

Chapter 1 - The Queen Fights

Despite the harrowing picture in front of her, Solene moved forward to the inner valley, to a path she believed was safe enough to trek on. She didn't have a choice. She couldn't stay in her spot too long for it had the same depressing element as the others.

Again, the portal that admitted her had disappeared. Solene couldn't backtrack her steps now even if she wanted to.

Heat continued to scorch her skin the entire time she ambled the precarious path. Now a soul, Solene expected this would have no effect on her, but she thought wrong. Like her heart wildly thumping against her ribcage, like the sweat collecting on her forehead and temple, and like the hot breath licking her lungs, the burn on her skin was real.

It wouldn't be right if it wasn't, she thought.

This was Gehenna. The land of the dead inside the *Land of the Dead* as per what that disembodied voice said. If all evil souls were to end up here, they were due to pay for their sins through unimaginable hardships.

She accepted the whole design. What she couldn't understand was why she was sent here. As far as she was concerned and as far as her memories could take her, she lived a life as a law-abiding citizen. She loved and cared for her family. She stayed true to her husband—whoever he was—and she didn't kill anyone or anything. Yet.

Her life as a full-fledged conjurer was just starting. She was supposed to become one on her birthday, but then she died...

"Damn it," Solene muttered as her ankle got nicked by a black coral-like stone and drew blood. The majority of the ground she threaded on was made out of it and despite the blunt edges jutting from all sides, it still promised danger.

"I guess first-aid is underrated here," she stated, hoping the simple wound wouldn't infect and fester.

Carefully, she continued forward until she found herself on top of a hill. This spot provided her a good view of the other side of the lava valley and it was extensive.

Instead of lava and prickly stones, golden to brown sand bathed the land. Sand dunes were everywhere, looking like playful waves from where she stood. There wasn't any sign of green or blue within her view indicating trees or water but this was a promising land than the valley.

Delaying no further, Solene crossed boundaries, jumping from one black palette to a golden one.

'*So far, so good,*' her mind cried out as nothing happened when her boots touched the sand. This was Gehenna after all. She expected some kind of a surly surprise but at least one of it wasn't a corrosive ground.

Already parched from her walk past the valley, she marched forward into unknown destination. One consolation for her was the absence of the sun. There wasn't one glaring ball of light in the dull sky. At least her thirst wouldn't triple but she knew she still needed that element sooner or later. It wasn't life-sustaining since basically she was already dead, but she figured, since all her vital organs were still working, she had to find water soon.

And luckily, after what seemed like hours and hours of walking, she found a flat, compact clearing with what looked like a covered well in the center. Around it, vegetation was sparse to none and what could have been a possible greenery, dead trees existed.

Solene scoffed.

The whole set-up was either for effect or Gehenna just had some twisted sense of humor.

Approaching the well was so far so good. Drinking from its surprisingly cool water using an available bucket was uneventful too. All was fine except minutes later when Solene heard cackling sounds somewhere behind the dead trees.

She dropped the bucket and shuffled backward.

Shit! Her mind yelled.

Of course, such a promising spot wouldn't exist without a price. If the well was a trap then she fell right into it. Damn.

"What do we have here?" a burly man stepping out from the trees wheezed. He was easily a seven-footer, with an unshaved beard and dreadlocked hair. Cosplaying like a merciless pirate captain, he swung his curved sword in front of him and licked the blade; his glowing red eyes directed at Solene's small frame.

"A fresh new soul, boss," another man of the same height emerged from the trees. This one had chains around his naked neck screaming bloody murderer. Dirty jeans hung low on his ripped waist while a spiky club dangled back and forth as he moved.

"And not just a new soul, a woman!" screeched the third, joining them in Solene's distressed line of sight. He was smaller than the two, lanky and white-skinned, but nonetheless dangerous.

"And a beautiful, scrumptious one at that!" the one called boss exclaimed with a wicked grin on his face, giving Solene a lascivious once-over.

They all burst into a fit of laughter; each baritone sound a warning bell in her head.

She staggered back and clenched her hands hard enough that her knuckles turned pale.

"Back-off," she warned, giving them an unbreakable glare.

"Oohhh, fiesty," they all mockingly cooed. Instead of heeding her word, they pressed forward into a haunting formation.

"I said back-off!" Solene stepped back again, this time into the shifty sand where her balance would mostly give way any second. "If you don't want to face consequences, then you'd do well to leave me be!" She acted cool despite this though. She couldn't give them the pleasure of seeing her losing focus or worse afraid.

These men were mostly criminals during their hay days. Why else would they be in this hopeless place if not? They looked like seasoned souls too, probably dead for decades or millennia judging from the bravado they showed.

Mr. Chain Man moved closer to her. Solene flicked her eyes to him.

“Oh, she’s acting, boss,” the lanky one announced, flashing his canines. He was also mimicking his comrade’s movements.

“You do know you’re in Gehenna, sweetling, right?” the boss demanded Solene’s attention again.

“Yes, so what?” She raised her chin and brow, not really following what he was talking about.

“What this means is that whatever you did in your previous life, it was so cruel, so nasty that your soul was instantly listed for this place.”

“I have done no such!” Solene spat out, instantly offended by his accusation.

“Ooooooh,” they all cooed again, every note a mockery.

“Me thinks you’re in denial, sweetling.”

Sweetling. The appellation hit Solene in a way that it made her gag. It reminded her of someone who used it before she died, but unfortunately, she couldn’t quite figure out just who.

“New souls sometimes do that until their memories return and haunt them and they realize they deserve this kind of damnation,” the boss explained. She preferred to call him Maniac number one.

“I think she’s a whore, boss,” Mr. Chain Man, or Maniac number two, licked his lower lip. His tongue was shaped like a snake’s, totally far from that of a human’s.

Could this be a half-demon? Solene’s eyes widened, feeling grossed out with the revelation. Were they all half-demons?

Such a thing wasn’t impossible at all. Again, she was in the land of evil. She was bound to come across one sooner or later.

“Me thinks the same too,” Maniac One agreed. “A vengeful, nymphomaniac whore whose life only revolves to suck dicks like ours.”

This was the last straw. “I warn you...BACK. OFF.”

Invisible energy emerged from her clenched hands. It was pulsating and ready to explode. She didn't have the grimoire with her and she currently only remembered a few spells, but she could feel a great source of power inside her.

Whether she could tap it at will was a mystery still, but right here, right now would be a great time to test it out.

"All the delicious ones are already imprisoned in Caym's castle. I want this one for myself. Go get her boys!"

Maniac One thrust his sword, pointing it on Solene's way. His two lackeys sprinted on each side, arms at the ready to seize her. Their eyes were filled with wicked excitement but then it instantly changed to utter surprise when Solene halted their attacks with a pulsing blue wave from her hands.

The contact sent the three sprawling on the sand; the force of the hit extracted a sore on their butts and spine.

"She's a conjurer whore?!" the lanky half-demon bellowed.

"Fuck! She's even worth more now than just cock-sucking!" Their boss rose to his feet as quick as lightning. "FUCKING AFTER HER!"

Solene was already a good distance away from them when they chased her. Everytime her boots hit the sand, it created a depression, sucking in her feet, but she tried with all her might to run as fast as she could anyway.

"Spells, don't fail me now!" she shouted as she released another pulsing wave towards them.

Unable to dodge, the three were sent flying back, hitting the well in the process.

"You fucking bitch! I'll saw your head in half!" Their boss hurled his curved sword towards Solene but she deflected it with her energy shield.

She continued to run, randomly taking a new path over the sand dunes.

With revenge crawling on their skin, they stormed ahead, following Solene's tracks within the sand.

Their long legs provided them an advantage. Distance was cut in half. In their minds, they were already celebrating, but then the ground shook.

“Boss...” Chain Man abruptly stopped and threw a defensive arm in front of his leader.

Their eyes were trained ahead, fear swirling in its depths.

“Shit! Let’s skedaddle!” the lanky man worriedly cried out.

All three didn’t wait for another second to pass. Like a scared pussy, they all ran the other way, leaving Solene on her own.

“Oh fuck,” she muttered as she stopped in her tracks.

In front of her, a creature appeared from the ground. She became one with the ants in that instant, feeling minute, tiny, fucking insignificant in the face of a behemoth.

“Oh, god, can this get any worse?”

Her breathing deepened. She wasn’t ready to face such an adversary yet. However, she was left without an option.