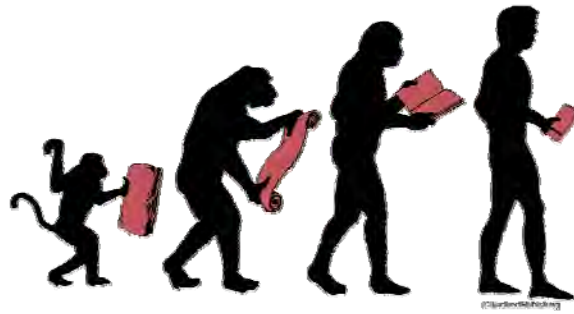


THE
SILVER
SPHERE
MICHAEL DADICH



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Dedication:

For Jenna and Jax; when they smile my heart is whole.

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"Hell is empty and all the devils are here."

William Shakespeare



"Your world will be over soon, won't it, dear Bianca?"

The cloaked creature rasped out the syllables one at a time, and each sound pushed Bianca closer toward the cold stone floor. Moonlight splashed across the room from a wall of windows. Even if she could have yelled, no one would have heard her. Pain made her dizzy.

As the assault on her consciousness raged, she struggled to her feet against the heavy stupor overtaking her body. Her limbs shook. The long table in front of her provided only a moment of support before she collapsed upon the solid oak board.

Her vision blurred from the pressure, and a murmur gurgled from her throat as she tried to call out to the Assembly members hunched in their chairs. The maroon wine spilled across the table told of their downfall. Were they unconscious or dead? She couldn't begin to guess. Her goblet remained almost untouched.

"How easy this was...."

The din of his words made her gaze upward, where a hood surrounded his darkened features. Screams echoed in her head, though no sound broke from her lips.

He knelt beside her and whispered, "Dear Bianca." His hands caressed full chunks of her raven hair, and he started pulling the strands through his fingers.

Horror traveled down her spine and numbed her. She felt the escape of fainting descend upon her, fogging her mind; how she wanted to drift off and shun the maddening fear. Yet he would not let her. She tried in vain to pull away, but his power over her was too great.

"Don't." She must have said it aloud because his grip tightened and he jerked her head back, forcing her to look at him. She gasped as he pulled the cowl away.

Her tormentor had a pallid complexion and a high forehead. Long, wiry auburn hair framed his narrow face, at the center of which sat a nose snubbed like a snout. It was the piercing glare of his eyes that caught her, though. Their intensity made her skin crawl.

"Malefic," she mouthed, her breath releasing in a terrified wheeze.

He loosened his grasp and eased her to the floor. Then he stepped over her body and slithered to the head of the table, admiring his handiwork.

Bianca's legs and arms stiffened. Malefic oozed power, and as she watched him, her mind reeled. What had led to such laxness in their security? Where had he come from?

We were betrayed, of course, she thought, as unconsciousness bid her closer to blackness.

Malefic turned and glared into her eyes, a sneer twisting his expression into a grotesque mask. "The Aulic Assembly is mine." His harsh voice pulled her to the brink. "Father will be pleased."

A decorative title card for Chapter 2. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a white, serif font on the left. To its right is a large, stylized white number "2". The background is a dark, atmospheric landscape with a silhouette of a person in the foreground and a faint, glowing geometric pattern in the upper right. The entire card is framed by a decorative, ornate border.

Shelby Pardow sat across the table from the beast. Her cereal rested on her tongue like paper, and she melted the particles to avoid any crunching. She planned every movement she made. Were it possible, she'd escape the beast without exchanging a single word with him.

Her father, Byron, had barged in from his night out. At eight o'clock that morning, the sickening-sweet scent of alcohol and cigarettes remained on his breath.

She needed to be cautious; after he drank gin, the devil possessed him. She glanced up at his rumpled clothes, haggard expression, and gray stubble along his jaw. His depression had worsened since Mom abandoned them.

He munched a slice of cold pizza left over from dinner earlier that week. His behavior turned her stomach sour. She needed him – well, except when she needed to avoid him.

Dang it all. How did I forget to set the iPod alarm last night?

The beast glared at her from across the table. "So, to what do I owe the pleasure, missy?"

The beast only called her "missy."

"Nothing, Dad. I just wanted to see you before I left for the library."

Her sweet reply was countered with a snarl. "Oh, really? Or did you oversleep before you cut out to your precious book cave, huh, missy?"

She took small bites of cereal and kept her eyes locked on the blue, flower-patterned bowl. Usually he ignored her when she did not look at him. She hoped today would be the same.

"Answer me!" the beast roared, jarring the table and sending her saucer crashing to the floor. The beast had consumed him.

Shelby winced. Maybe it believed she was her mother. Everyone always said she resembled Samantha.

She glimpsed her father in the beast's face. He scanned the ground with remorse, and for a moment, she thought he might return after all. Hope, however, was shattered.

The alcoholic creature rose with a howl.

Trembling, she stood and backed away. Her foot slipped on the cereal and milk now layering the slick linoleum, nearly tumbling her down.

"Look what you've done now, missy!" The beast growled as he whirled around the table and grasped her by the neck.

Her heart throbbed and her legs buckled.

"I'll teach you to respect food, missy. Children are starving in this world, some even here in town. Now you eat that food, missy. You eat it right off the floor."

"Daddy... please..." She managed to choke the words out in between gasps for air, and she sniffled in fear. On the ground, the dish wobbled and skidded a few feet.

"Go ahead, missy."

Shelby obeyed. Salty tears ran down her face to blend with the flavor of linoleum, low-fat milk, and cereal.

The second he gave an inch, she'd race for the front door. He'd never follow, but even if the beast did, Mr. Dempsey, the kind librarian, would protect her. She'd run straight to him.

The disgusting tang of the floor, and a sudden silence, snapped her back to the moment. The beast had let up, so Shelby stopped licking at the ground and eyed him.

He sauntered to the kitchen sink, poured a tall glass of water, and began chugging it.

Without delay, she got to her feet and charged to the front door. She ripped the deadbolt open, sped down to Bounty Lane, and ran toward Main Street, where the library waited. Houses flashed by, each fronted by a lovely yard, fenced in and tidy.

The beast did not follow.

Shelby halted, shivering in the morning sun, then doubled over and dry heaved. Sweat rolled down her brow and her hair clung to the back of her neck. She wanted to erupt into tears, but she sucked in a lungful of air and shut her eyes, forcing herself to calm down. Everything would be okay now, but she *had* to remember to set her iPod before the beast came home.

Shelby touched the back of her sore neck. Tears welled in her eyes.

What will I do if the beast never leaves?

She leaned against the rough brick wall of a store. Main Street spread before her with people bustling about their business. Children screamed and ran from a candy shop in droves, sweets in their hands.

Exactly what I need, she decided. Something sweet to wash away the dusty linoleum.

With a wad of money stuffed in her jean pockets, she strolled down the street to the drugstore that sold her favorite drink. She stepped in, but no one stood at the register.

How predictable. Someone made a spill in one of the snack aisles, and Mr. Goodman is mopping up.

She called to him, "Hey, Mr. Goodman! Buying milk!" and left the exact change on the counter for the bottle of strawberry milk.

She swilled the ice-cold beverage down, soothing her throat and rinsing the gross linoleum taste from her mouth, and walked to the exit with empty bottle in hand.

Daddy *would* be back in the afternoon. And she *would* talk to him. He'd declare his resolve never to drink again, and profess his never-ending love for her. Everything would be fine. It had to be.

Shelby tossed the bottle in a wastebasket and stepped out onto the street. She scanned both sides of the avenue, though she knew he hadn't followed. Her body still shook from the beast's attack. No sign of *it* on either side of the boulevard. She closed her eyes and exhaled. Confident, she strolled to the library.

The beast may not have even realized she'd left yet; her friends had nicknamed her "ninja girl" for a reason. She'd escaped again, though not without some harm. She rubbed the back of her neck, trying to let it go. Her father would *never* hurt her, but the beast.... That's what had done this to her.

The important thing was she'd managed to get away. "Par for the course," she said to no one.

Shelby arrived at the Rutherford B. Hayes Library, longing for its air conditioning and calm setting to cool her sweaty brow and dampened tee-shirt. She ascended the stairs and breezed through the entrance, where a wash of cold air enveloped her. She paused at the front counter and stretched her hands up over her head, reveling in the cool tranquility of her sanctuary.

Mr. Dempsey gazed up from his notebook, twirling a pencil. In his mid-fifties, he was a sweet man, though stern when necessary.

Shelby's mind drifted to the time a surly gang of boys ignited the library trash bin with matches. Mr. Dempsey stopped them as soon as he spotted the punks, barking at them like a drill sergeant. The thugs hesitated only a moment before bolting. Her confidence in him swelled after that. The gang had intimidated her friends many times over the years, but never after that.

"Top of the morning to you, young Shelby. Have you been running track? Don't tell me kids run track in their jeans these days." Whenever he spoke, he gave her his complete attention. He brushed some eraser residue off his crisp blue chambray shirt and khaki pants while maintaining his gaze.

"Aw, no, Mr. Dempsey, a crazy old stray over on Bounty Lane interrupted my path. I got a li'l nervous and ran over to Main. Hot outside." No reason to tell him the embarrassing truth. Anyway, private persons didn't share things that were... well, private. "Any of the computers open yet?"

She inquired as a matter of courtesy; computers were always open this early in the day.

"Take your pick of the four in the back right. I shut off the ones on the left 'til this afternoon to save power. Have fun and stay off the restricted sites."

The routine soothed her. She felt at home here, as if coming in and saying hello could be as normal as waking up and brushing her teeth. She grinned. Mr. Dempsey always reminded her that not all adults yelled at her or threatened her.

"Of course, Mr. Dempsey." Shelby glided to the back and slid into a cubicle. She flipped on the computer to study a site referring to magic spells she intended to use to cure her father.

An odd sensation raced up her spine, and she shuddered at the electric tingling. Without making an effort, she grew more alert as she peered at the screen. A dialogue box appeared with a clang.

She jolted. *How bizarre. I haven't even signed onto the instant messenger.*

It was different from other windows she'd seen, with a rainbow-colored border around a glowing box. Yet the sender's identity remained hidden.

She ran her fingers through her dark hair, her right leg rocking up and down.

You are needed.

Perplexed, she spied over her shoulder at the silent library. She stood on her chair and inspected the other cubicles nearby, but all of them sat empty, the computers still off. Maybe a virus had infected this machine.

"Is anyone here? I'm having a problem with my computer."

No answer. Her attention shifted to the glowing note. It was probably harmless.

She sank back down. "*For what?*" she typed, and hit the enter button.

At once, a sharp clang signaled another message.

The balance is in their favor.

Your Kin is our savior.

As she is missing,

Biskara is hissing.

An ancient evil has come.

Save us from thralldom.

Please answer our plea for help.

Did she know anyone named Biskara? It seemed vaguely familiar. Shelby had many friends on the Internet, most of them girls her age, in tenth grade. Some of them preferred quirky nicknames, so Biskara could have been one of their handles. Someone was probably playing a joke on her. Sometimes they did that to one another for simple fun, but this was just weird.

She typed, "*How?*" and hit "send."

A clang and a note followed.

File down the aisle to the storage room.

We will be there to greet you soon.

Mr. Dempsey might know what the message meant, or at least he could check its validity. She knew where the storage room was; last summer, she and some other kids had helped Mr. Dempsey clean the dark cavern. It was little more than a creepy closet near the back of the main section of the library. One glaring light hung with a cord in the middle of the gloomy antechamber. Just the thought of searching for that cord, in the dark by herself, sent chills down her spine.

A voice disrupted her thoughts. "How are we doing today, Miss Shelby?"

She jerked back from the monitor and gasped. "Mr. Dempsey."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Shelby. I didn't mean to sneak up on you. My silence is a curse sometimes. I thought I heard you call out."

"I did. I did." She tried to calm her panting. "Look at these messages, Mr. Dempsey. That one said they need help against an ancient evil."

She took a deep breath as Mr. Dempsey studied the dialogue box. Unlike the beast, he always listened to kids.

"Hmm, the storage room? I was just inside not twenty minutes ago, and nobody else is here except you. The O'Connor boys and some of their friends left right before you arrived, and that's been the traffic this morning. I suppose we ought to investigate, eh?"

"I do believe so." She relaxed, relieved to have his company.

She followed him over to the storage room. The entryway was solid oak, like all of the other doors.

Mr. Dempsey turned the handle and pushed it open. "Is anyone here?"

Silence.

He proceeded to the hanging light while Shelby tentatively strode behind him. A strange, damp chill hung in the air – colder than air conditioning should have made it. She shivered and rubbed her arms as goose pimples swelled over her flesh.

Mr. Dempsey tugged the cord, but the bulb did not turn on. He pulled the cord a few more times, but still no light.

"The bulb must be out. I have extras at the front desk in the bottom drawer. Why don't you grab one, Shelby?"

"Sure, Mr. D."

She turned and shuffled toward the door, which whirled shut with a bang. Shelby gasped and her heart jumped. Without light from the entrance, the room went pitch black.

"Mr. Dempsey?" she cried out.

A decorative title card for Chapter 3. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a white, serif font on the left. To its right is a large, stylized white number "3". The background is a dark, atmospheric landscape with a silhouette of a person in the foreground and a faint, glowing geometric diagram in the upper right. The entire card is framed by ornate, white, scroll-like flourishes at the top and bottom.

CHAPTER 3

"Geek!"

"Loser!"

Zach Ryder halted and peeked around the corner of the school hallway. The final bell had rung almost ten minutes ago, and the tiled halls loomed empty. Well, mostly.

Four massive brutes shoved one of Zach's friends into the row of metal lockers. One grabbed Adrian by the cuff of his shirt and walloped him.

Adrian whimpered. His small hands flailed in an attempt to cover his face.

Zach's guts churned. If he tried to assist, they'd pummel him. But he couldn't just hide. He and Adrian had known each other since third grade.

Zach glanced around in hopes of finding a teacher. No one appeared, and the teacher's lounge was on the far side of the school. If he bolted for aid, Adrian would be a bloody mess by the time he returned.

The fire alarm across the hall caught his attention. The little red box never looked so inviting.

Without hesitation, he scooted over and tugged the white handle. The bell reverberated down the corridor. He turned back to glimpse the bullies scrambling, yelling, "Fire drill now? Let's beat it before teachers get down here. We'll finish with you another time, wimp!"

Zach raced over to his friend and knelt beside him. "Adrian, are you okay?"

"Yeah, sure," his friend muttered through a bloody lip. A shiner already swelled over his right eye, his spectacles askew.

"Can you walk? We need to split."

Adrian groaned as Zach pulled him up and threw Adrian's arm around his neck. Zach realized how much smaller they were compared to their antagonizers, as he hefted Adrian's bag over his other shoulder and grunted.

"Geez! What do you have in here?"

Adrian didn't reply.

They hurried out the exit opposite the one the bullies had gone through. Zach sensed commotion behind, as teachers scurried around trying to figure out the cause of the blaring. Only a few of them had arrived at this end of the school, no doubt looking for any students left from band or soccer practice.

Zach shouldered the door open and he and Adrian slipped out of the building unnoticed. Once outside, he guided Adrian down to the green lawn. He dropped the heavy bag of books and wiped a layer of sweat from his brow.

"Did you pull the alarm?" asked Adrian, eyeing Zach as he fixed his glasses. One of the

arms had been bent and he struggled to straighten it.

Zach nodded. "Yeah, I... I didn't think I'd find teachers quick enough."

Adrian smirked. The smashed lip looked only half as bad when he smiled. "Thanks. I'll have to remember that one."

Zach plopped down beside him, the grass cool and soft. "No problem. Is your mom on her way?"

"Not for another hour. Math club today."

"Wanna go to the five-and-dime?" Zach eyed the school. If Gordie and his gang found them out here, he wouldn't be able to pull a fire alarm to escape. "We can get some ice for your eye."

Adrian picked at the lawn, snapping blades and dropping them in a neat pile. "I dunno, Zach. I might just head home."

"I'll walk with you."

"You don't have to."

Zach noticed the tears welling in Adrian's eyes. The other boy wiped them away as his mussed brown hair whipped in the breeze. He looked miserable.

"I want to. You're my bro," said Zach. "I'm not going to have you go home alone. Come on, I'll carry your bag."

Adrian stood. Zach offered to let him lean against his shoulder, but Adrian shook his head.

"I'm good. Just a little freaked out."

Zach hoisted the book knapsack over his back. "No problem."

They paced in silence for a time. Zach considered teasing his friend, but nothing sounded right. Being beat up was terrifying—Zach had suffered his fair share of bullying.

Cars zoomed by on Harding Boulevard. They lived a good three miles from the school, but by the time they reached his neighborhood, Adrian started chatting again.

"I did buy a new fatpack," he said with a smirk. "I didn't think I'd do enough chores. Forty dollars down the drain!" He laughed.

"Did you open it yet?"

"Oh, of course. And you'll *never* guess what I got!"

"Which series?" Zach asked. He didn't immerse himself into *Magic* the way Adrian had, but he understood the game well enough. Sometimes they'd play together. Zach liked his Sliver deck. If he pulled the Sliver Queen out, almost nothing stopped it.

"New Phyrexia, duh," Adrian said with a snort. He grinned, then winced and touched his split lip. "Anyways, I got *Karn!* The *Planeswalker!* Can you believe?"

Zach shook his head. "I never understood Planeswalkers. They seem to break the game."

"Nah, you have the Eldrazi to balance everything."

They reached Adrian's place, a ranch style, red brick house with a sprawling front yard. A single cottonwood stood sentinel in the center of the lawn. The tree was already dropping cotton across the plot.

"We'll have to play a game. You gonna be okay?" Zach stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"Yeah." Adrian shrugged a frail shoulder and took his bag. "Thanks again, Zach. You're a good friend."

"No problem. Take care, bud."

"Hey, want to come in and play a quick game, like the old days?"

"Nah. I should have been home by now."

"You sure? Come on! It's not like they would even notice."

Zach glanced at him.

Adrian pushed his glasses back into place, but the arm was still crooked and they kept

sliding down his nose. "Umm, I didn't mean that."

"Cool." Zach sauntered off and waved.

"See y-you tomorrow," Adrian stammered, then jumped inside his house.

The stroll to his house relaxed Zach. Late afternoon sunlight beckoned the rich gold of early autumn. Long, purple shadows cascaded across the sidewalk and street. A picket fence sent lengthy spikes over the tarmac of the road, spearing the lawns on the other side.

Soon, he left the smaller neighborhoods behind, and sighed. The homes where he lived stood too uniform, lacking character and warmth. His house appeared more box-like than all the rest. He hiked up the winding drive to the front door.

The spare key hid behind his mother's pot of azaleas. He fished it out and unlocked the door, carefully replacing the key before he went inside. The moment he entered the house, he wished he'd gone around back.

"No, I don't have *a clue* where your special mug is! Just use another one!"

"You're the one who always puts everything away! Where'd you place the dang thing?"

"I didn't put it *anywhere*! I bet you left it upstairs! Did you even check?"

Zach rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed. He began to ease his way up the flight of elegant wooden steps when his mother shouted, "Zach, is that you?"

"Oh, smart, Sharon. Get the boy involved!"

"He might know where your stupid mug is!"

Zach retreated down into the kitchen. The tiled floor and marble countertops made the room feel cold. Even the dark wood of the cabinets didn't help warm the kitchen. He shivered.

"Hi, I'm here."

His mother stood with hands on hips. "Zach, where were you?"

"Adrian got beat up. I walked him home."

And, as usual, it went in one ear and out the other. "That's nice. Where's your father's mug?"

"I don't know. Didn't you hear me?"

"Of course."

Zach rubbed his temples and muttered, "You *never* listen."

"Zachy, if you know where my mug is, speak up," said his father, who patrolled the counter, tearing through the cupboards. "And, Sharon, be a dear and make me a snack. Some of those marshmallow treats?"

"Oh, and while I'm at it, should I wash your car?" Her voice rose in pitch.

Zach backed out of the kitchen. By the time they were both screaming, he had whipped out the back door and dashed to the guesthouse. The French doors beckoned him, promising to keep him safe from the tension of his family life. He trooped inside, locked the door, and breathed a sigh of relief. Now he could be a normal kid.

His computer – not the ones his parents used, but *his*, the one he had scrimped and saved for about three years ago – hummed happily on his desk. He slipped into the comfortable chair and switched the monitor on. The computer chimed to life. Once the loading screen had gone, he accessed the chat. Maybe Adrian would be online. He really wanted to talk to someone.

The sound of clanging swords made him jump. A message popped up.

YOU ARE NEEDED.

Zach paused. For such a small dialogue box on his computer, the brief text shouted in capital letters. Why did it appear so different from the usual exchanges? Had Adrian or another friend discovered some new technique? It couldn't be from his foster parents. Sometimes they messaged him after calming down, to coax him back inside for dinner – if they remembered he

existed.

No, they were still shouting.

Mouth agape, he stared at the note: *YOU ARE NEEDED.*

The box flashed on his screen, awaiting a response. How curious. A joke from his friends? If it was Adrian, he would play along – or maybe not. He was tired of games right now. Zach typed in, "*Who is this?*" and sent it back.

A brief silence intensified the next loud bang. The jangle made Zach's skin crawl. Never before had an instant messenger ring resounded with such violence. The noise conveyed something unearthly in the dialogue box.

In a different world and another time,

your alter ego will brilliantly shine.

You and others just like him

are very close to next of kin.

These heroes gone and evil hissing,

the sphere's power is now missing.

The balance is quickly shifting.

Please heed our call for help.

Zach read the rhyme twice, and goose bumps raced over his skin. His conviction grew surer. Adrian had to be playing around with him. He and his friends would tease each other on instant message now and again – except the box offered no identity.

The queasy unease in his stomach worsened. His hands shook a little as he typed. "*How can I help?*"

The clang sounded the arrival of another memo.

Step outside and find us waiting.

Promptly now, as we are fading.

He swiveled in his chair. A noise he couldn't identify emanated from near the French doors – perhaps a bell or a whooshing sound. His blood surged. The pounding of his heart deafened him.

He turned to stare at the message for a minute before rising from the chair. The knot in his gut confirmed that it wasn't a game, and it wasn't any of his friends. Before he even touched the knob, both doors swung open and a cold, clammy burst of air whipped through the opening. Knocking knees made it hard to walk and tremors shook his body, but his resolve remained steady.

Zach pushed across the threshold. An unexpected, murky fog lay in front of him. His house loomed ahead, and he headed for the back door. The bay windows from the kitchen, only a short distance away, were a yellow haze as the mist became thicker and darker with each step, cloaking the outlines of his rooftop.

He squinted, trying to find his home. His uneasiness intensified as he hiked onward – no way it should have vanished completely.

On and on he trudged. Grass became compact and stronger, like the scrub of a marsh. Bald patches of earth sprang up where walkways and a trimmed lawn should have been. He continued stepping cautiously, even as he noticed the changing ground. His tennis shoes squished into its spongy, mire-like surface. Where had the well-kept turf gone?

Still, no sign of his home.

The mist grew heavier and his clothing became soaked. He longed for the shouting and anger usually emanating from the house. Even when he stopped and strained to listen, no sounds could be heard; their shouts too had been swallowed by the dense blanket of fog.

Only fear kept him from calling for help. Wherever he stood, this wasn't home any longer. He ventured alone in the murk, thinking he might have gone the wrong way and ended up near Willows Road, which wound around the back of his parents' property. Zach turned and began retracing his steps, hoping he could backtrack to the guest house.

No such luck.

He stopped at last by a bulky object that loomed from the brume before him, blocking his path. The mist dissipated. A tree trunk was recumbent in the mud, its girth as wide as he was tall. The tree branches traveled in both directions as far as he could see, and he pondered turning around. The coarse lumber offered several good footholds, so he decided to scale up its side and take a peek. He'd never seen a tree this big before.

Rough bark, sticky with honey-like sap, made the task much trickier than he'd thought. He climbed the immense growth, but hesitated when a voice echoed ahead.

Zach froze to listen.

"What do you mean we've lost him, Casselton? The poor lad doesn't even know where he is."

"Vilaborg, we do not quite have this down to an exact science."

"What science do you have down at all, Cassie? The science fair you attended at the fifth level? Don't you have an approximate idea where the portal opened, or are we to freeze to death looking for the Kin?"

"You know how things go, you fool. Stop behaving like this is your first time. This is not uncommon, Vilaborg. The portal must have opened somewhere nearby. He will turn up. Blazes that the Cark Woods needed to be used for a Kin intercept," vented a clearly exasperated Casselton.

Zach stayed rooted to the trunk as he processed the new information. These two had opened a portal without being in full command of the science? Adrian would have scoffed! Zach pondered approaching them, but decided to wait. They might be dangerous.

The voices traveled farther away, and he hoisted himself over and dropped to the ground below, landing in a squat. A tingling, like pins and needles, coursed through his body. Zach shivered and looked at his arms and....

His breath caught in his throat as he stared at his clothing. He ran his hands over the shirt and trousers, as if touching them might make them real.

His clothes had transformed. His blue vintage MegaMan top had disappeared. Now the linen doublet he wore made him itchy. Instead of jeans, his legs were covered with brown leather. Squires used to wear such clothing, he recalled from his readings, but that had been a long time ago.

Other things had changed. For one, he'd grown taller – now the trunk of the tree was a head shorter than he. He felt stronger, too. Cold despair quickly replaced awe.

He collapsed against the fallen timber and pulled his knees to his chest. A tear crept down his face.

I'm not Zach anymore, he thought.

A decorative title card for Chapter 4. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a white, serif font on the left, and the number "4" is on the right. The background is a dark, atmospheric landscape with a silhouette of a person in the foreground. There are faint, glowing geometric patterns in the upper right corner. The entire card is framed by a decorative, ornate border.

CHAPTER 4

"Shelby, are you okay?"

"I'm right here. The door just slammed shut."

Mr. Dempsey bumped into a box as he stumbled toward her. "We're close to the exit. Let's get some light back, eh?"

His voice reassured Shelby and gently rallied her. "Yes, please," she said.

Mr. Dempsey guided her forward.

She expected to reach the door soon, but they kept walking. Ten steps, fifteen steps, then thirty steps later, and still they had not found the entryway. She pinched herself to check whether this was all a bad dream or not. The pinch hurt and she didn't wake up.

"That's strange," Mr. Dempsey said. "I can't see a darn thing, but I know this room like the back of my hand. We should've hit the door by now."

The temperature dropped further – or did her cold fear make it seem so? Shelby shivered even more and, in an attempt to stay warm, wrapped her arms around herself.

"Do you feel cold, Mr. Dempsey?"

"Right through my bones, Shelby. Let's go this way." He eased her in another direction.

They tiptoed forward one careful step at a time. The darkness remained complete.

"I can't understand this for the life of me," Mr. Dempsey whispered. "Walls don't just vanish!"

The ground underneath Shelby's shoes had changed. The pull of gravity seemed different. No longer did the familiar, even hardwood floors of the library support them; rough stone and loose gravel now made the walk bumpy. The smell of the air changed too, as old printer's ink and paper had been replaced with the scent of rock and water.

"Mr. Dempsey, the floor...."

"I feel it, too. This is so strange."

Her eyes adjusted to the easing darkness, and she could just make out the shadowy outlines of some type of corridor. As they advanced, Shelby strained her ears. The steady trickle of water echoed from somewhere far off.

An orange glow appeared up ahead. Every muscle in her body tensed, and her heartbeat sped up.

Mr. Dempsey stopped and touched her elbow, and Shelby halted as well.

"I don't quite know what's going on here," he whispered in her ear. "I actually thought I dozed off at the front desk and this was a dream. I even pinched myself."

"Me too," she said, glad he was present to protect her. If anything went wrong, Mr. Dempsey would help her.

"We're in some sort of cave. The message on your computer drew us here. We should proceed cautiously, so keep quiet."

Shelby nodded, calmed by his logical evaluation of their situation. Mr. Dempsey knew everything. As long as he was with her, nothing could hurt her.

The light guttered as they crept forward. The scent of fresh air entered the cave and Shelby sighed. Its essence was refreshing.

"Shhh...." Mr. Dempsey put his forefinger in front of his nose.

The murmur of voices rose ahead of them. She glanced at Mr. Dempsey, and he again pressed his finger hard up against the tip of his nose. She nodded.

They moved forward a few more paces and halted. The cave ended and bright light shone outside. Shelby examined her surroundings as she listened. They were in a forest, where thick trees and foliage encompassed them.

The voices sounded clearer, and she could make out the conversation.

"Now, now, we will find her, Sculptor. You worry too much. Only ten minutes have passed. Give her time."

"I can't understand how after all these years the great Achernar has not perfected the mobile portal. I mean, really now, Barrick. We should be right in front of the entrance, ready to greet our guest. They're always frightened as it is."

The first person, Barrick, said, "Many energies are at work in the portal, Sculptor, both scientific and arcane. Near impossible to perfectly harness such a force, no matter how much research Achernar and the mentors conduct."

"Maybe we should rely on Malefic to decipher the solution then. I hear he was quite the mentor trainee up in Catonia."

"Come on, Sculptor. All you do is gripe. We've been entrusted by Achernar himself to carry out this crucial task. Intercepting Kin is an honor, and you sit gossiping and grumbling like a schoolgirl." Barrick bellowed. "As far as Malefic goes, you should join him if you're so impressed. A mixed breed like you would be enslaved on the spot. Don't you recall the number of lives lost in Hideux's camps on Andromeda? I'd lop Malefic's head off without hesitating." Hurt seemed to lurk under his angry voice, accompanied by fear. "But no, you constantly praise him like some lunatic."

Harrumph. "It's not clear if he's even Biskara's son," wheezed Sculptor. "Those are just rumors, you know that."

"He's still a renegade and a criminal."

A brusque silence followed, until insects chirped and their buzzing filled the air. An animal rustled in the underbrush somewhere in the distance. Shelby was sure she heard a bird quack above, but when she glanced up, there was nothing in the trees except leaves.

Mr. Dempsey's typically calm expression was strained, and he appeared about as confused as she.

He peered at her and motioned to lean in. "Seems these are our friends who sent you the message," he whispered. "From what they're saying, they don't sound hostile. They mentioned a portal of some sort, I guess like a teleportation device. It sounds inconceivable." He shook his head. "I want to talk to them. You hide here and listen. When I know it's safe, I'll call you in."

"No way! No way will I let you go by yourself."

"Now, Shelby, I would never forgive myself if something happened to you. This isn't a debate. Your safety is my priority, and that's that."

She nodded, but it still bothered her. After all, she'd stood up to the beast and managed to escape. Didn't he realize she was the *ninja girl*? She'd be more help to him if he'd take her with

him.

He studied her a moment with a puzzled frown. "You seem different—older or something. Maybe it's just the light." They were still crouched at the mouth of the cave.

She shrugged.

"Okay, wish me luck." He walked toward the flickering titian.

She crept forward, straining her ears as the two strangers spoke.

"We'll wait a little longer," Barrick said, "and then we should spread out. I don't want to be the only Meridian soldier in history to lose a Kin," he hollered. He seemed to have a bad temper.

Shelby repressed a shiver. The shouting man reminded her of the beast, but she forced herself to stay calm. *I'm the ninja girl*, she thought, mouthing the words. Her fingers tightened around the cold rock of the cave. *I can do this*.

She squinted and tried to view what was occurring ahead. Mr. Dempsey still shuffled forward through the foliage. She watched him for a moment, but spotted little else. While she strained to see, she heard the other man use that word again—*Kin*. What was a Kin, anyway? Could *she* be a Kin? Maybe Mr. Dempsey was right, and these two were waiting for *her*.

She snuck closer and hid behind a tree to get a clearer picture. As Mr. Dempsey approached a campsite, she crept beside a wide, short evergreen.

Pine needles dug into the palms of her hands and scraped against her pants while she crawled. As she ducked under the tree, branches grabbed her hair. She pulled her strands free, careful not to make a single sound. Once settled, she poked her head around the trunk.

Her jaw dropped and her eyes bulged at what she witnessed. Nothing could have prepared her for this.

Mr. Dempsey stood speechless before two figures crouched beside a campfire. Dusk was falling, bruising the twilight above. It had been sunset when she and Mr. Dempsey arrived, but night was truly upon them now.

"Who goes there?" Sculptor demanded, jumping to his feet.

She blinked hard. The voices had sounded ordinary, but these individuals weren't normal. They had typical skin and hair, yet they were built for war. Even the football players at her high school seemed scrawny compared to the two troopers—especially the one called Barrick. They resembled characters in a movie about Camelot and King Arthur, not people from modern-day Earth.

Barrick rose, his muscles bulging through the studded armor and boiled leather he wore. His beefy forehead was almost absent in an untamed jungle of eyebrows, and his neck seemed as thick as a ship's mast. He eased a large sword from its scabbard. The blade gleamed in the flickering light of the campfire.

Mr. Dempsey stood motionless while Barrick glowered at him.

In one swift motion, Sculptor stepped toward Mr. Dempsey and aimed a pistol at the librarian's head. Sculptor's lean, abnormally long face expressed little. Shelby thought she glimpsed a glimmer of fear cross his eyes, but it was gone in an instant. The dark blue cape strapped to his shoulders stirred in the breeze. One portrayed a medieval warrior and the other some sort of futuristic policeman in Arthurian armor.

She wanted to dart out from behind her tree to keep them from hurting Mr. Dempsey, but fear froze her to the spot. Barrick, the short one with the sword, wore a fierce sneer, and for a moment, she thought she saw the beast in him. A whimper escaped her. Her nails dug into the tree's soft bark, and cold sweat rolled down her temples. If she allowed them to hurt Mr. Dempsey, she'd never forgive herself.

"Speak up, dear sir," Sculptor snapped, "or I will unleash Barrick upon you. They say his

people are closet cannibals."

"Shut up, you raging idiot," Barrick said, his glare still focused on Mr. Dempsey.

"I, uh-um, w-well, I, I..." Mr. Dempsey stammered.

"Well, well," Sculptor said. "You are quite the vocalist, my dear sir. Perhaps you should audition as an announcer for the games at Fornax. You would do just fine, better than the biased gibberish Jeb Rooza and his sidekicks regurgitated at last year's events, eh, Barrick?"

Barrick seethed with anger. "Shut up, you blasted fool. This is serious. He resembles a citizen of Earth, yet he may be Malefic's spy." The brute trudged forward a step, his long sword raised, the sharp blade glittering like magma.

Shelby shook with terror.

"Identify yourself at once," Barrick said.

"How original, my dear Barrick," Sculptor scoffed, throwing his partner a weary glance. "I didn't suspect you were an avant-garde man. Such a progressive demand merits your potential as a poet."

Mr. Dempsey snapped out of his stupor. "Hold on now," he called. "I presume I'm present due to something about a portal you opened. I was in the library, and went to the storage room for supplies, and then I was here."

Sculptor cocked an eyebrow. "The Rutherford B. Hayes Library?"

"Why y-yes, actually. I-I'm its curator, Walter Dempsey."

"Please tell me, how'd such an average president manage to get an athenaeum named after him?" Sculptor offered a wry smile. "Why not a school, or better yet, a stadium?"

Barrick huffed. "Stop jesting! We need to learn if this person knows anything about Shelby Pardow."

He sheathed his sword and prowled closer. Though Mr. Dempsey towered over him, Barrick appeared a formidable figure. The stout man looked much stronger than Mr. Dempsey, and twice as mean as the beast.

Shelby ducked lower to the ground, trembling. She prayed Barrick wouldn't hurt poor Mr. Dempsey.

Barrick bowed on bended knee. "Forgive me, my friend, and trust me. We'll not harm you. Seems to be a miscommunication. We were looking for a girl named Shelby. But now that you're here, you must come with us so Lord Achernar can resolve the issue. We apologize, sir, for any inconvenience we have caused you."

Sculptor holstered his gun. "Yes, we're sorry, sir. My personal apologies that I was placed on this all-important mission with a bumbling buffoon like Barrick. Why, he can't even open the mobile portal at the right place!"

Barrick, still on his knee, grimaced at Sculptor and discharged a low growl.

Such odd cohorts. Shelby exhaled. Some bark of the tree remained stuck in her nails as she released her grip. Barrick, though a fearsome person, seemed more easily tempered than the beast.

"What do you need Shelby for?" said Mr. Dempsey.

"Well, sir, the situation is complex. Let's just say our destiny sways in the balance without her help and the rest of the Kin. Always the case when Biskara is involved." Barrick rose from his knee. "The Kin are the only ones who can locate those on the Aulic Assembly, who have gone missing."

Mr. Dempsey looked lost in thought as he tapped his chin with his forefinger. "Lord Achernar... you said before. Hmm, if I do recall, Achernar is the brightest star in the constellation Eridanus in the southern hemisphere of the universe."

"Oh yes, sir, you are absolutely right." Barrick beamed. "He is the brightest king of all, Achernar is."

"A king, you say. Pray tell, where on Earth are we?"

Sculptor belted out a high-pitched laugh as he strode closer to the librarian. The sound startled Shelby, and she drew farther behind the tree, ignoring the tingling sensation running through her like an electrical current. Crouching for so long must have put her limbs to sleep.

"Earth? My dear sir," Sculptor said, "you aren't listening to us. We are on Azimuth, over two hundred light years from your planet."

Shelby leaned back around the trunk, examining Barrick and Sculptor. The unsettling pang in her stomach was fading. Barrick still made her a little uneasy, but she really liked Sculptor. He was funny and kind to Mr. Dempsey so far.

"Nonsense. Where are we? Traveling that distance isn't possible, especially without the proper... uh... a ship or... or...." Mr. Dempsey fell silent.

Shelby frowned. The two men were pokerfaced.

Mr. Dempsey must have seen it too, because he whispered, "You're not kidding about this portal, are you?"

"'Tis a shock, sir, always is. Methinks I'd react the same way if the tables were turned. Thank heavens the portal makes it so we speak the same language."

Barrick held out his water canteen. "Thirsty?"

"No. I mean... yes." Mr. Dempsey sounded parched. He accepted the container and guzzled. After returning it, he walked several steps from the side of the campfire and gazed up into the darkness.

By now, the sky was black and Shelby could make out a few stars.

Mr. Dempsey was silent for a few long seconds.

Shelby held her breath, waiting to hear his next words. She yearned to know what a Kin was and why these two wanted to see her.

"You don't mean to harm me in any way?" Mr. Dempsey asked at last, and turned toward Barrick.

"On my honor as a Tuskarian, sir, no. I wouldn't let you wander around and get yourself killed, either, considering it's my fault you're here." Barrick walked over and extended his hand.

Mr. Dempsey hesitated briefly before raising his hand, and Barrick grasped his forearm. Mr. Dempsey returned the gesture, and they nodded to one another.

Releasing his grip, Mr. Dempsey said, "Now, Barrick, how do I get back to Earth? Can you reopen that portal gizmo?"

Barrick shook his head. "Alas, it only accepts guests from Earth. Yet all is not lost. Lord Achernar will be able to transport you back. I'm sure of it."

Mr. Dempsey nodded, holding his chin. "What do you intend to do when you find Shelby?"

"Why, we're sworn to protect her with our lives, and take her to meet the rest of the Kin and Lord Achernar."

"So your mission involves others? Other children?"

"Children? I guess on Earth they're considered children, but the Kin are fierce adversaries on Azimuth."

"What are these 'Kin' you speak of, Barrick?"

Sculptor stepped forward. "We have to take you to Achernar, Mr. Dempsey. We can discuss as we ride. Malefic's soldiers are combing the woods, and we need to move out. Our first priority is finding Shelby. She's mincemeat if Malefic finds her before we do." Sculptor's tone had gone from playful to serious. His expression had changed, too. He rubbed his temples and

his brow contorted.

"Well, I don't think finding her will be much of a problem at this point." Mr. Dempsey walked in Shelby's direction. He paused and glanced around, rubbing the back of his neck, then shouted up the path. "Hey, Shelby, you can come down now."

"I'm right here," she blurted, stepping from behind the tree. A few pine needles stuck to her hair, and she picked them out as she edged toward him. She was careful of the underbrush.

The glare of the campfire illuminated her arrival.

Mr. Dempsey gaped. "Shelby, you *are* older. I thought it was just the light! And your clothes...."

She stared down and gasped. Similar garb to Sculptor and Barrick replaced her old attire. Now she wore brown leather pants and a matching shirt. She expected such fabric to be stiff, but the outfit fit like a second skin. Around her waist was a boiled ox-hide belt with studs and a gold buckle.

"I... I'm t-taller," she stuttered.

She then inspected Mr. Dempsey. In the dark, it had been hard to tell, but now she viewed him clearly. The lines under his eyes and around his mouth had gone. "Mr. Dempsey, you're younger!" Despite his transformation, he still wore the same khaki pants and sweater vest from Earth.

Mr. Dempsey studied himself and then placed his hands closer to the fire. "I do feel better than I have in years. Remarkable."

"Well, thank the stars and all our mothers," Sculptor said, sounding relieved. "Something good! Now I can go back to Meracuse with pride and not have to report to Achernar that we lost a Kin. Not to mention this Tuskarian brute! He's so hard to work with!"

Mr. Dempsey began, "Shelby –"

"I listened to everything. This is crazy."

"I know. I can't explain it – or believe what happened."

She turned to Sculptor and Barrick. "Lord Achernar sent you to retrieve me?"

"Yes, milady. Captain Lazzo Barrick of the second brigade, third division of the alliance of Meridia. I am also your designated interceptor. Nevertheless... at your service." He bowed.

"I've been stuck with this raving brute from Tuska before, madam," Sculptor said. "So no need to fret. For a fortnight, I have traveled with this savage, and I'm accustomed to his eccentricities. Please, forgive him his lack of manners. I'm Sculptor Luten. Charmed to meet you." He swirled his arm in a flowery bow, then straightened again and studied the dark trees. "Since the introductions have been made, we must be off. Malefic is roaming through these parts, and it is important we return to our battalion."

"Malefic?" asked Mr. Dempsey.

"We'll have plenty of time to discuss everything, sir, but questions will need to be answered on the road. For now, we, my merry group, are off." Sculptor spun on his heels with a flourish of his cape.

Shelby and Mr. Dempsey eyed the splendid steed Barrick brought before them. The Clydesdale had a shiny, chocolate-colored coat with a honey-blonde mane. A feathering of long, cream-colored hair gracing the back of its legs flapped as it trotted over. The horse snorted.

"This is Lenore," Barrick said, and fed her a sugar cube. "She's very well trained, so don't fret if you've never ridden before. We have only one additional mount, as we didn't anticipate Mr. Dempsey's arrival. Both of you can share her, if you like. She's a sturdy girl."

Mounting a horse turned out to be more difficult than Shelby had imagined. Though she had grown, the Clydesdale still towered over her. She managed to put her left foot in the

stirrup, but couldn't quite pull herself over. Barrick offered his hand, and she used it as a step to mount. Once in the saddle, Shelby fought retreating to the ground, uncomfortable with the way Lenore swayed beneath her.

"Use the reins to direct her. Just the slightest tug will tell her which way to go. She'll follow us without any direction, though." Barrick smiled up at her.

She nodded. "Thanks."

Mr. Dempsey mounted behind her with Barrick's help. He seemed more at home on the enormous horse than she.

Sculptor put out the fire by emptying a bucket over the flames and kicking dirt onto the ashes. Once the pit was smoking white, he said, "We should go. Malefic's men may soon find our camp."

Barrick and Sculptor mounted their steeds with the elegance of practice. With a soft boot to the flanks, their horses were off at a steady pace. Shelby thought she should kick Lenore, too, but the mare started without the slightest nudge. Not used to the rocking of being on horseback, she clutched the reins to keep from falling.

A quick motion caught her eye. Shelby glanced down at a bizarre, bright green squirrel scurrying by, and a shiver ran up her spine.

She was glad Mr. Dempsey was with her. This place was certainly not home.