

“Zenith”
By Lauren Rivers

Six soldiers sat in the back of an army truck as it bounced along the road's uneven surface. Each one looked around the vehicle's interior without conversation. At the head of the vehicle, seated next to the window to the front was their unit commander, David Everett. With one finger, the closest to the back tapped Chris on the shoulder.

"What do you suppose this mission is all about? They pull us off our regular patrol and send us out here to meet a Talwyn master?" the giraffe asked.

"I don't know, but they must consider this mission pretty high priority if the Council itself is interested in what's going on out here. As far as I'm aware we're just here to check on some reports of illegal mining operations near the crystal refinery in Ardis." The ram tugged on his uniform where it read 'Hartley' and exhaled. The two sides had been testing each other's defenses for months. Most of the soldiers in the barracks expected the war any day now. The presence of a Talwyn master had certainly suggested that events were becoming more serious.

Kyle tapped his fingers on the bench that ran down their side of the truck. "Yeah, maybe. Do you think they suspect Ashurian involvement? We've always had issues out here with illegal miners trying to steal raw crystals for the black market. If they suspect the Ashurians are out here, it could change things."

"Of course, they don't tell us anything. We could be at war already and we in the rank and file would be the last to know," Chris said. The ram looked at the others in the truck. The bear whose name he recalled as Martin was somehow asleep. It seemed a common army trait, the ability to sleep anywhere. When you never knew if you'd be in a bed or not you started to learn to sleep when you could and eat when you had rations in your hand. Chris suspected before long that sort of life would become the normal way of things, at least for a while.

Kyle threw up one hand in concession to the ram's point. "True enough. Our job is just to march where they tell us to march and get the job done." The giraffe patted the ram on the back.

Chris smiled at the comment and leaned back against the wall of the truck. He and Kyle had served together for four years. The two had even trained together. He considered it somewhat fortunate that they had been assigned to the same unit when they graduated. "I suppose we'll find out what we need to know when someone decides to tell us."

"That's enough chatter, gentlemen." David Everett held up a paw in their direction. "I don't know any more than you do. We'll find out what's going on when we arrive in Ardis. Until then, I need you gentlemen to keep your wits about you. This area is close to Ashurian territory, and while I don't expect anything to happen I think it's a good idea to keep our attention focused, don't you agree?"

"Yes, sir," both replied in unison.

The truck suddenly slowed and came to a stop. "That's unusual. We shouldn't be arriving in town for another few minutes." David's ears perked up as he turned to slide open the window to the front compartment. "Why are we stopping?"

"A tree in the road, sir." The soldier in the front pointed ahead.

"Damn." David moved towards the back of the truck. "Everyone out. Somebody wake up Martin. We've got to clear the road."

Chris and Kyle were the first out, both landing in the soft dirt. Their hooves left firm impressions as the two stepped out on the right side of the vehicle. David Everett

followed behind while the others walked forward from the other side of the vehicle. The driver shifted the truck into park before he joined the group. Chris searched the forest on either side of their transport. Though no one passed into his field of view the hairs on the back of his neck rose.

David Everett approached the fallen tree and ran his paw over the bark. Since no one had reported an obstruction in the road this had to be recent activity. The Siamese cat gestured for the men to join him. "All right, between the eight of us I think we can move this thing out of our way. Four on each side, we lift and drag it to the other side of the road." He remained on the near side as the soldiers took up positions on either side of the fallen tree.

Chris took up a position on the far side. When Kyle did not follow, he looked at his taller spotted friend. "What is it?"

Kyle raised his hand. "Captain Everett, something isn't right here. There are no reported storms in this area in the past several days, but this tree was felled by lightning. Look at the burn marks near where the trunk splintered." Blackened wood covered the base of the fallen tree and the top of its now severed trunk. David stepped in for a closer look. Upon confirming the burn marks he looked towards Kyle.

"Spread out, search the..." He did not finish his sentence before a sudden bolt of electricity struck the lupine soldier that had been standing nearest to David. "Take cover!"

Kyle and Chris rushed towards the trees in a mad dash, avoiding stray bolts of energy. He drew his pistol at the same instant he reached relative safety. Kyle glanced around the trees before pulling his head back. "Five of them, armed with Talwyn crystals."

Chris fired a shot at their attackers. "Four now." He could see Captain Everett and Martin pinned down behind the truck, while the dead lupine lay out in the middle of the road with smoke billowing from his uniform. Three of the others had made it behind a rock and were firing both bullets and wind attacks at their attackers.

"Can you tell who these guys are?" Kyle asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Chris reached into his pocket and affixed his crystal to the slot on his uniform's wrist. He held out his hand and formed a ball of ice. The crystalline sphere shot away from his hand striking a canine attacker in the chest. The doberman cursed as he fell backwards. The ram could make out an iguana, a badger, and a horse, in addition to the one he had taken out.

When he looked again, the doberman had gotten back up with a snarl across his muzzle. He threw a bolt of lightning at the tree he and Kyle hid behind. The attack sent sparks flying away from the tree in a shower of flaming embers.

Flames struck Martin in the arm, setting his uniform on fire. The bear dropped his rifle and used his massive paw to beat out the flames, taking cover behind one of the wheels of the truck.

Captain Everett fired another two shots from his pistol. He dashed over towards Chris and Kyle, sliding into cover beside them. "Hartley, Simon, I need you two to circle around and take them out. Martin's wounded and the other three are pinned down. I'll cover you!" He did not wait for a response, firing another two shots in a rush back towards the truck.

Chris broke cover and hurried through the woods with Kyle close behind as both maneuvered in graceful steps parallel to the road. The trees were thick enough to cover their movement. Circling around the attackers he was certain to keep them in his field of vision every step of the way. Captain Everett and the others were doing a good enough job of keeping them busy. They were in the weaker position, both for lacking of significant cover and the fact that their attackers knew the area well. Chris could tell for certain at least one of these men had some formal training in use of the crystals. Odds are that one was an ex-soldier of some type.

Kyle remained at his side as the two confirmed they were behind their attackers now. The giraffe held up three fingers before raising his gun. Chris waited three seconds before both he and Kyle opened fire. The horse went down first. Blood dripped from his back as he collapsed against a tree.

The doberman whipped around and barked an expletive. He launched a bolt of lightning in their direction, though his aim showed he did not know where the attack had come from. He moved his position and sniffed the air.

Chris knew they were upwind of the three remaining males, but direction was not going to tell them exactly where the two soldiers were hiding. The badger burned a line of fire into the ground in front of the truck. With a bark from the doberman the three left their two fallen companions and ran off in another direction. No doubt the soldiers had proven more trouble than they were worth.

“You all right?” Chris asked his friend.

“I’m in one piece, which is more than I can say for Private Martin.” Both nodded in agreement and started the walk back towards the truck and their companions. Kyle switched out his clip with a fresh one and placed the other in his spare ammo pocket. All Talwyn soldiers always carried two extra clips and a Talwyn crystal of a type determined by a placement test. Unlike those that trained for more advanced use of the craft the soldiers simply received one type and were taught in basic forms of attack.

Chris placed his own weapon in its holster, intending to refill his clip once the truck was underway again. He approached Captain Everett with a respectful nod. “They’ve fallen back for now sir. One of their numbers is down back that way, he may need medical assistance.”

“All right. Retrieve both of the downed hostiles and place them in the truck. We’ll deliver them to authorities once we reach Ardis. Pick up Mister Paulson and place him in the truck, we’ll call for his retrieval as well. We’ll need to report a band of Talwyn rogues in the area, purpose unknown. They’re obviously not above setting up ambushes. My guess is they weren’t counting on Talwyn military. Let’s move this trunk out of the road and get on our way. We’ve lost enough time already.” The eight remaining soldiers carried out their orders without comment.

Chris and Kyle retrieved the equine corpse and placed it in the back of the truck along with their other attacker. By the time they were finished their fellow soldier was placed on the opposite side of the truck. The seven took up position to move the tree trunk, and after significant grunting and deep grooves pushed into the ground by paws and hooves the tree was moved to the side of the road.

Captain Everett ordered the group into the truck. A bang from his paw signaled they were ready, and truck resumed its journey.

* * *

A deep orange and red sky greeted the group as the truck rolled into the town of Ardis. Few people were out and about at this time of the evening other than a few townspeople and the occasional member of the assigned security force. As soon as the truck rolled underneath the archway that led into the town the door to a local house opened.

Horns were the dominating facial feature of the gray skinned male that exited the house. Dressed in the clothes of a Talwyn master it was obvious that this was the person they were sent to meet. Beside him was a female of his species with soft brown hair that fell over her shoulders like a waterfall. She wore civilian clothes that nonetheless identified her as a Talwyn citizen. The master stepped up to greet them with an extended hand, which Captain Everett shook with a nod both to him and his companion.

“Captain Everett, I presume. My name is Nathan Frost, and this is my wife Marla.” She gave a gracious nod of her head, but otherwise remained at his side. “How was your journey?”

“Not without incident, I’m afraid. We lost one of our men on the way into town. A group of rogues attacked us at a trap they had set up on the roadway. We killed two of theirs, but not before one of my men fell to their assault,” Captain Everett looked over his shoulder as the other soldiers got out of the truck and stood behind their commander. Chris and Kyle remained together next to the vehicle.

Nathan lowered his head. “Sadly, such things have become more common with rumors of the impending conflict between the Talwyn and the Ashurians. There simply aren’t enough men to deal with the local criminal element along with all of the other issues we’re being assigned these days. We do our best, but we’re stretched thin.” The rhino gestured towards his wife. “Some of the townspeople have offered to take watches at night to ensure our general safety. Marla has been coordinating their efforts with the men we do have.”

“They get bolder all of the time. Our food stores have been raided at least twice in the last two weeks. The first time we didn’t even realize someone had broken in until the midday meal.” Marla touched her husband’s arm.

Nathan gestured towards his home. “In any event, I’m certain you have things that need attending. Marla will see to your needs as well as the remains of your man and your vehicle for the time being. When you’re ready I have beds set up for your entire group in my home. It’s too dark to be wandering to the crystal refinery now. At first light we’ll set out towards the facility. Get some rest, and I’ll see you all in the morning.” With that he turned and returned towards his house.

Chris stepped forward to stand beside the Siamese cat. “Captain Everett, your orders?”

“Have Martin and two of the others remain here to assist with whatever the citizens of Ardis need. You, Mister Simon, and Blair will accompany us on the mission in the morning.” The Siamese cat headed into the house after Nathan.

Chris passed along the captain’s orders to the other men while Kyle grabbed their gear and carried it inside the large manor. The ram entered the large hall a moment later to be greeted by an expansive room with a sparkling chandelier hanging from above that

spread light throughout the room. The most dominating feature was the large stairs directly in front of him that boasted dark oak rails and a deep red carpet.

A pair of portraits on either side of the stairs containing images of the master and mistress of the house completed the effect, making it clear whom the lord of the manor was to anyone who entered. He waited a moment until Kyle joined him and dropped their bags on the floor. Surprise evident on his face, the giraffe looked around as he spun his body to get a complete view.

"This place is amazing. Look at all this, man! My first apartment wasn't even as big as this room." Kyle stood in the archway that led into a large sitting room. He wandered inside, leaving Chris no choice but to follow him. "I guess being a Master must have its privileges."

Chris nodded his agreement. "Yeah, it beats the local inn, that's for sure. So this is where Master Frost lives when he's not in the capital."

Kyle paused to inspect a weapons collection that dotted the wall opposite the front of the home. "Look at all of these blades! I've never seen a collection like this."

"It took quite some time to cultivate, I assure you," Nathan said. With more grace than either of them expected he entered the room and held out his hands. "I'd be happy to discuss my collection after this mission is over, if you gentlemen can spare the time. Needless to say, I believe it's always wise to keep a well prepared home. It allows me to keep my skills sharp in a variety of disciplines."

"I'm sorry, sir. We didn't mean to go wandering around in your home." Chris lowered his head.

Nathan waved off his apology. "Nonsense, it's quite all right. Would you like me to show you to your room? Your compatriots are already settled in upstairs, save for the few still outside."

"Yes, please." Chris hurried back into the atrium where he retrieved his duffel bag. Kyle slung his own over his shoulder, and the two proceeded up the stairs behind the rhinoceros. "You have a lovely home, sir."

A smile creased Nathan's muzzle. "I do enjoy it, when I get the chance. Being home with Marla is worth more to me than being a Talwyn master ever will. Not that I don't take my duties seriously, of course." The rhino led the way down the hall until he reached a solid oak door with a decorated handle. He pulled it open and gestured inside. "Here you are, gentlemen."

"Thank you, sir. This beats sleeping in the truck." Kyle gave him a salute as he entered the room and set his duffel on the largest bed, the only one that would fit a person as tall as he was.

Chris set his on the next bed before shaking the rhino's hand in gratitude and returning to his friend. He looked around noting that the other two beds were presently unoccupied. "I wonder if he entertains a lot of visitors."

"I would assume so, since he is a rather important man. I'm certain he regularly receives visitors from the capital and other places." Kyle tossed his duffel on the floor before sliding onto the bed himself and stretching out. His legs crossed, his pant legs sliding up just enough to reveal the spots on his legs.

"Even though I'm a grown ass man, you always make me feel like a kid when I'm around you." Chris gestured towards the tall bed before sitting on his own. It was at least two feet shorter than his friends.

“I can’t help it that my family is tall. If you want you can have the big bed and I’ll just let my hooves dangle,” Kyle said, half joking.

Chris rested on his duffel bag. “No, you keep it.” He looked at the clock. “It’s not that late yet.”

“I don’t intend to get to bed until the others come back. I doubt I can sleep knowing they’re out there without us, even if they’re just helping around town.” The giraffe motioned towards the duffel bag. “You know that you have a pillow, right? We don’t often get to enjoy beds this nice on duty.”

Chris pushed his duffel bag onto the floor and pulled himself to a sitting position. “Force of habit, I guess. I’m used to sleeping on the ground with my duffel as my only pillow.” The ram stood up and looked out the window. The view was fairly lovely, with the town spread before him centered on a fountain that provided both decoration and some of the town’s fresh water. There were several wells spread throughout the town, but the fountains were one of the features of this place that were not only functional but served as aesthetic and navigational purpose as well. On the top of the fountain was a fish, the position of which indicated it was in the center of town with the way it spiraled around itself. The others at the four compass points marked their navigational direction by the way their fish was facing.

In the distance a mountain loomed, and there he saw the distant location of the crystal refinery. A short time ago they had lost contact with the facility when power fluctuations started to show up from the power plant that serviced this area with electrical energy. It was then that they had been called to investigate the facility. It was likely a random act, but given the proximity to Ashurian territory and the rumors of a conflict becoming more and more likely, Captain Everett’s unit had been sent to deal with the issue, whatever it was, and report back.

Chris hadn’t realized how long he’d been staring until Kyle tapped him on the shoulder with a smile. “Huh?”

“You’ve been staring out that window for a good ten minutes. I started to wonder if you’d fallen asleep standing up.” Kyle glanced out the window and understood. “You’re thinking about what’s up there, aren’t you?”

“Aren’t you?” Chris walked towards his bed, adjusting his uniform as he walked. “Crystal refineries don’t just lose contact without a good reason.”

Kyle shook his head. “No, they don’t. Either way, as long as I’ve got you to watch my back, I’m not worried.”

“Not even a little?” Chris asked.

“Hartley, I can handle anything with you by my side. I’m with you to the end of the line, right?”

Chris clapped his hand into Kyle’s and the two gripped each other’s hands for a long moment. The ram gave a sheepish smile as the door opened to admit Blair and Captain Everett. “Sir!”

“Hartley, relax before you sprain something. We’re going to have enough of that tomorrow. For now, let’s drop ranks and have someone pour us all a drink. I could use something to help me sleep.” Captain Everett took a seat in an easy chair in the corner. He crossed his legs and held out a paw as Blair walked over and handed him a glass filled with some sort of red liquid.

Chris and Kyle toasted each other before downing it all in one swallow.

* * *

Sunlight peppered the town in the predawn hours as the team gathered outside of the Talwyn Manor. Nathan Frost and Captain Everett waited for the rest of the team to gather while they reviewed the map of the area. Chris, Kyle, Marla, and Specialist Blair approached in a group. Their duffel bags left upstairs until they returned, the soldiers only carried their essential duty gear. Once the team had arrived in its entirety, Captain Everett spoke.

“Listen up, everyone. We’re going to hike up to the crystal refinery and scout it out from a safe distance to determine if something is wrong. If there are no signs of anything unusual we proceed inside and determine the situation. If the workers need any assistance we’ll do all we can to provide it. In the event that the Ashurians are in the area, we are to ensure that the crystal refinery remains under our control. Is that clear?” He was met by affirmative shouts. “Good. Until we know more about the situation we’ll assume the refinery has been compromised. Proceed with caution.”

Nathan stepped to the head of the group. “Captain Everett has assured me that you’re the best. I’m counting on you to support me. He may be in command of the team but I command the mission. You follow my orders as a member of the Council. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” Chris stepped into line behind the two rhinos and the Siamese cat. Specialist Blair brought up the rear as the group of six set out towards the distant refinery. The route was the most direct to the facility but it was still several miles on foot. His glance drifted to Nathan Frost and his wife while they walked behind them. Missions in which they were paired with a Talwyn master were rare. He had only met a couple of them in person during his tenure in the armed forces. They were often busy with missions of various purposes, serving in any number of capacities to support the people and their government. They reported directly to the Talwyn President and his cabinet, though they were generally allowed to be autonomous when not out on missions ordered by the chief executive.

Their directive was simple. They trained and oversaw all of the Talwyn people who chose to become trained in the craft, as well as protecting the people from those who would abuse that power. Of course the police and the branches of the armed forces did the same, because twelve people could not be everywhere, but they were extensively trained to use their powers in ways most common users could not.

Nathan was trained in the art of shadow manipulation. Of all of the masters Chris knew the least about this one. He was a mystery to him due to the fact that he spent more of his time away from the capital than any of the others. From what he’d seen he preferred to perform his duties from his home in Ardis. He supposed it was a nice side effect having one of the masters close to the Ashurian border with the relations between the two nations being as tense as they were at the moment.

Chris had been so busy thinking about Nathan Frost and the mission at hand he hadn’t noticed at first that Captain Everett had stopped. They had reached the bridge to the crystal refinery, or where it was supposed to be. Instead they were greeted by a large gaping hole, too large for a person to jump across. The small stone bridge had been destroyed by something.

“Damn,” Nathan said.

Specialist Blair took a step forward. The hyena took out a pair of binoculars and carefully examined the opposite end. “Blast damage. This was intentional.” She pointed at the other side. “You can see the scorch marks. Likely an explosive, probably technological.”

“A gravity caster could do this, but it wouldn’t leave burn marks on the debris. A fire caster might be able to melt the metal but I doubt it would affect the rest of the structure of the bridge,” Nathan said.

Captain Everett glanced across the gap. “It certainly suggests Ashurian involvement.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have left the rest of your team behind,” Marla said in suggestion.

The Siamese cat shook his head. “It wouldn’t have changed anything. If the Ashurians are here, they’re probably here covertly. Anything large enough to outnumber us probably would’ve been seen and reported already. No, if they were here in force we’d have received word before we were dispatched here. Regardless, we need to find out if they’ve gotten to the crystal refinery.”

Nathan’s expression became sour. “That was the most direct route.”

“Is there another way up?” Captain Everett asked.

“Of course there is. Unfortunately all the other ways up are longer and more circuitous.” Marla gestured for the others to follow her. “If we keep moving we shouldn’t lose too much time.”

Chris considered that the increased likelihood of the Ashurians being present in Talwyn territory made this mission that much more important. It was more than just a check on the crystal refinery. Now it could be the catalyst to open conflict between their two peoples.

The giraffe tapped his friend with a hand. “What’s on your mind? You look like you want to say something.”

“It’s nothing.” He diverted his glance away from Kyle.

“Bullshit. Talk to me, Hartley. Remember, I’m taller than you.” At the reminder of his greater species height Chris chuckled to himself. The giraffe continued to shoot him expectant looks until finally the ram acceded.

“I’m just trying to figure out what the Ashurians would be doing at a crystal refinery. They’ve never had interest in our crystals before. What’s their endgame?” he asked.

Kyle considered the question. “Maybe they’re trying to develop some sort of technological countermeasure to them.”

Chris dismissed the idea with a shake of his head. “I don’t think so. They have the ability to duplicate some of our abilities with their own technology. Besides, how would you counter all twelve types? You’d have no idea what you’d be facing at any given battle.”

The giraffe conceded the point with a wry smile. “What about using them in some of their weapons?”

“It’s possible, though the crystals are weapons in themselves in the right hands. It’s why most of us need to go through significant training before we’re allowed to carry them.” Chris took out his own crystal and attached it to the slot on his uniform. It

slipped into his sleeve's holder with a smooth click signifying it was properly secured. He regarded it curiously trying to imagine what an Ashurian scientist would make of them. "Something must have changed in Ashur."

"They've never been interested in us before," Kyle said.

"Well, they are now. Whatever the reason, they want what we have and they're willing to take significant steps to get it." Chris's statement hung in the air. The group kept up a steady pace for the better part of an hour. Progress was slow, but other than the occasional order from Captain Everett or comment from Nathan Frost, there was little conversation between the members of the group.

Once they had come within visual range of the facility the group slowed and at Captain Everett's instructions took cover behind some brush and rocks around the path that led to the rear of the crystal refinery. The Siamese cat examined the quiet scene in front of him. "I don't see anyone. Where are the workers?"

"They're probably being held somewhere inside the facility." Nathan gestured for Specialist Blair to hand him her binoculars. He scanned the facility and shook his head. "I don't see any movement outside. If the Ashurians are here, they don't have any patrols."

Blair took the binoculars back. "Records indicate there should be at least forty workers in there."

"Sir, electronic surveillance systems are still operational. If we approach and the facility is occupied, we may be seen," Chris said.

"We don't have much of a choice, we need to know what's going on in there. Hartley, Simon, and Blair, we approach as quickly as possible. As long as we time it right and move fast enough we should be able to avoid being spotted by surveillance." Captain Everett prepared to stand up when the rhinoceros placed his hand on the cat's arm.

"I'm coming with you."

"Sir, I don't think that's a good idea," David said. The Siamese cat was silenced when the rhino stood up to his full height. "I can't guarantee your safety."

Nathan shook his head. "I'm a member of the Council. That doesn't come without taking some risks. I'm combat trained and both my wife and I are more than capable in the field. I'm here to assess the situation. You're here to support my actions, not to keep me on the sidelines while you and your men do whatever it is you intend to do. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." Captain Everett gestured for the rhino to take the lead.

"I know you're just trying to do your job, captain, but we may not have the luxury of playing it safe for much longer. I watch your back and you watch mine, fair enough?" The rhino reached out a hand and shook the feline's paw. "Now that that's settled, let's get in there."

Nathan waited until the security camera passed by and dashed towards the crystal refinery. He sprinted up the stairs and pressed himself against the outer wall of the facility. He gestured for Captain Everett to follow him. The feline got down on all fours and waited. Once the camera moved past their hiding spot he made his move. The cat moved like a flash, taking the distance in two seconds and taking the stairs two at a time. Once he made it to where Nathan stood, he held up his hand to instruct the others to hold position.

Captain Everett looked at the door control panel. The rear door was constructed of thick metal designed for the dual purpose of containing a catastrophic failure and keeping people out. Heavy bolts ensured the door would not open without a command from either the interior or exterior panel. The Siamese cat touched the panel which displayed an emergency lockdown, indicating it could only be opened from inside.

“Report,” Nathan said.

“We’re not getting in this way.” He thumped the door with his paw. “Nothing’s getting through there short of a battering ram.”

Nathan stepped in front of the panel. With a swift motion he removed the outer casing and exposed the inner circuitry. He removed one of the control crystals with an audible click. The door mechanism whirled as the bolts released and the doors started to slide open.

“Impressive,” David said. A purr escaped his muzzle.

“I didn’t do that.” The rhino looked up and found himself face to face with a male tiger dressed in Ashurian clothes. Before he could react the tiger kicked him squarely in the chest sending him flying backwards down the stairs. An unusually striped giraffe stepped out and drew a blade from what appeared to be a cane and slashed its pointed edge at Captain Everett. The weapon cut through the air and missed the cat by inches. He leapt over the railing and backed away from the rear entrance. An equine soldier took position just inside the open door and fired at the others, pinning them down behind the rocks.

Captain Everett affixed his barrier crystal to his wrist. The barrier field buzzed to life moments before the next attack came down with the blade. The cat drew his gun, but the pistol was knocked out of his hand by a movement so quick it was almost a blur. The giraffe grabbed his still extended arm and spun around, throwing him to one side. The cat scrambled to his feet and reestablished the barrier as he stepped back keeping his enemy in view.

Chris cursed as he attempted to get a clear shot at the soldier in the doorway, but he was at a higher elevation and had better cover. The ram swore under his breath, but he knew they were at a disadvantage in the present situation. The element of surprise had been their strongest weapon, and by chance or by some surveillance they had not noticed they had lost it. The ram could see that Nathan was holding his own against the tiger with the blond ponytail, but the battle was far from one sided. Every time the rhino made a move the striped feline would counter. He had gotten more than a few good shots in on the Talwyn master.

He watched as the rhino used his shadow abilities to obscure himself as he rushed at the tiger. The attack took the Ashurian by surprise with a jab to the side of his muzzle. Nathan was larger, but he was also slower. The tiger dodged his next attack with fluid grace, sliding under the punch and striking him in the back with his fist. Nathan grunted, turning around to face the next attack.

Captain Everett blocked slash after slash with the barrier. The field flashed active every time he deflected an attack, but he would need to change his strategy before it exhausted all of its power. He kicked the striped giraffe as he drew back for another attack, throwing him off balance and allowing him to press the advantage. The Siamese cat dropped the field and slid in low, getting his legs underneath his opponent so he could force him down to the ground.

Chris fired a pair of shots in the air, forcing the soldier guarding the door to retreat out of view with a clatter of rapid hoof steps. He watched as the captain and the striped giraffe wrestled on the ground. He could not tell which one of them had the upper hand.

Nathan fell backwards from another powerful kick from the tiger. He rolled out of the way just before the cat dropped a foot paw onto the space he had just occupied. The rhino cursed and threw up a shadow to obscure their retreat as he pulled the Siamese cat back to cover.

"Fall back! We'll find another way in. Move!" He shouted his orders, and the others obeyed without delay, hurrying away from the crystal refinery and stopping a few hundred feet away from the site of their brief battle.

Captain Everett looked at Nathan. "Are you unharmed?"

"I'll be a little sore tomorrow, but nothing I can't handle. Yourself?"

"Let's just say I'm glad I had my barrier crystal with me," David said in reply. The Siamese cat held it up for a moment. It had become much clearer, indicating the power was substantially drained. It would take several hours to recharge in the sunlight.

Chris checked his ammunition. "What are your orders, sir?"

"Hold position for the moment. That facility is designed to keep people out when it's locked down, so we need to find another way inside." Captain Everett looked at Nathan. "I'm open to suggestions."

"We could wait for reinforcements," Specialist Blair said.

"We don't have time for that. We need to do something soon. Every moment they're in there they're doing something we don't want them to do. Not to mention we have no idea about the status of our people. I don't think they'd harm the workers but now that they know we're aware of them, they might change their minds." Captain Everett's eyes scanned the rest of his group.

Chris knew that they did not have the firepower to force their way in through the hardened doors. The emergency exits weren't an option either since they were primarily designed to allow a fast exit rather than outside access. In addition to that even if they were able to gain access the alarm would sound.

Marla gestured towards David's arm. "What about a teleportation crystal?"

"None of us are carrying one," Kyle said.

"I know that, but this area is rich in natural crystal deposits. Odds are if we search this area long enough we'll find one we can use." The female rhino's hands fell onto her hips with a feminine grace.

"Unrefined crystals are a little unpredictable, not to mention that they won't have enough capability to teleport us all." Nathan leaned against a nearby tree. "However, it should be easy enough to get at least one of us inside. Once we have someone inside the refinery they can unseal the doors and allow the rest of us in."

"I volunteer, sir," Chris said.

"You're not going without me." Kyle placed his hand on Chris's shoulder.

"We only need one of us to get inside," Nathan said.

Marla touched her husband's hand. "That's not a bad idea. One person might be intercepted; with two we double our chances. I wouldn't recommend more than that, though. Without a refined crystal the margin of safety becomes unacceptably low after that."

Captain Everett nodded. "All right, then. Once we get a teleportation crystal it'll be up to the two of you."

"I'll remain here to keep an eye on the refinery. Marla, you go with them. You know this area well enough." Nathan embraced his wife before giving her a gentle kiss. "Be careful."

"I will." Marla led Chris and Kyle off from the rest of the party. They traveled back the way they came until the path split into several different directions. Led by the female rhinoceros, they traveled for close to fifteen minutes before they came upon a series of small valleys cut into the rock. She sprinted over the awkward terrain, surprising the two men as they struggled to keep up with her.

Chris huffed a few times after he vaulted over a rock and landed on his hooves just in time to see her come to a sudden stop. Kyle landed in a tangle of limbs on his friend with a string of profanity leaving his muzzle. "Ow!"

"Maybe next time warn a guy when you're going to stop, huh?" Kyle picked himself up and dusted off his uniform before pulling Chris up with one arm.

"Wasn't part of the plan," Chris said motioning to the blonde rhino in explanation. She knelt by a small crystal deposit with a opaque rose glow. "Is that what we're looking for?"

"Yeah, it's a flawed crystal, but it should accomplish what we need. I need a knife." She held out a gray skinned hand. Chris placed it in her hand and a moment later she held up the freed crystal. The rhino returned the blade and looked at it with some hesitation. "Have either of you used a teleportation crystal before?"

Kyle held up a hand. "I have, in training."

"That'll have to do. Let's get back to the others. Now that the Ashurians know we're here, they may not stay much longer." Marla placed it in her satchel and motioned for the two soldiers to head back the way they came.

"I don't suppose we can use that to get back?" Chris asked.

Marla shook her head. "Not if you want to get inside in one piece. This crystal has some flaws in its structure. It'll work, but we're going to have to walk back the long way. I can't tell how much power it has, but I'd rather not risk it." She hoisted herself back up over the rock they had just come from.

Kyle knelt and offered his hands for his shorter friend to place his hoof on as he vaulted up after her. He in turn climbed up after him as they proceeded back towards the others.

Once they had joined the rest of the team once more, Captain Everett stepped forward. "There's been no movement since our first assault. You'll have to get to the door and open it as fast as you can. We'll handle the rest."

Marla held up her hand between the ram and giraffe. "Reduce your mass as much as you can, and make sure you two are both in contact with the crystal. You should make it inside, hopefully together."

"Hopefully?" Chris removed his extra gear until he was dressed only in his uniform.

"It's an unrefined crystal. It's not an exact technique. Focus on where you want to go. Good luck." She and the others stepped back as the two soldiers touched the crystal on each side and looked at each other before a portal opened before them. They stepped through and were gone.

* * *

The floor came up on Chris faster than he expected. He'd thought he would land on his feet, but the portal had other ideas. With a thud and a shout of profanity he found his hooves in a fraction of a second and drew his gun. A shot over his head told him he'd been seen by one of the Ashurians at least. He heard two more shots before the sound of a metal hatch creaked open. Chris identified four of them in a brief glance. There were two soldiers, a horse and a wolf, guarding a hallway. The striped giraffe was on the landing heading towards the refinery floor and the tiger was the closest standing near a panel into the floor.

He moved from his place behind the conveyor belt to a tall machine that would be enough to shield him from incoming fire. Chris scanned the area for Kyle. The giraffe had appeared closer to the rear of the facility. He met the ram's glance as the two nodded in understanding. Kyle was closer so he would need to let the others inside. Soft padded steps moved closer to where he was hidden as he gestured for Kyle to move. It all seemed to happen at the same time. Chris tackled the tiger the moment he saw an orange form step past his position. He pushed him back against the machine across the path and slammed his gun hand against the metal.

After the third time the gun clattered away. Less than a second later the tiger's foot paw was in his chest sending him flying backwards. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the two soldiers disappear down the access hatch the tiger had opened. No sooner had he looked up than the tiger was on top of him, fangs bared and claws unsheathed. He felt a pain in his arm as the claws tore into his uniform. He was about to scream when the tiger was gone in a fraction of an instant. He looked up to see the form of Nathan Frost materialize.

"Good timing." He sat up just in time to see the hatch slide closed. He jumped to his feet and hurried over, but when he opened the hatch he could not see where they had gone.

"Hartley, are you injured?" Nathan touched his shoulder.

"It's a minor injury, sir. I'll be fine." He held his hand over the wound where blood stained his uniform a dark shade of it's standard blue. Chris looked down towards the hatch.

Captain Everett, Kyle, and Marla approached in a group. "Don't bother. We don't have the forces to follow them right now, and we have other priorities. Seal that hatch and secure the facility. Specialist Blair, search the facility for the workers. Miss Frost, assist her and report any injuries." The Siamese cat walked with Nathan as they started to conduct a survey of the floor of the refinery.

Chris checked the doors carefully before he returned to the main area. The workers had started to return to their stations in small groups. From the conversation he determined they had started to assess the condition of the facility. Captain Everett had moved up to the control booth along with Nathan. Their attention was carefully focused on the console in front of them.

Kyle met him in front of the hallway where most of the workers had been held. "No casualties, as far as I can tell. A few of the workers are a little exhausted from the ordeal but that's not surprising."

“They weren’t here for the people, that much seems certain.” Chris started up the stairs towards the control booth with Kyle behind him. “They must’ve gotten whatever it was they were after.”

“I’m not sure I want to know.” The giraffe followed him into the booth and took up a position by the rear monitors. “Survey of the facility is ongoing, sir. The workers all appear unharmed. There are a few minor stress related symptoms among the employees but that seems to be all.”

Captain Everett turned towards the two soldiers. “I’ve called the rest of the unit to join us as soon as they can. I’ve received new orders from command. Until further notice we’re assigned to defend this place in case there are any further incidents. Officially we’ll be stationed in Ardis and based out of Nathan’s manor. For the moment the assignment is temporary. Most likely at some point they’ll assign a couple of units here as permanent relief.”

“We understand, sir.” Chris approached the rear monitors. “All of the doors are presently secured and locked.”

“Once reinforcements arrive we’ll assign one person to each primary entrance. For now I want Specialist Blair and Sergeant Simon to open the front door and maintain station there. Once we’ve confirmed that the area is clear we’ll allow the workers to return to town in groups,” Captain Everett said. “Hartley, you and I will clear the area ourselves.”

The refinery foreman approached from the main floor and stood by the doorway. “Sir, we’ve completed our initial survey of the equipment.”

Nathan motioned the fox to join them in the large booth. “What did you find?” The rhino remained expressionless as he moved towards the center of the booth.

“Several components of the machines have been removed. We’re still conducting an inventory to determine exactly what they took. It’ll be at least a day until all of the proper repairs and safety checks have been performed to get the refinery back up, but in theory we should be able to resume normal operations tomorrow. We’ve also determined that a number of files have been accessed and possibly downloaded though a thorough computer analysis will take longer,” the fox said.

The fox’s statement drew looks from both Captain Everett and Nathan towards each other. Nathan’s face became expressionless as he turned his head away from the fox. “Thank you, you can return to your duties. Keep us informed of the progress in bringing the plant back online.”

Captain Everett closed the door behind him. “I guess that answers the question of their objective here.”

“I don’t like that one damn bit,” Nathan said.

“Neither do I.” David rubbed his forehead.

“Command and the Council aren’t going to like this. Whatever their reason is they’re pursuing crystal research. I’d say the odds that the Talwyn and the Ashurians will be fully engaged at this point are academic. A conflict is inevitable. Our crystals don’t grow in their territory and if they need them for whatever reason they’ll have to get them from us.” The rhino gave a grunt as he slammed his palm on the wall. He whirled around towards the Siamese cat. “Captain, you and your men are dismissed. I’ve got to return to my home and report to the Council immediately.”

David nodded. "I'll need to inform my superiors as well. Simon, Hartley, with me, please." The three soldiers walked down the stairs together while the workers milled about the refinery floor. Chris and Kyle remained silent until the trio had exited the front door and stood guard not far from where Specialist Blair had taken up her station.

Kyle broke the silence first. "Captain Everett, what do you think the President will do?"

"I don't know. I suppose it all depends on what the Ashurians do next. She can ask them for an explanation but I doubt they'll openly admit what happened here. Relations between our two nations aren't exactly cozy. We could demand the return of whatever they removed, but given the fact that no one was killed if they refuse or deny their involvement I don't know if President Evans will be willing to declare open hostilities over it. I doubt they'd be willing to surrender either their team members or the components and information they took from here. Even if they do we have no way of being certain of whether they've made copies of the data." The Siamese cat flattened his ears and sighed.

Chris knew the political landscape was complex especially in recent times. While the two nations had alternated between moderately friendly and passively hostile they had never really advanced to either extreme. Neither allies nor enemies they had remained parallel in their development despite sharing a border. Chris had never been to Ashur but he knew that they relied on their technology the way they relied on the craft and it's powers.

It was at that moment that Chris realized the reason the Ashurians had broken the continuous standoff between their two peoples. Their technology had outstripped their ability to continue advancing. They required more and more energy to grow their massive civilization and now they had reached the tipping point. Either that, or one or more of their core energy sources had finally run dry. In either case, the Ashurians had become desperate enough to send an elite team into a foreign nation to find a new source of power.

"One things for certain, things just got a lot more complicated." Kyle leaned against the wall.

Captain Everett shook his head. "So it seems. My son has expressed interest in joining the military, and my daughter wants to enter the program to train in the Tower. I'm worried about what this will mean for the Talwyn nation, and for them."

"I don't know, sir," Chris said. "All I do know is that we will be ready for them."

The Siamese cat diverted his gaze from the two soldiers. "We can only do what we can. I almost find it impossible to believe that the Ashurians would be willing to risk a war over these." He held up his wrist to display the crystal attached to his uniform.

The ram shook his head. "It isn't about the crystals." He paused for a long moment. "It's about power."