

“Lauren’s Morning”

By Lauren Rivers

Waking up in the same bed had taken some getting used to. During the war and most of the time after Lauren had gotten used to sleeping where she could in small fits and bursts. Often times she had to make do with what bedding she could find with relatively few luxuries. Even though she had never been one to overly desire fancy things it had been a difficult adjustment. She had learned to travel light with only a few extra sets of her robes and the essential equipment she had come to carry almost everywhere. Most of it was practical, except for a necklace her mother had worn and given to her when she became a Talwyn master.

When Lucas had chosen her as his successor it had been the most wonderful day of her life. Not only had she been paw picked by the ferret to succeed him but she had proven she was capable of carrying the burden of leading the Talwyn masters. When she had told her mother the elder zebra had been overjoyed. Lauren was not her birth daughter, but to Madeline Rivers it had never mattered. Lauren was hers as much as if she had given birth to her and never once had she felt as if her mother loved her any less for having been adopted. As a symbol of her pride in her daughter she had given her the necklace she had worn since she had known her, promising her as long as she carried it she would always be with her. Lauren had always drawn strength from that.

After their return to the Tower she had moved into the traditional lodgings of the Water Master, a rather pleasant suite with a large bedroom and a private office. In addition to its own kitchen and dining facilities it possessed a comfortable living space which at the moment was rather sparsely decorated. There was a sofa and living room set which had been gifted to her by Lucas, her predecessor, and which she had been forced to leave behind the day they had to abandon the tower. It had surprised her greatly it was still here when she returned.

Even though she had set an alarm her eyes fluttered open a few minutes before it went off. She glanced towards the windows which automatically darkened during the night and stayed that way providing a gentle increase to the light when it actually sensed movement. Lauren whinnied and pressed her head back against her pillow, still not used to the comforts of a private place once more. She had almost forgotten what it felt like. The sheets were soft and silky and almost made her never want to get out of bed, but as the Water Master she had responsibilities that would not wait for her forever.

Staring at the clock she pressed the button to cancel the alarm. A few moments later the windows brightened a tiny amount and she sat up enough to get her arms up to support her. The zebra yawned and threw the covers back swinging her hooves onto the floor. The silk nightgown she wore flowed down her body like a liquid as she got up to stretch. It took her a few moments to clear the cobwebs from her mind but she was drawn forward by the thoughts of her morning routine.

She walked to the dresser and removed her nightgown, trading it in for her jogging clothes. A tight spandex pair of shorts and a modest top rendered her relatively decent, though she would not feel like herself until she donned her robes later that morning. She set her gloves out on the bed and stretched for a few more moments being certain her body was in peak physical condition for the day ahead. After a quick glance in the mirror, she gave herself an approving nod and slipped on the fingerless gloves on the way out the door.

Early in the morning there was little activity in the Tower. Other than the night staff few people were awake at this hour. The sun had just barely risen and few things

were going on other than general operations. If there were an actual emergency the master on duty would be called, and if it was severe enough Lauren would be summoned. Since the Tower remained quiet it appeared to be just an ordinary day. She nodded to those she passed on her way to the elevator and rode it down from one of the two masters' floors down to the main lobby.

Traditionally the twelve Talwyn masters or at least most of them resided in the Tower to minimize response time in case of an emergency. In practice many of them maintained residences elsewhere and some, such as Nathan Frost, had preferred to live away from the capital completely and only come in when needed. She felt a tinge of sadness upon remembering her lost friend, and closed her eyes for a moment until she could once again focus her thoughts.

The elevator arrived down at the ground floor with a beep. The doors parted to reveal the rather expansive lobby which took up almost all of the area beneath the Tower itself. The building expanded outward on the lower floors which covered a significant area consisting of an entire city block. This meant that the building was widest at the base. The lobby had a stone floor and Lauren's hooves clacked with every step as she made her way across the open space. She waved at the desk clerks who responded in kind as the zebra offered them a warm smile. Most of them had been here before the war and had eagerly returned after the Talwyn masters had ended the war and returned to their proper home.

The pleasant sound of her hooves was interrupted by a rapid set of footfalls behind her belonging to her young companion, Topaz. The young Siamese cat mewed and hurried to catch up to the taller zebra.

"Wait for me!" she cried.

"I wasn't going to leave without you," Lauren promised. "What's the rush?" she asked.

"I thought I'd missed you! I woke up realizing I hadn't set an alarm and I guess I panicked. I was sure you'd be in your room but when I knocked there was no answer." The Siamese cat bent over heaving in her efforts to catch her breath.

"You must have just missed me," Lauren replied. "I left my room hardly five minutes ago. We usually meet down here, don't we?"

Topaz flattened her ears. "I wasn't fully awake, okay?" She glared in protest and after another moment was finally able to slow her breathing and stand up straight. Topaz was still technically a student, her training having been interrupted while she was studying in the Tower's training program. Had the war not occurred she might have been a Talwyn master by now, but even though it was not considered something that was usually done, her experiences during that time had taught Lauren that original thinking was sometimes required. Given the fact that most of her social circle consisted of Lauren, Chris, Kyle, and her brother Starr, it made sense to keep her close.

Dressed in a similar outfit to Lauren though hers were red and white compared to Lauren's blue and black with yellow highlights, the two were all set for a run in the park. As they exited the Tower they emerged on the well maintained grounds that surrounded the building. The neglect that had seeped in during their long absence was gone, replaced with the same care that had always marked the reverence with which the Talwyn people had treated this building and its occupants. Twin rows of trees provided shade as the pair

headed away from the building towards the concrete walkway that led to the nearest street.

Lauren looked up at the sky noticing it was somewhat overcast. "Looks like it might rain during our run."

Topaz gave her a smirk. "Don't tell me you're afraid of a little water."

"Hardly," she said. "We'll just have to be quick."

Less than two blocks away from the Tower was a large park where the pair frequently enjoyed an early morning run. There were numerous paths one could take meaning they very rarely ran the same route twice. They would take turns deciding which one of them led the way during their journey through the park. Today was Topaz's turn.

The young feline stopped at a park bench to tighten her shoelaces, placing one foot paw on the seat as she made sure they were secure. Once she was satisfied she mewed in approval and turned back towards Lauren. "You ready to lose?"

"Are we racing today?" she asked. "Usually we just jog until it's time to go back." Lauren gave the young cat a curious expression.

As only cats can do, Topaz returned a grin that managed to look both mischievous and innocent at the same time. She gave the zebra a squeeze on the arm and leaned her head against her. "Hey, you're the one that said we'll have to be quick." Topaz gently pushed her off balance. "Three, two, one, GO!" Topaz bolted ahead with eagerness, her shoes giving her good traction as she sprinted down the trail. She dodged another early morning park visitor offering a mild apology as she sped on past.

Lauren rolled her eyes before taking off after her student. Her hooves clopped loudly against the path as she began to close the gap between them. She could see the young cat up ahead giggling in between breaths as she cast a glance back towards Lauren. The zebra sped up causing Topaz to do the same in response. The two sped through the park making their way to the large tree that was their finish line.

Taking a cue from her student, Lauren formed a small sphere of water in her hand and threw it at her student's lower back. The water splashed against her fur causing the feline to squeal. Her paws flew to the affected area as her mind caught up to what had happened.

Lauren used her hesitation to speed past her to the tree, resting her hands on her legs and breathing heavily. "I win."

"You cheated." Topaz pointed an accusing finger. "I can't believe you used your powers on me."

"So did you," Lauren pointed out. "Besides, I didn't hurt you, and you kind of brought it on yourself."

Topaz seemed ready to dispute that point when the clouds opened up and rain began pouring from the sky. Lauren hurried underneath the tree for shelter when Topaz sat down on the grass beneath it to catch her breath. "At least we got a good workout."

"We did," Lauren agreed. "Though next time let's just exercise, okay?"

"Okay," Topaz replied. "So what are you going to do next?" she asked.

Lauren considered it for a moment. The next agenda item on her list was breakfast with Isabelle following a shower, and then her morning would really begin. The day was going to be long, but it would be worthwhile. "Getting cleaned up, for one

thing,” she said while she considered the rain falling down around them. “We’re going to get pretty soaked on the way back to the Tower.”

Topaz shrugged. “I’m not made of sugar.”

Lauren held up a hand to shield her face as she looked up at the clouds. The water soaked into her fur and clothing and made her workout clothes stick to her even more than they usually did. She felt a little embarrassed at the thought of walking through the Tower lobby soaked to the bone, but there was little alternative. While strictly speaking she could divert the rain around her it seemed an imprudent use of her powers for such a trivial purpose. She looked at the cat and smirked. “Ready to head back?”

“In a minute.” She leaned her head back and opened her mouth wide. Even under the relative shelter of the tree the rain somehow managed to make it’s way through the leaves and find Topaz as well though she was far less soaked than Lauren.

The zebra moved away from the edge of the tree and leaned up against it. “How’s your brother?” she asked.

“He’s good,” Topaz replied. “He says now that hostilities between most of the major nations have settled down it’s been fairly quiet. He promised he’d try to visit in a few weeks but right now I think they’re busy with some of the recovery efforts near the border.”

Lauren nodded. “There’s a lot of work to do in that regard, no matter where you are.” The conflict between the Talwyn and the Ashurians had taken a heavy toll on both nations. Both Topaz and Starr had been instrumental in helping Lauren end it. She had since developed a rather close relationship with both of them. She knew Topaz had initially been somewhat cold and distant to her when she had still harbored a crush on her boyfriend Chris, but once they had worked through their issues they had found themselves pressed together by fate, and from then on their relationship was much more familial. While Lauren could never replace the loss the young woman had suffered when both of her parents had been killed, she attempted to provide her guidance as a mentor and good friend.

“Can we just stay here all day?” Topaz asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Lauren said. “You’ve got studies and I’ve got breakfast to get to.”

“Fine,” Topaz shot back. She got up with a grunt of protest. “Ready?”

Lauren slapped her gently on the back and nodded. “Let’s go.” The two ran out into the rain, giggling like school girls as they tried to pretend they were being chased by the rain monster. They hurried back towards the safety of the Tower attracting more than a few looks on their way there. Lauren slowed as she got to the inside of the building and walked to the station near the door to dry her hooves and face. Wet hooves and smooth floors didn’t mix well, and she was already feeling like a drowned rat. She gave Topaz a gentle hug and smiled. “I’ll catch up with you later, okay?” she asked.

Topaz grinned and waved as she walked towards the elevators. “Okay!”

Once Lauren had dried her hooves sufficiently she stepped off the rubber mats and walked towards the elevators that would lead to the masters’ floors. She was fortunate enough to get her own elevator, so she rode it in silence up to her destination. Emerging from the car she proceeded to her quarters.

The doors slid open when she entered her access code and the doors parted to allow her into the familiar living space. She would have about twenty minutes before Isabelle arrived. Lauren walked to the bathroom and stripped off her wet clothing, dropping it to the floor by her hooves in a small pile. Naked, she spared herself a glance in the mirror and brushed her hair out of her face with the back of her hand. Though they were not visible, the last few years had left marks on her that she could feel inside even if they did not reflect on her outer body. She had made hard choices and suffered a lot during the war and occupation, but she had survived it. The entire time she had never compromised her beliefs or her principles, and she never would. Even so, she did not think it was possible to emerge from such things without aftereffects. The war had left them practically everywhere and it would take years to repair all of the damage. Despite all that had happened, she was confident she was ready to face whatever came her way.

Reminding herself Isabelle would be expecting her soon she turned on the water. Adjusting the temperature until she was satisfied she placed a hand under the water to be certain it was to her liking. Once that was done she sat on the toilet and slipped on the rubber booties she wore on her hooves when bathing. They were a common safety precaution for bipedal hoofers given smooth surfaces and hooves did not always mix well. She climbed into the stall and let the warm water rush over her striped fur. She preferred her showers hot but not too hot, just enough so that she could feel the temperature through her skin. She placed her head under the water, allowing it to soak into her ebony and dark blue hair making it even more slick and smooth as it clung to her body.

Already wet from the rain it was nice to feel the warmth of the shower. It chased the chill from her bones and helped to center her thought process. She took the fur wash in her hands and rubbed up a good lather before spreading it across her body and letting it do its work. Fur often required a lot of maintenance and perhaps universally among sentient species the female gender often seemed to be expected to maintain higher more involved standards than their male counterparts. She used a brush to work the loose fur and dirt out of her skin and rinsed it clean with the water. In another ten minutes she had managed to make herself somewhat presentable, and squirted some shampoo into her hair.

For this she sat down in a seat built into the shower stall and closed her eyes. The water felt good on her head and body as it flowed over her. The shampoo rinsed the oils from her hair leaving it shiny and smooth. She turned off the water and let out a deep breath before she pressed the button to activate the fur drying function. Vents built into the shower opened up and spat out warm air as it circulated within the mostly enclosed stall. Her fur began to dry far faster than a manual process, and in a matter of minutes it was done. She stepped out and rubbed herself smooth with a brush designed for such a purpose, running a hairbrush through her hair to complete the look. Removing the rubber booties she placed them back in their regular spot in the bathroom and emerged to find Isabelle standing there.

“GAH!” Lauren said.

“I didn’t know it was casual Friday,” the arctic vixen said, pointing to her nudity.

“What are you doing in my bedroom?” she asked.

Isabelle shrugged. “You were late,” she said.

“No I’m not,” Lauren protested. “I…” She looked at the clock. Apparently her shower had taken longer than she had expected. “I’m sorry, I just need a moment to get decent.”

“Take all the time you need,” Isabelle said, smirking.

“Do you mind?” Lauren asked.

The arctic vixen shrugged. “I’ve seen it all before.”

Lauren stuck out her tongue. “I’ll remember that the next time we do breakfast at your place.”

“I don’t care if you see me naked. Bitch, I’m fabulous.” Isabelle posed in her masters robes, which were light blue compared to Lauren’s brown and yellow. The vixen rarely swore, but in this case it seemed appropriate.

Lauren sighed and dropped her towel. “Suit yourself.” She opened her closet and removed her Talwyn masters robes which were cleaned and pressed. She laid them out on the bed and slipped on the black bodysuit with the pants and skirt style she preferred. Functional and attractive, it was one of the commonly accepted styles of Talwyn dress for a female master. She glanced over her shoulder at the vixen. “If you’re through staring at my ass, you could go and get breakfast ready.”

“Not necessary. I ordered in for us.” As if on cue, the door chimed and Isabelle strode over to admit the staff member who brought their morning meal.

Lauren sighed and slipped on her ankle coverings while seated on the bed. She pulled her top over her torso and glided the fingerless gloves onto her hands. While she always knew she was a Talwyn master, it was this moment which always made her feel like it. Dressed properly she emerged from the bedroom to find Isabelle already in the dining area.

Spread out on the table was an assortment of breakfast goodies from rolls to donuts to pancakes and just about everything in between. Lauren stopped short as she took in the smorgasbord of choices and looked up at the arctic vixen. “Are we expecting company?” she asked. “You do remember it’s just the two of us, right?”

“I may have gotten a little carried away,” she said.

“Uh huh.” Lauren sat down in her usual chair where a place setting had already been laid out for her. “How did you get all this set up so quickly?”

“I have my ways.” Isabelle took her seat and squirmed when she realized Lauren was still glaring at her. “I got the kitchen staff to send up a few people to help get it laid out for me.”

Lauren looked at her with a playfully accusing stare. “Isabelle, really?”

“It’s what they’re there for! They work for us, remember? Besides, I gave them a nice tip.” The arctic vixen began to lad up her plate with various selections from the rather well stocked table. “Eat up, it’s not going to stay good forever,” she said.

Lauren examined the table considering her various options. She was about to make her first choice when her gaze stopped upon the tall stack of pancakes. “Are those blueberry pancakes?”

“With confectioners’ sugar.”

“Isabelle,” Lauren said again.

“What? It’s not like we’re not going to work it off, and besides, I spent two years sleeping in all manner of conditions eating whatever ration packs were available at the time. I think I’m entitled to a nice breakfast once in a while,” she said.

Lauren held up her hands in mock surrender. “Sorry,” she replied, half giggling.

“What’s the matter, you don’t like it?” she asked.

“I do, it’s very impressive, and thank you by the way. I guess I’m just not used to this sort of thing,” Lauren admitted.

“Being Talwyn masters comes with certain perks. It’s not all duty and sacrifice you know. We save the world at least twice a year. We deserve some silk sheets and an extravagant breakfast now and then.” Isabelle held up her coffee cup.

“Agreed.” Lauren joined her in a toast of their glasses. She added some cream and sugar to her own drink and took a sip.

“Now pick something before I have to tie you down and make you eat breakfast,” Isabelle said in mock threat.

Lauren filled her plate with two blueberry pancakes, some honeydew melon, a few strawberries, and a small supply of sausage. Two eggs filled a smaller plate she set beside her main dish. “It looks delicious.”

“It should, its high quality ingredients. One of the pluses of the war being officially over,” Isabelle said, gesturing with her fork.

The zebra tipped her coffee mug in acknowledgement of the statement and set about cutting pieces of her pancakes. Isabelle had ordered two kinds of syrup as well as a number of fruit spreads. Lauren selected the maple syrup and poured it generously onto her plate letting it spread and soak into the food being careful to use just enough to coat the pancakes but not so much it covered the entire plate. She picked up the first square and placed it in her mouth savoring the delicious flavor of the food.

It had been a long time since she had been able to indulge with such extravagance, but she could not deny how much she enjoyed it. After her third mouthful she smiled in the white vixen’s direction. “Thank you for this.”

“Absolutely,” Isabelle replied. “Needless to say we won’t be doing something like this every day, but you’ve got to admit, it’s nice to know that we can from time to time.”

Lauren nodded in agreement before eating a strawberry. “Point well taken.” She ate a forkful of her eggs and noticed the tablets set beside their respective place settings. In addition to sharing breakfast every morning the meal served as an informal strategy session for the day ahead. Both Lauren and Isabelle had a full plate and often needed the extra time to formulate their agendas. Not to mention it was one of the few times of the day the women could simply be themselves with no other expectations or facades. Here they were simply friends and nothing more. Lauren chuckled inwardly at the memory of a time when she would have never believed they would be as close as they were, but that was a long time ago.

When she and Isabelle first met they had both been gunning for the same job, to take over for Lucas. When the time came, he chose Lauren, and Isabelle held it against her for a good long while afterwards. In time the arctic vixen was chosen to assume the title of Ice Master, and then the war happened. Forced to depend on each other for their survival, the women developed a mutual respect and in time a friendship. Lauren knew she excelled in some areas like diplomacy and strategy, but Isabelle was a much better fighter than she was and had a different kind of strength that Lauren had come to depend on when she was in over her head. More than once Isabelle had saved her from herself.

“So what’s on the agenda for today?” she asked.

Isabelle reluctantly picked up her own tablet and smirked. "We're to meet with the president to discuss rebuilding our ranks. Given the people we lost during the war and thereafter we aren't exactly flush with personnel."

"We've barely gotten the training program up and running again," Lauren said.

"For now the military is loaning us personnel to shore up the gaps but we're going to need to start classes soon," she said.

"That's going to be interesting," Lauren replied. While the Academy and the Tower had survived the war and its aftermath mostly intact it was still going to take a considerable amount of time and effort to get them both up and running again. For the time being they were being evaluated and assessed by the various departments to determine how quickly the training program could be reopened but no matter how long it took it was going to be a complex affair. "We may need to locate some suitable instructors for the disciplines without active masters." Several of the Talwyn disciplines had lost their master before or during the war and there simply had not been time to arrange for a replacement during the chaos that followed. To that end, a sufficiently trained user would have to do until such time as their replacements could be selected and brought up to speed.

"Not to mention that those of us still on active duty are not likely going to have the time to do a traditional course load," Lauren said. "We're still operating at about half strength."

"We'll figure it out. We made it through the war," Isabelle pointed out.

"Barely," Lauren replied. "I sometimes wonder how you and I manage to keep ourselves in one piece."

Isabelle smirked and ate another bite of her breakfast. "You wouldn't have if I hadn't kept you from getting yourself killed more than once."

"I didn't do it that much," she said.

The arctic vixen shrugged. "I seem to recall busting you out of an Ashurian prison ship."

"That wasn't my fault," Lauren protested.

"Maybe not, but if I hadn't come after you you'd probably have ended up who knows where," Isabelle said.

"For which I am eternally grateful." Lauren looked at her coffee and sipped just enough to savor the taste. "Thank you, by the way."

"No problem," Isabelle said. "I couldn't let your striped ass sit in prison. Besides, I like the idea of you owing me a few favors."

Lauren placed her coffee cup on the table. "Are you saying you only saved me so I'd owe you a favor?"

Isabelle shook her head. "Of course not, but it is a nice perk."

"Good deeds aren't supposed to be ammunition," Lauren said.

"Hey, you can never have too many favors," she said. "So what are you going to do about the openings in the council?" she asked.

Lauren ate another spoonful of egg. "I haven't decided yet." The female zebra lowered her head. "There's a lot to consider. Traditionally we'd have reviewed candidates through committee and held a vote."

"Yeah, but good luck finding the time for that, even if we had the candidates lined up. I know you want to respect tradition as much as possible but I think you might just

have to make some decisions in this case.” Isabelle fixed herself another egg and panted for a moment over the delicious looking food.

“Is that appropriate?” she asked.

“Maybe not, but we can’t keep pretending the last three years didn’t happen. Things are different now and they’re not going to be the same for a long time. Maybe they never will. At the very least for the short term we’re going to need to be flexible.” Isabelle shrugged.

Lauren nodded in agreement. The normal selection process was going to take a long time and if they chose someone who had not been through the Tower’s training program it would require longer still. At minimum it would take a year to get a fully trained master and that was assuming the best case scenario. Choosing the right person was often a long drawn out ordeal with many hands in the decision making process, because selecting a master was not simply choosing someone for a job but placing them in an office of significant power and influence. The right choice was a benefit to everyone, whereas the wrong one could spell disaster for a long time to come. While of course no unsuitable master would be allowed to remain in their position there were some types of damage that could only be measured in the long term. In any case, there was no point in worrying about problems they didn’t have yet. First they needed to choose one. “Do you really think I should be the one to choose the new appointees?” she asked.

“All I’ll say is I’d feel better about your choices than someone else’s. I know you know what’s involved in the job, you’ve worked with the rest of us and you’ve led us through some of the darkest times in our recent history. If you don’t know what it takes, who does?” she asked.

“Thanks,” Lauren replied.

“No problem,” Isabelle said. “It’s true, by the way. No one could have done what you did for us.”

Lauren shrugged. “I was just in the right place at the right time,” she said.

“Nonsense. You knew things no one else did, and you trusted your gut even when most of the rest of us didn’t think you knew what you were talking about. I’ve learned to trust your instincts, a long time ago. You may not have been where you were on purpose but I doubt anyone else could’ve done what you did.” Isabelle offered a supportive smile.

Lauren nodded. “I’ll think about it.”

“Fair enough,” Isabelle replied.

“No matter what we do it’ll be a while before things are business as usual,” the zebra said.

Isabelle shrugged. “They may never be the way they used to be, but we shouldn’t look at it as a negative. Maybe things needed to be revised. I’m sure the reasons could have been better, but if we need to reevaluate how we do things, now would be as good a time as any.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Lauren agreed.

“Think of how much the political landscape has changed in the last few years, to say nothing about what’s happening overseas. Things are changing and we’re going to be headed into a very different world than the one we’ve known for the past few years. Maybe we’ll even get a chance to do some exploring,” Lauren said.

“Oh yeah?” she asked.

“We know there’s a lot going on outside of our borders. Some of the tales are pretty wild.” She smiled. “It might be fun to see if any of them are true.”

Lauren ate another bite of her eggs. Once she was done chewing she looked at the arctic vixen. “The thought does have a certain appeal.”

Isabelle took another bite of her breakfast and then looked up as if struck by a sudden thought. “Maybe we should develop a hand signal.”

“A hand signal?” Lauren asked.

“Yeah, something to identify us to others out in the field. Maybe even something with a little bit of flourish. It might come in handy in case any of us are replaced by an evil twin.” Isabelle pointed towards Lauren with a big grin.

“An evil twin?” she asked. “Is that something you anticipate happening?” she asked.

“Nobody anticipated what we’ve been through the last few years,” she said. “All I’m saying is if we’re instituting changes then why not add a personal touch?”

“I knew there was a reason I liked having breakfast with you,” Lauren replied. When she realized Isabelle was still staring at her expecting an answer the zebra shrugged. “Fine, if you want to work something up I’ll think about it.”

Isabelle leaned back and grinned. “I think it could be fun.” She folded her arms and looked at the spread before them. “Now what do we do with all this?”

“You ordered it, you figure it out,” Lauren chided her gently. She touched her napkin to her muzzle before setting it down on her plate.

Isabelle shrugged. “The staff can have the leftovers. Next time I’ll order a little less.”

“Probably a good idea,” Lauren agreed.

“Well, it was a special occasion and I wanted to treat it as such,” Isabelle stated.

“How do you figure?” the zebra asked.

Isabelle offered a mild shrug. “It’s the first time in a while we haven’t had a major crisis to deal with. We can start fresh and see where the next phase of our adventure takes us.”

“I can get behind that,” Lauren said. She rose to stand.

Isabelle pressed a control panel and summoned the staff to Lauren’s quarters to remove the excess food as the two masters walked out of the room. As one of the Tower culinary staff walked by her to begin the cleanup she gestured to the room behind them. “Anything that’s left is fair game. Enjoy it, okay?” After a cheerful nod from the fennec fox she continued on her way and walked down the circular hall towards the elevator.

Lauren’s hooves clicked on the floor as she made her way towards the lifts against the exterior of the building. She stepped inside and looked out over the beautiful view of the Talwyn capital city. Tall buildings, sky bridges, and countless airships flying through the air reminded her of how much she had missed this. There was a certain energy to it, a joy that was not there during the war and occupation, but now she could feel the power of the Talwyn resonating through everything she saw. Maybe it was just in her head, but she could feel an energy that filled her every time she watched the city go about its business. It wasn’t just there, it was alive. The war was over, the Talwyn masters were back in the Tower, and all was right with the world. Well, almost everything.

There was a lot to do yet, but at least now they knew what they were facing. She smiled as the elevator arrived at the top floor of the building, and the two stepped out.

Before them stood the large thick double doors that led to the command center. Designed to defend against any sort of assault they were well shielded to counteract any known weapon or ability at least long enough for aid to arrive.

Isabelle turned to Lauren and smiled. “Ready to take on the world?” The arctic vixen asked.

Lauren smiled.