

“The First Lesson”
By
Lauren Rivers

David found himself thinking of his family, the staccato drumming of his claws on the fancy white tablecloth interrupting the conversations filling the busy dining room. He had secured a table at his wife's favorite restaurant on the busiest night of the week. A nod to the waiter brought a pair of water filled glasses and a basket of some warm appetizing bread. For the upcoming discussion with his wife he would need all the advantage he could get.

His daughter Topaz had expressed the desire to learn how to use the craft, the Talwyn word for their unique abilities granted to them through the power of specially cut crystals. Some called it 'magic', but it was a blanket term for unexplained things and most found it uncivilized to refer to it by that term.

The Siamese cat had attempted twice before to argue for Topaz's learning to use it. Both times Lynn had argued against it, citing Topaz's age as a reason. Since Topaz had recently had a birthday now seemed like a prime opportunity to bring the subject up again.

Lynn was late. She wasn't the type to make an entrance for its own sake. More likely she was occupied with business related to her position. She was the Talwyn master of healing, an important and noteworthy position. While his son Starr had expressed interest in following in his paw prints, Topaz had gravitated towards her mother's profession. Both of his children's decisions had delighted him more than his mate.

He recalled his ulterior motive to inviting her to dinner tonight. Summoning the waiter to the table, he ordered a drink for himself and his wife. Spinning around on his hooves, a moment later he delivered a glass of her favorite wine in a crystal long necked glass. He set another in front of the pondering feline in a smooth motion of his striped arm.

David intended to argue for Topaz's learning the basics of the craft now that she was twelve. Marriage at times seemed more like a complex battle than anything else. He'd launched his opening salvo by purchasing her a fine new dress that fit her body like a silk glove, and he had to admit she was not the only winner in that transaction. The fine dinner experience coupled with his best logical argument was going to be hard for her to defeat. As a final stratagem he'd arranged for his children to be cared for all evening so they could discuss the matter uninterrupted. He would never have a better chance.

Lynn sauntered into the restaurant wearing the silky dress like she was poured into it. The diamond necklace on her neck reflected the light from above. It was an anniversary gift from the year before.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Business at the Tower ran longer than I thought it would. Lynn gave her husband a gentle kiss before drawing back. She smiled, her Siamese feline features seeming to glow.

She wore a floral perfume that reminded him of her every time he inhaled the tantalizing scent. "More war talk?"

"It seems more and more likely with each passing day. We've attempted to open communication between ourselves and the Ashurians, but they don't seem interested in talking." Lynn absentmindedly fingered the stem of her glass. Her posture seemed to suggest she had been arguing with some of the other masters all day about the possibility of open war between their two nations.

Ashur was the more technologically oriented of the two. Their nation had abandoned the use of the craft in favor of their vaunted technology. It was impressive;

there was no disputing that. Each year their airships seemed to become larger and more powerful. Talwyn airships lagged behind in complexity, though their reliance on crystal technology had given them a strong advantage given the abundance of energy in their continent. Nevertheless, as a member of the military David was aware of reports that the Ashurians had increased their airship production by several times its normal capacity. The military buildup suggested that the Ashurian nation was planning something. It was all the more likely when one considered their dwindling energy supplies.

For some time no one had even heard from any representatives of Ashur. Envoys had been sent to a neutral location, but the Ashurians had sent no one. For some, the silence was reassuring. To David Everett, military captain, he found it nerve wracking.

“What do the other masters think?” he asked.

“Lucas suspects it’s inevitable, though he wishes we could be certain what they’re planning. The truth of the matter is that we simply don’t know. The Ashurians could attack tomorrow, or maybe never. All we know is that there have been a number of small border incidents that we suspect could be tests of our defenses. Still, we are the most likely targets. Sedona is still in the middle of a civil war, and I’m not aware of any moves they’ve made towards their other neighbors.” She paused and took a sip from her drink. “Lucas has already started seriously evaluating his successor.”

David raised an eyebrow. “He’s not ready to step down, is he?”

“I don’t think so. I strongly suspect that he believes he’ll be needed elsewhere.”

Lynn opened her menu and began to read it.

“Somewhere other than in the Tower with the other masters?” David attempted to suppress his confusion, with little success.

“I don’t know, it’s all based on feelings I get from him. He’s been speaking of several of his new students as if he’s narrowing down his decision on which one to appoint. Maybe I’m just reading into it too much.” Lynn brushed a claw through her hair. “With all that’s going on, this dinner is just what I needed.”

David felt a pang of guilt, knowing full well that this dinner had a purpose as much as he wanted to ease her burdens. He looked up as the striped waiter stepped up to the table. “I think we’re ready to order.” Lynn seemed to welcome the opportunity to peruse the menu while her husband ordered. “I’ll have the salmon with a lemon butter sauce.”

“I’ll have the grilled cod, thank you.” With a practiced grace Lynn returned her menu to the waiter, which departed for the kitchen. “So what did you really want to invite me here for?”

“What?” David feigned disbelief. “Can’t a husband just take his wife out to dinner without having some sort of underlying motive beneath it? I’m a little shocked that you think I’d stoop to that level.” David gave his best round eyes and touched her hand with two fingers.

She hesitated for a moment before heaving a sigh. “I’m sorry, I just suspect everything around me lately.” Checkmate. Now was the time to ask.

“I did have one thing I wanted to discuss,” David said without meeting her eyes.

“I knew it!” She gestured towards herself. “Dinner at my favorite restaurant, the new dress, the kids somewhere else tonight, and you’ve probably got some sort of reservation at some place for an amazing night away too, don’t you?”

“I thought that would be overkill.”

“You’re unbelievable,” Lynn said. She took another sip of her wine. “If you weren’t so cute I’d be tempted to make a scene. So what is it? Out with it.”

“I want to talk to you about training Topaz in the ways of the craft,” David said.

Lynn set her wine glass on the table with a sudden clack as her eyes drifted down. His wife tended to avoid the subject of training Topaz in the various skills employed by much of their population since it also meant Topaz was growing up. He loved his little girl too, but he knew she would not stay a kitten forever. “I’m not ready.”

“You don’t have to do anything. I’ll teach her.” David put his hands on her upper arms before offering her a reassuring smile.

“She’s too young, David.”

“She’s the same age I was. How old were you when you first tapped a crystal?” David glanced at his wife already knowing the answer. Despite Lynn’s hesitance, he knew that he’d already won the debate.

Lynn heaved a sigh. “Her age.”

“All right, then. Tomorrow, I’ll take her to the park and teach her about the basics.” David kissed her for a brief moment.

“I still don’t know if I’m ready for this,” Lynn said.

“Lynn, you know she’s old enough. Most kids start to learn around her age, and she won’t be learning anything dangerous for at least another year. They’ll start teaching her in school before you know it, and I want to be the one to give our daughter her first lesson. She can handle it.” David smiled at the thought it was not long ago he had expressed the wish Topaz stay his little girl forever. It wasn’t he didn’t love seeing her grow into a young woman, but there were only so many days a father got to play tea party with his daughter and carry her on his shoulders. Many of the other men in his unit had wanted and gotten boys, but he wanted a girl. Topaz was only twelve, but she was already mature beyond her years. He suspected a small part of it was her desire to be like her big brother Starr. Two years older than Topaz he had already expressed a desire to follow his father into the service. The young cat was always testing his limits in games with the other boys.

Lynn acquiesced to his logic. “A fair point. She may be ready, but I’m going to need a little more time. Still, it can’t hurt to introduce her to the basics.”

“She’s already been watching you do it for years. With her mother as a member of the Council, it’s no surprise she would be curious.” David gave his wife a kiss on the cheek and took a few long sips from his drink. The waiter returned with their meals.

“Enjoy your dinners.” He bowed gently before he turned and left them alone once again.

“I assume you’ll take it slow, David?” Lynn looked at her husband with a serious glare.

David nodded in agreement. “Of course. Topaz isn’t the first young recruit I’ve taught about our power and where it comes from. She’ll be in good hands, I promise.” The flavor of his fish spread through his mouth at the first bite. He savored the taste before he swallowed and continued talking. “I suspect she’ll be easier to teach than Starr was.”

The mention of their son brought a smile to Lynn’s face. “He was eager, wasn’t he?”

“Starr was definitely a challenge, for both of us. He’s so determined to earn our approval, even though we couldn’t be more proud of him. I’m just glad it’s also transferred into his wanting to be a good older brother for Topaz.” David didn’t add that he was also pleased he wanted to follow in his father’s paw prints. As a young father he was nervous their children would decide to both enter into the Academy or both sign up for the Guard. He was pleased when Starr seemed to emulate his father and Topaz expressed a desire to learn how to use the craft.

“Yes. I know he’s already expressed a desire to enlist in the Guard as soon as he’s old enough.” Lynn ate some more of her fish. David knew they both worried about their children. He supposed it was all part of being a parent. He touched his wife’s hand with his own.

“He’ll make a fine soldier some day.” David took another bite of his fish. The rest of the dinner passed without much conversation, as both found themselves occupied with thoughts of their children, and what the conflicts with the Ashurians were likely to mean for their futures.

* * *

Lights in each of their children’s bedrooms told him both of them were still wide awake when the Everetts returned to their modest home. David held the door for his wife before allowing it to close behind him with the quietest click. Once inside, he met his wife’s eyes. This would be her final effort to talk him out of it. He had to remain firm.

Lynn touched his arm. It was one of her most powerful moves when combined with her blue eyes. “Last chance to change your mind about having this talk with them.”

“My mind is made up, Lynn. Everything will be fine.” David gave her a kiss on the cheek before he moved towards the hallway that led to his children’s bedrooms. He started with Starr’s, his son.

Starr was still up, dressed in military style pants and a t-shirt. It appeared despite the modestly late hour the young cat had not even begun preparing for bed. A book on Talwyn history was open on the desk. The moment he noticed his father at the door he closed the book and stood up with a rigid posture. “Dad.”

“At ease, son. You’re not even in the service yet, and already you’re more disciplined than some of the men I serve with.” David laughed and slapped his son on the back with a firm paw. “I’m proud that you want to follow in my paw prints, but we need to have a talk about a few things first.”

“Yes, sir.” Starr relaxed his shoulders, though like most soldiers he kept a certain formality about his posture. “I do still intend to sign up when I turn seventeen.”

David pulled the chair away from the desk and sat down backwards on it. “Though I suspect your mother would prefer you wait a little longer, I certainly understand your decision. I want to make sure you know what it is you’re getting into.”

“I do, sir. I’ve studied the Talwyn military for a long time, and a few of my older friends already enlisted. They write me letters from time to time about their training, and a few of them are being assigned to the city guard.” Starr kept his expression neutral, but he could tell the boy was attempting to contain his excitement. His son had always looked up to him, ever since he was a boy and saw his father return home in uniform. Starr insisted it was the first thing he remembered.

David gestured for his son to sit. After the young cat obliged, David spoke. "That's good. Of course you've heard my stories for years, and you've got a good head on your shoulders. Your mother and I want to make sure that you're safe, and above all, smart. You keep your wits about you and you'll come home, more than likely. With the upcoming possibility of conflict with Ashur, you may be drawn anywhere. When you're in the service, you don't always get to choose your assignments. In some ways I wish history had been reversed, that you could've had the much quieter career, and I the war experience. I know I've fought in the last minor war, but it only lasted a year, and we hardly saw battle. You're a good kid. You're smart, you're fast, and you're the strongest kid your age I've seen, emotionally speaking."

"You're what I'm sure most recruiters would love to see walking into their office to sign up. There's no doubt in my mind that you'll get in," he said. He handed him a pin displaying his father's graduating class year and unit. "I want you to remember that when you're out there I'm always by your side."

"Thanks, dad." He accepted it, clutching the pin in his paw and getting up to hug his father.

"Now, when you go and sign up I want you to write regular letters to your mother and I. She probably won't even let you walk out the door unless I promise that to her. You understand? Regular letters." David put his paw on his son's shoulder.

"I promise, dad. I'll write as often as I get a chance, and as long as I'm training, I'll be home every day to visit. They don't ship cadets out of the city for at least three months." Starr placed the pin in his shirt pocket. The young feline was still inexperienced, but his father was certain he would make him proud. Starr still kept a photo of his father in uniform and his much younger self on his bookshelf. The tomcat had only been five then, but already Starr had idolized his dad.

"Now you're sure that this is what you want, son." David turned towards the door and placed his paws behind his back.

"I've wanted this for as long as I can remember, dad." He looked over at the Talwyn flag and then at his father's picture. "It's what I want to do."

David nodded, turning back to his boy. "You know that you can do anything you want in this world. Your mother and I will support you." He knew his son had his heart set on the service, but he also knew as a young man it was also hard to know if what seemed like the right path was the one you should be on. "I'm not trying to talk you out of enlisting. I just want to make sure that you're doing it for your own reasons, and not just to make me proud. As a young cat, I know I did some things that at the time I was certain it was the right thing to do, but at the time I just didn't have the experience to understand my choices."

Starr assumed an introspective look as he considered his father's statements. He picked up their picture and held it up. "It's not just to make you proud, dad. I want you and mom to be proud of me, but I also want to stand for something. Every day when I was growing up I saw you put on that uniform and walk out the door to protect us. You may not have been in danger, but you were doing it to keep everyone safe, and our nation as a whole. You weren't just my dad when you wore the uniform. You were a soldier. We knew that we were safe as long as the military and the police were watching over us." He paused a moment. "I remember one day when I was walking to school with Topaz, and a bully tried to take her doll away from her. I got so angry seeing her cry I broke his

nose and cracked two of his ribs. If the teachers hadn't pulled me off I would've broken a lot more. You always told me to look out for her and that's exactly what I did that day. That's what you and mom do for us every day. The feeling I got when I gave my sister back her doll and dropped her off at her classroom was the most amazing feeling I've ever had."

"You always have been a good big brother to her," David said.

"That's why I want to sign up, dad. I want to do what you do."

David beamed at his son's story, and gave him one more hug before he turned to leave. "You're wiser than I was at your age, son. I know you'll make your mother and I proud."

"Dad?"

"Yeah?"

"What were you doing at my age?" Starr asked.

David laughed. "I'll tell you some other time." He closed the door behind him and walked down the hall to his next stop. He knocked on the wood and waited for a response.

"Who is it?"

"It's your father. Can I come in for a moment?" David waited until he heard the door unlock and open. Topaz stood there in a nightgown, her hairbrush in one paw as she stepped back to let her father enter. "Hey, sweetie." He embraced her before he sat at the chair in front of her desk. Topaz sat on the bed, clutching the brush in both of her paws. She was always a smart kid, and probably already knew what her father had come to say.

Her hair had a silky sheen with a pleasant floral smell indicating she had bathed not long ago. The aroma reminded him of spring. He clasped his paws together for a long moment before he spoke.

"I've been talking with your mother, and she and I agreed that you should be trained in the use of the craft." He had not even finished his sentence before his daughter had embraced him in a hug strong enough to knock the breath from his body. "ACK!"

"You're serious? How did you convince mom to let me do it?" Topaz released her father and started to pace back and forth, her feet paws making rapid steps on the carpet.

"Calm down, sweetie. Your mother and I just decided that you were old enough that you'd be learning in school before much longer, and I wanted to be the one to teach you the basics," David said.

"When do we start?" Topaz picked up the hairbrush from where she had dropped it on the floor.

David held up his paw. "Tomorrow morning. I'm going to want you up bright and early, but seeing how eager you are already I doubt that'll be a problem. Wear your student uniform, all right?"

She nodded. Her uniform was already pressed and ready for the following Monday. Topaz was always prepared well ahead of schedule. He sometimes wondered if Topaz knew any other way to behave. At times he thought it a little odd for a teenage girl to be more focused on her studies and almost completely oblivious to her natural looks and the sort of things that most young cats her age were doing with their time. Many of her classmates were discovering tomcats for the first time. They shopped for revealing clothes and makeup to go with the oils that would scent their fur with different aromas. In some ways it was a relief to him as his daughter was not the type to fall in with an

impulsive boy who believed he was in love when he was too young to know what that word even meant in the romantic sense.

In other ways he wondered what it meant if she wasn't developing as fast as the other children in social terms. She was smart, studious, and very well behaved. He could also sense a number of qualities in her that suggested she would be a talented craft user later in life. He hoped she would not have a hard time making friends or developing connections with people while she was doing it.

"I'll be ready, dad," she said.

"I know you will. Get some sleep, will you? I don't want to come back in an hour and find out that your light is still on in here. Trust me, you'll want to be well rested for what I have planned for you tomorrow." He closed the door behind him and returned to his wife in the kitchen.

"How did it go?" she asked.

David embraced her with both arms. "Ask me that tomorrow."

* * *

Dawn had barely established itself when David had taken Topaz to the park. Both were dressed in their respective uniforms. He had been looking forward to this particular moment for a long time. He began by stepping out into a clearing, confirming that there was no one in the immediate vicinity. He turned around to Topaz. "Are you ready to begin?"

"Yes, sir."

David looked around at the park. "Do you know why I brought you here for your first lesson?" His daughter shook her head side to side. "Simple. The sun provides our world with the energy it needs to grow plant life and keep our bodies in the natural rhythm from day to day. A seed will start as the basic building blocks, and through energy and resources will become a flower or a tree. Even we have similar origins though the method of our growth is a little different. The moon creates the tides, without it's gravity we would not have the cycles the ocean displays every day of the year. What I intend to illustrate by this is power has to come from somewhere. Nature abhors a vacuum. I'm sure you've heard the phrase 'you don't get something for nothing'. Perhaps a more accurate statement would be you don't get something from nothing. There must always be a source. Now ignoring for the moment the 'avian and the egg' argument, let's just say since the cycle has begun, it continues in order to keep everything moving."

David opened up a pouch on his belt and tossed her an oval object. "Do you know what that is?"

"It's a Talwyn crystal," Topaz said.

"Yes, but what kind?"

Topaz studied it for a moment. She turned it over in her paws several times examining the shape and weight. She held it between her thumb and forefinger and nodded. "It's a barrier crystal," she said, throwing it back to him.

"That's right. What does a barrier crystal do?" He caught the crystal in midair with an effortless motion.

"It generates force fields and containment shapes within a certain size." Topaz answered with a certainty that made a father proud.

He snapped his fingers in approval. "That's correct. Now tell me why it's restricted to a certain size."

"The energy contained in a Talwyn crystal is of limited capacity. Therefore it can only generate force fields for a finite amount of time and size depending on the use for which the caster chooses." The young cat waved her tail behind her body, her face bright with the satisfaction of answering correctly.

David smiled as he stepped around her in a circle. "What happens when the energy in any given crystal is exhausted?"

"When a crystal is drained of all of its powers, it must recharge either by solar energy or by being placed in contact with another compatible power source that can restore its energy levels." She kept her attention straight ahead. David maintained a steady pace in his continuous circles around her.

"Can a Talwyn use the power when not in physical contact with the crystal?" he asked.

"No. Only a master does not require direct contact with the crystal." Topaz waited until he stopped in front of her once again.

David dropped the crystal into her paw. "I find that barrier is often one of the better crystals to start with because there is much less likely to be accidents from learning to use one than with fire or another potentially dangerous style of the craft. This is one of mine, I want you to learn a few basic skills before I go and buy you one of your own."

"My own crystal?"

"Focus, sweetie. Snap that crystal into one of your holsters." She did as instructed, snapping the crystal into one of the two empty slots on her skirt. "Can you feel it? You should be able to sense a new energy source within you."

Topaz closed her eyes for a moment. Her paws flexed and her ears rotated as she visibly searched for the energy her father had described. After a moment she nodded in confirmation. "I feel it."

"Good. Try and draw from it. Extend your paw away from us, and picture a wall." He stood behind her and held her arm as she did as instructed.

She shook her head, lowering her arm. "I don't think it's working."

"Keep trying, it's not like snapping your fingers. It takes a combination of concentration and instinct. Eventually you'll be able to do it on reflex. Try again." David guided her hand back up, holding it with his right arm. "Feel the energy source, and then picture it as something you can mold. Shape the wall. It's just a flat square of energy, nothing fancy."

"I'm picturing it, I think," Topaz said. "Maybe mom was right, I need more time before I'm ready."

David gestured ahead of them, and her jaw dropped when she noticed a near transparent wall of energy. "Nicely done."

"I can't believe it." She lowered her arm and the force field disappeared as fast as it had come. "What happened?"

"As soon as you let your focus go, the force field collapsed. The crystal and its energy depend on you for instruction. It will remain as long as there is power in the stone to generate the effect or until you release it." David put his paws on her shoulders. "The basic flat force field is the most common use, and the beginning technique taught to students of barrier."

Topaz extended her paw and tried again. The force field appeared before her eyes as she created a transparent wall a few feet in front of her. "It's working!"

"Keep it up. A force field like this you should be able to maintain for a long time before you run out of energy. Keep an eye on the amount of power you're using and how much you have left. You'll know when you're running low. The larger the field and the further the distance from you the more energy it will consume. Understand?" David received an acknowledging nod from his daughter. "The other thing to understand is that impacts against the field will drain energy. The more the impact, the larger the drain." He walked to the other side of the field and pressed his hand against it. David increased the pressure and noticed his daughter straining to maintain the field. "Feel the difference?"

"I do." Topaz kept her focus in maintaining the field.

"Brace yourself for this one." He drew his paw back and struck the field with a medium strength punch. Topaz shook as if she had been hit by a gust of wind and the force field collapsed. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, dad. It just took me by surprise is all." Topaz shook her paws to clear her head of the sensation. "It was unusual."

David smiled at her. "You did remarkably well for your first try. I should warn you though, if you go into the study of barrier, the final test involves repelling gunshots." He gave her a paternal hug. "That's pretty much all for today's lesson. Now let's go by the crystal shop and buy you your first one."

Topaz hugged him with both arms as her eyes sparkled like sapphires. The two joined paws and returned to the paths.

"You don't think it's embarrassing to be holding paws with your dad?" He stepped onto the path first as they headed up towards the upper level of the city.

"No way. If it were up to me I'd never let you and mom go." She chuckled to herself but kept his paw in hers. They walked for some distance until they reached the stairs up to the next level of the city. They were on the upper level, where David could look down on the courtyards and open areas of the city.

He led her some distance along the cross bridges until they reached one of the elevated plazas where several shops and open kiosks were selling various goods. This was what they called the southern plaza, which was one of four such locations spread throughout the upper level of the city. This one focused in Talwyn specific goods such as the crystal David sought. Entering the store, he stepped up to the counter where a blonde tigress stood. A dark haired rabbit girl and a skunk were the only two others shopping in the store at the moment. He greeted the tigress with a wide smile, detecting the slight smell of cinnamon on her fur. She appeared to be the store clerk.

"Hello, how can I help you today? My name is Amber." She extended a paw to shake, which David removed from Topaz's embrace to return the courtesy.

"Good day, Amber. My daughter Topaz and I are here to purchase her first Talwyn crystal, seeing as she's about that age and I want her to get used to having one." He put his arm around the younger Siamese cat.

The gesture softened the tigress's facial expression. She held up a finger and slid open the display case. "I think I can help you with that."

"I need a barrier crystal," Topaz said.

Amber paused for a moment. "Now that's different. Most of the kids your age that come in here want something flashy like fire or lightning. They don't ever seem to want barrier, healing, or anything like that."

Topaz nodded to the tigress. "It's what I've trained on, and I doubt my mother would approve if I were to start off with something like that."

David concurred with a nod of his head. Lynn was hesitant enough allowing Topaz to learn how to use a crystal in the first place. She certainly wouldn't approve of an offensive style this early. "I'll be paying for it."

"Certainly. Would you like a container for it?"

"That won't be necessary, Amber, I think she can just carry it." David was just about to reach into his belt to remove some money when a loud crack from behind them drew their attention. Shattered glass fell into the case as the young thief hurriedly grabbed a handful of crystals. She bolted for the door before David registered what had just happened.

"Stop her!" Amber shouted.

David rushed out of the store after the rabbit, with Topaz hot on his heels. He almost ordered her to stay behind, but he was too focused on keeping track of the rabbit, which had already dashed well ahead of him into the crowd. Damn, rabbits were fast. He pushed his way through several clusters of people as he lost sight of her for a brief moment. He cursed, but less than a moment later she ran past his line of sight as she took off down one of the bridges that connected the upper level's sections. He sprinted after her, noting that it would be too dangerous to use an offensive crystal in this much of a crowd.

The rabbit knocked another person to the ground in her haste. David jumped over the wolf and hurried after his target. He rounded a corner to see her dash towards an incomplete bridge. Signs indicating maintenance and detours were everywhere, but she did not alter her course.

Topaz kept up with her father's rapid pace as the two pursued the lapine thief. The rabbit jumped over the warning barriers towards the gap in the crossover bridge.

David ran around the barrier and stopped cold as the rabbit leapt an impossible distance over the open gap to the other side. The rabbit girl landed roughly in a pile of debris on the other side, but in less than a second she was on her feet. She searched frantically for her dropped bag full of crystals. "Damn it!"

"She hasn't lost us yet," Topaz said.

"We can't jump that far!" Her father gestured to the gap in protest.

Topaz extended a hand and formed a near transparent shimmering barrier between one end of the gap to the other. She set one foot forward and then the other, running across the barrier without looking down to see if it was still there. She jumped the last few feet to the other side and leapt to tackle the surprised rabbit girl.

David ran across the barrier, seeing the shimmer start to disappear from both edges as he found himself in the middle above nothing but the city below. He got as close to the end as he dared and leapt the last few feet. He clawed his way up and swung a leg over to roll to safety. He breathed deeply as he stared up towards the sky.

Topaz held the rabbit's arms behind her back and pressed her knee into the rabbit's shoulder blades. "You're not going anywhere."

David sat up with both of his arms resting on his knees. "Are you all right, Topaz?"

"I think so. Are you all right?" she asked.

David touched his chest in a few places. "I seem to still be in one piece. That was impressive, thinking on your feet like that. Definitely an unconventional use of a barrier crystal."

Topaz nodded. "I knew we couldn't jump that far, but given that I still had the barrier crystal from earlier we didn't have to."

"How did you know that would even work?" David asked.

"I didn't," Topaz admitted. "I just had to try. I'm glad I didn't think about it or else I might not have been able to do it." She shrugged. "I just know that the field would last as long as I kept the thought in my head, at least until I got distracted by other things." She gestured towards the struggling rabbit.

David held onto her as the security patrol approached. He handed the thief off to them and picked up the bag of stolen goods. "Let's take the long way back to the shop, if you don't mind."

Topaz embraced her father for a moment before she nodded in agreement.

* * *

The walk back to the shop was uneventful. Little conversation had passed between the two given that they were both still digesting what had happened a short while ago. David was torn between being prouder than he'd ever been about his daughter's bravery and wanting to kill her for endangering her life like that. It was his job to protect their home city, not hers. He knew that Lynn would never have approved, but he couldn't stop beaming at her. His little girl had managed to figure out a new way to use the barrier crystal after only one training session.

It wasn't the first time someone had done it, but most people didn't usually learn that trick until much later in their training. He put his arm around her shoulder as they waltzed back into the shop, where a few other security officers waited. "Sorry it took so long, but that rabbit was slippery." He deposited the bag on the counter. "She's on her way to detention now."

The shopkeeper, Amber, examined the contents of the bag and assumed a large smile. "Oh, you have no idea how much you just saved my ass. All of these are dangerous crystals in the right hands. Not to mention how much money you saved me." She placed the bag behind the counter to inspect it later. "I'll be sure to get a better lock for that case as soon as I can." She paused for a moment. "As a thank you, why don't I just let you have that crystal you were here to buy?"

"You're too kind." David nodded as she handed the crystal to Topaz, who exchanged it with the one she had been wearing from earlier. She returned her father's to him. He gestured for her to wait outside. "Thank you, Amber. You have a good day now, and if you security officers need a statement, you know where to find me. Name's David Everett, with the military."

Topaz waited until her father joined her to explode with excitement. "OH MY GAWD. I have my own crystal! I can't believe it! I can't wait until we tell mom about what happened today."

David's eyes got wide as he stopped in his tracks and held his daughter by the arms. "Topaz, whatever you do, do NOT tell your mother about what happened today. She will absolutely kill both of us if she finds out. Trust me. Your mother worries about both of us more than either of us does about ourselves. She will kick my tail up one end of the world and down the other if she finds out what happened. As far as she knows, you and I went to the park, had a quiet training session, and that's all. The rest of it, it's our little secret. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Topaz nodded.

David let out a deep breath. He was glad he would not have to explain the affair to his wife. "Between you and me, I think you've got real talent. I think one day you'll even become the protégé of one of the masters. I don't know which one, you may not stay with barrier your whole career, but I know you'll be something amazing."

Topaz grinned widely at her father for a long time until they finally arrived home, and Topaz steeled her face and rehearsed her story for her mother, reciting it once for her father before he would actually walk up the path to their home and knock on the door.

Lynn answered with a friendly expression. "So how did it go?"

"Oh, not bad. Just a few basic theory discussions and a practical test or two in an open area."

"You didn't shoot at her, did you?" Lynn asked, referring to the final test of a barrier student.

"Honey, what do you take me for? I can say with total honesty, no one shot at Topaz today. She formed a few force fields and we worked on maintaining them for a few seconds, that's all." He looked at Topaz and winked when her mother wasn't looking, and then continued. "Topaz, it's a beautiful day out today, go enjoy the rest of it with your brother."