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Reaper in the Rain: An Animated E-Book

Kurt Stilwell

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Abstract

Reaper in the Rain is a short story approaching Novella length in the young adult fantasy genre. The story follows two protagonists, Rebecca Reed, a freshman college student, and Eric Manning, a teenage boy who harnesses the powers of the Grim Reaper to destroy the Temuti mafia and avenge his mother's death. This thesis explores the melding of genre; the fantasy of the Grim Reaper, the realistic grounding of Chicago, and the visual novel with the addition of animations.

Reaper in the Rain: an Animated eBook

Reaper in the Rain is the beginning of a novella/novel that aims to change the electronic book industry with the incorporation of short animated clips that tie in with scenes within the story. With our society constantly making technological advancements, most aspects of our lives are affected by and adapt to these changes, including the rate of writing today. With the introduction of eBooks such as Kindle and iBook, the accessibility of the Internet has presented various opportunities for both reader and author. One of these new opportunities is the ability to add other media into digital works. While many contemporary writers add pictures throughout their works, eBooks expand the possibilities of additional mediums, from interactive images, videos, .gif files, and so on. Throughout *Reaper in the Rain*, I plan to include .gif-animated files, drawn in the style of Japanese Manga, and use them to display the action scenes for the climax of the story. The goal of these images are to help the reader with understanding of how the fantasy Reaper powers are meant to appear, show how the action plays out, and provide an additional outlet for the reader to experience and enjoy the story.

Reaper in the Rain follows two protagonists. The hero, or more accurately anti-hero, Eric Manning, "The Reaper," is a fifteen-year-old boy who becomes a Grim Reaper in order to wipe out the Temuti mafia. The other protagonist, Rebecca Reed, is a college freshman at the University of Chicago and serves as the realistic grounding for the reader to witness the story of the supernatural Reaper unfold. The story begins with the prologue, where Eric Manning has tracked down Joe Drayden, the man who murdered his mother six months before. Drayden, who was stabbed in the leg with Reaper's ethereal sword, and desperately tries to get away with only one working leg. Eric, after forcing

Drayden to remember the night of the murder, finishes him off and continues to hunt down the remaining members of the gang. The first Chapter introduces Rebecca and Jess, her childhood best friend. The two are driving home from class and make plans to go out to a new nightclub that weekend. Rebecca returns home and the reader sees more into Rebecca's life; suburb, financially well off, and the daughter of the Chicago police commissioner. Before the nightclub there is a flashback to the night of Ms. Manning's murder. Eric comes home from school and gets in a fight over an insult to his mother. His mother, a prostitute, goes out for work and is jumped on her way home. Eric tries to intervene, but his mother is shot as she struggles for freedom. Left with nothing, Eric encounters the Grim Reaper, and agrees to become a Reaper himself. Rebecca and Jess successfully make it to the Scorpio nightclub and meet two men, John and Michael, who show the girls a fun night and Rebecca lets herself have fun. Jess becomes dangerously drunk, Rebecca and Michael help the intoxicated girl into a cab to go home. Back home, the girls are locked out, and are jumped by Michael and John, members of Temuti. Jess, too drunk to realize the situation, dances away only to have Michael kill her by accident. Eric, the "Reaper" appears and dispatches the two thugs before Rebecca, in a state of grief and disbelief. Before departing, Eric creates a bridge to the afterlife, allowing the two gang members and Jess to pass on.

As a work of fiction, *Reaper in the Rain* primarily focuses on the theme of grief and loss. Both characters go through a similar experience; a loved one dies before their eyes, and they personally witness their souls passing onto the next life. While they share this tragedy, they both cope with the situation in exceptionally different ways. Beyond this expert within the thesis, Rebecca is able to move on from the loss of her friend. She

still feels sorrow, as anyone would, but is able to return to her everyday life. Rebecca has a strong support system, a loving family who takes care of her in her time of need. Eric, however, lost his only family and support system. Without anything left for him, he agrees to become a Reaper alongside Death to help souls pass on. He learns how to control his powers, and decides to become a vigilante in order to get revenge on the gang that murdered his mother. Even after catching Drayden, his mother's killer, he refuses to find closure and continues down his dark path of vengeance. Past this thesis, Rebecca tries to stop Eric from taking on the Temuti. The two clash, Eric unable to accept that Rebecca was able to overcome her grief. As the story progresses, Eric is presented with doubt, and decisions between helping himself or voluntarily choosing to hold onto his hatred. Rebecca represents the idea of love can get someone to overcome even the worst of tragedies, while Eric is proof of what happens with the absence of love.

Social class also comes into play with these two characters. Rebecca is in a far better position than Eric; she has a home, parents, financially stable, and a support system. Eric suffers in this story because of his social standing. He and his mother lived in a poor district of Chicago, who could not even afford the phone bill for a landline to call for help. Eric grew up hateful and resentful of his situation, getting in fights in school and keeping to himself. Eric had to face many harsh realities at such a young age, including his mother becoming a prostitute just to make ends meet. Eric shut himself off from others, so when he did lose his only foundation of support he became empty inside. If Eric had grown up in a sound environment, his ability to cope with his tragic loss, while still difficult at such a young age would have been more manageable. But because of the way he grew and matured, he only saw the worst of life and became cynical, which

lead him to the path of revenge over closure. Beyond this thesis, as Rebecca tries to tame Eric to stop his plan for violence and death, it becomes a battle between two social classes. In this case, Rebecca, the class with power, is the one trying to help the lower class, but there is only so much the middle class can do on its own.

As a work of Genre fiction, *Reaper in the Rain* is geared towards young adult but closer to the mature spectrum. This story is aimed to adults around 17-22 years old, late high school or college, due it's graphic nature near the end of the story. *Reaper* is also primarily a work of fantasy, with Eric having supernatural powers that allow him to stop bullets with his cloak, make ethereal weapons that simply kill on contact, and is able to create bridges to the next life for spirits of the departed to pass on. However, unlike fantasy that typically takes place in a world that is separate from our own, *Reaper in the Rain* is set in the real life city of Chicago, giving the reader a realistic grounding in this otherwise mythical premise. Urban fantasy is a growing sub-genre in it's own right. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is arguably within this category, as a fair portion of the story is set in real places such as London. The *Percy Jackson* series is also a prominent example of urban fantasy in which the greek gods still exist and have moved mount olympus to the Empire State Building. A factor that has lead this sub-genre to success is it's connection to the real world that the reader lives in. By setting *Reaper in the Rain* in Chicago, there becomes an additional sense of relatability between the reader and the characters. In addition, there is a subtle air of tension in the realistic setting. Within the realm of disbelief, the reader can see the events of the story unfold to real people in this real world. Finally, the advantage of urban fantasy is that it saves the author and the reader time in terms of the world-building process. While world-building is a fun aspect

of the fantasy genre, there must be pages dedicated to setting descriptions in order to place the reader inside the world of the story. Many fantasy stories do so with maps of their fictional lands to assist the reader, such as *Eragon* and *The Lord of the Rings*. By setting the story in Chicago, once the setting is authenticated, the reader can dive into the story as the city comes to mind easily enough. Even without living in Chicago, most readers can picture a city easy enough, allowing them to enter the fictional dream easier with this setting.

Other works have had a deal of influence in the creation of this project. One of the primary works that have demonstrated the potential of eBooks is Boston College's digital edition of James Joyce's famous collection of short stories, *Digital Dubliners*. An eBook designed by students for students, *Digital Dubliners* includes supplemental material in order to assist students in understanding the complex works of Joyce. These materials included videos by students and Joycean experts, images from 1900's Dublin, interactive images, articles, in book note taking and a glossary. The visual medias are particularly helpful for students who work better with either auditory or visual learning styles. This digital book challenges what defines an eBook in today's market. The possibility of adding different media to go along with the text and storytelling is what initially inspired this piece. Within *Reaper in the Rain*, the animations are placed primarily in the climax of this section of the story. The concept of Reaper's powers can be difficult to grasp and imagine. His cloak is made of shadows, and his weapons are made from the same material. The fluidity of the "death essence" might be difficult for the reader to imagine, so by including a moving image displaying the intended appearance of Eric's Reaper cloak will assist the reader in imagining the scene as they read it. These animations will

also provide readers who prefer a visual medium to enjoy the story further. Digital literature has the potential to provide readers a best of both worlds experience.

For the art style, the animations have an eastern influence from Japanese manga and anime. Manga is Japan's equivalent to the United State's comic book or graphic novel industry. Anime, short for animation and associated with animation from Japan specifically, practically goes hand in hand with manga, most manga eventually gets an animated adaptation. Manga and anime have a distinct and dynamic art style that has grown a strong fan following in Japan, the United States, and other areas of the world. *Reaper in the Rain* also shares similar plot elements that are often found in anime; a young boy protagonist with the supernatural powers fighting his way out. Anime as it's own genre is known to often be action heavy. By having the animations for *Reaper* drawn in this art style, readers who recognize this style will be drawn into the action on a deeper scale due to that association.

The concept of merging art and literature isn't in itself a revolutionary concept. The final major influence for *Reaper in the Rain* is another Japanese mode of storytelling, the light novel. Light novels are similar to Japanese manga books. They come out in multiple volumes, and often have their own manga or anime adaptation. Unlike manga, which operates as a graphic novel, light novels are written as a traditional novel would be, with the exception of full-page pictures scattered throughout the volume. The images are visual presentations of an event that occurred in the scene that corresponds to it. *Reaper in the Rain* takes this concept with its animation and takes it to the next level. Where in a light novel there is one drawn picture, *Reaper in the Rain* presents the reader

with a full display of action. Because of strides with technological advancements, these separate mediums are able to come together within one volume.

Reaper in the Rain is a digital innovation that intends to challenge the eBook industry. As it is a digital work, it becomes far more accessible to potential readers than just a print copy. Many eBook readers tend to experiment with different stories on the Kindle or iBook store, as it can be downloaded right to their device with the simple push of a button or tap of a screen. The art style especially will be a draw in for many readers. Fans of anime and manga are at heart fans of fiction, and the fans between today's young adult fiction and anime tend to overlap. Those who recognize the style will be more tempted to give the book download a try, while the cover won't necessarily turn other fans away. Readers who give this book a try will be pleasantly surprised with the integration of the animation, especially if they originally picked up the story because of the anime styled cover. This novella has the potential to have an impact within the young adult/fantasy genre. Reaper fiction is a developing sub-genre, a trend very similar to the recent surge in vampire fiction. Many works of fiction are incorporating death as a figure within their stories, or creating grim reapers of their own. *Reaper in the Rain*, with its dynamic multimedia delivery and a growing market, has the potential to stand out as a definitive work for both eBooks and fantasy to follow into the future.

Reaper in the Rain



By Kurt Stilwell

Art By “Retrosleep” Tom Palumbo

Prologue

The rain fell from the black night sky against the streets of Chicago. Raindrops ripple in the puddles along with the steps of the man hobbling away for his life. The alley was dimly lit and barren, and had an orange glow. Joe Drayden hopped his way down the back street, using the brick wall for support. His right leg no longer responded to his will after being stabbed. There was no blood, or pain, but his leg was limp. It was just dead weight.

“What the hell was that?” the man grunted as he struggled down the alleyway. His hand shook against the rough brick as he moved forward. His chest was tight and his lungs hurt as he panted for breath. Drayden couldn’t believe what he just witnessed; a single guy wiped out his entire crew, a kid no less. The child wasn’t normal. He was a demon.

“I finally found you,” said the boy lurking behind him.

The man turned around to see his attacker once again. Without the support of his leg he fell back and landed in the rainwater under him, the icy cold spread through his good leg. A white boy, who was no older than fifteen, stood under the street light, surrounded by a cloak of shadows. Under the dim orange light, Joe could see the shadows flicker like fire around his sleeves and collar. In his hand, the boy held the sword that had slashed his leg. A spectral sword, made from the same substance that formed his cloak, but unlike the free flowing wisps of the cloak, the substance was condensed and refined into a solid form. Within the blade, Joe could see shadows stir, like a river waiting to be unleashed in fury.

Sneakers met the puddles with a splash as the cloaked boy advanced towards him. Unable to take his eyes off the kid, Joe crawled backwards until his back was against the wall. He was cornered like an animal. The boy stopped in front of him.

“Do you remember me?” the boy asked. The rain patted against the ground and metal fire escapes. Adrenaline made Joe’s blood pump faster; he could feel his pulse beat from his bare neck. The boy raised his voice. “I said, do you remember me?”

“How the hell should I know you?” Drayden said.

“Don’t give me that crap!” The boy yelled. The shadowed wisps flared around him as his anger spiked. He swung his sword through the lamppost, the blade passed through the pole seamlessly. Where the metal made contact, the metal began to rust and corrode. Within seconds, the rust chipped away at the pole and it crashed against the pavement. The lamp shattered on impact, sparks jumped and screeched, and left the two standing in the dark back corner of the alley way. With only the light from distant street, Joe could only see the outline of the shadow-clad boy. His outline, and his anger fueled eyes.

“You’re going to say you don’t remember what you did to me? What you did to my mother?” The boy took a step towards Drayden and squatted down, to look him in the eye. “Remember.”

The boy’s eyes were a piercing blue. His stare was intense and made the man clench his teeth in fear. Had I met this kid before? The man thought. As he stared at the black haired youth, he remembered a failed abduction six months ago. It was on a side street, on another rainy night. He was trying to kidnap a woman walking home late at night. It was supposed to be a simple grab and toss in the van. But she put up more of a fight than he thought she would. She

screamed, and he had the gun in his hand. Joe remembered the gunshot and screams echo in the streets as a teenage boy watched his mother die.

“You’re that boy,” Drayden said. “Your mother...”

“I finally found you, you son of a bitch.”

“No, please,” Drayden shouted. “Please, I didn’t mean to kill her, it was an accident!

What the hell do you want? I’ll do anything!”

“I want you dead.”

“Do you realize who I am? I’m a big player in Chicago’s underworld. If you kill me, the Temuti will hunt you down,” the man’s voice sounded more desperate than threatening.

“I’m counting on it.”

“No!” Drayden turned on his belly, and crawled to the door near him, his only way out.

“Someone help me!” The boy stood up and followed. The sword in his hand dissolved into shadow gas and changed form, extending towards the ground as a black scythe. Drayden stopped short as the scythe appeared in front of him. He could see the dark energy swirling in the black blade. The man turned to look at his killer one last time, tears slid down his face. “Please,” he whispered.

“Wander forever.” The young Reaper pulled the scythe back. The blade passed through his neck like a ghost would pass through a wall. His neck remained intact, but the body fell to the ground with a splash. From Drayden’s corpse, the shadowy Death Essence rose from the body and was drawn into the young reaper’s cloak. The scythe evaporated, rising towards the night sky.

The Reaper stared at the motionless Drayden. His fist clenched underneath his sleeves. This is only the beginning, he thought. I won't stop until they're all wiped out.

The Reaper dug his hands into Drayden's pockets and removed his cell phone. He opened the flip phone to make sure that it was unlocked. He snapped the phone shut, locking it to protect his next lead from the night rain. The Reaper reached behind his neck and pulled at his cloak, formed a hood from the shadows and pulled it over his head. Once covered, his cloak became transparent, making him completely invisible. He took one last look at his kill.

Rest in peace, Mom, he thought. He walked away from his mother's killer, and wandered alone down the back streets of Chicago.

Chapter One

The sun shone through the gray sky for the first time in a week, the rays broke through the clouds, raining yellow sunshine onto Rebecca Reed's Corolla as she drove home through Chicago's downtown traffic. She could feel the sun's warmth against her face as the rays penetrated her windshield. Wind brushed against her bright brown hair through the open window whenever the small sedan made progress down the busy street. Rebecca didn't mind the long ride. She loved to look up at the massive skyscrapers, standing tall and proud, piercing the heavens with their incredible height. Rebecca hoped that one day, she would be able to work in one of those offices. Her best bet would be in finance, there was always a demand and she didn't really care what she did for work. She just wanted to be near a window, to be able to look out and see Chicago like the birds did.

"God, that old man takes forever to end his class," her friend Jess said.

The other reason she didn't mind driving through downtown was to bring Jess home. Jess has been Rebecca's best friend since they started school together, and the two of them were in their first year at the University of Chicago. The two had always been practically inseparable, though sometimes, just sometimes, Rebecca wished that wasn't the case. "You never were one to sit still for long," Rebecca said.

"Yea but come on. That class is *so* boring. He's so dull that it's a wonder anyone stays awake for it."

"It's accounting, what did you expect?"

“Well I figured I’d rather take a class with my best friend than not,” Jess said, followed by a sigh. “But you don’t even talk to me in class. When did you get so boring?”

“I’m not paying sixty grand to gossip in class.” Jess was right though, in a sense. She was only in her second semester of college, but it seemed that all she ever did was read and study. She slowed the car down for a red light and looked over at Jess, as she brushed her wavy blonde hair out from her face. She had truly taken on the life of a college girl, with full makeup and tight low-cut jeans. It was true that they hung out at school, but as they entered college, they began to spend their spare time differently. While Rebecca did homework, Jess was out partying every weekend. When they hung out at either of their homes, Rebecca would always talk about school, her plans for her degree and future, or something along the lines that was off Jess’s radar. Even the fairly often times that Jess convinced her to go out with her, Rebecca’s mind would always turn to the assignments that she had to do. She never really enjoyed herself, no matter how much she drank.

The beeping horn from behind brought her thoughts back to the road. The light had turned green. Stretching her foot, she eased onto the gas. The engine revved and propelled the car onward.

“So Bec, got any plans for the weekend?” Jess asked. Rebecca already knew what Jess was getting at. Jess would have her next weekend planned before Monday classes came around. Whether at a small apartment or a frat house, there was always a party to crash and an excuse to get wasted. Rebecca hesitated to answer, giving her attention to the road and cars ahead of her. The wheel vibrated from the engine under her fingers as she gripped the wheel. She had a

twelve-page paper due on Monday, and she really didn't want go out, but how could she say no to Jess? "Well?" Jess continued to pressure her, not giving her time to think of a stronger excuse.

"Well, the thing is I got this twelve-page paper to write, and I haven't even started it."

"Oh, come on," Jess said, the tone of her voice had a hint of irritation. "You always do this. It's always work with you. 'I have to do draft this paper' or 'edit this assignment,' or whatever. Do you not want to hang out with me? Is that it?"

"No of course not. It's just that--"

"Don't give me the 'too much work' crap then. You're in college. Don't you want some fun memories to go with that degree you're so hung up about? You know you'll regret it when you look back on your college years and only see books and papers."

"Yea you're right." After all, Jess was always right, at least when it came to fun. "So, where's the party this time? Red House?"

"Oh no, not another dull house party. This weekend we're going clubbing."

"A club?" Rebecca asked. Startled, she almost missed Jess's street, causing the car to jerk as she made the sudden turn.

"Yea, this new club just started up, so you know the place will be popping."

"Ok, but how do you expect to get in?"

"Please, the IDs were so easy to get, they look so legit."

"Wait you already got them?"

“Check them out.” As Rebecca pulled over into the empty parking spot, Jess pulled out two cards from her phone case and handed one to Rebecca, who examined the small red and white card in her hand. She was amazed at the amount of detail put into the plastic card. Illinois was in the top left corner in the correct bold font, with the white silhouette of the state carving through the top red banner and her picture below. The picture on her school ID card was used for the fake card, how Jess got that picture Rebecca did not want to ask. They even had the holographic lines across the surface. “With these, we can get in anywhere we want. Plus, any new club wants as many girls as they can get, so we should be able to walk right in. You are in, right?”

Rebecca slid the card into her jean pocket, “Yea, I’m in. After all it could be fun.”

“It *will* be fun.” Jess said with a smile, showing off her perfect white teeth. She opened the car and her heels clicked onto the sidewalk. She spun around and faced Rebecca. “Come back tomorrow at six so we can get ready. It’ll be the best night you’ve had all year!” With a wink she shut the door, and her heels clicked up the stairs to her brick apartment building.

Rebecca sighed as she pulled back onto the road. She’d have to stay up late tonight to get her paper done, otherwise she wouldn’t be able to get it off her mind tomorrow. That wasn’t a big deal; she’d done it plenty of times. Even with the thought of a full night of work, Rebecca couldn’t help but smile, heart beating a bit faster with the excitement growing inside of her.

The breaks squealed as Rebecca pulled her Corolla into its usual spot by the garage door. She took a moment to stretch as soon as she was free of the car, her arms and legs ached after being idle for so long. She stood there for a minute, admiring the purple lilacs her mother had just planted by the side door. Their fresh aroma reached her even though she stood tall above them. Lilacs were her favorite. Rebecca strolled around to the small front yard to see more of her mothers' handiwork. Along the fence, lilies hung in long rectangular planters, the violet flowers bright in contrast of the black metal. The grass was always well taken care of. Rebecca could tell that it was just mowed from the strong grass smell lingering in the air. To either side of the red front door, more lilacs hung proud. Rebecca gave a relaxing sigh, as she looked up at the small two-story home. She had lived in the northern side of Chicago her entire life, and her house always seemed to be an escape from the dirty streets and honking cars with its flowers and wind chimes that played along side with the occasional breeze. The metal gate rang as she opened and shut it. The heels of her boots clicked against stone walkway as she made her way to the front door.

"I'm home," Rebecca said after locking the front door.

"Perfect, just in time for dinner," her mom replied from the kitchen. Rebecca pulled her boots off with her feet and passed the stairs as she made her way down the hall to the kitchen. Her mom was standing in front of the stove, auburn hair tied up in a bun, pulling out the lasagna she had just finished. Her mother was an older woman, in her late fifties, and wrinkles were already spreading over her face. However, her smile was always young, retaining the spirit of youth the rest of her body was beginning to lose. "You used the front door coming in?" Her mom asked.

“Yea, just wanted to admire your hard work,” Rebecca said.

“Please, I’m not even done. I still have much more to do out there.”

“I can’t wait to see it.” Her mom cut her a piece and put the plate in front of Rebecca. Steam rose from the red and yellow square, the delicious smell of cheese and marinara rising with it. “Hey, where’s Sammy? It’s going to get cold.”

“Sam’s out with some friends, she should be back soon though.”

“She seems to be out more than me these days.”

“Guess she’s following her big sisters footsteps. It feels like the house is always empty these days, I thought I had four more years before the nest was empty.”

“I can’t imagine you sitting around at home all day. Hey, have you ever considered going back to work?”

“Never. I do admit it’s kind of dull playing housewife all day, but I know I wouldn’t jump back into this city’s politics for anything. Being a councilwoman isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. It did however let me snag the would-be Commissioner before anyone else though.”

“You know when Dad will be home tonight?”

“Don’t know. He’s always late these days.” Rebecca knew the real reason she retired. Since her father was appointed commissioner of the Chicago PD, neither of them were around often for her or Sammy when they were younger. It was around when Sammy started getting in trouble in school that Mom realized she was needed more as a mother than politician.

Twenty minutes go by as the two of them engage in small talk, mostly over how classes are going. “So, you and Jess have any plans this weekend?” Mom asked.

“Always.” Rebecca said. “I’m heading over to her place tomorrow to get some homework done.”

“That so? Well then, just make sure not to *study* too hard now ok?” she laughed as she brought their dirty bowls to the sink, the running water cleaned what little Rebecca left uneaten. Nothing got past her Mom; she always encouraged Rebecca to have fun in college. As laid back as she was, Rebecca still didn’t want to tell her about the club, just to be safe.

“Thanks for dinner mom, it was great. I’ll be up in my room.” On her way back down the hall, the front door opened. Her sister, dressed in gothic black and hair crimson red, walked inside. “Hey, Sammy.”

“How long are you going to call me that? I’m in high school now.” Sam said.

“I’m sorry, *Sam*,” Rebecca said sarcastically, before she ruffled her sisters dyed red hair. “Dinner’s ready, make sure you thank mom.” Rebecca heard a grunt from Sammy before she made it to the top of the stairs and turned towards her room. She gently closed the door as she entered, she could feel the soft white carpet through her socks. The yellow walls had pictures scattered over them, photos from her life, most of which were with Jess. She walked up to her desk and pulled out chair. She sunk into the smooth leather chair and wheeled the chair back into place, the wheels returning to their respective indents in the carpet. She took out her notebooks and laptop and opened a new word document, and got to work on her English essay. The clicking of the keyboard filled the room.

An hour passed as the words dashed across the screen, the room darkened as the sun set under the window. Rebecca reached over and turned her desk light. As light returned to her bedroom, she glanced at the frame next to the lamp. The picture was of her and Jess in middle school, running through the water at the beach. She held up the plastic frame, losing her train of thought for her paper. So much had changed since then, so much between her and Jess. As they entered high school, Jess became obsessed with partying and drinking, while Rebecca had remained wary of drinking. Even when she went out she always restrained herself. She always worried about what would happen if she drank too much, and that worry would always show itself by chastising Jess for it. She didn't like to drink, but she loved going out with Jess. Her happy-go-lucky attitude never changed, and was always able to spread through Rebecca whenever she was around.

Maybe I'm the one who needs to grow up, Rebecca thought, stop thinking about all the possibilities and just live in the moment.

Perhaps this weekend would be different, she might be able to shrug off the stress that weighed her down from night after night of schoolwork. Jess was always right when it came to having a good time, maybe this really will be one of the best nights she'll ever have.

Chapter Two

Six months before Joe Drayden's death, Eric Manning walked up the grimy stairs of his apartment building complex, each step echoing in the lonely stairwell. The fourteen year old was returning from school. His blue sweatshirt and jeans were covered with dirt. The black eye from his earlier fight was mostly covered by his shaggy shadowy bangs. On the third floor, Eric opened the thick metal door and made his way to the end of the hallway. The green walls were scattered with paint chips and old stains. He stopped in front of door 301. The rusty iron numbers matched the doorknob and keyhole. Metal clanged as Eric struggled with opening the door, which he often did, and jimmied the lock to finally get it open. The door hinges groaned and he stepped into the small apartment. It was a one-bedroom apartment, the kitchen to the right hand side of the door comprised of a small oven, fridge, and a single cabinet. Next to the kitchen was the door leading to the single bedroom. The tiny bathroom with broken floor tiles was directly across from the bedroom door. Dull light came from the ceiling fan that wobbled as it spun, as well as from the screen less window that led to the fire escape. The rest of the apartment contained the old linen couch that Eric slept on, and a wooden kitchen table, where his mother was reading a hand-me-down red covered book.

"I'm home." Eric said.

"Hey there," she replied. She bent the corner of the page she was on and let the cover shut itself with a soft thud. Her long black hair, contrasting with her pale white skin, was tied back to keep it from obstructing her reading. She was fairly young, just turning thirty-two a few weeks prior. Her smile quickly faded, her eyebrows closed in on her sapphire eyes as she stared at the bruise over his right eye. "You got into another fight, didn't you?"

“He had it coming.”

“Eric,” his mother’s gaze softened into a saddened expression, “you’re going to high school next year, you can’t keep getting into these fights. What happened this time?”

“He called me the son of a whore.” Eric couldn’t maintain eye contact with his mother as her own eyes dropped down in shame.

“Eric,” she said. The loose window shook in its frame from the wind. Heavy footsteps pounded against the ceiling from the room above. His mother fiddled with her fingers, unsure what to say.

“It’s ok.” Eric cut her off. “I get it. We need the money. You don’t have to say anything else. Just,” fingernails jabbed into the palms of Eric’s clenched fist. “Just forget it.”

Eric, fixated on the kitchen tiles, missed his mother’s gentle smile. “You’ve really grown up too soon,” she said. Her face became stern again. “But no more fights you hear me? That’s the last one.”

“If it helps, I gave the kid a nosebleed.”

The window rattled again. His mother chuckled, then the two of them burst out laughing. Eric laughed until the sore bruises on his chest made him stop. He raised his head, his mother continued to laugh. Out of everything about his mother, Eric admired her laugh the most; short and gentle bursts that were full of life. They did not have much, no TV or microwave, and had to watch how much water they used each month. His mother did everything she could to support them. She used to waitress during the day. When the restaurant failed, she tried to become a nanny. After losing job after job she eventually found herself working nights on the street, finally

making enough for rent again. Through it all, her spirit never wavered. Maybe she was putting on a face for him, but either way Eric couldn't help but follow suit with a smile of his own.

Raising his head, Eric's attention turned to the red book on the table, the black spine reading *Eldest* in a golden font.

"You got the next book?" Eric asked.

"Oh, yeah. Mrs. Robinson gave it to me. She said her son is done with the whole series and was looking to get rid of 'em." She said.

"Why would he get rid of them? No one seems to appreciate a fun read anymore."

"It's our gain though, right?"

"True. So you finished Eragon? How'd you like it?"

The two dove into an eccentric conversation over the final battle under Farthen Dur. The flying dragon, the fire, the dwarves, the swordplay, and the magic; they practically went over the entire book. Whenever they could get their hands on a book, they would both read it through to talk about it. They would debate the best scenes, or how they believed it should have ended. It was times like that that Eric smiled the most. Moments like those were enough for him.

"Alright, I gotta get dinner started." She said. "How about you get started with *Eldest* while I get dinner ready?"

Eric was lying on the couch, his neck sore from bending forward to read the open book resting on his sweatshirt. The taste of Kraft Mac and Cheese still hovered on his tongue, the dirty bowl on the floor next to him. He turned the crisp page to begin the third chapter when the door to his mother's bedroom creaked open. Heels clicked against the hardwood floor as she stepped into the room. Her ivory hair was wavy and hung free behind her. Purple covered her eyelids. She donned her old tan overcoat to cover up her real outfit.

“Don't wait up for me.” She said.

“I know.” Eric said.

Heels clicked with each step she took. She grasped the old doorknob, which jangled as she opened the door. Turning back to her son, she said. “It won't be like this forever. We'll get out of here, you'll see.”

Eric didn't look up from his book. Picturing his mother's guilt ridden expression was enough. “I know. We will.”

“I love you.” She walked out and gently closed the door, the lock clicked and the steps of her heels faded away. Eric closed the book and set it onto the floor. His head fell back to rest on the armrest. The pale ceiling above him was scarred from water damage caused by the upstairs tenants years ago.

How much longer are we going to stay like this? He thought. Eric never had much, he was used to their standard of living. The only extravagant luxury was the hand-me-down books his mother scavenged. As long as there was a ceiling over his head, even if it was stained, it was

enough. He didn't care that he never had an Xbox, or cable, or even a cell phone. He was content with the life he had. However, he didn't bear the burden. His mother did.

Eric remembered the only time he had ever seen her cry. It was a few months earlier. Eric was up late lying in the same spot on the couch, unable to sleep. He was riled up from the fight he had gotten in that day when some punk had pushed him into a locker. Distracted by his thoughts of payback, Eric didn't hear the door open slowly and gently. It wasn't until her keys clanged against the floor that he turned and saw her. His mother, supposedly babysitting, was standing there in a thin black dress, the left string hung off her shoulder. A hickey was bright red on her neck, make up splotched around her eyes. She tried to speak, stuttering, unable to get out the first syllable of his name. She dropped to the floor on her knees, and rather than words she uttered only sobs as she cried aloud.

Since then, she wore that smile whenever she could. She had to be strong. Eric had tried to talk her out of it. She could find another job again. But whenever he brought it up, she only smiled wider and told him not to worry. Eric had given up talking her out of it, but he was resolved eliminating the need for her to sell herself.

As soon as I hit high school, I'll grab a job. Then we won't have to worry about the rent, or food, or using the water. Mom can sleep in her own bed for the whole night, not having to fuck some stranger for a hundred bucks.

Eric wondered if he would even go to high school next year. If he was old enough to get a simple job, he could help cover what his mom worked nights. He didn't mind the apartment, just what it cost to them. The light suddenly went out, a neighbor must have blown a fuse. The room

darkened, unable to keep reading, Eric stretched out on the couch, and tried to escape his thoughts in sleep.

†

Thunder roared in the Chicago sky directly above Eric's apartment loud enough to jolt him awake. He sat upright, as if waking from a nightmare. Just thunder, Eric thought. As his heart rate settled, he laid back down. He tried to go back to sleep, but the rustling wind kept pushing against the loose window, the wood rattled constantly against the frame. Eric swung his legs down to the floor and made his way to the window to shut it in place so he could sleep in peace. Another bang, a flash spread across the sky, illuminating the room. The rain bounced off the metal fire escape, which rang like a pot being played as a drum with a wooden spoon. He grabbed the top of the window, the chipped wood rough under his fingertips. Just as he was going to push down, he saw a lone woman run down the sidewalk toward his apartment. Under the flickering streetlamp, she hung her tan coat over her head to protect herself from the downpour. Eric smiled; glad to see she made it home safely. Neither of them expected the storm tonight. While he was up, he thought of making up some tea to warm her up. He turned to go light the stove when, under the heavy rain, he heard tires screech against the pavement.

Turning back, Eric saw a man jump out from the side of an old gray van. A gun was in his hand. The man grabbed his mother, putting the gun against her neck, and dragged her towards the car as she struggled against him. He pulled the window frame upward. The cold wind blew into the apartment through the opening. "Mom!" Eric screamed as loudly as he could through the open window, hoping to scare off the man or alert one of the neighbors to call the police. His mother stopped for a moment, looking up to him. The man, seemingly unaffected,

continued to pull her towards the van. Eric crawled through the open window onto the fire escape. The oncoming rain immediately soaked his sweatshirt. He descended down the stairs, his bare feet hitting the cold wet metal hard with each step. “Get away from her, you bastard!”

You can’t take her, Eric thought. You can’t take her. You can’t take her.

“You can’t take her!”

“Eric no!” His mother started to struggle again, more violently than before, flailing as the man tried to pick her up. She shook as much as she could to get away from him, to stop Eric from getting any closer. Eric got to the second floor landing, the last set before he had to detach the set of stairs to the ground. He vaulted over the guardrail, falling on top of the closed dumpster beneath. He rolled off the wet cover and tumbled into a puddle. Drenched, Eric shivered from the cold. Eric regained his footing, and sprinted towards the two.

“Quit it, bitch!” The man pushed his gun into the side of her neck.

“Eric, get away!” She yelled as she continued to struggle. The man tried to reaffirm his grip of the hysteric woman. She shook back and forth as hard as she could, almost knocked the gun out of her assailant’s hands. The man squeezed gun handle tight, and pulled the trigger. The gunshot was muffled slightly in the rain. Blood from her neck burst into the air. The man, taken aback, lets go of his mother, her body dropped to the ground. Eric stood still from shock. The gunshot rung in his ears as his mother lay in a red puddle, the rain made her blood jump in the air. He let out an agonized scream.

“Get in the fucking car!” yelled the driver. The thug jumped into the van. Eric fell to his knees by his mother’s side, only able to scream and look on as his mother’s killer got away. Her

murderer faced Eric as he closed the door. He was Italian, dark brown bangs slipped from underneath his black beanie. A mole was on the right side of his nose. From that angle, he could see on the side of his neck, *Temuti* tattooed in cursive just above his collarbone. That man's face was forever etched into Eric's mind. The door slid shut, tires spun against the street, sending water flying back towards the sky as the van sped away, leaving Eric in its wake.

Beneath him, blood spilled over the pavement, watered down from the rain. Eric's screams became a gasping sob. He looked into her lifeless eyes, hoping for them to blink back at him. Eric's body shivered from the cold, his throat tight as he sobbed. He longed for her smile, for her short spirited laugh to resonate in his ear and wake him from his slumber. That this could just a nightmare, he was still on the couch and she would be coming in any moment. But there was no dream, or even a nightmare. There was only blood, tears, and the rain flowing down the alleyway.

Do you wish for her to be saved?

Eric gasped as a voice rung in his head. From his mother's body, shadowed wisps began to emit from her skin, like steam after a shower. The shadows flew towards the street, his head jerked up to follow them. Beneath the streetlight where the killers once were was a shadow. Empty, like a void, he saw a figure of darkness standing there. Its edges had shadows that danced like fire. The only features that Eric could distinguish were a human skull, dull white and chipped, and a tall scythe held in a bone hand. It was Death.

The skeletal figure advanced towards him. Feet hidden under the shadow cloak, he seemed to glide in the air. Darkness covered the broken family as he blocked out the light from the streetlamp. Eric's chest ached as if the wind was knocked out of him, he hyperventilated as

the Grim Reaper approached them. Its other hand appeared from the cloak, both hands grasping the scythe and raising it upward.

“No, you can't.” Eric whispers. “No!”

The Grim Reaper slashed the air above him, leaving a white trail of light behind the blade. As if ripping through space itself, the light grew in diameter, forming a round glowing portal in the sky. The rain seemed to stop, as if everything hung still. The same white glow spread across his mother's body. Floating upward, the spirit of his mother levitated from her body. She was beautiful, gowned in a dress of pure white, her black hair flowing free just like she always loved to wear it. Straightening up, she looked down upon her son's face, tears free from rain streamed down his face. She smiled her warm smile, and for a moment he forgot about the cold, the violence, and the sorrow. In that moment, there was only her and her great smile. She nodded, as if to convey that she was ok. Water danced behind her eyes. Her mouth moved, her ghost unable to speak. But Eric knew what she was trying to say. *Don't worry about me.* Her eyes closed for the last time, as she was lifted up into the circular portal, disappearing into the glow. The light dimmed, before vanishing entirely. The rain fell unhindered.

Eric slumped over onto all fours, hands gripping the wet pavement, trying to hold on to anything stable. From his forearms to his hands he shivered. It was too much at once, Eric's vision blurred and he was light headed. Knuckles scraped against the concrete as he made a fist, determined to stay conscious.

“You said you would help her,” Eric breathed heavily, steadying his panic. “So why?”

Would you rather she remained here? The voice rang in his head again. It had no distinct sound, but the words just formed in Eric's mind.

“Of course!”

Even though she would suffer? She would be a spirit forced to wander, unable to interact with the world. The dead remain dead. Would you have her remain only to envy the living?

Eric looked back to his mother’s body. Raindrops splattered as they landed on her skin, the pool of blood seeping under her dress from below. “No. I don’t want her to suffer anymore.”

Do you want to help save others as your mother has been saved? No one should suffer alone.

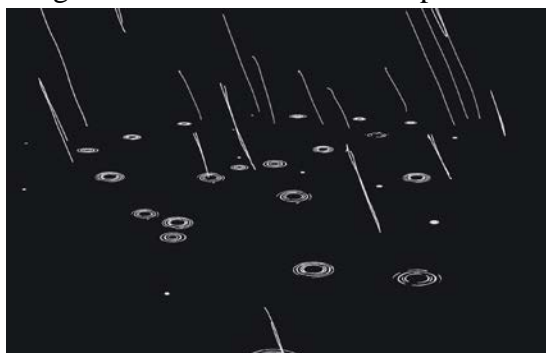
Eric’s breathing was steady, but his mind remained in a fog. He stared at the fabled Grim Reaper. Its hollow eye sockets were like black holes, without a face he was impossible to read. Its cloak danced in the night, the rain did not phase the shadows whatsoever. Death towered over him with scythe steady in hand, but Eric was not scared. Lightheaded, Eric did not know what to feel anymore.

Come with me and spare those from eternal suffering. Death raised its left hand, the bare bones somehow held together. Fingers outstretched, Death moved closer towards Eric.

What do I do? Eric thought. Eric had nothing left, no ambition. Everything he had wanted to work for was to get his mom out of her awful life, and that had come to pass all too soon.

Nothing kept him here. He did not care anymore. Bone fingers inched closer to his scalp. If this were all that was left for him, Eric would take it.

Eric closed his eyes, allowing Death to approach him, only aware of the cold rain that enveloped him.



Chapter Three

“I’m not too sure about this anymore,” Rebecca said.

“Oh come on, don’t wuss out on me now.” Jess replied.

The two girls were in line at the Scorpio nightclub, the line running down the block and turning the corner. Red movie theater rope keeps the line closer to the club, freeing sidewalk space for passersby. Jess and Rebecca were about ten people deep in the line, the fluorescent letters on the Scorpio club shine in bright pink above their heads. Rebecca wore a sleeveless pink top and a black skirt. Jess mirrored her except choosing white over pink. The cool April evening air gripped her bare shoulders and arms, she crossed her arms together to keep from shivering. She turned to the line behind her, the young crowd filed with skinny girls in skinnier black dresses, and men in loose button up shirts and occasional suit jacket. A lot of them were wearing shutter shades, and a few wore glow sticks around their necks, popping out like fireflies. Rebecca wondered if there was anyone else in that river of partiers that was new to the night scene, if any were as nervous as she was, and how many out in the crowd pregame. Those who did probably weren’t feeling the cold like she was. Jess bumped into her, signaling that the line was moving forward. Six of them entered, a pair of guys stood between the girls and the bouncer.

“C’mon man, we’re with them,” the man on the right said.

“No you’re not. Keep quiet or get out of line kid.”

The young man was ready to keep the argument going, but his friend grabbed onto his shoulder. “It’s not worth it, let’s just go find a bar,” he said. The two crawled under the red rope and vanished into the passing foot traffic.

“Next,” the bouncer said.

Now at the front of the line, Rebecca got a good look at the bouncer; tall, muscular, and had skin almost as dark as his black t-shirt. He was clean-shaven from his face to his scalp. Rebecca thought he looked like what you would see in the movies, and that made her all the more nervous. Will we get caught? Rebecca thought. She lowered her hands, rubbing her elbows with her fingertips in a nervous fit. Rebecca knew this wasn't a good idea; they weren't going to get past him. The cool air change, from the smell of it Rebecca knew it was about to rain.

“What's up with her?” The bouncer asked. The sudden question caused Rebecca to flinch. This is it, but at least I can go home now, Rebecca thought.

“Sorry,” Jess spoke up, smile bright as ever on the cloudy evening. “Truth be told, she just got out of a three- year relationship. She's just a little nervous going out again.”

“That so.”

Rebecca just nodded her head, looking down at the ground to avoid eye contact.

“Bec, it'll be a good time. You need to get back out there, meet some guys.” Jess put her arm around Rebecca, pulling her tight next to her. Her reassuring touch helped sooth her nerves and shivering arms. Jess always had that talent, to pass her confidence onto to others. “Now, you don't think just two girls will cause you any trouble, right?”

The bouncer stood still, looking the girls over. Unsure of what else to do, Rebecca looked up with an awkward wide smile. A raindrop broke apart on her shoulder. The bouncer tilted his head back to check the rain. “Looks like it's about to pour. Ok, just head in.”

“Thank you.” Jess said in an extra peppy tone, walking Rebecca in before either of them could change their minds.

“Alright, club’s full. Get soaked or get out,” the bouncer said to the waiting line.

Rebecca’s arms dropped to her side in relief, letting out her long held breath. “That was close, he didn’t even card us.”

“Shut it,” Jess whispered. The two walked down the low-lit hallway. Their heels clicked against the floor, but were drowned out from the booming stereo as they approached the double doors leading to the dance floor. The two girls pushed through the twin doors. Without the door to buffer the sound, the music ran through their ears, hitting them like an ocean wave. Dance-pop reverberated off the walls and from the base speakers, the female artist’s lyrics lost in the instrumental and the sea of drunken screams of joy. The room was dyed in shades of blue and violet from the lights above, crossing into each other to join the dancers on the dance floor. Strait ahead of them was the DJ standing on a raised platform, his head bobbed with the music as he made adjustments on the soundboard. The club was full of people; at least a hundred men and woman were packed intimately close, many pressing and grinding against each other as they danced without care. Stairs in the back lead up to a secluded second floor, only the smoke of hookah could be seen. Tables and booths ran along the walls except for the left hand wall, where the bar kept busy with the constant drink orders. The LED rail faded in and out between green and pink along the black surface. It was overwhelming to Rebecca, the pounding music and flashing lights made it hard for her to concentrate on anything, let alone Jess who was yelling to grab her attention.

“What?!” Rebecca yelled as best as she could over the speakers.

“I said, let’s grab a drink!” Jess yelled back. Jess pulled Rebecca by the arm, leading her through the crowd towards the illuminated bar. The girls squeezed between two guys to get to the bar tender. “Hey barkeep, two margaritas!”

“Make that four, on my tab.” One of the men they had just walked between spoke up behind them. Rebecca turned around to face them. The one who ordered their drinks was on their left; a young black man, wearing a red dress shirt, black tie, and confident smile. His hair was short and neatly trimmed. The other guy was white, blond with middle length hair, and a tieless white shirt. His blue eyes mixed with the blue hue of the lights above, and shined just as bright.

“Well, thank you boys.” Jess said as she leaned on the bar behind her.

“My pleasure,” said their drink benefactor. “Name’s John. Now for the drinks, my friend and I expect to have a dance with you ladies.”

“Oh you’ll get your dance, Jonny,” Jess said. “We just have to get loose first, don’t we Bec?”

Rebecca, shy and nervous, laughed in response, as she didn’t think she would be heard over the speaker anyway.

“Here you go.” The bartender placed their two drinks on the table, the ice rattled against the glass as he put them down.

Rebecca reached for her drink. Jess leaned in close to her to speak without raising her voice. “Hey, so you don’t mind if I take dark and handsome right?”

“I mean, I guess not.” Rebecca said.

“Don’t give me that, his friend’s a cutie too. Now let’s have some fun.” Jess, margarita in her right hand, John’s tie in her left, struts towards the dance floor. “C’mon Jonny, let’s see if you can keep up. Come join us you two, but not after you finish that drink!”

Jess and John danced by the edge of the crowd, sipping their glasses as they danced in rhythm with the music. Rebecca took a sip of her own drink. The salt and lime left a strong after taste in her mouth. The crystals on the rim of the glass glimmered in the blue and pink light. Rebecca took a moment to take in the scene before her. The air held a mixture of perfume and cologne. The crowd moved back and forth in their dance, moving in and out though the lights above. Smiles and wide eyes glistened like the salt on her margarita. Everyone here is having fun, Rebecca thought. She took a longer drink as the song came to an end.

“This is your first time out to someplace like this, isn’t it?” John’s friend asked. He had already finished half of his margarita as he waited for Rebecca.

“That obvious, huh?” Rebecca said.

“You don’t seem like the nightlife type to me.”

“I guess not.”

“Well, the way I see it, you made it out here tonight, so might as well make the most of it and live it up. After all, regrets are for the morning.”

He had a relaxed smile. He was in his element here. He was a player, but he also had a point. I’ve come this far, I might as well enjoy it, Rebecca thought.

“Michael,” He said as he raised his glass to her.

“Rebecca.” The two glasses clicked together as they made a toast to the evening before they tilted them back for a long drink. The lime liquor raced down her throat as she took a long swig. The music changed, replacing the lyrical pop with electrical dance, and seemed to send a charge throughout the air, as the crowd went wild and bounced as they danced away. Energy filled Rebecca as well, her legs fidgeted on their own. She wanted to dance.

“Shall we go?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, let’s!” Rebecca said, her confidence and excitement finally allowed her to raise her voice over the speaker.

“You heard your friend though, you gotta finish that drink first.”

Rebecca brought the drink to her lips, titling the glass up and her head back, finishing off the bitter drink in one final gulp. She left her glass on the bar, only ice and salt left behind. She grabbed Michael by the hand and made her way to the dance floor. Lightheaded and a little buzzed, Rebecca left her hesitation back with her glass, determined to have a fun night of her own.

Chapter Four

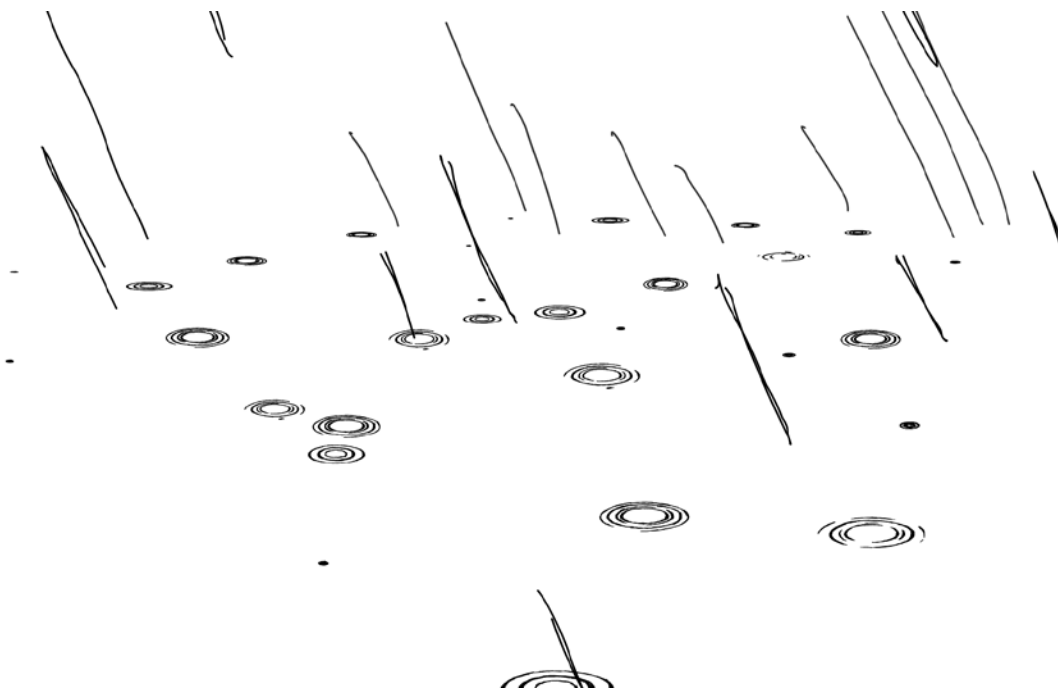
GIRLS ARE GOING TO HARISON AVE. MJ AND

D MAKE SURE THEY GET HOME SAFELY

Eric closed Drayden's flip phone, shutting it with a snap. The Temuti gang used pay as you go flip phones so they could dump phones if necessary, and they were harder to track. Lucky for Eric they also didn't have great security. He pushed the phone through his reaper cloak and into his jeans pocket. The young reaper walks down the alleyway, his sneakers splashed in the rain puddles.

He knew where they would strike next. He knew where to find his next target.

Chapter Five



The rain fell, black as the night sky that it fell from. The Chicago streets were dimly lit by streetlights, making the cloud-cloaked sky all the darker. A yellow taxi pulled over, the rolling tires splashed water onto the sidewalk as it pulled up in front of the Scorpio nightclub. Rebecca and Michael helped a wasted Jess to the cab.

“Hey, watch it! These shoes are new!” said Jess as she stumbled over and fell in a puddle.

“Jess, I’m holding your heels, remember?” Rebecca said.

“Oh, yeah,” said Jess.

Rebecca helped her intoxicated friend back onto her feet and led her into the back seat of the yellow cab. Rebecca followed her in and shut the door. The backseat gave off a mixture of sweat and lavender perfume. Her bare arms shivered from the wet cold, her pink sleeveless top

and black skirt were soaked and heavy from the rain, and her previously bright brunette waves became dark and straight. She turned to Jess, who was lying back, and close to sliding off onto the floor. Jess was no longer wearing a shirt, having taken it off at some point during the night, but she was too drunk to pay the cold any mind. Well, at least she kept her white bra on, Rebecca thought.

“I knew I shouldn’t have gone out tonight,” said Rebecca. “This is my favorite shirt, now I have to dry clean it.”

“Girl, you worry to much. You need to learn to relax, like me.”

“I’ll keep my shirt on, thank you.”

Michael knocked on the glass window. Rebecca rolled down the window just enough to hear what he wanted to say to try and keep the rain out.

“You sure you’ll be alright on your own?” Michael asked.

“Yeah, yeah, I can take care of her, no worries.”

“Ok, here’s my number, please text me when you get back safe.” Michael handed her an old business card, his number was scribbled on the back by a fading pen.

“Smooth.” Jess said, and giggled to herself.

“Where to, ladies?” the cab driver asked.

“Harrison Avenue,” Rebecca replied. The cab driver turned back to the wheel and drove off. Rebecca rested her temple against the cold window, the beads of rain zooming across,

occasionally highlighted when they passed a streetlight. The cool window felt good, she was still light headed from her second margarita.

I knew it was a bad idea, look where we are now. If I didn't go with her, who knows where she would of ended up, Rebecca thought.

Jess's parents were out of town for the weekend, so they were crashing there for the night and Rebecca's parents would be none the wiser. The breaks squeaked as the taxi came to a stop in front of the four-story brick building that was Jess's apartment. "Harrison Ave, that'll be twenty-six fifty," the cab driver said with an outstretched hand.

Rebecca paid the man and turned to Jess. "We're here, let's go." Jess had fallen asleep and was out cold. "Oh, come on. Wake up." Rebecca pulled her up and out of the cab. The rain had not lightened up and Rebecca shivered as the cold water showered over her. With another splash, the driver drove off as soon as the girls were out of the cab. Thanks for the help, Rebecca thought.

Jess woke up when she was re-introduced to the cold rain. "Hey, what the hell Bec. I'm up, I'm up." Jess said.

"For now at least. Anyway just give me the key and let's get out of this down pour."

"About that, I think I left my bag at the club."

"You what?" Rebecca would have screamed if she weren't conscious of the time.

"You're cute when you're mad." It seemed the rain didn't help sober Jess up much.

Rebecca clenched her teeth in anger. "I swear to God, Jess you better be kidding."

“Chill out, chill out. We’ll use the fire escape. The window isn’t locked, I use it to sneak out all the time.” Rebecca kept her teeth clenched as she followed Jess, who couldn’t walk in a straight line, much less a slippery ladder. She thought about leaving her here and go on ahead to open the door, but she didn’t want to leave Jess alone. The second floor wasn’t that bad, and it defiantly beat walking back to her place. Jess had stumbled into a trashcan on her way to the ally, the echo of the banging metal threatened to wake the neighbors.

“Hey watch where you’re going,” Rebecca said in a low voice.

“I’m fine no worries,” Jess yelled, as though she were still talking over the dance music from an hour before.

“Keep quiet, do you want everyone to wake up?” The two girls made their way further into the alley, the light of the streetlight seemed to dim as they went. The concrete ground was littered with the trash that Jess knocked over. Raindrops rippled across the surface of the tiny river that covered the alley floor as they made their way to the rear of Jess’s apartment building.

“Bec, we’re fine. The ladder’s right there, see?” Jess pointed at the brick wall two feet away from the ladder. “Girl, I take you out cuz you need to *relax*. You’re way too uptight.”

“I’m uptight because you’re always such a mess, and I’m always the one to pick you up when you-” Rebecca was cut off when she was grabbed from behind. A click next to her ear, there was a gun against her temple, keeping her quiet while the rain continued to pat against the sidewalk behind her. His wet shirt cold against her bare arms as he held her. The man reached into her pocket to pull out her cell phone, and threw it into the puddle, short circuiting her access to help. The man re-secured his grip around her torso, pinning her arm to her side.

“You babes look lost for this time of night,” said the man who held Rebecca. “Now, why don’t you chicks come with us quietly?” Rebecca recognized his voice.

“Hey, is that Jonny? I don’t remember him coming with us.” Jess was giggling and did not understand what was happening. There were steps in the puddles and a second laugh behind Jess.

“Jess, look out!” Rebecca was too late and Michael grabbed Jess’s right arm, holding it behind her back. The man behind Rebecca pushed his gun harder against her skull. She knew that if she made another sound, she was dead. Tears mixed with rain, she thought she was going to die.

Michael, his blonde hair dark and wet, replaced his gentle smile with one that was wide and wild like the Joker. He pulled a butterfly knife from his pocket and flipped it open. He whistled as he looked them over, paying extra attention to Jess. “We found a couple of hot ones tonight, huh J?” he said. The thug slipped his knife under her bra and cut it open. “That’s better.”

“Oh you’re a bad boy aren’t you?” Jess was still laughing, she thought that she was back at the club. “I don’t mind a bad boy.”

“You dick, keep her quiet.”

“Woohoo! It’s party time.” Jess started dancing and stumbling around, back in the party scene she loved and dancing to the music of the rain. Michael grunted as he struggled to keep her from moving. He brought the knife to Jess’s neck to keep quiet, but Jess continued to shake her head, and her neck slid right into the knife.

“Shit!” Michael jerked his hands back and let Jess fall. Blood spurted from her neck and splattered against the brick wall of her apartment. She fell into the puddle with a splash, like the raindrops from above.

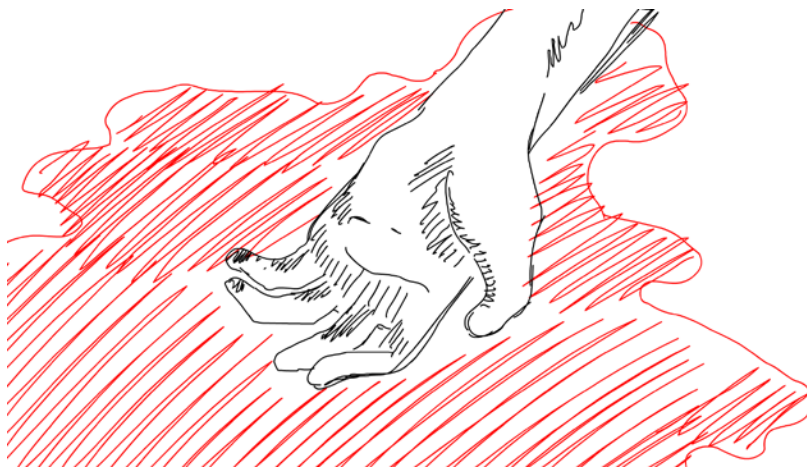
Rebecca wanted to scream but John covered her mouth and said, “If you wanna end up like her, keep screaming.” Her eyelids were stretched as she looked at her friend with wild eyes. Blood from her neck quickly spread across the ground, mixing with the puddle under her. Oh my God. This can’t be happening, she thought. Her friend was dead, and she just stood there and watched. She never did anything to stop Jess, and now she did nothing to help her.

Rebecca panicked, she didn’t know whether to run for it now or play it safe. They were not going to just let her go after what just happened, they would be willing to kill her if she resisted at all. Her eyes darted all over the alley, looking for a way out. The fire escape was pulled down, but even if she got out of his grip the other one was right in front of her.

“You fucking dumbass! Just help me with her. One’s better than none.”

Rebecca’s chest tightened in apprehension. She stared at Jess’s body, and she knew the imminent outcome of her situation. She was going to die. Even if she complied with them, they would dispose of her as soon as they had no use for her. The blood thick water ran into Rebecca’s open toe shoes. Michael took a step towards her, stepping in Jess’s blood, when darkness began to evaporate from the pool.

The black gas began to concentrate over the ripples of blood. The darkness then flew past them, towards the street. The thug turned around and swung Rebecca around with him, and before them stood a



boy under the flickering streetlight. Rain rang against the metal of the fire escape as the three watched the shadows gathered around the boy. It changed shape as the wisps came together to form a cloak around him, black as the night sky and his shaggy hair. The boy, who couldn't be older than fourteen, stood still. His blue eyes sharp as he stared at the three in the alleyway.

“What the hell?” Michael whispered. The boy stared at them, completely immobile. His eyes fixed on Michael. The blade in Michael's hand almost slipped out of his grip as his hand shook. John also released his guns pressure on Rebecca's head, getting ready to use it.

“Damn it!” Michael re-gripped the handle with a steady hand, and charged at the boy
“What the hell are you?”

The boy finally spoke, “I am the Reaper.”

Michael got into arms reach of the boy, his arm pulled back ready to deliver a quick and powerful stab. The Reaper took a step back, getting into a fighting stance. His eyes remained focused, ready for his enemies assault. Just as Michael was about to make his thrust, the darkness that came out of Jess's blood rushed out of Reaper's sleeve and changed shape again. The

Reaper thrust his arm towards Michael's chest. Michael stopped on the spot, a black spectral sword pierced through him, sticking out of Michael's back from a bloodless wound.

Michael's knife fell to the concrete, the metal rang as it hit the pavement, and then it stood still. The sword vanished into black wisps as the boy caught the thugs lifeless body. He held Michael for a moment, studying the tattoo of the word *Temuti* in cursive on the right side of his neck. The boy in black lowered him to the ground slowly, laying him on his back. The same black wisps that appeared from Jess's blood began to arise from Michael's body, merging into the Reaper's cloak as they were drawn into it. Rebecca stared at Michael. The man who just killed her friend was lying there. He wasn't bleeding like Jess, there didn't seem to be any wound at all. His shirt remained whole, showing no sign that a blade had just pierced him moments before. But he was dead, Rebecca was sure. Rebecca couldn't imagine how this was possible, but she had to believe. This was the only chance of getting out of here alive.

"Temuti." John stiffened when Reaper addressed him. "That is the name of your gang, right?"

"What do you want anyway?" John said in a shaken voice.

"You."

"Why? What the hell did I do to you?" John was getting desperate now, taking the gun away from Rebecca and pointed it towards the kid who was walking towards him.

"You gangs cause nothing but pain and suffering. I'm here to collect the toll of your sins."

“Screw you!” As he yelled, he fired five shots at the boy, the blast from the barrel echoed in the empty alley over the pounding of rain. Rebecca’s ears rang, the smell of gunpowder ran up her nose, and she shrieked in shock. Reaper was not fazed, the bullets flew towards his chest, but as soon as they got to his robe the metal rounds disintegrated on contact, the dust of their remains fell with the rain. The boy in black continued to stare John down, completely ignoring the gun as though it were a children’s toy.

“I will ask you but one question. What is more important to you, your gang or your life?” The boy continued his stride to his next target, eyes unwavering in his cold stare. She watched him get closer. The streetlight behind him flickered out for a long moment, making his pale skin and blue eyes jump out in contrast to the total black. For that moment, she forgot all about the man with the gun as she watched Death himself take another step forward.

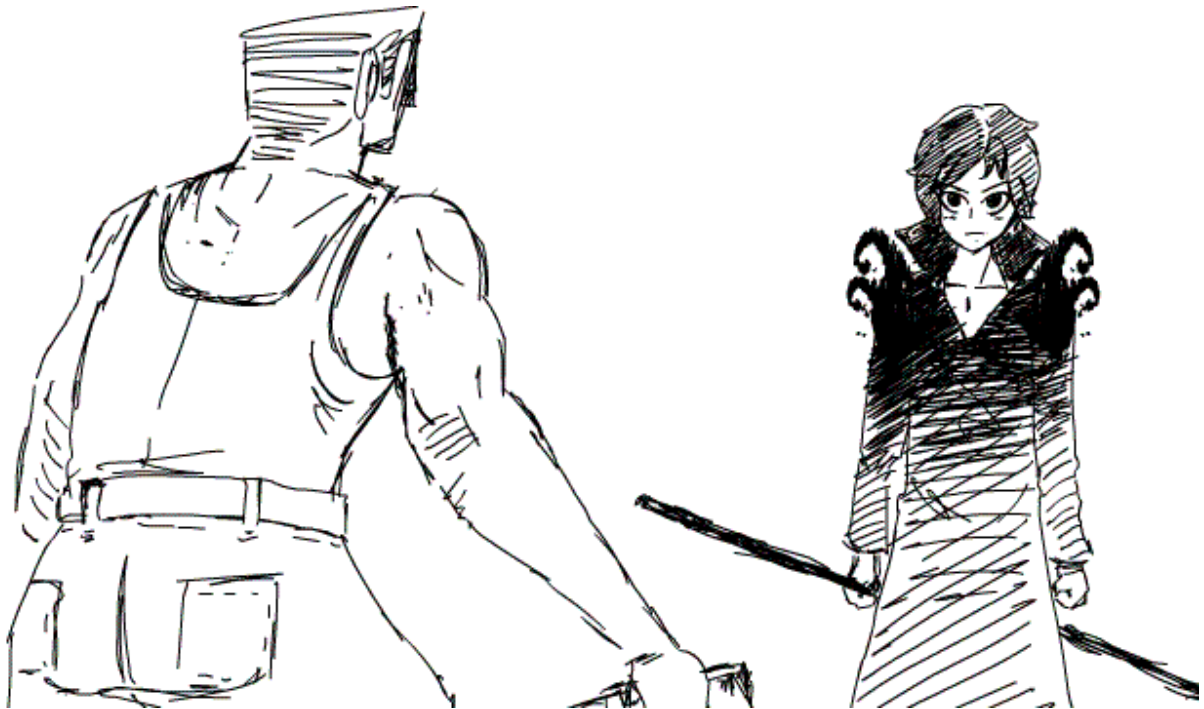
John almost turned tail and ran, but then he raised his gun once more against Rebecca’s temple. “I walk, or I’m putting a bullet in her!”

Reaper stopped his stride again, breaking eye contact for the first time and stared at the gun. Rebecca knew that this boy was her only way to get out of this alive. The fact that he stopped meant that he didn’t want to harm her, and she knew no other help was going to come. I’m not going to be his hostage, she thought.

Her right arm was free from John’s grip. She raised her arm out and struck his ribs with her elbow, which rang with pain at the sudden hard contact. John recoiled, and in his shock let go of Rebecca. This is my chance, she thought, and took off running as fast as she could towards the street. In her adrenaline rush, she did not notice the trashcan that Jess had knocked over. She stumbled over it and fell hard onto the concrete, scraping her arms against the rough surface.

“You bitch!” John raised the gun to her, but Reaper took the opportunity to create another spectral weapon. A black rod appeared and with it he jabbed it towards John’s skull. John had just enough time to dodge it, lining his gun back towards Reaper, pointing it right between his eyes, where no cloth covered his skin.

Behind John’s neck, the end of the rod began to change shape again. More wisps extended from the end, forming a blade. As John pulled the trigger, Reaper pulled his arm back. Newly formed scythe made contact with John’s neck. Like before, the blade made no cut but phased through it. The blade emerged on the other side, and John followed its path, falling face first into the wet ground.



Rebecca held her breath and waited as the splashing behind her came to a stop. She did it. She survived. But what would happen to me now? She thought. Slowly, she turned around to see the boy kneeled over Jess’s body. He lifted his hand, the scythe had dissolved like the sword before it, and using his two front fingers closed her eyes. “Poor girl,” he said. “Go in peace. The

streets are a little safer thanks to you.” He stood up, and raised his right arm straight up, palm facing the sky. Rebecca watched as the black cloak began to dissipate. The haze gathered above him, forming a spiraling cloud above him. By the time his cloak had fully disappeared, the vortex had picked up in speed, becoming a perfect circle. Light emerged from the center, creating a portal to the next world.

Rebecca could have stared at the bright portal forever. The sight of it brought a sense of serenity, her tense limbs finally relaxed from the stress just a few minutes before. However, her gaze soon fell over Jess’s body, as the spirit image of Jess floated above it, veiled in a beautiful white gown fit for any party.

“Don’t worry, you going to a much better place than here. A place without suffering, and full of joy. Go in love and peace.”

Jess looked over at Rebecca, who sat there in silence, unable to say a thing. How could she? She let her die. If she had taken better care tonight, Jess wouldn’t have died. She could have kept her from losing her bag and they would have been safe inside. She was on the verge of tears when Jess smiled at her, a warm smile that brought heat into Rebecca’s cheeks. Jess waited a second more, and then acceded to the bright halo above, smiling all the while.

Behind Rebecca, the two thug’s soul’s also appeared, following Jess into the portal without the kind send off that Jess received, but far more than what they deserved. As John passed through the portal, it began to condense, becoming a small sphere of light before disappearing, just like that.

Rebecca continued to stare at the space where the vortex was while Reaper dug through John's pockets. He pulled out a flip phone and opened it, scrolled through the contacts before shutting it again. He turned around and offered Rebecca a hand. "Here, let me help you up."

She hesitated on taking his hand for a moment. Without the cloak, he seemed like a normal teenager, normal for a Chicago hood anyway. Blue torn-up hoodie, faded jeans, dirty sneakers, and messy black hair. She took his hand and with his help got back on her feet. Her legs tingled as they woke up from being cramped on the ground. She opened her mouth to say thanks when sirens rang in the distance.

"You should stay here and wait for the cops, they will make sure you stay safe." He turned and ran towards the back of the alley, sneakers splashing as he went.

"Wait." Rebecca called out. He stopped and turned to her. "Please, who are you?"

He looked at her for just a second. He smiled and chuckled to himself, as if finding it funny to be asked that after so long. "If you need to call me something, just call me Reaper." He turned back around and ran out of site.

Blue and red lights filled the alleyway as the Chicago PD rushed in. One of the officers escorted her out of the ally, while the rest tended to the scene and scoured the area for suspects in the area. The officer walked with her to the ambulance, where a paramedic was waiting to examine her. Before she got into the back, she stopped and stared at the black sky. At that moment she didn't think about recovering from this, or any consequence she might receive for being so reckless, or anything that would happen from this point forward. In that moment, she simply appreciated was that she was alive. She was grateful for standing right there, by that dark alley, letting the cold black rain fall over her.