

“Crystal Gambit”

By Lauren Rivers

"I'm not surprised you know me," he said. "I of course, know you. Lauren Rivers, and Isabelle Sheridan."

"If you know who we are, then you know why we're here," Lauren replied.

"Of course I do. Two Talwyn masters don't just breeze into town without me knowing about it," he said. "Unfortunately you're going to have to go back the way you came."

"I can't do that," she said.

"You don't have a choice. No doubt you've noticed that you are currently at a tactical disadvantage," he responded.

Isabelle kept her weapon up as she turned to regard him. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

Rafa chuckled to himself. "While I admire your bravado I wonder if your companions are as willing to support your determination as you are." He walked a few steps trailing his fingers along the rail, keeping his eyes on them. "I have no quarrel with the Council but I will not allow you to interfere in my operation."

"That's going to be a problem because we have an order to bring you in for trial. Theft of Talwyn crystals and unauthorized distribution is a crime, not to mention potentially reckless." Lauren held the water spheres above her hands, enlarging them by several inches until they were as large as beach balls. "By the order of the Talwyn Council I am placing you under arrest."

The maned wolf exhaled, his eyes narrowing. "That is your final answer?" he asked.

"It is," Lauren replied.

"Very well, then," he said. Snapping his fingers, the wall of bodies around them surged into motion. Lauren threw the pressurized spheres of water towards their attackers sending several of them falling onto their backs. Forming long thick cords of liquid in the air she guided them like whips pushing the men back in an effort to provide them more space.

Captain Brandis fired several shots into the advancing crowd. Despite every shot hitting its target they continued to surge forward, pulling Doctor Dunham away from the group. The donkey kicked one of his attackers while the two struggled for control of his weapon.

Isabelle extended her paw, freezing an area of the floor with a clear sheet of ice. Every single person on it found themselves struggling to stay upright while the arctic vixen fought off some more of their attackers. She kicked the closest one in the chest before slicing another across the chest with her ice blade. The man went down holding his injury but there was no rest as another moved towards her at the same moment.

Lauren spotted the blue jay wrestling with two of their attackers who were trying to haul him away. Moving quickly she used her water abilities to launch herself into the air and landed hard on both of them sending all four the ground in a tumble of bodies. Once she collected herself she pulled the doctor to his feet. "Are you all right?"

"I suppose, though I doubt I'll remain that way much longer if we stay," he replied.

Isabelle and Captain Brandis were holding their own for the time being but it was clear they were losing the fight. Standing back to back the pair had managed to fend off the worst of it but it was clear both had been injured. Blood stained Captain Brandis's

sleeve and darkened the back of his uniform. Isabelle's white fur showed a couple of signs of pink where her wounds had marred her snowy white appearance.

"Fall back!" Lauren shouted, using her powers to force an opening between her and Isabelle. Wasting no time, the pair took advantage of it, hurrying towards her and the exit. Lauren performed a spinning kick paired with thick cords of water guided by her movements which sent their attackers diving for cover. The reprieve was only temporary, as no sooner did she complete the act than their opponents rose to their feet.

Wasting no time the group hurried to create some distance between them and their pursuers. Guided by Doctor Dunham they made their way to a small alley where they ducked behind some cover. The blue jay held his hand up for silence as the individuals chasing them hurried past. Once it was clear they were gone, Doctor Dunham exhaled.

"Everyone all right?" he asked.

"Relatively speaking," Captain Brandis replied.

Doctor Dunham scanned the street beyond for signs of pursuit. "It looks clear. Follow me." He did not wait for a reply as he darted out into the shadows making his way across the street into what seemed like a residential area. Most of the buildings appeared to be either single dwelling homes or apartment buildings of less than a dozen units each. He guided the group to one in particular walking into the lobby before climbing the steps to the second floor where he walked to a door with the number '209'. The last digit had partly fallen off to where it resembled a six, further illustrating the general state of disrepair that seemed to characterize the entire area.

Removing a key from his pocket he opened the door and guided them inside. "Come on inside. It's my place." He gestured towards a couch and a few other chairs set about the main living space. "Make yourselves at home. It'll be a while before our friends figure out where we went. In the meantime I'll go get some medical supplies to treat your injuries."

"Thank you," Lauren said, walking to the window and casting a glance down towards the street below. Few people were out at this time of night but the view of the street would allow them a bit of warning should they be found by Rafa's men. Lauren turned away from the blinds upon hearing Jeremy's return to the room.

The blue jay carried in his arms bandages and other medical supplies which he set on the nearby table. "You'll have to forgive the mess. I wasn't planning on having guests, but we should be safe for the time being, at least." He arranged the various items on the table while he gestured for Captain Brandis to take a seat closer to the light source. "Take off your jacket, please," he said.

The donkey removed his uniform tunic and set the dark blue jacket on the closest chair. "It's not as bad as it looks."

"All the same, let's get the two of you squared away, shall we?" the blue jay asked while he began to clean the wounds on the jack's back. Brandis winced as the doctor worked, trying to look over his shoulder.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"I've seen worse," the blue jay replied. "Nothing I can't patch up the old fashioned way. You might be a little sore for a bit but it looks like they didn't go too deep." He applied bandages and medical tape to hold the dressings in place and surveyed his handiwork. "Although it's probably too much to ask, try to stay in one piece."

"I can't make any promises, doc," he replied, getting up.

Doctor Dunham smirked. "You folks never do." He examined Isabelle's arm with a look of deep concentration. "You got off lucky," he said. "This is hardly a scratch." He cleaned the wound with some alcohol pads and applied some gauze before taping it in place.

Isabelle looked up at Lauren. "So what's our next move?"

"I haven't thought that far ahead yet," she said. "Rafa Cantrell was far more organized than we expected. I think it's safe to assume we were on his radar the moment we stepped into town. Under normal circumstances I might suggest calling for reinforcements but I doubt we'd even get a signal out if he's as smart as I think he is."

Doctor Dunham nodded his agreement. "He is, and more. Even if you could call for help he'd be long gone by the time they arrived."

"I assume retreat is not an option," Captain Brandis said.

"You assume correctly. Even if we can flee I refuse to leave these people or anyone else at his mercy. We let them out of our sight who knows how long it will be before we track them down again," Lauren said.

Isabelle folded her arms. "As much as I hate to admit it we're not exactly in a position to take them all into custody. We only made it out of there in one piece because we were lucky."

"So we can't run, we can't fight, at least not directly, and we can't call for help," Captain Brandis said. "What does that leave?"

Lauren considered the problem, recalling the moments when they were face to face with Rafa in her memory. She thought back to where each person was standing, and then snapped her fingers. "Doc, you said that was where they met anyone who wanted to buy a crystal, yes?"

"That's right," he said.

Lauren nodded. "Did you notice anything missing when we arrived?" She looked at each member of the group in turn.

"They didn't have them there," Isabelle said.

"Exactly, I didn't see any Talwyn crystals anywhere, which means either they were keeping them out of sight or that's not their true base of operations." Lauren leaned against the wall and crossed her hooves, folding her arms gently. She turned to the blue jay. "Do you know of any other place they could be keeping the crystals?"

"Unfortunately no," he replied. "The warehouse by the docks was the only place we ever had dealings and Rafa's men weren't the kind to share information. His people are crawling all over this town and most of us know better than to ask questions."

The blue haired zebra stepped away from the wall and nodded. "Then it would seem to leave us only one option. We need to go back to the warehouse."

Doctor Dunham puffed up his neck feathers in alarm. "Is that a good idea? We barely got out of there in one piece."

"It's our only lead. If you have a better idea I'm open to suggestions but under the circumstances I fail to see any alternatives," she said. "If you're concerned for your safety you don't have to come with us. Isabelle, Captain Brandis, and I can handle it."

The blue jay shook his head. "No, this is my town and you may just need me. I'm with you."

"All right," she said. "We'll wait a while longer and then head back there to see what we can find. Stay sharp."

Unlike the first time they had come to the warehouse there was no reaction to their presence when they returned there a few hours later. The doors remained closed and no sign of any activity arose to greet them. Even the exterior lights were turned off leaving the area dark other than the tiniest amount of ambient light from the stars above. Captain Brandis held a flashlight as they searched the building for a way inside, finding a lock on the door to the building's office.

"Anyone else feeling déjà vu?" the blue jay asked.

"I'm feeling something, but it's not déjà vu," the soldier replied.

Lauren shook her head. "We need to get in there. Isabelle, can you freeze the lock?"

"Yeah, just give me a moment." The arctic vixen walked up to the door and took the lock in her paw. Closing her fingers around it the lock began to freeze until the metal was so cold it shattered in her grip. She opened her grasp to the ground allowing the pieces to fall at her boots. "Shall we?" she pulled open the door, allowing Captain Brandis to enter first.

Lauren followed, making sure to stay a few steps ahead of the doctor in the event of any danger. "Come on," she urged.

The door into the interior of the building was not secured in any way. The donkey shined his flashlight around the wide open space but other than some nondescript shelves and a few assorted items there appeared to be nothing distinctive.

"Anything?" she asked.

"Not as far as I can tell," Captain Brandis reported. "If there was anything here it's long gone now."

Isabelle nodded in agreement. "I think it's safe to say this is not the center of their operations. For all we know they could have a bunch of facilities like this to meet with potential customers."

"In which case it's going to be remarkably difficult to track them down," Lauren said.

The arctic vixen rubbed the back of her neck with her paw. "It's smart. It protects them from being found by people like us and all they have to do is provide a location to their customer when they're ready to make a deal. This may not even be their building."

"It probably isn't," Lauren said. "I doubt Rafa Cantrell is foolish enough to leave his name on the paperwork."

"So what do you want us to do?" Captain Brandis asked.

"Conduct a sweep, make sure we didn't miss anything, then we'll go back to the ship for the time being," Lauren said.

Doctor Dunham held up a talon. "If you're looking for a place to stay I can offer my clinic for the time being. I haven't many overnight patients right now and I imagine it's a slight bit more comfortable than your ship. Besides, it will give me an excuse to prepare a proper meal. I don't often get to entertain guests, least of all people like yourselves. I'd welcome the company and it would be a way for me to thank you for all you're doing to help."

Lauren looked at the rest of her team and pursed her lips. The ship was a short range craft with no proper living quarters. The mission profile had not really called for a larger craft with any sort of overnight accommodations. That being the case their only

option if they chose to stay on the ship would be to lay sleeping bags across the deck. Both Isabelle and Captain Brandis looked as tired as she did, and none of them had eaten a proper meal in several hours. "I think the others would kill me if I turned down your incredibly generous offer. I'd say you've got yourselves some houseguests, doc."

A thorough search of the warehouse revealed no further clues. Lacking any other alternatives the group retired to the relative safety of Doctor Dunham's clinic. After a hastily assembled meal the blue jay found suitable accommodations for them and bid them goodnight.

Despite her best efforts to do so, the Talwyn Water Master found herself stubbornly unable to sleep. After an hour of staring at the ceiling she sat up in the darkness cloaked in its shadows. Swinging her hooves over the edge of the bed she rose to stand and walked towards the doorway. Still dressed in her Talwyn uniform she attempted to smooth out the wrinkles with her hands though the next time she would have to remember to bring a change of clothes or two on future missions.

When she arrived at the front of the clinic she looked up to see a squirrel standing before her in the waiting area. Dressed in a long sleeved shirt he seemed to be holding himself and avoiding eye contact. Inches away from the bell to alert the staff he was here, he pulled his hand back upon seeing Lauren.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I'm looking for Doctor Dunham," he replied.

"I'm sorry, but he's asleep right now. Are you hurt?" she asked, attempting to get a look at his injury. He pulled his arm away from her with a sudden twist, and it was then she saw the Talwyn crystal on his arm. Understanding his purpose for being here she blasted his chest with water, sending him though the window. Jumping out after him she no sooner set hoof outside than he darted off in the opposite direction. Giving chase, she hurried after the squirrel doing her best to ensure he did not slip away.

It was a dangerous going after him alone, but she could not wait for the others nor could she allow their only lead to escape. Running as quickly as her hooves would carry her, she turned a tight corner to continue pursuit. Just when she thought she had almost lost sight of him he dashed down an alley.

Lauren paused at the entrance knowing that it was likely another trap, but seeing no alternative she stepped forward. Once she had entered the private courtyard behind a building she did not recognize, a couple of Rafa's men blocked her escape. The blue haired zebra lowered her hands upon seeing his face in front of her. "Nice try back there."

"I had hoped to get Doctor Dunham, but you'll do," he said, motioning for his men to move forward and restrain her.

She knew that fighting this many of them would be impossible in her current state. She had not slept and with no one to back her up she gave little credence to the possibility she could escape without one of them getting in a lucky shot. Without resistance she allowed the men to tie her wrists as they brought her closer to Rafa. She kept her eyes on the maned wolf, watching him for any reaction as he stared at her.

"Precautions, you understand," he said. "I can't have you freeing yourself with a blast of water, not before we've had a chance to chat. Now I'll leave your legs unbound provided you cooperate, but if you put up a fight I will do what I have to, including rendering you unconscious. Understood?" he asked in a tone that brooked no argument.

Lauren nodded her assent as she was blindfolded and led out of the alley, away from the site of her abduction. It was clear they intended to take her somewhere else in Kaladriel but for the time being she had no options other than to cooperate.

The room where they placed her was barren of any furniture or anything other than a bed bolted to the wall. It was clear the room had not originally been designed to serve its current purpose but had been modified to serve as a detention cell. The door was constructed of a thick metal with a large wheel inside to operate the mechanism. Even in the event she could get free it was not likely she would be able to break through the door before someone came to investigate.

With no other options but to bide her time, she remained standing while Rafa spoke to his men before entering the room. He waited until the door latched into place before speaking. "I apologize for the conditions of the room, but I assure you it is only temporary. I don't intend to keep you for long."

Lauren looked past him at the door. "You might want to call some of your men back in here."

"If you're thinking of doing anything violent I would reconsider. While I'm certain you could disable me in short order should you choose to do so it would mean the end of our conversation and I would hate for our discussion to be interrupted." He gestured for her to sit but she remained standing. "Suit yourself, but it will have no impact on the length of my statements."

"I'll remain standing," she replied.

Rafa offered a conciliatory gesture. "Very well." He began to pace the room slowly as he spoke. "I intend no harm to you or your companions. Provided that you do as I ask, no further violence will befall your party unless you force the issue."

Watching him carefully she knew Rafa believed himself to be a reasonable man. Whatever his intentions it would serve no purpose to reject his proposal out of hand. If she allowed him to continue she might learn some valuable information about what he had planned, so for now, she would listen to what he had to say. "All right, I'll hear you out," she said.

"You and your companions will return to your ship and leave immediately. Provided you do so my men will make no effort to stop you but you will not interfere with our operation now or in the future," the maned wolf said.

"You know I can't agree to that," she replied, staring into his eyes. "I'm here on orders from the Council to retrieve the crystals you stole and bring you in for trial and that is what I intend to do."

Rafa scoffed at her. "You Talwyn masters are always so stubborn. Do you even know why they sent you after me?"

"Trafficking in stolen Talwyn crystals is illegal," she replied.

The maned wolf stepped closer. "Such an unimaginative answer."

"I wasn't aware I was being evaluated," she responded.

"But that's what you do, isn't it?" he asked. "Evaluate people and determine if they're worthy to hold your precious crystals?"

Lauren tilted her head, watching him closely. "We ensure proper training in their use and make sure they stay in the right hands."

"Is that so?" he asked.

"It is," she replied.

“Do you know how many more lives we could save if the Council didn’t hoard the crystals?” he asked.

Lauren shook her head. “The Council does not hoard the crystals.”

“They don’t allow free access to them either,” he said.

“No, we don’t,” she said. “Experience has shown that left uncontrolled the crystals can be dangerous. Even ones with an apparent benevolent purpose can be bent and twisted with in the wrong hands. By making sure that everyone who carries them has been properly licensed and trained, we can minimize the risk of anything going wrong.”

“And while you do that people are left to suffer,” he said. “I’m going to tell you a story.” He turned away from her and spoke over his shoulder. “Before I ended up here I used to wear the uniform. I served in the military with distinction.”

“I’ve seen your service record,” she said.

“Then you know I used to be just like you. I followed orders, did as I was told, because I believed it would make a difference.” He turned to face her and walked around her in a circle. “What a fool I was.”

Lauren remained where she stood turning her ears as he moved around her. “What happened?”

He stopped before her and then closed his eyes for a moment. “I was serving my latest tour of duty when I received a letter from my sister. She was ill and needed treatment, but she was unable to travel and could not get to any of the larger cities. No one in the area had a healing crystal and conventional medicine had done little to help her. I had one with me, I was trained to use them, but I was unable to get away at the time.” He clenched his paws into fists. “I tried to get someone to see her but with everything going on there simply weren’t any medical units available. By the time I was able to secure leave and go to see her I was told she had just died the day before. The autopsy confirmed it was treatable. I simply didn’t get to her fast enough.”

“I’m sorry,” Lauren said.

“I don’t need your pity,” he said, striking her across the face. “It’s because of people like you that my nephew will grow up without a mother. All because of your precious illusion that without your benevolent guiding hand we will descend into chaos.” He grabbed her neck and stared down the length of her muzzle. “If you ask me I think we’d do just fine without you.”

“You have my sympathies for your loss, but you cannot allow those crystals to be sold to people who aren’t trained to use them.” Lauren shook her head free from his grip. “The regulations are in place to protect everyone.”

Rafa smirked. “They did nothing to save my sister,” he said. “I find it ironic that the only reason she isn’t here anymore is because of one of these.” The maned wolf removed a healing crystal from his pocket and held it in his open palm. “I intend to make sure that what happened to her never happens to anyone again.”

“You can’t do that.” Their eyes met as Lauren stood before him. “Isabelle will stop you.”

“I expect she’ll try,” he said. “And just like you, she will fail. There are more of us than you think, and we will not let you stop us.”

She relaxed her shoulders, never taking her eyes off of him. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

Rafa walked to the doorway and knocked on it. “Oh, I’m certain she’ll do everything she can to get in our way but in the end she’ll have the same choice I offered you. Either she accepts my proposal and goes back where she came from, or I’ll make it too costly to continue pursuit.” Without another word, he turned and left Lauren alone.