

## CHAPTER 20

Eddie reached the roof first. I took his extended hand and pulled myself up.

“So, Eddie – why are we on the roof? Is there really a way into the school from here?”

He shrugged.

“Probably not.”

“What? Probably *not*? Why did you suggest climbing up here?”

“I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

I groaned and looked around. Swamp coolers, stack pipes, and a handful of lost balls and Frisbees were the only things visible in the dim evening light. The pipes were all too small to climb through (not that I really wanted to try that), and there were definitely no doors.

“Eddie, this is–”

“Wait!” he interrupted. “I have an idea! Do your wind magic on a swamp cooler! If you can blow one off, we'll have a perfect way into the school!”

“Will that work? Can we fit through a swamp cooler hole?”

“Oh yeah – they're like a foot or two around. C'mon, Teal! Do your magic!”

As much as I felt ridiculous hearing Eddie say “do your magic,” I didn't have any other ideas and we had been gone much longer than the two or three minutes we'd promised Lee and Danny. Why not give it a try?

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the three silexes resting there. I glanced at each, but in the dim evening light it was awfully hard to tell which stone was which.

So I picked a random one and squeezed it.

A blast of fire scorched from my hand, catching Eddie in the leg. He

screamed and leaped around the roof.

“AHHH! I’m on fire!”

“Eddie, it’s–”

“Stay away from me! My leg! It’s burning! Someone help!”

“Eddie, listen to–”

“I’m gonna die up here! You killed me, Teal! I–”

“EDDIE!”

He stopped leaping.

“You’re not on fire, so quiet down! Do you want the HIRCs to find us?”

He looked down at his pant leg, which was – indeed – not burned at all.

“Oh. No. Sorry, dude.”

Seriously, that kid...

With an angry groan, I placed that silex back in my pocket and squeezed one of the two remaining ones. Bright, pure white light erupted from beneath my clenched fingers. I set that silex in my other pocket.

Fire and light could only mean one thing.

“Okay, Eddie, this last one must be connected to wind. Stand back.”

Eddie complied as I leveled my arm at the nearest cooler. I took a deep breath, then slowly squished the remaining stone.

Wind burst from my fist, making my eyes water and sending my hair squirming all over the place – but the swamp cooler didn’t budge.

I squeezed harder. The gravel beneath me started to drift away in cloudy packs, and I had to squint to keep my eyes from burning.

Still the swamp cooler didn’t move.

I squeezed harder, the gravel beneath me now gusting away in droves. I closed my eyes and dragged a foot back for balance, then I brought my other hand over the first and squeezed the small silex with both of them.

A massive rush of wind bore into the swamp cooler, pulling its front two

supports away from the roof and bending the entire housing away from the hole over which it stood.

I squeezed open an eye to make sure the gust had worked, then released my deathgrip on the silex.

Eddie and I forced the swamp cooler's heavy box a little further back. The hole beneath it was indeed big enough for each of us to fit through.

My next concern was where the hole led. I really hoped it wasn't into the waiting arms of an agent...

...But there was only one way to find out.

I assumed a serious expression and turned to face Eddie.

“Okay, pal. You first.”

“What? Why should I go first?”

“Uh, because you're the better climber, of course!”

Yes, that was a bald-faced lie. What can I say? I *really* didn't want to jump down first.

“Anyway, you'd better hurry – Lee and Danny must think we've died.”

Eddie eyed me suspiciously.

“Whatever.”

He hunched down and gingerly slid himself over the edge of the swamp cooler hole.

“How big a drop do you think this is?”

“Not too big. Now hurry! We gotta get that door open!”

Eddie looked concerned, but he shrugged and completely let go of the roof, disappearing through the hole faster than I could register what had happened.

“Eddie?”

A loud crash and lengthy string of bad words answered me back.

“OW THE PAIN WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME I WAS FIFTY FEET OFF THE GROUND I COULD'VE DIED TEAL YOU STUPID PIECE—”

Eddie kept yelling as I peered into the hole and pulled out my light silex. I gently squeezed it, sending pale light drifting down the hole and into what appeared to be a normal classroom.

Eddie lay sprawled across several desks and his face looked murderous. I thought it served him right.

“Fifty feet off the ground? Eddie, it’s like ten feet. Why did you let go of the roof?”

He said more words not worth repeating, which only made me smile more. I gently climbed over the edge of the hole, then lowered myself down until my arms were fully extended. From there it was a soft drop onto a desk below, and after sliding gracefully onto the floor, I turned to Eddie with a smug grin plastered across my face.

“That wasn’t so hard.”

“Not so hard, I’ll show you not so hard, can’t believe I had to go first, fricking unbelievable...”

I was about to tease him further when a light drifted past the window in the classroom door. I shoved Eddie off the desks and quickly threw myself onto the floor. He hit the ground with a solid *thunk*, but wisely kept from yelling anything.

The classroom door creaked open.

A bright beam of light flickered over the top of the desks. I held my breath and tried to hold perfectly still. The beam swiveled around the room several times, then a voice further down the hallway yelled something.

“What was that noise, 16?”

“I dunno. Doesn’t look like it came from here. Try the next room.”

The beam slid out the doorway as the classroom door swung closed. Eddie and I exhaled in unison, my mind already racing to form a new plan of attack.

“We gotta get that outside door open,” I whispered. “Kyralee’s way better

than I am at this magic stuff, and who knows – maybe Danny’s muscles could come in handy.”

Eddie nodded his assent.

“So here’s what I say we do: let’s wait until the two goons in the hallway leave, then we’ll head for the outside doors. I’ll keep my magic ready in case we run into an agent. Once we get Lee and Danny inside, we’ll go hunting for Cierra, then once she’s safe we’ll head for the portalgate. Sound good?”

Eddie nodded again.

We crawled around desks and chairs until we reached the classroom door. From there I carefully stood up and peered out the steel-gridded window inset in the door, and after searching and finding nothing, I gently turned the doorknob.

With a gentle *click*, the door slipped open.

I peered both ways down the hallway. The two men we’d heard earlier were nowhere to be found. I motioned to Eddie, and the two of us slid silently out into the moonlit corridor. We quickly tip-toed toward the far entrance, keeping our backs tightly against the lockers and our eyes peeled for any sign of movement.

It didn’t take us long to reach the end of the hallway. I pushed open the interior set of doors, then had Eddie hold them while I edged open the outside doors.

But Danny and Lee weren’t there.

“Hey!” I whispered. “Lee? Danny? Hello?”

No one replied.

I kept one hand on the door as I cautiously stepped outside. A quick scan of the surrounding grounds revealed nothing, except that Lee and Danny were definitely gone.

“Teal! Duck!”

I spun around just in time to see a burst of green energy soar into the door on my left. The blast exploded the glass into a cloud of dust, sending Eddie scream-

ing and diving out the still open door.

I did my best to use the door for cover without letting it close. I considered running for my life, but as the dust settled I was struck by the thought of Kyralee being somehow captured by the agents, and it filled me with a maniacal fury unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

So I whipped out two silexes and, yelling madly, charged back into the school.

A lone HIRC stood some fifteen feet inside. He leveled his alien rifle and prepared to fire off another burst of energy, but I smashed down on both silexes before he could do anything.

Red-blue balls of fire soared down the hallway and exploded against the unprepared agent. I pressed down harder, and larger clusters of flame burst from my hands. The agent disappeared in a massive pyre of smoke and light.

That was somewhat unexpected. I looked into my hands and realized I grabbed the fire and wind silexes – hence the wind-like bursts of flames.

This made me wonder whether the magic stones were meant to be mixed like this. It seemed to be working, but were there side-effects I didn't realize? I hoped not.

After ensuring the HIRC was truly taken care of (I didn't need more surprise attacks), I ran back to the outside doors. I burst through them and found Eddie still outside, hiding behind the wall and breathing heavily.

“Hey! C'mon!”

He cleared his throat and shook his head.

“No way, Teal. No way. You've got magic to protect you, but I've got nothing! Every time we get into these fights, I'm just a sitting duck.”

I couldn't believe I was hearing this. Now was not the time.

“And besides, man,” he panted, “you don't really need me.”

I shook my head angrily.

“Eddie, enough! Danny and Lee are gone! We have to help them! Of course I need you!”

“No you don’t. I’m not good for anything. This whole time it’s been you doing all the dangerous stuff. I’m just a tag-a-long. Leave me out here.”

There’s nothing worse than having an argument with someone that’s mostly right.

“Shut up, Ed. You know that’s not true. It was your idea to race through the store on our bikes. You saved us there.”

Eddie laughed, but it wasn’t a happy laugh.

“And then what happened? I tried to run away and almost died when those agents hit me with their car. I’m just a liability, Teal.”

I clenched my teeth. Tempting as it was to say “know what, you’re right,” I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Kyralee was in danger, Cierra was in danger, and we still needed to find a way back to the portalgate.

And as much as I wanted to punch Eddie, I knew things would be way worse if I were alone.

“Listen to me. You can think whatever you want, but we don’t have time to argue about this. If you’re too chicken to help me save Lee and Cierra, I’ll do it myself. Then I’ll go through the portalgate alone and save mankind myself too. I don’t want to, but I will.”

Eddie said nothing.

“So that’s it? Not even a response?”

Apparently not. I turned and walked back into the school.

“Teal, wait.”

Eddie stepped out from behind the outside wall, then through the broken glass and into the hallway.

“Do you really think I can be useful?”

“Of course! But we don’t have time to fight about it. If you come with me,

I need you to be serious about it. There's no turning back from here."

He thought about it for a moment.

"...Okay. I'm in. But do you think we could find me a weapon? I'm tired of sitting around and watching everyone else fight."

I smiled and walked down the hallway to the unmoving HIRC I'd fired moments earlier. The agent was little more than a pile of dust, but his rifle was still there, a little blackened but otherwise intact. It looked just like the ones the janitor had given us beneath the school.

Which finally confirmed one thing – the HIRCs either worked for the Zargansk or had some kind of access to Zargansk weapons. The former seemed most reasonable.

I picked the weapon up and handed it to Eddie.

"Will this do?"

"Oh, yeah! I've missed these babies."

Then he grinned.

"Now let's fry some agents!"

I forced another smile, hoping it would hide how sick I was of playing psychologist. Every second we wasted talking was another second Kyrilee and Cierra stayed in potential danger.

"So, Eddie – any ideas on where our missing friends went?"

He thought for a moment.

"I'm guessing the agents are somehow connected to the silver tunnels beneath the school. Let's head to the janitor's closet first."

"I agree. You've got the big gun, so why don't you lead the way."

Eddie smiled and struck out opposite the blown-up doors, his newfound rifle held out stiff and cautious. I kept the fire silex firmly enclosed in my left fist and the wind silex similarly tight in my right. I quite liked the fireball thing I'd busted out on the last HIRC. If more agents decided to stir up trouble, I was looking

forward to blasting every last one of them.

Eddie led us midway down the hallway before veering down another hall on the right. The only light came from the ends of each corridor, where dull beams of moonlight shone around the opaque braces of the exterior doors. I considered getting out my light silex, but worried that would make us visible from too far a distance. We were probably safer in the dark.

But the eeriness of the dim, silent hallways made me nervous. Every shadow seemed a potential HIRC, every locker a hidden enemy waiting for us to pass before blasting us apart. My eyes had started to adjust to the darkness, but it would still be all-too-easy for something to catch us unaware.

I wiped the beading sweat from my forehead and moved closer to Eddie.

We traveled three-fourths of the way down the hall before turning left onto another lengthy corridor of lockers and classroom doors. I recognized this as the hallway leading to the locker rooms and gymnasium. The janitor's closet was down the next hallway on the right.

I swallowed heavily and continued following Eddie as he crept forward. Both our heads flicked about nervously, checking every direction in an attempt to prevent HIRCs from surprising us.

At last we reached the turn-off to the hallway containing the janitor's closet. Eddie watched behind us as I cautiously peered around the corner.

The door to the janitor's closet remained closed, but two muscular-looking HIRCs paced methodically in front of it. The girls had to be in there.

I slipped back behind the corner and consulted with my nervous friend.

“Any ideas on how to get past two goons guarding the janitor's door?”

Eddie shook his head.

“Short of the old create-a-distraction-then-blow-them-all-up routine, I've got nothing. What if we—”

But he was interrupted by a sudden buzzing and mechanical beeping coming

from somewhere on his body. Eddie frantically searched his pockets for the culprit – his cellphone – which was steadily crescendoing to maximum volume.

Just when you think things can't get worse, right? And who would be calling Eddie at this time of night?

It took him several seconds to find his phone and silence it, seconds I spent creeping away from the HIRC's hallway and readying my silaxes.

Heavy footsteps bounded down the hallway toward us, and once Eddie slammed the silenced phone back in his pocket (while whispering curses at his parents for calling so late), he quickly backed away from the hallway while simultaneously raising the Zargansk rifle and tightening his trigger finger.

The footsteps coming down the hallway slowed as they approached. Unfortunately, it seemed these agents weren't as dumb as I had hoped – they weren't going to wander blindly into our firing path.

Too bad.

The footsteps stopped inches from the corner. A deep bass voice growled out, "who's there?"

I deepened my own voice as much as I could and replied.

"Who's here? I'm, uh, Number 16. Who's there?"

"HIRC Number 4. What's the passcode, Number 16?"

"Er," I fumbled. "Why don't you tell me the passcode, Number 4?"

"Because I'm higher-ranking than you, Number 16, if that is your real ID. Step around the corner to verify."

I swallowed my sudden mouthful of nervous drool.

"Not unless you put down your weapons, Number 4. I don't want you shooting me just because you're suspicious."

"Very well," the deep voice growled. "Our weapons are lowered. Now step around the corner. That's an order."

I doubted very much that the HIRCS had lowered their weapons, but maybe

this meant they wouldn't shoot me on sight. I stretched out my arms, readied my fists, and walked to the edge of the hallway.

“Okay, Number 4. I'm coming out now.”

I swung around the edge of the hallway and clamped down on the silexes.

Monstrous fireballs erupted from my grasp, swallowing the two unprepared agents and sending waves of heat and light in every direction. Each HIRC screamed; one fell to the ground as the other whipped out a rifle and fired back at me. I dove around the corner as a green burst of energy smashed against the lockers to my left, decimating them.

Eddie and I popped back around the corner, him firing his rifle madly as I unleashed more fiery missiles. It didn't take long for us to reduce the two HIRCs into nothingness.

I waited for the flames to disappear, then stepped over the agents' lifeless forms and quickly searched for anything useful. Each carried a Zargansk handgun similar to what the agent outside had pulled on Danny and his friends. I took one and handed Eddie the other. Each agent also carried several silexes, but since they were unusable to us, we left them behind. Anything else the HIRCs might have been carrying had been destroyed by our attack.

After quickly checking to make sure no other agents had appeared, we sprinted down the hallway. I reached the door to the janitor's closet first and found it still securely locked. Eddie muttered something angry about forgetting the keys.

Fortunately, I had an idea for getting around the whole no-key problem.

I extended my arms and flames erupted from my fists, engulfing the door and the surrounding walls with explosive, burning claws. I had to take several steps back; the heat streaming from the blaze was painfully thick and intense.

After several seconds of this inferno action, I released the silexes and lowered my fists.

The janitor's door was no longer a drab gray color. Instead, it was a bright,

shiny silver – the same brilliant silver that lined the secret hallways beneath the school. The paint on the door had apparently been designed to obscure this little secret.

Unfortunately, was still locked up tight.

On to plan B.

I whipped out my Zargansk pistol, eager for a chance to try out its firepower. Eddie joined in and we blasted the door over and over and over again.

But the blasts did nothing. As had happened with the janitor in the tunnels, the bursts of energy simply dissipated upon hitting the smooth metal of the door.

I stuffed the fire silex back into my pocket and pulled out the light one. I placed it and the wind silex into my right fist and clamped down on both stones. The tornado of gossamer light reappeared, but it was also unable to do anything to the door.

My jaw clenched as I tried to refrain from saying all the angry words passing through my mind.

I absent-mindedly returned the light silex back to my pocket when a new burst of green energy soared past my head. I dove to the ground as a second blast narrowly missed my chest. Three more blasts echoed down the hallway, sending Eddie and I scampering backwards.

Eventually I was able to find and wield the fire silex, which I combined with the wind one to send gusts of fire back down the hallway at whoever was attacking us.

Another green blast came dangerously close to my head, and I replied with more eruptions of flaming missiles. Eddie fired back madly with his own rifle, and after several more blasts from both of us the shooting from down the hall ceased.

I climbed to my feet and held the silexes firmly in front of me. Step by step, I inched down the hallway toward the side the blasts had come from.

Suddenly another blast – this one from behind – blew apart the lockers next to me. I dove wildly away as the blasts continued from behind and, even worse, resumed from in front. Green balls of energy exploded all around.

I realized that we were surrounded, and if we didn't move quickly we would certainly be caught.

Or worse. These green blasts didn't seem the "take Teal alive" variety. These were meant to kill.

I searched frantically for an escape.