

CHAPTER 16

I hurried after the mysterious girl as we moved swiftly through the warehouse. Startled employees watched as our odd trio ran toward the door at the very back of the store. The girl burst through it first, followed by me.

Eddie exited last, his hands still clutched tightly around his bike handlebars.

I glanced around, wiping at my eyes to try and stop the smoke-induced tears, but Eddie spotted them first: two more black sedans swerving into the rear parking lot.

Would the chasing ever stop?

Eddie jumped onto his bike and yelled, “C’mon! Let’s go!”

“No,” I yelled back. “I don’t have my bike. You go! And take this girl with you!”

The girl laughed.

“Take me? Ha! You cannot survive without me! I will take care of the black ships. You must focus on finding transportation.”

Uh, black *ships*? Had she never seen a car before?

Great. Just what I needed – *another* weirdo in my life.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have time to ask the girl about her strange comment. The black sedans slammed to a stop and two men piled out of one, four out of the other.

Six of them against three of us.

I yelled for Eddie to run away and man, he didn’t hesitate. He sped off on his bike, and two of the men jumped back into their car and sped after him. The other four advanced on the girl and I.

“Don’t try anything stupid, kids. If you come peacefully, we’ll try not to hurt you.”

The man in front smiled sarcastically.

“And if you resist, we’ll hurt you a lot.”

The mysterious girl laughed.

“Try and hurt me, HIRC. I dare you.”

I raised an eyebrow for two reasons. One, the girl knew that these men were HIRCs. That was an interesting development.

And two, she was clearly insane. A teenage girl against four guys with laser guns – and she was calling *them* on?

Suddenly the nearest man darted for her.

The girl extended both arms.

Just as the agent was about to reach her, fire exploded from the girl’s hands. Huge plumes of vivid orange flame poured from an imaginary point just beyond her grasp, surrounding and swallowing the unsuspecting man.

He screamed and fell to the ground in a burning, writhing heap.

I barely had time to register what happened next. The girl – with one hand still delivering fire to the man curled on the ground – extended her other hand toward one of the men still by the car. Fire shot out in a long, spiraling streak, forcing that man to dive behind the man next to him.

Both burst into flames.

The fourth man took this opportunity to make a grab for me.

I darted out of his grasp and began running in the opposite direction, fumbling in my pocket for the small black stone that had saved me once before. The thought of using it again was terrifying, but I had no other weapon and these men were way too big for me to fight physically. The magic – as much as I hated even calling it that – would have to save me again.

My hand found the stone. I closed a fist around it when I was suddenly hit from behind. I wrenched my hand out of my pocket and barely got it in front of me before falling onto the asphalt, my hands smashed violently beneath me.

The stone went flying.

The HIRC behind me grabbed at my legs and I instinctively kicked back, landing a foot in the agent's face. He grunted and I kicked again, slithering away as my legs continued pounding at his grasp.

Once free, I jumped to my feet and looked around frantically for the stone... but it was nowhere to be seen.

The HIRC again reached for my legs. I stomped on his outstretched hands then took off running, madly searching for the small black stone. How could I possibly find it on a huge black pad of asphalt?

Then I wondered what had happened to Eddie. I guess running away had been a dumb idea. He should have stayed with us.

I hoped he was okay.

As for my pursuer, he was now back on his feet and madder than ever. I wanted to run back to the mysterious girl – who seemed to be holding her own against the other three agents – but that would require getting past the goon marching steadily toward me. To make matters worse, my legs were wobbly from overexertion and adrenaline, and the palms of my hands still burned from the HIRC's tackle.

I tried to clear my mind and form some sort of plan, but it was hard to concentrate with a furious enemy staring me down.

Out of options, I started backing away. My eyes darted from the girl to the goon to the asphalt as I hoped desperately for an epiphany.

I yelled to the mysterious girl for help and she turned to look, but one of the burning men lunged for her and she had to fight back.

Apparently I was on my own.

The large HIRC directly in front of me leapt forward and I darted to the left, barely escaping capture. I seized the sudden opportunity to dash past him, running for all I was worth back to the mysterious girl. The man behind me pursued,

moving much faster than I had expected.

This was gonna be close.

The mysterious girl delivered a final torrent of flame at the three men attacking her, which seemed to take care of them. She turned and yelled at me to run faster.

I didn't need the advice.

I was less than twenty feet from her and I could hear the last HIRC breathing heavily behind me. "Do something!" I screamed.

She started running, but there was no way she'd reach me in time.

The man behind me reached out and brushed my shoulder.

Seizing a spontaneous instinct, I shifted direction. The HIRC reacted too slowly; I was no longer between him and the girl, and she seized the opportunity.

I glanced behind to see another column of red-orange fire bursting from her hands and into my pursuer. His suit coat burst into flames first, followed quickly by his shirt, tie, and pants. The man dropped to the ground and tried to roll away, but the girl closed her eyes and the size of the flame doubled. I watched, mesmerized, as the flames danced and swirled in complex rhythms.

Was there a way to make my little lightning stone work like that? I certainly hoped so – the girl seemed to be in total control of the fire, and with power like that the HIRCs didn't stand a chance.

The man on the ground finally stopped moving. The girl opened her eyes as the fire disappeared. She shook out her hands then sank to the ground, breathing heavily.

I began walking over to her when, for the first time, I realized the sickening smell of burnt cloth and – I stifled a gag – burnt flesh. A glance at the four men's crinkled bodies showed smoke and steam still drifting from each.

I covered my nose with my shirt and tried to calm my gag reflex.

When I reached the girl, I gently crouched down beside her.

“Er...thanks for your help.”

She smiled and looked up at me, giving me my first chance to really examine her closely.

She couldn't have been more than fifteen or sixteen herself, and wow – she was shockingly good-looking. Her face was small and pale and dominated by a pair of giant brown eyes. Her lips were thin and her nose small and pointy.

Eddie would have said she looked like a fairy. The only things missing were pointy ears (which I, in my recent state of paranoia, checked – they were normal). I guess fairies typically had blonde hair, too. The girl's was the exact opposite: so jet-black it made the surrounding asphalt look faded.

She cleared her throat, and I suddenly realized I'd been staring way too deeply at her.

I laughed nervously and extended my hand, which she took and pulled herself up. Her hand was surprisingly soft and gentle, especially considering that I'd just watched her turn four grown men into toast.

“You are welcome...”

“Teal,” I replied, still grinning a little too excitedly. “My name is Teal.”

“You are welcome, Teal. My name is Kyralee, but everyone calls me Lee.”

Kyralee. Pretty name. I started to ask where on earth she got her magic, but she interrupted me.

“Where is your friend?”

“My friend? What fr—”

Aw, crap. I was so relieved with my own survival that I'd completely forgotten about Eddie.

“We need to find him! C'mon!”

I started running toward the front of the store when I was struck by a much better idea. I turned and ran back to the HIRC's black sedan. Sure enough, the keys were still in the ignition.

Hehe.

“Kyralee!” I yelled, motioning towards the car. “Get in!”

She suddenly looked very apprehensive.

“...Is that thing safe?”

“Uh, sure. It’s just a car.”

I decided against mentioning my age – after all, I didn’t want her to worry more than she already did. And, if she didn’t know what a car was, she probably didn’t know about licenses either.

Just as well. This could be a perfect chance to restore some manhood points, since my fight against the HIRCs had been... well, “less than ideal.”

Kyralee frowned and climbed into the passenger seat as I turned the key. The engine roared to life, and I didn’t need much driving experience to realize that this was a very nice, very powerful car.

Which made me wonder – who was funding these HIRCs? The Zargansk? Some evil madman bent on destroying mankind, *a.k.a.* Augustus Beck? I was at a point where I’d believe pretty much anything.

I added that to my list of “things to find out” as I quickly surveyed the car’s controls. I’d never actually been driving – driver’s ed wasn’t until next semester – but I’d played enough video games with Eddie to know the basics. I took the control stick and shifted roughly into drive. Then I floored the gas pedal.

The sedan rocketed down the asphalt. I was so startled at its swift acceleration that I reflexively slammed on the brakes, sending both Kyralee and I crashing into the front dash.

Even worse, it was hard to say who screamed louder.

This was just not my week.

I slid back into my seat and buckled my seatbelt. Kyralee followed suit. I tried to ease the tension with a forced laugh – it didn’t help – then I gently let off the brake.

“Have you controlled one of these before?” she asked.

“Nope.”

She cringed as I gently depressed the gas pedal. It was time to find Eddie before this conversation went any further.

Thirty seconds later, our black sedan pulled around to the front of Megamart. So far we hadn’t seen Eddie anywhere and this made me nervous: if he had tried to outrun the other black car, the results couldn’t possibly be good. I just hoped he hadn’t been captured.

“Teal, look!”

Kyralee pointed to the left, where – in front of the store – a large crowd of people had gathered around something. I slammed the car into park; Lee had already jumped out and was running toward the crowd. I ripped the key out of the ignition and followed.

It was immediately obvious that the HIRC’s other black sedan was somehow involved. It was parked diagonally across multiple handicapped spots and both its front doors had been left wide open. Lee and I forced our way through the crowd until we reached the center of all the attention.

As we pressed through the front row of frightened bystanders, Kyralee suddenly gasped, both hands flying to her mouth in terror as icy chills crawled down my spine.

Eddie lay in the center of the crowd. One of the two suited men from the car spoke quietly into a phone while the other checked Eddie’s pulse. Both were facing away from us.

I glanced sideways at the fender of the black sedan. It had a basketball-sized dent in the hood, and a bent bike lay under its front tire. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to fill in the rest.

My jaw involuntarily clenched.

I couldn’t believe the HIRCs had tried to kill Eddie – and yet, it had a certain

cold logic to it. They were obviously after me, and for some reason they needed me alive. But Eddie meant nothing to them. He was just a blip, a tiny inconvenience on their way to acquiring me.

My fists tightened. They might have been able to hurt Eddie this time, but never again. Apparently they had forgotten who Eddie's best friend was – and what that friend did to people who messed with his friends and family.

It was time to remind them.

I slipped quietly out of the crowd and ran to the bike rack at the front of the store. Thankfully, our backpacks were still there. I grabbed both of them and sprinted back to the stolen sedan. I threw Eddie's bag inside, then ripped open the one I'd been carrying. Once I found what I needed, I threw that bag inside and walked, grimly, back to the crowd of people.

I plowed through person after person, not giving a damn what any of them thought. I didn't care what they said to me or what they thought of me. I only had one thing on my mind.

I was going to show those HIRCs what happened when people mess with someone Teal Garrison cares about.

I was going to make them pay.

Once I reached the center of the crowd, I reached into my pockets and removed my weapons. I held out both hands like I had seen Kyralee do, then – with a wince – I clamped down tightly on the two small black stones I held.

I had no idea what these stones were linked to or what would happen if I used them together. I really didn't care. I just wanted the two men in black suits to pay for what they'd done.

As soon as my hands closed, furious beams of light exploded from between my fingers. The light spiraled around me, engulfing my body in a matrix of white wisps of energy. The wisps began coalescing into larger strands, dancing and twisting around me as they grew.

I closed my eyes and focused all my thoughts, all my energy into directing this new power at the two men in black suits.

The energy around me suddenly burst upwards into a towering tornado of light. It soared above the parking lot, expanding and branching out as it climbed, metamorphosing into a monstrous tree made from blazing shards of light. The branches soared outward before slowly dipping back toward the ground. Like hundreds of miniature funnel clouds, each branch began spiraling and accelerating toward the asphalt, rotating faster and faster as it approached.

By now people were screaming and running, but I didn't care. Nothing mattered now but saving Eddie. I would do anything to save him from the HIRCs.

I spared a sideways glance at Lee. She stared upwards, her face aglow with childlike awe.

I don't think she'd ever seen something quite like this. I knew *I* had never seen anything like it.

Then my gaze fell upon the two men in suits, who had just realized that I was the one commanding the expanding energy storm. They wasted no time turning and running for their lives.

I tightened my grasp and smiled. They weren't getting away that easily.

The falling branches of light suddenly shot after the HIRCs, fusing into two explosive braids of energy as they surged across the parking lot. The beams caught both men simultaneously, surrounding them and bringing down the canopy of light hovering over the parking lot. All the energy emanating from my hands converged into those two beams as power poured from the stones, the entire parking lot ablaze with white light so bright I had to squint.

The two men dissolved into nothingness.

I released my grip on the stones, and the beams of energy collapsed upon themselves.

I took a deep breath and glanced around. The crowd had dispersed. Some people were pointing at the sky and shaking their heads. Others were running. Some were screaming.

Kyralee, meanwhile, stared unashamedly at me. I stared back, then let my eyes drift to Eddie.

He still wasn't moving.

We ran over to him. Together, we lifted him to his feet and dragged him to the black sedan. We set him as gently as we could into the backseat before climbing into our respective doors. After a quick check to make sure we hadn't forgotten anything, I started the car and sped out of the parking lot, my mind much too calm considering what had just happened.

No one said anything as I drove back toward the high school. My driving wasn't great, but it did its job of getting us away from Megamart and closer to the school and the portalgate room. At this point, there was no reason to go anywhere else. Every minute we spent in the open was another minute the HIRCs would hunt us. Once we made it through the portalgate I hoped this would change.

And even if it didn't, it's not like they could hate me *more*.

I spent most of the drive on panicked lookout for more black sedans, and while I spotted several possibilities, no one pursued us.

I also tried to tally how many agents we'd taken out. I hoped that might provide some scope of what exactly we were up against.

Friday night at the hospital I could only estimate, but seemed like there were at least three or four. That seemed to be the common group size when they attacked. There were four HIRCs in the car I sabotaged during the minivan chase, then another three from the lightning incident in my parent's room. Lee had fried four inside Megamart, then four more behind Megamart, and then there were the last two I had just wiped with my lightning storm.

That put the total number at... wow. Over twenty.

Who knew how many of these guys had been dispatched to take care of me, but twenty was a lot to have fought and beaten.

This realization calmed me down, but several things still troubled me. Eddie lay silently in the back seat, wounded and unconscious. He was still breathing and his pulse remained steady (I had Lee check), but he didn't look well. His ankle had swollen even larger and a nasty goose egg swelled from the side of his head. His left side was covered in impact wounds from what – I assumed – was a bad crash onto asphalt.

On top of that, I had lost my lightning stone. I didn't know how hard it was to get "magic" stones, but the thought of losing one made me angry and frustrated. I debated going back to look for it, but heading to the portalgate seemed more important. Maybe I could look for it after we returned from our trip through the portalgate...

...whenever that happened.

As I continued pondering our situation, I realized that, perhaps worst of all, I was now going to be traveling through the portalgate with one seriously injured person and no supplies. We didn't even have bikes. I wished I could drive the HIRC's black sedan to Orionis, but that wasn't a possibility.

All this thinking could be summed up in one response: a very, very heavy sigh.

And it got worse. As soon as I stopped thinking, I realized how much *I* hurt. My hands and arms were still raw from the tackle I'd taken. My legs felt shaky, most likely from the all the running and biking I'd been forced to do in the last 24 hours. On top of all that, I was beginning to develop a nasty headache.

So much for this mission being something glamorous.

Sick of thinking about my crappy life, I took a moment to glance over at Kyralee. She looked absorbed in her own batch of deep thinking. I wanted badly

to talk to her, the thought of it scared me. I'm not sure why.

So I found myself grateful when she cleared her throat and spoke first.

“Teal, where did you get silexes?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Silexes?”

“The small stones you used to save your friend – those are silexes. Where did you get them?”

I debated telling her the truth. I'd been forced to lie a lot lately, and frankly I was growing sick of it. (That, and I was having trouble remembering who I'd told what.) Then there was the small matter of saving my life back at Megamart.

...And it didn't hurt that she was ridiculously hot.

“They were my father's. He worked as an ambassador for the Zargansk before escaping.”

So much for subtlety. Lee gasped upon hearing this.

“Your father – he is the one that escaped? Your father is Cronus?”

How famous *was* my old man?

“Yup, he's Cronus. How do you know that name?”

“Teal, everyone on Orionis knows of Cronus. He is the reason Kepik Arist was captured! Where is he? I must visit him and convince him to return to service! If he remains in hiding, Dr. Arist will die!”

“Whoa now – slow down, Kyralee. My father is dying from poison the Zargansk gave him. I don't know who Dr. Arist is, but my father asked me to find him. He thought Dr. Arist could give me an antidote.”

Lee took a deep breath.

“Teal,” she replied, her voice suddenly soft and serious. “I know you love your father, but you must understand something: Kepik Arist is the only hope for humans. He is one of the few Zargansk that believes in human rights, and he has studied our kind for many years. He was taken prisoner by his own people be-

cause of your father’s escape, and if your father doesn’t return, Kepik will certainly be executed.”

She looked directly at me.

“Without Dr. Kepik Arist, it is only a matter of time before the Zargansk declare war on humans everywhere. We will not survive.”

Boy, did this sound familiar. Only a matter of time, Zargansk killing everything, blah blah blah. I’d already heard that crap once today and I still wasn’t sure I believed the Zargansk existed at all.

“So let me get this straight,” I said, my headache intensifying. “The Zargansk want to destroy humans, right?”

Lee nodded.

“And this Dr. Kepik Arist guy is a Zargansk, but he *likes* humans.”

More nods.

“And my dad’s escape has gotten this guy in trouble? He’s going to be executed because of my dad?”

Nod nod nod.

I frowned. Dad had neglected to mention *that* little detail.

“And – according to you – saving this Dr. Arist guy is more important than saving my father?”

Lee didn’t respond.

I let out another heavy sigh. This was the last thing I needed – some hot but bizarre chick arguing with me about my mission.

“Lee, listen to me: I have only one thing on my mind, and that’s getting an antidote to my dad. I don’t care about aliens, I don’t care about scientists, I don’t care about portalgates or HIRCs or saving the universe. Even if my dad wasn’t the leader of the human rebellion here on earth, I’d still go anywhere to get him an antidote.”

My eyes started to water. I really wished they wouldn’t.

“So either you can come with me and Eddie through the portalgate and help us find an antidote – which means finding this Dr. Arist guy – or we can leave you here to do whatever you came to do. Speaking of which – why *are* you here?”

Again, Kyralee didn’t respond. Her shoulders were trembling.

“Hey... are you okay?”

I could hear her sniffing. I nervously pulled a hand off the steering wheel and set it on her arm. She pulled away.

Sigh. *Women.*

The rest of our drive to the high school was spent in silence.

Once we arrived, I parked in the cul-de-sac next to the field behind the school – the field that Eddie and I used to escape earlier that day. That seemed to be the safest way to return the school. It seemed inevitable that more HIRCs would be guarding the building tonight – especially since I’d heard the agent at my house discussing that – and I figured they were more likely to congregate around the front of the building.

I was suddenly struck by how dumb it was that I *still* didn’t know who these HIRCs were or who they worked for. Lee had to know more about them.

I turned to talk to her, then hesitated. She still wasn’t looking at me.

But I *had* to talk to her. I needed to know why she was here, who she was, how she knew about “magic.” I needed to know if she would come with me into the portalgate, since I wasn’t real keen on going alone and who knew if Eddie could make it.

I placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Kyralee, listen – I’ve got to get into that school tonight, and I could really use your help.”

She slowly turned to face me. Her eyes were red and puffy.

“Do you know a man named Joseph Denaye?”

That came outta nowhere.

“Um, no. Doesn't ring a bell.”

“Are you sure? He worked at this school. He was forty years old, graying hair, tall and strong.”

I shook my head again. The only school employee who fit that description was the crazy old janitor.

...Wait a sec.

“Did this man know about the portalgate?”

Lee nodded.

I burst out laughing, then stopped when she shot me a withering glare.

“Sorry, it's just – the only man I know who looks like that *and* works at the school is this crazy old janitor. He's the main reason Eddie and I got involved in this, and he's not here anymore. He disappeared into the portalgate this morning.”

“He WHAT?”

Lee sat up straight and grabbed my shirt. She was surprisingly strong.

“He went into the portalgate? You must be lying!”

I tried to pull her hands off my shirt, but she wouldn't let me.

“I'm not lying. Do you know the janitor?”

“Know him? He is my father!”

I blinked.

“...He what?”

“My father, Teal! That man is my father! Why did he go through the portalgate?”

Suddenly it all came together.

“He was hunting an alien named Phenx. Phenx had threatened to harm his family, and the janitor said he had to go save them. He said his family was in danger.”

I looked into Lee’s frightened brown eyes, and suddenly I realized why she looked vaguely familiar.

“Holy crap. You *are* his daughter.”

She nodded.

“Unbelievable. He went through the portalgate to save *you*, only you’re not there.”

We stared at each other for several moments, and I was once again struck by how pretty she looked, even despite her red eyes and grim expression. It was a small miracle that someone so beautiful could share genes with that crazy old janitor.

An unexpected moan rose from the rear of the car. I reluctantly pulled my eyes from Kyrilee and looked into the back seat. Eddie was stirring.

“Teal, listen to me.”

I turned back to her. She looked desperate as she took my hands in hers. I felt my heart beat faster, and for the first time in several days I didn’t try to calm it.

“I will come with you into the portalgate. I must find my father, and we must find Dr. Arist. I am sorry for implying your father is not important. If he is truly leading a human rebellion here on earth, he must be very important, just like his son.”

A sudden warmth slipped into my cheeks.

“Uh, really Lee, it’s nothing, I just—”

She cut me off.

“I also think I can help your friend, but there is a risk involved.”

I stopped thinking about how soft her hands were and tried to focus on what she was saying.

“...How can you help him?”

Lee let go of my hands and reached into her pocket. She removed a small

vial with a dark, sandy-looking liquid inside.

“Do you know what nanons are?”

“Nope.”

“Nanons are robots – very, very small robots. Each one is hundreds of times smaller than a grain of sand, which makes them useful in situations where space is limited.”

“Situations like inside a human body,” I realized out loud.

Lee nodded.

“Yes. Nanons are able to accomplish things in spaces too small or too dangerous for humans. They can be programmed to perform many tasks, including helping a body repair from terrible wounds.”

I eyed the vial suspiciously.

“So that stuff can heal Eddie?”

“I believe so. This is a vial of emmons, or ‘emergency medical nanons’, and I would be happy to give them to your friend.”

I reached for the vial, but Lee pulled it away.

“However, Teal, you must know something. Some ten percent of humans experience a severe reaction to nanons. On Orionis they can test for such a condition, but I have no way of doing that here.”

There was that Orionis name again. Why did she keep bringing it up? Was *she* from the Zargansk planet?

I tucked that question away for later.

“So you’re saying—”

“I am saying that if Eddie is part of that ten percent category, his body could experience a terrible reaction to the nanons...and if that happens, he will almost certainly die.”

I exhaled. Loudly.

“...You say the odds are one-in-ten?”

She nodded.

I glanced back at Eddie; he had shifted slightly but looked otherwise asleep. The bleeding on his legs and arms had stopped, but his ankle still looked terrible. There was no way he could run or even walk with it like that.

Which meant I couldn't take him through the portalgate with me.

“Arrrgh,” I groaned. “I shouldn't have make a choice like this!”

Lee placed a hand on my leg. My cheeks began self-heating.

“Whatever you decide, Teal – do it quickly. We must act soon.”

Easy for her to say. What if Eddie *did* experience a reaction? What if I made the decision that killed him?

“Teal...”

I mean, I was the one that got him into this. If it weren't for me, he would never have been attacked by those HIRCs...

“Teal.”

Maybe I could go through the portalgate without him... but he could die if I left him, especially if the HIRCs found him, and we definitely didn't have time to go to the hospital...

“Teal, listen to me.”

Ten percent, that wasn't too high.

...But it was certainly higher than I liked.

“Teal, please!”

I made my decision. If we wanted to travel through the portalgate tonight, there was only one real option.

I looked up at Kyralee.

“Okay, I've decided. Let's try your emnon things.”