



DEATH CURSE

THE

REALM

OF

FALSE GODS

STEVE HIGGS

Death Curse

The Realm of False Gods

The Final Book

Steve Higgs

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Chapter 1

“Herr Schneider!” A voice carried over the top of the chatter filling the SIA battle arena. “Herr Schneider?”

Otto twisted about to spot a raised hand, that of the person calling his name. It was a man in uniform – one of the SIA agents, those persons originally recruited to help round up and manage what was considered (back then) to be an emerging supernatural problem. That the supernaturals were now the military element of the SIA relegated the largely non-supernatural agents to desk jobs and assistant duties.

The man had two more agents with him, all three pushing through the crowd to get to the German wizard in charge.

They had only been back in Washington for a few minutes, yanked back to the below ground battle arena when the death curse finally winked out of existence. The disorientation and nausea were passing, but everyone had been affected.

“Herr Schneider,” the man repeated, this time at a normal volume as he drew close to his target. He was slightly out of breath and clearly in a big hurry.

Otto thought his name was Jones, but uncertain he had it right chose not to use it. The other two were Vargus and Brown.

“What do you need?” he asked. Otto wanted to gather the team leaders together and hear their reports. The entire SIA army, a force of just more than a thousand supernaturals, had been in the immortal realm fighting demons in a bid to destroy their hordes of beasts less than five minutes ago. There were losses, and Otto wanted to know who hadn’t made it back alive.

Equally important, the demons were on Earth now and the SIA Army, otherwise known as the SWATS - the Supernatural World Alliance Team - needed to engage with them. Maybe they couldn’t be stopped, but humanity’s best hope resided in

the people surrounding Otto Schneider. Coordinating their efforts with the planet's conventional forces – the militaries of the world, they hoped to be able to battle the demons and win.

“Mrs Pendragon needs you in the situation room, sir,” the SIA Agent replied. “Right now, sir,” he added when Otto failed to instantly react.

Ayla Pendragon was once just a housewife and mother, but an awakening of magic inside her body attracted the attention of a demon called Daniel. He collected and sold humans with elemental magical abilities to become familiars (slaves) to the demons trapped in the immortal realm. That was when Otto met her.

At the time he was enslaved to Daniel, a position he took to ensure Katja Weber, a fourteen-year-old girl, went free. Otto smashed his way out of the demon realm, destroying Daniel's livelihood in the process and freeing hundreds of the humans trapped there. That included Ayla who returned home, but ditched her homemaker role for one in the political arena. Taking a job in the administration of the SIA, she used her senator father's connections to rise to a senior position and then take over the whole global organisation when her former boss, an overly ambitious man called Colt Ironbolt, overstepped his bounds and got a lot of people killed.

Now the global head of the SIA, she was the person expected to lead the world's fight to save humanity from genocide and enslavement. There was no ambiguity about the demons' plans. Beelzebub wanted to remove ninety percent of the global population and rule over what was left. Under his command, the world would be divided into kingdoms with demons ruling in every location. The world would thrive, pollution would cease, and in many ways the planet would be better for it. Billions of people had to die first though, and no one was going to let that happen if there was any way they could possibly stop it.

If Ayla needed to see him urgently, Otto would go. There were others who could and would reorganise the army of supernaturals in his stead.

Starting to walk toward the arena's exit, Otto called out to attract the attention of Ezra, a centuries old human Otto rescued from his life as a demon's familiar.

"Ezra, Ayla wants me in the situation room. Get everyone ready as quickly as possible. We may be deploying sooner than anyone likes." He didn't need to say any more, everyone knew the death curse had fallen and what that meant for the people of planet Earth.

Otto caught a thumbs up as he crossed the room, a physical confirmation his instructions were understood rather than a verbal one which might be drowned out by the background noise. As he reached the exit to access the elevators beyond, he could already hear Ezra calling to get everyone's attention.

Flanked by the three uniformed SIA agents, Otto stepped into the elevator and turned around to face the doors. Jones, if that was his name, went around to stand behind and to Otto's left, Brown went to his right, and Vargas operated the button to take them down to sub-basement level eight.

Otto blinked, a frown forming. The situation room is located above ground, why would they be going down?

He opened his mouth to speak, and it was at that moment he noticed the bead of sweat running down the side of Vargas's head. There was no reason to be sweating, it wasn't hot, and they hadn't been running. That only left nerves or worry as a reason for his perspiration.

Otto sensed the attack in the heartbeat before it came, just long enough for him to draw elemental energy from the nearest ley line to power a spell. Quite what the three humans thought they could do against him Otto had no idea. He was a powerful wizard, able to conjure and control the elements in ways a non-supernatural wouldn't even understand. He could

render them unconscious in a few seconds by shutting off the air in their lungs, or by interrupting the flow of liquid through their brains. The latter was a little dodgy because it was just as likely to cause a stroke, but he had options when it came to defending himself against a non-magical attack.

However, the elevator was descending, and the further a supernatural went below ground, the harder it was to tap in to a ley line. At a certain depth, it became impossible and his attempt to conjure a spell came slower than it otherwise might.

Jones jabbed the stun gun against Otto's neck and pulled the trigger. His heart was beating so fast in the moments leading up to the attack, Jones worried he might pass out if they didn't get the German wizard into the elevator quickly enough.

With Otto slumped on the floor between their feet, Vargas withdrew a syringe of a powerful sedative intended to keep the wizard unconscious.

Brown leaned his head down to where a radio was pinned to his collar.

“President Ironbolt, this is team Alpha, Primary One is down. I repeat, Primary One is down.”

In his private office, Ironbolt acknowledged the message and when his hand released the send switch he punched the air in triumph. Removing the troublesome and disobedient Otto Schneider from the playing board had long been a goal, but had become utterly necessary in the last few hours. Ironbolt wanted to kill him – it would be far safer to do so – and had he believed Beelzebub would accept an ‘Oops’ as an excuse, he might have given the order. Instead, it was necessary to keep him alive along with Ayla Pendragon. The sooner he could eliminate them the better, for now though, he had procedures in place to ensure they would cause no further bother.

The rest of the SIA army could be ordered and controlled by General Smith, a former US Army colleague Ironbolt

appointed because he knew he could be trusted to follow the plan. This was true for most of the US branch of the SIA. Anyone Ironbolt didn't think he could trust had been quietly removed, replaced by those loyal to him.

The SWATs were Colt Ironbolt's private army now and he was going to send it into a trap.

Many floors below his office, the elevator opened into a stark, white hallway. It led to the detention centre, a secure facility well below ground where they could keep supernaturals because they were too deep to tap a ley line. Without elemental energy to power their magic, they were just like anyone else.

Of course, it was known that Otto Schneider escaped from one such facility in Germany, taking the werewolf Zachary Barnabus with him. That was years ago, and the German continued to refuse to reveal how he did it. Due to that, Ayla Pendragon, and everyone else Ironbolt rounded up when he seized control of the SIA headquarters only a few hours earlier, were being kept in a medically induced coma. He couldn't risk them escaping.

Irbolt pushed thoughts of Schneider and Pendragon from his mind. They were neutralised and he had bigger hurdles to jump yet. They would be handed to Beelzebub in due course and Ironbolt's only hope was that he might get to see them die.

Chapter 2

Beelzebub held a constant stream of source energy, channelling it from the earth and through his body to create a firehose of hellfire. The demons' most powerful weapon, an abomination of what their race originally conjured to be used to heal and soothe, was an ugly, dark red construction of magical energy. It killed humans and pretty much everything else on contact. When it hit solid things it would blast them to smithereens.

Demons could form it in their hands and fire it at will, blasting everything around them if they so chose, but only three beings were known to be able to create a constant stream of it: Beelzebub, his brother Godfrey, and human female known as Anastasia Aaronson.

Nothing was known about her past other than she lost her memory when a piece of shrapnel tore into her brain. She also lost her left foot and left hand, all three injuries the result of a single incident when a soldier under her command stepped on a landmine. She possessed a magical suit of armour that protected her from harm at all times. It wasn't complete but it was close enough, and she had a sword and throwing knife through which she could deliver source energy to kill demons.

Until the death curse fell, demons were considered to be immortal. Utterly unkillable until Anastasia discovered she possessed the ability to wield the sword. Now, though, so far as everyone knew, the immortality thing was no longer part of the deal, so Beelzebub, along with all the other demons, were employing defensive spells to protect themselves for the first time in more than four thousand years.

Dropping his hands, Beelzebub took a moment to examine his handiwork. They were in London, one sixth of his demons with him as they went from nation to nation, removing the seat of power in each to destabilise the entire world. It had taken a while to get started, the demons finding themselves scattered

across the planet when the death curse fell, but they had a rally point identified in advance and they gathered there within a few hours of the death curse finally falling.

There were a few absences, notably Rebecca and a team who were known to travel with her, but little concern was given to their whereabouts.

The first task on his list was to break the humans' ability to coordinate any form of military response and to execute all those in power to create disarray. In the two hours since the death curse failed, his legions had laid waste to more than a hundred national capitols, killing indiscriminately.

There was simply no way to stop them. The ability to open a portal between two places on Earth meant they arrived with no warning. The humans were given no time to respond and where they were able to coordinate some form of resistance, Beelzebub's forces would simply open another portal and leave.

This alone rendered the nuclear option null and void.

In theory at least, the SIA ought to be able to snap open a portal the moment they knew where the demons were. They could bring conventional human weapons – guns, tanks, helicopters – through, and the supernaturals' mastery of elemental magic made them worthy opponents to the demons.

Thus far that had not happened. The SIA's forces were yet to make a single appearance and the demons were yet to lose one of their number. As military campaigns go, Beelzebub's plan to conquer the planet was a dream.

He knew why, of course. The SIA could have brought their weapons to bear, but they were being held in check. At their head was a man so consumed with his lust for power that he was prepared to let the entire human race suffer. Beelzebub was happy to use a man like that. Colt Ironbolt could be trusted to do the right thing.

The right thing from Colt Ironbolt's perspective, that is.

Beelzebub told the fool what he wanted to hear, made him some promises, and told him exactly what he needed to do.

Clearly, Ironbolt was doing it too, otherwise Beelzebub and his legions would be facing opposition everywhere they went.

Coming to Beelzebub's side, Prosperine, the general leading the first legion, reported, "Another flawless victory, my lord. The humans cower and hide as you predicted."

Beelzebub nodded, mostly to himself. "Yes, it was predictable. However, we must soon face the supernaturals. They will prove to be tougher opposition."

Prosperine scoffed, "Surely you jest, my lord. They number too few to offer any real defence. We shall send a horde ahead of our troops and ..."

Beelzebub cut him off. "We shall grind them into dust, yes, but only a fool would underestimate them. They destroyed more than three quarters of my hordes in just a few hours. They can think strategically, and they are powerful. Katja Weber has shown the ability to dismiss our hellfire as though it were no more significant than the wind. There will be others among their number, our former familiars, each of them more experienced and knowledgeable than any human ought to be."

Frowning as he tried to decipher the meaning in the demon leader's words, Prosperine, questioned, "You think they stand a chance, my lord? That they can beat us?"

"No. But I choose to remain wary. They are more capable than we ever imagined. More resourceful, and they know they have everything to lose. They will fight to their last breath and that alone makes them dangerous."

Prosperine elected to ask a question that had been bugging him for many years.

"Do you believe your brother will side with them to fight against us?"

Godfrey and the angels, divided from the demons by ideology and their plan for the Earth, were exactly the same in every other way. They were the same race, separated before the death curse knocked them all into an alternate reality by their fundamental beliefs. Beelzebub railed against his father's sympathetic, benevolent rule. He wanted to subjugate the humans, have them worship their masters as gods. Godfrey sided with his father, and as elder brother was always going to be the one to inherit the mantle of supreme being.

Knowing this, Beelzebub rebelled, calling his followers to rally behind him. He was charismatic and handsome, tall and strong, and he attracted a far greater percentage of their race than his father. When the supreme being was murdered in his bed, it was assumed Beelzebub was behind it though he vehemently continued to deny the accusation.

With his final breath, the supreme being split reality, sending all magical beings to a new place where they would spend eternity unable to enslave the lesser race of humans he loved so dearly.

Now back on Earth, Godfrey had just as much intention of ruling as his brother. His followers, the angels, numbered less than a thousand, far fewer than the demons, but were they to side with the supernatural army Otto Schneider created, Beelzebub knew they could cause him trouble.

Silent while he pondered the question, Beelzebub spoke before Prosperine saw need to repeat himself.

“No, I do not think he will. He aims to rule them just the same as us. My brother is a fool, but he will have a plan. Sooner or later, we will discover what it is.”

Chapter 3

The angels were more fortunate than the demons for almost all of them were pulled into the same location when the death curse fell. Finding the melding of realities dumped anyone in the immortal realm back on Earth wherever they were when they last used a portal, the vast majority were returned to the original home of their race in what thousands of years ago was known as Mesopotamia.

Unlike the demons, Godfrey's followers were less inclined to travel to the mortal realm. They had no reason to do so, other than to do what they could to protect the humans against the shilt who went there to prey on the people, and the demons, who wanted familiars.

Among their number, less than three dozen had ever found the need to leave the immortal realm; they were, by their nature, content with what they had.

Godfrey and his mother, Serena, found themselves in New Zealand where a weapon devised long before either of them was born had been hidden. Much like the armour and sword now in Anastasia's possession, it was considered too dangerous to be left where a demon might find it. In theory the demons could not even know it existed – the angels didn't – yet Godfrey, the moment the death curse began to weaken, knew the weapons and armour had to be hidden. Until that point in time, they had remained trapped in the mortal realm, out of reach to either side. Now that the demons could visit the mortal world, it was necessary to hide them lest they fall into Beelzebub's hands.

Appearing to superstitious humans hundreds of years ago, he commanded their terrified souls to take the artefacts and hide them elsewhere. They did precisely that, however they did not hide them where Godfrey commanded. He wanted to be able to collect them when the time was right, but the

humans chose instead to scatter the deadly artefacts to the far corners of the planet.

They hid them in churches, a secret order charged with monitoring for anyone who might one day come looking. But though the order survived the centuries, their knowledge did not. Wars across Europe throughout the Middle Ages and beyond broke the chain of information and many of the artefacts were forgotten.

They remained where they were, sealed beneath the floor or in special chambers inside religious buildings across the globe. Each was annotated with a marker to show its location, but unless one knew what the symbol meant, it was nothing more than an odd mark in the old stone of an old church, temple, or synagogue.

As the death curse weakened, Beelzebub began the search, offering rewards to anyone who could find his father's armour and weapons. No breakthroughs were made, and though they came to believe the artefacts were buried inside hallowed ground – a place they were unable to tread without suffering terrible pain – they could not retrieve them. Attempts to use humans to do so revealed what they had forgotten: mortals cannot touch the armour or the sword. To do so resulted in instant death. And so the armour remained hidden until Anastasia Aaronson came along.

Daniel discovered her and how unique she was, and the sword soon fell into his possession. Not for long though for Anastasia proved to be far more defiant and tenacious than anyone could have predicted.

She went on to collect as much of the armour as could be found, but there was one thing she did not possess: the Bagh Nakh. Godfrey figured out where it was, had humans collect it and move it using tools that allowed them to pick it up without touching it and he hid it once more inside a church where he could watch over it. He recruited humans, creating an

emphatic cult that would die to protect his secret, the secret that would ensure he won when the death curse failed.

It had done precisely that just a short while ago and he wasted no time collecting the Bagh Nakh from its hiding place. He and his mother, Serena, knew where the rest of the angels would be, and though there were still a few of their number missing when Godfrey arrived, most had found their way to the agreed meeting point. They were in the footsteps of their ancient seat of power, the supreme being's palatial home around which their entire race had once lived.

The settlement was buried beneath the sand, eaten by the shifting desert long ago, but they knew they were in the right area from the topography. The sun, which had blazed down upon the scorching sand just a few hours ago, was dipping toward the horizon now, taking the daylight with it.

Gathered far from the nearest town or city, but close to the Tigris River, the angels were more than a little keen to hear Godfrey's plan.

"What are we doing here?" enquired Giannis, a long-time thorn in Godfrey's side. More than once the angels' leader had been forced to quell challenges to his authority, but this time he knew he was carrying all the cards.

"We are preparing to win the war against the demons," Godfrey replied with a smug smile. "Precisely what I have always told you would happen once the death curse finally fell. Is that not so?"

The question was aimed directly at Giannis, putting him on the spot, but it was answered by Bokerah, another of Godfrey's followers who harboured significant doubt.

"And just how is it that we are going to achieve that, Godfrey? You have constantly and continually refused to divulge your great plan. Your father's armour and sword, the one thing that would give you the edge over your brother, is in

the hands of a human woman. She wields it for the humans, a race we are supposed to have dominion over.”

His smile still in place, Godfrey replied, “The armour is of no great significance and Anastasia Aaronson will soon perish.” He dropped the smile, assuming a more sombre expression. “Her death is an unfortunate necessity. As you say, the armour provides an edge, but it is not one that I will be employing. I shall recover the armour only because it is fitting that I have it.”

“You could have taken it at any point since Anastasia began collecting it,” pointed out Belladonna, a raven-haired angel who rarely voiced her opinion. “Why didn’t you?”

It was a fair question, and posed in the tone of someone who was genuinely curious, not looking to score points.

Godfrey nodded, pleased she chose to raise the subject for which he wished to explain. Admittedly, it pained him a little that his people were all so blind. Not one of them could visualise the greater picture and think strategically.

Rotating slowly to meet as many eyes as possible, Godfrey said, “Anastasia has the armour and it makes her arguably the most powerful human on the planet, yes?”

A murmuring of agreement passed around his followers.

“Is there anyone who would say otherwise?” Godfrey encouraged anyone to speak out. “If I took the armour from her already, I would be able to march into battle wearing it and it would protect me from harm, would it not?”

“That is the whole point,” argued Giannis.

“Yes,” agreed Godfrey. “Except it isn’t.” He paused to watch the frowns form. Only his mother, Serena, understood where he was going, and she gave a small nod of approval and encouragement when their eyes met. “First, I will wipe out the demons.” Mutterings arose, the angels questioning how he proposed to do that. “Then, when what remains is us and the

humans, we will meet them in battle. Arriving to fight whatever forces they muster wearing the full suit of armour and carrying the sword that can kill with a touch would be an impressive sight the humans would remember and talk about for centuries. It would help to cower them and teach them that they cannot stand against us.”

Everyone agreed, voicing their opinions, but showing their confusion. If this was what Godfrey believed, why was he not pursuing the armour? Why hadn't he taken it from Anastasia when he had the chance?

“Now, imagine the same scenario, but instead the armour and sword are with the humans. Anastasia understands its significance and its power. Therefore the rest of the humans will also understand and they will expect her to win. They will, at least, believe she stands a chance, and they will bring everything they have to the fight, rallying behind a woman who carries *our* greatest weapons.” He paused again, rotating slowly once more through a semi-circle to meet the eyes of all those who saw fit to question him.

“When I kill her with a sword, and she falls lifeless at my feet, what message will that send?” His voice rose toward a crescendo. “A more powerful one than if I appeared to be unbeatable in the first place?” He was almost shouting by the time he asked the final question and he looked down, acting as though he wanted a moment to gather himself. “The armour has a purpose, and it is to remove all hope from humanity. They are many and we are few. They have bred and bred and covered the planet like an infestation. I may disagree with my brother about his intended methods and his ruthlessness, but he is right that the human numbers must be reduced. We will achieve that humanely in ways we have already discussed many, many times. However, until their population is reduced to a manageable size, they will remain a threat and we need them to fear what we might do. I will use Anastasia Aaronson and others they see as their champions to ingrain in their hearts a certainty that to unite against us means death.”

Godfrey stopped speaking. He knew what was coming next; it was inevitable that someone would ask how it was that he was going to defeat the demons, how he planned to kill Anastasia with a word. The question, however, came from an unexpected voice.

“What is it that you are not telling us, Godfrey?”

More than half the assembled angels spun around to look at the figure who chose to speak.

“Benjamin?” questioned Godfrey, surprised and a little shocked to see the banished member of their community back among them.

“Yes, Godfrey. If you are about to remind me that you ejected me from my home and my family, I can assure you I remember the incident quite clearly. I have been in the company of Beelzebub for much of the time since, enjoying his hospitality, one might say.”

Serena stepped forward. “You side with him now?”

Benjamin shook his head. “No. I travelled with Anastasia for some time, helping her to gather the armour along with Daniel. When we broke into Beelzebub’s palace to steal back the sword, I was captured, but I was offered the hand of friendship, not the torture chamber I expected. I come to you now to hear what plan you might have to defeat your brother and his forces. They are strong and they are tearing the humans apart. In days they will have reduced this world to ashes, so I ask you, if you have a plan to beat them, what is it and why have you not already enacted it?”

Godfrey eyed his former ally. Benjamin had always been a staunch supporter of their way of life, their beliefs, and their plans for when the death curse finally failed. However, he challenged Godfrey when Beelzebub gained the sword and took a band of angels to recapture Anastasia. Benjamin believed with the armour, Beelzebub would be invincible, and

he would be correct were it not for the thing Godfrey had never told them.

“Can I trust you, Benjamin?” he asked plainly. “If you return to the fold, will you stand by my side and pledge loyalty?”

“No.” It was a simple response, but it was the opposite of what everyone expected to hear. A collective gasp rang around the assembled angels. “I cannot promise that, Godfrey, not when you have deceived me and everyone else here for your entire existence. You have a secret. I have long since suspected it as I am sure many others do.” Benjamin came to stand in front of the crowd where they could easily see him. “Your confidence betrays you. If you are building up to the big reveal, I’m afraid I have stolen it from you. The time to tell us all the truth is now.”

Godfrey debated a show of power, commanding a sustained burst of sinfire to remind them all why he was their leader. However, he instead chose to use Benjamin’s introduction as his prompt.

“Thank you, Benjamin. You are right that I have kept a secret from you all.” Mutterings arose which he ignored. “Secrets are often necessary, and you will all agree that the best way to keep one from getting out is to tell no one. Believe me when I say that what I am about to tell you could have spelled the end for us and humanity if the demons had ever learned the truth.”

Twisting about to look at his mother, Godfrey nodded his head. It was time.

Chapter 4

Still in New Zealand, once Anastasia and Alex had fought off the nausea that came with being ripped from one reality to another without warning, their thoughts turned to the Order of Jesus the Almighty. There was a need to wring information out of them.

She had come so close to killing the angels' leader it felt akin to fate that the death curse chose to fall before she could swing her sword. Anastasia refused to dwell on the potential ramification of that notion.

The belief that Godfrey had some kind of secret weapon became a certainty in Anastasia's head when he failed to deny it. She accused him outright and his reaction told her she was right. The nature of the weapon and what it could do remained a mystery, and that was why she planned to find the cult leader and convince him to reveal what he knew.

Finding the building the Order used as their headquarters was easy enough – Alex used the internet.

Having arrived back at the same spot where they last opened a portal on Earth, they were in the square outside St Paul's Church in Auckland. The Order's building wasn't in the same place, but it wasn't that far away either, relatively speaking.

"It's only three miles," Anastasia tried to put a positive spin on it for Alex's sake. "We don't need to rush either since there won't be anyone there at this time of day."

Alex challenged, "I wouldn't be so sure. Some of the order's members might stay there."

Anastasia shrugged. "I guess we'll find out soon enough. You lot coming?" she asked Daniel and the two angels.

They were standing a few yards away and a few yards apart, Daniel separating himself from the other two.

“The death curse fell,” said Gabriel. It was perhaps the third time he’d said the same thing since they landed less than fifteen minutes ago. It was as though his brain had gotten stuck in a loop and he couldn’t find a way out.

A strangled gurgle emanated from Alex.

Anastasia jinked an eyebrow. “Was that your stomach?”

With a hand pressed to her centre, the tall librarian tried to hide her reddening cheeks. “We haven’t eaten in ages,” she pointed out. “Some breakfast wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Here, here,” agreed Daniel.

Anastasia shook her head. “We can eat when we have saved the world. Right now we need to get moving. If the crazy people Godfrey formed into a cult here know anything, I want to know it too. Godfrey having some kind of secret weapon makes my skull itch.”

Despite her remarks, Anastasia was hungry too. The sun was rising in New Zealand, and it really had been many hours since their last meal. Combining that with the convenient fact that no one was chasing or trying to kill them for once, taking a moment to feed their bodies wasn’t the worst of ideas.

“Come on,” she beckoned, expecting everyone to start walking. Alex’s phone was set up to guide them from A to B and it was going to take a very long time to get there if they never actually moved from where they were.

With her feet moving, she chose to ignore that she couldn’t hear anyone following.

“Hold on a moment,” said Daniel, sounding preoccupied. When a second later, he shouted, “Bingo!”, Anastasia couldn’t resist turning back around to see what was getting him excited.

“Bingo?” repeated Alex. “Don’t tell me demons play bingo because I’m simply not going to believe it.”

Daniel stood proudly next to his portal, rolling his eyes. “No, it’s just a human expression I picked up somewhere.”

“From a familiar,” Anastasia observed accusingly.

Daniel shrugged, then grinned pointing to his portal. “We don’t have to walk, we can go anywhere we want again.”

Confused, Alex asked, “How? I thought portals worked to get you between the two realms.”

Samuel chimed in to explain. “Before the death curse, everyone had to walk ...”

“Or ride a horse,” Daniel pointed out.

Ignoring the demon’s need to be pedantic, Samuel continued, “And it was only when the shilt figured out how to cross from one realm to the other that the concept of portal travel came into existence. Now, I guess ...” he stopped talking to conjure a portal of his own, his tongue sticking from the left side of his mouth as he concentrated, “we know how to do it, so we can open portals between two spaces in the same realm.”

“So why couldn’t you open one earlier?” Alex pressed them for answers.

Both Samuel and Daniel shrugged and Daniel hazarded, “Probably because the death curse was about to wink out of existence. The magic has always worked on travel between the realms and one realm was about to vanish. Now that it has, there is nothing to stop us opening portals to wherever we want.” To demonstrate his theory, he collapsed his portal and opened another. “Paris, anyone?”

Anastasia closed the distance between them. “No, thank you. You can take me to the order’s headquarters though. Alex, please show Daniel the map.”

Twenty seconds later, they were standing outside the ornate architecture that dominated the front façade of the Order’s headquarters.

Alex, having stepped through the portal first, was heading for the door.

“Do we just knock?” she asked.

Anastasia pulled a face. “Well, that’s one option,” she remarked. “I’m not sure I’m feeling all that polite though.”

Alex shrieked and ducked back when her friend sent a bolt of hellfire into the doors. They appeared to be solid oak, but they vanished into shards with a single blast.

With a maniacal grin, Anastasia gave Alex a wild-eyed look when she said, “Little pig, little pig, let me in.”

Following her friend through the ruined entrance, what remained of the left door crashed to the floor as they passed, Alex remarked, “I believe you are supposed to say that before you huff, puff, and blow the house down.”

“The house is still standing,” Anastasia pointed out.

They were inside the Order’s building now, strolling through a large entrance lobby to a hallway that ran to the left and right. Both women heard hurried footsteps coming their way, a pair of middle-aged men careening into view only to skid to a stop when they saw who was there.

One of the men, reversing direction faster than his inertia would allow, lost his footing and spilled to the floor. He was ten yards away down the hallway to their left.

“Good morning,” Anastasia waved cheerily. “Could I speak with your head fanatic, please?”

Both men had reversed course; the one who managed to stay on his feet already vanishing back the way he came. The other, his eyes wide while he did his best to get his scrambling feet back under his body, got left behind.

“He’s going to make me do it, isn’t he?” Anastasia griped.

Alex twitched an eyebrow, unsure what her friend was asking. “What, chase him? It’ll have to be you, Ana, I’m not

much of a sprinter.”

“No.” Ana frowned. “I’m not going to chase him. I’m going to shoot him.”

The man was back on his feet when she sighed and sent an orb of hellfire into the wall above his head.

“Stop running, please.”

The man froze, his arms up and his head ducked so low his chin almost touched his chest. Cringing like that, Anastasia felt a twinge of guilt about the way she was handling things. Her beef wasn’t with an individual. Whoever the man was, she had no desire to hurt him, but reminding herself that the demons were almost certainly killing people at will and the angels planned much the same, she pushed her negative emotions aside to get the task done.

Walking up to him, her armour flashing into life above her clothes with a whisper of will, she got right into his face.

“Were you one of the ones I met last night?”

“Y-yes,” the man gibbered.

“Jolly good. The man you idiots believe to be Jesus plans to take over the planet and rule it with humans as his slaves. He’ll use a nicer word than that, but the terminology employed will have no effect on your lack of free will. He has a weapon. I want to know where it is and what it does. What was under the floor at the church?”

The man’s eyes were darting left and right, his brain on overload as he fought against his desire to reveal all he knew and the need to keep the Order’s secrets.

Anastasia punched him in the gut with her magical armour-clad prosthetic hand. He doubled over choking.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she stated flatly, “but I will. Where is the head of this order? Is he here in this building?”

“No,” the man squeaked. “He never stays here overnight. He’ll be at home.”

Anastasia grabbed his shoulder, dragging him back along the hallway toward the broken doors.

“Let’s pay him a visit then, shall we?” It was, of course a rhetorical question.

Outside the building, Anastasia found Daniel and the two angels arguing.

“What’s going on?” she demanded to know. Anastasia had never figured out if she automatically took charge everywhere she went because she was naturally dominant, or whether it was because most other people who wanted to be in charge were so incapable they ought not to be allowed control over a hamster, or whether it was something her army training had imbued her with. She could not remember being bossy as a child, but right now she wasn’t about to take any argument from anyone.

“The death curse fell,” Gabriel replied, his eyes not on hers but on somewhere distant.

Anastasia gave her captive acolyte a shove. “Stay there,” she ordered. Getting in front of Gabriel, she said, “I know. You’ve said that already.”

“Like twelve times,” added Alex.

“So what?” Ana invited Gabriel to expand.

Daniel got in first. “They want to rejoin the angels.”

“It is not so simple,” Gabriel snapped. “They are forming up to take on the demons. They are weaker without us.”

“Good,” Anastasia frowned, unsure what had changed. “Godfrey has a weapon. We know that. Now we need to know what he plans to do with it. That was the plan. That was why you came with me yesterday.”

Was it only yesterday? Anastasia questioned. How had so much changed in a single night?

Gabriel met her gaze. “If we do not rejoin them, what will our place be when they are victorious?”

“Great, you’ll be standing in the rubble that used to be a planet. The humans will be dead, but you can wave a flag and know you were on the winning side,” she sniped back. “How about this? What will your place be if you rejoin Godfrey and I kill him? Do you really think the angels are going to win?”

Gabriel nodded, “Yes.”

Anastasia raised her eyebrows; she hadn’t expected his response.

“Well, he won’t. To win he has to kill his brother and he has to kill me. I understand your crisis of conscience, but don’t you at least want to find out what his weapon is first? He seems to have pinned everything on whatever it is. Can he win if it fails?”

Anastasia could tell from Gabriel’s expression that he saw no good future for the angels if Godfrey’s master plan failed to deliver. She grasped onto his lack of verbal response to issue a new command.

“Daniel, open a portal.”

“Where to?”

Drawing her sword, she pointed it at the quivering acolyte. “You. Give him a location.”

Chapter 5

Two hours had passed since the SIA army returned to Earth and they were still stuck in the battle arena where they were instructed to remain. Sure, they'd been given food and water, hot beverages, and even medical treatment for those who needed it, but no one was telling them anything.

There were soldiers among them, admittedly that was mostly from within the clan of rescued familiars and they were in different armies going back hundreds of years, but they all nevertheless agreed that knowing nothing was standard operating procedure in a war.

Katja was unworried about Otto's absence right up until the claxons started to sound. They chimed above their heads in the battle arena at an ear-splitting volume to be replaced a few seconds later by a human voice coming over the same speakers.

“All SIA supernaturals, this is General Smith. Prepare for deployment.”

Katja glanced at Cassie. “Where is Otto?”

Cassie shrugged and guessed, “With the general? If they are deploying us, Otto must be involved, right?”

Hastatus, another of the former familiars and a man rumoured to be close to five hundred years old rushed by. He was the leader of team six, a person who ought to know what was going on.

Cassie shouted after him, “Hey, Hastatus, what's going on? Is there a plan or do we just run into battle against the demons and hope for the best?”

He didn't stop moving but turned around to jog backwards when he shouted, “Listen to Otto's commands. You will be briefed on the way.”

“Otto's not here!” Katja yelled impatiently.

“But I am,” said Ezra, speaking calmly as he joined their group. He waved a hand at Hastatus, sending him on his way to rejoin his own team. Keeping the emotion from his voice, Ezra beckoned team one to gather around. “I will tell you what I know. I’m afraid it isn’t much.” The team leaders had been summoned to a briefing almost as soon as they had picked themselves up off the ground. It happened only minutes after Otto was escorted to see Ayla.

Tucked into a windowless room far below ground, General Smith outlined what had occurred during the last few hours. The team leaders learned of demon attacks across the globe, restricted initially to those areas covered in darkness, but spreading to all parts of the world once the death curse fell.

The majority of the demons, according to Ezra who was regurgitating second hand information, had been trapped on Earth while they in turn were stuck in the immortal realm going after the hordes. Untold destruction and death followed with the armed forces and law enforcement of multiple cities fighting back and dying for their bravery. That all changed when the death curse fell and the demons discovered they could once again use portals to travel.

“Wait, what?” interrupted Nicole, a middle-aged wizard from Scotland. “We can open portals again?”

“Yes,” Ezra confirmed. “All the team leaders tried it in the briefing room,” he laughed, trying to break the tension. “It got the general quite angry. I think he was worried about what might come through from the other side.”

Cassie whispered in Katja’s ear, a rude remark about what the general had in his pants. Katja blushed but couldn’t help sniggering too.

“The demons were operating in small pockets, but they have since banded together now and have swept across the planet, attacking different capitols and seats of power. The

consensus of opinion is that they are looking to destabilise the world. By killing off the politicians ...”

“We are all so much better off,” joked a voice from the back of the group gathered around Ezra. He got a laugh, but the team soon hushed again when Ezra continued.

“The demons are split into six forces, each of them attacking a different country. They have beasts with each legion. It’s whatever is left of the hordes, thank goodness we were able to take out most of them. They have swept across Europe, levelling the capital cities, and taken out most of southern Asia, plus Australia, Russia, Japan, and Africa. They have been moving steadily west, jumping from one place to the next using portals. They are yet to make landfall on US soil, but they will, and we are deploying to the White House and the Capitol Building right now to be ready. They are yet to meet with any real resistance, so it is our job to give them hell and send them packing.”

Naomi, her voice quiet, asked, “Are they mortal now? Can they be hurt?”

Growling, Cassie argued, “You mean can we blow them to pieces and fry their asses? That’s what I plan to do.”

Ezra drew in a deep breath and huffed it out slowly and purposefully through his nose. “I don’t know. There are some unconfirmed reports that suggest gunfire and other non-magical weapons employed have managed to cause a few injuries. They might be right, or they could be utter nonsense. Like I said: they are unconfirmed.”

Nicole had another question, “What do we do if they cannot be hurt?”

Ezra offered her a tight-lipped smile. “The same thing we have always done. We try our best, but here is what I can tell you.” Everyone leaned in to hear. “If they are using defensive spells then they are vulnerable, and we will see that almost immediately when we engage with them. Don’t forget the US

military will be joining us. General Smith apologised on behalf of Ayla, explaining that she couldn't attend our briefing because she is coordinating with the conventional forces. Here is where we make our stand and drive the demon legions back." Ezra thumped a fist into his other palm to accentuate his determination.

"What sort of defensive spells?" asked Katja, voicing her question before a dozen others could ask the same thing.

"Shields and such. Not unlike the barrier spells you all use. I hope you recharged the ones you expended going after the hordes," Ezra paused to have everyone confirm it was one of the first things they did.

The non-supernatural SIA agents were going around the teams, confirming they were ready and getting them set to portal to their defensive positions ready for the demons to arrive.

That was before the klaxon sounded again.

General Smith's voice echoed out just as loud as before, but this time filled with urgency.

"The demons have arrived! They are attacking the White House! Go! Go now!"

Ezra looked at the frightened eyes of all those looking back at him. Some of them were barely old enough to join an army and there were those, like Katja, who were far too young to be facing such terrible danger.

Pushing himself to act, Ezra stopped wasting time on concerns he could do nothing about and conjured a portal. Others did the same, the members of team one dashing through from one side to the other as around them in the battle arena the other teams did likewise.

Almost a thousand of them, going up against what they expected to be a force of more or less equal magnitude, only equipped with better weapons and probably aided by huge

supernatural creatures that were hard to kill at the best of times.

 Holding Cassie's hand, Katja stepped into the daylight on the White House lawn with just one thought in her head:
Where is Otto?

Chapter 6

“He’s out?” Ironbolt asked, peering at the German wizard.

Doctor Gale Lumley looked up from her monitor. “Herr Schneider is in a state of suspended animation, yes. We can keep him like that indefinitely.”

“He will be easy to kill?” Beelzebub wanted him alive, but Ironbolt wanted to keep his options open.

Dr Lumley raised both eyebrows, the question registering a surprise reaction before she wrestled her emotions under control.

“Yes, President Ironbolt. Quite easy.” She crossed the room to where Otto lay flat on his back inside a Perspex chamber. There was a line of other individuals, Ayla Pendragon included, to his left and right. Each was sealed inside a see-through tube, an oxygen mask covering their nose and mouth. Intravenous tubes ran into their bodies in several places: their arms, a central line entering just above their right clavicle ... “A drug can be administered here,” she indicated a point on the tube outside of Otto’s Perspex chamber where a small screw off lid covered an entry point. “Its effect will be almost immediate.”

Irbolt found that he was staring at Ayla. The woman had a remarkable figure, anyone could see that, but now, stripped of all but her underwear, he was getting to see it for the first time. Conscious he was ogling her, Ironbolt looked away.

“Very good,” he said, already heading for the door. “Inform me if anything changes and keep them under. It could be disastrous for the entire world if Otto Schneider and Ayla Pendragon wake up.”

What he actually meant was that it would be disastrous for his plans, but in his mind the two things were one and the same. Ironbolt believed the demons would win, so he was going to make sure he came out of it with some benefit.

Someone had to be the person who led the humans into the new era, and he was equipped with the mental fortitude to see the task through.

The SIA army were walking into a trap; that was his bargain with Beelzebub. Deliver the supernaturals on a plate at a time and place he could anticipate them, and he would grant Ironbolt land, servants, and a seat at his table.

Well, he was holding up his end of the bargain.

Chapter 7

Certain the supernatural army would come, Beelzebub summoned all six of his legions to the same place. Here in Washington, they would squish the insignificant force Otto Schneider gathered to oppose them. There was still no sign of his brother, which had gone without comment thus far, but was beginning to trouble him.

Regardless of what Godfrey might be up to, Beelzebub's attention was on the task at hand. The US President, an influential human, Beelzebub understood, was not going to be found at the White House unless he was in what the humans believed to be an impenetrable bunker way below ground.

He'd already sent a legion into the grand palace with its ornate columns to test the theory of the term 'impenetrable'. They would level the house and kill as many of the nation's leaders as they could, just as they had everywhere else. The remaining five legions were waiting for the humans to arrive.

Oh, there had been a paltry handful of US Marines and secret service agents when they arrived, but they were dead before Beelzebub was even aware they had tried to resist.

Facing out toward the street running past the front of the White House, Beelzebub was one of the first to see the portals opening. The sight brought a satisfied smile to his face. The power-hungry idiot Ironbolt had actually achieved that which he claimed he could.

The SIA Army was arriving. Now it was time for them to die.

The first barrage of hellfire turned the air red. It shot outwards from the demons surrounding the White House in such density that individual orbs were impossible to pick out. It slammed into the barrier shields held in place by the leading SWATs as they charged onto the battlefield. Their barriers fell

instantly, the hellfire so thick the first wave of them died before anyone knew what was happening.

Beelzebub watched impassively, a tinge of sorrow for the great talent they were being forced to kill. Each member of the SIA Army would make for a great familiar; someone to perform mundane routine tasks for their master or mistress. Alas, he knew many of those now perishing were former familiars, foolishly opting to escape their lives for the great lie that is freedom. They could never be returned to such a subservient role, and they were too powerful to be allowed to survive.

They signed their own death warrants the moment they chose to escape with Otto Schneider.

More fell as the wall of hellfire continued to batter the supers. Beelzebub turned away.

A half second later he turned back. The hellfire had stopped. Abruptly and without warning every one of his soldiers had chosen to stop firing.

Except they hadn't, he realised, when he saw how confused they all were.

It took him a few seconds to pick her from the crowd, but there among the resilient fighters was Katja Weber, the young girl given to Teague as a familiar only to be rescued by Otto Schneider. The young girl who beat half a dozen of his demons all by herself when the idiots attempted to take her in Bremen. The girl who could do things with hellfire that ought not to be possible.

She was floating three feet off the ground, her hair fanned out on either side of her head as though supported on an invisible breeze. Her eyes were pure, blazing white, elemental energy flowing through her body at such volumes and speeds it ought to burn her up from inside, yet she continued to defy all that the demons knew about humanity's ability to wield magic.

“Very well,” Beelzebub grumbled, his deep rich voice carrying across the stunned silence. “Elemental magic it is then.”

He drew energy from the nearest ley line, feeling like a child as he conjured, the spells were so basic. Bringing lightning to bear, he lashed out against the lines of supernaturals. The power he brought down ripped into the ground, blasting chunks of earth, and sidewalk in all directions. The humans held fast, their defensive spells repelling almost all the demon lord’s strike.

The rest of the demons, tens of thousands of them took a second to catch on. They used elemental magic for household tasks, nothing more. Most could not recall the last time they might have used it as a weapon, but that was what they did now.

With bellowed commands from both sides, the battle changed. One on one, they were more evenly matched now that the demons’ deadly hellfire was out of the equation. Earth spells tore at the ground, lightning filled the sky, and goutts of flame flared so brightly a person would have to look away or risk temporary blindness.

“Where is the military!” screeched Hastatus. His team had been one of the first through and had the misfortune to open their portals right in the demons’ line of fire. His numbers were reduced almost by half in the first few volleys. “They are supposed to be here to help!” he yelled at Ezra.

“Keep fighting!” Ezra shouted in reply. Then, using an air spell to magnify his voice, he addressed everyone. “They will be here soon! Keep fighting! We need to be ready to give them cover when they arrive!”

The portals had closed already, the SWATs spread out across a dozen or more positions around the front of the White House where they threw everything they had at the demons. They were woefully outnumbered, and any fool could see they

were going to be beaten back and defeated if reinforcements didn't arrive soon. They needed the additional firepower the US military could bring to aid their efforts and reduce the number of spells coming their way.

What no one in the SIA Army knew was that the military were never coming. The US forces had no idea the battle was taking place and when they saw it on the news and believed they should be responding, the supernaturals deployed at the US bases to open portals to the military's targets had all miraculously vanished.

Ironbolt's treachery was complete. The best hope humanity had was being cut down and pushed back by an overwhelming force of demons commanded by Beelzebub himself.

That did not, however, mean the SWATs were going to go out without a fight.

When the first demon died, those around him dropped their spells in shock. The net result being that they died too only moments later. The familiars were powerful wizards, each of them capable at a level beyond what most of the supers wouldn't live long enough to achieve. They fought with all the fury a few centuries of enslavement will generate.

It was a pair of them, sisters called Marie and Gertrude, who were the first to strike a blow for the humans. Yet their victory was to be short lived. No sooner were they able to kill five demons with a concentrated manipulation of an air spell, than Gertrude was killed by a dragon.

The dragons had not been kept with the hordes, their ability to fly dictating they had to be corralled elsewhere. They were free now, and obeying Beelzebub's commands.

The one that killed Gertrude swept down from high above, the SWATs in its path scattering when its huge, leathery wings swept over their heads. It snatched Gertrude from the ground, snapping her spine with one bite before swallowing the rest of her whole.

Too shocked to defend herself, Marie almost joined her sister and was only saved when a shifter darted in to snatch her from the path of a water spell that might have frozen her on the spot.

“My lord,” Mesos bowed before Beelzebub. “Should we not unleash the rest of the beasts against them?”

“What?” Beelzebub shook his head. “Because they are able to score a few hits? Because we lose a few of our number? We should be thanking the humans for weeding out our weakest. Bringing beasts will just confuse things at such close quarters.” He grabbed his general roughly by his collar and shoved him back toward the action. “Now stop snivelling at the back and enjoy yourself.”

Mesos called, “Yes, my lord,” over his shoulder, the last words he ever said as the Stevens sisters split him in two with an air spell. They were power merging again, the three girls using two other wizards to provide a barrier that kept them safe while they dished out the pain.

The air spell they just conjured came loaded with shards of glass they took from a smashed car. The whole area was loaded with shrapnel, but if one side could use it, so could the other.

Ezra screamed for his team to hold fast when the first wave of debris loaded magic came their way. Trapped in the open the humans were spreading out, but finding cover wasn't easy. There were a few walls to hide behind, and a few cars, but the area to the front of the White House was flat and open. What cover did exist, got pummelled to the ground in seconds after anyone attempted to use it.

Katja knew they would be coming for her. Floating three feet off the ground as she maintained her watch for anyone attempting to create hellfire, she expected the lashes of lightning and flame when they came.

Such spells were easy enough to deflect with her own, using water to earth the lightning and diffuse the flame, but the demons were savvy enough to switch tactics when their first attempts to tackle the young girl failed.

Mammon and Caym, two demons who found themselves on a flank, opted to combine their spells. Neither was well practiced in using elemental energy for combat, but the principles are simple enough.

Mammon conjured air, manipulating it to generate an updraft that lifted a car's bonnet from the ground. Caym then sent it flying, his own spell crafted to add control and direction to the object. It spun through the air like a giant steel frisbee, scything across the battlefield on a direct course for Katja Weber.

She didn't see it coming, her own attention focused on pushing back a wall of demons coming at the humans from the west. They had flanked one team of the SWATs and would have broken through had she not been able to send her magic into the ground to rip the earth apart.

Utilising a trick she learned by accident in Bremen, she tore electrical cables from the ground. Amid the dust and flying dirt, the deadly, sparking cables danced like angry snakes. It both halted the demons' charge and brought the threatened team about to face the challenge.

Looking the wrong way to avoid the car part coming her way, Katja twisted in the air when she heard someone scream her name.

On the ground, Agatha, a Russian woman only recently learning how to control her own supernatural side, ran and jumped. In her shifted form, she stood well over six feet tall and weighed more than two hundred pounds. Her skin was a matt black like most of the weres, and it was tough like a shark's.

Her leap carried her high above the heads of all those around her and she might have altered the trajectory of the bonnet had she not been unfortunate enough to jump into the path of a manipulated lightning spell.

The magic tore into her, electrical energy generated by agitating the air molecules, sending her back to the ground in a crumpled heap.

Above her head, Katja's tiny body was hurled from the air, the impact of the sheet steel component resounding like a gong where it struck her head.

A hundred yards away, Beelzebub's mouth twitched in a smile as he formed an orb of hellfire.

Chapter 8

The weapon looked like a science experiment gone wrong. It was part organic and part stone which shone and sparkled from within with a purple light as though amethysts ran through it. Around the base, onyx spikes touched the ground and in its centre, what appeared to be a heart trapped in crystal pulsed, with energy.

“What is it?” asked Giannis, doing his best to look and sound unimpressed.

Serena came to stand beside the machine. “It is an ancient weapon, Giannis. It was designed by one of the very first of our leaders, our supreme beings, to provide a way to protect ourselves. It is called the Bagh Nakh which means final weapon.”

Mutterings and questions were growing in volume. The device looked alive. It looked dark and deadly. Perhaps even evil. The angels wanted to move away from it; the device made them uncomfortable though no one would be able to articulate why.

Serena continued, “Like the sword, it was built to only be operated by our strongest, by the supreme being’s line.”

“How come I’ve never heard of it?” Benjamin challenged. Looking around for confirmation, he added, “How come none of us have ever heard of it?”

“Because it was kept a secret,” mocked Godfrey, repeating a point he’d already made. “Only the supreme beings knew it existed. Once I came of age, my father told me about it and explained how to make it work. Not even my brother knows it exists.” Godfrey allowed the assembled angels a few moments to let his revelations sink in. They were in awe, their reactions all variations of the same shock.

Raising his voice, he silenced them when he started speaking again. “You questioned why I have remained so

confident that we will triumph over the demons. The answer is this device. With it we cannot be defeated.”

Benjamin opened his mouth to speak, but his question was so obvious Serena answered it before he could speak.

“It was originally intended to wipe out the humans if they ever rose up against us. There were so many of them, our ancestors recognised the need to have a way to reduce their numbers quickly.”

“But the humans are not the danger,” called a voice from the crowd.

“That is correct,” agreed Godfrey. “I have been working on the device for some time to improve it. The user – me – connects themselves to it using source energy. It requires a constant stream much like a sword, a safety feature built in to prevent anyone but the line of the supreme being from using it. The user guides the device to use source energy to connect with the targets. This is achieved at an organic level. Humans are fundamentally different to our race, so they are easy to target. The demons are the same as us, but through experimentation I have found I can identify them individually.”

“Individually?” questioned Giannis, his tone incredulous.

“Yes,” Godfrey placed a hand upon the device. “If you are questioning how that is possible, I’m afraid I cannot explain the intricacies of the Bagh Nakh and how I operate it. Connecting with the demons is not easy, not when there are so many of them, but I have achieved it on multiple occasions. Who of you has observed my absences?”

Godfrey knew Gabriel wasn’t the only one suspicious of their leader’s regular vanishing tricks. He heard the mutterings and saw the looks; the shared whispers, and had enjoyed them knowing he would silence all his detractors with a single demonstration of the device.

Ever the sceptic, Giannis was yet to be satisfied. “You have operated the weapon successfully?” He got the question in just before Benjamin was able to voice the same concern.

Godfrey twitched an eyebrow. “Successfully? You question whether I have already used it to destroy the demons? Clearly, I have not. The death curse fell mere hours ago. Like everything else I do, there was strategy behind delaying the demons’ demise. Right now they are crushing the humans. We will end their terror and having done so will reveal ourselves to the world. The humans will not know of the weapon and have no ability to comprehend how we crushed my brother and his followers. Now that the humans are terrified, I will save them. They will then send their supernatural army to tackle us because I will announce my right to rule. I will sweep their best fighters aside with a word, as I already explained, and the world will fall to its knees certain there is nothing to be gained by resisting.”

Serena came to stand behind her son, her right hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

“It is time, son,” she remarked, prompting him to face the device just the way they planned and practiced. Godfrey was a master showman, able to captivate an audience and control them. Right now they were silent, eating out of his hand, every last one of them leaning forward and straining to see and hear.

Godfrey knelt in front of the device. Drawing source energy from the planet, he placed his hands through two holes the angels were unable to see from their angle. The second he sent power into the weapon, it lit up from within, springing to life as the onyx spikes around the base burrowed into the ground.

Enraptured, the angels watched. A soft glow spread outward from the weapon, enveloping Godfrey so he appeared to be lighting up from inside.

A bead of sweat formed on his right temple, then one on his left. Effort made veins stand out on his head and neck, his lips parting to reveal teeth clenched tightly together. More sweat came, the light from the device getting brighter and brighter.

Serena, standing just a few yards behind her son, began to grow concerned.

A grunt of effort escaped Godfrey, the sound of a person doing everything they can to continue performing something incredibly difficult. He grunted again, this time louder, the sound he made more closely resembling a scream.

Serena's right foot twitched, indecision preventing her from advancing.

The rest of the angels were likewise poised, many getting to their feet as they questioned if this was what the Bagh Nakh was supposed to look like when operated.

Before anyone could rush to his aid, Godfrey cried out with a mix of rage and frustration as he fell away, collapsing back into the sand where he lay panting.

Serena got to him first, dropping to her knees to help support his upper half. Godfrey's laboured breathing made his chest rise and fall as he heaved in gulping lungful's of air.

"What happened?" asked Giannis.

"Did it work?" asked someone else, their question echoed by so many others.

Godfrey looked up at their worried faces. He was sprawled in the sand, fine grains of it sticking to his wet skin. He'd promised them deliverance, the opportunity to defeat the demons who outnumbered them many to one. He'd promised and now he had to admit he could not deliver.

"It did not work," he managed to say between gasps of air. "I can reach out and touch the demons, I can feel them and

connect to them, but the weapon would not operate.” He had to stop speaking so he could get his breath.

The angels filled the silence with their own words, questions giving way to near panic as they each postulated what this might mean for them. Godfrey had always been their strength, their confidence. If that was all based on a weapon he wasn't able to operate, were they now lost?

“My people!” Godfrey cried out, pushing away from his mother and up off the sand. “My people,” he repeated more calmly now that he had their attention. “All is not lost. I believe the device may be missing a component. In truth I have wondered about this for a long time.”

He drew their attention to a gap in the rock. It was roughly rectangular, which is to say it was almost square, and perhaps four inches deep.

“So there is a bit missing?” questioned Giannis. “Then it is useless.” Benjamin echoed the sentiment with more voices making it clear they felt the same.

“No, my people. Not useless, for I know where the missing piece is.”

Chapter 9

The leader of the Order of Jesus the Almighty was a man called Denton Kirby. A used car salesman by day, he viewed his other role as his true calling. His house was a modest semi-detached where he lived with his wife and the last of three children.

His youngest son was already out for the day when Anastasia and her team arrived in the street outside the house. He had swimming training and was up and gone before the sun made an appearance.

Not that Anastasia knew this or would have cared. She wasn't thrilled with the work she had to do, but no one else could do it and it had to be done.

Refraining from blasting the front door off its hinges, she chose instead to have Daniel open a portal inside the house.

Denton's wife, Alice, was taking milk from the fridge when she heard the sound of birdsong inexplicably coming from behind her. She turned around to find a shimmering circle and a view of the street outside where the rest of her kitchen ought to be.

She screamed, somewhat predictably, and dropped the milk. The plastic container split, pitching milk across her tiled floor.

Anastasia stepped through, her feet landing in the kitchen right in front of the startled and hyperventilating Mrs Kirby.

"Samuel could you be a sweetie and take care of that for me?" she asked without taking her eyes off the terrified woman.

Alice Kirby had backed up to the fridge where she gripped it, hoping she was about to wake up. She wanted to close her eyes, but was too scared the horrifying apparitions might still be there when she opened them again. Where should she look

though? At the five-foot woman with the ruined face, her doll-like proportions and the enormous sword sticking out from behind her back? At the three men coming through the shimmering circle behind her, or at the rather dumpy looking woman with the pale skin. She looked so out of place against the other four, Alice's brain almost sniggered.

However, when Samuel employed a simple air spell to funnel the spilt milk off the tile, into the air, and across to her sink, she found herself unable to look away.

"Is there coffee, my love?" asked Denton, strolling into the kitchen with his hands full of mail. His eyes were down, sorting the bills from the junk, and he succeeded in walking right by Alex before something at the back of his brain spasmed into life.

He jerked, leaping away from the unexpected danger. His eyes wide and the day's post falling to the floor, he bounced off the kitchen counter and blurted, "It's you!"

Anastasia gave him a pinky wave.

Daniel formed hellfire and though he had no intention of using it, he almost let it go by accident when Mrs Kirby screamed and fainted.

Drolly, Alex asked, "Do you have that effect on all women?"

They all watched her fall, Alice toppling to the side and toward her husband who did nothing to arrest her journey to the solid floor. Her head hit the tile with a thud.

Anastasia looked at Daniel. "You couldn't at least have tried to catch her?"

"You're closer," he replied. "I thought you were going to catch her."

Swearing loudly, Anastasia flared her eyes at the demons and jinked her head toward the softly moaning woman now lying at their feet.

Daniel rolled his eyes in a ‘why me’ gesture and summoned source energy to heal just in case she was injured.

Stepping over Mrs Kirby, Anastasia dropped her friendly demeanour. She walked right up to Denton, close enough that she could smell his toothpaste.

“I need to know everything you know, and I want to know it right now.”

Unlike the previous evening, when Denton had the full strength of his order’s membership at his side to make him feel braver, he spilled his guts without the need for any further threats.

Samuel and Gabriel tended to his wife while Denton explained what he knew.

“I don’t rightly understand how it works, but I witnessed him powering it up. It glowed and there was purple light coming from within the rock. Jesus ... sorry, I mean Godfrey.” Denton didn’t believe for a moment that it was anyone other than the son of God come again that he had been meeting with. However, the tiny, yet fiery woman insisted she would slap his face if he referred to him as Jesus again, so he refrained from doing so.

“Yes, Godfrey,” Anastasia pushed Denton to continue. “You were telling me about the weapon. What does it do?”

“It will kill the demons. Well, actually,” Denton corrected himself. “He said it would kill whoever he aimed it at. I don’t think he really meant to say aimed because it carries the power of God inside it.” Seeing Anastasia’s disbelieving face, he tried to defend his statement. “That’s what he told me. I swear. He said it would allow him to use the power of God to eliminate the demons when they came to Earth. Only ...” he paused.

“Yes?” Anastasia narrowed her eyes. “Only what?”

“Well, I’m sure you’ve seen the news this morning. Demons are everywhere. Well, everywhere but here. There’re no reports of demon attacks in New Zealand, but ... do you think they will come here?”

Anastasia might have lied and told him not to worry if she’d been given the chance to do so. She wanted to blame Denton for helping Godfrey, but knew he had acted the same way most others would. The world was living in fear. It was bad enough before Mostar, religious centres around the world enjoying a massive upswing in attendance. Ana could only imagine what it might have been like in the last month.

She hadn’t seen the news, but before she could comment, Alex was shouting her name from the next room.

Alice had been moved to the couch in the living room where she remained. Anastasia found her there when she hurried through the house to see what had her friend so excited.

Alex was staring at the television in the corner, her eyes transfixed by what she was seeing. Samuel and Gabriel were staring too, as was Mrs Kirby, her situation forgotten as the images playing on the screen across the room stole everyone’s attention.

“I just turned it on for something to distract Mrs Kirby,” Alex explained, her voice quiet and sounding far away as though she barely had enough concentration left over to make her mouth move. “I thought I might find a cooking show.”

Anastasia gawped at the scene projected into the Kirbys’ living room. It was clearly the White House though the building had suffered a lot of damage and was on fire.

A reporter, her voice excited and full of nervous fear, talked over the footage which was filming from a helicopter high above and away from the action to a static camera aimed at the battle from a building overlooking the White House lawn.

“I’ll try to keep reporting for as long as I can!” she yelled into her microphone. “The scene outside the White House is one of absolute devastation. There are what I believe to be supernatural humans fighting the demons. Is it an army? Is this the Supernatural Investigation Alliance? Is this their response? I hope not because it looks like the humans are losing.” A thunderous roar accompanied the cameraman ducking.

The footage suddenly was of the reporter, a young woman with flaming red hair and an Irish complexion. She was crouching too, hiding from whatever had just come their way. Dust filled the air around her, and it was easy to tell by the amount of white around her eyes that she was utterly terrified.

Despite her fear, she nodded to the person holding the camera and came out of her crouch. Once again, they were looking down from an open window high above the streets of Washington, showing the fight in all its terrible glory.

The reporter did her best to describe what she was seeing, but fell silent for a second after she let out a tiny squeal of horror. There was no need to question what startled her into making such a sound, one wing of the White House had just collapsed on live TV.

Anastasia reached behind her head, gripping her sword and drawing it.

“Daniel,” she spoke his name calmly. “Please open a portal. I am going there.” She heard the portal take form and turned to face Alex. “You are staying here, babes. If I don’t die, I’ll be back for you shortly.” She twisted from the waist again, this time so she could see Gabriel and Samuel? “Are you coming?”

Chapter 10

Very few of the SIA Army soldiers saw Katja Weber get tossed from the sky, but they knew about it a fleeting moment afterward, nevertheless.

Beelzebub launched a hellfire orb that ripped through the battlefield. It was aimed with care though tossed with an almost nonchalant disinterest. Hastatus saw it coming, but only at the last moment when it was far too late to do anything other than sacrifice himself.

It was heading for Katja, the young German girl who was lying on the ground, a wound to her head leaking blood onto the tarmac. One of her legs was very clearly broken; anyone with eyes could see the unnatural angle at which it was set, and for all Hastatus knew she was already dead.

If, however, she was still alive, he understood that she represented humanity's best chance to win. They were fighting with the demons, and though desperately outnumbered, for the last few minutes they had held their own against the invaders. Much of that was because Katja denied the demons their best weapon. She simply switched it off though no one, not even the German girl herself, could explain how it was possible.

In the hours before the battle, when they were back in the SIA battle arena preparing for whatever was next, he heard a rumour she was immortal like Otto Schneider. He heard it was something to do with Schneider exploding a demon called Teague and Katja being in close enough proximity to absorb the same magic that made him unkillable.

Hastatus didn't know how much, if any of it was true, but seeing the hellfire coming for the broken form lying wounded on the ground, there was no time for reflection or inner decision making. He stepped into the orb's path and perished.

There were cries of horror, but few were directed at his death. Instead, they were all to do with the demons rearming

themselves with hellfire. The battle had spread out since the supernaturals arrived, flooding into the streets around the White House where the humans could find more cover and limit the number of demons able to attack them at one time.

Using portals, both sides moved about, unleashing a spell and ducking back through a portal held open by a partner. It worked to a degree, but only because the demons were stuck using elemental magic. The humans were more readily able to deflect and work against it. All they had to defend themselves against hellfire was their barrier spells, but those had to be loaded in advance, the magic stored inside a ring or locket and sealed with the wearer's blood. They could call them forward with a word, but each barrier fell the instant hellfire touched it.

This meant they could defend themselves against a few hits, but not indefinitely.

For precisely that reason, in the two seconds following Beelzebub's first fresh orb, a fifth of the SIA force died. The demons dropped whatever spell they were conjuring, and the air turned a dark, dirty red once more when it filled with hellfire.

Anastasia stepped onto the battlefield and willingly into the path of the deadly hail of orbs. Behind her and still in New Zealand, swearing as she threw herself to the carpet, Alex managed to avoid the hellfire that passed to the sides of her friend.

Alice Kirby froze to the spot, staring at the new and rather smoking hole between her living room and kitchen as the portal snapped shut.

"Well, darling, here we are!" Daniel had to shout so Anastasia could hear his voice. "What now?"

He was ducked down behind an overturned truck that looked like it had recently re-entered the Earth's atmosphere and then been used as a chew toy by a Tyrannosaur. Alongside him, Samuel and Gabriel also chose to stay out of the way.

They could be hurt now and though they could use source energy to heal themselves, they needed to be alive to do that.

Peeking around the side of the truck, Gabriel shouted, “These are rather poor odds, Anastasia.” He didn’t just mean the demons. Gabriel felt the humans, those still alive, were as likely to attack them as members of his own race.

Anastasia, having been protected from harm by her armour, had also absorbed the energy the hellfire contained and was searching the battlefield for the person she wanted: Otto Schneider. He commanded the SIA forces so far as she knew, so it was he to whom she needed to speak.

Unable to spot him, she accepted things for what they were - utterly confused like any battlefield – and chose a new strategy.

News of her arrival had not gone unnoticed. The Stevens sisters had spotted her for a start. When the second wave of hellfire came, they were a hundred yards from Pennsylvania Avenue and almost on 17th. Protected by other members of their team, they had been able to isolate and annihilate a group of about twenty demons. Now heading back to try to regroup they saw her sword.

She was pointing it like an arrow, her right arm extended.

“Is that ...” Jennifer started.

“Yup,” confirmed Cassie, “She’s going after the big guy.”

Beelzebub saw when his shot at Katja Weber was intercepted, and would have tried again had there not been other humans who rushed to the girl’s aid. She was surrounded in seconds, the supernaturals wise enough to protect their greatest asset. Even then, he thought it worth the risk to open a portal right next to them. He could kill at will with only a small risk to himself, but Anastasia arrived and that changed the game.

When she calmly deflected the hellfire using her sword and aimed it right at him in a brave announcement, he inclined his head to acknowledge her challenge.

Over her shoulder, Anastasia said, “Get the humans out of here. They will get slaughtered if they stay. Grab everyone who is still alive and take them somewhere safe. And find me Otto Schneider. I need him.”

“But the military are supposed to be coming!” argued Nicole. “We are supposed to give them protection when they come through their portals so they can help us to fight.”

Anastasia grabbed the Scottish wizard roughly by the arm and yanked her in close.

“Does it look like anyone is coming to save you?” she barked. “Look around! This is a slaughterhouse, a kill box. Get out now or everyone dies!”

Anastasia had a lot more to say, but there was no time. She could explain later if she survived. Beelzebub was coming her way, his own sword drawn. It couldn't do what hers would but that hardly mattered any longer. Her sword could kill an immortal demon if she pushed a sustained stream of source energy through it. But the demons were no longer immortal, one only had to cast one's eyes around the battlefield to know that to be the case.

There were more human bodies, but enough of the demons to confirm what she hoped – she could kill them far more easily now than she had before, and every one of them she removed from the playing field the more likely it became that the humans could win.

Walking directly toward the demon lord, she sent a stream of hellfire from her left hand. It blasted through a dozen demons, killing each instantly. In theory a demon can catch hellfire and reuse it, but her sustained stream was always going to be too much for them to handle. Only descendants of

the supreme being were able to survive hellfire or able to be hit with sinfire without losing consciousness.

If Beelzebub cared, he showed not the slightest sign. Fully two feet taller than the diminutive former soldier, when he got within ten yards of Anastasia, he started running. At three yards, he leapt, his sword going high.

Beneath him, Anastasia lifted her left hand, firing a stream of hellfire up into her enemy's face.

Having anticipated her tactic, Beelzebub was ready for it. His own sustained stream came down to meet hers, his left hand extended even as he swung his sword.

The two streams met in the middle, the resultant explosion akin to two opposite magnetic poles being forced together at speed. Around them, combatants on both sides found themselves unable to do anything but watch.

A blinding flash of energy swept outward, a shockwave of air flattening everyone without a place to find cover. It created a temporary lull. It lasted no more than three or four seconds, but in that time, the humans withdrew. The white house had slumped, the combined efforts of the demons resulting in a lake of lava in the bedrock beneath the great building.

Live across the globe, stunned viewers got to watch America's seat of power sink into the earth. Amelia Stadler, the reporter doing her best to show the world what was happening, saw Anastasia Aaronson and recognised who it was.

Reputed to be a terrorist, Amelia questioned whether the world had that all wrong when she started killing demons and went up against the biggest figure on the battlefield. The shockwave of energy blew out windows all around Lafayette Square and filled the air with so much dust and debris it was impossible to see anything afterwards.

In the confusion, Beelzebub picked himself up, but was unable to find his opponent. He had wanted to kill her. To end

Anastasia's life at that moment and reclaim his father's armour would have made a statement to his followers and opponents alike. Alas, she had chosen to strike and flee.

The battle against the SIA Army had not been the fantastic victory he'd hoped for, but few things are certain in battle, he knew that much. Ironbolt promised to deliver them, and he had done so, though without Otto Schneider - another human Beelzebub longed to kill.

Summoning his generals, Beelzebub called for his legions to regroup. They had lost a few of their number, but only a few. It was, in the end, insignificant.

They would rest now, and they would eat. Then they would start anew, for there were still nations to conquer and cities to level.

Chapter 11

Anastasia didn't lose consciousness when the two streams collided, but she came very close and found herself completely disoriented when the shockwave finished tumbling her along the ground. Yet again, as she found herself flying through the air, she wished Alex could have located the helmet that went with the suit of armour.

Hands above her head to protect it, she worried she might lose the sword, skewer herself with the sword, or maybe just snap it in two. None of those things came to pass, but by the time she stopped rolling, she had no clue where she was or whether Beelzebub might be about to cut her in half.

Another reason why she was so confused was the lack of battle going on. There was no dust or debris around her, no sounds of fighting or magic getting flung in all directions. Looking about, she realised she wasn't even looking at the White House and the sun was in a different position.

Daniel released her, taking his arm from around her middle and scooting back a couple of feet to give her some space.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Paris."

Anastasia blinked. "Paris, France?"

"Is there another?"

"Yes. Several, probably. Never mind that though. What are we doing in France?"

Daniel got up off the ground and offered a hand to help Ana up too. "You said to get everyone safe. This is safe."

Now that she was standing, Anastasia could see that she was on top of a building, the flat roof giving her height to see above much of the surrounding city. They were right in the

heart of it, the Eiffel Tower looming over them and less than a mile away.

“I grabbed you when the shockwave sent you flying,” Daniel explained. “You tumbled through to land here. Are you hurt?”

Anastasia thought about his question, and decided she was not. Not badly enough to care about anyway, but she said, “Since when do you care if I am hurt?”

“Since my future started depending on it, love. If you die and the humans lose, what becomes of Daniel, eh? If the angels win with Godfrey’s wonderful weapon, I am screwed. If Beelzebub wins because he has vastly superior numbers, I am doubly screwed. My only hope is to keep you alive and pray you can find a way to beat them both.”

There it was then. The old Daniel was never very far away. He might put on a show of looking out for others and acting altruistically, but behind it all his only motivation was self-preservation.

“Where are the others?” Ana asked, to stop herself from thinking about Daniel. It didn’t work, for even as she said the words, all she could think about was the night they spent together. With her entire memory wiped by the piece of shrapnel in her brain, she knew nothing of her life before that point. There must have been boyfriends, she guessed, but their faces, what they did together was all lost now. It meant the sum total of her sex life amounted to one night spent with a demon.

A very handsome demon with a great body, but a demon all the same. She tried hard to ignore it, but his indifference, his lack of interest in repeating the encounter, hurt her.

“The survivors?” Daniel confirmed. “Back in Washington I would guess. I told Ezra to get clear and suggested coming here, but he insisted they needed to go back to their base to

regroup and deal with their wounded. Samuel and Gabriel went with them.”

“Who’s Ezra?”

“Oh, um, a former familiar. I forget sometimes that you don’t know everyone.”

Sucking in a deep breath through her nose, Anastasia sheathed the sword and held out her hand for Daniel to take – portal travel requires flesh to flesh contact for those who cannot conjure their own.

“Take me to Washington. I need to find Otto, and I need to see who is left. This is far from over and they don’t even know about Godfrey.”

Chapter 12

Colt Ironbolt watched the battle outside the White House with a blend of emotions. Horror at what he was seeing, especially when the White House collapsed in on itself, joy and pride that he had been able to orchestrate the SIA Army walking into a trap, fear because the plan he'd spent so long crafting – his rise to ultimate power – was coming to fruition and it felt so tantalisingly close it made his gut revolt, and sadness too. Not for the supernaturals, of course, he still found them to be freaks of nature too revolting to tolerate, but for his own agents he'd needed to send with them knowing they would die. Their sacrifice was necessary; had he withdrawn all the SIA agents, someone would have known there was something amiss.

When the dust cloud obliterated all hope of seeing anything more, he turned off the television set in his office and poured himself two fingers of bourbon.

The good stuff.

There was much to do now. He wasn't going to get a lot of sleep and he needed to look good when he went before the cameras. That would be tomorrow probably, he thought – tonight would be too soon. Also, there was need to confirm the president was dead. Colt felt it a foregone conclusion he was and knew that whoever was left from the current administration, if there was anyone at all, would be trying to find the next in line to be sworn in.

It was the way it worked. There had to be a president. Well, he was going to fix that. The world, not just America, was without leadership. If other countries, even his own, wanted to claim they had a leader, that leader would be subordinate to him.

It was all set up. Everything but the announcement itself. Beelzebub's bargain centred upon Colt Ironbolt being the first

world president, the person representing human affairs and concerns in their new master's house.

Ironbolt downed his glass and after a few seconds debate, decided he deserved another one. After all, he was about to become the most powerful and influential person who ever lived.

Chapter 13

Godfrey was not used to being on the back foot and it was making him unpredictable. Since he could remember, he had promised his followers victory over his brother and that they would all, once again, live in peaceful harmony on Earth. The humans would worship and serve them, and finally it would be as though the death curse had never occurred.

Now, however, standing beside his malfunctioning device, the voices of those who dared to question him were getting louder.

“Is this really all you have?” questioned Marina, a tall woman with green eyes and blonde hair.

“It is all we need,” Godfrey replied.

Giannis, always ready to undermine their leader, was quick to add his thoughts. “It might be all we needed if it worked.”

Godfrey fought against a rising desire to silence Giannis once and for all. Killing him would set an example and pull the rest into line, but the example was not one he wanted to start his new kingdom with. They were supposed to be the peaceful ones. The race the humans would follow because they wanted to. Okay, so the humans would have no choice, but Godfrey also believed he could convince them to see his ways were right for the entire planet.

“I have already told you the missing component can be found. We waste time here bickering, Giannis. Do you not wish to see an end to the demon threat?”

Giannis scoffed. Now that he was joined by other voices, his confidence was growing fast. He remembered the last time he stood against their leader and suffered the full force of a sustained sinfire stream for his sedition.

“Produce it then, Godfrey. If you know where it is, why are you not fetching it?”

Serena narrowed her eyes and responded with a growl. “Remember who you are talking to, Giannis. The supreme being ...”

“He is not the supreme being!” Giannis interrupted with a shout that was echoed by the voices around him. “Not until he rules over Earth and the humans. Not until the demon threat is eradicated. At this moment, Beelzebub is closer to becoming the supreme being!”

In the face of Giannis’s intensity, Godfrey knew well enough to remain calm. It made it so much easier to belittle and discredit his opponent.

“You think this is a time for panicking, Giannis?” Godfrey mocked.

“I am not panicked,” Giannis ground his teeth.

Content to let Giannis be the spokesperson for the group while he watched and listened, Benjamin continued to size up who stood where and how strong their feelings for or against Godfrey might be. He wasn’t sure yet where his loyalties should lie. If Godfrey could operate the Bagh Nakh, it would cement his position and no one would be able to question his rule or stand against him. Exactly as it should be for the supreme being.

Serena weighed in with, “You could have fooled me.”

Now that Giannis’s cheeks were burning, Godfrey continued. “I think it a good thing you are not in charge, Giannis. Goodness knows what might become of us. The device will work perfectly well once it is whole. That our conquest of the Earth suffered a minor setback is hardly surprising. Everything that I have planned has been hypothetical until this point. The device could not be tested until the death curse fell. We are mere hours into our fight to win and you sound ready to give up.”

Struggling to understand how the argument got away from him – a few moments ago he’d been firmly in the driver’s seat

– Giannis tried to regain control.

“There’s nothing to be gained by twisting my words, Godfrey. Everyone can see ...”

“That you are the last person they should listen to? Yes, I’m sure they can see that.” Turning away from Giannis to address everyone else, Godfrey lifted his arms and in so doing completely blocked out the crowd’s view of his opponent. “My people, in a few short hours, this will all be over. We will leave now, all of us. The missing component formed the headpiece of my father’s helmet. I’m sure you all noticed that Anastasia did not possess it though she was able to collect most of his suit of armour.”

Godfrey looked about for confirmation.

“So where is it?” asked Marina.

Godfrey smiled. Giannis hadn’t spoken for more than a minute. He had been forgotten as Godfrey brought the angels’ attention back to where it should be: firmly on their leader.

Opening a portal, he said, “Come with me. I’ll show you.”

Chapter 14

Cassie was arguing with Robbie when a portal opened just a handful of yards away from them. In the SIA battle arena below the headquarters, they were regrouping and coming to terms with how many of their people failed to return.

Six of the ten team leaders never made it back and no one knew where Otto was. The SIA army was in disarray to say the very least, their beleaguered numbers numb from the battle and largely unable to find direction or purpose to even consider what their next step should be.

To further their confusion, two angels had appeared in the midst of the battle, helping them all to escape back to Washington. The angels were being guarded warily now, the supers far too suspicious to allow them freedom to move, speak, or escape through a portal.

That said, the angels were powerful and experienced, and had they wanted to overpower the supernaturals surrounding them, they probably could, so it was a good thing they were willing to accept their terms of confinement.

Dropping their fight, which was all about whether she had actually seen Anastasia go after Beelzebub or not, both Cassie and Robbie conjured fresh lightning spells to repel whatever was about to step through the portal. Unsure who to expect, Cassie only held off in the hope it might be Otto Schneider or someone else returning from the White House.

More of the SWATs readied spells and chose to keep them charged for deployment when they saw Anastasia step through.

Her sword was sheathed, and she wasn't showing any intent to produce hellfire. Cassie and many of the supernaturals watching relaxed though they continued to keep their hold on the ley line should they need it. However, when a

demon stepped through right on Anastasia's heels, all hell broke loose.

A cry of, "Daniel!" came first but it was followed by warnings that the demons were in the arena, and other shouts to rally and be ready.

Jolted into action, Cassie released her spell. In her head, she questioned if it was the right thing to do, but hers was just one among many that came winging toward the portal. She didn't know Daniel, but she'd heard the name enough. He was the demon responsible for kidnapping and enslaving most of the familiars including Katja, Otto, and Ayla Pendragon, the head of the SIA. Cassie knew Anastasia was reputed to travel with a demon – it was one chief reason why she was listed as a terrorist for so long – but she hadn't realised it was the one most hated by the supernatural community.

Daniel got one foot onto the ground, his thoughts elsewhere when the first bolt of lightning caught him. It sizzled over the top of Anastasia's head, making her hair dance as the static plucked at it. Had it happened half a second sooner, he would have been shunted back through the portal to land on the rooftop in France. Instead, it struck in the heartbeat after he broke the portal link and was bowled across the battle arena.

Anastasia screamed, "No!" forming hellfire in her hands that just created more confusion and panic.

The supernaturals, many of whom had no idea what was going on and hadn't seen the portal or the new arrivals, reacted to the new threat as though their lives depended on it. Magic tore through the air as those with line of sight of the hated demon all threw what they had at him.

Anastasia had enough presence of mind not to throw her hellfire, blasting it into the ground by her feet instead. Daniel was down, smoke rising from his body which was undoubtedly damaged. She refused to allow him to be killed

for his past mistakes. They were big ones, but she needed him and so did humanity if they wanted to win.

Throwing herself across his body, she protected him from a deluge of lightning, flame and other spells. They tore at her exposed parts, her armour protecting her from the worst of it, but there was no way to avoid it all.

Heat seared her scalp, the smell of burning hair filling her nostrils to make her reconsider her stance on hellfire. She was never going to win any beauty contests, not with a network of scars where the left side of her face used to be, but she'd grown her hair back to cover it and burning that off was not okay.

The attack on Daniel started the instant the first former familiar recognised him, and might have continued had Katja not intervened. In many ways it was the fact that the young German girl was up and on her feet that stopped her colleagues from throwing all they had at the demon.

She left the scene of devastation outside the White House being carried. Stewart, a shifter, had lifted her broken body to bring her back through the portal Gabriel conjured, but few had seen her since. She was being tended to by those with medical training, but surely her body had sustained too much damage for her to survive.

Gawping at her now, the supernaturals watched her deflect their best spells with casual impatience. She was striding through the arena on her way to the huddled forms at the centre of the magical maelstrom and blocking everything that came their way. One by one, and then in a rush, the supernaturals stopped flinging destruction at their target.

Katja had as much reason as anyone to hate Daniel. He plucked her from her home, terrorised her and gave her to a demon as a pet. His interference resulted in her father's death, though it was not by Daniel's hand that he met his end.

Regardless of her feelings, the teenager was willing to put the past behind her if Anastasia Aaronson could give just reason why she should. It was for Anastasia, a woman she met only recently, that she had stopped the barrage of spells, not for the demon.

Crossing the last few yards, the arena now silent as they watched her with incredulous eyes, Katja saw Anastasia roll away from Daniel. He didn't move and was clearly injured. Ana was patting at her hair, craning her eyes to see whether it was damaged. Smoke rose from the ground around them both, but shockingly, Anastasia did not appear to be hurt.

“You are unharmed?” Katja questioned, her German accent pulling Anastasia's head around to look.

Ana remembered the girl. They met in an alley in Louisiana while she was fighting the horsemen. What she recalled was how powerful the teenager was - she could dismiss hellfire as though it was of no significance.

“It's the armour,” Ana remarked, twisting away from Katja to check Daniel. She swore, lifting her head to look about and around. Spotting what she needed, she shouted and gestured, “Hey, Gabriel! Get over here! He's hurt.”

Neither Gabriel nor Samuel, who was standing beside his father, moved. Not straight away. They looked at the humans positioned to guard them. They might have come to the supernaturals' rescue at the White House, but they were not human and were not trusted.

“Hey!” shouted Anastasia, straining to see what was going on. Spotting the wizards surrounding the angels, she roared, “I need them both right now. Do you really want to mess with me? If I have to come over there and get them ...”

Without leadership to guide them, the wizards failed to make a decision, so when Samuel raised his hands in a move of supplication and started to walk away, they did nothing.

“I’m going to help,” Gabriel assured them. “You have nothing to fear from us.”

The wizards tracked them across the arena, following close behind and on both sides. More joined, the supernaturals all wanting a closer look at what was going on.

Cassie, one of the closest to Anastasia, came even closer.

“Um, hello,” she said, addressing Anastasia who looked up at the American teenager. “Are you on our side now?” Her only interaction with Anastasia Aaronson before seeing her try to kill Beelzebub today was the same night Katja fought her. Sent to capture what they were told was a wanted supernatural terrorist, Katja claimed the tiny English woman had been fighting the demons.

“I’m fighting to ensure the humans come out on top if that’s what you mean.” Dismissing the girl, for that was what Ana considered her to be, she demanded, “Where’s Otto?”

Katja said, “We’ve been wondering the same thing. No one has seen him since we attacked the hordes. That was hours ago. He went to see Ayla and never came back.”

“Ayla Pendragon?” Ana questioned, wanting to make sure she understood. “The head of the SIA?” She knew the woman from the television even though she had briefly met her some months ago. She checked over her shoulder to confirm Gabriel was using source energy to heal Daniel, then said, “Let’s go see her then.”

“Wait, what’s he doing?” Naomi wanted to know. Both her and Jennifer had come to join their sister, Cassie. They were looking at Gabriel and the gossamer thin thread of spectral white light between his hand and Daniel’s body. “Is he ... is he healing him?”

Daniel’s eyes fluttered open.

Ana started walking. “Daniel, stay there, I’ll be back soon. Yes, the angels originally employed source energy to heal

injuries. It is very effective.”

Weakly, Daniel called out, “Um, are you sure you want to leave me with these people? I think most of them want to kill me.” There was a sea of angry faces looking his way.

Anastasia was powering across the arena, marching past the bewildered supernaturals who were finding it impossible to keep up with events. From destroying the hordes to the death curse falling, then a battle with the demons and the terrible losses that brought. Now the demon responsible for the enslavement of more than half the humans in the room was at their mercy and it was payback time.

Anastasia stopped and turned back to face Daniel. With a shrug, she said, “Well, you kinda deserve it, don’t you think?”

Daniel’s eyes flared. It was not the response he’d been hoping for.

Sighing, Ana, said, “Fine, okay. Listen up, everyone. You know who I am. Daniel kidnapped me too. He tricked me into bonding with him and did all kinds of other awful things. You hate him and I don’t blame you, but right now that doesn’t matter.”

She heard dozens of arguments starting.

“It doesn’t matter,” she growled loudly, “because we need him.” She wanted to tell them why, but something made her hold back. Gabriel and Samuel had been acting odd ever since the death curse fell. They were twitchy, and talking between themselves as though they had some big decision to make. Which they did. They knew what Godfrey had planned now and if he pulled it off the angels would win. In fact, the angels would be unstoppable. She was going to try to stop him, which meant she had to fight the demons and angels all at the same time. “I need him,” she added. “If we are to have any chance of winning, Daniel must not be harmed.” Looking at Daniel, she said, “Are you good to go?”

Gingerly, and watching the humans around him for any sign they were going to attack again – though this time he would be ready – he got to his feet.

“Sure.”

She jinked her head toward the doors leading from the arena. “Then come on, demon. We don’t have all day.” Starting to walk again, she did what came naturally and handed out more orders. “Gabriel, Samuel, tend to the wounded. Heal as many as you can. Also, I need a guide to take me to Ayla Pendragon; I have no idea where I am going.”

Standing right by the doors leading out of the arena, two SIA Agents, both men loyal to Ironbolt, were relaying a constant report through their radios.

More supernaturals made it back than Ironbolt anticipated. He’d expected Beelzebub to more or less wipe them out and would have been happy if he did. The fewer magical humans the better in his books. However, with no way to contact the demon leader, he was unsure what he ought to do now. Should he order his men to open fire? They had automatic weapons and would take out a few at least before the supernaturals deflected and defended against the bullets coming their way.

He wanted to know what state they were in and what they planned to do next. If they were not redeployed to attack the demons again, which Ironbolt wasn’t sure they would do unless he lied about the size and disposition of the force they needed to fight, they would want to return to their accommodation. He couldn’t have that. He needed to keep them corralled in one place where they could be controlled. If they were set free, how long would it be before they discovered he was running things again?

It would bring instant questions such as ‘where is Ayla’ and ‘what happened to Otto’. No, they had to stay in the arena and that message was relayed to the SIA agents manning the doors as Anastasia came toward them.

“Stop right there,” commanded the one on the left though both men placed a hand on the grip of their sidearms.

Anastasia kept walking, one eyebrow lifting slightly. “I’m going through those doors, boys. Trying to stop me would not be a good idea.”

“Sir,” Jared Caplan blurted into his radio. He wasn’t talking to Ironbolt, or even to General Smith, but a much lower subordinate manning the radio. “It’s Anastasia Aaronson, sir. She’s heading straight for us. Orders?”

Anastasia could hear the panic and indecision in his voice. She’d heard the same many times before from soldiers. The best of them would think on their feet, understand what the commander needed to achieve and make it happen. The rest quivered and dithered and failed to ever think for themselves.

She hit them both with sinfire, one orb from each hand. They struck the agents’ chests, rendering them instantly unconscious. They fell back against the doors they were supposed to guard, and she bent down to retrieve the radio from the talkative one.

“Caplan, report,” the voice said. “Caplan, under no circumstances are any of the supernaturals to leave the arena. Ironbolt’s orders. Caplan?”

Anastasia gritted her teeth. Ironbolt. She’d met him only once, but he epitomised everything she hated about people in command.

Turning around to check she wasn’t mistaken, she said, “I thought that idiot Ironbolt was replaced as the head of the SIA?”

“He was,” confirmed Ezra. “Weeks ago. Ayla Pendragon is running things now.”

Ana tilted her head to one side in a gesture that was easy to read as a challenge to the group belief.

“That is clearly not the case. This chap is getting orders from him.”

Ezra hastened over, others jogging to be included.

In the situation room many floors above their heads, General Smith had already witnessed his guards getting taken out and had sealed the doors electronically. He got to watch when Anastasia Aaronson, troublemaker that she was, rattled the handles and tried to get them to open.

The radio operator called out, “General, sir, they are asking questions. They want to know where Otto Schneider is. They know President Ironbolt is back in charge. What do I tell them?”

General Smith gave the man an incredulous look. “Lie to them, man! Tell them nothing has changed, and they are to wait in the arena until they receive further orders. The demon army is on the move, and they will be redeployed soon.”

In the arena, the supernaturals listened to the speedily delivered message and looked at each other.

“Lying?” asked Ezra.

Walking away from the doors, Anastasia said, “I should think so, yes. Let’s go find out for ourselves, shall we?” When she spun around with both hands blazing sinfire orbs, those closest to the doors bolted to get out of the way. Ana gave them a half second to get clear before unleashing what she had.

The doors flew inward, torn from their mounts like so much straw before a huffing wolf. Knowing they might shut off the elevators, Anastasia reluctantly took the stairs. The stump of her left leg was already hurting, and stairs were the thing she hated the most.

Daniel caught her arm. “Shall I open a portal, love?”

“To where?” she replied, paused two steps up the first flight. “We don’t know where anyone is.”

“I think I can guess,” supplied Ezra, one of the few team leaders to survive and therefore the person everyone left was looking to for leadership. “If Ironbolt really is back and both Ayla and Otto are missing, they will be in the detention centre.”

Chapter 15

London was a mess, huge swathes of it were reduced to rubble where Beelzebub released a horde to inflict maximum damage. The Houses of Parliament had been flattened, so too Buckingham Palace and St Paul's Cathedral. They had not been picked out specifically; everything around them was equally destroyed.

Miraculously, the British Museum survived, its location dictating that the worst of the devastation was elsewhere. It was abandoned, obviously, the day's visitors fleeing along with the staff when news of the demons' attack reached them.

Consequently, there was no one to see when portals opened outside the doors, and the angels stepped through.

Godfrey believed the artefact they wanted was separated from the rest of the device as a safety switch of sorts. To prevent anyone from operating it, even though in theory it could only be worked by a direct descendant of the supreme being's line, the safety switch was mounted on the helmet the supreme being wore. It went everywhere with him and therefore was in his possession at all times.

At least in theory.

What Godfrey knew was that his father hated wearing the helmet. It could usually be found in his bed chambers. He considered the rest of the armour, the sword and shield to be sufficient. Sure, it was magical and resided within his body until called forth, but according to his father, the helmet still made his head itch.

"How does that help us find it?" challenged Kasia, one of his mother's closest friends. "We already know our settlement was buried under the desert many thousands of years ago. Surely it is lost forever?"

"And why have you brought us here?" asked Giannis, always hoping to score a point.

Leading them through the museum, Godfrey explained, “Because the settlement was found in 1923. A British explorer called Sir Gavin N. Stacy discovered it. The artefacts have been listed as Mesopotamian even though they fail to match anything else from that era, but the point is that they were all brought here.”

“But you told us our settlement was lost,” protested Kasia.

Godfrey refrained from rolling his eyes. “It *is* lost. Even had it not been consumed by the desert, it has been four thousand years since we inhabited it. We can hardly return, my dear Kasia.”

Godfrey kept his walking pace fast to make everyone else have to practically jog to keep up. He didn’t exactly know where he was going; he’d never been to the museum before and never imagined that he would. Nevertheless, he acted as though he knew precisely where the artefacts were located while surreptitiously checking the signs located on the walls and above their heads.

After a few minutes, someone said, “Haven’t we been through here before?”

“No, no,” argued Godfrey. He was beginning to worry that he wasn’t going to be able to find the right section of the enormous building. Thankfully, his mother came to the rescue.

“Mesopotamian Research Wing,” she read from a sign her son had managed to miss twice. “It’s just down here everyone.”

The muttering that had become a constant among Godfrey’s followers quietened for a few seconds, but only for as long as it took them to reach a locked door.

What none of the angels realised was that several of the museum staff considered it safer to stay where they were. The museum itself had survived the bombings during the second world war and was largely thought to be one of the best places to be if London was under attack.

Professor Andy Scott chose to lock everyone inside when the horde and demons rampaged through London and was jolly glad he had done so. In many ways, this was turning out to be a most productive day. Usually, they had tourists traipsing through the displays and squinting through the glass panels to see what the bookish nerds on the other side were up to.

Andy was quite content to think of himself as a bookish nerd, it was a career he specifically pursued because it was what all the bullies at school called him. Now they worked in dead end jobs, and he was a professor with a staff of twenty.

His smugness over choosing to stay behind and lock the door evaporated the moment it exploded inwards.

Through the cloud of dust walked a man with flowing blonde hair and a beard to match. He was followed by dozens more people, both male and female and all of them strikingly good looking. There was no mistaking the aura of magic about them though or the light blue sparks coming from the glowing orbs many held in their hands.

Screams echoed around the room as the museum staff ducked to find cover and tried to run.

“Peace be upon you,” Godfrey called out, his time pretending to be Jesus meaning he was well rehearsed in what to say. “We mean you no harm.”

Some gentle ushering extinguished the sinfire orbs and brought Professor Andy out from his hiding place behind a desk.

“We are looking for an ancient artefact,” encouraged Serena, her smile matching her actions to make the humans feel more at ease.

Mimicking her smile, though he was honestly too terrified for it to look even near to convincing, Andy couldn't help the joke that made its way past his teeth. “Well, you came to the right place,” he laughed.

Around him, his staff cringed.

Godfrey took over. “What I seek is a helmet. It will appear to be made of forged iron and bronze. There is a decorative headpiece ...” he paused to look about, finding the pencil and paper he wanted on a nearby desk.

With the piece he really wanted drawn with what could only be described as an accurate hand, the professor and some of his braver staff crowded around to look at it.

“I’ve never seen this before,” Professor Andy Scott admitted, his voice rather sheepish as he tried to ignore what the consequence of failure might be. It wasn’t his fault he had no idea what the artefact was or where it could be, but would that be considered an acceptable excuse?

“So, it’s not here then,” remarked Giannis, his tone deliberately devoid of emotion though the subtext of his comment was clear.

Godfrey’s temper, held in check thus far, chose that moment to vent.

“You continue to dare to question me!” he spun around to face Giannis, only to find the angel already had sinfire orbs ready in his hand.

Spitting fury back at his leader, Giannis roared, “You continue to fail your people! You have no plan! You have no solution! Your brother is going to win and what do we do then? Meekly beg for a subservient place in his court? Everything you promised has come to naught because you refused to listen to counsel!”

“Do you think you can beat me?” asked Godfrey, his body swelling with source energy. “Have past encounters not taught you better?”

It was true that Giannis had challenged Godfrey before and had suffered the indignity of being shown just how much more powerful their leader was. It wasn’t going to happen today

though. Not only did he have the drop on his opponent, he also had backup.

Around the room, angels formed sinfire, their palms filling as they chose that moment to separate themselves – they were with Giannis, not Godfrey. It was a big step to take, and one that would not be easy to reverse. Yet in their eyes Godfrey had created the situation, not Giannis. He was not to be their new leader, just their spokesperson.

Looking around the room, Godfrey nodded his head. Behind him the humans were backing away and hurriedly trying to find a new way out. He paid them no mind and he accepted things for how they were.

“You are so easily defeated, Giannis. So the artefact is not here. All that means is that it is somewhere else. I will locate it and the fate of the demons will now be the fate of our separatists. Is that what you all want?” he shouted the final sentence, his eyes boring one by one into all those who dared to oppose him.

“What we want is the chance to find our own path,” replied Kasia, stepping out from behind Godfrey’s mother to join Giannis.

Shocked, Serena said, “You too? Why did you never speak of this to me?”

“Because you and Godfrey are of the same mind. You both believe your way is the only way. I think perhaps that Beelzebub may have a better way.”

Instantly incensed, Godfrey spat, “He murdered my father!”

Calmly, for he had learned from Godfrey how to disarm an angry person, Giannis replied, “But did he? I heard him deny the claim and accuse you.”

Unable to control himself any longer, Godfrey sent source energy through his body to create a sustained stream of sinfire.

He knew that if he could catch Giannis by surprise, he could kill him and anyone else who chose to oppose his rightful leadership. He was next in line to be the supreme being. No one else.

He wasn't fast enough.

Anticipating that Godfrey would blow his stack if pushed hard enough, Giannis fired orbs of sinfire directly into his chest. From three yards away it was impossible to miss. The suddenness of it shocked half the assembled angels, not all of whom were able to fit inside the room. Many reacted by loosing their own sinfire, multiple orbs hitting their leader even as he tumbled and crumpled away from the first two.

Unlike in the immortal realm where they could not be hurt and the effects of sinfire were a nuisance and little more, Godfrey crashed backward into a desk which broke under his body weight. He was unconscious before he hit the floor and therefore missed the terrifying close-quarter exchange of firepower as angels from his court and the new group of separatists flung sinfire around like fireworks inside a barrel.

When the smoke lifted, Giannis was gone, so too Kasia and most of the others who stood up to challenge Godfrey's leadership. Serena took a hit in the exchange and was slumped, groggy against the wall.

Only about ten percent of the angels' total number had departed, the rest choosing to stick with what they knew in the hope that Godfrey's plan would work. They were all lost if it did not.

They used sinfire to heal and aid recovery, bringing all those who were knocked out back to consciousness. It didn't take long, but a nervous silence dominated the room as Godfrey got back to his feet.

He'd been beaten for a start; something that would not have happened if he'd listened to those who wanted him to reclaim his father's suit of armour. Few could understand his reason

for letting Anastasia keep it when it would give him the advantage he needed over all challengers including his brother.

“Look. Benjamin.”

Godfrey turned to see what Adele was trying to say, his eyes immediately falling on the body of the fallen angel. For most of their existence, Benjamin had been a staunch supporter of the angels’ leader. Only in recent years had he chosen to challenge Godfrey. Really, it all came down to Godfrey’s willingness to ignore Beelzebub’s activities. Had Benjamin known what Godfrey planned, that he possessed the Bagh Nakh and could guarantee their victory, his attitude would have been different.

“It looks like he fell,” said Atticus, crouching near to, but not touching Benjamin’s body. “He must have been hit, and when he toppled, he struck his head.” Everyone looked at the deck right above Benjamin’s head.

Benjamin’s head was sitting at a bad angle, his neck surely broken, his sightless eyes staring at nothing. The angels looked down at their brother, their compatriot. He was the first of their kind to perish in more than four thousand years and it was a shock to them all. Also, it stood as a timely reminder that they were all mortal now and could no longer be cavalier with their lives.

The lack of sound in the room meant they were able to hear the whispering humans still cowering out of sight at the far end. They had a key for the door there, but it was on Professor Scott’s desk, and no one was willing to go back for it.

“Bring them to me,” Godfrey commanded, forcing Benjamin’s death to one side. “One of them must know more than they are revealing.”

His announcement drew whimpers of fear from the museum staff, but it turned out he was right and the one person who was able to provide helpful information was only too

pleased to do so in the hope that it would mean the dangerous magical beings would depart.

“I might have found what you want,” a timid voice claimed.

The humans around her parted, men and women equally content to expose the person volunteering to step forward.

She carried a book in her hands, a large reference manual held open to a page showing what she hoped was the very thing the terrifying group’s leader had drawn.

“Is this it?” she asked, indicating the old, grainy photograph with a finger.

Hope welled in Godfrey’s heart. There could be no mistaking that it was the missing piece from the device and the headpiece from his father’s helmet. The helmet was not shown, but it hardly mattered.

“Well done, my child. What is your name?”

Swallowing hard so she could control her voice, the young woman said, “Abigail Frost?” like she wasn’t certain or needed to check if her name was okay.

Godfrey showed her a smile. “Thank you, Abigail. Now, please tell me where I can find this artefact.”

Chapter 16

With Ezra leading and a bunch of the supernaturals following, including Katja because she insisted on going – she wanted to find Otto and make sure her mentor was okay – and the Stevens sisters because despite Katja’s obvious power, Cassie still saw her as a little sister.

They bounded down the stairs, heading for the bottom level where the detention cells were located. This deep underground, the supernaturals were unable to tap into a ley line and could all feel it when their magical energy left them.

“I feel so weird,” murmured Cassie, speaking to her twin, Jennifer. “It’s like someone just took away all my toys.”

Jennifer felt much the same, and said, “And we are just about to walk into a hostile environment.”

“You think they will have guards?” asked Katja, feeling very ordinary all of a sudden.

Naomi nodded. “I would be surprised if they didn’t.”

What they didn’t know, as Anastasia and Daniel reached the bottom level and started along the short corridor, was that no one in the SIA thought it necessary to place guards on the detention level. They had stopped the practice months ago when they stopped taking shilt and other supernaturals from the streets.

For years, the SIA wanted to study and understand what they labelled ‘the supernatural problem’. Once Otto Schneider and others stepped into the public light, the need to quietly figure out how these strange individuals ticked evaporated.

Daniel got to the door first.

“Shall I knock?” he asked with an amused tone.

Anastasia strode straight past him. “Absolutely.”

To his great surprise she then did precisely that, rapping her knuckles on the cold steel of the only door on the entire level.

Doctor Gale Lumley, looked up from the romance novel she was reading. Well, she called it a romance novel for the sake of decorum, but it was as smutty and spicy as a book could get and was as close to a sex life as she'd managed in more than a year.

Idly wondering why someone would knock when everyone with a reason to visit the detention level had key cards, she reached across to thumb the key to operate the lock without taking her eyes off the page – the central character, Alice, had just been willingly lured back to a penthouse suite by three very rich brothers and the doctor wanted to read what was going to happen next.

However, the story got forgotten when people began spilling through the door.

Jerked out of her fantasy, Dr Lumley jumped off her chair.

“Hey! You can't be in here! This is a restricted area!”

Unaffected by the inability to tap a ley line, Daniel held up his right hand, palm upwards, a sizzling ball of hellfire balanced there like a threat.

“Sit down,” Ana growled on her way past. Her eyes were locked on the row of steel tubes, each of them big enough to house a person which is exactly what she found they were for when she got close enough to see inside.

More and more of the supernaturals came into the detention cell area, those at the back led by the angry shouts they could hear coming from the front.

Dr Lumley foolishly picked up her desk phone, trying to place a call to report the intrusion, and had it swiftly ripped from her hand.

“How do I get them out?” Ana demanded.

Behind her, the supers were gasping as they identified more and more of the people locked inside the tubes.

“You can’t,” lied the doctor. She had backed up to the wall behind her desk and had nowhere else she could go. Why wasn’t security reacting? Surely they must have seen what was happening from the monitors positioned everywhere.

Dr Lumley was right in this, and a force of armed SIA agents was already en route to the detention cells. General Smith was overjoyed at the supernaturals’ tactical mistake. He would never have pitched his men against them in the battle arena or anywhere else, but so far below the surface, he knew they couldn’t conjure spells. It would be like shooting ducks in a barrel.

“Can’t?” Anastasia repeated, one eyebrow raised. It was a challenge and the barely concealed threat behind it needed only for her to produce a glowing blue ball of sinfire for the doctor to change her mind.

“It’s complicated,” she continued to lie, hoping she could stall long enough that the cavalry might arrive. “They are in medical comas to stop them from trying to escape.”

Ezra frowned; he didn’t understand. “They cannot conjure magic down here. It’s too deep to tap into a ley line, so how would they escape from a cell if you placed them in one?”

Dr Lumley didn’t know the answer to that question, but she knew why President Ironbolt insisted upon the extreme measures.

“Apparently Otto Schneider figured out a way to do precisely that the last time he was locked up by the SIA. He escaped, tearing through a facility in Germany, setting free captured shilt which he then used to jump to the immortal realm once he was high enough to properly connect to a ley line. I read the report.”

“Nevermind all that,” growled Anastasia. “Get them out. Now!”

Jolted by the short woman's harsh tone, Dr Lumley crossed to the console that controlled the steady flow of drugs into the patients. They were fed via tubes and had their waste removed in much the same way. Their bodies could be kept in such a state almost indefinitely though it was unlikely their brains would last as well.

A shout from the doorway got everyone's attention. It was Damian, a shifter from New Orleans. "Guys! We're about to have company!"

They all heard it in the next second – the sound of boots on the metal stairs. They were coming fast, but with pauses – soldiers darting from position to position, giving covering arcs of fire at all times to minimise their exposure.

No one could visualise that as accurately as Anastasia who had practiced such skills a thousand times herself in preparation for deployment. She ran for the door, a single word shouted over her shoulder, "Daniel!"

Daniel sighed. "Me again? Why is it always me? You know I'm not immortal anymore, right?"

"Shut up and get over here!"

Daniel continued to mutter shuffling sideways to get out, while Ana and everyone still outside the detention centre, squeezed to get out of his way. She wanted them inside where they might be able to figure out how to get Otto and the others out and conscious.

The door clanged shut behind them, leaving Daniel and Anastasia in the bleak hallway by themselves.

"We're the only two with the ability to repel whoever is coming our way. I think it safe to assume Ironbolt has reclaimed control and knowing Otto would go all out to stop him, made sure he was taken care of first. I'm surprised he didn't kill him and be done with it."

Daniel looked around. There wasn't a single spot of cover to be had anywhere in the hallway. They were at one end, five yards from the elevator doors and the exit from the stairwell. Grabbing Anastasia's right arm, he started running.

"Come on, I've got an idea!"

Ana went with him mostly because he weighed twice what she did and his hand had wrapped right around her bicep. She could have wrenched it free but if he had an idea that might help, she was willing to listen.

The footsteps were close now, the boots pausing and rushing, pausing and rushing. They had a few seconds, no more. Daniel punched the button for the elevator.

"What are you doing?" Ana yanked her arm free. "We are not running away!"

Daniel would have rolled his eyes if there was time. Instead, he clamped a hand over Ana's mouth when the elevator doors opened and lifted her off the floor to drag her backwards inside the car.

The doors swished silently shut again, Daniel's index finger to his lips when he released her and pointed.

SIA agents streamed into the hallway. They couldn't see them, but they made enough noise for Anastasia to do a rough head count. Twenty. At least.

She got it now; Daniel saw the elevator car was positioned on their floor and got them inside. The agents passed them by and now they got to attack from behind, the element of surprise theirs for his quick thinking.

The agents reached the doors at the other end and, as expected, threatened to blast their way in if no one opened it.

Anastasia held up three fingers using her left hand and drew source energy to create sinfire with the right.

"Only me," she said. "I don't want to kill them."

Daniel made a hurt face. “Spoilsport.”

Her final finger folded down, she pushed sinfire into her left hand too and nodded for Daniel to open the doors.

General Smith was right about it being like shooting fish in a barrel. The part he got wrong was who the fish were in that scenario.

Anastasia filled the short hallway with sinfire, a sustained stream from each hand mowing through the SIA agents like so much grass. They toppled unconscious one after another, the fight over in under two seconds.

In the situation room, General Smith slammed a fist into the console so hard he left a dent. He also broke one of his metacarpals but refused to acknowledge the pain he felt in front of his troops.

Stepping over and around the unconscious bodies, Anastasia got to the door.

“Open up,” she shouted. “It’s me. The soldiers are down. Come and collect their weapons.”

The door opened a crack, the shifter, Damian peeking through the gap to confirm Ana didn’t have a gun to her head. Satisfied, the door was flung wide, and a dodgy do-si-do session took place as Anastasia tried to get inside to see how things were progressing and those nearest the door tried to get out.

Squeezing through because she was so small, Ana left Daniel outside and pushed her way into the room.

On her lips was a question that she never got to ask. There was no need because the tubes were open, and the prisoners trapped inside them were either sitting up or being helped to sit up.

“What happened?” Ana asked. “She said this would be complicated. I’ve only been outside for two minutes.”

“Oh, yeah, she was lying,” said a person Anastasia didn’t know. He was tall, quite thin and handsome. He was also distinctly Indian and in his late thirties. “I’m Dr Romesh Patek. I used to be chief resident of critical care at Seattle Presbyterian Hospital before the world went sideways.”

Katja, feeling like she was the only one in the room who could claim to sort of know Anastasia, chipped in, “He pushed the other doctor out of the way and took over.”

Dr Patek shrugged. “It’s not advisable to wake them up like this, but the risks are minimal, and we appear to have reason to hurry.”

“That we do,” agreed Anastasia, going to Otto’s side.

There were others pressed around him, helping him to get dressed and fetching him water. The rest of the prisoners were getting the same treatment and all appeared to be ok, if a little shocked, pale, and possibly nauseous.

“Otto, we need to get out of here,” Anastasia wasted no time on pleasantries. “We have to stop Godfrey.”

Otto was still putting on his shirt. His feet were bare, no one could find his shoes and socks, and he was badly in need of brushing his teeth. Ana’s statement stopped him dead.

“Godfrey? The leader of the angels? What have I missed?”

Around him everyone exchanged glances and whispered questions. No one knew why Anastasia was so interested in the angels’ leader. There had been no sign of him, no reports of problems related to anyone other than the demons. Why would they need to focus on Godfrey instead of Beelzebub?

Anastasia supplied the answer before Otto got to ask it.

“He has a weapon, Otto. I’ve been in the immortal realm living among the angels for the last month. Ever since Mostar, in fact. I cannot tell you exactly what it does, but I believe it has the ability to connect the user to whoever they wish to

target. Godfrey can reach into their heads and simply switch them off.”

“How?” asked Ayla. Like the others held captive at Ironbolt’s will, she had awoken clad only in her underwear and was still getting dressed. Mercifully for her, the clothes she wore had proven easy to find and she finished stuffing the hem of her blouse into the waistband of her skirt before grabbing her hair to pull into a determined ponytail. “How does it work and what can we do about it?”

Like any good leader, Ayla got right to the crux of the matter. Ana gave a nod of her head; she liked the woman already.

However, the answer to Ayla’s question, much to Anastasia’s surprise, came from behind her.

Chapter 17

“I cannot tell you exactly how it works, but I can tell you that it is missing a part and Godfrey is desperately searching for it.”

Twisting to face back toward the door, Ana was surprised to find Alex behind her. She was crossing the room and it suddenly dawned on her what she had forgotten.

“Alex! Oh, good lord, we left you in New Zealand,” Ana cradled her head with her hands and closed her eyes, questioning how she could have forgotten her best friend.

“Mm-hmm, yes, I noticed that. Thankfully, the people you left me with turned out to be friendly enough. They made me breakfast.”

From behind Alex, a smaller figure emerged. With a jolt of recognition that made Anastasia’s eyes almost jump from their sockets, she realised who she was looking at. It wasn’t Alex who had spoken, Ana knew that, but the wave of guilt she felt over leaving her friend on the other side of the planet managed to distract her. Now she could match the voice to a face, and it filled her head with questions.

“Abigail!” Anastasia closed the distance and pulled her friend into a hug. Pushing her away again so she could look at her face when she spoke, she asked, “What the heck are you doing here? How are you here?”

“Daniel came for me,” explained Alex.

“I did,” Daniel confirmed. “You were busy with ...” he wafted a hand to indicate the room full of people, “with this. So I thought I would make myself useful and collect Alex.”

“And I told him we had to go get Abigail. She phoned me while I was having breakfast,” explained Alex.

Anastasia turned her attention to Abi, a woman she met on her first day of civilian employment. Injured and medically

discharged from the army, she took a job at a library in Rochester. It didn't last long because it was also the day she met Otto Schneider. He turned up to save her from an enslaved wizard sent to collect her for Daniel.

Regardless, she met Abi and both she and Alex tried to help the recovering amputee who had enough on her plate without discovering she could produce magical stuff from her body and getting chased by supernatural creatures bent on dragging her to a different dimension.

She lost track of Abi after that point and hadn't seen or heard from her since.

Abigail did her best to explain. "I work at the British Museum. Godfrey and a whole army of angels turned up there about an hour ago. They were looking for this," she opened the book she held, a large, thick, hardback tome. "It's the part missing from his device. Also the headpiece is from a helmet, they said?" She framed it as a question, making it clear she wasn't sure if she had heard that right.

"The helmet," muttered Anastasia, still wishing she could have found it.

Alex explained, "We've been looking for the helmet for ages."

Abigail looked down at the picture in the book she held. "Well, this isn't it, but I got the impression it used to be part of it. The headpiece, Godfrey said. Oh, and I heard them refer to the weapon as something called the Bagh Nakh. I looked it up, it means ..."

"Final weapon," Anastasia finished her friend's sentence. "Yes, that much we know."

"Okay, well, the angels were fighting about it and ... well, they did properly get into a fight, actually. A whole bunch of them left, splitting the group."

Anastasia saw this as good news, but ultimately if Godfrey found the missing part and got his weapon working, it would make no difference how many supporters he had.

Alex started talking again. “Abigail knows I have been helping you, though I left out a lot of the details. She knew this was important though, and called me to pass the information on to you. I made Daniel go and get her.”

Daniel made a show of rolling his eyes, silently complaining about being there to transport humans where they needed to go.

Alex didn’t even see his expression and carried right on talking. “The good news is that Abi overheard the angels arguing about the weapon. It was originally created to wipe out an uprising if the ancient humans chose to challenge their masters. Apparently, we have always outnumbered them, not just now. They wanted something that they could use to stop us all in one go.”

A chill crept through the room, the implication of such a weapon too horrifying to ignore.

Ana shot her head around to look at Otto. “We have to find that missing piece first and keep Godfrey from operating it.”

“What about Beelzebub?” asked Ayla. “From what I understand he is taking the world apart. There won’t be a government left anywhere if he is allowed to run riot for another day.”

Anastasia shrugged. “Not really something we need to be concerned about if Godfrey kills us all with a thought.”

Otto hopped down from the tube that had been his prison. The tile was colder than he expected, and he danced about until he realised he was doing it in front of everyone.

“Seems to me we need to tackle both of them,” he argued. “If we fail to stop Godfrey, he kills the demons and can eliminate in an instant anyone who stands against him. If we

focus on Godfrey and he fails to find the missing part, Beelzebub will destroy society and become too powerful for us to stop.”

“There is a third option.”

The room rotated as one to look at who had spoken.

Daniel met Anastasia’s eyes. “In all likelihood, you can operate the weapon. It will have been designed for the supreme being to use. I realise I am just guessing, but I believe the device will require a sustained stream of source energy for it to operate, just like the sword. Why would they make it any other way?”

Anastasia’s mouth went dry.

When Daniel spoke again, the room was silent, and his words carried a soft, almost apologetic tone.

“Ana, this is what you were born for.”

Chapter 18

General Smith ground his teeth. The supernaturals had flooded the lower levels of the SIA headquarters. He was unable to confirm it, but felt it safe to assume Otto Schneider and the other captives had now been freed. It was a disastrous outcome.

He needed to report the news to President Ironbolt, and it wasn't the sort of information one delivered over the phone. Fixing his hat firmly onto his head, he strode from the room while around him the remaining SIA agents hastily packed up what was needed and fixed charges to destroy the rest.

In his office overlooking the Potomac, Colt Ironbolt was running through his speech for a fourth time when the knock at his door came. Wheels were set in motion, everything was in place. In the morning he would address the world and claim his place as their leader.

The first 'world' president. So much better than US President.

No one had been able to confirm the commander in chief was dead, but then the White House and the bunkers beneath it had been reduced to a smoking hole. It might have been built to withstand a nuclear attack, but demons were far more dangerous and deadly.

Across the planet, reports of premiers, royal families, heads of nations and the governments underpinning them were gone. There would be someone left, but who would be foolhardy enough to come forward and announce themselves as the next in line when to do so would mean almost immediate death.

Anyone wanting to take a position of leadership for the humans was subject to termination by Beelzebub and his legions. They had fallen quiet, but Ironbolt knew where they were. They were waiting for him.

Confident Beelzebub would keep his promises and the appointment they made, Ironbolt was going to use the television networks, which were still operating to report the global panic and to address the world. CNN and other networks were already on the hook. How could they not be? He promised them an address and interview with the leader of the demons.

It would be the biggest event in television history. Bigger than the moon landing, bigger than the King of England's coronation, bigger than the news that Michael Jackson had died. With the world's eyes watching, Beelzebub would claim dominion over the Earth and assign Colt Ironbolt, President of the Earth, guardianship over all of humanity. He would be their spokesperson.

His chest swelled with pride. He could see it all. The fanfare and ceremony as he took office – possibly claiming the Taj Mahal as his official residence though he would spend his time in Montana. He would need lovers, that was for sure. A man of his stature wouldn't be tied to one woman the way a traditional politician would need to be. In fact, he'd already picked out a few likely ladies to join him. It wasn't hard; all he needed to do was pick up a copy of Playboy.

The knock came again, this time interrupting his fantasy.

“Come,” he barked, annoyed by the disturbance.

General Smith closed the door behind him and saluted his boss.

“Sir, I am evacuating the building. It is time for you to leave, sir.”

Irbolt's eyes tightened, his forehead scrunching as he tried to make sense of what he was hearing.

“It's the supernaturals, sir,” General Smith continued. “They have broken out of the detention area. Anastasia Aaronson is with them, and they are heading this way. If we

do not leave soon, sir, I fear they may use portal travel to trap us.”

“You let Otto Schneider and that stupid woman, Ayla Pendragon, escape?”

“Well, no, sir. I ...”

“It was a simple job, was it not?”

“What happened was ...”

Ironbolt opened a drawer on his desk, removed a snub-nosed revolver and shot the general in the chest. He could not abide incompetence.

With his former right-hand man slumping to the carpet, Colt Ironbolt grabbed his jacket, emptied his glass of bourbon, and walked swiftly to the door.

The general had been right about one thing: it was time to leave.

Chapter 19

“That rat won’t hang around,” Ayla warned. “We need to be fast if we are going to catch him.”

That she was referring to Colt Ironbolt did not need to be questioned. Upon leaving the detention centre, the supernaturals all but ran back up the stairs to get to the battle arena. Eighty percent of their number were still there, waiting to hear news, getting treatment from the two angels, and either eating or reworking their defensive spells ready for the next fight.

Otto’s arrival sparked a plethora of questions, but there was no time for complicated explanations.

“Ironbolt seized control of the SIA while we were fighting in the immortal realm. By the time the death curse fell, he was back in charge and Ayla was locked in the detention cells along with anyone who might prove to be loyal to her.”

That meant almost exclusively supernaturals employed within the SIA which was good because they were available now to bolster the force massing to accompany Otto, but also bad because they were almost all low-capability supers.

Anastasia and Otto argued about what strategy to employ all the way up from the detention centre and were yet to agree on any course of action. She was going after the missing headpiece, her sole focus on stopping Godfrey and just maybe winning the war for the humans by turning his weapon against demons and angels alike.

Knowing Gabriel and Samuel overheard the argument still raging, she checked to see their reaction. There was none. It was as though they hadn’t heard after all which was suspicious because they must have.

Otto agreed in principle that they needed to stop Godfrey, but with only a few clues as to the whereabouts of the missing

headpiece, he felt the likelihood of Godfrey succeeding slim enough to warrant leaving it as a risk.

To take on Beelzebub – the bigger threat right now – they needed to stay together. However, even with everyone included, they still numbered no more than six hundred. It wasn't anywhere near enough to be a threat to the demon lord. They needed to attack with conventional weapons at their side, something that ought to have happened in the White House battle. They now suspected why they were left without – Ironbolt walked them into a trap.

Quite why he would do that and what he could possibly gain no one could fathom, but they would beat an answer from him if the slimy worm hadn't already slipped away.

“We have to get going,” Otto insisted.

“So do I,” countered Anastasia. “Come on, Otto. This is our best chance to win. It might be our only chance to win. We should put everything into beating Godfrey to completing his weapon.”

Otto could see her side of the argument, but it still felt too much like a roll of the dice.

“And if you cannot find the missing part? If it can never be found?”

“Then we will lose anyway, Otto. At least this way we have a chance.”

He shook his head. “I think we have a chance yet anyway.” Without warning, he took a small, silver knife from his pocket and stabbed it into his left hand. He winced and people around him gasped.

Ana asked, “What the heck?” But the answer was right before her eyes. Blood flowed for two seconds before an odd, ethereal glow began to emanate from the site of the wound.

“I'm still immortal,” Otto stated needlessly. “So is Katja. Don't ask me how. I would guess that it has something to do

with residual magic and the fact that I wasn't cursed when the supreme being was murdered. Maybe this won't last, but for now I can walk right up to Beelzebub and only one of us can die."

Katja voiced what many people were thinking. "Otto and I must take him on. We have to beat him and do what we can to give our side a chance of winning. If I can eliminate their ability to produce hellfire, it becomes a dog fight, a scrap. We just need more numbers, Anastasia. We need you."

Ana shook her head. "I'm taking Daniel and the angels and I'm going after Godfrey. He is far more dangerous than any of you give him credit for."

It was a stalemate; there was no way either side was going to change their minds.

Otto, ever the pragmatist, accepted things for how they are, never allowing himself to dwell too long on how he wished they were.

"You should take more people with you," he offered. "Giving you some extra help won't have much impact on us, we're so badly outnumbered already."

Anastasia, feeling moved by his offer, had to quash her immediate need to refuse the help. He was right, she could do with it.

Daniel, who had been resting on a chair he'd found unguarded, jumped up with vigour and energy.

"Are we doing this then?" He flexed his shoulders and dusted some dirt from his black jacket, not that doing so had any impact on how filthy it was.

Anastasia reached out her good hand. Otto took it. They wished each other good luck, Ana dipping her head at Katja just before she turned away.

Otto's team needed to get moving, not least because Ayla was threatening to go without them if they didn't hurry up.

Nevertheless, he waited long enough to gather some volunteers to accompany Anastasia. The British woman had a tough mission ahead of her and no way to know whether she might run into resistance or not.

The Stevens sisters were among the dozen or so to follow her into the portal Daniel held open. Alex and Abigail were there too, plus the angels, Gabriel and Samuel.

Before they were all gone, Otto and the remaining members of the SWATs – they were considering the need for a new name – were heading out through the busted doors. It was time to retake the SIA headquarters.

Chapter 20

Zachary slashed out with the claws of both hands. In werewolf form, his fingers ended in talons that could cut through steel. They were deadly weapons he could use to inflict terrible damage and that was precisely what he was doing.

Following in the wake of the demons, shift arrived to feed on the wounded and homeless. The strange asexual creatures fed on lifeforce, essentially sucking the life from their victims. They were the first creatures to find their way through to the mortal realm back when the death curse first began to weaken. More than two hundred years ago, their horrifying attacks gave rise to the vampire legend, but there was nothing sexy or romantic about them.

They each carried a short knife and attacked in packs, moving in the shadows to remain undetected. Zachary knew them of old, his first encounters coming years ago when he ventured into the immortal realm with Otto Schneider.

“They are on the run!” shouted Gedeon.

Zac was with a local pack of shifters, defending Budapest and its people though you could hardly tell from the destruction around them. The demons attacked twice, first when they were trapped in the city unable to open a portal to leave, then again when a legion swept through the city to obliterate the government buildings. The shifters killed the demons in the first wave though they lost many of their own number in the early skirmish.

Thinking it might be over, for a while at least, they were to be shocked when the second wave arrived. Unable to open portals of their own, they reacted as fast as they could, but too slow to stop the legion who swept through the city’s business and financial district. The capitol’s government buildings were removed entirely, reduced to dust and debris in moments when

creatures from a demon horde pulverised the streets and everything built on them.

Zachary and the shifters arrived to find the demons gone; their task complete. Apart from helping a few survivors, there was nothing they could do. Until the shilt turned up that is.

Trailing the demons, who had little tolerance for the lesser beings, they came to feed on the ruined city, its inhabitants still reeling from the chaos already endured and their defensive forces wiped out.

Budapest was just one of many excellent targets for the shilt. Subsisting on scraps for thousands of years until they found a way back to the mortal realm, the shilt were here to feast and they would leave the city devoid of life if left unchecked.

All that stood between them and their victims were a handful of shifters.

Responding to Gedeon, Zachary growled, “They’re not running. They are reforming.”

Having started the night with over forty shifters at his side, the pack now stood at less than thirty. The demons accounted for most of their losses, but the shilt had numbers and even the strength of a werewolf can be overwhelmed.

Panting heavily, Izsak asked, “What do we do?”

“We keep fighting!” answered Sebestyen, roaring his fury at the last few shilt in sight. They were rounding a corner to get away. When he made to follow after them, Zachary grabbed his arm.

“There are not enough of us,” he remarked, his brain running at high speed. They couldn’t abandon the fight, but they also couldn’t win; there were simply too many shilt. Thousands of them. Heck maybe tens of thousands. They could fight a handful at a time, but that left the rest to prey

upon the human population elsewhere in the city. “We need help.”

“Help?” questioned Izsak. “Who is going to help us? Isn’t this happening everywhere?”

Zac rolled his shoulders and growled, “Probably.” He had no idea what was going on elsewhere in the world, but if every city had a small band of supernaturals doing their best to fight back, they would all lose. Combining their numbers into one larger force might, however, mean they could win wherever they were.

It pained him to admit it, but the SIA army, into which agents had tried to recruit him many times, might just have the right strategy for winning battles. Maybe not the war, that was a different thing entirely, but he was willing to take it one battle at a time.

Morphing back into his human form, Zac said, “I need to make a phone call.”

Chapter 21

Daniel's portal opened onto a luscious, green lawn. The part they were standing on was drenched in sunlight, but just a few yards from them, the grass was in shadow.

Jennifer let out a low whistle. "So this is England, huh? Does everyone have houses like this?"

Alex frowned. "Of course not. My flat in Rochester would probably fit inside a bathroom in this place."

"That's quite the residence," remarked Cassie, looking up at the huge building. "Are you sure the King doesn't live here?"

Abi said, "I would be shocked if royalty hadn't stayed here at some point over the centuries, but Capston Manor belongs to the Stacy family still."

"You didn't tell Godfrey about this place?" Anastasia sought to confirm.

"Goodness no," Abi recoiled, horrified. "He was borderline foaming at the mouth when he discovered the thing he was after wasn't at the museum. I wouldn't send him to see my worst enemy."

With Daniel and the angels following, Anastasia led her group to the front door. For once, she didn't feel the need to blow it off its hinges. In truth, she wanted to politely knock and wait for someone to answer. There really wasn't time for that though, so with the fate of the planet hanging in the balance, she turned the handle and used a shoulder to push the large oak door inward.

Stepping into the premises, Anastasia heard a click, but got no time to register what it could mean before a concussive blast wave sent her back outside again. Caught unaware, her whole body was lifted from the ground and tossed into those behind her, taking them out like so many skittles before a ball.

Reacting instinctively, the next person available to return fire, produced a wall of air. That turned out to be Naomi, for Anastasia's flailing body wiped out Alex, Abi, and the twins. Leaping over the fallen, she sent what was effectively a horizontal tornado into the house.

Naomi's conjuring sent a shockwave through the entrance lobby. It picked up everything that wasn't nailed down which included a man in butler's livery. The double-barrelled shotgun he held had already expended its full load which proved to be a mercy as he tumbled along the hallway.

Behind Naomi, the rest of the supers, plus Daniel, Gabriel, and Samuel all ran toward the danger. They reached her sides and swarmed around her, heading inside to tackle whoever was there.

"It's just the butler!" Naomi yelled. "Don't hurt him!" No one else, save for Anastasia perhaps, had seen the person inside.

Dropping into a crouch as she twisted around to check the tangle of bodies lying outside the door. She asked "Is anyone hurt?".

Anastasia said, "Ow." It came in a voice that was calm and reflective, not one that was in desperate pain. She sat up but stayed on the gravel. "Well, that's a first. Never been shot with a shotgun before."

"Did it get you?" Naomi wondered, fairly certain it had because there was blood on the gravel and more on Anastasia's fingertips.

Her armour deflected ninety-nine percent of the pellets, but a few snuck through where her armour suit still wasn't complete.

She touched two fingers to her right hip, coming away with more fresh, red, blood on them. She swore and started to lever herself off the floor. Inside, a commotion demanded her

attention – Ana worried Daniel might choose to deal with the situation by killing someone.

She got through the door with Alex, Abi, and everyone who wasn't already inside hot on her heels. Ahead, the hallway was ... well, it was destroyed. The contents were for sure. Naomi's hasty reaction carried a tad more juice than the situation called for and a grandfather clock now lay across the carpet at an angle where one bottom corner had gouged a hole in the wall. That it must have tumbled end over end to get to its current position was obvious.

Oil paintings, an umbrella stand, an occasional table, and several large houseplants were likewise strewn across the carpet. At the far end, a door leading to the rest of the house was hanging off its hinges.

Anastasia muttered, "So much for not blowing the doors in."

Gabriel was kneeling over the butler, a white line of source energy coming from each hand as he healed the man.

Naomi sucked air between her teeth. "Is he okay?"

Without looking up, Gabriel said, "He will be. He broke a couple of bones is all."

Pushing through the people and stepping over the mess, Anastasia asked what everyone else should have been thinking.

"Where is everyone else?" She looked about at blank faces. "The butler tried to kill me when I stepped through the door. I think it safe to assume the family is cowering somewhere and sent him to see off the terrifying supernatural people when they saw us coming through a portal on their lawn."

The team split up, twos and threes heading off through the massive house to find the owners. Meanwhile, Anastasia knelt by the butler.

"Can you bring him around?"

Gabriel finished what he was doing, extinguishing the white line of source energy from his hand as he stood up.

“It would be better to let him come around naturally.”

“Thank you, Dr Gabriel. I rather think we ought not to wait.”

“I can bring him around,” offered Daniel, lifting one foot to stamp on the butler’s hand.

Ana shot him a look that convinced him to place his foot gently back on the carpet.

“Oh, bloody hell. You lot can be useless,” moaned Alex. “If you can’t use magic to do something, you find yourselves all confused about how to proceed.” Bustling to get Gabriel out of the way, she grabbed a fallen vase of fresh flowers from the floor. Incredibly, it had neither smashed nor lost all the water inside when Naomi’s spell launched it down the hallway.

The butler, an austere looking man in his late forties, with a slight belly and the start of jowls forming around his jawline, woke with a start when the water splashed across his face.

“There. Awake,” announced Alex.

Coming around, the butler’s eyes fluttered open, and he squealed in fright. Backing away, he scooted across the carpet until his back hit the wall. There his left hand came to rest on the barrels of his shotgun.

Anastasia sighed. “I probably should have thought to move that.”

“Get back!” the butler yelled, a blob of spit making its way onto his chin when he spat the words.

Anastasia shot a warning look at Daniel.

“What?” he protested. “I wasn’t going to do anything.”

She’d seen his hands twitch and the glow of red beneath his clothes as hellfire began to form.

Dropping to one knee, Anastasia looked the butler in the eye.

“Look, we’re not here to hurt anyone and believe it or not, we’re the good guys.”

“I’ll shoot!” he threatened.

“Yeah, you already did that, and it felt like both barrels. Sorry, but I’m a little harder to kill than your average person. Or average demon for that matter. Look, I just have a few questions for the Stacy family. If you can tell me where they are, I promise we will leave soon.”

The sound of a child wailing in fear echoed through the house.

Anastasia rose to her feet, “Nevermind.”

Chapter 22

The SIA headquarters were abandoned. They expected resistance and a fight to retake the situation room, but they got the opposite. Ironbolt and the non-supernatural SIA agents had already fled.

Ayla found General Smith in his office. It stank of cigar smoke and the bourbon decanter was almost empty, the stopper ditched on the desktop next to the glass.

She checked the general's pulse, but knew from his pallor that his fight was already over. Otto found her leaning on the desk, her head down as she gathered herself.

"He's dead?" Otto questioned.

Ayla nodded. "I'm worried, Otto. Ironbolt is about as ambitious a man as I have ever met. He double crossed us, and sent the SWATs to die. He's got a plan, and I don't know what it is, but we can be sure it's going to be trouble for the planet."

Otto's dislike for the man was well known; Ayla didn't need to convince him that Ironbolt wasn't to be trusted. He'd almost left him in the immortal realm once and right now Otto regretted only threatening to do so.

Rather than dwell on it, he said, "Come on. We have the control room back. We should figure out what the demons are doing, where they are, and try to organise a strike back. If we can liaise with conventional forces, get us all in one place, and coordinate an attack with everything Earth has to offer, we might stand a chance. We've still got Katja," he reminded the real leader of the SIA.

Ayla shoved away from the desk. There was no time for wallowing in self-doubt. Most countries had an SIA division. The best or most capable supernaturals were all sent to Washington to form what became the SWAT, but there were others who could fight. Like Otto said, they just needed someone to coordinate them.

That was her job.

From the situation room, she would be able to connect with the other division heads, all of whom were subordinate to her. Goodness knows what Ironbolt might have told them over the course of the last few hours, but whatever it was could be undone. Humanity needed to come together if they were to survive.

Arriving in the situation room a few moments later, Ayla paused just inside the doorway.

Walking by her side and hypothesising strategies, Otto walked three paces before he realised Ayla was no longer there. Grinding to a halt, he turned to see where she was.

“Ayla?” he questioned.

Ayla skewed her lips to one side. “Something is wrong.”

The situation room looked like it was back to how it had been before General Smith sprung his trap. Ayla’s people were back at their stations, the screens were operating, and it was clear from the chatter that some of the team were making contact with other SIA divisions across the globe.

Otto looked about the room. It all looked like it had every other time he had seen need to venture into the hub of the headquarters. No, he corrected himself, usually there would be some of the non-supernatural SIA agents dotted about. They were easy to spot with their uniforms and the sidearms most of them carried.

So, what though? Ayla knew they were gone from the building. Why was she questioning it? Or was she seeing something else? A spike of worry doubled Otto’s heartrate. Ayla Pendragon was not given to panicking. In fact, the only time he’d seen her get truly emotional was when her children were threatened.

“What is it?” he asked, an edge to his voice as concern crept through him.

“Why would Ironbolt leave us the situation room? Why leave it intact? He put us both on ice, probably with a plan to kill us later, and sent the army into a battle they couldn’t hope to win. He did all that to get us out of the picture. I can’t tell you why yet. It makes no sense to me, but why go to all that effort to take over if he is just going to hand the headquarters back to me?”

“He wouldn’t,” Otto murmured, his brain whirring towards a conclusion that scared him senseless and jolted him into motion. “Everyone, get out!” he roared.

Ayla spasmed, the suddenness of Otto’s voice making her jump. She saw it too though. “It’s a trap,” she whispered to herself.

No one moved. Not in the first seconds after Otto started shouting. That changed when the first explosion ripped through the building.

Less than half a mile away, watching from a vantage point, Colt Ironbolt smiled when one side of the SIA headquarters blew outwards to rain rubble and glass down onto the plaza below.

A second charge detonated a second later, a third a second after that. There were thirty of them planted at strategic points around the fifth floor. Among his people, a pair of former special forces guys claimed to have demolitions expertise and it was clear at this point it was the truth and not hyperbole.

The explosions continued, a ripple of them designed to destabilise and then collapse the building. Ironbolt thought it made more sense to blow out the structure from the bottom until he was reminded of the twin towers.

Content this would deal with the rest of the supernaturals – he’d waited to hear the situation room was live again before giving the order to level the building – he watched as the roof crumpled and fell. He could have continued to watch, the

billowing dust cloud was so pretty for what it represented, but there was work to do.

The sun would set soon, and tomorrow he was going to address the world.

Turning away to slide into his waiting car he quipped, “Survive that, Ayla Pendragon.”

Chapter 23

The landing was a hard one. Otto tasted blood, his jaw having connected with the street when he landed. He rolled onto his side and into a sitting position.

Ayla had a cut to her head just above and to the left of her left eye. Blood ran freely from it showing it must be deep. She looked at him, their eyes meeting.

Neither said it, but they were both asking themselves the same question: who else got out?

Otto's quick thinking saved them both. As the building shook, he opened a portal and reached out his hand to Ayla. They fell through it as the floor beneath their feet tumbled away. Another second and they would have been buried in the ruined structure.

Rather than focus on who might have been lost in the latest terrible attack, Ayla asked, "Will they go to one of the rendezvous points?"

Otto hoped so. Expecting people to get separated in the mayhem that would be the fight for planet Earth, Otto instilled in everyone the need to seek a safe haven in the event they found themselves alone.

There were three rendezvous points. One at the base of Mount Rushmore in South Dakota, one in Cairo underneath the chin of the Sphinx, and one outside an ice cream parlour at a lake near Bremen. They were random locations that could realistically be expected to not be a demon hotspot.

With no time to think about where he was going, Otto had chosen none of those locations. Instead his portal took them from the SIA headquarters to a street corner two blocks to the west.

Still nursing his jaw and questioning if he had a loose tooth, Otto was gathering his thoughts when his phone began

to ring.

Hoping it would be Katja or one of the other supernaturals calling, he was most surprised to see a different name displayed on the screen.

“Zac?” he murmured the name. Thumbing the green button to answer the call, he pressed the phone to his ear.

“Wizard? Is that you?”

That he was hearing the voice of Zachary Barnabus did not need to be questioned. Why he chose to call, however, did.

“Zachary? I’m kind of in the middle of something right now. Is this important?”

“I’m in Budapest, Otto. The demons levelled half the city and in their wake a plague of shilt landed. They are killing the people even as they try to clamber out of the wreckage.” The pain in the shifter’s voice cut right through Otto. “I’m fighting them with a pack of weres, but there are just too many. I need your help, old buddy. Can you do me a solid?”

That the werewolf was asking for help was a first. That alone made Otto want to go to him. There was more though. Zac had the shield that went with Anastasia’s suit of armour. If she really was the one who could save the humans from genocide and enslavement, then giving her the shield was the only sensible course to take – anything that would help her to win.

“Ok, Zac, I will help. I need to find a couple of friends first, but I’ll be there as soon as I can. We’ll drive the shilt out of Budapest, but when that is done, I need your help in return.”

Zac didn’t hesitate. “You got it. Whatever you need. Just get here quick.”

Ending the call, Otto looked up to find Ayla standing over him.

“I can’t go to Budapest, Otto.”

So she could hear the conversation.

“I have to go,” Otto replied.

“Saving one city isn’t the mission. We have to think bigger than that.”

“I am.”

“Are you? Because it seems as though you want to run off to help a friend. I get it, but while you do that the demons are fortifying their position. We must coordinate a strike force to hit back at them when they next show their faces. If we don’t hit them hard enough, we might as well not hit them at all. We cannot afford to have you off the playing field.”

“Agreed,” Otto opened a portal to Mount Rushmore, relief flooding his system when he saw dozens of the SIA supernaturals gathered there. They knew to wait until someone came for them. “However, killing a few thousand shilt will not take long and I intend to recruit Zachary and his network of shifters.”

“Network?”

“That’s right. The SIA handled him so badly when they first picked him up that he’s refused to work with them ever since. He recognised the need to band together though, so he’s been forging alliances around the globe, making contact with more and more packs. They have always stayed hidden, and mostly they still are, but Zac knows them, and they know him. Also, he has the shield from Anastasia’s suit of armour, and I rather think a thing like that ought to be on the battlefield next time.”

They stepped onto the tarmac of the Mount Rushmore visitor centre. The portal closed behind them with a barely audible pop, but by then they were walking toward the gaggle of supernaturals.

Otto scoured the crowd, searching for Katja.

“She’s not here.” The comment came from Sheila, a former familiar who was snatched by Daniel when she was in a field hospital with terrible wounds from a German attack during the Second World War. He healed her and for that, despite the enslavement that followed, she was still grateful.

Raising his voice, Otto asked, “Has anyone seen Katja? Did anyone see her get out of the headquarters?”

He got a lot of head shakes in reply. No one knew where she was. They would face the demons without her if they needed to, but it lessened their odds significantly to do so.

Before he got a chance to question it any further, another portal opened. It created a ripple of reaction, the supernaturals arming themselves with magic until they saw it was another group of their own. These had fled to the Sphinx, but yet again Katja was not among them.

That just left Bremen and it was the most obvious place to find the young German girl since it was her home city.

Little more than a couple of minutes had passed since the explosions tore the SIA headquarters apart; just enough time for the surviving supers to gather themselves and question where the others might have gone. Anyone who went to Bremen ought to be opening portals to the other rendezvous points, even if only to confirm there was no one there.

It worried Otto that there was no sign of a portal from Bremen, so he opened one himself.

There was no one there.

Otto wanted to believe they were somewhere else, but the explosions at the headquarters came so suddenly, there had to be some who didn’t make it out. That Katja was most likely one of them tore into his soul. He thought he was angry before, but it was nothing compared to the fire raging through his bloodstream now.

“I have to go back and look for her,” he said it as a statement.

Ayla, having been convinced they should help Zachary and recruit his army of shifters, asked, “What about Budapest?”

Overhearing them, Ezra voiced what those around him were thinking. “Budapest? There’s something going on there?”

Arguing with himself, Otto explained, “The shift are attacking, preying on the victims left behind after the demons wrecked the city.”

Ayla cut in with, “We have to help because we should, but also because there is a man there who could help us. Otto believes there is an army of shifters we could recruit.”

“You’re talking about Zac Barnabus?” a shifter called Mason asked.

Ayla nodded. “You know him?”

“Know of him,” confirmed Mason. “He’s famous. He’s got some magical shield everyone talks about, and they say he cannot be killed. Like he got made immortal somehow.”

Otto nodded, mostly to himself, and looking at Ayla said, “I need to look for Katja. If she is alive, we need her.”

Ayla couldn’t argue the young girl’s importance. She didn’t want to split the group and Otto was not only a natural leader, he was the lynchpin tying everything together. He was the one who knew Zachary Barnabus, not her, yet Otto would return to Washington to look for Katja and though she wanted to stay with the main body of SWATs, Ayla knew her skills lay elsewhere. Her job was to find a way to bring everyone together. There were more supernaturals out there – each SIA national division housed them, plus there was the military to consider. Not just the US military this time, but all of them.

Wishing Otto good luck, and waving Ezra goodbye, Ayla readied herself for the challenge to come.

Chapter 24

The Stacey family were cowering in an upstairs bedroom when Anastasia got to them despite Gabriel's assurances they were in no danger. It was just the lady of the house and her two children, neither of which could be older than five or six by Ana's judgement.

The husband, Steven Stacey, was in London on business when the demons smashed it and Mrs Stacey had not heard from him since.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Anastasia thought it was the right thing to say.

"Oh, I'm not," moaned Mrs Stacey, covering her kids' ears with one hand and pressing their heads into her ample chest. "He's probably holed up with his secretary. That skinny little cow can have him."

Unsure what to say to that, Ana pressed on. "We can stop them," she claimed, lowering herself to sit on the carpet opposite where the mother and children were huddled against a wall. "I can stop them. I just need to find something."

"You're not one of them?" Mrs Stacy questioned. "You look like one of them."

"I'm quite human," Ana replied. "I grew up in Cheltenham. I used to be in the Army. That's how this happened." She used her right hand to indicate her face. "Listen, I know this must be scary for you and especially the children, we will leave as soon as we have some answers, I promise you."

Mrs Stacey, a rather beefy woman with a double chin and dark hair yanked into a bun, asked, "What is it you are trying to find?"

Ana explained about the missing headpiece and had Abigail show the one picture they possessed in the book she had taken from the museum. They all migrated downstairs

where impromptu ice cream soothed the children along with some cartoons.

Gathered around the kitchen table, Alex questioned Mrs Stacey on the family history and where the item might have gone, but the task proved to be an exercise in futility: Mrs Stacey didn't know a thing.

In fact, she scoffed at the notion that she might be able to help.

“Great great grandpapa found a lost village a hundred years ago and you think I might be able to tell you where one missing artefact could have gone?”

Anastasia felt like reminding the woman they were trying to save the planet, but refrained from wasting her breath.

Looking around until she found the thing she wanted, Alex asked, “Can I borrow your laptop, please?”

“Ooh, good idea, Alex,” said Abigail, clapping her hands together in excitement. “Let's do some research.”

Alex hadn't bothered to wait for permission, taking a leaf from Anastasia's book on how to just get stuff done. Mrs Stacey clearly didn't care; she was in the fridge, pulling out a half empty bottle of white wine which she promptly emptied into a single glass.

When the lady of the house sloped off to the nook to check on her children, Ana drifted across to look at what the girls were doing.

“What are you searching for?”

“Yeah, can we help?” asked Jennifer. “We've all got phones.”

“Look for anything related to Sir Gavin N Stacey,” Alex prompted. “Especially where it refers to missing Mesopotamian artefacts.”

The three sisters got to work, several of the other supernaturals in their party doing likewise. It felt like a long shot to Anastasia, but Alex and Abi proved her wrong less than a minute later.

“It’s his journal,” Alex announced. “It has been digitally uploaded to the British Museum.”

Abigail swore. “I should have thought of that.”

“Sir Gavin talks about a cache of items going missing while they were at the dig site. He blamed thieves, claiming they likely made off with them in the night to sell wherever they could find a buyer.”

Gritting her teeth, Anastasia said, “Surely that creates a dead end. How can we hope to find a thing that was stolen a hundred years ago?”

“Um, I might have something.”

They all turned to find Naomi with her hand raised.

“Does Sir Gavin talk about a man called Edwin Rolston?”

Abigail’s eyebrows pinched together. “Yes, he was Sir Gavin’s business partner. A rather brash American if the reports are to be believed. What have you found?”

Naomi, reading from her phone with Cassie and Jennifer pressed in on either side, said, “A large cache of ancient Mesopotamian artefacts was found at the Rolston family home four years ago. The artefacts, believed to be from an expedition undertaken by Edwin Rolston in 1923, have been catalogued and taken to the Smithsonian in Washington where they will join other artefacts donated by the Rolston estate upon Edwin’s death in 1978.” Naomi looked up. “There’s a bunch of artefacts at the Smithsonian.”

Daniel, who had been lazing quietly in a corner of the kitchen since they arrived, shoved off with an elbow.

“I guess we are going back to Washington then, yes?”

Chapter 25

Ezra led the SWATs, now one big team rather than several smaller ones, through a fresh portal, opening it at the location Zac gave Otto. It had been less than five minutes since the two spoke.

Budapest had been hit hard, that was the first thing the group noticed. The tallest buildings dominating the skyline were smashed, the top floors missing in several cases. Smoke hung heavy above and between the streets and it was easy to pick out more than a dozen fires raging. Was there anyone left to tackle the blazes?

Walking toward the scene of destruction, Ezra took out his phone, but before he tried to call Zachary using the number he got from Otto, a tap on his arm resulted in a question.

“I’ve never faced the shilt before,” revealed Mason. Sheila and Alice were with him, making it clear he wasn’t the only one.

Alice asked, “Is there anything special we should know?”

Ezra stopped the team, jumping onto the bonnet of an abandoned car so they could all see him.

“Who here hasn’t fought the shilt before?”

A bunch of hands went up.

Ezra nodded, “Stick with someone who has. They are easy enough to kill; fire and lightning will do it, or you can manipulate spells to blow them up or use earth spells to bury them. The shifters can carve them up, but must do so at close quarters and should watch out for their blades – each will carry a short sword. Some have low-level elemental magic abilities. It’s nothing too much to worry about, but shouldn’t be ignored. Their greatest strength is their numbers. We stay together and battle them as a force. Understood?”

He got a chorus of agreement and could feel the wizards among them tapping the same ley line he was connected to. There were perhaps two hundred and fifty of them now, the rest presumed dead at the headquarters in Washington.

Revenge for those who died would come if they got the chance, but Ironbolt, who the supernaturals believed was behind the building's sabotage, was the least of their worries.

Zac didn't answer the call from Ezra's phone and he cursed, wondering if the werewolf ignored the call because he didn't recognise the number. Either way, he couldn't get through to him which made meeting up hard. They were at the location in Budapest Zac gave to Otto, so why wasn't he here?

The answer to that came down to events in the minutes since Zac and Otto spoke.

Wanting to wait for his wizard friend to arrive, Zac was denied that option when screams from the next street filled the air. He transformed back into his werewolf form and ran, cutting through an alley to find a mother trying to protect her children. Closing with them at full speed, Zac could see what had happened.

The woman had been sheltering in her home, hoping if she stayed quiet and out of sight, the danger in the city would pass her by. But one of the unchecked fires was coming her way, smoke filled the street and she'd accepted the need to make a run for it. Car doors were open; she had gotten that far, but shilt attacked, the life sucking creatures grabbing her children from her arms even as she fought.

There were a dozen of them, maybe more, and they were so focused on the great time they were having to even notice the approaching danger. They were human shaped but that was where the resemblance ended. Their skin was more reptilian than mammalian and had a yellowish tinge that always looked wet. There was no hair on their heads, their beady eyes seemed

to glow orange, and they had awful mouths; narrow and pointed with rows of needle-like teeth.

They could produce a charm that would disguise their appearance, and used to do that all the time, but why bother now? The world was ending, and they could feast.

Zac tore through them, removing those not touching the mother and her children with sweeping blows from his giant arms. Skidding to a stop and reversing to make a second pass, he stalked forward. Just as he hoped, the shilt dropped the kids and ran. Two were fighting over the mother, each with their short sword drawn.

The woman dangled between them, terrified enough already without the seven-foot werewolf entering her life.

Zac ushered her children inside the car, closing the back door to trap them inside where they would be safer.

“Just us now, boys,” he growled, knowing full well the shilt were neither male nor female. “Let the woman go and I will make it quick.”

The one to the woman’s right hissed at him, brandishing the sword it held. The one on the left simply dropped its weapon and ran.

Zac didn’t want to let either escape; they would just find someone else to attack, so he grabbed the one too stupid to run by the throat and ran after its companion.

The shilt in Zac’s hand flailed and struggled, swinging with his knife and striking home only to see the wound he created glow and heal a moment later.

Zac adjusted his grip, bringing his arm high to then slam the shilt down headfirst into the unyielding street. He didn’t need to look to see if the creature was dead, and the one he was still chasing was in the process of opening a portal.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Zac growled as he launched himself at the fleeing figure.

Twisting in the air, he caught a glimpse of the woman with her kids. She was behind the wheel of her car and powering away from the kerb in a tight U-turn. Smoke came from her tyres as she burned rubber in the opposite direction. She had debris and other obstacles to negotiate, but Zac thought she would do fine so long as she didn't stop.

The shilt got the portal open just as Zac reached him. He drove his claws through the creature's chest, killing him instantly, but his forward momentum carried him into the open portal which snapped shut the moment the shilt controlling it died.

In an instant, the noise of Budapest burning vanished. So too the smells filling the Hungarian capital's streets.

Getting to his feet, Zac swore. He had no idea where he was, other than in a different city, he didn't have his phone with him so couldn't call Otto, and until he found someone who could open a portal, he was stuck.

Back in Budapest, Ezra and the remnants of the supernatural army were engaged with the shilt. Zac had not exaggerated their numbers – there really were tens of thousands of them. Mercifully, just like Ezra claimed, they were relatively easy to kill. The supers drew energy from a fat ley line running under the city and pummelled the reptilian creatures every time they found some.

However, what Ezra and the others did not know was the shilt had leadership. This was not unusual; their very nature made them natural followers, but having been subservient to the demons for thousands of years, the ogres now questioned if they might be able to carve a small territory for themselves. They were strong and with the shilt as their foot soldiers, they had numbers. Not enough for a direct battle against Beelzebub and his legions, but sufficient to overpower a smaller group of demons for sure.

The shilt wanted to feed, that was why they had come to Budapest. Following behind the demons was a sound tactic and they had already caught a few straggling demons left behind when the main body moved on. Each time they killed one of Beelzebub's followers, it strengthened their belief – they could win. Even if all they won was respect enough to be given some land where they could live away from the demon stronghold.

They had been in the city for more than an hour, the shilt running riot as they found humans on which to prey. The ogres planned to move on soon, but before they could, a new threat emerged.

Basall sought the opinion of his mate, Turoc. “Should we confront the humans?” The ogres around them listened for her response. There were always two leaders, a mated pair who proved their right to lead in combat against other pairs vying for the right to be first among their race.

Turoc smiled. “Yes, it will be good practice for what is to come.”

Chapter 26

Finding the Mesopotamian section was easy enough despite the vastness of the museum and the way it was set out across multiple buildings - all they had to do was follow the signposts. The display, which they wrecked in trying to find what they wanted, did not contain the missing headpiece.

Feeling defeated, Alex said, "We'll have to get into the storage areas. If it's not here, it must be there."

There were suppressed groans from the group. This was not what any of them wanted to be doing.

Finding the storage facility and accessing it ought to have been impossible and were the world not in crisis it probably would have been. However, instead of security guards, and barriers, they found the lower parts of the museum to be just as abandoned as the tourist areas.

"You think everyone just ran home?" asked Abigail.

Anastasia shrugged, but it was Cassie who gave an answer. "What's the point of guarding a load of old stuff when there are demons tearing the city apart?"

"So how do we find the thing we need?" asked Daniel, already bored with the task even though going after it had kind of been his idea.

Alex aimed her eyes at Abigail. "You're the one who works in a museum, hon. This is your show."

Abigail cupped her chin and continued to walk. They were inside a vast warehouse facility with huge rooms and corridors linking them. The area was too vast to search manually.

"What we need is a computer," she remarked, sounding optimistic as though mentioning the items she needed might make it appear.

“Won’t it be locked out even if we do find one?” asked Jennifer. “Surely, you will need a password or something.”

Abigail had not considered that and when they found an office with computers just a few minutes later, they discovered just how big of a problem they faced. They tried to get around the password, searched the room to find where someone might have sneakily written theirs on a piece of paper and tucked it in their desk, and even tried to guess what it might be only to find the terminals went into a dark standby mode if you failed to get it right three times in a row.

“What now?” asked Alex, looking at Anastasia in the hope she might have a genius plan up her sleeve.

She didn’t, but they didn’t get to discuss what they might do next because voices echoed in the hallway outside.

“Someone’s coming?” questioned Naomi.

“Probably just some museum staff that chose to stay here,” remarked Abigail, remembering her own decision to hide out at her place of work.

Playing no part in the computer work, Gabriel and Samuel had spent the last thirty minutes talking quietly in one corner of the office. They’d been largely ignored by the rest of the group, most of whom silently questioned why the angels were there at all. What was their motivation? Were they after the artefacts for their own purposes?

Daniel harboured the same concerns, watching the angels closely and wishing he could overhear what they were saying. When the sound of people came from the outside, he was not only nearest to the door, but another one playing no active part in the proceedings. He slid off the desk he’d chosen to sit on and stuck his head outside.

The loud expletive he uttered stopped everyone in the room. Yanking his head back into the room, he didn’t even get time to explain his outburst when the door frame lit up behind his ducking head.

“Godfrey!” Daniel yelled, darting away from the door and turning to face it as he pushed hellfire into his hands.

Anastasia shot a look at Gabriel. Had he somehow communicated their location? She couldn't see how he could have done, but he'd been acting odd since the death curse fell.

“What do we do?” cried Alex. Abigail was clinging to her, both girls powerless when it came to fighting. All around them, the supernaturals were powering up, sparkles weaving in the air as they conjured spells.

Anastasia had drawn her sword - the damned thing even sounded sharp. When it carved through the air it made an almost imperceptible swooshing sound like it was cutting air molecules in two.

Daniel needed only a moment to realise they were completely trapped, and he wasn't the only one. The office had only one door. It led back out into the corridor where Godfrey and the angels were about to attack. They were underground too, so the only way to avoid being shot at like fish in a barrel was to create a new exit.

Gabriel was one step ahead.

Three seconds had passed since someone outside shot at Daniel, but Gabriel had used that time to open a wall. Less destructive than hellfire, sinfire would never have achieved what was required, so the angel had employed elemental magic, both he and Samuel combining their efforts to melt a hole through the cinderblock.

Samuel hissed as loudly as he dared, “Quick! Everyone out!” he didn't want to tip off the angels coming their way, but he did need to get the people in the office moving.

They didn't need to be told twice.

Daniel backed toward the new opening, his hands held up and ready to hit whoever was brave enough to come through the door first. By his side, Anastasia held the sword in one

hand. The other toted sinfire, ready to give back whatever came her way. The armour would protect her, so all she needed to do was stay on her feet and give everyone else enough time to get out.

Of course, Godfrey knew better than to have anyone go through the door. He'd already seen Daniel and knew the demon could attack them with hellfire. The people on the other side of the door might be trapped there, but only once Godfrey's followers had forced their way through the tight funnel the door represented.

Defensive barrier spells might keep them safe, but not from everything that might be thrown at them. Plus, if Daniel was there then so too would be Anastasia. Not for the first time, Godfrey regretted not taking the sword and armour sooner.

Blasting the wall inward from outside, Godfrey used a sustained stream of sinfire to blast the bricks apart. It exploded inward, the concussive wave of displaced energy knocking Daniel off his feet.

Through the hole, the angels unleashed a hailstorm of sinfire, dozens of them firing into the office space. They all went over Daniel's head and there was no one else to hit other than Anastasia. Her armour did its job, keeping her from harm.

With a scream of rage, she sent a stream of sinfire back through the blinding dust that obscured her target and grabbed Daniel by the collar.

“Come on!”

Her words echoed in the office, but by the time the angels could aim at where she was, Anastasia was through the hole and running.

“We have to fight them!” Anastasia roared as she turned to face whoever came through the hole next.

Daniel wrapped an arm around her waist and kept running, her hundred-pound frame no problem for him to carry.

“There’s too many!” he shouted in reply. “He doesn’t have the headpiece. If he did, he wouldn’t be chasing us. Maybe it just isn’t here.”

“And maybe it is,” Ana argued, struggling to get free.

Claudius came through the hole and into the corridor, followed swiftly by Septus, Rhianna, and Finbarr. Anastasia threw sinfire their way, but they were fast enough to deflect it. Daniel was right, there were too many. She could attack with her sword, but to do so would leave everyone else exposed, especially Alex and Abigail.

They had no choice but to flee.

The angels pursued and a running battle commenced.

Daniel wanted to open a portal and take them somewhere else. He felt it was the obvious thing to do, but Anastasia refused. She wanted to stand her ground and fight to prevent Godfrey finding the artefact first. If it was here, she could not afford to let him have it.

However, in order to fight back, they had to first find a position they could defend. Another wall blew out, this one showering the corridor ahead with bricks and rubble – the angels had split, some had gone around them.

Godfrey commanded, “Kill them if you have to. I want that headpiece!”

More sinfire filled the air, some of it getting around the supernaturals’ barriers now they were being attacked on more than one side.

“Through here!” shouted Alex. She’d barged through a door to get out of the line of fire and found the room she was in had another door on the other side. “There’s a way out!”

The supernaturals darted through the door, Daniel and the angels going last with Anastasia. They were running through the room when Godfrey’s voice called out.

“Gabriel, Samuel, there is no reason to run. Come back to the fold. Come back to where you belong.” His voice had an eerily calm quality to it that sounded out of place in the midst of a battle. “Your sins are forgiven, my brothers. We are your family. Only with us can you ever truly find peace.”

Anastasia knew it was going to happen before it did. She thought their efforts would be aimed at her, but they were not. Evidently Gabriel and Samuel had discussed their strategy because when they acted, they did so in unison.

They fired at the backs of the fleeing supernaturals, their sinfire unopposed as they rendered half of Anastasia’s force unconscious.

Samuel split his targets, aiming at the Stevens sisters and everyone else at the same time as he attacked Daniel. Had he been further from the demon, he would have been sure to score a direct hit. Instead, because he was so close, Daniel jinked to the side and Samuel missed.

The automatic response from Daniel could not be avoided. With his attention split, Samuel’s reactions were a heartbeat too slow. Daniel thrust his right hand up and out, striking Samuel’s solar plexus at the exact moment he released an orb of hellfire.

The angel froze. He blinked once. Then he fell to the floor, his lifeless body folding on itself.

Gabriel’s horrified cry interrupted his merciless attack on the supernaturals. The rest of the angels were coming, any hope to mount a defence against them and find the headpiece was gone and Anastasia knew it. If they didn’t get out in the next few seconds, they would be overrun, and she might lose everything.

There was time to deal with Gabriel’s treachery though. Her sword flashed out, lit from within by the sinfire she pushed into it. The angel toppled backward, clutching his chest as she withdrew her blade from his ribcage.

Snarling her disgust, Anastasia said, “You picked the wrong side.”

Daniel snatched her arm again, tugging her across the room. “We have to go! Right now!”

More than half their group was unconscious, knocked out by Gabriel and Samuel’s cowardly attack.

Anastasia shook her arm free. “We’re not leaving anyone behind.”

Daniel’s eyes went the size of grapefruits. “How do you expect me to get them all out?”

“You figure it out!” Raising her sword, she walked back in the direction of the sinfire winging across the room. “I’ll hold them off!”

The sinfire connected with her armour where it harmlessly discharged, but her head was exposed and a shot there would spell trouble – she could absorb sinfire, but only so much of it. Getting closer meant she narrowed the angle and gave the angels a clearer target. In turn that meant they were less likely to hit her friends.

Behind her, she could hear Daniel and whoever was left standing yelling annoyed and frustrated instructions to one another. They were getting the team in one place, mostly by dragging their unconscious forms it seemed. Ana didn’t dare look and it worried her that she hadn’t heard Alex’s distinctive voice in the last few minutes.

Keeping the sword in her right hand, Anastasia pushed source energy through her body, a stream of sinfire erupting from her left hand to hose the angels. The air was filled with dust and smoke again, the smell of charred wood and burning plastic catching her throat to make her choke and cough.

Her tactic worked though. They couldn’t do anything to her with the armour to deflect their best efforts and she had a cannon to turn on them. It buoyed her with hope. Yes, the

angels outnumbered the force the humans could muster, but she could not be counted as one combatant.

Unlike any other human on the planet, she was more like the angels and demons than the people she so dearly wanted to protect. Maybe that was a bad thing, but her genetics allowed her to do what no one else could and she'd known for a long time she was going to beat Beelzebub and Godfrey or die trying.

No one else could. Not the way she saw things.

However, when her stream of sinfire was abruptly deflected, the blue light suddenly going sideways as though it was hitting an angled mirror, she was forced to acknowledge that the brothers were her equals. At least.

Godfrey stepped into the room. He looked calm. To his left and right, more than a dozen of his followers were strewn across the floor where Anastasia had mown through them, yet he remained unaffected by her power.

Ana dropped her stream. It was doing nothing.

"You killed Gabriel and Samuel," Godfrey observed. "That is disappointing."

"Were they always working for you?" she asked.

Godfrey looked down at his unconscious comrades, the threat Anastasia represented treated as though it were an insignificant trifling. He nodded though, "No, I'm afraid you credit me with too much guile. However, it has become clear to me you will not become one of us. My mother thought maybe you could be convinced to see things from our perspective, to allow us to give humanity what it really needs: true peace and harmony. Alas, you are, at your core, a woman with a mind that cannot be reshaped, and you possess a penchant for violence."

Anastasia pushed out her lips. She's never had anyone sum her character up quite so neatly. She'd risked a glance at

Daniel and got a thumbs up from Cassie. They were ready to go. Ana backed up a pace. Godfrey was stalling, probably to give the angels enough time to come around from the other side.

It was time to go.

Anastasia gave brief consideration to charging Godfrey. She had the sword and the armour, but from a tactical perspective, she knew it was the wrong time. Nevertheless, she launched a fresh stream of sinfire his way, forcing the angels' leader to focus on deflecting it as she ran toward Daniel.

He opened a portal in the floor, the mass of unconscious supernaturals plummeting through the hole to land a foot lower on the grass outside Rochester Cathedral. Shocked passers-by shrieked and ran, their footsteps echoing into the distance while Daniel waited to close the portal.

Just as she expected, angels burst through the door at the far end of the room in the half second before Anastasia reached Daniel. Thrusting out her hand as she shut off her stream of sinfire, she threw herself into the hole. Her fingertips touched Daniel's and they all vanished from sight.

Chapter 27

Katja came to with a thumping headache and it took a few moments to orientate herself. She was in Bremen, she could tell from the skyline, and knew roughly where she was within the city. Looking around, she questioned where Sharice could have gone, but only for a second before her memory supplied the answer.

With the SIA Headquarters exploding, Katja's panic filled eyes had found the nearest available person. Sharice, an old African woman from Kenja, was already opening a portal, responding to the shout that everyone should 'get out'. Katja didn't care where the portal went, just so long as it got her out of the building which already felt like it was collapsing.

Which is precisely what it then did.

Katja fell into the portal, touching Sharice's hand to make the physical contact needed for travel, but the floor went out at that precise moment and Sharice, waiting for someone else to get to them, vanished from sight even as Katja tumbled through.

Evidence of the terrible destruction in Washington was all around her – pieces of rubble lay in a circle with Katja in the middle. Her clothes and skin were covered in a thick layer of dust and grit from the demolished structure.

That Sharice must have perished in saving her felt like ice in Katja's heart. How many others died in the same attack? Was it the demons behind it, Katja questioned. Or someone else. She'd overheard Otto and Ayla talking, the two of them and others convinced the mission to battle Beelzebub was a trap intended to get them all killed.

Wanting a drink – her mouth was full of the same dust and grit – Katja reached around to get her phone. The movement brought searing pain that drew a squeal from her lips.

She was hurt!

Twisting to see, she could feel something digging into her back now, but no matter which way she carefully contorted her body, she just couldn't get her eyes on it. Tracing it with her fingers, Katja determined it to be a shard of glass. It was embedded in her back, just beneath her lowest rib and right above where she believed her right kidney would be.

She didn't think it was in all that deep, and convinced her flesh would heal if she could just get it out, Katja gritted her teeth, gripped it as tightly as she could, and gave a fast yank.

It came free, but not without more pain than she had ever endured in her life. Rolling to her side, Katja focused on breathing – the pain would subside as her body healed. It didn't though, and when her tentative fingers reached around to feel the wound, they confirmed what she already knew – the demon magic deep inside her was gone.

Or going. She wasn't sure which, but the immortality Katja briefly enjoyed appeared to have left her body. Lying in the street wasn't going to do her any good. She needed to get up and find help. She needed to find Otto and get back into the fight.

Biting down until her jaw ached, Katja came into a crawling position, got one foot under her body, then the next, and stood up. Her back felt warm and wet where blood leaked into the waistband of her jeans. She didn't think she was losing a dangerous amount and told herself the wound wasn't life threatening. Despite that, she also knew it did need to be treated.

The injury demanding she walk slowly and with care so as not to jar it, Katja tried once again to get her phone from the back pocket in which it resided. This time she succeeded. She could call Otto, she could call an ambulance ... Katja scrubbed the second option as unlikely – the world was on fire. If the emergency services were even operating, they would have bigger issues than her little cut to worry about.

However, upon turning her phone the right way up, Katja realised she wouldn't be calling anyone – it was smashed, the screen destroyed when she tumbled through the portal and landed on it. Head swimming, she bent over for a moment to let the whirlies pass, and when she stood up, she felt her other pocket for the shilt glove she kept there.

She didn't use it very often, there were always other people around to travel with, but her scrambling, panicked fingers needed only a few seconds to confirm the other thing she needed wasn't there. With a groan she remembered putting it down. Clearly, she hadn't picked it up again.

She was in the middle of Bremen. It was the middle of the night and there was no one around. There were no pay phones, not that she could really remember there ever being any. She only knew about them from watching movies set in the nineties and earlier. Perplexed and tired, it took her a few moments to figure out a course of action that might work.

The police headquarters wasn't too far away; she could go there. Grimacing against the pain in her back, Katja dropped the remains of her phone on the street and began hobbling.

Chapter 28

Otto had arrived in Washington more than an hour ago determined to find Katja. However, in the time since he came through the portal all he had done was stare at the smoking ruins of the SIA Headquarters.

Katja was dead. How could she be anything else?

Even if, by some miracle, she had fallen into a pocket and was still alive inside the rubble, there was no way to get her out. He thought about what magic he could conjure to move the giant pieces of broken building, exposing the gaps in between layer by layer, but there was no way to safely do anything.

The likely outcome was the demise of anyone left alive inside the ruins.

Ironbolt, the treacherous idiot, had killed humanity's greatest hope. Growling his name, Otto looked to his left. The skyscrapers of the city were still there. Well, mostly they were. The city, like so many across the planet, had taken a pummelling at the hands of the demons.

There were lights shining out from some windows and the hum of traffic was there in the background. The demons might have killed thousands and annihilated the government, but the survivors were defiantly going about their lives. Heck, Otto imagined that some were even going back to work now that the immediate threat was passed.

Was Ironbolt here somewhere? The man lived close enough that he used to arrive by car each day. That meant he lived in the city, right? Opening a portal, his belly filled with the need to exact revenge, Otto took himself to the battle site outside the White House. The familiar building, one that could be recognised all across the globe, was nothing more than a few smouldering pieces now.

There were people gathered around what was left of the outer fence, Washington residents coming to see with their own eyes what they refused to believe could be true. Otto moved between them, engaging his second sight out of habit. There were only one or two humans with thin tendrils of ley line energy connecting them to the earth. They were probably not even aware they had supernatural genes.

What he needed was an address. An address for Colt Ironbolt so he could find him and kill him. It was a worthless task that would bring nothing more than an additional shade of darkness to his already black soul, but he would do it anyway. Only then would he return to the mantle of leading the rag tag remains of the supernatural army.

Leaving the White House behind, Otto walked away.

Chapter 29

In Rochester, England, Anastasia raged at the sky. Forced to flee the Smithsonian, they hadn't found the headpiece and Godfrey was there right now, probably tearing the place apart in his quest to find it. She would return shortly, she had no choice. Godfrey could not be allowed to possess a weapon that could end the fight and defeat humanity.

Daniel would go with her, but what about the others? Caught in a crossfire between two groups of the angels and the treachery of Gabriel, most of her new colleagues had been cut down. It was a miracle they were not dead for the angels could have chosen to eliminate the threat they represented just as easily.

Instead they used sinfire to render the supernaturals unconscious.

She looked up at the cathedral spire where it reached into the sky high above her head. It looked as though it could touch the clouds drifting across the sky.

"Why here?" she asked. The question hadn't been aimed at anyone, but Daniel knew she was asking him.

He shrugged. "First place I could think of. I figured this would feel like home to you and it was a long way from where we were."

Anastasia pursed her lips. Rochester wasn't home, not really, but then neither was anywhere else. An image of her mother surfaced along with her sister. Anastasia didn't know them other than from a few visits when she got back from Zannaria.

The piece of shrapnel in her skull wiped out her memories of everything before the explosion. Really, it was a mercy she could still form new memories; she didn't want to think what that might be like to live with.

Rochester was where she lived when she was considered recovered enough to be released from hospital. Her military career was over, but she found a job at a library through one of the many forces' charities and that was where she met Alex and Abigail. It was also where she met Daniel when he sent his minions to kidnap her.

The demon was working on reviving the unconscious supernaturals, his mastery of source energy being put to positive use for once. It took no more than a few seconds to bring each person around, but they were then groggy and confused. Mercifully, some of the humans had managed to avoid the barrage of sinfire and were helping those less fortunate.

Abigail was sitting up, accepting a hand from Naomi who, Anastasia noticed, had a nasty cut to her right arm. Daniel would fix that too if he got a chance.

Looking around for Alex; they needed a new plan since there was no choice but to go back and try to find the headpiece, Anastasia's heart thumped in her chest. Her eyes widened, and holding her breath, she started to move through the mess of people still littering the grass outside the ancient cathedral.

Now breathing rapidly, her heart beating faster than it ought, she reached the end of her search and spun around, her eyes darting left and right in denial.

It was no good though. She could search all she wanted. Alex wasn't among the group though – they had left her behind!

Chapter 30

While Anastasia panicked about her friend, Alex was in her element. Having been one of the first ones through the door, she ran across the room into which the supernaturals were all crowding to get away from the angels, and with her head down kept running as she assumed that was the plan.

No one saw her go through the far door and it wasn't until she realised the only footsteps she could hear were her own, that she thought to slow down and stop.

She would have retraced her steps, but before she could, a gang of what had to be angels – they were not part of her group – ran past her in a connecting corridor. She froze, expecting them to see her gawping at them like a fool, but they were too focused on where they were going.

When their footsteps faded a little, and she could hear no others coming, she dared to take a breath.

“Alex,” she murmured to herself, “if you survive this, you are going to the gym to get fit. You are absolutely not celebrating your survival by eating cake.”

Pushing herself to start moving, she wasn't sure which way to go, but tagging along behind the angels sounded like a stupendously bad idea, so she went the other way and hoped she could find a way to circle around them.

“Maybe just a small piece of cake with your friends,” she conceded. “Anything less would be impolite.”

She walked on, keeping her footsteps light. To battle her nerves, she talked to herself about cake.

“There would need to be a selection, of course,” she whispered while peering around a corner. “A Victoria sponge for the traditionalists, a decadent chocolate torte of some kind, something fruity ...” She froze again. The sounds of shouting

and battle, which had been present the whole time, had suddenly fallen quiet.

Heart thumping in her chest, she knew exactly what it meant, but didn't dare to believe it.

“They absolutely didn't just open a portal and escape without you, Alex, don't be so silly.” They had though, and the soft words that followed confirmed it for her. She was close enough to hear Godfrey speaking though she could not make out what he was saying or tell who it was that she could hear.

Trying hard not to panic, Alex looked about. There was no point trying to get back to where she had been; not if Ana and the rest had already left. So what should she do? The answer was obvious and by the time Anastasia realised her friend was missing, Alex had found the area reserved for Mesopotamian antiquities and was exploring the boxes.

There were a lot of them.

As a librarian, Alex had spent her working life among dusty old books and inevitably on computers as that was where all information was going these days. The bowels of the Smithsonian turned out to not be too much different.

The building still had power which was a good thing because night would be falling outside soon and she was underground anyway. There was a tower computer and monitor on a desk near where she was working, but as expected, she couldn't get past the password encryption. Alex figured that didn't matter all that much because the file system inside would have been unfamiliar and confusing, so she resorted to opening all the boxes one by one.

That lasted about a minute.

She was being super careful with ancient artefacts when the fate of the world and all its residents might actually rest on whether she could find the headpiece before the angels turned up – they had to be here looking for the same thing, right? Suddenly aware that she was being ridiculous, Alex started

ripping the boxes off the shelves. They were labelled, but since the notation on the outside meant nothing to her, she just flipped lids and rummaged.

Five minutes in, she stopped. The area around her was utter carnage, boxes strewn and upended in every direction.

“Come on, Alex,” she growled to herself. “You need to be more organised than this.”

She knew what the headpiece looked like and roughly how big it was. There were some enormous boxes – crates really – that she figured she could ignore. The only way the thing she wanted was in one of those was if it was mixed in with goodness knows what else. Also, more than half the boxes abandoned on the floor were too small for what she wanted to be in.

Narrowing her search parameters, she started again.

For about ten seconds.

This time when she stopped moving, it was because she could hear voices. Pulse quickening, Alex snorted a terrified breath from her nose. The angels wouldn't kill her, right?

Truthfully, she didn't know the answer to that question, and didn't want to hang around to find out. Remaining stock still, she listened until she could be sure they were coming closer.

She wanted to find the stupid headpiece, but getting caught was going to do no one any good. Starting toward the door, hoping she could get out and slip away before the angels were in sight, Alex told herself the mess she had made would slow them down and make it harder for them to find what they were after.

At the door, she looked back at the boxes and her breath caught.

Alex could still hear the voices approaching, but wasn't that the headpiece lying on the floor? She couldn't see it properly, her search by tantrum method might have exposed

the thing she wanted, but it was mostly obscured by the lid of a box.

Hesitating was only making things worse - her heart threatened to beat right out of her chest if she didn't make a decision and move.

With a suppressed squeal of fright, Alex let go of the door, ran to grab the thing, and darted back to the door convinced she would open it and find the angels right outside. The voices were so loud now!

Her feet skidded to a stop. She'd waited too long and was going to get caught. If only she'd been less in a hurry in her searching. If only she'd not hesitated when she first thought she might have spotted it. With no option other than to hide, Alex tip toe ran back past the mess of boxes and around a high shelf.

The moment she tucked out of sight, the door opened.

Her legs felt weak. There had been moments of terror in her life before this one – being held hostage by the four horsemen so Anastasia would do their bidding, being threatened with instant death, that time she got naked in the girls' locker room at the pool only to discover it was a unisex changing area – but this one trumped them all.

“She beat us to it!” Godfrey raged, his voice filled with venom. “She must have the headstone, that is why she ran instead of facing me. We must pursue her.”

“But how?” begged Tiana, “We have no idea where she could have gone.”

“Then we must track her down,” snarled Godfrey in response. “I cannot explain how she could have found the headpiece, but without it we are all lost. She will want to use the Bagh Nakh, so perhaps it is time to set a trap to ensnare her.”

Backing silently away, Alex knocked a cardboard tube poking out from a shelf. It didn't make a lot of noise, but in a quiet room it was heard by everyone.

“What was that?” asked Godfrey.

Through the gaps in the stacked boxes, Alex saw faces turn her way. Others might have found their feet rooted to the spot, their ability to move denied them when they needed it most. Not so Alex.

She squealed, “Waaaaahhh!” as she turned and fled. To her knowledge there was nowhere to go, but based on a simple desire for survival, running away promised better odds than staying where she was.

The tactic turned out to be sound, for she reached the end of the shelves and discovered a gap running to another door in the corner of the room. It was an emergency door, a push bar in the middle of the door suggesting a quick exit was likely. They don't lock emergency exits, right?

Alex hit it with her entire body weight, the door slamming back against the wall outside as she near tore it from its hinges. Far from athletic, Alex knew she was built for eating cake and had often considered it her moral responsibility to eat the portion of the skinny girls around her so they could stay the shape they wanted to be.

Right now, as she tried to cover a hundred metres in a shade under four seconds, she reflected that her food strategies might not have been as sound as they ... um, sounded.

A hiss of angry static filled the air, giving her a fraction of warning. Alex grabbed the corner of the wall and threw herself around a corner just as a ball of sinfire flew through the space where her bottom had been.

Thinking it a touch unkind for them to aim at her derriere just because it was a big target, she ran on. Her lead wasn't a good one and the angels would catch her soon enough. She knew that, and the unavoidable fact shaped her strategy.

If it was no good running, she needed to hide. Would they find her regardless? Well, probably, but small hope was better than no hope.

Rounding the next corner, once again narrowly avoiding the sinfire thrown her way, Alex came into a larger warehouse area. The team had been through there earlier, she realised, recognising the shape of the space.

It was an area she could get lost in. Ducking between two giant crates, she slowed her pace and kicked off her shoes – socked feet would make less noise. Now all she had to do was convince her lungs they didn't need oxygen so she could stop huffing like a rhino in the final throes of energetic coitus.

Unable to see her pursuers, Alex wedged herself between two crates and ducked down, using a hand to cover her mouth.

Someone, she couldn't tell who, told everyone to spread out and find her. They could tell she was human and thus unable to open a portal. Finding her was just a matter of time. Some were dispatched to watch the exits, and the rest began weaving through the crates.

How long until they find you? Alex questioned. Certain the answer would be, 'Not very long at all', Alex inspected the headpiece. She'd been carrying it for the last few minutes but was yet to look at it properly.

Made from rock, it shone from within with a purple iridescence. It looked to be alive with amethyst. One face was etched with glyphs with an ornate pattern running around the outer rim. Fitting snugly into her palm, it was rectangular with the same dimensions as a pack of cigarettes. That made it small enough that she could hide it.

With that thought in mind, and certain it was only a matter of moments before her hiding place was discovered, Alex looked about for a dark hole into which she could stow it.

As she turned her head, someone placed a hand on her shoulder, and she screamed in shocked fright.

“Aaarrrrghhh!”

Anastasia rolled her eyes. “Well, that ought to bring them running.”

Shouts came from every direction, the angels zeroing in on the location of the scream.

“Are you coming, or what?” Ana asked with a smirk.

Right behind her, Daniel held a portal open, the demon jinking one eyebrow to suggest they might wish to hurry.

Alex needed no second invitation. She needed new knickers, but that was a problem she felt no need to air publicly.

With a helping yank from Anastasia, she tumbled through the portal and onto the grass outside Rochester cathedral.

Chapter 31

Having walked some distance, Zachary had been able to determine he was in England. Probably. There were signs in shop windows advertising prices with a £ sign. That meant England or one of the other countries in the United Kingdom, he felt certain. The writing was in English too as were the street signs he saw. Checking the window of an estate agent, and the names of the shops, he guessed he was somewhere called Rochester.

It was dark out and it looked as though martial law had been imposed, for there were no civilians on the streets, but he had seen several military vehicles going by. The army guys looked dangerous and unsettled which came as no surprise.

He walked on, still in werewolf form because his clothes were back in Budapest still. Whether the soldiers would panic and open fire if they saw him was a subject for conjecture, but with the streets as empty as they were, he figured he could stay out of their way.

What he needed was to find someone who could open a portal. One of Otto's bunch would be ideal, but given that he still wasn't sure where in the world he was, Zac figured he was more likely to find a member of the shilt.

Finding a phone would do him no good because he couldn't remember anyone's numbers except his own. So he continued to walk. There was a spire ahead; the top of a large church Zachary assumed. It poked above the other buildings which were all centuries old.

He came past a piece of ruined city wall that had to be even older than the buildings. Wherever he was, it had some history to it.

To his left as he meandered along what he took to be a high street, a sign above a shop flashed and sparked. It had been

broken, the glass on one side smashed and the door to the premises hung open, the offices inside long since abandoned.

Zachary read the sign 'Blue Moon Investigations' and the ad in the window 'debunking everything supernatural, one case at a time'.

Moving on with a chuckle, the seven-foot werewolf muttered, "Good luck with that."

He was nearing the cathedral when he heard gunfire. It was coming from his right and slightly behind his current position. Shouts from the soldiers suggested they were engaged with ... something.

It had to be shilt or gindars. Heck maybe it was ogres. Zac didn't care what it was. He was trapped wherever he was, and he was getting hungry. He could help the soldiers and maybe scrounge a meal from them. They had to have food, surely?

Turning right before he got to the cathedral where another group of supernaturals were too busy to consider rushing to aid the British Army, he broke into a jog and flexed his claws.

"Shilt," he remarked to himself. "I hope it's shilt."

Chapter 32

Getting an address for Colt Ironbolt proved to be easy, not that he was at home. Otto arrived at the man's private, gated residence to find it all but abandoned.

All but.

While Ironbolt had left, there remained a small guard contingent to keep the home safe from intruders. They were more of his handpicked soldiers, many of them having served under his command when both they and he were still in uniform.

The guards spotted Otto Schneider on the camera feed when he approached the front gate. They were secure inside the house where their boss assured them they would be safe from all the terror going on outside.

They were not SIA, so they failed to recognise the threat the middle-aged bald man represented. Until he blew the gates off that is.

By the time they were out of their chairs and scrambling to grab their weapons, Otto Schneider was floating six feet above the ground on his way to the house. There had been no need to blast the gates, but Otto felt it set the right tone. He didn't know Ironbolt wasn't at home; not that it would have made much difference. Otto knew the man was divorced with no kids and was thankful for it because it meant he could rip through the building looking for the man he wanted to kill without feeling concern for innocent victims.

The guards ran out of the house on both the ground and upper levels where a balcony swept around three sides. They were firing before they had time to aim, but even when they zeroed in on their target, their bullets had no effect.

Otto's shield, designed to withstand hellfire, repelled the bullets as though they were flies aiming their faces at a speeding Volvo's windscreen.

Shield in place, he conjured an air spell and with his senses reaching to touch all the humans inside and outside the house, he shut off the oxygen in their lungs. It was a simple manipulation of a spell that even a low-ability wizard could master. A supernatural with some skill could fight the spell, but the humans clutched and clawed at their throats, panic setting in almost the instant they found they couldn't breathe.

Otto held the spell for a solid minute, looking around to see if there was anyone he might have missed. He hadn't, and after sixty seconds, most of the guards were prone on the ground, consciousness wavering or already gone.

Selecting one man who had gone blue in the face but was still glaring up at his tormentor, Otto released the spell and glided down to the first-floor balcony.

The man heaved in lungful's of air, his eyes locked on Otto's. His weapon, an ugly black assault rifle, hung from a strap around his shoulders. His hands were not on it, but Otto could see the man calculating his chances of getting a shot off now that the wizard was within a few yards.

"I wouldn't bother," Otto remarked casually while pushing heat energy into the metal of the gun. It required only a second or so of effort to make the weapon too hot to touch and, feeling it through his clothing, the man swore and danced away, trying hard to rid himself of the smoking hot metal without touching it.

"Is Ironbolt here?" Otto asked. He didn't advance, there was no need; just moving his arms served as threat enough.

When the man refused to answer, his eyes darting this way and that for help or an exit, Otto sighed and tried again.

"I need to have a quick word with Colt Ironbolt. Kind of a one-sided conversation actually. If you don't tell me where I can find him, I will do something terrible to you and then find someone else to ask." The man's eyes widened at the unspecified nature of Otto's threat. "Have you ever seen what

happens when a wizard superheats all the liquid inside a person's body?" he asked, raising one hand.

A few sparkles trailed from it, the elemental magic fizzing as he pushed a slight warmth into the man's chest. The sudden discomfort was enough to erode any final defiance the man felt.

The guard proved to be highly talkative and knowledgeable. Ironbolt was about to announce himself as the new world leader for all of humanity. He was holding a big press conference with news channels from around the world turning up to record and stream him as he brokered peace for everyone.

That was the pledge he gave the media. He was in a unique position to lead the world into a new dawn. One where they would live alongside the magical beings laying waste to the world.

Otto didn't care what grand plans Ironbolt might have stuffed inside his head, he planned to kill the man no matter what.

Having extracted all that he felt he needed from the terrified guard, who chose to demonstrate his fear by wetting himself, Otto opened a portal.

He was just about to step through when he felt a blow to his left arm. The shock of it broke his spell and the portal snapped shut. The echo sending birds into the air was that of a single shot being fired. It was followed immediately by a volley. Otto's shield deflected the bullets, but his left arm wavered, and the barrier spell faltered.

He was hurt, not an unusual sensation, but something was different this time. He'd given the guards too long and they had recovered. More shots came his way, this time from more than one direction. Otto dropped to the ground and opened a portal behind his body. Falling through, he left Washington

behind and closed the portal before anyone there could follow him.

He took a moment to regain his breath and inspect his wound. Most notably, it wasn't healing. Otto had always expected that his immortality would vanish the moment the death curse fell, but that had proven to not be the case. He was both pleased and unhappy about it at the same time.

Being unkillable in a battle is a big help, but who wants to live forever? Otto certainly didn't, but now that he was bleeding, the red liquid spilling freely from the deep gouge in his left triceps, he badly wanted the immortality back. At least for a while.

Tearing his eyes away from the injury for a second, he looked at where he was. Leaving Washington and indeed America behind, he was now in Geneva, Switzerland, a city he'd never visited before. He thought it an odd venue for Ironbolt. Obviously, it had been chosen for the universally known 'Geneva Convention' the set of rules that prevented terrible atrocities in war. They were at war right now.

His portal had opened in a green field opposite the Palace of Nations, the headquarters for the United Nations which Otto correctly guessed had been scattered to the wind along with all other governing bodies around the world. It was a magnificent building like a palace should be, and right now it was bathed in light.

A large stage erected before the building's ornate front façade housed microphones and there were news vans scattered all around the grounds. Perhaps a thousand chairs sat facing the stage where Ironbolt undoubtedly planned to address the world.

Otto didn't understand what the former SIA chief could mean by his promise to broker peace until he caught sight of a demon.

Startled he engaged his second sight and felt his blood run cold. The building was full of demons. Not just dozens or hundreds, but tens of thousands of them. Those that were not inside were behind the palace in the grounds.

Ironbolt had been colluding with them all along. Otto could draw no other conclusion. The man was so power mad he had sold out humanity to gain another step on the ladder. What had Beelzebub promised him? A seat at the table in return for handing over the world's ability to fight back?

It explained the terrible ambush at the White House. It explained how he and Ayla along with dozens more came to be locked in the SIA detention centre.

A blanket of red rage descended over Otto's vision and his need to kill Ironbolt trebled. It was replaced almost instantly with despair. Katja was gone, the SIA headquarters were smashed, and the supernatural army was scattered. Zachary wasn't answering his calls any longer, Anastasia was on a mission of her own, and Ironbolt would seize control of what was left of the world's politicians, promising them peace if they simply surrendered.

Only when it was too late, and the armies of the globe had been disbanded would they learn the awful truth: that Beelzebub intended to reduce the human population to a fraction of its current size.

Otto slumped to the grass, bone weary. He could try to find the others, he could return to Budapest and the fight. He could rally everyone and stage a last attack on the palace where all the demons had gathered to enjoy their victory, but what was the point?

Even if he were still immortal, it was too great a challenge to think he could wade through so many enemies. They would overpower him and find a way to nullify his abilities. He wasn't immortal though, not anymore. The magic took longer

to fade from his body which was a good thing or he might have died hours ago, but it was gone now.

His left arm throbbed where the bullet tore through his flesh. It wasn't a life-threatening wound and the blood leaking from it was already diminishing. The blood already lost, however, was making him feel woozy. He laid back his head and stared up at the stars above.

Ironbolt would appear on the stage in the morning and maybe there would be a chance to kill him then. Otto doubted it; he would have demons to protect him, but if not then, perhaps another opportunity would arise. Maybe he couldn't win now, maybe humanity was doomed, but Otto was going to kill Colt Ironbolt if it was the last thing he ever did.

Chapter 33

Anastasia broke into the cathedral, blasting the doors open with hellfire so she and her team could find somewhere inside to rest. They had been going for hours. To most it seemed like days, the constant shifting between time zones playing havoc with their body clocks. They were hungry; that was almost universal, and a small party went in search of food. There would be no takeaway treats – the world was largely closed for business, but they would find something even if they had to loot a supermarket to do it.

Anastasia remained behind in the cathedral, examining the headpiece Godfrey so desperately wanted.

“What do we do with it?” asked Cassie. She was sitting cross-legged on a wooden pew next to her twin, Jennifer. They both had cups of coffee from a stash of raw materials they found in the vestry. The scent of the hot brew filled the air and even though it was the awful dried, instant stuff, it tasted like heaven.

Anastasia turned the odd rectangular artefact over in her hand. “We keep it away from Godfrey. That’s paramount. And we try to find the weapon.”

“You really think you can operate it?” asked Abigail, sounding doubtful.

Ana shrugged. “Won’t know until I try.” Seeing the faces around her, she added, “What do you want me to say? I have literally no idea how the weapon even works, only that it is likely only operable by Godfrey, Beelzebub, and me.”

“It’s your best chance,” said Daniel.

Anastasia noted that he said ‘your’ and not ‘our’. He wasn’t including himself in those who would be saved. If Anastasia could operate Godfrey’s ‘end of the world’ machine, would she be able to do so with enough finesse to kill the demons while saving him?

They hadn't discussed it, and the subject hung like an elephant in the room.

Jennifer chose to approach the subject of the Bagh Nakh with a positive attitude. "Okay, so for now there is a stalemate, yes? Godfrey cannot operate the weapon until he gets his hands on the piece that we have. Conversely, we cannot use it because Godfrey has it. All we have to do is take it from him."

Cassie chuckled. "Just like that, eh, sis? We just waltz into their stronghold, which, by the way, will be difficult because we don't know where it is. Then we snatch the one thing they will want to protect above all else, and hold them off while Anastasia reads the instruction manual."

Frowning, Jennifer said, "There's no need to be flippant."

Anastasia cut them both off. "There's no need for anything right now. Like Jen said – it's a stalemate. We need to rest, and we need to eat."

As if on cue, the raiding party returned, coming through the broken cathedral doors with bags and bags hanging from their hands.

"We have bread!" announced Robbie proudly.

Trotting behind him, the next in line held his bags aloft, "And potato chips! And cookies, and soda, and cheese and ..."
The list went on and it was a good one.

They might all die when the sun rose, but for now they could fill their bellies with simple food that required no cooking. They would sleep, and in the morning they would make a plan.

Chapter 34

Coordinating the armed forces of the world along with the SIA outposts and whoever was left to fight among the supernaturals would be a hard enough task with a full staff and the SIA Headquarters to run things from.

Ayla Pendragon had neither.

Arriving back in Washington, her first move was to contact her family. She wanted desperately to go to them, to hug her kids and kiss her husband. She couldn't do that; it was too risky. Maybe she wasn't being watched or tracked, but it was clear she had enemies. Ironbolt seized control of the SIA and attempted to eliminate her. She could not have been more grateful that she chose to move her family away from the city and into the Rocky Mountains where they were less likely to be in harm's way.

That happened months ago, her NYPD husband taking a pay cut and a demotion to become a lowly deputy in a small town. That was how he saw it, but they didn't need the money and Ayla knew concerns such as career aspirations would be rendered laughably insignificant if the death curse fell during their lifetime.

She called the house, a tear-filled conversation ensuing. Her family had watched the story unfolding around the world in horror, and witnessed the destruction of the White House and the terrible losses the SIA forces took when they attempted to intervene.

Ayla explained in brief terms what had happened and ended the call with a promise to call again as soon as she could. She did not caveat it by saying, 'If I am still alive'.

Phone call complete, Ayla thought about what she needed to achieve and how she might hope to take even the first step.

Her phone was all she had. No office, no staff, no help whatsoever. However, locked within the memory of her device

were the numbers for dozens of SIA outposts and national headquarters. She found herself an abandoned coffee shop, helped herself to a bottle of water and a sandwich from the glass counter, changed her mind about being healthy and added a large slice of cake, then settled into a chair with a pad of paper and a broken pencil she found behind the till.

Swilling away the cake crumbs with the refreshingly cold water, she opened her contacts list and pressed the first number.

“Commissioner Bliedtrey,” barked a voice at the other end. “Who is this?”

“Ayla Pendragon,” Ayla replied, her forehead knitting. Surely her name should have appeared on his screen when the call connected. She could hear Bliedtrey breathing at the other end. He sounded tired, but also perplexed.

“Ayla Pendragon died yesterday when the SIA Headquarters in Washington was destroyed. President Ironbolt is back in charge. Is that really you, Ayla?” The German SIA head revealed several things in his simple statement: Ironbolt had announced his return to power and lied about her demise. That would work in her favour.

It was no accident that she called Bliedtrey first. He was another one of the SIA higher ups who was considered for the top spot when Ironbolt weaselled his way into it. He was considered again when Ironbolt made a mess of things, but that time Ayla got the job. The two of them had met several times and saw things on the same wavelength. If she could get him on side, he would help pull things together.

Touching her hand to the shilt glove in her pocket, she said, “I can open a portal and be with you in seconds. Where are you?” She needed a destination before she could travel.

“Nevermind. It’s you,” Bliedtrey concluded. “Do you have a plan?”

Ayla closed her eyes and allowed herself to feel a smidgeon of hope. Flicking them open again she said, “Yes, maybe.”

Chapter 35

He'd expected to sleep badly, it was the eve of his coronation, as he liked to think of it. He hadn't used the term publicly, or even in company for it messed with the image he was trying to portray – that of the reluctant servant stepping into the limelight to do what no one else could. Yes, he would accept the mantle of world leader for the good of mankind, what else could he do?

He combed his hair and wiped a small blob of shaving foam from his left earlobe. Turning left and right to examine his reflection, Ironbolt decided he was happy with what he saw. He could lose a few pounds from around his middle, but he believed he carried it well. If anything, it made him look statesmanlike – a man of the people. One of them, only better.

The stage outside was set. For the last hour a band of his own choosing – he'd been planning this for some time – had been banging out hits in multiple languages. He was uniting the world and wanted to include everyone.

The cameras were rolling, sending around the globe messages of hope displayed on massive screens on either side of the stage. An announcement was coming, humanity would be saved, and life could return to how it had been before the demons came.

Irbolt knew that wasn't true, but equally he believed the version of normal he could offer was the best they could hope for. It would be close enough too and most families would carry on as though nothing much had happened. There would be big changes for sure, but all were manageable. Religion would be out the window, so too many of the polluting practices humanity carried out every day.

The demons would insist on many things, but it was all acceptable and it wasn't as though they had a choice.

A knock at his door broke his daydream and he plucked the pieces of tissue from his collar, there to ensure he wouldn't leave a sweat mark before he went in front of the cameras.

"President Ironbolt, they are ready," called a soft feminine voice.

Colt hadn't picked Sophie, the Harvard MBA graduate who was assigned to run his press service, but he intended to bed her the first chance he got. She was everything a man in power could want: young, pretty, slender, and hungry for success.

Without feeling any need to respond verbally, he stood up, straightened the jacket of his suit, and went to the door. Just when he felt Sophie must be about to call again, he snatched the door open, startling the poor woman with the sudden unexpectedness of it.

He looked down at her, or tried to. She was annoyingly tall with heels that placed her eyes above his. Nevertheless, he managed to give her a haughty look.

"Lead on, Sophie. History awaits."

She shot one eyebrow, but turned around and led him to the stage entrance as rehearsed. She felt certain the sleazebag was staring at her backside the whole way, and let it pass without comment – it was as close as he would ever get.

Just off stage, Ironbolt took a moment to settle himself. This was it, the biggest moment of his life.

"You seem nervous," observed Beelzebub, speaking from just behind Ironbolt and making him start.

"Just savouring the moment," Colt replied dismissively. "Such things should not be rushed." Expecting the demon lord to have something more to say, Ironbolt started forward straight away, cutting Beelzebub off before he could talk.

Cameras flashed and a cheer arose from the crowd of spectators in the chairs facing the stage. They were all

employed to do precisely that, the demons quite clear of the consequence for failing to be suitably jubilant.

Ironbolt waved to the world as he crossed the stage, heading to the microphones and lectern waiting in the centre for his arrival.

Pausing when he got there, he donned a suitably sombre expression and faced the cameras.

“My fellow humans. If you do not know me, my name is Colt Ironbolt. For some years, I have been the head of the Supernatural Investigation Alliance. Formerly, I was a US Army colonel. I address you today as the person chosen by the invading demon army to represent humanity.” He paused and looked to the sky, adding drama where it was needed.

“The past hours have been the hardest the planet has ever faced, yet I am able to greet you today with glad news.”

Chapter 36

Shaken awake, Anastasia reached for her sword and drew on source energy before she was able to focus her eyes and see that the thing blocking out the light was Alex.

“Wake up!” Alex begged, shaking Ana’s shoulder again even though her eyes were open and she was trying to sit up.

Anastasia wanted to snap that she was awake and slap Alex’s hand away, but the urgency in her words made Ana believe they were in danger. Shoving off the bench and pushing Alex out of the way, she drew her sword and pushed sinfire into it. Her left hand went to the throwing knife on her belt – she was ready to kill.

But where was the target?

Around the room, the team of supernaturals, now largely recovered from the ordeal of the previous day, were either still asleep, or yawning and stretching. One or two were on their feet and shuffling about, but no one was acting as though the group was about to be overrun.

Before Ana got a chance to ask why Alex woke her with such urgency, a phone was thrust under her nose.

“Look at this!” insisted Alex. “It’s Ironbolt.”

Her eyes needed a second to focus, but her ears could already hear his voice.

“The world must adjust to a new way of living, but it is one that you will all find palatable. I have brokered peace with the leader of the demons.” Before Ana’s disbelieving eyes, Ironbolt turned to his left and held out a welcoming hand as Beelzebub stepped onto the stage.

He looked much like he had every time Ana saw him: like he had just escaped from an audition for an eighty’s hair band. Leather trousers clad his lower half, a white t-shirt with the sleeves torn off covering the rest. He wore biker boots and had

leather straps around his right wrist. At seven-feet tall he was a seriously imposing figure.

“This is live?” questioned Ana, scarcely able to take her eyes off the tiny screen.

Alex nodded solemnly. “What do you think it means?”

People began to gather around them.

Anastasia bit her lip. “I think that idiot is about to sell out the whole planet.” The footage was from a major news network, the title running across the bottom of the screen displaying the message: ‘New earth leader announced. Peace brokered with demons.’ “If he convinces whatever leadership is left across the world to stand down their armies, we are lost. There won’t be another chance to fight back.”

“What about Godfrey?” asked Naomi around a yawn that split her face.

Ana held up the headpiece. “He’s got nothing. The best he can hope for is his brother’s mercy.”

In the minute since Alex woke her, everyone else had been roused and most were watching the same event on their own phones or gathered around someone who had it playing.

Alex looked straight at Ana. “What are we going to do?”

Chapter 37

In Bremen, Katja Weber had found her way to the police station, but collapsed from loss of blood and pain as she came through the doors into the reception area. Vaulting the desk, the on-duty sergeant yelled for his subordinate to bring a med kit and ran to the young girl's aid.

When she awoke many hours later in a hospital bed, it was to find herself in a corridor, not a room. Her clothes were missing, replaced by a gown and the first careful examination of her back revealed a dressing over the wound that was there.

Her mouth was dry, and she felt incredibly hungry. Even without knowing what time of the day it was, Katja could calculate it had to be at least eighteen hours since she ate anything. Gingerly sitting up, and surprised her wound didn't hurt more than it did, she looked down the corridor.

There were more beds lining the wall in each direction – overflow from the wards. Had Bremen suffered at the hands of the demons? She didn't know. There had been no time to watch the news, but most of the world's major cities had been attacked so it stood to reason that Bremen would be among them even if it was a lesser target.

“Hey, you're awake,” said a voice from behind her.

Katja twisted around to find a teenage boy of about sixteen or seventeen behind her. He had a bandage wound around his head which covered his right eye and made his hair stand up at crazy angles.

“What happened here?” she asked. “Was Bremen attacked?”

She got an incredulous look in response.

“Bremen got hit by a horde. How can you not know that? Most of the city centre is gone.”

She took the news in her stride. It was a terrible thing to hear, but terrible things were fast becoming the norm.

“I need to go,” she murmured, swivelling around to hang her feet off the bed before hopping down to the tile. It was cold beneath her feet, but the sensation was welcome, nevertheless.

“Hey!” called the boy as she walked away using the beds as a handrail in case she felt woozy. “Hey, where are you going?”

Katja didn't bother to answer and didn't look back. She needed clothes and she needed to find a way to contact Otto. Anything else was a waste of precious time.

Ten yards down the corridor, she came past the entrance to a room. There were four beds inside, each with a patient glued to a television set into the far wall. Katja would have kept going had she not caught a glimpse of the man on the screen.

Unable to stop herself, she drifted into the room, her eyes just as transfixed as those already inside.

“My fellow humans. Today is a great day. You may question my reason for labelling it as such given the terrible destruction all around us, but I am here to tell you it could all be so much worse. The truth is that the beings we refer to as demons are nothing more than a race who once ruled over us all. You will find that hard to believe but it is true. Beelzebub here,” Ironbolt once again indicated the giant standing silently to his left, “is a direct descendent of a supreme being who ruled the planet for the benefit of all the creatures who dwelt upon it. Humans included. They have returned now so that they can bring an end to our self-destructive practices. They will return this Earth to the lush paradise it used to be, and we will help them ...”

Katja gawped at the screen. Was this really happening? The scrolling words at the bottom of the television claimed Ironbolt had announced himself to be the world's first global

leader. It also said a truce had been established and that peace was on the table if humanity surrendered.

“Oh, my God,” she breathed.

The sound of her voice drew the eyes of a woman sitting awkwardly in the bed to Katja’s left. Unconsciously, she had known someone entered the room, but was too invested in the scene unfolding in Geneva to consider tearing her eyes away until now.

“Katja?”

Blinking, Katja turned her head to see who had spoken her name. Her eyes flared.

“Heike?”

Detective Lieutenant Heike Dressler gasped, “It is you! Oh, my goodness, Katja. Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

Overwhelmed with relief and happiness to see a face she knew, Katja rushed across the room to hug the police officer. She hadn’t seen the woman since ... she didn’t know, but it had been years. They found themselves trapped in the demon realm when Daniel kidnapped them both and that sort of experience tends to form unbreakable bonds.

“I’m fine,” she managed to say when she pushed away again to look at Heike. Tears were running down Katja’s face, but she wasn’t lying; seeing a friendly face made all the difference. With a start, Katja’s brain supplied a question she needed to pose. “Heike, do you have Otto’s phone number?”

Chapter 38

Otto Schneider's arm continued to throb, but it hadn't prevented him from sleeping. The fact that he spent the night outside asleep on the grass with no blanket or pillow showed just how tired he'd been.

He had awoken to a blast of music, the sudden noise jolting him from his sleep in a panicked state. The band were warming up. It was morning in Geneva which meant much of the world would be asleep. Half the world was always in darkness though, so while Otto thought it was an odd time to be starting a press conference, he also had to acknowledge that it was as good as any.

He watched, certain a chance would come if he was patient enough. Attacking Ironbolt once he got onto the stage would be a suicide run, but Otto was fine with that. His wife was long gone, he had no children, and from what he could see the Earth and its people were doomed to a life of subjugation under the heel of the demons.

Otto would die, exchanging his life for Colt Ironbolt's, and if he got a chance to take out a few demons at the same time, so much the better.

He was hungry and thirsty, but leaving his vantage point wasn't an option – he needed to be here ready to act when the time came. Would Ironbolt wander onto the stage to get his bearings before it all started? Would that be the chance Otto hoped for?

What spell could he employ to maximise his chance of success? With all the demons inside or around the palace, something truly destructive was what he wanted to conjure. Creating a volcano wasn't exactly easy, but in principle he could do it – he'd made pools of lava many times by superheating the rock. A volcano was just the same only bigger.

It would never work though, and he knew it. The moment he started to pull that kind of energy the demons would detect it. His spell would barely be started, and they would be all over him. That many demons appearing through portals from every direction including up and down would overwhelm him in seconds.

The same could be said of a tornado or a lightning attack. He could superheat the liquid inside a demon or even multiple demons at once, but no one could attack them all at the same time. To even attempt such a tactic would be foolish.

All he could really hope to achieve was the death of the man behind the SIA Army's downfall. Colt Ironbolt sent Otto's team ... his friends into battle knowing they would be mown down. That any of them survived was a miracle. A miracle called Katja Weber.

His thoughts turned dark again remembering the young German girl and Otto sat staring at the stage as the band played to the gathering crowd and the TV camera crews recorded the event. From the hillside looking across and down at the palace, he waited patiently for his target to appear. He didn't move when the band finished, and an announcer asked people to stand and applaud the new leader of the human race.

Otto near spat out his teeth at the preposterous title. Leader of the human race! Otto's desire to crush Ironbolt like the little bug he was brought him to his feet. Moments later he was rewarded with the former head of the SIA walking onto the stage.

Otto's second sight confirmed there were demons in the crowd facing him and many, many more waiting in the backstage area. Oddly, he felt no nerves, just a sense of calm purpose. He wanted to strike straight away, but chose to wait. He wanted to hear what the idiot had to say.

Then he was going to kill him right in front of the cameras.

Chapter 39

Colt Ironbolt was loving his life. All he had ever wanted was coming to pass. The crowd were reacting as though he was making them all millionaires. Each time he made a new promise, a new prediction for the future, they cried out in joy. It was beyond anything he could have hoped for.

They loved him.

He'd been talking for nearly thirty minutes, pulling the global audience along with him as he drew toward the conclusion where he would shake Beelzebub's hand and assure the world the fighting was over for good.

That would lead into an invitation for all people everywhere to celebrate. Go out into the streets and party, that would be his invitation and they would do it, he was certain.

When the press conference ended, Beelzebub wanted to begin the process of inviting world leaders to join him and his council. They would form a new world government, led by Beelzebub, but with humans included. The demons would lay out their plan for the coming years and Ironbolt would help to convince humanity it was in their best interest to comply.

It was that or the violence would resume.

However, when he finished his speech to rapturous applause and turned to offer his hand to the demon lord, Beelzebub chose to go off script.

“Kneel,” he spat in Ironbolt's face.

Hoping the demon's voice had not been picked up by the microphones, Ironbolt kept his smile in place.

“Shake my hand,” he urged, whispering out of the side of his mouth not facing the crowd and the cameras.

“Kneel!” Beelzebub roared, gripping Ironbolt's hand and crushing his fingers hard enough to crack bone.

Ironbolt collapsed to his knees, squealing in pain as he fought to get his hand free. What was Beelzebub doing? This was going to ruin all the visuals!

It was the last thought Ironbolt ever had.

The world watched as Beelzebub fired an orb of hellfire directly into Ironbolt's face and saw the human flop to the stage, his body devoid of life. The giant demon stepped over his latest victim, moving behind the lectern and the microphones as he glared into the cameras.

“Humans,” he spat, “your time on Earth is done. No longer will you pollute and desecrate this wonderful planet. No longer will you leave your brothers and sisters to starve while you connive and lie to get richer. I, Beelzebub, claim my rightful place as the new supreme leader. Those of you who survive what is to come will serve me and my race or will perish like so many of you must.”

Watching from the hill across from the palace, Otto Schneider's mind raced. His instant reaction had been to cry out in horror that he was to be denied killing a man who deserved to die. That emotion was soon replaced by guilt, for Otto knew he could have snuck into the palace and attacked Beelzebub. All night he'd sat idle when he could have been doing something, anything, to help his side.

Beelzebub was on stage addressing the world, the crowd was scattering, screaming in fear even as the demons sitting among them picked them off like so many apples in a barrel.

He was just about to launch himself into the air, a suicide run to at least try to make a difference, when his phone rang. He almost ignored it, but something at the back of his head made him check the screen.

“Heike Dressler?” he questioned, wondering what possible reason she could have for calling him. It had to be because she had just witnessed the press conference and couldn't think who else to call. He jabbed the red button to kill the call and

was about to stuff the phone into his pocket when a text message popped into life.

It contained six simple words, but ones that changed everything.

'Otto! It's Katja! I need you!'

Chapter 40

Simultaneous with Otto opening a portal to get to the hospital in Bremen, a different portal was opening on the stage adjacent to Beelzebub. The demon lord was too caught up in his message to humanity to notice it forming, but he found out about it soon enough when Anastasia Aaronson and a team of supernaturals burst onto the stage.

The audience around the world didn't see it, the portal and the supernaturals racing through it were out of the shot, but they saw when a stream of sinfire blasted Beelzebub seemingly from nowhere. One moment the demon was threatening the world, the next he simply wasn't there.

A global audience held their shocked breath, only to gasp again when a tiny woman wearing a glowing suit of armour jumped in front of the lectern.

Anastasia wanted to stand behind it, but the stupid lump of wood was set at a height designed for a six-foot man. If she was lucky, the people watching might see the top of her head.

She let the stream of sinfire send Beelzebub all the way to the curtains at the side of the stage. He tumbled over and over out of control until he fell off the side and was lost to sight. He wouldn't be down for long, and she dearly wanted to capitalise on her attack by trying to kill him, but she had no time to waste, and the most important message of her life to send.

Staring straight at the cameras and praying they were still rolling even though the news crews had long since abandoned them, she raised her sword.

“I am here to fight Beelzebub. Everything he threatened will come true if humanity doesn't band together now and fight. Ayla Pendragon! If you are seeing this, you know where I am. Send everyone. Send everything. Every supernatural on the planet, form up on me now. We have one chance to stop them, and it is right now, but we must throw everything we

have at them! If you think they will jump through portals to get away, don't worry. They are not going anywhere." She lifted her left hand to show the world the headpiece. "Are you watching Godfrey? I have what you want! Come and get it! Let's end this!"

The shocked audience at home or wherever they were got to see the tiny woman with the glowing sword and glowing armour rush out of shot again. Not many of them had any idea what they had just witnessed but a few did.

A precious few.

Anastasia's plan was about as simple as it could be. Her team numbered fifteen supernaturals, one demon, plus the two humans, Alex and Abigail. The vanilla humans got left behind, much to their disgruntlement, but while they complained, they knew the battlefield was not their place.

Through the portal they raced, tapping into the nearby ley lines the moment their feet touched down in Geneva. Desperately outnumbered, all they had to do was stop Beelzebub, send a message to the world, and stay alive long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

The plan relied on a lot of luck. Anastasia needed Godfrey to see it. If that happened, he would come and if Godfrey came Beelzebub would stay to fight him. If they were all in one arena, the humans could fight them. It would be a final battle with one side emerging victorious.

The humans' chances were slim, the demons still had the numbers, but Ayla spoke of conventional forces and the remaining supernaturals at the SIA international outposts, and Otto spoke of a small army of shifters led by Zachary. Ana had fought the giant werewolf and knew what he was capable of. If they all came, maybe they stood a chance.

Beelzebub first though. That was the thought dominant in her mind when Anastasia rushed to the edge of the stage where

she last saw him. With a flick of her sword she carved a path through the curtain and leapt, her right arm swinging high.

Beelzebub wasn't there.

On the stage behind her, the supernaturals had spread out, employing the tactics she gave them to reduce their visibility. The Stevens sisters had been able to clear out the demons in front of the stage with a crushing earth spell that flipped half an acre of ground in one move. Robbie and Ethan, two of the boys the sisters knew from Chippewa Falls, had successfully converted the shock of their arrival into an air spell that drove back those demons rushing to the stage from inside the palace, but they all knew their element of surprise wouldn't last for long.

"Get off the stage!" Anastasia yelled even though her team of supernaturals were already doing it.

"What now?" asked Daniel, out of breath and sounding worried.

He didn't get an answer, not from Anastasia at least. Rather, his reply came in the form of hellfire as a hundred demons burst through a window to their front. They were more than a hundred yards away, but Ana knew they would be coming from all sides.

Daniel threw himself to the ground, so too the Stevens sisters and other supernaturals arriving behind Anastasia. Only she stayed on her feet, absorbing the hellfire with her sword and relishing the increase in power she felt.

"Now we find a position we can defend," she growled. Forming a stream of hellfire with her left hand, she sent back what she had just absorbed with devastating effect. The demons pouring from the broken windows were mown down, killed with their own weapon. Those not at the front were able to hide from it or scramble back inside, but more than two dozen perished in the unyielding stream of red death she sent

their way. It was hardly cause for jubilation though given how many demons there were still to face.

Having created a lull that would last a few seconds, Anastasia grabbed hold of Daniel's jacket.

"We need to move," she insisted, wrenching him from his prone position. "Everyone, get inside. We need tight hallways where we can minimise the direction of attack and the numbers able to throw their magic at us, and we need height, so stick together and look for a stairwell."

As one they rose from the ground, driving off with motivated legs to sprint for the palace.

The demons were waiting for them.

Their attack was uncoordinated, three separate groups all choosing to throw hellfire at the same time. They were answering a rally call from their leader who was wise enough not to face Anastasia and her friends alone.

The supernaturals sprinted, but they didn't make it to safety. Not all of them.

The soft exhalation of air from Ethan was all Robbie needed to know that his friend had been hit. He should have kept running but he didn't, and in glancing back he saw that he too was doomed.

Cassie also heard Ethan die, but adrenaline kept her moving. She sailed through the door behind the stage with hellfire orbs landing all around her. Anastasia was doing all she could to defend their rear, the woman's ability to absorb hellfire as valuable as it was unexplained.

At the door, Cassie turned, her eyes locking with Robbie's in the instant before he was engulfed in fizzing red death. She got to watch the life leave his face, an image that would be forever burned into her soul.

She screamed his name and tried to reverse course only to be pulled further inside by her sisters.

Anastasia arrived, closing the door behind her.

She dropped into a crouch, coming down so her face was only inches from Cassie's.

“Mourn him if we survive!” It was the verbal equivalent of a slap to a person in shock. “Let's move.”

The demons were coming, not only from outside to follow them into the palace, but from within the palace too. If her team were to stand any chance of making it through the next few minutes, they needed a miracle.

Reaching the roof via the first stairwell they found, the supernaturals burst out into daylight with their lungs burning.

Anastasia was among the slowest. Though physically fit, her stump made stairs hard, and she refused to let Daniel carry her when he offered. Between them, they watched the rear and when demons began to follow up the winding staircase, they sent hellfire their way.

Ana wanted close contact with the enemy; her sword was far more effective at close range and no use at all from a distance. Her throwing knife had a greater range, but the demons were never close enough for her to consider using it.

Instead, she was forced to resort to the only other advantage she had – the ability to create a sustained stream of source energy. Whether sinfire or hellfire, she could put the demons down or kill them, depleting their numbers swiftly. Yet despite knowing their immortality was lost and to die now was forever, the demons kept coming.

On the roof and backing away, Anastasia kept a stream aimed at the exit from the stairwell, but there was more than one way to get to the roof.

“The palace is surrounded!” cried Daniel. He was looking over the side and had to throw himself back when hellfire scorched through the air by his head.

“Naomi?” Anastasia called.

“He’s right,” the elder Stevens sister confirmed. “There are thousands of them on the grounds around the building.

“And more coming up the stairs!” yelled Daniel, launching hellfire at yet another stairwell exit when it began to open.

The supernaturals backed into the centre of the roof.

Ana shifted her streams, one coming from each hand as she tried to cover multiple access points. However, her best efforts, and the combined spells of all the remaining supernaturals could not overcome the sheer strength and depth the demon legions represented.

They came over the edges of the roof a thousand at a time, surrounding the beleaguered team in an instant. Each held twin orbs of deadly, dark red hellfire in their palms though none of them fired because any misses would hit their brethren on the other side.

Anastasia, exhausted from the effort and long since out of hellfire, let her arms fall and the streams of light blue sinfire dwindle to nothing. Daniel accepted defeat too, dropping his head and turning to look at Anastasia. The Stevens sisters huddled together, holding hands as they faced the inevitable. It was too late to open a portal and escape; that time had come and gone. Were Daniel to so much as twiddle his fingers, the demons would fire.

There were eight of the team left. The rest had fallen along the way. Their gamble had not paid off. The rescue party of forces led by Ayla and Otto had not arrived. Maybe they soon would and perhaps they could overcome the demons, but it was Godfrey and his weapon that Anastasia feared most, and he hadn’t even taken the bait.

Daniel tried a smile, it didn’t really work, but Anastasia acknowledged the sentiment and moved closer to him. They were about to die, but at least she could be kissing him when it happened.

Chapter 41

Observing quietly from a nearby hill - ironically it was the same spot on which Otto had stood until a few moments ago - Godfrey had been able to watch Anastasia's team flee into the building.

"Do we follow?" asked Annette, curious and nervous at the same time.

Godfrey gave a small shake of his head. "No, that would be folly. Anastasia is tenacious enough to evade them for a while. We do not have the numbers for a direct assault against my brother's legions, so we must wait until she is cornered or in the clear."

The moment of which he spoke came sooner than expected when the supernaturals, led by the demigod, Anastasia Aaronson, appeared on the roof. It was a tactical error, but not one Godfrey felt she could have avoided. High ground was always desirable in a fight, but the force she faced was always going to overwhelm her no matter where she went.

Seeing her surrounded, Godfrey decided it was time. All he needed was the headpiece and he knew she had it. Taking it would be easy enough, especially given the nature of her position, but he needed to act fast.

"With me, please," Godfrey requested politely though it was the same as giving an order. He opened a portal, stepping from the hill to the inside of the palace and signalling that Tiffany should open the next portal while the rest of the angels were still coming through the first.

Creating a portal beneath the feet of Anastasia and the supernaturals dropped them through the roof in the instant before the demons began firing. Godfrey didn't care if they got hit or not; he wasn't trying to save them, merely expediting his recovery of the headpiece.

For the demons surrounding the supernaturals, their abrupt vanishing trick just as they moved in for the kill sent a wave of shocked awe through their numbers. None had seen the portal open or close and they looked about at each other in confusion.

Anastasia's lips had just touched Daniel's when the floor vanished, and she let out an involuntary squeal when she fell more than ten feet to the carpeted floor below.

Not that she felt the impact; the angels hit the falling bodies with sinfire on their way down, Godfrey adding his own stream of it directed solely at Anastasia to ensure she was robbed of her consciousness too.

When the limp bodies came to rest, they were all out cold, but essentially unharmed.

"There. You see? Simple and painless in the end," Godfrey declared as he stepped over Naomi Stevens and picked his way around Daniel to get to Anastasia. He found the headpiece in one of her pockets and held it aloft to show his loyal followers they had been right to stick with him. "Now we can end this."

The blast of sinfire took him by surprise, lifting him from the ground and knocking him four feet to the left. The headpiece flew from his hand, flying through the air to be caught by Giannis who grinned triumphantly.

"Beelzebub, I have it!" he shouted, running back toward a portal the angels gathered around Godfrey hadn't even noticed opening.

He might have made it too were it not for Daniel. The demon, hit by sinfire as he fell through the air from the roof, lost consciousness, but only for a moment. In the jumble of bodies, he only caught a glancing blow and thus the effects of the sinfire wore off almost the instant he crashed to the floor.

Wise enough to play possum, he waited until he needed to act and killed Kasia who was holding the portal open for

Giannis.

The shocked angel fell backward, dying as her body crumbled, and the portal snapped shut.

Startled, Giannis merely altered course, running through the open door of the room before anyone could stop him.

Serena screamed her outrage and sent sinfire into Daniel's body, this time making sure he was properly out.

Godfrey was back on his feet, getting hit with sinfire little more than a nuisance to his birth line.

“Stop him!” he commanded. “If he gets away or gives the headpiece to my brother we are doomed!”

The angels tore from the room, leaving Anastasia and her team behind to chase a much bigger threat to their existence.

Chapter 42

Ana's eyes fluttered open to the sound of feet running away and she caught a flashing glimpse of the last angel thundering from the room when she lifted her head. Around her, what was left of her team were coming around. For some this was the second time the angels had knocked them out, but there would be no chance to get their breath and recover; the battle was on and though they had clearly survived what was a certain death situation, the fight was far from over.

"Everyone okay?" she asked, forcing herself into an upright position. She got some murmurs and nods in reply, but Daniel cut them all off when he opened his eyes.

"They have the headpiece," he announced, twisting around to grab at Anastasia's pocket. "Godfrey saved us so he could take it, but Giannis hit him with sinfire and took it. They are chasing him now."

Ana felt that required a lot more explanation – I mean, how did any of that happen? However, talking wasn't going to get the headpiece back and the fate of the world was once again in the balance.

Tilting her neck to the left and then the right until it cracked audibly, Anastasia pushed herself off the carpet and drew her sword. Inside a building, it would come in very handy.

"Ready?" she asked, not expecting or waiting for an answer. "Let's go. This isn't done yet."

Chapter 43

Giannis had one destination in mind, the palace throne room where Beelzebub had chosen to set up his command centre. He'd taken it over the previous evening when they all arrived, thinking it a fitting place for anyone to come if they wanted to see him.

When the battle started and the tiny human blasted him from the stage, he had retreated there to recover. He might be able to absorb hellfire and sinfire without dying or losing consciousness, but that didn't mean he was unaffected. Momentarily weakened, he sought sanctuary inside the palace while his legions went to eliminate the insignificant menace.

It should have been a simple thing to deal with, even with Anastasia Aaronson involved. She was just one human after all. Yet when minutes passed and no report of her demise returned, he donned his sword and prepared to take matters into his own hands.

That was when he heard Giannis yelling. The angel and his separatists had sought the demon lord out the previous day, claiming they had no faith in Godfrey and that they wanted to join him.

Beelzebub scoffed at the idea. Thousands of years had passed and never had they once thought to defect, yet now that it was obvious he would win they wanted to be on the right side? He was going to kill them all himself.

He would have done so too had Giannis not convinced him his brother still posed a serious threat. Beelzebub had never seen the weapon Giannis and the other angels described, but he'd heard rumours of its existence. Living in the supreme being's house as a youngling, where voices echoed and could be heard through the walls, he knew there were secrets his elder brother was privy to that were being deliberately kept from him.

The Bagh Nakh, which his lieutenant insisted could not be real, sounded entirely plausible to the demons' leader. Either way, it was too great of a risk to ignore so he killed most of the separatist angels and offered Giannis one chance to join his ranks: deliver the headpiece and the weapon or be hunted down and killed once the demons ruled.

Together with a select handful of his companions, Giannis set out to do just that.

Now, with the headpiece in his possession, he was running as fast as he could to deliver it to his new lord. He would have used a portal, but the chasing angels loyal to Godfrey were too close for that to be an option. So he sprinted and yelled and yelled and sprinted.

His efforts brought him into a great hall. He needed to cross it to get to the throne room on the other side, but there was no way he could achieve that without Godfrey's side dropping him before he got halfway across.

A shot of sinfire burning a hole in the wall right behind him was enough to halt Giannis's indecision. Maybe he wouldn't make it, but the throne room beyond the great hall was full of demons ...

With a cry for help bursting from his lips, Giannis ran, the headpiece gripped tightly in his right hand.

Beelzebub heard the racket the angel caused. So too the trusted lieutenants remaining by his side. With a nod, he moved toward the great hall, the other demons jogging in his wake. He threw the door open just in time to see Giannis hit from behind.

The angel's body went floppy and crashed to the floor, the headpiece skittering across the ground and coming to rest at what was almost exactly the halfway point between the two ends of the great hall.

Godfrey skidded to a stop, his angels fanning out on either side.

Brother faced brother for the first time in a long time and both knew they would never face each other again. It had been a long time coming, ever since their father died, murdered at the hands of ... who? Both accused the other of the crime. Neither would admit it and they would fight to the death to prove who was the rightful heir.

Beelzebub raised his hands, calling forth hellfire. Godfrey mirrored his brother's actions as the supporters on both sides – in roughly equal numbers for the first time, faced off and got ready to trade blows.

It took a second for them to notice, but nothing was happening. Godfrey glanced at his right hand where sparkling, crackling sinfire should be ready to explode forth. There was nothing but bare skin.

Looking across the great hall, Godfrey saw his brother was doing much the same.

High above them, looking down from a mezzanine floor, Otto nodded his head at Katja.

“Well done. Now it is time for me to kill them.”

Chapter 44

Running through the giant double doors at one end of the great hall, Daniel skidded to a halt when he saw Godfrey and Beelzebub facing off against each other. The Stevens sisters, all athletes, were right on his heels.

Instinctively, Daniel raised his hands, staring at them in confusion when no hellfire formed.

He got to say, “What the?” before the thrum of elemental magic filled the air right next to him. It came at an intensity he’d never witnessed until he encountered Naomi and the twins. It would have been fascinating to watch had it not triggered the angels and demons in the room to drop their attempts to draw source energy from the earth and tap into the nearest ley line.

The flash of power from the sisters was shocking at such close range. The three girls were enveloped in a misty white light that clung to them like a shiny cloud. Standing too close, Daniel had to duck back out of the way when they released their combined spell.

Idly, he wondered how they knew what spell to cast together, how to shape it and control it with three minds working in unison. He had no idea another of their very special peculiarities was telecommunication.

“Again!” Cassie screamed into the minds of her sisters.

In the confined space of the hall, the spells they could employ were limited and with so many targets they needed something that would hit as many as possible at the same time. They had chosen lightning simply for its destructiveness.

Angry bolts of light so bright and blinding they were impossible to see so close to the source, ripped across the room, arcing and gouging into the ceiling, floor, and walls. On the way, they tore through Godfrey’s angels, smashing them this way and that as though swatted with a giant bat.

Lightning continued on across the hall covering the entire distance in a fraction of a second to earth in the far wall. Of the fifty or so combatants facing each other, more than a dozen were hit. The remainder were swift enough to counter the spell, conjuring water to earth the lightning before it could reach them or simply getting lucky enough to have it miss where they stood.

The second barrage from the girls was less effective, the ancient race of magical beings all well-versed in conjuring elemental magic and deft enough to counter a defensive spell.

Anastasia, her own ability to draw hellfire just as nullified as everyone else, had just her sword and throwing knife to use now. They were poor options against elemental magic, but as she charged around the sisters, aiming herself at Godfrey, the thought that she was effectively disarmed never entered her mind.

Godfrey, in the midst of all the confusing close quarter magical fighting, had disengaged from his group and was running for the headpiece. From the opposite end, so too was Beelzebub.

Anastasia couldn't hope to get there first, but she kept running, ignoring the spells whipping through the air around her head.

High above on the mezzanine floor, Otto threw spells of his own. The demons and angels were yet to look up and he used that to his advantage. Using heat energy to boil them from the inside was impossible earlier when he was looking at taking on all the demons at once just to get to Ironbolt, but tackling the smaller force below him was well within his capability.

It did, however, require several seconds to achieve and was a difficult spell to weave. With Katja's significantly enhanced powers, she could probably achieve the same conjuring in a fraction of the time, but her concentration was focused entirely

on preventing both angels and demons from employing source energy to fuel their primary weapons.

Watching demons throw elemental spells at both the angels and the tiny group of supernaturals at the far end of the great hall, and witnessing the angels caught in the open almost a third of the way into the hall do much the same, Otto chose to target as many non-humans as he could.

For a moment he considered including Daniel – he had more reason to hate the demon than most, holding him responsible for his wife’s untimely death. Ultimately though, he could see Daniel was fighting on the humans’ side, so putting the chance for vengeance aside, he concentrated on those he knew he ought to target.

His spell never even got to coalesce.

Chapter 45

Anastasia had her sword in her right hand and her arms pumping as she chased across the great hall. Godfrey was going to get to the headpiece first and he still possessed the Bagh Nakh. Anastasia didn't know where it was or even what it looked like, but felt certain Godfrey would have it close to hand and well protected. She chased but even though she knew she couldn't get to Godfrey, Beelzebub was close enough that his brother would have to deal with him before he attempted to go anywhere else.

Breathing hard, she watched Godfrey drop his legs and skid the final few yards across the polished floor like a batter trying to steal home. He scooped the headpiece while simultaneously sending a shockwave of air from his right hand.

Beelzebub deflected the spell with a conjuring of his own, his lips drawn back in a vile grimace that spoke of death and blood to come. He meant to slaughter his brother and anyone else who stood in his way.

Looking down at the floor of the great hall and the battle raging there, Otto's brain had time to register the far wall exploding inwards before the shockwave of air threw him backwards. It did the same to Katja, cutting through her concentration when her head slammed into the wall behind her.

She bounced off, flailing her arms and trying to right herself despite the dancing lights in her eyes. Her vision swam, but even fighting consciousness she could feel the source energy returning.

The explosion came from the demon legions outside coming to their master's rescue. They poured through the hole, emerging at speed through the dust and smoke only to be cut down by Godfrey.

Where the explosion levelled the room, tossing tables and other furniture around as though made from paper, and sending the people inside rolling and reeling until they collided with something solid enough to stop them, it barely touched Godfrey.

He was on the floor already, the shockwave doing little more than ruffling his hair. He felt his ability to create sinfire return and was fully charged to release a stream of it by the time the demons charged in. Hosing the front row when they came through the breach, he looked around for his brother, failed to find him, and ran from the great hall before anyone could stop him.

His only cause to pause was his mother, who he stopped to collect on the way out through a door on the wall opposite the one that had just been blasted inwards.

Anastasia, her ears ringing, and with blood running from both her nose and a cut to her head, managed to lift her head in time to see Godfrey and Serena leave the room. She was dazed, choking on the dust that hung heavy in the air, and trying hard to ignore the pain reports coming in from all over her body. Regardless, and with a screech of rage to get herself moving, she got wobbly legs underneath her body and hobbled after them.

No one else saw her exit the room, leaving as she did through a door no one else was anywhere near. In the confusion that followed, Daniel dragged an unconscious Cassie while helping Jennifer to get Naomi moving. A table had killed another two members of their team, crushing them against a wall so completely Daniel didn't bother to check for signs of life.

Upstairs in the gallery, Otto could taste blood. His left arm was bleeding heavily again, the bullet wound reopened in his fall, yet he was more concerned with Katja. She had clearly taken a hard blow to her head. Blood trickled from her right ear and one eye was completely bloodshot. He believed she

was okay in that she just needed time to recover, but the demons were below them in the great hall and massing outside. Without her ability to switch off their hellfire, his only choice was to get her to safety.

Keeping low, he lifted her fragile body in a baby carry and snuck along the mezzanine toward a stairwell in the corner.

Lungs burning, he made it to the stairs where he shifted his grip so he could conjure a manipulation of air. With that he lifted his feet from the floor and drifted down the centre of the winding ornate staircase, touching down at the bottom after first checking to hear if there was anyone around.

The second his feet hit the carpet, a door slammed open behind him. He spun around, drawing fresh energy from the nearest ley line to power the fastest spell he could conjure: air. A blast wave was far from an effective weapon, but it might buy him some time.

His eyes came into focus just as his arm came up fizzing with potential magic.

“Wizard,” said Daniel, a hellfire orb in his left hand. It was poised and ready to be fired into Otto’s chest.

“Daniel,” Otto growled, wanting badly to release the spell in his hands. It would come down to which of them was the fastest, but they were both holding unconscious girls, Otto guessing the denim clad backside he could see hanging over Daniel’s shoulder to be that of Cassie since her sisters were now coming through the door behind him.

“Truce?” Daniel offered.

Otto nodded, unhappy yet knowing it was the right thing to do.

“Um, can we keep moving?” asked Naomi. “You two can sort out your differences later. This place is overrun and we’re going to die if we stay.”

Otto shifted his gaze. The eldest of the Stevens girls clearly had a broken leg. Possibly a broken collar bone too and her clothes were torn and dirty. She was right, they needed to move.

There was a large door just along the corridor from where they were gathered. Otto had no idea where it led, he'd lost his ability to orientate himself a long time ago, but he was going through it no matter what. They needed somewhere quiet to heal the girls and bring Katja back around. Until they did that they were sitting ducks and even once they had, their chances of survival were slim.

The door opened close to the stage, on the other side to where the battle had started, in fact. It was quiet outside; they could hear bird song coming from the distant trees.

"There," Otto nodded his head toward the side of the stage where a curtain still hung. "Over there. We'll be out of sight."

"Shouldn't we just open a portal and go?" asked Daniel.

"Go where?" Otto shot back. "Your kind all but own the earth. It's just us now. We can die here trying to stop Beelzebub or Godfrey from killing everyone, or we can run away and die later when they bring the weapon to life. I know which I would rather."

No argument returned, but as the weary and beaten group were halfway to the stage, the curtain was ripped aside to reveal an army of demons.

Jennifer said something colourful and for the first time in her life, Naomi repeated it rather than berate her younger sister.

More demons appeared to their right, stepping up and out of dead ground, Otto and the rest had not been able to see. They were hemmed in; demons on two sides and the palace wall along a third. It left one side open for escape, but they knew they would be cut down the moment they tried to run.

Otto looked about for Beelzebub, but the demon lord was not anywhere that he could see. It made little difference for the demons knew who he was. Likewise they knew Daniel too, formerly one of them, yet viewed as a traitor now.

Otto eased Katja to the ground. She was conscious but confused and he doubted she could do anything to save them at this point or she would already be doing it. They were surrounded by several thousand demons, heck it might be ten thousand or more given that they were still appearing and when he looked up at the palace found them looking down at him from the roof too. Many of them were holding hellfire in their hands, waiting for someone to give the command.

Otto's eyes fixed upon one face in the crowd. Looking right at him, an angry expression on his face, was Asmodeus, the supposed demon turncoat who offered to help the supernaturals train. Just as Otto suspected, the demon had been gathering information, working both sides as it were.

Asmodeus held a hellfire orb in each of his hands, ready to launch them as soon as the word was given. Otto longed to be able to kill him, but then he wanted to rid the universe of all their kind, erasing them from history if he could. Such magic was beyond him, of course, and any chance to win was already gone.

Assuming it would be his final thought, Otto said a silent prayer that Anastasia might do better.

Chapter 46

In a giant courtyard in the centre of the palace, Ana staggered into the sunlight to find the brothers Godfrey and Beelzebub locked in battle. Godfrey couldn't easily be killed by hellfire, though the effects of being hit were debilitating should Beelzebub get through his defences. Likewise, Beelzebub would not be knocked instantly unconscious from sinfire were his brother to get in a lucky strike.

Godfrey had gained a sword from somewhere, and now the brothers pirouetted and slashed, thrust and parried as they simultaneously attempted to hit each other with their source energy weapons.

Ana looked about for Serena, but of the boys' mother there was no sign. It was a worry, for the weapon had to be around somewhere, but Ana was never going to get a better chance than the one she had now – the brothers were distracted, and she could hit them both before they even knew she was there.

Her lungs felt thick with the clogging dust she inhaled in the great hall, her head was still ringing, and she had to keep wiping blood away from her eyes where it leaked from the cut on her head and down across her face. She told herself that none of it mattered. She had one job to do. Anastasia framed it as though her very existence was for this singular purpose. She was unique among humans so far as anyone knew and everything in her life had led her to this point.

She should have died a dozen times already, and that was just today. Instead, she had a chance of stopping the two most dangerous beings on the planet.

Sheathing her sword, she formed hellfire in both hands. A sustained stream might not kill them, but the sword would if she could put them down. The demons and whatever remained of the angels would continue to pose a significant threat, but

perhaps Earth's conventional forces could win if they continued to fight.

The demons had killed millions, but billions of people remained. Without the brothers, it would be enough to win in the end.

Taking aim from behind a bush, she popped up and unleashed her twin streams of deadly, fizzing energy.

The demons she hadn't seen in the corner of the courtyard were as surprised to see her suddenly appear as she was to be blasted sideways by their hellfire. With the wind knocked out of her yet again, she tumbled through an ornate arrangement of climbing roses and the wooden pergolas on which they were tied.

The thud of footsteps coming her way gave Anastasia no option but to roll over and fight. Her sword was still in its sheath on her back, trapped between her body and the ground, but her arms were free and lying flat on her back all she had to do was aim her hands at the direction of the sound coming her way.

Her supply of hellfire fizzled out fast, the dark red sputtering and turning to light blue less than two seconds after she began to send it. It was less effective and knowing they were in no danger of dying the demons came for her without fear.

Hoping her initial burst might have created a little space, Ana threw herself upright, bouncing onto her feet with energy and vigour that was a complete bluff. The demons didn't need to know how beaten she felt; it would only make them braver.

A glance to her left showed the brothers still fighting – she would get to them if, and only if, she managed to deal with the present menace.

Her left hand gripped the hilt of her throwing dagger and flicked out. It missed its target, but it was meant more as a

hopeful distraction than anything else. With her sword drawn, she ran at the approaching demons.

In the ornately landscaped garden inside the giant courtyard, which had to be a hundred yards in each direction, there were far more demons than Ana first realised. Maybe more had arrived, or were still arriving, but slashing her obsidian blade to cleave a demon's head from his shoulders, Anastasia's hope was already shrinking. There was no way she could get to Godfrey or Beelzebub.

She spun and slashed with her right hand, using her left to send a powerful stream of sinfire at anyone who came close, but the demons were wise enough to halt their use of hellfire and in switching to elemental magic, they once again disarmed her greatest advantage.

Buffeted by a surge of air, Ana felt the air in her lungs shut off. In the midst of a fight, with adrenaline raging through her body and her overworked lungs struggling to keep up the supply of oxygen her body demanded, spots began to dance before her eyes almost immediately.

Another demon failed to stay out of reach of her blade, but as Ana cut him down, she knew he was the last one that would fall to her blade. Her brain was going fuzzy and her vision was dimming. Her eyes closed lazily and reopened. There were demons closing in now, getting close so they could deliver the final blow.

She saw the bright, bright orange of flame coming her way and cursed herself for being so weak.

Yet the flame didn't touch her, and hanging onto the final threads of consciousness, she flicked her eyes up to find the blooming orange held at bay by something.

What was it? Her brain knew the answer, but was struggling to supply the word.

It was only when a familiar voice cut through the mush of her mind that she understood why she was still alive.

Standing over her, his shield employed to deflect the flame, Zachary growled at the demons, “Now, that wasn’t very polite, was it?”

Chapter 47

The whump of a large explosion had been preceded by an odd sort of high-pitched whistling noise that neither Otto, Daniel, the sisters, nor any of the demons gave the slightest thought to until the ground shook.

Dirt, debris, and pieces of demon flew into the air moving outward from the centre of the blast that came from beyond the stage erected for Ironbolt's global press conference.

For a half second, everyone looked around as if the person next to them might be able to explain what had just happened, then a portal opened right next to Otto and from it sprang werewolves.

Another portal opened to Otto's right, seemingly appearing inside the wall of the castle and from that came a tank. Not just one but a whole squadron of them. The one in the lead started firing the instant the tip of its barrel emerged from the portal and the roar it created shook the marrow inside Otto's bones.

He sucked in fresh ley line energy, dropping to his knees and dragging Daniel with him by his collar.

"Heal her!" Otto screamed in the demon's face.

This was it! This was the final battle! The last ten minutes of terrified running and fighting had been nothing more than the first skirmishes. Otto had been in the hospital in Bremen watching the TV event while Heike helped Katja into a set of clothes three sizes too big for her. They were Heike's clothes, but good enough and far better than the hospital robe she'd been in.

He saw when Anastasia appeared on the stage and cheered when she blasted Beelzebub from it. Urging Katja to hurry, the terse reply from both ladies forced him to wait when he knew there was no time to do so. Consequently, by the time he came

through a portal with the young German girl in tow, Anastasia and the fight had already moved elsewhere.

He had heard her call to arms, the desperate plea for Ayla to rally everyone and everything, but when no one came he assumed the true head of the SIA had failed in her task to coordinate a response or perhaps even fallen in the hours since he'd last seen her.

Instead, like a chess master positioning their pieces in preparation for the strike that would win the game, Ayla had taken the time she needed.

Another explosion rocked the ground. The demons were fighting back, their hellfire a deluge of raw death it came in such plenitude, but the conventional forces were coming at them from multiple directions and the demons were all bunched together to make a perfect target.

More weres came, thousands of them surging into the demons. In close quarter fighting, they were extremely effective, but they would be killed quickly if Daniel couldn't bring Katja around.

Now that the demon legions' attention was elsewhere, Otto added his own weight to the fight. Flame, lightning, earth spells ... he employed them all, burying, burning, and blasting as fast and as mercilessly as he could.

More portals were opening, but the demons were beginning to rally. The attack caught them by surprise, but there were generals among their number, so even without Beelzebub to guide their actions, they were able to coordinate their response.

Before Otto's eyes a wave of Apache helicopters swept out from a new portal only to be destroyed by hellfire before they could add anything to the fight.

More and more the demons fought back against the Earth's conventional forces, their hellfire more than a match for the

best of weapons, their shields sufficient to deflect bullets and shrapnel. Otto even saw them shooting missiles from the sky.

For once the demons were outnumbered and they were taking heavy losses, but the attrition rate on the human side was far greater. Yet again, even with the element of surprise, the humans were somehow going to lose.

Then, like a tap being turned, the hellfire stopped.

Katja was sitting up.

Chapter 48

Leaders of the ogres, Turoc and Basall watched the shift in the battle that came with the arrival of the Earth's conventional forces. Following the demons to Switzerland out of curiosity, they were startled when the attack came.

The shilt were with them, more than three hundred thousand in total though some had been killed along the way and several thousand had wandered off. Massed inside the wood line where they were able to observe the battle, the ogres were pleased.

“The demon numbers are being reduced again,” boasted Basall. It had been her strategy to avoid contact where possible. The demons were the enemy the humans and angels would target. If they sat back and watched, the ogres would see their greatest challenge eroded.

To the ogres it was inconceivable that the demons would lose, but they didn't need them to be annihilated in order to improve their own standing. If sufficient numbers of demons were killed, the shilt, led by the ogres, could swarm them and kill many more.

Considered a lesser race and little more than beasts by the demons, the ogres not only wanted to cement their position among the magical races that would rule the planet now, they desired the respect that would come by beating the demons. Not in the war, but in battles. It wouldn't do to win the war and eliminate the demons, that would turn the attention of the humans their way.

“There,” pointed Karac, a tribe leader and one of many who pledged allegiance to Turoc and Basall when they united the ogre clans. “A group of demons has splintered off. We should attack them.”

Turoc tracked where Karac pointed, seeing for himself a force of approximately a thousand demons breaking off from

the main body. Split by the surprise attack from the humans, the demons were moving to engage with a new body of supernaturals.

Wizards and weres were still spilling from a series of portals behind the demon legions, their elemental magic gouging into Beelzebub's army before they had time to react.

"Why are they not using hellfire?" questioned Basall.

Turoc shrugged. "It is of little consequence. We have the numbers to wipe out the demons and humans both if we focus on the group to the west."

Basall stepped in before anyone could give an order to attack. "We wait. The demons and humans can tear themselves apart while we remain safe here. When the battle begins to die down, then we will attack. Our opponents will be weakened by then."

Turoc didn't agree - he was eager to get started and thirsty for some blood. He did not, however, argue with his mate.

Basall, hearing no opposition to her decision, smiled to herself.

High above the forest in which the ogres and shilt hid, a trio of American B21 stealth bombers confirmed that the heat signature from thousands of bodies in the trees below were not human. With their target clear, the pilots launched their payload and laser guided their munitions all the way down.

At the palace, the humungous whumpf of explosion caused every combatant to momentarily pause.

Jen asked, "*What was that?*"

Cassie shouted back, "*Who cares! Earth spell and fall back! You heard Otto. We need to find Anastasia. She was fighting Beelzebub and Godfrey.*"

With a small mushroom cloud of flame rising into the air above the now burning woodland on the other side of the

valley, the three sisters flipped a swathe of earth just as Otto used his last shield to intercept a barrage of flame and lightning coming their way.

Just behind them, and protected by their bodies, Katja held her concentration. No one was going to employ sinfire if she was conscious.

Chapter 49

In the courtyard, Ana sucked sweet air into her chest, heaving and coughing as her vision returned.

Zachary was fighting the demons and he was winning. The shield made all the difference. She always knew it would.

Whatever they threw at him, he deflected with the shield, his powerful legs allowing him to move almost faster than her eyes could track. His claws dripped with blood and between where she lay and his current position at least a dozen demons lay dead.

Wanting nothing more than to lay her head back and rest, Ana knew no such luxury could be permitted. With a grunt and a groan, and fighting against the pain in her body, she got back to her feet.

The brothers were still in the centre of the courtyard, breathing hard and facing each other. They were no longer exchanging source energy and Anastasia knew why, she could feel Katja's influence too.

For the first time since entering the courtyard, Anastasia noticed Serena. The mother of Godfrey and Beelzebub was at the far end, forty yards beyond her sons where, to Ana's horror, she had the weapon. That had to be what it was. How could it be anything else?

Believing she was getting it ready for Godfrey, Ana was shocked to her core when it thrummed into life, bright purple light emanating from inside it like a small sun was somehow trapped inside the rock.

Equally startled, Godfrey made the mistake of looking her way. Beelzebub's sword lashed out, and distracted, Godfrey failed to parry it in time. The blade bit deep into Godfrey's right shoulder, cutting flesh down to the bone. Godfrey's sword fell from his limp hand, clattering to the ground as he slumped, exhausted and defeated to his knees.

“And now you die, brother. Finally, I will avenge our father’s death.” Beelzebub brought his sword high, the point aiming down at his brother’s head.

Godfrey just looked confused, as though he couldn’t understand what was happening.

Unable to convince her feet to move, Anastasia just watched, but when Beelzebub ought to have been delivering the death blow, he froze in place. With his arms held high and looking to be stuck there, he began to shake.

His whole body vibrated. It lasted for several seconds, no explanation given for what might be happening until, without warning, he snapped out of existence.

To Ana, as one of the few to witness it, Beelzebub’s demise reminded her of an old TV set where turning it off resulted in a sudden shrinking of the picture to a tiny spot in the centre of the screen that would then vanish a second later.

He was gone, nothing left but the sword above his head which fell to the ground with a loud clatter.

Godfrey, still terribly wounded, used his good arm to get back to his feet.

“Mother! Mother how did you do that? How can you power the weapon?”

“How?” she screamed, her voice filled with venom and malice. “How? Still think your brother killed your father? I killed him! I killed my husband for his continual need to treat me as an accessory. He never showed me the slightest respect unless you or your brother were around. He beat me! He abused me! So I drugged his drink and killed him in his sleep. I had no idea he would manage to cast a death curse, but as he died, as his body expired, his power seeped into me. For thousands of years I have kept my secret, letting the two of you believe the other was responsible. Now it is my turn to claim my place as the supreme being.”

If Godfrey had something he wanted to say, the chance was denied him as Serena turned the weapon against her other son. Just like Beelzebub, Godfrey froze and began to vibrate. In a handful of seconds it was all over, Godfrey snapping out of existence just like his brother.

The remaining demons in the courtyard rushed Serena, the elemental spells ripping through the air but to no avail. The weapon had a shield around it. Invisible to the eye until flame or lightning struck it, Serena was locked inside a seemingly impenetrable bubble of energy.

She turned her mind toward the attacking demons, killing them the same way she had her sons.

Still rooted to the spot and scarcely able to comprehend the latest turn of events, Anastasia jumped when Zachary spoke right next to her.

“I believe this belongs to you,” he said, holding out the shield. It was no longer attached to his body and looked like metal, the same way all the pieces of armour had when she found them. “Sorry, I held onto it for so long.”

Ana looked up into Zac’s eyes and thanked him, taking the shield and placing it against her left forearm where it rooted itself, merging with her body and becoming translucent like her armour.

Facing Serena, she knew what she had to do. The weapon would end the war. With it she could eliminate the entire demon threat, just like Daniel suggested she could.

Startling her with a growl, Zac spun around to face a new threat. There were people approaching, but it wasn’t demons or angels, it was Otto. He had Katja with him and the Stevens sisters. Daniel was there too.

“We have to stop her!” Ana shouted, pointing to Serena at the other end of the courtyard. “She can kill us all with that thing!”

It was a stark warning that was accentuated a moment later when they all froze. Serena had turned the weapon on them.

They couldn't know it, but the mother of Godfrey and Beelzebub was targeting all the demons, all the humans fighting them and all the angels who proved themselves disloyal. Channelling her mind through the weapon, she was able to reach out to touch all those she felt could stand against her. She could reach into them, grasping the essence of their lifeforce and with enough concentration, could simply switch them off, making them as if they had never been.

However, where it was easy and relatively swift to kill one person with the weapon, it became exponentially harder when the user wanted to target many at once. Serena was trying to eliminate close to a hundred thousand in one go and it was far harder than she had anticipated.

Anastasia could feel the magic coursing through her, but she was able to fight it.

Just about.

Looking down at Katja, Otto managed to say, "Can you stop it?"

Katja felt like her skull was being compressed. She was sweating profusely, but nodded that she would try. She reached out with her senses, trying to understand the weapon. With hellfire, she had been able to see into the structure of it, the way the magic formed it and held it together. As her skill developed, she was able to stop the source energy from forming inside the demons before they had the chance to create their primary weapon.

However, no matter what she did, her senses could not get beyond the energy shield around the weapon. Grunting and straining, she eventually sagged, dropping her attempt to break down the magic inside the weapon that continued to gain power.

Otto was beginning to vibrate, so too Zachary and the Stevens sisters.

Daniel's teeth were gritted together as he fought to resist the effects, but with Anastasia watching him, he too began to shimmer before her eyes.

Only she and Katja were still able to operate.

From between tight lips, Anastasia managed to say, "Katja, I need you to do something. I need you to help me die."

Her eyes flaring, Katja cried, "I'm pretty sure that's about to happen anyway!"

"No, I need you to kill me." Her movements slow, Anastasia pressed her obsidian sword, the sword of the supreme being, into the German teenager's hands. "Also, I need you to help me to conjure a death curse."

"I don't know how to do that!" Katja wailed, terrified enough without what the crazy English woman was asking her to do.

Ana looked at her with kindly eyes. "I think I do. I just don't possess the wizard skills to do it. I need you to help me. I'm going to send them all back to hell, Katja. This is the way it has to be."

"But ..."

"Don't argue!" Anastasia shouted, grabbing the tip of the sword, and using it to find a gap in her armour. The suit was supposed to be impenetrable, and perhaps if she'd managed to find all the pieces it would have been. She had no doubt it was the suit around her body that was the reason she could still function. It provided an additional layer of protection, but at the same time, she knew the Bagh Nakh's power would kill her all the same once it got through.

Thankful, for once, that the suit of armour wasn't complete, and with a yank that drew a sharp intake of air, Ana thrust the first inch of the blade between her ribs.

Employing a softer voice, she implored the girl, “Please, Katja. Save everyone. There’s no time. You’re the strongest here, but if we dither the chance will be lost!”

Her estimation proved accurate for in the next heartbeat, Anastasia’s body began to vibrate.

Horrified, terrified, but somehow not petrified, Katja gripped the sword, fought against the magic that threatened to overwhelm her too, and with a heart that felt like lead, shoved in and up through Anastasia’s body.

Sharper than a surgeon’s scalpel, it cleaved through Anastasia’s chest and into her heart. Her life was over, her death certain, but as she collapsed to the ground, dragging Katja down with her, her last breaths were all she needed.

“Need help,” she croaked, willing the tearful girl to do what was necessary.

Katja placed her hands onto Anastasia’s head. She had no idea how to do what she was doing. No one had taught her, she had never seen it done before, but kneeling over the dying demigod, Katja Weber pushed her power into another person’s body.

Anastasia knew this truly was her final act. She could barely think from the rushing of blood in her head. Her lungs had shut down and she was moments from death, but that was good. Like Katja, she had no idea how to do what she was about to attempt, but something told her she could do it, nevertheless.

Closing her eyes, she felt Katja’s magic tickling inside her body. It was very different to source energy in many ways. It was the first time she had felt it, and the last, of course.

Conditioning her dying mind to the curse she needed to release, she hoped with her final thought that there was enough of the supreme being’s lineage inside her to make it possible.

Chapter 50

Nothing happened at first. That was what Katja believed. Anastasia had died, Katja could tell without the need to feel for a pulse. Everyone around her was vibrating and she knew for certain they would all start to wink out of existence soon.

This was how it would end. It was painless at least.

But then the world went dark, and she felt a strange tugging sensation in her core.

Then nothing.

Chapter 51

Anastasia eyes fluttered open, and she looked upwards at a ceiling that was somehow familiar while also utterly confusing.

A surge of memory made her reach up to her chest with her left hand and further confusion surfaced when her fingers failed to arrive at her ribcage.

Craning to look down without really lifting her head, she discovered bandages on her left forearm. Okay, so something had happened, and she'd removed her prosthetic arm, but as she came more fully awake, her brain caught up with the information it lazily received from all around – she was in a hospital.

Not just any hospital, but the exact same hospital where she had come around after being evacuated as a critical casualty from the Republic of Zannaria. Her sergeant had stepped on a landmine, and she'd been too close to avoid being caught in the blast.

Reaching up with her right hand this time, she found the bandages on her head where a splinter of shrapnel had burrowed through her skull and buried itself in her brain.

Wriggling her toes felt fine, which was confusing, but a quick inspection confirmed her left foot was indeed still missing. There was a name for the sensation she felt: phantom. Her brain told her the missing limb was still there even though it was not.

Ana laid her head back on the pillow to think. She wasn't freaking out which she ought to be. She knew she was fresh back from Zannaria, but somehow that also seemed like a lifetime ago.

A nurse came to see her, finding her awake and reacted with surprise, she brought Anastasia a drink of water to sip, checked her vitals and paged a doctor.

Three doctors appeared, all of them bearing kindly yet concerned faces. Two were in military uniform, one major and one lieutenant colonel. They addressed her as Lieutenant Aaronson and expressed concern while they did their best to explain her injuries.

She cut them off. "I've lost my left hand above the wrist and my left foot below the ankle. There is a tiny piece of shrapnel lodged in my brain that might one day shift and kill me, but is inoperable so I'm stuck with it no matter what."

She watched bewilderment spread across their faces.

"Also, my face is ruined, and you had to shave off most of my hair so the scarring is exposed until I can grow it back enough to hide it."

"Um."

"You want to know how I know all that, right?"

The major and the lieutenant colonel looked at each other, confusion ruling their expressions.

The civilian doctor said, "How *do* you know all that? You have been in a coma for four days."

Anastasia bit her lip. "Can I ask a question?"

"Please do."

"What happened to the demons?"

Chapter 52

It was a further four months before Anastasia was released from the hospital. By then she had been fitted with a state of the art, ultramodern prosthetic hand and her hair had grown to a length that could at least partly cover her scarred face.

She could walk, the months of physiotherapy taking her from barely able to stand to slowly jogging on a treadmill. A forces charity had helped to find her a job at a library in Rochester in Kent and she had a flat into which she could move.

She chose to ignore the job and the flat and went home to stay with her mother and sister. She didn't remember them at all, but they were her family, and she could form new memories with them.

Memories of the intervening years, the magic, the shift, meeting Daniel for the first time and the battle in Switzerland, had all resurfaced while she was talking with the doctors moments after she woke from her coma. The biggest memory was of the death curse she cast with Katja's help.

Uncertain it would work, yet somehow at the same time secure in the knowledge that it would, she sent her dying wish, wrapped in Katja's magic, out into the world and with it she split reality. She knew it could be done because it was what the supreme being did more than four thousand years ago.

Would her death curse last as long? She had no idea, but hoping to undo as much of the destruction and catastrophe as she could, Ana died resetting the world to when the madness began. For her that was four years earlier just after she came out of her coma.

While recovering in the hospital, she read the papers, watched the news, and studied the internet looking for signs of supernatural activity. It was there, much as it had been before, but it was all before her coma. Odd reports of people being

snatched from their homes, eyewitness statements claiming to have seen werewolves and murders that could only be attributed to the shilt, were all there, but also historic.

There were no fresh ones.

She had split reality, sending all magical creatures into a new realm where they could fight or learn to live with each other once again. She banished all magic from the Earth, returning Zachary, Otto, Katja, and everyone else to normal. Whether they would remember their magic or not she could not tell, but resolved to one day seek out Katja Weber, just to see if the German girl knew who the scarred English woman was.

She thought about Otto and hoped he might be reunited with his wife now. She Googled his name once, just to see what she would find and discovered a man advertising a private investigation business that specialised in finding missing persons. She called the number just to hear his voice, but hung up without speaking.

The Stevens sisters had been shunted back to a time before they discovered their magic and Anastasia hoped they would be able to grow up having normal lives now.

Daniel's face came to her when she slept each night. Not as a nightmare, but often in the form of an adult dream. In many ways she had loved him and knew for certain she would judge any future love interests using him as a standard. It helped that he was such an untrustworthy rogue.

Banishing him would not have been her choice, but in her dying moments there had not been a way to separate him from everyone else. The magic went away, and the Earth returned to normal.

Six months after returning home, when nothing magical or demonic had happened and she felt in control of her life, she began to relax. Surprising herself, she announced to her mother and sister that she needed to move out.

She wanted to try living on her own. The job in Rochester library was still available, so she applied for it, and certain she was going to get it, chose to rent a small cottage in the countryside a few miles from the city. The cottage needed a stack of work both inside and out, but Anastasia felt she needed such distractions while she figured out what to do with the rest of her life.

It was an odd thing to know she had saved the world and could tell no one about it. The doctors had spent weeks quizzing her about one single mention of demons, so she was keeping quiet about all of it from now on.

One night, just a few weeks after moving into her new home where the locals were growing suspicious of the strange woman who kept to herself, she felt a tingle in her right hand. When she looked down, she saw tiny light blue sparks dancing between her fingers.

The End

Author's Notes:

Hello, Dear Reader,

I feel exhausted. As I write you this final note, I am doing so seconds after writing 'The End' a few lines above. Writing a book, if you have never tried it, can be emotionally taxing, mentally tiring, and because one tends to live and breathe the story to the detriment of eating and sleeping, also physically debilitating.

There comes a huge emotional purge at the end because it is finally done and because the characters that have lived within you for weeks, months, or even years, are given the ending they deserve.

The end of a series, I now discover, is the same thing only amplified.

I have been writing books full time for just a month shy of four years now. I was writing part time while holding down a full-time job for several years before that. Yet this is the first series I can ever truly claim to have completed. All my others are ongoing.

Admittedly, I have wrapped up significant story lines to effectively end other series, but have then continued to write the characters as though it were a TV show and the next season were starting.

The Realm of False Gods came to me one day in the bath. It was the piece of shrapnel that caught in my mind. I imagined a person who, through injury, would unlock magical abilities. Originally, that character was Otto Schneider. However, by the time I shoehorned time in my schedule to start writing the books, I had conceived Anastasia Aaronson.

I wrote Otto first, more and more enticing characters coming to life in my head as I continued to develop the story. I hope I did them all justice.

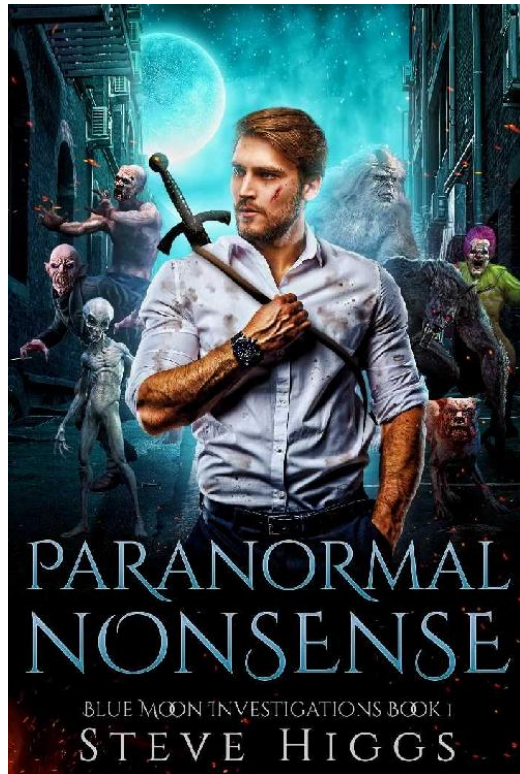
I'm going to stop now, genuinely I need to step away from my laptop and do something else for a while.

Thank you for reading.

Take care.

Steve Higgs

What else has Steve Higgs Written?



Fight a demon, investigate a werewolf biker gang, have tea with mum ... it's all in a day's work for England's #1 paranormal P.I.

When a master vampire starts killing people in his hometown, paranormal investigator, Tempest Michaels, takes it personally

...

... and soon a race against time turns into a battle for his life. He doesn't believe in the paranormal but has a steady stream of clients with cases too weird for the police.

Mostly it's all nonsense, but when a third victim turns up with bite marks in her lifeless throat, can he really dismiss the possibility that this time the monster is real?

Joined by an ex-army buddy, a disillusioned cop, his friends

from the pub, his dogs, and his mother (why are there no grandchildren, Tempest?), our paranormal investigator is going to stop the murders if it kills him ...

... but when his probing draws the creature's attention, his family and friends become the hunted.

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