

CHAPTER 13

It took the better part of an hour and several confusing bus transfers, but eventually we arrived at the hospital. I helped Eddie up the front stairs and the receptionist at the front desk gave each of us directions.

I asked Eddie if he'd be okay; he just shrugged and hobbled down the hallway. His goal was to have a doctor look at his ankle, but he didn't know if they could do anything without his parents around. "It's still worth a try," he had said.

I went the opposite way, taking the elevator up to dad's new room on the second floor. I wondered when he had been moved – and if his move was related to the gunfight at his old room.

I couldn't believe how nervous I was to face him. I had no reason to be scared – and I knew I would feel better once everything was out in the open – but something about openly discussing all this Zargansk crap made me feel uneasy.

I just hoped dad would be willing to talk. The last thing I needed to hear was another round of "sorry, but we can't discuss that."

I exited the elevator and, after several turns, found myself outside my father's room. The butterflies in my stomach had been fluttering the entire way up; now they were going wild.

But there was no getting away from what needed to be done. I gritted my teeth and slowly pushed the door open.

Dad appeared to be sharing the room with another person. Both of them looked asleep. Thankfully.

I breathed out a sigh of relief and pulled a chair over to the side of dad's bed.

For several minutes, I couldn't help but stare at my old man. He didn't look well. His cheeks looked sunken and new wrinkles had sprouted around his eyes and the corners of this mouth. His hair looked thinner and his skin had an odd, translucent look to it. All this, combined with the soft hum of the overhead lights and a strong antiseptic smell, made me feel a tad nauseated. This wasn't going to be easy.

I thought for a moment about when dad would have checked into the hospital. Exactly two weeks ago he had claimed to leave town on an overseas business trip; I wondered if he had actually made it out of town before his symptoms set in. Mom didn't find out about him checking into the hospital until last Friday

night, so where had dad been between the previous Monday and last Friday? Had he been involved with the agents that now pursued us?

That explanation was better than some of the ones I had considered on the way up. I hoped my dad was a hero.

My throat involuntarily tightened, but this was no time to be getting sentimental. I would find a way to make him better. There had to be a way.

But first things first. I had to tell dad about the green explosions, the crazy janitor, mom disappearing, and the Zargansk.

Only...I really didn't know what to say about that last one. Eddie still hadn't told me anything about them.

And as for the crazy janitor, well – we still had no idea who he really was. I didn't even know where he had gone. He had called it "Orionis," but that didn't sound familiar. Maybe that was a code name for something else...?

And oh yeah – then there was the Cronus guy we were supposed to find. Should I tell dad about that?

I felt completely overwhelmed. The more I thought about it, the more ridiculous my story sounded. No way would it be good for dad's health if I told him a bunch of big men in black suits were actively pursuing his family. Maybe coming here had been a stupid idea after all.

Just then, dad stirred.

I stiffened. I wasn't ready to talk...yet.

I watched him for several moments and swore I saw his eyes open, but after another minute passed it seemed like he had fallen back asleep.

So I took a deep breath, then began recounting the story of my weekend. I had described the various events so many times to so many people that I had the chronology down pat. I told dad everything, starting first with the Friday morning explosions and eventually ending with my bus trip to the hospital. More than once I got so excited that I stuttered and tripped over my words, and more than once my throat tightened up.

Thankfully, I managed to make it to the end without a single tear. Dad would've been proud.

"Well," I said after finishing my sordid tale. "There it is. That's how my weekend went. How was yours?"

I grinned in spite of myself, and it almost looked like a slight smile formed

at the edges of dad’s lips.

“So what am I supposed to do now? Eddie has a gimp ankle, I’m broke, and I have no idea who Cronus is. Everything seems hopeless.”

Suddenly dad cleared his throat and whispered, “I can’t fix your friend’s ankle and I don’t have much money, but I think I can help you find Cronus.”

My jaw dropped. Literally.

“Dad! Have you been awake this whole time? And what do you mean you can help me find Cronus?”

He coughed and weakly held up his hand.

“Quiet, Teal! The janitor told you to keep this information secret.”

I shut my still-open mouth and sat back down.

“I can’t believe you were—”

“Shh. This won’t take long.”

I looked sharply at my old man.

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re not dying here, dad. No way.”

He sputtered out a combination of coughing and laughter.

“No, I’m not dying yet. But I probably won’t live past the end of next week without an antidote.”

“An antidote? So you *have* been poisoned!”

“Teal! Quiet!”

I realized I was standing again.

“Sorry, dad. I just—”

He held up a hand.

“It’s okay. Now please listen carefully to me.”

I nodded.

“I know about the Zargansk, Teal. I also know about your janitor friend, and I know where he has gone.”

“What?! How can you possibly—”

“Let me finish!”

“Sorry.”

He smiled weakly.

“What do you know of the Zargansk? Anything?”

“Pretty much nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “The janitor was just about to explain the connection between the Zargansk and Genetitech when that earth-

quake hit. He never got a chance to finish.”

Dad let out a heavy sigh.

“Oh, son. I wish I were well. I have so much to tell you – so much I never should have kept from you kids. But now’s not the time. You have to get going. You have an important mission ahead of you.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Dad, I–”

“Quiet!”

He cough-laughed again.

“You’re just like your mother, always interrupting with some kind of question.”

If dad thought we were bad, he should spend some time around Eddie. Now *there* was a person who asked too many questions, especially at times he shouldn’t.

“Listen to me carefully, Teal: the janitor was absolutely right. Genetitech was just a front for the Zargansk and Augustus Beck. Beck had a deal with the Zargansk – in return for curing his poisoning, he would act as a horrible scientist for them, carrying out tests on humans that Zargansk laws prohibited actual Zargansk from doing.”

“Humans? But what are the Zargansk...?”

“The Zargansk are an alien race. One–”

“They WHAT?!”

The other patient in the room suddenly coughed and rolled over. We paused until his snoring resumed.

“Son – yell again and we’re done.”

“Look, I’m sorry,” I whispered. “But aliens? Seriously? Dad, c’mon!”

“Do you really think I’m making this up? Think about everything you’ve seen. How else would you explain it?”

“I, it’s just, there’s no, you can’t possibly...”

“Teal, enough. Now is not the time for arguing. Do you want answers or not?”

“I’d love more answers.”

“Then keep it down and stop interrupting. The Zargansk – whether you like it or not – are an alien race. I swear it. To make a long story short, one of their

spaceships found Earth thousands of years ago while traveling on a scientific journey through the galaxy. Ever since then, they have been keeping constant watch over us.”

Dad coughed again and motioned for a glass of water on the table beside him. I handed it to him, then thought better of it and slowly helped him drink.

“Thanks.”

He wheezed again and I offered another drink. He shook his head, so I took one instead.

“The Zargansk have always been afraid of us, Teal. They have always feared that someday we would grow strong and become a threat to their race.

“To prevent that from ever happening, they employed hundreds of humans to act as their ambassadors. These ambassadors were to keep the aliens constantly informed of what we, the humans, were up to.”

I couldn’t believe this. Humans serving aliens? Ridiculous. Dad had to be on some trippy new medicine.

“Dad please, this is—”

“Quiet. These human ambassadors were more than just passive observers. They were a failsafe. If the Zargansk ever decided us humans were becoming too strong, they would force their human ambassadors to murder, or steal, or do whatever was necessary to keep mankind from reaching its full potential.

“Your janitor friend was one of these ambassadors. So was Augustus Beck, before he turned. I was also an ambassador.”

I spit water all over myself.

“You WHAT?”

“An ambassador to the Zargansk, Teal. It was terrible. But I escaped, and now I fear I am paying an even more terrible price.”

“But dad, how could—”

“Listen to me. The Zargansk gave all of us – including me, Augustus, your janitor friend – a poison when we began our service. We had no idea. We also didn’t know why every time we reported to the Zargansk, they would make us drink a special concoction before reporting to them. We didn’t realize it at the time, but they kept giving us those drinks as antidotes – antidotes that kept the poison inside us from spreading. When I escaped from service to the Zargansk, I no longer had access to those antidotes, and this is the result.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was like some kind of dream – no, like some kind of nightmare. Everything in my life had officially become a horrible, unbelievable nightmare.

Aliens.

He had to be joking.

“Teal, if what you told me is true and Phenx said that Project Earth is being terminated, then the Zargansk may already be coming to destroy us. We don't have much time.”

He sighed heavily before muttering, “Kepik was right. We should have moved sooner...”

I didn't know what that meant. Maybe dad's medicine had officially taken over his mind.

“Dad, I think you need to rest. You're starting to sound–”

“No. There's more I need to tell you.”

I didn't know how to respond. Dad continued, but his voice was getting weaker. I had to strain to catch all of his whispers.

“I escaped service to the Zargansk exactly two weeks ago – the night before I left on my 'trip.' The purpose of my trip was to track down as many of these human ambassadors as possible before someone like Augustus Beck got to them. Each time I found one I would beg him to join our rebellion against the Zargansk. I think I found most the ambassadors, but it's impossible to know how many will actually join us in our fight against the aliens.

“We agreed on a date – ironically enough, today – when all the ambassadors on our side would secretly close their portalgates. That's why the janitor needed you down there with him. If he wanted to go into the portalgate after his family, he would have been unable to close it behind him. He needed someone to stay behind and close his portalgate. You played a key role in our plan to delay the Zargansk, Teal! You still have the remeter – the gate-closer? It looks like a small silver pole.”

I nodded. The silver rod was still in my back pocket. Every time I sat down I remembered it.

“This is great news! It means the ambassadors have been following my plan! We might actually have a chance at beating the Zargansk!”

Dad coughed again, and this time it took awhile to subside. I was worried a

nurse would overhear and make me leave. I warned him of this.

“You’re right. Let me hurry – I only have a little more to say.

“First, you need to go home.

“When you get there, go to my bedroom. Under your mother’s side of the bed you’ll find an unmarked steel box. The key to its lock is beneath our TV. Find the key and open the box, then take everything inside it – along with any other supplies you can gather – then go back to the alien tunnels at your school. I need you to reopen the portalgate and follow the janitor to Orionis.”

I stared at my father in total disbelief. Was this really happening?

“Don’t talk to anyone about this, Teal – *especially* your mother. She’d kill me if she knew I was telling you this.”

“Dad, mom’s gone.”

“I know. She’s somewhere safe for now – and she’s very sorry about leaving you behind, but she was ambushed and there was no choice. She’ll be ecstatic to know you’re okay...which is all the more reason not to let her know about this, if you catch my drift.”

I didn’t, but I nodded anyway.

“Good. I’d go myself, but as you can see I’m in no position to leave. But I will try to keep the HIRCs distracted.”

“HIRCs?”

“Augustus Beck’s creations, or the men that have been hunting us.”

Ah, *them*. The agents.

“What does HIRC mean?”

“It’s a long story. I’m sure you’ll find out eventually.”

“Er, okay. So let me get this straight – you want me to go home, grab a strange box and some supplies, then travel through a portalgate to some planet called Orionis?”

Dad nodded as if this were a totally reasonable request. I started to protest...but then it hit me.

This is what I wanted. This is what I had hoped for. This was my mission – the mission mom didn’t want me to have.

This was my chance to save my father...and maybe the rest of my family too.

This was my revenge against *them* – against the HIRCs.

Thinking could wait.

“Okay, dad. I have no idea what’s going on, but I’ll do it.”

The way my old man smiled at me, I would have done anything he asked.

“Thank you, Teal. You...you’re my only hope. In fact, you may be the only hope for all of us.”

I didn’t like the sound of that.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t ask. And Teal – I want you to know that I believe in you. You might only be fifteen, but look at how much you’ve done already.”

I couldn’t help but smile. Dad reached over and placed a trembling hand on my leg.

“And this may be obvious, but I need to say it. If I don’t get an antidote soon, I’m going to die.”

I began arguing but was swiftly silenced.

“It’s true. No sense denying it. Without an antidote to this Zargansk poison, I *will* die. So listen to me, Teal – I know more about the HIRCs, Augustus Beck, and the Zargansk than anyone else on earth. On top of that, I’ve become the *de facto* leader of our rebellion against them. Without me and what I know, I’m worried that when the Zargansk do attack we won’t have a chance against them.”

He sighed heavily.

“If there was any way to keep you out of this, I would use it. But I have nothing. You meeting that janitor – well, read the gold note in my box. Then you’ll understand what I mean.”

Dad coughed again. He didn’t look well.

“Dad, I–”

He waved his hand as he tried to control the coughing. It took longer than ever for it to stop.

“Teal, you need to go. Time is running out. Take Eddie – if he’s willing – and go to the Zargansk world of Orionis. Once you arrive, use the remeter inside my box at home to close the portalgate behind you. The remeter you have right now only works on Earth. Do you understand?”

No, but I nodded anyway. Dad looked worse than ever.

“Once you’ve passed through the portalgate, try to find a Zargansk doctor. His name is Kepik Arist. He is my friend, and he will help you find an antidote.”

I nodded again.

“Dad...are you okay?”

He shook his head. I’d never seen him so miserable.

“No, I’m not. I don’t have much time left.”

My eyes began to tear up, and I knew that this time I wouldn’t be able to stop them.

“I won’t let you down, dad. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He smiled weakly.

“I know, son. I know.”

“...I love you, dad.”

But he didn’t respond. It looked like he was sleeping again. I wiped the tears from my eyes and turned to leave, when suddenly I remembered that I had one last very important question for him – maybe the most important question of all.

“Wait! Dad, what about Cronus? The janitor told me to find him! Where is he?”

My father stirred and weakly opened one eye.

Then he quietly whispered, “Teal, don’t you see?”

My eyes went wide.

He smiled, then closed his eyes again.

I spent another minute just staring at my father. I wondered if the janitor had known this would happen. Eddie was never going to believe it. I barely believed it.

I had actually found the mysterious Cronus, just hours after the janitor had told us to. I had found him completely on accident.

Cronus was my weak, poisoned father. He was lying quietly in a local hospital bed, tired and frail and frighteningly close to death.

I wiped the tears from my eyes as I walked silently to the door. I found that, for the first time in a long time, my mind was surprisingly clear. In fact, I had but one thought on my mind: a single, powerful, overwhelming thought.

I *would* find a way to save my dad.

No matter what.