

“Endgame”

By Lauren Rivers

Broken glass littered the ground outside Doctor Dunham's clinic. It was clear whatever had happened here was fast and violent. As Isabelle knelt to examine the damage her ears perked up at the arrival of Captain Brandis and Doctor Dunham from the sleeping quarters.

"What the hell happened?" Doctor Dunham asked.

"Rafa, I would assume," Isabelle replied, rising to her feet.

Captain Brandis drew his weapon and stepped outside, conducting a cursory examination of the area. "I don't see anyone. Whoever did this is long gone."

"So is Lauren," Isabelle said. "She was gone when I came out. Either she went after them or they took her. I have to assume it's the latter or we would have heard from her by now."

"Why didn't she wait for us?" Captain Brandis asked.

Isabelle shook her head. "She probably thought whoever attacked her was our only lead."

The blue jay walked around the lobby area. "I don't see a lot of blood. Odds are if they have her she's in one piece."

"Until we know otherwise we're running under that assumption." Isabelle placed her paws on her hips. "All right, this mission has just gone from a capture to a search and rescue. Lauren's smart, she'll let us know where she is if she can but we can't wait for that. Other than the warehouse we visited earlier do you know where Rafa's men hang out?"

Doctor Dunham nodded. "There's a club they like to frequent. Most people around here give it a wide berth since Rafa came to town. He doesn't conduct business there but a lot of his men tend to go there on their off hours."

"Can you take us there?" she asked.

"I can, but you're going to need more than the three of us. You remember what happened last time, and we had two Talwyn masters then," the blue jay pointed out.

Isabelle nodded. "That's true, but at the time we didn't know what we were walking into. Now we do. Besides, we needed to test their capabilities. I can handle Rafa's men, but it's not going to matter if we don't know where they are."

The blue jay considered her for a moment before he finally nodded. "All right. I'll show you where the club is but don't underestimate Rafa. Stronger people than you have made that mistake and regretted it."

"His mistake was underestimating me," she said. "Where's this club?"

From the outside the club appeared to be a fairly sizeable two story structure with a large set of doors as the main entrance. No one stood guard outside but it was clear the club was in use. Isabelle approached the doors when she felt Captain Brandis touch her shoulder.

"So how do you want to play this?" the donkey asked, gesturing towards the doors ahead.

Isabelle looked at each of her companions. "I'll take the lead. You two just watch my back in case things get hairy in there."

"Odds are whoever's inside is expecting us," Doctor Dunham said. "I wouldn't count on the element of surprise."

"I don't need it," the arctic vixen replied. "This time I want them to know I'm coming."

Pulling open the doors with both paws she stepped into the center of the club where a few of Rafa's men were waiting. Standing in a group they did not react as she strode directly towards the leader stopping mere feet from where he waited. The fox kept his composure, not moving other than to acknowledge her arrival with a nod. He was armed with a sword as were the others present. "We've been expecting you."

"Then you know why I'm here," she said.

"Indeed we do," he said. "Are you prepared to discuss terms?" He tilted his head looking at her companions. Both Doctor Dunham and Captain Brandis stood behind her, one on each side.

"You will release Master Rivers and surrender yourself to my custody. No terms." She kept her gaze firmly on the swift fox before her.

He smirked in amusement at her boldness. Clearly he had not expected her to be the one to set the conditions of their negotiation, but if he was taken by surprise at her approach he did not show it. The men behind him shifted nervously at her words. Even though their leader was not affected by her statement it was clear the others were. In an attempt to regain control of the situation the fox chuckled. "They said you Talwyn masters had a reputation for being bold. I see it's well earned." He smirked. "Of course you know it's not that simple."

"It is from where I'm standing," she replied. "You have a Talwyn master in your custody. I cannot allow that. Release her now and surrender to me and we may consider that in your punishment."

"I do that and we lose our only leverage," he said.

Isabelle shook her head. "You don't have any. I am not here to negotiate nor am I going to allow you to use one of us for your own ends. This conversation ends only one of two ways. Either you tell me where she is, or I beat you until you do."

The swift fox looked at Isabelle with his ears swiveled to face her. "If you expect me to simply hand her over I'm afraid I can't do that."

Isabelle dropped her paw to her side where a sword of ice began to manifest from the air. Forming in her grip the weapon took only a few seconds to go from a smattering of ice crystals to a full length sword. Made from and maintained by her powers she raised the weapon towards the swift fox holding it inches from his face. "I would suggest you consider very carefully what you do next."

"I already have," he said. "Rafa sends his regards." He swung towards her forcing her to dodge out of the way, the first strike missing her by inches. Isabelle brought her ice sword up to block his next attack, spinning around to swing her blade towards him. The weapon sliced the air above his nose as he got to his feet paws to face her. "I've always wanted to fight a Talwyn master."

Isabelle thrust her weapon towards him. "Then I'm glad I could provide you the opportunity."

The swift fox struck at her again, close enough that she felt the air from his attack. Their weapons clashed while each pushed forward in an effort to gain the upper hand. She could tell from the corner of her eye that Captain Brandis and Doctor Dunham had given her a wide berth, each of them dealing with their own opponents. She knew the longer this went on the more likely one of them would be injured. Determined to keep them out of harm's way she would have to end this quickly.

With a rapid movement to her left she performed a feint, allowing her to deliver a swift kick to the vulpine's back. With a yelp of surprise he fell to the ground and spun around only to find her weapon in his face. Isabelle placed her boot on his chest but just enough to hold him in position.

"Wait!" he shouted, causing all of his men to freeze.

"That's better," she said. "Tell them to drop their weapons and stand down, or else."

"Or else what?" he asked.

Isabelle channeled her powers through the weapon extending the blade before his eyes until it broke the skin, allowing the tiniest amount of blood to stain the ice weapon. "Do you really want to find out?" She kept her gaze on his, never wavering from her icy stare.

The swift fox breathed steadily clearly considering his options. She could tell he was attempting to formulate a plan, but with his own weapon just out of reach there was almost no possibility he could act before she did. Conceding his own defeat the fox held up his paw. "Stand down." His men did as ordered, lowering their weapons.

Captain Brandis kept his weapon on the others while Doctor Dunham walked forward to disarm them one at a time, returning with the small pile of weapons in his arms. "Area secure, Master Sheridan."

"Thank you, captain." She pulled her weapon back slightly but only enough so that the swift fox could prop himself up. "Now I believe you had something to tell me."

Doctor Dunham placed the confiscated weapons on the table, taking one of them to show Isabelle. "The men were all wearing one of these." He held before her a bracelet with a Talwyn teleportation crystal positioned in the slot.

Now it all started to make sense. The reason Rafa and his men had been so hard to track down was right before her eyes. Taking the bracelet from the blue jay she held it in front of the swift fox. "This is how you're moving the crystals, isn't it?" she asked. "You go where you plan to do business, sell some crystals, and then you're gone before anyone knows you were there." The swift fox said nothing. "I'll take that as a yes." She gestured for the doctor to remove the one from the fox as well. "I gather you have men watching our ship?"

"We've had people on it from the moment you got here. If you try to reach it Rafa will know," he said. Doctor Dunham pulled out a chair while Captain Brandis secured the rest of the men in the club's freezer.

Isabelle stood guard as her companions lifted their captive into the seat and held him. Gazing down at the bracelet in her paw an idea formed in her head. "Maybe not." She leaned forward towards his muzzle. "Now I'm going to ask you one more time, where is Lauren?"

His eyes shifted from her to her weapon and back again before he answered. "Our compound is underground, beneath the center of the town," he replied. "Rafa is holding her there."

"How do we gain access?" she asked.

He gestured towards their confiscated bracelets. "There are no entrances to the surface. The only way to get in and out is with one of those."

Captain Brandis folded his arms. "So what's the plan?"

“We go get Lauren, but I have to make a stop first.” Isabelle motioned towards their captive. “Put him with the others. We don’t want him letting Rafa know we’re dropping in.”

The dimensions of their ship were just large enough to fit a portal sufficient for the transmission of a single individual towards the widest point of the cabin. Stepping through Isabelle looked around to be certain she had ended up at her intended destination. While not a teleportation expert she knew enough to get where she needed to go. Listening carefully she could detect the sounds of movement from the individuals outside guarding the ship. As long as she worked quickly they would never know she was there.

Moving forward she slipped into the pilot’s seat and activated the communications system. “This is Master Isabelle Sheridan attempting to contact the Tower. Do you read me, Tower?” She waited for a response.

“This is the Tower, we read you, Master Sheridan,” a female voice responded.

“I don’t have a lot of time so I need you to listen carefully. Master Rivers has been taken captive by our target. I’ve got a location on their HQ but I’m going to need reinforcements. Captain Brandis and I are unharmed. We’ve joined forces with one of the townspeople though we need assistance at my location as soon as you can make it happen. Rafa and his people have their headquarters underneath the town square. They are armed with teleportation crystals. Repeat, they are armed with teleportation crystals,” Isabelle said.

“Understood,” the voice replied. *“We can have reinforcements to your location when ready.”*

Isabelle nodded. “Standby for my signal. Sheridan out.” She extended her paw, opening the portal once again. The moment it formed she stepped through, with Rafa’s men outside none the wiser. Once again back with her companions they met her gaze as she emerged from the swirling portal.

“Were you able to get through?” Doctor Dunham asked.

“They’re ready,” she confirmed.

The blue jay fitted one of the bracelets to his wrist. “You know all hell is going to break loose in there once they realize we’re inside.”

“Then let’s not keep them waiting.” She formed an ice blade in her right paw once more, extending her left as she closed her eyes and searched for the underground structure.

Experienced teleportation crystal users could simply think of their destination and generate a portal. Isabelle had been trained in the basics, but given she did not know where exactly she was headed she needed to feel for the space where the portal would form. In her mind’s eye she pictured the center of town and reached beneath it until she found an open space large enough to accommodate the size of the aperture she needed. Concentrating, she focused her energy through the crystal as the swirling portal began as a single pinprick of warped reality.

Expanding rapidly it reached its full circumference within seconds as the air around them reacted to its presence. She looked at her companions and then nodded. “Here we go,” she said.

“Let’s just hope you didn’t portal us into a sewer,” Captain Brandis remarked.

Not bothering to answer, she stepped into the opening.

RAFA'S HEADQUARTERS

Emerging into the dark underbelly of Kaladriel, Isabelle was immediately aware of the unfortunate contrast of her snow white fur to her current surroundings. Despite their fortune in arriving in apparent isolation she knew it would not be long before their presence was detected. Once her companions emerged it was clear the room in which they stood was some sort of storage room. Metal shelves lined with boxes clearly containing Talwyn crystals stretched from one end of the room to the other.

Captain Brandis looked around and let out a relaxed sigh. "It looks like this is the place."

"So it seems," Isabelle agreed.

Doctor Dunham glanced back at the portal as it closed behind them watching it as the opening disappeared. "That portal was awfully close to these boxes of crystals, don't you think?"

"I did the best I could on short notice," Isabelle replied. "Besides, the crystals can't open portals inside solid matter. If there's anything in the way it won't establish a lock."

"Good to know," the blue jay said.

"Didn't you study crystal use in the Academy?" she asked.

Doctor Dunham shrugged. "I must have missed that class."

Isabelle shook her head. "Just be grateful we're not in the middle of a bunch of Rafa's men."

"Speaking of which, we have no idea how many of them are down here, or whether or not they're all armed with these," he said, holding up his arm.

"All the more reason we should move quickly," she replied. "Follow me." Isabelle approached the door where she stopped to listen for any signs of anyone outside. Perking her ears up, she swiveled them around but did not detect any signs of anyone in the hallway outside. "It's clear. Let's move."

The area was clearly some sort of underground tunnel system, a portion of which had been sealed off by Rafa's men for their own personal use. She cast a glance down the hall and motioned for her companions to follow. They approached the nearby corner where voices prompted her to throw her arm out and press the three as close to the wall as possible as she listened to their conversation.

"Any idea what Rafa is going to do to the Talwyn master?" the first one asked.

"I don't have a clue. Whatever they do you know we'll be the last to know." The other one shook his head. "They never tell us anything around here."

Isabelle looked over her shoulder at the pair before forming an ice staff between her paws. "Stay here," she whispered, before stepping out into view. Without breaking her stride she launched her attack swiftly, knocking the first one onto the ground before he'd even had a chance to fully turn around. The other pulled out a pistol only to have it knocked from his grip as he clutched his wrist in pain. Isabelle slammed him to the ground placing the end of the weapon on his chest. "Where is Master Rivers?" she asked. When he did not reply, she lifted the weapon for another attack. "Last chance."

"She's in the room down the hall," he said. "You'll never get out of here, you know. Rafa won't let you."

"Thanks," she said, knocking him out with her staff.

Wasting no time she hurried down the hall with her companions in tow until she arrived at a thick metal door. Gripping the wheel with both paws she spun it around until the door's mechanism released and pulled with Doctor Dunham's help until they could access the room inside. Lauren stood up as the trio entered the room. "About time you guys got here."

"Excuse me for not having a map to Rafa's secret base," Isabelle replied as she formed an ice dagger to cut Lauren free. "If you'd prefer I could leave you here."

"Ha ha." Lauren rubbed her wrists and gestured towards the door. "Let's get out of here. We don't have much time. I've heard Rafa is planning to move his operation as soon as they can load the crystals onto a ship."

"Then we'd better get a move on," Isabelle replied.

Captain Brandis stood guard at the door as the two women stepped into the hall. "We already had to take out one of his people. It won't be long before they know we're here." As if on cue, the alarm began to sound.

"So much for the element of surprise," the white furred vixen remarked. "Oh well, it was only a matter of time anyway."

Lauren stepped in front of her as a pair of Rafa's men appeared, swirling her hands in the signature pattern of the water users and sending a powerful stream of it towards them. The force of the attack sent them sprawling backwards sputtering and coughing in response. "Come on, we have to find Rafa," Lauren said. Her hooves clacked loudly on the stone floors echoing through the halls while they ran.

Isabelle hurried to keep up with her, casting a glance towards her fellow master. "Based on what I saw when I came in the bulk of their forces are on the opposite side of the complex. Rafa will be there."

Between the two of them they were able to keep a steady pace disabling any attackers that attempted to slow them down. Turning down what appeared to be the main hall they approached what appeared to be the command center of Rafa's operation. Inside the largest room there was an upper railing and along the perimeter of the space were monitors displaying the views of the town above as well as several points around Kaladriel.

Isabelle stopped as they came face to face with Rafa. The maned wolf did not blink at their appearance, maintaining his stoic expression in the face of their potential confrontation. She held up her ice staff towards his muzzle. "It's over, Rafa. Surrender now."

"And why would I do that?" he asked, apparently unconcerned.

"Because we have you outnumbered," she replied.

"Perhaps I've miscounted, but there are only the four of you." He smirked, folding his arms as his men moved to surround them.

Isabelle held up a paw to signal the others to hold their position. "I called ahead," she said, holding up her wrist.

Rafa's eyes widened, realization rendering him momentarily silent as portals opened all around the room soon occupied by armed Talwyn soldiers taking position around the upper level. "No!" He extended his arm forming a portal between them. Before she could react, he was gone.

Isabelle leapt into the still open portal, with Lauren close behind. The two women landed hard on one of the building rooftops, having made it through the portal by the

narrowest margin. Rafa's crystal had a limited power supply. He could not escape them as long as Isabelle could see the other side of the portal. They both picked themselves up and rushed after him, already running towards the opposite side.

Rafa leapt off of the roof down into a portal Isabelle only saw the moment before she jumped. Her fur bristled from the surprise as she fell into the opening. Emerging from the other side she landed on her back as gravity suddenly took hold from a 90 degree angle. Rubbing her ass, she did not have any time to see if Lauren had made it as Rafa already opened another escape route. She knew she would have to break his concentration. If she could keep him distracted long enough he would be unable to open any additional portals. At least it would give her a chance to get the bracelet off of him. She was about to jump through when Lauren stopped her.

"He's going to escape!" she shouted.

"I saw where he's headed. Time for a new strategy," she said, whispering his destination in her ear. With a nod she opened two portals before them, with each stepping through.

Isabelle emerged initially unclear as to where exactly she was, but it was not long before she realized she was moving. Rather, the surface on which she stood was rocking. Recognizing she was on a boat she looked up to see Rafa standing on the deck above her. "Stop right there! You're done running."

"Don't you Talwyn masters ever give up?" he asked.

"Seldom if ever," Isabelle replied.

"You always think you know what's best for everyone, don't you?" he asked. "Well, I'm afraid you're getting off at this stop." He extended his arm, but before he could actualize the thought to open the portal, Lauren appeared from behind and grabbed his wrist, pulling the bracelet free before kicking him hard in the chest. The maned wolf cursed as he fell down onto his back right before Isabelle.

She placed a boot on his chest and smirked. "How nice of you to drop in." She kept her gaze on him as the two of them stood over their target.

DOCTOR DUNHAM'S CLINIC

TWO DAYS LATER

Sunlight warmed Isabelle's face while she observed the repairs to Doctor Dunham's clinic. Now that Rafa was no longer a concern the mood of the town shifted to one of joyful satisfaction. People no longer avoided each other or stared in silence at the two Talwyn masters that had come to their town. Since the news had spread most everyone had been eager to express their gratitude as they completed the last stages of the mission.

Strictly speaking it had not been necessary that they stay following Rafa's being placed into custody, but neither woman had felt it appropriate that they depart without saying goodbye and making sure that everything would be fine going forward. Isabelle had devoted her attention to Doctor Dunham and his clinic, while Lauren had spent her time speaking to the citizens and helping to address needs long left unattended.

The opening of the door drew her attention as Captain Brandis and Doctor Dunham emerged to greet her with a mutual smile. "Good morning, Master Sheridan."

"Good morning, doctor. And you, captain," she said.

“Ma’am,” Captain Brandis replied. “We’re just about finished here. Other than a few last minute things the clinic is pretty much back up and running.”

Doctor Dunham took her paws in his hands. “Thank you so much for all of your help. It would have taken us weeks to fix all this on our own.”

“It’s the least we could do. Have you received all of your new supplies yet?” she asked.

“Almost. We’ve been taking in new shipments all afternoon. I’m running out of places to put it all,” he said with a grateful smile. “Hopefully I’ll have much less cause to use them now that things are almost back to normal.”

“Well, if you should need anything else feel free to send a message to the Tower. I promise it won’t go unattended,” she said.

The blue jay gave a cheerful chirp and shook her paws once again. “Thank you so much for everything you’ve done.”

“I only wish we’d been able to help you sooner,” she said.

“You’ve done more than I could have hoped for,” he replied. “I truly appreciate it.”

Isabelle nodded. “It was our pleasure.” The arctic vixen turned at the sound of gentle hoof beats coming up the path. She smiled at the expected sight of Lauren returning from the town square. “Everything okay?”

“Just about. We’ve finished conducting an inventory of the crystals Rafa stole and over thirty percent of them are unaccounted for,” she said.

“Any idea where they went?” Isabelle asked.

“Unfortunately no. Rafa’s men scattered after we raided his secret hideout, but no one seems willing to talk to us about where the missing crystals were sent. I’ve had the ones we’ve recovered sent back to Vanskar to be catalogued so we can get an exact list but it’s going to be a while before we have a clear idea of exactly what’s missing,” Lauren said.

Doctor Dunham reached into his pocket and presented his own illicit crystal. “I suppose I should return this then,” he said.

Lauren took it with a gracious nod and held it in her hand. “Hopefully you won’t need it, but if you do I assure you medical help will not be far away.” She looked at his clinic and then back at the avian doctor. “Have you ever considered returning to the Tower? I’m certain that given the reasons for your dismissal we could pull some strings, get you reinstated. That is, if that’s what you wanted.”

The blue jay touched his chin with his hand and hesitated. “A tempting offer, but if my experience has taught me anything it’s that I’m needed here. I appreciate all you’ve done but my place is here with these people.”

“Of course,” Lauren said.

Isabelle touched her fellow master on the arm. “So how are you doing after all this?”

“I’ve been on missions before,” she said.

“Yeah, but this was the first one where you and I were in charge of our own destinies. That’s got to be worth a little consideration,” the arctic vixen remarked.

“I suppose,” Lauren replied. “It certainly wasn’t what I expected.”

“Speaking of unexpected, since when do you go charging off into the night by yourself? That sounds like something I would have done,” the vixen said, gently poking Lauren in the side.

“There wasn’t really time to wait,” Lauren said. “At the time I thought it might be our only chance to find Rafa’s headquarters.”

Isabelle smirked. “Maybe you and I are finally rubbing off on each other.”

Earning her an amused tilt of her head, Lauren conceded the point with a shrug of her shoulders. “Perhaps.”

“You have to admit, we do make a good team,” she said.

“That we do,” Lauren agreed.

Doctor Dunham looked at the trio. “So where are you three headed next?” he asked.

“Isabelle and I will be returning to the Tower, while I expect Captain Brandis will be sent to his next assignment,” she said.

Captain Brandis nodded. “Since I don’t know when I’ll next have the opportunity to work with you all again, I’d like to say it was an interesting experience.”

“Thank you for your help, captain,” Lauren said.

The blue jay put his hands on his hips and looked around. “I don’t think I’ve ever been happier to not see a line for my clinic.”

“Well, I wish you luck, doctor,” Lauren said.

“Are you certain I can’t convince you to stay a bit longer?” the blue jay asked with a cheerful chirp. “I hear the mayor wants to throw you all a party.”

“As much fun as that would be, we really need to get back.” Isabelle slapped her paw on his shoulder. “Feel free to celebrate on our behalf, however.”

“Just not too hard,” Lauren added with a smile. “Knowing our luck, we’ve probably already got another assignment waiting for us.”

Doctor Dunham nodded in understanding before giving the two a final hug of thanks. With their duty complete, the group turned away and began the walk back towards the ship.

The small ship was just as they’d left her, waiting for her passengers just outside of town. Captain Brandis was the first to enter, taking his seat in the pilot’s position while Isabelle slipped into the secondary chair. Lauren stopped at the ramp, sparing Kaladriel one last glance before she joined her companions at the front of the ship.

“All systems read fully operational,” Captain Brandis said.

“Take us home,” Lauren ordered.

Silent and smooth, the ship lifted into the air and headed back towards the Tower.