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Opening extract from

Sammael's Wings

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Published by

Andersen Press Ltd

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Andersen Press

First published in 2015 by
Andersen Press
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 325 3

Typeset in Goudy by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Limited, St Ives plc



Nightmares

Jonathan was running for his life. His lungs screamed with effort as he tore along a marble-floored boulevard, buffeted by waves of heat from the burning buildings on either side. A thick, greasy smoke hugged the ground, and an unfamiliar stench filled his nostrils as he gasped for breath. He'd never smelled it before, but somehow he knew what it was: burning flesh.

A huge crash to his left signalled the collapse of a house; red-hot masonry and smouldering wooden beams exploded into the street in front of him, carpeting the marble with glowing cinders. Knowing that to stand still for too long would be to die, Jonathan vaulted over the obstruction and ignored the pain as his clothes began to scorch. The marble beneath his feet was now so hot he could feel the soles of his shoes beginning to melt.

An agonised cry came from a doorway up ahead, and a humanoid figure wreathed in orange flame lurched through it before slumping to the ground. Shielding his face from the heat, Jonathan skidded to a halt to see if there was anything he could do. The figure was so badly burned it was impossible to tell

whether it was male or female, and flames still danced across the blackened skin. The awful wreckage of the figure's face was turned towards Jonathan, and it seemed that life had mercifully fled under the weight of such terrible suffering.

Worse still, from the figure's back protruded two blackened, ragged clumps. Jonathan looked closer – squinting through the heat haze – and saw that there were white patches untouched by flame. He reached out a trembling hand and brushed one of the patches with his fingertips; it was covered with . . . feathers. Jonathan felt tears begin to sting the corners of his eyes, but the liquid evaporated in the heat before it had time to run down his face.

'This was an angel,' he said to himself, horrified.

A vicious crackling erupted from behind him, and he turned to see a wall of fire leap across the boulevard: a wall which began moving rapidly forward. With his throat too dry to scream and his clothes beginning to smoulder, Jonathan dragged himself away from the dead angel and ran. The skin of his feet began to blister along with that of his hands and face, and the din behind him grew louder and closer. Breathing was almost impossible as the superheated air seared the inside of his lungs with every painful gasp.

He glanced over his shoulder and his eyes widened in terror as he saw that the wall of fire was gaining on him. He willed his wings to manifest themselves, desperately wanting to hear the joyful song of power that accompanied those serrated purple ribbons. With his wings outspread and the mathematics of

creation itself coursing through his veins, he could outrun the inferno and escape. But nothing happened. His wings remained silent: no song, no power, no way out.

'*No!*' Jonathan cried as he forced the tortured muscles of his legs to keep moving. He had fought the archdemon Belial and won; he didn't deserve to die in agony, reduced to a blackened corpse like that poor angel.

Half-blind in the writhing smoke, Jonathan stepped on something that gave way with a crack and sent him sprawling into what felt like a pile of kindling. He thrust out his right hand to break his fall and felt it jam into something dry and hard. He pulled his arm back and came face to face with a jawless skull, his fingers buried deep in the eye sockets. With a cry, Jonathan flung the awful thing away and struggled to his feet. Looking about him he could see what had tripped him up – bones. He was knee-deep in a mountain of humanoid bones: skulls, femurs, fingers, and scapulae, some of which were very small, like those of children.

Utterly exhausted and reeling with shock, Jonathan sank to his knees and bowed his head as the inferno raced towards him, its hungry light reflecting on the polished marble. The heat grew in intensity, and Jonathan gritted his teeth as his jacket began to burn. The roar of the flames filled his head as he shut his eyes and prepared to die.

Without warning the heat and light suddenly vanished. Blessed darkness and cold air played around Jonathan's face, soothing his burns. He slowly opened his eyes, wondering why he wasn't

dead. The bones were still there, but the space around him was dark, chill and silent, like an ash-filled mortuary.

'Look at me,' said a soft, youthful voice from directly behind him.

Jonathan almost jumped out of his skin. He wanted to see who had spoken but dare not move; it was sure to be yet more horror for him to endure.

'Look at me,' the voice said again. 'Turn your head and look at me.'

Terrified of what he might see but desperate to find some comfort in this dire place, Jonathan turned round. He was stunned to see a young boy of similar age and height to himself, wearing simple leather sandals and a white, short-sleeved tunic, belted at the waist. The boy's long, fair hair was pulled back and tied loosely with a gold silk cord, and from his shoulders grew a pair of wings that arced up above his head, white-feathered and glorious.

'The fire,' Jonathan croaked. 'How did you . . . ?'

'There's no need to be afraid,' said the angel. 'I've been waiting for you. I have someone you've been looking for.'

The angel reached out a hand, and from the swirling smoke emerged the tall figure of a man. He wore a similar tunic to that of the boy, but it was stained by splotches of dried blood.

Jonathan shifted his gaze from the tunic to the man's face. His father's eyes stared back at him.

'Dad . . . ?' gasped Jonathan. 'Dad, I've found you!'

'My son,' replied Darriel, his face pale and sad. 'I need your

help. I'm wounded, see?' He turned and showed Jonathan the torn and ragged remains of what had once been two mighty wings. 'This is what Belial and the Corvidae did before leaving me for dead on the steps of Heaven. Please help me, my son.'

'We both need you,' begged the boy angel, his handsome face as smooth as polished alabaster.

Jonathan made to stand up, but stopped short when he heard a guttural moan from close by. He looked to his left and saw the horrifically burned body of an adult angel, clawing his agonised way towards him across the bone-strewn ground. From his face, a pair of blazing blue eyes fixed their gaze upon him.

'Help us!' repeated Darriel, his voice strangely flat and unemotional.

The burned angel drew level with Jonathan and reached out to grab his ankle. Frozen to the spot in utter terror, Jonathan could only watch as the angel opened his blackened mouth to speak. 'No! Don't. Don't help. Stay awaaaaaay!' The angel pulled himself even closer, his eyes boring into Jonathan's. 'STAY AWAAAAAAY!' To hammer the point home, the angel's hand suddenly burst into flame, burning right through Jonathan's jeans and searing his skin.

It was only then that Jonathan finally began to scream.



Just a Kid

Elgar was sound asleep and dreaming happily. He was just about to pounce on a giant kipper he'd been stalking when a scream shattered his slumber.

'What the hell was that?' he spluttered, only to fall off the draining board where he'd been curled up and land in an ungainly heap in his basket.

Halcyon Grimm – who was asleep at the kitchen table with a copy of *The Times* steepled across his face – bolted upright in surprise, knocking over a mug and spilling cold tea everywhere. He blinked and looked at Elgar. 'Was that Jonathan?' he asked the cat.

'Sounded like it,' replied Elgar. Without delay they ran from the kitchen and up the stairs, meeting Ignatius on the landing. The vicar of Hobbes End was barefoot, wearing a dressing gown, and his hair was sticking up at all angles.

'Is Jonathan all right?' asked Grimm.

'I don't know,' said Ignatius. 'Come on, let's see what's wrong.' He knocked gently on Jonathan's bedroom door, but when he didn't receive an answer he opened it regardless. 'Jonathan?' he

said softly, poking his head round the door to see the boy sitting on his bed in a tangle of sweat-drenched sheets, hugging his knees to his chest.

Jonathan looked at Ignatius with haunted, dark-rimmed eyes. 'I had a nightmare,' he said.

'It sounded like a whopper,' said Elgar, padding into the room and jumping onto the bed. 'I haven't heard a scream like that since my aunt Agatha accidentally ate her own arm.'

Despite himself Jonathan smiled at the cat. 'How is that even possible?'

'Too much daytime television,' replied Elgar. 'Anyhow, what's got you all screamy?'

Jonathan rested his head on his knees for a moment as he took a deep breath. He could see his chest wall pulsing in time with his runaway heart. 'I was stuck somewhere and everything was burning. It was so hot and I could barely breathe . . . and there was this *smell*.'

'What kind of smell?' asked Grimm.

Jonathan shuddered and closed his eyes. 'Burning people,' he whispered.

'So, not one of those dreams where you end up taking an exam wearing just a pair of hiking boots?' said Elgar.

Jonathan shook his head and ruffled the cat's fur. 'I wish.'

'There's something else, isn't there?' asked Ignatius, his face grave. 'Just like me, you have a bond with Hobbes End; this village has a soul, remember? It can feel your distress, as can I.'

Jonathan nodded and looked at the vicar. 'I saw a burning

angel, and then all these bones – a mountain of them. Just when I thought I was going to burn too, everything stopped and a boy angel spoke to me.'

'A boy angel?'

'Yeah,' said Jonathan. 'He said he'd been waiting for me and that he had someone I'd been looking for.' He paused, tears welling up.

'It's all right,' Ignatius reassured him.

'But it's not,' said Jonathan. 'My dad was there too. He looked at me and he was so sad. He was really hurt and he begged me to help him. He's been missing for weeks now and I'm still no closer to finding him. Is he calling out to me somehow from wherever he is? D'you think he's waiting for me to rescue him?'

Ignatius sighed and gently patted Jonathan on the shoulder. 'I don't know, lad,' he said.

'Dad showed me what the Corvidae had done to him, Ignatius. Those monsters tore his wings off and left him to die on the steps of Heaven. And . . . isn't Heaven sealed from the inside? Nobody has gone in or out for decades . . .'

Ignatius nodded. 'Yes. Gabriel could never understand why his brother Raphael did that. All right, he is the eldest archangel, and he is in charge of Heaven, but even if he is as . . . unstable as Gabriel feared, surely he would not let your father suffer. Somebody inside Heaven would open the gates.'

'I don't know,' said Jonathan. 'We were told that Raphael had gone insane. Would a mad angel care about helping my dad?'

'Yes, but we were told that by Belial: a vicious, manipulative

archdemon,' said Ignatius. 'He wanted to use you as a weapon to conquer his enemies and he tore your family apart in the process. You sent him screaming back to Hell, remember, so don't let his lies upset you. And as for the demons of the Corvidae, well, we know what happened to them. Grimm and I made sure that Rook, Raven and Crow will never hurt another soul. We have their bowler hats to prove it.'

'Yeah,' nodded Jonathan. 'I'm glad you killed them. They were monsters.'

'That they were, Jonny,' said Elgar. 'They hurt my family too, remember? I'm stuck in this fetching feline body because of Belial's curse. Sometimes even I forget that I'm actually a demon boy.'

'I know, cat,' said Jonathan, gently ruffling the fur on his friend's head.

'We make a right pair,' said Elgar. 'Who would think you're actually half-angel, half-demon, and all badass when you need to be?'

Jonathan couldn't help but smile at his friend.

'Now that's better,' said Elgar, playfully butting Jonathan's shin.

'Ow!' cried Jonathan, snatching his leg away from the cat.

'What?' asked Elgar. 'I didn't bite you or anything!'

'No, it's not that,' said Jonathan, hurriedly pulling the sheets away and swinging his legs to the side of the bed where he could see them clearly. 'Oh God, look!'

Ignatius, Grimm and Elgar all craned to see what Jonathan

was pointing at. There at the bottom of his left leg, just above the ankle, was a livid burn. The skin was blistered, red and weeping, but that wasn't the worst of it.

'Is it just my tired old eyes, or does that burn look like it's in the shape of a *hand*?' asked Grimm. 'Sit there while I go and get my bag; that burn needs dressing.'

Jonathan nodded, but inside he felt empty; the injury confirmed that his nightmare was no mere bad dream.

Once Grimm had finished applying cream and bandages, he brought Jonathan a mug of steaming hot chocolate and left him alone with Ignatius and Elgar.

'What should I do?' Jonathan asked.

Ignatius paused and sucked on his unlit pipe. 'I think you should start by looking for your father at his last known location.'

'The steps of Heaven? And how do I get there?' asked Jonathan. 'Grandfather – Gabriel – told me that there was a path between Hell and the steps of Heaven; and the Corvidae used it when they left Dad there. But I don't know where the entrance is.'

'And you can't exactly wander around Hell looking for it,' said Ignatius, taking off his glasses to rub his tired eyes.

Jonathan shook his head.

'What about Gabriel's Clock?' suggested Ignatius, gesturing to the ordinary-looking wristwatch that sat on Jonathan's bedside table. 'Your grandfather built it so that his magnificent knowledge wouldn't be lost. You were wearing it when he died, so all that knowledge rests inside you now. And let's not forget that somehow

it's supposed to be able to open a secret door into Gabriel's old workshop in Heaven.'

'Yeah, I know,' said Jonathan. 'If I could get into Heaven itself, then I could look for Dad there too, find out if someone took him in and has been caring for him, but I have no idea how to open that secret door. The answer is somewhere inside my head but I don't know how to find it. It's like . . . it's like walking into a huge room crammed with shelves of books, but there are no titles on the spines and no filing system. I *know* so much now, but I don't *understand* any of it! I'm just so tired.'

'I know,' said Ignatius. 'But it's only been a week since I watched you – a twelve-year-old boy who didn't know who or what he really was until just recently – go toe-to-toe with an archdemon and win, saving us all. Go easy on yourself, lad; the injuries you received in your fight with Belial have only just begun to heal.' He paused. 'If David had grown up to be like you, I would have been very proud indeed.'

Jonathan looked at Ignatius and smiled. He knew what a huge compliment he had just received from the deeply private cleric. Ignatius rarely spoke about the deaths of his wife and son.

'I'm so worried about Mum too,' sighed Jonathan, stroking the fur on Elgar's back for comfort. 'I don't know what's happened to her, either. She's somewhere in Hell because she tried to go and get help from Lucifer but she's lost – and it's only because she wanted to save me. We may have beaten Belial, but what use is all this power I've been given if I can't even help my

parents? My mum is missing, and my dad is probably dying on the steps of Heaven; it doesn't feel like much of a victory.'

'You didn't cause any of this, Jonathan,' said Ignatius. 'Your parents did their best to keep you safe and you mustn't blame yourself for it. A parent will do anything to protect their child, remember that.'

Jonathan nodded. He knew the truth of what Ignatius was saying, but the ache of his parents' absence was with him all the time – and it was getting worse.

'It'll be a new day soon,' said Ignatius. 'Who knows where help may come from? I know this nightmare has upset you and there's probably more to it than meets the eye, but for now you need to sleep. Don't forget that we have the memorial service for Gabriel tomorrow evening.'

Jonathan settled back into his pillows, his eyes once again filling with tears. 'I miss my grandfather as well.'

Ignatius nodded, the sadness on his face mirroring that of Jonathan's. 'Me too,' he said. 'Now, how about I read to you for a bit; keep the night terrors away.'

Jonathan closed his eyes, lulled by the soft sound of Ignatius's voice as it told him the story of a fictional young boy, battling against the forces of darkness.

Grimm looked up from the sink where he was washing his hands. 'They all right?' he asked Elgar.

'I think so,' replied the cat as he padded into the kitchen. 'Ignatius is reading to Jonathan from *Henry Cobbler and the Teapot*

of Doom, or something. Never understood the attraction of kids' fantasy books myself.'

'But you're just a kid too,' said Grimm.

'*Just* a kid, eh?' said Elgar, raising an eyebrow.

'That's not what I meant and you know it,' said Grimm. 'We're not expecting you or Jonathan – or Cay – to start taking on the responsibilities of an adult. It's not fair on any of you; nobody should be forced to grow up too fast.'

'Well, I s'pose not,' said Elgar. 'Still, cometh the hour, cometh the cat and all that. Can I have a kipper?'

Grimm chuckled to himself and opened the fridge.