

THE FALLEN

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PART ONE

The Fall

Chapter 1

The young man stared into the eyes of his aggressor, wondering why it was that he was always picked on. They never got anything out of it, Gau had nothing they were interested in and he never reacted to the taunting and pushing.

Today though he could see they were going to push him too far. He could see the bitterness in his assailant's eyes, the anger that had always before been hidden today was on the surface.

He prepared himself.

His aggressor pushed him again, the spectators suddenly seeing what Gau already knew was coming, seeing that the aggressor would swing next. One of them stepped forward, intent on catching the swinging fist.

He managed to stop the aggressor just before the fist would have connected. Gau smiled, still staring into his aggressor's eyes.

"Leave him man, it's not worth it." The spectator whispered loud enough for Gau to hear. The aggressor shook free and swung again. Gau swayed backwards, just out of reach then elbowed his assailant in the sternum as he swayed forward again.

The man dropped breathlessly to his hands and knees, the spectator stepping back in surprise.

"Good day." Gau said quietly as he walked around the man and continued on to his destination. He hoped he'd never have to deal with that again.

Alexa folded in her wings, ruffling the feathers to get them to sit neatly. What this creature was saying made some sense, there was no way anything evil could get into Eden. Nothing evil had set foot here since the time of Adam and Eve.

And yet still she felt like she should not trust this creature, this monitor on two legs. She did not recognise it as a creature of the garden and the fact that it seemed to be vocalising rather than communicating in any way recognisable for the lizard it seemed to be based on.

"Where did you come from?" She enquired inquisitively. The monitor seemed to shrug, its scales making a soft rustling sound. She noticed that the ones that changed their position seemed to change colour in the light.

"I woke up here, I don't remember before." It seemed to say. Its mouth did not move, nor did any other part of it suggest that it had spoken however Alexa was still sure she

was hearing it rather than interpreting as was usual with the creatures of Eden. She considered her options for a moment, knowing that with her suspicions she should probably go to the Arch-Angel.

If this creature was an alien to the Eden though, she shouldn't let it out of her sight.

"Come with me." She commanded, turning and leading the creature towards the Arch-Angel. It was the only way.

The beautiful Archangel Sariel stared at the creature, as curious as Alexa was about him. He had watched Eden for long enough to know that this creature was not of the land. As with Alexa though, he knew that it was not possible for those without divine power to enter the realm.

He stepped close to the creature, between it and Alexa, then started to circle it, watching as the scales reflected the light differently, constantly changing colour.

Alexa felt a frisson of terror sweep over it but suppressed it. She was in the company of one of the most powerful beings in existence, nothing could go wrong.

The monitor allowed the inspection, standing still for the most part. It was only as the Archangel turned away that Alexa saw the shiver pass through its scales. In that moment of rapid movement she thought she saw its form change but dismissed it as being a product of her fear.

"Although I do not doubt that you are here for a reason, I can not believe that you are a part of the realm." Sariel intoned, his voice rich and deep. The monitor shivered again and this time Alexa was sure of what she saw. She took a step forward but it was too late.

The lizard form shivered one more time then grew instantly to twice its size, the scales disappearing and revealing a more leathery skin, crimson in hue.

It moved quicker than she thought possible, its still toothless maw snapping closed around the neck of the Arch-Angel. With a snap of his wings, Sariel pushed the creature away and turned towards it, a sword of light appearing in his hand.

He moved with deft speed, slashing at the creature's throat while moving forward, his wings providing a forward thrust as he moved. The creature dodged under the blade and snapped its mouth around the Archangel's left hand.

Sariel pulled the creature forward and slashed down onto its tail, severing it completely with a hiss. The creature released his hand, roaring in pain, then darting around the Archangel and snapping at his left shoulder.

The Archangel followed its movement easily and slashed at it as it snapped, the blade of the sword cutting cleanly through the crimson skin on either side of the maw.

The creature did not pause, instead slashing at Sariel with vicious intensity with its claws. They sank deep into the Archangel's chest leaving four gashes running diagonally across it.

Sariel gritted his teeth and attacked with renewed vigour, sending forth a blurred series of slashes at the creature. As each slash landed a hiss accompanied it and Alexa

saw dark welts forming wherever the blade touched.

The creature staggered backwards, its arms going limp. As it took one more step away from the Archangel, Sariel slashed once more across the creature's throat, severing the head.

Sariel and Alexa stared at the creature as it fell to the floor. Within moments it began to disintegrate, becoming a fine mist that floated away on a non-existent breeze.

The Archangel was breathing deeply and Alexa could hear that he was having difficulty with each breath.

"Shall I go and fetch Raphael?" she enquired quietly, almost trying not to be heard. She felt powerless and worse, she felt responsible for the terrible injuries she was currently staring at. Sariel turned to her and seemed to be trying to recognise her.

He opened his mouth as if to speak but then closed it again, his brow furrowing in puzzlement. Alexa stood staring at the Archangel, not able to move, unable to comprehend the symptoms that he appeared to be displaying. The Archangels had always seemed perfect, powerful, infallible.

And yet here stood Sariel, unable to recognise her, unable to speak. She shivered as dread crept up her spine.

Sariel's mouth curled into a snarl a moment before he dropped his blade, his hand going to the gashes in his chest and trying to clutch at them. The snarl turned to a grimace as he dropped to his knees and bowed his head, obviously in pain.

Alexa saw the bite on the back of the Archangel's neck, red and practically glowing with heat. Infection did not exist in the realm of the divines but Alexa had spent time around humans once and she recognised the signs.

She ran for help.

By the time Alexa had gotten back to Sariel with Raphael and Raguel Sariel was already lying prone on his back, his right hand still on his chest, the left swollen and red as the back of his neck had been, his throat red and inflamed now as well.

His breaths came slow and shallow and Alexa knew in that moment that it was too late. Nothing Raphael could do could save Sariel. Raguel turned to her and gestured for her to follow him.

She obeyed without hesitation, knowing what was coming. She had had no choice, but she had still failed and so punishment was something that was inevitable. Alexa followed the Archangel a little way into Eden before he turned to her.

"I imagine you're shaken up by this?" he asked of her. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak without giving away her expectations. Raguel looked back towards the glow that told them Raphael was attempting to heal his comrade.

"If Sariel dies..." he trailed off, apparently troubled by the continuation of the thought. Turning back to her he continued, "Banishment to the realm of humans shall be your punishment. You will not be sent as you are but split. The side of you that could have saved Sariel will be one, allowed to learn to be stronger. The side that led to this

mess shall be the other, allowed to learn to trust her instincts.”

Alexa stared at the Archangel, not fully understanding what he meant. He put a hand on her shoulder, comforting despite the judgement he had just passed down.

“I am truly sorry.” He said as pain ripped through her.

Samantha screamed out in pain as she woke up, feeling a deep burning sensation between her shoulder blades and her spine. She looked around at the room that she had woken up in, her breathing heavy. Her eyes took a long time to adjust to the darkened atmosphere.

She could smell something foul in the room with her but could not identify it immediately. It was only after a moment that memory began to come back to her about the dream she had been having. A dream of Eden and Archangels and a demon.

The foul smell resolved itself and she identified it as alcohol and cigarette smoke. The combination meant trouble since the cigarettes were likely not pure, and the fact that she could smell it meant that he was in the room somewhere.

Slowly she climbed out of the bed, glad that she had slept in her clothes, and moved towards the door, careful of the lumps on the floor, any of which could be him.

She made it out without accidentally tripping over him. She had had enough, it was time to leave this place, to leave the pain that he constantly inflicted on her. She made her way to the front door.

Samantha put her hand around the door knob and slowly turned it, only pulling on the door when she heard the latch clear the strike plate.

“Where are you going, slut?” his voice whispered right behind her. She became aware of the smell again too late.

As he grabbed her arm so tightly it hurt she screamed.

Victoria woke with her arm throbbing as if she had been grabbed. She could feel the pain of her other heart but could do nothing about it, her blackened wings too conspicuous. She had tried to venture into the city twice but both times her wings had been identified as more than a coat.

She had flown away both times, hoping that somehow the people watching would be dismissed as crazy or otherwise dismiss what they had seen.

So far she had been lucky. She cursed her lack helplessness, not just for herself, but also for her twin Samantha. She moved to the front of the cave in the cliff overlooking the city, the morning lights still on as the sun rose above it. Such a beautiful view, marred by the knowledge of what was right at this moment happening somewhere in it.

She had considered flying down during the night and removing the man from existence but she had not lost all sense of what was right and what was wrong.

Unfortunately killing without provocation like that wasn't even grey enough for her to motivate herself to do it. She sat down, holding her arm and shutting her eyes, trying to take some of the pain from her twin, feeling the blows landing on her shoulders and back as she curled into a ball.

“Please, someone save her.” She pleaded as the tears began.

Gau heard the scream and its sudden end. His blood ran cold even as he started to run towards where he was sure the sound had come from. The abandoned house on the corner had long fascinated him with the dingy residents that he had often seen moving in and out of it.

Now it no longer seemed like a curiosity but rather it looked dark and foreboding. He hesitated a moment at the foot gate, listening, wondering whether he had imagined the cry that had drawn him here.

Another one sounded, a loud sob that confirmed what he had heard initially. He grabbed the top of the gate, stepped up onto the middle crossbar and launched himself over and into the unkempt garden, feeling the strong smell of weeds hitting him as he crushed them.

The narcotic flora was not his concern though as he sprinted towards the door, his backpack tight to his back as always. He could see that the door was slightly ajar. The breeze should have pushed it open all the way but instead he could see it almost shivering.

As he got closer he heard the soft thuds of someone being beaten and his blood boiled. The scream had been female.

He stopped at the door, felt his jaw clench as he forced himself to resist the urge to kick the door open, figuring that the person being beaten was likely behind it.

Instead he knocked and waited as he heard the beating stop. There was a whimper of pain, then the door opened. A man stood there, unshaven and unkempt, the smell of alcohol strong enough for Gau to feel it burning his nostrils.

“What do you want?” the man demanded roughly. Gau considered his options for a moment, then stepped forward and put his hand on the door. The man reacted as he had expected, by reaching forward to push him back out.

Gau grabbed the man’s hand, pulling it forward and down. With his right hand he grabbed behind the man’s neck and quickly dropped to his left knee.

The man’s intoxication showed as he rolled over forward and landed heavily.

Gau stood quickly and moved into the kitchen beyond the door. A girl lay on the floor, her nose bloody, an eye swollen, her bottom lip split. Gau couldn’t help the snarl of anger that escaped him as he looked back to the man who was just now standing up.

Gau stepped towards the man, his fists clenched in anger for the first time in a very long time. It was only the girl’s voice that stopped him.

“Don’t.” She whispered quietly, the word clear despite the clear damage to her face. The man stood and turned towards him.

“Get out and leave here.” He growled. Gau could see his right hand clenched and knew once again what was about to come.

“I’m not leaving without her.” Gau said as an ultimatum, watching the man’s body language. He could see the possessiveness, the violence, the jealousy, the anger and

bitterness, all of this he could see in this man's eyes.

"One more chance." The man warned.

"If he attacks me, may I defend myself?" Gau enquired of the girl. A muted sob was her only reply. "My statement stands." He replied to the man. With anger fuelled violence the man charged, feinting with a punch but then sending a kick towards Gau's knee.

Gau dodged sideways, stopping himself from kicking back, instead moving his foot to overextend the man's already extended leg. The man slid into a split beyond what he was capable of and howled in pain. Only then did Gau kick out, catching the man in the chest.

He watched as the man fell backwards, hitting his head on the strike plate on the door frame. The man crumpled into unconsciousness.

He turned to the girl and extended his hand.

"Come with me, I'll keep you safe." He promised, keeping his voice low. With the slightest of hesitation she took his offered and he helped her to her feet.

They left the house behind.

Chapter 2

Victoria had felt the moment Samantha had stopped being afraid. It had taken her a week after she had left her abuser before she allowed the protector to come near her.

Even in his moments of tenderness she had felt her twin's fear, the belief that at any moment the kindness would turn to torture once again.

In those moments Victoria had tried to think reassuring thoughts, tried to will her calm across to her sister. It had started to work and now almost a month later she could feel her sister relaxing, could feel the warmth of the moments that the protector created.

Sitting against the back of her cave she revelled in the shared warmth that her twin was feeling, the connection strong thanks to Samantha's beginning to understand that there was someone else out here connected to her. No longer did it feel like the connection was an intrusion into her sister's life, now it was as safe as the protector's arms.

A tear rolled down Victoria's cheek as she remembered Sariel's moments of protection, those times where she herself had been afraid so far back in her memory that she hoped it was truly that and that fabrications that she needed in order to feel like she wasn't being left out.

The thought brought more tears.

Gau was holding her while she cried, not knowing why and not asking either, just keeping his arms around her, his head over hers, enveloping her in as close an embrace as he could manage.

He didn't know if what he was doing was right, and he knew that there was no way that he would ever know the right thing to do with Samantha. She was different in a way that he could not quite identify. He had told herself in the beginning that it was merely the fact that she had been so abused, that it had caused her to be this meek and so kind.

But then he had asked her about before she had met her abuser.

The question had confused her and let her into a breakdown when she realised that she could not remember anything from before waking up in that house. She hadn't let him near her again for hours after that and he wondered whether he had destroyed the little trust that he had managed to build in her.

The sobs were beginning to slow, Samantha's body slowly calming. She nuzzled closer into him and he felt her hands unclench against his chest. He smiled at that small

movement, knowing that it meant she would be smiling again soon.

Her smile was enough to make his heart soar. Every time he saw it he felt like everything was right in the world.

Samantha sighed softly, feeling the girl on the other end of her connection slowly calming down. The pain had been intense, the emotion as strong as anything she had felt for herself. She wondered where the person on the other end was, and what had caused her pain.

She wished that somehow she could find her and show her the same kindness she was being shown in this moment. Slowly she relaxed, pushing her arms around her protector, embracing him and keeping him close to her, feeling him tense at the unusual reaction.

She still could not understand him, could not understand why it was that he had come for her, why he had saved her, why he had allowed her to stay, why he never asked for anything.

Somehow, despite her worthlessness, he always treated her like there was nothing more important to him in the world, like in that moment nothing else even existed in the world. She looked up into his face, focusing on his eyes, staring deep into them and smiling at their complexity and kindness.

She saw the skin around them crease into a smile, knowing that his lips didn't show nearly as much as his eyes ever did. She put her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, her smile still on her face. He would need to move soon, she knew that, he never was able to keep the affection going after she had calmed down, not as long as she'd like at least.

She could feel the restlessness growing in his legs and chest, the random twitches that said that his body had already been fighting him for ages. Slowly she pulled away, pulling back a little and crossing her legs facing him.

He sighed and she could see the relief in his features that told always told her how much he wished he could hold her forever without his 'limitation' getting in the way.

Gau looked at her as he stretched his arms and legs, trying to get the tingles to quiet. He wondered again what exactly caused them, wondering whether knowing would allow him to fight them.

"Are you okay?" he enquired quietly, his voice little more than a whisper. He had found that it helped to speak as softly as he could with her, but that whispering caused his words to be lost in the space between them.

She nodded once, looking toward the door then back at him.

"You need to go again." She said matter-of-factly. He nodded, his smile fading as it always did. She returned his nod, confirming the sequence of events in her mind. She reach for his hand and he met hers halfway. The moment lasted longer than he expected and his smile returned before he squeezed softly.

He let her hand fall slowly away, then stood and stretched once again, focusing on his legs this time.

“I’ll try not to be too long.” He promised. At the door he turned back to her and smiled once more, watching as his smile was reflected with the radiance that he always hoped for.

As he closed the door behind him he closed his eyes, allowing the sight of her to linger longer before he turned and continued with his day.

Gau’s day progressed smoothly, his work challenging but not too much so. He buried himself in it with as much zeal as he always did and before he knew it it was done, his day was over.

Heading home he thought of Sam, wondering why it was that he still didn’t call her that even though he thought of her with that name.

He drove home as he always did, fast but not so fast that he endangered himself or others, knowing that he now had someone to live for again.

Today though he noticed that the dark flashes and figures that he had always seen were more plentiful and worse, they were far better defined than he had ever noticed before.

A cold shiver ran through him as he began to try and look more directly at them. A couple of minutes later the shiver was a feeling of pure anxiety. Something bad was coming, and whatever it was, it was worse than anything he’d faced before.

He got home soon after that, the figures everywhere now and for the first time in his life they were visible even when he was not driving. He rushed to the door, unlocking it quickly and heading inside.

Silence greeted him, safety seeming to shower over him as he stepped inside like an air curtain. He turned and looked outside, surprised to see that some of the figures had resolved into humanoids rather than just being tall blobs of darkness.

Gau shut the door quickly and rushed to Sam’s room, knocking on the door despite her insistence that he didn’t need to.

“Come in.” She called out to him. He opened the door slowly, cautiously, not knowing why he always felt like he should be ready to run whenever he came into her room.

She was sitting on the bed, cross-legged again, smiling at him until she saw the look on his face. Slowly the smile disappeared.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, worried. He looked back behind him, feeling something happening, then looked back at her.

She was no longer looking at him, instead she was staring out of the window, her eyes far away.

“It’s begun.” She whispered quietly and although he had no idea what she was talking about he knew that it was true.

Victoria crouched at the entrance to her cave, staring out at the city and the red shimmers that were popping up everywhere. She knew what it was, knew that this was

her fault.

One of the shimmers on the far end of the town solidified and turned crimson a moment before demons began to pour out of it in their thousands. The winged ones took to the air, filling it like a swarm of bats, darting back and forth scouting for those below. They began to focus their movements on the gates that had not yet opened and soon more began to solidify.

Victoria put her hand back behind her, spreading her wings and feeling their weight change, ready for flight. She closed her hand slowly, feeling the moment when her sword formed and feeling the relief spread over her that that had not been taken away as well.

She could fight if she needed to and she intended to do so.

As she raised her wings, ready to push off into the air she paused, apprehension overtaking her.

It froze her from action and more, her intuition told her that she should listen to her instinct this time.

Gau looked out the window as saw the demons circling in the sky. Their patterns seemed to have randomised now where before they seemed to have been centred. Somehow he knew that they were searching for something.

“Gau?” Samantha asked quietly. He turned to her, his expression harder than he intended but it was impossible to change it. She didn’t recoil as she normally would have.

“What’s happening?” He asked, hoping that she would know after her statement that it had started.

“I don’t know. I’m scared Gau.” She whispered, coming to the window and looking out with him. He turned back to the sky and saw the patterns beginning to resolve once again.

With horror he realised that they were beginning to centre on them.

“We need to go.” He said, grabbing her wrist and pulling, keeping his grip as light as he could while still making sure that she would follow.

He led her out into the street and looked up. The demons were definitely centred around them.

“Where are we going?” Samantha asked, a tremble creeping into her voice. He couldn’t answer. Instead he pulled her down the street, heading toward the mountains, for the industrial area. There were warehouses there that had long since been abandoned but that still hadn’t been gutted in the hopes that one day they would be used again.

Victoria could feel Samantha’s fear as the two of them ran closer to her. She could see where the demons were focusing and was thankful that there were no gates between her and Samantha.

The protector was keeping them moving at an amazing rate, keeping them going fast enough that Victoria dared to hope that the demons would not be able to keep up yet. This soon after their breach there would not be enough fear in the world to strengthen

them.

It was only a matter of time though.

Victoria's grip on her sword tightened a little and a flicker of light made her turn away from the chase.

The sword had engulfed itself in fire, something that even as an angel it had never done before. It meant that the weapon had fully focused itself. And it meant that it was now truly a divine weapon.

Victoria looked beyond it, remembering that the fires grew when a demon got closer. Right now they were flickering as if a demon was in the cave with her. Slowly she moved into the cave, holding her blade in front of her for light and defence.

An unholy screech accompanied the sight of her enemy, a lesser demon with the same leathery skin as the one that had killed Sariah.

Bloodlust overcame her and she lashed out.

She did not know how long she fought or even how she had, instead all she knew was that the demon now lay dead in front of her, burning scars covering its body in a way that told her she had not stopped when it died.

She turned away from the corpse and looked back toward the city.

Her heart sank as she saw that the swarm above her sister had begun to descend. Without hesitation she launched herself high into the air, her huge black wings extending fully for a moment before she beat at the wind once more and propelled herself higher.

She gained altitude quickly, the wind ripping at her hair as she flew, her blade at her side.

She paused for a moment, then tucked her wings in, angling herself down at the swarm, bringing her blade across her body and diving.

They were almost there, the warehouses visible a couple more blocks down. Gau continued to run as hard as Samantha could go while still they held each other.

The demons above them were beginning to descend and he could hear the terror beginning to spread as people became more aware of what they were facing.

He glanced over his shoulder and could see that there were now demons in the street, some chasing him and Samantha, others breaking into houses, screams hailing their arrival.

He turned forward again, starting to feel his legs burning from the distance they had covered. A shadow crossed in front of him and he looked up in time to see a huge pair of wings extend then push at the air.

He did not follow the object, focusing instead of trying to get off the street before whatever it was got involved.

A demon descended in front of them, its skin crimson and scaly, its arms ending in wicked claws, its wings folding as it dropped to the floor.

Gau did not slow, letting go of Samantha's hand and getting ready for a fight, knowing in his mind how futile it would probably be.

Just before he reached the snarling demon a blur whipped past, a flash of light accompanying it. The demon glared at him a moment longer before it fell into two pieces.

He hurdled the body, then turned for a moment to make sure that Samantha cleared it as well.

The blur shot past again and once again a demon split in two. Gau focused on leading Samantha again, pushing a little further before choosing an old abandoned mill that had once been part of the original town.

He bashed through the door with his shoulder then shut it immediately after Samantha had made it in.

Somehow they had made it and for whatever reason Gau felt safe once again.

Chapter 3

The morning after their escape saw them wake stiff and sore, the hard ground having provided no comfort to their sleeping bodies.

Gau's shoulder was visibly bruised from where he had slept on it and the bruising made it difficult for him to move it. As a small blessing it was his left rather than his right which meant that, in his mind at least, he would not be completely useless if something were to happen.

He set about exploring the mill further, something they had neglected to do before out of fear and exhaustion. Samantha followed him around, helping search the rooms and showing a different side to her than the meek innocence that Gau had assumed was all there was to her.

She seemed to know where best to find what was hidden but when he asked her how she had figured the places out she could not tell him.

It made him wonder about her past.

Before the morning had passed they had already found a small stash of old canned food with no signs of rust or swelling, a tap that still worked, a filtration system that although a little dusty still looked like it had been new before it was abandoned and finally a few odds and ends that would come in handy in surviving whatever this was.

Something that they didn't find however was any sort of weaponry. There were no knives or even letter openers left behind and so, so far as offensive tools were concerned, they were left unarmed.

Victoria watched as the demons circled over the mill, diving now and again, probing for a weakness in the barrier that had formed.

Once again she wondered whose work it had been. It was bigger than anything she could have created, and with Samantha's obliviousness to who she was and what she could accomplish Victoria doubted it was her doing.

Which left three possibilities.

Either someone else in the area was skilled with anti-demonic magic and had a vested interest in keeping Samantha alive, or it was magic that had been placed over her to protect her in exactly this event, or finally it could be the man with her tapping into something latent.

None of the options comforted her in the least. The former meant that there was

another player in this event, someone beyond the forces that were already clashing somewhere out there.

The latter meant that Samantha could be around someone who, although he seemed to be looking out for her, might be something other than what even he thought he was.

The middle option was the least worrying for her although it meant that someone had a plan for Samantha, someone from the kingdom who didn't have the same plan for her.

That thought sent shivers down her spine.

Gau was sitting in the middle of the mill, breathing deeply and slowly, trying to take stock of what exactly had happened since the day before and extending it into the near future.

That there were demons ruling the outside world he could not deny. What it meant was that nowhere was likely to be truly safe which meant that simple things from getting food to finding others would be extremely dangerous.

It also meant that he should probably find a way to barricade windows and doors that they were not going to use.

Which meant that they'd have to find tools and wood.

Which meant they needed weapons.

He sighed quietly, looking around at what had been left behind. The only thing even vaguely viable as a weapon was an old broom that had been abandoned in a corner.

He slowly stood, stretching as he rose, before heading across to the broom. Samantha was somewhere else in the building, still looking through what was around with the intention of creating sleeping quarters for the two of them that weren't hard, cold floor and easily attackable.

He picked up the stick and kicked off the head of the broom, the metal fasteners rusted to the point where they broke off easily. The stick was heavy, obviously not made with the usual stuff that one found everywhere. He imagined that with the mill being as dusty as it could get someone got tired of always having to replace the broomsticks.

He swung the stick around a few times, testing its weight before heading off to find Samantha.

"Samantha?" he called as he approached the door to where she had started to set up. She came to the door and smiled at him.

"Please call me Sam instead." She admonished him. He returned her smile and nodded before continuing with the reason he'd sought her.

"I need to head out and see what's out there. Whether there are survivors, where the closest store is... I imagine it would be a good idea to gather some sort of supplies. Can you think of anything we could need?" he inquired.

"It will be far easier if I come with you. Then we can find what we need and bring back more at once." She said, picking up on his suggestion that she stay behind. He smiled lopsidedly then shrugged.

"I guess that's true... I just don't really want to have to worry about looking after you

while we're out there. I have no idea what I'm up against and I'm afraid that whatever it is will be too much for me." He explained honestly, knowing that it probably wouldn't change her mind one way or another.

"When are we heading out?" she confirmed his suspicions. He sighed quietly and looked around at the room she was creating.

"We'll go as soon as you're ready." He allowed, turning and heading back onto the mill floor.

They left half an hour later, the broom handle clutch in both his hands, anxiety running the length of his spine. He could see the demons still circling far above, every now and again trying to dive toward them but somehow always stopping as if they were rebounding off something.

He wondered what it was that they were coming up against but put that out of his mind, focusing on the road ahead, on their destination.

There was a small mall only a couple of kilometres away and Gau figured that was probably the closest place to gather supplies without looting the houses in the area. Somehow he still felt like that would be wrong, despite the likelihood of them being abandoned.

Samantha stayed close behind him, watching the shadows, expecting something to jump out at any time. She was glad she had chosen to come with him, knowing that she would have been paralysed by fear while he was away if she'd stayed behind. Something about all of this felt so familiar, and she felt a horrible guilt for it that she could not understand.

It was only when they crossed over into the more residential area that the ground based demons started to appear again. They seemed to be going about whatever it was their business was without even noticing the two of them.

Samantha could see that Gau was nervous, his knuckles white around the broom handle, his head moving rapidly from side to side, trying to keep track of every movement around them.

They managed to make it all the way to the mall without incident, the broom handle still tightly clutched in Gau's hands.

They quickly made their way from shop to shop, gathering sheets and pillows and other items they needed to make themselves a little more comfortable in their new living quarters.

In addition they grabbed various supplies for barricading the warehouse further, two first aid kits and other medical items which they thought would come in useful as well as a couple of knives.

One of these Gau attached to the top of his broom handle to create a crude spear. He tested it on a mannequin, feeling the weight and the range of the weapon before nodding with a slight sense of satisfaction.

In order to make the supplies easier to carry they stretched a sheet between two poles

and made a stretcher in which they placed what they had gathered.

Still, even after their shopping trip it seemed like the demons weren't interested in them.

It was only halfway back that they were ambushed.

Gau spotted the quiet spot before they got to it, an area that seemed devoid of movement where there were signs of it before and after.

They slowed slightly and he whispered to Samantha that if he hopped out from under the stretcher's poles that she should try and work them together and keep everything from falling out.

Once she responded he resumed the pace they had been keeping before, relaxing his shoulders a little, realising how tightly he was holding onto the spear and trying to relax his grip as well. It would after all end up slowing him down if he was not relaxed enough.

They crossed over the threshold of the still area and Gau slowly scanned the houses around them. He could feel the eyes on him and yet, even above them, there were no demons in sight.

He was just starting to believe he was being paranoid when a screeching cry issued forth from a house to the right.

A small group of demons rushed out, two of them taking to the air as the others charged them on foot. Gau lunged forward out from under the stretcher, bringing his spear to bare and facing the oncoming demons.

As the first one got within striking distance of the spear Samantha called out to look up. Gau hopped backwards and brought his spear up in front of him, one of the flying demons impaling itself on the knife on the end of it as it tried to take a swipe at him.

Gau quickly tilted the shaft and thrust forward quickly before pulling back, dislodging the dying demon with relative ease and turning towards the runners. He stepped forward, swinging at the closest demon and catching it on the temple with the shaft of the spear before jumping forward and embedding the knife into the next one.

It groaned in an almost human voice as he pulled the knife out and changed his grip. He used the butt of the spear to hit what would have been a temple on a human on the next demon.

Gau smiled as he felt the rhythm of the fight, stabbing into the first demon as he turned again. It was at that moment that the knife ripped itself free of the shaft.

Victoria felt the fear suddenly erupt in Samantha where before there had been an odd sense of exhilaration. She sprinted to the edge of the cave mouth and launched herself into the air, her wings unfurling as she fell, catching the air and with one powerful beat propelling herself forward.

She pushed herself for spear feeling the fear give way to anxiety and uncertain hope. She wondered what could be happening that was causing these feelings but only for a moment as she tried to pick up on her twin's location.

She climbed quickly when she realised that they'd gone further than she expected and finally spotted them, a single winged demon flying above a group of others who were fighting the man.

She could see that he'd managed to at least incapacitate a couple of the creatures but now they were moving in on him, his defence desperate and yet still it showed sign of being competent.

She angled herself towards the scene then dove, tucking her wings in enough to reduce their drag but still keeping her angle right. She put her hand to the hilt of her sword as she felt the air rushing past her, waiting to draw it at the last moment.

The flames left a demon behind the man with a neat cut down the middle. He didn't slow in his dance, the staff he was using lashing out this way and that, trying to keep them off him.

Victoria wished she could help more directly but for one reason or another did not want her twin to be able to see her more closely. She circled round as quickly as she thought safe then dove again, this time severing the head of the flying demon.

Gau spun around, letting the stick slide through his hands until it was almost fully extended. He felt the impact of the strikes and the jarring that accompanied its force. Finally he brought the stick back in and dropped to his knee having managed to inch his way to the knife.

He picked it up in his left hand, lashing out once more with the stick before letting it go and swapping the knife across to his right.

He heard another whoosh as the winged figure swept through the group of demons again but he focused on what was an immediate threat.

He lunged forward and buried the knife to the hilt in one of the remaining demons, twisting it as he turned away and pulled it out, ready to attack the next one.

It was then that he realised there were only two left. He smiled as he took two quick steps forward and slashed at the creature in front of him. It dodged backwards as if he were moving in slow motion, a caricature of a grin spreading across its face as it pulled an arm lazily back, ready to take a swipe at him.

Its arm below the elbow disappeared in another whoosh and in that moment Gau lunged forward again and slashed open its throat.

The final demon stepped in around its dying kin and took a swipe at Gau.

He felt a deep burning sensation suddenly explode through his upper left arm as he was flung off his feet. He landed with a roll and pushed himself up immediately, turning to face the demon who had knocked him aside.

It was already charging at him, hand trailing behind it but not above its head suggesting that it knew what had happened to its compatriot.

Gau watched it coming, waiting until the last moment before dropping to a knee and pushing himself forward, the knife ahead of him, his left arm limp beside him.

The knife punctured the creature's chest and he watched as the life drained from its eyes.

Pain shot through his arm again as he stood over the corpse and he looked down at the four large gashes in his arm. They weren't too deep since most of the force of the blow seemed to have transferred into his impromptu flight but they were deep enough to be bleeding.

Victoria watched from the sky as Samantha ran over the Gau carrying a red first aid kit. She was panting from the exertion of attaining speed quickly and then redirecting it at the last moment.

Samantha pulled out gauze and a bandage, quickly wrapping the man's arm tightly enough to stop the bleeding. Victoria smiled as they rushed back to the stretcher, knowing that they had thought the same as she had.

It was better to get back to the mill and deal with his wound there than to try and dress it properly here.

She flew slowly above them, looking out for any further ambushes or potential problems. It was only once she was sure there were none that she headed back to her own home, hoping that the particular demon who had landed a blow on the man had not had anything lethal coating its claws.

PART TWO

Life

Chapter 4

Gau looked out the door at the world as it now was, the red sky with its dark clouds, the swirling vortexes that showed where the weak points between realms were, the dark murmurations of demons that seemed to endlessly be hunting for those that were left.

If there was anyone still out there they were hiding. Gau and Samantha had not seen them at all in the time that they had been surviving in the mill.

In the meantime they had broken through the asphalt and concrete of the parking lot, creating a small vegetable patch that sustained them. Soon after the fall of man animals had grown bold enough to move into the neighbourhoods where previously only cars and people had roamed. It made hunting a fair amount easier, but also more dangerous since worldly predators had joined their demonic kin.

Gau had ended up with a nasty scar across his back when they'd discovered that.

Samantha had not come away unscathed either. She was less innocent now, she understood the natural order and the need to survive, to defend herself when there was no other choice.

She still showed more compassion than Gau thought was wise, avoiding and if necessary defending but never switching to the offensive and never killing any of the creatures that attacked them.

She ate but would never watch the preparation of the meat and the garden and home were more her domain more than anywhere else.

On more than one occasion they had been saved by the black winged figure that had twice save them during the fall. Although always moving too fast for them to properly make out, Gau believed that the figure was female and somehow felt familiar to him despite their lack of contact.

He'd managed to make out the flaming weapon of the figure, that burning death that the demons seemed to have come to fear. It made him think of mythical images of angels at war, their swords enveloped in flame as they smote the evil before them.

Although this was the image that came to mind he had dismissed the possibility. Besides the wings being black he wondered why, if they were real, angels would have allowed the demons to destroy human life so completely, why there only seemed to be one fighting to keep them alive.

And moreover, why it seemed to only be him and Samantha that were being kept

alive.

When he had asked Samantha about her thoughts on the matter she had closed off, becoming almost unable to speak and shivering uncontrollably.

Victoria sat with her legs over the edge of the mouth of the cave. She was staring out over the city, enjoying the same murmurations that Gau was. Somehow, even in this apocalyptic world there was beauty.

She had been busy, going where she could, interrogating demons who seemed significant and probing at the edges of the vortexes. None of them seemed to go near the realm humans had called heaven, each and every one of them led to more demons.

About two weeks ago the demons had stopped pouring through though, and during the last week the traffic had started again, this time going both ways. She knew what it meant.

The world was dead so far as humanity was concerned, only Gau was left. It was now a demonic realm as much as hell had been before it. Despite this knowledge, and the leak of the thought to Samantha, she could still feel Samantha's hope that it wasn't all over.

Her sister wasn't the only one who had grown in the past months. She had developed her skills with her sword even further, learning to adjust the flames both in heat and purpose. Different demons reacted to different things and she had found a few that had been impervious to both flames and blades.

Those she'd had to fight for far longer than she would have liked but she had discovered that certain types of flame that she could wrap the sword in didn't seem to count as fire.

With a sigh she stood, thinking still of those fights.

There were more to come and today would be one of them. She jumped into the air and plunged towards the ground, revelling in the wind on her face before near the bottom of her fall she opened her wings and soared into the sky.

She rose high into the sky, her black wings beating at the sky in slow, easy strokes. Once she was above the usual altitude of the demon swarms she stopped, keeping herself there and surveying the area.

Gau and Samantha were below in their home, largely ignored by the demons now. It was only when they left their protective hemisphere that they were in any danger.

Far off to the north was a cluster of demons which didn't seem to be acting right. They were hovering instead of circling, all seeming to face some central point.

Victoria knew that that was where she needed to go.

She folded her wings and dove once more before levelling out at swarm height and speeding forward.

She drew her sword, ready to thin out some of the swarms, knowing it would attract attention but needing to warm up for the fight to come. She wrapped the blade in fire just before she cut through the first.

Her arm had gotten stronger since the break had happened and so her speed had

increased. A blur of flaming steel accompanied the wretched screeches of those she killed. She didn't even slow.

She landed softly just outside the seeming zone of influence of whatever it was that she was planning on fighting today. Sheathing her blade she continued her journey almost without missing a step.

Being close to the centre of the city meant that she couldn't see the entity that was addressing the demons but she knew from past experience that there had to be one.

Carefully she made her way through some of the alleys, glad that whatever was speaking could not be seen from ground level. It meant that she could advance unhindered and so she was able to make good progress, glancing up now and again to make sure she was still going the right direction.

After about ten minutes of walking she began to hear the sounds of battle. Although it was unexpected she thought nothing of it, the demons were always fighting each other and maybe whatever she was hunting was trying to host a display of force.

It was only when she stepped around a corner and saw the square in front of her that she realised that this was not a normal gathering.

She jumped up to a balcony, perching on the balustrade just behind the closest demon. Slowly she pushed herself up to standing, taking care not to make a sound.

She watched the pair of fighters attacking each other with a vigour that she was surprised to see. They seemed to be human, both armed with swords, one an arming sword, the other a claymore.

Both the combatants were bloody, and both showed signs of fatigue as they fought on and as Victoria watched she realised that the demons only seemed to react whenever the claymore broke the guard of the arming sword.

With a growing sense of horror she realised that for whatever reason the claymore wielder was a champion for the demons. It meant that whoever the man with the arming sword was, he was fighting for his life.

A thin snarl escaped her as the realisation was proceeded by the claymore knocking his opponent to the floor. The demon directly in front of Victoria began to turn but didn't even get halfway round before she had drawn her weapon and dispatched it.

She pushed herself off of the balustrade hard, flinging herself forward and over the edge of the crowd and then landing on the cobblestones of the square. She dropped the tip of her sword so it just touched one of the stones and only then did she allow it to light, the fire this time meant for light.

It was enough to distract the claymore user and he faltered long enough for the man on the ground to recover. She could hear the demons behind her starting to react to her presence, most of them chattering away rather than attacking her.

She smiled despite the moment, knowing that it meant her own little legend was spreading.

“Who are you?” Demanded the fighter with the claymore. His voice was amplified and she realised with horror that it meant he was either possessed or otherwise dealing with the demons.

“That’s not your concern, why are you two fighting each other?” she shot back, not amplifying her own voice, keeping it just loud enough for the man to hear. He considered her a moment, saying nothing. She wondered whether he would answer, and if he did, whether it would be even close to the truth. The man smiled, his eyes showing mischief clearly. He slammed the tip of the claymore into the stones and Victoria noted that the blade showed almost no resistance from the ground.

“This man has somehow survived this long, so we wanted to see what he could do before we destroyed him.”

Victoria stood for a moment, not understanding the implications of what had just been said.

Then her mind dropped the disbelief and what the man had meant filtered through.

“You’re playing with him?” she growled, amplifying her voice now without even thinking about it.

“He has a fair chance.” The man responded. For a moment Victoria felt a sense of vertigo before she realised that there was now a demon standing next to the man.

The demon stood quietly as the man walked towards her.

“I’m going to have to get closer to you for you to hear me now.” The man said, his voice no longer amplified. She stared at him, knowing what this was supposed to mean but not convinced that he could be as evil as the evidence was trying to suggest.

“Did you think he was fighting someone possessed? It’s not quite so simple. I was possessed, but I wasn’t the one being controlled.” He jeered. “I am Caloustrance, and this,” he motioned to the gathered demons, “is my doing.”

“That man over there, he figured it out, he’s always been suspicious of me. Unfortunately for him, he was naive enough to think he could do something about it.”

Victoria looked over Caloustrance’s shoulder at the fighter who had pushed himself up to his feet. He held his sword still, the blade across his front, the tip pointing to his opposite foot, ready for a backhand slash.

She turned back to Caloustrance and paused a moment before she attacked him, swinging her blade at his neck, cursing the fact that it was a slower forehand slash.

It didn’t matter. The blade bit deep into the man’s neck and continued on, cutting through his throat and most of the vessels that resided there. She stood stunned for a moment as the man reached up to his bleeding neck and tried to keep it all in.

Only then did she realise there was no howl of outrage from the assembled demons.

In a moment of panic she launched herself backwards away from the man. As she did it shattered, the claymore slashing through it, its tip passing through where she had been standing.

She circled inward, away from the demons who could interfere, towards the fighter.

Caloustrance laughed, his voice amplified again.

“Well done, I thought for sure I’d have your pretty little head off those shoulders.” He leered. She lifted her sword in preparation for a fight.

“Oh, would you look at that.” Caloustrance called out to the crowd, “a defensive stance.” Victoria kept her stance even as she realised that all around her the demons seemed to be doing whatever it was that they considered laughing.

Caloustrance attacked again, his speed impossible to follow, even for her. She barely managed to block the first blow but the second she parried, using her free hand to pull her opponent through.

He stumbled and turned, somehow managing to bring his claymore up to block a blow that would have met his shoulder. Even in that moment of danger he smiled at her.

Victoria felt rage fill her and she attacked even harder, her blade moving quicker than before. Caloustrance’s smile widened as he blocked again, regaining his balance and blocking the next blow as well.

He continued like that for a while, her attacks always finding the blade of his claymore, somehow no matter where she attacked it was always in the perfect position to block.

Then he attacked.

She watched with horror as the blade went from being just an annoyance to a sharp threat to her life. He attacked quicker than she could block, pulling back always just before he would strike her. A moment later her blade would meet his and he would swing to the next attack.

She realised that he was toying with her, trying to bring forward the despair that she could see he knew was trying to engulf her. She fought it, fought his influence on her mind, knowing that that strength was the only thing keeping her alive, wondering how long he would wait before he grew bored.

Then for a moment his blade wasn’t in the next attack. She took the opportunity and attacked, cutting into his arm a moment before his blade blocked hers from doing any real damage.

The next second had his blade on his other side again and she realised that the fighter from earlier had joined the battle.

She attacked with renewed vigour and took pleasure in the wounds that were appearing on Caloustrance’s body. They were winning.

Caloustrance blocked another blow just slightly too late and Victoria felt a smile form on her lips. The man saw it and his focus turned to rage, his eyes narrowing.

He jumped back with supernatural strength leaving Victoria and the fighter standing there, swords ready.

“Enough.” Caloustrance shouted, his voice rattling the buildings nearby. Everything was silent for a moment.

“Kill them.” He said, his voice sharing the cadence of a whisper but still being loud

enough for everything nearby to hear. His smile was terrible as the demons began to pour forth.

“Hold this.” Victoria said, handing her sword to the man then stepping close to him and wrapping her arms around him. She unfurled her wings and lifted them into the sky, pushing as hard as she could to gain altitude before she angled them away from the swarm below.

She realised a moment later that somehow they were clear and only then did she notice the deep blue light that was calling her attention to the corner of her vision.

Her blade had changed colour in his hands, the flame dark but strong.

Chapter 5

They landed at the mouth of Victoria's cave, the demons left far behind. Those that had come near had met with the oddly coloured flame of her blade in his hands.

She looked at him appraisingly, wondering at the shifting flames and the fact that they didn't seem any weaker than those that engulfed the blade when she was holding it.

"It's considered rude to stare, even if you did just save my life." He snapped angrily. Victoria looked up at him, not entirely grasping the situation for a moment, then seeing the anger in his expression.

"Did you want to die?" she asked, holding back her initial response and deciding to try to stay calm. She saw his expression falter for a moment before it hardened again.

"I appreciate you saving me, but your kind did nothing to stop any of this happening." He pointed out, gesturing to the darkened skies and demon portals. Victoria unfurled her wings.

"So who exactly are you referring to when you say my kind?" she enquired, her voice cold. "I was cast out just before this happened, I tried but unfortunately there is no end to the demons, literally. They have no souls, they are just fragments of evil and so they are infinite. Should I have died trying to stop them?"

The man's expression softened and he knelt on one knee, placing her blade on the floor in front of him, the flame going out the moment he let it go, then he bowed his head.

"I am sorry, I assumed the worst of you even after you saved my life. Please accept my apologies." He said loudly and clearly. He did not move from that pose.

"It was an easy assumption to make, I forgive you."

He looked up at her and she noticed for the first time how deep his dark brown eyes seemed.

"My name is Skeksys." He introduced himself.

He lifted her blade once more and held it out to her, hilt first. She could see slight flickers of fire running along the blade as he held it and wondered just what this man was that he could get such a response from a divine weapon.

Taking it she sheathed it immediately, preferring not to ponder on that for too long right now.

"My name is Victoria." She responded to him, offering her hand to help him up. He

put his fingers on hers but rose unaided, the gesture an odd one in her mind.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Victoria, and thank you for the help.” He said with a smile. “I must say, I always wondered whether any of this truly existed before everything went to hell.”

“Pity it literally had to happen for you to find out. I’m sorry nothing was done to stop it. I still don’t know why.” She responded. He frowned at her in curiosity then tilted his head slightly. She wondered whether he was aware that he did that.

“Why the guilt?” he asked, his question piercing her mind quicker than she could react. She felt the guilt flicker across her face before she was able to turn away. With a deep breath she turned back to face him.

“I caused it.”

Skeksys listened quietly as Victoria explained the events in the Garden. He didn’t ask questions, he didn’t seem phased at all by what she was telling him and she found herself elaborating far more than she had meant to.

He was easy to talk to and the lack of judgement on his face meant that instead of feeling as horrible as she had at the time she felt the weight of her action or lack thereof lifting off her shoulders.

By the time she was explaining Samantha and Gau she was speaking far more freely and realising that she wasn’t evil or the cause of it. She realised that in her way she was making a difference, even if it was a small one.

It was a good feeling and made her want to try even harder, to keep on with what she had been doing and to finally find a way to make a change.

She ended her story with her arrival in his arena and he sat quietly for a moment.

He thought of her story and her guilt, considering his own and the odd parallels in their journeys. The question in his mind was exactly how much he wanted to share with her.

Normally he was private, closed off. He didn’t let people anywhere near the truth of his being. But after the way she had opened up to him he felt it would be rude to apply the same rules to her.

“I can’t say for sure whether this is your fault or not, but I can say that you weren’t the only one at fault.” He began slowly, choosing his words carefully, his mind accelerating through his story before he continued.

“A couple of months before the break, a friend and I did something stupid. We thought we were strong enough as people to face a demon and overpower it.

“We weren’t wrong.” He paused, watching for a reaction but Victoria’s face had lost its expression. There had been no sign of shock or judgement so he continued.

“My friend was Caloustrance, the man you saved me from. He did the research, found the ritual, prepared it. Then, when he was ready, he called me over. He told me the plan, then hooded me so I couldn’t see and took me to the site of the ritual.

“I did not see what he was doing, I did not care. I was focused on what was about to

happen, I was making sure I was ready for what was going to come next.”

“What came next was loud. Whatever the sound was, whether it was reality being ripped apart or just the demon’s roar it was enough to almost discombobulate me, especially since I had been as focused as I was.

“The hood was removed and before me stood a beast which I still cannot quite describe. It didn’t look anything like I had expected and when I try to fix it in my mind it’s impossible.

“But I could see enough to make out its shape, and that was enough for me to attack it.

“Whenever it attacked, I believed it could not hurt me, whenever it was done I attacked, knowing that I could harm it.” He paused again, remembering the thrill of the fight, that moment of realisation that everything was going according to plan.

“I don’t know what Caloustrance was doing while I fought and at the time, I did not care. Everything was in that battle. Eventually it started to flicker and I knew its energy was running out, it’s hold in this world fading. I struck once more then pulled away and turned away, kneeling and closing my eyes, putting it completely out of my mind to allow Caloustrance to complete the ritual, to push it back into its own realm.

“That’s what I believed he had done when moments later he put a hand on my shoulder. It was the predetermined sign that we had been successful. Since neither he nor I were dead, and the sigil on the ground had faded and worn I figured it was over.”

“It was two weeks before the break when I realised things were not over.

“I started to see things. Demons in the traditional form as well as spirits that I had always sensed in the corner of my vision but that I could not actively see.

“I researched it, found out about chaos magic in its various forms and began to try and figure it out. The data that I managed to accumulate was astounding and I once again dismissed my misgivings when I read that it was mostly driven by belief.

“I believed in it and so it was real for me, at least so I thought.

“When the break happened I knew it was real for far more than just me. Initially the same techniques I learned from that first battle worked. I was able to fight without coming to any harm but as the break began to worsen and those gates opened the demons became more and more real. I don’t know if it’s because so many more people began to believe that they could cause harm or whether the wall between worlds just weakened that far but they started to hit back.

“I had to learn very quickly not to get cocky and soon I had to resort to weapons of various sorts. The knowledge I had accrued from my research began to become invaluable and eventually...” he trailed off, looking away from Victoria and gritting his teeth.

In his mind he saw what came next and he felt shame in it.

Victoria did not press for him to continue. She could see his internal anguish at what

happened next and wanted to know as quickly as possible but she waited. He had after all sat through her story without interruption.

So far his story had been interesting to her, the progression of his quest seemed to have taken its toll on him and she could sense guilt in him deeper than hers. It was at once wonderful and terrible.

She could see that he thought he was an evil man, that he felt directly responsible for this even though he was merely a tool in the greater scheme of things. So far she felt no animosity towards him but to tell him that now might affect the rest of his story so she waited.

The two of them had taken a seat on either side of her fire pit while he spoke and the sun had begun to go down. She gathered some of the wood she kept along the back wall and stacked it carefully before setting it ablaze.

The softly flickering light and the light crackling of the wood gave the cave a more comfortable feel and she watched him relax as the sound continued to fill the space.

With a sigh he looked up at her.

“I’m sorry, the next bit will have to wait. I’m not ready to tell it yet.”

She lay awake that night, staring out over the lightless town. For the first time she wondered whether this world was still actually in the physical realm or whether it had been transported into one of the demonic dimensions.

She checked on Skeksys, making sure that he was sleeping, then carefully got ready to head out, blade on her hip. It only then occurred to her that she had no way of making sure that he remained safe.

Her hand curled around the hilt of her sword and she hesitated, frowning, wondering why exactly he mattered enough for that to have given her pause.

There was always the chance that it was merely because she had been alone for so long, privy to the feelings of her twin but with no one of her own to mirror it with, that she had unwittingly imprinted that role onto Skeksys.

But somehow it didn’t feel like that. With a sigh she went back over to him and placed her sword just next to his hand. Still he did not stir.

With that she returned to the mouth of the cave, weaponless and uncertain of herself again. Should she really go out there tonight of all night?

She didn’t allow the thought time to work itself through.

She took a running leap out of the cave and pushed up hard with her wings, trying to gain as much speed and height as possible as quickly as possible.

If there was anything around she wanted to leave it behind before it knew she was even there.

It took three beats of her wings to get her to the fastest speed she was going to achieve while climbing, and then triple that to reach the bottom of the clouds. There were flashes around her as electricity crackled along her wings and skin, tingling rather than jolting her.

A rumble in the distance warned that it did not have to be so.

With renewed urgency she pushed upwards, beating at the clouds and noting the increase in electricity as she did so. Even her attempts at getting out as quickly as possible were making it more likely that she would be struck.

A mile sense of panic started to grow at the back of her mind as she felt time stretching out. She wondered how much longer she had to go when the next peel of thunder sounded like it was all too close.

A bolt of lightning brought with it more thunder, close enough that it lit the clouds around her as she breached the top.

Breathlessly she hovered, her heart racing, her mind following.

It was worth it.

Above the clouds spread out as far as she could see were the stars of Earth.

She landed lightly just inside the cave mouth, folding her wings and staring out at the darkened landscape, a smile over her lips from the exhilaration of being able to fly without worry.

When she turned to look inside Skeksys was sitting beside a newly made fire, no means of lighting it anywhere nearby. It was only then that she remembered that she'd left her sword behind and anger flared in her.

"Did you use my sword to light that?" she demanded, marching forward towards him. He looked up at her with a harried expression. She knew that it was not her question that had caused it and she stopped mid stride.

"No." He responded, handing her the blade.

"Caloustrance was not the only one to summon something."

"When I thought there was no other choice I decided the only way to match strength with my enemies was to become what Caloustrance had chosen to be.

"But I did not want to risk calling a demon too strong with the wall so weak. And so I didn't. Instead I tried to call an angel.

"I did not fail, and I did not need to defeat him for him to agree to help me. He lent me his power then faded out of this world saying that once it was restored he would take his power back.

"I didn't stop there though.

"I then summoned a demon and enslaved it, taking its power into me but not allowing the possession." Skeksys paused, seeing the now horrified expression on Victoria's face. He did not care which part had caused it, he had started his story, he would finish it.

"Everything went great for a while. The two powers were mine and whatever I needed I had access to.

"But coming up against Cal... Somehow he called to the demonic side of the power and it responded, desperately trying to reject me. It was then that you saved me. Right now it's quiet but I don't know whether this means he resurrected the demon I had to defeat or whether the power itself is just untamed.

“I honestly don’t know what to do right now.” He finished quietly. A flame flickered up over his hand and he played with it for a moment before extinguishing it. Finally he looked up at her and saw that her expression was gone.

“Skeksys, you did what you thought was needed to save your world. I would have done the same.”

Chapter 6

Her almost black hair flowed out around her, the lightened tips creating a circle as she spun, her arms out as if in dance, the fire around her engulfing her enemies. She laughed as they burned, not at their pain, or at their death but merely at the feeling of channelling. All her life she had dreamed of being a mage, now in this time of turmoil when everything seemed deadly and life seemed almost pointless she had found her wish come true.

Only as the hissing sound of her enemies died down did she stop and let the new calm wash over her. It was always an odd feeling, recovering from the channelling. A feeling of being raw on the inside but not in a bad way. Raw and refreshed, like she was a new person. Initially she had been afraid that maybe she was a new person, that maybe there was something corrupting her but now she was sure she was fine.

She sat cross legged and head down while her body normalised again holding in her mind the fact that, even if these were demons, she had still killed and reminding herself that it was never right, merely acceptable. As her focus returned she looked at her right hand, holding it cupped with her palm up. For a moment a purple flame flared up, flashing bright for just a second before she extinguished it.

Something about that particular flame always saddened her and yet for some reason she couldn't help but look at it after every fight, even if she hadn't channelled flame.

She stood slowly, the flame in the back of her mind as she looked around at the supermarket and supplies that she had come for. It would be easy to find what she needed now that there was nothing trying to kill her.

The small garden cottage wasn't much but it was home. She packed her new stock into the cupboards of the kitchen, keeping everything in its place so that if she felt like something in particular she could find it easily. It was raining, something that hadn't happened for what felt like so long, the soft sound of it on her corrugated iron roofing soothing her even further than the new feeling ever had.

Once she was done packing she went to the lounge, a small room with a fireplace and two armchairs. She took a seat in the one on the right and put her head back against the rest, closing her eyes and letting the sound wash over her.

A memory flashed across her mind's eye, a man cutting through a group of demons, beating them away from her, slaying them until they forgot all about the girl lying curled

up on the floor. He ran then, drawing them away. It was only after that that she discovered her own power. She felt a drop of something land on the back of her hand and realised that tears had crept out from beneath her lids.

If she had been stronger then he wouldn't have had to save her. She doubted he had survived. She had seen what the demons were capable of, and that was before their masters had come through the gates. And it was her fault if he had died that day.

The purple flame appeared in front of her without her trying to call it. It floated there right in front of her, her hands still clenched in her lap. Anger flowed through her and she tried to backhand it away.

It flew from her swipe and landed in the fireplace, lighting the wood there despite its dampness and soon turning orange as the fire got going.

Leliana fell asleep with her emotions warring inside, the fire softly crackling in the grate.

Victoria had encountered these rings of ash before, signs that something had burnt her like a storm with a calm centre. It made no sense to her, even with the revelation of Skeksys and his peculiar effect on her own sword. Was there another human around who had actually managed to get hold of a divine blade? The thought worried her, the memory of Caloustrance and his corruption fresh in her mind.

Humanity was weak even in their quest for strength. Even Skeksys who fought for the right side so far as she could tell had succumbed to the need for power. She touched her hand to the ash and felt the warmth of it, maybe because of the cooling effect of the rain, which meant that whoever had done this had not been here too long ago.

Even that knowledge was useless to her though. With a sigh she stood and looked around, seeing the gaps in the shelves where canned items had been taken. She wondered whether her pyromancer realised that in their inferno they somehow managed to control the fire well enough to preserve the shelves and their contents even while burning hot enough to incinerate her foes.

It was a terrifying thought to Victoria, one that made her wonder whether there was more to this power than she hoped, an ancient force that was actually in control, one that was allowing itself to be used.

Her mind wandered to Skeksys again and the dual pact that he had wrought, and to Caloustrance and the very powerful pact he had somehow negotiated.

Humans with power might not be a good thing at all.

Leliana woke before the new sun rose, ate quickly, then left. Every day she went out into her neighbourhood and picked off any demons that had wandered in. It allowed her free access to the houses as well as seemed to deter future incursions.

She found it strange that somehow they hadn't figured out that with so many of them they could just swarm her. She knew that there were strategists among the demons, she had once watched two groups go against each other, the ebb and flow of the battle making it clear that somewhere, something had been commanding either side. When the

defeated side eventually did accept that fact they retreated, leaving the battlefield behind but not before making one last attack, inflicting a large amount of damage on the opposition numbers before routing entirely.

It had made her wonder two things.

First was if there were leaders, what would happen if a leader was killed?

And the other was how the demons could tell each other apart.

A small winged imp appeared out of a doorway to her right. She raised a hand to it and felt the fire rushing through her. A smile crossed her lips before her brow creased into a frown.

The imp had fallen to the ground in two parts, the cuts showing singe-marks. She knew that she had not released her flames and further she knew that she didn't have that sort of control.

The sound of feathers from behind her made her whirl and fling the flames she had been holding.

Victoria jumped upwards, seeing the spray of flames slash horizontally under her scoring the wall of the house she had been standing in front of. She pushed forward over the girl even as the girl tracked her and only when she got behind her did she drop back to the floor. Abandoning her blade she dashed forward to grab hold of the girl's hands. The flames only stopped when the girl brought up her knee to try and catch Victoria off guard.

Victoria parried the blow with her right leg, pushing it across and then pushing forward with her weight behind it. Catching the girl off balance she managed to push her all the way back to the wall, pinning her against it. A flash of realisation crossed the girl's face before she pulled her hands downward. The twisting angle broke Victoria's grip and allowed the girl to shoulder barge Victoria backward. She took two quick steps, unfurling her wings as she did, ready to dodge again.

The attack did not come. Instead the girl held out a hand, palm up and a small flame the same colour as Skeksys' formed and flickered for a moment before settling.

"Who are you?" the girl asked, "And what are you?" she added with a curious tone, eyeing the black wings suspiciously.

"My name is Victoria," she replied, folding her wings behind her back again, "and you'd probably call me an angel except I lost the right to be called that. Who and what are you?"

"I'm human, and I don't know if I trust you enough to tell you my name." She responded, here suspicion still clear from her expression. Victoria considered her options for a moment before replying.

"Fair enough, I've given you no reason to trust me." Victoria said, moving slowly to her sword and picking it up again. She kept her eyes on the girl and watched as she tensed, expecting an attack. Instead Victoria sheathed the blade and smiled.

Leliana watched the so called angel picking up her blade, keeping hold of the purple

flame but also preparing an attack in the other hand, not letting it manifest yet but just feeling it bubbling under the surface. As Victoria sheathed her blade and smiled she released the flame, letting it flicker over her hand and extinguish itself. She saw a moment of tension freeze the angel's smile and felt a short flash of triumph before she smiled back.

"It seems you don't trust me either." She pointed out and Victoria shrugged.

"All I know for sure about you is that you seem to be a pyromancer, and those haven't existed in your world for centuries." She responded, pointing to the purple flame. "And that is strange even for a Pyromancer. Normally your kind can only produce a single type of flame but not only do you have at least two, but the last person I found who could create a flame like that made pacts with both demons and angels." Victoria explained. Leliana considered what she had said for a moment, wondering whether she had meant long ago when pyromancers last existed or whether she meant in the midst of this current disaster.

"Well don't lump me into the same category as that person, I made pacts with neither." Leliana said with a slight snap to her tone. Her answer obviously surprised the angel and it made her wonder once again where her power actually came from.

"I know you won't come with me, but would you object to meeting the other person?" Victoria inquired. The question took Leliana aback but she didn't show it. Instead she shrugged.

"What would that help?" she countered, not sure if she wanted to be outnumbered if this angel wasn't actually as good as the name suggested.

"Who knows, you guys are as lost as I am in this world." Victoria admitted, looking up at the sky and seeing a small group of demons a little way off. She knew they wouldn't see the two of them but it was probably best not to hang around much longer. "Yes or no?" she asked.

"Fine." Leliana responded, seeing the demons as well and thinking the same. "We'll meet at the old supermarket near here, it's clear of demons currently." She demanded. She knew the layout well enough to feel comfortable there even if it was neutral ground.

"This evening?" Victoria suggested. Leliana hesitated a moment, she tried to avoid doing anything anywhere near night time but it was better for her, this evening was soon enough that she wouldn't have to worry too much about an ambush.

"Fine, an hour before dark." She acquiesced. Victoria did not leave time for more conversation, the angel unfurled her wings and shot up into the sky, flying towards the demon and drawing her sword once more. Leliana saw the flames engulf the sword before she turned and left.

Leliana arrived an hour before the rendezvous, her suspicions driving her to making sure there was no chance of being caught unaware. She found a dark corner which allowed her to watch the entrance and waited there. Despite wanting to make a fire she held off, not wanting to give away her position until she was sure that she was safe.

The time passed slowly as she stared at the doors, the light just beginning to fade

before a shadow fell across the pale light shining through. It was decidedly different to the silhouette of the angel she had met and it was certainly not human. As she watched it, hoping it would leave she realised with growing dread that more shadows were forming.

With a deep sense of panic welling up inside her she suddenly realised she didn't know any other way out or if one even existed. The first shadow, different from the rest, larger and somehow less humanoid, began to grow and she knew that it meant the creature was approaching the door. She huddled closer into her corner and allowed the magic to surface again, keeping it from manifesting but holding it close.

The door exploded in a spray of glass and the twisted metal frames smashed into the row of till counters. Leliana felt a whimper escape her but knew it was too quiet to be heard over the tinkle of glass. She watched as the creature stooped through the doorway, only able to stand straight once it was through. Behind it poured in a gaggle of demons. They seemed frantic, their energy unhealthy. Leliana held onto her fire for only a moment longer, until it looked like the steady stream of minion demons had stopped, before she let it fill the room.

Victoria saw the flash of light from the supermarket and watched as flames and smoke sprouted from the various openings. A hole opened in the roof, a neat circle of metal punched outward. She angled herself and Skeksys towards that hole and hovered just off to the side as the fire still poured through it. As it stopped she moved over it and let them drop.

No sooner had they touched the floor had Skeksys turned away from her, looking around at the wreckage from the girl's power then charging. Victoria focused on her, wondering only for a moment whether Skeksys would survive a blast from her or whether it would kill him. The girl was standing, her fists clenched, an expression of confusion leaving her face and hardening into anger.

"You did this." She snarled, flames licking around her fingers, rapidly spinning and growing. Victoria stepped to the side and looked to Skeksys, hoping that the girl did the same.

Skeksys had known what he needed to do, there were demons in the building and Victoria had spoken about a pyromancer. As they landed he had pulled her blade from its sheath and rushed the monsters amongst the ashes. He only allowed the sword to light as he slashed through the first survivor with an upwards sweep. It didn't even cry out.

The pale flickering glow of his odd flame gave him enough light to see clearly and he whirled and slashed at anything close enough, cutting a wider space around Victoria and the girl as he went, turning, cutting, charging, piercing, he moved and killed and all the time made sure the demons' focus was on him. The blade spun in his hand, light and perfectly balanced he felt like he could do anything with it and so far it seemed like that was true.

A moment later he found himself flung from his feet, landing on his side and rolling once again closer to the girls. He turned his roll and stood, looking for what had hit him,

heedless of the blood pouring from his nose and the cut on his lip. He saw the rising demon, larger than the rest and obviously more powerful. There were fresh burns on its body but it looked like it had been protected by its smaller brethren, the pattern of the non-burnt sections suggesting vaguely humanoid edges.

It was grey in those sections, its skin mottled with darker spots and although it walked upright it had four legs in addition to its arms. Its torso seemed more crablike than anything else although its arms ended in hands.

Skeksys lifted the blade again, having managed to keep hold of it, smiled at the thought of battle then charged at the demon.

Leliana watched past Victoria at the man as he fought, his technique clumsy but somehow it worked. The man cut down the enemy where he spotted them, his blade leaving behind a blade the same strange purple as her flame. She held a hand out and created that flame, holding it up for comparison.

When the leader demon rose after batting him aside she was sure he would stop though, stand his ground and wait for help. After all, they had an angel with them, surely she would be proficient in defeating this monster.

Instead the man charged in, the sword he was carrying flashed brighter and she saw that it was in fact engulfed in flames of its own, flames that were without a doubt the same as her.

“You were telling the truth.” She mused as she stepped forward beyond the angel. She focused on the blade in his hand, bringing both of hers to cup the flame. Kneeling so she didn’t obstruct her view of him and the sword she imagined the flame feeding the one that he had created.

The sword flared up as he slashed at the demon, the sudden brightness blinding.

Victoria was surprised at the sudden intensity of light that flashed from her sword as Skeksys pulled it through the demon with his slash. She knew neither the girl, nor he would be able to see the effect but her eyes were protected from light.

The flame flared up and from the moment it did the sword trailed fire all the way to that point of origin. As it struck the demon the wretched creature was engulfed in that strange fire that intrigued her so much. It burned for only a moment until the blade left its body on the other side then fell to ash. Skeksys stood motionless, the sword at his side, breathing as if he had exerted himself for too long. The girl knelt on the floor as she had been staring straight ahead, blinking frantically, trying to get her vision back.

Victoria moved over to Skeksys, gently put a finger on the back of his hand, then slid over it to take the weapon from him. The flame returned to white as she looked around to check for any further enemies.

There were none.

Victoria helped Skeksys back toward the girl, leading him by the hand while he was

still blinded. She could see that the girl was beginning to get her sight back, her blinking slowing and that same expression as before flashing across her features.

“Hey there, you’re still alive.” Skeksys greeted, a thin smile on his lips, his eyes pulled into a tight squint. The girl’s confusion turned to shock as her suspicion was obviously confirmed.

“I thought you’d died when they chased you.” She countered. Victoria looked from one to the other, uncertain of what was going on.

“Nah, after I drew them away from you I could focus on losing them.” He explained, holding a hand out to her. “I’m Skeksys, care for some help there?” She took his hand and stood without him needing to do anything.

“Leliana.” She introduced, looking from him to Victoria. “I guess I should trust you now, but that could be the idea.” She said quietly.

“Distrust has probably got you this far, it’s probably a good thing to keep. What of him?” Victoria asked, nodding towards Skeksys. He raised an eyebrow at her, then turned to Leliana. She looked at him and Victoria could see the hesitation.

“You’ve saved me twice, and you and I seem to have something in common so I’ll trust you for now.” She responded, talking to him instead of Victoria. He shrugged and smiled.

“Pleasure to meet you too.” He jabbed, an awkward lilt to his voice that Victoria couldn’t help but notice. Leliana didn’t respond to it. She was staring up through the hole in the roof at the rapidly darkening sky.

“I’ll walk you home.” He offered, taking both Victoria and Leliana by surprise. He looked at them with a lopsided grin. “Either neither of you have ever been around anyone decent, or you don’t think I’m a decent person.” He joked away their surprise. Victoria was relieved to see a smile cross Leliana’s features as she nodded.

“I would appreciate that.” She responded, already leading the way to the door.