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JENNIFER ESTEP



Spider  
AND  
FROST

AN ELEMENTAL ASSASSIN  
AND MYTHOS ACADEMY NOVELLA

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## **Spider and Frost**

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*To all the fans who wanted more Elemental Assassin and  
Mythos Academy stories—this one is for you.*

*To my mom—for everything.*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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**Spider and Frost** is a 28,000-word crossover novella between the **Elemental Assassin** adult urban fantasy and the **Mythos Academy** young adult urban fantasy series. It is told from the points of view of Gin Blanco and Gwen Frost.

**Spider and Frost** takes place after the events of **Last Strand**, book 19 in the **Elemental Assassin** series.

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# CHAPTER ONE

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## GIN

“I’M GOING TO KILL Finn,” I growled. “Slowly. Deliberately. Painfully. Really take my time. Really make it *hurt*.”

A disbelieving snort echoed out of my phone, and the woman on the screen shook her head, making her shaggy blond hair fly around her shoulders. Despite my ominous threat, she laughed, which made her blue eyes sparkle and her rosy skin glow.

Detective Bria Coolidge, my baby sister, smiled at me. “As much as I hate to admit it, Gin, the situation isn’t Finn’s fault,” she said. “Not this time—”

Bria’s voice cut off, and she disappeared from the screen. A moment later, a man popped into view, with Bria hovering behind him. With his walnut-brown hair, green eyes, and tan skin, the man was as handsome as my sister was pretty, and the two of them made a striking couple.



Finnegan Lane, my foster brother, peered at me through the phone screen. “You cannot possibly blame this little snafu on *me*,” he said in an indignant tone. “Like Bria said, it’s not *my* fault that some sort of rockslide is blocking the road. Or whatever is holding up traffic.”

“No,” I replied. “But it *is* your fault that I’m stuck here at the train station by myself. *You’re* the one who told me to go ahead and leave the hotel and that you, Bria, and Owen would meet me here.”

“Hey, don’t blame me because your significant other just *had* to have blueberry muffins this morning,” Finn replied. “Why, I would say it’s entirely *Owen’s* fault that you’re at the train station alone. Not mine—”

His voice cut off, and he too disappeared from view, much like Bria had done a minute ago.

When the phone stilled again, another man was staring through the screen at me. The early-morning sunlight brought out the blue highlights in his black hair, as well as his violet eyes and tan skin. His nose was slightly crooked, and a white scar slashed across his chin, but the tiny imperfections only added to his rough, rugged appeal, and I thought he was the handsomest man I’d ever seen. Then again, love could make anyone biased, even a bitter, jaded assassin like me.

Owen Grayson, my significant other, grimaced with guilt. “Finn’s right. *I* was the one who wanted to get some blueberry muffins from that great little café we ate at yesterday.”

He held his hand up, revealing a large white paper bag dangling from his fingers before slowly lowering it again.

“On the bright side, I got enough muffins for everyone, along with some whipped cream cheese. I know that’s your favorite, Gin.”

Some of my annoyance faded away, and a smile crept across my lips. Blueberry muffins slathered with cream cheese *were* one of my favorite breakfast treats, and it warmed my heart that Owen had remembered that small fact and gone out of his way to get me said muffins, even if it was keeping us apart right now.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked. “The train is leaving in fifteen minutes. There’s no way you all will make it to the station by then—”

The loud shriek of a whistle drowned me out.

Bria, Finn, and Owen might currently be stuck on the side of the road, but I was standing smack dab in the middle of the Pine Crest train station. A few days ago, the four of us had left Ashland to take a much-needed vacation and escape the myriad problems and clever criminals that populated our violent, dangerous city.

Finn had had his heart set on exploring Pine Crest, a charming little town tucked away in the Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina that catered to skiers in the winter and tourists in the summer. Distance-wise, Pine Crest wasn’t all that far from Ashland, but in some ways, it might as well have been a completely different realm.

Instead of run-down, graffiti-covered buildings, colorful storefronts filled the downtown area, which boasted everything from cafés and bakeries, to antiques shops and bookstores, to artisan workspaces where you could learn how to blow glass, sculpt clay, and carve wood. In addition to shopping, we'd spent the last three days at the Pine Crest Resort, taking advantage of its luxurious spa and gourmet restaurants. Even though it was late March, a winter storm had recently swept through the area, leaving behind cold temperatures and plenty of snow for some late-season ice skating and sledding.

This morning, we were supposed to take a scenic train ride from Pine Crest over to the nearby town of Cypress Mountain. In addition to the beautiful scenery, the trip also featured a stop at a historic train depot, where lunch would be served.

The train ride was the grand finale of our trip, one last chance to relax before we drove back home to all the usual problems waiting for us in Ashland—demanding underworld bosses, old enemies lurking in the shadows, new rivals rising up and trying to take us down.

Fighting for my life was practically a monthly occurrence for me, Gin Blanco, the notorious assassin the Spider. Now that I had finally defeated Mason Mitchell, my evil uncle and the head of the Circle, the secret society responsible for much of the crime and corruption in Ashland, I was the official, undisputed queen of the city's underworld. We'd only been gone a few days, but I was sure that a dozen new problems and even more enemies were already waiting for me back home.

But right now, I only had one problem: the fact that I was here, and Bria, Finn, and Owen were stuck elsewhere.

I sighed. “I could always take the shuttle back to the resort and wait for you all there. We have to get our luggage anyway before we leave for home.”

Earlier this morning, Owen had slipped out of bed so that I could sleep late, although he had texted me about his plan to grab some muffins and other snacks before coming to the train station. The resort shuttle had dropped me off at the station about five minutes ago, which was when I’d realized the others weren’t already here. I’d called Bria to find out where they were.

The answer? Stuck on the opposite side of Pine Crest. Apparently, the clipper storm that had dumped enough snow here for us to go skating and sledding had also caused some rockslides in the area, including on the main road that led into town. Hence my being stranded miles away from my loved ones.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Finn said, his face popping into view over Owen’s shoulder. “Go on the train ride. Relax, eat, enjoy the scenery. I already paid for the tickets, and I sent yours to your phone last night.”

“Yeah,” Bria chimed in, shoving her face in next to Finn’s. “There’s no reason why you should miss out on the fun.”

“Think of it as a test run,” Owen said, still in the center of the screen. “If you like it, then maybe we can come back and

ride the train again. Maybe in the fall, when the leaves are changing colors. That would be nice.”

I knew they were right, but I still hesitated. “Well, if you’re sure you don’t need me to call for a ride and head that way ...”

Finn rolled his eyes. “We’re fine, Gin. It’s just a little traffic jam. It’s not like black-clad villains are running around wild and we’re all in mortal danger again.”

Bria shoved her elbow into his side, making him hiss with pain. “Don’t jinx us. We’re still on vacation until the end of the day, remember?”

Finn gave her a sour look and rubbed his ribs, but he didn’t say anything else.

“Finn’s right,” Owen chimed in. “Go on the train ride, and we’ll be waiting at the Pine Crest station to pick you up this afternoon. And if the food isn’t as good as advertised, then at least you’ll have some blueberry muffins to look forward to, right?”

He wagged the paper bag, and I smiled back at him.

“Okay, then, I’ll see you all in a couple of hours. Oh, and Finn?”

“Yeah?” he said, leaning toward the screen.

“If you eat all my blueberry muffins—”

Finn huffed, cutting off my warning. “I know, I know. You’ll kill me. Slowly. Painfully. Deliberately. Really take your time. Really make it *hurt*.”

“So you *were* listening earlier,” I drawled. “Excellent. I do so hate having to repeat myself.”

He huffed again. “I wonder if I’m the only person who has to deal with death threats from their sister the assassin on a regular basis.”

I snorted. “In Ashland? Please. There are more family feuds in our city than customers at the Pork Pit.”

Finn tipped his head in agreement. “Either way, enjoy the trip. Oh, and Gin?”

“Yeah?”

He winked at me. “Try not to kill anybody today, okay?”

I glanced around at the cutesy shops lining the storybook-looking street that ran in front of the train station. “Somehow I don’t think that will be a problem. This place is about as far away from Ashland as we could get and still be in the Appalachian Mountains.”

Finn chuckled at my words, as did Bria and Owen. I joined in with their laughter, but a small, nagging part of me wondered if Bria was right—and if Finn had just jinxed us all with his talk of villains and killing.



I ENDED THE CALL, slid my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, and headed inside the train station. Just like the rest of Pine Crest, the station was colorful, charming, and immaculate, with beige brick, glossy black wooden beams,

and stained-glass windows featuring, you guessed it, trains. Black wrought-iron chandeliers shaped like train wheels and studded with bare bulbs dangled from the high ceiling, while old-fashioned lampposts shaped like pine trees stood at the ends of the wooden benches that lined the walls.

Dozens of people were milling about in the main lobby, checking their phones and drinking coffee, and everyone seemed happy, relaxed, and cheerful. But I knew how deceiving looks could be, so I took up a position in the far corner, close to one of the wide archways that led into the back of the station, and studied everyone around me. I didn't spot any immediate, obvious threats, so I reached out with my magic, listening to the brick walls.

People leave emotional vibrations behind in whatever stone is around them, and as a Stone elemental, I can hear and interpret all those feelings, from amusement to annoyance to murderous rage. But the brick walls only whistled about all the trains that had rumbled through the station over the years, along with the hurried, harried passengers who were eager to board and get to their next destination, wherever it might be.

A woman opened a metal door marked *Employees Only* and stepped through one of the archways close to the corner where I was standing. She was about my age, early thirties, with dark brown eyes and tan skin. Her blond hair was sleeked back into a low ponytail, and she was sporting an old-fashioned conductor's uniform of a black suit jacket with shiny gold buttons over a ruffled white shirt and black pants with a thick gold stripe running down each leg. The only thing that ruined

her polished, professional look was her footwear. Instead of shiny black wing tips to match the rest of her spiffy uniform, the conductor was sporting scuffed, stained, brown hiking boots.

A brimmed black hat trimmed with gold thread topped the conductor's head, and she stopped and tugged it down, as if something had knocked it askew. She also ran her hands down her jacket, smoothing it into place.

The woman spotted me, and she turned and smiled. "You here for the trip, ma'am?"

I nodded. "Yep."

Her smile widened, and she nodded back at me. "Excellent. I'm Winifred. I'll be your conductor today. See you on board."

I nodded at her again. She flashed me another smile, then stepped through the archway, moved deeper into the station, and vanished from view.

"Attention, passengers. Now boarding. The ten o'clock Lunch and Look tour," a voice announced through the station's crackling intercom system. "Please have your tickets ready and start making your way out to the tracks, and we'll be under way shortly."

I plucked my phone out of my pocket, pulled up the text and ticket info that Finn had sent me, and got in line with everyone else. As the group slowly snaked toward the archways, I noticed a girl standing alone in the opposite corner and surveying the people in the lobby, just as I had done earlier.



And just like me, she had her arms crossed over her chest, and a wary look filled her face.

The girl couldn't have been more than eighteen, but she seemed far more suspicious than excited about the trip. She reached up and ran a hand down her dark brown hair, although her thick locks immediately frizzed out to where they had been before, despite her halfhearted attempt to tame them. A gray messenger bag was slung across the girl's chest, and something odd was sticking up out of the side. Did she play some kind of sport? Was that a hockey stick? I squinted, but I couldn't quite make out exactly what the shape was—

The person ahead of me stepped forward, and suddenly, I was at the front of the line.

“Ticket, please,” Winifred chirped in a bright voice.

“Here you go.”

I showed her my phone, which she zapped with a handheld scanner. A cheery *beep* sounded, a light on the scanner turned green, and the conductor gestured for me to step forward through the archway into another, much smaller waiting area. The other passengers were already opening the glass doors in the far wall and heading outside to the tracks. I moved out of the way of the folks coming up behind me and looked back over my shoulder, but the girl had vanished.

I glanced around, but I didn't see her anywhere in the main lobby. A bit of unease trickled down my spine. There was no way any of my old enemies from Ashland could have possibly

tracked me here, much less sent some girl I had never seen before to spy on me.

But that didn't mean *other*, new enemies weren't lurking around somewhere, just waiting to strike.

If Finn were here, he would have said I was being paranoid, which admittedly was my usual state of mind. Oh, yes. Finn, Bria, Owen. They all would have told me to relax and enjoy the ride and not even *think* about enemies or danger or anything else untoward.

But I couldn't do that. I hadn't been able to do that since my mother and older sister were killed when I was thirteen, and I certainly couldn't do it now, given everything that had happened to me as both Gin Blanco and the Spider over the years.

A compromise, then.

As I pushed through a door and stepped outside to board the train, I told myself I was going to do my very best to relax—and still be on the lookout for trouble in the meantime.

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## CHAPTER TWO

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### GWEN

“I DON’T LIKE THIS,” I muttered. “Not one little bit.”

“Oh, stop worrying, Gwen,” a voice with a biting English accent piped up. “Everything is fine, and so far, everything is going exactly according to plan.”

I glanced down at the sword sticking up out of the top of my messenger bag. Instead of being plain and featureless, half of a man’s face was inlaid into the sword’s silver hilt. An arched eyebrow, a sharp cheekbone, a hooked nose, even the round bulge of an eye. The features were as familiar to me as my own face, as was the sword’s larger-than-life voice and confident, boisterous personality.

I shook my head. “I still don’t like this.”

Vic, my talking sword, rolled his purple eye. “You never like anything having to do with artifacts.”

That was certainly true. During my time at Mythos Academy, I had encountered far too many artifacts that had

been used, wielded, or worn by various mythological gods, goddesses, warriors, and creatures over the centuries. And I had witnessed all the damage the magical weapons, armor, clothing, books, jewelry, and other items could do, especially to the people I cared about. But I was an Oracle, someone who had been gifted with magic by the gods, as well as the Champion of Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, so it was my duty to protect artifacts from anyone who wanted to use them to do bad, bad things.

A while back, I had helped defeat Loki, the Norse god of chaos, and the Reapers of Chaos, people who willingly served the evil god. Once Loki was imprisoned, I'd thought that would finally be the end of all the death, danger, and destruction that had plagued me at Mythos Academy, but it hadn't been—not by a long shot.

Okay, okay, so things weren't quite *that* dire. Many of the Reapers had either been killed or captured during the Battle of Mythos Academy or had gone into hiding afterward, but there were still plenty of Reapers and other bad folks running around who would do anything to get their hands on mythological artifacts that would give them amazing abilities—and let them hurt and manipulate innocent people.

A long, loud, weary sigh escaped my lips. Sometimes I thought I would *never* get done saving the world.

My phone beeped, and I pulled it out and read the text message from Logan Quinn, a Spartan warrior who was also my boyfriend.

“Logan says the convoy is still stuck on the side of the road and Coach Ajax is trying to clear the rockslide so the vehicles can get through. He’s going to text me again when he knows more. Logan also says some female cop from another town is poking around, asking questions and trying to figure out what’s going on. Nickamedes and Professor Metis are talking to the cop right now.”

Vic snorted. “Regular mortals have no clue about the mythological world. Don’t worry, Gwen. Nickamedes and Metis will send that nosy cop on her way, and Logan, Ajax, and the others will move those rocks soon enough. Everything will be fine, and we’ll get the artifacts back to the academy in one piece just like we intended. After all, no one even knows we’re here.”

That was the plan, which worried me more than I cared to admit.

A couple of weeks ago, a group of Reapers had broken into the Crius Coliseum after the museum had closed for the day and made off with dozens of artifacts. Linus Quinn, Logan’s dad and the head of the Protectorate, the mythological police force, had asked me and my friends to track down the Reapers and recover the stolen weapons and other items, but the thieves had seemingly vanished—until three days ago.

Daphne Cruz, my Valkyrie best friend, was a total computer genius. Using security and traffic cameras, along with some other footage, she’d spotted a couple of the Reapers leaving a

nearby casino, and she'd eventually tracked them all the way back to a remote mountain cabin on the outskirts of Pine Crest.

Clever of the Reapers to hide so close to Mythos Academy, especially since we'd all expected them to get far away as fast as possible. But this group of Reapers had been much smarter and sneakier and far more patient than most, and they had spent the last two weeks lying low, just waiting for the search to die down so they could slip out of the area. If not for some of the less cautious Reapers partying at the casino, we never would have found them.

At dawn, my friends and I had raided the cabin hideout and recovered the artifacts with no resistance. The only problem was that we hadn't found the Reapers along with the items they'd stolen.

Nickamedes, Professor Metis, and Coach Ajax all thought the Reapers had fled, but I wasn't so sure. The artifacts they'd stolen were worth millions of dollars on the black market, and I'd never known any thieves to just give up a major score like that. Especially not now, when so many of the Reapers had been exposed, were on the run, and were desperate for enough money to disappear to some deserted tropical island where the Protectorate couldn't find them.

Adding to my worries was the fact that these artifacts were much more dangerous than most, which is why we'd split them up. Earlier this morning, Nickamedes, Metis, and Ajax had overseen the packing of some of the smaller artifacts into wooden crates, which had been loaded onto the train to be

whisked from Pine Crest over to Cypress Mountain, where the academy was located. I'd stayed behind here at the station to keep an eye out for Reapers, while everyone else had returned to the cabin to load the rest of the larger, heavier artifacts into several SUVs.

The plan had been for Nickamedes, Metis, and Ajax to drive those vehicles back to the train station and drop off Logan and Daphne, along with Carson Callahan, Oliver Hector, and Alexei Sokolov, some other Mythos students. Together, my friends and I were going to pretend we were just on the train for the Lunch and Look tour and guard the artifacts until we reached the Cypress Mountain station, where Nickamedes, Metis, and Ajax would meet us. But of course, the rockslide had derailed our careful plotting, and now here I was, stuck at the train station all by myself, except for Vic—and the other artifact in my messenger bag.

I reached down and patted the side of my bag, just as I'd done a dozen times in the last ten minutes. My fingers traced over the shape of a long, slender box, although I couldn't feel the artifact nestled inside—Minerva's Dagger.

Supposedly, the dagger granted the wisdom of Minerva, the Roman war goddess, to whoever held it. On the surface, it didn't sound like a big deal, but often, the most innocent-sounding artifacts were the most dangerous. Besides, wisdom could be used in a variety of ways, from solving a crossword puzzle to winning a fight to figuring out how to steal even more artifacts from other museums. Either way, the dagger was simply too powerful and valuable to store with the other

crated artifacts in the train's baggage car, so Metis had given me the weapon, and I'd slipped it into my bag to transport it back to the academy.

From Logan's text, it sounded like the rockslide was a natural occurrence and not some clever, devious Reaper trap, but that knowledge didn't make me feel any better, only more anxious.

"Attention, passengers. Now boarding ..." The announcer's voice boomed through the speakers attached to the walls.

I gnawed on my lower lip. "Do you think I should get on the train like we planned? Or wait here for Logan and the others?"

"And stay here at the station all alone? With no one else around?" Vic's hilt quivered, as though he was shaking his half of a head. "No. At least there will be plenty of people on board the train. Surely the Reapers won't be daring enough to attack you out in the open like that."

I huffed. "Do you not remember the last time we were on a train? When we went to the academy in Snowline Ridge, Colorado? Because I distinctly remember several Reapers attacking us right in the middle of the ride in broad daylight."

Vic rolled his eye again. "Okay, so *maybe* the Reapers won't be daring enough to attack us this time."

"We both know that Reapers don't care who they hurt, only that they get what they want."

Vic's hilt quivered again, as though he was trying to nod his half of a head in agreement.



“Besides, I think I spotted one of them already,” I said. “Did you see the way that one woman was staring at me earlier?”

“The woman in the black fleece jacket?” Vic replied. “Yeah, I noticed her too. But just because she was staring at you, that doesn’t mean anything. Maybe she thought you were someone else. And we both saw her glancing around the train station, like she was looking for someone.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. “Maybe she was looking for *me*, and especially Minerva’s Dagger.”

My hand curled a little more tightly around the strap of my messenger bag. I didn’t see the mysterious woman anymore, so I moved away from the corner and headed toward the front doors. I didn’t know who that woman was, but she seemed dangerous, and I didn’t want to get on the same train as her. I hated leaving the other artifacts in the train’s baggage car, but protecting the dagger was the most important thing right now.

As I neared the exits, I tried to remember where the closest coffee shop was. I’d walk down the street, hole up in the first one I came to, and drink hot chocolate until Logan and the others arrived.

I had reached out to push one of the glass doors open when a black SUV zipped up to the curb outside the station and screeched to a stop. I froze, my hand still stretched out in front of me.

One of the SUV doors opened, and a guy got out of the back of the vehicle. He was about my age, eighteen or so, and wearing a long black overcoat over a black T-shirt, jeans, and

boots. With his blond hair, brown eyes, and tan skin, he was super cute, and the sight of him made my heart pound and my breath catch in my throat, but not in a good way.

The guy's name was Brayden Vitales, and he was a Reaper.

Brayden was a Roman warrior, which meant that he was gifted with supernatural speed, just like Amazons were. According to the information that Daphne had dug up in the last few weeks, Brayden was the head of the Dolos Crew, named after the Greek god of trickery, treachery, deception, and more. The group of thieves also included Valkyries and Vikings, all of whom were exceptionally strong.

Together, Brayden and the rest of the Dolos Crew specialized in stealing artifacts from museums, libraries, and even secure Protectorate storage facilities, although the recent heist at the Crius Coliseum was their biggest, splashiest, and most daring so far.

On all their previous jobs, the Dolos Crew had vanished without a trace—until they popped up somewhere new and stole some more artifacts. Reapers were usually so careful, so I found it really weird that Brayden and his friends would risk partying someplace like a casino, which had dozens of security cameras that could potentially be used to identify and track them down. But I supposed even the smartest criminal slipped up on occasion.

Two older, thirty-something adult men and a woman also got out of the SUV. Brayden looked at his phone, then gestured with his hand, pointing up and down the street, and

the adults peeled off, as if they were searching for someone—me, most likely.

So much for our plan to split up the artifacts. Somehow the Reapers had tracked the objects here anyway, which meant that I was once again in serious, serious danger.

I muttered a soft curse and moved away from the doors before Brayden spotted me. I glanced around, but everyone was heading toward the back of the lobby, and there was only one place for me to go: on board the train.

“You have to get on the train, Gwen,” Vic said, echoing my thoughts. “The Reapers will see you if you try to leave.”

He was right. I couldn’t slip away from the station without Brayden and the other Reapers outside potentially spotting me, and I couldn’t stay here in the empty waiting area either. Maybe the train would be marginally safer, even if that mysterious woman was on board.

Either way, it was the only choice I had, so I pulled up my ticket on my phone and got in line with everyone else.



I SHOWED MY PHONE to the female conductor, stepped outside, and boarded the train.

The train was an old, vintage model that had been lovingly restored, and everything looked like it had just been cleaned, waxed, and polished, from the wide picture windows, to the

glossy wooden benches topped with thick red cushions, to the brass rails that served as handholds and cordoned off the groups of seats from the main aisle. Even the air smelled faintly of some fresh, lemony cleaner.

I glanced down at my phone and quickly found my seat assignment, right in the middle of one of the cars. I grimaced, knowing that I was far too exposed here, in everyone's line of sight, but I was trapped until all the other passengers sat down. Maybe then I could find a more out-of-the-way seat, perhaps by one of the doors, with my back to the corner, where I could see any potential Reapers who might be on board and creeping up on me.

"Is this seat taken?" a soft feminine voice asked.

Startled, I looked up. The woman in the black fleece jacket, the one who'd been watching me earlier inside the station, stood in the aisle, a pleasant smile fixed on her face. Up close, she was quite pretty, with dark brown hair and pale skin, but the thing that caught my attention was her eyes. At first, I thought they were a weak, watery blue, but on a closer look, I realized they were actually a deep, wintry gray. The color reminded me of the sly, wicked gleam of Vic's blade.

"Is this seat taken?" the woman repeated, giving me another pleasant smile. "I know the seats are assigned, but my friends didn't make it, and I don't want to sit by myself. Besides, you look like you could use some company too."

Company was the very last thing I wanted, but I just shrugged in return. Making a fuss about the seat would draw

unwelcome attention, which I wanted even less than I wanted her dubious company.

The woman took my shrug as an invitation to sit down on the bench facing mine. I tensed, and my hand drifted over to my messenger bag, which was resting on the seat beside me.

In addition to her black fleece jacket, the woman was wearing a royal-blue T-shirt with some sort of pink pig logo on it, along with dark jeans and black boots. Somehow she made the casual clothes look cool, even though she was a bit underdressed, considering that most of the other passengers were wearing either suit jackets and ties or pretty sweaters and dresses. Then again, I was no fashionista myself, since I was sporting a worn purple hoodie over a long-sleeve gray T-shirt, gray jeans, and my favorite and most comfortable purple-and-gray plaid sneakers.

The woman tugged down the sleeves of her jacket, then leaned forward and stuck her hand out to me. “My name is Gin Blanco. You can call me Gin, like the liquor.”

I flinched and had to stop myself from visibly recoiling at the polite gesture. Thanks to my psychometry magic, I *never* shook hands with strangers, and I rarely did more than bump fists with my friends.

Touch magic, some people called it. Basically, I got flickers of memories and flashes of feelings off just about any object I touched with my bare skin. Oh, I was safe enough drumming my fingers on the red seat cushion or clutching the brass railing, since those were common, ordinary, everyday objects

that hundreds of people had used over the years. Besides, no one had any special feelings for or big attachments to things like seats and rails.

But touching someone else, especially this mysterious, suspicious woman ... well, that was almost guaranteed to open a window into her memories and give me a front-row view of everything that had ever happened to her and all the things she had done in return—good, bad, and ugly.

I usually didn't get flickers or flashes off people unless I was physically touching them, but sometimes my psychometry magic gave me other small hints about folks. And right now, a little voice in the back of my mind was whispering a warning that I very much did *not* want to touch this woman and see what was lurking in her heart.

“My name is Gwen,” I said, finally answering her question. “Gwen Frost.”

I studied her closely, but no recognition flared in her eyes, indicating that she wasn't part of the mythological world. Pretty much everyone, from the youngest Mythos student to the oldest Protectorate member to the cruelest Reaper, knew *exactly* who I was. Gwen Frost, Nike's Champion, the girl who had defeated and imprisoned the powerful god Loki. I was rather famous for saving the world—or infamous, depending on your point of view.

The woman, Gin, kept staring at me. When it became apparent that I wasn't going to shake her hand, she slowly

dropped it to her lap and gave me a puzzled look, which made me feel a little guilty.

“Sorry,” I said, trying to explain. “But I don’t want to shake your hand. I, uh, just got over a cold. I might still be ... germy.”

Gin’s forehead crinkled like she didn’t believe my lame excuse. Yeah, I wouldn’t have believed me either. But after a few seconds, she nodded.

“I don’t particularly like shaking hands either,” she drawled. “Especially when the other person’s hand is warm and wet, like a limp fish. Or when they try to crush your bones to show you how strong and superior they are.”

Despite my best intentions, a laugh escaped from my lips, and I found myself smiling at her.

Gin grinned back at me, then relaxed back in her seat. “Well, we might as well get comfortable, Gwen Frost. We have a long ride ahead of us.”

Her tone wasn’t the least bit dark and sinister, but something about her words made a shiver skitter down my spine. I didn’t mind the ride being long. I just hoped that the Reapers wouldn’t find me and that this wouldn’t be the last trip I ever took.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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### GIN

I WAS PRETTY SURE the girl was in trouble.

Finn would have claimed that I was being paranoid yet again, but something about the girl seemed slightly ... *off*.

Oh, there was nothing wrong with Gwen Frost herself, and she seemed smart, strong, and capable. But the way she eyed everyone in the train car, especially me, as if she was just waiting for someone to leap up out of their seat, brandish a weapon, and reveal their true evil intentions, reminded me of ... well, *myself*.

I was always waiting for new and old enemies alike to appear and try to kill me and my loved ones. Story of my life.

So when I'd seen Gwen board the train through one of the windows, I'd left my assigned seat in another car, entered this one, and plopped down across from her. Gwen's trouble wasn't any of my business, but I just couldn't sit by and let someone get hurt. Especially not a girl who seemed as weary



and wary, and as haunted and hunted, as I always felt, even now, when I was on vacation.

But perhaps the most curious thing was that Gwen didn't seem particularly *afraid* of whatever trouble she was in, just resigned to the fact that something bad was going to happen sooner or later. Her resolute resignation made me even more curious about what might be going on. Besides, I had to do something to occupy my time until the train stopped for lunch.

I studied the girl again. Frizzy brown hair, pale skin, a few freckles sprinkled across her cheeks. Her features were quite pretty, but one thing stood out: her eyes. At first, I thought they were blue, but a second look revealed that they were really a lovely shade of violet.

My gaze flicked over to her bag. It too was perfectly ordinary, although some sort of longish box was bulging up against the side of the gray fabric. Of course, I couldn't tell what the girl might be hiding in that box, but I could clearly see what was sticking up out of the top of the bag.

"Is that a sword?" I asked.

Gwen's hand curled around the bag in a protective gesture, and I got the distinct impression that she wanted to hide the weapon from sight. "Yeah. I go to Mythos Academy. It's for, uh, fencing class."

I didn't know nearly as much about swords as I did about knives, but even I knew that wasn't a fencing sword. The weapon was much too broad and thick for that, and the hilt was all wrong. Instead of being smooth silver, the hilt was

shaped like half of a man's face, as though an actual person was trapped somewhere deep inside the metal. Curiouser and curiouser.

“Mythos Academy, huh?” I murmured, still eyeing the sword.

“Have you heard of it?”

I shrugged. “Just in passing. It's in Cypress Mountain, right? That fancy private boarding school where all the rich kids go?”

Gwen kept staring at me, as though she expected me to say something else. But after a few seconds, she slowly nodded. “Yeah. That fancy private boarding school for rich kids.”

My gaze flicked over her clothes. A hoodie, T-shirt, jeans, and scuffed sneakers didn't exactly scream *rich kid*, but I knew even less about clothes than I did about swords. For all I knew, she was wearing a Fiona Fine designer hoodie and Bella Bulluci sneakers that cost more than the five silverstone knives I was carrying—one secured in the small of my back, two tucked up my sleeves, and two more nestled in the sides of my boots.

“So, Gin, where are you from?” Gwen asked.

Most people probably would have thought she was just making polite conversation, but her eyes narrowed, and she stared at me as though she was going to weigh my answer very, very carefully.

“Ashland,” I replied. “I run a barbecue restaurant called the Pork Pit. Maybe you’ve heard of it?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, but I haven’t.”

“That’s okay.”

I reached into my jacket pocket. Gwen tensed, and her hand drifted over to the sword, as though she was going to yank the weapon out of the top of the bag. Wary and skittish. Yep, she was most definitely in some sort of trouble.

I kept my movements slow and easy as I pulled a small white card out of my pocket and held it out between us. Gwen hesitated, but she reached out and took the card. She blinked, and I could have sworn that magic flared in her violet eyes, even though I didn’t sense any elemental power rippling off her. No Air, Fire, Ice, or Stone and no offshoot elements like electricity, acid, water, or metal. Nothing like that at all.

Still, some ... *force* gathered around her, like a blast of wind about to whistle in my direction, and it seemed like she saw something else besides the small white card in her hand.

Gwen blinked again, and the force—or whatever it was—abruptly vanished. She stared down at the card and rubbed the thick paper in between her fingers. “*The Pork Pit, Gin Blanco, Proprietor and Purveyor of Ashland’s Finest Barbecue. Cool. I’ve never met anyone who owned a barbecue restaurant before.*”

She gave me a cautious smile, and I grinned back at her. That was the magic of barbecue—talking about it almost

always broke the ice with other people.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a flash of purple, and I glanced over at her bag. For a moment, I didn't understand what I was looking at or where the odd bit of color was coming from. Then I realized that the sword's round, bulging eye was open—and that the very bright, very purple eye was staring straight at me.

“Barbecue, eh? Well, that's not *nearly* as tasty as Reaper blood and bones, but I have been known to enjoy a good barbecue sandwich on occasion.”

Shock jolted through me like an electric current. Not only did the sword seem to be talking to me, but it was also speaking in a cool English accent. But that simply wasn't possible.

Swords couldn't talk ... could they?

I blinked and blinked, trying to come up with an explanation for what I was experiencing. Maybe I'd drunk too much hot chocolate at the resort this morning and was having a weird sugar-induced hallucination. Maybe someone in the train station had discreetly doused me with a powerful mind-altering poison. Or maybe there was much more to Gwen Frost and her sword than there appeared to be.

I opened my mouth to ask the sword a question, but from one instant to the next, the sword's eye was closed again, along with its mouth, and it was still and inanimate once more. I watched it closely, but the weapon—he?—didn't move or speak again.

Had I just imagined the sword talking to me? I rubbed my head, which was suddenly pounding. Maybe Finn was right. Maybe my constant paranoia was finally getting the better of me and making me see things that weren't really there. That seemed far more plausible than a talking weapon.

Gwen stuck her arm in front of the sword, shielding it from my line of sight. Then she gave me a bright smile and tucked my business card into her hoodie pocket. "Tell me about your barbecue restaurant."

I got the feeling that she was desperately trying to change the subject, but I decided to play along—for now. At least until I could wrap my mind around the idea of a speaking sword.

"Well, the Pork Pit is located in downtown Ashland, and it's my pride and joy ..."



THE LAST OF THE passengers boarded, the whistle screamed, and the train pulled out of the Pine Crest station. Winifred, the conductor, ambled along the aisle, smiling and stopping to speak to everyone, including Gwen and me.

"We're going to climb up to the very top of Pine Crest Mountain, where the old historic depot is located," she said in a conversational tone. "That's where lunch will be served, so sit back and enjoy the scenery in the meantime."

Gwen and I both murmured our thanks. Winifred tipped her black hat to us, then moved on to repeat her spiel to the folks

in the next section of seats a few feet away.

I stared out the window. As its name implied, Pine Crest Mountain was covered with pine trees, all of which were outlined in a picturesque coating of ice and snow. A couple of inches of snow also covered the ground, adding a clean white sheen to the landscape, although the sparkling crystals were quickly melting away under the clear blue sky and bright March sunshine.

As the trees and snow slid by and the train slowly chugged up the mountain, I kept talking to Gwen, asking question after question and trying to find out more about her.

The girl was polite, if exceptionally vague. Still, I learned a few things. In addition to attending Mythos Academy, Gwen also had an after-school job in the academy's library, which she referred to as the Library of Antiquities, as though it held more than just old reference books and dusty encyclopedias. Her grandmother lived in a nearby town and worked as some sort of fortune-teller, although Gwen kept referring to her grandmother as an Oracle, as though the term meant something special.

“What about your parents?” I asked.

“My dad died a long time ago. I don't even remember him.” Gwen's face hardened. “My mom died a couple of years ago when I was sixteen.”

Her cold, flat tone indicated there was a lot more to the story than that, but she clearly didn't want to talk about it. And who was I to make someone else talk about their feelings?

Especially since that was always the very last thing I wanted to do myself.

I nodded in understanding. “My parents are both gone too. I don’t remember my dad much either, but my mom died when I was thirteen. It was ... tough.”

That was an understatement, but I wasn’t about to share how Mab Monroe had murdered my mother, Eira Snow, and my older sister, Annabella, and burned our mansion to the ground with her elemental Fire magic. That was way too heavy a conversation for what was supposed to be a fun, relaxing train ride.

My gaze dropped to my hands, and I massaged the scars embedded in my palms, which were suddenly aching. The marks had been a parting gift of cruel torture from Mab the night she’d murdered my family, and each silvery scar was shaped like a small circle surrounded by eight thin rays—a spider rune. The symbol for patience, something that had influenced my life in so many ways, especially as an assassin.

I was also wearing a silverstone pendant shaped like a spider rune, although I had tucked the necklace and matching chain under my T-shirt. Normally, the slight weight of the pendant against my skin comforted me, but right now, the spider rune was as heavy as an anvil pressing against my heart.

That was the funny thing about grief. No matter how much time passed, no matter how happy I was now, every once in a while, that heavy, heavy grief would sneak up on me like, well, an assassin in the night, twist the broken shards of my

heart that belonged to my mother and sister, and remind me of everything I'd loved—and lost.

Gwen frowned. “Are you okay? What are those marks on your hands?”

My fingers clenched into fists, my nails digging into the scars embedded in my palms. My first instinct was to hide the marks, but she was just asking a simple question, and I didn't see a reason not to answer. Besides, if I opened up to her, then maybe she would trust me enough to let me help with whatever trouble she was in.

So I stretched my fingers wide and held out my palms where she could see them. “Just a couple of old scars. Sometimes they ache. They're spider runes, actually. The symbol for patience.”

Her frown deepened, but she didn't seem to recognize the marks or what the symbols truly meant. She opened her mouth to ask another question, but the whistle screamed again, cutting her off, and the train slowed, sputtered, and ground to a halt.

“All right, folks,” Winifred called out from the front of the car. “We've arrived at the original Pine Crest station. Lunch is going to be served inside the historic depot. If you will all follow me, please.”

The conductor plodded down the stairs, opened the door, and got off the train. Gwen grabbed her messenger bag, stood up, and moved into the aisle, and I fell in step behind her.



The train had stopped at the very top of the mountain, although the town of Pine Crest was still visible in the valley several miles below. From this height, the colorful shops, clean streets, and surrounding stands of evergreen trees looked like miniatures that had been carefully nestled inside a snow globe.

Another sharp shard of grief twisted into my chest. My mother had collected snow globes, and Bria and I used to spend hours shaking them when we were young. I admired the pretty, panoramic view a moment longer, then shoved my grief aside and followed the rest of the passengers.

Winifred and the other employees herded us across a wide wooden platform, through some glass doors, and into the station. Historic black-and-white photographs showing both the inside and the outside of the old depot, along with various trains, adorned the white brick walls, and glass display cases containing tools, bits of metal, and other objects were scattered around the main lobby. Round dining tables covered with green linens were set up in the middle of the area, while long rectangular buffet tables lined one of the walls.

Most folks made a beeline for the food, but a few people wandered over to the far side of the lobby, where a wide, waist-high table ran the entire length of that wall. Tiny mountains, pine trees, and gray stones jugged up from the tabletop, along with several small houses and businesses, and several electric trains careened around the tracks in endless loops, occasionally belching out some low, rumbling *choo-choos*.

Gwen glanced around curiously, then headed over to the buffet tables. I trailed after her. We each fixed a plate of food and grabbed a seat at a table. Gwen slung her messenger bag down onto the chair beside her and arranged it so that the sword was propped up and staring out over the table, almost like it was a real person sitting here with us. Weird.

A waiter came around and poured lemonade into our empty glasses.

I held mine out. “A toast to a safe trip?”

A shadow passed over Gwen’s face, but she clinked her glass against mine. “I’ll drink to that.”

We both dug into our food. Hot roast-beef-and-cheddar paninis studded with apple slices, all of it encased in thick, crusty grilled sourdough bread. Crispy fried baby potatoes seasoned with dill and loads of Parmesan cheese. Dried figs stuffed with blue cheese and wrapped with brown-sugar-glazed bacon and then baked to perfection.

Everything was excellent—except for the desserts. I cut into a cranberry-orange scone that was as dry as dust, while the chocolate chip brownies were almost as hard as the brick walls.

I huffed in annoyance and pushed my plate away, refusing to eat the rest of the scone and the brownie. “I make better desserts than this at the Pork Pit.”

Gwen laughed. “Now you sound like Grandma Frost. She loves to bake, and she’s always complaining if we get dessert

at a restaurant and it's not as good as what she makes at home."

"Your grandma sounds like a nice lady."

A bright light filled Gwen's eyes. "She's the best."

She seemed genuinely happy when talking about her grandma, and I was glad she had at least had one parental figure in her life. After my mother and sister were killed, I'd spent some time living on the streets, so I knew how hard it was to think that you were alone and that no one would ever help you or watch out for you. I didn't know what would have happened to me if Fletcher Lane, Finn's dad, hadn't taken me in and trained me to be an assassin.

We got second helpings of everything except the desserts. Gwen told me a little more about her grandmother, while I talked about Bria, Finn, and Owen and all the fun things we'd done while on vacation.

Eventually, the luncheon started winding down, and Winifred, the conductor, wandered over to our table. "How was the food?"

"It was great," Gwen replied. "Will we be leaving soon?"

"Yep," Winifred replied. "In about thirty more minutes."

Gwen nodded, pushed back from the table, and stood up. "Great. I'm going to look around before we leave."

She smiled at me, grabbed her messenger bag, and headed toward the electric-train diorama in the front of the lobby. I stayed at the table and sipped the last of my lemonade, content

to people-watch. Everyone was talking, laughing, eating, and admiring the photographs and displays, and no one was doing anything suspicious.

So why were the brick walls muttering?

The low, sinister notes washed over me like a tide slowly rising along a sandy shoreline and threatening to drown anyone who didn't get out of the way. According to what Finn had said, the old historic depot was only used for special events, so it sat empty most of the time. Yet the stones were teeming with emotional vibrations.

Something was wrong.

I scanned the crowd again, but everything was the same as before. Passengers talking, laughing, eating, and ambling around the exhibits, waiters refilling drink glasses and offering coffee to those who wanted it, a few other workers putting out a final round of food. I reached out with my Stone magic, wondering if I was mistaken, but the bricks kept right on muttering, the dark whine an annoying hum that reverberated through my head loudly enough to make my teeth ache.

Then I realized what else was wrong. Gwen wasn't in the main lobby anymore.

I stood up, getting a better view, but she had vanished. I didn't know for certain that the muttering walls had anything to do with her, but I hadn't stayed alive this long by ignoring my instincts. So I set down my lemonade and circled around the lobby, as though I was admiring the historic photos and displays along with everyone else.

I still didn't spot Gwen, but I did come across two corridors that led away from the main lobby. One went left, and the other went right. I went down the right one and came across a couple of bathrooms, but they were all empty, so I kept going and eventually wound up in a kitchen.

A few workers gave me curious looks, but I smiled and nodded at them all, moved through the kitchen, yanked open a wooden door, and stepped through it.

I found myself at the front of the station, which featured another wide wooden platform with several sets of steps that led down to the ground. A gravel parking lot stretched out for about a hundred feet before giving way to a two-lane road in the distance. Gwen wasn't out here, although a black SUV was haphazardly parked nearby, more in the snow-cruled grass than on the bare gravel, as though someone had been in such a rush to reach the depot that they didn't care how dirty their tires got.

Even outside, I could still hear the mutters of the brick walls, and the sounds were growing increasingly loud and violent. Someone around here was definitely up to no good, and I would bet every dollar in the Pork Pit cash register that Gwen Frost was somehow involved.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and texted Bria. *Train stopped for lunch. Might be some trouble with the ride. Find me as soon as you can.*

Bria texted me back almost immediately. *What?!?! We're on our way!*

I sent her a thumbs-up emoji, then set my phone on silent and slid it back into my pocket. Bria, Finn, and Owen wouldn't get here in time to stop whatever bad thing was brewing, so I was on my own yet again.

I was okay with that.

Instead of wasting time backtracking through the kitchen, I stalked along the wooden platform, peering through the windows that fronted the station. I spotted another, smaller kitchen, along with some more display rooms and one area with an enormous video screen and several benches. A few folks were sitting on benches, watching a documentary about the historic depot. Even through the window, I could hear the narrator's booming, solemn tone, along with the sharp shriek of a train whistle and the loud, continued *chug-chug-chug* of the engine on the screen.

I moved on. Finally, at the far end of the platform, I looked through a window into a storage area. Chairs were stacked along the walls, with several large cardboard boxes and other odds and ends haphazardly strewn about. No framed photographs or video screens adorned the walls, and only a couple of bare bulbs dangled from the ceiling, casting out far more sinister shadows than the few they banished.

Gwen was standing in the middle of the storage area, texting on her phone. She was so focused on her device that she didn't notice the guy tiptoeing through the brick archway behind her. The guy was young, eighteen or so, like Gwen, with blond hair and dark eyes. He was wearing a long black coat over dark

clothes, but the sword belted to his waist glinted a bright silver.

In my experience, people didn't carry weapons unless they were planning on using them.

I glanced back over my shoulder, but no one was creeping up behind me on the platform, and no other vehicles had entered the parking lot. Had the guy with the sword come here alone? If so, it was going to be the last mistake he ever made. I didn't know what sort of trouble Gwen Frost was in, but I was going to help her get out of it.

I followed the platform around the corner of the building and came to another door. The knob turned easily in my hand, and I slipped back inside the depot. This door led into a short corridor, and voices murmured nearby, so I quickly moved in that direction. I stopped at the archway I'd seen through the window, eased up to the opening, and peered inside the storage area.

Gwen was standing with her back to one of the walls. She must have shoved her phone back into her jeans pocket, because both her hands were clenched into fists.

The blond guy was standing a few feet away from her, his sword now clutched in his hand. I snorted. Fencing class. Right.

Two older men were flanking the young guy, along with a woman, and all three of them were also clutching swords. A weird sense of déjà vu washed over me, and for a moment, I felt like I was back at the Winter's Web Renaissance Faire,

which had taken place in Ashland a couple of months ago. Only these people weren't dressed in knight and pirate costumes, and those swords definitely weren't wood or plastic. Even more telling, everyone looked like they knew *exactly* how to use the sharp, pointed weapons, especially the young guy, who seemed to be the leader, despite his age.

“Gwendolyn Frost,” the guy drawled. “Nike’s Champion. The girl who saved Mythos Academy. I thought you’d be taller.”

He chuckled at his old, tired, cliché joke, as did his three friends.

“Brayden Vitales,” Gwen replied in an icy tone. “I thought you’d be smarter than to face me in person.”

I grinned. The girl had some serious gumption. Even though she was surrounded and outnumbered, Gwen was still standing her ground and eyeing her enemies like she was plotting the best way to take them all down. I admired her courage, although four against one wasn't the best odds.

Good thing I was here to help with that.

“Let’s skip all the usual threats and other violent chitchat,” Brayden said. “We came here to recover the artifacts that you and your friends stole from our cabin, and you’re going to tell us where they are—every last one.”

Gwen’s chin lifted in defiance. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”



“Don’t play dumb with me,” Brayden replied, a bit of anger creeping into his voice. “We had security cameras hidden in the woods, and we saw you and your Protectorate friends storm inside the cabin and take our artifacts.”

He dug his hand into his coat pocket. I tensed, getting ready to leap into action, but he only pulled out a phone. “Besides, we tagged the most valuable artifacts, and the tracking app led us straight here.”

He wagged the phone at Gwen, then slid it back into his pocket.

“What are you planning to do with the artifacts?” Gwen asked. “Use them to start another war?”

Brayden laughed again, but it was a low, bitter sound. “Please. The Reapers are *finished*, especially now that Covington and his followers failed to take over the academy out in Snowline Ridge. As for me and my crew, well, we’ve decided to do the smart thing and get while the getting is good.”

“You’re going to sell the artifacts on the black market, take the money, and disappear.” Gwen shook her head in disgust. “Typical Reapers, running away whenever things don’t go exactly like you all planned.”

Brayden shrugged off her harsh accusation. “More or less. I’ll admit that it was clever of you and your friends to split up the artifacts, but it also gave us a chance to cut you off from the rest of them.”

She jerked back in surprise. “*You* caused the rockslide on the highway?”

Brayden gave her an evil grin. “Yep. Well, the other part of my crew did. I told them to recover the artifacts and kill your friends.”

Gwen’s face paled, but her hands curled into even tighter fists. “If you hurt Logan or anyone else, I’ll—”

“You’ll do what?” Brayden sneered at her. “Cry? Well, not for long, because we’re going to kill you, Oracle, just like the other half of my crew is killing your Spartan boyfriend and the rest of your friends right now.”

Oracle? Spartan? It had been a while since I’d read any mythology books, but I remembered the two types of ancient warriors, as well as Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. Unless I was gravely mistaken or these folks were engaged in some weird fantasy role-playing game, Mythos Academy was much more than just a fancy boarding school for rich kids, and Gwen and the rest of these people were far more powerful and dangerous than they appeared to be.

“But like I said, enough idle threats and chitchat,” Brayden said. “Where are the artifacts, exactly? Where is Minerva’s Dagger? Did you leave the artifacts on the train or did you stash them here at the depot?”

Gwen shuffled back, and I realized that her messenger bag was sitting on the floor behind her, as though she’d dropped it and then stepped in front of it to guard whatever was inside. Even from this distance, I could still see the faint outline of

that long rectangular box pressing up against the thick gray fabric. That bulge looked like just about the right size and shape to hold a dagger. So Gwen was carrying this so-called Minerva's Dagger in her bag, but where were the other artifacts Brayden had mentioned?

"Reaper scum," a voice with an English accent muttered.

Startled, I glanced around, wondering where that voice had come from, but none of the adults had opened their mouth, and I didn't see anyone else in the storage area. Gwen shifted on her feet again, and a flutter of movement caught my eye.

The sword sticking up out of her messenger bag was sort of ... *vibrating*. The sword's eye was also wide open, revealing its brilliant color, which was the same violet as Gwen's eyes.

"You'll never get away with this," the English voice sounded again, and the sword's mouth moved in perfect sync with the angry, muttered words.

Wait a second. Was her sword ... actually ... really ... truly ... *talking*?

I blinked and blinked, once again wondering if I was hallucinating or if my lemonade had been spiked with something or if my rampant paranoia was making me see things that weren't really there. But the sword's eye remained open, and no one else seemed surprised by the words coming out of its—his—mouth.

Brayden sneered down at the weapon. "Don't worry, little toothpick. We'll take you too. You'll fetch a few dollars on the

black market, even if we have to muzzle you.”

“A few dollars?” The sword sniffed, and the entire weapon vibrated with righteous indignation. “I’ll have you know that I am worth *far* more than a few measly dollars. Why, a talking sword is one of the rarest and most valuable artifacts of all! I’m bloody *priceless!*”

“You’re not helping, Vic!” Gwen hissed, glaring down at the sword.

Vic? So the sword had a name. Okay. I thought I’d seen some weird stuff in Ashland over the years, but talking weapons and sword-toting villains were a whole new experience for me. I’d been right before. Gwen Frost was up to her eyeballs in trouble—and it was up to me to get her out of it.

I studied Brayden, along with the two men and the woman. Besides the swords in their hands, it didn’t seem like they had any other weapons, and I didn’t see anyone else lurking around, waiting to jump into the fight.

Oh, sure, I could have palmed one of the silverstone knives hidden up my sleeves and sidled forward until I got close enough to strike. But sometimes the best approach was the most direct one, especially given the fact that Brayden looked like he was about three seconds away from lunging forward and slashing his sword across Gwen’s chest. So I loudly cleared my throat, then stepped around the archway and strode forward, my boots *tap-tap-tap-tapping* out an ominous beat on the stone floor.

The two men whirled around, although the woman kept her eyes on Gwen. Brayden turned to the side so that he could see both Gwen and me at the same time.

Brayden frowned. “Who are you?”

“Your worst nightmare, sugar,” I drawled.

His blond eyebrows creased together in obvious confusion. “I didn’t realize that any of the nightmare gods and goddesses had Champions.”

I shook my head, just as confused as he was. “Trust me. I’m nobody’s Champion. I just always wanted to say that to an enemy.”

Brayden glanced over at his friends, and they all shrugged back at him. Even Gwen was staring at me with a bewildered expression, as was Vic, her talking sword, and I got the distinct impression that everyone thought I was a few barbecue sandwiches short of a picnic.

Anger sparked in my chest, joining my own increasing confusion. *I* was fine. *They* were the ones spouting gibberish about mythological warriors and artifacts and whatnot.

“Forget about Champions,” I growled. “Here’s the deal. Lower your swords, and move away from my new friend Gwen.”

“Or else what?” Brayden asked the inevitable question.

A cold, thin smile spread across my face. “Or else I’ll kill every single one of you.”

Brayden studied me a little more closely, but he didn't seem overly concerned about my threat. "I don't know how you'll be killing any of us, lady, since you don't even have a sword."

He chuckled, as did his three adult friends. Idiots. Just because they couldn't see my weapons didn't mean that they weren't there.

"Trust me, pal," I said. "You don't want to mess with the Spider."

Once again, confusion filled Brayden's face, along with everyone else's. "So you're the Champion for a spider goddess?"

I threw my hands up in consternation. "Will you stop babbling about gods and goddesses?" I jerked my thumb at my chest. "*I'm* the Spider. Me. Gin Blanco. No one else involved."

Not so much as a hint of recognition sparked in his or anyone else's eyes.

"Do you think she tripped and hit her head?" Vic asked, breaking the tense, awkward silence. "Or maybe she's been drugged. Gwen, did you see anyone slip her anything on the train?"

More frustration filled me. Having to explain exactly who I was and what I did was rather annoying. I much preferred it when my enemies automatically quaked in their boots at the mere whisper of my assassin name.

"*I'm* the Spider," I repeated, my voice even sharper than before. "The notorious assassin who runs a barbecue restaurant

in her spare time. The queen of the Ashland underworld, feared by crime bosses near and far.”

More blank looks all around. For once, my reputation did *not* precede me.

“Oh, yeah,” Vic piped up. “She’s definitely been drugged.”

I sighed. “I killed Mab Monroe and Mason Mitchell and a whole bunch of other bad folks. Seriously, none of this is ringing a bell?”

Brayden shrugged, not the least bit impressed with my credentials, such as they were. “Never heard of you.” An evil grin spread across his face. “As for being an assassin, well, we’re Reapers. We know all about killing people.”

The two men also grinned, while the woman smirked at me and twirled her sword around in her hand, as if she just couldn’t wait to cut me down with the sharp, silver blade.

Gwen shook her head. “You need to get out of here, Gin. Assassin or not, you’ve never dealt with Reapers before.”

“Don’t worry about me, sweetheart. I can take care of myself. Been doing it for a long time now.”

I crooked my index finger at Brayden. “What are you waiting for? If you’re such a badass, then come on over here and try to kill me with that fancy sword. I’ll be more than happy to take it away and gut you with your own weapon.”

Perhaps it was my confident purr, but for the first time, a bit of doubt flickered across his face. “There are four of us and one of you.”

“First of all, I can count just fine, sugar,” I drawled. “And second, those are terrible odds—for you and your friends.”

A flush swept up his neck, and anger bloomed like ugly red roses in his cheeks. Brayden opened his mouth, probably to snarl some insult right back at me, but a voice cut him off.

“What’s going on in here?”

I glanced to the left. Winifred, the conductor, strode into the storage area, an odd look on her face. She stopped about ten feet away from me, Gwen, and the Reapers, or whatever weird term these people were calling themselves.

Brayden flashed her a wide smile. “Nothing’s wrong. We were just having a little private chat with our new friends. That’s all.”

Winifred’s forehead crinkled in confusion, and her gaze flicked from one person’s sword to the next. She stepped forward, as if to get a better view of everyone, and I did the same thing, putting myself in between her and the Reapers.

Winifred stopped and gave me a puzzled look. “Are you ... trying to protect me?”

“Something like that,” I replied. “Stay behind me, Winifred.”

She frowned and shifted backward. A soft *skitter-skitter* sounded, and my gaze dropped to her feet. The laces on her right boot were loose and dragging along the floor, hence the odd noise.



I started to lift my gaze, but once again, I noticed how her scuffed brown boots didn't match the rest of her sleek black uniform. Not only that, but her pants were also too long, as were the sleeves of her jacket, almost like ... she was wearing someone else's clothes.

Like she had killed the real conductor, donned their uniform, and taken their place on the train.

As soon as the thought popped into my mind, I opened my mouth to shout a warning to Gwen, but Winifred was quicker than me—much, much quicker, as though she had some sort of supernatural speed.

Winifred yanked a gun out of her pants pocket, aimed it at me, and pulled the trigger.

*Crack!*

The bullet punched straight into my chest, and I dropped to the floor.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### GWEN

“NO!” I YELLED. “NO! No! No!”

I started to rush over to Gin, who was crumpled on the floor, but Brayden stepped up and brandished his sword at me.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he said. “You stay right there, Gwen.”

I had no choice but to freeze. How had things gone so terribly wrong so quickly? Ten minutes ago, I’d slipped away from the luncheon and the displays in the main lobby and snuck into this storage area to have some privacy while I texted Logan for an update. He hadn’t answered me, so I’d texted Daphne next and then Carson, but no one was responding, not even Oliver or Alexei. I’d been so worried and focused on my phone that I hadn’t heard Brayden creep up behind me until it was too late. I hadn’t even had a chance to grab Vic to try to cut down any of the Reapers.

My gaze dropped to Gin, who was sprawled across the floor like a broken doll, and my heart squeezed tight with worry,

dread, and a heaping dose of guilt. Now a woman was dead because of my lack of awareness. And Logan, Daphne, and the rest of my friends might be dead too, if Brayden was telling the truth about the rest of the Reapers causing that rockslide to steal the artifacts that Nickamedes, Professor Metis, and Coach Ajax had loaded into the SUVs.

Winifred, the fake conductor, kept her gun trained on Gin. I glanced back over my shoulder, but no one came to investigate the commotion. The documentary blaring in the nearby room must have drowned out the sound of the shot.

After a few seconds, when Gin didn't move, Winifred lowered the weapon to her side and glared at Brayden.

"I thought you idiots were going to grab the girl quietly," she hissed. "Not make a scene and let one of the passengers sneak up on you."

"We *did* do things quietly," Brayden protested. "It's not *my* fault that some random person decided to play hero. She even said she was an assassin, as if any mere assassin would be a match for Reapers like us. Can you believe that?"

He laughed, and the rest of his crew joined in with his hearty chuckles. Anger surged through my body, and my hands clenched into fists again.

Winifred kept glaring at Brayden, not at all amused. "Well, I don't care who she is, little brother. Only that you messed up —*again*."

Little brother? I glanced back and forth between Winifred and Brayden. Same blond hair, same dark brown eyes, same straight nose and pointed chin. The resemblance between them was obvious, and I mentally kicked myself for not seeing it before.

The Protectorate had compiled a detailed file on Brayden Vitales, just as they did on all known Reapers, and I remembered one of the documents mentioning that he had an older sister, an Amazon, with the same sort of amazing speed that he had, although I hadn't thought much of it at the time. But of course, his sister would be just as evil as he was, and apparently, she was the brains behind the Dolos Crew, its actual leader. Smart of Winifred to let her brother be the front man and thus the focus of the Protectorate investigation, while she stayed safely hidden in the background.

Brayden waved off his sister's harsh words. "I didn't mess up anything. Yeah, we had someone try to play hero, but she's dead now. Problem solved."

Winifred shook her head in exasperation. "Problem solved? Please. I had to swoop in and clean up your mess, just like I *always* do. Why, you wouldn't have even realized that the Protectorate had found your little mountain cabin if *I* hadn't set up those security cameras in the woods. You'd all be twiddling your thumbs in Protectorate custody right now if I hadn't gotten an alert on my phone and warned you to leave the artifacts behind and get out."

At her sharp, chiding tone, the other three Reapers dropped their heads and shifted on their feet, but Brayden huffed and rolled his eyes.

“And I have thanked you for that, numerous times,” he snapped. “Now, let’s get what we came here for. Agreed?”

Winifred shot him another angry look. The two of them might be brother and sister, but there was little love lost there. Yeah, I was totally Team Winifred, and I would have gotten tired of keeping Brayden from screwing up too.

“Fine,” Winifred muttered. “I’ve searched the depot. There’s nowhere to hide the artifacts in here, so she must have stashed them on the train. Let’s go. *Quietly* this time. We can’t afford any more mistakes.”

Brayden rolled his eyes again, but Winifred ignored him and waved her gun at me. “Get your bag, Champion. Now.”

I didn’t have a choice. She could easily shoot me before I managed to get my hands on Vic. So I slowly leaned down, grabbed my messenger bag from the floor, and hoisted the strap onto my right shoulder. The bottom of the bag bumped against my hip, along with the box inside that contained Minerva’s Dagger.

It was only a matter of time before the Reapers searched my bag and found the weapon and Winifred figured out that the other artifacts were stored in the train’s baggage car. I had to figure out a way to escape before the Reapers realized that I was utterly expendable, or Gin would have died for nothing.

“We’re going to get on the train, and you’re going to tell us exactly where the rest of the artifacts are,” Brayden said. “And if you’re still feeling a little reluctant, well, just look at your new friend lying on the floor.”

He gestured over at Gin, and my heart squeezed tight again. She’d been so strong, so calm, so confident in herself and her skills. Had she really been an assassin? I would probably never find out.

I frowned. Wait a second. The last time I’d looked at Gin, I could have sworn that her right hand had been flat on the floor. But now her fingers were curled inward, almost like she was hiding something in her palm, although I didn’t know what, if anything, that meant. Winifred had shot her in the chest, and not even a Spartan like Logan could survive something like that.

“You two, stay behind and get rid of the body,” Winifred ordered, pointing at the two men. “Dump our would-be heroine in the woods at the edge of the depot, then get on the train. With any luck, the animals will come and pick her bones clean. I’ve heard rumors that there are some wild Fenrir wolves in the area. Maybe even some Nemean prowlers too.”

I shuddered at the thought of the oversize wolves and panther-like prowlers tearing into Gin’s body, but there was nothing I could do to stop the Reapers.

The two men nodded and slid their swords back into the scabbards on their belts, but Brayden brandished his blade at me again.

“Let’s go,” he growled.

I managed one more guilty glance down at Gin, who was still lying on the floor, before he shoved me forward and forced me out of the storage area.



WE MARCHED DOWN THE corridor back toward the main part of the depot. Brayden and the female Reaper sheathed their swords and stored the weapons under their long black overcoats. Winifred also shoved her gun into her pants pocket, hiding it from sight.

We quickly reached the lobby. The luncheon was over, and folks were heading outside to the wooden platform that lined the back of the station.

Brayden clamped his hand around my upper arm. “Come along quietly, and don’t make a fuss,” he warned. “Or we’ll start killing the passengers.”

His eyes gleamed, and a cruel, sadistic grin creased his face. “Actually, make a fuss if you want to, Gwen. I wouldn’t mind cutting down a few mortals. Staying off the grid and planning heists is pretty boring. It’s been a long time since I’ve had any real practice—or fun—with my sword.”

I glared at Brayden, who just cackled in return.

Once again, I didn’t have a choice, so I let him steer me past the stragglers, who were all still cluelessly talking, laughing, and taking photos with their phones. Brayden gestured for me

to open one of the glass doors, and we stepped outside, crossed the wooden platform, and boarded the train. Winifred and the female Reaper followed us.

“I have to keep up appearances as the conductor,” Winifred said in a low voice. “Brayden, you stay with Gwen in here. Rosie, you keep an eye on them, and make sure the girl doesn’t try to bolt or warn the other passengers what’s going on.”

Rosie, the other Reaper, nodded and dropped into a nearby seat.

“I don’t need a bloody babysitter,” Brayden muttered.

“Considering I just had to shoot a woman, and we still don’t have our hands on the artifacts, I’m not taking any chances,” Winifred snapped back. “Now, be a good boy, and try not to screw up any more today, okay? I’m going to start looking for the artifacts. They have to be on board somewhere.”

Brayden glared at Winifred, who ignored him, spun around, and left the car. Rosie grabbed a magazine about the tourist town of Cloudburst Falls, West Virginia, that someone had left behind on a nearby seat and thumbed through it, although she kept glancing over at me.

“Okay, Gwen,” Brayden hissed in my ear. “You’re going to sit down and behave, or I’m going to make you wish you had cooperated—”

“Excuse us,” a voice called out.



Brayden and I both froze and looked over our shoulders. An elderly couple was waiting for us to move out of their way so they could walk down the aisle and find their seats. Rosie tensed and slowly lowered the borrowed magazine to her lap.

Brayden flashed the couple a friendly smile and tightened his grip in warning, his fingers digging painfully into my upper arm. “Oh, sure. Sorry about that. My girlfriend and I were just talking about how good lunch was.”

I wanted to punch him in the face for daring to call me his girlfriend, but I forced myself to smile at the couple, knowing that Brayden would kill them if I didn’t play along.

“That’s right,” I chirped in a bright voice. “The food was so good.”

The man and woman frowned, as though they could hear the blatant lie in my voice, but I kept my fake smile plastered on my face. They murmured about how good the food had been, then moved past us.

The second they were out of the way, Brayden shoved me forward and pushed me down into my seat, then took the one across from me where Gin had been sitting earlier. Another wave of guilt and sadness washed over my heart. Whether she’d been an assassin or not, Gin Blanco hadn’t deserved to die just because she’d had the misfortune to try to save me from a bunch of greedy thieves.

Brayden leaned back in his seat. To a casual observer, he probably looked like he was relaxing, but he shoved his coat aside and curled his hand around the hilt of the sword belted to

his waist. I knew that he would draw the weapon, lunge forward, and gut me without hesitation if I did anything he didn't like. A few seats away, Rosie also dropped her hand to her own sword.

“Reaper scum,” Vic hissed in a low voice, still sticking up out of the top of my messenger bag.

Brayden rolled his eyes at the sword's snarky words, then focused on my bag, which I'd propped up in the seat beside me. I'd tried to turn it so that the bulge of the box wasn't so obvious, but his gaze locked onto it anyway. Drat.

“So that's where you're hiding the dagger. Of course. Hand it over. Now.”

I glared at him, but Brayden casually patted the hilt of his sword.

“Hand it over, or I'll start stabbing people,” he replied. “A few of them might escape, but they won't all get off the train before I kill them.”

Yet again, I had no choice but to do as commanded, so I reached into the dark depths of my bag, drew out a long, rectangular gray velvet box, and passed it over to him.

Brayden glanced around, but other than Rosie, no one was paying any attention to us, so he slowly cracked open the box. His eyes brightened, and he let out a low whistle of appreciation. “Now, *that* is an artifact.”

Most of the mythological weapons I'd seen were rather plain, and the power hidden inside them was far more

important and valuable than any adornments attached to the outside.

Not this dagger.

Minerva's Dagger was crusted with jewels. A stunning array of rubies, topazes, citrines, and white diamonds covered the hilt, forming a pretty mosaic pattern, while smaller, matching jeweled chips were embedded in the gold blade itself. Given the plethora of gemstones, the dagger looked like it was intended for more decorative and ceremonial purposes rather than being used in battle, although I would have dearly loved to snatch it away from Brayden and see just how sharp and strong the blade was by plunging it into his rotten heart.

Brayden tossed the box onto the empty seat beside him, then carefully grabbed the dagger by the blade and held it up to the bright afternoon sunlight streaming in through the windows. The mosaic pattern on the hilt featured a circle with several jagged rays radiating out of it, making it look like a dazzling jeweled sun. Strangely enough, the pattern reminded me of the scars I'd seen on Gin's palms earlier. What had she called them? Oh, yes—spider runes, whatever that meant.

A fresh wave of guilt and sadness crashed through my chest, and I made a silent vow to myself—that Brayden, Winifred, and the other Reapers were going to pay for what they'd done to Gin Blanco.

Brayden let out another low, appreciative whistle. "Just the jewels on the hilt alone are worth several hundred thousand dollars. We could always pry them off and sell them one

gemstone at a time. Or maybe we'll sell the intact dagger to a mythological collector for even *more* money." A greedy grin creased his face. "I'm not too picky as long as I get my cut of the score."

The whistle shrieked, making me flinch, and Winifred stepped back into the car. She slowly moved along the aisle, still playing the part of the friendly conductor, nodding and smiling as she reminded everyone that the train was departing and to please take their seats.

She stopped beside Brayden and gave him a sharp look. "Put that dagger away before someone else sees it!" she hissed.

He huffed with annoyance, but he lowered the dagger to his side. Winifred walked on, and Brayden glowered at her back.

"Seems like you have some issues with your big sister," I said.

"Winifred is fifteen years older, so she thinks that automatically makes *her* the boss," he grumbled, a sour expression twisting his face. "She might be the brains of our crew and plan all our heists, but *I'm* the boss."

He puffed up and jerked his thumb at his chest, and I had to resist the urge to roll my eyes at the petulant tone in his voice. Brayden wasn't the boss of anything, except being a whiny brat.

Winifred reached the end of the car, then turned around and headed back this way. She stopped and asked Rosie

something, but the other Reaper shook her head, as though she didn't know the answer. Winifred plastered another smile on her face, but it was a tight, worried expression. She chatted with a few more passengers, then strode over, bent down, and looked at Brayden, as though she was just making casual conversation.

“Where are Dennis and George?” she asked. “They haven't texted me, and I didn't see them get on board the train.”

“I'm not their mom,” Brayden replied, his voice even more petulant than before. “How should I know? They're probably just in another car.”

Winifred shot him a nasty look, but she straightened up and moved on. She opened the door at the front of the car and stepped over to the next one. The whistle shrieked again, and the train slowly chugged away from the platform, heading down the backside of Pine Crest Mountain.

The other passengers, including Rosie, peered out the windows at the pretty scenery, but Brayden leaned forward and fixed his dark brown gaze on me. “Now, let's get down to business. Where did you hide the rest of the artifacts?”

I bit my lip, thinking about the best way to get out of this mess. I didn't want to reveal the artifacts' location, but Winifred would figure it out soon enough. Besides, I didn't dare fight the Reapers while innocent people were around, so maybe I needed to go where there were *no* innocent people around.

“Where do you think they are?” I snapped. “Where on this train is big enough to hide anything? What’s the one place that is not full of passengers?”

He gave me a blank look.

“The artifacts are in the baggage car, you idiot.”

Anger stained his cheeks a dark, mottled red. I *cluck-cluck-clucked* my tongue, mocking him. “Your sister’s right. You are definitely *not* the brains of the crew.”

Brayden growled, leaned forward, and swiped Minerva’s Dagger across the back of my left hand. Given his Roman speed, he was simply too quick for me to stop, and I didn’t even have time to try to dodge the blow. One moment, Brayden was glaring at me. The next, he was slicing the dagger through the air, the blade glinting a bright, sinister gold.

Even though it was adorned with jewels, the dagger still bit deep into my skin, and blood welled up out of the wound. I hissed in pain and surprise and started to jerk back, but Brayden clamped his fingers around my left hand. He tightened his grip and twisted, making even more pain explode in the wound, but that was a small misery compared with the sudden, overwhelming surge of my psychometry magic.

The second his skin touched mine, I saw everything there was to know about Brayden Vitales.

Images flickered through my mind one after another, almost too fast to follow. A young Brayden scurrying along after a

much older Winifred, trying to keep up with her longer strides. Brayden watching with wide-eyed fascination as Winifred swung a sword and cut down a girl in front of her. Brayden struggling to lift his own sword while Winifred circled around and barked out instructions. Brayden trying to obey her directions but always tripping over his own feet or losing his grip on his sword or doing something else clumsy. Winifred mercilessly mocking every single mistake Brayden made and then mocking him even more as angry, frustrated tears slid down his cheeks ...

“Not so tough now, are you, Gwen?” Brayden hissed.

He dug his fingers even deeper into my skin, and a fresh wave of pain and memories bloomed in my mind—including one of Minerva’s Dagger.

I reached out with my magic and latched onto that image. Brayden was in the Crius Coliseum, standing in front of a glass artifact case and staring down at the dagger, which glimmered like liquid gold.

“Soon, baby,” he murmured, stroking his fingers across the glass. “Soon you’ll be all mine, along with the other artifacts. Then I’ll have enough money to leave Winifred and the rest of these losers behind and finally start my *own* crew ...”

Brayden abruptly shoved me away. I fell back against my seat, sweating, clutching my wounded hand, and gasping for breath. He smirked and wagged the dagger at me again, and my stomach roiled at the sight of my own blood glistening on the blade. Maybe it was my imagination, but the jewels

embedded in the hilt seemed to glow a little more brightly than before, almost as if they approved of the pain and violence the Reaper had inflicted on me.

“Maybe that will teach you to keep your smart mouth shut.” He glared at me, although his anger quickly congealed into a cold, sadistic grin. “Although I’m happy to give you another lesson, Gwen, just in case you didn’t get the point this time around.”

His low, evil chuckles scraped against my skin like razors, and my wound throbbed in response. I glanced over at Rosie, and the other Reaper smirked, clearly enjoying my suffering.

Brayden’s laughter slowly died down. He glanced around, but no one had noticed what he’d done except Rosie, and he jerked his head at me.

“Wrap that up,” he ordered. “I can’t have you dripping blood all over the place for the mortals to see.”

Under his sharp, watchful gaze, I dug into my messenger bag, shoved my hand past a stack of *Karma Girl* comic books, and grabbed a roll of purple gauze. Nyx, the Fenrir wolf I was taking care of, had recently decided that she loved to chase strings, so I’d been using the gauze as a sort of toy for her.

I wrapped the gauze around the wound as tightly as I could manage with one hand and shoved the end underneath the other layers to hold it all together. My blood swiftly seeped through the purple gauze, staining it an ugly brown, but there was nothing I could do about that right now.



The other passengers kept murmuring to each other, pointing at the various trees and rocks they spotted through the windows, and generally oohing and aahing over the snowy scenery, but a tense silence descended over Brayden and me. A couple of minutes later, his phone beeped, and he pulled it out of his coat pocket and stared at the message on the screen.

“Winifred says the other employees are finally taking a break, so it’s time for us to get the rest of the artifacts.” He jerked his head at Rosie, who got up, came over, and dropped into the seat next to him.

“Watch her,” Brayden ordered, sliding Minerva’s Dagger into his coat pocket. “I need to text Winifred and let her know the artifacts are hidden in the baggage car.”

Rosie nodded, pushed her jacket aside again, and curled her hand around the hilt of her sword. She never took her eyes off me as Brayden started typing on his phone.

Every button he hit was like a grain of sand trickling through an hourglass, and I was rapidly running out of time to figure out how to defeat Brayden and the other Reapers, protect the artifacts, and get off the train alive.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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### GIN

THE THING NO ONE ever tells you about getting shot is that it bloody *hurts*, more than just about any other kind of injury. And over the years, I had been shot, stabbed, choked, cut, punched, crushed, burned, and bludgeoned enough times to know. Yep, that was me, Gin Blanco, wound expert. Sometimes I thought I should just quit the assassin business and start training to become a nurse. Because I certainly had a lot of experience dealing with injuries.

Like the massive, puffy bruise that was aching in my chest right now.

Winifred had been going for a kill shot, and her aim had been true. Her bullet would have blasted straight into my heart—if I hadn't used my Stone magic to harden my body into an impenetrable shell. Even then, the bullet had still hurt, as though someone had hit me in the chest with a sledgehammer.

The force of the blow had knocked the wind out of me, and I'd crumpled to the floor, although no one had seemed to

notice that I wasn't bleeding all over the stone. Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy of Winifred and the other Reapers not to check and make sure that I was really down for the count.

So I lay there with my eyes closed, listening to my enemies plot, as well as Gwen's answers to their questions. Sweet of her to be so worried about me, but I could take care of myself, and it sounded like she could too, given all the things she said.

Although I still wasn't sure why Gwen kept calling them Reapers. To me, they were just your run-of-the-mill thieves, but I wasn't about to quibble over semantics. It didn't matter what fancy name they gave themselves. Winifred, Brayden, and the others had tried to kill me, so I was going to return the favor. Only I wouldn't be so foolish as to let any of them live, even if I wasn't a Champion for some mythological goddess ... or whatever Gwen Frost truly was.

"You two, stay behind and get rid of the body," Winifred ordered her minions. "Dump our would-be heroine in the woods at the edge of the depot, then get on the train. With any luck, the animals will come and pick her bones clean ..."

The other Reapers murmured their agreement, and several sets of footsteps sounded, including the squeaking of Gwen's sneakers, along with a couple of heavier thumps. My enemies were splitting up. Excellent. That would make it easier for me to kill all of them.

The last of the footsteps faded away, but I remained still and silent on the floor, as though I truly was dead, instead of about to make a whole bunch of other people that way.

“I can’t believe Winifred is making *us* get rid of the body,” one of the men grumbled. “She shot the woman, so *she* should have been the one to haul the body outside. Or made her stupid kid brother do it. Not dumped the job on us just because we’re Vikings and stronger than she is.”

“No kidding,” the second man muttered his agreement. “I don’t mind getting rid of a body, but tracking down the girl and retrieving the artifacts was supposed to be an easy payday. So far, nothing about this has been *easy*.”

Aw, being a criminal was *so* hard these days. I hid a grin. If he only knew how much harder—and bloodier—it was about to get.

“Come on,” the first man grumbled again. “Let’s carry her outside and be done with things. We still need to get on the train before it leaves.”

Some more footsteps scuffed across the floor. One of the men must have squatted down, because his sour breath wafted over my cheek, and I could smell the burned coffee he’d drunk earlier in the day. My fingers tightened around the knife I’d palmed on my way down to the floor during my supposed death. The spider rune stamped into the silverstone hilt pressed into the larger matching scar that adorned my palm, and a sense of calm resolve and deadly purpose settled over me. Nothing steadied me like the cold, hard feel of a knife in my hand.

The coffee drinker dug his fingers into my right shoulder and rolled me over onto my back. My eyes snapped open, and

I gave him a bright, sunny smile.

“Boo!” I hissed.

The man flinched and jerked back, but I surged up, fisted my hand in his coat, and yanked him right back down toward me—and my knife.

The silverstone blade punched into his chest, making him yelp with pain. The man lashed out again and again, trying to swat me away like a pesky bug. I didn’t know anything about Vikings, but he was as strong as he had claimed to be, and his brute force easily rivaled that of a giant or a dwarf. But I used my Stone magic to harden my skin again, and his hard, heavy blows didn’t do any real damage to my face, neck, and arms.

The man pitched over onto his side, and I followed the motion, maneuvering around so I was on top of him. Then I ripped my knife out of his chest and slashed it across his throat, and his pain-filled yelps morphed into desperate, choked gurgles.

This guy was already more dead than alive, so I scrambled to my feet and whirled around, searching for the second man.

A glint of metal caught my eye. On instinct, I ducked, and a sword zipped through the air where my head had been. The second man—the Reaper—snarled in frustration and whirled around. He lifted his sword and came at me again.

I waited until he was in range, then reached for my magic. This time, I tapped into my elemental Ice power, and I snapped up my hand and blasted the Reaper with a cloud of

Ice daggers. The cold jagged chunks punched into his face, neck, and chest, bruising and cutting his skin. The man growled in pain, but he kept charging forward, so I whipped up my knife to block his blow.

*Clang!*

His sword crashed into my knife, and the blow rocked my entire body, hard enough to make me bite down on my own tongue. This guy was even stronger than the first one had been. I wondered if that was what made him a Viking, or maybe even a Reaper too, but it didn't much matter. Strong or not, I was about to make him dead.

The man snarled and drew his sword back for another swing, but I darted forward and spun past him. Then I whirled back around and lashed out with my boot, driving it into the side of his left leg. He grunted in surprise, even as his knee buckled, and he toppled to the ground.

I didn't give him a chance to get back up.

I surged down and forward and rammed my knife into his back, making him scream. Then I yanked the blade out, dug my fingers into his hair, pulled his head back, and cut his throat.

This guy's screams also morphed into desperate, choked gurgles. I released his hair, and he thumped to the floor, quickly bleeding out, just like the first man had.

I straightened up, my gaze sweeping back and forth across the storage area, searching for more enemies to fight. But the

other Reapers had left, taking Gwen along with them, and I was all alone. No footsteps pounded in this direction, and it didn't seem like anyone had heard the sounds of the fight—

A phone beeped.

Curious, I tucked my knife back up my sleeve, then crouched down and rifled through the first man's pockets. I pulled out his phone and read the message from Winifred.

*Hurry up. Train leaving in five minutes.*

I slid the dead guy's phone into my jeans pocket, right alongside my own phone, then straightened up. Winifred was right.

I had a train to catch.



I QUICKLY DRAGGED THE dead men off to one side of the room, then haphazardly piled some of the cardboard boxes on top of the bodies, hiding them from sight as best I could. Then I hurried out of the storage area.

By the time I made it back to the main lobby, the luncheon was officially over, the waiters had packed up all the leftover food and disappeared into the kitchen, and everyone else was already on board the train. I opened one of the glass doors, scurried to the left, and darted behind one of the wide brick columns that supported the platform roof. Then I peered through the train windows, trying to spot my enemies.

No ... no ... no ...

*There* they were.

Gwen and Brayden were sitting across from each other in one of the cars, with Rosie, the Reaper woman, perched a few seats away. And of course, Winifred was ambling along the aisle, smiling and nodding as though she really were a conductor instead of just a murderous pretender. It was a smart disguise. The conductor had free rein of the entire train, and she could do just about anything she wanted while she was wearing that stolen uniform.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket, but I didn't have any messages from Bria, Finn, or Owen. Weird. I would have expected Bria to have sent me a string of texts by now, asking where I was and what was happening, along with more and more frowny faces. My sister loved emojis just as much as Silvio Sanchez, my personal assistant, did.

I sent my friends a group text explaining what was going on, along with the fact that the real conductor was probably dead somewhere back at the main Pine Crest station. I finished by saying that the train was about to leave and asked them to meet me at the Cypress Mountain station, then slid my phone back into my pocket.

I looked through the windows again. Gwen, Brayden, and Rosie were all still in the same car, but Winifred had moved on to a different one.

The whistle screamed, the engine clanked, the wheels churned, and the train slowly pulled away from the station. I



held my position, not wanting any of the Reapers to spot me. If they realized I was still alive, then they might hurt Gwen or some of the other passengers. Winifred certainly seemed determined to get her hands on whatever artifacts were on board, and I had no doubt that she would kill every single person who got in her way.

I waited until the car with Gwen, Brayden, and Rosie had moved past my position. Then I stepped out from behind the column and started running, my boots slapping against the platform's thick wooden planks. The train was swiftly gaining speed, and I had to time this just right, or I would be left behind, and Gwen would probably wind up dead.

So I pumped my arms and forced my legs to move even faster as I rushed toward the end of the platform. I picked up my pace a little more, took one final step, and then leaped forward as far as I could, stretching my arms out wide, wide, wide ...

For a moment, I hung in the air, like a spider swinging on a strand of its own web. Then my chest crashed up against the back of the caboose. Gravity took over, pulling me down, down, down, even as I flailed out with my hands, searching for something, anything, that I could grab onto ...

My fingers closed around one of the rungs on the ladder attached to the back of the caboose. My body jerked to an abrupt stop, wrenching my left shoulder. The sharp, painful motion almost made me lose my grip, but I used my Stone magic to harden my fingers and forced myself to hang on.

I dangled there for a few more seconds, my brain sloshing around inside my skull. The world slowly stopped spinning around, and I was finally able to reach up and grab the rung with my other hand, as well as anchor my boots on another rung below.

I glanced down, watching the metal tracks whiz by below my feet. Not even my Stone magic would have saved me if I'd fallen off and somehow been sucked under the train's chugging wheels. I shuddered at the thought, then quickly pushed it away.

I'd caught the train—literally. Now I needed to get back inside and help Gwen. So I looked up, reached for the next rung on the ladder, and started climbing.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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### GWEN

TRY AS I MIGHT, I just couldn't think of a way to take down Brayden and the other Reapers. At least, not without a whole lot of innocent people potentially getting hurt in the process. So I decided to bide my time, stick to my original plan, and wait for the Reapers to take me to the baggage car. Besides, every second Brayden wasted texting on his phone was another second for Logan, Daphne, and the rest of my friends to escape the Reapers' trap, get past the rockslide, and come find me.

That's what I kept telling myself, over and over again, instead of dwelling on the possibility that Logan, Daphne, and the others might already be dead.

An image of Logan lying by the side of the road, blood coating his chest, his eyes empty and fixed on the sky, filled my mind, but I shoved it away. Logan freaking Quinn was a Spartan and one of the best warriors in the mythological world. It would take a whole lot more than a rockslide and a

Reaper ambush to kill him. Not to mention all the other smarts, skills, and magic that Daphne, Carson, Oliver, and Alexei had, along with Nickamedes, Professor Metis, and Coach Ajax. They were going to be fine. My friends were going to be just *fine*.

And if they *weren't* fine ... well, I would at least take down the Reapers who had a hand in hurting them—starting with Brayden, Winifred, and Rosie.

Brayden finally put his phone away. A couple of minutes later, Winifred stepped back into the car and jerked her thumb over her shoulder. Brayden nodded back at her, as did Rosie.

He grinned at me. “Time to find the pot of gold at the end of the Protectorate rainbow.” His grin faded away, and a cold light filled his eyes. “Get up and head toward the front of the car. And don’t try anything stupid, or I’ll shove this dagger in your back and watch you bleed out.”

Once again, I didn’t have a choice, so I reached over and grabbed my messenger bag. I slung the strap onto my shoulder, making sure that Vic’s hilt was within easy reach of my right hand. Rosie stood up, stepped out into the aisle, and backed up. Brayden clamped his hand around my upper arm again, then hauled me to my feet.

I glanced around, but the other passengers were busy talking, admiring the scenery, and taking photos with their phones and cameras. Rosie gave me a cold look, her hand darting into her coat and curling around the hilt of the sword

belted to her waist. Like Brayden, she wouldn't hesitate to gut me if I didn't do exactly as the Reapers commanded.

“Come along, baby,” Brayden crooned for the benefit of anyone listening. “Let's go see what the view is like from another car.”

*Baby?* Ugh! I glared at the Reaper. My fingers curled into a tight fist, and I had to resist the urge to punch him in the face.

Brayden smirked at me, then dragged me along the aisle, heading toward the door at the front of the car. Once again, I had no choice but to go along with him, but as soon as I got the chance, I was going to grab Vic and take down Brayden, Rosie, and Winifred—for my friends, and especially for Gin.

With that dark vow beating in my heart, I plastered a smile on my face and let Brayden lead me to his doom.



**BRAYDEN FORCED ME THROUGH** one car after another. They were all filled with people, but no one paid any attention to us. A few times, we had to stop to let other folks move in front of or past us as they returned to their seats, but everyone smiled and nodded, and no one had any idea about how much danger they were in.

We left yet another car behind, and Winifred was waiting on the small platform outside. I glanced around, wondering if I could shove at least one of the Reapers off the train, but a

waist-high metal railing lined the platform to prevent things like that from happening. Too bad.

“I just checked,” Winifred called out, raising her voice to be heard over the train’s continued *chug-chug-chug*. “The baggage car is empty. Follow me.”

She turned around, opened the door on the next car, and stepped through to the other side. Brayden tightened his grip on my arm and dragged me along behind him. Rosie followed us, then closed and locked the door behind her.

A wide aisle ran down the center of the baggage car, and metal shelves lined the walls, stretching from the floor up to the low ceiling. Several suitcases of various shapes, sizes, and colors were sitting on the shelves, and a couple of open cardboard boxes containing packs of cheese crackers, bags of trail mix, and cartons of soft drinks were squatting next to each other on the floor.

My gaze skipped past the suitcases and snacks and landed on the wooden crates nestled together on the shelves near the center of the car. Each crate featured a large symbol stenciled in black—two gryphons sitting side by side, just like the statues that perched on the steps outside the Library of Antiquities on the Mythos campus. My heart sank. I’d hoped the Reapers might at least have to search through the luggage for the artifacts, but the crates might as well have had *Property of Mythos Academy* painted on them in big, bold letters.

Brayden let out a loud whoop of excitement, then dropped my arm and hurried toward the crates like a Nemean prowler

bounding straight toward a rabbit. Winifred also hurried forward, although Rosie remained behind me, her hand still on her sword, blocking the exit.

I reached out and took hold of one of the metal shelves, as though I was using it to steady myself against the train's rocking motion. Rosie kept staring at me, still wary and suspicious. I sighed and dropped my head, as though I was utterly defeated, although I kept watching her out of the corner of my eye.

Rosie stared at me a few more seconds, then shifted her focus over to Winifred and Brayden. The second she was distracted, I discreetly brought up my right hand and curled it around Vic's hilt. For once, the talking sword was silent, although he vibrated slightly against my fingers, telling me he was ready to strike whenever I was.

Winifred tried—and failed—to pry the lid off one of the crates. “Help me with this.”

“You got it,” Brayden replied.

He yanked his sword out from underneath his long black coat, then wedged the blade underneath the lid. It took him a few tries, but eventually, he tore the lid off with a long, harsh *screech*.

Winifred grabbed the wooden slab and set it aside, and then both she and Brayden leaned forward, staring down into the crate. A couple of weapons were nestled inside the shredded brown packing material, along with a few other objects.

“The Sword of Eris, the Scroll of Seshat, the Arrows of Osiris ...” Brayden’s voice trailed off as he picked up first one item, then another, and set them all back down inside the crate. “Yep, these are some of the goodies we stole from the Crius Coliseum. And lucky for us, they’re the more powerful and valuable artifacts, along with Minerva’s Dagger, of course.”

Brayden grinned, yanked the dagger out of his coat pocket, and flashed it at Winifred, who grinned back at him. Apparently, getting her hands on valuable artifacts made her much more agreeable. Rosie grinned as well, although she still had her hand on her sword, just like I did.

Winifred’s grin widened. “Now that we’ve found the artifacts, all we have to do is stay in here until we reach Cypress Mountain. Then we’ll grab as many artifacts as we can carry and slip away from the train station. We’ll be long gone before the Protectorate even realizes what’s happened—”

The train lurched, as though the engine was suddenly having trouble dragging the rest of the cars along behind it. Winifred and Brayden both stumbled around, since they weren’t holding on to one of the shelves like I was. So did Rosie, who was still guarding me.

The second the Reaper staggered away from me, I yanked Vic free and let my messenger bag fall to the floor. Then I raised the sword high and whirled around. The train lurched again, and I let the momentum carry me all the way over to Rosie, who was now standing in the very back of the car, right in front of the door. Her eyes widened at my approach, and she



dropped her gaze, trying to yank her own sword free from its scabbard.

Too late.

I swung Vic out in a vicious arc and slashed his blade across Rosie's chest, making her scream and stagger backward. She slammed into the door, and her head hit the metal with a loud, sickening *crack*. Rosie's scream abruptly cut off, and she slumped to the floor, blood rapidly pooling underneath her body.

"Yeah!" Vic said, his mouth moving underneath my palm. "Take that, Reaper scum!"

Rosie wasn't getting up again, so I whirled around, facing the front of the car again. Brayden and Winifred had both regained their balance. Brayden was still holding Minerva's Dagger, while Winifred was clutching the Sword of Eris, which had belonged to the Greek goddess of discord and strife. The sword greatly increased the strength of whoever wielded it.

The two Reaper siblings grinned at each other, then brandished their blades at me. I didn't need to touch them or use my psychometry magic to realize they were looking forward to hurting me.

White-hot fury exploded in my heart at everything the Reapers had done—stealing the artifacts, threatening me, and especially killing Gin Blanco. I didn't care what weapons or magic they had or how much danger I was in. Brayden and Winifred were going to pay for their crimes, even if it was the

last thing I ever did. So I tightened my grip on Vic and widened my stance, trying to find better balance and some more stability, given the train's continued abrupt jerking motions.

“Please.” Brayden sneered at me. “There are two of us and one of you. Face it. Your time is up, Champion. Get ready to die.”

“Actually, you got the odds wrong—again,” a familiar voice drawled.

A shadow detached itself from the wall near the front of the car and stepped out into the light. I gasped, along with Brayden and Winifred.

Gin Blanco snapped off a mock salute to the Reapers, then looked over at me. “Hey, Gwen. Sorry I’m late.”

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### GIN

“HOW—HOW ARE YOU STANDING here right now? I *shot* you,” Winifred growled. “In the chest!”

“Oh, sugar,” I drawled. “It takes more than a bullet to the heart to keep me down for long.”

Her gaze dropped to my chest. “You have on a bulletproof vest?”

“Something like that,” I agreed.

I didn’t bother trying to explain my Stone elemental magic to her. I doubted she’d believe me, especially since no one else had believed anything I’d said so far today.

“How did you get back on the train?” Winifred demanded. “You weren’t on board when we left the old depot. I *know* you weren’t, because I checked.”

I shrugged. “I grabbed the ladder on the back of the caboose and climbed up to the roof. Fun fact: each car has an access hatch with a nice little window embedded in the ceiling, so it

wasn't too hard for me to move around and keep an eye on things. Once I saw your little group start heading in this direction, I figured you were going toward the baggage car, so I ran across the tops of the other cars and got ahead of you. Then I used another hatch to get down in here."

I shook my head. "Even on a train, no one ever thinks to secure anything that's above their heads and out of their line of sight. It's sad, really. Such a rookie mistake."

The two Reapers looked at each other like I was speaking gibberish, and a confused look filled Gwen's face too. Maybe I *was* weird, talking about easy access points at a time like this, but they had always been some of my favorite things as the Spider. Over the years, I'd managed to sneak into dozens of places I shouldn't just because someone hadn't bothered to lock their second-story doors and windows. Or in this case, the access hatches embedded in all the train-car roofs.

"Are you a member of the Protectorate?" Winifred asked, her dark brown eyes narrowing in thought. "Some sort of secret shadow bodyguard for Nike's Champion?"

An annoyed, exasperated sigh escaped my lips. Why wouldn't these people just *listen*? I'd told them time and time again that I was an assassin, but they *still* didn't believe me. It was like they were trying to force me to fit into their weird mythological worldview, or whatever it truly was.

"It doesn't matter who she is," Brayden snarled. "She's still going to die, just like Gwen is."

He stepped forward and brandished a weapon at me.

“Oh,” I purred, a wide grin spreading across my face. “I just *adore* knives. I have several of my own. Wanna see one?”

I flicked my wrist and palmed the knife hidden up my right sleeve. Brayden sucked in a surprised breath, as did his sister, and uncertainty flickered across both their faces, as if they were just now realizing that I was as big a threat as I claimed to be.

“Who *are* you?” Winifred demanded.

“Like I said before, I’m the Spider. And I don’t much like it when people threaten my friends.”

Winifred jerked her head at her brother. “You kill the Champion. I’ll handle the assassin.”

He nodded back at her, then turned toward Gwen, who lifted her bloody sword and firmed up her fighting stance. Given the Reaper woman lying on the floor in the back of the car, Gwen Frost could take care of herself. Good to know.

I left Gwen to deal with Brayden and focused all my attention on Winifred again. For a moment, I thought she might pull out the gun she’d shot me with earlier, but instead, she hefted her sword a little higher, then snarled and rushed toward me. Winifred used her dizzying speed to close the distance between us in the blink of an eye, and I barely had time to whip my knife up to defend myself.

*Clang!*

Her blade crashed into mine, and the force of the blow almost ripped my silverstone knife right out of my hand.

Winifred was even stronger than the two Viking Reapers in the old depot. Even more troubling was the fact that her sword was glowing with a bright bronze light, as though the weapon contained some sort of magic that was giving Winifred supernatural strength, as well as enhancing her own already incredible speed.

Gwen and the Reapers had been talking a lot about artifacts, but I'd thought they were just referring to pottery, statues, and other pretty antique decorations. I was finally getting an inkling of what *artifacts* truly meant—and the enormous power such things possessed.

*Clash-clash-clang!*

Winifred hammered her sword at me over and over again, each blow hard enough to rattle my entire body, and it was all I could do to counter her blows and not lose my grip on my knife.

The train jerked forward, and the unexpected motion sent me staggering all the way over into the door at the front of the baggage car. My hand slammed into the metal, and I lost my grip on my knife, which hit the floor and tumbled away.

In the back of the car, Gwen was still battling Brayden, and she too lost her balance and staggered to the side. Her arm slammed into one of the metal baggage shelves, and she hissed with pain, even as her sword fell through her fingers.

“Can't believe you bloody dropped me in the middle of a fight ...” Vic grumbled, before the talking sword's annoyed

words were lost in the continued groan and churn of the train's engine and cars.

Given all the loud noise and clanging commotion, I was starting to think *restored train* meant *on its last wheels*. But the engine kept chugging, and the baggage car shuddered back and forth and back and forth, as if trying to settle into some sort of rhythm and equilibrium with all the other cars on the tracks. I clung to one of the metal posts that supported the shelves, trying to keep my balance, and Gwen and the Reapers did the same thing.

After what seemed like forever but couldn't have been much more than a minute, two tops, the ride smoothed out, and we were all able to release our handholds.

I glanced around, searching for my silverstone knife. Somehow it had slid all the way to the back of the car where Gwen was, while her talking sword had ended up close to my side of the car.

Winifred growled and stalked toward me. She was still clutching that sword, which started glowing even more brightly than before, as if the Reaper's rage was further fueling its magic.

I considered palming the knife hidden up my left sleeve, but I couldn't keep blocking Winifred's blows for much longer. Sooner or later, she would use her superior strength and speed to force her way past my defenses and gut me. At the very least, I needed a larger, sturdier weapon to knock that glowing bronze sword out of her hand.

“First my Champion dropped me, and then she let me rattle around all over the bloody place,” Vic muttered. “Gwen just polished me the other day, and I was looking all nice and shiny. But that’s all ruined now ...”

My gaze locked onto the still-grumbling sword. Despite his incessant chatter, Vic was an impressive weapon, and he should hold up nicely against the Reaper’s enchanted blade.

Winifred growled and quickened her pace, drawing her sword back for yet another strike.

I was out of time and options. When in Rome, as the old saying went. Or in this case, the wild, weird world of Mythos Academy.

I lunged for the talking sword.



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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### GWEN

I WAS STILL TRYING to find my balance when I saw Gin dart toward Vic, who was lying on the floor near the front of the car and still chastising me for dropping him. As if it had been *my* fault that the train kept lurching forward like an old, wheezing truck that was about to run out of gas.

Winifred charged forward and swung her sword at Gin.

“Look out!” I yelled.

Gin dodged Winifred’s attack, spinning in the other direction and moving away from the Reaper. Then, just as quickly, Gin whirled back around, put her shoulder down, and plowed into Winifred. The Reaper lost her balance and staggered backward, although she bounced off one of the shelves and charged right back at Gin again.

Gin stepped forward, hooked the toe of her black boot under Vic’s blade, and kicked the sword up into the air. She easily

caught Vic with one hand, then smoothly whirled all the way around to block Winifred's blow.

It was seriously one of the coolest things I had ever seen.

Even Logan, a Spartan who could pick up any object and automatically use it as a weapon, would have been impressed.

But I had my own Reaper to battle, so I dragged my gaze away from Gin. Brayden had also regained his balance, and he stalked toward me, still clutching Minerva's Dagger. I backed up, and my sneaker hit something, making it skitter across the floor. I glanced down and realized Gin's knife had somehow ended up by my feet.

"Time to die, Gwen," Brayden hissed, still stalking toward me.

My eyes darted back down to the knife. I *should* scoop it up and use it to defend myself before Brayden tried to kill me with his weapon again, but I hesitated. From the easy, skillful, familiar way Gin had wielded her knife against Winifred, I was guessing that she had a very deep, very personal attachment to the blade, which meant my psychometry magic would kick in the second I touched the knife—and I would see all the people Gin had killed with it over the years.

I had already witnessed enough blood, death, and destruction at Mythos Academy to last three lifetimes, but I didn't have any other options, so I braced myself, then leaned down and plucked the knife up off the floor.

Just as I expected, my psychometry kicked in, and the memories slammed into me like a tidal wave, threatening to knock my legs out from under me and drown me in the flickers and flashes of feelings.

There were *so* many memories, so many more than I had expected, each showing a different place and time.

Gin palming the knife with cold, ruthless, expert precision in what must have been her barbecue restaurant, given the blue and pink booths and the matching pig tracks covering the floor. Gin throwing herself out of the back of a bullet-riddled van, then killing a couple of tall, muscled women—giants, maybe?—with the blade. Gin clutching the weapon and facing down another tall, muscled woman, along with several men, at what looked like a wedding.

But one memory was a little clearer and sharper than all the rest: Gin standing outside a beautiful mansion, part of which had been crumbled, as though someone had taken a wrecking ball to one side of the structure and knocked off parts of it. Clouds of dust cloaked the air, but Gin stalked through the swirling fog, her knife clutched in her hand. She stared down at a man trapped underneath some rubble on the ground—a man with the same wintry gray eyes she had—then coolly, calmly leaned forward and cut his throat.

I flinched, expecting to start screaming at the awful memory, as I so often did. But instead of horror or rage or some other terrible emotion, soft, soothing relief flowed through me instead—Gin's relief that she had *finally* killed this

man, this dangerous enemy who had caused her so much pain, and that he would never hurt her friends and family again.

I knew that feeling all too well. It was the same sort of relief I had felt when I'd realized that Agrona Quinn, Logan's evil ex-stepmother, was dead. And that Vivian Holler, Loki's Champion, was trapped in her own mind and my memories and no longer a threat. And of course, that Loki himself was imprisoned and would never again menace the mythological world—

“You might as well give up, Champion.” Brayden's voice jarred me back to the here and now, and mine and Gin's memories faded away, if not the feelings that went along with them. “You can't beat me, Gwen. Not when I have Minerva's Dagger. I can *feel* its magic flowing through me, the power, the wisdom, the history. There is literally *nothing* you can do, no attack you can make, that I haven't seen before.”

He brandished the dagger at me, and the jewels embedded in the gold blade glittered like drops of ruby, topaz, citrine, and diamond blood. Even though I wasn't touching the blade, my psychometry roared to life again, and suddenly, I could feel the *hunger* emanating from the dagger, its burning thirst and deep, dark, unquenchable desire to be in yet another battle and add the knowledge of that fight to all the others that were already stored inside it. The dagger wasn't so much a weapon as it was a greedy *parasite*, sucking up all the life and blood that crossed its blade. My magic recoiled, and my stomach twisted with revulsion.

But Brayden was right—I couldn't beat him. Despite all the battles I'd been in against Agrona, Vivian, and the other Reapers, I was still just eighteen. I simply hadn't been a warrior long enough to counter all the wisdom and knowledge that had accumulated in Minerva's Dagger over the centuries.

Brayden grinned and twirled the dagger around in his hand in a showy, taunting motion. I flinched again, and my fingers tightened around Gin's knife. The metal was strangely cool against my skin, and something slid up against my palm. I loosened my grip and glanced down.

A symbol was stamped into the knife's hilt—a small circle with eight thin rays, the same symbol that had been branded into both of Gin's palms. What had she called it? Oh, yes, a spider rune, the symbol for patience. Now that I was holding her knife, I knew that every word she had said before had been true.

Gin Blanco *was* the Spider.

I couldn't beat Brayden on my own. Not with my limited skills and training. But I wasn't on my own right now. No, right now, I was holding a knife that had been used by the best assassin in all of Ashland.

So I reached out with my magic, my psychometry, and all those memories flickered through my mind again. All the bad, bad people Gin had faced down, all the life-and-death battles she'd been in, and especially all the ways she'd found to defeat her enemies over the years.

Brayden stalked toward me, slashing Minerva's Dagger through the air. I watched him come, a cold calm settling over me—the same cold calm Gin had felt countless times before. Using my psychometry, I truly, fully, completely embraced that quiet emotion, that eerie stillness, that utter certainty, until it blotted out everything else, including my own worry that I wasn't smart, strong, or skilled enough to win this fight.

Because I knew that Gin *was* smart, strong, and skilled enough, and I was holding a piece of her in my hand and even more of her in my mind and heart.

Brayden stopped, grinned, and flipped the dagger end over end in his hand. "You know what? I might keep this dagger. It's certainly been useful in this fight. It would be nice knowing that no enemy could ever stand a chance of beating me, not even Nike's Champion."

I didn't respond to his taunts. Instead, I kept focusing on that cold calm and all the memories of Gin that were still flashing through my mind.

Brayden's grin widened, and he lunged forward, trying to cut me with the dagger. But I—or maybe Gin—had been expecting the blow, and I sidestepped his charge, whipped around, and sliced the knife across his upper arm.

Brayden hissed with pain and staggered back. He glanced down at the blood that was clearly visible through his cut coat and the T-shirt underneath. "You sneaky little bitch!" he snarled. "You're going to pay for that!"

I held up my crudely bandaged hand. “Just paying you back for cutting me earlier. What’s wrong, Brayden? You can dish it out, but you can’t take it? Yeah, that’s how it usually goes with arrogant Reaper bullies like you.”

Brayden growled and charged forward, slashing out with the dagger over and over again. He wasn’t playing around now, and each blow was meant to be a deadly strike, but I dodged his attacks and lashed out with Gin’s knife in return.

I managed to cut Brayden’s other arm, then opened up a deep gash in his left thigh. He staggered away from me, struggling to find his balance.

“Minerva’s Dagger might make you smarter, but it doesn’t make you any more graceful,” I taunted him. “Why, you’re as clumsy and awkward as a Black roc with its wings tied together.”

Rage sparked in his eyes, making them glimmer even more brightly than the dagger’s gold blade, and Brayden charged forward. I braced myself for his attack, but he wasn’t watching where he was going—or especially where he was putting his feet down. One of his boots landed on the wooden lid that he and Winifred had removed from the artifacts crate earlier, and he skidded to the side, his arms windmilling wildly as he fought to stay upright.

I waited until he teetered in my direction, then lunged forward, shoved his flailing arm out of the way, and buried Gin’s knife in his heart.

Brayden's eyes bulged, and he screamed with pain. He raised Minerva's Dagger to try to kill me, but I ripped Gin's knife out of his chest and used it to knock the artifact out of his hand. The dagger landed on the floor, and the golden glow of magic quickly winked out, faster than a star giving way to the approaching dawn.

The train jerked yet again, and Brayden toppled forward, hitting my chest and forcing my entire body to the side. My head smacked into one of the metal shelves, and gray and purple stars erupted in my eyes.

I managed to hang on to Gin's knife, but my legs slid out from under me. I hit the floor hard, causing more stars to erupt in my eyes. Brayden dropped down onto me like the deadweight that he was, punching the air out of my lungs. Even worse, his warm, sticky blood stained my skin and seeped into my clothes.

In the front of the car, Gin was still battling Winifred. I tried to move, to yell, to tell Gin to be careful, but a third wave of stars filled my eyes, growing darker and darker until they blotted out everything else.



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## CHAPTER NINE

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### GIN

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT kind of training Reapers usually had, but Winifred could definitely fight. She was smooth, skilled, and fast with that sword, and whatever power the blade possessed also made her incredibly strong. But Vic was strong too, and the talking sword easily blocked all of Winifred's hard, heavy, hammering blows.

The only disconcerting thing was that Vic kept talking through the whole fight. Somehow, despite the fact my hand was clamped around the sword's hilt, and thus over his mouth, he *still* found a way to keep talking. His lips tickled the spider-rune scar in my palm time and time again, which was weird enough, but his shouted encouragements made the sensations stranger still. I didn't hear all his muffled words, but I got the gist of what he was saying.

“... take her down ... kill Winifred ... defeat this Reaper scum ...”

I grinned. The sword was even more bloodthirsty than I was. So nice to meet a kindred spirit, even if that spirit was encased in metal.

*Clash-clash-clang!*

Winifred and I broke apart after a furious exchange, and she studied me with dark, narrowed eyes.

“You really *are* an assassin,” she accused, as if I hadn’t made it crystal clear who and what I was all along. “You should come work for me, for the Reapers. I’ll make it worth your while.” Winifred jerked her head to the side. “See those crates over there? They contain hundreds of thousands of dollars in mythological artifacts. Help me get them off this train, and I’ll cut you in on the deal—”

Brayden let out a bloodcurdling scream, drowning out the rest of her offer. I knew that sound. I’d heard it more times than I could remember. Gwen had hit something vital, and Brayden was well on his way to being dead.

Winifred glanced over at her brother. Instead of worry, dread, or fear, an annoyed look creased her face, and she huffed out an exasperated breath, as if Brayden couldn’t even die right. For a moment, I thought she might go over and try to help him, but instead, she faced me again.

“You can have a bigger cut now,” she said. “All you have to do is help me eliminate Nike’s Champion.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Your brother just got killed, and you’re still offering to make a deal with me?”

“Brayden was always a thorn in my side, always thinking that *he* ran things, when *I* did all the planning.” Winifred’s eyes glittered with anger. “The only reason we even lost the artifacts in the first place was that Brayden and the rest of those Reaper losers just *had* to sneak out and go out partying at a casino. I told Brayden time and time again that we all had to stay at the cabin and lie low until the Protectorate heat died down and I had a buyer lined up for the artifacts. But he didn’t listen, which is why I’m on this bloody tourist train in the first place, instead of already counting my money. Well, now that he’s gone, I don’t have to worry about his stupid mistakes constantly tripping me up anymore.”

More anger filled her eyes, although her expression quickly turned cold and calculating. “But I can always use a good fighter like you, Gin. So help me kill the girl, and you can have Brayden’s cut of the money after I sell the artifacts.”

A laugh bubbled up out of my lips. “Sugar, a few weeks ago, I gave away fifty million dollars to charity. A couple hundred grand in lousy antiques isn’t going to tempt me.”

“You’re making a mistake. My offer is genuine.”

“Oh, I’m sure it is,” I replied. “Just like I’m sure you would stick that fancy bronze sword in my back the second you got the chance. Especially since you didn’t bat an eye at your baby brother getting killed. Not much for family, are you?”

Winifred shrugged. “Family is useful—until it’s not.”

And that was one of the many, many differences between the two of us. Because if I’d just seen Bria get cut down, I

would have been doing everything in my power to kill the person who'd killed my baby sister. Not trying to make a deal with an enemy to save my own skin and make a few bucks on the side. Vic was right. Winifred really was Reaper scum.

The train jerked yet again, catching me off guard. I staggered to the side, and Winifred saw an opening. She charged forward and lifted her sword high, ready to bring it down and finally end me once and for all.

This time, instead of fighting the train's helter-skelter motion, I went along with it, dropping to my knees and ducking Winifred's swing. Her sword whistled through the air where my chest had been a moment before. The train jerked again, and for the second time, I went with the momentum, letting it pick me up and set me back onto my feet.

Then I followed the surging motion all the way over to Winifred—and buried Vic's blade in her stomach.

“That's what I'm talking about!” the sword crowed, his lips moving underneath my palm again. “Way to go, Spider assassin lady!”

I grimaced at the oddly ticklish sensation and yanked the sword out of Winifred's stomach. She reached out and tried to grab one of the shelves, but her hand slipped off the metal, her legs buckled, and she slid down to the floor.

She didn't move after that.

Once I was sure that Winifred was well on her way to bleeding out, I stepped over her body and hurried to the back

of the car, where Gwen and Brayden were sprawled on the floor, both of them deathly still.

“Gwen?” I asked. “Gwen! Are you okay?”

She grunted, lifted her head, and shoved Brayden away. He landed on his back, his sightless eyes staring up at nothing. Blood stained his arms, along with one of his legs, and a larger patch of it was centered right over his heart. Another grin stretched across my face. Nice. I couldn’t have done a better job of killing him myself.

Gwen slowly sat up. Her brown hair was a tangled, frizzy mess, and a purplish bruise was already forming on her temple, but she seemed to be okay.

I leaned down and held out my arm. She hesitated a moment, then grabbed my hand. I pulled her up, and we stood there, locked together.

Gwen stared at me, her violet eyes big and bright and glowing with even more magic than what the Reapers’ weapons had possessed. But even more disconcerting was the look on her face, like she was peering deep, deep down into my heart and seeing everything I had ever done, thought, felt, and experienced.

I froze, not sure what to do or say and not wanting to interrupt her trance ... or whatever she was doing with her magic right now.

After a few seconds, Gwen shook her head, released my hand, and stepped back. That strange, bright glow had

vanished from her eyes, and she gave me a look that was equal parts impressed and sad. Once again, I had the feeling she had seen a lot more of me than I'd wanted her to—a lot more than I would ever want anyone to see.

I cleared my throat, carefully took hold of Vic's bloody blade, and held the sword out to her. "Thanks for letting me use Vic. He came in pretty handy."

Vic sniffed, and his violet eye swiveled around to glare at me. "I *always* come in handy when there are Reapers to kill."

Gwen grinned and shrugged at me. I grinned back at her, then exchanged her sword for my knife.

"Thanks for the knife," she said. "It came in handy too, especially since I was up against Minerva's Dagger. That artifact gives whoever wields it the wisdom of the Roman war goddess Minerva, including how to win whatever battle they are currently engaged in."

Gwen gestured at the knife in my hand. "But I got plenty of wisdom from you, Gin. You saved my life."

I wasn't sure what she meant by that, but I decided not to ask any questions. It had already been a strange enough day with Reapers and talking swords and everything else that had happened. Sometimes it was just better to go with the flow and not think too much about the small details. So I moved on to more practical matters, as I so often did.

"What are we going to do about all of this?" I asked, gesturing at the three dead Reapers sprawled across the floor.

“Because the train will be stopping soon, and it’s only a matter of time before someone comes in here. Normally, I would call my friend Sophia Deveraux to come and make all these bodies disappear, but she’s miles away in Ashland.”

Gwen gave me a mysterious smile. “Don’t worry, Gin. I have my own friends, and they are also very good at covering things up.”

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## CHAPTER TEN

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### GWEN

I TUCKED THE SWORD of Eris back into the crate with the other artifacts and replaced the lid. I also grabbed Minerva's Dagger, which had landed on the floor close to Brayden's body, and slid it back into my messenger bag, along with Vic.

Gin and I left the bodies in the baggage car, and she used some sort of Ice magic to lock the door behind us so no one could get inside. After that, we took turns ducking into a bathroom to clean ourselves up, then returned to our original seats. Everyone was still busy talking and taking photos of the scenery, and no one paid any more attention to us than they had during the rest of the ride.

Gin asked to see Minerva's Dagger, so I fished it out of my bag and passed it over. She twirled it back and forth in her fingers, getting a feel for the weapon.

"Sharp blade, nice balance, but all that bling is just asking for trouble," she said. "In Ashland, some folks would kill you for the jewels alone."



She shrugged and handed the dagger back to me. I slid the weapon into its box, which Brayden had left on the seat, then stuffed the whole thing back into my messenger bag.

“Well, I agree with the assassin,” Vic piped up from his spot by the window. “I don’t care what kind of power the dagger has. All those jewels make it look like a cheap trinket. Why, back in my day, you didn’t need any fancy jewels on your hilt to prove that you were a *real* weapon ...”

And he was off, talking about how a proper sword didn’t need any frou-frou decorations.

Gin eyed him, then looked at me. “Does he always talk so much?” she whispered.

“Oh, yeah. You get used to it after a while.”

“Vic should meet my foster brother. Finn also loves to hear the sound of his own voice.” Gin laughed, and I joined in with her chuckles.

Vic eventually wound down, announced that he was taking a nap, and shut his eye. Soon soft snores were rumbling out of his mouth, although the continued *chug-chug-chug* of the train mostly drowned them out.

“So you’re an Oracle,” Gin said. “What does that mean? That you can see the future?”

I nodded. “Something like that, but every Oracle’s power is a little different. Grandma Frost can see the future, and she works as a fortune-teller, like I told you before. My mom, Grace, could tell whether people were lying just by listening to

their words. But I have psychometry magic, which means that I see ... other things.”

“Like what?”

I drew in a breath, then slowly let it out. “Whenever I touch something that someone has a strong, personal connection to, like a family ring or a favorite T-shirt or a beloved book, then I see all the memories that are attached to the object—good, bad, and ... bloody.”

Understanding filled Gin’s eyes. “So when you picked up my knife, you saw all the people I’d killed with it over the years.” A grimace twisted her face. “Sorry about that. All those battles were bad enough for me to endure. You shouldn’t have had to witness them too, Gwen.”

I hesitated, wondering if I should ask the question that had been on my mind ever since I had grabbed her knife, but since we were sharing secrets, I decided to see if she would reveal some more of hers.

“I saw several old battles, but mostly, I got drawn into a more recent memory. You were standing in front of this big, ruined mansion, and this guy was lying on the ground, half buried in the rubble in front of you.” I drew in another breath and wet my lips. “Who—who was he?”

Gin’s grimace deepened, and lines of pain bracketed her mouth. “My uncle. Mason Mitchell. Several months ago, I found out that he was the head of the Circle, a secret society that did a lot of bad things in Ashland. I also found out that he killed his twin brother, Tristan, my father, when I was a kid.

He also ordered my mother's and my older sister's murders, and he was threatening me and my friends."

Those lines of pain smoothed out. Gin's face hardened, and her eyes glittered like bits of gray ice in her face. "So I killed him."

Her tone was cold, flat, and matter-of-fact, but her words didn't bother me. I'd felt her overwhelming relief when she'd killed Mason, and I knew that she'd taken him down to protect herself and her loved ones—the same way I had battled Loki, Agrona Quinn, Vivian Holler, and all the other Reapers who had tried to hurt me and my friends.

"I'm sorry," she said in a low voice. "Watching that must have been difficult for you."

I shrugged. "Yeah, seeing the battles and everything you went through was terrible, but those memories also helped me—*saved* me. I wouldn't have been able to beat Brayden and Minerva's Dagger without your assassin skill and prowess."

"So you're saying that I know more about fighting than some ancient wisdom and war goddess?" A wry smile curved her lips. "Well, that's certainly good for my ego."

Gin glanced over at Vic, who was still napping. "What will happen to Minerva's Dagger and the other artifacts?"

"Hopefully, my friends will be waiting at the Cypress Mountain station, and we'll take the artifacts to the academy. They'll be cleaned up, cataloged, and put in storage for a

while, and then eventually some of them will be displayed in the Library of Antiquities.”

“Your library sounds really cool.”

A smile spread across my face. “It is. You should come see it sometime.”

Gin grinned at me. “It’s a deal—but only if you come to the Pork Pit, along with your friends. I especially want to meet Logan, the Spartan boyfriend.”

A blush burned in my cheeks at her teasing, but I grinned back at her. “It’s definitely a deal.”



ABOUT THIRTY MINUTES LATER, the train finally slowed and pulled into the Cypress Mountain station. I grabbed Vic and my messenger bag, and Gin and I got off the train along with everyone else.

I scanned the wooden platform, but I didn’t see my friends. I checked my phone, but no one had texted me, and I still had no idea what had happened during the rockslide or if Logan and the others were okay.

Gin laid a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry. If Logan is as good a fighter as you said, then I’m sure he’s fine. Just like I’m sure my folks are fine. Let’s go see if they’re waiting inside the station.”

I bit my lip, worry churning in my stomach, but I followed her inside. Even though Gin was acting perfectly normal and

natural, she walked with a smooth, strong, confident stride, and people instinctively scrambled back to get out of her way. I felt like a guppy trailing along behind a shark.

We ended up standing in a corner, staring out over the sea of people moving through the main lobby. Most folks were heading outside, but a few were going against the flow and streaming inside to take the train back over to Pine Crest.

I stood on my tiptoes and scanned the crowd, but I still didn't see Logan, Daphne, or anyone else from Mythos Academy.

Gin must have sensed my worry, because she jerked her thumb toward the doors. "Let's check outside. They might be waiting in the parking lot."

By this point, my stomach had tied itself into tight knots, but I nodded and followed her, trying not to think about what it would mean if the others weren't outside.

We crossed the lobby, pushed through a set of double doors, and ended up at the edge of the paved lot that fronted the train station. I scanned the vehicles in front of me, but I didn't see any of the black SUVs that had been used to transport the artifacts.

My heart sank, and my stomach tied itself into a few more knots. Maybe my friends hadn't escaped the Reapers' trap. Maybe the rockslide had crushed their vehicles. Maybe they had all died while I'd been fighting Brayden on the train—

“Hey there, goddess girl,” a familiar voice drawled behind me. “Did you miss me?”

I whirled around, and there he was—Logan freaking Quinn, with his black hair, pale skin, and ice-blue eyes. His face crinkled into a teasing smile, and he opened his arms.

I dropped my messenger bag, surged forward, and hugged him tight. “I was so worried about you,” I whispered in his ear.

“I was worried about you too,” Logan whispered back. “But we both made it through another battle, and that’s all that matters, right?”

“Right.”

I drew back and pressed my lips to his. My psychometry kicked in, and I reveled in the feel of Logan’s love for me, in the warm spark of emotion that burned so brightly and fiercely deep inside his heart. That spark perfectly matched the one burning in my own heart, and I knew those two flames would never be extinguished.

We broke apart, and Logan grinned at me, his hands still on my waist.

“Wow. If that’s how you’re going to kiss me every time you take a train ride and we have to fight a few Reapers, then we’ll have to do this more often.”

I rolled my eyes. “Uh-huh. Don’t get too cocky, Spartan.”

His eyes gleamed with mischief. “Only with you, goddess girl. Only with you.”

Gin pointedly cleared her throat.

“Oh! Sorry. Let me introduce you two. Logan, this is Gin Blanco. Gin, this is Logan Quinn.”

They shook hands, and Gin gave him an appraising look. “So this is the Spartan boyfriend.”

A bit of shyness swept over me, but I threaded my fingers through Logan’s. “Yeah.”

She grinned. “I approve. Now let’s see if we can find my people.”

“Oh, I think they’re over there.” Logan paused. “Talking to Nickamedes.”

Gin’s eyes narrowed at his hesitation. I raised a questioning eyebrow, but Logan shook his head.

“Trust me. You need to see this for yourself,” he replied.

Logan grabbed my messenger bag and slung the strap onto his shoulder. Vic was still napping inside, and the sword yawned, smacked his lips, and murmured something about killing Reapers before starting to snore again. Still holding Logan’s hand, I moved forward, with Gin following along behind us.

Logan headed for the far end of the lot, where a couple of SUVs were parked together. A man with the same black hair, ice-blue eyes, and pale skin as Logan’s was standing beside one of the vehicles. He was wearing a blue sweater vest over a matching shirt, along with black corduroy pants and wing tips.

A blond woman was standing in front of him, with her arms crossed over her chest. A gold detective's badge was clipped to her black leather belt. My heart squeezed a little. My mom, Grace, had been a detective too.

“ ... I assure you that we have the situation firmly under control.” Nickamedes's voice drifted over to me.

The woman snorted in disbelief. “Well, it seems to me that this situation is completely *out* of control.”

Gin looked at the woman with a combination of love and relief. I didn't need my psychometry magic to tell me that she had been as worried about her friends as I had been about mine.

“Your sister?” I asked.

“Yep, Detective Bria Coolidge, being a hard-boiled badass like usual,” Gin replied, pride and affection filling her voice. “I'm guessing that's the fussy librarian you told me about earlier?”

I nodded. “Yep, that's Nickamedes, Logan's uncle.”

“I don't care how smart you think you are or which elite boarding school you work for, Mr. Nickamedes,” Bria snapped. “If I don't see my sister in another minute, two tops, then I'm taking over this whole operation. Is that clear?”

Nickamedes glared down his nose at her. “This operation is not *yours* to take over, Detective Coolidge.”

Bria lifted her chin and glared right back at him. “Well, I would have to disagree, especially since my friends and I kept



you and your convoy from getting killed by those people in the creepy black cloaks and rubber masks who wanted to skewer you all with their swords.”

Nickamedes bristled. “As I have said *numerous* times now, we had the situation completely under control.” He paused and cleared his throat, as if what he was about to say next left a sour taste in his mouth. “Although we are grateful for the assistance of you and your friends.”

Bria rolled her eyes. She opened her mouth and stabbed her finger at Nickamedes, as though she was going to lay into him some more, but then she caught sight of Gin, and she immediately hurried in our direction.

“I’m so glad you’re okay!” Bria said, hugging Gin tight.

“I’m always okay,” Gin replied, hugging her sister back. “Although the train ride turned out to be a lot more exciting than I expected.”

Bria drew back and gave her a knowing look. “Aren’t things always more exciting whenever you’re around?”

Gin laughed and slung her arm around her sister’s shoulders. “You can say that. Where are Finn and Owen?”

Bria waved her hand. “Finn is still down the mountain, along with some of Nickamedes’s friends. Some guy named Ajax and a woman named Metis. As for Owen—”

“I’m right here,” someone said.

A tall, muscled man with black hair stepped around the side of the SUV and came over to us. He curled his arm around

Gin's waist and drew her close, and their love for each other shone on their faces for everyone to see.

Gin pressed a quick kiss to Owen's lips and drew back. "Hey, you."

He grinned back at her. "Hey, you too. Sorry it took us so long to get here."

"Better late than never," Gin teased.

Owen's grin widened. "I have something for you." He lifted his arm, showing off the white paper bag in his hand. "Your blueberry muffins, as promised."

Gin clutched a hand to her heart and let out a dramatic sigh. "My hero."

She opened the paper bag, grabbed a muffin, and sank her teeth into the sweet treat. Gin and Owen started talking, while Bria and Nickamedes kept arguing over who had jurisdiction to deal with the Reapers, both the dead ones on the train and at the historic depot and the others who had been captured or killed during the rockslide ambush.

Logan leaned down. "What happened on the train, Gwen? Who is that woman, really?"

"She's the woman who saved my life. And I think Vic and I saved hers too. So I guess you could say we all saved each other."

Logan frowned, not understanding my cryptic words, so I hooked my arm through his.

“Come inside the station and buy me a hot chocolate, and I’ll tell you all about it.”



AN HOUR LATER, WE were all still at the Cypress Mountain station. Professor Metis and Coach Ajax had finally arrived, along with Daphne, Carson, Oliver, and Alexei. So had Finnegan Lane, Gin’s foster brother.

The introductions had been made all around, and once everyone realized we were all more or less on the same side, the hostility and distrust had gone way, way down. Bria, Owen, and Finn had all looked a little confused when Professor Metis had drawn them aside and explained the mythological world, but Gin had just nodded, as if it all made perfect sense to her.

For their part, Gin and her friends had tried to explain Ashland to us, with all its elementals, vampires, giants, and dwarves, and then it was our turn to be confused. Funny how our two cities could be so close to each other and yet still be in completely separate worlds. But I decided to treat the whole thing like it was a time-travel plot in one of the comic books I loved to read. In other words, I decided not to think too long and hard about it, lest I get caught up wondering what cosmic vortex or flap of a butterfly’s wings or fantasy author’s whim had caused all of this to happen.

“Are you sure we aren’t entitled to a finders’ fee?” Finn asked, eyeing the crate of artifacts Coach Ajax was loading

into an SUV to take back to the academy. “After all, Bria, Owen, and I helped you all take out those Reapers on the road. And Gin totally kicked some Reaper ass on the train.”

Coach Ajax finished loading the crate, then drew himself up to his full height and crossed his arms over his chest. The afternoon sun glinted off his black hair and made his dark eyes and onyx skin gleam. “You need a finder’s fee for doing the right thing?”

Finn eyed Ajax’s impressive biceps and sidled back a step. “Well, when you put it like that, I suppose not.” He sighed, as though the weight of the world was yoked on his shoulders. But just as quickly, his face brightened again. “But let me look at all those jewels on Minerva’s Dagger again. Just one more time. Pretty please?”

Daphne Cruz stepped up beside me. The Valkyrie was wearing a pink leather jacket over a matching shirt and black jeans, and neon-pink sneakers adorned her feet. Her blond hair was sleeked back into a high ponytail, and pink eyeshadow and gloss brought out her black eyes and amber skin.

Daphne waved her hand, and a few pink sparks of magic shot off her fingertips and flickered in the air like fireflies. “That Finn guy does not give up easily.”

“No kidding,” Vic piped up from his spot in the SUV’s backseat. “I’m just glad he didn’t try to take *me* home with him.”

I actually thought Vic and Finn would be perfect for each other, especially since Finn seemed to love to talk as much as

the sword did, just like Gin had said, but I kept quiet.

“I’m just glad we’re all okay,” Daphne replied, more sparks flickering in the air around her.

Gin, Bria, Finn, and Owen had been discreetly eyeing the pink sparks of magic streaming out of the Valkyrie’s fingertips, although they hadn’t come right out and said anything about them. Bria, in particular, kept opening and closing her mouth, obviously dying to ask questions, but she restrained herself.

Professor Aurora Metis walked over to me. Her black hair was sleeked back into a high, tight bun, and silver glasses covered her green eyes. The lenses also reflected a bit of sunlight down onto her bronze skin. “We’ve got everything loaded up. We should get the artifacts back to the academy where they’ll be safe.”

I nodded. “Give me a minute, please.”

Metis moved off to talk to Ajax. My friends started climbing into various vehicles, while Bria, Finn, and Owen got into their own SUV.

That left me and Gin standing alone in the parking lot. I hesitated, wondering what to say. In some ways, today had gone exactly as I’d expected, with Reapers, double crosses, artifacts, blood, and death. But in other ways, so many things had happened that I *hadn’t* expected, including meeting Gin, although I was so very, very glad our paths had crossed.

Gin smiled at me, as if she knew exactly what I was thinking. “It’s harder to say good-bye than I thought it would be.”

I nodded. “For me too.”

She held out her arms, and I stepped forward and hugged her. Gin hugged me back, then we broke apart.

“Take care, Gwen,” she said. “And if you ever need anything, anything at all, I’m just a phone call and a train ride away.”

I laughed at her black humor. “I’ll try to stick to the phone call. I haven’t had the best luck with trains.”

She joined in my laughter, but then her face turned serious. “I’m so glad I got to meet you and be a part of your world, even if it was only for a day.”

“Me too. And I’m going to take you up on that offer of a free meal at the Pork Pit. I want to come see what Ashland is like.”

Gin tilted her head toward the open SUV door. “Just be sure to bring your talking sword. He’ll probably come in handy again.”

“According to Vic, he *always* comes in handy, remember?”

We both laughed, then stared at each other again.

“Good-bye, Gwen.”

“Bye, Gin.”

The assassin nodded at me, then stuck her hands into her jeans pockets and ambled away with that smooth shark-like stride, heading over to the SUV where her friends were waiting.

Logan stepped up beside me. “You ready to go?”

I watched Gin slide into her vehicle and shut the door behind her. The soft *thump* echoed through the parking lot, but it didn’t sound like a good-bye to me. No, it was more like a promise of further adventures to come—for both of us.

I turned to Logan and smiled. “Yeah. Let’s go home.”

Logan held out his hand, and I threaded my fingers through his again. Together, we headed toward the Mythos convoy. I stopped at the open SUV door and glanced back over my shoulder.

Gin was sitting in her vehicle with the window rolled down. The assassin winked at me, then the engine rumbled, and the SUV cruised away.

I waved at her until the vehicle was out of sight, then slid into my own seat, with Vic on one side of me and Logan on the other.

“Well, I, for one, am looking forward to getting back to the academy and taking my afternoon nap,” Vic said. “You wouldn’t *believe* how that Spider assassin lady manhandled me today. I know she’s a really good warrior, but she didn’t even bother to oil me or shine my blade after she got through with me ...”

I let the sword's words wash over me. In the front, Carson was driving, while Daphne was fiddling with the radio, trying to find a song she wanted to listen to. Behind me, Oliver and Alexei were talking in low voices.

The Reapers had been defeated, the artifacts were safe, and I was surrounded by my friends. So I leaned my head back against the seat and soaked up everything that was happening around me, especially the warmth and strength of Logan's fingers intertwined with my own.

It was good to know that some things would never change, whether I was in Mythos Academy, Ashland, or somewhere else.



**Gin Blanco will return.**



THANK YOU FOR READING **Spider and Frost**. Want more of Gin Blanco's adventures? Keep reading for a look at **Stings and Stones**, an **Elemental Assassin** short story collection.

Want more **Mythos Academy** adventures? Keep reading for a look at **Spartan Heart**, book 1 in the **Mythos Academy Spinoff** series.



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## EXCERPT FROM SPIDER'S BARGAIN

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GIN BLANCO

This story takes place before **Spider's Bite**, book 1 in the **Elemental Assassin** series.



THE COP WAS GOING to die tonight.

He just didn't know it yet.

For Detective Cliff Ingles, this was just another Saturday night in the Southern metropolis of Ashland, and he was spending it the way he did all his other Saturday nights: slugging down drinks and ogling the waitresses at Northern Aggression, the city's most popular nightclub.

Just before midnight, people were packed into the club, all looking for their particular brand of poison. Blood, booze, drugs, sex, smokes. Northern Aggression offered all that and more, as long as you had the cash or the plastic to pay for your favorite vice.

The nightclub had a decadent style, with red crushed-velvet drapes covering the walls and a soft, springy bamboo floor. But the most striking feature was the bar that ran down one wall—a long, thick, solid rectangle made entirely of elemental Ice. Runes had been carved into the slick surface of the Ice, mostly suns and stars, symbolizing life and joy. The symbols were rather appropriate, given all the people getting hot 'n' heavy in the booths in the back of the club.

I'd spent the last hour sitting at the Ice bar—along with Cliff Ingles.

The detective threw back his third whiskey of the evening, then leaned forward and murmured something in the ear of the vampire waitress who'd brought over his drink. The two of them were near the center of the enormous Ice bar, about thirty feet away from my position around the curve and up against one of the walls.

Ingles never had a clue that I was watching him. No real reason he would. If the detective had bothered to look in my direction, all he would have seen was another woman drinking her way through a night out on the town.

Even if he had noticed me, even if he'd come over and talked to me, I would have told him exactly who I was. Gin Blanco. A part-time cook and waitress at the Pork Pit barbecue restaurant in downtown Ashland. And the assassin known as the Spider.

I would have even told the detective about my current mission—to make sure he quit breathing before the end of the

evening.

But there was no danger of Ingles noticing me. I wasn't his type; the bastard preferred to assault young girls. Given the five silverstone knives hidden on my body, I was anything *but* helpless.

I took another sip of my gin and tonic and studied my target, comparing the man in front of me to the photo that had been in the file of information that my handler, Fletcher Lane, had given me when he'd told me about the job.

Detective Cliff Ingles was six feet tall, which was a good foot shorter than the giant bouncers who patrolled the club and kept everyone in line. Still, at more than two hundred fifty pounds, Ingles wasn't a small guy, although his once trim, hard-muscled body was slowly giving way to flabby fat underneath his expensive navy suit.

With his thick honey-blond hair, wide smile, and square chin, Ingles was an attractive man, but his ruddy skin got a little more flushed and his brown eyes got a little meaner with every drink he downed. Now he reminded me of a copperhead, all coiled up and ready to lash out and sink his venomous fangs into whoever crossed his path.

Ingles wore his gold detective's badge openly on the brown leather belt around his waist, along with his gun, almost like being a member of the police force was something to be proud of.

I snorted into my drink. Everyone knew that the majority of the Ashland cops were dirtier than the graffiti that covered so

many of the city's buildings. Ingles was no exception. Fletcher had dug up all sorts of nasty business that the detective was involved in. Extortion, blackmail, stealing drugs and money from crime scenes. Ingles was a real classy guy all the way around.

But he wasn't going to die for those sins. No, Cliff Ingles was getting my particular brand of attention because he'd tried to lure a thirteen-year-old girl named Rebecca into his car. When Rebecca had resisted, Ingles had badly beaten her, among other horrible things. Ashland was a violent city, full of bad people doing lots of bad things, but Cliff Ingles was the lowest sort of scum.

And I was here tonight to make sure that he never hurt anyone else—pro bono.

Normally, I didn't work for free. Mine was a highly specialized skill set, and I liked getting paid for it. I *earned* it, if only for all the blood I had to wash out of my clothes and hair after the fact.

As the Spider, I got paid—a lot—to kill people. I'd been in the assassin business since I was thirteen. Now, creeping up on thirty, I had more money tucked away than I could spend in two lifetimes. Which was one of the reasons why Fletcher, who was also my foster father, kept nagging me to retire. The old man wanted me to live long enough to actually spend and enjoy my ill-gotten gains.

So far, I'd only listened to Fletcher with half an ear. Killing people and cooking barbecue were all I knew how to do. What

would I do if I retired? Take up knitting? Adopt stray puppies? Move to the suburbs and try to put my bloody past behind me?

None of those things particularly appealed to me. Well, except adopting the puppies. I'd always been a dog person, especially when it came to corgis.

But the simple fact was that I liked my job. Sure, it was dark, dirty, dangerous work, but the blood and the screams didn't bother me, and I'd long ago accepted that I was one of the villains. Besides, every once in a while, I got to take care of somebody like Cliff Ingles. Got to make the city just a bit safer in my own twisted way.

It was the little things in life that made me happy.

Cool magic surged through the air, interrupting my musings. I glanced over at the bartender, whose eyes glowed a bright blue-white in the semidarkness of the nightclub. The Ice elemental responsible for keeping the bar in one piece for the night was feeding some more of his power into the cold, solid structure.

My own sluggish Ice magic responded to the familiar influx of power trickling into the bar. I was an elemental too, with the rare ability to use two of the four elements, Ice and Stone, although my Ice magic was far weaker than my Stone power. But as the Spider, I didn't usually use my elemental powers to take down targets.

That's what my knives were for.

I uncurled my hand from around my drink and stared down at the scar embedded in my palm. A small circle surrounded by eight thin rays—a spider rune, the symbol for patience. My namesake, in more ways than one. A matching scar adorned my other palm.

The spider rune had once been a pretty pendant that I'd worn around my neck as a child, until a Fire elemental had superheated the metal and burned the symbol into my palms, marking me forever the night she'd murdered my family—

“Disgusting pig!”

The waitress that Ingles had been propositioning spat out the words, then drew back her hand and slapped him across the face. Despite the thumping music, I still heard the sharp, stinging *crack* of the blow at my end of the bar. There weren't many things you couldn't do at Northern Aggression, which made me wonder exactly what revolting thing Ingles had just suggested.

“Bitch!” the detective snarled. He surged to his feet, and his hand dropped to the gun on his belt, like he wanted to grab it and hit her with the weapon.

The waitress's dark eyes widened, and she backed up a couple of steps and made a small, discreet hand signal. One of the giant bouncers immediately cut through the crowd and took up a defensive position in front of the waitress, using his roughly seven-foot frame to shield her from Ingles. The giant's shaved head gleamed like polished ebony under the club's dim lights.

“Is there a problem?” the giant rumbled, his deep baritone voice cutting through the pulsing beat of the music.

I’d seen this particular giant around the club before. Hard to miss almost seven feet of solid muscle. Xavier was his name.

Ingles’s dark, angry gaze cut to the waitress before flicking back to Xavier. The waitress’s handprint marked the detective’s cheek like a scarlet letter, but he made a visible effort to get himself under control. He might be a member of the po-po, but Ingles knew he’d get his ass kicked if he kept pushing things. Even cops couldn’t get away with assaulting people—at least not in such a public place like Northern Aggression where everyone had their phone in one hand and a drink in the other.

“No problem.” Ingles spat out the words. “The bitch isn’t worth it. I was just leaving.”

Xavier nodded. “You do that.”

Ingles’s eyes narrowed to slits, but he reached into his pocket, drew out a couple of bills, and tossed them onto the bar. Then he shoved his way through the crowd, heading for the exit.

Instead of immediately following him, I skimmed the scene, my gaze moving from the people clustered three deep around the bar to those grooving out on the dance floor. Looking for trouble, searching for anything out of place, anyone who was taking an interest in my target—or, worse, in me. I’d been an assassin for almost twenty years, and I hadn’t survived this long by being reckless and sloppy.

Once he'd made sure Ingles was really leaving, Xavier turned back to the waitress, and the two of them started talking. To them, the detective was just another creepy customer they'd kicked to the curb. It happened, even here at Northern Aggression, where very little was off-limits. But no one else showed any interest in the detective or, more important, in me.

Time to make my move.

I swallowed the rest of my gin and tonic, enjoying the sensation of the cold liquor sliding down my throat before starting its slow, sweet burn in the pit of my stomach. Then I paid my own tab, stepped away from the Ice bar, and sauntered out of the club, moving toward my prey.

The Spider was finally ready to spin her deadly web for the evening.



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## EXCERPT FROM SPARTAN HEART

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RORY FORSETI

THE FIRST DAY OF school is always the worst.

A new school year means new classes, new books, new professors, new projects to prepare and papers to write. Plus, you have to decide what you're going to wear and how you're going to act and what kind of person you're going to be—and be seen as—until school breaks for the summer several long, distant, dreary months in the future. There's so much freaking *pressure* to get every little thing right starting from that very first day. And that's just for regular kids.

That pressure is turned up to extremes at Mythos Academy.

“Are you excited for the first day of school?” a light, happy voice asked.

I stuffed one last textbook into my dark green messenger bag, then slid it over to one side of the kitchen table. I looked up to find Rachel Maddox, my aunt, smiling at me. “Not really.”

Instead of being put off by my sour, surly tone, Aunt Rachel's smile widened. "Well, you should be excited. It's a brand-new school year and a brand-new start for us. Everything's going to be great, Rory. You'll see."

"You mean like all the other kids, professors, and workers suddenly forgetting that my parents were Reapers of Chaos and all the horrible things they did?" I snorted. "Not bloody likely."

Aunt Rachel's warm smile vanished like a candle flame being snuffed out by a cold wind. She dropped her gaze from mine and turned back to the stove, flipping the blackberry pancakes that she was making special for my first day of school. And hers too, since she worked as a chef in the Mythos dining hall.

I winced, guilt churning in my stomach. Aunt Rachel was twenty-seven, only ten years older than me, since I had turned seventeen a few days ago. She had always been more of a big sister to me than an aunt—at least until my parents were murdered last year.

My mom and dad, Rebecca and Tyson Forseti, hadn't been brave, strong, noble Spartan warriors like I'd thought. The two of them had secretly been Reapers, working with others to bring Loki, the evil Norse god of chaos, back here to the mortal realm. And my parents hadn't been your average, run-of-the-mill Reaper bad guys. Oh, no. They had been Reaper *assassins*, the worst of the worst, responsible for killing dozens and dozens of innocent people.

I had been absolutely horrified when I'd learned the truth about them, especially since the whole time, all my years growing up, I had never realized what kind of evil warriors—what kind of evil *people*—they truly were.

My parents had fooled me as easily as they had everyone else, leaving behind a deep, jagged wound that just wouldn't heal. Even now, a year after their deaths, their betrayal still coated my heart like a cold frost, freezing out all my previous love for them.

Sometimes I couldn't feel anything but that cold numbing me from the inside out. Other times, I was so angry at my parents for all their lies that I half expected red-hot steam to spew out of my ears like I was a cartoon character. In those moments, I wanted to lash out at everyone and everything around me. I just wanted to *hurt* someone or something the same way my parents had hurt me, especially since I was still dealing with the consequences of all their evil actions. Maybe I also wanted to lash out because I was a Spartan, and fighting was what we were naturally hardwired to do. If only dealing with my emotions were as easy as battling Reapers.

I didn't know which was worse, not feeling anything or feeling way too much. Or maybe it was going back and forth between the two extremes. Either way, the cold numbness and hot anger had been my constant companions ever since the day I found out about my parents.

But I wasn't the only one who'd been devastated by the truth. So had Aunt Rachel, who had always looked up to her

big sister, Rebecca. Aunt Rachel had been hurt just as badly as I had been, but she'd stepped up and taken me in anyway, despite all the horrible things my parents had done. She had even put her dreams of going to culinary school in Paris on hold so she could stay here in Colorado and take care of me. Aunt Rachel had been so good to me this past year, and she did her absolute best to protect me.

I didn't mean to snap at Aunt Rachel. Really, I didn't. That was my hot anger boiling up through the icy numbness and getting the best of me. Sometimes, though, it was hard to even *look* at her, since she had the same long, glossy black hair, green eyes, and pretty features that my mom had. The same black hair and green eyes that I had as well and the same features that haunted me every time I looked in the mirror.

More than once, I had thought about dyeing my hair neon-pink or wearing violet contacts so I wouldn't look so much like my mom anymore. Who wanted to be the daughter of notorious Reaper assassins? Much less look exactly like one of them? Nobody, that's who.

But that was me, Rory Forseti, and this was my life, like it or not.

I didn't want to be like my parents, and not being like them meant not snapping at Aunt Rachel the way my mom had done so many times over the years, especially in the weeks right before she died. Or at least, trying to make things better when I did snap at Aunt Rachel. So I forced myself to sit up straight and plastered a smile on my face.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m just a little...nervous. I’m sure you’re right. This is my second year at Mythos, so it’s bound to be easier. Besides, Loki has been defeated, so everyone can finally relax and get on with their lives without worrying about him or Reapers or mythological monsters anymore.”

Aunt Rachel turned back to me, a smile spreading across her face again. “Exactly! And everyone knows how much you helped Gwen and her friends defeat Loki at the Battle of Mythos Academy. They know that you’re a good person, Rory. A hero, just like Gwen is.”

My dad, Tyson, and Gwen’s dad, Tyr, were brothers, which made Gwen my first cousin. Gwen Frost was kind of a big deal in the Mythos Academy world these days. Okay, okay, so she was more than just a big deal. She was like a freaking *princess* now. Since, you know, she’d found a way to trap Loki and keep everyone safe from the evil god forever.

Several months ago, Loki and his Reapers of Chaos had stormed onto the Mythos Academy campus in Cypress Mountain, North Carolina, in one last, desperate attempt to recover an ancient artifact that would restore Loki to full health so he could enslave us all. But Gwen had beaten the god, tricked him into almost killing her, so that she could sacrifice herself to trap him and save us.

If I closed my eyes, I could still see Gwen lying on the floor of the Library of Antiquities, looking deathly pale, bleeding out from the stab wound she’d inflicted on herself with Vic, her talking sword, in order to stop Loki from taking control of

her body, her mind, and her powerful psychometry magic. But Gwen had pulled through, thanks to some help from her friends and Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. Gwen truly was Nike's Champion, the person who worked for the goddess in this realm, in every sense of the word.

And now she was everyone else's Champion too—the hero of all heroes.

In an instant, Gwen had gone from just another girl to an outright celebrity. Gwen had told me that every time she walked across campus or worked at her job in the Library of Antiquities or even went out for coffee with her boyfriend, Logan Quinn, people were always staring at her and whispering about her. I'd seen it for myself when I visited her over the summer. Now everyone treated Gwen like she was royalty instead of a regular student. Some of the other kids—adults too—would even come up and ask her for autographs and pictures. Gwen hated all the attention, and she just wanted to get on with her life.

I knew the feeling, even if my life was as dark as hers was golden.

The fake smile slipped from my face, and I slumped in my chair.

Aunt Rachel slid a stack of pancakes onto a plate and set it on the table in front of me. “Rory? What are you thinking about?”

I picked up my fork and forced myself to smile at her again. “How great these pancakes look and smell.”

She grinned back at me and sat down at the table with her own plate of pancakes. “Thanks. I used the wild blackberries we picked when we visited the gryphons at the ruins a few days ago.”

I nodded. The Eir Ruins were located on top of the mountain that loomed over Snowline Ridge. Named for Eir, the Norse goddess of healing, the ruins were a magical place, always full of blooming wildflowers and green herbs, no matter how cold and snowy the Colorado weather was. Even better, the ruins were home to the Eir gryphons that Aunt Rachel and I had befriended several months ago.

I loved hanging out with the gryphons, who were like the pets I’d never had. If, you know, pets were enormous mythological creatures who could eat you if they really wanted to. And I especially loved riding on the gryphons’ backs as they soared around the mountaintop and over the evergreen forests below.

“Maybe we can go to the ruins this weekend,” Aunt Rachel said. “After we’re both settled into our routines for the new school year.”

This time when I smiled at her, my expression was genuine. “I’d love that.”

She reached over, grabbed my hand, and gently squeezed my fingers. “I have a good feeling about today. You’ll see, Rory. Everything’s going to be great. For both of us.”

I didn’t know about that, but her cheerful voice and happy expression made a tiny bit of hope spark to life in my chest. I

squeezed her hand back. “Of course it will.”



WE ATE OUR PANCAKES, along with the bacon, scrambled eggs, and cheesy hash browns that Aunt Rachel had also whipped up for breakfast. She was a terrific chef, and everything was delicious, especially the light, fluffy, golden pancakes. Aunt Rachel had also made some blackberry syrup, which added even more sweet yet tart flavor to the pancakes.

The good food lifted my mood, and by the time we finished breakfast, I was feeling really hopeful about starting school. So I grabbed my messenger bag from the table, slung the strap across my chest, and left.

Aunt Rachel and I lived in a small stone cottage nestled in a stand of pine trees on the outskirts of the academy. I stepped onto one of the ash-gray cobblestone paths and walked across the lush, green, landscaped lawns, past the student dorms, and up the hills, heading to the main part of campus.

It wasn't quite eight o'clock yet, but the sun was shining brightly in the clear blue September sky, further lifting my mood. We were so high up on the mountain that the air was still cool, and I stuck my hands into the pockets of my forest-green leather jacket to keep them warm. It didn't take me long to climb the last and steepest hill and reach the main quad.

Mythos Academies were located all around the world, from the one here in Snowline Ridge, Colorado, and the one in



Cypress Mountain, North Carolina, to those in London, England; Frankfurt, Germany; Saint Petersburg, Russia; and beyond. But all the campuses looked more or less the same, and each one featured a quad that served as the heart of the academy.

Five buildings made of dark, almost black stone ringed the grassy quad in front of me—math-science, English-history, a dining hall, a gym, and a library. These same five buildings were arranged in the same starlike pattern at every Mythos Academy, including the North Carolina campus where Gwen went to school and where the final battle with Loki had taken place.

But plenty of differences existed among the various academies. The buildings at Gwen's school resembled old, creepy Gothic castles, while the ones here were shaped like enormous cabins, made of heavy boulders and thick logs that had been fitted together. Wide windows were set into all the buildings to take advantage of the spectacular views of the pine trees that covered the grounds and the high, craggy mountain that loomed over the campus.

But the things I liked best about the quad were the statues of mythological creatures perched on top of, around, and beside all the buildings. Nemean prowlers, Fenrir wolves, Eir gryphons. All those creatures and more looked out over the quad, their gray stone eyes seeming to follow the students as they moved in and out of the buildings.

Most of the other kids didn't care what the buildings looked like, and they completely ignored the statues, but I enjoyed the rustic feel of everything, and I especially loved seeing the mythological creatures. They might be frozen in place, but I knew they were only a few seconds and a little bit of magic away from breaking free from their stone moorings and leaping down to the ground to protect the students, just as they had during the battle at the North Carolina academy.

I nodded at the Fenrir wolf statue sitting on the steps closest to me. The wolf studied me for a moment, before one of its stone eyes slid down in a slow, sly wink. I grinned back at it, then drew in a deep breath, letting the cool air seep deep down into my lungs.

To everyone else, this was just another Mythos Academy, but a sense of wildness, of freedom, existed here that I'd never experienced while visiting any of the other academies. I could see it in the shadows that pooled around the statues, smell it in the crisp, clear air, and hear it in the sharp, whistling wind that ruffled my ponytail.

It felt like home to me.

Since this was the first day of school, the quad was packed, and practically everyone had a coffee in one hand and a phone in the other. All sorts of mythological warriors attended Mythos Academy, but the majority of the guys were Romans and Vikings, while the girls were mostly Amazons and Valkyries. Bright, colorful sparks of magic flashed in the air around many of the kids, especially the Valkyries. For some

reason, Valkyries almost continuously gave off magic, and showers of sparks streamed out of their fingertips with every gesture they made and every text they sent.

Each kid, each warrior, had their own skills, powers, and magic—everything from enhanced senses to being able to summon up lightning to the ability to heal other people. But in general, Romans and Amazons were superquick, while Vikings and Valkyries were superstrong.

I was none of those things.

I was a Spartan, like my parents, and it was another way I didn't fit in with everyone else, since Spartans were rare—and very, very dangerous. Almost all the other kids were carrying at least one weapon, whether it was a sword or dagger belted to their waist, a staff propped up on the bench beside them, or even a bow and a quiver full of arrows peeking up out of their gym bag.

But I didn't have any weapons. I didn't *need* them, since I could pick up any object and automatically know how to kill someone with it.

Seriously. I could kill someone with a toothpick if I wanted to. A plastic fork, a paper clip, an ink pen. Whatever was handy. Not that I would ever actually do that, as it would be difficult, even for me, especially when it would be much easier to take away my enemy's sword and use their own weapon against them. But if I had to, I could defend myself with whatever was lying around, no matter how small and innocuous it might be.

I didn't know how it worked for other Spartans, how their magic manifested itself, but anytime I was in a fight, I could see what the other person was going to do before they did it. How they were going to move their feet, how they were going to shift their weight, even how hard they were going to swing their sword at me. It was like we were both part of the same movie, only I was three steps ahead of the other person.

And the same thing happened when it came to weapons, whether it was a traditional sword or something as flimsy as a toothpick. As soon as I touched a sword, I could tell how well made it was, how balanced, how strong, and I intuitively adjusted my feet, my grip, and my swings to maximize the damage I could do with the weapon. Ditto for the toothpick, the plastic fork, the paper clip, the ink pen, and anything else I could get my hands on.

And it wasn't just that I instinctively knew how to hurt people. Something about my Spartan blood made it seem *natural*, like it was something that I was *supposed* to do. Holding a sword or a staff or drawing back a bowstring seemed as right and easy as breathing to me.

Sometimes that scared me a little.

I didn't want to be like my parents. I didn't want to hurt innocent people. I didn't want to be a bad person.

I didn't want to be a Reaper.

I wanted to be...well, I wasn't quite sure yet. I wanted to do something with my life the way Gwen had. I wanted to do

something important. Something that mattered. Something that would aid other people.

And maybe, just maybe, something that would help make up for all my parents' mistakes.

But I couldn't do any of that standing here, so I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and stepped out onto the main quad.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered.

I walked along one of the cobblestone paths, winding my way toward the English-history building, since that's where myth-history was, my first class of the day. I loved myth-history and learning about all the gods, goddesses, warriors, and creatures, and I wondered what new things the professor would talk about this year, especially given the recent battle and Loki's imprisonment—

"Look!" a voice hissed. "It's Rory Forseti!"

I was halfway across the quad when I heard my name.

I froze and looked over to my right, dreading what I would see. Sure enough, a group of Valkyries wearing designer boots, jeans, and matching plaid jackets were gathered around one of the iron benches that dotted the quad. They were all quite pretty, with perfect hair and makeup, and their phones and purses were even more expensive than their clothes.

Dezi, Harley, Kylie... I recognized several of the girls, since they were all second-year students like me. None of them had liked me when we started school last fall, and they had

outright hated me after it came out that my parents were Reapers.

The Valkyries realized that I was staring at them. But instead of turning away and pretending they hadn't said my name, they all pointed at me, making pink, green, and blue sparks of magic crackle in the air around them. My heart sank. I knew what was coming next.

“I can't believe she came back here this year.”

“Did she really think that just because she helped out in North Carolina, we would forget what her parents did? Or what they were?”

“They were Reapers, through and through, and rotten to the core. And she's probably even worse than they were...”

The snarky comments went on and on, each one sharper, crueler, and more vicious and hurtful than the last. Even worse, the Valkyries' loud voices drowned out everyone else's conversations, causing the other students to turn and stare at me as well. In less than a minute, I was the center of everyone's attention, and they were all talking, texting, and whispering about me.

All I could do was stand there frozen in place with my mouth gaping open, looking like a clueless fool. I'd actually gotten my hopes up. I'd actually thought that this year would be different, better, normal. That I'd done enough good things to change everyone's opinions of me. But I'd been wrong—dead wrong.

I was such a freaking *idiot*.

Of course the other kids wouldn't forget that my parents were Reapers—not for one lousy second. How could they when Reapers had terrorized them all for so long? When they had lived in fear of Reapers their whole lives? When Reapers had killed their friends and family members for generations on end? One battle wasn't going to change all of that history, all of that bad blood, all of that fear, anger, and hate.

Nothing could *ever* change that.

But the worst part was that I had hoped it would. I had hoped for the fresh start that Aunt Rachel had said we would have. I had wanted it more than *anything*.

My first class hadn't even started yet, and my school year was already ruined, soaked in blood and burned to ash by my parents' evil actions, like so many other things in my life.

In many ways, my feelings about Mythos Academy mirrored those about my parents. I loved so many things about the academy—the scenery, the statues, the sense of being home—just as I had loved my mom's quiet strength and my dad's unending patience. But part of me also hated the academy, especially all the other students knowing about my Reaper parents. Sometimes I felt like I had a big red bull's-eye strapped to my chest, one that gave all the other kids permission to mock me.

The cruel comments, snarky whispers, and hateful stares continued. A hot, embarrassed blush flooded my cheeks, and my anger bubbled up to the surface again. But I knew from

past experience that there was no point in fighting back against the other kids. It would only make me even more of a target than I already was. Besides, they had just as much right to their anger as I had to mine. So I gritted my teeth, ducked my head, and hurried forward, determined to get inside the English-history building as quickly as possible—

A shoulder slammed into mine, making me stagger to one side of the cobblestone path.

“Watch it!” I snapped.

“Why don’t you watch it?” a low voice growled right back at me.

Normally, I would have kept on going, since this wasn’t the first time someone had accidentally-on-purpose rammed into me while I was walking across the quad, thinking that it was hilarious to pick on the girl with the dead Reaper parents. All the taunts, whispers, and stares had filled me with a familiar, sickening mixture of guilt, shame, and embarrassment, but those emotions quickly morphed into a cold, hard knot of anger in my chest. Dirty looks and whispers were one thing, but actually plowing into me was something else, especially when I was already struggling with my emotions.

Once again, I felt that need to lash out, and I decided to give in to it, since my day was already ruined. Someone wanted to mess with me? Well, I was tired of taking everyone else’s crap, and I could give as good as I got.

I whirled around to confront the person who’d run into me and realized that it wasn’t one of the snotty Valkyrie girls like



I'd expected. It was a guy—and he was *gorgeous*.

Seriously, he was tall and muscled and just plain gorgeous in his black boots, black jeans, dark gray henley, and black leather jacket. Rich honey highlights ran through his dark blond hair, which stuck up at odd angles, as though he constantly ran his fingers through it, but the slightly messy, unkempt look totally suited him. He had the kind of great cheekbones, perfect straight nose, and strong jaw that you'd see on a movie star. But his eyes...his eyes were simply *amazing*—a light, bright, piercing gray. I'd never seen eyes like that before, and I tried to figure out what their color reminded me of. Rain-soaked clouds, maybe, or the gleaming edge of a freshly sharpened sword...

The guy glared at me, breaking the spell. I blinked and forced myself to ignore how cute he was. Instead, I studied him again, and I realized I'd never seen him before. Last year, after all that mess with my parents had happened, I had made it a point to know every single student at the academy, especially the ones I should avoid. But this guy? He was new.

Oh, I was sure there was a perfectly logical explanation. Lots of students transferred from one academy to another, especially at the start of the school year and especially at the start of this school year, since the North Carolina academy was still undergoing repairs from the earlier battle.

Still, I kept studying the guy, this time trying to figure out what kind of warrior he was. He couldn't be a Roman, since his magic would have made him fast enough to avoid running

into me. My gaze dropped to the black duffel bag dangling from his hand. The bag's long, distinctive shape was meant to hold a battle ax, and a couple of smaller axes were hooked to the outside of the bag as well. So he was a Viking. They were the only warriors who used axes like that. No wonder he'd almost knocked me down. His Viking strength would have let him knock me into next week if he'd wanted. Maybe he hadn't slammed into me on purpose after all.

The guy's eyes narrowed. "What are you staring at?"

Embarrassment spurted through me that he had caught me gaping at him. But I ignored the fresh, hot blush stinging my cheeks, crossed my arms over my chest, and glared back at him.

"What are *you* staring at?" I snapped. "I was walking along, minding my own business, when *bam!* You plowed right into me. And now you're not even apologizing for almost knocking me down."

Anger sparked in his eyes, turning them a darker storm-cloud gray, which, of course, only made him look that much more handsome. "I didn't plow into you. You weren't watching where you were going. If anyone should be apologizing, it's you, cupcake."

My arms dropped to my sides, and my hands clenched into fists. "You did not just call me *cupcake*."

He arched an eyebrow. "What? You don't like that nickname? Well, it's true. Look at you, with your designer clothes and expensive bag and perky little ponytail. You're a

cute little cupcake of a warrior, just like the rest of the girls here.”

More anger surged through my body, and I stepped up so that I was standing inches away from him. “I am a *Spartan*,” I hissed. “One who is perfectly capable of kicking your ass, right here, right now, Viking.”

He arched his eyebrow at me again. “A threat? Aw, that’s so cute. Maybe some other time. Right now, I’ve got to get to class, and so do you. Unless you want to be late on the first day of school.”

“I—”

I started to snap back at him, but a series of bells rang out across the quad, cutting me off and signaling that we had five minutes to get to class.

“And that’s my cue to leave. Later, cupcake.” The Viking snapped his hand up to his forehead in a mock salute. He hefted his bag onto his shoulder, making all the small battle axes hooked to the outside *clank-clank-clank* together, and moved past me.

“But—”

I whirled around, but he was moving fast, heading for the gym on the opposite side of the quad. He was already out of earshot, unless I wanted to scream insults at him. I was still so angry that I opened my mouth to let loose, but then I realized that everyone was staring at me again, including the Valkyries who’d been mocking me earlier. The girls all rolled their eyes

and snickered, adding to my humiliation. Everyone had seen my confrontation with the Viking, and they were already gossiping about it.

Great. Just great. I had wanted things to be different this year, but I was right back where I'd started, with everyone talking about me, the supposed Reaper girl in their midst. And it was all *his* fault.

I glared at the Viking's back, but there was nothing I could do about him now. So I sighed, turned around, and trudged across the quad toward the English-history building.

As I walked along, one thought kept running through my mind. I had been absolutely right before.

The first day of school is always the worst.

Especially at Mythos Academy.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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JENNIFER ESTEP is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and internationally bestselling author who prowls the streets of her imagination in search of her next fantasy idea.

Jennifer is the author of the **Elemental Assassin**, **Mythos Academy**, **Galactic Bonds**, **Section 47**, **Crown of Shards**, **Gargoyle Queen**, and other fantasy series. She has written more than forty-five books, along with numerous novellas and stories.

In her spare time, Jennifer enjoys hanging out with friends and family, doing yoga, and reading fantasy and romance books. She also watches way too much TV and loves all things related to superheroes.

For more information on Jennifer and her books, visit her website at **[www.jenniferestep.com](http://www.jenniferestep.com)**, or follow her online on **Facebook**, **Instagram**, **Twitter**, **BookBub**, and **Goodreads**. You can also sign up for her **newsletter**.

Happy reading, everyone!

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