

VENGEANCE

101

Chapter One

Delivery from Hell

There was a hellhound in my bedroom.

I walked in and there it was—two hundred pounds of pure muscle, shiny midnight-black fur, and eyes blazing with the images of eternal hellfire.

If I was human, I'd be screaming my head off right around now, or wondering if I'd made a deal with a demon and totally forgotten about it. But since *I* was the demon in this case, that would seem a bit overdramatic.

I stopped a few feet before the hellhound and got onto one knee, willing myself to keep my movements steady. Sure, logic dictated that hellhounds couldn't harm me, but try being up close and personal with a beast sporting sharp fangs the length of my face. I couldn't walk away, though, not with what was being clutched by those fangs.

A single red envelope.

The hellhound, a creature that could enter any realm unseen, had shown itself to me. That could only mean one thing—the envelope was meant for me.

Beads of sweat formed on my forehead as my hands stayed stubbornly at my sides, refusing to take delivery of the envelope.

Because I had a fairly good idea what this was all about.

The symbol on the wax seal, though barely visible, looked a lot like the official crest of the University of Demonic Studies. The timing seemed right, too, as they should be sending out their admission offers and notifications of refusal sometime this month. It was a time-honored tradition to use hellhounds for such a task—who needed owls when they could send the beasts from Hell?

After what felt like an eternity, I finally reached for the envelope, my heart pounding so hard I was sure even the neighbors from the next block could hear it. Once my fingertips made contact with the envelope's edge, the hellhound's jaw sagged. I pulled the envelope close to me and stared at it. Yep, it was indeed from Demon U.

With his job done, the hound's eyes turned a soft grey color, flames gone, and he flopped down onto the floor, exposing his underside for me.

"Angling for a belly rub, huh?" I obliged him with the hand that wasn't holding the envelope, sinking my fingers into all that gorgeous fur. "Awww, isn't this so much better than dragging evil souls back to Hell?"

I was stalling, and I knew it. The hound seemed to know it, too. After two rounds of satisfying belly rubs and a whole lot of happy howling—thank Hades the rest of my family wasn't home—he got back up on all fours and looked at me with patient eyes, as if saying, *go on*.

“Fine.” I sighed. “I’ll open it. How bad could it be?”

Well, pretty bad, actually. They could say no to my lifelong dream—something I’d worked hard toward since I was five. As long as I didn’t open the envelope, I was simultaneously accepted and rejected by Demon U, like that feline of Schrödinger's that humans liked so much. That was better than a real and very permanent rejection, right?

Disgusted with my own indecisiveness, I broke the wax seal and ripped open the envelope with more force than needed. Inside was a small sheet of paper that magically expanded to a one-page, standard eight-and-a-half-by-eleven-inch letter as soon as I pulled it out:

Dear Gamen Kennedy Aequitas,

Congratulations! It is my pleasure to offer you admission to the University of Demonic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Vengeance. This opportunity to join one of the most outstanding learning centers in the Cosmic Balance comes in recognition of your academic achievements and...

The rest of the letter was pretty standard, and it went right over my head as I tried to process the most important fact laid out before me.

I’d done it. I’d finally done it. I’d gotten into Demon U.

There was only one tiny, itchy, bitsy problem—my name wasn’t Gamen.

Chapter Two

Family Opposition

"What do you mean, you're going to Demon U? That place is so stifling, repressive, and *boring*." Fir, my older half-brother, moaned as he ran his fingers through his spiky ginger hair. As a full-blooded trickster, there was no greater sin to Fir than being boring.

Soon after the hellhound had loped back to the Underworld, half my family had arrived home, all at around the same time, so I’d gathered everyone in the living room and told them the great news.

Except nobody thought it was great news at all.

"Megan, given how you feel about your dad’s side of the family, I never thought you’d want to become one of them." My trickster mother, who was sitting on the couch, said as her hand flew to her chest. I must’ve given her quite the nasty shock.

That was my fault. I had never told my parents and siblings what I wanted to do with my life. It was a secret dream I’d held close to my heart. Yes, I hated the stuck-up nature of my vengeance demon relatives, but I wanted their chosen profession more than anything else in the

world.

"Tell her what you were planning, Mom." Fir said.

"I suppose it doesn't matter anymore." Mom took a steadying breath.

"No, she should know." Fir insisted. "Tell her."

"Megan, I, er, assumed you wanted to answer your trickster calling." Mom fiddled with her skirt trim and smiled at me awkwardly, "And I thought maybe you would like to take your apprenticeship with me. So I went ahead and planned a few pranks that would be perfect for us to try. A laughing gas party at the dentist, a bank account switcheroo, and a cosmetic surgery that goes ass backward—literally. I did the recon and kept the records nice and organized—just the way you like things."

Ouch. She did all that prep work for nothing. A sharp pang of guilt sliced through me. It wasn't in my mother's nature to do guilt trips—her trickery nature was fun-loving, not manipulative. But I felt terrible all the same.

"Megan, she was planning to come out of retirement just for you!" Fir glared at me. "Greer the Magnificent, the queen of improvisation, was keeping a *paper trail*, for crying out loud."

Fir had a very good point. Ever since my trickster mother had married Dad, an arch vengeance demon, she'd toned down her pranks out of respect for his profession. She was stepping back onto the trickster scene after almost two decades for the sake of her only daughter.

And I repay her by wanting to go to Demon U instead.

"Can't you feel the call to trick and prank? Even fifty percent of it? What kind of half-trickster are you, anyway?" Fir asked me, utterly bewildered. A child from Mom's relationship with another trickster long before Dad came onto the scene, Fir was one hundred percent trickster and never had any issues with his own identity. Unlike me, the hybrid who was caught between two worlds—the only vengeance demon and trickster hybrid ever born.

Intentionally or not, I was disappointing those around me. How did I explain to my family that, although I had trickster blood flowing in me, I yearned to dish out justice even more?

"Megan." Dad, who was also sitting on the couch, placed his hand over Mom's, calming her fidgeting. "What about your living arrangements?"

"What about them?" I tried to keep my tone neutral, but I knew exactly what Dad's argument was going to be about.

"Being at university generally means you have to live at the dorm."

"So?"

"It isn't safe," Dad stated flatly.

I rolled my eyes, "Yes, it is. Generations of young students have done it."

"But it isn't safe," Dad repeated. "Anyone and anything could get into the dorm. It'd be impossible to run the kind of state-of-the-art safeguards we have at home."

My vengeance demon daddy had always been overprotective to the point of paranoia. I often wonder if that was the side effect of making a living pursuing serial killers and war criminals—after a while, everyone looked like they were out there to cause harm. I actually caught him following me on a high school camping trip once. As I grew older, I tried to see the over-protectiveness as being super sweet rather than super annoying and ridiculous, but not today.

I suppose I should be grateful that my other three trickster half-brothers were still off on their mischiefs of the day—I didn't need any more opposition to my life choices right now.

Of course, I had to jinx myself with that thought.

There was the ripple of energy in the air that signified someone had just teleported into the

living room, then a cold female voice said from behind me, "My, my, most of the family is here. How convenient."

I spun around and faced a woman of short stature in a gray Chanel suit, her brown hair tied into a severe bun. She looked to be in her late fifties, but I knew her to be centuries older than she appeared. She had sharp cheekbones and an aristocratic nose, and a commanding presence that always made me want to stand straighter at the same time it got my back up.

"And here's the Wicked Witch of the Venge," Fir muttered.

The woman ignored Fir's comment and glanced past my mother without a single sign of acknowledgment—which pissed me off every time it happened. She looked straight at my dad, and he stood up.

"Mother," he said respectfully.

"Nicolas." She nodded.

"Grandmother Aequitas," I said stiffly and bowed to her as per tradition. Well, technically a lot of vengeance families had long foregone such formality between family members, but since the old lady had hated me since birth, civilized behaviors as per tradition were all we had.

"Grandmother Aequitas?" She chuckled mirthlessly. "Are you certain I'm still the matriarch of our little vengeance clan? It would appear I've been so out of touch, I didn't even realize I have a college-ready grandson by the name of Gamen Kennedy Aequitas."

I winced. Being as active as Grandma Aequitas was on the University's board, I should've known that she'd get wind of my acceptance sooner or later. I was hoping for later, but guess not.

"Mother, what are you talking about?" Dad asked.

"I'm talking about our Megan here, being accepted into the University under a false name."

Fir whistled. "A false name? Megan, I take everything back. You *are* a trickster after all."

My cheeks burned. "I just wanted to be judged purely on the merits of my academic achievements, not whether or not I have a proper middle name, that's all."

Vengeance demons generally had a first, middle, and last name—as it was considered respectable and proper. As a vengeance demon and trickster hybrid, I'd never been granted a middle name by Grandma Aequitas, which rendered me only slightly better than a bastard in the vengeance society, despite my parents' steadfast commitment to each other.

"Alright, that explained the middle name, but what about the first name? Of all the ones to choose from in the world, you picked *Gamen* as an alias?" Fir pulled a face.

"It's an anagram for Megan," I said defensively.

"It's a boy's name."

"Yeah, but the other two choices were Nag'em, which is great if I'm trying to get into journalism school, and Mange, which is a canine skin disease."

"Wait." Fir's eyes gleamed with mischief. "Did you fake your VSAT score as well?"

"Of course not." I was taken aback. "It's totally legit. I just enchanted the school administrator to see *Gamen Kennedy Aequitas* when they read my real name on the record, that's all. I didn't cheat. I swear."

"Don't you understand, you silly girl, that it doesn't matter?" Grandma Aequitas said in disgust. "They'll think you've somehow tricked your way into the University. That cloud of suspicion will always be with you. And by extension, with the House of Aequitas. This isn't about you."

Of course not—this was about the reputation of the house. A house I was never truly a part of. My chest hitched thinking about all the aunts and uncles and cousins and nephews who'd

always be strangers to me. I was worse than dead to them—in their eyes, I was a time bomb of clan-wide embarrassment waiting to happen.

Like now.

I forced myself to ask the one question I dreaded the most. "So am I still in?"

My grandma had the political clout to withdraw my acceptance offer—if she chose to.

"Of course not," Grandma Aequitas said firmly.

"Because of the false name?" I bit out the words. Was I my own worst enemy?

"No." Her nose wrinkled as if I was something unpleasant to be put out on garbage night.

How she could manage to appear to be looking *down* at me, given her diminutive figure, I had no idea. "Because of all the future times you're going to shame my house. You're a hybrid. That's what you do—you wouldn't be able to stop yourself."

The vengeance society was one of protocol and respect. There were pre-established ways in which one addressed one's elders and ways in which one excused oneself from the said elder's presence. In that moment, I didn't care.

I stormed out of the house.

Chapter Three

Dictators and Terrorists

I spent the next two hours lying among the tall grass on the sloped hill that overlooked my neighborhood.

The sun was beginning to set, the grass casting long shadows in the golden light. From my vantage point, I watched as Miss Neringa, my giantess neighbor next door, walked out onto her yard with what looked like a cell phone in hand. She was always in the middle of spreading one piece of gossip or another, which ranged from twisted truths to pure speculation.

During my childhood, I'd spent many summer days cooking up new ways to prank her—though I'd always made sure my tricks were directly tied to her gossiping. For example, I'd spell her freshly baked apple pies to lose more and more of their flavor as the number of rumors she spread increased. Worked like a charm.

But as I laid there now, listening to the faint voice of Miss Neringa's in the distance, I wondered if tricking her was already the peak of my never-even-started career.

"Hey, pumpkin." A shadow blocked out the fading light above me, and my dad's voice rang out on the open hillside. "Can I sit down with you?"

I propped myself up on my elbows and watched my dad as he settled down on the spot next to me. He seemed so out of place with his tailor-made suits. I'd grabbed him for my big announcement right after he'd come home from work, never giving him a chance to change into casual clothes, and it looked like he hadn't done so after I'd left the house, either. Since I'd used an anti-locator spell to mask my presence, I wondered how much of the last two hours my dad had spent looking for me. As bad as I felt about it though, I was glad that he had found me now rather than earlier. I'd really needed the time to calm down.

Rather than angry, right now I just felt defeated. And stupid. For so many years, while I

dreamt about entering Demon U, never breathing a single word to my family, I'd somehow managed to completely block out the ultimate gatekeeper from my mind—my very own grandmother. Instead, I'd focused entirely on my VSAT score, which was something I actually had control over.

Unlike the prejudice against me.

"So," After a long while of sitting together in silence, Dad said, "You want to become a licensed vengeance demon, huh?"

"Yes." My voice was small as I bowed my head.

"Why?"

I looked at him and echoed, "Why?"

"Yes, why. I get that tricksters can be frustratingly chaotic." The corner of my dad's mouth lifted. "I live with them too, so I know. But why do you want to become a professionally qualified vengeance demon, other than the fact that it is *not* the trickster path?"

There was a huge difference between being *born* a vengeance demon and being *licensed* as one, just like how for humans, there was a difference between being a native English speaker and getting a master's in English literature.

"I don't know why. I just feel better when justice is served." I stared off at the neighborhood bus stop, where a bogeyman was getting on the bus and heading out to work. Mr. Timor, the father of three, was working at a piecework, a-dollar-a-boo job a couple of years ago when they'd decided to cut his rate by fifty percent. Dad had a, um, chat with his employer, and now the bogeyman was compensated fairly for his scares. "I just know that if I release laughing gas at a dentist's office, I want to do it not because it makes a great party, but because it punishes the dentist for pulling out the wrong teeth—and I'll get him to laugh like a hyena afterwards so there are no innocent bystanders trapped breathing in that nasty stuff along with him. And if I switch bank accounts, I want them to be offshore accounts belonging to dictators and terrorists. I'll let them tear one another apart, leaving the rest of humanity alone."

"So you want your work to mean more than just fun and games," Dad commented. "Is that right?"

"Yes." I didn't just want it—I needed it.

Dad seemed to have come to a decision. "I talked to your grandmother. She's agreed to let you in for a trial semester."

My jaw dropped, not only over Grandma Aequitas' compromise, which was even less likely than Hell freezing over, but at my dad's intervention, considering his own misgivings in the matter. "Oh, Daddy." I threw myself into his arms. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Dad laughed and embraced me back.

Then a horrible thought occurred to me, and I nearly jumped. "Wait, how? What did you have to promise her? Attend those dreadful charity balls for a full year? Take on more cases?"

Dad shook his head. "Don't you worry about it. The truth is, I've been putting in extra time here and there in the last few years for, shall we say, karma points? I had a feeling I'd need a favor at some point."

And he'd decided to use it on me. Eyes suddenly prickled with tears, I vowed, "You won't regret it."

"I know."

"So what were Grandmother's exact words?" I didn't trust Grandma Aequitas to be nice just over some banked overtime. I had to find out the exact conditions she had laid out if I was to survive at Demon U.

Looking at my dad's face, I could see that the part of him that wanted to shield me was at war with the part of him that understood why I needed to know. "She said one single mishap, no matter how small, and you're out," he said softly.

Of course. Grandma Aequitas pretty much expected me to cause trouble—like a trickster would. I didn't know why it stung for her to have so little faith in me. It wasn't like she'd ever been nice to me to begin with. But somehow, it still hurt.

"Sugar plum." Dad squeezed my hand. "Don't worry about that. You just focus on doing well in this semester, then there'll be another one after that. And another one after that. It'll happen. You'll see. Your mother understands why you have to do this. And your brothers will come around, too. I've watched you bedeviling our neighbors all these years. Do you know what's special about you?"

"What?"

"Miss Neringa's apple pies."

"Huh?" Now I was confused.

"What I mean is..." Dad chuckled. "Your ability to blend trickery into vengeance. Not a lot of vengeance demons could give justice an ironic twist. That's your secret weapon. Don't ever forget that."