

**A Life of Fear: The Monster
Within
By
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Genre: Urban Fantasy

ODION

Odion knew something was otherworldly about his twin brother the day their foster parents exploded, and their warm blood splattered across his face.

Margaret Watkinson stood off to the side and watched her husband, Hubert, tuck them in for bed. Apollo had been crying nonstop ever since Hubert had insisted he'd give him a bath after dinner. Being nine years old, Apollo felt he was old enough to bathe himself, but Odion wasn't sure if that was the reason for Apollo's sudden tears.

"Aww, what's wrong, Apollo?" Hubert had asked. His textbook-sized hand rested gently over Apollo's forehead, and his mouth and eyes immediately grew wide. "He's awfully warm."

"He must be running a temperature," Margaret had said. "Let me run downstairs and grab the thermometer."

Hubert slid his hand down toward Apollo's tummy. "Don't worry, Mommy and I are going to see that you're all right." He lifted the covers and unbuttoned Apollo's pajama shirt,

planting a gentle kiss across his chest.

“Is Apollo going to be okay?” Odion had asked as Apollo continued to wail and grab his head.

“Absolutely,” Hubert had said, smiling as the corner of his eyes crinkled. “Odion, do me a favor and look the other way, could you please?”

Odion shuffled his body around as he was told and faced the door. No sooner after, a strange sensation swept over him. His head buzzed. A gurgling, queasy-type feeling tumbled in his stomach. It was like he’d eaten a whole bunch of sweets and wanted to puke.

Odion quickly turned around to the sound of his brother’s deafening scream.

POP!

Like a gunshot fired into the air, Hubert burst apart. He didn’t even have time to scream. One moment he was rubbing Apollo’s tummy, whispering encouraging words. The next he was in several pieces. His blood sprayed around the bedroom and changed the walls from bumblebee yellow to ruby red. An unknown body part thudded against the window next to their bed, obscuring their views to the backyard.

Odion’s lip quivered. His arm trembled. Water welled at the back of his eyes. “Apollo ... wh-wh-what did you ... do?”

Margaret came dashing up the stairs, bursting onto the scene in extreme terror. Her grayish-mahogany colored hair stood up on her head as she screamed, the thermometer in her hand falling to the floor.

Odion brought his thoughts back to the present, unwilling to revisit what happened next. Even though that incident took place approximately seven years ago, Odion remembered like it happened yesterday. He looked down and stared at the knives inside the drawer, shaking his head. Slitting Apollo's throat wouldn't have worked; he probably would've sensed him coming from a mile away.

Whatever it was that took possession over Apollo that night seemed to have returned. Images of their bedroom light flickering, the door opening and slamming closed on its own, the small crack line on their bedroom window popped into Odion's mind. Two weeks hadn't passed since those paranormal occurrences. What was going to happen next? The fact Apollo wasn't even conscious while doing this made matters that much worse. He was freaking asleep!

A tickle of sweat slid down Odion's spine, his breath hitting him in waves. There might've come a time where Apollo was so out of control, he was tearing people apart in his sleep. *I can't let that happen!*

Odion exited the kitchen and darted up the stairs, skipping a stair with each step, approaching their closed bedroom door in the hallway. Apollo's monstrous energy pulsed from behind the door, causing a tingling itch to spread across Odion's arms and down his back. He paused to look down at his trembling hands. *Steady your nerves. I can't allow Apollo to scare me like this. Stay strong!* Odion took in a set of deep breaths, his stomach twisting into a series of pretzel knots.

Telling yourself to "stay strong" and *being strong* were two completely different things

and was a lot easier said than done. Anyone who could do that to their father ...

Odion shook the memory from his head again. As much as he tried to forget, moments like those never left you. Instead, they followed you to the grave. And, if Odion's nightmares were anything to go by, Apollo was going to destroy everyone around him—and quite possibly the world.

Each nightmare started with fire engulfing the city of Sauga and ended with Apollo bathing in the heat of the flames, smiling as if proud of what he'd done, the charred remains of innocent civilians all around them.

Odion scrubbed his hands through his dreads and down his face to pull the imagery out of his mind. Whether Apollo wanted to acknowledge it or not, it's his fault it took several months for Ontario's Association of Children's Aid Societies to find their *second* foster parent, Marcella Rosenbaum. It was a miracle she even decided to adopt them, given the report about Apollo's mental instability and behavior from their social worker. Apollo was the type of child who could've easily been considered a spawn of The Devil.

Odion shook out his arms and turned the knob slowly, cracking the door open as he poked his head inside. Apollo's chest rose and fell as he slept, his Sony headphones resting over his ears. Odion cringed at the classical music blasting through them. *No wonder he doesn't have any friends.* Who the hell would want to hang out with a kid who listened to Beethoven or Mozart as a pastime? The fact Apollo fell asleep to such music was baffling. *Boomer.*

Odion tiptoed inside, stepping over piles of empty juice boxes scattered around the room from last night, along with the empty cereal bowl he'd forgotten to wash. Since the curtains were

drawn, the dimmed salt lamp resting on Apollo's bedside table emitted an orange glow, giving the room an ominous dungeon feel as if he'd performed some sort of demonic ritual before falling asleep. *Wouldn't surprise me if he did. He's good for it too.*

Odion shifted his eyes around the room as if searching for gold. *His journal's gotta be somewhere around here.* He took a peek under Apollo's bed and found nothing. He then slinked his way toward Apollo's work desk against the wall and dug through each drawer as if he'd misplaced a winning lottery ticket.

He stumbled upon a photo of himself locked in Apollo's arm after their Under-10 football league championship win. Odion recalled moments from that game being down by two goals with only ten minutes left on the clock, and Apollo came back to score a hat-trick, earning them the trophy. Of course, Apollo's winning goal was all because of the killer pass Odion made to him from central midfield. Had it not been for his assist, they very well could've lost the game. A faint smile tugged on Odion's lips as he placed the photo back in the drawer. It was crazy how he and Apollo were the only seven-year-olds on that squad. *Those were the days when Mom was alive, and life was normal.*

Odion turned and snuck his way around Apollo's bed, spotting something looking like a notebook sandwiched underneath his leg. *That's gotta be it.* Odion's left pocket vibrated. The notification jingle that alerted him Marcella had arrived home beeped from his iPhone. A pair of keys clinked and jangled from outside the entrance doorway no sooner after.

"Odion, is he awake?" Marcella's voice boomed from the entryway as she stepped inside.

“Nah, not yet,” he shouted, walking toward the hallway.

Marcella thundered up the stairs and hobbled toward the room out of breath, the meat on her arms flapping back and forth as she marched past Odion. “Apollo Kingsley Biobaku!” She ripped the headphones away from his ears, and Apollo sprung upright in fright. “You mean to tell me since I left for my doctor’s appointment, you’ve been here fast asleep? Fetch us some milk from the supermarket, and clean up this pigsty of a room. Now!”

Odion stepped off to the side, allowing Marcella’s wide body to pass as she stormed down the stairs, still mumbling about Apollo’s laziness. She wasn’t lying. If Apollo wasn’t writing in his journal or browsing YouTube videos on the PC down in the basement, he was snoring up a storm. *Terrible habit he developed.* Odion shook his head, watching Apollo untangle his dreads one by one.

“I don’t even drink milk. Why can’t you get it?” Apollo asked, putting his squared glasses on. He shook his head to allow the rest of his locks to come free naturally, some of them slapping across his face.

“She never asked me, that’s why.” Odion contorted his face into disgust. “It ain’t gonna kill you if you do some shit for us from time to time.”

“Except I’m the one who’s *always* doing shit for you from *time to time*,” Apollo said, biting off the end of the sentence.

Odion scoffed. “Aww, you mad? One more time ain’t gonna do you no harm.”

Marcella’s heavy footsteps plodded toward the kitchen, with the faucet turning on shortly

after. “Why are there plates still in the sink?” She stormed back into the entryway. “I swear to God, Apollo, if you don’t get your ass down here and come wash these plates, it’s going to be me and you. Don’t make me come back up there. Bring your bowl too!”

“It’s not my bowl,” Apollo said, walking toward the edge of the stairs.

“Excuse me, young man, what did you say?” Marcella climbed halfway up the steps, slicing Apollo with a glance that could’ve easily cut through refrigerated butter.

“It’s not my bowl,” Apollo repeated, matching her intensity. “It’s *his* bowl.” He gestured his head back toward Odion.

Marcella looked at him for a moment, twisting her face into a nasty scowl. “I don’t give a horse’s ass whose bowl it is. When I tell you to do something, you do it! Do I make myself clear?” Apollo looked at her, venom boiling in his eyes. “Do I make myself clear, Apollo Biobaku?”

The air in the hallway gradually became heavier the longer Apollo remained silent. *Don’t try anything funny.* Odion balled his hands into fists. Attacking Apollo would’ve been suicide, but he wasn’t going to stand there and let him destroy the place because of a scolding.

“Sure.” Apollo tilted his head to the side and shrugged, descending past her a step at a time.

Marcella grabbed him by the arm and spun him around. “Don’t ever talk back to me like that again.” She pointed her chubby finger in his face. “Go wash those plates like I told you to

and hurry up with that milk.”

Odion’s heart marched to his throat as the anger brewed across his brother’s face. Apollo worked his lips, no doubt contemplating something dastardly. He cut a killer glance at Odion before eventually making his way downstairs. It’s moments like those Odion had to be on his toes because there was no telling what Apollo was up to. *But his journal will!*

Odion raced back to the bedroom and took a quick peek behind him to see if anyone was coming. He yanked Apollo’s journal from his bed and began flipping through its pages, hoping to find some answers as to what kind of sorcery Apollo was able to conjure up and where he acquired such power. Odion stopped on an entry that caught his attention.

What's the purpose of life? I don't think anyone in the Universe knows the answer to that question, but I'm almost certain it doesn't stand for Living In Fear Eternally. Fear of going outside because of the dangers that lurk around the city. The fear of socializing because of the nasty things people often say about me. The fear of failure because disappointing Ma (rest her soul) is something I couldn't live with. And my personal favorite, the fear of becoming ~~something people don't recognize~~ the monster people think I am.

I've always thought my purpose in life was to save the world. A little ridiculous, I know. I blame it on all the comics I read (Bionic Man and Black Shadow I'm looking at you). Ma used to mention something about a great power Odion and I had within ourselves, and that it was our destiny to make the world a better place. I never really understood what she was referring to by that and it's my fault for not asking her when she was still alive.

After she passed away, life seemed pointless. Still seems pointless. She was the only person who ever cared about me. I've never received that kind of affection from Marcella or Odion and he's supposed to be my brother.

I'm only sixteen years young and already feel lost with no sense of purpose or direction in life. A routine day consists of school, listening to music, journaling, and being berated by Odion and that witch of a woman. I'm regarded as the 'bastard child' while she looks upon him like he's the greatest thing since the creation of the Internet. Oh well, I'm quite used to it by now. They say some things never change. Besides, I have no right to complain. There are people out there in far worse conditions than my own. To complain about my situation means that a part of me wants to be heard

by others, but by doing that, I'm implying that what's currently going on in my life is of any importance. To express what I mean in mere words is next to impossible, so I won't bother, especially since my eyes are closing on me.

Odion snorted. Some of the lies told in this journal entry were outrageous. Apollo's purpose in life wasn't to be berated – whatever that meant – by him or Marcella, and she most certainly didn't believe he was the greatest thing since the creation of the Internet. It was also highly doubtful she viewed Apollo as the “bastard child,” as he put it.

Apollo always acted as if the entire world were against him (which they had every right to be) and painted himself as the victim when *he* was the one who held all of the power. If he wanted to, he could obliterate anyone he chose without even lifting a finger. Odion closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and exhaled. He heard Apollo's footsteps trudging back up the stairs and quickly returned the journal across his bed just as he'd found it.

Apollo didn't say a word or even attempt to look at him once he'd made it back to their room, throwing his hoodie on before grabbing his headphones and Sony MP3 player. Odion could tell he was fuming inside by the way his brows loomed over his eyes and how the muscles at the sides of his jaw bulged through his cheeks.

“You sure you want to bring your headphones and MP3 player with you? It looks like it's gonna rain any minute now.” Odion pointed to the window.

Apollo ignored him, going into his drawer and storing his wallet and house keys in the pockets of his beige chinos. He placed his headphones around his ears and bumped Odion out of the way, exiting the room, slamming the door shut. Odion stared at the door for a long moment and couldn't help but think that one of these days, Apollo was going to be the death of him and

everyone close to his heart.

APOLLO

Apollo dragged his feet across the puddles of rain along the ground, his socks becoming increasingly cooler and soggier as he did. Strangely, the amount of water his socks absorbed reminded him of the abuse he'd absorbed throughout his life. The dense fog, concentrated in the air, mirrored the uncertainty of his future, and the barrage of raindrops beating off his head and shoulders equaled the amount of vitriol he had to deal with from his peers.

If anyone were to believe the nonsense Odion spat about him, nearly half—if not all of Sauga's population—would've been reduced to ash. That's well over seven hundred thousand people—seven hundred twenty-one thousand six hundred to be exact—never mind the people in Toronno. That's an awful lot of bodies to be on the conscience of a kid who's only sixteen years young and just wants to live a relatively normal life as a teenager.

If it weren't for Scott Joplin's ragtime music playing in his ears, serenading him with its thumping upbeat melodies, Apollo wouldn't have a clue of where he'd end up. The thought of suicide crossed his mind on many occasions. "It'd be easier killing yourself than other people,"

Odion had said to him a short time ago. “You’d do the world a favor if you did.” Oftentimes Marcella and Odion spoke about him in this sort of manner as though he weren’t in their presence or as though he were something less than human, like a cockroach.

As Apollo turned onto Sauga Valley Boulevard—also known as The Valleys—the apartment complexes around him gradually became more segregated, run-down, vandalized, and tagged with graffiti art. Garbage littered the sidewalks, and several of the vacant business offices down the street had broken windows and pieces of brick missing from their foundation. The entrances to the doors were also completely boarded with lumber to prevent anyone from entering. The Metro gas station across the street was fenced up due to it going up in flames a few months ago, rumor being it was a burglary gone wrong.

Since the number of violent crimes taking place within the community increased each year, it was best to stay indoors. To be caught up in these streets as a young black male was a life risk with only two possible outcomes: death or imprisonment. It was only a few days ago Apollo overheard Marcella telling Odion about an individual who’d been fatally shot in front of the apartment building next to the plaza where the supermarket was located.

With the number of beggars, addicts, gangsters, and street hustlers frequenting the area, it wouldn’t come as a surprise if Marcella sent him out here hoping something fatal would’ve happened to him, given the numerous times she told him he was a “prick in her thigh.” Such is life. After a while, Apollo got used to the mistreatment.

Apollo stopped in his tracks and removed his spectacles to wipe off the rain that spattered against it. The water was coming down in drenching sheets now, running through the portion of his dreads that wasn’t covered by his hoodie and dripping down his face, his nose, down to his

chin. He blinked a few times after putting his spectacles back on, looking both ways across the street to check for any oncoming traffic before crossing.

A couple of blocks ahead was St. Isabelle's Parish; the church Mama used to bring them to every Sunday morning. Apollo turned his head in the other direction as he walked past, a mixture of anger and sadness rolling through him. He could never figure out why God had to cut her life short, despite her being so devoted to her religion. Did The Almighty need her that bad? You'd think that a divine entity as benevolent as God would do everything in its power to protect its children. But with Mama's untimely passing, it made Apollo wonder if everything about God was a lie.

"Ah shit." Apollo put his head down, shifting his eyes between the police car and the ground just as the officer was pulling out of the apartment building where the fatal shooting took place. The last thing he needed was to be interrogated by a cop simply for getting a bottle of milk. Apollo cautiously shifted his eyes back toward the police car and watched it make a U-turn, the officer inside flashing the vehicle's blue and red lights in his direction. His heart started to bounce. *Ah, great, now what.* Apollo quickly slid his headphones around his neck and reached inside the pocket of his hoodie, tapping the pause button on the screen of his MP3 player.

"You there, in the red hoodie," the male officer said, pulling up beside him. "Where were you coming from just now?"

"M-my house," Apollo said, doing his best not to fluctuate his voice. It was bad enough he stuttered in his response.

The officer looked at him for a long moment like he was trying to remember if he'd

recognized him from somewhere. He had a very pronounced mustache with slicked jet-black hair and some streaks of gray sprinkled around the front. He wanted to look like one of those mafia guys you see in the mob movies. The ones you don't mess with if you want to remain alive and not have your remains found at the bottom of a lake somewhere.

The officer opened up the laptop beside him and spoke some words into his radio. No sooner after that, another police car pulled up right behind him. Apollo looked to the skies and took a deep breath, the cool rain pattering against his face. Who knew it was a crime walking to the supermarket?

"Excuse me, officer, is this really necessary—"

"You be quiet!" the officer said, scrunching his face. He slammed the door as he stepped out of the vehicle, putting his cap on. "Put your hands where I can see them."

Apollo raised his hands in the air. "Look, I was only heading to the supermarket—"

"What'd I say?" the officer said. "Do as you're told, and you might actually leave here *alive*."

Apollo twisted his face. *What's that supposed to mean?* He took a look at the officer's name tag. J. SODIMENTO

"Just be cool, and we'll be out of your hair," the other officer said. This one looked like he couldn't have been older than twenty-five and looked as though he'd recently graduated from police academy. He had a narrow face and was clean-shaven, which made him look a lot younger than he probably was. Apollo stole a glance at his name tag as well. B. ADAMS

"Lock both of your hands behind your head," Officer Sodimento demanded. Apollo complied. "You have any illegal weapons and drugs on you?"

“No.”

“You’re not lying to me, are you?”

“Why would I lie to a police officer?”

Officer Sodimento patted him down around his back, sides, and chest. He reached for the MP3 player Apollo had in his hoodie pocket and stared at it like it were some foreign device he’d never seen in his life. “You tell me. And I’d suggest you watch your tone the next time you answer.” The officer curled his lip, and Apollo detected a stony hardness in his voice. “Place your hands on the vehicle and spread your feet,” Sodimento said, pointing to the hood of the patrol car, kicking Apollo’s feet apart. He patted both of his ankles, up to the inside of his legs and around, making his way up to his pockets, reaching inside. Again. “What’s this?”

“My wallet,” Apollo said, turning around.

“Keep your hands on the vehicle and do not move until I tell you to!” the officer barked, right hand on his gun, the left forearm shoved against Apollo’s throat. Apollo’s heart started to dance faster inside his chest as he choked and gurgled, the anxiety traveling down his spine and wobbling both his knees. “Move again, and I’ll be forced to shoot you.” Officer Sodimento forcibly spun him around, and Apollo took a large gasp of air as his feet were kicked apart again, harder than the first time. “Don’t you move! I’ll be back.” He looked to Officer Adams. “Watch him.”

Officer Adams responded with a single nod and held his hand firmly on his gun as Sodimento went back into his patrol vehicle with Apollo’s wallet in hand. There were a few moments where people walked past the situation and rolled their eyes as if to say, “Oh look, another black kid stopped by the police. What else is new?” The few who stayed to watch had

their smartphones out, shaking their heads at what they were witnessing. If Officer Sodimento was true to his word, at least justice would be served by the fact a homicide was committed in front of witnesses who had proof of the incident on their smartphones. Or perhaps Apollo was instilling too much faith in the criminal justice system. Officer Sodimento and Officer Adams would probably get away scot-free. *Man, why won't this clown hurry up?*

“Why isn’t there any identification in your wallet?” Officer Sodimento asked, rolling down the front passenger window just wide enough so the rain wouldn’t soak his seats. Apollo shrugged, unable to answer his question. “What’s your name?”

“Apollo Biobaku.”

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Whereabouts do you live?”

“Twenty seventy-nine Silvius Drive, unit twenty-four.”

Officer Sodimento kept darting his eyes back and forth between Apollo and his laptop, rubbing his chin as if he were in the midst of making a scientific breakthrough. “Pull up your left sleeve and show me your forearm.”

Apollo kept his palms visible and carefully rolled up his left sleeve to show the officer. Sodimento pulled down his shades, just a touch, again looking back and forth between his laptop and Apollo’s forearm.

Officer Sodimento dismissed his arm with the wave of his hand. “You got any siblings?”

Apollo nodded. “Yeah.”

“How many?”

“Just one.”

“Brother or sister?”

“Brother.”

“What’s their name?”

What’s with all these damn questions? “Odion.” Just saying his name caused a pang of anger to roll throughout his body, wishing it were him out here in this pouring rain. “Am I free to go now?”

“No! You’re not!” he said, pulling his shades down to his nose. “I tell you when you’re free to go. Continue with the attitude, and the longer I’ll keep you out there in the rain. Your choice.”

Apollo narrowed his eyes and clenched his teeth together, his nose flaring hot. The fear and anxiety screaming in his body slowly transformed into irritation. He tried his best not to stare at him for too long because he knew the prick would take it as a threat. Why couldn’t these two bozos just drop dead already?

A good ten minutes—or what felt like it—must’ve elapsed before the officer stepped out of his vehicle and gave Apollo the permission to turn around, handing him back his wallet.

“Okay, listen up. The reason I stopped you was because my partner and I are part of the Gundam Regional Police Street Crime & Gang Unit, and there was a fatal shooting that took place at this very building a few days ago.” He pointed to the building. “Were you aware of that?” The officer looked at him suspiciously.

Apollo stared at him for a moment before responding. “No,” he said, working his lips around like he wanted to say more but held off on it for obvious reasons. The fewer words said to

these assholes, the better.

“Well, the suspect we’re after looked like you, except he had a tattoo of two Glock 17’s in the form of an ‘X’ on his left forearm.”

‘Course he looked like me. Apollo remained silent, trying his best to keep the disgust from showing across his face. What he really wanted to say was, “Just because I’m a young black kid doesn’t mean I’m a criminal or part of any street gang, you power-hungry piece of shit. Your mama should’ve swallowed you.” He left it alone.

Officer Sodimento looked him up and down. “Where are your parents?”

Apollo processed the question and then matched his eyes, something feral grumbling in his stomach. “Dead,” he said, looking away toward the sidewalk. *Like you should be.*

“You sure about that?” Officer Sodimento chuckled. “I’ve had kids like you lie to me before.”

“Why would I lie about something like that?” Apollo snapped, his heart skipping at an unhealthy amount of beats per minute.

“What’d I say about your tone?” The officer bit off the question, squinting his eyes. “Your crackwhore mom did a shitty job raising you after your dad cut loose for a pack of smokes.” A smile grew on the corner of his mouth as a sizzling spark jolted across Apollo’s body. “Do me a favor, kid, and stay off these streets. You’ll live a lot longer if you do.” He and his partner headed back to their respective vehicles.

Your crackwhore mom did a shitty job raising you after your dad cut loose for a pack of smokes. Apollo squeezed his fist so tight he wouldn’t have been shocked if his nails broke through the skin of his palms. He took several deep breaths as the officer’s words about his

parents played in his mind over and over again. And then to smile ... as if he were happy they were dead.

A violent rage crashed and tumbled in his soul: a bubbling and crackling at his guts, slowly rising toward his chest, past his neck, boiling up to the crown of his head. Apollo winced at the pain, like hammers smashing against his temples. He watched as the two police cars spun around and drove off, concentrating on the sensation boiling at the top of his head. Apollo reached into his mind and expelled a forceful burst of energy in their direction.

Sodimento's patrol vehicle swerved left, then right, then flipped several times along the road, colliding with Officer Adams' vehicle as his too flipped and tumbled before both vehicles exploded, shooting furious streams of fire into the air.

Apollo's eyes shot wide, mouth agape, his body paralyzed with panic. Perhaps that was *too much* energy. The noises around him became silenced and replaced with a sound like a rabbit squealing in pain. Maybe it was his heart; he wasn't sure.

The only thing he was sure of was that it was time to get out of here.

ODION

Odion massaged the sides of his head, wincing at the drumming pain radiating from his temples to the center of his forehead. He wasn't one to usually suffer from headaches; however, this one was different. Unexplainable. Sharp. Sudden. He took a closer look in the bathroom mirror, turning his head to each side, gently gliding his hands across his face in a circular motion to inspect for anything abnormal.

Nothing. *That's a relief.* He turned off the lights and exited the bathroom.

Just as he was making his way downstairs, keys jangled from the other side of the entrance door with the click of the lock turning as Apollo stepped in, soaking wet. His face was still, and his eyes looked to be in a constant state of shock and awe. He didn't even wait to take off his shoes before heading to the kitchen to put the milk in the fridge, leaving water footprints all over the hardwood floor.

"And where the hell have you been?" Marcella howled, huffing and puffing her way toward the kitchen as if she'd just finished running a marathon. "Boy, what did I tell you about

wearing your shoes inside the house?” She pointed to the wet floor. Apollo hastily kicked off his shoes and placed them on top of the shoe mat near the door, making his way upstairs afterward. “Don’t you dare ignore me inside my house.” Her voice thundered throughout the entryway, eyes wide and hard as titanium. Apollo froze in his stride and looked at Marcella for a brief moment as if he didn’t recognize her. “If you’re not going to talk, I *will make you talk* so that you answer me when I’m speaking to you.”

The two of them stood still and stared at each other for the longest while. In the silence, Odion felt every bit of obligation to do something: to move, to speak, to take even just one step down and rest his hand against the railing, so there was motion inside the house. The stillness was unsettling, and even more so with Apollo in the vicinity. Odion swallowed, stiffness developing in his shoulders. A tense ache knocking at his upper trapezius muscles, tightening by the second.

“Th-these ...” Apollo mumbled, hardly above a whisper. Odion took a silent deep breath, exhaled, and relaxed. It was a start.

“I beg your pardon.” Marcella knitted her brows together and stuck her neck out.

“These ... two guys ... tried to rob me.” Apollo slowly shifted his eyes away from Marcella and toward the living room, Odion following his trail of focus. *What caught your attention now?*

“Nonsense,” Marcella said. “What could you possibly have that’s worth stealing? You always come up with the most ridiculous of excuses every time you know you’ve done

something wrong.” She shook her head. “Two guys trying to rob you. What are you going to come up with next?” Marcella rolled her eyes, storming back into the living room.

Apollo followed her.

Odion raced down the steps to see what Apollo was up to, licking at his dry lips. From the moment he walked in, something was off. The way he skittered to the fridge, seemingly in disbelief, looking guilty of doing something he knew he shouldn’t have. Apollo stood a few inches behind the couch, his eyes glued to the television. CN247 reported breaking news of two police officers tragically killed in what seemed to be a fatal collision about ten minutes away from where they lived.

“But this just happened moments ago near the supermarket,” Marcella said, grabbing the remote to turn up the volume. The news report transitioned to footage of witnesses who caught the incident on their smartphones. “Oh my God, look at the state of those two police vehicles.” Marcella brought a hand up to her mouth, appalled at how badly both cars were destroyed and set ablaze, thick clouds of black smoke rising rapidly into the sky.

“I could feel the heat all the way from the entrance of my building,” a female witness said. “It was incredibly crazy with how huge the flames were!” Her hands jumped into the air as she said it.

The news report cut to another witness who seemed to be in the area when the accident occurred. “Just as I was pulling out of the supermarket, I heard this loud bang, like an explosion going off somewhere. I quickly parked my car and hopped out to see where it came from. That’s

when I seen all the smoke and the fire, just everywhere. It was scary. Real scary.”

Marcella turned to Apollo with skeptical eyes. “Where were you when all of this took place?”

Apollo seemed engrossed at the images presented on the television screen, trapped in a nightmare he wanted to escape but couldn’t. Odion narrowed his eyes at him. *What did you do?*

“I asked you a question, Apollo?” Marcella turned her body almost all the way around. “Did you—”

“No.” Apollo’s voice escaped him. “I ... I saw ... nothing....” He excused himself and raced up the stairs, clicking the bathroom door locked.

“That boy is getting on my last nerve.” Marcella screwed up her face and ran her hands through her auburn hair. “Sometimes I wish he’d just disappear already.”

You and me both. “I’ll go see what’s up,” Odion said, heading upstairs.

Just as he was about to knock on the door, he heard Apollo mumbling to himself along with the sounds of soap squeaking and water splashing. It was hard to tell what he was saying with the pipe turned on, but who knows what sort of madness he got himself into now. The door swung open, and Apollo stared at him, face dripping with water, eyes bleeding with guilt. Apollo turned his face away and pushed himself through, heading toward their room. Odion watched him for a moment as he sat at the edge of his bed, burying his face in his palms. Had he not been aware of Apollo’s deep-seated disgust with religion, he would’ve sworn he was deep in prayer.

“What happened out there?” Odion closed the door, keeping his hand firmly on the knob.

“Out where?” Apollo said into his hands.

“Quit playing with me.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.” Apollo lifted his head and took a deep breath, bouncing his feet along the floor.

“Bullshit.” Odion looked at him through narrowed eyes. He reluctantly let go of the door knob.

“Everything’s bullshit according to you,” Apollo said, pacing around the room.

“What happened at the supermarket?”

“Nothing happened aside from me getting Marcella’s milk,” Apollo said.

“You told Marcella two guys tried to rob you. Who were these niggas and what happened to ’em?” Apollo stopped pacing and kept his focus firmly on the floor. “Trying to think of another lie?”

Apollo looked up and met Odion’s gaze. “Don’t use the n-word around me. You know how I feel about that word.”

“Then answer the question, fool.” Odion raised his voice toward the end. *Stay strong!*

Apollo remained silent for a moment, squinting his eyes. “I killed them.” Odion had a sinking feeling he was telling the truth. “I killed them. Is that what you want me to say?”

“Did you?” Odion watched as Apollo sank onto his bed.

“You really believe I had something to do with those two police officers, don’t you?”

Apollo looked at him as if he were appalled.

“I ain’t talking about any police officers, dummy. I’m talking about the two niggas ...”

Odion paused and corrected himself, “the two fools who tried to rob you. Unless them two clowns *you’re* referring to are those pigs in uniform,” Odion said. Apollo didn’t offer a response, choosing to turn his face away instead. He didn’t need to say anything. Odion knew what his silence meant. “Why’d you do it?”

“Do what?”

Odion shook his head, gritting his teeth. “Quit playing with me. Why’d you do it?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“There you go lying again,” Odion said, cutting his eyes at him. “I wonder if you believe half the shit you say. The way you can just sit there and lie through your teeth while keeping a straight face. Don’t you ever get tired of that shit?”

Apollo chuckled at the comment. “You only think I’m lying because it doesn’t fit the narrative you’ve told yourself in that stupid head of yours.” Apollo shrugged. “It doesn’t matter what I tell you. If it goes against *your* truth then it must be a lie.” Odion formed his mouth into a straight line. “Since you’re on a need-to-know basis, let’s say hypothetically I *did* kill those two police officers. What difference would it have made? Last I checked, you despise the police even more so than I do, so what changed? That’s two less cockroaches you have to worry about.”

“Ah, kinda like what you did to Margaret and Hubert.” Odion wiggled his fingers to counteract the anger building inside. “Are you still in denial of what happened that day, or is it too painful to admit you’re a soulless monster?”

“Don’t ... call me that.” The words came out bitterly as Apollo closed his brows together. “I’m not a monster.”

“Truth stings, don’t it.”

“There you go making things up—”

“Bullshit!” Odion’s heart fluttered. The temptation to leap over the bed and attack him was strong, though it most certainly wouldn’t have been the brightest of ideas. “I know what I saw that day ’cause I watched you do it!

“And what did you *watch* me do?” Apollo curled his mouth into a frown, squinting his eyes. “You sure it wasn’t another one of them nightmares you been having? Can you even distinguish what’s real from what isn’t anymore, or has all that weed you been smoking killed whatever little brain cells you had left?”

“You ripped ’em in pieces! I was right there when you did it!” Margaret’s look of horror flashed inside of his mind. The way her husband’s blood splattered onto his face, his intestines sticking to the ceiling, swinging back and forth. Odion shook his head and pressed his hands over his face, refusing to remember what Apollo did to Margaret afterward.

Apollo rose from his bed. “Maybe they deserved it.” He shrugged as if he hadn’t a care in

the world.

“What’d you say?” Odion squeezed his fists tight, charging a couple of steps forward.

“You want to hit me?” Apollo darted his eyes toward Odion’s fists. “Okay, I’ll give you a free shot.” He turned his cheek toward him, and that accelerated Odion’s heart rate even more.

“What are you waiting for?” Apollo taunted.

Odion sprinted toward him and pushed him up against the wall, holding him there, aligning his right hand, ready to strike. “How could *you*?” he asked, right hand trembling with the temptation of punching a hole through his face. “They were two human beings, doing the best they could at the time to provide for us, and you murdered ’em.” He stared at Apollo for a long while, fighting every urge in his body from doing something he’d regret later on.

“Perhaps Hubert should’ve kept his hands to himself,” Apollo said.

Odion softened his grip. “What?”

“You heard what I said,” Apollo stated matter-of-factly. “I did what was necessary to protect the *both* of us.”

“You’re lying.”

“Yeah,” Apollo said, nodding. “Margaret thought the same when I tried telling her her husband was a pedo. And therein lies the problem.” Apollo’s voice crept beyond the edge of irritation. “Every time I try and tell you something, you and everyone else think I’m lying. You know how many times that piece of shit tried to fondle my nuts when giving me a bath? Did you

know I caught him one night beating off to child pornography? I warned Margaret of his problems lots of times, but she refused to believe me. Just like you! It made me wonder how they were even qualified to become foster parents in the first place. Whatever happened that night turned out to be the best thing for the both of us.” Apollo shrugged himself free and shoved Odion backward, gathering his pajamas from his drawer. “Instead of criticizing and wanting to fight me all the time,” he stopped just before opening the door, “you should try listening for once and be thankful I saved your dumb ass from such terrible human beings.” He walked off, stepping inside the bathroom, clicking the door locked.

Odion stared at the door, then shifted his eyes toward the floor. Was Apollo really telling the truth? *Did Hubert really try to molest my brother?*

APOLLO

Apollo entered the cafeteria and looked for a table that wasn't occupied by students. If it were up to him, he would've eaten his lunch inside the school library. That way, he could enjoy reading his *Black Shadow* comic book without having to hear about how much of a "nerd" he was for reading them. Unfortunately, food or drinks weren't allowed inside the library, and if you were caught smuggling them in, it was an automatic three-day suspension. Apollo thought of intentionally breaking those rules on plenty of occasions so he had a valid excuse for not being at school. But, spending time at home with Marcella on her off days didn't make for a tolerable plan B.

Apollo darted his eyes through the rows of tables and saw all the black students congregate at the northwest end of the cafeteria, taking up several of the tables for themselves. Although it would've been nice to sit down and break bread with his own people, Apollo remembered that one time back in ninth grade, Jermaine believed he wasn't "black enough" to be eating lunch with them.

"Where'd this waste yute come from?" Jermaine had said, screwing up his face. There

was something cold and aggressive found in his voice. Every conversation around the table immediately came to a halt as soon as Apollo rested his tray of poutine down. They all looked at him as if he was lost.

“Nobody wants you around here, fam. Kick rocks.” Jermaine nudged his head toward the double doors behind him.

“What, I can’t sit here?” Apollo had asked, uncertain of what the big deal was.

“Ayo, whose mans is this?” Jermaine looked around the table, pointing at Apollo with his thumb.

“I think that’s Odion’s brother,” another boy from the table had said, mean-mugging Apollo like he was ready to fight him.

“Hang on a sec,” a girl sitting at the table had said, “aren’t you the kid who shat himself in the hallway a couple months back?” The entire table broke out into hearty laughter as Apollo wriggled his mouth from the embarrassment. It wasn’t something he could shake off because it actually happened. The meatloaf Marcella cooked the night before wreaked havoc on Apollo’s stomach, and when an event like shitting yourself at school happens, word quickly spreads around like cancer. You then become the laughing stock at school and a meme on social media.

“Take your Oreo cookie lookin’ ass on out of here before you shit yourself again.” Jermain chuckled. “We don’t fuck with shitty niggas like you, fam. You ain’t a real nigga like us.”

“So because I don’t consider myself a ‘nigga’, speak ebonics, have the latest pair of

Jordan's, or rap, you're implying I'm not black?" Apollo looked at him closely to see if he was being serious. "Seems a bit silly don't you think?"

Jermaine stood to his feet, and Apollo tilted his head back to look into his eyes. "Nize it, nigga. Take your shitty lookin' ass on out of here before I smack a few sparks out your face." He balled his hands into fists and a rush of excitement swelled around the table, the atmosphere quickly spreading into a net of hostility. Jermaine swiped his arm across the table, spilling Apollo's lunch of fries, gravy, and cheese curds all over the floor. A roar of praise and applause erupted around them as Apollo fought with himself not to lash out and do something that'd land him in some serious hot water.

Apollo shook off the memory. That was all in the past. Mama always used to say, "There's no point in crying over spilt milk. What's done is done. Time to move on." She was right.

Apollo moved his eyes a few tables down to where all the straight-A students ate lunch. Intellectually, he knew he wasn't on their level, and even if he tried starting a conversation with them, they'd probably look at him as if he were some sort of alien waiting to steal their lunches. *I'll spare myself the embarrassment.*

His attention shifted to a group of female students in the center row doing what appeared to be a new coordinated dance routine in front of one of their smartphones. *That's being uploaded to TikTok for sure.* He wiggled his arms to shake off the cringe that crawled through his body before finding an empty table in the far end corner of the cafeteria. Apollo shrugged off his backpack and placed it on top of the table, reaching for the apple butter sandwiches he made this

morning.

After devouring both sandwiches and a few slices of his Pink Lady apple, he pulled out his *Black Shadow* comic book. Nothing was better than getting lost in the world of Demetrius Miller and understanding his deep sense of justice; the process he took to instill fear and hopelessness in bad guys whenever he became the Black Shadow, and how his morals shaped him as a superhero.

Unfortunately, society viewed him as a reckless vigilante who went above and beyond the law, taking matters into his own hands. However, what many people failed to realize was Demetrius Miller never harmed the innocent. He had a strong moral compass where he only killed criminals and supervillains, but due to his radical beliefs, he was vilified by the media, causing the public to fear and hate him. Despite that hate, he still went out and did what he believed was best for his city and the entire world. *Only if our world had a Demetrius Miller. There'd be no crime.*

A few mumblings and giggles were coming from the table across from him on his right-hand side. Apollo looked up casually just as he turned a page and saw Sandra, pointing and whispering something most likely foul and untrue to her friends. He narrowed his eyes a little.

For a girl who could easily pass for a dwarf, she always had something stupid to say. She even went as far as creating an Instagram post wishing he'd die of cancer just so she could throw a party on top of his grave. According to Odion, her post got flagged and removed from the platform.

“Shitty-brief!” Sandra said, placing strands of her flaming red hair behind her ear.

Apollo bit on his tongue, trying his hardest not to pay them any mind. A short moment later, a long strip of a french fry hit the table, sliding over to where he had his comic book. “Quit doing that,” Apollo said, picking up his comic. “Why you throwing food at me? I didn’t do anything to you.”

“*Why you throwing food at me?*” She made a face that implied he was retarded. “Shut the fuck up,” she said. “Why don’t you put down that dumbass comic book and go wash your ass?” Sandra and her friends giggled.

Apollo stood up and grabbed his backpack, shoving his comic book inside. He didn’t need to put up with this.

“Uh-oh! I think Shitty-brief’s going to shit himself again,” Sandra said, laughing. “Sure you don’t want any diapers?” All of her friends joined in on the laughter.

Apollo paused and stared at her, eyes oozing venom, curling both of his hands into fists. If she weren’t a girl, he would’ve placed a nice, fat ring around her eye.

“What, you wanna hit me?” She pointed and laughed in his face. “Go on then, I dare you,” she said. “How does it feel being a *literal* piece of shit nobody likes?” She giggled again. “Even your own brother doesn’t like you! Do you know how many times he’s told me in class he wished you were dead? Like, how does that make you feel?” Sandra laughed harder this time, holding her stomach. Apollo’s nose steamed with irritation, heart clawing at his chest. “Do us both a favor and kill yourself. The world would be a much better place without you.” She

worked her mouth for a moment and spat hard at his feet. “That’s what everyone at school thinks of you.” She blew him a kiss afterward, turning her attention back toward her friends.

Apollo stared at her saliva for a long while, unable to understand how someone could carry so much hate in their heart they’d feel the need to spit at them. A large part of him wanted to grab her by the throat and shove her face to the ground, where she spat. It’d be hard to say she didn’t deserve it given her vile misbehavior, but that would’ve resulted in expulsion, and assaulting girls wasn’t really his thing.

“Hey Cassandra,” Apollo called her by her full name, knowing full well she hated that, “the only reason why you hate me is because I asked Isaiah if the rumors about your stank pussy were true. But thanks for letting me know you’re a spitter and not a swallower. I’ll be sure to keep that in mind.” Apollo smiled and blew her a kiss back.

Sandra’s expression quickly turned murderous as she lunged at him with a fork in her hand, yelling obscenities the entire cafeteria could hear. Apollo grabbed her wrists and watched her face strain with effort as he spun her around off-balance, shoving her as light as he could to separate and gather space. Sandra’s head snapped back and smacked against the wall with a thud that didn’t sound healthy.

“Oh, SHIT!” a student yelled in the background. It sounded like someone from the black section of the cafeteria with how animated their voice was.

Sandra slid to her knees, eyes sealed closed, her face moist with tears. With the way her body tremored along the floor, it was at that moment Apollo knew he fucked up. He briefly

glanced at his hands, surprised by his own strength. He hoped that wasn't blood on her palms as she held the back of her head, bawling. All of her friends sitting at the table quickly rushed to her aid, cutting venomous looks at Apollo while tending to her needs.

"You're such a fucking asshole," one of them said, pulling out a napkin from her back pocket.

Apollo reluctantly looked around the cafeteria and saw a variety of expressions staring at him: shock, disappointment, anger, disgust. On Mama's grave, he swore he wasn't trying to hurt her even though he'd be lying if he said she didn't deserve it. He had no idea he pushed her *that* hard.

"What happened over here?" Mrs. Cunningham asked, arriving at the scene. "Are you all right?" She kneeled, tending to Sandra's aid.

"This asshole pushed her against the wall," napkin girl said.

"Tamara, watch your language." Mrs. Cunningham took a look at the crowd that formed around them. "Which one?"

"This idiot." Tamara pointed to him.

Apollo closed his eyes and pressed his lips together. *I'm definitely getting suspended for this.*

Mrs. Cunningham closed her brows together, her pale blue eyes piercing a nickel-sized hole through his forehead. "And why am I not surprised," she said, standing to her feet. "First,

you were late for my class, and now this.” She made a disapproving sound with her mouth and shook her head. “Gather your belongings and head straight to the office. I’ll see to it the principal is notified of this incident.”

“Look, I was trying to—”

“The office. Now.” She pointed in the direction. Apollo fixed his backpack over his shoulders, kissing his teeth. “And lose the attitude.” He heard her say before exiting the cafeteria.

Apollo darted his eyes away from Raquel and Soraya as he passed them by their lockers. He could only imagine the amount of shit they were going to talk once they caught wind of what happened in the cafeteria—especially since they too were best friends with Cassandra and just as chatty. *If not more*. Apollo could already see the hashtag *womanbeater* along with his name trending online after today’s incident.

He sighed. *Just my luck*.

Apollo stumbled his way into the office and took a seat in front of the secretary’s desk, placing his backpack on the vacant chair next to him. He rested back against the wall and folded his hands over his head, awaiting his punishment. He shouldn’t have even been here right now. All of this could’ve been avoided had Cassandra kept her stupid mouth shut. Perhaps where he went wrong was not heading to the library after finishing his sandwiches and apple slices. But why should he have to go through all that trouble to read a comic book just to appease a dumb bitch who can’t keep her mouth shut?

It seemed as if anytime he tried defending himself, consequences needed to be paid. Apollo furrowed his brows. Simply thinking about the situation flared his nostrils, but instead of

causing a stink, cursing, and tossing things around, he remained quiet. The milk had already been spilled.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Cunningham opened the door, ordering him to follow her.

“Back again?” the secretary asked. Her wireless headset was fixed around her head as her fingers pushed down on the keyboard.

“Yeah,” Mrs. Cunningham said, contempt heard in her voice. How many times did she practice that tone in the mirror? It sounded awfully rehearsed. “Some things just never change.”

Like the dirty panties you wear to school every day, you cantankerous prick. Apollo exchanged glances with the secretary, picking up a look of condescension on her behalf. Mrs. Cunningham stood in front of Mr. Walters’ private office and knocked softly, his voice booming through the closed door.

“Come in!” he said, returning back to his previous rumblings. Mrs. Cunningham closed the door silently after they entered, Apollo taking a seat on one of the chairs in front of his desk. Mr. Walters pierced a displeasing look at him, narrowing his eyes. Was he supposed to ask for permission before sitting down?

Apollo shifted his attention toward the window behind him and watched the sun ironically cast a bright shine inside for what was to be a dark situation. He caught himself smiling because it was as if the universe was trolling him at this point.

“I understand that, Charles, but the situation must be taken care of immediately. You guys had plenty of time to discuss the objectives and plan accordingly. I will not tolerate any delays,” Mr. Walters said, swaying casually in his chair, the light on his earpiece flashing blue.

By the tone of his voice, Apollo could tell an aura of superiority exuded him as his

chestnut eyes glimmered across the room. Even with the way he sat on his leather chair, he probably felt like a king on his throne: back straight, chin up in the air, arms relaxed.

Mr. Walters looked at Mrs. Cunningham and rolled his eyes, pointing to his earpiece. “Listen, I have a meeting to attend. Just make sure those files are on my desk by tomorrow morning.” He removed the earpiece from his ears and shoved it on the table. “Incompetent fool,” he said, staring at it distastefully.

“The fun just never ends,” Mrs. Cunningham said, brushing her hair back. It wouldn’t have come as a surprise if the two were having an affair with the way she smoothed her blouse. *Unfaithful wretch.*

“It comes with the territory,” Mr. Walters replied, placing some folders into his drawer. “What can I do for you this morning?”

“I’ve brought in a guest.” She gestured toward Apollo.

“Sit up, young man,” Mr. Walters demanded as Apollo reluctantly readjusted in his seat. “And what’s the situation with this gentleman?”

Apollo felt Mrs. Cunningham’s eyes on him. “Well?” she said. “Would you like to go first, or shall I begin?”

Mr. Walters shot another fierce look at Apollo. “Based on your reaction, it seems there’s been a myriad of problems with this young man.”

Mrs. Cunningham nodded her head. “Apparently, he shoved a girl against the wall inside the cafeteria.”

“Oh!” Mr. Walters said as he sat back in his chair. “We’ve got a hostile one on our hands. What else?”

“I think it's best if he explains why he's here,” Mrs. Cunningham said.

“Young man, what is your name?” Mr. Walters stood up and adjusted the blinds to his office. Now the room was dark, which, to be honest, was a lot more fitting for the situation at hand.

“Apollo,” he mumbled, looking down at the floor.

“I can't hear you.” He returned to his *throne*.

“Apollo,” he repeated, still looking at the floor.

“My eyes are up here.” Mr. Walters pointed to the glaciers forming in them. “What are you doing in *my* office?”

Apollo shrugged, unwilling to muster up an explanation that would've sounded believable. In times like these, it's best to take your L and move on.

“You have a voice. Use it!” Mr. Walters curled his lip.

“I don't know,” Apollo said.

Mrs. Cunningham sighed. “You're lying. Explain to him what happened inside the cafeteria.”

“Look bro, if you're going to suspend me, just hurry up and do it so I can go about my business.” Apollo dropped his head back toward the floor.

“I find your attitude quite appalling.” Mr. Walters wrinkled his eyes.

“I find your breath quite appalling,” Apollo said.

“Hmpf!” Mr. Walters' face turned pink, the veins in his forehead springing to life.

“This is what I have to put up with every time he's in my classroom,” Mrs. Cunningham said.

An exaggeration. There must've been some sort of rulebook that stated if there were students teachers despised, they must exaggerate any and all incidents that occur between teacher and the student being disciplined.

"Start from the beginning and explain to me what happened between you and that other student." Mr. Walters leaned forward and folded his hands together.

"I wanted to read my comic book. She wouldn't let me read my comic book. We exchanged some words, and then she tried to attack me. I defended myself. The end."

Silence fell over the room as Mr. Walters looked at him, expecting him to say more. "You're bit of a smartass, aren't you?"

"It's a lot better than being a dumbass." Apollo shrugged.

Mr. Walters slowly shifted his eyes toward Mrs. Cunningham, who looked absolutely clueless sitting in her chair. What was she even doing here in the first place?

"It seems to me you have a problem controlling your temper," Mr. Walters said. "Are you angry? Is that your problem?" He had the fakest look of concern in his eyes Apollo had ever seen.

"What, so now you're trying to psychologize me?"

"You shoved a girl half your size against the wall, causing the back of her head to bleed," Mrs. Cunningham chimed in. "*That's* what happened. If you're going to explain something, the least you can do is tell the full story."

"How would you know? You weren't even there when it happened." Apollo looked at her side-eyed.

"There were plenty of witnesses who saw you do it. Don't get smart with me!" Mrs.

Cunningham twisted her lip into an angry frown. “Head trauma is a *very* serious issue. For you to sit there as if you haven’t got a care in the world says a lot about the type of person you are.”

Apollo nearly gagged at the comment. *If only you knew the things she said before I shoved her, perhaps you’d be singing a different tune.* “You’re right,” he said, pushing his spectacles back up to his eyes. “I apologize for what I did. It won’t happen again.”

Mr. Walters shot a look at him as if he were trying to figure out his thoughts. “That’s all you’ve got to say?”

Apollo looked at him and shrugged. “What else you want me to say?”

“You’re awfully short on compassion, aren’t you?” Mrs. Cunningham cut in just as Mr. Walters was about to open his mouth. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“Just hurry up and write me my suspension papers so I can get out of here.” Apollo sat up on his chair, bouncing his feet on the floor. “I’ve got better things to do with my time than to listen to you two bozos talk about how heartless I am.”

“Aye! Watch the name calling and take the bass out of your voice,” Mr. Walters warned, eyes wrinkling. “I don’t think you realize who you’re speaking to.”

“No, obviously I don’t, so please enlighten me,” Apollo replied, thick with sarcasm.

“Apollo!” Mrs. Cunningham called. “Watch your manners in front of the principal!”

Mr. Walters leaned forward. “You listen here, for I will say this only once. In this world, you’d *better* learn how to respect your *superiors*, or one day you’ll end up being extremely sorry. Do you understand?”

“My superiors?” Apollo raised his eyebrows. “And who might that be, you?”

Mr. Walters’ eyes twitched. What sort of message was he trying to convey if all of his

students were deemed inferior? What kind of principal was that? You'd swear this man was running a dictatorship.

Mr. Walters looked to Mrs. Cunningham. "Call his guardian and notify them he is not to be seen on school property for ten days. I'll print out a copy of the form and give to you, and I'll document the original into his files." *That's basically two weeks off school. Not bad. Perhaps I should be thanking Cassandra after all.* Mr. Walters handed over the papers along with his pen and ordered him to sign on the bottom. "I'm suspending you from this institution for causing serious bodily harm toward another student, a failure to recognize your wrongdoing, and for that horrendous attitude of yours." He stuck his head out and curled his lip. "And the next time I see you in my office, I'm going to expel you from attending Sauga Valley High School."

Apollo shifted from one of his eyes to the next before reluctantly inking his name, sliding the document over to that unfaithful sleaze ball sitting next to him. Mr. Walters photocopied the document and handed it to Apollo before taking another poisonous glance in his direction. "One more thing," he said, "because of your lack of concern for your peers, I hereby declare you no longer eligible to attend Sauga's end of the year school dance." Mr. Walters sat back in his chair and ordered him to leave.

About time. Never cared about that stupid dance anyway. Apollo couldn't have gotten up faster, grabbing his backpack and heading for the exit outside. He held off on pulling out his MP3 player and headphones, watching Tyron, Bishop, and two more of Odion's friends head in his direction from one of the portables. *Here comes trouble.* Apollo immediately zipped up his backpack and threw it over his shoulders.

"Hold up, hold up, hold up," Tyron said to the camera held in his hand. "In the comment

section below, rate on a scale of one to ten how goofy this nigga looks right now.” He laughed and pointed the lens at Apollo. “This is what happens when your mama abandons you. Look at him y’all.” Tyron turned the camera back to himself. “Don’t do drugs, or else you’ll end up looking like him.” He pointed his finger to the lens as if he were teaching a valuable lesson. “Anyway, I’m ’bout to head inside, so I’ll see y’all in the next clip.” He shoved his hand into the camera lens before turning it off.

Apollo squeezed the straps of his backpack as a piercing rumble tugged at his stomach, similar to the one he had just before those two police cars tumbled and exploded on the street. It was baffling to see how someone who had the body of an elephant and face of a donkey be so comfortable in front of a camera. “Tyron,” he called, “don’t be calling me no ‘nigga’ for your entertainment.” He looked him square in his beady brown eyes. “And the next time you mention anything about my Ma, I’ll kill you.”

Tyron looked him up and down, shoving his camera into Bishop’s hands. “Do sum then, *nigga!*” He shrugged off his backpack and tucked the gold chain he stole from Tracy underneath his shirt, shoving Apollo hard toward the ground. Apollo stuck his arm out to break his fall, fortunately landing on his backpack, softening the impact.

“C’mon, that’s enough,” Bishop said, using his long arms to pull Tyron back. “It ain’t that serious. Leave it alone.”

“Do sum,” Tyron said, trying to force his way past Bishop’s tall, wide frame. “You wanna kill me, eh! Do sum then! Do sum nigga!”

Apollo gritted his teeth at the sharp, stinging pain shooting to the sides of his temple. He grimaced as he slowly rose to his feet, head throbbing like he'd been whacked with a piece of lumber. If Tyron and his friends knew what was good for them, they'd better leave before something disastrous happened.

"Calm down, man, damn," Bishop said, trying to force Tyron inside as he continued to act up.

"That's what I thought, pussy!" Tyron flipped both of his middle fingers in Apollo's direction as he was being dragged inside. "Fuck you and your mama, bitch!"

Apollo stormed through the doors and into the hall, adrenaline soaring through his veins, about to tackle Tyron toward the ground until he saw Mr. Walters and Mrs. Cunningham turn the corner, heading in his direction.

"Get out of here!" Mr. Walters shouted from the end of the hall. "Don't make me have to call the police on you." Apollo watched Tyron stick out his tongue and mumble some words he couldn't hear, flipping him the finger again just before he escaped inside the cafeteria. "You've got three seconds," Mr. Walters declared. "One, two, thr—"

Apollo turned around and headed back outside, teeth firmly locked together. Tyron should've been thankful Mr. Walters was there to save his ass, or else he would've ended up like those two police officers yesterday.

Dead.