reach her target. With languorous speed, he trailed his fingers across her midsection and leaned over her to plant kisses on her newly-exposed skin. Parts of her that, if he was being honest, he'd wanted to see since he had first brought her to his home. When he began to lap at her breasts, one of her hands flew up to muffle her cries of excitement.

It's been so long...too long...

His hand went to pull hers away, so that he could kiss her without any hinderance. She sighed contentedly and he gently placed her hand on the pillow, above her head. Then he brushed his fingers down her body, until he reached the hollow of her legs. He lightly stroked the sensitive skin there, tracing small circles upon her quivering thighs. She whined into his mouth, and her groin bucked into his hand, craving more than just feathery touches.

With one finger, he felt her slick entrance. She pushed against him, urging him to continue, and he accommodated her need by slowly probing her sacred cavity. Her breathing became too erratic to handle both the stimulation and his kiss, so he abandoned her mouth and she tossed her head to the side in blissful abandon.

He worked steadily, focusing all of his efforts on drawing out her release. The attention and time paid off. One of her hands pushed the side of the pillow up and against her mouth, and she bit down on it to fully muffle her screams of ecstasy.

I've missed that sound. I wish I could hear all of it...

Her climax finished, and he pulled out his fingers to allow her to catch her breath. She opened her eyes and smiled lazily at him. He waited to see what she wanted, now that she'd experienced her satisfaction. After a couple of minutes, she turned her body to face his and wrapped a leg over his waist. He held it in place and rolled back on top of her.

There was a moment, only a small indication, when she tensed underneath him. Apollo thought back to when he'd found her in her apartment. *I'm not Cole. And she needs to see*

that. He saw that she had her eyes closed and her jaw taut. Most likely, she was remembering the same trauma.

"Open your eyes," he asked her softly. "It's only me."

She did so and he slowly inserted himself between her parted legs. Her expression went from mild surprise to relief. He took his time filling her, sure that there was nothing but pleasure in the action. Catherine responded well to his gentleness. She pulled him closer to her, desperate to passionately kiss his mouth and simultaneously dampen the noises she involuntarily made.

Their intimacy was a journey, delicious heights and soul-binding valleys of rest. Apollo had to stop on several occasions to avoid finishing, and he would use those brief reprieves to remind Catherine how different he was from anyone she could have ever been with... including the man who had pillaged her so ruthlessly only a month ago.

He praised all of his favorite qualities about her: her beauty, her willingness to challenge him, her strength in crisis, her boldness in taking what she wanted from him. He teased her about the tattoos that she had originally denied having, now uncovered: a small red heart with black scrollwork on either side of it located next to her left breast and an oversimplified starburst at the crest of her right hip. He lavished affection on her body, subtly claiming her as a lover, desiring to be the most favorable, memorable experience for the rest of her days.

When he came inside of her, he barely kept himself from collapsing on top of her in complete exhaustion. What little light had been left in the day was gone, now, and it was dark in both the apartment and outside. He needed to get up, rinse off, brush his teeth. But then she curled into his side, in a familiar position. But, this time, he didn't feel used. He wasn't a substitute for David. She fell asleep against him, and he let himself rest, as well.

He awoke in darkness, and he could tell that he had only been asleep for a couple of hours. She still lay with him, her naked form illuminated by the sliver of moonlight that penetrated his bedroom's window. As stealthily as he could manage, he left the bed and snuck out of the room. At the doorway, he glanced back and smiled at her repose.

In the bathroom, he cleaned himself off with the washrag in the shower. He used the commode and brushed his teeth, while staring at his reflection. Done with what he'd needed to accomplish, he couldn't bring himself to leave the mirror.

What are you doing, man? This is exactly why you've been alone for the entire quarantine. To not bring someone else into your messy life. To not give your enemies leverage against you. She needs to be able to move on, and here you are...complicating things. How do I let her go, now? And how do I make sure she doesn't get hurt?

His thoughts drifted back to relishing their love-making. He felt the stirrings of arousal, and he remembered something. Something important.

And he found the answer to all of his questions.

C and N

It had to be early morning, sometime close to sunrise, when Catherine awoke. The first thing her senses registered was the heat radiating from a body that was not her own. She lay on her back, completely naked under the sheet and comforter. Along her side, she felt Apollo's prone form. Her eyes fluttered open, blinking away the bright sunshine and looking over to him.

Apollo was actually on his stomach, both hands tucked under the pillow and with his head faced away from her. She could tell from the slow, even breaths that caused the bedcovers to rise and fall that he was still fast asleep. Seeing him in such a vulnerable, peaceful state made her smile.

Well...months of nothing. And that was...amazing!

Her happy thoughts sobered into analytical questions, soon thereafter.

What now? Should I cuddle him? Should I get up and leave him in bed? Is he going to regret this? Do I regret this...even a little? Was this a one-time thing? Do I want more? Does he?

She needed to use the restroom. Her throat was dry. And she was hungry, too.

But...not yet...

Holding her breath and moving as stealthily as possible, she curled onto her side and pressed her bare body to his. Apollo emitted a low moan, and the sound resembled something primal. He rolled over to face her and gave her a lopsided smile.

"G'morning," he greeted in a gravelly tone.

Catherine allowed him to pull her closer, embraced in his arms. She noticed that he had his boxers on, which made her wonder how and when he'd snuck out of bed.

"Hi," she said back, mostly into his broad chest.

"How did you sleep?"

"Too well," she smiled. "I didn't even feel you get up to get your boxers."

A brief silence followed. Not uncomfortable, though. Catherine took the time to think.

"What did that Reaper do that made you mad, at the very end?" she asked.

"Huh? Oh, he took my game. The one I taught you how to play."

"Boo. What an asshole. I'm sorry. Well, I'm sorry for *you*, but not sorry for me. I sucked at that game," she lightly teased.

He chuckled, and her heart fluttered as her head moved up and down with his chest. When she felt his fingers skim up the flesh on her spine, she bit her lip and gently pulled away. He frowned at the subtle rejection. She needed to speak up quickly.

"I...I just want to go...freshen up a bit. Is that okay?"

Apollo forced a smile, but he didn't say anything back. Catherine held the covers up to her body and sat up in the bed. She saw her clothes on the floor. A little further away from her than she would have liked.

I mean, I'm not going to get out of bed naked. I don't care if he saw all of me last night. Now, it's morning.

As she hesitated in thought, she registered the shifting of weight behind her. And, in the next moment, Apollo was holding one of his large shirts out to her. She grabbed it gratefully and put it on, while still mostly shielded from view. The shirt was barely long enough to act as a short dress, so she accepted that level of modesty and walked out of the room without looking back.

She purposefully did the absolute minimum in the bathroom: relieving herself, wiping all traces of bodily fluids, washing her hands, and brushing her teeth for an absurdly short amount of time. Everything in her wanted to rush back to bed, to reassure Apollo with renewed interest and energy. Her throat felt arid, but she only allowed herself a small handful of water from the tap.

Apollo was sitting up in bed, too, looking like he was about to throw his legs over the side and start his day. He seemed surprised to see Catherine reenter so quickly. She gave him no time to do more than freeze in place, as she bounded back into the bed and pulled him down. They sprawled out, limbs stretched across the mattress, both laughing at the playful activity.

She felt...safe...back in the bed. With him.

This was no Reaper. Apollo was a good guy. A little too good, for her. Handsome, too.

Catherine and David were a good match. They were usually on the same page, and, even when they disagreed about something, they compromised. Although, if Catherine was honest about it, the compromise was usually David giving in to her demands. She'd never questioned being in a relationship with him. They'd talked in-depth about their future together.

With that chapter coming to such an unexpected and abrupt close, Catherine didn't spend much time of altering her future plans. She lived in the moment.

And, perhaps, that's exactly what last night was: a moment.

She would do her best to extend it as long as possible, until one or both of them came to their senses. This wasn't love. It was comfort within the eye of a never-ending storm.

Apollo clenched his jaw in a tight smile that did its best to hide how pleased he was that she had initiated another round of sex. He eagerly helped her discard his shirt from her body,

throwing it somewhere off the bed where his eyes didn't follow. He removed his own single article of clothing, too.

Their lovemaking was less tentative and much more satisfying for both. At the end of a mutually-reached climax, they held each other and waited for their arousal to wane.

"I saw the message Mariah wrote on the inside of the photo album," Catherine pointed out. She allowed a beat to pass, figuring that, once again, Apollo would be thrown off by the abrupt change in topic. He didn't answer, but surely he was aware of what she was referring to. "*M* for Mariah...and that makes you *N*, right?"

I mean, I've lived with him for almost two months. I'm entrusting him with my life, and we just slept together...

"My name is Nick. Nicholas," he quickly corrected. "I'm sorry, I should've told you by now."

"Did you go by Nick?"

Her head rested on his chest, which calmly rose and fell with each steady breath.

"Most people called me Nick, yeah," he confirmed. "My coworkers, my mom and sister. My dad was Puerto Rican, and he liked 'Nico' better." There was another pause, and Catherine waited patiently. She could tell he had more to say. "Mariah called me Nico, too. She was Mexican. When she was really pissed, she'd chew me out in Spanish." The warmth was audible in his tone, speaking of his ex.

"You speak Spanish?" Catherine asked with genuine interest.

"Not very well. I can understand it fine, but I'm kind of slow putting the words together. Definitely not fluent. My dad always gave me shit about my crap pronunciation. But my little sister was better, which made him happy."

"I wish I could speak another language," she confided.

"Again, it's not too late. You could major in another language if you wanted to," he reminded her of their previous discussion of Catherine's regret at not finishing her college education.

"Yeah..." she had noncommittally responded, fading the word into a longer-stretching silence.

After that, the day had been surprisingly...typical. Breakfast, showers – taken separately, some lighter conversation, lunch, turns on the computer...

The sun was streaming down on the city, giving the illusion that it was warmer outside than the late autumn season allowed. No snow, yet, but Empire City would see a change in the weather within another month or so.

Catherine stared out the window and cradled her arms at her midsection. When she looked over at Apollo, he seemed to be deeply interested in whatever was on the computer screen.

"Everything okay?"

He looked up and gave her a reassuring grin. "Yeah, of course," he assured her. "I have to meet up with the Reapers tomorrow night."

She frowned and moved to join him, but he quickly shut the laptop and stood.

"Why are you meeting? What are you guys doing, now?"

"I'm not sure, actually. The message only gave the basics: time, date, place." He stood in front of her and she crossed her arms, openly dissatisfied with the ambiguous information. He looked out the window, too, still next to her. "It's a nice day, outside. Would you like to get some fresh air?"

Her jaw dropped, and she looked out the window briefly before looking back to his profiled face.

"Not to the park or anything," he quickly added. "I meant to the roof." Now, he met her surprised stare. "Less chance of us being seen, and I can either get us back here or conceal you. Sound okay?"

"Yes!"

She dressed more warmly, preparing for the inevitable chill in the air. But, when she returned to the common area, she was startled to find Apollo in his Reaper uniform.

"It'll be easier to defend you," he explained with an apologetic tone, sensing her distress. "If I'm dressed as a conduit, I can act as if you're in my custody, just in case I can't hide you in time."

"Okay..." she half-heartedly agreed, with a shaky voice. "I guess that makes sense..."

He finished buttoning his jacket, and she stared at the sloppily-painted ribcage that was supposed to compliment the skeletal look. The skull mask was back on, too, and Catherine couldn't help but think of the two Reapers that had searched the apartment for her only yesterday. She did her best to push the images out of her mind.

"How are we getting up to the roof?"

Apollo looked again at her, and she was disappointed to see that she could no longer tell what he was feeling behind the macabre veneer. He walked past her to the living room window and opened it as far as the hinges would allow.

"I think it's best if we use the quickest route."

Catherine shifted her weight back and forth between each foot, nervously imagining what that would entail.

"We can't get up to the roof from *inside* the building?" she squeaked out.

"No," he shook his head and looked over his shoulder at her. "I blocked the entry. And I did the same to several other buildings that surround this one. I had to be sure that some random person wouldn't come up, while I was trying to get back home."

As he explained his reasoning, she walked up to stand beside him. When she looked out the window, her eyes couldn't help wandering to where the ground lay below. The strangest thing, though, the earth continued to plummet into a dark abyss, the more she watched. She felt light-headed and took a step back.

"Come here," he gently commanded. Her eyes were still focused on the fall, so when she next saw a Reaper mask step into her view, her arms immediately went up to guard her space. "Catherine," he softly chided.

She muttered an apology and dropped her hands to her sides. He ignored her initial misgivings and scooped her into his arms, before she could protest. Her arms instinctually circled his neck for added stability, even as the rest of her body tensed against the rigid Reaper coat. Slowly, her body disappeared from sight, as did Apollo's. Catherine's gaze immediately fell to the floor, upon feeling Apollo stepping up into air. There was nothing underneath wherever his feet were, but, upon further inspection, she could see a very slight glimmer. Like looking through transparent glass.

He stepped up and out the opening, into absolutely nothing. No tightrope, no gangplank. Nothing separating them from guaranteed death except for some invisible barrier that Apollo's power created. She wanted to squeeze his neck, but she feared it might disrupt his concentration...so she held her breath, instead.

She didn't have long to wait, thankfully. She was right, when she had assumed that he was on the top floor of his building. Just as she had begun to feel dizzy from the height, he was placing her on the solid ground of his roof.

Catherine let out her breath and took in a few deep gulps of air to force herself to relax. Apollo had let her go, and both of them were standing out in the open. She felt vulnerable, but she knew she was not unprotected.

"That was terrifying," she barely spoke above a whisper. Her eyes were on the horizon. The sun was on its descent, and the sky was already changing hues.

"I would've thought I'd earned your trust, by now."

That made her turn to look at him. Reaper or not. She gave him a sly smile, only slightly annoyed that she couldn't tell from his tone or his eyes if he was teasing her.

"I think it's obvious I do. Anyway, it's not about trust. I don't like heights," she shrugged.

They stood in silence, then, enjoying the crisp autumn air and the languid trek of the sun. Catherine surveyed as much as she could from the roof, but she stayed far from the edge of the building. Apollo remained in one spot, trying to soak in some of the remaining sunlight, while still being vigilant in his lookout.

"Not much of a view, from here," Catherine finally broke the quiet between them. "And this roof is, like, nothing. Just concrete and no seating."

"I didn't pick this place for the view, I chose it because it was close to my station," he good-naturedly shot back.

"What's really going on tomorrow night?"

And...again, with the hesitation to answer...

"You're very good at quickly changing topics," he quietly pointed out. "It catches me off-guard, every time."

Oh, yeah? "You're equally good at deflecting questions that you don't want to answer."

"It's not that I don't want to answer," he defended himself. "I just don't have much information to give you. The message only said where and when we'd be meeting."

"You're not scared it could be another confrontation with Cole...or Zeke?"

"No," he firmly answered. Catherine tried to detect any hint of deception in his voice or manner, but he sounded and acted truthful. "I feel like it'll probably just be a meeting. Maybe go over our options, if Cole refuses to align with us to defeat Alden and the Dust Men." He was already standing beside her, but now he moved to stand behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist to pull her back against his chest. "The Reapers aren't going to be able to produce you to Cole, so it's time to start setting up contingencies."

Her heart fearfully skipped a beat, at the thought of Cole's anger toward the Reapers and Empire City...because of her. *No, not me. HIM. This is all Cole's fault.*

She relaxed into Apollo's embrace.

The sunset was a beautiful one. Warm pastels deepening to rich, robust reds and oranges to compliment the current season.

"Ready to go inside? Have dinner?" he said the words into her ear, and goosebumps rose in the place where his breath hit her flesh. "We'll have to get creative, seeing as we're mostly out of food. Might have to do pasta, again. I'll get some supplies tomorrow morning."

"Sounds good," she sighed. Content. *I am content. In this isolated hell. For now, anyway.*

He carried her, cloaked her, and made his way back into the apartment, closing the window and locking it behind him. She was just as frightened on the way back home as she was leaving, but she was thankful for the brief reprieve from being constantly hidden away in a building.

Dinner led to a movie, which led to another round of sex and sleep.

She was not ignorant.

Catherine knew that was the third time they'd engaged in unprotected sex. She trusted Apollo, Nick, enough to believe that he wouldn't knowingly infect her with some disease. If he was selfish in that way, it would have been apparent in other aspects of his personality. Admittedly, she didn't think about the possibility of getting pregnant until after their second time being intimate. With enough time to be bored within the day, her mind had eventually reminded her of that fact.

Actually, when Apollo was checking the computer, before they'd spoken, her silent moments at the window were her contemplation of what to do.

Now, as she lay beside him, her thoughts floated back to that very important subject.

Three times, now. I have no idea if I'm ovulating. I had my period how many weeks ago? Should I mention that I might get pregnant? Nah, he knows that's a possibility. Why doesn't he say anything, then? Is he waiting for me to bring it up? Unless...maybe he's had a vasectomy or something, so he knows we probably won't. Or maybe he doesn't bring it up because he's trying to get me pregnant? Nah, he wouldn't do that, either. He wouldn't make a plan like that without including me. Do we keep doing this, then? Can he get condoms tomorrow, along with the other supplies? Do I encourage him to get some? Or do I want to get pregnant? It would be the quickest way to escape this quarantine. But...then, what? What happens when I'm out? What do I do with the baby? What would Apollo want? Do I have a choice?

Apollo hadn't said anything, but she could tell he was still awake. The arm that cradled her also idly brushed a single digit, probably his thumb, at the dip in her waist.

Yes, I have a choice. But I don't need to decide anything tonight.

"Goodnight, Nick," she whispered his given name with a natural ease.

She was drowsier than she'd thought. She couldn't recall if he'd returned the sentiment, before she fell fast asleep.

When she woke in the morning, she was alone in the bed. Apollo had smoothly maneuvered out of the sheets and off the mattress without disturbing her. She frowned at having slept through yet another instance of him leaving the room, then noticed a small sheet of paper on the nightstand.

It was just a few scribbled lines. Apollo informed her that he had left at daybreak, to pick up supplies without many other Reapers present at their resource warehouse. He promised to be back before lunch.

A familiar feeling in the pit of her stomach rose up through her body, until her heart clenched and her breathing suddenly quickened. *What if he doesn't come back?*

She didn't trust Zeke. She didn't trust the Reapers. For all she knew, Apollo could be walking into an ambush. Her heart raced at the idea of more Reapers coming to the apartment to do another search, while Apollo was out. And so she paced and stared restlessly at the door, until

she heard a light knock. She jumped at the sound, and she couldn't breathe until she'd looked through the peephole. Nothing. No one. *Apollo.*

He entered invisibly, but appeared once he was across the threshold holding two large bags. Both items were placed upon the small kitchen island, and Catherine awkwardly stared at his Reaper coat with her arms folded below her chest. Sensing her discomfort, Apollo's next course of action was to remove his coat, balaclava, and gloves. He met her stare and shared a relieved smile.

His run to the supply warehouse had been especially successful, and they both set to work unpacking all of the groceries.

As the day gave way to night, Catherine braced herself for Apollo's looming departure.

"How long do you think you'll be?"

"I'm not sure," was the only answer he could, or would, give her. "I don't think it'll be too long. But I don't want you to wait up for me."

They were seated on the couch, Catherine leaned into Apollo's side and her legs stretched out along the length of the furniture. His arm was draped over her, and he discarded the book he'd been reading onto the coffee table.

She felt him kiss the top of her head. *Sweet...*

"I can't guarantee I'll be back tonight at all," he warned. She frowned, but her facial expression was directed toward the wall across the apartment. "If I do get back, would you like me to join you in the bed? I don't want to wake you-"

"Yes," she interrupted, a bit prematurely. "I mean, no, I don't care if you wake me up, and yes I want you to stay with me."

"Okay, then." The answer may have been underwhelming, but she could hear the smile in his voice.

In another half hour, Apollo was up and changing into his Reaper outfit, while Catherine watched from the couch. He hugged her and exited through the modified window once more, not even leaving a shadow behind his cloaked form in the moonlight.

She still had a little time left on today's allowance for her internet usage. Her mind couldn't help but to dwell on pregnancy. Obviously, she wasn't feeling any differently, but she wanted to know what to expect. *What to expect... ha ha ha... Ugh... Morning sickness...that lasts ALL DAY?! Swelling...cravings...aversions... Sounds awesome.*

Catherine had been on birth control from the moment she'd entered adulthood. She was vigilant. Never one scare. She and David spoke on many occasions about starting a family one day...but not in the near future. David disappeared and Catherine dutifully took the remainder of the pills. When those were gone, and because David didn't ever come back, it was hardly something to worry about.

Now, here she was, twenty-three and facing the possibility of being pregnant with a man who she had met under the most stressful and unusual of circumstances. Not exactly an ideal time.

Then again, it's not the first time it's been inconvenient for a woman to be pregnant...

Feeling only a twinge of guilt, she looked up all of the options available to her, if she should get pregnant and escape Empire City.

I might be on my own, if Apollo...if Nick can't come with me. Or won't come with me. He said before that he chose not to leave, when he was picked for the lottery. Abortion...adoption... What will Nick want? Will he care? Do I let him have any say? Do I let him know I'm pregnant, if I get pregnant, or do I just disappear one Friday and start my life over?

Her muddled thoughts didn't pave the way to some greater clarity. After running her mind in circles, she erased the browser history and signed out of her user account. She got up and walked to the fridge, marveling at all the new contents and choosing to snack on some of the green grapes.

Although she wasn't especially tired or exhausted, she found herself in the bedroom. She'd left the living room light on, for Apollo's return, but everything else was turned off and closed down for the night. She took a shower, brushed her teeth, and changed into sleep clothes. Before lying down, she sat cross-legged on the bed and closed her eyes to meditate. Ease her anxious mind.

He'll be home soon.

She didn't love him, but she wanted him with her.

For now, at least.

There was so much more to think about.

Nick and the Meeting

Apollo awoke to the most wonderful sensation of soft, bared skin against his own. The memory of what had transpired between he and Catherine flooded his thoughts, and he drew her closer to him. They spoke only a little, but, just as he began to touch her more intimately, she had pulled away.

Thankfully, it was only for her to freshen up. As he'd prepared to leave the bed, she'd unexpectedly returned to the room, practically tackled him and playfully began another round of sex.

Being with Catherine, focusing on nothing outside of her pleasure, he felt a sense of freedom that he hadn't experienced at any other time within the quarantine. There were no Reapers, no Zeke, no Cole... No Neon, no ECFD, no Empire City... No virus, no quarantine, no past. There was only him and her. Her smell, the sounds she made, the feel of her skin, the passion that lit up her eyes. It was all he needed in that moment.

When she had mentioned Mariah, after their sensual session, he'd braced himself for yet another invasive question about a past that he wanted so badly to keep in the recesses of his mind. In the end, though, all she wanted was his name.

Truth be told, he felt guilty for not telling her, before having sex with her the first time. Incredibly awkward and inconsiderate of him to not trust her with that small nugget of personal information.

The day went on without incident. Apollo wondered if the Reapers had concluded their search for Catherine or if it continued. Catherine stood at the living room window, obviously deep in thought, and he sat at the table to check his laptop.

The Reaper logo was there. A pit appeared within his stomach. Before Catherine, he'd always dutifully answered Zeke's calls. It's not that Apollo looked forward to his Reaper missions, but he certainly didn't dislike receiving messages. Now, every mission, every meeting, every message was a chore. He wished he could remain in his apartment...with her.

But he clicked on the logo, because he had made a promise to himself, when he'd lost his family and his city to Cole's villainy. Apollo had power. It would be selfish of him to withhold his help.

The message came up straight away, no clever riddle to open the file.

Odd. He couldn't think back to a time when Zeke hadn't come up with those cheesy passwords.

"Meet tomorrow at 2100, top of the Framer Building. DON'T bring your com."

Very odd.

"Everything okay?" Catherine asked, which made him look up. He glanced down to delete the message and then gave her a winning smile.

I hope so.

"Yeah, of course. I have to meet up with the Reapers tomorrow night."

Her curiosity wasn't sated, of course, as he had become accustomed to, so he suggested going outside, to the rooftop, to get some air. Her look of surprise had been both satisfying and helpful, as her attention diverted to the new topic. But, when he'd changed clothes into his Reaper gear, she'd stopped in her tracks.

"It'll be easier to defend you," he said. "If I'm dressed as a conduit, I can act as if you're in my custody, just in case I can't hide you in time." *Trust me, I hate wearing this in front of you.*

Ultimately, she'd agreed, although he felt she sounded reluctant. Hopefully, once they were on the roof, her anxiety would melt in the new ambiance.

When he'd approached her, to pick her up, Catherine had held up her hands to automatically block his advance. He gently called to her, reminding her of who was behind the frightening mask.

He felt her tense up, as he went through the window, cradling her against him. When she'd protested going out the window in the first place, he had sensed that it might be due to a fear of heights. She'd confirmed that theory, once they were on the solid ground.

"That was terrifying," she whispered.

"I would've thought I'd earned your trust, by now." He was lightly ribbing her, but a subconscious part of him truly wanted her to remember everything he had done to help her.

She smiled coyly at him. "I think it's obvious I do." His chest puffed up a little. "Anyway, it's not about trust. I don't like heights."

They'd enjoyed watching the sun descend from the sky. The air was chilly, especially at this height, but there wasn't much wind. Apollo continuously scanned the rooftops and listened for any suspicious noises. He did his best to not alert Catherine to his watch.

"What's really going on tomorrow night?" she had asked him, out of the blue.

That's what I've been thinking about ever since I read the Reaper message, he silently admitted. No clever riddle or encryption. I'm not sure Zeke sent it. Well, either that, or maybe he's just pissed at me.

"You're very good at quickly changing topics," he credited to her. "It catches me off-guard, every time."

"You're equally good at deflecting questions that you don't want to answer," she had shot right back.

That's not...hmm...

"It's not that I don't want to answer, I just don't have much information to give you. The message only said when and where we'd be meeting."

"You're not scared it could be another confrontation with Cole...or Zeke?"

That's exactly what I'm scared of, actually.

But his fears weren't her concern. She had enough on her plate, without piling on his paranoia. He kept his answer as brief as possible, while still striving to assuage her worries. As he did so, he moved behind her and held her in his arms. She went slack against him, pressing into his warm body, and he smiled underneath the balaclava.

Their excursion came to an end, and they returned to the small apartment. Dinner was simple, and Apollo set a mental reminder to stock up, as much as he could, on groceries.

Just in case.

He hated thinking that way, but his fire training had beat that exact notion into his head: prepare for the worst, hope for the best.

And it wasn't lost on him that he was about to take his own advice. Apollo told David, months ago, to buy up as many groceries as he could and take them to Catherine. The difference was that David *knew* it meant goodbye.

That night, as Catherine lay next to him, curled in his arms, Apollo thought about what was at stake. Before he'd swooped in and brought her into his life, everything had been incredibly simple. He'd lost everything. His parents and sister, many of his friends, his identity and purpose. Everything of lasting value. Once he'd joined with the Reapers, there was only one goal. And if he was killed along the way, well...one more body amongst the rubble.

Catherine changed everything.

He had someone to fight for.

Although he doubted she was pregnant, there was that to factor in, as well. He needed to talk to her about it. And once she was past the barricade, she'd be in the wind. Would he see her, again? What would happen to the baby? Should he give her his opinion on what they should do, or should she make the decisions on her own?

It took him too long to notice that Catherine was also awake, seemingly distracted by her own thoughts. He wondered what she was thinking. He brushed her waist with the thumb that lay next to it.

"Goodnight, Nick," she said.

And that one little phrase made his heart flip. It'd been months, since he'd heard his name spoken. The last person that had uttered it was his chief, ordering him home from the scene

of the blast. To have a feminine voice purr it out was an altogether much more enjoyable experience. He clung to that and fell asleep.

He woke with the sun at daybreak, carefully sliding out of bed, and leaving Catherine to continue slumbering. His Reaper outfit was where he'd left it, and each item was donned without disturbing her. As he was about to leave, a thought entered his head, and he walked back to the bedroom. He found a scrap of paper and a pen and scrawled a short note.

"Left early to get food before many Reapers show. Be back soon, hopefully before lunch."

Aside from those guarding the doors, no Reapers were in the storehouse, yet. That was especially lucky. He took as much food as he could, without arousing the suspicion either from the guard or, eventually, from Zeke, who oversaw the inventory. He mostly grabbed nonperishables, but he selected an assortment of fresh food that he knew Catherine would like. At the pharmaceutical section of the warehouse, he paused and wondered if he could get a pregnancy test without having it be a big deal.

Terrible idea. No way I need that kind of heat on me, right now. Especially after that last conversation with Zeke.

At the door, he went over every item with one of the guards, who catalogued what would be taken and by whom. It was routine and more of a formality, so that Zeke could make sure the Reapers' resources weren't being improperly distributed.

He left with two large bags and made his way back through the city on foot. It took hours, and most of his conduit energy, for him to travel invisibly through the boroughs. But, as promised, before noon, he was knocking on his front door. Catherine answered and then moved well out of the way, so that he could pass through.

Making himself visible, he noticed her staring at the different parts of his uniform. He quickly placed the bags on the island and removed the coat, gloves, and mask.

After that, it was business as usual. They unpacked the groceries and Catherine excitedly commented on some of her favorite foods that he had brought back.

Apollo had just enough time to recharge his energy, before daylight was done. The meeting time was later than usual, but he tried not to dwell on all of the red flags that were present in the one message. He focused, instead, on his time with Catherine.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" he asked her after dinner.

"Nah," she shook her head. "I'd rather just relax on the couch."

"Sounds perfect."

He picked out one of his favorite novels, with its much-abused spine and pages that were threatening to fall apart, and he sat against the right armrest. His spot. Catherine sat at the opposite end, then leaned over the middle cushion to place her head on the side of his left

chest. He raised his left arm, as she did so, then draped it over her shoulders. Her legs sprawled out to use the remainder of the couch.

Apollo managed to open the novel, turn the pages, and hold it within his single free hand, albeit somewhat awkwardly. He hadn't finished reading the first chapter, when Catherine spoke up.

"How long do you think you'll be?"

He'd answered honestly, avoiding the pit of dread in his stomach, then asked her if he could join her in bed. She'd answered positively, while tripping over her words, and he'd grinned.

And, within the blink of an eye, the day was done and it was time for Apollo to leave the comfort of his home. He dressed silently, while Catherine watched from the couch. She didn't seem as anxious, this time, having had the opportunity to watch the man dress as up as a monster. There were things that he wanted to say to her, but he couldn't speak. He waited and hoped she would say something, but she remained silent, as well.

Maybe that's for the best...just in case.

They only exchanged a hug, and he took off into the night.

Nine o'clock. Framer Building. No com.

He would be there at least forty minutes early. Not having his com device in, there would be no way for plans to change. And, if this was a ruse to somehow get to Catherine...if Zeke knew more than he was letting on...

I'll leave at 9:05. If no one comes, I'll leave. If I get shit for it, it'll be worth it to be home safe.

But, arriving as early as he did, he found that he was not alone. Another figure in a white coat greeted him quickly.

"Apollo."

"Aura?" he uncertainly called out. Loud enough for her to hear, but not so loud as to alert anyone further away. "What's going on? Did you call this?"

"Yes."

He paused. "Is anyone else coming?"

"You'd better hope not."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She chose not to answer that and pressed on. "You're early."

He chose to let her be evasive. "So are you."

"That's because I knew who I was meeting."

"I'm always early."

"Exactly."

He sighed and looked around. If his instincts were wrong about her, he needed to figure out a quick exit.

"Does Zeke know about this?"

"No," she shook her head.

"How did you send out that message without him knowing?"

She scoffed, as if she was insulted. "Please. He's an idiot with technology. He can barely use a walkie-talkie. I'm the one that sends out the messages. Zeke just comes up with those stupid passkey riddles. So unnecessary."

"Alright. So...what do you want?"

"To give you a heads-up, *hero*," she added snidely.

Apollo folded his arms, in a defensive posture.

"Zeke may not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he's not completely stupid. He met with Cole two nights ago, to give him the news: we haven't found that girl he's obsessed with."

Apollo's insides lurched, but he did his best to remain uninterested.

"I'm pretty sure you already knew that," she continued, "even though I know for a fact that you didn't participate in any of the searches. I think," Aura paused and cocked her head, her expression completely masked, "that you either have her stashed somewhere brilliant, or she's living with you."

"Or maybe she's already dead?"

"Maybe. But I doubt it."

"Maybe she left. Either through the barricade or to another district."

"Now I *know* you're lying." Aura stepped closer. "Zeke let you go, but he didn't totally believe you. He figured he'd find her, with or without your help. He didn't *just* send out search parties. We have Reapers posted at all three bridges. 'Round the clock at Roosevelt and Fremont, and every Friday at Stampton.

"However you've managed to hide her, it's...frustrating Zeke. Cole was *beyond* pissed. But Zeke managed to convince Cole to go ahead with his plan to gang up on Alden and the Dust

Men. Zeke promised that your little girlfriend was practically in the bag. Cole left, and Zeke met with me."

She paused, and Apollo was sure that it was hesitation.

"He asked me to follow you, Apollo. You'll be getting another message, soon. We're attacking Shanty Town in two days. Cole doesn't know about Zeke suspecting you, as far as I know. I'm supposed to trail you after the fight, follow you home and see if that's where you're keeping her."

"An admirable amount of confidence Zeke has in you," he spoke in a deeper tone, "assuming that you could trail me without my noticing."

Aura rolled her eyes, the only visible part of her face, and ignored the slight from Apollo.

"Stop being an ass and just listen to me," she shot back. "I don't know what your plans are to keep that Trish look-alike safe, but you should know you're on Zeke's radar. He doesn't want to lose you, as a soldier, but you're hardly in his circle of trust, anymore. You need a plan."

"Why are you even telling me this? Aren't you interested in Cole's deal? Get the girl, save the Neon."

She narrowed her eyes and they flashed dangerously in the moonlight.

"I didn't sign up to work with or make deals with that terrorist." Aura leaned back a little and took a breath. "What did you do, before all of this?"

Apollo knew exactly what she was asking. *In for a penny...* "I was a firefighter."

Aura burst out laughing at that. "Figures," she muttered, after catching her breath. "I owned a hair salon, if you can believe it. Off Broad Street. Cole started all this. I'll fight with him this *one* time. To kill Alden. For Razor," she whispered.

He wondered how close Aura and Razor were. He'd never pegged them for lovers, but he didn't pay much attention to the other Reapers.

"After Alden's dead, all bets are off. I don't want Cole's deal. I want him *dead*. I won't settle for less. And that's why I'm willing to help you. And your friend. Cole's already...he's already hurt her, I assume."

"You have no idea," Apollo gritted out.

"So what is your plan for getting her out? She can't stay here much longer. Either you'll die and she'll be defenseless, or your luck will run out and someone, a Reaper, Zeke, Cole, will find her."

He remembered something from earlier and toyed with the idea in his mind for a couple of minutes, before finally trusting her.

"Would you be able to get a couple of things from the storehouse for me?"

"Depends on what you're asking for."

"I need a pregnancy test kit and prenatal vitamins." Aura's eyes widened and then settled into a sardonic glare. Apollo continued. "What are the patrols like, on Fridays?"

"We spread out, fanned out within the public, scanning for anyone that fits her description, until the end of the lottery process."

"If you saw someone that looked like her, would you report it?"

"Not as long as she wasn't obvious about it. If my ass isn't on the line, because she could have snuck by anyone, then no...I wouldn't report her."

"Well, if that's the case, I would encourage you to follow me after the battle against Alden. Do your best, and I'll prove to you that you would've never succeeded with Zeke's plan," he lightly ribbed her. He hoped she could hear that he wasn't trying to mock her.

"Fine," she gave one succinct nod. "The stuff will be hidden next to one of those porches on the ground floor of the Seltzer Apartments. Give me until noon tomorrow to drop it off." Aura turned to leave, but stopped herself and turned back around. "You're going to a lot of trouble for this girl, Apollo. You love her?"

He bristled. He hadn't been this open with another Reaper since Reach. David, that was. If Aura held up her end of the bargain, this was still a shaky alliance. Fortunately, she didn't know anything that would directly lead her to Catherine. And, in light of these new circumstances, Apollo had little choice but to trust someone who could help him get Catherine out of Empire City.

"I don't want to see her hurt, again," he said slowly, purposefully choosing his words carefully. "Cole wrecked her, and I need to make sure she's safe from him. I care about her, sure, but, once she's out, she's going to go on with her life. And we may never see each other, again, and that's-"

"Ugh," Aura interrupted. "You could've just said 'yes'."

With that, she walked away, without so much as a glance over her shoulder at the conduit she was leaving behind.

Apollo left the scene, too, praying that Aura would be true to her word. She showed *some* integrity, but she acted more like a lone wolf than a pack member.

He returned home to find a sleeping Catherine. Per usual, the first thing he did was throw all of the Reaper uniform pieces and accessories on the living room chair. He changed into clothes for bed, trying to be as quiet as possible, but the rustling woke her.

"Mmmm...I'm glad you're back," she murmured sleepily. She rolled to make more room for him, curling onto her side.

He crawled in and lay down beside her. She was warm and soft. She shivered, a little, at his colder flesh. He was usually a heater, in bed. That's what Mariah had always called him. He

kissed Catherine's shoulder.

"Me, too," he answered into her ear. "Good night."

"Night, Nick," she whispered.

The flutter in his stomach. The way he felt, when he lay next to her. The easy feeling of hanging out with her all day. The trust built between them, forged from their shaky beginning and mistakes made on both sides.

He could only speak for himself. Yes, he loved her. And he knew how it would end. He'd tried to tell Aura. He'd tried to remind himself, on multiple occasions. And, now, it was too late.

He regretted the way he'd left things with Mariah. He'd hurt her, in so many ways, and there was no way to atone for it. And now, in spectacular retribution, he was about to feel that same pain of watching someone leave and move on with their life... without you.

And that was fine. Fitting, even. He could handle more pain. He could save Catherine, love her, send her off with a brave goodbye.

He would do his best to make sure that he didn't hurt her, too.

He fell asleep and into a dream.

He was in a forest, in a campground. He'd gone on a camping trip every summer, growing up. His parents had a favorite place in upstate New York. And here he was, back amid those familiar surroundings. The tent he'd set up was unzipped from the inside, and he saw Catherine stepping out with a toddler. A little boy.

But, before he could study the scene before him, take a good long look, there was an explosion on the horizon. He held up a hand to shield his eyes from the blast, and then a figure emerged from behind that light. A giant. Made of what looked to be lava and ash. The beast was male, bald, and had fiery eyes within a grimace.

Apollo ran to the tent, grabbed both smaller bodies, and ran through the trees, away from the monster. As he ran, he felt his burden become lighter. He looked down and both Catherine and the child had disappeared from his arms. But not by his doing. He stood, shocked into inaction, and waited for the beast to catch up to him...

He woke from the nightmare, and apparently his jerking movement woke Catherine, too.

"You okay?" she asked, rather groggy. She had turned to face him, still within his embrace.

He was not okay. But he didn't want to talk about it, either. He kissed her, then smoothly trailed his hand along her thigh, down to her knee. He used the handhold to pull her leg up and over his waist. Her legs were clean-shaven, and the fact that she had groomed herself bolstered his ego. He chose to believe it was for him. She helped to defend his assumption by excitedly responding to his sexual advances.

Sex was always a welcome distraction.

But, even in their passion, Apollo couldn't help but look at Catherine and worry.

How long will it take to get pregnant? Can she even get pregnant? What if it takes a year?

He buried himself inside her and imagined happier, unrealistic outcomes. Him taking her on dates to the coast, visiting cities neither of them had ever seen, proposing to her in an absurdly romantic fashion and the ecstatic look of joy on her face. Living away from Empire City. Starting over, with her. Watching her belly grow with their child. Her lying with him every night, adoring him. Her hero.

It was those dreams, little more than fantasies, that helped push him over the edge, spilling inside of her once more. And, when they were both spent, he was left feeling incredibly lonely.

He felt Catherine press against him, her leg over his, her hand on his chest, and her head on his shoulder. She let out a contented sigh. He breathed in her scent and made plans in his head for the next two days. He could only control what he could control...which wasn't much. Deep breaths in, deep breaths out.

Prepare for the worst, hope for the best.

Catherine and the Talk

Apollo was unusually quiet, Catherine thought. And, as she stared at him over their eggs and bacon, she forced herself to reimagine their initial introduction.

Nick. He's Nick. Nick is the man, Apollo is the Reaper. Stop thinking of him as Apollo.

Nick looked up and noticed her staring, giving her a quizzical smile in return. They finished their food and he cleared the dishes from the table.

She'd already asked him about the previous night's meeting. He'd been vague, but he also promised to discuss it with her later in the day...for some unknown reason. He did assure her that there was nothing for her to worry about. The lack of information was annoying, as usual, but she knew it would be rather pointless to make him bend to her wishes. Not when it came to Reaper business.

He left midday to run an errand, promising that it would be brief. When he left, Catherine occupied her thoughts on distracting herself. Now that she knew more about Mariah, she wanted to revisit the gifted album. She pulled it from its place on the lowest shelf of the bookcase.

Nick and Mariah. Happy. Nick is so young here.

Some of the pictures were obviously from their high school years, or the first year of college. Nick had spiky hair and bleach-frosted tips. Catherine shook her head at the dated fashion. Other pictures were from the latter part of their relationship, when Nick returned home after graduating. Now that she knew his side of the story, the reluctance and hesitation were easier to see behind his smiles. He had a buzz-cut, after his college years, and it was only slightly longer on top, now. At the end of the album, the pictures showed him with longer hair on top, with gel used to style it.

He hardly ever used styling products, now. Catherine mostly saw him with his hair ruffled and barely coaxed into one direction.

At the end of the album, Nick was probably only about a year or two older than her. He was only five years her senior.

She flipped the pages back to a couple of photos that featured Nick standing at the edge of a dock, leaning on the rail. In one, he was facing the water, his profile and back visible from the camera's perspective. In the other, Mariah had clearly asked him to face forward. He had both elbows perched along the rail and a genuine smile. The picture was taken in the Neon. Perhaps he'd just been transferred?

Catherine imagined herself taking the picture. Capturing the candid moment, of him staring off into the horizon. Calling out for him to turn around, and him obliging her, posing in an attractive way.

Mariah gave this to him toward the end of the relationship. Catherine knew it. She didn't know Mariah, but she knew it to be true. Nick was pulling away. She put this together to remind him of what they had. Nick saw his face in each photo and knew the emotion behind it. I'll bet it made everything worse... And then, she finally had enough, and Mariah left. She took everything that was hers. There's no sign of her in this apartment, except for these photos. She left it on purpose, because either she hoped it would change his mind or it was too painful to keep.

A theory. All speculation. There was no way to truly know. Catherine was sure that Nick himself wouldn't know everything about those final days of their relationship. Not from Mariah's point of view, anyway.

There were other pictures. Nick with his father, Nick with his sister and mother. Precious memories. Perhaps his only remaining family pictures, after the blast destroyed his childhood home in the Historic District. Tragic.

The errand, indeed, was quick. Nick came back through the window and saw Catherine staring at the photo album. She looked up and blushed, then she started to close it, but Nick called out.

"If I didn't want you looking at it, I'd put it in the safe," he gently assured her. He crossed the room, removed his Reaper uniform, placed a full brown lunch bag on the island and returned to join her.

He picked up the album off the floor, where Catherine sat with it, and brought it to the coffee table. Catherine followed, sitting next to him. They went through the album together. Catherine teased him about his frosted tips. He laughed, too, and defended his high school hairstyle. He told her about where the various locations were, what he and Mariah were doing at the time. He described his family's personalities. His mother, blonde and blue-eyed, a former flight attendant turned homemaker. Affectionate, sometimes militant about her home, a woman who would welcome her children's friends with refreshments and hugs. His father, dark brown eyes and hair, a man who had risen through the ranks of his construction company to become the lead foreman. Infectious laugh, loud yelling at the television when he didn't agree with whatever was happening onscreen, a man who was going to do everything within his power to bring his family happiness. His sister, blonde like their mother, who was ten years younger than Nick. She was a cheerleader in school, like Mariah had been, someone that she greatly admired. They spoke in Spanish, when they could, but never in front of Nick's mother, who only knew a little of the language. His sister was also a typical daddy's girl, baby-of-the-family, which was equal parts endearing and annoying.

And Mariah. For the first time, Nick spoke freely about her. Answering all of Catherine's questions. At the end of their conversation, Catherine wasn't sure whether she and Mariah would have been friends, as Nick and David were. Both women had strong, outgoing personalities. If they agreed, they would be unstoppable; if they weren't in agreement, it would be...stressful.

Catherine was right about Nick's expression on the pier. He had been transferred to the Neon, and he and Mariah weren't just visiting, they were apartment hunting.

"So, what's in the bag?" Catherine asked, playful and ready to move on from their visit to Nick's past.

"A couple of things," he vaguely answered. "I'd rather talk about it later, especially after..." He trailed off and gestured to the album.

Okay, she thought. With one graceful movement, Catherine picked up and closed the album, while rising from the couch. She placed it back in the bookshelf and glanced over at the bag on the counter.

Stop it, Pandora, she chided herself. *Nick's not keeping anything from you, he just wants to wait a bit.*

And the rest of the day passed without addressing the bag. They walked by it, ate around it, and didn't mention it. Finally, before bed, Nick pulled Catherine to the kitchen table and coaxed her to sit down. She felt uneasy, but complied. He grabbed the bag, with a familiar crinkling sound, and placed it on the table, before also sitting. Catherine was silent, waiting.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I'll be leaving for the Warren, again," he told her.

Catherine knew her face told the story of how she felt. He nodded, to acknowledge her anxiety, then continued, grabbing one of her hands in his own.

"Zeke got Cole to agree to his terms. We'll fight Alden and the Dustmen on the same side. I met with Aura, last night," he explained.

Aura...that Reaper woman he's mentioned a couple of times...

"Cole only agreed to this, because Zeke promised that the Reapers would find you," he said seriously, with a squeeze of her hand to calm her. "Aura has been instructed to follow me home from the fight. I'll lose her, but I'm more nervous about Cole attacking me, again."

"Aura *told you* she's going to follow you home?" Catherine shook her head at the nonsensical act.

"Yes. I don't trust her completely, but I do think she wants to help. As long as it doesn't get her in trouble."

"Help? How?"

"The Reapers have been more...vigilant than I anticipated. They're guarding the bridges, including Stampton. That's why we need Aura. I have a plan," he smiled. "I'll be leaving the battle, tomorrow, at the defining point in the fighting. When the odds dictate we're about to either lose or win. If Aura follows, I'll lead her in circles and put on a good show, so that Zeke isn't clued into her being on our side."

The smile on his face faded, and he looked abnormally grim.

"After tomorrow night, I won't be a Reaper. I won't be *able* to be a Reaper. Leaving early, not checking in, not helping search for you...it's over. No way Zeke will trust me, after this."

"Does that upset you? The idea of leaving the Reapers?"

"No," he said, honestly. "And yes. I mean, it'll be difficult to make my way through this quarantine without their resources. I think I can get by, though. Might be able to use my powers to sneak into their storehouses. For a while, anyway."

"Aura can't help you?"

"I need her to help *you*, Catherine." There was a pause. Nick was going to continue, Catherine knew it. So she bit her lip and struggled to patiently wait. Nick let go of her hand and dumped the contents of the bag onto the table. A container of pills and a thin, white box. Prenatal vitamins and a pregnancy test kit. "Aura was the one who got these from one of the warehouses. I'm already suspected. I can't get you any more...stuff. Products specifically for women, I mean."

Catherine stared at the box and placed her hands in her lap.

Here we go...

"We've had unprotected sex a handful of times, now. I think it's time to talk about what we're doing. I won't lie, I thought about you getting pregnant after our first time together. I stared in the bathroom mirror, while you slept, and I thought it would be the answer for all our problems."

"Problems?" she whispered, looking up to meet his eyes.

"*You're* not the problem, Catherine. But keeping you safe, that *is* the main problem."

"So you *do* want me to get pregnant." Her voice sounded alien, in her ears. The words fell flat. Emotionless. Underneath them, her emotions were surging around within her like a turbulent storm.

Nick sighed. "I don't know how to do this. I'm not great at difficult subjects, like this." He leaned back in his chair and placed a hand at the back of his neck. The hand massaged the area, then dragged down the exposed skin and fell to his lap. "Let me start again, please."

Catherine could only nod, numbly.

He leaned forward, as far as he could, leaning on his forearms and trying to remove the table as an obstacle to her.

"I love you, Catherine." Her eyes widened and she felt her lips part. "I don't want anything bad to happen to you. The longer you stay in Empire City, the more likely it is that you'll be found. Or killed. I can only do so much as a Reaper. It'll be even harder, after I'm *not* one, regardless of my powers. I want you to have a life. I'm not putting any expectations on you."

"Aura is stationed at the lottery evacuation, every Friday. She agreed to let you pass by her, get to the officials and get out. I don't just want to get you pregnant. I want to save your life. Whatever you want to do about the baby, that's your choice. I can tell you that, if you wish, I would love to be with you and our child once I can make it out of Empire City, too. If it's just

you, I still want to be with you. But, if you never want to see me again, I'll promise to leave you alone."

Catherine was silent, overwhelmed by the gravity of the conversation. The choices given to her weighed her down.

"Catherine?"

Getting pregnant. Escaping Empire City. What to do? Staying with Nick. Trying to make it work. Hoping that normalcy returned, before a baby came into the picture. A negative pregnancy test. Trying for weeks, months, without success, and with fear and frustration mounting. Hiding from Cole. Hiding from Reapers. A positive pregnancy test. Pushing through the crowds and taking someone's place in the lottery. A clinic or a hospital? A baby. Nick finding her. Another picture at the pier, years later, after Empire City had time to heal. Catherine holding the camera, Nick holding their child. Posing with genuine smiles.

"Catherine?"

She heard the insistence in his voice and finally snapped out of her trance.

"Sorry, it's just...a lot to think about."

He was still leaning over the table, and he looked concerned for her. When she apologized, he narrowed his eyes, slightly.

"You're too clever to be *this* startled by the idea of pregnancy. Are you trying to tell me you haven't thought about this?"

"Of course I thought about it, Nick! I just was thinking about it being accidental, instead of a key piece of some plan you were making behind my back!"

Nick sighed, again, and stood. He walked to Catherine's side and held out a hand to help her out of her chair. She obliged and was pulled immediately into an embrace.

"What do you want?" he spoke low, into her ear.

"I don't know," she responded, an uncharacteristic crack in her voice. "I wish I could stay here, with you, but I know you're right. I don't want to be pregnant, and I don't want to have to make choices about...being pregnant."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Catherine pulled away and looked to the table.

"Do you want me to take that now?"

"Take what?" Nick asked, perplexed.

Catherine tilted her head toward the pills and test. "The pregnancy test? A pill? Both?"

"Do you think you're pregnant, now?"

"I doubt it. I don't feel pregnant, anyway. I had my period...huh...about three weeks ago?"

"We only have the one box. I think there's a few in there, but it's probably best if you wait until you know more."

"Yeah."

"I, uh, don't want to assume..." he faltered as he tried to speak his thoughts. "I mean, I got the prenats so that you would have them. If you wanted them."

"Sure."

She reached past him and grabbed the bottle. As she set about opening the seal and getting some water, she saw Nick take the box to the bathroom. After swallowing a pill, she felt calmer. No accounting for why that was. She was still unhappy about her prospects, but the initial shock of their conversation had waned.

He was right. She had thought about it, before he'd brought up the idea of her getting pregnant. And, if she was honest with herself, her researching and contemplating the matter and then continuing to engage in sex with him was not exactly thinking on "accidental" terms. Not as if she would be admitting that to Nick, though.

Despite the awkward conversation and strained relationship, they engaged in sex before bed. There was comfort to be found in the warmth and passion of their love-making. When they finished, Catherine brought up all the places she hoped to visit, someday.

"I get most of the places," he replied to her list. "I'd like to see Italy, too. I've been to Canada and Jamaica. My family went to Toronto and Montreal for vacations. And I went to Jamaica for spring break, in college, once. Why Peru?"

She laughed, hesitating to answer. "Um. I don't have a great answer, for that."

"I'm not saying you're wrong for wanting to go to Peru; I was just curious, because I don't think I've ever heard someone specifically pick that as a bucket-list destination. You know?"

"No, I know. I get that. It's because...did you see *The Emperor's New Groove*? The Disney movie?"

"No..."

"Well, it takes place there. During the Incan Empire."

"A cartoon made you want to visit Peru?"

"It made me interested enough to want to see pictures. Real ones. It looks astoundingly beautiful. *Indiana Jones and the Lost Ark* was set there, too. In the beginning."

"When he's trying not to die in that temple? Running from that huge rock with the golden idol head thing? Running for his life from the tribesmen with the poisoned darts?! That's Peru?"

She punched his arm lightly. "That's where it's *set*, jerk, not what it's *like*."

He laughed and hugged her tighter to him. "Well, if you want to go to Peru, I'd be happy to join you."

Catherine stiffened, then she shifted her weight away from him and rolled off the bed. She excused herself, saying she needed to use the restroom. Nick nodded and also went to stand. He started to put on his boxers, as she left the room.

Too much. I can't think that far ahead. Do I even love him? I loved David. Moved across the country to be part of his life. Then, without so much as a note or text, he disappeared. Died. Nick's a lot like him. Steady, self-assured...and a conduit. He has a target on his back, too. Cole's gunning for him, and soon all the Reapers will be, too. If David couldn't survive Cole, how can Nick hope to survive, once he deserts? I can't plan a future with someone who will probably die. I can't love someone that I may never see again...

The remainder of the night was filled with silences and side-glances. Catherine couldn't help but feel like Nick was overly-optimistic about his chances of coming back from the Warren.

The following day started, for Catherine, with a choice. She awoke keenly aware that it could be her last day with Nick, if things didn't go according to his plan in the Warren. An uneasy night's sleep actually helped clarify Nick's position and the conversation they'd had. It wasn't ideal, but she couldn't argue that he was right. It was, probably, the only way to save her life. It had been months, since she'd walked by herself to Stampton Bridge. How much longer could she last in Empire City?

She looked to her left, still lying in bed. Nick always slept closest to the door. He was currently asleep on his back, with an arm draped above his head. His chest moved slowly, and Catherine gently trailed her hand across the musculature there, until her arm wrapped around his torso. As he stirred, she pulled herself up and lightly straddled him. Before he could open his eyes, she leaned down and pressed her lips to his.

He smiled and let out a pleased rumble that vibrated Catherine's lips. She felt her own heart flutter, as she poured into the kiss.

He loves me.

They took their time, deliberately choosing not to rush the kisses and caresses. The day would pass too quickly, anyway.

I didn't say it back.

The thought plagued her, and she tried to banish the guilt by showing him as much affection as she could. She worried that he would assume she loved him, from her actions in lieu of words.

She worried that she already *did* love him.

As the hours passed, she found herself following and clinging to him as she had in the past. He didn't seem to notice. Or, if he did, he didn't act as though her abnormal behavior alarmed him. Eventually, he stood from where they sat together on the sofa, heading immediately to his room. Catherine knew it was time. Neither had acknowledged the clock, but they both saw the sun beginning its descent. Catherine remained in her spot, changing the television channel and surfing through the different options.

As he prepared to leave for the Warren, putting on piece after piece of his Reaper uniform, she suddenly found herself acting completely opposite to how she had before.

When Nick emerged from the bedroom, he wore all black. Black pants, black combat boots, and his black long-sleeved shirt. She saw him from the corner of her eye, but she refused to acknowledge him. He strode directly to the chair that held his coat, gloves, and mask.

"Catherine?" she heard him softly call out.

She looked over and saw Apollo. His eyes were kind, but everything else was intimidating. Especially the large machine gun that was slung over his shoulder. He was ready to kill or be killed. He held out his arms, clearly expecting for her to stand and give him an affectionate goodbye.

"You'll be back soon, right?"

That made him sigh and drop his hands.

"Yeah," he replied tersely. "I'll be back soon. Is something wrong? Why're you acting like this?"

"Acting like what?" she said nonchalantly.

"Like you're mad at me." Before she knew it, he was standing in front of the television, blocking her view. Not that she cared about whatever was on. She only wanted to stare at something that wasn't him. His eyes were narrowed within the only two holes in the mask.

She stood and walked toward the bedroom, purposefully cocking an eyebrow as she went to cross him. He grabbed her arm to stop her. She pulled away and he let her.

"It's nothing," she shrugged. "I'm just nervous about you going, is all."

He nodded and looked down.

"See you when you get back, then?" she softly asked.

"Yeah," he said in a disappointed voice. He took a step toward her and her heart sped up.

Hold me, she begged silently. She was sure it could be seen within her eyes.

But he hesitated, then took strides toward the window. He looked over his shoulder, before he exited, but she turned away. She walked to the bedroom, although there was plenty of daylight left. Once inside, she closed the door and the blinds of the one window.

Catherine laid down and forced herself to take deep breaths.

Shit...please, Nick...please come home. Don't die without knowing that I love you, too...

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!