

CHAPTER 15

“And where do you think you’re going?”

I gulped and tried to squirm out of the HIRC’s grasp, but it was hopeless. The man smiled evilly and dragged me back into the bedroom.

How could I have been so stupid?

“Hey!” he yelled. “I got the kid!”

Stomping came from the stairs and hallway, then two more suit-clad men appeared in the doorway. One of them looked extremely relieved. The other looked wary. I recognized the second one as the man I had seen outside.

The one holding me laughed.

“I caught this one trying to sneak in the window. Nice try, kid.”

He laughed again, and my temper started to displace my fear.

“Good work, Number 5,” the wary-looking one said. “Let’s tie him up and take him back to the boss.”

The large man standing over me reached for my arm. It was all over now: Eddie and I would go to jail – no, probably somewhere way worse – and I wouldn’t be able to find dad an antidote. My father was going to die.

I wanted to scream. Looking up at the smug man hovering over me only made things worse.

But what else could I do? I had no choice but to obey. I couldn’t fight three grown men.

I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists, and then something extraordinary happened.

My right hand burst open in an explosion of electric energy. Sapphire torrents of lightning blasted from the small sphere smashed in my grip, engulfing the bedroom in a sudden burst of light.

The three HIRCs had no time to react. The lightning rapidly extended from my hand and wrapped snakelike around each of them. One of them screamed; all three writhed and tried to escape, but the lightning held them in place as it tightened its grip around their struggling bodies.

I tried to look away, but my own body wasn't responding. It felt anchored in space – anchored in *time*. The lightning seemed locked in the palm of my hand.

Its intensity continued to grow.

My eyes watered from the pain. I tried to pull away, but my body didn't respond – it felt like it *couldn't* respond.

Oh God, it burned. I'd never felt such pain.

I pulled away from it with all my might. Slowly, eternally slowly, I slid away from the sphere still emanating with deadly energy.

By now the room was drenched in writhing spokes of lightning, all of it pouring from the electric marble clenched in my hand. The three men had stopped moving.

I pulled harder. The pain was growing, moving into my arm. I had to get away from the sphere before it killed me.

I yelled and poured my whole nerve into unclutching my fist.

And, miraculously, it worked.

As quickly as it had appeared, the lightning curled upon itself and retreated into the small sphere. I dropped the death-marble as if it were burning – even though I don't recall it being hot – and instinctively gripped my forearm.

I was panting, disoriented, scared...so it took me a second to realize that the pain had stopped. I wasn't hurting anywhere. My arm, my hand, none of it hurt.

I raised an eyebrow.

A glance at my palm revealed no mark, no imprint, no scar. Nothing.

This didn't make any sense. Just moments before, the pain had been excruciating. I thought my arm would be permanently paralyzed.

But now it looked fine, and nothing hurt.

Then I remembered the others.

My eyes flew to the three HIRCs, each curled into an awkward, unmoving clump. I didn't know if they were dead or alive – but one thing was for certain. I wasn't about to stick around and find out.

On a whim, I grabbed a nearby phone and dialed 9-1-1. I told the operator there had been a robbery but I'd managed to stop it. Then I hung up. I hoped the police could stop these guys before they hurt anyone else.

My presence of mind fully returned, I finally remembered the small lock box. I definitely didn't want *that* sitting out when the police arrived. I retrieved it, closed it, then carefully fetched the small black lightning marble and *very* cautiously pocketed it. After a final glance around the room, I darted quickly down-stairs.

As I ran out the front door I was suddenly struck by a sharp hunger pain. In all my excitement, I had once again forgotten to eat. I really needed to quit doing that.

I debated running back to grab food, but there just wasn't time. The police would be there within minutes and I wanted to be far, far away by the time that happened.

So I left at a full sprint. My mind felt unnaturally calm as my legs pumped me smoothly and swiftly down the street and away from my latest nightmare.

Eddie was waiting at the corner with both bikes ready. I threw the alien box into his spare backpack – which I had wisely left behind – then jumped onto a bike.

“Do you need to go to your house?” I asked.

He paused midway through the question he was trying to ask, then shook his head.

“I guess I don't need–”

I didn't wait for him to finish. I swung my feet onto the bike's pedals and rode away from my street as fast as my legs could move. Eddie stared for several seconds before realizing I wasn't slowing down, then he quickly pedaled after me.

At this point I didn't care where I was going – just that I was leaving my house. The adrenaline had started to wear off and panic was creeping into the void it left behind. Glad as I was to escape capture *again*, the look on those three HIRC's faces haunted me. I couldn't get their terrified, frantic eyes out of my mind.

I rode faster. Now it was Eddie's turn to struggle to keep up.

After almost a mile of frantic riding, I pulled my bike off the sidewalk and into a field of scattered trees. I pedaled until we were hidden from the road, then leaped off my bike and collapsed into an exhausted heap.

Eddie eventually caught up. He quickly parked his bike before limping toward me.

"Teal," he gasped between heavy breaths. "Dude. That was some crazy pedaling. Are you okay? What happened at your house?"

I ignored the growing lump in my throat and tried to steady my breathing.

"Sorry for not explaining. I just...I just had to get out of there."

I forced out an awkward laugh.

"But what happened at your house? Did something freak you out?"

I knew Eddie well enough to know he wouldn't leave things alone until I answered his questions.

But how was I supposed to answer? I wasn't even sure *I* knew what happened in my parent's bedroom.

"Well? C'mon! Tell me!"

I forced another laugh. Eddie was so frigging persistent.

"Wait, let me guess – you found something crazy in your dad's box, didn't

you?”

I nodded.

“So what did you find? Did you find any little black stones?”

I swerved to face him, my eyes involuntarily narrowing.

“What do you mean, *little black stones*?”

“You did!” he exclaimed with a grin. “I knew it! What did they do? Were they magic?”

“Are you kidding me? What’s going on? How do you know about the stones?”

“It was all in the research from Friday, Teal – all in the stuff I found on the internet! Remember the black orb the janitor disappeared through?”

“C’mon, man – of course I remember.”

Eddie smiled.

“Good point. Like you’ll ever forget *that*. Anyway, there’s these little black stones that supposedly act like miniature versions of that orb the janitor disappeared through! I guess they act as transporters too, but only for special things.”

I thought about this for a moment. The little sphere that had almost killed me was a transporter? A *lightning* transporter? That seemed weird.

“Listen, Eddie – I’ll tell you what happened. Maybe you’ll be able to explain it.”

So I recounted the entire ordeal. Eddie, surprisingly, didn’t interrupt once. He looked like he wanted to, but instead he waited politely until I finished.

Then he burst out with his usual frenzied response.

“Oh, DUDE! I wish I could’ve been there! Do you still have the stones?”

“Yeah... but you don’t want to mess with them. Trust me. What if you got zapped like those HIRCs did?”

“No, it’s okay. Just don’t squeeze them!”

I forced another laugh. I really didn’t want to touch that stone again, and the

thought of Eddie touching it was even worse.

Time for an abrupt change of subject.

“Why do you think lightning came out? Why not something else?”

Eddie smiled.

“Actually, you’re lucky you picked the lightning one. A typical Zargansk carries four stones: one each for fire, wind, light, and electricity. There are a lot of other types, but those four are the basics.”

“And these stones – they each transport a specific *element*? Where do they transport it from?”

“Each one transports from a different location. I read that the Zargansk have giant farms set up for fire, lightning, and all kinds of other substances. Any time someone uses one of those little stones, they’re just transporting its associated substance from a farm on Orionis to their current location.”

I wasn’t sure this explanation was accurate, especially since Eddie had pulled it from who-knew-where on the internet. I was having a hard time envisioning what a lightning farm might look like.

He continued with his explanation.

“Another thing I read is that these ‘magic stones,’ if you will, are unique to a particular person. For example, I can’t use stones made for you, and you can’t use stones made for me. They’re made that way to prevent people from stealing them and doing bad things.”

“But how was I able to use the stone I found? It certainly wasn’t made for me.”

“Maybe you could use it because it belonged to your dad. Maybe family members can use each other’s stones.”

Even though that made sense, I found myself growing increasingly irritated at the weirdness of our conversation. *Magic?* As if. Laser guns and alien Zargansk were bad enough. I didn’t want to talk about this fantasy crap any more.

I rolled my eyes, then realized the sun had begun to dip deep into the western sky. Eddie and I needed to get going before we got caught in the dark.

“Okay Eddie, tell you what – if all the...” I considered using several obscene terms. “...stuff...you’ve said is true, then you should be able to touch these ‘magic stones’ without hurting anything – right?”

He nodded despite my emphatic sarcasm on *magic*.

“Then as soon as we’ve finished shopping for supplies, I’ll let you take them.”

“Aw, sweet! It’s a deal! I can’t wait to go buy stuff for our trip into the portalgate!”

I was also looking forward to this even though I didn’t know what to purchase. Who knew what supplies we’d need on the other side of the portalgate?

I made a mental note to figure that out on the way to the store.

“So where do you want to go, Ed? Where’s the nearest store?”

“It depends on what you want. Are we shopping for groceries or supplies?”

“Probably both. Are there any malls nearby?”

“I know somewhere even better than a mall. Follow me!”

We threw our backpacks back over our shoulders, jumped onto our bikes, and hurried out of the trees.

Fifteen minutes later, we turned into the enormous parking lot of a Megamart store.

“This has everything we could ever want,” Eddie yelled back to me.

We wove our way through row after row of parked cars as we approached the front doors. I still couldn’t believe I was riding a \$3,000 bike, except that it rode more smoothly than anything I’d ever been in – including mom’s minivan. This was especially true after what the minivan had been through the previous weekend, which brought up another question:

Had mom taken that car when she left with Emmary and Jackson...? I had

serious doubts as to how road-worthy the Odyssey was after being rear-ended.

I still hadn't arrived at an answer by the time we reached the front of the store.

“We don't have any bike locks,” I observed, turning to Eddie. “Why don't you buy two? I'll stay out here and keep an eye on the bikes, and after we lock 'em up we can go shopping for supplies.”

Eddie nodded and handed me his backpack. He then dashed inside, leaving me to drag the bikes and backpacks over to the bike rack. I leaned the bikes against the rack, dropped the backpacks beside them, then slumped over and let out a heavy sigh.

When I paused long enough to really think about the last four days, the weight of it was staggering. I counted the main points on my fingers as I considered them.

We were just hours away from traveling into an alien world. My dad had been an ambassador for the...(I still didn't want to say it)...“aliens” – the Zargansk – and unless he got an antidote, he was going to die from their poison. Eddie and I were being chased by a group of men called HIRCs, and they had to be unhappy about the way I kept slipping from their grasp.

And now, to top off the weirdness, I had almost killed three of those same HIRCs – and maybe myself – by mistakenly using a Zargansk “magic stone,” as Eddie had called it.

I stopped counting there. Thinking about those three guys still made me feel a little sick. I wondered if they'd woken up before the police arrived.

Tired of thinking and wondering, I ignored my thoughts for a moment and glanced around the Megamart parking lot. The sun had finally dipped below the western horizon, leaving the sky a smooth red-violet gradient. Streetlamps slowly popped on throughout the parking lot, shading everything in sterile, creamy light.

After ten minutes of patient waiting and people-watching, I started wondering why Eddie hadn't returned. How long did it take it to find and buy two bike locks? Could something have happened to him?

I debated leaving the bikes and trying to find him, but that seemed too risky. What if the bikes got stolen? No way did I want to be responsible for abandoning bikes that cost almost as much as my parents' minivan.

I tried to think of a better plan when I suddenly noticed the distant drone of police sirens.

I don't know why, but I stiffened. It sounded like multiple sirens were going off – and they sounded close. Really close.

Eddie suddenly burst out the store's front door.

“Teal! Teal!! We gotta go!”

I started to ask ‘why?’ but Eddie cut me off.

“My credit card was reported stolen and the cops are coming! I barely escaped the cashier! We have to go!”

Eddie leapt onto his bike. I swung mine around and took a quick glance around the parking lot. I couldn't see any flashing lights, but the sirens were definitely getting closer.

Legs pumping, we braided in and out of empty parking stalls in a frantic race back to the main road. I really hoped we could get out of the parking lot before the police – or more of those HIRCs – arrived.

Eddie, who was now far ahead of me, slammed on his brakes at the edge of the parking lot. He glanced both ways down the adjoining street, then spun around and screamed madly as he pedaled back toward the store.

“Ride, Teal! Ride away!!”

I'd never seen a human being pedal so fast.

Eddie blurred past me, his face a mess of wild excitement as he yelled, “the cops! They're here! We gotta go another way!”

I whipped my bike around as two black cars pulled into the parking lot, horns blaring and headlights flashing.

Ahead of me, Eddie yelled a string of curses. I joined in after taking a glance backward and realizing we weren't being followed by police cars.

We were being followed by black cars full of men in black suits.

Those cars belonged to the HIRCs – HIRCs pretending to be police officers.

These guys were smarter than I thought. If they posed as policemen, no one would help us escape. Who would believe two high school kids claiming a group of adult men trying to “arrest them” were actually alien henchmen?

Yeah, this definitely wasn't good.

I pedaled faster.

Ahead of me, Eddie veered toward the store's front doors.

“Eddie! Where are you going?!”

He replied, but I couldn't make out what he said.

The flashing lights seemed right behind me.

Eddie reached the front of the store, jumped his bike onto the front sidewalk, and then I realized what he was about to try.

“Eddie, no! You're insane!!”

This time he said nothing in return. He simply grinned and pedaled faster.

I gritted my teeth and followed close behind.

Eddie swerved around an elderly couple then slipped between the slowly opening automatic doors.

The black cars reached the front door. Four men jumped out.

This was completely nuts.

We zoomed past the elderly greeter, her hand clutching frantically at her chest as she yelled something about “damn kids.” I hoped we didn't give her a heart attack.

We had entered on the grocery side of the store, and Eddie wasted no time

using this to our advantage. We swerved through the front racks of fruit before turning right and speeding through the deli. The HIRCs screamed at us to stop – as if that ever worked – and I couldn’t make out the rest of their yells over the alarmed cries of shoppers and employees.

I glanced back to see one of them drawing a gun while two others ran toward the back of the store.

And deep inside, I knew this would be a bad day for Megamart.

Hehe.

We reached the end of the deli, then turned left and raced down the frozen meat aisle. Eddie rode quickly and dangerously and I was starting to fall behind.

Shoppers all down the aisle screamed and scattered.

Eddie reached the end of that aisle and swerved left. He was now riding down the back edge of the store.

Several seconds later I followed suit.

Two of the HIRCs reached the back edge of the store right as Eddie passed. One chased after Eddie, the other turned to face me.

“Move!” I yelled. The HIRC gave me the finger, then wrenched open a freezer door and started smashing gallons of milk on the floor.

I grimaced, slammed on my brakes, and spun the bike around.

The HIRC stopped throwing milk and started running toward me.

I turned back down the long meat aisle I had just traversed. The two men originally following from the front of the store were now running directly toward me. The man behind was getting closer.

I was surrounded.

I cursed and accelerated toward the men in front of me. One of them drew a gun – a silver one – and yelled at me to stop.

I swerved down the canned food aisle as a writhing ball of green energy whistled past my left ear. The HIRC had fired at me, and he'd used an alien gun.

I pedaled faster.

At the end of the aisle I turned right, which again pointed me toward the back of the store. I hoped to plow through the employee doors into the warehouse at the rear of the building. There had to be an exit back there.

I accelerated toward the employee-only doors.

Suddenly an employee emerged from the swinging doors with a full shopping cart in tow. I swerved left at the last possible instant, grazing the corner of the cart. Boxes went flying and I fought to keep my bike from tipping over.

Once I regained control, I found myself somewhere inside the women's clothing section. Hangars scraped my elbows as I pushed forward, desperately hoping to circle around and make another go at the warehouse entrance.

More men in suits ran parallel to me on the left.

I heard a sudden yell from behind. Eddie had somehow arrived at the employee doors, and he was wildly yelling for me to “come back!”

I slammed on my brakes and swerved the bike around. The HIRCs realized what I was doing and darted into the clothing section.

I accelerated as best I could, but the clothing racks were placed asymmetrically and there was no straight path through them.

I pedaled faster.

Suddenly an elderly lady, completely oblivious to the chase transpiring around her, wheeled her motorized shopping cart directly in front of my bike. I barely had time to react; I swerved right and missed her, but plowed straight into a rack of clothes.

I jumped to my feet and frantically tried to pull the bike out from beneath the clothes rack. The HIRCs were almost on top of me.

No time. I would have to run.

I darted away from the bike as a HIRC suddenly reached for my right arm. I swiveled away and accelerated but another man stepped in front of me; I darted

left, only to be met by another one. I tried spinning around again, but the last man was closing in from that side.

I was surrounded, and the men in suits were swiftly advancing. I had to do something, and I had to do it quick.

My hand reached into my right pocket, but before it could close on the small black stone still hiding there, I caught the eye of a pretty teenage girl standing fifteen feet in front of me. Something about her looked vaguely familiar.

I stared at her, and then she winked at me.

In any other situation I would've responded with my most charming grin, but now I could only raise an eyebrow as she clearly motioned for me to duck. I don't know why, but I obeyed and instinctively dropped to my knees.

As soon as I hit the ground, the air around me exploded.

Huge claws of flame grabbed everything in sight; the clothes-laden racks incinerated, the men in suits screamed as they burst into fire. Smoke poured over everything.

And wow, did my eyes burn. I couldn't see anything through the smoke, but I knew I had to get out of there. I crawled as quickly as I could but at every turn the flames seemed to surround me.

I was struck by the panicked thought that I might die.

Suddenly a thin hand grabbed my wrist and pulled me to my feet. I stumbled as my captor dragged me out of the flames, and once free I dropped to my knees, coughing.

I was immediately dragged back to my feet. I rubbed my eyes but could only make out a small, female face yelling something.

“No! We have to go!”

I tried to blink my eyes clear as I stumbled behind the girl still holding my wrist. She led us back to an impatient Eddie, then darted through the employee doors into the back of the store.

I saw Eddie watch, almost in a daze, as the girl and I ran past. He blinked curiously, then jumped on his bike and pedaled after us.