

Hidden Sanctuary - Deleted Chapter

This chapter takes place in the human town the group stops at for trade. It includes some spoilers, so I recommend not reading this until after you have finished the book at least to this point. Pieces of this chapter were used or referred to in the final published book, but this includes more of what Annalla did that morning.

Please note: this chapter did not go to my editor, so there are likely to be some errors.

{Town to the east of the Palonian Woodland}

Larron managed to quell further questions about why Annalla would go hunting alone, and Hampton had wisely taken the statement as an end to the conversation. They retrieved their weapons and were led to a couple of rooms. It seemed the rooms' former occupants had been displaced to another location, but Hampton would not hear any protests. Annalla and Patrice had a room to themselves. The two of them were small enough the little bed held them both without issues or discomfort. After so long on the road, they were quickly asleep, but with weapons close at hand.

Annalla woke long before the sun rose and slid out of the covers to dress and arm. Patrice woke instantly but eased back into sleep at a quiet word from Annalla before she slipped out of the room. She moved through the inn and into town without a word from any she passed, though there was a surprising number about in the early hour.

It comforted her to see they already understood the night was not safe. Willingness to adapt would make them easier to train and more likely to survive. Silent eyes followed her passage as she walked confidently back down the winding way to find the common stable where they left their horses.

“Good morning, Moonshine.”

She heard the horses shift at her voice, but none raised their heads. They likely protested the early hour now that they finally had shelter from the winter weather. Annalla collected the appropriate saddle and stood beside Moonshine in her stall.

“Come on, lazy. They are feeding you here, so the least we can do is try to return the favor.” Annalla lowered her voice. “Maybe we will find some sweet grass for you to munch on while I’m hunting.”

That got her a snort of pleasure— maybe more from the muzzle scratches than any verbal promises—as she finished tying off the thin saddle and grabbed the reins to lead her out of the stable. Before they took a step, she stopped to listen as a group approached, following the whispered conversation.

“They said she would go alone.”

“We could be killed out there defending their hapless woman. There is a reason we haven’t gone hunting.”

“A single woman is willing to do what we are not. She should not be left vulnerable because we are afraid of what might be out there. We go.”

“You stay,” Annalla said as she moved with Moonshine to the stable door, coming face to face with eight men dressed for the fields. “It is not a trip of leisure I take, but a trip to hunt. The larger the group, the greater the noise and the less game caught. Go to Larron, and Tyrus, and the others. Learn what they teach. You have done well to stay together, and you can hold this place if you are smart about it and determined enough. I will be back by midday.”

She shouldered past them toward the ‘gate,’ leaving the men sputtering their ‘but’s; and ‘you can’t’s’ and scrambling into the stables to saddle their mounts. It was a pointless move. She would be too

far away before they had their equipment secured. They were also likely to be riding larger farm horses, which stood no chance of catching Moonshine.

Coming out in the open fields, she set Moonshine to an easy, ground-eating pace and headed to the southwest. In her scouting yesterday morning, Annalla found a thinly wooded area in that direction extending to the river. She hoped to find game within.

The first rays of the sun lingered trapped below the horizon when she made it to the thickening of the trees and stopped beneath the branches. With some quick work, she had a small area cleared of snow, and a wave of her hand brought bright green grass shooting from the ground. Moonshine eagerly sought her meal, and Annalla tied her off to a small branch. It would give resistance when pulled but break off if the mare needed to run while Annalla was gone. With her horse taken care of, she spread her wings and raced the light deeper into the wooded land.

She landed in a tree, well within hearing range of the Nierda's rapids, and waited with bow and arrow in hand. The only movement in her tree was the barely perceptible rotation of her head as she scanned with ears and eyes for movement.

The wait was not long before a winter hare emerged cautiously from the brush. In a smooth movement, she drew and released to spear the animal, killing it instantly. Without wasting time, she swooped down to dress the hare, packed it in snow, and hung it high on a nearby branch before moving away to find another perch and begin the wait again.

The work was slow and repetitive because she did not follow any tracks. A case of 'hurry to the next position,' then 'wait for prey to cross her path'. Annalla had seen many rabbits in her scouting flights, so she gambled they would be around today as well. After she strung the third hare up in the trees, she finally found signs of deer. She looked at the sun and back down at the droppings, considering the two hours or so remaining. Tracking was not her greatest skill, but there was time to try.

Annalla took off, gliding silently between the trees, following the game trail visible in the snow cover. Movement sounded ahead; the rhythmic crunch of snow beneath delicate hooves moving away from her. She took the time to circle around to approach from downwind, alighting on another branch to wait for any deer to come into range.

Twelve emerged through the underbrush, and she sighted one of the young bucks in the group. She should speak with Larron or Patrice about what would be best to take from the herd if she came out tomorrow. A quick release took the animals by surprise, and the rest scattered through the surrounding woods when the male went down.

Annalla looked to the sky and knew she would be late again. There was a fair distance to travel, she still had to pick up the hares from the last location, and she would be carrying all of this herself until she reached Moonshine. She dealt with the buck as quickly as possible and slung its weight over her shoulders before testing her ability to fly. It was not the easiest flight she had ever taken, but the carcass did not hinder her so much she needed to look for a different way to carry it.

Her flight back progressed slower, and with much more effort. The three hares hung easily from a rope around her waist, but she struggled to hold the deer high enough to keep it from either slipping or bumping against her wings.

Close to where Moonshine should be, she dropped down to walk into the area. Their horses might not have been able to catch up with her on Moonshine, but that did not mean those men could not have followed to where she left the horse. As she came closer and still heard nothing to indicate people ahead, that became less of a possibility.

Instead, she worried Moonshine would no longer be there due to the lack of sounds. Her concern was less about any danger to her horse—Annalla believed the elven mount could have escaped most threats in the area—and more about the idea of walking from the last rise to the town being more work than she wanted to do before training for the rest of the day and hunting again the next morning.

The silence thickened as she eased the buck to the ground and drew her sword to creep forward. Finally, there was the snort and stamp of a dozing horse, but she did not ease her caution until she had a clear view of Moonshine by the tree.

Annalla retrieved the buck and woke her horse. Before loading her up, she removed the blanket and brushed her down. They took it slow to warm her up after standing in the cold. As they crested the final rise, she could already see Tyrus's influence at the gate and hastily constructed walls. Smoother on the outside, reinforced within, the perimeter would hold up against more than thirty gilar when he finished.

"You're late, again," came a familiar voice over the wall. He laughed, entertained by his own joke.

"Yes, Tyrus, but successful," she replied, shaking her head at him. The gate opened smoothly then closed quickly and firmly behind her, the heightened performance showing more of his influence. "Impressive improvement for such a short time. Do you know where they are training?"

"Cory, bring a quick meal!... You, too, brought an impressive haul for one morning's work. And from the look of you, carried them back to Moonshine yourself instead of bringing her to them."

He laughed as she gave him a wry, twisted grin. "That would have made me twice as late, and I hope I already have students waiting for me."

"You do." A boy came running up to Tyrus with a small bundle in his hands. "Cory will show you where they are training. I know it's pointless to tell you to take the time to wash from your hunt before heading over there, but you can at least eat something on the way. I know for a fact you did not take anything when you left this morning. Water to rinse off over there," he pointed to a couple of barrels, "leave Moonshine and your kills here. I will see they are taken care of."

The bundle was passed from Cory to Tyrus as she dismounted and splashed water on herself to clean off what she could quickly, and then it passed to her hands. Annalla patted Moonshine, bit into the bread from the bundle, and tilted her head to indicate to Cory to start leading the way.

He was startled into a hasty "Yes, sir" by her movement and headed deeper into the town while she followed, still munching on breakfast.

"Can you really fight? I mean good enough to beat a man?" he dared to ask through his nerves when she finished eating. He could not be more than nine or ten years old.

"Will you be watching or learning today, Cory?"

"They want me to learn some, ma'am. The elf said you could teach smaller people what to do."

"Larron is right. You can be the first of the group I will be teaching to know that I am a *better* fighter than most men."

This brought a chuckle to the boy's face, but it died on his lips to be replaced by awe when she tipped her head to show she was serious. From the looks on the faces of those waiting for her when they arrived, his amusement with the situation was one of the better attitudes toward this arrangement. Many would not be so easily swayed. Most of them probably thought they were being pushed off on her as *not good enough*.

She followed Cory into the yard to face seventeen— eighteen with Cory— young men and boys, including three from the group trying to hunt with her that morning.

"I am sorry for my tardiness. There was a buck I felt compelled to follow. If you would give me your names, please." She waited for them to do so before continuing. "Has anyone had training with a weapon before this?"

One of the young men raised his hand, conveying challenge with every aspect of his posture. She gave the attitude no thought and simply felt grateful his was one of the few names she remembered from their introductions.

"Gerris, what was the weapon, and for how long?"

"My brother taught me some with the hatchet and knives before he went off to fight." It was said with defiant pride.

"Knives are a desperate last resort against trained gilar, always worth knowing, but a hatchet could prove the more useful weapon in our current situation if it is well kept. Anyone else?"

There were no other hands, but their faces shone with the same pride. The defiant attitude was not simply because she was a woman. They were the ones identified as weaker and not worth the time of a real warrior.

She suspected it was not Larron who broke up the groups but rather gave vague instructions to some of the men. Despite the possible insult, they were here. She removed the outerwear she wore hunting,

having wrapped her wings around herself beneath it before returning to town. Everyone agreed her wings simply looked like a thin, decorative garment over her clothing when wrapped so the joints at her shoulders were concealed. Then, she re-tied her hair.

Annalla spared a small smile thinking about Larron's constant dismay over the lack of care she took with her braiding.

"I think we will start with hatchets. They are something you are familiar with and more likely to have enough of to pass around to everyone."

"You're an elf?" Cory's surprised voice came from the back of the group, peeking between the older boys.

That seemed to be the final point to convince him she was worthy. He nodded to himself as though agreeing with his own assessment as he stared at her intently. The rest of them were not so easily convinced. Maybe it would at least help them find a path between their cultural expectations and the reality before them.

"I am, and before we begin, I am going to talk to you about gilar. There are a few tips that will help you more than the little training we can provide in the next day and a half. First, they are better fighters than you."

She paced before the group, at times so close to those in front they leaned back to focus on her properly. "The gilar are stronger, more agile, better armed, better armored, and possess more skill in a fight than you could gain in a year of formal training. Do not forget this and become overconfident because you have gotten good at a few maneuvers.

"If you are alone, in a position where it is you against a gilar, even if it is only one, your first instinct should be to retreat. This is smart, not cowardly. Run, swerve, get around a corner. That gives you the chance to take it by surprise when it chases you, still thinking of you as prey.

"Second, gilar have skin like armor, but there are weak points that can be exploited and prove fatal to them through loss of blood or mobility. These are the joints on their body where the skin must be more flexible. One is behind the knees, another under the arm where it meets the torso, and last where the head meets the neck.

"They will continue to fight until they are dead, but with enough force to any of these places, they will find it difficult to continue or weaken quickly. Keep these places in mind and follow through on your strikes with purpose. If you hesitate in the middle because you think another spot is more vulnerable, the only thing you will do is miss them both. After you have started a movement is *not* the time to second guess yourself."

She came back to her starting position and stopped her pacing, slowly scanning the faces as she continued talking, meeting each person's eyes for a held moment.

"Finally, keep in mind that you *can* kill them. I said earlier not to become overconfident, but you must believe it is possible or you are certain to fail. The gilar are intelligent, and they know when they have their opponent outmatched. It is times such as these they become overconfident in a fight. They will see you as nothing to be concerned about, something they can toy with before finishing.

"Fear will make you seem to be exactly what they expect, but your will and determination will prove their assumption a fatal mistake. You have already shown this town can act in a coordinated effort against them. You have shown you can succeed where others have failed. It is to be considered a strength to think of the whole before yourselves because it means the gilar are the ones who will lose. Remember those three things, and you can forget everything else and have a fighting chance. Are there any questions before we start our work with weapons?"

"We can't run if we are on the line at the gate," said a boy of about seventeen. He was tall but skinny; still filling into his most recent growth. Annalla thought his name was Arturo.

"No. Unless an order to retreat is given, your job would be to hold the line as well and as long as you are able. Tyrus is setting up the defenses at the gate, and they are intended to funnel the gilar into small openings to limit the number able to attack at once. On the line, you will be using your greater numbers to your advantage and overwhelming the gilar to the point their training becomes incapable of saving them.

This is why I will be teaching you ambush techniques first, and techniques for working in close quarters with your allies second. You will need both."

Before the physical work could begin at all, weapons had to be found for the group to use. Most of them came to her unprepared to practice, standing around with nothing. Blunt hatchets were scrounged up and wrapped in thick cloth so no one would be hurt. Much. Then, they lined up again and training resumed.

Annalla held their full attention when describing gilar. Those monsters were real. They had seen them only once, but it made a lasting impression. When story-time ended and she shifted back to training, they returned to their initial attitude of not taking her seriously.

Some, like Cory, watched avidly as she demonstrated a few simple moves in slow motion. Others, especially the older boys and young men, made mocking gestures, laughed, and talked over her. There was probably a polite and clever way to respond. Larron would know it and accomplish the task without hurt or angry feelings. Larron was a diplomat; Annalla was not.

"Alright," she said, calling for attention with a savage smile on her face, "if anyone believes they have the basics down, I'll take a volunteer to demonstrate them with me before I move on to testing your skill to pair you up."

"I got this," said a sandy-haired young man.

Perfect. Just the arrogant troublemaker she hoped would volunteer. While not the eldest among them, from what she could guess, he was one of the few who would be considered an adult. All the young men here were slimmer than average for the humans she had seen, which likely drove them to be placed in her "class." They all resented that fact.

Annalla attempted to sweeten her smile, but it probably landed somewhere closer to a contemptuous snarl.

"Okay, Mevin. Come out here with me, please. Would you like to attack or defend in our demonstration?"

He smirked. "Attack. I kill gilar. I don't act like them."

I'm sure you do. Annalla barely resisted rolling her eyes as she considered what movement would feel most natural for them.

"Very well," she said. "We will start with the basic overhand chop to the neck. A slow demonstration if you will. Proceed when you are ready."

Mevin did not go slow, he did not go for an overhand chop to the neck. Instead, he charged forward with the hatchet held awkwardly to his side in two hands, swinging it back, then forward like she was a tree he intended to fell.

The entire attack was as clumsy as it was aggressive, and it did not come close to touching her. She slid out of the way, and Mevin ended up on the ground, crying out and clutching his lower back where her elbow jabbed him as he passed.

"Thank you for that demonstration, Mevin," Annalla said while he continued groaning and rocking in the dirt. *I didn't hit him hard enough for that much complaining.* "I want you all to note a few things Mevin helped illustrate here.

"First, balance. I'm going to guess everyone here has chopped wood for their families." She received nods as a couple of the boys helped Mevin to his feet. "If you swing without a balanced stance, you are more likely to hurt yourself than split the wood. The same is true in combat. In this demonstration you saw an attacker overcommitting, which threw off his balance, throwing off his precision and forcing him to use strength to compensate. You can use strength to compensate when chopping wood, but in a fight, doing so sacrifices speed and allows your opponent to counter."

She tipped her head toward her first volunteer. "Thank you again, Mevin. You may return to the others. Everyone line up, face me, and on three I want to see a *slow* and *gentle* overhand chop please."

A few of them took longer than others to treat this as training for a battle coming to their door. Those individuals slept with a few extra bruises that night. They were learning, though.

Annalla still hoped the surprises Larron and Marto were setting up, and the archers Larron was training, would be able to take out a majority of what they might face. In a melee confrontation, she would

not give them more than a one in ten chance of surviving, and those were generous odds. Any victory achieved would come at a high price, if it came at all.