'til the End of the World

Year One

Episode XI

A Whole New World

Opening

January 2006

His heart thundered in his chest as he bounded down the street in the cold, fresh air of the new year. Somehow, though Christmas had been somewhat mild, the new year had taken on a sharper bite. He could still smell the faint scent of gunpowder, or whatever shit they put in fireworks these days, lingering in the air. Still. Two days later.

Or perhaps it was the hint of brimstone from the upcoming return to school. Y'know, a rational explanation for everything.

He reached the intersection; around him, the hulking shapes of long-abandoned buildings stood propped up like broken cardboard boxes. Nothing moved, yet he'd heard the pounding of claws on the pavement only seconds earlier. His breath was barely ragged; his heart rate, though elevated, was hardly thumping. He could hear sharply, whether it was super-senses like Sara always teased him about, or something far more mundane, like being fifteen and in shape.

On hunting monsters, sure – but cardio was cardio.

"I don't see him," he hissed, his finger slipping up to the Bluetooth headset in his ear. It felt weirdly bulky, which, given his phone was still rocking around in his pocket like a brick, was probably

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not surprising. He looked forward to the day when they miniaturised this shit like the Japanese were doing. Or again, was that only something Sara said?

"Are you using your eyes?" Mark's voice crackled over, sounding crisp and clear. The sound quality was amazing; no wonder Amy loved it. Granted, he'd seen her bring her Dettol wipes out the moment she'd agreed to lend it to him – even though he repeatedly reminded her he did, in fact, wash his ears thoroughly in the shower. Sara had asked him whether that's what took him so long, and so he'd told everyone about her secret stash of men's underwear catalogues.

"No, I'm using my sense of smell," Ricky snapped, scanning the area. He stood at the crossroads, but nothing moved. The night was still.

But there – finally. He tore the thing off his ear and jammed it into his pocket even as he heard a mumbled 'rude' and trusted in his actual senses instead. There it was, beneath everything – a high-pitched whining noise, growing in intensity. He snapped his head to the right, just in time to finally see it bounding.

Nothing human about that noise, or about what he saw. The beast seemed to be some bizarre mixture of scales and fur and teeth that wouldn't have looked out of place in a *Harry Potter* beast compendium or some shit – or the result of a bad trip. Plus the fact it was bright green probably didn't make it any easier to hide. But it was *fast* – and it was barreling straight towards him.

He bunched every muscle, prepared to fight – only to calculate in a moment that the thing's trajectory was not coming directly for him, but was instead ever so slightly to the right. It was going to be a near-miss instead, like some kind of crazy furry comet with teeth. Snarling, slathering and with the scent of sulphur – it burst past him… and straight into the dead lamppost.

The thing bonged with all the ceremony of a Three Stooges sketch, and Ricky found himself for once lost for words. After a moment, two shapes came down from the nearby rooftop where they'd been attempting surveillance, and Luke and Mark finally joined him. Luke was the first to stop and frown down at the bundle of beast.

"Did you do that?" he asked.

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"Wasn't me," Ricky shrugged. "Was it you?"

"From the rooftop in the other direction?" Mark asked, clicking the hang-up button. Ricky had to smile to himself; he'd obviously waited to make a point, which Ricky decided to firmly ignore.

"Hey boys!"

They turned to see Sara and Amy coming down from the third direction of travel, incidentally the same one in which the… he was going to have to be careful here… Apeppy Beast – Mark would obviously correct him – had shrieked itself from. He frowned, confused to see that the two of them were not alone.

"Did you just do that?" he asked, only just noticing the thing squirming around in Sara's jacket arms. It stood out bright black against the red polyester of her new North Face jacket. Oh, please don't say the fucking thing had a litter or something?

"No, Mr Kitty did that," Sara said gently, as the thing in her hands turned its golden eyes toward him. He tried to suppress the shudder, as he always did with cats. They creeped him the fuck out. Ever since he saw his Aunt's tabby rip apart a mouse when he was five. The things might be all over the internet, but they were nowhere near as cute as everyone thought. "Looks like Mr Evil Scary Monster trembles before the power of the Kitty."

"Well, this species of demonic beast *does* have Egyptian roots," Mark pointed out as the five of them gathered around its fallen form. Ricky kept his eyes closely on the thing's chest – assuming the thing even breathed normally – and detected no movement. Still, it would pay to be careful – they always came back in horror movies. While Amy nodded gently, the other three simply looked at him blankly. "Cats are associated with being guardians of the underworld in Egyptian mythology; in fact, if we look at the history of Bastet in particular…"

"Sure," Sara cut him off dryly. "It couldn't just be because it's fluffy."

"Is it dead?" Luke wondered out loud, peering down at the thing.

"Well, we can make sure of that," Ricky pointed out, unsheathing the broadsword from his scabbard. Considering how big the thing turned out to be compared to Mark's book's renderings, he

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was glad he hadn't stayed with the dagger. He didn't need another monster hide dragging him around a darkened mill. *Again*.

He sighed, looking down at the thing. It did look pretty disgusting. Slightly helpless, having clearly either killed or brained itself outright on the lamppost. But… no… he had to remind himself why they were there. The three bodies back at the New Age Shop weren't going to be so easily put back together. He scanned for weak points as he counted way too many limbs.

"Can anyone see the crystal?"

"Um, I saw it… kinda… swallow it…" Amy admitted.

Their grossed-out look was unanimous as Ricky realised what that meant. He sighed, shrugged off his new black coat and chucked it over to Mark. Rob would kill him if he had to chuck *another* coat without explanation – and this one was a Christmas present. He raised the sword and began moving toward the beast.

"He's not seriously gonna do that, is he?" Luke said from behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sara shield the kitten's eyes.

"Jaffa cake?" Amy interjected, holding out a tub she'd produced from the mysterious nowhere of her duffel coat. None of them partook, so she scoffed one herself. He'd have one afterwards.

As he moved within three feet, the thing chose *that* moment to do its little 'ha, surprise not dead' cliché and sprang to its clawed feet, roaring furiously at them with spittle flying. With one swipe of his broadsword, Ricky cleaved the thing's scaly-furry head from its body and simultaneously let loose an outpour of green stuff that could have been blood, pus or some putrid combination of the two.

Luke and Sara… and Mr Kitty… glared at him from beneath their baptism of goo as Amy simply held the tray out once more.

"How about now?"

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* * *

Okay, so he felt a little bit guilty – but having been the only one of the three of them to see what the thing had done to the small business owners of Calendar, he knew how quickly he'd needed to act. Not that it changed anything, as the three un-gooed handed them every single supply of tissue or handkerchief they had about their person. Which explained some of Amy's jacket's poofiness anyway.

The five of them trundled back to the Library, Sara allowing Mr Kitty off to clean himself somewhere along the way, with a kind of quiet resolve. The night's hunt had been successful, at least – and once the thing's body began to spontaneously decompose in the middle of the street, they realised they wouldn't have to also bury the evidence, so small favours. The crystal they'd realised had been stolen – well, technically eaten – lay lying there in the little puddle of puss.

And it was serious stuff, or so Mark had tried to explain to them when he'd clocked the inventory at the crime scene. So, all good for their first successful fight of 2006.

"I'll look up ways to destroy the crystal," Amy announced brightly, moving away from the main huddle and over to the table where she'd left her laptop. She seemed way too bright and peppy for that time of night; perhaps it was the sugar from the Jaffa cakes or something. The girl had been munching on them all night. During her shift on surveillance, the monotonous chewing had been like soothing white noise.

He sighed, leaning against the counter and holding the innocuous-looking hunk of milky white rock and crystal in his hands. Seriously unimpressive, it looked like something one of his aunts would buy from the local woo-woo shop and use as a paperweight.

"What kind of badness can this thing do again?" he asked aloud, as Mark slipped behind the counter.

"Well, a Tear of Cronos is pretty rare, but the books do say some nasty things," Mark explained – probably not for the first time. "Rip a hole in the fabric of space and time, for one."

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"I thought that was Dilithium crystals," Sara glared. Ricky glanced over to see she'd removed her pus-strewn jacket and was shaking it all over Mark's preciously polished Library floor. The glare didn't help, so she moved to the table and draped it over the back of her chair instead, slumping down next to Amy.

"No, they just enable warp travel," Luke corrected her, dropping his own arse over at the table.

"Reality check, people," Mark sighed, exasperated. "This crystal is not some prop from a sixties science-fiction show; this is the real deal. Cornelius said…"

Sara groaned from her seat.

"We get it, Mark. Cornelius always knows everything; why don't you move to Cairo and marry him?"

"Does he usually track the movement of things from the Elizabeth Taylor wardrobe of understatement?" Luke jumped on the bandwagon. Ricky couldn't help but suppress an inner smirk as Mark glared at the lot of them.

"Understated or not," Mark clipped, his tone betraying his irritation, "If it had gotten onto the black market, we don't know what the results would be."

"We have a black market?" Amy piped up, looking up from her computer with way too much interest.

"I got a better question, couldn't we just smash it?" he ventured, with a shrug.

"Ah, excellent plan," Sara called over. "Why not just smash the uber dangerous crystal?"

"I doubt it would do any good anyway," Mark said condescendingly, as the two of them stood on opposite sides of it, the hunk of it lying on the counter looking all uninteresting-like. "Ancient demonic clans who forged these kinds of things didn't exactly make them fragile by design."

What harm could it do? Ricky removed his trainer – another gift from his brother from Christmas – and brought the heel down with all his admittedly augmented strength – straight towards the thing.

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"Ricky! No!" He heard Amy cry from behind him.

Too late. The heel slammed into the crystal, which, despite Mark's protest to the contrary, shattered into a million pieces. Of course, that wasn't the big problem, was it? The big problem was the massive flash of white light.

And then he knew nothing.

* * *

At first there was only pain. A kind of generalised pain like a headache. But as he began to realise he was actually alive and was actually awake, the pain began to localise in his face. Specifically in small pinpricks of pressure on his cheek and a couple on his chest. He realised, almost immediately, that he was lying face down on the ground; beneath him, little bits of… something? The crystal?

He could open his eyes; thank God he could open his eyes. And despite the increased pressure on whatever bits of rubble or crap he was lying on, he could breathe. Even if doing so triggered a cough, followed by a groan.

"Remind me never to do that again," he muttered, as his eyes fluttered open and he realised the "rubble" did indeed look like chunks of the counter which he'd managed to land on. He pushed himself up onto his hands, ignoring the bits of dirt and grit stinging them, got onto all fours, and eventually sat back on his haunches.

Okay… so it wasn't just the counter. His heart leapt in his chest as he realised the entire Library seemed in disarray. But something was strange – this didn't look like blast damage. It looked like something else. Like… like age. Disuse. He looked over to the table to the right and realised it wasn't there. The whole massive oaken table, which Mark had once told him was heavy enough to have to be assembled on site, was gone. In its place were giant pieces of what looked like brick and mortar.

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"Guys?" he asked, the sound feeling small in the echoing space. He could still see, but it was dim. It was night, and whatever had happened had obviously knocked out the electricity too.

But there was no blood. There was no Luke or Sara or Amy. No table, already established. But then… oh God… what about…

"My hand to God, I will kill you."

The voice sounded as harsh as his own, as though trying to speak through the urge to cough. But the sardonic irritation was pure Mark. And awake. And alive. So his heart, which had dropped through his chest, could have at least a quarter buoyancy.

He shifted on his knees, the dizziness and ringing in his head too strong to let him consider standing just yet, and saw his friend picking himself up from the remains of the counter. He did seem to manage to get to his feet, even though his entire face was now soot-covered, as if he'd been in a cartoon explosion. All he needed was the frizzy hair.

Well, he needed a haircut anyway.

"Mark?" he asked, still needing some reassurance. "Where are the others?"

Mark's eyes finally regarded the destroyed Library around him, taking it in with a kind of overwhelmed horror. But yes, he too could see there was no table, no Amy, no Luke, no Sara. No books, which Ricky felt would hurt most of all.

"Well… they're not here…" he added, helpfully.

Ricky frowned, for a moment realising that he could see something else of Mark. His skin looked not only soot-covered, but red. Too red, like someone had messed with the colour settings on the TV. As he watched, Mark coughed out a chunk of what looked like black snot and then tried to crack his neck, straining up to the ceiling above.

He stopped cold, his eyes pinned above.

"Ricky…"

He felt the sudden sense of dread, something in the way his friend's face fell. Something in the way the red light seemed to intensify as he looked up contributed. He didn't want to, but he

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knew he had to. Slowly, bravely, he raised his eyes to the ceiling above them. Only, there was no ceiling above them. No skylights. No normal.

“Is this where one of us says ‘we’re not in Kansas anymore?’” Mark quipped.

Above them, beyond the broken remains of the library roof, they saw the sky. It rolled with thunderclouds, thick, black and streaked crimson with blood.

‘til the End of the World

Episode 11 – A Whole New World

Starring:

Ricky Kent, Sara Carpenter, Luke Cross, Amy Donaldson, Mark Matthews and Sam Summers

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Act I

"Well, I think smashing the crystal was the wrong idea," Mark muttered from across the room. Ricky tried his best not to glare, but with them drenched in unusually crimson light, it just felt wrong. As he clambered to his feet, Mark brushed at the front of his jacket and small clouds of dust, or soot, or possibly powdered crystal ventured forth.

"How was I supposed to know this would happen?" he tried to defend. He shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs and the slight ringing. What the hell had even happened? The sky, the library, and where the hell were the others? "I didn't know it was gonna, like… end the world or whatever."

"I don't think that's what happened," Mark began, coming around from the remains of the counter and joining him in the centre of the library. High above them, he swore he'd heard a rumble of thunder. It sounded perversely normal. Like any other storm would sound. Minus the streaks of black, of course.

What other explanation was there? He frowned at his friend, whose contemplative look was the same one he wore whenever he wondered why Sara was rearranging his shelves. Complete with the mild irritation.

"The crystal has the power to create tears in space and time," he reminded them, "And this looks far more apocalyptic than a simple reality breach."

"Seems pretty teary…" he indicated to the sky above.

"Then why have only you and I woken up in the Library?" Mark countered, indicating to the space around them. Ricky looked, trying to remember something that was tickling the back of his mind. Something from History, one of the most annoying GCSEs he had ever taken. Something about World War II. Then it struck him, with a kind of dawning horror.

"The others were vapourised?" he asked, seeing in his mind's eye the shadows on the walls of the Japanese city. The ones he'd seen in the history books, in black and white. Even now, thinking

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of them gave him a chill. Then he began to realise that, apart from the fallen ceiling and the counter, the rest of the library looked much the same. Sure, having been run through the Halloween store of shit and left to dust for like…

Wait, how would dust have accumulated that quickly?

"I don't think it's done anything to *my* library or *our* friends," Mark emphasised. "I think it's taken us somewhere else."

"Huh?"

"Trust me, if I thought you'd done this to my library, you wouldn't have to worry about the sky turning red," Mark offered. "You'd have its remains force-fed up your backside."

"Then what?"

"I hadn't exactly considered *that* foreplay," Mark threw back sarcastically. Ricky glared for the second time, feeling that, despite being clearly responsible for their current issue, it was warranted. Mark relented, "Well, I'm personally waiting for the little goatees before I place my bets."

Before anything further could be said, he heard footsteps approaching the door. He found himself slinking backwards, going further into the shadows, and expected Mark to do the same. Instead, the idiot just stood there as the double doors slammed open and three men came inside. It took him only a second to clock the one in front.

"Yep, that pretty much confirms it," Mark muttered to himself.

"Who the hell are you?" Rinasi demanded. The same one he had fought with in a slaughterhouse what felt like only a few weeks ago. The same swaggery movements, the same cocksure walk. The slink of a predator. Except, of course, for in the intervening weeks he'd indeed grown a goatee. The kind of shit his folks would have called a 'soul-patch'.

He figured it was a fair question, though Mark had been amongst those sealing the doors and burning it down; the two had never met face to face.

"Well, I go by Toto; you wouldn't happen to need a heart, would you?"

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"I take offence to that," Rinasi quipped, before stepping forward and grabbing him by the upper arm. "You're gusty for someone who just broke into the most dangerous place around these days. How did you get past the guards?"

"Well, my legs had something to do with it," Mark lied. That earned him a backhand, as Ricky slipped into a crouch and picked up the hunkiest chunk of rock he could easily throw. The predator's senses must have finally picked up on the movement. Odd, vamps were usually better at sensing people around them.

By the time he did, Ricky was already moving forward. Yet there was something in the way Rinasi looked at him – with… fear? That wasn't right. They'd pretty much fought to a stalemate last time, and even with the fucker on the ropes, he hadn't looked scared for a second. This fucker, Soul-Patch Rinasi, looked at him with something approaching outright terror.

And then… something else.

"You're not Him."

Him?

Before Ricky could say anything else, Rinasi's fist connected with the side of his head. The blow was fast, from the side, and though Ricky had been moving, something slowed his senses. Perhaps being blown through 'time and space', as Mark put it, had something to do with it. He felt the cold ground hit him, the same pinpricks of rubble he'd felt on waking.

Then he saw the bastard's boot. And thought no more.

* * *

Mark didn't have to calculate his chances against three vampyrs, so he surrendered tactically with ease. He didn't expect them to live, but something about his reaction to Ricky made Rinasi hesitate. That was enough. And so, he found himself being roughly grabbed again by his arm, as one

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of the other red-eyed lackeys picked up Ricky in their fireman's lift – and thus began the strangest walk of his life.

Then again, if he was right in what he suspected – and that was a big *if* – then of course he could not be sure of anything he should expect. Still, to walk through the remains of one's life – changed as it was – felt like a perverse kind of terror.

Outside the Library, the school was hardly in a better state. Some corridors he saw were now completely open to the outside – which, except for the brief glimpses of rubble and blackened ground, seemed barely to have fared any better than the inside. Others were grubby, soot-stained. Some of the rooms which seemed intact were abandoned; behind others with closed doors, candlelight flickered and shadows moved.

More vampyrs? People? Something else? And were they too red-eyed rather than the black of Sundune's ilk?

When they reached the stairs, he was led down, still more under his captor's control than necessarily under his own steam. Here he could feel the rising of the heat, the first place he felt such a sensation and vaguely remembered Drake saying something about it being the boiler room. Or the maintenance area. Something she spoke of with disdain, anyway.

Only now, with undulating torchlight on wall sconces, did it seem they had little use for central heating. Or electricity. Instead, someone had taken what he imagined was already a pretty dark and dismal shithole and turned it into something more like a castle dungeon. He was led past cages too dark to see much except for hulking shapes.

Finally, they reached the last cage, the door standing open; Mark was led in, and Ricky was unceremoniously dumped. Chains were slid across the bars, the rattling sound so familiar yet chilling – and finally they were left alone once more.

Shit, he thought to himself.

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"I'm sick of being unconscious," Ricky groaned next to him, shuffling around on the ground until finally he was able to see where they were. "Do you remember the school having dungeons before?"

"You mean other than the classrooms?" he asked. "None."

"This is weird."

He pretty much figured that was an understatement, but perhaps not the time.

"Not particularly," he sighed. "Because this isn't our school."

Ricky scrambled up to a seated position, looking at him with a mixture of confusion and worry.

"You ready to tell me what you're talking about yet?"

"We're in an alternate reality."

"You're talking transporter-accident-hello-my-evil-twin 'alternate reality'?"

Oh, so Ricky couldn't get a goatee reference, but he knew exactly what Mark meant now. Then again, hadn't he once said he preferred the one on the space station? Never mind, perhaps that could be a conversation for another time.

"Precisely," he agreed.

"The crystal can do that?"

"I told you the crystal exerted influence over space and time," he reminded him. "When you… you know… smashed it with your bloody shoe, there was obviously a tremendous amount of energy unleashed. You and I being in proximity has very likely led to you and I being flung through realities to this lovely representation of inner décor."

He didn't quite know how the conversation about the possible nature of 'reality' itself, or dimensional travel, might go down, but considering their history it wasn't exactly unexpected. It would be an easier conversation than the one about werewolves they'd have to have one day, anyway.

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"So, that's why Rinasi is here, and we're sitting in what should be our school basement but like… a fucking Crystal Maze set?" Ricky reasoned out loud. "What the fuck do we do?"

"Well, personally, I'm going to sync up my Pink Floyd album," he muttered.

"Now he chooses to make cultural references…"

"There is nothing we *can* do, Ricky," he sighed, trying to keep the irritation out of his voice. "Not at the moment anyway. Nothing except try and look for opportunities to get out of this hell-hole and see what sort of state this world is in. Or worse… what has become of… well… us."

He shuddered at the thought. It would, of course, depend on the time of the divergence. Which action was the split? Or was that even how this worked? He found himself wishing for Amy then, her science brain. He could tell you about hellish realms – or at least the lore about hellish realms – until the demonic cows came home. But dimensions? Realities? It really was a little *Star Trek* – and he hardly thought he could count his admittedly limited knowledge of television programmes as scientific knowledge.

Then, of course, Ricky asked the really important question.

"If I meet myself, are we both gonna explode?"

* * *

Things were quiet at first, except for Ricky complaining about his one-shoe situation. The cell was extensive enough that they could move around – although not far enough to have anywhere interesting to go. At some point they noticed that, further into the shadows, they were not alone – there was a third occupant. But the person themselves lay in a foetal position, and other than unkempt, scraggly hair and an unpleasant smell, they could do nothing but watch him breathe. So they left him alone.

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He wondered which one of them it would be when they finally heard bootsteps again. This time, they brought a torch, and Rinasi didn't bother to do it himself. Instead, they opened the cage and two flunkies, both of whom looked unfamiliar to him, indicated it was him.

The room in which they took him – one that somewhere at the back of his mind he thought once upon a time might have been the staff room – was not exactly a tour of the word 'subtle'. The classroom windows, behind which only the faintest sliver of red light could be seen – was there even a daytime anymore? – were blotted out by thick red drapes. Most of the furniture had been pushed aside, including one with a rather vulgar display of shiny tools. Many of which also contained rust… and more than a little dried blood.

In the centre stood the chair he sat on. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, the ground beneath it carried a similar stain. There was no question what this was. A torture chamber. And the figure glimpsed at the back of the room made his stomach drop, even before they spoke.

"Well, well…" she purred. "What do we have here?"

Of *course* he recognised the voice. And of *course* it would be her.

"Oh for bloody hell's sake, I can't even hop realities to escape you," he muttered.

She moved behind him; he heard the ground creak beneath her, a faint hint of movement.

"You know, I knew someone who looked an awful lot like you," she mused, as he noticed one black leather-gloved hand slip over his shoulder. It squeezed, harder than was strictly necessary.

"Did you eat his liver?" he mocked.

"No, I let my pet do that," she answered. He saw a pair of yellow eyes curled up in the corner and heard the faintest hisses.

"So if my Mark is dead, who are *you*?" she questioned. He felt her lips brush his ear and resolved it would never happen again if he made it back home. Never, he would Dettol himself to death if it did.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid that's classified," he bristled. "Also, you're a bitch, so…"

"Isn't the line 'you're just going to kill me anyway?'" she mocked.

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"Well, it sounds like you already have once."

As Miss Drake moved from behind him and around into the flickering candlelight, he finally saw that very little about her had changed. She could have been about to tear him a new one for the budget. Except for one not-so-little detail, which made him burst into gales of laughter.

"I'm sorry, but *what* are you wearing?"

A vicious backhand sent him off the side of the chair and onto the mucky ground. It was only for a few seconds; the vamps standing guard at the door came and slammed him back into place pretty much immediately. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth where he'd bitten his lip, and his ears rang with the blow – but nothing would ever remove the image of his headteacher in full-on dominatrix gear. Seriously, Helga's house of pain?

"Sorry, I forgot Gucci did a hooker range."

Her second blow was pulled back, just enough to keep him seated. But the cut on his lip tore a little more.

"I'm gonna bleed you good this time, savour it."

"You know it's a shame you don't have a goatee."

She nodded to her goons, who, without instruction, began to tie him by the ankles and the wrists to the chair. He could have resisted, but he knew it was pointless. Even without El Vira, he was outmatched and outpowered.

As she slipped over to her table, lovingly fingering the edges of her torture devices as she went, he wondered which one she was going to use. But of course, he wouldn't ask; that would spoil the surprise. When she turned back, he realised just how familiar that look was – and how devilishly perverted its purpose had become.

"You know, Mr Matthews, you may be the one person I have the pleasure of killing twice."

* * *

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Reality. Alternate reality.

As Ricky sat in the cell, the mute and somehow unmoving prisoner – only the slight breaths telling him he wasn't sharing his space with a corpse – he somehow couldn't bring himself to quite believe it. He knew there was weird stuff. Hell, the whole damn problem had started with dreams that weren't exactly on the softer side. But here, in the basement of what should have been *his* high school, he was surrounded by cold steel and flickering torchlight like some medieval cosplay.

Dimensions, now that he knew about. Or, realms. Whatever term Mark had used. Were they a different thing? The Hall of the Guide? Wherever Claire had been taken? Were they realities? Dimensions? It made his head hurt. Other than the smell of human sweat and despair.

"Hey, does this place get room service?" he called to his companion, who didn't move an inch to show they had heard. He sighed.

Another thing had struck him during his captivity – the bars of the cage were strong. He wasn't exactly weak, as anyone who'd ever crossed him knew, but whatever ill-defined Guide abilities he had couldn't bend these cages. Were they used to superhuman strength? Was this cage meant for something more than regular human beings?

Or was it worse, were there rules about his strength and other abilities in this place? Had he lost them in whatever flash it was?

Every thought only brought more questions, and none of them was good.

"He doesn't like talking much anymore," a voice called to him from the darkness. At first he thought it was his cellmate, but it sounded a bit more feminine than the shape suggested. And worse, it seemed far too familiar – which was becoming a regular refrain in this shithole. "Well, well, the stories are true."

He turned to face the bars of his cage… and stopped. Rinasi was one thing, but he wasn't prepared for *this*. Amy stood there. Amy Donaldson. Five foot three of chaos and scientific know-how. Across dimensions. Or realms. Or realities, whichever.

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Only she dressed like she was going to a bad X-Men cosplay in some kind of leather whorehouse. Not that he knew exactly what that looked like, but he always had imagination. Not that he'd ever imagined… this…

"Amy?" he asked, for a moment falling for the possible idea that it was his own. "How did you get here?"

"I walked."

She walked slowly across the front of his cage, one hand trailing along each bar. Her skin was pale, her nails painted in a way he'd never seen before – blood red. They clinked against each of the bars as they went, making a horrible scratching music. And in her eyes, a look he couldn't quite marry to the face. One of curiosity. And menace.

"You look just like Him," she said, smiling. "So where do you come from?"

"Over the bloody rainbow, who cares?" he snapped.

"Oh, you'll find I care a lot," she sighed. "And He will as well."

"And He would be?"

"The boss," she supplied, "he's going to love you. But he's got a busy schedule, hell to run and all that, so it's still gonna be a while." Her tone dropped a little more as he realised that she was wearing a thick crimson lipstick that made her lips look dipped in blood. "You want a way to pass the time?"

A shiver ran through him.

"I can't play chess."

"I wasn't thinking of chess," she teased, dropping him a wink. "Think about it, champ."

With that, she slunk away from him back towards the stairs. He realised why he'd never noticed her coming – her footsteps made no sound against the stone floor. She almost glided, moving less like the sweet girl that once saved him from a poison dagger and more like someone else.

Something else. A predator.

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Where the fuck was he?

* * *

She was skilled. That much was obvious. The things she did hurt, but not all of it left marks. And she was methodical. By the time she stepped back, wiping her latest instrument, he realised he still had all of his limbs and digits – but he could see sensitive parts of his body through the fabric of his clothing.

Who knew the back of a fucking knee had nerves like that?

"So, had your fun?" she asked him. He could see it in the heave of her chest, the way she was pleased at what she had done, the effort and the control with which she was holding back. He looked at her, the vision in his left eye coloured slightly red from the cut she'd given to his eyebrow. He could still give defiance.

"Barely."

The hand polishing the blood – *his* blood – off of the curved thing she held paused halfway along the blade.

"There's no point in stalling, or trying to be brave," she warned him, almost casual. Her voice had a soft quality, but the silken control was only an illusion. He could tell. He'd heard his Drake use that more than once in staff meetings. "You'll break eventually, and probably with far fewer body parts to your name. And I will know everything you know."

"I don't think your brain could handle it."

She thumped him. There was no dignity in it. No sadistic pleasure. One remarkably human person lashed out, and with it, he tipped over the edge and landed hard on the ground. His wrists and ankles, still bound to the chair, meant he felt more like an overturned turtle. Of course it would be; this world was on a turtle's back, wasn't it? With turtles all the way down.

Oh bollocks, he thought. *I think that's blood loss*.

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"I know you come from another dimension," she told him. "That's frankly obvious."

"The fifth dimension?" he mocked. "Could be; everything's in black and white where I come from."

He whistled through his swollen lips, badly imitating an old UFO special effect from a crappy movie. She scoffed, as though it almost amused her, then in a flash was once more in his face. She didn't even bother to help pick him up from the ground – just brought her own furious mug into his own.

"You're tougher than your counterpart," she explained. "He squealed like a pig the second his blood left his veins. I didn't even get a chance to pull his fingernails off before he told me everything he knew."

"Was that a compliment?"

"But you look like you're going to be just the opposite," she continued, ignoring him. "And that's going to annoy me. Because, you see, while I'm trying to get information from you, I have to worry about keeping you all alive. I don't get to just kick back, have fun. See my problem?"

This close, he could feel the heat coming from her face, could pick up on the soft perfume – the same one Miss Drake always wore that had a touch of orange blossom. And he realised something in one deep, profound moment.

"You're human."

She withdrew, looking down at him warily.

"What difference does that make?" she snapped.

"I'm in hell, right? And either this place has always been this way… or at some point something changed from my world," he answered. "So, tell me, Drake… was this kind of shit what you were always capable of… or did this place make you into a soulless bitch?"

A moment passed between them. He knew what his Drake had told him, what she had done in her past. Or at least enough of it. But there were miles between the woman he was working with… and this person before him.

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What the hell had happened to this place?

With a wave of her hand, the guards moved in towards him. Pins and needles flooded his hands and feet as the bindings were removed and blood rushed back into them – the bit that he obviously had left. He felt himself lifted and mercifully moved backwards towards the door.

"We'll talk about this later."

He hoped not. Because as he half-walked, or half-dragged, himself across the room, he heard the sounds coming from behind him. Something he had said had worked. Miss Drake, or this Mirror-Universe-looking variant, was smashing the shit out of her torture room.

So some things transcended realities, after all.

* * *

When he heard footsteps again, the figure that came back was still recognisably Mark – though the thick line of red obscuring one side of his face nearly made Ricky bolt for the bars. Not from fear, but in the pure ugly rage he felt inside. Maybe they had prepared for that, because this time the two thick-headed-looking vamps who dragged Mark back were escorted. Rinasi. Amy. And looking up the stairs, two more.

"Time for a little meeting," Amy greeted, her voice haunted by that older, harsher quality that still hit his ear wrong.

"Mark's coming with me," he demanded, though from the groan next to him he was fairly certain Mark wouldn't have agreed. It didn't matter; they shouldn't be separated. Not here. Not now. He shook his head.

"Afraid not, boy," Rinasi snarled, then added with a nasty grin, "He's gotta recuperate."

"Wanker," Ricky spat, getting to his feet and staring the creep down. It didn't work; he knew he was outmatched. And he didn't even know why, but something about the way Amy stared at him.

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No, not my Amy, he reminded himself. It would have to be an important distinction. He wouldn't punch their Amy in the face, but he couldn't afford to hesitate with this… thing?

"Now, now," she taunted, "sticks and stones and all that." Her face fell into a look of naked aggression. "Come now."

He bunched his muscles; he was ready to resist, but one hand gently reached for his wrist. Mark now sat on the ground of their shared cell, clearly letting the pain of whatever they'd done to him sit for a while. He shook his head, and his hand fell back. So Ricky went with them, willingly, trying to ignore the effect of the blood on his wrist. Mark's blood. From his own hand.

They led him up the stairs back to the main area of the school, and before he could even see the double doors, he knew where he was being taken. To the Library. To where it began – in more ways than one. Where they had landed in this… whatever it would ultimately turn out to be.

He knew. He didn't know how. Maybe it was in the things they had said, the way they had looked at him. But as he was led through those double doors to the library, which was at once familiar and completely alien to him, he saw the figure standing there, looking up at the red sky, the colour of dried blood. It rumbled above them all, flickering and moving as if it had become something else alive.

He knew.

"This is it?" he asked, pushing a kind of bored irritation into his voice, which was entirely false. "I was expecting like Satan or something."

"Oh, that fucker's a myth," the figure responded. Yep, the same voice. Although, again, it sounded alien to him.

When the figure turned, he took in the longer hair – not a look he thought suited him. The large scar running across his face cut through one milky-white, dead eye. The other, the reddened sclera of a vampyr – the pupil a single slit of blackness across it. One lip scarred from a slightly askew canine's protrusion. Just like his own.

Of course, it would be. It was himself. A vampyr. A grinning, twisted mirror.

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"Well… hello me."

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Act II

So there it was, no denying it now. This 'world', whatever it was, had doubles of all of them. It wasn't some wonderful life kind of bullshit conclusion. It was an alternate reality. Like he'd wandered straight out of a Star Trek episode. Complete with Mark's shitty goatee reference – or in the case of his own counterpart, long hair. And here it was, his own darkness reflected back. Not a Guide, but a vampyr.

Not the hero. The villain.

"Nice place we have here," he told himself. What was he going to call him? Mirror Ricky? Derivative. Prick Ricky? Accurate, but too many hard Ks. "Did you do the redecorating yourself?"

To no surprise, he found himself funny.

"Nah, Satana did the main work," Dark Ricky shrugged. Yes, Dark Ricky, that would do. Shit, is that what he looked like when he was trying to be casual?

"I always knew that bitch was trouble."

"She used something called the Alliance Stone to bring about the end of days," his counterpart continued. "Turned me in the process. And in return for my loyalty – and to be fair, Mark's corpse for Drake… I get Calendar."

"And she gets?"

"There's plenty of other places to go around," Dark Ricky responded. "I believe she's off teaching the Chinese a lesson at the moment."

"God, I'm an evil bastard."

"Amazing…"

It took him a moment to realise that it wasn't either of them who'd spoken, and just like that, the spell was broken – and he remembered both Amy and Rinasi were standing beside them. He would have considered Rinasi Dark Rinasi, but considering their version wasn't a fucking cakewalk either, he figured the name fit.

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"Amy… what are our options here?" Dark Ricky asked, his eyes flicking across her. He caught the slight hint of a tremor, and it was immediately obvious where the power lay. "What's happening?"

"Well, it could be some kind of temporal effect," she began, her brow furrowing. For a moment, despite the outfit, she looked almost like their Amy, from what he was rapidly beginning to think of as the Real World. It kind of wrinkled in the middle like when he'd seen her do homework. "But considering you presumably don't remember coming to the future and seeing yourself, then I think that's out."

"Besides, being a vampyr isn't just for Christmas," Rinasi added helpfully.

"Or we might be talking alternate reality," she finished, her eyes landing on Ricky's own. He felt himself suppress another shudder as she continued, "The multiverse suggests that at every decision point a new reality may be created from it. An infinite number of worlds, some incredibly similar to our own, some different. It's possible that he and the Librarian found some way across." A smirk crossed her face as she added, "Playing with magicks, boys?"

"Something like that," he shrugged.

When he turned to face his doppelganger, the thing had moved closer. His red eye had reverted to human, and now it was just like looking at a sun-starved version of himself. Damaged, angry, filled with hate. But recognisable.

"What are things like in your world?" Dark Ricky asked, one hand reaching slowly for the side of his face. He didn't touch, but the curiosity in his eyes held venom.

"Well, I have access to a barber for one," he shot at himself before adding, "And for another, we stopped Satana."

"We?"

"Me, my friends," he answered. If this was an alternate reality – what difference did it make? "We gave her a trial separation period. Head from the rest of her."

"So your world is all happy shiny?"

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"Well, Bush and Blair are still fucking up the Middle East, but sure."

He felt something shift in the atmosphere. Less anger, more possibility. He saw the excitement rising in himself. Even as horrifying as it was to see, packaged in some leather-jacketed dark version of his own eyes, he realised that was exactly how he looked when excited. When something had captured his – admittedly often limited – imagination. He grinned, lopping to the same side as his own when he was being a goofy twat.

"Amy, are you thinking what I'm thinking?" his double asked his lieutenant.

"Certainly," she nodded. "Another world… perhaps worlds. The possibility is endless."

"Not just to rule over this dinky little town…" Dark Ricky mused, "Rule over *universes*… oooh, I'm getting all tingly."

One hand shot out; they were close enough. The grip, incredibly strong, gripped him around the throat hard enough to cause him to buckle one knee ever so slightly – yet not enough to yield altogether. He could still speak, and breathe ever so barely.

"If I kill me, is it suicide?"

The red eyes were back, the excitement paired with a kind of lust. The lust, though, was for power. For knowledge. For worlds.

"How did you get here?" his Dark self demanded. "And how are you getting back?"

He didn't reply, and the grip tightened. Then, the sounds of commotion came to them all through the halls. Something was causing a disruption. Mark, maybe? Had he found a way out of the dungeons? Could he even allow himself hope for the fool?

He was thrown to the floor, and for the third time in what was likely as many hours, he felt the sting of rubble on his palms and his cheek.

"Oh for God's sake," his counter-dark sighed to himself, as though discussing another bothersome Jehovah's Witness at the door, "Is it that time of the day again?"

"You know if you'd just let me snap her neck…" Amy muttered to herself – but was silenced quickly by the darkest of looks.

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"I guess they have no need of a sodding resistance in your world, do they?" Dark Ricky asked him. He felt confused, not sure what he meant, until the doors burst open and, moments later, a whole host of people came through.

That these were not vamps was obvious – from the dirty, grimy and yet somehow still normal clothes they came in. They were human. Their faces were unwashed and the looks in their eyes wild, but they were people nonetheless. Many of them older, some of them he kinda recognised – was that the waitress at Gina's?

But the one who was leading them caught his attention. He'd known that face since he could remember. Same blue eyes. Same blonde hair, though it could do with a wash. There were other changes. A scar under her chin. A cold look in her eyes. And the big dock-off crossbow in her hands.

"Hey Ricky," she greeted, looking his counterpart in the eye.

Then, realising she had clearly intruded on something, her eyes fell down to him. And Sara – or this universe's version of Sara – looked at the friend she had known since before she could speak and asked,

"Who the hell are you?"

* * *

Mark gently teased the edges of the bruise he could feel forming on his ribs and wondered how long it would take. His blood had begun to clot; the places where she'd cut throbbed with the first signs of healing, but he doubted he would be all the way back to normal by the time the bitch decided to return for him.

Drake. Of course it would be.

What he still hadn't figured out was exactly what that meant. He had heard of alternative universes as a plausible concept in quantum physics, but not exactly as something in the history

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books. Time slips, sure – they were a dime a dozen. But they were demonstrably slipping around on the quantum ladder in their own world. And realms?

Yes, there were plenty of realms. The Hall of the Guide. The hell dimension to which Claire had been taken – whose name continued to elude them. Small pockets of reality were layered, folded, and twisted around our own in ways that defied thought. Perhaps more than he even knew – perhaps every 'underworld' or 'shade' of reality had its basis in some kind of legitimate layer of reality.

But this… this seemed different. An entire universe of twisted selves? Could he be wrong about the premise? That perhaps they were less in an alternative universe and more in some kind of psychic projection of their own subconscious fears? Somehow the idea that his dying mind had placed the damn headteacher in a leather harness was more mortifying than a hell dimension.

"You know, I was wondering when you'd show up again," he sighed, but not to himself. He saw her slinking around the edges of the cage.

"I know I said an hour," she returned, "but I just couldn't wait."

His torturer slid up to the bars like a snake, her eyes gleaming with the enjoyment of what was about to come. No guards this time; perhaps she thought he'd be weak enough to take right there. It didn't matter. He'd scratch her eyes out with the last ounce of fight he had left. But then her eyes filled with something else – surprise, followed by a blankness that followed her down to the floor.

He barely registered that the cage door was slightly open, Drake having already eagerly fed the lock, because what he saw was like a ghost of someone he'd only ever seen out of the corner of his eye. A young woman, dark raven hair falling down her back, surprisingly clean for the grimness of the world they'd entered.

Samantha Summers, he believed. Though he had seen and heard of her in passing, he wasn't familiar with her. She looked down at him with a flat expression, looking remarkably more human and a lot less dominatrix than others. In one hand she held onto the end of a baseball bat, the very

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end now slightly red from where she'd just whacked their headmistress. Well, in the other world. In the other hand… well, there was no other hand. Her left arm ended at the elbow.

"They said you were dead."

"I am," he admitted, "in your world."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can explain," he assured, "But it's going to take time."

Her hand moved onto the lock, hesitating for a moment as she gripped the bars without moving. Her eyes flickered to him, doubt and a kind of grim expectation of experience filling them.

"How do I know this isn't a trick?"

"Well, if it was, the torture was a bit above the call of duty," he bit back, though some bitter sarcasm still managed to slip through. "Don't you think?"

She looked him up and down, her eyes scanning him like someone all too used to seeing danger around every corner. He waited, and after a moment, she seemed satisfied. Enough, it seemed, to slip the cage door open further and let him get to his feet. He found himself limping slightly, his right foot having gone to sleep and his left sticky with what felt too much like his own congealing blood.

"How come you don't look like Lady Leather?" he asked, nodding towards the unconscious tormentor next to them.

"Because the good guys can't pull it off," she told him, her face holding the same blank expression he'd seen since she'd arrived. With bite, she asked, "Do you want rescuing or not?"

"There's another prisoner…" he began, but as he turned, her eyes followed with him to the shape that had been his sole companion since Ricky had been taken. At the sound of their voices, he finally stirred, shifting in space until his face came into the dim candlelight.

Even with the thick grime of imprisonment and the untamed growth of facial hair. Even with the wild expression of lunacy in his eyes, Mark recognised him. Their newest friend, their latest recruit. Luke Cross.

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"They took my mouse," he told them, with absolute authority, "…and now I don't have it."

"Yeah, let him run if he wants to," Sam sighed grimly, leaving the door open as she helped Mark out into the corridor's relative expanse. He took one moment to look down at Drake. "And leave her."

"Why didn't you kill her?" he wondered out loud. He knew a baseball bat to the back of the head wasn't exactly a subtle weapon – and even he knew she would have had to pull her punches, so to speak, otherwise there'd be more than just an unconscious headteacher on the ground.

"She's still human," Sam explained, indicating for them to continue back toward the stairs. "In this place, one day she'll kill herself."

* * *

"I'm Ricky."

It was the only answer he could think of, the first one that came to mind. The *only* answer. Despite everything the world around him was telling him – Sara holding a crossbow and looking like a lumberjack, Amy looking like the goth Bratz doll version of the girl he knew, him a sodding vampyr and Rinasi looking like he was headed to Woodstock – he still felt like he was *the* Ricky.

"Bullshit."

"Not your Ricky. Another Ricky," he corrected, as the tip of his friend's crossbow dangled precariously in his direction. He sighed, wishing more than ever that the brains of the operation were there. "Perhaps in some universe there's a Ricky who knows how to explain it."

"Whatever," Sara snapped, her eyes flicking back to his Dark counterpart. "Where's our people, Ricky?"

"I don't know!" he protested.

"Not you."

"She means me," Vamp Ricky offered, then turned back to Sara. "Heckle and Jeckle was it?"

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"Helen and Justin…" she snapped.

"Right, and what were they doing again?" Vamp Ricky teased. He shuddered; the playful tone was exactly his own but felt like nails on a chalkboard. "Were they spying on me?"

"Are you going to pretend that your feelings are hurt?"

"No, they really are," his counterpart mocked. "I mean, they didn't have any nice things to say when I gutted them. Nothing about my new haircut or that I've clearly been working out. Just rude, y'know?"

"I am such a twat in this dimension," he muttered as he clambered to his feet. It was true, something about himself was remarkably skeezy. And it wasn't just the straggy Hanson-length hair; it was a vibe. Was he seriously this much of a prick in real life? Even without the vampyrism?

"You know, just to clear it up – it's not 'dimension', it's reality," Amy pointed out, and once more the strange doubling effect began to happen. "Dimension is like another aspect of this universe, you know, like forward-back, right-left, up-down… time. Whereas reality refers to a universe that's split from our own at some kind of choice intersection. Then of course there's parallel universes…"

"Amy…" Vamp Ricky's tone warned.

"Sorry, boss."

"Whoever you are, you want out of here?" Sara asked him, her eyes never moving from the vampyr he had become. Her finger rested on the crossbow trigger, ready to fire, and he believed without hesitation that she was happy to use it. He moved himself behind her, suddenly feeling a weird role reversal.

"Take me with you, and my friend in the dungeons," he asked.

"He'll already be taken care of," she assured him.

"Oh, this really is pathetic," his vampyr self muttered, "Amy…I take it back, wipe them all out."

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The five-foot-three Amy smiled in a cold grimace that spread across her face. Eagerness, clear and evident. She turned towards them, moving her hands in the air. A spark seemed to pass between them, a flicker of purplish light. He frowned, not recognising what was happening. The look on Sara's face told him she evidently did.

"What the hell is happening?"

"Run."

* * *

Mark felt the air crackling but couldn't see the source. It did seem familiar, however. The kind of same feeling he had gotten, like his hair was standing on end, when he and Nikki were dealing with Jackson Wells. It was magick, plain and simple.

As he and Sam rounded the corner, having made their way out of one of the back routes from the High School, he realised it was still coming from inside the school. Purplish light seemed to snake through the corridors and blast the last of the glass from the windows, as they arrived just in time to see several figures burst from the entrance and fall hard down the steps.

One he recognised immediately as Ricky – minus the shoe he'd lost in the destroying the sodding crystal – and the second, it took him a moment to realise, was Sara. Well, not *their* Sara, he reminded himself. Next to them, two other apparent humans, neither of whom he recognised, picked themselves up.

Sam raised her bat again as they approached, her eyes locked on Ricky, who looked back at the wave of destruction. Whatever the source, it had shaken him, but before Mark could ask anything, Sam took an aggressive stance.

"What is he doing here?" she snapped.

"I should say the same thing about him," Sara answered, nodding in his direction. Well, yes, he supposed he understood from her point of view.

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"He's my friend," Ricky interjected, as Mark watched the furrows in Sam's eyebrows increase tenfold.

"Sure, but Mark's dead."

"Right, and I'm a vampyr; we're not who you think we are," Ricky snapped at her.

"You can tell us the whole story later," she threw back, picking up her crossbow from the ground. He recognised it; the same model was sitting in his weapons cabinet back in his library. In *his* world. His heart hurt almost as much as his ribs. "For now…"

"For now, I need to go home," Ricky interrupted her. Mark went to say something, knowing that if he didn't, Ricky was apt to do something remarkably stupid. He tried to take a step forward, but his knee began to shake, and Sam had to hold him up.

"To our home is where I'm taking you," Sara snapped, her eyes flicking back toward the double doors. "Nowhere else."

"I'll go myself," Ricky answered, not breaking stride as he quickly made his way up the deserted street.

This universe's Sara looked back at both of them, her eyes flicking towards Sam with a kind of weary recognition Mark surprisingly recognised. Usually, he felt it on his own face. Ricky could do that to anyone, it seemed.

"Take him back to the caves," she instructed. "Make sure he gets some medical attention."

"You're babysitting that crazy arse?" Sam asked, nodding toward where Ricky had gone.

"I want the full story."

With that, Sam steadied him with her one good hand, and together they began to walk in the other direction. Sara, her eyes resigned, turned and headed to follow after his friend. He could have probably told him that splitting up was a bad idea, but somewhere between his ribs and his lip, and a thousand other small cuts and bruises, he didn't have the fight in him.

After all, it didn't seem that they had anywhere else left to go.

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* * *

Everything was in place, but nothing was the same. As he headed down street after street, winding the familiar path home from the school he'd walked so many times in his own world, everything was where it should be. The corner shop. The chippy. The car garage that did MOTs – and apparently was where Covenant operations went to shit, as he recalled.

Ricky saw everywhere he'd walked past every day of his school life… and everything was shredded to shit. Buildings lay in ruins, piles of rubble and soot with fires long since past. Some houses still looked like they were standing, but even a cursory peek into their windows showed the gutting within. The damage, the horror.

Every part of this world he walked through was like some kind of stage. A deeply fucking immersive 3D experience – what would your home look like after the apocalypse? Red Sky Edition. And he knew, he knew before he even got there, what he would find. But he had to go anyway. No part of him could.

Even if he *wasn't* his brother in this universe, he still was.

Fuck it was confusing.

"Where are you going?" Sara asked from behind him. Not *his* Sara, *their* Sara. He didn't even want to look at her – it was like a funhouse mirror – so he continued at his brisk pace instead, and she rushed to catch up, falling into step beside him.

"Home," he repeated. "I have to see my home. I have to see what happened to Rob."

"Who are you?" she asked again. "Where are you from?"

He was fairly certain they'd been over this, but considering they'd been blasted at by Amy the goddamn dark witch (sorry, Magick User, apparently Nikki hated the term), maybe she'd failed to register. Yeah, he was failing to register.

Looking in his own dead red eyes, for instance. He'd register that when it was over. Like when he was eighty.

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If he ever got there.

"Me, Mark, you, Amy and Luke were tracking down a demon who had hold of something called the Tear of… ah fuck, I forget," he explained quickly, already impressed by how easily this kind of shit rolled off his tongue. "Anyway, it was a dangerous thingy and had like space-time powers or something. So we killed the demon, and when I smashed the crystal, it flung me and Mark into an alternate reality." He paused as he rounded the final corner, steeling himself, and added one last sarcastic flourish. "Or as I've come to think of it, 'Funkytown'."

Fucking help him, but the look of scepticism on this Sara's face was downright spooky.

"You're from another dimension?"

"As Amy the Teenage Witch pointed out, no," he answered, "Reality."

He sighed, realising that at least the conversation was stopping him from having to face the inevitable. What was that thing about the cat? Right now this Rob was fine and dandy and… whatever the horrible alternative was. Both possibilities were true, and would collapse into one shitstorm soon enough.

"Look, he said something back there…" he tried to begin, before realising he'd gotten his pronouns wrong. "Well, I said… he said… the fucking Vamp of Monte Kent-o, whatever. You remember when you were kidnapped by Satana?"

"Of course," she nodded. "It was the day I found out the truth. The day after, the world ended."

"What if I told you that Satana never used the Alliance Stone in my world?" he continued, watching her struggle with the very possibility. Of course, his were only words. When he had to face the reverse, he could simply look around them at the charred remains. "That you, me and Mark stopped her. That you cut off her head with a shovel."

At that, her eyes dropped. Her voice grew quiet as she softly answered,

"It didn't happen that way."

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"It did for me," he insisted. "And now you, me, Mark, Amy and even Luke Cross, we fight all sorts of weird paranormal shit in Calendar. The world *didn't* end for us."

"And now you've ended up here?"

"Right, and we need a way back."

"I have news for you, Ricky: we're *not* you guys," she said, shaking her head. "We resist, we hide, we fight if we can. But we don't have any running water or heart." He spun on his heel, deciding to rip off the plaster, but she followed him. "We don't have any magickal crystals of our own, even if I could believe you."

"There'll be a way."

"Then what's all *this* about?" she asked, pulling ahead of him and gesturing back to his familiar street. He could already see some of the blackness behind her, the broken glass of his front windows peering out at them through jagged cracks.

"If I'm going to be stuck in this goddamn place, I'm going to find out what happened to my brother."

"You're not going to like it."

The darkness in her eyes wouldn't stop him. He stepped past her and, within five more paces, finally saw the half-destroyed terrace that was once his home. There was no door, barely a roof – giant patches through which the blood-red sky beyond could be glimpsed. Cobwebs, spiders apparently having survived the end of the world, in the toothy gaps of his own front windows. Dead. Burnt. Destroyed.

"What happened?" he asked, sensing this Sara move up slowly behind him.

"It hasn't happened for you…"

"What happened?" he repeated, more insistent.

"After you… our Ricky… was turned, he came back home," she answered slowly. "You offered Rob a choice: to join him or to die. You… he… burnt the house down with your brother in it."

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And there it was. The true cost of this darkness, the worst-case scenario. The place to which the monster could go. Murdering his own brother. And yet, somehow, he could only imagine it would get worse. And worse.

"Is there anything in this place that isn't fucked up?" he asked, though he didn't really care if she answered.

"You're talking about my world."

He turned to her, not sure how she could still claim this hellhole as her world, but her eyes blazed like his own. His anger deflated; it was misplaced anyway. Of course this was her world. Of course she had every right.

"I had to watch everyone I love either suffer or turn into a monster," she continued, her tone so familiar and yet so broken. "You know nothing of my life or my world… you haven't been through any of this, so don't you dare act as if you have."

"I'm sorry."

Whether she accepted his apology or not, it was done. He turned away from her, towards the rubble of the home he knew, and finally crossed the threshold. Into a life that was not his, but could have been.

* * *

Inside was no better than outside. Ash, strewn; pieces of furniture that looked familiar and yet misshapen echoes at the same time. The armchair, the one in which Rob used to sit… no, in which his Rob did usually sit… was still there – covered with ash and only one arm charred from the flames. The coffee table smashed in front of it.

Not knowing why, perhaps across realities he only hoped to feel a ghost of his brother, he sat down in the chair. Beneath him, it still felt like the same lumpy pile of crap he'd told him to continuously get rid of.

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"One thing," he muttered to himself, "One thing changed everything."

"Satana won."

"Is this what my world can become?" he wondered out loud. "Is it all this fragile?"

"You may be luckier than us," she offered.

"Or I caused this," he suggested. "By winning in mine, another world was created in which I lost. That's how all this multiverse stuff works, right? Perhaps if I lost…"

"You did," she countered. "In another world."

"That clarifies things."

Somehow, despite everything, they both managed to smirk in unison. It gave him a flutter in his chest, immediately followed by a sense of homesickness that slammed hard into him. Almost physical. Though he had to admit he'd been finding it harder to breathe since he arrived. Perhaps it was the lingering ash in the air, dust motes that floated through crimson light.

He heard the springs go on the half of the sofa that wasn't charred and twisted as Sara joined him a moment later.

"So what happened after you killed Satana?"

He didn't bother to correct her; she was, after all, not the one who'd slammed the shovel in, obviously. Of course, she'd still managed to survive – and a bloody long time given the state of the world.

"Uh, the Alliance Stone went schiz," he answered, "Mark and Amy managed to shit it down. They didn't tell me at first, until you were possessed by an incubus and then Amy told me she knew the truth and she started helping."

He realised how it sounded, so he snuck a look over to her, only to see her frowning in confusion.

"Seriously?" she asked. Strangely enough, it wasn't the incubus; something else caught her scepticism. "Amy?"

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"Yeah, she's like this bundle of brains; it's scary," he agreed. The homesickness ramped up another notch. "But like in a good way, not in a magick blast of power kind of a way. Or whatever's going on with the leather."

"Let's hope she never gets to that stage in your world," she answered.

"Mark found a girlfriend," he continued, feeling something comforting in explaining his world. As though speaking it aloud kept it alive. Ridiculous, it probably was still alive somewhere out there. Unless the power from the exploding crystal had… no, he couldn't go there. Not right now. "A magick user named Nikki."

He didn't catch the moment Sara's eyes widened, so he continued.

"Claire's in hell – obviously not this one," he said. "Turned out she was a Hunter. After this guy called Sundune."

"Sundune?"

So he guessed, despite Rinasi's appearance, Sundune hadn't yet made his name known in this one. He started to explain, but before more words could come out, the air split with an almighty shriek. A whining, rising sound that wailed into the deadness of the sky above. He caught her look this time, her face draining of even the moment's peace and falling into fear.

"Oh shit…"

She said nothing further as she grabbed for his arm and dragged him to his feet, in one motion moving them both towards the kitchen. The air raid siren, for that's what his mind said it was – likening it to those old war movies he remembered watching with his dad – was overlaid with another higher sound. A shriek more organic.

"What the fuck is happening?"

"Down!" she yelled.

The two of them ducked to the floor of his kitchen as the walls above them crumbled. Something unseen moved like an invisible shadow. A sense of motion, a shriek of something monstrous, and bits of brick and dust fell onto both of them. The howling continued as something

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flapped, and large winged shadows bathed them both. She grabbed him again and pushed him through the back door, in front of her.

"What are those things?!" he tried to yell over the roaring.

"Who the fuck cares?" she snapped back, without skipping a beat.

The two of them half-scrambled, half-ran down the alleyway, her managing to get ahead of him, with the sounds behind them clearly indicating pursuit. Above it all, the haunted wail of the air raid siren continued. They reached a manhole cover; she knelt and, within moments, flung the lid back, and it clanged hard onto the ground beside it. The gap was narrow, and he felt the air brush behind him as he fell forward.

By the time he landed hard on the ground, water splashing around his face and the scent of thick, mildewed age, he had never been so glad to be out of the fucking fresh air. The two of them lay tangled, as high above them something struggled to get to them, shrieking in impotent rage as whatever its malformed body truly looked like couldn't squeeze itself into the opening.

The face, so familiar and so different, looked at him with a kind of grimness he hoped never to have to see again as she said,

"Welcome to my world."

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Act III

Another consistency he noticed – the sewers still connected in rotted places to the old cave systems under Calendar. That was at least one thing that almost felt like home. He could almost imagine above the world was the same as his own. Although, strangely, the sewer portions had smelled better. It was only when he realised why – not many people left to flush away their sewage – that he felt the same drop in the centre of his chest.

Who thought he'd miss the smell of shit?

Sara had a torch, because of course she did, and once they were well away from the manhole and edging towards the cave system ahead, she clicked it on and began to lead them. Now, he knew them to some degree, but the ease with which she navigated them told him something very simple – this really was *her* world. Beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Something about the oppressive darkness, slipping in behind them as they walked and parting before them only reluctantly in the torch-beam, began to get to him. The steady sound of their footsteps, the dripping of water. It was maddening. He had to break it.

"So what were those things?" he finally asked.

"We don't know," she admitted, her voice firm. "You've got to understand, the rise of the vampyrs has tipped the scales. Vamps aren't the only evil fuckers that were unleashed in this Armageddon. There were all sorts of other things… and I think we both know the guy who knew his monsters is not around to help."

"I couldn't see them," he mused when she fell silent again.

"No, as best we can tell, they're invisible," she agreed. "Or seem to be. The air raid sirens stir them up, seem to agitate them into a mad frenzy. Then they attack anything living above ground. And as you can tell, they're fucking vicious."

"What's causing the air raid sirens?"

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"We don't know," she admitted. "So far as we can tell, they're roughly twelve hours apart, like some damn recording or something left on."

"Well, that's a problem," he muttered.

She paused and looked him in the eye, some of the same bite back in it.

"We're well aware of our problems, thanks."

With that, she turned and headed around the corner. He rushed to follow, realising as he did that he was beginning to see better than the torchlight allowed. Light, soft and diffuse, from further up the cave. As if reading his mind, she called back,

"Just through here."

She disappeared around a corner, and he followed once more, emerging finally into a cavern. He finally saw the resistance's home base. What he saw broke his heart, mostly because of how little of it was left.

* * *

From where Mark lay, with the soft gas-lit lanterns around him, he could see enough of their makeshift infirmary to realise just how lightly he'd gotten off. Several others were badly injured. Some with wounds that would scar. Some had burn marks he wondered were caused by either magickal energy or fire. He recognised some from the attack on the school, but most he did not. On just how many fronts were they fighting?

But also while lying there, he saw home. He began to realise that this was not exactly some mirror universe. Good was not evil, and evil was not good. People were harried, and traumatised and filled with sorrow and darkness. But he recognised faces. Betty – who he last saw in her hospital room two months earlier – was tending to one of the wounded – applying a salve which he could smell from across the room. And there were others, though some whose names escaped him. And they were helping. That was the key thing – they were in some small way living and resisting.

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Even if it was obvious they were losing.

"Hey, you okay?" Sara's voice reached him, pulling him into the present to realise Ricky, Sara, and even this universe's Sam had gathered near his coat. He managed to get himself into a seated position, feeling remarkably better now he'd had a chance to wash away some of the blood from his face. His clothes still felt thick and heavy with the ash falling on his way over there, but he didn't think there was a Burton's Menswear nearby.

Or at least, not one with staff.

"Thanks to Sam," he agreed, putting on the bravest face he could. His ribs would take some time to heal, but he should be mobile, he reckoned, in an hour or so, when the several pills she'd slipped him began to kick in. He didn't ask how she'd gotten them, and she hadn't supplied. "Who knew she was such a nurse?"

"She's not in your world?" Sara asked him. Ah, so Ricky had told her more, no doubt. He stood beside her, looking like he'd had the metaphorical shit beaten out of him as much as himself.

"What world?" Sam interrupted, confused.

"We're from an alternative reality," he offered.

He didn't know much about the Sam of his own world, but this one seemed to have a stoicism he rather admired. Instead of following up with questions, she nodded, and that was that.

"You seem pretty okay with that," Ricky pointed out.

"Well, the world's thrown most of my preconceptions out of the window," she corrected him. "What's one more?"

He had to admit, she rather had a point. Alternate realities clearly didn't tip the weird-o-meter when your world rained ash.

"We're going to need your help in the days to come," Ricky suggested. Mark's eyes flicked to his friend, and he already realised what he dreaded he truly meant. Of course, it was his heart. It was always his heart. Not his head.

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"I already told you, Ricky, we can't help you to get back," Sara reminded him, her tone firm. "We don't have the resources."

"That's not what I want to do," Ricky tossed back. "Not first."

"Ricky…"

Yes, there it was – the dangerous look in his friend's eye. He knew what he was planning.

"We need to help you guys," Ricky offered, "Help put this place right."

"The world you knew, the world *we* knew, is gone," Sara snapped at him, as though some kind of petulant child. "There's no putting it 'back'."

"But we can make it better," Ricky countered. "We start by killing me… or the evil me anyway."

"Someone will take his place," Sam offered grimly.

"It's the way this world works now," Sara confirmed. "There's only evil, and we can't defeat every last bit of it in the world. It belongs to them now; all we can do is try to survive, and try to help those few people we can."

"We can take a stand," Ricky answered them both, defiantly.

"No, we can't," he finally snapped. Ricky looked at him, shocked and a little hurt, but he had to say his piece. "We can't help them, Ricky. This is not our world, not our place to interfere." His eyes pleaded with him, but he could see the defiant anger in them and knew Ricky wasn't in a reasoning mood.

"You've already done that by coming here…" Sara pointed out. He could see it already; she was being persuaded. As if some kind of 'one for all' gung-ho bullshit that Ricky was planning could ever undo what had been done.

"Look, we have no right to stop what's happening here," he continued. "We don't know what it could do. We just need to get back."

"And how the hell do we suggest we do that, Mark?" Ricky challenged him, "I don't see any trans-dimensional crystal things lying about, do you?"

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"If I know Amy… she'll find a way to get us back," he answered quietly, knowing how pathetic it truly sounded. A tiny hope. After all, had they managed to find a way to get to Claire across dimensions yet? And how many months had that been? If time even worked the same from reality to reality. His brain began to hurt once more, dulled only slightly as he felt the pills kick in.

"Right, if she wasn't vapourised when I smashed that other crystal," Ricky threw back. He was too wound up to hear the savagery in it, and Mark's heart stung at the thought he couldn't bear to acknowledge. "Face it, we might be stuck here. And I don't care about some Prime Directive bollocks, the first thing I want to do is chop the fucker's head off who wears my face."

Mark hung his head, knowing he was determined to do what he was going to do – and once his friend's mind was made up, the argument was done. He could only hope he wasn't going to get himself… or perhaps all of them, killed. And Sara… the look on her face was the beginning of hope. Somehow he found that even more dangerous if they were – as he was still hopeful – retrieved at any point.

What would become left of this world, if they brought hope – only to snatch them away?

"And then we need to shut off those air-raid sirens," Ricky added.

"You encountered the Shadow Wings?" Sam asked them. His ears pricked up.

"Yeah," Sara nodded. "They went off while we were outside."

"What are Shadow Wings?" he asked, curious.

"When we got out there, some air raid sirens were going off," Ricky explained. "Then something we couldn't see began to smash the shit out of… of the house we were hiding in." He didn't say which; Mark didn't ask, but he knew. "Just saw their shadows, but they had big wings, and it sounded like a lot of teeth."

"The Rakishi."

For a moment, Mark felt a strange doubling. Almost as if he was at home. Ricky, Sara and Sam stared at him, blank and confused as if he'd simply spoken in Ancient Sumerian or something. Of

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course the joke would be on them; Aramaic and Latin were his only fluent dead languages; everything else required his translation books.

"You know what they are?" Sara demanded.

"Sure, they sound like Ancient Persian shadow demons," he said, shrugging. "Good foot soldiers. Used during an early Perso-Egyptian War. The only part that can be seen is their shadow; the rest of them is invisible along the normal spectrum of light."

"What about the air-raid sirens?" Ricky pressed.

"Well, they're very sensitive to certain frequencies," he offered. It was a bit of an understatement; the buggers liked to live remotely for a reason. After what happened to the Hindenburg…

"Are they common?" Sara asked him.

"Their numbers have dwindled in later millennia, but there are some nests reported around the world," he offered. "They tend to shy away from civilisation but are drawn to paramystical energy. Calendar, especially post-apocalypse, would certainly qualify. I would suspect someone here is using those air raid sirens to rile them up. I'm assuming if we manage to shut them down, then they should go more or less back to normal."

"Thank you," Sara told him. She walked off so abruptly that Mark wondered if he'd said something wrong. Instead, he looked up at Ricky, who looked back down at him, having quite clearly caught the 'we' in his sentence. They didn't need to speak. He knew Ricky understood he would back him. He had already shown him he would go to the end of the Earth for him, to the end of the world – and now it would seem across both worlds and ends. He didn't have to agree, but he would be there. Until the day he couldn't.

And it seemed, having died presumably early in this apocalypse, this world may have needed his set of skills after all.

"Have you got anywhere to clean up?" Ricky asked Sam. She nodded and led him away, as Mark lay back down onto his bunk to rest.

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To think how the fuck they were going to help this world.

* * *

At first Ricky had believed the resistance base was entirely underground. For the most part, it was; several larger caverns connected by tents that offered some privacy for sleeping, and other rooms simply laid out with bunks. He even spied a makeshift armoury, which, when he realised how many items came from their own weapons cabinet, made him feel a little sadder for home. It wouldn't have been enough for an army – and so this one had supplemented it with shovels and rakes.

In his world, one of those had undone all of this. Now, it hadn't.

But a couple of openings led to the outside world. One of them, almost hidden by two gargantuan boulders, was high enough that he could see across the town. After washing away some of the dirt, ash and grime from the sewers, he put his old clothes back on and clambered up onto one of those boulders.

The town was dark before him, and somehow he knew it was nighttime. The sky had darkened, the bright red becoming a deeper crimson and the blacks growing between them. No moon, no break in the sky. But it was night; that was clear – and the only lights he could see in the town came from the flickering fires of the old high school.

So he really did have his own little Mad Max post-apocalyptic wasteland camp. Go figure.

After some time, Sara came to join him. She clambered up onto the boulder and sat quietly next to him, looking out across her home, one that he was rapidly becoming concerned may become their own. He wondered at first why, until he thought about how he would feel if the positions were reversed and realised. In her world, he had suffered a fate worse than death – and she had lost her closest friend.

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Perhaps he was as familiar to her as she was to him. After all, only five months and an apocalypse separated them.

"You know what I miss?" she asked eventually.

"Strawberry ice cream?" he smiled. "Is that still your favourite in this world?"

"It is," she confirmed. "But that's not what I miss. I miss school."

He couldn't help but smile back at her when he saw that warm smile she made. It created the same dimples, even if these were caked with a little soot. She obviously had missed a spot, but he thought it rude to tell her.

"You probably don't feel that way," she sighed.

"I had double English this afternoon; good Lord, do I not miss it," he joked.

"I miss the safety," she admitted. "The security. Friends, and thinking about anything other than slaying demons and taking our home back from… from my best friend." Her smile was tinged with a sadness he could empathise with. It was, after all, the way he felt every day. Just in a very different way. When was the last time he even just went out for a milkshake without wondering if he'd be too bloated for patrol that night?

"Mark is right," she told him. "You need to find a way home."

"I can't just leave you to whatever fate," he said, shaking his head.

"Our fate is our fate."

"What happened?" he pressed. He'd been playing it over and over in his mind. That night, every step. How had he managed to fuck it up so badly? How had he failed so thoroughly and let everyone down? How was it that his friend had been murdered and he had been turned? "Why did things change?"

"It was one slip."

She wasn't looking at him now, her eyes cast both over the town and back into her mind. Somewhere deep, he couldn't follow. But he saw that same night as she did; it was burdened in his mind as part of his history after all.

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"You and a girl named Claire came to rescue me," she recounted, softly. "In the church."

"We did."

"Right, and then you told me to go back home," she continued. "I didn't want to at first. But then I decided it was best. I didn't want to fight. Not monsters. Not after the church. Not after vampyrs. Not after they'd taken Mark."

She looked back at him, her eyes brimming with tears. He suddenly began to see, began to realise.

"I was there, wasn't I?" she asked. "In your world, I was there when you killed Satana?"

"Yes," he told her, wondering if doing so was cruelty. "You actually killed her."

"And in my world, I didn't," she concluded, turning back to the panorama. The world she now felt responsible for. "Satana turned you, turned you into one of those things, with just a fucking bit of blood. She took Mark hostage until he finally unlocked the secret to the Alliance Stone. She unleashed the vampyr spirit, or God, or whatever the fuck it was that did that…" She gestured up to the sky above. "The sky turned to blood…and everything ended."

"It wasn't your fault," he tried to insist, but she wasn't listening anymore. She was lost in it, in the revelations that were happening now for her.

"People didn't realise what was happening at first," she told him. "I knew. And I said nothing, because I couldn't say anything – who would have believed me? You slaughtered half our school, tortured Drake until she came to work for you. She was the one who killed Mark, y'know? And Amy… you tormented her, mentally, physically, any way you could until she fought back. She didn't know she had Magick blood. Not until it began to come out. And by then… it was tainted with anger and hate… and she was never the same. She was so good, so pure, so… fucking nice. And then she became… that…"

Tears were falling now, carving soft streaks through the dirt on her face.

"I sound like a right bastard," he offered, weakly. Her smile was grim and humourless.

"And it all hinged upon a single decision," she finished. "And I made the wrong one."

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"And in another one, you made the right decision."

"Not the one that counts to me," she countered.

"I'm not going," he told her, feeling the certainty in his chest. If there even was a way out of this mess, he wasn't going to take it. "Not until we find a way to take down both those Shadow Demons and mirror Me. Not until you can stand there triumphant and you can rebuild."

"And how do we do that?"

"Using the one thing this world works on more than anything else," he explained. She looked at him, the same hopeful look he'd seen before. "Power."

* * *

Mark found himself offered a small plate of food warmed on one of the gas burners. Apparently the camping store had become ground zero for good supplies – made sense considering the world they were now in – and so a dinner of warmed spaghetti hoops it was. Only afterwards did he realise how badly he'd needed it, his stomach grumbling greedily even then. It was warm, it was heavy, and it would have to do.

Then he waited, and he thought.

When he saw Ricky and Sara walking back from the entrance, where he could hear the pitter-patter of rain outside, he could almost for a moment imagine they were both his own. There was something in their rhythm that seemed to transcend the end of the world, and he smiled – internally, his Ricky would quite rightly murder him if he insinuated anything further.

"We need to talk," he interrupted them.

"I won't reconsider Mark," Ricky bristled, already on the defensive. Mark rolled his eyes, which seemed to cut through it a little.

"Right, because you're a pig-headed idiot," he agreed. "But I've come to terms with that."

"What's this about?" his friend asked, honestly a little unkindly.

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"Look, I still think that we need to find a way home," he pointed out. "I know the others are probably still looking for us. But I also agree that we need to be both alive and ready when they do manage to get us back. And it'll be a lot easier to either find a way home ourselves without the Wizard of Oz, if we don't have the Goatee brigade and Wings from Hell hunting us down day and night."

"Well, thank you for the yay vote…" Ricky snarked sarcastically.

"There's something else," he continued, "I think I can help with the Rakishi and… well, with you…"

"What is it?" Sara interjected.

"I know the location of a bunker," he began. "Well, actually, both of you two should as well if you'd actually been listening in history class or ever hit up a museum on your half-terms." Their shared glare was practically normality restored. "It's not used anymore, in fact pretty much condemned in our world – but it has a connection to the old air raid system they used to use in World War II. The council was so cheap they never took them down, just closed down the bunker and never used it again. Well… until now, it seems."

Ricky nodded, his look grim but his eyes thankful that his friend was on board. Of course, they'd been through worse scrapes than this before. Normally *before* the end of the world, but of course that didn't mean the old rhythms had to go away after, did it?

"That's good; it'll make it easier for the resistance to move around in daytime," Ricky reasoned through. "What about stopping me?"

"Well, you wanted power, right?" Mark offered, knowing immediately where Ricky's mind would go. Ricky nodded, as Sara's brow furrowed curiously. "Then I think I might know where to get some."

He looked over at Sara, whose face had the very hopeful look he didn't want to destroy.

"What do you know about Magick Users?"

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The response was immediate. Her face fell, her eyes went wide with shock. And, if he was very honest with himself, something buried beneath it.

A big dose of fear.

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Act IV

"This is a bad idea."

Sara's assertion that contacting representatives of the Magick Users left in this world was a bad idea had been a recurring notion as they made their way through the caves to their designated meeting spot. She had yet to provide specifics, but the way she'd spat on the ground (tinged with a little red, perhaps un-fresh hell air wasn't so good for you) sent the clear message.

"And no horror genre action is complete with someone saying something along the same vein," he pointed out. She frowned at him; he could see it in his mind's eye even before he glanced over. She walked beside Ricky, while he and Sam walked in front. They had debated bringing more – Sara suggested a bazooka and five hundred infantrymen – but they settled on the four who were aware of this little situation.

"You talk more than the dead Mark," she threw back at him, darkly. He had to shrug in agreement; he was probably slightly chattier than most dead men. Except Elvis, according to the mediums.

They had taken several tunnels, Sam leading them confidently through them with only their torchlight to guide. Many of the formations looked the same to him, slick with underground moisture that smelled only slightly more sulphuric than back home. Still, he began to feel a familiar sense of unease. He recognised some of these, in fact.

When they rounded the corner he could almost hear his and Ricky's collective intake of breath. The obelisk, the thing Satana had referred to as an 'Alliance Stone ', rose before them, ten feet into the air. The same slick, blackish, almost polished stone like obsidian, the same carved languages across its four faces, indecipherable. The same panels at the bottom, which he was *not* touching with a ten-foot fucking barge pole.

Yet, it was incredibly different. It was dead.

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There was no hum of electricity, nor tingle creeping along the back of his neck. There was no sense of being seen by something that had no eyes. Even Ricky, whose supernatural nature may have made him more sensitive to such things, seemed to feel the same draw of power this thing had held before. Obviously, once it had been used – and judging by the way the sky high above them and the ground above was cracked and blasted to allow them to see it – it was no longer anything.

Now it was just a hunk of rock. Yet in his world, it was currently boxed up in the Calendar Museum somewhere. Or at least, that was the last he heard – since the police had never bothered to lock the damn thing up. He could only hope no others knew what it was – and, given the state of the world in which they now found themselves, knew what it could do.

"You're playing with fire," Sara continued, disinterested in the obelisk, it seemed – of course, to her, she acted as if she'd seen it a thousand times.

"They're just magick users," he pointed out.

"Right, and maybe in your dimension they're like little frolicking lambs," she bit back. "But in mine, they're worse than the fucking vamps." As if to illustrate, she spat onto the ground once more. Sam's face was grim. Well, grimmer. She agreed. Sara looked back at Ricky and saw some pleading in her eyes. "Look, when the vamps first seized control, there was a power struggle. The Magick users lost it to the forces of darkness. Now they're pissed off, and the covens – at least the local one we knew of – have formed their own resistance. If they could destroy the vamps, they would take their place… they would enslave us under their own rule – and call it protection."

"But at least on the plus side, we don't drink your blood," a playful voice echoed around the cavern. It was familiar, of course it was; was nothing sacred?

As he turned to look, there she was. He had spoken to her only that morning over coffee, laughing and joking about yet another horrendous movie she made him watch. This one about a mouse and Hugh Laurie. She slipped from behind the stone, alone it seemed, her long, flowing chestnut hair cascading around her shoulders as she grinned at them, provocatively.

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Of course, if he was already dead in this dimension, they never met. But the effect on his heart, yammering away in his chest, was immediate regardless.

"Does everyone have a sodding second here?" Mark muttered, more to himself. Of course, being in an echoing cavern tended to keep private thoughts much less private once uttered. Nikki's eyes flitted over to him, her look momentarily clouding as she scrutinised this new face.

"Our messenger should have explained, if he even fucking knew how to," Sara told her. "We have extra-dimensional backup now."

He hardly knew how an injured eighteen-year-old Librarian and one Guide were classed as inter-dimensional backup, but he wasn't going to ruin her posturing. Nikki's eyes held a dangerous look he didn't like. Especially when her eyes slid over him almost as if he were irrelevant and looked instead at Ricky. Here was someone she recognised, but there was almost no fear. Instead, her grin held a mocking challenge.

"No backup," Ricky pointed out.

"Don't need it," she tossed aside. "So… this is boy wonder before he turned into a leech? Sexy."

"Thanks, but can we stick to business?" Ricky answered back.

"Then state your business."

Mark decided to interject, if only to take her eyes off Ricky in a way that probably made him a little jealous. This was, after all, not his Nikki. Not even that Nikki was technically 'his' Nikki; she wasn't property, but… he was getting bogged down in ethics when he should be convincing.

"We need your help," he cut in. "We know you hate Ricky – Vampyr Ricky – as much as we do. We want you to help us to take him down."

"And what do we get out of this?"

Her eyes didn't move from Ricky, but her tone was clearly addressed to him. Was she trying to flirt with him or charm him like a sodding cobra?

"How about 'not slaughtered'?" Sam pointed out, deadpan.

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"Oh please, like you could even try," Nikki laughed off the threat.

"Then a truce." Sara stepped forward. "You have the vamps off of your back, so do we go. We go our separate ways, and hope never to run into each other at the cauldron shop. Or wherever else you get your outfits."

"Oh, because your lumberjack chic is Chanel?" Nikki mocked, before asking the serious question, "How do I know you'll honour this?"

"You said it yourself, we're no match for you," Sara admitted. "The only thing keeping you in hiding is the vamps." She glanced over at Ricky. "Did I mention I hate this plan?"

"It's a working plan."

"Only an Other-Worlder would bring this idea to us," Nikki mused, as she started to glide over to the Alliance stone once more. "It's so… naïve." She threw a smirk back in their direction, before running one pale hand across the smooth stony surface of the obelisk. Her fingers dipped into the grooves as she caressed it, moving around its edges. "Do you know what this place was? What it represents?"

"The Stone of the Alliance is what Satana called it," Mark supplied.

"Oh, it's so much more than that," she told them, her voice taking on a curiously melancholy tone. In his world, it was the way she spoke of home. Sadness. But something about it here, coming out of those darkly lipsticked lips, didn't sit right with him. "It was the first place in which the Alliance was formed. The Magick Users, or a faction of them anyway, agreed to fight the forces of darkness with what they thought were allies. The Elementals, the Titans… the Noetics, although thankfully there are precious few of them left anymore. Each is represented by a face of the obelisk. Each of them had powers no mere human has ever dreamed of."

Mark felt his lore brain go into overdrive, but instead of asking one of a million questions, he waited for her to finish her performance. After all, with the sense of mischief she exuded, the kind of seductive charm he loved about *his* Nikki turned up to eleven; he didn't even know how much of what she said he could believe.

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"How fitting that it be the forging place of a new Alliance," she concluded, "Humans and Magick Users working together." She turned back to them, the grin on her face one he very much didn't like. "I like your plan."

She clearly knew who she regarded as the leader, stepping across and facing Sara directly. She held out one hand, Mark noting the polish on her fingernails was unchipped and a dark black. Clearly, the Magick Users still had access to a manicurist.

"Shake on it?"

Sara threw one more glance at her three companions, then stepped forward and shook her hand. But somewhere in the back of Mark's mind, alarm bells were ringing. Nikki was smiling, and so were her eyes. But it was not a good-natured smile.

It was the grin of the Cheshire Cat.

* * *

"I still don't like this."

Ricky, Sara, Sam and Mark made their way back through the caves towards the resistance base with a kind of hopeful anticipation. There was movement, even if it felt like the moment before a rollercoaster plunge. He'd only been in this world, what, a day? And already he could sense what a monumental shift he was proposing. Changing the balance of power.

Of course he didn't trust Nikki as far as he could throw her. Having seen what Magick could do to someone like Amy in this god-forsaken world, he was fairly certain she wouldn't be all sunshine and rainbows.

"You know as well as I do, this is the way it's gotta be," he answered, pausing to let Sam and Mark catch up behind them. He noticed Mark was still limping slightly, but he knew if he pointed it out, Mark would shake him off and stubbornly carry on anyway. Besides, he needed him in this fight. He hated that he did, but he did.

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"We need to take a two-pronged approach," Sam pointed out immediately. They had reached the edge of the camp; Ricky could hear people muttering quietly nearby, and the soft, diffuse gaslight drifted from around the corner. He smiled at her. Sure, he'd run across her a few times in that friend-of-a-friend kind of way, and he'd always thought of her as a bit of a princess. Here, he saw a side he liked.

"Are you sure you're not a general in another life?"

"I have another one?"

Still, her idea was good, so he ran with it.

"You and me'll babysit the witch," he nodded to Sara before turning to the others. "Sam, Mark, I want you guys to shut down the sirens."

"We should stick together," Mark protested.

"This isn't the time for all for one, one for all," he countered. "If we're double-crossed by Nikki and her friends, we don't want to put all our eggs into one basket."

"He's smarter in your dimension," Sara pointed out. It may have been a velvet backhand, but having seen himself, he wasn't so sure he agreed.

With that done, they set about preparing. In the morning, at first 'light' – or what passed for it – they would move. And tomorrow, the fate of a world would be decided one way or another.

Potentially now, *their* world.

* * *

A night's sleep and another pack of instant noodles warmed over a small fire, and Mark found his spirits remarkably buoyed. Not because he was certain they would win, in fact quite the opposite. He was fairly certain this was going to be the end – unless some last-minute miracle managed to pull their arses out of the fire. Perhaps it was the pre-battle adrenaline – and he

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reminded himself another reason he preferred to work from the Library rather than run around in the field. He was certain he'd be sick later.

"It's not guarded," Sam noted next to him, her face set in determination. They had reached the edge of the slight rise nearby.

The bunker – which most people walked by these days and never realised – was not too far from the school itself. The school backed onto a series of woods and fields collectively and unimaginatively named Bunker Hill. There, nestled in one particularly unassuming group of trees, was a concrete outside leading to a thick door. Most people likely assumed these days it was some kind of electric station or connected to the nearby reservoir – or even the Wind Farm despite there being miles between them.

Instead, it was a run-down, disused bunker. That was it. He'd heard rumours someone had tried to run a 'haunted house' out of there in the noughties, but it had shut down under circumstances which, in Calendar, you don't look into too closely.

"Not on the outside," he agreed, also seeing there was almost no one around. Nothing in the blood-red sky either; they were good to go. "But I do wonder where Chewbacca is." Yes, the joke was terrible, but it evoked Sam's ire for a moment. "Where's your sense of humour?"

"I must have left it with my other hand," she snapped.

"You may want to work on that," he suggested.

Slowly she extended the stump of her left arm, the gnarled and scarred end looking him right in the face before she explained.

"You may not be able to tell, but I'm giving you the finger."

Whether she meant to or not, he sensed a small smirk somewhere beneath that dour expression. Still, work to do and a schedule to keep and all that. He stood, moving from the crest of the hill and downwards towards the bunker door – as Sam followed with him.

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"This place seems familiar," Sam mused as they found no resistance and passed through the thick metal outer doors. Inside, the place was still drawing power, and low red emergency lights lit the corridor leading deeper within.

"Did you not take the Year 7 trip to this hell hole?" he wondered, knowing it was one of the few trips that Drake, their Drake, would allow the school to retain during her reign. After all, it was cheap, right around the corner and until the place was condemned, killed an afternoon.

"I think I pushed a kid down the stairs."

Now that *was* consistent with the Sam he'd heard about.

Water dripped in the distance, as he heard the sounds of scurrying rat-like feet off there in the dark. Their torchlights caught nothing, but the oppressive feeling continued. They were being watched. Perhaps not by human or even vampyric eyes, but they were nonetheless.

Luckily, the main control room wasn't far down the initial corridor. There were branches, but they didn't bother to explore. Instead, they moved towards the bank of screens and computers which lined one entire wall. The room, lit by the red emergency lights they'd been following, glowed like the Security Room of Hell.

"Very sloppy," Sam commented, though beneath her quippy tone he could sense the same unease he felt. "Do you know how to shut the sirens off?"

"Well, I didn't ask last time I was here, but I am assuming it's a coloured button."

He stepped closer to the panel, trying to discern what he could in the distorted light. And of course, the entire panel was unlabelled and filled with coloured buttons. Why the military never had a simple 'on/off' switch for their equipment was beyond him.

"Which would be useful if this wasn't the bridge of the starship Enterprise."

They had approximately three seconds to scan the buttons with their eyes, looking for any kind of differentiator, before the quiet and calm, and that uneasy feeling of walking into something that wasn't quite empty, exploded. A ring of pain sliced across Mark's neck as he felt something bite in, and his head yanked back.

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He didn't even have to scent her perfume to realise who the fuck it was, as Drake wrestled him backwards with the garroted wire and whispered deep into his ear.

"I am so going to kill you again."

He couldn't even gasp the 'bitch' he wanted to retort with as he kicked and flailed and tried to reach for the thin wire wrapped around his neck. His brain felt like it was exploding; his foot connected with something, only for the edges of his bright red vision to show he'd accidentally kicked out at Sam. He did the only thing he could: he drove the back of his head in a sudden jerking motion and felt something give.

He felt her grip suddenly loosen and fell forward, the wire still trailing around his neck, as he coughed and spluttered and tried to give himself enough slack to allow air down into his starving lungs. He managed to spin enough to see Drake, with blood careening down her face from her broken nose and grimaced.

"Oh, that's it…" she snapped, regaining her composure and beginning to come for him.

"Oh, right, now you want to kill me," he threw at her, sarcastic to the end. She was going for him, but instead he flung the makeshift garrote off to one side and launched himself at her in a very undignified ruby tackle. "Sam! Find the sodding button!"

"What does the big red one do?"

"Leave it!"

The momentary opening that provided, as he told Sam *not* to hit the big red button – mostly out of fear it would be what every big red button is designed to be – an ultimately fucked button – cost him dearly. One high heel drove right into his nads as Mark's 'former' headteacher and murderer kicked him in the bollocks.

He was down.

* * *

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A combined force of resistance members and Magick users waited outside, as Ricky, Sara and their new uneasy ally Nikki walked confidently down the corridors. Guards were few; they were – as he suspected – relatively unprepared. They'd had to dispatch two guys outside, leaving scorch marks behind, but that was so far it.

When they moved through the double doors into the Library, Ricky baring his sword, Sara holding the crossbow and Nikki crackling with her kind of soft blue energy – they were remarkably underwhelmed by what they saw.

His vampyric self sat lazily on a throne he could have sworn hadn't been there before, one leg cocked over the side. Good God, was that what he would look like in leather pants? And Amy stood next to him, one hand upon the spiked top of the chair that looked like a prop from the drama department. A bad prop at that. Of course camp would survive the apocalypse.

"You don't knock?" Vamp Ricky mocked.

One thing struck him immediately, sensing more like a trap than he'd considered before.

"Where's the Goatee-Bellend?" he asked, scanning the room's hidden corners for signs of the vampyr. His self shrugged, though he noted Amy's hand gripped the throne a little tighter.

"Had a bad performance review," Vamp Ricky shrugged. "Anyway, office hours don't open until noon, so…"

"I'm sure you can spare us five minutes," Sara mocked, raising the point of her crossbow aggressively. To his Vampyric credit, he didn't flinch, although Ricky did find himself edging a little further out of the way.

"You're right, should only take about that," Vamp Ricky responded. "Even less. Amy…"

With a wave of his hand, his second in command – if that's what she was – stepped forward. One gloved hand raised, none of them flinched. Nothing happened. No sparks. No Magicks. She frowned, frustrated, confused. She shook her hand twice and tried again, like she was attempting to get the remote to work. Bloody ridiculous.

"Amy…" his counterpart purred menacingly, "…don't make me ask twice."

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"I can't," she answered, fear entering her eyes. "Something's…" Her eyes settled on Nikki, and within seconds, of course she figured it out. "She's blocking me."

Nikki, who had indeed claimed she could do such a thing, held a small orb behind her back. One she'd claimed had a temporary dampening effect on powers. Just how temporary, he wasn't willing to question, but at least it took their big gun out of the fight.

"Shouldn't play with the big leagues, Amy," Nikki mocked her, grinning. Perhaps poking the bear wasn't a great idea.

"You f…"

Just as he thought he was about to hear profanity come out of Amy's mouth for the first time – and no, jinkys never counted – Vamp Ricky interrupted.

"Now, now, I think they've finally gotten an upper hand; let's not spoil that with swearing," he suggested. So Amy cursing was unnatural even in this world; that was worth noting. As he spoke, he swept to his feet. "Death is much more appropriate."

"Any specifics as to preference?"

"Yours, preferably."

Ricky grinned to himself, knowing that even though the stakes were literally life and death, a part of him was going to enjoy this. Kicking his own arse, essentially. Well, hadn't he been beating himself up about various shit since the dawn of time? Might be fun to externalise it.

He threw off his hoodie for full range of motion and noticed his vampyric counterpart doing the same with the shitty leather jacket. They stood, face to face, and he could see the same electricity in his one good – if vampyric – eye. He was looking forward to this just as much. Good, the more distraction the better.

"You ever wanted to see which of us is the better one?"

"The thought *had* crossed my mind."

"Isn't this the part where you tell me you know every move I'm gonna make? That you *know* me?"

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"I don't know you, and you don't know me. Except, does the same thing happen when you have mint-choc ice cream…"

"Hell, yeah…"

He could see Sara and Nikki looking back and forth between them out of the corner of his eye, the kind of talking-to-himself effect clearly disorienting.

"Angelina Jolie or Christina Aguilera?"

"Oh, Angelina definitely. Even with the creepy Miss Robinson vibe."

"You know you should vamp her in this dimension."

"Can't. Already dead."

"Shame."

They paused, both left in thought, likely mirroring each other. Sara's insistence startled them both out of their thoughts.

"Boys!" she snapped. They looked at her obediently. "Are you going to fight now?"

Not waiting for a reply, he felt his Vamp self thump him on the side of the head, knocking him off his balance.

"Better," she muttered.

With that, the gloves were truly off. Vamp Ricky launched a wild attack, but Ricky managed to parry each one. Neither of them had time to reach for weapons; they *were* weapons themselves, and they used them to their full advantage. The only problem was, advantage didn't seem to be the word.

There were five months and a bunch of demonic experiences between… and yet they fought more or less the same. He knew what he was going to do, and his counterpart knew he knew. Both their heads ached as they tried to rain down blows that would hurt the other.

"Maybe the movies weren't wrong, after all," the Vampyr snarled.

He had to admit, worryingly, he agreed.

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* * *

From where he lay clutching his balls, Drake strode across the room towards Sam, who remained at her post by the buttons, furiously trying to finish what they had started.

"I'll peel your goddamn skin off," Drake snarled, her vision clouded by the kind of pure rage she normally reserved for Year 7s.

Fighting the sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach and the urge to vomit – and the obvious emasculation that now came with numb testicles, he staggered to his feet and rushed towards her. And in a move he would never have contemplated in the real world, he leapt onto his headteacher's back and suddenly found the whole situation turning into a mad piggyback rodeo very quickly.

"This is worse for me than it is for you!" he yelled, as she clawed and snarled like some kind of wild beast trying to shake him off.

"I'm gonna tear your goddamn eyes out."

He didn't quite know why she was so focused on doing things to various body parts rather than actually doing things to various body parts, but he had to think maybe a limited range of torture narrowed her vocabulary somewhat. Still, she was strong, angry, and she drove them both backwards toward the wall.

But he clung on. Partly because his watch was stuck in her hair more than anything else.

"Sam!" he snapped across to her.

"Don't rush me," she retorted.

With one hand, she slammed a button, hoping it was the right one. Then her face darkened even further, and she glanced over to him.

"I think that was the self-destruct…"

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His eyes widened as the feral creature that was once a semi-ally kept trying to carry through on her threats. He assumed she was correct; above them, the alarms began to flash and glare, adding yet another dimension of red to the hellscape they were in.

"Now can you rush?!"

* * *

His Vamp self did have one advantage he noticed – he didn't need to breathe. And though Ricky was strong and had stamina that would floor a normal guy, he did. And so he felt himself slowly beginning to tire with the swift brutality of the fight. They were evenly matched; neither was giving ground – and he had the slight disadvantage of mortality. Against someone who knew everything he knew.

So he decided to retreat. Not fully, not enough – but enough to give him breathing room. Enough to deny the opening the beast was looking for. He launched himself backwards, in one swift movement making his way up onto the half of the Library counter that hadn't been completely trashed. He balanced precariously, standing on the rubble.

"Okay, this is getting annoying," he pointed out.

"My sentiments exactly," the Vamp Ricky snarled.

"You know I did learn one thing in the time after Satana was gone," he continued.

"Yeah?"

"I learned the value of cheating?"

His one good eye went wide – which just so happened to be perfect timing – as Ricky booted a bit of rubble from on top of the counter directly into his counterpart's face. It was a hefty chunk and broke apart a little on the flight, but somehow still was solid enough; he heard the crack of bone and the roar of fury as blood began to fly down his dark half's face.

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It gave him the opening he needed, so he summoned the last of his strength and leapt from the counter – with the height and the weight coming down in a furious arc. He drove both of his hands, clenched together as one large fist and aimed straight for the jagged edge of his already bloodied nose. He brought it down hard, heard the sickening crunch, and felt the thing fall to the ground before him.

"That's better," he snapped.

The thing wanted to recover, but he wouldn't let it. He saw exactly what he needed and, grabbing the slimy, scraggly hair of the Vamp Ricky, used his momentum to fling him straight toward the already half-broken door to Mark's office, lying uneasily in its frame. His head and neck went through, landing on the remains of the jagged glass shards of what was once frosted glass.

It was done. He knew it. Sara knew it. Nikki knew it… and the dark shadow of what he could become knew it. He lay there, precariously, his face awash with blood as Ricky strode over to him.

"We… could have been great… together…" the thing wearing his face tried to say, in bloodied words.

"Yeah, well I can be an arsehole in any dimension."

One swift kick to the head with his borrowed boot, and the glass shards did their work. As Ricky stepped back, the column of heat rose from the remains of the vampyr, and the final death throes were remarkably quiet. Restrained. At least his dark half had a dignified, undignified defeat.

"You did it," Sara said, her voice barely registering belief. "You saved us."

"Yeah, good job," Nikki mocked, as Ricky turned back towards them. He saw the smirk on her face, saw Amy slipping closer to her, and frowned.

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Her hands brimmed with blue energy, strong and bright… as Amy's did the same.

"Thanks, Ricky…"

* * *

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Things continued to go from bad to worse, as Mark felt himself launched over Drake's head and slammed hard against the ground. There was yet another crack as he wondered if he'd just outright broken the ribs he'd already bruised, and he could only lie there groaning as she regained her composure. The monster headed straight for Sam, grabbing her by the throat and slamming her back against the consoles.

A shape moved past him, the alarms blaring, and for a moment he thought he had completely cracked – or Ricky had come to save them. But the figure was barefoot, dressed in the dirtiest of prison rags, with bloodied soles and feet caked in grime. Ricky had been given boots – who the fuck was their problem now?

Drake slumped as the figure struck her across the back of the head with a chunk of what looked like rock. She went down like a sack of potatoes as Mark scrambled to turn onto his good side and see what was going on.

It was the prisoner. The man from the cell. Luke.

Something was different: the look in his eyes, something a little less wild. He tried to speak, his voice raw and cracked with pain.

"Sam…"

He recognised her, and in those two souls finally reconnecting, Sam rushed forward and kissed him deeply. Mark didn't want to ask too much about hygiene in this world, but he was happy for them. He managed to get to his feet and look towards the console. So perhaps a self-destruct would do the trick, although as he watched the clock, he saw they had precious few seconds left before they joined it.

"Guys…"

He turned back to the reunited couple to find them bloody well snogging. Yes, heart-warming and all, but they were still choosing copping off over living. He rolled his eyes and instead of yelling at them again, grabbed the one nearest to him – Sam – by the arm and began to drag them

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both towards the door. That clearly broke through their fog of romance, and the three of them raced back down the corridor.

He never thought stale, ash-filled air would be so fresh compared to the oppressive insides of that bunker, but he felt sweet, blissful relief as they made it into the outdoor world. He couldn't hear the sirens as they raced up the small hill and dived behind the ridge just as the flames burst through the front door and the ground beneath them seemed to shake.

Landing hard on the ground did nothing for either his bruised body or his bruised ego, but he just took a moment to feel glad that he was alive once more. They had done it. They had stopped the air raid sirens and, with it, perhaps made the streets of this reality a little safer.

He had time to roll over, look up at the sky, and wonder if that too could one day be righted. But as he did, he glanced across to see if his companions were okay – only to find the two of them necking like it was the end of the world.

Well, he thought, some things transcended universes. And the world *had* ended, after all.

* * *

"What's going on?" he demanded, as Nikki and Amy held their hands of crackling magick out like weapons. Fucking magick guns, sure; it would have to be after the day they'd been having.

"The resistance is over," Nikki smirked. Then, with one swift movement, she turned her hand toward Sara. He watched his friend – he would think of her as that in any reality – flung back through the doors, her head connecting with the solid door on the way with a sudden thud. He couldn't see what happened to her beyond, but he tried to move in her direction anyway.

A blast of magick slammed into the ground in front of him, causing him to instinctively step back.

"Let her die," Nikki suggested. "We have more use for you anyway."

"I won't help you," he snapped. "You bitch."

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"Oh, please, find a less misogynistic insult," Nikki challenged before shaking her head. "And I don't want your help, at least not voluntarily. There must still be a little of that Guide juice left in your dimension; I just wanna tear it out and use that power for my own ends. Y'know, secure this new normal."

"Oh well, by all means…" Ricky snarked back at her sarcastically.

As he did, he watched the body language between the two magick users. Amy sidled up next to her, one gloved hand gently caressing her shoulder, and placing a soft kiss on the side of her face.

"Good job, my love."

"Oh, this is even worse," Ricky groaned. "Are you skanky to everyone in this dimension now?"

"Watch your tongue," Amy hissed.

"She knows what it is to survive," Nikki said, smiling.

He considered his options, none of them good – but as he did, he began to feel static in the air around him. Something was happening; a light, bright and white began to slowly gather around him – though he could see no source. Both Nikki and Amy's faces dropped, telling him this wasn't their doing. He could only think of one hopeful possibility.

"Oh, thank fuck for that…"

The white light flashed, and he could see no more.

* * *

Blinding, all-encompassing light surrounded him. He felt pulled in a million directions that smashed together, like he was at one moment the size of reality and the next an infinitesimally small atom. His brain followed suit, as moments began to bleed into one another.

Amy and Nikki stood in front of him, his brain seeing the danger before he could react.

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"Watch out, she's evil!" he yelled, his head whipping back and forth as he tried to find Sara. Where had she landed? Was she hurt? Was she okay?

Wait, they were looking at him with concern. And Amy was dressed in a school jumper. There was no leather anywhere. No lipstick. Nikki… why was Nikki looking at him with hope in her eyes? He swooned, directions coming to him all at once. Soft light, pitter-patter of rain on the windows. A roof – there was a sodding roof!

"You're not lesbians," he said to them. Their look, which they shared, was confused before they glanced down at the ground where Mark lay at his feet, on his back and groaning in pain.

"Ricky… you're home," Amy told him.

"This certainly looks like home…" Mark muttered, as he pulled himself up into a seated position, clutching the side of his chest. Then he finally saw them. Luke and Sara, at the table, both looking relieved and worried at the same time. He realised how he must look, covered in ash, wearing weird boots that looked at home in Mad Max and sweaty and grimy as Mark was.

He was so relieved he could cry, but instead all he could think was,

"How did you do it?"

"Well, it was simply really," Amy shrugged. "Although some of us *cough* Sara * cough* thought you were dead…"

"To be fair, I said vapourised," Sara protested.

"I realised pretty quickly, with no bodies, that the tear had probably thrown you through realms," Amy pointedly ignored her. "So we first had the problem of finding your essences, which required a trans-realm locator spell using some of your personal belongings – and yeah, I'm sorry about the coffee mug, Mark – which helped us to tune into the intrinsic frequency of your beings…"

Ricky held up his hand, and Amy abruptly cut herself off and frowned at him. Yeah, that was the Amy he knew very well.

"Amy, if I say how in future – just know I'm being polite," he smiled. "I don't care, but I am grateful. You rock."

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Redness spread in her cheeks and the tips of her ears as she looked away.

"As I say, it was nothing."

"If you listen quietly, you can hear Stephen Hawking screaming somewhere in the world," Luke mused.

"So where did you boys go?" Sara asked brightly, "Not the mint-chocolate ice cream dimension, I hope?"

"Reality," he and Mark answered in unison as he helped his friend to his feet. Amy smiled a little at them both, clearly relieved that some of the science classes had rubbed off. If she only knew. And in time she would; they would tell the whole story. He joked and began to point at them one by one, "And you were there, and you were there, and you…"

"And there's no place like home," Mark agreed.

"Seriously?" Sara questioned.

"Yeah, well…" he pointed to Amy, "You needed a heart," then to Luke, "You needed a brain," and finished with Sara, "And you needed deodorant."

Sara's look of horror told him yes, he was indeed back in his own world. He was surprised her counterpart had survived as long as she had without it. He caught their Sara sniffing her armpits when she thought no one was looking.

"How about everyone heads home for the night?" Mark suggested, "I'm sure we can catch each other up with our respective stories tomorrow. For now, I believe I need to find out if I'm going to bleed internally, then perhaps collapse into bed for a week."

None of them could find a better suggestion, and so one by one they began to pack up their stuff and set off for the night. It seemed, however long they had been in the other reality, it had once more become night there. Ricky made sure to take a moment and regard both Amy and Nikki, who were packing up her presumably magickal paraphernalia back into her bag.

"Seriously, you two, thank you so much."

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"Anytime," Nikki told him, with a warm smile. Yeah, one without lust; he could get used to that, finally.

When the others had slipped away, he found Mark had already made his way into the office. No doubt he was not going to follow his own advice and check himself, then get some rest. He was probably going to get on with work. So Ricky followed him, an idea already forming that he didn't want to share with the others just yet.

"Mark…"

"Don't tell me you can't bear to part from my company?" his friend joked, lowering himself gingerly into his office chair.

"I'm going home," he reassured him, "And so should you. But when you're feeling up to it, I just… I want you to see if you can find another one of those crystals. Another Tear of Clonus."

"Cronos," Mark corrected. He sighed, apparently having caught up with him already. "I take it this whole excursion has given you an idea?"

"It's possible to cross realms, Mark," Ricky reminded him, looking his friend in his tired eyes. "Right? We've got first-hand knowledge. Even if we have to break through with one of these crystals, we can. Now we have a way… all we need is a location."

"Ah…"

"Yeah, I want to go to hell," he said, nodding. Mark's face set into grim determination as he nodded in agreement. It was more than time; now they had a way, and Ricky was right: all they needed was the location.

"We're gonna get Claire back."

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