

A GOOD VENGEANCE

Chapter One

Prince Who?

I must have had an old people theme going when it came to vengeance assignments.

“Hi, I’m Megan. I’m here to see Sandra Hogan, room one twelve.” I pasted on a sad smile, hoping for some sympathy to get me in, and leaned over the oversized reception booth. With my hair pulled back in a ponytail and my face sprinkled with a dash of de-aging fairy dust, I looked about sixteen. A regular human girl here to see a sick loved one, not a vengeance-demon-in-training dishing out comeuppance to dying wrongdoers in order to earn good grades.

The receptionist smiled back. “And Ms. Hogan is your...?”

“Aunt. I’m late because I had softball practice. You know, I should’ve just skipped it.” I bit my lip, my voice caught with regret I wasn’t actually feeling. The visiting hours ended at four thirty today, and it was already four twenty-eight. I needed to see Ms. Hogan today if I could, as my work schedule was rather packed this week.

The receptionist looked around as if checking if her boss or other visitors were within hearing range, then she winked at me and tilted her head toward the hall. “Go on in, hon. Visiting hours are pretty much over now, but I don’t see why you can’t go in and see your auntie real quick. Don’t tell anyone I let you in, though, or I’ll be in trouble.”

“Thank you *so* much.” My gratitude was heartfelt, but not in the way the receptionist might think. I could’ve waltzed right through the reception during all hours of the day using a bit of compulsion, but I was on conservation mode having just exchanged most of my magical credits into human currency for this month’s rent. Living on the human plane while going to university on the demon side carried some additional expenses compared to other students.

Independence was expensive, but acting was cheap. This way I could save my magic for direct interaction with the target only.

I walked down the hall to find room one twelve, excited to get started. Now that I wasn’t so green anymore, the prospect of cracking open a fresh case of vengeance and seeing bad people getting theirs filled me with a sense of happy anticipation.

For the first vengeance assignment of my second co-op work term at University of Demonic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Vengeance, I found myself with yet another senior citizen

on my work order. I certainly hoped this new assignment would go smoother. Considering I almost got fried alive the last time I tried performing vengeance at a retirement home, that shouldn't be too hard.

But this wasn't a retirement home; it was a hospice, hence the lax security. It was a place for the terminally ill. A place for making peace with one's life and family members before moving on to the next world.

Or, a place for wrongdoers to get served some overdue vengeance, and in addressing the injustice they caused in this lifetime, give their victims the peace and balance that had long eluded *them*.

The prospect of facilitating this healing process was what made me want to become a licensed vengeance demon in the first place. Anyone could be *born* a vengeance demon, but being *licensed* as one was a deliberate choice. It was like the difference between being born a native English speaker and getting a master in English Literature. Beyond social acceptance and prestige of the vengeance license, I really wanted to help bring forth that kind of peace for the victims.

Well, getting paid doing it wasn't so bad, either.

I found the room stated on my work order with no problem at all. My new mentor for the co-op program, who happened to be my grandmother, had provided me with a detailed layout of the building, along with the target's profile.

Sandra Hogan, retired nurse at the triage desk of a local ER. Petty. Power-tripping. Purposefully unhelpful.

A classic case of minor bureaucrat syndrome. I'd seen *those* types before.

I walked into the room and closed the door behind me, making sure to place a muting spell over the immediate area. My target's pension must have been pretty good, if having a private room and nurses making rounds at the top of every hour was anything to go by. A small-framed woman lay in the bed, facing away from me and looking toward the window. Outside, the ground was covered in snow; a Toronto streetcar could be heard but not seen.

"Finally. Give me more of those damn shots." She turned to me. Either she didn't notice I wasn't dressed as a nurse, or she didn't care.

"Hello, I'm Megan Aequitas," I began. Not everything I'd told the receptionist was a lie. My name *was* Megan. "Are you Sandra Marlena Elizabeth Hogan, of Hamilton, Ontario, born to Ann and Michael Hogan?" I asked as I walked over to the window and drew the heavy blinds.

"What about it?" Seventy-seven years' worth of spite showed as she snapped at me. Her eyes were clouded with pain, but nevertheless shrewd. No age, discomfort, or late-stage cancer was going to soften this old gal up. "You people know perfectly well who I am. I pay good money to make sure you do. Now get me that morphine or your supervisor will hear about this."

I tightened my jaw. I didn't understand how people, supernatural or otherwise, could do bad things and simply assume that what goes around would never come around. "Don't you think it's ironic to demand excellent medical care, when you devoted your entire life to being crappy in attending other people's needs?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about." In contrary to her harsh denial, the faintest hint of fear crossed her face.

I took out her file, enchanted to be small enough to fit in the pocket of my jacket. I expanded and opened it, and started reading aloud. "Samuel Robertson. Visited the ER on July 2, 1974 with an inflamed appendix. He was six years old. You didn't like the way his mother talked to you. She was worried about her little boy so she kept asking you if he was next. To retaliate,

you moved him all the way to the back of the queue when he should have been next to see the doctor. His appendix burst while he was waiting for help, infecting the abdominal cavity's lining. The boy lived, but you caused him a great deal of pain."

Sandra sat up from her bed. "What the hell?"

"Jenny Weston. Middle-aged." I tried to keep the anger from my voice, my fingers bunching up the file from my effort. Vengeance demons were supposed to be the instrument of justice, but unaffected by the grievances themselves. I guess being a half-blood meant I might never be aloof like the rest of them. "May 5, 1991. Mrs. Weston came in because she was experiencing the symptoms that her eye specialist had told her to go straight to the ER if they ever appeared. You informed her—without consulting the eye resident—that she was just fine and had imagined the whole thing. You sent her home without care. She ended up with a detached retina and vision loss."

"This is crazy talk." Sandra's face told me she knew exactly what I was talking about. She might not remember the specific names and faces of the people she'd hurt through the years, but the modus operandi should sound very familiar to her.

As I read out a selection of her crimes spanning over four decades, I had to will my hands to un-clutch the file, longing as I was to wrap them around my target's neck. Her negligence had resulted in everything from unnecessary agony to three preventable deaths. What a witch. And I'd met some real ones in my day.

She had always been super clever about making sure there wasn't any hard evidence that could later link back to her. She never got caught—hence the cushy retirement with a full pension. After all this time, she probably thought she'd gotten away with murder, or murders, in this case.

"Sandra Hogan, it is time to pay for your sins." I closed the file after I finished reading ten cases out of it at random. I'd be here all night if I was to read out all of her crimes. "By the power vested in me by the Concord Council, you're hereby sentenced to Vengeance. May you endure it with grace and contemplation."

Now that the proper wordings had been recited, the real work could begin.

Just then a nurse came in, so I quickly activated an invisibility spell over myself with a snap of my fingers.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Hogan. It's snack time. How are you doing?" The nurse put a tray of food on the table over Sandra's bed. There was a bowl of Jell-O, a cup of fruit, and a glass of orange juice on the tray. Sandra stared at the space in the room where I had been visible to her just seconds ago; her mouth opened and then closed. I was still physically there—she just couldn't see me anymore.

Sandra pointed toward where I stood with a mixture of horror, relief, and puzzlement on her face. Horror of having seen me, relief that I was no longer there, and puzzlement as to whether or not I was merely a fragment of her imagination.

"What is it?" The nurse frowned, glanced at my direction, seeing nothing but an empty room. "What are you looking at?"

"Noth...nothing." Sandra shook her head and seemed to come to a conclusion. "My mind must be playing tricks on me."

Probably unsure how to respond to that, the nurse asked instead, "How's your pain been?"

"The pain. Right. Of course," Sandra murmured. Self-centered to the bone, having her pain mentioned seemed to have snapped her out of the shock she'd been experiencing from her

interaction with me. She set her jaw firm and reverted back to her good old charming self. “About that. Give me the morphine, girl. I know people on the board who can make your life miserable if you don’t take good care of me.”

“No need to use that kind of language, Sandra. You’re due another shot anyway.” The nurse sighed and turned to get whatever medical instrument might be required to dispense the morphine. I cast a freezing spell on her.

With the nurse rigid and motionless, I reappeared to Sandra. She hissed at the sight of me.

“Yes, I’m real,” I assured her, “and so is the punishment you’re about to receive.”

“Go to hell!” she bellowed, making me glad of my foresight to envelope the room in a muting spell upon entrance. I so didn’t need anyone to come running because of the noise she was making.

“I won’t be going to Hell with a capital H, but you will be. Well, not until *after* I’m done with you.” It was the vengeance demon’s job to “soften up” the wrongdoers before they moved on to eternal damnation. And damnation was what Sandra totally deserved, for all the patients she’d hurt, people who came to her in their hour of need. “Do you remember what you told little Samuel Robertson’s mother when she unintentionally offended you?”

“I don’t remember,” she snarled. “That was a long time ago. Who the heck cares?”

“You *should* care, because as your punishment, the cruel words and excuses you used on those patients to deny them care are now going to be thrown back at you.”

I snapped my fingers, and the nurse woke from her trance at the same moment I became invisible again. She straightened her spine and faced Sandra. “I’m sorry, but I will not be talked to in this manner. If you’re going to disrespect me, then you can stand to wait a bit more.”

The nurse walked out without administering the morphine.

An hour passed as I watched Sandra sweat and shake with pain. Had a vengeance demon been assigned to her earlier, her punishment would’ve been a lot more active. Like getting her into a heart surgery and have her lungs replaced, or something like that. But since she was already in pain, my job involved preventing the relief of it, which in a way was harder to do because my instinct was to comfort upon seeing an old lady in distress.

While vengeance laws demanded that I be physically present during her punishment, I was no sadist. Witnessing her suffering wasn’t fun for me. I longed for the clinical detachment that came so easily for my classmates.

At the end of the hour, another nurse showed up and checked in on Sandra. Again the latter asked for the morphine.

I froze Nurse Number Two before she reached for the painkiller.

“Do you remember what you said to Mrs. Jenny Weston when she begged for your help?” I asked, remembering the details from the file and getting angry at my target all over again. Okay, so maybe I could get some manner of satisfaction out of this, after all.

Sandra just glared at me with sheer hatred.

I snapped my fingers. The nurse could talk again, but she didn’t see me. “The pain is all in your head. Geez, people complain about everything these days. My time is too valuable for this.”

The nurse turned and left.

I settled down in the chair beside the bed. This was going to be a long day, and it would last well into the night. Sandra had a lot of victims that needed avenging, and she had used many classic lines on them, such as “Calm down. I’m looking into it as fast as I can,” “You’re not the center of the universe, you know,” and “Cry me a river, the hospital is full of people like you.”

I pulled out a pocket novel from my backpack and started reading, but couldn't concentrate. To sit around and hear the wheezing and moaning of the old lady as waves of pain rocked through her wasn't easy, especially since I had a grandmother of my own—albeit a near immortal and powerful one. I kept reciting the various crimes Sandra had committed to remind myself that my job had a healthy function for the Cosmic Balance.

But really, couldn't the Council have gotten to her sooner? Punishing someone this old and frail was really not a fun task, and over two-thirds of her victims had passed on already. When a vengeance was served, the anger and bitterness that festered in the victims' hearts would magically dissolve, replaced with a great sense of peace and relief—but only if those hearts were still beating to begin with.

As it was, almost all the victims carried the burden of the injustice to their graves. How was that for being fair?

Sometimes the inefficiencies of the Council could drive a girl mad. I knew what I said before about justice comes slowly but surely. But really, this was super-slow. Molasses-in-January slow. If they had punished Sandra sooner there might not have been so many victims; knowing that there were nasty consequences to their actions had a wonderful way of scaring people straight. And what was up with just a single day and night of pain for a lifetime of sins? Vengeance heavily discounted due to her age, that was what it was.

It reminded me of those catchy human pizza delivery commercials that I used to watch. If it took over forty minutes you could have it for free. In this case, if a vengeance was not delivered to the target in a timely manner, it was discounted.

That just didn't sit well with me. At all.

“If this was left to us mercenaries, this target would've been punished a long time ago,” a voice said from across the other side of the bed, as though someone had read my mind.

I dropped my novel and jumped out of the chair, realizing a beat too late that there were now more than two people in the room. Damn, I hated it when people teleported in without any forewarning.

There was Gregory, looking sinfully delicious in a tight black sweatshirt and dark jeans, filling them out in all the right places. Muscular build, long limbs, graceful movement...he reminded me of a lithe jungle cat. The Earl Grey aftertaste of his power signature was rich and potent. His brown hair was shorter than when I had last seen him; it was cut just above his chiseled cheekbones. His lips were arrogant and sensuous. I always had a heck of a time pinning down his age. His measured manners and self-assurance bespoke experiences that outmatched people in their late twenties, yet I got a feeling he was in fact a lot closer to me in age.

Look at that pair of annoyingly proud wings of his. Midnight blue. Uncamouflaged. We didn't have the kind of relationship for him to pop by unannounced and let his wings spread out across half the room. It was considered rude in vengeance society to do so, unless it was between family members, or lovers, which we were neither. Mercenaries obviously worked with a very different set of rules, and he was flaunting it.

It had been over three months since I'd seen Gregory. A school semester ago, to be exact; funny how my life was measured in semesters now. Co-op work term, school term, then co-op work term again.

I was a little busy when I last dealt with him, saving Esme and the world and all, but not so busy that I forgot that I'd promised him a boon—who even used that word these days, let alone asked for one? I was forced to give him a stupid, unspecific boon like I was some lame-ass, wish-granting genie. Worse, the bastard hadn't even bothered to come collect yet. I hated being

indebted to someone.

Yeah, that's the story I'm sticking with. No way was I going to admit to missing the jerk.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I snapped. Better to show annoyance than drool over the jerk face. Gregory wasn't exactly the world's most trustworthy guy. He'd withheld information from me that almost cost my half-sister, Esme, her life.

"Well, hello to you, too." Gregory smiled ruefully. "I was just commenting on the inefficient and dreadfully slow process of your governing body."

There was no need for him to know that I was thinking the exact same thing just before he popped up. "Yeah, and the mercenaries do it so much better."

"Of course." He didn't seem to get my sarcasm. Asshole. "We're hired by the victims. For the victims. None of that bureaucratic crap that drags on forever."

"And what if there's a misunderstanding, or your client is just being vindictive? You'll end up with a miscarriage of justice." *Ha, take that!*

"We vet all the clients carefully, often more so than licensed vengeance demons. We vet the target thoroughly, too." He smirked. "Too bad the same couldn't be said about the homework that was done on Dan Pillar, or the lack of it."

I glared at him at the mention of the target from my last work term. The supposedly harmless human turned out to be in possession of dark magic and he had almost killed me with it. And yes, it was an agent of the Council who had vetted him and sent me to him.

I could've told Gregory that the same agent later turned out to be a fanatic from a secret society. I didn't think it would've helped my case in his argument about the low vetting quality of the Council.

But I wasn't about to admit he had a point, either. So instead, I went on the offense. "You didn't answer me the first time. What are you doing here?"

"Can I not just come by and say hi?" Gregory's lips curved into a smile that was sexy if not for the hint of sarcasm in it. "You know, from one professional to another?"

I was a vengeance demon in the process of being properly licensed by the governing body of my race in order to become a guardian for the Cosmic Balance. He was a vengeance demon exploiting his mama-given ability for profit, and only employed civility in his speech and appearance for the purpose of mockery. We. Were. Not. Both. Professionals.

When I just crossed my arms and stared at Gregory, he dropped his devil-may-care attitude, his expression turned serious. "Alright, the truth is, I came here to confess. I haven't been entirely truthful with you. In fact, I might've misled you somewhat, and I'm sorry."

Sorry, my butt. Whatever he claimed to have lied to me about.

I snorted. "You've been untruthful to me? Really? *You*, of all people? And the surprise here is...what?"

Gregory's eyes narrowed. "You might not believe it, but we mercenaries have our own code of conduct."

"Whatever happened to 'no honor among thieves'?"

From the muscle that jumped in his jaw, I knew I'd just crossed the line. I reminded myself that there was probably a heck of a backstory behind someone of highborn vengeance blood who resorted to this shady manner of earning a livelihood. Maybe my criticism regarding his chosen career hit a sore spot.

Right. Insult the man, not his job.

"What do you want? As you can see, I'm in the middle of an assignment." I made my tone as professional as I could, courtesy of a course I took last semester called *Business*

Communication 207: Before, During and After the Punishment.

Gregory blinked, and then he was back. His jaw loosened and his shoulders, which I didn't even realize were tense, relaxed. Vengeance demons, being a race that systematically managed the Cosmic Balance, tended to respond best to official sounding stuff. Looked like even a rogue and mercenary like him was no exception. I made a mental note of that. "I would like to call in my boon, of course. But as I tried to explain, in the process of obtaining it, I might've created some misunderstanding between us."

"Which part of it was misunderstood? It sounded pretty clear to me." I reminded him, "You said that the job is going to be legal for both vengeance and human laws, doesn't involve trickery, and got my grandmother's stamp of approval."

I knew the parameters he'd set for the boon well because I'd spent many sleepless nights in the past few months thinking about them. I'd granted the boon in desperation to save Esme's life, and only afterward did I ponder what Gregory would try to trick me into doing. There must've been some kind of legal technicality he was counting on. It was like that old human movie *Bedazzled*—the devil would always find some loophole.

Sandra groaned, reminding me that we were not alone. I really hated having this conversation with Gregory in front of her, but it wasn't like she was going to tell anyone else. At least my target was still in discomfort, and still going without her painkiller, so it wasn't like the vengeance stopped while I was forced to deal with Gregory. There was that.

"All of those conditions are still true," he confirmed.

"Then which part did you lie about?"

He straightened. "Now, *lying* is such a harsh word—"

"Tomato. Tomahto. Which. Part. Did. You. Lie. About?"

"I'm simply trying to point out that I might have given you the impression that I needed your help for an assignment I'd already obtained, when in fact it was more like I was—"

"Fishing," I said simply.

He swallowed his unfinished sentence, seemingly surprised at my lack of reaction, so I continued. "Let me guess. You have a certain instinct about where a freelance job might be, and you wanted to secure my help before soliciting the potential client."

"And you knew this?"

"Yep." I shrugged. "I did a bit of freelancing, remember? I understand sometimes you have to create your own jobs. So hit me with the next lie already. Don't deny it. You threw that bit at me to test the water. Consider it tested. Get to what you're really here to confess."

He smiled. "I sometimes forget you can be refreshingly practical."

Practical. Right. In this matter, yes. But I wasn't entirely practical when it came to thinking about him. But he needn't know that. I made a great show of checking on Sandra's suffering progress, checking her pulse and pupils and all that, when there was really nothing new, passive vengeance that it was. "Go on."

"Alright." This time he swallowed. Seeing someone who was usually arrogant looking nervous was making *me* nervous. "I also mentioned that your help would make your changeling friend happy. Truth is, it might cause her as much pain as it would joy."

I walked around the bed toward him, barely containing my temper at his suggestion of possibly hurting Serafina. How dare he think I would even consider causing grief for one of my closest friends? If that's what he expected me to do to repay him, we'd see how badly he wanted his damn boon after I shrank his nuts.

No, Megan.

I'd recently started to learn meditation from Grandma Aequitas, and I'd been practicing letting my trickster tendencies run wild in a controlled environment. But this was no controlled environment. Serafina was one of mine and just thinking about what Gregory wanted from me made my blood boil.

I kept walking until we were mere inches apart.

My pearl pendant grew bright, signaling the gearing up of my power.

"Even if it hurts her, she would still want you to help, you know," Gregory said quietly. He stood his ground, not powering up in response. Somehow, his not rising to my challenge was pissing me off even more. "Look, I just want you to tell her what's going on. And we'll go from there. She'll never forgive you if you don't tell her what I know."

That gave me pause. "Just what is this really about?"

His eyes were so close to mine, I could see the white parts of them. He didn't blink. "Prince Eldon."

"Prince who?"

"Crown Prince Eldon. Of Fae. She'll know who I'm talking about. He's in trouble. Can you tell her that? She's the only one who can locate him."

"And this benefits you how?" I spit out. Gregory wouldn't be doing this if there weren't something in it for him. He was a mercenary, for Hades's sake.

"I would rather not say at this point. Let's just say that I've been keeping my ears on the ground, and an opportunity to curry favor from someone has just presented itself."

"Currying favors? Like from someone who's going to be king one day? By helping a certain crown prince out of a spot of trouble?" I pressed.

"Something like that. Look, I'll explain later. You better hurry. My source told me this is urgent."

Was it really urgent, or was Gregory trying to shut me up until I was in too deep? My gut feeling was that this guy was totally bullshitting me about his role in all this.

I pointed at Sandra. She was keeping quiet, but I could sense her hope rising. She'd heard every word between me and Gregory, and she thought she might be able to get off easy after all. "So you're expecting me to leave my target in the middle of a vengeance assignment to do this? What if she, like, died in the meanwhile or something? You know how much trouble I could be in?"

Without my interference, Sandra would be relieved by a shot of morphine at the top of the next hour and at regular intervals after that. She could pass on to the beyond in relative comfort, her vengeance unserved. Did Gregory not know the backlog down at the underworld? If Sandra got there without at least some of her sins abated, it would be an administrative nightmare to process her.

"I assure you this can't wait," Gregory insisted.

"Alright. On the off chance that you're telling the truth, I'll go talk to her. But if she refuses to help," I warned, "I'm not going to push her."

"Agreed," he said quickly. Too quickly. His tone was curt, his eyes confident. He seemed very sure that Serafina would say yes.

Huh.

"And I'll speak to her alone."

"Of course. You don't even have to bring me along to find the prince if you don't want to."

"I don't." The less Gregory could be a part of this, the better. I needed to see what was really going on first.

“Not a problem.”

Again, he agreed too easily.

“Alright, then.” I started for the door, stopped, turning to point at Sandra, who had a look of triumph on her face. “You. Don’t die on me.”

“Don’t worry.” Gregory grinned like a cat that ate a canary. “I already checked with my contact at Hades. This lady is not due to die for another two weeks. It’s going to be a long and drawn-out death. She’ll be right here when you come back.”

Sandra’s curses filled the room as I exited it. The anticipation of pain—to be inflicted by me or otherwise—was a punishment all on its own.

Gregory followed me out, winking at me. “A freebie off the books. I must be getting soft.”

Chapter Two

Scenic Painting

Guessing where Serafina was located wasn't hard at all. But the getting there part was a pain.

Thanks to Grandma Aequitas, Serafina had failed her first year at Demon U—for her own good. Being kidnapped at birth by the changelings, she had barely returned to the vengeance plane before being enrolled in school by her powerful family. She had an entire new way of life to adjust to, and the result of rushing the process was disastrous. Her grades were terrible; she was constantly bullied by everyone. Anyone who thought bullying ended after high school had never experienced Demon U, with its small classroom size and deep-rooted elitist culture. Serafina and I were in the same year together, so I'd seen her hardship firsthand.

Grandma eventually stepped in and put her on a one-year hiatus. From what I understood, her family backed off, too, allowing her some much needed time to immerse herself in the vengeance culture, however begrudgingly.

Serafina's family home was on the vengeance plane. Though vengeance demons were responsible for addressing the injustices for *all* the planes in the Cosmic Balance, the human one was considered a special case. That was due to the mortal's lack of magic, and the fact that the vengeance and human planes were parallel universes.

There were thousands of planes in the Cosmic Balance. Well, technically there was an infinite number of them out there, but those who had life intelligent enough to be active participants were in the thousands, with the ones holding the most powers in the double digits. Some planes were similar to one another, though not exactly identical, and some were drastically different. The difficulties in teleporting through the barriers between planes varied, and depended on the traveler's skill level.

The ease of cross-dimensional traveling and the low difficulty in handling the targets made the human plane the perfect practice grounds for vengeance trainees such as myself. That was why I was assigned to work on Ms. Hogan.

Yet there was a different reason why human movies and smartphones made their way into many supernaturals' households, and became a counter-culture of sorts throughout the Cosmic Balance. Granted, the wide availability of the mortals' handiwork was a factor, but that was not all.

Many, including myself, actually found the humans fascinating. In the relatively short time since progressing from near savages, humans had come up with quite a lot of technologies that were almost indistinguishable from magic. Of course, Hades forbid if the snobbish vengeance demons would ever openly consider the mortals their equals, let alone living among them. Nope, especially not Serafina's family, with an ancestry illustrious enough to fill a medical textbook.

Due to the supposed urgent nature of the visit, I didn't bother to save magic by finding pre-existing portals to the vengeance plane. So it took me mere seconds to teleport to the outer boundary of Serafina's home. Like all vengeance families, big or small, a protection spell was placed around the perimeter of the twenty-bedroom Advocatus family estate. The Bridle Path neighborhood of Toronto, with large mansions on two to four acre lots, was no less affluent than its counterpart on the human side. The teleporting part was easy, but the walk to get to the actual

front door of the property took me almost twenty minutes.

The contemptuous butler told me that Serafina was out back. He didn't, however, offer to let me walk *through* the mansion, though it would've saved me much time and energy. Instead, he made it very clear my path was to go *around* it. Dear old Andre and I had interacted with each other whenever I was here to visit my friend, and the experience had not endeared us to each other. He could smell the trickster in me, and I could smell the classist asshole in him. Funny how some people could really get behind a system that would put them in a servant's rank, if it meant there were others considered even lower ranking than them.

I turned to start the long trek around the mansion when a disapproving voice boomed behind Andre, "What exactly are you doing here, Miss Megan Aequitas?"

In the past months since I'd gotten closer to Serafina, I'd always been lucky enough to visit her when no one else in her family was home. But just the way my day was going, High Judge Edbert Llewellyn Advocatus was there. Serafina's uncle played a pretty heavy hand in my suspension during the last work term, and he was also a powerful member of the Council. He wasn't someone I could afford to offend.

But that didn't mean I was happy to see him.

"High Judge Advocatus." I bowed to him in accordance to vengeance etiquette. "I'm here to see Serafina."

"And what's the purpose of this visit?"

"With all due respect, that's between Serafina and me." Then I added, "Your Honor."

Buzz off, jerk. If Gregory is telling the truth, then I'm on a timeline here.

"I fail to see the benefits of my niece hanging out with the likes of you." The high judge huffed. "That defeats the entire purpose of the hiatus."

I guess when they gave their consent for Serafina to take the hiatus, they were hoping that she would use this free time to job shadow a few of her many accomplished relatives and in doing so, realize her incredible fortune in being born into such a privileged family. There was the high judge's court she could sit in, and one of her twin aunts was the chief liaison with the four major witches' unions, while the other was an arch vengeance demon just like my dad.

To the family's disappointment, Serafina simply chose to stay home. Reading, doing art, and contemplating the changes in her life.

I thought it was the healthiest thing she could've done.

With Serafina's uncle looking at me like I was a bug and costing me precious time I didn't have, I knew I had to get out of the high judge's presence fast. Without looking like I was trying to.

"Maybe seeing my difficulties being accepted into the vengeance society will, er, reiterate to her the importance of having a proper place in it?" I offered helpfully, my eyes 100 percent sarcasm-free.

Take that, creepy dude.

High Judge Advocatus studied me for a long moment but couldn't call me out on my bullshit when it was done with just enough politeness and pretend sincerity. "Perhaps," he murmured.

That was all the cue I needed to take off.

I found Serafina by a small clearing facing a frozen pond on the edge of the Advocatus family estate. The waning rays from twilight reflected on the iced-over body of water, dried twigs of pussy willows poked out from the snow covering the surrounding marsh. I pulled the sleeves of my jacket farther down. I had no idea why anybody would want to be outside when they didn't

have to.

Serafina stood by a propped up canvas on the clearing with an easel and paintbrush in hand, her eyebrows knitted in concentration as she added a careful stroke on what looked to be a landscape painting, yet she wasn't painting the wintery nature scene before her at all.

Rectangular midnight blue strips, depicting skyscrapers, filled the background with tiny yellow dots over them representing fluorescent lights. A bird of prey, glowing as if on fire, swooped down from above, heading straight for the roof of a building on the foreground. There was a person standing on the roof, and with a splash of flesh-colored paint, Serafina was in the middle of adding details to her face. The character's body was clad in black. Skin tight.

Classic vengeance demon outfit.

"Hey," I called out.

Serafina jumped and dropped the paintbrush. It disappeared in the snow surrounding her.

"Sorry." I hurried over. "I thought you already knew I was here and were playing the cool-artist-being-in-the-zone thing."

That wasn't entirely true. In the past months we'd hung out a lot, and I knew her enough to know she wasn't the pretentious type. I figured she was probably too distracted to notice me, but I felt like I had to talk about something, anything more trivial before broaching on the real reason I was there. After all, how do you tell someone that a mercenary you'd met from an old crisis wanted to drag the both of you into a new one?

Serafina turned those soulful brown eyes on me. "You're here about something." Dammit, she was so quiet most of the time I always forgot how perceptive she was. Well, better get on with the explanation then. I swallowed and told her about my encounter with Gregory.

"You have no idea what he's talking about, right?" I asked her anxiously. "I mean, the guy is a jerk. A total jerk. In fact, forget the whole thing. It's probably some sort of false lead he cooked up anyway."

"I know exactly *who* he's talking about. Though I never expected to hear that name ever again," she whispered in a shaky voice, and the rest of her started trembling, too. She reached out to steady herself, suddenly gripping my arm like an anaconda. Ouch, I didn't even know her grip could be that firm. "This Gregory, he said Eldon is in trouble?"

"Yeah, that's what he said." I eyed her curiously, wondering at her referring to this Crown Prince Eldon on a first name basis. Just who the heck was he? And what was he to her? "What's this all about?"

I was already speaking to her back. She dragged me toward the Advocatus mansion. When I started following her lead, she broke into a dead run. It was a ten-minute trek crossing half the estate, but we did it in under two. Once inside, Serafina raced up the grand staircase, perfectly suited to *Gone with the Wind*, and took me to an enormous bedroom in a private wing. Before I could even admire the fine cream silk décor—or catch my breath, for that matter—she drew the heavy curtains, effectively cutting off the last ray of sunlight and plunging the entire room into darkness.

"Whoa. These are some top quality black out curtains; I can't even see my fingers. Can you wait until I get the light?"

"Don't." There was urgency to her voice. "I can't make this work if there are lights around."

"Alright." I gingerly felt my way around, using the flash mental map of the room in my head, making sure I didn't bump into any sharp objects. I sat down on what felt like a shaggy armchair. It could be the back of a very patient—or very pissed off—hellhound for all I knew. Big families like Serafina's were known to keep these creatures of the underworld as pets. The little

buggers were adept at blending in—how else were they supposed to collect souls if they made their presence known a mile away?

On the high vaulted ceiling, dozens of maps made of neon green lights exploded into my vision, overlapping one another. They reminded me a bit of the laser shows humans liked to put on.

“What is this?” I asked, already forming a theory in my head. I remembered how handy Serafina’s tracking ability was when Esme, my half-sister, was kidnapped. An ability Serafina picked up from her changeling captors, and the maps seemed to be a physical manifestation of it.

“Bird’s eye view of all the known planes. Hopefully Eldon is on here somewhere,” Serafina replied.

“Hey, don’t you need an anchor to do the locating spell?”

Last time, Serafina required something of Esme’s to properly identify her location. Luckily, Esme had donated some of her life force to charge me up before the kidnapping, and we used that as the anchor to find her. I had no idea who this Prince Eldon was to Serafina—though there was no doubt she knew him from the way she spoke of him—much less what she might have of his that could serve as an anchor.

“I already have a magical baseline to go by.” Her voice sounded incredibly sad.

He’s in trouble and she’s the only one who can locate him.

Huh. I’d been friends with Serafina for months now; she never even mentioned an Eldon, prince or no prince.

By the eerie glow of the juxtaposition maps, I could see Serafina standing in the middle of the bedroom, her hands waving as if conducting an orchestra. With each movement there were fewer maps on the ceiling, until only one remained. With a last wave, she brought the map down from the ceiling onto the space just above our heads. She magnified it and made it three dimensional, with bright lines indicating the *X*, *Y*, and *Z* axis.

Large clusters of tall buildings. Narrow streets. Moving rectangular boxes representing what must be cars. It could be either the vengeance plane or the human plane.

“Human plane,” Serafina said, as if reading my mind.

“How could you tell?”

She magnified even farther and pointed at the scattered dots in the alleyways. They weren’t moving like the dots on the main streets. “The homeless.”

“Okay, but there are homeless on both planes.”

“It’s spring break for the University of Vampiric Studies.”

“Oh.”

The vampire plane was on a different time rotation than us, so our mid-winter was their spring break, and nobody on the vengeance plane—homeless or otherwise—would be dumb enough to be caught outside when the streets were flooded with waves of raucous, fanged frat boys. Humans, on the other hand, either denied the existence of the supernatural or believed they were tormented romantic heroes. Hence the lack of self-preservation.

Drunken college kids from any planes could be trouble. Those with fangs, especially.

“Alright, so this Prince Eldon is on the human plane. You have any idea which city he’s in?”

“It doesn’t matter. I can take us there.” Serafina’s voice was firm, her hand reaching for mine and I grasped it. Then she froze, and she said with great hesitation, “Actually, I can go on from here. I don’t want to trouble you.”

“Don’t you dare. You’re my friend and I’m going. Who knows what might be there?”

I was the one who brought Prince Eldon—whoever the heck he was—back into her life. I did it because of Gregory, though I was still unsure of his motive. That made me responsible, and no way was I going to let her go in alone.