

CHAPTER 18

We moved quickly and quietly across the field. The night sky glowed with spattered stars, and except for the occasional misstep on a branch or twig, the evening remained eerily quiet.

From this distance, the school grounds looked deserted. I wondered how long that would last.

Assuming we didn't encounter any HIRCs, our first hurdle would be finding a discreet way in. There were multiple entrances on the ground level, but none were ideal. Doors would obviously be locked. Windows were a possibility, but they might be alarmed and even if they weren't, breaking them would be noisy.

I debated trying to climb onto the roof but – for the second time that day – there was no ladder, and I didn't have any trampoline springs on hand.

Behind me, Eddie peppered Lee with questions.

“How old are you?”

“Seventeen.”

“What magic can you do?”

“Eddie, now is not the time. We must move quietly.”

“What do the Zargansk look like? Teal and I kinda saw one, but it happened so fast. He looked huge. Are they huge?”

“Eddie, please. No more questions!”

He continued pestering Lee until they caught up to me, neither of them realizing I had stopped walking.

“Is everything okay?”

I shook my head. As much as I didn't want to admit it, Eddie's assumptions about Lee really bothered me.

Because the truth was that things didn't feel right at all, and they hadn't felt

right for awhile. So far, Eddie and I had only escaped capture because of dumb luck and quick thinking (mostly the former), and I was extremely worried about what would happen if we had to fight more men in black suits. This was especially problematic if Eddie’s theory was correct, and the HIRCs were expecting us.

I sighed heavily for what seemed like the millionth time. Even now, as we approached the school, everything seemed way too calm, way too quiet, way too suspicious. I didn’t want to say anything, but I couldn’t shake a nagging feeling that we were being watched.

Or worse, set up.

I glanced over at Kyralee, who looked deep in thought herself. I wanted nothing more than to know I could trust her and count on her help – because, truthfully, she really had saved our butts back at Megamart. I thought back to the panic that had gripped me as I stood, surrounded, in those racks of clothing, before she came and saved me. Lee and her amazing fire magic had gotten me out of that mess, then saved me again behind the store. I owed her my life at least twice.

But like it or not, there was definitely something “too good to be true” with the way everything turned out. I mean, even the fact that I was the son of Cronus – what were the odds of that? What were the odds of the son of the only human ambassador to ever escape Zargansk service finding out about the Zargansk completely on his own? My entire situation seemed awfully contrived.

I debated bringing this up with Eddie, but my thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a startled yell from somewhere across the field. I ducked beneath the weeds; Eddie and Lee quickly followed.

“Hey! Who do you think you are?”

For a second I thought the voice was directed at me. Had we been spotted?

“That’s right – I’m talking to you, bub! You want a piece of me?”

The voice was unmistakably angry, and it seemed to be coming from the school grounds.

I ducked lower.

“Are you threatening me? Are *you* threatening *me*?”

Something about the voice struck me as familiar. Where had I heard it before?

Following a gut instinct, I took a chance and started creeping through the weeds, hoping to get a closer look at whoever was yelling.

“Teal,” Eddie whispered from behind. “Hey, Teal!”

“What? Do you recognize that voice?”

“Yeah! Look!”

I peeked over the tops of the weeds. Fifty feet in front of me, a group of high school kids – several with flashlights, maybe six in all – were confronting a man in a black suit.

I dropped back below the weeds.

“Oh great,” I whispered back to Eddie. “Do you know who they are?”

Behind us, one of the high school kids began to laugh. It was a mocking, sarcastic laugh.

I suddenly realized where I'd heard it before.

“Eddie, that’s–”

“Yup! It’s Danny Jackson! Looks like he’s got a girl and some football buddies with him.”

Great. Just frigging great.

“Who is Danny Jackson?” Lee whispered. “Is he dangerous?”

I tried to think up a fitting response, but nothing came to mind. There just wasn’t a good way to explain Danny Jackson.

I suppose the simplest description would be *jock*, but such a title didn’t do Danny justice. Eddie once described him as “the platypus of evil” – a hodge-

podge collection of everything bad – and that was probably going easy on him.

Danny stood just over 5 feet tall – 5’2”, to be precise – and he weighed well over 250 pounds. Some people with those dimensions cope with their size by developing admirable characteristics: a great sense of humor, a talent for music or art, extra compassion and kindness.

Danny possessed none of these. His temper was legendary; he once ripped a locker door off its hinges when he found an unflattering picture of himself on it. On another occasion, he threw an unlucky freshman out a closed window because the cafeteria ran out of brownies.

Yes, brownies.

Ironically, the worst thing Danny ever did wasn’t actually something evil... it was something normally considered *awesome*. Last year, the high school football coach decided that Danny’s weight and demeanor made him a prime candidate for the varsity football team, despite Danny being a junior with no prior sports experience. Danny spent most of the season on the bench (where he belonged), which had the added benefit of reducing the number of fights he started with fans of opposing teams.

This continued until the state championship game, when – as fate would have it – our center tore his ACL late in the 4th quarter. Danny was brought in as the replacement, and thanks to a ridiculously lucky trick play involving a center hand-off, Danny won the game.

Why was this the worst thing he’d ever done? Because, for reasons I still didn’t comprehend, most of Franklin High thought this meant the kid deserved respect and friendship – a kid with an uncanny resemblance to Mighty Joe Young (the gorilla, not the musician).

Since the start of this school year, Danny had become worse than ever. The only thing worse than an angry, ignorant thug, is an angry, ignorant thug with an ego.

“Teal!” Lee said, shaking my arm. “Answer me! Is this Danny Jackson man dangerous?”

I again tried to think up a fitting explanation, but more of Danny’s sarcastic laughter rolled across the field, interrupting my thinking.

“Ha ha! This tough guy is gonna take us away! Hey man, why don’t you try it? Why don’t you *make* us go with you?”

I peeked back up over the weeds. The kids were closing in around the lone agent – all but the girl, anyway. She stood ten feet from the group, begging Danny to leave the man alone.

But Danny ignored her. Waving his friends onward, they continued moving toward the man in a black suit. My eyes drifted over to the man – undoubtedly a HIRC – who looked far too calm for how significantly he was outnumbered.

Suddenly one of the boys pushed the agent. He stumbled and warned them not to touch him again. Another boy reached out; the HIRC knocked down his outstretched arm and drew some kind of pistol. It didn’t look human-made.

“Whoa whoa whoa, man. Not cool. Put that thing away.”

“I warned you, kid. Now who’s the tough guy?”

The agent’s voice sounded tinny and mechanical. Who were these HIRCs? Were they even...human?

Danny began rolling up his sleeves.

“Not a chance, pal. You want a fight, you got a fight. Bring it.”

The girl started crying, eliciting a growl from both Eddie and I. What was Danny thinking?

The HIRC smiled.

“You want a fight, boy? You got it.”

The agent smiled again, then threw back his head and let out a terrible mechanical roar. My hands flew to cover my ears as the group of boys around the agent jumped backward in alarm.

Danny, however, yelled at the top of his lungs and charged the black-suited man.

Without hesitation, the agent lashed out his arm. It caught Danny square in the chest and sent him flying through the air. Another boy near the agent met the same fate.

Behind me, Lee gasped.

“Teal! This is terrible! We must help these people!”

I turned to respond but was promptly interrupted by Eddie's loud whispering and frenetically shaking head.

“No! We can't help them! This could be our chance! While these guys fight, let's use it as a distraction to sneak into the school!”

I looked from Lee to Eddie to the group of kids attempting to engage the agent. The HIRC was throwing them around with inhuman strength. It was almost funny...in a frightening sort of way.

Part of me considered going to help them, but another part of me thought it served Danny and his punk friends right to get thrown around by someone stronger. Danny wouldn't help Eddie and I if we were in trouble.

We watched the HIRC dispose of the final boy, who also went flying through the air before colliding with the ground some fifteen feet away.

The agent laughed, shook out his arms, then smiled evilly at the girl. She screamed and turned to run but the agent was too fast. He dashed after her, seized her arms, then began dragging her toward the school. She thrashed against his grasp and continued screaming desperately for help.

That was the deciding factor for me.

I shot after the agent, sprinting so fast the weeds slapped painfully against my legs. I ignored Eddie's frantic yells for me to wait – that girl was in trouble, and if no one else was gonna do something about it, I was.

For what seemed like the tenth time that day, I took a flying leap at the chain

link fence separating the green grass of the schoolyard from the browned field of weeds. The adrenaline must have helped, because I cleared the fence on my first try.

The agent was rapidly nearing the school, and with each step the captive girl's screaming grew louder and more frantic.

As my legs thumped and heart pounded, I noticed my breathing felt more labored than usual. I was tempted to leave behind my backpack, but the metal pole containing the portalgate was still inside it. We had no reason to be at the school without that pole.

So I kept running, forced to helplessly watch as the agent and the girl arrived at the doors of the school. I knew we needed to stop the HIRC before he brought his prisoner into the school; I'm not sure how I knew it, but the thought wouldn't leave my mind. I just wished I knew what he was up to.

Behind me, I could hear Lee and Eddie racing to catch up. I also heard Eddie using every bad word he knew to describe having to run again. He'd never been a big fan of running.

Oh well. A little exercise never hurt anyone, and Eddie probably needed it.

My legs pounded away as I rapidly scanned the school, watching for any sign of movement. If I didn't know better, it looked like the HIRC holding the unnamed girl was the only one of his kind at the school. I doubted that, but I allowed the thought of it to plant some small seed of hope in my otherwise gloomy anticipation of what lay ahead.

I spared a glance behind to see Kyrilee almost caught up; she was surprisingly fast, and the sight of her long black hair waving in the wind...

...er, never mind. Let's just say I cranked up my speed a bit. She'd have to work harder than that to catch up to ol' Teal.

Then a sudden piercing scream burst from behind me. I spun around, worried that something terrible had happened to Lee.

But it wasn't Lee's voice at all. It was Eddie's.

"Teal!" he screamed, arms waving around like the world was coming to an end. "He's after us!"

I was tempted to yell my own brand of obscenities back, but then I saw it – Danny Jackson was up, and he was running straight for us.

With a newfound reason to run my heart out, I resumed a blistering pace for the school. And just as well – the agent had paused at the doors of the school as he reached into his pocket for, presumably, a key. I didn't think there was any chance we'd reach them in time, so I weighed the odds and risked a yell at him.

"Hey HIRC! Stop right there or I'll bust my magic all over your sorry–"

My yell was interrupted by a burst of lightning streaming from the agent's outstretched hand – a burst heading straight for me. I leapt to the side, barely escaping being turned to human toast.

Time to show this guy how a *real* man used magic rocks.

I reached into my pocket and found the two stones I'd used at Megamart. I pulled them out and, while still sprinting, held them in front of me. I had just begun to clamp down my hand when I heard Lee yell, "Teal! No!!"

I slowed slightly as she caught up.

"You cannot use that while he has the girl! You will kill them both!"

"But we don't have a choice! They're getting away!"

"Then we will follow them into the school and catch them there! They cannot escape through a portalgate – right? You still have the remeter?"

I raised an eyebrow.

"Ugh, Teal – the metal bar you used to close the portalgate? You still have it?"

Ah, that. I nodded.

"Then they cannot escape! Let us hurry and free the girl. *Then* we can use magic to defeat him."

I nodded again and picked up the pace. Morbid curiosity led me to turn and check the scene behind us one last time, and I was unpleasantly surprised to find that Danny had passed Eddie and was now less than twenty feet from Lee and I.

I tried to pick up the pace but my legs refused. They'd had enough of my unreasonable demands.

Apparently the agent found the key he was looking for because he suddenly plowed through the school doors, the girl still firmly in his grasp and screaming frantically for help.

Somewhere behind me, Danny yelled something unintelligible.

Everyone kept running.