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“My name is Gin, and I kill people.”

Normally, my confession would have elicited gasps of surprise. Pale faces. Nervous sweat. Stifled screams. An overturned chair or two as people scrambled to get away before I buried a knife in their heart—or back. A sucking wound was a sucking wound. I wasn’t picky about where I caused it.

“Hi, Gin,” four people chorused back to me in perfect, dull, monotone unison.

But not in this place. Within the walled confines of Ashland Asylum, my confession, true though it might be, didn’t even merit a raised eyebrow, much less shock and frightened awe. I was relatively normal compared to the freaks of nature and magic who populated the grounds. Like Jackson, the seven-foot-tall albino giant seated to my left who drooled worse than a mastiff and gurgled like a three-month-old child.

A long string of clear, glistening spittle dripped out of his oversize lips, but Jackson was too busy cooing nonsense to the crude daisy tattooed on the back of his hand to pay attention. Or do something sane and hygienic, like wipe his mouth. I shifted away from him so I wouldn't come in contact with the oozing mucus.

Disgusting. But Jackson was typical of the sorts of folks in the asylum. *Asylum*. The word always made me smile. Such a pretty name for a hellhole.

It was bad enough I'd been stuck here for almost a week. But what really set me on edge was the noise—and having to listen to the building around me. The screams of the damned and deranged had long ago sunk into the granite walls and floors of the asylum, the way all emotions and actions do over time. Being a Stone elemental, I could feel the vibrations in the rock and hear the constant, insane chatter even through the industrial carpet and my white, cotton socks.

When I'd first gotten here, I'd tried to reach out to the stone, to use my own magic to bring it a bit of comfort. Or at least quiet the screams so I could get some sleep at night. But it had been no use. The stones were too far gone to listen or respond to my magic. Just like the poor souls who shuffled along on top of them.

Now, I just blocked out the damn noise—the way I did so many other things.

A woman at the head of the circle of plastic chairs leaned forward. She was directly across from me, so it was easy for her light eyes to find mine. “Now, Gin, you've made this claim before. We've discussed this many, many

times. You only *think* you're an assassin. You are most certainly not one.”

Evelyn Edwards. The shrink who was supposed to cure all the crazies in this magical nuthouse. She radiated professional cool and confidence in her tight black pantsuit, ivory blouse, and kitten heels. Square black glasses hung on the end of her pointed nose, highlighting her greenish eyes, and her sandy hair was cropped into a short, tousled bob. Evelyn was pretty enough, but a hungry look pinched her pasty face—a look I recognized. The hard gaze of a sly predator.

The reason I was here today.

“I most certainly am not a mere assassin,” I countered. “I'm the Spider. Surely, you've heard of me.”

Evelyn rolled her eyes and looked at the tall orderly standing just beyond the ring of chairs. He snickered, then raised his finger to his temple and made a circle.

“Of course I've heard of the Spider,” Evelyn said, attempting to be patient. “Everybody's heard of the Spider. But you are certainly not him.”

“Her,” I corrected.

The orderly snickered again. I raised an eyebrow in displeasure. The joke was on him because that laugh had just cost him his life. I didn't care to be mocked, even if I'd spent the last few days masquerading as a loon.

In order to kill people, you have to get close to them. Put yourself in their world. Make their likes your likes. Their habits your habits. Their thoughts your thoughts.

For this job, putting myself in Evelyn Edwards's world

had meant getting tossed into Ashland Asylum. To Evelyn and her orderly underlings, I was just another schizo dragged off the streets, driven crazy by elemental magic, drugs, or a combination of the two. Another poor, lost ward of the state who wasn't worth their time, attention, consideration, or sympathy.

I'd spent the last two weeks locked up in the asylum convincing Evelyn and the others I was just as Junebug crazy as the rest of the babbling psychos. Spouting nonsense about being an assassin. Drooling. Finger-painting with the moldy peas they served for lunch. I'd even hacked off gobs of my long, bleached blond hair during craft time to keep up the pretense. The orderlies on call had taken the scissors away from me, but not before I'd used them to pry a screw loose from the rec room table.

The same screw I'd sharpened to a two-inch-long, darlike point. The same screw I had palmed in my hand. The same screw I was going to shove into Evelyn's throat. The weapon rested on my palm, and the steel felt rough against my scarred skin. Hard. Substantial. Cold. Comforting.

Of course, I didn't really need a weapon to kill the shrink. I could have offed Evelyn with my Stone magic. Could have reached for the elemental power flowing through my veins. Could have tapped into the acres of granite the asylum was constructed out of and made the whole building come crashing down on her head. Using my Stone magic was easier than breathing.

Call it professional pride, but I didn't use my elemental power to kill unless I absolutely had to, unless there was

no other way to get the job done. Just too easy otherwise. But even more important, magic got you noticed in these parts. Especially elemental magic. If I started collapsing buildings on people or braining them with bricks, the police and other, more unsavory characters would be sure to take note—and an unhealthy interest in me. I'd made more than my share of enemies over the years, and the only reason I'd stayed alive this long was by keeping to the shadows. By creeping in and out of places completely unnoticed, just the way my namesake did.

Besides, there were plenty of ways to make someone quit breathing. I didn't need my magic to help me with that.

"The Spider." Evelyn's scarlet lips twitched, and she allowed herself a small titter. "As if someone like *you* could be someone like *that*. The most feared assassin in the South."

"East of the Mississippi," I corrected her again. "And I most certainly am the Spider. In fact, I'm going to kill you, Evelyn. T-minus three minutes and counting."

Maybe it was the calm way I stared at her, my gray eyes steady and level. Or perhaps it was the complete lack of emotion in my tone. But the laughter caught and died in Evelyn's throat like an animal in a trap. She wouldn't be too far behind.

I got to my feet and stretched my arms over my head, moving the screw into a better position in my hand. The long-sleeved, white T-shirt I wore rode up over my matching pajama pants, exposing my flat stomach. The tall orderly licked his lips, his eyes locked on my crotch. Dead man walking.

“But enough about me,” I said, dropping into my chair once more. “Let’s talk about *you*, Evelyn.”

She shook her head. “Now, Gin, you know that’s against the rules. Therapists aren’t allowed to talk to patients about themselves.”

“Why not? You’ve been asking me questions for days now. Trying to get me to open up about my past. To talk about my feelings. To come to grips with the fact I’m cold and emotionally unavailable. Turnabout, you know. Besides, you did plenty of talking to Ricky Jordan.”

Her eyes widened behind her glasses. “Where—where did you hear that name?”

I ignored her question. “Ricky Robert Jordan. Age seventeen. An Air elemental with a serious bipolar disorder. A sweet but confused kid, from all accounts. You really shouldn’t have gotten involved with him, Evelyn.”

The shrink’s hand tightened around her long, gold pen until her knuckles cracked from the pressure. The orderly frowned, and his eyes flicked back and forth between us, as though Evelyn and I were playing a game of verbal tennis. Jackson and the three other patients sitting around me kept drooling, gurgling, and murmuring nonsense, locked in their own twisted worlds.

“Correction,” I continued. “You shouldn’t have used him as your psycho ward boy toy. Did you panic when he realized you weren’t really leaving your husband for him? Did he threaten to tell his parents how you seduced him the way you do all the young men put into your care? Is that why you pumped him full of hallucinogens and sent him home to his family?”

Evelyn’s breath puffed out of her mouth in short gasps.

The pulse in her throat fluttered like a hummingbird’s delicate wings.

I leaned forward, capturing her panicked gaze. “Mommy and Daddy Jordan didn’t appreciate it when Ricky had a psychotic break and hung himself in his own closet, Evelyn. But before he died, he wrote them a letter, telling them how he just couldn’t go on without *you*.”

Normally, I wouldn’t have bothered with the whole assassin’s exposition. Such a cliché. I would have infiltrated the asylum, killed Evelyn, and escaped before anyone knew she was dead. But letting Evelyn Edwards know exactly why she was dying had been part of the job requirement. And was netting me an extra half million dollars.

“That’s why I’m here, Evelyn. That’s why you’re going to die. You fucked with the wrong boy.”

“Guard!” Evelyn screamed.

Last word she ever said. I flicked my wrist, and the sharp point of the screw zipped across the room and sank into her throat, puncturing her windpipe. Ace. Evelyn’s scream turned into a whistling wheeze. She slid from her plastic chair and hit the floor. Her hand wrapped around the screw, and she pulled it free. Blood splattered onto the carpet, looking like an abstract Rorschach pattern. Stupid of her. She might have lived another minute if she’d left it in her throat.

The orderly cursed and raced forward, but I was faster. I snatched the shrink’s gold pen from the floor where it had fallen, stood up, and rammed it into his heart.

“And you,” I murmured in his ear as he jerked and flailed against me, “I’m not getting paid for you. But con-

sidering how you get your kicks by raping female patients, I'll consider it a public service. Pro-fucking-bono.”

I yanked the pen out of his chest and stabbed him twice more. Once in the stomach, and once in the balls. The flickering, lecherous light in the orderly's eyes dimmed and died. I let go, and he thumped to the floor.

In less than thirty seconds, it was over. Game, set, match. Too easy. I wasn't even winded.

My gray eyes flicked to the four other people in the room. Jackson still drooled at nothing. The other two men stared at the floor as if something was wrong, but they weren't sure what it was. The fourth person, a woman, had already gotten down on her hands and knees. She dipped her fingers into Evelyn's blackening blood, then licked it off like it was the sweetest honey. Vampires. They really would eat anything.

The granite floor's insane murmurs intensified, fueled by the fresh coat of blood seeping through the loose weave in the carpet and dripping onto the stone. The harsh discord made me grind my teeth together. I would be glad to leave this place and that noise behind. Far, far behind.

I yanked the pen out of the orderly's groin and picked up my screw. Witnesses were bad, especially in my line of work, and I considered killing Jackson and the others. But I wasn't here for them. And I didn't slaughter innocents, not even these pathetic souls who would be better off dead and free of their cracked mortal shells.

So I pocketed my still bloody weapons and headed toward the door. Before I stepped out into the hallway, I glanced over my shoulder at Evelyn Edwards's lifeless

body. Her face and eyes were wide open in a look of shocked surprise. An expression I'd seen more than once over the years. No matter how bad people were, no matter what evil they committed, or who they fucked over, nobody ever really believed death was coming for them, courtesy of an assassin like me.

Until it was too late.