Scarlett Wolfe

and the

Mythical Mysteries

Book One

A TALE FROM THE BRANCHES OF YGGDRASIL

DETECTIVE DEATH



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For Maggie

ONE



I EAT A BAD APPLE

I was enjoying a peaceful sleep when I was brought back to kill someone.

A brick fireplace extinguished, the amber glow remaining without flame. Light snuck onto oak floors. As if suffering the first freeze of winter, the room's only photo-frame of a summer meadow greyed. The five-pronged ceiling fan stopped, but a whirlwind splintered the circular coffee table, shards skittering across the confines of the small living room. It wouldn't be called a living room for long. Everything drained dry of color, except where light twirled at the center of the silent room, solidifying like red-hot steel dunked into cold water, transforming into bones and flesh and sinew and ichor.

Into me.

My face once lined temples. My hand rewrote history books. My bright grey eyes twinkled like a star between storm clouds, leading desperate, wet wanderers to safe harbor.

Mortals called me a god. After all, that was what daeva once meant.

But, alas, people called me other things now.

The youthful man in a comfy-looking leather lounger who'd watched my entrance only called me by a single startled scream.

Rather rude. This was a subdued entrance—the filaments had burst in bulbs, an ivory mug had shattered and spilt its contents over laminated wood floors, and the echo of thunder now rippled the pooling coffee that collected over fake cracks.

Even in sweatpants and a loosely-fitted plaid pajama top, the mortal's bones trembled more than the liquid. I paid him no mind, dusting soot I'd accidently gathered off my pressed white shirt and taking another first breath, filled with the smell of coffee and smoke. I'd arrived old and silver-bearded, a comforting presence. I didn't come to startle the man.

Regardless, accidents happen.

A crisp apple rolled from the man's hand. Enough artificial orange light peaked through slits in the shades to see the red orb tumble in still-frames—leaning over the edge of a rounded armrest, plummeting, and then rolling over the sooty floor. The man's wrinkles deepened in similar stages, and he managed a few shaky words. "What are you?"

"Someone who'd loved it if you hadn't dropped that apple. But if you must be curious…" I picked up the once fresh fruit, which clung to ash like humans clung to expectation. I obliged that expectation, filling the room with a fallen-timber boom of a voice. "Mortals call me demon, daeva, and death."

Darkness crackled. Despite my shadows, I was a creature of light; I devoured it like a black hole.

"I am deceptively devious," I said. "But does that mean I am more or less devious than I appear? I tilled the fields for the first settlers of the Indus Valley, felled the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and rode with Genghis Khan. People worshiped me, until I became the vanquished instead of the vanquisher. I, more than most gods, understand mortality because I am mortality—I am Zarik."

I expected stunned silence, and I got it.

"Any final words?" I asked, drawing closer.

This time, the silence lasted too long. Dry lips? My summoning had drained the life from the man, leaving him newly wrinkled and white-haired. He was petrified, but the white of his eyes reddened with struggle.

The Pull—my purpose—was strong. Like a fly caught in a web, the strings around me tied tighter with struggle. I had been summoned for a single reason. My hand touched the man's on the armrest. His fingers were bony; soon, they'd be more so. I gave into the path laid out for me, and the bindings snapped.

The thread of the man's life snapped, too. Unfortunate.

I had the Midas touch, but instead of making things gold, I made them old.

"The quiet type. I like that." I took my hand away and smudged soot from the apple, cleaning a small sliver to crisp red. I shook my head, as if that would shake off the rest of the dirt.

I'd watched the spirit of civilization rising, blazing, exploding, and burning out, leaving lingering embers in ashes and chaos. I'd watched peasants, kings, and now, even gods, aged and fallen.

But it still pained me to see an apple fallen on the floor. Oh, and another man dead.

Logically, his death was not my fault; I was the murder weapon. Still, guilt gnawed at me. Like a scythe, I was supposed to harvest the ready. I wanted people to thrive. But the reality was more complicated.

The fresh fruit aged in my hand slower than the man. I chomped into it with a sweet crunch.

The Pull that had summoned me here was served, and I waited to return to the void, as had happened the last few times. Leaning against the lounger, dead man still sitting in it, I appreciated the quiet company as I would soon share a not-all-that dissimilar fate.

This time had been better than most. No pleading, no crying. A real fire. A few moments of peace.

But as the moments wore on, I grew impatient. There shouldn't have been anything keeping me here.

I could try the old standby of counting sheep, but when I imagined them, they were always old and had difficulty jumping over the fence. Instead, I counted bites of the aging apple. The peace and quiet of a pleasant meal would leave a lovely aftertaste for my dreams.

A knock on the door.

"Unfortunate timing," I said to the vacant man next to me. "Dead men don't open doors."

Another knock. And although the apple was done, I was still here.

"Not my problem," I assured myself and tossed the apple core onto the dead man's lap.

A louder knock, this time rattling the door as my entrance had.

"I guess dead men do open doors." Reluctant, but tired of the persistence, I studied the man in the chair. Even with the darkness, I remembered the man well enough to copy him before he became white-haired and dead. A sharp face, curly hair, and hatred in his still-staring eyes, which I didn't copy.

The change was draining, but the feeling of frustration got me through. Whoever brought me back, I both hated and

loved at this moment. The apple was delightful, but dealing with this man's nosy neighbors was not quite as sweet.

I looked through the peephole.

A wall of scarlet. Droplets slipped on the surface and gathered speed together—an umbrella.

This was not an angry neighbor. The walkway was dry between the apartments, and no one next door would bring an umbrella to yell at a neighbor unless they planned on hitting them with it. But then, it wouldn't be wet. I mean, that could be part of the fun; wet umbrellas were heavier and more painful, but mortals were not usually so imaginative.

I undid the latch and held the door ajar, ready to slam it. "Can I help you?"

The umbrella spun out of the way and revealed a curious woman in a white jacket with black zipper pockets. "Did you hear thunder?"

"It's been raining."

"But not storming," she said.

There was also a puddle at the door to my right. She was looking for something. Or someone.

I frowned. "You're all wet."

Her auburn hair was slicked together in thick strands, framing a keen face. "As you said, it rained."

"And you have an umbrella."

"I jumped in a puddle." She had such a genuine smile. The statement seemed perfectly normal, at least to her.

"Did you jump headfirst?"

"Once you jump in a puddle, what's a little rain going to do?"

I grinned. "Help you catch your death."

"We all catch our death eventually."

"What?" Usually I was more articulate, but I was baffled.

"Your mouth's going to collect rain hanging open like that." Sarcasm dripped out of her like the water from her hair to the concrete floor. "What's the matter with you?"

"Me?"

"No, the person right behind you."

I almost looked back to check if the dead man had gotten up. Gods and fools were not mutually exclusive, but I liked to think I was not usually a fool. "You're the one who's soaking wet."

"And I can dry off inside." She was genuine as a summer day, but there was a complexity like clouds gathering behind mountains.

Did "I" know this person? It didn't seem like the dead man was expecting company. One apple, one mug, nothing left out in the kitchen. My appearance definitely surprised him. "You'd make the room wet. It's better to talk here."

"What about the thunder?"

"What thunder?"

"So, you didn't hear any thunder?" she asked.

"There might've been." Thunder sometimes accompanied the arrival of a god, but she couldn't know that, nor would I ever say it. "Does it matter?"

"It makes all the difference in the world." She set her umbrella, open, down by the door. "Are you Izak Cayne?"

I really should've found out the dead man's name. But I reasoned the woman would not bluff me with a fake name. I responded with sarcasm and plausible deniability. "You figure?"

"And you're alive?" she asked.

"So far." I was rather hoping I'd pop out of existence then. Would've given her quite the scare.

"That's all I wanted to know." She closed the umbrella and walked off.

"You realize that was a weird question," I said after her.

"Weird questions are my job." She was halfway down the hall.

I followed into the hallway. "Your job?"

"I'm trying to solve your murder."

"What?" Few times had I been this confused. There was that laughing turnip, but that's a story for another time. This was more like the time someone hit me with a lamp, thinking I was a genie.

"Izak Cayne's a murderer," she sung as she turned the corner.

If I took her at her word, I had killed a murderer. If I was Izak, I probably would've chased after her for singing such slander in public. Instead, I smiled. I wasn't Izak Cayne.

I was glad for justice. But how could I take her word? What proof was there to ease my guilt? No. I shouldn't feel guilty for being used.

The last words I heard from her was, "I'll see you later."

"Goodbyeee," I said with my cheeriest tone. I was happy because she wasn't investigating who I'd killed, only who he had killed. Mostly, though, I was glad she was gone.

I looked from the second floor balcony and adjusted to the foggy world. Skyscrapers ascended higher than mountains gods once ruled from. Lights—beautiful, boundless lights—bounced between buildings. The clouds were a neon haze, and clear color echoed in puddles of freshly fallen rain. The crisp smell of the storm flowed like streams in the streets, water

cascading into sewer grates, which glittered gold with the sparkling lights of a glorious city.

Elements mixed, melting into a watercolor world—water was filled with fire, ground was built into the sky. This was not what I remembered.

I felt dim. A being of light was less bright in a brilliant world, and this was the worst sort of light—empty calories.

A thunderbolt. The flash overtook color. A skyscraper devoured it.

Then, a familiar *boom* gave me heart. The woman must've been crazy; there was already thunder before my arrival, unless this happened to be the first natural strike.

I shut the door and thought of what to do. Hiding the dead body was the first step. Of course, I could go the godly route of spurning consequence, but I believed in consequences—I was one.

As the dead man waited on my judgment, his hands were tight with anticipation. I noticed a piece of paper clenched within his palm.

An idea came into my head, whispering like midnight wind. Naturally, fire was the spark.

But I couldn't let this paper burn with the rest. Not without seeing what was so important to the man that he'd hold on to it during his death. To be honest, he wasn't keen to give it up, even now. I pried at his fingers, and once I broke it free, I unwrinkled the crinkled page best I could.

On the back, there were maddened scribbles. The handwriting was atrocious, but I made out a couple of items associated at the top. "Ivy – Phoenix". "Lurk – Demon". As the scrawl descended, the phrase, "Sort of colorful" was repeated enough times for me to make it out after about the

fifth iteration. The bottom was a dense mess, but I discovered that the words were colors. Ruby. Jade. Hazel. Scarlet.

Scarlet was underlined three times.

Thinking about it, the woman's umbrella might've been candy-apple red. Besides, it was just an umbrella.

I flipped the paper, only to find a map, meticulously detailing the city, an "X" over a building, with a note that said, "It's here". I recognized enough of the layout of the city to know roughly where it was, even if I wasn't sure what the dominating structure, labeled "The Root", was at the center of the city. I had my guesses, but those guesses had to wait. Although I was only a murder weapon, I'd rather the evidence didn't lead back to me.

From the embers of the fireplace, I poked and prodded until the faint crackling of coal caused flickering flames to overcome the silence of the deathly room. My nature sought to take the flame, and the hushed whispers of kindling sounded like the echoes of gods long lost. Grabbing a log from a surprisingly untouched idyllic pile beside the fireplace, the coarse grain dried at my touch. I dipped the log into the flames, and the edges of bark began to smoke, the slivers crawling up the stone chimney and into the dazzling electrical world outside. I dropped the fuel for the fire. A plume of ash and firefly-cinders escaped the twilight carbon and brushed my newly transformed face.

I was no longer Izak Cayne. Instead, I changed into one of my normal guises, a handsome man I once knew with a face like a barn owl—a smooth face with a widow's peak hairline, big eyes, and a thin, long nose.

The fire was raging now. Big, boisterous flames licked the stones, casting crests of blackening char on the confines of the fireplace.

I stuck my hand in, encased as if in a feather pillow. Withdrawing a burning log, I waved the sparkling wand around the room. The painting of a meadow curled with heat before bursting into a wildfire and the lounger smoked like a funeral pyre. And as the room sung sweet songs of destruction, I resisted the urge to absorb the light and tossed the burning log by the bits of the broken wood table, grabbing a white jacket by the door and leaving to the foggy future outside.

Despite all the questions surrounding my rebirth and why I had no Pull, I had one answer.

I was reborn at the perfect time to forget why I killed Izak Cayne, who the woman was, what the maddened scribbles meant, where the map led, and focus on the most important question—how would I get my next apple?

That, at least, was my own purpose.