

CHAPTER 11

It wasn't until my third candy bar that it hit me: meeting at the vending machines was a dumb idea. After the final get-to-class bell rang, the school's halls cleared out and everything went deathly quiet. If I stayed at the vending machines, a teacher would undoubtedly find me and force me to go to class – something I really wasn't in the mood to deal with.

So I bought another two candy bars then snuck around the corner and into the lunch room. If I hid in a back corner it would be harder for a teacher to spot me, but I would be still be in a good position to see Eddie coming.

Speaking of which, where was my strange little friend? At least ten minutes had passed since our disastrous lock-out. Maybe the office ladies were giving him crap about faking sick. It certainly wouldn't be the first time that had happened to some poor student.

I absentmindedly chomped into another candy bar and tried to ignore my growing sense of panic. Eddie would show up any minute. He had to.

Two candy bars later I changed my mind. Apparently Eddie didn't *have* to return, because there was still no sign of my delinquent friend. My rising panic seemed plenty justified since nothing short of an emergency would keep him from coming.

Another five minutes passed...

...and still nothing. This had to mean something bad.

I wasn't in the mood for bad.

But without any other options, I dumped my pile of candy bar wrappers in the trash and went in search of my missing friend. A quick glance down each hallway surrounding the cafeteria revealed nothing, and a pass by the now-infamous janitor's closet showed it just the way we'd left it: closed and locked.

I hurried back to the cafeteria – my eyes darting every-which-way in search of a hall monitor or wandering teacher – but still Eddie was nowhere to be found.

I glanced at the analog clock hung high on the cafeteria's back wall. Almost twenty minutes had passed since I last saw my friend.

Something had to be wrong. I prayed it didn't involve green laser guns.

Much as I didn't want to, the next logical place to search was the main office. Maybe someone there could tell me if Eddie had successfully checked out.

Of course, the downside was that the place would be crawling with teachers and administrators.

But what other choice did I have? Unless Eddie had abandoned me – and I really couldn't blame him for that – he probably needed my help. I at least owed him one final check at the office.

I hurried there as quickly as I could, and as soon as I reached it I knew something was wrong. Really wrong.

Three tall men in dark suits and sunglasses stood, arms folded, immediately inside the front doors. Two more were outside talking to an administrator while another two paced the sidewalk. All looked like FBI agents, but recent experiences made me doubt that.

I debated doubling back and approaching the office from the opposite direction, but it quickly became obvious that no matter which way I went I would have to pass the agents. Worse yet, if they were related to this whole Zargansk thing they would almost certainly recognize me.

But I *had* to get to the office. I had to find out what happened to Eddie. He'd been brave enough to follow the janitor into the tunnels despite having no promise of protection, and I knew if I ever disappeared again, he would go to any length to track me down.

So I took a deep breath, tightened my borrowed backpack, and made a beeline for the office doors, trying my best to look inconspicuous.

I held my breath the entire way and – *thankfully* – the men in suits ignored me. This ray of hope gave me newfound courage, and once inside the office I headed straight for the front desk.

But before I could reach the desk, a familiar voice floated from a room down the office hallway.

"I told you already – I don't know anyone named Teal. Why do you keep asking me about him?"

I stopped in my tracks as another voice followed.

"Listen, kid: we were told to pick up you and a student named Teal. You can either help us find him, or you can count on being in a lot more trouble than you're already in."

"Trouble? What have I done wrong? You haven't even told me why I'm here!"

“Excuse me, young man – do you need help?”

I looked up at the secretary, who gave me a matronly smile.

“Um, no, I’m alright. I was just wondering why the police are here.”

She frowned.

“You’re not the only one wondering what they’re doing here. They’re not even police officers. I don’t know who they are,” she continued, her expression growing angry. “I was worried they’d frighten the students, standing around all scarily like that.”

I put on my most convincing frightened face.

“Oh, it’s okay, ma’am. I’m not,” I paused for emphasis, “*too* frightened. I just wanted to make sure no one was hurt.”

Suppressing my sudden urge to gag was no small feat. This was so unlike me.

The secretary smiled sympathetically.

“Well don’t worry, son. I guess they just needed to ask two boys some questions. Hopefully they’ll leave after that.”

Two boys, and Eddie was obviously one of them. That could only mean the other one was...

I forced a smile.

“Okay. Thanks.”

I left the office and walked out the front doors of the school, trying hard to stay calm even though one of the suited men showed a hint of recognition upon seeing me. I just kept my gaze firmly forward, carefully avoiding eye contact and acting like I knew exactly what I was doing.

As soon as I was out the second set of doors, I dashed behind the row of bushes set along the front side of the school. I waited, but no agents followed me outside. Maybe my luck had begun to turn.

I crept quickly along the wall, hidden from view by the bushes, until I was directly below the window of the room with arguing voices.

“How many times do I have to repeat myself? I don’t know anyone named Teal!”

“You know what – I’ve had it with you, kid. Stay here while I go make a phone call.”

A door slammed; I waited a moment, then slowly stood up and peeked

through the open window.

This looked like the principal's office. It was empty except for a lone figure hunched in a chair opposite an oversized oak desk; the figure appeared to be shaking a fist and mumbling bad words underneath his breath.

I'd know that brand of grumbling anywhere.

"Eddie! Over here!"

My no-longer-missing friend whirled around.

"Dude! Where have you been?"

"What do you mean, 'where have I been'? I was at the cafeteria waiting for you! What's going on? Who were you arguing with?"

Eddie rolled his eyes.

"I don't know – some stupid guy. He won't say who sent him, but he's obviously not a cop, not FBI, and not CIA. He won't even tell me *why* they want us."

As much as I'd anticipated this, my stomach still dropped when he said *us*. Apparently these stupid men in suits were also after me, surprise surprise.

So why hadn't they grabbed me by the front doors?

I pondered this as Eddie continued.

"So I got to the office and was just about to check out when this big guy in a suit grabbed me from behind, dragged me into this office, locked the door, and started asking all about you. I told him I didn't know anyone named Teal, but he didn't go for it."

"And he didn't say why they wanted me?"

"Nope, and I'm not even sure he knows. He just kept saying *we're going to take you down to the boss so he can ask you some questions*." Eddie scowled. "Somehow I doubt that's a good thing for us."

I nodded in agreement, making a mental note to try and get information on this *boss* guy if the opportunity presented itself.

"So what are you waiting for? Jump out the window! Let's go!"

Eddie darted for the window. He was halfway out when the doorknob to the room clicked. I slunk down into the bushes as Eddie pulled himself back inside.

"Not thinking of jumping out the window, were you?"

"Uh, jump out the window? Ha! Why would I do that?"

I was almost certain the person who'd just entered didn't find this funny.

“So did you make your phone call?”

“Yeah, kid. I’m supposed to take you to the boss right now. My associates will bring your friend as soon as they find him.”

This sent my heart pounding. I had to get Eddie out of there and I had to do it fast. What could I do to cause some commotion?

I hunched over and ran to the end of the building, then turned and sprinted to the nearest door. Once back inside the school, I found myself in the same hallway as the main office.

A glance down the hallway revealed that more suit-clad men – *agents*, I decided to call them – had assembled around the front doors. Fortunately, none seemed to notice me. They were too far away, and whatever they were talking about had them deeply engaged.

I rapidly scanned the walls of the hallway in search of something that could create a distraction. It didn’t take me long to find one.

I crawled along the ground until I reached a fire alarm. After a quick glance around to make sure no one was watching, I closed my eyes, reached up, and yanked down on the alarm lever.

Sirens blared as red emergency lights flashed along the length of the hall. Sudden noise echoed from every open classroom door and more than one “agent” drew a weapon.

I slid to my feet and joined the throngs of students leaving the building. Once outside, I strolled around the corner of the school to the front lawn, hoping to find a good-sized crowd.

I wasn’t disappointed. Kids were everywhere and more continued to pour out of the school’s many doorways. Some of the more assertive teachers were attempting to organize students by last name and take a headcount, but it wasn’t going well.

This was exactly the situation I had hoped for. It would take the teachers awhile to get a grip on things – especially given how jittery everyone was after last week’s green explosions.

I just hoped there would be enough time for me to get Eddie out of his current ‘situation.’

I waited until my imprisoned friend exited the school. A group of annoyed agents escorted him to a row of – surprise surprise – black sedans at the edge of

the parking lot.

I started weaving through the crowds of milling students. I tried to stay behind taller and wider students as I worked my way over, and I quickly realized how much I would have to hurry to reach Eddie before he was dragged “down to the boss”...

...whatever that meant.

So I moved faster, grateful for the adrenaline saturating my blood. I couldn't believe I'd just pulled a fire alarm and was now trying to steal Eddie out of secret agent custody. Part of my brain told me to turn and run for my life, but I couldn't ignore the nagging feeling that if I were the one stuck with the police, Eddie would almost certainly try to save me.

I also realized there was no way I could find that Cronus guy without Eddie's help. If I wanted to get to the bottom of everything that had happened, I needed to keep him around.

I also remembered that the janitor had told the two of us to stick together, and though I found that entire conversation very confusing, it was probably best to follow whatever advice the crazy man had given. Right now I had nothing else to go on.

So I gritted my teeth and continued sneaking toward Eddie and the agents surrounding him.

By now, Eddie and the agents had reached the black sedans. The front agent opened a back door for Eddie and forcibly pushed him toward it. Eddie looked around (presumably for me) then reluctantly climbed inside. The agent closed the car door and began talking to several of his nearby companions, each of which looked exactly the same: big men, dark suits, dark sunglasses. How cliché.

A quick sidestep and I was able to sneak into the group of students nearest the black sedans. I glanced around to make sure none of the agents were watching, then I tried to signal Eddie.

As usual, he wasn't paying attention. I was going to need another quality distraction to pull the agents away from their cars.

But what? It would need to be something flashy – something so slam-bang shocking that even the agents would fall for it. This couldn't be an ordinary, everyday distraction.

My eyes drifted across the crowds of mulling students as I considered my options. Whatever I decided, I needed to do it fast. It wouldn't be long before the teachers figured out this was all just a false alarm.

As I considered my options, I couldn't help but marvel at how my displaced classmates innately ordered themselves into their usual social circles. The jocks stood near the flagpole, flanked by the Franklin High cheerleaders and drill team. Next to them were the drama kids, then the band geeks. After that came the artists, the yearbook staff, the math nerds. The debate team was next, followed by the skaters.

In fact, only one student stood completely alone – a tall boy with shaggy blond hair, his lean frame resting against a tree on the edge of campus and his face buried in what looked like some kind of old textbook.

A-ha. There was my answer.

Let's just hope it worked.