

# Talon



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**Excerpt From**

**Part One**

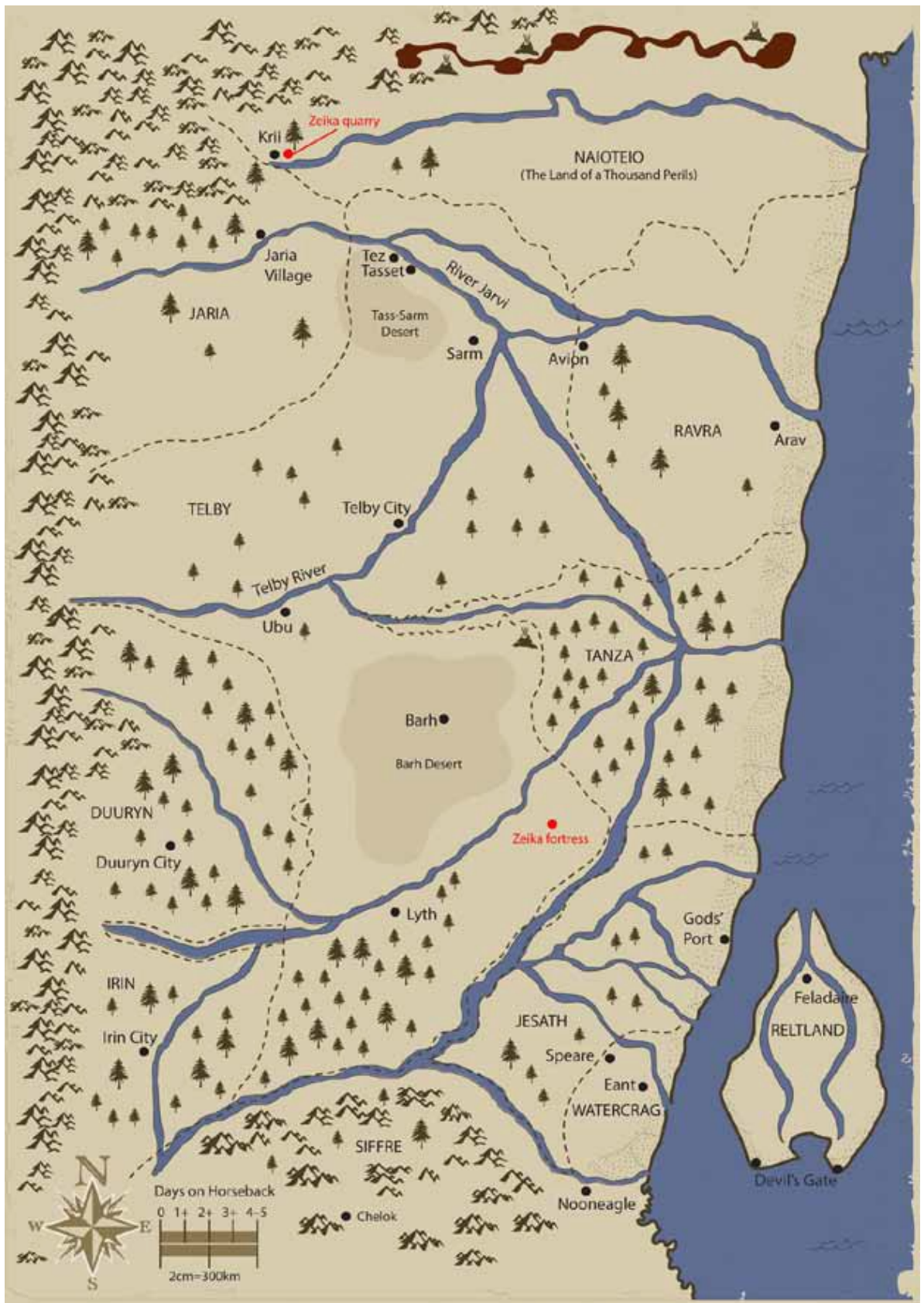
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# Map



# Chapter One—Who am I?

**L**ight. Glorious, blue prisms of light sparkled off every leaf and branch. Thick, powdery sap burbled slowly inside the crystalline structures. 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 for the mineral sapphire 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 withdrew my iron knife from its sheath.

‘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.

*Don’t be silly,* I told myself, trying 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 back 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 vine from the roof of

the cave. The plant grew deep inside the walls. It would take much work with my pick-axe to determine where the precious bulbs were concealed.

If there was an animal inside the cave and it decided to attack me, despite the mask, I would use the pick-axe to defend myself. I'd rather not cause any lasting damage, just enough to scare it off.

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

A scuffling noise came from 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 and a large tongue cleaning a muzzle.

A surge of excitement passed through me. If I trusted that glimpse of a white

paw, the creature in this cave with me was indeed an icetiger. Furthermore, somewhere inside me, I found that I knew the animal was sentient.

‘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. Besides, night was not too far away and I wanted to get this finished and start a fire.

I was on the third axe-head when the rocks around the milk bulb finally gave way. About two feet into the cave wall was the biggest cache of milk bulb I had



ever seen. It would be fortunate if I could manage to carry it all back to Jaria. I used my knife to dig away the rootlets and dirt around the bulbs, severed their cords, and hauled them out in pairs.

Having lined them up at the mouth of the cave, I collapsed in a heap and lay panting for some time. 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 dying 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. Of all the animals in the world, birds were my least favoured.

Lying on my back with my head propped on my pack, I rubbed at the scar

on my left wrist. It was the source of my nick-name and of my one true fear.

*Who?* The word came as an interruption to my thoughts, jolting me out of my reverie.

*Talon,* I replied. My heart thumped with excitement. The great cat!

*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 soul soared and I had the distinct impression of Sy-tré, the wolf herald for my people, running and leaping for joy. 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 immense and frightening than I had pictured. Its back was level with my thigh, large yellow fangs gleamed in its snarling maw and the tail thrashed like a farm cat's. Thick blue-grey stripes and myriad black and blue spots covered its luscious pelt—no wonder these creatures had been so hunted that they were now rare.

*'How dare you?'* the voice shrilled. The wild cat ran forward several steps 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.

*'Apparently you are a Rada-kin',* I replied. *'And for whatever reason be known to Krii, it appears that you are my Rada-kin.'*

The cat stared at me for a long time, seeing and hearing far more than the words I spoke through the waves. 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 sentience and fulfilment granted to them. It was a special gift for an animal as most were destined to live out their lives oblivious to the gifts of the Lightmaker.

Pulling thoughts out of my wide-open mind the icetiger responded with a menacing tone and a sharp flick of her tail.

*'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. You are now a being of three dimensions.'*

The icetiger padded slowly into the light and walked in a circle around me. She sniffed me from in front and behind, eyeing me. She growled and licked her lips.

*'What is this "life" and "death" you define yourself by?' she asked.*

*'I don't define myself by them,' I replied. '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.

*'I am not only alive physically,' I began, 'but spiritually as well.'*

*'Yes... I sense three facets to you....'* the icetiger replied. She fished through my knowledge for the words to describe what she perceived. *'Body, soul, spirit?'*

*'That's right,'* I replied enthusiastically, *'The soul or "mind" is what links the body to the spirit, more than just one's intelligence, thoughts and desires.'*

*'Your body is alive. Your parents' bodies are dead, but their spirits are alive?'* She was smart, and quicker to understand novel concepts than a child.

*'Yes. There are three domains to our existence, each layered atop the other. The domain of the body is where we are here and now. The domain of the soul is the waves, through which we now converse. The domain of the spirit is harder to define and*

*reach but it is the part of us that exists despite all else and the part that persists after our bodies die.'*

*'How do you know if you've never done it?'*

*'The Lightmaker tells us in the scrolls.'*

She hesitated, needing more time to come to terms with what scrolls were than with the deep spiritual truths we discussed.

*'I know this Lightmaker already,'* the icetiger said with conviction. *'Somehow I have always known him.'*

*'Perhaps all animals know him in their soul,'* I suggested.

*'And now I have a spirit, like yours?'* the cat asked, with the first hint of being impressed with her new circumstances. *'Body, soul, spirit.'*

I bobbed my head, blinking slowly in



a feline gesture of trust and approval. She allowed me to edge slightly closer.

*'Even though their spirits live on, it hurts that your parents left you here alone,'* she said curiously, delving deeper in my mind.

*'I try not to think about it.'*

*'You try....'* she retorted.

The icetiger was picking up things all the time, meanings behind words I rarely even thought of. My very thoughts and memories seemed to be open to her, so I wondered if I could reach into her mind likewise.

A surge of wild instinct filled me. For a moment all I could think and feel was the need to fight or flee. The icetiger's experiences were so alien to mine that I found myself sinking down to the floor. It was a carefree life she had given up. Not without pain and struggle but free from the

burden of sentient thought. Until now her soul had been that of a natural animal—simple and pragmatic. Now it fired with the spark of the spirit, and emotions she had never experienced before.

Crouched on all fours, I locked eyes with her. She stared straight back at me with shocking blue eyes the colour of sapphire tree leaves. She raided 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?’*

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