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JENNIFER ESTEP

SPARTAN FROS

A Mythos Academy Novel

"Recommended for fans of Richelle Mead,
Rachel Hawkins and P.C. Cast."

—NocturneReads

“What is this place?” I whispered.

“Part of an abandoned ski resort,” Sergei whispered back. “The bank foreclosed on it before the season ever started, so it’s been sitting here empty all fall and winter.”

“All of which made it a perfect place for the Reapers to take over and use,” Inari added, his dark eyes fixed on the structure.

“Well, it looks like someone’s home, with all of those lights on,” Dad murmured.

“So what are we waiting for?” I asked. “Let’s go say hello.”

My voice was dark, harsh, and ugly—as dark, harsh, and ugly as I’d felt ever since that day at the auditorium. I didn’t want to talk to the Reapers—I just wanted to kill them.

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Spartan Frost

SPARTAN FROST

A Mythos Academy Novella

JENNIFER ESTEP



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As always, to my mom, my grandma, and Andre,
for all their love, help, support, and patience
with my books and everything else in life

And to all the readers who wanted a Logan story,
this one's for you

Acknowledgments

Any author will tell you that her story would not be possible without the hard work of many, many people. Here are some of the folks who helped bring Logan Quinn, Gwen Frost, and the world of Mythos Academy to life:

Thanks to my agent, Annelise Robey, for all her helpful advice.

Thanks to my editor, Alicia Condon, for her sharp editorial eye and thoughtful suggestions. They always make the story so much better.

Thanks to everyone at Kensington who worked on the project, and thanks to Alexandra Nicolajsen and Vida Engstrand for all their promotional efforts.

And, finally, thanks to all the readers out there. Entertaining you is why I write stories, and it's always an honor and a privilege. I hope you have as much fun reading about Logan's adventure as I did writing it.

Happy reading!

Chapter 1

I was going to kill her.

I *wanted* to kill her—more than anything *else*.

“Logan. Stop! It’s me! Your Gypsy girl!”

Gwen Frost said those words to me over and over again. Cajoling. Begging. Pleading. She shoved her wavy brown hair back off her face, then stretched out her hand as if she could stop me just by touching me.

I frowned and paused the vicious attack I’d been about to unleash on her. Maybe she could, give her psychometry magic, the strange power she had that let her learn about people and objects simply by touching them. Maybe all it would take to free me from this horrible, pounding agony in my head was a mere brush of her cool fingers against mine.

An angry snarl rose in the back of my throat, and my fingers tightened around the hilt of my sword. My hand wrapped so hard around the metal that it felt like a spike digging into my palm. Well, it wasn’t going to find out. I didn’t *want* to find out. All I wanted to do was *kill* her.

Gwen’s lips pulled up into a soft smile, as if my not immediately attacking her was some sign that her silly, stupid, tearful pleas were actually *working*. I made myself smile back at her, although I could feel how terribly twisted my face was, as though I was wearing a rubber mask stretched tight over my own skin.

Gwen crept a little closer to me . . . and then a little closer still . . .

Her sneakers squeaked, and the wooden floor of the stage creaked as she kept easing toward me one small, careful step at a time. For a moment, I stared past her, looking at the rows of padded seats that ringed the stage and wondering why the auditorium was empty. There had been plenty of people here earlier. My dad. My uncle Nickamedes. Coach Ajax. Oliver. Kenzie. Carson. Daphne. Professor Metis. Students who were members of the Mythos Academy band. I remembered seeing all those people and more.

My eyes swept over the seats once again, but they were just as empty as before. For some reason everyone else had vanished, leaving me alone with *her*.

“Logan,” Gwen said, so much love, so much sympathy, so much hope in that one soft whisper.

My gaze snapped back to her. She gave me another tentative smile, then stretched her hand out toward me again—

I swung my sword at her, trying to take her head off with one blow.

Gwen jerked back at the last second, the blade barely missing slicing into her neck and shoulder. The hopeful smile slipped off her face, and sadness sparked in her violet eyes.

For a moment, I almost felt what she did. I almost felt her disappointment. I almost felt her deep aching sadness. I almost felt how *wrong* this was. But the emotions seemed like smoky whispers that I couldn’t quite hear, and the more I concentrated on them, the softer and more indistinct they became until they faded away altogether.

Then, the thing inside me rose up once more, clawing its way to the surface of my mind, ripping and tearing and shredding through all my fight, all my resistance, all my attempts to stop it.

No, not it, not a thing—*Loki*.

The evil Norse god of chaos. The powerful being whose soul was invading my own body. Corrupting my own soul and eating away at everything I was. Replacing every single thing that was

me with all of the foul things that were *him*.

That was the last coherent thought I had before the rage took over.

Rage that this . . . this *girl* was still alive, despite all of my many, many attempts to kill her, to kill her mother and grandmother, to wipe all of her ancestors off the face of the earth. But no matter what I did, no matter what I ordered my Reapers to do, no matter how I schemed and plotted and manipulated, the Frost family always managed to survive. *She* always managed to survive, along with that stupid goddess she served—Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. My nemesis.

The rage rose up in me again, boiling and bubbling like lava in my chest. Everything in my field of vision slowly took on an angry red tint, as though a bloody fog was sweeping through the auditorium. The rows of empty seats. The wooden stage under my feet. The sword in my hand. Even Gwen's jeans, T-shirt, and hoodie turned that glorious shade.

Her eyes stayed that same violet color, though—that soft, twilight shade that I hated more than anything else in the world.

“Logan. Stop! It's me! Your Gypsy girl!”

Gwen repeated her pitiful words. Her weak pleas made my fingers slowly clench and unclench around the hilt of my sword. Anticipation surged through me, hotter and more powerful than even the rage, and my heart thrummed in a quick, familiar rhythm. Spartans weren't known for being kind to their enemies, and I had no sympathy and no mercy right now—especially not for *her*.

I let out a fierce yell and charged at her again, but once more, she managed to avoid my vicious slashing blows, all of which were designed to kill her where she stood. Gwen ducked under my last slice and whirled around, raising her own sword up into a defensive position in one smooth move. I let myself admire her technique for a moment. She'd gotten so much better at fighting these last few months. But it wasn't going to save her—nothing was.

Not from *me*.

“That's not Logan right now,” another voice advised, this one low and harsh and colored by a thick English accent. “And he won't stop until one of you is dead. Do the Spartan a favor, Gwen. Put him out of his misery.”

I recognized the voice as belonging to Vic, Gwen's talking sword, the weapon she was wielding right now. I nodded my head in approval. Vic had the right idea. He *always* had the right idea, since the bloodthirsty sword wanted to kill Reapers more than anything else.

And right now, I was the biggest, baddest Reaper of them all—Loki himself.

Thinking about the Norse god made the thing inside me burrow a little deeper into my heart, and I felt more and more of myself falling away, as though I was being charred to ash from the inside out. Sweat streamed down my face and slicked down my neck, and I could hear the angry sizzle, spit, and hiss of the salty drops as they trickled onto the collar cinched around my neck. The gold circle was tight, but more than that, it was hot—so terribly hot, as if it might ignite and engulf me in flames any second. Somehow, I knew there was only one thing that would stop the heat, the pain, the agony—killing Gwen.

So I raised my sword and went on the attack again. And this time, I didn't stop.

I chased Gwen around and around the stage, swinging my sword at her over and over again.

Clash-clash-clang!

Clash-clash-clang!

Clash-clash-clang!

For a while, she parried my blows, and we moved back and forth, stomping over the stage, each footstep louder and harsher than the one before, until the wood threatened to splinter under our smashing feet. But while my blows grew quicker, harder, and more vicious, fueled by my rage and the unbearable burning inside me, hers grew slower, weaker, and softer, until she was barely managing to

parry my attacks.

~~She stared at me, her violet eyes wide. The sadness had vanished, replaced by shock, surprise, and most important, *fear*. That's what I loved—that look of utter desperation when my enemy finally realized there was no winning this fight—and no chance of stopping her own death.~~

I slammed my sword into Gwen's, knocking hers away. The blade went sliding across the stage sending up a shower of purple sparks before it dropped off the edge and clattered to the auditorium floor. I could hear Vic screaming at her and me too, but I didn't care. I quickly twirled my weapon in my hand, then brought it up, around, and down into her heart.

For a moment, all I felt was . . . *satisfaction*. Cold, cruel, triumphant satisfaction that I'd finally killed my mortal enemy, the one who had stymied me time and time again, the one who was such a threat to me.

Then, Gwen reached out, her bloody hand brushing mine, even though her fingers were already going cold and still with death. Her touch was as soft as a snowflake falling onto my skin, but the emotions that went with it were anything but. Her sadness, agony, and heartbreak slammed into me, cutting me to the core, just like my sword had rammed into her heart.

Too late, I realized what I had done—that I'd just killed the girl I loved.

Gwen finally screamed, and I screamed right along with her—

I rolled over and over, thrashing in the soft, flannel sheets that covered the king-sized bed. For a moment, I flailed against the empty air, my fists lashing out in hard, fierce arcs, fighting enemies that weren't really there. A second later, I hit the floor.

The sharp *snap-snap* of my left shoulder and hip banging against the cool wood jolted me out of my dream.

I lay there on the floor for a few seconds, my face mashed against the wood, waiting for my heart to slow down, for my breathing to go back to normal, and for the tremors to leave my body. When I felt able, I pushed myself up and leaned back against the side of the bed. I let out a long, tired sigh and ran my hands through my black hair, making the sweaty locks stand straight up.

No, not a dream—a *nightmare*.

One that was all too real. Because I hadn't just attacked Gwen in my dreams—I'd done it in real life, too.

It had all happened a few weeks ago during the winter band concert at the Aoide Auditorium, where my stepmom, Agrona Quinn, had finally revealed herself to be the head of the Reapers of Chaos, the evil warriors who served Loki. Before I realized what was happening, Agrona had snapped a golden collar around my neck, one that was studded with Apate jewels, named after the Greek goddess of deception. With the help of the jewels, a book, and some other horrible magic, Agrona and the Reapers had tried to put Loki's soul into me, so the god would have a young, strong, healthy body, instead of his own gnarled, twisted, broken one.

But Gwen had used her psychometry to break through the Reapers' magic and the terrible hold that Loki had on me, and remind me who I really was to her—Logan freaking Quinn, fierce Spartan warrior, the guy she loved enough to sacrifice herself in order to try to save me.

Oh yes, my Gypsy girl had been there when I'd needed her the most. And in return, I'd stabbed her in the chest with my sword, just like Agrona had ordered me to.

Gwen had saved me, and I'd almost killed her. I *would* have killed her, if Professor Metis and Daphne hadn't been there. I could still see the horrible scene like it had just happened a moment ago. Gwen crumpled on the stage, blood all over her chest and even more pooling underneath her body, her eyes closed, her chest still, Vic sheathed in the scabbard hanging off the belt around her waist. Mr. Oliver, and everyone else gathered around her. Me screaming at Metis and Daphne to *do* something, help her, to save her. The golden and rosy glows from Metis's and Daphne's healing magic focused on

Gwen's heart and the deep, ugly wound that I'd left there. The minutes ticking by, each one longer and more unbearable than the last. And then, finally, *thankfully*, the small, choking sound Gwen had made as she rasped in a breath, and I realized that she wasn't going to die, that I hadn't killed her after all.

But the awful memories didn't stop there. Because I remembered something else from that day—the way that the other students had hurried to back away from me, staring at me with frightened eyes like I was going to go all Reaper and attack them again at any second...

I scrubbed my hands over my face, trying to block out the horrible memories, trying to forget the horrible thing I'd done to the girl I loved—

A sharp knock sounded on the bedroom door.

"Logan?" my dad's voice drifted in through the thick wood. "Are you okay? I thought I heard noise."

It took me a moment to push away the rest of the memories and find my voice. "Yeah, I'm all right," I called out, hoping he wouldn't hear how low, harsh, and strangled my words were. "I just, ah, dropped something."

Silence.

"Well, okay," he replied. "Breakfast should be ready soon. Come on downstairs, when you want."

After a moment, he shuffled away from the door, his footsteps slow and steady, as though he was still listening and ready to come running in here at the slightest sound or sign that I was in trouble.

But I wasn't in trouble—I *was* the trouble.

I didn't want breakfast. I didn't want to eat, and I certainly didn't want to go back to sleep and have another nightmare. I didn't want to do anything but sit in the dark and try to forget everything I'd done.

But that was the one thing I couldn't do. Because, like it or not, life went on, especially for warriors like me. You waged the battle, killed as many Reapers as you could, licked your wounds, and then you geared up for the next fight. Besides, my dad was trying to make things better between us, finally trying to fix our problems, and I figured that I owed it to him to try just as hard.

So even though I didn't want to, I untangled myself from the sheets, got back up on my feet, and went into the bathroom to wash up and face the day.

Chapter 2

I took a long, hot shower and threw on some jeans, along with a white T-shirt, a heavy blue sweater, and some wool socks and thick boots.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror over the dresser as I combed my hair out. Black hair, blue eyes, nice smile, muscles in all the right places. More than one girl had told me that I was cute, handsome, dreamy even, and I'd used my looks to my advantage. A slow smile, a sly look, a low laugh, a whispered compliment, and most girls melted in my arms—except for Gwen. She'd told me to get over myself. Her sassy sarcasm was the first thing I'd noticed—and liked—about her.

But I didn't look cute anymore. Not handsome and *especially* not dreamy. Not unless raging murderous psycho was your idea of the perfect guy. I snorted and threw the comb down on top of the dresser.

Oh sure, my features were the same as always, right down to the crooked quirk of my mouth and the stubborn cowlick that I could never quite flatten out. But I couldn't help but lean forward and peep into the mirror, trying to see if an ominous red spark was shimmering in my gaze. Oliver Hector, one of my best friends, had told me how my eyes had gone completely Reaper red when I'd been connected to Loki at the auditorium. I searched and searched for any flicker of color that shouldn't be there, but my eyes were the same pale blue they'd always been. Still, the sight didn't make me feel any better.

I'd always liked the fact that girls thought I was cute. What guy wouldn't? But now, I just felt ugly—inside and out. Dirty. Tainted. Corrupted.

“Logan.” My dad's voice crackled through an intercom set into the wall by the door. “Breakfast almost ready.”

I went over and hit the button so I could answer him. “I'll be there in a minute.”

I opened the door, left the bedroom, walked to the end of the hall, and headed down the stairs to the first floor. The wood creaking under my weight reminded me of how the stage had made the same sound in my dream—my nightmare. I winced and quickened my pace, grabbing hold of the railing and jumping down the last three steps.

I'd left Mythos Academy, left Cypress Mountain, North Carolina, the night that I'd attacked Gwen. My dad had driven me over to Ashland, then we'd flown up to Bigtime in his private plane, before getting into another car and driving to our final destination—the Quinn summer mansion in the Adirondack Mountains in New York.

The house wasn't too far away from the New York branch of Mythos Academy, which was where my dad spent a lot of his time. The mansion had been his base of operations ever since he'd become the head of the Protectorate, the police force for the mythological world that tracked down Reapers and put them in prison where they belonged.

But more important, the mansion wasn't where my mom, Larenta, and older sister, Larissa, had been murdered by Agrona and her Reapers when I was five. There were no bad memories here. No blood soaked into the wooden floors. No scratches in the thick stone walls from where weapons had missed their mark and gouged into the rock instead of someone's skull. No imagined screams to haunt me about how I'd failed to protect my family, how I'd failed to stand and fight with my mom and sister against the Reapers. No snide whispers to remind me how disappointed my dad was in me because of that—because I hadn't acted like a *real* Spartan would have that day. Because I'd hidde

like my mom and sister had told me to instead of fighting—and dying—with them.

I snorted again. ~~Maybe I'd been hanging around Gwen too long. Because I was almost starting to think that I could hear and see things that weren't really there and pick up on memories and feelings like she could with her psychometry.~~

I walked on, moving from one hallway to the next. The mansion was all polished wood, gleaming glass, and gray stone, more like a large rustic hunting lodge than anything else. But instead of stuffed Fenrir wolf, Nemean prowler, and Black roc heads, weapons covered many of the walls—swords, axes, maces, daggers, bows with quivers full of arrows hanging beside them. Some of the weapons were for decoration, but most were in case of a Reaper attack. A threat that loomed even larger now that Loki was free from his Helheim prison, and his Reapers on the verge of declaring a second Chthonian War.

I strode by a series of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the backyard and the mountainous wooded ridges that surrounded the mansion. Outside, fat flakes of snow slowly drifted down from the dull gray sky, adding another layer to what had already fallen overnight. It had been snowing ever since we'd gotten here about two weeks ago. More than a foot covered the ground at any one time, and it showed no signs of stopping anytime soon. Fine by me. The frozen cold matched my mood.

An ornate grandfather clock with a gold gryphon perching on top of its wooden dome started chiming as I passed one of the first-floor living rooms. The clock's golden face was also shaped like a gryphon, complete with two topaz eyes and an ebony beak. The creature's mouth was open in a silent snarl, as though it wanted to use its sharp beak to break free of the glass case that housed it. I glanced at the clock hands, which resembled two silver swords stabbing into the gryphon's face. Seven a.m. on the dot.

Gwen should be in the gym right now for weapons training with Oliver and Kenzie Tanaka, another one of my best friends. Daphne Cruz, Gwen's best friend, and Carson Callahan, Daphne's boyfriend, were probably there too. I'd have to text Oliver later and see how Gwen was, just like I'd done every day since I'd left the academy. Oh, I knew that she was fine—physically, at least, since her wound had been healed—and that all of our friends were watching out for her. But Oliver had said more than once that Gwen had been quiet lately—and that she asked about me every single day.

Gwen had texted me and left me several voice mails over the past two weeks, but I hadn't responded to any of them. In fact, I always checked my phone when it beeped so I wouldn't accidentally answer one of her calls by mistake. Still, I replayed the recordings she left me over and over again, carefully listening to every single word and trying to figure out whether or not she was really okay from how her voice sounded. I couldn't bear to talk to her, though. Just the thought made my chest tighten and my stomach churn with guilt.

Still, more than once, I found myself staring at my phone, trying to work up the courage to at least text her back and tell her that she shouldn't worry about me. That I didn't deserve one single second of her time. Not anymore. But I couldn't even do that. Not yet. Maybe not ever again.

Not after what I'd done to her.

The clock chimed a final time, snapping me out of my dark thoughts, and I moved on. Finally, I reached the kitchen, which was one of the largest rooms in the entire mansion. More wood and stone made up the floor and walls, while several square skylights were set into the ceiling, although the glass was covered over with snow, just like everything else. A long, skinny, gray marble island divided the front part of the kitchen into two large halves, with gleaming chrome appliances flanking the walls on either side. A rectangular dining table took up the back half of the room, the four wooden legs each carved to look like gargoyles standing straight up. The glass tabletop itself rested on the creatures' upstretched front legs, as though they were really here and holding it up with their talon-tipped paws. A set of glass double doors stood behind the table, revealing even more of the cold air

snow outside.

~~A man stood at one of the stoves along the right wall, stirring something in a skillet. Blond hair, pale blue eyes, tall, thin figure. Linus Quinn, my dad, and the head of the Protectorate.~~

Dad wore jeans, boots, and a heavy sweater like I did, although his long gray Protectorate robe was thrown over the chair at the head of the table and his sword was propped up in a nearby seat. His cellphone was also sitting on the wooden surface, although with his open laptop, several folders, and three thick stacks of papers. His black reading glasses perched on top of a pile of glossy photos, along with a magnifying glass.

Folders, papers, pens, and more had cluttered that end of the table for as long as I could remember. Dad was *always* working on something. Even when I was a kid, and we'd come up here to relax and have a vacation, he'd still bring along stacks and stacks of reports on what the Reapers might be up to and where they might strike next. His dedication to his job, to stopping Reapers and keeping the members of the Pantheon as safe as possible, was one of the things I admired most about him—and hated at the same time. Because Dad had been able to lose himself in his Protectorate duties after Mom and Larissa had been killed. All I'd been able to do was miss them.

Dad turned at the scuff of my boots on the floor. "There you are," he said. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd gotten lost."

He let out a small chuckle, trying to make a joke, and I forced myself to smile back at him.

"Yeah. The house is bigger than I remember. I turned left instead of right."

He nodded and scooped the eggs that he'd been scrambling out of the hot pan and into a white serving dish. "Well, you're just in time. Come and fix a plate."

I wandered over to the counter next to the stove. The eggs sat next to an even bigger platter of crispy bacon, smoked sausage, and country fried ham. Buckwheat pancakes, buttermilk biscuits, black pepper gravy, and hash browns completed the menu, along with pitchers of fresh-squeezed orange juice, apple, and grapefruit juice. The smells of the sizzling meat, fluffy eggs, and fried potatoes made my stomach rumble. I hadn't been eating much lately.

I raised an eyebrow. "You really went all out this morning."

"What is it they say? Breakfast is the most important meal of the day." Dad let out another small chuckle.

This time, I didn't respond. I was too interested in the food. Instead, I grabbed a plate, piled it high, and went over to the table, and sat in my regular spot, three seats down from and well out of the way of Dad's nest of work at the end.

Dad fixed his own plate and came over to the table. He started to sit down in his chair at the end, but then hesitated and glanced at me, as if he was thinking about going around the table and sitting across from me. I kept my gaze fixed on my plate and shoveled another bite of eggs into my mouth. After a moment, he slid into his usual spot, moving his laptop off to one side to make room for his plate.

I didn't know whether I was disappointed that he hadn't chosen to sit closer to me or happy that he hadn't. After a moment, I decided on happy, or at least relieved, since him being down there was pretty much the status quo. This was what we were, and this was what we'd been for a long time now—as distant and impersonal as strangers sharing a meal. That was the only way we'd been able to keep from shouting at each other for the last few years. By being polite, eating quickly, and getting out of each other's hair, going to different parts of the mansion, and doing our own separate things as soon as we could.

For several minutes, we focused on our food, and the only sounds were the tinny *scrape-scrape* of our knives and forks on the plates and the occasional *slosh-slosh* of juice in our glasses.

My dad was no gourmet cook, not like the chefs at Mythos, who whipped up lobster omelets, spiced veal sausages, and other elaborate concoctions on a daily basis, but the food was warm, tasty, and

filling. The pancakes were light and fluffy, while the wild blueberry syrup that I poured over them was tart, tangy, and sweet all at the same time. The cheesy scrambled eggs went great with the slightly salty ham, buttermilk biscuits, peppery gravy, and fried hash browns. And, hey, bacon made *everything* better.

After we'd finished our first helpings and had gotten seconds of everything, my dad cleared his throat. Wary, I looked at him. He only did that when he wanted to talk to me, usually about something I wasn't going to like. Actually, we never talked about anything I *did* like.

"So," he said, struggling to smile just as I had earlier. "What's on your agenda for today?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe some training exercises in the gym. I should work on my archery. I've been slacking off on that lately."

Plus, bows and arrows didn't immediately remind me of what I'd done to Gwen. Not like all the swords hanging on the walls.

Dad frowned. "That's all you've done ever since we arrived. I'm all for training, staying strong, and keeping on top of your game, but I think you're taking things a little too far, Logan. You've spent at least three hours in the gym every day since we've been here—sometimes even more. Then, after you train, you go hiking through the woods for another couple of hours, and you don't come back until it's dark out."

I shrugged again. I wasn't going to tell him that wearing myself out to the point of utter exhaustion was the only way that I could keep from dreaming about stabbing Gwen again, that I could at least postpone some of the nightmares. And I certainly wasn't going to tell him the other reason I was training so hard—so I could kill Agrona the next time I saw her.

Part of me still couldn't believe she was the head of the Reapers, the person who'd led the attack on my mom and sister in hopes of killing them and kidnapping me all those years ago. Agrona had actually been okay, as far as stepmoms went. She'd always been nice to me, and she'd certainly never tried to take my mom's place or anything. She hadn't even bossed me around all that much or nagged me about how messy my room always was.

She'd even listened when I'd complained to her about my dad, and she'd always encouraged the two of us to try to get along better. In fact, Agrona was pretty much the only reason my dad and I had been civil to each other the last few years. But the whole time—the whole damn *time*—she'd been using us. Spying on the Protectorate through my dad and his friends, secretly sabotaging the missions she went on with them, keeping tabs on me so she could try to put Loki's soul into my body when the evil god finally got free from Helheim.

"Well, I thought we might go over to the academy today," Dad said when it became apparent I wasn't going to say anything else about my reasons for training so hard. "Get you all set up for class next week."

"I thought you did that already," I muttered.

I hadn't wanted to go back to the North Carolina academy, but I didn't want to transfer to the New York one either, or any of the others around the world. But my dad was a stickler for the rules, and he insisted that I return to one of the academies and get caught up on all the work I'd missed the past two weeks. As if nothing had happened. As if I hadn't been connected to Loki. As if I hadn't tried to murder Gwen. And most especially, as if everyone didn't know about all the terrible things I'd done.

Oh, I knew it was all the talk of the mythological world. How Logan freaking Quinn had gone a Reaper and almost killed Nike's Champion and a whole bunch of other kids at the Aoide Auditorium. Oliver and Kenzie had told me about all of the calls, texts, and questions they'd gotten from the other kids at the academy. Not to mention the crazy rumors that were going around campus—everything from Gwen killing me, to me willingly joining and escaping with the Reapers, to my body being in cold storage in the morgue in the bottom of the math-science building.

Apparently, Kenzie had started turning his phone off so he wouldn't see all the silly questions and stupid messages. ~~Nobody had been brave enough to text or call me, though. I supposed they were a~~ too afraid of me for that.

Nobody except for Gwen, that is.

She'd even sent me a letter, telling me how she'd seen exactly what Loki had done to me, how he tortured me from the inside out, and how hard I'd fought against him. She also said that she forgave me for everything I'd done, for how I'd hurt her.

Maybe she did, but I couldn't forgive myself.

But questions, rumors, and my own guilt aside, everyone would be watching me the second I set foot on any Mythos campus anywhere in the world. And right now, I just didn't want to deal with all of the stares and whispers and stupid *gossip*.

It was hard enough handling what had actually happened.

"Logan?" Dad asked in a soft voice. "Are you okay?"

"Terrific," I muttered, pushing my scrambled eggs from one side of my plate to the other instead of eating them. "Just terrific."

"Look, I know it's hard, but I really think that returning to school and getting back to some sort of normal routine will help you . . . deal with things," he said. "You can't just sit around here all day and do nothing."

"I'm not doing nothing. I'm *training*. Just like a *real* Spartan would, right?" I didn't bother keeping the sarcasm out of my voice, but I couldn't hide the hurt that went along with my words.

Dad sighed and started to open his mouth, probably to lecture me some more about going back to school—

A sharp knock sounded on the front door, cutting him off before he could get started. A second later, the door creaked open. I tensed and sat up straight in my chair, my fingers repositioning the knife and fork in my hands so I could lash out with them. Like all Spartans, I didn't need a weapon to fight. Thanks to my innate killer instinct, I knew I could jab the knife into someone's neck or poke one of his eyes out with the fork. If worse came to worst, I could always break one of the plates and use the shards like daggers, or shove someone's head through the top of the glass table—

Dad waved his hand at me in a placating gesture. "Relax, Logan. I'm expecting company. It's time for the morning briefing, remember?"

Every morning, at least a couple of Protectorate members stopped by the house to update my dad on the latest Reaper sightings, crimes, and suspected activities. It had been Dad's routine for as long as I could remember, and I felt stupid that I'd forgotten about it today.

"Oh. Yeah. Right."

I gave him a curt nod, but it still took me a moment to unclench my hands from around the utensils and set them down on my plate. I'd been on edge ever since that day at the auditorium, expecting Agrona to show up at any moment, slap another collar studded with Apate jewels around my neck, and try to finish the ritual she'd started. Or worse, for Loki to suddenly storm back into my mind, take control of me once more, and make me murder everyone around me. Nickamedes and Professor Metz had told me that wouldn't happen, that I wasn't connected to the evil god anymore, that he couldn't force his will on me like that ever again, but I didn't know if I believed them.

I didn't know what to believe anymore—especially not about myself.

Heavy footsteps sounded, and two men appeared in the kitchen doorway. One of the men was short and stocky, with a thick, muscled body, while the other was tall and slender. Sergei Sokolov and Inari Sato, two of my dad's best friends and important members of the Protectorate. Normally, this early in the morning, Sergei and Inari would have been in jeans, boots, and sweaters, like me and Dad, but today, they'd already put their gray robes on over their regular clothes, and their swords were belted

around their waists, the metal hilts winking at me like sly, knowing eyes. Something was up.

“Linus, Logan,” Sergei said, his Russian accent a little more pronounced than usual.

We both nodded back at him. Inari stood by his friend’s side, still and silent, as was his way. The Ninja never talked much.

Dad gestured over at the platters of food on the counter. “Sit down and help yourselves to some breakfast. I made enough for all of us.”

Sergei shook his head. “No time. I hate to interrupt your meal, but we’ve got a report of some Reapers using a nearby building as a base of operations,” he rumbled, his hazel eyes dark and serious. “According to our intel, there are at least half a dozen Reapers there right now. Maybe more. We think it’s the same crew that’s been stealing artifacts from some of the local museums.”

Dad’s gaze flicked to the photos on top of the table. He spread them out, and I leaned over so I could get a better look at them. They were all slick, glossy shots, the sort of things you might see in a museum brochure, artful photos that would show the items in the best possible light. A spear, a shield, some rings, and a half-used candle were among the artifacts featured in the pictures.

Dad had been working on this case nonstop ever since we’d arrived in New York. A group of Reapers, all wearing black robes and rubber Loki masks, had been going around, breaking into museums, and swiping artifacts—weapons, armor, clothing, and more that had belonged to gods and goddesses and the warriors and creatures who had served them over the centuries.

I rubbed my neck, which suddenly felt tight, stiff, and hot, as though that gold collar were still clamped around my throat. The Reapers had been stealing jewels too, some of them similar to the Apate gems that Agrona had used to help control me. So far, Dad hadn’t been able to figure out what the Reapers wanted with the artifacts, as some of them were pretty obscure and seemed to have little magic, but it didn’t really matter. At least not to me. All that mattered was stopping them—for good.

“We’ve called for reinforcements, but due to the weather, they won’t be here for at least two hours,” Sergei said.

Inari nodded, his dark hair gleaming under the kitchen lights. “And we don’t know how much longer the Reapers might stay at their current location.”

Dad looked at me, regret and resignation flashing in his eyes, along with stubborn determination. His somber expression was all too familiar, since his work had always come first—especially before me.

“I guess that trip to the academy will have to wait, huh?” I said.

He put his fork down on top of his plate, pushed away from the table, and got to his feet. “I’m sorry, son, but I’ve got to go check this out. You know how important it is that we don’t let any more artifacts fall into the Reapers’ hands.”

I did know—better than he did, since Agrona had used some of those stolen artifacts on me. That wasn’t the first time that Dad had ever been called away in the middle of a meal, and it wouldn’t be the last. In fact, I couldn’t remember a time when we’d actually managed to make it all the way through dinner without him taking a phone call, checking e-mail, or chatting with the Protectorate members who’d come to the house to speak to him about an urgent matter in person. It used to piss me off, that he couldn’t forget about work for one measly hour, but not anymore. Not since Loki had wormed his way into my mind. Not since I’d felt all of the evil god’s intense, burning hatred for the members of the Pantheon. Not since I knew exactly what horrors my dad and the other members of the Protectorate were up against.

I stood up as well. “I’m coming too.”

Dad was already shaking his head before I finished speaking. “No. Absolutely not.”

I threw my hands out to my sides. “What else am I going to do here all day? Like you said, I’m not supposed to start classes at the academy until next week. Even I can only play so many video games

a day. Come on. Let me go with you—*please*. I want to do something, anything, to help. You know that. ~~Why do you think I've been training so hard?~~

It wasn't exactly the truth, but it was close enough. I didn't think Agrona would be at this building, not given how close it was to our mansion, but if she was there, then I wanted to be the one to deal with her—I wanted to be the one to kill her.

And if she wasn't there, well, I would settle for the Reapers that were.

Sergei walked over and gave me a hearty, approving clap on the shoulder. "Well, I say it's a fine idea. We can always use an extra pair of eyes and ears, not to mention another sword, right, Linus?"

Inari moved to stand beside me as well, silently offering his support. Dad looked at his friends' turn, before his blue gaze focused on me again. I lifted my chin and stared right back at him.

"All right," Dad said, sighing a bit. "All right. You can come. But make sure you grab some weapons on the way out the door. If the Reapers are using that building as a hideout, we don't know who or what we might find there."

Chapter 3

Dad threw on his Protectorate robe, while I went back to my room and put a heavy black snowsuit on top of my winter clothes. On the way out the front door, I grabbed a sword from one of the walls. Sergei and Inari were already outside waiting in Sergei's black Range Rover. Dad and I piled into the back of the vehicle, and the four of us took off.

Sergei drove for about thirty minutes, twisting and winding through the mountains before slowing down on a remote section of road and stopping the car on the shoulder. Sergei reached into the glove box, pulled out a black toboggan, and tugged it down over his head, hiding his brown hair from sight. He grabbed another toboggan and handed it to me. I yanked the fabric down over my ears, grateful for the extra warmth it provided.

"Now, we hike," Sergei said with a big grin and a wink.

I grinned back at him.

We left the car and trooped through the snowy woods single file, with Sergei creating a path through the snow and the rest of us following along in his wake. The forest was completely silent except for our harsh, frosty rasps of breath, and even the birds were still and quiet in their hidden roosts on the branches above our heads. Everything smelled crisp, sharp, cold, and clean, and I breathed in deeply, enjoying the icy burn of the winter air in my lungs.

Finally, we crested the ridge we'd been climbing up for the last ten minutes and reached the back side of the property that was serving as the Reapers' hideout. The four of us hunkered down in the deep snowdrifts at the edge of the trees and got our bearings.

An enormous building lay in the clearing before us, one that was even larger than my family mansion. It too was made of wood, glass, and stone and had three wings that were joined together, each of which boasted its own A-line roof. Even though it was midmorning, lights still burned inside the structure, fighting a losing battle against the unrelenting grayness of the day, but I didn't see anyone moving through the glass wall that was set into the back of the building.

"What is this place?" I whispered.

"Part of an abandoned ski resort," Sergei whispered back.

"The bank foreclosed on it before the season ever started, so it's been sitting here empty all fall and winter."

"All of which made it a perfect place for the Reapers to take over and use," Inari added, his dark eyes fixed on the structure.

"Well, it looks like someone's home, with all of those lights on," Dad murmured.

"So what are we waiting for?" I asked. "Let's go say hello."

My voice was dark, harsh, and ugly—as dark, harsh, and ugly as I'd felt ever since that day at the auditorium. I didn't want to talk to the Reapers—I just wanted to kill them. No, scratch that. I didn't even want to kill them. Not really. I wanted to make them *hurt*, like I'd hurt Gwen. More than anything else, I wanted to make them *suffer*. Especially Agrona. And Vivian Holler too, if she was here.

Dad must have picked up on my feelings because he frowned at me, and his gaze dropped to the sword in my hand. Despite the cold, I wasn't wearing gloves, and my knuckles were white from where I had such a tight grip on the weapon. I lifted my chin and stared right back at him. I wasn't a kid anymore. I hadn't been for a long time now, and I wasn't going to pretend to be anything other than

what I was—a Spartan out for blood.

~~He sighed again, but after a moment, he nodded. “Okay. Logan’s right. Let’s go see what the Reapers are up to.”~~

Dad, Sergei, and I stayed where we were, hidden by the snow and the trees, but Inari slid out from behind the stand of pines and crept toward the ski resort. Even though I was looking right at him, I never really saw him move. One moment, he was hunkered down beside me in the snow. The next, he was at the back door of the building, reaching for the knob. Ninjas had cool stealth magic like that, an amazing ability to blend into the shadows and background so well that people just sort of looked past them without really seeing them—until it was too late.

Inari tried the knob. It must have been unlocked because he cautiously opened the door. He stuck his head inside for a second before gesturing at us to approach. Sergei, Dad, and I left our hiding place in the woods, slogged through the snow and across the yard, and stepped through the open door into the house. Inari came in as well and quietly shut the door behind him. We stood there, swords raised, bodies tense, muscles clenched, looking and listening for any sign of Reapers.

Nothing—we saw and heard nothing.

Inari stepped forward once again and headed toward the right down the long hallway that we were standing in. Sergei followed along behind him, then me, with Dad bringing up the rear and watching our backs.

The hallway seemed to run the entire length of all three wings of the building, with the entire right wall being made of glass and rooms branching off to our left. We stopped, paused, and peered into each room we passed, but we still didn’t see or hear anyone else moving through the structure. But someone had to be here. Not only were the lights on, but I could hear a furnace faintly humming, and the air was warm and toasty. I even thought I smelled bacon, but that was probably just my own disappointment at not having finished breakfast.

I carefully studied each one of the rooms, but the furnishings were what I would expect to find at a ski resort. Lots of stone fireplaces, lots of overstuffed chairs and couches, lots of colorful rugs covering the gleaming hardwood floors. But there were other things here too—things that told me this was definitely a Reaper hideout.

Like the Loki masks that decorated the wall.

We found them near one of the side entrances. More than a dozen rubber Loki masks had been hooked over a series of coat hangers that jutted out from the wall, their eyes wide open and their mouths drooping, as though the hollow faces were about to start shouting and alert the Reapers that we were here. Long black robes were also draped next to the pieces of rubber, as though this was a regular coatrack—and not something far more sinister.

I shivered and dropped my gaze from the masks. I didn’t get any vibes off objects, not like Gwinn did, but staring at the twisted pieces of rubber made me sick to my stomach all the same. Loki had been inside my head, his one blue eye and one red eye burning into my brain. I didn’t need any reminders of what he looked like, of how one side of his face was so smooth and perfect and the other side so ruined and melted. I would never forget the awful image of his face looming up in my mind over and over again, or especially how the evil god had made me feel—like he was scooping out everything inside me and shoveling his own rotten self into its place.

And laughing all the while.

That had been one of the worst parts—having to listen to him laugh at me and knowing there was nothing I could do to stop him from taking control of me. Even now, I could hear the faint echo of his low, throaty chuckles in my head, chiming over and over again the same way the grandfather clock

had this morning—

Dad's hand touched my shoulder, making me flinch in surprise, and his blue eyes met mine. "Are you okay, Logan?"

I ground my teeth together to help swallow the hurt, angry snarl rising up in the back of my throat. I knew that he was concerned about me, that he was just trying to help, but I still shrugged away from his touch.

"I'm fine," I muttered.

Inari and Sergei stared at me as well, their eyes dark, thoughtful, and just a bit wary. I could almost feel the three of them holding their breath, as if the sight of all the black robes and Loki masks would flip some switch deep inside me and make me go all Reaper on them. Anger spurted through me at the fact that they didn't really trust me—not anymore—no matter how much they claimed otherwise. But part of me was also glad they were so wary and suspicious of me—because I was afraid of myself.

Loki, Agrona, and the rest of the Reapers had made me attack and almost kill Gwen. Who knew what other magic they might have worked on me? Who knew what other evil things they might have implanted inside me? Who knew what other horrible things they might make me do at any moment? The others were right not to trust me—because I didn't trust myself.

More anger raged through me, burning away the last echoes of Loki's laughter and everything else, but my desire to hurt every Reaper in the entire ski resort.

"Logan?" Dad asked again.

"Come on," I said, my voice even harsher than before. "Let's keep moving."

I shouldered my way past him, Inari, and Sergei and started forward once more.

"Logan, wait—" Dad called out in a soft voice.

But it was too late.

Because three Reapers stepped out of the room right in front of me.

Chapter 4

For a moment, we just stood there, all of us surprised to see each other. Maybe it was the anger still pulsing through my body, but I recovered quicker than anyone else did. I let out a loud battle cry, raised my sword high, and threw myself at the Reapers.

Slash-slash-slash.

The three men were warriors, just like I was, and instinct took over, causing them to leap back out of the way of my whistling blade.

“The Protectorate!” one of the men screamed out. “The Protectorate has breached the perimeter!”

The men kept backing away from me, even as they pulled their own swords out of the scabbards belted around their waists. By this point, Inari, Sergei, and Dad were right beside me. Together, the four of us advanced on the other men.

“Lay down your weapons and surrender peacefully,” Dad said in a grim voice, “and we’ll take you into custody. No one has to get hurt, and no one has to die today.”

One of the Reapers snorted, a tall guy with a beefy build and blond hair that had been shaved close to his head.

“Forget it. We’d rather die than end up in one of your Protectorate prisons.” He grinned, his pale blue eyes taking on a sinister light. “Actually, we’d rather kill all of you instead.”

I tensed, thinking that he might raise his sword and attack us, but instead, the Reaper put his finger to his lips and let out a fierce whistle. I tensed again, my head snapping left and right, half expecting a Black roc, Nemean prowler, or some other fierce mythological creature to come charging out of one of the rooms down the hallway or smash through the glass wall and try to rip us to shreds on the Reaper’s orders. But it must have just been a signal between the three of them because the men turned and ran away. We chased after them.

The men raced down almost to the end of the hallway before veering left into a large room.

“Logan! Wait!” Dad called out behind me.

By this point, I was in the lead, and I ignored him and hurried after the Reapers. One good burst of speed, and I could catch them—I *would* catch them. I wasn’t about to let them get away. And not just because they were Reapers. If Agrona wasn’t here, then maybe one of the Reapers knew where she was hiding. Vivian Holler too. I couldn’t bear to face Gwen right now, but I could help her by killing them. I *would* do everything I could to keep her safe—from a distance.

So I sucked in a breath and kicked into high speed, storming into the room right behind the three men. I was in the center of the enormous area before I realized it was a dining hall—one that was full of Reapers.

A dozen Reapers were gathered around a table, eating a late breakfast of ham, eggs, pancakes, bacon, and orange juice, just like Dad and I had eaten earlier that morning. I hadn’t imagined the bacon smell after all.

“Didn’t you hear my yell? Or my whistle?” the blond Reaper leader hissed. “Get them, you fools!”

With one thought, the Reapers pushed their chairs back from the table, fumbled for the swords belted to their waists, and headed in my direction.

I twirled my sword in my hand, familiarizing myself with the weight, length, and heft of the weapon. The hilt settled back into my palm, and I tightened my fingers around the smooth metal guard the way I had a thousand times before. Then, I grinned and charged at the incoming Reapers.

Clash-clash-clang!

Clash-clash-clang!

Clash-clash-clang!

I whirled this way and that, moving deeper and deeper into the fray, my sword slicing into every single Reaper I could reach. Screams and shouts tore through the air, and blood spattered over the still-steaming food on the table.

I kept grinning through the whole thing.

The feel of the sword in my hand, the starry flash of silver as the weapon sliced through the air, the satisfaction when the blade went exactly where I wanted it to. This—*this* was what Spartans did. We fought. We battled. We raged. And I loved every single second of it.

I'd been so weak, so useless, so damn *helpless* when Agrona had snapped that jeweled Apate collar around my neck. No matter how hard I'd tried, no matter how hard I'd fought, I hadn't been able to stop Loki from taking control of me. Well, the evil god wasn't here now, and I was going to make the most of it.

One Reaper fell beneath my sword. Then another, then another. Inari, Sergei, and Dad had all waded into the fight, and I could hear them yelling back and forth, darting here and there, protecting each other's backs as they battled their way over to my location in the middle of the dining hall. Sergei, in particular, twirled from one enemy to the next, his movements absolute grace, almost like he was dancing through the fight, his Bogatyr magic at work—

Crack!

A Reaper came up on my blind side and plowed his fist into the side of my face, making me stagger back against the table. I brought my sword up, but he slammed his weapon into mine, knocking my blade out of my hand and sending the weapon skittering across the floor. I shook my head, trying to banish the white stars winking on and off in my vision. Through the haze, I could see the Reaper grinning and raising his sword for the killing blow.

My hand bumped against something on the table. Instinct took over. I grabbed a bowl full of scrambled eggs, stepped up, and smashed the whole thing into his face. The Reaper screamed in pain and surprise, but he followed through with his blow. I jerked to one side, and the sword sank into the top of the wooden table instead of cleaving through my skull. The Reaper grunted and tried to pull his weapon free, but I stepped up and slammed the dish into the side of his head.

This time, the bowl broke apart in my hands, and I grabbed hold of a sharp, curved, pie-shaped piece before it clattered to the floor with the rest of the mess. The Reaper turned and lashed out with his fist, but I caught his hand in mine. We seesawed back and forth for a moment before I brought the broken bowl up and stabbed him in the throat with it. The Reaper died with a bloody gurgle.

I shoved him away, pulled his sword out of the tabletop, and turned to face the next Reaper, but there was no one left to fight. Inari, Sergei, and Dad were all engaged with a Reaper apiece, while the others lay on the floor, dead or bleeding out from the wounds they'd received.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed the final Reaper—the blond guy who had whistled and signaled the others—running out an open doorway on the far side of the dining hall. I immediately headed in that direction.

“No, Logan!” I heard my dad shout. “Wait!”

But I didn't want to wait, and I wasn't about to let the last Reaper get away. So I tightened my grip on my sword and chased after him.

* * *

The Reaper zigzagged through the ski resort, racing from one hallway and room to the next. He had

to be a Roman, given how fast he was moving, and it was all I could do to keep him in sight. The sounds of the fight in the dining hall quickly faded away, and I had no idea where we were in the resort. But I didn't care. I'd ask the Reaper when I caught up with him—if I let him live that long.

Finally, the Reaper came to the end of the hallway we were in and darted into a room, vanishing from my line of sight. I sucked down another breath and forced myself to move even faster. Because there was another exit from that room, and he got out of it before I saw which way he went, he could easily disappear into some other part of the resort—or worse, double back and attack Dad, Sergei, and Inari again. So I ran into the room, my sword up and ready to counter any attack the Reaper might make.

But he wasn't there.

I whirled around and around, but I didn't see the Reaper anywhere. After a moment, my eyes locked on an open doorway at the back of the room. I listened, but I didn't hear any footsteps scurrying away. He must have gone through there and into the hallway beyond, which meant I'd lost him after all.

I let out a loud curse and whirled around, ready to try to find my way back to the dining hall to warn the others the Reaper had gotten away. I took five steps back toward the door I'd come through before I realized I was in a large study—one filled with artifacts.

They were all lined up in a row on top of a desk on the right side of the study. A spear, a shield, a half-used candle, even a few rings and bracelets. I recognized the items as the ones that had been stolen from various museums in the area. They were the same objects that were in the photos Dad had left on the kitchen table this morning. But the weird thing was that they were all just sitting there, some of them with their ID tags still attached, as if someone had laid them out on the desk and had then promptly forgotten all about them.

I frowned, wondering why the Reapers would leave the artifacts lying around like that, but at least we'd found them, even if the last Reaper had gotten away. So, once more, I headed toward the door to go find the others. This time, a gleam of glass on the other side of the study caught my eye. I turned in that direction and spotted a table in the corner filled with books. But what really caught my attention was the table next to that one—and the chemistry lab that had been set up there.

Glass tubes, beakers, and eyedroppers crowded together on the table, along with several burners and small bags filled with green herbs and plants. I frowned again, then walked over to the table so I could get a better look at things. Had the Reapers suddenly developed some fascination with pot? Because that's what it looked like they were messing with in here.

One of the beakers held a dark green liquid that was still bubbling, as though it had recently been taken off one of the burners. Steam escaped from the top of the beaker, and I cautiously leaned over and drew in a quick breath. Whatever was inside the beaker smelled sharp and slightly tangy, almost like some sort of pine sap that had been boiled down. Strange. Even for the Reapers.

I had started to reach for one of the open books to see if I could figure out what this chemistry experiment was all about when I heard a faint rustle behind me and felt a swirl of air against the back of my neck.

I leaped to one side, and the Reaper's sword missed my head by an inch.

I'd been standing in front of the chemistry set, and his weapon smashed right in the middle of all the beakers, bags, and burners. Glasses broke, sending liquid arching through the air, while a burst of flame erupted from a lit burner.

The Reaper screamed. At first, I thought it was in frustration that he hadn't been able to kill me. But then, he turned, and I realized that some sort of liquid from the beakers had splattered onto his face. I didn't know what it was, but it had already raised red welts and blisters on his skin, including around his nose and mouth. I wondered if he'd accidentally swallowed any of the liquid. Even worse, it had gotten into his eyes, puffing them up and making them almost as red as Loki's one burning eye.

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