

**Strike  
of the  
Skyearls**

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# Strike of the Skycarls

**THE PSION SAGA 2**

**Alikai Bronach**

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## Author's Note

*Strike of the Skyearls* follows the first book in The Psion Saga, *Tiger Eyes and Dragon Teeth*.

Talon, an nineteen-year-old man from the Kriite tribe of Jaria, met his new Rada-kin, an icetiger. He was able to take animal form for the first time. Meeting Rekala also awakened an ancient psionic power within Talon's blood. These rare abilities enabled him to overcome the magic of enemy Zeikas.

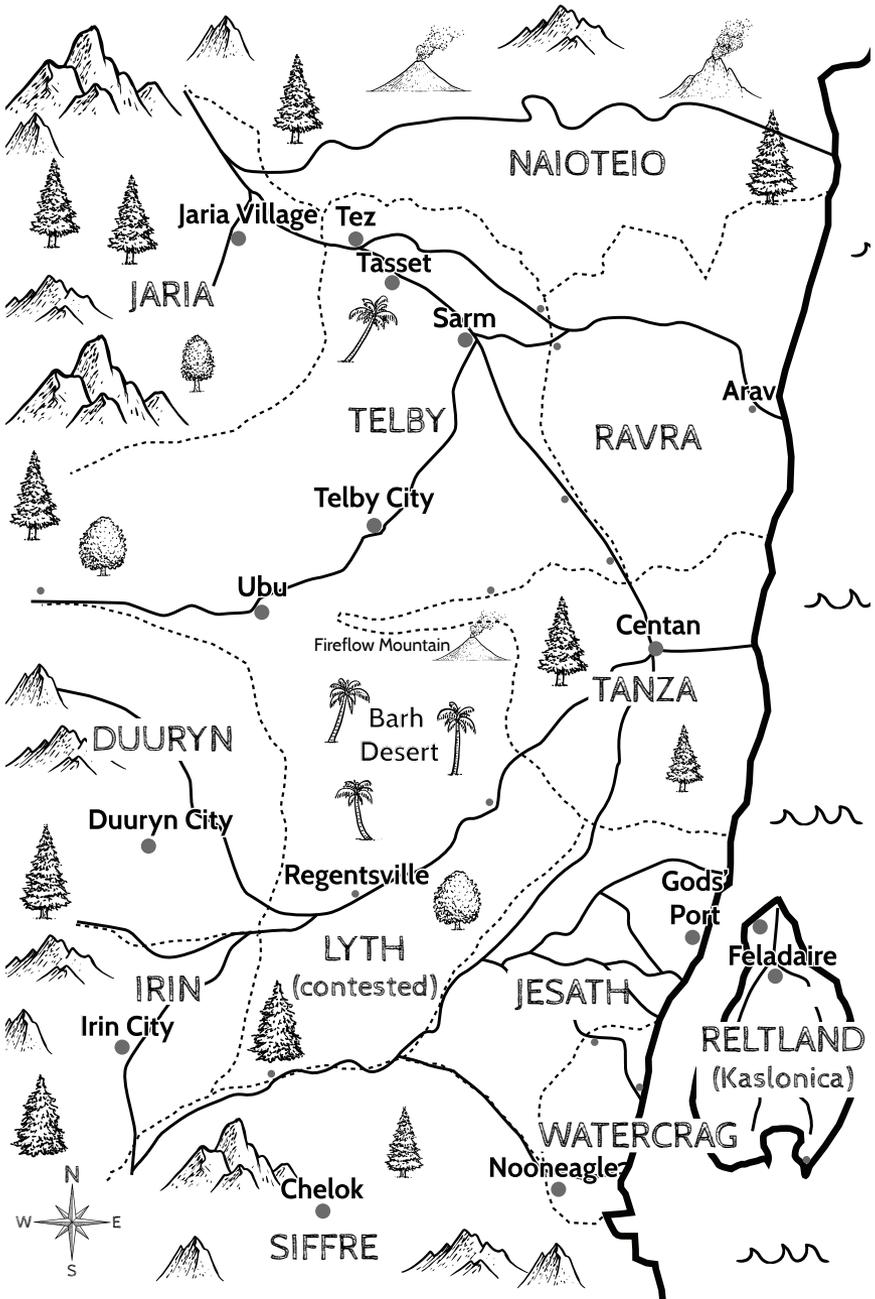
Sent by Jaria to seek out allies for their beleaguered village, Talon was accompanied by Sarlice, a warrior from the Kriite tribe of Lyth. On their way to Telby City, Talon and Sarlice met Lira who appeared to need their help. Talon was betrayed and violated by Lira, who was really the Princess Denliyan of Telby.

Pursued by the Zeikas, Talon and Sarlice escaped through the Tanzan Chasm, heading for the safety of the legendary Kriite nation of Tanza.

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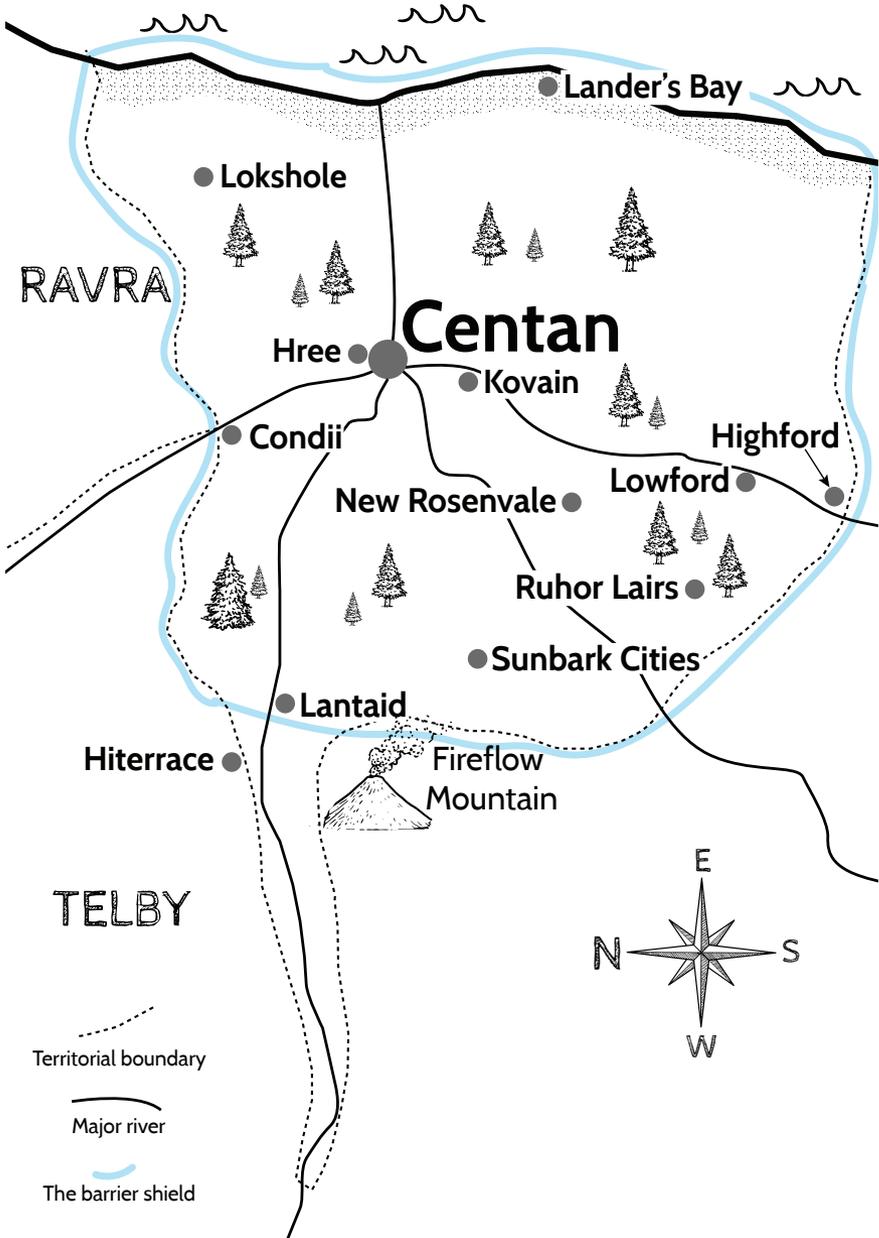
# Chryne

East of the Kiayr Ranges



# Tanza

Realm of the Slefions





# Chapter One—A Storm in the Morning

The deep mists chilled my flesh like the snow I remembered in the mountains near my home. My legs carried me forward slowly. My muscles felt stiff and strangely weakened.

I tried to remember how I came to be here, but all I could recall from my passage through the barrier was an exhilarating sensation of flying.

Greenish shapes formed ahead. The mists cleared and a thriving, exotic world came alive around me. The morning air tasted fresh and moist. Small thickets and stands of trees bobbed on a sea of glistening dark-green grass, and beyond the field was a mystical jungle. The sky was iron-grey, clouds looming low over the wild gardens.

In comparison to these forests, the scrubland I had cherished back in Jaria seemed brutish and rough. Even the almighty spruces of the Kiayr Range seemed ordinary compared with the trees of Tanza. I sensed Tiaro awakening as her curiosity was piqued by my reaction to our wild, new location.

To my right a row of trees with dark green bark gave way to a jungle filled with plants of all shapes and sizes. The ground was thick with moist leaves in varying shades from dark green to black and every now and then was a parade of striped orange, pink and purple fungi. Shrubs and small trees flanked the boles of the larger

trees, some drooping under the weight of their yellow and purple fruit.

My hunter-gatherer observation skills took over as I mentally tallied the possibilities for both human and animal consumption and use. The husks from some of the palms looked strong enough to build roof shingles. Bessed would be ecstatic to see a forest filled with so many useful materials.

A pang of guilt washed over me for not contacting my foster father in so many weeks. I decided that as soon as I figured out where I was and what was going on I would get Rekala to reach back to Jaria using the network of Rada-kin between here and there.

A gust of fresh air wafted over me and I smelled the rich earth, water and ripe fruit. Vines dangled from the canopy—they were as thin as my little finger, but some held up fallen boughs thicker than me. Moss and lichen grew densely over every fallen trunk and small black lizards darted from one to the other.

There were a lot of fallen trees with bite marks in them, as if some giant creature had feasted here, scattering its leavings. *What manner of creature would eat an entire tree?*

There were faint creaking noises coming from deeper into the forest where branches rubbed against each other. The wind drew a flurry of raindrops from the swelling womb of clouds above.

Despite the drama of my flight through the Tanzan Chasm, the peace of the rainforest was enough to calm me. I let the muscles in my shoulders relax, stretched and flexed my toes inside my boots, and spread my fingers out.

I heard a soft noise, like the puff of a bellows, reached down and felt the rough hair of my Rada-kin's back.

*'Are you hale, dear?'* I asked.

She rubbed against me, exuding happiness, then flopped down on her belly to rest.

*'Aye. Those Zeika scouts nearly had us. Their hunt seems relentless.'*

I crouched down and felt over her body for injuries. The fur on her majestic face was singed and her nose was dry and blistered, but her eyes had not been burned by the Zeikas.

When Rekala had faced the sorcerers and been injured I sent her ahead through the barrier to Tanza. Sarlice and Kestric hadn't been far behind her, so I was perplexed not to see them anywhere. My icetiger lay with her nose up and eyes closed, flicking her ears as she drank in the unique sounds and smells of Tanza.

'*We're safe now,*' I said, including Tiaro in the conversation. '*There are other Rada-kin in the distance. I can sense them mostly concentrated in an area that way—probably a town.*'

'*I concur,*' Rekala said, pleased with the progress I was making in my wave-sight.

'*There are no Zeikas nearby,*' Tiaro confirmed.

There were soft footfalls behind me and the sound of tall grass being swished aside, but I wasn't alarmed. I turned as Sarlice came up to me and reached for her without even thinking about it. We embraced tightly, our bodies interlocking in a familiar way, with Sarlice's curls brushing the right side of my chin. We rested against each other for a moment, the enormity of what we had been through just sinking in. The safety of being inside the barrier of Tanza had lifted a terrible weight off my shoulders.

'Finally, we're here,' Sarlice sighed, stepping back. 'And you... have a sword.'

She gestured at a white sheath buckled to the Jarian leafshard belt I was wearing.

'I hadn't even noticed,' I stuttered.

I pulled the shiny scabbard off the sapphire-leaf encrusted belt, staving off Rekala's outstretched muzzle. The muscles in my arm strained as I lifted the heavy object.

The golden hilt sported two skyearls, their bodies entwined, heads pointing outwards to form the cross-guard. I drew the sword from the sheath, marvelling at the cerulean-blue metal. I supposed I could get used to the weight with some training and exercise.

I felt Sarlice's eyes on me, stealing my next sentence, and I froze, uncertain, looking at the sword.

'Talon, how did you get a Tolite-kin?' she asked.

A tingling sensation passed through my body. 'I don't know.'

She stared at the sword. ‘The Tolites must have come here to Tanza. They could have transferred the weapon-kin magic from Watercrag’s Waterfall Catacombs to the Tanzan Barrier Shield. Anyone with the gift as yet unfulfilled who came through the barrier, would have a chance of becoming bonded to one of the vacant weapons given over to the magic by the Tolites.’

‘Why would the Tolites come here?’ I wondered. ‘Could Watercrag have fallen and we have not heard about it?’

Sarlice thought for a long time before answering. ‘If it happened within the last few weeks, yes. I bonded with Henter at Nooneagle in Watercrag about four years ago. The Kriites there had been under constant threat from Reltland, which is just across the Zeika Strait. I wonder if they were finally driven out and came to Tanza.’

‘Watercrag is closer to Lyth than it is to Tanza. Why wouldn’t they come to you for protection?’

‘If they needed to protect the sacred magic of Tolite bonding from the Zeikas, only skyearls would have been strong enough to get them out. Lyth has not been a safe haven for many decades. Nor do we have constructions like that shield.’

I turned the blue blade in my hands.

‘What is his name?’ Sarlice asked.

I glanced at her. Henter was strapped to her back with a quiver of black arrows.

‘Fyschs,’ I replied. Without even thinking I just knew.

Sarlice grinned.

‘Somehow it feels alive,’ I said.

‘Tolite-kin are not really alive,’ she replied. ‘They aren’t separate beings like Rada-kin or Sleffion-kin.’

‘More like Anzaii-kin,’ I suggested. I tapped Tiaro with my forefinger and glimpsed a slight increase in the earring’s glow reflected in my nail.

‘Both contain sapphire tree leaves,’ Sarlice agreed. ‘The waves allow the connection to your mind, making each artefact an extension of yourself.’

I accepted her teaching, even though I knew the basics of Kriite magic already. As a fully fledged Tolite, Sarlice had years more

experience than me with a weapon-kin. My guide had been a member of the warriors guild since she was thirteen, whereas I was a simple harvester.

Sarlice was standing with her hands on her hips looking outward as she spoke to me, taking in the sounds and smells around us. The wind lifted her hair, blowing it in her face. She muttered and pulled it out of her mouth.

Rekala jumped to her feet and bolted around the glade, caught up in the energy of the approaching storm. Dewdrops flew everywhere and she pounced at them skittishly. A shaft of morning sun penetrated the storm clouds, limning Rekala's whiskers and hair in light.

After admiring the leafshards embedded on the flat of the blade, I sheathed the sword.

'Maybe we should find some shelter,' I suggested, bending down to tug my Rada-kin's tail.

The icetiger spun around with mock-ferocity, rolled onto the ground and pummelled my knees with her back legs, the claws safely sheathed. I tickled her even more, pushing her enormous paws away.

Sarlice weaved her way between shrubs and trees, skirting the jungle. I sensed Kestric deeper in to our left. He had been scouting the entire area, hiding himself in the shadows and keeping his waves to himself.

He turned his attention on me and shared what he was receiving through the waves from Sarlice. A blurred outline of her formed in my mind's eye. She stumbled over a mossy root up ahead. Her heart was beating fast and she silently berated herself. My real eyes saw her stop and look back at me. A surge of warmth swam through Kestric's wave, followed by a strange uncertainty. Feeling intrusive, I broke the link.

Rekala bounded into the jungle after Kestric, her immense, stripy paws leaving dents in the grass. I caught up with Sarlice on the crest of a hill. The wind buffeted us, carrying the scent of woodsmoke on its breath. Sarlice sniffed the air and raised her eyebrows.

'Smells like breakfast,' she said.

We were relaxed as we walked down the hill and I was comfortable in my awareness of there being other people nearby. I felt certain they were friendlies.

Dark clouds streaked over us, stealing the sun from view early. At the bottom of the hill the first person was a mere silhouette against the brightness of a fire that blazed in the centre of a hollow. Despite the shelter of a huge boulder, the flames guttered and danced in the stirring wind.

‘Hello there,’ Sarlice called out.

The figure dropped his pot of tea on the ground and ran to meet us.

‘Welcome! At last! Talon, Sarlice, I greet you.’

We gaped at him. He bowed low, hands on his forehead. This kind of bow usually signified an oath of allegiance or service. I noticed three dark shapes on the other side of the fire. The man followed my gaze.

‘Your horses were wandering loose. I’ve been here waiting for you to come through the mists.’

I glanced back the way we had come. The barrier shield was only visible in certain places. Along its lower edge was a thick layer of cloud. As the shield rounded up and over Tanza it became partly translucent, revealing the normal-looking sky in patches. It admitted the light, the wind and rain, just not any human being that was not of Kriite blood. I shook my head in wonder. If only Jaria and Lyth had magic like this.

The blood protection Sarlice had spoken of before we’d past through the barrier was that of our ancestors. Why Tanza was the only Kriite nation to have such protection, I did not know, but I had heard that only the skyearls knew how to control it.

From this distance the blue and purple shimmered and ran together like the surface of a pearl. Tiny bolts of lightning arced from one spot to another, creating flashes in the ball’s surface that were mirrored in the sky above us.

‘My name is Tivac,’ the man said.

Returning my eyes to him, I held out my hand.

‘Oh,’ he said, bemused. ‘Yes, I’ve heard of this.’

He grabbed my hand.

Sarlice touched her right shoulder with her left hand and bowed her head. Tivac giggled with pleasure.

‘Ah. You know our ways, my lady. I am honoured by your fellowship greeting.’

We approached the fire together and consumed what was left of the tea.

‘What was it like?’ Tivac asked. He had an open face, curious and childlike. ‘The barrier shield, I mean. It does different things for different people.’

‘My experience was personal,’ Sarlice replied, with a glance in my direction. ‘Put it this way: I have forgiven someone who did wrong by me in the past.’

I knew she referred to her uncle, a man who had abused her as a young woman. She had later killed him in self-defence.

My mind wandered to the perpetrator of my own assault, the Princess Denliyan of Telby. Disguised as a noble named Lira at the time, her attempts to seduce me had not been unwelcome, but she had come up against my deeply ingrained cultural beliefs. Like all Kriite tribes, Jarians tended to take a mate for life, not on a whim. So she had drugged me and attempted to get with child.

‘And what of your experience, Talon?’ Tivac wondered, noticing how deep in thought I was. His eyes were so inviting I almost blurted out what I had been thinking. I wrenched my mind back to the chasm.

‘The magic of the shield challenged a fear I’ve had since childhood,’ I replied, rubbing the talon scar on my wrist.

Tivac nodded. ‘When the skyearls told me about you being a Tolite now, I thought maybe they were tricking me.’

I grinned. ‘They do that?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘How did the skyearls know we were coming?’ Sarlice asked.

‘They sensed you passing through the shield.’ Tivac started packing up his supplies, talking over his shoulder at us all the while. ‘The skyearls are magical creatures,’ he replied. ‘In addition to their wave senses, they have a gift with water. Their bodies can convert

water into shrouds, which look like clouds from the ground, but have a solid surface on top. After creating a shroud, the skyearls involved can sense it from afar and it takes small parts of their energy daily to maintain it.’

‘I’ve heard of shrouds,’ I said, ‘but what does that have to do with the barrier?’

‘It is chief among the shrouds,’ he began, ‘bearing similar properties, yet it is altogether different. It is said that three hundred of the largest breed of skyearl, the keltoars, combined forces to create it and, in doing so, gave their lives over to it.’

‘So it has literally the blood of skyearls powering it?’ I queried.

He nodded. I felt a mixture of awe and revulsion. In Jaria we valued individual lives—humans and animals. What kind of culture would sacrifice three hundred lives for a magic shield?

How trivial would reaching out to aid a Kriite nation of hundreds seem to these people? Perhaps it was the crisp wind, but my teeth chattered as I yawned and stretched. Rekala did not share my feelings, instead being far too stimulated by her new surroundings to let my anxiety trouble her. However, I thought I felt a hum of readiness in the sword at my side.

Having finished loading his gear onto his horse, Tivac gestured for us to mount ours.

‘Where are we going?’ Sarlice asked, glancing up at the looming storm.

‘It’s not far to Lantaid,’ Tivac replied. ‘We can expect a blessing from the storm on the way, I’d wager.’

Riding single file, we travelled over hillocks of rich green grass and skirted around large, limestone rocks. The Rada-kin padded silently along the edge of the forest, watching us.

The relief of finally being in Tanza where we were safe from the Zeikas disquieted me. I wished the same peace for Jaria, but even with the mercenaries I had hired for them in Ubu I doubted they would be safe.

*‘All is well now,’* Rekala said, finally sensing my distress. *‘We are on track to get help for both Jaria and Lyth.’*

*'Maybe,' I replied. 'But the longer Sarlice and I take to find allies, the more people from our tribes will perish.'*

*'We're also here to find out if you are a Sleffion,'* Rekala reminded me.

*'I can't be,' I argued. 'I have the two of you and now this sword. I hadn't even got used to being a Rada when Tiaro came along, and it's the same with this sword. Things are moving so quickly for me.'*

*'The waves are rising around you, Anzaii,'* Tiaro agreed.

*'But a master psion hasn't been seen for years,'* I protested, frightened of the prospect of having yet another magical gift to learn. *'Me? Anzaii, Sleffion, Tolite and Rada? It's too much for one person.'*

*'I hope you don't find us that much of a burden,'* Rekala sulked.

I could just make her out between the trees—she looked dark grey in the stormy morning light.

*'You are not,'* I replied, *'but a skyearl and the culture of this place to learn along with it? That would be too much.'*

*'Just think how much a skyearl could help you on our quest,'* Tiaro argued. *'If you get a big enough one, you'll be able to fly! Imagine how much time that will save for the return trip.'*

*'You're right, Tiaro,'* I said, *'but I'm concerned the time we'd save would be negated by the bonding and training that will be necessary beforehand. If the Tanzan king isn't willing to help Jaria and Lyth, the sooner we find out and get out of here, the better.'*

*'But if Watercrag has indeed fallen, what other Kriite allies does that leave us?'* Rekala asked. Ravra, I thought, not a Kriite nation, but favourable towards us in the past at times.

I called out to Tivac, *'Does the king of Tanza live in Lantaid?'*

*'Nay,'* he said, allowing me to ride Fleetfoot abreast of his horse. *'The king rules from Centan, the capital.'*

He wiped a hand through receding, grey hair. *'The people you will meet in Lantaid are mostly from Watercrag.'*

*'I knew it!'* Sarlice exclaimed. *'It was the only explanation for Talon's new Tolite-kin.'*

*'I'm grateful, but I am not certain I deserve such a fine weapon.'*

*'There will be people in Lantaid to help you,'* Tivac said. *'It has been only three and a half weeks since they came, but one of the*

first things they did was establish a bonding charm in the barrier shield. They call it the Curtains of Battle.’

‘Has it been difficult to integrate the two cultures?’ Sarlice asked.

He waved his hand. ‘Oh, it’s just what you would expect. They have lost their Caverns of Forging. There was some contention about combining the magic of the Tolites with the Tanzan Barrier, but it is done.’ He looked at Sarlice. ‘Did your passage through the barrier leave you with a weapon-kin as well?’

‘No. I travelled to Nooneagle years ago for mine.’ She gestured at the sleek warbow on her back.

‘That’s interesting,’ Tivac replied. ‘Maybe you’ll know somebody in Lantaid who is from Watercrag.’

‘Perhaps. Talon is Anzaii as well. If he becomes a Sleffion as well as Tolite, that will give him the rank of A.S.T.R.’

‘Is that right?’ Tivac said, looking at me more closely. ‘A master psion—we have not had one for a long time.’

‘Although I grew up in Jaria, I am a new Rada,’ I said, ‘and an even newer Anzaii—’

‘There are a few Anzaii here,’ he jumped in enthusiastically, ‘but none of them can reach far in the waves. Flight squads are occasionally sent into the Kiayr Range to see if the Anzaii can get word from our departed brethren, but the snowy heights only bring the bleakest silence.’

‘Departed brethren?’

‘Aye. Oh, there’s so much for you to learn of our history. Many years ago a large number of our people journeyed across the Kiayr Range in search of the Cauldron of Storms, a place of great power similar to that of our Barrier Shield. It is mentioned in historical scrolls. The chain of heralds lost contact with them during a massive snowstorm and we haven’t heard from them since. Many fear they perished, but the king holds hope. He will ask you to search the waves for them once you are able to wave-speak the minds of skyearls. How far can you reach?’

‘I can reach Rada-kin other than my own within a few leagues,’ I replied, ‘for short bursts.’

He seemed surprised. ‘That is good news.’

‘But that’s with Rada-kin. I’ve never interacted with another Anzaii-kin besides my own. Sleffion-kin might be different.’

‘You are at the beginning of your learning,’ Tivac said. ‘There is hope.’

‘What if I don’t become a Sleffion myself? Will my Anzaii abilities on the waves still extend to other people’s Sleffion-kin?’

‘I believe it has happened before, but not within living memory.’  
We rode in silence for a time.

‘Tivac, I have an aunty somewhere here in Tanza named Jaalta. Any idea where I might find her?’

Tivac craned his neck back, then cast his eyes to the sky. ‘I’ve heard of a Rialta somewhere in the Sunbark Cities, but no Jaalta. There are 1.3 million people in Tanza, Talon. Perhaps if you ask around in the capital, someone will have heard of her.’

Our conversation slowed when the wind picked up and it became harder to hear. Daylight disappeared behind clouds of slate. We travelled at a steady trot for half an hour before reaching Lantaid.

The gates of the city were purely ornamental: four coloured pillars on each side of the sand-gravel pathway. Further down the lane was a large water-sculpture: a central water fountain with wiggly arms out to other fountains. I couldn’t make out the exact shapes in the gathering darkness.

Tivac aimed his horse for a large building at the far end of the fountain. Just as the stables came into view, the storm crashed down. An aging stablemaster came out of his quarters at the front of the stables and ushered us inside. The stablemaster moved all three horses into their stalls before untacking them.

Rekala and Kestric burrowed into the straw at one end of the stable and fell asleep. Sarlice and I both yawned in response and then grinned at each other.

Tivac led us through the stable and out the back door to what he called the Hall of Hallows. His explanation of its function went only partially through my mind. In short, the Hall of Hallows served as a greenhouse for communal plantings and a hall for public announcements and meetings. The living quarters down one end were for him and his husband—the caretakers—and visitors.

Most of the wall sconces had been doused for the day so Tivac lit a lamp to lead us through an enormous chamber. I felt relieved that there was no welcoming party or formalities. All I wanted was a quick meal and a long, comfortable sleep.

My unspoken request was granted when Tivac opened the door to a brightly lit guest room. An elegant man with long, grey hair stood in the centre of the room near a table of food. Tivac stroked his hand as he entered.

‘Welcome to Lantaid,’ Tivac’s husband said. ‘I am Glane.’

Sarlice and I both performed the fellowship greeting. Glane smiled and returned the gesture. He pointed out our separate quarters at either end of the living space.

‘When Bessed’s wave reached us, we were only too pleased to hear about two young Kriites coming to visit,’ Tivac beamed. ‘I recall days when there was a steady flow of visitors and migrants through the chasm.’

My smile faded away. How much had the Kriite tribes diminished just in my lifetime? Tivac looked ready to sit down with us and ask more questions, but with all the grace of the experienced host, Glane shepherded him out, leaving us to our meal.

I put down my packs and bent to brush grass off my pants. Rainwater was dripping from my long-sleeved tie-neck shirt onto the brown slate floor so I carefully pulled it off and hung it over a rack by the fire. I was aware of Sarlice noticing the warm light shining on my sepia skin.

‘Am I being crass?’ I asked Sarlice.

She laughed. ‘I should think you know me well enough by now not to ask that.’

I concentrated on her for a minute, trying to see if there was any way I could discern what she was really thinking. What did the emotions Kestric passed to me mean? It was difficult to tell through the filter of a Rada-kin, but I thought I detected respect, friendship, even love.

Was Sarlice attracted to me or was she only fond of me in a brotherly way? The thought of being with a younger man might be abhorrent to her. I berated myself for letting my thoughts turn to

lust when I had so recently been led astray. I turned away, slouched and hooked one thumb into the Jarian belt I was wearing.

A glass-covered window revealed the storm outside where lightning streaked across the sky above a rain-lashed river. Unbidden shapes appeared in the rushing river outside—myself and Lira. Naked, I pulled her towards me and kissed her passionately. A well of warmth rose up from the soles of my feet and I stepped back, raising my hands in surprise. The sensory apparition vanished.

Sarlice was seated at the table looking at me curiously. ‘Are you coming to eat?’

‘Aye.’

‘Thank the Nine for seeing us safely into Tanza,’ she said.

‘To the Nine,’ I agreed, raising a goblet.

It was the finest meal I’d had for a long time and I made a mental note to introduce myself to the cook. A roasted pheasant dominated one end of the table, surrounded by clay pots of lukewarm potatoes, boiled vegetables and herb syrup. A covered dish in the centre revealed the full body of a Lowry fish stuffed with fresh nyno eggs and lemon slices.

I filled my belly fast, barely leaving room for spicy hot rolls of lamb, turnip and squash in plum gravy. It was a hearty meal with obvious thought given to the fact that we were wild Rada—who were thought to indulge the carnivorous nature of their animal selves more than city Rada. When all the eating was done and we were able to retire to our beds, I fell asleep dreaming of Sarlice.

## Chapter Two—Our People

Rekala pushed the door open and nudged me awake.  
*'You are oversleeping, Talon.'*  
*'I could say the same to you on many occasions,'* I grumbled, not rousing from my pillow and blankets.

*'There's no such thing as oversleeping for tigers,'* she retorted.  
'Hmmpf.'

My back ached. It was unlike me to sleep in. After years of working for Bessed, with many a night spent outdoors, I was accustomed to rising with the dawn. I had also trained myself to awaken at the slightest sound out of place, but this room was quiet.

A small fire had burned itself out during the night and gave off a faint smoky odour. A rich green rug covered the flagstones on the floor and fresh clothes and a washbowl sat ready on a small, rubywood table.

Rekala stopped nudging me suddenly and sat bolt upright. The stink of fear rose from her like a cloud. I sensed the screaming of voices in the waves far away, calling desperately for help. Rekala served as the terminus for a wave initiated by another presence. I had a vague sense of eight other Rada-kin spanning the continent between us as the sender.

*'Anzaii, oh Anzaii where are you?'*

*'Here I am.'* I replied, coming fully awake in my panic.

It was Uola the ram. Despite the fatigue of age, he had fought bravely in battle. Now he lay wounded by the ruins of a Jarian warcamp.

'It cannot be!' I cried out.

'We tried reaching you,' Uola sobbed. '*We must have had a dozen Rada-kin searching the waves. Bessed and Drea have been captured. Many of the warriors and leaders are slain. The surviving citizens of able body have been taken, as before.*'

'Zeikas...' I snarled out loud and through the waves. '*What about the children and their carers?*' I asked, desperate with worry. My heart filled with sick dread at the thought of what the Zeikas might have done to them after killing those who protected them.

'*We dug an escape tunnel underground after you left,*' Uola replied. Relief washed through me. '*It led all the way to a grotto under the mountains that is said to join up with the Catacombs of Krii. They are safe, for now.*'

'*What of Jaria?*' Rekala asked anxiously. The other Rada-kin who were serving as Uola's conduit to reach us were fuzzy outlines in my visual understanding of the waves. None of them were party to the conversation. I sensed that this was a limitation of Uola's. He was unable to directly link with that many beings at once, using them more as tributaries for which direction to send his link with us.

I sensed that Uola could no longer hold up his head. His muzzle rested in the mud, his body dragging his mind down towards oblivion. He allowed us to see his last memory of Jaria: the village was scorched black, with buildings and huts in a tumbled mess. Some had turned to ashes completely in the fires that ravaged my home town. The trees nearby were scorched and dead. My heart thumped with dread.

'*Are there any other Jarians still free?*' I asked.

Uola's mind was slipping from the waves and I feared it wouldn't be long before he was unconscious or dead.

'*Some,*' Uola said with strain. '*Most of the Rada-kin are slain, but some fled into the forest with Namal and a few other adults to lead the Zeikas away from the tunnel the children escaped into.*'

'*How did it happen?*'

'*Tyraks...*' the ram sent. '*Hundreds of them.*'

He offered his most recent memories to me, which I pulled desperately into my mind. I 'saw' the events of the battle not as a

vision, but as I normally perceived someone else's memories—the knowledge of how things had smelled, sounded, looked and felt as well as the meaning behind every detail.

To the old Rada-kin, it had been an ordinary day, with Jarians going about their business and visitors from other nations shopping or peddling their wares at the market. Uola was with Bessed strolling about the village, checking on the people's wellbeing. It had been about eight weeks since the Zeikas' last attack and all of the citizens were still grieving, but village life had a way of staying on track. The people of Jaria pulled themselves together for the sake of others.

Bessed had increased the number of warriors on patrol around the village beyond the lookout towers, but nothing could have provided warning of an attack from above. One minute, Uola was gnawing a wooden post while Bessed chatted amiably with a farrier, the next, there were tyraks descending through the clouds spewing green fire across the village.

The wooden buildings lit up immediately—including my own house—followed by the piles of wood, straw and barrels of goods around the village.

Archers fired from the battlements of Jaria's fortress, but there simply were not enough of them to cause any real grief to the tyraks.

Mounted on the backs of the dragons were Zeikas, concentrating hard on controlling their conjurations.

Realising they were unable to fight so many airborne foes, Bessed and Uola spread the word for everyone to take shelter in their designated places, some to the fortress, some into the forest, some into the tunnel.

The battle at the fortress went on for hours, with the Zeikas eventually surrounding it on their tyraks and flaming it from a hundred directions. The stones became so hot that some exploded. Even on the inside walls of the fortress, the heat was intense, causing flames to catch on the wall tapestries and reeds on the floor.

From his fallen position outside, Uola saw Bessed and Drea emerge from the smoking fortress minutes before all the people inside would have choked to death. With their heads bowed and their arms uplifted they surrendered Jaria and were taken captive.

*'Where are Bessed and Drea now?'* I asked.

*'T— Telby. Bessed asked me to tell you that you are released from your quest to find allies for us.'*

I shouldn't have been surprised that my foster father was still thinking of me, right up till the moment of his capture. He had, of course, been warded by the Zeikas soon after and could no longer communicate with his injured Rada-kin.

I cursed out loud. The mercenaries I had dispatched from Ubu probably hadn't even reached Jaria yet. The trade agreement wouldn't do them any good now.

*'What am I to do now?'* I shouted. Everything I'd worked for was slipping through my fingers. My other reason for being here in Tanza—to find out if I was a Sleffion—seemed egocentric. While I was on a merry journey of self-discovery my tribe was being wiped out. I feared they could not recover from this, but if my powers weren't to serve Jaria, what were they for?

*'You are not just a Jarian, but a Kriite,'* Uola corrected me. *'It may be time for you to realise that.'*

With those final, serious words the ram's presence faded and was gone. As I keened aloud in sorrow, Sarlice came running in, demanding to know what was wrong. Although I tried to fight them, sobs wracked my body.

*'Jaria is destroyed,'* I choked out. *'We took too long.'*

She stroked my back and Rekala put one large paw up on my knee, but neither gave me comfort. A fire sparked within in me that Rekala sensed and echoed. A long growl-whine escaped her throat. She and Sarlice drew back as I got to my feet.

Feeling the urge for violence boil up inside me, I pulled open the door slowly, aware of every texture in the wood—every fibre screamed at me *'You failed!'* I slammed it back, blurred down into dire wolf form and ran through the Halls, not caring about the people I startled.

I ran out into the bright, clean day and hated it. All around me were happy Kriites, doing mundane things. What did they care that their distant relatives were being murdered and driven to slavery back in Jaria? The people of Lantaid went casually about their

business: gardening, stripping hides, forging weapons, peddling goods at market.

*'I don't belong here!'* I wave-shouted.

I headed out the main gate and across a nearby field. Once I was out of sight of all humanity I staggered into human form. Still running I lost my balance over a tumble of rocks and fell at the edge of the river. Sharp wet rocks grazed my face and hands. I pushed my face in deeper until the cold river submerged me and took away the pain.

My thoughts circled. *What am I doing here? Did the Nine Trees truly take an interest in us? If so, why didn't they care enough to protect Jaria?*

Tiara and Rekala tried to console me through the waves, but I pushed them out of my mind and locked myself in. It seemed like a good idea to just keep my head under the water until it killed me, but my body refused to go down so easily. It spasmed and pulled me sideways out of the water. Gasping with sorrow and breathlessness, I slowly rolled onto all fours.

My hands crunched into fists and, grasping as many rocks as I could, I hurled them into the river. If I could have screamed I would have, but no sound would come out of my throat. It was trapped inside me; a pain, like thirst, that could never be quenched. I crouched there for a long time throwing stones at the water.

Much later a shadow passed over me in the afternoon sunlight. I looked up and could just make out a flying shape in the clouds. Beyond the clouds the sky shimmered and undulated with a strange, unnatural glow as if a mantle had been spread right over it from horizon to horizon. The barrier was visible up there, in places. The flying shape grew larger as it descended, reminding me of the crag hawk that had once nearly killed me. For some reason I wasn't frightened, but I stood up when I realised the shape was heading straight for me.

I bit my tongue in shock as a skyearl of phenomenal size landed beside me with a thump. Its thickly padded paws left footprints the size of a barrel. Its neck arched backwards so that the lizard-

shaped muzzle rested majestically on a muscular chest, which was thickly furred. Its head was the size of an entire horse and had a similar shape to a horse's head as well. It was covered in rope-like fur that ranged from all shades of amethyst purple to sapphire blue and emerald green.

Its golden nose was tipped with three shiny domes. Large purple-ivory horns poked out of the ruff along his brawny neck. Two arm-length horns adorned the outline of each cheek bone, mere decorations when compared with the immense triplet of purple claws on his four lion-like feet.

The rest of his body was covered with glossy fur except the wings, which were feathered. The colours and patterns on the feathers were so beautiful—they appeared to shimmer from blue to purple to green. In this posture, the top curve of his wings touched the back of his neck and fell from there like a waterfall. His muscled tail, which was thicker than the trunk of a cedar tree, curled regally around his powerfully built hind legs.

More chimera than dragon, the skyearl seemed made of lizard, lion, eagle and horse. He regarded me with a calculating, golden eye. The pupil was shaped like a bird in flight. I stood there mystified by his size and magnificence, but unafraid. Knowing he was an animal with intelligence to rival my own, I had no fear, only awe.

He cocked his head and I sensed the locks on my wave-link being pried gently open. Suddenly the skyearl broke through and a tide of knowledge rushed into my mind. My legs went slack and the skyearl's clawed hand caught me as I fell, and held me until I stopped shaking. The shovel-sized claws protruded on either side of my body, cupping me dexterously between two fingers.

The creature's memories were like a window upon the world of skyearls. I had not imagined until now that there was so much more to know. This skyearl had been alive for nearly three centuries—waiting for me! The realisation that I truly was going to be a master psion now filled me with such emotion that tears streamed from my eyes. My soul was so full of intense emotions and new information that my grief melded into my elation and brought me to a place of complete humility.

Who was I to have been spared Jaria's fate? Who was I to be here in this place with these people and these miraculous gifts? I wondered if I would be ready when my time came to really use my psionic abilities against the Zeikas. How would I—a lowly hunter-gatherer from a tribe that had been wiped from the face of Chryne—stand up to the most powerful sorcerers the world had ever known? If the people of Tanza hadn't been able to defeat the Zeikas, how would I help the Kriites, even if I was a master psion?

The anger in my heart receded as I glimpsed the skyearl's own terrible grief and sadness for countless lives lost. The concerns of Jaria seemed small now that I fathomed the lifestyle and magnitude of Tanza. Thousands of Tanzans died every year in Zeika raids—despite the strength of the barrier shield, the sorcerers were sometimes able to break through using human sacrifices to counter the barrier's magic.

Several hundred years ago Bal Harar had learned how to conjure dragons, the only real threat to a skyearl. Since then, the Zeikas had done everything in their power to overthrow the people of Tanza.

The blue and purple skyearl who held me had overseen thousands of battles in his lifetime. He had tasted the magic-sour flesh of Zeikas. He had performed the shrouding many times and constructed an entire building on one of the shroud platforms, called Raer.

I blinked stupidly as I absorbed more information from the skyearl's mind. Tivac had mentioned sky kingdoms made of shrouds, but I hadn't been able to comprehend. Without even having to ask, it became apparent to me that sky kingdom shrouds looked like ordinary clouds from the ground, but solid-ground floated above them. In some parts of Tanza, there were literally cities in the sky.

*'Is this real?'* I asked through the waves, picturing one of the cities in my mind.

He chuckled aloud, his voice soft and deep. Though his silvery lips moved with the precision of a human being, out came a thick, husky sound. His accent was odd, even compared with the other Tanzans I had heard. He seemed to favour long vowel sounds like 'ay' and 'o'. And so he spoke my true name.

*'It is real, Taeon.'*

It resounded like a bell in my mind; a turning point in my life. I was Rada, Anzaii, Sleffion, Tolite, Taeon, a man who no longer feared birds, a Kriite with the most tremendous Sleffion-kin in the world. The skyearl pushed me to my feet and grinned at me. The intimate wave-link we had shared a moment ago snicked closed and I staggered a little as I regained my equilibrium, both physically and mentally.

‘You have done well to take all that in, kindred,’ the skyearl spoke. ‘But we will share information through speech for a while. I don’t wish to overwhelm you.’

‘You’ve already done that,’ I responded without malice. ‘I don’t even know who I am anymore, let alone who you are. We’ll have to take this slowly.’

‘What would you like to know?’

I scratched the back of my head, staring up at the skyearl’s massive body. The skyearls I had seen in Sarm many years ago hadn’t seemed quite so magnificent.

‘Are all the skyearls in Tanza this big?’ I asked.

‘Nay.’ He lifted one purple claw to scratch his neck. ‘I am of the old breed, but even among the keltoar I am the largest and oldest skyearl in Tanza. My name is Ciera.’

I blinked, licking my lips. ‘Ciera... the Emperor Ciera?’

‘The very same,’ he said with amusement.

My hopes suddenly flared. ‘I was sent here because of your invitation to all Kriites, Ciera. My people sent me even though I was their only Anzaii, and now Jaria Village has been wiped out by Zeikas. Will you fly back with me to free the survivors who’ve been enslaved?’

‘We will go back when the time is right,’ Ciera started gently, ‘but I feel that won’t be for a while yet. I have not waited three hundred years for you so that you could rush through our bonding and fly off without learning a thing or two about your new gifts and responsibilities.’

‘Can’t you do something now, like send a squadron of warriors in our stead?’

‘I could,’ he said aloud, ‘but against the wishes of the human king of Tanza. Skyearls have hardly been seen in Telby for decades because we were exiled from that land. In fact, Jaria had some part in that. So it is a delicate matter to send in warriors uninvited.’

‘My own father had some part in the exile,’ I muttered, ‘but even he recognised that Tanza and Jaria were not enemies. Besides, the ban against the Zeikas has been lifted—perhaps it’s a free-for-all now.’

‘It is not my place to make decisions for Tanza that may have political ramifications,’ Ciera replied.

‘Please...’ I began, desperation blinding me to the possible consequences. Couldn’t they fly through Ravra, bypassing Telby altogether?

Ciera sent a thread of calmness through the waves, which sank me to my knees. A vertigo more powerful than drunkenness grasped me, yet would not let me rest. I closed my eyes and thought I heard a faint tune.

‘The first thing we must do is make sure you go through the proper training of a Sleffion,’ he said. ‘Then we’ll go on to Centan where you may present your concerns to the human king. You mustn’t take the Sleffion gift or the full rank of A.S.T.R. lightly.’

Frustration flared in me at his words. I didn’t take them lightly—I was merely worried sick about my home. I wanted to protest, but the emperor’s mind was too strong. A hint of music flowed between us; so soothing and entrancing that I began to relax. It was like a steadying heartbeat with the shaking of a seed-pod and a slowly emerging clavichord, followed by pipeflutes and strings. Never before had I heard such diversity in music or been so entranced by it. Slowly the melody made itself known, pleasantly dramatic, underscoring my emotions.

My hatred for the Zeikas seemed petty and irrelevant in the presence of such a wise being, someone who had experienced the wrath of our enemies even more than I had. He understood the fierce loyalty I had for Jaria, just as he also perceived the deeper knowledge within me that Jaria itself had grown detached from

other nations, which had weakened it. There was more to the current conflict than Jaria and Reltland alone.

The steady heartbeat continued slowly, in time with Ciera's own heartbeat, which was much slower than my own. The chorus was both poignant and uplifting and I felt a deep satisfaction each time the song built to the chorus. I found myself holding my breath waiting for it and then breathing out slowly when it played in Ciera's mind. The emperor skyearl held me quietly until my emotions subsided.

'*What was that?*' I asked him.

A sense of love and hope flowed from him, enrapturing me. I waited long moments for his reply, the song still echoing between us.

'*It is Halduronlei,*' he replied, using the waves with me for the first time, '*meaning "weatherstorm". It is my soothing song, a focusing song I use to calm myself when the battle-fury is upon me; to learn to weather the storm of my emotions. All skyearls have a soothing song and it is usually their Sleffion who must make the music for them, not the other way around.*'

His rebuke, though gentle, chastened me. Throughout my childhood, many in Jaria had complained about my temper, which was part of the reason I preferred solitude. Perhaps I did lack self-control.

Ciera turned my attention back to himself. Understanding and respect flowed through me and I realised I had a lot of learning to do before Ciera and I could properly bond. I also sensed that the emperor's desire to help my people was almost as strong as my own. Even if the king of Tanza refused to ally with Jaria, Ciera would try to persuade him to do what he could to win their freedom.

Ciera thought that perhaps Tanza could buy their freedom or send someone to quietly get them out without connecting the rescue with Tanza.

'We will do what we can for the survivors from Jaria when the time is right,' he acknowledged.

Hope flowed through me.

Hearing the squeak of leather behind me, I glanced back. Sarlice stood behind me with her arms folded, looking up at the huge skyearl. Kestric and Rekala stopped in front of her as if to shield her from danger. Their tails twitched nervously and in the paradoxical manner of cats they exuded both wariness and ferocity. Rekala's uncertainty coursed through the waves and Kestric's lip curled up in a menacing snarl.

Ciera crouched down so his head was on their level and said, 'I'm pleased to meet you, Rekala and Kestric.'

His words reverberated strongly through the waves as well as out loud. This was the first time Ciera had communicated through the waves. He had access to my wave abilities and was now able to converse with all Rada-kin. Likewise, because I was an Anzaii, Rekala would also be able to link with other Sleffion-kin once I had learned to.

Even though Rekala understood all of this from me, a rough growl rumbled from her throat at the unfamiliar voice and the enormous physical presence of the skyearl. Her logical mind was not yet developed enough to overcome the instinctive rejection of something so alien. Kestric's ears flattened tight to his skull and he lifted his claws to strike.

Ciera took hold of the tigers through the waves and sent such an overwhelming sense of peace that the Rada-kin flopped into the grass looking puzzled. Their stripes shivered as if they were being bitten by flies. Ciera's mental power and intellect outstripped my own, but it was his vast experience and the wisdom of centuries that empowered him the most.

*'Greetings Tiaro and Fyschs,'* Ciera said to the earring and the sword respectively. Each item sung back to him on the waves, emanating the pleasure and relaxation that was left over from the skyearl's Soothing Song.

*'It is a pleasure to meet you,'* Tiaro said, her fascination with his mien in the waves apparent. She perceived that even the skyearls' magical abilities with shrouding were connected to the waves. It would take time for her to process everything from Ciera's mind,

but eventually I knew Tiaro would provide me with some valuable insights to the wonders of the Sleffion-kin.

I lay on my belly and encouraged Sarlice to do so as well. There was no way for us all to be included in the conversation because only Sarlice, Ciera and I could speak out loud. The others could converse on the waves, but only inasmuch as I could, so all my kin could interact with each other, but the only one who could interact directly with Sarlice and Henter was Kestric.

*'Your wave abilities may continue to expand,'* Tiaro said. *'One day, you may be able to reach other people's Sleffion-kin and Tolite-kin... perhaps even other humans. Then, you will be able to connect us all together in one wave conversation.'*

*'Incredible,'* I replied.

I knew by the way Sarlice was looking at me that Kestric had passed on Tiaro's words. I already felt dizzy from perceiving the awareness of each kin in the waves and the way they danced and swirled around me, connected to each other only through me.

*'So this is what it means to be Anzaai?'* I asked them collectively.

Their voices came back over the top of each other, trying to encourage me and lend their support. Eventually, Ciera's voice won through.

*'You are on the path to becoming a master psion,'* he corrected. *'An Anzaai is only as powerful on the waves as he is experienced with each of the other gifts. Over time, you must develop them all if you are to reach your full potential.'*

I sensed relief from Rekala, who had been wondering if she was still as important to me as she had been in the early days. I reached out to ruffle the fur on top of her head.

*'Of course you are,'* I said. *'You are my first kindred and no matter where we go, even if we are apart, we are connected.'*

We lay there for some time getting used to Ciera. Throughout the encounter, the emperor skyearl held back his mind so as not to flood Rekala, Tiaro and I with new knowledge. Instead, he caused his vast experiences to seep through so that we had a chance to discuss the things we learned with Sarlice and Kestric and commit them to memory in our own unique ways.

By the time I looked up from our engagement, the day-star was setting. The rich, teal sky rippled in the distance with the strangely translucent, shiny skin of the barrier. Ruddy orange clouds clustered above the distant cliffs and the two moons waited patiently for night to fall.

# Chapter Three —

## The Nine

Sarlice kicked the side of my foot, jolting me out of a reverie. We were in the middle of community gathering in the Hall of Hallows and I had been staring at an immense mural of a castle in the sky instead of listening to the announcements of Keryn Alger, the Duke of Lantaid. Everyone was now on their feet, so I stood up slowly. I stretched my arms, popping the joints loudly by accident. Sarlice stifled a laugh, several heads turned and a pale boy snickered.

Rekala and Kestric were clustered on a raised platform to one side with the other Rada-kin. There were water troughs, bales of hay and plush carpets for the comfort of the animals. Most of the kindred listened to the announcements of the humans and participated when they could. As the official-looking people up the front continued with their talk, Rekala and I allowed our thoughts to wander again.

Two days had passed since our first meeting with Ciera and since then we had scarcely seen him. He said he had urgent things to attend to before he could devote himself to us and it would be better to get them out of the way now. I sensed that the sudden change we represented to his life was both welcome and a burden. He was, after all, a being who had been alive for hundreds of years, doing whatever he willed. That he had climbed the ranks and become emperor spoke volumes about his ambition and leadership

abilities. Among skyearls, Emperor was a democratic position, not an inherited one.

I wondered if newlyweds felt the same way—separate beings thrust into one life together and suddenly having to share everything.

Ciera's priorities and motivations had begun to merge with Rekala's, Tiaro's and mine, leaving us all trying to sort out where that left us. My bonding with Rekala hadn't been anywhere near as complicated, because she had come into the civilised world through me. Rekala brought few desires of her own save filling her belly and snoozing for as much of the day as she could.

Ciera, on the other hand, had countless responsibilities to the people of Lantaid and other parts of Tanza as well as the thousands of Sleffion-kin he knew personally. Ciera was sought daily by high-ranking members of the three Kriite labour guilds—the speakers, the warriors and the harvesters.

Everything from organising skyearl events to providing enough resources for the various sky kingdoms to stay operational. Defensive strategists and flight training instructors wanted his input. Where he couldn't spare the time he always knew exactly who to delegate the task to.

My desire to get help for Jaria and Lyth *had* pushed its way forward in his mind, but also now I perceived a bigger picture. For the time being, our quest to speak with the king of Tanza was on hold.

Using his new access to the waves, Ciera had contacted the Sleffion-kin of the royal couple's chief scribe, a lady by the name of Skylien. Ciera had been assured that the king and queen would attend to us soon after our arrival in Centan to discuss the needs of Jaria and Lyth.

The sense of urgency that had driven me thus far had diminished somewhat, to be replaced by a sick feeling of dread. It was too late now for trade agreements—all I could hope for was Tanza's charity and its willingness to send a rescue party.

Those Jarians who were enslaved were completely uncontactable—they and their Rada-kin were probably warded—but I had been in contact with the escapees. Namal had led the group of about

60 into the grotto and collapsed the tunnel behind them. With supplies from the emergency stash, they were travelling through the darkness, rationing the torch oil, water and food.

The journey was slow because more than half of the party were children, and many of the rest were elders and the sick or injured. There were also seven women with babies under a year old and two pregnant women, so the group had to pause every few hours. Though their situation wasn't desperate, it was uncomfortable and many of them were sick with worry or grief.

*'They're strong people,'* Rekala counselled me. *'They'll get through this and make their way to Lyth.'*

With a sigh, I put aside my concerns—Ciera had bidden me to wait until we went to Centan.

I brought my attention back to the room I was in, confirming to myself I hadn't missed anything important. Something off to the side of the dais caught my eye. I sensed Rekala sit up to get a better view as a pair of women about my age carried out a small golden cabinet with a gilded and etched glass front. Inside hung an ancient scroll with spidery black words written in straight lines.

*'This is the oldest scroll of Kaslonica we now possess,'* Duke Alger announced. *'It was unearthed in the Chilwen ruins two seasons ago by ritualists and has been meticulously translated and cross-referenced with our other copies of this book to produce an even more accurate version. As most of you know, a team of scribes recently completed over a hundred copies of this history scroll. They will be available after the announcements at no cost, but if you wish to contribute to their work, you are, of course, welcome to place an offering in the ritualists' pot.'*

He held up a large silver pot, which was engraved with the sigil of the ritualists. Not exactly a guild of their own, the group operated a little bit like the speakers, warriors and harvesters, recruiting members who showed an aptitude for spiritual work. Unlike the guilds, ritualists were encouraged to renounce their membership in guilds to focus completely on their new purpose.

*'I wonder what else is new about this version,'* I whispered to Sarlice.

She nodded, sharing my curiosity. From time to time, the Jarian scribes announced the acquisition of new Kriite history scrolls, usually when fragments were recovered from far off lands, verified and integrated with our master texts. I wondered how much the Jarian history scrolls differed from the Tanzan history scrolls. Although Tanzans were banned from entering Telby, that hadn't stopped ambassadors like myself from journeying *to* Tanza and back again several times over the past decade.

'There are places revealed in here...' Duke Alger tapped the golden cupboard, 'that should interest all Kriites, but are especially relevant to those with kindred. We each have a duty to study the waves and determine how the Ancient Sapphire Trees can help us in the days to come, not just ritualists. Those without psionic powers can support the rest. The Zeikas are massing against us, so now, more than ever, is a time for us to be steadfast in our minds and strong in our understanding of the waves.'

On our way out of the Hall of Hallows Sarlice and I eagerly picked up a copy of the new Tanzan history scroll, and dropped a donation into the box for the scribes. A tiny orange skyearl peered at us from his perch on the scribes' table.

'Newcomers from Telby are you?' he squawked, forming the words with an accent similar to Ciera's but a more high-pitched voice. I couldn't help comparing the skyearl to Ciera, even though he wasn't much bigger than one of Ciera's eyes. The differences in their size and colouring was vast, but for all that they looked very much the same, right down to the shiny domes on the tiny skyearl's snout. Sarlice nodded and offered him one finger, which he shook vigorously with both of his dexterous little forepaws.

'Found your Sleffion-kin yet?' he queried.

'Not I,' Sarlice replied, 'but there's nought to say I actually will. Talon here has, with Emperor Ciera. Say, you're not bonded yet either, are you?'

'Nope,' he acknowledged, cocking his head and scrutinizing her with one golden eye. There was a long silence as the two stared at one another. The people crowding around the table seemed to fade out of their awareness. I looked from one to the other, appreciating

how the rich orange of the skyearl's fur matched Sarlice's coppery-bronze hair.

'Your name is Sarlice, isn't it?' the skyearl chirruped happily.

My guide's body went even stiller. 'Aye, and you are Thita.'

'How did you...?' The words died on my lips as I realised there was only one way they could have deciphered each other's names without ever speaking them.

The tiny orange skyearl flew suddenly to Sarlice's shoulder and snuffled her hair. She stroked his back and he crooned into her and rubbed his jaw along her cheek, scent-marking like a cat. The claws of his four tiny feet clutched at her upper arm and his feathered wings were flapping.

'I have a strange and wonderful sense about you...?' A smile, if it could be called that, creased the line of his mouth upward. 'I never knew what it would feel like to finally meet my own Sleffion-kin.'

'Nor I,' Sarlice replied, staring at him in fascination.

'Velkin, will you take over for me, please?' Thita asked of a human-sized skyearl in the crowd. 'I've just met my Sleffion-kin!'

'Congratulations,' Velkin replied, shuffling between people on his hind legs until he reached the table. He opened the coin chest Thita had been using and began taking money from those eager to make a donation for the new history scroll.

Sarlice was already moving outside with Thita, her interest in the new scroll temporarily forgotten. I followed them, torn between my anticipation for the scroll and my joy for Sarlice's new kin. Rekala wended her way through the forest of people around her and butted her head against my hip. I stroked her forehead affectionately and chuffed to her in greeting. When I looked up Sarlice and Thita were completely engrossed in conversation, so I decided to take a peek at the manuscript.

The scroll was bound with green ribbons and encased in a nynoscale tube. The first piece of parchment I unrolled contained a list of chapters in the book and a preface explaining what had been changed in this version of the history. Even in Jaria it had been impossible to find a complete book of Kriite history. Not only were some ancient writings lost to time, but the banishment of the

Tanzans from Telby had caused the destruction of countless Kriite texts.

I held my breath as I unrolled the scroll, and scanned for the list of Ancient Sapphire Trees and their location. Since Namal had shown me that there was one in the Catacombs of Krii in Naioteio, I had been wondering about the other eight. The list in this history scroll was ambiguous, but at least I now understood its significance. It read:

The magnificent birds bore each seed swiftly to its place on Chryne; one to the Council of Water, one to the City of Snow, one to the Land of a Thousand Perils, one to the Spring of Understanding, one to the Running Rock, one to the Shrouded Forest, one to the Plain of Slaughter, one to the Sister's Hand, and one to the Cauldron of Storms.

That the text did not reveal where the Nine Trees were was deliberate. Kriites had to keep this a secret to protect them. With one hand on the Jarian belt I took a deep breath, feeling certain I had some part to play in strengthening our understanding of the waves.

I was so engrossed in the history scroll that I didn't see Tivac until he was patting me on the back. 'I just heard the news, Talon. Congratulations! It will be the talk of the town—nay, the realm—for seasons. What a tremendous honour to have the Emperor Ciera for your Sleffion-kin. These are notable days, my friend, and I'm sure glad to be alive to see them.'

I chuckled nervously at his enthusiasm. Sarlice, Thita and Kestric joined us and Tivac blinked in surprise when he realised Sarlice had also become a Sleffion.

'So soon for both of you!' he exclaimed. 'Thita, how wonderful for you to have met your match.'

'Indeed it is,' the small skyearl replied, gnawing at the feathers on one of his wings.

'Will you all be attending the Bonding Ceremony that's on this afternoon?' he asked us.

My hopes flared. 'I didn't know there was one.'

‘We could,’ said Thita, nuzzling into Sarlice’s red-bronze hair. ‘I’ve been waiting a long time, why wait another day?’

‘How long have you been waiting?’ Sarlice asked.

He tapped one tiny claw against the fingers of his other forepaw, counting. ‘One hundred and twenty-four years.’ Skyearls matured at around a hundred years of age then aged more slowly.

Sarlice, Thita and Kestric made an impressive sight; the flame-furred firetiger, the bright orange skyearl and Sarlice with her rich, bronze hair. I wondered at the colours of my Rada-kin and my new Tolite and Sleffion-kin too; all mostly blue.

Sarlice and I had known each other for only a short time, but in that time we had both grown and changed. Here I was, an R.A.S.T. and she an R.S.T. Since coming together, our lives seemed to have converged into a single path which sped up and strengthened with our combined destinies. It seemed that Jaria and Lyth could no longer be our main focus.

Ciera’s mind touched mine. He was helping a group of large skyearls build a bridge over the other side of town. He spoke openly through the waves so both Thita and I could hear.

*‘Are you ready to cast off your independence this very afternoon, Thita?’* Ciera asked wryly.

I couldn’t sense Thita’s reaction through the waves, but he spread his wings and wrapped them around Sarlice’s head in a gesture of love. Unable to see, she flailed her hands about comically, causing a gathering of children nearby to laugh.

*‘You know I am ready to bond,’* I told Ciera.

*‘Ha! You barely know what it is,’* came his reply.

I could almost see the teasing squint of his eyes, teeth bared and shining against the blue fur of his muzzle. Ciera had a well-developed sense of humour and tolerance.

*‘It wasn’t always thus,’* he sent.

I realised my youthful impatience was becoming somewhat of a joke between us.

He, on the other hand, had mixed feelings about the loss of his independence. Part of him was uncertain about the future of the skyearls since there was no obvious replacement for him if

he abdicated his role as emperor. Part of him was tired of being unbound and therefore somewhat incomplete.

He was pleased that his final twenty or so years would be spent with his own Sleffion. In some ways, it was as if life was finally starting for him. He hefted a large wooden strut down the length of his back and moved it into place beneath the bridge. I decided to leave him to it.

‘Ciera is working, even now,’ I told Tivac, ‘but he is willing to put it off for the Bonding Ceremony.’

‘Tivac, what is a Sleffion Bonding Ceremony like?’ Sarlice asked. He winked at her. ‘You’ll see.’

## Chapter Four — The Bonding Ceremony

**W**e rode out of Lantaid with a company of two dozen riders. Sarlice and Duria rode ahead with Tivac on a dun pony. Tivac, who was not a horseman, preferred the more docile (albeit stubborn) nature of ponies. His mount picked its way lazily across the green hillocks. The leaders of the company disappeared through a stand of gorse bushes at what appeared to be the edge of a cliff.

As Fleetfoot reached the spot, I felt the rush of open air against my face. A cavernous gorge opened before us. It was surrounded by enormous cliff faces, dotted with greenery and fallen rocks. Into the distance, down the length of the gorge, was a thin waterfall and river. A gentle breeze flowed up out of the chasm, carrying the faint, wild scents of river and forest.

Tivac's mount moved expertly down the rocky track. Duria tossed her head at each rolling pebble and kept pulling against the reins. Sarlice leaned well back in the saddle so that her weight was on the mare's hind legs.

Miles below was a gathering of onlookers—humans, skyearls and other animals. The gorge was like a rock bowl cut into the side of a small mountain. At one end, striped crags towered over it. On our side was a steep, rocky cliff-face with clusters of trees and small plants on either side of the track.

In the middle of the bowl was a wooden stage, which was covered with carvings of skyearls and humans. More onlookers were arriving by air or cloud at every moment. Apparently all those who were bonded with a skyearl already had other ways of getting into the Bonding Canyon.

Skyearls of all shapes and sizes spiralled through the air above the gorge. Those skyearls who were too small to bear their Sleffion down on their backs performed small shroudings. I watched with fascination as the tiniest skyearls flew in complex patterns through the sky, forming a trail of mist in their paths.

The mist became denser and denser until, at the very centre, a mystical white substance formed. Humans walked down through the shroud from the very top of the gorge. It looked ridiculous to my eyes, but I kept my thoughts to myself to avoid playing the part of an utter newbie.

*'You'll soon get used to it,' Ciera said. 'Keltoars are born with an aptitude for shrouding, but after three hundred and three years of doing it I am considered the Master Builder.'*

He waited down on the stage, easily taking up a quarter of it with his massive body. As if bored, he was puffing out little gusts of steam, which quickly solidified into white disks that floated off in different directions. A group of at least thirty human children were chasing them in circles in front of the stage. A dozen skyearl whelps flew in their midst, playfully snatching the disks and spinning them in new directions. Some of the whelps were larger than Thita.

Besides Sarlice and I, there were two other humans bonding today: Devlan and Gieri. Only Sarlice and I were also Rada. Rekala and Kestric stayed with the horses, respectfully keeping their distance.

Soon after Sarlice, Devlan, Gieri and I had made our way to the stage horns started to blow. On every face of the gorge, a conical, U-shaped tunnel was cut into the rock. Large skyearls stood below each tunnel and blew into one end of the U. It produced a strange hum, which was soon taken up by countless voices across the canyon.

A choir of skyearls formed around the stage in a circle. They sang a complex melody to go with the background hum. Their

voices were like those of a human male choir. Even the females had a husky baritone hum.

As I watched and listened I noticed that each skyearl only sang one portion of the song. Together they created a complex whirlwind of canons. My entire body vibrated with the wistful, enchanting sound and I allowed my lungs to fill with air and my thoughts to calm. Tension that I had been holding onto for days melted away and a sense of relief and hope suffused me.

During the song Ciera gently sifted through my mind, poking a memory here, lifting up an old hurt there, examining my motivations and ambitions. He noticed something pending about my relationship with Sarlice but, understanding humans far better than Rekala did, he left it alone. Presently, he invited me to investigate his memories and thoughts.

Looking upon his mind was like standing at the edge of a canyon ten times the size of this one. I felt so tiny and out-of-place. I was so insignificant when viewed through the lens of centuries, yet to Ciera I was important. The most profound thing I found in Ciera's mind was such resilience. With a maturity I could barely comprehend he embraced weakness, change and tribulation, believing even the harshest trials he'd endured to be a natural part of life's tapestry.

I rejoiced in the knowledge that I could grow so much with Ciera as my Sleffion-kin. When we were each satisfied that what we were doing was truly in alignment with our inner selves we sat down on the stage. The singing continued around us as the other initiates strained to find each other in the waves.

Sarlice's face was screwed up in concentration as she tried to make contact with her new Sleffion-kin. Over the next hour, I conversed privately with Ciera about everything from our favourite foods to the most boring ceremonies we'd ever had to attend. He chuckled mentally.

Eventually, the others sat, too. Sarlice was beaming and kept reaching out to stroke Thita's fur. One of the horn-blowing dragons ceased his tune. Ciera broke the skyearl song with a low, rumbling howl and a series of growl-grunts. The singers fell silent, allowing Ciera's skyearl words to echo from wall to wall. The skyearls and

their whelps stood with rapt attention, heads pointing in his direction. He continued to growl-grunt.

Escotia, a ritualist in her mid-fifties, was waiting at the front of the stage.

In a loud voice she repeated what Ciera was saying in the Telbion-Tanzan language. I already knew what he had said:

‘Welcome to this Bonding Ceremony of four new kin pairs. As you all know, Tanza has thrived for centuries with the blessing of the Ancient Sapphire Trees. Skyearls who are fortunate enough to become Sleffion-kin are among the privileged protectors of the Kriite people—along with the Anzaii-kin, Tolite-kin and Rada-kin. Together we are known as kindred.

‘It is only through the waves that our humans make best use of the Kriite magic that bonds us. We each must strive for improvement, build our knowledge and support others to do the same.

‘We skyearls are masters of the sky and of the element of water. Many of us have the ability to breathe out shrouds and the magical solid platforms we use to build kingdoms in the sky. There are those of you here today—skyearl and human—without kindred of your own. Do not be discouraged, for you are valued individuals, each and every one of you. We all have a part to play in the safety of the realm.

‘Today we welcome four new human beings into a bonded relationship with their Sleffion-kin. From this day on we will serve you, feel your emotions, hear your thoughts. We will carry you on the strength of our wings, and our shrouds if we are able. We will defend you with our very lives for we are skyearls.’

When Ciera was finished, there was a cheer made up of human and skyearl voices.

Escotia announced, ‘I now present Devlan the Sleffion, bonded with Guardian Rinshock. They are bonded on this the 119<sup>th</sup> day of the 700<sup>th</sup> year.’

A pair of red sashes was handed to the boy standing next to me. He slung one across his shoulder and beneath the other arm then approached Rinshock with the other. The black and silver skyearl

bowed his head and allowed Devlan to tie the sash around his neck, a symbol of both his servitude and his ties to the human.

‘I now present Gieri the Sleffion, Tolite, bonded this day with Scout Annaseld. They are bonded on this the 119<sup>th</sup> day of the 700<sup>th</sup> year.’

Gieri was given a pair of white sashes—white for the scouts, I presumed—and she donned hers as Devlan had.

Sarlice gave me a look of excitement as her turn approached. The boy waiting on the side of the stage had a pair of blue sashes and a pair of yellow. Judging by the sizes of the skyearl sashes the yellow one was for Thita and the blue for Ciera.

‘I now present Sarlice the Sleffion, Tolite, Rada,’ Escotia announced. ‘She is bonded this day with Strategist Thita. They are bonded on this the 119<sup>th</sup> day of the 700<sup>th</sup> year.’

Sarlice stepped forward, accepted the sashes and put them on. Thita shivered with delight at her touch and fluttered happily around her head when she was finished. The tiny sash fell off his neck and Sarlice gave an embarrassed squawk and hurried to reaffix it. Escotia smiled at her and waited. When my guide was finished, the interpreter resumed her serious expression and spoke in a voice that boomed loudly in my skull.

‘Finally, I give you Rada, Anzaii, Sleffion, Tolite, Taeon—’ A raucous of gasps and talk was followed by roars of delight and cheering. ‘That’s right, we now have a master psion among us! Taeon is bonded with Emperor Ciera. They are bonded on this the 119<sup>th</sup> day of the 700<sup>th</sup> year of the age.’

Hearing my true name announced I decided it was time to start using it again. Time to put the scars from childhood behind me.

I accepted the blue sash for myself and carefully wrapped it around my body and over one shoulder. The sash for Ciera was as wide as a bed sheet, twice as long and very heavy. I marvelled at the amount of work that would have gone into its weaving. On one side of it was a gold-painted leather strap and the other was stitched with links of gold. Gems dangled from the links in such a way that they would become like a chest adornment on Ciera. With a grateful nod to its bearer, I hefted the material and threw it over my Sleffion-kin’s

lowered neck. I fastened it using the inbuilt hooks and eyelets and patted Ciera's thick, furred neck.

Ciera howled my name in a triumphant roar. Without a word to me he hoisted me off the ground with one clawed hand and set me on his back. A puff of mist surrounded us, his back legs bunched and my gigantic Sleffion-kin somehow launched into the sky. I scrabbled for a handhold, my stomach lurched and my heart drummed. I struggled to find a secure position on my knees. It was nothing like riding a horse—because of the keltoar's size, straddling his back was impossible. Desperate for purchase I grabbed Ciera's fur with both hands.

*'You've got it,'* Ciera reassured me, sensing my near-panic.

He bore me into empty space and I could no longer see Sarlice and Rekala. We ascended slowly as Ciera's wings beat, making use of the winds rising from the canyon. It seemed impossibly difficult.

*'Is the magic of shrouding what's keeping you in the air?'* I asked.

*'At my size, shrouds are usually needed to get into the air, but it's not too difficult staying up here. Not all skyearls have good use of shrouds. Without a good updraft those have to take a run up or jump from a high place. We also have latticed bones, like a bird.'*

We rose slowly but steadily until we reached a dizzying height. I shuffled forward so I could grab the gold strap, wishing there was something holding me on. Ciera laid his wings flat and plummeted down towards the canyon. My insides gave a sickening, yet delicious, swoop. The hair on my arms stood up.

Wind streamed around me, deafening me. The ground seemed to be growing larger at an alarming rate. At the last possible moment Ciera curved in an arc and used his momentum to carry him upwards. Sensing my fear turn to thrills he gave a whoop of delight. The crowd cheered. Devlan and Gieri and their Sleffion-kin, Rinshock and Annaseld, flew up to join us.

Ciera swooped down and up again. It was a magnificent feeling, bringing back the faintest memories of being swung around someone's head as a child, smiling and laughing.

*'I don't know what's taking Thita so long,'* Ciera said.

The orange skyeard shot suddenly into the air and a trail of cloud followed him. He flew up and around in many loops until the sky was knotted with shrouds. Sarlice put her foot on the first solid substance inside the shroud and climbed. Thita had made a kind of white stair inside his shroud.

Rinshock, Annaseld and Ciera danced through the air, weaving around Thita's loops but keeping a safe distance from Sarlice. She seemed awfully vulnerable out there, walking through the sky. It was a good thing she was fit.

Once she had climbed to the top, Sarlice ran the length of Thita's shroud and peered excitedly over the edge. Thita cavorted around her, delighting in his newfound human. Ciera gave a great laugh of affection.

*'Sarlice will never ride the back of her Sleffion-kin, but Thita is skilled with shrouding.'*

Without warning, Sarlice dived off the edge of the shroud into the vast expanse of sky beneath her. Dread stabbed me so hard that it made Ciera flip around. His wings made a slapping sound as the wind buffeted us. Thita zipped beneath Sarlice's falling body. A layer of shrouding appeared beneath her. It seemed to be falling at nearly the same speed. It slowed her fall and eventually stopped it altogether. She got to her feet with an expression of elation.

Rinshock and Annaseld formed a figure-of-eight in the sky and picked up speed until their forms became blurred. In the distance behind them I saw a dark, winged shape.

Feeling no nausea at the sight of the bird, I told Ciera, *'I have conquered my fear.'*

He turned to look at the bird and a sense of alarm flowed through the waves. Had I spoken too soon? Tiaro sparkled to life. Ciera roared and spread his wings. He struck out at an angle away from the bird, but he found a current of wind up high that sent us in a straight line towards it. The landscape below us looked like a platter of food, salted with small towns and peppered with dark rainforests. Ciera roared again. This time the sense of alarm came directly from him.

That was no bird.

It was a Zeika trespasser.

The dragon wheeled when it spotted us and flew back the way it had come. Ciera chased the dragon until his wings were aching. He soared on and on. No matter what I said, he would not stop and rest. I could feel my Anzaii-kin rolling out of her slumber, drawn awake by the Zeika magic.

Ciera had called for help through the waves, but so far no other skyearls had been able to keep up with us. The distance between us and the dragon was gradually decreasing.

*'We're gaining on him,'* he said. *'The Zeika's concentration must be wearing thin.'*

*'We're too far away for me to tell,'* Tiaro lamented.

His words were shot through with pain from his straining wings. A painful contraction tore through his wing.

*Panic!*

His body twitched sideways and down, falling, twisting. He tucked in his other wing and duck-dived. I couldn't see the ground for the clouds, but I could imagine what it would be like to hit it from this height.

Ciera struggled with the cramped limb. My breath whooshed out of me and I clenched my fists tightly around the gold strap. Ciera shook himself and finally opened his wings.

Ciera's dive turned into a graceful curve that swept us upwards again. The dragon was a speck in the middle-distance. The great cliffs of Tanza were visible through gaps in the clouds. The sheer wall of rock was topped by a veil of purple that shimmered against the teal sky. I hadn't realised how close we were to the boundary, or rather, how fast Ciera could fly. The dragon shot over the border with alarming speed and disappeared into the distance. Ciera blew out a great wisp of cloud and landed on it to rest.

*'I'm sorry to take you away from the Bonding Ceremony,'* he said, *'but I needed to be sure that dragon was only a scout.'*

*'How can you be sure now?'* I asked.

*'If there was a Zeika camp inside the borders of Tanza, that dragon would have headed straight for it. The Zeika on its back will need to land very soon or he risks losing his concentration.'*

‘That sounds similar to when a Rada morphs,’ I observed.

Ciera regarded me thoughtfully. ‘Yes. But when a dragon rider loses his concentration, the conjured dragon vanishes and he falls to his death.’

‘Can’t they simply conjure the dragon and send it off flying and look through its eyes while they stay safely on the ground?’

Ciera nodded his enormous head. ‘Yes, far-conjurers can. But they are fewer and most cannot do it from any great distance.’

‘I thought the borders of Tanza were protected,’ I said after a while. If not, then what was the barrier shield for?

‘They are, or the Zeikas would be pouring in here by the dozen. As it stands, they usually take some time to create a strong enough spirit circle to break the barrier. For one scout to get through, it probably would have required a large amount of blood from a Kriite.’

‘Why would the founders of Tanza have made a barrier that could be broken by Kriite blood?’ I asked.

‘There is magic in your blood,’ he said, shaking his head, ‘just as there is in mine. The demon lord, Zeidarb, knows its power. By ingesting or covering themselves in our blood the Zeikas can trick the barrier shield that a Kriite is passing through.’

‘You don’t seem too surprised by that scout,’ I observed.

‘Our spies tell us that with enough blood, the Zeikas can get a whole squadron of tyraks through.’

I recoiled from him, with a look of outrage. ‘How can you allow it? Turn off the barrier shield altogether.’

‘Do you think our military so powerful?’ He shook his massive head. ‘The shield is all that stands between us and annihilation. If it were ever to come down, the Zeikas would attack us constantly until the entire realm was in ruin.’

‘What are you doing about it then?’

‘Tanza’s army, the defenders, employs many scouts to interrupt the Zeika raiding parties. There are reports every few days of such encounters. We do everything in our power to disallow it, but every now and then a few scouts or a group of Zeikas get through. Sometimes the Zeikas launch a campaign against us and entire

armies get in. If it weren't for that shield, we would not be here today.'

I thought on this for a long time as we waited for him to recover from the flight. Perhaps one of the reasons the tribes of Jaria and Lyth had diminished, and Kriites had scattered into the protection of other nations, was because the Zeikas had been harvesting us for our blood. This could have been going on for years. I wondered if the masters of Jaria had known. They were in contact with other Kriite nations, such as Tanza. Surely they had known. It was me who had been ignorant. After a while, Ciera went on speaking.

'We fight the Zeikas off every few years, but over time they have gradually grown stronger. In many of our cities, the last war campaign nearly spelled their doom. The Zeikas killed tens of thousands. You will find many ruins around Tanza—despite the protective barrier. Our people have realised they are safer in well-fortified towns.'

I fidgeted and looked at my feet. The ground was like spongy, white clay. It was wet from the mist of the shrouding. The fog rose up to my knees, leaving the legs of my pants damp.

We watched the day-star set over the western horizon and I tried to imagine what it would be like to watch it from the tops of the Kiayr Range. Would the day-star look the same over the other side of the world?

When he had rested, Ciera allowed me to climb up his shoulder and perch on his back. He spread his wings and took a flying leap off the shroud. The shroud dissipated, the harder substance broke into small pieces and rained down. Gaining flight was much easier from this height. Ciera simply flapped his wings in the air currents and let them carry him towards Lantaid. When I looked back, the shroud was gone.

## Chapter Five — Past and Future

**A**long with Devlan and Gieri, Sarlice and I were expected to spend some time learning about Tanzan history and culture. The morning of our thirteenth day of learning was a struggle for both of us. Two weeks had passed and we didn't seem to be any nearer to moving on to Centan to speak with the king.

Although Jaria was already lost, the Rada of Lyth and other parts of the world still had a chance. Sarlice kept quiet about it most of the time but I knew she still had a burning desire to find allies for her father. I was already convinced by recent developments that this fight could end up involving far more people than just the Rada.

Ciera was aware of my thoughts and reassured me he was working as fast as he could to tie up loose ends, finish off projects and speed things along for us. He was eager to get to Centan and join the human leaders of Tanza in working out what to do about the current Zeika threat.

Sarlice and I were in the guest room at the Hall of Hallows, each brushing the fur of our Rada-kin. Rekala and Kestric basked in the attention, making it plain they had not enjoyed becoming second-fiddle to our new Sleffion-kin.

*'I have Fyschs and Tiaro to contend with, as well,'* Rekala complained, snuffling against my hand, then licking it with her rasping tongue.

*'I'm sorry, Rekala,'* I sighed, *'but nobody will ever replace you. How could they?'*

She rubbed the side of her head against my leg, nearly pushing me over.

'What is Ciera up to today?' Sarlice asked me.

'He is training a team of skyearls to take over what he's been doing here for the past two seasons. He knows we need to get through the training quickly and move on to Centan.'

She nodded. 'There is still hope for Lyth. Kestric tells me that the Lythian Rada have not seen more Zeikas than usual in the south.'

'That's odd,' I said after a moment's thought. 'Reltland is so far south you would think the Zeikas would be more interested in conquering the southern lands. They've already taken Nooneagle. Why not overtake Jesath, Lyth, Siffre, Duuryn and Irin? That would give them ample resources for whatever they're trying to accomplish.'

'They desire Tanza and Telby,' Sarlice said firmly. 'The lands of the south are cut off from the north by the Barh Desert. To get from Reltland to Telby City involves a trek of a season or more around the Barh Desert, almost to the borders of Duuryn. From Tanza it would be a matter of weeks.'

'And why do they want Telby,' I pondered, 'its size and wealth?'

She stopped brushing Kestric and stared me straight in the eye. 'It is the ideal location for the building of an empire. With the mobility of the dragons at their disposal, the Zeikas will have every mine and farm in Telby under their control. They'd be in an ideal position to take and keep every nation from Naioteio to Siffre. Where King Flale's predecessors failed, they will succeed.'

'They will fatten the ranks of their armies and dominate the people of the world until all realms are under the rule of Reltland. They hope to expand the influence of Zei to all nations.'

I stared at her, horrified by the simplicity with which she outlined our doom. She let her stern expression drop and resumed grooming the firetiger.

'There must be something we can do to stop them,' I said.

‘Communication is our greatest advantage,’ she pointed out. ‘The A.S.T.R. gifts allow us to communicate over impressive distances. Even if it’s just between towns within one realm, that’s instant mind-to-mind communication. The Zeikas don’t have that.’

‘No, but they do have scryers,’ I replied.

She wagged her finger at me. ‘Ah but scryers can only spy over very short distances and they have to mark the person or place they want to scry beforehand. To my knowledge they cannot hear. They can only see.’

‘They can always enslave Anzaii, Sleffion or Rada to relay messages by threatening to kill others,’ I responded. ‘I’m certain that’s what happened to some of the stolen Jarians.’

‘How?’ she asked.

‘The very first level of Zeika initiation is a warder,’ I began. ‘Wards can be used to block the use of our magic. They just ward one relayer, tell their message to the other and get them to send it. Then they ward the second relayer and get the receiver at the other end to repeat it back to the first relayer to ensure the message was received unaltered.’

She stuck out her bottom lip and nodded, seemingly impressed. A slight flush covered the olive brown skin of her face and her deep blue eyes held mine. For a moment, I couldn’t look away. Henter was strapped to her back alongside a quiver of black arrows. It reminded me of the desperate dash I had made to retrieve her Tolite-kin and the rest of our gear just over seven weeks ago. It seemed like a much longer period of time than that.

‘You’re wearing your warbow,’ I observed.

‘I try not to go anywhere without Henter,’ she responded, ‘and we’ve got a meeting with a historian in five minutes.’

‘You may yet need a warbow to get us out of that,’ I returned.

She gave me a small smile and gestured to get up. With a groan, I dragged myself up and pulled on a loose white shirt that was crisscrossed from torso to neck with leather rope. I strapped on my sheath and slid Fyschs into it.

My heart raced as Sarlice stepped up to me, but she merely flicked a speck of dirt off my shoulder. I watched the light bouncing off her hair as she walked away from me.

Rekala sensed the racing of my blood, but she clamped down on her curiosity, leaving me to my thoughts. Together, the four of us exited our quarters and made our way through the Hall of Hallows. Once outside, the warmth of the day beat down upon us and I wished I could go shirtless again. It was humid in this low land. Our feet crunched on the rocky ground.

‘We’ve been invited to celebrate the Lunar Festival with the locals in two weeks’ time,’ Sarlice said.

‘Very well,’ I murmured, not sure how I felt about that. It was nice of the Lantaideans to include us, but I was still raw from the loss of Jaria where I had celebrated most of the Lunar Festivals of my young life.

Aside from New Day, these five days were the most important days of the year for Kriites all over the world. Day one was when the two moons were the furthest apart of the festival. This was generally a day of solitary reflection and fasting.

The middle three days featured the coming together of family and friends, intensifying and growing in size to symbolise the impending joining of the two moons.

Finally Capril would pass in front of Naeva in the sky, partly obscuring it. The fifth day of the Lunar Festival was a jovial celebration in commemoration of this joining. It was a popular day for couples to get married or new bond-mates to come together.

Our ‘meeting with a historian’ turned out to be a three-hour-long seminar on the battle readiness of Tanza by someone from the warriors guild. In Tanza the warriors were more often referred to as the defender army.

Devlan and Gieri were among the twenty or so citizens participating. Sarlice and I sat on two intricately carved wooden chairs and the two Rada-kin lay at our feet. After a few minutes, a man with long greying hair and a beard came to stand at the front of the room.

‘My name is Benzar,’ he began, in an earnest voice. ‘I’m a father of six, grandfather of two and my skyearl died five years ago in battle. I am an Anzaii, Sleffion and I have been a statistician for Tanza’s army, the defenders, for thirty years. It won’t surprise you, then, that the first thing I want you to learn is the importance of gathering population and army statistics.’

There was a humorous murmur among the audience. Benzar’s way of speaking included many short pauses and piercing looks.

‘At the last estimation,’ he began, ‘the population of Tanza was over 1.3 million with significantly more men than women. The biggest cities were Centan, with over 50,000 inhabitants, Lowford: 23,000 and Condii: 22,000. Most of the population live in between the towns and work the fields and forest.’

‘I’d wager you discarded the latest stats for Lantaid,’ a brightly-dressed man called out from my left.

‘Aye, Paetlan, we may as well have,’ Benzar affirmed. Looking back at the rest of us, he explained, ‘Paetlan is from Watercrag. In recent times, Lantaid’s population more than doubled with the inclusion of the refugees from Watercrag, many of whom are Tolites skilled in weapon-craft. We don’t know for sure, but estimates of the new population of Lantaid City are around 24,000 and the surrounding farmlands have another 150,000.’

Benzar went on. ‘The statistics we have of Tanza’s army, the defenders, are much more exact. Knowing precisely how many skyearls, human-warriors and animal-kin are available in one place, at one time and what skills they have, is vital to planning Tanza’s strategies of defence.’

He spoke at length about these groups and the various ways they were deployed as part of the defender army. Tanza had 57,000 warriors, and psionic strike forces were implemented during battles, as needed. As much as Tanzans would prefer to remain peaceful, the Zeikas relentlessly sought to take their lands.

Throughout Tanza’s history, the Zeikas had invaded dozens of times and even managed to take control of the low-population, coastal cities of Lokshole and Lander’s Bay four times. How they were getting through the barrier was a matter of extreme secrecy,

and that's all Benzar would say about that. Ciera and the king and queen had personally led the force that had retaken those cities three years ago. In an effort to rid their land of Zeikas once and for all, they had shown no mercy.

With Anzaii teaming up to dispel the Zeika conjurations and magic effects, the defenders had cornered and killed more than 20,000 Zeikas. Less than half that number had managed to escape aback their conjured dragons. The funeral pyres had burned for weeks and great pillars had been erected to celebrate the victory and remember those who had perished.

After that battle, a new appointment of high commander had been created. The nine commanders who had lead their battle groups of some 3000 each were awarded land and fortresses at the nine major cities of Tanza except for Centan: Kovain, New Rosenvale, Lowford, Highford, Zoen, Solix, Vassen, Lantaid and Condii. This ensured their ability to keep and train their battle groups in preparation for future attacks on any of the major cities.

The chain of command went from the king and queen to the prince and princess to the high commander, to the commanders and then to the unit commanders.

The A.S.T.R. rankings ran parallel and supported the chain of command. An A.S.T. commander held more authority than an S.T. commander. There was an authority level points system whereby Anzaii counted for 15 points, Sleffion for 10, Tolite for 5 and Rada for 5, meaning an A.S. commander ranked higher than an S.T.R. commander. Those without gifts weren't excluded from a position of command, but those with A.S.T.R. ranks often got promoted sooner.

The status of the skyearls was generally independant of the position of their human Sleffion-kin, but the two often ran in parallel. As the elected emperor, Ciera led the skyearls and was due the same level of respect as the high commander. He was allowed to give orders to human commanders and lower ranks, but among skyearls he was free to ask anyone to do his bidding.

I wondered what authority I was entitled to simply by being Ciera's kin. Until I knew more about the defenders I decided not to test it.

When Benzar called an end to the seminar, Sarlice and I walked to the Tolite barracks in the new part of town. Tivac had arranged a series of sword-fighting lessons for me, and Sarlice had offered to help.

'Do we have to do this?' I moaned. 'I am going to reveal my weakness to everyone.'

Her eyebrows shot up. 'You're not weak.'

'You know what I mean. When it comes to swordplay I haven't got any finesse.'

'All the more reason to learn how to wield your new sword.'

I followed her, muttering to myself that Sarlice's Tolite-kin was a warbow, yet she could still best me at sword-fighting.

I rested my hand on the hilt of my Tolite-kin. There was an answering tingle from Fyschs, but nothing resembling coherent thought.

A porter at the barracks directed us to the adjacent sparring room, an immense chamber with hard, yellow dirt packed into the floor. A couple came out to greet us, introducing themselves and Miya and Harlan, our trainers. They each wore loose pants and a tight suit of upper-body armour. Where Harlan was blond, tall and broad, Miya was dark, short and squat. Despite their differences both of them were experts with a sword. Their Tolite-kin gleamed at their sides; Harlan's was a black broadsword and Miya's was a razor-sharp rapier.

There were two other learners, two young Lantaidian men named Salthan and Mach. Salthan, who was rangy and olive-skinned with curly black hair, wielded a steel shortsword with a ruby set into the pommel. Mach was a heavysset man with a gold-coloured broadsword. I nodded to them as we were introduced, then we each fitted our own armour from the rack against the wall.

Before we began, Harlan inspected each of our weapons, commenting on the quality of their make. Sarlice explained that she

was here to help me and showed him her simple steel shortsword. When Harlan saw my Tolite-kin, he whistled.

‘It’s a pretty weapon,’ he observed. ‘If looks can kill, you might be in luck. It would have been made by Alguhzal. He’s creative when it comes to swords.’

‘I don’t know,’ I replied. ‘It appeared on my belt when I came through the Tanzan chasm.’

‘Alguhzal puts four or five weapons into the chest every year,’ Harlan explained, ‘or at least he did when he was in Watercrag. Since he’s been here in Lantaid, his production has slowed.’

‘The chest?’ I queried.

‘Tolite weaponsmiths make many weapons to sell, but ten percent of their work is offered up to the waves,’ Harlan said. ‘The weapons go into a magical chest, which can never be opened. They appear seasons or years later with new Tolites who pass through the Curtains of Battle.’

‘Tivac said they were integrated with the barrier shield when the Tolites came here.’

‘Yes,’ Miya agreed. ‘The Curtains are connected to the waves. It is the weapon who chooses when to become someone’s Tolite-kin. Like when a Rada sends personal effects into the waves during a transformation, and brings them out again upon returning to human form, a Tolite-kin comes out of the waves when a person transitions from them.’

‘I’ve never been great with swords,’ I stammered.

‘The Tolite-kin who chose you believes you will be,’ Miya said.

‘Do you know his name yet?’ Harlan asked.

‘He is Fyschs,’ I declared.

Harlan stroked the flat of the blue blade and tapped one of the leafshards near the end. ‘This weapon should be very effective against demons.’

‘I best skill up then,’ I murmured, feeling unworthy of such a proud Kriite weapon.

‘You and I will spar first,’ he announced. ‘You others watch closely for his weaknesses.’

We wrapped our blades with bandages so as to draw no blood. Harlan and I bobbed our heads to each other, then he came at me with strength and speed. He got through my guard easily, disarming me within moments. He picked up my sword and gestured for me to try again.

Sarlice watched my every move, making me flush red with shame. As we fought, the older man criticised, and remarked on, my movements. He explained, between bursts of swordplay, that the key to survival was in knowing exactly how to use each part of the body. How to make it move without even thinking about it.

‘Years of daily practice,’ he emphasised.

He flicked his blade upwards. I blocked it, but my feet were at an odd angle so I was thrown off balance. Harlan twisted the sword around and drove it downward into Fyschs hilt, which fell from my hands.

‘You lost your balance,’ he said, bending to retrieve my fallen weapon again. ‘Sarlice, you take over here and show Taeon what you know of footwork.’

She and I moved out onto the sparring arena and left Harlan and Miya to coach Mach and Salthan.

‘When we learn sword-fighting in Lyth, each move has a special name to help you remember it,’ Sarlice said. ‘Plant your feet in line with your shoulders, bend your knees a little and hold your sword straight up in front of you.’

She winked when I had it right. ‘We call this “candle maker”. It’s the basic defensive position from which you can execute a number of blocks or attacks. It is useful to know which defences or attacks to use when your opponent’s body is in a certain position.’

She lifted her sword above her head with both hands and held it as if to strike.

‘If I did this,’ she began, ‘what would you do?’

I moved one foot forward and lifted my blade up to meet hers as she brought it slowly down.

‘That’s good,’ she said. ‘You just performed a move we call “burning the bread” against my attack, which was “chopping wood”. “Chopping wood” is rarely used because it leaves the attacker open.’

Instead of “burning the bread” you could have executed “pig on a spit” and stabbed me straight through the heart.’

I grimaced. ‘I don’t like having to name everything. Isn’t it better just to do it?’

She sighed. ‘Do you just want to try sparring with me?’

I raised my sword. ‘Let’s see what happens.’

Sarlice launched at me and executed a complicated series of attacks.

“Flying sparks”, she cried as I ducked and scooted out of her reach.

I stabbed up at her from below. She struck down with her blade and nearly pinned me there.

“Boiling water”, she shouted. ‘Got anything else for me?’

Darting in from the side I swerved back at the last minute and cut from the other side. The bandaged swords made soft thudding noises.

“Holding coals”, she said.

Her sword slapped side-on against mine and she twisted it in a circular motion. Fyschs spun out of my hand and the skyearl-adorned hilt clanged against the hard yellow floor. I frowned as I flexed my wrist; it was a little sore, but it was more my pride that was hurt.

“Stirring the soup”, Sarlice said with a triumphant laugh.

Miya and Mach had paused in their lesson to watch. Harlan scowled at us.

‘Enough fun and games, Sarlice. Footwork.’

I bent to retrieve Fyschs and check him for dints or scratches—apart from a little dust he was the same as before. I eventually managed to look Sarlice in the eye.

‘Why does naming all your moves make you so much... better?’ I asked.

She shrugged. ‘The names simply help me remember the moves. Now that my body knows the moves well, my mind can focus more on what the opponent is doing. That way I will always be a step ahead.’

I gave her a humble nod, ‘So... footwork... what is it?’

‘Footwork is thinking about where your feet are, not just letting it happen.’

‘What difference does it make?’

‘If you trip, that could be the only opportunity your enemy needs to strike a killing blow. Nimble footwork is essential for moving out of reach of your opponent’s cuts or thrusts. There are certain positions where you’ll be more stable than others. It’s important to learn how to get from one position to another and when to change position. Footwork is also about balance. Where do you hold your sword when you’re moving? What will conserve the most energy?’

‘It sounds complicated,’ I complained.

‘You might as well take advantage of the time we’re waiting for Ciera,’ she said. ‘Everything is hard before it’s easy.’

‘All right,’ I sighed. ‘Let’s get through the hard. I could really do with some easy.’

After twenty-three days in Lantaid, waiting, learning and waiting some more, the Lunar Festival was a welcome distraction. It was an opportunity for me to reflect on all the events of my life. I struggled with my questions for the first half of day one. When I was younger it always seemed like Jaria was against me, but now that I was grown, I could see how much love had been poured onto me, despite my shortcomings.

Deep down, I had blamed the elders of Jaria for the loss of my parents and sister. I came back hardened by my failure and the failure of my people to go searching for Ella. It was Bessed and Drea who rescued me from utter despair. Through them I was able to feel loved and valued. If it hadn’t been for them, I wouldn’t have knitted into the Jarian lifestyle at all. I’d probably be off in the jungle somewhere, a truly wild Rada, doomed to wander aimlessly.

They had been like second parents to me. To lose them on top of everything else I had lost was almost unbearable.

‘*They aren’t lost,*’ Rekala interjected. ‘*We will rescue them from slavery somehow.*’

‘*I hope they can hold out ’til we get there,*’ I replied, ‘*because it isn’t going to be any time soon.*’

*'You worry a lot about things that are out of your control,'* Rekala observed.

*'I will try not to,'* I replied.

At noon, when hunger was getting the best of me, I buried myself in a study of the Tanzan history scrolls. Reading wasn't something I often had time to do any more, but I had been interested in learning about the world since I was young.

Throughout the middle three days of the festival, I joined in with all sorts of different people in the meeting hall and library who were discussing various topics and sharing scrolls. There were lively debates, quiet conversations and creative adaptations in song, poetry and performance.

Each of the three guilds promoted their efforts for the betterment of Tanza, but I noticed there wasn't a lot of talk about Kriites as a whole. It was as if by being banished from Telby, the Tanzans had raised their middle finger to the rest of the world. With a realm this bountiful, perhaps they didn't feel the need to push their luck.

Rekala and Kestric participated as much as they could, sometimes following us around, other times going with groups of Rada-kin to their own conferences. Tiaro was a soft presence in my mind, sometimes observing or commenting, but generally staying dormant while she wasn't needed.

On the fifth morning of the festival, Sarlice and I were treated to a breakfast banquet in the guest lounge with over two hundred other visitors. After the seriousness of the past few days everybody was bursting with excitement. After the festivities ended, Sarlice and I met our kin outside. The crowds leaving the eating hall formed two streams to walk around Ciera's massive form.

*'The bridge project I'm a part of is nearing completion,'* Ciera said when we were all within earshot. He and his team had worked all through the festival.

*'Are you able to leave the others to finish it?'* I asked.

Ciera cocked his head and peered down at me, *'If absolutely necessary.'*

*'Excellent,'* I said. *'We've been here long enough.'*

Ciera sighed, 'I suppose I can finish things up early. My administrators won't be happy... but I must admit I, too, am eager to return to Centan. The next Gathering of Minds is due, but it will not be done unless I am in Centan...'

The way his voice trailed off left me wondering, but he neither said nor thought anything further about that. Instead, he offered me a ride back to the city. Thita and Sarlice were happy to go for a walk by themselves. I climbed onto my Sleffion-kin's back and held on warily. There was something specific about his offer to fly me home.

The skyearl puffed out a small shroud, bunched his immense legs under him and sprang into the air. The shroud lifted him up a few yards, then his wings caught a draft and beat hard against it until we were high enough to ride the current. He flew slowly, blocking me from his thoughts. Eventually I grew suspicious and asked him if anything was amiss. He glanced back at me with what seemed to be sadness.

*'I want you to come to understand what it means to be bonded with the Emperor Skyearl,'* he began mildly. *'My responsibilities to the Tanzans and to the other skyearls are now yours as well. Likewise, your people are also a concern of mine. But you must understand I can never abandon my brethren.'*

I thought hard before asking, *'Does that mean you'll never leave Tanza?'*

*'No,'* he replied, even though it seemed difficult for him. *'I pledge to help you with whatever you are called upon to do. But I am the Emperor of the skyearls, leading them as surely as King Crystom leads the people of Tanza. Until I am voted out of this position I must always be there for them.'*

*'It sounds like you're having trouble letting go of your role as an unbonded skyearl emperor,'* I commented.

*'I may be at that,'* he admitted. *'I have lived without a human-kin for hundreds of years. To have one now is wonderful, but... different.'*

*'I think I understand,'* I said. *'I'll try not to push you.'*

*'We will go back to help the Jarians one day,'* Ciera declared.

*'I hope there will still be Jarians to help,'* I said.

## Chapter Six— The Cascade City

Ciera swooped down into the lane near the oddly shaped fountain at the gates of Lantaid. I climbed slowly down from my Sleffion-kin's back and rubbed his wing. He stretched it out so I could scratch beneath the feathers more effectively. The skin there was loose, but tough, and my nails left no marks at all.

As I rubbed his wing, the wind changed and Ciera's smell wafted over me; dusky tree-bark, the faintest hint of sweet sap, flower nectar and, strongest of all, a smell like the air before a storm.

When he was well fed and full of vegetation and water, he smelled of them. I had heard that if a skyearl ever had to go without, his or her fur would lose its shine and a drier, more animal smell would prevail.

*'Like me,'* Rekala sent. Her fur was looking much better now that she was properly rested and fed; blue instead of grey.

We were about to embark on another horseback journey, but this time we wouldn't be hounded by Zeikas. We would be able to hunt in the Tanzan forests on the way to Centan. The likely game included chevrotain deer, capybaras, okapi and gromvi.

Before we departed Lantaid, Ciera and Thita took their fill of water and palm trees. Glane and Tivac helped me load Ciera with provisions—some were his possessions, but most were for Sarlice, Rekala, Kestric and I.

During the day Ciera and Thita continued training us in the ways of Tanza. As a strategist Thita was an expert in political matters. I was not surprised to discover that Ciera's knowledge of Tanzan history went far deeper than the information he'd passed on to me in our first encounter. He not only confirmed what others had taught us, but he explained it from the perspective of someone who was there.

Sarlice trained me in swordsmanship at dusk, so I could learn how to wield Fyschs properly. I was having trouble blocking 'stirring the soup', which was meant to disarm the other person. It certainly worked on me, tearing the twisted skyearls from my grip with ease. Sarlice executed it time and again, leaving bruises on my wrists and to my pride.

'Concentrate on your Tolite-kin,' she told me, 'but keep your eyes on your opponent.'

I watched her closely, preparing myself for the pattern of movements I had seen before. I watched her dancing in and out, observed the length between her shoulder and sword tip, memorised the way she flexed different muscles before making a strike. As she moved I stared at her and gradually shifted my mind onto my sword.

*'I'm going to beat her this time!'* Fyschs seemed to have spoken.

A moment later Sarlice's sword was angling toward me, the tip plunging toward Fyschs' hilt. Her lower arm muscles flexed, ready to 'stir the soup' and fling Fyschs from my grip. Anger seared my senses.

A blaze of white heat flashed through my arm and went all the way down the sword. It felt like every inch of the blade came alive, feeding back sensation like a part of my own arm. The bandaged edge caught Sarlice's weapon, crunched against the steel and rent it in two.

Sarlice leapt back in shock as the top end of her shortsword thudded onto the leaf litter. I lifted Fyschs into the air and shouted in exultation.

'Stop it, Taeon,' Sarlice snapped. 'You'll frighten any prey away.'

I lowered the sword, disappointed by her lack of support.

'I don't know what you think you did,' she said, 'but it wasn't the *correct* way to block "stirring the soup".'

She picked up the severed end of her sword.

‘I’d like to see a more effective way,’ I said indignantly.

She wrapped the pieces up in a cloth and stuffed them into her pack.

“Rubbing sticks” is a move you could use. When someone else goes to disarm you, move in closer. It shifts their momentum and brings you in close enough to strike with the hilt or kick them in the guts.’

I glared at her, thinking she didn’t want to admit it when I did something well just because I hadn’t been explicitly following her instructions.

She sighed. ‘Don’t be childish.’

*Childish?* So she really did think of me that way. *But I’m only four years younger.* I kept my mouth clamped shut, closed myself off from the waves, and sheathed Fyschs, heart pounding. We stood there for some time not looking at each other. Maybe she was angry about me breaking her weapon.

‘Look, I’m sorry about your sword,’ I said quietly.

She waved a hand and turned away. ‘Do not concern yourself.’

We tracked the river for six days, moving as quickly as we could through the humid forests. During that time, the hunting was good. Rekala, Kestric, Sarlice and I caught two chevrotains, an okapi, four wild boar and a gromvi. The okapi was the size of a pony, but had an unusually long neck patterned with stripes. The gromvi was a medium-sized ape with a horn and an aggressive bite. Using her Tolite-kin, Henter, Sarlice had shot it down from high in the trees. The warbow never seemed to miss.

We probably could have travelled faster on one of Ciera’s shrouds, but that would leave us exposed to the elements and unable to hunt. Ciera also stressed to me that every additional shroud he created was a drain, however small, on his energy. Causing a shroud to move was even more taxing.

When we stopped at night, Ciera and Thita munched on rich vegetation. I observed Ciera eat an entire tree one night, leaves, branches, staghorns and all. If there were bugs or small creatures in

his meal, it didn't seem to bother him. He seemed to be enjoying the journey; it was time out from his normal duties.

We had an unspoken agreement to use that time to get to know one another a little better. Because he'd been so busy, finalising his role in the projects in Lantaid and training his replacements, we hadn't had a lot of time together.

During the day I sometimes asked Sarlice to lead my horse so I could fly high in the sky with the emperor skyearl. Ciera showed me ways to remember the terrain from above and recognise certain landmarks once I was back on the ground. He knew the land intimately well and needed no map to recognise a place from the smallest description. It was far too much for my mind to comprehend.

Other skyearls flew overhead several times a day, sometimes in groups of up to ten flying in formation. Most of these were delivery flyers for The Wing service, carrying packages, supplies and the occasional letter. With so many beings about who could use the waves, there was little need for people to send letters, except for business matters. There were no roads in Tanza, but it wasn't unheard of for people to travel by horseback or wagon.

We passed through a plateau of plantations and fields on the last day of our travels, and the thundering of the river gradually multiplied, until Sarlice and I could hardly hear each other. The river widened considerably and branched out into hundreds of tributaries. The waterways glimmered so brightly it was as if hundreds of polished swords lay shining in the sun.

Further on, mist rose from a vast canyon, obscuring what lay beyond. I wasn't sure what to expect of this city because Ciera and Thita had only revealed small things from their memories. Ciera wanted me to enjoy the feeling of seeing it for myself with fresh eyes. I was compelled to whistle as the horses picked their way through the tributaries. When I glanced at Sarlice, I saw that she was smiling too.

Fleetfoot baulked at one of the rivulets and pawed the ground. Sarlice slapped him on the rump as she passed. He followed Duria through the river and around an outcrop of rocks. The mist closed

in around me like a veil of ice. On the other side of the outcrop, a strong wind gusted up out of the ravine and the mist billowed like white flames. At the thinnest point, I caught a glimpse of the river's end—the top of the waterfall was white, churning violently.

Ciera landed roughly on the tip of the outcrop and folded his wings. His feathers were beaded with dew, his fur clumped with moisture but he didn't mind. Skyearls were descended from water chimera; Ciera and Thita were both literally in their element among the mist and the water. My Sleffion-kin took a deep breath. I could not hear all his words aloud so he spoke them through the waves as well.

*'Behold the splendour of the Cascade City.'*

He exhaled and a spray of shroud came out of his mouth, blowing the water spray back down into the ravine. For several minutes, Sarlice and I had a clear view of the land. The plateau looked like it had been stabbed with a giant cookie-cutter. An immense sinkhole had formed in the lowest part of the land, carved out by dozens of rivers. Water tumbled over every edge, reminding me of an enormous water drain like the ones I'd seen in Telby City.

The ravine was at least a mile wide. The waterfalls on the other side were so far away I could barely make them out. Ciera's supernatural wind billowed all around us, lifting Sarlice's ponytail. Rekala and Kestric stood with their ears back and eyes half closed, their whiskers beaded with dew.

'Unbelievable,' Sarlice murmured.

Somewhere near the middle of the ravine was a large promontory with a flat shelf on one side. It had fared better than the lands around it—where they had been worn down by flash floods over the centuries, the promontory stood a few hundred yards taller, rising from the centre of the canyon like a tower. Nestled against the side of a rocky cliff face on the shelf was Centan.

The city sprawled in a semi-organised fashion across the shelf. There were no walls, only tall silvery towers and yellow buildings that might have been carved out of the very rock. The stonework glistened like wet gold.

*'There are no gates,'* Ciera told me.

With his mind, he directed my gaze toward the centre of the city. His degree of control frightened me but I swallowed hard and concentrated. In the middle of all the gold and silver was a white palace with spires that touched the clouds.

*'Up there,'* Ciera said, *'is my sky palace, Raer.'*

His pride washed over me, mixed with a satisfaction in the power of the waves that I had never felt before. I witnessed the beauty of Raer in my Sleffion-kin's mind; colonades of creamy marble under a dazzling sun; white terraces that shone and sparkled when the overhanging shrouds drifted to and fro. The skyearl palace was made of crystal, marble and jade held aloft by shrouds that dragged on Ciera's psionic power even now.

Suddenly I didn't care about going to Centan and speaking to the king on Jaria's behalf. All I wanted was to see Raer with my own eyes and to feel the enchanted stone beneath my feet.

*'Alas, it is forbidden for humans to set foot on Raer,'* Ciera responded.

*'Even me? Isn't it your home?'*

*'Even you.'* He twisted his neck around, shouting, 'Ah, there you are.'

I turned in the saddle. A young woman was standing directly behind me. She said something indiscernible and held out her hand. I shook it, looking to Ciera for guidance.

*'I sent for her to pick up your horses.'*

'You must be Taeon,' she shouted, looking pleased with herself. 'My name is Lari. I'm glad Emperor Ciera chose me to collect your horses and not one of the other serfs.'

Ciera reached out his wing and let her scratch under the feathers.

*'Lari will take the horses south to Hree, a small military village on the flats.'*

Sarlice and I dismounted and unstrapped only our personal packs.

'Leave the saddles on if you like,' Lari hollered. 'You won't need them in Centan.'

'Our thanks,' Sarlice shouted back.

Lari accepted the reins of both horses and led them slowly away.

Thita jumped from Sarlice's shoulder and glided down into the ravine. He reappeared a minute later flying in an arc from the direction of the city. With a broad shroud spreading out behind him, he bridged the gap between Centan and our position.

I hefted my pack over my shoulder. My clothing was soaked through.

*'Is the mist all through the city?'* I asked Ciera.

He answered, *'Nay. There is a barrier around the city, somewhat like the protective barrier around all of Tanza, except this one holds out the mist and shrouds only. If ever we were to leave this place, we would simply deactivate the barrier, allowing the clouds from the waterfalls to cover the city. Our enemies abhor water and they would not thrive in a place blanketed by it.'*

I nodded, barely understanding. If magical barriers had been available to the tribes perhaps Jaria wouldn't have been decimated.

Sarlice, Kestric, Rekala and I set off over Thita's bridge and I tried not to think about the empty air and the thrashing foam miles beneath us. Sarlice and I shared a nervous grin, and I sensed that her anticipation was focused on what we would encounter in Centan.

I set my eyes upon our goal and concentrated on the exquisitely formed arches and pillars between the closest buildings. A wide set of marble stairs led further into the city. On either side of the stairs were rows of pillars with sleeping skyearl statues at their peaks.

Above the huge city was a cluster of permanent clouds, which broke in small patches every so often to allow warm beams of sunlight through. I couldn't see Raer above the clouds, but dozens of multi-coloured shapes whirled in different directions, some flying out far enough to circle back and up into the sky palace far above. Now and then, a skyearl dared to zip through one of the sun breaks.

Ciera landed as we stepped down from Thita's shroud, and gave me a nod. The path fell away in tiny white pellets behind us. Like walking into a gust of wind, we passed through the invisible barrier. Mists I had barely noticed melted away. The city of Centan came more sharply into view.

We were high up on a special recreational platform off to one side of the main boulevard. Down below was a wide causeway with

hundreds of people, skyearls and animals walking to and fro. A broad permanent-looking shroud-bridge led across the falls some distance away, joining up with the wide street.

Cartloads of supplies were being ferried across from the mainland by teams of horses, elephants or the occasional skyearl. These were unloaded in what had to be the main market district. The people interacted with each other in a friendly manner; never was a smile far away.

A young couple descended the marble staircase in front of us hand in hand. They were a picture of prosperity. Both had medium brown skin, as I would expect of Kriite royals. The woman's was darker, more like cacao. The man was dressed in a long-sleeved, blue shirt and a gold vest covered with tiny tassels. His smart yellow trousers hung loosely at his ankles. The woman wore a pale blue gown that covered her swollen, pregnant belly with a festoon of intricate ruching and dangling gems. Her perfectly-formed features, and the circlet of royalty on her head, reminded me of Lira.

I spared a thought for my would-be lover, wondering if she was carrying my child. Despite what Lira had done to me, I didn't wish the wrath of the Zeikas to fall upon her. Having drugged me and stolen my seed, Lira had later joined up with the Zeikas.

I had realised her true identity—Princess Denliyan of Telby—and purpose; to get with child and produce a psion. Now that I knew I was a Rada, Anzaii, Sleffion, Tolite I could understand why my bloodline was so important.

Now I was to meet another princess.

The woman tipped her head respectfully to Ciera. Speaking loudly, to be heard over the falls, she said, 'Congratulations, friend. Your time of waiting is over.'

Ciera chuckled softly and replied, 'Thank you, Princess. It's good to see both of you. Prince Tyba, Princess Clayr, please allow me to introduce Taeon of Jaria and Sarlice of Lyth.'

Clayr touched her right shoulder with her left hand and bowed her head to us.

Tyba's smile was broad and his expression open. Instead of using the traditional Tanzan greeting, he grabbed both Sarlice's and my hands and shook them vigorously at the same time.

'This is what you do, isn't it?'

'Tyba,' said Clayr with a laugh. 'Don't get over-excited.'

'Oh, but I am,' he replied, patting me on the back. 'It is an honour to meet you!'

Princess Clayr glanced behind us at Rekala and Kestic.

'What magnificent animals,' she said. 'You must feel safe with them by your side.'

'Yes, we do,' Sarlice said in a loud, appreciative tone.

'It's wonderful to have you with us,' Clayr replied. I saw a glimmer of her husband's enthusiasm in her eyes and I decided I liked them both already.

Tyba and Clayr led us deeper into the city where it became a little easier to talk. I was awed by the sculpted magnificence of the buildings. Many of them reached great heights, brushing the lower formations of the city shroud, Raer, with their rooves. Ciera explained to me that most of these buildings had been engineered and created by skyearls of his type.

*'Only keltoars had the height and strength to structure something so immense,'* Ciera sent.

Many of the individual stones of the walls and towers were larger than I was.

Once he was sure we were comfortable in Tyba and Clayr's presence, Ciera told me he needed to attend to his duties.

'There is a Gathering of Minds later, which I must help the ritualists prepare for,' he said aloud. 'Since this is your first time in Centan, Taeon, you are excused from this responsibility. Go ahead and get settled. I will see you at the meeting.'

The Gathering of Minds sounded like an exciting event to participate in. Ciera had explained to me that Anzaai were instrumental in facilitating the joining of hundreds of minds from across Tanza, using the Ancient Sapphire Tree at Centan to enhance their telepathic abilities. I couldn't help wondering if my new rank as A.S.T.R. or master psion would be important to Ciera's role at the

Gathering of Minds. His dismissal puzzled me, as I wanted to be involved in whatever he was involved in.

*'One step at a time,'* Ciera said. *'We've been running gatherings for hundreds of years and I think we can manage one more without your assistance.'*

*'I only want to know what it's all about,'* I sulked.

*'It'll be nice for you to be an observer at this one,'* Ciera reassured me. *'All too soon, you will have more than enough responsibilities as a master psion. Enjoy this while you can, Sleffion.'*

*'Very well.'*

I slapped him on the lower leg in farewell, but he hardly felt it. Ciera's body bunched like a spring and he leapt upwards into the air with astonishing power. I watched him rise over the buildings and catch a draft of wind in his shiny blue wings, which buffeted him sideways.

For a moment, I sensed the connection between him and the shroud. It reminded me of a spider on a web, feeling every tremor of wind, knowing the touch of even the tiniest fly.

*'Doesn't the water eat away your island?'* Sarlice asked.

Tyba answered animatedly. *'The outer precincts were rebuilt once or twice in decades past. Now we don't have any problems.'* He jabbed his finger downwards. *'Solid granite.'*

We passed through a series of wooden arches. Long bone-coloured vines snaked between them, creating a cluster of skyearyl shapes. At the end of the arch-avenue was an open square. Clayr described the functions of the largest buildings. There were armament factories, blacksmiths, stone mason yards, jewellers, tanners, fine clothiers, scribe works and food distribution warehouses. These buildings and scores of others made up the Construction District.

Tyba pointed to the scribe works, boasting, *'This facility employs over forty scribes to search out, study and make copies of the history scrolls and natural philosophy texts.'*

I nodded politely, feeling a sudden wash of fatigue. It would be nice to just find a bed and sleep. Tomorrow I would speak with the king and finally be able to discuss the situation with Jaria.

A loud squeal echoed around us and at least ten shapes lifted off the tops of the buildings, soaring into the sky. The shapes of the flying skyearls reminded me of the hawk which had nearly killed me as a child. A grin spread slowly across my face as it was reinforced to me that my irrational fear of flying things was gone.

Sarlice also smiled, but her expression was one of wonder. Centan truly was magnificent.

Tyba and Clayr lead us away through the town, pointing out a brewery, a herbal warehouse and a few other places of interest. They took us past a row of shops on an artificial watercourse and into the heart of the city. We could see the palace on a hill above the city centre.

It was a salmon and blue coloured structure, rising from the ground like a tree of the great oak variety. Its outer walls were built for decoration, not protection. It loomed there on its hill, dwarfing the multi-storeyed buildings we'd passed earlier. I had no doubts that Ciera could walk about in that palace as easily as I had walked in Telby Palace.

Tyba and Clayr guided us to a comfortable little tavern called *Dawvor*.

'Go inside when you are ready,' Tyba said. 'There's no charge for your stay!'

Clayr added, 'The tavern master, Minac, may ask you to help out in the mess occasionally.'

'Our thanks,' Sarlice replied. 'Through all that's been going on, we have not had much of a chance to replenish our coin purse.'

'"Our" coin purse?' Clayr repeated, doubt creeping into her voice. 'You say that as if you are used to sharing. We weren't sure, but we presumed you weren't a couple... from what the Sleffion-kin said.'

Frowning and with slight colour in her cheeks, Sarlice was about to answer.

'We have been through a lot together,' I jumped in. 'And, travelling for so long, it becomes easier to pool resources.'

'Of course,' Tyba replied, glancing at his wife, who found something very interesting to stare at elsewhere.

‘I was appointed Taeon’s guide when we left Jaria,’ Sarlice explained hastily. Her tone became wistful as she said, ‘So much has happened since then. Now, I don’t think he truly needs a guide any more.’

I met her eyes, trying to say so much, but not able.

‘We are ambassadors for our people,’ Sarlice added. ‘Lyth and... what remains of Jaria... need allies if they are to survive.’

‘We shall discuss it together with my parents,’ Tyba replied.

Clayr stepped a little closer to me. ‘You must understand the king’s time is in great demand. He places you here—close to the Palace and to the Dome of Gathering—so he can call on you when he has made sufficient time.’

I nodded.

‘You will meet him soon,’ Tyba added in an upbeat manner.

‘You may need to pick the right time to discuss your... concerns,’ Clayr warned.

*‘I suppose she knows I haven’t been an ambassador for long and I’m not used to the formalities,’* I said to Rekala, trying to make myself feel better.

*‘You have been rather direct about it thus far,’* Rekala commented as she brushed past my leg to poke her nose in through the door. *‘Not that I blame you.’*

‘Thanks for the advice,’ I stuttered.

Tyba blinked from Clayr to me and I got the impression he wasn’t as astute as her at diplomacy. ‘We’ll send an escort to take you to the Gathering of Minds in three hours.’

‘Our thanks, sire,’ I replied.

Sarlice and I gave him the traditional Tanzan greeting. He beamed widely and clapped both of us on the back.

‘You may call me by my first name,’ he said. ‘I have a feeling we are going to be good friends.’

# Chapter Seven—The Gathering of Minds

Minac led us to a medium-sized room with a curtain between two wood-based beds. Rekala and Kestric stalked in and proceeded to sniff every object and mark each piece of furniture with their chins and cheeks while Thita flew to the balcony and perched there to preen his fur.

‘I hope you don’t mind sharing,’ Minac said. ‘There’s a shortage of rooms because of the gathering.’

‘All is well,’ I replied.

‘What exactly is a Gathering of the Minds?’ Sarlice asked.

Minac cleared his throat before explaining, ‘Local ritualists, Anzaii and Sleffions meet in the Dome of Gathering and use the Ancient Sapphire Tree to augment the long distance wave communications with beings in all different parts of Tanza. Disseminators speak the message out loud for those who aren’t on the waves.’

‘I had no idea the Ancient Sapphire Trees could be used that way,’ I murmured.

‘Then you have a great deal to learn,’ Minac said in good humour.

‘What do they talk about?’ Sarlice asked.

‘It’s a chance for every town and every guild leader to report in,’ Minac replied. ‘They discuss anything that’s relevant to the running of Tanza: resource management, politics, new psions, training and

patrols. There have been increasing skirmishes with the Zeikas around the borders. Increased fatalities.'

'It sounds important,' I muttered, again feeling frustrated Ciera hadn't wanted to involve me in his preparations.

'It's important to most Tanzans,' Minac chuckled. 'Though I admit we pretty much go about our business here at *Dawvor*—no time to stand around gabbling! Well I'll leave you to it. Someone will call on you in a few hours to escort you to the meeting.'

'Thanks, Minac,' Sarlice said, seeing him out the door.

She closed it gently behind him.

I unbuckled the Jarian belt and the white scabbard Fyschs was in. I laid them down on one of the beds, staring at them for a while. There was so much yet to be learned, not only about sapphire trees and being Anzaii but, also about my new sword and being a Tolite. Tiaro glimmered awake as my thoughts touched her.

*'What do you make of the suggestion we can use the Ancient Sapphire Trees to augment our psionic power?'*

*'I am fashioned with crystals from a Great Sapphire Tree,'* she began, *'and my power comes from them. It is not a stretch to suppose the Nine offer even greater power to those who know how to use it.'*

I recalled learning that Jaria's Wave Master, Feera, had been limited in her abilities. Perhaps nobody had been capable of using the Ancient Sapphire Tree in the Catacombs of Krii near Jaria. As for my mother and sister, who had also been Anzaii, had they even known it existed or had the ritualists and the leaders of Jaria kept it a secret?

Sarlice unhooked her packs from each other and dropped them beside the other bed. The curtain between our beds was, as yet, pulled back. I lay on my side on the straw-stuffed mattress and watched Sarlice organise her things into a set of wooden drawers. She folded a purple garment in, tossed a small pouch of coins in on top of it and unpacked our emergency food supplies into the second drawer. We would replace it with fresh food before leaving Centan.

She bent down to retrieve a fallen trinket. Observing the fluidity in the way she moved and the way her leather clothing sat so easily

on her muscular body, it occurred to me how far out of my league she was. I must have seemed like a youth to her.

*'You are a youth,'* Tiaro responded.

*'I'm nearly twenty.'*

*'In most cultures you would still be considered a youth.'*

*'What do you know of other cultures,'* I asked. *'You are an inanimate object.'*

My stomach turned, in a mixture of uncertainty and anticipation. I shifted to lie on my back and tried not to dwell on Sarlice. I fell asleep and had visions of people coming to me with all their messages for distant relatives, probing me for information, draining me of all thought... and there was Sarlice with her sword out, dancing in and out of my reach. Her arms and neck were bare, revealing, not far from her collar-bone, the stark white scar against the golden-brown skin of her shoulder. Lost in my dream, my eyes roved down over the swell of her chest—

'Please forgive the intrusion.' A plump lady pushed through the door, struggling with armfuls of linen. 'By the Nine Trees, I sure am sorry to barge in on ye' like this, but a messenger has come! Should have brought these up before ye arrived.'

'It's no trouble,' Sarlice said even as I pretended to be still asleep.

'My name's Hessie,' the lady told her. 'I'm Minac's sister. Now listen, Prince Tyba has sent a messenger here to escort you to the Dome of Gathering. She's waiting downstairs.'

'Thank you. Will you tell her we'll be down shortly?' Sarlice requested politely.

I heard the woman place the linen at the foot of each bed and depart. I groaned and rubbed my eyes. Had three hours passed already? My muscles felt heavy and my eyelids were sticky. Sarlice offered me her hand, which I hesitantly accepted.

'Aren't you going to change?' she asked.

I sniffed at the dusty cream shirt I was wearing, then thought of the black silk shirt with the white wolf of Jaria sewn on the breast. I nodded and pulled off the one I was wearing, enjoying the feel of Sarlice's eyes on my chest.

The Jarian shirt was at the bottom of one of my packs, so it was a bit crumpled. Sarlice tried to smooth the fabric down on my back, but she stopped short of touching my front.

‘I know a trick with that,’ she said. ‘But we would need a hot bath and we don’t have time.’

‘Later,’ I promised, liking the idea of a bath very much.

Once we’d re-equipped ourselves with our weapons, we made our way downstairs. Thita and the Rada-kin followed.

The woman standing outside the tavern’s huge double-doors was tall and blond with piercing brown eyes. Her pale skin revealed that she had mixed heritage.

‘Good evening Taeon, Sarlice, Thita, Rekala and Kestric. My name is Skylien. I’m chief among the scribes for the king and queen. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you so much that I tasked some of my subordinates with scribing for tonight’s gathering.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Sarlice replied. ‘It must be satisfying to have people like that, you can trust to do a good job.’

‘They are very dedicated,’ Skylien agreed. ‘Most of them I trained myself.’

‘You must really enjoy writing,’ I commented.

‘Aye,’ she said. ‘There is something satisfying about making the ink flow neatly from the quill onto the scroll. Scribe work can be dull at times, though, so I write my own material.’

‘I can’t remember the last time I wrote anything down,’ I muttered. Then I recalled the letter I had written to Princess Denliyan.

‘I would have thought ambassadors like you would have to keep some written records,’ Skylien said, arching one eyebrow. I glanced at Sarlice, who rolled her eyes. Skylien led us away from the tavern down a cobbled street lit with large yellow lanterns.

Thita flew silently above Sarlice’s head, landing on her shoulder every now and then for a pat.

I tuned out as the women discussed what we’d been through over the past few weeks, choosing instead to focus on our surroundings. The journey only required the briefest walk as we travelled most of the way by ferry on the artificial canals. Despite their slick appearance, the buildings in Centan were not damp. The shield around the city

protected it from the shrouds and from the clouds the waterfalls generated. As we passed close enough, I could see many buildings made of polished marble in various hues. Some had plain yellow granite foundations that matched the colour of the ground. There were columns down the main thoroughfares, carvings and mosaics on the walls of official buildings and fountains or troughs on most corners.

The humans shared the city with skyearls and animals of wondrous variety. As such, many of the buildings were enormous, with archways as high as a forest canopy. When I looked up, I saw creatures playing on the beams far above—everything from tiny skyearls the size of Thita to cats, hawks and lizards. I could sense the tightly-coiled control of the predatory Rada-kin as they resisted their instincts to hunt. Some were more used to it than others, depending on how long they'd been bonded.

'Greetings,' I called through the waves to nobody in particular.

A chorus of voices came back to me and half a dozen birds fluttered around my head crying through the waves, '*Welcome, welcome, Taeon of Jaria. Master psion!*'

I didn't think I would be deserving of that title until I could fully understand and use all four powers.

Rekala and Kestric trailed behind us, a little bewildered by all the new sights, sounds and scents. I stopped to stroke Rekala's head and she rubbed her cheek against my hip with a low whine of apprehension.

'*What do you think of the city?*' I asked her.

'*It is confusing,*' she complained. '*There are too many beings all in one place. I cannot discern where everything is.*'

Rekala's ears provided one of the most important senses that she used to understand the world around her, including the direction and distance of other creatures. When she'd been alone in the jungle, she'd used this to hunt prey and avoid other icetigers. Now, however, it was overwhelming for her. When I concentrated on her mind, I got the impression of a map spread out around us, with hundreds of differentiated sounds all piled on top of each other, as

if there were humans, skyearls and animals all standing in the same place in every direction around us.

She seemed relieved when we crossed the road into the parklands that surrounded the Dome of Gathering. Large blue lanterns hung from the boughs of countless trees in the courtyard. A banner-lined stone pathway led to a set of stairs and the immensely high glass dome.

Skylien led us through groups of people who were chatting and sipping mugs of lime-green liquid. Tyba came down the stairs looking pleased to see us but somewhat distracted. Skylien shook our hands farewell, nodded to the prince and departed.

‘Well met, friends,’ he said. ‘Do come in.’

We passed through the wrought-iron entryway and into a hall of starry black. Crystal candleholds jutted from the ebony walls, catching shards of light and throwing them in all directions, but the immensity of the hall made it far too big to light properly at this time of night. Instead, the candles winked above us as skyearls flew in by the dozen, using the waves so they never crashed into each other. Fluttering, squawking and human sounds echoed. I kept one hand on Rekala’s shoulder to reassure her. She could see better than me in the dark, though in a smaller range of colours.

Further down the hall, we emerged into a blue-lit chamber with rings of green chairs underneath a distant glass dome. An oval-shaped stage jutted into the middle of the room. On its front end was an Ancient Sapphire Tree; even bigger than the one I had touched in the Catacombs of Krii in Naioteio near Jaria. Its trunk was several paces wide and its branches richly jewelled with the same stone-like leaves that adorned my belt. Blue light emanated from each leaf and reflected in the pupils of the thousands of eyes across the chamber.

Ciera was lying on his stomach at the back of the stage, speaking urgently with a group of four ritualists in blue robes, eight other skyearls and their Sleffion. Under the ethereal light of the tree his coat was exquisite. I felt like I should have been there with him but Tyba patted my shoulder and lead us up a spiral staircase to a small balcony.

A broad-shouldered man sat rigidly at one of the tables, watching the figures on the stage. He had an ordinary face that was, somehow, not what I expected of a king. I could see the resemblance between Tyba and him, but the prince's face was more symmetric, his features sharper. Crystom wore a neatly-trimmed beard and moustache that was brown with flecks of silver. Even in the flickering firelight I could tell his skin was medium brown but it was also spotted from many days spent in the sun.

Opposite was a regal looking woman in purple velvet and white silk robes. She had her greying black hair done up in a bun with a golden circlet atop. She had a kindly, but firm, look about her and the beauty of her youth was apparent in her large green eyes, streamlined cheeks and petite nose.

'This is my father and mother,' Tyba told us unnecessarily, 'King Crystom and Queen Emyla.'

The king slapped his left palm against his right shoulder and nodded his head. 'Pleased to meet you Taeon, and you, Sarlice. Your skills are welcome here and I hope you decide to join our army for the defence of Tanza.'

Despite the formal way he addressed us, there was a twinkle of mirth in his eyes. I guessed that Tyba got his exuberant nature more from his father than his mother. I expected that the king and prince were people who followed rules when it was necessary, but knew when to strike a compromise and show a sense of humour.

'If what we've heard is true, Sarlice,' Crystom continued, 'you could eventually have a position here training our new recruits in archery and swordcraft.'

'Thank you,' Sarlice replied in astonishment, forgetting to return the ritual greeting.

*'He thinks we are here to settle down?'* I thought to Rekala and Tiaro, affronted.

*'It's a big realm,'* Rekala replied. *'They're bound to be self-important about it and presume the Kriites living in other nations would rather be in this one.'*

'It's an honour to meet you, King Crystom,' I said, bowing with my left palm against my right shoulder.

*‘Perhaps he presumes that you will naturally start seeing yourself as a Tanzan now,’* Tiaro suggested.

*‘Now that Jaria is no more?’* I lamented.

*‘Well, there is that, but I meant now that you are bonded with the emperor skyearl.’*

*‘True...’*

‘Queen Emyla,’ I began, setting aside the uncertainty Tiaro’s words roused in me. ‘Tales of your beauty have been vastly understated.’

Sarlice’s eyebrows shot up. The queen beamed and held out her jewel-encrusted fist for me to kiss.

‘My husband referred to you as “Taeon”,’ the queen said, ‘but I wonder if you would rather be called by your Jarian title of Ambassador.’

‘It’s kind of you to consider my feelings, Your Majesty, but I am forced to conclude that a ruined realm hardly needs ambassadors.’

‘I’m sorry to hear what happened to Jaria,’ she replied with genuine sorrow in her voice. ‘It’s much the same in various parts of the world, you know, Zeikas capturing Kriites to get past—’ She glanced at her husband. ‘Well... you will have heard about the defeat of Watercrag?’

‘Aye.’ What had she been about to say? Capturing Kriites for what? I had started to form words to describe how I thought Jaria could be restored, but these questions threw me. The queen looked away, presumably listening to her Sleffion-kin on the waves.

She patted me on the arm. ‘We will speak more later.’

The crowds hushed and Ciera stood up very slowly and looked up at our balcony. He winked at me and began to speak. His size gave his voice enough amplification to reach the back of the room.

‘Be welcome at the Gathering of Minds for the 700<sup>th</sup> year. The Gathering recognises Duchess Zar and Anzaii Chinal from Highford, Duke Vernor from Lokshole, Duke Pelram and Commander Tinok from Condii, Duke Alger from Lantaid, Duchess Silik, Commander Teska, Anzaii Lilyrm and Duke Osk from The Sunbark Cities, Commander Hushoer from New Rosenvale and Specialist Tsek from Ruhor Lair.

‘These minds are on the waves, their thoughts amplified by the channelling powers of the many sapphire trees in this realm and the artefacts made from their leaves and bark. We welcome you into our presence, with the warming light of the Ancient Sapphire Tree of Tanza.’

Tyba whispered in my ear, ‘Each representative from the cities of Tanza has a ritulias and an Anzaii by their side, guiding them through the waves for the Gathering of Minds. The Ancient Sapphire Tree functions mainly as a beacon. Look at it through your wave senses. I have heard it is beyond beautiful to most Anzaii.’

I focused my real eyes on the tree and gradually brought my awareness of the waves down to a single channel. It was like sweeping a firebrand through a vast black plane—a bright blue spark leapt out at me. Then, twinkling like brilliant blue fireflies, the leaves of the Ancient Sapphire Tree came alive. The entire tree pulsed with life and many faces seemed to be reflected in the shining surfaces of leaf and stem.

Ciera had continued introducing participants in the Gathering who had travelled here from places called Lander’s Bay and Kovain. When he raised his voice, it echoed throughout the dome and some people held their ears.

‘Does Ciera always run these gatherings?’ I asked the queen.

‘Nay,’ she whispered. ‘We take turns between Crystom, myself, Tyba, Clayr and our Sleffion-kin. He’s the only one who doesn’t need a speaking funnel.’

‘Before we move onto graver matters I have a few routine announcements to make,’ Ciera began. ‘First of all, King Crystom has asked me to remind you that the defenders are calling for new recruits across all of their warrior and service classes. Secondly, less than a season ago, the people of Lantaid were happy to receive Taeon of Jaria and Sarlice of Lyth, two Kriite tribes mostly made up of Rada.’ He gestured at our balcony. ‘Furthermore, it is my pleasure to reveal that I have finally found my Sleffion, Taeon.’

An enormous rush of talking engulfed the dome. Suddenly all eyes were upon me. On a suggestion from Ciera, I stood nervously to my feet and waved. Smiles of wonder appeared on a thousand

faces and some Tanzans clapped. Soon the entire Dome was filled with a sound like rain in a narrow canyon. Rekala cowered, so I bent to cover her ears.

When the noise had died down, Ciera nodded to one of the other humans on the stage and swept his piercing gaze across the crowd.

‘And now for my most unpleasant announcement,’ he said. ‘The Zeikas have breached the barriers of Tanza once again. We have reason to believe there are large forces already within our realm.’

I gasped in shock, wondering how he had kept this from me. Even if he only confirmed the breach since arriving in Centan, his ability to shield his mind from mine was impressive.

All joy evaporated from the room. Silence fell and people fixed their eyes on the emperor skyearl in solemn concentration.

‘During Taeon’s and my bonding ceremony, we spotted a Zeika scout. This afternoon I received reports that sightings have also been made by citizens of Highford and Condii. Defender scouts have been sent to the border to help the patrols search for the Zeika warcamps, but we expect the Zeikas to use many wards and spirit circles to conceal themselves.’

I could hear a hesitant murmuring.

‘We have fought off four Zeika incursions in the past twenty-five years,’ Ciera went on. ‘Though their desire for our lands must be strong, there is nothing to suggest they might succeed in their mission this time.’

‘Why are they attacking us now?’ a young man standing towards the back of the hall called out.

‘Why do they ever attack us?’ King Crystom rejoindered, shouting to be heard. ‘Retland is stripped bare. The Zeikas want our bountiful Tanza.’

Ciera nodded at him from the stage then turned toward the Ancient Sapphire Tree, making it obvious he addressed the representatives from all the cities of Tanza who were still hovering on the waves.

‘Data and wartime log books have been sent on The Wing for the high commanders of every city. You are all required to prepare your armies for attack. As usual, when the Zeikas attack, you are also

expected to have an effective relocation strategy in place. It's not likely we'll need it, but I have to remind you nonetheless.'

The audience rumbled and hissed with displeasure. Sarlice and I exchanged glances. Perhaps it wasn't the right time to come to Tanza for help. No matter where I turned, things seemed to be going from bad to worse. Tiaro conveyed her own sorrow through the waves. I rubbed the earring absentmindedly and it glowed brightly. My other hand went to the sapphire-leaf belt from Jaria. My perception of the people listening on the waves became sharper. I marvelled at that and spent some time dwelling on each person I encountered. They were not aware of me, it seemed.

Over the next half an hour, Ciera and the others in the dome and on the waves discussed a range of issues. Feeling out of my depth, I listened. Border patrols from several cities had failed to report in recently; there were skyearls whelping in Ruhor Lairs who needed protecting in the event of war; there was a water shortage in Lander's Bay; an overabundance of crops in The Sunbark Cities were putting farmers from New Rosenvale out of business; the most powerful Anzaii in Highford had recently died of old age.

My hand tightened on the belt. If what Ciera had said was true, perhaps my belt could be used to enhance my Anzaii abilities, too. It was, after all, fashioned not only from a sapphire tree or a Great Sapphire Tree, but an Ancient Sapphire Tree. When Namal had given it to me, he had said the Jarians suspected there was a purpose to the leafshard artefacts. The belt had been fashioned from the leaves of one of the nine remaining Ancient Sapphire Trees. And here before me was a second.

I thought of the Jarians at work for the Zeikas. I could imagine the cruel whips punishing the bound Rada-kin, bullying them into submission and forcing their human kin to obey their slavemasters' every wish. My breath quickened.

Tiaro cried out in response to my emotion, and I heard my own mental scream of anguish on the waves echoing hers. Many of the faces I could see in the leaves of the ancient tree looked in my direction, followed by the faces of those wave-users who were in the

chamber with us. Their expressions varied from shock and outrage to sorrow and compassion.

Ciera watched me with interest, but he didn't reach out. I thought he was holding back to prevent himself from losing control in front of everyone. I couldn't stop the visions of death and destruction nor the sadness that welled up in me. Worse still was the certain knowledge that many people were suffering long-term torture and deprivation at the hands of the Zeikas. Not just Jarians, but any who refused to bow down to them and their demon lord.

I thought of the countless Kriites in Telby and nearby who would soon suffer under the swelling Zeika Empire. Hadn't King Flale spoken of them as an acceptable sacrifice for the greatness of Telby?

And there was the princess of Telby scheming and joining forces with Reltland, heedless of the suffering she would bring upon a portion of her people. She was prepared to use her own child to boost her power.

A few yards away, the intensity of my feelings resonated with Rekala. She was crouched low with her ears back.

I felt my heart beating harder and heat rush to my face as I realised that the Tanzans wouldn't be able to dedicate forces to search for the captured Jarians and help the Kriites of Telby until Tanza was free of the Zeika threat.

I decided I would help them. I would make myself indispensable to them, then they couldn't say no to helping Jaria. Together we would drive the Zeikas back. Rekala lurched forward and roared. I jumped to my feet with my fists in the air.

'We will not be defeated!' I shouted. The talking slowly died away as more people looked up at the balcony. It was as if my words had somehow reached through the waves into their minds to capture so much attention. Surprised at my own tenacity, a thrill of nerves buoyed me on. 'No matter what it takes,' I yelled, 'we shall not bow to the Zeikas! No matter what, we shall not yield to our enemies!'

They cheered loudly; ritualists, delegates and citizens from all over Tanza, people listening here in the dome, people connected through the Ancient Sapphire Tree. Skyearls stamped their feet and flapped their wings. Ciera lifted his massive head and roared. The

deafening sound was what I imagined an exploding volcano would sound like.

The soles of my feet vibrated in my boots and my teeth chattered. In the skyearl language his roar had meaning—‘overwhelm’. I found myself shouting along with him. People jumped and shouted and raised their fists. It was as if some kind of energy travelled through the entire room with that thundering roar.

Slowly the king got to his feet. He stood beside me, placing one hand on my shoulder. I made eye contact with him and allowed myself to relax. Together we waited for the crowd to quieten.

Crystom looked out over his people and said, ‘Emperor Ciera and Master Psion Taeon are right. The Zeikas plan to use Tanza to advance their war campaign, but we will stop them here! Go now and prepare yourselves for war!’

It was the first time someone had called me by my new rank publicly.

*‘Master Psion Taeon,’* I thought to myself. *‘If only my father could see me now.’*

# Chapter Eight— The Council of Water

Over the next few days, Centan was abuzz with activity and chatter. Sarlice and I encountered a mixture of feelings towards the prospect of war. Shrewd business people were stocking up on foodstuffs, weapons and medicines, which would soon become the most valuable of commodities.

Every day we could see great bands of cloud stretching over the waterfalls, providing transport for new defender recruits. The defender base was in Hree, a few hours flight or a day's walk from Centan.

The city smithies worked night and day to get enough weapons and armour constructed for the upcoming battles. Some of those on the night shift dropped in to *Dawvor* in the evenings to eat, and were eager to discuss world events with Sarlice and me.

Minac was a generous host and showered us with food and gifts. I tried to explain to him that we weren't likely to be able to carry them all once we started travelling again. He merely shrugged and thrust more trinkets and clothing at us; rabbit-skin slippers, an osprey-feathered headpiece, a jewelled skyearl-eggshell wristband, a set of nyno-scale carry cases, beaded straps and buckles of various sizes and designs. In return, I cooked some of the meals and Sarlice waited on the tables and told stories.

Sarlice and I ate in Minac's private dining hall, because when either of us were among the patrons there wasn't a moment to

ourselves. Everyone had questions for us, especially me. How long had I been an Anzaii? How did I reach so many other beings at the Gathering of Minds? Where had I come from? What was life like there? How did I feel about being Ciera's Sleffion?

After such encounters I would retreat to the kitchens or our balcony upstairs. Sarlice caught me staring into the distance every now and then. My guilt at not being able to help Jaria in time had transformed into a resigned sadness. Even by getting Rekala to chain-wave other Rada-kin, the closest being to Jaria that we had been able to reach was in Tasset. This had revealed nothing about the fate of my people.

With an empathic smile, Sarlice directed my thoughts away from home, distracting me with conversations about the new things we were learning or trivialities from the day.

There was a mutual agreement between the two of us not to part with much coin during our stay. As we were currently guests at *Dawvor* and had access to everything we needed it made no sense to waste money. We spent many hours investigating the City of Centan, though, leaving no street and no shop unnoticed.

We were invited to dine with eight different families and representatives from each of the three guilds. We met a wide variety of city residents. I came to understand that Tanza was a free society. It had a king, but its people were free to pursue their own destinies, without the shackles of nobility that oppressed most other societies on Chryne. People who would be considered peasants in Telby owned land and businesses in Centan.

Many of these enterprising individuals enlisted our help in projects for the speakers guild, including resource organisation, evacuation and escape plans and various messenger services. As a politician Ciera was part of the speakers guild.

He gave Rekala and me the task of contacting two dozen remote families to inform them of the impending war. This involved seeking out Rada-kin living nearby and getting them to relay the messages. It felt good to use my Anzaii-based ability to reach all Rada-kin for something so valuable.

Thirty skyearls occupied the same massive room I was in, contacting other Sleffion-kin who lived far away from the major cities. The beings I was contacting didn't live with or near skyearls who were also Sleffion-kin, for one reason or another, and were outside the usual lines of communication. They all conveyed their thanks through the animals that communicated my message to them.

Sarlice, Kestric and Thita assisted Ciera in the evacuation plans for Tanza. While they weren't expecting to have to abandon the realm it was a contingency that had to be planned for. Ciera was in frequent contact with a skyearl representative in Ravra, Tanza's only ally in the Highlands. Should the worst come to pass, the citizens of Tanza would be granted refugee status in Ravra for a time.

The Ravrans promised no aid in the actual battles—understandable given the risk to their own realm from a misstep with Reltland. They knew only too well that Ravra was also in a prime position for the Zeikas to launch a war campaign on the rest of Eastern Chryne.

I was aware of Ciera's involvement in a failsafe plan to deactivate the dome of energy that kept the shrouds out of Centan should the Zeikas defeat the defenders. It was sometimes difficult getting people to cooperate and answer his questions when they heard the word 'defeat', but Ciera was persistent about preventing the Zeikas from having free access to Centan and the skyearl palace, Raer. If they couldn't see where they were going and were unable to light fires in the mists, they would have to leave the place alone.

Five days after the Gathering of Minds Tyba met Sarlice, myself and our kin in a grand courtyard.

'I hope you haven't minded being left on your own out here,' Tyba said. 'We wanted to give you time to adjust.'

'We understand,' Sarlice said. 'How fares the realm?'

Tyba's brows pinched. 'Skirmishes are already occurring in places around the border.'

Sarlice clucked her tongue in disappointment. 'I just wish there was more Taeon and I could do to help you.'

Tyba nodded his head. ‘Oh yes. We will get to that. Shall we?’

Inside the palace was just as incredible as outside. It was high enough for Ciera to stand with room to spare—the immense space of the interior required hundreds of lights at night. Fancy gold torches lined the walls and dozens of chandeliers hung from the roof. Whenever a candle guttered out, a skyearl of about Thita’s size would fly up and relight or replace it.

There were four human guards positioned around the room, each one with a skyearl about the size of a large dog. One also had a ferret perched on his shoulder. I could sense the ferret’s thoughts, which were wide open and erratic. Despite this, the guard remained still, scanning left to right without distraction.

Outside, I had noticed that the skies were patrolled by ten defenders riding their Sleffion-kin. The skyearls of the Palace Flight-watch were all larger than horses, but nowhere near Ciera’s size. Though Centan was considered the safest place to be in Tanza, I figured it was prudent to be on the lookout for trouble when the king, the queen, the heirs to the throne and the emperor skyearl were all in the same place.

*‘And you, Sleffion,’* Ciera pointed out.

King Crystom and Queen Emyla sat together on one side of the large square table. Clayr and Sarlice were on the side nearest the queen and Tyba and I sat near the king. All of us were dressed in formal attire, but nothing that would have taken long to get into. Unlike the Telbion nobility, Tanzans favoured practicality, comfort and speed over the frivolities of fashion. Sarlice was seated across from me, wearing an elegant, cool-purple slip with a dainty silver girdle. Her rust-red curls shone in the lights of the majestic dining hall.

Ciera, Thita and the other four Sleffion-kin reclined in an enormous sand pit nearby, chatting among themselves and dining on trees of many shapes and sizes. Rekala and Kestric sprawled on a square of lawn beneath a skylight, having eaten their fill of stuffed goose, roasted turtle and lowry fish.

King Crystom swung his arms when he spoke, sharing his vision for the future of Tanza. Sarlice engaged him in a challenging debate

about the possibility for Tanza to use its unique position and resources to reach out to less enlightened nations rather than focusing on itself. I suspected she was trying to move the conversation toward a place where we could bring up the plight of the Lythians and the fate of the Jarians.

Crystom only smiled knowingly and cited the disaster that had occurred in Telby when Tanza had last tried to integrate with the Upper World. I ate quietly, wondering at Crystom's self-serving attitude.

'It's hardly possible to go off playing the hero in other nations when we are still fighting to control our own,' he said.

*'Should I ask about Jaria?'* I queried Ciera.

*'Not yet,'* he replied.

Tyba sighed. 'We have been fighting the Zeikas on and off for as long I have lived. They hold us back, but we will soon triumph. Then... then we will try mixing with the other races more.'

Ciera stirred from his divot in the sand. 'I agree, in part, with Sarlice. That is why I have maintained relations with Ravra and Jesath.'

The king brooded over his wine.

'Of course, Duurnyn and Irin remain closed to all outsiders,' Ciera added.

*'Now?'* I asked Ciera.

*'No,'* he sent. *'You don't want to be too abrupt with Crystom.'*

We ate for a while in silence.

'That's a lovely earring you wear, Taeon,' Queen Emyla said.

I wiped my mouth before replying, 'It is Tiaro, my Anzaii-kin. A gift left for me by my father...'

'Magical.'

'As far as I know, he had no idea it would become sentient upon our first meeting.'

'I should have reminded you,' Tyba said to his mother. 'Tiaro will be a welcome presence should the Zeikas attack us.'

That made Em pause. For some reason, I had the impression that my Anzaii abilities were somehow very significant to her. She

watched me out of the corner of her eye. I chewed and swallowed audibly.

‘Did you know there was an Anzaii division in the defender army?’ Crystom asked me.

I shook my head.

‘Was?’ Sarlice said cautiously.

‘There have been attacks on the Anzaii by other Kriites,’ he said slowly. ‘It’s some kind of faction. They believe that Anzaii powers are an open door for exploitation and they support the preservation of the majority at the cost of a few. Their aim seems to be killing Anzaii.’

Sarlice widened her eyes meaningfully at me, and asked, ‘What are you doing to stop them?’

‘All Tanza is under orders to detain and question anybody professing such beliefs,’ Emyla said. ‘They call themselves the Wavekeepers.’

‘We have heard of this cult in the Highlands,’ I said. ‘I saw a murder take place in Jaria...’

I nearly choked as I realised my time had come for requesting help for Jaria.

‘*Very well,*’ Ciera agreed. ‘*But don’t get your hopes up...*’

‘*I won’t,*’ I said impatiently, ‘*but it’s my duty to try.*’

All eyes turned to me as I told the story of Feera’s last moments at the hands of a Wavekeeper. I quickly summarised the battle near the Catacombs of Krii. I stumbled over my words, leaping through time as I hastened to tell them all that had befallen my people and all that Sarlice and I had gone through to bring our request to Tanza.

I was nearly out of breath when I finally said, ‘Even though I have been relieved of my duty as ambassador, and there may be only a few dozen Jarians left, I must request your help to rescue them from slavery...’ I glanced at Sarlice. ‘And to prevent the same fate from gripping Lyth... and all the Kriites in Telby...’

My request sounded ludicrous even to me. How could I expect this nation, on the brink of war, to fly to the aid of the Jarians and other scattered Kriites? Crystom stared at me for a long while, and

I thought the upwards tilt of his eyebrows indicated compassion. Tyba and Em waited for him to speak.

‘I think you already know what I’m going to say, Taeon.’ He poured more wine for each of us. ‘The original mission your leaders impelled you with has not changed. It was not for Jaria that you were sent. It was for something even bigger, hard as that may be for you to accept. I’m not saying we won’t help Jaria. Once we’ve driven these black-hearted demon-worshippers back we will be able to spare some thought to the matter.’

‘Of course you know we cannot march an army upon Telbion allies on Telbion territory. Not only because of the ban, but because that would give Telby’s armies every reason to band with Reltland against us. At present there is a tentative peace, contingent upon our staying out of their lands. It must be a quiet operation. Perhaps I will even send you... but not Ciera; he is not one for stealth...’

Crystom’s monologue ran down and I felt that he was truly trying to visualise a way it could be done. I felt naïve to have ever thought all my problems would be over when I reached Tanza.

‘You could send a handful of Sleffions and their kin to scout in Jaria, couldn’t you?’ I wheedled. ‘After the Zeikas’ war campaign in Tanza is over Sarlice and I can join the scouts and do whatever we can to help our tribes. I am willing to serve Tanza wholeheartedly if you will grant this one small boon.’

The king glanced at his wife. Sarlice nodded and I saw admiration in her eyes. I knew I was doing the right thing, but my heart sank with the weight of sadness and my appetite fled. Small and insignificant Jaria may be, but it was my home. They were my people and the Lythians were Sarlice’s. Could we change allegiance to Tanza so easily?

*‘That dilemma is part of the reason I’ve give you space these past few days,’* Ciera murmured through the waves, *‘but if it makes you feel any better, I believe that the Tanzans are your people too.’*

‘Sarlice, you are the ambassador for Lyth still, are you not? How do you feel about this?’ Queen Emyla asked.

‘Lythians are accustomed to being on their own,’ she replied. ‘We’ve been evading the Telbions and the Relts this far. Another few seasons isn’t going to make much difference.’

‘This war could go on for longer than that,’ Clayr said.

Sarlice was looking at me as she answered. ‘Kestric and I have known from our first days with Taeon that our true quest was somewhat different to the quest from my father, the Prime of Lyth. We are here for Taeon... and for the good of *all* Kriites.’

My heart swelled to hear her declaration of loyalty.

‘Thank you, Taeon and Sarlice,’ King Crystom said. ‘We accept your fealty, and the requested scouting party will be sent.’

‘This does not diminish your allegiance to Jaria or Lyth,’ Queen Emyla stated. ‘If anything, it strengthens it.’

I wasn’t sure what to think about that, but I kept my peace. Did she feel guilty about something?

‘Our thanks, Your Majesty,’ Sarlice said. Noticing my silence and perhaps sensing my distress, she reverted to our original topic of conversation. ‘And the Anzaii among the defenders,’ she began, ‘what happened to them?’

Emyla put her hand on my friend’s shoulder. ‘Well they’re not all dead if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m sure you know Anzaii are especially adept at surviving encounters with Zeikas.’

‘Then what?’ I asked, my curiosity piqued. I tried hard to keep the concern out of my voice.

‘Let’s just say, they are not quite as open about their gifts as they used to be. We no longer distinguish them from other members of the defenders except in the strike force, which is unavoidable. You will find Anzaii throughout all of the divisions. There are about 90 in total, most of whom I know by name.’

‘Perhaps you know where I might find my Aunt Jaalta,’ I said unenthusiastically, not willing to get my hopes up.

The king’s eyebrows went up. ‘Well, yes, I do know that name quite well.’

‘Is she the one with the...’ Clayr made a cutting gesture across her throat.

Crystom nodded. ‘The Jaalta I know is one of our most gifted Anzaii, here in Centan. Sadly, her throat was cut during a battle with Zeikas some years back.’

My heart sank. *So she is dead then.*

‘Miraculously, she survived, but she cannot speak,’ Crystom added. ‘She can barely raise a croak.’

I couldn’t decide whether to react with joy or pity. Finally I said, ‘So she has learned to communicate with people through the waves?’

The king and queen suddenly had new respect in their eyes.

‘Yes,’ Em replied. ‘This “person-to-person telepathy”, as it is sometimes called, is a rare and valuable gift.’

‘For that reason, Jaalta has personal bodyguards with her most of the time,’ Crystom added. ‘We’ll arrange for her to meet you, Taeon.’

I nodded my thanks.

‘So you *do* think the Zeikas are trying to capture Anzaii?’ Sarlice asked.

‘It is possible,’ Em said solemnly, ‘that the Zeikas have learned how to perform a waverade. It means “violation of the waves” in ancient Kaslonican. The ritualists, who research into Zeika sorcery, recently discovered a new rite that merges the wavelengths used by two people into an artefact. When the artefact is being worn, each person can use each other’s abilities.’

‘It is disquieting to think that some Zeikas may be able to listen to our wave communications.’

My stomach turned. Perhaps that’s why the Zeikas had been after me all this time. They must think my Anzaii abilities were strong. Little did they know I had barely scratched the surface.

‘May I ask what you know about the sapphire trees?’ I said.

‘What do you want to know?’ Tyba replied.

‘That one in the dome is the Ancient Sapphire Tree of the Council of Water, is it not?’

Tyba looked pleased and Queen Em was nodding.

‘Has a leafshard artefact ever been made from it?’

‘Not that we know of,’ Em replied. ‘The tree here has not willingly shed even a single leaf for centuries. We lack the tools to cut it, but even if we had such it would be frowned upon.’

Remembering how it had felt to place my hand upon the tree in the Catacombs of Krii, I asked, ‘Would I be allowed to touch it?’

Em was about to reply when Sarlice and I raised our heads in shock.

*‘ALERT!’*

Em was the first to react, but within seconds all six of us had received a summons from our Sleffion-kin. An image of many wings flashed through my mind. Oily black and green bodies stained the skies above a distant city. Tanza was under attack.

## Chapter Nine— Love and Ashes

From high in the blackness of the sky, a mass of dragons dropped to spread green fire over everybody and everything in Ruhor Lairs. Children screamed, adults shrieked in pain and terror as beasts plummeted to the ground in huge clouds of heat and ash. The engulfing green flames forced people to their knees, burning many to the bone, blinding and maiming others.

Ciera's attention on the waves was drawn to one of the nesting areas where hundreds of skyearl whelps were being cut down by an overwhelming force of Zeikas on their tyraks. Through his waves I witnessed the colourful, fluffy bundles lying broken and red in the wake of the Reltic army, their wings burned to mere frames. The adult skyearls who were charged with protecting them also lay dead at the entrance to the whelping caves. One adult remained, but his life was soon snuffed out and with him went the vision.

The unknown skyearl's death brought tears to my eyes, but these feelings paled in comparison to Ciera's dismay at the deaths of the young ones. The waves weren't done with us yet. Another Sleffion-kin somehow reached Ciera from Lander's Bay, and he was too distraught to keep the visions from me.

An even larger force of Zeikas had burst through the barrier there, dripping red with the blood of Kriites. The beach was piled with human corpses: slaves and captives who had been sacrificed to nullify the barrier. Ships that had somehow made it through the

treacherous reefs were anchored off the coast and Reltic tents lined the dunes.

Skyearls clashed with tyraks in a gargantuan struggle across the sands and among the temperate coastal forest. Humans and Rada-kin also fought against Zeika footsoldiers and their conjurations. Beasts of nightmare reared up, out of the ground, slashing their unnaturally long claws or beating the Tanzans back with inhuman strength. I cringed as I witnessed a Rada and his bear die in a funnel of green fire.

The nightmarish images came through the waves in spurts, ricocheting from one skyearl's mind to the next and bouncing inexorably into the minds of their human kin. Tiaro helped me and Ciera to stem the tide of waves, but it was enough to take me off my feet. I gasped for breath.

As the images subsided, I was able to reach for Sarlice, who was lying face down on the ground beneath the dining table, crying soundlessly into the rich carpet. I pulled her up gently, my heart wrenched by the sight of tears streaming down her face. I wrapped my arms around her and she lay limply against my chest, sobbing. Through her own Sleffion-kin she had also witnessed some of the carnage.

Rekala and Kestric bounded to our sides, chuffing and nudging against us. Sarlice turned from me to bury her face in Kestric's ruddy ruff. Rekala licked my hair in a desperate effort to offer me comfort.

Shocked by the violence and volume of the massacre, Sarlice, Kestric and Thita took some time to regain control. The violence at Ruhor Lairs, Lander's Bay and Lokshole continued, but Ciera had regained control of his mind. With Tiaro's help he held back the details from Rekala and me. I could sense his terrible grief and shock—he had expected an attack, but not one of this magnitude. A surge of protectiveness welled in me, first for Ciera, and then, with increasing passion, for the rest of the people of Tanza.

Ciera roared in anguish, shaking several candles from their perches above us. There was a flurry of movement in the chamber—flames on the carpet were quickly doused. I could hear Crystom shouting, but the volume of Ciera's cry obscured his words. I could think only of

Fyschs and the feel of Zeika flesh falling before me. Without thinking I drew the sword from its sheath. ‘*Soon,*’ I sent to him.

Rekala, Kestric and the other kin in sight leaped to their feet and stood rigid and snarling with hackles raised. Even Thita had become as tense as stone where he perched on Sarlice’s empty chair with his wings unfurled.

Sarlice wiped her face, smearing the makeup she had put on for this special occasion. I thought I glimpsed a snarl behind the back of her hand. I got the impression she was ready to fight, too, wishing she could transform and rush out to help. Ciera’s roar was like a battle call—reverberating into the waves like a tidal surge that rippled outward through skyearl minds across the nation.

‘Alight,’ Ciera shouted in the human tongue. ‘Away to the Dome of Gathering.’

We got to our feet, and, leaving our dishes and foodscraps behind, hurried out of the palace. Ciera flew off without me, knowing I wished to stay on the ground with the others. Crystom and Em were shouting commands to the dozens of warriors and serfs that materialised out of the palace. More bodyguards marched out of a building we passed before crossing the ornamental palace bridge. About a dozen guards flanked our party as we made our way through the streets of Tanza to the dome. The kin who marched beside us were tense and focused. I could feel Rekala’s body quivering with fury where she pressed against my side.

Ciera’s clarion call reverberated through the waves for a long time afterwards, with many still receiving it in distant parts of the realm minutes later. I knew this mostly from my connection to him, but if the lines had blurred, and I was starting to sense other skyearls on my own, I wouldn’t have known. I marvelled at his ability to send such a broad wave. Thousands of Sleffion-kin stopped what they were doing to answer the command of their emperor.

As we made our way to the dome, Fyschs remained in my hand, humming faintly through the waves, leafshards glowing. When we reached the dome I could see other Tolites with their weapon-kin out. We knew there was no immediate danger in Centan, but Ciera’s call had compelled us to draw our weapons.

Amid the royal party, I walked briskly into the Dome of Gathering; Tanzans with grave expressions parted to let us through. Ciera was on the dais, roaring in the skyearl language. His clarion call resounded through the city and through the waves, signifying the start of the war. There was a terrifying moment in which I could almost see the bodies of those who would die.

Three women and two men dressed in the garb of defenders carried maps and scrolls onto a large wooden table on the stage behind the Ancient Sapphire Tree. The king and queen climbed the short flight of stairs and helped lay out the maps. When Ciera's deafening roars finally ceased, I climbed the stairs and moved to his side, placing one hand on his furred hind leg. Sarlice and her kin remained behind in the audience area.

'*It's happening again,*' Ciera said woefully to me through the waves. Towering high above us he appeared mighty; surely when he joined the fight the Zeikas would be overcome. '*So many of our people will die,*' he lamented, referring to all species. Ciera felt he had little power to stop such large-scale destruction. He could only be in one place at a time.

His anger and despair enveloped me—my heart thundered and sweat broke out on my brow. I swallowed and found myself breathing hard. Down on the ground beneath us, Sarlice held her head in her hands. Thita and Kestric were nearby, looking on in concern. Almost as soon as he had let his emotions out, Ciera recalled them back into himself, seeking calm. After a while, he bent his neck down and nuzzled Rekala and me.

'As long as we have each other,' he began, 'there is hope.'

I looked up at him, instinctively moving closer to the warm furred body. I was starting to feel as small and helpless as those tiny whelps.

Beside us at the table of war, Crystom dipped a quill pen in red ink and scribbled on the closest map. The pen was so well used it had been stripped of the feather, leaving just a stick filled with ink. He held his hand to his head, listening through the waves as his Sleffion-kin transferred countless reports from skyearls across Tanza.

*'Lokshole has fallen,' Ciera told me. 'It had a population of over 9000 humans with 415 defenders. The Zeika Legion that arrived there had many thousands more.'*

*'Just like that?' I queried. 'Lokshole is gone so quickly?'*

He peered at me intently. *'That is not all. A Zeika army of more than ten thousand has attacked our people at Lander's Bay. Again, our defenders are outnumbered and we haven't seen an attack of this scale before.'*

*'Are we going to help them?'*

*'That is up to Em and Crystom.'*

Crystom continued writing for some time. He handed the quill to somebody else and bent over what he had written. Em was right there beside him, holding one finger against her cheek.

*'If they've destroyed Lokshole, will they be coming here next?'*

*'I don't think so, Mother,' Tyba replied. 'They'll work from the outside in, taking each town as they go. They will leave the heart for last—Hree and Centan.'*

*'I think you're right,' Ciera agreed. 'That way, they'll have already weakened the defenders and established their own bases and supply lines in connection with the Upper World bases.'*

Em nodded at her son's suggestion.

*'If it goes that bad we will relocate the population of Centan to Condi, as planned,' Crystom said. 'They won't expect that.'*

The room gradually filled and more opinions were being added to the conversation by the minute. A dozen skyearls came to stand by the stage, indicating for bystanders to move away and keep out of the deliberations. I wondered at that, but then told myself that Tanza was a much larger realm than Jaria. The leaders needed some kind of distance between them and the emotional crowds or nothing would get done.

Soon the Dome of Gathering was full of people and more were crowded outside. A dull murmuring echoed throughout the dome. I stared at the Ancient Sapphire Tree of the Council of Water. Was it voices I was hearing or thoughts? Drawn in by pulsating leaves I stepped up to it and rested one hand against some low-hanging leaves.

A flash of insight burned my mind. Terror overlaid with panic. Joy overlaid with ecstasy. Pride overlaid with determination. I saw a moment in the life of a hundred people at once, not just what they were doing but their internal response to it.

Ciera threw his head back and made a strange snorting sound.

*'Taeon! Don't.'*

Crystom, Em and Tyba continued discussing their options, barely glancing at Ciera. A number of advisors pointed out things on the maps and held discussions of their own. Sarlice, who was watching from below, gave me a frown of concern and I moved back to Ciera's hind leg, chastened.

The scale of this attack overwhelmed me. The population of Jaria Village, where I'd spent most of my life, was less than five hundred. The Tanzans were making decisions that would affect hundreds of thousands of beings. After a while it became too much.

Feeling I had little right to contribute, I withdrew to the back of the stage with Rekala and gestured for Sarlice and Kestric to join me. We waited there for a long time, solemnly observing the comings and goings.

*'Taeon, I've just received word the Sunbark Cities are expecting an attack,'* Ciera told me.

*'That's the opposite side of the realm,'* I said. *'What can we do to help them?'*

He looked over the other side of the table of war. Tyba's Sleffion-kin, Amadeus had drawn himself up to his full-height. Sitting up on his haunches, he was about half as tall as Ciera. Gradually those at the table quietened. Amadeus flexed his wings and the purple, copper and black feathers shimmered in the firelight and the light from the Ancient Sapphire Tree. The entire gathering waited to hear what the prince's Sleffion-kin would say.

In a deep, booming voice he said, 'It is agreed that Centan's defender forces will be divided among the cities of Tanza under attack.'

A stir of anger rose, but most of the crowd waited to hear more.

'We must prevent the Zeikas from gaining a foothold in our nation. We will also send a strike force of our most powerful Anzaii, Sleffion to Condii to prepare for a siege. It is our strongest town and

is close enough to Ravra to afford us supplies or an escape route. We expect the Zeikas to converge there before coming to Centan, if they even get that far.'

Sarlice murmured her approval.

I licked my lips, wondering who would be in the strike force. It sounded like a flying group. Would Rekala have to stay behind if I went?

'*We should go,*' Ciera said to me. '*Tyba and Amadeus need me to help lead the strike force. Will you join me, Taeon?*'

I stared at him. '*Am I ready for this?*'

'*I believe you are,*' Ciera assured me. '*But Rekala would have to stay behind.*'

Rekala, who was pressed against my leg, lashed her tail in frustration.

'Can we go?' Sarlice asked Thita.

Overhearing this, Amadeus flapped his wings again. 'We will need warriors who are not Anzaii to support those who are, but only those with the ability to ride aback their Sleffion-kin will be part of the strike force. Shrouding is too slow. You must fly swiftly to the aid of our brethren. Commanders, appoint your people and send them here in three hours, ready to depart tonight.'

The strike force was a flying squadron that had been formed several times in Tanza's history, usually lead by Ciera. Being the oldest skyearl with strike force experience, he knew some of the best strategies for getting a flight group close to the enemy without making them vulnerable.

When an Anzaii invoked his or her powers, it almost always left their physical body unprotected. Anzaii had far more effect against Zeika magic than Sleffions, Tolites and Rada so the other warriors would be there to protect the Anzaii members of the strike force. If there were any master psions, like me, at a time of war, they were usually expected to join the strike force.

'*You'll be surprised to see what a company of Anzaii can do,*' said an unknown voice in my head.

I whirled, looking around for the owner of the voice. Only a few Rada-kin were in the Dome and each of them were engaged in conversations with others.

‘Who are you?’

The owner of the voice was disappointed I couldn’t detect this for myself.

‘I am your Aunt Jaalta.’

A thin old lady in about four layers of green and white silk approached me. Her two protectors hung back, talking quietly. She raised one slim hand to her right shoulder and bowed her head. I returned the greeting, surprised when she hugged me. She looked up into my eyes, placed her hand on my cheek and smiled. I noted the messy scar across her throat. Sarlice, having missed the conversation, looked startled. I quickly introduced her to my mute, but telepathically gifted aunty.

We stood for a time absorbing each other’s presence in the waves, a new experience for me with another human being. Aunt Jaalta’s Anzaii-kin was named Galtoro and her Sleffion-kin was Reen. She had been in Tanza ever since my father wrote his letter to the people of Jaria. Coping with the injury to her throat had taken her thoughts far from Jaria.

*‘I apologise for not contacting you,’* she said through the waves. *‘I have been absorbed in myself and in things here in Tanza.’*

*‘I get the feeling Tanza can be like that,’* I replied. *‘Are you going to be in the strike force?’*

*‘For certain. I am in the warriors guild already. They tend to choose warrior Anzaii over speakers for strike forces.’* I wondered if I was still considered a member of the harvesters guild. Did it even matter any more? *‘Galtoro, Reen and I have been part of it before,’* she continued.

*‘And what about your Rada-kin?’* I asked, unable to sense it.

Jaalta shook her head. *‘Although I grew up in Jaria, I have no Rada-kin. I think I was always destined to come here.’*

She lifted a thin silver chain from around her neck and showed us a glowing blue leafshard pendant.

*‘This is Galtoro,’* she said, *‘my Anzaii-kin.’*

Tiaro’s wave-senses came alert as she inspected the new being.

*'Greetings, Tiaro.'*

'I heard it speak,' I exclaimed to Sarlice, who I felt was missing out. 'I heard the pendant.'

Sarlice nodded, a slight frown creasing her brow.

*'Greetings to you as well, Taeon of Jaria,'* the necklace said to me. *'My kin is greatly pleased to meet you here.'*

I grinned at Jaalta. Sarlice was interested in the pendant, but had not realised what it was.

'It's her Anzaai-kin,' I explained. 'It is talking to Tiaro and me.'

Sarlice gave me a small smile, but then glanced back at the table of war.

'What do you know about my mother and father?' I asked Jaalta eagerly.

*'An aunty should never have to see the death of a beloved niece,'* she said, through the waves. Even though her emotions were masked, the sadness welled through. *'Kerra was captured by a Zeika raiding party, while on a mission as one of Jaria's Anzaai. They stole two dozen Jarians and their kin for experimentation that day. Mandus and I led a company of Jarian warriors after the Zeikas. More than two seasons, we pursued them, and there were many Jarians who abandoned the chase.'*

*'The Zeikas met up with another legion and over a hundred captives from Tanza. An Anzaai from Tanza made contact with us and an alliance was formed. Together, we and the Tanzans defeated the Zeika legions. We rushed through the camp, where there had been so much suffering. By the time we found your mother it was too late. Kerra had given birth to a baby boy and was dying from blood loss.'*

Shock arced through me like a bolt of lightning.

'By the Nine Trees!' I exclaimed. 'I truly have a brother.' My father's letter had mentioned a baby, but it was something else to hear about it from someone who was there.

*'A half brother, yes,'* said Jaalta. *'If he's still alive, he is half Reltic half Kriite and almost certainly a follower of the Zeika religion.'*

'A Zeika brother,' I echoed out loud.

Sarlice looked confused so I quickly explained what Jaalta had told me.

My aunt continued. *'The Zeikas fled with the child, a wet-nurse and a few other male children, leaving the girls behind. Mandus told Kerra he would protect her child, she passed away not knowing he had been taken. As far as I know, the child was never seen by him again.'*

So that had been part of my father's anxiety after he came back to Jaria.

*'It's a shame he never told you or Ella,'* Tiaro commented. Only Ciera, Rekala and I could hear her, but Jaalta sensed my anger through the waves. I had a feeling she was hiding her own emotions. She laid a hand on my shoulder.

After a while I said, 'Father hardly even spoke of it to Ella and me.'

Allowing my thoughts to flow, I shared a bit of my childhood with my aunt. She winced at the pain my father's grief had caused my sister and me. When I told her about the letter and finding Tiaro, though, she smiled.

*'It is wonderful to see you again, after all these years.'* The tenderness in her thoughts was unmistakable. A virtue of wave communication was the raw honesty and understanding that could pass between us. Although I didn't remember her from my childhood, I felt like I knew her well. Finding family in this place, after being so long alone, was strangely calming.

Ciera turned from the table of war to face us.

*'I'm glad to see you found Jaalta, Taeon,'* Ciera said to both of us through the waves. Because Jaalta had initiated the connection, Ciera was able to converse with her as well. *'She can teach you far more than I about Anzaaii ways.'*

*'Truth be told there isn't much to teach,'* Jaalta countered. *'It's something you must learn from doing. The most important thing to remember is to give your Anzaaii-kin adequate time to attune to the Zeika magic you are facing.'*

I nodded, knowing what I needed to do. Bessed had sent me down this path, leaving Jaria, confronting the bigger picture of what was happening to Kriites in the world. For now at least, my place was with Tanza.

I hated the idea of parting from Sarlice and Rekala, but perhaps they would be safer away from me. Although it frightened me, I knew the strike force was the best place for Ciera, Tiaro, Fyschs and me to be during the coming battles. It would give us an opportunity to grow together.

‘*What about me?*’ Rekala asked, with a loud yowl. She dropped low to the ground and her ears were back.

‘I’m sorry, Rekala,’ I crooned aloud. ‘I know it means we’ll be apart.’

Sarlice’s lips formed a tight line, but she made no comment.

‘*I should be at your side, too,*’ Rekala complained. ‘*That is my place, especially during a battle.*’

‘I know, dear one,’ I said, ‘but how can that be when I must fly with the skyearls?’

‘*Maybe I can learn bird form...*’ she said, but her wave voice trailed off as she faced the fact that she couldn’t.

‘*You can understand why I need to do this?*’ I asked.

‘*I suppose so,*’ she conceded. ‘*But you are my Taeon, MY Taeon!*’

She took my arm in her mouth as she said this, clenching her jaw muscles, but not closing her teeth. One paw reached around my calf, pulling me toward her and I staggered a little. I crouched down and grabbed her ruff with both hands, reaching my nails through the thick hair to scratch her. I hugged her and she pushed her nose against my chest, nearly toppling me.

I could sense Jaalta’s empathy and Ciera’s guilt. After a few minutes had passed, Rekala let me go and I got back to my feet.

‘I will go with you and the strike force,’ I said aloud.

Sarlice and Kestric looked almost as forlorn as Rekala.

‘*There there, little one,*’ Ciera said to my Rada-kin. ‘*You will be needed as well. Along with Sarlice and Kestric, your place in this fight is also an important one. Just because we’re apart physically doesn’t mean we can’t support each other through the waves.*’

Rekala hissed at Ciera, but there was no animosity behind it. She allowed the immense skyearl’s calming presence to flow into her being.

‘I am well-pleased with your decision, Sleffion,’ my skyearl declared. ‘My armour is stored in the room at the end of that hall.’ He gestured behind the dais down a blue-lit corridor. ‘It will need to be taken outside and made ready for me.’

Many different people had been given the honour of preparing Ciera’s armour over the centuries. It was a momentous occasion for his own Sleffion to be doing it.

‘Yes, Emperor,’ I replied with a bow.

Jaalta squeezed my hand, saying, ‘*I, too, must see to my Sleffion-kin. Not much time to get ready for our departure.*’

‘See you soon.’

When I turned back to Sarlice, she was looking dispiritedly at the ground.

‘Will you walk with me?’ I asked her softly. The Rada-kin sensed our desire to be alone together and stayed where they were.

Without looking up, Sarlice bobbed her head. Sensing her disappointment, I put one hand on her upper back as we walked down the hall. She glanced at me over her shoulder, but still said nothing.

We passed several rooms where people were gathering and packing supplies. At the very end was a red door painted with the silhouette of a skyearl in armour. It was dark inside. Sarlice borrowed a torch from one of the sconces in the hallway and lit three in the skyearl armour room.

I looked around in wonder at the beaten metal of all shapes and sizes from head and chest pieces to shoulder plates, claw sharpeners and tail spikes.

‘Must you join the Anzaii strike force?’ Sarlice asked me, ignoring the armour.

I nodded. Sarlice bowed her head. With such a small Sleffion-kin, she could not go with me.

‘You don’t have to go,’ she said. ‘You can use your abilities here.’

I turned to face her, suddenly aware of how alone we were back here—it was a relief to get away from the crowds. Sarlice had not spoken the words, but I had a strong feeling she was thinking,

‘What if I never see you again?’. Did our friendship mean that much to her?

‘Our place is by your side,’ she said.

‘It won’t be for long,’ I told her. ‘We’ll be fighting side by side again before you know it.’

The depth of my emotion made my voice tremble and I fought to keep it hidden. Sarlice smiled fondly but glanced away.

‘I want to be with you, wherever duty may send us,’ I said sincerely. ‘I will find you as soon as this mission is done.’

She raised her eyebrows and sighed.

‘I’ll come back here,’ I added, trying to be cheerful.

She looked away. ‘I don’t know that any of us will come back.’

‘Come along now; that’s not the Sarlice I know,’ I punched her playfully in the arm.

Outraged, she advanced on me. I backed away, a big, silly grin on my face.

In a playful, teasing voice I jibed, ‘The Sarlice I know *never* backs down from a fight.’

She jumped on me, grabbed my head in an armlock and wrestled me into a wooden beam.

‘You taught me the most important things I know about combat...’ I struggled to kick her legs out from behind.

She easily twisted out of my reach and threw a punch that I barely managed to duck under. I knocked over a stand of skyealr helmets, which clattered across the floor. Embarrassed, but laughing, I ran at her. She easily sidestepped and elbowed down hard on my right shoulder, sending me sprawling to the dusty ground. She pinned me there with one arm twisted up behind my back. I could feel her muscular thigh through the dress she was wearing.

‘And what of Kestric and Rekala?’ Sarlice said, pulling my arm up even higher.

‘Ouch,’ I protested, but she didn’t let go.

‘They’ll have to stay with Thita and me,’ she added.

‘You should go back to Lantaid,’ I replied. ‘Close to the chasm...’ If things went badly for Tanza, I wanted my loved ones close to an escape route.

Having relaxed under her grip, I suddenly wrenched my arm free and rolled. Laughing at our antics, she resisted me. But I pushed her down with one arm across her collar-bone, sliding the other under her head to stop it from hitting the ground. My own elbow landed badly, shooting pain up my arm. I winced, but still managed to clench my knees against Sarlice's sides, pinning her to the ground.

'Perhaps all of you can go back through the shield into the chasm,' I added breathlessly. 'To escape.'

As I cradled her head, I forgot what I was saying about Rekala and Kestric. She lay still beneath me, breathing heavily. The scar on the top of her shoulder stood out white on the flushed skin there... just like my dream. I remember...

Sarlice made no reply. Her chest rose and fell beneath my arm. I was careful not to squash her, which she seemed to have noticed. Her skin was covered with a light sheen in the torchlight. Her lips, still bearing paint, were close to mine. And her eyes—those dark blue eyes like a forest pool at night—stared at me, pleasantly surprised... wanting?

I hesitated. My lips knew what they wanted to do, but my mind recalled another time and another place where I had lain like this with a woman. *But I said 'no', didn't I?*

Sarlice turned her face away and resumed her struggles. I let her push me away and we rolled up to our feet, dusting ourselves off.

Sarlice nodded to herself and then admitted, 'You know I just wish I could go with you.'

'I know,' I replied. 'But no matter how good a shrouder Thita is, you could never keep up with a flight team.'

She scowled at me, knowing I spoke truth.

'Couldn't Ciera bear me?'

'He could,' I admitted, 'but I don't think it's allowed. Every member of the Anzaii strike force must have a skyearl of mount size.'

'You don't really need a guide anymore anyway,' Sarlice said. 'No human alive could compare to Ciera.'

Behind us in the dome, the emperor skyearl stood up on his haunches and announced that he would lead the skyearls in the

Anzaii strike force as was the tradition. Prince Tyba and Captain S.T. Dathan would lead the humans alongside him. Through my link with Ciera, I sensed a group of Tanzans follow him outside where he waited to be fitted with a battle-seat for me, several throwing spears more than twice my height and sacks of provisions.

Sarlice took me by the arm and led me toward the largest of the armour in the room.

‘Come,’ she said. ‘You are the emperor’s Sleffion. You must fit his armour and sharpen his claws.’

Including Ciera and me, the strike force consisted of 200 humans and 267 skyearls. Three dozen of the humans were Anzaii. The rest were Sleffion-Tolites or Sleffion-Rada. The non-Anzaii members were solely there to protect and provision the Anzaii. I was the only master psion and was treated with special respect, even though I was technically only a rookie in the army.

Ciera was already an influential member of the warriors guild, but I had to swear an oath for myself and on behalf of Rekala, Tiaro and Fyschs. The High Commander himself took my vows in the Dome of Gathering. Sarlice, Kestric and Thita were also sworn in as defenders, joining a regiment of one thousand humans: some with, some without kin.

Until now Thita had only been in the speakers guild, but he understood Sarlice’s stronger affiliation with warriors. Here in Tanza members of the warriors guild were referred to as defenders, which was considered a more palatable term; less violent than ‘warriors’.

There were 17 regiments in Centan alone and a total of 57,000 defenders across the nation. Nearly 2000 had died at Lokshole and Lander’s Bay already, but the civilian bloodbath that followed was unimaginable. Due to the small number of Anzaii, there was only one Anzaii strike force but, as Queen Emyla had told me, there were some Anzaii scattered throughout the regiments.

The strike force gathered in a roped off area outside the Dome of Gathering. Ciera and I were at the centre of the group, watching as the warriors checked their equipment and sharpened their weapons. Other Tanzans attached water botas and sacks of food to

each skyearl's saddle. Only food for the humans was required. The skyearls were feeding now on freshly cut saplings, wet rushes and piles of leaves. After this feed, they would not require food again for several days. Then it was simply a matter of finding some vegetation.

I had been introduced to most of the warriors and their skyearls. Their names were a jumble in my mind. I hoped I would learn to speak to other skyearls through the waves soon, if only to be able to remind myself what all their names were.

A breeze made the garden torches gutter and billow, stressing the banners that lined the causeway until I thought they would tear and fly away. The blue lanterns in the trees swung and creaked. A number of them had gone out, leaving sections of the garden in shadow. I shivered. It was well after midnight and my body had that aching fatigue that usually meant I needed a long sleep.

Rekala's side was pressed against my legs and she circled me, panting and chuffing nervously. Her tail flicked against my chest and back each time she circled.

*'I don't want you to go. I don't want you to go,'* she said over and over.

I patted her forehead each time she came around and tried to send calm through the waves, knowing of no other way to reassure her. I didn't like us being parted from each other any more than she did. Eventually she lay down on her stomach and wrapped one paw around my boot.

Sarlice entered the courtyard from the direction of the canals. She strode toward me, carrying my worn travel pack. She handed it to me and then threw a black leather and fleece coat over my shoulders. As I slid my arms into it, I realised it was probably more expensive than any garment I had ever owned.

'Where did you get this from?' I asked in amazement.

'I bought it for you,' she said simply.

'You didn't have to do that.'

She looked me in the eyes. 'It's the least I can do. This coat will keep you warm when you're up in the sky.'

She fastened it down my chest with a dozen silver catches embossed with little skyearls. I watched the light glinting off her

hair and wondered at the beating of my heart. Her hands against my chest were like wildfire.

Hesitantly, I reached out and touched her face with the backs of my fingers. She paused, closing her eyes. We were about the same height now. The noise and movement continued around us, but for all I cared, we might have been standing alone. The waves hushed around me; it was as if I'd drawn an invisible curtain down around the two of us.

'I thought we had to conserve coin,' I said.

She opened her eyes and gave me a small smile. 'I traded most of those useless trinkets Minac gave us.' She chuckled awkwardly.

'Thank you,' I said quietly, amazed that she hadn't pulled away. 'You joined the defenders. Do you think they will let you take the horses back with the Rada-kin to Lantaid?' *If only she could be safe*, I thought.

Sarlice looked up. 'I will be safe enough.'

My breath caught as I realised I had projected my thoughts into her mind. Were my Anzai abilities growing that quickly? Or had we become so close that it was possible for me to connect with her in the waves? I looked deeply into her eyes realising she had opened her mind to me. Once I had initiated contact, she was able to sense me like she sensed her kin. Thoughts shuffled through my mind—some familiar, some foreign.

Sarlice continued to look into my eyes, mouth parted as if she was about to say something. Feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt clouded my mind. These patterns of thought were strange to me. Dozens of questions and issues came and went in the space of a few seconds.

I dared to pull her to me, pressing my cheek against hers and hugging her tightly. She did not resist. My eyes closed as I felt a rush of pure joy. This was right, more right than it had ever been with Lira. Sarlice's arms encircled me, pulling our bodies closer. I wanted to stay there forever, I wanted to tell her how I felt, I wanted so many things. But Ciera's roar rang out and the members of the strike force were mounting up.

Sarlice and Rekala clung to me, willing me to stay. I squeezed Sarlice tight, stroked her face and broke away. The curtain released and the buzz of the waves resumed. Rekala batted my leg with her paw so I crouched down and threw my arms around her.

*'Keep Sarlice safe,'* I implored her. *'And I'll see you again soon.'*

*'Don't go, don't go!'* was all she could say. But I had to.

Skyearls took flight all around us.

Ciera's roar boomed more loudly.

Agonisingly, Sarlice whispered, 'Farewell, Taeon.'

She rested one hand on Rekala's shoulder and Kestric was there attempting to console the two of them. My heart felt like it was tearing in two.

Ciera's impatience barrelled into me through the waves. *'I should be in the lead, Taeon.'*

I hoisted my travel pack, waved and ran for my Sleffion-kin. Using the ladder that was built into his armour and battle-seat, I climbed up onto his back. Fumbling with the buckles, I strapped the pack behind me and fastened myself into the battle-seat. Ciera spread his magnificent wings and crouched low. I waved to Sarlice and Rekala one last time and caught my breath as Ciera burst upwards. Cold air rushed around me, chilling me despite the warmth of Sarlice's gift.

Darkness closed in around us and the air brushed over us, threatening to smear us across the sky. Far below were the foamy white cascades of the River Jarvi and the last few settlements of Hree. Ciera and the other skyearls sped through the moonlit sky, hurried by the call of their fellows who were dying far away.

## Chapter Ten — Condi

**W**e flew for ten hours, landing every two or three for a break. Even the padding in Ciera's enormous battle-seat was not enough to keep me comfortable for that length of time. I stretched and wriggled, trying to keep my feet and my behind awake. Sarlice's face and the feel of her body against me was my mind's constant companion. I wanted her, more than I had ever wanted anything. I blocked out both Ciera and Tiaro as I contemplated whether our relationship had changed. Had she simply been hugging me in friendship? In the end I gave up trying to figure it out and accepted the diversion of sleep, sagging in my harness.

When we finally reached the outskirts of Condi, I was dozing lightly with an unpleasant twinge in my back. The breeze warmed as we descended, waking me—I rubbed my eyes and opened them to the shining vista of early afternoon. Below us were the patterns of agriculture, dark green fitting into light green like pieces in a puzzle. The great, flat expanse of farmland was dotted with jutting karst towers, windswept limestone topped with sparse foliage. From up in the sky the karst towers seemed like game pieces on a gigantic game plate.

To the north, houses cluttered the foothills of a larger slope. They were almost all made of white and red bricks with black-tile roofs. Tyba and Amadeus wheeled west, using the promontories and low-lying clouds as cover. The rest of the team flew after them, sinking lower and following a tiny stream. Ciera had been here before, but

even the memory of tasty saplings did not lighten his mood. He emitted a growl of anticipation as the strike force touched down.

Ciera's wings beat the air, allowing his feet to make only a soft crunching sound as they landed on the dirt road near an old stone bridge. I staggered down from Ciera's back and shook my legs. Across the other side of the stream was a small castle with many arches, pillars and balconies made of a mysterious, grey-blue substance.

'Home of the Chief Architect,' Tyba informed me. 'The Zeikas have not been here yet.'

Ciera's tail lashed, knocking over several trees. Some of the humans were startled, but nobody commented. The group fell silent. Beyond the sounds of feathered wings being shaken and bellies rumbling were the voices of jungle crickets and strange animal calls. Leaves rustled in a gentle breeze.

A group of skyearls, who hadn't eaten their fill earlier, moved into the forest to graze. The rest assisted us to set up a large shelter and cookfire. Ciera took a dozen water sacks down to the river on his back and hauled them back full. It would have taken humans an hour to gather as much water.

'Why aren't we going into the city?' I asked Tyba.

'The Condiites told us to make our camp here on the north side of the city. The Zeika legions have, so far, only approached from the south to attack the town. It appears they are avoiding the River Jarvi. When the Condiites call us, we will fly to their aid, surprising the Zeikas.'

'And what *are* we going to do?'

'Tactical warfare,' he replied, claspng me by the shoulder. 'We will hide in the clouds above the battle, striking only at the right moment.'

'When enough Zeika conjurations are close to our position, the Anzaii in our group will dispel them. It is the task of the rest of the strike force to protect the Anzaii if our position is discovered.'

'I have dispelled before,' I sighed, 'though I'm really not very sure of myself.'

'*You only need to be patient,*' Tiaro corrected me.

‘What about the people who are fighting right now?’ I began. ‘What are we going to do to help them?’

Ciera’s tail lashed again. A skyearl behind him ducked. ‘For now, we are expected to stand by as our comrades are slaughtered.’

I opened my mouth and closed it again.

Tyba’s shoulders sagged. ‘This plan was formulated two seasons ago, when the defenders contemplated the possibility of a large increase in Zeika ranks. The strike force is too valuable to throw at the main Zeika army. It must be deployed carefully and strategically.’

‘So you knew that Reltland’s army was growing?’

‘It was inevitable,’ he replied. ‘You see, because initiated Zeikas do not age, their army continually swells. It becomes more cumbersome and more costly, but also more powerful. For each year that passes dozens of Zeika sorcerers progress in rank. Zeikas become ‘Conjurers’ at the fourth rank, which is apparently a difficult achievement. We had hoped Bal Harar was no longer interested in seizing Tanza, that he had gained the land he needed for crops and industry in Watercrag.’

‘It is genocide,’ Ciera said, ‘against all Kriites.’

I rested my forehead in my hands and rubbed my temples. I looked up when Tyba patted me on the shoulder. A man had approached through the strike force who I hadn’t seen before.

‘This is Chief Architect Furlorny,’ Tyba said.

‘My prince,’ Furlorny said, with a dip of his head.

‘Furlorny, I’d like you to meet Master Psion Taeon.’

‘Trees! You’re young,’ Furlorny observed.

I didn’t know what to say to that so I held my tongue. Furlorny led Tyba away to discuss tactics with some others nearby, but I was too distracted to join in. Ciera’s mind was abuzz with conversation. I could ‘hear’ only his words, but the meaning behind all that was said to him by other Sleffion was clear. A few miles away there was a pitched battle. More Tanzans were dying by the minute, yet we could not strike too soon or all could be lost. After a ten hour flight, there was strength to be regained by skyearls and people alike. A young man tapped me on the shoulder from behind.

‘Master Psion,’ he said, ‘we all need to eat and then rest for a bit. Here.’

The young man handed me a deep trencher of gromvi stew and a platter of smoky boiled vegetables and cheese. I accepted the food gratefully and sat down on the ground, leaning against a treestump.

Another strike force member served food to the prince. I was relieved that we would have this opportunity to recover, but, at the same time, Ciera’s guilt washed into mine and I grieved for the unknown people who were dying for this land. Tyba gestured for a barrel to be brought over for him to sit on and he ate ravenously.

As I was eating I watched the young man who had served me. As far as I could tell, he hadn’t eaten anything himself yet. Instead, he was busy sweeping out the newly erected pavilion where we would all sleep. He unpacked blankets and ground mats from the vast stores that had been carried by Ciera, Amadeus and the other large skyearls in the strike force. He poured oil into clay lanterns and lit them. A few others tended a fire nearby, cooking more stew for the company. I could almost feel their hunger burning through the waves.

*‘That’s Jett,’ Ciera told me. ‘He grew up near here in Q’Villa with the quarry workers. He’s part of the harvesters guild. It’s hard work down there.’*

Eventually the boy joined me, bringing a second helping for me as well as a far-less-heaped plate for himself. His Rada-kin, a viperjay named Naltoch, landed on his shoulder and Jett fed the bird a scrap of meat. I fought to keep my distaste for the creature hidden.

‘You are welcome to call me Taeon. What’s your name?’ I asked him even though I already knew.

He wiped his hands on his leggings and then presented me with the traditional Tanzan greeting. I offered him my hand and showed him how people in the Upper World shook hands when they were introduced.

‘Sorry, Master Psion, sir,’ he said between mouthfuls. ‘I’m Jett. We just assume you know who we are...’ He lowered his voice. ‘There are some Anzaii in the group who can converse with other people’s kin. And if their own or others’ kin don’t tell them what

they need to know, there are some who can speak to other people, too!’

I raised my eyebrows. ‘Well I am only newly declared a master psion. I still have a lot to learn about being Anzaii, Sleffion and Tolite.’

He bobbed his head and swallowed a spoonful of onions and potatoes. He pointed across the camp to where Jaalta was resting on a pile of blankets against a rock. The flight here must have been hard for her.

‘A.S. Jaalta is one of the best Anzaii,’ he told me. ‘She has two guardians, Amril and Sanka, who are both S.T.s.’

Jaalta was now dressed in dark blue robes with her grey hair pinned neatly out of the way. I thought to myself that it was admirable for someone her age to be part of the strike force. I hoped that we would both live through this and find out more about my mother’s half-Zeika child. Amril and Sanka hovered near my aunt discussing how best to protect the talented Anzaii.

‘How is this going to work?’ I asked Tyba suddenly. ‘Does each Anzaii have guardians?’

Tyba wiped his mouth daintily. ‘Yes, in a way. But you and I will fly together—with eight guardians. Ensign Jett here is one of them; he’s your personal aide as well.’

Jett grinned at me and continued chewing his food.

I started to question the need for such protection, but the prince raised his hand.

‘Ciera and I are leading this operation, Taeon. Without us, the strike force would be in trouble.’

I nodded, but inwardly I wondered if there were others trained and ready to take our places should any of us fall.

*‘Maybe there’s no other skyearl who can maintain a shroud as well as Ciera,’* Tiaro suggested. *‘Without the most stable and reliable platform from which to launch each attack, our dispelling efforts would be inconsequential. Not many Anzaii can use their minds to dispel if their bodies are under physical attack.’*

‘True, Anzaii-kin,’ I conceded.

I finished eating my bread trencher and offered the rest of my meal to Jett.

He stared at me wide-eyed. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course,' I replied.

He accepted the food with such a look of gratitude I nearly choked.

'Didn't you know that several barrels of foodstuffs went bad already?' he asked.

I raised my eyebrow and shook my head slowly.

'Some kind of red waxy mildew was found in some of the vegetables,' he explained. 'There're not many vegetables left. Are you sure you don't want this?'

'I'm fine,' I replied.

Some raised voices caught my attention. Not far from the men's bathing area a group of six or seven Anzaii were arguing fiercely with one of the guardians. Other guardians watched from nearby, apparently staying out of it.

'That would be murder!' one of the Anzaii shouted. 'For me to take that concoction would mean death for my Anzaii-kin as well.'

The guardian, whose name was Corypha, chewed his lower lip. 'I can see your point Aerilaya, but don't you think it's a better fate for it than watching helplessly as you are captured and waveraded, then used as a tool against your own people?'

I frowned at the group, trying to hear more clearly. Jett mistook my expression for confusion.

Jett spoke through mouthfuls of food. "Waveraded" means "violated". The Zeikas can do that; or so we keep hearing. Someone in the Sunbark Cities uncovered a plot of theirs to "secure several Anzaii for studying wave interception". Their witches have learned how to hold captive an Anzaii within their own mind, using their abilities to do something with our wave communications.'

'The queen mentioned it during the one meal Sarlice and I shared with the royal family,' I replied. 'It would be yet another way for the Zeikas to spy on us.'

Jett nodded. 'Aye. There are those who think it could become more than just spying though.'

‘The Wavekeepers?’ I asked.

‘Yes. They think a captured Anzaii could be used to actually locate or interfere with Rada-kin, Sleffion-kin or Tolite-kin. They are afraid that if the Zeikas find one powerful enough, they will use her or his abilities to locate humans as well. It could be anyone they wanted to find, but especially Kriites, so the Zeikas could hunt down and kill them.’

I shivered, thinking over the ways in which my telepathic abilities seemed to be expanding. Had I been a target back in Tez for that very reason? Did the Zeikas know something of my future?

‘That would be terrible beyond imagining,’ I agreed. ‘But what can we do about it?’

‘The Wavekeepers seem to think you should all be killed. They think Anzaii abilities are not really a blessing from the Nine Trees, but a mistake...’

*‘How can plants make a mistake?’* Tiaro interjected into my thoughts.

*‘How can an earring ask a question,’* I shot back.

‘...rather it is the demon lord’s way of increasing a Sleffion, Rada or Tolite’s power to give them a false sense of security, with the ultimate aim of usurping that power for the destruction of Kriites.’

‘I’ve seen a Wavekeeper murder someone,’ I blurted.

Jett licked his lips. ‘They are surely mad.’

‘Surely mad,’ squarked Naltoch.

‘I’m glad you think that,’ I replied. ‘I haven’t yet proven myself an effective member of the defenders, but I believe Tiaro and I will be able to make a difference.’

‘Ah but do you know how to close off your access to the waves, Taeon?’ Colonel Berodukanis, one of the highest ranking Anzaii in the strike force, had approached us from behind.

Jett downed the last of the vegetables I had given him and said sarcastically, ‘We were just discussing the “solution” the Wavekeepers have for the threat of waverading.’

Bero rubbed the whiskers on his chin, which were shaped into a ‘V’.

‘There have been other, less extreme, suggestions,’ he said. ‘Corypha, our guard over there advocates that all Anzaii should carry with them a packet of viserill, life-quickening herbs. If they are captured and a waverade artefact created, they consume the viserill and within hours they are dead.’

‘Preposterous,’ I snorted. ‘Where I come from suicide is not an option. We must fight to the death.’

‘No matter what the cost?’ Bero pondered.

‘There is always another way,’ I replied.

‘It is difficult to equate the risk to other Kriites with one’s own life and that of your Anzaii- and Tolite-kin,’ Bero agreed. ‘But in certain circumstances, you might like to have the choice. The same could be said for any of our high-ranking officers. Successful interrogation could lead to the deaths of many thousands of our people.’

‘Well I want nothing to do with this viserill,’ I replied, standing up.

Corypha, who heard my outburst from several feet away scowled at me.

‘Much of this is new to you,’ Bero said, also standing. ‘I wouldn’t expect you to understand why we do many of the things we do. In fact I’ve been told you haven’t had much experience even at dispelling.’

‘No, not really,’ I mumbled.

‘You’ll soon get a chance to learn,’ Bero said before he walked away.

I stood outside the pavilion for a while, taking in the night air. I could sense Ciera sleeping restlessly nearby. Amadeus stood with his head bowed and his wings folded tightly around his body. His claws had extended deep into the ground, crushing grass and roots. Tyba rested his forehead against his Sleffion-kin. Sorrow billowed from the skyearl, not just in his body language, but also in the waves. It was a small step forward for me—to know that I could sense the emotions of a skyearl other than my own Sleffion-kin—but it was a bitter-sweet accomplishment, which, at that moment, I did not feel like sharing with anyone.

‘I know it’s hard,’ Tyba whispered to Amadeus, ‘but we must wait.’

The prince stroked the great skyearl’s furred forehead and slowly turned away. He rubbed his hand through his hair and stopped in front of me.

‘Tomorrow will be challenging,’ he said. ‘I don’t expect you to give up your life for this. You are a new master psion... there are others who would die in your place.’

I stared at him with a look of horror.

‘We are going to need you, Taeon. Even if you cannot do much with your Anzaii gift yet, your kin will work through you. We will need you, and all Anzaii, for the duration of this war. Your lives must be protected. Don’t forget that.’

I nodded grimly. I did not have the energy to argue with him. And what was the point? When the battle came, most of our expectations and careful planning would be overturned with immediate problems. And Tyba had little reason to fear for me—I would ride aback none other than the emperor skyearl!

# Chapter Eleven— Bird's Eye View

Ciera woke me early in the morning with a gentle, but insistent tapping in my mind. I sensed him standing by the river, muzzle glistening with water. His belly was so full of it that his body felt heavy and saturated. It was damp and grey outside and the sweat inside my leggings made me shiver. The smoke from our cookfire rose into the mist, creating a dense haze. Several men and women were standing about the fire sipping mugs of tea and talking quietly. A couple emerged from the pavilion, embraced and then moved in opposite directions to bathe and prepare themselves for battle. I thought painfully of Sarlice.

*'I have convinced Tyba and Amadeus that one skyearl is harder to spot than nine,'* Ciera said. *'You and I will fly out unguarded to set the shrouds.'*

*'What are you setting shrouds for?'*

*'For the strike force to ride upon. We'll be masked from view until a tyrak passes close enough to see through the mist.'*

*'Good idea,'* I said. *'Zeikas hate the wet.'*

*'It is one of the many uses of shrouding we've employed over the decades,'* Ciera said, subtly reminding me he'd been fighting Zeikas for longer than I'd been alive. *'Though during war Zeikas are willing to put up with certain discomforts.'*

I stretched my arms up in the air and tried to breathe deeply. My back stung in several places, but as I limbered my arms and legs

and continued to stretch, a pleasant warmth came into my muscles. I performed the exercises my leaders at Jaria had taught me and I threw in a few others I had learned from Sarlice. I pictured her alongside me, stretching and straining, smiling at me all the while.

Although I missed her, I was glad she wasn't here. A small part of me hoped she would ride for Lantaid with the Rada-kin and keep her head down. Whether Tanza won this war or not, the casualties would surely be high. The further they all were from the fighting, the better. But I knew Sarlice would not run like that—and I could never ask her to either. By most predictions there would be fighting in Lantaid eventually—maybe even in Centan itself—and Sarlice would be right in the thick of it, among her new defender comrades.

When I was finished stretching I hauled a bucket of hot water to the men's bathing tent and scrubbed myself clean. At Jett's insistence I even spared the time for him to clean and cut my hair and shave my face. I dressed in multiple layers of clothing, including a chainmail vest and a black glass chest-plate. The king had given his best Watercrag armour to the strike force, including dozens of expensive cloaks of dampening. They were made of blue-dyed flax treated with fire-retardant sap. I gritted my teeth as Jett fastened mine on. It didn't seem right for me to have one and not Jett.

There were also black helms for the 36 Anzaai, which were made of black boiled leather covered in black and blue scales, horns, teeth and claws. They covered only the top of the head, leaving the face uncovered. A scarf of the blue-dyed flax protected my neck. It had chainlinks and rows of tiny interlinked scales on one side and was lined with wool on the other. There were matching gloves of dampening: silver wrist-guards with verses from Tanzan poetry inscribed on them.

A pair of skyearl-claw shoulder spikes were my next challenge. I had never worn shoulder-armour before and some of the spikes were ten inches long. I took off the black iron chest-plate and fastened the leather straps and buckle of the shoulder spikes over the chainmail vest. It was difficult to get the straps of the chest plate back on over the top of the spikes. A pair of iron legguards went over my underclothes without hindering movement.

I hid the marble-hilted dagger in my left boot and strapped the Jarian belt and Fyschs at my side. Finally, after fastening Tiaro to my left earlobe, I jogged to meet Ciera. As I made my way through the forest, the familiar sounds of birds and small amphibians reminded me of home. It amazed me that a simple hunter, used to solitary rambles into Jarian forests had been accepted into an elite strike force in a realm of 1.3 million people. With such fine armour on, I hardly knew myself.

I found Ciera meditating just in front of the bridge where we had landed yesterday afternoon. The sight of such an immense creature resting was awe-inspiring. He sensed me coming and opened one eye to wink.

*'You're calm today,'* I commented, remembering his frustration at having to hold back yesterday.

*'I am compensating for my weakness,'* he replied.

*'It isn't weak to want to save the lives of your people,'* I counselled him.

*'Yet there is wisdom in taking time to gather ourselves for a proper assault,'* he said. *'I don't disagree with Tyba's strategy.'*

*'What's worse, losing members of the strike force prematurely due to lack of rest or losing dozens more Condiites you might have helped keep alive?'*

He arched his eyebrow, acknowledging my rhetorical question. Then he said, *'We have a saying here in Tanza: "When you find yourself between a rock and a hard wall, fly".'*

He continued to hum a soft tune as I threw ropes over his body and used them to haul the battle-seat onto his back. It took some time to strap everything down. The buckles were so enormous that it took all my strength just to get the metal prongs to go into the holes. Ciera waited patiently, but when I was finished, he walked over to Amadeus and got the smaller skyearl to pull all the straps much tighter. He stood on all fours looking at me with a gentle smirk.

*'Time to fly,'* he said.

I climbed onto his back, strapped my own legs into the battle-seat and tried to make myself comfortable.

*'Ready,'* I said through the waves.

Ciera leapt upwards with his hind legs and spread his wings. Smoke and mist whirled beneath us as a shroud-made wind gave the enormous skyearl lift. He roared through the waves, letting all of the strike force know we were on our way. Ciera was adept at broadwaving to large numbers of skyearls and now that he was bonded to an Anzaii, his communication abilities had expanded even further.

Amadeus waved with one clawed hand. Ciera shot up and the dawn rays caught us in a burst of warmth and radiance. I lifted both hands in the air and revelled in the freedom of flight.

Ciera flew higher and higher. I belatedly wished I had worn the coat from Sarlice underneath the chainmail and flax cloak. Ciera's breathing laboured and a great fog came from his mouth in the cold air. The same fog was coming from my mouth too. I wondered if shrouding was the same as breathing this out on a cold night.

*'It's similar,'* Ciera replied through the waves.

The rushing air would have made it difficult for me to hear him out loud.

Ciera had flown so high that we were above several layers of cloud. We could not see any land below, but my Sleffion-kin knew exactly where he was going. Soon, I became aware of another presence in the waves. As the rays from the morning sun danced with the clouds around us, a hovering shape came into view ahead. A golden skyearl waited for us, marking a safe place for the shroud to be created.

We came to hover in front of them, which was very difficult for Ciera with his belly full of water.

*'Greetings Emperor,'* the skyearl call in a female voice.

On her back was a person of indeterminate gender of about seventeen. They were dressed in black armour like mine and sported the same black cloak and helm. It was heartening to think there would be other Anzaii to help the strike force. The youth bowed their head to me.

*'Master Psion,'* they intoned. *'My name is Riftweaver and this is Rawn. It is an honour to meet you.'*

A glimpse of the golden skyearl's perceptions told me how magnificent Ciera and I appeared. *The shining blue, purple and green fur of the emperor's hide was dazzling in the dawn light. The young rider on his back was formidable, bearing a blue sword, wearing Anzaii armour.* It was dizzying to see myself from another's point of view. Through Rawn I had a brief window into the world of a non-binary person. Riftweaver had chosen this new name for themself years ago and was comfortable in their own skin, which was medium brown, like mine. Rawn sensed my accidental intrusion.

'I apologise,' I said aloud so that Riftweaver could also hear me. 'My wave-speech to Sleffions other than Ciera is newly acquired.'

Rawn blinked. 'It comes to you surprisingly young,' she said. 'Many humans work for decades trying to learn the skill and even then it is only possible with skyearls they already know and trust.'

'Myself included,' Riftweaver added in a gentle voice.

'How fares the battle?' I asked.

'We are holding our own for now,' Riftweaver replied. 'It will take more than a few thousand Zeikas to breach our perimeters.'

The fact that Condi's leaders could spare Riftweaver for this task encouraged me.

*'There are many tasks to be carried out in a war,' Ciera said. 'While footsoldiers and Rada-kin march out to battle and skyearls patrol the skies, there are people going about their normal lives in Condi City. Back in the city proper, merchants are still peddling their wares, blacksmiths are hammering armour, street cleaners continue their work and water sprogs empty the slop buckets of those who can afford them.'*

*'In other words, there is still time to defend the city,' I replied. 'You have to forgive my small-mindedness, Ciera. I come from a village of only a few hundred.'*

'The strike force will soon be there to assist you,' Ciera said.

Riftweaver nodded. No more words were required. Rawn flew away a fair distance and turned to watch. Ciera glanced back at me once and then focused his mind on the task. He drew in deep breaths of air. I felt the gathering of his will then Ciera swept downwards through the first layer of clouds.

He blew out steam as he went, venting great gusts of white cloud. The shroud formed slowly behind us as he circled and soared. His body strained with the effort and I could feel a burning pain in his throat and stomach. The water he had spent hours swallowing earlier this morning was being released as vapour.

We flew on for what seemed like hours. Eventually Riftweaver and Rawn flapped away.

*'Until we meet again,'* the skyearl sent to Ciera.

The shroud behind and beneath us gathered into a tight mass, but on the edges it stayed wispy and vaporous. Ciera had formed a second level of mist about one hundred feet above the main shroud, shielding it from eyes above. Ciera's shroud was easily the size of the strike force camp. When it was finished, he reached out his feet and collapsed onto the spongy, white surface in the centre. He rested there for some time, breathing heavily. Water dripped from his open mouth.

I stepped down from his back, thrilled with the swooping ride I had just enjoyed. The flight from Centan had not been nearly so interesting.

'Flying is magnificent!' I declared.

I tried to touch Ciera's mind with my excitement, but he was unreachable. He must be asleep—after such exertion it wasn't suprising.

I wandered around on the platform, trying to get close enough to the edge so I could see below. It was difficult with the amount of mist around the edges. Every now and then, the breeze would lift the veil and a spectacular view came into sight. We seemed to be even higher than when the strike force had flown here.

During the mission to come, Ciera would make the shroud move much closer to the ground. Right now, with the sun shining down around the edges of the cloud above and a fervent breeze lifting my hair, I could hardly imagine having a pitched battle on this dreamlike cloud.

I rested for a while and fossicked in Ciera's pack a few times for food and water. As the day wore on the breeze became a buffeting force. With little else to do I soon became bored. Ciera seemed to

be even further away from me now. If he dreamed, it was well out of my reach. I dried the drooling water from his lower jaw and stood beside him.

*'Master Psion, are you safe?'* Naltoch, Jett's Rada-kin, touched my mind from far away. *'The other Sleffion have noticed Ciera's withdrawal from the waves and the prince is concerned for your safety'*

I reached back to the viperjay. *'He seems fine—just sleeping.'*

*'I suppose that is to be expected after creating a mobile shroud,'* Naltoch said. I could almost hear the upturned pitch of a viperjay squawk in his sending. *'It isn't done very often.'*

Now that I had my attention focused on the rest of the strike force, I could sense a jumble of conversation between kin. The words and feelings slipped and slid like dust motes in the air in front of me. I could tell they were there, but I couldn't catch them. Several of the Rada-kin sensed my awareness of them and turned their thoughts to Tiaro and me. A wave of vertigo washed over me. I sat down hard on the surface of the cloud. Ciera's shadow protected me from the late morning sun's glare.

*'Master Psion Taeon,'* came the gentle, rumbling wave of an arctodus, or giant bear, named Kotor, *'The strike force continues to prepare for battle. Prince Tyba has requested that we convey to you the information you will need.'*

*'Very well,'* I responded. *'I will do my best to commit it to memory.'*

*'I will help you,'* Tiaro added.

Kotor and Naltoch's presence in the waves became more pronounced and I sensed that the viperjay had landed on Kotor's back. The physical touch heightened their ability to share senses and thoughts. The contrast between the two beings became more obvious at the same time as their thoughts aligned to deliver the information to me as coherently as possible. I received an image in my mind, at once close and far away. I tried to clear my thoughts and simply observe what they sent me, but it was hard not to feel the bear's ceaseless, niggling hunger and the viperjay's nervous restlessness.

When I thought about their differing perspectives, the image began to make sense. From the one came an intimate knowledge

of terrain; humps and hollows, rocks, ravines, rivers and trees, then buildings, towers and roads. From the other came a vision much like a map, but instead of being hand-drawn and made up of symbols, it was like looking straight down on the landscape from Ciera's back, with no clouds hindering the view. The rivers and ravines I'd seen from Kotor's point of view suddenly fitted together as a majestic whole, a network of watercourses both dry and running. Trees dotted the landscape and dissipated gradually at the foot of an unnatural mound.

At the top of the enormous motte were the city walls of Conдии. Tiny drain-pipes emerged from a few spots around the motte depositing a slow trickle of city waste. The grass was greener there, but few people went near the dirty water.

Small details followed so that when I thought of Conдии, I knew the best places to perch and preen, the places to find puddles after rain, how to pinch bread-dough from the bakehouse and quiet places under the rafters of the donjon and surrounding buildings in the bailey. I knew intimately the very fibres that made up the walls and rooves, the wells and bridges; even the smell of the red and black paint on the marketplace buildings and fence posts.

I bathed in my new-found knowledge. The amazing, but baffling, vision of a great many trees and rocks far beneath Ciera's massive body started to make sense. The bent tree I had seen was a landmark and a scentmark. The little hollow with the patches of black bushes was a place to shelter and roll in herbs. The forest of yellow-barked trees was a snacking spot for skyearls. And I gradually found that I knew this place, knew it like I knew only the forests around Jaria. It was an inspiring sensation.

*'It's called imprinting,'* Naltoch told me. *'And it's not unlike the learning that takes place when a young creature first imprints on its parent.'*

I felt stuffed with new and unexplored knowledge, even though the imprinted map only extended a short distance around Conдии.

*'And that is not all we need to convey to you,'* Kotor said gravely. *'There are a few routes and rallying points you need to memorise before we join the battle.'*

The unlikely pair combined once more to draw my attention to their dual vision of the terrain, one from the ground and one from the sky. By the time they were finished, I was certain I could easily navigate my way into and throughout the city and that I knew every good hiding place in the forest nearby. I also had a rough idea of where we would regroup if things went bad, where each of the Condiite armies were based and where to find food, water and medical supplies, among other things.

I spent the rest of the morning mulling over these things and trying to remember the best military tactics I'd learned over the years. I appreciated the collection of scrolls that used to be in my house in Jaria, before it was destroyed. I consoled myself that I had read them all at least twice.

There were other castles and garrisons throughout Tanza, from which a counter-attack could be launched to help Condiit but, from all reports, the Zeikas had simultaneously assaulted the major outlying cities and so it would be wise for each castle and garrison to defend its closest major city only.

For the Zeikas to divide their own offensive armies like that could mean only one thing; they had far superior numbers to our own. I had never heard of such a force and knew I wouldn't be able to come to terms with it until I saw them with my own eyes.

## Chapter Twelve — Battle Plans

Ciera eventually stirred and his urgent need for food and water dominated my mind. He felt hollow and dry inside and a stinging weakness was spreading through his body. If we didn't fly to land soon, we wouldn't be able to. The great skyearl's fur and feathers glistened with dew and it was slippery climbing on. Although my eyes had mostly adjusted to the brightness of the day, I was blinded by light as we launched off his newest shroud. The clouds beneath us seemed to glow with their own brilliant light.

Looking back, I saw the shroud following us lazily. Ciera swung backwards and forwards to slow his passage through the sky. The shroud moved slowly over a layer of creamy cumulous below us, protecting us from eyes below. Even if the Zeikas were scouting with their dragons, it was unlikely they would fly as high as we were, especially in exactly the right place to be able to see us. But Ciera wasn't taking any chances.

Ciera's shroud stopped following us when he felt it was safe to fly on without it. After that he shot through the air like an arrow. In very little time, he was landing near the strike force camp so he could feed on the lush vegetation. The smell of hunger and thirst was all around him. The silver in his saliva had gone thin.

'You go on,' he said aloud. 'There will be more strategies and plans for you to discuss.'

'What about you?' I asked.

He shrugged. 'It is more important that I regain my strength for the coming battle. Besides, you are my Sleffion; it is your role to speak for both of us when I am absent and convey information to me.'

I wondered if my memory would be as reliable as he expected. It already felt like it was about to burst; my head still ached dully. Leaving him to his tree-felling, I padded back to the camp. A tall stranger with iron-grey hair in a shaggy ponytail was talking to A.S.T. Bero and A.S. Rialb. Tyba was engrossed in studying a map on a large tree-trunk table.

I removed my armour, except for the legguards, and sat next to Aunt Jaalta on a large wooden log in front of the main camp fire. She was stirring herb-scented tea in an iron jug. She winked at me as I sat down, offering me a tankard.

Some of the guardians were sparring in a stone-marked ring nearby. At least fifteen others stood around honing weapons, talking, eating or drinking.

'Jaalta,' I began, 'When an Anzaii dispels a conjured beast, what's to stop the Zeika from just conjuring another one?'

Jaalta sighed and shook her head sadly. *'Nothing. For that very reason we need as many Anzaii as close together as possible. We may not be able to get down there and melee with the conjurers and kill them, but we can slow them down somewhat by dispelling again and again.'*

I scrunched the corner of my mouth and muttered, 'Sounds like a grand waste of time.'

'If that's how you feel, perhaps you will work out a better way to use your psionic powers,' Jaalta replied demurely.

'How much longer do we have to wait?' somebody from behind me asked. Other voices joined in question. 'Aye, when do we move to help Condii?'

'The shroud is ready,' I announced to nobody in particular.

Tyba turned back to the map he had been studying. A number of writing tools littered the table, reed pens and quill pens among them.

'Soon, maybe this afternoon.'

'Maybe?' Major A.S. Abirim asked.

‘The Zeikas have been playing cat and mouse with Condii,’ Tyba replied smoothly. ‘We believe they may be hoping we’ll draw fighters away from Lantaid, which will leave it exposed.’

I looked at him sharply. ‘Prince Tyba, exactly what size force are we facing?’

He sighed and looked up at the gathering crowd. Most of the Anzaii in the strike force were present now. Captain Dathan stood near Tyba with his arms folded and a grim expression on his face.

Tyba cleared his voice and spoke more loudly. ‘It is believed that the Zeikas have superior fighting forces to ours. They have divided their armies and broken through the barrier in multiple places around our border.’

The noise around the camp dulled down and all turned to hear what Prince Tyba had to say.

It was his Sleffion-kin, Amadeus, who spoke next. ‘There were very few survivors from Lokshole and Lander’s Bay. The Zeikas leave only a small regiment, of about 1000 men in captured towns. There has been word on the waves that around 10,000 Zeikas are on the move from Lander’s Bay to Highford.’

Tyba leaned on his skyearl and held his own chest for a moment.

‘There is even worse news,’ he said. ‘It has been coming to Amadeus and me for some time now, but we didn’t want to alarm anyone unnecessarily when there’s nothing we can do...’

Ciera listened from afar through me.

Tyba cleared his throat. ‘The Sunbark Cities have confirmed the warning from their scouts that around 24,000 Zeikas are closing on their position. The Zeikas seemed to have gained entry through the barrier somewhere near Fireflow Mountain and were camped in the forest between there and Zoen.’

‘Then send the defenders from Lantaid and New Rosenvale to assist them!’ someone shouted.

From the maps I had seen it would be days before either contingent could reach the Sunbark Cities, and they were among the most vulnerable cities in Tanza. With their fire-magic, Zeikas could rain destruction on the Sunbark Cities, as most of the buildings were made of wood and suspended in the trees. Zeikas, on their dragons,

could even drop fire-brands on the cities from above the canopy, out of their defensive archery range.

‘Even if reinforcements could get there in a useful amount of time,’ Tyba replied, ‘the combined total of warriors in Lantaid and New Rosenvale is only 11,500. My father is in direct communication with the commanders in all of our cities. It has been decided that if war threatens our more vulnerable towns, they will be shrouded and their populations evacuated to the closest fortified towns.’

‘And sire, what are we doing?’ Jett asked boldly. ‘Naltoch and I have friends in Condii and they say things are looking bad.’

Tyba gestured at Furlorny and said, ‘We await the signal from Condii to move the shroud and the Anzaii in. When that happens, the Anzaii will be dispelling the Zeikas’ conjurations as fast as possible, then we’ll move the shroud back, have a rest and do it all over again. In the meantime, learn all you can from the Chief Architect here about defending the city.’

‘Thank you, sire. Aye, that’s the plan,’ Furlorny said. He glanced at me. ‘Are you up for it Master Psion?’

‘I already feel like I know it and I’ve never even been there,’ I replied, ‘Two of the Rada-kin imprinted me with their knowledge of Condii.’

He laughed, patted me on the back and said, ‘That’ll be a good start! Now listen up everyone, for the human perspective. There are 30 towers around the borders of Condii city, plus six at the main gate and six at the keep, making it one of the most fortified cities in Tanza. The curtain wall encloses the entire city and is three paces thick with a sloped inner passage closer to the outer edge from which arrows can be fired at various heights.

‘There are only six places to get into the passage from the inside and mechanisms are in place to block those off if the thinner outer layer of the wall is breached. Archers and spear-throwing skyearls are stationed at every tower and at the tops of the walls. The Zeikas attack from the skies on their dragons and with their conjurations so there are always squadrons of the Air Combat Group patrolling the sky above Condii.’

His descriptions went on for a long time and I did my best to match up my imprinted ‘memories’ of the city with everything he said. I finished my tea some time during the speech and obtained a flagon of ale. Everyone around me listened with rapt attention to the master stonemason. What surprised me most were the instructions for how we could evacuate the city if all its defences were, somehow, overrun.

Furlorny was adamant that if the Zeikas gained access to the town, we must be prepared to abandon it. The idea of evacuating a town of this size would have been unthinkable in the Upper World, but they didn’t have access to flying shrouds and skyearls.

‘Otherwise, tens of thousands of civilians will perish or be put into slavery,’ he said solemnly.

The fate of Jaria was a stabbing grief in my heart but this was on a much larger scale. I resolved to adhere to the evacuation plan for Condii if it came to that. Nothing was worth saving more than people’s lives, not even this magnificent city. Perhaps after fighting Tanza for centuries the Zeikas would not expect them to flee.

*‘I’ve just realised something,’* Tiaro said. *‘You no longer think of yourself as a Jarian.’*

*‘No, I suppose not, if Jaria is no more...’*

*‘Nor do you think of yourself as a Tanzan.’*

*‘No.’*

*‘What do we fight for then, Taeon?’*

*‘For me, this is about all Kriites,’* I said. *‘Our entire race is under attack. Therefore it does not matter what realm we are from.’*

‘The best way out is via shroud,’ Furlorny was saying, ‘but if necessary a few thousand people will fit in the waterways so it’s a quick enough way out of town.’

‘Let’s not dwell on that possibility,’ Tyba said. ‘The surviving scouts reported that the legion that took Lokshole is the one that now harries Condii.’

‘We have a very active Commander in Condii, S.T.R. Varal,’ Architect Furlorny said. ‘He has spent significant resources over the past twenty years fortifying the city and equipping the defender warriors that are stationed there.’

‘Prepare for battle everyone,’ Tyba announced. ‘We expect the signal soon, so go clean yourselves up, bandage any injuries, relieve yourselves. Do not eat or drink further—sustenance will be provided if and when it is safe and convenient. Leave your belongings here; take only what you need to fight the Zeikas.’

I put down my tankard as the camp scrambled into action. I reached for Ciera and found that he was already on his way back. He was walking off his enormous tree meal. I cleaned the dust from my feet with a wet rag and put my socks and boots back on. The rest of my armour followed, with Jett’s help.

By the time I was ready, Ciera was waiting. He looked tired, but ready for action. The great lizard-like tail, which trailed behind him, was never stepped on despite it sometimes being in the way. A variety of Rada-kin cavorted around the grounds, stretching their muscles, sharpening their claws and play-fighting. I yearned for Rekala.

*‘Trees be with you, my Taeon,’* Rekala sent from afar.

Ciera allowed two skyearls to lift the enormous battle-seat onto his back. Next they passed half a dozen spears up to him that he secured in a metal clasp on the battle-seat. The skyearls spent some time adjusting the buckles and making sure they were tight. Under the girth, Ciera’s fur was already rubbed thin from the journey here and to the shroud creation site. I touched the large spikes that were on my shoulder guards, wondering what skyearl had shed them. Or had it been dead when they harvested its horns and claws for human armour?

*‘It is a skyearl’s honour to give its body for human protection, in life or in death,’* Ciera explained.

I nodded solemnly, thinking of the viserill. Would I be willing to die to protect others? If not, could I really be used by the Zeikas, used against all Kriites?

I wondered what it would be like to be waveraded; imprisoned within my own mind, watching helplessly as I enabled my enemies to track and kill my own people. Ciera proclaimed the willingness of skyearls to sacrifice themselves for people but could I sacrifice Tiaro, Fyschs and myself to protect the waves?

*'I don't agree with the use of life-quickening herbs,'* Tiaro told me.

*'But what if they do capture me?'* I asked. *'I can initiate contact with any Rada-kin or Sleffion-kin. If I concentrate really hard, I can pinpoint them in the waves and get a feel for their location in the real world. A Zeika with those abilities would not only be able to listen in on secret conversations, but would be able to find kin in the flesh.'*

*'We will deal with it if it arises,'* she said, *'but I agree, killing yourself is not the answer.'*

Jett was right behind me as I patted myself down to be sure I had all my weapons. I had found a better place for the marble-hilted knife—fastened to my calf beneath the strap for my shin plates. Fyschs was in the white scabbard at my left side, humming with readiness. Jett handed me a pair of iron daggers in sheaths and I slid them onto the Jarian belt.

Jett wore two longswords, criss-crossed on his back, a crossbow and a bolt-pouch at his side. There was a shield for each of us, a lightweight metal disk with wooden grips. I noticed Naltoch nearby, sharpening his beak on a whetstone.

When Jett and I were ready we followed Ciera to the far corner of the strike force campsite where the leaders and their guardians had gathered.

In the lead squadron there were twelve humans in all: Prince S. Tyba, Captain S.T. Dathan, myself and our aides and guardians, including Sergeant S. Corypha. I was the only Anzaii. The other Anzaii were still preparing their skyearls for battle, chanting battle-songs or meditating on the waves while their guardians put the final touches to their weapons and armour.

There was something ritualistic about the way each sword was drawn from its scabbard and sheathed again, each buckle and strap tugged and refastened, each bolt and arrow checked for cracks or splinters.

It wasn't until I saw someone dipping their arrow-heads in a red, bubbling poison that the magnitude of what we were about to do hit me. This was a war—and a war like nothing I had ever seen. There would be no quarter, no negotiation.

Sergeant Corypha stood next to me and gazed out over the campsite where I was looking. ‘It’s us or the Zeikas, you know.’

I nodded. He dragged his hand through his sandy-brown hair. His skin was lighter than mine and not as golden as Sarlice’s. His family might have been from Telby or Jesath. Kriites from those areas tended to have a more intermingled heritage.

‘They’ll do everything within their power to crush us,’ he went on, ‘even turn our own magic against us.’

I faced him, perplexed by his relentlessness. We had never spoken before, yet he was already trying to persuade me to his view. He mistook my expression for confusion.

‘Just think about it,’ he began, ‘Tyba said the Zeikas have broken through our protective barrier in more than one place. They use Kriite blood to do that. It’s a twisted counterpoint to the purpose of our barrier. How much more, then, are they able to tap our wave powers?’

I had wondered that myself, not long ago. I resettled the helmet on my head to release some pinched skin.

‘The last person I encountered with those concerns had just killed the only Anzaii that Jaria had left.’

The silence between us became deadly.

Then Corypha squeezed my arm and said, ‘I’m sorry to hear about what happened to Jaria. Is that why you came here?’

I took a deep breath and let it out again. ‘Yes—Sarlice and I came here to find help for our tribes.’

‘You’re from separate tribes?’

‘She is from Lyth and I am from Jaria.’

‘Ah,’ he sighed out as if he’d discovered a great truth. ‘Is she the one with red hair?’

‘Mmm,’ I mumbled.

‘I saw you with her in Centan,’ Corypha said to me with a nudge. ‘Known her for long?’

I kept my eyes down as I tried to think back over the time Sarlice and I had been travelling together.

‘We only met last summer,’ I replied.

‘And she’s in Centan still, isn’t she?’

I nodded. 'Why do you ask?'

'Oh I just know how hard it is to be parted from those you love in times of war.'

I chuckled nervously, sighed to myself and muttered, 'I hope she will go to Lantaid to escape with our Rada-kin.'

'That might be wise,' Corypha said, eyes widening. 'Do let me know if you want one of the viserill packets, won't you?'

*'Trees! Go stuff your viserill up your—'*

His Sleffion-kin called him away and I was relieved my thoughts hadn't become a reply.

# Chapter Thirteen—The Many

All too soon we were mounting up, along with the rest of the strike force. The Chief Architect and several members of his manor staff were ordered to stay behind at the camp. It didn't surprise me that they wanted to keep a man of his genius safely away from the battlefield. Some people spoke of him as the best engineer in Tanza, a man capable of utilising the height and lifting power of the skyearls to construct anything from immense buildings and bridges to giant catapults.

Tyba waved farewell to Furlorny as Amadeus launched into the air. Mist sprayed my face. The great purple and orange skyearl gave a roar of anticipation and the entire strike force followed him in one immense wave of spread wings and puffs of shroud.

Once we were airborne, Ciera flew ahead of the main group, buffeting them with the force of his wing beats and letting them ride his wake.

We reached the mobile shroud and continued to fly with it trailing beneath us. Some of the smaller skyearls, not much bigger than Fleetfoot, landed on the shroud to rest and reserve their strength for the coming battle.

I hadn't realised how close we were to the city, but we soon came upon one of the thirty towers. Five spear-skyearls were standing watch on the flat roof, the claws on their four cat-like feet clutching the wooden railings that had been installed for them. The lances they held were twice my height, with glistening red tips. There were ten humans stationed there, five of whom were the spear-skyearls'

sleffion-kin. The other five were unbound members of the defenders, in the archery division. One of the archers cheered when she saw us. The others raised their bows in a sign of victory.

We passed over a river and seven other towers before, finally, coming to a halt in mid-air. The shroud floated between two of the towers at one end and over the healer's ward of Condii at the other. The front gates of the city were visible in the middle-distance, a looming wall of steel, diamond and grey stone. The ten towers formed a circle near the front gate with the four outer towers only just within firing range of the one next to it.

From the air the gate appeared to be located in a depression in the city wall, forming a W at one end of the city. This created a sort of gauntlet with six towers within firing range of each other guarding the gate. Rounded pillars of marble, as tall as Ciera, had been erected on either side of the gate and a network of steel framing held it all in place. The pillars reached high into the sky with a narrow point at the top capped with steel and flying twin skyearl flags of Tanza.

Archery division skyearls flew in gigantic arcs around the far side of the front gate; their target, a legion of Zeikas outside the firing range of the towers on the south east corner. From this distance I could barely make out what was happening on the ground. A cacophony of emotion in the waves let me know there was plenty of fighting going on, but most of it was in the air. I hummed *Halduronlei* to myself, trying to close the clamour out of my mind.

Ciera sat on his haunches on the edge of his shroud, eager to engage. The battle-seat had a sturdy back-rest so that when Ciera was sitting up on his hind legs, it still held me in. The great skyearl wrenched one of his spears from the clasp beside me. A low growling emanated from his throat.

'Easy, Ciera,' I said.

Dragons harried the circling skyearls and we were ordered to stand and watch as the battle raged on. The Anzaii strike force needed to wait until enough conjurers had revealed themselves—only then would we know where our abilities would be most effective.

It seemed to me like there were plenty of Zeikas already. There were at least twenty rows of a hundred men, but they waited outside firing range of our towers. It was as if they were daring the Condiites to leave the safety of their tower-watched city.

Meanwhile, Zeikas on dragons broke through the skyearls above Condii high in the sky every now and then and rained fireballs down upon the soft heart of the city.

There were conjured beasts in the air and on the ground too. Green-winged, long-beaked death hawks, like the one that I'd encountered near the Catacombs of Krii, flapped in angry circles. The rest of the creatures were new to my eyes but I had learned enough about Zeikas, recently, to name them.

White-furred, gorilla-like theros roamed among the ground troops, belching out their roars and beating their chests with grotesquely clawed hands. They were nearly twice the height of a man and had bulging, red muscle tissue beneath their sparse fur.

Wriggling closer and closer to the towers were mobs of firewyrms. The conjurers responsible for these had positioned themselves behind the first line of warders and flammers. With arms outstretched, they guided their green-flamed conjurations closer to the south-east tower.

To my surprise, not a single arrow was wasted on the firewyrms. Instead, buckets of water were hoisted from windows high up on the tower and an Anzaii emerged right into the midst of the firewyrms with arms outstretched, attempting to smite them. One by one they fell—but not without burning her and the wooden tower door. The next wave that attacked would probably break through. The wounded Anzaii retreated inside the tower leaving only smoke behind.

And thus went the rest of the day. We stood by, ready and watchful, as the Zeikas made only token efforts to trouble and weaken Condii. I hoped that somewhere, someone was thinking about our enemy's tactics and taking steps to discover why a full assault had yet to be launched. Ciera and Tyba didn't seem to know.

Were they building catapults or siege engines nearby? Were they concealing other Zeikas within spirit circles, creeping closer and

closer to Condii's tower sentries? The possibilities seemed endless and the odds were all on their side.

After a while, I climbed down from Ciera's back to stretch my legs.

'Why don't we attack?' a mounted guardian named Aquala asked from behind me.

'Our orders are to wait for a full scale commitment from the Zeikas before joining battle,' Ciera replied. 'We must trust the prince, the high commander and the king and queen. They have a better idea of the big picture.'

'It won't do anyone any good if we rush in and get ourselves killed,' Jett agreed.

After night had fallen Tyba allowed us to consume a small meal. In the darkness I could hardly see what I was eating and I only managed to eat a few bites. My stomach ached with tension. We couldn't even look up to see the stars because Ciera's protective roof-shroud was still there, blocking us from eyes above.

I kept watch on the small amount of sky that was visible around us. Because of the intensity of my vigil, I was the first to spot the dragon. It flew in a backwards and forwards pattern as if scanning systematically. Our shroud was safely within the boundary of the 30 towers, but if the dragon got on the right angle, it might be able to see us between the sandwiching shrouds. It zigzagged east to west, moving ever northward, closer and closer to our position.

'Tyba, we have a Zeika scout closing in,' I said, never taking my eyes off the barely-visible shape.

'I don't see anything. Jigm, can your Rada-kin confirm?'

S.R. Jigm, who was sitting nearby, stood up. His Rada-kin, Kotor, gave a warning growl. I climbed back into the battle-seat, daring to hope it might be Ciera and me who got to chase down the enemy. Such danger would be preferable to this mind-numbing waiting.

'Right,' Tyba said, 'Aerilaya, Mnason, Assos: kill that scout.'

'Yes, sire,' Aerilaya responded. The three Anzaii and their three guardians ran to their Sleffion-kin and mounted up. Within

moments all six skyearls and their riders had leapt from the side of the shroud and winged in a big circle to intercept the Zeika conjuration. As soon as they made themselves visible, the scout dived towards the ground and we lost sight of them all.

Tyba began pacing restlessly. He hadn't eaten anything either, and I sensed that he wouldn't take his eyes off the battle right now, even if someone put a sizzling hot salmon right in front of him.

The chilled night air poked its cold fingers down the back of my neck. Sweat broke out on my face and back, causing me to shiver. Ciera's lurch of alarm reached me before my eyes picked out the shape of a dragon and rider descending through the clouds. As soon as it came level with the shroud it would see us.

Ciera acted first, with me barely having time to gather my wits before he was diving off the shroud. The dragon wheeled at the sight of him. *Has the Zeika seen the strike force?*

We pursued arrow-straight, but the much smaller dragon was more agile in the air. I reached for one of the bronze knives, but in this darkness and at this speed I doubted I could do anything useful with it. Ciera drew one of his spears from the case and pitched it ineffectually at the dragon.

The dragon fled north, avoiding the archery and spear range of the seven towers we passed. I barely spared a thought for the strike force we'd left behind—Ciera and I could handle one tyrak. When it crossed the river and reached the trees, it dived for cover, knowing Ciera could not follow. Thanks to the imprinting I'd received, I knew that forest well, so I knew it was too dense even for a dragon to fly. We landed so suddenly that the ground shook and whirls of dust rose into the air. Ciera was puffing and enraged. His mental command to destroy the Zeika propelled me forwards.

Tiaro's thoughts were with me as I ran into the cover of the trees. My heart thundered in my ears. Broken branches revealed the path of the fleeing Zeika. He knew he had seen something important but, without wave communication, he must get back to his fellows to share his information. In the darkness, my only chance of finding him was by scent. I crouched to all fours, keeping my head up and reaching for my black dire wolf form. Gradually my senses became

clearer. The night seemed brighter and the smells of the forest came alive around me.

I pursued the Zeika, buoyed on by Ciera's restless pacing behind me. The Zeika had climbed into a tree not far from the end of the trail of broken branches. My hackles prickled at the smell of Zeika magic in the air. A dragon rider was no less than level four in Zeika initiation, a conjurer, sryer and expert warder and flamer. At any moment another of his bestial conjurations could burst from the darkness to slice me open.

I opened my mind to the waves hoping they would give me discernment or a premonition. A crackling bolt of green fire lanced towards me. The leaves sizzled and popped behind me, the flames catching despite the moist, green interior of the branches.

I circled the tree, watching the Zeika become more uncertain. If he vacated his own senses to conjure a creature now, his own body would be left vulnerable for just enough time for me to kill him. He gripped the branch he was sitting on with both hands and shimmied higher.

I growled, finding that it soon became the snarling, guttural challenge of a full-grown icetiger. I was not as big as Rekala in this form, but the muscles of my legs and jaws were primed and strong. My sense of smell diminished in this form, but I could climb. The Zeika flamed in my direction.

I was already moving. With thick claws sinking into the dry bark I hauled my weight up in three lurches. My jaws clamped over the Zeika's leg as he tried to get away. Flames scorched my ears and whiskers, but I climbed a little higher and savaged the man's face with long, razor-sharp claws. Distracted, his flaming ceased. Getting my teeth around his neck, I snuffed my enemy's life with a single bite.

The taste of the blood shocked me; like warm metal, but sweet and refreshing. I let the body drop from the tree before following it to the ground. It was tempting to fall upon it and feed, but something about that made me hesitate.

*'Enough, Taeon,'* Tiaro advised.

*Halduronlei* whispered through the waves, as if borne on the wind that murmured in the trees around us. The sadness of its melody immediately recalled me to my human self. I hunkered low to the ground in my natural form retching and trying to scrape the Zeika's blood from my mouth. My stomach cramped horribly and pain burned inside me.

Finally, I vomited. I lay there for some time, trying to recover.

Tiario led me out of the forest to the stream we had crossed in pursuit of the Zeika. Ciera watched silently, listening to the chimes and strings of *Halduronlei* that Tiario now brought to our memory. It made me so mournful, as if reminding me of the bigger picture of the world we lived in. Jaria destroyed. Tanza in a serious war. Zeikas swelling in numbers and ranks, flooding into the rest of Chryne like a torrent of poisoned water. I tried to clean the blood from my hands and clothing, but it had already dried red and waxy. My stomach clenched again, even though my nerves had calmed.

*Poison!* The blood-red tips of the poison-dipped arrows floated to the surface of my mind. Ciera and Tiario immediately saw the connection I had made. Mildew was white, not red. The mildew that had been found on those food barrels had been poison; a failed attempt to wipe out the strike force! And they'd tried it again. The stomach pain and sweating I'd experienced wasn't nervousness at all. It was poison. Thankfully the little food I had consumed had been regurgitated already, but what about the others?

'*Amadeus,*' I called out so suddenly through the waves that I didn't stop to question whether I could reach someone else's Sleffionkin or not.

Amadeus' soul-strong presence reared up in the waves. His solidarity with Tyba was incredible; so tightly were they linked that Tyba's emotions blurred with the skyearl's. *Despair!*

'*Taeon, the strike force has been poisoned!*'

'*I know,*' I cried out. Ciera and Tiario were with me in the waves, talking all at once.

*How could this happen? Who poisoned the strike force? Are you well? Were the Zeikas behind it? How many have been affected? What*

*are the Zeikas doing now? Are the guardians for the lead squadron sickening as well?*

*‘Those that still can are forcing themselves to throw up. Others have been carried to the healer already. Some have already died, very soon after you left us.’* Amadeus’ words carried the weight of a sobbing heart with them.

*Viserill...* I thought. I paced back and forth, muddying my boots on the shore of the river.

*‘Where is Corypha?’* I asked.

Amadeus did not reply for a long time. I chewed water-reeds from the side of the river to clean the bile and blood taste from my mouth. When Amadeus finally contacted me it was only to say that nobody had seen Corypha for some time.

*‘He’s a Wavekeeper,’* I realised, shocked by my own thoughts, even as conviction of their truth struck home. *‘He’s trying to kill all the Anzaii.’*

*‘Why?’* Amadeus demanded—and I almost heard Tyba’s exasperated tones. *‘We may be the only hope Tanza has of winning this war.’*

*‘They don’t believe that,’* Ciera replied. *‘The Wavekeeper cult believes that Anzaii magic is something gone wrong. They believe it corrupts the waves even though we embrace them as heroes.’*

*‘Yes, yes, we have heard their wild claims,’* Amadeus replied angrily. *‘But would they really use them to justify poison and murder?’*

*‘Perhaps they see it as sacrificing a few for the greater good,’* Ciera replied, though he sent with it a clear impression of his disapproval of such an attitude.

*‘Find Corypha,’* I ordered. *‘Do not kill him! We need to know exactly what he has set in motion before it’s too late.’*

I was aware that Tyba reserved judgment against Corypha. No matter how convinced I was, he needed more time to consider the evidence. Still, he was impressed with my quick thinking.

*‘What are you going to do?’* Amadeus asked.

The question surprised me; I had expected them to order me back at once. For the very first time, I became aware of the taste of my own authority.

*'Let's find out what we are capable of doing,'* I suggested privately to Ciera and Tiaro.

After receiving their approval, I said to Amadeus, *'We're going to take down some Zeikas.'*

*'Very well,'* Amadeus replied. *'Tyba says it's chaos here. You may engage the enemy. We'll have Jett fly out and meet you.'*

I had almost forgotten about Jett.

*'Thanks,'* I replied.

*'Ciera, be careful,'* Amadeus advised. *'You're not invincible, even with a master psion on your back.'*

## Chapter Fourteen— Entrapment

I turned and ran for Ciera. The great skyearl crouched, tail lashing through muck and vegetation. As soon as I was fastened safely, a cloud spread out below me and Ciera launched into the air. His body whipped sideways, magical winds and wings propelling us into the sky.

We shot upwards, the cold air embracing us. Ciera drank in the clouds we passed through. We burst through a particularly thick layer of stratus clouds and hovered above the moonlit plain of white. Stars spattered the sky above us, breathtaking in their splendour.

In the distance, greenish smoke billowed around a network of hastily-formed shrouds. Skyearls circled and dived. Some paused on shrouds momentarily before launching after a dragon. The death-dance was taking its toll on the flesh-and-blood Tanzan army. Whenever a dragon was dispelled, there was soon another to take its place. Even though dozens of Zeikas were falling to their deaths, there never seemed to be enough Tanzans to completely wipe them from the sky above Condii. Some conjurers weren't even mounted on their dragons. They were skilled enough to direct them from the ground outside the city.

*'They can't be too far away,'* Ciera commented, straining to hover in one place. *'Even the most advanced far-conjurers can't be more than about two miles away. We are already one and a half miles high.'*

A skyearl and rider approached us from the south west, Jett and his Sleffion-kin Ptemais, a green and red skyearl a bit larger than a draughthorse. Naltoch flew in a circle above them, keeping watch in all directions, including above.

‘I’m glad you made it,’ I shouted.

Ptemais pulled up next to Ciera and landed on a puff of shroud he created. Ciera set down gingerly and stretched his aching wings. Despite the assistance of a puff of wind from the creation of some shrouds, the stress of flight still took its toll on his body.

‘I hadn’t eaten yet,’ Jett began, ‘when the first Anzaii started retching. They always get their food first. It seems that somebody knew that and specifically wanted our Anzaii to die.’

‘Corypha,’ I growled.

‘What—you know who it was? How?’

I told him of our conversation before we left the camp. A feeling of foreboding crept over me as I recalled that I had told Corypha about Sarlice and the Rada-kin. I reached for Rekala with such anxiety that she stopped what she was doing and lifted her muzzle to the sky, as if reaching out to me.

‘*Taeon,*’ she wailed. ‘*When will you return to us?*’

‘*You are safe?*’ I queried.

‘*Aye, but I am not whole without you.*’

‘*I’ll come for you as soon as we’ve turned back the Zeikas from Condii and Centan,*’ I replied. ‘*But promise me you’ll move towards Lantaid and the chasm. If something happens to me, you can escape that way; I’m sure of it.*’

‘*Very well, Rada, but what makes you so concerned all of a sudden?*’

‘*There was a traitor here, someone from that Wavekeeper cult.*’

‘*Is that the same group we encountered back in Jaria?*’ Rekala asked.

‘*Aye. The traitor here in Condii is named Corypha—he was a guardian in the strike force. Poisoned most of the Anzaii.*’

‘*That’s terrible. I’m so sorry to hear that,*’ she said, yowling.

‘*It gets worse,*’ I continued. ‘*Before I knew he was a Wavekeeper, I told Corypha about you and Sarlice in Lantaid. It’s possible he told someone else...*’

*‘But Sarlice isn’t an Anzaii—why would the Wavekeepers care about her?’*

*‘They probably wouldn’t,’* I admitted, *‘but they might use you to get to me somehow. I was meant to be among those that got poisoned. Just promise me you’ll be wary.’*

*‘We will, my Taeon.’*

Her use of my name brought a smile to my lips. It was like she simply loved saying it. Rekala demanded a report of everything that had transpired since our last wave-conversation. Jett waited patiently while I stared into space, conversing with my Rada-kin.

*‘Please tell Sarlice I think she should leave Tanza,’* I said eventually. *‘I must go. It’s not safe here.’*

I caught Rekala’s chortle as she withdrew from the waves. She doubted anything could harm me with Ciera, Tiaro and Fyschs to help me. A strange sense of uselessness tailed that thought; as if she no longer felt that I needed her. I told myself I’d have time to resolve that later.

For now we needed to locate the far-conjurers and if possible entrap them.

*‘How do you propose to do that?’* Ciera questioned. *‘Nobody has even taught you how.’*

*‘It makes sense,’* I replied. *‘I’ve been thinking about this waverading the Wavekeepers are afraid of. In a way, Anzaii already have that power over the Zeikas.’*

*‘But Zeikas don’t use the waves,’* Ciera retorted.

*‘They invoke demons, which appear different on the waves than in the physical plane,’* I said, thinking as I spoke. *‘A Zeika must stay focused on their conjurations via the waves.’*

*‘And you think you can interfere with that link?’* Tiaro pondered, catching on.

*‘Yes.’*

*‘How?’*

*‘I don’t know.’*

To Jett I said, ‘I’m going to catch me a dragon.’

To his credit, he didn’t laugh or demand an explanation. He and Ptemais followed Ciera and I as we glided off the shroud platform.

We soared straight towards the south corner of Condii where dragons and skyearls spiralled and somersaulted. Intricate patterns of smoke, shroud and flame floated high above the city.

At least a dozen dragons were clearly visible. Still more battled above and below us. Some were protecting formations of four or five with baskets of hot coals and oil in their claws. Several of these oil-bombs were ignited with green flames and dropped. Ciera dodged to avoid one. There was nothing we could do to stop it falling down onto the barracks below.

The emperor skyearl climbed sharply and I felt a swooping pressure in my head. We aimed directly at one of the dragons guarding a group of retreating bombers. It lagged behind, surveying the area immediately around its charges. It did not have a rider. Within moments, Ciera had closed on his prey and clutched it with his foreclaws. Like a great-eagle capturing a sparrow, we then bore it to the ground. I jumped from Ciera's back as soon as we were grounded, jarring my knees as I did so.

My hands found the slick black hide of the dragon as Ciera fought to hold it still. With a thought for the Nine Ancient Sapphire Trees, I closed myself off from the real world and concentrated on the spiritual. I sought the demon that enabled the Zeika magic to take place.

My eyes were like a torchfire, sweeping across a barren landscape too long hidden in darkness. The demon could not hide. As soon as I'd found it I sensed the tendril of awareness connecting the dragon to its conjurer.

I plunged myself after the tendril. The dragon began to fade. Tiaro ran beside me in a form like a leopard. She chased the demon with her keen eyes and spirit-senses.

In the spirit realm it felt as if I was running with all my strength but getting nowhere. The fleeing demon was like a glowing rope racing across the ground just out of my reach. With it went my chance to locate the Zeika who had called it. Tiaro and I stretched our stride but, always, the rope stayed ahead of us.

*'Faster, Tiaro!'*

A rushing wind stirred the plains around us as we ran and the echoing howl of the demon filled my ears. Tiaro pounced on the glowing rope and wrestled it to a halt. Like a dog presenting a half-slain creature to its master, she turned and proffered the glowing rope to me. I grasped it in both hands and yanked.

The demon struggled in my grip, openly terrorised by the presence of the leopard. It tried to imprint random fear onto me, but Tiaro was there to fortify my resolve. I pulled the rope in, hand over hand until the enemy at its end came into view.

A human's presence in the waves was normally much like hearing or seeing them in real life. But here in the waves, this Zeika's appearance was greatly diminished. Like a starving child he hunkered low to the ground in rags. Shackled and chained by the weight of his own cowardice, guilt and poor choices, the Zeika moaned in the agony of pure hatred.

Strong he may be, in the real world, but here his weakness was exposed. Despite his frailty and hindrances, the Zeika rose up to fight me. I drew Fyschs from the sheath at my side and held him at the ready. This occurred both in the real world and in the waves. Curses and threats flew from the Zeika's mouth. He made casting gestures and ward runes, but his magic did not harm me.

Tiaro watched over me as I struck the struggling figure with my Tolite-kin. Dark scratches formed on my arms and face, stinging like poisoned dagger-slashes. The Zeika screamed at me, blinded by his hatred and filled with the thoughts and desires of a dozen demons.

The demons retreated as Tiaro's teeth crashed into the Zeika's head. Fyschs obliterated the remaining demons, which were frantically trying to leave the retiring vessel to find another. We crushed them with one final sweep.

I opened my eyes to Ciera's enormous blue one, peering into my face with concern. Fyschs was in one hand and my face ached even though there was not a scratch on me.

'It is done,' I whispered huskily. 'Tiaro and I killed the Zeika and his demons.'

Ciera chuckled lovingly at me, perplexed and relieved at the same time. ‘All that effort to entrap one conjurer,’ he said. ‘How will we ever succeed?’

‘*Don’t be a pessimist,*’ Tiaro scolded him. ‘*We will improve over time.*’

‘What in the trees has just happened?’ Jett had clambered down from Ptemais’ back and crawled to my side.

I tried to explain it with words, but a feeling of pure joy bubbled out of me. I found myself laughing with relief and astonishment.

‘Tiaro showed me the way,’ I said aloud for Jett’s sake. ‘We should let the other Anzaii know how to do that.’

‘What did you do?’ Jett asked.

I replied somewhat breathlessly, ‘I couldn’t really see the point in dispelling. They’ll just conjure something else.’

Ciera scratched his side with the claws on one back leg. ‘He used the far-conjurer’s link to the dragon to locate him in the waves and entrap him.’

‘You killed him?’ Jett pondered.

Before I could explain further, a deep growl-hiss emanated from my Sleffion-kin. ‘*Zeikas nearby,*’ Ciera warned.

He advanced into the valley before us with a deafening roar. Dark shapes were crowded in the sunken ground before the city motte. Ciera drew one of his spears and swung it before him like an immense scythe. The dark shapes fell back, uncertain perhaps.

‘*Careful, there may be more,*’ I said.

He jumped forward suddenly, spreading his wings to carry him across the intervening space. His spear swept across the ground again, knocking at least six men flying. From out of the darkness behind the mob came fifteen theros. The hairy beasts knuckle-ran at Ciera all at once and slashed at him with their long sabre-like claws. Despite their much smaller size, the theros occupied Ciera long enough for the remaining Zeikas to retreat.

The sound of Ciera’s teeth chopping the theros in half filled the air. Growls and screams accompanied the battle and black blood sprayed over Ciera’s purple-blue fur and feathers until they glistened

like oil. His spear broke in the stout body of one of the theros. He threw down the haft and roared thunderously.

The final two theros ignored the warning, throwing themselves at him with reckless abandon. He swept them together, knocking them senseless. He pressed them to the ground with his front feet and beckoned me forward.

His laboured breathing steamed the night, leaving small platforms of shroud in the air around him. The animal stink of his exertion engulfed me, fuelling a sense of rage that was totally inhuman. The corpses of the theros he'd slain evaporated into nothingness before my eyes. Even the blood hissed, popped and bubbled away. The slain Zeikas, however, had stiffened already; some had shrivelled beyond the age of an ordinary human, the last vestiges of Zei's 'gift' of long life gone forever.

I clenched my fists with my arms out straight, stretching my muscles and trying to vent some of my pent-up fury. The flax cloak felt heavy on my shoulders and my face stung even though there were no true injuries; perhaps the psychological effects of being attacked in the waves were stronger than I anticipated. Still, I approached the writhing theros that were still alive.

I extended my hands and touched both of the hot, moist bodies. One vanished under my touch so rapidly that I didn't have a chance to entrap the far-conjurer. I dived after the other; struggling to swim through the murkiness of the waves to locate his mind. I caught him like a fish, but he slipped easily out of my grip.

The scenery around us blurred and the water receded, leaving behind the dark, dry desert that I had encountered before. The chalky red dirt stretched for miles in every direction, dotted with small and large stones. Severe snow-capped mountains blockaded the horizon and lightning danced in the cloud-bruised sky.

Unlike the first conjurer I had faced, this one turned to face me with a sneer. His form was somewhat distorted to my eyes in that place; he wavered before me like a black flag in a moonless night. Looking down, I saw that my boot was firmly placed over a corner of his robe, pinning him in place. I realised that this was the tenuous link with which I held him.

As he turned, his body came right up against me, yet I dared not move and take my foot off his robe.

This Zeika's spirit-form was tall; he stared down at me with hatred, his whiskers scratching my temple. Before I had a chance to decide what to do, his hands were around my throat.

*'You will die,'* I croaked.

He struck me with the back of his meaty fist. If it was possible for bones to break in that place I was sure my jaw had been crushed. The ground rushed up to meet me. The impact shocked me senseless and still the Zeika attacked. He kicked me until there was no part of my body left untouched.

*'I am immortal,'* the Zeika told me, letting spittle fly with his words. *'Unlike you—pitiful slaves.'*

*'You're wrong,'* I managed to say through split and swollen lips.

He swore at me in Reltic, still unable to detach his robe from my grip; which was caught on part of my armour.

A breeze ruffled through the darkened plains, bringing with it the fresh, rough scent of the wild. In my battered state, I barely heard the sound of a leopard's footfalls.

Tiaro rushed through the scene faster than my stinging eyes could see. She seemed even larger this time. The Zeika's scream was the last thing I heard as the robe tore free and he was severed from the living world.

As I came back to myself, Jett was hauling me to my feet and propelling me towards my Sleffion-kin. Naltoch squawked from above.

*'Zeikas, zeikas!'* he warned us through the waves.

'They mustn't like what you're doing, Master Psion,' Jett said. 'There're more coming.'

Wiping my hand across my jaw to ensure it was whole, I groggily replied, 'Let them come. Tiaro and I can slay them.'

'Yes, Taeon, but there is a limit to how many you can face. You need rest,' Ciera nudged me with his nose to push me up into the battle-seat. On the far side of Ciera's body rose a tide of blinking lights.

The wind shifted, carrying with it the stench of Zeika flames and conjurations. Up from the valley came what had to be the bulk of their army. Too numerous to count, the black-green ranks swelled up around the south east corner of Condii, surrounding us. Crossbow bolts and balls of fire rocketed into the air just as Ciera and Ptemais sprang out of reach.

The skyearls carried us well clear of the approaching Zeikas. Anger pulsed through me, bringing with it a heady rush. I wanted so badly to turn and fight. I watched the Zeikas move catapults into place, launching a barrage of rock missiles at the southern tower. The sound of stone striking stone and crashing to the ground spurred Ciera on. A Tanzan flying squad rushed past us, arrowing straight for the catapults.

In perfect formation, the eight skyearls whipped suddenly and knocked one of the catapults over. Conjured dragons swarmed up from the valley in much greater numbers, catching several of the skyearls by surprise. The others wheeled away, forced to leave their friends to die.

*'We can help,'* I said to Ciera.

*'Nay,'* he replied, *'We must get back to the others and tell them what you've learned.'*

*'The strike force?'*

*'Aye.'*

*'What remains of it.'*

## Chapter Fifteen—Tactics

Ciera's enormous wings conveyed us to the shroud he had made in very little time. Only a handful of people remained standing watch. The rest were either deployed or in the healing ward. After I dismounted, Ciera walked the length of the shroud telling the other strike force Anzaii what I had done to the far-conjurers. Jett, Naltoch and Ptemais stood behind me, on alert.

Colonel Aerilaya, the Anzaii who was presently in charge, gestured for me to approach.

'Welcome back, Taeon,' she said. 'I hear you've found a way to attack the conjurations at their source. Good work.'

'Thank you, Colonel,' I replied.

'It's probably a good thing we didn't attempt to train you ourselves,' Aerilaya said. 'You might have been limited in your thinking if we had.'

'What do you mean?'

She had a head full of dark brown plaits, shrewd eyes and a piggish face. 'You and Tiaro have come at the battle with a fresh perspective. You can learn from each other and from experience as you go along.'

'Hasn't anybody ever done what I did to those Zeikas before?'

'If they have, it was never recorded,' she confirmed. 'Wave communication, banishing and dispelling have all been documented, but you seem to have discovered a new ability. What did Ciera call it?'

'Entrapment,' I replied, and explained to her what I had done.

When I was finished, she said, ‘Tyba and Amadeus have asked to see you, so you should go to the healing ward now.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ I said, giving her a Tanzan farewell.

By this time Ciera had finished talking with the skyearls on the shroud so the two of us walked on side by side. As we neared the edge of the shroud, Condi city came into view. Beyond the walls, Condi was a neat, orange-stoned place with mostly black tiled rooves and slate-gray cobblestones on the roadways. I could even see pasture and clumps of trees behind the taller buildings.

Like Telby City, Condi enclosed a sustainable farm district, vineyard and many small, recreational gardens. The main road spiralled around Condi parallel to the outer wall. In four loops, the road reached the central keep, a near-impenetrable fortress guarded by six towers and a moat wider than Ciera was tall.

It was a relief to land inside the relative safety of the walls; I rubbed my eyes and yawned. Ciera and Ptemais proceeded down Spiral Lane West towards the healers’ building, the second-largest building in Condi.

The entrance to the healing ward was an immense stone archway high enough for Ciera to walk through on all fours. Heads turned from innumerable alcoves to the side, watching the emperor skyearl and his master psion human.

Ciera stopped in a large chamber with a domed ceiling and lowered his left shoulder so I could slide down. Jett told me he was going to try to find a quiet place for me to rest. I looked around for the poisoned strike force Anzaii, but couldn’t see them anywhere. How many had Corypha murdered?

I tried to take in my surroundings. The walls were ivory-white with gold frames ribbing the ceiling like the spokes on a gigantic wheel. The mezzanine floor of the chamber was crowded with skyearls of every shade from silver to gold, green to red, white to black. Except for the healer-skyearls, every one had an injury; some more gruesome than others. Here was a skyearl with a crushed tail, there a broken wing stripped of feathers, here a missing forelimb and a gashed face, and there a completely blinded male skyearl crouched angrily in the corner, tail lashing.

Ciera made words with some of them but, over the cacophony of cries and roars, I couldn't really hear. I listened through our mental link for a time but something caught my attention. Through one of the smaller archways two storeys up was Tyba, face in his hands, shuddering with silent sobs.

My heart sank—we must have lost another Anzaii. Ciera sensed my desire to join the prince so, mid-conversation, he casually reached around and put both forepaws around my waist, claws clicking together, but not touching me. With no sign of effort he lifted me up to the ledge that led into the room Tyba was in.

I said nothing as I made my entrance. The ceiling here was not much higher than my head. Rows of beds lined the wall ahead of me, some tended by human healers. Despite the herbs affixed to the posts and fresh reeds on the floor, the room stank of the flux. Tyba braced himself against the wall to stand. His clothing was soiled and bloody. After some time he caught his breath enough to speak.

'Colonel A.S.T. Berодукanis just seized and died,' he said plainly.

Outrage welled up in me. 'What treachery is this?' I shouted, punching the air in front of me.

Tyba continued mercilessly on, all emotion drained from his words. 'Abirim, Mnason and Phoenicia died not long before. Of three dozen Anzaii in our company only twenty survive.'

He gestured at the beds along the wall where there were several bodies covered with shrouds. The others who had succumbed to the poisoned foodstuffs were going through alternating states of vomiting and an exhausted restless sleep.

'That's no way for a warrior to go,' I said darkly. 'Have you apprehended Corypha yet?'

'As soon as you accused him I sent someone looking, but everyone is so busy, they aren't paying much attention to who is coming and going.'

'What about Jaalta,' I asked.

Tyba answered so quickly, I could tell he'd already thought this through. 'She is on the battlefield dispelling conjurations and

sending stray thoughts into the heads of the Zeikas to distract them. Perhaps, later, she can find Corypha.'

Tyba's adjutant, Lieutenant S.T. Samos bustled into the room carrying an armload of fresh clothing and linen. He put it on a chair nearby.

'I've arranged a room for you two houses down, sire. Oh, greetings to you, Master Psion. A room is not available for you yet. I may be able to find a bed somewhere in—'

'Ensign Jett is already looking into it, thank you.'

'That won't be necessary,' Tyba told us. 'Taeon, you and Jett will share my room.'

Samos hesitated, drew a breath and nodded. 'Yes, of course, sire. I'm sure the hostess will be honoured to have not one, but three extra guests... despite the fact that the house was full even before we arrived.'

Tyba ignored the jibe of his aide. He moved away leaving Samos to re-gather his armload.

'Can I carry anything?' I asked.

'No, thank you. Though you might want to convey to Ptemais or Naltoch that Jett can stop looking for a place for the two of you to stay.'

Apparently word had spread about my new ability to mind-speak with other skyearls. I wondered what this would mean for my place in the strike force. Would they reposition me into the communications division, stuck in a room transferring messages?

*'The communications division is our greatest advantage over the Zeikas,'* Ciera told me, from down below. *'Do not belittle them.'*

I rolled my eyes but decided I was too tired to argue. I shifted my attention to the other skyearls within range of my wave-perceptions. When I located Ptemais, I told him about the prince's offer.

*'Jett was having some difficulties,'* he replied with relief. *'We have never seen Condii this crowded before.'*

Tyba was already moving through the room, touching the bedridden people on the forehead and uttering kind words for their recovery. Samos followed him, stammering about what resources he would need to chase up to accommodate both of us. I smiled,

thanking the Nine Trees for people like Samos and feeling glad that I was not one of them.

We acquired items from several rooms on our way out of the healers' building. When we reached the street, a distant booming could be heard. The sky seemed greener in the direction of the south east tower. Foreboding crept up in me. I wanted to respond with action, but my body was heavy with fatigue. The days spent waiting, filled with tension, followed by my near-poisoning, fighting and the stress of learning the Anzaii entrapment skill had taken their toll.

Despite the late hour, there were scores of people about on the street, mostly going to and from the healers' building. The barracks was also nearby and I could hear the shouts of the commanders and the roaring of angry skyearls. Wings swept over us frequently, beating a pattern through the air that was almost in time to the distant booming from the Zeikas' attack.

Lieutenant Samos knocked on the richly carved door to a house and was greeted by a very tall lady with a blond top-knot. This contrasted nicely with her dark black skin. Her family were from one of the Kriite tribes around the Barh desert, no doubt. She graciously ignored the state of Tyba's clothing and exchanged the ritual Tanzan greeting with him. A young boy gestured to him from down the hall.

'A tub and soap awaits you, sire, as was requested.'

Tyba raised his eyebrow at Samos and followed the boy.

'Master Psion Taeon,' Samos began, 'allow me to introduce you to Pivorn.'

'Oh my,' she said. 'A master psion, have we? You are most welcome in my home.'

'Thanks in advance for your hospitality,' I managed.

We stepped through the threshold and into a lavish kitchen, which was currently strewn with crates of supplies and baggage. It was so full of milling people that we had to step over gear to cross the room.

'I'm glad to hear that,' Samos replied. 'For Prince Tyba wishes for him to stay here, too.'

Pivorn's face pinched and she looked quickly away as if unsure how to respond. I could hear coughs and talking from deeper within the house, but couldn't tell how many other people were in there.

Pivorn cleared her throat. 'Will you sit and rest while I speak with Vareeki?'

'Vareeki and his family can stay where they are,' Samos assured her. 'Tyba and I will share our room with Taeon and his aide, Jett. We know how hospitable you have already been with all the distressed relatives of the sick and injured.'

Pivorn nodded. 'It is my pleasure, Lieutenant. As an upstanding member of the speakers guild I consider it a privilege and a responsibility to house those who live too far away from the healers' building to tend to their loved ones adequately. And I hear that accommodation is only going to become scarcer as Condi receives refugees from The Sunbark Cities.'

Samos stood up straighter, blinking rapidly. 'I'm not sure where you heard that, but news travels fast where the waves are in use. It is true and we are going to need more people like you to get through this confrontation.'

'In about nine days time the refugees from The Sunbark Cities should arrive. Although the journey is longer, they chose Condi over Lantaid, hoping that the Zeikas will not expect it. They also feel safer within these walls than in Lantaid.'

I wavered on my feet.

'Do come in.' Pivorn pulled me by the arm. 'You look like you need something hot to drink.'

'Thanks,' I replied, wincing at the loud caterwauling of a child nearby. 'That would be most welcome.'

'I'll bring it to the room,' Pivorn said.

Samos needed no further prompting. He marched up the stairs, carrying the clothing and linen, to a medium-sized bedroom with maroon walls and cream fur rugs all over the polished wood floor. A fireplace rustled pleasantly in the middle of the room, cupped in a stone basin that was open on all sides. Slits in the floor around the fireplace allowed air to gust upwards, directing the smoke into the

stone chimney above our heads. Samos guided me to a chair by the balcony and proceeded to make up the beds.

As I was unbuckling and peeling off my armour and shirt, Jett entered with a steaming pot of tea. Pivorn came behind with four tankards. She placed them respectfully on the table just inside the door and retreated to tend to her other houseguests. Tyba appeared at the door with wet hair and a rosy flush to his bronze skin.

‘Thank you for arranging the bath, Samos. I am going down to the barracks now.’

‘Again, sire? Haven’t you already been to see Commander Varal this afternoon?’

Tyba pointed at Samos as if to say, ‘we’ve had this conversation before’, but all he said was, ‘Perhaps Taeon and Jett would like to use the bath-house while I’m gone. Then will you prepare a light meal for the four of us, please?’

Samos nodded, watching his prince leave. ‘He takes on so much responsibility,’ he sighed. ‘He has hardly slept nor eaten for days.’

I was selfishly pleased I did not have that level of duty. I ruminated on the idea that my responsibilities as both a master psion and Ciera’s Sleffion had not yet come upon me.

‘You may use the bath-house first,’ Jett said. ‘I need to check and clean your armour so it is ready for you in the morning.’

By the time Tyba rejoined us, both Jett and I had bathed. The smell of smoke and food wafting through the room and the distant cacophony of the rest of the household reminded me of home. To distract myself from that thought I helped Samos and Jett arrange a meal of cheese, chutney, olives, lowryfish, eggs, oatcakes and green vegetables on the table.

Samos had already eaten from each dish—after what had happened to the strike force, he wasn’t going to let Tyba take any chances.

*‘And I thought he was doing it for you,’* Tiaro said.

I sent her the impression of a smile and gobbled some food. Jett ate with an appetite. Tyba, on the other hand, ate dispiritedly.

‘Has there been more bad news?’ I asked cautiously.

Tyba chewed his lip and looked up at me from beneath his perfectly symmetrical brow. His striking sky-blue eyes glistened with tears. I was touched that he could be so open towards me with his emotions. For a few minutes he could not speak.

Eventually he said, 'You remember the situation with The Sunbark Cities?'

I nodded. 'Yes, but I must admit these figures are nonsensical to my humble upbringing. I cannot imagine a legion of 24,000 Zeikas.'

Tyba shrugged. 'We can't fight spread out like they're trying to get us to. They might have the numbers for it, but we don't. All over Tanza our people are forced to flee their homes. Never has a war become this serious so quickly.'

'How many civilians are on their way here from The Sunbark Cities, sire?' Jett asked.

'Fifteen thousand,' he replied. 'With a defender force of only two-and-a-half. If the Zeikas catch them on the trip...'

'*Can a flight squadron be sent to help them?*' Tiaro asked me, and I passed her question on.

'A third of the Condii Air Combat Group and half of our Flying Archers were dispatched the minute we heard,' Tyba replied. 'But the numbers are irreconcilable; 24,000 against less than 4500. And we cannot spare any more Anzaii, especially now that there are so few of you left. If the worst happens, Condii shall be our last stand. My father considers evacuating Centan even now. With civilians safe in Condii and our defender forces bolstered by his, he believes we might be able to hold off defeat. Divided we will fall.'

My mind reeled at this information. Never before had I been required to think about warfare on such a large scale. Tyba's comment about there being so few Anzaii had made my face heat with anger.

'Corypha,' I hissed. 'How could he do this to his own people?'

'That reminds me,' Tyba replied, 'Commander Varal asks that you tell me everything he said to you before we departed the base camp.'

I recounted what I could remember and my stomach clenched in anger as I did so.

‘Jaalta is retiring from battle soon,’ Tyba said when I was finished. ‘Before she goes to her designated house to rest, she will report to Captain Dathan and try to locate Corypha. We can’t be sure he is involved, but we do want to find him.’

‘I thought I would be there,’ I blurted.

Jett made a sound of protest, about to speak.

Tyba raised his hand. ‘You have done enough for this Soversday. Do I have to order you to rest?’

‘No, sire.’

Samos chuckled huskily and gulped down some more wine. ‘If only there was somebody around who could say that to you eh, Tyba?’

Tyba grinned and patted Samos on the back as he rose from the table. ‘When this is all over I promise you can confine me to my quarters with Clayr and we won’t come out for a week.’

Samos laughed easily. ‘Fine, but I don’t know how much “rest” that will be!’

The four of us laughed and again I marvelled at how open Tyba was with us.

The fire was soon doused and we were each expected to retire to our beds. I suppressed the desire to ask more questions and reluctantly crawled under the outer layer of my bedding. With my head on a pillow filled with skyearl feathers, I wriggled until I was comfortable and forced myself to close my eyes. It was some time before sleep claimed me, but when it did, I felt the dead weight of my limbs dragging me down into a deep and calming slumber.

‘*Goodnight, Taeon,*’ Ciera said and I realised he had been humming *Halduronlei* from afar, watching over me even as I dozed.

## Chapter Sixteen—Division

Jaalta's searching in the waves that night proved fruitless. There were far too many people in Condii and the surrounding area for her to interrogate everyone. And if Corypha had moved beyond the reach of her human wave-seeking ability, she would never find him.

Jett and Tyba were visiting the sickened survivors. They had left me to eat a light breakfast in solitude. After I'd finished I went to the practice yard at the barracks to put some more scratches in the wooden dummies that were there. Fighting continued outside the city but Ciera and I hadn't been deployed yet. In the meantime I wanted to ensure I would be ready to use my Tolite-kin if the need arose. I was at it for some time before Captain Dathan came out to greet me.

'I'm sorry we weren't able to find Corypha.' He looked worn and haggard as he stood clutching a strong brew of coffee.

Making no reply, I performed a series of slow turns with Fyschs held out as far away from my body as possible. The weight brought a pleasant tension to my muscles. Joints popped as I stretched.

I performed the manoeuvres Sarlice had taught me. At first I moved with deliberate slowness, increasing the pace until I was ducking one way, swiping the other, leaping sideways, thrusting up, parrying low, striking high. My breath came quickly and I made no attempt to hide it from the captain.

He watched me intently.

‘What’s on your mind?’ I asked, between bouts with my wooden opponent.

He drew a deep breath. ‘I stand here in Condii with more Zeikas than have ever sieged here before and yet I can’t stop thinking about Lantaid, The Sunbark Cities and the fords. More than half the army that was spotted near Zoen has marched toward Lantaid. That’s double the defender soldiers stationed in Lantaid.’

I paused in my movements—cold shivers travelling down my spine. Anxiety made my head spin as I thought about Sarlice, Rekala and Kestric in Lantaid. I hoped they would head for the chasm as I had asked.

‘There are a great many Tolite warriors in Lantaid,’ I said, ‘and some of the best war-strategists in the realm. Surely they will hold off the enemy despite their greater numbers.’

‘Perhaps,’ Dathan agreed. ‘If I know Commander Fostron, he will not let the Zeikas get near the town. He will meet them out on the Hills of Everstain. Many a battle has been fought and won there by us using the crags and canyons as launching platforms and the forest-covered valleys as cover.’

‘Trees be with them,’ I said.

‘And with the fords,’ Dathan agreed.

‘You have family going there?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘You’re perceptive. My brother normally lives in Ruhor Lair. As with The Sunbark Cities they’ve had to shroud their home-town and abandon it. He’s on his way to Lowford as we speak, with children and their carers in carts. Last I heard there were warriors holding off Zeikas close behind. As you know there are 10,000 Zeikas besieging Highford, which has a smaller contingent of defenders than Lowford. If they take Highford, I am not certain what will happen. It will not bode well for the realm.’

‘You wish to be everywhere at once,’ I murmured, thinking of Ciera, who felt the same way.

He nodded. ‘Our economy is already starting to collapse. Without the constant supply of food from our farms, soon it will not be possible to even feed all our people, let alone defend them.’

‘Why do the Zeikas want both Tanza and Telby?’ I asked. ‘Do you know what they’re up to?’

‘Tanza and Telby are the greatest nations Chryne has ever seen. And the Zeikas want that glory for themselves and their demon lord.’

‘I met with King Flale when I was in Telby,’ I said. ‘But I still don’t know why he has allied with the Zeikas. It seems foolish.’

‘Word on the waves is that King Flale and his daughter Denliyan are scheming with the Zeikas to expand Telby’s borders and increase their resources.’

‘Warmongers,’ I exclaimed. ‘They’ll only bring terror upon their lands.’

Dathan took on a stealthy tone of voice, ‘And the Princess Denliyan remains an aggressive voice at court, even in her state.’

‘State?’ I queried, stomach clenching.

‘She is with child,’ he replied. ‘I thought you would have heard. It’s been in news waves for weeks. Been married a few years now, but no baby until now. Having a descendant secures her succession, in a time when their hold on the monarchy is ever-more tenuous.’

*I am to be a father!* Conflicting emotions of wonder and despair assailed me. My baby would be born and grow apart from me... and there seemed nothing I could do about it.

Dathan caught me by the shoulder. ‘Are you hale, lad? Didn’t eat any of that poisoned food, I hope.’

I wiped my brow. ‘A new little life,’ I stammered, ‘amid so much death. It’s hard to fathom.’

‘Indeed.’

Over the next few weeks the Zeikas attacked the southern corner of Condii with relentless force. Though their numbers were depleted by an endless barrage of arrows, spears and ballista fire from within Condii, they rarely let up for more than a few hours. It was only later that we realised this force had been totally sacrificed in order to gain a foothold in Condii. Their lives had been forfeit from the beginning.

Under pressure from several places around Tanza to send reinforcements, King Crystom had finally agreed to divide the army at Centan. Over 4000 were sent to Conдии, over 2000 to Highford and over 6000 to Lantaid, leaving about 4300 to defend Centan itself. The choice to divide the army was debated by some but, considering it would take about eight days for the armies to reach Lantaid and Highford, there was no time for indecision.

I heard from Ciera that Sarlice and Thita were among those sent to Lantaid. I fervently hoped they would join the Rada-kin and lay low. Even the journey back to Lantaid posed numerous threats. Tens of thousands of Zeikas were closing on them, behind the refugees from The Sunbark Cities.

Every day there were messengers and refugees arriving from some part of the realm and news came in torrents over the waves.

In Conдии two of the south-east towers had fallen about the same time the survivors from The Sunbark Cities arrived within our walls. Some wondered if those people had walked all this way only to die with us.

Only about half the civilians had made it, despite the efforts of the reinforcements from Centan. More than 2000 defender warriors from The Sunbark Cities had given their lives holding back the Zeikas long enough for the civilians to reach Conдии. Wails of grief and devastation rang through the now-crowded city and yet the warriors fought on, trying not to lose heart.

With two of the southern towers destroyed, the barracks were more vulnerable. Dragons bombarded it constantly with oil barrels bursting with green flames. After retreating to the safety of Conдии Fortress, Commander Varal had ordered the entire strike force to gather at the barracks to banish, dispel and entrap.

Jaalta and I had explained the entrapment power as best we could to the other Anzaii. Conjured beasts had to be trapped in the waking world first, enabling the Anzaii to touch them without risk to their lives. So far nobody else had been able to do it.

*'They probably need an artefact from an Ancient Sapphire Tree to learn it,'* Tiaro said.

A sketchy new scroll of Anzaii abilities had been drawn up, now covered with our combined notes and many crossed out words. We were rarely resting at the same time, so my aunt and I took to leaving each other notes and ideas on the scroll that was pinned to the wall outside Pivorn's house.

I stood on the shroud one evening with Jett, Ptemais, Tiaro and Ciera by my side. Prince Tyba and Amadeus were nearby, overseeing the Strike Force's actions. There was a whirlwind of Flying Archers above us, literally blowing my cloak and hair in small eddies.

Reaching out with my mind, I latched onto a flying dragon with a rigidly focused rider. Sensing the link between them was effortless now and I welcomed the feeling of power that accompanied it.

I chose to introduce confusion this time and gently plucked the dragon's invisible reins from the Zeika's clutches. Now in partial control of the beast, I made it lurch sideways and away, crashing into the dragon and rider beside it. Dark green flames belched from its mouth as I impelled it to kill its own squadron.

The Zeikas soon fell victim to the flames, the viciously sharp claws and the exploding oil barrels their own dragons were holding onto. The stink of sizzling reptilian flesh accompanied the cries of outrage from the falling Zeikas. Those who survived were quickly put to death by ground troops in the barracks below.

'A fine effort, Taeon,' Tyba congratulated me. There weren't many Anzaii who could do what I had learned so the prince and his guards were often nearby to protect me.

It was all we could do to hold off the Zeikas in time for the Centan army to regroup inside our walls and lend their assistance. The army at Lantaid likewise struggled.

The battle at Everstain raged on and there were whisperings on the waves that the reinforcements from Centan would be too late.

The other half of that Zeika legion had followed the fleeing civilians here and were reforming somewhere to the south of Condii. The 2000 or so defender troops that had been sent from Centan to help Lowford and Highford now faced an army of over 10,000. With Highford's meagre force of some 2500, there was little hope of victory. The commander of the more highly populated Lowford

had pledged to send warriors. It was hoped that their combined forces, and sound military practice, would be enough to hold off the Zeikas.

In total the Zeikas had assaulted Tanza with over 40,000 men and there was no indication that they had finished penetrating our borders. The occasional scout managed to glimpse still more Zeikas gathered in several places around the outside of the Tanzan border, waiting for their turn to slick themselves with blood and pass through the barrier.

Pyres billowed smoke into the air around these places where countless Kriites were being drained alive, many to death. These camps were heavily guarded and the border patrols that remained had found no way to stop this atrocity. I had suggested to Tyba that he sends me and Ciera, but this was briskly dismissed by Commander Varal. It was true that I was simply too new at what I was doing.

The Zeikas also seemed to have a limitless supply of ground troops. They moved in enormous semi-circles, enclosing the Condiite ground troops who strayed far enough away from the protection of the towers.

Near the southern corner of the city the battle raged with the most ferocity. Watching through the eyes of confused dragons, I flew low over the battle, trying to find the most powerful Zeikas and kill them. Several times I saw a render who could tear a person limb from limb with a simple touch and a verbal incantation.

One time I saw a render surrounded by four heavyset warders who were casting blocking wards nearly constantly. Theros and death hawks prowled nearby, moving aside when the render expressed a desire to step into the battle. Condiite after Condiite fell before him, making a trail of shredded and mangled corpses behind.

Not a single arrow could penetrate the invisible shield the warders created. Even a flock of wyvern Rada-kin that dove into the group were brought up short and smashed to pieces by weapons both physical and demonic. *Perhaps a falling Zeika and dragon would go through that ward-shield*, I thought.

Using my powers I directed the dragon to climb steeply upwards. The armoured lizardine body somersaulted and dived straight at the render, the rider's screams reaching my ears from far away. The render leaned down to kill a Condiite at his feet, not hearing the threat from above. In that instant, the Zeika and dragon crashed down.

My senses reeled as the link that I had violated suddenly vanished.

Tyba caught me just before I hit the surface of the shroud. He peered over the edge where Ciera was looking and nodded with approval. The render lay beneath the smoking ruin of the conjured dragon, which slowly melted into a black pool and bubbled away. The warders looked around in surprise.

Seeing the render's crushed and bent body brought me no triumph, only a grim determination that I needed to do more.

'You have surprised us all, Taeon.' Tyba helped me regain my footing.

Gasping from the effort of controlling the dragon, I stepped back from the edge of the shroud and wiped sweat from my face and brow. Ciera continued to defend the area while I recovered. After a while, even Jett and Ptemais had to fight off dragons and death hawks that were coming perilously close to our position.

I felt distant from it all, as if each time I became connected with a conjuration I lost some of myself to its baseness. It disgusted and discouraged me to become one with such creatures, and to dish out death from afar, even though I knew I was helping to save Tanzan lives.

'Stand aside, Taeon!' Jett shouted.

A tyrak lurched toward us, screaming as its conjurer died astride it. I leaped sideways to get out of the way, observing the fatal wound across the Zeika's throat. The tyrak's long claws slashed and dragged at the air, reaching for me as it staggered. Its footfalls on the solid base of the shroud were heavy, the claws clicking inches from my legs. It toppled sideways off the shroud moments before vanishing from existence, the corpse of its conjurer shrivelling as it fell down alone.

I got to my feet noticing that many of the other Anzaii who had been deployed with me on the shroud were occupied by dragons and death hawks. There were only eighteen Anzaii left in the strike force and some were on a rest cycle. With Ciera, Tiaro, Tyba and Amadeus still by my side, I forced myself to turn my back on them and concentrate on the Zeika forces below. That was my duty, where my skills were needed most.

Repeatedly, through the night, the Zeikas moved catapults into position and fired on the outer four towers near our gate, testing their defences. The gate was heavily fortified, but the Zeikas knew that once they had control of it, Condii would fall. It seemed like they would sacrifice entire legions to take the city.

Our army's commanders used far more conservative strategies, which left us all feeling wing-clipped. Ciera did not begrudge his position by my side, but I could sense his restless fury and the burning desire to snap his enemies between his teeth and crush them into the ground with his enormous keltoar paws. However, we all knew it would be death to go out there alone and the Tanzans valued individual lives whereas the Relts cared not for any who may fall. Ciera mastered his emotions and together we focused our efforts on strategic defence and staying alive.

As I was about to choose my next target, a third tower was breached by the catapults. The stones on one side collapsed inwards. A horde of firewyrms and at least a dozen Zeika ground troops pushed past the Condiite footsoldiers and ran into the tower. The towers to the north-west and south of the fallen tower fired upon the now in-range Zeikas.

But it was too late; they had already made it inside. Several of the spear-skyearls on top of the tower allowed their Sleffion-kin to mount and took off into the air. Using shrouds to create airflow these skyearls hovered near the top of the tower raining down spears and arrows on any Zeikas who emerged.

I could only presume the Condiites left inside the tower had been killed. A ballista was wheeled quickly into the tower and the Zeikas on top doubled in number. Within minutes they had shot

down or flamed all but one of the hovering spear-skyearls, who flew away like a whipped dog.

The ballista appeared on top of the tower promising a speedy demise for any skyearls that attempted to retake it. Two mangonels were also ushered in by more Zeika ground troops below. They were being killed so quickly by the other two Condiite towers that bodies now blocked the collapsed entry to the tower. In many cases their caped and armoured remains quivered and shrivelled in upon themselves, leaving brownish husks more than bodies.

The incoming Zeikas kicked the corpses out of the way with disdain.

A fresh surge of dragons bombarded the two defending towers with flaming oil-barrels and the Zeikas on their backs hurled fireballs and poison-darts at the humans and skyearls. While the Condiites in those towers were partially distracted, more Zeikas carried rock-missiles into the fallen tower and knocked out stones from around two of the window-slits to give the mangonels room to fire. As soon as they had done this, the Condiites within the other towers realised what was about to happen.

Not only were they barraged by fire from above, but the missiles from the fallen tower now threatened to breach their walls and admit the swarming firewyrms that plagued the ground level. It would only be a matter of time before the Zeikas had captured more of the towers. They would use that same method to take all of Condi. In my mind I could see the towers falling one by one over a period of days or even weeks. While we were able to use their own conjurations against them, the Zeikas had learned how to use our own defences against us.

‘We must do something they don’t expect,’ I said suddenly.

Ciera caught my meaning, but Tyba wasn’t so sure.

‘Why don’t we take the battle to them?’ I asked. ‘Threaten *their* defences and supplies.’

‘It would be suicide to leave the safety of our tower network,’ Tyba replied, thoughts racing behind his eyes.

I knew he would consider my plan, if I could come up with one.

‘I need to know more about the Zeika camp to the south. Where do they keep their oil barrels?’

Tyba and Amadeus exchanged a look. I caught the vaguest sense of interest from the prince’s Sleffion-kin—though I was sure he was trying to block me from his mind. A distracted look crossed his furred face and his eyes strained to see into the distance.

‘I have conversed with Reen,’ Amadeus said after a while. ‘He carries Jaalta nigh over the Zeikas even now. She uses her powers in the waves to glean information from any who have unguarded minds. She reports that oil barrels are spread out in several stockpiles throughout their encampment.’

‘If we could cause an explosion of fire somehow,’ I began, ‘the wood barrels would break and whole piles would catch fire.’

‘How could we do that?’ Tyba wondered. ‘We are not Zeikas that we may tell fire to go this way and that.’

‘I’ll think of a way,’ I replied with determination. *Flint and steel?* I thought. *No. Too slow. I could not send a lit lamp into the waves and bring it with me in animal form. No Rada could do that. Could I steal a torch after infiltrating each of the camps?* I would need wicks.

Tyba also pondered for a time and then said, ‘Ultimately, it is not only up to me. We must consult with the others.’

‘Are you not the prince, and in your father’s absence, the ruler?’

‘We are not a tyranny like the royal family of Telby,’ he responded.

When I raised my eyebrows at him, he added, ‘I have great respect for the commander of Condii. We could do with a rest, anyway. Come with me to Condii Fortress and we will see what Varal and the strategists think. They may have already considered it.’

‘Jaalta and Reen will meet us there,’ Amadeus said.

## Chapter Seventeen— Determination

Ciera and I followed Tyba and Amadeus through the thick of the sky-battle. Ciera dived and wheeled around the struggling bodies, throwing a spear or biting a dragon when the opportunity arose. Yet he didn't deviate from our course and we were soon flying low over the houses and halls behind the barracks. We crossed Spiral Lane South and a small river before reaching Condii City Central. Usually a bustling marketplace, even at this hour, it was empty, except for a few hurrying groups. A large vineyard to our right gave way to the moat that surrounded Condii Fortress. Five towers stood some distance away on the outside of the moat, with a sixth on the island with the fortress itself.

As we came closer, I could see that the fortress was constructed from the same steel, diamond and grey stone as the front gate and walls of Condii. A single, immense red flag with a flying skyearl and rider billowed from the top of the main tower. Above us, the dragons kept their distance as spear-skyearls and mangonels were always in position around the fortress.

A dozen squadrons of flying archers soared to our south and west. It was a constant job for the flying archers to keep the dragons from attacking civilians in the town below. In several places around the city, their numbers had become overwhelming and Zeikas were being ferried into the city by dragons.

As we flew I became aware of a multitude of Kriites who needed assistance, both with my natural senses and in the waves. I stretched out through the waves and confused any dragons I could reach. Too many things demanded my attention. If I confused or dispelled this dragon, then that one would make it to the ground.

If I took the time to capture that death hawk, hold it still and attempt to entrap the far-conjurer then Ciera and I would not be able to fly in and rescue the family trapped behind a tavern by two hulking theros.

Everywhere I looked there was destruction. Flames reached up from storehouses and barns all over Condi.

Ignoring my hurricane of thoughts and commands, Ciera arrowed straight for the fortress. His mouth hung open with the strain of his flight and Amadeus had fallen somewhat behind. As soon as we reached the island, Ciera landed on a platform on top of the main building. His panting caused the dust on the platform to billow.

There were Condiites in every direction, all rushing to do one job or another. Ciera roared angrily as he stretched his wings, expressing the depth of our worry and frustration.

Having been alerted by his own Sleffion-kin, who had conversed with Amadeus on the waves, Commander Varal came out onto the platform and bowed before Ciera.

‘Emperor Ciera, Master Psion Taeon, we welcome you,’ he said in a deep, booming voice.

The man was of medium height with a very broad chest and bulging muscles. He wore no armour; clearly a man who knew his place was not on the battlefield. He shook my hand vigorously as Tyba and Amadeus touched down.

Several Condiites wound a crank that made the human-sized doorway behind Varal expand into a huge archway that Ciera could walk through. Varal and Tyba exchanged urgent words as we hurried down the polished wood hallway.

I noticed groups of messengers in all of the rooms we passed. Signs above each doorway indicated they were divided into cities and inside I could see that many of the messengers were Rada. They

sat in varying states of trance, listening and speaking with their minds. Others were rapidly recounting what they had been told to scribes or other people, some with wildly swinging arms. Voices were raised in every part of the building, making it difficult to hear what any one person was saying.

A surprising feeling of elation was building within the waves. Human voices lifted in whoops of delight. I caught on to the good news via the waves. The Zeikas attacking Lantaid had been defeated at the Hills of Everstain. A success at last!

Ciera and I stopped when we reached the glass-walled vista, the main area of Condii Fortress where Varal and his strategists now met. There was not a single pillar obstructing our view over the city and the panels of glass were so fine they were almost flat—unlike most windows I had seen before, these ones were easy to see through.

The island and its fortress were up high enough to afford a view over all of Condii. I could even see the front gates in the distant south west. Missiles were being launched periodically from the towers around the fortress, but rarely made their mark. With so many shrouds in the sky above the city, it was difficult to perceive how many skyearls battled, on high, but the cacophony in the waves indicated there were thousands of Sleffion-kin up there. There would be other skyearls I could not hear as well, ones with no human Sleffion.

*'Close that down, Taeon,'* Tiaro suggested. *'You need to focus here.'*

I made an effort to block the waves from my mind.

'Please, take your fill,' Varal said, making a sweeping gesture at a table laden with jugs of sweet-nectar, cellar-cooled water, wine, bowls of soup, cheese wheels and trenchers of meat. Tyba and I were both dehydrated and famished so we took up the offer without hesitation.

There were strategists seated at a round table with a stone-carved model of Condii on it. A skyearl was carving a new map of the land with his claws, showing where the Zeika encampments were. Many other humans and skyearls paced around the table discussing

ideas with each other and scrawling notes and diagrams on scrolls of vellum set before them.

A messenger entered the hall and spoke fervently to one of the strategists, 'Ervan, the Zeikas have taken a fourth one of the outer towers.' I missed the rest of what he said. Ervan waved to get Commander Varal's attention. Most of the other strategists paused to participate.

'Another tower has fallen,' Ervan said. 'The Zeikas are using them to attack our ground troops before they can reach the south west corner.'

Varal marched over to the round table, examined the blue and green armies that were positioned in the south west corner and made some adjustments to represent what he had just been told.

'Well? It's up to us,' he snapped. 'You're meant to be some of the best strategists in Tanza. Come on and strategise.'

Several of them began talking at once.

Varal gestured at one human. 'Sigthan, your thoughts first.'

Sigthan stood up and moved to his side. Pointing at the model, she explained how having our civilians so spread out was allowing the Zeikas to keep our flight squadrons separated.

'If we are to defeat this legion we must recall all flight squadrons and direct them to the gates and retake or destroy those towers,' she said.

Looking out through the dome, Varal made a sweeping gesture. 'And allow our children and their carers to be killed? There are far too many civilians here now to gather them all in one place.'

'Varal, if I may,' Tyba began. Varal nodded. 'We have ground troops, Rada and cavalry at the gate, trying to take back the towers. Why not recall them into the town and send the flight squadrons out to the gate?'

Several of the strategists shook their heads, but it was Varal who spoke. 'That would leave the dragons free to send their oil barrels down upon the city from on high. What good can ground troops do against dragons?'

'Then take away their oil barrels,' I said boldly.

All eyes turned to me, some roving up and down.

‘This is our new master psion, Taeon,’ Tyba said. ‘You will have heard about him in missives from Centan.’

There were several nods and ‘ayes’ around the room.

‘We’ve seen the battlefront,’ I continued, including Ciera and Tyba in my gesture. ‘The Zeikas move like one great swarm, everybody together. They will not expect us to attack their camp.’

‘Us attack them?’ Strategist Sigthan demanded. ‘How would we get that close?’

‘Through stealth,’ I replied.

‘But what could you possibly do against that many splittin’ Zeikas? There are over ten thousand out there!’

‘Light their oil barrels,’ I replied. ‘Destroy their supplies and take down a good part of their camp as well.’

Everyone seemed to start talking at once.

‘We can’t even get our own supply skyearls into Condii let alone send an army out undetected,’ Sigthan said.

I looked her directly in the eye and said, ‘You don’t need to send an army. Send me.’

Ciera lowered his head to my level, ‘You would go alone into that nest of demons? I could not go with you.’

I gestured at my earring and folded my arms. ‘Tiaro will accompany me. We have done this before... though on a much smaller scale.’

The rescue of the Jarians from the Zeika camp in Naioteio came back to me vividly. Rekala and I had been newly bonded then, and the Zeikas had taken her from me to lure me into a trap. They sometimes seemed to know what I would do, but perhaps they still underestimated me.

‘What happened last time?’ someone asked. ‘How did you survive?’

‘I was a new Anzaii then. They had my Rada-kin, so they expected me to come, but they didn’t count on my being able to dispel so soon.’

‘And how do you know they don’t expect you now?’ Sigthan asked. ‘We don’t want the Zeikas to get hold of you and use your knowledge or powers against us.’

‘We can’t let that fear hold us back,’ I argued.

‘You don’t seem to understand what a threat you are—’

‘You’re sounding a lot like a Wavekeeper,’ I growled, my skin tingling with the start of a transformation. With effort, I suppressed it. ‘I apologise, my lady. I am still raw from the betrayal of Corypha.’

‘Apology accepted, Master Psion,’ Sigthan said. The others in the room watched the exchange, seemingly happy to let us argue it out so they could think. Sigthan drew a breath and added, ‘Whoever poisoned the Anzaii strike force, their methods may be distorted and wrong, but that doesn’t mean we are happy for you to just march in to a Zeika stronghold and hand yourself to them on a platter.’

‘I don’t think I am that infamous,’ I replied. ‘How would they know it was me?’

‘You would be surprised how much they know,’ Commander Varal argued. ‘We have found inked vellum on some of the Zeika’s bodies. Rough sketches depicting the facial features of many of our most gifted Anzaii indicate they are most certainly aware of and targeting both you and Jaalta.’

Many around Varal stared at him in surprise. Apparently he hadn’t shared this news before.

‘How would you get past their perimeter anyway?’ Tyba asked. ‘They are bound to have spirit circles, guards and a timber palisade.’

‘Not all Zeikas shrivel after death. You have the bodies of some of their younger warriors, don’t you?’ I queried. ‘I will wear the robes of a Zeika and control one of their conjurations long enough to get inside. Conjurers are higher in rank than most Zeikas and will not be questioned, especially if I have a conjuration there with me.’

‘This is madness,’ one of the strategists said.

Then Tyba asked in wonder, ‘Can you really control a conjuration for that long?’

‘I think so,’ I replied. ‘But you have to hold the real conjurer captive and conscious for all that time.’

‘And what about handling the spirit circle at the same time?’ Tyba added.

‘Tiaro can handle it if there is one, but I’m willing to chance they don’t have one,’ I said. ‘Why bother when they don’t see our ground troops as a threat? They’ll have dragons circling the camp to protect it from aerial attacks, but that won’t affect me if I’m in disguise.’

‘It is far too risky,’ said Sigthan. ‘You do not even speak Reltic, for one thing.’

Then Ciera added only to me, *‘I tend to agree, Taoen. It’s a brave idea, but I do not want to lose you and Tiaro.’*

‘That’s true,’ I admitted, ‘but Ciera does.’

*‘Couldn’t you listen through the waves and send me the words I need?’*

Commander Varal continued moving pieces about on the stone replica. Numbers were scratched into various lumps of wood, representing the placement of defender warriors throughout the realm. Blue paint indicated the squadrons originating from Centan. These were spread out across the realm now; some 2,400 were on their way to Highford; 6,400 were nearing Lantaid, to my great relief; roughly 4,400 had travelled to Condi with only 4,300 remaining in the Cascade City. So we had divided our army... but what choice had we?

Tyba and I sat down; the backs of our knees were aching from standing for so long outside on the shrouds. Servants came to take away our armour for cleaning and offer warm water to wash our faces and hands. A pair of Condiites even removed our boots and washed and massaged our aching feet.

‘Thank you,’ I said when they had finished.

The middle-aged woman who had served me bowed politely. ‘My pleasure, Master Psion.’

‘Sooner or later I might learn to accept my new rank,’ I whispered to Tyba.

He grinned. ‘I’m the wrong person to confide that to. I’ve been royalty all my life. Humble people of Tanza are honoured to serve those with more abilities in battle.’

I nodded, realising that I myself had been in that position prior to meeting Rekala.

‘The servants do what they can to make you more effective, Taeon,’ Tyba went on. ‘They know that you, and the others, with gifts, are the most powerful weapons we have against the Zeikas. That is why I cannot understand the position of the Wavekeepers.’

‘I agree with you,’ I said, ‘but imagine it from their point of view. They are mostly ungifted people, or have only one of the gifts, Sleffion, Tolite or Rada. They are jealous. What’s more, they find it threatening that an Anzaii with enough experience might actually be able to read their thoughts the same way their own beloved kin can.’

Tyba nodded. ‘And judging from the Zeikas’ drive to capture you alive, they *have* figured out a way to harness that telepathic power and use it to intercept our long distance communications.’

‘*Tyba!*’ Amadeus interrupted, allowing me (and therefore Ciera and Tiaro) to hear him on the waves, ‘*Jaalta’s squadron has been intercepted. Reen has been knocked in the head and is fighting to stay aloft. He is no longer responding through the waves.*’

My heart sank.

‘Can you reach Jaalta, Taeon?’ Tyba asked.

‘I’ve never initiated contact before with a human,’ I replied. ‘But if she is open to me...’

‘*Jaalta,*’ I called. Tiaro joined her senses to mine in the waves, questing out over the mental landscape, searching for the pin-points of light indicating another’s awareness. There were tens of thousands of them and enough voices to make me go insane. Thoughts and emotions rose off them like steam invading my sense of purpose.

‘*Jaalta,*’ Tiaro reminded me. We searched.

I began to focus on those thoughts and feelings that were the most harried, the most threatened, the most desperate. A whirlwind of presences, floating up into the sky, caught my attention. These were Jaalta and her personal guard.

Even as we watched, one of Jaalta’s guards, Sanka, was knocked from her Sleffion-kin’s back and plummeted to the ground. There was no time for any of the three skyearls to react with a shroud. The light I perceived her mind as suddenly winked out. Her skyearl was driven to the ground after her by four dragons.

‘They’re in trouble,’ I murmured distractedly to Tyba.

Jaalta was dragged from Reen’s back and the skyearl set upon by three dragons. Their demonic jaws opened wide and their unnaturally long teeth stabbed into the skyearl’s neck. Reen fell, back first, towards the ground, wings flapping uselessly. As he perished, Jaalta went limp in the arms of her captors. The emotion that seared from her collapsed me against the back of the chair. I didn’t care what it looked like to those gathered in the vista.

‘*Jaalta,*’ I called. ‘*We will come for you. Jaalta.*’

There was no response. Then Galtoro touched my mind. Though it was just a leafshard pendant, the Anzaii-kin’s mental presence was strong.

‘*They have not harmed her,*’ Galtoro said. ‘*This is... a bad sign.*’

‘They are taking care not to harm her,’ I relayed to Tyba, dragging my arm from my eyes. ‘They surely mean to use her in the way you suggested.’

‘Go!’ Tyba shouted to someone else in the hall.

Boots clattered on the floor as whoever it was ran to do Tyba’s bidding. Tiaro and I noticed several other presences outside turn their attention to Jaalta. As one they began to converge on her location. The dragons and Zeikas that were still struggling with Jaalta’s remaining guardian, Amril, drove him further away from her, leaving the one carrying the Anzaii free to retreat. His dragon somersaulted and shot away to the south, bearing her away.

Tyba, Varal and the strategists were shouting. Pain erupted inside me; the most terrible grief I could imagine, ripping open old and long buried feelings from my own childhood. Jaalta’s reaction to Reen’s death had been entirely different to anything I had ever experienced, and yet the memories it awoke in me were like red-hot daggers stabbing me from all sides. When I opened my tear-filled eyes even more people had appeared in the room. One servant patted my back and another pushed a tankard of ale into my hands.

‘Reen is dead,’ I stuttered. The shouting ceased and all eyes turned toward me. ‘Sanka and her Sleffion-kin have also been slain.’

‘And Amril?’ Tyba asked.

I concentrated for a moment on the waves before saying, ‘He and his Sleffion-kin made it to the ground... fighting off Zeikas with help from citizens.’

My breath came in gasping sobs. Someone pressed a cold swab against my forehead. I closed my eyes, swallowed and tried to stand. Reassuring hands pressed me down into the chair.

‘I must go now,’ I said. ‘We cannot allow our most powerful Anzaii to be exploited by them. Not only will we lose a powerful warrior, but we may also lose our main advantage over the Zeikas...’

Tyba looked long into my eyes—and finally nodded. ‘Taeon’s right. If the Zeikas are able to use Jaalta’s wave senses to intercept the communications from this building, they will ambush us at every turn.’

I noticed a hooded figure pulling back his cowl revealing the the light brown skin of a hook-nosed face I recognised instantly. Standing right before us—daring to be within our midst—was none other than Corypha.

‘Do not attempt a rescue,’ he said loudly. ‘You must send spear-yearls and slay her now, before they get to the camps. It is the right thing to do.’

The heat that flashed through me was enough to make the food I’d eaten riot through my body. I flew from my seat, bowling Corypha over. Both of us slid several paces across the polished floor. Without even thinking, I had shifted into icetiger form, blue fur bristling like icicles. My claws pressed savagely into Corypha’s chest, drawing blood through his cloak.

Outside the room a skyearl roared and talons clacked on stone as his Sleffion-kin tried to get to him. Corypha shouted and struggled, but nobody moved to stop me. It was only the words of my Sleffion-kin, which registered dimly in my hate-clouded, instinct-driven mind that stopped me from biting the traitor’s throat open.

‘...*not do anything unwise,*’ Ciera was saying.

I panted over Corypha’s face, enjoying the fear that filled his eyes. My finger-length fangs brushed against his cheek, threatening to lay him open.

'You *dare* to show yourself here,' Tyba roared at him. 'Murderer! Betrayer of the crown!'

'But not a betrayer of the Nine,' Corypha sputtered, trying to shove me off.

The crowd in the room seemed to have thickened. I could not see a path out of there. I had decided... whatever these people might say... the right course of action was *not* to kill Jaalta. It was to rescue her and destroy those oil barrels. I could do both.

I clenched my claws even tighter into Corypha's flesh. He sobbed in pain. But it was nothing compared to the pain in which many of the strike force Anzaii had died. The pain that assailed me now. It was suffocating. My chest ached and stung... it burned... and a terrible weight pressed down upon me. It dawned on me that I was sensing my enemy's pain.

I slowly released Corypha. I did not enjoy being the author of that sensation after all. Ciera cocked his head at me. Something important had just happened, but at the moment I could not bring myself to think about it. What now would we do with the traitor? I morphed slowly back into my human form and unbent from a crouching position to stand over him. Corypha remained on the floor, pressing his hands against the shallow gouges in his chest.

Nobody spoke. All eyes were on Tyba and myself. Even Amadeus, who was usually so quick to speak, remained silent, waiting.

'It was you who poisoned the food supplies of the strike force,' I accused Corypha. 'You will tell these people everything you have set in motion, who you were working with and for how long.'

Tyba nodded at me. Behind him, High Commander Varal made a dismissive gesture as if he knew there was no stopping me.

'I am leaving now,' I said to the crowd, turning my back on Corypha. 'To rescue Jaalta and prevent the Zeikas from invading our lines of communication and forging ones of their own.'

The Tanzans parted before me and someone ran from the back of the room carrying a set of Zeika armour for me. I glanced at Tyba and Amadeus.

'Trees be with you,' Tyba said.

'Our aims are much the same,' Corypha stammered desperately.

I turned to him with a glare of such loathing that several people drew their breath and looked away.

‘But where you give deceit and death, I will risk everything to *save* her.’

‘You will be captured along with her,’ Corypha shouted maniacally. He had crawled to a sitting position. ‘Stop him!’ Two guards stepped in to lift him to his feet and hold him still. ‘Then where will we be?’ he cried desperately.

‘You live in fear,’ I retorted. ‘We will make light.’

With his lips curled up in a snarl, Ciera shook his head at the cowardly traitor and followed me out of the room.

# Chapter Eighteen— Infiltration

**A**fter the encounter with Corypha in the vista, Ciera and I made contact with a group of citizens in Condi city who had a lone conjurer trapped inside a house. His death hawk was wreaking havoc inside, but so far the Condiites had managed to board up all the windows and keep them both contained.

A handful of defender warriors and civilians made way for Jett and I after Ciera and Ptemais touched down. I strode into the house in full Zeika garb, including a faceless, green helm. My features were deliberately obscured by dirt, coal smears and a mixture of pomegranate juice that looked a lot like blood.

The conjurer screwed his ugly face up at me when I appeared. He garbled something at me in Reltic, which I ignored. He didn't realise I was a Kriite until the moment I interrogated the connection between him and his conjuration.

My confuse ability made it seem as if I stood on the bank of a river holding the Zeika's hand in one of mine, and on the other bank was the death hawk. As long as I held tightly to the Zeika's hand, he could neither control nor dismiss his conjuration.

With the death hawk in tow, Ciera and I flew with all speed toward the Egg Basket Range and the closest promontory he could get to without being spotted from the Zeika encampment. Despite his

anxiety, his thoughts toward me were suffused with an air of pride I had not sensed before.

It took all of my concentration to know what I was doing in the waking world as well as keeping hold of the Zeika in the waves. Every now and then the death hawk veered sharply towards me, snapping its jaws. The black eyes glinted fiercely, as if the demons inside were ready for the slightest lapse in my concentration.

Tiaro fortified me with all her strength. In the waves her spirit seemed layered over my own, a second hand reaching out with my own hand to clench the Zeika tightly. There was an unspoken agreement between us that Tiaro's concentration would not waver from holding the Zeika for even an instant. This would leave me somewhat more able to deal with whatever happened in the waking world.

Jett and Ptemais agreed, reluctantly, to wait by the promontory with Ciera. If there was anything they could do to help me they would be there, with a moment's notice. We all knew that, in this instance, there would be nothing they could do. It was the first time, since before I had become bonded with Rekala, that I'd had such a heavy responsibility to bear alone.

Well, not entirely... Tiaro was still right there on my ear and Ciera was ready to join with me in the waves and translate anything that was said. I had been warned not to say much or else my pronunciation and accent would give me away.

I squared my shoulders, tried to assume an air of superiority, and stalked down the gravelly hillside. Ciera's feelings of helplessness followed me down the dark trail. I tried hard to lend a bit of my strength to Tiaro who was struggling to hold onto the Zeika.

The death hawk followed me obediently. All I had to do was think a specific action towards it and it would do it. *Fly in a circle. Turn around. Fly backwards. Perform a somersault and swoop upwards...*

I was moving uphill, through a small forest when the faint smell of a Zeika's herb-washed body came to me. I could wait until he passed, but with daylight swiftly approaching, I needed to keep moving. It would be so much harder to light those oil barrels in the

open light of day. I proceeded out of the forest with a supercilious demeanour. A dark figure stepped out from behind a boulder.

‘Identify yourself.’ Ciera translated the the voice, which was harsh, but young.

The death hawk soared back down out of the sky and I made it circle the speaker three times. He had drawn his sword several paces away and stood at the ready.

‘Underling,’ I spat, in Reltic. ‘You will not address me so.’

The Zeika took one look at the death hawk and bowed low. ‘Apologies, Conjurer. I am on scout patrol and I did not expect anyone to come from this direction.’

‘Nay, you would not. It is often those who don’t expect the unexpected who end up dead.’

I knew death was a sore point for most Zeikas, who strived to prolong their lives through sorcery. Their leaders cared not, and there was no grief for the death of another Zeika, but individuals preferred to stay alive.

‘Yes, Conjurer.’

‘Continue,’ I said, hoping he would carry on. Instead he turned to follow me.

Now I’d better not make a wrong turn or he would see I didn’t know where I was going.

‘If I may, Conjurer,’ the Zeika began, ‘what is happening on the front lines?’

I clenched my teeth. Ciera did his best to give me the words I needed to speak.

‘We are pushing through their pitiful defences even now. It is only a matter of time before Condii falls.’

The death hawk sailed low over my head, missing me by mere inches. I pretended not to be surprised. My fists were clenched tightly by my sides and sweat beaded around the muck on my face.

‘Praise Zei,’ said the boy. I did not echo him, as was expected.

*That could be a problem.*

‘*Just say it,*’ Ciera advised me.

A lifetime spent hating the Zeikas and their demon lord prevented me. ‘*Not unless I have to,*’ I replied stubbornly.

The hawk cawed angrily, flying in tighter and tighter circles.

‘Your conjuration is most restless,’ the youth observed.

I cut him off with a sharp gesture of my hand. ‘That’s because *I* am in no mood for diversions.’

A wooden palisade came into view, with orange torches gleaming at intervals along it. The front gate was manned by two guards with melee weapons. On either side was a skinny tower with a single bowman in each. The large doorway was recessed with hanging leather instead of a real, fortified gate. They obviously weren’t expecting any enemies to get this close.

I forced myself not to look up and around as I approached the gate. *I’ve seen this many times before*, I tried to tell myself. *I am bored by it. I am tired and angry from battle.*

The youth kept marching straight past the gate to continue his rounds. He spoke not another word to me, for which I was grateful. The less talking I had to do, the better. The guards sneered as I passed through. The death hawk flitted this way and that, coming very close to one of their heads. He swore at me and made a shooing gesture.

Inside I beheld a clearing directly ahead and a large wooden tower about two thirds as tall as Ciera. A set of stairs lead up the front of the tower and its roof was made of multi-coloured oiled skyeal pelts, drawn to a point at the top to allow water to run off. There were barrels piled up on either side of it—oil barrels?

Noticing a reed-strewn pathway to my left and right, I turned left and strode purposefully along the path. A guard passed me with no comment. To my right were two tents that rung with cries and wails—an infirmary perhaps. Further on were piles of logs, stacked as high as myself, and an open-sided tent for cutting and shaping the wood.

I rounded a U-shaped bend and witnessed the takeoff and landing of at least six squadrons of dragons—ten per squadron. There was a huge oval-shaped clearing for this purpose marked out by dragon-head totems in the ground. A small pile of oil barrels had been stacked ready for the dragons to pick up. Another guard passed me and I tried to look both arrogant and annoyed, as if I

was doing some kind of inspection and I didn't like what I saw. The Zeika bowed to me, saying 'Praise be to Zei.'

'Praise be to Zei,' I replied smoothly. And when he was out of earshot I added, 'Over my dead body.'

*'I will most certainly praise Zei over your dead body,'* the real Zeika conjurer, back in Condi, told me. I stumbled at the sound of his voice in the waves. I could sense Tiara losing her grip on him, or rather he had tightened his grip on her and was using her to communicate with and try to distract me.

*'How fortuitous it will be if they take you alive, however.'*

The death hawk floating above me swooped down, claws outstretched.

*'Get out evil one,'* I sent a mental shove back at the Zeika and walled myself in. The death hawk shrieked and whipped upwards again, flying out over the general area as if scouting. The battering the far-conjurer gave me was enough to make my head spin. I blinked and tried to steady myself, failing to walk straight. Several Zeikas turned to look at me. I scowled at them and continued doggedly on.

Having come nearly in a full circle, I passed close by the stairs to the great tower and entered the other side of the camp. Perhaps Jaalta would be somewhere here. *But where should I start looking?*

I stopped when I reached a tent with an immense wall of crates and barrels outside it. Many of the barrels were marked with the Reltic symbol for oil. I pretended to inspect one.

'Do you require aid, Conjurer?' An older voice.

'No,' I replied in Reltic. Then, thinking quickly and waiting for Ciera to translate, I added, 'that is unless you can tell me where the Anzaii prisoner was taken.'

'She is in the harledo, of course,' he replied. Ciera took a moment to determine the meaning of 'harledo'.

*'There is no Telbion-Tanzan language equivalent,'* he said. *'Seems like "pleasure-tent".'*

'That one is not for pleasure,' I said. 'She is to be waveraded.'

The Zeika spat. 'She is old. Old and ugly... and mute. It is hard to believe she'll be *any* use to us at all.'

'She will,' I replied.

The Zeika looked a bit more closely at me. 'You appear to be injured.'

I fingered my forehead. 'It's only a scratch.'

'As you say,' he replied, slouching away.

I continued on my way, scanning for the harledo. The piles of barrels and crates continued much further than the first tent I had seen. Yet another tent appeared in the background; this one about twice the size of the other. A number of fireplaces were set up outside the tent with Zeikas in various positions around them. Most had a pipe, a drink, a whore or a combination of the three. It took every ounce of willpower not to turn my head away from their open debauchery.

I grinned my most lecherous grin and resented the part deep inside me that was curious about what they were doing. I continued past the opening to the great tent. The two guards at the doorway ignored me as I entered, but I caught them glance oddly at the conjuration that followed me. The squawking death hawk had served its purpose of helping me get into the camp and it no longer seemed logical for me to have it out.

I made a flicking gesture with my wrist and, at the same time, called upon Tiaro to deal with the demon. With a blood-curdling cry, the death hawk faded to nothingness. I let go of my grip on the far-conjurer through the waves and tried to focus on what was in front of me.

Several groans and angry mutters came to me from the shadows within the tent, but it wasn't until I trod on somebody's arm that I realised this was their sleeping quarters.

'A little worn from battle, are you?' one of the guards asked me disdainfully.

He had approached from behind and now held out one hand with a tiny ball of green flame dancing upon it. It gave just enough light to find our way through the slumbering bodies. Each person had a cot and a barrel of supplies. Some, clearly of higher rank, had a wooden deck with a larger bed, a chest and two chairs to themselves.

The tent was vast, held up by an immense sunbark trunk in the centre and many metal poles and ropes on the sides. It could easily have housed a thousand people lying down. What's more, towards the edges I could now make out bunks of up to four levels. There were two open flaps on the far side of the tent.

'Put that splittin' light away,' I told the guard grumpily, holding my head. 'I do not need your aid to find my sorry excuse for a bed.'

Before he snuffed the light, I attempted to memorise a clear path to one of the exits, but I knew I would step on somebody else. I closed my eyes and started my icetiger transformation, stopping partway through. With tiger eyes I was able to see in the dark and pick my way through the sleeping bodies.

I reached the far side successfully and came out into the fresh air, releasing my partial transformation and pent up breath. Although I couldn't communicate through the waves I had somehow managed to retain my connection and ability to transform.

I looked around, adjusting to my inferior night vision. To my right was yet another cluster of oil barrels.

'*They've got them spread throughout half the camp,*' I said to Ciera and Tiara, '*utilising every bit of space they have.*'

'*That makes things difficult,*' Ciera replied.

I cursed under my breath. Now what? To my left were more Zeikas around a large bonfire, performing some kind of ritual with a steaming purple liquid. To my right were more barrels, which clustered all the way up against another large tent. Looking through my eyes, Ciera informed me that it bore the Reltic symbols for 'quartermaster'.

I squeezed past a small wooden building and listened closely through the flaps of a second tent. There were voices raised within and the sound of chains dragging.

Hearing something outside, I stood up straight and moved forward. A group of four or five Zeikas passed me, laughing about what they had just done to some Kriite captives. I gulped. *When I finally find Jaalta, will she be in any state to travel?*

As I rounded the corner of the tent and reached the open front, I saw a cluster of at least fifty men. They were pointing, laughing and staring hungrily at whatever was going on inside the tent.

Drawn out wailing and sickening crunches sounded from within. Bile rushed into my throat at the sight of the seven or eight captive Tanzans. The Zeikas seemed to be jostling with each other and vying to get a turn.

More prisoners were being dragged in along the path behind me. I tried not to look any of them in the eye. Without meaning to, they might give me away and I wasn't ready to rescue anybody yet.

Towards the back of the tent was a legion commander in full garb, a tall and muscular Zeika with black hair reaching down to his waist. Three skyeal-claw spikes stuck up from each of his pauldrons and a heavy mace rested across his back.

He and three others talked casually while drinking something thick and red from a shared tankard. I tried to ignore the sounds of the Tanzans, but my entire body was rigid with the effort. It felt as if my teeth would break from being clenched so hard. What if I could hide somewhere around the back and confuse a dragon or two? I could make them come down here and kill these butchers... but there would only be more... and it would only be a matter of time before I was found. *Focus... focu!*

Back at the landing spot, Ciera, Jett and Ptemais paced restlessly. Amadeus was also receiving many of my mental projections and relaying them to Tyba.

*'You must stop communicating with us,' Amadeus said. 'I know it comes as naturally to you as breath, but think about it. If Jaalta's abilities are being tapped, then they will know there is someone nearby. As long as you are reaching out to us, you will be like a beacon. The one doing the waverading will sense you. You must shut the waves down completely. Close your mind.'*

Close my mind? He wanted me to be cut off and alone in this place?

*'Have you not done this before?'*

*'I have,'* I said, remembering the private time I had spent with Lira. I had been a fool, then, but I could re-use that skill now.

'*Goodbye for now,*' I said to my kin and Amadeus.

'*We'll still be here,*' Ciera assured me.

Being careful not to show any emotion on my face, I brought *Halduronlei* to my mind, thought about the sparkling sapphire trees and mentally pulled down a barrier of darkness between me and the wavelengths I used to communicate with other beings. There would be no distractions, nothing in my mind but my own thoughts.

'There are no waves,' I said to myself. 'There's only me.'

Presences and feelings I hadn't even been aware I was sensing faded away. All became still and calm in my mind. It was the loneliest I had been since before bonding with Rekala.

It was like when I had been alone in the woods near Jaria, gathering herbs and foodstuffs for Bessed. Peaceful yet, somehow, empty. There, I had been nothing but the quartermaster's apprentice. Here, I was a specially-gifted warrior; the only person who could free Jaalta.

Now was the time I needed my kin. Here I was with an insurmountable task before me. Not only did I have no help from anyone else, but I couldn't even share my experiences, relying on the waves for mental support and advice. It was all up to me.

'Alrudo san yu ran,' a big, hairy Zeika challenged me from behind. I jabbed him with my elbow as he passed and growled at him.

'Haf-u rin doso jenRada?' he snarled back.

Hearing the word 'Rada' made chills go down my spine. *Have they discovered me already?* I ignored him and he pushed forward, cursing loudly. I pretended to be interested in what was going on inside the tent and pressed in for a closer view. It was then that I saw Jaalta.

Huddled beneath the legion commander was a bloodied, manacled form, lying on her side with her neck bent awkwardly over a wooden plate. She was dressed in mere shreds of what had been her proud, Anzaii armour. The stately flax shirt had been stretched and torn, leaving most of her chest and neck bare. Bandages had been wrapped hastily around her. The mottled scar across her throat was stained with fresh blood. She lay so limply that I thought she

might be dead. After what I had seen, that would probably have been a boon.

*'Stop thinking like Corypha,'* I told myself.

It was some time before the legion commander had consumed his fill of whatever was in the shared tankard. He sat down in a throne-like metal chair and gestured at one of his underlings. The person ducked out of the tent, returning momentarily with a buxom female in a gauzy green robe. Her partially-naked body drew the eye of every Zeika in the vicinity and I sensed that here was a female who could only be touched by one person.

*'Vasduro sensel, hass,'* the legion commander said to her. *'Viska doro neph-tinar lakt on ef tepturo. Visko ela ais noi est.'*

The witch was young, but the intelligence in her eyes unmistakable. She bent to roll Jaalta over and cut off a piece of her hair.

*'Allaph nal trygal?'* she asked.

The legion commander nodded, handing her the tankard they had been drinking from.

*'Aye,'* said the witch, *'ephan nalla ka.'*

*'Arak,'* he replied sternly.

The witch drank from the tankard. Red liquid ran freely over her chin. The witch dropped Jaalta's hair into a cast iron pot that was positioned over a small brazier. She poured the rest of the liquid from the tankard over it and chanted. Green flames burst forth at her fingertips and she released the glowing balls into the pot. They seemed to liquefy before our very eyes, turning into a greenish molten metal. The liquid bubbled and a putrid smell arose.

Many of the Zeikas who had been occupying themselves with the captured Tanzans turned to watch.

*'Allarvo karenno est ok irin oost,'* the legion commander said boastfully, when it was clear the witch's incantations were working.

I guessed from his tone that it was some kind of announcement or call to attention to witness what was going on. I strained to see over the heads of those in front of me. There were now over a hundred Zeikas crowded before the harledo. The liquid, hair and

metal in the pot slowly merged leaving the mixture a sickly brown mass.

The legion commander said something else, raising his hands up high in worship. His eyes rolled up into his head and he shouted something to Zei in exultation. Jaalta stirred beneath his feet and scabbled with her hands. Despite the noise from the gathered Zeikas, the hoarseness of her breathing reached me. I wished I could react, do something... would this process kill her? If so, why bandage her? Surely that meant they needed her alive. My thoughts raced... was now the time to act? How could I with all these people around?

My right hand was thrust deep inside my pocket, my fist clenched around the bundle of wicks I had stashed there. The plan was to use a nearby torch once the wicks were laid to piles of tinder under each stack of barrels. Maybe if I waited I could free enough of the Tanzans who could still walk to help me. Then we could grab Jaalta and get out of here. But now this...

I watched in horror as the witch threw a handful of black dust into the bubbling pot. A small explosion threw smoke into the air. I thought I sensed a dark presence flowing into the pot.

When the smoke finally cleared, the witch had pincers in her hands and was pulling two lumps of malleable metal from the pot. A blacksmith nearby had fitted two thin, metal cuffs over the legion commander's wrists and then took them off again. The witch laid the green, sticky lumps over each metal cuff. With the cuffs as a guide, the blacksmith took a hammer and worked the lumps into an even, circular shape. Before the metal had cooled completely, the smith cut some grooves and allowed the witch to press five or six skyearl teeth into them.

After all the snippets and rumours I'd heard about waverade artefacts it seemed unreal to be seeing it come to pass. Some of the Zeikas watched in rapt fascination while others had returned to their previous amusement with the Tanzan prisoners.

Jaalta whimpered and squirmed on the ground. Whether she was in pain from her injuries or suffering from the witch's actions, I could not tell.

After a long wait, the witch dipped the wristguards into a barrel of liquid. Steam rose off them, and a faint green fire burned from the centre of each wristguard. Although the wristguards were still hot, the witch said something to the legion commander and passed them to him.

He nodded, pursed his lips and slid each one onto his wrists. He roared in pain and the smell of burning hair and flesh filled the already rancid-smelling tent. The flames on the wristguards burned brighter and Jaalta's damaged throat actually managed to produce a strangulated cry. She pressed her hands to either side of her head and began pounding it against the ground.

*What can I do? What can I do? Trees, this can't be happening.*

One of the Zeikas grabbed Jaalta and strapped her down to the wooden pallet beneath her. With arms, hands, legs, feet and head tied down, she could only lie there and let the waverade take place. Even now the legion commander was violating her, turning himself into a quasi-psion. His eyes were closed and he babbled rapidly in Reltic. Soldiers ran in all directions, presumably rushing to tell those on the front lines what they had learned from their enemy's waves.

Perhaps I should open myself to the waves just for a moment and try to warn everybody to stop communicating important information via the waves. But the legion commander would certainly notice me then.

It seemed like forever before he stopped shouting. Then he suddenly walked forward toward me. My heart stood still. Everything depended on me... If he could somehow sense me...

He passed me by, shaking his fists in the air and grinning widely. The Zeikas around me followed in his wake, abandoning whatever else they were here for. Just like that, the harledo cleared out, not a single Zeika left. Glancing down the pathway, I could see that the bonfire had been likewise abandoned. I hesitated, wondering if it was plausible for me to stay behind. Now was my chance...

As the ruckus died down, I looked carefully around to make sure no Zeikas remained. Carefully, quietly, I approached Jaalta. She winced as my shadow fell over her, then peered at me more closely. The recognition in her eyes was tipped with such pain that

I drew back. Did she wish the Tanzans hadn't tried to rescue her? Would she have preferred death? Surely not. I had never seen one of the viserill packets in her gear. I opened her left hand. Sure enough, there was one of Corypha's packets—waxed paper marked with three leaf symbols.

I shook my head at her, saying, 'I'm going to get you out of here.' Tears filled her eyes and she whispered the words, 'too late'.

'Can you sense him?' I asked.

She nodded, eyes going wide with anxiety.

'Close down your waves,' I suggested.

She shook her head and mouthed the words 'I cannot'. Clearly the whispering caused her great pain. I took the packet from her hand, ripped it open and tipped its contents onto the ground.

'No matter,' I replied. 'We'll find another way.'

I unstrapped her and helped her to sit up. She was unable to take her eyes away from the spilt viserill.

'We're going to light the oil barrels,' I told her quietly, 'and escape.'

'What about them?' she mouthed, gesturing at the other Tanzans.

I licked my lips nervously. 'Maybe they can help.' *Or maybe they'd be a liability.*

Jaalta gripped my shoulder with one hand. 'I didn't think anyone would come,' she whispered. 'I don't know how you did it.'

'We're not done yet,' I replied grimly.

# Chapter Nineteen—Bloodlust

All but five of the Tanzan prisoners had perished in the fervent cruelty of the Zeikas. The survivors were all men, still wearing most of their armour. I unshackled and helped each of them to their feet. None of them were Anzaii, Sleffion, Tolite or Rada. I surmised they were footmen or perhaps town militia.

‘Master Psion Taeon?’ one of them queried. ‘Surely you did not come to save us?’

‘I’m sorry...?’

‘Ronsah.’

‘...Ronsah. My mission here is to destroy the oil barrels and rescue Anzaii Jaalta,’ I replied without preamble. ‘Will you help?’

‘Yes, of course,’ he sputtered, belatedly adding a ‘sir’.

One of the others rubbed his arms and legs, trying to get the feeling back into them.

‘Are you hale?’ I asked him.

‘I’ll manage. Thank you.’

‘Tell me your names.’

They were Uzziel, Jehuel, Shimei and Soco.

We tried not to look at the beaten and mangled bodies of our fallen comrades. Nor did we speak of what had happened to any of them.

Jaalta hobbled to her feet, but was so weak from blood loss that she nearly fell over again. I caught her around the shoulders and held her against my chest.

I reached into my pocket with the other hand and gave out the knives and wicks.

‘We don’t have much time,’ I said. ‘Uzziel, can you carry Jaalta? The rest of you follow me and cut open some oil barrels. Empty one out of each pile onto some of the others. Pile some tinder under it, anything that will burn, even these reeds.’

I kicked the ground. ‘Put the wick in and drag the line out as far as you can. You will light it with any torch you can find nearby then run. We are hoping that the whole lot will catch fire and burn out before the Zeikas can stop it.’

‘What about the guards?’ Ronsah asked.

I nodded impatiently. ‘Yes, I counted seven in this area. I will kill them quietly. We must not wake any of the sleeping Zeikas.’

My body still answered when I started to morph; I had only blocked the communication part of the waves.

‘How are we getting out of here?’ Jehuel asked incredulously.

‘We can’t risk the front gate,’ I said. ‘I can take elephant form and lift each of you over the fence down this end.’

An angry looking Zeika paced around the corner of the harledo, pausing when he saw me. Before he had a chance to react to the standing Tanzans, I dived onto him. The shift to icetiger form came to me so quickly that I had clamped my jaws over his throat and killed him without a thought. My fellows stared with open mouths at the swiftness of the kill. There was no time for squeamishness now.

I tilted my head to the right and the Tanzans followed me carefully around the corner. We slipped behind two wooden buildings and I nodded at the first stockpile of barrels. Ronsah got to work straight away, stabbing his knife into one of the barrels and spilling its contents over the others.

I didn’t wait to see the outcome of his efforts. I knew there were two guards on the other side of the pile who would soon sense what was going on. Sitting up on my back legs, I held up one paw, gesturing for the group to wait for me. With that, I ducked into the sleeping tent and crept through it as I had done before. It was somewhat emptier than it had been.

I spied the two guards and felt the fur stand up along my spine. There was a lot at stake still. If we couldn't get Jaalta out of here, there'd be nothing we could do about the wave-imbued wristguards. If the oil barrel plan failed the Zeikas would continue raining them down on Condii. And if we were discovered by the crowd who had watched the formation of the waverade artefact we would all die.

When both of the guards' backs were turned, I pounced. One man hit the ground hard and I spun to grapple with the other before he could raise the alarm. My claws raked across his chest, tearing him open. I spun mid-air as the other Zeika was coming to his senses, and crushed his forehead in with my teeth. It was an effort not to growl. The blood that spurted over me was just an inconvenience. I closed myself to the instinctive bloodlust that rose within me.

I ran back to the Tanzans and resumed my human form just in time to stop one of them from tossing a firebrand onto the wick.

'Don't light it yet,' I said. 'They must all be ready at once. Wait for my signal.'

Jaalta and the Tanzans were staring at me in shock. I tasted a metallic tang on my lips and could only imagine how horrifying I looked with real blood dripping over the fake blood.

'Soco, prepare that pile,' I said, pointing at the barrels on the far side of the entrance to the sleeping tent. 'Jehuel, Shimei get to work on those over there.'

The final stockpile was the biggest of all and covered half the length of the sleeping tent. This would be the most difficult part of our mission. I took icetiger form again and jumped onto the barrels, searching for the other guard that had patrolled the pathway here.

He was somewhat closer to the main tower, when he spotted me, than I liked. Within seconds I had closed the distance between us. His shout drew the attention of another pair of guards, but by the time they reached the corner where the guard had been, I had killed him and dragged the body into the nearest tent.

I hoped that the other Tanzans would have the good sense to lay low while the guards were there. To my dismay I heard one of the guards moving away, leaving one behind to investigate further.

I crawled out of the tent on my belly, using the whiskers all over my body to navigate between barrels and casks without knocking anything over. The remaining guard's stink made my lips curl up in a silent snarl. I rushed him, flailing with claws and teeth. Stripping the flesh from the backs of his legs, I pushed him over and forced his face against the ground. He struggled against my considerable bulk for a few minutes, but his shouts were muffled by the soft pine needles and reeds that covered the pathway. I closed my teeth over the bones in his neck, killing him.

*'This is necessary,'* I said to myself. *'This is war.'*

When I returned to my natural form, Jehuel and Shimei had finished coating the oil barrels in the spilt liquid and piling tinder underneath. Shimei darted to a nearby scone and lit an oil-coated scrap of cloth.

I jogged to the main entrance to the sleeping tent and found Ronsah hiding between the barrels on that side.

*'It's time to light them up,'* I said. *'Then follow me.'*

All this running backwards and forwards to communicate was foreign to me now. Since meeting Rekala I had used the waves to get such information across to others. Before that others in Jaria had done it for me.

It took several minutes for the Tanzans to light all the wicks they had laid. Within moments flames caught on the outsides of many of the wooden barrels.

*'This way,'* I said, leading them back past the first stockpile, the two wooden buildings and the harledo.

Uzziel and Jaalta looked like they were about to collapse.

*'There may be guards on the other side,'* I said to the other four. *'Have your knives ready.'*

The Tanzans nodded, looking worried, but ready.

I took a deep breath and imagined my body in the form of an elephant. My ears strained outwards, my back arched up and my nose surged out into a long, grey trunk. Ever so silently, I settled into my new shape, flapped my, now enormous, ears and wrapped my trunk around Jehuel's body. He felt very heavy and I wondered

if my neck would be able to lift him up high enough to get over the fence.

It was only possible if I pushed up with my forelegs and stood half against the fence. Jehuel was agile enough to avoid the points at the top of the palisade and wiggle his body out of my grip to jump down on the other side. I winced at the noise his fall made and the vibration I felt through my softly padded hind feet.

Soco was a little lighter. One by one I lifted them over until only Jaalta and Uzziel remained. I lifted her over first and was grateful for the men on the other side having devised a way to climb partially up the fence to help her down from my trunk.

Uzziel felt the heaviest of all in my trunk and I strained to get him to the top. One of the posts I was leaning my front feet on groaned and cracked. Uzziel slipped just at the top of the palisade and cut his arm on one of the spiked logs.

I stepped back in time to prevent the log from giving way. Perhaps an easier way to escape would have been for me to use my weight to knock down the fence. But that would have attracted attention.

Now I had only to save myself. I relaxed back into my human form and tried to catch my breath. It came in huge gasps. Blood thundered in my ears and a sensation of dizziness nearly overcame me. I tried to wipe the congealed blood from my eyelashes and found that it was stuck fast. The muscles in my face ached from using my trunk in elephant form. It felt like somebody was trying to wrench my teeth out.

‘Hoi!’ A shout from behind. I stood up, barely remembering in time that I was still garbed as a Zeika.

I spat at the guard’s feet. He sneered at me, gesturing at the blood all over me and babbling something in Reltic. I grunted at him and pretended to be drunk. It was easy to make myself vomit. I had only to think on the things I had seen and done that night and taste the blood that lingered in my mouth.

The guard turned away, muttering. I rested there for some time, waiting for the guard to walk down the path and back past the quartermaster’s tent.

Drawing on my last reserves of concentration and strength, I blurred down into rat form and scurried up the wooden palisade. I paused at the top to survey the area outside the walls. Four guards had been killed and dragged up against the wall. Jaalta and the rest of the Tanzans were nowhere to be seen. I puzzled on this for a moment, wondering where they had got to.

A light breeze touched my face and I looked up to see Ciera descending through the clouds. He landed just long enough for me to hop onto his nose and run up along his neck to the battle-seat, before taking off again.

Up high in the sky was a shroud with Jaalta, Jett, Ptemais and the other Tanzans on it. I waited until I was on the flat, white surface of the cloud before transforming back into myself. I crawled to the edge and looked down over the Zeika encampment, pleased by the billowing red flames and black smoke that rose from their oil barrels.

About a third of their supply had lit up so far. The Zeikas weren't ones to keep large volumes of water lying around and so they would have little with which to douse the fires. Although we had only poured oil on and lit a small number of the barrels, the heat and flames would hopefully soon burn through the wood of the other barrels and bring each pile crashing down. I smiled to myself and flopped down onto my back.

Jaalta was lying on the cool surface of the shroud next to me. Ciera stood at the pointed front-end of his cloudy creation as if steering a great sky ship. Apparently he and Ptemais had dispatched any Zeika sky patrols that had remained near the camp. We floated serenely over the Zeika encampment and continued north east along the line of towers on that side of Condii city.

Although I told myself that I had achieved the mission, I knew it hadn't all gone to plan. As I closed my eyes, it did not even occur to me that there were no voices in my head. My mind remained closed to the crashing waves and the havoc the Zeikas were now wreaking.

## Chapter Twenty—Violation

There was a loud boom.

‘Wake up, Master Psion,’ Ronsah nudged me. ‘Is he all right?’

I shook my groggy head. Dried blood made it difficult to open my eyes again. More thunderous noise drove me from my stupor. The oil barrels are exploding! I stood up, looking behind us at the destruction of the main Zeika camp. Clouds of smoke billowed up, black in contrast to Ciera’s white shroud.

I mustn’t have lost consciousness for long. The shroud ship had not even made it back past the protective line of Condii’s towers. Soco had spotted dozens of dragons making their way straight towards us. One carried a brilliant green flag, which whipped in the breeze of their passage. I groaned and rolled into a sitting position.

‘Are reinforcements coming to aid us?’ I asked Ciera.

He glanced down at me with pinched brows. ‘Yes, Taeon. Can you not unblock your waves now?’

‘What is the point?’ I replied. ‘Anything we say over the waves has the risk of being heard by the legion commander now.’ Furthermore, I wasn’t sure how to unblock them.

‘We will kill him,’ Ciera said.

‘He is there,’ Jaalta whispered hoarsely. She pointed in the general direction of the approaching squad. ‘He means to claim me so I cannot be killed.’

‘He thinks we will kill you?’ I asked.

She nodded.

‘We will not,’ I told her firmly. ‘Corypha would have, but he has been apprehended. He will pay the full price for his betrayal.’

‘Expulsion,’ Jaalta whispered.

Ciera roared as the Zeika squadron veered closer.

‘Everyone together with me,’ I shouted, getting to my feet.

Jett and the battered Tanzans clustered around Jaalta and myself. If they didn’t want to kill Jaalta then they wouldn’t be able to use the flame-breath of their dragons against any of us.

The dragon riders flew in tight circles around the shroud, perhaps gauging what to do. Six of them landed on the shroud and the Zeikas dismounted. Barely had two of them found their feet when they hefted a large cross-bow each and fired upon us. Ciera stepped into the path of the vicious bolts to protect us. They penetrated deeply in his softly furred side, but he was so enormous the bolts weren’t able to do any serious damage.

I could not sense his pain, but I knew that, to him, the sharpened bolts would be like someone driving spines into my flesh. Ciera bellowed at the Zeikas, stepping forward on all fours to snap one in half. Four of the Zeikas raised their hands in the air, and a dim white shape started to form.

Ptemais tried to protect us from flying Zeika bowmen on the other side, but Shimei was shot in the neck and died.

‘You must kill me,’ Jaalta hissed, tugging at my bloodied Zeika garb.

I shook my head. ‘Never.’

‘I can sense him,’ she said whispered. ‘Harolak—the legion commander—is one of Bal Harar’s sons. He has raped and murdered hundreds. His filth is seeping into me...’

‘You are strong enough to resist him,’ I replied firmly. ‘You are a Kriite.’

‘I am... something else now as well...’

She rolled onto her side, holding the newly tightened bandages the Tanzans had strapped around her. She pushed herself up, holding out her hands. Green flames danced there, like little spirits on her palm. The Tanzans stared at her in shock.

‘What is this?’ one of them demanded.

‘An effect of the waverade spell,’ I surmised.

Jaalta shrugged with irritation. There wasn’t time to ponder on it. The conjurers had finished whatever they were conjuring. Combining their thoughts and powers into one, they had managed to conjure a gigantic theros about half as tall as Ciera. Its thick, muscled arms swung at my Sleffion-kin, pounding him. Ciera snapped his jaws at the theros frantically, but somehow it always managed to duck and spin away. It swung on its enormous arms like a wild gorilla and beat its chest with rage.

Jaalta moved forward to stand with Ciera. I remained where I was, uncertain that I could do anything to help without the waves. If Ciera was killed, that would be the end for all of us. The shroud we were standing on would dissipate and everyone would fall to their deaths.

Jaalta raised both arms and pointed her palms at the theros. Green jets of flame poured from her, blasting the creature backwards. Ciera’s wings spread out and he pounced and closed his jaws on the struggling conjuration. The remaining five Zeikas ran at Jaalta. She flamed one of them straight in the face and he collapsed to the shroud, burned to a crisp. The others grabbed her.

*Now is the time to act.* I told myself. *Risks be damned.*

I leapt forward in icetiger form and knocked two of the Zeikas down. Jett and the Tanzans were right beside me, grappling with the Zeikas however they could; with knives, fists and boots.

Green flames erupted around us, some from Jaalta, some from the Zeikas. The mists of the shroud billowed up in great clouds as the moisture combined with the flames.

Before the rest of the circling squadron could join the fight, Ciera flew after them. Jaws swinging wildly, he crunched down on the hindquarters of one dragon, let it fall, then swerved and snapped up another one.

Despite his prowess, there were so many, and when they began to turn on him, he struggled to stay aloft. Slowly we descended, Ciera, shroud and all.

I swiped my claws across the knees of one of my assailants and shoved him over the edge of the cloud.

Ciera's roars of pain indicated the dragons' jaws, though small in comparison, were sharp enough to injure him. There was nothing I could do. I paced, clenching my fists and wishing I had a bow and arrows with me. *If only Sarlice and Henter were here.*

Jaalta collapsed into a sitting position once more. There was blood showing through her bandages. Her eyes were haunted.

The day-star burst through the clouds in the distance. Dawn brought a cool snap of wind that whisked away the mist that hung in the valley. As I glanced in the direction of the light, wondering if this would be my last battle, hundreds of winged silhouettes came into view.

It was Prince Tyba, leading a hundred flying archers and two hundred air combat skyearls to our rescue.

The skyearls engaged the dragons. Within moments, the battle had escalated. Having slain all the Zeikas on the shroud, I could do little else to help without using my Anzaii abilities on the waves.

I watched as the Tanzan skyearls collided with and killed the Zeika squadron. I had a view of the sky battle that made my heart pound and my head spin. Skyearls flew in massive arcs around the shroud, forming a living, breathing perimeter.

Many of the skyearls were bigger than the dragons and it took little effort for them to overpower them and bite into the Zeikas that were on their backs. The dragons that were being far-conjured, threw themselves at the skyearls with abandon. Dozens, on both sides, were killed.

Jaalta was lying on the shroud with her head in Jett's hands. Her mouth hung open and I worried that, if we didn't get help for her soon, she might die even after all we'd done to save her.

Ciera was free of the dragons that menaced him. He sailed around the area, knocking Zeikas from the backs of their dragons with his immense lion-like paws, or snapping them up and spitting them out again. Every falling Zeika that plummeted to his death screamed in fear.

With an army to support him, Ciera seemed unstoppable. His fur was peppered with blood, but he soared through the sky vigorously, roaring and flapping his purple and green wings.

The battle went on until only a small group of Zeikas on tyraks remained.

‘It’s Harolak,’ Jett said, having read Jaalta’s lips. ‘Jaalta’s quaspion.’

Staring at Jaalta’s rapid decline, I shouted, ‘Slay him!’

Even though we weren’t connected on the waves, Ciera heard me and gave chase.

The commander wheeled his unit to flee.

The ferocity of the immense flying skyearl surprised us all. Even for those who had known Ciera a lifetime, it was rare that he let out such raw, animal viciousness. A burst of shroud buffeted him and with great speed, he flew after the retreating Zeikas, colliding with them mid-air.

He tumbled with Harolak’s tyrak, which was less than half his size, through the sky, grappling with his claws, snapping with his teeth. The black dragon tore at Ciera’s chest and fresh blood flowed.

My Sleffion-kin’s fist closed around Harolak’s head, crushing it to a pulp. The tyrak vanished as conjured creatures could not exist without their masters. Those who were with me on the shroud let out a cry of triumph and Jaalta blinked at me in relief.

When finally all the Zeikas had been killed, Ciera landed back on the shroud and dropped the corpse of the legion commander. I averted my eyes from the mangled head. The wristguards no longer burned with green flames. I pulled them off the Zeika’s wrists, wrinkling my nose at the blood and pus that came away with them.

‘These can no longer be used against you,’ I said to Jaalta. ‘From what I saw before, the ritual only works on the person who drank your blood and received it into his own flesh.’

She nodded weakly.

‘We must return her to the fortress,’ I said to Jett and the other Tanzans. ‘She is in a bad way.’

‘I will take you all,’ Ciera said, then return to finish this battle.

'Finish it?' I asked.

'Yes,' he replied happily. 'Now that the Zeikas have less oil barrels, their attacks on the city have ceased. Commander Varal has sent almost all of the air combat group and flying archers out to finish off these foul intruders. Among the Zeika ranks there is widespread confusion about the waverade artefact. The Zeikas are over confident and attack with renewed frenzy, but it becomes carelessness. We will overpower them.'

'And the strike force?' I asked.

'Are in their element,' Ciera replied. 'Your actions gave us the advantage we needed.'

'And the waves...,' Jaalta whispered hoarsely, 'are clear.'

'Yes,' Ciera agreed. 'Now that the Zeika legion commander is dead, the strike force is free to utilise all the powers of the waves.'

'We must get the waverade artefact back to the vista so they can study it further.'

'Thank the trees,' Jett murmured.

I climbed up onto Ciera's back and he flew ahead of the shroud, pulling it more quickly. I tried to relax and let my guard down, but my mind was clamped shut. It was like holding a muscle in the same place for so long that it would no longer go any other way. I railed against my own borders with a growing feeling of being trapped. I could no longer communicate with Tiaro or use my new-found Anzaii abilities. I was still able to transform, but I could not reach out to Rekala to find out how she was. *Don't panic. It will return in time.*

Ciera brought us over the walls of Condii and straight to the fortress. The shroud came down until the others were able to stumble, exhausted, onto the landing platform. Commander Varal came out to greet us personally. He received Jaalta from Uzziel and gestured for someone else to help each of us walk inside. Jett took off my Zeika helmet and carried it for me. I hung my head, feeling nothing but my own pain, sensing nothing but my own thoughts and feelings.

‘We have prepared a place for each of you to wash and rest,’ Commander Varal said.

Jett and I followed a middle-aged woman down one corridor towards a small bath chamber. I groaned, feeling that all I wanted to do was fall into a bed and sleep. I wished I could be outside witnessing the victory that was about to take place. But I knew I would only be a burden to someone now. My body was coming into a depressed low after the high of the last twenty-four hours.

Jett dismissed the woman and closed the door behind her. Without speaking a word he undressed me and pushed me towards the bath. I had not realised how much blood was on me until I stepped into the water. It sheared off in globs and pools, making the water turn pink, then red. There was a second hot tub nearby.

Once I had wearily climbed into it Jett cleaned my upper body with soap and a scrubbing brush and washed my hair as I dealt with the rest of me.

Afterwards, my body felt warm but weak as I made my way to my assigned sleeping quarters. To my surprise, Jett opened the door to a lavishly furnished, spacious suite.

‘This can’t be right,’ I stammered. ‘The city is crowded with refugees...’

‘Of that you need not concern yourself,’ my aide told me. ‘After everything you’ve been through, both you and Ciera will be afforded every luxury we can give you. This room was at his express request.’

‘I have worked no harder than any other warrior out there,’ I protested.

‘We all do our utmost to win this war,’ Jett agreed. ‘However your efforts happen to be about a hundred times more effective than just “any other warrior”.’

‘I have slept outdoors most of my life. I do not need—’

He cut me off with a gesture. ‘You will function at your best when properly catered for. Stay here as long as you need to rest and refocus your mind. Ciera has asked that you do not return to battle until you’re able to use the waves once more.’

‘Ciera needs medical attention,’ I stammered. ‘All those bolts and bites...’

'I will take care of it before he flies off again,' Jett said.

I blinked tiredly and decided against arguing.

'You will rest too?' I asked.

He seemed amused. 'Yes, just as soon as you and Ciera are seen to.'

I waved my hand at him. 'Go then, I will be fine. Thank you.'

I dragged myself into the plush, skyearl-feather bed and pulled the linens loosely over me. Jett drew the curtains shut to hold out the light of dawn and to keep the sounds of battle at bay. I was asleep before he'd even left the room.

# Chapter Twenty-one — Isolation

I woke some time in the evening when a Tanzan entered to light the lanterns around the walls.

When she saw I was awake, she said, ‘Your pardon, Master Psion.’

I groaned. My head ached like I had been severely bashed. At the lady’s gesture, Jett came in bearing a mug of nyno soup and some aloe vera paste.

As he ministered to the variety of minor injuries I had acquired, he said, ‘A message awaits you.’

‘They wouldn’t give it to you on my behalf?’ I queried, stretching out my legs to regain some blood flow.

‘Nay. We have laws about that sort of thing. They will hand-deliver it soon.’

‘Very well,’ I replied. ‘How fares Ciera and the strike force?’

Jett glanced at me. ‘The Zeikas fall back before them, their numbers much fewer than expected. Estimates indicate we were evenly matched at about 13,000 per army. Thanks to the destruction of most of their oil barrels, our tactics have temporarily prevailed. We have retaken the towers and crushed the Zeika army. Ciera and the Condiid defenders are hunting down the survivors, who are fleeing back to Lokshole.’

I smiled a bitter-sweet smile. ‘More will come.’

‘Yes.’ Jett applied a thin bandage to my left wrist where a wound had broken open.

'I wouldn't be surprised if they rank you a Specialist before too long. You're going to need a rank to truly be useful in this war, and it cannot wait for the usual defender promotion process.'

There was a knock at the door and Jett waved in a young female with her hair in braids. She curtsied.

'Greetings, Master Psion. I am Treya, aide of Rada Egrastta. We have some messages for you. The first is from your Rada-kin, Rekala.'

I reached out my hand for the note she was carrying. Receiving a written letter from my own Rada-kin brought home my isolation. The note read:

What have you done to yourself now, Rada? I have heard of your escapades from many sources on the waves. We are all proud of you, but I am sick with fretting. Will you join us here? Sarlice is with us now. She misses you terribly. Why stay in Condii? If you cannot use the waves, perhaps you would be better off here. Maybe we can help you lower your barriers if we are together again.

There is no doubt that more Zeikas will come to both Lantaid and Condii. If it's fighting you want, there's sure to be plenty here. No matter what you decide, dear one, trees be with you.

Rekala

I closed my eyes for a long moment, thanking the Nine they were all safe.

'And the second?' I stretched out my hand.

Treya handed me a curl of pig's hide, inked in black.

Dear Taeon,

We've been so preoccupied with war here in Lantaid I've hardly had a moment to myself to

write you. Fought Zeikas at a place called the Hills of Everstain. Rekala and Kestric were by my side. You'd have been proud of your Rada-kin. She saved my life more than once.

We have heard of your prowess in the strike force—everyone seems to know you now, Tanza's master psion. Look how far you've come since we left Jaria more than a season ago. I look forward to resuming my place at your side.

If you can't come to us, perhaps the three of us could join you there in Condi. I have heard that you are not always flying about with Ciera and that your latest mission was afoot. Let us be reunited, Taeon.

Yours, Sarlice.

I brushed the paper with my fingertips, wishing Sarlice was here. *Yours.* Perhaps I could ask to have her sent to Condi. It felt strange fighting Zeikas without Rekala, Sarlice and Kestric, yet if I did bring them here wouldn't I be bringing them to their deaths?

The logistics weren't the main hurdle, I realised. A spare skyearl could be found to transport them in the strike force with me or the three of them could shapechange during flights and stow aboard Ciera somehow. Nay, the reason Sarlice, Rekala and Kestric mustn't be with me now was because I would become distracted with protecting them. With so much going on and me still learning how to use my Anzai powers, it was imperative I remain focused.

I wished I could discuss my thoughts with Tiaro or Ciera, but my walls were tight around me.

'Do you wish to send a reply?' Treya asked.

I shook my head. 'Nay. I will regain use of the waves.'

Jett and Treya both remained looking at me.

I shrugged. 'I must.'

Treya eventually left and I tried to eat some of the soup. Though heavy of limb and exhausted, I felt as if I ought to be doing something. I wandered out to the vista. An argument was in full swing.

‘As much as I wish to be involved in defending the entire realm, our focus must remain on Condii,’ Commander Varal was saying.

One of the strategists threw up his hands. ‘No disrespect to our king, but if Centan cannot oversee the activities of all our armies, then we must do it.’

‘They are doing it,’ Tyba replied calmly. ‘They are simply distracted at the moment. They are experiencing other difficulties relating to the sky kingdoms. Several sky kingdom shrouds have already fallen due to the deaths of shrouders in other cities. If too many of the skyearls who maintain those shrouds are killed, it leaves too much of a burden for the others.’

‘Prince Tyba, if I may speak openly, being distracted by this problem with the sky kingdoms is hardly an excuse,’ the strategist replied. I could see Tyba’s usually-cheerful countenance darkening. ‘If it weren’t for my own family being hidden on the coastline east of Lokshole, we would not have found out about the thousands of Zeikas that are now heading in this direction. It is Centan’s responsibility to have adequate scouting parties out—’

‘Saned, you are out of line,’ Commander Varal told him sternly. ‘We are in a war. Scouting parties are sometimes discovered and killed. Instead of questioning our leadership and wasting time trying to correct our procedures, why not be thankful that your family are indeed in the vicinity and able to warn us? Please tell them to take cover and stay hidden should they be needed to spy upon the Zeika entry-point again.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Saned mumbled.

Commander Varal turned to me. ‘Welcome back, Taeon. I’m sure you’ve heard of the advantages your plan has afforded us here in Condii.’

I nodded. ‘But you say more Zeikas are already on their way here?’

‘It is true,’ he agreed. ‘We will not have long to rebuild our defences. Estimates have the Zeikas arriving here no sooner than

179 Faraday, seven days hence. But more good news has reached us. Even against higher numbers, the defenders at Highford have turned back the Zeika invasion. Air combat squadrons and cavalry have ridden down most of the survivors.'

'And has Ciera finished off the Zeika survivors near Lokshole yet?' I queried.

Tyba gestured broadly out the window. 'I take it you have not regained use of the waves. The Condiid defenders have killed many of the fleeing Zeikas and take advantage of a sluggish watch over Lokshole as we speak. The Zeikas were not expecting the battle to come to them. Lokshole has never been an easy town to defend.'

I swallowed, trying to reach out with my mind as I always had. There was a strange void all around, making me feel like a blindfolded person in broad daylight. I sat down on a chair proffered by one of the strategists and fiddled with one of the bandages on my arm.

Their conversations continued on through the night and I tried to pay close enough attention to make sense of the battle as a whole. As the night deepened, Varal and most of the strategists retired. Others came to fill their place. Captain Dathan relieved Tyba, who was dragged away by Samos, protesting. Although we had now reached a lull in the fighting, there would always be a team of commanders and strategists in the vista.

They focused mainly on coordinating repairs throughout Condiid and building new fortifications around the towers that had been taken. Architect Furlorny had been called into town to advise the head masons and oversee all the structural and engineering work that was going on. With the vast number of citizens in the city, labour was not a problem. Farmers and hunter-gatherers were sent out into the fields and forests of Condiid to collect food and fodder. Supplies from other towns had all-but ceased. Nearly all the major cities, except for Centan, were at war and few could spare the time or resources to send help to the others.

Furlorny and his workers had packed up the strike force camp near his manor and brought most of the supplies into Condiid. My gear was jumbled up in a pile in the vista with the belongings of

other members of the strike force, some of whom were no longer with us.

I wondered where Corypha was being kept and what information, if any, he had revealed about the Wavekeeper plot. Did the Condiites believe it had been he who poisoned the Anzaii?

After I'd taken my gear to the suite, I returned to the vista with Fyschs' scabbard on the Jarian Anzaii belt. Tiaro was still clasped in my left ear, but even when I touched her the waves remained eerily silent and there was no answering glow.

In the early hours of the morning, when I was finally starting to feel awake, we heard that a Zeika stronghold had been discovered on the high side of the border, to the south west of Lantaid. In the craggy granite canyons at the base of Fireflow Mountain was a hollow some four hours walking-distance across. Thousands upon thousands of Zeikas had gathered there.

My heart sank as I realised Sarlice and the Rada-kin would face yet another overwhelming army near Lantaid very soon. With little defensive capability in the town, the civilians would have nowhere to hide if the Lantaid defenders fell.

'You must tell them to start getting supplies ready to flee through the chasm,' I said to the messenger.

To my surprise, Dathan nodded. 'Yes, that is wise. The barrier will allow them through, but the Zeikas will be delayed by having to drink the blood of our people. The civilians would have more chance of getting to the chasm than reaching Condii.'

I shook my head in exasperation. 'If they have so many warriors, why not hit us all at once, in one place, and then move on to the next?'

'They attack us on multiple fronts,' Dathan replied. 'We have no choice but to remain divided.'

If only we could deprive them of access to any Kriite blood. Spurred by my success attacking the camp I asked, 'Why do we not attack their bases on the upper side, now?'

Dathan nodded. 'King Crystom has several flying archer teams attempting just that, but these missions have so far failed. We haven't had any solid reports of Zeika numbers up there. They must

be using spirit circles to hide themselves and kill any scouts that come within range.’

That’s where I needed to be, but not without my Anzaii abilities. I hung my head in sorrow. What could we do? The mighty Tanza appeared to be losing this war. Hopelessness welled up in me. An anxious thought crossed my mind—that it was somehow me bringing death and destruction to my people wherever I went. The Jarians. The Tanzans. That’s what the Wavekeepers had predicted.

Some of my teeth throbbed. I had done a lot of killing with those in icetiger form; perhaps I had damaged them. I stared at my palms, the scarred and battle-worn hands of a warrior or a killer? Was there a difference? As my heart rate went up claws pushed through the tips of my fingers, then receded.

Dawn broke across the city, sending shafts of sunlight through the mists that curled around the buildings and towers. In the distance, outside the walls of Condii, were many pillars of dark smoke. The body pyres burned in all directions, but most were to the south near the Zeika encampment.

I pressed my head against the almost-transparent glass of the vista, wishing I could hear a benevolent voice in my head. Despite the mood, I marvelled at the vastness of the waking city. What a shame to have war come here. The smoke of many kitchens and inns rose up like flags of life persisting throughout Condii.

I tried to imagine the many thousands of people out there. Without the waves to connect me with their kin, I could only guess at their thoughts and emotions. Though some had been injured or lost loved ones, they would press on.

Battalions of cavalry walked and trotted down the cobbled lanes from the direction of the front gate. Many of the horses were riderless, some limped horribly. Cattle, goats and sheep were herded through the streets by groups of children on foot. Elsewhere, pigs and chickens were shoved into smaller and smaller pens while makeshift huts and tents were still being erected for the refugees. Some slept on pelts in the open air.

Rada-kin of all kinds moved about the town, some following their human-kin purposefully, others wandering aimlessly, grief-stricken.

In the distance, if I strained my eyes I could see the builders labouring at the tops of the gate and towers. Wooden scaffolding had been erected in some spots, but in others they simply had the larger skyearls at work, lifting stones and putting them high up in the castle wall. The skies were strangely devoid of skyearls.

‘They must return,’ someone was shouting. ‘Trees! Tell them to return!’

‘We could take Lokshole back,’ someone else retorted angrily.

‘And lose thousands more of our people? To what end do we take Lokshole now? There are 1000 Zeikas holding it and 4400 heading here. You must bring back our troops before there are no troops to bring back.’

‘I don’t think you realise what—’

Captain Dathan slammed his stone cup down on a marble tabletop. The sharp ‘ching’ stopped the cascade of voices abruptly. A tiny chip appeared in the thick, milky surface.

‘Haden is right. Recall them,’ he said simply.

‘Ciera refuses,’ someone said. ‘He is in a berserker rage and cannot be stopped.’

Suddenly all eyes were on me. Even though Ciera and I weren’t presently linked they still thought I was influencing his mood.

I licked my lips. ‘I cannot reach him. If I could I would send our soothing song to him...’

‘It is your anger that corrupts him,’ Saned accused me. ‘Before you came along, Emperor Ciera never lost control.’

The entire room fell silent, staring at him. Had he simply spoken the words that others had not been bold enough to speak? Did they really see me that way? Young, impetuous, influencing the great skyearl even without the waves?

When their eyes darted towards me, shame and hurt welled up. My chest tightened. After all I had done... After all I had been through did they expect me to not be angry? To always be in control of myself? With no kindred around to respond to my thoughts, my

emotions boiled and whirled violently inside. Tiaro might as well have been a thousand leagues away.

‘Saned has not slept in days,’ Dathan said carefully. ‘Do not misunderstand his words, Taeon.’

Suddenly I wished I was with the strike force and the reassuring presence of other Anzaii. If it hadn’t been for Corypha, there would be dozens of Anzaii still around, people who could understand others; people who could understand me; people who could help me to reopen myself to the waves.

Now that I didn’t have access to the waves these people no longer had respect for me. They did not know me any more than my people in Jaria had known me.

‘No, I understand,’ I replied without malice. ‘All too clearly.’

I turned and walked from the room.

## Chapter Twenty-two— Expansion

Jaalta found me sitting by the banks of the enormous moat around Conдии Fortress. Plucking another pebble from the garden bed behind me, I allowed it to roll down into the water. Although I could not be anywhere outside without someone in Conдии’s many towers being able to see me, it felt good to be away from the vista. The fresh air soothed the pounding of my face and teeth. The morning sun dried the sweat from my skin.

Jaalta, unable to speak at more than a whisper, chose to sit next to me in silence. She moved cautiously, trying not to tear her recent wounds. We sat for some time and I appreciated her quiet presence.

After a while I glanced down at her.

She closed her eyes at me, like a cat offering its trust. Instinctively I relaxed and closed my eyes back. When I opened them she offered her hand, palm up. Gently I placed my hand in hers. She rested our hands on her knee and faced the moat, breathing in slowly but audibly. In through the nose, out through the mouth. I matched my breath to hers.

Listening to our breaths, the insects and the water I strained against the cloistering walls I had erected around my mind. While part of me had found solace in them another part felt trapped and isolated.

I had built the walls to protect myself and my fellow wave-users. Now that the danger had passed I needed to overcome my fears.

I remembered the hawk that I had faced, in my vision, passing through the Tanzan barrier shield. I had given myself over to the waves completely. My fear of birds seemed silly now, and there were no butterflies in my stomach when I thought of them.

I breathed in and out, slowing my heartbeat.

*'Thank you for rescuing me,'* Jaalta's thoughts came clearly into my mind. *'Even when all my hope was lost, you were steadfast.'*

Regaining the waves was like walking out of the shadows on a winter day. I turned my face to the sun, revelling in the light and warmth. My aunt's love hit me like a torrent of warm water. I sensed Tiaro too, sending her own love and support to me in ripples. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the earring flash with blue light as my wave senses came alive once more.

*'Taeon!'* she celebrated.

*'Welcome back, Taeon.'* Jaalta's wave was calm and trusting. *'Thank the Nine!'*

There were voices and pinpoints of light all around me, but it was easier to keep my focus on just a few now. Jaalta's kindness was all the more meaningful to me considering she had just lost her Sleffion-kin. The death of Reen was like a gaping wound in her wave-presence, causing the sort of pain I knew from my childhood, yet she loved me.

*'I'm so sorry for your loss,'* I said, sending every ounce of empathy through the waves that I could. I felt Tiaro join her sorrow with mine. Tears ran down Jaalta's face but she made not a sound.

After a while I was surprised to see a smile on my aunt's lips.

*'I knew you were still in there,'* she said.

*'If I could close myself in, why couldn't I get out again?'* I asked her.

*'You have become very good at "closing yourself in" and I'm not just talking about the waves,'* she replied.

Had I been too withdrawn, too independent of those around me?

*'Wouldn't you be, in my situation?'* I retorted gently. If she could read my mind, she obviously knew about the many struggles I'd faced as a child; the child of a grief-maddened father. It was natural that child had become a self-reliant, strong-willed man, wasn't it?

She looked down at the dew-beaded lawn. *'I just don't want you to end up like your father.'*

*'Nor do I,'* I agreed with vehemence.

She took my hand. *'He loved your mother. His passions drove him... to his death.'*

*'We must fight the Zeikas,'* I replied, wondering if my father had instilled this passion in me.

Jaalta shook her head. *'Nay. All we must do is beat them.'*

I didn't know what she meant. What other way was there to best them? I stood and paced around. Being parted from Rekala, Sarlice and now Ciera was grinding me down. My left fist clenched around the belt from Jaria. It warmed to my touch, somehow making me feel more alert. Oh but it was good to have my wave senses back!

*'Who should we contact first?'* I queried Tiaro. If Ciera didn't return soon he and his battalion would be overrun.

*'Sing,'* Tiaro suggested. *'Sing and reach out to your Sleffion-kin. Bring him back from whatever darkness he has flown into.'*

*Halduronlei* chimed in the waves as Tiaro and I worked together to recall it from memory. The song built slowly and we turned our attention to Ciera. My heart lurched when I found him many leagues away. He laboured both physically and mentally, taxing his body to within an inch of survival.

The distance between us was insubstantial in the waves now. It was as if he was only in the next room. Rage billowed off him like a storm. Bursts of fury washed over me, searing me with their heat. With the belt helping us, Tiaro and I projected the soothing song at Ciera with all our might. Its sad and meaningful tune locked the three of us together.

Emotions swirled in the void between us. Our connection no longer came to me in a purely auditory sense—brilliant colours burned through the waves. Ciera's outline pulsed before me as he attacked the Zeikas at Lokshole. He took one final pass at the battlements before breaking off.

*'I heed you, Sleffion,'* he told me tiredly. *'I heed you.'*

He was breathing hard and I detected dozens of injuries in his massive frame. One of his forearms was enveloped with pain;

probably a break or dislocation. Ciera roared and the skyearls that had continued to defend him, despite the orders coming from Condii, turned and followed him towards home.

*'Be calm,'* I told him. *'There are other battles to be fought.'*

He made no reply. His anger still boiled so strongly that he could barely think straight. There was also something else... some other burden dragging at him...

*'Raer is falling,'* he reported angrily. *'And I am not strong enough to sustain it.'*

He flapped his wings in powerful sweeps, leading the strike force and flying the Condii defenders back to the city.

*'But Centan will be damaged,'* I responded carefully.

Ciera snorted. *'They evacuate the Dome of Gathering as we speak. They cannot even help us move Raer over the falls.'*

*'There are other shrouders with such ability?'* I queried.

He sighed. *'Not many, and all but a few of the creators of Raer perished before we could accomplish the plan.'*

*'I'm sorry,'* I told him. My situation with the strategists seemed unimportant in light of this news, yet I couldn't keep it from him. The reminder of my problems seemed to bring him back into focus. We did not discuss his berserker rage.

*'Something is different,'* he said instead. *'Despite the distance between us, our waves are so clear.'*

I looked down at the belt and said, *'It's strange, you know. I've had it all this time and never realised...'*

*'The Jarian belt aids you somehow?'* Ciera queried.

The Ancient Sapphire Tree in the Land of a Thousand Perils had willingly given one of its shards to my Jarian ancestors. Namal had shown it to me in the Catacombs of Krii, and here I stood with an artefact made from that tree. Was the belt able to augment the waves, just as the tree itself was?

My mind spun with questions, but I was also aware of Ciera's intense struggles. Although our waves were clear, it seemed to take more and more of his strength to concentrate on our conversation. For the first time ever, the smell of his exhaustion reached me through the waves. It suffocated me such that I found myself

coughing on the ground. With growing alarm, I realised Ciera's flight path was taking him lower and lower to the ground.

'Are you hale enough to make the flight?' I asked him.

'Too much...' he responded. 'I cannot hold it aloft any longer.'

His body skimmed low over a field of stubby trees. Several branches scraped his underside, some even penetrating the fur and gouging the thick skin due to the force of his fall. As he came to an exhausted crash landing, something inside him gave way. To Ciera's immense skyearl senses, it was as if a sinew within his own body suddenly tore. Pain ripped through him, and me.

Through the belt and Ciera's connection to the shroud, Raer, I saw the great sky palace and all its foundations crash down onto Centan. The bulk of it crashed into the Dome of Gathering and the Ancient Sapphire Tree inside shattered to pieces. *So, they're not completely indestructible.*

A shockwave followed, like a tsunami punching through the waves. I watched in horror as all those with wave senses were affected, one after the other.

The shockwave bubbled out. With the Jarian Anzaii belt in my hand, I was able to perceive the shockwave's effects all across Tanza. The tens of thousands of wave-users in the realm were floored by the sudden impact of the breaking of the Ancient Sapphire Tree in Centan. For some it was their last moment alive. Wherever they were in battle, the Zeikas took full advantage of the distraction.

I found my awareness hovering over the armies between Lowford and Highford. A defender army of some 5000 warriors had embarked to help Highford only to be intercepted on open ground. The Zeikas wiped out the last of their number before my very eyes.

'*Crystom! Em!*' I cried out.

With Jaalta's help, the belt enabled me to search out the king and queen within a few minutes. Of all places, they were both inside the Dome of Gathering.

Panels of stone and glass shattered around them as the outer walls crumbled inwards. As I watched in horror, the pressure on the last remaining blocks of the ceiling became too much. King Crystom was pulling at Em's legs, trying to get her clear of the

falling debris. She pushed forward relentlessly, grasping for a single large leaf of the Ancient Sapphire Tree that had shot clear of the first pile of rubble.

Finally she had it in her hand and the two of them fled from the collapsing building.

Structures from Raer toppled in after them, crushing whatever was left of the passages and tunnels in the dome.

Afterwards, not an inch of the tree was visible in the wreck. I felt like a spirit hovering over them, unable to help. Perhaps with the belt, I *could* help.

I gestured at Jaalta, allowing her to read my thoughts. She placed her hand on my waist so that some of her fingers were touching the leafshards directly. Together we reached out for Crystom and Em.

*'Jaalta? Taeon?'* came Crystom's bewildered reply.

He had sprained his ankle and Em bore many cuts and bruises from her dash into the dome.

*'Zeikas have defeated a Lowford defender army on its way to Highford,'* I blurted, hoping to at least get that vital piece of information to them before our communication over the waves was interrupted.

The king and queen looked at each other.

*'How are you doing this far-waving with us?'* Em wanted to know.

*'It's the belt,'* Jaalta said. *'Taeon's been out of the waves a while, but I helped him open up again. Now, with our combined Anzaii abilities and using the belt, we seem to be able to reach further.'*

*'You said the Lowford army has been slain?'* Crystom queried, unable to keep his dread from reaching us. There were hundreds of souls in that army he knew well, and even those he didn't know were precious to him.

*'Aye,'* I confirmed. *'I saw it as I watched a shockwave from the breaking of the Ancient Sapphire Tree.'*

*'May I ask what you were doing in the dome?'* Jaalta said.

Em replied, *'I wanted to recover a leaf from the tree—for you and Taeon.'*

She risked her life for it. Was she going to have it fashioned into a Tanzan Anzaii artefact, like the Jarian belt?

Crystom and Em were distracted by a group of Tanzans who came to escort them to safety. Both of their Sleffion-kin were nearby, ready to fly them out of the waterfall city.

Crystom said, *'From what I can tell, you are both already reaching further and more clearly than you ever have before, to another human.'*

Jaalta and I agreed.

*'It is the leafshard belt from Jaria,'* I admitted. *'I've carried it with me all this time and never realised its true purpose.'* Then to Jaalta I said, *'The nine seeds mentioned in the history scrolls have grown into the Ancient Sapphire Trees. Are you suggesting that if pieces from all nine trees are brought together something will happen?'*

*'It seems possible they can be combined somehow and used to augment Anzaii abilities,'* she replied. *'The Centan tree has long been used for bettering our communication. Perhaps these artefacts will be more effective when kept together.'*

*'I hope so,'* Crystom replied. *'Right now, I will take any advantage we can get. We are coming to Conzii. We'll talk more then.'*

*'Yes, sire,'* I replied.

As Crystom and Em made preparations for their departure, I turned my attention back to Ciera. He had lain still for a long time after his crash landing, ignoring the efforts of his skyearl companions to rouse him. He had listened to the conversation between Crystom, Em, Jaalta and I and sent his feelings of support to me.

*'I behaved badly,'* he admitted after a while. *'I ignored orders from Conzii. I got countless Tanzans killed...'*

*'We are at war,'* I replied, trying to reassure him. *'Are you able to return?'*

He dipped his head. *'Yes, after I have consumed this grove.'*

I chuckled at the thought of him eating an entire grove. He pulled himself to his feet and opened his tremendous jaws to eat some of the palm tree leaves and pine saplings that had been left in front of him by his fellows. The rough branches scraped away the blood and human remains that had caught between his teeth, but the memories were harder for him to get rid of.

I used the rest of Trayaday to communicate with Rekala, Sarlice, Kestric, Tyba, Skylien, Dathan, Jett, Tivac and even Riftweaver. All were relieved to hear I was back on the waves and stronger than ever. The kindred I used to forge the wave connections were honoured to be assisting the master psion.

Prince Tyba was astonished that I could reach directly to humans within ten yards and detect them on the waves from even further away. I was pleased that I could reach Sarlice from leagues away. Tiaro theorised this was because we were so close. Our minds naturally followed a similar wavelength.

Sarlice had heard a fragmented version of what had been happening in Conдии. There were far worse tales coming from the fords. By sheer force of numbers, the Zeikas were gaining control. A force as high as 10,000 Zeikas now descended upon Highford.

The 7000 Zeikas that remained after killing Lowford's defenders during the shockwave continued on to Lowford. Civilians fled the town, knowing well it could not hold back forces of that size without its army. From so far away, it was heart-wrenching to have to watch and know I could do nothing to help.

Ciera, and the Conдии defenders who'd remained with him, arrived back in town and joined a war camp near the decimated barracks. The emperor skyearl had barely staggered in through the gates before he collapsed in the parade grounds to sleep. I watched through the waves as skyearls swarmed around him, forcing him to wake long enough to drink water and have his injured arm splinted.

In the evening I made my way down to him to stay by his side through the night. With nobody else around I decided to reach out again to the most important person in my life. I hooked my thumb over the Jarian belt and thought of Sarlice. I expected her to be somewhere in Lantaid. I let my thoughts wander out over Conдии and shoot west.

Beyond the brighter presences of Rada-kin were Sleffion-kin and the dim lights of humans. I was certain the difference in brightness was due to my ability to reach each kind of being, not because they were any larger or smaller in their own wave-presences. If that was

true then my familiarity with Sarlice ought to make her brighter to my wave-senses than the other humans. But where was she?

I quested around the city of Lantaid without finding her. My head ached as I strained to keep my awareness floating as I searched.

*'Try looking for Rekala first,'* Tiaro suggested.

I was able to locate Rekala straight away. Sure enough, there was Sarlice, up a tree in the twilit night. Lying on her stomach watching Rekala and Kestric down below. Thita was perched on the branch in front of her, chirruping about all the different lichen, creepers, vines and moths in their vicinity.

*'Sarlice,'* I called.

*'Taeon?'* she said aloud, shocked.

*'Where?'* Thita barked.

*'Here in the waves,'* I said, pulling Sarlice's thoughts toward me so she was able to reply.

*'How are you... you can communicate with other people now? I thought you had shut down your wave senses.'*

*'I got them back, and with a vengeance,'* I replied. *'It's this belt from Jaria. It contains leafshards from one of the nine Ancient Sapphire Trees. You remember the tree in Centan, how they used it to enhance communications? My belt does the same thing, I just never knew it.'*

*'That's... that's amazing, Taeon. So you can read human minds...?'*

*'Not exactly,'* I replied. *'Well, strong thoughts come out and I can glean those, but I can't just pick a random person and listen to all their thoughts. I can initiate a mental conversation from a distance. If I'm touching someone I might be able to read their thoughts, but most people have some sort of mental barrier.'*

*'Taeon, are you well? Is Ciera? Thita said he can't reach him.'*

*'He is exhausted,'* I replied. *'The sky palace crashed into the Dome of Gathering. Ciera couldn't hold it any longer. He was in a battle at Lokshole while I recovered from rescuing Jaalta. So much has happened, Sarlice.'*

*'Slow down and tell me all about it,'* she commanded. I obeyed.

We conversed for over half an hour before my concentration started to waver. Like most of the defenders in Lantaid, Sarlice was aware of the Zeika army on approach.

*'I wish we could be there with you,'* Sarlice said.

*'I got your letter,'* I replied, resting my aching head in my hands. *'Thank you. I did consider it, but it's safer this way.'*

*'Safer?'* I couldn't decide if she was incredulous or offended. Her mental voice started to become fuzzy on the waves.

*'You and the kindred should leave Tanza,'* I pressed.

*'Why shouldn't we help to defend it just like you?'*

*'Pretty soon, there won't be much left to defend,'* I said.

I strained to hear her reply. *'It sounds like you're giving up.'*

*'No, never that! But the Zeikas have taken most of the realm.'*

*'Be that as it may,'* she replied stiffly, *'it is our duty to defend the weak—'*

*'Do it!'* I interrupted, pain making my thoughts towards her harsher than I intended. *'Take the weak out through the Tanzan chasm. Do it while you still can.'*

*'Taeon, I don't like the way you're talking.'*

*'I'm sorry,'* I said, my connection slipping. *'I don't want anything to happen to you.'*

*'I miss you,'* I said aloud, after the wave had broken.

Ciera stirred beside me, but remained in slumber.

I pictured Sarlice's strong face and blue eyes. *If only we'd had more time together.* With the future so uncertain, I felt a longing for her that went beyond friendship. It would be comforting to have her with me right now, to make the most of what time we had left.

No kindred could ever be what Sarlice was to me, a woman I loved. A woman I wanted with every fibre of my being. The question was, did she want me?

My head was pounding so I lay down. I wished Rekala was here. Jett had brought me a pallet and blankets, but it was hard to sleep. The noises from people and skyearls all around us made my head ache even more. I longed for the peace and quiet of Jaria's forests or the hush of a dry plain just before dawn.

Ciera had a fitful sleep as well. Every time he twitched, I feared he might roll on top of me. Steeling myself, I held my position by his lower jaw and hummed *Halduronlei* through the waves. It

seemed to calm him enough to sleep more soundly. Eventually, I drifted off as well.

As soon as Crystom and Em arrived, they took charge of the strategy meetings in Condiif fortress, straightening out some of the tensions that had been building. Crystom conferred with his closest advisors, including Em, Tyba, Dathan, Varal, Amadeus, Ciera and, to my surprise, me. During that time, we learned of the full details of every battle around the realm and how valiantly all the defender commanders had conducted themselves.

For every bit of ground gained by the Zeikas, they suffered unheard-of losses. The numbers of our enemy were so high that the scouts and counters all across the realm were expressing their inability to maintain accurate records.

After I explained how Jaria's Anzaiif artefact seemed to be working, Em gave Jaalta the leaf from the Ancient Sapphire Tree in Centan. It was shaped somewhat like a shield, but only slightly bigger than my hand with outstretched fingers. The edges were sharp enough to cut so we had it mounted on a steel plate with a bracket on the back so it could be held like a shield or attached to armour.

Jaalta and I used the Anzaiif artefacts to facilitate a meeting on the waves between Crystom and his commanders.

*'We mourn terrible loss of life all across the realm,'* Crystom said. *'Tanza is in its most desperate hour. If we are to have any hope of survival, we must band together now.'*

*'We flee Kovain on the morrow,'* said a solemn female on the waves, Commander Lorik. *'With some 5000 defender warriors and at least 120,000 civilians—we are sure to lose a few along the way. Supplies are being gathered and stored on boats. The people will travel by foot to Centan.'*

*'Trees be with you,'* Crystom said.

Commander Selten of Lowford and Commander Risca of Highford agreed it was pointless now to expend more lives.

*'We concentrate, now, on helping our people to evacuate,'* Selten affirmed.

*'The Zeikas will expect us to make our last stand in Centan,'* Tyba said to the seventeen gathered minds.

*'We must not let them discover when Centan has been evacuated,'* one of the advisors added.

Crystom spoke up. *'We will have hunting parties on patrol in the skies around the falls, to kill any Zeika scouts or squadrons.'*

It took every bit of skill Jaalta, Galtoro, Tiaro and I had to use the two Anzaii artefacts as a bridge for their conversation. Other Anzaii, in each location, added their strength to the communion. But it was far too taxing. Somebody pushed both Jaalta and I into seats and wiped our brows with wet cloths. I devoured the food that was given to me, without even knowing what it was. I felt Ciera's furry toe against my right shoulder when he lifted his foot up to the armrest. His touch lent me strength.

*'Do the skyearls have anything to add, Ciera?'* Crystom asked.

My Sleffion-kin used my connection to the group to get a good look at everyone who was present on the waves before responding. *'We are greatly saddened by our inability to protect you from this foe,'* Ciera said. *'Skyearls haven't gathered for a meeting in a season, nor will we now that the realm is in such peril, but I have spoken with the eldest of our kind and the highest ranking skyearls in the defender army. We all agree to follow your lead, King and Queen.'*

*'We thank you for your loyalty,'* Em responded. *'The service of the skyearls to our people is not taken for granted. We are sorry for your losses.'*

*'Thousands of skyearls have perished,'* Ciera mourned, *'but we feel the loss of human and Rada-kin lives just as keenly. Every life lost is a mission failed,'* he lamented.

Feeling the decades of experience behind his emotion, my vision swam. Tiaro bolstered me as best she could, but the gathered minds shimmered and wavered for a moment. Beside me, Em placed a hand on Ciera's massive paw and there was silence for a few minutes.

Eventually Crystom spoke again. *'Usually the skyearls have certain issues to bring to my attention. Do you—'*

Ciera seemed impressed he had brought it up. *‘There are some trivial matters between some of the kin pairs and their respective leaders, but all that pales into insignificance in the face of evacuation.’*

*‘It does at that,’* Crystom agreed. *‘I have a pile of scrolls taller than me from the wave messengers. Issues, bah, may the waters take them. Ciera has the right of it. What we don’t need right now are any more issues. All right, commanders? You deal with critically important matters only now. Life and death, care for the wounded and the orphaned, shelter and supplies, weapons and armour, attack and defence. Encourage and elevate your most pragmatic and compassionate leaders. Stand down any trouble-makers with “issues”.’*

The plans and discussions continued, but I no longer had the energy to consciously think about them. My vision swam with vertigo. When it became clear that Jaalta and I could hold out no longer, Ciera ended the gathering of minds.

King Crystom placed one hand on my shoulder afterwards, saying, ‘My thanks, Taeon. If there is anything you need, please ask.’

My thoughts were of the Jarians. Despite having a Rada-kin and a Slefion-kin who could chain minds, we had been unable to reach any kindred with Bessed or the others.

‘My pleasure to serve, Your Majesty.’ I sighed. ‘Was there any news from the scouting party you sent to Jaria?’

He gestured to Samos, who was over the other side of the vista, and conferred with him before answering. ‘Eldry and Tralvard reported in this morning. Sad to say they have not located any Jarians in the Zeika quarry.’

‘And Jaria Village?’

‘In ruins.’ Seeing my shoulders slump, he added, ‘They will keep searching.’

I had invited my aunt to share my chamber, so we staggered there together. After being connected to so many minds, I felt disoriented and alone. Jett held a steady hand on my back.

I fell into a dismal heap as soon as I made it to the bed. Jett pulled off my boots and shirt and extinguished the torches around the room.

# Chapter Twenty-three — Communication

**B**efore venturing from my chambers on 178 Trayaday I took a few minutes to read through the history scroll I'd obtained from the ritualists in Lantaid. The seed that was borne to the Council of Water was clearly what had grown into the Ancient Sapphire Tree of Centan. The Land of a Thousand Perils was Naioteio, where I had seen the tree in the Catacombs of Krii.

A 'City of Snow' could be anywhere to the south west, in the Kiayr Ranges, but Siffre was the only realm I knew of with cities where it snowed. A town fed by a spring might be worth investigating for this 'Spring of Understanding'. But what was meant by a running rock? I had no idea what the others meant, either, but I was starting to think about who I could ask—the ritualists, a Kriite historian or archaeologist, perhaps.

I rubbed the Jarian belt, appreciating the cool smoothness of the sapphire tree leaves that decorated it. The blue shards twinkled in the torchlight of my room but, unlike the shards in my earring, they had no light of their own.

Were Anzaii meant to journey to the other seven Ancient Sapphire Trees in the hope they would give over a leafshard? Was I? If I possessed an artefact made from each one's leaves, would my effectiveness multiply or was there a limit? Would new powers emerge?

After the events of the past four days, it didn't seem likely anybody from Tanza would have time to go on pilgrimages to the trees or answer my questions. After the Centan Ancient was crushed, the secretive ritualists were said to have fled the realm.

Both Lowford and Highford had fallen, with 50,000 civilians and less than a thousand warriors having made it to Jesath. They were refugees now, and their future was uncertain.

The legion of Zeikas that had been too numerous to count, last time I'd heard of them, had been estimated at 18,000. These had made their way to Lantaid; it was the same army that scouts had reported only a week ago near Fireflow Mountain. Sarlice was among the warriors positioned at the Hills of Everstain, once again, to meet them.

The survivors from Kovain made it to Centan the same day the Zeikas engaged our people at Everstain. Under the cover of darkness that evening, the entire population of Centan and Kovain embarked on their journey toward Condi. There were 350,000 civilians altogether, a number neither Tiaro nor I could grasp. The even higher death toll was sudden and catastrophic. Even the counters didn't have reliable numbers for that as it was a developing situation. We relied heavily on Ciera's greater experience and wisdom to comprehend all that was going on.

Although the Centanians had been stockpiling supplies for weeks, there was widespread panic in Condi about lack of food and potable water.

It took four days for the people of Centan and Kovain to reach Condi, during which time the barrier around the Cascade City was lifted and the mists rushed in.

Also during that time, it was discovered that 20,000 Zeikas were heading towards Centan, from all corners of the realm, which could only mean one thing. Our enemies were coming for the killing blow. They just didn't know we were in Condi and not Centan.

King Crystom's hunting parties slew any Zeika scouts that strayed towards Centan. The net of defenders around the waterfall city was so tight that not a single spy got through. At all times there were about 500 skyearls flying at various heights around Centan,

protecting it in a gigantic skyearl-bubble. Little did the Zeikas know that what they protected was an abandoned city.

*'If only all those skyearls had been able to help you with Raer,'* I said to Ciera who was outside helping coordinate fortifications at the sentry towers. His injured forearm was held in a sling at his chest and he sat with his other three paws on the ground.

*'Alas,'* he replied. *'The art of maintaining sky kingdoms has nearly been lost. It was a speciality of my breed, but most keltoars have perished or flown away across the Kiayr Range.'*

*'I wish I could reach across Kiayr with the waves,'* I replied. *'Perhaps I could find a force of Tanzans to fly back and turn the tide on this war. I am unable to reach that far.'*

*'Even with the Anzaii artefacts boosting your abilities, you must take it slowly,'* Ciera said with a sigh. *'As much as it would be fortuitous to have some allies to help us right now, you should keep your focus here.'*

*'Isn't Ravra an ally?'* I asked.

*'Yes,'* he replied, *'but few of them have Kriite blood, so they do not have an easy way into our realm. They offer us sanctuary within their borders, but expecting them to send soldiers to die in our land is another thing entirely.'*

*'I want you to use the waves to kill Zeikas. Try to leave the communications to others where possible. Your entrapment and confusion abilities are going to be pivotal in the coming battles.'*

*'Ciera's right,'* Tiaro agreed. *'Communication is taking its toll on our reserves. Your focus would be better spent on the front lines.'*

Even though the two artefacts made using the waves easier for me, I tried not to reach out too far. People were perishing in every direction and the pain of those final moments was unbearable.

*'Good morning, Master Psion,'* Jett said as he came into the room.

Many of the furnishings had vanished over the past week; makeshift places of abode were popping up all over Condii and just about every room in the fortress had been converted into sleeping quarters for the defenders. I was glad to at least be sharing my room with Jett and Jaalta. My aunt had already departed, leaving her bed neatly made.

‘Good morning, Jett.’

‘We are starting to see the effects of the rationing now,’ he told me as he handed me a small bowl of porridge and a buttered scone.

I waved my hand. ‘This is adequate. Thank you.’

Jett muttered something under his breath.

‘What was that?’ I asked, spooning the porridge up.

‘Oh... nothing, Taeon, I was just complaining because even the prisoners are still getting their normal rations. I admit that prison food is a step below defender food, but still...’

‘That reminds me,’ I began, ‘isn’t Corypha being held in the prison? I was hoping to have a talk with him.’

‘Can’t you just locate him in the waves now, like any of us would with our kin?’

‘You know what? I probably can, but I won’t waste the psionic energy. Can we go to him?’

‘Prince Tyba has been to see him many times,’ Jett replied. ‘In fact, I believe he’s with the traitor again now, trying to unravel what’s been going on with that wave cult.’

‘Truly? You must take me there,’ I said. ‘Perhaps I can help Tyba persuade him to talk.’

‘Very well.’

I ate my scone on the way to the prison, which was located towards the back of Condii Fortress. A short flight of stone stairs brought us to the barricaded wooden entry where two guards were on duty. Recognising both myself and Jett, the pair stood aside. We passed dozens of iron-barred cells, most of which contained multiple occupants, before coming to a more heavily fortified room.

A skyearl was imprisoned in a stone cell we passed, his fur matted and bloody.

‘What’s going on here?’ I asked.

The skyearl threw himself at the bars, claws lashing out for me as I passed.

‘What’s going on here?’ the creature mimicked savagely.

‘This was one half of a renegade pair,’ Jett explained. ‘The human died while fleeing capture and the Sleffion-kin went on a rampage.’

He's deranged. We've had people trying to work with him, but it isn't looking good.'

'Where's Corypha?'

'Corypha, Corypha, Corypha!' the skyearl chanted, turning his head sideways and showing me the white of one eye.

'This way,' Jett said, leading me further down the hall.

We came to a room with just one cell inside. It was stone up to waist height with iron bars all around the top so the prison guards could see in. The traitor's belongings were on a table not far from the cell and included a multi-faceted crystalline ring, the symbol of the Wavekeepers.

'Let me get this straight,' Tyba said as we came up behind him, 'you admit to being part of the Wavekeeper cult, whose mission is to kill all Anzaii.'

'I have nothing to be ashamed of,' Corypha declared. 'The Anzaii are an infection in our ranks, like a snuffle that soon leads to death chills. We must prevent them from being used against us. You have already seen the destruction that can occur—'

'I've had enough of your proselytising!' Tyba shouted.

The guard who was in the cell with them moved a little closer to Corypha, threatening him with his mace.

'Did you or did you not poison the strike force?' Tyba asked.

Corypha sneered at him, with his lower jaw jutting forward. 'As I've told you, it was a necessary part of the plan.'

'Who's plan?' Tyba demanded, grabbing Corypha by the front of his shirt.

Corypha pursed his lips, defying his prince.

I pushed my way into the cell, pleased that the guard allowed me in. Jett watched through the bars.

'Morning, Tyba,' I said with a quick bow.

'Taeon,' he responded, releasing Corypha from his grip with a shove.

Tyba's brows were pinched tight, making deep vertical lines in his forehead. Although slightly shorter than me, his royal demeanour was already apparent.

‘Vile demon—’ Corypha snarled at me, shoving me backwards into Tyba.

Without thinking, I slammed the base of my palm into Corypha’s face. He hunched down, stunned.

‘What other betrayal have you set in motion?’ I demanded.

Bent over before me, Corypha looked pathetic. I could sense that his fears and self-righteousness were what drove him to such extreme beliefs. He put up one hand to fend me off, while holding his chin with the other. I pushed past his defences easily and dragged him to his feet.

‘Speak!’ I commanded, pushing him back against the wall by his throat. The hair stood up all over my body and I noticed mottled icetiger fur on my forearms. The colours available to my vision faded, but the brightness and clarity soared.

I impelled him to speak not only with my words and my body, but also with the waves. The traitor didn’t have much mental fortitude so he found my words hard to disobey.

‘Very well,’ he gasped. I let him go and he sank onto his knees.

‘I sent the details of your kin in Lantaïd,’ he said. ‘They were to capture them and the red-head, using them to lure you into a trap.’

‘Who?’ I half-shouted, half-roared.

He flinched at the sight of claws on my upraised hand. The teeth in my mouth had turned pointy, rage driving me into icetiger form through no conscious effort.

‘The others,’ Corypha stammered. ‘I don’t know who they all are.’

‘Fool!’ Tyba accused him. ‘How do you know they aren’t Zeikas, using *you* to gain information? You are guilty of the very crime of which you accuse others.’

‘No!’ Corypha cried, looking up into the prince’s eyes. ‘They are other Wavekeepers like me, unbound people... or people with maybe just one kin. We don’t use the waves to communicate; it is too risky.’ He cast an obstinate look in my direction. ‘Instead we use traditional, incorruptible means to contact each other over long distances.’

Tyba and I exchanged a look.

‘Incorruptible?’ Tyba asked in disbelief. ‘The waves are our most sacred and secure means of communicating.’

Corypha stammered, 'A penned scroll is more secure—'

'It is less secure you imbecile,' I interrupted. 'The ideal way for missives to be sent and fall into the wrong hands, even turn up elsewhere completely changed.'

Corypha appeared stricken by this idea.

'Why the elaborate deception?' Tyba asked him, trying to keep him from clamming up. My presence had provoked a response in the prisoner and he wanted to take advantage of it. 'Why not just kill the Anzaii yourself?'

Corypha rubbed at his head, clearly in pain. 'Operatives like me don't kill openly because we want to maintain our positions as spies.'

'*You* are the cowards,' I accused him.

Tyba shook his head at me and I fell silent.

'That way we can keep sending information,' Corypha continued quietly, 'or take concealed opportunities to kill Anzaii.'

'Like the poisoning of the strike force,' Tyba accused him.

Corypha's face was dripping with sweat. Blood had collected under one nostril. He made no reply.

'Come, Taeon,' Tyba said gravely. 'I've heard enough.'

'Yes, sire,' I replied.

'But what about me...?' Corypha murmured pitifully.

Tyba's mouth was a flat line as he looked over the prisoner and his cell.

'You will be tried for treason,' Tyba said. To the guards he added, 'For the time being, give him criminal's rations, no privileges.'

Even in a time of war as desperate as this, Tanza was renowned for its humane protocols. There would be no starving of prisoners. It was deeply ingrained in their culture that those in power had a duty of care to treat others fairly. Tyba and I left the cell, and Jett followed behind us.

'Do you really think the Zeikas might be behind all this?' I asked Tyba.

He rubbed his eyes. 'If it is being masterminded by the Zeikas, then I have to face the idea of there being intelligent Kriites out there who genuinely condone murder...'

'We know there's Corypha,' I said.

Tyba raised an eyebrow at me. ‘I said “intelligent”. Corypha is a follower; both he and his Sleffion-kin are, you might say, “easily lead”.’

‘How did they get into your elite guard in the strike force, then?’ I queried.

Tyba threw his hands up. A group of people was approaching from down the hall, eyes fixed on the prince. Jett headed them off so we could keep talking. Tyba and I hurried past them.

‘He was Anzaii Klutha’s aide. She wouldn’t have joined without him. She was the first to die.’

I sighed. ‘Corypha is a fool, but I am an even bigger fool for telling him about Sarlice going to Lantaid.’

‘Hopefully nothing will come of it,’ Tyba said. ‘We don’t even know who Corypha’s information was given to.’

I nodded. ‘I have warned her about the Wavekeeper plot, but I wish there was more I could do to protect her.’

‘Do you want me to order her to be taken somewhere safe, with guards?’ Tyba asked.

‘No,’ I replied, ‘she wouldn’t appreciate that.’

Tyba smirked at me. ‘She doesn’t seem like the kind of woman who needs protecting.’

‘That’s true,’ I agreed. ‘She will not put herself before Tanza. Nothing will stop her from fighting, not even me.’

‘It sounds like you both consider yourselves Tanzans, now,’ the prince observed.

‘We are Kriites,’ I responded. ‘Tanza is the last great Kriite nation. Soon, I think nations will not be so important.’

‘You see the world differently to me,’ Tyba said.

Despite Jett’s efforts, our conversation was soon interrupted. On our way to the vista, Tyba was trailed by at least six people trying to relay messages to him. I overheard that the civilians from Centan could no longer fit inside the walls of Condii. Over 100,000 had started to make camp between the six towers at the front gate.

Food, water, rubbish and disease were all becoming problems, even with supplies being purchased from Tanza’s ally, Ravra.

‘There’s naught we can do,’ Tyba replied. ‘Have the reinforcements been sent to aid the spy-hunters around Centan?’

‘Yes, sire,’ came the reply.

More Zeika movements were reported than I cared to comprehend. Using the Jarian belt I engaged my enhanced wave-senses to detect all the scurrying people in the corridors ahead of us. I held my hand in front of Tyba as we reached an intersection and enabled a group of thirty footsoldiers to pass.

‘Thank you, Taeon,’ he said.

The messengers started up again the moment we were moving. I screened them out, trying instead to narrow my wave-perceptions down to a few select individuals... here was Corypha stewing about his treatment and wishing he hadn’t told us so much about the Wavekeepers... there was strategist Saned, still fretting and worrying so much that he couldn’t sleep. Using the waves to locate people was taxing. I stopped when my vision began to swim. I concentrated on my own kin instead, which was much easier.

Tiaro was here in my ear and her presence was close to all my thoughts. Ciera had made his way back to Condii Fortress and now sat in the shade conversing with about two dozen skyearls. The skyearls were attempting to tighten the net of flying skyearls around Condii. I was surprised to find that one of their aims was locating Miletus, Corypha’s Sleffion-kin.

Tyba and I had to push past crowds of people to gain entry to the vista. Although mostly military personnel, there were countless people milling around. I recognised some faces from the strike force. Most hailed me with a wave or a salute. I found myself smiling in their company. At last we were all together.

King Crystom, Queen Em, Commander Varal and Captain Dathan were at the head of the strategy table, each looking fresh and clean if not exactly rested. Strategists Ervan and Sigthan were present as well as two whose names I didn’t know. The others were on their rest break.

Jaalta was seated at the table, with the Centan shield in front of her. I took off the Jarian belt and placed it next to the shield. Crystom and Em gave Tyba and I a welcoming smile.

‘...not much time now,’ Captain Dathan was saying. ‘If the new legion from Lokshole has made good time, they will reach us tomorrow.’

‘What of all the civilians at our front gate?’ Commander Varal asked King Crystom.

‘We will not let the Zeikas get that close,’ the king replied. ‘Prince Tyba will lead the defenders against them.’

‘Yes!’ Tyba exclaimed. ‘There’re only 4400. We shall crush them now before more arrive.’

‘It’s important we stop the Zeikas from destroying their own supplies once they realise the battle has been lost,’ Ervan said. ‘With so many mouths to feed here and so many casualties, we are desperate for food, bandages, sinew for stitching wounds, tonics, clothing—’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘We must use careful tactics,’ Captain Dathan counselled him. ‘The defenders number nearly 20,000 in Condii now, but we need about half of those to stay near Condii in case of unexpected attacks and to help the civilians settle in.’

‘Granted,’ Tyba said. ‘But I am glad to have this opportunity to take the battle to them. We have been too reactive most of this time. As Taeon has demonstrated, the key to survival is going on the offensive. Since I will be occupied with the army, I would like to appoint Taeon and Ciera to lead the strike force.’

There was a wash of quiet murmuring throughout the hall. Without the belt, I was unable to read their thoughts. I noticed a nearly imperceptible nod from Captain Dathan to the king.

‘Very well,’ Crystom replied.

‘That’s settled then,’ said Queen Em. She looked me in the eyes. ‘Taeon, are you feeling up to the task?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ I responded formally. ‘And yet, who am I, a rookie, to lead the most important squadron of the army?’

Em and Crystom exchanged glances.

‘Come here,’ Crystom said gruffly.

I had to stop myself from gulping. *What now?*

‘Kneel,’ said the king. ‘Cross your arms over your chest.’

In front of everyone, the king of Tanza drew his sword and tapped me first on my left shoulder and then on my right.

‘I, Crystom, King of Tanza, hereby promote you, Master Psion Taeon of Jaria, to the rank of Specialist.’

A mixture of applause and sharply indrawn breaths echoed about the chamber. I glimpsed a small smile on Jett’s lips. Tyba also gave me a wink.

‘Thank you, sire,’ I responded, heart beating fast. All my doubts about my recent boldness and outspoken behaviour evaporated. If the king and queen supported me, then that was enough to dissuade any naysayers. I was a little disappointed Saned was on his rest break—the look on his face would have been satisfying.

*‘Don’t be too smug, Taeon,’ Ciera said from outside. ‘Specialists have far more responsibility than rookies. I tried to protect you from too much while you were still finding out who you are and what you can do. You have brought this upon yourself.’*

His words weren’t unkind, just resigned to the inevitable.

‘I know,’ I replied.

King Crystom gestured for me to stand up.

‘Keep those on your person,’ Queen Em said, pointing at the Anzaii artefacts on the table. ‘You and Jaalta may do with them as you see fit.’

‘Thank you.’

Noise rose in the vista as the gathered civilians and defenders in the hall discussed what they had just witnessed. I got the impression it had been a while since a newcomer, like me, had been elevated through the ranks so quickly.

Queen Em raised her hands for quiet.

‘You will take down this Zeika legion,’ Queen Em said to both Tyba and me. With a glance at Strategist Ervan, she emphasised to Tyba, ‘You must also secure their supplies and bring them back here.’

‘May the Ancient Sapphire Trees light our path,’ Tyba intoned.

## Chapter Twenty-four — Summoners

**W**e spent the rest of that day meeting with the strike force and the squadron leaders, drawing up plans for the coming battle. My imprinted knowledge of the area around Condii proved very useful. Many of the squadron leaders had grown up in this area of Tanza and knew the lay of the land. I would have felt useless to the discussions if it hadn't been for the two Rada-kin who'd shared their knowledge with me.

Naltoch nodded to me from his perch on Jett's shoulder. As a local from Condii, he had made an effort to share his knowledge of the city and surrounding areas with all the foreign Anzaii.

There were eleven Anzaii left in the strike force and only five of them knew Condii from past experience. Like me, Aerylaya, Nirixa, Quetanav, Rialb, Sioned and Kass had all received imprinting from Naltoch, Kotor and other local Rada-kin.

Even with this knowledge, I had little experience coordinating a battle so I relied on my sense of logic as well as Ciera's guidance during the discussions. My Sleffion-kin stood at my side while Tyba laid out his plans on the table. The king and queen were resting in their chambers, completely trusting their son to carry out their orders. I marvelled at such closeness and confidence in their relationship.

Tyba had chosen a specific pocket of woodland that was sheltered on one side by one of the immense tree-covered tors that

characterised the area. It was open on the other side, but featured a series of hummocks and crevices where hundreds of footsoldiers could wait in ambush.

Further up the hill was an overhang of grey stone where counters and strategists could gather to watch the battle and give their advice to us mid-battle. They could also see the road to the south from that position.

By the next morning just about all 10,000 of the defender soldiers in our battalion were positioned around the area. Squadrons of between ten and fifty scout-hunters soared in the air above us, with many more to the east, preventing Zeika scouts from perceiving exactly where we were. Rada with wyverns and birds of prey flew in clouds around the much larger skyearls.

A group of only a few hundred Zeikas on dragons were the first to come upon our spot. As soon as they saw the first Tanzan army at the top of the hill, two of them aboutfaced and shot away. The rest hovered in defiance of our hunters, tempting them to leave their designated places.

Instead of allowing them to pursue, Tyba gestured for me to lead the strike force forward. With my fellow Anzaii positioned beside me and all their kin and guardians behind, I strode into battle.

I carried Fyschs and a crossbow, but I spent most of my time using my Anzaii abilities.

Under our barrage of dispelling, entrapping and confusing, the remaining dragons were fragmented. With a hold on two dragons at once, I used them to pummel Zeikas who were throwing flame balls in our general direction. Not a single Tanzan died in the skirmish and all but five or six Zeikas were slain. We were not loath to let the survivors go; if they made it back to their commanders and reported only the numbers they had seen, the main army would come.

Ciera and I flew a lap around the valley, roaring our triumph. Aunt Jaalta was seated on the battle-seat behind me. This battle was very difficult for her, being one of the first since Reen was killed. Despite that, she and I had been at the forefront of the skirmish. I

was wearing the Jarian belt and Jaalta was holding the Centan shield. We used our combined might on the waves to easily overpower the Zeikas' conjurations. A dozen guardian spear-skyearls trailed us, each equipped with the finest Condiite skyearl-armour.

From so high up, I could clearly see how Tyba's battle-plans would come into effect. Nearly half of the army was hidden in the pocket of woodland at the foot of the enormous karst tower. In front of them were at least twenty smaller groups of only a few hundred warriors. These were scattered over the top of the valley. Thousands more were positioned at the top of each of the three valleys in the area. Each line of defenders could reach beyond the next to strike at oncoming Zeikas with arrow and ballista fire if necessary.

Tyba and Amadeus waited on a pile of rocks between the two northern-most valleys, scanning the terrain intently. The prince gestured to the south west. Jaalta, Tiaro and I perceived that scouts had sighted the main Zeika army, and soon Ciera and I could see a dust cloud. As expected, the Zeikas were taking the opportunity to wipe out our enticingly smaller force.

The first Zeikas to arrive were mounted on dragons. They didn't even bother to wait for the rest of the army, flying straight into the northern valley. About a thousand defender warriors engaged them there in a sky-battle that left me speechless.

Against the backdrop of green grass and granite boulders, the black and fiery dragons swarmed. Met by furred skyearls of every colour, shape and size, there was a tremendous uproar across the normally tranquil area. The skyearls grappled with the tyraks, snarling and using teeth and claws to get at the thick black hides. The human riders concentrated on each other—Tanzans had to duck incoming blasts of fire and counterattack with arrows. Sometimes a Tanzan would get close enough to slice a Zeika with their sword, but those with projectile weapons were better equipped to reach their enemies.

Ciera was standing on a shroud high above the battle with Jaalta and I on his back. The rest of the strike force waited behind us, the skyearls resting on the shroud, but ready to fly in an instant. Every now and then a few of us swooped down so that we could get

close to a conjuration and dispel it. We watched as waves of archery skyearls looped the valley, raining arrows upon the Zeikas.

There were groups of dragons and Zeikas whose specialty seemed to be anti-archery. They carried red-painted, beaten-metal shields and long curved machetes. Numbering in the hundreds, these groups would fly directly at an archery squadron and, if it managed to catch them, fight at close range. Bodies began to pile up around the valley. Sometimes the slain fell on hapless victims below. Footsoldiers and Rada-kin fought bravely against Zeika ground troops, but most were unable to stand against the flames of the enemy.

I itched to fly down there and help them, but it was important to hold the strike force back for the main Zeika army.

*'We must wait,'* I said, trying to justify to myself why we couldn't help the Tanzans on the ground.

As more of the Zeika army arrived, their ground troops slowly advanced up the northern valley. Even though our warriors put down wave after wave with their spears and arrows, more poured in from the west.

From the safety of his vantage point, Tyba gave the signal for those at the northern valley to fall back towards the woodland. It was there that the main part of our army could offer some cover fire. It was too soon, yet, to bring them out of hiding. We did not want this Zeika army to flee and rejoin more of their comrades later in an overwhelming force. Our strategy was to use their arrogance and quest for glory to destroy them.

Behind us, more Zeika forces were sweeping into the other two valleys. Met by our waiting forces of some 1,500 each, the enemy was kept busy on all fronts. I saw Zeikas burning Tanzans where they stood, sending their conjured monsters at others, and some clashing weapons with Tolites. I saw one Zeika stripping an injured Tanzan naked.

*'We must help that woman,'* I said to Ciera and Tiaro, pointing.

*'Send Jett,'* Tiaro suggested. *'You are needed here. It's nearly time to lead the strike force into battle.'*

*'You must not send anyone,' Ciera countered sadly. 'This is a known tactic. The Zeikas want us to fly behind their lines to help people being raped. That is why the Zeika commanders allow their troops to engage in such disgusting behaviour. Look how many enemies are in that area, and how few Tanzans. Anyone who tries to rescue that woman will be slain. We must choose the battles we can win.'*

I felt sick at not being able to do anything to help the Tanzan woman. I forced my eyes away, across the field of battle, peering between all the struggling creatures in the sky to see where Tyba was standing. It was a good thing I was using the waves to communicate because my teeth were so tightly clenched I probably wouldn't have been able to speak.

*'Now, my prince?'* I asked him.

He turned to my presence in his mind and was able to reply, *'Yes, Taeon. You have my leave to engage the enemy, but make sure the strike force doesn't scatter too far. Stick with the plan.'*

*'Now!'* I shouted. The strike force kindred passed on my command through the waves.

My people dived off the shroud, each Anzaii and their skyearl followed closely by a cluster of guardians. Ciera delivered Jaalta and I to a large group of skyearls and dragons fighting in the skies nearby. As soon as I had the opportunity, I confused a tyrak and sent it straight for the rapist. He would die slowly. I had a glimpse of the thankful woman's face before turning the tyrak away to crash into another group of Zeikas, teeth snapping.

*'Our thanks, Specialist,'* said the woman's Rada-kin as she freed it from a spiked net.

I could not spare the time to gain their names. Jaalta and I were surrounded by combat. We stretched out our hands and minds to dispel and confuse conjuration after conjuration. Jaalta managed to entrap a Zeika conjurer who was riding his tyrak. After the demons keeping him alive were banished, he shrivelled up.

The tyrak and the conjurer's corpse smashed into a group of other Zeikas, taking out three more.

*'You've got it!'* I celebrated.

Our guardians fought to keep masses of dragons at bay. Amril and Jett flew behind Ciera on their Sleffion-kin, fighting back whenever a Zeika strayed close enough to become a threat to Jaalta and me.

I was forced to dispel dragons several times to prevent them from overwhelming our protectors. The tyraks shrieked angrily as I ripped them from the world—any Zeikas on their backs fell screaming to their deaths.

To the south west, crowds of Zeikas were setting up a camp, complete with a mess hall and healer tents, obviously expecting to be here a while. Our own rest area was hidden in the foothills of the naturally-formed karst tower, with some respite tents even up on the cliff-face.

*'Taeon, look to the west,'* Jaalta said.

In the direction she pointed was a line of Zeikas on gold litters borne by dozens of slaves. Each of the Zeikas was dressed in gold and green battle raiment and wore an elaborate head-piece extending up from the back to a hand-span above the head. Symbols were etched into the gold plating.

*'Summoners!'* Jaalta cried out through the waves.

Both Tyba and Amadeus received her mental cry. With the Centan shield in her possession, Jaalta's voice on the waves was amplified so much that anyone in the valley who was listening could have heard her. Images flashed through Jaalta's mind and she shared them openly with me. Monsters of great variation appeared before my mind's eye.

Jaalta had seen her fair share of summoned creatures. Different to conjurations, these were demons brought into our world temporarily as behemoths. All were gigantic with outsized horns, fangs and claws. Some had more limbs than seemed necessary, others had more than one head. The largest and most dangerous of them could be summoned only by a group of summoners.

*'The likes of which I have never defeated...'* she said, referring to this last kind. The crushing of her throat came unbidden to her mind. It was only thanks to her Sleffion-kin, Reen, that she had survived at all. And now he was dead.

I winced at her terrible pain. She squeezed me from behind. Realising our concentration had lapsed, Jaalta made an effort to hold in her grief. I refocused on the line of Zeikas.

On the rocks before them was a towering black being with a man-like torso, bear-like head with long pointed red horns, a lupine tail, grasping black claws and hooved feet. A mane of liquid black fell in a straight line down the back of its neck, travelling all the way to the tip of its tail.

Other Zeikas nearby bent prostrate before the behemoth, worshipping it. The summoners, however, remained seated on their litters, idly playing with fireballs on their fingertips. They seemed to be watching the summoned creature as a strict parent might watch a child, just waiting for it to do something wrong.

The behemoth's breathing was audible even from this distance. It nearly matched Ciera in height, and enormous bulbous muscles were visible along its chest, arms and legs.

*'Gather the Anzaii together,'* Amadeus instructed me.

I contacted them one by one to let them know we needed to regroup. It seemed to take an eternity to free them all up from the battles they were engaged in, even though it was only about fifteen minutes. Of the eleven Anzaii I had set out with, nine remained alive. The guardians had suffered far heavier losses, but in total I counted about forty in the strike force.

The behemoth advanced on the field of battle looking left and right and snorting its tiny, flat nostrils. Because of its uniform black colour, it was difficult to discern exactly what it was doing from a distance.

The Tanzan ground troops fled, looking to us for support. This was what the strike force had been held back from battle for. Only we could stand against such a creature.

The behemoth chased the ground troops, snatching-up people and skyearls with ease and breaking them over its knees. Bodies were spread in its wake. None moved again.

*'Anzaii to us!'* Jaalta called through the waves. In one deafening wave-shout she was able to reach them all. *Amazing!* I revelled.

All of the skyearls bearing Anzaii formed up beside us. Some of them hadn't been part of the strike force, but were joining us now.

*'We hold two Anzaii artefacts,'* Jaalta declared to them all. *'As with the Ancient Sapphire Tree in the Dome of Gathering, we can use them to augment our effects on the waves.'*

'For the win!' Ciera roared.

His arm was hurting badly, but he was confident nonetheless.

As we started to descend on the creature, hundreds of dragons swarmed upon us. Ciera narrowly avoided the behemoth's sweeping claws, spiralling down past it and snapping at one leg. His teeth barely grazed the colossal behemoth's flesh before we were lurching wildly upwards, the ground just a few paces away. I shot a Zeika on the back of his dragon with the crossbow. Three more filled his space, striking at Jaalta and I with spears and firing poisoned arrows.

Just when it seemed the strike force would be overwhelmed, four squadrons of spear-skyearls converged on our position. Winged bodies smashed together overhead and beneath us.

The sounds and smells of violence and death overwhelmed me, both in the waves and in the natural world. The behemoth rampaged below us, slaying all within its reach easily. Whenever I tried to focus on it, even using the Jarian belt, it slid away through the waves like oil.

Tyba and Amadeus would be dismayed by the destruction the black behemoth was visiting upon their ground troops. *I have to stop it.*

*'Get them out of there,'* Amadeus relayed to the squadron leader on the ground.

*'What can we do to it in the waves?'* I struggled to ask Tiaro and Jaalta.

*'It should be much the same as dealing with a conjuration,'* Tiaro said, *'except this creature will be more powerful in the waves.'*

I cringed; dispelling or taking control of conjurations was difficult enough. Now we would have a fully summoned behemoth fighting against us in the real world and in the waves.

‘*We must prevail,*’ Jaalta rallied me, touching Galtoro, her own Anzaii-kin. The Centan shield was fastened to her chest to offer extra protection and so it couldn’t be dropped.

‘*Ciera,*’ I called through the waves, ‘*fly us closer to the behemoth so we can dispel it.*’

He tried, but every time we got close, more dragons would drive us back. The behemoth itself ignored us. It seemed intent on killing as many ordinary warriors and skyearls as it could. Like me, the rest of the skyearl-mounted Anzaii could not get close to it. After dozens of unsuccessful passes, I lead the strike force north east away from the battle. Feelings of shock and abandonment rose off the Tanzans who were fleeing below us.

‘*We will come back,*’ Jaalta reassured them collectively. ‘*But we can’t get close enough to the behemoth while on the backs of our skyearls. The dragons are all over us. We will have to approach it on foot and hope the Zeikas do not recognise us.*’

It wasn’t possible for the humans to reply to Jaalta’s broadwave, but with so many kin about we soon got impressions of how the defender warriors were feeling. They were afraid, but steadfast. Most of them showed overwhelming support towards Jaalta—for the first time in most of their lives, an Anzaii could communicate with them en masse.

It brought a sudden leap forward in the way the army was run and I knew that Jaalta must be protected at all costs. Tyba clearly thought so too, for he had personally instructed our guardians not to stray from us.

I connected with the squadron leader coordinating the retreat, a Sleffion, Tolite woman named Avinel. She demanded, ‘*Have you taken leave of your senses, Specialist? Approach it on foot?*’

‘*We have to try,*’ I responded.

‘*Don’t get yourselves killed,*’ Avinel responded. ‘*We need you.*’

I broke contact with her, wondering if Ciera and I should deposit Jaalta out of harm’s way before attempting to fight the behemoth.

‘*We need her,*’ Tiaro said.

‘*But Tyba needs her more,*’ I argued. ‘*To coordinate this battle. Look at all the guards he’s sent with us—*’

*'It is your life that Tyba guards so carefully as well.'*

*'I cannot wave-speak other humans en masse,'* I replied, including Jaalta in my waves, *'even with the help of the artefacts. I don't know how Jaalta is doing it.'*

*'I have read about broadwaving in scrolls by the Anzaai of old,'* my aunt told me, *'but it wasn't till Em gave me the Centan artefact that I could actually do it. It requires you to turn everything you've ever learned about the waves on its head. Instead of targeting one or a few of your trusted kin, you send it out like a ripple in a pond for anyone listening to hear.'*

I shook my head when I was still not able to do it.

*'There is time to learn,'* Jaalta said. *'I will lend you my scrolls.'*

I made no reply. Reading was just about the last thing I could imagine myself doing any time soon.

## Chapter Twenty-five — A mental battle

Ciera led the strike force straight back to the base of one of the karst towers. He circled down and landed on a naturally-formed ledge that was ringed with windswept bushes and red flowers. It took a few minutes for all the humans and their kin to be deposited near the respite tent. Several of us were treated for minor injuries. Jaalta's wounds, from her time in the Zeika encampment, were carefully inspected and rewrapped. A skin of water was thrust into my hand and I drained it.

I looked around, hoping to see a friendly face nearby, but everyone was preoccupied. I wished, again, that Sarlice, Rekala and Kestic were by my side, not only for their support and company, but just so I knew they were well. I could spare no strength to spy them out on the waves just now. I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that the current battle at Everstain would be Lantaid's last.

Taking a moment to look for Tyba's presence in the waves, I found him fighting hand-to-hand with two Zeikas. A group of tyraks must have landed on the shelf halfway up the karst tower where he and his lieutenants were coordinating the battle. He duel-wielded two shortswords, darting and ducking so quickly that the image in my mind blurred. He wasn't a Tolite, but had been trained from a young age.

A conjured death hawk sailed towards him, fangs bared. *Trees, no!* I stretched out my hand, sending my thoughts like a bolt in the direction of the monster. The Jarian belt gave me a boost—shooting my awareness into the creature like a spear.

Tyba finished off the two Zeikas and saluted at the air, not knowing which Anzaii had saved him.

*'It was me,'* I told him. *'Sire, I presume you heard that the strike force will run down through the woods and approach the behemoth on foot?'*

*'Yes,'* Tyba replied, *'but it is good to tell me directly just in case.'*

He was breathing hard and a cut down the left side of his back drenched him in acid rain.

*'Your position has been compromised there,'* I observed. *'You won't be able to coordinate the battle if you are injured or worse.'*

Tyba only grumbled in reply, knowing I was right. If the prince was badly hurt during the battle, his lieutenants would continue in his stead, but none of us wanted that to happen. For the sake of our prince, who was competent and well-loved, and because it would be a devastating blow to morale.

Because I was still connected to his mind, I sensed Tyba master his desire to fight his enemies in person. It wasn't out of malice that he thirsted for combat, but out of a deep sense of loyalty for his people. How could he send others into such danger if he wasn't prepared to face the enemy himself?

*'I understand how you feel,'* I said. *'But you are far more valuable to all of us if you are able to coordinate the defenders from a safe location.'*

*'Much like you having to hide up in the clouds dispelling,'* he commented. *'I know, Taeon. You don't have to counsel me about the big picture of a war. I've grown up with strategy and battle. Defence is in my blood. Now get out of my thoughts so I can choose a new vantage point.'*

The Anzaii strike force gathered around me near the respite tent. Red flowers nodded in the breeze behind them, adding to the feeling of urgency. It was time to face the behemoth.

*'Let's go,'* Jaalta said. *'You will have to be the voice for both of us. Without the Sleffion-kin with us, we should communicate aloud.'*

*'But you can wave-speak to other people,' I replied.*

*'It is still difficult to target large groups. I can target a few individuals at once or I can send a broadwave—to everybody. But I cannot send targeted waves to the entire strike force without disturbing all others within the vicinity of the broadwave. I don't want to cause that kind of distraction unless it is very important.'*

I nodded. *'I think I understand.'*

I took five deep breaths, squashed the panic that was welling inside me, and shouted, 'Strike force, listen up! We will walk to the battlefield. A line of guardians, then the Anzaii followed by another line of guardians. Form up as soon as we reach the woods on the ground.'

It felt strange to be giving orders, but a surge of calm filled me as the strike force came to attention. It was no time for misguided heroics. Hundreds of thousands of people were depending on us. Three of the Anzaii—Rialb, Quetanav and Aerilaya—stood close, eyes fixed on me. I was humbled by the way Colonel Aerilaya was willing to follow my orders. Not long ago she had outranked me.

Aunt Jaalta went first, leading me down the steep trail of the karst tower. We pushed past the dry, scrubby bushes clinging to the edge of the cliff and stepped down over rocks and roots. The Anzaii armour I was wearing felt heavy, but was keeping me warm on the bracing autumn day.

As we came onto more level ground, we had to make our way between the silvery trees. Many more shrubs dotted the forest before the woodland.

Once inside the woodland, I gave the signal to spread out and form into the three lines I had specified. Aunt Jaalta and I stepped out in front of the first line with Amril and Jett by our sides. Jett gave me a salute when I looked his way. I smiled. My heart was pumping. I tried to tell myself it was only performance-anxiety. This was, after all, my first command.

We moved forward through the forest, becoming interweaved with the three or four thousand defender warriors who were still concealed there. Jaalta used the waves to communicate with Tyba and the captains and corporals in our area, one by one. The field

in front of the woods could barely be seen through the trees, but I knew there were hundreds of small groups of defenders out there, fighting valiantly. Since Tyba's signal to fall back, they had made it nearly all the way back to the trees.

'*Tyba has ordered the main force to advance,*' Jaalta informed me.

As one, the rest of the army marched forward. Archers began firing as soon as they had a clear view of the field. The many thousands of Zeikas who were spread out at the top of the northern valley paused only for a moment. Their commanders appeared to be giving them orders to engage us. The first lines of the woodland squadrons ran forward. Within seconds, there was death and mayhem all around us.

I held my fist straight up in the air, holding the strike force back. There were still many lines of defenders to come out of the woods. If we moved too soon, we'd never even make it to the behemoth. Instead we'd be caught up in the ground assault with the infantry.

'*Focus,*' Jaalta counselled me.

'*Focus,*' I repeated.

A booming sound came from the direction of the valley and a thundering screech pierced the air. Over the lip of the valley came dozens of Tanzan warriors, tripping, falling, scrambling up and running again. The behemoth burst into view behind them, snatching up the stragglers and throwing them against rocks or pitching them over its shoulder. Occasionally it would bend to snap a Rada-kin in its jaws. The cacophony on the waves was incredible. It took most of my concentration to shield myself from it.

Tiaro hummed *Halduronlei*. I could sense Ciera and the strike force flying over the southern valley, carrying other humans instead of each skyearl's Anzaii, as a decoy. The vast majority of dragons were now heading for that area, trying to take down what they thought was the Anzaii strike force. The ruse would not last long. Jaalta, who was connected with my thoughts, concurred.

'Now!' I shouted, throwing my arm down.

The strike force ran forward with the next wave of the army. Swords and spears lashed out in front of me. Arrows came from nowhere, landing everywhere. Within moments, dozens of people

around me had been killed. Each death was like a punch in my gut; their lights were cruelly snuffed out on the waves.

*'Focus!'* Jaalta cried.

She was having as difficult a time with the battle as I was, but experience gave her the edge she needed. I blinked and rubbed my forehead, which was starting to ache.

The behemoth loomed before us, shaking the ground with every step. The line of guardians behind us fired upon the behemoth with cross-bow bolts, arrows and spears. Hardly any pierced the mottled black skin of the gigantic beast. Skyearls also attacked it, but most were thrown back. Some of the larger ones managed to loop a great rope around the behemoth's left arm. It had no neck, or else they would have aimed for that. Instead, its back arched over and the bear-wolf head dipped low in front of it, red eyes glaring out of the dark visage.

It turned to shriek at the skyearls, crouched low and yanked on the rope. The skyearls flapped backwards, hauling with all their combined strength. It was not enough to pull the behemoth over, but it did slow it down. If they could get another rope around the right arm... *Snap!* The behemoth's sharp yellow teeth snipped the rope with ease. Brushing aside any skyearls that came too close, it advanced on the ground troops.

The first line of the strike force gathered in front of it. Instead of turning and running, the guardians formed up more tightly in a sort of semi-circle. Holding shields, swords or pikes up in front of them, they bravely made their stand. A feeling of tremendous gratitude and sadness welled up in me. *They willingly give their lives.*

A woman's eyes met mine, her nod urged me on, and the behemoth's clawed foot crashed down, killing her.

*'Now is the time to dispel,'* I found myself shouting. *'Now!'*

I sheathed Fyschs and offered one of my hands to my aunt. Jaalta gripped my hand and reached the other to Aerilaya, who was connected to Rialb, then Quetanav, then all the others. Linked by physical touch, and with the collective support of the Anzaii-kin and the two Ancient Sapphire Tree artefacts, we swam through the waves.

A sort of bubble of awareness opened up around us. Jaalta and I could see and hear each other, and the other Anzaii, through the waves. Tiaro and the other Anzaii-kin merged into a fountain of psionic energy.

Jaalta, who had a fine voice in the waves, declared, *'We will not stand for it. We will not allow it. Banish it!'*

I was vaguely aware of my real body bellowing from the strain. Sioned and Nirixa, beside me, also shouted from the effort of our combined wave-questing. Like before, the behemoth's presence in the waves was elusive. It toyed with us in the waves, all the while crushing more of our guardians in the natural world.

*'Closer,'* I encouraged the group. *'We need to make contact.'*

Now that we were all touching and linked by the Ancient Sapphire Tree artefacts, it was easy to target all of them inside the wave bubble we had created.

*'More ropes,'* Quetanav said.

The command was passed along through the waves to the quartermaster who controlled the supplies for the battle. Commander Varal was out there somewhere, trying his hardest to come to our aid.

More of our guardians fell before the behemoth's onslaught. It ripped through them, using its own weight to stand on people and animals alike. A cavalry squadron galloped out of the woods, pointing makeshift-extended javelins at the behemoth. Because the soft parts of its body were so high off the ground, though, all they could do was target its shins and calf muscles.

Deafening moans and the smell of blood pounded my senses. I closed my eyes against the sight of a horse and rider being kicked into the air by the behemoth's great hooves. Its groping hands and five clawed digits were big enough to pick up an entire horse each. Each hand squeezed and dropped the mangled remains. The remaining frontline guardians and cavalry kept the behemoth busy until more help arrived.

Eight skyearls, carrying spools of rope, dived from high in the sky. They moved swiftly to enmesh the behemoth in a tangle of ropes and chains. It twisted and snapped with teeth and claws,

fighting to remain free. While it was distracted, a group of skyearls with large jaws landed behind it and began gnawing at the backs of its feet. Black blood oozed down over the shiny hooves. It kicked savagely and stood on one of its attackers.

More flew in to continue the job. The ropes around the behemoth's body became so tangled around its horns, arms and torso that it couldn't reach them with its teeth.

The rope-skyearls pulled hard in one direction. The skyearls at its feet bit and scratched with more vehemence than before. The behemoth lashed out wildly with its one free arm, then stumbled and finally fell. I moved forward with the Anzaii still attached to each other in a huddle. There was one foot being held in place by the gnawing skyearls. Uncertain what would happen, I lunged for it.

As soon as I touched it, the waves became our primary focus. The behemoth could no longer slip away from us. It looked the same in the waves except it was now on its feet. In the waves the other Anzaii were no longer touching me, but I could see them standing around with varying degrees of horror and defiance etched into their faces.

*'Back!'* I shouted to the behemoth.

It drew itself up to its full height and bellowed. The sound reverberated across the dusty grey plains. A silt storm was visible in the distance. Beside me, Jaalta gestured for the Anzaii to get hold of their weapons or Tolite-kin, if they had one. I drew Fyschs, admiring the way the leafshards in the blade glimmered in the light of the two moons above us. Was it always night time in this part of the waves? Wind ruffled the hair under my helmet and my cloak whipped behind me.

*'Fools!'* the behemoth spat. *'My Lord Zeidarb controls this world. He is the master of death. None can stand before him.'*

He made a sweeping gesture with his arm and nearly half of the Anzaii fell down, lifeless. Their names flashed to the forefront of my mind—Sioned, Tarindi, Kass. The rest of us moved into a tight ball, standing with weapons at the ready. The behemoth was angered by our obstinacy. I latched onto the recognition of its emotions. They were alien to me and powerful, yet somehow familiar. Using

the connection I had forged, I probed further into the behemoth's make-up. A name came to me...

*'Boiva,' I said. 'Demon of the waves, you are not welcome here!'*

Tiaro and the other Anzaii-kin rushed the behemoth. Jaalta's pendant, Galtoro, seemed more like a charging bull in the waves. The wind whipped around us, casting silt and rocks against our faces and armour. I shielded my eyes with my hand. Jaalta stepped forward heedless. Flecks of blood appeared on her cheeks and mouth. Her arm remained outstretched.

*'Get back!'* she bellowed through the waves. *'You are banished, Boiva!'*

The behemoth looked right and left, puffing with exertion. When nothing happened, it snarled and launched forward at the approaching Anzaii. We channelled our energy together, palms raised. A whirlwind whipped across the plains and lifted the behemoth off its feet. The monster writhed and shrieked as if pummelled by many fists. It was thrown against the ground several times before finally being torn apart by the shredding power of the silt storm.

The winds slowly died down, leaving behind only dust. Quetanav and Rialb looked at me and Jaalta in awe. One by one, we transferred our focus back to the natural world and let go of each other.

It took the rest of that day and night for the defenders to overcome the Zeikas. By the time they realised they were defeated, it was too late for many of them to get away. The strike force reunited with their Sleffion-kin and flew after the fleeing summoners. Their dragons were harder to dispel than most, but it was only a matter of time before each enemy had fallen or been captured.

Tyba and I had lost thousands of defenders in the battle, but it had saved the refugees outside the city and bought us valuable time. The victory gave all of Tanza hope that perhaps Condii could be our last stand against the Zeika onslaught.

As 180 Minerday dawned we received word that the battle at the Hills of Everstain was also over. Though the Zeikas had taken Lantaid, 60,000 civilians had made it to the chasm along with

1200 defender warriors. I mourned the loss of so many lives, but my hopes flared at the thought that Sarlice and the Rada-kin may have joined the refugees.

Although I was tired enough to be at risk of falling off Ciera's back, I made the effort to reach out to Sarlice. My mind quested west of Lantaid, finding my Rada-kin and Kestric among the large group of Tanzan evacuees, but no sign of Sarlice. I had located her before, why not now? *She could be dead...* I shied away from that thought.

'*Rekala,*' I called. Because we were bonded, it was very easy to find Rekala's presence. Even from this distance, instead of only being vaguely aware of Rekala's surroundings, the belt enabled me to see into her mind and see everything that she saw. Normally I would only have been able to do that if we were within a few leagues of each other. I had been carrying the belt ever since I left Jaria, but not known how to use it.

The river stretched away ahead and to the right of her. Kestric was to her left among a disorganised line of people, skyearls and animals who'd trekked through the eastern end of the chasm. The historian, Bendar and the first Tanzan I had met, Tivac, were at the end of the line preparing to seal the barrier once everyone had made it into the chasm. Duke Alger led the procession and I was pleased to see Glane, unharmed. He was carrying a large knapsack and a child, who had fallen asleep on his shoulder. Everybody around looked exhausted from the evacuation.

'*My Taeon, my Talon!*' Rekala called—reminding me of our early days together when she had been less in control of her animal instincts. Her reaction told me much about her distress. The recent battle and evacuation must have been hard—thankfully Rekala wasn't injured. Nor was Kestric, but I still couldn't detect any sign of Sarlice.

'*Hello, dear one. I'm so glad to see you are hale, but what has happened to Sarlice?*' I extended the wave conversation to include Kestric. The firetiger made a throaty tiger yowl. A hot shard of fear went racing through me.

*'She was snatched during the battle,' he replied. 'Five Zeikas mounted on tyraks came for her. They were very purposeful when they flew off with her.'*

Kestric's sense of yearning reached me. He wished there was some way he could run after Sarlice but, without the ability to fly, he had been forced to wait behind as Thita went after her. Duke Alger had asked all the kinless Rada-kin, including Kestric and Rekala to help ensure the safety of the survivors from Lantaid. No matter how much they begged, Alger had refused to send more skyearls after Sarlice saying it was simply too dangerous and they needed to concentrate on evacuating now.

*'I will go to her,' I said. 'It is because of me that she has been snatched. Because of me and because of the traitor, Corypha.'*

*'If Sarlice hadn't been captured, she would probably have been slain at the Hills of Everstain,'* Rekala said.

*'You survived,'* I pointed out.

*'We were separated from the fight when Sarlice was taken,'* she said. *'By the time we got back it was clear that Lantaid had been beaten, so we slunk away through the forest.'*

Kestric paced and yowled. *'If you truly believe you have a chance of rescuing her, we will return and go with you.'*

*'No,'* I replied firmly. *'I will have to travel by air and neither of you have learned bird form yet. I want both of you to stay with the survivors. They need all the help they can get.'*

Rekala gave the wave-equivalent of a wounded sniff.

*'Tiaro and Ciera will aid me,'* I added. *'Thita is following her, you said?'*

*'Aye, the little skyearl is tailing them,'* Kestric affirmed.

*'Be well, dear ones. Stay with the people and help them on our behalf. You are still representing Jaria and Lyth, remember.'*

I used Kestric's link to Thita to find him quickly.

*'Thita, are you hale?'* I queried.

The tiny orange skyearl was flying above the clouds, keeping out of sight of the party of Zeikas who had Sarlice. They, too, were in flight, somewhere over south east Tanza.

*'I am tired, Master Psion,'* Thita replied. *'Sarlice is unconscious, but still alive.'*

Helpless to do anything, but follow, for now, Thita's waves emanated both desperation and hopelessness. His breathing was laboured and he had no moisture left for shrouding.

*'I will come after you as soon as I am allowed to, Thita,'* I said.

*'You are needed there,'* Thita responded. Tiaro, who was always with me during wave conversations, agreed. *'Besides, I don't see how you could catch us. They appear to be making straight for Reltland.'*

*'Then Reltland is where we'll go,'* I said.

*'But not today,'* Thita said. *'You're in dire need of some rest, Taeon. Look after yourself and do what needs to be done for Tanza. Don't let the Zeikas draw you away from your responsibilities. I can't reach Sarlice's mind, but I know she wouldn't want you to throw away your duty. And she wouldn't want you to fall into a trap.'*

*'We'll think of something,'* I assured him.

Dread filled me—not only did I want to get to my Rada-kin, but also to go after Sarlice. In opposite directions. No matter how much I thought about it, a solution evaded me.

A flurry of voices on the waves close to me brought my focus back to my immediate surroundings. Ciera had landed on the platform at the back of Condii Fortress and was waiting patiently for my conversation to end. Other Sleffion-kin pairs were waiting for their turn to land in the now-reduced space.

*'Sorry,'* I murmured to Ciera.

*'It's no matter,'* he replied. *'The others can wait. I am sorry about Sarlice.'*

*'Sometimes I wish we could just fly away—Sarlice and her kin, me and mine—and just go far away from the Zeikas, hide out and live our lives in peace.'*

He made no reply to this expression of emotion, but sent me the equivalent of a mental hug. He waited until I had unstrapped myself before sitting up on his haunches and reaching around with his good arm to pick me up. He held me up in front of his face, peering at me closely.

*'What is it?'* I queried.

*'I just wanted to look upon you,' he replied. 'So much has happened recently. We have been very preoccupied, you and I. I just wanted to look upon the human who has changed me so.'*

*'For the better, I hope,' I replied hesitantly.*

He dipped his head. *'We were victorious, weren't we?'*

I relaxed back into the palm of his hand, my helmet tapping against his enormous claws. My concentration was starting to wane, exhaustion taking its toll.

*'A warm bath and private chambers await you,' Ciera said out loud.*

*'Yes, about that—' I began, but Ciera cut me off.*

*'There's not much I can do to show my appreciation to you, Taeon. I know everything you have done for Tanza even if nobody else does. Consider this my gift to you.'*

He lowered me slowly. I gave his neck a scratch on my way to the ground. Feeling the sensation through his body on the waves, I realised it was little more than a light tickle.

*'One day I'll have to get you a rake,' he jested.*

I smiled weakly. *'One day... when this is all over.'*

I walked inside, dragging my feet. Jett ran to meet me and put his arm under my opposite shoulder.

*'Why is it that you always have more energy than me?' I asked.*

*'Because I save some of my strength,' Jett said. 'Whereas you hold nothing back.'*

## Chapter Twenty-six — Survival tactics

**A**gainst my wishes, I slept for fourteen hours. The peace and warmth in my suite held me in a tight embrace.

When I became awake enough to remember all that had happened, it took still more time to convince my body to start working again. Muscles ached in every limb and my back and neck throbbed with pain. A headache held me in its grip, preventing me from getting a clear sense of the waves. Conversations burbled around me, but I had not the strength to discriminate one from another. Trickle of information still reached me.

Kovain had been taken yesterday afternoon. As many as 13,000 Zeikas had arrived there only to find it shrouded and abandoned. Tanzan spies had intercepted plans from a messenger dragon to the legion at Kovain. They had been ordered to hold their ground, recover and prepare for the 'final phase'. The hunter skyearls and spies in the area worked tirelessly, day and night, to prevent the enemy from realising Centan, too, was now abandoned.

Jett confirmed the information as he helped me dress in my battle armour. Afterwards I stuck my head out of the door to my suite. Cots and tables lined the hallway, with scores of defender warriors sleeping on my very doorstep. I felt ashamed to have a room just for myself and Aunt Jaalta, but I didn't want to gainsay Ciera's gift. With a nod of thanks to Jett I crept past the sleeping bodies and made my way down to the vista.

‘Master Psion Taeon,’ King Crystom greeted me. ‘Congratulations on your victory.’

‘Thank you, Your Majesty,’ I said. A vision of Sarlice slung across the back of a tyrak assaulted me, but now was not the time to blurt out my concerns.

Most of the strategists were looking at me with newfound respect. Despite what Saned had said last time we’d been here, he greeted me formally with one arm across his chest and offered his praise.

‘Many of our warriors and civilians are gathering loot from the Zeika supply carts still,’ the king said. ‘They came poorly equipped for such a large force, but it will bolster our provisions for a few days.’

‘I’m glad to hear that,’ I said. ‘How is Prince Tyba?’

‘He is resting,’ Crystom replied. ‘He continued to chase down stragglers and coordinate the army throughout the day.’

I looked out the windows at the colour of the sky. We were deep into the night, possibly even past midnight judging by the faint glow on the horizon. My strange sleeping patterns of late were throwing my sense of time out.

How long had Sarlice been a prisoner? Would they do to her what I’d seen them do to other prisoners in the Zeika encampment—what her uncle had done to her when she was a child? Would they bleed her and use her blood to bring more soldiers into Tanza? My stomach simmered with hate.

‘He is a dedicated leader,’ I affirmed, fighting to put aside the agony of my thoughts.

‘Yes,’ Crystom replied, ‘Colonel Aerilaya told me how you and Jaalta held them together when you faced a summoned behemoth.’

I licked my lips. ‘Yes, sire, but it was Jaalta more than me.’

Jaalta stirred at the end of the table. I had not noticed her there before. She was dressed in ornate cream and bronze robes, and a thick blue-grey pelt adorned her shoulders.

‘*We have heard about your friend, Sarlice,*’ Jaalta broadwaved, sparing me the need to bring it up.

Everybody in the room turned to stare, even people who were not already participating in the conversation.

‘Will you allow me to mount a rescue?’ I asked.

I nodded my thanks to Jaalta. When I reached out to her in the waves, she held her mind tightly closed. I cocked my head at her with a frown. She looked to Crystom.

‘You know we cannot,’ he said simply.

My fists curled into tight balls. ‘Then I shall go alone.’

‘No, you *shall* not,’ Crystom said firmly. ‘You are an officer in this army and you are needed here.’

My heart thundered. *They would stop me from going?* Ciera entered the room from the oversized hallway, walking awkwardly on all fours with the splint around one of his forearms. His fur was standing up, a sign of stress.

*‘The king is right,’* Ciera said. *‘Do not let your emotions cloud your judgement.’*

I stood up and turned to face him. He could understand everything that was going through my mind. Because of this, I could hardly believe he would oppose me.

*‘You would only be slain or captured and used as Jaalta was, with a waverade artefact.’*

*‘I never asked for this gift,’* I railed at him. *‘I never asked for this responsibility.’*

‘No,’ he agreed. *‘But you have it and thus far you have borne your responsibility well. Do not ruin it now.’* Ciera sent *Halduronlei* through the waves to me, trying to calm me and help me get my breath back. My face was hot, the panic in my chest swelling to breaking point.

There was more to this than I had first realised. There were people in the room just waiting for me to defy the king. I decided that my loyalty to Sarlice was far greater than my loyalty to the king, but that didn’t mean it was right to disobey Crystom. I respected him and I believed in what I was doing as part of Tanza. I had accepted my position in the Tanzan defender army so I needed to honour that decision, as least for now.

‘If the Zeikas truly want to use you for a waverade artefact, then they will not kill Sarlice,’ Ciera said aloud.

I sat back down and put my head in my hands, murmuring, ‘That’s partly what I’m afraid of. What *will* they do to her?’

Jaalta came and stood behind my chair, putting her hands on my shoulders. I sensed that she was sorry that my request had been denied, but now sought to lend me the strength to continue.

‘*Have patience,*’ she said.

Strategist Ervan cleared his throat. ‘Many of us have lost loved ones,’ he began. ‘Let their sacrifices not be in vain.’

I raised both hands in the air in submission.

‘We have three days before 20,000 Zeikas arrive here in Conдии,’ Commander Varal declared. ‘In that time the skyearls will build a shroud fortress to house the civilians within the walls of Conдии.’

Crystom gestured at Jaalta and me. ‘Bring the Anzaii artefacts here, please. We must converse with the commanders of Tanza.’

I could sense something ominous in his mind. ‘About what, Your Majesty?’ I asked.

There were some scowls around the room, but Crystom answered me calmly. ‘The evacuation of Tanza.’

For the next four days Conдии was like a kicked anthill. Once Crystom had announced his decision to abandon the realm, there had been a furore on the waves. The king made the controversial declaration that the barrier shield could be used against the Zeikas.

The sheer number of people crammed into every hallway of every building and every corner of every street made it very difficult to go anywhere or do anything. Food and drink was strictly rationed. With half a million mouths to feed, and the economy decimated, the counters and other officials were pushed to the limits of their abilities. The defender soldiers who were assigned to supply duty for the civilians were some of our gruffest, meanest looking warriors.

‘It’s for the best,’ Tyba told me.

We had made our way down Inner Spiral Lane to the centre of the city. Representatives from groups of families were queued down the street into the distance, waiting to receive their rations.

*At least these people have their freedom*, I thought bitterly. Sarlice didn't have that. Dread was my constant companion as I worried about Sarlice and wished I could go to her. It took every ounce of my self-control not to pester Ciera until he agreed to take me to her. The situation in Condii was desperate and I knew I was needed more than ever now.

The 20,000 Zeikas Commander Varal had predicted would arrive today had been spotted from the western towers. An army of equal size had also stationed itself just south west of Centan on the edge of the watery flats.

Shrouds had been left in the way, in addition to the thick cloaking of the waterfall city itself. The spy-hunters who had remained to protect Centan from prying eyes now came into their element. Using the vast shrouds as cover, they engaged in guerrilla warfare with the enemy.

Uncertain of the numbers they were facing, the Zeikas did not launch an all-out assault against the city. The bulk of their army waited just outside the mists, sending in parties to chase the marauding Tanzans and try to gain intelligence on Centan's defences.

To the Zeikas, this was the most important phase of their incursion and they appeared to be prepared to wait it out. After all, Centan had no crop fields, and food supplies had to be flown in. It was only a matter of weeks before starvation would have set in.

Water, of course, would not have been a problem, but with that much mist, the population would also be susceptible to mildew, mould, rot and disease.

Back in Condii, where the population actually was, things were only slightly better. Where Tyba and I now stood, in the centre of the city, we could see and smell the refuse that was piling up. The parade ground was no longer green, having been trampled to dust long ago. Children ran past with dark snot coming from their noses, because of all the dust in the air.

The waterways in Condii had long since become muddy. Even though it was the River Jarvi that passed through the north east

corner of the city, each day it seemed to take no time at all for its banks to become slick and treacherous and the water fouled.

The shrouder-skyearls continued to drink it and were busy night and day with building the new shroud fortress. They had named it *Elonavé*, which meant ‘spirit away’ in ancient Kaslonican. *Elonavé* was a multi-layered construction, built for functionality in a compact space. The higher it reached into the sky, the more skyearls were assigned to guard it. Being the most experienced shrouder alive, *Ciera* played an integral role in its formation.

He still grieved for *Raer*, but it was nothing compared to the devastating realisation that all of *Tanza* had been lost. *Ciera*’s disbelief over the evacuation of *Tanza* had lasted many days. Even now he flew about in a sort of trance, not quite willing to face the reasons why he was creating a new shroud building.

*Elonavé* was designed very differently to the sky palace. The king and queen had sat with *Ciera* for hours designing a multi-tiered structure that could be converted into an immensely long pathway when the time for our evacuation came. At the shrouder-skyearls’ commands, the blocks and sheets that made up *Elonavé* would slide out and around, forming a snaking platform that would stretch all the way to our border with *Ravra*.

It was believed the *Zeikas* would not expect this, and it would provide the people with the best chance of survival.

Other skyearls shrouded this end of the city, coating it in a bowl of cloud. From inside the bowl, *Tanzans* could not even see the teal sky. It meant that very few *Zeikas* were game enough to fly through the mists, not knowing what awaited them on the other side.

There were squadrons of skyearls both inside and outside the bowl. Even if the *Zeikas* did catch sight of *Elonavé*, and lived to tell the tale, it looked nothing like a means of escape.

While *Ciera* had been occupied, *Tyba* and I had both flown out to the battlefield on *Amadeus*’ back. *Jaalta* and *Amril* had been right behind us, along with *Jett* on *Ptemais* and two dozen other guardians. There were 17,000 *Tanzan* warriors here now and about 20,000 of the enemy, but we had the advantage of being the

defenders of a great city. In addition to that, there were thousands of civilians learning to use weapons.

Architect Furlorny's fast repairs had fortified Condi's walls and towers to something even more formidable than they had been before. Weight and pulley contraptions had been fitted to most of the windows so that rocks and rubble from the previous destruction could be rained upon intruders. Tens of thousands of weapons had been brought across from Centan. Combined with those we had plundered from the Zeika legion we'd defeated, our offensive capabilities were greatly enhanced.

As before, Jaalta and I had spearheaded the efforts of the strike force using the Anzaii artefacts. Countless hundreds of conjurations had fallen before us. Wave after wave would attack—sometimes ten or twenty at once—and we had wiped them all out of the sky. We generally carried one artefact each, using them to augment our own abilities. When necessary, a shroud-skyeal was called in to create a platform for the strike force to gather and combine strengths.

In a war that had gone almost entirely in the Zeikas' favour, it was liberating to finally feel in control of the battle.

At times I could almost convince myself that we would turn the tide of this war. But by all the reports from survivors in other parts of the realm, the Zeikas had total control of all the other towns. They had obliterated Tanza from the outside in. Centan and Condi were their final targets. When all their armies finally converged here, the battle for Tanza would be lost.

Small, isolated battles continued around Condi even while Tyba and I were safe inside the city centre. Crystom and the strategists made sure each of the Anzaii were given time to rest and recover from the stress of fighting. I was grateful to be with Tyba while Ciera was building Elonavé. It felt more useful than sitting inside Condi fortress discussing war tactics.

I snorted in a vain attempt to clear the dust from my nose. A scuffle broke out across the street where an elderly man was trying to get fresh straw for his livestock. The man shoved the soldier and attempted to seize what he needed, but a younger woman pulled him back.

The prince and I had come to the parade ground today to meet the people and boost morale. So far we'd been greeted mostly with resentful stares, angry questions and complaints. Our guardians had been forced to hold back the crowd. I looked forward to when the king would join us—I was struggling to maintain my composure.

No matter what any of these people were suffering, Sarlice was suffering worse. I clenched my fists and ran my fingers through my hair. My stomach grumbled, but I set aside my hunger, knowing that Sarlice was probably enduring worse.

Not all of the Tanzans in the city centre were making trouble. In fact, most people were getting on with the business of everyday living and helping each other. I observed a girl about the age of nine pass up the offer of a second piece of fruit so that a smaller child behind her could have extra.

'Did you see that girl over there?' Tyba asked me, pointing.

I nodded.

'That is what we are fighting for. Kriites are more than just a race and Tanza is more than just a place. It is an ideal. We are the last hope for an increasingly hostile, self-serving world.'

I gazed at him, starting to understand what it was about Tyba that I knew would make him a great king one day. Instead of becoming disheartened by the negative people, he focused on the honourable ones.

'If you know this, why haven't you gone out into the world with the rest of the Kriites?' I asked. 'The tribes could have really benefitted from your skyearls and their shrouds and barriers.'

He blinked and looked down at the ground. 'Have you forgotten Telby's exile?'

'Nay, but Jaria is accessible via Ravra and Naioteio.'

'Do you really think Reltland would have left you in peace all these years, if we had gone to Jaria and left skyearls or built defences there?'

I had never considered the Zeikas' treatment of Jaria to be peaceful, yet seeing their vast armies in Tanza showed me that only small raiding parties had attacked Jaria in my lifetime.

‘As for the other nations,’ Tyba continued, ‘There were many Sleffion in Watercrag, and look what happened to it. There are some Tanzans living in Ravra, Siffre and Duuryn. We trade with those nations. Like Jaria, we send delegates now and then.’ Seeing the look on my face he added, ‘Perhaps we could have done more...’

I turned my head to the sound of hooves on the road. King Crystom and his personal guard rode into the city centre. With a nod to Tanza, Crystom dismounted and spread his arms wide, welcoming his people to him. Swarms of Tanzans approached to ask questions.

‘Must we leave Condi? Can it not be defended?’ ‘What will become of Tanza?’ ‘When will Elonavé be completed?’ ‘When’ll we be receiving more wool?’ ‘We need more oil.’ ‘We need meat.’ ‘Who is going to settle disputes?’ ‘Who will go first once the shroud is finished?’ ‘When will the evacuation begin?’

‘*Taeon,*’ Ciera’s voice was very faint on the waves. I sensed that he had collapsed somewhere on the upper levels of Elonavé. *‘It is done.’*

With that he faded into a deep sleep.

‘Soon,’ I blurted.

‘What’s that, Taeon?’ Tyba asked.

I kept my voice low so as not to be heard by others. ‘The evacuation will begin soon, won’t it? Ciera has just completed Elonavé and he has passed out.’

‘I’ll have water sent up right away. Amadeus and I will take you to check on him.’

‘My thanks,’ I replied.

Amadeus glided down to the ground, his purple and yellow wings temporarily casting a shadow over us. The prince and I climbed onto his back and strapped ourselves in to the two-person saddle. Amadeus pointed his nose straight up into the air, expelled a puff of shroud to create air movement ahead of him and launched into it. His great, feathered wings snapped open, beating a path through the air towards Elonavé.

Our guardians followed close behind. Within minutes Amadeus had scaled the immense floating castle and was landing on the roof.

Only a small amount of vapour clung to the edges of the sky fort; it was primarily made up of the spongy, white material that enabled us to walk on ordinary shrouds.

A short stairwell and passage led to the level beneath. Tyba and I disembarked and walked around the stairwell to where Ciera and a number of other shroud-skyearls were resting. He lay sprawled out on the shroud. His head was outstretched, his eyes shut tight and his wings and limbs completely relaxed. He looked somewhat like a skyearl whelp that had crash-landed and was lying stunned on the ground. As I approached, a pair of skyearls appeared with waterlogged towels that they pressed to Ciera's face and mouth. One skyearl pried open his mouth, which emitted a rancid gust of dry wind.

'He needs food,' one of the skyearls said.

'I'll harvest those banana trees for him,' the other answered.

There was a curt nod from the first skyearl before the second took off. I marched over to Ciera, instinctively trying to see if I could reach him through the waves. As with the construction of the strike force shroud, the effort of creating this one had drained him. This time his exhaustion was even more pronounced.

'Do not fear for him,' Tyba told me. 'He will be watched over by the other skyearls.'

'Good,' I replied, listening to the waves for a few moments. 'The civilians are being sent here to Elonavé already.'

'Very well,' Tyba said. 'I am going to fly out and oversee the shutting of the front gate. You can come with me if you want. We could do with your help if you're feeling up to it. There are plenty of conjurers out there to be entrapped.'

'Any behemoths?' I asked, feeling that the effort required to face another one would just about break me.

'Not at the moment,' the prince replied. 'It was rare to see that many summoners together. They are Bal Harar's highest ranking officers. Their appearance can only mean the Bal himself is nearby.'

I pursed my lips. Sarlice had been taken and Bal Harar was here. Could the two somehow be related?

'What is the meaning of "Bal"?'

‘It can be loosely translated as “strongest” or “most powerful”. Zeika hierarchy demands there be only one Bal at any one time, but the position can be challenged at any time. The Bal usually gains his position by murdering or maiming his competitors. Young, ambitious Zeikas get close to the top through prowess in battle and in contests of sorcery.’

I screwed up my mouth in distaste.

‘Shall we go to the gate?’ he asked.

I nodded reluctantly. Tyba and I mounted up on Amadeus again and glided down, down, down towards the front gate. We passed through the shroud bowl—on the far side the ruddy afternoon light was a dazzling contrast to my eyes.

The brilliant orange sun reached tendrils of light beneath a puffy expanse of dark brown and black clouds. The land beneath the clouds was washed with red light and patterned with deep shadows. Wind stirred the grass and trees in the distance, bringing with it a sense of change I could not quite ignore. The smell of rain was in the air.

Amadeus passed by the gatehouse where thousands of Centanians were lined up waiting to get inside Condii. He descended slowly towards one of the outermost towers where we could see both the gates and the battle that was raging just a few stadions away, at the bottom of the hill. This new Zeika legion was not yet in range of the newly equipped and fortified towers. Our warriors faced them still, determined to hold them back for as long as possible while the civilians made it to Elonavé.

Amadeus stretched out his claws to grip the wooden rails that were built into the top of the tower. He landed easily on one of the thicker rails and settled his wings.

Tyba and I climbed down just as the rest of our group was arriving, Jaalta and Jett among them. They spoke not a word as we spread out among the spear-skyeards who were already on the tower. A few of the spear-skyeards spared a polite nod for the prince and his Sleffion-kin before returning their stern gazes back to the battle.

I sensed a coiled strength in most of them. They fought within themselves to stay put. Every instinct in their bodies clamoured at them to fight and defend the humans. As we watched, the battle

crawled closer. The Tanzan army fell back every so often, finding new boulders and crevices to use as cover. Skyearls, dragons and death hawks slashed the sky.

After a while my eyes started to see strange criss-crossing patterns. The blood and screaming was barely detectable from this distance but I knew that it was there. It was an effort to rein my thoughts away from the option to investigate what was going on with the waves. It would only reveal more pain and distress than I could cope with.

As night fell, the gates of Condi were finally closed. The battle raged ever closer to our position, affording me with opportunities to dispel and confuse conjurations. If I could confuse a conjured beast for long enough to bring it close to me, I could tie it up and then use it to entrap the sorcerer who'd conjured it.

Some of these conjurers were not aged beyond a normal life span, so all this effort simply freed them from demonic possession. I figured the loss of demons would dampen their magical abilities or at least slow them down.

I used one death hawk that I'd managed to get control of to fly back over the Zeika army. They were organised into rows of ground troops with conjurers and renders towards the back. In several places there were pockets of Tanzans still fighting. I flew the death hawk down upon one group, wincing as the Tanzans darted back in fear. But the death hawk had a new target, a render by the name of Jonaal whom I had met before, back in the Plains near Tez.

His presence on the waves was tainted with hate and fear. He hid the latter well, using his bull-strength and render abilities to kill dozens of Tanzans. I switched the hawk just a few paces away from a group of Tanzans and made it drive straight toward Jonaal's chest. Just when I was preparing for the shock of its death, Jonaal spun around, raised both hands and flung them outwards. There was a painful tearing feeling inside the hawk's conjured body. The creature flew apart and evaporated in mid-air.

I cursed.

'Steady,' Tyba said, holding me front and back with strong arms.

I came back to myself, only to see the dizzying drop over the edge of the tower. I stumbled back, feeling disoriented.

'He killed it,' I stammered.

'They know what you can do, now,' Tyba said.

My head pounded.

'*Don't overdo it,*' Jaalta said.

She and Jett were also by my side, watching me with pinched foreheads. Naltoch flew in circles above us, keeping watch. I shrugged and tried to shake my head clear. When I looked back over Condi, I could see a snaking trail of people with torches disappearing into the misty edges of the shroud bowl. The evacuation had begun.

# Chapter Twenty-seven — Ignice Jabez

**I**t was deep into the night when the Zeikas had pushed our troops back far enough to be within range of the towers.

I tried desperately not to think of the hundreds of thousands of people who had given their lives to buy time for Condii's evacuation. There were still ten thousand Tanzan soldiers, but they were in desperate need of rest, food and healing. Unlike many battles I had heard about in Chryne's history, there was no relief at night.

The Zeikas pushed forward, chasing what they clearly perceived as an advantage at night time. Perhaps they wished to complete the takeover of Condii before the storm clouds above brought forth rain.

As the Zeikas got closer, the increased range of the towers quickly depleted their foremost ranks. They moved forward in an immense line, dividing our fire so that no matter how many were killed, more Zeikas and conjurations were always there to climb over the dead and fill their place.

In this manner they gradually moved forward, killing defender stragglers and reaching each of the seven towers at the front of Condii city at about the same time. Jaalta, myself and the other Anzaii simply couldn't be everywhere at once.

As soon as we focused our dispelling and confusing abilities on one tower, we gained a foothold there, but lost one of the others.

Likewise, each tower was only able to fire its catapults and ballistas on enemies attacking the next tower along. Architect Furlorny's rubble-dropping contraptions only held back the Zeika ground troops for a time. Despite our best efforts, first one, then two and three towers fell.

When Zeika troops finally managed to break down the doors of our tower, Tyba ordered our retreat.

'We can fight them,' I argued.

'Nay,' he replied. 'It's not worth the risk.'

He pulled me up onto Amadeus' back, barely waiting for me to strap in. We soared off the edge of the tower, narrowly avoiding arrow fire from dragons and Zeikas both above and below us.

Jaalta was not so lucky. Her shock reverberated through the waves, followed by intense physical pain. An arrow had landed in her ankle, punching straight through the metal boots she wore. With Jaalta clutched in front of him, Jett flew Ptemais straight for the semi-repaired healer building just inside the front gates.

Amadeus carried us back to the gatehouse where King Crystom and his personal guard were stationed. The substantial platform at the top of Condi's gates was big enough for about a hundred people to stand. A table had been set up towards the back with piles of maps made of vellum, of fabric and even some valuable papyrus ones.

The waves enabled me to discern that one of the people standing nearby was a counter. Another row of tables had piles of supplies from water and bandages through to cross-bow bolts and arrows.

Tyba and Crystom clasped both hands, looking pleased to see one another unharmed.

'Master Psion Tacon,' Crystom said after a while. He offered me his hand, which I shook firmly. 'Thank you for everything you're doing. I understand you've gone without sleep now for more than 16 hours.'

'At least someone is counting,' I said with a weak chuckle.

'Aye,' said the king, 'there is a counter among my personal guard who keeps me abreast of these things.'

‘I’ve had a break from the fighting,’ I assured him. ‘I was with Tyba in the city centre when you arrived earlier.’

‘If you feel you need to go and sleep, I would suggest doing so close to Elonavé...’

‘No, thank you, sire. I am needed here.’

The truth was that I sensed something different in the waves. Although it was too much effort to sort through the myriad of thoughts and emotions coming from the Zeikas below us, I was able to glean general shifts in their overall thinking patterns. What seemed to be happening now was an energy build-up of some kind.

Whether motivated by fear or awe, the Zeikas were throwing everything they had against the Tanzan army. There was no more time to ponder—the last of the seven frontal towers was overrun.

Dragons massed above us, dropping flaming oil barrels directly over the gate. If only I’d been able to visit all the Zeika camps and destroy all of them. Amadeus nudged me out of the way of one just in time. The oil barrel smashed straight into him, rolling off his left haunch and onto his furred tail.

Tyba threw water over it, but the skyearl’s shrieks of pain brought tears to my eyes. Amadeus was a friend, not only of Ciera’s, but of mine. When the drama had past, a bloody burn was visible down the skyearl’s striped haunch and tail.

‘My thanks,’ I said, stroking his neck and wincing at the pain he tried to ignore.

*‘I wish Ciera was here to help us,’* Tiaro echoed my own thoughts.

More oil barrels fell around us, throwing balls of flame up around the map table and provisions.

‘Can you stop them, Taeon?’ Crystom asked me.

I licked my lips, shielding my face from the blistering heat. ‘I can try.’

Crystom put his hand on my shoulder, saying, ‘I will watch over you.’

Amazed that the king of Tanza would say such a thing, I humbly obeyed his command. Lifting my eyes to the sky I cast aside all concern for my own body and threw the net of my wave senses out over the descending dragons.

With one hand on the Jarian Anzaii belt I caught hold of a group of four dragons and sent confusion into their minds. The suddenly-empty vessels were completely at my mercy. Unable to direct them separately, I sent the suggestion to them to attack the other oil barrel dragons. There were dozens of them nearby carrying barrels of oil towards us and towards the southern end of Condi.

The vicious snarling of the dragons above us brought a whole new frenzy to the battle. The dragons tore at each other, snarling and shrieking like dogs with wings. The sound was terrifying.

Other Zeikas aback their own conjurations swerved to seek out the author of the attack.

Crystom and his entire personal guard were standing over me, with their shields raised. I was vaguely aware that Tyba and Amadeus were caught up some distance away with Zeikas who had landed on the gatehouse.

Zeikas had blockaded the entries to the inner towers near the gatehouse and were burning down the doors with green flames. All around us was the mayhem of battle. I hardly knew what to do.

*'Confuse another,'* Tiaro suggested.

*'There are so many...'*

Staring up, as even more dragons with oil barrels flew into Condi, I did not see the approaching fireball. It struck me full in the chest, bowling Crystom and me over. Unable to catch on my fire-resistant clothing, the flames woofed out, but my breath was gone. I struggled there on the ground, unable to breathe until somebody rolled me over and stretched me out.

The heat of the fire had singed the hairs and skin of my neck. My chest ached as if I'd been crushed.

Just as my breath started to come back, I located a new presence with my wave senses. Although I'd come to expect the unexpected over the past year, the vision that presented itself was enough to make the breath rush out of me again.

A whirlwind about twice the size of Ciera raced across the space between the fallen outer towers and the gatehouse. The inner towers continued trying to defend one other. As the whirlwind approached, several of King Crystom's guards helped the king to his feet and

tried to draw him back. They were flung back by the wind and disappeared over the back of the ramparts.

The rest of us stayed where we were, unsure how to face this new threat. My breath came in short gasps and pain seared through my upper body. I wanted to stand, but Crystom gestured for me to stay put.

Out of the winds appeared an immense chestnut horse of the deepest red. Its entire body was enflamed, with small red fires licking off its flesh. The tail and mane were cords of molten lava interspersed with flames. Gold bands encircled some of the cords, chinking as the winged creature hovered.

Its eyes were opaque yellow balls with tiny red slits and its teeth were long enough to rival Rekala's. Black smoke snorted from its nose and a tinkling of fine silver dust blew out. As the dust settled on the roof, it etched small holes into the stone.

Mounted on the back of the summoned equine was a man whose face I did not know, but he needed no introduction. Here was the ruler of all Reltland, Bal Harar. With pale, youthful skin and large liquid-green eyes, the Bal looked calm and serene upon his oversized, out-of-this-world mount. His eyes roved over the stunned Tanzans, coming to rest on the king.

An arrow sailed at the Bal, fired by one of the king's personal guard. The demon-horse reared up, taking the arrow into its own fiery hide, where the flames absorbed it. In the same smooth motion, the horse lashed out its head and blasted the guard with flames and hot black soot. His screams pierced the night as the acid particles dissolved his body to ashes. Nobody else fired a shot. Bal Harar continued to stare at us as if studying our every feature.

The Bal was attired in white chainmail, a red cloak and a reflective, silvery chest-plate. A belt of silver girded his waist and a metallic-red ram's head was nestled over each buckle of his armour.

His head was unprotected and he had close-cropped black hair as fine as a child's. An elaborate green neck-piece framed his upper torso and a large green stone of some kind was the setting for his Xeldfet. The six-pointed star indicated he was a fully initiated Zeika

summoner, as enslaved to Zeidarb as the demon-horse was enslaved to him.

As with Boiva, this behemoth was as elusive on the waves as a wet piece of soap. If its fiery body could absorb a flying arrow I didn't dare to imagine what would happen if I tried to touch it. Yet how could it be banished if I couldn't touch it?

While Bal Harar continued to stare at Crystom, the demon-horse's snake-like eyes seemed locked on me. A pointed tongue flicked out over its fangs.

Although I was unable to discern a way to attack the demon on the waves, I did become aware of its name: Ignice Jabez, the fiery one who causes pain.

It raised its head, sniffing the air. Small flurries of wind brought the smell of rain even closer. I hoped the demon had as strong an aversion to water as Zeikas did in general.

*'Now I really wish Ciera was here,'* I murmured to Tiaro.

*'Well you have us,'* King Crystom suddenly shouted to his enemy.

*Surrender?*

Bal Harar cocked his head. Ignice Jabez continued to flap its wings, slowly. The sound was distracting, like someone fanning the flames of a fireplace.

*'I only wonder why you, the king of Tanza, are here,'* Bal Harar began, *'and not within the safety of your waterfall city.'*

I could tell Crystom's heart sank, but his expression did not change. Of course it would seem strange for him to be here. Even as we spoke, the many hundreds of hunter-skyeals in the mists around Centan were struggling to keep the Zeika legions occupied. If the Bal was here, he clearly knew something important was going on in Condii. If he uncovered our ruse now, it was unlikely all our citizens would escape on the Elonavé path.

*'What can I do?'* I asked Tiaro desperately. *'I don't know what to do!'*

*'Unlike your cowardly kind, I stand with my warriors in battle,'* Crystom declared.

Bal Harar seemed unperturbed by the jibe. Raising one eyebrow he said, 'You are a fool. For decades I have known you would be the king I finally defeated in Tanza.'

In the distance I sensed eight Zeikas dressed in more finery than usual flocking towards their leader aback tyraks. With one hand on the Belt of Jaria I reached out my other hand to send a psionic shock at first one, then another. The conjured beasts slid out of the sky, falling into dust even as their riders plunged downwards. I managed to dispel three before the remaining five of the Bal's elite guards reached the gatehouse.

'Even if you defeat me you will never defeat Tanza. Kriites will be here for eternity,' Crystom shouted.

'Ah yes, eternity. Ones with lives as short and pitiful as yours would have to hope in a life after death.'

There was a sour smoke smell and the sound of perpetual crackling flames coming off Ignice Jabez.

'What do you want?' King Crystom asked, lifting his arms in surrender.

'Your lands for my own irrepressible people! You and all your flying feather dusters silenced forever,' Bal Harar chanted. 'The psionic powers of your race enfolded into my own.'

Crystom laughed. 'No matter how many years you live, Harar, you will never live to see that. Even if I should die there will always be another to take up the flow of the waves and resist you.'

Bal Harar leapt from the back of his horse, landing on the roof in a crouching position. The warriors that rushed forward to defend the king were knocked flying by the Bal's guards or by Ignice Jabez' burning tail and acid breath even as it hovered.

Fireballs streamed towards Crystom's Sleffion-kin. The king had raised his sword, but a green flash pushed it aside where it should have struck, and Bal Harar punched him in the chest.

King Crystom's body convulsed and tensed up as straight as a pillar. The Bal's fist remained against his chest, shaking with some strange force. Crystom's feet left the ground.

'Then die,' the Zeika leader said, a smile of ecstasy spreading across his face.

With a jerking motion, Bal Harar drew his fist away. The king's body tore in countless places at once, dark blood gushing out. The arms separated from the body at the shoulder. Veins ruptured in the neck and the legs tore right out of their sockets.

There were screams of shock all around me and more emotions than I could bear. Amadeus and Tyba's cries of agony reached me through the waves, even though they didn't specifically intend it.

'Pleasure meeting you.' With a courteous smile, Bal Harar flung what remained of the corpse down. I sensed the keening of Crystom's Sleffion-kin through the waves, like a punch to the chest.

Dozens of skyearls attacked Bal Harar, his guards and the demon-horse, but he shielded himself with some kind of ward. Flashes of green appeared with each blow that landed. He seemed untouchable.

The prince ran towards me shouting, 'Do something!'

His shock and grief came secondary to the stark realisation that if I didn't take action, we would all die.

I grabbed Tyba by the arm saying, 'I need Jaalta and her piece of the Centan tree.'

'You know she is injured,' Tyba replied hotly. 'You have the waves. Use them. Command whoever you need. You have my authority.'

'*All Anzaii to me!*' I shouted through the waves, hoping it was a broadwave like what Jaalta had described. '*And bring the Centan artefact with you.*'

Several preoccupied voices floated back to me saying they would try to reach me.

'*Now!*' I replied. '*Bal Harar is before us. If we do not delay him, the entire evacuation is in jeopardy.*'

Huddling down behind the blackened supply table, I sent my awareness towards Ciera. I quested stubbornly for his mind, finding him in a distant dream, soaring over fields of purest white.

'*Wake up, Emperor,*' I commanded him. '*Your people need you! I need you.*'

There was a hint of recognition. The great skyearl stirred. As he opened first one eye and then the other, he was startled to see the Elonavé pathway already unfolded. He stood up hesitantly,

watching as the other shrouder-skyearls coaxed more of the spongy white surface to unfold and flex out towards the north.

A blast of burning air enveloped me and I snapped my attention back to my immediate surroundings. Ignice Jabez had sprayed fire at a group of Tanzans who were firing cross-bows at Bal Harar. Tyba was off to one side, calling in more troops and trying to coordinate their efforts.

Skyearls continued to bombard Bal Harar and the fire-horse. They would soar in and dart back, looking for any opportunity to bite or slash their enemy. They mostly avoided the demon-horse, except to distract it. Any time a skyearl attempted to grapple with it, the singeing flames and acidic breath soon killed them.

Spear-skyearls flew in from the north, pitching their weapons at Bal Harar. Not one made its mark on him. Though some hit the horse, it did not appear to be injured in any way.

‘Tiaro!’ I cried.

‘By the Nine!’ said a soldier nearby.

Having slain all the humans and kin close by, Bal Harar sheathed his swords and gestured at his summoned behemoth. The great fiery wings folded at its side as it landed on top of the gatehouse next to him. It lowered its head and looked around, powerful neck muscles straining against the bounds of its summoned skin. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

More troops ran across the top of the gatehouse, shouting incoherently. Bal Harar threw up his hands, directing fireballs bigger than his head in multiple directions. Unsheathing two swords, he sliced the arm off one opponent and vaulted backwards to avoid the strike of another. His moves were dizzying.

‘*Ciera!*’ I called. ‘*We need you!*’

At last my Sleffion-kin started to come to his senses. He shook his wings, which had been bent in an unusual position for six or seven hours. Still groggy, and parched from thirst, he ambled over to the barrels of water that had been left for him. Lightning ripped across the sky as he ate them, wood, nails and all. Four banana trees went next, each one gone in three quick gulps down the enormous gullet.

Ciera flexed his wings and dived off the sky kingdom. The span of his wings easily reached from one side of the central plaza to the other. Without a second thought towards the precious banana trees he'd left behind, he soared straight for the gatehouse.

Canhmalo, Nirixa and Rialb, from the strike force, ran up a rope ladder behind me, followed by Riftweaver from the Condii defenders. Riftweaver was the Anzaii who had watched Ciera create the strike force shroud, and it was they who bore the Shield of Centan.

They passed the shield to me and I held it with reverence. This could save us. I now had four artefacts made with sapphire leafshards to help me: earring, belt, sword and shield.

'Thank the trees for you, Riftweaver,' I shouted, noticing my wave-senses expanding out and sharpening. 'Now stand behind me, all of you. Put your hands on each other and on me.'

*'But we must be touching the behemoth's physical form in order to dispel it,'* Rialb said.

*'I will touch it,'* I replied. I set aside the fear of what might happen to my hand. There was too much at stake now to be concerned with my own life or wellbeing. If I didn't act soon, neither I nor any Tanzans would be around to worry about it.

Tiaro was transfixed with Ignice Jabez, her full attention upon it. The demon-horse squealed and pawed the ground, staring straight at us. Bal Harar was occupied with a relentless tide of Tanzan attackers.

*'Splittin' crystal!'* Ciera sent from afar, still coming to terms with my surroundings. *'You're right in front of it!'*

*'I can't believe we've lasted this long,'* one of the Anzaii replied.

*'I think there's a specific reason for that,'* Tiaro said.

Using our close contact with each other and the artefacts, I allowed the other Anzaii to hear Ciera and Tiaro, too.

Without Tiaro even having to say so, I knew her thoughts centred on the Zeikas' attempts to capture me near both Tez and Telby City. Now that we had seen a waverade artefact, it didn't seem quite so strange that the Zeikas specifically wanted me.

*'Bal Harar's minions have failed,'* Tiaro began, including Ciera in the wave, *'and now he is here to do the job properly.'*

*'Over my dead body,'* I growled, speaking out loud for emphasis.

*'That's exactly what he doesn't want,'* Tiaro said. *'I think that's why he's landed. And that's why his horse has not disintegrated us already.'*

I stood up from my ineffectual hiding place, the other Anzaii right behind me. Ignice Jabez continued to stare straight at us, snorting its nostrils and curling the back of its mouth in a carnivorous snarl. The pointed yellow teeth in its maw clacked shut less than an arm-length from my face. It reared and screamed, then lowered its head to focus on us once more.

I looked over to my left to see Tyba staring at us in disbelief. The Bal was engaged with at least eight Tanzan warriors, keeping them all at bay with his unbelievable swordsmanship and magic.

*'Do you think Bal Harar knows you have to touch the behemoth in order to dispel it?'* one of the Anzaii asked.

*'Yes,'* Tiaro said. *'He knows you will step forward to try and defeat it. He will wait until you're close, then hit you over the head and carry you off.'*

*'You are right,'* Ciera agreed, getting closer to our position. *'I have been battling Bals for centuries. They have a gift for thinking ahead. Bal Harar wants to know our plans. He hates to be outwitted.'*

Even though Tanza was more or less defeated, Bal Harar was still bent on gaining access to our wave abilities.

I forced my hand towards the demon-horse's nose.

*'If it has been instructed not to harm me,'* I began, *'then perhaps I can touch it without sustaining injury.'*

Though fearful, the other Anzaii sent me their support.

*'Do it,'* Ciera said. *'Try to dispel it. I will be there momentarily. Together we can beat it.'*

Ignice Jabez stilled as my hand made contact. It shuddered all over and gave a high-pitched squeal, as if battling within itself. The cords of lava lay slick over its neck, dropping shiny orange blobs onto the roof. The horse's muzzle was hot to the touch, but it did not burn me. The slick fur felt much like Rekala's hair after she had been swimming.

*'Ready?'* I asked the gathered Anzaii.

*'Yes,'* came the instantaneous reply within my mind. I jumped forward, grabbed a handful of Ignice Jabez's forelock and shoved the leafshard of the Centan Shield into the bridge of its nose. I brought the face close to mine, forcing it not to use the acid-smoke, lest it kill the prize. I could feel Nirixa and Riftweaver's hands on my back.

Dropping from high up in the clouds, Ciera landed on the horse's back, pushing the enflamed wings away from his soft underside. For long, painful seconds, it felt like we were in two places at once. Ignice Jabez struggled against Ciera's much greater bulk. Visions of dust and darkness washed over me and the demon-horse was before us in the waves, running in circles around a great corral.

Holding on with all my might, I closed my eyes. The other Anzaii clung to me, hoping that no stray arrows would fly our way and that Bal Harar would remain occupied.

# Chapter Twenty-eight— Contingency Plan

Within the dusky atmosphere of the waves, the now wingless demon-horse glowed with a brilliant orange light. It was breathtaking at the same time as being repugnant. The senseless squealing and bucking reminded me of breaking-in wild horses back at home. Would this scenario play out in much the same way?

I moved forward to the wooden beams of the corral. The texture was rough, with thick iron nails holding the rails and posts together. Steeling myself, I climbed over the fence and approached the horse.

‘Steady now, steady,’ I said. Heedless, it continued to run in circles around me, kicking up more and more dust with every pass.

Whenever I got in its way, it would rear or throw its head, kicking out with its front legs. I rolled away from it and looked around for a rope or harness. There was nothing. The horse bellowed at me, working itself into a lather.

As I watched it through my wave senses, it occurred to me that this demon was not as powerful as the two-legged behemoth had been. Unlike Boiva, this demon had been summoned by just one person. It was loyal to Bal Harar and Bal Harar alone. As such, it was weaker than Boiva.

Knowing this gave me the confidence to proceed with the symbolic way my mind had chosen to portray the struggle to me. Tiaro and I had cast out demons many times; it wasn’t so different.

‘Open that gate!’ I shouted to the bewilderment of Nirixa.

*‘Ignice Jabez, go back to the waves!’*

The demon-horse turned on me with a ferocious glare in its eye. Nirixa and Riftweaver opened the gate as the horse reared up before me. The fur stood out in jagged ripples and fiery light pulsed from the equine body.

It heaved and bent its neck down to scream. An ear-splitting crack ricocheted outwards as semi-transparent light burst from the creature. Tiaro and I hurled our combined mental might at the creature, shooting into it like blue streams of pure energy. Shrieking at us, the fire-demon shot up into the sky and away.

A physical blow to the face shocked me back to my real-world senses. Bal Harar’s demon-horse was gone and his attention was fixed on us. Cahnmalo and Nirixa moved to defend me, but the Bal grabbed first one and then the other, rending their bodies apart with ease. Blood and gore splattered around us.

I gagged, reaching for Fyschs in his white scabbard at my side. My Tolite-kin came out into the blustery night, shining with pent-up fury. After all the ranged fighting we had done, it felt strange to finally draw my sword.

Rialb and Riftweaver hung back, uncertain what to do.

*‘Get to safety,’* I ordered them. *‘Live to fight another battle.’* Tanza had lost far too many of its Anzaai. Rialb called her Sleffion-kin and jumped off the gatehouse, however, Riftweaver remained.

*‘I’m not leaving you alone, Master Psion.’*

The thunder that slapped our turbulent surroundings was soon followed by a ripple of lightning. The storm was getting closer.

*‘Trees, help us,’* I prayed, *‘send rain.’*

*‘Rain will hinder as much as help us at this point,’* Ciera argued, biting a dragon through the mid-section and tossing the body aside. *‘It will dissipate the cloud content of the shrouds around Centan and Condi, revealing exactly what we’re up to with Elonavé.’*

More Zeikas had landed on the gatehouse. Tyba and his troops ran to engage them before they could reach me. Bal Harar tore apart any humans who strayed too close to him. Those who held

back to fire arrows were unable to penetrate the shimmering green shield circle around his body. They were soon obliterated by his and other Zeikas' fireballs.

*He won't want to kill me, I thought. So it's up to me to engage him. I can save some more lives.*

Overhead, other skyearls could not get close. Swarms of dragons and death hawks grappled with them, breathing green fire over them, biting with their yellow razor-edge teeth and gouging with their claws. Ciera struggled against an oscidar, which was a conjuration like a gigantic meat-blob with four mouths, and a host of dragons.

Riftweaver danced out of the Bal's reach, well aware that he could cast a rending spell on them if he managed to touch them. Bal Harar threw a fireball, which they ducked. I moved in from behind, driving Fyschs in a sideswipe that nearly beheaded him.

The Bal rolled and came to his feet with two swords drawn. These he slashed at me, using manoeuvres I had never been taught by Sarlice. I concentrated on defending myself with my Tolite-kin and the Shield of Centan.

Each blow that struck Fyschs was like a wooden paling being whacked across the bones of my arms or my shins. Fyschs was a living extension of me, moving faster than conscious thought, reacting in tune with my body's heightened reflexes.

Riftweaver, being only A.S. had no weapon-kin to use against the Bal. Their Sleffion-kin, the gold skyearl, was not far away, but was fighting for her life.

*'Go to Rawn,' I suggested. What did they think they could do without her? Perhaps Riftweaver was ready for advanced Anzaii tactics. Could they confuse a conjuration if I gave them back the shield? But I need it!*

All four of my leafshard artefacts enhanced my perceptions, decreasing my reaction time to his casting. When he reached to rend me Tiaro gave me split-second impulses to duck out of reach. Knowing that I could use conjurations against him, the Bal fought me only with swords and fire.

With Fyschs in my right hand, I blocked and moved away from Bal Harar's strikes. Having backed me into a corner, the Bal

knocked the shield from my hands. It clanged on the stone roof. Before I could get Fyschs in the right position he crashed the hilt of one of his swords against my head.

I staggered back, barely registering that he was raising both swords up high to attack yet again. Executing ‘candle maker’, I planted both feet and lifted Fyschs upwards in a straight line with both hands. With the strength of my thigh muscles under me, I blocked the Bal’s attack, drove upwards and pushed him back.

He stumbled momentarily. Bal Harar was limited by not wanting to kill me, but I did not have the same problem.

*‘We need the shield! Get the shield!’* Tiaro screamed. My head felt like it was about to split. The shield was behind Bal Harar, out of reach. But my need for it was so great. This could be the difference between keeping my freedom and capture. I shifted partway into icetiger form, sending Tiaro and Fyschs into the waves along with the Shield of Centan—then halted the magic.

It was the first time I’d moved something into the waves I wasn’t touching. The shield was there in the waves. *This is going to work!*

*‘Bring it out with you, Tiaro!’* Reaching out with all of our psionic energy we dragged everything back with us. I resumed human form, making Fyschs and the shield appear in my hands. *‘Praise the Nine!’*

Head and chest aching, I strived against my pain to perform a series of offensive moves, from the low jabs of ‘stoking the fire’ to the quick and complicated side, lower and upper attacks of ‘flying sparks’. The Zeika leader shied away from the shield whenever I managed to bring it close.

I pushed Harar back, keeping my feet in sturdy positions as I ‘crossed the kindling’ and attacked him with two rapid slashes. I succeeded with the strenuous crouch, switch and strike attacks of ‘blazing inferno’ for the first time. Then, in a ‘stirring the soup’ hit that would have made Sarlice proud, I knocked one of Bal Harar’s swords flying.

While his remaining sword kept Fyschs at bay, I struck him in the face with the Centan shield. This hurt him more than I had expected. I heard screeches and witnessed a dual-layer of reality

with demons fleeing from the Bal's body in the waves. He staggered and glared at me, the beige skin of his face ageing ten years.

'Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be, boy.'

I resumed a defensive stance, sword and shield raised. He pointed one palm at me. A burst of flames scored my right eye and scalded the flesh of my cheek and ear. Pain erupted and the vision in my right eye was washed with red.

My shout must have reverberated through the waves. Riftweaver and their golden skyealr landed nearby to help me. Simultaneously a group of dragon-riders landed behind the Bal. Keeping my body between Riftweaver and Bal Harar I pushed the shield into their hands.

'*Confuse one of the dragons,*' I instructed. '*Use the Centan artefact to take control and then use it against the others.*'

'*I don't know how,*' they responded, perplexed.

I could sense more Zeikas and Tanzans converging on our position. Word had passed around that the Bal himself was battling the master psion.

Riftweaver dispelled one of the dragons and their Sleffion-kin grappled with one of the riders.

'You will never take me alive,' I said to Bal Harar. 'Every dragon you bring will only be used against you.' One of the dragons bit the head off the other. I reached out my psionic senses to confuse another.

With an expression like stone, Bal Harar stretched out his spare hand to me, as if willing to rend me there and then. I jumped out of his reach and tried a round-house kick. The Bal was too quick, crabbing in a circle around me, controlling the fight. I held Fyschs up in front of me, chest heaving. My arms locked up with fatigue and the scalds on my face burned wetly. *I need rest.*

'*Don't give up, Taeon,*' Ciera said. '*While the Bal is distracted here, more Tanzans escape to Ravra.*'

'*I need help,*' I called. '*I can't do this for much longer.*'

Ciera struggled more violently against his own attackers, striving to get to me. I was vaguely aware of Riftweaver celebrating over successfully confusing one of the dragons.

Fyschs struck the Bal's shoulder, shearing off a piece of his armour and leaving a shallow cut. He jumped back, surprised that we got through his guard. The scrap of metal clattered onto the stone roof.

'Do not mistake my interest in you for fear,' the Bal said. 'You are nothing but a tool I will use against others of your ignorant, self-righteous kind.'

I glared at him. Hadn't he already taken enough from me? How could a young man from a tribe so far away mean so much to this bicentenarian? I had done nothing to deserve any of this. The unfairness of it burned red behind my eyes. 'You may think you will live forever, but I will take you apart year after year, piece by piece.'

He struck at me with renewed strength. Fyschs met his every blow, but the strain on my arms and back was starting to toll. Before the pain became too distracting, I assumed icetiger form. I stalked around him, growling under my breath.

The Bal held his sword at the ready. Expecting a blow to the head, I pounced anyway, sinking my teeth into his exposed forearm. The hilt of his sword smacked down into my forehead at the same time as my fangs found bone. His shout of pain was muffled by the clouding of my awareness. I slumped back into human form, barely managing to stay awake. I could not make my body move.

Ciera descended onto the top of the gatehouse, breaking the stone at one corner with his weight. With his good elbow, the Bal hit me in the gut. Scrambling to his feet, he awkwardly wrapped his injured arm with a shred from his cloak.

Blood spouted from the wound, splashing on the grey stone. A flash of lightning above was reflected momentarily in its sheen. Still unable to clear my head, I rolled onto my side, blinking. The Bal kicked me savagely in the chest.

With the outrush of my breath, blackness swarmed across my vision, yet I clung to consciousness, desperate not to be taken.

Bal Harar held his good hand out and made a swirling motion, speaking words I could not understand. A dragon coalesced in the air before him, its many spines flexing as it stood rigid before its master.

The Bal's concentration was now divided, just as mine would be if I was confusing a dragon.

He climbed onto the creature's back just before it reared and blasted an approaching skyearl with green flames. Then it stepped forward to clutch me with its claws. I squirmed backwards and the immense talons shredded my chain-mail vest. The thick, muscular arms were cool against my exposed skin, clammy and unreal. I struggled, but the dragon advanced on its hind legs, snarling.

Its claws took the skin off my arms and ribs in great gouges as it grasped me.

Thunder crashed and Ciera's roar carried the sound to new heights as he rushed to my side. Easily fifteen times the size of the dragon, Ciera slapped it off me with his forepaws. It rose into the air, breathing flames over my Sleffion-kin's head. He shied away from the Zeika flames then bowed his head to strike with his horns, which faced backwards.

This manoeuvre gashed the hovering dragon's neck, which did not react to the injury even when black and green liquid oozed out. Instead it reared back and tore at Ciera's face with all four legs. Sharp claws drove through the bridge of Ciera's nose, cutting through one of his domes. My Sleffion-kin's head jerked back in pain, but it was a feint. A split second later, his teeth snapped down, chopping off the dragon's forelegs completely. He spat them onto the parapet where they fizzled and vanished.

Bal Harar's voice called out incoherent words and forelegs started to reform on the tyrak's body. I had never seen a Zeika with such power before. Only an Anzaii could defeat him, that much was clear, but I was nearly senseless.

Riftweaver stepped forward, holding out the shield to dispel the Bal's dragon. Tyba and Jett came to my side, lifting me off the ground. Realising his chance to snatch me had passed, Bal Harar made his dragon fly up in an angry spiral.

Other dragons joined him. To my blurred vision, they were little more than a dark mass against the even darker backdrop of the livid clouds. It was my wave senses that told me exactly how many were there.

Riftweaver was struggling to affect the Zeika leader's conjuration. I presumed he had a more advanced hold upon it than lesser Zeikas did. I lacked the concentration to lend my wave-strength to hers. *Get it together, I told myself. Now is the time.*

'I had hoped to preserve your life, Tacon son of Kerra,' Bal Harar shouted at me. 'Instead you will most likely die along with the rest of these scum, but I will return to Feladaire with my prize. The female you call Sarlice will be fine sport for our arcane arena and a ready breeder should you fail to retrieve her. Between hers and the offspring of the princess, I will have the power to enslave all Kriites eventually. Unlike you, I can wait another twenty years.'

Roaring unintelligibly I struggled to rise. Many hands prevented me from getting to my feet. The troop of dragons flapped once more in a menacing circle above us. As Ciera and a dozen other skyearls took flight to attack them, the Zeikas flew away in a downward path over the walls of Condii. Rallying my psionic power I blasted the dragons I could still see with a dispel attack that evaporated them mid-flight. Five or six Zeikas fell to their deaths.

'Let me go!' I shouted, my voice breaking with emotion. When the hands released me dizziness took hold and I stumbled. Someone caught me. It was still difficult to breathe. My body hurt in so many places I couldn't tell which was which.

In the back of my mind, I could hear Amadeus speaking to Ciera through a direct wave.

*'Tyba thinks he has combat fatigue,' Amadeus said. 'We will send him back to the fortress to rest. There are not so many people there now. It will be quiet for him.'*

I struggled, trying to shove the hands off me. At Tyba's signal, the Tanzans held me more firmly. Bal Harar and his troop had disappeared into the night.

'Split it!' I growled vehemently at the Tanzans around me. 'We should have killed him.'

I staggered against one of them. His look of shock and concern told me how out-of-control I seemed.

Elsewhere, the battle continued. Skyearls and dragons fought all over Condii. A terrible crash sounded beneath us and hundreds of

Zeika ground troops threw down the gates and clattered into the city.

‘Get him back to the fortress,’ Tyba said to those who were holding me up.

Still unable to stand unaided, let alone hold myself on Ciera’s back, I allowed myself to be pulled up onto a Sleffion-kin and held in place by a Tanzan warrior.

‘I’ve got you, Master Psion,’ a deep male voice said.

Even with my head pounding, and barely able to hold my eyes open, my wave senses told me the names of both man and skyearl. This was Commander Saige, the military leader of Kovain who had fled here only recently. His Sleffion-kin was named Ayrae and was one of the largest skyearls in the realm aside from Ciera.

The skyearl spread her wings and launched off the gatehouse. Crashes and booms sounded above and below us. The roars of pain and anger from the many thousands of skyearls around us were drowned out by increasingly frequent claps of thunder, but I still heard them through the waves.

It was harder to hold it all back now. Fire and lightning lit the buildings below us, many of which had been burnt out. Some of those that were still intact now served as military stations or cover for either Zeikas or Tanzans.

‘*You must take me to Sarlice,*’ I said to Ciera, who had remained behind to fight, despite his injuries.

‘*Nay,*’ he replied. ‘*You would only be captured. Then what would all this have been for?*’

‘*Sarlice needs us!*’ I shouted back angrily. I shook my head, trying to clear it.

‘*You already knew she’d been taken,*’ Ciera said.

‘*Bal Harar, himself, has targeted her. They’re going to torture her,*’ I cried.

Commander Saige’s arms held me tightly against his chest. The gouges in my sides were being pinched, sending sparks of agony, and anger, through my entire body. The pain helped me to come more fully awake.

*'There is more at stake here,' Ciera argued. 'You know that as well as I do.'*

*'Curse Corypha!' I railed. 'It's his splittin' fault.'*

# Chapter Twenty-nine — Catharsis

**A**s soon as Ayræ touched down, I struggled from Saige's bear-hug and slid down the skyearl's side to a crouching position on the ground. I took a few moments to gather my strength and still my spinning head.

Disregarding the blood spots I left behind me, I marched straight into the fortress. Saige, Jett and the other Tanzans Tyba had sent back exchanged glances and followed me.

'Let us attend to your wounds,' they said. 'What are you doing?', 'Where are you going', 'Master Psion... please...'

Ignoring them, I made my way through the now-familiar halls of Condii Fortress. The sounds of the storm and the fighting were audible even inside the thick walls. Very few people remained within, most of whom were running with last-minute supplies and valuables.

The majority of the Condiites were already up on the Elonavé path, or were helping to organise those still waiting in line. The civilians from Centan and Kovain were the last to make it inside the city and many of them were yet to be herded inside the lower parts of the Elonavé sky fort.

I pulled off my gloves, letting them fall to the floor as I entered the prison-sector. Corypha had been left unattended. He had managed to pull the guard table up against his cell and pinch some food and a wooden baton. Bread and fruit were stockpiled inside his

cell along with a clay pitcher of water. Pieces of wood had broken off inside the lock of his cell door.

Without bothering to find the key, I marched straight up to the bars, reached in and grabbed Corypha by the neck. Pulling him up against the bars I noticed the bruising on his chin from our last meeting.

‘To whom did you send that missive?’ I demanded.

The bones of his neck creaked beneath my fingers and his unwashed body stunk of sweat and fear.

‘I will not tell *you*,’ he spat.

I blinked, feeling the cold spittle slide down my hot cheek. ‘They have taken her.’

Despite his predicament, Corypha sneered. *Is this all a joke to him?* ‘Give yourself up and they’ll let her go.’

‘Not the Wavekeepers, you half-wit,’ I interrupted, pulling him closer against the bars. His face turned to the side, one eye squished shut. ‘The Zeikas. You gave the information to them that lead to her capture.’

‘Impossible,’ he sputtered. ‘I don’t understand what you’re talking about, you animal! Let me go.’ He looked to the others trying to crowd in behind me. ‘Someone get him off me!’

I gripped him even tighter, teeth clenched so hard that the ache in my skull threatened to tear through my very flesh.

‘You gave Sarlice to the Zeikas,’ I accused him, pushing him away and then pulling him back against the bars, ‘to be tortured and used. How else could they have known her whereabouts? How else could Bal Harar himself have realised her importance to me?’

He pulled feebly against me, trying to pry my hands off his neck with dirty, nail-bitten fingers.

‘I don’t know how,’ he replied, letting go of my wrists, ‘but we *are* in a war you imbecile. If they have her then you might as well forget about her.’ He must have seen the look of refusal in my eyes. ‘She’s dead,’ he whispered. ‘If you go after her, the rest of us will be, too.’

‘No.’

I pressed my thumbs into the soft part of his throat. He coughed and gagged. Commander Saige's hands were on my arms, trying to pull me away.

'That's enough now. Come along now. You're tired from battle, Specialist.'

The sound of a loud explosion reached us from outside the fortress. Easing off Corypha's throat momentarily I said, 'Do you hear that? That is the sound of our defeat.'

'What little good you and your fancy wave tricks did,' he replied. 'You're nothing but a danger to us all.'

'If it weren't for you,' I shouted, 'the strike force might have saved Condii. Condii might have saved Tanza.'

'That's right!' I heard Jett say.

'That's unlikely, Taeon,' Commander Saige said from behind. His grip tightened on my arms and I had to struggle against both him and Corypha to maintain my hold on the remorseless prisoner.

'Let go,' said Commander Saige.

'Not until he tells me who he gave the missive to,' I replied. 'There are others of his traitorous kind among us.'

'I will not tell you,' Corypha said, reaching one hand up to grip my arm with surprising strength. Had his earlier weakness been a feint? I glanced down and caught sight of a sharpened stick he had brought from underneath his prison robe. *He's going to kill me!* I was affronted more than afraid. Even in the face of his own stupidity and betrayal—giving the Zeikas information they could use to enslave me—his focus remained on finding a way to kill me.

'If my fellow Kriites will not stop you, I will,' he ranted. We gripped each other tighter, a deadly embrace with prison bars in between. My energy was ebbing, but Corypha seemed to be gaining strength. 'Your behaviour only demonstrates how dangerous and unpredictable psions can be. I hear you can even control Zeika monsters.' He looked around to make sure there were plenty of people to hear his words. 'Only a Zeika could do that. That's what you're becoming!' Then he whispered so only I could hear, 'I am glad that the Anzaii were poisoned. None of you can be trusted. You are—'

The sharpened stick darted upwards. Talons sprouted from my fingertips and disappeared into his neck. My hard black claws pierced the tender skin and spilled his lifeblood over the both of us.

Commander Saige hauled me back with all his strength and we fell against the desk and chairs, snapping wood and bruising our backs. Corypha sagged against the wall of his cell, dazed.

‘What have you done?’ Commander Saige demanded.

He and the other Tanzans who had accompanied us struggled to clear the wood from the lock and open Corypha’s cell. His blood flowed out between the fingers he pressed against his neck. The hook-shaped nose bled, but the look in his eyes was smug.

Commander Saige went to him and pressed torn fabric against the wounds in his neck. My own injuries continued to bleed and waves of dizziness threatened to overwhelm me. *The waves?*

Shock reopened my senses to the waves and a flood of questions rushed in from Ciera and Tiaro. *Halduronlei* floated between us, but, realising what I had done, Ciera allowed the song to slowly fade away.

‘*You nearly killed Corypha...*’ he stammered, barely believing it.

‘*It was not my intention,*’ I replied.

‘*You were in a rage,*’ Tiaro said hesitantly, ‘*like Ciera was a while ago. We could not reach you.*’

‘*The Zeikas have overrun most of the city,*’ Ciera told me. ‘*You must come to Elonavé. We will sort this out later.*’

Saige and the Tanzans glared at me as they lifted Corypha’s limp body. They did not see the piece of wood with a wicked end lying on the floor.

‘Ciera says the Zeikas are upon us,’ I told them. ‘If we do not reach Elonavé, we will die here.’

I climbed to my feet, glanced at Corypha one last time and departed.

Ayrae was somewhat hesitant as I went to climb onto his back. His neck curved in a threatening arc and his eyes bored into me, searching. I held myself back from him in the waves, preferring to be alone to figure out what had just happened. A sinking weight

inside said it wasn't right. Commander Saige got up behind me, leaving the other skyearls and their humans to carry Corypha.

Dragons clamoured close by and the storm was closing in.

'Let's get away from here,' Commander Saige said.

Jett was on Ptemais close behind us, concern etched into his features. He and the other Tanzans followed us up into the sky on their skyearls, but we were soon separated. Dragons massed in the skies around us, flying between the shrouds blasting stray skyearls and people with green fire. The enormous, white mass that was Elonavé was surrounded by billowing clouds. The air was thick with moisture from the gathering storm.

Lighting struck the top of Elonavé, nearly hitting some of the beings that ducked and dashed across it. The civilians were screaming and running, jostling against those in front on the Elonavé path. Most of the people clutched a survival pouch, food supplies and their own belongings. Anything extra was loaded onto animals or left behind.

Through one eye I strained to witness the impressive sight of thousands of skyearls flying in circles around the spongy pathway, ensuring no humans were attacked. Shrouds had been created right underneath the Elonavé path to catch any who fell.

Squadrons of defender warriors and Zeikas battled along the lower shrouds. More dragons were flying in all the time. Maybe their Zeika riders had started to realise the Tanzans were attempting escape.

Flying archers and spear-skyearls chased them down, often never reappearing. As Ayræ flew us over the pathway, I noticed Ciera down below. He and only a handful of others were fighting a group of ten or twenty dragons. The point of one of his purple horns had broken off and there were burn-marks and bloody wounds all over his body. His skin gaped in places and the dragons were quick to target those unprotected patches.

Streams of green fire were blasted at him from five directions. He spiralled upwards, flying towards me. Gripping my belt in one hand, I confused three of the dragons and closed my eyes. Seeing through the eyes of the dragons, I caused their bodies to turn about

and crash into the other dragons nearby. Leaving behind a trail of shroud, Ciera shot upwards.

He flew with Ayrae for a while, conversing privately through the waves, while I covered him. I killed the three dragons and their riders by flying them straight into the ground. That left a dozen more within my range. I dispelled one, confused another and bit the heads off the Zeika riders of six other dragons. Suddenly the one I'd been controlling was slain. Coming back to myself with a jolt, I looked below and saw the dead Zeika lying on the shroud below the path. A black arrow stuck out of the rider's body—he had been shot by one of his own.

Ciera, Ayrae and Ptemais landed on a small shroud platform the emperor had made, and I continued dispelling and confusing dragons. One smashed into Ciera's back as I crashed another dragon into it. Ciera bit my dragon through the neck and crushed the Zeika conjurer between his claws.

My head swam and I slumped forward onto Ayrae's neck. My body sagged and slid, but Jett was there to catch me. Commander Saige got down behind me and had a look at my injuries. My legs couldn't hold me up. The right side of my face had gone stiff and I could only see out of a tiny part of my eye. Jett and I stood transfixed by the incredible scene around us.

The sounds of collapsing buildings, howling children and screaming adults filled my mind. Smoke, shrouds and wind billowed around us. Despite his exhaustion, Ciera made his shroud move quickly through the air, overtaking the slow walking progress of the Tanzan escapees below.

Several deaths registered in my mind as shrouder skyearls, who had given all they had to defend the humans, folded their wings and fell limply to the ground.

Ciera moved off to rally the surviving shrouders and encourage them not to overdo it. If too many died, there would not be enough left alive to bear the burden of the Elonavé path. Like Raer, it would fall, taking all the humans with it. Those people who had Sleffion-kin rode aback their skyearls, but there were simply far too many people for the skyearls to ferry them all to Ravra in the same

amount of time. Enabling 460,000 people to travel over ten leagues unhindered was no easy feat.

Swarms of dragons were flying around the base of the Elonavé fortress-path, like vultures looking for an easy place to strike. Green fires had sprouted all over Condii, including the fortress. The sentry towers had been abandoned and the last of the defenders had retreated to defend the civilians on the Elonavé path.

I covered my ears as a deafening thundercrack erupted above and below us. The bolt of lightning struck somewhere near Condii Fortress leaving a jagged trail of orange sparks floating in mid-air. More thunder rumbled above us and the rolling black clouds finally disgorged their load.

One minute the air was smoky and misty, filled with the sounds and smells of fire and destruction; the next it was blanketed with sheets of rain that drowned out all other sounds. I sank to my knees, only kept from falling face first onto the shroud by Jett's arms.

The wispy edges of the shrouds throughout Condii were quickly absorbed in the falling torrent and dissipated, leaving the more solid shroud stuff exposed.

The Zeikas flew in angry bunches, finally able to see more of what was going on. Although the shrouds had been cleared away by the rain, the rain itself blanketed the land in a grey miasma. The fires that had cut off some of the escapees slowly went out, allowing the final survivors to leap onto parts of the Elonavé path.

The rectangular prism I had first perceived Elonavé to be had completely transformed; the structure was now almost fully rolled out. Only a small part of it remained over Condii City.

Dozens of Rada and their kin leapt from the city walls onto the departing tail of Elonavé, having fended off enough attacks in the city streets to make a final desperate dash. These were mainly in the form of predators.

Drenched and cold, my physical pain paled in comparison to the guilt, sorrow and frustration that assaulted my spirit. Unable to put words to my anguish, I collapsed against Jett, who lay me on my side. What would the world be like under Zeika domination?

What were we meant to be doing with the Anzaii artefacts? It had all happened so quickly.

I must have lain there for a long time because when I woke, my body felt like a cold, wet plank. Stiff neck. Pins and needles in my left hand and forearm underneath me. I could hear the pattering of rain, but not feel it. I opened my left eye. Even that was painful. A dark green and blue ceiling lay between me and the world, like the top of a canvas shelter, but feathered. It took a few minutes for me to register it as my Sleffion-kin's wing.

'King Crystom...' I stammered.

'*Killed by Bal Harar,*' Ciera reminded me. Sorrow enveloped me as the memory of his death came back to me. I saw his body rent limb from limb. Against such might, how could we prevail? Against such manipulation and deception.

'*What became of Corypha?*' I queried, remembering the feel of my claws in his neck.

'*He is alive,*' Ciera replied, '*fortunately for you.*'

I pondered for a time on whether I would be punished for injuring him.

'*What is the hour?*' I queried.

'*Well past noon, Soversday,*' Ciera replied.

'*The first day of winter?*'

'*Yes,*' Ciera agreed. '*The battle continues, but with the help of the rain, we are resisting the Zeikas' attacks.*'

'*Enough of the army survives to defend us then?*' I asked.

The Emperor skyearl nodded, parting the flight feathers on his wing a little to let some fresh air and light into my cocoon. I pulled myself up to a sitting position, leaning heavily against Ciera's flank. The material of my shirt had fused with the wounds on my sides, causing some to tear open again when I moved. The pain dizzied me. My hands lay flaccid by my sides.

'Sarlice,' I murmured, 'where is she?'

'*Thita says they are still in transit, but they're nearly out of Tanza now.*'

'*Curse them,*' I swore. Then, '*Rekala,*' I called. '*Please say you are safe.*'

The Jarian belt made reaching my Rada-kin easy. Once we had connected, it seemed as if she was not so far away. Rekala, Kestric and the survivors from Lantaid were in the chasm.

*'We are safe,' she replied, 'but Kestric is torn apart by his desire to return for Sarlice. He knows he cannot, but that doesn't stop him fretting.'*

If only I hadn't told Corypha about her—perhaps the Zeikas would never have targeted her. Hopelessness welled in me. I wished we could mount a rescue, but I knew Ciera and I were both needed here. The Tanzan survivors' most desperate hour was upon us.

*'I will go to her,' I said, 'just as soon as this is over.'*

*'Yet, if you do,' Tiaro argued, 'you condemn countless Kriites to persecution and death. Using your wave-skills in a waverade artefact, the Bal could potentially track down every Kriite within six leagues.'*

*'Enough!'* I scolded her, pulling my Anzaii-kin from my ear and stuffing it in my pocket.

*'You need meat,'* Rekala observed.

Jett ducked under my Sleffion-kin's wing and pushed some of the hair out of my face, inspecting my injuries. A broad egg had formed across my brow where Bal Harar had struck me. It pulled the flesh of my face taut, sending pain down as far as my neck.

*'Too bad you can't whole-morph,'* Jett commented. *'I hear there are some Rada in Jaria who can do that.'*

I thought of Healing Master Safton, but couldn't raise the energy to open my mouth. I sensed the approach of Amadeus and Tyba, with about five other skyearl-riders flying in escort. After landing and conversing with Commander Saige, the prince strode over to me.

*'How is he?'* Tyba asked, coming under the shelter of the great skyearl's wing.

*'He is at the end of his strength,'* my Sleffion-kin replied.

*'There are no major injuries, but he needs some healing attention and rest,'* Jett added.

*'Get him a tincture,'* Amadeus suggested, perceiving the force of my pain.

One of the prince's guards retrieved a small bottle of parn and handed it to me. Thirsty and hungry, I glanced at Ciera's back. In all the mad rush, Ciera and Jett had thought to attach my packs to his battle-seat. Not wanting to move too much, I gestured at a waterskin that hung within Jett's reach. He passed it to me.

'Where is Jaalta?' I asked. I couldn't have reached out to her without putting Tiaro back in my ear.

'Ahead of the Elonavé line,' Tyba replied. 'The sick and injured are being carried by skyearls or on separate shrouds like this one.'

And the dead lay far behind us, too burdensome to carry along. 'I'm sorry about the... your father,' I croaked.

Tyba looked down, saying, 'He was a fearless leader to the end.'

I drank another swig of the parn and leaned back against my skyearl. Ciera's calm loyalty flowed through the waves, comforting me despite all that had happened. No matter what, he would stick by me. An unspoken fear hovered in our minds; that I would be tried and expelled from the Tanzan army for harming a prisoner. Like mosts Kriite nations or tribes, Tanza had strict rules about the treatment of prisoners of war. Either Tyba did not know about it yet or he chose not to speak of it.

'See to him,' Tyba said to one of the guards, who promptly brought a cloth and medical swabs to my side. With Jett's help, they pulled me forward from Ciera's side and removed my chainmail overcoat. Using the wet swabs and herbs, they gently pried my undershirt from my sides. Despite their care, the wounds broke and pain throbbed afresh. I swallowed some more of the parn.

Tyba's guards fashioned a makeshift bed for me and Jett rolled my cloak for a pillow. My neck ached from having been flung out on the flat surface of the shroud for most of the day. Lying there under Ciera's wing, with the quiet drizzle of the rain, I fell into a sort of trance. Removing Tiaro was giving me a nice break from the extra awareness she granted me. The murmuring of the prince and his guards became a dull buzz.

Conдии was overrun and tens of thousands more Zeikas were due to arrive there tomorrow, yet all I could think of was how I would get to Sarlice. With the Zeikas' head-start, it was impossible

for me to stop them reaching Reltland. That was exactly where they wanted me, but not following meant so much suffering for Sarlice.

*No matter where you are, Sarlice, I will find you.*

## Chapter Thirty—The Escape

The scars on the palms of my hands ached. A reddish tinge had tainted the normal flesh around them. I tried to rub it off, but the spots remained. Maybe it was because of the cold of being high up in the sky for nearly three days.

Thita told me that Sarlice had been taken out of Tanza by her Zeika escort. They had landed outside the border and met up with another group of prisoners, mostly girls who had been chosen for their youth and good looks. Bal Harar met them, sneering when he saw Sarlice for the first time.

Thita hid in some trees nearby wishing he could reassure Sarlice he was nearby. The wards the Zeikas had set on her prevented any wave communications. Thita promised me that as soon as an opportunity presented itself, he would fly in and help her to escape.

Helpless to assist them, I turned my thoughts back to the present. Many Tanzans were still dying in countless sky and shroud battles with the Zeikas. Although thousands of Zeikas still pursued us, Tyba had commanded the Tanzans to keep me away from the fighting. Ciera flew without me, helping where he could, ignoring his own injuries.

Jett brought food and drink to me every few hours, bathed and redressed my wounds. We were visited by people whose names I didn't know. Names I didn't want to know. Tiaro remained in my pocket. My head was spinning and I wished to be back home in Jaria forest where I could find a log in a quiet glade or a cave to curl up in.

Even though I could walk around, I was not allowed to help in any way. Those on the shroud with me concentrated on their maps, sent messages via the waves, into Ravra and secluded parts of Tanza where some Kriites had chosen to remain.

All across our great nation the evacuation was coming to an end. With groups of people exiting the realm in several places it would be seasons before we all came together once more.

Floating over the river Jarvi where the ground-based Zeikas could not easily follow us, the snaking Elonavé path had come to a halt. The many shrouder skyearls who had guided it all this way, rested on the shrouds beneath it even as their brethren fought off scores of the most determined Zeikas and dragons.

With so much rain still about, the green fire of the dragons was not as effective as it could have been, but their teeth and claws were still formidable weapons. I paced back and forth on my shroud, feeling that I should go and help the Tanzans who were fighting. I put Tiaro back onto my ear.

*'You can't even see properly out of your right eye,'* Tiaro said to me.

*'I have to do something,'* I responded.

*'Just wait,'* Tiaro advised. *'Remember your time with Damia and Annie in Tez after you burned your hands.'*

*'When I first met you,'* I murmured.

*'Yes,'* the earring replied. *'You knew then you could do nothing to help Rekala until your wounds had healed. Now is much the same. You must let others do their part.'*

It seemed like a lifetime ago that I had been with Damia and Annie in Tez, but it had been less than two seasons. What would my father and mother's old friends think of me now? True, I had advanced in skill to become one of the best Anzaii in Tanza, but at what cost?

What parts of myself had I left behind to do the things I had done... to face the things I had faced? Would anyone understand?

*'I understand,'* Ciera told me from afar. *'We have some tough times ahead of us, but whatever happens—I am with you.'*

Tiaro's agreement flowed around me, but there was little anyone could do to make me feel at peace today. I yawned and coughed

moodily, looking out over the sun-seared shrouds beneath us. Rays of golden morning light penetrated the white mists, casting strange shadows. The magical appearance of sun-showers and rainbows in the teal sky, pearlescent with the barrier shield in parts, were a stark contrast to the struggle and death still around us.

The people of Condii, Centan and Kovain trudged doggedly on beneath us. In some places, groups of them had stopped to rest. Where possible, these were picked up by skyearls and flown the rest of the way into Ravra.

I moved to the head of Ciera's shroud and gazed at the cliffs of Tanza's border we were nearing. Thousands of almost-vertical lines decorated the rock face. These were shadows cast by the many channels that cut their way from the top of the cliff to the bottom. Leading up to the border were more karst towers like the ones around Condii City.

Condii City, that I would probably never see again. Despair threatened to overwhelm me but I was acutely aware of the presence of other humans nearby, glancing at me. Some had compassion in their eyes, others condemnation. The guilt was almost too much to bear—it was as if my attack on Corypha had undone everything good I had ever done for Tanza.

Rage rose within me. People were too quick to judge. They did not know he was going to try to kill me. Would I even have a chance to say so?

I looked up into the sky above. Although the rainclouds still clustered thickly, obscuring my already-limited vision, I knew Ciera was up there. A few minutes later he sailed down and down—first a speck, then an enormous glistening, green, purple and blue feathered skyearl.

*'Let's go for one last flight over Tanza,'* he suggested, sadly.

I gathered the possessions I had spread out on the spongy white floor of the shroud and climbed up the ladder to stuff them into the packs on Ciera's battle harness. I crawled into Ciera's battle-seat, the bandages around my torso pulling painfully when I stretched my arms.

Safely on board I waved goodbye to Jett and the remaining Tanzans. Ciera flew to the north. Even more vulnerable to the wind and rain, I huddled into the fur coat Sarlice had given me. The facade of peace I had worn while on the cloud ebbed away and misery filled my eyes. Thunder rumbled in the distance, a sign of nature's indifference.

Tremendous sadness also suffused Ciera's being. Although he was, arguably, one of the greatest skyearls that had ever lived, he had been unable to defend Tanza from the Zeikas. Now that the time had come to leave his beloved homeland, he needed to spend a little time taking it in.

Flying us low over the river, he had a clear view of the rain-soaked forests, the boulder-strewn ravines and the flower-studded meadows Ciera loved so much. I sensed how devastated he was that he hadn't had time to show it all to me. The land meant almost as much to him as the other skyearls and the people.

The pattering of the rain and the creaking of crickets and birds would ordinarily have relaxed me. It was peaceful here. Away from all the fighting.

But Ciera and I found no peace. Small animals went about their business, oblivious to the tremendous battle that had just taken place. Ciera's anguish wrenched my heart. I felt that I knew this land almost as well as he did. He had memories of places I had never even been to, yet I knew I would miss them sorely.

We circled and soared for an hour, observing the wilderness and trying to calm ourselves and each other. Tiaro sung *Halduronlei* to the two of us. Eventually I sensed that the last of the survivors from Tanza had made it to the border.

Flying up over a tumbled ravine of stones and shrubs, Ciera carried me up to the immense bowl lake of the Jarvi-Tanza waterfall. The falls thundered before us, churning the lake into a tumultuous pool. The river escaped the bounds of the lake over a pile of boulders that had been eroded away in the centre, forming several smaller waterfalls. As in Centan, the power of the water was astounding.

With a tremendous force of will, Ciera flew up over the falls and out of his homeland.

The brown fields of Ravra stretched before us, dismal in comparison to Tanza's greenery.

Over the rocky gorges we flew. On and on past the line of walking refugees and the Ravran army that had come to escort them to safety. Behind the survivors came thousands of Zeikas, barely being held back by the skyearls who were our last line of defence. Ciera sailed in a large circle over the people, his flight-path intersecting with those of hundreds of other skyearls.

He flew back over the plains to the edge of Tanza where we could see the last of the survivors stepping off the Elonavé path and onto Ravran turf. Behind them on the shroud beneath the path were hundreds of defender footsoldiers holding back a tide of Zeikas.

As soon as the defenders had staggered back over the threshold of the cliffs and onto solid ground, the last of the skyearls turned in unison and fled Tanza.

To my delight, the pursuing Zeikas came up against the shimmering blue barrier and were not able to follow them into Ravra.

Taking one last look at the Elonavé path and shrouds, Ciera and the other shrouder skyearls combined their mental powers to tilt them sharply downwards. Those Zeikas standing on them, plummeted to their deaths hundreds of paces below. Slowly, like a fishing line being reeled in, the Elonavé path was pulled upwards into Ravra and reformed the rectangular structure I had seen before.

*'What happened with the barrier?'* I asked Ciera.

*'The effects of the barrier work from either side, that is all.'*

My eyes widened. *'The Zeikas may have taken our realm, but now they are trapped within it?'*

He considered how much to explain to me. *'It should hamper them for a time.'*

*'This was part of Crystom's evacuation plan all along,'* I marvelled.

*'Aye, it would seem so.'* Ciera's head drooped. *'The last battle of Tanza may be over, but the war is only beginning.'*

# Chapter Thirty-one — Exile

**W**e continued to converse to keep our minds occupied as we made the three-hour flight north to the canyon-fortress of Sancran. The skyearls had agreed to form a relay team to fly as many people as possible across the final leg. The old, the infirm, the very young, and their carers were among the first to be transported.

Next went the military leaders and heads of households who could organise things at the other end.

When Ciera and I arrived, we were ushered in to a circular amphitheatre with no ceiling. Tyba's wife, Clayr was standing with his mother, Queen Emyla, whose eyes looked red and puffy.

While she was in mourning Tyba had assumed the responsibility of leadership. He and a number of Ravran officials were laying out plans for how to feed and care for the Tanzan refugees until some more permanent accommodation could be constructed.

Tyba looked at his Sleffion-kin, whose body was inside the amphitheatre, but his wings outside. Realising I was here, the prince motioned for me to come over. Jett got up from his seat when he saw me and greeted me with a genuine hug of affection. I clapped him on the back.

'Your eye,' he said. 'Is it painful?'

I shrugged. 'A little.'

The burnt flesh around it was still moist to the touch.

'Taeon...' Tyba began, glancing at the Jarian belt around my waist. He was unable to hide his worry and hesitation from me. I

realised, from Tyba's thoughts, that Commander Saige had spoken publicly of my terrible deed in Condii Fortress. Before my arrival, he and the other Tanzans who had witnessed my attack on Corypha had condemned me in front of everyone present in the amphitheatre. Only Jett had sought to defend me. Now that I was here, Tyba was lost for words.

I reached out through the waves, trying to see what Tyba's perspective was. While he could understand the need for some kind of punishment, he regretted being the one to mete it out. His genuine desire was to be able to overlook the incident as something that had happened, out of my control, in a time of war. But it was too late for that. The people would only see it as favouritism or compromise.

'And now we must digress from these matters for a moment,' he announced, gesturing for the Ravran officials to regain their seats. Commander Saige rose to his feet, glaring at me. Tyba's eyes were fixed on the ground.

'There has been an accusation, verified by witnesses, that one of our laws has been broken by a person of considerable power among the defenders,' the commander stated without emotion. 'Specialist Tacon of Jaria, you are accused of a vicious assault of A.S. Corypha who has now died of his wounds.'

I gasped. With all that had been going on I had not thought to find out how the Wavekeeper fared. Talk broke out across the room. The fifty or sixty people gathered there pressed closer to get a look at me.

'Corypha was a traitor,' someone called. 'He and his skyearl, a renegade pair.'

'It's true,' Commander Saige agreed. 'Corypha was in prison awaiting a trial for the alleged traitorous acts that led to the deaths of dozens of Anzaii, but that doesn't change the law. I was there. I saw what Tacon did to him.'

'Then why didn't you move to stop him?' This was from Architect Furlorny in his ever-casual tone.

I stood rigidly, finding it difficult to discern the spoken words from the mental ones. With my thoughts churning, and the

intrusions of others, it was difficult to recall anything from my time in the prison with Corypha. He had been going to attack me, but did anyone believe me?

‘He was in a rage.’

‘We tried to stop him.’

‘I ordered him to let go.’

‘—didn’t know he could partly shapeshift.’

‘It’s not our way.’

‘—brutally attacked Corypha.’

‘We have trials for prisoners for a reason.’

‘He was out of control.’

‘He had combat fatigue.’

*‘I wish it didn’t have to be this way—I probably would have done the same.’*

Searching around the room for this last comment, my eyes came to rest on Prince Tyba’s. Though he hadn’t spoken a word, I knew those last two thoughts had been his. From several paces away, he looked sadly into my eyes.

‘Do you wish to say anything, Taeon?’ he said.

‘I admit to the attack,’ I whispered. ‘But he had a sharpened stick, which the others may not have been able to see.’

‘You were holding him!’

‘He was holding me, too. He was going to—’

‘Through the bars?’

‘Aye.’

‘How do you know?’

*‘I could sense the direction of his thoughts. I can sense all of you!’* I could see it in his eyes. He wanted me to die. You all heard him call me a Zeika.’

‘Enough,’ said Commander Saige. ‘It sounds like there will have to be a trial. Until then he will have to be incarcerated.’

*‘It could take half a year to settle the refugees enough to mount something as complex as a trial,’* Ciera said.

‘No,’ I squeaked, unable to find my voice. The rescue attempt for Sarlice could not wait that long.

Ciera raised his head as much as he could and spoke loudly across the courtyard, 'I, too, admit Taeon's violent act, however it was self-defence. I do not think the full severity of the law should be brought against him. It may seem heavy-handed, but Taeon wasn't thinking straight after his battle with Bal Harar, and he was in fear for his life. He was grief-stricken over the capture of his friend, Sarlice, and the death of King Crystom. Corypha was in league with the Zeikas, whether he knew it or not. Let this not go to trial—'

'Why should it not? Is a master psion above the law now?' This from Saned.

'What are you suggesting, Emperor?' Commander Saige interrupted. 'We cannot have blood-lusting bullies in the Tanzan army. He is your Sleffion-kin. You know the depth of his violent nature.'

'Taeon would not attack for no reason,' my skyearl contradicted him.

'Then was it insanity I witnessed in the prisoner's quarters?' Saige demanded.

There was a shocked silence. My cheeks burned as I turned my eyes to Ciera to hear how he would react.

The great skyearl curved his head downwards and issued a small growl. 'No, he is not insane. He has killed many hundreds of Zeikas and saved countless lives, including mine. His self-control slipped once, resulting in regrettable injuries to a prisoner who was about to attack him. If that amounts to insanity, then I must be insane too, to stand with him!'

Saige had his head in his hands as he conversed quietly with Prince Tyba. I reached towards my friend, trying to find out if Tyba understood my need to go after Sarlice.

'Sire?'

'*Even if I do,*' he shot his thoughts at me, '*shouldn't I try to make you stay with us?*'

'*No, please.*'

'If we call it manslaughter, because of the self-defence claim, the standard punishment is exile for one year,' Tyba said. 'Taeon and Ciera would not be allowed in Tanza or Ravra.'

*My freedom to mount a rescue for Sarlice.* Would I be able to do it on my own? Still lurking in the back of my mind was the need to gain assistance to free the Jarian slaves in Telby. That seemed like a slim hope now.

A series of arguments broke out. Strategist Saned was among those saying it should be classed as murder. He claimed I should be exiled forever and all my kin along with me. Commander Saige seemed to think we had more important things to deal with now, and I should be imprisoned to await a proper trial.

*‘Corypha would have died if you hadn’t gone to him,’* Jaalta broadwaved, reading that from the thoughts of several commanders in the room. *‘He was still locked in his cell when Taeon found him. The fortress had been abandoned.’*

It had not occurred to me that Corypha would have either starved to death or been captured by the Zeikas had I not gone to interrogate him. Ironic.

‘That doesn’t change what Taeon did—drove his claws into the prisoner’s neck,’ Strategist Saned prompted. ‘He must be stripped of his rank, imprisoned and await trial.’

‘It was self-defence.’

‘Everyone knew you hated Corphya. It was murder.’

*Why is he so angry?* ‘You knew him,’ I stated, but only Jett was listening to me. Was Saned a Wavekeeper too? When I reached towards Saned’s mind, I found it blocked by an impenetrable wall.

Jett, who had narrowed his eyes, gave me a small nod. At that moment I knew that, whatever happened, Jett would investigate Saned. A low growl burred inside Ciera like a distant roll of thunder, as he stared suspiciously at Saned.

Tyba turned to Clayr who was stroking her pregnant belly, staring straight ahead in a worried trance. Queen Emyla paced around them in agitation, still grief-stricken, but trying to figure out what Crystom would have done in this situation.

If I was imprisoned, Ciera and Rejala would suffer for my misdeeds. Tiaro and Fyschs would become redundant—without any Zeikas to fight, they would both enter dormancy. Worst of all, Sarlice would be tortured, raped and probably perish.

Thinking of the gorgeous Lythian warrior brought tears to my eyes. I decided that if Saned's punishment was chosen for me, I would have to escape. If Ciera defied his people to go with me, they'd probably call us a renegade pair, but at least we'd be free to rescue Sarlice.

*'You must not make me choose between Taeon and Tanza,'* Ciera lamented. I was about to reply when I realised he was speaking to Amadeus.

Queen Emyla, Commander Saige and Prince Tyba conversed for a few minutes. The queen came to a decision. A combination of relief and fear flooded through me.

*'What we have heard here today precludes the need for a trial,'* the queen began. She gestured at her son to continue.

*'Master Psion Taeon, we have found that your attack on Corypha was excessively violent and resulted in his death.'*

To hear those words from my friend hurt more terribly than I could have imagined.

He continued, *'An investigation into the mind of your Sleffionkin, Emperor Ciera, confirms it was an act of self-defence, and that combat fatigue played a role in your lack of self-control. You are hereby stripped of your rank and are no longer a specialist in the defender army.'*

*'Thank you,'* I sent on the waves, fighting the panic and shame that rose within me.

*'You will be exiled for a season,'* Tyba announced.

*'So be it,'* Commander Saige agreed.

I started forward, shocked when the people hurried to clear a path for me. Strategist Saned had jumped back about three feet. Somebody clutched at him from behind, pulling him back away from me.

*'Goodbye,'* I said simply.

After taking one more look around at the faces of those I knew, I blurred down into my dark blue icetiger form, roared and swept from the room.

# Chapter Thirty-two— Never Waver

Once outside, I ran from the building as fast as my tired legs could take me. Ciera chased after me, catching up somewhere in the middle of a cornfield. A feeling of elation came over me as I realised just how loyal he was to me. Ciera, the Emperor skyearl, had just been publicly discredited by my sentence. There was already talk about us being a renegade pair, yet he was ready and willing to leave the Tanzans and help me on my quest to free Sarlice.

*‘At least he will still be Emperor upon his return, though,’* Tiaro said. *‘Whereas you will have to start from the bottom.’*

*‘I don’t think I will ever want to rejoin the defenders,’* I said.

Ciera turned to stare back in the direction we had come. Amadeus flew down out of the stormy, grey sky and landed beside him, Prince Tyba upon his back. The emperor skyearl exchanged a knowing look with his friend.

As he climbed down, Tyba seemed a little out of breath.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘Before you go there are some things I want to give you.’

‘My prince,’ I jibed, ‘you are conversing with an exile.’

He patted me on the shoulder, saying, ‘It’s only one season. You’ll be hale without us for that long.’

A smile crept slowly over my face. Tyba wasn’t one to let officialdom get in the way of our friendship.

‘You know I’m going to free Sarlice,’ I stated.

He smirked at me and pulled a flat, well-wrapped object from a satchel on his skyearl’s side.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘If anyone can, you can, but you’re going to need this.’

Before I’d even unwrapped it, my senses told me it was the Centan shield artefact. It had been set into a larger wooden shield and fortified with steel braces and edges. A sturdy metal handle was pegged through the back of the shield. After what had happened I wasn’t sure if I still deserved it.

‘This belongs to Tanza,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘An Anzaii in the defender army should carry it, like Jaalta or Riftweaver.’

‘Nay,’ he replied. ‘My mother said she always meant it for you.’

‘But it’s all you have of Tanza’s Ancient Sapphire Tree.’ I was shocked that he would still consider giving it to me.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And despite what some of the populace believe about you, you have Tanza’s support on your quest, and mine.’

The tears that swam in his eyes and the emotion that reached me through the waves were enough to make my voice choke up.

‘We will fight alongside each other again some day,’ Tyba said.

‘Now that the Zeikas are trapped in Tanza, we may not have to,’ I replied.

That brought a sad smile to his face. We both knew our troubles with Zeikas were not over yet.

He raised blue eyes to the sky above us. ‘The weather is against you. Please take these extra supplies and coin. They are my gift to you.’

As he spoke, Amadeus lifted down a pack from his own harness and fastened it to Ciera’s.

‘Thank you,’ I replied, humbled beyond belief that he would do this for me. He must have known ahead of time that something like this would happen. He had been prepared.

He embraced me as a brother and gave me a leg-up onto Ciera’s back.

‘Trees light your path,’ Tyba called.

Ciera hunched down and let out a tremendous belly-roar that echoed off the cliffs in the distance. His great wings lifted him off the ground and we spiralled upwards into the stormclouds. Amadeus tossed his head, sending reassuring thoughts through the waves towards us.

*'Farewell,'* I called openly through the waves.

A chorus of voices replied, from animals to skyearls to human beings: *'Farewell Master Psion Taeon', 'Stay on course', 'Never waver'.*



Thank you for reading my book!  
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# Glossary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Meaning or description</b>
Animal-kin		An animal that has bonded with a person (known as a Rada). The animal is usually called a 'Rada-kin' but can also be called 'animal-kin' or even by whatever type of animal it is, such as 'bear-kin' or 'leopard-kin'.
Ancient Sapphire Tree (Also see 'Great Sapphire Tree' and 'sapphire tree')		Ancient trees fuelled by magic, nine of which are thought to remain. Artefacts made from their sapphire-like leaves or their iron-like branches augment an Anzaii's use of the waves. The 'Ancients' are the largest and most powerful of all sapphire trees.
Anzaii	Ahn-ZAI	A person with very strong abilities using the waves, one of 'ancient blood', i.e. descended directly from the original Kriites of Kaslonica.
Ciera	See-EH-ruh	The emperor skyearl, who becomes Talon's Sleffion-kin
Condii	Con-dee-I	A town on the northern border of Tanza
Cubit (one)		450 mm (width from one's elbow to one's hand)
Chryne	Krine	The world on which the novel is set
Foot (one)		304.8 mm or 12 inches

<b>Word</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Meaning or description</b>
Great Sapphire Tree (also see sapphire tree)		Although not as powerful as any one of the Ancient Sapphire Trees, Great Sapphire Trees have nonetheless been used to create dozens of powerful artefacts, including many Anzaii-kin (jewellery, musical instruments etc.) and Tolite-kin (weapons).
Inch (one)		25.4 mm
Kaslonica		An ancient island realm that is now known as Reltland
Jaria	Jah-ree-uh	A realm nestled against the Ky-Ayr Ranges where a Kriite tribe of Radans lives. Also used in common speech to refer to the main village.
Jarian	Jah-ree-uhn	A person whose heritage is in Jaria
Kin		A general term that refers to any of the Rada-kin, Sleffion-kin, Tolite-kin or Anzaii-kin, it also simply means 'family' or 'brethren'
Kriite	CREE-ite	A race of people who originated in Kaslonica
League (one)		5 km or 3 miles
Mile		1.6093 km
Magic		Sometimes used to describe the good and evil forces that allow supernatural things to take place. It is closely linked with the waves, an ethereal spirit world.
Pace (one)		1.48 m or 4.85 feet
Prime Leader		A traditional term for a ruler of a group of Rada (only Jaria and Lyth keep to the old ways)

<b>Word</b>	<b>Pronunciation</b>	<b>Meaning or description</b>
Psion	SAI-on	A Kriite with any of the gifts of Anzaii, Sleffion, Tolite or Rada. A master psion is a person who has all four gifts.
Rada	Rah-duh or Ray-duh	A person who has the Kriite gift of sharing their thoughts and gifts with an animal (their Rada-kin). Note: 'Rada' is also the pluralised form, used to describe this group of people
Rada-kin	Rah-duh kin	A sentient animal who has the Kriite gift of sharing their thoughts and gifts with a human; also the pluralised form
Sapphire tree (Also see 'Ancient Sapphire Tree' and 'Great Sapphire Tree')	Saf-FAI-uh Tree	Smaller than a Great Sapphire Tree, it is more numerous and the effects of an artefact made from it are less pronounced to the Anzaii. Still, objects and weapons made from sapphire trees are highly valued. These trees are rare, having been harvested for generations.
Sarlice	Sar-leese	A woman from the Rada tribe of Lyth, she is Tacon's closest human friend.
Shapeshift		A magical morph from one form to another, usually to some kind of land animal
Skyearl		A highly intelligent dragon that has brightly coloured fur, feathered wings, lion-like paws, a horse-like body and lizard-like tail.
Sleffion		A person who has the Kriite gift of sharing their thoughts and gifts with a skyearl (their Sleffion-kin)
Sleffion-kin		A skyearl who has the Kriite gift of sharing their thoughts and gifts with a human; also the pluralised form

Word	Pronunciation	Meaning or description
Taeon (or Talon)	Tay-uhn	The main character, a twenty-year-old Jarian man
Ton	ton	20 hundredweights of 112 pounds each
Yard		0.9144 metres
Zeidarb (or Zei)		The god of the Zeikas. Demon-lord (king of demons) and arch enemy of Kriites.
Zeika		Person who worships Zei and seeks supremacy over other living beings

## About the Author

Alikai Bronach is an Australian writer of epic fantasy who loves animals and plants. She is a mother of two who enjoys gaming, swimming and watching science fiction or fantasy. *Strike of the Skyearls* is her second novel and there are many more to follow in the world of Chryne.

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