



*The Illani led them into secret catacombs within the Lost Citadel. The library told of a civilization that came here from another world. They would have to sail to Alanis where people lived under ancient Chinese feudalism.*

## **Mysteries of Alanis: Book 4 of "Hell's Blade" Series**

By R.L. Pool

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BOOK 4 OF HELL'S BLADE SERIES



MYSTERIES  
OF  
ATLANTIS

R.L. POOL

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## Chapter 1

*“It takes time to get things right...”*

It was the morning after they arrived when Pat, Danny, and the twins walked into the dining hall. After their initial shock, the twin girls were sitting with the little white haired, pointed eared Illani, asking about... *everything!* The giggling brought smiles to every face in the room.

They told her about the horses now being trained in the paddock at Rance’s and invited her to join them.

“Illani go with new friend?” Illani asked Holly softly.

Holly grinned at Greg and, after a smiling nod, Holly replied, “Sure.”

Illani ran right away up to Holly’s room, brought her bow, quiver and small pack down and grinned in excitement. Holly, with a laugh, walked up to her room with her mother, gathered her pistols, quiver and bow.

“I think I’ll go with you.” Hong said as she watched her... *grownup* daughter mount her weapons to her small body and pick up Illani’s dark blue coat from the bed. “I haven’t seen Joy in a long while and there’s probably a lot I need to catch up on.”

When they returned to the Main Hall, Greg still hadn’t moved. When Holly tilted her head with the question on her face, he grinned.

“Somebody needs to start the research, Holly.” he said with a chuckle. “I guess I’m elected.”

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, Greg.” Holly responded.

He shrugged and waved her after the three little girls, Pat and Danny.

“Wait for me!!!”

Toni ran out of the dining area with her coat in her hands, Sarah following with a grin. Danny helped the little blonde get the coat on and, with her hand in his, walked out.

The twins and Illani followed, chattering like little girls do when they’ve been away from each other for a while. The strange thing was, the twins just met Illani and acted like they’d been friends since birth. Holly wondered about the draw her new little sister had when it came to people, and glanced at Patty. Pat shrugged with a grin and followed them while Hong waited on her daughter.

Holly glanced at the now open door to the catacombs, sighed, and started for the door to the outside.

“He’s not going to disappear, Holly.” her mother whispered softly as she took Holly’s hand. “He’ll be here when you get back.”

Holly giggled, squeezed Hong’s hand gently, and they followed the small group toward the stables.

The twins had Illani between them and Holly could guess that they were talking in tandem again... especially the way Illani’s head turned back and forth as they walked toward the stable.

When Illani shivered at the soft cool breeze coming from the open gate to the vast holdings beyond the valley, Holly ran up and handed her the dark blue coat.

“It’s still kinda chilly out, little sister.” she said as she watched the little girl put the coat on and button it.

Of course, the twins ooo-ed and ahh-ed at the fine stitching and the lighter blue embroidery on the cuffs and collar. Illani took special care to explain where she got it, and the twins both asked if they could go there with her sometime to...

Holly saw the sad look on Illani’s face, and stepped in to help.

“We’ll be going to Alanis in a while, ladies.” she said as she followed them toward the stalls in the back of the stable. “Illani’s people come from there and she may want to stay with them for a while.”

“I wish we could come with you.” Tish responded softly. “Kristi and I just met you and we really... *really* want to know you better.”

“And it would be very helpful in learning your language as well.” Kristi added.

“Joy and Rance will be coming with us.” Holly interjected. “I don’t think they would like the idea that you two were left here alone. Do you?”

“You mean...” Kristi said as she and her sister stared at Pat and Holly in open-mouthed astonishment.

“I mean,” Pat replied with a giggle, “you two had better start packing.”

The twins squealed and ran, with Illani running between them, toward the two stalls next to each other at the end. While Tish ran on to the stall holding the smallish dark brown mare, Kristi stopped Illani and, after a backward glance at the stall next to Tish’s, sighed.

“You might want to ride with Tish, Illani.” she said softly. “Tyree is very protective of me and has been known to snap at anyone getting too close.” She let go of Illani’s hand as she backed toward the stall, and added, “Just wait here until we get the horses saddled.”

Kristi turned and walked toward the stall while Illani waited, her slim hands held together at her waist. Holly turned at the soft flutter behind her and walked toward the gray mare with a smile.

“Tyree! *Stop!*!”

Holly spun and watched as the big speckled grey stallion pranced out of the stall directly at Illani. Kristi looked as if she had been pushed aside when the big horse came from his stall and the frightened look on Kristi’s face was...

But Illani held a slim hand up and began talking to the horse in that ancient, whispery soft language. Tyree stopped, snorted, and then lowered his head with his ears forward as if listening. After a tense moment, he stepped toward Illani until the hand she held toward him met his big forehead.

Illani cooed in her language while stroking the stiff hair between his eyes and, after he took another step and laid his big head to her small chest, she reached around that head with one arm. While stroking the long black mane out of his face, she continued talking to him in that soft language.

He fluttered softly, his eyes half lidded, and Illani giggled. She kissed his big forehead and he backed a step and turned back toward his stall. Kristi looked dumbfounded as the big horse entered his stall, turned and waited for someone to saddle him.

“I’ve never...” Tyree snorted... *loudly!* “Okay!” Kristi stated sternly. “Let me lift my chin from the floor first, please!”

“Him berry pretty, Kristi.” Illani said softly as the girl lifted the bridle to his mouth and he took it eagerly. “Him say Illani okay for ride.”

“So it seems.” the girl replied as she took the thick saddle blanket from the wall of the stall and set it close to the horse’s withers. As she lifted the saddle and turned to mount it, she added, “He’s never let anyone close to him unless they were around him for a while. Then, it was only to let them fix his shoes or brush him down. But he’s never actively approached anyone before, so...”

“Illani say him big, strong and pretty only, Kristi.” Illani responded softly. “Illani say wrong?”

“Obviously not.” Kristi replied with a giggle. She pulled the cinch up with the leather strap, her hand between it and the horse’s ribs, and



tied it off. Then, while attaching the belly strap, “Whatever you two talked about made an impression on him. That’s all.”

“Me don’ want he t’ink me better.” Illani responded sadly.

“Oh, that’s not a problem.” Kristi said with another giggle as she patted the big horse’s shoulder and led him from the stall. “He and I grew up together. When I go to Dediso next year to start my training to be a Ranger, he’s going to go with me, keep me company, and try to keep me out of trouble.”

“I just wish I were more like you, Kristi.” Tish interjected as she too led her horse from the stall. “I just...”

“Rangers need magistrates to administer the law, Tish.” Holly said as she led Misty out and threw the reins up and onto the saddle. “You may not be suited for the rough part of keeping the peace. Study the law and work with your sister to keep everyone safe from the thugs still roaming free out there.”

“That’s an idea I never considered.” Tish responded softly. “That way, I can still work with Kristi while maintaining my own set of standards.”

“Myra knows a magistrate in Federin who could possibly help you with that.” Holly said softly as she walked toward the stable door with Misty prancing behind her. “But you might want to take it up with Joy?”

“I will!” Tish said, now with a little excitement in her tone.

Tyree stopped, turned his big head to Illani, and fluttered.

“I think he wants you up in his saddle, Illani.” Kristi stated with another giggle. “I’ll help you up and the rest of us can walk.”

“You know,” Holly added as Kristi lifted the small girl into the saddle of the big gray, “Aunt Myra might have some other ideas for you too! I mean, they have courses at the Gargoyle College in Dediso, so...”

“We could study together, Tish!” Kristi said excitedly. “And you could work with me when in training to see what it is a Ranger does to temper your judgement as well!”

“True.” Tish responded softly. “If I could travel with you, enroll at the college and get those courses under my belt, then I could find a good university, maybe in Federin, to finish out my education!”

“Myra is supposed to be traveling back to Dediso later in the week.” Kristi stated as she followed Holly and Misty out. “We’ll see what she says.”

While the twins walked along working out the details of their schooling, with Illani joining in the conversation occasionally, Pat came to walk with Holly. She glanced up at Danny, now with his arm around Toni and the other securely holding the pommel of the saddle.

“Tish will have to borrow some clothes from Kristi.” she all but whispered. “She’ll need something a bit sturdier to wear for the crossing.”

“That should be interesting.” Holly replied... and then added, “I think we’ll let Kristi broach that subject.”

“That would be best.” Pat responded sternly. And then they both laughed.

The short trip out to the Fillion farm was filled with giggles and non-stop chattering from the girls leading. Toni fell asleep shortly after Sadie walked through the gate to the vast acreage, and Danny seemed content to hold her in the saddle.

Joy was standing on the porch drying her hands on her apron when they walked up. She grinned at Holly, and then at the twins.

“Rance went over to help Kyle Turner with shearing.” she said. “He put the five new horses in the paddock and Mr. Bledsoe and Caleb are out there to see if they can get that mare to let them trim those overgrown hooves.”

“We’ll unsaddle Glenda and Tyree and see if we can help, Joy.” Kristi replied.

The three girls led the two horses into the stable while Joy took Holly into her arms first, and then Hong. Misty snorted and, when Holly shot her a glance, the horse tossed her head and pranced after the girls.

“Where’s the ponies?” Danny asked from Sadie’s back.

“In the post corral, buddy.” Joy replied with a chuckle. “They’re probably just waiting for you and Toni to come spoil them!”

“Let’s go, Danny!” Toni all but squealed as she looked back at the smiling, redheaded nine-year-old. “Gretch could pro’bly use a brushin’ and...”

“Troy’ll need one too once he gets over bein’ a-scared a me.”  
Danny responded.

Pat caught Toni as she slid from the saddle, let her down to her little feet and, while the little blonde bounced on her toes, Pat helped Danny down. Then, Toni grabbed Danny’s hand and ran toward the stables... and presumably the corrals in back.

“So,” Joy remarked softly, “are we back now? Or just passing through?”

“A little bit of both.” Holly replied. “We’re headed to Alanis to...”

“I know all that.” Joy said as she waved it off. “I mean, are you gonna stay with us a while, or...”

“Research.” Holly responded. “There’s so much more we need to know before rushing into a strange land looking for history.”

“I can assume, since he didn’t come with you, that Greg is down in those dingy catacombs?” At Holly’s grinning nod, Joy sighed and, “Just make sure to live as well as study, girl. Knowledge without the wherewithal to use it is wasted.”

She glanced toward the stable and asked, “The white-haired girl?”

“That’s Illani.” Holly replied, her eyes following Joy’s. “It’s a long story, but...”

“And is best told over a good cup of coffee.” Hong interjected. “Why don’t you two go out and see to the girls while Joy and I catch up?”

Hong took Joy's arm and, without a backward glance, walked her into the house chatting.

"Well," Pat said softly, "I think we've been dismissed."

"Rude much?" Holly whispered back.

"Com'on, Sadie." Pat said with a giggle as she walked toward the stables. "Let's get that saddle off you and check on the girls."

Pat took the saddle and bridle from the brown mare, set them to the waiting mounts in the stall, and walked toward Holly. Sadie followed docily with a flutter. Holly had just lifted the saddle from Misty when the two men, Caleb and the big blacksmith from Outerburg, came into the stable from the back.

"She cain't stay like that, Mr. Bledsoe." Caleb was saying. "She'll be all crippled up if'n we doesn't find some way a trimmin' them hooves."

"I know that, Caleb." Bledsoe replied sternly. "We may have to drop her, hold her down, and trim 'em that way, but that might give her even more reason to hate people." He sighed and added, "Besides, bein' skinny from not bein' fed proper, we could break a rib.

"Get my box and the saw from the wagon, Caleb. Get the hoof-block too just in case."

"I don't think she gonna be all that willin' ta put her hoof up thar, Mr. Bledsoe."

“That’s why I said just in case, Caleb.” the older man said sadly. “When it comes right down to it, we’ll do what we gotta. Even if it means...”

“Yessir.” Caleb replied softly and... sadly.

Holly glanced at Pat, turned back and removed the bridle quickly. Then, she and Pat hurried out the back door to the stable, the two horses following.

Kristi saw them coming from where she sat on the fence watching the four horses milling around on the right side of the paddock. She jumped down, ran to the gate to the pasture, and opened it for the two prancing horses. After they were through, she closed the gate and walked back.

When Pat and Holly leaned on the fence next to Illani and Tish and looked over to the left, Kristi followed their gaze.

The mare was young, maybe three years old if that. She was so thin, her ribs were obvious through the dull red hide. Her head was down, the dirty blonde mane hanging into her half-lidded eyes, and it seemed she would collapse any minute.

And Kristi could see why.

Hooves were supposed to come down and help the horse stabilize the weight they carried. They were ground down in the wild by the horse’s own running through hard ground, or rocky terrain.

When domesticated, it was on the owner to see after those hooves and trim them. Shoes were added to protect the hard hooves from breaking and splitting, and required periodic care.

The hooves on the mare looked like they had never been tended, growing so long that they curved up at the front a good five inches! It was a wonder the horse could even stand!

Then, she saw Caleb and the blacksmith come out of the stables carrying a coiled rope, a large box of tools, and a block of wood.

She also saw the pistol in Mr. Bledsoe's belt and the sad look on his face.

"What is happening, Holly?" Kristi asked as she stepped up on the fence next to the small girl and watched the two men move toward the gate to the paddock.

"Something about that horse, Kristi." Holly replied. "I think they're gonna try to do something about those hooves, but it doesn't look good."

"If they can't get her to let them trim them up," Pat interjected softly, "they might have to force her on her side and hold her down."

"But that could hurt her badly." Kristi all but whispered. "She could break a rib, rupture an organ, or..."

"That's why Mr. Bledsoe is carrying the pistol." Pat whispered. "If they can't..."

Illani went over the fence quickly, ran toward the horse, and held a hand back without looking that stopped the two men just coming through the gate.

When the mare glanced at the little white-haired girl, she lifted her head, snorted and tried to back away painfully.

Illani stopped and they all heard her soft voice talking to the horse in that gentle language she'd used on Tyree. When the horse stopped trying to move, Illani began walking slowly toward her again, her hands to her side with the palms toward the horse, and her soft voice cooing gently.

Holly started over the fence, but Kristi's hand held her arm.

"She's got this, Holly." the girl whispered.

"She has that horse's full attention." Tish added.

Indeed, she did. The horse was all but transfixed on Illani, the large eyes wide with fear.

Illani slowly raised her left hand as she came closer, but, when the hand almost touched, the horse started to lift her big head away. Illani stopped, cooed a bit more in that ancient language, and the head came back down slowly.

"What is she saying?" Tish whispered.

"And what language is that?" Kristi added.

"An old one." Holly replied. "I don't know much, but she's been helping me learn. I think... I think she's using inflection more than the words though."



“It seems to be working.”

“And very well.”

They watched as Illani gently stroked the stiff hair between the horse’s eyes and the horse’s head again began to droop. The girl slipped her left hand beneath the big jaw and gently lifted.

The horse responded by lifting her head and, when their eyes met, Illani used her right hand to shift the dirty blondish mane from the mare’s eyes. But always with that soft voice speaking to her, consoling her, comforting her.

Then...

The soft voice drifted across the paddock. The words to the song were indecipherable, but carried comfort to everyone who heard it. Even the other horses stopped milling and stood still to listen.

## Chapter 2

*“A song of peace...”*

Holly risked a glance at Kristi and found the shocked, open-mouthed awe she expected. But when she looked over at Tish...

Tish’s eyes were closed and there was a soft-half smile on her pretty fifteen-year-old face. Her head swayed slightly at the gentle cadence of the song and she seemed... content.

Holly understood that. She felt it too. There was something...

A glance across the paddock showed her the birds starting to gather on the fence across the way. Holly grinned, saw the faces on Bledsoe and Caleb, the way the horses stood so still, and had to force herself not to laugh.

*I’m stuck in the middle of a fucking Disney movie,* she thought.

“Wait here.” she whispered as she again began to slowly climb over the fence. Kristi only glanced her way, but didn’t try to stop her.

She stepped down from the fence and walked slowly to Bledsoe, touched his arm and got a dazed glance. She looked over at Illani and saw the slim hand reach toward them and beckon for them to come.

Slowly, with Holly’s hand still on his arm, the blacksmith walked toward the sweetly singing girl. It took Caleb a second or two to realize they were moving again, and followed.

When they were within two or three paces, Illani’s song drifted into silence. The horse looked up, saw the two men and Holly there

and started to back away. Another soft word from Illani, and a slim hand to the big jaw, brought the horse's attention back. Illani looked over at the blacksmith and smiled.

“You fix feets?” she asked in a soft, breathy whisper.

He nodded, and she waved him toward the back of the horse, while again talking to the skittish mare softly.

Holly stayed as still as she could while Calib followed the blacksmith to the back left hoof of the all but crippled mare. Bledsoe gently moved his hand across the ribs showing through the hide, the skin rippling with shudders as the hand passed.

He stroked the still strong muscles showing through the hide of the big haunch and the mare tried again to turn to look. Again, Illani allowed the mare to look, but used that slim hand and her soft voice to bring the horse back to her.

Bledsoe wasted no time. He held a hand back without looking, and Calib put the metal handle of the short wooden block into his hand. While Bledsoe stroked the leg, patted it, and guided the hoof to the block, Calib set the toolbox down and fished the saw from it.

Holly thought the saw looked like one of those keyhole saws she'd seen in the DIY warehouse in Jersey.

Bledsoe quickly used the saw to remove the excess hoof material, dropped the saw to the ground and pulled out a rasp. As quickly and efficiently as possible, he reshaped the hoof. He returned that to his apron while stroking the leg gently, then patted it again.

When the horse visibly shifted her weight, Bledsoe helped to guide the hoof up, stepped over it, and held it between his legs. With a pair of long, plier-looking clippers, he set to work removing more of the overgrown hoof. Once he was at least partially satisfied, he put away the clippers and pulled a strange looking, but exceedingly sharp knife from his apron.

With that, he carved the bulging excess from inside the hoof, cleaned it as best he could, returned it to his apron, and pulled out the rasp again.

With that, he filed the bottom of the hoof until it was flat all the way across. Holly saw him sigh, put the rasp back into his apron, and guide the hoof to the ground again. He picked up the saw and block, and then looked at Illani for permission to continue.

Holly could see the horse tentatively put her weight on the repaired hoof, and then more. The fetlocks on the others were distended to compensate for the overgrown hooves. But the one Bledsoe had repaired looked like it was more comfortable, straighter as the weight of the horse shifted to it.

She caught Illani waving at Bledsoe again, and the blacksmith, again with his hand gently stroking the side of the smallish horse, moved slowly to the front left hoof.

Again, Bledsoe stroked the too thin leg, and again the horse shifted to allow him to raise it to the block. First the saw, then the rasp, then the clippers, knife, and rasp again. It didn't take long before

Bledsoe was lowering the hoof to the ground again and watching as the horse shifted her weight. He nodded, and glanced at Illani.

She stroked more of the long, dirty-blond mane from the mare's eyes, and then motioned for Bledsoe to move around her to the right front hoof.

The mare's eyes went to the blacksmith, but always came back to Illani and the all but whispering voice.

Bledsoe repeated his efforts on the right front hoof, carefully felt the fetlock there, and lowered that hoof to the ground. This time, when the blacksmith gently moved his hand over her reddish-brown hide toward the back leg, the skin barely shivered.

He carved the excess from that last hoof, rasped it flat, set it to the ground and moved back to the front a pace or so behind the little white-haired girl.

"It's the best I could do right now, girl," he whispered. "I'll have Calib mix up a large batch of feed for her. If you can get her to eat the portions I recommend at least three times a day, let her loose in the pasture to graze, and see she has plenty of water, she should begin to gain weight pretty quickly.

"She really needs a bath, but that will have to wait until she fattens up a bit. Otherwise she could catch a chill.

"I'll be back in three... four days to have another look at them hooves. If they look good, I'll retrim 'em, measure for shoes, and work 'em right here to mount 'em... if she'll let me."

“She do.” Illani whispered softly with a smile for the softly fluttering mare. “She say thank. Illani too.”

“Well,” Bledsoe replied, “thank *you*, little one. When you’re ready, we’ll be in the stable.”

He turned to walk away, but stopped and turned back.

“You know,” he began in something above a whisper, “horses as good as that one deserve a name. She got one?”

“Ningal.” Illani replied softly. “Illani say Ningal.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard...”

“Mean *great lady*.” Illani all but whispered as she continued to stroke the long jaw gently. “Her maybe no treat like lady, but now Illani friend for Ningal. Illani show great lady good peoples here.”

“That you have, little one.” Bledsoe replied as he turned to walk away. Then, as if to himself, he repeated, “That you have.”

“Looks like you have a horse of your own now, little sister.” Holly remarked softly.

“No.” the little Gigi replied. “Ningal b’long Ningal. Maybe let Illani ride, bath for clean. Maybe Illani lay in grass with Ningal. Ningal Illani friend. No own.” Illani raised her hand to Holly and, with a soft grin, asked, “You come? Illani say Ningal you sister me.”

“You sure?” Holly responded as she very slowly walked to Illani and held a hand to the horse.

“Yes.” the little girl responded as she stroked the long jaw again. “Ningal see Illani sister. Love Holly maybe same me.”

As if in answer, the mare cast her sad eyes at Holly, lowered her head and let Holly's hand stroke the stiff hair on her face. After a soft flutter, Holly reached out and stroked the neck of the starved horse.

"Why don't you take your new friend into the stable and get her something to eat." Holly said as she backed a step away. "Then we might just see what we can do about a bath for her."

"Man say no bath 'til better, Holly." Illani responded. "Brush only."

"Then, let's brush her together, sister."

Illani giggled and, as she and Holly walked toward the paddock gate, the mare followed without a noticeable limp this time.

## Chapter 3

### *“A Ranger’s vengeance...”*

Myra and Bobby were barely out of the saddle in Gadsden when Tom Delaney walked out on the porch of the Ranger Station/Inn with a letter in his hand.

“Mark was ambushed, Myra.” he said angrily as he handed the letter to her. “Says he got wounded, but he lost one a his investigators and his assistant. Them thugs took the evidence pouch offa the boy’s body.”

Myra remembered the young man with the portable desk always at Mark Kendrick’s elbow. Cyrus was the young man’s name and, according to Mark, had a great future ahead of him. If they were after the evidence...

“The Rangers?” Myra asked, the question clipped and filled with venom.

“Two wounded, Myra.” Tom replied. “The other two loaded up the dead and wounded and headed for Federin. Mark says accordin’ to Josh, they didn’t have time to do any trackin’. But the signs said Federin.”

“Let’s go, Bobby.”

“Myra, wait!” Tom shouted as Myra jumped back into the saddle. “It’s gotta be at least two weeks since...”

“I can still find their tracks, Tom.”



“And then what?” he asked sternly.

“I won’t know that until I find them.” she replied, tugged the reins, and Kev spun to trot out of town.

“See she don’t get herself in trouble with the Law, Bobby.”

“Ain’t promisin’ nothin’, Tom.” Bobby responded tautly as he too mounted and trotted after his wife.

“Myra,” Bobby said sternly as he came abreast of the seething Ranger, “we gotta do this right.”

“I know, Bobby.” she responded angrily. “But you and I know who ordered the ambush. Someone had to have ridden out to tell their boss about us when we were here last, set up the ambush and took the evidence. If we don’t catch them before that... *suspect* destroys all we gained, they’ll be free to do it again. I can’t... *won’t* let that happen!”

“Whatever you wanna do, darlin’,” Bobby replied, “know I’m with ya ‘til the end. Now, where we gonna start?”

“We need to find the ambush site and follow whatever we find there.”

Bobby nodded, and they rode on.

For three days they followed the road toward the turnoff to Federin. Myra rode before Bobby and they both watched for any sign that the ambush happened anywhere near them.

They rode throughout the day, walking briefly to rest the horses, and stopped only when the light faded to where they could no longer

see. They'd make camp, take turns on watch, and were in the saddle and riding as soon as they had enough light.

Late morning on the fourth day, Myra dropped from the saddle and squatted next to the left side of the road. After a moment of searching...

"Take the other side, Bobby." she all but whispered. "Let me know if you see anything out of place."

"Gotcha." he replied as he dropped from his horse and carefully moved to the right side.

Myra stood up and looked around. The forest they traveled through started some five miles back. Until then, there was only open fields and brush. Here the forest was thicker and a perfect spot for an ambush.

The old blood stains she found were what she'd been looking for anyway. Rangers, if they were worth their salt, would have returned fire without hesitation. She didn't know whose blood this was, but it was blood.

Now she examined the trees in hopes of...

"They's some broke brush over here, darlin'." Bobby called.

But Myra was walking into the forest to a particular tree. When Bobby joined her, she was digging into the hard wood with one of her daggers.

"Whacha got?" he asked.

In answer, she pried the small lump of... something from the wood and handed it to him. He held it in the palm of his hand and, after moving it around with a finger, sighed.

“This is a Ranger bullet, Myra.”

The distorted lead and mushroomed silver coating told the tale. Rangers *had* returned fire. Now to find the old tracks that would tell them...

“More broke bushes over here.” Bobby called softly. “And it looks like blood on one a these trees too.”

“Blood here too.” she replied as she gently moved the thick brush to the side to reveal the dark stain on the leaves. “At least our guys hit one or two of them.”

Bobby nodded and moved slowly into the forest. He found more broken branches, spots of dark blood, and what looked like to him as stumbling footprints. Then...

“Over here, Myra.” he all but whispered as he pushed some leaves away from a foot partially hidden in the mulch. “Looks like one a them didn’t make it.”

He pushed some more of the mulch away, and recoiled at the stench.

“Been here fer awhile, darlin’.” he whispered as Myra joined him.

“They have wounded.” Myra responded as she squatted and checked what they could see of the decomposing body. “They won’t

head straight for Federin until they've gotten some healing. The guards would have questions they don't want to answer.”

“How many ya figger?”

“Not certain yet, Bobby.” Myra responded. “You follow what you can of these tracks while I see if there are more where I found the blood stains.”

While Bobby slowly moved through the brush, Myra went back to the bush where she found the stains and followed the old tracks into the forest. She found there were others there as well and followed the remains of the tracks until she and Bobby came closer together.

“I think there were two more hit, Bobby.” she stated as they continued to move through the brush, the tracks seeming to come together. “That would slow them down, unless...”

“Unless what?” Bobby asked as he concentrated on the broken brush and faint tracks.

“Unless we find more bodies.” Myra replied tersely. “I've seen very few thugs willing to stake their lives on a wounded companion.”

Bobby nodded, and added, “Looks ta me like they was seven or eight of ‘em.”

“Nine counting our unfortunate thug in the undergrowth.” Myra countered. “Let's see if these lead us to their camp.”

Myra whistled softly. Before too long, the two horses came pushing through the brush behind them, but stayed back until called for.

It didn't take too long for them to find the camp. The cold campfire, the remnants of cast-off food, and beaten down brush told them these had been here waiting for a while. Then, Myra found the shirt.

It was coated with dried blood stains, with a neat hole in the left shoulder. Myra glanced at the back and saw no exit hole and tossed it to Bobby.

“What do you think of this?” she asked.

“Seems one a them got shot.” Bobby replied, and tossed it back. “I got some stains over here too. Maybe another one?”

Myra squatted next to the tree Bobby indicated and moved some of the leaves away from the blood that seemed to have been poured there.

“This one caught one low.” she remarked as she stood and looked down. “The bullet may have passed through his guts and exited his back. We may find another body as we go, Bobby.”

“Yep.”

“Thing is, they'll either have to leave them, or take them with them.” She continued. “If they leave them, the others won't trust each other. So, I think they took them with them to...”

Myra paused, and Bobby glanced over at his wife waiting.

“They'll need a place to hold up, Bobby.” she said finally. “They won't go directly to Federin until the wounded either die, or are healed up enough to get by the guards.”

“So...”

“So, they may be looking for a small farm to take over.” She looked into the forest rubbing her chin, shook her head, and sighed. “We’re running out of time, Bobby. If they have captives in one of the small farms, they’ll kill them when they leave.”

“Then let’s see they ain’t got that chance.” he responded tautly.

With that, Bobby followed Myra back to the horses, mounted, and then followed her through the forest. The prey had mounted and were moving a lot slower now. They could follow the pushed down brush easily enough, unless they came to a riverbed and rocks.

So far, the ground was soft. Myra could see where they were walking their horses through, and where they came out of the forest and rode southeast. Then, she spied something else, pulled Kev to a halt, and again dropped from the saddle.

There had been little traffic on this old dirt road, and the horseshoe she found definitely belonged to their prey. Myra ran a few paces ahead, nodded at the tracks of an unshod hoof, and remounted.

They could move faster now that she had a clear indication of who they were chasing. With the dirt road mostly unused, the tracks they could barely see would be the ones they followed.

Just before noon on the second day, the tracks veered off of the road onto a more southerly trail. It looked overgrown and unused, but the tracks definitely led that direction.

Myra and Bobby became more conscious of the problem of running upon the thugs all of a sudden, and kept themselves on high alert. When the trail turned left in a slow curve, Myra saw the open fields, pulled Kev to a halt, and dismounted.

She pulled the big rifle from its scabbard, moved into the thinning forest and moved slowly toward the shack she saw through the trees. Bobby followed suit, and soon they were looking at the horses milling around in the fenced in area at the back of the shack.

Myra pointed, and Bobby nodded at the horse that seemed to favor its front right leg. They moved slowly toward the house on an angle that would keep anyone from inside seeing them through the only window they could see.

Once they had the side of the shack to their backs, they paused to listen to the voices from inside.

“How much longer, Keesler?”

“I still got some healin’ ta do yet, Jon.” came another voice. “I figger tomorra, or the next day, I’ll be able ta ride. For now, I’m hungry.”

Several other voices agreed, and then Keesler said, “When’s that food gonna be ready, woman?”

“The roast is still cookin’,” came a nervous sounding female voice... of indiscriminate age, “but I wanna put some taters ta fryin’. If you’ll let Tad...”

“Take the kid and go get them taters, Pitt.” Keesler said... and then moaned a bit. “And hurry up!”

“Why I gotta go?” came still another voice. “He ain’t goin’ nowhere, Kees. If he do, we kill his gramma!”

“Hmm... Ya got a point.” Keesler replied. “Go get them taters, boy, and hurry up! Ya don’t want we should shoot yer gramma, right?”

“N-n-no sir.”

Myra waited until they heard the backdoor open and feet running toward the barn.

“Hurry up, boy!” someone yelled from the doorway, chuckled and the Rangers heard the door close.

Myra patted Bobby’s arm, pointed toward the back, then her ears, and then her chest. Bobby nodded, the message clear. He would take the back and enter, but only after he heard Myra’s entrance at the front.

While Bobby moved to the corner of the house, Myra went around to the front. She crept along the rickety porch, crawled under the window, and then stood at the side of the door. She, cocked the rifle, took a deep breath, and...

She burst into the one-room house, the rifle at her hip. There were two men sitting at the table to her left, one with his left arm in a sling. The other reached for the pistol in his belt and caught the first round as the rifle bucked in Myra’s hands.



The two standing close to the bed on the right turned, reached for their weapons and the Ranger cocked and fired two more times. They ended in a heap at the foot of the bed.

Two more stood on the other side of the bed, and a third close to the back door. All three were shocked into temporary immobility at her entrance, but...

The man to her left, the one with the sling, grabbed a knife from the table and tried to lunge at the woman with her back to the counter. Myra's left hand left the fore stock of the rifle, drew the pistol from beneath her left arm, cocked it and fired... all in one motion. That man died as his brains burst from the back of his head to coat the counter and the hot stove next to it.

Her pistol spun back into the holster still smoking, and Myra cocked the big rifle just as all three of the remaining men reached for the pistols in their belts. She sent one reeling into the far wall, but knew...

Bobby came through the backdoor and fired twice. The last two spun to the floor as the jacketed bullets did their jobs.

The man lying in the bed reached for the pistol on the side table, and...

"Don't."

It was low, lethal, and commanding. He pulled his hand back slowly and looked. Even through the thick smoke of gunfire, he could see the deadly eyes of the Ranger with the big rifle pointed at his head.

“*Gramma!*”

“Bobby?” Myra said softly as the boy’s scream told them he was running toward the house.

“Com’on, missus.” Bobby said gently as he extended a hand to the woman... she still in shock. “The boy needs ta know yer alright and he don’t need ta see all this. Take him ta the barn and wait ‘til one a us comes ta get ya.”

She nodded shakily, walked through the bodies strewn across the small room, and past Bobby as he held the door open for her. Then, Bobby watched her run toward the young boy with the frightened eyes. After he saw they were walking quickly to the barn, he closed the door and looked back at Myra.

“Start dragging the bodies out, Bobby.” Myra said, the rifle never wavering and her eyes glued on the shocked face of the wounded man on the bed. “They’ll need to be sketched before we bury them.”

“And him?”

“We’re going to have a little talk.” she replied, her lips now raising at the corners in a lethal grin.

Keesler winced as the tip of the hot barrel pressed against his throat. Myra took the pistol from the side table and tossed it onto the closest body. Then she took the bloodstained evidence pouch from the side of the bed, set it to the foot, and pulled the rifle back. She grinned at the neat circle of black and red the barrel left on his neck.

She slowly uncocked the rifle, leaned it on the end of the bed, pulled one of her silver-inlaid daggers from her vest, and sat next to the wounded man.

“What’re ya gonna do?” he asked nervously.

“Like I said.” she answered conversationally. “We’re going to talk. I will ask you some questions and you will answer them truthfully.

“Now, if you answer those questions fully, I’ll get Bobby to bring in my aid kit, get you properly patched up, and see that the infection I can already see building in that wound is cured.”

She made a point of picking at one of her nails with the dagger as she continued.

“If you think you can withhold that information or lie to me, I may have to... coerce you. That will not go well for either of us.

“You see, if you live through that kind of questioning, I may have to explain the extra wounds on your body to the magistrate. I won’t like that, so I would more than probably have to bury you with your friends.

“Of course, that would upset me to a great extent. You know, having to dig another deep hole? So much so, I may just tie you to a tree deep in the forest where you can watch over your friends until you die. That would probably be the best thing anyway for both of us. Besides, scavengers have to eat too, right?”

“Wadya wanna know!” he all but shouted.

Myra grinned, and began.



*The Illani led them into secret catacombs within the Lost Citadel. The library told of a civilization that came here from another world. They would have to sail to Alanis where people lived under ancient Chinese feudalism.*

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