

## My Scythe-Wielding Queen - by J.M. Felic

### Prologue

#### The Queen in Gehenna

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A stench unlike anything Solene encountered wafted through her nose the moment she came to consciousness. It was so strong, so revolting; she gagged and spat out saliva onto the ground.

Quickly, she raised her head and searched for the source of the terrible smell. There was none in front of her, none on her left or right too, but behind her...it was another story. A wall of dirty white spiky scales towered above her. Easily, her mind registered it as a monster. She gasped and desperately crawled away; fearing for her safety; fearing for her life.

How did she arrive in this place and next to a beast? That was the question she didn't have an answer to, and unfortunately, she didn't also have the time to figure it out as scrambling away was her top priority.

Her palms and knees hit the black sand. She thought it would have been an easy escape, but even the feel of the sand made her grimace. It was hot and prickly and it created bruises on her skin, so she instead rose to her feet and ran.

She was able to cover some good meters away from the monster until she glanced back, and when she did, her brows quickly furrowed.

She saw that the monster oddly remained on the same spot, immovable even, and that's when she realized it wasn't chasing her. She clenched her teeth, stopped, and despite her fear, decided to examine the behemoth.

She neared it again. Slowly. Cautiously. Went to the front of the monster and found its state gag-inducing.

With sharp claws and fangs unlike anything Solene had seen, it screamed deadly. Even the spiky scales covering up its body promised painful death. Solene could have sworn the monster was about to attack her earlier, but looking at it now, she realized it was already dead. The exposed muscle and ribs were the obvious indicators.

Maggots and other unknown insects feasted on it, but Solene was sure another bigger creature had made a buffet out of it before. The bites and claws marks told her so.

Whatever liquid had seeped out of its organs, it made the sands even darker than it already was. It looked to be dead almost two days to three. Half of its body had actually decomposed, half of it not. The decomposing side explained the putrid smell around her.

Solene gagged again once she realized her dirty condition. A good bath with an aromatic soap and shampoo would perfectly rid her of this problem, she thought, but the sudden idea of a bath made her pause and blink.

“Where am I again?” she muttered to herself, her face devoid of any recognition. Her eyelids blinked fast. Her forehead wrinkled. Her irises dilated and constricted, trying to make sense of her surroundings, trying to fish out a memory...any memory to tell her the name of the place, but none came.

She circled and studied the gloomy area she was in—a barren place filled with nothing but sand and sand—and she clenched her teeth. “How did I...actually got here? What is this place? Where is this place?”

She continued to question until her attention fell on her clothes.

She was wearing jeans that had become dirty from earlier, boots, and a loose white shirt that, to her surprise, was tainted with blood.

*Blood*, her mind processed, and it immediately weakened her knees and knocked the air out of her lungs. She fell on the ground thereafter. Her eyes started welling up with tears.

“I died... I think I died.” Her voice shook. Her hands trembled. “Is this...is this the Afterlife?”

She tried to think deeper, tried to cultivate her memories even harder, but they just wouldn’t come back.

“How did I die? Why did I die? Why can’t I remember!”

She tossed her head against the sand, huffed again and gnashed her teeth. Tears now streamed at the corner of her eyes, moving toward her forehead instead of her cheeks because of the very position she was in.

Profound grief enveloped her, and it looked like it wasn't ending anytime soon. It was dicing her heart. It was crushing her whole being.

What Solene did remember were tidbits of her life on Earth: her status as a conjurer, her training of using her powers, the feel of the grimoire in her hands, having a loving family, marrying a Lord of a famous clan, and loving him with all her heart.

Everything else was a blur: their faces, their names—basically all the important information that would have helped her understand the current situation she was in.

Would have chased the pain of loss away.

"*Welcome to Gehenna*," a disembodied voice suddenly filled her head. It was echoic, female-like but with a touch of terror. It gave Solene chills the moment she realized she may not be alone in such a deserted place after all.

She sat up straight and angled her head up towards the gloomy sky, consequently making her tears fall down her cheeks.

"Who are you?" she asked audibly, trying to contain her fear from slipping through her disordered heart.

She took a deep breath, enough to calm herself down. Her grief was still present, but attending to it now wasn't the right time.

When the voice didn't answer, Solene cried louder. "Who are you? Tell me!"

"I am nobody. I am everyone. I exist nowhere. I exist everywhere," the voice replied with a confusing riddle. "I only appear inside the minds of those souls sent to this place. Guide them. Help them. Ruin them..."

"You confuse me," Solene muttered whilst standing up. The "ruin" part gave her another chill. It was indicative of two things: either someone was really out there talking to her or that it was her mental voice all along trying to twist her senses.

"Gehenna, where is this place?" she tried to ask, testing both her theories.

"The Land of the Dead beyond the *Land of the Dead*. Salvation gone. Salvation lost. No turning back whence you came. No hope for those souls

damned,” the disembodied voice answered again with a riddle, and this made Solene even more confused.

Diverting her focus instead to the physical clues she had—the blood stains on her shirt, the gaping hole in her chest, the dead monster a few distance away from her, and the unearthly color of the sky—she knew she wasn’t on Earth anymore.

And this, in turn, produced more tears in her eyes.

She didn’t expect the Afterlife could provide her this salty liquid, but it was a welcomed fact she clung onto. It made her feel alive, at least. I made her feel *human*.

“Damn it,” Solene muttered under her breath and wiped her tears away. Now was not the time to be weak, she thought. Now was the time to be logically minded. “You said you would guide souls. I’m guessing I am a soul, so guide me.” She looked up at the sky and in every direction of the sand and waited...waited for the disembodied voice to answer again.

But instead of words, the entity just gave a sign, a bright one, showing a doorway filled with light some meters away.

“Welcome to Gehenna,” the voice said again. “Be damned forever.”

That didn’t sound right, Solene thought, but she had no choice. She couldn’t stay in this gloomy desert and rot like the scaly monster forever. There was always a possibility this monster had a killer—another monster perhaps, and that there was a high chance she’d likely meet it if she wouldn’t leave the place.

Plus, at least beyond the doorway, it had light. Light meant good. Light meant hope—well, for her that is.

As Solene strode to the doorway, she could feel her heart thrumming against her ribcage. Once again, she realized, this was something unexpected in the Afterlife. She was a soul now. Souls weren’t supposed to have this life-sustaining muscle.

“If this place has something as intricate as a beating heart then I’m guessing the feeling of pain is no exception,” Solene mused, cautious now of any danger possibly lurking in the shadows.

When she crossed the opening, light surrounded her for a moment until it dissipated and gave her a clearer view of what was behind the doorway.

*Shit*, she cursed.

The light was misleading. The light didn't promise goodness or hope. No. Not one bit.

In front of her, a great valley stood, and it was nowhere near homely or touristy. It was filled with rivers and waterfalls of lava; steams she hoped wasn't toxic; skulls, and bones, and decaying matter as far as her eyes could reach.

There were trees, but they looked scorched to the root. There was no hint of water, or even a clear blue sky. There was no hint of life.

Searing heat surrounded her. Pricked her skin. Burned her skin hairs. Solene winced and winced some more because of this.

"Be damned forever," the echoing voice said again, as if a broken record in Solene's head.

She hissed in reply. "I don't deserve to stay in this place!"

Still expecting the portal present, she whirled around and tossed sharp glares, but instead of a deserted environment, she met the same rough terrain.

Her breathing doubled. Her pulse throbbed against her throat.

The place has indeed delivered one message:

It was a cesspool of despair, of suffering and death.