

CHAPTER 14

“No way! You’re kidding! It can’t be that easy! Your dad is really Cronus?! Dude! Is he an alien?”

Eddie was hopping up and down on his uninjured leg and spewing out questions as fast as he could think 'em up.

“Eddie, c’mon – he’s my old man. He’s not an alien.”

After leaving my father’s room, I had returned to the front entrance of the hospital. Eddie was already there, waiting impatiently. I quickly related the details of my conversation with dad – a task that had proven difficult with Eddie interrupting every other word – and when I finished, he had unloaded a list of frantic questions on me.

Thing is, this wasn't the best time or place for conversing. Maybe I had inherited mom’s paranoia, or maybe I just figured we’d have plenty of time for talking later.

I quickly asked Eddie about his experience at the hospital.

“Did you get your ankle fixed?”

“Not really. Apparently hospitals can’t do anything – even a stupid x-ray – without parental permission. All they could do is tape it up.”

“Does it hurt?”

“It’s swollen, but it doesn’t hurt too bad. The nurse thought it was just a sprain. It should go away in a couple days.”

He shook his head and massaged his bandaged ankle.

“So tell me more! Did your dad say anything about what Orionis is like? Does he really want us to go through the portal like the janitor did?”

“No, he didn’t describe Orionis, and yes, he does want us to go through the portalgate.”

Eddie raised an eyebrow.

“*Portalgate* – I guess that’s what the Zargansk call those magic orbs. Now stop asking questions! I’ll tell you more once we’re somewhere safe.”

“What could be safer than a hospital?”

“In case you forgot, those weird guys in suits – they’re called HIRCs, by the way – are still after us. It’s only a matter of time before they figure out where we are. As soon as they discover that, they’ll be all over this place. I’m hoping my

dad and his ambassador buddies will keep them so busy they forget about us – but Eddie, let’s face it: we’re fugitives.”

“Fugitives.”

He spoke it almost reverently.

“We’re *fugitives*. How cool is that?”

He said that now, but next time we ran into HIRCs you could bet he’d be wetting himself.

“Whatever. Now help me think. We’ve got to find a way to my house, but I’m broke. Do you have any money?”

Eddie grinned and nodded.

“Have you forgotten how loaded my parents are? I have more money than you can possibly imagine!”

He fished through his pockets and emerged with a shiny plastic credit card.

“This thing has thousands of dollars on it. Hey – are we going shopping for supplies? We should, since we’ll need stuff to take with us into the portalgate.”

I hadn’t considered shopping for supplies, but it would definitely be a good idea to bring some fresh food and survival gear with us.

“Yeah, let’s go shopping later tonight. First, though, we have to head to my house and get whatever’s in dad’s box.”

Eddie’s eyes took on a childlike glow.

“Dude, I wonder what’s in it. Maybe it’s more alien weapons, like the rifles we used in the tunnels!”

I remembered dad saying something about a gold note inside the box. I hadn’t told Eddie about that. Honestly, I still wasn’t sure how much to reveal to him. Though I definitely knew I could trust my best friend, I worried about HIRCs capturing him and torturing him for information. Because of this, I made the decision (with a twinge of guilt) to not tell him anything more about the box until I’d had a chance to look inside it.

I turned back to Eddie and held up a hand.

“Stop changing the subject. How can we get to my house?”

“We could take a bus back, or we could catch a cab.”

I shook my head.

“Those are too dangerous now. The HIRCs could have alerted the police, and since we’re not old enough to drive, it would make sense to warn all the bus

and cab services. They could easily send out our descriptions over the radio.”

I paused.

“We might even be on TV!”

At this, we both glanced at the lobby’s TV. Thankfully, our faces weren’t on it...

...yet.

“Wait, Teal – don’t your parents have a car here? Can we take it?”

I shook my head.

“Besides the fact that we’re only fifteen, the minivan isn’t here. Mom took it wherever she went.”

My spirits lifted every time I thought of her getting out safely. That was the best news I’d had in days.

Eddie sighed.

“If we can’t use cars, buses, or taxis, we’re out of luck. Walking is the only other option.”

I folded my arms and tried to think of another method of transportation. Nothing came to mind.

“Well,” I sighed, “we’re not getting anywhere by standing around. Better start walking.”

Eddie didn’t look happy about this, but he closed his mouth and hobbled over to the hospital’s revolving doors. I followed him out.

The afternoon sun was already well on its way into the western sky. It was a beautiful day out; the temperature was warm and the streets bustled with energy. I actually felt much safer out in public. Two teenage kids could disappear in a city this big.

This was the first time in a long time that I’d been downtown, and I had to admit I wasn’t sure which direction led home.

Eddie sighed and rolled his eyes.

“Guess I’m leading the way,” he muttered, limping to the nearest crosswalk and motioning for me to follow.

We traveled slowly. Eddie complained about his ankle every few seconds, but I was getting good at ignoring him, especially since I was preoccupied with thinking about a fast, safe way to get back to my house. I couldn’t wait to get there and see what was inside dad’s box. I just hoped men in suits wouldn’t be

there waiting for us.

After several blocks of walking, Eddie slammed himself onto a bench.

“This is idiotic. What are we doing? We’re never going to make it home by walking!”

“Do you have a better idea? Maybe you should think of a way home instead of wasting all your energy whining about your stupid ankle.”

As soon as I said this I wished I hadn’t.

“Whining?” he yelled, his face contorting into a huffy scowl. “What do you mean, whining?!”

But I ignored him. A large store window across the street had caught my attention, and I deliberately peered around Eddie’s outraged face.

My eyes drifted to the sign above the window. I read it twice as a grin broke out on my face.

“What’s so funny? Hey Teal! Listen to me!”

I shifted my eyes back to Eddie, who still looked furious.

“Calm down and turn around.”

He glared, but obeyed.

His glare faded.

“Hmph. Not a bad idea...”

I glanced both ways then hurried across the street, pausing as I approached the large glass window that had caught my attention moments before.

Inside it were two of the most beautiful, amazing, gloriously expensive mountain bikes I had ever seen. Both were painted in wavy camouflage colors, and an extravagant sign above the display read: “The New WindSpectre X-3: The World’s Most Advanced Bike.”

Impressive claim.

I turned to look at Eddie, who appeared to be wiping drool onto his sleeve. He was whispering the specs listed at the base of the bike.

“Wow. Aluminum frame, full-suspension,” several other things I didn’t understand, “built-in GPS... and all under 25 pounds.”

Eddie’s eyes were wide as GameCube discs.

“Dude, I haven’t been this excited since I bought my Segway.”

If you knew Eddie, you’d know that was no small claim.

“I didn’t know you were into bikes.”

“I’m not real serious about them, but when my parents dragged me on their bike tour of Honduras last summer they made me take a mountain biking course. As part of the class I had to read a book on mountain biking, and from what I know, this is a dream bike in every possible way.”

“What? You never told me that!”

Eddie just shrugged. I wondered how many other secret talents he was hiding.

I stared at the bike for several moments more before raising the question on both our minds.

“So, uh, what would you think of biking back to my house?”

Eddie grinned mischievously and we hurried into the store.

Thirty minutes later, the two of us walked out of Jeffy’s Bike Emporium with two brand-new WindSpectre X-3 mountain bikes. The only person more surprised than I was the speechless store clerk. He asked Eddie for ID no less than four times before running his credit card. I couldn’t blame the clerk – the bikes had totaled to almost \$3,000 *each*. Eddie hadn’t blinked an eye as the clerk reluctantly swiped his card.

“Mom and dad will just be glad I’m getting some exercise,” he had said.

“Won’t they be angry about you buying *two* bikes?”

“Nah – I’ll just tell them one is for here, and the other is for our cabin in Colorado.”

I could only shake my head in disbelief. I still had trouble comprehending just how loaded Eddie’s parents were. I had almost felt guilty as I watched him sign the credit card receipt – but the more I learned about the Singh family’s wealth, the more I realized that \$6000 worth of bikes meant nothing to them.

And while I’m being honest...you might have guessed it, but money was one of the reasons I kept Eddie around despite his bad attitude and gimp foot.

Don’t judge me too harshly.

As expected, the bikes were every rider’s dream and we made our way home quickly. Traffic had reached at its full rush hour peak, leaving most of downtown totally gridlocked. Taking a bus or cab home would have taken hours.

Eddie swiftly led the way as we wove first through downtown, then down suburban street after suburban street. He was a surprisingly good rider (especially considering his bad ankle) and I had to work hard to keep pace with him.

Fifty-two minutes later we arrived at the end of my street. We had taken the long way around to avoid any agents lingering near the field, arriving on the side of the street furthest from both downtown and the high school.

And wow, was it nice to be done riding. I held up one hand to block the setting sun while the other clutched at my burning chest. Beside me, Eddie was also breathing heavily, his face a grimace as he slowly massaged his injured ankle.

After I caught my breath, I took a moment to squint down the street at my home. My worst fears were confirmed – three black sedans still sat out front. They looked unoccupied.

But this didn't make me feel any better, because empty black cars could mean only one thing: the suit-clad men were inside my house. One of them was probably the same guy I had narrowly escaped earlier that morning. I wondered if he'd gotten in all kinds of trouble for letting me get away.

That made me smile.

Eddie's shrill voice shook me back to reality.

"Well? What now?"

I thought for a moment as Eddie idly stroked his new bike.

"I don't know. We need to get into my house and find dad's box. Any ideas on how to do it without getting caught?"

"Not exactly, but I sure don't like sitting out in the open. Let's leave the bikes and try to get closer."

We leaned the bikes against a nearby fence before warily approaching my house. Eddie and I took turns hiding behind fences, trees, mailboxes or any other cover we could find before darting one at a time to closer hiding spots.

Eventually we reached the small picket fence on the north side of my home. I crept along it until I reached the corner where this fence intersected the fence to the backyard. After a quick glance to make sure no one noticed our approach, I carefully leapt onto the corner where all the fences met, then dropped gently into my backyard.

"Hey!" Eddie whispered angrily. "I can't jump over a fence! What are you thinking? My ankle's still screwed up!"

"Quiet," I whispered back. "I'll take care of this. Go watch the bikes while I find a way inside."

Eddie cursed but headed back toward the bikes. I bet he grumbled the entire

way.

I, on the other hand, quietly slunk up to the massive rosebushes below my bedroom window. I placed my back as close to them as I dared, then started creeping toward the back corner of the house. Because I had approached on the side where my bedroom sat, that was the only window from which I could be seen. I figured it still smelled like sleep-inducing stench, meaning I would most likely be safe unless the agents decided to actually walk out into the backyard.

And we'd just have to hope that didn't happen.

Once I reached the back corner, I peeked out and surveyed the backyard. It was empty except for some rakes, two shovels, and a big box of trampoline parts. (Mom made us dismember the trampoline after Emmary hurt herself on an accidental backflip.)

I stepped out a little further and glanced up at the window to my parent's room. It was at least thirty feet away and another ten feet off the ground. To get to the bedroom I would have no choice but to go through the house, unless I could somehow find a ladder or rope.

How ironic. Just this morning I had been forced to find a way *out* of a second-story window, and now I had to find a way *into* one. On a better day this might have seemed funny.

But nothing about the current situation brought a smile to my face. I knew darn well that we didn't have any ropes or ladders in the backyard. I thought briefly about using the hose as a makeshift rope, but there would be no way to attach it to the window.

If only I had some kind of ladder...

...or maybe...

My eyes drifted back to the box of trampoline parts.

I raised an eyebrow as my mind sorted out the logistics. It was a crazy idea, but it just might work.

But I'd need to move quickly.

I dashed over to the box of trampoline parts, grabbed it, then dragged it over to the side of the house. As quietly as possible, I tipped the box over and began sliding out bunches of trampoline springs. Once I'd gathered about twenty, I began hooking them into two long chains.

When I had two strands built – each about six feet long – I took the remain-

ing springs and hooked them in place between the two long rows, forming a makeshift ladder.

Then I grinned. This was a freakishly brilliant idea.

Or at least I *hoped* it would be brilliant. The hardest part was still to come.

I gingerly grabbed the top rung of my trampoline-spring ladder and inched back around the corner of the house. The coast remained clear, so I tightened my grip on the “ladder” and made a beeline for the small pile of rakes and shovels in the center of the yard.

(I’ll have you know that dragging a ladder made of trampoline springs across grass isn’t easy. More than once I had to crawl back and unhook a spring caught on the ground, making the entire experience ridiculously stressful *and* tiring.)

It took an entire nerve-wracking minute, but eventually I reached the yard tools. I grabbed the longest tool – a big rake – and, holding it in one hand and my ladder in the other, I began slowly crawling toward my parent’s bedroom window.

Something I hadn’t planned for was the fact that the yard was clearly visible through the kitchen’s large sliding glass door. There were no agents in the kitchen now, but if one wandered into it he would have a perfect view of my equipment entourage.

And me.

I really needed to move faster.

Every movement brought me closer to my parent’s bedroom window. My palms were still raw from jumping over the school fence during our school escape, and crawling across the ground wasn’t helping. Plus, the trampoline spring ladder was so damn heavy. I prayed it wouldn’t catch again.

I continued crawling as quickly as I could, trying hard to be discreet even though the large rake was impossible to drag gracefully.

The kitchen’s glass doors were so dangerously clear.

10 more feet...9 more feet...8 more feet...

Sweat dripped down my forehead; my arms and legs burned from the exertion.

But I gritted my teeth and continued crawling, my eyes darting between my parent’s window and the kitchen doors.

5 more feet...4 more feet...

Something moved into the kitchen and I leaped for the back wall of the house, landing flat on my stomach. It hurt.

To make matters worse, this cost me my grip on the rake. It clattered against the house before falling squarely on top of my head.

Yikes – it hurt – but I held my breath and carefully watched the kitchen door.

Ten seconds passed. I could hear someone inside the kitchen, but whoever it was must not have seen me. I slid out from underneath the rake and began inching the spring ladder toward me.

Now I *really* had to hurry.

Once I had the ladder gathered at my feet, I reassembled the springs that had disconnected, then softly placed the top rung in-between the prongs of the rake. I took a deep breath, then lifted the rake into the air, slowly dragging the ladder up with it.

More than once the rake swayed dangerously and I had to use my entire body to pull the ridiculous assembly back toward the house. By the time I got the head of the rake level with the bedroom window, the sweat poured freely and my arms burned like you wouldn't believe.

I wiggled the rake back and forth until the top springs caught hold of the window frame's bottom lip. Lifting the rake out from under the springs proved impossible to do without making the whole contraption fall, so I left it hanging awkwardly as I prepared to climb up the springs.

Somehow I knew this wouldn't be pleasant.

As quietly as I could, I grabbed hold of the highest ladder rung I could reach, then pulled myself up with all my might. The trampoline springs groaned under my weight – but they held.

I continued pulling. My arms may have been aching before, but now they were *sizzling*. I tried to ignore them.

Once I pulled myself up as far as I could, I tried to squirm a leg onto the bottom rung of the spring ladder. It wasn't easy, and my legs scraped painfully along the stucco wall of the house.

This was taking way too long.

I scrambled one hand onto a higher rung.

Whoever was in the kitchen was now walking around.

I climbed another rung.

It sounded like someone was trying to unlock the sliding glass door. I panicked and a foot slid off the ladder. My arms ached, my fingers screamed. I started climbing using only my hands but my grip was quickly weakening.

The glass door began to slide open.

I reached the bottom ledge of the open window and with one final, terrible lurch I plunged headfirst into my parent's room. I landed awkwardly on my shoulder but was otherwise quiet.

As quickly as I could, I whirled around and peeked out the window. I couldn't see anyone, but I also hadn't heard the sliding glass door close.

Regardless, there was no time to waste. I darted to the TV and gently lifted it with one hand as my other swept beneath it.

A small, dusty key fell to the floor. I let down the TV, pocketed the key, then started ripping stuff out from under my parent's bed.

I quickly found the unmarked steel box dad had described. I set it aside and started stuffing everything else back under the bed.

Outside, someone began talking.

"Yes, I understand that...No, I'm not questioning the boss. I just want to know why there are three of us here, wasting our afternoons, just to wait for two dumb kids..."

I stopped pushing stuff under the bed. This sounded interesting.

I slowly crept over to the window and peeked outside. A short, solid man in a suit was standing just outside the sliding glass door and facing away from the house. He held something to his ear while nodding absent-mindedly.

My heart rate – which had almost returned to a semi-normal state – skyrocketed. If the man turned around, he would find my trampoline spring ladder and a rake hanging from the window.

Meaning I had to escape, and I had to do it now.

But I couldn't pull myself away from the window. I desperately wanted to know what the HIRC was saying.

"Yeah, I know...yes, I realize that. But what makes you think these kids would break into the school to search for the portalgate?"

My stomach plummeted. The HIRCs knew we were going after the portalgate? How could they know that?

“So Phenx claims these kids are gonna break into the school sometime soon because they already know where the portalgate is? That’s a lie and you know it!”

Well, this established one thing. These guys knew bits and pieces of the truth – certainly not the whole story, but enough to be dangerous. This significantly complicated tonight’s plan to sneak back into the school. Eddie and I would have to be extremely careful.

“I understand that,” the man continued, “but why are there *three* of us waiting here at the house? ...What? The kids might be *armed*? With *Zargansk* weapons?”

This was not good. I really needed to get out of there.

The HIRC began to pace.

Any second he could turn around.

“Okay, I understand...yeah...yes...okay.”

He lowered his head, pocketed his phone and walked quickly back inside, his gaze never leaving the ground. I waited for the sliding glass door to shut...

...and when it did I breathed out a panicked sigh of relief. Guess I still had some luck left.

I crawled away from the window and finished putting everything back under my parents’ bed. Once everything looked exactly how I found it, I picked up the small steel box that had motivated this entire suicidal mission.

It was surprisingly light. I shook it and an uneven rattle replied. There were no markings on the box – including no visible lines or hinges – and there didn’t appear to be any place for a key. Maybe it was some kind of safe...?

I debated using the key I found under the TV. I really needed to escape, but I *really* wanted to know what was inside the strange box.

Either way, I needed to make a decision quickly.

I finally convinced myself that carrying the box would complicate my escape. I needed both hands free if I was going to make it back down the spring ladder without killing myself.

So I swiftly pulled the tiny key from my pocket and placed it against the small metal box.

The front of the key glowed bright blue as a thin black line appeared around the middle of the box. A gentle click echoed and the lid slowly opened, reveal-

ing a haphazard collection of items within. I quickly inventoried each thing as I stuffed it in my pocket.

Another black key, a small pocket watch (maybe?), something golden and rolled up – probably the note dad talked about, another remeter-silver-pole-thing like the one the janitor’s portalgate disappeared into, and...a bag?

I picked up the last object – a small leather bag – and hefted it several times. It seemed to be holding something like...marbles?

I tipped the bag over, and – sure enough – a small sphere fell into my palm.

This called for a closer look.

At first glance, the small black sphere really didn’t look like anything more than a marble. I inspected it for several seconds – when suddenly something *inside* it caught my attention.

I looked closer to find...

Whoa!

Something inside the sphere was *moving*. I squinted and noticed faint blue lightning bolts dancing across the interior of the sphere. The sparks looked almost like cracks, except that they moved rapidly and randomly. The effect was mesmerizing.

I tried shaking the sphere, but nothing happened. I tried the opposite – holding it perfectly still – but still the cobalt bolts rolled around the interior of the small ball. Finally I tried squeezing the sphere, and it zapped me.

“Yow!” I gasped.

The accidental yell slipped out much louder than I would’ve liked. My electrocuted hand flew to cover my mouth – but it was too late. Somewhere downstairs a man’s voice yelled something illegible, followed by pounding footsteps up the stairs.

I panicked and ran for the back window, completely forgetting about the small metal box still open and exposed on the floor.

As quickly as I could, I threw a leg out onto the spring ladder. It slipped off; I barely caught the windowsill with my free hand, but my concentration was scrambled. All I knew was that I needed to get the stupid electric marble out of my hand before it zapped me again – but how could I do that when my other hand was busy hanging on for dear life?

Then an iron clamp seized my wrist.

I looked up to find the smug smile of a tall, suit-clad man staring back at me.