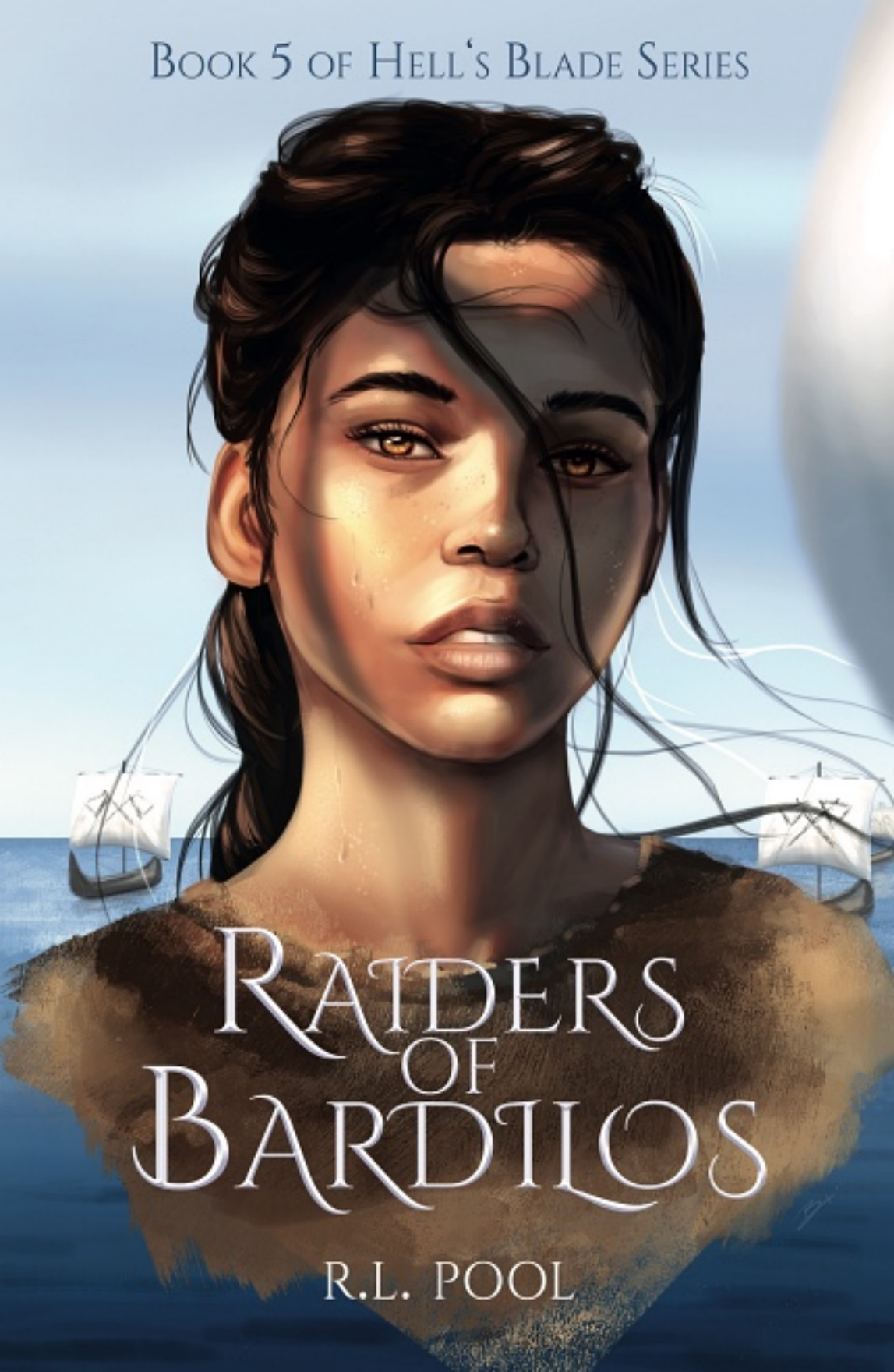


Raiders from the southern continent steal from poor fisherman, burn their villages, and kill any who try to intervene. The Hawks and Rangers are coming to end that problem, as well as find the reason why.

**Raiders of Bardilos:
Book 5 of "Hell's Blade" series**
By R.L. Pool

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BOOK 5 OF HELL'S BLADE SERIES



RAIDERS
OF
BARDILOS

R.L. POOL

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Chapter 1

“*Joule...*”

She sat on the dock, part of the large fishing net laid across her lap. As she mended the many breaks in the netting, she fumed.

“Girls are to tend to a man’s needs, Joule!” her father had chastised her just before casting off. “You’re seventeen! You need to learn to tend house, cook, and clean, girl. Tend the garden. Raise his children. That’s how to find a proper man who will care for you.”

All she had done was tell him she wanted to join him to help. She was already the only one in the village who could bring down a deer in the forest and carry it back for the villagers. She wanted to be allowed to be a working part of the village. Not just some girl who needed to be taken care of.

That’s when he got angry... *again*.

Her momma was not quite as adamant, but still cautioned her to keep her desires to act as a man to herself.

Act as a man? She didn’t want to be a man! She wanted to be... *herself!*

Even at five foot, six inches, she was stronger than most of the big strong men who went out on the boats to bring in the meager catch every day. That came from dragging the torn nets out, stringing them up, and spending hours mending them. Or maybe from carrying the

heavy pails of water from the well to the house for cooking and bathing.

It may also have something to do with her extensive hunting with the bow she got from the Hawk. He liked the shell necklace she'd made, and wanted to trade. He had an extra dagger... and the bow. Of course, he only had six arrows for it, but that was enough for her... for now.

She threw in the shell bracelet and the deal was done. The dagger, bow and the few arrows were hidden under the hut to maybe keep her father from becoming even more disappointed in her. She only brought them out when she went out to hunt. They never asked how she was able to kill wild game, and she never told them.

To say she didn't care that he was disappointed would have been a lie. She loved him after all. He was her father. She just didn't believe her only worth was to keep house, have babies and tend the garden.

The garden?

The garden was a joke too! The land here was too poor to grow anything of consequence, and most of what the village got came from Gondol or Sondler. And not much at that! They couldn't afford much, the meager catch of late bringing very little in the way of gold to the village elder.

Frankly, they were starving to death, and very slowly. If things didn't change, they might have to abandon the shore here in the south,

and travel north through the pass to Heartly, Gadsden, or the open lands to the west.

Of course, the elder forbade that, saying that it would get better. But it never did. He even frowned on the few who'd left to find work in Sondler last year. Of course, he took a share of that income "for the good of the village".

They shared everything here. What was earned from the catch and what came from the family gardens was placed in the community warehouse. From there, it was rationed to everyone. It was a good system, but the village elder was the regulator for what each family got. If he liked you, you might get a little extra. If not...

Her family was not one of those the elder liked and, according to her father, it was all her fault. The village had a sort of dress code. They didn't like girls who wore pants and sandals instead of a dress and going barefoot. It went against everything they believed.

Her father and mother tried to convince her to wear the "appropriate clothing" and to let her hair flow like all the others. To her, that was just... stupid!

She kept her deep brown hair in the long braid to keep it out of the way while she worked. If she had her way, she probably would have cut it all off long ago!

And a dress felt... wrong! She couldn't move properly in a dress and it made her feel vulnerable. Her father gave up, but her mother still made comments, though no longer insisted.

Joule actually didn't want to make their lives harder. She just wanted to live her life her way. Why did they have to conform to what other people thought anyway? As far as she knew, it wasn't a sin or anything to dress like she did, wear her hair like she did, or want to do the things that felt natural to her.

Then, why?

She finished the knot for this part of the netting, started to move it to the other break she'd seen, and glanced out to sea. She shifted the net off of her lap and stood up. She put one hand up to shade her eyes, stared out at the small dots coming, and tried to make out what they were.

It couldn't be her father and the others. They'd been out only a few hours and weren't expected back until close to dark. Then...

"What're ya lookin' at, girl?"

Joule risked a glance at Maudie. The woman was standing next to a drying rack with her husband's extra net hanging there. She'd been repairing some of those tears and, occasionally, frowned at the seventeen-year-old with a bit of scorn. Or maybe envy. Joule wasn't certain.

"Five... six on the horizon, Maudie." Joule replied softly, her eyes turned back toward the sea to the south. "That can't be ours, can it?"

"Dunno." the stout woman replied, her eyes now searching the horizon. "Run down an' get Seb ta come look."

Yeah, Seb. Sebastian. The elder. That was what she *really* wanted to do, considering it was Seb who initially called her father down for not controlling his daughter.

“Go on, girl.” Maudie insisted, her eyes glued to the tiny specks in the distance. “An’ tell ‘im ta bring his lookin’ glass.”

Joule sighed and, with one more look out to sea, trudged toward the large hut in the center of the village. The dread she felt from the sea was doubled with each step she took to the elder’s hut. She knocked on the flimsy wooden door.

“What?”

The voice sounded annoyed. Well, it was *his* turn then.

“There are ships coming in, Elder Seb.” she said loudly. “Maude wants you to come with your looking glass.”

“That you, Joule?”

“Yeah.” she replied sarcastically. “But it’s Maude who sent me.”

“Give me a moment.”

Joule stepped away from the door and far enough back to see the small wharf. Maudie had three or four more women looking and pointing out toward the horizon. At least someone had a sense of urgency about them.

The door squeaked and Joule glanced that way in time to see the rather fat elder step through and close the door quickly behind him. He was tucking in his shirt with one hand, the other filled with the small, cylindrical looking spyglass.

He wasn't quick enough to keep Joule from seeing Sabrina though. That blonde girl sat in the bed at the back of the hut, the thin sheet pulled up to cover her naked body with a frightened look on her face.

So, that's why she always looked so well-fed. Joule shook her head and led the elder toward the wharf. Whatever it takes to eat, she decided.

"So, Joule..." Seb began as he glanced at her with an appraising eye. "I can see you and your family gets more... if you're interested."

"Just come and see if those are ours or someone else's, Seb." she responded caustically.

This wasn't the first time he'd made the suggestive offer, or the first time she'd turned him down. Be his whore? Not in *this* lifetime!

"Suit yourself." he responded... like he always did.

He'd punish her when the time came to draw rations. And he'd make his offer again next month. Each time she'd refuse, tell her father what he'd asked her to do, and watch her father's face to see if he got angry at Seb, or her!

He never let on though. He just shook his head and probably began to tally what he *wouldn't* get as their ration for the month.

Such was their life... and she *hated* it!

She followed him to the wharf, behind him to keep his lecherous eyes off of her, and watched him wave off the women now looking to him with anxious eyes. He strutted out on the rickety pier, raised the

looking glass with flourish, and extended it. Then, as he moved the cylinder in and out to focus, he brought it up to look out to sea.

His face drained of color, he lowered the glass, and then brought it up again as if he didn't believe what he'd seen. He quickly brought it down, collapsed it, and his frightened face turned to the women.

"Get everybody out!" he shouted as he waddled back down the pier. "Everybody to the safe place! Raiders are coming!"

As he waddled past, Joule grabbed the looking glass from his pudgy hands. He started to turn back to retrieve it, thought about it, and turned to run, in his waddling fashion, back toward his hut.

Behind her, the women were shouting at each other, gathering what they could, and ushering children toward the north and the scant forest they could see in the distance. The "safe place" was a gathering point in the forest where they'd wait for the raiders to leave.

Joule raised the glass, extended it, and after adjusting it as well as she could, brought the six ships into view.

They were small. Just barely fishing boats. But each had a stained sail with a hastily painted double-bitted ax displayed. She lowered the glass, collapsed it, and turned to walk back to the village.

It was in turmoil! Everyone was running back and forth, gathering what they could and ushering children north. Seb waddled out of his hut carrying more than he should, with Sabrina right behind him. She grinned at the large pack Sabrina was carrying for the fat elder and

decided that the blonde girl finally had to do some real work for her food.

She got to her family's hut and heard noise from inside. She shook her head and walked around the hut to the support post at one corner. On her hands and knees, she pulled the wrapped package from beneath the hut, opened it, and took out the bow, quiver and dagger, along with the old belt she'd found.

After looping the quiver and dagger sheath to the belt, she pulled it about her narrow waist and cinched it tight. She settled the quiver to her right hand at her waist, and the dagger on her left hip. Then she strung the bow.

"Have you seen Joule?" she heard her mother ask from the doorway on the other side of the hut.

"Last I seen..." came the answer as she walked around the hut to the front.

"Right here, momma." Joule answered. "Get Devon to the safe place and I'll join you later."

Joule dropped to one knee as her six-year-old brother ran toward her, his face screwed up in a frightened visage. She hugged him, smiled, and ruffled his curly red hair.

"You stay with momma, Devon." she said softly. "I'll try to come for you in a bit."

"What are you planning, Joule?" her mother asked sternly.

“I plan to help the raiders rethink their desires, mamma.” she responded as she stood up and shrugged. “Someone has to, and Seb isn’t gonna.”

“But why you?” her mother insisted.

“Because I can.” she replied with another shrug. “Now, get what you can gather and take Devon to the safe place. Go!”

Her mother hesitated only a moment before calling the little boy to her and taking their meager belongings in hand for the long walk to the forest. Just before leaving the hut, her mother looked at Joule strangely.

“You be careful, Joule.” she all but whispered. “I love you, you know?”

“I know, mamma.” she responded, her grin for her mother not causing the response she wanted. “I love you too. I’ll be okay. Just go.”

Her mother nodded and, taking the little boy’s hand, walked north with the others.

The village emptied quickly. It got quiet and Joule walked slowly back to the wharf with the looking glass in hand. She brought it up, extended it, and forced it to focus on the ships that were now a lot closer.

She needed a place to fight from, she knew. Somewhere she could make her stand and save what little they had... maybe.

The fish drying racks next to the warehouse was a good bet, and would give her vision over the front of the huts and the racks behind. And, if necessary, it would give her a safe path to the forest a distance beyond the village. She looked once more at the ships and walked away.

She found a spot with an overturned wheelbarrow for cover. After she pulled the bow from her back, nocked an arrow, and squatted, she took a deep breath to calm her nerves to wait.

Chapter 2

“Raiders!”

She heard the ships grind onto the beach and risked a look. There were six of them with four or five men in each. While one lowered the crossbeam with the sail connected, the others jumped out, grabbed the sides of the boats and pulled them farther up the beach.

Then they armed themselves with axes. Though only a few had long handles, they all had a wide blade attached... some double-bitted! Once the boats were safe, they came up the beach toward the village.

She watched them come but, when two walked toward the first of the huts, she stood up, pulled the arrow to her ear and shouted.

“NO!”

They all stopped and all eyes were now on her! A few chuckled at the girl with the bow, and one started back toward the hut. As he reached for the handle to the door, she released the arrow. He dodged back as the arrow sank into the wood, and he glared at her.

“No!” she shouted again.

One of them, possibly the leader, said something sternly and they backed away from the hut slowly. Then, axes in hand, they all came toward her, one slow step at a time.

There were twenty to thirty of them, and she had only five arrows left. If necessary, she would shoot five of them and then run like Hell!

She centered her aim on the leader as they came, and hoped not to have to release the arrow.

When they were about twenty to thirty paces away, the leader stopped. He turned his ax down and dropped it to the dirt. With one hand to the base of the ax handle, he waved the others to mimic him.

They did, and Joule let the bow down. She kept the arrow nocked and slight tension on the string, but it wasn't pointed at the leader anymore.

"Myndirðu deyja til að vernda mat?" he asked, the language rather guttural.

Joule pointed at her ear and shook her head. The man, his face painted with blue streaks and red, lowered his head for a moment. And then...

"Fight... for... food?"

"Don't you?" she retorted. "Why can't you grow your own? Why do you have to come here and take what we've worked very hard to have?"

He pointed to his ear with a grin and shook his head. It was her turn to try to...

She pointed at him, "You", squatted down to pull a weed from the ground and held it toward him, brought it to her mouth to bite, and then pointed over his head south.

He nodded.

“*Við gerum það.*” he said loudly. Again, he paused, looked down, and then up again. He pointed at his chest and, nodding again, said, “Do.”

“Then why?” she responded angrily, her hand held palm up toward them and moved back and forth.

The man again looked down for a moment. Then he looked at Joule with a frown.

“Work... make food.” he said as he waved his hand toward his men palm up. “Make many food.”

Then, as he glared at Joule, he continued.

“Jarl take.” he continued angrily with a motion that represented something forcibly taken away. Then, with his hand at waist level, he continued, “*Börn* hunger. Come for food. Take.” Then, as he used one hand to mimic parceling out... something, he added, “Give. No hunger.”

“Yarrel?” she asked with a tilt to her head.

He pointed at his men and held a hand about waist high. He pointed at himself and held that hand just a little higher. Then, he said “jarl” and held the hand over his head.

“Your leader?” Joule asked, her hand held over her head as well.

His leader confiscates everything they work for. So, he and his men raid the shoreline, take what they can and take it back to see that his people don't starve. She understood that, the face of her fat elder coming to mind.

He nodded and started to turn away.

“Wait!” she said sharply. When he turned back, she pointed at the warehouse and said, “Open it and take one.”

She held up one finger and he gave her a confused look.

“Trade.” she stated, but his confusion just increased a little more.

She took the arrow from the bow, stuck it into her quiver and looped the bow across her back. Then she bent down to pick up two rocks. She held one toward him and the other to her chest. Slowly she brought the one she held to her chest out to him with one hand, while bringing the other to her chest.

“Trade.” she reiterated.

He nodded in understanding and grinned at her. He glanced at the men with him, and then reached behind him to pull out a small hatchet.

Joule started to grab her bow, but he held a hand toward her while sliding the hatchet down to grab the small head. With that in hand, he held the handle toward her.

“Trade?” he asked softly.

She grinned, nodded and walked slowly toward him. Her eyes went to the men now standing perfectly still as she approached their leader. When she got close... within two arm lengths... she stopped.

He leaned forward with the handle held out for her to grasp. She too leaned forward, trust the issue now. When she had the handle in her hand, he released it and stepped back. She glanced at the men now smiling at her, and then down at the hatchet.

It was beautiful, if one could say a short-handled hatchet was beautiful.

But it was! The handle, eighteen to twenty inches long, entered the blue/black head of the hatchet and was wedged there with a piece of wood driven into the handle from the top. The handle was wrapped tightly in a single long strip of leather all the way to the head.

The head consisted of a knob of steel about an inch thick on one side, and an ever-widening blade on the other. The blade was curved at its edge and there were symbols etched into the side of the blade part. She turned it over and more symbols.

She looked up at the grinning man and smiled as she brought the head flat against her chest, nodded, and slipped it under her belt next to the dagger.

Then, she pointed at the warehouse, raised one finger again, and spread her hands wide to indicate they should take a large bag of grain. She also pointed at the racks of dry fish to the south of the warehouse. With the back of her hand, she waved them away while smiling at the astonished raider.

“Fair trade.” she said softly as she patted the sharp blade of the hatchet.

He motioned to the fish and she nodded. He grinned, shouted orders, and some of his men began pulling fish from the stringers and placing them into baskets stacked close.

The man pointed at his chest and said, “Gustov.”

Joule mimicked that and said, “Joule.”

“Joule come.” Gustov pointed to the hatchet and held his hand up like he was holding the hatchet above his head. “Say, Gustov Olavson! Come Zelknor, me.”

Joule nodded and they both looked toward the warehouse.

Three men went to the door to the warehouse, lifted the lock there, and looked back at their leader. Joule motioned for their attention, raised her hand, and brought it down quickly.

They nodded and, with the back of one of the single bladed axes, struck the lock until the bottom fell off. Then they removed the metal piece from the hasp, opened the warehouse, and went in.

They found a large sack of what was probably wheat and two helped to load it on the third man’s back. As that one trudged out of the warehouse with one of the others helping to balance the load, the other patted a smaller sack just down from the empty shelf.

Flour? Joule thought. She’d never seen flour in any of the rations provided and wondered if Seb was keeping that for himself.

When the young man started to lift the sack to his shoulders, the leader shouted something that sounded rather harsh. The young man reluctantly left it alone and started to leave.

Joule stepped toward the leader and, after tapping his arm to get his attention, held a hand out and palm down close to her waist. Then, she brought that hand up to her mouth like she was eating.

“Children.” she said softly... and nodded.

“*Börn.*” he replied, and then shouted at the young man again.

That one smiled and ran back to load the bag to his shoulders and walk out of the warehouse.

The leader smiled at Joule and said, “Trade?”

Joule shook her head.

“Gift.” she said softly. When he tilted his head like he didn’t understand, she looked down for a moment. Then, as she put her hands together as if offering something, she held them toward the leader and added, “For *Börn.*”

He smiled, nodded and held his open hand to his chest.

She responded by holding her hand to her chest and he nodded again, raised a hand, and followed his men back toward the boats. She waited at the edge of the beach for them to load the bags and fish and begin pushing the boats off of the beach and into the gentle surf. When they were all in the boats and the oars came out to take them back out to deeper water, the leader stood on the bow looking at her.

He raised a fist into the air and shouted, “*Joule!*” Then, he brought that fist to his chest and bowed slightly toward her.

The other men did the same, the shout echoing through the empty village. Then, with their fists to their chests, they bowed toward her as well.

Joule raised her fist into the air, brought it to her chest, and bowed her head at the raiders who must never have had this kind of welcome.

As the small ships turned east and the sails were raised, Joule sighed and walked back into the village. She stopped at the warehouse, closed the doors, and put the metal piece through the hasp to hold it closed.

She walked over to the hut and pulled her arrow, stuck it back into her quiver, and started the long walk toward the forest.

She didn't know how she was going to explain all that happened, but she was going to try.

Chapter 3

“Betrayed...”

Maudie was watching for her and, when she saw Joule walking toward them, shouted at the rest of them. Twenty or so women walked out of the forest with their children around them, Sebastian walking at their head.

He was sweating profusely and the pack on his back seemed... heavy. He pulled it down and dropped it at his feet while waiting for Joule to come to them. When she came close enough...

“So, did you chase them off?” he asked haughtily.

“Nope.” she replied as she came to a stop in front of him. “I traded with them.”

“What?” he asked, his eyebrows drawn down into an intimidating frown.

“A bag of wheat and a rack of fish, for not burning the village to the ground and taking everything we worked hard to acquire.” she replied softly, her eyes looking around at the shock on the women’s faces. “Everything is as you left it, ladies... with the small exception of the lock on the warehouse.”

“That was not yours to trade, girl!” Sebastian responded harshly.

“No?” Joule asked innocently. “I thought everything in there belonged to everybody in the village. Including the bag of flour I tossed in to finish off the deal.” She rubbed her chin as she added,

“That brings the question. How many of you ever got any flour in your ration?” A glance at the shocked faces told her the truth. “No one? Strange.”

“Sebby taught me how to make his bread and sweet rolls outta flour, Joule.” Sabrina interjected.

“Shut up, stupid girl!” Sebastian shouted harshly. “It is my duty to parcel out what has been stored there. If I have need, I am owed a few vanities for the service I provide as elder.”

“Why?” Joule asked angrily. “What have you ever done for the village besides pass out edicts, feed your fat face, and fuck starving little girls?! What are you hoarding in that knapsack that you think is so valuable? Food? I doubt it!” She reached for the bag at his feet as she added, “Let’s see...”

“That is mine!” he shouted as he grabbed her arm.

She shook loose and grabbed the bag. She opened it, reached inside and pulled out a large heavy pouch. When she opened it, she grinned and poured the gold and silver coins to the ground. She reached in again, and he grabbed her arm... again.

“If you don’t release me, I will take that hand for my own.” she stated in a low lethal tone.

He jerked his hand away and she pulled another pouch out, opened it, and more coins joined the others. She turned the knapsack over and dumped other pouches, large and small, to the ground on top of the coins. They all resonated with the tell-tale jingle.

“So, we can’t afford to buy food from Sondler or Gondol?” she asked sarcastically. “I’d say we have more than enough!”

“But I must be careful how that coin is spent!” he responded, flustered. “It is in the best interest of the village...”

“It’s in the best interest of the village to send you on your way and appoint someone who really has an interest in seeing to the people of the village!” she retorted angrily.

“You don’t have that authority!” he shouted back.

“But *we* do!”

Joule looked at her mother as the other women gathered around her. She’d never seen her mother angry before and hoped never to see it again!

“Joule risked her life to save the village while you hid here with the rest of us! You are no leader, wise elder, or anything resembling anything of the kind! I say we find someone who does, give him the position, and relegate you to mending nets!”

“You’re just women!” he shouted haughtily. “It is the *men* who hold authority here, not...”

“Women who bed their men, cook their food, have their babies, and keep their house!” Joule’s mother retorted. “Who do you think they’ll listen to? You? If we stop doing those things for them, they will take you out to sea, tie stones about your neck, and see if you can swim back to shore on your own! *Now* who has the authority?!”

If her mother hadn't been so angry, Joule would have laughed at the fat man and his frightened face. She glanced at Sabrina, she standing away from Sebastian holding her hands to her chest in shock.

"Sabrina." Joule called. "Come here and pick up all of these coins and put them back into their pouches. Then you can help Seb load it to his back... along with the one he made you carry."

"Then she can leave with 'im." one of the women stated scornfully. "Ain't no room fer whores..."

"Whore?" Joule said angrily. "It's okay to force women to marry someone they don't choose, make them wear what you say is decent, and force them to bed someone they don't love for the sake of some time-worn policy that forces women into slavery.

"But when one gives themselves to a monster to keep from starving, and to somehow keep her mother and two little brothers from that same fate, you call them a whore? Shame on you and your hypocritical crap!"

"Joule!"

Joule glanced at her mother to continue her tirade, but the look on the woman's face was...

"If you, in your zealously, cannot forgive Sabrina her choices, you can all go to Hell!" her mother intoned angrily. "I will care for her *and* her family! I have no doubt I will have to hold her mother in my arms to convince her that she will be safe finally, and that Sabrina hasn't tainted herself beyond redemption. If Sabrina is no longer

welcome in her own home, I will have an empty bed within my hut soon!" She glanced at Joule and added, "Someone will have to go to Sondler to report the raid, Joule. That someone should be one we trust to tell the truth of the matter. That someone should be you."

"Yes!" Sebastian responded excitedly. "You must go at once! We will wait for the men to come in and tell them..."

"What?" Joule interrupted. "That a woman caught you cheating the people of the village, or that a woman had the nerve to stand up to the raiders when you wouldn't? I'm not leaving until my father and the others get here, *Elder Seb*. Then, after the truth is told, I will travel to the Hawk encampment at Sondler and report what happened here!"

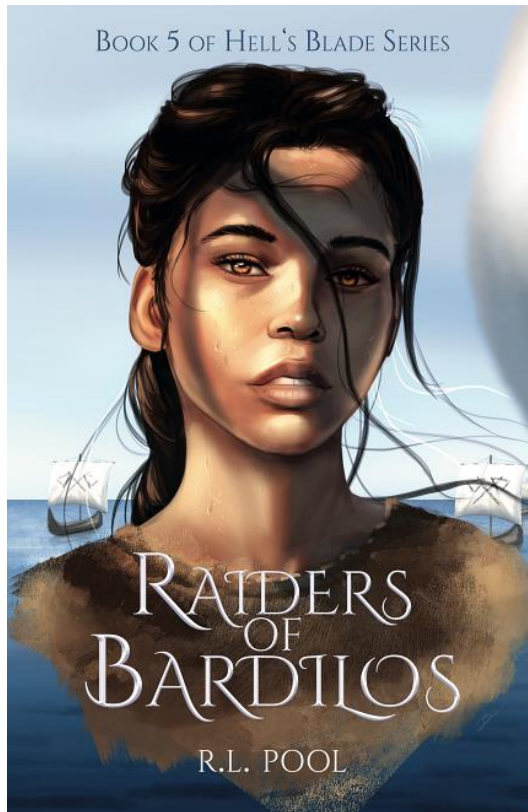
"Hear, hear!" came several of the female voices from those gathered around them.

"Now, once Sabrina has every coin accounted for, you will take the pack and hers, and move your fat ass back to the village." Joule grinned evilly... and added, "If you slow down, I'm going to poke you in the ass with my dagger."

The women picked up their belongings and, with their children walking beside them, began the long walk back to the village, Sebastian panting along far behind. Joule took Sabrina's hand in hers, Devon's in the other, and led them back.

"I thought you said..." Maudie began softly.

Smoke was rising in the distance, and a fist tightened about Joule's heart.



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