



Illani was found in secret chambers within the Lost Citadel. When Holy found her, she spoke of the gods leaving her and her people here and flying away. The link to Atlantis caught Holly's attention immediately.

Illani's Song: Book 3 of "Hell's Blade" Series

By R.L. Pool

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BOOK 3 OF *HELL'S BLADE* SERIES



Illani's
Song

R.L. POOL

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“Ignorance and stupidity are not the same.

Ignorance is lacking the information to adequately and intelligently discuss, objectively, a topic of interest. Ignorance can be cured with study of the subject matter.

Stupidity, on the other hand, has no cure. Stupidity is standing in the rain and wondering why you’re wet.”

R.L. Pool

Chapter 1

“Gefron’s Citadel...”

Holly looked down at the half-eaten sandwich and sighed. The people in this weird *Subway* were... loud! It looked more like... the tavern in Outerburg than a *Subway*, though the counter over there was exactly like the one in Jersey.

She glanced at Jill over there behind the counter and, except for the horned helmet on her head, Jill was just the same as when Holly last saw her. She was smiling as she served the tall guy his sub.

That guy, a blond with muscles to die for, smiled at her, took the pint of ale, and walked toward Holly. He had to move the oddly fancy sword to sit, his fur loincloth and knee-high boots all that he wore.

“Interesting dreamscape, Holly.” he said softly, as he unwrapped his sub and rubbed his hands together. “The sword is a nice touch, but I really don’t have... *this* one.”

“I remember you.” Holly said matter-of-factly, as she frowned at him and his very large sandwich. “What the fuck, Merlin?”

“Hey!” he replied, his chuckle drawing grins from those sitting close by. “This is *your* dream! Don’t blame me for the ambiance!”

She grinned back at him and glanced around the eatery again. She recognized a few of the people, but others...

“What am I doing here, Merlin?” she all but whispered.

“Dreaming.” the blonde guy replied softly, as he lifted half the sub and turned it to find a good place to start eating. “I’m just here to bring a message.”

“Yeah?” she asked sarcastically. “Like what? I’m going nuts? Sorry. That ship has sailed.”

“Funny you should mention sailing.” he stated, as he set the sandwich back on the paper and stared at her. “You will have to choose whether to sail to a distant land, find a lost colony of refugees, and do what you can to save them... or not.”

“Very cryptic.” Holly replied. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged and, as he picked up the sandwich again, he added, “Immunity is the least of your worries.”

He was gone. Everything went black and...

“Look at this.”

Holly shook herself, opened her eyes, and glanced up from the book she was supposed to be reading. It took a moment to reorient herself as she looked at the young man holding an old leatherbound, ragged paged book. He looked excited, so...

“Let me see, Greg.” she responded, her small hand held toward him... the other wiping away the small amount of drool from her mouth.

He walked around the big table set at the front of the vast library, close to the ancient wood doors within the catacombs of Atrial, and set

the book on top of hers. He stood behind her and looked over her shoulder.

“It makes reference to that place Patricia and Myra found three years ago... I think.” he said softly. “Look. It says...

“Within the lair of Gefron, a storehouse and apothecary laboratory were set. Opposite were the stables. Though we knew of the hidden doorway for the young Gigi Gefron brought back with him from the ruined city of Atalanis to the west, and the possible treasure, it has yet to be found.

“It has been said that Gefron and his six apprentices have hidden many bars of gold there, and refused the entreaties of Lord Duke Helmuth to share in his knowledge and riches.

“Yet, Dissel Helmuth has long wished for the sovereignty of the lands far beyond the sea, and Gefron’s ill-fated exploration could provide an excuse to enter there for conquest.

“Lord Duke Helmuth has ordered the knights to ready themselves to meet the challenge from the west brought on by Gefron’s lust for power and riches, and bring his might against the western realms.”

“I don’t see the connection.” Holly responded as she reread the whole thing quickly. “Myra said there was a barracks, stable and the meeting room. Other than the living quarters to either side, there was not much more to be seen. If there *was* a secret door to some fantastical treasure, she didn’t find it.”

“Neither did they. But, if there *is* a secret door there, like the one we came through to the library, what might we find?” Greg insisted. “We have a treasury at the end of the hall, an ancient armory just full of old armor, swords and things they used back then... and this library. What do you think we would find if we could discover this one?”

“So, you wanna go poking around in that mountain looking for gold?”

“No, Holly.” he replied chuckling. “A library. Can you imagine what could be in there if it exists? This book says Gefron was, for all intents and purpose, a wizard of some sort. I’ve read many books here that talks about wizards and, though I believe they are only flights of fantasy, there could be some truth there as well. Suppose this Gefron was an alchemist who mixed potions and came up with powerful drugs. How else would he get a... Gigi here, if not by capturing it and bringing it on a ship?”

“But the book says, ‘ill-fated’, Greg.” Holly insisted. “How do we know that there wasn’t some kinda... bad stuff he went through that caused...”

“We won’t know... until we find it.” Greg replied. “And maybe we’ll find a Gigi there too!”

“Do you even know what a Gigi is?” Holly asked, her grin making him look down at the table, his grin matching hers.

“Noooo.” he replied softly. He glanced up quickly, and added, “But don’t you want to find out? I mean, if there is a library...”

“*If* there’s a library, Greg!” Holly repeated sternly. “Pat went there twice with Myra to look, and found nothing that would show a secret... anything! She took notes, copied the symbols she found there and searched the place thoroughly! If it was there, she’d have found it!”

“But she wasn’t looking for... anything specific, Holly.” Greg insisted. “She was just looking for clues to say who lived there. Suppose we have the answer right here? Isn’t it worth a look at the very least?”

This was the Greg Graisson she’d met almost three years ago when her mother and she were offered a chance to come here from Jersey. He was actually the first person from this world she’d met! And right here in this vast library in the bowels of the Citadel of Atrial.

Patty... Patricia Langstrom... was supposed to be in Afghanistan at a special dig, but ended up here instead. According to the stories she heard from Patty... and the many people she’d met here... Pat, Ranger Myra, and many others, finally got the upper hand on demons... *real* demons... who had escaped from Hell a thousand years before, and sent them all back to Hell.

Now, her mother was working with the “Duchess of Atrial”, Sarah MacLocklin... another person drawn here from Earth... to set up a hospital, lab, and a place people could come when all else failed to cure them. Her mom was in seventh heaven!

She was one of those Chinese ladies who believed there was a natural cure... or at least an effective treatment... for anything that

ailed the human body. That's what got her fired from the clinic she worked at in Jersey, and why Patty suggested they come with her back to this strange and wonderful world.

Wonderful... except when she had to be here researching something Patty set for her... and Greg. She'd rather be out riding between MacLocklin and the harbor, little Danny in the saddle in front of her, Greg, Dot and Polly riding along side, and the twins giggling with them from the back of one of the very large draft horses.

She chastised herself for that thought. She really enjoyed reading the ancient texts waiting for her hungry eyes here, and knocking ideas back and forth with Greg. It's just that she'd really rather be out working the fields with her new friends, riding the beautiful countryside, or working out with Bruce.

Greg, on the other hand, was an engineer and... a bookworm. He wanted to know everything about his world, and libraries were his safe space.

"So, what are you thinking, Greg?" she asked in a deep sigh. "We go there ourselves? Patty would no doubt take us, but what if we find nothing? That'd make us look kinda stupid, don't ya think?"

"But what if we find a vast library that will tell us what happened long ago?" Greg responded. "What if, after all this time, we actually find out what happened here... *and* there... that will shed new light on the ruins of both? I think it would be worth the weeks of travel. Don't you?"

She grinned at him, his excitement rubbing off.

Why not? She really wanted to get out and look around anyway. If she were with Patty and a few rangers, her mom wouldn't be near as worried, right?

"Okay." she replied as she put a hand on the open book in front of her. "Let me have this, and you see if you can find anything else on the subject. If we can come to some kinda consensus on where to start looking, we'll broach the subject with Patty tonight at dinner."

Greg left the book in front of her, all but ran back to where he'd found it, and began looking through the dusty books with a lot more effort. Holly grinned as she shook her head, turned back to the first page of the book, and started reading the old script.

They were still at it when Holly's mother came down to get them.

"Holly Kelley!" Caihong Kelley stated sternly. "Are you and young Mister Graisson going to sit down here all night? Meredith has worked hard to put a wonderful meal together, and it will not be appreciated if she has to wait on two tardy children! Mark your places and come!"

"Yes, ma'am." they both responded.

They laughed at each other, and at Hong's smile, marked their places with ribbons, and left the library.

"What's so interesting that it takes me to come get you, Holly?" Hong asked as she led the two up the ramp to the door to the catacombs.

“Just some stuff Patty wants on that fortress thing she and Myra found before we got here, mom.” Holly replied. “We still haven’t found the ‘What, When, Who, or Where’ yet, but we’re working on it.”

“We found some writings that might point us in the right direction, Mrs. Kelley.” Greg interjected. “We’ll need to talk it over with Patricia to see how much of it is pertinent.”

“Well, I think the two of you should get out more.” Hong said as they walked through the Main Hall toward the dining area. “A little fresh air, exercise, and sunshine might help loosen the grey matter. You never know.”

“Sounds like a great idea.” Holly replied, with a conspiratorial grin at Greg.

Greg looked skyward and grinned as they walked into the big dining hall. It was starting to fill up with the people who lived and worked within the citadel. Others were moving into and out of the kitchen to help with plates and dinnerware.

Hong led the two teenagers toward a table close to the kitchen archway, and found a chair close to the brown-haired Duchess of Atrial. Greg and Holly walked around the table toward the two little ones giggling with each other.

“Okay.” Holly said as she took a seat “next to the little redheaded boy. “What are you two cooking up now?”

His size, small and thin, belied his age. Although he was just a little taller than the little blonde girl beside him, he was at least three years older.

“Nothing.” the blonde girl said sweetly.

“If I have to tickle both of you to death, I’m gonna find out!” Holly replied with a mischievous grin.

“We was just talkin’ about Sadie’s babies, Holly.” Danny replied with another giggle. “Momma says they still too little ta ride, but Caleb told me he wants us ta start trainin’ ‘em. Right, Toni?”

“Right!” the little girl... maybe six... responded. “They’re so pretty, Holly! Gretch walks right up and takes apples from my hand already!”

“And Troy?”

“He’s kinda stand-offish still.” Danny replied. “I figger a few weeks and he’ll be runnin’ with us in the paddock though.”

“And you’re just the guy to do it too.” Patricia Langstrom stated as she leaned down to kiss her son on the cheek. “Now, we need a little help in the kitchen. Any volunteers?”

“Me!” Toni screamed as she hopped from the chair and took Danny’s hand. “Com’on, Danny!”

“Com’on, you two.” Pat said to Holly and Greg, as she followed the skipping children to the kitchen.

“You’ve got your hands full, Patty.” Holly remarked as she and Greg flanked the small woman. “So, when are you and Rance gonna...”

“Ooooooh no!” Pat responded. “That’s gonna have to wait until we get a little more done on the house! Then, there *is* a wedding required, Miss Thang!”

“So, you haven’t...”

“I didn’t say that.” Pat responded quickly, blushed... and then they all laughed. “Find anything?”

“Are you trying to change the subject?”

“Yeah.” Pat replied with a grin at Holly. “Is it working?”

“More or less.” Holly responded... and giggled. “Greg?”

“Let’s wait until we’re all sitting down... especially you, Patricia.”

Greg lifted the heavy platter of sliced roast, potatoes and carrots and left them standing there.

“That good, hunh?” Pat asked, an eyebrow raised at Holly.

“Yep.” the teenager responded as she took the platter of dishes and turned to walk out. “I guess you’ll just have to wait.”

Pat rolled her eyes, picked up another platter of dishes, and followed Holly out to distribute them to the different tables in the hall. When she finally came back, sat down, and took a piece of the roast for her plate, she looked over at the two teenagers filling Toni and Danny’s plates.

When Pat saw Holly put two carrots on Danny's plate, she started to say something. But Toni's fork flashed out, stuck one of those carrots, and quickly put it on her plate with a grin at the small boy. When he grinned back with a nod, she breathed easier.

It was hard enough to get Danny to eat vegetables. She'd let him slide, as long as he ate at least a bite or two. With Toni around, they had a deal. If he had more than he liked, she would take the extra. It worked out, and they were best... *bestest* friends.

"So?" Pat asked around a bite of roast.

Greg swallowed the bite in his mouth, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and sat back.

"From what we found," he said softly, "it looks like the former Duke of Atrial had a problem with that particular fortress."

He paused to take a drink of the juice, and Pat sat forward in her chair. He grinned, and continued.

"About... what? Five thousand years or so ago, a man named Gefron went to Alanis, stole some riches... maybe... as well as something he called 'Gigi'. When the Duke found out about it, he set up his knights to go there and force Gefron to share... as well as put a large army together to sail to Alanis."

"From what we've found so far," Holly chimed in, "Gefron was some kinda wizard, alchemist, or... something. I think he gave the knights fits. But he might have had a vast treasury in the citadel just

full of precious stuff. But we're really interested to see if he had a library there as well."

"We never found anything but..."

"We know, Patty." Holly interrupted. "But Greg and I think there might be some kinda... secret door that leads deeper into the mountain there somewhere.

"We do know that the Duke either sent, or led an army to Alanis, and probably never came back! We haven't gotten any proof yet, but we both think that's the cause of Atrial being deserted for so long. We think Alanis invaded to keep the Duke and his 'barbarians' from ever trying to take Alanis again."

"That, of course, is conjecture on our part." Greg added. "But it could answer the question of the ruins here... and the vast sums found in the treasury.

"Then again, if that were so, where did those books come from?"

"Obviously, the Duke's men managed to take Gefron's citadel, but failed to protect his people from an invasion from Alanis." Holly replied. "There's no mention of them finding the Gigi... whatever that is... so it might still be there somewhere. But the only way to be sure..."

"Is to go there, look around, and see if we can find a secret passage." Pat interjected. "I agree. Do you have any idea as to where to look?"

“Yeah,” Holly answered, with a meaningful glance at Greg, “but we’ll have to show you.”

“Excuse me?”

Holly looked at her mother and saw the disapproval. She sighed and glanced at Greg for a moment.

“We won’t be going by ourselves, mom.” she said softly. “I mean, Patty’ll be there, and probably Aunt Myra. Right, Patty?”

“Myra should be back in a week or so.” Pat agreed. “She, Bobby and Bruce had a few more things to do in Gondol, so we’ll wait on them, put the party together, and go from here. We’ll need the time to do more research and get set to go. You can come with us if you want, Hong.”

“No.” the short Asian woman replied, her soft grin for her too-smart daughter. “I’d just be in the way. As long as you are with a group of good people, I’ll keep my reservations to myself. Just...”

“We’ll be careful, mom.” Holly said softly, and then giggled. “We won’t let any boogers get us.”

“That’s cause momma ain’t gonna let ‘em!” Danny interjected firmly.

“Right!” Pat added. “We’ll start compiling information tomorrow, and...”

“Tomorrow,” Hong began sternly, “these two are going with me to MacLocklin! I’m going to work in the garden with Di and Polly, while they spend some time in the sunshine!”

“Can I go too?” little Toni asked.

“Of course,” Holly responded, with a glance at Sarah, “if your mom says so.”

“Mommy?”

“As long as you listen to Auntie Hong,” Sarah replied softly, “I don’t see why not. Besides, we haven’t seen the twins in a while. I might go with you.”

“Yay!” the little girl squealed.

“If your mommy says it’s okay,” Pat added, “you could come with me and Danny home tonight, and she can come to pick you up tomorrow!”

“That sounds like a great idea!” Sarah responded. “Would that be better, Toni?”

“Yeah!” she replied, her little hand grabbing Danny’s tightly. “That way, me and Danny can go out and play with the ponies in the morning!”

“You’ll need a change of clothes and your nightgown.” Sarah said, her grin broader in response to her little daughter’s excitement. “You can pack after...”

“I’m done.” Toni stated quickly. She hopped down from the chair, grabbed Danny’s hand again, and pulled. “Com’on, Danny! You can help!”

Danny stuck the last potato with his fork, shoved it into his mouth, and, after dropping the utensil on the plate, let the smaller girl drag

him along after her. Before long, they were both skipping toward the Main Hall giggling.

“Starting a bit early, aren’t we?” Xander remarked with a big grin. “Teaching our daughter to dominate her men like that? It seems I remember something about...”

“You were never dominated, sir.” Sarah responded sternly, though her blushing grin told a different story. “You were just... enticed to a large degree. Admit it.”

Xander grinned, tilted his head to the side, and nodded amid the riotous laughter from everyone at the table.

Holly looked over at her mother, now with a slightly thoughtful glance. If there *is* a library there, and he was an alchemist...

“Mom?” When the pretty woman glanced at her daughter, Holly continued, “Listen. If there is a library there, it might have more natural formulas, possibly forgotten or not shared, in books there. If you think about it, you probably should go with us.

“I mean, what if they’re written in Mandarin? I could read ‘em, but I don’t really know all that much about homeopathic stuff. You would probably be a big help.”

“She has a point, Hong.” Pat added. “We might need your help to decipher some of that... if a library is actually there. If not, at least you’ll see a little more of this world. What do you say?”

“Come with us!” Holly prompted.

Hong glanced from Pat to Holly with a grin.

“I would like to see the villages and people around here.” she said softly. “I haven’t even left Atrial since we got here.”

She took a deep breath, let it out through her smile, and nodded.

“Yes!” Holly exclaimed.

Pat and Sarah laughed, and Hong blushed.

Chapter 2

“Little Red Robin Hood...”

“I still don’t understand why you need that, when you could carry two or more of these.” Greg said as he held up his pistol.

Holly grinned at the young man sitting beside the stream in the shade. They’d ridden out here to relax, and she’d taken that opportunity to work on the three arrows she still needed to repair in her quiver.

One of the Gargoyles had taught her to make her own arrows, and the glue she needed to use to attach the fletching and points. She worked hard to get it right, and that Gargoyle spent extra time with her to see she learned the skills well.

While she carefully wrapped thread around the arrow in her hand to attach the feathers to the nock end, she grinned at him.

“When you shoot that, you have to stop and reload.” she replied softly. “I can reload, shoot, reload, shoot, and repeat until I run out of arrows.

“Besides, I’m pretty good with this. I can hit a target at forty yards consistently... and fifty if I take the time. Plus, I don’t have to worry about my ears busting!”

He laughed, holstered the pistol and took a bite of the jerky they’d brought with them.

“So,” he said after a moment of reflection, “what do you think, Holly. You think Patricia will let us go along?”

“She said she would.” Holly responded, as she tied off the end of the string, and fished around in her pack for the small bottle of glue. “I really want to go this time, Greg. If I’m gonna be doing this for the rest of my life like I wanna, I need to get out there and see if my research means anything.”

“I never thought of that.” he admitted. “I’ve spent so much time delving into the books in the library trying to get a sense of what it was like *when*, I never thought about actually going to a site to see for myself.”

“A dig makes all the research prove itself, Greg.” Holly replied as she carefully painted a thin coating of the glue to the thread and set the arrow aside to dry. “Otherwise, it’s all just conjecture.”

“True.” he stated. He leaned back on his elbows in the grass, closed his eyes, and added, “I just picture what it must have been like back then. All the pomp and ceremony, shining armor, lances held high, and horses snorting. It must have been grand.”

“Unless it was some pompous asshole sending good men to their deaths.” Holly commented. “War isn’t pretty, glorious, or grand, Greg. It’s ugly, bloody, and seldom has a purpose. It always causes pain, destruction, and nightmares for those who have to defend against it, and those who perpetrate it seldom participate.”

“I mean, you were here when Sarah attacked Atrial to remove a stain from the lives of the good people around here, right?”

Greg nodded, the nightmares of that time still etched deep into his memory.

“It wasn’t grand or glorious, right? It was ugly, but necessary. The demons had been preying on folks for years... *centuries!* If you and the army from Dediso hadn’t won, what do you think life around here would have been like?”

“No. War may be warranted for reasons like that, but it is never grand, Greg.”

Greg nodded, and then glanced over at the pretty Asian girl. She sat on her deep maroon cloak with her legs drawn up and her arms around them. He sighed, looked back at the stream flowing clear water along its course, and closed his eyes again.

Holly was his friend... his best friend as far as he was concerned. He had other friends... like Frank, Dot, Di, and... a few more. But Holly was like he was. She read, studied, and discussed with him like those others never did. They were so much alike, yet so different in many ways.

He never saw her as someone he’d like to get to know... better, though the thought had crossed his mind. He was, after all, an eighteen-year-old healthy male, and she was... so perfect!

He shook his head. She was more a sister than his own sister was in some ways, he decided. They shared an interest in the past and how

it affected the present... and possibly the future. And she moved with so much certainty, especially when her mother and Bruce were around.

On a couple of occasions, he'd sat with Danny to watch her and the twins do that... *Tai Che Quan* thing she did. It was... amazing to watch her move with grace and surety as she instructed the girls through the exercises.

Then Bruce would put her through the dance with the stick... *staff*. He could never make a long staff move like that! Even now, she had a staff with her and it was leaning against a tree with her bow and quiver.

Of course, with Holly, it wasn't your ordinary staff. It was a gift from Bruce when he was here last time. It was about five foot long... just a couple of inches shorter than she was... and had a band of brass or something in two places separating it into three equal parts. If she twisted the staff, it would separate and, with the small steel chains that came out of the connections, she'd spin it around her body like an angry swarm of bees!

He thought about what it would feel like to have one of those spinning sections smack him in the head, and his grin broadened. Oh, he'd probably come to her rescue if anyone wanted to give her a problem, but would probably have to render aid to the ignorant fool after she was finished with him!

"You really think it's a good idea for your mother to come with us?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" she asked in return.

“It’s just that…” he began.

He looked over at her, shook his head, and sighed.

“You’re capable, Holly. I mean, you can handle yourself well, and I have no problem trusting that you will be able to keep up.

“Your mother hasn’t been away from Atrial… ever! I just worry she will find life on the road a bit… exhausting.”

Holly sighed, laid her head to her knees, and glanced at Greg. Then, she looked away and closed her eyes.

“My mom has worked her whole life trying to give us a good life, Greg.” she began softly. “When my dad left, she took the whole brunt of raising me on her shoulders and, when she wasn’t working her ass off, spent time with me teaching me to think for myself, defend myself, and gave me the benefit of the doubt when my schoolwork got me down.

“On weekends she wasn’t working, we’d go hiking, biking, or just walking through the park talking. She’s one of my very best friends… but my mom too, ya know?”

“Yeah, I sometimes gave her grief, but she was always patient with me, listened to what I had to say, and we’d discuss it… like adults. She never looked down on me as simply an annoying kid.

“As far as keeping up?” Holly concluded with a grinning glance at Greg. “She might surprise you.”

They both heard the long, trilling whistle, and Holly giggled.

“I think mom wants us.” she said as she stood and started gathering her things. With the quiver on her hip, and the bow across her back, she picked up the staff and grinned at Greg. “Com’on, lazy-bones. We gotta go.”

She gathered the three newly fashioned arrows, checked to see if the glue had set, and slipped them into the quiver. Then, with his hand in hers, they walked through the trees toward the herb garden, their horses following along behind.

When they got to the edge of the herb garden... a vast acreage of bushes and flowering plants put there by Diane Pervis, Dorothy Sutter, and Polly Graisson... the dapple-gray mare snorted at her.

“Go ahead, Misty.” Holly said, with a grinning glance at the mare. “Take Chaz with you and I’ll be in later to brush you down and let you out.”

While the two horses pranced away toward the house and the stable beyond, Holly took Greg’s hand and walked toward the garden.

Joy and Rance looked after the garden when the girls weren’t around, but Holly’s mom spent a lot of time here too with Sarah and a few of the new students from the villages around Estelan.

It was harvesting time, and the different flowers, leaves and stalks needed to be gathered quickly before they lost what Hong said was their potency.

“Holly!” came the cry from behind a row of bushes in the garden.

When Holly saw the shock of red hair appear, and the smile on the little nine-year old's face, she giggled. He was trying to carry a basket of cuttings that were bigger than he was!

She ran over, took one side of the basket and Danny grinned at her as they walked toward the house.

"Where's your mamma, buddy?" she asked.

"Inna house with Miss Joy and yer mamma, Holly." he replied... while grunting as if he was carrying the whole load. "Toni's in there with 'em, but we gonna run out ta the paddock in a bit."

"The ponies?"

"Yep!"

Di and Polly followed them into the house, each with a basket of their own. Caihong was supervising the sorting of herbs and the bagging process... as well as sorting them herself. When the two teenaged girls entered, they brought their baskets to the table and set them next to Danny's.

Of course, the two little ones waited for only moments before running out the backdoor again.

"You two don't go far!" Joy shouted after them. "We'll have lunch in an hour or so, and..."

"They stopped listening at the door, Joy." Pat stated, the giggles and chuckles around her causing Joy to grin. "I guess we don't stack up to ponies, hunh?"

“I guess not.” Joy admitted, as she brought the pot of coffee to the table and set it on the folded towel next to the piles of fresh herbs. Then, with a frown at Holly and Greg, “Weapons at the front door, please.”

Pat watched as Holly and Greg walked to the pegs next to the front door, took the weapons from their young bodies and hung them.

Again, she wondered why Merlin had suggested... encouraged... Okay, set it up to bring Holly and her mom here. She knew somehow that it had been his idea, but couldn't make the choice for them.

But why?

He never did anything without an ulterior motive, right? Sarah came here to stop the demons, and Pat was given the choice to come here and maybe keep Atrial from becoming a ghost town.

So, why Caihong... and Holly? And what kind of danger were they going to walk into? Seems that every time Merlin is in the mix, danger follows, so... Why?

When Holly turned around and saw her, Pat knew the girl had seen the look on her face. Holly patted Greg on the arm, whispered something to him, and nodded toward the door. When she walked out, Pat followed.

When she got outside, Holly was leaning against one of the posts that held the porch roof up and looking out over the fields at the end of the road. Pat stepped up beside her and sighed.

“Spill it, Patty.” was all the girl said... and waited.

What could she say? *The truth, Patty.*

“There are real bad people out there, Holly.” she began softly. “The demons are gone... mostly... but the thugs are still there. We’ve been getting reports of them for the last year.

“The Rangers have been on watch, but they can’t catch ‘em all, so...”

“So, you think I should stay here and be safe?” Holly asked, her glance at Pat disapproving. “Maybe I should hide in the catacombs, stay out of sight, and maybe the bad guys will all become priests and serve up hot lunches to the homeless?”

“And mom should stay here too? Maybe we can get Danny and Toni into the catacombs, hide them out until they’re... like... forty? They’ll be safe then, right?”

Holly looked back out toward the trees and the people far into the fields, sighed, and looked back at Pat.

“There’s always gonna be assholes, Patty.” she began. “There’s always gonna be danger no matter where you live. Hell, mom and I coulda been run over just going to the *Subway* that day! Or gotten mugged by some drugged-out psycho!

“The only difference I can see is, here I can defend my friends and family. There, not so much.

“Here, if somebody wants to hurt Danny, mom, Greg... just anybody I love, I can stick an arrow in their asses so deep they’ll be shitting arrowheads for a week!”

Pat laughed at that, and Holly grinned.

“As for staying behind while you go to the ‘Lost Citadel’, no chance, sister! I’m going! You take off without me and I’ll track you! And yeah! I can do that!”

“Okay!” Pat responded, her smile at the pretty Asian girl showing her acceptance. “Just thought you should know the situation!”

“I do.” Holly replied. “We probably won’t see any of those shitheads, but, if we do, we’ve got Myra, you, Greg, Bobby, and probably Bruce to handle it, right?”

“Good point.” Pat sighed, and laid a soft hand to Holly’s shoulder. “I’m just a worrier, okay? Can’t blame me for wanting to keep my best friend... *and* loyal researcher... safe, right?”

“See?!” Holly shot back with a giggle. “Always the ulterior motive!” Then, a bit more soberly, “I need to see what it is I’m researching, Patty. How can I become... *you* without going out and seeing if my conjectures are true?”

“Yeah.” Pat replied softly. “I know what you mean. Okay then. Just make sure you have what you’ll need when we go.”

“In that spirit,” Holly responded, her cute smile offered to Pat, “I notice you don’t carry the Ruger anymore. I’d kinda like to have it... if you’ll let me?”

“Why not a flintlock, girlfriend?!” Pat interjected. “Greg would probably want to teach you...”

“He already has, Patty.” Holly stated, her grin for the implications. “I’m pretty good with one of those heavy things, but I know I would be safer with the Ruger on my hip.”

“And a fedora?”

“That too.” Holly replied, and they both laughed.

“I only have a few rounds for it, and it needs a good cleaning, so...”

“Show me how?” Holly interrupted.

“No prob.” Pat replied softly as she walked toward the door. “Let’s get something to eat, get your mom, Di, and Polly loaded, and I’ll get the Ruger so we can play with it for a while.”

When they walked in, Holly smiled and nodded at Greg. He took a deep breath, grinned back, and joined them at the table to help load the bags of herbs to the saddlebags.

“Greg and I’ll saddle your horses, mom.” Holly said after a short while, while grabbing Greg’s hand and heading for the door.

“Aren’t you coming too?”

“Nope.” Holly replied, her mother’s face showing her concern. “We’ll be coming along after a bit. We need to talk to Patty about a few things first.”

“Okay.” Caihong responded, and began setting the smaller bags into the saddlebags sitting beside the table. “Just don’t be too long.”

“We won’t.” Holly tossed back as she led Greg out.

“So?” Greg asked as they walked to the stable.

“We’re on.” Holly relied softly. “She already gave us permission, but I knew she had reservations. As long as we’re good, she and mom won’t backtrack on us. Just make sure you have everything you’ll need just in case we have to go it alone.”

“You mean...”

“If they take off without us, I’m gonna follow.” Holly responded quickly. “You in?”

“Let’s get their horses saddled.” Greg replied with a chuckle. “Then we’ll spend the time with Patricia working out the details.”

It took no time at all for Greg and Holly to have the three horses saddled, and readied for the trip back to Atrial. Then they helped Di and Polly load the heavy saddlebags filled with herbs to the mounts, and waited until after lunch to send Holly’s mother and the two girls off.

Chapter 3

“Indiana... Holly?”

“Don’t stay too long, Holly.” Caihong said softly as she stood beside the smallish brown mare loaded with lifesaving herbs. “From what Patty told me, you and Greg still have to compile the documentation for our trip.

“That should keep you busy for a few days anyway.”

“I just wanna spend a little time with Danny and the twins, mom.” Holly replied. “We’ll be home for dinner. Tell Sarah we’ll bring Toni with us when we come, okay?”

Caihong kissed her daughter’s cheek, mounted, and the three women rode toward the pass to Atrial. The twins... Tish and Kristi... walked past Holly and Greg on the way to the stables.

“We’re going to the paddock to watch Danny work with Troy, Holly.” Kristi said as they passed.

“He’s trying to make that spoiled pony behave.” Tish chimed in with a giggle.

When Holly first met the twins, it was hard to tell them apart. After almost three years however, it became much easier. The fifteen-year-olds still finished each other’s thoughts, but they were extremely divergent in their mode of dress.

While both were well read, intelligent and had the vocabulary of those much older, Tish was more into pretty clothing and style. She

loved the dresses she and Joy made for her. Bright colors and short sleeves were the norm, with sandals for the summer and spring, and flat ankle boots for the fall and winter.

Kristi, however, was the adventurous type. With pants, long-sleeved shirt, vest, and boots that were laced to midcalf no matter the weather, she was the “tom-boy” of the two.

While Tish watched from the fence, hanging to the top bar and clapping with glee, Kristi would sit astride any of the new horses and dare the mount to buck!

Kristi was also the first to learn to shoot the big flintlocks, Tish still a bit afraid of the smoke and noise. Kristi had two of the newer, lightweight flintlocks designed for a smaller hand, one under each arm, with the leather possible pouch on her left hip. A dagger rode to her right from her belt.

But make no mistake. If you challenged one, you challenged both!

“Com’on!” Kristi shouted over her shoulder as she took her sister’s hand and they skipped through the stable toward the doors to the fenced in pasture behind.

A loud snort and flutter stopped Holly and Greg halfway through the stable. With her hands to her hips, Holly glared at the stall and the big head of the dapple-grey mare. The horse snorted again and tossed the long black mane impatiently.

“You can just be patient, Miss Misty.” Holly chided. “I’ll be back in a minute or two to brush you. You can just wait.”

The horse snorted again as Holly turned, grabbed Greg's hand, and walked purposefully to the doors to the back and out. As they walked toward the circular corral, Greg glanced back at the stable with a big grin.

"Looks like someone needs a bit more training in patience."

"She's just spoiled, Greg." Holly replied as she continued walking. "She needs to learn who's in charge here."

"And that would be..."

Holly punched him on the arm and they both laughed.

Tish was standing on the bottom rung of the fence giggling. Kristi was inside the corral with Toni helping the six-year-old brush the pretty palomino colt, the little blonde girl carefully combing the long light-blonde mane.

But Danny...

Danny stood leaning against the other side of the corral, his back to the jet-black colt. The colt pawed the ground, snorted, and fluttered, but Danny just ignored him and took another small bite of the apple.

The pony screamed!

"What?" Danny asked as he looked over his shoulder at the small horse. "You want somma this? Ya gonna have ta come over here then."

He bit off a large piece of the apple, held it out in his hand, and turned to look away again. The pony took a step forward, snorted, and stopped. Danny glanced back, shrugged, and stuck the bite into his mouth.

The colt screamed again!

“Yer gonna have to come here, Troy.” Danny stated with another glance over his shoulder. “I ain’t gonna just walk over, beg ya ta take it, and chew it up for ya!” He bit off another bite of the apple, held it out, and added, “It’s here if ya want it.” Then, he looked away again.

The colt looked from Danny to the bite of apple, snorted and stepped forward again. When Danny just ignored him, the black pony took another step. One more step and he stretched his blue-black neck out as far as he could and took the piece of apple.

Immediately, the colt stepped back and chewed the apple as fast as possible. Then, he again looked at Danny.

When the small redhead still ignored him, Troy minced a step, fluttered, minced another step, and nudged Danny’s shoulder.

“What?” Danny asked petulantly as he again glanced over his shoulder. “Ya want another bite?”

The colt fluttered at him and took a couple of steps back. Danny bit off another bite and held it out. Again, the pony stretched his neck, but Danny pulled the hand away slowly. After Troy took a small, nervous step forward, Danny slowly held the hand back toward the pony.

The pony took the bite, but Danny reached up quickly and scratched under the long head. Troy jerked his head back and took a step away. Danny shrugged, turned away, and took another small bite from the ever-shrinking apple.

“What’s he doing?” Holly asked softly.

“It’s kind of a long story... and a strange one at that.” Tish responded softly. “Sadie is a buckskin, and Kev is a big, beautiful, dark brown stallion. Not only is it odd to have a pairing like that produce twins, but the two of them are so different!

“Rance told us that it should have produced a foal with one or the other of their coloring... or made a variation of the two. But to have twins... and one a gorgeous golden color and the other a black... Well. It was strange.

“Rance said it was not unheard of, he said something about recessive ancestors... or something like that. Gretch is loving and can’t wait until Toni comes to spoil her. Troy, on the other hand, wants nothing to do with... anyone!

“After they foaled, and after finally getting to unsteady legs, the two found their mother and drank their fill. Then, Gretch stumbled over to Toni and nuzzled her right away! It was like they were meant for each other. You know?

“But Troy stayed close to his mother while watching Gretch get petted by... everyone! When Danny moved toward him, Troy backed away unsteadily and wouldn’t let anyone touch him. He wouldn’t even come back to nurse as long as anyone was around!

“Rance said to give them time, but it seems that the longer it went on, the more stand-offish Troy became. Danny tried many times to get near Troy, but the colt always snorted at him and ran away.

“Then, last month, when Rance and the farrier made a trip to Galdorn to find a new draft sire for the herd, Danny met a man named Beaumont. When he came back, Danny started coming in here with Gretch and Troy, but studiously ignored the black colt.

“Then, after heaping a lot of petting on Gretch, Danny would walk toward Troy with an apple... but didn’t look at him. When Troy would move away from him, Danny just walked to the other side of the corral munching on the apple and ignoring Troy.

“Danny would leave a bite or two of the apple on the fence, walk back to Gretch and continue petting the pretty colt, while Troy slowly made his way to the waiting apple bites.

“Now, as you can imagine, Troy became upset if Danny didn’t leave him a bite... and voiced it loudly! But Danny would just ignore him. He would still occasionally walk to the other side of the corral and leave a bite or two, but he was not consistent.

“Today, Danny decided that it was time. If you’ll notice, he hasn’t left anything on the fence, and has demanded that Troy take the bites from him. The reasoning is two-fold.

“First, Troy needs to know Danny won’t hurt him. Secondly, Danny wants Troy to know that to get any gifts will take trust.

“That’s what Mr. Beaumont told Danny. Trust is the best thing to teach a horse. When Troy finally understands that he can trust Danny, he will begin to trust others.”

“So,” Holly responded, while watching Danny still with his back turned to the colt, “Danny is going to force Troy to take the apple from him, and pet him.”

“Not really.” Tish replied softly. “Today is only the start. Danny told us that Mr. Beaumont said it would take time and patience. Danny will, no doubt, leave off with this exercise in a bit and walk away. Troy now has it in his mind that Danny is the giver of gifts, and hopefully will remember. One day at a time.”

“I see.”

Danny bit off all but a small bite of the apple and, while chewing, slowly drew back his arm to throw the core and the last bite into the field beyond the corral. Troy screamed again, and Danny turned to the small, black colt.

“You want this?” he asked while holding out the core of the apple in his palm.

The horse fluttered and Danny held it out.

“Come get it then.”

The pony took a step, glanced from Danny to the apple, and stopped.

“I ain’t askin’ again, Troy.” Danny added firmly. “If you don’t want it, I know somethin’ out there does. What’s it gonna be?”

The colt took another step and started stretching his neck toward Danny’s hand, but Danny pulled it back.

“Oh, no ya don’t.” Danny stated as he pulled his hand away. “Ya want it, ya come over here and take it.”

Then, Danny held the core out to his side and waited.

Troy looked at the apple... at Danny... and the apple again. He took a small step, glanced at Danny, and took another. Then, he reached out to take the apple from Danny’s hand.

Again, Danny reached under the pony’s head and scratched, but this time, Troy only lifted his head a little. After a moment, he lowered his big head into Danny’s hand and, while shivering all over, let Danny scratch him again.

Danny stuck that hand into his pocket, turned and walked nonchalantly across the corral toward Toni and the others. Troy started to follow and, when he remembered he was supposed to be stand-offish, he stopped. When he snorted, Danny ignored him and walked over to stroke the pretty palomino on the back gently.

“So...” Greg began softly.

“That’s the first time he’s let me touch ‘im.” Danny replied. “I ain’t gonna push it. Mr. Beaumont said ta take it slow.”

“Speaking of slow,” Holly interjected with a giggle, “if I don’t get my butt in the stable and brush Misty, I’ll probably be walking before long!”

“That’s taking charge of the situation, Holly.” Greg chuckled. “Show her who’s boss!”

“Shut up!” Holly responded, but giggled as she headed for the stable.

Greg followed her and, after catching up, took her hand. While Holly stepped into Misty’s stall, Greg went to the stall his big brown horse called home when they were here.

Rance had already unsaddled the horses, and Greg stroked Chaz’s long neck gently.

“So, buddy,” he began softly, “you ready for an adventure?” The horse snorted and Greg grinned. “Good. At least one of us is.”

After seeing to their horses, the two returned to the house. Patricia waited for them with the Ruger and her cleaning kit laid out on the kitchen table. While Pat supervised, Holly went through the steps to unload the big pistol, remove the cylinder, clean it thoroughly, and reassemble it. While Holly reloaded the big weapon, Pat sighed.

“I only have about twenty rounds for that, Holly,” she said softly, “so be careful to make each shot count. If you have to use it, use it.”

Pat sighed again and, while Holly slipped the pistol back into the holster, added, “This is not America, girl. No 911, cops on the corner, or anyone else to help you if you come up against thugs. It’s all on you. Having to shoot someone who’s trying to kill you is no laughing matter.”

“I got it, Patty.” Holly replied. “I don’t think it will ever come up, but I think I’m good enough to shoot ‘em where they won’t die. Then...”

“You can’t think like that.” Pat snapped. “When I came here, it was because some assholes were chasing me through dark corridors trying to kill me. If I took the time to even think about wounding them, I’d be dead!”

“I’ve used that to kill demons here, kiddo. It wasn’t exciting, pleasant, or any of that stuff! It is what it is. Kill or be killed! If you get into a situation where somebody wants you dead, don’t think about it! Aim and shoot!”

“Okay!” Holly replied. “I’ll try not to get into that kinda situation! Besides, you’ll be there... and Aunt Myra, right?”

“Yeah.” Pat replied. “But we might not always be.”

“You worry too much.” Holly responded... and giggled. “Besides, if there’s trouble, I’ll hide behind Greg. He’s a bigger target.”

“Thanks!” Greg chuckled.

“Don’t mention it.” Holly responded with a giggle.

After an hour or so, Greg and Holly got their things together... to include securing the big pistol and cartridge belt into Holly’s saddlebag... and Pat followed them out to the stable.

“You two need to compile everything you have into a comprehensive set of notes we can use to look for that hidden door that *might* be there.” she said. “I’ll look it over with you as you go, and you can add to it as you find more... stuff. I’ll be in Atrial tomorrow and we’ll sit down and go over everything you have now and I’ll help with the research.”

“So, when do you wanna...”

“I think we should wait for Myra and Bobby to get here.” Pat replied. “Bruce might want to go too, ya know? If Hong is going...”

“She likes him a lot, Patty.” Holly said softly. “I wish...”

“Give it some time, Holly.” Pat cut in. “She’s been hurt before... as you know... and she won’t be pushed into trusting anyone until she’s ready.”

“Yeah.” Holly replied with a sigh. “I just...” She sighed again and then grinned. “I’m not sure we’ll be able to pry Toni away, Patty. Could you...”

“I’ll get her.” Pat replied as she headed for the door to the back pasture. “Just get ready to go and I’ll bring her to you.”

Misty’s snort drew their attention, and a giggle from Holly.

“Okay, Miss Impatient.” she said to the horse. “Give me a minute to get you saddled, and we’ll go.”

“Yeah.” Greg interjected sarcastically. “You’ve trained her well.”

“Shut up, Greg.”



Illani was found in secret chambers within the Lost Citadel. When Holy found her, she spoke of the gods leaving her and her people here and flying away. The link to Atlantis caught Holly's attention immediately.

Illani's Song: Book 3 of "Hell's Blade" Series

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