

A Redemption of Wings Sample

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Chapter 1

Twelve was a lucky number, but it wasn't Kheone's. Not today. She braced herself as she released the rift. Lightning exploded in her brain and agony radiated through her body, diminishing sight and sound and balance. She fell to her knees. This pain greeted her every time she tried to open a rift. The red line of her latest attempt fizzled out.

It should be easy opening this gateway through space, through realms. After all, she'd been doing it for thousands of years, traveling the farthest points on Earth in a single step. But in Purgatory, it seemed the old rules no longer applied.

She took a deep breath and rose. At least the headaches faded as soon as she let go of the magic used to create the rift, and they kept her from thinking too hard about recent events. Kheone would rather a thousand debilitating headaches than to spend another moment brooding over unchangeable things, like her new surroundings, her attraction to a demon, or the idea that if they couldn't find a way out, the Archangel Michael might destroy the very world he was created to protect.

The gray sky met the washed out horizon, the strange, blue-tinged light spread uniformly over the grassy expanse of the Nelson-Atkins Museum lawn. The trees and grass were an odd shade of green, as though a vacuum had sucked out most of the color. Even the bright orange tips of the giant shuttlecocks strewn over the field were dull, rusty facsimiles of their cheery, non sequitur selves on Earth.

Kheone stretched and circled her head, banishing the remaining ache. She had been at this for a while, though it was impossible to tell how long. Time had no meaning in Purgatory, all the better to encourage the contemplation of sins. The light was always the same bluish-gray, and

no sun or moon or stars traversed the sky. At least, not so far. Best guess, they had been here close to a day.

One more try, then she would go inside and rest if possible, with the maelstrom of worries and plans swirling through her mind.

Closing her eyes, she reached once more with her angelic magic, imagining the museum on Earth, the sky a brilliant late-winter blue, the trees bare, and the air chilly. She focused on opening a rift there and pushed through the viscous sludge between realms. The pain started at the base of her skull and traveled under her scalp. Pressure built and stabbing agony kept her from forming a rift. No good. They were stuck.

She rubbed her temples and opened her eyes. Slumping on the steps of the museum, Kheone threaded her fingers through her hair. Her whole life, all ten thousand years, had been upended and there was nothing she could do to fix it. In fact, a large part of her wanted to keep it, but other things needed mending: the Gates to Heaven and Hell, Michael's betrayal, and her heart.

Movement to her right caught her attention. There were no breezes in Purgatory nor animals of any kind. Fog drifted out of the trees. Wait, not fog. It had too much form and purpose.

Kheone watched as the mist condensed into distinct shapes. Human shapes. These were souls, not fog. Souls not evil enough to be damned to Hell but sentenced to roam Purgatory until they expunged their sins. Since the Second Fall, angels and demons had joined the human souls, waiting until the Gates were rebuilt to return to their respective homes and corporeal forms. And in a desperate bid to save herself and Shax, Kheone had somehow landed them here in the flesh, with a dagger and a blanket the only useful tools.

A rope of vile murkiness slithered through the human forms. They recoiled from it and inched back toward the trees. The end of the rope touched a figure, turning it from mist to oily muck before it joined the cord. A roiling tide of fear and faded hopes shambled over the gray-green lawn. Numbing dread gripped her guts.

Crap. What would that thing do to her if it made contact?

She scrambled up the steps and burst into the main gallery. Kheone ran straight for the padded bench in the middle of the room. A small black cat slept, curled on a ratty blanket.

“Gotta go, Shax.” She pulled on the blanket.

The cat lifted his head and blinked his amber eyes. He stretched and yawned, taking no heed of the urgency in her voice.

“Not kidding, demon brain. We’re surrounded by souls. Something else too.” The way the rope moved, the way it had sucked in a soul, had Kheone’s hackles up. It wasn’t normal. “We need to move. Now.”

In a single heartbeat, a man seemingly in his twenties replaced the cat. As tall as she, his whipcord muscles twitched as he settled into this form. She pushed aside the memory of how they had felt under her hands. How his skin had tasted. How, for a few shining moments, they had lost themselves in smoldering passion.

Shax shoved his white hair off his brow, his irises still the amber color of a cat’s. His sharp features were almost cruel, but a softness around the corners of his lips and eyes told a different story.

“How many?” he asked as he scanned the room.

“I didn’t stop to count. A lot.”

“More than twenty?”

“Yes.”

“Christ.” He rubbed his palm down his face.

Kheone fought the urge to roll her eyes at his understatement. “Grab your security blanket and that damned dagger, and let’s go.”

She regarded the dagger lying on the floor under the bench. The dread that had filled her as the souls approached increased tenfold, but there was no time to give into it. Shax grabbed the blanket and the knife, his body tensing in displeasure as his fingers gripped the hilt.

“This is a blade of doom, Kheone. And this...” He shoved the material at her, frigid with fury. “This is no woobie. The Archangel fucking Michael intended it to be your shroud.”

Kheone shivered at the memory. She had loved Michael as a leader, as a mentor, as the hero of the Heavenly Host. And he would have killed her if not for the demon before her.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said after a quiet moment, clutching the blanket tight enough her knuckles paled. “We need to leave unless you want to ask the mob what they’re doing here.”

They hurried to an exit opposite the way Kheone had entered. Shax yanked the door open, only to freeze with a foot over the threshold.

“You son of a bitch,” said the soul in front of him, right before its fist connected with his nose.

Shax crumpled to the floor.



Chapter 2

The dagger skittered across the floor, and his world went even grayer when Shax's skull hit the hard floor. Satan's balls, he hated when his past snuck up on him.

Shax blinked, trying to clear the fuzziness from his vision. Kheone dropped the blanket and launched herself over his prone form, a vengeful Valkyrie ready to guard him from his doom. He wanted to point out he was past saving, but before he uttered a word, she knocked over the short, translucent soul. The rotund form clawed at her and kicked her in the gut, forcing a grunt out of her, but it was over all too quickly. The soul dissolved out of her grasp and rematerialized ten feet away.

His rusty hair had been brilliantly ginger in life, but his eyes were still dark pits of malice and his sharp teeth gleamed in the low light. A demon's soul and Shax's friend. Holy hell.

"C'mon," Hinndal growled. "You can't beat me, not with you being here in the flesh. I'll slip through whatever trap you set and come back for you."

Unable to stop the world from spinning, Shax had trouble forming the words to cool off the fight brewing before him. Kheone eyed the dagger with the yellowed bone handle lying on the floor ten paces to the side. Michael had threatened her with that blade, and she knew well its capabilities. He wouldn't let her use a Blade of Doom and stain her soul.

"Don't you be getting any ideas, angel bitch," Hinndal said.

Did his friend become even more translucent at the sight of the dagger? Shax rolled over and pushed himself to his hands and knees. Sweet Lucifer, please let Hinndal be too afraid to do anything else.

Kheone dove for the blade, a graceful leap and tumble. She landed on her feet, clutching the dagger and pointing it at Hinndal.

“Don’t make me end you, demon scum,” Kheone said, colder than the winter they’d left on Earth.

Hinndal dissolved again, his voice soft as a breeze as he solidified a few paces distant. “What, like my friend there? How long before his dagger finds itself buried in his heart?”

Shax laughed, drawing their attention from each other to him. He couldn’t help it. Reading a room had never been one of Hinndal’s strong suits.

“Knock it off, both of you,” Shax said thickly as he pulled himself upright.

“But Shax,” the other demon protested.

“She’s a friend.”

He limped over and stood next to Kheone. Shax enclosed the hand holding the dagger with his own. The electric pulse that always accompanied her touch wormed along his arms and settled in his heart.

“Give me the dagger, Blue.”

“He hit you.” Kheone’s face was still a fiery map of vengeful anger as her fingers tightened around the hilt.

“Yeah, well, I deserved it. I killed him.”

Finally, she turned her glare to Shax. He lifted a shoulder, and her grip loosened. Shax took the blade that had been his curse since he first agreed to kill for Lucifer and shoved it through his belt at his back.

“Aye, and it was well done, too. Never saw it coming, you fucking bastard.”

Hinndal’s words were belied by a wry grin. He grasped Shax’s forearm, all animosity forgotten. Quick to anger, quick to forgive had been one of his friend’s quirks.

“Hinndal, Kheone. Kheone, Hinndal,” Shax said. “Are we all friends now? Because we can’t linger. There are plenty more souls wanting in.”

“Yeah, about that...” Hinndal scratched the back of his head, a worse-than-useless nervous gesture in Purgatory.

Kheone lunged toward Hinndal, but Shax stood firmly between them. She glared at him, and Shax graced her with his most suggestive smile. It only made her brow furrow deeper.

“I don’t trust him,” she said.

“Do you trust me?”

She blinked, and his stomach sank. All the pretty words from before...

“Yes.”

The tension drained from her body. She still glared at Hinndal, but the sheen in her eyes changed from deadly to merely pissed. Kheone stepped back, and Shax let out a small sigh of relief.

He brushed his fingers against hers before turning to the other demon.

“You get one minute to tell us what the hell is going on.”

“This isn’t the—”

“Not fucking kidding, Hinndal. If I move out of her way, only God can help you.”

“They’re after your dagger. Not the regular souls—the Shadowed Ones, weighed down by deep despair.”

“The sh—” Kheone started.

“Unless you want to see what happens when a Shadowed meets a flesh bag, we need to go. There’s several out there, and the other souls don’t need to sacrifice themselves to save your asses.” Hinndal’s gaze darted over the room, peering into the darker corners and looking for threats. “Please tell me one of you is still able to make rifts.”

Shax glanced at Kheone. She shook her head almost imperceptibly. “We’re having a little trouble with that at the moment,” he said.

Hinndal went almost transparent with fear. “Shit, now what?”

The hell if he knew. But Kheone froze, her face slackening for an instant before a sharp bark of laughter erupted.

“What’s going on, Blue?” he asked.

She held up a hand to Shax and closed her eyes. “Shh. I’m concentrating.”

“But—”

“Demons of few words are the best demons.”

A pleased-as-punch grin appeared at her insult, but he said no more. Shakespeare for the win.

The short crack of a static discharge echoed through the enormous room, followed by the sharp scent of ozone as a red-rimmed rift split the air. Kheone clenched her jaw to fight off the pangs, but when she opened her eyes, she smiled her familiar, fierce smile he’d seen more times than he cared to count.

“I only tried to open a rift to Earth, never within Purgatory,” she said with a rueful twitch of her lips.

“Better late than never.” Hinndal hurried toward the rift. “Let’s go before the Shadowed realize we’re about to make our escape.”

He stepped through as though it was an everyday occurrence. Shax, on the other hand, stood frozen by the twin desires of escaping danger and ensuring Kheone’s safety.

“You should go.” Kheone clenched her fists at her sides, her knuckles paling against her golden skin. “I don’t know if I can hold it.”

“Come on, Shax,” Hinndal called from the other side. “Unless you’re scared?”

Shax scooped up the blanket from where Kheone had dropped it in her eagerness to defend him. He grinned wickedly at her. An answering flame sparked in her eyes, and heat washed over him.

“See you on the other side, Blue.”

He stepped through. The hairs on Shax’s arms rose. The room on the other side of the rift was small and familiar. A bed, a desk, a dresser, and a small closet all shoved into a ten-by-ten space. Even in the physical realm, this had been a utilitarian room with little color or interest. In the gray light of Purgatory, it was downright depressing.

Kheone followed him into her old room at the angels' dorm on the campus of Hurst University in Purgatory's version of Kansas City, Missouri. She winced as the rift closed as though preparing herself for something. When it snapped shut behind her, Kheone rubbed her temple.

"I don't remember it being this small," Shax said.

"Because you were this big." Kheone held her hands about a cubit apart.

"Hmm, true." Small cat, big room. Big demon, small room.

"Are you two finished flirting, or should I go find somewhere else to be so you can fornicate?"

Hinndal's harsh voice crashed in on Shax's memories. He quashed the grin threatening to form, but not before the corners of his lips turned up. Hinndal glanced from Shax to Kheone, and a cunning glint lit his face. Kheone scowled at the red-haired demon.

"Oh, we're done," Shax said.

Kheone turned her scowl on him. He tossed her the blanket with a wink, and her expression softened.

"Good. So, where the fuck are we?" Hinndal walked to the window and peered out.

Shax pulled over the small desk chair and sat, regarding the beautiful angel before him. Her short, blue-black hair provided a shadowy frame to her sculpted face. The harsh angles reminded him of a bird of prey, but he had never met anyone as beautiful. It all worked for her. Her lean legs, the slight curve of her hips, the softness of her small breasts. The flame of desire sparked in him again at the image of those legs wrapped around him only...Christ, how long had they been in Purgatory? Hours? Days?

"The dorms at Hurst." Kheone folded the blanket as she paced the room.

Hinndal snapped around and stared open-mouthed at her. "Why in the ever-hating heart of Satan would you bring us anywhere Michael might be?"

“I know we can’t stay here, but this is the first place I thought of,” Kheone mumbled, her shoulders set defensively.

“Michael isn’t here.” Shax shrugged.

“I don’t want to be anywhere Michael might look,” Hinndal said. “And Hurst isn’t far enough away. The others will be here soon.”

Kheone stopped her pacing and strode to the door, leaning against it and crossing her arms. “We’re not going anywhere until you tell us what’s happening.”

“She always like this?” Hinndal asked.

Shax linked his fingers behind his head and leaned back. “Pretty much.”

Kheone glared at him, and he gave her his best smile, the one that spoke of sex and pleasure. A rosy flush flashed across her cheeks and she looked at her toes.

“The Shadowed Ones are pissed.” Hinndal glanced out the window again. “They’ve been stuck here for ages and they want release.”

“They’re seeking the blade?” Shax blinked in surprise.

“Yep. Some are demons, more are angels, but most are human who couldn’t come to terms with their sins. Strong emotion draws them. The other souls have a quieting effect for a little while, but it won’t last forever.” Hinndal waggled his brows. “What have you two been doing since you landed in Purgatory?”

A flush bloomed on Kheone’s cheeks, but she had no other reaction.

“None of your business,” Shax said.

“I disagree, but we don’t have time to argue.” Hinndal focused on Kheone. “Hey angel bi—”

At Shax’s glare, he gulped.

“—babe, can you open another rift far, far away from here? Another state is good, maybe another country?”

Her gaze found Shax. At his encouraging nod, she continued with a sigh. “I think so.”

“You think so?”

She rubbed her temples and tapped her feet together. “Since the Gates fell, angels have been losing their abilities. It’s been harder and harder to open rifts, and...painful. The rift I opened to get here is the first success since we arrived.”

Ah, that explained why she seemed drained at their meetings over the past few weeks and the look of anguish when she brought them here.

“Well, if the Shadowed catch you, you’ll suffer more than you can imagine.”

The smile she showed Hinndal was fierce and bitter. The other demon had no idea how much suffering Kheone had endured, how she nearly died at the hand of the being she trusted the most.

“I’ll survive,” she said impassively. “Let’s go.”

Shax stood. “You won’t get an argument from me.”

“That’s refreshing. Do you have somewhere in mind?” she asked, leading them outside.

Good, her sense of humor remained intact. He scanned the area. Nothing. Not a breath of wind, not a single buzzing insect. And most importantly, not a soul.

“Maybe. How do you feel about Florida?”

Hinndal chuckled. “Fucking Florida? Really?”

“I know a place.” As he spoke the words, creeping dread pressed in on his mind. A flash of fear sent his heart racing.

He swiveled his head. There. An oily cord slithered along the ground like a massive snake. Kheone followed his gaze.

“Florida it is.” Kheone took his hand.

An arrow of hope chased off the dread, and warmth flooded through him.

“Picture where we’re going,” Kheone whispered, “but make sure you imagine it in Purgatory—gray light, dull colors.”

He conjured an image of the run-down motel he had stayed at his first night after the Second Fall. It wasn’t much of a stretch to visualize its Purgatory version.

“Got it.”

A grimace pulled at the angles of Kheone’s face as a red line formed in the air between them and the Shadowed slowly inched closer. Her shoulders tightened and her knees locked. A circle opened in the air.

“Go,” she grunted, releasing him.

The dread returned, worse than before, but this time it offered incentive to move his ass. He dashed through the rift, Hinndal on his heels. Kheone shambled forward stiffly. The thick oily rope twisted over the ground and through the air. It stretched out, thinning itself into a shoestring and almost touched her. The rift hissed as the tip crossed the boundary. The black strand vanished as the rift snapped closed. Kheone stumbled to him before her eyes rolled back, and she collapsed into Shax’s arms.



Chapter 3

The pain wrecked her. Lines of lightning raced across Kheone's skin, through her nerves, and nestled in a ball at the back of her skull. Her legs gave out, but before she hit the dirt, strong arms lifted her, cradling her against a solid chest.

Shax's heart thudded beneath her ear as he carried her to the motel, a low building with rusted-out chairs on the porch and doors with peeling paint.

Hinndal opened one of those sad doors, and Shax laid her gently on a bed with a threadbare cover. A mattress spring dug into her kidney. Kheone rolled over with a groan.

"You okay, Blue?" Shax untied the blanket from her waist and covered her.

She took strength from his tenderness. "Yeah, but we're not going anywhere for a while."

He smoothed her hair away from her face. "Okay."

Kheone closed her eyes, knowing sleep was impossible, but the misty light of Purgatory was too much for her. Shax rose and stepped out of reach and she tucked her hands under the pillow, resisting the urge to call out to him.

"Good to see you, Shax," Hinndal said.

"I wish I could say the same. I'd hoped you'd be somewhere better than this."

"Nah, it's all right. Bit dull, but better than the alternative." The demon's voice came from a different part of the cramped room.

"The alternative being Hell?" Kheone's said with the barest hint of a sneer. She was too tired for this crap.

"Yeah, well, you wouldn't know. He does."

Besides Shax, Kheone knew no other demons. For millennia, she had killed them without learning their names. Some returned after a brief stay in Hell. Others met oblivion with her guardian angel's blade. Until the Gates fell, she never imagined meeting one in Purgatory.

Kheone had convinced herself Shax wasn't like other demons, holding as proof all she had seen him do since he pushed her out of the way of Serel's falling body. But her unease grew as she interacted with the demon he called friend. Shax kept his expression oddly neutral, his old self appearing, the one she'd first met in the wasteland of Eden thousands of years ago. She had grown used to seeing a little emotion break through the mask of detachment, even if it was annoyance. A chill washed over her as she listened to the most recent evidence that Shax was a ruthless killer.

She was in bed with a killer.

The hypocrisy slapped her in the face. How many demons had she killed in her immortal life? Hundreds? Thousands? More than anyone other than God knew? The night before she and Shax had escaped to Purgatory, Kheone killed at least six to save her fellow angels. And now she was judging Shax for killing one demon.

He had been Lucifer's assassin. Hinndal might be the last demon Shax killed, but he certainly wasn't the first.

"How long before they find us again?" Shax asked.

"Time has no meaning here," Hinndal replied sourly.

"That is not helpful, fiend," Kheone said with no heat.

"Wasn't meant to be, babe."

She opened her eyes and glared at Hinndal, whose silent pacing carried him back and forth over the worn carpet.

"Fine," Hinndal said. "About a day, as best as I can tell, for enough souls to gather. Your accursed dagger calls to all of us, especially the Shadowed. They're not exactly working off reason and logic."

The light no longer bothered her. Kheone kicked the blanket off and scooted until her back was against the wall, fighting the remaining dizziness.

“So, you came to save us. That doesn’t sound much like you.” Shax’s shadowy form slouched against the door to the shabby motel room. Though he seemed relaxed, a subtle tension to his muscles and his fidgeting fingers told her he was ready for anything.

Hinndal flashed his sharp-toothed grin. His escape route was through the odd physics of Purgatory, not the door. He could vanish in a heartbeat, and there was nothing either Shax or Kheone could do about it. “No, it doesn’t. I’m an...emissary, I guess. From all those souls. We have some questions.”

“We’re not going anywhere.” Shax gestured at her in a carefully neutral manner, but a spark of worry shone bright in his eyes.

Kheone smiled weakly at him. She would be fine with a bit of rest. Of course, she had no idea how much rest she needed.

“When the souls realized I’d known you in the flesh, they made me find you. You should be glad they did. There are others here who won’t be as forgiving.”

“What is there to forgive?” Kheone demanded. “Most of the souls must be human, and I’ve only ever protected them. The angels would welcome me, and the demons...well, if I killed them once, I could do it again.”

“Kheone, please,” Shax said.

She glowered at him but held her tongue, out of energy to argue with a damned demon. Either of them.

“I like her. She has fire. Most angels I’ve been unfortunate enough to meet are sad, quiet pisspots,” Hinndal said, turning his gaze to Shax.

Kheone’s face twitched as she fought the urge to say or do something she might later regret. Her fingers flexed at her side, looking for a weapon that wasn’t there.

“You still haven’t asked any questions, Hinndal,” Shax said, keeping his voice bland.

“They want to know—hell, so do I—how you came to be here in the flesh and if you can fix whatever went wrong. Things have been weird, Shax. You told me you didn’t know where I’d be going, so imagine my surprise when I woke here after you killed me, my body gone. My fucking cell phone gone. Thanks for that, asshole.”

A genuine smile graced Shax’s mouth. “Thought you might appreciate your freedom from the infernal device.”

Hinndal answered Shax’s smile with one of his own. “It wouldn’t be so bad if it wasn’t so damned boring. How long have I been here, anyway?”

Another punch to the gut, another reminder she’d tied her fate to a demon. A demon was going to do demonic things, like killing other demons, and Shax was a demon. Kheone had killed demons too, but he refused to hold that against her; she should extend him the same courtesy.

“Before we arrived here, it had been, oh, two weeks. Maybe a little less.” His amber gaze met hers, and a somber cloud fell over him. “Hinndal is the only being I’ve killed since the Second Fall, Kheone, and I haven’t killed anyone else since.”

She uncrossed her arms and took a deep breath, giving him a quick nod. Shax was a person, not just a demon.

“It feels like both years ago and only yesterday.” Hinndal leaned against the wall and ran a hand through his hair. “Each moment is exactly the same as all the others. The sky is always the same color, the air always the same temperature, enough to drive you mad.”

“Are you?” Kheone asked.

In answer, Hinndal gave her a Cheshire grin. “We’re all mad here, angel-face.”

Her jaw clenched, and once again she attempted to seize a nonexistent weapon.

“Knock it off, asshat,” Shax said. “Kheone understands we’re all broken. Get on with why you’re here before I change my mind about being polite.”

“If you entered this place without dying, there is a way out. I need a way out. All of us do. This place sucks. It won’t be long before I’ll be begging you to run your blade through my heart rather than stay here another minute.”

A hush fell over the room, and Hinndal slumped against the wall, his exuberance leaving him as he admitted his despair. When the Gates to Heaven and Hell had collapsed in Michael’s ill-advised attempt to free Lucifer, there had been no avenue home for the angels or demons caught outside. Only when she had found a note from her friend Serel after he died had it occurred to Kheone all the souls—angel, demon, and human—would come to Purgatory, waiting until someone rebuilt the Gates.

That was almost as bad as disappearing into nothingness. Stuck in Purgatory, they were doomed to become shadows as the madness took them.

Kheone pushed aside the sympathy rising in her at the plight of Shax’s friend and speculated on the consequences. Eventually, Purgatory would fill with souls unable to go anywhere else. What then? It could ruin the balance between the celestial realms and doom everyone to oblivion. Maybe even God. They needed to rebuild the Gates. But how?

“What if we offered an alternative to oblivion?” Shax asked quietly, his gaze finding hers. Trust me, he mouthed.

Hinndal’s face brightened. “Really?”

“Since the Gates were destroyed using magic, there must be a means to rebuild them. Michael never would have killed Serel if there wasn’t,” Kheone said, following Shax’s lead.

Of course, Michael had in his possession the only copy of the book holding the spell, as well as Serel’s notes about how to undo the mess. Hinndal wasn’t ready for that information, not yet.

“Michael killed Serel?” Hinndal leaned forward and pressed his fingers together. “Do tell.”

“Long story, mate. I’ll fill you in later,” Shax said.

His friend frowned and muttered something which sounded suspiciously like, “You always say that.”

“Do you know a way back to Earth?” Kheone asked. “If we can return, we can work on rebuilding the Gates.”

“Seriously?” Hinndal looked at Shax, hope shining in his eyes.

The only other demon she’d seen display hope was Shax, and it radiated from him whenever he looked at her. It was strangely moving.

“Seriously,” Shax said.

“You can count on me.” Hinndal threw an arm out in an expansive gesture. “Even Hell is better than this place. At least there’s beer.”

