

Tiger Eyes &
Dragon Teeth

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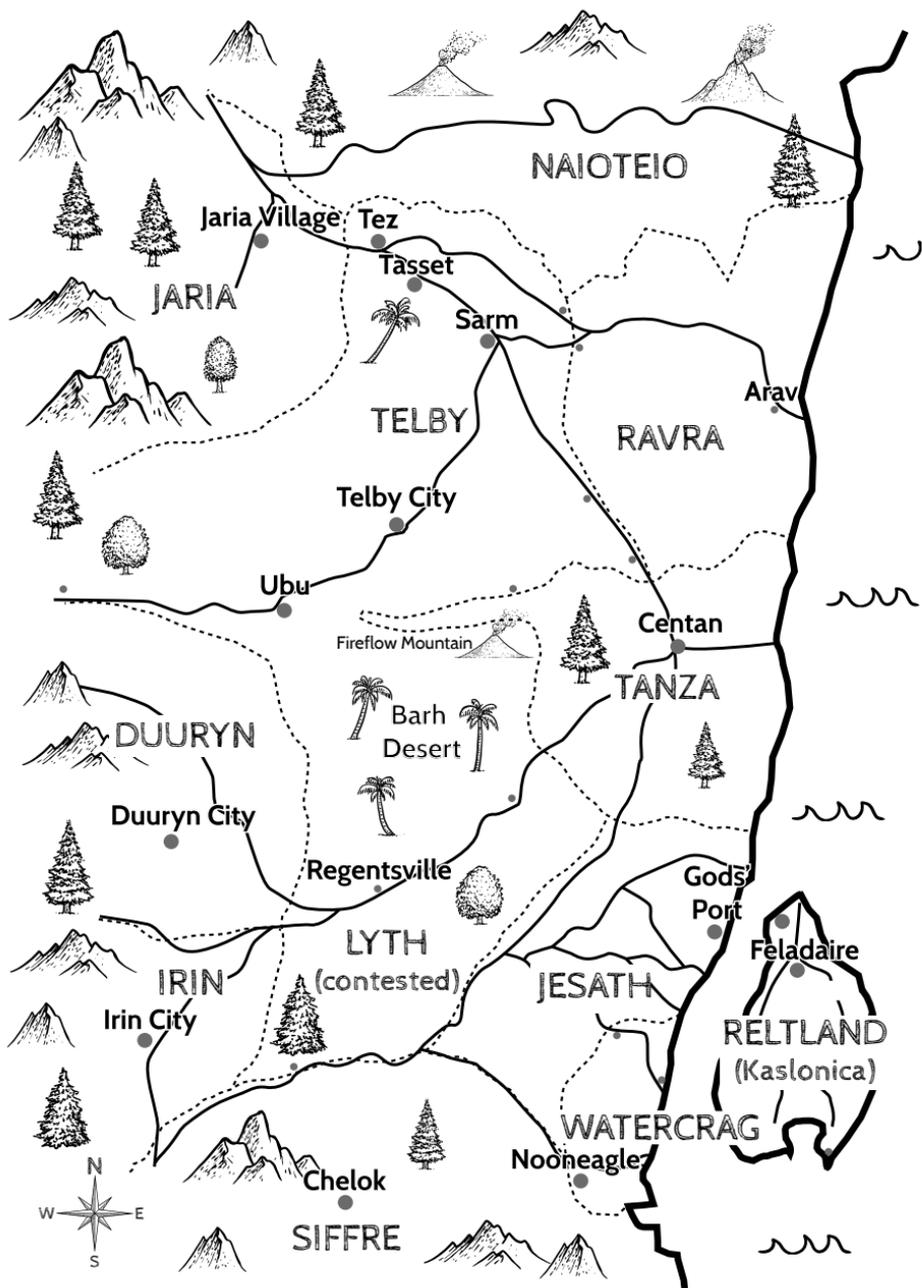
THE PSION SAGA 1

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Chryne

East of the Kiayr Ranges



Chapter One—Who am I?

Light. Glorious, blue prisms of light sparkled off every leaf and branch. Thick, powdery sap burbled slowly inside the crystalline tree. The Great Sapphire Tree of Jaria was one of only a few hundred sapphire trees that were still known to exist. Its leaves were hard and thick as sapphires, its branches like iron bars. Such trees were rare, most having been harvested long ago.

I brushed the leaves with the tips of my fingers as I passed the tree, and stooped to get to the cave behind it.

I hadn't made the climb to see the tree, rather to get at the cave and a likely source of milk bulb. I leaned down with a lamp, sniffed the air and listened. A soft scuffling noise reached my ears. Heart thumping, I touched the hilt of my knife, sheathed at my belt.

'Who's there?' I asked.

A faint growling rumbled off the wall of the cave. It was too deep and throaty to be a treelion. I guessed it was something more like a rock panther or maybe even an icetiger.

I tried to keep my breathing even. Today's journey had just got a whole lot more interesting. Perhaps I would come home with a bond-mate of my own, after all my years of waiting.

There were a dozen Rada with rock panthers in Jaria presently, but no one was bonded with an icetiger.

I told myself not to get my hopes up. *The best I can hope for today is to see one and live to tell the tale.*

I shuffled further into the cave, holding the lamp high enough to throw light into its dark recesses. I saw only rocks, roots, spiderwebs and bones.

I pulled a pair of spicy dried sardines from one of my pouches and lay them on the ground. Retreating towards the entrance, I set the lamp between myself and the possible predator.

I unhitched my pack, retrieved the leather mask from within and arranged it so that the bright eyes were on the back of my head. Gatherers like me often used them to keep great cats at bay in the forest. A wild cat was less likely to attack if it thought it was being watched.

I took a few deep breaths and decided it was safe to continue my work. I tore a section of milkvine from the roof of the cave. The plant's roots resided deep inside the walls. It would take much work with my pick-axe to determine where the precious bulbs were concealed.

I began the laborious task of hacking at the cave wall, removing rocks and dirt from around the roots.

After about an hour I detected a pungent smell behind me. I turned ever so slowly to see a large white paw retreating into the darkness, fish in tow. Then there was the faintest sound of jaws smacking together. I put down the pick-axe, sensing the animal was no threat to me.

'How long have you been here?' I asked.

If I was right, then this was some fortunate Jarian's new Rada-kin. *Mine?* The words I spoke were probably the first human words it had ever heard and understood. When the great cat still did not show itself, I sighed and went back to work. It would come out when it was ready. Night was not too far away and I wanted to get this finished and start a fire.

About two feet into the cave wall was an impressive cache of milk bulb. The bulbous white protuberances on the roots were nutrient-dense, coveted in Jaria for a substantial vegetarian meal. It would be fortunate if I could manage to carry it all home.

I used my knife to dig away the rootlets and dirt around the bulbs, severed the cords, and hauled them out into a pile.

Having lined them up at the mouth of the cave, I rested on all fours, panting. The day-star hovered on the horizon. From my vantage point on the side of an incline I could see over an expanse of forest. The reddening light made the balls of mist that hung over the landscape glow like fire.

Wild geese flocked across the sky to the east. Harmless though they were, I turned my eyes away from them, barely suppressing a shudder. Animals of all kinds fascinated me, but I detested birds.

Lying on my back with my head propped on my pack, I rubbed at the scar on my left wrist. That mark was responsible for my moniker, but it had left a scar of a different kind on my mind.

'Who?' A foreign voice interrupted my thoughts.

'Talon,' I replied thinking of the crag hawk's talons ripping my wrist. My heart thumped with an equal measure of anxiety and excitement. The great cat had spoken to me!

'No,' it repeated, with a fierce edge to its voice. *'Not "who are you?". Who am I?'*

I sat up. This wasn't my imagination. It was real. That voice in my head... could it possibly be a voice for me? A Rada-kin, finally... for me? My time had come—like my parents before me, I was a Rada!

'Enough about you!' the voice accused. *'What have you done to me?'*

I got to my feet slowly, feeling dizzy. There in the shadows behind me was a huge blue and white icetiger, its fur standing on end; puffed up it was even more impressive than I had pictured. Its back was level with my thigh, large yellow fangs gleamed in its snarling maw and the tail thrashed. Thick blue-grey stripes and myriad black and blue spots covered its luscious pelt.

'How dare you?' the voice shrielled. The wild cat ran forward and seemed about to pounce on me. I held my ground. A drawn out yowl escaped the cat's lips. *'Speak prey! What am I?'*

The joy I had felt was joined by a thrill of fear. The great cat's raw ferocity and mental power stunned me. I blinked, trying to clear my senses, which seemed to have expanded. Smell, hearing, sight and touch vibrated outwards with a depth of perception I could not have imagined.

I was suddenly aware of other creatures, plants, watercourses and wind I had not noticed before. Their sounds and smells were all around the icetiger and me. Each whisker and hair on her body seemed to be receiving and processing these impressions with ease.

Frustrated by my distraction, the icetiger growled and lifted its paw to strike.

'Who am I?' the cat shrieked.

You are a magnificent icetiger, I thought. It could hear my thoughts even when they weren't directed as speech through the waves. *You are experiencing a change in your understanding, just like I am. We are joining minds and becoming kin.*

'Stop what you are doing to me!' she commanded.

'I'm sorry,' I replied. *'I cannot control it. You and I are becoming bonded, Rada and Rada-kin.'*

The cat stared at me for a long time, seeing and hearing far more than my words conveyed. I frowned, trying to remember if the other Rada-kin I had escorted to Jaria had been so affronted. I hadn't been able to hear them in my mind, but I knew the body language of animals well.

Most had seemed confused at first, then grateful, not only for the longer life but also for the expanded sentience and fulfilment living among humans would grant them.

Pulling thoughts out of my wide-open mind the icetiger responded with a menacing tone and a sharp flick of her tail. She took her time pulling the right words from my vocabulary. *'Easy for you to say. You've had... plans and... purpose all your life. Imagine me, awakening one day to find a question in my mind: "is there more to life than hunting and sleeping?" It's unnatural.'*

'Indeed,' I replied, smiling at the first hint of the tiger's sense of humour. *'You are no longer a natural animal with the simple task to live, reproduce and die. Your lifecycle is now so much more.'*

The icetiger padded slowly into the light and walked in a circle around me. She sniffed and eyed me all over, growled and licked her lips.

'Yet you define yourself by this "lifecycle",' she observed.

'What makes you say that?'

“I am alive”, “my parents are dead”—are these not thoughts that define who you are?”

I supposed that at the most basic level I did define myself as alive and those I had lost as dead but to explain the intricacies of life and death to an animal was surely like speaking about it to a child. I hardly knew where to begin.

‘Start with parents. What is that?’ she suggested.

‘Do you not remember your mother?’ I queried. *‘Warm fur, paws kneading, sweet milk.’*

She couldn’t yet grasp any familial words, so I tried sending her a visual of what I imagined a tiny icetiger cub would experience. She strained to remember while I edged slightly closer. My thoughts and memories seemed to be open to her, so I wondered if I could reach into her mind likewise. I brushed her back with my hand.

A surge of wild instinct filled me. For a moment all I could think and feel was the need for meat, blood gushing around my fangs. The icetiger’s experiences were so alien to mine that I found myself sinking down to the ground.

It was a carefree life she had given up. Not without pain and struggle but free from the burden of thought. Until now her life had been simple and pragmatic. Hunt, eat, sleep, patrol territory. Now her mind fired with the spark of humanity and emotions she had never experienced before. This spark came entirely from me. Was I worthy?

Crouched on all fours, I locked eyes with her. She stared straight back at me with eyes the colour of sapphire tree leaves. She explored my memories, springing and pouncing on them, devouring the happy times, sniffing and licking dispiritedly at the sad.

Some kind of understanding passed between us. She looked at me and saw me for everything I was. It was the first time I had felt so connected with another living being.

‘Well,’ she said after a while, *‘if I am stuck with you, then how about some more of that fish?’*

Chapter Two—Bonded

‘Keep still, human!’ the icetiger instructed.

She was crouched ahead of me in the long grass, stalking a deer as it drank from a creek. The tan-coloured animal’s neck was stretched over the slick bank, its lips straining to reach the clear liquid beyond. My mouth watered with an urgent hunger.

The icetiger inched forward, belly pressed so low that grass and mud stuck to it. We were strategically placed downwind from the deer—my Rada-kin said the animals of the forest could smell me a mile away otherwise.

I could smell the deer through the icetiger’s senses and its scent was accompanied by her ancient instinct to hunt and kill. I marvelled at the restraint it took for the hunter to creep slowly toward its prey with this instinct screaming at her.

‘Please stop distracting me with your thoughts.’

‘I don’t know how to keep them to myself.’

She crawled forward when the wind rustled the long grass, masking the sound of her near-silent approach.

The icetiger had been keen to show me how hunting was done by a master predator. Persistence was the key, she had told me. When one hunt was unsuccessful, you sought the next opportunity without dwelling on the failure of the last. From what she had seen in my mind, there was something of a lesson in this for my kind, she had informed me.

So far this morning we had attempted three kills but, every time, something had tipped off the prey, whether it was me making a noise, birds or primates sounding the alarm or the wind shifting.

I turned my attention back to the icetiger who was on the verge of bursting from the long grass. The deer threw its head up, along with two of its fellows, sniffed the air and barked a warning to the herd. This time I couldn't tell what it was that alarmed them, but their instincts were so attuned to the natural sounds of the forest that it could have been anything. There was a hush as the wind died down, like the calm before a storm. The icetiger exploded from hiding.

The herd of deer panicked and bolted. The icetiger's blue form blurred across the distance between them, startling an elderly-looking deer that hadn't been as aware of the danger, into the creek. Despite its age, the creature bounded away swiftly, with hooves lifting high. Water splashed in every direction as the icetiger plunged in after her prey.

I stood up to witness the chase, on the far side of the creek, just in time to see the deer change direction, to avoid a wall of thorns, and the icetiger's powerful front paws crash down on its back. The deer's head went under and it was only able to struggle feebly after that.

The icetiger dragged it out of the waterhole by the neck. She lay in the grass panting and growling over her kill, eyes glaring ferociously.

The animal instinct was so strong it blurred my thinking and for a few heartbeats I considered fighting her for the chance to feed on the deer. I rubbed my temples, trying to clear my thoughts. It was difficult to reach the icetiger's mind.

When I reached her she growled thunderously at me.

'It's me,' I said aloud, 'Talon.'

'My deer, my kill, my deer, my kill. MY KILL!'

Her words reminded me of those of a child, completely selfish, instinctively self-centred. Sometimes a child would hurt you to get what it wanted. In that moment, I believed the icetiger would hurt me if I went for the deer. She was still so new to being a Rada-kin.

I kept my distance, but I felt that there was an important step for us to take here.

‘It’s me,’ I repeated, ‘your Rada, your Talon.’

My Talon. MY TALON!

She remained there, glaring at me for some time, growls rumbling in her throat.

Ictiger—we must think of a name for you—can you hear me?’ I asked through the waves.

The question jolted her back to a semblance of civility and, as the deer had ceased breathing, she slowly released her hold on its neck.

I hear you,’ she muttered.

‘Will you bring the kill back to camp?’ I asked.

‘Yes, yes, not safe here. Eat it there.’

I wondered briefly how any place would not be safe for an icetiger before I remembered the packs of dire wolves that ranged these mountains. From the volume of paw prints in the mud it was clear this was a frequent gathering place for them.

‘I don’t suppose you’d let me skin it first, before you put your teeth marks in the hide?’

The icetiger growled at me and did not answer. She wouldn’t let me help carry the deer, insisting on dragging it herself, snarling all the while.

I reached the camp long before her and gathered wood and got a fire going. When the icetiger arrived with her kill, she let go of it and lay down, panting with exertion. She allowed me to approach her and stroke her back where the muscles most pained her. It was new for her to experience pain in an emotional way, and she seemed equally surprised by the pleasure of my touch.

I set some water to boil in my kettle and peeled a couple of yams I’d dug up earlier in the day. I dropped them into the simmering water and put the tin lid on. I got to my feet and approached the deer carcass. The icetiger glared at me.

‘It will be easier for you to get at the flesh when I’m done.’

There was a minute of hesitation as the icetiger tried to stare me down. Everything in her experience screamed at her to protect the

kill, but her new mind viewed me as an extension of herself, or like a cub, I couldn't quite tell.

'Fine,' she grumped. 'Have at it. We will see what you can do with your small metal fang.'

When I was done skinning the deer, I cut off one leg for myself and let the carcass fall to the ground, where the icetiger pounced on it.

My mouth watered, but I steeled my resolve not to eat the shank yet. Only after hanging it for a week at home would the meat be tender enough for me. These deer had a rich, tangy flavour, much nicer than the grain-fed cattle of Jaria. I seasoned the yams with salt, cinnamon and herbs from my pack and attempted to stave off my hunger.

The sound of the icetiger chomping and ripping the deer's flesh was almost in tune with the popping and crackling of the fire. The breeze gusted every now and then, lifting the smoke into high eddies and fanning the flames.

Before it got too dark I set up my canvas shelter and blanket roll. With the icetiger asleep nearby, I spent the evening cleaning my gear, pondering my good fortune and staring at the fire. The sounds of the forest at night were not threatening to me. Even with the distant sound of wolves howling, I felt at home in the wilderness.

I packed up, crawled into my shelter and settled down to sleep. The fact that I had an icetiger ready to defend my life, if the need arose, was enough to send me into a deep slumber.

Dawn broke with splendour; a cacophony of birdsong accompanied the day-star's appearance over the nearest peaks. A breeze stirred the embers of my fire when I emerged from my shelter. I shivered and looked around for the icetiger, but she was nowhere in sight.

'Icetiger?' I called hesitantly.

Speaking through the waves had seemed as natural as thinking yesterday, but now that my new Rada-kin had ventured away from me, I didn't know if I could reach her. I concentrated on the space in my being that allowed my thoughts to flow outwards like a gust of wind.

I discovered a landscape to the ethereal world of the waves. Rather than being affected by the ground and trees, though, it expanded outwards emptily. It was only empty briefly, for I soon encountered the brightness of the icetiger's presence.

'Rada-kin?'

The sparkling icetiger shape I could see in the waves seemed startled. As I focused my attention, her form became more like the real icetiger's in my mind. She turned her bright eyes upon me and stalked forward. It took her a few minutes to learn how to respond. It was like she was shouting from a long way off. Communicating over distances in the waves was clearly a different skill from conversing with our bodies closer to each other.

'I'm here,' she called. 'I'm heading back.'

She had been marking the east side of her territory one last time, a fruitless exercise, but something she felt she needed to do. I figured some of her natural instincts would be harder to transform than others.

There was still some meat left on the deer carcass when it came time for us to leave. The icetiger growled at me and muttered through the waves about abandoning it.

'There's plenty of food where we are going,' I assured her. 'There are cattle, goats and chickens.'

'What is chickens?'

I took the time to send her my memories and impressions of domestic animals. Her eyes widened and her ears pricked up as she caught on. She recalled the sardines I had used as bait to draw her from the back of the cave.

'Fish?' she queried.

I chuckled. *'Yes, but this season's catch has been less than usual.'*

'How do you catch a fish with such feeble paws?'

I packed up as I explained it to her. Although we used words to speak to each other through the waves, they were accompanied by multi-sensory memories and emotions. When I spoke of the fishing that I did for Bessed, the icetiger recognised the pride I took in being one of the best fishers in Jaria. Though it was a solitary,

tedious task for some, it was something I enjoyed. The simplicity of testing one's patience against the inexorable movements of nature helped me to achieve a sense of triumph. The fish weren't holding out on me, tricking me or waiting for me to look away. They just *were*, and they did what fish do, until one might happen upon the bait on my fishing hook.

'You have the patience of a hunter.'

'You seem surprised,' I replied.

'I know from your memories that most of your kind are not like you.'

'Perhaps I only think they're not. How would you know if you haven't ever met any other people?'

She gazed up at me, struck by the profundity of the question and by the fact that she could think in such a new and convoluted way. We left the question hanging, both knowing that soon it would be answered. The icetiger would meet more people this very day, as well as other Rada-kin.

We made our way south east down the mountain, enjoying the warmth from the day-star and the smells of nature. Everything seemed more alive to me now that I had the benefit of the icetiger's senses. Her fascination with my mind was more focused on all the thoughts and emotions. We had opened each other's worlds in just a few days, the bond between us already strengthening.

I stopped to rest and rearrange the milk bulbs. I was relieved when, through the icetiger's senses, I noticed a person travelling north west through the forest to meet me.

'Someone is bringing us one of those goats you were talking about,' the icetiger said, considering if she could fit even more meat in her belly.

I recoiled from the vision she sent me. *'No! You mustn't. This is probably Bessed and his Rada-kin, Uola the buck. You must not harm another Rada-kin.'*

Ranging through the forest slightly ahead of me, she paused to pull me a stinky face. Normally reserved for testing the scent of another wild cat, the expression was remarkably similar to the human expression of distaste.

‘How will I know the difference between Rada-kin goats that cannot be eaten and... Oh!’

I smiled to myself as I sensed the icetiger meeting Uola in the waves. I couldn’t hear what Uola was saying, but the icetiger’s words were clear enough. It was obvious from my Rada-kin’s emotions and body language that she was in awe of this much more experienced bond-mate.

I wondered how long it would take for her to start learning to morph once she found out it was possible. Even though being an icetiger was just about the ultimate animal, there would be times when other forms would serve us better.

It was the way of my people, the Kriites, to utilise many different animal forms. Beasts of burden for travel, small animals for sneaking, predators for hunting and, when extreme circumstances demanded it, fighting.

A few miles on, I saw Bessed hiking up through a cluster of trees to meet me. He had a gentle, rounded face, with more wrinkle lines in the shape of a smile than a frown.

The muddy pathway was littered with fallen logs, orange fungi, green moss and moist brown leaves.

‘Talon!’ Bessed exclaimed as he came up next to me. ‘Your Rada-kin this time—your very own.’ He clasped his hands around my shoulders and beamed at me with his yellowed teeth. ‘Nine Trees! I’m so happy for you.’

‘Thank you,’ I replied. ‘She’s magnificent. Just wait till you see her.’

The icetiger emerged from the foliage downhill from us, staring up at Bessed. Uola, Bessed’s buck, was standing on the track nearby, concentrating on the icetiger. They were still deep in conversation.

Bessed’s smile remained and his eyes were wide. His interest in animals was not as strong as mine, but he knew a rare and powerful Rada-kin when he saw one. The blue tiger would be the talk of Jaria for a season.

‘Do you know what they’re saying to each other?’ he asked.

‘Only her side of the conversation,’ I replied. ‘Should I be able to hear Uola?’

‘Well, no... unless you have far greater psionic powers than the rest of us.’

‘Anzaii,’ I whispered, recalling the special status such people had held in our history. They could hear all people’s kin in their minds, not just their own and not just Rada-kin.

He picked up two of the milk bulb sacks and started off down the path. ‘As you know, your mother was Anzaii, but what you may not have known is that her gift started to manifest itself after she first found her Rada-kin.’

‘She went looking for her Anzaii-kin, didn’t she?’ I reached up to stroke the pendant that hung around my neck.

Bessed picked his way carefully over a rotting log and under a series of thick vines. ‘She plucked the leaf from the Great Sapphire Tree of Jaria herself and had a jeweller fashion a necklace and clasp for it. Roukney awakened gradually and learned the rhythms of your mother’s thoughts long before it ever spoke to her.’

‘Don’t get your hopes up about me,’ I replied. ‘Just because I’m Rada now doesn’t mean I’m going to have any of the other gifts. I saw a Great Sapphire Tree a few days ago but it didn’t give up any of its leaves for me.’

‘You have great potential, Talon. The psionic gifts are strong in your family.’

I caught a glimpse of his face as he changed direction, shimmying down a rock wall to reach a more open pathway below. He had a pained expression that he was trying to hide from me.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked.

He glanced up at me, shrugging as he did so, ‘Things change, is all. Selfishly, I thought you might be with us forever and take over the village storehouses one day.’

‘Bessed, things don’t have to change. We can hunt—’

‘You might be surprised,’ he interrupted gently, ‘but I’ve been preparing for this day to come.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You don’t have to,’ he replied. ‘Your clarion call will come, and soon. The gifts don’t come upon us for no reason.’

‘But there are plenty of Rada in Jaria just living out their lives as if nothing much is different,’ I protested. ‘I’m not leaving you. It hadn’t even crossed my mind.’

‘What happened to “As soon as I get a Rada-kin, I’m going after Ella”, huh? Or “One day all Zeikas are going to fear my name”?’

‘The last time I said that must have been five or six years ago. I’m an adult now. I see how insignificant I am in the grand scheme.’

I recalled how helpless I had felt when Ella was taken. Why couldn’t the icetiger have come along then? Was it not my destiny to rescue my sister?

‘Now you need to learn that we are all significant. Have a child’s faith once more.’

‘What difference can I make to Ella or the Zeikas... or anyone, even with an icetiger by my side?’

‘You may find answers to those questions sooner than you think.’

‘How’s Drea?’ I asked.

‘She’s well.’ Bessed sighed. ‘The miners have demanded more rations, which Prime Arone has granted, so we’re kept busy getting all those resources and preparing the food.’

My home in Jaria was next door to theirs, and it was just across from the village storehouses where the two of them worked most days.

Uola and the icetiger joined us after a while. The dense foliage left only one clear trail down this part of the mountain. My new Rada-kin was learning fast, and it was hard to get a word into her mind when she was preoccupied with asking questions of the buck.

Eventually we reached flat ground and the forest gave way to the green pastures where Jaria kept its herds. The icetiger sniffed nervously at a gate I opened for her. There were many other carnivores here, creatures she would ordinarily have avoided.

Bessed and I chatted easily as we passed the farms on the north end of Jaria Village. It was close to midday and the people we saw were mostly on their way to break for lunch. A few waved at Bessed and one even stopped to clap when she saw my icetiger. I felt nervous and even more out of place than usual until I realised my Rada-kin’s emotions were seeping into my own.

'It's all right,' I soothed. 'These are all friends.'

The concept of friends was foreign to her, but she understood what I meant. I rested my hand on her shoulder as we walked and I tried to send calm through the waves.

Walking past the houses, the noises of human habitation shocked the icetiger—she jumped at everything from pots clanging to horses jogging up the road in front of us. The icetiger's ears went back and a low whine escaped her lips.

'Steady, girl,' I whispered. 'We're safe here.'

'The prey is on the prey,' she said, staring wide-eyed at the horses and riders.

'You're going to have to stop thinking of people as prey,' I chastised her. *'You must not eat people, ever.'*

'But I can bite them if they threaten us, can't I?' she whined.

'We'll have to deal with that on a case by case basis,' I replied.

'Where is your den?' she queried. *'I want to go there.'*

I hurried to drop off the milk bulbs and other resources I had gathered at the storehouse, and Bessed freed me to take the icetiger home.

I opened the front door, which was never locked, and went straight to the pile of wood I'd left by the fireplace.

'You like to sleep during the day, don't you?' I asked aloud.

'Usually,' she replied, *'but I do feel different. Maybe I will do as you do.'*

She paced around the two-room house, sniffing every piece of furniture and every object on the floor. She batted some historical scrolls off a rack on one wall, flung them in the air and swatted them like a cat playing with a moth. Some clothing I'd left lying around occupied her for a while, then she stalked over to a chair by the fire.

'What do you do here?' she asked, rubbing the side of her face against it.

'I read or take down records of what I've gathered,' I replied.

'Uola's Rada... ?'

'Bessed.'

'Yes, Bessed... he has a mate.'

'Drea.'

Bessed and Drea sit by the fire together in the evenings,' the icetiger said. She knew this from reading Uola's mind, but she hadn't really understood what a fireplace was until now. *'Where is your mate?'*

'I could ask you the same thing,' I replied.

'I'm a little too young,' she said. *'My first heat, as you call it, is probably not far away. But I asked about you. Do people come into heat as well?'*

'No. It's not quite like that for us. Mating is part of what Kriites call marriage, a lifelong commitment to love and support another person.'

'Is that what we have? A marriage?'

I laughed. *'No, but I'm sure the commitment level is similar.'*

'So you will marriage a female of your own kind some day?' she asked hesitantly.

'Maybe,' I replied with a snort. *'We must work on your grammar.'*

The icetiger sniffed the air and tossed her head.

'What is grrr... never mind. I do not wish to know.'

She continued investigating the house for ages and barely noticed when Bessed and Drea called me outside to talk.

Drea hugged me tightly, tears in her loving, green eyes. I led her to the door where she could peer in at the ferocious cat prowling around inside my house.

'She's glorious, Talon, simply wonderful. Where did you find her?'

I told her the story about the cave and the sardines. She laughed and exchanged glances with Bessed, who looked preoccupied.

Dozens of others came to visit that afternoon, looking in on the icetiger with reverence, leaving food gifts for the new Rada-kin and imparting a few words of wisdom, according to Jaria's custom. Only one of the masters attended us, Archive Master Namal.

I felt slighted not to hear from any of the other masters. Had they gladly accepted the idea of me being without any of the Kriite gifts? Did they see it as a punishment for the rebellious days of my youth?

By the age of ten I had stolen from just about every house in Jaria, but I usually gave back what I took the next day. Each time my father had found out about one of my misdeeds, there had been a

long talk and much arguing. I remembered having shouting matches with him, which sometimes led to physical punishment.

One time I had helped my older sister sneak out to see a boy, my father caught me. Ella managed to get away while Father was taking me to the village centre to be corrected. He assumed I was on my way to steal something again.

Years later Mandus died and Ella assumed the role of caregiver. She was twenty, single and beautiful, with dark ochre skin and black hair. Like all brothers and sisters we had our conflicts, but, for that one year of my life, I was happy. The guilt stabbed me even now that I had only been able to be happy after my father had died. A small voice inside spoke on my behalf, reminding me that the Mandus who might have been a good father died when my mother did, seven years before his actual death.

The Zeikas had taken my family from me, just as they had killed or kidnapped so many other Jarians. They had been exiled from Telby since before I was born, but that didn't stop them coming to Jaria, which was outside the king's protection. Like all the Kriite tribes, Jaria had always resisted amalgamation with Telby. The Telbion kings weren't known for their generosity, and those nations they could not conquer were usually considered enemies.

Not Jaria. We had helped Telby in the past, sending our best shapechanging warriors and their kin to fight for their lands. Our psionic abilities were widely considered one of the few magics to be effective against the Zeikas.

I read a Zeika scroll once. The words spoke of immortality in this life, with powers that brought exultation, riches and women to any who would join them. It encouraged the reader to make the journey to Reltland, the island once known as Kaslonica, where the Zeikas ruled, and become one of them. I had thrown it in the fire.

Chapter Three— Transformations

I awoke to find the icetiger sitting by my side of the bed, staring at me. The stark blue eyes portrayed the voracious appetite of a hunter. Just looking at her brought pangs of hunger to my belly—not just any hunger, but an irresistible craving for fresh meat.

The icetiger’s perceptions were a part of me now, and I resolved to learn to block her animal instincts from my mind.

She was aware of my thoughts and growled in response. *‘If I have to become a little bit human, it’s only fair that you become a little bit icetiger.’*

‘I fully intend to,’ I replied. *‘Learning to morph into an icetiger is the thing I most look forward to. It must be amazing to have such strength, such sharp claws and teeth—every weapon you need to survive.’*

‘It is,’ she agreed, not bothered by my avoidance of her original statement. *‘Your feeble human flesh does not compare.’*

I rubbed my eyes and crawled out of bed. In my cold store there was plenty of meat apart from the deer shank. I offered the icetiger different things to try: duck, rabbit, cheese and beef jerky. For my own breakfast I fried a few slices of bread coated with a mixture of eggs, milk and herbs.

I offered some to the icetiger. She gulped it down, chuffed at me and arched her neck for a pat. I was aware of the four inch teeth glistening in her jaws as she licked her lips. Animal ferocity was revered by Kriites and often symbolised by teeth and claws, which featured widely throughout our culture.

'*Rekala*,' the icetiger said. That word meant "ferocity" in ancient Kaslonican, the first tongue. Not many Kriites spoke it nowadays, but I knew a few hundred words and phrases. She had plucked it right out of my head.

'It would make a fine name,' I observed.

'Such things seem important to humans,' she observed.

'*Rekala*,' I echoed, lost in thought. I felt privileged to have her, and it was already unthinkable that we should ever be apart.

'So, you've got fish in here,' she stated. *'Not only can I smell it but I know so from your mind.'*

I raised my hands in defeat, *'You're going to eat me out of a living.'*

'I promise not to eat you,' she responded, affronted.

I explained the saying, but she wouldn't be distracted.

'The fish.'

'Very well.'

I lifted the coldest meats from the bottom of my cold store and located the fish I had stored beneath. It was almost frozen when I pulled it out, wrapped in a few sheets of a recent Telbion news scroll. I held the fish close to the fire to warm it.

While I was waiting, I glanced over the news article. The neat hand-writing of the scribe was wasted now that the ink had run. I could still make out one slightly blurred headline: 'Princess Denliyan Still Without Heir'.

I knew enough about the local politics to understand that there would be instability in the monarchy of Telby if something should happen to King Flale. Princess Denliyan would become Queen, and her husband would become Duke of Telby, but without an heir, her relatives would squabble and fight to have themselves named.

Who cares? I thought. *Telby doesn't seem to care about Jaria or any of the other Kriite tribes anymore, so why should we care if they squabble about who rules them?*

The warmth from the fire soon made the fish glisten pink in my hands. The raw flesh even smelled appetising to me. *Rekala* growled.

'Give!'

With claws extended, she draped one paw over my bare shoulder.

‘Ouch!’ I said aloud, dropping the fish onto the floorboards. ‘Trees! That hurt.’

The great she-cat bent down to gnaw on the fish.

‘Sorry?’ she offered. It was probably the first time she had encountered the concept of contrition.

I changed into fresh clothes and made sure my marble-hilted knife was at my belt. I never left home without it. Rekala paused in her slow enjoyment of the fish to listen to something on the waves. Because she was still new to it all, it both fascinated and horrified her.

‘The inedible goat and its human is coming to get us,’ she said. *‘Something about learning to morph.’*

A few minutes later, Bessed knocked on my door.

‘Good morning. Rekala told me you were on the way.’

‘Rekala? So you’ve named her already?’

‘She chose it for herself,’ I replied. ‘Do you like it?’

‘I can see why it might appeal to her,’ he said. ‘But it’s an aggressive name. It fits more with the warriors than the harvesters.’

I shrugged and gestured for him to come in. I had never told Bessed that I preferred my warrior training over most of what he taught me. I couldn’t decide between fishing or archery, but I enjoyed sword fighting and sporting on horseback more than gathering resources from the wilderness.

The three facets of Kriite culture—the speakers, the warriors and the harvesters—often came into conflict. Even the layout of our village reflected the division.

Jaria was a gigantic clearing in the forest, shaped somewhat like an egg, with the Jarvi River running right through the middle. On the north side was the village centre, market district, houses, farms, herding grounds and the village storehouses where Bessed, Drea and I worked.

The north was the place of the speakers and harvesters; peaceful people, intelligent, spiritual, and gifted in crafts and creativity. The Rada of the north usually had animals like horses, dogs, birds or ferrets.

To the south of the river was Jaria Fortress, the stables, archery range, warrior barracks and dwellings for all those who spent their lives in service to Jaria's fighting forces. I had noticed that they had a different way of life to the rest of us. The Rada of the south tended to have large predators for kin: wolves, bears, wyverns and cats.

What did that mean for me? I had spent my entire life on the north. It had not seemed to be an option for me to move to the south, especially without a Rada-kin, but I had always had a secret yearning. Now that I had an icetiger...

'Are we going to the south side for today's lesson?' I asked.

'No,' he replied. 'The first lesson in your morphing training involves some nature studies up in the village hall.'

Rekala and I followed him out of the house and stood in the small garden I had built up over the years. The sounds and smells of the village were a gentle reminder that I was home. As much as I was uncertain of my place in Jarian society still, this was my home.

'For how long have you marked this territory?' Rekala asked, looking around the village, taking everything in.

'Nineteen years,' I answered. *'My whole life. This house belonged to my father seven years ago and then my sister became the owner. Seeing as she may still be alive, I have never asked the masters to transfer ownership to me.'*

'What happened to your littermate?' Rekala asked, surprising me with her love and concern. I nearly stumbled when I sensed the depth of her emotion. I reached out my hand to touch her shoulder blade and rallied myself to face her question.

'I was only thirteen,' I began. *'Ella was twenty-one... my guardian... all I had left. My father died a year before she was taken. There was a Zeika raid. Actually, there were many, but in this one we defeated them. I killed for the first time that day.'*

'A cub must learn to hunt if it is to survive,' Rekala said, trying to grasp why killing at thirteen was horrific to a human. I decided not to contradict her, knowing it would take time for human conventions to make sense to her.

'Jarian teenagers were expected to help defend the village, even if they were from the north side.'

'Your littermate was as fierce as a mother tiger,' she commented, bringing images to the surface of my mind that I hadn't thought about in years.

'Ella and I got separated when she went with the other Anzaii.'

'What is Anzaii?' Rekala interrupted. *'What is mind reader?'*

'Yes,' I replied. *'That's it. You are reading my mind now and I am reading yours, but Anzaii can use the waves with far more precision and over vast distances compared with other wave-users, like Rada. Their gifts take time to develop and it is said that some can eventually use the waves with any beings, not just their own kin.'*

'Ella was an Anzaii?' Rekala asked.

'She is Anzaii, like our mother, and had an Anzaii-kin, but she was not a Rada.'

'And she was with other Anzaii during the battle,' Rekala prompted.

'Yes, they were standing together dispelling the demons—conjured monsters—the Zeikas called to do their bidding. I was trying to get to her, but there were Zeikas everywhere. Bessed saved my life, and instructed me to hide in the stables behind his house. I went partway to the stables, but then I saw the Anzaii being overcome.'

'I ran to help them, but an injured Zeika grabbed me. He was a conjurer, one of the higher-ranking Zeikas, with the ability to conjure a tyrak.'

An image of a black dragon rose to the forefront of my mind and Rekala, who had never seen such a beast, hissed.

'He struck me over the head and dragged me to his tyrak. Even with all the Zeikas attacking her, Ella somehow managed to reach her hand towards the tyrak. It was the first time she had dispelled one without touching it. It vanished in a cloud of greasy, black smoke. While he was distracted, I stabbed the Zeika with this dagger.'

I unsheathed the marble-hilted knife, revealing a long iron blade pitted on the surface, but still strong.

'When the smoke cleared, Ella was gone.'

Rekala growled in response. *'I would have claw, slash, bite the neck... protected both of you.'*

We reached the grass-covered village centre where part of the battle had taken place. Rekala was able to see my memories of it in far more detail than my words could convey.

'Where are they now, these Zeikas?' the icetiger asked, swinging her head from side to side as if a sorcerer was about to come out of one of the buildings.

'They haven't attacked us for years,' I replied. 'There were rivalries back then, between different Zeika summoners, for the position of Bal—supreme leader. The current Bal's name is Harar, but I believe there was a summoner six years ago called Ogeyn who challenged Harar for supremacy. He failed, of course, but he left Reltland with a few hundred followers. It was Ogeyn who led a legion here to Jaria, captured our Anzaii and escaped.'

'With your sister?'

'Yes. Only two Anzaii were left here. The other twelve were taken.'

'Do you think the twelve are still alive?'

'I hope so,' I replied. 'But Ogeyn and his ilk haven't been heard of since. For all we know, the entire legion and all their prisoners perished in the mountains.'

Rekala spun, claws raised, when a Jarian by the name of Ivon approached from behind.

'Morning, Talon,' he said. Then he spoke to Rekala. 'Sorry to startle you, my dear.'

She remained standing as he held out his hand for her to sniff.

'I brought Jaseca over to meet you,' Ivon said.

A pure white ermine crawled out of his back pack, its broad pink nose sniffing timidly in Rekala's direction. Jaseca was like a cat that had been stretched and given rounder ears. To Rekala, however, it was no cat—her first instinct was to pounce on the skittish creature.

'Easy, Rekala,' I said. 'This is a fellow Rada-kin.'

'Smells like prey,' she complained.

'Thanks,' I said to Ivon. 'It's all very strange to her.'

'When I first brought Jaseca into town, she wouldn't come out of my overcoat for a week.'

I laughed. Ivon was about ten years older than me, but he'd only been living in Jaria for the past four years. Like many of our number, he had been compelled to journey out here after he met his Rada-kin. Some Rada lived happily in the big towns like Sarm, Telby and Ubu, but others felt their place was in a Kriite city like Jaria or Lyth.

He gestured for me to sit next to him on a log seat.

‘I’ve been out of Jaria for about a week,’ I said. ‘Have I missed anything?’

Ivon chuckled at my facetious expression. ‘Actually, there is a new woman here.’

‘Oh?’

Ivon was well-known for his interest in women. I felt a pang of jealousy when thinking about the young ladies in Jaria who swooned over him. This behaviour was frowned upon by most of the community, but among the young adults, Ivon was a welcome diversion from the tedium.

‘She’s got a body like a Jesathian goddess, hair like fire and eyes a shade bluer than twilight.’

‘Hair? Eyes? You’ve only got one body part in mind,’ I teased.

‘One?’ he laughed back at me. ‘You know nothing about women, Tal.’

It was true, but I didn’t take offense. I shoved him instead, and he shoved back, making me fall off the log. Rekala growled.

‘Have you got her attention yet?’ I asked, making a show of dusting myself off.

‘Sadly, no,’ he replied. ‘She’s the daughter of the Lyth prime and probably has higher prospects than me.’

‘Naw, you’re just—’ He waved my words away with a playful wink.

‘She just arrived here from Lyth, seeking help for our fellows down south.’

‘Sounds like you should volunteer,’ I said.

‘I don’t think she’s after troops,’ he replied.

‘What then?’

‘Erm... diplomats, maybe. I overheard something about banding together to petition the king of Telby. He has some connection to the Zeikas. I don’t know much more than that.’

‘You don’t know much, do you?’ I teased, but my chest did not share my levity. The thought of Telby allying with the Zeikas was terrible. The very ones that had exiled both the Zeikas and the Tanzans—one of the other Kriite nations—couldn’t possibly consider an alliance with the Zeikas, could it? And if it did what

would that mean for Jaria? It was no secret the Zeikas wanted to use Kriite powers to build their own. Telby stood between us and them on the map, but an alliance would dissolve even that small boon.

In Reltland there were hundreds of Rada slaves, performing duties that required animal labour or communication over great distances. Only people with Kriite blood could access the waves. Their interest in Anzaai like my sister remained poorly understood.

‘That traitor, Flale,’ I muttered. ‘He and his daughter will stop at nothing to secure their position.’

‘So you heard about Princess Denliyan’s lack of pregnancy?’ Ivon said, chortling. ‘Reckon it must be that husband of hers, Joram. Seems a flaccid sort of fellow.’

‘I’ve never been to Telby,’ I replied. ‘Never seen any of them.’

‘May the Nine Trees spare you from their noble filth,’ a new voice said. It was Cradic, a forty-something transformation trainer with family living in Telby.

While we had been speaking, other Rada-kin had come out to meet Rekala. She was surrounded by eleven other animals. Her thoughts were filled with their thoughts; I did my best to filter them out.

‘That princess, though, she is a dish,’ Ivon exclaimed. ‘Willow, smooth-skinned...’

Cradic shook his head in a friendly manner. ‘You have to find yourself a wife, Ivon.’

As if on cue, a young brunette woman called to Ivon from the other side of the village centre. He winked at us and went over to her. I swallowed back a snort of laughter, knowing that Danigol would never be interested in him. The new woman he had mentioned on the other hand...

‘Talon,’ Cradic said, ‘I hope you’re ready for today’s lesson. Bessed told me you only just met your Rada-kin a few days ago. You might consider giving it some more time before you learn to morph.’

‘We’re ready now,’ I replied.

Rekala extracted herself from the group of Rada-kin and padded to my side. Together, we entered the hall and followed Cradic into

a large room with tables displaying stuffed animals and skeletons in various poses. There was a life-sized painting of a human skeleton on one wall for comparison.

The skeletons had only been natural animals, not kindred. We buried our precious Rada-kin in the ground after death, like humans. The floor was made of stone, but half of it was covered in straw and rushes for the comfort of the animals. It smelled like a barn.

I nodded to the other three new Rada and seated myself behind them. Rekala sat close beside me, her head touching my arm. Cradic moved to the front of the room where he welcomed each of us and asked us to introduce our new Rada-kin. Two of the others weren't named yet: a hawk and a capybara. The third was a black horse who had accepted the name Shadow from his Rada. He was an impressive creature, but I could tell the other humans were more in awe of Rekala. The few icetigers who appeared throughout Jaria's history were revered hunters and warriors. *Does a quartermaster need such a mighty Rada-kin?* I wondered.

Cradic held up the lower leg bone of a cat.

'Who can tell me which bone in the human body becomes this bone during a transformation to cat form?'

One of the others pointed to his forearm.

Cradic clapped his hands. 'Now, which bone does a tail come from?'

'The back bone gets longer?' one of the students suggested.

Cradic shook his head. We looked at each other, dumbfounded.

'There are many differences between the human body and the body of an animal. So where does the missing material come from and where do the extra parts go when we transform into the body of an animal?'

'Isn't it the waves?' I asked. 'I always thought that's where our clothing and gear went as well.'

'Aye,' Cradic said, 'but how do you use the waves to control this? How do you tell your body what it needs to gain and what it needs to let go of?'

'Isn't that what we're here to learn, Master?' the youngest student asked. His capybara was sniffing around the room, finding it impossible to sit still and pay attention.

‘Yes,’ Cradic replied. ‘You are here to learn the principles behind transformation so you and your Rada-kin can learn the rest on your own. Most Rada can only transform into five or six different forms. It really depends on your need to master forms, and your determination.’

‘And your memory,’ one of the others chimed in. ‘There was a murmur of laughter. ‘Yes, it’s true,’ Cradic acceded. ‘You will need to become adept at remembering all the facets of your clothing and anything else you have on you during the transformation. If you forget something and you try to change back, that object could be gone forever.’

‘But I don’t know the inner workings of my body,’ I replied.

‘You’re right if you’re talking about your waking mind,’ Cradic said. ‘Thankfully each of us has an awareness of our body already built into our brain; we just can’t access this knowledge with our mind ordinarily. You might be surprised how much your brain knows about what’s going on inside your body.’

‘It is this self-awareness that you tap into when you choose to shift your form. After memorising everything superfluous that is touching your body prior to a morph all you have to do is picture the animal you want to become and instruct your body to shift to it.’

‘Sounds easy,’ one of the students said.

‘Not so fast. If you try something you’re not ready for, the toll it takes on your mind will be too great and you’ll crash back into your human form. This can be dangerous. Any interruption to your concentration can cause a reversion to your human form.’

‘Can anything prevent it, Cradic? I’ve heard that Zeika ward rings can trap us in another form and you can pass out from the pain.’

‘That’s nothing for you to worry about, unless you’re heading off to Reltland, are you, Zonrik?’

I rolled my eyes, wondering why older Kriites tended to be so forgetful. Since losing Ella I had lived every day expecting another attack. It seemed foolish to become complacent.

My training in the Jarian art of animal transformation went on for four days. We studied the bones and drew sketches of dozens of

animals, discussed traits and differences, senses and instincts until all I dreamed of at night were paws, hooves and tails. We took walks outside and studied the way the animals ran and played. We practiced our arithmetic on the strides and leaping distances of various kinds, learned about weight-bearing, swimming and climbing.

On the third day, Cradic took us into the hospital for sick animals where we learned about the injuries and illnesses that could befall us or our Rada-kin if we weren't careful. One lesson that stuck in my mind was the consumption of incompatible foods. If I ate bad meat or drank still water while in animal form, it could make me sick if I changed back before my animal body had processed it.

Any injury sustained in another form would usually remain after we changed back. Injuries could even become worse and tear during the transformation. Healing Master Safton, and his acolytes, were the only ones in Jaria to master whole-morphing, healing recent injuries during transformation.

On the fourth day we got to attempt a transformation. The Rada-kin went first. Because they each had access to each other's minds, through the waves, it was possible for them to sense how it felt to be another animal. Rekala's first transformation was to dire wolf form. She had linked up with a dire wolf Rada-kin and used his impressions to guide her transformation.

It was strange watching her body morph into the shape of a dire wolf. The luxuriant blue fur became rough black hair, the snout elongated and the teeth shrank a little. New teeth appeared that hadn't been there before. The whole process took less than thirty seconds.

'You did it, Rekala!'

'You're going to love this,' she replied.

When it was time for the humans to try, Cradic went with us, one by one, to a big space in the room. When it was my turn, my stomach fluttered with nerves.

'Touch your Rada-kin's back, chest and legs, concentrating on her sensations more than your own. Think about how your body will have to change in order to become like hers. Imagine the feel of the air on your fur, and the sights, smells and sounds you will

experience. It will be like what you can sense through Rekala now, but it will be through your own senses.'

After ten minutes of coaching he said, 'All right, are you ready?'

'I think so,' I responded. Then to Rekala, 'Are you ready?'

'Yes,' she replied. *'You can do it.'*

I crouched down until I was on all fours and stared at Rekala until my eyes burned. I couldn't seem to do anything more.

'You're focusing too much on what you see. Try closing your eyes,' Rekala suggested. *'Believe.'*

I obeyed her, letting my eyes drift shut. The smells Rekala could sense were stronger than my own. The sounds were more acute, and it was easier for her to discern their direction and distance. I flexed my fingers into the straw until the nails reached the stone beneath.

I imagined claws there, fur upon my hands, and fur all over my body. I strained to feel what it was like having a muzzle that stuck out from my face and a tail extending from my tailbone. I felt the difference between my human knees and the knees of an icetiger. They were still there, but the legs were positioned differently.

My entire body changed. I let go of my human self, sending clothing, knife sheath and items in my pockets into the waves. An exultant feeling passed through me as I shifted, partly triumph at my achievement and partly from the sudden strength and flexibility of the feline form.

When my transformation was complete, I whirled, knocking the table over. Rekala sniffed at me curiously and rubbed her cheek against mine. I smelled the scent this action left behind. Looking down at my forelegs and paws I could see they were streaked with a rich, dark blue colour—much darker than Rekala's fur.

I looked up suddenly, sensing the other humans in the room, tasting them in the air. They smelt delicious. I let out a roar and ran two paces towards them. Some looked startled.

'No!' Rekala shouted, leaping in front of me. I crashed into her, back paws tucked under my body, fangs reaching for her neck.

'Talon!'

I tumbled onto my face, back in my human form, at her feet. The others' expressions of fear changed to mirth, but they didn't know how close I'd come to killing one of them.

Now I know what you're dealing with,' I said to my Rada-kin, rubbing the bridge of my nose.

'The instinct to hunt is powerful,' Cradic said, helping me up. 'Something to be aware of in a carnivorous form. Perhaps make sure you've eaten before you attempt that next time, Talon.'

The room erupted in laughter. Even the Rada-kin seemed amused. I smiled at myself.

You had already eaten,' Rekala said, remaining serious. *But the urge to kill endures.'*

Only one of the other students was able to transform. The young woman with the hawk Rada-kin would need a lot more coaching and the boy with the capybara was having trouble keeping a strong connection to the mind of the distractible creature.

Cradic took the student who had morphed into horse form, and me, aside at the end of that lesson and told us we didn't have to attend any more lessons. We had learned everything we needed to know, and now it was up to us to practice transforming. He reminded me to take more care with my animal instincts, an instruction that seemed to parallel the anger control I'd had to learn after Ella's abduction. I decided to ask Bessed and Drea about the relation between the two at dinner.

'I think your anger is understandable given what you've been through in your life,' Bessed told me. 'Many of us have seen the ugly side of war and violence because the Zeikas keep bringing it to our doorstep, but few would have lost both parents and a sister, like you.'

The night Bessed had caught me and dragged me back to Jaria came to my mind. I'd been alone in the wilds for three weeks after Ella and the other Anzaii were taken. I had tracked them as far as the Kiayr Ranges, where I had lost the trail in the snow. Even at thirteen I'd had a knack for surviving alone in the forest, but I was

half-starved and delirious with cold and fatigue when Bessed and Uola found me.

Grief-stricken as I was, I never would have returned to Jaria of my own accord. Bessed forced me to face reality. There was no way I or anyone else could continue tracking the Zeika legion.

Rekala entered the room, chuffing in my direction. I reached out a hand to stroke her. Drea patted her on the shoulder too.

'Ask Drea if there's any more of that butter fish,' Rekala commanded.

'There's no more, I'm afraid,' Bessed answered. Uola had overheard Rekala's demand and passed it on faster than I could. 'There's a shortage of fish this season. In fact I was wondering if you feel up to an errand. Are you and Rekala getting tired of hanging around the village yet?'

I glanced at my Rada-kin, knowing how she longed to get out into the forest. 'It might be nice to get away for a while, practice some of this transforming on our own somewhere.'

'Good, because I need you to go down to 'Tez and buy some fish. Unless, that is, you think you can do better than all our regular fisherfolk.'

'I'll give it a try tomorrow,' I replied. 'And if I can't catch enough, we'll go to 'Tez for what you need.'

'Is that all right with you, Rekala?'

'Of course,' she replied. *'I'm starting to see that you know your way around this human world of yours. I go where you go.'*

Chapter Four — Fishing

I pulled myself out of the water, shaggy black hair streaming. The day-star warmed my skin, soothing the scrapes I had sustained during the morning's efforts. I sneered at the single white fish I had managed to catch with my spear. Sensing something in the bushes ahead of me, I lifted the fish up, pretending to inspect it. The pink-white flesh glistened and it gave off a smell like bulrushes.

Rekala's hunger saturated me through the wave we shared. This had been one of the most difficult things for me to get used to: her constant, unrelenting hunger. I could now understand why some new Rada gained weight in their first year of being bonded.

The icetiger ran out from the shadows, making a soft drum-beat travel through the ground and into the bare soles of my feet. Just before she reached me, she stood up on her hind legs and chuffed noisily.

'Give it to me,' she crooned in my mind.

Nostrils flaring, she lifted her paw to pat at the fish. Sitting on her haunches, she could easily reach it. I held it up even further.

'That's half a day's work,' I moaned indignantly. *'You know how much Bessed needs this fish.'*

'I will catch you a camel in return,' she wheedled.

'You've never even seen one,' I retorted. *'Much less brought one down.'*

Camels roamed the plains to the south east; it wouldn't necessarily be any time soon that she could fulfil such a promise.

'I wait till it sleeps then... pounce and bite the neck.'

'I can't give it to you,' I apologised. *'It's my duty to give this to Bessed.'*

'Duty, duty, duty. You humans worry far too much about the future. What will I eat, what will I wear, what will this person or that person think of me? What do I want? What is my duty? How can I do my duty and get what I want?'

I wrapped the fish in sacking then dried myself with a flax cloth from my pack. After changing into dry clothes, I strapped on my knife sheath and positioned the spear diagonally across my back.

'There is another new kin pair,' my Rada-kin said suddenly. *'Somebody named Asher has just met her new Rada-kin.'*

The ease with which Rekala had started using the waves impressed me. She was already familiar with most of the other Rada-kin, and conversed with them from anywhere in the village. It was incredible being linked to the network of Rada in Jaria. Throughout my entire life I had lived right alongside it but never been a part of it like this.

'Do you know what kind of animal the other Rada-kin is?'

The icetiger licked her lips and, with a soft growl, said, *'Lemur.'*

I chuckled. *'Yet another sentient prey animal that you can't eat.'*

'I may be able to resist it,' she replied, *'if you give me that fish instead.'*

'We had better depart,' I said, suppressing a laugh. *'Considering my tiny catch, Blessed may want us to head out for Tez today.'*

Rekala stretched slowly to her feet. *'I know you think of giving it to me. I read your thoughts, remember?'*

She stalked toward me, eyes becoming intent. I hoisted the pack and ran into the forest. I knew she could easily outstrip me, yet she only trotted behind me, pretending to be waylaid by the branches and vines I flung at her.

As I stumbled into the clearing at the eastern edge of the village I could see a group of horseback archers practising near the stables. I envied them for a moment, but then I saw the long-sleeved clothing and armour they had to wear, and felt sorry for them. Summer in Jaria was hot, despite the fact that we were so close to the Kiayr Ranges.

Rekala's blue fur had started shedding since we came down from the higher region where we'd met. It hung off her in big clumps. I bent down to pull some of it away and she twisted to

snap her teeth at me. I ran from her across the open ground to the village centre. Several heads turned to watch as we passed.

Rekala gave me a head start and pursued me with impressive speed. We raced across the main road, nearly upending a mule cart loaded with fresh fruit, and skittered to a halt in the forecourt of the village storehouses.

Uola had informed Bessed we were coming. My adoptive father emerged from the closest building, wiping his hands on his shirt.

‘So, has the prize-winning fisherman of Jaria succeeded where others failed?’ he queried.

‘Sad to say, no,’ I replied, handing him the sackcloth-wrapped fish. Rekala growled as the fish changed hands.

‘One is better than none,’ Bessed said, with a shrug. ‘But there are some Rada-kin here who only eat fish. Some of the villagers don’t like going without it, either. My cold store is getting dangerously low.’

Bessed had seven hundred mouths to feed, including the kindred. After all he’d taught me I could understand why a short supply of any of our usual staples would concern him.

‘I’ll go now,’ I said. ‘It’ll take me five days to get there, even if Rekala is willing to take horse form for the journey.’

The icetiger sent me a disgusted impression. *‘You want me, Ferocity-Rekala, to become prey?’*

‘If not, we could let you take Meeka,’ Bessed offered.

‘No, all is well,’ I said, thinking that managing a horse would slow us down if we wanted to practise morphing while travelling. ‘Either Rekala will transform or I will.’

‘As long as you’re sure you can handle it.’ Bessed gave me a purse full of bronze and silver coins.

‘We’ll be fine,’ I assured him. *‘Right, Rekala?’*

‘Right,’ she grumbled.

Back at my house, I strapped my spear, my bow and my arrow quiver to my back and packed my saddlebags in a hurry, wondering how to convince Rekala that horses were noble creatures. The great

cat knew horses well, having hunted the wild mountain ponies in the past. As magnificent as humans might think horses were, they were still prey animals to Rekala.

If she wouldn't transform into one and carry me, we would both have to travel in animal form and I wasn't sure if I had the concentration to stay morphed for that long.

When I came out of my family's cabin, a large dapple grey horse with thick, feathery fetlocks awaited me.

'Rekala?' I exclaimed through the waves.

The horse tossed her head and snorted at me.

'It's not as bad as I thought,' she said. *'The view is really something, and I have so much energy!'*

She fidgeted a little as I girded her with a saddle and secured my packs to it. There was no need for a bridle—Rekala could sense where I wanted to go faster than I could have tugged the reins. I dug into one of the packs and found a small leather satchel of sugar lumps.

'How about this, then,' I said, holding one out in my hand, *'to a horse's tongue, these are supposedly irresistible.'*

She nibbled the lumps, bobbed her head and lifted her top lip into the air.

'I've never tasted anything like it.'

While she was distracted, I pulled myself up onto her back. She shifted her weight suddenly and I sensed her impulse to buck and bolt, but with an immense effort of will she kept herself still.

'It is rather humbling to be a horse,' she huffed. *'I'll have none of that rib-kicking nonsense I saw those other humans doing.'*

I laughed as we moved off down the road. We ventured east out of the village following the river bank past where I'd spent the morning fishing. With our minds linked it was simple to work together.

During that first day of travel I appreciated things about a horse's body that I had never contemplated before; the way the muscles strained and the blood quickened to fuel them, the rapid beating of the heart and the deep, steady breathing. Rekala was not

slight in her horse form, but after only a few hours she had worked up a sweat.

Still, a sense of strength suffused her body. It was a strange feeling to her—the steadfast and enduring constitution of the horse. She was used to many a lazy day, with the occasional burst of speed to run down prey.

I set up camp using the deerskin from my first hunt with Rekala as the bed inside my shelter. I made a meal from vegetables, herbs and flowers I'd brought with me, combined with a pheasant my icetiger helped me to catch.

Rekala found hunting much easier now that she had the ability to think in abstract ways and predict the behaviour of prey. After she ate any meat I made sure she didn't transform into horse form for half a day to ensure the food had gone down.

'I could catch us something that would really need half a day,' Rekala suggested on the fifth day. My stomach groaned at the image of a giant stag she sent me.

'We can't be diverted,' I said, knowing it could take days to locate a herd and make a kill of that magnitude. *'We're not more than half a day out of town.'*

'What's the urgency?' she wanted to know.

'I'd like to get back to Bessed as soon as possible, that's all. I'm working right now.' I slid down from her back and started unfastening the saddle and packs. It was my turn to morph and give her a break.

'From what Uola has revealed to me, Bessed wants you to be happy. He wouldn't mind you taking a few extra days to hunt and spend time with me.'

'You're probably right,' I replied. *'But Bessed is like that. He's always thinking of other people. He needs this fish and I've got to get it to him as soon as I can. Eleven days to wait is already too much. The least I can do after everything he and Drea have done for me is be a good worker.'*

'Duty, duty. Work, work.'

I concentrated hard on my body, imagining the point of my nose much further from my eyes, the shape of my head and neck much longer. My tongue lolled out of my mouth, ears perked forward. My arms reached for the ground, now hooves and black forelegs. The saddlebags and other gear I had slung over my back

vanished from the physical world along with my personal effects. They became a burden on my mind instead. As the hours passed I recalled and pictured each item in rotation.

I shook my head, stretched my front legs and looked around for Rekala. She was standing in the trees not far away. I could see myself in her mind, a dark bay stallion with a thick, black mane and tail. There were darker patches of hair around my nose and eyes. I swished my tail, arched my neck and pranced before her.

'Chase me!' I shouted.

I pivoted on my hind legs and rushed south east on the final stretch to Tez. Rekala followed after me, slowly, refusing to take the bait. She was more relaxed in her natural form and was still relieved at not having to carry any gear.

I kept reminding myself about the gear in the waves as I ran, so as not to lose them in the exultation of horse form. By the time I arrived in Tez my coat was slick with horse sweat and I'd left Rekala a mile or two behind me.

I transformed back into my human self, checked that all my clothing was intact and emerged from the woods. I walked the final stretch into Tez, carrying my gear with some difficulty. I sat by a tree on the outskirts of town, took off my sweaty shirt and let it air on the grass, while I waited for Rekala. There wasn't anything I could do about the horse smell, but plenty of people in Tez smelled worse.

Tez was a small city by most standards. Like the other settlements in these parts the town had burned down and been rebuilt a number of times. The buildings in the main causeway were mostly sandstone nowadays although some still had thatched roofs. The outskirts of the city housed commoners and servants, who lived in humble wooden dwellings or in mud-brick homes.

The nobles were in the manor district, a walled-off area with a man-made river, a stone fortress and a colourfully tiled bathing house over a hot spring.

The poorer area didn't have such fancy public bathing houses, but what it did have was practical. They were wooden steaming rooms

anybody could use as long as they contributed coal or firewood to the furnace and helped draw water from the nearby well.

People crowded the well in the centre of Tez gathering water for themselves and their animals. There were drinking troughs for Rada-kin throughout the city, and roped off grassy areas with coarse woven shade-cloth, scratching posts and salt licks.

These animal resting places were usually stocked with dried meat and fish, hay, pea-grass, fruit, nuts and seeds. The fish was noticeably absent. There were also brushes, rugs, boxes with open archways and plentiful bowls and buckets stacked for any animal's use.

People occasionally took advantage of these resources when looking after their natural beasts, but any resources they used were supposed to be replaced soon thereafter. The same rule applied to the Rada-kin; each Rada had to contribute to the stockpile.

If the natural animals sometimes used up a certain resource, the Rada-kin rarely complained. They were usually glad to see other animals benefitting from humankind's benevolence toward them. I contributed a small sack of milkbulb, which would be enjoyed by any ruminants that came along.

Rekala padded out of the forest, chuffed at me and flopped down to rest. I chuffed back at her and massaged the muscles of her neck and shoulders.

Leaving Rekala to doze beside our gear, I walked into the Tez Marketplace. Packs of children ran by me in the street, giggling and shrieking. Some of them were followed by carers with baskets of food and rugs. I was glad to see a group of older children being taught their letters. In Telbion cities, like this one, only the wealthy landowners could afford private tutors, which left the populace with a minority of educated people. In Jaria everyone had a right to learn arithmetic, grammar and inscription.

The lack of reading ability in most of the adults in Tez had surprised me when I'd first started coming here. Those who could read or do figures were able to charge for their services. If anybody needed to communicate with someone in another town, there was usually a Rada messenger whose Rada-kin could relay the information using the waves.

There was one such courier service set up in a permanent building at the beginning of the markets. Several horses were tied up out the front, laden with large saddlebags, one having the mud in his hooves picked out as I passed. A rider was filling water sacks nearby and there was a cart around the side for even larger deliveries. The service catered for wave messages and actual deliveries of packages and scrolls.

On the door was a painting of a black monkey chattering into a red dog's ear. Underneath this a wooden sign hung on a piece of rope, 'Faraday discount: 2 messages for price of 1'. A heavysset man was seated inside, with his monkey Rada-kin perched beside him on the counter. There was a queue of people waiting for their turn to send a message.

I did not envy the wealthy Rada's position. He probably lived in the apartment on top of the courier shop, and spent his evenings about the town, eating and socialising. The life of a wave-caller, although it seemed easy, was not for someone like me.

The place I most belonged was the wilderness. Even in this small city, I was feeling the pressure of too many eyes, too many smells, and too much noise.

I passed a number of vendors before finding the one I wanted. In between a lady selling lemons and kumquats and a family with odds and ends, I found the fishmonger, Beney.

He was separated from his neighbours by wood-framed walls hung with canvas and fishing nets. Dozens of different fish on hooks and strings hung from every space, including from ropes going between the walls. He had an array of multi-coloured seashells and turtle shells for wealthy shoppers. Crabs and lobsters dangled from the walls, some as large as my hand. *Good thing Rekala didn't accompany me.*

I approached the counter, which smelled even worse than the hundreds of dead fish suspended around me. I tried not to wrinkle my nose as Beney sidled up to me. His apron was smeared with fish scales, oil and worse.

'It's been a while 'ey, Talon?' he greeted me. 'You been gettin' good catch up on those mountains 'ey?'

I grasped his hand in mine.

‘Not as such. And it’s Rada Talon now,’ I announced. ‘Got myself an icetiger.’

‘Icetiger?’ Beney stepped back in over-dramatised shock. ‘And here I was thinkin’ you wasn’t ever gonna be a Rada.’

I scowled at him. ‘Thanks for the confidence.’

‘Is a compliment from old Beney,’ he amended. ‘I find those masters of yours... something... snooty. You no!’ He gestured broadly. His other customers watched, looking me over. ‘You got something a bit different about you, boy.’

‘Don’t know about that.’ I gestured for him to pipe down. I handed him the small purse of coins Bessed had entrusted to me. Without needing to be told what I wanted he started wrapping dried cod and salted smoked salmon in a leather cloth.

Never one to miss a selling opportunity, Beney took a breath and launched into a loud speech to all the passers-by about how my icetiger and I were soon going to eat all his non-perishable stock. The customers better come in to buy their dried fish quick or it would all be gone. I gestured for him to leave off, but he continued his sales pitch for a few minutes.

When he was finished, he admitted quietly, ‘Didn’t think to see you here. Presumed Jaria was the one licking up all the fish, what with you being upriver.’

I shook my head, ‘Not us—we’re coming up short. The fish have been fewer than I remember them ever being.’

With several customers crowding in to see his wares, Beney gestured for me to come closer.

‘If it isn’t you Jarians, then who is it? That’s what I’d like ter know. Some say Zeikas have come inland. What with all their mouths to feed, perhaps they sucked the rivers dry!’

‘By the Nine! Do you think the Zeikas are further upstream than the village? That would mean they are in the realm of Jaria.’

He made a hushing motion with his hand. Other customers were jostling each other to get to him.

‘Maybe. I don’ really know. But here’s yer fish anyway.’

I had to wrap both arms around the bundle to carry it away. I belatedly wondered if Rekala would make me haul it all the way back to Jaria myself.

'I'll carry it for you,' she said sneakily, from afar, *'in my belly.'*

By the time I got back to her she was in horse form again, ready to travel. She knew I didn't want to spend the night in the town. I could have stayed with Damia and Annie, old friends of my family, but my dedication to get back as soon as I could took precedence over our comfort.

I fastened the saddle onto her back and added the fish-stuffed saddlebags. I grabbed a bit of Rekala's mane so I could jump on.

Beney's words troubled me. Despite the assistance from Kriites that Telby had used during the Realm Wars, citizens from the Kriite nation of Tanza were banished.

Decades ago, people from the two rival nations, Reltland and Tanza used to visit Telby regularly. Even after the Realm Wars had resolved the borders of some countries the Tanzans and the Relts remained at war. A fight between them resulted in the death of the king and queen of Telby, and in response the new king, Aabyn, banished both nations from Telby.

Telby itself had known peace for most of my life, but it had absorbed the realm Tez was in. Perhaps the present ruler, King Flale, wanted to expand his kingdom once again.

Something caught my eye to the south—two men coming out of a stone building. Frowning, I tried to decide whether it would be faster to morph or to draw my knife if we were threatened.

One of the men approached us. Rekala's head came up and her body went rigid.

I patted her shoulder. 'Easy.'

'Hail, traveller. Could I offer you a round of ale?'

He looked tall and stocky in his baggy, dark green trousers, cream-coloured doublet and brown leather jerkin.

I pointed to the sky, 'The day-star is going down, friend, and I have a ways to go.'

‘And where are you going?’ the other man asked. ‘You only just arrived.’

‘They’ve been watching us.’

‘I’m sorry I didn’t detect them,’ Rekala apologised. To her, all the humans in Tez were a threat, but she didn’t yet have the experience to recognise suspicious behaviour. As soon as we returned to Jaria I would ask Uola to teach her how to change form and scout for trouble in a town.

‘There’s nowhere you can reach before the day-star sets ‘sides Tasset and it’s that way,’ the man added.

He pointed across town where I had just come from. He was a large fellow with hairy arms and a thick, sharply-wedged beard. I looked more closely at the other man’s hands and neck, trying to see what jewellery he was wearing. This could reveal to me if he was a Zeika. But his collar was high and he was wearing gloves.

‘Camping in the wilderness isn’t safe for ordinary travellers,’ he warned.

If they’d been watching us, they knew I was a Rada, no ordinary traveller. I felt a strange mixture of elation and dread. He walked forward, but Rekala sidled away from him. She snorted and rose up slightly on her back legs.

‘They don’t smell like any other humans I’ve met.’

‘Who are you?’ I asked. Surely they were not common thieves. The only valuables I had were my mother’s pendant and a pack full of fish.

‘I’m Arak,’ said the hairy one, in an accent that sounded familiar. ‘I just want to talk wit’ you.’

He came closer, but Rekala shimmied away again.

‘What do you want with me?’ *If they know I am Rada, why pick a fight?*

He made a grab for my foot. Rekala reared up, lashing out with her hooves. The second man jumped me from behind. He pulled me off backwards. I thudded to the ground, winded.

Rekala wheeled on him, screaming with anger. The scream quickly became a roar as she resumed her natural form. The saddle and packs fell to the ground with a clunk.

The man glanced at Arak before drawing his sword. A magical hum issued from the blade, but this was no Tolite-kin—only Kriites could have one of those.

Green Zeika flames appeared along the edge of the blade. Rekala coiled and sprung like a catapult. I sensed fire brushing her belly and jumped to my feet, but she knocked the sword from the Zeika's hand and drove him to the ground.

I glared at Arak. 'Back away or your comrade dies.'

'You *are* young,' he laughed. 'In our world, the weak perish and the strong live forever.'

Rekala wrestled with the fallen Zeika, pushing her teeth closer to his throat.

'Bite the neck?'

'No, Rada. I do not want a human death on your conscience, unless there's no other way.'

During his struggles with my icetiger, the man's neck charm had come free of a concealing pouch. It showed a single triangle outside a circular symbol known as the Xeldfet. I knew enough about Zeikas to recognise the triangles as initiation points. One initiation point meant he was a warder, capable of casting wards, including wave-wards and spirit circles. Luckily, his hands were pinned at his sides, beneath Rekala's bulk.

'He is struggling. What do you want me to do?'

She was close enough that a knife pulled from a sheath could do her serious damage.

'Don't let him get his hands out. Bite him, if necessary, but try not to kill.'

'If you insist,' she grumbled.

'I've heard it is foolish to underestimate a beastman,' Arak crooned, 'but you are so fresh, you do not have the skill to defeat me.'

He pulled a huge broadsword from a sheath at his back. The steel was red hot, steaming even in the warm air of late afternoon. A stinging drop of sweat slid into my eye. It was never too late to run, but Bessed... the fish... and Rekala was still struggling with the fallen warder.

I picked up my fishing spear from where it had fallen, with the saddle. Arak laughed and charged at me with the hissing broadsword. I dived out of the way, swiping the back of his leg with the spear. His clothing was tough enough to protect him from the barbed point.

He struck at me low and high. I jabbed for his stomach and neck, blocked an uppercut, and jumped back. The point of his broadsword missed my head by a fraction as I ducked and thrust the point of my spear into his boot—the hard iron cap deflecting the clumsy shot.

Arak hammered at me with wide, powerful strokes—his motions were not precisely controlled, but there was little that could stop that steaming hot blade. The sword arced toward me and I threw my upper body back to avoid it. It cut through the ground, passing through rock and dirt with ease, and I barely managed to move my leg in time.

I had heard Zeika weapons could be strengthened by sorcery, somewhat like bonded Kriite weapons. The ruby-steel withdrew from the ground in one swift movement, and Arak came at me again.

Our fight brought us closer to Rekala and the warder. He swung his body around as I passed, causing me to trip backwards. I held the spear before me, but it snapped in two under Arak's heavy blows. The heat of his sword caressed my throat.

I morphed into wolf form and darted away. The fur along my spine bristled as I turned to face him. He seemed surprised, but his sword did not waver.

It was so soon to be using another form in combat. Having only just learned how to transform I wasn't sure if I could fight with effectively. Nobody had expected me to encounter Zeikas on this trip. What were they doing here—weren't they still banished from Telby? I looked from Arak to Rekala and the warder who was still on the ground.

Should we abandon the fish and flee? It wasn't worth risking my Rada-kin's life, or mine, for a bundle of fish. Rekala roared in outrage. Hearing her ferocity, even Arak paused. I darted at him

while he was distracted, snapping at his lower leg. My teeth found no purchase before the sword swung down. I retreated.

We had a couple of onlookers. All the more reason not to be too vicious. Whatever the Zeikas were up to in Tez, making it easy for them to claim Rada were bestial killers wouldn't help anybody.

'We run,' I decided.

'No,' the icetiger snarled. *'I bite the neck.'*

Rekala closed her teeth over the prone Zeika's shoulder, and he screamed in pain.

'Let's go, Rada-kin.'

'We need that fish,' she argued. Was she stuck on that? Had I imparted to her that it was so important that she would risk her life for it? Black and white thinking was probably a difficulty faced by all new Rada-kin. *'Won't they continue to hunt us if we let them live?'*

'We are faster,' I reassured her. *'We'll scare them off... give us a chance to gear up.'*

With the warder's blood on her lips, it took a supreme effort for her not to finish him off. The injury may result in a red death anyway. She slowly unclenched her jaws and lifted her weight, letting him scramble away, but followed after him.

Arak advanced on me, still in my wolf form, with the sword. I ran three yards from him, turned and rushed him, changing direction at the last moment. Always keeping the sword within sight, I ducked and dashed in circles around the panting Zeika. He swiped at me time and time again, and I avoided him, sometimes narrowly, sometimes by a wide margin.

It seemed an impossible stand-off, until Rekala joined me, barrelling into the Zeika with all the power of her natural form. With claws outstretched, she pushed Arak away from me, avoiding the sword. Arak fell heavily, punctured through his armour, breathless and stunned.

'Now's our chance,' I said.

I stumbled back into my natural form, and Rekala became a horse again. I lifted the saddle off the dusty ground and fastened it, and the saddlebags, on again.

I resumed my wolf form and loped away. I briefly considered seeking aid from the Town Watch, but that went against my independent streak.

Even with other Rada and Kriites in town, it seemed wiser to vanish into the woods as only a Rada could. Not only did I need to get this fish back to Bessed, but also the news of Zeikas being in Tez and maybe consuming all the fish upriver from Jaria Village.

'Can you reach any of the other Rada-kin to let them know what's going on?' I asked. She didn't respond; her mind was too was clouded with fury.

Rekala's hooves clattered on the hard-packed road behind me and thumped on the dirt path into the forest.

Once we were surrounded by trees Rekala slowed to a trot and left the forest track. We decided to travel in dry riverbeds and rely on rocks and leaf-litter to mask our trail. Rekala took the lead and I watched for hoof prints.

I wondered if it was a coincidence that Zeikas were back in Telby just when I received a Rada-kin.

Rekala picked her way gingerly through the foliage, being careful not to break any branches with her equine body.

'Wonder what they wanted with me,' I mused.

'From what you've told me, Zeikas don't need a reason to kill Kriites,' she replied.

'They weren't trying to kill me.'

She chortled mentally, *'You're probably right. Otherwise you would not have escaped.'*

She must view me as weak, but we were both young and inexperienced.

'That one you were fighting was much older than you,' Rekala conceded.

'More than you know,' I replied. *'He looked about thirty years old, but that's about the time most Zeikas stop ageing.'*

Rekala struggled to comprehend. *'Now that I understand the concept of ageing, you are telling me there are some who do not age?'*

'They seem to think they can live forever,' I replied, *'but even Zeikas aren't immortal. They only postpone the inevitable through sorcery.'*

We trotted and loped through the forest until I could barely maintain wolf form. Surely we would be safe now. Rekala stopped in a tiny grove sheltered by a large tree on one side and a tumble of rocks on the other. The grass was soft and green, fed by a small spring at the base of the rocks. I resumed human form, carefully bringing my clothes and personal effects back out of the waves with me.

I unfastened the girth and dragged the heavy saddle and packs from my Rada-kin's back. The dapple grey horse hide shrank down into blue striped fur. Without complaining about her own fatigue, Rekala slipped into the forest to scout for Zeika followers and an opportunistic hunt. I spread my blanket-roll on the ground and rested my head on the still-packed shelter.

Hours later, Rekala settled beside me. Her warmth and familiar smell brought a smile to my lips. There was a carnivorous tang to her breath as she chuffed beside my ear. I could just make out her still form in the darkness, a heaving mass of stripes and speckles. She appeared to be completely at rest, but her senses were alert. She would remain watchful for a few hours and allow me some needed sleep.

Chapter Five—Anzaii

I awoke to a harmony of bird calls. The mists of dawn were thinning, but the light remained poor. Rekala was scouting nearby.

I opened my mouth to yawn when I heard a whisper of movement above me. Strong hands hauled me up and shoved me against a tree, face first. The man grabbed my wrists, twisting them up until it hurt.

He spat on the ground, gripping my wrists tighter. ‘Stop struggling, boy.’ It was the same accent as the men from yesterday. I was just as surprised they’d taken the trouble to find me as the fact that they’d been able to.

‘What do you want with me?’ I demanded.

I felt the touch of ice-fire on my wrist—he was attempting to ward me with a binding spell that would cut me off from the waves. Before the Zeika could finish the incantation, Rekala crashed through the trees, roaring.

I wrenched free from the distracted Zeika and twisted around. It was not the warder from yesterday; I would have been surprised if that one could even get up today. This man was lanky, perhaps younger, but with Zeikas it was difficult to tell.

He was unable to draw his sword with Rekala attacking. She kept him busy stumbling and leaping out of her way while I buckled on my bow and arrows.

Rekala grasped the Zeika's lower leg in her jaws and dragged him several feet. He made a grunting noise, somewhere between frustration and fear.

Rekala ran back to me, blurring into horse form. We both knew our fastest getaway would be with me riding her. I was still too bleary-eyed from sleep to make a safe transformation.

I grabbed a bit of mane with my free hand and jumped onto her back.

'The fish!' Rekala lamented. It was unthinkable to abandon it. I fought off those sentiments, knowing they were part of the animal instinct to prioritise food, and the icetiger's inability to flex her thinking.

'Leave it,' I commanded, unsure of how many Zeikas were on our trail. *'Once we are safe we may be able to come back for it.'*

She trotted past the Zeika with a flick of her tail. His pants were torn in several places and he seemed unsteady on his feet.

Rekala sensed the approach of another horse before I could hear anything. Moments later, a chestnut warhorse thundered through the forest with Arak on its back.

'Don't they have anything better to do?' I grumbled.

We moved out into an open field and the morning mists were suddenly lit through with light, making the ground glow and sparkling dew drops fly off the yellow grasses. Arak and the warhorse emerged from the shadows of the forest behind us, catching up with alarming speed. I squeezed Rekala's sides with my heels, even though she knew exactly what I was thinking.

A loud clattering came from our right where two horses and a war-carriage careened toward us over the plain. Standing spread-legged on the back were two Zeikas with silver crossbows. The caped driver was smiling with elation.

As we crested a small rise, I could see a supply cart in the middle distance with more Zeikas on board. Others were standing around at some kind of camp site, eating breakfast. Some of them looked surprised to see us, but they set down their meals, gathered weapons and moved to intercept.

'This is really serious.' I took a deep breath, fighting down my fear. The last time I had seen this many Zeikas was a skirmish in the desert a year ago. I had witnessed six of Jaria's warriors repel a force of twice their number. *'If you get a chance, Rekala...'*

'I will bite the neck,' she affirmed. She spun to a halt, kicking up a spray of dew. The chestnut warhorse slammed into us; I hit the ground rolling. Rekala resumed her natural form and ran at one group of horseback enemies.

Gasping for breath, I grabbed for the bow and quiver strapped to my back. It was half-crushed from the fall, making it difficult to get an arrow out. The first two arrows missed by a humiliating distance. Zeikas surrounded me from all sides, closing in at the gallop.

Arak was trying to get back onto his horse. I loosed a third arrow in his direction and it struck his horse in the flank. The animal squealed and bucked like a demon, swaying dangerously close to the oncoming cart.

'Sorry,' I thought, dismayed at injuring an innocent beast. Its flailing hooves struck one of the carthorses. The carthorse tripped and fell, bringing the entire thing to a sliding halt.

I took my chance to run, but three Zeika men were coming at me on foot while two others approached from the other side, swords at the ready. I closed my eyes and shifted into my black wolf form, wincing at the pain along with a sensation of weightlessness as the rules of the natural world were defied.

'Fire!' Rekala screamed. *'Run!'*

The Zeikas were channelling their magic towards us. With their palms up, green fire spewed forth in streams.

I turned and fled through the grass. I heard the thundering of hooves behind us. I stretched my four legs until they burned, but the hot breath of the horse swelled behind me. Muscles strained and locked tight, I faltered to the right, and the horse's hoof clipped my side. I pitched over and lay still in the swaying grass, thrown back into my human form.

I could feel the quiver of arrows on my back digging in. I thought about reaching for the marble-hilted knife at my side, but the Zeikas were upon me too fast, pointing crossbows and polearms at me.

The horse and rider that had run me down galloped off to help capture Rekala. She had been forced to stop and defend herself. At least two of her attackers lay dead, but another Zeika advanced on horseback. The animal snorted in fear, but the Zeika booted it forward. Rekala raked her claws across its chest, causing it to rear and dislodge its rider. Then an arrow struck Rekala's tail, pinning it to the ground.

'No!' *They're going to kill my Rada-kin!* I rolled onto my feet. I sensed Rekala's rage and knew the pain she was in.

'Stop!' I cried. 'Don't hurt her.'

So soon. So soon and it would all be over?

I stood up slowly, holding my arms out. Tears blurred my vision—I wanted to dash them away because these Zeikas could not possibly understand the relationship between Rada and Rada-kin.

A group of men surrounded me, all dressed alike in dark green tunics, black leathers and pale green cloaks. One also wore heavy silver jewellery and black gloves.

This Zeika came to the front, staring down at me with disdain. I perceived an unnatural smoothness to his skin. He might have been twenty-five, but for the piercing green eyes, that burned with ancient hatred.

Arak rode over on his warhorse. So it was he who had driven me to the ground. The animal bounced and snorted in agitation. Arak had pulled my arrow out of its flank, leaving an open wound that streamed blood. When Arak saw the green-eyed man, he cast his eyes down.

'High Commander Jonaal,' Arak stammered, 'I didn't know you would be joining us.' They seemed comfortable talking to each other in Telbion.

'Somebody had to find out what in Zei's name you were doing,' he shouted. 'Explain this!'

He pointed at me and a crackle of fire appeared on the tip of his finger.

'I have brought him to prove the will and power of Zei,' Arak replied. 'This is the Kriite we were sent to find.'

The green-eyed warleader glared at Arak and muttered a curse of some kind. The injured warhorse reared and dislodged its rider, then galloped away like Zei himself was on its tail. Arak struck the ground again.

‘Fool warder,’ Jonaal hissed. ‘You ran off and did this without consulting a summoner. You will suffer the consequences.’

Jonaal’s voice was rough and deep with an accent unfamiliar to me. I remembered his name from my schooling in Jaria. He was the high commander of the Zeika Legion, second only to Bal Harar, and bearing near equal power. And here he was standing right before me. *What is this?*

‘Are you Anzaii?’ he asked me.

I stared at him, shaking my head.

Arak stood to his feet, clutching his side.

‘This is the wild beastman from the ancient line,’ he muttered. ‘I found him. His face matches the picture we’ve all been shown. I recognised him outside a tavern in Tez. Zei sent him to me. Look at his wrist.’

He grasped my arm, bearing the underside. Against my dark olive skin, the livid white talon scar was clearly visible. I saw the hawk in my mind; a memory that would haunt me forever. *It dropped from the sky like a rock, claws outstretched to snare its meal. I saw it a split second before it arrived and instinctively threw up my arms. The raptor’s claws snapped closed over my wrist before it realised I was too heavy to carry off.*

I shook my head, fighting to think straight. They could only know about my scar if I was very well known to them. That meant two things—first—Jaria had been infiltrated by Zeikas at some point—and second—these enemies had me mistaken for somebody important. Little did they know that I only possessed the gift of the Rada, and I was a new one at that.

Rekala tore the arrow out of her tail with her teeth, but by then the Zeikas had her surrounded. She roared at her aggressors. I felt sick listening to her frustrated whine-growls. What would they do to her? With that many weapons pointed at her, she now knew better than to rush one of the Zeikas. Her rational, human sense of self-preservation won out over primeval, animal instinct.

‘He does look like Joram, doesn’t he?’ Arak mused.

‘Hold your tongue or I’ll rip it out of your head.’ Jonaal touched Arak’s face with one finger and a tear appeared in the flesh of his cheek, shooting outwards to his ear. With an earsplitting scream, Arak staggered back, blood pouring down his face and neck. This was Zeika rending magic, which I hadn’t witnessed since I was a child. If Jonaal was a summoner, that meant he also possessed all the powers available to a Zeika. With him nearby, my chances of escape were bleak.

Arak continued to wail.

‘Silence,’ Jonaal snapped. ‘You have interfered in a larger plan, Arak, and for that you will suffer. However, your bungling may have revealed a slight miscalculation in our timing. This Kriite is obviously not at the level Bal Harar requires.’

‘Surely now is the time to seize him, then,’ Arak muttered. ‘Before he becomes as slippery as the other Anzaii we have known.’

‘No, no, no,’ Jonaal growled. ‘He is not ready. I’ve cast a piercing spirit circle upon him, but he’s not even attempting to block us from warding. This means he’s telling it true; this Kriite is not even Anzaii.’

I listened to their conversation in a state of breathless shock. In their quarrelling they didn’t even bother to search me for weapons. I was glad, because my mother’s pendant could easily have seemed like my Anzaii-kin to them, and I didn’t want them to take it or the marble-hilted knife from me. I shifted on the ground, causing Roukney to slide down behind the folds of my shirt. It caught on one of the leather ties on the neck of the shirt. I held my breath as the Zeikas continued to argue.

‘Where is he?’ a silvery voice questioned from behind me. ‘I want to see him.’

Her voice was young, but full of self-confidence.

Jonaal whirled angrily. ‘Not now, Princess.’

‘High Commander Jonaal, this is an unexpected fast delivery of Bal Harar’s promise. You will at least let me see if this Jarian is what I require.’

‘When we arrive at the quarry, he’s all yours.’

Princess? A strangely endearing term for a Zeika to use to one of his whores... And what did she want with me? The Zeikas were renowned for their intensely patriarchal society.

‘Arak,’ Jonaal began, ‘seeing as you brought the Jarian to us prematurely, you will be his guard.’ There was no sympathy for his injuries, of course. Zeikas shunned weakness. He turned to address the other Zeikas who were gathered around. ‘Warder Arak is ambitious, so let’s see what he can do, but there will be no treatment for his wounds until Talon is in Reltland.’

His cloak swept outwards as he stalked away. The other Zeikas laughed as they followed him, casting supercilious looks at Arak, who swore vehemently as he got to his feet. He grabbed me by the collar, projecting Jonaal’s wrath, along with a spattering of blood from his facial wound, onto me.

‘Order your beast to take horse form. She will replace the horse that was killed.’

I strained to see Rekala to my left. She was in her natural form with a wire noose around her neck, struggling to rake her claws at her Zeika captor. The noose grew tighter and tighter until her tongue was hanging out. The skin was thickly furred there, but a ring of red had appeared under the wire.

Rekala, please.’

He lifted a crossbow and aimed it at her head. She morphed into horse form with a flick of her tail.

‘Now tell her that if she tries anything, *you* will suffer.’

I didn’t have to tell her. They led her to the front of the war carriage and put the harness on. One of the other horses snapped at her as the carriage jolted forward. She laid her ears back.

Arak knotted a rope to my wrists and tied me to the back of the second supply cart. I was so relieved he didn’t try to block my access to the waves with a ward again that I didn’t mind the pinching grip of the rope. The carts bounced forward, following the war carriage, and I had no choice but to stumble and run behind.

The two Zeikas on the back of the cart spoke urgently and I saw one gesture at the swirling clouds in the sky. The back of the cart was stacked with sacks of flour and other perishables. If it rained,

they would be ruined. This must be an emergency supply, purchased, or stolen, without thought for bad weather. Where could they be heading? The Zeikas and their slaves lived in Reltland, which was far away across the sea.

I tried to work the binding off my wrists as I jogged, but it was strong. As long as my hands were tied I wouldn't be able to morph. Rada could take another form mid-stride or mid-battle. We could morph with clothes and possessions, knowing they would be restored when we resumed our natural form. But if we were tied up or attached to something larger than ourselves, we were trapped in our current form.

I ran faster to keep up, head pounding each time my feet made contact with the ground. After a while my energy flagged and I leaned on the back of the cart. One of the Zeikas lashed out with his boot and pushed me off with such force that I lost my footing. I was dragged along the ground.

The Zeikas laughed at me. I spat blood and dirt out of my mouth as I grasped at the rope with my fingers. Rocks and rubble scraped my side, but I was unable to regain my feet.

'Stop!' I hollered. 'Let me... up... help... me!'

Arak swore at me from the other cart as ours began to slow. He jumped down, unable to hide his wince of pain.

'Weak fool,' he spat. Blood had congealed on the cut on his face, and he had to be in pain from Rekala's scratches and his falls earlier. 'Get on. You're holding us up.'

He peeled me off the ground and shoved me. I allowed myself to look tired, but drew a series of deep breaths. Now was a better time than ever to attempt an escape, now while I was not exhausted or injured, not warded and knowing my captors were under orders not to kill me.

Aiming for the part of his armour Rekala's claws had penetrated, I kicked him with all my strength. The blow connected, but he staggered back for only a moment.

He drew his sword and shoved me away with the hilt, the rope drawing tighter around my wrists. Arak's blade lashed out, but I ducked and pushed him over with my shoulders.

As he rolled onto the ground, I snatched his broadsword and severed the rope that kept me tied to the cart. I turned to face the other men on the cart. The strong silver hilt sat awkwardly in my bound hands. The amazing dark burgundy colour of the blade almost seemed to shine. I couldn't angle it enough to cut the bonds around my wrists.

'You don't know what you're in for, boy,' Arak growled.

I stood my ground.

'Eeloy will show you,' he sneered.

His eyes grew oddly detached as he summoned the demon in his sword.

'Fire of Zei, burn!' the Zeika called out.

I glanced at the ensorcelled weapon. If the blade burned with magic, wouldn't that work to my advantage? The maroon blade glowed, its bloody light nearly blinding me as veins of magic popped out along its length. The silver hilt also grew hot beneath my hands.

'Drop it!' Rekala screamed, sensing my pain.

'I can't!'

My fingers were locked around the hilt, which glowed orange with heat. I felt my hands scorching. The pain sent aching blows right up my arms.

'Trees, make it stop!' I gasped.

I stepped backwards, dropping the tip to the ground. The hilt dragged at my flesh. My bones might have been melting. The Zeikas looked on in amusement. My head swam. My eyes rolled. I staggered and fell, unable to hold my thoughts.

'Let's finish him off,' one of the Zeikas laughed. 'He's too pathetic to be what you say, Arak.'

'Don't be an imbecile,' Arak retorted. 'Bal Harar has big plans for this one.'

He approached slowly, looking down on me with mock pity, 'Learn when you are beaten, Kriite.'

My neck flopped, my breathing slowed and I licked bitten lips.

'Rekala... Rek...'

'Talon, I'm getting free. The other horses are spooked.'

Rain burst free in the sky, causing the sword to cool and release me. Water was a known counter-agent to Zeika heat magic, which was part of the reason they hated it. I heard cursing as the war carriage and carts plummeted away. Rekala was screaming in feigned terror, which whipped the other horses into a frenzy.

The Zeikas voices faded as they went after the carts in the rain. Only Arak and one other Zeika remained to deal with me. Another mistake.

They cursed at the sudden downpour. Arak picked up his weapon and peered at me. My eyes were mostly closed and I kept very still. Without even looking I knew that my hands were a mess of blood and blisters.

‘Get him up,’ Arak spat. He pulled his hood further over his head and attempted to dry his face with a bandanna.

‘There will be other Anzaii we can rade,’ the other said. ‘Why don’t we just kill this one?’

‘No. The Bal wants this one. He is also our key to the princess and will provide our power over her.’

In my weakened state, it registered dimly that the Zeikas had been referring to an actual princess all along. The Princess Denliyan of Telby was the only one I knew of, but there probably others in the world. And there was a word they had used, an ancient word I could barely recall the meaning of. Rade: violation.

After a long silence, the second Zeika tried again, more quietly. ‘Then leave him here. We have his animal-kin and it is trapped in horse form.’ His voice lowered. I strained to hear his words over the pounding rain.

‘...follow. The situ... fect... should run the animal all... to quarry... follow the original plan.’

Arak pressed his muddy boot onto my chest and nudged one of my hands. I bit back a cry of pain, pretending to be unconscious.

The pair shielded their faces from the rain, stamping their feet in irritation. Would they leave me? I’d better help them decide.

The rain intensified. Arak shouted something obscene in Reltic. I chose that moment to swing my legs around and trip him. Using my elbows to push myself up, I tottered to my feet. My head boomed.

I gazed dizzily ahead at the wind-whipped grass, then stumbled through it like a newborn foal. Thunder pummelled the air and the rain pelted down in blinding sheets. Without turning to see how close my captors were, I ran into the forest.

I lurched to the left and right, bashing into the slick trunks of trees and tripping over bracken. Would Arak follow me into the woods? Should I double back and go in the same direction the carts had gone?

After a while, I realised I was lost. The thrashing trees made the forest look different from the way I remembered it. Exhausted, delirious with pain and shivering, I stopped in a tangle of bushes and sank to my knees.

'Rekala, where are you?'

'You are free?' she exclaimed. Her breathing was laboured and her muscles ached with fatigue. *'Get back to Tez—find help.'*

She was right; there was nothing I could do to help her in this state. I squinted in the darkness, trying to recall which was the right way. I continued in the direction I had been running initially. Strangely, the more I thought about it, the more certain I was that it was right. It was like something was calling me.

I staggered on. The pounding rain beat at my skull like a hammer, but I thanked the Nine Trees for it nonetheless.

Chapter Six—The Wavekeepers

It seemed like I watched myself from afar. Rather than having any actual sense of myself, it was more like throwing open the shutters on my mind. The dark recesses of my memories were suddenly lit, as if by fire. Shadows loomed on one side of my mind, light on the other. Something strange seemed to be awakening. It wasn't me. It was someone else. Yet it knew me, had called me... surveyed me.

Is he hale? How will he react to me? Will he understand? Is he a worthy kindred?

I woke with a start, shouting, 'Tiaro!'

The taste of parn, a liquid drug used to reduce pain, was in my mouth. A salty smell hung in the air, confined by the walls of a small cottage. Somebody was stirring a stew nearby.

'Good morning.'

I blinked, trying to remember what had happened. 'Rekala...'

The woman approached and touched my forehead with her palm. I could smell thyme, calendula and tea tree oil.

'Shh... You're well,' she said, smoothing back my hair.

'Rekala.'

'Who is that? A woman?'

I remembered finding my way to the outskirts of Tez in the pouring rain. My father's friends, Annie and Damia, lived here. They had known me since I was small. They were Kriites but had none of the psionic gifts.

Try as I might, I could not reach my Rada-kin through the waves. What Arak had first attempted on me yesterday morning he had now done to Rekala. Zeika wards were capable of blocking the waves completely, and only an Anzaii of equal or greater power could overcome them. Despite that, I didn't feel entirely alone. It was as if I could still sense another presence...

I looked around suspiciously. An old grey cat snoozed by the hearth. I could hear chickens clucking outside the open window. A pot boiled cheerily over the fire. Other than that, all was still and quiet, including the waves.

A tiny trinket box sat on the bed beside me and I wondered briefly what was inside. While Annie bantered about the weather, local ruffians, and the lack of a good seamstress in Tez, I nodded politely, but my eyes kept straying back to the trinket box.

Eventually, Damia came in for the morning meal. 'It's good to see you awake, young man. That's quite a burn you have there.'

I sat up slowly, holding my bandaged hands out in front of me so as not to knock them. Despite the pain I had been given, I caught my breath and winced.

'Damia, my thanks for your hospitality but I must leave. The Zeikas have my Rada-kin. Have you sent, by wave-caller, to inform Jaria of my plight?'

'No,' he replied. 'We thought it best to let you decide whom to trust with such sensitive information.'

'You will need some time to recover, Talon,' Annie said. 'You can't help your Rada-kin like this.'

I glanced at my hands. 'I can't thank you enough for helping me,' I said. 'But you put yourselves in danger by having me here.'

Damia raised an eyebrow. 'Well now, you are Mandus and Kerra's son, but what can be so important about you to the Zeikas?'

'I don't know,' I stammered. 'I thought perhaps they had the wrong man, but the lower-ranked one, Arak, looked for my scar.'

Said I was from an ‘ancient line’ and that he had recognised my face from an image he’d been shown.’

Damia and Annie exchanged a worried glance.

‘Do you know what this means?’ I asked, desperate for help understanding what I’d heard.

‘Whatever those demon-worshippers are up to it isn’t good,’ Annie said.

‘What did they mean about an ancient line?’ I pressed. ‘Aren’t all Kriites descended from Kaslonica?’

Damia ran his fingers over his scalp, disturbing his neatly combed hair. ‘Yes, but there are families in which psionic magic is particularly strong, even today.’

‘Anzaii families,’ I murmured, thinking of my mother and sister.

I knew from history lessons in Jaria that the people of Kaslonica had been forced to leave their island home when the Zeikas arrived. Our ancient enemies had renamed the realm Reltland. They destroyed any sapphire trees they found in order to protect their demons from their cleansing effects. This diminished the psionic powers of the Kriites.

Over the centuries that followed, Anzaii became rare and each Kriite tribe tended to focus on one of the four types of kindred rather than all of them.

The Jarian and Lythian tribes were Rada—with animal-kin. The Tanzans were Sleffions—with skyearl-kin. The Watercragans were Tolites—with weapon-kin. The Anzaii had a focus-item containing parts of a sapphire tree leaf, which made the object sentient. There was no particular Kriite tribe of Anzaii; as they were so rare they tended to appear in any of them occasionally.

‘Why would Zeikas care so much about an ancient bloodline of Anzaii psions?’

Damia stood up and paced across the room a few times. ‘The minute someone embraces Zei, they may gain agelessness, but all trace of the wave abilities is extinguished and replaced with powers from Zeidarb instead.’

‘Do you think they see Anzaii as a special threat and are trying to slay them?’

‘Not as simple as that, I suspect. Zeika abilities are a counterpoint to an Anzaii’s powers. Because of that Anzaii must be at least one level beyond the Zeikas they face in order to overcome the most advanced aspects of their magic. Due to the fact that Anzaii are usually in battle at the time they discover this, it has rarely been put down in writing, but if you are Anzaii, like they say, you will soon find out for yourself what you can do.’

‘What makes you think I am?’ I asked, trying not to let my irritation show. ‘I don’t want any more abilities right now. I am still a new Rada. I just want to rescue Rekala from those bastards.’

‘You might be glad of the extra powers to get her out,’ Damia said.

‘You’re in no fit state to do anything just now,’ Annie reminded me.

I rested my arms on my knees. They were already aching from the pain in my hands. Annie was right. I couldn’t do much to help Rekala without the use of my hands.

‘We will save her, together.’

My eyes were drawn to the box. Surely it had not spoken to me.

When she saw where I was looking, Annie’s expression changed from one of concern to anticipation. Damia went to a drawer in the kitchen and pulled out a tiny key.

‘You can’t open it yourself,’ he began, ‘but I suppose I can unlock it for you, as long as you’re the first to see inside.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘That box is from your father,’ Annie said. ‘A gift for when you first found your Rada-kin.’

‘What is it?’ I leaned closer.

‘We don’t know. We’ve never opened it. But we know he bought it for you in Watercrag.’

I glanced at him. Most of the world’s sapphite smiths were in Watercrag. Tolite weapons were enhanced with shards from a sapphire tree’s leaves, imbuing them with properties of sentience and making them accessible on the waves.

I swallowed. ‘My father bought that for me?’

‘He loved you,’ Annie said.

Damia's expression grew troubled. 'Even though he was... different... towards the end.'

Damia turned the key and opened the tiny lid. A whisper of wind seemed to escape the box. That vaguely familiar word floated into my mind again: Tiaro. Damia held the box so I could see inside. There was an earring about the size of a gold piece. It was a thick, gold ring decorated with a stripe of blue positioned in a deep groove.

'Can you take it out for me?' I requested of Annie.

She smiled as she extracted it, turning it around for me to see. The post of the earring was thick, secured at the back by a tiny clutch. A more expensive earring my father could not have found. Compared with the simple shell and wood earring I currently wore, it was like something a noble would wear and even then it would be one-of-a-kind.

'Is that sapphite down the middle?' I pondered. As I spoke, my breath flowed over the gem and it glowed in Annie's hand.

'Appears so. By the Nine Trees, would you look at that?'

Annie, Damia and I stared at the vibrant light sparkling from the strip of blue.

'Indeed it is made from a Great Sapphire Tree,' said a strange voice in my head.

'Who's that?' I replied, while at the same realising it was true—I was an Anzaaii.

'You're hearing it? It is then! You are then!' Damia whooped. I was touched by his enthusiasm, but also elated by the magnificent gift. From my father. And the gift of a rare psionic power, like my sister before me. It was almost enough to lift my spirits.

'If only you were here to share this, Rekala.'

'An earring?' Damia stammered, smiling.

'Why not?' Annie replied. 'The Anzaaii-kin can be just about anything.'

'Just be thankful you didn't get a harp.'

'A harp?'

Annie had been holding the earring in front of my eyes all the while.

‘I really am Anzaii, just like the Zeikas said. And if it weren’t for them I wouldn’t have even visited you...’

Damia marvelled at the glowing earring. ‘It must have been waiting for you—for this very moment.’

I leaned back against the wall, overwhelmed by the rapid changes in my life. Perhaps I would get my wish and go over to the south side of Jaria; as an Anzaii my skills would be sought after.

‘But what about becoming quartermaster?’ I asked. ‘Is that still my role for Jaria or has it now changed?’

‘I believe Jaria’s Anzaii have usually been involved in more sensitive matters,’ Annie said. ‘Your mother went on many important quests for them. Kerra and Mandus often stopped by here and stayed with us.’

She put the earring down on my thigh. I fell silent, contemplating.

After a while Annie brought over a bowl of stew and spoon-fed it to me.

‘Thank you,’ I said, feeling like an overgrown infant.

‘Now, listen, you will let me feed you and tend you. Burns like that might not seem like much, but I’ve seen full grown warriors die of the red death after similar.’

‘*What now?*’ I asked the earring while I chewed. *‘What do I do with you?’*

My new Anzaii-kin’s voice was at least as strong as Rekala’s had been. Unlike Rekala, it seemed to have burst into life with foreknowledge, a connection to the supreme psionic powers of the sapphire trees.

‘Nine Trees, I’ve bonded with a half-wit,’ the earring lamented.

‘Right... uh... put you in my ear, yes, but I mean...’

If the earring could have moved of its own volition it would have. As it was, I sensed a whoop of mock triumph. Tiaro had awakened with a well-developed sense of humour.

‘I am a “she” thank you,’ the earring said. *‘I rather like the primary female archetype that dominates your thoughts. Oh we shall get along splendidly.’*

‘I thought you just said I was a half-wit,’ I retorted.

But I knew it was only light-hearted teasing. Like Rekala, she absorbed my thoughts and memories. Every second, she discovered

something new. Through my senses she was coming alive. Then she sensed the pain in my hands. She shied backwards out of my mind, enclosing herself in the earring.

‘It’s all right,’ I said out aloud. ‘It’s just a flesh-wound. I will recover.’

‘Are you talking to the earring, Talon?’ Annie asked.

‘Yes, strange as it sounds. She has discovered pain for the first time.’

Despite the awkwardness of my injuries I recovered quickly. I had to. Every hour apart from Rekala was more distressing than the one before. I had difficulty sitting still or sleeping, even though I could do nothing useful to save Rekala like this.

I managed to track down my abandoned packs, but wild creatures and insects had devoured most of my food supplies, including the fish Rekala had so coveted.

I tried many things to take my mind off the aching hole inside me—walks around Tez, conversations at the local tavern, stables and gardens. I read the news scrolls and Damia’s precious few leather-bound books.

In the news scrolls from Telby there was more about the Zeikas in Telby and Princess Denliyan’s need for an heir. I wondered if the two were linked somehow. Some of the headlines that caught my attention were *Wave-callers accused of leaking private information*, *Zeikas provide rum for slum taverns* and *Princess Denliyan still without heir—cousins curry the king’s favour*.

Annie bathed my hands in her calendula and tea tree salve day by day, and clucked with concern as the blistered flesh turned from pinkish red to an ugly purple-grey colour. I spent those few weeks doing very little with my hands and receiving help from Annie and Damia to clothe and feed myself. I couldn’t even spend much time in the various animal forms I had learned, because walking on sore and weeping forefeet would slow the healing process and I was anxious to continue after Rekala.

Damia fixed Tiaro in my left earlobe. She loved it when I walked in the fields where she could absorb everything I was sensing. I

was her conduit to the world and, although she perceived things through the filters I had in my mind, she was already able to throw a different light on certain issues. Usually, when she touched upon something I didn't want to think about, it was our mutual agreement to leave it alone. We were constantly aware of the danger Rekala was in, but were powerless to do anything about it.

'As soon as I'm mended, we'll return to Jaria for help,' I told Annie one afternoon. 'We'll get Rekala back and hopefully find out more about that quarry the Zeikas were talking about.'

'I'm glad you're optimistic,' Annie replied.

'Does that mean she thinks it's hopeless?' I wondered.

Earlier that day Damia had left for Tasset to send word to Bessed via the wave-caller. We could now see him coming down the road in his horse-drawn cart. Annie seemed relieved to see him.

When he drew near, she said, 'You didn't see any Zeikas, did you, dear?'

'Matter of fact, there were a few,' he called out over the sound of the horse's hooves. 'It's a good thing we made you stay at home, Talon.'

'What's the word from Bessed?' I asked.

Damia handed me a piece of papyrus, covered in messy handwriting.

Foster son,

You've no idea how relieved we are to hear from you. The village is in an uproar at your news. Scouts have confirmed the proximity of our ancient enemies. There's a camp upstream, but no sign of a quarry or of your beloved new kin.

Hoping you're able to return home soon.

B

‘He’s not taking any chances with this note falling into the wrong hands, is he?’ I commented.

‘You can’t blame him for being careful,’ Damia replied. ‘If Zeikas really are allowed back in ‘Telby now, there’s no knowing what they could get their hands on.’

‘Why would they be allowed into ‘Telby, and not the ‘Tanzans?’ I asked.

‘If there’s been a change to the law and some kind of treaty between ‘Telby and Reltland,’ Damia replied.

During the time I remained in ‘Tez, the thirtieth day of the year came by—commonly known as New Day. Kriites celebrated the Nine Ancient Sapphire Trees, which were supposedly scattered throughout the continent in secret places only known to some. People of other races used it to celebrate their own births and fertility. Because it was the year 700—a centenary—even more gifts than usual and bigger feasts would be held this year.

Damia and Annie weren’t a wealthy couple, so I did what I could, with bandaged hands, to help them prepare a small feast. Annie allowed me to help by reciting a recipe I knew for the evening meal.

After the meal we listened to Damia play some tunes on his lute. As was the nightly ritual, Annie unwrapped the bandages on my hands and inspected the injuries. This time I was pleased to see some newly sealed flesh. I was able to clench and unclench my fists without breaking the skin. The shiny pink and white scars were hideous and the flesh was taut and tender to the touch.

‘We’ll have to leave those bandages off some of the time now, Talon,’ she said. ‘And let it all dry out.’

‘In that case I should like to take my leave in the morning,’ I said quietly.

‘You should let the scars form up more before doing anything with your hands unbandaged,’ Damia warned. ‘A few more days?’

I shook my head, saying, ‘It has already been fifteen. Who knows what suffering my Rada-kin endures while I rest safely here?’

‘But your fellows have looked for her...’ Annie began.

‘Not as hard as I would,’ I replied. ‘I will not give up until I find her.’

‘But, from what you said, the Zeikas are expecting you to follow,’ Damia countered sternly. ‘It is most certainly a trap. Now that you are Anzaii it is no wonder they want you as their slave.’

It was true that the Zeikas knew I was Anzaii—they had known even before I did. I lowered my eyes, having made up my mind, but not wishing to argue with my hosts. If they had Rada-kin they would understand.

‘I can’t thank you enough for what you’ve done. Is there any way I can repay you?’

‘No,’ Damia replied, ‘but please deliver this letter to Archive Master Namal.’

‘It would be my pleasure,’ I said, receiving the rolled-up vellum scroll from him. I marvelled briefly at its quality. This scroll was obviously something important, yet it appeared to be years old.

I left the following morning before the day-star rose. Damia and Annie lent me their horse-drawn cart and a knapsack full of supplies. There were no signs of Zeikas during the four-day journey back to Jaria. I travelled mostly during the night and the early hours of the morning and slept in the back of the cart through midday and afternoons when my body was naturally at a low-ebb. Because I had to take the cart along the road to Jaria, I was constantly on alert for enemies.

Tiaro talked to me from time to time, but without any wave activity in my mind there was little for her to enhance or teach me. She was a constant presence, but it wasn’t the same as the loving companionship I had begun to share with Rekala.

After each night of travel, I would hide the cart off to the side of the road, feed and brush down the horse, eat an uncooked breakfast and tend the wounds on my hands. During my preparations for sleep, Tiaro often thought about the Nine. Visions of soaring branches with shiny blue leaves soothed my anxiety. It was a good habit, she informed me, whether we were sleeping during the day or at night. Envisioning the trees my people revered could bring calm and peace for a more fortifying sleep.

On the third morning in the wilderness, I tried taking on my wolf form. My forepaws were a little tender against the ground, but it was worth it for the chance to have fresh meat. Tiaro was in my ear when I morphed down into wolf form, and while I was shapechanged she remained in my ear.

While we travelled that night Tiaro also explained some of the things she knew about the gift of Anzaii to me. She contained a sliver from a Great Sapphire Tree leaf and was awakened with pre-existing knowledge. Not all Anzaii-kin had elements from a Great Sapphire Tree; some were from an ordinary sapphire tree. This made her potentially much more powerful.

'Because I lived and worked on the north side of Jaria, the secrets of the psionic gifts were never taught to me in detail,' I said. *'I don't have a clear idea of what an Anzaii does.'*

'It includes the ability to understand any and all wave patterns,' Tiaro said. *'In time, we will be able to converse through the waves with other sorts of beings, starting with other people's kin.'*

'I thought the purpose of the Anzaii was wave warfare, not communication,' I said.

'Effective communication is the foundation of a successful war campaign. Over time you will develop heightened senses within the waves. All Rada, Tolites and Sleffion use the waves, but you will become a master of them.'

After only a few weeks I couldn't imagine living without Tiaro. But in no way had she replaced Rekala. A fierce anger rose every time I imagined Rekala under Zeika control. She was still so wild. To be forced into human captivity was bound to leave its mark.

After such a hasty journey I entered Jaria with tired eyes and an impatient heart. My house was tidier than I had left it a few weeks ago, and the deer leg was gone. Drea's handiwork. I changed into some fresh clothes, adding my leather surcoat for extra protection. Even though I was hungry, I forsook eating in favour of finding Namal.

Namal had been a master since before I was born—he had adopted the post of archive master seven years ago when the previous master passed away.

Along with three other masters, he answered to Elder Y’asa who was the same rank as Bessed. Y’asa, Bessed, Safton and Uvolde reported to Prime Arone. Should the prime ever fall it would be up to the four elders and sixteen masters to vote for a new prime.

A tent-like structure adjoined the main part of Namal’s lodging. The entry flap was pinned up, allowing the breeze to flow through. Namal’s Rada-kin, Josker, was standing in his front yard, wagging his tail at me. I patted him on the head and tickled under his left ear. I got the impression from the grey wolf that I was welcome to enter the tent.

Namal looked up from his writing desk as I stepped through the doorway. Without saying a word, I held up my scarred hands for him to see.

He got up at once and grasped my arms. ‘By the trees! How did that happen?’

‘Zeikas,’ I answered.

‘You strayed farther than Tez?’ he queried.

‘I did not.’

His brown curly hair was beginning to grey. He suddenly looked older.

‘That’s just one of many changes, I’m afraid,’ Namal said hoarsely. ‘To have your Rada-kin taken so soon... I’m sorry our scouts haven’t located her. They are sure there’s a Zeika presence upriver but don’t know where they’ve taken your icetiger.’

I glanced sideways. ‘I’m going out myself tomorrow.’

He nodded and spoke in his slow, rasping voice. ‘Don’t go alone.’

‘Who will go with me? Doesn’t the battle commander already have people out searching?’

‘Elder Uvolde sent warriors as soon as we heard what had happened to you,’ Namal replied. ‘I’m certain she would understand your desire to go yourself, but you may need to go see her first.’

I knew Namal and Uvolde sometimes struggled to get along, so I didn’t take his instruction to see her lightly. The archive master was

the village historian, a bookish type, not a warrior, very much a north sider. Elder Uvolde was all south side. As the battle commander she coordinated all the combat training and defensive efforts of Jaria. She'd never taken much interest in me.

'I was going to find Bessed and Drea, next.' I turned to exit the tent. 'But perhaps I'll run over to the fortress first. I presume that's where I'll find the battle commander?'

'Forgive me,' Namal said, following. 'I had gotten used to the idea of your being bonded. I forgot you can't tell where Uvolde is now, without your Rada-kin. She's—'

As I pushed through the open tent flap, I came face-to-face with two moving bodies. A tall, black-haired man was wrestling with Feera, the village Anzaii. She was wearing a blue robe with a jewel-encrusted belt and, at first, I thought perhaps the man was trying to steal the belt from her.

The man shoved Feera into the side of the tent, narrowly missing me with his wild, furious punches. I dived for him, but the pair were moving too fast. Feera crouched low and seemed about to transform, but the man thrust his sword down through her heart.

I caught my breath.

Feera slumped to the ground, dead. Seconds later, a black rock cat landed on the man's shoulders and savaged the back of his neck. Blood sprayed into the air, filling my nostrils with a sharp, metallic tang. The man toppled over like a felled tree. The cat collapsed on its belly by the dead woman and yowled in torment.

Namal pushed past me and grabbed the felled man by the shoulders. 'Who are you? What are you doing here?'

The man blinked, took a ragged, soggy breath. His head was twisted up in an awkward position.

He reached toward Namal and implored him, 'We must stop him... Bal Harar. The Wavekeepers... are the only way. Bal Harar is going to use all the Anzaii to find Kriites everywhere. You must purge them from your midst... go into hiding. Preserve the Kriite way before it's too late...'

Namal looked from the man to me. 'He's mad!'

'He's dead,' I replied.

The eyes stared lifelessly at the sky. Namal lifted the man's hand, revealing a small ring of crystal.

'Must be some kind of cult,' Namal said. He moved to Feera's body. His voice quavered with emotion. 'Poor Feera... What a despicable way to be torn from this world. She was our only Anzaii.'

'Actually,' I replied, 'there's something else I need to tell you.'

Chapter Seven—Intruder

All the Rada in Jaria became aware of Feera’s murder in a matter of minutes. Josker communicated what he had seen to every Rada-kin within range of his wave abilities and they, in turn, passed it on to their human counterparts and other Rada-kin who were further away.

Namal’s house, which was close to the village centre, was soon surrounded by people and animals. There was no need for anyone to ask Namal or me what had happened, and the horror on the faces around us spoke so much more than words. Prime Arone rode in on his Rada-kin, a chestnut stallion, followed by a group of foot soldiers and four aides.

‘Welcome back, Talon,’ he said. ‘I see it hasn’t taken long for you to get involved in some more trouble.’

Our leader’s voice was gruff, the expression hard, so I said nothing as he dismounted. I hadn’t had much to do with Arone in recent years—he’d approved of Bessed and Drea’s efforts to reform me, but I had never had much reason to interact with him. Namal swallowed, wiped his eyes and leaned on my shoulder.

‘Prime Arone,’ he began, ‘what we’ve seen here today, and what Talon has been through recently, abhors me. We must call a Village Council meeting at once. I fear there is some connection between these events.’

‘Gather the elders and masters,’ Arone instructed one of his aides. ‘We’ll convene in the Centre shortly.’ He crouched over

the black-haired man's corpse asking, "This is the killer? Isn't this Dugan, the fletcher from Tasset?"

Some others around us agreed. Namal flipped over Dugan's wrist to look at the crystal band on his finger. "And this is the only clue we have of his deviant beliefs."

"He referred to something called the Wavekeepers," I said.

Arone kept his eyes on the archive master.

Namal slid the ring off Dugan's finger and held it up to the sky. The light of the day-star glinted through the rough-cut crystal circle, casting tiny speckles of light across Namal's face.

"You will lead the investigation," Prime Arone said to Namal. "I want to know everything about this cult and why they have killed Jaria's only Anzaii."

Namal glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, giving me the slightest head shake. He didn't consider it safe for me to reveal myself in front of the crowd. Although most of them were Kriites, there were a few dozen strangers who had wandered over from the marketplace to see what was going on.

"Prime," Namal said, "may I request Talon be given protection while we sort out what's going on?"

Arone looked Namal in the eyes, and I thought perhaps their Rada-kin conversed on their behalf, passing information so nobody else could hear. Eventually Arone ran an appraising look over my face, flared his nostrils in a horselike manner and nodded.

He gestured to two of the warriors who had been with him. "Cora, Paril, accompany Talon for the rest of the day. Stay sharp."

"Yes, Prime," Cora replied.

Arone took one last look at Feera before departing at a canter.

The rock cat howled and snarled when people came to take Feera's body. Both hers and Dugan's were loaded onto the back of a horse-drawn wagon and trundled away. A member of the Village Watch took down Namal's and my eyewitness account of what had happened on a scroll.

With the departure of the prime and the two bodies, most of the crowd dispersed. Bessed and Drea appeared down the road, jogging with their Rada-kin alongside.

Drea was so relieved to see me she and her hunting dog nearly bowled me over. Caltan wound around my legs, yipping. Wrapping her arms around me, Drea patted my back, head and neck as if searching for additional injuries. Then she held my arms, so my palms were facing upwards, and gasped at the scarring.

‘We were so worried about you,’ she said. ‘Your poor hands.’

Bessed rebuked himself. ‘I think next time we send someone out of town for supplies they’re going to need an escort. It’s my fault you were so vulnerable... and so soon after meeting Rekala. I’m so sorry, Talon.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ I responded. ‘I have been gathering things alone for you for years—’

‘The Zeikas’ timing in relation to your recent advancement is alarming,’ Namal interrupted. ‘It’s almost as if they knew your talents were emerging.’

‘It did seem like that, the way they spoke of me,’ I agreed.

‘*Scrying*,’ Tiaro suggested. *‘A Zeika ability that attaches spying demons to a person or place, which are then able to send visual information back to the scryer over a distance, limited by their skill.’*

To my horror, Namal’s words confirmed what Tiaro said. ‘While you were away, Feera discovered six scrying marks around the village. Most were on the outskirts near where our lookout towers are, but one was outside your home.’

‘Mine? Does that mean that a scryer could have been looking to see what was happening there at any time?’

‘I’m afraid so. If he was close enough at the time, the Zeika responsible for casting the mark would have seen you come home with Rekala.’

‘Is it gone now?’ I asked, looking west towards my abode, just visible beyond the corner of Bessed and Drea’s place.

‘Yes,’ Namal said. ‘I’m not sure if you know this, Talon, but Feera’s Anzaii abilities were limited. She was able to abolish the marks around Jaria, but if there was a mark on you, she would not have been able to detect it.’

‘What’s the difference?’ I queried.

‘Our knowledge of Zeika sorcery is limited,’ Namal replied, ‘but we do know that marking a place for scrying is simpler than marking a being. It’s not usually until a Zeika reaches conjurer status that he can mark and scry a living being.’

‘I hadn’t been around any Zeikas long enough to be marked until recently,’ I replied. ‘I suppose High Commander Jonaal could have done it when I was their prisoner... He said my Anzaii abilities hadn’t come out yet. It was like they let me go...’

‘You would have to have been unconscious not to notice it,’ Tiaro said. ‘The pain of a scrying mark is similar to being branded with a hot iron. It also takes time and effort on the part of the Zeika—you do not recall anything like that from what I’ve seen of your memories.’

I passed on Tiaro’s comments to the others.

‘Wait a minute,’ Drea said. ‘Talon, are you Anzaii now?’ She looked me over and noticed Tiaro in my earlobe. ‘That’s it isn’t it—your Anzaii-kin?’

‘Shh,’ Namal cautioned her. ‘We don’t want the word to get around yet. Please tell your kin to keep it to themselves for now. We’ll talk about it at the Council meeting.’

Drea looked from me to Namal, trying to hide her grin. ‘We always knew you were destined for something important, Talon.’

‘Walk with us to the Centre,’ Bessed suggested to me.

Drea clung to my arm as we walked. Caltan was on my other side, pressing his body against my leg. Namal, Bessed and my two guards were close behind us. We crossed the road and passed around a small outbuilding of supplies that were used for shows and other entertainment in the Centre. As the Centre itself came into view we could hear a small group of people. Some were holding each other and crying, others shouting at a woman in her early twenties.

‘Go on, Lythian, resume your feat.’

‘The children are upset. It will help take our minds off—’

‘If you insist.’

She was tall and lean with dark red hair and blue eyes, just like the woman Ivon had described to me last time I’d been here. I tried not to gawk at the appealing shape of her body.

Ten speckled eagle feathers stuck out from her collar. Her shoulders were bare except for a circle of gold on each that depicted a tiger's head. Except for wrist guards, she wore no other metal armour.

A small male firetiger waited by her side, reddish fur on end. The woman's right arm rippled with tension—the hard ridges of her muscles angled straight down the shaft of a drawn arrow. The black warbow seemed like part of her body.

At the far end of the field was a middle-aged man in a red tunic, black vest and dark blue pants. A few feet away from him was a table with six small metal cups on it. They were dented, and many more cups with holes littered the ground. The pair must have been interacting in front of the crowd before Feera was slain.

The woman's arrow struck one of the cups, making it fly off the table and thud onto the dirt some distance away. The man walked over to the remaining cups and picked one up to reveal a round blue stone.

'It was here,' he said, raising one finger like a red flag. 'Now, watch more closely.'

He placed it under another cup and switched them around rapidly. The small crowd was riveted. The woman frowned, colouring slightly. He stepped well clear and gestured for her to try again. She did. Her aim was impeccable, but this trickster kept her from hitting the right cup. When only one remained, he picked it up and, not one but, three blue stones fell out.

'How could you miss them?' he mocked.

A murmur of laughter followed as the woman made her way slowly toward him. Bessed, Drea and Namal waved goodbye to me and crossed the Centre to get to the village hall. My guards went with me to the trickster and the red-haired woman.

'You cheated,' the Lythian said with little humour, 'or used trickery...'

He grinned at her menacingly. 'I told you I could do it.'

She spoke so quietly I could hardly hear. 'You didn't say you were going to cheat.'

The man did something to each of the cups, releasing stones from them all. He threw the stones out all over the ground for the children to gather and turned to glare at the red-haired archer.

‘Don’t be a bad sport now. It’s unbecoming, even for a slave.’

She went stiff. ‘What did you say?’

He ignored her and walked off. When she grabbed his shoulder from behind, he jerked around and struck her in the face.

‘Keep your filthy hands off me, infidel!’ he shouted. ‘That was no way to treat a woman in Jaria, and he should have known it. There seemed to be a flash of regret in his eyes as he realised he had drawn attention to himself.’

I darted forward, but the small firetiger beat me to it, leaping onto the man’s shoulders. He hit the ground hard and dust flew up around him, coating his clothing. He swore as the Rada-kin’s hot breath smothered him. While the tiger pinned him down, the Lythian woman touched a streak of blood on her cheek, and grabbed the man’s fist for a closer look. There was a ring on his finger with the green and black jewel hidden on the underside of his finger.

‘He’s wearing a Zeika ring,’ the woman shouted to the crowd. Then, to him, she said, ‘Poorly concealed.’

‘A murderer from a cult and now a Zeika!’ I wave-shouted.

A number of Rada-kin looked up. Had they heard me, or was it this woman’s firetiger summoning their aid?

Jarian warriors surrounded the infiltrator, jostling my guards and me behind them. Minutes later, Prime Arone and his aides appeared from inside the hall, eyes fixed upon the intruder. Two of his aides had crossbows trained on the Zeika.

‘Get this beast off me,’ the man snapped, but the firetiger only pressed closer.

Arone gave no reaction.

‘My name is Regar,’ the Zeika said. ‘I have a private message for the prime of Jaria.’

‘Splittin’ deceiver!’ the red-haired woman shouted.

Prime Arone put one hand on the woman's forearm. 'Sarlice of Lyth, isn't it?' She bobbed her head. 'What were you doing with this Zeika?'

'He came here with a travelling caravan to entertain the children,' she said. 'He noticed me practicing with my Tolite-kin.' She gestured at her warbow. 'And he claimed to be able to best me at a shooting memory game.'

'The attack on Feera interrupted the show,' one of the spectators explained. 'But we urged her to continue. Anything to distract from this tragedy.'

Something is still afoot! I wanted to shout, but my guards were pulling me further back. I didn't want Arone to speak harshly to me again.

'Let me up,' Regar shouted, struggling against the firetiger and surrounding warriors. 'I would speak with you.'

'You are a Zeika spy,' Arone responded. 'Yet you wish to be treated like an ambassador and allowed to speak?'

'You will all be subdued. I only came to offer you a chance to surrender and preserve some lives in exchange for something we want.'

'What right do you have—'

'You who do not speak the name Zeidarb in reverence, and submit to the rule of his chosen ones, will become our slaves or die.'

The Jarians around him swarmed over him at these words. Sarlice's firetiger closed his jaws around the man's hand, and blood seeped out between his fangs. Sarlice pulled hard on the tiger's tail to make him let go. A sense of predatory bloodlust prickled across my scalp, causing me to flinch. *Where did that come from?*

The tiger snarled, took a swipe at the Zeika then stepped back.

'Bold words for one who will soon know the back of a Jarian jail cell.'

Regar laughed at all the warriors surrounding him. 'You are afraid of me. That is wise.'

The Jarians pulled him to his feet, holding his arms behind his back. One pulled his ring from his finger and flung it to the ground.

It occurred to me I didn't even know whether Zeika magic was tied to their artefacts like Kriite powers were connected to their kindred.

From the outside Arone seemed calm, but I somehow knew his Rada-kin was rallying others through the waves. It was as if I could sense a distant shouting crowd. 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm here to find out where a young man by the name of Talon is,' Regar replied, glancing around. 'Have you seen him?'

Without looking in my direction, Arone cocked his head. 'How interesting. And what would you want with one of our hunter-gatherers?'

'Get him out of here,' Sarlice hissed to my guards. 'Arone's Rada-kin spoke directly to mine. He says to get Talon to his home right away.'

Cora and Paril crowded in front of me so there was no chance the Zeika would see me. Neither of them had Rada-kin so it wasn't possible for them to communicate with Arone like Sarlice and her firetiger had. It occurred to me that by assigning them as my guards Prime Arone hadn't really taken seriously the need for my protection.

The red-haired warrior tugged on my hand. 'Come on,' she urged.

'But the Zeikas know where my home is,' I whispered.

She shrugged. 'Would you like to disobey the prime?'

I backed slowly away, torn between my distrust and my need to follow Prime Arone's directive. I followed Sarlice back behind an outbuilding. Cora and Paril crept after us, more Jarians filling the gap between them and the Zeika so that he couldn't see me.

'Which home is yours?' Sarlice asked.

'How do I know I can trust you, Lythian? You were with that Zeika—'

'You don't have to trust me, Jarian, but if you want to live I'd suggest getting out of sight.'

She was the daughter of the Lythian Prime, a fellow Rada and Kriite. If I couldn't trust her, who could I trust? Cora and Paril were much older than me, but I'd seen them around the village and knew they were loyal to Arone.

'Fine.' I pointed and started walking. 'This way.'

A few minutes later I stopped at the doorway and peered back towards the village centre.

'What's going on?' I asked Sarlice.

'They've taken Regar into the village hall for questioning,' she replied. 'Listen, I really think we should get you inside.'

'All right,' I said. 'Come in and wash your face. That must be stinging.'

'It's nothing,' she murmured.

'We'll stay out here,' Paril said. 'One out front and one back.'

'Thanks,' I replied.

Sarlice hovered at the door with her head nearly touching the top of the frame. She was taller than me. The firetiger marched boldly into my home and lay down in the middle of the room, tail flicking.

'You're from Lyth?' I asked Sarlice.

She glanced outside before fixing her attention on me. 'That's right. I arrived here a few weeks ago. Life seems... easier here.'

I turned away to mask the frown that came to my brow. My new Rada-kin had just been captured, a woman murdered in front of me and a strange Zeika was in town looking for me. If this was easy, I didn't want to know what difficult was like.

'I apologise,' she said. 'I can be... outspoken.'

I blinked. *Had she read the emotion in my body language?* It might seem a little crazy if I asked her how she knew what I was thinking. To my knowledge she wasn't an Anzaii, and only the most advanced Anzaii could wave speak with fellow humans anyway. With Rekala out of contact I knew it wasn't her passing on information. Occasionally Rada-kin would unintentionally allow thoughts to flow between them.

'We are constantly on the run in Lyth,' she clarified. 'No permanent settlements.'

'I've heard about it,' I replied. I had never been to visit the other Rada but I knew they shifted from site to site throughout the forest to escape their enemies. The forest itself was far from here, situated in a lush valley between the snow flats of Siffre and the Barh desert.

'It's part of Telby, isn't it?'

‘Only to ‘Telbions,’ she snapped. ‘King Flale tries to impose his illegitimate rule upon us. It’s easy enough to avoid Regent Mastema’s patrols most of the time.’

‘You’ve had problems there from Zeikas, too, all throughout their exile from ‘Telby, haven’t you?’ I asked. ‘Why doesn’t the king enforce the ban down your way?’

‘That’s what I’m going to ‘Telby to find out,’ she said. ‘I came here to Jaria for them to send somebody with me. Now that I see you having your own problems with Zeikas, there’s all the more reason for Jaria and Lyth to form a united front to King Flale.’

‘It’s been twenty-three years since the ban. Why are you only going to ‘Telby about it now?’

‘Lyth has regularly petitioned the King of ‘Telby. Ambassadors have been going to ‘Telby since before I was out of swaddling rags.’

‘I can see how Jaria must seem like a much easier place to live, but I’ve only recently met my Rada-kin, and she has already been taken from me.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Sarlice met my eyes briefly. ‘I hope you get her back.’

A thin trail of blood had dried down one side of her face where the Zeika’s ring had cut her.

I stepped over the snoozing form of Sarlice’s Rada-kin and grabbed a bit of cloth from a basket under my bed. I mixed salt and water in a small wooden bowl and stepped over the firetiger once more.

One dark red paw whipped around my ankle, claws extended. I staggered, trying not to spill the mixture. Sarlice gave me a droll, catlike look and nudged the firetiger with her foot.

‘For your injury,’ I said, giving her the bowl.

She mopped at her face.

‘Kestric, you’re not helping.’ She stroked the tiger’s fire-coloured ruff with her boot. ‘He’s always been playful like this.’

When I focused my attention on him he seemed to become sharper and warmer.

‘Greetings, Anzaii, Rada Talon.’

His voice was faint at first—as if someone had spoken to me as I woke from a dream. He repeated himself until I perceived him clearly within the waves.

‘Trees...’ I breathed in reverence.

‘Your psionic powers are manifesting,’ Tiaro said.

The earring had remained silent all this time, observing my experiences from my earlobe.

‘What’s wrong?’ Sarlice asked in alarm.

‘Talon is Anzqii,’ Kestric said to both of us. *‘Therefore he and I can communicate.’*

‘Oh!’ Sarlice exclaimed.

That would explain why she had appeared to know what I was thinking.

She looked at me closely and noticed Tiaro for the first time. The earring throbbed to life and sparkled with such luminosity that even I could see it out of the corner of my eye.

‘That is a rare gift,’ Sarlice gasped.

She and the firetiger conversed privately.

Now that Tiaro was more engaged with my mind, and with the waves, a swooping feeling in my stomach alerted me to some kind of danger.

Tiara’s focus seemed far away as she said, *‘We are starting to be able to hear the other Rada-kin, Talon. Something is wrong. Listen.’*

I closed my eyes and focused on the waves around me, sensing small ripples all over the place. It was similar to when I had first started hearing Rekala, but this time there were many more presences and they were fainter and harder to understand. Their emotions broadcast something terrible, though. Words came slowly into clarity. I was out of my house and running in an instant, the old Barh sword heavy in my hand.

‘What’s wrong?’ Sarlice called at the run.

‘Where are you going?’ Cora demanded.

Some of the other Rada had just received warnings from their own Rada-kin and were moving away from the village centre.

‘The lookouts are slain,’ I called back to them. ‘Rada-kin are searching the perimeters for more Zeikas.’

I stumbled down into wolf form—the Barh sword vanished out of my hand just before it touched the ground. Tiaro hung securely from my lupine ear.

Sarlice was somewhere behind me—both she and Kestric followed my lead and transformed into wolves. Cora and Paril weren't quick enough to stop us, nor could they hope to keep up, so we left them behind. We raced down the streets and between the houses, to the western edge of the village, where the voices on the waves seemed to be most alarmed.

Sarlice, Kestric and I slipped into the forest. I scented magic—an acrid aroma that spoke darkness to my soul. Sarlice followed me about the forest for a few minutes, unaware of the locations of all the other Rada-kin as I now was.

A handful of predator Rada-kin were creeping through the jungle nearby, and there were at least six monkeys in the treetops. I closed my mouth to quiet my breathing and heard far too many heartbeats to count. *It must be a whole battalion of soldiers!*

Between us, we counted nearly two hundred Zeikas riddled throughout the bracken like spiders, poised before their leaders. My nose told me that the five Jarians at their feet were dead. There was fresh blood on one of the Zeika's twin daggers and a smear upon his lip where he had tasted one of his kills.

Most of the other Zeikas carried scythes or maces and wore black leather and chainmail that would hide them well in darkness. I guessed that the Zeikas wearing thick moss-green capes and heavy silver jewellery were higher in rank.

There was a murmuring among the men and they each took their initiation necklaces in their hands. The medallions were circular in shape, bearing the sign of Zei, the Xeldfet, and with one or two black triangles on the outer edge. Most of these Zeikas were flammers, capable of casting wards and flames. One of them, who had four triangles, ranking him as a conjurer, was probably the leader of this group. On his right side was a wicked black dragon standing stock still to the point of lifelessness. It stared emptily ahead with beady black eyes. Flames licked from its oily black neck—a mane of

greenish yellow fire. The feet on the ends of its four black legs were wickedly clawed, its body was scrawny and its wings were batlike.

'A tyrak,' I said openly through the waves.

'You are Anzaii. Can you dispel it?' Kestric demanded.

I turned my attention to Tiaro. *'Well, can we?'*

'Doubtful,' she replied. *'Even if, by the trees, you could already dispel, you would have to be touching it to locate it on the waves. Only more advanced Anzaii can apply their skills from a distance.'*

A blast from the direction of the village drowned us with heat and sound. I spun to peer in the direction of the explosion, and missed the Zeika soldiers' order to attack. They charged past us in a frenzied rush. Sarlice, Kestric and I ducked and waited for the onslaught to come. But the Zeikas didn't even notice us as they passed. They were too intent on their aims. With a glance at each other, in wolf form, Sarlice and I loped through the underbrush after them, with Kestric close behind.

By the time we reached the village, the Jarians were engaged in a desperate fight. With their animal-kin and their ability to morph, the Rada were formidable in battle, but the Zeikas made good use of their fire power. A line of archers were positioned on the roof of the village centre taking out Zeikas below. Mounted Jarian warriors approached from the stables to the south, and anyone who could morph or pick up a weapon did so.

I was so shocked to see this number of Zeikas in Jaria Village that I lost my concentration and fell back into human form. The Barh sword clattered at my feet as I wrenched it out of the waves. Sarlice followed suit and pulled me behind a stack of crates and barrels.

I noticed a scuffle at the entrance to the village hall. Flames and smoke were billowing from inside it, and Prime Arone fought singlehandedly with Regar, his guards and aides already slain.

'Bessed, Drea,' I murmured.

'No, Talon, don't,' Sarlice pleaded, holding my arm. *'Don't let him see you.'*

'It doesn't matter if he sees me,' I retorted. *'I'm going to kill him.'*

Bessed and Drea are hale,’ Kestric reassured us, after contacting their Rada-kin. *‘They are inside the building, cut off from Arone by the flames and falling debris, but there is a door on their side of the hall.’*

‘Uola,’ I called, clawing my way through the waves in desperation. It was as if the many Rada-kin around Jaria were suddenly lit-up, whereas they had been dark to my wave senses before. Tiaro was much brighter and easier to find but, if I concentrated, I was starting to perceive dozens of other presences.

Bessed’s buck confirmed what Kestric had told me. *‘Get away. Get free. Bessed says you’re supposed to be escaping.’*

‘The Anzaii gift is manifesting,’ I argued. *‘How else could I be talking with you in the waves?’*

‘That may be,’ he replied, distracted by his efforts to escape the burning building, *‘but it’s too soon for you to fight the Zeikas.’*

‘I’m not leaving,’ I retorted angrily. Why was everybody still treating me like a child? Uola made no reply, busy helping Bessed and some of the other elders.

Regar knocked Prime Arone to the ground with a final, vicious swipe and moved into a clear space, bloodied scythe in hand. I lurched forward, but Sarlice grabbed me back with both hands on my shoulders. We were about twelve yards away from Regar and he had his back to us, but Sarlice wasn’t taking any chances.

‘Arone told us to protect you,’ Kestric said. *‘And that’s what we’re going to do.’*

‘Today, we are not here for a massacre,’ Regar announced, ‘but we will be forced to neutralise any who continue to resist.’

For emphasis, the conjurer and his dragon flew down from the sky, breathing a wall of flame in front of Regar.

‘You slaughtered our leader,’ Commander Uvolde shouted hopelessly. ‘What more do you want?’

‘Your prime wouldn’t listen but I’ll give you one more chance. Turn over Talon son of Kerra or your suffering will be unending.’

‘We would never betray one of our own!’ The daring cry came from a thirteen-year-old girl named Pelsha.

Regar hurled a white dagger. The girl screamed and Jarians surged forward to protect her. The battle resumed and the roars of

Rada-kin mingled with the crackle of sorcerous flames. Snakes of fire lanced out, shearing through all in their path. I leapt up with a snarl of hate, fighting Sarlice's efforts to hold me back.

The Lythian's strength surprised me. I tried to twist out of her grip. She forced me down, so I grabbed her by the shoulders and rolled, hoping to fling her off me. She seemed familiar with these brawling tactics and managed to trip me before I could get up.

'Stop!' I grumped at her. 'I'm not letting people die for me.'

But she had her hand clamped around one of my wrists. As I stood up she came up behind me with her arms trapping both of my arms. I struggled, but without hurting her all I could do was watch as the fighting went on and on.

About a dozen Zeikas were now pressed in around Regar, and one whispered something in his ear.

Regar blasted fire at a dog to his right and bashed a man over the head with the hilt of his scythe. A pair of Zeikas ran to the fallen Jarian and lifted him onto the back of a spotted horse. With one final glance around the village centre, Regar jumped onto the horse in front of the Jarian and galloped off. Many of the others followed, mostly on foot.

Sarlice finally let me go and I ran into the fray, ducking a blue flail. My attacker struck at me again with surprising speed. I blocked the flail with the Barh sword and lost my footing. His swings came within an inch of my body as I stumbled backwards. The steel darts on my surcoat deflected his glancing blows. The Barh sword saved me from a more serious injury once... twice... three times.

The Zeika twirled the mace over one shoulder and a stab of fear gripped me. The weapon was decorated with a demonic eagle head. Like a bird descending, the mace crashed into my outstretched arms, piercing, bruising. The tender, scarred flesh of my palms burned with pain. The Barh sword lurched dangerously in my direction as my wrists gave way. Then it locked against the chain of the mace and I wrenched the weapon from my enemy's hands.

I tried to trip him up with my feet, and was about to take wolf form when Sarlice, Kestric and two other Rada-kin rushed to my defence.

Picking myself up, I realised the sword had paid a heavy price for my life. A hairline crack had formed across the pitted blade, about a third the way down.

I squinted around at those who remained. Two Jarians fought desperately against one Zeika to my left. Another pair of Zeikas disappeared into the forest, one with two children tied to the saddle in front of him, the other holding injured Pelsha in his arms, whispering into her ear. *No! This cannot be!*

Across the other side of the field was a thickly bearded Zeika on a huge palomino warhorse. His captive was tied behind him with his hands and feet stretched under the girth. I recognised Hirron by his red leather boots. He was one of Bessed and Drea's older hunter-gatherers. He'd taught me a few skills over the years.

The bearded Zeika dug his spurred heels into the palomino's sides. The horse blew its nostrils and trotted through the struggling bodies.

I made three bounds and stretched out my hand to catch the palomino's reins. The animal's neck whipped around as my weight came onto his bridle. The overburdened horse stumbled onto its knees, dislodging its rider. A hoof stabbed into the Zeika's torso and something inside crunched.

The horse sidestepped away from the fallen man and panicked when Hirron slid underneath its belly. The horse bucked a few times, pummelling his body.

Still gripping the reins I allowed the horse a bit of slack. It sniffed me nervously before letting me move slowly toward Hirron. With the utmost care I undid the thick leather straps around his wrists and lowered him to the ground.

The Zeika got to his feet with a large battle-axe, blood dripping from his mouth. Before I could do anything he fell forward onto the ground in front of me.

I glanced up to see Sarlice, bow in hand. She crouched to make sure our foe was dead and to retrieve the arrow. She glanced over her shoulder as some other villagers assisted Hirron. Making sure we were safe for now, she pushed me towards a nearby fence.

'We better stop that bleeding,' she said.

Six blue-black gouges patterned my forearm, one with a stream of blood coming from it. I pulled somebody's clean leggings from a line nearby with my good arm and cut them in half with the cracked Barh sword. Sarlice bound up the wound.

The Zeika legion had all but retreated, and I sensed Kestric helping a few other Rada-kin chase the last Zeikas away. Bodies of charred fur and pink flesh were scattered about the village. I gazed around in shock, and felt the burn of bile in my throat. Both Cora and Paril were among the fallen. It had all happened so quickly.

Children and their carers crept out from various hiding places, spreading out among the fallen and searching for signs of life. I nursed my sore arm against my chest and searched the waves for Uola.

'We are fine,' the buck told me. *'But Commander Uvolde is taking all the surviving elders to the fortress. I think they're going to call all the survivors in there.'*

'How many are left here?' I queried.

'Forty or so.' Uola replied. *'Masters Namal, Curn, Rundo, Esra and Cyle have been captured, along with at least fifty others.'*

'Trees, no,' I murmured. More than a hundred humans slain. And that wasn't even starting to count the lost kindred.

He echoed the desperation in my comment with his emotions. *'The prime, one elder and five masters have been slain, including Feera.'*

'So the thing with Feera was all part of this,' I surmised. It seemed that I would not only be mounting a rescue for Rekala. Who would go with me?

Uola said, *'Sarlice is the only able-bodied warrior left. All those who aren't needed here have been killed, badly injured or taken.'*

'I can fight,' I said.

'You may be able to shoot a bow, but a warrior you are not,' Uola responded. He didn't mean to be unkind, but I had not been trained as a warrior. Uola knew I could hold my own in a fight. He was unable to hide from me that Bessed didn't want me to risk my life.

'Nonetheless, please tell Bessed and Uvolde I'll go after our people,' I requested. *'Tiaro and I have business with those Zeikas. They're holding our Rada-kin.'*

It took a while for the goat and Bessed to realise there was no dissuading me.

‘What are you going to do?’ Uola finally asked.

‘We’ll hope to the Nine Trees that my Anzaii abilities are indeed manifesting,’ I replied.

Uola sent his agreement along with his heartfelt request to Tiaro to help me with my new abilities.

Sarlice followed me home and watched as I threw a number of essentials into my largest saddlebags. Regretfully, I left the cracked Barh sword lying on the table.

‘What are you doing?’ the Lythian Rada asked me.

‘I’m going to get our people back,’ I replied, ‘and Rekala. It’s up to me and you now.’

‘You’re not serious?’ she said. ‘I’m used to bad odds, but didn’t you see how easily they overwhelmed us on our own territory? How exactly do you plan to stage a rescue on theirs?’

‘I’m Anzaii now,’ I said. ‘This is what I was born for.’

‘I didn’t see you doing anything Anzaii-ish just now,’ she stammered, wincing. ‘Not meaning to offend...’

‘I’m new,’ I admitted.

‘Jarja needs you alive,’ Sarlice said. ‘I don’t think Prime Arone had this in mind when he told us to keep you away from Regar.’

‘Prime Arone is no longer with us,’ I reminded her. ‘My foster father Bessed is an elder and I’ve told him I’m going after them.’

‘How are you going to—’

‘Look, Sarlice, you can either come with me and we can both figure it out or stay here and help with the clean-up.’

Having witnessed how much more effective she was than my guardians had been I hoped she would choose the former. Although I was used to doing things on my own, this wasn’t a situation I wanted to face alone.

To my great relief she followed me out the back to the stable I shared with Bessed and Drea. She was fierce, I gave her that. Perhaps all Lythians were.

Sarlice and I helped ourselves to the tack hanging on the walls nearby—within minutes both horses were saddled and ready to go. Sarlice climbed on Meeka, muttering and shaking her head.

After adding a bag of chaff to the saddlebags of each horse, I looked up at Sarlice's face. She had a new bruise on her forehead and the cut from Regar's ring was still weeping.

'I barely know you,' I said, 'but it almost feels like we're old friends. Thank you for helping me.'

Kestric chuffed at me.

'It's nothing,' Sarlice replied, but we both knew otherwise.

Anzaii—Guiding Light. The plaque on the statue we passed was worn with time. It was an immense carving of green stone. A human figure stood in the centre with one arm outstretched to the heavens. The other hand clutched a long spear. At the figure's feet was a snarling dire wolf. Behind him was the huge coiled body of a skyearl. Covered in fur and feathers, skyearls were sentient dragon-like beings that bonded with a Kriite to become their Sleffion-kin.

Vines and creepers had to be cut back regularly to keep the statue from being swallowed whole by the forest. The base of the statue was scuffed and worn by clambering feet.

I glanced up at the clouded sky. Since leaving Jaria, around midday, Kestric had been tracking the Zeikas through the forest with the help of eleven other Rada-kin.

'It's going to rain,' I commented.

Sarlice's attention remained fixed on the broken branches ahead that swayed and scratched each other in the wind. There were four different paths the Zeikas had made. Kestric trotted ahead in wolf form, sniffing out what was most likely the real path. He told Sarlice and I that there were other Rada-kin ahead of us following various trails, but none had located the Zeikas yet.

Sarlice sniffed the air and glanced up at the looming clouds.

'I think you're right,' she said. 'Do you know these lands? We might need to find shelter for the night.'

My instincts screamed at me to keep going until we found Rekala and the Jarians, but the horses were foamed and trembling. I was both famished and exhausted, my arm and hands stinging. It would be no state to attempt a rescue.

‘I do,’ I replied. ‘There’s a cavern with supplies.’

The Rada-kin would continue tracking the Zeikas. We’d be able to catch up with them in the morning.

When lightning illuminated the forest and sky, the clouds looked like an enormous ceiling high above us. Sarlice’s horse fidgeted nervously, but she held her grip with her knees and tried to calm it with soothing words. I led them to the cavern, trying not to think about what the Jarians might be suffering.

Chapter Eight—The Quarry

‘Were you a warrior in Lyth?’ I asked Sarlice.
‘In a manner,’ she replied. ‘I am... was... one of the prime’s guardians. He had me trained from a young age and liked to keep me close by.’

‘Your father?’ I asked, recalling what Ivon had told me a few weeks back.

A look of surprise crossed her face, but she quickly shrugged it off. ‘I wondered if I was his “guardian” so that he could keep a close eye on me. He doesn’t really need me.’

‘Clearly,’ I replied. ‘You’re here.’

She licked her lips. ‘Mmm... let’s just say my appointment as an ambassador wasn’t among my father’s plans.’

I looked at her with awe. ‘You’re Lyth’s ambassador?’

It was a worthy appointment, bestowed only upon the most trusted advisors to a Kriite tribal leader. Ambassadors went forth as spokespeople for their nation, usually in times of war, to form alliances. An ambassador was expected to travel to the courts of nobles, regents or monarchs and work out policies, trade deals or alliances with them.

With the Rada nations of Jaria and Lyth this involved contacting their prime leader, over vast distances, to outline and agree upon the terms of a negotiation. Where possible Anzaii were chosen for this purpose because they could usually communicate directly with the prime leader’s Rada-kin or, possibly, even the prime leader. That Sarlice had been chosen indicated how skilled she was in defending

herself on the open road and at communicating and negotiating, yet she was not Anzaai. It would be up to Kestric to reach all the way back to their home realm of Lyth.

I can still reach it from here,’ he replied to my wide-open thoughts.

He was scouting some distance away, following the path two of the other Rada-kin had taken the day before. Above him were the tops of a great variety of tall trees, their crowns forming a canopy at a height of more than one hundred feet. It may have been difficult for a foreigner to determine the time of day in the darkness of the rainforest, but I knew the cadence of Jaria forest well.

There were smaller trees beneath the canopy, and ferns with little red and gold flowers that only opened in the morning.

Folai and Kang have found the camp up further,’ he called. Both Sarlice and I were able to hear him. We shared a look of relief. *They’re waiting for us.*’

How far away are Folai and Kang?’

Why don’t you ask them yourself?’ Tiaro suggested.

I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate. Black, red and blue stripes behind my eyelids. Kestric. *There he is.* It was as if my mind had to flip-up to a new way of seeing—the focus came off what my eyes saw, and dived into the waves. Through the waves I could just make out the shape of Kestric’s body. More than just a simple blob, Kestric appeared almost like he did in the flesh, his reddish fur standing on end as he looked at me over a great distance.

Reach further,’ Tiaro encouraged.

With effort I closed the distance between us by blocking out the emptiness and looked around for more signs of life. Thinking back to all the voices I had started to sense in Jaria, before the battle, I began to listen through the waves as well. In the distance was a faint murmuring, two Rada-kin having an unshielded conversation. I could almost see them, but something crowded the way between us. I reached out my hand and brushed leaves and vines aside—at least that was how I visualised it—one of the Rada-kin took shape and I nudged it gently with my thoughts.

‘A human?’ the Rada-kin queried, *‘...Anzaai... Ab, Talon. Tiaro, nice to make your acquaintance.’*

I could sense it was a fox in rabbit form, Folai. I had played with her in Jaria, and felt a familiar twinge as I connected with her for the first time.

'Where are you?' I queried.

'We are far away. The Zeikas travelled overnight even in the rain.'

'Is it... is that... you're near the Catacombs of Krii, aren't you?' I said. *'But why would the Zeikas go near there?'*

'They're not right near it,' Folai replied. *'They've laid the cornerstone for a fortress a few miles away from it. Unless we act quickly, the Jarrians will be branded and shackled as slaves.'*

'We're on our way,' I said.

Sarlice stood watching me, one saddlebag slung over her arm.

'You really are Anzaai, aren't you? You had that unfocused look of being deep in conversation with a Rada-kin a long way away.'

'They're not even in the realms of Telby or Jaria any more,' I replied. *'The Zeikas have started building a fortress in Naioteio.'*

'Not far from the Catacombs of Krii, yes, I know,' she said. *'Kestric told me.'*

We finished loading our gear onto the two weary horses and followed after Kestric. Although we travelled swiftly, it took us all day to catch up to him.

'The trail ends here,' he told us. *'We've been hesitant to go much further without you, Talon, in case of spirit circles.'*

There were other Rada-kin hiding in the trees, including Folai and Kang, a few hundred feet east. We hid the horses in a cluster of tall trees and tied them. Continuing on foot, we accompanied Kestric through the trees, which thinned to a wispy wood, around a seemingly empty clearing.

'Is there a spirit circle here?' Sarlice asked.

'I don't know,' I replied. *'I've never seen one before, nor do I understand how they work.'*

'Infused with Zeika wards,' Tiaro explained, *'a spirit circle portrays ordinary ground inside it, concealing the reality. If you cross it, the demons within will tell the Zeika who created it.'*

'Look ahead of you through the waves,' Tiaro told me, *'and call upon our power.'*

'I'm going to try something,' I added to Sarlice. 'Will you watch over me?'

She drew her warbow and nocked an arrow, standing up and moving a few yards behind me. Kestric was nearby in a cluster of orange plants, utilising all his senses to keep a buffer of safety around us—no Zeika could get within fifty yards without him being aware of it.

'Concentrate,' Tiaro cautioned.

I wanted to do as she said, but it was like trying to see through eyes that didn't know how. I closed my eyes and faced in the direction of the clearing. I was assaulted by the metallic stink of blood. I could see a three-foot-wide ring of gore scraped over the foliage and grass, right around the outside of the clearing. It hadn't been detectable to my natural senses, but in the waves the smell was overpowering.

What humans or animals had been sacrificed to make it? I daren't imagine. Their screams flashed at me from the spirit circle, almost as if the demons there revelled in the memory of their suffering.

I strained to see where the severe laughter was coming from, becoming aware of the presence of hundreds of dark green and grey imps. Their cackling reverberated through the waves as they played on the spirit circle, throwing lumps of sinew and flesh at each other. My gorge rose and I blinked back tears.

'Quick, before they see you and alert their master,' Tiaro cried. *'Banish them.'*

'How can I—?'

'You are a psion, Talon. Send your energy outwards and fight.'

A slight breeze rustled through the waves, blowing softly at first, then with more force. I directed my focus at the enemy, shutting all other thoughts out. Waves crashed around me like water sloshing in a barrell. I had never seen the ocean, but maybe it was like this.

The demons were shaken to the ground and the cackling ceased. Grasping onto entrails and hair, they clung to the spirit circle, unable

to speak or reach out to their Zeika master because of the rushing wind.

'The Great Sapphire Trees stand forever,' I declared. *'Be gone!'*

The winds grew stronger and I could hear the tinkle of sapphire tree leaves upon them. With one final blast, an immense trunk appeared out of the rushing wind behind me, and cobalt blue energy swept around the entire spirit circle.

The east end of it was so far away I wouldn't have been able to see it with my natural eyes, but in the waves my perspective was no longer limited by the position of a human body. I could float higher, see further and close distances my human eyes would never have been able to penetrate. I blinked in wonder at the scene beneath me, which was now completely clear of blood and gore, revealing the Zeika construction site and their camp.

'That's it, you did it,' Sarlice whispered, patting my shoulder from behind.

'Not I,' I replied, coming back to reality. 'A Great Tree.'

'You got to see one?' Sarlice whispered in reverence. 'What was it like?'

'Breathtaking,' I responded, matching her smile.

She and I looked out over the clearing—large burgundy tents were positioned in a lazy circle around a huge green pavilion. Firelight within caused many shadows to play over the material. The figures inside lifted strange objects to the sky in some kind of offering. A tingling sensation of foreboding crept up my spine.

'So this is why there are no fish in the river,' I muttered. 'They must have been travelling into Jaria, west of town, to catch them upriver.'

'It's a wonder the Rada-kin didn't notice,' Sarlice said. 'If I remember my maps correctly, they would have just about passed through the outskirts of Jaria Village to get to the western part of the Jarvi River from here.'

'Not if they crossed the mountain range west of the catacombs,' I said. 'Food in Naioteio is scarce and they're much too far away from Reltland to have a supply line coming in.'

‘Agreed. Well at least it’s a small group,’ Sarlice said softly. ‘It can’t be all that important to the Bal.’

When I made a confused face, she added, ‘There are at least 100,000 Zeika warriors in Reltland, maybe more. We only have to deal with a few hundred here.’

I frowned, and crouched down on the ground for a better view through the foliage. ‘It’s all they need to outnumber Jaria.’

‘Not by much,’ she said, ‘but we’ve seen how easily they overcame your defences. I wonder what they’re after, apart from yourself.’

I reached out to hold a bunch of tall grass aside. ‘Probably want to use Jaria just like King Flale did years ago.’

She caught my eye. ‘Rada would never fight for Zeikas.’

I snorted. ‘I was thinking more along the lines of wave slaves. That murderer back in town said something about Bal Harar wanting to use Anzaii to locate other Kriites.’

Kestric growled and inched closer to the clearing. Green light from the camp illuminated one side of his head, and his whiskers appeared to glow, but Sarlice’s full attention was on me.

‘Talon, I really think we’re making a mistake by being here,’ she said. ‘Prime Arone’s instructions to me were very clear—to keep you out of danger.’

‘I wasn’t blessed with these abilities so I could sit tight in Jaria Fortress, like them,’ I replied. ‘Now is when my people need me.’

‘But the Zeikas must be expecting you,’ Sarlice argued. ‘Maybe they did all this just to get you here—captured your Rada-kin and then your people.’

‘It has to be part of it, you’re right, but not all. I don’t know what I can do yet—I think the Great Sapphire Trees will do something through me...’

‘The trees are with us,’ Tiaro affirmed. *‘The Zeikas may not expect it yet—I believe we can overcome their sorcery.’*

Sarlice, unable to hear Tiaro, grew angry, ‘If you know it’s a trap then don’t splittin’ go any—’

‘What would you have me do?’ I interrupted. ‘Turn my back and walk away?’

‘I’ll go,’ she replied. ‘You stay here.’

We both knew that was ridiculous. *She would do that for me?*

‘You didn’t even want to come in the first place,’ I tried.

‘Jaria may not be my home town, but you are my brethren. I don’t like the idea of leaving the Jarians here any more than you do, but we are outnumbered. Can’t we go and get help—does Jaria have any allies in Tasset?’

‘I have to get Rekala back now,’ I growled. ‘It’s already been more than three weeks. And we have to free the prisoners before more of them are raped or killed. Surely you can understand—’

‘Kang and Folai have found them,’ Kestric interrupted. *‘The Jarians are in a cave of some kind.’*

The two Rada-kin had advanced when I lifted the spirit circle, following the scent of the Jarians to a small cave guarded by Zeikas. Kestric looked up at me and then at Sarlice. He chuffed at her and they conversed privately for a time. A small frown creased Sarlice’s brow.

‘We should join them,’ I suggested.

Sarlice gestured reluctantly for me to lead the way. Kestric crept after us, keeping a close watch on the forest behind us. Crawling on all fours was the only way we could reach Kang and Folai without being seen by the Zeika guards. The three that I could see had just turned their backs on us.

Folai and Kang waited in the forest ahead of us, scheming with Kestric about the right time to leap out and distract the guards. Sarlice’s plan was for the four of them to hold the Zeikas long enough for me to free the Jarians from the cave. The mouth of the cave was barred with glowing red bars of light and, as the only Anzaii in the vicinity, it was my job to banish the demons behind the magic. There was simply no other way.

‘Call upon the trees,’ Tiaro reassured me. *‘We are not alone.’*

The Zeika guards wandered a few more feet away from the cave, leering at a group of female slaves who were washing themselves nearby. The water they were using looked tepid, but they had leaves, lemons and a few bars of soap to share.

‘Go now, while they’re distracted,’ Sarlice hissed to me. ‘And by the trees, don’t get yourself killed.’

Kestric bolted from cover in his natural firetiger form, Kang and Folai close behind him. The Zeikas shouted for help and drew their weapons. Sarlice's body heaved into wolf form. I followed her around the backs of the tents near the cave, whiskers twitching. It was getting easier to shapeshift now—my lupine nose came alive with hundreds of unique smells. The echoing lilt of Zeikas alerting other guards shot painfully through me as my mind adjusted to the differences in my hearing. Sarlice and I crept from one tent to another, pressing close and crouching low.

The Zeikas called to others around the camp, alerting them to a possible escape attempt. I felt my tail turn down in sudden fear. Before panic could grip me, Sarlice snapped her fangs over the tent rope. One corner of it fell in. She leapt onto it, tearing at the thick fabric. Three of the five Zeikas let out a cry and hurried around the tent to fight us off.

I jumped onto the first one's chest, biting at his face. An axe whistled through the air and bounced off a wooden crate nearby.

'Go into that cave,' Tiaro hissed.

'We won't be able to get out again,' I argued.

Sarlice darted behind and around the Zeikas, drawing their attention away from me.

'We will,' Tiaro assured me. *'Have faith.'*

With a yelp, I ran between the two remaining Zeika guards and leapt through the mouth of the cave, an icy feeling passing through me as I crossed the threshold. Sarlice's growling grew faint and there was the smell of too many bodies crammed into a small space.

Master Namal stood at the front of the group, arms outstretched as if to shield them. I relaxed into my human self and stood up from a crouching position.

'What now, Tiaro?' I said with one hand on my ear. *'Sarlice and the Rada-kin won't last long out there!'*

'We've cleared the entrance already,' she replied.

I stared back at the mouth of the cave in astonishment. The red lines were gone. *How?*

'Glorious Trees! We are glad to see you, Talon,' Namal said. *'We've all been wondering if your Anzaii abilities would manifest'*

faster than usual. Without Feera, we knew you were our only hope of escape.'

'So you told the others?' I said.

'With Zeikas upon us, we seem to have less to worry about from Wavekeepers,' he replied sheepishly. 'And now that we've seen what you can do, it is obvious to all that you are Anzaii.'

'Do you think you can free us from these wards?' Ivon asked, coming up beside Namal. 'All the Rada here have been wave-blocked.'

There were about sixty Rada Jarians handcuffed with bracers of Zeika magic, and two dozen non-Rada. As long as the Rada were warded their kin would not be able to sense them, and they were unable to transform.

'I can sense the wards,' I replied. 'It's like nothing else. First spirit circles, now wards. There was one on Rekala when I saw her last, but I couldn't sense it then.'

To Tiaro only, I added, *I'm not sure how to begin.*

'Ward magic is subtly different from spirit circles,' Tiaro counselled me. 'With this many wards, sometimes there is only one demon, sometimes many. You must be touching one of the wards in order to find out. The other Jarians must also be touching so that the power can flow through them when you attempt to send the demon or demons away.'

'Why the limitations?'

'Can you imagine what would happen if the Trees flooded you with their full power?' Tiaro responded. *'You would not be able to withstand it. The slow progression of learning is to protect you. The sapphire trees empower us to do certain things for ourselves, and demand that we be actively involved in them, but most of their power is always held back until we're ready to take each step in our growth.'*

'Give me your hands, Namal, oh... you're not warded. Your Rada-kin... Josker... she's not...'

I knew from the look in his eye that the magnificent grey wolf I had last seen outside Namal's house in Jaria was slain. My heart ached for Namal's loss—his dearest, truest friend.

'Tend to the others,' Namal croaked. He would battle on like a true leader, despite his grief. 'We have to get away from here. We'll

take refuge in the Catacombs of Krii, if necessary, as the Zeikas cannot follow us there.'

It was difficult to concentrate with the weight of Namal's and others' losses heavy on my heart. But the Rada-kin and Sarlice were struggling to hold back the tide of Zeikas who were starting to emerge from the main tent. I had to move quickly or more lives would be lost.

I grabbed Ivon's shoulder and turned him so I could reach his bound hands behind his back. His ermine, Jaseca, was hiding down the front of his shirt.

'Everyone take hold of the person beside you.'

Staring at me wide-eyed, the Jarians did as they were told. I closed my eyes and sought frantically in the waves for the demon or demons governing the wards. I could hear Namal and a few others whispering to the Ancient Sapphire Trees.

I sent my focus into the waves once more. A writhing mass of nothingness swarmed out of the disappearing wards. The demon bellowed its anger at me and rolled closer. I lost my breath and a wave of nausea threatened to knock me off my feet.

Tiaro's voice resounded firmly in my mind. *'The roots reach deep into the ground, connected to the life-giving waters.'*

It was helpful to visualise one of the Great Sapphire Trees as my guardian. The demon spread its vacuous claws and billowed toward me. A wave of terror washed through me and I stumbled back, nearly letting go of Ivon's hands. The demon surrounded me with its blackness, reaching into my mind and probing down into my soul.

'The torchfire of its leaves reveal the enemy.'

Like a closing door, the light of awareness began to dissolve, and anger and hatred welled up inside me.

Another place, another time. Red all around me, like the belly of a tremendous monster, veins like tentacles in the walls. A gurgling sound like water being sucked down... echoing. My feet... invisible beneath a sludge of muck and clouds of hot steam. Sweating, crying, my voice scratching against my throat, burning? The underworld? Death...?

'I am not dead,' I cried, searching for calm, but instead there was agony and fury.

'The rake of its branches topples the foe,' Tiaro said.

I could see the black of my own eyelids and hundreds of red dots. *The power of the Great Sapphire Trees resides within me—that much I know.* I smelled mountain streams, pine trees and the richness of the earth. The howling wind flowed around me and my anxiety fled.

'The pressure of the seed within pierces the pod.'

I opened my eyes and found myself kneeling on the ground before the Jarians, arms outstretched. A number of them were still murmuring. Others moved out of the cave to hold back the enemy. The wrist wards had fallen away, leaving them free to morph and communicate with any kin who were not warded.

'Thank you, Great Trees,' I breathed.

Ivon and I were the last to leave the cave. Dozens of Zeikas emerged from the tent and flooded towards the cave looking dazed. *Why choose this time to get drunk?* They knew we were coming. These people knew not the bounds of restraint.

Dazed or otherwise, it wouldn't be long before the Zeikas outnumbered us. A garrison this big was sure to have a number of high-ranking warriors, sorcerers who could scry and conjure. The only sensible option for the Jarians was to flee.

'This way, Talon!' Namal said, beckoning me.

'Not without Rekala,' I called out. 'You go on.'

Outside the cave, most of the Jarians were running for the forest, luring the Zeikas to the place where animals had the advantage. I crouched behind the tent where I'd last seen Sarlice. Red material rippled where her claws had left jagged shreds. I slipped in through the back door of the next tent. Two screams heralded my entrance as I stumbled upon a Zeika with a pair of slaves. I burst out the front of the tent, running to the next one, which was empty.

A green light lit up the sky outside—Jonaal stood at the entrance to the green pavilion sending fireballs in streams around him. He spread his arms into the air and tilted his whole body back until I thought he would snap. Conjuring a line of fire between his hands, he turned to face a charging wolf. A ripple of green spun along the

line and careered into the wolf. The Rada-kin lay smoking in the middle of the field.

‘If we can’t have you as slaves,’ the sorcerer shouted, ‘we will have your ashes for our crops!’

I ran on past a cluster of wooden buildings, noticing that the cookfire out the front of each one was cold. Perhaps the Zeikas had feasted together this night. Deeper in the Zeika camp there were less people as most of them were concentrated around the main pavilion. I crept through the camp, hiding behind barrels and tents, hearing the whoosh of fire and shouting behind me. It seemed cowardly not to be there in the thick of it, but Rekala needed me also. I had to focus on that.

A recently constructed wooden building soon came into view—I could see saddles, harnesses and ropes within. Perhaps the stables would be nearby. I hurried over to the equipment building and pressed my spine against the wooden wall. Footsteps crunched in the gravel after I had stopped moving, and I heard someone mutter and curse.

After a while the footsteps moved on. I peeked around the corner of the building and glimpsed a heavily armoured Zeika with a ball of flame balanced on his head. The flames illuminated the causeway, throwing strange shadows as he passed the hanging pots, herbs and prongs at each cookfire.

Senses straining, I moved past the equipment building and located the stable, a wooden building with an apex roof open to the night sky at front and back. I crept around the back and reached up the wall. The top of the wooden slats was a little rough, but it was flat enough to climb over. Moving as silently as a mouse I jumped up against the wall and hauled myself up. Shaking with the effort I lowered myself down on the other side, being careful not to make a thud. There was no telling how many Zeikas would be in here on guard, especially if they knew I was coming.

‘If they were expecting me, why haven’t I been caught already?’ I pondered.

Tiaro replied, *‘Perhaps they thought they had you at the cave. They underestimate you because you are so new.’*

Putting my questions aside, I peered around the stable. Orange flames burned in sconces at intervals around the walls, bright enough to reveal my position, but the two Zeikas standing at the far end of the stables weren't looking in my direction. One of them turned his head and the firelight revealed a hideous facial scar. Warder Arak. I ducked behind a pile of hay.

High Commander Jonaal had given him that injury to punish him for capturing me prematurely, and now he was on stable duty. I grinned at his misfortune, but my pressing desire to find Rekala made the smile fade away. Peering carefully from behind the hay I spotted her in dapple-grey horse form in a stall in the middle of the room.

Behind the piles of hay, crates and equipment, I moved slowly toward her, peering through the darkness for any threat. There were at least four feet of open space on every side of the stall.

I chanced a quick scurry across the gap. Fear shot through me and I ducked just in time to miss a burst of fire.

Arak and the other stable guard called dark energies to their aid, seeming reckless in their haste to strike me down. *Am I that important to them?*

A stray shot set fire to the piles of straw on the ground, and it started burning with a soft whoof. As the green flames crawled closer to the main haystack, pungent, dusty smoke thickened the air. The Zeikas continued firing blasts of magic at me, missing by inches as I ducked and darted away from them. *Not when I'm this close!*

A pounding fury heated my chest as I dropped to all fours. An image of Rekala filled my mind. In response, my shoulders and lips bulged, striped fur thickened across my skin—black, white and blue. My orbs shifted to tiger eyes, improving my vision six-fold in the dim light. The muscles across my face and neck responded faster than thought and a terrible noise came out. Despite not being full-grown, my fangs were as long as dragon teeth.

Arak lost concentration and staggered back while the other Zeika continued to hurl green fireballs in my direction. Planks of wood fell around us, showering the room with smoke and sparks.

I cornered my prey, glaring at him with fly-green eyes. I arched my back and lashed out with dark red talons. He uttered a prayer to Zei and stretched out his palm as I leapt, a sphere of lime coloured fire swelling between us. I closed my eyes, roaring in frustration. Heat touched my teeth, licked across my tongue and died in my throat. The Zeika's head struck the floor as I landed.

Arak panicked and made a run for the door, but a falling beam swept him off his feet and knocked him out of the stable.

The fire had burned quickly through the debris on the floor and now cartwheeled up the walls. Resuming my human form, I ran to Rekala's stall. She was fidgeting restlessly despite the thick hobbles weighing her down. Now that I was close to her, our physical touch reduced the effects of the wave-ward.

'Talon, my sweet Rada,' she murmured and I wasn't sure if the faintness of her wave was more due to the wave-ward or to her own exhaustion.

I slammed the gate open and darted in. Rafters split and creaked above us—I glanced up as part of the roof fell in—the fire had devoured the main haystack and raced hungrily for more fuel.

'Hurry,' Rekala hissed faintly through the waves.

The ward on my Rada-kin was a thin black ring hung over her head. I wrapped my fingers around it and fired all my psionic energy at it. Most Kriites called it dispelling, but to me it was simply a surrender on my part, an admittance that I could do nothing, but the Great Sapphire Trees could. I felt wind rushing through the waves as the magic in the ward ring snapped and raced away.

Rekala's presence was strong in my mind once more. She was surprised by the third presence in the waves with us. Tiaro wisely kept silent.

'So much has changed in our time apart,' my Rada-kin complained.

'Where's the key to your hobbles?' I demanded.

She looked up at me, large eyes dim with lack of rest. *'Leave me...'*

'I would rather die!' I choked as I spoke through the waves.

The smoke swirled in thick eddies through the stable. I left her there, crashing into the stable wall as I blindly sought one of the

fallen stable guards. More of the roof collapsed behind me and I could hear other horses squealing in panic and pain. I found one of the Zeikas, but there were no keys. I blinked tears of fire and desperation from my eyes and hunted about for something to break the hobbles. Near the body was the Zeika's sword, conjuring up memories of searing pain from the last time I'd attempted to wield a Zeika weapon, but this time, the weapon's owner was dead. Coughing violently, I carried it back to Rekala's stall.

I hefted the huge weapon in the blinding smoke, and struck. Sparks flew, Rekala recoiled from the shock and pain in her hooves, but the hobbles remained. A tingling reached through the scars on my hands, and my gut squirmed with dread. My insides burned from inhaling too much smoke. Pushing my discomfort aside, I stood on the blade end of the sword and wrenched the hilt upwards. Three pulls, shoulder muscles tearing... no give.

This is metal. It will never snap. Am I going to die here?

On the fourth try, part of the hilt snapped and the blade slid free. A puff of green smoke bled outwards, blending with the rest of the smog. I crouched down and rammed the hilt into the bolts on the hobbles until each one broke. One by one the bolts fell away. I wrestled the pins out of the hobbles and pulled Rekala's feet free.

Rekala sneezed and stumbled into tiger form—she was in no condition to carry me.

'Get out now,' I told her. The instruction was sent with such force into her mind that she had no choice but to obey.

Fire extended to the stall I was crouching in, caressing the dry wood. I gagged and spat smoky saliva from my mouth. Debris crashed down around me. The other horses panicked as fire spilled down the walls of their prisons. Could I leave them here to die? I debated with myself for only an instant. Just because they were natural animals didn't mean they should be left to die.

I threw the bars back on the stalls and shooed them out. The fire raced to overtake me as I freed the last of the animals. I grabbed its mane and jumped onto its back, and it panicked and bucked its way out of the stable. I clung to the horse's mane and withers with all my strength, squeezing my knees to stay fixed on its bare back.

The stable crashed down around us and hot wood struck my back from above. The horse tripped over fallen beams and I grazed my legs against the collapsing walls. I noticed a sharp sting across my brow as we came out into the cool night air. The horse trotted briskly into the forest behind the stable, snorting and flaring its nostrils.

‘Steady,’ I soothed, leaning back to shift my weight.

The horse slowed long enough for me to slide down—at least it was trained that much. I rested my head on its withers, but it sidestepped away from me and disappeared into the night.

Chapter Nine—Heirloom

Darkness lay thick around me in the forest. Despite the Zeikas' ability to conjure fire I felt safely out of sight. Rekala was waiting beyond the first band of trees in her natural form. She was lying down in a pile of brambles, eyes half closed. I stroked her head and inspected a shallow wound where the black ward ring had been.

There was a bonyness to her sides that had not been there before. Her skin seemed to hang off her gigantic frame and the fur was dusty and lacklustre.

'Ab but it's good to hear your thoughts,' she seemed to sigh through the waves.

'You have been so mistreated,' I lamented. *'Are you injured?'*

'I'm well enough,' she lied. *'I just need a moment to recover.'*

'Go to the catacombs,' I said. *'I'll imprint its location for you.'*

Although I'd never done it before, imprinting was a procedure I was familiar with from growing up around wave-users. Now that I had access to the waves between myself and the Rada-kin, it was simple enough to send my memory of a specific place and its general location.

We were further north than Rekala's territory had been, but the great cat was able to learn the way from the landmarks I called up in my memory. I had been to the Catacombs of Krii on Jarian pilgrimages a few times before—sometimes Kriites from other nations came to town to be escorted there after being invited by the ritualists who maintained the holy grove.

When I was certain Rekala would be able to make it on her own I crept cautiously back to the dilapidated stable. Apart from the smoke the night sky was clear and, as I looked up at the stars, I saw a falling star, its beauty a counterpoint to the devastation around me.

For the moment the Zeikas were distracted, trying to protect their tents from the spreading fire. I chuckled at the absurdity of their situation, harangued by their own evil fires. Controlled Zeika fire would not usually catch on their own possessions or people, but out of control it quickly morphed into something far more terrible than ordinary flames. Red warred with green across the camp providing a welcome chance for the remaining Jarians to escape.

Most of them were running now, some carrying wounded friends. In the distance I could see Sarlice fighting in human form alongside six Jarians. As I emerged from the forest a Zeika close to the enormous stable bonfire was conjuring something in the air. It went from being nothing but a shade to something resembling a bird with an overly large head.

My gut iced over with fear. *Those wings... just like...* When he saw me the Zeika started in surprise and, with a sneer of hatred, he directed the conjured beast after me. It snapped its long jaws and flapped forward.

I ran back into the forest, tripping over a large trunk in my haste. The conjured beast whipped after me with a shriek. Terrified, I morphed into my black wolf form and rushed through the forest, but the conjured bird kept coming; clearly it could see well in the dark.

With my ears pressed hard against my skull and my chest becoming tight with strain I cleared a huge log. Upon landing I sharply changed direction, but the creature wasn't fooled. I risked one look back and caught a glimpse of its bright green wings. *That shape... just like the hawk... a death hawk...*

The flying creature descended on me, tore skin from my back and snapped at my legs. I imagined the hawk from my childhood, talons locked in my flesh, struggling. *Pain!* The beast following me now could do so much more damage than a hawk. *What should I do?*

If I stopped to face it, that enormous sharp beak would go for my throat. If I continued to run it would gradually tear me to pieces.

'The source,' Tiaro schooled me, finding it difficult to make herself heard in the jumble of thoughts that was my mind.

Source? The conjurer! I darted back towards the wild bonfire, which was now mostly red instead of green. Bursting through a row of weeds and shrubs, I could see the Zeika conjurer standing on the other side of the obliterated stable. I picked up speed, bounding over bracken and forest debris until the clearing was before me. As the stable's blackened carcass came into sight my vision blurred with smoke and red haze. I sprang upwards, heat clutched at me and I realised clear ground on the other side was a body length too far.

I skidded across a piece of wall and jumped again, black coat turning grey with ash. The red fire reached for me so I twisted to clear it and landed in a crashing slide, shocked back into my human form. The momentum carried me straight onto the concentrating Zeika's back. I wrapped my arms around his neck from behind and we struggled on the edge of the giant furnace.

'Bite the neck!' Rekala screamed at me from afar.

I glimpsed the flying creature shooting vacantly towards us and scabbled out of the way.

Its sharp beak struck the Zeika in the chest and he collapsed, quivering. The death hawk vanished as its master breathed his last and the Zeika's flesh finally remembered how old it truly was. Skin pulled taut over his body, wrinkles and lines split into peals of pink and red and one hand crushed in on itself and shrivelled to black.

My struggle had gone unnoticed by other Zeikas, but Sarlice gave me a nod. She and three Jarians finished off the last of a group of Zeikas as I stood there gasping for breath. I crawled to my feet and ran to meet them, trying to ignore the pain in my arm, back and forehead.

'To the meeting place,' Ofrent, one of the Jarians, called.

Sarlice rested her hands on her knees, fighting to catch her breath. 'I don't have the strength to morph.'

'I'll help her,' I said to Ofrent.

Without arguing they shapechanged and ran ahead, so I put one arm under Sarlice's and half carried her from the camp. Kestric paced behind us watching for remaining enemies, but most were occupied with putting out fires or pursuing other Jarians.

After we'd made it to the partial safety of the forest I let Sarlice rest against a tree.

'We mustn't stop,' she whispered. 'Or... won't be able to keep going.'

I helped her back up and we crashed our way through the thick vegetation. There was little to be done about the path left behind us. I only hoped that with this many Jarians and Zeikas in the forest our enemies wouldn't be able to discern one trail of broken branches from another. The Zeikas were unlikely to come close to the catacombs or they risked being reversed like the corpse I had just seen.

Eventually we emerged from the scratchy trees to find the small entrance of the Catacombs of Krii, a cave mouth low down on a steep incline. A small river burred between us and the cave, but it was only shin-deep. The cave mouth was hidden by two shrubs, but my sense of Rekala's location drew me to it.

As we crept inside I sensed a feeling of peace from the Rada-kin within the catacombs. This was a sacred place. The ritualists believed all the psionic abilities of Kriites, especially Anzaii powers, were amplified while in this place.

The dark passages at the beginning of the catacombs were littered with rocks and vegetation. We stumbled around a bend and I noticed a warm glow up ahead. Beyond a natural archway there was a wider passage of pearl-white walls with a soothing inner light. It was as if the roots of a colossal tree had explored beneath the mountains at the dawn of time, burrowing out a safe haven where nothing foul would ever venture.

Kestric helped us follow the right path through the echoing tunnels until we came to an enormous loaf-shaped cavern. Here the roots had clumped before vanishing away, creating a round womb that glowed with light and warmth. The Jarians were sprawled about the Womb in clusters; sleeping, talking or tending to each other's

needs. Ivon had found Sarlice's and my packs, brought them inside and used our provisions to start a fire and a pot of broth.

I smiled at him and stood with Sarlice for a moment, inspecting her by the firelight to ensure her injuries weren't life-threatening. *She's brave*, I marveled. Ivon scowled at me in mock jealousy. Ignoring him, I helped Sarlice over to the far side of the cave where Rekala was curled up against the glowing wall asleep.

Seeing my icetiger in good light for the first time in more than three weeks wrenched my heart—her usually spiky fur was matted and singed and the brilliant blues had faded to a murky grey. She would remain discoloured until her summer fur was shed and new fur came to replace it.

I sensed her stirring in the waves, exhaustion warring with desperation to be near me. I sat close by and lifted her head onto my leg, stroking it. She chuffed at me, wiggling closer. Her forced stay in horse form had weakened her physically and mentally. For such a new Rada-kin it had been an experience that pushed her to the brink of sanity.

During her trial with the Zeikas there had been a certain letting go, an acceptance of her weaknesses. I now sensed new contentment in her despite what she'd been through.

Kestric stood still, watching her. Being strangers to each other there were certain feline protocols the tigers had to observe. Although they were both thinking beings, instinct and old habits still remained.

'Greetings, Rekala,' said Kestric through an open wave. I, and all the Rada-kin in the Womb, could hear him.

Sarlice slid down against the wall nearby. With a knowing glance at each other, we watched the two tigers meet. Rekala opened her eyes a fraction and growled at the male firetiger.

'You should get someone to clean that up,' Sarlice was looking at the slash across my forehead.

'Tomorrow,' I murmured.

I closed my heavy eyes. I rested my head against the wall, being careful not to scratch the earring. Realising a group of people were conversing about me nearby I looked up.

‘Our thanks, Talon,’ said a man to my right, ‘for coming after us. And you, Sarlice.’

Sarlice nodded at him.

‘It was nothing,’ I replied slowly. ‘You would do the same for me.’

He, too, was leaning against the wall with his hands flopped at his side. I recognised him as Kolinar, a herbalist and soapmaker from Jaria. In his thirties, he was a fine-featured man with sandy blonde hair and warm brown eyes. Without the characteristic dark skin of the Kriite race, Kolinar was from a migrant family of Rada, which had dominant Telbion blood.

He nodded. ‘Except that I couldn’t have dispelled those wards like you did.’

I reached a hand up to stroke Tiaro. The earring almost seemed to purr through the waves, enjoying the attention. For a few minutes, the only sound in the cave was the gentle crackling of the fire.

‘I just don’t understand why the Zeikas are here,’ Kolinar mused. ‘Why build here in the Land of a Thousand Perils?’

‘Perhaps they intend to corrupt the catacombs with their foul magic,’ Ivon suggested. ‘For what purpose I do not know.’

‘They have an interest in Talon,’ said Namal, who was standing with his head in his hands. I was impressed by his ability to master his grief and continue functioning as one of Jaria’s leaders. We needed him now more than ever.

‘But why, then, did they let him escape?’ asked Ofrent. His cat Rada-kin was curled up on his lap, pressing its brown-furred body as close to his leather-clad torso as it could get.

‘What happened to you out there, Talon?’ Namal asked me.

I told my story as briefly as possible, not used to having dozens of people listening to me speak.

‘It seems like they weren’t expecting this much trouble from us,’ Ofrent said.

‘Nor Talon’s ability to banish spirit circles and wards,’ Namal added.

‘By the time those fires got out of control most of us had fought our way out,’ Ivon said. ‘The Zeikas were so busy trying to save

their encampment they hardly had time to follow us, much less find Talon amid the chaos.'

'If they were trying to lure you here, Talon, it seems like a botched attempt,' Namal concluded. 'And if they were hoping to have Jarian slaves to help build their new fortress here, they have been disappointed.'

'That murderer, Regar, did anyone see him?' I asked.

Sarlice stirred beside me. 'He is dead, slain by one of Henter's arrows.' The Lythian stroked her warbow affectionately, the black wood shining orange in the firelight. It took me a moment to realise she was referring to her Tolite-kin by name.

'Many Zeikas died this night,' Namal said, 'but this is far from victory. More will come.'

A woman by the fire, Sefrel, turned to face him. 'And where does that leave us?'

'Leaving Jaria,' Ivon stated. Having grown up in Ubu he knew what it meant to be a Rada in a non-Rada society. If we were forced to leave Jaria would we lose our identity as a race? Become like all the other Rada who were scattered throughout Chryne? Mostly they lived like ordinary people, and expected their Rada-kin to fit in with their chosen lifestyle.

'They can't just boot us out of our splittin' homeland!' a man across from him responded.

Angry voices echoed in the chamber.

'We could stay here,' a younger voice suggested.

'We'll petition the king,' said another.

It seemed to me that even if we could increase the defences around Jaria village there weren't enough warriors to protect the herds and farms.

Though it was possible to go deeper into the catacombs it would be easier for us to sneak home through the forest. I'd tried to follow other tunnels, once or twice, when I was younger, but they were too complex—a torch of embers or an oil lamp only lasted so long.

One such torch was being waved in front of my face with Namal standing before me.

'Do you have the strength to walk with me?' he asked.

I swallowed my first response and nodded politely. When I climbed to my feet, Rekala lifted her head and whine-growled.

I won't be long, I promised.

She wanted to follow me, but she was beyond exhaustion.

Namal lead me deep into the catacombs where the pearly glow gradually faded. Soon all we could see was the flickering light of the torchfire on the walls, and our silhouettes in stark relief. Namal went unerringly down one tunnel and another, choosing with absolute certainty which way to go when it branched.

'Have you explored these caves before?' Namal asked.

'Not this part of the catacombs, no. I visited the Womb a few times when I was younger, with Ella.'

'You and your sister were close?' It was more of a statement than a query. Namal was old enough to be among those who'd known me from birth, which was part of the reason I was so open with him.

I shrugged. 'Why? Is there something down here of significance to Ella?'

Namal met my eyes as we walked, 'Well yes, she knew about it. It is home to one of the few remaining Ancient Sapphire Trees.'

My eyes widened. Now I knew why the ritualists guarded this place. An Ancient Sapphire Tree was even more special than a Great Sapphire Tree.

'It is one of the Nine original trees from which all the lesser sapphire trees are spawned.'

I stared at him. 'Can we see it?'

He gestured ahead with the torch. 'That's where I'm taking you. I thought you'd be interested.'

'I am. Why haven't I been told of it before?'

There was a faint blue glow in the darkness ahead of us.

Namal put his hand across my shoulders, 'Ah, now that is hopefully obvious.'

I sniffed, masking my frustration. From what I knew of sapphire trees they were sought after by weapon-smiths, armourers, jewellers, sculptors, collectors and more. The Nine Ancient Sapphire Trees

were said to be impervious to human devices. Only if an Ancient gave up one of its leaves *willingly* could any item be crafted from it.

‘Aren’t the Ancient Sapphire Trees indestructible?’ I asked. ‘Why would you need to hide its location?’

‘Not only to protect it,’ Namal answered, ‘but also to protect its spawn.’

As he said that, we rounded a sweeping bend and the blue light suddenly became a glowing miasma. Namal extinguished the torch and rested it on a stone table set into the wall. Before us was a forest of sapphire trees, spread out in a massive cavern even bigger than the Womb. Just like the Great Sapphire Tree near Jaria, these trees were as hard as rock from trunk to branch to leaf. The sapphire-like leaves glowed and throbbed with sap, and each tree was easily twice my height.

We walked among them for a while, and I noticed there was a faint sound in the air, a mixture of whirring and chiming. The cavern smelt like rich, dark earth, and the floor was slick with moisture. It felt like soil beneath my boots, not rock. Tiaro revelled in the presence of the trees, one of which might have been her ancestor.

It seemed possible that the earring had been fashioned from the leaf of one of these very trees—my mother or father might have come here to harvest it. I wondered if they had somehow known that I would become an Anzaii like my mother and sister. Emotions rose, almost choking me.

‘Why did you bring me here?’ I asked.

He stroked the shiny trunk of a tree. ‘Only the prime and a handful of others are aware of this Ancient Sapphire Tree’s existence. Traditionally, it has been a secret kept between the prime, the elders and Jaria’s Anzaii. Your mother and sister took their responsibilities seriously, which is why you were never told about this spawning ground.’

I could only frown in frustration.

‘Feera was the sole surviving Anzaii, after Ella and the others were captured, as you know.’

‘So...?’

‘Now that she, too, has been parted from us,’ Namal began, ‘you are Jaria’s only Anzaii. Some will want you to take up the mantle and serve as those before you served.’

The honour of being Jaria’s appointed Anzaii leader was more than I had dreamed, but I felt a certain aversion to being harnessed so soon after coming into my new abilities. Having just met Rekala and Tiaro it seemed there was a world of possibility for me now. I realised that my desire to find out what was going on beyond Jaria’s borders had doubled.

‘I should not like to disappoint my leaders,’ I murmured.

‘I said “some”,’ he reminded me. ‘Your leaders may not have decided what to do with you yet.’

Do with me? Am I chattel?

‘And what do you think I should do?’ I asked, regretting the stiff tone in my voice. After all, Namal seemed to be on my side.

Namal continued walking, glancing at me over his shoulder.

‘I think you should heed your instincts and follow your heart.’

We skirted around a large glowing pool filled with sparkling leafshards. Staring into those waters was like being transported to another place. A whisper of wind with the hint of a storm smell emanated from it.

‘Strange.’

We reached the foot of the biggest sapphire tree yet. Its trunk was wider than me, even with my arms out straight. The branches towered above me with leaves as big as saddles. When I rested my hand against its trunk, a burst of sensation went through my mind. Tiaro screamed in alarm as hundreds of voices and emotions overwhelmed me. I collapsed to the ground, swallowed whole and absorbed by the waves.

Here was Namal. There were the Jarians—including Sarlice and Ivon—all the Rada-kin and a number of bonded weapons, Tolite-kin. Further away were specks of floating darkness. Masses of resentful, murderous thought, scheming and complaining, cleaning up from the fires, eating, rutting and praying to their many gods.

‘I can sense them,’ I exclaimed, ‘the Zeikas.’

Namal was crouched on the ground beside me, peering at me. 'Do not touch it again.'

'I won't.'

The burst of insight faded, leaving echoes of thought in my mind. It had been far too much information for me to process; a barrage of words and images continued to range through my conscious mind, making little sense. My breathing was hoarse and painful.

After a while I sputtered, 'This is the power of an Ancient Sapphire Tree?'

'Yes,' Namal said. His voice was a little high-pitched, like someone was squeezing him around the middle. 'And it is too much for most Anzaii to bear. I am amazed that you were able to discern the Zeikas.'

I, too, am astonished,' Tiaro said.

'This tree gave up some leafshards to us once,' Namal said. 'And an item was fashioned from them by Zoen of Watercrag. It has been in our keeping for generations, passed from Anzaii to Anzaii. In days past, when there was more than one Anzaii in Jaria, the best of them was declared Wave Master and took care of Jaria's Anzaii artefact. Feera's time is over and it seems your time has come.'

I picked myself up, staring at him. 'Are you making me the Wave Master of Jaria?'

'No—it is not my decision to do that, but seeing as you are Jaria's only Anzaii now you are entitled to carry the belt. That is written in the Codes of Jaria.'

He handed me the belt of black leather that I had last seen around Feera's waist. On closer inspection I realised that the jewels it was encrusted with were thick shards of sapphire tree leaf.

Following my gaze, Namal said, 'They're made from one of the Ancient Sapphire Tree's leaves. Hundreds of years ago the Anzaii wore entire suits of leafshard armour, but those were crafted from Great Sapphire Trees. This is something even rarer.'

The shards were as tough as rock, but flexed with the leather. Dark channels of the tree's sap glued it all together. By my reckoning, this belt would be impervious to blade and fire.

‘You entrust this to me?’ I asked in disbelief.

‘Yes,’ Namal said. ‘It is law.’

‘Surprising that the Zeikas didn’t steal it from you.’

‘They daren’t touch it. This belt has a powerful effect against demons because it was made from one of the Nine. Indeed, the full extent of its power is unknown.’

I thought again of the reversed corpse I had seen in the Zeika camp. It had only been demonic powers that had kept that Zeika alive. Contact with a light-touched artefact would have a chance of making the demons flee.

The earring hummed, vibrating in my ear. I slid my belt pouches onto the leafshard belt and wrapped it around my waist, already feeling safer.

‘It looks well on you.’ Namal seemed pleased, but I wasn’t sure why.

‘Thank you,’ I murmured, awed.

When my fingers brushed the shards I experienced a surge of awareness—the Zeikas I had sensed when I touched the Ancient Sapphire Tree were still out there. Perhaps it was insight from touching the Ancient Sapphire Tree that reverberated in my mind.

‘I will take good care of it,’ I said.

‘I know you will,’ Namal replied. ‘There were some who used to say there was a purpose to the Anzaii artefacts.’

‘There are other artefacts like this?’

‘There are said to be, aye. You would have to ask the right people in other Kriite nations. With so many of Jaria’s scrolls lost due to the ban on the Tanzans, we have not been able to look further into it.’

‘It sounds like a worthwhile quest.’

I noticed only the slightest nod from Namal before he turned away. With one more look at the Ancient Sapphire Tree, I followed him out of the cavern. It was tempting to try to pluck a leaf from one of the smaller trees as we passed, but Namal’s reverence for them stayed my hand. Were sapphire trees so few now that they needed protection? In some ways, it reminded me of my people.

We, too, had once glowed brightly.

Chapter Ten—The Letter

Most of the Rada travelled home in animal form, carrying those who were injured or couldn't morph. Ivon helped Sarlice and I carry our gear back to the horses that were busy cropping grass and chewing it over their bits.

The forest was eerily silent as we hurried through. Namal was anxious to return to Jaria in case the Zeikas attacked again, but our enemies did not pursue. *Why?* There would be less than two hundred in Jaria once we arrived. It would be easy pickings for the Zeikas.

'You caught them off guard,' Tiaro said. *'They realise the mistake they made last night. Jonaal must recalculate Jaria's defences before their next attack, especially if it now has a new Anzaii.'*

'Me?'

'Of course.'

'Talon,' Rekala said. *'Some of the other Rada-kin want to know if you are certain there are no scrying marks in the forest. The Zeikas could be watching us at this very moment.'*

'I think I would have noticed,' I replied. *'But I'll pay more attention.'*

Rekala asked, *'Why is there such hatred between the Kriites and the Zeikas?'*

'The Zeikas will not abide our freedom and consider us their rightful slaves. They kill in cold blood, not only their enemies but anyone who gets in the way and is too weak to defend themselves.'

'Zeikas build their kingdoms on the backs of slaves, and their womenfolk are treated like chattel.'

'Why can't you just leave each other alone?'

'I'm sure most Kriites would do just that. We prefer not to go to war.'

'Haven't you tried to reason with them—stake out territories where they're allowed to live the way they like and you're allowed to follow your own beliefs?'

Her mind illustrated this concept with the scent-marking of trees and bushes that was common practice among wild tigers.

'The Zeikas have mostly stayed out of Telby since their exile,' I replied, 'but it seems that they've had enough of leaving us alone. They consider it their mission to rid the world of the Kriite way of life, and they believe it is their right to rule, in the name of Zei.'

Throughout the rest of the day Sarlice, Kestric, Rekala and I travelled with six others. We were bringing up the rear, just in case the Zeikas tried to follow. With my new ability to banish wards, spirit circles and conjurations, I commanded a new and wonderful sense of respect from the Jarians. The rest of my group were seasoned fighters.

As we neared Jaria that afternoon, I detected three scrying marks, which I removed in much the same way as I had banished the demon from Rekala's ward.

When we finally made our way into the village, the day-star was starting to retreat, and the two moons, Capril and Naeva, were visible in the pre-twilight sky. Charred debris scattered the village grounds, and the reek of smoke and magic still clung to every surface. The smell of spit-roast goat had Rekala salivating when we were half a mile away from the village centre. Eventually it reached my nostrils, reminding me I had eaten only rations since the battle here.

Sarlice has got to be at least as hungry as me. I felt a thrill at the idea of serving her before myself. Jarians valued such selfless behaviour, and it was a good excuse to remain near the Lythian. Having been through the rescue with her, I felt drawn to her. Now that we had accomplished our mission I did not want to part ways. I couldn't help wondering what she thought of me.

Waving off the advances of a healer, I urged her to attend to Sarlice while I collected some food. Upon my return, the Lythian rewarded me with a generous smile.

‘Have you many friends here?’ Sarlice asked.

I shrugged. ‘Jaria is my home—its people are my family.’

Rekala sat up and whined.

‘Sorry, girl,’ I muttered, bending down to place the food in front of her.

I sat beside her and rubbed her back, dismayed when patches of greyish-blue fur came off in my hands. Her wounds were already healing, and I could sense the great cat’s strength slowly returning, but it would be many days before she was back to normal.

Once Sarlice’s injuries were treated, she sat in a chair beside me to eat. I was glad she didn’t leave—I worried that, any time now, she would announce what business she had to attend to as an ambassador and be on her way. Then I would never see her again. Kestric looked up at me in surprise.

‘You must teach me how to shield my thoughts,’ I said to Tiaro.

‘Yes,’ she agreed. *‘You are like an uncurled scroll at the moment, broadwaving when you don’t mean to and letting thoughts out to those who are listening keenly. Yet I do not think you have anything to fear from Kestric and Sarlice.’*

‘Talon, there you are.’

‘Bessed, why are you wearing the ephod of prime?’

‘I’ve been elected as prime,’ he replied.

I gestured at the spare chair in front of me and my foster father sat with a deep sigh. Rekala lay on her side and groomed herself.

‘This is my foster father, Bessed,’ I told Sarlice.

‘We’ve met,’ she replied. ‘Congratulations on your appointment, Prime.’

‘How will you manage it all?’ I asked. Bessed was capable, but the position of Quartermaster was demanding enough all on its own.

‘Drea will run the storehouses and I will do my best to lead Jaria, or what’s left of it.’

I cast my eyes around the village, saddened by the destruction. A dozen fresh graves had been dug in the cemetery, which was just visible in the distance.

‘I’m sure you’ll lead us well,’ I said.

‘My thanks for the encouragement, Talon. As Prime, I was privy to the village’s most recent mail. That letter you brought to Namal from Damia and Annie... was from your father.’

I shifted so that my foot was leaning against Rekala’s side. With effort, I forced myself to remain calm. A letter from my father so many years after his passing! Sarlice looked on with respectful silence, stroking Kestric’s ears.

‘Damia scribbled a note at the top,’ Bessed said. ‘Let me read it all to you.’

‘Namal,

Mandus asked me to send a letter once, years ago. Days later he told me to burn it and never say a word. He was back in Jaria, then, and there seemed no reason to keep it. As you can see, I did keep it. For some weeks I had been feeling that I should pass it on. Then Talon arrived on our doorstep and it all became clear. You better show him. He has a right to know.

DAMIA

Jaria,

I don’t know myself anymore. My heart has departed this world. I wanted to thank you, my people, for letting me search for Kerra and the other captives. Then I wanted to curse you. Three seasons. She tried to say ‘farewell’, but only got halfway. I never saw the child who stole her life away. She made me promise to see it safe. I failed her. If I ever find it I know I will hate it for killing her.

Bal Harar appears to have put a great deal of planning into capturing Kerra but, true to form, she defied him by dying in childbirth. Perhaps this list I have enclosed will help you more than it has helped

me. Not a single name on it revealed any sense to this Zeika madness.

Kerra's aunty will not come home with me. Jaalta has abandoned us to live among people who were once enemies.

Perhaps some good has come of this. At long last I have been shown that the Tanzans are not our enemies and never were. I don't know what will happen, but may the Nine Trees shade you.

MANDUS—
Your commander
Your servant
Your friend?

It hurt slightly that my father's letter did not even mention me. That letter must have been written shortly after my mother died. Had my father been planning not to return to Ella and me in Jaria? Perhaps he had intended to ride back alone to search for this mysterious child. If so, he must have changed his mind. In all the years that followed his return he never even mentioned that my mother had been pregnant to a Zeika. *Do I blame him?*

I scrubbed at my forehead and felt sweat and crusted blood come off on my fingers.

Rekala sat up, whined and pushed her back against my leg. I reached out to receive the letter from Bessed's outstretched hand and sat for a moment re-reading it. Surely there was something, anything, more. I ignored inquisitive looks from around the campfire. The list of names my father mentioned was equally frustrating. Written in Reltic, it had a rough Telbion translation scrawled alongside. Some spaces were blank and some names were underlined, but there was no key to understand it.

Mosera and Isvan

Jodhi and Lersa
Varid and Igivorn
... and Nikayai
... and ...
... and Jueli
Tegran and Isola
Nion and Kerran
Kamla and ...
Cristo and Isedrea
Ballex and Niria
Veer and Chapad
Eillana and ...
Jodhi and Rosa
Kerra

I recognised the names of my grandparents on my mother's side and my great grandparents on her father's side. Beyond that were what I presumed were the names of my mother's ancestors going back through one side of parentage with each generation. A fragment of a genealogy, it must be a clue to why the Zeikas had wanted Kerra so badly, and now me.

Namal and two of the other village leaders, Curn and Rundo, came to sit by Bessed. The nine of us, including Uola and the two tigers, formed a rough circle. I could sense Rundo's Rada-kin behind us, but Curn's was away helping Drea and some others transport goods from the storehouse.

'It can't be true,' I stammered. 'Someone would have said something.'

Bessed glanced around at the others and said, 'When your father came back from your mother's grave he secluded himself for weeks.'

'I remember,' I grumped.

'He wasn't himself after that,' Bessed went on.

'I know.'

'There were many things he didn't tell us, and most of the others who were with him perished or went their separate ways. We didn't know about the child nor the list.'

I gritted my teeth. *Surely somebody had known.*

‘I’ve never heard of Jaalta either,’ Bessed added.

‘Kerra’s mother, Rosa, wasn’t from Jaria, so it’s likely her sister never set foot here,’ Curn said.

I had never met any of my grandparents, but I had learned their names when I was small. It was comforting to know that my family history hadn’t been forgotten. Curn was the village planner so it was his business to know Jaria’s population and most of its comings and goings. He and Namal sometimes worked closely on that part of the village archives.

‘Perhaps Talon can attempt to find this Aunt Jaalta of his when he goes to Tanza,’ Curn suggested.

I stared at him in open-mouthed shock. Rekala got to her feet, sensing my confusion.

‘With all that has happened and the demise of poor Feera there’s probably been nobody to tell you...’ Bessed began. He nodded at Curn to continue.

‘As you probably know it’s been our custom over the past decade to send new Anzaii on a pilgrimage to Tanza and Watercrag to find out if they’re Sleffion and Tolite as well. This is especially important before one is chosen to be the Wave Master.’

So they are considering me for Feera’s position, I thought. Jaria’s leader of waves and kin had immense responsibilities. I was awed at the trust the leaders were willing to place in me, but my hesitation remained. Namal’s words of encouragement to follow my heart and heed my instincts came to mind. One thing was certain—I would never be the quartermaster’s apprentice again.

‘You want me to become a village leader,’ I sputtered.

‘We need you to,’ Curn replied. ‘Feera was responsible for overseeing the waves and the needs of our collective kindred. With your growing Anzaii abilities, you will be able to do the same.’

‘I don’t know if I’m ready.’

‘You aren’t,’ Rundo answered.

With a glance at the others, Bessed put his hand on my knee. ‘The purpose of the quest is to ensure Anzaii aren’t beleaguered

with responsibilities here before determining whether they have other psionic powers to learn.'

'You are our only Anzaii,' Rundo added. 'Otherwise we wouldn't even be considering this—'

Bessed noticed my slight recoil and added, 'What Leader Rundo means is that you are so new to your abilities, those of both Anzaii and Rada. We don't ask this of you lightly.'

Rundo screwed up the corner of his mouth and glanced irritably at Bessed. 'We do not yet know if he is cut out for leadership.'

'What does the pilgrimage entail?' I asked cautiously.

'To find out if you are a Tolite or a Sleffion as well you must go to Watercrag and Tanza,' Namal answered.

I wondered who would finance such a long journey—from one end of the map to the other—especially given Jaria's current state.

'It's simple.' Rundo misread my lack of response as incomprehension. 'You go to Tanza to find out if you have a skyearl companion and then on to Watercrag to attempt a weapon bond.'

'If you manage both,' Bessed added, 'you will be Anzaii, Sleffion, Tolite and Rada, the most powerful psion a Kriite can be.'

'Are there any?' I asked, trying to quash my excitement.

'Not that we know of,' Namal answered, 'but we are somewhat out of contact with the Watercragans at the moment.'

'You can understand why we need to know,' Curn said. 'There is a far greater advantage to having a fully fledged psion in our ranks, as opposed to an Anzaii Rada, especially now.'

'And we want to give you every opportunity to discover all of your abilities.'

Sarlice, who had been silently observing up until this point, said, 'There are many Anzaii Tolites in Watercrag but no full psions that I'm aware of.'

'You know the ins and outs of the journey to Watercrag,' Bessed looked at Sarlice. 'You could be Talon's guide and guardian.'

'I came to Jaria to seek your counsel on negotiating with the king of Telby. We want to win Lyth's independence, just like Jaria has,' she replied with care, 'or to do whatever else was necessary to find allies for both Lyth and Jaria. It seems that neither of our beloved

nations can survive much longer if the ban against Zeikas entering Telby has been lifted.

‘If I am to travel to Tanza and Watercrag,’ I began, ‘isn’t Telby along the way?’

Sarlice looked at me, lifting her head as Kestric passed on to her the gist of what I was thinking.

‘Would you like me to join in Sarlice’s diplomatic quest? Then she can go with me to Tanza and Watercrag.’

‘Would you agree to such an undertaking?’ Namal asked her.

She crouched down out of her chair and conferred with Kestric on his level. When she closed her eyes, I worried that she was preparing herself to answer ‘no’, but she turned back to the watching leaders and grinned.

‘Not only would we agree,’ she stated, ‘but we feel compelled by the Nine Trees to accept this mission.’

‘That’s settled then,’ Bessed said. ‘You and Kestric will guard Talon and guide him all the way to Watercrag, stopping at Telby and Tanza on the way.’

‘Talon,’ Namal began, ‘when you and Sarlice arrive in Telby City, you must find out why King Flale is letting Zeikas back into Telby.’

‘Should the king fail to sympathise with our situation you must notify us,’ Bessed said. ‘Then, carry on to Tanza and Watercrag to determine whether you are Sleffion or Tolite, and to see if either realm can send help to Jaria and Lyth. We will send another ambassador to Ravra, which is our closest potential ally. Finally, go with Sarlice back to Lyth, whereupon her duty to you is filled. Meet with the Prime of Lyth to discuss what we can do to strengthen our alliance. It’s a long journey, but you must not delay.’

‘Namal will give you a list of trade goods we have to offer our allies,’ he said, ‘and contracts for them to sign stating that they will send troops to aid us.’

‘I’ll get to work on them right away.’ Namal started to walk away. It wouldn’t normally have been up to him, but the Trade Coordinator was among the five village leaders who had been slain.

‘Are you certain how Jaria will fare after I am gone?’ I asked Bessed.

The new prime sighed. 'I cannot be certain about that, however, the Zeikas may not even know you're gone. Now that you've rid Jaria of scrying marks, the enemy will not be able to see what we're up to. Mayhap a few weeks of peace will follow last night's attack, but we will hide ourselves in the fortress as much as possible, and keep our warriors on the alert.'

The enormity of what I was about to do filled me with trepidation, but it was also exciting to imagine the things I would see on my journey. Rekala's tail flicked and she sat up, looking around sharply at the other humans.

'I have never travelled beyond Sarm,' I stammered. 'Are you certain I am knowledgeable enough to speak for Jaria?'

'You have much to learn, Talon,' Bessed said coolly, 'but that will not stop you from serving Jaria in this. I hereby promote you to the rank of ambassador.'

It took some time to prepare for the journey, but we were given ample supplies. I loaded my saddlebags with everything I needed.

I strapped the packs onto Damia and Annie's carhorse. Sarlice and I had enough coin to buy some horses once we reached Tasset.

The last thing Bessed gave me was a black silk shirt with the emblem of Jaria—a white wolf under a blue tree—on it.

'What's this for?'

'Any encounters you might have with nobility or royalty,' he replied. 'As an ambassador for Jaria, it's important you are respectable when speaking for the realm.'

Nobility! What have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Eleven—Rade

Sarlice, Kestric, Rekala and I travelled steadily from Jaria towards Tasset. We stayed a night in Tez with Damia and Annie and returned the horse and cart. During the journey from Tez to Tasset, Rekala and Kestric carried our gear and occasionally carried one of us on their backs. Sarlice and I travelled in animal form as much as possible.

She was adept at twenty-three animal forms, everything from elephants and leopards to ferrets and snow lizards. Seeing the latter up close was a treat, as I had only glimpsed them in the mountains near Jaria. The feathers on the top were mostly white giving them supreme camouflage. The feathers of the underside were smaller, but completely black. Snow lizards would bask upside down during sunny weather to soak up warmth and energy with the black feathers.

Five days of steady loping in dire wolf form found us crossing farms and grassy hills surrounding the city. There were wooden fences to either side of the road and a sign post welcoming us to Tasset. Further southeast was Sarm, where we would make our last stop before heading for Telby City.

Soon we could make out the hard-packed yellow streets and stone buildings of the town. Everything in the outskirts of Tasset was built to withstand howling desert winds. The houses faced inwards, with thick rock walls providing protection from the heat and the cold. I noticed stacks of hay piled near an open corral that were tied down and wrapped in canvas, presumably to keep the hay from blowing away.

Most of the houses had fenestral windows with wooden lattice frames that supported linen shutters soaked in resin and tallow. They let in the light without admitting sand or wind. Some of the smaller dwellings merely had wooden shutters, like the houses in Jaria. Even though there was only a light breeze today most of the shutters were closed and nothing loose was left outside. If a dwelling had a porch with a table and chairs they were weighed down with sand bags, tied with rope or made of stone.

Both Tiaro and Rekala were fascinated by our new surroundings—everywhere I looked Tiaro was right there in my mind, conjuring up everything I knew so she could understand it better. Instead of merely glancing at a peasant who passed us by Tiaro drew my attention to everything about him, devouring the information that came to the forefront of my mind.

He was towing a cart full of threshed wheat with his sickle hanging from the back. He wore a simple desert robe made of brown linen tied at the waist with a cord. He wore a straw hat, plain leather shoes and had a pewter badge in the shape of a well dangling from his robe. Over his right shoulder was a leather drinking costrel probably filled with ale. Rekala sniffed him as he went by.

Sarlice glanced at me. ‘You probably know this town better than I do. Where’s a good place to stay?’

‘The Pottage Inn should be adequate and it backs on to a livestock market and stables where we can seek new mounts.’

‘It’s a shame Jaria couldn’t spare any,’ Sarlice murmured.

I shook my head. ‘Namal did offer, but they are going to need every asset they have to survive and pay for allied warriors.’

She looked into my eyes and then blinked her agreement. It was such a catlike gesture that I barely registered what she had done. There were other feline things about her, such as the way she perked her head up from time to time and stared around sniffing the air. Most Rada experienced an increase in their nasal acuity, simply because they came to recognise certain smells through their kin to which they wouldn’t normally have paid attention.

‘Lead on,’ Sarlice said, gesturing ahead.

We dismounted outside a small red-daubed building, unloaded the Rada-kin and stacked our gear on the porch out the front of the inn. The two tigers moved around the side of the building to groom themselves in the shade. A couple of children who had been playing nearby squealed and ran away.

I held the door open for Sarlice to enter the inn. Inside to our left was a man sitting on a barrel pretending to be a knight on a fine steed. Behind him was a girl pretending to be the knight's page boy and a second man playing a lute.

'Young couple moving in to town?' a high-pitched voice carried across the room as the owner of the inn approached us.

'Sad to say, we are not,' I corrected him. 'We're just passing through Tasset. I'm Taeon and this is... Klerice.' It seemed safer to give him my real name than the moniker even the Zeikas seemed to know me by.

'Very well,' he replied, stroking his pointy black moustache. 'My name is Blakton, and you have come to the finest affordable tavern in town. What needs have you?'

'A room for two nights, meat for our Rada-kin, meals and mead if it please you,' Sarlice said, raising her voice to carry over the performance behind us.

'That would be four weights of silver and seventy-three bronze,' he replied smoothly.

Sarlice glanced at me with a look of distaste.

'We have stories to tell in the evening,' I said to Blakton in my most appealing voice. 'And I think the cats can look after themselves.' Sarlice nodded her assent.

'What kind of stories?' Blakton queried, narrowing his eyes.

'I can recite Jarian history and the Telbion Realm Wars,' I offered.

The innkeeper stifled a yawn. Sarlice added, 'I know the complete tales of Dilon the serf, The Queen's Secret Lover and the epic Bandits of Sandsease'.

'Well, in that case,' Blakton replied, 'you may take the north-facing suite with two meals a day and all the mead you like for one weight of silver and sixty bronze provided you, ma'am, are available

in the tavern from dusk until late to keep my guests from thinking too carefully about what *they* are spending.’

He winked.

‘And food for our animals, too?’ Sarlice asked sweetly.

The man’s face soured, ‘What animals have you?’

‘A firetiger and an icetiger, sir,’ Sarlice began. ‘Shortly to be joined by two horses.’

‘Throw in an extra silverweight,’ he said, ‘and we’ll provide feed for your horses. The cats can have what’s left over from each day’s eating.’

‘And a leg of beef today,’ I negotiated.

Blakton made a churling noise deep in his throat, scratched the back of his head and looked at us through shrewd eyes. After requesting that we send a number of messages to Telby through the waves for him, he finally agreed to our deal.

Sarlice picked up as much of her gear as she could carry and headed up the stairs. Blakton and I hefted the rest of it and followed her. I paid the man his dues and closed the door behind him, glad to shut out the bellowing from below.

Our suite was a room with two beds and enough space between them to fit a low bench with drawers facing each bed. Each canvas tick the straw was stuffed into was stained and the pillows were browned and dusty from years of use.

Once I had stowed my gear, I lay on my back to rest. It was nice to lie in a bed again even if it was just a palliasse on a slab of wood. Sarlice covered her bed with a green tunic from her pack. We lay there in silence for at least an hour.

‘*Hey in there,*’ Kestric called to both of us on the waves, ‘*we want our meat.*’

‘We might as well take a look at these horses now,’ Sarlice said, ‘before the barrel-rider and his wailing companion are through deafening the crowd.’

‘*We’ll stop by the kitchen on the way out,*’ I told Kestric.

On our way out of the Pottage Inn, we wheedled the raw leg of beef off the cook, in addition to three bones with some skin and

sinew. Outside, the tigers just about knocked each other over in their eagerness to reach us, but Rekala, being the larger and the most recently turned Rada-kin, won the first gnaw of the beef. After making sure they took their food out of sight behind the tavern, we strolled to the stables nearby.

‘I’ve never purchased a horse, before,’ I admitted, ‘but I will know a good one when I ride it.’

Sarlice introduced herself as Klerice to the horse-merchant who ran the stables behind the inn. After checking the general health of the horses, we chose four of them to be prepared for riding. The woman left to do it herself.

While we were waiting, I asked Sarlice, ‘What about your family? You know so much about mine...’

Sarlice looked down. ‘Well... my mother died birthing me. My father, Laars, was the battle commander and my brother, Gelvin, was one of his soldiers. When I was three, Gelvin got lockjaw from a dire wound and suffered for days before taking himself off into the mountains of Siffre to die. We never saw him again. My aunt and uncle helped Father to raise me, but Aunt Rae died of the pheasant plague when I was seven. My father never knew what my uncle had become...’

I turned to face her, leaning my back on the rail I had been resting my arms on. She had a pained expression, the corners of her mouth pinched down and lines across her brow. Kestric noticed her distress from behind us at the inn and sent a series of questions through the waves to the two of us. Although I couldn’t hear Sarlice on the waves, I knew when she reassured her Rada-kin, because his presence calmed. Sarlice gave me a sheepish grin.

‘What had your uncle become?’ I pressed her gently.

She spun on her heel, biting her lip and staring off into the desert to the south. When she started speaking again, her voice was shaking and her fists were so tightly clenched they turned from golden tanned to pale.

‘I’ve never really spoken to anyone about it,’ she began, ‘certainly not my father. My uncle was... more... familiar than he should have been with young girls.’

I stared at her, horrified at her words, but also touched that she had chosen to share this with me. I had no idea what to say.

‘Don’t say anything,’ Kestric suggested, reading my thoughts, *‘just listen. Sarlice has never dealt with this before. This could be a turning point for her adult life.’*

I was still wondering what Kestric had meant by ‘adult life’ when Sarlice patted my hand. I experienced a surge of sensation, including foreign and disturbing sights, sounds, smells and feelings, but they flashed through my mind so fast I couldn’t understand what I was sensing, much less determine where they came from. I guessed it was a memory echo of some kind, passed on accidentally by Kestric through the waves, coinciding with Sarlice’s touch by chance.

‘I was with child for a season when I was eleven,’ Sarlice whispered. Realisation dawned on me. ‘My uncle was the first to notice, and he made sure he was also the last.’

I blinked at her and glanced around to make sure nobody else was listening.

‘You’re offended that I told you about this,’ Sarlice concluded from my shocked silence.

‘No,’ I replied emphatically. ‘Just splittin’ angry, for you!’

‘You’re not... you’re not disgusted by me now?’

I turned my hand around so that I could hold hers in it, surprised that she didn’t pull away because of the eerie, smooth feel of the scars on my palm.

I stammered a little when I replied, ‘N... no. I am sorry you had to endure such abuse.’

‘He was vile,’ she whispered. She covered her lower lip with her upper, sniffed and tried unsuccessfully to hold back her tears.

Although I’d never experienced anything like what she had, I guessed that the reason she told me about it was because of the losses I had been through—she thought I would understand her pain. A few tears made tracks in the dust on her face, but she made not a sound. Following my instincts, I reached out to her and pulled her into a loose embrace. She wrapped her arms behind my back and bowed her head against my shoulder.

I hesitated for a moment, then caressed the back of her head, smoothing the runaway curls. She snuffled and squeezed me tighter. Her hair smelt of woodsmoke and the familiar, alluring smell I had come to associate with Sarlice. *Smell? I'm thinking like an icetiger.*

After a few minutes, she stood back and wiped her eyes, laughing to hide her embarrassment.

'He was?' I asked.

Her eyes became distant once more and I guessed another shocking admission was on the way.

'I killed him when I was fourteen,' she replied, staring into space. 'He came for me in the forest one day and I waited until he was lying right on top of me before drawing my hunting knife and stabbing him through the neck.'

Bite the neck,' Rekala chimed in.

I gulped and ran one hand through my hair. 'How terrible for you. How did you explain it?'

'A raiding party from Regents Keep,' she replied. 'My uncle died to save me...'

A bitter laugh escaped my throat. 'That rapist will be remembered as a hero because of you.'

A ball of boiling rage ignited and churned inside me. I wanted no other child to ever go through what Sarlice had, and I wondered if I would dismember any man I witnessed committing such an atrocity.

It's never enough to want to defend them,' Kestic counselled me, sharing his words with Sarlice and Rekala as well. *These predators wait until their prey is alone and they have no defender.'*

Tears streamed down Sarlice's face, but she looked right at me, moved by the intensity of my reaction. Kestic allowed me to sense a fraction of his Rada's emotions so that I would realise how much guilt was tangled up in her memories of her uncle.

'You were not to blame,' I told her firmly. 'You were a child and he violated you. Even that word is not strong enough to describe it. There is a word in Kaslonican—do you know it?'

'Rade,' Sarlice mumbled, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. 'Literally "the rape of mind and body"'. But that doesn't justify murder. Slaying him was wrong.'

‘You were defending yourself,’ I argued.

Across the other side of the corral the horse-merchant emerged with two saddled horses from the stable. Sarlice hastily wiped away her tears.

‘I should have told somebody what he was doing,’ she replied. ‘To this day nobody from Lyth even knows.’

‘He would have killed you,’ I replied, accepting the reins from the horse-merchant when she arrived.

Sarlice did the same, mounting up faster than I could.

‘At least I wouldn’t have had to live with the shame of what I did,’ she said.

I walked my horse in a circle around hers. It was a fleabitten grey mare with bony withers and a nervous way of tossing her head and chomping on the bit.

‘You feel guilty about slaying your uncle,’ I said.

She booted her horse hard in the ribs and leaned forward as it launched into a canter. Dust flew up around the corral as she circled the outer edge. The chestnut she was riding had a loping gait that would eat up the miles but might not be very comfortable.

‘This one feels like a rocking horse,’ she confirmed after slowing to walk beside me.

My grey reached out to bite the chestnut so I wheeled her away, forcing her to spin in a tight circle. Sarlice kicked her horse into a trot and raced around behind me, coming up on the right side, forcing the grey to lurch left. I leaned back and pulled on the reins to bring the mare to a halt. Sarlice and I both dismounted and walked the horses back to the horse-merchant who was busy talking to some other customers.

‘We’ll try the others,’ I said to her.

After the woman had walked away with the horses, Sarlice whispered forcefully to me, ‘My uncle was drunk that day, and any time he was drunk he was even rougher than usual. He’d already split my lip and blackened one side of me. I would have been permanently injured or slain if I hadn’t done something to defend myself. I did what... I had to...’

‘There,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘You finally started talking some sense.’

When the horse-merchant handed over her next mount, Sarlice thanked her and climbed aboard. This time, we both had blacks: Sarlice on a mare and myself on a gelding. The horses seemed to know each other and were eager enough to start trotting around the arena.

After a few passes, Sarlice whooped and flew forward at the canter. In seconds, she was behind me, making my horse surge into a canter. I let him go, impressed by the ease with which he outstripped the mare. Sarlice tried her hardest to catch us, shouting with enthusiasm—when I glanced back I was glad to see a smile upon her face—but try as she might she could not catch me on my black gelding.

He was soft-mouthed, comfortable and responsive, three traits that, when combined with the speed and musculature, sold me. Even though there were other geldings of excellent breeding I didn’t bother riding them. Sarlice had a similar feeling about her black mare.

I let her do the bargaining, with the horse merchant. After paying for the animals, we led them away.

‘I’ll name her “Duria” because she’s come all the way from Duuryn.’

‘Is that where they’re from?’ I asked, leading my gelding into a stall in the Pottage Inn’s stable.

‘Yes, didn’t you see the signs?’

‘No, I didn’t look,’ I admitted. ‘I was too busy talking to you.’

Sarlice looked me in the eye, lost for words but clearly thankful for my interest and sensitivity. We poured grain from the stable’s storage crates into the horses’ feed troughs and brushed them down with handfuls of straw, getting our hands very dirty.

There was a communal hand-cleaning bowl on the way into the Pottage Inn, so we made use of it before walking over to a table in the corner closest to the fireplace. Rekala and Kestic followed us inside, causing a few people to pause and stare. The two tigers made an attractive pair—one with fur the colour of fire, the other made

up in the hues of winter. Rekala's coat was still mostly dull grey, with dusky black stripes and spots here and there. I patted her head and scratched behind her ear with as much force as I could.

'You've told me about one aspect of your childhood, but that can't be all that has made you into the strong, confident woman you are today.'

'I'm surprised you think I'm strong after that display,' Sarlice whispered.

'I know you don't usually let that side of you show. Therefore it was strong of you to do so.'

Sarlice cocked her head at me, clearly enthralled by the way we had connected.

'It is good to have the Rada-kin enhancing our communication, but I've never experienced anything quite like this before. I'm guessing it's because Kestric can use the waves directly with you. There is no emotion being lost in the transition from me to my Rada-kin to your Rada-kin, then to you.'

'You'll have to be my guide on what's normal communication between Rada,' I replied. 'Everything is new to me. I assumed I had been missing out on this with my fellow Jarians all this time.'

'No,' she countered. 'It's not usually like this.'

We drank and ate together for an hour, swapping stories from our past and commenting on how we would do things differently if we had been the adults in those scenarios. We agreed that the world of adulthood was filled with responsibilities that children could never imagine, but that nothing was more important than being there for family members in their formative years. What we had both lacked in our childhood was a part of us now, but it was something that we could look back on with objectivity and learn from.

It was in this mood of enlightenment and friendship that Sarlice and I told stories to the gathered people at the Pottage Inn that night. The Lythian received many compliments for reciting the tales of Dilron the serf with so much empathy. As the fireplace burned low the last of the tavern's patrons drank their wine, Sarlice drew her tale to a close, and gave me a wink when she delivered the final line.

Two days later we made our way to the trail that would soon follow the River Jarvi to Telby City. It started with a road across the desert. A herd of camels was grazing in the distance. I recalled Rekala's promise to catch one for me in return for the fish I had speared.

'I've heard of man-eating leopards on these plains,' Sarlice commented, 'but have never seen any.'

'Wild animals are the least of my concerns,' I muttered to myself.

I didn't want to burden Sarlice with my nagging fear about the Zeikas.

Besides, I told myself, they don't know where I am. What reason would they have to bother about me?

'The same reason they "bothered about you" on the plains near Tez,' Tiaro piped up. 'The same reason that Zeika came to Jaria to talk with Arone and killed him.'

'Because the Zeikas want me alive for some reason?'

'It is certain,' Tiaro replied. 'And let's hope your moving away from Jaria is in everyone's favour, not their disadvantage.'

I shuddered. The last thing I wanted was for Jaria to fall under attack now that I was gone. Yet it seemed absurd that my presence would make such a difference. Anzai I might be, but I was as green as a newborn foal.

As we were walking I adjusted the length of one of my stirrups and sat back in the saddle. My new black horse seemed pleased to be on the road, stepping out with enthusiasm, ears pricked up. Sarlice rode ahead, scanning the terrain.

We stopped at the river early in the evening and let the horses paw at the water's edge, splashing themselves. Capril and Naeva were visible in the teal coloured sky; one moon to the east and one to the west. I gathered tinder, kindling and logs then lit a fire with my steel and flint. Sarlice and I set up the canvas shelter we were to share. I had found some abandoned fence rails while gathering firewood and made use of them for propping up the shelter.

Sarlice washed clothes in the river while I put together the evening meal.

'It's tasty,' Sarlice said. 'Your cooking is a real treat compared to my usual travel fare.'

My heart warmed at her compliment. I had used special nuts and herbs from my supplies, but I hadn't been sure she would appreciate the flavours.

The tigers brought down a warthog together and shared their kill, promising to leave us a small portion of meat for our breakfast.

Partially sated, Rekala curled up behind me, proffering her side as a giant pillow. I leaned against her feeling more relaxed than I had in weeks. My muscles ached slightly from all the recent use but it felt good to stretch my bare feet out in the heat of the flames.

I smiled faintly at my current situation and mused on how things were changing. The fellowship of an impressive Radan woman, a talking earring and two fine tigers was a far cry from the many years spent roaming the forest alone.

Chapter Twelve— The Darkening of the Sky

A thunderous roar echoed across the plains.
‘Wake up, Talon!’ Sarlice shouted.
I groaned and rubbed my eyes. ‘What?’

Sarlice pointed to the horizon. It was still dark, but the first rays of light from the day-star sprayed through a rising cloud of dust. I placed one hand on the sandy ground and felt the frenzied tremors of a stampede.

I shook myself awake and concentrated on shifting my eyes only into those of an icetiger, so I could see better. It was difficult to only partly transform, but in the circumstances it seemed the best option.

I carried my saddle and bridle to the gelding, leaving everything else behind in the tent. The buckles of the tack were cold and stiff and the horses fidgeted as we tried to saddle them—heads flung up, ears erect and nostrils flaring. Sarlice was mounted up first.

The stampede was gaining and I spotted the two tigers trying to herd them away from us. I swung aboard my gelding, and he lurched into motion, just as eager to escape the stampede as I was. Scrabbling with loose reins, I managed to pull him up beside the river. I turned back and, to my surprise, there was a pale, frightened girl running towards me.

The camels raced for a gap in the trees beside the river, straight towards the girl. Sarlice cursed loudly and readied her Tolite-kin, the

large black warbow named Henter. The camels closed, tall and lanky, but with bodies as round and hard as barrels. In the dusty blackness behind them I thought I glimpsed something even blacker bearing up through the sky, but the girl's plight drew my attention away from it. Her eyes pierced me with such intense need that I felt my body respond with readiness.

I slackened the reins and shouted to urge the gelding on. He launched into a canter from a standstill and bolted right into the path of the camels.

For a moment we were amid the mass of stampeding creatures. They jostled and shoved us so hard I nearly lost my balance, but I grabbed a chunk of the gelding's mane to steady myself.

As we passed the girl I held out my arm and tried to pull her up behind me. She ended up in front of me on the gelding's withers, clinging to me tightly. The gelding darted to and fro through the grunting beasts, bucking once to dislodge us, but I clung to him with leg muscles that were strong from mountaineering.

A particularly large camel charged after us, baring its tusks and growling. The waif watched it over my shoulder and shouted something in my ear. Blinding dust rose and the camel rumbled. The thudding of its steps became louder then suddenly it stopped.

Turning back, I saw a long arrow shaft sticking out of the back of its head. Another camel nearby jumped out of the way of the falling beast and knocked us off the gelding. We landed in a jumble of limbs, bruising our hands, elbows and knees. The gelding threw his back feet into the air, narrowly missing my head, and galloped off.

I huddled over the girl, expecting to be crushed at any moment. More camels rushed past us, the wind of their passage blowing dust into our eyes. The girl was staring at me through the dust, somehow disconnected from the danger assaulting us. The perfection of her features and form captivated me. As the last of the thundering faded away, I was drawn into the girl's large, mystical eyes, which swirled with watery greens and greys. Her skin was pale and pure as goat's milk.

The thundering faded and the dust gradually settled—everything seemed quiet and still after the pandemonium had passed and the girl shivered against me.

‘We’re safe now,’ I said breathlessly.

‘Are you unscathed, Talon? Are you hale?’ Rekala was shouting in my mind. I realised she’d been calling me for some time, but I’d been too distracted to receive her wave.

Rekala rushed over, nudged and patted me like I was her cub.

‘What happened?’ I demanded. ‘We could have been killed.’

‘It wasn’t us that started the stampede,’ Rekala told me defensively.

I recalled the black shape I thought I had seen in the dusty sky. With Zeikas in the area perhaps it had been one of their ghostly, conjured dragons. I decided not to voice my concern for fear of alarming the girl.

Sarlice cantered over to us, slid off her horse and helped us to our feet. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘No,’ I replied.

‘My thanks to you,’ the girl said, never taking her eyes off me.

‘Where did you come from?’ Sarlice asked gently.

The girl seemed bewildered at the question, then gradually sense came into her eyes.

‘I was with my family when the wolf pack came,’ she said. ‘They slew and devoured everyone and they would have slain me too if it weren’t for my horse. I’ve been wandering the desert for days. Then those camels came in the night and frightened my horse away.’

‘What’s your name?’ I asked.

‘Lira,’ she replied.

‘We could turn back,’ Sarlice suggested. ‘Take you to Tasset where we just came from.’

‘We were bound for Jesath,’ Lira said in a daze. ‘My uncle lives there.’

Still embracing her slight form, I felt a surge of protectiveness. With one glance at Sarlice, I knew she was thinking the same thing I was—Lira could travel with us. Although it would put a strain on our supplies, we were resourceful enough to get by. Kestric’s thoughts confirmed that Sarlice was agreeable.

‘We are going in that direction, too,’ I said. ‘Would you like to go with us?’

She looked frightened for a moment, peering from Sarlice’s face to mine. She looked about seventeen, but was more delicate than most of the Kriite women I’d met.

‘Who are you?’ she wondered. ‘Appearing like spirits out of nowhere.’

‘We are Kriites,’ Sarlice replied. ‘My name is Sarlice and I’m an ambassador for Lyth and also a Tolite, Rada.’

If Sarlice felt comfortable enough to reveal her true identity, then I decided I could too. I could have imagined the black shadow in all that chaos.

‘And you,’ Lira raked her eyes down by body, appearing overwhelmed.

‘I’m Ambassador Talon of Jaria,’ I said, enjoying the use of my new title. ‘Anzaii, Rada.’

She blinked and nodded slowly. ‘How much will your services cost me?’

I spread my hands apart. ‘Nothing. Unless there’s a hidden bag of gold in that dress of yours.’

A small smile lit up her face. ‘No, but I will find some way to repay your kindness,’ she said.

Lira’s horse was gone but we located her packs a league away. It would burden our horses a lot more to be carrying Lira and her packs, but Sarlice and I agreed we could sacrifice some speed in order to help out the poor girl.

We spent the rest of the day skinning the camel that Sarlice had slain, smoking meat over the fire inside a makeshift tent with a wooden hanging frame I knocked together, and packing it in salt. Sarlice gave one of the tusks to me, kept the other for herself, and relinquished the carcass to the Rada-kin.

I slept outside the tent with the tigers so Sarlice and Lira could have more space. I could hear their somewhat awkward conversation as I drifted off to sleep. A warrior woman from Lyth and a noble girl from the city had little in common, I supposed.

Instead of taking animal form, I rode with Lira for our first day of travel. Each time we stopped I could see the fear in her eyes as she dismounted. I tried to reassure her that our Rada-kin would keep us safe, but she remained sensitive to any noise. The tracks in the dust beneath her eyes told me she still grieved for her family, so I did what I could to make her more comfortable.

Before the daylight faded, we stopped to set up camp in a copse of trees not far from the river. The sandy ground was covered with grassvines and small, grey rocks, some of which the tigers upturned to catch the lizards and land crabs hiding beneath them. The day-star was setting to the east, casting a mauve glow over the desert hills and lighting the underside of the few clouds that draped the sky.

Lira sat with her back against a tree, while I strung up our shelter in a three-sided design between the trees, got a fire going, and prepared the evening meal. Sarlice brushed and fed the horses, collected water, unpacked her bedroll for Lira and created a makeshift one from blankets and clothing for herself.

‘Would you like me to set up your bed, Talon?’ she asked.

I finished licking my fingers and wiped them on my tunic. ‘All is well, I’ll do it later. Come over here and tell me if this curry is edible.’

I offered her the wooden ladle and watched with anticipation as she tried the food. Her eyebrows shot up.

‘Talon, that’s delicious. How do you do it?’

‘Ha ha. You’ve been away from civilisation too long,’ I replied. ‘Living on travel rations is not fun.’

‘Living on *your* travel rations is something else,’ she said. ‘Lira, you’re from a noble family. Tell Talon he’s as fine a cook as any.’

Lira smiled coyly at my guide and ran her fingers daintily through her black hair. In the waning light the girl’s green eyes seemed filled with shadows, but as she came closer to the fire the light danced in them. She accepted the ladle from Sarlice and scraped a bit of sauce off with her finger, sliding it slowly into her mouth.

‘It is a fine curry,’ she agreed. ‘Is that ice pepper, garlic and ginger I can taste?’

‘Very good,’ I responded, accepting the ladle back and stirring the contents of the pot.

Sarlice chortled in the background and patted her stomach. ‘I’m hungry now, which is a little bit unusual for me. All these years of simple food have left me with a neglected appetite.’

‘How long has it been since you first left home?’ I asked, stirring the curry to prevent it from scorching on the bottom.

‘I went to Watercrag almost four years ago,’ she replied. ‘Two years later I returned to Lyth for three seasons then set out again as Lyth’s ambassador.’

Lira crouched beside me on a rock with her back to Sarlice.

‘Ambassadors usually have a hearty appetite,’ Lira commented. ‘They do little more than talk and eat.’

Sarlice’s spine stiffened. ‘Who are you, exactly?’

Lira turned to face her, a subtle frown on her brow. ‘I’m from a noble family that worked for its wealth for three generations. My father’s speciality was diplomatic advice to other nobles. My grandfather was an adviser to King Aabyn of Telby.’

‘He might have known my father, Mandus,’ I commented.

‘And your uncle lives in Jesath?’ Sarlice pressed.

‘Yes, our ancestors come from there,’ she replied. ‘My father, mother, brothers, sisters and I were on our way to Jesath to escape social pressure from more ancient noble families when the wolves struck. I am now the sole surviving heir.’

‘What is your family name?’ Sarlice asked. ‘Perhaps I will have heard of it.’

‘Doubtful,’ Lira replied looking Sarlice up and down. Perhaps to reduce the potential for interpreting her remark as snobbery she added, ‘As I said, we are relatively new to noble circles.’

Sarlice kept looking at her, waiting for an answer.

‘Very well,’ the girl huffed, ‘but please don’t tell anyone my identity without my leave. The situation for the Demaeda family is delicate.’

‘Demaeda...’ Sarlice repeated, casting her eyes upwards in thought. ‘Never heard of them.’

‘I didn’t think you would have.’

Sarlice shrugged and turned away.

‘Your feast is ready, ladies,’ I announced, scooping curry out of the pot and serving it in wooden bowls. We only had two, so I handed one each to the girls and ate my own dinner straight out of the cooking pot.

‘What was your first mission as the ambassador for Lyth?’ I asked Sarlice between mouthfuls.

‘I was sent to the nomadic peoples of the Barh Desert,’ she replied.

‘They don’t speak Telbion, do they?’

‘No, it is a difficult language, but I found ways to communicate with them, for which they respected me. We came to agree that Barh and Lyth should be allies, although it is not their custom to write things down.’

Lira commented, ‘Not much point in savages writing.’

Finishing my meal, I sighed and gazed at the sky and the distant desert, both of which were blanketed in hues of red-pink and gold. The river flowed gently in the background, with fishlike reflections of dusk darting on its surface.

‘What will you do when you get to your uncle’s?’ I asked Lira.

She held my eyes. ‘I’m interested in starting an advisory service to nobles in Jesath who are looking to extend their holdings in Telby and Siffre.’

‘What of Tanza?’ Sarlice asked. ‘Isn’t that a realm sharing its borders with Jesath as well?’

‘It does,’ the pale-skinned woman replied. ‘You’re quite right, but Tanza is notoriously difficult to access, being in a sinkhole, lower than most of the rest of Chryne. Even without the shield it would make it difficult for ordinary travellers to get in.’

‘We are heading there,’ I said. ‘Before I can be declared Wave Master of Jaria I have to find out if I have any other psionic powers, and Tanza is the home of the Sleffion.’

‘Do you think you will be?’ she asked, curiosity burning in her eyes.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘What are the chances? I’m already Anzaii, Rada.’

‘I’ve met an Anzaii, ‘Tolite, Rada before,’ Sarlice said, ‘and a Sleffion, ‘Tolite, Rada.’

‘I have met Anzaii, ‘Tolites,’ Lira added. ‘They make excellent advisers and guardians for nobles.’

‘One thing’s for sure,’ I began, ‘If I am Sleffion or ‘Tolite I will have a lot to learn. I don’t know the first thing about skyearls, and my weapon abilities are limited to knife throwing and bows and arrows. Even with those, my skills are lacking.’

‘The first sign of a good pupil is the willingness to learn,’ Sarlice replied. ‘Perhaps I can teach you a thing or two about warbows.’

‘I’d like that,’ I said, eyeing her ‘Tolite-kin resting a few feet away, ‘but not tonight.’

Lira laughed. I stood up, stretched and walked to my packs to fetch a costrel of ale. I offered it to the girls first, but only Lira was interested. Sarlice bade us good night and retreated to her makeshift bed. An hour later Lira finished questioning me about my Anzaii abilities and the two of us also retired. Exhausted from the day’s journey I fell asleep quickly and dreamed of strange winged monsters made of roses and water.

In the morning Sarlice and Lira prepared breakfast together, arguing about trade and politics, female fighters, motherhood, slavery and so forth. I sat half-listening, with my back against a rock, gazing out at the desert.

In my mind I explored the surrounding territory with Rekala. Rather than overlaying what my natural eyes were seeing, the vision I received on the waves from the icetiger was like part of my imagination, but far more vivid. When I concentrated this hard on the waves the things I could see and hear in the natural world faded to the back of my mind. I didn’t even notice when Lira brought me a bowl of rice.

‘Hungry?’ she asked, jolting me back to reality.

She had tied her black hair back neatly and garbed herself in a tight-fitting white robe. Admiring her figure, I took another few seconds to reach out my hand for the food.

‘Sure, thanks.’

She smirked at me, collected a second bowl from Sarlice and came back to sit beside me. Sarlice ate her food out of the pot, as I had done the night before. She rested one bare foot on Kestric’s back—he was snoozing in the shade of a tree. Rekala padded into the campsite and sat to watch me eat, shivering her skin to get rid of flies.

‘This new female fascinates you,’ she stated. *‘Why?’*

‘What gave you that impression?’ I retorted.

Instead of answering my question, she mused upon me and probed as deeply into my mind as she could. She soon got frustrated and declared, *‘Kestric told me about this phenomenon, but I hadn’t thought my own Rada-kin would be so self-deceiving.’*

‘I’m not deceiving anyone,’ I replied moodily. *‘Human relationships aren’t as straightforward as animal relationships.’*

Rekala continued to watch my interaction with Lira as the day went by. When it came time to stop and set up camp that afternoon Lira walked past Rekala on her way to the river and the icetiger whine-growled deep in her throat. Lira recoiled and looked at me with wide-eyes.

‘Rekala’s just jealous,’ I reassured her.

Lira pursed her lips and continued on her way. Rekala padded to my side, chuffed and bunted her head against my thigh.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked her. ‘Hasn’t Lira been through enough already?’

Rekala yowled in a throaty way and flattened her ears. Sarlice, who had been observing this from Duria’s back, dismounted and walked her horse over to me so she could speak without Lira overhearing. ‘Perhaps you and Rekala should take a walk alone. Lira has barely left your side in three days.’

I lowered my eyes for a moment, and then looked over at the pale-skinned girl who was stripping down to her undergarments to get into the river. I thought it strange for her to do so within my sight, but I wasn’t about to complain. Sarlice frowned in Lira’s direction as she waited for my response. All the attention I was getting was starting to drain me—perhaps I wasn’t handling it right.

‘What do you say, Rekala? A walk?’ I asked out loud for Sarlice’s benefit.

Very well,’ she replied, setting off in the opposite direction from Lira.

I took Tiaro out of my earlobe and handed it to Sarlice.

‘I sometimes forget about your Anzaii-kin,’ Sarlice said.

‘When there are no Zeikas around, it is dormant most of the time,’ I replied, ‘but if I want to give Rekala my devoted attention, it will be better not to have Tiaro nearby.’

‘I imagine it’s similar to my Tolite-kin,’ Sarlice said. ‘The voice is more integrated with yourself because it isn’t a living being. It becomes more active when it is being used.’

‘Seems like it.’

I followed my Rada-kin silently for fifteen minutes and she led me away from the river, down a rock-strewn slope and into a shallow depression in the land. Ochre stones were piled around us, like droppings left by a colossal beast. A channel was cut through the centre of the depression and small plants struggled to survive where there had once been water. My boots crunched on the rocks, drowning out the sound of the wind as it flowed across the landscape.

Is everything well with you, Rekala?’ I queried.

She settled down beside the dry creekbed and fixed me with her deadpan tiger stare.

I am fitter than I’ve ever been,’ she replied, ‘*what with all this marching about day after day. Tigers spend a lot more time snoozing ordinarily.*’

Is there anything I can do to make things easier for you?’ I asked, sitting down beside her and tickling the immense, leathery paw pads.

She flicked one paw absentmindedly, but didn’t pull away. *I’m not much used to being in a pack,*’ she repeated, ‘*so I’m having difficulty with the idea of sharing you.*’

I’m always here in your mind, aren’t I?’ I asked, patting her on the forehead.

She lifted her cheek so I could scratch it.

'Not always,' she replied. 'There are some times when I can overhear your every thought, but others when you seem far away. I don't like it when you hide things from me.'

'Trees! I'm not hiding anything!' I exclaimed out loud.

'Oh no? What about the conflicting feelings you have toward Sarlice and Lira?'

'Conflicting feelings? No, no, not that again. Listen, Rekala, I barely know either of them—'

'We barely know Lira,' she agreed.

'What has Kestric been saying to you?' I asked.

'Nothing. He is even more frustrating than you.'

'Did you ever consider that we don't discuss it yet because we don't know? And it's... personal.'

'You are my world, Talon,' she replied, punctuating her statement by getting to her feet and pressing her body against me. She rubbed her cheek against my shoulder, scent-marking me. 'This communication we have on the waves is deeply personal.'

'Yes, but it isn't personal in a romantic way,' I countered. 'Most humans have a very high regard for intimate relations—'

'Mating...'

'Call it what you will. Rada-kin must learn to... go elsewhere. It is not a part of my life I can share with you.'

'Fine,' she replied. 'I think I'm starting to understand, but if you keep things locked away from yourself, just remember I will have a hard time working them out as well.'

'It's the way we humans cope with certain complications in our world,' I reassured her. 'You'll get used to it.'

While we were in the desert Sarlice and Lira wrapped themselves in layers of cloth and swathed their heads, but it wasn't enough to fully protect them. We considered travelling at night for a time, but Lira insisted on staying close to the fire at night where the wolf packs would not approach.

It was a bright, humid afternoon when we arrived at Sarm. Though not much bigger than Tasset it had a style and sophistication

like no other place I'd seen. I was suddenly conscious of my dusty, worn attire. Would the people here consider me to be an outlander? *Never mind that. I have more important concerns.*

I set my mind to the terrain instead. Here the River Jarvi clashed with Telby River and split sharply in two again. For centuries the River Jarvi had been the stronger, eroding tons of sand, rocks and silt from the riverbed as it crashed into the higher ground around the Telby River. A single foaming waterfall now delivered vast quantities of water from the Telby River into Lake Sarm, which was more like a gigantic whirlpool of rapids than a lake.

'The waves crashing on a beach are somewhat like those rapids,' Lira said, taking my hand and pulling me towards the edge of the wooden platform we were standing on.

'It sounds like dangerous water to swim in,' I commented.

Sarlice glanced at us from where she was standing at the sailbarge clerk's desk. We'd been told that to transport the three of us, our horses and the two tigers across the river was one silver and 85 bronze, but Sarlice was doing her best to negotiate the price down.

'I've never swam in it,' Lira replied. 'Many have drowned.' Her dainty face was still red and blistered from her time in the desert, her lips dry and cracked. A protective instinct rose within me, and I wondered if there would be a way for me to keep her from such exposure again. She wasn't used to being in the wild like Sarlice and I were.

'All right, we can board,' Sarlice said, coming up behind us. 'I got him down to one-and-seventy.'

'Impressive.' Lira's praise seemed a little forced. *At least she's making an effort to get along.*

I collected the horses from a tying rail and led them towards the sturdy sailbarge. My gelding gave us the most trouble, but we coaxed him on with a half-rotted carrot from an impatient member of the crew who muttered about outlanders and their animals. Kestric and Rekala mingled nervously on the deck in the least offensive form they could muster, the common dog.

Sarlice leaned down on the rail, letting the wet spray coat her hair and shoulders. A fellow passenger on the sailbarge asked us where

we were headed. I was about to tell him it was none of his business when Lira announced we were going to Jesath. He hesitated, giving each of us a head-to-toe assessment.

‘You’ll not be leaving for a few days, I suspect,’ he said. ‘The viperjays are due tonight.’

A cold shiver stabbed me from throat to belly.

‘Trees, let them be late,’ I prayed.

‘Viperjays?’ Lira queried.

‘Poisonous blue birds that live in the forests of Ravra throughout most of the year,’ Sarlice explained. ‘Once a year, they flock inland through Sarm and Jaria to the roosting trees in the mountains.’

‘Tens of thousands of the little devils blot out the day-star for two days in their westward journey,’ I added.

‘I know what they are. I take it you don’t like them?’ Lira asked, intent on my expression.

I tried to hide the furrowing of my brow, but my stomach was already starting to tighten with nausea. ‘I... no, I don’t like birds... much. Childhood fear.’ I held up my wrist for her and Sarlice to see the scar.

The grunts of the oarsmen beneath us suddenly stopped and the docking struts butted the floating harbour. A deckhand pulled a rope and the mainsail rolled up. A cold sweat had broken out on my forehead.

There were signs of past viperjay migrations even here—bird poo splattered across the wooden slats of the jetty all the way up to town. The buildings were also coated in worn-down white and black droppings from years of migrations and subsequent weather.

It had been two seasons since I’d entered Sarm, the Silver City, but I remembered a good place to stay where Rada were welcomed for the work they could do for patrons. The Silver Shell was near the heart of Sarm at the end of a wide market lane. Sarlice had been there before as well.

Peddlers were busy packing up their wagons while stall owners took advantage of the remaining buyers in the streets, shouting discounted prices for perishables. Scores of young boys and girls and older hunters readied slings or bows in anticipation of the

viperjays. Not only were the feathers and bones of the birds worth a certain sum, but if the venom could be extracted soon enough after death, various poisons, remedies and potions could be created from it.

I fidgeted and sighed as Sarlice purchased a sack of bran for the horses. Lira dismounted and offered to take the horses to the stable so I could get inside as quickly as possible. Despite feeling cowardly I accepted, taking the packs off my gelding so Lira wouldn't have to lug them back to the inn.

Once I got inside the Silver Shell the tautness in my chest and neck lessened slightly. The common room was only a quarter full. Down one end three men sung in a loud yet pleasing harmony. My eyes found three green and black cloaks over the backs of their chairs and a circle with three points on a chain around each neck. I felt a man's hand on my wrist and realised I had drawn the marble-hilted knife with my spare hand.

'Hold your peace,' he said firmly.

I knew him as Austo, the residing Rada of the Silver Shell. His presence alone wasn't enough to quell any violence here, but with his bear Rada-kin, Mocinte, alongside, few would dare cause trouble. My body went rigid at the sight of more Zeikas coming in.

'They have spread so fast,' I sent to Rekala. She came to sit by my feet in her dog form. Staring at us, one Zeika missed his cue to sing, but the others didn't seem to notice.

'Don't you know what they are?' I meant to keep my voice low, but it rung with malice.

'Don't raise your voice, lad,' Austo said, gripping my wrist harshly. 'They have every right to be here, now, whether you and I like it or not.'

I glared at him.

'Business is good for all.' His own dark eyes shot straight back into mine. 'As long as we tolerate our differences.'

'While us Kriites are busy tolerating, the Zeikas are busy undermining every positive step we've made to fit in to Telbion society,' I retorted. 'Don't you know they want us all in chains?'

‘I do,’ Austo replied, ‘but attacking them for no reason is not the answer.’

‘You’re right,’ I agreed, sheathing my dagger. ‘Sorry.’

Lira appeared in the doorway, brushing her fingers through wet black hair and smiling when she saw me. I was barely listening as Austo told me the Silver Shell was overloaded with viperjay hunters just like every other tavern in Sarm tonight and he could not fit us in. Despite the fact that we were of the same race he could do little about it.

Sarlice appeared with saddlebags over one shoulder and our night shelter under her other arm. She, too, stared angrily at the Zeikas, but soon Austo had relieved her of her burdens and was shaking her hand vigorously, apologising for their lack of rooms.

‘I’ll see that some other guests are shifted immediately, peasant hunters that they are.’

I raised my eyebrows at his sudden change of heart. Clearly Sarlice had more influence in this town than I did.

‘What are you try—’ I stammered, but Sarlice interrupted me.

‘Thank you, Austo,’ she replied coolly. ‘It’s been a long time. Could you get us three proper beds too? We’ve been sleeping aground far too long now.’

Surprise flitted across Austo’s face as he realised we were all together. Then he drew her aside. I overheard him say, ‘You know I’d do anything for you Sarlice... are beyond full... find a room for your two companions with some others... but I doubt... even find one bed.’

I could not have made out the rest if not for Rekala’s keen ears.

‘You deserve better than this,’ Austo told her. ‘You said you’d be back so I could return the favour... My sister would not mind *one* extra in our home if you wish to join us.’

‘I suppose you won’t let me say “no”,’ Sarlice mumbled with a shy smirk.

I could not remember seeing that look on her face before.

Austo turned his head suddenly. ‘Mocinte says there’s trouble at the sanctuary.’

He opened a door to his right and hastily shoved our things inside. He and Sarlice moved back outside without another word. I shivered with irritation, wishing I could just stay right where I was, despite the Zeika presence. Right then I could not believe that I was an Anzaii. Throughout Kriite history the Anzaii had been revered leaders, conflict-solvers and warriors. I'd never heard of one who was afraid of birds.

'We won't stay out long,' I said to Lira, following after Sarlice and Austo. Somewhere inside I knew I was only trying to comfort myself. 'We'll be back under cover long before the viperjays appear.'

The image of a screeching crag hawk flooded my mind, rending the earth like flesh, drawing blood into the navy sky of twilight.

I was relieved to feel Lira's hand, her fingers cool against my clammy palms.

As we passed down the main boulevard the crowds thickened until we had to use shoulders and elbows to carve ourselves a path. Rekala pressed her dog form side reassuringly against my leg whenever she got the chance. Like me she was tense with anxiety.

I gripped Lira's hand tightly. She struggled to keep close to me among the pushing bodies. Sarlice and Austo swam in and out of my vision. The stink and heat of others set my skin to crawling. Sweat collected on my back and neck. Just when I thought I could take it no longer, and was preparing to join my kin in dog form, the bodies halted.

'By the trees,' Austo muttered as Lira and I came up behind them. 'They push their religion, but never have I seen such as this.'

Sarlice lurched forward shouting, but Austo grabbed her back. People murmured fearfully all around me, but none raised their voices too loudly. Through a gap in the crowd I could make out a figure standing near a sawn log that was stained red. Two shrubs gave off a sickly sweet stench as they burned, and a boy with three knives sticking out of his body lay dying. As his last breath escaped the crowd throbbed with anger.

The figure behind the log held up one hand to silence them.

'This child was willing to place his life in Zei's hands.'

Rekala and Kestric sensed the salty, sour smell of sweat, the metallic tang of blood and the reek of fresh carrion. Being the smell

of a human's blood, it repulsed them. Both were standing with their hackles raised, snarling.

'Now cleansed, arise son, with the blood of Zeidarb in your veins. Arise with everlasting life!'

The dead child got to his feet, pushed back his blond hair with blood still in his hands and shouted in triumph. His voice wasn't even broken yet. I was pushed back as the crowd surged forward. I couldn't see what happened next, but I heard men and women hollering in amazement and fright. Some ran, but most stood transfixed. They had heard of Zeika immortality, but few had ever seen the rite before.

I heard the child chant loudly, then I caught a glimpse of him holding his elbows up with hands pointing at the ground—the revering stance of Zeikas. The ground seemed to respond, rumbling and throwing up a dozen rocks.

'Zeï's powers are open to anyone. Come now to the altar. Bring your own idols with you, for Zei is in every god and every god is embodied in Zei,' the first figure said.

A cheer went up from somewhere and the river of bodies flowed once again. Lira's hand slid out of mine and her cry was lost in the shuffling. I managed to free myself from the throng by grasping a post near an open tent flap. Inside was a Zeika shrine. Crowds poured in either empty-handed or carrying all kinds of things. Some clutched statues, trinkets or paintings to their chests, dragged in animals or even sick people. A body wrapped in black cloth was carried in on a stretcher.

My stomach turned. The afternoon was bright outside, but the inside of the tent was dark. The shrine glittered with green fire and strange eddies of smoke flew in circles above the altar. A group of young men around my age nearly swept me inside in their eagerness. When I stood up, the crowd had hushed and all eyes were turned upwards.

A flood of terrifying shapes filled the skies. They weren't tyraks—those I could have coped with, ludicrously. These were the viperjays, come already. I folded over and heaved my guts out until there was nothing but air. My entire body quivered and went cold.

Thunderous flapping deafened me. My muscles worked of their own accord, propelling me through the people, arms flailing. I felt my elbow press against the flesh of others, pushing them aside, shoving. My eyes felt like they would tear apart. My throat burned with the taste of bile.

Flat on my back. The black shapes whizzed by overhead. Black. Black. Black. Teal—an inch of sky. Black. Black. Black. Red.

Sarlice's red-brown curls framed a stern face as she bent over me. 'They're birds, Jarian, get a hold of yourself.'

Part of me was relieved to see Lira was not around to witness my shame. Sarlice pulled me up with one arm and gripped me by the shoulder to move me on. I gritted my teeth and buried my eyes and thoughts in the materials that made up my shoes; leather boots of fine hide, horse-hair rubber soles, steel buckles—scuff marks across the caramel coloured toes. Caramel...

'No food,' I said aloud as my belly lurched and my head whirled. The noise of the flapping viperjays was terrifying. Would they attack me even here—their sharp beaks plunging into my wrists, filling my blood with toxic venom? I sicked up bile and air into Sarlice's clutching arms. She did not back away or complain.

The Silver Shell was nearly empty by the time we got there. Clusters of people outside made no effort to move out of the way, though some waved their hands in front of their noses, so we barged our way through. Sarlice sat me down at a table and helped herself to a barrel of water behind the bar.

Once inside, the noise of the viperjays dulled to a sound like rough wind accompanied by relentless squawking. I rubbed at my eyes, but they would not stop staring. A film of water glazed my sight.

'Lira, where's Lira?'

'I'm sure she's fine,' Sarlice replied. 'We just got separated by the crowd. She'll come back here to find us.'

'No, she's not safe. It's Zeikas.' I could hear the hysteria rising in my voice.

'Just stop, Talon,' Sarlice said. 'The Rada are looking for her.'

Sarlice pressed a cup and rag into my hands and left me alone for a few minutes. I took several enormous gulps of air and grabbed

my hair with both hands in an attempt to pull myself together. I splashed water over my face and throat, using the wet rag to clean myself.

Sarlice returned with a new shirt on. She also carried oil and cloth to clean her sword and warbow. This unexpected behaviour drew my attention away from my fear. Sarlice's shortsword was straight dark metal in an ornate Lythian sheath. The black hilt smelt of well-oiled leather. I watched her for some time, content to sit and wait for my heartbeat to slow and the sweat to dry on my skin.

Eventually my pulse returned to normal and I felt steady enough on my feet to get some fresh clothes out of my pack. As Sarlice had done, I stepped inside the storage cupboard Austo had put our gear in to get changed. I took the dirty clothes out to the wash-house behind the kitchen where a tavern worker was cleaning patrons' undergarments. The boy, who looked about nine, wrinkled his nose and gave me a sullen look.

'I'll get you some fresh water when I'm done,' I said.

'Room number?'

'Um... the storage cupboard.'

He grunted. I returned to Sarlice in the common room. She was oiling the arrowheads in her quiver to protect them from rust. I reached past her to get one so I could help.

'How did you get that scar?' she asked, looking at my wrist.

'When I was twelve, a southern crag hawk tried to catch one of Verlisa's kits. Verlisa was my father's Rada-kin, a treelion. I was sitting right beside them, playing with them, at the time, and I threw my arms over them. The hawk's talons snagged in my wrist instead of one of the cubs and it cut deep.'

'It must have been very painful,' Sarlice commented.

'It tried to fly away, but only succeeded in dragging its claws deeper. Verlisa slew the hawk and summoned my father on the waves. He carried me to the village healer. It took ten minutes to stop the bleeding. I passed out. They thought I was going to die. Did you know there are certain parts of the body that bleed more than others?'

'Yes...'

Lira stumbled through the doorway. A rich scent permeated the air, fruity sweet but also smoky and sour. I went to her side, catching one slender wrist.

‘Are you well?’ I queried.

She took a deep breath and murmured an affirmative.

With a weary glance at the crowds outside, Sarlice asked how long we were staying in Sarm.

‘Two days,’ I said. *Enough time for the viperjays to pass.*

‘But we must press on,’ she argued. ‘There’s no space here, and our supplies will only last so long before we must work for more. We have a long way to go, Talon.’

Lira frowned at her.

‘Two days is not that long,’ I replied. ‘We could do with the rest.’

Chapter Thirteen— The Immortal Children

The Rada-kin spent the next day hunting and sleeping in an abandoned mill on the outskirts of town. Austo managed to find a replacement Rada to fill his shift at the Silver Shell tavern so he could take Sarlice for a tour around the town and surrounding countryside. Lira forsook the offer to join them so she could remain with me in the tavern.

We passed the day playing darts, discussing the customs of Jaria, Telby and Jesath, eating fruit and bread, drinking ale, and listening to travelling minstrels. It occurred to me that Sarlice and I could have performed even better at Tasset if we had combined our storytelling skills with a bit of music. Thinking back to the way Sarlice had opened up to me then, I realised she'd retreated since Lira had joined us.

It was disappointing that our friendship had been hampered by a newcomer, but I didn't understand why it had to be that way. Lira was a sweet girl, with looks I could stare at all day and wits far beyond her years. Lira was fiercely loyal to me, which was a good feeling—never before had a woman bestowed so much undivided attention upon me.

'Your turn,' the pale-skinned woman chimed.

I got to my feet, positioned myself at the line that was cut into the floorboards and sighted down the dart. Doing my best to account for the lack of breeze in the room, the condition of the flights and

the weight of the dart, I tried to guess the arc it would travel when I threw it with a precise amount of force. It hit home one square away from the number I'd been aiming for.

'Miss!' Lira declared. 'Are you deliberately letting me win?'

I laughed at her. 'You're not winning.'

She pouted and stood. While she was preparing to take her turn she kept her eyes on the dart board, but threw me a question. 'Talon, I was wondering if you could get a message to my Uncle Enreve in Jesath using the waves.'

'I don't know,' I replied. 'You may be better off asking Sarlice to get Kestric to do it. They're more experienced than Rekala and I. I'm certain Kestric can reach further, reducing the number of Rada-kin relayers needed.'

'No,' she replied, tossing the dart and missing by two spaces. 'I'd rather keep this between you and me.'

'Very well,' I said, 'but I'm curious to know why. I trust Sarlice with my life.'

'You may trust your life to whomever you wish,' she said gently, 'but I do not do so lightly.'

'Are you concerned someone may be after you? I thought it was wild animals that killed your family.'

She sat beside me, so close I could smell her and I suddenly lost interest in the game of darts.

'Please keep your voice low. It *was* wild animals, Talon, but that doesn't change the fact that I am now the sole surviving heir to the family fortune. If someone wanted to make a lot of money all they would need to do is take me hostage and my uncle would be forced to pay a ransom. He dotes on me like my own father did.'

She looked down and I noticed a tear glisten in her eye for a moment before it escaped down her perfect cheek. I wiped it away with my scarred hands, feeling rough and indelicate in comparison. She looked up into my eyes and I was once again struck by her innocence and loveliness.

'I'll do anything I can to help you,' I said, 'but it's too far for me to reach Jesath. It is hard for me to even reach a Rada I know in Jaria.'

‘What about Rekala?’ she asked. ‘Your own icetiger would be able to keep a secret, surely?’

‘Yes,’ I replied, ‘but I’m still not comfortable keeping anything from Sarlice.’

‘Please, just humour me.’

She must have her reasons. ‘Fine, I’ll do it,’ I replied. ‘But you know there will have to be relayers between Rekala and the receiver in Jesath, don’t you?’

‘I understand,’ she replied. ‘We’ll just have to hope their humans don’t say anything to anyone else.’

‘I will ensure they know it’s a matter of some delicacy,’ I said.

After waking up Rekala and explaining the situation to her, I waited patiently while she paced around the empty mill trying to focus her wave senses. Reaching a Rada-kin she had never even met was challenging, and she had to hop from presence to presence asking for referrals to the most appropriate relayers. I observed while the jackrabbit she’d contacted in Telby City connected with a llama in Ubu who, in turn, reached for a Lythian bull in the Barh desert, followed by an eagle, a horse, a maned wolf and an oryx.

Eventually she said, ‘*The Rada-kin wave has reached a rock cat in Jesath by the name of Deom.*’

The strain in her mind made me cringe and I had to sit down to avoid getting dizzy. Although it was only the jackrabbit that Rekala was communicating with, she had a vague sense of the others all crowded onto one train of thought like a rope stretched across rapids. It was hard to see those at the far end, but they were there in the mist of the waves. I could see them in Rekala’s mind but there was no way I could reach out to any one of them myself. *Maybe one day.*

‘Rekala has made a connection,’ I told Lira. ‘The Rada of a rock cat in Jesath is prepared with scroll and ink to write down your message.’

Lira cleared her throat. ‘It is for Enreve of the Demaeda family. Dear Uncle Enreve. Your brother Tirof and his family have perished in the Telbion wilderness, all except me, Lira. I’m in Sarm right now and I’m on my way to Jesath with two Rada companions who have

been most kind. I expect them to be repaid in full when I get there. Uncle Enreve, any assistance you can arrange for us on our route would be greatly appreciated. I am in need of coin, clothing, food and a mount to replace mine. We expect to be in Telby within two weeks. Your niece, Lira.'

'We'll check in with the wave-callers in each city for his reply,' I began, 'and Rekala has told him he can get Deom to contact her via another Rada-kin link.'

'Thank you,' Lira said.

'Done,' Rekala told me, the effort of reaching so far making her drowsy. *'Deom says his Rada knows of this Enreve.'*

'My thanks, dear one,' I replied.

I refocused my eyes on Lira. 'It is sent.'

Relief flooded her eyes. 'Thank you, Talon. I know how stretched yours and Sarlice's resources will be if you keep having to provide for me, so I wanted to see if my uncle could help.'

'That was wise. I don't suppose there's anyone in this town who would honour your family name by extending you credit.'

Sadness covered her features once more. 'I don't want to make it known what has befallen the Demaedas yet, not until I'm safely with my uncle, but he should be able to make some quiet arrangements for me in Telby City.'

'Very well.'

'Thank you again,' she said. 'Now if you don't mind I'm going to have a rest in our... store room.'

'I'll wait till after you've slept,' I replied.

'You don't have to do that. There are three pallets in here, and a strange woman using the other one already.'

I watched her go, filled with a strange mix of awe and uncertainty. After a few minutes I packed up the dart board and made myself comfortable in one corner of the tavern. For the rest of Minerday I occupied my mind by reading scrolls, trying desperately not to notice the ever-present whooshing of wings from outside.

Some time during the night the viperjays completed their passage into the mountains. In the morning Lira and I awoke and emerged

from the store room together. I breathed a sigh of relief at the absence of any sound of birds nearby. One glance outside told me that thousands of viperjays had lost their lives during their passage across Sarm—rows of carcasses lined the market stalls outside and the town was painted with fresh droppings.

‘Have you decided to eat your fear?’ Sarlice asked me, approaching from down the lane with my Rada-kin in trail. Rekala, who was a large, boisterous retriever, wagged her tail and licked my hand. I crouched down to wrap my arms around her.

‘I missed you,’ I told her. Then to Sarlice, I said out loud, ‘No. I’m not going to spend coin on meat when we still have so much of that camel flesh left.’

‘There’s no need to spend coin,’ she replied, ‘because I shot down a dozen viperjays, myself. They’re cooking in the city ovens right now.’

‘Ah, well that’s different.’

‘Are they safe to eat?’ Lira asked.

‘Yes,’ Sarlice replied. ‘The venomous part is in the throat. I gave those to Austo along with all the extra parts to add to his own catch. In return he paid for ingredients to have my birds made into pies.’

‘They’ll want to put some peas and apple sauce or dripping with garlic and herbs—’

‘I think its fruit chutney and cheese sauce,’ Sarlice interrupted me. ‘They’ll be ready in ten minutes or so. Meanwhile, I was hoping to buy some fish baskets for our next leg. There are trout and crayfish in the Telby River.’

‘I’ll help,’ I said. ‘Bessed taught me a thing or two about fishing. If we get the right materials I can even make a crab pot.’

‘I do like to eat crab,’ Lira said taking my elbow. Rekala growled so softly that the young woman didn’t even notice.

‘That’s enough of that,’ I warned my Rada-kin.

Sarlice, Lira and I walked through the market together, inspecting any wares that took our interest, but saving our coin for important items only. We purchased three bundles of twine made from roots and vines for the crab pot, fresh feed for the horses and ale, brandy, vegetables, cheese, flour and oil for our own consumption.

I was just hoisting one of the flour bags over my shoulder when a male voice rang out over the crowd from across the lane. ‘Out of the way, slaves!’

The crowd parted for a troop of young Zeikas, and I saw the boy who had been on the altar two days ago among them. He was riding a bay horse and dressed in the black leather and chainmail of a warder, the lowest ranking Zeika sorcerer. He couldn’t be more than fifteen years old and the boys around him didn’t seem much older. They rode through the market sneering at the commoners beneath them. Each boy’s saddle blanket bore the Xeldfet, and an array of weapons bristled from the pouches and slings on their backs.

As they neared us, one of the older Zeika boys spotted Sarlice, Lira and I with the two dogs hovering at our heels. He kicked his mount savagely to spur it in our direction and, when I stood my ground, it reared up, nearly dislodging its rider. Rekala rushed forward, unable to contain her retriever form when she perceived a threat to my safety. As she transformed, the young Zeika’s face went red with indignation and he drew his lance, pointing it in my Rada-kin’s direction.

The icetiger snarled her fury and took a swipe at the horse’s forefeet, but it wisely sidestepped away from her. The rest of the Zeika boys wheeled to face us, outraged that we would defy them. It didn’t matter that I was already standing as far from the centre of the road as I could to allow them past.

‘Rekala, that may not have been wise,’ I cautioned.

She stood between me and the young Zeikas, her white and grey fur bristling. It was clear from the turned heads that her noise had been heard several streets away. I could see a middle-aged Zeika standing over a young woman at a fountain in the distance.

‘If our noise draws his attention, we could have a fight on our hands,’ I said openly on the waves.

‘I thought Austo told you to keep your peace,’ came the voice of Mocinte the bear, from the other side of town. Clearly, word had already spread throughout the Rada-kin in the city about the confrontation.

‘Rekala is a new Rada-kin,’ I replied. *‘It is her instinct to defend me.’*

'Just don't do anything to damage the Silver Shell's reputation,' Mocinte replied.

'Thanks for your concern,' I grumbled.

I took a careful step forward and gently pushed the Zeika's lance away from my Rada-kin's head.

'Please excuse my Rada-kin, mate. She's only concerned for my safety. We—'

'You will address me as "my lord",' the child demanded. 'And I am not interested in your pathetic story.'

My stomach churned a little as I crossed the threshold from wanting to maintain peace and being unable to hold my tongue. 'And why should I bow to you? I am your elder and clearly the stronger. Isn't that what you Zeikas believe? Victory to the strong?'

'Death to the weak,' the child replied. 'Do not fret—you Kriites will soon be put out of your misery.'

Sarlice edged a little closer to me, expression grim. Rekala glared up at the Zeika with her teeth bared.

'And why should you want to kill me, a perfect stranger?' I asked him, surprised at the lightness of my tone. The audacity of the child amused me more than anything else.

The boy glanced at his fellows, a swarm of angry boyish faces waiting to see if he would put the Kriite in his place, but because of Rekala's presence the young Zeika knew I wasn't merely a Kriite—I was a gifted Rada as well. The boy's eyes darted to my glowing earring and my mother's pendant hanging around my neck, noting the presence of sapphire tree leaves. I regretted not wearing the Jarian Anzaii artefact—at that moment it might have helped me.

'You are Anzaii,' the boy observed.

'He's young and arrogant, but he isn't stupid,' I commented to Rekala.

I folded my arms across my chest, content to wait for his next action. When it came, it took me completely by surprise. The child raised his hand and sketched a pattern in the air with all five of his fingers—causing an invisible wall to knock Rekala and me into the stall I was standing in front of. Splinters of wood flew up as Rekala, the bag of flour and I crashed through a shelf, sending dreamcatchers, painted snail shells and bead necklaces flying.

Bruised but otherwise unharmed, I crawled forward out of the mess. Sarlice and Rekala lunged forward, but found an impenetrable barrier around the boy. A glowing orange rune hung in the air above his head with a transparent orb of light cascading out of it, surrounding him and his horse.

‘He’s a particularly gifted warder,’ Tiaro commented, her Anzaii-kin knowledge awakening in the presence of the work of Zeidarb. *‘Not many can create a personal shield like that.’*

‘What do I do?’ I asked, but before she could answer, the boy fainted and toppled off his horse. With me still on the ground and the other boys mounted, Sarlice was the closest, so she darted in to catch the falling sixteen-year-old. Sensing it was free, the boy’s horse ran off, followed by three of the other Zeikas on their mounts. The new Zeika I had seen on the altar sneered at his fallen comrade and turned his horse, following the rest of the group as they cantered away.

The owner of the stall I had fallen on grabbed me by the front of my shirt and pulled me to my feet, demanding reparation for the damage I had caused.

‘You’re blaming me?’ I asked, exasperated.

‘You provoked them,’ he retorted. ‘You know if you just swallowed your pride for a moment and bowed to the Zeikas there wouldn’t be any trouble, but no, you Kriites are too high and mighty to do that. Better to act all tough, get knocked over and who cares what or who goes down with you?’

The fallen Zeika came around slowly, staring up at Sarlice’s bronze ringlets in stunned fascination. His expression soon changed to one of chagrin as he realised he had not only lost control of his ward rune, but also lay prone in the arms of a Kriite woman—the lowliest of creatures in the Zeika worldview. He shoved her away as he climbed unsteadily to his feet saying, ‘Get your hands off me, slave.’

Sarlice gave him a sardonic smile. ‘You’re welcome.’

I crouched down to help Sarlice pick up the twine and food she had dropped then assisted the stall owner to put his wares back in order. The bag of flour I’d been carrying was split open at the top,

but was salvageable. The Zeika tried to straighten his jerkin and stalk away, but he stumbled again, this time caught by Lira.

‘Here, my lord,’ she murmured. ‘Allow me to help you. I am not a Kriite.’

Eyes widening at her beauty the child accepted her hand and stumbled into the Silver Shell with her. Raising one eyebrow at me Sarlice went after them. I shoved handfuls of necklaces and dreamcatchers onto the stall owner’s sole remaining table as fast as I could then followed Sarlice into the tavern.

Once inside Lira had taken the young Zeika to a table in the corner where she sat him down and went to the bar to get him some mead. Sarlice and I sat opposite him, glancing at Rekala, who positioned herself on the floor to our right. She glared at the Zeika, her tail lashing and her fur still standing on end.

‘Clearly you’re an initiated Zeika,’ Sarlice said. ‘But did you know that most Kriite tribes are willing to take in ex-Zeikas who have renounced their religion?’

Still a little dizzy the boy waved his hand in a feeble attempt to shoo us away.

‘If I was in my prime you would be rended in a dozen pieces for your insolence,’ he growled. It sounded as if his voice had only recently broken.

‘You respond to our concern with threats of violence,’ Sarlice said calmly, ‘because you have been brainwashed by men who have no cares for anything other than their own power.’

‘A concept I wouldn’t expect a woman to fathom,’ he retorted, holding his head in pain.

Lira returned with the mead and sat beside him. He glanced at her cautiously. Only after she had drunk some herself did he take a sip.

‘What are the Zeikas doing in Telby?’ I asked him.

‘I’m not answering your questions, slave.’

‘Your rank is too low,’ I said, clucking my tongue. ‘You don’t even know.’

‘Isn’t it obvious? Taking our rightful place above all mortals and removing the influence of Kriites—’

‘That’s enough from you!’ a male voice shouted from the doorway of the tavern. The Zeika I had seen by the fountain strode across the room and dragged the boy to his feet, deftly avoiding Rekala’s swiping claws. Lira glared at him with such venom that I felt good about what I had accomplished.

The adult Zeika shoved the young one towards the door, turning away when he staggered and sprawled on the floor. Without warning the adult Zeika pointed both palms at me, spewing a jet of green fire. I dived beneath the table, feeling the heat whoosh overhead and sensing Rekala jump at the same time—heedless of her own wellbeing, she pounced on the man, claws out. Using a ward similar to the child’s, he created a personal shield that knocked her back.

Lira leapt between him and Rekala, shouting, ‘Stop this at once!’ in such a commanding voice that both icetiger and Zeika paused.

‘You. I recognise you,’ the Zeika said to Lira. ‘You’re the—’

‘You would not harm the sole surviving heir to the Demaeda fortune,’ Lira cried, ‘if... if you knew what was good for you...’

The Zeika stared at her for a moment, blinked at Sarlice and I, then strode from the tavern, dragging the Zeika child with him. Rekala and Kestric ran a few paces after them, growling.

‘What was that about?’ I asked, turning to Lira in awe. ‘I thought you wanted to keep your family name—’

‘I wasn’t about to let you get killed,’ she replied testily. ‘Much as it cost me to reveal my name, it holds some influence...’

‘Why does it mean so much to the Zeikas?’ Sarlice murmured.

‘Uh... what? It’s Jesathian,’ Lira replied. ‘We are important traders in Gods’ Port.’

That meant trading with Zeikas.

I caught Sarlice’s furious eyes, shaking my head slightly. There was no point arguing about this in such a public place. The rest of the patrons of the Silver Shell had stopped what they were doing to watch the altercation. Rekala returned to my side, growling and chuffing at the same time.

Austo ran in from outside with a string bag of Sarlice’s viperjay pies in one hand and his sword in the other. When he saw that

the danger had passed he sheathed his weapon and set down the wrapped pies.

‘I thought I told you to stay out of trouble,’ he snarled in my general direction.

He moved to Sarlice’s side, squeezed her shoulders and arms as if checking for injuries.

‘I am hale,’ she told him, looking unimpressed by his fussing. ‘It is Talon who was pushed through a market stall and also nearly took a fireball in the face.’

I hadn’t noticed before, but my hair was a little singed and there were new bruises from the market.

‘You have to teach me how to divert Zeika flames,’ I said to Tiaro. *‘If such a thing is possible.’*

‘It may be,’ she replied. *‘But I think I need more time in proximity to them to figure it out.’*

‘Next time may be the last chance you get,’ I replied. I was starting to wonder if we would ever get better at wielding our so-called Anzaïi power.

‘I think we should leave,’ Sarlice said, pulling her fingers out of Austo’s clinging grip.

‘Stay in Sarm a while,’ Austo implored her. ‘It’s too dangerous on the road for Kriites. There are more Zeikas pouring into Telby every day. You are welcome to continue staying with me.’

‘That’s very sweet of you,’ Sarlice said. Her tone was gentle, but I received the impression of rolled eyes from Kestric. ‘But our mission is far more important than my safe-keeping.’

‘I can’t imagine anything more important than that,’ Austo said touching Sarlice’s chin.

She blinked at him, looked down and chuckled uncomfortably.

‘I am Talon’s guide and companion,’ she explained stepping back from him and looking in my direction. ‘We’re on a diplomatic mission to Telby City for the people of Jaria and Lyth.’

‘Then we’re bound for Watercrag and Tanza,’ I added, taking a sip of the expensive mead. ‘To see if I am a full-fledged psion.’

Austo spared me the tiniest glance. ‘What kind of false hope is that? I haven’t heard of a master psion in at least a dozen years. All four gifts? I wonder if it’s even possible anymore.’

‘What do you mean?’ Sarlice asked.

Austo explained. ‘It has long been demonstrated that bloodlines play a pivotal role in the gifts of the Anzaii, Sleffion, Tolite and Rada. Maybe the ancient blood is simply too diluted nowadays.’

‘My mother was Anzaii,’ I replied. ‘My father a Tolite, Rada. When I was captured by Zeikas half a season ago, they spoke of an ancient line that I am supposedly descended from.’

Lira’s eyes were intent upon me, however Austo wasn’t impressed. His interest was only in Sarlice. I had seen that look before, on the faces of the couples that courted back in Jaria. A bubble of rivalry ascended from the foot of my being to my head. I glared at Austo, but was forced to soften my expression when Sarlice looked in my direction.

‘Talon’s lineage is not in question,’ Sarlice said, ‘and, even if it was, it is not my place to bely the orders of Jarian leadership. They send all new Anzaii on this quest.’

‘But you are Lythian,’ Austo protested. ‘What sway have they over you?’ He was almost whining.

‘Jaria and Lyth are tightly allied,’ Sarlice replied, ‘such that the leaders of one hold authority over the other’s people.’

My heart sank—was that the only reason she served as my guide? Because she had been ordered to? Austo shrugged and turned away from us, muttering something about not wanting to lose Sarlice to some pointless quest. His lack of support did not disturb me, but I could see Sarlice was getting annoyed. She must have realised Austo was baiting her. Instead of responding to his turned back she cast her eyes at the ceiling and gestured for Lira and I to go to the store room.

‘Fetch your things,’ she said.

‘What about yours?’ I asked glancing around the room.

‘I’ve already put my belongings in the stables. Kestic is guarding them.’

Austo remained standing with his back to us, but I could almost feel his frustration. After smiling at Sarlice I downed the Zeika's unfinished mead and followed Lira into the storage room.

By the time Lira and I emerged Sarlice was marching out the door, leaving Austo standing in the foyer with his arms thrown up in defeat. I offered my hand to him as we passed and he took it grudgingly.

'She may think she's looking after you,' he began, tightening his grip on my hand, 'but you'd better see that no harm comes to her.'

'I will,' I replied.

'She saved Mocinte and I once, you know,' he murmured, still holding onto my hand. 'Put herself right in harm's way to do it. If she truly believes you're destined to be a master psion there's no telling what she'll do to protect you.'

'I'll see that she gets the same protection from me,' I promised him.

Austo looked me in the eye, holding my gaze for a long moment. Eventually he nodded and let me go.

Chapter Fourteen— Allies and Enemies

From Sarm it would take us ten days to reach Telby City. Sarlice chose to avoid the dust-choked road and the caravans and brigands she said it would attract. Instead we travelled on the deer trails on the far side of the river, climbing small outcrops and winding through copses and woods when we had to. I saw distant settlements from time to time, many surrounded by crumbling walls—remnants of the Realm Wars.

Fields covered the lands around the settlements, growing everything from lavender to lemons. Between the populated areas were rugged, tussocky grasslands and rocky headlands. Occasional herds of fallow deer, oryx or sheep grazed there.

As far as the eye could see the hills loped on with occasional ravines or groves. The fields were peppered with flowers and alive with noisy bees. Soon the trees that flanked the river became so dense that we had to travel on the grasslands, out of sight from both river and road. We made our way back to the water each night.

The Rada-kin found plenty of game within the luxuriant forest and there was often a variety of crayfish along the river. As promised I fashioned a crab pot out of the twine we'd purchased in Sarm and baited it overnight to catch breakfast. This succeeded less than half the time, but the bowl-sized pine crabs were a welcome addition to our diet.

One afternoon, as we were crossing the plains we saw grey clouds in the distance and sheets of rain connecting them to the ground. The storm came upon us faster than expected. Sarlice and Kestic had chosen a good place to camp, near a small lagoon, but raised on a knoll surrounded by bushes.

As the wind lashed us and water poured down, we set up the canvas shelter, pegged it down and threw our gear inside. Lira, Sarlice and I piled in, dragging away wet boots and socks. Lira complained bitterly about the weather and I found myself apologising for the crudeness of our shelter. There was barely enough room for the three of us to lie down with all our gear. Worse, it smelled like unwashed bodies, horse sweat and wet leather.

Sarlice lit a stub of beeswax and stuck it down on a small flint dish. Though it was still dark inside I could make out a black stain on the back of Lira's shirt from the collar down. I wondered what it was, but didn't want to annoy her further by asking.

We took turns getting changed while the others faced away. I went last to allow the ladies to get comfortable. Sarlice had her back turned, but Lira merely closed her eyes. Somehow I knew she had opened them again, but I couldn't bring myself to look at her. I couldn't help but flex the muscles of my chest and arms a little more than was necessary as I donned a dry shirt.

The rain splattered down so hard on our shelter that I felt sure it would leak. It had been a few weeks since I had rubbed oil into the canvass.

Something hard landed in my lap.

'Dinner,' Sarlice shouted, to be heard over the storm.

I unwrapped the cloth around a block of hardtack and nibbled. The bread was tasteless, dry and hard—an offensive meal for a quartermaster's apprentice, but I was hungry enough to eat it.

Shoving our gear a little further down, the three of us managed to lie lengthways in the tent, side by side with Sarlice in the middle. There was no point having someone outside on guard tonight. Sarlice closed her eyes, lost in conversation with her Rada-kin. Even though their words were private I could sense Kestic's focus on my guide.

I had put Rekala out of my mind, I realised, almost blocking her. She had continued to hunt in the rain, her great blue paws squelching in the mud. Her prey was upwind—a silverspotted doe with a fawn. The mother, limping, seemed unable to get out of the bog on one side of the lagoon. Rekala put her out of her misery, but spared the fawn. It was old enough to find the herd by itself.

'Ab, so you are still there,' Rekala said, sensing my attention on the waves. *'Finished posturing before blacky?'*

'Her name is Lira,' I replied icily, *'and I wasn't posturing.'*

'Sure you don't want to come out here and skin this, first?' Rekala asked, recalling our first hunt together. *'You could mend the holes in your shirt with this unless, of course, you want them there.'*

'No,' I replied, hearing another reference to Lira between Rekala's direct thoughts. *'I don't want them there, but I'm far too comfortable in here.'*

'Indeed.'

As we neared Telby City Lira confessed to me that she didn't enjoy living it rough. That morning she'd eaten fistfuls of mulberries without realising the dark purple juices would stain her pale skin for days. She was adamant about covering her face with a veil despite the late hour of our arrival.

'Some people wear them in mourning,' she said. *'Nobody will know I wear them because I don't know how to eat mulberries.'*

'It's nearly midnight. You won't even be noticed,' I replied.

She slapped me on the shoulder from her position behind the saddle. Sarlice laughed, but my own chuckle died in my throat. The land had been climbing slowly for the past few minutes and we paused on a gentle crest. The walls of Telby City were before us, higher and more magnificent than any structure I had ever seen. The pure white gloss of the walls shone orange in the combined moonlight of Capril and Naeva.

When we reached the main gate in the centre of the West Wall I forced myself to appear apathetic. The shining white stone extended either side for close to one hundred horse lengths. Pale orange and blue towers lined the tops of the walls, casting pointed shadows

over our path. As we neared the moonlit gate, three guards stepped forward. Sarlice swung down off Duria. Even at this hour I could see movement within the gatehouse. Beyond it the streets of Telby City were mostly empty.

‘Telby City greets you,’ a female guard murmured huskily. ‘State your business.’

The male guard to her right had a less friendly look.

‘We are ambassadors from Jaria and Lyth, here to seek audience with your king,’ Sarlice replied, handing over our scrolls of introduction.

The female guard straightened a little and said, ‘You shall have to wait until tomorrow to be received at the palace. You’d best try your luck at one of the inns.’

It occurred to me that Rekala, Kestric or I could reach out to a Telbion Rada-kin to ask if we could stay with their human master, but it would be rude to at this late hour. I also wasn’t in the mood for another Austo-like encounter. Despite the expense it was easier to remain autonomous by staying at a tavern.

I reached down to stroke Rekala’s head as she came up beside my horse. He was used to her by now. The male guard stared at my enormous, blue tiger companion. I didn’t like the way he ran his eyes over her pelt, as if sizing up how much money he could get for it.

‘This is your beast, is it?’ he asked me.

My reply was drowned out by Rekala’s roar of challenge. The guard took a step back.

‘Here to see the king, eh?’ he stammered. ‘How do we know you’re not a Slefion assassin with skyearl fiends hiding in the forest as well as these beasts?’

Sarlice intervened with a strong tone of voice. ‘You’ll find seals on those scrolls, which should allay any fears you might have.’

The male guard was unmoved, but the female soldier nudged him and they retreated a few yards to talk. Little did they know that Rekala could still hear them. The male muttered something about wild Rada, but the female finally convinced him that if we were here with winged skyearls we wouldn’t have needed to enter through the front gate.

‘Pass,’ the guard growled, ‘but stay away from the Zeikas or you won’t be coming out the way you came in.’

Sarlice crossed over the threshold between the huge blue-gold gates.

‘My first visit to Telby City and it’s riddled with Zeikas,’ I muttered.

Lira shifted behind me, wrapping her arms tighter around me.

I’ll protect you, I thought.

The gatehouse opened onto a broad slate road with rows of shops. I stared into them as we passed, amazed to realise there were enough people in Telby City to warrant a shop called *Buckle and Sash*. We passed bakeries, blacksmiths, jewellers, alchemists, cartographers and professions I had no words for. Buildings owned by the king were of ochre-orange sandstone. Soon they became a blur of amber to my tired eyes.

I blinked and looked behind us. The slate road had given way to large, round cobblestones. They were dark from summer rain. I realised Lira was staring up at me as I looked around. With considerable effort I dropped my eyes to hers.

‘You seem like a child at the Winter Festival,’ she giggled. ‘You don’t know what to look at first!’

What little I could see of her skin through the veil was flushed pink, which made her even more attractive.

‘Will we see the palace soon?’

‘The guards said it’s too late to announce our arrival tonight,’ Sarlice protested. ‘Aren’t you tired?’

‘Let us simply look upon it,’ Lira argued. ‘Come along, the palace is this way.’

With her hand over mine, Lira pulled on the left rein and nudged the gelding with her ankles. We followed the main road past the first town circle and along a forested path towards the palace. It was poised on a steep bank, trees and shrubs clinging to the castle walls. Red and cream turrets and spires twisted from the outer walls, reminding me of blood and bones. Though a magnificent sight, a sense of foreboding crept out at me from the palace. This place, this bastion of power, signified the fate of my people.

A narrow river flowed right up to the palace, forming a moat. A southern and northern gangway allowed entry into the palace grounds from either side of the river. Guards manned both gangways. Their expressions were stern and focused despite the tranquility of the evening. I raised my eyes to take in the full height of the tallest buildings. Capril and Naeva had risen high in the sky like two guardians hovering over it. Stars shone through a veil of clouds.

Lira pointed to the largest of the turrets, 'That's where the king keeps some of his treasure. The only way in is over that bridge going from the spire to the east.'

Sarlice looked at her in surprise. Duria snorted.

'You know your way around here well,' said my guide.

'My family had some connections,' Lira replied smoothly. 'I've been here before, for the king's Winter Ball.'

I wondered what it would be like courting a woman of Lira's birth, attending balls and feasts. A Demaeda noble wouldn't normally be seen with the likes of me, probably.

'Nothing has changed since I was last here, except for the guards,' Sarlice said.

It might be useful to know what was going on in the palace before we came here on the morrow. 'How many were here before?' I asked.

Lira replied before Sarlice could, 'None. Flale is afraid the Zeikas have it in for him.'

Was there an edge of bitterness—even scorn—in her voice?

'I would be, too,' Sarlice replied.

'I wonder why he lifted their exile then,' I muttered.

Sarlice led us away from the castle and we passed the large fountain in the Town Circle once more. She took us to a tall tavern nearby, named *Three Storeys*. The Lythian waved a sleepy stable boy back to his hay bed. We put the horses into a small undercover pen, gave them hay and water, brushed them down and hung their tack out on a beam nearby.

Sarlice strode ahead of Lira and I, set down her gear and opened the heavy wooden door of the tavern. It creaked loudly and the

foyer inside was dark and quiet. The stable boy pushed past us and disappeared up the stairs. Realising we may have to wait a while I put down my gear as well.

After ten minutes or so a stocky-looking woman came from one of the rooms upstairs, holding a lantern and a tin of spare oil. The boy trudged back outside, casting a wary eye at our tigers.

‘Rada travellers are you?’ The woman’s eyes were sad.

‘That we are.’

Rekala shook herself, and the whitish-grey fur of her ruff bristled. I ran my fingers through it and she chuffed at me.

‘Are Rada-kin welcome here?’ Sarlice asked.

The woman sighed. ‘Kriite coin’s as good as any other’s, but there have been... incidents of late. Whether it’s Zeikas or that new Kriite cult—nobody can be sure—many Rada have been disappearing. Some even turnin’ up face down, if you know what I mean. And the dead ones weren’t just your average Rada neither. Usually Tolites or ancient-bloods, what do they call them—Unzai?’

I clenched my teeth. Rekala’s fur stood a little higher, but her keen senses detected no threat nearby. The incident out the front of Bessed’s cabin came back to me. I could almost smell Feera’s blood. Could that same spy cult, the Wavekeepers, be involved in these murders here in Telby City? I would have to ask around through the waves tomorrow if other Kriites were fleeing the city.

Sarlice did not look at me, but Kestric sent her feelings of trepidation to me.

The innkeeper’s gaze fell on Sarlice then travelled to Lira. For a moment she looked suspiciously at her veil, then realisation dawned in her eyes.

‘Oh... I’m sorry dear, you must think me heartless. To have been talking on about murders like that when you’re obviously still in mourning, yourself. Are you staying here long?’

‘Could be a week,’ I suggested. Sarlice nodded.

‘What kind of rooms for the three of you?’

‘We will pay eight silvers for one of your larger rooms,’ Sarlice answered. ‘Plus food for ourselves, an entire goat for our Rada-kin and feed for the horses we put up in your stables.’

The woman blinked several times, came to some kind of calculation on her hands and seemed about to protest. After a look into Sarlice's determined eyes, however, she nodded tersely.

'Of course,' she said and led us up the stairs, down a creaky hall and into a dark, musty room. Reeds were strewn on the floor, but they did little to mask the scent of too much humanity in too little space. There was no window and I surmised the room was not touching an outer wall. A refurbished supplies cupboard, again. Being stuffed into this rat-hole made me long for the clean, fresh air of the forest and a roof of stars.

Lira patted my hand. 'Do not trouble yourself, Talon. Once I receive help from my uncle we can move to accommodations that are more fitting to our station.'

I thought I heard Sarlice snort.

A stream of warm air flew by my face. Light stroked the horizon. From my perch atop *Three Storeys* I could just make out land beyond the walls of Telby City. Compelled from sleep in the close quarters of our room, I had wandered listlessly in the dawn. As much as I enjoyed being with Lira, Sarlice and the Rada-kin, it was sometimes blissful to be alone. I had even left Tiaro behind, in her case, with my things.

I drew my knees up and rested my arms on them. On the streets below me, dozens of people were already moving about. From my privileged position I perceived them as distant strangers, wandering the road of life in a sort of dream. If King Flale knew I was sitting up on one of his buildings like I owned the place he would probably split crystal.

A wave of foreboding passed over me. I was going to try to meet the king of Telby today, and I wasn't confident his thoughts toward Jaria and Lyth were friendly. Perhaps he feared the Rada and therefore found the independent nature of Jaria and Lyth threatening.

For a kingdom that prided itself on its modernism, Telby was remarkably ungrateful to those who had helped make it what it was. Although the Realm Wars had occurred before I was born the prowess of the Rada throughout Telby in those days was legendary.

Hardly a battle took place where the shapeshifters hadn't played a crucial part.

I wondered how much of Jaria's history I would need to know for my conversation with King Flale. Given that he had come to power the year I was born and subsequently lost three of the four realms his brother Aabyn had gained, Flale may not wish to discuss much history. Still, I couldn't help worrying that my knowledge would come up short.

I didn't know what to expect from the king, or even how to approach the possibility of getting him to sign the papers Namal had drawn up. Jaria's best trade goods were on offer to Telby, but I wasn't sure if all the leather, produce and spices in the world would be enough to entice the king to protect us from the Zeikas. What if he wanted something else from Jaria, a request the leaders hadn't prepared me for?

It didn't seem real that, of all the people in Jaria who could have been sent here as ambassador, the leaders of Jaria had chosen a nineteen-year-old new psion. Telby City was on my way to where I was ultimately heading, but that didn't mean they had to choose me. Another person could have been sent with us, someone in the speaker's guild who would be more qualified in diplomacy and politics. I was merely a quartermaster's apprentice and, even though that quartermaster had been made prime, it didn't follow that I was as qualified as Bessed to take on a political role.

I would have to stop thinking of myself as his apprentice. Things had changed—I was an Anzaii, Rada now, with the possibility of becoming Tolite and Sleffion as well. The thought of wielding all of the psionic powers was overwhelming. What would Jaria need from a master psion? What about the other Kriite tribes?

I sat back with my hands on the stone roof behind me and my legs stretched out in front. The dawn broke before me, sending rays of light through gaps in the clouds and bright yellow warmth across the land. In the middle distance, a star-cathedral's banners fluttered and the shadows cast by its many turrets and spires metamorphosed before my eyes. The streets teemed with life. People and animals

flowed onto the cobblestone roadways. There were even more crowds in the poorer areas, kicking up clouds of dust.

I heard a bang from inside the chute I had used to access the roof of *Three Storeys* and cursed silently as the door started to swing open. With a small growl I leaned down into cat form. The shock of such a quick transition set my ears to ringing. Despite practising alongside Rekala, the effort required for each transformation was still intense. The woman who had greeted us last night, climbed out of the chute, dragging a broken barrel behind her.

When she turned to set it down, I darted back inside, landing softly on the wooden floorboards of the attic. I sneezed from the dust I had disturbed and looked around at all the exciting nooks and crannies I could explore for mice.

Stop that! I shook my head. When Namal told me to trust my instincts I don't think he meant getting lost in animal-form.

I trotted around the outer wall of the attic and descended a narrow set of stairs to the third storey. Two bleary-eyed males were leaning against the rail outside their rooms, talking in low voices, blocking my path to the next set of stairs. I sat still for a moment, licking the short, mottled fur of my left forefoot and washing behind my ears with it. I had seen a hundred cats do the exact same thing so it didn't feel strange to be grooming myself while in the form of one.

A door burst open behind me, spewing forth a half-dressed man who laughed as a woman screamed invectives at him from inside.

'Shoo, cat,' he said in response to my hiss.

Taking my chances with the other men I darted between their legs and hurried downstairs. Once I'd made it to the ground floor, I could hear the common room buzzing with voices. A man in overalls was sweeping the floor and whistling quietly. When he noticed the small foreign cat walk in through the foyer he shook his broom at it. I closed my eyes and released the string of concentration on the waves that was holding me in cat form. The man gasped in surprise.

He shoved the broom against the bar. 'Confounded Rada. Think it's funny, do ya, sneakin' up on people in disguise? Naeva knows what you might poke your noses into.'

‘I apologise,’ I replied. *Perhaps I’d better be a bit more subtle while in Telby City.*

‘You’re the ones what arrived late last night.’

‘Guilty as charged.’ I bowed and asked, ‘I take it you’re employed by the innkeeper?’

He muttered in agreement. I sat at the bar and folded my arms. Footsteps echoed softly down the stairs and Sarlice entered, hair swept up high. She wore a red and white dress with gold trim. The white sleeves were long and dangled open at the wrists. An intricate blue and gold embroidered circlet sat just above each elbow, bearing the symbol of Lyth—a bear running through water.

Her eyes were bright and focused, her smile warm when she looked upon me.

‘Nice shirt,’ she commented, letting her eyes rove across my body. ‘You’ll do.’

I got the impression from Kestric that Sarlice was a little more impressed than she let on. I grinned mischievously at her. The fine clothing Bessed had given to me wasn’t as comfortable as the more practical attire I was used to.

Having left Jaria and the mountains behind me it seemed fitting that I would start to wear clothes that I hadn’t worn before. Telby was warmer than Jaria, and the cultural expectations of this crowded metropolis were far beyond anything I’d experienced before. The Jarian Anzaii artefact Namal had given to me was cinched around my waist, matching perfectly with the blue sapphire tree leaves in my mother’s pendant and in Tiaro. The clothing boosted my confidence.

Sarlice’s hands were empty, but I suspected her boots and clothing hid at least two weapons. Kestric and Rekala were by her side—the firetiger and the icetiger making a striking, formidable pair. Rekala’s greyish fur had mostly shed, leaving a motley pattern of blue and grey between her black stripes.

Many of the tavern patrons whispered among themselves and craned their necks to see us. Although there were about nine hundred Rada in Telby City the total population numbered somewhere around 400,000. The presence of two tigers tended to stand out.

'Is Lira still asleep?' I asked as our food was served.

'Said she wasn't hungry,' my guide said. With a shrug, she forked rubbery egg into her mouth.

'That's hard to believe—I'm starving,' I swallowed a hot chunk of meat that burned my tongue before I managed to swallow it.

'I can see that.' After a few more mouthfuls she paused and said, 'Do you still think it's a good idea?'

'What?'

'Travelling with her.'

'Lira?'

'We hardly know her.'

'She hasn't got anyone else—'

'She isn't part of our mission, Talon.'

I glanced at the staircase, imagining Lira up in our dark room alone. I ate more quickly.

'She'll be all right now that we've reached Telby City,' Sarlice argued. 'She's from a noble family, or claims to be.' The last part was muttered.

A surge of protectiveness welled up in me. If Sarlice wouldn't agree what would I do? I wanted to help Lira, but I didn't want to alienate Sarlice. I couldn't choose between them.

'Will they fight over you, to demonstrate which one is the strongest?' Rekala queried. Despite her connection to my mind she still couldn't grasp the subtleties of human relationships. To her, my dilemma was like two male tigers fighting over a female.

'It's never that simple with people,' I explained. I considered that perhaps Sarlice was feeling jealous of the younger woman. When Sarlice had told me about her experience with her uncle she had been confiding something she never had before. She must really respect and trust me to do that. Then along came Lira, and my attention had largely been diverted to her, and her needs, since then. I decided to be delicate.

'I'd like to give her the choice,' I replied. 'Didn't you ever rely on the kindness of strangers when you were travelling alone?'

'No.'

‘Well, Lira is not as resourceful as you. And she doesn’t have a Rada-kin to hunt with and protect her.’

Sarlice raised one eyebrow and returned to her food.

I ate the rest of my breakfast quickly and made my way up the stairs to our room. Lira was standing by the window looking out over the city.

‘Are you going to come downstairs?’ I asked.

‘If you’re not going to be there, I’d rather not.’

‘I could see if Sarlice will let you accompany us to the palace.’

She stared at the wine-stained floor and said, ‘I don’t want to even show my face in public, let alone go before the princess or the king.’

‘Let me see,’ I said, standing before her. ‘Won’t a bit of soap take care of it?’

She allowed me to take her face in my hands, her whole body going still at my touch. She looked into my eyes as I examined her. The mulberry stains across her chin and nose would probably just look like birth marks to a passing stranger.

‘I think you look fine. I mean... that is... not just fine... but...’

She stroked a smear of food from my cheek with a quirky smile.

‘I’ll wait here for my uncle’s people,’ Lira told me. ‘Just go. The sooner you go the sooner it will all be over and I’ll know if you are safe or not.’

So that’s what this is about, I thought, she’s afraid for me.

‘You know this place better than I,’ I said. ‘Do you have specific reason to fear for us today?’

‘No—but what if King Flale simply kills you to please the Zeikas?’

I smiled at her concern. ‘We’ve had no indication that the king’s feelings towards Jaria have dipped that low. He doesn’t want war with us, as far as we know.’

Lira grumbled. I opened my mouth to say more, but she stayed my next words with her finger across my lips.

‘Go then and I will invoke the protection of my ancestors for you.’

Three Storeys was right on the eastern edge of the Town Circle. To the west was the forest we had seen last night and beyond it the palace. Sarlice and I navigated our way between the throngs of merchants and villagers bustling about the Circle.

A man carrying a baby girl was pursued by three Kriite women, beseeching him not to harm her. My attention was drawn to the child's face, which was malformed, with one eye pinched shut and the other with a half-closed lid. The women overcame the man and wrestled the baby from him, hurling insults and fists at him.

'Brue, darling, 'twill be all right, now,' one of the women cooed.

Not waiting for me, Sarlice headed for the gap in the trees which led to the palace. Rekala and Kestric overcame the drowsiness such a hot day brought and scouted ahead for us. I glanced back at the marketplace noticing a formation of bare-chested Zeikas jogging in our direction. I nudged Sarlice who, after seeing what I was indicating, looked in the direction of the tigers to make sure they were out of sight.

The Zeikas passed us by without incident and a few people trailed them through the forest path. Sarlice and I followed, receiving images from Rekala and Kestric in the woods.

The Zeikas turned north before the palace gates and crossed the Telby River over a wooden footbridge before disappearing into the forest on the north side of the river. Sarlice and I called the Rada-kin to our sides before greeting the guards at the southern gatehouse. Tiaro felt heavy in my earlobe, but her thoughts were quiet and watchful. The guards looked us up and down with some amusement and mumbled to one another about uninvited guests. Rekala curled her lip and breathed out a growling huff, but neither guard reacted.

'What's your business here, Rada?'

My guide bowed gracefully and said, 'I am Tolite, Rada Sarlice, daughter of Prime Solaars and ambassador for the Kriite tribe of Lyth.'

I hesitated before offering my hand to the guard. 'I'm Anzaii, Rada Talon representative of the Kriite tribe of Jaria. We would like to request an audience with the king.'

The man ignored my outstretched hand and glanced at the two tigers.

The second guard's eyes narrowed. 'King Flale does not hold audience with lowborns. I'm surprised to see wild Rada in the city at all, given recent events.'

Their blatant insults sent shards of ice through my soul, especially given how nicely we had both dressed for the occasion. If it was common for soldiers to think of Jarians and Lythians as 'wild Rada', what hope did we have? To not even be afforded the same respect as the Rada who were citizens of Telby City... Perhaps even they were suffering from the king's alliance with Reltland.

'Please forgive our outlander ways,' Sarlice replied smoothly. 'Jaria served Telby during the Realm Wars, but it is so long ago that many Telbions today do not recognise the significance of their contribution. Those who do remember know that Kriites have neither high nor lowborn people in our culture.'

I realised that the rank of ambassador the Jarian leaders had bestowed upon me had been an attempt to evoke a sense of privilege and importance that would get us past obstacles like this. A futile attempt.

'Listen lady, if you're not a member of the court you don't get access to it today. Come back on Trayaday when there's an open court. Or send your request for a meeting via the waves to the steward. You cannot simply walk in here and expect to see royalty.'

Making nothing of their unhelpful attitude Sarlice withdrew a small piece of vellum from the pouch that was slung around her waist and handed it to the first guard.

'What is it?' the second asked, eyes widening as he stared over his comrade's shoulder.

'Bribing the king's guards is a crime punishable by three days in the stocks,' the first man stated, turning away, but still clutching the vellum.

Sarlice reached one hand to his shoulder, turning him back to face her. 'You will take us to see the king or that credit will be gone long before you have a chance to use it.'

The other guard fingered the leather strap around his pike. I waited for Sarlice to speak, wondering just what kind of credit she had offered them.

The guard smirked at Sarlice and spat out the side of his mouth. He wrenched his shoulder out of her grip and held one finger up as if he was about to reprimand her again.

Kestric rushed forward, stopping just in front of the man. Then he circled back and paced. The second guard appeared unimpressed, but the first shuffled backwards, waving for his companion to retreat and share some private words. Even though Sarlice and I couldn't hear them, Kestric could.

'Should the king be disturbed for these?' the timid guard asked.

The other raised his eyes. 'You remember that reward Princess Denliyan promised us? We were to bring matters pertaining to the tribes to her, in order to spare her father the trouble.'

'Oh... yeah,' the other replied. 'The tribe of Jaria are allies, not subjects, aren't they?'

The aggressive guard tapped his head with his fist. 'Now you're gettin' it. But if she ain't around there's nought for it. Off at her aunty's isn't she? Not to be disturbed.'

'We had better see if the king wishes to see them, then,' the first murmured. 'It could be something important—like time to *make them* subjects and start charging taxes.'

'Don't care too much about taxes if they're willing to pay me.'

The second guard leered at us. I stood with my arms relaxed forcing myself not to react to what the firetiger had overheard. The first guard waved for a herald to come down from the palace. After giving his message out of even Kestric's earshot the guard stood beside his companion once more.

'Accepting your thoughtful gift, we will see if your presence is welcome,' he said to us, folding Sarlice's piece of vellum and slipping it into his belt pouch.

I kept a stern expression as we waited, but sweat was beading on my forehead and my jaw ached with tension. The first guard was nonchalant, standing over us with his arms up in the air, stretching. I ground my teeth a little harder.

About half an hour later the herald came from the main entry and signalled to the guards to take our weapons and let us pass beneath the gatehouse. I smirked to myself about the pointlessness of removing our blades—Sarlice and I could shapechange at will, bringing far more deadly weapons to bear. As protocol demanded Rekala and Kestric were also allowed to enter.

Another four guards were waiting to escort us on the other side of the southern gangway. We passed between the watchtowers on either side of the entry to the palace. A statue of the king dominated the foyer. He was in an upright position with a shield and crossbow at his feet. Chains ending with spiked balls and bars were draped over his right shoulder. His uplifted hand held a sword with a crown grafted onto the hilt.

The herald led us past the guards' barracks and into an immense auditorium. I had never imagined one room could be so big. The ceiling was at least as high as *Three Storeys*, but I could only make out one other level above ground level. Light poured in through a central skylight making the room yellow. The guards pushed us from behind until we were standing beneath a balcony decorated with red and cream.

After another uncomfortably long wait King Flale appeared up there with an entourage of guards and attendants. His smooth pale fingers wrapped around the royal sceptre, a four foot rod of alvurium with a scarlet gemstone at its tip. Unlike king Aabyn, who had been my father's friend, his brother was no warrior. The statue was a lie.

Flale's shoulders were broad, his body stout but not rotund. His hair was cropped short to hide the fact he was going bald and his iron-grey beard was shaped in a broad wedge. Even the king's facial skin was smooth and unlined, as if great care had been taken throughout his life to preserve it.

He was dressed in finery the likes of which I had never seen, and I had no name for some of the pieces of his attire. His cream trousers were almost hidden by black leather boots that reached to his thighs and a red overcoat with gold buttons, a gold band around his middle and numerous medallions and brooches.

It was cool in the wide-open space of the auditorium, but not enough to allow the King to wear his royal cloak all the time. Instead, one of his attendants carried it for him, ready at a moment's notice to adorn the king with the thick, fur and velvet mantle if he should require it.

Through Kestric, Sarlice let me know that the fact that King Flale didn't feel the need to impress us with it was a foreboding sign. Sarlice and I bowed low.

'Your Majesty,' my guide said. 'Thank you for seeing us.'

The lines I had spent hours developing during our journey here suddenly disappeared from my mind. My heart pounded and my throat constricted such that I didn't trust my voice not to falter. I caught my tongue between my teeth and looked down at the stone floor, feeling how cold it was through the pads of Rekala's paws.

'I am Tolite, Rada Sarlice, daughter of Solaars, the prime of Lyth and this is Anzaii, Rada Talon, the ambassador for Jaria.'

'You are young,' the king sneered, looking straight at me. 'Has Jaria fallen on such hard times that it sends untried diplomats to negotiate with me?'

Both Rekala's and Tiaro's reassuring thoughts swam through the waves toward me, trying to give me the courage I needed to speak in this intimidating man's presence.

'Just think about those delicate, unmarred fingers,' Rekala suggested, *'struggling to wield a pickaxe let alone string a bow.'*

I laughed inside at the mental picture she sent me and somehow mustered the will to look up at the king, my expression blank.

'Yes, Your Majesty. I am young and untried and yes Jaria has fallen on such hard times that I am the one who was sent. Indeed, the Zeikas have killed our prime, many of our leaders, people and Rada-kin.'

I decided against mentioning that our only other Anzaii had also been slain. If King Flale was in league with the Zeikas it wasn't wise to let him know Jaria was currently unguarded by those with the most chance of repelling Zeika magic.

Ignoring the tragic news I had brought the king leant down over the balcony rubbing his chin. 'What are you capable of, psion?'

I glanced at Sarlice whose face remained calm, although I could tell from Kestric she was seething at the king's nonchalance.

'Thus far, not much, Your Majesty, other than banish the odd ward or scrying mark.'

The king's eyes fell upon the pendant swinging around my neck, comparing its lack of shine with the earring I wore in my left ear. He gestured for one of his aides to collect them both from me. Resisting the urge to fight I dutifully removed both Roukney and Tiaro and handed them to the man. A sick feeling settled in the pit of my stomach as Tiaro was taken away from me.

The aide climbed the stairs to the balcony and gave the precious artefacts to King Flale, who held them up to the light. The blue strip of sapphire tree leaf that housed Tiaro's soul, pulsed and glowed, but Roukney was as dull and lifeless as an ordinary sapphire.

A swooping fear passed through me. What if the king took a fancy to those artefacts and decided to keep them? There would be nothing I could do about it. To have met Tiaro so recently only to lose her would be unbearable. And what would happen to my Anzaii gift without her? It seemed that she was the mechanism that facilitated my learning and that proximity to Zeika magic was the catalyst for our development. Without Tiaro my new purpose would be gone...

Rekala whined, unable to stay seated as she was supposed to in the presence of the king. One of the guards stepped a little closer to her, his pike held at the ready. It would only take him a moment to deliver a crippling blow to her spine.

'Easy, Rekala,' I said through the waves. *'Fade, Tiaro.'*

Confident there were no Zeikas in the room, the earring closed down her sense of awareness and slowly withdrew. The glow faded to a mere hint of what it had been before, just a fraction brighter than the sapphire tree leaf on my mother's pendant. King Flale pursed his lips, disappointed to see that the jewels now looked very much like ordinary trinkets.

'Why didn't this one light up?'

'It is dormant,' I replied. 'An heirloom.'

'And your belt? Is that an heirloom, as well?'

‘A Jarian artefact,’ I replied.

‘The earring is your Anzaii-kin? Does it only glow like that for you?’ he asked.

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ I replied. ‘Anzaii-kin are triggered by the presence of their Anzaii and when it senses Zeika sorcery.’

King Flale narrowed his eyes at me. ‘It might be interesting to see what you can do. Perhaps I should send you into the Red Arena.’

Sarlice drew a sharp breath and Kestric joined Rekala on all fours. The Red Arena was Telby’s famous bloodsport, a pit in which soldiers, slaves and beasts were sent to fight for the entertainment of others.

Telby valued its soldiers too much to make every fight to the death, but deaths regularly occurred nonetheless. If a pit fighter didn’t die during the spectacle they often did later from a red death.

‘If a spectacle is what you desire, Your Majesty, I humbly suggest finding a more qualified Anzaii to pit against a Zeika. I fear I would not last long.’

‘What makes you think I want to send you against a Zeika?’ Flale asked. ‘When I have only recently allied myself with Reltland it might be considered rude to have them fighting in my arena.’

I bit back a snide remark about it being worse than rude to suggest he send me, an ally, into the Red Arena. His laid-back confirmation of my own feelings of unimportance was enough to make me feel sick. Sarlice shifted beside me. I could tell from Kestric that she wanted to scream at King Flale, but with masterful control, she kept her voice even.

‘Please, Your Majesty, why have you done that? Why have you lifted the ban on our ancient enemies?’

He ignored her, waiting for my reply to his question.

‘I guess because that’s the only way to truly see the scope of an Anzaii’s power,’ I said. ‘Only Anzaii can overcome Zeika sorcery. That is what an Anzaii-kin is for.’

The king looked down at Roukney and Tiaro once more, contemplating.

‘I suppose it’s hard to break one,’ he mused. Without any further warning, he flung both objects over the side of the balcony, blinking

innocently as I dived to catch them. The cold stone met my hips and knees with a thud, but both my mother's pendant and the earring crashed down out of reach and skittered away from me. The large gathering of guards and attendants chuckled at my performance, but I ignored them, scrambling across the stones to reach the artefacts.

I sat up with both items in hand, checking them for damage. Satisfied the two were hale, I allowed myself a small groan of pain. Despite landing hard on the Jarian belt the sapphire leaves on it remained unscathed. Kneeling, I put both items back on, fumbling with the catch on the necklace.

Sarlice fastened it for me then offered me her arm. The long white sleeve engulfed my hand when I accepted her assistance and stood back up. She squeezed my hand, out of sight, catching my eye for a brief moment. I nodded at her to continue speaking.

She cleared her throat and said, 'Lyth and Jaria are being attacked by Zeika raiders. In light of Telby's alliance with Reltland our leaders wish to know where we stand with Your Majesty.'

The king laughed. 'Where you stand! You stand on the outskirts of my territory resisting inclusion in the safety of my realm. You refuse the protection of Telby by running your own splittin' trade scheme.'

'We are your allies, not your subjects,' Sarlice uttered, barely controlling herself.

'A point of contention that Lyth seems determined to maintain,' the king replied. 'Alas, perhaps if you were my subjects I would be able to stop the Zeika legion from overrunning your precious forest. Oh, haven't you heard? There is a fortress being built south east of the Barh desert and they need a great deal of wood for its construction.'

To cover Sarlice's cry of outrage, I asked, 'And what of Jaria? Has what my ancestors sacrificed for the establishment of your kingdom faded so easily from memory?'

My blood quickened and the anticipation of conflict brought clarity to my senses. Rekala's fur bristled. Tiaro started casting her energy into the waves, seeking the threat.

‘Your history is true,’ Flale replied coldly. ‘There was a small advantage the wild Rada brought to augment Telby’s own Kriite citizens. But as long as Jaria and Lyth remain independent and deny my regents the right to rule over them, you have chosen your own fate. I am the ruler of the greatest kingdom on Chryne—do you really think your petty concerns are relevant to me? If your people are being attacked by my new allies, the Relts, I suggest you do something to appease them.’

‘The vastness of their armies and their powers goes far beyond what anybody in Telby has yet seen. I choose my allies carefully and you would be wise to do the same.’

‘Telby is our ally,’ I said, fighting to keep the quaver out of my voice. ‘That is why Jaria has sent me to you now. It seems you have lifted the exile and made a new alliance that threatens us. We will never appease the Zeikas. They hate all Kriites and it’s only a matter of time before they start killing or enslaving the Kriites that are part of your realm as well.’

‘I rule nearly six million people!’ the king declared, gesturing broadly with the hand that held the sceptre. I realised he was speaking to the court more than to us. We were pawns to him, nothing more than an excuse to boast. ‘My realm harbours people from many lands, races and religions. I do not favour one over another except to support those who can strengthen the kingdom. Is the progression of Telby inconvenient for Kriite tribes? Live with it! Or don’t. When the weak perish the strong thrive.’

Sarlice glared upwards, recognising the Zeika sentiment the king spouted. I could tell from her body language she was lost for words. Her sense of hopelessness reached me through her Rada-kin.

‘Your Royal Highness,’ I said smoothly, trying to start over, ‘am I to believe that if Jaria or Lyth were to forfeit their lands and accept the rule of a regent you would make treaties and send soldiers to protect them from Zeika incursions?’

Sarlice whispered angrily in my ear. ‘Lyth would never accept the rule of a regent.’

‘There was a time when I might have considered that,’ King Flale answered, ‘however, no regent will be sent to Jaria. That offer was

turned down long ago when your leaders refused to make Jaria a part of Telby. Therefore you are not my concern. As for Lyth...’ He turned on Sarlice with a savage expression. ‘My regent has been there for years yet you constantly rebel. Your people are like a burr in my boot that will soon be removed. Tell your leaders that I, King Flale of House Rakerne, Lord of Four Realms, repay their stubborn independence by letting them have it.’

Sarlice stiffened and Kestric roared with such volume I nearly clamped my hands to my ears. The guards drew their weapons and advanced on us.

‘That is all,’ Flale said, nodding to the guards.

They forced us backwards through the chamber.

As we passed through one of the stone archways, flanked from behind and in front by guards, a man of about thirty entered the palace. He was with two male companions who were making jokes and recounting something that had just happened. The first man stopped when he saw me.

For a moment our eyes locked and it was like looking at myself in a still pool. He had thick, black hair like mine, brown eyes, a strong jaw and round nose. His skin was not as dark, and his body was flabby, but for all that we could be related.

‘Come now, Prince Joram,’ one of his companions said jovially. ‘How about those summerberry tarts Cook Jeffries promised us?’

My look-alike relaxed and nodded. ‘Yes. Yes that would be nice.’

They continued on. Prince Joram was a name that I had heard recently, but could not place. It was probable that this Joram and I shared a common ancestor, though he clearly did not possess any of the psionic gifts of the Kriites.

We passed Flale’s statue in much lower spirits than before. The stirring of my belly had been replaced by a hard, angry knot. Rekala and Kestric stalked at our sides, swerving their heads to snarl whenever a guard came too close. Despite the presence of the tigers I felt vulnerable walking out of the palace with my back to it.

The guards at the front led us across the southern gangway and unlocked the gate. Rekala swung around and scanned the watch-towers behind us. Sarlice, Kestric and I passed through the gate.

A guard poked his lance at Rekala to get her moving. Her roar of outrage echoed off the palace walls high above. The guards drew back, but their fear enticed her even more. She swiped with her claws and made to chase them further.

I spotted archers with drawn bows in the watchtower and shouted, 'Rekala, no!'

She gave one more frustrated roar and backed slowly out the gate. It clanked shut behind us.

Sarlice put her face in her hands. 'I don't know what I expected. My father knew it was a desperate move. That's why he sent me to Jaria first.'

'You thought to benefit from Jaria's higher standing, because we helped Telby during the Realm Wars,' I stated.

She looked into my eyes. 'It sounds callous when you say it like that, but the fact is, King Flale has considered Lyth a part of his territory for all of the nineteen years he's been in power. Telbion workgangs take whatever resources they like.'

Once we reached the shelter of the trees, Rekala and Kestric had a good scout around to make sure we weren't under any threat. Then they sat near us and took it in turns to contact our homes. Rekala went first. I observed her search-wave without interfering.

Unlike Sarlice I could sense each of the minds Rekala touched in my own mind. There were four other Rada-kin positioned between us and Jaria, who served as a conduit for her wave. At the terminus she chose Bessed's Rada-kin, Uola, to relay the news of our talk with King Flale. Only he could hear her.

Perhaps because I knew him so well I found it possible to jump across Rekala's connection in the waves and link with him myself. Uola locked onto my wave with intense curiosity, probed to see how strong it was and found it satisfactory.

The ageing male goat anticipated my news. *'You bring gloomy tidings.'*

I sent my recollection of the meeting to him with a heavy heart. Though I couldn't communicate with Bessed I sensed his lack of surprise in Uola's mind.

'Bessed thanks you for trying,' Uola said.

'We will continue in our mission to find aid,' I replied steadily. 'How fares Jaria?'

'Our wounds are healed Talon, but the hearts of the grieving are still raw. We are wary in the fields and forest, but so far the Zeikas have not bothered us again. Some say it's because the Zeikas think you are still among us, protecting us. Others say it is because you have left and the Zeikas are after you instead of us.'

'There is more to this conflict than we yet know,' I replied. 'King Flale seemed very confident in his alliance with Reltland, but there was something the guards said about the Princess Denliyan. She's involved in something, too.'

'What was it?' asked the ram.

'That they were to send any representatives from the Kriite tribes to her instead of the king,' I replied. 'What does Bessed make of that?'

Uola conferred with his Rada for a few minutes before turning his attention back to Rekala and I. *'Bessed says that the princess is heavily involved with the politics of Telby. We know from your encounter with them near Tez that she is dealing with the Zeikas. This is probably behind her father's back. Bessed wants to know if you've seen her during your time in Telby.'*

'No,' I replied, 'and the guards said something about her being at her aunt's estate. That's why they took us directly to the king, I suspect—Princess Denliyan was not around.'

'Interesting,' Uola replied. 'We wonder what she is up to. With this delicate new alliance between Telby and Reltland, it is surprising she's not there in the capital.'

'Prince Joram was there,' I offered, 'but not at court.'

'We have heard that he is... unambitious.'

'What should we do to unravel this?' I asked.

'Nothing,' Uola replied. 'Continue your journey to Tanza and Watercrag, learning what you can of the Zeikas' schemes on your way. If you can find anyone willing to send aid to Jaria you have the trade agreements to arrange it.'

With a kind farewell he withdrew. Rekala watched me through the waves, sending her love and admiration. I chased her through the tunnels she had made and came back to myself with a jolt.

Chapter Fifteen—Sting

The *Three Storeys* tavern was full of people when we got back. Sarlice threw down her packs at the entrance to our room and pushed open the door. Lira looked surprised to see us already. A plate of food had fallen to the floor spilling red carrots, beetroot, corn and shredded chicken onto a new, white silk dress. Lira's eyes burned at Sarlice.

'That was expensive,' she said.

Sarlice set her jaw. 'It looks it. I'm glad you're sure enough of your resources to spend it on a new dress. Don't have enough to buy a replacement horse I suppose... no?'

Lira glared at Sarlice and demanded, 'What is that supposed to mean?'

Sarlice glanced at me. 'Nothing. I'm going for a run.'

After she had gone Lira's eyes filled with tears. I tentatively put my arms around her and helped her get to her feet. She nuzzled into me, leading me to embrace her. I couldn't help feeling protective of her—she was so delicate and vulnerable. I smelled sweet oil in her hair and concluded that it had arrived with the supplies from her uncle Enreve.

'Are we really going to be here for a week? When are we leaving?' she whined.

'Tomorrow?' I suggested, stroking her back. 'There are too many Zeikas here for my peace of mind.' *And too many pent-up emotions.*

Rekala refrained from sharing the thought with Kestric. She growled at the way Lira draped herself over me.

We left Telby City the following afternoon, much to Lira's relief. She was on my gelding, riding with a confidence I had not seen in the four weeks we'd been together. The horse seemed to share her mood and was jig-jogging restlessly. Rekala and Kestric scouted ahead and I was in wolf form, following Sarlice and Duria and occasionally doubling back to check further behind Lira.

One time when I was passing, my gelding suddenly flew into a gallop and whisked by Sarlice so closely that their stirrups touched. Startled, Duria charged forward after him. I ran behind for as long as I could, the air rushing through my hair and whiskers. I was back at a lope by the time Sarlice brought Duria to a dusty halt. If the horses went on like that for too long they'd be worn out before the day had even begun, but Lira didn't seem to care. She aimed the gelding for a long, tall bank nearby that jutted up from the plains like a broken bone.

'Trees! Not up there!' Sarlice shouted.

I resumed my human form and bent over, still puffing. Lira galloped the horse all the way up the hill and nearly flew off over his neck when he stopped at the top. He quivered with energy and threw his head up.

'She's going to ruin that splittin' horse!' Sarlice fumed.

'Lira,' I called. 'Walk him back!'

The gelding reared and pivoted. He bolted back down the bank. Lira was a blaze of white against the black of the horse's body. She reminded me of a falling star, like the ones I used to watch in the night sky when I was young. Her freedom and beauty took my breath away despite the circumstances.

'No!' Sarlice shouted.

The horse ran flat tack towards us. The saddle shuddered on his sides, his mane sprayed out in all directions and he gave the final stretch all he had. It seemed like he would crash straight into us, but Lira yanked on the reins. Her legs were squeezed tight around the horse, heels down. She glanced at me as she boldly pulled up inches from Duria.

The mare reared and Sarlice held her seat. 'Easy, girl.'

Duria danced around for a few minutes before Sarlice managed to calm her. The gelding, meanwhile, was bouncing on the spot and looked like he was about to take off again.

‘Get off him!’ Sarlice commanded Lira. ‘Cool him down.’

His sides were foamed and shivery. He shied at every movement and his eyes and nostrils were flared.

‘You shouldn’t have let him do that,’ Sarlice snarled.

‘Oh, why not? It’s what he was born for,’ she retorted angrily. ‘These horses have been cooped up in Telby for two days just like me.’

Lira climbed down from the horse and gave me the reins. It was done so naturally—like I was a servant—that I was reminded of my lowly station compared to hers. It was a wonder she even deigned to ride with the likes of us. We had to cut her a little bit of slack considering her lofty upbringing.

My horse tossed his head when I tried to pat him.

‘He sure was fast,’ I said to Lira. ‘I don’t think I’ve run him like that before.’ I tried to ignore Sarlice’s hiss of anger. By not rebuking the younger woman was I taking sides?

‘You should name him for it,’ Lira suggested. ‘Call him Windrunner or something. I’ve heard that Rada name all their animals, not just their kindred. Is it true?’

‘Usually. I didn’t think I had my bearings on this one yet.’

She gave me a strange look. For a moment I thought I saw disdain, but then I decided it was merely the expression of someone learning to see something from a different point of view.

‘I’ll name him Fleetfoot.’

I caught a glimpse of her smile before I led the horse away. Sarlice seemed aware of the conspiratorial nature of our exchange so she rode off without us.

When we stopped that night, I felt the tension building between Sarlice and Lira. My guide’s lips were taut with anger and her blue eyes seemed even darker than I remembered. Lira held her chin up, with the glow of moonlight upon her face. Sarlice brushed down

Duria, set out her gear and went about her ablutions as if we weren't there.

Lira glanced at Sarlice often, shaking her head and scowling at the older woman's rudeness.

Looking from one to the other with apprehension I asked, 'Who's thirsty? Shall I collect some running water?'

Sarlice shrugged. Lira and I exchanged a tired glance and headed for the river with two water sacks. The foliage wasn't very thick along this stretch of the river and we found a nice little bank to sit on as we washed our faces and filled up the sacks. The moons cast a ruddy light over the trickling water. Lira sipped from a wooden cup. She offered me a drink but I didn't feel like it.

'I'm sorry, Talon,' she said quietly. 'I really shouldn't have given in to Fleetfoot like that.'

I smiled at her. 'All is well. I've done the same thing a few times on other horses.'

Flooded with relief she rested her head on my shoulder.

'You rode well enough,' I said.

She looked up at me with hazy eyes. 'I'm so glad I met you.'

I lowered my face to hers, looked her in the eye and bent to kiss her. Not having kissed a girl for years, my heart was pounding with uncertainty. She giggled and pulled away.

'What's wrong?' I asked, wounded.

She got to her feet, pulling me up. The water sloshed and spilled on us.

'Come with me,' she demanded.

Caught up in the moment I followed her across a narrow part of the stream and onto a small island. We ran through the ferns and knee-high grass for some time before finding a little glade of soft new grass. Lira pulled me to her, smiling and breathing hard. She held her palm against my chest, her touch igniting my senses.

'If you want me, Talon, I must ask you to close out your little friends. It just doesn't seem right otherwise.'

'Trust me, I already did that,' I responded. 'It's just me in here, right now.'

To prove my point, I unclasped Tiaro from my ear and slid her into my pocket. I moved closer to Lira and kissed her softly on the lips. She moaned, pressing closer. Feeling like every part of her was ready and willing, my passion rose.

Everything I'd been taught about being careful in my choice of partner in Jaria seemed secondary to my body's immediate needs. I took hold of Lira's groping hands, buying a few moments to think.

'What's wrong?' She echoed my words from earlier.

There was a long silence. Lira looked at me.

'Talon,' she tried to entice me back, but I got to my feet.

Another puzzled look.

'Why?' she asked. 'Is it your tribe?'

I nodded, having no other way to explain it.

'It binds you so?'

I grimaced. 'It's not quite like that.'

'Then what is it like Talon? I don't understand. Loving is good—a natural need of all people. What wrong can there be?'

I crouched down and stroked the grass, giving me a moment to think.

'When Kriite people marry,' I began, 'it is a life-bond. Jarians believe this must not be given to more than one person.'

Her expression softened. 'Nobody's ever mentioned marriage to me before.'

'I find that difficult to fathom,' I said, staring deep into her eyes. 'A woman of your birth...'

She glanced away.

'And beauty,' I added. 'Didn't your parents have some plans for your future?'

She stared into the trees as if they could reach out and engulf her. I felt a pang of guilt for rejecting her and reminding her of her recent loss. Was I being foolish not to flex the beliefs of my culture? Did Telbions fulfil their desires with anyone they pleased, like Zeikas? I wanted to mitigate the impact of my words, but I didn't know what to say.

I wasn't sure I knew Lira well enough yet to begin a relationship. I was interested in finding out, but not if she wasn't willing to go at a reasonable pace.

I stood beside her, placed my arms around her shoulders and rested my head against hers. She sighed. We stayed like that for a while, listening to the rustling insects and the noisy chatter of the stream.

'Wait here,' Lira said and she left me momentarily.

I continued to stare into the woods enjoying the sounds of the wilds. She returned with the wooden cup she had offered me earlier, and held it out.

'A tribute,' she began, 'to future possibilities.'

I grinned and accepted it, draining the whole cup. Lira wiped a drop of moisture from my mouth and licked her lips. My groin ached. It was a real effort to hold back from her. I gazed at her face, so pale and perfect. Her black hair fell delicately around it, framing her large green eyes and pink, full lips. I leaned in to kiss her, but before I could, a wave of dizziness overcame me and I fell to my knees. Something was stinging me. My vision blurred and went black.

When I came to I was still on the ground. Lira held her palm to my head and asked me again and again if I was well. Gradually, her face came into focus, cheeks pink. I was breathing hard and my skin was warm and sweaty.

'What happened?' I asked.

'You were stung,' she replied. 'You became hot and you thrashed around.'

Blood pounded through my muscles and I felt fatigued.

She held me against her lap, which was damp with spilled water. 'Everything is fine now. Everything is good.'

I allowed her voice to soothe me. I felt all right.

'What was it?' I asked.

‘It looked like a recknid,’ she replied. ‘It’s a little, round wasp with a sting that causes an enemy to black out long enough for it to escape.’

I sat up slowly, trying to clear my head. I felt a powerful need for sleep. If I’d been fighting against my desire for Lira before, the feeling was now gone, quashed by the recknid sting. Lira looked a little shaken up herself.

I ran my fingers through my hair. ‘Did I hurt you?’

‘I am well,’ she said. I caught a hint of amusement in her eyes. ‘You closed your waves earlier. Do you think your little friends will be looking for you?’

I contacted Rekala, Kestric and Tiaro. Their relief and anger barrelled into my mind along with several questions at once. I explained what had happened. All three of them probed my memories, except for those I kept locked away.

Kestric did not realise what was blossoming between Lira and I, but it was harder to keep that from my own kin. I was grateful that neither of them questioned me about it; they sensed my uncertainty. I was pleased with myself for resisting the temptation to lie with Lira. It was like I had passed some kind of test.

Tiara was lying in the grass some distance away, having fallen from my pocket. She glowed slightly when I picked her up and slid her back into my earlobe.

‘You’d better head back,’ Rekala suggested. *‘Sarlice is getting angry.’*

Sarlice had grown weary of waiting for us and had already eaten. She lay in her bedsack under the bivouac watching the flames. When she saw the half-filled watersacks, she raised an eyebrow.

‘Talon had an encounter with a recknid,’ Lira explained.

Sarlice’s lips pressed together.

I sat to have a look for the spot where I’d been bitten. I still felt a little weak.

Rekala snuffed all over me, saying, *‘You smell different.’*

‘Poison?’

‘No, you smell like her.’

Lira approached a pot of stew that was hanging over the fire. 'Did you prepare food for us? Thank you, Sarlice. That's just what we need.' She filled a bowl for each of us.

Saying nothing, Sarlice turned over and went to sleep.

After we'd eaten, Lira encouraged me to lie down while she cleaned the dishes. Feeling exhausted I pulled off my rumpled shirt, crawled onto my bedsack and stretched out. It was too hot to get inside it. Rekala lay at my feet, watching Lira and thinking deeply.

A sinking feeling crept into my belly and I put it down to the poison of the recknid. Soon after closing my eyes I fell asleep.

Chapter Sixteen— Animal Instinct

In the early hours of the morning, a sense of warning splashed through the waves and a terrible howl woke the night.

‘Rada, there is danger!’ Rekala cried as she raced away from a pack of slaving wolf-like creatures at least three times the size of ordinary dogs. They pursued her with demonic speed.

Sarlice leapt to her feet, warbow in hand. Before she could draw, an arrow struck her upper body, the force of the blow knocking her to her knees. Her shout of alarm roused Lira, and the girl awoke in a panic, staring around half-asleep, not sure what to do. Sarlice screamed in pain and Kestric’s response on the waves was deafening, like a tidal wave of snarling.

‘Help her,’ I yelled at Lira. ‘Help Sarlice.’

I fumbled the bedsack off and stumbled to my feet. Tiaro was floating through the waves, trying to banish the demons inside the beasts that pursued Rekala and Kestric in the distance. Without physical contact her efforts barely slowed the demons.

A dark shape emerged from the shadows behind Lira, startling the horses. Fleetfoot bolted into the forest, but the Zeika managed to grab Duria’s halter before she could follow. He pointed his one-handed crossbow at Lira’s head. She froze on her way to Sarlice’s side. A huge, dapple-grey horse galloped into the camp. On its back was a dark knight in shiny black armour and blood red chainmail.

No average weapon would pierce the mail of a Zeika warrior such as this.

I decided to try icetiger teeth on it instead. Leaping forward on my human feet, I blurred into icetiger form mid-air and bounded twice to reach the knight on the horse. The dapple-grey faltered and nearly fell when I came down on its right side, clawing at the Zeika. My jaws worked at the gap near the Zeika's underarm and he toppled off the horse, landing with a clank. My teeth jarred against his shoulderplate and pain engulfed me, causing me to lose my concentration and fall back into human form.

'Rekala, Kestric, hurry!'

'We have our own problem here, Anzaii,' Kestric responded. *'Can you not help us?'*

On the ground beside me the Zeika elbowed me three times in the side. His movements were slow because of the armour, but the blows he dealt winded me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sarlice writhing in pain, but she somehow managed to kick her arrow quiver up to within reach and hide it up her shirt behind her back.

While I was still fighting to breathe the Zeika pulled a rope from his pack and tied my arms and feet. He dragged me over to Sarlice who was gasping in agony, trying not to scream again. Blood seeped from her shoulder where the arrow still protruded.

'You will be a fine boon for my troubles,' he told her, 'after I have spent the other.'

I looked up at Lira who was shaking with fear, doing nothing to stop the first Zeika from grabbing her hands behind her back. A torrent of rage swept through me and I lashed out at the Zeika with bound feet, but my attempts were for nought. He pinned me down easily and tied Sarlice against my back, causing her arrow quiver to dig into my left shoulder blade. At least the Zeika hadn't noticed it. He fixed the long end of the rope to the horn on his saddle.

'What do you want?' Sarlice choked out.

Ignoring her the Zeika remounted and dug his heels into the dapple-grey's sides. With some effort it managed to drag us across the ground. Sarlice spluttered in pain, trying to choke back the sobs.

With the rope so taut, neither of us could reach up to her arrows. Some of them fell out and were scattered behind us. I had the marble-hilted knife in my boot, but that was even harder to reach.

I kicked my feet, trying to get them under my body. Sarlice did too, and we struggled together until we'd managed to get to our feet. Back to back we crabbed sideways behind the horse, stumbling over each other's legs. I hooked my arms under Sarlice's so I could half carry her. The blood from her shoulder seeped down through my shirt, soaking my arm as well.

'Stop!' I shouted. 'She's injured.'

The Zeika on the dapple-grey ignored me, kicking the horse into a faster walk when he realised we were on our feet. The other man rode a chestnut horse alongside us. He had Duria on a lead rope with Lira gagged and tied to her back. The petite, young woman I had come to cherish cried silently into her bonds. Unlike Sarlice and I she had probably never been attacked by Zeikas before. Her kindness to the Zeika in Sarm would not aid her now.

She had been caught up in our conflict, something I should have foreseen. Sarlice had been right. It had not been a good idea to allow Lira to join us. She had no battle skills, no kin—she wasn't even a Kriite. If something happened to her I would have only myself to blame.

'Our Rada-kin will tear you to pieces,' I roared.

The Zeika on the chestnut merely laughed at me.

Rekala and Kestric were running for their lives—they had taken wolf form so as to maintain both speed and stamina. A dozen bristling death hounds were on their trail, baying like something from a nightmare. The hounds were so close to Rekala that she could taste their blood-hot breath in the air.

The beasts were unnaturally large and muscular with red eyes and jowls glistening with saliva. The fur seemed sparse over their expanded bodies, sticking out like thin, black spines. I was already breathing hard from the strain of walking sideways and helping Sarlice, but the vision I saw through the waves made my breath come in even shorter, faster puffs.

'Trees!' Tiaro swore through the waves. *'Send your energy to help them, Talon.'*

'Can I do anything from so far away?' I asked her.

'I know not,' Tiaro replied. *'I am too new... I haven't yet been able to study them on the waves.'*

'What are they?' I demanded.

The earring's emotions were in turmoil as she desperately searched her knowledge for the answers. Without being closer to the abominations it was difficult for her to access the information. It seemed as if proximity to the magic of Zei was what triggered her ingrained ability to teach me what I needed to know. The more time we spent with Zeikas, I concluded, the more powerful we would become as Anzaii.

'I think they are dogs possessed by demons,' she eventually replied.

'Can't we dispel the demons, then?'

'They're too far away. I can't even get a fix on them except for what I see through Rekala's mind.'

I roared my frustration. What was the point of being Anzaii if I couldn't even do anything just when it was needed? This kind of attack was exactly what Anzaii were meant to defend against.

With such a huge distance between the Rada-kin and I there was little I could do except stumble along behind the dapple-grey horse. It took great effort to prevent Sarlice from falling and my concern for her heightened as she sagged against me. Her neck arched back so that her head rested on my shoulder, despite being jostled as I walked.

'You with me, there?' I asked her.

'Yes... arghh... can't you stop... I need to rest...'

'Soon,' I answered, not sure if she was still aware of what was happening.

'Don't drop... me...'

'I won't,' I reassured her. 'I've got you.'

'You left... me... you chose... Lira.'

'No,' I stammered, out of breath. 'I wouldn't do that.'

'You did. You swooned... not that I blame you... she's beautiful.'

‘You’re delirious,’ I told her, wondering if her words indicated the jealousy of friendship or something more. I still wasn’t ready to analyse how I felt about Sarlice nor was I sure what had happened between Lira and I. Right now all that mattered was getting them both away from the Zeikas. Keeping them away from me in the future might be better for them as well. It seemed that I attracted Zeikas like the stench of carrion attracted flies.

By dawn the Zeikas had taken us to a small dip in the land. As we passed into it the smell of blood came to me. Through the waves I sensed the presence of a spirit circle. The last time I had seen one was at the Zeika camp in Naioteio. Before Tiaro and I had a chance to do anything about it the Zeikas dragged us through. Two tents and a campfire that hadn’t been visible before blinked into view.

‘Another spirit circle?’ Sarlice croaked, dragging her head off my shoulder to gaze around.

‘Yes,’ I replied glumly. ‘And now that we’re inside I don’t think there’s much I can do to dispel it. The border is too far away.’

The Zeikas came to a halt and dismounted. Four rabid demon dogs were staked beside some kind of cesspit. Seeing them in front of me was vastly different from the impressions I’d received of the ones chasing Rekala and Kestric. The smell of death was upon them making me gag. They gurgled with bloodlust as the Zeika dragged us closer. He lifted the cover off the smelly pit and shoved us both down into it, making my insides turn with rage and nausea. Lira cried out from above. Even if Sarlice wasn’t tied to my back I wouldn’t have been able to jump high enough to see out. The demon dogs growled at us over the edge of the pit.

‘Talon... get... get an arrow out of my quiver,’ Sarlice said, gasping for breath. ‘I’ll cut your bonds.’

‘There’s a knife in my boot,’ I said.

‘The arrows of my To... Tolite-kin will be sharper,’ she argued.

After much fidgeting I grabbed hold of an arrow and pressed it into my guide’s hand. She wriggled and squirmed until she could reach my foot. Her body shook with pain and I wondered just how

bad that wound in her shoulder was—the fact that she was still awake was a good sign, but I wished we had some pain for her pain. She braced herself against the wall so she could see against the bonds around my feet. Lira shrieked and the sound of a struggle and cloth tearing spurred us on.

Lira was sobbing by the time Sarlice severed all the ropes. I morphed into rat form and scurried up the wall, but without much purchase for my claws, it was difficult. Before I reached the top, one of the demon dogs lunged for me. I let go of the wall just in time, dropping to the ground with a light thud. The wind was thumped out of my tiny body and Lira continued screaming. I resumed human form and was on my knees in the muck at the bottom of the pit, wishing I had learned bird form.

‘We can’t go that way,’ Sarlice hissed furiously.

‘They’ll kill her,’ I nearly shouted.

‘Those dogs will kill you if you try that again.’

I fretted and scrambled at the base of the pit, racking my brains for a form that would facilitate escape. I could take off my clothes, tear them into strips and knot them into a rope, but the dogs would tear me to pieces the second I got close to the top.

In my frenzy, I morphed into the forms of several different animals—bear form did little to deter the demon dogs and it was too heavy to climb out. The hole was too narrow and deep for me to leap out of, even in mountain lion form. My claws slipped on the slick walls.

‘We ca... can dig our way out,’ Sarlice suggested. ‘Hurry!’

‘That will take too long,’ I protested, but there was not much else we could do.

‘Get this out of me,’ she said, gesturing angrily at the arrow.

‘You’ll bleed too much,’ I replied. ‘And we don’t want any of this filth getting into the wound. That’ll bring a red death, for sure. You stay here. I’ll dig the tunnel.’

Sarlice nodded regrettably. ‘Come back if you hear me calling.’

I closed my eyes, allowing my body to shift into the form of a brown speckled rock rabbit. With large claws on their front paws and teeth like a beaver, the speckled rock rabbit was the best digging

animal I knew of, capable of chewing through roots, scraping away dirt and even clawing rocks out of the way.

It was a species I knew from the mountains near Jaria, where they caused extensive damage to our agriculture. Even crops placed on top of rocky soil suffered from cave-ins where these animals decided to tunnel. When my senses had cleared, I engaged the rocky wall. It was all I could do to keep my concentration on the new form and not on what the Zeikas were doing to Lira. Once I was inside a tunnel of my own making a loss of concentration would be fatal.

Sarlice didn't make any noise for a long time so I set my mind and claws to the task and burrowed outwards and upwards for what felt like at least an hour. The light behind me faded, though the stench of waste was still strong.

The sounds of the earth ahead of me changed from a solid wall to something like an echo. Perhaps I was near the surface. I heard a desperate wail and fear gripped me. The coursing of my blood rumbled painfully in my head. A sense of confusion came upon me, followed by the disorientation of being in another form for so long. *Did Rekala feel this way when she was taken by the Zeikas and kept in horse form?* I couldn't risk reaching out for her now, not when I was so close to losing my concentration. Another shout echoed down the tunnel—Sarlice needed me!

I raced back the way I had come, ears flat against my skull. I emerged into the light, resumed human form and sat so that I covered the tunnel opening. The dizziness in my head made feigning sleep easy as I almost passed out. A few minutes later, the lower ranking Zeika looked over the edge of the pit. He scratched himself, looked around the stinking midden and spat on Sarlice's still form.

'She's no good,' he said to the Zeika some distance behind him. 'Half dead already.'

'That never stopped you before,' the other Zeika guffawed.

He moved away, muttering. I crawled to Sarlice's side, fearing the worst. She grimaced when I touched her.

That wound needs treatment fast, I thought, wishing for the herbs and salves I had in my pack.

‘Sarlice,’ I whispered. ‘Sarlice, do you hear me?’

My guide stirred, blinking through tear-filled eyes.

‘It hurts,’ she complained.

‘I know, my friend, but I’m going to have to make it hurt a little bit more. We need to pull the arrow out, now,’ I said. ‘You cannot cast that into the waves, can you?’

Even if she could, morphing with a foreign object embedded in her flesh would cause even more damage when she returned to human form. Sarlice shook her head.

I took my shirt and surcoat off, noticing how cool the night air was against my warm, sweaty skin. The smell of a campfire and roasting meat wafted down from above, so I felt confident the Zeikas were occupied for the time being. I wrapped part of the surcoat around the shaft of the arrow, hating what I was about to do. I gripped the arrow and pulled. Sarlice responded with several loud wails, her pain bringing tears to my eyes.

The Zeikas only laughed and made more jokes from out of sight above. My muscles strained against the arrow, but it still wouldn’t budge. I yanked twice more, with all my strength and it came out with a slow slurping noise. Sarlice gasped, slid to one side and lay there, shaking. Redness soaked her chest and side.

Sarlice drew in shuddering breaths, fighting to keep her eyes from closing.

‘I’m sorry,’ I whispered, stuffing a swab of my shirt against her wound. I tore the rest of the shirt into strips and knotted the ends together to fashion a makeshift bandage.

‘Can you concentrate for long enough to get through the tunnel?’ I asked.

‘I will try.’

After she had transformed shakily into rabbit form, I wrapped the makeshift bandage tightly around her wounded shoulder and under the opposite forelimb. When the blood kept coming, I realised the wound might not stop bleeding without proper care and bedrest.

Putting the bloodied surcoat aside I shifted into speckled rock rabbit form with painstaking effort. We moved slowly into the tunnel. Hearing the dogs bark louder than ever, I doubled back. One of the Zeikas had discovered our escape and was shouting about letting the hounds off.

I heard a woman's voice clearly with my keen rabbit hearing.

'You can't!' she said. 'They will kill him. This has been a mess right from the beginning.'

I recognised it as somebody I'd heard but not seen. My blood went cold as I realised it was the woman who'd been there the day the Zeikas captured me near Tez. Arak and Jonaal had spoken of a princess when Rekala had made the other carthorses flee in the rain. The Princess Denliyan. It was the same voice as the one asking to see me then; shrill, pitiless and commanding. The possibilities whirled in my mind—too many to process all at once.

'We can't let him get away,' the Zeika replied testily.

There was the sound of someone stamping their foot. The shrill female voice said obstinately, 'Keep your cape on. He will come for me.'

I ran back into the dark hole, passing Sarlice who was ambling along very slowly. At the end I continued to shred the dirt away with my huge front claws. I tried to stay focused on digging, but when there was no sign of Sarlice behind me, I had to stop. My little heart raced with exertion and worry.

What if she couldn't go any further? What if she'd dropped back into human form and caused the other end of the tunnel to collapse? She would be dead. The Zeikas must have thought we were not capable of this. *Are we?*

There was a sound in my head like thunder—the pulsing of my own blood. I wondered if I had been in rabbit form too long. Then I wondered why I was wondering. One minute I forgot why I was in this situation, the next, I remembered. Through it all, my instinct for escape remained.

I dug faster, working myself to the point of hysteria. What if the Zeikas had decided to let the hounds down into the hole? *Escape!* Were Rekala and Kestric still alive? My mind was so clouded, I couldn't access the waves to check. Even Tiaro was silent, bobbing somewhere on the waves far away.

Within moments I forgot who Rekala and Kestric were. Then I remembered again. I raked at the tunnel until my paws stung, wondering where Sarlice was. I forgot who Sarlice was. I wondered who I was. I remembered for an instant only.

I sniffed the air for some sign—beyond the earth and waste smells was the sour tang of rabid canine. It didn't smell right. Another rabbit came slowly down the tunnel, hurrying as best it could, its eyes wide with terror. I watched it go, thumping my back foot in warning.

I remembered the demon dogs—a flash of fang, the scent of old blood. I forgot again, but knew I was in danger. *My flock is in danger!* When the other rabbit reached the end of the tunnel, I ran my nose over its neck in comfort and caught the smell of rabbit mingled with human blood. I remembered Sarlice. In rabbit form, the wound was obscured by her fur. The thumping in my head decreased.

I am Talon! I shouted, suddenly regaining access to the waves.

My mind lurched with fear and the realisation I was losing myself. I suppressed compelling urges to regain my original form.

Trees be with us, Tiaro called. Although she was physically in the waves at that moment, she was still with me, sensing everything I sensed, a version of my own mind. But I was losing my sense of self.

Help me, Tiaro, I said. *I can't hold on much longer.'*

Her words of encouragement took on an echoing quality in the waves and faded into the background noises of the deep earth. Part of me realised that Tiaro was the only thing keeping me alive.

Tiaro surrounded my mind with light. She reminded me of things about myself that I hadn't thought of for years, tender moments with my mother when I was very young, sacrifices I'd

made for my grief-stricken father after her death, quiet times alone in the mountains.

There were flashes of Jaria's Rada-kin, running to greet me and beg for scraps of their favourite foods. Then there was my own precious Rada-kin. *Rekala!* Thinking of her gave me another anchor to myself, and her voice found purchase in my thoughts.

Hurry, dear one, she called, fighting her own battle to escape the hounds. *Dig!*

I sniffed around me. There was Sarlice-rabbit. The smell of blood was strong. I fussed over Sarlice's injury, but she pushed me away weakly to encourage me to keep digging. She even scratched at the earth with her good forefoot. The smell of the demon dogs increased as I dug and scraped.

My body trembled with fatigue. The tunnel shuddered and I heard scuffling in the distance. The dog smell became overpowering, so I drove my teeth into the dirt to help my splintered claws. A root barred my way. I scoured around it and chewed at it frantically. Sarlice did what she could to help, but her strength was fading fast. Panic engulfed me.

The tunnel echoed with roars. A beast scabbled at the dirt behind me, larger than the tunnel I had dug. I bit down through the root until my jaw felt like it was breaking. The dog nipped at my tail. I drove my hind legs into its eyes, but the dog gave no reaction. I broke through the root in front and pushed Sarlice-rabbit into the light ahead. The dog's claws struck my back.

Sarlice fell before me as part of the wall we had just dug through collapsed into an enormous dimly-lit rabbit warren. The central area of the warren was ablaze with hundreds of eyes; my nose told me they were not speckled rock rabbits, but another kind.

Sarlice-rabbit was nowhere to be seen and tunnels stretched away in every direction. The demon dog wrenched a tuft of hair from my tail as I dived into the rabbit haven.

I could sense the hostility and fear of the other rabbits. The bravest of the crowd sniffed at me warily and hissed in admonishment—I was a foreigner to the burrow and therefore not welcome. My body was out of control, hair standing on end as I took on an offensive

stance. Behind me the demon dog's nose poked through the gap, causing the other rabbits to freeze in silent fright.

As the mongrel scented its prey, it rapidly began widening the hole with its forefeet. The rabbits broke into hysteria, rushing into numerous tunnels. I was forgotten by all but the hound.

'Fight back!' This thought came from Rekala. *'You are not prey!'*

With enough space now, my body shifted and stretched into the form of a fox. I snapped at the monster's paws and sunk my teeth into its snout as it tried to squeeze through the collapsed part of the wall, but it seemed oblivious to pain. The mongrel had almost made enough room to squeeze its entire head through. Once its powerful shoulders were behind the loosened dirt it could easily push through.

I spun, scented something delectable and chose a tunnel. It came to an end almost straight away. Inside was a huddle of terrified young rabbits, at the mercy of my fangs.

I paused. My body screamed, *'Hunt, kill!'*. My mind hesitated. A steady beat had started up again, distracting me from my purpose, which a small voice told me was to, *'Flee, escape!'*. Animal hunger competed with blind fear. Something else was in the tunnels.

Unable to decide what to do I yapped and chased the young rabbits out into the main chamber. The demon dog drove through the wall, roared hungrily and lunged for the rabbits. It forgot about me temporarily in its lust for food. I slunk down through another tunnel using my powerful fox sense of smell to navigate towards open air.

The tunnels opened out quickly into a set of larger catacombs, pierced with light from the occasional rift above. I pressed my nose to the ground, picking up the smell of blood, the blood of a plump, juicy rabbit. The blood trail mingled with the tang of mongrel and human, leading me through tunnel after tunnel until I finally came to a large cave. I traced the human-blood smell down across the moist rocks of the cave floor. Hunger drove me. *I am the predator.*

Something smoky sweet like burning flesh filled my nostrils before I saw the demon dogs. They must have overtaken me while

in the catacombs, intent on the blood smell like I was. They were closing on a fallen creature, the bearer of the blood trail.

'*My prey!*' I roared a challenge to the dogs. The creature they were haranguing looked up weakly.

'Talon?'

I cocked my head. There was something about that sound.

The monsters turned simultaneously, red eyes boring into me. They licked their lips and showed their teeth. My instinct now screamed at me to, '*Fight, win!*'

My red-gold fur stood on end and I braced myself for attack. The pair circled me, grimacing triumphantly. Something unnatural flickered in their eyes.

'*Defend!*' came a small voice. '*Talon!*' It was Tiaro shouting through the waves, struggling to reach my clouded mind. '*Come out of it. You've let instinct take control! Wake up!*'

I stood for a moment, mouth agape. The hounds loomed before me. A human threw a shower of rocks at them. A human woman?

'Talon! Taeon!' she shouted.

This name called to something deep within me. The fox form I had taken melted away, revealing my proper body crouched on the cave floor. I barely managed to haul my clothing and effects out of the waves in time. With the demon dogs snarling and barking right before my eyes, I breathed out and unleashed my energy.

The waves became visible to me, endless torrents of water spinning and swirling through empty space. Demons also surrounded me, red, black and green. Horns of all sizes and shapes dripped with blood and gore. One demon seemed to be a sprout of nothing but tentacles, its oily black skin riddled with iridescent green veins. Another was covered with rows of orange spikes. I gasped in revulsion and lifted hands to my head. The demons closed in on me as flashes of horror erupted in my mind.

'*Fight, Anzaii,*' Tiaro commanded. I withdrew my knife. '*Not with that,*' she instructed. She wanted me to use my bare hands against those hideous things?

'*Through your hands, let the sapphire waters flow,*' she said.

'*So be it.*'

In the natural world I lunged into the slaving mass and gripped a leg here, a tail there. Teeth closed on my weak, human flesh, biting...

'Release these creatures,' I commanded the demons.

One of the death hound's claws raked my bare chest. The demons I could see in the waves were attached to the living creatures, but far more numerous. They swarmed me and I writhed my wave-limbs out of synch with my real body. It was strange to be in command of two separate versions of myself.

'Focus on the waves,' Tiaro suggested. *'With me.'*

In the waves Tiaro seemed to be more than just an earring. Her energy flowed out of me, coalescing into a blue glowing leopard. I was able to let go of the demon dogs in the waves while simultaneously holding their legs in the physical world.

Once I had split my focus I ran with Tiaro and attacked the demons. She bit and scratched them while I punched and kicked. Tentacle-blob recoiled when it was struck. Tiaro's teeth sunk into one limb, severing it. Shrieks of rage and terror roared in my 'ears'.

A black slaving maw filled my vision. I sent an upper cut into the monster's chin. Gore splattered my face in the waves. My wave body was very much like my real body, but ethereal and blue, like Tiaro's leopard form.

I struggled with creature after creature. Body parts I couldn't recognise came at me, along with teeth and horns and stingers. The injuries I sustained in the waves were painful, but I didn't think it was causing me physical harm.

'You're all right,' Tiaro affirmed. *'Master your fear.'*

Grabbing hold of all the demons I could reach, I roared, 'Get out!' I blasted them with psionic energy, hearing a deep pulse of noise. Stars streaked in my vision and there were sounds like trees crashing down. The blue light around me dissipated.

I sat up slowly, dizzy with fatigue, arms stinging from half a dozen bite wounds. Blood dripped down my chest. The two dogs cowered nearby whining in confusion. They were both average sized mutts now, mangy and scraggly. They bolted when I got to my feet.

Rekala and Kestric were suddenly free of their pursuers. The demons inside them must have been linked to these ones.

'You did it, Rada,' Rekala called down the waves. *'I don't know how, but you've banished them!'*

'Thank the Nine,' I responded. *'I very nearly lost everything for us.'*

Rekala relaxed into her icetiger form, pausing to catch her breath in the shelter of a tree with large, dark green leaves and purple flowers. The forest around her was dense and the air was cloying. I realised they'd been running away from us all this time, drawing the demon dogs west towards the Kiayr mountains.

Though they were already exhausted the two tigers soon started trotting, but now in opposite directions. Kestric came toward Sarlice and I. Rekala made for the last known location of Lira and the Zeikas to find out what was befalling our noble friend.

The voice I had heard when I ran back to the pit echoed in my mind, recalling a time when I was only new to being a Rada and Rekala had been taken from me. I was too fatigued and distracted to put the puzzle together, but a sense of foreboding had settled inside me. All I knew was that the Princess of Telby was at the heart of it.

'How will I get to you?' Kestric asked both Sarlice and I. *'If I follow my sense of you overland, I will end up above you, not inside the cave.'*

'I'm not sure if you can get to us in here. It may not be accessible from the open ground.'

'I have to try,' he replied. *'Can you do something for Sarlice? It seems like she's about to fade.'*

Sarlice was sprawled against a tumble of rocks, barely holding her head up. Her clothes were torn and the bandage around her shoulder had stretched and ripped when she'd resumed human form. It lay to one side, covered in her human blood.

I crawled to her side. 'Stay with me, Sarlice.'

She gasped for breath and shivered. I pulled a scrap of her shirt away to expose the damaged flesh. The arrow wound was on the top of her shoulder near her collar-bone and drilled down into the muscle. I hoped it had not severed any of the strings inside or Sarlice might never have full use of her arm again.

Fear gripped me. If it had gone any deeper it might have struck her heart, but she would be dead by now if it had. If it had been on a slightly different angle, it might have burst her throat or the air sacks I knew all land creatures had inside their chest. As if to emphasise that, she spluttered for a breath and grabbed onto me. I swallowed and held onto her, gripped by helplessness. We had nothing sufficient to treat the wound out here.

Kestric's panic came to me through the waves. *'Do something, Talon, or she will die!'*

Already shirtless my only option was to use Sarlice's. I pulled it off and shook it. Her arrow quiver was still tight against her back, held in place by a wide strip of leather she wore under her shirt. It had left marks in her flesh, so I pulled it out and set it beside her. I packed the cleanest part of her shirt against the wound and pressed it to stop the bleeding. She howled in pain.

After half an hour I felt it was safe to let go. Once again I tore what material I had into strips and bandaged her shoulder. She lay back against the rocks and closed her eyes. I pressed one hand to her throat, fearing the absence of a pulse, but I felt a weak throbbing against my fingers.

All I wanted to do was lie down and fall asleep beside her, but that would not be wise. We needed water and the rest of our gear to recover. My throat was parched and seemed coated in dirt. Sarlice's need for water would be even greater, I knew, because of the blood she had lost. Drea had taught me that.

The need to clean her wound of the foulness from the pit was also in the back of my mind. She might have a pulse now, but the likelihood of a red death loomed. I needed to find some aloe or betany, neither of which would grow down here in the dark. I stumbled down the passageway, tripping over rocks and roots in my haste. There was enough light for me to make out the shapes on the ground, but I was exhausted and terrified of losing Sarlice. For her to die like this when our journey had only just begun would be too much to bear.

Don't die, Sarlice.

There was a spring about a quarter mile away, which yielded fresh, cold water. In my haste I hadn't thought that there was no way I could get it back to Sarlice unless I was willing to give her water that had been in my boots. It was better than nothing, so I washed them both out thoroughly, filled them and carried them back to her.

By the time I got back another half hour had passed. She opened her eyes when I sat next to her.

'Thank the Nine you're still with me. Here, drink this.'

She grimaced at the proffered boot and sipped. I checked that the dressing on her wound was secure, and was relieved to see that the shirt-bandage was not soaked in blood.

'Where's H... Henter? I can't sense it.'

'Your Tolite-kin was left behind when the Zeikas captured us,' I reminded her.

She nodded, staring listlessly at the roof of the cave. 'What about Li... Lira?'

'I don't know,' I replied, 'but there was another woman's voice when I last checked on the tunnel entrance. She sounded highborn and like someone I heard a few week's back, when Rekala was captured by the Zeikas.'

'Another wo... woman?' Sarlice asked in disbelief, unable to keep the shivers of exhaustion and pain from her voice.

'I don't know who,' I added. *Not the Princess of Telby. That would be absurd.* 'I can't think straight right now. It's been a harrowing day. Rekala is going to help Lira escape.'

Sarlice slumped back against the rocks, saying, 'They probably think I'm de... dead and you are going to go after them to rescue Lira.'

'*Clearly Bal Harar is still hunting you, Talon,*' Rekala said, listening in to the conversation via my thoughts.

'Per... perhaps Lira was *helping* the Zeikas,' Sarlice struggled to say.

'No,' I responded harshly. 'That's not possible. Lira wouldn't betray us. And why would Zeikas enlist the help of a woman?'

‘You said you heard an... another woman’s voice. Could it have been Lira?’

‘No,’ I protested, although their voices were similar. ‘You’ve got it all wrong. You’re tired and you’re not thinking clearly. You never liked Lira much, and it’s clouding your judgement now. You should rest.’

‘There’s more to that girl than she let on,’ Sarlice argued feebly.

‘You don’t know her like I do.’

‘No, I don’t.’ I sensed there was a double-meaning to her words, but I put it down to their personal differences. Sarlice let her head flop back against the rock. ‘Do what you feel you must.’

I stood up and paced around. I could run back and see Lira for myself, but even if she was a traitor the Zeikas would probably have her tied up just to fool me.

‘Why go to so much trouble just to catch me?’ I said through the waves to my kin.

‘The Zeikas have a saying,’ Tiaro began, *“We have eternity to perfect the art of our power and make all that is mighty serve”.*

‘Are we really that powerful, you and I? It doesn’t seem so to me.’

‘Perhaps,’ Tiaro replied.

‘The Zeikas must think so,’ Rekala said from afar. *‘They had you under surveillance even before you met the earring.’*

‘Rekala, did you get a glimpse of the woman they called “Princess” back when we were captured near Tez?’

I had never thought to ask her that before—so much had been going on at the time and so much had happened since.

‘Yes, from a distance,’ Rekala replied, distracted by the need to seek cover. She had reached the area where the Zeikas had thrown us into the pit, but with the spirit circle still there, she couldn’t see anything but ordinary land. Without me to dispel the spirit circle there was nothing she could do, but risk creeping over the line. She couldn’t see what was inside, but the Zeikas could see out. What if they spotted her and struck her down?

Rekala broke through the shield, finding she had no clear view because she was behind a stand of bushes. She crept through the leaves, looking out over the camp.

Her impression of the princess the Zeikas had been talking to on the plains near Tez flashed into my mind and layered over it was her current vision of Lira standing in the middle of the Zeika camp, bound in ropes. Both women were thin, with smooth, pale skin, but one had long, silvery-white hair and the other's was cut to shoulder length and black. Despite the differences, the fact that their bodies were the same shape and build set off a cascade of realisation in my mind.

I was bombarded with snippets from news scrolls and other people, snatches of memory and a sick feeling of dread and self-loathing. Back in Jaria, Ivon had described the Princess Denliyan as willowy and smooth-skinned. There was the tyrak I thought I had glimpsed bearing up through the sky in the desert near Tasset where I'd rescued Lira, the black stain on her shirt that I'd seen the night we were soaked by a storm and the convenient mulberry stains that meant she had to keep her face hidden when we were in Telby City.

But why? Why would she do this to me? Why go to all the trouble?

Rekala's next words caused shivers to go down my spine, *The Zeika Arak said, "He does look like Joram, doesn't he?"*

I recalled meeting my look-alike in Telby Palace, the Prince Joram, who I had seen being offered summerberry tarts by his aide. Prince Joram was Princess Denliyan's husband and the only reason I could think of that she would need another man who looked like him was for him to father her children.

Whether Joram was impotent or Denliyan specifically wanted a child with Kriite powers, it suddenly hit me what might have happened in the forest yesterday. I had been drugged by Lira and violated.

'She said it was a recknid,' I cried, my voice echoing through the cavern, 'but there was no sting mark.'

Sarlice glanced up at me, concerned.

'What? What's happened?'

'*She is a traitor,*' Rekala sent through the waves to Tiaro and I, denying her impulse to attack the princess and the Zeikas. My rage filled her with wild fury.

I don't believe it,' I said, but what Rekala said was true.

‘We could still have it all wrong,’ I said aloud and through the waves.

The evidence of betrayal loomed before me, but I still wasn’t ready to accept it. My head ached with the day’s efforts, but it was nothing compared to the tearing in my heart. Could the woman I had started having feelings for really have been deceiving us? Would she really have crept out and met us in the desert, somehow forcing a camel stampede to entice our sympathy? All the time we had spent together—talking under the day-star and at night, playing darts in the tavern in Sarm—was it all a ruse?

I doubled over, cursing myself for a fool, and let a small groan escape from my lips.

‘It cannot be,’ I said to Sarlice.

‘What, Talon?’ she asked, dragging herself off the rock and kneeling by my side. She stroked my back.

I pulled away, shouting, ‘No. It cannot be.’

On all fours I strained to stay in my human form. Fur bristled along the tops of my arms and my fingers splayed out, growing claws. My back arched and I heaved up the contents of last night’s dinner. The act of vomiting drew so much of my energy that my body stopped transforming. The fur and claws vanished, but the feelings of betrayal and self-loathing remained. That someone had raped me was only a part of my despair. Most of all I was furious at myself for being duped.

Sarlice was crying, one hand over her wounded collarbone.

‘Tell me what’s going on, please...’ she pleaded.

I turned my watery eyes upon her, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and said, ‘You were right. Lira is the Princess Denliyan of Telby.’

Chapter Seventeen— Recovery

I will follow Lira and the Zeikas,’ Rekala said.
‘I had better take Sarlice to Ubu,’ I replied. *‘It’s not safe for us in Telby City.’*

I sensed Rekala’s eyes close in agreement. She was feeling bewildered by the big city and all the human conflict, but knew enough from her connection to my mind to have a good understanding of our predicament. In the wild an injury like Sarlice’s would usually result in death through starvation. Rekala recalled seeing a wild treelion shot by an arrow and escape, only to die a lingering painful death in the mountains.

‘I have found the entrance to the cave,’ Kestric sent with great relief.

He was racing through the dank passages in horse form, ready to carry his Rada on his back. I had been unable to hide my emotions and thoughts from Kestric, so he gradually passed everything I had realised about Lira on to Sarlice. She was exhausted and in pain, but still sharp enough to comprehend what it meant—we now had something else in common.

The water in my boots was long gone, but I used a damp piece of torn fabric to mop Sarlice’s brow, which felt hot. She shuddered, wincing from the pain brought by the slightest movement.

‘What do you suppose Li... the princess will do once she and the Zeikas realise you’re not following?’

‘I’m guessing they’ll come after us,’ I replied. ‘Lira may want to try again, and the Zeikas want me in Reltland.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Something High Commander Jonaal said when the warder Arak caught Rekala and I. He said there would be no treatment for Arak’s wounds until I was in Reltland.’

‘You’re worried about why they want you in Reltland,’ Sarlice observed, watching my face with such intensity that I had to look away.

‘I was just wondering if...’

‘If what?’

‘...if the Wavekeeper cult is right. Those are the people who killed Anzaii Feera.’

‘Right about what?’ Sarlice pressed.

‘That there’s a plot of some kind to harness Kriites with exceptional psionic abilities.’

‘Well of course there is,’ Sarlice replied. ‘We’ve known for decades that the Zeikas have Rada slaves. I freed some myself once, an Anzaii, Rada among them.’

‘What were they doing with—?’

‘He was in his fifties and had lived in Duurnyn for most of his life, rarely encountering Zeikas,’ she breathed, talking faster to distract herself from the pain. ‘They captured him and put him to service as a wave-caller. It’s easier for them to work with a human, than to coerce the Rada-kin into sending their messages.’

‘They would still need a verifier,’ I observed.

‘Yes, but there’s nothing to stop the wave-caller from reaching out to a second being on the waves, as long as they also get the Zeikas’ message through.’

Kestric wasn’t far now. I could sense him in the waves like a bright mass rushing down a river of blue-coloured light.

‘Is that how you found out about him in order to attempt a rescue?’

‘It was,’ she said, stopping herself from nodding. Even the smallest motion caused agony to rip through her body and Kestric was doing little to hide her pain from me. ‘We intercepted them in

Jesath, slew the guards and cut the remaining Zeikas' throats in their sleep.'

When Kestric reached us I pulled Sarlice against my chest and struggled to my feet. She tried to bite back her cry of pain, but it proved too much for her. Kestric crouched down on his knees so I could lift Sarlice onto his back. After he stood I climbed up behind my guide. She slumped heavily against me, tears coursing down her face. I held her head between my chin and shoulder, striving to stop her body from slipping forward. I squeezed my knees tightly—bareback riding was familiar enough to me—but it was all I could do to keep us both safely on Kestric's back.

The Rada-kin moved gently despite his increased anxiety. His hooves clattered on the rocky ground, filling the cave with the sound of our passing. He had not rested for more than a day, spending his endurance with steadfast devotion that would rather see himself collapse from fatigue than more harm come to Sarlice.

At the mouth of the cave I lay Sarlice flat and left Kestric to guard her. I raced back to the campsite in wolf form to retrieve Henter and the rest of our gear, hoping Fleetfoot had not gone far.

Thankfully a whistle and a portion of feed brought Fleetfoot out of hiding. I caught him and loaded him up with my saddle, my packs and Sarlice's gear. Leaving his lead tied loosely over a tree branch, I stared at him for a few minutes, storing as much as I could about the body of a horse in my mind. It had been a while since my first horse transformation and I wanted my equine body to be as strong and fast as it could be.

I crouched down onto all fours, arched my neck and closed my eyes, pretending, like a child would, to be a horse. I brought my feet up under me, pawed the ground with my arms and tossed my head. When I opened my eyes again my view was two times higher than it had been a moment ago. My body felt strong and supple, muscles and limbs perfectly aligned for motion. Fleetfoot snorted and nipped at me when I got close enough, so I laid my ears back and reared up.

He stepped back, drawing the rope tight. Without wasting any more time, I took the gelding's rope between my teeth and pulled him after me. He followed nervously at first, shaking his head and stopping every few feet, but eventually I increased the pace until we were trotting then cantering back to Sarlice and Kestric.

The urgency to get further away from our attackers was now paramount in my mind. As soon as they realised I wasn't going to attempt a rescue they would be searching the land around the rabbit warren and would eventually find the cave mouth where I'd left Sarlice.

I came to a halt not far from my fallen comrade, resumed my human form and tied Fleetfoot to a pile of rocks. The gelding was breathing heavily, flaring his nostrils and quivering. I hauled the gear off Fleetfoot's back and lay it out on the ground, fossicking for the salt, linen bandages and needles, dried betony, water, parn and food.

It had been a day since either of us had eaten or drunk properly and my belly was roaring, but I was more concerned about Sarlice than feeding myself. I woke her and helped her to drink two cups of water and some parn to ease the pain.

'Now, I want you to bite down on this trencher,' I said, putting a slab of hard bread into her hand.

'Kestric, make sure she doesn't drop it. Tell me if she does.'

'Very well,' he replied to both of us. *'Not that I understand why.'*

'He d... doesn't w... want me to b... break my own teeth.'

Once she was busy with that I removed her bandage and poured salt water over the area. Copying the healer I had seen in Jaria, I poked around in the wound with a clean knife and removed all the bone fragments I could find. Kestric growled at me. Sarlice was unable to speak to reassure him, but Kestric's connection to my mind was enough to convince him I was trying to help.

Blood flowed afresh, making my hands sticky and causing me to fumble the knife. I washed Sarlice's collarbone again, then pressed a dry piece of linen into the wound, leaning down with all my strength. Ten minutes passed, during which time Sarlice breathed erratically and fought back as many groans of pain as she could.

Once her breathing had calmed a little she pulled the trencher out of her mouth.

‘More parn,’ she said hoarsely.

I lifted my bloodied hands from her injury and passed the tiny bottle to her, trying not to get blood over the spout. Seeing the blood seeping through the linen I pressed down again and Sarlice guzzled the rest of the painkilling potion.

‘I’m nearly done,’ I reassured her. ‘I just have to suture it closed now. Can you press on the cloth while I get a fire going?’

I retrieved the flint and steel from my pack. There were some dry branches with leaves at the cave mouth, so I broke them up and piled them in a tepee shape. I lit the fire faster than I ever had before, stoked it up and placed the metal pan we usually used for cooking on the flames. I lay the needles in the pan and retrieved the black silk shirt Bessed had given me.

Using the marble-hilted dagger I separated some threads from the shirt, laying them side by side on a smooth stone. Once the needles were hot, I offered the bread trencher to Sarlice again and shooed Kestric away.

‘Go scout around us for danger,’ I requested.

Once he was out of sight, I stitched Sarlice’s wound closed with the silk threads, trying to ignore her grunts of pain. I had performed surgeries like this on myself and it wasn’t very different from patching clothes.

I could sense Kestric stop and turn back, ready to attack me. Each time his Rada-kin cried out he growled low in his throat and glared at me, fighting to remain civil. His logical mind knew I was helping her, but his animal mind only wanted to fight that which was causing his beloved much pain. The closer he was to both of us the stronger his emotions were to me and I didn’t have enough spare concentration to block him.

‘Go,’ I told him. *‘You’re not making this any easier.’*

After what seemed like an age I tied off the final stitch and wiped all of the blood from her skin. I bandaged Sarlice’s upper body from one side of her neck to beneath the opposite arm. She was still awake, clenching her teeth over the trencher.

Dawn was almost upon us. I washed the blood from my arms and chest, then donned the remains of the black silk shirt. Between us, Sarlice and I drank two waterbags, wolfed down four chunks of bread and devoured half of a cheese wheel.

After stowing everything and burdening Fleetfoot with all the gear once more, I bade Kestric return to us in horse form.

Kestric walked briskly for the rest of the day with me holding Fleetfoot's lead-rope in one hand and Sarlice in the other.

Rekala reported that the Zeikas were also on the move, but in the opposite direction. Lira was mounted on Duria with her hands bound behind her back and the horse was being led by the knight. The young woman frequently looked behind her, as if expecting me to pop out of the bushes at any moment to save her. I scoffed at the vision of her face in my wave-link with Rekala. It was obvious now that she had dyed her hair. It really was too black to be natural on such a pale-skinned girl.

'Conniving little temptress,' I muttered.

Sarlice stirred from sleep against my chest. She was facing forward this time, draped over me with her arms folded in front of her to prevent them from swinging free. She was so weak and there was little I could do for her pain but encourage her to sleep.

'Not you,' I added. 'It's Lira. They're still keeping up the charade that she's been captured.'

'G... good.' Sarlice murmured in my ear. 'Gives us more ch... chance to es...'

'Escape, yes, I know. Rest now. All will be well.'

When evening came Kestric stopped and lowered himself down in a copse enclosed by large, basalt rocks and dry, old trees. I stepped off with Sarlice and sat her against the smooth side of a large boulder. She had woken occasionally during the day and now squeezed my hand and managed a tired smile.

I quickly removed all the gear from Fleetfoot's back and tethered him to a tree with some water and feed. Sarlice held herself very still while I lit a small fire. I inspected her wound, washed it with more

salt water and dressed it using fresh cloth and betony. The redness around her arrow-wound seemed to be clearing—the bleeding had accomplished that much at least—however, a yellow gash which ran from her spine to her ribs was flanked with red skin. The energy spent dealing with the injury in her collar-bone and shoulder seemed to have left the rest of her body behind.

Sarlice blinked. ‘It was just a near miss, right?’

I nodded, hoping it was true. With injuries like Sarlice’s, I had seen far too many people die. I turned to my bags in search of food, and found a package of flatbread and salted meat from Telby. I set the meat to soak and heat in a pot of boiling water with some black pepper and ginger, then chopped up the bread and dripped some oil onto it.

‘I don’t suppose you’ve got anything worth selling,’ I said. ‘We’re going to need a bit more coin when we get to Ubu.’

She wondered for a moment. ‘Sell the camel tusk. Or the belt.’

I had forgotten about the belt in our recent trauma, but it was fastened around my waist, as always.

‘It’s no ordinary belt,’ I said, ‘but an heirloom of great cultural value to Jaria. It’s made from the leaves of an Ancient Sapphire Tree and is the official Anzaii artefact of Jaria.’

‘I didn’t know.’ She brushed the sapphire with her fingertips, and a look of reverence came over her face. ‘The Lythian Anzaii Artefact was stolen decades ago.’

After we had eaten, Sarlice closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep. Her chest seemed to stop moving and my fingers hurried to find her pulse. It was there, soft, but steady. My hand lingered against her neck, my thumb stroking the solid line of her tanned jaw. How could I have been so blind—to have my attention diverted from this strong, brave woman by a deceiver?

Sarlice and I left all the scouting, hunting and night-watching to Kestric during the seven days it took to reach Ubu. We were both exhausted from the fight with the demon dogs. Sarlice’s injuries sapped her strength so fast I had to hold her on the saddle most of the time. Kestric assured

us we weren't being followed within a day's walking distance, but at times it seemed there were eyes all around us.

Fleetfoot's restlessness didn't help either. With the extra burden of carrying two people he became fractious and tense. When Kestric grew weary from staying in horse-form, I switched the gear to Fleetfoot's back and we walked. Kestric never strayed far enough from us to carry out a successful hunt. He forsook his own needs in favour of ensuring our safety. The lithe firetiger burned his reserves with abandon, leaving him the thinnest I had seen him.

Sarlice's mount was still on the road with Lira and the Zeikas. Rekala had followed them most of the way back to Telby City before they realised she was there. The Zeikas did not attack her, but they shouted at her and boasted about taking their 'prize' back to Reltland to be in the harem of Bal Harar himself. They rode hard through the night and met up with a battalion of two dozen Zeikas outside Telby City.

As I had done many times since the split I wondered if Lira really was in trouble. Perhaps I had it all wrong and the clues I thought I recognised were just coincidences. Maybe I had imagined the voice of the princess. *Nine Trees!* I was nearly out of my mind at the time, having been trapped in rabbit form for so long. Rekala and Tiaro didn't see why I went over everything in my mind again and again. To them, it was clear Lira had been deceiving us from the start.

Rekala stayed on the Zeikas' trail down through the eastern sheep fields just to make me feel better. From what she overheard it seemed they were headed for Ravra where they could sneak through to the coast unnoticed and hop on a ship out to Reltland. That would take many weeks and would be very risky for such a small group. Ravrans had little sympathy for Zeikas and I had read that Queen Opoel's vassals could raise up to 37,000 warriors if needed.

My heart ached with anger and self-loathing. While I'd been enjoying the attention of the young princess, the Zeikas had been hatching their own plans. What hope had Jaria if Sarlice and I didn't manage to find them some allies? And if I was destined to be their Wave Master then the longer I took to get this quest over with and return, the greater their peril.

We rode into the outskirts of Ubu mid-morning on the seventh day since leaving the cave. We were crossing an immense stone bridge when Rekala suddenly broke into my thoughts. *Lira and the Zeikas know you aren't taking the bait. A group of them have headed off to Telby City with Lira. She is free of her bonds now and seems to be in command.'*

'Betrayer!' I wave-shouted, all my doubts banished. If King Flale had wanted me he could have put me in irons the day Sarlice and I met with him. Perhaps the princess was plotting for my seed to secure her place in the dynasty, giving her not only an heir, but a psionic one.

'What are the other Zeikas doing?'

'Coming your way,' she replied. *'I managed to release Duria during the night. She and I will overtake the Zeikas tonight and rejoin you in seven or eight days time.'*

'Very well, Rada-kin, but just make sure you stop to eat something. Your hunger is like a living fire.'

'I will.'

'Keep safe.'

Fleetfoot seemed relieved when the town of Ubu came into view. His swishing tail and fidgeting skin became calm. Sarlice leaned heavily against my chest. I stroked her forehead and cheeks to awaken her. She climbed down weakly from Kestric's back as we arrived at the stables of a large, well-kept tavern. An A-frame signboard sat alongside the pathway to the main entrance with the words 'Ubu Adventurer's Inn'.

The pathway into town was cobbled with brown stones that I presumed had been dug from the surrounding countryside centuries ago. Countless trees stood tall in clay pots along the streets. Shops and buildings were made of wood and stone. Curling metal awnings formed intricate patterns and sparkled in the morning light.

We rested against a yard-rail until a stableboy came out to take Fleetfoot.

'Thanks, boy,' I said. 'We need a healer. Do you think you can fetch one for us?'

He stared at our blood-stained clothing and travel-weary appearance with wide eyes. 'It looks more like you need the bath-house.'

From our right, a booming voice scolded the boy. ‘That’s no way to talk to our patrons, Kalemp.’

‘Yessir.’ He scurried away with Fleetfoot.

‘I’m Malochar, the owner of this tavern,’ the man said taking my proffered hand and shaking it.

He eyed the prowling firetiger behind us with genuine respect. ‘You two look like you’ve seen some trouble recently.’

‘You might say that,’ I replied. ‘Can you please arrange for a healer and a tailor to visit us today?’

Malochar glanced around. ‘Aye, of course. Do come in.’

I helped Sarlice hobble into the inn and Malochar carried our dusty packs to one of his spare rooms. Once inside I helped Sarlice to lie on the bed and dug the ivory tusk out of my pack.

‘If I give it to you, will you take care of all our supplies for a week?’ I asked.

Malochar fingered the ivory and sighed. ‘It won’t leave much of a profit for my time.’

‘I understand,’ I said. ‘If we tether our horse on grass during the day he won’t need grain...’

He clapped me on the back. ‘Naw... I won’t do that to the poor bugger. He looks like he needs a bit of good tucker in ’im—so do all of you for that matter. I’ll even feed that ravenous beast of yours. Which one of you is the Rada?’

‘We both are, sir,’ I replied. ‘My Rada-kin is a week behind us. But I cannot ask for your charity...’

‘It’s not charity, my boy,’ Malochar guffawed. ‘Consider it a favour in return for reciting some tales from your adventure.’

I smiled uncomfortably, knowing there were certain things I just couldn’t share. There were some stories, however, that I would be glad to tell. Bessed’s Rada-kin, Uola, had instructed me to make Jaria’s plight known to other nations. What better way than by turning it into a ballad to be recited in the taverns?

‘I may need a day or two to recover from our ordeal and prepare,’ I said.

‘Very well,’ he replied.

Around midday a healer arrived from the local apothecary.

The bent old man shuffled into our room, took one look at Sarlice's sutured wound and declared, 'There's nothing more I can do for her.'

I followed him out, all but grabbing him by the shoulders. 'Trees, man, do you have to be so brash? I cannot believe there's no hope.'

The healer turned his beady eyes upon me. 'Is that your handiwork in there?'

I ran my fingers through my hair and couldn't meet his eye. 'I did my best, merely copying what I'd seen real healers do in Jaria—'

'Then I'd say you're a fine learner—Sir...?'

'Talon,' I replied.

He put both hands on my shoulders, squeezing the muscles as if testing me. 'Yes, Sir Talon, now if you have a mind to become a healer you might drop by the apothecary some time—'

'Is she going to be well?'

'The wound looks good enough. Your suture is a little rough, but it will do. Cleaned it with brandy, did you?'

'Salt water.'

'I see. Right... right! Pull the stitches out carefully in another week or sooner if you're sure the wound will hold.'

I celebrated inside. 'Can I give her something for the pain?'

'Parn, an opium tincture,' he replied, 'for three silvers a bottle.'

'That's outrageous.'

'That's medicine.'

'Very well. Furnish us with two bottles for five silvers and six bronze. Malochar is looking after our expenses.'

I returned to Sarlice's side, knelt down and squeezed her hand.

'I knew it,' she said. 'The wound's rotted, hasn't it?'

'I don't know if you'll make it,' I said with a deadpan expression. 'Any last requests?'

'How can you make jokes at a time like this?' she demanded.

'Because,' I replied, unable to hide my joy, 'the wounds are healing well. You're going to be hale in no time!'

'Thank the Nine Trees,' Sarlice said, shoving me over with her good arm.

I landed on my behind, laughing with relief. *Sarlice is going to be fine.*

‘You’re a man with many talents, Talon,’ said my guide, ‘but humour isn’t one of them.’

Over the following week, Malochar generously provided us with everything we needed. I took an instant liking to Ubu, a town with Kriite foundations. The patrons in the common room were glad to hear of my adventures with the Zeikas. They had an appetite for information about Jaria and the Rada-kin. Even without Malochar’s supplies I would have eaten well each night.

As a result of sharing the tale of Jaria’s recent battle with the Zeikas word spread around town that we had generous trade agreements on offer to any who would send warriors to serve there. A guild of merchants and mercenaries who had banded together three years ago took us up on our offer. They pledged four dozen warriors for two seasons in return for goods and an exclusive right to trade Jaria’s beef in Ubu.

The papers were signed in the presence of an officer from the Ubu guard and I contacted Uola in Jaria to inform him of our success. I was pleasantly surprised to find I could now reach that far in the waves without Rekala or Kestric to help me, joining instead with six Rada-kin who were dotted across the countryside between here and there.

How do you and the others fare?’ Uola asked when we were done with the trade negotiation.

‘We are plagued by Zeikas,’ I replied. *‘A traveller we had with us since the desert turned out to be in league with them.’*

‘That’s terrible,’ the buck exclaimed. I sensed that he and Bessed were conversing, although I could not hear my foster father through the waves.

‘It gets worse,’ I added. *‘I am now certain of the identity of the traveller. Her name is not Lira and she is not the sole-surviving heir of the Demaeda family. She is actually the Princess Denliyan of Telby.’*

There was silence on the waves for a minute as Uola and Bessed digested the information.

Uola's trepidation reach me through the waves. *What did she want with you and Sarlice?*

I hesitated before answering, holding back the knowledge in my mind that would shame me.

It's vital that Bessed knows what's going on,' Rekala counselled me privately.

Very well,' I sent with a sigh.

Do you recall my father's letter?' I asked, inferring that Uola pass the question on to Bessed.

We have a copy of it here somewhere,' the buck said. *What has it to do with this?*

On it, there was a genealogy of some kind,' I explained. *My mother's line, back through single sets of ancestors. Each one had at least one name underlined.'*

Namal studied it for a time,' Uola said, *but because your mother wasn't Jarian, we didn't have much to compare it to.'*

Well there has to be something to it,' I replied, building up the courage to reveal my terrible secret. *Lira and I were alone in the forest a few weeks ago and she drugged me and stole seed.'*

Trees!

There's more,' I said, cutting off the stream of negative thoughts that came from him. *When Sarlice and I were in Telby Palace, we saw Lir—Denliyan's husband, the Prince Joram, and he looked a little bit like me.'*

She's married,' Uola stated, his disgust apparent. *What need has she of another man's seed?*

What if the princess and prince could not conceive?' I responded. *With no heir of her own, Denliyan's place on the throne would be insecure if her father were to pass away. Perhaps she went to Bal Harar for help—'*

What's that got to do with the genealogy then?

Perhaps he saw a way to combine two goals in a single scheme.'

What scheme?

They tried to capture me near Tez,' I rambled, thinking it through even more now that I was sharing my jumbled thoughts with others. *And why me? Princess Denliyan wanted an heir to the throne who would at*

least pass as Prince Joram's child. He and I look alike—who knows—with Bal Harar involved we might even be related. And Bal Harar himself wants me in Reltland, that much is clear. The Zeikas who caught me even before I became Anzaii knew what I looked like, knew about my scar...'

'You're right,' Uola said, passing on Bessed's rapt attention and agreement as well. 'Bessed has his copy of the letter here and he says that your mother's name is underlined. What if those underlined names were all Anzaii?'

'It would mean Bal Harar has been tracking Kriite genealogies for centuries and this is one he has focused on in recent years.'

'He's trying to breed an Anzaii into the royal line of Telby? That would seem counterproductive to say the least!'

'He wanted me,' I replied, 'for something to do with using my abilities.'

'How is that possible?'

'I don't know,' I replied. 'But that Wavekeeper who murdered Feera said it.'

'But the child—if there is one,' Uola began, 'could be our salvation... Why would the Zeikas bring that upon themselves? Imagine a Kriite Anzaii on the throne of Telby!'

'Perhaps the Bal thinks he can control the heir or do away with it any time he likes. He probably knows that bloodline or no, without the proximity of a Great Sapphire Tree or the power of sapphire tree artefacts, the gifts remain dormant.'

'Our ability to communicate across vast distances has always given us an advantage over the Zeikas,' Uola said.

'If we are fortunate, they will give up on me now. I may be only one of many Anzaii the Bal is trying to catch.'

'Possibly,' Uola said, 'but we haven't heard about anything like this till now. The Anzaii gift, especially, is not common and those who do have it are often limited in their power.'

It sounded like he had high hopes for me. 'Let us hope Tiara and I can develop our skills in time to defend ourselves.'

'Indeed. If Bal Harar's minions keep failing to catch you, he will come for you himself. Trees guide you, Talon.'

On our sixth evening in Ubu, Sarlice was asleep by the time I made it back with her dinner. I unrolled my rug and placed it on the floor beside her.

I lay there for a while staring at the blemishes on the ceiling. I thought of all the things I had said to Lira, all the looks she'd given me and the thrills it had sent through my body. Had it all been false? Did she not care for me at all?

Unable to sleep I retrieved a quill pen, ink pot and vellum from my pack. After lighting a single candle, I wrote a letter to Lira:

To Lira, servant of Princess Denliyan,

I am disappointed by your deceptive actions and will never forgive your attack on me. Your commitment to the Demaeda family is commendable. I can see why you might consider desperate measures to secure your place as the heir. You might want to consider the name, Rade. Don't be fooled into becoming anyone's puppet. The woman I thought I knew would not be so malleable.

Sincerely,

Anzaai, Rada Talon

When morning came I felt like I had barely slept. I pulled myself up, pocketed the scroll I had written, stretched and padded to the window.

I gazed thoughtfully at Sarlice's sleeping form. What had I been thinking, getting so involved with Lira? This wasn't my time—we were on a mission of great importance.

Sarlice opened her eyes and pushed herself up. Though she still looked groggy and worn it seemed like the worst was behind her. I assisted her to walk downstairs for breakfast then hurried through the meal, sensing the proximity of my beloved Rada-kin.

Outside I squinted in the morning light. Duria was standing in the same stall as Fleetfoot with a Zeika saddle on her back. Not far

away lurked a large grey-blue icetiger, cleaning herself and exuding self-importance.

‘Rekala!’ I shouted.

The great cat chuffed at me and rubbed her head against my leg. I crouched to throw my arms around her. Her fur came off in clumps, dull and grey from lack of rest and good food.

My Talon, my Talon.’ She chuffed, hooking one paw around my calf muscle as if she could hold me in place forever.

I missed you,’ I said. Being able to converse long-distance on the waves did not compare with seeing my Rada-kin in the flesh.

‘We haven’t been apart this long since I was captured by the Zeikas.’

‘Welcome back, Rekala,’ Sarlice called out.

My Rada-kin and I made our way to Sarlice’s side. The icetiger chuffed at Sarlice and sniffed her injured shoulder when she crouched down to scratch under Rekala’s chin. Kestric also came to greet my Rada-kin, rubbing the underside of his chin against her furry cheek.

‘The Zeikas won’t be far behind,’ I commented. ‘The way I see it we can either make a stand here or press on.’

‘Now that we have two horses, we should continue our journey,’ Sarlice said. ‘There’s no reason to put the people of Ubu at risk.’

‘Are you sure you’re ready to go on?’

She flexed her neck and shoulder muscles. ‘I’m still a little stiff, but the best thing to do now is get moving.’

She looked into my eyes. ‘Thank you for everything you did for me. I know it must have been hard to abandon Lira like that.’

I shook my head sharply. ‘We both know she’s a traitor.’

‘Yes... well I’m glad you were willing to face that. I was worried for a while there that she had you under her spell.’

‘I’m a fool,’ I said. ‘I jeopardised our mission and our lives. I brought this injury upon you.’

‘No, you didn’t,’ she argued. ‘Kestric and I knew when we joined with you that it would be perilous. The Bal of Reltland himself is after you, for trees’ sake.’

I turned away, humbled by her grace and conviction. She put her hand on my shoulder and walked beside me back into the tavern.

Chapter Eighteen— Strength and Weakness

Malochar sent us off with our bellies and our saddlebags full. It was a bright morning full of promise and a stiff westerly breeze.

Two days after leaving Ubu, Sarlice had recovered much of her former zest. There was still plenty of light in the sky when we decided to stop and make camp. We both dismounted and tethered the horses near the water's edge. Rekala and Kestric splashed into the river to cool off while I kept watch for enemies.

Later, when it was my turn for a rest, the two cats padded through the grass, circling our camp. Sarlice oiled her Zeika saddle and explored the flaps and pockets for resources we could use.

Insects hummed in the background, growing louder as twilight peaked. The boldest stars were just daring to poke through the darkening teal-blue sky and the two watchful moons hung over us like guardian spirits.

With the stew gurgling in a pot, I leaned my head back on my pack and closed my eyes.

'Smells good,' Sarlice said, startling me.

'I'm a little jumpy,' I chuckled.

'Not surprising after everything you've been through.'

I felt a slight awakening inside me, the most unusual and curious of feelings. It was like I was no longer focused only on myself, but I was becoming more aware of others—their needs, their

emotions and their thoughts. Sarlice's proximity seemed to heighten it, perhaps because of the care I had given her. Were we becoming close? It made me wonder if my Anzaai abilities were going to be as strong as my mother's had been.

'It is possible you will develop empathy and even telepathy with other people,' Tiaro said, aware of my thoughts.

I looked up from my reverie to see Sarlice sitting with one hand supporting her head, watching me.

'You miss her don't you?' she asked.

'Who?'

'You don't have to hide it, Talon. I know you had something with Lira.'

'I wasn't even thinking about her until you mentioned her,' I retorted, turning my face away.

Perhaps if I'd been more on guard with Lira I wouldn't have fallen for the deception, I berated myself.

'If the Zeikas really masterminded the whole thing they must be desperate to get to you,' Sarlice murmured. 'What I can't work out is how Lira came into their plans.'

'She must have been working with them at the beginning,' I muttered. 'In the plains near Tez where Rekala and I were captured. Probably struck a deal with Bal Harar—by influencing her father to strike an alliance with Telby she would receive... what? Assistance securing her throne?'

'Who knows where the girl's ambition ends?' Sarlice commented. 'With the Reltic and Telbion armies combined she could take over all of Chryne.'

'Yes, and it will not be long 'til they've found more reasons to enslave Kriites,' I said. 'It is being done in secret by the Zeikas now, but once they've positioned themselves in Telby properly, the noose will be set. They'll gradually turn the population to their religion. Those that don't comply will be enslaved or killed.'

'What of Flale?' Sarlice pondered. 'How does he factor into all this?'

'He seemed pleased enough with the Reltic alliance,' I replied. 'Princess Denliyan surely had a hand in it, but I'm guessing Flale

thinks he's the one in control. Only he doesn't realise the depth of her deceit. She'll be queen regnant as soon as she can.'

'I hope they know what they've got themselves into,' Sarlice said in a foreboding tone.

'I'm afraid they do,' I stated. 'Why else would Lira have felt the need to have an Anzaii child?'

With a look of horror on her face Sarlice waited for me to continue.

'To protect her from the Zeikas when she is no longer of use to them? To use for military advantage?'

'You think she is playing both sides? Using the Zeikas and the Kriites, but loyal to neither?'

'There was a genealogy with the note my father left. The Zeikas have long been paying much closer attention to Kriite bloodlines than we do, and now it appears they have what they want—a child of my mother's line under their complete control.' I considered the half-sibling they might also have, who would be about fourteen now.

Sarlice shook her head. 'You don't know for certain Lira's pregnant.'

'If she is I'll let her think I loathe the child. In my letter I suggested she call it "Rade". That way she will not expect me to come for him or her.'

Sarlice nodded. It was as if my suggestion of walking into Telby Palace to capture the heir to the throne was the most natural thing in the world.

We crested a rise and made our way between a maze of tors, rocks and boulders that lined the river. The water thundered louder the further east we went making conversation difficult. If we hadn't been following it we may never have come across the entrance to the Tanzan Chasm. The chasm itself, however, was unmissable. It stretched far out of view, flanked on either side by bushes, small pockets of forest and more rocks.

This narrow canyon whistled strangely. The Tanzan Chasm was an enormous rent in the ground revealing the swirling layers of rock

that made up the land beneath the surface. Multi-coloured boulders and scrubby bushes dotted the ground, and jagged rocks and roots stood out from the steep walls.

In the early afternoon light most of the chasm floor was in shadow. Up higher the rocks were orange and gold. The river was about two thirds the width of the River Jarvi, meaning we could easily see across to the other side. It rushed down into the canyon, crashing into the rock walls, which boomed and echoed like a summer storm.

‘Incredible,’ Sarlice commented.

‘You’ve been through this area before, haven’t you?’

‘Yes, but I never even knew this was here. The line most people take on their way to Telby City goes through Ubu, completely missing this chasm.’

‘How long will it take to reach the end?’

‘Eight days or so.’

‘Then we’d best get started,’ I said, glancing behind us. ‘Surely the Zeikas aren’t far.’

We walked the horses down a steep grade and entered the chasm on the south side of the river. Our initial descent between the south wall of the canyon and the edge of the river was very tight with barely enough room to walk the horses. Their hooves slipped on the moist, sandy rocks and we had to coax them over large stone slabs with feed. The wind squealed like a chariot of ghost horses around us, but nothing compared with the booming of the water. It was like being stuck in a tunnel of thunder.

The chasm widened gradually so that three horses could have stood nose to tail between the river and the south wall. More boulders and rocks were strewn across the ground preventing us from moving as fast as usual. We travelled downwards for a long while before finding level ground. In the shadows of the chasm walls the stream seemed deeper and blacker.

Small plants grew up the rock walls, reeds and rushes became thicker along the river and I could see moss and strange purple grasses on the rock floor. We travelled peacefully for the rest of the day, moving south away from the river so we could hear each other.

We found no indication that anyone else had been this way in a long time.

That night Sarlice and I ate a meal she'd prepared from a hare she shot during the day. It was good to see her gaining the use of her arms enough to wield Henter. Afterwards I scrubbed our dishes clean with leaves and stowed them hastily in my packs. I was hesitant to get the sleeping gear out, scrunching my hair as I looked back the way we had come.

'You look worried,' Sarlice said.

'It doesn't feel safe to stop here. Now that we're in the chasm, there's only one way to run.'

'We don't have to stop. We could try riding through the nights,' Sarlice suggested. 'Tie ourselves to the saddles.'

'I don't like the sound of that,' I replied. 'It's not real sleep.'

Sarlice raised her eyebrows at me. 'Let's both sleep and let the Rada-kin linger far enough behind to give us fair warning of the enemy's approach. We will only rest for a few hours at a time.'

'A compromise?' I bantered. 'How diplomatic of you, Ambassador Sarlice.'

'Indeed it is, Ambassador Talon.'

As the days went by Sarlice used a variety of techniques to build her strength. She and I discussed the use of swords as we rode and I learned what I could from Sarlice's greater skill and experience. I sat watching her one evening as she practiced with her Lythian shortsword.

'How do you have such disciplined movements and focus?'

'Nine years of practice.'

Doing the math in my head I concluded she had been learning swordplay since the age of 14. I settled back onto my bedroll, half-closing my eyes. The Lythian warrior parried within the firelight, placed her feet carefully and kept looking to her side and behind, reinforcing a habit that served her well in battle.

It wasn't easy for her to get back to the fitness she'd had before. Though she tried not to show it she had a frustrated expression

sometimes. Her shoulder injury still pained her and she specifically targeted that arm in her swordplay, increasing the strain on it gradually. I watched her until I fell asleep and dreamed of a woman made of flames.

My sleep had been fitful since Ubu—with the threat of Zeikas coming at us from behind or even above, I found it difficult. Stopping for only three hours at a time messed with my usual habits.

Six days without proper rest saw us fast asleep under the shade of some trees.

'Awaken, Rada!' Rekala cried. *'Enemies draw nigh.'*

I knew from her mind that we didn't have much time to break camp. Sarlice roused at the same time, no doubt hearing from Kestric. With a wordless glance we saddled the horses and packed everything vital.

'You take Duria and Fleetfoot,' I said. *'I'll follow in wolf form.'*

'Are you sure you can after just waking up?'

I rubbed the grime out of my eyes and doused my head with water from a bag hanging on Fleetfoot's tack. This would also lighten his load. *'Yes. Ride now. Hurry!'*

She trotted away on Duria, looking backwards to make sure I was successful in my transformation. I reached for the Kriite magic, picturing myself as a huge, black dire wolf. Rekala and Kestric loped past me, also choosing wolf form.

The sound of our pursuers sent us running over the rocky terrain. Ahead of us, Sarlice pushed the horses into a gallop, shouting to urge Duria on.

My head pounded with pain as the thundering behind us grew loud enough to compete with the booming river. With my keen wolf hearing, I could hear the Zeikas shouting to their mounts in Reltic and their whips cracking.

As we ran, I sent a question to Kestric via the waves, *'Can you ask Sarlice if there's anything we need to do before passing through the Tanzan barrier?'*

'Yes,' he said, conversing with her outside of my wave perceptions. *'She says she doesn't think so. It's only humans who lack Kriite blood who dare*

not enter. The shield bars their way; translucent in appearance but solid as crystal. I think I can see it.'

As hooves thundered behind us, Rekala and I were both reminded of our capture in the fields near Tez. Not wanting to go through that again, we turned in unison and ran to intercept them.

'Bite the neck,' she chanted.

When we were in range I lunged at the nearest rider. The Zeika was caught off guard, and was unable to do anything but crash to the ground. Rekala snarled and struggled to bite through the Zeika's protective armour with the teeth of a dire wolf. I looked up at the oncoming Zeikas and then back at Sarlice.

My guide had drawn Duria to a halt, but Fleetfoot would have none of it, and charged right on through the shimmering wall of purple and blue I could see in the distance. The barrier stretched up and out of the chasm in a giant ball, presumably extending over the entirety of Tanza.

It must not affect animals; Fleetfoot passed straight through it. Seeing that we were about to engage the rest of the Zeikas, Sarlice dismounted, dropped the reins of her horse and roared into firetiger form. Bigger than Kestric, but not quite as big as Rekala, Sarlice bristled with healthy, orange fur, which was striped and spotted all over and had long blood red guard hairs. She stood with her head lowered and her back arched, snarling with such ferocity I felt an instinct to turn and run. *Even a dire wolf would never attempt to fight a firetiger,* I thought.

Rekala resumed her natural form and killed the Zeika in front of her with one crushing bite to his neck. Her sabre-like teeth passed right through his armour. Following her lead, Kestric and I took tiger form. Along with Sarlice, we lined up to face the oncoming sorcerers. At least in this form, the four of us could not easily be distinguished from each other. If the Zeikas wanted me alive then maybe they wouldn't risk killing any of us.

Three Zeika knights charged towards us, covered from head to foot in bronze armour. Sarlice and Kestric darted in, knocking one of the knights off his mount. The second was carrying a black partisan with a jagged arrow point on the tip, which I ducked to

avoid. Rekala roared in fury and sprang, only to be knocked back by a wall of green fire.

'Tiaro!' I wave-shouted. The earring was already fully alert, sensing the magic that the Zeikas wrought.

'More time,' she hissed. *'I need more time to align the energy.'*

Rekala shook her head in pain and ran blindly towards the fray, swiping and slashing.

'Get out of here, Rada-kin,' I ordered her. *'Find some water and open your eyes under it.'* I injected my vision of the way into her mind so that she could run in the right direction.

'I'm sorry, Talon,' she said, running for the barrier. Without the use of her eyes, she could do no more to help us.

Hoping her burns weren't bad, I returned my attention to the attacking Zeikas. The third knight was riding straight for me, but Sarlice reached her paw out to trip the horse. It staggered enough to dislodge its rider, then pivoted and galloped back the way they'd come. I raked my claws into the falling knight's body, ignoring his shout of pain. The man stabbed his sword forwards, scathing my belly as I sprung back.

Saliva collected at my jowls as I snarled at the three. The first knight had recovered from falling and was whispering incantations under his breath. A bird-like shadow was starting to take shape in the air.

'No!' I cried. *'By the Nine Trees, no!'*

But it was no good. The conjuration burst to life and soared towards Sarlice. The other two Zeikas advanced on me, one carrying a lasso. I hunched low to the ground, gathered my strength and leapt. The lasso man screamed as I knocked him to the ground, but I couldn't get my teeth close to his throat. The other man threw himself at me, jabbing my side with his partisan. The thick fur protected me from a worse injury.

I fought frantically to get the fallen Zeika's plate-mail away from his neck so I could kill him, but my fangs just slid off. Furious, I dug teeth into his arm. *Pain!* My teeth jammed deep in the ring mail. Despite the pain, I held my grip. Using the power in my neck, I hauled him against a rock, causing his helm to fly off. He became

my human shield against the other Zeika and died from a blow to the head.

Sarlice and Kestric struggled against the third Zeika and his conjuration, circling and running away when either got too close. They would both run in to nip the human from opposite directions, but couldn't make any real damage without risking injury from the death hawk.

The other Zeika stepped towards me, holding the partisan out in front of him. I bared my teeth and growled, laid back my ears and lifted my paw to strike. At that moment, Sarlice landed a fierce enough blow on her attacker's calf and the man collapsed to the ground. His conjuration vanished just inches from Sarlice's head and Kestric jumped on the fallen Zeika, killing him.

The man who was facing me held his hand out to cast fire. In the distance behind him, there were a dozen more mounted Zeikas, four of them carrying nets between them. The ones we had faced had only been scouts, I concluded, sent to delay us even if it meant their deaths.

'Run!' I wave-shouted to Kestric.

Leaving the third Zeika behind us, we fled in tiger form. Sarlice stopped for long enough to take human form and drag Duria after her. The Zeikas were coming up much faster than the stubborn mare would go and the barrier was too far away. Kestric and I split up, causing the riders to break into three groups. Bolts of fire and metal sailed toward us. Sarlice turned to throw a knife at one of the Zeikas closing on her. Kestric roared, frightening the horses who were racing after him.

A few seconds later we had re-converged and the Tanzan barrier shield was before me. Up this close it was like a ball of lightning, crackling and humming with untold power. *Can we really touch it and survive?* I wondered, filling my chest with air. My teachers in Jaria had always spoken of a time in my life when I would have to take a leap of faith—now could very well be that time. Would my Kriite blood really protect me?

With a roar that shook the ground I ran back between Sarlice and the Zeikas. Flames billowed towards us, but the barrier shield

seemed to have an aura around it which sucked the magic up and away. Sarlice, Kestric and Duria plunged through the barrier and vanished. I clawed a spear with a trailing net aside.

With one last snarl at the Zeikas I spun and leapt to safety, barely registering the arrow that scraped my tail.

As soon as I passed through the barrier the only things I could see were clouds—billowing whiteness with a hint of pink and jade. Shadows and streaks of light competed among the flipping, fleeting haze. My arms flailed as I fell backwards, shooting down through the endless sky, weightless. A dark hole appeared in the clouds above me, quickly transforming into a hawk-shaped blot. It descended on me, claws outstretched. I curled into a ball.

‘Trees!’ I cried involuntarily, fear curving my tone into the desperate squall of a child.

The crag hawk would tear my arms off. Its form grew larger. I unfurled my body, forcing the muscles to obey. In my mind I saw the deep gouges in my wrist, remembering the most terrifying moment of my childhood as if it was happening all over again.

‘I can overcome this,’ my own voice told me. It was mine, but it was also Tiaro’s, me and not me.

I threw back my head and thrust my arms into the sky. The hawk struck me. My fingers snapped closed over its legs and the ground rushed up to meet me.

Just seconds before impact the hawk’s wings beat like thunder in the sky, and slowed my fall. The bird’s body became my own and the freedom of flight transformed me. I flew with my fear up into the clouds, through flashes of lightning and into the mystical world of Tanza.

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Glossary

Word	Pronunciation	Meaning or description
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.
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
Great Sapphire Tree (also see 'Ancient Sapphire Tree' and '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

Word	Pronunciation	Meaning or description
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 who is from Jaria
Kaslonica		An ancient island realm that is now known as Reltland
Kin	Kin	Usually refers to any of the Rada-kin, Sleffion-kin, Tolite-kin or Anzaii-kin, but also simply means ‘family’ or ‘brethren’
Kriite	CREE-ite	A race of people who originated in Kaslonica
League		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.
Milk vine (and Milk bulbs)		A cave-dwelling plant, the roots (bulbs) of which are squeezed for their ‘milk’
Pace (one)		1.48 m or 4.85 feet
Prime Leader		A traditional term for a ruler of a Kriite tribe, such as the Rada of Jaria and Lyth
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.

Word	Pronunciation	Meaning or description
Rada	Rah-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	An animal who has the Kriite gift of sharing their thoughts and gifts with a human, ceasing to be a natural animal at the time of bonding; also the pluralised form
sapphire tree (Also see ‘Ancient Sapphire Tree’ and ‘Great Sapphire 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	Second main character of book one, a twenty-two-year-old Lythian woman
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
Talon (birth name Tacon)	Tal-uhn	The main character of book one, an nineteen-year-old Jarian man
Treelion		A cat-like animal with reddish fur, except for its white underbelly. It is most at home in the upper canopy of a forest
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. When her kids ask her what super power she would like to have she can't decide between being able to take animal form and flying. *Tiger Eyes and Dragon Teeth* is her first novel. Book 2 of The Psion Saga, *Strike of the Skyearks*, is due for release later in 2023 and Book 3, *Claws That Cut Both Ways*, will be published by PublishMyBook.online in 2024.

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