

CHAPTER 19

Seconds later, Lee and I reached the school doors. The agent had locked the doors behind him, and a glance inside revealed nothing.

I pressed my face against the glass and searched for the door to the janitor's closet. It took me a moment to realize that the door lay down another hallway. Could that be where the HIRC had gone?

Suddenly I found myself swinging through the air before being violently smashed against the glass.

“Where is she, kid?! Where is she?”

I clawed at Danny Jackson's massive paws.

“Lemme go, Danny! I'm here to help!”

Danny hit me against the wall again and brought his face painfully close. I was struck by how bushy his eyebrows were, but I wisely kept that to myself as he plastered me with damp, heavy breathing.

“Don't screw with me! Where is she? Where did he take Cierra?”

Wait – did he just say what I thought he said?

“Cierra? That was Cierra Russell?”

“Of course it was! Where is she?”

I was struck momentarily speechless.

“Danny, put him down.”

He spared a sideways glance at Kyralee.

“Who're you? You with this kid?”

She nodded.

“We want to help your girlfriend.”

Danny snorted out a laugh.

“She ain't my girlfriend, too bad for her.”

Too bad for her? Grrr...

Lee reached out a hand and set it gently on the gorilla's arm.

"Danny, please. Let us help."

He eyed her suspiciously, his grip on me loosening ever so slightly.

"Okay, chick. Can you get me into the school?"

"No, but Teal can. Right, Teal?"

They both turned to face me, and I suddenly wished Danny *had* killed me a moment ago.

"Uh, sure I can, but only if this goon lets me go."

Danny's grip on my arms tightened.

"First tell me how you're getting us into the school."

I fumbled for a moment, then glanced over his shoulder to find Eddie stumbling toward us.

"Eddie! Are you okay?"

He collapsed against the wall.

"<huff> ...no... <puff> ...I'm... <gasp> ...not..."

I took this opportunity to wrestle myself out of Danny's grasp.

"Hurry it up," he grumbled, scowling at me. "Cierra's in trouble!"

If only he knew how much interest I had in saving Cierra Russell. She'd *have* to go to Homecoming with me if I saved her from a HIRC!

"Wait here. Eddie and I will get inside, then let you two in. Give us two or three minutes."

Lee nodded as Danny continued glaring. I grabbed Eddie's arm and dragged him around to the back of the school.

"Teal <gasp> no more running. *Please* <wheeze> no more running."

"Listen, Eddie – we gotta get into the school, and we gotta do it fast. How can we do it without setting off alarms?"

Eddie panted for a moment longer before squeaking out, "roof. Try the

roof.”

The roof? How were we going to get onto the roof?

I dragged Eddie several more steps to a small, wheeled dumpster sitting comfortably against the curb.

“Help me push this next to the school. Maybe we can use it to climb onto the roof.”

Eddie held up his hand.

“Gimme another minute—”

But he was cut off by the sudden appearance of another agent – another God-forsaken HIRC, who darted from behind the dumpster and grabbed Eddie before either of us could so much as blink.

The HIRC motioned at me.

“Yooouuu. Baaack aaawaaayyy.”

His voice was slippery and snake-like. I reached into my pocket and closed a hand around a single small stone.

“Drop him, HIRCKy. Otherwise I’ll blast you like you’ve never been blasted before.”

The agent didn’t smile.

“Nooo maaagic foor yooouu, boooy.”

He shifted himself directly behind Eddie, who was trying everything he could to free himself from the agent’s firm grasp.

“Argh, lemme go!”

The agent’s arm clamped down harder around Eddie’s neck.

“Teal...help...”

What could I do? I wanted to use magic, but Lee’s warning hung thick in my mind:

You’ll kill them both.

But if I did nothing, who knew what the HIRC would do to Eddie?

So I advanced on them, my right hand held out straight with the silex firmly in its grasp.

“Let him go,” I growled.

The agent ignored me and began drifting toward the side of the school from which Eddie and I had come – the side where Danny and Lee still awaited our return. I continued advancing, pushing the agent closer to the edge of the school. Perhaps if he crossed the corner, Lee would be able to bust out magic from that side.

I hoped she would be able to do *something*, because as usual I had no plan.

By now I was walking quickly and steadily toward the HIRC; he couldn't be more than ten feet away, and Eddie was being quite successful in slowing his retreat. Those flailing arms and legs were enough to drive anyone crazy.

The agent seemed worried.

“Staaay aawaaay, booooy.”

His oily voice sounded panicked. I darted toward him, and Eddie took the opportunity to clamp down his teeth on the agent's arm. The HIRC screamed a terrible, slimy scream and reached for his own pocket.

But I was ready. My right hand clamped down on the silex and a massive gust of wind burst away from me. The force of it blew the HIRC off his feet and onto his back.

I screamed at Eddie to get out of the way as I kept my right hand extended. I reached my left hand into my other pocket, closed it around another silex, then ripped it out and squeezed. As before, light soared out of my left hand, merging with the wind still gusting from my right. The two forces twined into a stream of writhing power, soaring toward the agent still fumbling on the ground and smashing him so hard into the concrete that he was unable to counterattack.

I advanced on the agent as the lightwind continued to gust from my grasp.

Eventually he stopped moving, allowing me to release my iron grip on the

small stones in each hand. I kept my arms outstretched as I slowly approached the HIRC's unmoving body.

When I reached it, I stuck out my left foot and lightly tapped the body. It didn't respond. I pressed harder and the agent suddenly grabbed my leg, flipping me onto my side. I reflexively stuck out my hands to catch the fall and the silexes fell from my grasp.

Not again, dammit.

I hit the ground awkwardly and tried to roll away from the agent, but not before he landed a solid foot in my side. I grunted in pain and reached into my pocket for the last silex. The agent prepared to kick me again when Eddie suddenly blindsided him with something blunt and heavy. The agent stumbled; my hand fumbled into another silex.

I ripped it out and reached for the agent.

Tawny flames bridged the three-foot gap between us, engulfing the HIRC in an angry pyre. He hit the ground and tried to roll away, but Eddie whacked him again. I yelled for Eddie to keep hitting, and Eddie happily complied.

The agent stopped moving as the flames continued to flicker. I used this light to round up the two silexes I dropped – I wasn't about to lose those again – then I turned to Eddie, who still clutched the bent metal pole he had used on the agent.

“Where did you get that pole?”

“I noticed it sticking out of the dumpster right before this clown grabbed me. When you started using magic on him, I ran and grabbed it.”

“Good idea. Thanks.”

Eddie shook his head.

“No, dude – thank *you*. I thought that guy was gonna kill me.”

Then he burst into an enormous grin.

“And whoa, can you do magic or what? That was frigging awesome!”

I smiled.

“Yeah. It’s pretty cool, I guess.”

“Pretty cool? Dude – it’s AMAZING! I wish I had magic powers. Are you sure those stones only work for one person?”

I shrugged and held out the silex. Eddie picked it up so gingerly you’d have thought it was made of smoke.

“How does it work?”

“I’m not sure. I just squeeze ‘em and crazy stuff comes flying out.”

Eddie squished the silex – sending my heart rate through the roof – but thankfully, nothing happened.

“Eddie, I’d be careful squeezing that...”

But he was too busy crushing, shaking, and clamping down on it with both fists to listen. Thankfully, all he did was work up a sweat. Nothing he tried brought anything out of the small, black, innocent-looking stone.

He sighed and handed the silex back to me.

“Maybe I can get one on the other side of the portalgate. I guess you’re not afraid of using them now?”

“Nope. I don’t know why, but they haven’t been hurting me like they did the first time. Maybe that pain happens to everyone when they first try magic.”

Eddie shrugged.

“As long as they keep taking out agents, I wouldn’t worry about it. Now weren’t we supposed to find a way into the school?”

My stomach dropped. I had totally forgotten about *that*. Lee and Danny must be pissed. I debated going back and telling them the truth – that I had no idea how to get into the school – then decided against it. Eddie and I would just have to hurry.

“Where were we? Oh yeah – let’s push the dumpster up against the wall. We can use that to climb onto the roof.”

We walked over to the foul-smelling container when I was struck by a sudden urge to return to Lee and Danny.

I stopped in my tracks.

“Teal, c’mon! We gotta hurry!”

“Wait...” I said. “Maybe we should check on Lee and Danny. What if they’ve been attacked too?”

Eddie considered this for a moment.

“I’m sure they’re fine. I guess we can go back if you really want to.”

I thought about this, then shook my head. Lee was perfectly capable of protecting herself. I had no reason to worry about her

“No, it’s okay. Let’s keep moving.”

It took several minutes of ridiculous effort, but eventually we got the dumpster next to the school building. I just hoped the smell on my hands would dissipate before I saw Lee again.

Or Cierra.

Speaking of which, what on earth was *she* was doing at the school building, this late, with the likes of Danny Jackson and his hoodlum friends? That made no sense.

Oh well. Add it to my ever-growing list of ‘things I didn’t get.’

I began climbing onto the dumpster when I was struck by another strong impression to go check on Lee. I wish I could describe the sensation – it was sort of like remembering the location of something I’d lost, only more blurry. I once again considered acting on the impression, but then Eddie prodded me from behind, telling me to hurry up.

What did I have to worry about? Danny wouldn’t touch Lee, and even if he did, Lee would just give him a nice dose of fire magic.

And like that the nagging feeling left.

I climbed onto the dumpster.