

A Memory of Wings

by Emily Michel

Chapter One

Searing pain danced across Shax's shoulders as sleep attempted to pull him down into its blissful release. The old, familiar agony reminded him he could once soar.

"Shit," he said, his voice a ragged whisper in the darkness.

He sat up, half grateful the pain had roused him before he made an even bigger mistake. The sound of soft breaths from the naked man sleeping next to him broke the quiet. Shax hadn't set out to fuck anyone last night, and he sure as Hell hadn't planned on sleeping over. He hated falling asleep and avoided it whenever possible. It wasn't the sleep part, it was the falling part. He'd had enough falling for one demonic lifetime. The pain now rippling through his body emphasized the hazards of his new life.

But the man's kind, gray eyes, shining like liquid silver in the dimly lit room, reminded him of—he tore his thoughts away from the past. An itch had needed scratching, a wham-bam-thank-you-man liaison. It had nothing to do with the nearly identical eyes plaguing his dreams.

He slid out of the bed, barely rustling the sheet half covering him, and stepped over the blankets puddled on the floor. Shax found his jeans where he'd dropped them, right next to what's-his-name's pants. Graceful as a cat, he put them on without a sound and stared at his bedfellow for a moment, watching the near silent rise and fall of his chest. He gave in to temptation and rifled through the other's jeans.

Ah, there.

Shax thumbed through the man's wallet and pocketed the cash, leaving the credit cards and identification. Losing the cash was a minor nuisance compared to replacing a fucking driver's license, a pain in the ass he'd only wish on his worst enemy. Tucking the wallet back where he found it, Shax pushed aside a twinge of guilt and resumed the search for his own clothes.

He pulled on a soft, gray t-shirt and ran his hand through his hair. It was impossible to straighten the snowy white mess. He shoved his arms into his black leather jacket and picked up his boots. With a last glance at the sleeping form, he snuck from the room, closing the door with a soft snick behind him.

Shax plopped down on the chair next to the stairwell and sighed. Still trembling from his rude awakening, he dragged on his socks and crammed his feet into his boots. Tromping down the stairs, he kicked himself for not leaving before things got all snuggly. For the thousandth time in the last year, he reminded himself the best way to stay alive

was to stick to the plan. And banging some hotel hottie was not part of the plan, no matter the color of his eyes.

He strode across the hotel lobby, his footsteps echoing on the tiled floor. The hair on his arms stood up. Just his luck to be discovered while sneaking away from an ill-conceived liaison. Shax slowed and glanced around.

Only the desk clerk.

The young woman watched his tall, whipcord-lean frame with an appreciative stare. He gave her his best smile. When she blushed, he finished with a jaunty wave. He stepped through the automatic doors and onto the streets of St. Louis. The Arch was a shining beacon reflecting the golden streetlights in the dark, wintry night.

His own shitty motel room, a mere two miles away, waited for him. Shax turned up the collar of his jacket and shoved his hands into the pockets. Even after a year, he was still getting used to the fragility of this body. The rules had changed, and he was no longer immune to the elements as he had been on prior visits to Earth when he had the full power of Hell coursing through his veins.

The denizens of the impoverished neighborhood he traversed scattered before him, some disappearing down dark alleys, others flattening themselves against the rough walls of buildings, silent and still. Some instinct gave those who paid attention an inkling evil incarnate walked among them. Lucky for them, tonight, Shax preferred to pretend they didn't exist.

A block from his destination, grungy, gnarled fingers reached out from an alley and grabbed his coat. Damn fool.

"Spare a dollar?" a creaky voice called out.

Shax faced his assailant. His amber eyes reflected the meager light, glowing like the otherworldly being he was. The old man with scraggly hair and dirty fingernails let go and backed off, terror gushing from him.

"Get thee behind me, Satan," the man muttered, crossing himself and fading into the darkness of the alley.

A grin stretched Shax's lips. Most people chose not to look too closely, but some just knew.

"Wrong demon, my friend."

He tossed a twenty to the shadow breathing in the alley. The old coot scabbled for the money as Shax moved on.

His fingers numb from the bitter cold, Shax unlocked the door to his motel room and slipped in. He stripped and took a hot shower, chasing away the shivers. A year ago, Shax had enjoyed the best foods, the best beds, and the best lovers, both human and demon, that Hell had to offer. And now he washed off the night in a cheap motel shower. How the mighty had fallen.

Shax slid in between the sheets, the fabric rough on his skin, irritating the red wings indelibly inked on his back, the only remnant of what he'd once been. He tossed and turned as the compulsion took hold of him. A voice pulsed through his mind, hoarse from centuries of screaming curses at God, the Archangels, the Heavenly Host, and, most of all, God's most favored, humankind.

"Find her," Lucifer's voice said, prodding Shax to finish the task set for him a year ago. "Kill her."

He fought it every day. The voice had greeted him when he'd woken up in the Florida swamp a year ago, wings gone, sunburn turning his skin pink, urging Shax to find her. He suppressed it with the aid of copious amounts of tequila and vodka, some weed, and, occasionally, harder drugs. Sex helped, too, the pleasure driving away the residual pain of the first Fall, Lucifer's failed rebellion. Mornings were usually the worst. Any drugs were long metabolized, and lovers left asleep in their own beds, and nothing but the compulsion remained. Last night, he'd gone to bed too late and too sober. He braced for an entire day of fighting the impulse to find her.

Shax gave up trying to sleep when the sun peeked through the gap in his curtains, sending a beam right onto his face. He didn't know whether the hangover or the near-sleepless night was responsible for the pain shooting through his skull, but he knew just the fix. He rummaged through his bag, looking for the oxy he'd lifted off a dealer a few nights ago. Shax washed the pill down with the metallic water from the bathroom tap. God, he wished he had a bottle of vodka in his room, but he'd finished his last one yesterday.

Sitting on the bed, Shax bounced a foot up and down and flipped through the channels. He needed a distraction. There had to be a hundred channels, and he couldn't find a single show to divert his attention from, well, everything. Christ. He needed a good wallow in self-pity, and vodka would ease him into it nicely. Melancholy wasn't part of his customary state of being. In fact, he'd rather enjoyed the past twelve months of freedom, but the one-year anniversary of the destruction of the Gate to Hell seemed an appropriate time to grieve for what he'd lost. The list was short: a friend or two, a few special abilities, and his wings.

He shoved his arms into his jacket and stalked down the street to the liquor store, which should be open by now. Yanking open the barred door, he walked into the tiny space, making a beeline for the cheapest vodka he could find.

"Anything else?" the clerk asked, not quite meeting Shax's gaze.

"Nope." He paid with some of the cash he had, um, liberated.

"Have a nice day."

"It's about to be." Shax raised the bottle in a final salute and left.

Shax hurried down the street, the oxy finally kicking in. Pretty soon, he would drown the need to pull on the string tugging him inexorably toward his prey in various painkillers. He could get back to cramming as much debauchery as possible into his life before the dickbrained angels figured out how to rebuild the Gates.

So focused on drowning out the malevolent voice in his head, he missed the shadowy figure lurking at the bottom of the stairs to his room. A glimpse of fiery hair caught his attention as he placed a booted foot down on a patch of ice in the parking lot. His feet slid out from under him. Shax cradled the bottle of vodka next to his chest and stumbled into the pile of dirty snow behind him.

"Fuuuck," he cried to the heavens.

Low, gray clouds moved in to cover the cold blue of a late February sky. The icy slush threatened to sober him up, but he was in no mood to stand. If fate wanted him sober in a pile of snow, so be it.

A shadowed figure loomed over Shax and intruded upon his examination of the clouds.

"Shax? You okay?" Male and familiar, it took him a moment to place the voice. The last time he'd seen that bearded face topped with red hair had been at Hell's Gate. Shit, they'd found him after he'd worked so hard to get lost. He never wanted to deal with another demon for as long as the Gates remained blocked.

"A momentary existential crisis, Hinndal," Shax said, one corner of his lips twitching up.

"Hate those," the man said with a chuckle. He held out a hand.

Shax grasped it and used the leverage to remedy his prone state. He brushed off the snow.

"Thanks."

He plastered on what he hoped was a welcoming smile and turned to his old friend. The other demon's eyes were black ice, and the teeth showing in his answering grin sharp. It would surprise no one to discover Hinndal was a demon. In fact, he was an ass-licking toady to whatever Duke of Hell he could cozy up to, but Shax didn't hold it against him. One did whatever one had to in order to survive in Hell.

Hinndal pulled him down into an awkward bear hug. Shax patted him on the back, hoping to bring a quick end to the unwanted embrace.

"Where have you been, Shax? Aeshma thought you'd died. I told her you were too perverse to die in the Second Fall."

Thankfully, Hinndal let go.

"Sorry to disappoint Her Grace. Care to come in?" At Hinndal's nod, Shax led the way up to his room. He set the vodka down on the dresser with a loud thump.

Shax's mind fought off the lethargy of the opioid as adrenaline coursed through his system. Hinndal served Duke Aeshma. Getting caught up in her schemes was the last thing Shax needed.

"She's had to learn to live with disappointment." Hinndal settled his chunky butt on the only chair in the room, a hard, rickety thing next to the desk. "Things haven't been easy since we all ended up stuck here on Earth. I'm surprised to find you on your own. Couldn't find a Duke to offer protection? I always told you your attitude would get you in trouble someday."

"Can I pour you a drink?" Shax gestured with the vodka, ignoring the question.

Hinndal grimaced and shrugged. "Beggars can't be choosers, I suppose. Sure."

Shax grabbed the plastic cups the housekeeper left periodically and sloshed in a measure of the cheap stuff. He passed a cup to his guest and raised his own in a toast.

"Cheers, old friend," he said, fixing the vapid smile on his face. What if it was there for all eternity? God, what a horrific fate.

"Cheers!" Hinndal downed his drink in one gulp, wheezing as the rotgut hit his throat.

"Want another?"

"No, thanks. Think I've had all I can handle of that shit. Jesus H, how do you manage?"

Shax poured himself another and sipped. Although this body wasn't as easily intoxicated as the humans who surrounded him, it still wasn't good to mix too much alcohol with those pills. He'd found that out the hard way, passing out in an alley somewhere in Virginia, only to wake half-naked and shoeless. Or had he been half-naked and shoeless before passing out? Either way, it had been a killer trip.

"Well, I'm not in Hell, so I figure anything is better than that."

"That vodka may make you wish for the tender mercies of Lucifer's own torturers."

Shax snorted. There were many other things so much worse than cheap vodka, even here on Earth. "So, you found Aeshma?"

"Didn't have far to go. Came down about half a furlong apart in Montana in the middle of a Goddamn blizzard. We almost froze to death before we found a barn. You?"

"Fucking Florida, about ten feet from an alligator who thought I looked like a snack."

"Well, it wasn't entirely wrong." The hearty guffaw from his comrade drew an almost genuine smile from Shax. "Aeshma will be glad she still has the chance to finish what the gator was too stupid to do."

Mostly, Shax was grateful to whatever or whoever had set off the explosion, destroying the Gate. In a flash of light, the constant torment of Hell was a mere memory, as were his obligations to Lucifer. He'd spent the past year doing whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, answering to no one. It had been the best year of his life since Lucifer's rebellion had failed.

If Aeshma found out Shax was alive, she would take his freedom quicker than he could curse his rotten luck. Joining her would mean giving up most of his autonomy. His only other choice was to run. It was one thing to keep off the Duke's radar, another thing entirely to avoid pursuit. In that moment, Shax knew Hinndal needed to die before he informed Aeshma of his survival. Another loss to grieve.

"What makes you think I'm coming with you to see Aeshma?" Shax sipped at the vodka again, keeping his voice steady. No need to tip off the other demon.

"She's the only Duke left. Haven't you heard? Michael is down here, and he is on a self-righteous mission to kill every last demon on Earth. He's got himself a small army, and they're hunting us down."

The Archangel Michael did nothing subtly. If the bastard had made that much progress, Shax was officially screwed. As if this day couldn't get any worse, he now had to deal with a ticking bomb, and the being holding the detonator was God's right hand.

"All the more reason for me to disappear. Joining up with Aeshma will only make the target bigger. You should come with me. Michael's smart. He won't worry about two insignificant demons when he has a Duke to go after. We'll stay out of his crosshairs."

"Nah. All the demons Michael's killed have been unaffiliated. Aeshma's kept her horde alive so far, and Michael hasn't figured out where we're headquartered. She extends her protection in exchange for loyalty. Your best bet is to jump on her bandwagon. I know you don't trust her, but you can trust me. We've known each other since Troy fell."

Poor fool. The duke certainly would protect her minions until the choice was between them or her. Then she'd choose herself and sacrifice her loyal demons to whatever would keep her alive for a little longer. Shax had garnered a reputation for being many things, but reckless wasn't one of them. He'd only join Aeshma if there was no other choice, and if Hinndal told her he was here, Shax would have no other choice. Experience told him his best chance against the other demon was surprise.

"Sure you don't want more?" Shax pointed at the vodka bottle, stalling.

"Nah. Aeshma would be pissed if I called her drunk. You wanna say hello?" Hinndal fumbled with a cell phone and tapped on it.

"Yeah, but I don't have to be sober, do I?"

The other demon snorted and shook his head.

"Cursed things never work right." He glared at the phone. "You any better at this? I liked the third century a whole lot better than this one."

"Let me pour myself another drink, and I'll help."

Hinndal's attention now on the phone, Shax got up as though moving to the bottle of vodka on the desk. He pulled a folding knife from his jacket pocket and lunged toward the demon, slicing through his throat before the call completed. Black blood sprayed over the room, covered his boots, and splattered his shirt. Shax snatched the phone out of Hinndal's grip and tossed it to the side as the other demon fell to the floor, choking on his own blood.

"I don't trust anyone," Shax said over the dying demon. "I can't have Her Grace know I'm alive. If it makes you feel any better, you won't be going to Hell. I have no idea where you *will* go, but it won't be there."

Hinndal tried to gasp, but Shax had done his job well. He had severed the artery and sliced through the demon's trachea, making breathing and speaking impossible. A horrible death rattle escaped from the gash on Hinndal's neck, and the bleeding ceased as his heart stopped.

Shax stumbled to the bathroom and wiped off the blood with a towel. Within an hour, it would disappear from the room and his clothes. At sunset, so would Hinndal's body. He searched the demon's pockets and found a wad of twenties. Satan's balls, there must be a thousand dollars here. He tucked the money into his jacket and waited.