

“Relativity”
By Lauren Rivers

Reflective moonlight bathed Lauren and Isabelle's white fur as the two women hurried through the forest. Lauren's hooves made deep impressions in the grass with each step. Her breathing was heavy and labored in her efforts to maintain her pursuit. Isabelle seemed to be fueled by irritation. Her teeth bared in a growl as she increased her speed into a sprint. Lauren formed a water ball in her hand and tossed it towards her quarry. Her aim was off enough that it splashed harmlessly against a tree.

She cursed as he levitated a pair of sharp knives and threw them behind himself. Both women diverted their paths to avoid the blades. Lauren did not see where they struck. Her ears perked up towards the rear just in time to hear them whip back towards the women. She pushed Isabelle to the ground seconds before the blades shot back into the hands of the raccoon.

"Leaven!" Lauren's shout was enough to cause him to whirl around. He held one of the knives out at Lauren. "That's far enough!" Leaven laughed. "Did I say something funny?"

Leaven tapped the knife against his paw. "So you two are the new masters of water and ice. I suppose I should be flattered that the Council deemed me important enough to send two of you after me, though I should think with the war on you'd have more important things to worry about."

"You're a fugitive and a rogue master. I can't think of anywhere else I'd need to be." Isabelle formed an ice dagger in her right paw. "The war can wait until we deal with you."

"Tell the Council they're wasting their time. Their best course of action would be to let me go." Leaven placed the knife back in its sheath.

Isabelle shook her head. "Our orders didn't give you a choice. Remember the fugitive part?"

"Try and take me in if you must, but I warn you now, just because we are in the middle of nowhere does not mean I'm defenseless." The raccoon lifted a pouch from his waist and opened the drawstring. Ten coins dropped out and froze in midair. They danced around his paw as if they were following an invisible breeze. He turned his paw over and glanced at Lauren. "This is your last chance to walk away."

Lauren formed a ball of water in each hand. She took one step forward as the ball of water started to spin. "I can't do that."

Isabelle crafted an ice dagger in her other paw. The frozen weapons flew towards the raccoon alongside the spinning spheres of water. Both exploded in a shower of moisture and ice shards as the coins whipped through them and tore them to pieces. Isabelle moved behind a tree as several of the coins struck the wood at high velocity. She threw a blast of ice after him but he had already retrieved his projectiles and started running again.

Lauren resumed her pursuit of the rogue master, determined not to lose him in the forest. They were deep inside Ashurian territory. Failing to capture him here meant they would not get a second chance to bring him in unless he returned to the Talwyn nation. Her hoof beats were a rapid percussion to his relatively silent steps. She leapt over a fallen log and lost no speed when he changed direction.

Isabelle followed on her left. Both of them stayed on one side of him to prevent the raccoon from getting too far in front of either. The arctic vixen threw an ice blast at his back, but only succeeded in freezing a nearby tree. "Shit!"

Coins shot towards them both with enough force to splinter the bark of several nearby trees. Lauren dove to the ground soon enough to avoid them while Isabelle created a shield of ice seconds before the projectiles stuck into the makeshift cover. They drove deeply enough into the semitransparent barrier enough to make visible trails inside the ice. When Leaven retrieved the coins the wall of ice collapsed in a pile of thick ice chunks.

The zebra jumped to her hooves and took off at a sprint. Dirt kicked up into the air behind her as her determination drove her forward. She threw a ball of water towards the back of his head. As the liquid splashed against its target he fell forward and rolled to a kneeling position facing her.

“Is that the best you can do? I would’ve expected better from Lucas’s protégé.” Leaven stood with coins dancing between the fingers of each hand.

“It stopped you, didn’t it?” Lauren spread her hooves and stood ready for combat. She locked eyes with the raccoon.

Leaven kept an equal distance between his two pursuers. The coins started to circle the raccoon like sentinels. He extended his paws sending them towards both women. One struck Lauren on the shoulder and another grazed her leg in her attempt to find cover. She fell behind a tree and heard a painful grunt escape Isabelle’s muzzle. The white vixen manifested an ice sword and charged. She thrust towards him piercing his flesh with the tip. Blood stained the end of the weapon causing Isabelle to smirk.

Lauren threw a ball of water into his chest at top speed. Isabelle changed the sword into a spear like shape as she threw it above her head. It spun in the air until she caught it and drove it forward with a throw of her hand. The weapon pierced the ground inches away from Leaven’s head.

“That was awfully close,” Lauren said.

“I was aiming for his head.” Isabelle stepped on his chest and glared at him. “You’re done running.” The white vixen rolled him onto his chest and secured his hands with restraints specially designed to prevent any movement of either. “Get up.” The raccoon remained silent as he moved to his knees and stood.

Lauren placed a hand on Leaven’s chest. “Where were you headed?”

“Does that matter?”

“Were you going to meet someone? Why did you leave the Tower?” the zebra asked. Leaven was due to choose his successor like most of the previous masters in the current group. Without warning he disappeared a month before he was due to make his selection. While at first the students had discussed rumors that he was sent on a secret mission it was quickly put to rest when the Council declared the raccoon a fugitive. Before Lauren knew it, she and Isabelle had been ordered to bring him in when he had been sighted in Ashurian territory. Despite the risk it was deemed important enough that two of them were sent in a special mission to retrieve him and bring him back to the Talwyn.

The raccoon stared back at Lauren, declining to answer any of her questions. He would meet her glance only to return her questioning expression with a confident one. “I assume you have a ship nearby, otherwise you wouldn’t have come after me. It won’t matter though, you’re not me taking me back with you.”

“You sound pretty sure of that.” Isabelle squeezed his arm with visible pressure. She gave him a sharp push in between the shoulder blades to start him walking back in the direction they had come.

“I am,” Leaven said. “It won’t matter how many people you brought with you. You can’t stop what’s coming.”

“You seem awfully interested in talking when it’s something you want to say,” the white fox said.

Leaven ignored Isabelle’s comment and kept walking as if he had not heard her. He turned to Lauren. “What did they tell you about me?”

“Lauren, be careful.” Isabelle’s tail bristled in irritation.

The zebra held up her hand and fell into step beside Leaven. “If you don’t answer my questions I don’t see why I should answer yours.”

“Fair enough, but if neither one of us talks it’ll be an awfully boring walk back to your ship.” Leaven took a few steps ahead to be slightly ahead of the zebra.

She backed up a few steps to look at Isabelle. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know. He seems awfully confident for someone that’s on his way to answer to the Council and President Evans.” Isabelle kept her eyes on him as they spoke. Her tail was still bristled though Lauren suspected it was no longer from irritation but from the sense of discomfort that she had felt since they had captured him.

Lauren nodded in agreement. “The sooner we get him back into Talwyn territory the better I’ll feel.” In the time since Lauren and Isabelle had become Talwyn masters she had only met Leaven twice. Most of his duties at the time kept him away from the capital, and then the war had begun. While he continued to check in for the first eight months something happened to cause him to stop submitting reports. Given their wartime status they could not allow any of the masters to drop off the grid.

Her mentor, Lucas, had told her a few things before they had set off to pursue him. She knew that the raccoon was clever, and he rarely acted confident unless he was certain he had an ace in the hole. His carrying coins and other metal objects was well known due to his specialization in the magnetic style of the craft. They had been prepared for that. What they had not been able to figure out is why he had surfaced here in Ashur.

The trio approached the rendezvous point that was a small clearing two miles away from the spot at which they had captured Leaven. He stopped once they had reached its edge.

Lauren kept walking while Isabelle stood with her paw on the raccoon’s shoulder. She stopped a few feet into the clearing and removed a small communication device from her waist. “We’re back. We’ve got the package.”

A small ship shimmered into visibility as the light reflective hull took on its natural white color. Lauren stepped up the ramp and gestured for the others to join her. Isabelle gave Leaven another push between the shoulder blades and followed behind him.

“The package? I would’ve expected a more inventive codename than that,” Leaven said.

“You’re going to have more to worry about than your codename. Leaven Woods, you are hereby placed in the custody of the Talwyn Council. You are to be brought back to the capital and will face judgment in the Tower, at which point I expect you will be stripped of your powers and dismissed from your post.” The source of the voice was a

rather commanding blue avian wearing the uniform of a Colonel. Authoritative and distinguished, Paul Hastings had not only become a Talwyn master but also ascended to his present military rank at the same time. It was nearly unprecedented, seen only once before. Perhaps it was his bearing or the impressive way he donned his uniform, but few were willing to talk back to the avian when he spoke. It appeared that Leaven was not willing to break this trend. He did not speak again on his way into the ship escorted by a watchful Isabelle.

"I'm glad you're on my side," Lauren said. The zebra smiled as the rear hatch closed with a whisper behind her. She met the blue bird's glance with a silent dignified nod. "What's our status?"

"Satisfactory, for the moment. The Ashurians have not detected us nor have their ships altered their patrol routes since our incursion into their territory. All the same, I'd prefer not to remain here any longer than necessary." Colonel Hastings led the way through the small cargo area of the airship and into the forward area of the lower deck. "I hope Leaven wasn't too difficult to capture."

Lauren gave him a sideways glance. "You mean for two newly minted Talwyn masters."

"I meant no offense, of course, but Leaven is considerably more experienced than the two of you, especially with the finer nuances of his abilities. He's had far more time to hone them to his will." He preceded her up the stairs towards the command and habitation level. His wings folded in slightly as he ascended the steps in a graceful smooth motion. Lauren kept one hand on the railing, her hooves clacking with every step on the metal stairs. Once she'd reached the top deck she touched the bird's arm.

"Thank you for your concern, Colonel." She paused. "Paul." He relaxed his posture at her use of his first name and for the first time since she had come on board softened his expression. "Leaven certainly didn't give up easily, but when we did capture him he almost seemed unconcerned."

Colonel Hastings touched his chin and rubbed his beak in thought. "We still don't know why he was in Ashurian territory."

"Do you think he was defecting?" Lauren asked.

"I don't believe so. We haven't noticed any appreciative shift in the balance of power since he disappeared, and there are several Ashurian bases and cities within a reasonable distance. Given the fact that he was out here I suspect he has as much interest in avoiding the Ashurian forces as we do." He extended a hand in a half shrug of mock surrender. "Unless he talks to us, there's no way to know."

"What's out here?" She had meant it mostly as thinking out loud, but the avian responded regardless.

"Not much. Though in fairness our information about the Ashurians is as incomplete as their information about us. We simply don't know." He entered the bridge, which was just large enough for four seats and a walkway down the center. The pilot and co-pilot's chair were lowered down a foot from the rear consoles and protected by a railing. The avian rested his hand on the railing behind the pilot's chair occupied by a young feline soldier. He was a young adult, wearing a Talwyn military uniform. His dark red hair was neatly kept and his whiskers trimmed to precision. "Specialist Everett, prepare for departure."

“Aye, sir,” the young cat responded. He tapped several controls with his paw. Less than a moment later, the engine revved up and the ship lifted off the ground.

“Estimated time until we cross the border into our own territory?” Colonel Hastings kept his eyes ahead as the ship moved across Ashur.

“Two hours.” The young cat turned to observe the display that showed their location relative to nearby landmarks and ships. In the simple matter of distance the ship was not that far away from the border, but even with their light reflective hull it was necessary to avoid their patrols and bases to minimize the possibility of detection.

The blue bird bobbed his head. “Let’s not make that a minute over if we can. Keep an eye on the Ashurian patrols and report any changes immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lauren sat next to the young feline and watched him for a moment while the blue bird sat in one of the rear seats. “How are you doing, Specialist?”

“Ma’am?” Specialist Everett raised an eyebrow.

She brushed a stray hair out of her face. “I know I’m always nervous when I’m behind enemy lines. You seem to be handling it well.”

“I’ve been preparing for missions just like this for over a year. Plus I come from a military family so I’ve got a little experience in how to handle myself.” The Siamese cat offered a mild smile.

“Your mother or your father?”

“My father. I entered the military because of him.” Starr straightened up and took on a more formal posture as he talked of his father. “I know he’s out there somewhere just like me, doing what he can.”

Lauren touched his arm. “I’m sure he’s very proud of you.” She looked again at his name embroidered on his uniform. “Everett. You wouldn’t be related to Lynn Everett, the master of healing, would you?”

“She’s my mother.” The cat gave a sheepish shrug, and now it seemed obvious. She recognized the woman’s red hair in her son. Lauren had been on the Council for ten months, but the war had kept small talk to a minimum. The masters had often been on missions and other tasks that kept them from gathering in one place for some time. It was deemed just as well, since they did not want to risk a catastrophic loss of their most skilled users of the craft during a state of war.

They could survive the loss or disappearance of a few masters but if they should all be killed it would drastically affect their ability to train future users of the craft. Their power would go back to The Well if no one suitable was there to accept it, but that would take time they could not afford.

Lauren gave him a supportive nod, returning her attention to the conversation. “I should’ve known. You have her eyes.”

“My father says that too. My sister Topaz has been training in the craft. I think she’s looking to be accepted into the Tower’s training program,” he said.

“I see. Well, good luck to her. I’ve taken up enough of your time...” She realized she did not know his first name.

“Starr.”

Lauren nodded. “Thank you for the talk, Starr.” She walked back towards the rear of the bridge and gave a glance to the bird before she prepared to have a much less pleasant conversation.

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Absolute silence greeted her as she descended the stairs and approached the door where Isabelle stood. The white vixen waited with her arms folded and her ears perked. She maintained a stoic expression until Lauren stopped a few feet away. "Has he said anything?"

"Nothing that means anything to me," Isabelle said. "Just some cryptic bullshit. I had the computer record it all. Maybe you'll have better luck with him than I did."

Lauren held her breath to compose herself. She pressed the door trigger and it slid open to admit her. She entered first followed by Isabelle, who took up station on her right. "Leaven."

"I expected you'd be back. As I told the ice queen, you won't learn anything by interrogating me. The only information you'll hear is what I want you to know." The raccoon walked back and forth in front of the energy field. His hands were bound in restraints that kept them immobile, unable to use his powers. He stopped when he reached Lauren's position on the other side of the field. She looked into his dark eyes and scanned them for any sign of his intentions. "You won't find what you're looking for."

The zebra stepped close to the field. "What are you talking about?"

"You're looking for some sign that there's a reason behind my actions. You hope that I'm not truly against you, that I've got some agenda I haven't told anyone about because of one noble reason or another. Sorry, Rivers, but that's just not the case. It's half true, I suppose. I do have an agenda, but it's not for the Council or the President. I'm afraid that we're simply at cross-purposes."

Lauren spared a glance at Isabelle before returning her attention to him. "Fine, so you're not on our side. Why were you in Ashurian territory?"

"I had business here," Leaven said.

"What business?" she asked.

"None of yours. I accomplished what I intended." The raccoon gave her a smirk.

Lauren heaved a sigh. "Leaven, just give me a straight answer."

"If you want a straight answer than you should ask the right questions." He turned away from her and walked away from the field.

Isabelle approached her with her arms still folded. "We're not going to learn anything from him this way."

"I agree." She pressed the control panel that deactivated the field standing between them and their prisoner. "You said the only things that we'd learn from you are what you want us to know. I'm here. If you want to tell us anything, now would be the time."

As she finished, he turned around and sat on the bench in the cell. Isabelle activated the field after Lauren stepped inside, but remained beside the controls. Leaven leaned backwards with one leg on the bench, bent at the knee. "At last one of you realizes that it's all about time."

"You seem to think you're your stay with us is temporary, so we may as well take advantage of it. I can already surmise that you left the Tower in a hurry. Something

happened or you learned something that caused you to leave behind everything you'd known and turn your back on your people." Lauren held one hand over the other as she paced in front of him. "You were found in Ashurian territory but not in the company of the Ashurians. You were making as much effort to avoid them as we were. You weren't here to meet them."

"Very good." Leaven gave a confirming nod.

Lauren's eyes did not waver as she examined him for any subtle reactions but he gave away nothing. He remained stoic and kept that same knowing expression on his face that she simply could not find a way behind. "You know that there's no way out of this cell."

"It doesn't matter where I am." Leaven stood and walked away from her. Isabelle bared her teeth at the raccoon.

"Why is that?"

Leaven smirked. "At the moment I'm an irrelevant piece. I've played my part in this little ballet. Where I am is unimportant until I'm needed again. All you need to know is that trying to take me back to the Tower is a waste of your effort. Of course, I know you have your orders and that President Evans thinks she's doing the right thing by sending you after me, but the pieces have already been set in motion and the endgame is all but inevitable. You're playing your parts same as I am, only you don't know it yet." The raccoon's tail waved behind him in slow, even cycles until he turned around again. "How is the war going, by the way?"

"Stop playing games, Leaven," Lauren said.

"It doesn't matter anyway. One side or the other wins, the only difference is where the pieces fall. The players may change but the game is always the same. You only think it matters which side wins in the war, but the end result is that we all continue to move forward regardless." His tail lowered and ceased to move, as he stood motionless staring at her.

She reached out towards him and before she could react he kicked her in the stomach, sending her retching towards the ground. Lauren grabbed her midsection as it burned with pain, only to be kicked again and knocked to the ground. The raccoon knelt on her windpipe forcing the air from her lungs. She slapped at his leg in a desperate attempt to free herself when a moment later the field dropped. Her vision lost focus as the pressure disappeared and she gasped for air. Coughing and crawling towards the door she collapsed against the wall of the detention area only to see Leaven lying on the floor and Isabelle with a bloody fist. She stepped out and activated the field.

"You okay?" she asked.

Lauren hacked and coughed for another thirty seconds until she finally was able to speak. "I think so. What about him?"

"He'll live." Isabelle said nothing else as she left the detention area. Once Lauren was able to stand she followed.

She spared one final glance at the raccoon that lay motionless on the floor. He wouldn't be waking up for a while. "Thanks."

"You let your guard down in there." Isabelle pointed a claw at Lauren's muzzle. The white vixen touched her paw to her forehead. "If I hadn't been there he could've killed you."

Lauren rubbed her neck at the reminder. "You were there, and thank you, by the way."

"You're welcome. Next time I might not be," Isabelle said.

"Noted. I should've seen it coming." She swallowed a few more times to shake off the unpleasant memory of Leaven's knee pressing down on her throat. "Maybe some time alone will give Leaven motivation to speak to us."

Isabelle leaned against the wall and rolled her head to one side. "I doubt we'll learn anything from him in the time we have available to us. If we get him back to the Tower we might be able to break him, but he seems confident that he won't be on this ship when it arrives back at the capital and I am still wondering as to why."

Lauren led the way back up towards the bridge. Both Colonel Hastings and Specialist Everett worked silently at their respective consoles. The two women joined the avian at the rear right station. He ceased what he was working on and turned towards them.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Not much. I'm a little more certain of a few details but he didn't confirm anything that we didn't already know. He's here for something but it doesn't have anything to do with the Ashurians and it isn't on our behalf. Whatever he's here to do, it's his own agenda." Lauren rubbed her neck gently.

Colonel Hastings bobbed his head. "Are you all right?"

"Leaven attacked her during the interrogation. She went inside the cell." Isabelle held up a paw. "I took care of it."

"That was dangerous." Colonel Hastings admonished Lauren with a look. "If you wanted to make a play like that I should've been there."

Lauren placed one hand on the console and the other on her hip. "I know it was a risk. I thought I could see something if I got close enough to him, I don't know. Maybe it's a raccoon thing but he's incredibly good at hiding what he doesn't want you to find." She sat in the chair on the opposite side of the bridge. "I thought since our time was limited I'd have to throw him off guard. I believed I was ready for him. He just surprised me, that's all."

Colonel Hastings leaned back in his chair. His wings were wrapped around his torso to avoid getting in the way of a conventional humanoid seat. He checked the video feed from the detention area to confirm that Leaven was still present, raising an eyebrow at his unconscious form on the floor. "Well, we certainly won't learn anything from him until he wakes up again."

"I'm more concerned with his certainty that he's not going to make it back to Talwyn territory with us. Either he plans an escape, or he knows something we don't. Maybe both," Isabelle said. "There's also the possibility that he's got someone out there that's coming for him."

"If that's the case, then we're back to square one. We don't know who his allies are or what their capabilities might be." Colonel Hastings rubbed his beak with his right hand.

Lauren perked her ears up. "Is there any possibility he could get out of the detention cell on his own?"

"No, those restraints are designed to prevent any use of the craft, and that force field will hold a master level Talwyn at least for the short term," Isabelle said.

The zebra looked from the avian to the white vixen in turn. “That leaves outside intervention.” She walked up towards the pilot’s console. “Mister Everett, are you detecting any craft close enough to us to intercept?”

The young Siamese cat tapped a command into the console with a tilt of his head. “No, we’re clear at the moment, but in approximately five minutes we will pass within the interception range of an Ashurian patrol ship.”

Isabelle stepped to the center of the bridge. “They can’t detect us with the refraction system still active, and even if they do we’re faster and more maneuverable.”

Colonel Hastings held up a talon. “I wouldn’t be so sure. All things being equal I would agree, but their fleet is twice the size of ours and we are still in their territory. Just the same I don’t think the Ashurian vessel will knowingly come to his aid, but they don’t have to if the only goal is to ensure we don’t return to our territory.” The bird spared a glance back at the monitor displaying the still unconscious raccoon. “Engaging an Ashurian ship at all will slow us down and may give a third party time to intervene.”

“We can’t second guess ourselves. For now all we can do is minimize the time spent in Ashurian airspace.” Isabelle took a seat at the copilot’s console. Lauren turned away from the forward controls and assumed the only empty seat opposite from the blue bird.

Silence dominated the bridge for the next several minutes. Lauren felt her fur stand up as a tingle of unease passed over her body. She gripped the console in an attempt to control it, willing herself to calm down. Her efforts were only partially successful, as she still felt the unease even though the physical signs had faded somewhat.

Lauren considered the possibility that President Evans had not told them everything. Perhaps even the other members of the Council knew more than they were telling. Given the fact that during their current wartime setting it had been determined that bringing Leaven in was important enough to send three masters across enemy lines Lauren wondered if there was some piece of intelligence they had not been told.

For all she knew she was attributing more to this mission than actually existed. She turned to the blue bird. “Colonel, what do you think Leaven is after?”

“I try not to speculate,” he said.

Lauren crossed her legs. “We’ve got to be missing something. You know him better than I do, I didn’t have much time to get to know him before he took off.”

“Leaven is clever. He’s had years to perfect his skills and he’s shown that he will not hesitate to use them. Until last year I would’ve thought he was loyal to the Council but apparently that’s changed. All I can say is that he is not to be underestimated. If he says he has a plan, you can be certain he does.” Colonel Hastings turned back to the monitor to check on their prisoner.

An alert on Lauren’s panel diverted her attention away from the conversation. She tapped a button acknowledging the alert and bringing up the full warning message. “I don’t understand all of this, but the computer is reporting an alert in the refraction system.”

Isabelle tapped a command into her own console. “Confirmed, one of the connections has shorted out. If we lose another one, we’ll be detected.” Less than a moment later an alarm klaxon blared causing all four to immediately check their readouts. “We’ve lost refraction.”

“Damn it.” The avian spun around to face his display.

Lauren crossed the bridge and looked at the security feed in the detention area. She had to make sure their prisoner was still present and accounted for in his cell. Leaven was face down on the floor, as he had been when they left the room a few moments ago. His still form had not moved since Isabelle had knocked him unconscious. She heaved a deep sigh of relief. Before she could return to her seat a flurry of static filled the screen for a split second. She had to shake her head to believe what she saw. Leaven was gone. “The detention cell, it’s empty!”

“We’ve got bigger problems at the moment. The Ashurian patrol ship has detected us. It’s on an intercept course. Its estimated time until engagement is less than five minutes,” Isabelle said.

“Orders, sir?” Specialist Everett turned towards the avian.

Colonel Hastings pointed a talon towards the feline. “Maintain course and speed. Try and get the refraction system back online before they’re close enough to ID us.”

“You know their top speed is faster than ours.” Isabelle met the bird’s glance.

“I know. If we can get the refraction system back online in less than two minutes it won’t make a difference,” he said.

Lauren pressed the door control and turned around. “I’ll take a look at it.”

“If you find Leaven, don’t engage him on your own.” He gave her a stern look as she turned away.

Lauren rushed towards the back of the ship to the door labeled ‘systems control’. She entered the room finding it empty. Her hooves crunched as she approached the rear of the room. Crystal dust and fragments littered the area around her feet. After a moment she discovered their source. Someone had shattered the crystals installed as part of the ship’s refraction system. She checked the equipment locker for replacement crystals only to find the boxes empty. They probably made up some of the shattered crystals on the floor.

She cursed under her breath and rushed back to the bridge. Lauren resumed her station opposite the bird. “The refraction system’s been sabotaged. There’s no way to get it back online.”

“Then we have no choice. How long until the Ashurian patrol ship is within range?” the avian asked.

Specialist Everett checked his readouts. “Two minutes. They’ll be close enough to identify us before then.”

“Bring us about,” the colonel ordered.

“Sir?” the young feline asked.

“We cannot allow them to report our presence here. We’re engaging them.” The avian gave a look that brooked no discussion from the others. The ship lurched to one side as it spun around on its curved course and headed back the way they came.

“Intercept in one minute. They’re in a hurry to reach our position.” The young cat kept his attention on the readout displaying the distance between the two ships.

Colonel Hastings looked towards the white vixen. “Isabelle, the moment they’re in range, take out their communications. We cannot allow them to report our presence.” She nodded in response as the distance between the two ships decreased further.

Lauren held on as the ship dodged the first shots from the Ashurian patrol ship. The clangs and percussive beats of bullets striking the ship’s hull resonated throughout

the bridge. The damage indicators informed Lauren that the hull had taken only minor hits.

Isabelle returned fire towards the enemy ship, scoring several direct hits on their forward section. "Their communications are disabled!" The two ships passed each other close enough that each had to turn to the side to avoid each other. The ship shook from the air being compressed between the ships.

"That was too close!" Lauren held on to the console and braced her hooves for support.

"They're coming around for another pass," the young feline pilot reported. He swerved the ship's course from side to side as bullets sailed past the ship. A few clangs indicated direct hits, but more passed than struck their vessel. As the Ashurian ship flew to one side, Colonel Hastings ordered Specialist Everett to go on the offensive. The Talwyn craft curved towards the Ashurian patrol ship in a deft maneuver. The Talwyn ship opened fire with its own bullets, several of which struck the Ashurian hull. "Direct hits!"

Colonel Hastings nodded his approval. "Tactical analysis!"

Isabelle studied her display. "Minor damage to the enemy." The Ashurian patrol ship turned and fired several shots in a strafing attack down her side. The damage indicators on Lauren's panel started screaming for attention as several systems went from green to red status.

"We've taken a hit to the port engine. It's functioning at fifty seven percent! Another hit like that and it'll be offline," Lauren said. "I'm attempting to reroute the damaged systems but it's only a stopgap measure."

"Isabelle, finish this quickly."

"Yes, sir," Isabelle said. The ship dodged another flurry of bullets. With a sudden acceleration the ship took off as Specialist Everett maneuvered them above the Ashurian patrol craft. He turned the nose around to face the enemy craft from above as he led the ship into Isabelle's sights.

"Fire!" Colonel Hastings jabbed his talon at the target.

Isabelle pushed the fire control and a hail of bullets launched into the enemy craft. A moment later it exploded in a hail of flaming metal debris. The hull immediately ceased to fly as the engines belched flame and the entire mass crashed into the ground below. The twisted metal hull rolled in the dirt, carving a deep gash into the ground and shedding parts as it went.

"Status." Colonel Hastings rose from his seat and looked at Lauren's displays.

"We're stable, we can probably make it back to Talwyn territory, but without refraction we're going to have to avoid any other encounters like that," Lauren said.

Colonel Hastings gave a nod of acknowledgement. "Specialist Everett, resume our course. Have the other ships altered their patrol routes?"

"No sir. No one seems to have noticed us other than the patrol ship, and she didn't get a signal out that I can detect," the young feline pilot said.

"Keep it that way. Inform me if there's any sign we're being intercepted," Colonel Hastings said.

"What about Leaven?" Isabelle asked.

"If he's not still on board, we can't spare the time to look for him. I'm afraid this time we'll just have to let him go." The blue bird left the bridge without another word.

* * *

A complete survey of the craft proved Leaven was gone. There had been no sign of him since his mysterious disappearance some time ago. Despite having no idea how he had left the ship, they began attempting to piece together what had happened. While Isabelle and Specialist Everett conducted repairs and kept the ship on course for Talwyn territory, Lauren and Hastings had gone down to the detention cell where the Talwyn master had been held.

Lauren stood outside of the cell. There were no obvious signs of damage to indicate the field had failed. "I don't understand it."

"What?" Colonel Hastings walked to the center of the cell.

"The crystals that generated the barrier are all intact. There's no sign that Leaven broke out," Lauren said.

"I agree. There's no damage in here either. Someone must have dropped the field from the outside."

Lauren shook her head. "How could someone have gotten on board without being detected? We've been in flight ever since he came on board and before that the ship was hidden."

The Colonel stopped and looked down at the restraints that had bound Leaven. They had been released, another action requiring the presence of a second person. "Nevertheless, it is the only possibility. We were all on the bridge when he escaped. He did not escape on his own; therefore a sixth person must have been on board. Perhaps they were a student of the light discipline or perhaps shadow. Regardless of the method it would appear that an unknown individual entered this room, dropped the field, and removed Leaven's restraints."

"I suppose now we know why he was so confident he wouldn't be returning with us," Lauren said.

"No doubt whoever freed him also did the damage to the refraction system. It was likely engineered to delay us and prevent his recapture." The avian picked up the restraints from the floor and placed them on the nearby security desk.

"It certainly did that," the zebra said.

Colonel Hastings walked to the other side of the desk and entered several commands into the computer. He called up the security footage from the past several hours and started to scan it. "The cell was being monitored the entire time. There has to be something in the security records."

"From the bridge it looked like he simply disappeared," Lauren said. She did not believe that was the case, and it was obvious that whatever happened was not the effect of a teleportation crystal.

The blue bird paused as he reached the first section of footage to display an empty cell. He reversed it and watched as Leaven was lying on the floor one moment and gone the next. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" Lauren leaned in closer as he backed up the footage once more. He slowed the rate of the playback as she examined it looking for anything out of the ordinary. She paused as she saw a blur. "What the hell?"

“I’m going to try to slow it down further,” Hastings said. The footage reversed again and played back one frame at a time. Both of them watched carefully until they reached the moment Leaven ‘disappeared’. Neither spoke for a moment as Lauren saw something she had not seen since the day she had become a Talwyn master.

The light distorted the image but she was able to make out two humanoid figures walking out of the cell. One supported the other, smaller person. She knew the smaller of the two had to be Leaven. The other was ursine in nature, the same shape she had seen in the Tower. Other than a blur of the light no detail could be made out for either other than the fact that they were both male.

“I’ve seen this before,” Lauren said.

“When? On this mission?”

Lauren walked a few steps away. “No. One day in the Tower there was a breach in the vault. I was nearby when it happened. Holly, Rowan, and I responded to the incident. I sensed a presence there, but I saw no one. I dispersed water droplets into the air and a shape appeared. It was the shape of a bear.”

Colonel Hastings took another long look at the figure’s shape. He rubbed his chin for a moment before nodding his agreement. “Do you think this is the same individual?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is he a light user?” Hastings asked.

She dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand. “It’s not the same. The effect is similar to refraction but it isn’t that. I’ve seen what light users can do. What he can do if it is the same person, it’s different.” She paced back and forth a few times, her hooves making a gentle click against the floor. “It’s different.” She flexed her hands twice before she turned towards the bird. “We won’t find either him or Leaven unless they want to be found.”

Colonel Hastings tapped the desk. “We found him this time.”

“I’m not entirely convinced we did. Now I’m wondering if Leaven didn’t allow himself to be captured in the first place. He was in the middle of nowhere when we found him.” The zebra leaned against the wall. “We assumed he was avoiding the Ashurians just like we were, but we also assumed he was alone. That obviously isn’t true. Who knows who else is working with him?”

“I suppose it’s possible we were fed the information that he would be here, but why would he do that? What would be the point?” Hastings rose from behind the desk to stand on the other side of it and unwrap his wings.

Lauren took a step forward. “Someone wanted to see what we were willing to do.”

“A test?” Hastings asked.

“It’s only a theory, but finding Leaven in the first place would require us to take a large risk and cross enemy lines. If we succeeded in bringing Leaven back we might’ve gained critical intelligence on whatever he’s doing,” Lauren said. “If it was a test, I think it’s obvious we failed.”

Colonel Hastings closed the security log and turned towards the zebra again. “We need to determine the identity of the ursine figure. We have no idea what his agenda is at this point. We don’t even know if he’ll be back at all.”

“He’ll be back. The question is, who he’ll bring with him.” Lauren left that thought hanging in the air as she left the detention area.

* * *

A figure stood in the hangar as the Talwyn ship landed with some obvious difficulty. As it touched down a metal panel fell to the ground in an unceremonious clatter. The gangway opened slowly at first before it shuddered twice and touched the ground with a loud clang. Lauren gave a meek smile at the ferret as he stood with his arms at his sides.

"I take it that you were unsuccessful," Lucas said.

Lauren descended the gangway to meet him face to face. "Somewhat. We found Leaven, but he escaped from our custody with the help of a second as of yet unidentified individual." She stepped a short distance away from the ship allowing her to survey the exterior damage. A number of bullet holes lined the ship though they narrowly avoided any critical areas. "We engaged an Ashurian patrol ship but they did not report our presence." The ferret nodded in understanding.

"I'm relieved that all of you returned safely." Lucas touched Lauren's arm with a half smile. He suppressed the expression on his face a moment later as Isabelle descended the gangway followed by Colonel Hastings and Specialist Everett. "The Ashurians have increased their border patrols. You may not have been identified, but the four of you certainly kicked the hornet's nest."

Colonel Hastings extended his wings to a comfortable resting position. "I'm not surprised. We won't be able to attempt to retrieve Leaven for some time if we even get a second chance at all."

"He will surface, you can be sure of that. When and where will be up to him." Lauren led the group out of the hangar and into the hallway. The group walked down the stairs towards the underground transport back to the Tower.

"It'll take at least two days to repair the ship," Specialist Everett said.

Colonel Hastings stepped first onto the transport as it arrived. "What's the status on the refraction system?"

"It's the least damaged. Ironically once we install new crystals and run some diagnostics it should be back online. The hull and the propulsion system will take some more time." The young Siamese cat took a seat towards the back.

The blue avian remained standing. "See that the ship is placed on the repair schedule. In the meantime I've got to return to the flagship. I'd like you to come with me."

"Sir?" Starr perked his ears up.

"I was impressed with how you handled yourself on the mission. I'd like you to join me on the flagship as a member of my crew. During a time of war I need the best people I can get. The assignment is yours if you want it." The bird extended a hand towards the young feline.

Starr swallowed before extending a paw. "Thank you, sir."

"I'll draw up the transfer orders." The transport started moving slowly at first but picking up speed as it traveled.

Lucas pulled Lauren and Isabelle aside, drawing the two women to the other end of the passenger area. "While you were gone we didn't have much better luck than you did. We secured a small Ashurian research facility with an encrypted computer. Our

soldiers captured and interrogated their chief scientist. What we learned is in the report on your personal terminals in your quarters. Suffice it to say that the Ashurians are pulling the crystals apart, seeing how they work. They've already adapted them to several applications we never would've anticipated. The soldiers retrieved some of the database, but it will take some time to go through it all and determine what we've got."

"Whatever it is, I hope it was worth all this," Isabelle said.

Rhythmic clacks filled the empty air with a comforting sound as the transport traveled underneath the city. Lauren held on to the cool metal of the support bar while she kept her hooves spread far enough apart to provide stability. She watched him for a moment until she was certain he was considering something he was not eager to share with her. He shifted position in an attempt to appear casual but despite his attempt to be nonchalant he met her glance as the transport moved around a turn. Their eyes locked together until she leaned in with eyebrows raised. He let out a resigned sigh.

"After the four of you are debriefed, I've been tapped by the government to undertake a mission in Sedona," Lucas said.

The admission surprised Lauren. "What do they want you to do there? They're not involved in our conflict with the Ashurians."

"That's part of the reason they want me there." The ferret shifted his weight as the transport pulled into the station.

"I don't understand." Lauren stepped out onto the platform. Both the Colonel and the young feline headed up the stairs to the walkway into the Tower, but Isabelle remained with her.

Lucas exhaled a sigh. "Sedona is between our northern borders. Both the mainland and its island components have been frequently traveled by most of the known nations. In theory, intelligence that may be useful to our efforts might pass through there. They want me to establish a base of operations within Sedonan territory."

"Is this part of a new strategy?" Isabelle asked.

"It's part of a backup plan. The war is not going well for us. They outnumber us with superior weapons technology. We can hold them off for a time, but the strong possibility is that we may suffer defeat before we can assure a victory. To that end, President Evans has asked that the Talwyn masters ensure the survival of our legacy. We are no doubt all targets for the Ashurian military. It is our top priority to ensure that we all remain in effective positions and stay in play. Leaven's disappearance was unexpected but we cannot afford to let it have any more of an effect than it already has. We're discussing the possibility for a plan in the event that the capital should fall to the enemy." The three resumed their motion towards the stairs and up to the walkway. Lucas led the two women across as Lauren caught sight of the Talwyn flagship, the *Prometheus*. The sleek vessel hovered above the Tower in the form of a watchful guardian. It would not remain there for long, now that Colonel Hastings had returned, but for now it provided a modicum of comfort to a tense populace.

The ship was long with a somewhat avian appearance, with a long neck in front and propulsion systems integrated into the wings. The craft was heavily armed with the latest in Talwyn weaponry. She was rarely away from the front lines, but for the attempted retrieval of Leaven it was determined that Colonel Hastings' presence was needed to deal with such a dangerous prisoner. The gray hull contrasted to the gentle running lights on the ship as well as the illuminated engines and windows along the sides.

Lauren had only been aboard once after her promotion to Talwyn master and succeeding Lucas in the position.

One look at the ship explained why she was the strongest vessel in the Talwyn fleet. She possessed a commanding outline and cast an imposing shadow on the city beneath her. To those that she protected, the shadow meant their guardian was in the skies above them. Those that challenged her often found her a most capable vessel. Equipped with an advanced refraction system capable of hiding several support ships alongside her, it gave the *Prometheus* an additional advantage when going into combat. Her weapons were mostly conventional arms, though she did possess two prototypical energy weapons capable of massive destructive power. Based off of the combined light and lightning crystal technology the weapons were capable of dealing crippling blows to enemy vessels. The trade off was that the technology was still a work in progress and provided a limited number of shots.

Lauren returned her attention to the conversation. "It's a disconcerting thought, the possibility that the Ashurians could take the capital."

"Nevertheless it's one we can't afford to ignore," Lucas said. "Plans are in place to install one of our own in the Ashurian hierarchy. We need as many sources of intelligence as we can get."

Isabelle touched her paw to her chin. "Dangerous."

"Necessary. We have the opportunity to get someone into Eden and into a position of relative influence. Once there they should be relatively unnoticed. One sees far more when one is not being watched," the ferret said.

Lauren turned towards her mentor. "Who are they going to recruit for that task?" The striped equine kept her eye on the ferret expecting an answer.

"Michael Warren."

Isabelle looked away for a moment. The zebra supposed she had expected that she might have been chosen for such an assignment. It was true that Isabelle was more than efficient at survival skills and handling herself on her own than most of the others. She understood a great deal about precision and control. Lauren expected that President Evans had thought she would be more effective remaining at the Tower with the others.

"He's good," Lauren said in agreement.

"Why was he chosen?" Isabelle asked. Her pride was obviously wounded though she took great care not to show it outwardly. Lauren had known her long enough to read the subtle shift in her posture.

Lucas held the door so the two women could enter the Tower before him. He nodded to the guards that protected the entrance as they passed. "The Ashurians don't know him. They've already seen Nathan and both of you in action. Colonel Hastings is the head of our military, and we can't spare Lynn or Holly. Most of the others don't have enough experience, and obviously Leaven isn't an option. He was the best choice."

Isabelle seemed to accept this though she avoided looking at Lucas as they entered the elevator. The ride up to the level where they were quartered was silent. No one spoke as they considered their individual thoughts. Lauren was preoccupied with the identity of the mysterious figure they had encountered on the ship, and before in this Tower. She had encountered him twice and yet still did not know who he was. She knew he was a formidable force, whoever he was.

When the elevator came to a stop, Isabelle stepped out and departed towards her quarters. Lauren remained with her mentor as they walked towards her own quarters on the other side of the cylindrical building.

She approached her door and entered her personal entry code in the panel to the right. The door unlocked and allowed her to open it. Lucas entered after his former student and closed the door behind them. The zebra's hooves made gentle clacks on the hardwood floor on her way towards the sofa beside the bay window. She sat on the right side and gestured for Lucas to be seated anywhere he liked. The ferret chose a seat in one of the two chairs opposite the sofa, between which sat a polished wooden table. "Your quarters are very efficient."

"I appreciate organization. Just don't go into my bedroom." She blushed at the recollection that she had a number of articles of clothing she had not had time to put away before she left, as well as a few items that were simply strewn on the bed that she had intended to put in their proper place at some point.

"I wouldn't dream of it." He smiled at her mild modesty. Everything in her quarters was organized to the point that every book in a set was in perfect order. Her walls were neatly adorned with floral pictures or photographs of her friends. A picture of herself and Lucas adorned the wall beside the door to her bedchamber. She placed her hands in her lap.

Lauren raised her head with a start. "I should offer you a drink or something."

Lucas held up a hand. "Not necessary. I imagine you might need something more than I, given that you've been behind enemy lines for the past few days. I sensed that you had more to talk about than what we've already discussed."

"You always could see right through me, sir." Lauren half smiled at her old habit of calling her mentor 'sir' rather than Lucas. She'd finally trained herself to use his first name rather than his old honorific. As a young student she'd never been able to bring herself to do so. Her adoptive mother had taught her to treat all others with respect, especially those you considered your family. "Lucas." She corrected herself with some effort, leading to his turn to smile. "I wanted to talk about the unidentified individual that helped Leaven escape. He wasn't just anyone. Do you remember the day I became a Talwyn master?"

"I do, it was the proudest day of my life when you succeeded me. It was also one of the strangest I can recall," he said.

Lauren nodded. "There was a security breach in the Tower. The guards could not find anyone nor did they know who had entered. Some hours later we found Isabelle unconscious, and I found a person hiding behind a refraction field. He attacked us, and soon disappeared after what I can only recall as a hiccup. One moment he was there, and then he was gone. I had not noticed his leaving, but you were behind me almost as fast as he had disappeared. I think that whoever he was, that he is now working with Leaven."

"We still don't know what Leaven's game is or what he intends to do in Ashurian territory," Lucas said.

"Nevertheless, we know hardly anything about this other person. Which one of them is the mastermind? What do they intend to do?"

Lucas stood and looked out the window. "I don't know. I fear we'll learn far sooner than either of us would prefer."

* * *

An empty residence in the middle of the forest was the only structure for miles. Two males entered the long abandoned building and took up a position in the center of the main entrance. The structure was large, suggesting that someone of significant wealth had once lived here. The condition of the furnishings and other belongings in the house clearly showed that the owner had fallen on rather hard times.

The ursine moved through the house as if he owned it, climbing the steps to the landing in the middle of the flight of stairs to the second floor. He turned around to face Leaven on the steps below. "I trust your experience was enlightening?"

"I suppose you could say that." Leaven rested his weight against the banister, leaving one foot on the step below.

"I'm impressed that they came after you. I would not have thought they would've been so bold as to pursue you into Ashurian territory." The bear rested a paw on one of the decorative spheres that marked the landing's corners.

Leaven lowered his muzzle in contemplation. "I'm certain it was an order from the president. No doubt she was concerned with the possibility that I intended to defect to the other side, which I believe after this mission she will realize that was never my goal."

"To prevent that possibility they were willing to commit three Talwyn masters to your capture. I wonder if they had the slightest idea why you were really out here," the bear said.

The raccoon raised his head to look the bear in the eye. "I don't believe so. They simply think I went rogue and ran out on them in a time of war."

The bear came down a step to look Leaven in the face. "It is essential that you be certain they are not aware of our plans. How much do they know?"

"Let's not talk about what they know." Leaven moved past the bear to stand on the landing. The bear returned them to an equal footing. "Let's talk about what they don't know. They do not know who you are or where you came from. They do not know that I allowed you to enter the Tower or that you and I are now seeking a set of items that predates everything we know. They don't know that this is only the beginning."

The bear turned away from the raccoon as they continued up the stairs. "I can confirm that they do not know the origin of the artifact I removed from the Tower or the probable location of the other pieces. It appears that we will simply have to find them on our own."

"What's our next move?" Leaven asked.

The bear did not answer until they had reached the top of the stairs. "Given the recent destabilization of the Talwyn/Ashurian border caused by our little reconnaissance mission it will be some time before we can expect complete freedom of movement. Searching for the artifacts now may end up attracting more attention than I would prefer. For the moment we must simply wait and focus our attention on another aspect of our campaign."

"Another aspect?" Leaven turned his muzzle away as he looked at the bear in confusion.

The ursine walked around the raccoon in a wide circle, one hand waving as if he were counting off something. "It may occur to you that progress has been slow due to a

lack of numbers on our part. There was a time when a great many people followed my every order. I know a great deal has changed about this world, but some things are still the same.” The bear stopped and touched his paws together. “I think it’s time we started recruiting.”

“Recruiting?” The raccoon raised a curious eyebrow.

“We need to increase our forces. We’re more than a match for any one of the masters but if we encounter either side in force we’ll need more than our combined powers.” He continued his walk towards the east wing of the residence. “Start reaching out to the others. You should know which ones might see our side of things and which ones won’t.”

“I have a feeling,” Leaven admitted.

The bear entered a large library that had not been used in some time. He threw both doors open and looked around the massive shelves that lined every wall from one side of the room to the other. “Excellent.”

“Someone certainly liked reading,” Leaven said. His statement earned an irritated glance from the bear.

“One thing that should never change is one’s appreciation for knowledge. We should be grateful most of this was overlooked when the house was cleared of all its valuables.” He started scanning the shelves looking for a particular volume. One thing the bear knew was that the former owner had always insisted on complete collections and possessing rare tomes and historical records that would cost a fortune to collect. It was likely what had led to the eventual disrepair of his home.

Leaven observed from the center of the library. His arms remained folded while the bear continued to search the shelves, moving one from group to the next. “How long is this going to take?”

“If there is one thing that associating with me should have taught you by now is that I have all the patience in the world. It will take as long as it takes. If you would like to help, you can start on the second level.” The ursine continued to tap each book with a claw in a systematic search of the room.

The raccoon threw up his hands in surrender and climbed one of the spiral staircases up to the second level. He reached the upper level and started his own search. From time to time the bear would pull out a book and look at it, but it seemed that what they sought would not be so easily found.

“Are you certain it’s here?”

The bear nodded. “I’m certain if it’s anywhere it will be in this library. The knowledge we seek was ancient in even in ancient times. Nevertheless, it is the sort of thing that does not vanish even with the rise or fall of empires. There are certain things in this world that cannot be erased.”

“All that’s up here seems to be books on Ashurian history and technology,” the raccoon said.

“Keep searching. Until we find it, we have nowhere else we need to be.” The bear removed another book and continued to carefully scan the contents of each page. “This may be it.”

Leaven climbed down the stairs. “You’ve found it?”

“This is an illustration of what we seek.” He tossed the book on a nearby table. The raccoon leaned in to observe it. Displayed on the page was a base that held four

rings that fit inside of each other, with writing listed on the outside of each in golden script. “I have the first piece, thanks to you.”

“I don’t understand the language on the artifacts,” the raccoon said.

The bear waved a dismissive paw. “There’s no reason you should. Even I don’t understand what the words say, but I do know what this device does. That’s all that matters.”

Leaven touched the illustration, as if that would give him some sort of connection. The ursine supposed that it did, in a way. The artifact had roots deeply embedded in the history of the Talwyn. The bear remembered the first time he had seen it in person.

It had sat upon a pedestal in the most secure room in the Spire. Their finest minds had studied it attempting to divine its secrets. Even in all of the time he had searched for it, they had learned little. After he had split from the others, he had finally discovered it’s true purpose. It was the link to the source of their power. All he needed to know was how to use it.

“Aaron was a fool. He never knew what he had in his possession. I do.” The bear closed the book.

“I think I know where we can find our first recruit.”

Caspian smiled.