



INTERVIEW WITH Talnovar Imradien & Zane Burns

PART 2



Still catching his breath, Tal escorts Zane out of the gates and up to the Main Street, acknowledging the guards with a slight nod of his head. Instead of the brooding look from before, now there is a smile on his face, even though it doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"That was a good match. Has anyone ever won a fight against you?" He rubs his arm in memory.

Zane chuckles. "Of course. I am not unbeatable. My friend Mrak Delar would win any fight against me with his hands tied behind his back. And when it comes to a sword—he's unmatched."

Talnovar's lips quirk up.

"Did you use your fire... stuff... while fighting?"

He looks at Zane curiously, the look in his eyes akin to wonder. People step aside as they pass, and some stare at Tal somewhat remorseful—some look downright angry. Most just pass, keeping to themselves. The air vibrates with a sense of urgency, which is not strange in a city like this, but the undercurrent is fear.

"No, Tal, I would never use the Fire against my friend. I fought you as a man, not as a Fire Salamander." Zane surveys the area, registering people's behavior, and bites his lip. "Do you mind me asking where we are going?"

"The only place where I can make sense of the world these days..." Talnovar nods in the direction of the Main Gate. It takes them a couple of minutes before he halts in front of a ledge and pulls himself up. "You're a good fighter."

With those words, he hoists himself up on the wall, motioning for Zane to follow.

"Thank you..."

Zane pulls himself up onto the wall easily and sits next to Tal, staring down at the city view unfolded before his eyes.

"Amazing view," he mutters as his eyes explore the landscape beyond the city walls. "So, what's going on here? I can sense the vibe of unease all around me, and people look at you like you are on death row. What's going on here, Tal?"

Tal glances at Zane for a moment, before walking to a corner where he sits down with his back against the wall. There's enough room for two. He locks his hands between his knees as he stares out over the glittering sea in the distance.

"You know the *Tarien* is missing, right?" He swallows, looking down at his hands. "I more or less handed her over to the enemy..." Breathing in deeply, he looks anywhere but at Zane. "And on top of it, the *Tari* is courting Death, leaving just her sister as heiress..."

Zane sits next to Tal, staring straight forward. As he processes Tal's words, fire slowly ignites in the bottom of his eyes.

"You handed her over to the enemy? Something tells me this is not the case..." He shakes his head, closing his eyes for a moment to suppress the fire energy within him. "If anyone can understand you, it's me... tell me what you can, and let's see what we can do to find her."

Tal glances at Zane, a faint smile on his lips.

"As far as everyone is concerned, I handed her to the enemy, but yes, it's slightly more complicated than that..."

He breathes in, staring back over the sea. "This was her favourite place. Whenever she ran away, she'd be here, and every time, we hauled her back to the palace... but not without her making us work for it..." There's a fondness in his voice which hasn't been there before. "She was stubborn... is stubborn... probably more so than her brothers combined. I handed her over, because she told me to... because it was the only way she could save both of them, and our healer... and... me..." he adds the last word with shame.

"Dammit," whispers Zane, rubbing his face with his hands, a pained expression clouding his features. "It's like a *déjà vu* to me... You didn't hand her to her enemies. She made a sacrifice to save people she loves. She is not, dead, Tal. Until you see her dead body buried, she's alive. So, what are you going to do to honor her sacrifice? What are you willing to do to have her back in your arms?"

Tal's lips curl up faintly. "I'd go to the end of the world to find her. The *Tari* wants me to... the problem is, I cannot just leave." He sighs, jerking a hand through his hair. "Not without alerting Azra, that is..."

Zane turns to Tal, giving him an arched stare. "Who is Azra and how can she stop you if your Queen... I mean, *Tari* wants you to go and find her daughter?"

"The *Tari* is barely alive. A few more days..." He shakes his head and sighs deeply. "I have reason to believe Azra has poisoned the *Tari*, and got rid of her daughter, so she can take the throne. When that happens... may the Gods and Goddesses be with us...."

"Fire Almighty! You can't let it happen!" Zane slams his fist on the rocky surface of the wall, and responding to his emotion, fire breaks through the skin on his arms. "Who can you trust to stand by your side and fight?"

"The royal brothers, I hope," Tal replies with a shrug, staring a bit at the sudden flames. "Soren, our healer. Rurin, the *Tari's Anahràn*. My students perhaps..." He shakes his head. "Not many people know what is going on... and those who do... let's just say they do not believe she's still alive..."

"That's not enough... You need people who believe you, who believe in you. You need friends whom you can trust with your life."

Zane gets up and touches his watch, whispering something. A small wyvern materializes in the air in front of him. The wyvern lowers down to Tal's level and cocks his head, staring at him with curiosity in his igneous eyes.

"Hey, boss," says the wyvern, "what's with the white hair and bright eyes? What the hell did you get me into this time?"

Tal practically jumps up against the wall, flattening himself against it like a frightened cat. Emerald eyes watch the... whatever it is... in suspicion. "By Esahbyen? What is that!"

Zane rises to his feet, giving Tal a light tap on his shoulder. "Relax, Tal. This is Mishka, my wyvern. He is my friend, my brother in element. Don't you have dragons here?"

Circling around Tal, Mishka touches his long white hair with his wing, then lands on Zane's shoulder and whispers loudly, "He's pretty, I like him. Can I keep him?"

Tal blinks. "Excuse me, a what now?" He stares slack jawed at Mishka, as if any intelligence has just left him. Closing his mouth, he shakes his head. "If you explain to me what dragons are, I can tell you whether we have them or not...." He points at Mishka then. "Don't show him to Haerlyon..."

Zane laughs. "Dragons look like Mishka but about a hundred times bigger and with four legs. If you had them here, you'd know." He gently pets Mishka's golden wings, moving him from his shoulder to his arm. "No, Mishka, you can't keep him. Tal is my friend, not a pet to keep. But I was wondering if you could stay with Tal and provide him with some fire power when the time comes to a fight."

Mishka leaps up in the air, turning to Tal. "Mishka the mighty is at your service, my lord. Whom should I fry first? I feel a bit peckish, you know? And fried food is my favorite meal."

"Eeeh..." Tal is barely in time to keep from flinching as Mishka turns to him, unsure what to do with the situation. "Roasting Azra sounds like a good idea... but I'm afraid we'd only be cutting the head off a snake... she cannot have done this alone... and Yllinar is nowhere close..."

Zane taps on his watch, and Mishka vanishes into thin air. "It sounds like you still need to figure a few things out before you can make a solid decision," he says. "Let's do this. You call me when you're ready, and I'll be here to stand by your side and fight." He extends his hand to Tal for a handshake.

With a nod, Tal shakes his hand. "I do. Whatever happens next, I cannot do this alone. Thank you."





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