

Talon

An Excerpt from Ch.8

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‘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 pensively. ‘Mmm... let’s just say my appointment as Ambassador wasn’t among my father’s plans for my life.’

I looked at her with awe. ‘You’re Lyth’s ambassador?’

It was a worthy appointment, bestowed only upon the most trustworthy. 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 kings and work out policies 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



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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 Anzaii. 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 Jarai forest well.

There were smaller trees beneath the canopy, and ferns with little red and gold flowers that only opened in the morning at this time of year.

A green tree snake, that would have been invisible to my eye, slid across the leaves of one of the ferns to Kestric's right. The firetiger could also sense the movements of tiny frogs, snails and flatworms in the bushes or leaf litter around him, but he put them out of his mind. He was intent on assisting the other Rada-kin to find the most direct route for us to get to our people.

'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?' he replied haughtily.

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

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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,' he told me patiently.

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, *'...Anzaii... Ah, Talon.'*

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 Jarians will be branded and shackled as slaves.'*

'We're on our way,' I said.

Sarlice stood watching me, one saddle bag slung over her arm.

'You really are Anzaii, 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.'*

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Kestric was already beckoning us in the right direction. We finished loading our gear onto the two weary horses and followed after him. 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 exactly 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 Sy-tré.’

‘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. Almost immediately I was overwhelmed 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

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of the clearing. It hadn't been detectable to my natural senses, but in the waves the smell was overpowering. What number of 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, eventually 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, trying to deny the terror and disgust I felt from overwhelming me.

'Quick, before they see you and alert their master,' Tiaro cried. 'Banish them.'

'How can I—?'

'You must summon Sy-tré.'

I remembered the chant of my people, the prayer for our herald, the wolf, to come to our aid.

'Come, Sy-tré,' I called, 'kindred of Krii. Refresh the hearts of the faithful with your wolfsong. Let the marks of your paws lead the way for your pack. Light the shadows with the flash of your eyes, and drive back the darkness. Bite through the snare that assails us. Rake your claws through the belly of the mountain, and set loose wonder upon the world.'

A slight breeze rustled through the waves, blowing softly at first, then with more force. 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.

'Sy-tré stands with me,' I wave-shouted. 'By the power of Krii, be gone!'

The winds grew stronger and I could hear Sy-tré's howls upon them. With one final blast, the immense furred wolf himself

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appeared out of the rushing wind behind me, and 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. 'Sy-tré came.'

'Praise the Lightmaker,' Sarlice said.

Sarlice 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 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.'

'Aye. 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 a hundred thousand Zeika warriors in Reltland, maybe many more. We only have to deal with a few hundred here.'

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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 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. 'Surely 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, but I think I can do something....'

'Don't be afraid,' Tiaro said. 'Krii is working with us. The Zeikas may not expect it yet, but I believe you can overcome their sorcery.'

Sarlice, unable to hear Tiaro, grew angry, 'If you know it's a trap then don't splittin' go—'

'What would you have me do?' I interrupted. 'Turn my back and walk away?'

'I'll go,' she replied. 'You stay here.'

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‘Nay,’ I retorted. ‘You didn’t even want to come in the first place.’

‘I did. Jaria may not be my home town, but you are my brethren. I don’t like this 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 killed. Surely you can understand—’

‘*Kang and Folai have found them,*’ Kestric interrupted. ‘*The Jarrians are in a cave of some kind.*’

The two Rada-kin had advanced when I lifted the spirit circle, following the scent of the Jarrians 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 Jarrians 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.

‘*Sy-tré is with us,*’ Tiaro reassured me. I heard a reassuring howl in the waves, reverberating much more loudly than any Rada-kin’s voice.

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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 and blurred into leopard form, Kang and Folai close behind him. The Zeikas shouted for help and drew their weapons. Sarlice moved immediately 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

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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 Krii! We are glad to see you, Talon,' Namal said. *'We've all been praying that 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 send the demon or demons away.'*

'Why the limitations if it truly is Sy-tré working through me?'

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‘Can you imagine what would happen if he flooded you with his full power?’ Tiaro responded. ‘You would not be able to withstand it. The slow progression of learning is to protect you. The Lightmaker empowers us to do certain things for ourselves, and demands that we be actively involved in them, but he holds 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, not only the loss of his dearest, truest friend, but also his ability to morph.

‘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 think about reaching out to Sy-tré 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 standing in agreement with me to face our spiritual foe.

I recited the prayer of the wolf 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

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resounded firmly in my mind.

'Sy-tré is with us. Krii and the Lightmaker will aid him.'

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. 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 a plug or drain... 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. If Krii was there, I could not sense him.

Yet, *'He is here....'* Tiaro said.

I could see the black of my own eyelids and thousands of red dots. *Krii is real and he lives—that much I know.* Peace flowed around me and all became quiet. I opened my eyes and found myself kneeling on the ground before the Jarians, arms outstretched. A number of them were still murmuring their praises to the Lightmaker. 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 Krii,' 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 slightly dazed. *Why choose this time to get drunk?* They knew we were coming.

'This is not the stupor of drink, Talon, but of opening one's soul to Zei.'

Dazed or otherwise, it wouldn't be long before the Zeikas

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outnumbered us. A garrison this big was sure to have a number of high-ranking warriors, sorcerers who could scry and conjure. By no mortal means could we fight and win against such evils. The only sensible option for the Jarrians 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 Jarrians 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 she 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 pleasure-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, causing an explosion that boomed so loudly it echoed off the distant mountains. The helpless Rada-kin keeled over and lay smoking in the middle of the field.

‘If we can’t have you as slaves,’ the sorcerer shouted, ‘we will have your ashes!’

I ran on past a cluster of wooden buildings, noticing that the cookfire out the front of each one was cold. Apparently 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 gingerly through the camp, hiding behind barrels and tents, hearing explosions 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 darkened tack shed soon came into view—perhaps the

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stables would be nearby. I hurried over to the shed 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 tack shed 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 cauldrons and dried meat at each cookfire.

Senses straining, I moved past the tack shed and located the stable, which consisted of a large, 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. Green 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. Peeking carefully from behind the hay I spotted her in white-grey horse form in a stall in the

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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 somewhere between Rekala and Kestric filled my mind. In response, my shoulders and lips bulged, striped fur thickened across my skin—black and blacker. Night tiger! The name we gave to melanistic firetigers and icetigers.

The muscles across my face and neck responded faster than thought and a terrible noise came out. Despite not being full-grown, my teeth were as long as daggers.

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 out to Krii in desperation. Heat touched my teeth, licked across my tongue and died in my throat. The Zeika's head struck the floor as I landed.

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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 called on Krii. Most Kriites called it dispelling, but to me it was simply a surrender on my part, an admittance that I could do nothing, but Krii could. I felt the presence of Sy-tré like a distant howl on the wind as the magic in the ward ring snapped and raced away.

Rekala's presence was strong in my mind once more. She was instantly aware of a third presence in the waves with us.

'So much has changed in our time apart,' she 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

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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?

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