

# 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 Sariel.

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.

## **PART THREE**

### **Fighting**

## Chapter 7

Victoria had spent months away from what she had come to think of as her home. She had travelled the world seeking out others, be they of her own kind or human. Wherever she had gone she had found the same thing, demons and lots of them. She had seen signs of a surviving humanity but nowhere had she actually spotted humans themselves.

It made her wonder after her own little group; Gau and Samantha, Skeksys and Leliana. When she had left Gau and Sam still had their protective hemisphere and the two of them had seemed fine.

Skeksys and Leliana had been training, both against each other and together, Leliana boosting Skeksys' attacks with her flames. She knew that even without her sword Skeksys had become almost as deadly as with it thanks to Leliana's help and the training she had put him through. He had just started being able to manifest his own flames before Victoria had left.

Now she was almost home, a Yari and a Katana with her at the request of her two cave-mates. She wondered about their choices but with the amount of time they had, they would probably both be perfectly capable of learning the weapons even if they had no proficiency in them.

She just hoped they were alive when she got there.

Skeksys ducked under a flash of flame from Leliana then batted the next one away, his left hand coming up and sending a flame her way. He spun right as it left his palm and flung two more. Leliana surrounded herself to block his fireballs, then channelled the remaining flame back towards him. He waited until the last moment then dashed forward, keeping himself close to the floor as he moved under the column of flames.

As the flame ended he came up just in front of her, a cold flame in each hand.

He saw Leliana smiling and looked down just in time to see the last of her flame shield fly up from around her feet and part around his neck.

He laughed heartily, shaking his head and allowing his own flames to flash out.

"Well done." He conceded, taking a couple of steps back.

"You are way too quick to close the distance when you see a gap." She chided him. He shrugged and looked out at the world beyond the cave mouth. The reddened clouds were particularly dark today, lightning breaking their uniformity here and there but no rain fell.

“Out there it doesn’t really matter, they generally don’t last long enough to learn that.” He said with a touch of arrogance creeping into his voice as he turned back toward her. Leliana’s expression darkened.

“Careful, just remember that when Victoria found you you were in dire straits because of that very same attitude.” Leliana snapped. Skeksys visibly deflated and nodded then shook his head with a bleak half smile.

“One day I’ll be good enough to back up those creeping moments.” He said.

“Until that day I’ll just have to keep watching your ass.” A voice said behind him.

Skeksys dropped to a knee and rolled forward, a flame forming over his right hand as he did so, the heat creating a small wisp of steam as it touched the always damp cave floor. As he came up facing the cave mouth he stopped, recognising Victoria and quickly letting the flame die with a sheepish grin growing across his features.

“You scared the life out of me.” He complained. Leliana smiled and shook her head.

“Maybe if you were paying more attention to your surroundings...” she jabbed.

“Nothing’s going to get at us up here though.” He countered without thinking.

“Obviously you thought otherwise.” Victoria pointed out with a smile. She started to walk further into the cave, unstrapping the katana first and tossing it across to him. Skeksys caught it out of the air and looked at Victoria.

“You’ve changed your hair.” He noticed, streaks of a deep pink and black set out at intervals in her normally blond hair. Victoria smiled widely, obviously glad that it hadn’t gone unnoticed. She untethered the yari and handed it to Leliana.

“Thank you.” Leliana said, feeling out the weight and balance of the weapon.

“Sorry, thank you as well.” Skeksys quickly added realising he’d forgotten before. He slowly drew the katana, focusing on the blade as it came out of the sheathe. He didn’t know how he could tell but he knew this wasn’t just a ceremonial katana, he blade felt real, like it had a soul of its own.

When the blade was fully drawn he held it out straight ahead of himself. Slowly he built flames up around it, focusing on the flames not affecting the blade itself. He held them for a few seconds then extinguished them and touched the metal.

It was still cool.

“Now all you have to do is figure out how to do that while it’s moving.” Leliana said. Skeksys jumped a little in shock, his focus shattering. He chuckled and nodded.

“That I shall.”

Victoria watched as he moved, the katana seeming to move between stops in its path without passing through the intervening space. At various spots through its path Skeksys was lining the blade with a thin streak of flame just a mere millimetre in front of the metal itself. They had tried to do it differently, to actually wreath the blade in flames but that had just caused the blade to heat up and they’d worried about what would happen if they did that for too long.

Leliana had then come up with the solution. She began to run flames along her blade

only at the points in the training forms they had created where an enemy would be and so her blade hadn't heated however the flames still helped with the combat.

Something else that had happened was that in concentrating the flames so thinly they had actually created fire that was far hotter than what they had used before.

Victoria turned to Leliana and watched her for a while, marvelling at how easily she seemed to handle the yari. Where Skeksys was fast Leliana was smooth, the yari protecting every angle and punishing every approach. Victoria knew that it only looked slower than Skeksys' style, that if you were to actually compare the two their speed was almost the same.

She drew her own blade, spreading flames along its length and then beginning her own practice form. It would soon be time to take this fight a step further than they had been.

They had been training for weeks, their movements now smooth and deadly, their various flames more in control than ever. Skeksys and Leliana stood on either side of an alley that led into a small square. In the square were a number of demons, a small group with a leader who had started to try and organise his own faction.

Victoria had been watching them for a few days, mapping their movements and finally establishing a pattern. Today they were hitting the group at its most vulnerable point, when all the minor demons' attention would be on their leader and the lieutenants among this group would be distracted.

Skeksys could feel his heart racing, the plan flowing through his mind and the knowledge that the plan would completely disappear the moment the demons realised what was happening. He was relieved that when they had set it out they had acknowledged that so although the opening movements were planned to perfection, everything beyond that was simple.

Kill the lieutenants, isolate the leader.

Victoria would take care of the rest.

Victoria was high above them, hovering above the flight range of most of the regular demons. She was watching the scene below, the soft sound of her wings beating the only noise up here.

She was nervous, not only for her part in the battle, the assassination of the leader, but also for her friends. Skeksys and Leliana were capable and more than that, they were good at what they were about to do, but they were in the end completely mortal. If things went wrong there was no escape for them, they could not just fly away.

She watched the two of them turn into the alley and run towards the square. She smiled as a pair of flaming scythes cut down many of the close demons, taking two of the lieutenants with them. It gave Leliana space to work with as Skeksys began to cut down those demons closest to them. Leliana's fireballs were far more potent than the yari's sheath of flame whereas Skeksys' blade was deadlier than anything he could muster up at range.

Skeksys cut left and right as the demons turned and began to try and attack them. He focused on anything that was slightly bigger, knowing that for the most part the bigger demons were normally stronger.

His primary concern was keeping them off of Leliana while she tried to pick off the lieutenants. He heard the fireballs whistling past into the crowd and hoped they were finding their marks. There were only five lieutenants left after the two they had cut down with their initial attack but that was still five demons with the power to make their minions cower in fear, and one that could terrify those five.

Skeksys hopped backwards instinctively as a blade slammed down into the cobbles in front of him. He looked up at the lieutenant standing in front of him, flanked by one of its compatriots. They stood almost a metre taller than him, the one in front yielding a blade that looked like a scimitar, the other's hands curled into wicked looking claws.

Leliana had been picking off anything coming close to her, her yari sitting point down in her left hand, her right busy with her magic. She had killed two of the lieutenants when the last two had waded through to face Skeksys directly. The last lieutenant had turned tail the moment the fighting had started and its comrades went down.

She prepared a tiny flame, concentrating heavily on it and making it as small as possible. She could feel the pressure she was putting on it pushing against her hand as she increased that she began to feel like her entire body was starting to be compressed.

As she felt she couldn't take it anymore she flung it at the clawed lieutenant, leading its now moving form as it tried to attack Skeksys.

The spark caught the demon on the temple and as it struck the beast burst into flames, the heat enough to melt it almost instantly.

Skeksys flung himself away from the fire and she saw his skin redden as if he was suddenly being sunburned. The sword wielding demon held a hand up to cover its face and Leliana saw blisters forming on its hand.

Finally the flame died and she looked around, seeing the demons closing in on her.

She raised her yari and attacked them with a ferocity that she felt rising from deep inside her.

Skeksys rolled as he hit the stones, feeling the uneven surface digging into his body, knowing that it would bruise him. He came up smoothly despite feeling the tightness in his skin from the burn he knew he had.

The bladed lieutenant was staring at its hand in disbelief, a moment of weakness that he leapt at. Skeksys wreathed his blade's edge in flames and charged forward, slashing viciously at the demon's neck, the path of the blade taking it through some of the smaller demons that had crept forward to try and take advantage of the lull in the fight.

The lieutenant reacted with supernatural speed but having been focused on its had its reaction was poor. It brought the hand up to protect itself once again but this time it lost

it.

The blade passed through the flesh easily, led as it was by the thin edge of flame. It roared and dropped to its knees.

Skeksys allowed the blade to follow its arc, turning and bringing around a second slash. As he did so he extended the blade of flame outward.

The move was needed as the demon tried to dodge backward, avoiding the katana's blade but not the flame.

Its head rolled from its shoulders.

Skeksys smiled as the body collapsed sideways but only for a moment before he saw the final lieutenant, winged and flying, a spear extended in its hand, the point aiming straight for his chest.

There was no way to avoid it.

Victoria saw the lieutenant returning as it entered the square. She watched as its wings unfurled and suddenly knew what was about to happen.

"No." She whispered as she drew her sword and dove. She aimed the point of her blade at Skeksys, pushing herself to move faster, feeling the wind ripping at her as she flew downward, hoping she was going fast enough.

Tunnel vision set in as she pushed even harder and she was glad for the point of her weapon breaking the air in front of her, she could see flickers of flame that were not her own sparking off the tip.

With just a little further to go the lieutenant appeared in her restricted field of view. She angled the point of her blade to where she worked out it would be and with a final beat of her wings she braced herself.

Leliana watched as the lieutenant was pierced by Victoria's sword. The blade penetrated it easily and kept going, slamming into the ground as if it weren't there. Victoria tucked herself into a ball as the hilt met the demon's back and the demon met the floor.

Even so Leliana could see the impact and a moment later she was shocked to feel a light shockwave from it. Victoria stopped on her back after rolling a couple of metres, not moving and spread-eagled.

Skeksys started to move again, quicker than she had ever seen him, truly fighting for the first time that she had seen. He had always said that he battled to get up to full strength.

Leliana watched for a while, the demons around her moving toward him, ignoring her for now. It was then that she remembered their mission, the demonic leader that they were meant to assassinate.

As she spotted it she realised why the demons were trying to crowd Skeksys. It had gotten down on all fours and was slowly approaching them in amongst the crowd.

She felt a growl bubble up as she sprinted towards a smaller demon, only half as tall as she was. As she did she pulled her yari like a javelin, focusing fire around it.

She jumped up onto the demon's back and launched herself over the heads of the crowd, taking aim and flinging her yari at the leader. One of the demons close to it saw the incoming weapon and jumped, knocking the shaft hard enough to alter its course away from the leader. The flames kept going and punctured the leader's back.

Skeksys was fighting with everything he had. He could feel his body protesting, but he kept going, his mind on Victoria and nothing else. She hadn't moved since she hit the floor and he didn't even know if she was alive but he was not going to allow these fell beasts near her.

He slashed and stabbed as quickly as he could and as he felt like they were beginning to break him down he gritted his teeth and attacked even harder. It was only a moment later that he realised he was fighting two handed, a blade of fire in his left hand.

He felt a savage smile split his expression as he slashed at the multitudes, some flashing into flame and then ash, others falling to the floor in pieces.

A roar of pain made him pause for only a moment as the leader suddenly stood up out of the crowd, only a couple of metres away. He shoulder charged into the crowd, impacting with the closest demons and feeling the edge of his circle giving way. He slashed outward in the direction of the leader, coming face to face with it as three demons fell apart.

He kept the momentum going and stabbed with the blade of fire. It looked down at it, then back up to Skeksys.

A blade of flame from its right caught it perfectly along the side and he smiled, knowing that Leliana was nearby, knowing that the blade was the same as the one they had opened with.

The demon collapsed to the floor and then split, one half going left, the other right. Before it had even hit the floor the demons around them had scattered, chittering and screeching.



## Chapter 8

Skeksys stood panting, the battle finally catching up with him as he stood there watching the demons scatter. He was vaguely aware of the sounds of distressed demons as Leliana mopped up the stragglers, making sure they didn't come back.

Slowly he turned to Victoria, first checking her breathing and then her pulse. Both fine. He looked back at Leliana and was surprised at the fact that she was standing over them.

"Is she okay?" she enquired with worry clear in her voice. He shrugged.

"She's alive and breathing but I don't know, she isn't exactly human." He pointed out, scooping her up into his arms, her wings providing an awkward challenge for a while before he managed to tuck them back into their 'stored' position.

"Let's try and get home."

The trip through the section of town they were in was uneventful and soon they were into the suburbs. Skeksys was still carrying Victoria, checking to make sure she was still alive periodically by stopping and leaning forward, listening for her breath as well as feeling it.

Once they got into the suburbs however the concentration of demons increased again and they had to hide on numerous occasions, Leliana keeping her flames close at hand.

They were almost through into the industrial section below the cave that was their home when they were spotted.

A large demon with an entourage of smaller ones shouted and pointed, calling for its brethren to charge.

There was no way that they could fight.

They began to run, Leliana flinging arcs of flame back periodically, amazed at how little they were doing to the pursuing demons. She looked forward at Skeksys carrying Victoria, wondering how he must be coping. He didn't show signs of slowing, or even any sign that she weighed anything at all.

She glanced back and saw that a few of their pursuers were gaining on them. Coming to an abrupt stop she summoned up a brighter flame than her previous attempts and flung it hard at them. This one cut through the first three but left the rest relatively unharmed.

Leliana swore and turned, putting in an extra burst of speed to catch up to Skeksys.

She could hear the demons beginning to gain now, their footsteps heavy, their voices growing more excited as they got closer.

All at once there was a shriek behind them. Skeksys stopped and turned, looking back to see what was happening.

Just behind Leliana the demons were bursting into flame as they crossed a line that he could not see. He tilted his head slightly, puzzling over this fact as the demons tried to probe a way around the line.

Leliana joined him and stood watching too as demon after demon burst into flame.

“What’s happening?” she thought out aloud. Skeksys could merely shrug and shake his head. He had no idea.

“Let’s not hang around to find out.” He said wearily, turning and walking towards a nearby building. He hoped that they could find some shelter there for now so they could try and wake Victoria.

He got to the door and Leliana opened it without question letting him go through first. As he got through he lay Victoria on the floor, propped up against the wall in a sitting position.

Again he checked her pulse and breathing, both still fine.

“Victoria?” He whispered, keeping his voice down for no reason he could think of. “Victoria?” he said again, louder this time to try and wake her.

Victoria did not respond.

Gau stirred, a sound far off in the mill disturbing his nap. He looked over to Sam and all at once he was alert. She was sitting in the corner, her knees pulled up to her chest, her head bowed in, her arms around her legs. She was rocking slightly and he could hear her muttering something to herself.

Quickly he rolled to his feet and moved over to her, listening to the words.

“Don’t come near, don’t come near, don’t come near.” She kept whispering with each new rock. He looked to the door to their makeshift abode and decided it was time to go and check on whatever had woken him.

He walked to the door, picked up the cut off pipe that had become his weapon and he set off out into the building.

Moving slowly, careful not to make a sound, Gau crept along the corridors that were his home. He held the pipe up in his right hand, point forward like that of a fencing sword. Although he had practiced and the rust on the point wasn’t all rust he was nervous. Nothing had ever managed to get into the mill before.

He began to hear voices, two so far as he could tell, and sped up a little. There was no growl to either voice and they sounded almost human.

Gau stopped just short of the voices, the door between him and them ajar. He listened as the two voices were discussing what to do with someone. At the mention of wings he pulled the door ever so slightly further open, peering through the widening gap.

As he saw the girl against the wall, black feathered wings folded behind her he knew

what he had to do.

The door banged open behind Skeksys and he whirled, his blade clearing its scabbard and coming up defensively on reflex.

The movement saved him a nasty blow to the head, his blade catching the swung pipe and guiding it over. As it was his arm was jolted hard by the blow and he could feel numbness in his fingers and wrist. This man who had just attacked him was strong.

His speed came as a surprise as well, the pipe being pulled back and thrust forth in a stab almost immediately. Skeksys dodged sideways but the tip of the pipe caught his shift and surprisingly cut through it rather than ripping it.

With a smooth movement forward Skeksys tried to take control of the situation, bringing his blade up to slash at the other man's face.

Once again he was taken by the man's speed, the pipe easily coming up quickly enough to knock away the attack. A return swing by the man caught Skeksys on his right shoulder and he felt the force of the blow as it rippled through his body, his shoulder screaming in pain as his blade dropped to the floor.

He snarled and dove forward, tackling the man and hearing the pipe fall to the floor as he drove his opponent into the wall.

The man brought a knee up into Skeksys' chest and he felt the wind pushed out of his lungs. Before he had a moment to recover he felt a sharp elbow driven into his back just to the left of his spine. The reaction was involuntary, his body spasming sideways away from the pain.

He felt the man's arms encircling his chest, then nothing. He was aware of the world spinning and then of the man standing over him, the floor hard against his back, his head still spinning his vision blurry.

"Stop." Leliana's voice was cold and Skeksys could just see the point of her yari against the man's neck. After what seemed like forever his breathe returned and he gasped in air, breath after breath of burning air.

Finally his head stopped spinning and he pushed himself back to the wall and then up against it. He tried to speak but instead his attempt at words turned into a painful fit of coughing.

He looked up at his victorious foe and took him in for the first time. The man should not have had nearly as much strength based on his build although the speed would have come as no surprise, he was lithe and toned. There was no hatred in the man's eyes, all Skeksys could see was shame and fear as the man tried to glare at him.

"He's not dangerous," Skeksys managed to whisper hoarsely, "just protecting someone too."

Gau felt his eyes widen as the point of the blade was retracted. The man who he had just assumed had captured his winged protector had just suggested that they were protecting her. He felt stupid then as he realised that he had tried to kill them for doing

exactly what he was doing for Samantha.

He turned around and looked along the still raised weapon in the hands of the girl and saw suspicion there.

“I’m so sorry.” He said, stepping back away from the winged lady and either of the two protectors. “She has saved me more times than I can count and I thought you two had captured her.” Gau saw the man glance at the winged woman and saw the pain that passed over his expression. When he turned back it had been replaced with a gave worry.

“She got knocked out while saving me.” He said, pain evident in his voice. The girl with the spear looked across at him with surprise.

“It’s not your fault Skeksys, she would have known what she was doing.” She insisted. Gau didn’t say anything, looking instead at the winged woman. He had just noticed her resemblance to Sam.

Leliana glanced over at their attacker and saw his look of shock. She followed his gaze to Victoria and then looked back at him.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, feeling her body readying itself despite the calm tone of her voice. The man nodded dumbly, apparently unable to speak. He raised his hand and pointed at Victoria.

“Yes, she was injured, we’re taking care of her. What of it?” she snapped, still suspicious and angry at this newcomer. Skeksys pushed himself up to his feet and went over to Victoria again, checking her pulse and breath as he had been.

“The girl I’ve been protecting...” the man began, “Will you come with me?” he changed tack, shaking his head at his original sentence. Leliana looked back at Skeksys who shrugged.

“I’ll look after Victoria, just be careful.” He warned, picking up his katana and sheathing it slowly. Leliana wondered what sort of damage had been done to Skeksys’ shoulder. She pointed her spear at him again.

“First, a name. Second, try anything and I will not hesitate to stab you, even if it is in the back.” She warned, her voice icy cold.

“My name is Gau.” He offered, “and I won’t try anything.”

“Then lead the way Gau.”

She followed him through the halls, keeping the directions in her mind, making sure he wouldn’t get her lost even if he tried. After a short, uneventful, while of walking they arrived at a door and he paused. Putting his hands over his head he turned to her.

“When I left Sam just now she was not well, I don’t know how we’re going to find her.” He said quietly. Leliana nodded acknowledgement and then gestured for him to keep moving. Gau turned and gently opened the door, leading her into his small home. Leliana immediately saw the girl in the corner, curled into a ball and rocking slowly, her muttering audible even from there. She turned to Gau and snarled.

“What did you do to her?” Leliana demanded, her voice full of venom. The girl looked up all at once at the sight of her face made Leliana forget Gau standing right

there. She looked so much like Victoria that she could easily have been her twin. Leliana looked back at Gau and he was smiling.

“I’m hoping you understand why I was so shocked just now.” He said conversationally. Leliana just nodded as the girl buried her head again. She did not resume her rocking.

“I need to get back to Skeksys.” She said, walking out of the room backwards then turning and running down the corridors. She found her way back in no time. Skeksys looked up at her from Victoria’s side.

She was awake.

“It’s not time yet.” Victoria said, staring straight at Leliana. She did not know what was happening or why she said it but she knew it had to be said. Vaguely she could feel Samantha doing the same although she did not understand why she could feel it so strongly. Slowly in her mind she went over the events leading up to this point. She remembered her dive, the impact and then...

She realised that she must have lost consciousness.

Quickly she took stock of her surroundings and felt a sense of panic that she couldn’t explain.

“We need to leave here right now.” She said, pushing herself up quickly. As she stood she felt a wave of dizziness sweep over her and she put her hand against the wall to steady herself.

Only Skeksys catching her stopped her from falling as she realised she had missed the wall itself.

“We can wait until you’re better.” Leliana insisted. Victoria shook her head, looking up at Leliana. Something in her expression must have gotten her point across because Leliana clutched her yari across her body defensively and then showed grim resolve.

“Alright, Skeksys will support you, I’ll walk ahead.” She said, not waiting for an answer before turning to the door and leading the way out.

Victoria followed, Skeksys helping her along her arm over his shoulders.

They walked out into silence, an eerie fog had fallen over the town. With the redness of the sky it looked like instead of water suspended in air they were walking through blood.

Leliana walked three length ahead, her yari held out defensively, her posture showing her anxiety clearly. Even Skeksys felt like this was a bad idea but Victoria had been clear about her need to move. Since they were trying to make sure she was fine keeping her stressed was a bad idea.

Within a few hundred metres they came to an obvious thickening in the fog. Skeksys surmised it must be whatever barrier had caused the demons to burst into flames and said as much.

“It feels so strange.” Victoria whispered as they crossed through it. Her words sent a shiver down Skeksys’ spine and in trying to suppress it he felt it build up in his neck

instead. The resulting spasm was painful as the right side pulled his head back.

“Let’s try not to consider it too deeply, it might just decide that we’re not safe.” He tried to joke, the fog adding to his anxiety. Leliana was still the same distance ahead but now the fog was almost completely obscuring her. Skeksys moved faster, lifting Victoria more as they walked.

As they moved on Victoria began to start walking properly, taking the weight off of Skeksys and supporting herself. She felt terrible, her body ached, her wings were stiff and worst she could feel the throbbing of her head. For a brief moment she wondered why she was feeling the way she was. With her theoretically still being an angel none of those things should be possible.

The realisation that she didn’t actually count as that, that she could feel her own physical pain, threatened to overwhelm her but she pushed onwards, refusing to let her legs collapse under her.

As they walked on they began to draw closer to Leliana, making sure they could see her and more importantly if something attacked her. Skeksys’ hand had moved to his blade, Victoria’s weight now mostly off of him and her arm strong enough to hold herself up.

For her part she started to flex her wings, working the stiffness out of them and wondering whether she would be able to make the flight to their home in her current state. Skeksys and Leliana knew the climb on instinct now but she had never needed to do it.

Skeksys felt the light breeze as Victoria began to stretch her wings and smiled. She was getting better quicker than he had expected.

His smile faded quickly, however, when he realised that the fog wasn’t swirling where the breeze should have been pulling it into small whirlwinds and eddies.

“Victoria,” he whispered, his hand tightening around the hilt of his katana, “would you please use your wings to blow the fog out a little?” he asked, hoping that she didn’t notice the curiosity in his voice. He didn’t want her noticing the lag of reaction because he drew her attention to it.

Her wing beat was barely audible but he felt the short sharp gust of wind that flowed around him.

Nothing moved.

Leliana felt the slight wind and heard the soft thump of Victoria’s wing beat. She smiled at the idea, wondering why they hadn’t thought of using it to clear this fog before.

She stopped abruptly as she realised it hadn’t improved visibility at all. She held her Yari out protectively and felt Skeksys coming up on her left side, his weapon ready as well.

“What’s going on?” she demanded even more nervous now.

“The fog doesn’t move, it’s a trap.” Skeksys said, peering through the gloom. The fog

rose a little way, then suddenly dropped and flowed away as if it hadn't a second ago been suspended in air. All around them were demons, mostly minions but with enough leaders that it wouldn't matter how many they took out.

Leliana heard Skeksys' katana's point tap the floor as his arm went limp. She kept her yari steady as she looked around.

Victoria was surprised at the show of strength from Leliana but didn't have the time to ponder upon it. She stepped forward between them, wrapped an arm around each, lifted her wings high then pushed down hard.

Her attempt took them into the air and for a moment she thought that her plan was working. They rose over their opponents and then cleared the last of them quickly.

Only after that did Victoria realise that their path was no more than an arc, her trajectory flattening despite her attempts to rise.

She was still too weak to fly them both at the same time.

As they began to drop she felt the two of them bracing, ready to hit the ground and immediately start fighting. The horde behind them had started to howl in anticipation and she could hear that the howls were getting closer. Quickly she looked around, finally finding a huge wooden framed window that had had its glass all smashed out.

She aimed for that and with one last push of her wings they broke through and landed in a jumble on the catwalk just on the inside of the window.

## Chapter 9

When Skeksys came to he could hear the furious chattering of demons in the distance but somehow they seemed far away. He slowly looked around for his companions then checked on Leliana and Victoria. Both were breathing and seemed to be alright.

Only then did he look around properly.

A man sat on a sofa, staring at them with an odd smile on his lips.

“To say this is a pleasant surprise would be a lie...” He said with a strange chuckle. Skeksys jumped to his feet and his hand went to the blade at his side.

“But only because it’s not a surprise.” The man finished. He stood and bowed deeply to Skeksys. “Shall we wake your friends?” he offered, gesturing to the two still on the floor.

“I’d much rather do that alone, I do not trust you and all I know about you is the demons are staying away from here which isn’t necessarily a good thing.” Skeksys responded, kneeling again besides his friends.

He gently tapped Leliana’s cheek, then shook her lightly with no response. He moved to Victoria and did the same but once again there was no effect.

“I really wouldn’t mind helping.” The man offered again. Skeksys turned to him and considered for a moment before stepping back and drawing his blade.

“If you hurt either of them I will kill you on the spot.” He warned.

The man stepped forward and knelt beside Leliana, then put a hand on her shoulder and then the other over her temple. He closed his eyes and there was a moment of stillness. Skeksys could feel his held breathe building as time dragged on but he couldn’t release it.

Finally Leliana’s eyes snapped open. She took in the man hovering over her quickly, then shot away from him, rolling and coming up into a fighting stance, flames in hand. Skeksys noted how weak those flames were compared to what they should usually be.

“It’s alright.” He said over the man’s head. Leliana looked up at him and released her flames.

“Where are we?” she asked groggily, her recent unconsciousness clear in her voice.

“So far as I know, this man’s home.” He responded, gesturing with his blade towards their apparent ally.

He was bent over Victoria now, his hands mimicking where they had been on



Leliana. This time though he was not silent, he was murmuring something and Skeksys recognised the tone and rhythm as some sort of spell.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he demanded, moving his blade to the man’s shoulder. The man quickly removed his hands and stopped talking.

“It’s alright, she’s waking up.” He pointed out as Victoria’s eyes slowly opened and then after a moment focused on the scene above her.

Her head tilted ever so slightly.

Then she screamed.

Victoria’s scream was one of panic, not pain, and that fact made him hesitate. This man had apparently not hurt her but something else was causing her reaction.

She shimmied away from him as quickly as she could, pushing herself up against the wall as far from him as she could get and always Skeksys could see the fear in her.

He stepped around the man, putting himself between the two of them and saw out of the corner of his eye Leliana heading to Victoria to try and calm her.

“I warned you about hurting her.” Skeksys said, trying to make himself sound like he knew what was going on, trying to sound threatening at the very least. He knew he was failing.

“I didn’t do that. Or at least, I didn’t hurt her to cause that.” The man responded while smiling amiably. He sounded like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Who are you?” Skeksys demanded. The man shook his head.

“That I will not tell you, I’ll leave that up to her though.” He pointed as Victoria, “I believe she recognises me from her past.”

Skeksys turned to look at Victoria who was finally not screaming any longer. Her cheeks were tear streaked and her breathing was heavy but he could see that she was calming down and, or so he thought, she was beginning to get angry.

“You did this.” Victoria hissed at the man. Leliana recoiled a little from the venom in her voice as well as the sudden change from mind numbing fear to such loathing. She looked at the man and wondered who exactly he was that he could create such a response from Victoria.

“How could you have done this? How could you have just ignored everything and hurt so many people?” Victoria demanded, pushing herself to her feet now but still keeping her distance. “So many agreements, so much freedom to do whatever you wanted and yet you obviously wanted more.”

The man stood and drew himself up. Or at least, that’s what Leliana’s mind told her had happened. What seemed to happen was the man grew a little, going from a slightly built man a little older than Skeksys to being almost double the size, half a head taller and in the prime of his life.

“My dear Victoria... That is what you’re called now yes? I didn’t do this. Those accords were everything to me.” The man said without menace, despite his presence somehow having grown.

“Then how? How did all this happen?” she snapped at him. Leliana had a suspicion she knew who they were talking to now and a shiver went down her spine at the thought.

“Why don’t we fill in your friends before we do that? They look quite lost on this subject.”

“This evil creature is Lucifer, or rather, Satan since he abandoned that name.” Victoria explained, a snarl twisting her lips and her voice as she mentioned his second name. “I’m sure you’ve heard the story of his casting out of Heaven.” She watched as he two companions turned to the devil in shock, almost disbelieving.

“He was given so much when everyone said we should just eradicate him. Him and his kind are a blight on the spiritual and too many people have been corrupted by his ways.”

“We have to watch so many promising souls go to hell because of his corruption, so many people who should be in heaven fall to him because the balance of their life goes his way. And why? Because this is what he does. He always cheats, he always wants more.” She could feel her hands shaking, the fingers balled into fists, the overwhelming urge to hit him as hard as she could only just barely contained.

Satan smiled at her, his smile perfect and charming, his posture welcoming and friendly. It made her skin crawl just thinking of him and now, speaking to him face to face, she knew why so many angels had fallen with him. Even with the apocalypse outside she could almost think of him as someone she could trust.

“I am indeed who she says I am, but I did not do what she thinks I’ve done.” The man insisted.

Skeksys had already decided that he would hear this man out. Although listening to him, Skeksys watched Victoria closely, watching for her reactions.

“Elohim never treated me as anything but equal. He is our father, and so he had every right to treat me as little more than a child... But he chose not to. All of us were equal, all of us had everything we wanted.”

“But I envied the respect he got. I was more charming than him, younger, stronger, in my mind I was better than him. And yet no one respected me. I was always treated with suspicion because I was capable of envy.”

“When I tried to take power from Elohim the cataclysmic war happened, and I was cast out of Heaven with all who supported me. Instead of becoming mortal as I had expected and ending up stuck and powerless I went beyond the realm of your kind.”

“Instead I found myself in what I could tell was a completely different realm to Heaven or Earth. I did not name my realm, even after I found that I could shape it to my will. The entrance is fiery and hot and all that, but only because at the time I wanted everything to burn.”

“It was soon after I had shaped a large part of my infinite realm that I realised what had happened.”

“I had been given what I had asked for.”

Victoria looked at Lucifer with obvious puzzlement. She had heard much of this story before. The rise of Lucifer and his subsequent fall, the fiery realm of hell and the army of fallen angels that had become the first demons.

But this statement of Satan being given what he asked for surprised her.

“I looked around and I saw the respect of those who had followed me. I was allowed to draw souls into Hell if they did not reach the requirements for Heaven. I was allowed to choose no less, I didn’t just have to take the rejects. At first I chose devout Christians who had made one mistake in their lives, one breach of the laws they held themselves to.”

“Then I saw how miserable they were and no matter what I did with the sections of my realm that were already fiery torture pits, they stayed miserable. They wanted to go to Heaven.”

“And so the legend of Purgatory was born when I started letting them go.”

“Jesus was born, and sacrificed, when Elohim realised that I had accepted the truth of what he had done. From then on the rules changed. I would take those who would never respect Elohim for who and what he is, the rest went to him, whether they were misguided or perfect.”

“I was happy with the way things were.”

“But some were not. Satanism took hold in the world and at first people had the right idea. They prayed to me as others prayed to Elohim, and they worshipped peacefully, developing their theology the way Christianity did. It was truly a beautiful moment for me. These were people choosing to come to me rather than not choosing to go to him.”

“But with it came Christians who were simply rebelling and they created a dark form of Satanism, one corrupted by the views of zealot priests. They are the ones who sacrificed beings to me, they are the ones who believed me to be Evil.”

“When they reached hell they chose to become demons as soon as they were able to. They rose through the ranks quickly, ruthless and single-minded, they wanted to get close to me so they could pillage the world when the apocalypse came.”

“When I insisted there wasn’t one coming they laughed, thinking I was joking.” Lucifer was standing at the window now, staring out into the night.

“Just before the rifts opened I was away. Elohim and I had met to discuss the world and whether another flood-like event was necessary.”

“When I got back I found an army standing before a ritual site. I recognised the ritual they were performing too late and the rift opened. I put myself in front of them, calling for them to stop but the army marched, pushing me through first.”

“I fell once again, this time down to Earth. There was nothing I could do without destroying billions of souls, and not just those of the demons who had disobeyed me. In Hell I would not have hesitated. On Earth it would have destroyed the world beyond regrowth.”

“When I noticed you and your other half I decided to protect Samantha. Her friend is strong, but that mill of theirs is a terrible shelter.”

“You, I didn’t worry about. You had hidden yourself well and by the time the demons found out about your cave you had found Skeksys and both of you had a reputation.” Lucifer sighed and turned back to the three of them. Skeksys had sat down with his back against a wall, his head on his chest, his eyes closed but his breathing still showing he was awake and aware.

Leliana had sat in the middle of the floor, straight-backed and cross legged, her head straight forward.

Victoria still stood but her stand was far more relaxed now.

“So what now?” she asked, wondering what his solution was going to be.

“That remains to be seen.” Lucifer replied, “Elohim said he had a plan for if this were to happen. He told me that thousands and thousands of years ago. It’s so strange to think this must be the event he was planning for.”

The four of them stayed in silence for a while, the noise from outside gone now and night properly fallen. Skeksys could feel his mind wishing for sleep and his body aching from exhaustion but he didn’t want to sleep yet. What he had learnt tonight was amazing but he couldn’t help wondering how much of it was actually true. This was after all Satan, the one who had traditionally always lied and manipulated and schemed to trap and trick everyone around him.

And yet he felt like this wasn’t just a story designed to lure them in. He opened his eyes and looked at Victoria, trying to read her stance. To his surprise he read it as calm and accepting. He pushed himself to his feet and stretched.

“Sir, I’m sure I speak for all of us when I say thank you for your protection here, but we should really get going.” He said out loud, looking at Leliana on the floor and wondering if she were in a trance already.

“If you’d like, you’re welcome to stay here.” He countered, gesturing back towards the door out of the room, “There are plenty of beds here and honestly they are still watching for you to come out. They know how tired you are.” He pointed out. Skeksys looked to Victoria and saw the very slight shrug there.

“I think we will take you up on that offer.” He responded with a smile.

## **PART FOUR**

### **Tides**

## Chapter 10

When Skeksys woke he didn't know how long they had slept. The sky outside was dark but somehow he did not believe that they had only slept a few hours. Stretching he slowly rose and went over to the window. Outside there were no signs of the demons that had crowded around the invisible barrier before he had gone to sleep. It made him both happy and wary.

This man who claimed to be Lucifer obviously had vast power and if that were the case... Skeksys hoped that he did not have to be on the receiving end of anything that Lucifer were to dish out.

He went into the hall and looked side to side, picking a direction and following it, not really knowing where he was going despite having navigated his way to his room the previous evening. He felt disoriented by the size of the place, almost as if he were travelling further that he was actually moving and so his sense of direction was suffering in its attempt to find his way back to the lounge where they had met their host.

What he found instead was a kitchen and Leliana was already there, sitting at the breakfast nook and eating a small plate of food that looked to have come from a platter in the centre of the table. The platter contained eggs, bacon, tomatoes and mushrooms and the smells that filled the kitchen made Skeksys' mouth water.

Leliana looked up at Skeksys and smiled apologetically.

"I would have woken you." She assured him, "but I couldn't figure out where anything was." She went on sheepishly. He smiled at her and shook his head.

"Don't worry, this house is odd. What time do you think it is?" He asked, taking a seat across from her and serving himself a large plate of food. She wondered whether it had been as long since his last decent meal as it had been for her.

"I don't know. I've been trying to figure it out but I'm not sure that's entirely possible. I feel like we slept for a couple of days though." She answered him, finishing her response before continuing to eat. They sat in silence for a while, the sound of cutlery against crockery the only sound punctuating their meal. Leliana looked over the platter to Skeksys and watched him eat for a moment, watching the small, sharp movements as he cut through whatever was on his plate, seeing the care he took in making sure nothing spilled from his fork and the one time that something did, watching the short flash of anger and shame that crossed his expression.

She wondered what had made him the way he was, and whether he was actually stronger for it like he appeared or whether those scars would become something that would be exploitable by their enemies at some point.

Victoria woke with a start, her mind immediately racing. She felt like she had been dreaming of something other than Samantha. She thought she'd dreamt that Satan had betrayed them, waited for them to sleep and then allowed the horde to come in.

Only after climbing from her bed and checking every corner did she finally allow herself to calm down.

It was at that moment that he spoke.

"You're her, aren't you." He said quietly. His voice came from behind her and as she whirled to face towards it she saw him sitting on the opposite side of the bed, his legs crossed and his hands on his knee.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, her skin crawling along her spine and her wings rustling as a result. She cursed inwardly at the display of weakness and loathed his obvious pleasure at the situation.

"Do not let the smile fool you, it is not at your expense." He assured her, "And I mean you're the other girl's other half. You and her were the angel that allowed this to all happen." He spoke matter of factly this time, no longer asking for her to confirm it but rather just assuming that it was the case. She knew there was no point in trying to deny it, and even if she did manage to convince him otherwise there would have been no point.

"How much do you know about it?" she asked him, giving in to the logic that seemed intent on doing the exact opposite of what she wanted.

"Enough to know that you were tricked, although not just by the demon that found its way into Eden. What I've heard suggests that you are far more important than you realise, and that your companions in the kitchen have a huge part to play in what comes next as well... At least, you all will if you survive." Lucifer explained, his smile still fixed in place. Victoria wondered whether it was there to disconcert all those who spoke to him or whether he actually found something amusing.

"When is it going to end?" she enquired. Satan shrugged.

"Maybe tomorrow, maybe next month. Every decision that every being makes affects the outcome. Right now unless one of you make a decision that will be completely out of character you will all die within a week. But if that person does break from their instinct you will actually end up in a far, far better situation. And before you ask, I can't tell you anything, otherwise you will all die and that won't even be your own faults."

Victoria considered his words and then shrugged.

"What you're saying is that you don't want to answer." She pointed out. Satan's smile became a grin as he confirmed her statement.

"Precisely." He said jovially. "Now, do you eat? And if so there is a wonderful breakfast in the kitchen that I'm sure will still have a spot for you." He rose from his seat

and appeared next to the door, holding it open. "After you." He said, his smile somehow more sincere now.

Skeksys was in high spirits by the time that Victoria and Lucifer came to join them.

"Good day." He called happily after putting down the mango juice that they had found tucked into the fridge. It was somehow fresh and the tart taste was something that he had missed without even remembering it. Victoria looked at the food that was left, still plentiful at this point, then turned to Lucifer with a glare.

"What brought that for you?" she demanded. Skeksys felt his face drain as the question was asked and listened for the answer. He hoped it wouldn't make him regret it.

"I still have some demons who are loyal to me. And all of that is from my personal store in Hell which is why it'll never go off." He explained calmly. Lucifer turned his ever present smile on Skeksys, "Don't worry, it's pork and chicken, nothing that you would find disgusting." He promised. Skeksys eyed his food again, his mind and body at odds despite the reassurance.

In the end he was too hungry and he started to eat again.

"So why can't you use them to control those outside?" Victoria pointed at a window as she spoke, leaning forward almost imperceptibly towards the man, her anger clear.

"It doesn't quite work like that dear, those demons outside are commanded by a certain level of demon. In turn, that level is commanded by one above and so on and so forth. Think of a human military chain of command. If one link of the chain breaks away then the orders from above never filter through. By the time my allies realised what was happening it was far too late to stop it."

"So what do we do?" Leliana asked, putting down her cutlery and looking to the supernatural pair. It was odd to think that the devil and an angel were conversing in this very room but she put that out of her mind, for now making sure this room could no longer need either of them was more important to her.

Lucifer appeared to think for a moment while Victoria eyed him suspiciously, almost seeming to wish that he couldn't give them an answer.

"Well, I imagine there is someone giving orders somewhere. The lesser demons don't do well on their own and I can't believe anything below my allies would be able to pull this off. If you find that demon that's giving the orders, you should in theory be able to put an end to this." He explained calmly. She found his manner a little infuriating thanks to the indifferent stance and the matter-of-fact tone of his voice.

"So you reckon we should just find a demon and ask it who its commander is?" Leliana snapped, her agitation clear in her voice. Lucifer turned to her, his infuriating smile still in place.

"I imagine that could work, but only on the lesser demons. Try that on a sergeant and you're likely to have your head bitten off, literally." He answered her, apparently oblivious to her tone. She stared at him for a moment, trying to figure out whether he would have done that on purpose and finally deciding that he probably had.



“So does anyone here speak demon?” she asked sarcastically.

Skeksys had been watching the exchange with interest. Lucifer’s responses had been interesting to him, their simple content somehow so obvious despite being completely outside of anything he had previously considered.

“One of you is capable of speaking demon.” Lucifer pointed out, looking to Skeksys now. “In addition to that though, no matter what language you speak they will understand you. Language is humanity’s creation, full of deceit and easy to twist, communication with demons is far easier. Call it telepathy if you will.”

“If that’s the case, why have none of the demons we’ve slaughtered ever said anything?” Skeksys enquired. Lucifer turned to him again, this time his smile was condescending.

“Would you talk to something that’s massacring you and all your friends when you knew death meant nothing?” he countered. Skeksys thought about it for a moment then shook his head.

“I guess there’d be no point.” He conceded.

“Exactly.” Lucifer chuckled. “No reason to beg for mercy, no real need to declare the intent for vengeance and beyond that there is of course the fact that many of them either see themselves as far below you or high above. Neither group are likely to want to interact with you in any way, lesser in case of offending you and higher because they won’t lower themselves to your level.” Lucifer explained. Skeksys considered this for a moment then nodded.

“So you’re saying we have to find a leader or two, pummel them into submission then force the answer out of them using telepathy?” he clarified. Lucifer grinned toothily.

“Exactly.”

## Chapter 11

A month had passed since the encounter with the Prince of Darkness. Victoria still did not like the plan that had been set forward, Leliana just wanted to be able to leave the apocalypse behind and Skeksys showed an enthusiasm that both the others were convinced was misplaced.

Victoria noticed something else curious about Skeksys' behaviour. He seemed to be turning in on himself more and more often, staring off into the distance, cocking his head this way and that as if listening to something and every now and again in one of those moments he would mouth words that she just couldn't make out. Somehow he was always aware though, and the one time she had waved her hand in front of his face he had looked at her with a puzzled expression that suggested he wasn't actually inside his own head.

It worried her immensely.

On Leliana's side she had begun to practice even more vigorously, adapting her style time and again, today focusing on a single point, the next moving blisteringly fast, the next using wide sweeping motions that would be sure to cause a wide area of destruction for whatever was attacking her.

For her part Victoria focused on her own plans, trying to think of how to protect these two humans while she still tried to keep herself safe. Their last outing had proved to her that she wasn't strong enough to fight on her own so now she had to out think any situation. She spent hours going over scenarios that she was sure would never happen but somehow they made her feel better nevertheless.

Leliana whirled and slashed, stabbing and swiping, her enemies many and yet none at all. She had a feeling that she was going to be fighting on her own more than she had been recently thanks to Skeksys' shift in focus. He truly seemed to believe that he could convince demons to follow him somehow and she knew where that led.

There was a reason that people didn't negotiate with terrorists before the apocalypse, there was no reasoning with them and if there was, it was probably a ruse that would allow the enemies to get the upper hand at a later junction.

Swirl, duck, jump and stab, she moved forward a couple of paces then dodged under an invisible blade, keeping her own moving along a path that only she could see, death always needing to be on the move, always one step ahead of any of her imagined

enemies, always ready to catch them off guard. If she slowed they would block and then she would have to start her movement again and in that time her own or her friends' death would follow.

And so she trained harder, her movements increasing in speed and strength, pushing herself and feeling the improvement with every new day and every new hour.

When next they fought she would be ready.

She didn't notice that her blade was glowing white and bright enough to light the cave.

*"You know it'll be easy."* The voice was small and quiet, and yet somehow it was clear as day to Skeksys. He considered the statement for a moment, wondering if there would be a response as there had been so many times before.

*"Yes, but will it be right?"* There is was, that second voice, always the voice of reason in these exchanges, and yet never fully denying that the other's plan might work.

*"How can it not be?"* Skeksys asked in his mind. He felt his lips move this time, as they always did when his focus slipped too far inwards. He was being careful, making sure he was always aware of his surroundings. He sat in the mouth of the cave, staring out at the city that had been his home, the city that was still his home.

He was dividing it up, trying to figure out how they were going to take it, trying to come up with some sort of plan that would help his goal along. He knew what he had to do, he just couldn't see how.

*"Just go in, I'll take care of the rest."* The first voice assured him.

*"What if they sense me?"* The second interjected. The first had no response for it immediately. Skeksys thought about that for a moment. What would happened if the demons actually saw that it wasn't just a demon possessed human speaking to them, what if they pick up on the angel that he had living in him as well?

*"We can spin it somehow, you always were good with words."* The voice was addressing Skeksys now. He smiled slightly and stood, the beginning of a plan in his mind. His smile faded as he realised he was casting a shadow forward.

Skeksys turned to the inside of the cave, looking for the source of the light. He saw Leliana's yari glowing and his mind raced. If the blade was that hot it should already have shattered, showering them all with molten metal.

*"Let's show him what we can do."* One of the voices said, Skeksys didn't even know which one. His mind was on the blade, on the girl in the centre of the streaks of light, on his friend and the danger she was in. He was already moving forward, tracking the blade, making sure that at all times he knew where it was.

By the time he reached the edge of her circle of death he could understand the blade's pattern and he could feel the two others inhabiting his body running sequences as well.

The blade came around low from the right. He saw the slight twist in the motion and dodged towards it, spinning his legs over it as it moved to where he was and then rose. He stepped forward as she pulled the weapon back for a stab and ducked under it and

back to the left as she brought it to bear to where he had been.

She didn't stop moving even though he was beyond the crossguard of her yari. Instead she kept the blade moving sideways, bringing up the butt of the staff and attempting to attack with that.

The movement caught Skeksys by surprise and all he could do was dodge out of the way, ever aware of the bright blade that was now behind her.

Leliana had not expected to be attacked in the safety of their home while training but she knew what to do. The demon looked like Skeksys but its eyes were different and obviously so, orange and red and glowing slightly. She smiled as it dodged back from her attempted attack and swung through, bringing her blade back to the fore and slashing across at its neck. It dodged backwards again and she advanced a sliding step, wanting to crowd it back out of the cave.

She doubted it could fly.

She circled her blade around to keep the momentum and then pushed it forward to stab at the beast. It pirouetted sideways and forwards, once again pushing it's way inward. This time she stepped forward to meet it, bringing her foot up in a kick aimed at its knee.

To her surprise it moved with her, moving its leg back and allowing hers to slide down in front of it.

She felt her yari being pulled away from her, her grip on it such that she moved forward with it. A hand gripped her right wrist, pulling it away from her weapon as it was pulled out of her grasp.

She brought her left hand in and sent the elbow up towards the demon's face, feeling despondence engulfing her even before she felt the hand blocking her blow and then grabbing her wrist.

"Leliana!" The voice was strong, loud and deep and was so much like Skeksys' that she paused for a moment. She looked into those eyes and watched as they calmed, growing brown once more and losing their glow. Darkness engulfed her.

Leliana gradually regained her vision, surprised that she had that much time, still unsure of this creature holding her arms. She was still staring into its eyes, recognising them but somehow still not believing that they could actually be Skeksys'.

"Are you alright?" it asked, that tone so like what Skeksys would use. She blinked a couple of times then tried to step backwards. It let go of her wrists and she rubbed them out of reflex, suddenly realising that it wasn't necessary, there was no pain there.

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?" she asked, the snap in her voice unintentional but she stood by it feeling anger welling up inside of her. He stepped aside and pointed at her yari lying near the edge of the cave. "Yeah, what about it?"

"It was glowing." Victoria said, startling Leliana slightly. Skeksys looked at the blade, then moved over to it and touched it, clearly perplexed by something.

"It's not hot." He called back to the, lifting the weapon from the ground and bringing

it back to Leliana, holding it out to her sheepishly. “It was glowing so brightly that the entire cave was lit. I was worried the blade would explode.” He explained. Victoria backed him up, standing next to him and nodding. Leliana considered this for a moment, then took her weapon and looked at the blade. She focused on it, trying to recapture the mental feeling of movement. Surely enough the blade sheathed itself in fire, first yellow, then red, blue and finally moving to white. The light was still pale though.

“I don’t see how that could have happened.” She pointed out.

“Think about what you felt when you thought you needed to kill me.” Skeksys responded. The flame flashed brighter for a moment then faded again. He held his hand close to it, then pulled away. “No heat.” He mused.

Victoria stepped back and picked up a stone.

“Hold it out.” She suggested. Leliana did so, stepping away from both of them but maintaining the flame. Victoria tossed the stone.

A flash of brightness accompanied the contact.

On the floor a small spot of molten rock rapidly cooled.

Skeksys looked down at the cooling rock and smiled.

“Impressive.” He said jokingly trying to lighten the mood. He looked to the other two and settled on Leliana. She was staring at the little patch of red with a shocked expression, the blade of her yari clear once more.

“Now what I want to know is how you moved like that.” Victoria demanded. There was an edge to her voice that made Skeksys wary.

“Who?” Leliana enquired. Victoria pointed to Skeksys.

“You, I’ve watched training non stop since we got back but he’s mostly been sitting around doing nothing. Yet he still outpaced you. It shouldn’t have been possible.”

Victoria asserted. Skeksys shrugged.

“I haven’t been sitting around doing nothing. I’ve told you before that I asked an angel to help me and then defeated a demon who agreed to lend me its power then as well. I’ve been getting to know them, planning how we’re going to head out into the world and change it. I called on their power to help me.” He explained. Victoria still looked sceptical but it was Leliana that held his attention.

“Your eyes changed.” She said, her voice low. He knew why it would be something she brought up, eyes were supposed to be the sign of someone still being themselves. So often people could tell if someone wasn’t well by the change in their eyes.

If his had changed entirely, what was he risking by calling on their help...

Victoria looked at the two, wondering what must be going through their minds, knowing that eyes were such an important part of humanity’s legacy and expression. It made sense that the eyes would change when the soul was different but she had somehow hoped that Skeksys could keep the others in check. Now she was not so sure and that worried her. If they were going to clear the world of demons then there needed to still be humanity left in the world to rebuild.

“I’m sure it will be fine.” She said, not believing her own words but feeling like they needed to be said anyway, hoping that the assurance would give them the confidence they needed not only to use the power that Skeksys had just displayed but also for Leliana to accept it. She knew how important it was for them to work together now that their functions seemed to have changed so much, Leliana going more into the warrior path and Skeksys into a leadership role. She realised that it was not just Leliana with a difficult job of trusting Skeksys.

He would have to believe in her and her ability to control the fire that she had displayed today. If she lost control of it it could easily do exactly as he had expected and explode her blade, killing him in the process. And if she lost control outwards who knew what sort of carnage that could cause.

“You’re both far stronger than you give yourselves credit for, if there’s hope anywhere it’s in the two of you.” This time the words came out stronger, confidence giving rise to a certainty that she hadn’t felt before.

“I think it’s time that we start to make a move to fix this mess.” Skeksys said with a smile, looking to the two of them. Victoria’s confidence had infected him with a feeling of hope that he hadn’t thought possible any more and he was enjoying it. “I’ll make sure nothing escapes me that won’t be useful to us or might be harmful to others.” He promised, his eyes finding Leliana’s in the hope that she would see that it was truly him making the statement. She smiled back at him.

“I’m glad, I would hate to have to hurt you.” Her tone suggested more than just the jest that the words suggested.

“I would hate that too.” He responded, choosing to ignore the threat of violence.

“If anything goes wrong, please make sure that those two in the mill survive.” Skeksys said, suddenly remembering their odd encounter and this time turning to Victoria. She looked momentarily taken aback, then nodded.

“I will make sure of it.” She replied. “So where do we begin?”

Skeksys walked over to the mouth of the cave, knowing that the silhouette would be impressive, knowing that he was showboating but considering his new mission he figured it would be appropriate.

“We’ll start in the square where you first found me.”

## Chapter 12

The journey down to the edge of the city seemed to take forever, time seeming to speed by without going anywhere. Somehow every movement seemed like a challenge, and ever moment an eternity. Skeksys wondered whether the others felt the same.

This was it, the end was in sight and he had the key to it, all he had to do was not drop it somehow.

When they got to the ground he turned and looked at the city, this first step in saving the world. He felt stupid for the thought but that was really it, this would either work or, at least for him, the world would end.

He looked to Leliana and Victoria and tried to smile, feeling how false it must have looked but holding it anyway, hoping that somehow it would still portray the sense of nervous hope that he felt.

Leliana unstrapped her yari and Victoria drew her sword. Skeksys turned and drew his own blade before taking the first step. He almost expected an ambush right then and there but nothing happened. Nor did it occur on the next step, or the next or beyond.

The way through the outskirts was clear and that was the first time that Skeksys felt something tugging at the back of his mind, some suspicion that someone was playing a game with them.

Leliana held her yari at the ready, scanning for any sign that anything was amiss. Somehow the demonless walk was sending shivers down her spine with every new turn that should have led to a horde but didn't.

There was something very wrong here and she could see that Skeksys was noticing it as well. His shoulders were hunched over, his gait such that each step would allow him to transition immediately back into a fighting stance.

Victoria was the only one who didn't seem to have noticed. She was walking as if curious as to the lack of demons but not necessarily worried about it. Leliana noticed that her blade was only barely wreathed in flame as it swung slightly from side to side.

Bringing her gaze back to what was ahead she allowed her stance to relax a little. She doubted Victoria would allow anything to get the drop on them, and if she was calm then was there truly any reason to worry?

She shook her head at herself and brought the yari back up to her fighting position. Victoria may have been calm but she was a supernatural entity. Skeksys had always

seemed to have a good nose for trouble and he seemed worked up enough for the three of them. She would keep her guard.

Victoria walked alone in her slight daze. She was vaguely aware of the other two, both of them so tense that she was sure any loud noise would set them off. She wasn't too worried about Skeksys, his reflexes always seemed to be geared towards defence but Leliana's reactions had always seemed to involve trying to attack her opponent before they could do the same.

She pondered a moment on whether there was anything to actually be worried about, and then wondered why they were worried at all. It very much seemed like the city was deserted. Not a thing stirred, demonic or otherwise. Even the air seemed still.

It was only with that last thought that her mind began to catch up with what she was experiencing. Here was an area that was always swarming with monsters and animals and yet there was not one in sight and stranger still the sky seemed to have cleared above this section of the city. The crimson clouds looked like they had been pulled away into a whirling vortex centred somewhere further into the city.

A chill ran through her unlike anything she had experienced before and she suddenly wondered whether this was a good idea or whether Satan had played them for fools.

They walked on, all three of them now on high alert.

Skeksys felt it first. A deep sorrow that persisted despite the thrill of what was likely to come. He thought of all the people he had once known, the people that he had lost. There were so many people who had been peripheral in his life, people who he hadn't valued, people who he had taken for granted.

When they were gone he had cursed himself for a fool, for not letting them know what was happening in his mind. When he had found out more about what was happening he had cursed himself for helping this happen.

He didn't even realise that his guard was dropping as his mind closed in on itself, spiralling downward, remembering everything from before, from during, from after. He thought of all the failures, his loss against Caloustrance and before that all those people who he had tried to save in person who he had watched carried off.

His mind enveloped itself in darkness but the light did not disappear. Somewhere in there was something keeping him from losing everything. He focused on that.

In the light was Victoria, and behind her Leliana. The two of them were there, Leliana with the yari, the blade lighting them both, Victoria's fire glowing strong, somehow emitting less light but giving him a feeling of confidence that he could not quite describe even in his own mind.

They were his strength, and if for no one else, he would be strong for them. He brought his guard back up and smiled as his blade wreathed itself in that odd coloured flame that always felt right.

Leliana saw Skeksys' shoulders hunch, his guard drop and that was when she felt it.



A flutter of heartbeats forced her to slow but she did not stop, somehow Skeksys was still going and so would she.

A second later she felt a tear rolling down her cheek, and then another on the opposite side. She gritted her teeth, feeling the well of emotion beginning to fill and the memories beginning to flood her mind. Images of her family, her mother. The strained relationship she'd had with them, the wish to get away, to be able to just be her.

She'd lost herself in so many ways, so many times that she could normally barely remember them but here they all were, flowing and threatening to overwhelm her. She tried to hold them back but that just made them spread out like a wave instead of a stream.

She knew she had stopped moving now, her guard down, her will broken. She saw that Skeksys had stopped as well, as had Victoria. All of them were going through this, all of them had things that they had lost and the weight of that knowledge had now overwhelmed them. She closed her eyes and knelt, her yari upright, the only thing supporting her, stopping her from lying down and giving up.

An odd light caught her attention, the colour familiar. She opened her eyes to look at its source and saw the katana in Skeksys' hand glowing with the colour of their flame. The sight made her smile and just like that her torment dissolved. She stood, ready to go on.

It was her fault. None of this would have happened if only she had been wiser. She had destroyed their world by being careless and she felt that more strongly than ever now. Seeing their dejected forms, seeing the lost look in Leliana's eyes was too much.

Victoria's flame dropped, her sword useless. How were they going to fix her mistake? These mortals who had somehow survived the devastation she had brought upon their world. How had she expected them to be strong enough when she, someone who had been designed to be strong, had failed so thoroughly? It was unfair on them and she knew there was no hope.

The demons had obviously gathered, that was the only explanation for the vortex. They were gathering for something and she felt like it might be the scorching of this world, the cleansing of it and the creation of an extended Hell.

All this because of her. Everything was her fault.

She closed her eyes as the sobs came, quiet but strong, her body heaving with each one, the tears flowing freely.

Sariel appeared in her mind, so full of life the one moment but quickly degenerating as the poison killed him. Raguel appeared next, his expression solemn, the banishment in his posture clear.

Michael appeared before her, a surprise since he had not been at Sariel's death. He was smiling, his sword bright with the flames that he had once used to cast Lucifer from the realm of Heaven. His left hand was outstretched to her, welcoming her.

She opened her eyes, a glimmer of hope in her heart. That glimmer grew to a flame unlike anything she had ever felt when she saw the strange glow from Skeksys and

Leliana's blades.

Hope would guide them through this.

## Chapter 13

Sam sat bolt upright, looking around in panic. Something was wrong, or at the very least different, and for some reason it was of the utmost import that she figure out what that thing was.

She slowly climbed to her feet and moved over to Gau.

“It’s time to go.” She whispered shaking him gently. Groggily he sat up, much to her dismay, and stared blankly at her. “Well?”

“Where are we going?” he asked with his confusion clear. She thought back and realised that they had never discussed this, that this was an impulse.

“I don’t know... Out definitely, into the city probably. I don’t know why but I have to do this.” She said with a tone of command that even she was surprised by. Gau didn’t question it, simply rising and getting himself ready for the trip.

Sam did the same, gathering things that she didn’t want to leave behind for whatever reason. Most of them were mementos of their time here, little objects that had brought her happiness along the way.

Finally she picked up the weapon that Gau had trained her with, a thick stick the length of her forearm that had enough weight behind it to snap almost anything in its way.

She was by no means talented with it, she hated the thing and it showed when she used it, but that was why they had chosen it. There was no talent needed to defend yourself with a stick and even the slowest of swings had the weight behind it to carry it through into a decent attack.

She turned to Gau to see if he was ready.

Gau stretched for a while before he actually started to get ready, splashing his face with water, washing it and going about the rest of his normal ‘morning’ ritual.

He was puzzled by Sam’s insistence that they needed to go somewhere. She had always been content to be in the mill or close to it, and when those outsiders had found them she had been very much against the idea of meeting them or going anywhere other than the room.

Why then did she now want to go out into the world? What was out there that was drawing her towards potential danger?

He picked up his staff, three quarters his height and made from the same heavy wood

that her club was, and got it moving in the tight space, controlling the points carefully so as not to damage anything. He could feel his body warming up and getting ready for whatever might come and wondered what exactly she was going to be getting him into.

Slowly he stopped his movement and picked up the last of his kit. A set of lockpicks he had made as well as a small knife and a couple of punch daggers.

Carefully he put the three into the sheathes he had made for them and then picked up the staff once more. He turned to Sam as she did to him and he smiled nervously. He was anxious but excited, a feeling of hope filling him at the same time as dread.

They moved out into the street outside of their home, surprised by the blue skies above. For a moment they stood blinking in the sunlight before looking towards the centre of the city and seeing the swirling mass of clouds there. Gau shivered with apprehension as Sam began to walk in that direction.

He really did not like this. There was something seriously wrong and he felt something tragic just on the horizon. Never before had he wanted more to go and curl up in a ball and hide.

But before him was his reason for doing that, the girl that he had sworn to protect and who he had promised his life for. He did not think she knew it but he lived for her.

With a vague sense of resignation he began to follow her, skipping a couple of times to catch up and standing to her right side, ready with his staff, ready to step between her and any danger. He knew it was coming, the question was merely when and in what form? They had managed to always avoid any of the leader demons but now they seemed to be walking to the only place that they would certainly be gathering.

Nervously he spun the staff a couple of times, in his mind telling himself that he was just keeping his body warm but knowing at the same time that he was doing it to distract himself from whatever was just over the horizon of time.

It didn't work. Slowly he felt himself growing more anxious and just when he thought it couldn't get worse he felt something else, he felt the memories of his life flooding through his mind, dragging him with them into the deep pit of the depression that he once thought he had filled.

He remembered those who he had failed to save, those he'd failed to protect, those he'd hurt in trying to. He remembered the girl who he had invited in, promising to help her and then trapping her instead, his emotions getting the better of him and his reactions making it difficult for her to leave.

He remembered the group that he had founded. A number of people who had always been outcast and bullied by everyone. He remembered the way the group had turned on the weaker members of itself, bullying and ostracising even as they themselves had done to them. He remembered standing by and doing nothing, remembered joining in because he thought it was all in good fun.

He had not seen the pain in his friend's eyes with every insult and jab, had not seen the sorrow hidden behind the laughter. When his friend snapped and ended up committed

to a mental hospital it had hit him hard but even then he had thought more about how it had hurt him, how he should have seen it. He hadn't even cared about how his friend must have felt.

How terrible must he have been? How terrible must he still be?

He looked up at Sam and those feelings disappeared. He had made mistakes with her, taking her from her abuser and then leading her through the danger of this apocalypse. But here they were and she seemed almost happy about something, somehow the approaching storm did not phase her.

He smiled then, a sense of calm sweeping over him as they walked on.

Sam felt the beginning of her spiral, her life with her abusive partner suddenly at the fore of her mind. The detail in each moment, the pain of those beatings bright in her mind, bright enough that she could feel them. She cocked her head and considered what was happening, suddenly curious about something.

Her memory of her time with Gau was fresh and clear, as was her memory of the little amount of time before while she was with her abuser.

But before that there was nothing, not even haze. She had woken up with a headache but no memory of anything, and that was when she had first met her abuser.

And that was when he had told her who she was and what she was, or rather what he thought she was. Something was wrong, there was something that just wasn't adding up.

She forced her mind to speed towards those first moments, her intention to try and mentally crash through whatever barrier was preventing her from seeing her memories. Time flew backwards through her mind, memories good and bad flitting past as she mentally built up speed. She saw that moment in bed, her head throbbing, the man who would be her abuser standing over her by the side of her bed.

As that memory passed she saw paradise for just a moment, paradise, a lizard and three angels, one of them bleeding on the floor while another attended to him. She considered the scene, unable to fathom what it meant, not realising that it was truly her own memory.

She let it go as her mind returned to the present and the approaching city centre.

## **PART FIVE**

**End**

## Chapter 14

Lightning flashed above them as Victoria, Skeksys and Leliana entered the city's centre. The thunder rolled over them almost immediately and despite there having been no ground strike they felt the shockwave nevertheless.

"Something tells me we're on the right path." Skeksys said nervously, breaking their silence. He could feel his heart racing already but knew that there was no turning back now. They had come here to end this and that was what he intended to do. They had a chance, they had to have a chance. Somewhere out there someone had been watching out for them. The fact that they had met in the first place was proof enough to him of that.

Leading the way forward he suddenly knew where they were headed. At the centre of the city was a stadium. A colossal structure pointlessly designed to be able to host multiple field events simultaneously. What better place than that to stage the obliteration of the last of humanity's survivors. In his heart he knew that Caloustrance would be there, waiting for him, and if by some chance he did fail, he would have ordered all in attendance to finish the job.

After all, surely his contribution to this paradise for demonkind would not go unrewarded, even if he failed in that final task.

*"You know of course that unless he succeeds he won't be rewarded."* The demon inside him muttered. Skeksys frowned.

*"Look at this place, it's doomed. Even if we succeed, humanity is doomed. I can't exactly repopulate the world."* He countered.

*"Noah did, and Leliana's quite nice."* The demon jabbed. Skeksys felt himself blush at the suggestion the shook himself inwardly.

*"It's good to see his influence hasn't changed you."* The angel said in the background, *"Somehow I doubt you'd be expected to though. There will be a plan."* He added with confidence. Skeksys wondered what such a plan would be and felt a glimmer of excitement. He wanted to find out.

*"Who would have thought that curiosity would drive you in this final battle."* The demon commented with a clearly bright tone. Skeksys felt a smile cross his otherwise grim expression. Somehow he enjoyed the two inhabitants of his mind. Neither of them felt like intruders anymore. He wondered for a moment whether that was a good or bad thing, aware of the psychoses of the old world that would have described what he was

going through.

“We should start finding some resistance soon.” He said aloud, glancing back at his two physical companions.

Skeksys’ voice pulled Victoria out of her reverie. She was remembering the garden, hoping to see it again for the first time since she had been banished. The beautiful safe space had been safe once again and she had revelled in the feeling. In the present she considered the clouds overhead, and the approaching vortex that they were heading towards.

First they had to survive this before she could go back there. She also suspected that something needed to happen with Samantha. Her twin was out of the mill, out of that protective bubble that had always confused her. There was no fear there, only certainty. Victoria envied her.

She looked across at Leliana and then back to Skeksys. Both of them seemed calm, calmer than she herself felt. Somewhere in the distance was a sound like the chirping of cicadas, slowly growing louder and changing as they approached the city centre. She knew that Skeksys was right, they were going to start finding opponents soon and when they did they would need to be ready for anything. If there was some cataclysmic battle planned by their enemies, then she doubted that they would provide much resistance until the right time for them but still she felt her alertness growing, felt her muscles tensing. Involuntarily her wings rustled as she walked.

This would be it.

Leliana was thinking of the future when Skeksys spoke. She had been considering what could possibly be waiting for them on the other side of this battle. She had never ventured this far into the city and so she wondered where they were headed, what they would find under the eye of the storm above them. The clouds had started to light up regularly now, the thunder far away and quiet for now but the light giving and odd ambiance to their surroundings.

As they walked she began to hear the sound of the demons in the distance as well as the thunder. Somehow she heard beauty in that combination and yet she knew it signalled danger. She began to warm up, moving her blade around, going through the motions of a battle slowly, gradually increasing the speed but never moving even close to her fighting pace. She did not want to wear herself out and so she kept the movement fluid, tracing out shapes with no beginning or end.

Each step brought them closer to whatever their role was in this final battle and she felt the anticipation growing steadily. She smiled at the anticipation, knowing that there was no way out of it and glad for that. The thought of what was beyond it came back to her and she looked at Skeksys. Somehow they were likely to have a role in rebuilding the world and that thought scared her. She liked him, but having to finally acknowledge that was a prospect that she did not relish.

Instead, for now, she focused on the movement of her blade.



Skeksys saw the first of the demons ahead as they turned onto the main road towards the stadium. It was a four lane highway packed with abandoned vehicles. The demon was lurking on top of a red panel van looking straight at them. Its limbs were decidedly insectoid while its body looked closer to human than he would have expected. Its face was that of a bulldog and the eyes staring down at them as they passed were suspiciously lucid.

He kept it in his peripheral vision as long as he could without turning but kept walking, wondering whether they would be ambushed or whether there would be some form of honour in these final moment. He hoped for the latter.

As he walked he began to notice more of the creatures, each one different to the last. Somehow the standard monsters that they had fought before seemed to be absent from the menagerie that was facing them but each of these stared as they passed. Skeksys felt a shiver run down his spine but managed not to let it show. The only change in his outward appearance was a slightly tighter grip on his katana and a more alert stance in his walk. He was ready for a fight but he realised that he didn't actually expect it.

Not yet at least.

Leliana felt a wave of goosebumps roll over her skin as the creatures studied them. Completely alien, they made her think of the monsters of her youth, the things that her imagination had conjured up in years of shadows where there turned out to be nothing but air. Somehow that thought gave her the confidence she needed to keep her going without needed to keep her weapon moving. She was worried that if she did show nerves, if she did start to move her blade through its motions again, the monsters would attack all at once. With the environment so full of flammable material in the form of the fuel in the vehicles she would not be able to use her fire safely.

Rising up on the horizon was a gargantuan stadium, bigger than anything she had seen before. She knew then where they were headed and shook her head at the theatrics of it. She wondered when exactly Skeksys was planning on trying to convince the demons to join him, when exactly Lucifer's plan for them was going to have any bearing on the happenings of this day.

She flexed her left hand at her side, feeling the nails digging into her palm slightly and smiling at the distraction it provided.

For now it would have to do for calming her nerves.

Victoria could feel a wave of loathing for the creatures that were treating them like some sort of exhibit. She could feel their hatred as well, the well recognised animosity between her kind and theirs. She knew that if not for the fact that she was fighting them she could easily have become one of their leaders, as so many fallen had done before her.

She wondered what had happened to others that had fallen before her who had not joined the ranks of those standing around here, wondered why she had never heard of a re-ascent into heaven for her kind and the thought scared her greatly. She wanted to

reclaim what she had lost, not matter what it took but there weren't even legends that could suggest how she would do it.

She still had to try though. She felt the hands of fate weaving together something in those moment, some plan that was building towards its conclusion that would be unfathomable until the moment that it came to fruition. She did not think that the plan was the one that Satan had put in motion, this was something bigger, something that might even have started the moment Sariel had died if not before then.

The thought of being a part of that made her shiver and once again her feathers made their soft rustling sound.

A demon chittered nervously as it watched her.

They were approaching the parking lot for the stadium. Somehow devoid of the vehicles that had to that point made their path a winding one, there was a single truck standing in the middle of it.

It was then that Satan's plan came to her mind. The stage was set, the truck was Skeksys' podium and the parking lot was where the demons would gather for his speech.

## Chapter 15

The strange calm continued all the way to the truck in the centre of the lot. Skeksys looked up at it and took a deep breath, the task ahead suddenly at hand. He could feel the nerves in the pit of his stomach, the thought of relinquishing control, even momentarily, to the demon making him worry that this might not be such a good idea.

What worried him most wasn't getting the other demons to follow, it was trying to get his possessor back under control afterwards. After all, he hadn't exactly gone small when he had gone hunting.

He looked back at Leliana and Victoria, smiling nervously, hoping that he wasn't making a mistake. Victoria was looking around at the assembled demons, more of them arriving every second, and Leliana was looking at him. He could see the consideration in her mind. The resolve in her expression told him that even if he was completely lost, she would make sure his fears did not come true.

Turning back to the truck he sighed deeply. This was it.

He reached up for the door handle and pulled the cab open. Using the step he pulled himself up, then stepped on the seat and climbed.

Finally on the cab he jumped to the covered trailer, testing the roof to make sure it was solid before stepping out onto it.

*"It won't make a difference if it's solid or not."* The demon said, a chuckle following the statement. Skeksys shivered but held steady.

*"I guess now is the time."* He thought, stepping back and feeling a horrible cold feeling engulf his entire body. He knew it wasn't real, after all, he couldn't actually feel his body anymore. Beside him in his mind stood the angel, wings folded but twitching.

*"He knows he won't win against you alone, let alone against both of us together."* The angel whispered reassuringly. Skeksys relaxed a notch but still held his anxiety. For some reason he felt it necessary.

Leliana stepped back to be able to see Skeksys as he climbed onto the truck's trailer. She had changed her grip on the yari, ready to throw it if necessary, knowing it wasn't balanced properly but knowing that it would give her a target for her fire if she needed to use it.

She saw the moment of limpness as he pulled into his mind and the demon took over.

Almost immediately a soft flame covered his entire body. Unlike his own this flame was a dull grey and clearly weak. She relaxed a bit and then focused, strengthening the flame and making it spread a little bit further out than the demon had managed.

It looked down at her and smiled in gratitude. Despite the crawling feeling running up her spine she held the flame. Right now this was their best chance.

The demon looked out at the assembly and raised its hands. She saw that the hands were clawed before she noticed other differences in the flame's form. It was wider across the shoulders, taller and with legs that were somehow just wrong.

It was then that she realised that not only was the flame's form larger than Skeksys, it was also supporting him inside it. He was floating almost a metre from the roof of the trailer.

Victoria watched with interest as the crowd turned its attention to Skeksys. She refused to think of him as the demon inside. Somehow acknowledging that he had let it take over was beyond her.

The demons around them had expressions that she imagined were facsimiles of surprise and suspicion. After all, a moment ago they were staring at a human, now that human was engulfed in flame in the form of a demon.

She looked up at the man who had been with her through so much, still focusing only on the human in the flames. She could see something there that kept her hope up, a vague flicker every now and again of a white flame and more frequently of the purple colour that was his signature.

The demon had now doubled in size and she knew it would be visible to all in the lot and many on the highway. The speech would begin soon.

A voice rang out over the assembled masses, deep, gravelly and menacing. The language it spoke was not one that she recognised but as it rolled over her she found she understood it anyway.

This was it.

As the demon's avatar spoke a soft chattering began in the mob. Leliana stared up at the fire, only barely holding enough concentration to keep her own flames boosting it. The demon's voice seemed to be perfect to her, approachable and amiable despite the knowledge that it was a demonic being who was producing it. She heard the words but they meant nothing to her, a grouping of strange clicks and sounds that she knew no human would ever be able to produce.

When she looked to Victoria for a moment she noted that she was nodding as if the language was familiar to her. Scowling Leliana turned back to her task.

To find that the flames had grown even further, her own completely useless now. She dropped them, stepping away from the mass in front of her, barely able to see the head now.

"Victoria, what's happening?" she enquired with uncertainty. When Victoria did not respond she turned to her and saw that her eyes had glazed over slightly. Leliana shook

her roughly. "Victoria!" she shouted. The angel came around and looked down at her, obviously slightly dazed. When she looked up at the fire once again fear replaced her lethargic expression.

"We need to get some distance, now." Victoria said, her voice leaving no room to question the command. The two of them retreated through the crowd all the way to the highway.

Leliana turned back the moment they reached the cars. She could still hear that strange language flowing from the figure that was so much larger than life, still see the flames of the demonic form far away. She could not help noticing that from here it looks more like the legendary devil of old than anything else, cloven hooves to horned head.

"Did he imprison Satan?" she mused out loud. Victoria stared beside her then shook her head.

"That can not be possible." Victoria articulated, denial thick in her tone. Leliana heard the demonic chattering growing again. It sounded agitated but not angry and soon she heard something else. There were arguments growing in amongst the demonic horde. Clusters had begun to form and soon the horde was no longer, instead there were little gaggles of screaming demons.

"Get ready." Victoria warned, her flame covering her sword in preparation for battle. Leliana tried to summon her flame but found it gone. In a moment of panic she tried to reach for it again but found nothing.

She raised her yari in nerveless fingers, focusing on the training she had done and the smooth movement that she had made a part of her life. She looked up at the fiery figure and wondered what exactly had happened in that moment when she had turned away and lost focus.

Skeksys could feel the power flowing through his mind and into the avatar of this demon. The angel beside him was at a loss for words.

"At least it seems like it's working." He quipped, trying to make light of the situation. The angel turned to him, a seething mass of anger.

"What were you thinking taking him on?" he demanded of the mortal, "Do you have any idea who you captured?" Skeksys shrugged.

"Someone powerful evidently." He said with a cheeky smile. The angel put his face in his hands and shook his head.

"I honestly don't know if there's any way we could beat him." He said with exasperation as he looked back at Skeksys. "Of all the demons you could have lured and caught you picked one that would definitely be able to overpower us. You do know that all those minions out there will be making him stronger right?"

"Well if that's the case we should probably stop him soon." Skeksys said nonchalantly. He began to move towards the fore of his mind again and found a flame there separating him from the demon.

The demon stood on the other side, considering him.

“There were so many times when you could have destroyed me, and there were so many times when you could have denied me. You treated me well and you did the same with our leader. It is only because of that that I am helping you.” The demon said. The fire dropped and he turned back to the fore. He uttered three words in that strange language before he stepped back letting Skeksys take control once more.

Skeksys looked out over the massed demons and saw the fighting erupt. Clusters turning on each other their claws, teeth and talons coming out and ripping into each other. He slowly turned, looking at the carnage that was erupting and suddenly realised that something was missing.

Quickly he scanned the crowds again and confirmed what he had suspected. He could not see Leliana’s flame anywhere. With a guttural growl he drew his katana again and leapt from the trailer. He landed on a demon and rolled off it, heading towards the highway where he had seen the light from Victoria’s blade.

He sprinted through the battle, slashing only when something got in his way, his mind on his companions, hoping that both of them were okay. If either of them had been harmed because of this plan there would be hell to pay.

*“Ironically, literally.”* The demon jabbed. Skeksys didn’t even give the quip any thought. He was nearing the highway and yet still the only light he could see was Victoria’s.

With a final push he got to the highway and almost got taken out by Leliana’s Yari. He dodged under it, then over it as it came around again, rolling as he hit the floor and then turning as he came up, ready to fight.

Ahead of the yari’s blade the demons were no longer turned towards them, instead the scene had quieted and the demons were quietly but quickly leaving their fallen brethren behind and heading for the arena.

“We should go.” Victoria said, urgency clear in her voice.

## Chapter 16

“What happened while I was out?” Skeksys asked as they started to follow in the direction the demons had disappeared.

Victoria filled him in on the speech that the demon had delivered, one filled with the story of the betrayal of Lucifer and how this was not his will. The demon had pointed out that none of them would exist if not for the demon who they had all turned against.

As had been expected many of the demons had not known of the betrayal, and seeing such a powerful entity delivering that speech had caused many of them to start questioning their original orders.

It was at that point that the demon had delivered his plan. All opposition was to be eliminated before the supporters of the Prince of Darkness would head into the stadium and mingle. They had orders to wait amongst their brethren until they were told to attack, at which point again they would turn on their kin.

Victoria left out the trance she had been put under by the speech. She did not want either of them to actually know what had happened. After all, the speech had appealed to her on the same level it had on the demons.

“So what happened to Leliana’s fire?” Skeksys enquired.

Leliana considered for a moment what had happened before she began to speak.

“When the demon took over his flame was weak, so I helped him boost it. Once he managed to get used to what he was doing I held the flame there in case I thought you wouldn’t be able to make it back. I got distracted for a moment and when I turned back we decided we needed to get out of there. I don’t know why I can’t cast now.” She finished. Skeksys was silent for a moment as they kept going, cocking his head this way and that as he ran.

“Are you okay?” she inquired, worried that he was fighting the demon again.

“Yeah, sorry, was trying to find out what happened. It’s going to take a little while but it will come back.” He said, turning back for a second and showing her a sheepish smile. “Apparently he needed the little bit of extra strength and pulled too much.” He explained.

Leliana considered what he had just said, had the demon really needed her strength to do what they had witnessed? It seemed unlikely to her but she decided not to question it too much. They had seen enough to make them doubt almost everything they knew about

the world before.

After all, so far they had survived the apocalypse and now they were on their way to potentially end it. Nothing really made sense any more.

*“Why don’t you just hand it back to her?”* The demon asked, clearly confused. Skeksys could see them overlaid on his vision, both the demon and the angel judging his choice.

*“You know that’s really distracting right?”* he complained to them. They blinked out of existence and he could see where he was going again, approaching the truck once more and then continuing past it. They were heading towards the old team entrances for the stadium.

*“I have a feeling that this fight that’s coming will see a moment where they will be overwhelmed. If she fights with her flame from the beginning it will make no difference.”* He explained to the two.

*“Messing with them like this is not a good idea.”* The angel warned, *“It’s and absolute betrayal.”*

*“For once I’m with him.”* The demon agreed.

*“As am I, but it’s necessary.”* Skeksys countered, not willing to reconsider his choice. This was going to be a battle that would either see them save themselves and their world, or otherwise they would all die and everything would be lost.

They approached the entrance, the big double doors swinging back easily as they pushed through them and then turned into the corridors. He stopped just outside the locker room and showers, considering what they were about to do for a moment, then turned to the other two.

“I lied just now,” he said, shaking his head to try and clear it of the screaming voice telling him to stop. Oddly this voice was neither his own nor one of his possessors.

“If you need your flame back I can give it to you right now, but I’m worried that if we go in there with all guns blazing we’re going to lose this fight. I think if we can hold off, if we can hide as much of our strength as possible until it becomes completely necessary, we will do better.” He explained quickly, glancing around guiltily as if at any moment someone was going to appear out of the shadows.

He looked back at Victoria and Leliana, waiting for the backlash from his revelation.

“Did you not think we’d be able to time it right?” Victoria asked angrily. Leliana was considering him intently, her mind obviously working.

“Do you think they’ll be able to tell if we’re holding back?” she asked. Skeksys considered that for a moment. He hadn’t thought about that possibility.

“Victoria, I had no doubt that you could time it right, but I was being paranoid. A single mistake and this could go horribly wrong.” He said, “I’m sorry though, it was wrong to not even give you a chance.”

“Leliana, I honestly don’t know. It’s possible that they can, and they have seen us fight before so they might even expect it.” He said, turning to her.



“Keep the flame for now then.” She said, smiling reassuringly at him. “I trust that you’ll pick the right moment.” Skeksys stared at her for a moment, then smiled. He visibly seemed to get taller as the weight of his guilt left him. Leliana knew that if this were to succeed they had to trust each other and by extension every decision they made in the next few hours would have an impact that they could not predict.

She readjusted her grip on her yari and then pointed with it towards the tunnel leading onto the fields.

“I think it’s time that we face whatever is out there.” She said confidently, wanting to get out of this corridor. It was growing strangely claustrophobic. Suddenly she realised why. Sound was reaching them from the field now, the chattering of hundreds of thousands of demons was creating a roar not unlike those at big sporting events. There was a cheer to it that made her worried, one that made her wonder exactly what it was that was going to be expected of them. If it were just anticipation it would have sounded different.

Skeksys’ doubt had affected Victoria deeply. She was looking at the two mortals with her and wondering whether they knew what they were getting themselves into. All along she had trusted that somehow they would find the strength to prevail but now they were causing her concern.

To fight at half strength was suicide, even if half the demons out there turned on the others there would still be thousands to deal with if they stormed the field. A moment was all there would be before everything went completely wrong.

She felt her grip tighten on her sword.

“They know exactly what I’m capable of, after all there will be many of them who at the very least will have fought alongside or against the fallen before.” She said, already having decided to fight at full from the beginning. Skeksys looked at her with his head cocked for a moment.

“That is true, and you fighting at full strength might actually help them believe that we are too.” He said jovially, completely missing her original intention. She realised in that moment what she had done, and what he had done in return. She had doubted him and instead of arguing he had trusted her decision without question. She felt wretched.

“Right, let’s do this.” Skeksys said, turning to the corridor again and leading the way down it. They got to the tunnel, wide enough for ten people and three times as tall as he was. It was an impressive feeling especially as it seemed to have been designed to funnel the sound of the crowd down it.

The floor felt like it was shaking as they walked towards the green of the grass beyond. He lifted his katana and swung it a couple of times and he walked, keeping his wrist relaxed as he did so and just allowing it to move. Here was the moment that they had been preparing for, the moment that they had all hoped for.

He thought of all the things they had done together, the close calls and the easy wins.

Each and every one had had a purpose, each one had brought them closer, showed them their limits and then allowed them to overcome those limitations.

Even his battle with Caloustrance had been important. He had been completely beaten but in that moment he had learnt to never give up. There was always something more, some event that could change everything.

There was always hope.

## Chapter 17

They stepped out onto the fields, focused on the centre and walking towards it. Skeksys kept his eyes forward, listening for anything amiss but hearing little above the sudden roaring of the crowd of demons. As he walked he realised that the light on the field was mottled, little spots of light filtering through but for the most part it was covered in shadow.

He knew that it meant there were enough fliers in the air to block out the sky and somehow that thought made him smile. He kept walking feeling his shoulders loosening as the tension went from his body, his mind accepting the fight that was coming. His anxiety changed to a grim excitement as he got to the centre of the field and looked around.

Hundreds of thousands of demons were in the stands, more in the air above. The field itself was, for now at least, deserted.

A silence descended on the crowds and Skeksys looked towards the opposite tunnel. A single figure was approaching them, a human by its size and gait, but somehow it was different. It exuded an air of power that it took him a while to identify.

Then he realised who he was looking at. Caloustrance was approaching them. A shiver ran along his spine as the man he was once friends with strolled towards them.

“You actually showed up.” Caloustrance called with glee.

“You practically rolled out the red carpet, it would have been rude not to come.” Skeksys called back, refusing to allow him to control the situation. Caloustrance looked surprised for but a moment, then started to laugh, mirth spreading across his face.

“Oh my, it seems you’ve grown a spine. And here I thought I’d be crushing a glorified jellyfish and his pet.” Caloustrance gestured to Victoria, then paused on Leliana.

“Well, well, well, aren’t you an interesting little piece.” He muttered, keeping his distance while he began to circle. He went all the way around before he stopped again.

“I might just keep you alive, maybe we could repopulate the Earth.” He sneered at her. Skeksys felt a shiver of revulsion run through him but he held it in.

“Why don’t you just get on with it and tell us why you wanted us here.” He interrupted. Caloustrance’s surprise showed once again and once again mirth was the response. He grinned widely and shook his head.

“Who would have thought that it would take all this to bring you someone to love.” He teased, his tone that of a child who’s just found out his friends had kissed. Skeksys felt himself blushing even as he spoke.

“Stop stalling Cal, or I won’t let you finish.” He warned, bringing up his blade.

“Fine then, you’re here to die. Simple as that.” Caloustrance raised his hand, then dropped it.

It was uncanny how quickly the demons swarmed down, every one of them charging the trio in the middle. Before they knew it the demons had passed Caloustrance and then they were fighting.

Victoria’s blade flashed back and forth, the flames trailing behind it as she cleaved through their enemies. She kept moving, trying to create a gap, trying to keep a clear area around them. Behind every enemy though were three more, and behind them nine more. Somehow they didn’t end and despite the speech that had caused the demons to attack each other before there did not seem to be any help coming their way.

Victoria felt her wings shivering as an urge to run almost overwhelmed her. She redoubled her efforts as she forced herself to stay, slaying faster than before, cutting down the opponents that came her way and moving on to the next. She could hear Caloustrance’s voice in the background, urging his minions on, promising the world if they could only eradicate those before them.

Victoria glanced up and saw that both Skeksys and Leliana were still fighting, their blades slashing through the air, neither of them using their flames yet.

If they could do it, so could she.

She snarled as she focused on her fight once more, her attack speed rising as she felt anger coursing through her. This needed to end.

Leliana gritted her teeth as she fought, pushing herself as hard as she could, focusing on the blade and where it needed to be, where it needed to go, and how she could bring everything together. She knew she was moving as fast as she could and she knew that that was the only reason she was not being overwhelmed by the number of demons trying to attack them.

Knowing that she had no flame to fall back on was making her heart rate soar, fear and excitement mingling and giving her strength and speed. Caloustrance’s voice was somehow loud enough for her to hear over the ruckus but she couldn’t make out what he was saying. It was probably for the best since even just hearing it was making her skin crawl. The way he had looked at her was still enough to make her shudder.

She thought of what he had said after that and the revulsion that coursed through her pushed her even harder. She would die before she allowed that to happen.

She stabbed viciously into another demon then turned with a larger step than usual and swung her yari in a much wider arc. It created a little bit of space for her to move and she used it, shifting her way towards where Caloustrance was still standing.

Although she would rather die than allow him anything, her first choice was to get rid

of him.

Skeksys was fighting at half strength, not needing to exert himself. He could see the hordes of demons, was aware of the numbers of them that were charging him but somehow they did not seem intent on killing him.

Initially he had just thought that the extra power was coming from one of his possessors but then he realised that he could normally feel that. This was just a lack of external effort.

He started to move towards Leliana but almost immediately the horde thickened in that direction. Curious now he began to probe in other directions. Sure enough, every time he moved anywhere except towards Caloustrance the horde thickened.

He was still considering this when he saw Leliana inching her way towards Cal. His nemesis slowly pulled the claymore from his back, smiling towards Leliana and just waiting there.

Skeksys pushed his mind off all the question about the demons' patterns and forced himself forward through the masses. He was at full strength now, his arm burning from the extra speed he was forcing himself into. If he didn't make it in time he was sure Cal would do something horrific to her.

For a moment he considered releasing Leliana's flame but he told himself to wait. The correct time was near.

Leliana smiled as the last demon between her and her quarry fell. He had drawn his own sword, a claymore, and was standing watching her, waiting. She stood with her yari at the ready, demons still flowing past her but nothing coming between her and this man.

"You're not bad, I must admit I thought you'd be the first to go down." He said smoothly with grudging respect being the nonchalance of his voice.

"And there you stand, a coward unable to fight for himself." She snapped at him. The corner of his lip twitched down for a moment before his mouth twisted into a snarl.

"A great general is never a coward." He growled, his stance lowering a little, the claymore a little more at the ready.

"A great general leads, he doesn't hide behind his army." She countered. He seemed to regain his composure but not his posture.

"In that case, maybe I should lead then." He cocked his head for a moment, the launched himself forward at her, his blade coming up in a wide arc and heading straight for her throat. She waited for the right moment, then twisted her yari around to parry the blow and put him at attack distance again. She slashed at him then followed up with and attack with the butt of her weapon before kicking out at him.

As he dodged each attack she followed with the next, constantly attacking, not once hitting him. He was laughing at her as she sent a quickly slash at his head from the right. He stepped half a step backwards and raised his blade to block the blow, his expression suddenly sombre, his eyes suggesting death to come.

Skeksys saw the move before it came, the block and thrust that Cal had so often fancied. He knew that it would mean death for Leliana if it happened.

“*Now.*” He thought, creating a fireball of their peculiar purple and flinging it to catch her blade. It stuck, resolved and brightened all in the milliseconds before her yari met the claymore.

Caloustrance’s look of surprise as the burning blade sliced across his nose was perfect but it did not last long. He staggered back, completely ignoring his nose.

There was a lull in the sounds of battle before the ground started to shake. Skeksys looked around and noticed that the demons were backing off, creating a huge arena around the three of them and Caloustrance.

In addition every one of them were stamping the ground in time. Skeksys walked forward to stand beside Leliana and Victoria joined them on her other side. They stared at their opponent as he stood there, blood pouring from the cut on his nose.

“Well now, I had been told to expect that but somehow I didn’t think you’d hold back like that. I thought it was just an excuse for failure.” Caloustrance called to them. He reached up to his nose now and they watched as the gash healed without a mark.

“Now why don’t you and I fight for real, old friend, while your girlfriends there try and stay alive.” He called, pointing behind them.

Skeksys glanced behind them to see two huge demons rising out of the floor. He looked back to Caloustrance.

“I guess we don’t have a choice.” He said loud enough for Victoria and Leliana to hear before he pushed himself off toward Cal. He brought his blade around in a backhand slash. Cal dodged back and smiled as the blade passed within millimetres of his face.

“You’d attack me unarmed.” Caloustrance chided.

“You’re never unarmed.” Skeksys countered attacking again, this time with a forehand attack. Caloustrance brought his hand up as if a weapon were in it and sure enough just before the katana reached him the claymore had reappeared there.

Skeksys didn’t let up, pulling the blade back and stabbing out at his opponent. As the blade touched he shot flame down through his and felt the resistance literally melt away. Half way through he dropped the flame and let go of his sword, stepping in and punching Cal hard in the face.

His opponent went sprawling, the attack having caught him unawares and off balance. Skeksys did not pause, he chased even as Cal recovered into a roll. As the man came up Skeksys kicked out, catching him on the shin. Cal dropped into a kneel and looked up just as Skeksys threw a punch directly at his nose, wrapping his fist in flames.

Caloustrance’s expression of fear made Skeksys falter for just a moment. That moment was too long.

Out of the floor came another demon, its head larger than Skeksys’ torso. He retreated quickly, picking up his weapon as he went and heading towards his

companions. They were fighting their opponents easily, single enemies being far easier than the multitudes they had been expecting.

Skeksys could see the other demons rising behind them though. He was too far to try and call out to them and so he just ran as hard as he could.

It wasn't long before he realised that he was never going to make it. The demons were already out of the ground now and lumbering their way towards his friends.

In the centre of the field, only a little way ahead of him something else was rising, a person who he could not identify from this distance. As he got closer he realised who it was.

Lucifer had come to join the battle.

Lucifer's voice boomed out over the stadium and Skeksys saw the demons stalking his friends stop and turn. He kept running though, past the Prince of Darkness and on towards Leliana and Victoria. He thought it would be best if they stuck together for now.

Lucifer was addressing the crowd in the eerie silence that had accompanied his arrival. It felt like every demon was focused on their once leader as he spoke.

From the tone and cadence of the speech it was a rousing one but it was in a language that Skeksys did not understand and so he let the voice roll over him and ignored it.

He finally got to his comrades and then turned to face towards the centre of the field.

"I think we should start getting towards one of the tunnels." He suggested. They nodded and the three of them started to make their way across the pitch towards the tunnel that they had entered through. Halfway there they saw two people coming out onto the field, pushing aside the demons that were enraptured by the speech. They walked out to where Skeksys, Leliana and Victoria were standing and Gau greeted the three of them.

Gau looked from his acquaintances to the assembled demons and then back.

"Looks like you threw quite the part." He joked nervously, looking at the man in the middle of the field. He wondered how exactly that man's voice was amplified so much but dismissed the thought.

"So, what exactly is happening at the moment?" he enquired. Samantha spoke, her voice different to usual.

"It's about to begin." She said, her body limp, her eyes far away. As the words left her mouth Lucifer's speech ended and pandemonium erupted. The demons on all sides screeched war cries and they began to tear into each other. Out of the ground more of the leaders began to emerge and no sooner had they appeared did they begin fighting as well. Lucifer and Caloustrance stood a little way apart each of them focused on something.

Gau looked back at Samantha and before he could ask exactly what was beginning he was cut short. She was glowing, as was Victoria.

The two of them were staring at each other and every movement was reflected. Gau realised why Sam's voice had sounded different, it had been the two of them speaking as one.

Slowly the two raised their hands, Victoria her left, Samantha her right. As they touched Gau felt himself flung to the floor and was blinded.

Skeksys braced and closed his eyes as the two touched, the resulting flash bright enough to make him see red as he was lifted from his feet and flung aside.

When he opened his eyes both were gone and in their place was an angel with their features, her wings doubled and pure white. The flames gently flickering over her blade seemed more like light than fire.

She smiled down at him, then leaned forward and shot off towards the centre of the field, he blade at her side, her arm across her body. He watched her go and knew what she was about to do. As she reached Caloustrance she drew her blade through him. A scream filled the stadium and demons who had remained on their feet in the shockwave sent off by the angel stopped fighting.

Skeksys cocked his head to the side as he squinted at the figure in the centre of the field. Although she had clearly sliced straight through him Caloustrance still stood there in one piece.

Skeksys rose and then turned to check on Leliana and Gau. She was up and already coming towards him, Gau was on the floor, his hands over his eyes. They went over to him and helped him up before heading towards the centre of the field where Cal was now on his knees, his head in his hands.

By the time they got there Lucifer and the angel were standing over him.

“Caloustrance, you will be coming with me. You have destroyed the balance of the worlds and so you will pay for your transgressions.” Lucifer said to him. There was pity in his voice underneath the steel of it. He turned to the angel and smiled.

“I must say, I did not expect you to succeed in this.” He said happily extending a hand to her. “Congratulations.”

“What exactly happened?” she asked, clearly a little confused. “I remember the garden, and then I have too many memories.” Lucifer nodded.

“When you were banished you were split into two, one innocent and the other hardened shall we say. Normally the innocent side dies and the hardened becomes a demon. Both of you survived and so, when you touched you succeeded in the trial set for you and ascended again, but this time you are an archangel.” Lucifer explained to her before turning towards the three mortals.

“And you three made that happen. This nightmare is not entirely over for you though. The world will heal now that balance has been restored but it will take a long time. When it does whatever emerges as civilisation will need guidance. The humans that survived the purge will all still be around when that happens but the others will perish soon after they pass on their knowledge.”

“You three will survive, immortal, and will be allowed to choose your path. If you wish to leave this plane, you will have the choice to go to either side, heaven or hell, and when you make that choice all you have to do is want it.”



“I wish you guys luck.” Lucifer smiled one last time before he faded out of existence.

Skeksys looked to the new archangel and smiled.

“Crazy day you’ve had here.” He said jovially. The angel smiled at him and nodded.

“You three helped me through a lot, so I’ll offer you anything you’d like in return.”

Her voice of soft and smooth and all three of them felt instantly relaxed as they heard it.

Gau looked at the other two and smiled.

“I have nothing keeping me here, I’d like to go with you.” He said to her. She smiled back at him and nodded.

“You shall be my new guardian of the garden.” She responded. Gau didn’t even notice when the wings unfurled from his back.

“And the two of you?” She asked, turning to Skeksys and Leliana. The pair looked at each other, then back to the archangel.

“Any chance I could get back to you on that?” Skeksys enquired. Leliana laughed.

“Likewise, I’m sure we’ll need something eventually.” She added. The archangel nodded at the pair of them.

“As you will.” She said before turning to Gau.

“Shall we go?” she asked, extending her hand to him. Gau took it and slowly they flew away.

Skeksys turned to Leliana.

“Shall we go too?” he asked, pointing towards the tunnel, their path now devoid of demons.

“Let’s get out of here.” She responded.