

“Cutters”

By Lauren Rivers

It all starts with an idea. A single conscious thought that creates something from apparent nothingness. Where at first there is only air, with the focus of will there becomes something else.

It always began with a single drop of water suspended in the air. Appearing out of nowhere it formed from invisible droplets in the atmosphere. Collecting molecule by molecule until it formed a perfect sphere the liquid expanded from a single point, growing larger and larger until it could be seen with the naked eye. From there the ball expanded until it was an inch across, then two, and three. When it finally reached five inches in diameter Lauren stretched out her hand, taking it under her control.

Guiding it with her thoughts she held one hand above it and the other below, stretching it from a round ball into an oval, and then a flow of liquid as her hands moved apart from each other. With one hand guiding it and the other maintaining its integrity, she began to move from one stance to the next, manipulating and shaping the water as she went. Placing one hoof in front of the other she moved and twirled about the room the water followed behind, never leaving her careful gaze. She watched as it hovered impossibly through the air maintained only by her focus and discipline.

With careful precision the liquid flowed around her responding to every gesture from each of her hands. The slightest movement of her fingers caused the water to alter its behavior as the flow became longer and longer while she moved about the room.

Now almost twenty feet in length, the water wrapped around her hovering in the air suspended only by the power of the Talwyn. As she stepped to her left to enter the next form she became aware she was not alone. Condensing the water into a single sphere once again before waving it out of existence she turned to see Isabelle standing in the doorway with a smirk across her face.

“You know you don’t have to do that anymore, right?” she asked. “You’re already a master.”

“I find it helps to focus. Besides, I find it relaxing.” Lauren let out a deep breath and loosened her shoulders.

The training exercise she performed every morning was one every Talwyn crystal user was expected to master. Creating and manipulating their element took practice, dedication, and focus. Before they were allowed to spar with their abilities, each student had to demonstrate control and competence over their chosen discipline before they were ever allowed to use it against another living being even if only for training purposes. Every student was generally expected to demonstrate their mastery by the end of their second year. Lauren was the only person in her class to do so with a perfect score.

“Only you would find the most stressful experience of my education to be relaxing,” Isabelle responded.

“It was only stressful for you because you were studying the wrong element,” Lauren said, reminding her of the fact she had done much better with the ice discipline than its liquid cousin.

Isabelle folded her arms. “Yes, well I didn’t know that at the time.” Isabelle and Lauren’s rivalry for the title of Water Master had been legendary. Almost every student in the school had placed wagers on which one of them would ultimately claim the honor. Despite their insistence no such contests were taking place it did not change the fact that their continued competition was a subject of their classmates’ daily discussions. Their

sparring sessions had been known to attract an audience larger than almost any other though neither Lauren nor Isabelle had ever claimed to encourage the behavior.

Indeed, the decision had been a close one. Between Lauren's natural ability and Isabelle's drive to succeed it had been a hard fought competition, but neither had been willing to surrender their candidacy to the other. They had remained firm rivals until the very end when Lucas had chosen her for the job. However, the decision had not left Isabelle out in the cold. The Ice Master had been impressed by her talent and hand picked her to be his successor. She had excelled quickly once trained in the art of ice and since then had never looked back.

Their once famous rivalry had soon morphed into a mutual respect for each other as the pair seemed to slide into a new dynamic free from the limitations of competition. Working for the same goals they seemed to make an effective team, a fact that did not go unnoticed by those with an eye on the Tower.

"So did you just come to critique my training regimen or did you want something?" she asked.

Isabelle exhaled. "Lucas has a mission for us."

"A mission?" Lauren stepped closer to the arctic vixen. "Did he say what's wrong?"

"No, and before you ask, I don't know. I was just instructed to collect you and bring you to the conference room." Isabelle offered a shrug before gesturing towards the doorway.

"Then I guess we'd best not keep Lucas waiting," she said, falling into step behind her.

The journey to the conference room took a few minutes as the training areas were kept far away from the command center within the lower levels of the building. Neither woman spoke during the long ride up the elevator as the two of them kept their focus on the task ahead. After transferring his power and title to her, Lucas nevertheless still maintained a position of influence among the Talwyn serving in the Tower as an advisor among other things. His vast experience in the geopolitical arena had come in handy on more than one occasion during his turn as Water Master and continued to do so afterwards.

Isabelle led the way out of the elevator as they walked the curved hallway to the room just opposite of the stairway that would lead them into the heart of the Tower where their operations were based. Walking through the double doors the women were greeted by Lucas standing at the side of the room with his arms behind his back. The space was empty save for a holographic display projecting out of the center of the table.

Lauren and Isabelle took their seats on either side of it as he acknowledged their arrival with a nod. She preferred the side of the table that faced away from the windows, settling into her chair as an attendant arrived to prepare coffee for all three of them. Their orders were well known to the Tower staff. Isabelle preferred hers black with two sugars. Lauren drank hers with both cream and sugar, and Lucas simply requested milk on most mornings. Once the attendant had finished he bowed and removed the tray as silently as he had arrived.

"Good morning," Lucas said, addressing both women. "As I'm sure Isabelle already told you, I have an assignment for you."

"She did, though she was not forthcoming with the details," Lauren replied.

“That’s because I wanted to brief you both at the same time. As you’re aware we’ve been having more problems with cutters lately,” the ferret explained.

A cutter was the term for people who illegally harvested Talwyn crystals and sold them on the black market. Considered a controlled substance due to its potential use as a weapon crystals were carefully regulated by the Talwyn government. Only trained users, both civilian and military, were licensed to carry them and only certified jewelers were allowed to partition and distribute the crystals. The process for refining the crystals from their raw form was referred to as ‘cutting’, hence the term. Natural Talwyn crystals were far too large to be practically worn by the individuals trained to use them so they were cut and polished into appropriate shapes for use with standardized clothing and accessory items.

While the majority of sources for the crystals were under government control there were constant attempts by black market dealers to circumvent their authority, either for personal use or sale to unlicensed individuals for whatever reason they saw fit. As a result there were whole floors of the Tower dedicated to the monitoring and enforcement of the official regulations.

“With our relationship with Ashur being on the razor’s edge, it’s no wonder they’ve started to get bolder with their operation.” It was no surprise Isabelle already had some familiarity with the situation, as her area of responsibility rested more towards combat and military applications compared to her own.

“Yes,” Lucas agreed.

“There must be more to it, as you wouldn’t have called us down here for something we already know,” Lauren said, watching her mentor’s expression carefully.

“You’d be correct,” he replied. “Reports indicate that one particular group has presented somewhat of a problem.” He brought up a global map with several red indicators to represent sites of incidents of cutter activity. “As you know, most of the cutters prefer to operate within our territory and sell the crystals to Talwyn citizens unauthorized for their use.”

Lauren nodded, knowing that over ninety five percent of the Talwyn crystals were sourced and used within their nation. Strict controls over carrying them across the border generally prevented most people from taking them somewhere they weren’t supposed to be. Of course, no system was perfect, and there were parties outside of their country that would jump at the chance to examine one of their crystals. “I take it this one does not.”

“The last stolen crystals we recovered represented less than half of what was taken from the Alpha facility a year ago. We’ve seen no increase among the usual circles and they were not found anywhere within their known areas of influence,” Lucas said, allowing Lauren to finish the thought for him.

“You think they’re taking them out of the country,” she said. Confirming her suspicions, he nodded.

“Yes. Needless to say we must shut down his operation as quickly as possible. The potential fallout should we be unable to staunch the flow of these crystals could be disastrous,” Lucas said.

“Do we know who’s leading this operation?” Isabelle asked.

“Unfortunately yes.” He entered commands into the holographic control which shifted to display an image of a rather handsome maned wolf with dark hair along with a

file number and a name Lauren recognized. "His name is Rafa Cantrell," Lucas said. "He used to be one of us until he abandoned the Talwyn military a few years ago."

"That explains how he knows our operation so well," Isabelle said. "More than likely that's how he gained most of his intelligence. We don't share that information with anyone."

Lauren leaned closer to inspect the hologram. "I remember hearing about him from some of the upperclassmen during my first year. Very talented, not to mention charismatic. He was part of the military training program."

"Which means he'll already be familiar with most of our policies and procedures. He'll see you coming so it's important you be prepared to think outside of the box," Lucas said.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Lauren said.

"What sort of resistance should we expect to run into?" Isabelle asked. The arctic fox always asked the tactical questions, which was one of the reasons they worked so well together. Unlike her Lauren tended to think more towards unconventional solutions and sometimes tended to miss the more practical concerns. Of the two of them Isabelle was certainly more well versed in direct resolutions.

Lucas consulted his notes on a tablet in front of him. "Details are sketchy but our current information suggests at least twenty people, perhaps more. We've been unable to get close enough to determine precisely how much of a force he has at his disposal, but what I can tell you is that they're well organized and skilled at hand to hand combat."

"Are you sure the two of us are going to be enough?" Isabelle asked.

"I'm sending an officer with you to offer support and intelligence during the mission. He'll be assigned to you both until this is resolved." Lucas turned as the doors slid open. "Ah, here he is now. Ladies, I'd like to introduce you both to Captain Zach Brandis."

"Ma'am." He nodded to Lauren, before turning to Isabelle and repeating the greeting. "Reporting as ordered, sir."

"I assume you've already been briefed by your commanding officer?" Lucas asked.

"Yes, sir. He provided me with my mission parameters. I'm ready to leave at any time." The donkey remained at attention until Lucas gestured for him to relax.

Lauren rose to shake his hand as did Isabelle. She turned towards Lucas who gave her a nod. "Then I guess we'd best get underway."

"There is a small scout ship already prepped in the hangar," Captain Brandis said.

"Lead the way," Isabelle responded as the two of them left the room.

Lauren felt Lucas's paw on her shoulder as she moved to depart. "Something else?"

"Be careful. Even though I know both you and Isabelle are more than capable of handling the situation this is no ordinary cutter. Keep your head down and your eyes open. Report back when you have something."

"Will do," she replied, giving him a nod before departing. When she arrived the ship was standing by with Isabelle and Captain Brandis already seated. She climbed up the ramp, turning to cast one final glance behind her as the ramp closed and they lifted into the air.

KALADRIEL

Coastal towns all had one thing in common. The air always had a touch of salt one could smell anytime one took a deep breath. Lauren inhaled until it filled her lungs before opening her eyes and taking a look at the town before them. Kaladriel was a peaceful enough place when it was not being used as a base of operations by a group of cutters, but if they were here they were keeping a low profile at least for the moment. It was midday so there was little likelihood they would observe anything worth reporting until later, but regardless she intended to remain on guard. Word of their arrival had likely preceded them given their relatively high profile after their recent ascension to master. As such Lauren expected they would not have to look for their targets, rather that they would find them.

The journey had taken a matter of hours. The scout ship, utilizing the shortest route, had flown at its top speed all the way from Vanskar. Lauren had taken the time familiarizing herself with the record of the group's leader, Rafa Cantrell. Assigned to the fifth fleet he had served on one of their support airships, apparently with distinction. There had been little in his file that had indicated anything other than an exemplary service record. Numerous commendations filled his history suggesting he would one day be placed in command of an airship. For reasons unknown to anyone but the man himself, one day he simply disappeared.

Lauren turned away from the open ramp towards the cockpit where Isabelle and Captain Brandis prepared the ship for their stay, setting most of the systems to standby until they were needed again. Once Isabelle had completed her work she stood to join the others.

"All right, our information suggests most of the incidents occur at night but I propose we begin by conducting a cursory evaluation of the area and see if we can't learn anything about where these people are operating," Isabelle said.

"It's a good idea. It'll give us a chance to look around." Lauren folded her arms as Captain Brandis checked his Talwyn crystals for a full charge as well as confirming his weapon was loaded.

The maned wolf looked from one to the other. "I know better than to tell the two of you to let me take the lead but nevertheless we should be careful. We don't know how much of a grip they have on this town or who might be inclined to inform them of our movements."

Lauren nodded. "I'm certain most of the town observed our approach. It's reasonable to assume that if Mister Cantrell doesn't know we're here he will soon."

"All the more reason to get started right away," Isabelle said, walking past them and down the ramp.

Lauren followed behind taking a moment to enjoy the air as her hooves went from the metal deck to the soft dirt beneath them. Once Captain Brandis had joined them he turned to seal the ship with the control panel before locking it with his access code. The task completed, the trio set down the path towards the town where their target waited.

Kaladriel was a small town on the sunlit coast home to fishermen, farmers, and general vacationers. The town had its own port though it was small enough that it generally was not seen as a trade town. Small shops lined the main thoroughfare which

ran down the central road in town. Given the time of day the majority of the local population was out and about performing their daily routines with one small exception.

From the moment they had walked into town the entire population seemed to take note of their arrival. Lauren regarded most of the reactions to be friendly with a few she found difficult to categorize. For the most part they were greeted with respectful nods to which she attributed to the rarity of the town having such high profile visitors. Even though she had never thought of herself as anything other than herself, now that she was officially a Talwyn master she had to consider that she was now a revered figure to most of their people, as was Isabelle.

Both of them had chosen to wear their Talwyn robes on their first mission as it was likely their arrival would not be unnoticed in any circumstances, and Isabelle had thought it was prudent to show the flag as it were. Silently Lauren simply enjoyed wearing them, feeling pride in having earned her place as one of her people's guardians and protectors. Even though she never thought of herself as especially vain she could not deny she liked how they looked when she caught her reflection in a storefront window.

After a few more shops they entered into what was obviously the town square, dominated by a large fountain and a rather impressive City Hall, tall enough to rise into the sky with an ornate clock tower at its top. The fountain was representative logically enough of the Talwyn art of water manipulation, with several figures from the past releasing water from their outstretched hands in various ways.

Isabelle looked at it with a bit of a smirk. "A little bit over the top, don't you think?"

"I think it's just perfect," Lauren said.

"Angling for a fountain of your own someday?" Isabelle asked.

"My aspirations reach far higher than a fountain, but I do think it's rather exquisite craftsmanship," she said.

Captain Brandis discretely approached them. "We're being observed."

Lauren's demeanor immediately shifted to a more serious tone. "Where?" she asked, scanning with minimal movement of her head. If they had been spotted she did not want to give away the fact they knew.

The donkey looked down as if he was inspecting the fountain. "I can see two figures watching us from the alley east from here. I can't tell if they're armed but they've definitely seen us. They've been watching us since we walked into town."

Isabelle sat on the fountain and gently draped a claw in the water slowly freezing the surface where she touched it. "How do you want to play this?"

"I thought we'd simply go and say hi," Lauren said.

Isabelle lifted her paw from the water. "The direct approach. Isn't that usually my strategy?"

"If you'd rather wait here," Lauren said.

Isabelle smirked. "I just thought you might have some better idea than simply charging in."

"Under the circumstances we need to see how tough these guys really are. I can't think of a better way to introduce ourselves, can you?" Lauren asked.

"Okay," Isabelle said, getting to her feet paws.

"I don't suppose I can convince you to let me go first," Captain Brandis said, though Lauren knew he was already aware of the answer. "I'll cover you," he replied.

Lauren walked east towards the indicated alley, making as if she intended to enter one of the shops on the far side of the town square. With the others close behind they approached the site of their inevitable ambush, doing their best to appear unaware. She stopped in front of one of the shops to inspect some of the goods in an outside display, while Isabelle walked past her with a paw on her shoulder as she made her way into the alley. Lauren followed a moment or two later when their observers were now conspicuously absent.

Once all three of them had made it into the alley the trap was sprung. Isabelle remained motionless as their attackers took their positions. Two of them blocked the entrance to the town square while three stood in front of them preventing any avenue of escape.

Lauren scanned each of their faces with her eyes, quickly ascertaining that their target was not present. She formed a sphere of water in her hand and held it outward, ready for combat. Her ears perked up at the sound of ice forming in Isabelle's hand in the shape of a sharp blade. Captain Brandis behind them had already drawn his weapon and turned to cover their backs.

"So the rumors were true," the lead attacker said. "I heard some Talwyn masters were coming into town."

"You might want to reconsider your life choice right about now," Isabelle remarked.

The lead attacker, a lion, laughed. "I was just about to say the same thing to you." He brandished a sword towards her. "After all, I'm not the one who walked headfirst into a trap."

Isabelle smirked. "I guess this is the part where you try to take us down, is that it?" she asked. "Give it your best shot."

The lion roared and rushed forward at Isabelle's urging. She deflected his first attack before grabbing his chest with her paw and freezing his fur before pushing him to the ground. Moaning in pain, the ice cracked and broke free of his body. The lion checked to confirm he had suffered no permanent damage, but by then Isabelle had already disarmed his companion.

Lauren threw a sphere of water into the third attacker sending the otter flying backwards into a barrel. The loud thud could be heard throughout the entire alley. She formed another sphere of water, turning to see Captain Brandis had shot one of their attackers in the shoulder. With three of their number injured, the rest ran from the battle, soon followed by the others until they were once again left alone.

"Is everyone all right?" Captain Brandis asked.

"So it appears," Lauren said, dissipating the water sphere back into vapor. "Do you think they belonged to Rafa?"

Isabelle shook her head. "I tend to doubt it. Local talent, probably. Maybe some muscle hoping to impress the man in charge by bringing him two Talwyn masters."

"I wouldn't be surprised if that were the case," she said. "We should probably look around, see if they dropped anything."

The arctic vixen knelt by the overturned barrel. "Hello, what is this?" she asked, picking up something small.

Lauren approached and looked at the object in her paw. "One of them was carrying that?"

“Yeah, it’s a fire crystal.” Isabelle held it out to show Captain Brandis. “No doubt one of them probably bought it from Rafa’s men.”

“I thought they were taking them out of the country,” Lauren said.

Captain Brandis took the crystal into his hand. “Even if that’s the case people like that tend to sell a few of them locally to raise operational capital. I’d bet more than likely that’s what’s happened here.”

“Too bad none of them stuck around,” the zebra said, searching the area for any other clues their attackers might have left behind.

“Did anyone see where they went?” the donkey asked.

Isabelle shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Then we are firmly entrenched in square one,” Captain Brandis said, taking the fire crystal from Isabelle. “I doubt anyone around here who would know where they got these would be willing to talk to us. Nevertheless it may benefit us to ask around the local gathering spots unless anyone else has a better idea.”

“Either way we should be cautious. Given our reception a moment ago we should be on guard in case Rafa decides to stage one of his own.” Lauren looked from Isabelle to Captain Brandis and back again before she noticed a figure at the mouth of the alley. “Hey,” she said, stimulating her companions to turn around.

Standing in the alleyway with his hands in a lab coat was a blue jay with a look of recognition on his face. Remaining still he locked eyes with Lauren offering her a nod of respect. “Master Rivers.”

“You know this guy?” Isabelle asked.

“In a sense,” Lauren replied.

“I’d heard you were coming to town. Congratulations on your new title.” He relaxed his posture as he addressed her.

Lauren walked between her companions to come face to face with him. “Thank you, although I’m sure you didn’t stop just to tell me that,” she said.

“No I didn’t.” He let out a deep breath. “Doctor Jeremy Dunham, previously of the Tower’s staff, until I was unfortunately dismissed by your predecessor,” he said, directing the last statement at Lauren.

“Lucas did what he had to do,” Lauren said.

“I’d have to disagree with you on that point, but now is not the time for that discussion. In any case, we shouldn’t remain here. Rafa and his men have eyes everywhere,” he said, gesturing towards the rooftops. “If you’re here to stop him I can tell you where to find his headquarters but I warn you that underestimating him is the last mistake most people make.” The avian physician peered out into the town square before motioning for them to follow behind.

Lauren met Isabelle’s glance before both women fell into line behind their guide. Captain Brandis predictably took up the rear, keeping an eye on the area behind them. The zebra discreetly looked around seeing nothing that seemed out of the ordinary, but it was likely this was by design. People like Rafa preferred to fly under the radar, only announcing their services to a very select clientele.

Few seemed to take notice as they proceeded further away from the town square to the more desolate areas of town. Half empty streets with minimal foot traffic seemed to make up the bulk of this neighborhood. In contrast to the cleanliness of the center of town, here appeared to be much more disorderly to say the least. Trash and other debris

littered the street blowing about in the wind while the locals moved among them. Lauren held her questions, knowing now was not the appropriate time.

Their destination was a small clinic with a door in desperate need of repair and a sign that was half lit with the other half lacking power or a functional light bulb or both. A line of people several dozen long trailed from the doorway down to the corner. None of those waiting reacted at all to the sight of the new arrivals. Instead they looked pleadingly at the blue jay that held his hands up to placate them.

"Friends," he said. "I had to go and run an errand, but I'm back now. Please, be patient and I will see to everyone. I need a moment to confer with my companions but I promise I will get to all of you." He offered his best smile and took the hands of a few of those waiting before gesturing for them to precede him inside. "My office is down the hall on the left."

Lauren gave a respectful nod before walking past him to the indicated room. Papers were strewn about everywhere though whether it was from disorderliness or an overwhelming onslaught of new patient files she could not tell. There were few places to sit in the tiny room, both of the guest chairs were covered in files so the trio remained standing. Captain Brandis took up a position by the door while Lauren and Isabelle worked their way into the room and stood against the far wall.

It was a few minutes before the blue jay came into the room with his lab coat slightly rumpled from whatever he had just been doing. "You'll have to excuse the condition of my office. I don't exactly have the luxury of a great deal of time to keep it tidy. I'd offer you something to drink, but what I do have is for my patients and I don't think you're here for that anyway."

"No," Lauren agreed. "You seem to already know why we're here."

"It's hard not to," Doctor Dunham replied. "After all, it isn't every day that we get two Talwyn masters sent to our little town. But of course, I've been sending requests for months."

Captain Brandis folded his arms. "If you sent a request I'm certain it was reviewed."

"Yes, and that's all it was." He chirped loud enough that it caused all three to wince. "It was placed under review and any time I asked it was being considered and I was politely ignored." He let out a deep breath. "After six months I stopped asking, until I found the right way to get your attention."

"The stolen crystals," Isabelle said.

Jeremy Dunham snapped his fingers and pointed towards Isabelle. "Exactly. A bunch of locals being injured isn't important enough for the Tower but threaten the supply of crystals and suddenly two masters are at my doorstep." He waved his hand at them in a dismissive gesture, turning away towards the windows.

"I'm sorry," Lauren said. "But our resources are limited, especially with the conflict with the Ashurians heating up. We need to prioritize."

"Spare me your lecture on the allocation of resources. I'm well aware of the current geopolitical situation and the truth is I don't care. All I care about are these people," he said, pointing at the front door. "They have been suffering for months waiting for one of you to give a damn while I do everything I can to keep them alive," he said.

"What is this place?" Isabelle asked.

“This is my clinic. It’s the only place in this entire town that will treat the people here for free,” he said. “Most people can’t afford to go anywhere else not to mention how dangerous it is for some of them. We run off of donations so whatever anyone around here can give keeps this place running. It’s a good thing too because a lot of them don’t have any other options.”

Their eyes met while Lauren considered the situation and the bird in front of them. “How did it get like this?” she asked. No reports had come in suggesting there was anything unusual going on here but the town was small enough that it had apparently slipped through the cracks and allowed a dangerous element to take hold. Whatever the case, Lauren intended to get to the bottom of the matter as quickly as possible.

Doctor Dunham let out a sigh and shook his head. “About a year ago some men came into town. They set up shop somewhere by the harbor and started dealing in illicit crystals. They paid most local businesses to keep quiet about their operation but it was pretty clear if you didn’t there would be consequences. Most of us weren’t particularly thrilled with it but we couldn’t afford to risk offending them so we said nothing. A month into it one of the businesses decided to stop looking the other way. The following day his place burned to the ground with a fire crystal found in the debris. It was pretty clear what that meant.”

“How did we not know about this?” Isabelle asked.

“The owner was convinced to declare it an accident. A few days later he moved away and we haven’t heard from him since.” The blue jay balled his hands into fists. “No one that was left was willing to risk pissing them off. After that they pretty much ran this place. The authorities do what they can but they’re local and don’t have the power to do much more than the bare minimum. We’re so far off the beaten path we only get a visit from the Tower twice a year and normally that’s only for official government business.”

A woman came to the door with a concerned look on her face. “I’m sorry doctor, but we have an emergency case.”

“Send her in,” Jeremy said, gesturing for Isabelle to clear one of the chairs. She did so, placing the files anywhere she could find space. A young squirrel girl was brought in with a bad stab wound in her abdomen. Tears streamed down her face as blood stained her clothes while the nurse guided her into the chair, which Lauren noted was covered in stains indicating she was not the first wounded person to be treated here. “Hold on, I promise I’ll take care of you.” He turned around and opened the safe against the wall. The combination lock clicked open at his ministrations and from inside it he removed a crystal bracelet and a healing crystal. Closing it behind him he slipped the accessory onto his wrist and held out his hand.

With a sudden glow the wound began to repair itself. Before their very eyes her wound went from being deep enough to be life threatening to non-existent. Once the injury had fully healed the young squirrel ceased crying and looked down until the doctor touched her chin and offered a reassuring smile. “Thank you,” she said.

“I’m glad I could help,” he replied. “How did this happen?” he asked.

She looked around at his guests before he nodded. “I was on my way home when one of Rafa’s men stopped me. When I wouldn’t talk to them they threw me to the ground and I fought back. The next thing I knew I was bleeding on the street.” The

girl's tail waved hesitantly behind her betraying her fear. "Someone found me and brought me here."

Jeremy's posture eased. "Well, they did the right thing. You go straight home and don't talk to anyone, all right?" he asked. She nodded and quickly left the room.

Alone once more, Lauren indicated his wrist. "I didn't realize you were one of his customers," Lauren said.

He looked down at the healing crystal, comprehending. "Before you judge me you should know it's the only way I can keep up with the amount of injured I treat on a weekly basis. I do what I can but most of these people can't afford to be out of work so I do whatever's necessary to take care of my patients."

"Under the circumstances I think we can overlook the infraction but I do have to ask how you could do business with Mister Cantrell," Lauren said.

"It wasn't by choice, I can tell you that much. After I was dismissed from the Tower's service I came here to find my future. I had my medical training to fall back on and I opened a small practice in this office where you're standing. For a while it was fulfilling, I was able to do some good for the people here. Then Rafa and his men showed up and the injuries I was seeing became more and more severe. They were warnings. Reminders, he called them, of what happened to anyone who was thinking of telling him no, so he makes examples of anyone who dares to try. Every now and then he'll just hurt someone just to remind us of where we stand. When I couldn't handle the amount of patients I bought a healing crystal to help with the worst of it. Considering the law wasn't of much use to us anyway what would you have done?" he asked.

Isabelle nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose that explains how you know where he operates."

"I'm willing to take you there even though I know it'll cost me this," he said, holding up his wrist.

"Then why help us?" Captain Brandis asked.

"Simple, because without Rafa I wouldn't need it. If you promise me you'll take him down I'll accept whatever consequences follow. My only concern is the safety and well being of those people out there." He folded his arms. "I need your word you'll help them."

"You have it," Lauren said.

"Good," he said. "You're too conspicuous in daylight. If we go now Rafa's men will send someone to stop us before we get halfway there. Our best bet is to wait until dark." He walked towards the doorway. "In the meantime, I've got patients to see. When I'm finished I'll take you then."

Lauren nodded. "Could you use a few extra pairs of hands?" she asked.

The blue jay walked back to the safe and removed a few more healing crystals and bracelets. "Do you know how to use these?"

"It's been a while but I recall the basics," Lauren said.

"Then let's get started." Doctor Dunham led the way out of the office with the others in tow. Lauren approached the first patient and with a warm smile held her hand over his injury and concentrated, the energy from the crystal healing his wounds and restoring him to normal. When she was finished he took her hands gratefully and smiled. She stood and considered the line while her companions got to work.

Treating the waiting patients had taken most of the afternoon. It was already dark by the time the last of them had been seen and the clinic calmed to the point that Doctor Dunham was able to leave. True to his word, he led them to the docks where Rafa and his men conducted their operations.

The area appeared deserted, with no one walking the streets other than their group. Isabelle led the way with Captain Brandis watching their rear. Both of them remained alert for any potential threats, their eyes constantly scanning the area for any sign of danger. Even though none were apparent it was still disquieting to say the least. Captain Brandis kept his hand on his weapon while Lauren and Isabelle kept their hands ready in case of a sudden attack.

"I don't like this," Isabelle said. "It's too damn quiet."

"I agree," Captain Brandis added. "Even this late at night there should be some activity."

Doctor Dunham filled in the gap. "Before Rafa there were people here at all hours. Nowadays people know better than to be out here at night unless they're here to do business."

Lauren moved to walk beside him. "Would I be correct in assuming he already knows we're coming?"

"More than likely. He keeps an eye on my clinic and there's very little that goes on in this town he doesn't know about. One of his men probably spotted us the moment we left the building." The blue jay looked around as if he was searching for something but it was clear from his demeanor he did not expect to see anyone. "If I know Rafa he's probably preparing a welcoming committee for us as we speak."

Captain Brandis approached the pair. "Perhaps we should fall back until we have a better idea of what's we're walking into."

The blue jay shook his head. "The time for that was before you came into town. If you try to call for help or attempt to leave I guarantee you Rafa will block it. He's very clever and very good at what he does."

"Noted," Lauren said. "Regardless we can't turn back now. One way or another we need to see what he's got and we don't have time to go back. Besides, if this is a trap then we're already caught in it. All we'd be doing is delaying the inevitable."

The donkey shook his head. "Maybe so but at least we'd get to control the terms of our engagement."

Lauren knew that Rafa at this point in the game had the home field advantage. They were playing his game by his rules. Even so, there was nowhere in this town they could go that he wouldn't already have under his observation. The only move they had to make was to keep going and see what they encountered. "Considering we're already almost there I think that opportunity has passed."

Isabelle nodded. "I agree with Lauren. I don't like it but I like waiting around even less."

"Then let's not keep our host waiting." The blue haired zebra resumed her walk forward, followed by the rest of the group.

Captain Brandis held up a weapon towards the blue jay. "Are you certain I can't interest you in one of these, doctor?"

"No thank you," he replied. "Though I appreciate the thought I prefer to patch up the holes those things make."

“The people we’re after may not extend you the same courtesy,” he said.

“Even so,” the blue jay replied.

Lauren held up her hand. “Quiet,” she said. “We’ve arrived.”

The building where Rafa conducted his operations was silent, betraying no signs of activity inside. Other than the exterior lights there was no sign of anyone present until the massive doors suddenly slid open revealing a dark abyss beyond. The group hesitated at the threshold as they each looked to the others before Captain Brandis at last broke the silence.

“This is not a good idea,” he said.

“I don’t think we have a choice. By opening those doors they’ve told us they’re expecting us. Turning around now would accomplish nothing and might in fact weaken our position in this situation.” She cast a glance into the darkness. “They’ve extended an invitation. It would be rude not to accept.” Lauren formed a sphere of water in each hand. “Let’s not keep our host waiting.”

Isabelle formed an ice sword in her right paw while Captain Brandis kept his hand on his weapon. Doctor Dunham stayed close to the others as the four walked into the dark open space.

Lauren moved slowly, waiting for her eyes to adjust. The click of her hooves against the floor was the only sound as they walked to where she estimated was the center of the room. Once they had arrived the lights suddenly turned on flooding the space with illumination. Reflexively she shut her eyes moving her hand to block the sudden brightness.

Before she could react Rafa’s men appeared from all corners of the warehouse, surrounding them and cutting off their escape. The four came together in a defensive circle with their eyes scanning back and forth in preparation of an attack. When none came, Lauren became aware of a figure watching them from the upper level of the warehouse.

Flanked on either side by his men, she recognized the maned wolf from his file. “Rafa Cantrell.”