

“Effective Measures”

By Lauren Rivers

“Have you heard the latest reports from command?” Rowan asked from her seat at the far end of the table. She tapped a hooved finger on the smooth surface next to a tablet with the first of four student profiles listed on it. The female bovine crossed her black spotted leg over her solid cream furred one and leaned back in the chair.

Lynn Everett shook her head and held up a paw. “Please, no war talk. It’s hard enough knowing every time my husband leaves it may be the last time.” Rowan had forgotten that the Siamese cat’s husband served in the Talwyn military. For that matter, so did her son. She had hoped to break the uncomfortable silence with some small talk. In retrospect she couldn’t blame anyone for not wanting to talk about the war.

“Sorry,” she said.

Reports indicated they were holding their own for the time being, but President Evans had concerns about several losses they had taken lately. Despite their best efforts to minimize the effects of Leaven going rogue it had still left ripples throughout the Council. The cow knew the people needed them to maintain as much normalcy as they could during these trying times.

To that end, they continued their responsibilities towards training and recruiting new students to the Academy and specifically to the Tower’s training program. A limited number of files were accepted every year for the highly competitive program. It was from these files that future masters were selected. Even if one was never chosen for that particular honor, graduating the program nevertheless meant one was likely to be placed in a key position in the Council’s support personnel and agents.

They were waiting for the third member of their review board, who likely at that exact moment was in the command center with the others discussing a mission or something else related to the conflict with the Ashurians. It seemed it was difficult to escape it these days.

With a gentle hiss of air the doors parted to reveal a female zebra with blue hair on either side of her face. She entered with an apologetic smile. “Forgive me for keeping you two ladies waiting. I would’ve been here sooner except things have been rather busy upstairs.”

“That’s no problem, Lynn and I were simply getting ready to review the files. We’ve got a few that were sent upstairs to us by the Academy instructors,” Rowan said, offering Lauren a seat, which she took with grace.

Lauren took another tablet and brought up the information. “I remember when Lucas did this for me. I was terrified when my response arrived. Sometimes I still can’t believe he chose me.”

Lynn nodded. “I remember. I was on the committee that reviewed your application to be accepted into the Tower’s training program. To be honest, it didn’t surprise me when you were accepted to train here. I was however, somewhat surprised when he chose you as his successor.”

The zebra seemed surprised. She raised an eyebrow that Rowan visibly noticed along with the fact that she had tensed up. “I see.”

“I don’t mean that to be an offensive comment. At the time I thought you were intelligent and compassionate, but I wasn’t certain you possessed the will to be a master. Not anymore.” Lynn gave a truly genuine nod of respect to the zebra. Lauren visibly looked down in mild embarrassment, but she recovered quickly.

“I’m glad I was able to prove myself to you,” the zebra said.

“As was I.” Lynn straightened in her chair. “At the time I questioned Lucas’s wisdom, but he saw something in you that I had not yet understood.”

Lauren gave a curious expression. “May I ask what that was?”

“You didn’t see things the way many of the other candidates did.” Lynn held up a paw as she explained. “The way you revealed the intruder with water particles was certainly not something most of the others would have thought to do. You may not have captured him, but nevertheless it was inventive.”

“Thank you,” Lauren said.

Rowan thought back to that day when she, Lauren, and Holly had found Isabelle unconscious in the hall. No doubt she had come up against the intruder and either discovered his presence or he had simply decided to knock her out. In either event, Lauren had revealed his use of a light crystal to hide his presence and the two had attempted to take him down. Just as Rowan and Lauren had prepared to engage the figure, he was gone and Lucas was standing beside them. The cow had no idea how the bear had managed to disappear so quickly nor had anyone else witnessed what had occurred.

“Shall we get to the files?” Lynn asked.

Lauren nodded and picked up her tablet. The names were ordered for all three women based on their rankings of their combined test scores to date. A psychological evaluation was included for each applicant. The first applicant was Susan, a young skunk girl who appeared to have an interest in either the water or the ice style. The photo showed a young girl that appeared to be somewhat shy. Her white hair rested gently on her shoulders but otherwise she appeared to be a normal Talwyn student.

“Susan looks like she’d be a strong candidate if not for some of these comments from her instructors,” Lynn said.

Lauren reviewed the file before responding. “She seems to have top marks.”

“Top marks, yes, but she’s refused most of her field exercises. She does quite well in the classroom or in the training rooms but she has little real world experience with the craft.”

“Still, she’s a fine candidate that I’d hate to disregard. Let’s put her aside for the moment,” Lauren said.

Rowan scrolled down to the next name on the list. “Logan Meers. His grades are adequate though according to the psychological assessment he’s got some issues with controlling his temper. He’s gotten into several fights in the last year.” The cow looked at his photo. The young badger was sullen and seemed to hide his face under his dark hair, but other than a somewhat somber appearance he appeared to be reasonably competent as a student. “He’s expressed an interest in the healing style.”

“Interesting,” Lauren said.

The three women went through the next twenty-four files making their recommendations on each name. Some of them were simple, others proved to be more elusive. They had approximately twenty spots to fill in this particular opening with fifty names. Once they had reached the twenty-seventh name Lauren’s head raised and she met Rowan’s glance.

“Topaz Everett,” Rowan said. Lynn scanned the information on her daughters file and held up a paw.

“You know I can’t weigh in on this one.” Lynn set her tablet down and looked at the file photo. Topaz was her mother’s daughter, a young Siamese cat at thirteen years of age, with dark red hair and a smile on her face.

Rowan reviewed her file as she had done for all of the others. Her grades were exceptional in practical applications of the craft, Talwyn history, and she had been on her fair share of field exercises. While she appeared capable of leadership she seemed to hesitate when assigned the position on team exercises. “She appears to be a candidate with some promise, though the psychological evaluation might suggest she isn’t ready for the program.”

Lauren glanced at the girl’s photo for a moment. “For a thirteen year old girl she’s remarkably mature.”

“Yes, Topaz did always seem to get along better with adults than with some of her peers.” Lynn enlarged her daughter’s picture on her own tablet with a mild smile on her face.

“She lacks the assertiveness to take command in a group.” Rowan leaned forward on the table. “She’s smart and she’s inventive, but when given the reins she’s either uncertain of herself or perhaps there’s something else at work here.”

Lauren turned towards the girl’s mother. “I’d appreciate your feedback, Lynn.” She held up a hand to forestall any argument. “I know you can’t vote on this particular case, but you know her better than any psychologist. Do you think she has what it takes to take command and to succeed in the Tower’s training program? If she’s got the potential to be a master someday, we need to know.”

Lynn looked at the photo while she visibly pondered her answer. The brown haired feline set the tablet down. “Yes. She may not know it, but she does. Both her brother and Topaz have exceeded our expectations as parents. I think she has it in her, she just needs the confidence to bring it out.”

“All right. We’ll add her to the group for further review.” Rowan marked her name along with Susan and Logan, noting that all three seemed to have potential not yet noticed by their instructors. The cow recalled that during her own journey through the Tower’s training program a number of people had considered her an unlikely candidate. She was thought to be unexceptional until a field exercise had given her the unique opportunity to impress some of the Talwyn masters.

She considered whether or not such a tactic would work with the three candidates they had selected for further review. After all, they might learn a great deal about their character by testing them without their knowledge. The children would either go through the obstacles or turn around. Either would tell them what they needed to know.

The women went through another several names until they were down to eight students to fill four slots. The last one up for consideration as one of those eight was a young wolf named Mack. His grades were nothing of particular interest though his psychological evaluation reported that he was a loner by nature and did not seem to do well with others. He avoided group projects and always insisted on being by himself when he was in the field. His interest seemed to be in the fire style, a fact that did not surprise Rowan.

“Mack,” she said.

“Mack.” Lauren repeated the name.

Lynn Everett shook her head at the file. “His instructors seem to think he’s remarkable in the field, one of the best they’ve seen. If not for his attitude he probably would’ve qualified for the training program last year.”

Rowan reviewed the student’s record and noted that he had about a screen full of violent incidents. “He certainly has proven to be a challenge to his instructors.”

Lauren held up the tablet with some chagrin. “This is more or less his last chance. If he doesn’t show some improvement he won’t be remaining at the Academy long enough to make it to another review for the training program.”

It was the committee’s policy to try to find not only the best candidates but also the best out of all the candidates they chose. The competition was fierce, and while any of the other seven names were more than suitable for the four spots that they had it was necessary to make decisions. Mack had obvious issues, but he was exceptional outside of the classroom. If his academic performance could be improved and his amount of violent incidents reduced, he might turn out to be a suitable candidate.

Lynn shook her head. “We have one week to settle on our decisions.”

“I’d like to gather some more information on these kids. What do you say we send them on a little field trip?” Rowan asked.

“What are you suggesting?” Lauren asked in return.

Rowan gestured towards the files. “The files can only tell you so much. Who a person is on paper may not accurately reflect whom they are when it really counts. While these files indicate that Susan, Logan, Mack, and Topaz leave room to be desired, perhaps it’s just that they haven’t been given the right opportunity to show off what they can do just yet.”

The Siamese cat raised her head. “You think that they’d respond to some additional training?”

“Not training. Evaluation. I don’t think we’re going to learn what we want to learn about these kids if they know they’re being watched. We need to observe them without instructors around. Turn the heat up on them in a controlled environment and see what they do.” Rowan brought up all four of their images on the tablet. “We’ve seen what happens when they’re in the classroom and have someone to tell them what to do if something goes wrong. I want to see what they do when they’re calling the shots. Training isn’t enough. We require more effective measures.”

Lauren nodded in agreement. “I have an idea on how we might be able to do that.”

“Then it’s settled,” Rowan said.

Lynn held up a paw. “Hold on a moment. We know they’re aware we’re considering them for the Tower’s training program, so whoever makes the contact for this little exercise can’t be one of us. In fact, they can’t know we’re involved or that this has anything to do with the evaluation process. Especially Topaz.”

Lauren stood, her hooves making soft clicks on the floor. “Leave that to me.”

The zebra left, leaving Rowan and Lynn alone in the room. The cow turned to the Siamese cat and smiled. “This ought to be enlightening, don’t you think?”

Lynn Everett simply offered a mild smile and the two women headed straight for the door.

The four children all seemed to be focusing on their own individual activities during the daily recess period. Nathan Frost had noticed that other than Susan, the other three students had mostly remained solitary. He supposed that he had watched them long enough when he paused at the sight of Logan Meers being harassed by another student. The badger ignored the first push, but when a second came he growled and put up his fists.

“Enough,” Nathan said, interrupting any action. Though Logan complied, he could not help but notice some disappointment on the faces of a number of his fellow students. The rhino had been young once and had gotten into his share of schoolyard fights. Regardless, he never understood why some people seemed to enjoy watching them. He had never started them and always finished the ones he got involved in, but what bothered him the most was when others just watched as if it were a show. “Logan, come with me, please. The rest of you, go about your business.” When they hesitated, he increased his volume. “NOW!” The second attempt scattered all of the remaining students into smaller clusters.

“I didn’t need your help, sir.” Logan put his paws in his pockets with a sullen expression on his muzzle.

“It wasn’t for you, Meers. I did it because I need you to join me for an exercise. Call it good timing.” He gestured towards Susan, who fell into step with them. “I’ve been asked to review your talents in a more unconventional setting than you’re used to for your next exam. You two are joining a handful of other students to assist me with a task in Ardis. Your teachers have been informed and you’re excused from classes for the week.”

Susan held up a paw in protest. “Sir, I really can’t afford to be removed from my classes right now, I’m at a critical juncture and cannot allow for my studies to be interrupted.”

“Consider them interrupted, young lady.” The rhino gestured for a young wolf and in turn a red haired Siamese cat girl to join the group. “This is non negotiable.” He stopped to face all four of them. “You’ve got one hour to pack and you’re coming with me. All your questions will be answered en route. All you need to know is that this is an important task and I’m counting on you all to be professional.” After issuing instructions for all four to pack a week’s worth of clothing including four Talwyn student uniforms each he waited in the same spot in the yard.

Less than an hour later all four returned and stood in a line before him. He could tell from their faces that Susan still wished she were in class. Topaz seemed to be confused but her face indicated she was ready for anything. Mack appeared uninterested, though he hoped that what he had in store for them would change their mind. Logan still had that same sullen look on his face, but little else to indicate his state of mind.

“All right, you four. Board the transport and within a few hours we’ll be in Ardis.” He led the group to the school’s landing pad on the roof and gestured for each one to climb in one at a time. Once they were all in, he climbed in himself and banged the back of the cockpit to inform the pilot to take off. The small craft lifted off and headed in the direction of Ardis. As Nathan looked down he saw Lynn Everett standing on the landing pad, not visible to her young daughter, but he waved to her before they pulled away from the Academy’s grounds.

The journey was mostly silent, with each of the four students remaining in their own little world. He suspected they may have chatted more had he not been traveling with them, but this was as good a time as any to evaluate each one in person. He looked at Susan first. She seemed to keep her eyes on her lap as if she would find answers there. He regarded it as interesting that she did not choose to avail herself of the view outside the window. She was the one that had intentionally avoided field exercises whenever possible.

Mack remained sullen and withdrawn during most of the trip. He on the other hand kept his eyes on the passing ground below. He did not make eye contact with anyone the entire way to Ardis, a fact that did not go unnoticed by Nathan. The rhino watched the boy snapping his fingers to create small balls of fire in his paw now and then but a stern look from him put a stop to it after a few minutes of indulging him.

Logan was the largest surprise. He kept watching his fellow students, especially Susan and Topaz. It did not appear to be anything relating to a crush or other adolescent interest, but there was more than casual observation to his glances. The rhinoceros wondered if perhaps he was not the only one in this instance performing an evaluation. He attempted to engage the young man in conversation once or twice but he seemed more than eager to return to his curious behavior.

Topaz spent most of the trip studying on a tablet. Her eyes remained focused on the text as she studied the various styles of the Talwyn craft. He suspected perhaps that this was not schoolwork but a personal interest. It was not surprising given that her mother was a Talwyn master and her father served in the military along with her brother who was several years her senior. He supposed that she might have potentially have been the type to feel entitled to a destiny in the Talwyn but knowing her mother as well as he did, he would've been surprised if that had been the case.

Lynn Everett was a gentle and trusting woman who had no doubt raised her son and daughter to be the same. Having a father in the military no doubt had instilled Topaz with a deep respect for both of her parents. He considered that perhaps she hesitated in accepting a leadership role because both of her parents had taken to it as a profession and a way of life. At times living up to your expectation of your parents was more difficult than living up to your parents expectations.

The rhino let out a sigh of relief when the awkward journey had ended and the craft had landed just outside of the town. His wife was there to greet them at the archway that welcomed visitors to Aldris. He was the first to exit the craft and greeted his mate with a warm embrace.

"Every time I leave you, I look forward to coming home again." He kissed her before turning to the four guests he had brought with him. "I'd like you to meet Topaz Everett, Logan Meers, Susan, and Mack." Each one gave a meek wave with the exception of Mack who simply gave a nod. Nathan gestured for each of them to follow the two into the town. "How have things been in my absence?"

Marla Frost took her husband's hand. "It's been quiet without you, though I feel better knowing you're back. I'm certain I'm not the only person that does, either." She led the group down the main street to the large manor that was their home. It was a rather expansive residence, but he had been convinced to live there given its history with the Talwyn. He led the group inside of the entryway before he turned to address them again.

"Do any of you know what this building is?" he asked.

“A house?” Mack asked, unimpressed.

Topaz held up a paw and spoke. “The Talwyn manor.”

Nathan snapped his fingers in her direction. “That’s correct. Do you know its significance?”

“I do. This was the place where the Council met before the Tower was built. Prior to that, they would meet and train here.” Topaz clutched her tablet gently in her paws at waist level.

The rhino looked to each of the four students in turn. “That’s right, and do any of the rest of you know why this location was chosen?”

“It was most likely due to this place’s proximity to natural sources of the Talwyn crystals.” Susan brushed some of her white hair away from her face. Her answer was the first time she had spoken since their trip to Ardis had begun. The young skunk girl had obviously been paying attention in her classes.

Nathan nodded again. “Correct. As a person who appreciates history, I thought it appropriate when the Council requested I move here from my former residence in town. After all, this building is not just my home but also a place from which I can perform my duties as a Talwyn master.” He embraced his wife with a gentle kiss to her cheek. “If you would be so kind, Marla, would you go upstairs and tell our guest I’ll be up in a moment.”

“Of course.” She bowed in respect before heading up the stairs to the upper level.

The rhinoceros gestured towards the sitting room. “Please make yourselves comfortable, dinner is in an hour. I’ll have someone take your bags to your rooms and call you when we are ready. Do not touch the weapons on display; they are not for ones such as you. Not yet, anyway. Until further notice your classes are all suspended. The four of you are my students for the time being.”

Topaz raised a paw. “Sir, exactly how long are we going to be here?”

“That depends on you,” he said.

Mack tossed his bag on the floor. “This is ridiculous. Why are we out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Ardis is hardly the middle of nowhere, young man. You’re here because it’s my hope and the hope of some of your instructors that you might learn something.” The rhinoceros regarded the gray wolf with a look that brooked no discussion. After waiting a moment to see if the young wolf would be compelled to say something, he softened his glance. “I’ll be back in a moment. I trust you can occupy yourselves for that long.” He turned around and headed up the stairs, but waited a moment to listen.

Mack’s voice came first. “I don’t get it at all.”

Topaz chimed in next. “It doesn’t matter why we’re here. We are so we may as well simply do whatever we’re required to do.”

“We don’t even know what that is,” Logan said. The badger came into view for a moment, and then turned around towards the others. “Or if we’ll be told.”

“Regardless, Topaz is right. We can only deal with the information we have at the moment,” Susan said.

“Do you think this is some sort of test?” Logan asked.

“If it is, it may have already started.”

Nathan nodded, impressed at Topaz’s latest insight. He completed his climb up the stairs and passed his wife along the way. She nodded and gestured towards the last

door on the right. He entered and closed the door behind him with a soft push. The click of the door was barely audible.

“How are they?” Lauren asked.

Nathan held one hand behind his back and made a casual gesture with the other. “They’re teenagers. They don’t know why they’re here and they’re trying to puzzle it out as we speak.”

Lauren faced the window. The zebra mare with the blue haired bangs looked out over the woods around Ardis. She paused for a long moment before she resumed speaking. “They’re in your hands.”

“I’ll do my best. Are you certain that this is the most efficient way to find out what we need to know?” he asked.

His fellow Talwyn master stepped away from the view of the forest. “It is. With the war intensifying it is more important than ever that we know how our people will respond to events around them. We could test these kids on their knowledge for years and not learn what observing them out here will tell us in a few short days. I need to know if these kids can go beyond what’s expected of them and surprise us.”

“They aren’t going to war,” he said.

“We’re already at war. They may not have to fight but they will have to hold us together after it’s over. I need to know what they’re made of, sooner rather than later.” The zebra mare shook her head as she came within a step of the rhinoceros. “If they’re going to be accepted into the Tower’s training program it’s going to put them one step closer to being on the front lines. Proceed as we discussed and report your findings as soon as you have something.”

“Are you certain that you don’t want to stay and observe the proceedings?” he asked.

Lauren held up her hand. “I can’t. I’d only get in the way and you don’t need me here.”

“Fair enough. Have a safe trip back to the Tower. You can slip out the back of the manor and the transport will take you back.” The two grasped each other around the forearm and exchanged a meaningful look before she turned to leave.

“Good luck, Nathan.”

“I doubt I’ll need it.” He paused before following her into the hallway. “Though the sentiment is appreciated.”

Lauren gave him a mild salute before she turned on her hooves and headed towards the rear of the mansion. The rhinoceros watched her go before he returned to the sitting room where the four teenagers waited.

He noticed Mack’s hurried attempt to slip one of the swords back onto the wall though he kept his silence pretending he had not seen the young wolf’s efforts. “I hope I didn’t keep you all waiting too long.”

“Not at all, sir,” Susan said with a meek smile.

Nathan gestured towards the weapons. “Since we have a while before dinner is prepared, does anyone have any questions about these weapons on the wall?” He spent the next half hour fielding their questions on weapons, his home, and any number of subjects until finally the call came to summon them to the dining room.

Topaz entered the room they had prepared for her and Susan. Handsome hardwood floors were offset by gentle cream wallpaper that ran up to the molding on the ceiling. Not to be outdone, the ceiling was covered in a gentle tiled pattern that was only interrupted by the dome shaped light fixtures. Both of the beds were covered in dark maroon sheets with a white pillow. She tested the fluffiness of the bedding with her paws and noticed her belongings had already been brought up and placed in a nearby chair.

A vase of flowers sat on the nightstand nearby. Susan's half of the room appeared to be nearly identical with the exception of a small writing desk. Two large windows that ran from waist height to the ceiling completed the room.

The boys were set up in the room across the hall. She could hear Logan and Mack talking about their theories of why they were whisked away from their classes and sent to this place. She purred as she kicked off her shoes and climbed into the bed, folding her arms behind her head. "Comfortable."

Susan dug through her bag for her tablet. "I wonder if that means we'll be here for a while."

"Mister Frost said that depended on us." Topaz watched as the skunk immediately started to skim her upcoming lessons for the classes they would be missing. "Perhaps they feel we need some special attention."

The skunk shook her head. "I'm doing quite well in all of my classes. I'm not sure I'm comfortable being so close to the Ashurian border, though."

"I wouldn't worry. The majority of the war reports put the fighting pretty far away from here. Besides, the fact is that there isn't much in Ardis other than a crystal refinery. I doubt this place would be a likely target for the Ashurian military." Topaz considered it unlikely that the Talwyn masters would take them to a hot zone. Nevertheless, she could not banish the possibility of something happening completely from her mind. She supposed from her fellow student's anxious manner that she had been thinking about it a great deal.

"I'll still feel much better when we're back in class at the Academy in Vanskar." She hugged her tablet as if that would reassure her in some way. Topaz supposed that it was a security blanket for the girl much in the way that she valued the photo of her family that she always carried. She got up to bring her bag beside the bed and laid back down on the soft sheets.

Topaz reached into her belongings to pull it out still in its protective case. The image of her smiling family looked back at her. The picture had her father on the left in his uniform with a smile on his face and his arm around her. Topaz had one paw on his arm and the other down by her waist. On the right her mother wore her Talwyn master clothes with one hand by her cheek and the other on her son's shoulder, in the proud gray shirt and dark blue pants of the cadet uniform. Starr just smiled with his paws in his pockets like always.

The peace was interrupted when the boys entered the room. "Knock knock, hope you girls are decent." Mack was the first to enter. The gray wolf looked around the room. "Figures, this room is nicer than ours."

"Is it?" Topaz asked.

Logan came in and shrugged. "It's just blue instead of red on the sheets, but otherwise it's pretty much the same." He observed the flowers on each of the nightstands. "Plus we didn't get those."

"Susan and I were just talking about the possibility of an incident with Ashurian forces." Topaz sat up in the bed and swung her legs over the side. For some reason she felt a little exposed being bare pawed now that the boys had come in. She slipped her feet paws back into her shoes and hoped neither of them noticed.

Logan sauntered up to the nearest wall and leaned against it. The badger did not appear concerned. "If that does happen this is the safest place we can be."

"You think so?" Susan asked.

"In the home of a Talwyn master and his wife? I'd say we stand a good chance with that in mind," Logan said.

Mack snapped his fingers, creating a small fireball in his hands. "I'm not afraid of any Ashurian soldiers. Let them come. I'll teach them to play with fire."

Topaz stood up. "Stop that! You know that if you get caught doing that in here you'll get your tail handed to you." The Siamese cat girl glared at him until he extinguished the ball in a wisp of smoke.

"I wouldn't do that too often if I were you," Susan said. The gray wolf leaned over the skunk girl with his teeth barely showing.

"Why is that?" he asked.

Susan pointed to the crystal. "Playing around like that wastes power. If you get attacked at night you may need every fire technique you have."

Mack lowered his arm, walking a few steps away. "That's why I always wear two crystals."

Topaz rolled her eyes at the wolf's arrogance. Even with two crystals they did not recharge at night. If they were attacked by anything in significant numbers, one fireball could be the difference between life and death. Maybe it was a boy thing. She looked at Mack and then at Logan. While the two had a lot in common there were several things about them that seemed different. Logan seemed like he was on the verge of opening up now and then, but Mack simply seemed angry. She supposed he probably had reason to be, but it was never a good idea to be angry when using the craft. That had the potential to cause a user to become wasteful with their power. One could drain a crystal twice as fast if one was not careful about its use.

"It doesn't matter. If something were going to happen I'm sure that we would never have been brought here. They wouldn't do that if they were sure the fighting was close." Topaz hoped her comment would diffuse the situation somewhat.

Mack reached into his pocket and held up a yellow crystal. "Either way, I'm ready."

"What is that?" Topaz asked, even though she knew full well what it was in his paw. "I know you're not rated for a lightning crystal."

"Relax, I know how to use it," the gray wolf said.

"How did you get it?" Topaz asked with a firmer tone.

"I bought it at a shop."

"Shops don't sell to students without teacher or parent authorization." The penalties for misusing a crystal or obtaining one through clandestine means were severe. The reason was that these crystals were effectively weapons in the right hands.

Mack stepped up to within inches of her face. "I don't need anyone to tell me what I can and can't do. Least of all some feline know-it-all who thinks she's better than me because her mother's a master."

"I have never once used either of my parents to get me anything!" Topaz was practically snarling, her fur bristling with fury. Her claws were extended even in her shoes. It took all of her self-control not to hit him.

Mack pushed her back a step. "Are you going to report me?"

"Do I have to?" she asked, before forming a fist and staring back at him.

Logan put a hand on the wolf's arm and motioned for Mack to follow him. "I don't know about you, but I want to get ready for some sleep. I have a feeling it'll be a long day tomorrow."

Mack hesitated for a moment before following the badger to the door. "Sleep tight, ladies."

Topaz closed the door after he was gone and leaned against it, breathing out as she met Susan's appreciative glance. "That's a bit more peaceful. Now to get comfortable." She once again kicked off her shoes and pulled her nightgown out of her clothes. After a moment she was changed and ready for bed. She tried to put the unpleasant confrontation with Mack out of her mind as best she could while she brushed her teeth and cleaned up a little. In ten minutes she had fallen asleep under the soft sheets.

She had no idea how much time had passed when she opened her eyes again. It was the middle of the night based on the moonlight that came through the windows. She noticed Susan was up on the other bed studying the history of the house in which they presently resided, the glow of the screen being the only indicator of her activities. Topaz sat up.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you. I'll turn it off." Susan moved to deactivate the tablet. Topaz held up a paw.

"No, you don't have to. I just woke up on my own." She noticed the skunk with the white hair hadn't changed out of her student uniform. "Don't you want to get some sleep?"

"I can't sleep, not tonight," the girl said. "I'm too anxious about why we're here. I don't know what I'm doing here, but I might as well put the time to something useful. You know?"

"I guess." Topaz shrugged and looked at the clock. It was roughly four in the morning. She pulled out her own student uniform and started getting dressed.

"Aren't you going to sleep?" Susan asked.

"Now you've got me curious about this place. I was thinking maybe I'd explore it a little." She removed her nightgown and slipped on her student uniform faster than she could ever remember doing it back at the Academy.

Susan held up the tablet so she could see the screen. "I've been reading up on the Talwyn Manor for hours. Would you like to see? There are all sorts of hidden passages and tunnels underneath the house. They were originally used for mining but now you can use them to get anywhere in town without being seen."

Just as Topaz was about to join her, she heard the sound of a body hitting the floor and something being knocked over. Topaz rushed over to her bed and grabbed her barrier crystal, snapping it into place on her uniform skirt. She held up a finger to warn

Susan to be quiet and ushered her to pretend to be sleeping. Topaz ducked behind the door and waited. A moment later a large figure dressed in dark clothes entered the room. She stomped on the figure's foot and pushed him with all of her energy against her bed. He fell back, but a quick kick to his face knocked him onto the floor. He was already getting up when she grabbed Susan and pulled her out of the room.

"Come on!" she shouted. She closed the door behind them to give them a few extra seconds. Both of the boys had burst out of their room in their uniforms though Logan was missing his jacket. "This way! We're under attack!" Topaz sprinted ahead as she gripped Susan's paw tight until she reached a fork in the hall. "You said there are tunnels under the house?"

"Yes, but..." Susan didn't finish her sentence until another figure in dark clothes appeared. Mack snapped his fingers and formed a fireball, but Topaz had already used a barrier to push the attacker against the wall. She dashed the other way and hurried down the stairs, the others close behind.

Mack jumped down to the landing and then to the floor below. The gray wolf took the lead and brought the group down to the main level. He searched for a door to the basement and pulled it open with an audible clack as it slammed against the wall. "Go!" He ushered the girls to go down first, with Logan going right before him. Mack threw a fireball at the figure just before he closed the door. He did not see what it hit.

The group hurried down to the basement level. It appeared to be much more technologically advanced than the main levels of the house. No doubt its modern uses were much more than what the house was originally designed for. The sound of the door pulling open spurred Mack to hurry ahead of the group. He gestured towards them as he spotted an opening to the stone tunnels that extended outwards from the house. "We can find a way out through here!"

"Are you sure?" Logan asked.

"We don't know how many of them are, do you want to go back up there?"

"No," Logan said.

Mack hurried ahead into the tunnel and motioned for the others to go on ahead. He turned around and snapped the lightning crystal into the bracer at his wrist. As the dark figures approached, he growled. "Let's see you follow us through this, assholes."

"NO!" Topaz said, but it was too late.

Mack aimed above the doorway where the stones were struck by a massively overpowered blast of lightning. The rocks shattered and debris collapsed, burying the way back with tons of rock and stone. The sound was deafening, forcing Topaz to cover her ears with both of her paws. Susan did the same, while Logan merely pushed Mack against the wall.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he asked.

"I stopped them, didn't I?" He pushed the badger back a step.

"You nearly got us all killed!" Susan's voice was louder than it had been since Topaz had met her.

The crystal on his wrist darkened and ceased to glow altogether. "What the hell?" Mack asked.

"It's what I was trying to tell you earlier, you imbecile. If you don't know how to use a crystal, you can drain it far faster than normal due to energy bleeding off from improper use. You blew that whole thing's charge in one shot."

“I needed to make sure we couldn’t be followed,” Mack said.

Susan breathed heavily. “You didn’t have to use the whole charge, a few key strikes in the right places would’ve done the same job. You needed a scalpel, not a club.” The skunk turned away from him in irritation.

Mack followed her by a few steps. “At least I did something. You were no help.”

Topaz stepped between them. “Stop it! This isn’t helping! What’s done is done but if you do something like that again I’ll claw your face, you got me?” She bared her teeth and flattened her ears. The fur on her tail bristled with barely controlled anger.

Mack held up his paws. “Fine, I hear you.”

“You’d better.” She turned to Susan. “Do you know where we are in the underground structure?”

Susan fumbled with her tablet a moment before she held up the display. “Here, I think.”

Topaz followed the map with the tip of her claw. “All right, it looks like we can get out if we head west.”

“Is that the closest exit?” Logan asked.

“No, but it’s the safest,” Topaz said.

Mack pulled the tablet from Susan’s hands. “We need to get out of here fast. This exit is much closer.”

“It’s also out in the forest near the Ashurian border and I don’t think it’s a good idea to run in that direction, do you?” the Siamese cat asked.

The gray wolf shrugged and pointed out another exit. “What about this one?”

“Too close to the house. I don’t want whoever was following us to know if we survived or not. If we use that exit and they’re still around it we’ll be right back where we started.”

Mack scoffed. “Fine, then we’ll do it your way. For now.” He stalked off in the direction Topaz had originally indicated.

Logan approached her from the side. “Do you think you can handle him? He’s a bit of an asshole.”

Topaz reached for Susan’s paw. “As long as I have you guys at my back, I can. Now let’s get going before he gets too far ahead of us.” She ushered them to follow, handing Susan back her tablet. The lights were still on down here, which made finding their way simpler. Apparently whatever powered them was not damaged by Mack’s foolish attempt to delay pursuit.

Topaz led the trio behind Mack for a while until they reached a juncture. “Which way, Susan?”

Susan looked at her tablet’s display for a long moment. “I think to the right.”

“You think?” Mack asked. He again pulled the tablet from her paws and rotated it around to his view. “We’re going left.”

“I don’t think that’s right,” Susan said.

“You don’t know anything, do you? All you do is think.” Mack shoved the tablet back into her chest.

Topaz pushed him away from her. “That’s something you could stand to do a little more of, if you ask me.”

“Fine, you three want to play around, good luck. I’m getting out of here while I can.” He turned left and a moment later was gone.

“Should we go after him?” Susan asked.

Logan waved a hand in a dismissive gesture. “As far as I’m concerned he can wander around aimlessly here until doomsday. If you ask me I think we’re better off without him.”

Topaz glanced in the direction in which he had left. She hated the idea of leaving anyone behind, but Logan was right. He was dangerous and unpredictable. The Siamese cat knew that while he was well versed in what to do with the craft he was not well schooled in how to use it. She motioned for Susan to come closer. “All right, let’s get moving. Susan, lead the way.”

The group had walked no more than ten steps before Topaz halted in her tracks. “Wait.”

“What?” Logan asked.

“We need to find Mack and get him back. Or at least try,” Topaz said.

Logan threw up his paws. “I don’t see why. That idiot is going to get one of us killed. Maybe even all of us.”

Susan held the tablet to her chest and shrugged. “What do you want to do, Topaz? We’ll follow you.”

Topaz looked at the tablet for a moment and looked at the direction of their planned exit. “Shit. Come on.” She turned back and headed the same way Mack had gone.

“This place is massive. How do we know what passage he might have taken?” Logan asked. It was a fair question. The first juncture they reached would increase the possibility that they were headed in the wrong direction. He sighed.

Topaz gave him a somewhat helpless gesture but kept on moving. She stopped when the pathway split and examined the floor for any signs that someone had been here. “He must’ve gone one of these directions, but does anyone see any footprints?”

“No,” Susan said.

“I don’t think so.” Logan walked down both directions a bit.

Topaz sniffed the air but his scent was heavy in the air. He could have gone either way, as it did not indicate a direction. She looked at the others. “Maybe we need to split up.”

The badger shook his head. “No way, that’s a bad plan. There’s only three of us, and I don’t think any of us should be alone right now.” Logan had a point. If two of them went one way it would only leave one person to head in the opposite direction. They had to come up with something. “The longer we stay here the more likely whoever it is that attacked the house will find their way down here.”

Topaz considered her options. They were stuck with the same three they had a moment ago. Wait for him, pick a path, or abandon him. The latter did not sit well with Topaz, but she did not want to split up the group so the most efficient use of time would be to pick one way and hope they were right. If only he would give them some clue of which direction he was headed.

A pair of gunshots sounded from the right passage. All three met each other’s glances at the same time.

“Mack.” Topaz rushed first towards the direction of the sound. As soon as she got there she found an unconscious Mack on the ground. One of the dark figures stood over him. It was even harder to identify him down here with the subdued light. She

rushed towards him as he leveled the gun at her. Summoning all of her strength she used the barrier crystal to force the gun upwards. She did not hear a shot but the gun clattered into the darkness. No doubt it had landed in one of the places that light did not reach. She faced the figure with her claws extended.

She charged her attacker with a burst of claw slashes. Her opponent dodged each one with surprising agility. It was as if she was fighting a shadow. The figure was never there when she struck. Always she missed him by a few inches when a moment before she was certain that she should have made a direct hit. A kick towards his midsection struck only air. She attempted to adjust but found herself off balance when the shadowy figure pushed her from farther away than she had thought possible. She landed on her back and watched him stand above her preparing to strike.

Logan tackled him around the waist sending them both tumbling to the ground. She had been the focus of his attention and that was why the figure had not noticed him at first. Topaz jumped to her feet and hurried towards Logan, who when he got to his knees was straddling nothing but air.

“Where did he go? I know I had him!” Logan whirled around several times scanning the area.

“He’s here, we just can’t see him.” She stood back to back with him while Susan pressed herself up against the wall.

“Susan, do you see anything?” she asked.

“No, I don’t see a thing other than us.” The skunk girl looked around and held her tablet to her chest. It was then that Topaz noticed the blue water crystal on her wrist.

“Spray the area with water!”

“What?” Susan asked.

“Do it!” Topaz said. Without any further argument the skunk girl sprayed a jet of water across the hall. It struck Topaz, then Logan, and then a third figure. “There you are, you bastard!” She struck at the figure, and it connected. The figure solidified into the dark clothed figure she had seen before. She thrust her knee into his stomach and punched him across the jaw. Topaz gave him a kick in his chest and then another in the same place, forcing him backwards a few steps. She performed a kick to his chin that sent him falling backwards to the ground.

Just as she was about to slam her foot down on his neck, a female voice called out. “Stop!”

Topaz hesitated, but lowered her foot as Logan and Susan joined her. “Who are you?”

The shadowy female figure approached and removed her mask. “Someone that’s very impressed with all three of you.”

“Miss Frost? Then who is... Oh crap, I killed a Talwyn master,” Topaz said.

The figure on the ground coughed a few times as he sat up against the wall. “Not quite, thought not for lack of trying. Your self defense instructor has taught you a little too well, perhaps.”

“I’m so sorry, sir.” Topaz extended a hand but he dismissed it.

“I appreciate the offer, but I doubt you could lift me, young lady.” He rose on his own a moment later. Removing his mask, Nathan Frost smiled at each of them. “No doubt at this particular moment you’re looking for a few answers.”

Topaz nodded. “That would be appreciated, sir.”

“By now I’m certain you’ve realized you were not brought here for a conventional lesson.” Nathan put his arm around Marla as they stood in front of the three students and Mack’s unconscious form. “Don’t worry, he’s not injured, simply unconscious. He’ll come around shortly. Suffice it to say the four of you were being evaluated. It was determined that the fastest way to learn what we needed to know was to test you and watch what you did. We’ve been observing you this entire time, with the events of this evening being recorded for later examination by the evaluation committee. With comments from myself, of course.”

Susan raised an eyebrow. “All this was to determine what, exactly?”

“Whether or not you possessed the qualities we were looking for. The three of you passed. Mack did not. He will summarily be returned to his classes and denied entry into the Tower’s training program until he learns the things we cannot teach him in a classroom.”

“Such as?” Topaz asked.

“When he had the option to remain with the group, he chose to abandon you. You three, on the other hand, did not choose to abandon him. Regardless of your feelings towards Mack, the fact that you are standing here meant that you would have intervened on his behalf, regardless. Considering that when he came face to face with me that he chose to run told me that he was not yet ready for the field challenges he seemed to excel so well at in controlled environments. As for you, Miss Everett, you took a leadership role in the group as we hoped that you would. You took charge and displayed a genuine concern for your fellow students, as well as exercising solid judgment in the face of life threatening pressure. Well done.”

Marla stepped forward. “Susan, we noticed you did extremely well in the field providing support and information to your fellow students. We were concerned on whether or not you would be able to function outside of a classroom, but now we know you can.”

“Last, but not least, Mister Meers. You were in control of your emotions the entire time, a fair sight more than Mack. I had no doubt that you would have done everything within your power to keep your fellow students safe had this been a genuine situation and not a planned scenario.” Nathan gestured for them to follow him. “I must admit, while we did our best to predict and plan the scenario ahead of time, we did not anticipate Mack’s possession of an illicit crystal nor his burning of a rather precious tapestry.”

Marla laughed. “It is not the first piece of art that has suffered in this house, I assure you.”

“Perhaps. Nevertheless, I will be sending someone to collect Mack shortly. The three of you have a choice.”

Topaz raised an eyebrow. “A choice?”

“Yes, on whether or not you’d prefer to return to your classes or remain here for a short while for a bit of additional training. This time, the offer is genuine.” The rhinoceros extended a hand to her.

“You did say that how long we’d be here was up to us.” She smiled and nodded at the others. “We accept.”

Nathan beamed as he walked. "Excellent. For the time being, the exercise is over. Return to your rooms and do your best to rest up. I promise no more interruptions."

ONE WEEK LATER THE TOWER

"Well, that had to be the most interesting evaluation I've ever seen for the Tower's training program," Lynn said to Lauren as she entered the room. "Was it really necessary to put them through their paces like that?"

Lauren turned to face the redheaded feline. "Perhaps not, but we learned what we needed to know, and much faster than traditional methods would have told us." She took a step closer. "Our predecessors had the luxury of time, a commodity that we at present possess in limited quantities. I needed to know what they would do when it really counted."

"What did you learn?" Lynn asked.

"I learned that Mack's instructors are right, he's not suitable for the Tower's training program, and maybe not even for the Academy at all. Not everyone is destined to hold a Talwyn crystal in his or her hands." She held up a tablet that displayed Nathan's notes on the gray wolf. He was the only one of the four that had washed out of the scenario and been returned to the Tower on the same day. "I'll leave it to his instructors to conduct the final evaluations on whether or not he should continue past the present semester, but the other three candidates were far more promising."

Lynn nodded as she stood beside the zebra. "I noticed you recommended all three of them for acceptance into the program."

"Yes. They all possess remarkable potential," Lauren said.

"Surely this wasn't simply about determining that they had potential?" Lynn asked.

Lauren shook her head. "Of course not. It was about getting to the core of their personalities and finding out what they have under the surface." The zebra walked to the table and leaned against it. "You can know someone for years and not really know who they are behind the masks they present to the world. When your faced with a choice you can't easily avoid you have nothing to hide behind. You don't have time to think about it. One can either act, or not. Either eventuality will teach us something about the person being evaluated."

"I'm not entirely sure I comprehend your meaning," Lynn said.

The blue haired zebra held her hands behind her back as she walked around the room. "When you look at a file, you see the details that someone has deemed prudent enough to record. It's a snapshot, but it only shows you the surface layer. You see what the candidate wants you to see. Left to their own devices you may never learn what they would do if faced with hard choices. That said, people tend to obey the basic laws of motion. They will continue to do what they were going to do until they are acted upon by another force. When this happens, they are forced to behave as their experience and personality have dictated until they are able to return to a state of equilibrium."

Lynn seemed to consider what Lauren said for a long moment. She snapped her fingers in comprehension. "I think I understand. We may never have known how Susan would have performed in the field if we hadn't forced her into it."

"Exactly. We had given her the choice several times, but at each opportunity she avoided the scenario. While eventually she would have needed to accept some field assignments in order to complete her education, we may have needed to wait for an unknown amount of time until she could no longer avoid the possibility." Lauren brought all four files up onto the screen at once. "We simply accelerated the timeline to find out what Susan would do."

Lynn rubbed her chin with her paw. "What if Susan had chosen to remain in the house when the scenario had begun?"

"Then we would have known she was unsuitable for field exercises and that too would have told us what we needed to know." Lauren folded her arms. "As I said earlier, regardless of which choices one makes, one does have to make a choice. You can lie to your teachers and yourself, hide behind your fears and your uncertainties, but when forced you cannot hide behind your actions. Whatever you do is genuine. As they say, you cannot lie with the choices you make."

"Like Mack's decision to abandon the others," Lynn said.

"Or his earlier decision to purchase an illicit crystal, made before the scenario even started. He chose to use it and nearly endangered the others when he did," Lauren said. "All of these actions indicate his personality is not well suited to a position in the Tower."

Lauren knew that a certain amount of that had been evident from the young wolf's psychological profile. Regardless, the committee had been wrong before. She knew that it was not her test scores or her affinity with the water style of the craft that had convinced Lucas to train her personally. He had seen something inside of her, something he thought was worth guiding by his own paw. Lauren hoped that she was seeing some of the same qualities in some of the recruits now that she was in his position.

When she wore the red student uniform she had studied hard and trained often. More than a few nights had been spent late in the library or practicing with one of the trainers. Lucas had watched her during some of those sparring sessions and after a while she had noticed that he was watching her all of the time. Finally, he had approached her and spoken to her in private and offered to take her as his personal student. She had been floored and at the time had no idea why she had been singled out for that honor. From that day forward she had always worked to make him proud. Perhaps that was what he had seen in her. Maybe one day she would have the courage to ask him.

"We still don't know why Leaven went rogue," Lynn said. The disappearance of the Talwyn master of the magnetism style had rocked the Council. Everyone had their own theory, especially those that worked and trained in the Tower and throughout the Talwyn nation. No one had known precisely what it was that had caused the raccoon to turn his back on his people and vanish one night. Lauren had been on the mission to try and retrieve him, but all she had learned was that there was more going on than she knew. She and Isabelle had come no closer to figuring it out since then.

Lauren exhaled and leaned her head back to spend a few moments staring at the ceiling. "No, we don't. We do know that he is no longer loyal to President Evans, and

that he is working with someone else. While we did not see any of that coming we know these things for certain.”

“True,” Lynn said. “I suppose he was better at hiding some things than we thought.”

“We can’t predict everything, even if we had the knowledge to do so. The simple truth is that there are things we are not yet aware of that for one reason or another have altered Leaven’s pattern of behavior.” She offered a gesture of mock uncertainty. “Until we understand why he chose to act the way he did we are simply speculating.”

Lynn returned her attention to the screen and gestured at the third file. “I must admit, I was pleasantly surprised by Logan. He appeared to function well as a team and seemed to be level headed under pressure. I imagine I’d be proud to recruit him as a healer.”

“I agree. He conducted himself well and kept the team together in a high stress scenario. I anticipate great things from him if he continues on the path he’s chosen,” Lauren said.

“If I may ask, what did you learn about Topaz?” Lynn looked at her expectantly; no doubt eager for the answer she had hoped to get herself from Lucas one day.

“Nothing I didn’t already know. She’s a bright, capable young girl with a good head on her shoulders. When she needed to she took charge and led the team to safety. Given the option to abandon someone she didn’t like or go and find him she chose the latter. She ran towards the danger instead of away from it even though she had no idea what she would face. She showed extreme bravery in the face of a potentially lethal threat, and I would be damn proud to have the chance to teach her someday.” Lauren looked at the girl’s image on the screen and focused on her eyes. Looking at the young redheaded feline she saw everything in her photo that she had seen in the exercise. Topaz had become the group’s de facto leader and had managed to do so without forcing her will on others as Mack had attempted or being ineffective at the task for fear of alienating her group. She understood the concept of being a leader, and not simply someone that shouted orders at others. Topaz had made both Logan and Susan feel valued. It was a rare quality, and one worth encouraging.

Lauren also noted that when pushed to extremes the girl found creative ways to use the craft. It reminded her of the night she had become a Talwyn master when she had used a similar technique to expose a figure she could not see with her own eyes. It told her that Topaz would not simply do what was expected; it meant that she was able to improvise. That was a skill that one could not teach. It was a matter of instinct and experience, and hers was already shaping up to be quite effective.

“Thank you,” Lynn said.

“I didn’t do anything special. Topaz did the hard work. She’s a remarkable student. You should be extremely proud of her.” Lauren extended her arms and gently hugged her fellow Talwyn master.

“Lucas definitely made the right choice when he chose you for his successor,” Lynn said, a smile forming on her face.

“I simply did what I thought was right,” Lauren said.

“That’s why I know he made the right choice.” Lynn gestured towards the door. “Now that all the evaluations are done, why don’t we simply go out for a cup of coffee? I could use a little peace and quiet before the next crisis.”

“I’d love to. Lead the way.” Lauren followed the Siamese cat out the door.