

HELL HATH NO VENGEANCE

Chapter One

Uneasy Allies

When a loved one went missing, some people raged in helplessness, while others retreated into themselves. I was fortunate enough to have a third option.

Keeping myself busy by kicking some vengeance butt.

“You know, what he’s doing is just a step up from stealing candy from a baby.” I wrinkled my nose, staying in the shade with Gregory as we watched our target cross the intersection and head toward our hiding spot. The shade also served as relief from a blistering sun. It was unusually hot for what is supposed to be the beginning of summer on the human plane. A good thing, too. Most people had the good sense to stay indoors, leaving the area surrounding the side entrance of a grocery store relatively deserted.

Gregory, clad in his trademark dark jeans and black sweatshirt despite the heat, shrugged. His sensuous lips parted in amusement. “Megan, is there ever a more ethical way to steal?”

I rolled my eyes. “I guess not.”

Today marked the three-month anniversary of my career as a mercenary and my partnership with Gregory. The mercenary life turned out to be a lot like my old life at the co-op program of the University of Demonic Studies. Granted, there were less textbooks and bigger paychecks, but I had to work just as hard to keep up.

The Prince of Darkness could be one demanding customer.

Our latest target was Boyce Armstrong, a mean-looking dwarf-giant thug who had adopted a human-sounding last name for his official records.

And what a record. The guy had a rap sheet the length of a person's arm, including grand theft auto, B&E, and to crown it off, the murder of four people. To keep up with the stereotype, the guy looked like he was straight from the villain catalogue of Central Casting. He was all biker jeans, tattooed arms, enormous build, and facial scars. According to the photo attached to our work order, there was one particular scar that went from his forehead to his cheek, missing his left eye by a narrow margin.

I liked it when they made the verification process so easy, helping me get to the capturing part all that faster.

Mr. Armstrong was supposed to be serving time in Hell, but he made an escape two weeks ago during a massive prison break. And now here he was, resorting to stealing from little old human ladies right off the streets of downtown Toronto. It was as wrong as it was sad.

We watched as Boyce smiled at an elderly woman carrying five bags of groceries, and offered to hold her stuff for her so she could concentrate on using her walker to cross the street. I barely resisted tapping my foot on the ground, as I hated witnessing anyone in the process of being charmed and conned, knowing in most cases the likes of me weren't there to prevent the fallout.

We waited until Boyce got onto our side of the road with his would-be victim. Then I grabbed the front of his shirt, pulled him into the small alleyway I was hiding in, and banged him against the wall before the old lady could let out a scream—and before the grocery bags could hit the ground. As dwarf-giants were tough SOB's, I relied on the element of surprise to quickly plant a temporary weakening spell on him.

"Get off me!" Boyce spat when I flipped his body so that his back was facing me, and restrained him using a pair of Unbreakable Cuffs.

With well-oiled coordination that we'd perfected in the past few months, the moment I engaged our target Gregory started calming down our innocent human bystander. With a light touch on her shoulder, he made the last few minutes of her memory blurry. Then he gathered the grocery bags, tied them onto her walker, and sent her on her merry way; he even threw in a boost of energy for her to enjoy for the next two hours. The old lady complied, moving away with a spring in her step.

Gregory turned his attention back to Boyce just when the latter tried to pull himself free of the Unbreakable Cuffs. It was all to no avail. I purchased the goblin-made cuffs with my first paycheck. They were expensive but impossible to break once they were on, making my job safer as a result.

"What the hell do you want?" Boyce yelled.

"Hell is the right word here," Gregory said dryly.

Comprehension dawned on Boyce's face as he took in Gregory's vengeance wings, fully extended as mine were during a confrontation, from his vantage point. Our target growled.

"Boyce Armstrong, we're sending you back to Hell," I informed him, using the dispassionate voice I learned from school. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do may offend the assigned vengeance demon and lead to a more severe punishment—"

Gregory coughed discreetly.

My cheeks heated. Damn, I did it again, giving the guy his Belinda, the vengeance demon version of the Miranda rights. Mercenaries didn't do that, as we weren't exactly legal ourselves under the existing vengeance laws. Old habits died hard.

Luckily, our target didn't seem to care about my present embarrassment whatsoever.

"I can't go back there," Boyce howled. "I didn't do those things they say I did. I mean, I did all the small-time stuff when I was younger, but I'd turned my life around since then. I didn't kill those four people."

"Yeah, and I guess taking that old lady's groceries is really making you believable here." I snorted.

"I was *helping* her," Boyce insisted.

"Yeah, right." I waved off his words and nodded at Gregory, indicating that I was ready to teleport whenever he was. He looked around to check for any other human witnesses, found none, and started opening a portal to Hell.

During those few seconds, Boyce went deadly quiet. That should've triggered some alarm in me. But I was confident with the Unbreakable Cuffs and my own weakening spell. Probably a little *too* confident.

Anyway, one moment he was calm and docile, the next he turned around and blasted me with an ice energy that knocked me right off my feet. Then he started running away.

Lying sideways on the hard concrete of the alleyway, I directed every magic I had at the retreating back of my target. With the weird angle and the growing distance, I wasn't sure how good my aim would be, but a girl's gotta try, right?

I didn't have a chance to check if I hit him, because a bone-numbing cold started settling into my limbs. It was a strange sensation, to have my skin sweating from the surrounding heat and my insides getting frostbite. Who would've thought a dwarf-giant, from a species known for their brute force, would know such strong, sneaky magic?

"Megan!" Gregory's voice sounded like it was from under water. I didn't have the energy to answer him.

Gregory kept calling my name, each time more urgently than the last. Oh, come on, couldn't he chill? I sure was. All I wanted was to drift off to sleep...

Someone was slapping my cold cheeks with scorching hands that came straight out of the oven, hot and relentless. It threatened to tear off the top layer of my skin with the friction. I opened my eyes.

And realized I didn't remember closing them. That should have scared me, but all I felt was numbness.

Gregory was holding me in his strong arms, his warmth surrounding me. His hair had grown since we started our partnership, and as he leaned down to look at me, strands of brown hair kept falling over his eyes and chiseled cheekbones, giving me the urge to smooth them back with my fingers. With the weakening of my body bringing down my mental resistance, I greedily took in two large breaths of his body scent, which reminded me of clean citrus soap, before I was able to stop myself.

I needed to get a grip. He practically ran away after our first and only kiss. I'd always known that I fell short on the vengeance demon beauty standard—with my wild mud-colored hair, olive complexion, and child-bearing hips, I wasn't classically lithe and graceful. I didn't think Gregory would've cared, but something turned him off and I had no idea what. My physical attributes were as good a possibility as any.

"Megan, you alright?" His voice tight, Gregory propped me in a more upright position and offered me his hand. "Here, take some of my energy."

Figuring this wasn't a time for pride, I clasped his hand and drew his power into me. Gregory didn't just have the blood of one of the oldest vengeance families flowing in his veins—he was also a powerful vengeance demon in his own right. His power, a rich and potent Earl Grey tea, filled my senses.

Immediately a picture of me being wrapped in a blanket and sitting in front of a crackling fireplace came to mind, making me feel safe and content. It was the perfect imagery to chase away the cold that had sank deep into the core of me.

As rejuvenating as the act of energy-taking with Gregory was, though, it wasn't as intimate as it was with Esme, my half-sister. With Esme, it was "no holds barred" when it came to her emotions. With Gregory, there was a boundary there neither of us was willing to cross.

I took just enough energy and stopped, before I became too overwhelmed by his essence and got right into wishful-thinking mode. He wasn't interested in me, and that was that. He'd been a valuable business partner, and I just had to learn to be content with that.

Even if it killed me.

"Thank you," I said to Gregory rather formally, with no small measure of awkwardness. I

got up quickly, desperate for some distance. “Whatever happened to our target?”

Gregory pointed at a space some twenty feet away, and I looked toward that direction. There was Boyce, trapped in a prison made of flaming rods, which nicely cancelled out his ice energy. The garbage cans next to the prison were melted, their contents fused with their grey plastic exterior like gooey ice cream sandwiches under a hot sun.

“Your magic hit the garbage cans,” Gregory said dryly, “and enough energy bounced back onto Boyce to delay his escape so I could imprison him.

So my less-than-perfect aim did manage to find purchase, kind of. Oh, well, as long as the job got done.

Boyce kept trying to touch the bars and kept bouncing back, his hands singeing. He didn’t look very happy about it, as he demonstrated with his endless stream of curse words.

“Go ahead.” I gave him a smug smile. “Make all the noise you want. This whole alleyway is sound and sight proofed from mortals. They see nothing. They hear nothing.”

That was the advantage of choosing the place of confrontation—Gregory and I had set up all the precautions beforehand.

I knew I should rejoice over not losing Boyce, but something was bothering me.

So let me get the sequence of events straight. After I was struck and Boyce was down, Gregory figured out the appropriate spell to offset our target’s ice energy and promptly trapped him with it, *then* he came to my aid.

All of which was understandable, as the profit and reputation of our business came before the well-being of any individual partner. Totally reasonable.

Then why was it a tiny, illogical part of me wished that his priorities had been slightly reversed? That maybe he would be so focused on my state of being that all else was forgotten, including the escape of our target, once I had fallen?

Because that would’ve been the expected behavior of a *solus iungere*, a vengeance soul mate. Total devotion and putting that person above all else.

During our one-and-only kiss, I was so sure that Gregory was my true mate. Except he wasn’t. He made that clear when he pulled away as if my skin burned him.

Anyway, I really couldn’t dwell on that. I straightened and briskly walked to one side of Boyce’s prison, and Gregory got to the other side after transforming the garbage cans back to their original state. He waved an enchantment that would allow us to touch the prison bars without harm. Then he opened up a now-familiar cross-dimensional portal. Straight to Hell.

Knowing what was coming, Boyce paled. “No, no, no. Listen, you really don’t want to do this.”

“Don’t want to do what, return you to Hell and collect our bounty?” I pulled back my upper lip. “You know how many all-nighters we’ve pulled in the last few months taking your kind back? I would gladly get this assignment done and over with.”

“And how’s serving Hell working out for ya?” He grit his teeth.

“We don’t *serve* Hell.” My nostrils flared. “We *do business* with Hell.”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that.” Boyce sneered.

I had to admit, Boyce’s comment struck a nerve. Granted, a big part of the reason I wanted to become a mercenary was to build up contacts in the fight against the Greys, aka the Council. There was no contact as big as the Lord of Hell himself. But in the past months it was increasingly looking like he was the *only* client we had time to satisfy, given the sheer frequency of the prison breaks that were fast becoming the norm. Nobody knew why Lucifer was having a hard time keeping his prisoners in check, but Gregory and I had handled at least two dozen cases,

and we weren't the only mercenaries Hell had contracted.

I was a big believer in not keeping all my eggs in one basket, but it was hard to say no to these assignments—and not only because they were extremely lucrative. It was more like riding on the back of a potentially ill-tempered beast, and it was a lot easier getting on than getting off. Not that our interaction with Hell had ever been anything but professional and civilized, but the devil's reputation spoke for itself. If the just and mighty Council hadn't turned out to be such bull, I would never imagine making such uneasy allies.

Not wanting Boyce to sow any more seeds of doubts into my head, I pursed my lips and grabbed hold of a pair of prison bars. Gregory did the same on his side, and together we dragged Boyce through the cross-dimensional portal, prison and all.

We arrived at Hell through one of its service entrances, being the freelance service providers that we were. This reception desk of the Underworld looked like one from a library for rare books, all tall, oversized, and polished dark mahogany wood.

Boyce rattled his prison bars, desperation seeping into his voice now. "Let me out of here!"

We ignored him, and he cursed wildly in an unfamiliar language. It had to be cursing, from its rough sounds and the universally rude hand gestures that came with it.

A small man with a frog's head and an elf's body, undoubtedly perched on a high chair, sat behind the desk. He had thick-rimmed glasses and a beer belly, and was bending over a large, thick volume with a fountain pen, making small notes here and there. Even with the ruckus Boyce was making, the man at the desk seemed to have difficulty tearing his eyes from the text to pay us any attention. There was a disturbingly obsessed look on his face as his head remained bowed. A tall, stick of a man stood behind him, holding onto an ink pen and parchment.

"Hey, Leonard," Gregory greeted the man reading the text, forcing him to look up at him. There was a power in saying someone's name and I was glad to see Leonard responding to it.

Leonard was the bookkeeper of the Book of Life and Death, which recorded the activities of all souls in existence, physically live or dead, supernatural or otherwise. The Book kept track of the estimated arrival dates of sinners in Hell, the expected duration of their torment, and where they were headed after the punishment was through—the cleansing fire of reincarnation for mortals, or a possible return to their old lives for the supernaturals.

The data in the Book was ever-shifting as every choice a living person made took them farther down one path or another. Everything from the decision to cheat on an exam, to pocketing a tiny screw from the hardware store instead of coughing out the required twenty cents, set the stage for the next round of choices and the round after that, which eventually determined a person's eligibility for Heaven or Hell. Leonard's job was to keep track of Hell's occupancy status based on all these variables.

A monumental task for such an unassuming slip of a man. His legions of assistants, like Tatus, the tall man behind him, were only ever trusted with manual tasks such as filing and miscellaneous note taking.

"Megan. Gregory." Leonard's eyes were clear once he looked up from the Book. He glanced at Boyce. "This is faster than I expected."

"Thank you." I beamed at the compliment. As concerned as I was about the jobs from Hell taking up too high a percentage of our total business activities, I was nevertheless pleased that Leonard was impressed with our work. For one, he was our way in to meet the ever-elusive Lucifer. Secondly, what vengeance demon, mercenary or otherwise, didn't like to be told that they'd done an efficient job?

Leonard glanced at Tatus, and the latter rang a small silver bell. A pair of guards materialized. They were both muscular and nearly naked, with a piece of cloth over their loins, which made them look like a cross between a stripper and a romance novel cover model. I heard that the higher rank you got, the more clothes you'd be allowed on the job. I wonder what the guards looked like at the grand entrance of Hell, which was rumored to be a place of super glam.

"Guards, can you take our prisoner back to his punishment? He has"—Leonard wetted his thumb with his tongue and flipped through the pages of the Book—"two years, five months, eleven days, and fifteen hours to go on Level One. After that he will be eligible for early parole."

Looking at Leonard casually reading someone's fate off the Book of Life and Death had always given me the creeps. To know that there was a database out there keeping track of all the good and bad things people did in their lifetime, which in turn determine the amount of time they might stay in Hell, was unsettling to say the least. I dreaded what the Book might say about me, and about my family and friends, especially since a lot of us were against the Absolute Good. If the Book followed the same "naughty or nice" standard as the Council, then we were so screwed. Just because Hell used me as a hired gun didn't mean it wasn't my eventual destination. Maybe it even made it more likely.

One of the guards waved his hand, removing the fire prison while the other took out a piece of yarn and wrapped it loosely around Boyce's wrists. I'd learned over the past months not to underestimate the fragile looking thread. It was more powerful than ten Unbreakable Cuffs.

Speaking of Unbreakable Cuffs, it was time to remove mine. I reached toward Boyce, knowing that I—the rightful owner of the cuffs—could release the locking mechanism with my touch. But the guard on the left beat me to it. And by that I meant he waved his hands over the cuffs, and the darn thing just fell off Boyce's wrists and into the guard's open palm. Then the guard handed it back to me.

My jaw sagged. I looked at Gregory and he shrugged. How the guards could pull that off, I would never know, but it must be an inborn talent for the servants of Hell or something. I couldn't help but wonder what other things we might get blindsided by if our friends here ever turned on us.

Boyce hadn't even left the room when Leonard's gaze started drifting back to the Book of Life and Death like a moth to the flame, his mouth gaping as he lost himself in it again.

Tatus gave a discreet cough, and Leonard looked up again, seeming almost surprised by the continued presence of Gregory and me. He blinked rapidly a few times. "Oh, right. Well, thank you for your help. The fee will be transferred to your account within the next twelve hours."

Having prompt payments from Hell was never the issue. It was what other hidden costs this working relationship might carry that kept me up at night.

Chapter Two

Complicated

Gregory and I teleported to the front of the duplex I shared with Rosemary, my human roommate, on the west end of Toronto. Whenever we returned from Hell, we always traveled to the same destination first even if we were to split afterward.

I would love to say that was done because Gregory was a romantic and wanted to escort me to a safe place before taking his leave, but the truth was he did it for business reasons—some spirits were known to be able to hitch a ride back from Hell, but their ability to do so decreased drastically if the traveler wasn't alone. Something about multiple people being able to ensure that all the blind spots were covered during teleportation.

The last thing we wanted after returning a fugitive to the Underworld was to provide passage out of there for another one. Leonard, ever the accountant, would probably consider it a wash and refuse to pay us for our work.

I cleared my throat after my feet landed on the front steps of the duplex. "So, er, that went pretty well."

"Yes, it did," Gregory agreed.

Awkward silence, in which we shifted our gaze everywhere except each other's eyes.

"I'm sure Leonard will call us when he's got something else," I said finally.

"He will."

Silence again.

Now that the responsibility of delivering the target was over, my mind veered to how Gregory held me in his arms earlier, something he hadn't done since that night three months ago. We'd been careful about avoiding physical contact with each other ever since then.

Under the waning sun, the sharp angles of Gregory's cheekbones made the contours of his face even more defined. His long-limbed body, usually relaxed with confidence, hunched with hesitation. His midnight-blue wings were only half-extended, as if they, too, weren't sure what the next move was.

If I didn't know better, I would have said he was as confused and conflicted as I was. But Gregory wasn't exactly the contemplative and tormented type. I must have been reading what I wanted from the situation.

Steeling myself to keep things light, I swallowed and said brightly, "Alright then, I'll keep Marv with me for tonight and let you know if anything comes up."

My comment had the desired effect. Gregory grimaced. "I wish you wouldn't call the Phone by that ridiculous name."

Marv, aka the Phone, was for the 24/7 vengeance hotline we set up for the business. We usually took turns holding onto that little communication device through the night. A few weeks ago I decided to rechristen it 'Marv,' which stood for Mercenary Assistive Response for the Vengeful. It was way cooler than its old name.

"You should be glad I'm not calling it Vermin." I smirked.

"Vermin?" he raised his eyebrow.

"You know, Vengeance Emergency Response Management Initiative, with the 'n' from the word 'initiative' forming the last letter of the acronym."

"Marv it is," Gregory said quickly, probably hoping to discourage me from coming up with more names for the little gadget. "Anyway, I reprogrammed it so it doesn't make that chirping ringtone if you don't answer it within a minute. Your roommate won't be disturbed again."

"Thank you." I dropped my cocky act and said gratefully. Always the optimist, Rosemary really thought that those abandoned eggs up in the nest under her bedroom window were still capable of hatching, though we were well past spring. I didn't need her getting excited by mistaking the chirping for the sound of baby birds only to be bitterly disappointed.

Gregory looked like he was going to say something else, then stopped himself. Without a further word, he took Marv out of his pant pocket and handed it to me. The little device, which fit right into the palm of my hand, was warm to the touch, and I tried not to think about Gregory's body heat that had warmed it.

I ducked onto the porch as Gregory teleported away, and opened the front door to the divine smell of pot roast and grilled vegetables. My stomach rumbled in anticipation. At least no matter how my day went, I could always count on a hearty meal at the end of it.

"I'm at the back. Come on out, Megan!" The distant voice of Rosemary, my roommate slash chef extraordinaire, called.

I walked through the living room and kitchen and stepped out onto the deck. A setting for two was laid on top of a yellow tablecloth, with a small vase of fresh cut daisies on the side. Rosemary was in the middle of pouring homemade lemonade into two glasses. In the center of the table were two large covered pots.

"Just in time for dinner." Rosemary smiled, uncovered the pots, and started spooning vegetables and pot roast slices onto the plates. A petite blond with a round face, my roommate was a culinary student who could bake like a team of angels and cooked like a temptress from Hell. I was so, so lucky to have found her. "I made chocolate molten lava cake for dessert."

And I officially didn't deserve her.

I just had to be glad that I had the metabolism of a supernatural, or I wouldn't have been able to fit through the front door, let alone catch any fugitives, with the way Rosemary had been feeding me. She called it experimentation, I called it Heaven.

Unfortunately, Rosemary also had a nosy side. "Hey, was that Gregory I saw walking you home?"

Living with me meant that Rosemary was bound to witness something supernatural at one point or another, be it catching me in the act of casting a spell, or seeing me talking to Sassy, my feline shade. Rather than dealing with these incidents on a case-by-case basis, I'd placed a

perception filter on her to help her mind ignore things that it couldn't understand. That meant that she didn't actually see Gregory and I teleport onto the property, or him teleport away. All she saw as she peeked out of the window was him walking me home, then leaving.

"Yeah, that was him," I replied.

"Gregory, your *business partner*?"

"Yep." I told her Gregory and I had started an event planning business together. It explained all the weird hours I kept, and it was true in a way—we planned events in which people got sent back to Hell.

"Uh-huh." Rosemary studied my face like I was an expensive restaurant dish she was trying to reverse-engineer.

"So how's the canning going?" I asked quickly. "Are you onto the grape jelly now? When is the peach batch ready?"

"The peach will be ready in another week. I'm already halfway through the grape jelly and I've started on the raspberry jam."

"That's a lot of new stuff to sell." Rosemary ran a side-business of jams, organic fragrance, and soap products, not to mention really awesome dog biscuits.

"I'm only keeping half. We're running a bake sale at the shelter next week. Why not tempt them with some jam when people are going to be buying breads and buns?" Rosemary got herself an extra portion of pot roast and offered me the same. I obliged. "Looks like I'm going to have tons of leftovers tonight. You should have asked your *business partner* to stay for dinner. I told you before that he's welcome to, remember?"

I should've known that Rosemary wouldn't be so easily deterred. Someone who created baklava from scratch by methodically building one sheet of phyllo over another twenty times over, without them drying out or sticking together, wouldn't have given up so easily.

Though my roommate had met Gregory briefly several times, I'd always managed to get her away from him before she could extend any dinner invitations. It would be just like her to grill him over a delicious meal about the state of things between Gregory and I, and that would've just killed me with embarrassment.

"Er, he's busy," I lied.

"That's what you said the last three times. You didn't ask him, did you?" She narrowed her eyes at me.

"It's...complicated," I admitted. What an understatement.

"What's so complicated? He's single. You're single." Rosemary stopped the forkful of meat that was halfway to her mouth. "Wait, he's single, right?"

I nodded. "As far as I know." Whatever the reason that made Gregory step away, at least I knew it wasn't because he had a girlfriend back home waiting for him—the essence of cheating had a distinctive flavor to it, and as a vengeance demon, I would've been able to detect it, and I didn't, either during or after the kiss.

"Then what's the problem?" she persisted.

"As I said, it's complicated." I envied the human in front of me. She could choose whomever she wanted as a mate. There was no weird vengeance chemistry, or the misread of such vengeance chemistry, for her.

"Just drop it, okay?" I begged Rosemary.

My roommate must've heard the weariness in my voice. She chewed on her lips. "Sorry. I just keep seeing how your eyes light up every time you mention him and I thought...never mind. Here, these came in for you today."

Rosemary hurried into the kitchen, picked up a stack of letters from the counter, and handed them to me.

“One from U of T, one from Election Canada, and one from Ontario Health.” She commented, “I betcha that last one is a health card renewal notice. I just got mine done last year. The lineup wasn’t too bad, but the picture was horrendous.”

With her perception filter, Rosemary only saw what she was meant to see as a human being. The three letters were actually from the University of Demonic Studies, Election Vengeance, and the Department of Vengeance Health, respectively.

The fact that they got the letters delivered here, my address on the human plane, rather than to my parents’ house, was in itself a bad sign.

I was glad I was a super-fast eater and had already polished off the main course, or I would’ve surely lost all appetite.

The letter from the University of Demonic Studies confirmed my withdrawal from the Faculty of Arts and Vengeance, and that for the time I’d spent there, with three completed school semesters, two tuition hikes, and a GPA of 3.7, they were granting me the transferrable course credits of... zero. It would be like I’d never attended a day there.

I clutched the paper so hard my fist was shaking. Rosemary shot me a worried look.

I tried not to let it get to me, to tell myself that this was such a small matter in the grand scheme of things. But dammit, I’d earned those credits fair and square. I’d slaved over the schoolwork, pulled all-nighters for the midterms, and almost gotten killed over my first co-op assignment.

I didn’t deserve to be treated as if I was expelled. I walked away voluntarily, and they were pretending that I left in disgrace.

The letter from Election Vengeance informed me that since I wasn’t living, going to school, or engaging in eligible employment on the vengeance plane, I wasn’t qualified to vote in the upcoming mayoral election.

Eligible was the operative word here when it came to the employment status. I worked plenty, just not in a legitimate, Council-approved sense.

Not that I cared about the mayoral election—all the candidates had pretty much the same platform—but it would be nice to be able to *not* exercise my right to vote.

The letter from the Department of Vengeance Health was not about the renewal of my health card at all, but the cancellation of it altogether. They cited the same reasons as Election Vengeance. Then, to put a cherry on the top, attached to the letter was a bill for the annual checkup I’d had two weeks ago.

A bill. They’d sent me a freaking bill. Nobody said anything about refunding my tuition, but they took the time to create an invoice for my annual Flap test—like a human Pap test but for my back where my wings were stored.

Three letters. Three fallouts from the fight against the Council, aka the Greys.

What do you expect, Megan? You denied their chance to annihilate most of the population in existence.

True enough.

“Are you alright?” Rosemary’s words pulled me out of my reverie. If my frowning roommate could sense supernatural powers, she would’ve been able to feel the sudden energy spike in the air resulting from my anger and run the other way. I forced myself to take a few deep, calming breaths.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” I reassured her. “How about that dessert?”

Sometimes the only thing a girl can do is dig into her chocolate molten lava cake, then move onward.

I was helping Rosemary put away the dishes when the doorbell rang.

“I wonder who that is?” Rosemary frowned as she wiped her hands on the dishcloth and hurried out to the front door.

“Could it be Jordon?” I asked. Rosemary’s boyfriend was a regular fixture here—whenever he wasn’t working two jobs on top of volunteering at the local animal shelter.

“No, he’s working tonight.”

I stayed put and wiped down the kitchen counter. I suppose I could use magic to do it, but I found the manual labor calming.

Not to mention, I was a bit stingy on magic use, especially with the three letters reminding me how unpredictable life could be. Better save up some power like humans would with blue chip stocks.

Rosemary came back with a vase of flowers. Not a huge one, but a tasteful tabletop botanical creation, with bright yellow carnations, purple Matsumoto asters, and pink Asiatic lilies. A single blood-red rose stood proud in the middle of the cheery beauty, adding a sense of the mystic to the floral offering. I so happened to like carnations and lilies quite a bit. Was it just a coincidence?

“It’s for you,” Rosemary proclaimed.

My heart rate sped up. For me? My first thought was wondering if it could be from Gregory. He didn’t seem like the flower gifting kind, but I couldn’t think of anyone else who would be sending me something like this. Unless it was from my trickster brothers, and the flowers were time-released stink bombs.

“Oh, look here, there’s a card.” My roommate pointed at the small envelope tucked behind the rose. She looked at me expectantly.

I suppose that was the part where I fulfilled the social obligation of reading the note out loud so a friend could share in the thrill vicariously. I reached for the envelope and opened it. There was a note and what looked like a movie ticket inside. Handwritten in a calligraphic style that was masculine and fancy at the same time, the note said:

Dear Megan,

Would you consider doing me the honor of joining me for an evening at my casino? If you play your hand right, I might be able to help take all your troubles away. If so, please come to the front of the casino and present the enclosed VIP pass to the guards with the red armbands.

*Until then,
L. Morningstar*

p.s. Wear something nice.

Through the roaring in my ears, I asked myself, *L. Morningstar, as in Lucifer Freaking Morningstar?*

My breath caught. What the hell is he doing inviting me to the grand casino of Hell? I mean, I'd been to the Underworld plenty of times in the last three months, but it was always through the no-frill service entrance, never the front door. What was the devil playing at? I was a pay-by-assignment freelancer. A professional. I worked as a team with Gregory. Why had Lucifer approached me individually, flowers and all?

And what the heck did he mean by "I might be able to help take all your troubles away"? Was he talking about my issues with the Council? The timing sure seemed suspicious given the letters I'd just received.

Or was he talking about helping me find Grandma? If so, the devil sure knew how to tempt me. Wondering how Gran was faring while trapped inside the Internet was what had been keeping me up at night. I had no idea how he would've found out about Gran, but he was the devil, after all.

"So, what did it say?" Rosemary asked impatiently, craning her neck to look over my shoulder.

"I—it's nothing. Just a client." I stuffed the note back into the envelope along with the all-access pass to Hell. I hate disappointing my roommate, but a message from the Underworld wasn't exactly the stuff the mortal should see.

Rosemary's eyes went saucer-sized. "A client? So not Gregory then?"

Guess that was her first thought as well.

"No, not him." I shook my head.

"What does he want?"

I decided to give her a half-truth. "He wants me to meet him at his place of work."

"For business?"

"I don't know."

"Do you like him?"

"Rosemary!" I gasped, horrified by the idea.

"Hey, you're the one who keeps insisting Gregory is just your business partner. What's the harm in saying yes to this other guy?"

What's the harm in mixing up with the devil? Oh, let's see, how about losing your soul?

Was that it, he was hoping to make a trade for my soul? Maybe as a half-vengeance demon, half-trickster hybrid, my soul was like a collector's item? Or was this something else altogether?

I glanced at the flowers again. The single rose, plus the suggestion to wear something nice, seem to indicate an interest of a more personal nature.

Eww, creepy.

Everyone knew that Lucifer was the ultimate seducer. Question was, was it my heart, soul, or body that he was going after? A light tremor made me shiver to my very core. Whatever it was, I was now officially singled out by the Prince of Darkness himself.

How the Hell was I supposed to respond to it?