



The question is not whether LT Sarah MacLocklin is ready to walk the dark corridors of Hell to the Gates of Heaven. The question is...are they ready for her?!

Hell's Blade

By R.L. Pool

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R.L. POOL

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Chapter 1

“If I were to visit Hell...”

She woke and sat up. She wiped the drool from her mouth with the back of her hand and looked about furtively.

“Where the Hell am I?” she muttered.

The forest was deep and the brisk chill of impending winter cut through the soft cotton of her red checked shirt. She brushed her hands on the denim jeans as she stood barefoot and, with a slight crouch, looked about. The small fire crackled but she felt... lost.

She caught a snatch of movement out of the corner of her eye. Whipping her head around, she took a step forward, a twig snapping under her bare foot. The sounds of the forest stopped. Only the crackle of the flames reached her ears, along with the pounding of her heart. Then she heard something... something...

“Clay?” she called softly. “Is that you?”

He was probably still pissed after she told him she hadn’t refilled her birth-control prescription. He had a weekend of frolic in mind and she, according to him, had let him down.

She’d met him in the parking lot at Great Shipman Park and he seemed to be a nice guy. After only a mile of hiking the Richmond Trailhead, it was obvious what he really wanted. After a couple of hours, he led her off of the trail to a secluded area and started making camp... tent, beer and everything. He kept making suggestive

remarks and grinning seductively until she told him she wasn't interested.

"I could have had any of the girls in the parking lot, Sarah." he'd said petulantly. "But I chose you. Why are you being such a... *bitch?*"

"Practice I guess." she'd retorted angrily.

He'd sat across the small fire he'd built... probably illegal here, but there was a fire ring of stones that had been left there previously so... He sucked down three Coors while he glared at her. Then, unsteadily, he'd crawled into the tent and passed out.

She'd left her jacket and boots in there with him with her pack and didn't want to try to get them. That might wake the bastard up. So, she sat with her knees up to her chest and laid her chin to her knees in front of the fire. She sipped at the Lone Star she'd brought and chewed on the jerky from the Ziploc she'd managed to sneak out of her pack. She wondered how she'd let this jerk get under her skin.

Sometime later she probably dozed off and now...

Clay was gone, the tent was gone and her plans to hike with the handsome Clayton Hausser through the Virginia countryside were gone as well. She only had two weeks before she had to report to her company in Fort Hood for deployment.

She seemed to be locked into some kinda... nightmare. No tent. No pack. No boots and... her jerky was gone too!

She heard the noise again, but this time she seemed to hear it as if from a distance; dim voices in the darkness far from her. She sighed, sat close to the small fire and rested her chin to her knees. If Clay was gone...

The sound of horses and screams came through the forest like a stray banshee escaped from a fantasy prison. Then she heard the barking of several guns. Her training brought her to her feet and her warrior's curiosity sent her to the edge of her small camp.

She ran back to the fire, scooped handfuls of dirt to cover it and, moving as quickly as she could on bare feet, ran toward the sound of pain, fear and gunfire.

Sticks and rocks bit at tender feet too used to boots. Braying, panicked horses stomped the air above her head as she broke through branches and into a clearing.

"This wasn't covered at basic training," she muttered, managing to avoid the flailing hooves.

Some long-forgotten instinct had her grabbing at the reins and fighting to keep the horse calm. It was only when the beast had subsided that she remembered the all too human screams. Over the pounding of her heart, she heard a gun being cocked.

Her instincts told her to look to identify the threat. Her training told her to mount fast and ride hard. She did both.

The gun fired. She had no idea where the bullet went but the horse bolted. They charged through an unknown forest at breakneck

speed. Branches scratched at her face like the long, twisted fingers of some hellish horror, enraged by her attempt to escape.

Suddenly she burst through the cover of trees into a large clearing headed straight for the edge of a cliff. The horse balked, skidded to a stop, and flung her to the ground. Momentum kept her tumbling towards the precipice, fingers scrabbling to slow down... but she rolled over the edge. One hand reached to grab something... *anything*...

Thick fingers wrapped about her forearm and she instinctively grabbed at the large wrist attached. She glanced up and her fear increased but she didn't let go. Instead of being drawn to the top of the cliff, she now hung below the leathery wings of a large, gray... manthing. He... for the gender was obvious to any who looked, held her arm gently though firmly and glided toward the other side of the deep gorge and the dark opening in its face. She shuddered but held on.

Two shots rang out, one on the heels of the other. The... thing that held her lurched and the big hand seemed to loosen its grip. She glanced up again to see the light gray blood pulsing from the wound in the large arm that held her. She reached up with her other hand, covered the wound and squeezed tight hoping to stop the bleeding.

Instead of the opening, they flew toward the cliff face. She let go, preferring to plummet rather than to be smashed to death against the

solid rock! At least she knew she'd wake up before she reached the bottom.

He, however, held on tighter. She closed her eyes and grabbed the wrist again, prepared for the crush of stone against her body. She opened her eyes slightly as the rocky side of the gorge loomed ahead and held her breath. Incredibly, they passed through the stone of the mountainside and into a well-lit cave. The bat-winged man dropped her. She tucked and rolled coming to a stop before a heavy, rough stone throne.

The man on the throne, a tall, dark-haired beast of a man with one eye, it scarred with a slash that started at his forehead and down through the left eye to his jaw, stood quickly and glared at the intrusion. She ignored him and ran to see about the manthing who dropped to his knees in pain while holding the bleeding arm.

"What is the meaning of this, Xander!" the scar-faced man shouted sternly. "This is *my* Hall and *my* domain! *Answer me!*"

"If you'll give me a moment..." Sarah began as she ripped the left sleeve from her shirt and wrapped it about the bleeding wound.

"I will give you nothing!" he shouted. "You will stand before me and..."

"Shut the fuck up, asshole!" she shouted back.

The big man stormed toward her as she brought the creature's other hand to the wound to press down on it. Then, as she rose and turned toward the oncoming scar-face, she brushed her hands on her

tight jeans to remove some of the gray blood and then put her fists to her hips.

"You will not address me so!" he shouted as he came toward her menacingly.

"Look, pal," she shouted back angrily, "I woke up and I wasn't where I was supposed to be, some som-bitches were making folks scream, I run toward the screaming and almost get shot in the back! I jump on a horse that runs through the fucking forest straight at a cliff and throws me over!"

The big man stopped and stared incredulously as the girl continued angrily, "This... *guy* rescued me and brought me here!" The man took a step back as the girl went on, "My feet hurt, my clothes stink and I'm pissed as Hell! I don't know who the fuck you are, where the fuck I am or how the fuck I'm supposed to get home! This nightmare has gone on long enough and I'm real fucking tired of it! Now, if you're gonna give me shit, bring it! Otherwise, *fuck off!*"

"But..." the big man began, a little shocked at the direct way this lithe girl addressed him. "Who are you?"

"Sarah MacLocklin," she replied tartly as she brushed the short brown hair from her face, "First Lieutenant in the 509th Med Battalion, 1st Cav. Now, if you don't have any other stupid fucking questions, I need to figure out how I'm gonna dig a bullet out of my buddy's arm without utensils, sterilize the wound without meds, sew

it up without sutures and then figure out how I'm gonna get outta here without any idea as to where here is! Suggestions?"

In answer, a soft baritone voice reached out from behind her.

"Your last concern should be the only one left now, m'lady."

She spun and looked up into the soft dark eyes of the creature that had saved her. Ram horns grew from his gray forehead to curl about his pointed ears and the small fangs in his upper teeth... in place of incisors... showed in the gentle smile.

He held a hand to her and she saw the distorted ball of lead lying in his palm. With a quick look at his wound, it was healing as she watched.

"I am Xander of Marcel's Legion." he said softly. "My Lord Zeridon is lord of this realm... the third level of what you would call... Hell."

"Shit!" she said softly but with excessive force as she spun to look at the angry face of the one-eyed lord, her nightmare becoming more complicated as it went along.

"Look, guy... uh... I mean Lord." she began as she looked into the brooding angry eye, "I'm sorry, okay? My buddy was hurt and I didn't know he could... heal himself like that. I was kinda... worried about him. Okay?"

"No, it is certainly not... *okay*, young woman!" he replied sternly, his angry eye looking Sarah up and down. "You are not supposed to be here!"

“You’re telling me?” she asked rhetorically.

“Yes!” he shouted angrily. “Are you deaf?”

“Look.” she responded after a deep, calming sigh. “I know I’m not supposed to be here and if you’ll point me to the door marked *Home*, I’ll leave you to your... Hell. All I wanna do is wake up and have a good laugh at this shit.”

“It is not quite that simple, Sarah.” came Xander’s gentle voice from behind her. As she turned to him with a frown, he continued, “Here on this level there is a portal to the... living world, yet it opens to a parallel Earth... and obviously not yours. Should you simply walk out through that portal, you will be prey to evil beyond your comprehension. That is why Lord Zeridon sends us out periodically to patrol.

“Our mission is to reduce or completely dismantle the Akitre warrior cult that preys upon the living there. They are... despicable creatures who feed on the souls and flesh of those without that portal, and cause pain and suffering that should never have been allowed. It was only luck that brought your plight to my attention.” Then, with a strange look at the brown-haired girl, “This is not a dream, Sarah. I do not know why, but you *are* here and, sadly, there is nothing for you to do but find your way through to the end.”

“And the Akitre we knew would attack Dediso?” Lord Zeridon asked sternly.

“They took three, m’lord.” Xander responded over Sarah’s head. “I killed four but then I sensed Sarah’s plight. They rode away with the young and I flew to save Sarah.”

“You should have let her die, Xander.” the lord responded sadly as he turned and walked heavily back to his throne. “Those children will be turned and become the evil we face daily.”

“You saved me instead of...” Sarah asked softly with a sad look at the creature named Xander. “I agree with your lord, buddy. You should’ve let me fall before letting anybody take kids away.” With a glance at Zeridon, she asked, “What do you mean, *turned*?”

“Before I came here,” Zeridon said softly as he sat with his elbows on his knees and wringing his hands, “this portal was accessed by denizens of the seventh and sixth level of Hell. Hadis and Bumphram made a pact and sent their demons to invade. One of those they took was the love of my life... now centuries gone. I fought their hordes for years and only with the gift of a special sword I was provided was I able to beat them back and send them into the depths. Afterward, I made a pact with... the guardians of the Gates to Heaven to accept this post to keep those monsters from ever reaching this portal again and, as a bonus, my love now basks in the splendor of the All Mighty.

“Yet those demons that had already escaped... stole the bodies of the populace... without their permission I might add... and now the Akitre, as they are known, attack periodically to sup on the souls of

the people and steal their young. I do not even want to think of the torture those young people will endure at the hands of..."

"Don't you have an army?" Sarah interrupted. "Can't you send them all out there and kill all of those monsters once and for all?"

"At what cost?" asked the lord softly. "These men and women have served their time in Hell, spent their lives as soldiers in both good and evil armies and were sent here for punishment. I see that they are not punished beyond having to wear the vestiges of demons and not seeing the face of the One. I too was... *am* a soldier and know what this life can do to gentle souls. Am I to further punish them by having them die out there and have their souls wander aimlessly for an eternity?"

"But I thought that they can heal..."

"Here, m'lady." Xander responded softly. "Out there we can die, but can no longer return here. Our souls will forever wander the world, knowing all that transpires but having no way to stand with them or even let them know we are about. I have friends... *many* friends... who have been lost in our battle with the Akitre in the past and I mourn them. When I am out there, I talk to them... though I know they cannot respond." He sighed and added, "Besides, we can only last outside of this realm for seven days. Otherwise, we will weaken and die, again not able to return here."

"The Akitre?" she asked with a glance between Xander and the lord of the realm.

“Being half-breed demons allows for them to live in either world and, as long as they have bodies at their disposal, eternal life.” stated Zeridon.

“So if they’re dying or getting too old...”

“They invade the bodies of the young and those souls are forfeit.” Xander replied in almost a whisper. “If we kill the bodies and they can reach another within one hour, they can again live to spread their taint throughout the world. They feed on the souls of others, draining their blood for their supper, but they use captured bodies to continue to live.” He shuddered as he added, “That is why we do not take their bodies from them, Sarah. We would become the same monsters we hunt.”

“Once those who live beyond our portal had four seasons: Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter.” Zeridon added softly. “Now, during the Summer and Fall months, it is called the Feeding Season. That is when we venture out to hold them to as few as is possible.”

“That just... *sucks!*” Sarah exclaimed. “Okay, what do we do about this?”

“What do you mean?” Zeridon asked sternly. “We have told you what we face, woman. What more is there?”

“We can get your sword, go out there and kill them.” she stated angrily. “I don’t have a problem staying out there until I get too old to take those bastards down. Whether this is a dream or not, this shit can’t continue! If I had a weapon that would kill them totally...”

“That was one of the conditions for my bargain.” Zeridon replied with a strange look at the lithe brown-haired girl. “I had to return the blade to the Guardian of Heaven and hold this portal from the demons of the pits. There is no way...”

“What if I ask him?”

“Are you mad?!” Zeridon asked in frustration. “First you must walk through the next two levels to the Gates, while explaining to the lords of those kingdoms that you do not envy their realm, stand before the Guardian and again bargain for the sword and any other weapons he might have that will destroy those demons. I do not relish...”

“I would.” she responded with an angry frown. At his doubtful look, Sarah continued, “Look. I’m a soldier who is looking at her fourth deployment to the middle-east. My luck is running out. So what if I’m killed here doing this shit. At least here I’ll be able to see the reason for my death and maybe save a few kids in the bargain.” She stepped away from the gray... demon and added, “If this is a dream, I need to take control of it until it plays out. What have I got to lose?”

“So you would volunteer...”

“If I get killed out there, I’ll either wake up in a cold sweat, or I might wind up here anyway and I would want to go back out there to kick their asses again!” she stated angrily. “I don’t see a downside!”

"You *are* mad." said the lord as he chuckled and shook his head. "If you are to do this, you must have armor and knowledge of the weapons those use."

"The asshole who shot at me was using a flintlock." she said with a grin. "He missed because he was either too stupid to aim or it was a smoothbore. I've hunted with those and cap-and-ball for years. I make my own bullets, bore my own barrels, with rifling, and carve my own stocks. If I can get to a machine shop, I can build a rifle or pistol that will let me shoot faster and more accurately than the shit they use. I know the body they're using can be killed by shooting them so if I can get most of them and keep them from an available body..."

"She just may be capable of doing what she suggests, m'lord." Xander interrupted with a certain amount of excitement. "If allowed, I would accompany her at the risk of eternal death."

"Yet Hestius knows you, Xander." Zeridon stated with a frown. "If she cannot remove him..."

"Okay." Sarah interrupted with a hand to her hip. "A new wrinkle? Who is... Hiss... whatever?"

"In my... former life," Xander replied, "I was a Roman soldier. During the first century, by your accounting, I was a soldier under Hestius during the Varian War. He was ruthless and clever but led us all to our deaths. Before then I was a simple soldier who joined others in rape, pillaging and plunder of the city-states we conquered."

I suppose I was no better or worse than any other mercenary soldier of my era, my personal pleasures outweighing my good sense. My excuse could be that I knew that I would die one day and...”

“And you figured on getting while the getting was good?” Sarah interrupted softly. “Now?”

“Now I am a demon on the third level of Hell and charged with protecting this portal from those who were worse than I from causing even more evil.” He chuckled and added, “I suppose you could say that this is a step up for me.”

He sighed and continued, “Hestius was sentenced to the seventh level and, too soon to my way of thinking, convinced Hadis that they should attack here and take the world as their own. The edict of the One does not prevent this, though I believe it should, and Hadis led the demons of the seventh and sixth level here in force. We fought them to a draw and sent them back into the depths but not before almost a thousand, to include Hestius, scampered through the portal to this version of Earth. Over the centuries we have thinned his demons by more than half, though it is in my mind that he may also be using mercenaries to serve his lust. He now leads those we have left to kill within that world. If we could but find his lair...”

Sarah nodded as she looked at the thoughtful lord of this realm still sitting motionless on his throne with his chin in the palm of one hand, the elbow to his knee. This shit was getting serious! If she was ever going to wake up...

“So...” she said softly as she walked toward the throne slowly. “I need to kill them but keep them from jumping to another body. Any suggestions? Silver? A crucifix? A wooden stake through the heart? What?”

“Silver would possibly kill the host but freeze their spirit within the husk.” Zeridon said softly. “I suppose you could drive a silver blade through them and...”

“Or shoot them with silver bullets?” she asked as her mind went through tactics and weaponry. “If I shoot them with a silver bullet or with a bullet covered in silver...”

“As long as the silver remains within the body, they are trapped.” he replied with a glance up at her. “If the silver is removed...”

“What about burning the bodies after they’re down?” she pressed. “Would that release them or set them out, like Xander said, to walk the face of the earth as a ghost?”

“I’m not certain, but if there is a possibility...” he responded as he sat up in the throne and looked at the girl with some hope. “You would have to ask a Guardian, but driving the blade through that body afterward...”

“Okay.” she responded, her face still thoughtful. “What about armor? Do I need anything special to keep...”

“You will die if they kill you, Sarah.” Zeridon responded redundantly and with a shrug. “Other than that, a good set of bracers, greaves and some type of breastplate would go a long way to keeping

their blades and bullets from finding vital parts of your body. Heavy clothing... jackets lined with leather or thin steel... could stop or slow down their attacks but..."

"I see," she responded as she rubbed her chin. "I'll need the kind of armor I'm used to and maybe a little more but I don't need anything that will hinder movement or slow me down. Gotcha."

"I too will need..." the gray creature began, but Sarah cut him off.

"Sorry, Xander," she said with a quick glance up at his strange, though strangely handsome face. "You're too big and... gray. You'd stick out like a turd in a punchbowl where I'm gonna have to go for the stuff I need. I'll either have to find some dumb-assed soldiers who wanna git down with me or go it alone."

She turned back to Zeridon but found him chuckling softly. She heard a strange sound behind her and, when she turned to look, she gasped.

He stood six foot plus with chiseled abs and muscular body. His blonde hair was short and his light blue eyes were piercing... and... he was naked.

Damn! She thought. This fucking dream is getting worse... or better!

"Okay, pal," she said breathlessly, "but you're gonna have to cover your junk if we're gonna move around those folks out there. Their women might just eat you alive!"

“I do not believe any of them have a cannibalistic bent, Sarah.” he chided with a frown.

“That’s not what I...” Sarah took a deep breath and turned back to Zeridon, more in self-defense than anything else. “Okay! So that’s one. Do you think...”

“I will assemble each legion for your inspection and have you choose...”

“They’ll have to be volunteers, Lord... guy.” she responded sternly. “They will have to know the consequences before I’ll take any of them.”

“Granted.” he responded with a grin at her address. “I only wish I could join you. As a part of my bargain, I...”

“You have to stay here as the General.” she responded with a nod. “That’s the way it has to be. You stay, set the tactics and the rest of us will follow the orders as well as we can. Understand, I will need your input to set the tactics, find these assholes and form a plan of attack, but the execution will be up to the individual soldier.” At his nod, she added, “Do you have any idea where they are?”

“Xander and a few others know what to look for.” he replied with a look over her head. “They will no doubt be out seeking prey for the winter but...”

“We’ll need to know where they might go to do that shit.” Sarah responded with a thoughtful frown. “If we can take ‘em piecemeal

and then follow the stragglers back to their lair, we might catch them all by surprise.”

“That I will leave in your hands.” Zeridon replied as he stood and faced her sternly. “I will walk you to the gate to the next level but the rest is up to you.” He crossed his arms and asked, “What do you ask for in return for your service in this, Sarah?”

“Nothing.” she replied with an insulted frown. Then, as she looked down for a moment, she added, “Okay, maybe a path home and a promise that when I... die, I can come back here sometime to visit old friends?”

“We shall see.” he responded with a stern nod. “Wait here while I consult with my commanders for those who could best serve under these circumstances. Then you may ask for volunteers.”

She watched Zeridon walk from the hall through a wide and tall passageway far to the right of his throne. She refused to look back at the nude man, her heart racing with the thought that...

Dammit, Sarah! she chided herself fiercely. *This shit is serious!*

“I have again reverted to my demon form, Sarah.” came the voice of her dreams softly from behind.

“Yeah,” she replied breathlessly, “but your junk is still out there, Xander.”

“Were a loincloth available...”

She spun about and looked up into his face in apology... though she refused to look down.

"I'm a healthy woman with a more than adequate libido, Xander." she said softly. "I haven't had any... *that* in a while and... you, either in this form or that... other... one... are a healthy and... deliciously hung man. Dream or not, I need to concentrate on what we're doing here or we won't make it. I'll try to keep from jumping your bones if you'll try not to push yourself in my direction. Deal?"

"I'm not certain I understand." he responded with a curious look on his gray face.

"Look," she said in an exasperated tone with her eyes closed, "I want to take you home with me, spend the next week or so fucking your brains out, take a shower, eat a big meal with plenty of protein and fuck you some more!" She opened her eyes, sighed and continued, "I can't be thinking that way and track the som-bitches who took the kids away, Xander. After all, you're dead and are likely to stay dead. If I don't get my head together, I could get dead too and, though that intrigues the shit out of me, I don't think that's a really good idea."

"I see." he replied with a grin. "I will try desperately not to allow my maleness to invade your senses, Sarah."

She chuckled and turned around to hide her blush.

It took less time than Sarah thought it would for the line of gray demons to march through the passageway following Lord Zeridon. He moved to her side while the many gray demons formed ranks as they entered.

One of them kept glancing at her with a strange look but Sarah shook her head and watched them form up and drop to a knee. They were male and female... again obvious from the physical attributes displayed without shame. Though there was a murmur of conversation throughout, it was low and kept at a minimum. Lord Zeridon nodded at her and she took a deep breath.

“I’m Sarah MacLocklin.” she said loudly. The murmurs subsided and she frowned at them. “Your lord has allowed that I might have a plan to take the Akitre down permanently. At least that’s the mission I have set for myself.

“Those assholes have been taking kids for a long time, using the bodies and... eating people’s souls like vampires. Now, we can just go on running around trying to stop them from attacking villages... which doesn’t seem to put a dent in their shitty plans... or go after them full on.

“That’s my plan, guys.” she continued as she paced before the many curious and somewhat confused gray demons. “I wanna find where they go to get the bodies they use to stay alive, take as many as possible down and then track the rest to their hide-out. I wanna find the asshole leading this shit and put him in a hurt-locker. I wanna check in with the guys guarding Heaven, get some useful intel from them as well as the possibility of weapons that will make a difference, and then take those som-bitches down!

“To do that, I’m gonna need help.” Sarah stopped and looked out on the several hundred demons now looking at her like she was nuts. “Lord... Zee told me that I could ask you guys to help me. I figure he could just order you around... but that *sucks*! What I want is to ask for volunteers.

“There is a good chance that, once we meet these assholes out there, some of us will get dead... deader than now anyway.” She sighed and continued, “Xander said that if you guys die out there you wander around not able to do shit. You won’t be able to come back here and nobody there will know what you did to help them.

“That’s all I got for you, guys. If one of us dies, that’s it! Even me. If I die out there I’ll probably end up here anyway so that’ll give me two shots at taking those dipshits down. Now, I’m going. Anybody with me?”

“I am!” shouted one of the demons as he got quickly to his feet and moved to the front. He turned and added, “I was with LT back in Iran. She led us through hostiles that would make your asshole pucker, held little kids while they cried, and patched up a buncha folks who had no hope. She *gave* ‘em hope, guys. She kept us all alive when we shoulda been dead.” He looked back at Sarah as he added, “She tried to save me when I got hit and cried when she watched me die. If anybody can do this, it’s her!”

“Who...” Sarah began with a strange look.

“Bobby Forshiem, LT.” he replied with a crooked grin on his gray face. “That IED did a damn-damn on me but you never gave up. Sorry I died but...”

The memory of holding this lanky corporal in her arms while the light went out flooded her and she began to cry. Bobby moved to her and held her in his large gray arms as she sobbed into his chest.

“It’s okay, LT.” he said softly. “I got good friends here and even got a girlfriend who doesn’t think I look too funny.”

She giggled between sobs and, after wiping her cheeks with her hands, grinned up at the gray demon.

“Sooo...” he added with a crooked grin. “We gonna do this or what?”

She nodded, pushed back from him and looked back at the others. One smaller female had stood and moved to the front and glared at Sarah with her gray arms crossed over her ample breasts.

“That’s Sephia Henepope, LT.” Bobby whispered with a grin. “She’s my girl and has a jealous streak a mile long.” He glanced back at the female demon’s scowl and continued, “She told me she was one of Cleopatra’s personal bodyguards. They all gathered around Cleopatra and drank from her cup before the Romans came for her. It was poison and she didn’t know what happened after that. I told her that her Mistress killed herself before she would allow the Romans to take her. It seemed to make her feel better.”

“She’s cute.” Sarah responded with a frown at the frowning demon. “But I’m gonna need those who know how to shoot, Bobby.” Then louder she continued, “I need volunteers with modern skills to come with me. If I can find a machine shop or blacksmithing shop in one of those villages, I will be looking for help to build guns that shoot straighter than the shit they’re using. I’m gonna go up to the... Gates of Heaven to ask for advice but I’ll need any who wanna join me to get set. Think about it while I’m gone and let Bobby know what you’ve decided before I get back.

“I won’t have a lotta time to train any of you guys, but from what I’ve been told you’re all soldiers of some era or another. I need you to bring your skills to the table and lay ‘em out for everybody. Share what you know and give us any intel you’ve got that will make a difference. Remember: the only stupid question is the one you didn’t ask.” She laid a hand to Bobby’s arm and added, “You know what I’m looking for, Bobby. Make it happen.”

“I got this, LT.” he responded with a grin.

Chapter 2

“I’d rather rule in Hell than...”

Zeridon led Sarah and Xander down the wide passage. It seemed to be moving up and Sarah wondered at the strange look on Zeridon’s face. When they got to a guarded smaller passage that led up into a stairwell with wide steps, Zeridon nodded to the two large gray demons and turned to Sarah with a concerned look.

“I cannot join you, Sarah.” he said softly... almost apologetically. “Since the incursion that started all of this, the lords of each level were given an edict that would not allow them to travel from level to level. Xander will accompany you through the next two levels... if that is even possible... and will introduce you and your mission to the lords there. When you move up to the Gates, he will have to wait just beyond. None of us are allowed... or even welcomed above.”

“I’ll just have to deal with it as I go, Zee.” Sarah responded with a grin. “What can I expect at the levels above us?”

“Jealousy, spite, envy...” Lord Zeridon chuckled as he continued, “Each level is ruled by a lord who really wants to move up. Since that is not an option, they take their spite out on their subjects and any who wish to likewise move beyond the level where they were placed. You will have to convince them that you do not wish to take their place and then convince them that it is in their best interest to escort you to the next gate.

“When I made this trek centuries ago, Lord Juno of the second level wished to see me dead.” Zeridon chuckled at the memory and added, “After I convinced him that I only wished to return to my level with the means to keep the demons below from his realm, he aided me to the Gates of Heaven. I don’t know if that will work again but it may be worth a try. Now Lord Thedius, he who rules the first level, is a dealmaker. He may try to convince you to...”

“I’ve had a lotta experience with used car salesmen, Zee.” Sarah responded with a chuckle. “If he wants his precious level raided with demons from below, he can stall me and keep trying to force a signature.”

“Do not discount their evil, Sarah.” Zeridon replied sternly. “They are there for a reason and it is not for their benevolence.”

“Gotcha.” Sarah responded with a grin. Then, after a deep sigh and a frightened look up the stairway, she added, “Well, I guess there’s nothing left to think about.”

She started up the stairway with Xander just behind her. It seemed that the higher they went, the longer the stairway grew.

You’d think I could dream up an elevator. She thought with a grin.

“Does this thing ever end?” she asked rhetorically.

“I have no reference to respond to your question, Sarah.” Xander replied softly. “All that I know is that Lord Zeridon made this trip and that he was successful. Beyond that...”

“I was just making an idle comment, Xander.” Sarah responded sardonically. “I know it will end and we will be faced with an asshole who wants to gut us. I just want to get this show on the road.”

“Show on the...”

“We need to get the sword, get any advice from them and get back down to level three as soon as we can.” Sarah explained as she continued up the stairway. “I don’t know how time works around here but I know there are little kids in trouble and I wanna get to them as fast as possible.”

“Ah.” Xander replied with a nod. “You wish to find a beginning to the path we have chosen to see the mission to completion.”

“Exactly.” she said with a chuckle. “I don’t know how we’re gonna approach the subject with Juno, or Thedius for that matter. We’ll just have to wing it.”

“I suppose that is another metaphor?”

“Yeah.” Sarah replied quickly with a sidelong glance at the big gray demon. “We’ll have to... feel our way through to his jealous nature, get him to help us and then worry about Thedius when we get there.”

“As Lord Zeridon suggested.” Xander responded, again nodding. “Until you find a way to his heart, I suppose we will have to... wing it.”

“Yep.” Sarah said as she tried to keep from laughing.

It seemed to take hours but, eventually, Sarah saw the end to the stairway just a few hundred yards ahead. She glanced back at Xander but saw the look on his face and stopped.

“What’s up, Xander?” she asked as she looked up into his concerned face.

“I... I am worried that you have taken too much onto yourself, Sarah.” he replied as his eyes came to meet hers. “I worry that you will... die and all that you have attempted will come to naught. I would not like to have you sentenced to any of the levels of Hell wherein I could not see you again. I have, in a very short span, come to... enjoy your presence.”

She reached up and, when he leaned down, she put her hand to his gray face and smiled. After a sigh and a glance up the stairway to the opening she could see in the distance, she looked back up into his dark eyes.

“I have no choice in the matter anymore, Xander.” she said softly. “I can’t turn my back on people in trouble... just like you can’t. You go out and patrol the world outside that portal looking for assholes who want to drink people’s blood, take their kids and make them all afraid of the dark... and you and I both know they would be scared of you if they knew.

“I know you did shit in the past that got you thrown into Hell but I think that many of those soldiers down there deserved better. The ones who volunteer for our little excursion and those who stand to for

deployment there are those I feel should have been given a waiver.” She sighed and added, “That’s above my paygrade so I’ll just leave it at that. As for me, I’m gonna do what I can and hope it’s enough. It’s all any of us can do, Xander. Do you understand?”

“I do but...” He took a deep breath and, with another glance up at the opening to the next level of Hell, said, “I suppose we should... get this show on the road?”

She chuckled and they marched up the steps toward the closed gate to level two.

The four demons guarding the gate were strikingly different from Xander. They had no wings, the horns that curled about their heads were much smaller and their skin was more of a... milk chocolate color. Sarah walked up to the bars that separated them and tapped on the metal.

“What do you want?” asked one of those brusquely.

“I wanna see Lord Juno, buddy.” she said with a pretty smile. “I have a proposition for him that he might like.”

“We guard the gate... girl.” the demon responded petulantly. “You and those of your ilk are not welcome...”

“Get your lord down here, shithead,” Sarah said angrily as she frowned at the prissy guard, “or I’ll take my offer to somebody else!” She grabbed the bars to the gate and shook them with a rattle. “These probably wouldn’t withstand an attack if Lord Zee... Zeridon let the monsters from the lower levels get here. Those evil assholes would

probably rip it down, come in there and gut you for the fun of it. As long as Zeridon holds the gates below, you can stand here like a princess and give us shit. What happens if he doesn't?"

"Now see here..." the demon began with a stern look down at the little woman snarling at him.

"Take your time, asshole." Sarah grated. "If I lose my patience, I might just hafta trot my little ass back down and suggest to Lord Zeridon an alternative approach. What do you think?"

"You think to frighten me?" he asked as he drew himself up to intimidate Sarah.

Xander touched her shoulder and, after she glanced back, he stepped in front of her and glared at the guard.

"My Lord Zeridon has sent Sarah to speak with your lord about aid he might be willing to give." he said low and lethally. "Should he find that you were recalcitrant, he might feel that you and all of those within this realm are taking advantage. We have seen the result of those from the lower levels coming in force. Should Lord Zeridon feel slighted by his request, he may be swayed by those below. Do you wish to be responsible for that?"

Though the guard was larger than Sarah, Xander stood a head and a half above him. When the big gray demon took the bars of the gate in his big hand and shook it, the stone around it groaned. When Xander raised an eyebrow, the guard backed away quickly.

“I... I will... will see if Lord Juno will receive you.” he stuttered and then turned and ran.

The others watched Xander release the bars and step back to kneel beside the small woman to wait. They glanced from Xander and his companion to where the other guard had run until they saw the big demon walking toward them with the much smaller guard at his side. The big demon stopped at the gate and glared at Sarah and Xander for a long moment.

“My guard said you threatened to burst into my realm and wreak havoc!” he shouted. “Is this true?”

“Not at all.” Xander replied with a grin. “I simply told him that we needed to address a problem that you may be able to aid us in resolving. That is all. He, on the other hand, thought to intimidate *us*.”

“And what form of aid could I possibly give?” asked Lord Juno angrily.

“I just need to pass through your realm on my way to the Gates of Heaven.” Sarah interjected softly. “I need some advice and help with a problem on level three. If you could escort us...”

“And what would you do for me in exchange?” asked the big demon as he rocked back on his heels and glared at the small brown-haired woman.

“In exchange...” Sarah began.

She took a deep breath and glared at Juno for a moment before she replied.

“Look, pal,” she rejoined sternly. “If it weren’t for Lord Zeridon and his buddies on level four and five, the big bads from level six and seven would have been at your throat a long time ago. Him and his soldiers have been keeping those assholes penned up below for... for a long time to keep them from running through you like shit through a goose!”

Juno took a step back from the gate, shock on his weird demon face, as Sarah continued, “Now you want to bargain for just letting us walk through your fucking realm to the gate on the other side? Who the fuck do you think keeps your realm from attack? You? These piss-ant guards?”

Juno glanced from his guard to Xander and then, with an astonished look at Sarah, backed another step.

“These soldiers keep the bad-asses away from your gate, keep you in business and don’t give a shit about your realm or what you do here.” Sarah said angrily. “Right now, they’re only worried about the kids who were taken from the world outside the portal they guard by sick-assed som-bitches who use them for their pleasure. Have you become so jaded...”

“They’ve taken children?” Juno asked as he took a step back toward the gate. “They are treating children badly?”

“Horrendously!” Sarah replied angrily. “Lord Zeridon sent his soldiers out there to stop them but so far hasn’t been able to make a dent. If we can get to the Gates of Heaven, the angels there might have an idea as to how we can proceed to take the demons who escaped out of the play entirely. Now, you gonna help us?”

“Open the gates!” he shouted as he backed away again. While the guards fiddled with the three locks, Juno added, “I will take you personally to the stairway to the first level, my friends. If you need my aid in seeing that those who would use children badly are taken to cases, you need only ask.”

“If they figure out what we are doing,” Sarah responded while the guards took their time opening the locks, “the assholes from six and seven might want to counterattack. If they do, it would be a good idea to beef up this gate. I think Xander can give you some advice to see that done but...”

“Whatever you can do, my friend,” Juno responded sternly as he glanced at Xander, “will be welcomed. Give your suggestions to my guards and I will see they are implemented.”

“Thank you for your trust, m’lord.” Xander responded as he lowered his head while still kneeling.

When the gate swung open and Juno stepped forward with his hand extended, Xander stood and took it. Then he looked at the construction of the gate.

“The hinges are the weak point, m’lord.” he said as he examined the gate critically “If you would have diagonal bars placed here, here, here and here,” he continued as he pointed out specific locations on the gate itself, “they can be placed into receptacles in the floor to strengthen the gate by several levels and the hinges by extension. You can have them removable should you wish to seek my lord below for more advice. Trust that Lord Zeridon wishes only that you defend the upper levels and has no desire to usurp your good rule. Our desire is to keep those of vast evil within the depths that they do no more harm and to protect the children outside of the portal as well.”

“Once we come back down,” Sarah interjected softly, “you ought to close this gate tight and only feel safe when we come to tell you it’s all clear. Until then, double your guards and stand ready to repel anybody who comes up those stairs.”

“Who are you?” Juno asked as he looked the girl over critically. He frowned at the red checked shirt with the left sleeve missing, the sports bra worn beneath it, the skin tight jeans and her bare feet and added, “You do not belong here.”

Sarah chuckled as Xander laid a gentle hand to her shoulder.

“She has offered her services as special envoy and tactician to see our mission to success, Lord Juno.” the big, gray demon responded with a fond grin down at the brown-haired girl. “If not for her insight, we might not finally have found a way to rid the world

outside of our portal of those who escaped during the last attack on our gates. She is Sarah MacLocklin and has offered her expertise voluntarily to see that the children are returned to their families unharmed. To do that, we must..."

"Come!" Juno responded as he held a hand to Sarah. "I will take you to the stairway to level one and send you on your way. Come, my friends."

Sarah took Juno's hand and reached back for Xander's. After he took her hand in his big gray one, she smiled and walked with the lord of the second level of Hell through his... realm. She saw the sad looks on all faces and that they looked away and down when Lord Juno passed. She also saw the way everything about the place was rundown.

"Why are they all afraid of you, Lord Juno?" she asked in all but a whisper. "You seem like a likeable guy."

"They, like I, were sent here for punishment, Sarah." he responded sternly without looking down at her. "In that light, I have seen that they regret their life choices."

"But if they can't see God's face... isn't that punishment enough? I mean... I'm not doubting you or anything and I don't know what they did to get them to be sent here, but it would seem that they might have some talents to make your realm a little more... livable. Maybe not comfortable by any means but... you know?"

As Juno glanced down at her sternly with an angry look on his face, she continued, "How many of these would stand with you if the assholes from below broke through our lines and attacked?"

Juno glanced about and sighed softly. Everywhere he looked he could see those cringing from his gaze, the pathways littered with stone and discarded scraps of cloth. His guards pushed some of the smaller demons out of their way when they passed and shoved others down just for the sport of it. He frowned at the practice and glanced down at the sad look on Sarah's face.

"It seems I have neglected my realm in favor of subjecting my subjects to a punishment not consistent to their offenses." he responded softly. "In so doing, I have been unwittingly developing those who would use their position for subjugation and strife."

"Hell was never intended to be a pleasant place to serve eternity, Lord Juno." Xander added softly. "Yet each and every one of us below would die for Lord Zeridon... and not because he has made our stay pleasant or has caused us to fear him. He has gained our respect by simply showing us all that there could have been a better result to our lives and providing an alternative to walking about in the darkness. Surely there is something your subjects can do to provide them with the will to serve if given the right incentives."

"Point taken, Xander." Juno replied with another glance about his realm and a stern nod.

“Isn’t there some kinda pathway up that these can take if they are found... I don’t know... rehabilitated?” Sarah asked. “If I were running this place... and I don’t want to, believe me...” she added with a grin and a look about her, “I would probably see if there could be a way of... repatriation... or something. Is there anything like that...”

“I’m afraid not, Sarah.” Juno replied with a thoughtful look at the ground before him. “I don’t believe that has been brought up beyond the Gates of Heaven. I have been here... for a long time and have never heard of such a thing. When I was... alive, it was thought that some or many were given a second chance by being sent back to inhabit yet another body. If true, where would those souls come from if not from one of these levels?”

“Good question.” Sarah responded softly. “It might be one I can bring up when I get up there.”

“Be careful, Sarah.” Xander cautioned softly. “It is not in one’s best interest to question the One.”

“Why not?” she asked with a glance up into the worried face. “What’s He gonna do? Send me to Hell? Looks like I’m already here, Xander, and I think there should be something... *something* that people can look forward to... even those stuck down here. Maybe reincarnation or earning your way to the next level of Hell... or something.”

“That does not sound unreasonable.” Juno interjected. “It may already be in play and we are unaware or have yet to ask. If you would...”

“That depends on if we can get there at all, Lord Juno.” Sarah responded. “You have to admit that you were reluctant to let us pass. What about Lord Thedius?”

“A snob.” came the quick response from the lord of level two. “I may have been... a bit hard on my subjects but that one...”

“How long has he been there?”

“A little less time than I have been here, Sarah.” Juno replied with a sigh. “He came to power...”

“What happened to the one he replaced?” she asked quickly. “You guys are already dead and you would have heard if he was sent... down, so...”

“That is a very good question.” Juno responded thoughtfully. “If you could use that to... send him to the Gates to question, you may be able to join him and not have to deal with him longer than necessary.”

“Good point.” Sarah glanced again about her and added, “If he... or she was sent back...”

“That is something to strive for.” Juno finished for her.

“And something that would give your subjects hope...” Sarah watched another guard push another smaller demon to the ground

and added, "Though it might be better if your guards didn't bully them."

"You there!" Juno shouted at the guard. "What do you think you are doing?"

"She was in my way, m'lord." stated the guard as he watched Juno lift the smaller demon to her feet and send her on her way. "They were sent here for punishment, m'lord, and I..."

"You too were sent here!" Lord Juno boomed. "Should I then push you to the ground, walk over your body and ignore you?"

"No!" Juno shouted angrily in answer to his own question. "Spread the word! Any caught treating any others within my realm with less than dignity will answer to me!" He grabbed the demon guard by the shoulder in a firm grip and added, "You were made guard to protect, not imprison them. They are already imprisoned... as are you! Do not cause me to remove you from the guard!"

"No, m'lord..." stuttered the guard in fear, "I mean yes, m'lord."

"See that my word is passed to all... including the populace of this realm!" Juno stated firmly as he released the guard. "See it done!"

"Yes, m'lord." the demon responded as he turned to run away... away to anywhere but where he stood.

Juno sighed and said, "It's but a beginning." With a meaningful glance down at Sarah, he added, "Please ask at the Gates, Sarah. If there is a chance..."

"I'll bring it up, Lord Juno." she replied with a sweet smile. "There are probably a lotta folks who could benefit from another chance, don't you agree?"

"That they could." he replied softly. "That *I* could."

Sarah glanced at Xander and saw the smile on that gray face. She liked the way his little fangs stick out when he smiles, the softness of his touch, the...

Stop it, Sarah! she thought as she frowned at the passageway in front of her. *It just won't work out and... he's dead and... living in Hell and... but he's such a nice... demon.*

Juno led them to the stairway and after waving the guards back, turned to Sarah and Xander with a sigh.

"From here it is upon you to bring the tools that might end the evil plaguing the world beneath our feet." Juno said stoically. "I wish you well and will await your return."

Lord Juno turned and stepped away, his guards standing behind him with stern faces.

Sarah squeezed Xander's hand and, with a little wave of her other, started up the stairway. Xander glanced back and saw Juno raise his hand slowly to send them on their way. He grinned, held Sarah's hand tighter and walked with her toward the next level of Hell.



The question is not whether LT Sarah MacLocklin is ready to walk the dark corridors of Hell to the Gates of Heaven. The question is...are they ready for her?!

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