

THE
VENGEANCE DEMONS
SERIES

BOOK 0-3

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Note From Author

This boxed set contains these books in the following order:

Vengeance Be Mine (Vengeance Demons #1, Novel)

Before Vengeance (Vengeance Demons #0, Novella)

Vengeance Unclaimed (Vengeance Demons #2, Novelette)

A Good Vengeance (Vengeance Demons #3, Novel)

I recommend that you read VENGEANCE BE MINE prior to BEFORE VENGEANCE for a better understanding of the world, but I heard from readers who prefer it the other way around, so it's really up to you!

I had a lot of fun writing these books, and I hope you'll have as much fun reading them!

VENGEANCE

BE MINE

Chapter One

There is a saying amongst vengeance demons—justice comes slowly, but surely.

Or on rare occasions, it could hit hard and fast, like the waves of contractions my male target was experiencing as I stood over him.

“Make it stop. I’m begging,” he groaned, arching his back on the hotel bed. His T-shirt was drenched, like in those bar contests he frequented, revealing the long torso and lean six-pack of an athlete in his prime. He looked up at me, his brown eyes pleading, and his gaze unfocused—the way humans got when they were in pain.

“Mr. Lodge, it’s not even midnight yet. We’ve got another four hours of torment to go, according to my work order.” I tried to sound professional, but my nineteen-year-old voice was just a bit on the squeaky side, even to my own ears. The business of vengeance was harder than I’d ever thought possible.

This was my first solo practice session after a year of in-class lectures at the University of Demonic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Vengeance. I needed it to go well.

Problem was, none of my textbooks mentioned how to deal with a crybaby.

A crying *man*-baby.

MVP Jeremy Lodge, aka “The Machine,” clutched his stomach and whimpered. The famous basketball star was known for striking fear in the hearts of opposing teams all over the world, but now the only thing that came knocking was another contraction.

“What’s happening?” The Machine panted during a respite, the tranquility of the hotel room clearly lost on him. There was soft light from the paper lantern overhead and a fluffy sand-colored carpet one could sink one’s toes into. The sliding doors made of mint-frosted glass added a touch of modern elegance to the five-star suite.

What was happening? What a question.

When I’d fantasized about getting my vengeance demon designation, this was the part I’d found the most satisfying—telling the target how his actions had led to the consequences he was facing.

“A taste of childbirth pain, which is a fitting punishment for cheating on your pregnant wife with the whole cheerleading squad.”

I had to pat myself on the shoulder for coming up with *that* particular punishment. Why exact a boring old vengeance when you could spice it up with a cool, ironic twist?

“You little bitch!” The Machine pounded his enormous fist on the mattress.

“Hey, the name is Megan. Not bitch. Not little.” I gritted my teeth.

“Fuck you!”

I pushed aside my first instinct—getting mad or, worse, scared. I’d been insulted before, but usually with more subtlety than that. I guess humans weren’t exactly subtle creatures. It might also be the difference between having the cuss words tossed at me, rather than learning them in a classroom setting. I forced myself to unclench my fists, my fingernails peeling away almost reluctantly from the imprints they dug into my palms. There was a magical barrier between us,

and I was in control.

Even though it was my first time alone with a target.

I straightened. Never show fear, they'd taught us in *Occupational Insults & Threats 101*.

"Bad manners will only get me mad and extend your punishment."

"I'm going to kill you," he snarled.

"Alright, an extra ten minutes it is."

Was insisting on ten too harsh? Should I have said five? I caught myself brushing my fingertips over the edge of the pocket-sized training manual currently pressed against my jean-clad bum. This being my first time, I'd packed the mini-bible along just in case. Now I longed to take it out and flip to the chapter on *How to Deal With the Misgivings of Hurting In the Name of Justice*, because every single moan that came out of The Machine hit my guts like ice water. Since I wasn't the target's direct victim, it was hard for me to establish him as the total bad guy in my mind, and part of me felt bad about administrating the suffering to him. Green, green, green—that was what I was.

Come on, Megan. You can't afford a soft heart. You want to help people, remember? Keeping balance in the world is helping them.

I sometimes forgot how annoyingly logical my inner voice could be.

"I swear, I'm going to kill you," The Machine repeated, every muscle on his body taut, his eyes promising death and destruction. Had I been a mortal, I would have been scared shitless.

I sighed. "I heard you the first time. How about you try *not* cheating in the future?"

The Machine looked ready to explode into a string of curses when his eyes widened to the size of saucers. Halftime was over, and there was no sitting this round out.

"Alright, listen up." I hastily leaned over. I had under a minute to get him to understand.

"Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. In for three, then out for three. Come on, I've read these exercises on your Internet and it should help."

Oh boy, it was going to be a long night. At least the target was contained within a dome-shaped energy barrier covering the entire bed. An attack from over two hundred pounds of pure muscle was something I did not need.

And so the labor carried on past midnight. And on. And on.

According to my training manual, I was supposed to stay with the target throughout the entire process. I tried, I really did. But after three hours of his moaning and bitching, I'd had enough. Why, oh why, was my fickle magic able to mute the noise for all humans within hearing range, but not for me?

The grating sound of torment caused my head to pound with the intensity of a full-blown aura migraine, the queen of all migraines that even a supernatural being couldn't escape. First came the offending aura; a whirling circle of flashing light the size of a penny appeared in my visual field. Soon, it expanded to cover most of my vision, pretty much blinding me. When the aura dissipated, that was when the nausea, dizziness, and excruciating pain in my skull started. Fun.

I stumbled out of the bedroom and sank down on the sofa in the dim living room, my temples throbbing. There was still another hour of vengeance to go, but my magic should maintain his torment for a while in my absence. Right now, my priority was to survive until this terrible pain in my skull went away, and that meant putting some distance between The Machine and me.

It was two in the morning, and the floor-to-ceiling window greeted me with a view of the Toronto Harbor. Mercifully, the yachts pushed only feeble light into the surrounding darkness,

and the undisturbed water calmed my nerves. I did mention I was sensitive to light in my current state, right?

I hoped it would get easier with each job, like Dad had claimed.

At long last my migraine subsided, but I wasn't ready to face the howling athlete just yet. I was still on the clock, and The Machine was still suffering. Who was there to see that I wasn't actually *in* the room the entire time? I just needed a few more minutes. It was more than fair, considering the occupational hazard.

As if on cue, The Machine's wails took on a kicked-in-the-balls tone, only to change pitch midway into a string of inventive swear words, most of which I'd never even heard before.

I turned on the lights, took out *Renters Weekly* from my backpack and sifted through the roommates-wanted ads. Now that the in-class segment of my demon education was almost over, bye-bye college dorm, hello sweet independence.

As I lost myself in the magazine, The Machine's yowls faded to nothing but ambient noise.

These human females sure were easy to please. Being a non-smoker with no pets that mortal eyes could see and no qualms about living in dodgy neighborhoods, I had my pick of the lot.

At some point, the screaming stopped and there was a distant thud. Huh, I wonder what that was all—

Wow, look at this ad with the most amazing feature ever: "3 meals/day incl. I'm a culinary student and I LOVE cooking!"

My mouth watered. It would be like living on the Food Network 24/7. As a half demon, I might not *need* to eat, but I sure *liked* to. Stuffed mushrooms, seared scallops with pancetta, fluffy soufflés...

"Ahem." Someone cleared her throat from the edge of the sofa.

I jumped, sending the thick rental magazine to the floor with a *smack*.

A slender figure in a tailored, taupe business suit and genuine sea pearl necklace graced the living room with her stern feminine presence.

Crap.

It was my turn to clear my throat. A lump formed at the base of it, the blockage nonexistent just seconds ago. "Hello, Enid. I didn't hear you teleporting in."

A moment of silence.

My heart raced guiltily and I shifted my weight, feigning sudden interest in a spot on my right shoe. The image of The Machine trapped in bed, going through the routine of tears and pain without proper supervision, came to mind. Damn, talk about rotten timing. I suppose that was why they called it a *surprise* inspection. How could I not have realized I'd get into trouble the moment I stepped out of line? It'd been happening since that one time I'd tried to talk behind the teacher's back in grade two history class.

Enid was a middle-age brunette with a tightly coiled hair bun and thick-rimmed glasses. She showed off her maturity not with the tiny crow's feet around her eyes, since anyone could get them with the purchase of a bag of semi-permanent faery dust, but from the well-measured power she carried around. That kind of discipline took decades to hone, and my program mentor was a lady who meant business.

After a year of in-class lectures, students like me were eligible to join the co-op program with Enid's approval. Given the serious expression on her face right now, I needed to convince her I was responsible and reliable, which I wasn't exactly doing by being caught taking this little breather.

"Megan, in our line of work, control is an art," Enid began with quiet dignity. "Making the

targets suffer just enough—”

I lifted my head. “I’m so sorry. I got a migraine and stepped out for just a mo—”

“—without scaring them to death.” Enid stared at me. “Or pushing them to commit suicide.”

I swallowed. “Suicide?”

Shit, what have I done? How could The Machine be dead? I left him for, like, five seconds. I’d painstakingly tested the dome-shaped barriers in the school lab. Was it my flaky magic, failing me when it most counted? Or did I overlook a procedure somewhere along the line? Didn’t matter. The guy still died on my watch. Dammit.

Without another word, Enid led me into the bedroom—which was empty. She gestured towards the French doors and the balcony. “Twenty-two stories down. He landed on the concrete, poolside.”

I winced. I might not have cared for the cheating bastard’s lifestyle, but that didn’t mean I wanted him dead. And there was his wife to think about, not to mention his newborn baby. From what I heard, it was expensive to raise kids, no matter what plane they were born into.

“You can reverse it, right?” I asked Enid urgently.

“Of course.” My mentor nodded towards the window. “I’ve already called Reapers ’R’ Us to cancel the dispatch. But you get a mark of zero in this practice session.”

I wanted to kick something or cry. A mark of zero. After all the group practice sessions and hard work. I didn’t realize until now that a part of me honestly thought I’d aced this with no issues. It was demoralizing to screw up in such a disastrous manner.

Alright, chin up and do some damage control. You lost the battle, but not the war. Try saying something contrite and repenting. You can’t afford to fail this semester. Not if you want to move out of the dorm and get away from those dreadful girls.

“What does *he* get?” I heard myself ask. I couldn’t help it. I might not want The Machine dead, but the idea of him getting off scot-free, with no memory of his punishment, didn’t sit well with me, either. Maybe I just plain sucked at the whole detachment thing they valued in school.

“Something a little less...heavy.” I could’ve sworn there was just the tiniest curve at the corners of Enid’s mouth. In an instant, the facial expression made my usually austere mentor appear a decade younger.

“Like what?” Now I was intrigued.

“A period.”

Chapter Two

“Before exacting your assigned vengeance, reconnaissance within reason is allowed under Article 4.3, section E of the IICVD handbook...” Professor Mando shook the said handbook in his hands for emphasis.

It was the last class of the semester in my freshmen year, and three weeks since The Machine made international headlines holding a gun to a convenience store clerk’s head for a package of winged maxi pads. The air was scented with late spring flowers. A few hummingbirds dive-bombed each other outside the classroom windows, their rapid flight graceful if one discounted their violent attacks on one another in their ceaseless turf wars. There was just enough of a cross breeze entering the stone structure to keep the students awake as Professor Mando droned on and on about even more rules we’d all one day be regulated by.

Assuming, of course, that we earned our designation from the Interdimensional Institute of

Chartered Vengeance Demons. We might have the blood of vengeance demons in our veins, but that did not guarantee being certified as a practicing member of our race. Those who failed the professional exams became support workers, like paralegals to lawyers. Those who failed to become support workers got on an even lower tier, and on and on it went until the worst of the worst simply became outcasts in our society. A dropout two years ahead of me was now living on the human plane, working as a security guard on *Judge Judy*, and nobody ever talked about *him* again.

Clang...clang-clang-clang...clang-clang...

I tried to focus on the lecture, but my mind kept straying to the metallic sound resonating from the floor and what it meant.

It meant somebody was being bullied. It meant that in a school intent on training future justice handlers, someone was deserving of a little comeuppance herself.

Yes, it was a she, and so was her victim. There was only one person in class the sound of iron would be terrifying to.

The target of the bullying was Serafina Anastassia Advocatus, a vengeance demon stolen at birth by changelings and only released a year ago. As a result, she had to learn the ways of her people from scratch, and it hadn't been easy for the pale and mousy girl. The prestigious name of her birth family might've earned Serafina an entrance into the university, but that wouldn't give her decent grades, nor stop the mean girls from targeting her.

The ringleader of the freshman clique, one Madeleine Abrianna Lex, tapped her heels on the floor in front of her seat. Embedded in the heels was a pair of miniature horseshoes. With each tap, the slick blonde hammered out a wave of vibration that would be nerve grinding for the iron-fearing changelings. Not that iron could actually hurt Serafina, who didn't have a drop of changeling blood, but tell that to eighteen years of conditioning. Serafina suffered the onslaught of pulsation in silence, shaking and folding her body in a near-fetal position on the chair, not daring to make a sound.

She reminded me of my younger self, before I toughened up and fought back. That sense of helplessness and isolation had to suck. I should've reached out to the reticent girl at the very start of university, but I'd been too wrapped up in pursuing my own career goal.

Professor Mando favored rubber shoes and didn't feel a thing. Before the start of class, Madeleine had craftily offered him an enchanted cupcake. One tiny bite had ensured the dear old prof couldn't hear the clanging, either.

Nobody else in class seemed inclined to do anything about the blatant bullying, which was playing out right in front of the teacher. They might find the vibration distracting, but nothing worth speaking out about, considering the consequences of doing so. No one wanted to make Madeleine angry, even if it meant approving through silence the re-victimization of someone who'd already been through so much. The whole thing was just so damn high school. Since Serafina had already missed the benefits of going through an adolescent education, she shouldn't have to suffer through the pain of it, either.

I totally got how it felt to be different, to be excluded because of something I couldn't control. There were rumors about Serafina botching her practice session because she'd tried to get her mean drunk of a target help rather than punishing him. Not that I thought we ought to save everybody, but the fact that Serafina *tried* was something.

While the vengeance demon in me protested Madeleine's cruelty, another part of me—the part I inherited from my trickster mother—whispered devious, delicious plans in my head to make her stop. I tended to think of myself as a vengeance demon, but in times like this I was

reminded of my dual heritage.

I could make Madeleine sprain her ankle with the next tapping or give her a phantom toothache with a rhythmic pulse matching the one she was dishing out. That oughta stop her. Or, to hell with a good poetic twist, I could simply compel Madeleine to climb onto the table and perform a little impromptu striptease. Videos of the blue-blooded heiress twerking could have a few thousand hits on the DemonTube before Professor Mando even called me to the front of the class.

Too bad I couldn't listen to my naughty side.

If I were seen using my mother's magic, no one would take me seriously in this school. Heck, they thought I was a joke as it was. Knowing my trickster heritage was one thing; seeing it in action with their own eyes would be another.

I loved Mom, I really did. I just liked Dad's profession more than hers, that was all. Tricksters had a bad rep for being impulsive, irresponsible, and lazy. I just wanted to get a bit of respect, build up a healthy credit score, and resist the urge to enchant my prof's chair with a whoopee cushion spell. Was that too much to ask?

Though I must admit, the idea of Madeleine on a whoopee cushion during a hot date did have a certain appeal. Talk about the opposite of being sexy.

Oh, shut up. Not happening.

But imagine the horror on her face. C'mon.

Not. Happening.

The tapping, and the blatantly public assault, continued.

"Now, I'm going to pass around my own vengeance dagger for you to see. You youngsters will get yours when you graduate from this program. Notice the carving on the left side, which originated in the eleventh century when humans were still aware of our existence." Professor Mando went on about the Five Principles of Vengeance, the Six Decrees, and so on.

Madeleine lived on my dorm floor. Opposing her in a public manner would mean certain consequences. I'd gotten crap this past year just for being a hybrid. My stomach tightened with the memories of her past pranks, from curdled rice pudding on the eve of my four-hour final exam, to itching-powder-laced body lotion right before my co-op interview. Each prank had gross and devastating results. Stepping in now would mean taking things to the next level.

Screw it. I'd be damned if I'd sit through the harassment of Serafina and did nothing.

I stared at the commemorative dagger being passed around, an *iron* dagger, and it gave me an idea.

When the person in front of me gave me the dagger, I deliberately dropped it at just the right angle, while sending a temporary shield to encompass Serafina. The blade bounced off the floor with a pronounced *ding*, sending a resonating feedback straight to Madeleine's iron-centered heels, cracking the horseshoes each in half.

"Ouch!" she screamed, rubbing her temple. Poor girl, the feedback must be ricocheting through her head like a malfunctioning human speaker. It would've pained Serafina even more, if not for the protection I'd placed around her.

"Oops." I filled my voice with innocent regret and picked up the dagger. I sneaked a glance at Serafina. She uncurled herself from her fetal position, looked up and around for the first time in class, like a wide-eyed baby owl fresh out of a snow cave, surprised at the abrupt end to her torment.

"What's wrong, Miss Lex? Why did you scream?" Professor Mando frowned at the obnoxious queen bee.

“Nothing, sir. I was caught off guard by the sound of the drop, that’s all.” Madeleine smiled weakly at our lecturer, then gave me a look of pure venom. She knew I did it on purpose and I’d pay for it later.

“Remember, a vengeance demon should never be so easily startled. It’s our job to startle *them*.”

Madeleine’s flawless face flushed to a crimson color. Alright, maybe the payback would come sooner rather than later.

I squared my shoulders. What was done, was done. Even if I could take it back, I wouldn’t.

Towards the end of the lecture, there was a knock on the classroom door. Through the window, we could see that it was Enid holding an envelope. The entire class sat up straight as a single entity, the sleeper ones doing so before their eyes were even fully opened.

It was time.

Professor Mando waved our program mentor in. “I’m just about finished, Enid. Come on in. Now, class, this is the moment of truth.”

Enid stopped next to the professor and addressed us, her shrewd eyes roaming around the room, missing nothing. “Congratulations on a successful first year, freshmen. But in life, it doesn’t matter if you’re a supernatural or a mortal, there will always be competition. The following is a list of those who have been selected into the vengeance co-op program. If you’re chosen, you’ll get your first assignment in the next few days. If you’re not, you can apply again next year or switch to the General Stream.”

Oh, the dreaded General Stream. Desk job workers supporting those who went into the field. Like those guys who polish James Bond’s cool gadgets or file his travel expense reports. Sexy, it was not.

Nobody found out whether he or she was selected until this moment, not even the ones with family connections. Way to make sure that not a single freshman skips the last class, considering the exams were already over.

Enid took out a single piece of paper from the envelope. “First on the list, Miss Madeleine Abrianna Lex.”

Madeleine stood and nodded in an arrogant manner that came from multiple generations of extreme privilege. She wasn’t at all shocked that she’d been accepted, and why should she be? To top off her straight A’s, her dad was on the Concord Council.

The names went on. With the reading of each of them, there was applause as the successful candidates stood up, took a bow, and sat down again. They were mostly predictable favorites, the ones who, while they might not have powerful family names behind them, had performed well in their practice sessions and won their spots fair and square. Serafina, unsurprisingly, didn’t get in. To be frank, the girl seemed relieved not to be picked. Her shoulders became more and more relaxed with every name read that *wasn’t* hers.

I could barely prevent myself from biting my knuckles. I willed my name to be read. I deserved to be on that list like the rest of them. I’d gotten pretty good grades, though I didn’t brag about it. Well, not that there was anyone non-hostile enough I could do the bragging to. As for the practice sessions, in the three weeks since my disastrous encounter with The Machine, I’d worked like a demon—literally—to catch up on my marks. With the help of a dozen industrial-strength earplugs, I gave a corner-cutting contractor a botched root canal, a corporate air polluter severe asthma, and I kept an insurance fraudster honest by matching his physical conditions with his claims—word for word.

The man had said he had a herniated disk, so he got his disk herniated. My brand of justice

was funny *and* fitting. I should get into the co-op just on that alone.

“The final name on the list is...”

I crossed my fingers. Here it came. The last chance. I peeked at Madeleine, who was exchanging smug nods with her two hench-girls. One of their names had already been read, and the other one, from the confidence evidenced on Madeleine’s face, was the undoubted candidate for the final seat on the co-op train.

“Miss Megan Aequitas.”

Instead of cheering and well wishing, my name was met with stunned silence. Then all hell broke loose.

Everyone was talking at the same time, their collective sound like the buzzing of angry flies over a pile of manure on a hot summer day. The words “cheating” and “trickery” abounded. The energy ripple of a few dozen students drawing on their vengeance magic unconsciously was rather unsettling, considering I was the one with a brand new target on my back.

“Calm down,” Enid chided the group.

Madeleine stood. “As the student council president, I demand that the administration reconsider this decision.”

Enid’s eyebrow rose. “You *demand*?”

Under Enid’s stare, Madeleine’s face flushed. “No, I mean I...I... But she’s a trickster!”

“Fifty percent trickster,” I muttered. Not that anyone was listening.

“And a dirty half-breed.”

I was the first vengeance demon/trickster hybrid ever born to any of the planes. I knew that. Everybody knew that. But did Madeleine really have to be so rude about it? I didn’t like the unique status, but it was something I was born into.

Madeleine continued. “She should never even have been allowed to be here with us. Who’s to say she didn’t get the spot using trickery?”

“Miss Aequitas’ acceptance into this university is a decision made by, and solely by, the school administration. And are you suggesting I was tricked and didn’t even realize it?” Enid’s tone was as chilly as winter on the Ice Priestess’ plane.

That gave Madeleine pause. Enid was one of the most powerful vengeance demons at the university, and the idea of me, a fledgling first year, pulling one over on her was a bit far-fetched.

Ha, take that!

Self-preservation kicked in, and Madeleine tried to backpedal. “No, ma’am, I don’t mean that at all. It’s just that, well, it’s never been done before. She doesn’t even have a proper middle name.”

Her last line ended like a whine. Taking the lead from her, the rest of the class settled into an uneasy silence. Not a good thing, because in my experience repressed dissatisfaction had a way of blowing up later, when the teachers weren’t around.

I hated the sense of foreboding in my gut. This should’ve been a moment of total triumph for me. And instead of support and congratulations, I was getting dissed for the same old, same old. It made me not sad, but angry as heck.

After the class was dismissed, I headed towards my dorm through the school courtyard. I didn’t need eyes in the back of my head to know I was followed by Madeleine, her two hench-girls, and a few other students. And not in a we-all-just-happened-to-be-heading-towards-the-same-destination kind of way. No, their movement was furtive and deliberate, in an attack formation. I was pleased to hear that Madeleine’s footsteps had a limping quality to them, thanks to the broken horseshoes. It was a testimony to her drive to hurt me that the fashionista didn’t

even bother tending to her footwear first.

I sighed, took a deep breath, and slowed down. In my experience, there were two options when it came to bullies. It was either fight or flight. In my high school years I'd tried both, to varying successes.

I wasn't in high school anymore. And the ship had already sailed for anything but the fight option. It'd sailed the moment I'd refused to be a bystander in Serafina's plight, and the co-op placement was the final nail in the coffin.

I assessed my surroundings. From the glaring daggers I'd gotten from everyone who crossed paths with me, it was a good bet that word had already spread like wildfire on campus. I'd made quite a few enemies with the simple pronouncement of my name from Enid's lips. I had to do something before somebody suggested a mob lynching.

So fight it was.

However, I did have some leeway when it came to choosing *how* to fight. And I chose to turn the imminent ambush into a direct confrontation. I was a straightforward kind of girl.

I pivoted and coolly locked eyes with Madeleine. Seeing the highborn heiress in full fury was quite something. She placed her hands on the hips of her black leather pantsuit, her long, bony fingers tightened with tension, as if she longed to close them around my throat.

Well, no "as if" about that.

"You'll pay for what happened this morning, Megan," she spat out, and her flock of hench-girls crossed their arms, pouted, and snarled, then pouted some more.

I rolled my eyes. The posturing and insults were really getting old. "Paying for what, breaking horseshoes or breaking tradition?"

I couldn't keep the pride out of my voice. Now I had the ability to decide where I wanted to live during the work term.

"Both. I heard you're not going to stay at the dorm for a few months," said Madeleine, as if reading my mind, her voice suddenly dripping with honey. That was never a good thing. "Have you started packing yet?"

Leaning into my personal space, she pulled out a family photo of my parents and me on our vacation last summer. It had gone missing from the top of my dresser around a month ago, and I'd assumed it had fallen into the disarray that surrounded it. With my messy habits, I had no idea where half of my stuff was most of the time. Turned out, Madeleine might've had it all this time.

"Here you go." She handed the photo back to me. Before letting go, she dug her thumbnail into the glossy layer printed with my mother's image, pressing in with a small push of magic so my mom's face peeled off. "Oops. Sorry."

My blood boiled and my eyes saw red, literally. Madeleine was insulting my mom by using an old human superstition, which said that destroying an image of someone would cause that person harm. With the right incantation and tools, that wasn't exactly an old wives' tale. It was a grave insult, if not an outright threat.

I tightened my fists. I didn't have a lot of pictures with just Mom and Dad and me, and the opportunities to take more grew fewer with the increasing demands in my life, given my chosen career path and the exhaustive venture of growing up.

"You could always mend it with magic." Madeleine suggested, her mocking tone burned like acid on raw skin.

I reverently picked up the peeled-off piece of my mother's image from the ground and concentrated. Nothing. I tried harder, squinting my eyes and almost giving myself early wrinkles in the process. Still nothing. The small scrap of glossy paper refused to reseal itself onto the

photo. Madeleine's more cunning magic blocked me at every attempt.

I could feel blood rushing to my cheeks and the air becoming as thin as if I was standing on top of the Himalayan Mountains. Guilt and frustration gnawed at me. Here I was, missing time with family in pursuit of a profession full of the Madeleine type, the sort who'd never accepted my own mother.

"What's the matter?" she jeered. "The dirty little half-breed's too weak to give Mommy a hand? You're a pretender, Megan. Never forget that. I don't know and I don't care how you managed to get into the co-op, but you're not one of us, you hear me?"

Of its own accord, my mind started creating scenarios of getting to the brat through trickery, and ironically that was what slowed my pulse down. Action was always more calming than inaction. How about putting a progressive shrinking spell on her tight pantsuit and a time-released rip of the seam during her next student council speech? What about an illusion spell so she kept reading an extra ten pounds on her scale? If I was really careful, she would never find out what I'd done...

Watch out, Megan. You're in a public area. This is exactly what she wants. She wants to catch you tapping in to your trickster side in front of the whole school. Then there would be no dispute that you could've used trickery to get placed.

I looked around. The school courtyard had indeed gotten more crowded since I'd last checked. Students had started congregating around us, watching our every move, hoping to catch a good fight.

So I would give them one. But not the one they wanted.

"Why don't we take it into the ring?" I gestured towards a designated combat practice ring in the courtyard.

I turned and headed in that direction, knowing Madeleine would follow suit.

A light rain started to drizzle as the elf manager of the ring greeted us.

Martial arts and other combative training were a part of our vengeance education, not because we used it very often—with vengeance magic backing us up and all—but because the administration believed it was a great way to develop discipline.

But for students, the practice ring was a way for them to settle personal scores while staying under the school's radar. We were prohibited from using our powers on each other within campus, but whatever happened in the practice ring was fair game.

Madeleine and I were even civilized enough to put our names on the sign-up sheet, blocking off a slot of exactly one hour.

The random game selector, a wheel that depicted over ten types of combative sports, started to spin.

Please let it be staff fighting. I'm good at staff fighting. There are plenty of soft organs to hurt with the dull end of a stick.

The tiny black arrow spun around the colorful pie-shaped wheel, stopping on a bright yellow wedge labeled *wrestling*.

"Are you serious?" I shook my head.

"What's wrong with wrestling?" Madeleine smirked as the elf blew fairy dust on her shoulder, changing her outfit into tank top and shorts in an instant. Then he proceeded to do the same for me. "You scared?"

Nothing wrong, just two college girls with wet tops rubbing skin to skin, grabbing at each other, that was all. I decided not to point out how porn-like the scenario would be for an average human male. For one, males in the vengeance world got more turned on by ball-busters—both on

and off the job—than a pair of sweaty girls. Second, I didn't need to share the fact that I was a human pop culture buff. I already had enough strikes against me.

And wrestling might actually work out better than I thought.

Madeleine took off her shoes. Doing so seemed to have reminded her of what I'd done to them, and that only got her madder. I passed my mother's photo and the bits of paper that held the image of her face to the elf manager. "Keep it safe, will ya?"

The next hour was broken into three twenty-minute rounds of the girls each taking their turns pushing me around. There was only one of them in the ring with me at any given time, so it was technically fair, and that was the kind of fairness the administration could live with. Whenever the elf manager turned his back, the girls cheated, using vengeance magic to make their pounces faster, their shoves harder.

More and more students gathered around the ring, pointing, jeering, and making wagers. There were those who mistrusted me, those who feared me for what I was, and those who were downright jealous, though I doubt any of them in their heart of hearts believed I'd cheated. And then there were a few who didn't seem quite comfortable being there, who regarded me with a measure of sympathy. I wasn't moved. Pity was cheap when one refused to act on it.

Tears were cheap too, I told myself as one threatened to make its way out of my eye. I ought to have gotten used to the hostile treatment by now. After all, it had started in kindergarten.

Nobody said anything when vengeance power was illegally used.

I used none. I couldn't afford it. I was running pretty low, since I'd been throwing every bit of vengeance power I had towards the practice sessions.

Nor would I use my trickery power, regardless of how much I had on reserve. I'd worked too hard to be here. There were over two dozen witnesses around me.

In general, it was the source of a magic that provided its distinctive flavor. Vengeance magic stemmed from cold logic and a sense of duty, while trickery came from a love of fun and mischief. One had the bitter aftertaste of Earl Grey tea; the other, margarita and pineapple.

This lot around me could definitely tell the difference.

Halfway through the hour, I heard a gasp and turned toward the sound, leaving myself open for a scratch across the lower half of my face. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth as I brought the horrified face of Serafina into focus. She was standing right at the edge of the ring. I had no idea when she'd gotten there.

"Everyone, please stop." She struggled to be heard over the racket.

"Get outta here!" I shouted at her. The crowd was wild, and the nasty mood could easily shift from me to the former changeling kidnappee, which would defeat the entire point of trying to stop the bullying in the first place. "Go!"

"But—"

"I'm just enjoying a good workout, that's all. Ouch!" My opponent wrapped a lock of my hair around her fingers and pulled hard. I returned the favor by elbowing her right in the breast. "Now GO!"

Serafina stared at me with an unreadable expression and left the courtyard without another word.

I was sore from head to toe from the "workout". The girls weren't as much into beating as they were into cat scratching, pushing, and tripping. So tons of bumps and bruises, not to mention some broken skin, but not exactly life-threatening injuries. The visual effect of blood and floor kissing was a crowd-pleaser though, so after a while, I just tuned them out.

My sweating slowed to a trickle, as if my body had figured out there was no point, and I was

grateful as I was starting to stink. My defensive blocks felt like they were done underwater, and my eyes grew heavy with fatigue.

When the one-hour timer sounded off, I slumped to the floor on my stomach, not bothering to make sure my opponent would honor the cease-fire and resist giving an extra kick to my head.

And that was how Madeleine and her cronies left me, defeated on the floor of the ring, content that they'd taught me a lesson. The crowd dispersed as many finally remembered they had to pack for the short break before summer courses began. The courtyard was soon deserted.

I took my time getting up.

And found Serafina standing next to the elf manager. She took a handful of faery dust from him and blew it on me once to get rid of all the sweat and bruises on my body, and twice to change me back to my original clothes. All my pain was gone in an instant.

"Thanks." I mumbled.

"No, thank *you*."

His shift ended, the elf manager turned and left, but not before throwing one last pitiful glance my way. Serafina, on the contrary, was grinning ear to ear, her eyes dancing with mirth.

"You figured it out?" I asked her.

"About halfway to the dean's office. I kept thinking about the way you said you were *enjoying* it." She glanced down at the pearl pendant hanging around my neck. At the top of the hour, the pearl had been semi-transparent; now it was glowing with a healthy luster. "I never would've thought to get charged up this way."

That was the real reason I'd brought the fight to the ring. I was doing more than rubbing skin with those girls. My pearl, a depository and amplifier of power, was robbing my attackers of their vengeance magic every time they thought they were hurting me. During the last hour, my body might've been exhausted, but my pearl was quietly storing up power, waiting for me to tap into it once the crowd was gone.

"I did give something back as a parting gift, you know." I grinned. In another month, the girls would suddenly sprout hairy pig's tails, and they wouldn't even notice them at first. The tails would poke out of their pantsuits, bouncing as they tried to incite terror in their co-op targets, or better yet, while they were flirting with hot guys.

I even took the time to give the one that was pre-set to go on Madeleine an extra curl. All with the girls' own magic.

Serafina took my family photo and the curled-up paper bits from the elf manager and handed them to me, "There's one more thing you can do with that magic."

"You read my mind." I touched the paper bits gently against my pearl pendant. The ruined parts unfolded themselves and leaped back into the photo where they belonged, restoring it. I put the picture in my bag and grinned at Serafina.

"Hey, you want to go for a fire and brimstone bubble tea?"

The only thing worse than standing in the dorm parking lot with three gigantic pink suitcases and snobbish girls smirking from the upstairs windows was to do so with the designated getaway car MIA.

After what felt like hours, a familiar purple sedan came into view.

"Esme, over here!" I waved at my half-sister, who swung the car into the space next to me, precisely fifteen inches from the white line on both sides. Somehow, though the car window was

open and it was a windy day, not a wine-red hair was out of place.

With one manicured finger, Esme pressed the button to pop the trunk. As a senior and a TA, she dressed head to toe in black, similar to Madeleine. The difference was, the pantsuit gave the impression that Madeleine was trying too hard, while Esme pulled it off with sleek curves and subtle confidence. Esme's pale, freckled skin and green eyes made a stark contrast with the leather that covered the rest of her size-zero body, and her chiseled cheekbones were sharp enough for her to get a part-time job cutting magic mirrors for goblins.

I sighed. My own mud-colored hair, brown eyes, and olive complexion were quite different from Esme's classic redhead look. It didn't take a genius to tell we weren't full sisters. And unlike her, I inherited my trickster mother's body type—more on the plump and jolly than super skinny. Except I didn't want to be jolly. I wanted to be light-footed and graceful and terrifying.

Esme got out of the car and walked towards the open trunk. She started helping me put the suitcases in.

"What took you so long?" I complained.

"Sorry, Megan. I was delayed by a target. He tried to bribe his way out of vengeance by kissing me."

I whistled. "Kissing on the job. Somebody is finally having a life."

"He's a slime demon." Esme stroked one of her pearl stud earrings and shuddered. "I had to go home for a complete scrub-down."

"Ouch." For someone that gorgeous, the girl sure had bad luck when it came to men. I glanced at the clock on my smart phone and swore. "Oh no, we gotta hurry. I'm fifteen minutes away from losing my freedom."

"What do you mean?"

"If I don't show up with the cash by three, the landlord will give the room to someone else." When I left after having bubble tea with Serafina two days ago, I headed straight to my dorm and dug up the outdated *Renters Weekly*. I'd never quite stopped thinking about that culinary student's ad since I'd first read it. To my delight, the room was still available for immediate occupancy. Yes, the landlord was slightly eccentric, but that was more than made up for by a live-in chef, not to mention escape from the dorm on such short notice. If he wanted cash by three, he'd have it.

Besides, it wasn't like I was allowed to make the man more accommodating with my magic.

"What's the money for?" She frowned.

"It's what the humans call the first and last. They're big on insurance because they can't employ Hire A Hellhound to chase down their debtors." I'd exchanged most of the magical credits from my Becoming, the demonic version of the Bat Mitzvah, into human currency for the down payment. Thank Hades the co-op was a paying gig, or else no way would I be able to afford the rest of the rent for the four-month work term.

"Do all humans like to deal in cash?"

"I'm not sure. The landlord mumbled something about never trusting the banks and how it's better to hide it under the bed." I lugged the last bag into the trunk and closed it. "Alright, we're all set."

Esme turned her head towards the freshmen dorm in longing. Two years my senior, she'd enjoyed her time there and fit in like I'd never been able to. "Are you sure about this? Living off campus, amongst humans? I can't recall if it's ever been done."

I chewed my lower lip, unable to put my need to move out into words. Esmeralda Cassandra Aequitas, a full-blooded, got-a-proper-middle-name vengeance demon, from her shiny red-scaled

wings down to her effortlessly executed glamour to camouflage them, would never understand. Esme's path was set and her future certain.

She wasn't a socially unacceptable half-breed demon-wannabe, like me.

"Yes," I said with as much firmness as I could without being rude. It would be nice to have a place where my mother could visit without dirty looks and jeers. I'd missed her easy and infectious laughter in the past year.

I used to laugh like that, embracing Mom's heritage, finding sheer delights in all things trickery, from sending the mailman running with illusion of salivating bulldogs, to enchanting the ATM machine to display zero account balances for my neighbors. Complete random victimology was a trickster's trademark. No targeted justice. No reasoning of merits. No guilt. Just the pure joy of pranking. Part of me missed that simplicity in my life, even though it was the exact thing about tricksters that had driven vengeance demons crazy since the beginning of time.

Esme considered me for a moment. Something on my face must've convinced her. She nodded. "Let's go then."

As the car zoomed off, the early summer breeze drifted through the rolled-down windows and kissed my cheek with the sweet scent of new beginnings. I leaned out and grinned like an idiot. After all this time, I was finally free. Well, for a while anyway.

Living with humans was going to be a gamble, but it beat sure misery. There was even a chance that being amongst mortals might help my control issues. Since they had no magic to speak of, they wouldn't be tempted to overuse what they never had.

The way I was tempted, every moment of my existence.

"Woo hoo!" I couldn't help but chortle as we passed a group of witch majors. The broomsticks they were on jumped back on autopilot. I snickered.

Esme gave me a puzzled look. Guess she never quite got the concept of unadulterated joy, since it wasn't exactly a vengeance demon trait. Clearing my throat, I made as if I was calling a bird.

She hesitated, then said, "Congratulations on getting Enid's co-op approval."

I straightened on my seat. I could feel the impression of her thoughts in my mind. And they reeked of reservation and doubt. "You're wondering if I won it fair and square, aren't you?"

"I didn't say that." Her fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

"But you *thought* it." I crossed my arms. "I. Didn't. Use. Trickery."

Esme's shoulders relaxed. "You didn't?"

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence." I shifted my weight and drummed my fingers on the side window panel. Now I was getting a bit annoyed. My former lightheartedness vanished like dew drops in the first morning rays. True to my trickster nature, my mood could change like quicksand sometimes.

Face reddened, Esme said nothing.

Seconds that felt like minutes went by.

"Tell me when you see the portal entrance, alright?" Esme asked quietly, cutting through our awkward silence with a subdued gentleness that vengeance demons generally looked down upon. I slowly released the breath I didn't even realize I was holding. My half-sister might not have believed in me a hundred percent, but here she was, giving me a ride for the move, ignoring the nasty things her friends had no doubt said about me. It meant something. And I should stick with that.

"Maybe a bit farther down. I think it's shifted again."

"Okay."

The University of Demonic Studies was located in a dimension parallel to the University of Toronto on the human side. Cross-dimensional transport could be done either through an existing free-of-charge portal or a temporary one opened for a fee of magical power. Since the control of—and by extension, the frugality towards—one’s power was prized in a vengeance demon’s upbringing, the first option was the way to go for non-emergency travel. I already figured out a passage to use for my future travelling back and forth between dimensions, but it was for walking only and too narrow for a car to fit through.

Once we got out of the campus area, the not-so-pretty part of downtown greeted us with overflowing garbage bins on the sidewalk and thick layers of dust covering the windows of the rundown shops lining the street.

“There, that’s it.” I pointed at a payday loan store with a banner that said *Why wait? Get your magic today!*

“Are you sure that’s the entrance?” She squinted. “It looks innocent enough.”

“Trust me.”

“But how do you *know*?” Esme insisted. Great, gotta hand it to Miss Top-of-Her-Class to not settle for anything but a proper answer.

“Today’s Friday,” I pointed out, baring my teeth.

“So?”

“Do you see a line-up of drunken unseele faes and gambling tricksters cashing their employment insurance cheques?” I shuddered, not exactly proud of the frivolous spending habits that were the signature of my trickster blood.

“Good point,” Esme conceded, turning her car around. She drove it right into the front of the store and came out in a quiet alley on the human side.

I directed Esme to Parkdale, a once-prominent west end neighborhood that suffered “death-by-highway” in the fifties. Now, run-down Victorian houses accommodated young students, druggies, and low-income immigrants alike, with trendy cafes gentrifying the outskirts of the neighborhood wherever more upscale parts of the city were attached.

My new home wasn’t on the outskirts of Parkdale.

As Esme turned the purple sedan into the residential street with large maple trees, I was glad at least it was too early in the day for the hookers to come out. She would’ve told Dad, and hell hath no fury like an overprotective demon father. Never mind that I was perfectly capable of taking care of my supernatural self. In his eyes, I’d always be his little girl. He would find out about my new neighborhood soon enough, but hopefully not today. Call me selfish, but I wanted today to be perfect.

We parked on the street in front of a red-brick duplex, but before I could even open the door, a petite blonde in a white apron ran out of the house and towards me, holding a rolling pin with a smudge of dough still attached to it. She looked just like the chefs I’d read about on the Internet, my sole information source for everything human-related.

“Whew, thank the lucky stars you’re here,” Rosemary breathed. “Mr. Lochte is showing the room to someone else right now. A *guy*. I don’t want to live with a guy.”

I jerked the car door open and marched towards the duplex, Rosemary falling into step beside me. “That neurotic, untrusting, grumpy old man. It’s only two fifty-seven. We got here in record time.”

Mr. Lochte emerged from the front door with a bespectacled guy about my age. *Hands off, Mr. Just-In-Case, the place is mine!* I marched up to Mr. Lochte as I reached for the cash envelope in my pants pocket. Totally ignoring my competition, I handed the landlord the cash.

“Here, a thousand dollars, and not a penny less.”

I almost felt sorry for my rival when Mr. Lochte counted the money, pocketed it, then turned to the younger man and said, “The place will be available again in four months. Can you wait?”

After getting rid of the bespectacled guy and Mr. Lochte, I went upstairs to unpack. Esme tried to help but was soon frustrated by my organizational style, which was a polite way to say that I was a slob who hated hangers and binders. Neither of us could hide our relief when she got the call to handle an ad hoc vengeance request.

In a few hours, the delicious aroma of burnt fat and meat drifted through the closed bedroom door. Rosemary must’ve fired up the barbecue for that early dinner she’d promised.

Then I heard her scream.

I raced downstairs, taking two or three stairs in every stride. Rosemary was by the patio door, holding a stainless steel spatula and pointing at a large man with broad shoulders, crouching over a corner in the kitchen. Fear was apparent in her voice. Being a defenseless human living in a dodgy neighborhood, fear probably came with the territory. “This guy just barged in and starting doing... whatever it is he’s doing over there!”

The imposing figure straightened and turned towards us. He was a tall man, and he loomed over the tiny room with his size as much as his menacing presence. In his hand was a trowel; its sharp edge gleamed when it reflected the late afternoon sunlight. Rosemary made an involuntary squeal.

I breathed a small sigh and laid a reassuring hand on my roommate’s trembling arm. “Don’t worry, I’ve got this.”

I put as much authority in my voice as possible. Though to my human roommate’s eyes I was as defenseless as she was, my confidence made her relax. She allowed me to push her across the threshold to the walkout patio, but she held onto her spatula.

I closed the door and turned towards the man. “Hey, Dad.”

Dad’s face split into a brilliant smile, and he pulled me into a hug with a wealth of affection, shoving the trowel into his back pants pocket. “There’s my little pumpkin.”

“How did you know where to find me?” I’d already figured out the answer.

“Your sister texted me the directions. You’re serious about living all alone, outside the protection of the vengeance plane? I still can’t believe it.”

I didn’t bother to point out that such *protection* came with a high cost. Like Esme, Dad wouldn’t understand. Heck, he’d been the valedictorian when he’d graduated from Demon U.

Dad gave the house interior a suspicious once-over. “Is this place defensible? I heard a gang of organ-smuggling ghouls has escaped from prison.”

I rolled my eyes. “That just happened yesterday, three planes over. They can’t travel that fast, even if they’re heading this way.”

“What about gremlins? Humans have too much of this technology thing.”

I snorted, “Said the guy who’s just got the latest iPhone.”

“What about banshees? Brownies with a grudge? Weak spots for cross-dimensional stalking? Did you check for all that before signing the lease? You know how we demons feel about contracts.”

It was almost comical, seeing my dad, the arch vengeance demon, fussing over imaginary threats against his little girl. My eyes suddenly zoomed to the corner of the kitchen my dad was

bending over earlier. There were patches of white all over the base molding. “Dad, what have you done?”

“What?” Dad tried to appear nonchalant, but I wasn’t fooled.

“What’s in the inner pocket of your coat?” I eyed the bulge by his left ribs and raised a brow. “And what was the trowel for?”

Almost sheepishly, Dad pulled out a small plastic tub, the type humans put cream cheese in. “It’s an all-purpose sealer that blocks out every magical creature imaginable. I enchanted it to make an exception for Sassy, of course.”

I couldn’t help but feel touched. Here was my dad, a legendary bringer of justice notorious for his mighty vengeance against war criminals and mass murderers alike, slathering sealant over tiny cracks in his daughter’s new digs. If an average demon caught wind of this ridiculous DIY project, Dad would lose street cred fast.

It was sweet, if slightly overprotective.

Dad finished with the rest of the cracks at top speed, then left for a strategy meeting with the other arch demons. To appear inconspicuous, they were always meeting on the human plane, and this week it was at Chuck E. Cheese’s.

Before he left, Dad gave me a large Hellhound-grade pepper spray. I knew better than to argue. I wanted him gone before the hookers started hitting my street corner—he’d freak out.

I braced for Rosemary’s reaction to all this, but when I explained that the “intruder” was my dad, she took it really well. She said something about having an Asian roommate before who had a tiger mom. I had no idea there were shape shifters amongst humans.

After making sure that Rosemary was okay with it, I invited Serafina over to the human plane for my very first dinner since independence. Well, as independent as someone who relied on others’ cooking skills could be. Ever since that fire and brimstone bubble tea, I’d developed a friendship with Serafina. I liked her, not just because we had the common ground of both being outcasts, but also because her nature was much sweeter than the average vengeance demon.

We shared a relaxing meal of barbecued pork chops, roasted corn, and peach cobbler. After dinner we cleaned up together, and by that I mean Serafina and I pretended to know what we were doing as Rosemary showed us the wonder of dishwasher loading.

With a pork chop doggy bag in one hand, Serafina gave me an awkward hug at the front door. “Thanks for having me. It was fun.”

“No problem. We should do it more often. And you should seal this before you get back home.” I pointed at the doggy bag.

“Huh?”

“You’ll hurt the house brownies’ feelings if they smell the food,” Serafina didn’t live on campus. After a lifetime of being away, her family insisted she stay with them through the school year, and it was common knowledge that brownies from those old estate houses were as skillful in the kitchen as they were prideful.

“Oh, right.”

After Serafina left and Rosemary insisted on staying in the kitchen to prepare the batter for tomorrow’s breakfast, I went upstairs. I closed my bedroom door and shut the heavy-duty curtains, blocking out the flooding streetlights and the muffled sound of a couple bickering in the next house.

For the first time in my life, I was in a world reserved only for me, and it felt good.

And lonely.

And exciting.

And scary.

And then not quite so alone. Sassy, my pet feline shade, passed right through my blanket and settled in for cuddling, digging her claws into my ribs. She must've finished the first patrol of her new domain, pity the poor unsuspecting mice and B&E guys. Laughing, I kissed her furry transparent head goodnight.

Chapter Three

Tzeeeeeee...tzeeeeeee...

“What the hell?” I flopped over on the mattress and pressed the pillow to my ears. No use. I could still hear the ringing of the morning breakfast bell by Ms. Morris, the hag who served as our dorm mistress. The old witch took delight in tormenting me at every crack of dawn.

Tzeeeeeee...tzeeeeeee...

Hold on, that didn't sound like Ms. Morris's bell. The sound through the wall was a lot more metallic.

More human.

This must be the morning drilling routine of Mr. Lochte that Rosemary had warned me about when I first came to check out the place. At the time, desperate to escape the dorm, I was hoping she was exaggerating. Guess not. Great. Bye-bye, demented dorm mistress. Hello, crazy mortal landlord.

There was an unforeseen downside to having a landlord who lived right next door.

Bang, bang! Bang, bang, bang!

Here came the hammer.

My fingers twitched and I itched to snap them. Just one snap...a little push of magic that would cause an accidental slip of Mr. Lochte's hammer. A tiny ding on the thumb never hurt anyone much. My dear landlord would be done for the day, and I could get some much-needed beauty sleep.

“That's violating the guidelines, as you're well aware,” a voice said from the foot of my bed.

I bolted upright. The voice belonged to Enid. Stupid, quiet-as-a-mouse teleporting. I could never manage it with such stealth. Enid stood with utmost dignity amongst my semi-unpacked suitcases and yesterday's wrinkled clothes-slash-impromptu floor mat.

“How did you know that's what I was thinking? I thought you were only a partial mind-reader,” I asked curiously.

“I am. But your desire for violence, small as it was, sent out a dissonance in the Concord that I could detect right away. Remember, we carry out violence, but we don't use it for our own convenience or pleasure. Control is of the essence.”

“I'll keep working on it.” Enid had risked the wrath of most of the school, and probably some of the staff, in giving my effort a fair chance in the co-op application process. The last thing I wanted to do was to fight with her over the small stuff.

She tilted her head. “Do you want to talk about that wrestling match I've heard so much about in the teacher's lounge?”

“Nope.”

“Alright.”

The silence stretched until I blurted, “The teacher's lounge?”

“They were taking bets.” Enid shrugged off-handedly, as if we were discussing the weather.

“Most of us lost.”

That would mean most of the teaching staff was putting the money on me to win the match. Which was flattering in a way, though a bit disturbing, since wagering was illegal within campus for both students and faculty.

“Wait a minute, *us*?” Us, as in Enid was a part of it?

Instead of answering, Enid placed an envelope on my lap. “Your first official co-op assignment.”

She’d just avoided answering me, but I was pleasantly distracted and didn’t care. It wasn’t like she’d say anything further on the matter anyway. I combed my fingers through my disheveled hair and opened the envelope with great eagerness. What was it going to be?

Unlike the vengeance demons in that *Buffy* show I watched online, who took on clients and fulfilled their wishes of retribution, in my world we were the guardians of the Cosmic Balance—commonly known as the Concord—the balance between right and wrong, good and evil. Until I became well-tuned to the mood of the Concord, Enid collected injustices off it like spun sugar from a cotton candy machine and put them in nice little office envelopes for me to fix up.

I spilled the contents of the envelope onto my bed. There was a photo of a distinguished, elderly gentleman, a brochure for an assisted-living home, the layout of a building, and a standard vengeance order form. According to the form, the name of my first co-op target was Dan Pillar. He was human, which wasn’t surprising since I didn’t have the clearance level—not to mention the strength—to tackle the supernatural wrongdoers yet. Dan Pillar had fifty-eight women listed as his victims in a two-decade-long career of broken hearts and stolen life-savings.

An image of Benjamin Theodore Judicium, a transfer student in my high school senior class, appeared in my head. He was handsome and smart, and I’d thought he genuinely cared about me. Turned out I was just an entrance fee for him to join the “in” group. To make a long story short, we had sex, he stole my panties to show his new friends, and I got back at him by posting pictures of his Hello Kitty collection on the student online forum. But I’d never forgotten the anger and hurt of being played.

I didn’t let Benjamin get away then, and I wasn’t going to let Dan Pillar get away now.

My eyes continued down the vengeance order form, and I frowned, noting that the scamming had stopped on August second, nineteen ninety-six. The halt was sudden, abrupt, and permanent. That was strange. In general, a criminal’s rap sheet didn’t just end. The nature of the crimes might change, but no one simply stopped unless the person was in jail or dead. Dan Pillar was neither.

Enid nodded. “I see that you noticed the date.”

I chewed on the inside of my jaw. “Why did he stop?”

Enid shrugged. “Not sure. Sometimes they claim to have found God. Sometimes the last job scared them so much they went straight. Whatever the reason, it doesn’t excuse what he did to those women. We caught up with this guy a bit late in the game, but since no amends were ever made, the procedure is the same.”

“Got it.” If amends had been made, the quality of the remorse and rectification would have to be examined by an independent tribunal, and the level of vengeance would be downgraded by the determined value. In my target’s case, the lack of amends made it much more straightforward.

Ready or not, here comes vengeance.

I crossed the lawn of my latest target's residence with a spring in my step. I had my first paying gig, a room of my own, and freshly baked blueberry muffins for breakfast. Plus, my pearl pendant was still pretty charged up, thanks to Madeleine. Life was good. What was there to complain about? Yes, the landlord's drilling was annoying, but there had to be a way around that.

I chose to be an optimistic demon. Half-demon. Whatever.

The garden of the assisted-living home, beautifully landscaped, had a gazebo and a fountain. The three-story building was a stucco structure with French balconies and graceful columns. And was that a uniformed doorman? The place resembled a high-end spa more than anything else.

It seemed Dan Pillar had invested the money he bilked well. I narrowed my eyes as I thought about what that financial security could've meant for those women he'd taken money from. Asshole. Now, what would be a just dessert for him? There was his age to consider, so I couldn't go too wild. I swear, my co-op's no-kill policy was such a killjoy.

I entered the lobby with a cool nod to the doorman, acting like I had every reason to be there. I'd taken care to dress in smart business-casual and to brush myself with faery dust designed to temporarily age me around five years. I'd found the dust on sale, which made sense because who would pay full price to make themselves appear older anyway?

With the help of the faery dust, my youthful skin dulled a shade or two and the corners of my eyes creased with the earliest signs of wrinkles. Let the staff think I was a young lawyer here to discuss a will with one of the building's well-to-do occupants. Better that than to be cast in the role of a salivating, greedy relative, looking for a handout.

The marbled lobby gleamed under a soaring vaulted ceiling. To the left was a stone fireplace, to the right a concierge desk with a couple of staff. As I approached the desk, both receptionists smiled at me.

"Hello, I'm here to see Mr. Dan Pillar." I nodded at the receptionist with the nametag "Kristi." I laced a compulsion into my words to make her more obliging and less likely to ask inquisitive questions.

Kristi beamed. "Mr. Pillar is at the spa for his massage appointment. Would you like to wait at the bistro?"

"Sure." I fought to keep my voice neutral. Spa, huh? He'd need a lot more than a relaxing massage by the time I was through with him.

"It's upstairs, miss, just past the entertainment lounge. Feel free to help yourself to the refreshments. I'll notify you when Mr. Pillar becomes available."

The elegant bistro, with lace linen tablecloths, gleaming silverware, and expensive china tea sets, treated patrons to the magnificent view of Lake Ontario. Soft piano music played in the background. A pair of chefs in starched white aprons were on standby in the open kitchen, a wild array of fresh ingredients from asparagus to salmon on display behind them, ready to create culinary delights on demand.

I ground my teeth. Daily fine dining for the bastard in his twilight years, and what about the poor women he'd stolen from in *their* dying days? How many of them had been forced to live on day-old bread and bruised vegetables from the discount grocery aisle?

There was a station at the front of the bistro full of cut-up fruits, coffee, and fancy pies. These must be the refreshments Kristi had been talking about. Well, I was never one to let free food pass me by, even though my stomach, still full from Rosemary's truly awesome muffins, was a bit queasy over the upcoming encounter. Not that I hadn't done vengeance before, but this was the first time I was earning marks that actually counted towards the co-op.

Maybe the refreshing taste of key lime pie was just what I needed. I cut a small piece, lifted it, almost dropped it back to the tray, and rescued it just in time. Stupid, unsteady fingers. Finally, I settled down on a dining chair and placed the pie in front of me.

Just as I put a forkful of citrus delight into my mouth, a shadow loomed over me. “You’re here to see my grandpa?”

I munched on the treat, looked up, and narrowed my eyes on a guy standing over my table in a white T-shirt and jeans. So this was my target’s grandson, huh? Funny, somehow I never figured the con artist to be the family type.

“Yes, I’m here to see Mr. Pillar.” I tried my best professional smile, the my-business-is-my-own kind of detached politeness.

“What do you want to see him for?” Suspicion was evidenced from the downward turning corner of his mouth.

“I have an appointment.” *Be vague and bluff your way through.*

“No, you don’t. I already checked his Google calendar.”

Damn.

“So why are you *really* here?” the guy persisted.

“None of your business.” Alright, that sounded fresh out of tricks, even to my ears.

The guy’s jaw hardened. “Anybody coming to see my grandpa is my business. We’ve got a lot of scammers hanging around here, hoping to make a quick buck off the seniors. So if you can’t give me a good reason why you should be here, then I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

I wondered if this guy, so protective of his precious grandpa, was aware of the irony of calling *me* a con artist. I crossed my arms over my chest, and he mirrored my stubborn stance.

The guy breathed out exasperatedly and ran his fingers through his hair, “Listen, you shouldn’t even be here. I left specific instructions at the reception to block unwanted visitors.”

I realized that if it hadn’t been for that compulsion I used on the receptionist, I would most likely have been barred from entry. But now that I was in, there was no getting rid of me. Vengeance demons were like termites in that way.

The guy was still standing over me. I disliked the height difference, and the psychological disadvantage it placed me at. I also didn’t like how he looked me up and down like I was a bug. A money-grubbing bug.

“Sit down.” I gave the command almost before I realized what I was doing.

The guy sat with a smack as his bum hit the chair. Oops, I might’ve been a bit too heavy-handed with the compulsion.

“What’s your name?” I asked him. While under my spell, he would tell me the truth. All truth.

“Will Pillar,” he obliged in a flat voice.

“Is your grandpa free now?”

“Yes. We’re done for the day.”

I frowned. “I thought he was having a massage.”

“He was. With me.”

“Why you?”

“I’m studying to be a massage therapist. This way he gets a free session, and I get to practice.”

I noted for the first time that Will Pillar had a white towel over his shoulder.

He continued talking. Sometimes I gave off tiny, unconscious magical outbursts, and the

subjects offered information beyond my questioning. I guess I just had a knack for making people loose with their tongues. “Mr. Harrison claims I pinched a nerve that one time, but Grandpa doesn’t mind. He keeps letting me practice on him.”

If the elder Pillar could afford to live here, he could afford to pay for the most experienced massage therapist money could buy. So finances was definitely not the motivating factor behind his participation in these free sessions. I had a sudden mental image of an indulging grandfather risking bodily injury to let his rookie of a grandchild work on him. It seemed so contradictory to the heartless bastard I’d pictured in my mind. Could people change over the course of a few decades?

I wished my paternal grandma was that good to me. The Aequitas matriarch hadn’t even come to my Becoming, nor did she send along the traditional gift of a pair of pearl stud earrings. The two tiny lustrous spheres, custom-sculpted by the Baltic mermaid-witches, were a means to enhance and control one’s power. My grandma had sent me a store-bought pendant on a chain instead, the humiliating single pearl dangling on my neck for everyone at the party to see.

A slap in the face, mocking my hybrid status.

Half the vengeance power times half the amplifier. Any wonder why my magic sucked? This Dan Pillar might be a shady character, but at least he seemed to be treating his grandson alright.

On a hunch, I leaned over and locked eyes with Pillar Junior. “What is your date of birth, Will?”

“Nineteen ninety-six, August the second.”

Now I understood why Dan Pillar had stopped.

I felt a pang of sympathy for him. Somehow, the harm my target had caused got lodged in the Concord and took decades to come back to haunt him. But come back, it did, even long after the wrongdoer started to love.

I was certain now that was exactly what had happened. Somehow, the birth of his own child’s flesh and blood had woken the older man’s conscience.

Never mind. All the love and conscience in the world couldn’t take away the mass suffering of Dan Pillar’s victims, and I still had a job to do.

Gently putting my unfinished key lime pie on a neighboring table, I got up, leaving Will Pillar shaking the cobwebs out of his brain. He wouldn’t remember our meeting.

As I went downstairs and walked across the marble lobby floor, the clicking sound of my heels bounced around the hallway. I kept clear in my mind an old medieval expression I’d learned in my high school history class.

Justice arrives on a wooden leg.

As in, it would come slowly, but surely. In the absence of a wooden leg, my pair of leather kitten heels would do.

Kristi the receptionist gave up Dan’s room number without a fight. In less than five minutes, I was taking the elevator to the top floor and knocking on my target’s door. “Mr. Pillar?”

“Come in.”

I opened the door and my jaw dropped. This wasn’t a “room.” This was a penthouse suite done up with a ten-foot ceiling, a mahogany library on the left, and a contemporary kitchen on the right that was larger than my entire living space at the duplex.

Dan Pillar was sipping brandy in an armchair in the library, a leather-bound volume on his

lap, appearing every inch like his photo. Even as an old man, the senior Pillar was one handsome fellow. His angular face and brilliant eyes bespoke decades of fine living, his hair a steely shade of grey. The large ruby ring on his slender right hand seemed right at home.

I closed the door quietly and, before I turned, I activated the magical noise muffler for some much-needed privacy.

Dan lifted his head, saw me and smiled. “Hi, there. Are you here to deliver the cupcakes for this afternoon? Well, don’t close the door. Just bring the whole cart in. The gold leaf red velvet was quite the hit last time.”

Huh, I wasn’t even wearing a caterer’s uniform. Guess when you were used to a certain social position, you assumed everyone worked for you in one manner or another.

I cleared my throat. “Are you Dan A. Pillar, of Hamilton, Ontario, born to Sophia and Robert Pillar?”

The smile fell from his face and he clutched his hands together. He glanced at the door and finally seemed to realize why I’d closed it. His jaw set, he nodded.

“Mr. Pillar, it’s time to pay for your past sins. By the power vested in me by the Concord Council, you’re hereby sentenced to Vengeance. May you endure it with grace and contemplation.”

My plan came in two stages. First, I’d force him to experience what his victims felt. All the heartbreak, shame, and despair in one fell swoop. Then I’d redistribute his wealth to those he’d hurt.

That sounded pretty fair to me.

Next thing to do was to give him his Belinda, the vengeance demon version of the Miranda rights. “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. You have the right to—”

“Thanks, but I have no intention of keeping silent, nor being punished, for that matter,” Dan said softly. His demeanor changed from easygoing to chilling in less than a second, and every ounce of warmth left the apartment. With his hands held together, he began to rub his blood-red ruby ring against his thumb, muttering something under his breath.

The hair at the back of my neck stood up in attention.

“I knew your kind would come one day, so I’m prepared at all times,” he continued.

Wait a minute. It wasn’t just my imagination; the temperature in the large penthouse had indeed dropped by a few degrees. A vortex of light and energy formed in the space between us, and there was no mistaking the shockwave of power filling the room.

Oh shit, Dan was calling magic. The dark and brutal variety.

He was not *of* magic, that much I was certain. But there were magical objects in the world that could be dangerous in the wrong hands, mortal or otherwise.

I would’ve tried to stop him, to reach for my pearl pendant necklace—weak magic against such an unnatural force and all—but from the moment he’d started the muttering, I’d been unable to move. In a my-body-is-in-a-block-of-invisible-cement kind of way.

I tugged at my arms, then tugged some more, all to no avail. It was like those sleep paralysis episodes I’d had when I was a child. My eyes darted from side to side, seeking a way out, and all I saw around me was expensive carpets and oil paintings. Beautiful, but useless. I had to get out of here. This was not the way things should be going down.

At least when I’d experienced the paralysis as a kid, deep down I’d known I was still safe in my bed. The present-day me didn’t have that comfort. I was alone, helpless, with no access to my own power and completely at the bad guy’s mercy.

I didn't want to die.

I tried to kick out, my legs more than willing to give it a shot, but I was unable to move even an inch. I wanted to do something. Anything but stay still. The nervous energy building up inside me ricocheted across my cold and tightened muscles, assaulting my senses with its feral need to be released.

I pressed down my rising panic. If I couldn't move, maybe I could talk my way out of this one. It always worked in those human movies.

"Where did you get that ring?" I croaked. Was that really my voice? Coarse and weak, it held none of the authority I was desperately trying to project. My galloping heart threatened to jump out of my chest, and the bitter taste of bile was on my lips.

Dan's lips curved. "As I said, I've got...friends."

"I bet it cost you more than a few gold leaf red velvet cupcakes." I spit out.

"It was worth every penny to stop a vengeance demon in her tracks."

How did he know to do that? The average human went through life without ever hearing of my kind's existence. Except Joss Whedon, and people just thought he was super-brilliant at making shit up.

Dan rubbed harder at his ring, and some sort of bubble materialized. It expanded to the size of a small elevator, then came toward me and enveloped my body. Inside the bubble was a mini universe of intense high temperature. My body, which had been freezing until that point, heated up.

My skin was scorched and my hair began to singe; the aging faery dust on my cheek melted away as if it was never there. Next was my vengeance magic. The ring neutralized it with frightening efficiency.

The bastard intended to burn me alive. And to think I'd been feeling sorry for him. If, no, *when* I survive this, all bets were off.

"You won't get away with this." He wouldn't. If he realized that, maybe he'd hesitate. "My handler knows where I am."

"Let me worry about that." Dan waved his hand. "*Think*, my dear, if I have friends who could help me destroy you, then I have friends who could help me survive. Bye-bye, my little vengeance demon. As they say, it's not personal."

But it was.

The soles of my kitten boots began to melt. The acrid smell of rubber invaded my nose. Instinctively I closed up my airway, which only served to make me dizzy from the lack of oxygen. With dark spots swimming in front of my eyes, it finally sank in. I was going to die. In a few minutes I would be burned to a crisp.

I wasn't ready to die. Not by a long shot. My life had barely started, and there was so much I wanted to see and experience. Mom and Dad would be devastated if something happened to me. Heck, *I* would be devastated.

Mom.

Wait! There was one thing that might help.

The very reason why I only had half the vengeance power was because I also had half the trickery power, and I had plenty of *that* on reserve, dormant and not affected by Dan's spell.

For a trickster, the simplest trick, first learned and last forgotten, was how to play dead.

I closed my eyes, the gleeful face of Dan Pillar the last thing I saw. I pulled the long-neglected trickery magic around me, fueled it with the raw energy stemming from my fear. I darkened my skin with a messy layer of ashes, dried blood, and raw flesh, simulating the visual

effects of a third-degree burn. Then I shut down my organs, froze my veins, and stopped my lungs from taking another breath.

I set my internal timer to wake up in one hour, and sank into oblivion. I would've sent up a quick prayer if I could've, but ya know, being a demon and all.