

CHAPTER 12

I don't know that anyone knew the lone boy's *real* name. At his request, everyone called him "Niche." Even the teachers.

Niche seemed to be a nice enough guy. He never got into fights, never caused trouble – but if you met him in a dark alley you'd probably crap yourself. He was actually an exchange student from...well, I don't know where. His voice was really deep and he spoke with a harsh accent, making him always sound angry. Thing is, he never really smiled or frowned or had any expression but a look of total indifference.

On top of that, he never associated with anyone unless they first engaged him. He was always polite – almost *too* polite – and more than one girl had pointed out that with a haircut he'd be very good-looking.

I wasn't so sure. Today he wore his usual outfit: baggy camouflage pants, heavy black boots, and a black denim vest over a t-shirt with "Animal Mother" written in bold letters across the front. The only part of the outfit that ever varied was the t-shirt; everything else was pretty much the same regardless of the occasion or the weather.

So what does this all have to do with my desperate need for a distraction? Not much, except in reference to a conversation between Eddie and I on our first week of high school. We were eating in the lunchroom when Eddie suddenly pointed at Niche.

"See that kid?" he had said.

"Yeah. Niche, right?"

"Yep. If you ever need an answer to an impossible question, talk to that kid. There's way more to him than meets the eye."

At this Eddie had begun humming the *Transformers* theme as he resumed eating. I didn't have any idea what he meant and the topic had never come up again. I never found out why he'd said this or what he meant by it.

But I was in a bind – a bad one – and I needed help from wherever I could get it. I just hoped Eddie's advice was good.

I slowed as I approached Niche's tall, stoic form. He didn't move except to turn to the next page of his book. I could just make out the title; it said *US Army Survival Manual*.

That worried me somewhat.

“Uh...hey, Niche.”

“Hello Teal,” he replied, his gaze never leaving the book.

How did he know my name? We’d never talked before.

“Hi. Um, I have a strange question for you.”

Niche folded down a corner of his current page and closed the book. He slowly raised himself from against the tree and turned to face me. I couldn’t help but tense.

But Niche simply looked at me, apparently waiting for more information.

“Uh, someone once told me that if I ever had an impossible question, you’d be able to help.”

He almost smiled.

“I don’t know about that.”

“Heh, yeah, it’s kinda weird... Anyway, I need to create a distraction.”

Wow. That sounded even dumber than I expected.

“A distraction? Why?”

“See those guys in suits? The ones by the row of black cars?”

Niche glanced sideways. He examined the agents for a moment before nodding.

“Those guys have a friend of mine in their custody, only he hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Then why do they have him?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because he’s with me.”

Niche paused.

“Then instead of creating a distraction, perhaps you should simply turn yourself in. That could be the best way to free your friend.”

“It’s not that easy, Niche. It’s...well, it’s complicated.”

“Who do the agents represent?”

Man, his voice was deep. He sounded like a Russian James Earl Jones.

“They won’t say, but I don’t think they’re police, FBI, or CIA.”

Niche nodded.

“They do not work for the government. They must represent a private interest.”

He glanced at me, then shook his head.

“Sorry Teal, but it’s not in my best interest to get involved.”

He opened his book and resumed reading.

“Niche, buddy – I know it sounds crazy, but I really need some help. Can you help me or not?”

He didn’t look up from his book.

“I can think of more ways to create a distraction than you can probably imagine, Teal. But I have no reason to help someone who withholds information from me.”

The grating buzz of the fire alarms suddenly ceased.

I was running out of time.

“Niche! I’d give you more information if I had it, but I just don’t know what’s going on! I think these guys work for the Zargansk and they’re after me for reasons I don’t understand.”

He didn’t move.

“But Eddie – he’s innocent! He hasn’t done–”

“Eddie? Eddie Singh?”

“Yes, Eddie Singh! We gotta help him! Please!”

Students were starting to file back into the school. Time was up.

Niche suddenly placed a massive hand on my shoulder.

“I’m helping because this makes Eddie and I even. Don’t expect charity from me, Teal. If you want my help again you’ll have to pay for it.”

“Okay. Whatever! But we gotta act now!”

A car door slammed shut. Niche and I glanced sideways to find the agents climbing into their vehicles.

Were we too late?

“Stay here and act surprised,” he muttered as he sprinted back toward the school.

Act surprised? No problem. Every part of the last three days had been surprising. Surprise was my trademark expression.

Niche darted between thinning throngs of students like a snake, and faster than I could’ve imagined, he was back inside the school.

Exactly seven seconds later the fire alarms started back up. Niche was good.

I smiled as bunches of grumbling students trudged back outside.

Suddenly I heard the roar of a starting engine. I glanced over to find one of

the black sedans – not the one with Eddie in it – backing out of its parking spot. Two spaces down, Eddie’s silhouette appeared to be banging on the back window of another sedan.

Argh. Niche or no Niche, I needed to get Eddie out. Time was officially out.

I took off at a sprint as I tried to formulate some kind of plan for freeing my trapped friend without getting both of us captured or shot. Nothing came to mind, but the next black sedan had just started its engine. That meant Eddie’s was next.

Niche suddenly emerged from the front doors of the school. He ran to the flagpole, placed something at its base, then ran back inside.

I slowed down, wondering what had just happened.

The final black sedan started its engine.

A sudden *BOOM* exploded from the base of the school’s flagpole. Kids screamed and sprinted in all directions as the pole began to topple.

The brake lights flickered on all three black sedans.

As the screaming escalated, the flagpole fell outward, gaining momentum as it dropped. I’m not sure of its total length, but it was taller than our two-story school, making it at least twenty feet high.

Students plowed into me and I had to fight to keep from getting run over.

Then I realized where the pole was falling.

Niche was a genius after all.

The gigantic metal beam smashed through the front windshield of the middle black sedan. Its tip crunched through the roof, popping metal and shattering plastic and glass as it turned the general shape of the car into a V. The horn blared, the airbags deployed, and the pole didn’t stop until it nearly touched the ground.

The car was decimated.

The driver and passenger of both Eddie’s car and the undamaged car jumped out. Two ran toward the school, weapons drawn, while the other two ran to the damaged car.

Now was my chance.

I ran past fleeing classmates in a direct line for the last black sedan. Once I reached it I slowed down, ducked, then crawled to the street side of the car.

I quietly opened the back door and beckoned Eddie out.

“Teal! Dude! Am I glad to see you! These stupid doors have no handles on the inside, so if you hadn’t come I–”

“No time to talk,” I interrupted. “Let’s get outta here.”

Eddie climbed out and I quietly closed the door behind him. The two agents trying to move the pole off the damaged car were making steady progress, but at least they hadn’t noticed us.

I quickly considered our options. Eddie and I wouldn’t have much time to make our escape, and I wasn’t even sure where to go. The only idea I could settle on was to try and get lost in the now-huge group of students running from the school.

We scurried away from the car and into a nearby group of running teenagers. I led the way as we made a wide berth around the school and started moving toward the back fence. Eddie loudly questioned this decision but I ignored him. He should just be glad he wasn’t still in the back of a black sedan.

A sudden boom erupted behind us. We looked back to find the two agents from Eddie’s car blasting away at the pole with – you guessed it – green laser guns. They were trying to split the pole into smaller sections so they could remove it from the mutilated car.

I sped up. Those agents weren’t gonna be happy when they realized Eddie had escaped, and I was starting to wonder if they might finally decide to use those green blasts on us.

Once we reached the back side of the school, we stopped jogging and started sprinting for the fence at the edge of the schoolyard. If I remembered things correctly, our destination would be just past the large, weed-filled field on the other side of the fence. With a bit of luck, Eddie and I could reach it before the agents noticed he was gone.

I just prayed other men in suits wouldn’t be there waiting for us.

My legs were starting to hurt, but that didn’t stop me from pouring on the speed as we sprinted toward the fence. I reached it at a full run and somehow managed to gracefully leap onto and over the top of it.

Eddie tried to jump over behind me but somehow he missed; all I heard was a crash and a curse, and I turned around to find him on the ground in a painful heap.

“Eddie, c’mon! Those agents are gonna see us!”

He grunted and tried to stand up.

“Dude, my ankle is killing. I think I broke it.”

I fought the urge to panic.

“It’s not broken. C’mon! We gotta go!”

Eddie tried to lift himself over the fence, but his leg collapsed beneath him.

“I can’t, man. I can’t make it. Go on without me. I’ll stall them. Go find Cronus.”

I shook my head as I backed up from the fence.

“No way. I’m not leaving you here.”

In one fluid motion I leaped toward the fence, grabbed the top of it, and flipped myself back over. My heart thumped and my mind raced, but I only had one thought: Eddie and I had to get out of there, and we had to do it fast. By now, the agents almost certainly knew we were missing.

I pulled Eddie up and half-lifted, half-shoved him onto the top of the fence. He teetered dangerously before falling to the other side. It sounded painful.

I lined up for another running start, then leaped back over the fence. My legs were tired and this time I scraped my hands as I flopped to the other side.

Eddie moaned and held his ankle as I watched the school grounds through gaps in the fence. I didn’t see any agents yet, but it wouldn’t take them long to pinpoint the possible places Eddie and I could have gone.

I reached down and lifted my injured friend to his feet. Eddie grimaced, but he threw an arm around my shoulders as we hobbled across the field.

I tried to reorient the weeds as we walked, hoping to cover our tracks, but the two of us were in a bad situation. No way could Eddie go much further without medical attention, and if we happened to encounter more tall men in dark suits we wouldn’t stand a chance.

I just hoped I could get us somewhere safe before he passed out.

“Hey – you okay?”

Eddie said nothing. His face was pale and frightened, but despite his obvious pain he continued hobbling alongside me.

It didn’t take us long to arrive at the cul-de-sac on the far edge of the field. The streets here were empty, but if we walked to the end of the street we would find ourselves on a busy road. I didn’t want to spend more time on public side-

walks than we absolutely had to, but my plan required us getting to that main road. Eddie and I hurried down the sidewalk as best we could.

The dissonant blur of chaotic screaming and exploding continued to play across the field, and more than once I thought a black sedan would suddenly pull into the cul-de-sac.

But none did, and we managed to reach the main road undetected. I scanned the busy street for the help we needed.

Perhaps it was fate, perhaps it was luck, but the street had exactly what I'd hoped: a bus stop. Eddie and I hobbled over to the empty bench and within thirty seconds a bus arrived.

Eddie stumbled down the center aisle while I took care of the fare. As the bus doors closed, I grabbed several bus schedule pamphlets and joined my friend, who had settled somewhere near the middle. He looked like he was suffering.

I sat and began searching through the various bus routes. Eddie held his ankle and stared blankly out the window.

A minute or so later, he elbowed me and motioned out the window. I looked out to find us driving past the far end of my street.

And wouldn't you know it, a host of black sedans sat parked in front of my house.

Eddie grinned.

"Guess we're not going to your place any time soon, eh?"

"Guess not."

His smile faded.

"Speaking of which...where are we going?"

I sifted through the bus routes in my lap.

"Actually, I was hoping we could go to University Hospital. That's where my dad is staying. I figure we could get your ankle examined, and maybe my dad will have some advice for us. He's the one family member I have left, and I know he has more information about what's going on."

Eddie raised an eyebrow.

"And what about Cronus? Shouldn't finding him be our first priority?"

"Eddie, look at us! You're injured and can barely walk. I spent my last three bucks on bus fare, so now we're broke."

He started to interrupt but I cut him off.

“And, as if that’s not ridiculous enough, these agent guys are after us at every turn. Getting help is way more important than hunting down some Cronus guy.”

Eddie looked like he disagreed but he stayed quiet. I just hoped the police and/or agents wouldn’t be at the hospital. Based on the events of my last visit there, I didn’t know how safe it would be – but it couldn’t possibly be more dangerous than sticking around the school.

I just prayed we’d make it there alive and unharmed.

And then I prayed we’d find my dad alive and unharmed. Bad as our situation was, his seemed even worse.

Then I prayed for Jackson. And Emmary. And mom.

I really missed them.