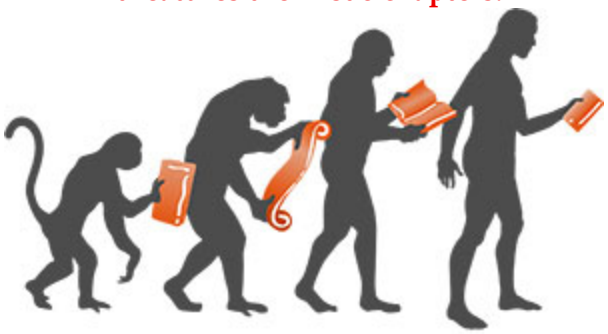
Copyright

*****SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW FILE ONLY*****
It features the first 8 chapters.



www.EvolvedPub.com

To make sure you never miss out on any important announcements related to our books, special promotions, etc., please subscribe to our newsletter at the address below. And fear not, we'll not spam you, nor will we share your information with anyone else.

Subscribe to the Evolved Publishing Newsletter

~~~

THE SILVER SPHERE
THIRD EDITION

Copyright © 2012 Michael Dadich
All rights reserved, worldwide.

~~~

ISBN (EPUB Version): 16922536002
ISBN-13 (EPUB Version): 978-1-62253-600-9

~~~

Chief Editor: Lane Diamond
Assistant Editor: Kira McFadden
Cover Artist & Interior Illustrations: Mallory Rock
Interior Designer: Lane Diamond

~~~

PUBLISHER'S NOTE:

At the end of this novel of approximately 89,350 words, you will find two Special Sneak Previews: 1) ***RED DEATH*** by Jeff Altabef, the multiple-award-winning first book in the "Red Death" series of young adult post-apocalyptic/epic fantasy adventures, and; 2) ***THE SPINNER'S WEB*** by Isu Yin & Fae Yang, the multiple award-winning first book in the "Grims' Truth" series of epic fantasy/visionary & metaphysical adventures. We think you'll enjoy these books, too, and provide these previews as a ***FREE*** extra service, which you should in no way consider a part of the price you paid for this book. We hope you will both appreciate and enjoy the opportunity. Thank you.

~~~

eBook License Notes:

The author specifically prohibits scrapping the book and/or using any portion thereof for the purpose of training Artificial Intelligence.

You may not use, reproduce or transmit in any manner, any part of this book without
~~~

written permission. This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only; it may not be resold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, please return to your eBook retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

~~~

Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or the author has used them fictitiously.
~~~

Awards for THE SILVER SPHERE

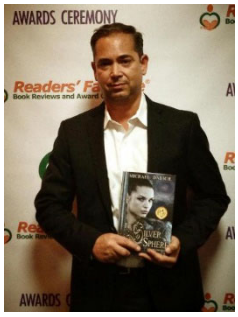
~~~

~~~





~~~


~~~

BONUS CONTENT

We're pleased to offer you not one, but two Special Sneak Previews at the end of this book.

~~~

In the first preview, you'll enjoy the first two chapters of ***RED DEATH*** by Jeff Altabef, the multiple-award-winning first book in the "Red Death" series of young adult post-apocalyptic/epic fantasy adventures.

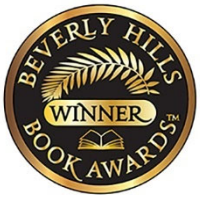
~~~



~~~







~~~

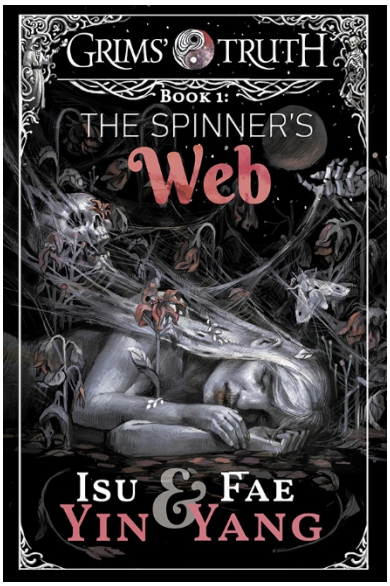
US Review of Books (RECOMMENDED) says: "Where dystopian novels are a dime a dozen, Altabef creates an epic tale that stands out."

~~~

OR GRAB THE FULL EBOOK TODAY!
FIND LINKS TO YOUR FAVORITE RETAILER HERE:
RED DEATH Series at Evolved Publishing
~~~

In the second preview, you'll enjoy the prologue and first chapter of ***THE SPINNER'S WEB***. This multiple award-winning first book sets the stage for the broad "Grims' Truth" series of epic fantasy/visionary & metaphysical adventures, which is unlike any other you've encountered.

~~~



~~~

Pinnacle Book Achievement Award

~~~

Kirkus Reviews says: "...there's laudable character development in this installment. ... The authors' lucid prose frequently evokes the senses. ... A somewhat perplexing but engaging start to what's sure to be an epic fantasy saga."

~~~

OR GRAB THE FULL EBOOK TODAY!
YOU'LL FIND LINKS TO YOUR FAVORITE RETAILER HERE:
GRIMS' TRUTH Series at Evolved Publishing

Table of Contents

Copyright 1
Awards for THE SILVER SPHERE 3
BONUS CONTENT 4
Dedication 8
THE SILVER SPHERE 9
Introduction 10
Chapter 1 11
Chapter 2 12
Chapter 3 16
Chapter 4 21
Chapter 5 28
Chapter 6 32
Chapter 7 35
Chapter 8 39
Chapter 9 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 10 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 11 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 12 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 13 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 14 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 15 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 16 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 17 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 18 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 19 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 20 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 21 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 22 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 23 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 24 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 25 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 26 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Chapter 27 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 28 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 29 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 30 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 31 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 32 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 33 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 34 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 35 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 36 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 37 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 38 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 39 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 40 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 41 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 42 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 43 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 44 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 45 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 46 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 47 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 48 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 49 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Chapter 50 ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Glossary ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Acknowledgements ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
About the Author ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
More from Evolved Publishing ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Special Sneak Preview: RED DEATH by Jeff Altabef ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**
Special Sneak Preview: THE SPINNER'S WEB by Isu Yin and Fae Yang .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Dedication

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


THE SILVER SPHERE

Introduction

~~~

"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. A fog descended upon her mind, promising the escape of fainting; 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. The piercing glare of his eyes caught her. 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."



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.

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

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 crept 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, but it whirled shut with a bang, cutting the light from the entrance. The room went pitch black. Shelby gasped and her heart jumped.

“Mr. Dempsey?” she cried out.



"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 soaked his clothing. 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 considered 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, brown leather covered his legs. 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.



"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.

Shelby halted.

"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.

"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. Branches grabbed her hair as she ducked under the tree. 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. 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 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.”

Though she had grown, the Clydesdale still towered over her, and mounting turned out to be more difficult than Shelby had imagined. 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.



How terrifying, thought Riley as she fidgeted with the hem of her leather skirt. Campfires guttered nearby, and a canvas tent perched at her back. Mulch, dusty horses, metal, and burnt food scented the air while swords and axes clanged, sounding just like the instant message that had popped on her computer a few hours prior.

Three others huddled beside her, a girl and two boys. Riley managed to coerce the fellows to give their names—Stuart and Max—but the girl refused to speak. She was pale, with long sandy hair resting on her skinny frame—the type of person Riley tried to befriend back home, but never succeeded in doing.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Max.

Riley's gaze slid to him. With a bold jaw and short brown hair, he reminded her of a boy she had a crush on at school.

Stuart lifted and lowered one shoulder. "England. Or a Renaissance Fair, maybe."

Riley shook her head. "No, we're not on Earth, I'm sure of it. Look at how we changed."

The noises and odors, though familiar, unnerved her, almost like something she experienced in a dream once. At the age of five, Riley had suffered a nightmare about a man, pale with wiry red hair, which still haunted her. He'd smelled just like this place.

Max opened his mouth to speak, but clamped it shut as a figure, garbed in silver armor and navy enamel, approached with an air of gazing sympathy. He stood tall with a calm face, his long dark hair peppered with gray. A blue cape fluttered from his shoulders, secured by enormous medallions with lion heads on them, and a sword hung belted at his hip. Despite her uneasiness, Riley spied kindness in his green eyes.

"Hello, I am Presage, a mentor here in the country of Meridia."

Riley examined him, her brow puckering, while Stuart gazed off to the side, distracted by another discussion a campfire away.

All around them, the clamor of the camp persisted as warriors used whetstones to sharpen their weapons, horses whickered and neighed, pots clanged, and the aroma of cooking food roamed the air.

Presage set his gaze on one of the boys in the group. "Max Tuttle, correct?"

Max's athletic build tensed and he locked eyes with Presage, fire blazing in his pupils.

Riley bit her lip and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. *I hope he doesn't try to hurt this Presage guy. He seems pleasant enough.*

Presage continued, "Riley Upchurch?"

She jumped. "Yes," she said, her voice even and guarded as her bright blonde mane tussled around her face. The band she used to tie her locks back had broken on her ride to the camp.

"Emily Lawson?"

"Yes," Emily replied, shyly staring down at her tea, her lengthy caramel hair concealing her features. She refused to meet Presage's gaze, and had her knees pulled to her chest.

Emily Lawson. The name sounded familiar, but Riley couldn't place it. The edges of her lips tugged into a frown.

Presage grimaced before continuing. "Stuart Lesser?"

"Depends on what you want," said Stuart at once, as he maintained his stare. His transformed clothing and long dark hair whipped in the breeze.

Riley flinched at the attempted slight. The boy seemed less friendly by the moment and his attitude nagged at her. No one talked that way around her—she didn't allow them. Not because she forced people to be nice, but rather because she tended to bring out others' good nature.

I'll have to get these guys in order. We might be stranded somewhere new, but I refuse to let them mope!

Presage bobbed his head. "Thank you all for answering our plea for help. I understand this may be a bit overwhelming, considering you were taken from your home through a portal to Azimuth. The interceptors, I'm sure, explained a little about what has transpired."

Another man, named Cumber, one of the pair who had found Riley, placed a stool close to the campfire. He had the look of a large, thick dwarf with a crimson and grey beard that grew down to his scabbard. Presage eased down and accepted a cup of steaming brew from him. The sweet, tangy aroma drifted into the air, while Riley glanced at her own empty teacup. Judging by his smile, Presage enjoyed a satisfying gulp before continuing.

"You are on the planet Azimuth in the country of Meridia, and we've called for your assistance. Recently, Meridia's governing body, the Aulic Assembly, disappeared. Each of you was born with a psychic link to one of the six members on the Assembly. As you passed through the mobile portal, you inherited the abilities of your links on the Assembly." Presage sipped his tea as he eyed each of the Kin.

When his warm stare landed on her, Riley smoothed her skirt.

Max rubbed his knees. "I don't understand how we can help."

"Forgive my candid explanations, but there is little time. An ancient evil, Biskara, has returned to our world. We believe he is responsible for the Assembly's disappearance. Biskara wages war through his mortal sons, and we believe an individual named Malefic Cacoethes has emerged and raised a powerful army with Biskara's aid. On your planet, some of the larger wars and catastrophes had Biskara's support as well. You would know him on Earth as Satan."

Biskara. Malefic. The face from her nightmare resurfaced, and then vanished. Riley shifted and her stomach churned. Their names sounded awful.

"How do you know about Earth?" She brushed a strand of loose hair from her brow and repressed a shiver. A gust whipped through and the chill worsened; even the crackle of campfires couldn't stay the thickening fog.

Presage gazed at her with deadpan green eyes, and sipped his tea while holding the cup with both hands. "My dear, we all originated from Earth."

They peered up at him, squirming as they sat. Even Stuart, who had stopped observing other soldiers and seemed focused on the conversation, fussed.

Presage's answer hadn't satisfied Riley, but she didn't press.

Cumber plodded over to the old officer, crouched down, and whispered into his ear. He was a soldier of middle age, garbed in wool garments instead of armor. A sword hung from his boiled leather belt.

"Alas, we must saddle-up and move from this location. Sitting in one place too long is not safe. We are off to the capital of Meridia: Meracuse."

Presage rose as several soldiers hurried around the camp and packed their belongings. Tents were broken down and stored, food wrapped tidy, fires stamped out, and horses loaded. Everyone rushed about, save the Kin.

Riley clustered with the others, trying to stay out of the way as warriors scurried around them.

Cumber walked up to them with satchel in hand. “You must be hungry. This here is chud, which lasts a long time when traveling and offers many nutrients. It’s made from the roots of druids, and it tastes pretty good to boot.” He offered the chud.

Max accepted a piece and twirled it in his hand before taking a bite. “Mmm. Reminds me of beef jerky.”

Nervous, yet intrigued, Riley nibbled. It was peppery like jerky, but stringy too, and held an aftertaste similar to oats and cashews.

Presage barked orders, directing traffic around the camp as wagons piled up with barrels of fresh water and supplies.

Soon, the Kin were on horseback around Presage, surrounded by several soldiers. A long train of warriors rode before and behind them, and the sound of hooves on hard earth thundered.

Riley glided closer to their guide. “Mr. Presage, even though we know a bit about your planet, what could we possibly do to help?” At school, she had the best grades. Math never stumped her, but this equation begged a different answer. It seemed like the old man was keeping a secret from them.

“We need the six active Kin to utilize their psychic links with their alter egos here on Azimuth, the members of the Aulic Assembly. They disappeared last week, all on the same day. Their rescue is of the utmost importance—besides the concern for their lives, of course—because the Aulic Assembly is made up of the only individuals able to operate the armillary sphere, or the ‘Silver Sphere,’ as it is called. Before I continue, have any of you heard of an armillary sphere before?”

They shook their heads, and Stuart murmured something. Riley glanced at Emily, but the quiet girl had her focus locked on the horn of her saddle.

“Well, an armillary sphere is an old astronomical model with solid rings. All circles of one single sphere, in this case Azimuth, are used to display relationships among the principal celestial circles. This particular sphere is special. The Silver Sphere gives the exact celestial coordinates of Biskara. It was created a long time ago when Biskara transformed from fable to reality. This ability to monitor Biskara kept him at bay, as his plans could be better followed and foiled. Without constraints, he can devise and carry out his evil plots—Azimuth, and by proxy, Earth, would be no more.”

“Is it possible to monitor one of his sons through the Sphere and find out if Malefic is one?” Max asked.

Riley eased her mare around a sapling sprouting in the middle of the path. The horse whickered and tossed its massive head. She knew Malefic embodied evil—she just wasn’t sure if he was really the son of this Biskara creature.

“The Sphere is a celestial tool,” Presage said, “which cannot detect mortals. Biskara is able to direct the war through his offspring’s corporeal existences and, when unimpeded, keep them one step ahead of their opponents. This is the Sphere’s vital importance. Hence, the disappearance of the Assembly and Malefic’s increasing power leads us to believe he’s not a typical terrorizing dictator. Otherwise, we could easily overrun him with our armies.”

Each of the other Kin looked confused as Riley shuffled her feet, her forehead pinched. Though they spoke the same language, she did not understand everything Presage tried to tell them. It sounded like a lot of fantasy to her.

Still, she wanted to get home. “What happens if we make contact with our links?”

Presage turned to her. “Once we locate your links and are able to operate the Sphere, we can bring the war to Biskara and then handle Malefic.”

"We are g-going to fight Biskara?" Emily stammered. Her eyes widened with fright, and she clutched the reins of her palfrey to her chest.

"No. The combat with Biskara is on a celestial battlefield. The truth seekers, some from Earth even, will pursue him. The truth seekers are defenders of this celestial universe. We'll encounter our own problems on the corporeal plane, though, I can assure you."

"Truth seekers?" Emily's voice quivered.

"Another time, my dear. Our war is with Malefic and the Nightlanders, here on Azimuth. We had Biskara's coordinates until the Assembly vanished, but we haven't been able to defeat him."

Presage coughed, pulled out his canteen, and took a sip. "If it is indeed true that Malefic is Biskara's son, he would be easier to oppose if his father were preoccupied on the celestial battlefield. Now rest. You will find comfort and familiarity with your new surroundings. Almost like you're home."

Max and Riley exchanged glances.

She hunched over and whispered, "We aren't anywhere near home."



Zach curled against a log and held his knees, his heart pulsing in his chest as he stared straight ahead in a bewildered state. Dried tears stained his cheeks.

Somehow, he had lost track of the people he overheard. Vilaborg and Casselton were their names. They sought him, and that was a relief—at least someone was looking for him.

He rose from his position and worked his way toward the direction he'd last picked up voices. Leaves and twigs crunched underfoot, and odd noises emanated from the dark woods, followed by an ominous silence. Zach froze and listened, his head cocked, checking for more sounds. Convinced no one tracked him, he advanced alongside the log.

A clamor from the bushes to his left made him pause.

In a puff of dirt and dust, an odd creature burst out of the flora. The small, hairy figure stopped abruptly when he spotted Zach. The strange man only came up to Zach's knees, but seemed brutish. He studied Zach with wide, startled eyes.

"Okay, little fella, don't be scared," said Zach. The last thing he wanted was to terrify someone who might help him get home.

A wild expression exploded on its painted countenance as he bared his yellowed teeth beneath a wiry, whitewashed beard. "Kin! Alert—I have a Kin!" the little man screamed.



The furry character brandished a large horn. He jerked the small opening to his lips and blew so hard, his cheeks inflated like two balloons. The blast echoed across the woods.

The blare jolted Zach's heart and he raced off down the side of the log. He veered into the first opening he spied in the trees, and thundered through shrubs and bushes, imagining a tribe of little hairy, painted men with spears giving chase.

Without warning, the right side of the forest vanished. The ground crumbled as the ledge gave way, sending him crashing down a steep hill and smacking into a sturdy oak tree.

He lay dazed and motionless for a few moments, praying he hadn't broken anything. A couple of parts throbbed, but nothing needed immediate attention, as far as he could tell.

Several horns trumpeted from above, and he sprouted and scurried through the thicket ahead. Leaves slapped his arms and face, and branches tried to hold him back, but he kept running. He moved adroitly in his newfound physique, aided by an adrenaline spike.

The lush and colorful woods slowed him to a jog as he marveled at his surroundings. Royal blue and lime green bushes, chocolate-colored roses, and trees full of violet apples sprawled everywhere. The farther he traveled, the more dazzling the forest became.

The echo of horns ebbed, and Zach stopped to rest against a boulder. He placed his hands on his knees while he panted, sweat dripping down his nose and forehead. Muscles he'd never used before screamed from the exertion of running hard for so long. At least he was alive.

He wiped his muddy hands on the brown leather pants that had replaced his jeans, sinking against the tree to contemplate his next move.

Out of nowhere, entrancing sounds reverberated around him. The volume increased, a chorus of several voices chanting a melody. His body grew rubbery as sparkles encompassed the area and choruses of female voices sang an unfamiliar language. The beauty of their song intoxicated him.

He had to find them.

The ground and tree vibrated and something flashed beside him. He glimpsed a pair of glistening blue eyes, but no other features appeared—only bright blue irises, the eyes of a comely woman. He rubbed his face and squinted, the cerulean eyes dancing all around. Dozens of them darted in and out of the foliage as the sweet, magnificent music continued. The symphony of choristers spoke to him.

The voices became more distinct when his eyes drifted shut. They directed him where to go. *"Follow the Eridanus River downstream a few miles to a man on a boat. The man's name is Throg. He'll bring you to safety. Leave now. It will not be safe here much longer,"* the voices chimed in unison. Behind the words, an unclear melody floated, one that made his entire being ache from its elegance.



"Wh-who are you?" He yawned.

"The Fugues. Tell Throg the Fugues have sent you, and he will take you to safety."

His body was steered—in fact *willed*—to travel the direction the Fugues wanted him to go. Walking was surreal—rubbery and foggy—as if he couldn't quite touch the ground. His legs moved of their own volition, wobbling beneath him. Trees and bushes almost seemed to stand aside for him to pass, like a dream.

Then his mind cleared and everything became real again. The rumbling of a river echoed, and the sudden return of reality bothered him. Before, the trees had been strange colors. Now only a few plants—mainly flowers—were different from those on Earth. Tree trunks were brown, leaves were green, and pine needles and mulch covered the forest floor.

He reached the riverfront by stumbling down a hill, and knelt down. He cupped his hands and doused his face with the freezing cold liquid. The trip hadn't been terrifying, being led by those voices, though it had shaken him a bit. Chilly water dripped along his neck and cheeks.

Wet hair plastered to his forehead.

He squinted out across the stream, turned, and looked back the way he had come. “What in the blazes happened?”

A single memory burned bright: the Fugues had sent him to find Throg.

He rose from his knees and followed the river downstream.



At Captain Jack's, Nick Casey's favorite restaurant, he ate a bowl of French onion soup and a Captain Jack's burger next to his friend Cliff. The next morning was going to be an early one for class at Densmore College, so he said goodbye to Cliff after eating and walked out to the parking lot.

The sounds of shouting and yelling erupted, and a van screeched by as the cries of a woman slashed the air.

Nick raced over to her. "What's wrong?"

"My baby!" she shrieked, tears welling in her eyes. "They've got my baby!"

"Call the police," he yelled.

Without another word, Nick launched down the street. The van stood only a few blocks ahead, forced to stop at a light behind ten other cars. He picked up the pace, his shoes slapping against the hard concrete, his heart smashed and his lungs already ragged.

He reached the van just as the light turned green, and jumped onto the back and latched himself to the door. A girl wailed inside, so he grappled the handle on the double door and wrenched it open.

The girl wasn't alone. A burly man shouted, "What the hell? Get out!"

Nick stumbled inside as the van lurched to life. He curled his hand into a fist and slammed it into the man's stomach, winding him. Just as Nick stretched for the girl, the man growled and knocked him into the side of the van.

A muffled voice came from up front. "Keep the kid quiet, Jordy!"

"Some nutcase got in! But he's not leaving," Jordy growled, glaring at Nick as he held him against the metal wall.

Nick glanced over at the teenage girl, who couldn't have been much older than fourteen. Long honey hair framed her terrified expression, and snot ran down her chin from her nose. She squatted while crying, her face scrunched.

"Run!" Nick gasped.

She was tied down, and rage filled him. What sort of *monsters* would kidnap a little girl? A sudden well of power hit him and Nick threw Jordy from him. The kidnapper's head smacked into the other side of the van and he dropped to the floor, hard.

Nick whirled around and pulled at the knot in the girl's ropes until it loosened. "I'm here to help," he whispered.

Jordy groaned off to the side, writhing with his head in his hands.

"My name's Nick Casey. Please, trust me."

She wiped her eyes and sniffled. Not once did she look away from the felled man. Her voice came out in a choked whisper. "Okay, I'm E-Emily L-Lawson."

Nick pulled her into his arms. "On the count of three, I'm gonna jump, all right?"

Emily nodded, her body shaking as she rose. Though she was in at least her early teens, she weighed less than he'd expected.

"Hang on tight!"

As the van sped along, Nick launched from the back, and a sharp pain jabbed in his side.

He looked down and... an ice pick was stuck in his gut. Jordy snarled from behind as Nick dropped from the exit.

The first thought in Nick's mind was, *Roll over. Protect her.*

He landed so hard the wind rushed out of him. He wheezed and his fingertips ran cold. Emily crawled toward him as cars honked. Someone had their high beams trained on him and yelled for traffic to stop.

"Mister, you okay?" Emily's voice cracked as she took his hand in hers.

"I'm... fine." Even as he gasped it, he knew it was a lie. "Are you... okay?"

She nodded as tears dripped from her chin onto his neck. "Please don't die."

"Someone call an ambulance!" a man cried somewhere nearby.

Another voice shouted directions to the police dispatcher.

He vaguely heard the girl's mother yell out, "Emily! Emily, are you all right?"

As his vision faded, Nick spied the girl being pulled into her mother's arms, the mother weeping and repeating, "Thank you," over and over.

Emily darted to him and cradled his head.

Emily, he thought, and closed his eyes.

Nick gazed at the radiant stars of the clear night, his head light as a cotton ball. Ascending, he rotated and viewed the bright, spinning lights below. Two ambulances and a few police cars formed a circle around his body. Its open eyes stared up at him from the stretcher while a paramedic tried desperately to revive it.

Cold panic rushed through him.

I must be dreaming, or my mind is slipping. He continued to glide higher, the image of the emergency technician over his figure fading away. Thick and murky blackness engulfed him with an arctic embrace as the shadows twisted and turned around him. Darkness ensued for a time, and he fell asleep.



Nick stirred and wiped away the chunky crust that had formed in the corners of his eyes. A haze of images prevented him from organizing his thoughts. *What happened?* His head ached.

Once more on solid ground, he brushed his hand through the grass. He stood and inhaled the chilly, crisp air, which invigorated him. A pair of hills emerged to his right, and beyond it swirled the remainder of an orange and red sunset. He lumbered toward the dwindling sundown, rustling his hair with both hands. The pain from the ice pick to his stomach grew dim, as if he'd only dreamt it.

Had he fallen asleep? Had the kidnapping been a dream?

He trekked awhile, sticking to the flat parts of the countryside. The twilight made it too dark to view his surroundings for anything familiar. Grass and sticks crunched underfoot and echoed around him, but didn't offer any clues. Light emanated from over a hill, and he quickened his pace.

As he drew closer, crackling sounds and voices rose ahead. He crawled through the mossy, wet grass, and stayed as low to the ground as possible as he scaled the embankment. When he reached the top, he peeked over the hill.

Several shapes hovered around a campfire, holding out long sticks over the cozy flames. The scent of roasting meat filled the air. His eyes adjusted to the light, and.... *Am I going insane?* The figures below were wearing armor like Arthurian knights.

One man, draped in a cape, darted over to a horse tied to a nearby tree. He was dressed in a rich violet and red, and a large sword hung from a sheath at his side. On his cloak was a lavender bird of some sort.

Nick considered approaching the fire, hoping they might be a traveling circus. *What else could they be?* He circled the encampment and tried to maneuver closer to better survey the strange men. Bobbing up from nowhere, in the middle of the night, probably wouldn't be a good surprise for the warriors. Their weapons dangled as though real, and testing them would be foolhardy. After all, if someone came after *him* from the dark, he'd want to defend himself.

A sharp object poked into the small of his back. Nick stifled a yelp, thinking for an instant of the ice pick slamming into him.

"Where do you think you're slithering off to, little spy?" said a raspy-voiced man behind him.

Nick jumped up. "Uh, w-who are you?" The words stumbled out of his mouth.

"Who am I?" the man mimicked. "Well then, that is quite a question to come from someone lurking around our encampment like Malefic's spy, now isn't it? If you weren't unarmed and so frail looking, I would have slit your throat eons ago. To your feet, snoop, and be glad I don't stick you through."

The surly-sounding figure shoved Nick ahead. As the glow of the campfire cast on them, the man behind him moved around and into view. The stranger was tall, slender, and fair-haired. His armor sparkled, and several weapons hung from his waist and shoulder. He, too, wore red and violet. The sharp object that he poked into Nick's back was a long, thin blade.

"Speak quickly, outlander. I won't waste time on meddlesome spies. What is your business and who sent you?"

Numb with shock, Nick didn't respond. He searched for words to explain everything, and found none. An honest answer was best, he decided at last.

"My name is Nick Casey. I woke up on the ground nearby, and I've been having trouble remembering how I got here. I'm definitely not a spy, and I mean you no harm."

"Harm? My, my, now Mr. Casey," the warrior said, as he studied him up and down in the better lighting. "You're certainly not from Azimuth, and you're a bit too old to be one of the six Kin. And you're absolutely not in a position to harm any reconnoiters of the First Brigade of Meridia. Of that I can assure you. I'm Captain Spiro. You're fortunate I was walking in your direction to relieve myself. If I had not stumbled upon you, one of my sentries assuredly would have cut you in two without asking any questions. Walk now." Captain Spiro held his blade out and motioned toward the fire.

They reached the bonfire, and the men sitting around stirred, muttering under their breath. Each and every one wore uniforms similar to Captain Spiro's, and all struck Nick as fierce and unforgiving. He swallowed a lump rising in his throat. Unlike Captain Spiro's thin, young face, many of them had weathered skin and were unshaven.

"Clayborn," Spiro boomed, "fetch me some handcuffs for this intruder."

"Well, what have we here?" Clayborn rose, a massive man, and towered over Captain Spiro and the rest. A full beard and long, braided hair made him look more like a Viking than a knight.

"One more traitor from Malefic's legion to carve up?" another soldier seethed and drew his sword. A mole sprouting black hairs hovered above his eye, and when he smiled, Nick saw his teeth were yellow.

"Simmer down now," Spiro retorted. "We do not harm free independents, and I need to determine what side this oaf is on."

Clayborn hissed as he turned and stormed off. "Aye, methinks he reeks of Malefic's soldiers. Malefic has cost me my ship and crew, stranger. The gods be with you if you are associated with that lowdown."

A few of the men sitting around the campfire stood and walked toward Nick. They examined him and appeared only mildly interested in him. By their glares, he noted they had already decided which side he was on. It seemed not to be theirs.

"Tolbert, Molson, keep an eye on him till Clayborn returns," Spiro ordered.

Nick shifted from foot to foot and wrung his hands until Clayborn arrived with rusty handcuffs. The hulking figure passed them off to Tolbert and Molson, whispered something, and headed back to the fire to talk to Spiro.

Tolbert, the man with the mole, fastened the ice cold shackles to Nick's wrists.

"We're doin' ye a favor, spy," said Molson. "Ye will be less sore with the cuffs in front."

They forced him down near the warmth of the flames, not far from Spiro and Clayborn, who engaged in a heated conversation. The captain seemed to be explaining something when a small troop of men trotting down the hill interrupted him.

Spiro shouted to them, "Where is Canter's patrol? They are a fortnight late."

"Sorry, Cap'n, things look bad. Zumbaki have turned up out there," one of the men reported.

Spiro hissed and spat on the ground. "Zumbaki? Painted tribesmen. They shouldn't even be on this side of the forest!" He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his crooked nose, which looked as if it had been broken in the past. "I intend to retire for forty winks. Be sure to alert Clayborn of anything suspicious. Be wary in the field. Malefic and his troops could be close," he cautioned as he marched to a small tent.

Nick stared at the fire, licking his dry lips as his stomach rumbled. His back ached and his feet throbbed.

After some time passed, two men came running down the hill, glistening with sweat. They wore lightweight armor and carried fewer weapons than the others.

"Canter, you should signal us with flares," Clayborn declared as he rushed to meet them.

Canter panted, barely able to speak. "The f-flares... l-lost. W-we're lucky to make it back. We ran into a pack of Zumbaki. We lost Landon and Maniker."

"Bloody savages," Clayborn muttered.

Nick's head spun as he struggled to follow their dialogue. He didn't know how he'd arrived in this nightmarish land, but he would have to adapt quickly if he wanted to survive.



Shelby decided Sculptor wasn't so bad after all. On the journey back to their division, Sculptor briefed her and Mr. Dempsey on their predicament, while Barrick rode ahead of them to scout for trouble.

The shrubbery around them burst in odd colors. Bushes blazed bright blue and teal next to flowers flaring yellow blossoms with violet leaves.

"Shouldn't be too bad," Barrick proclaimed from ahead. "We're on the southern side of the forest. No Zumbaki around here, and Malefic's patrols haven't been sighted. Over the eastern fringe, near the Cark Woods, I wouldn't be caught without an entire division."

"Um, what are Zumbaki?" Shelby asked.

He called back, "Savage tribesmen, cannibals who roam the Cark."

Sculptor sighed. "Ah, poor Vilaborg and Casselton. They had a Kin to fetch in the Cark Woods. I do hope they're all right."

"No better pair than that one to be in the Cark," Barrick said. "Borgy grew up there, and don't forget, both have intercepted before. I spoke to some Tuskarians who told me the Cark is infested with evil souls and vile monsters."

"You can't control where that portal of yours opens up, can you?" asked Mr. Dempsey.

Sculptor nodded. "Alas, although the device is efficient and transports our subjects safely, we cannot harness the powers needed to provide a specific location. The mentors bestow the coordinates where we can open the mobile portal. If an area doesn't consist of the proper nutrients and energies in the air, this may harm our passengers. We'd love the ability to utilize the portal with an entire brigade present, but the entry cannot operate with more than one or two living beings in the area. Hence our duty as interceptors. Do not fear. We aren't far from camp. We'll meet with our division in less than an hour."

"Let us ride now in silence while I find a safe spot to take a break," said Barrick.

Shelby stretched one of her legs. Both of her knees were growing stiff and sore from sitting so long in the hard leather saddle. Riding was new to her. She had imagined as a little girl how one day she might own a horse, but she'd never ridden one.

Barrick slowed down and dismounted. He waved a glowing compass along the perimeter, and then sniffed at the air for some time.

"The Tuskarian race is part ogre," Sculptor whispered. "They can smell a cigar a few miles away."

"We're close to the others now. We'll be safer when we join them," Barrick said as he returned to his mount. He grabbed something from his satchel and passed it back. "You must be hungry."

Shelby accepted the offering from Barrick and examined a hard strip. She sniffed it and debated taking a bite, as a growl from her stomach reminded her how famished she was.

"Very nourishing—chud. They're the roots of a druid." Barrick shoved a large hunk in his mouth.

Shelby took this as welcome news. "Oh, a root. That's good. I don't eat too much meat."

"Aye, and I knew the druid we're eating—taught me to read the trails up in Tuska. Close

friend for most of my life, he was. Name was Janor."

She glared at Barrick, unsettled. They were devouring a man? "I thought you said this was a root!"

"Aye, the root of a druid," he yammered, puzzled.

"Barrick, you ape," Sculptor shouted. "She has no idea what a druid is. Why, our own youth barely met live ones." He turned to her. "My dear, druids are tree people. They are mostly plant life, but with the soul of a person. They have become rare of late."

Mr. Dempsey said, "Tree people?"

Sculptor nodded. "Why, yes, they are part tree. Nearly all tree, in fact. The wood south of the Eridanus River had a village of druids at one point. The forest there is moist and lush, quite a salubrious setting for druids."

"We're eating tree people?" Shelby scrunched up her face and stared at the chud.

"The roots, my dear Shelby. Druids' stems can be found deep in the ground after they die. They last forever and are in abundance. Takes a while to dig them up, though. Old Floater Clancy is a rich man, since his family began excavating druid roots for a living. They are excellent for long road trips and the sort, because they don't rot and are full of nutrients."

Mr. Dempsey inspected the chud, turning the slice over a few times. "Druids, you say. In our history, druids are ancient sorcerers who appeared in Welsh and Irish lore. I believe I remember reading that the druids were renowned for their power to transform trees into warriors and send them out to battle. Dryads were considered tree spirits. I wonder if that legend has any connection to your druids, the tree people."

Sculptor and Barrick shrugged, each of them chewing on the chud.

Mr. Dempsey took a bite. "Hmm, not bad. Actually very tasty."

Shelby took a small nip. She didn't relish the thought of eating something that had been alive at one point, even if it wasn't meat. Mr. Dempsey was right, though. The roots were flavorful. The chud was tough, like beef jerky, but it didn't taste bland or stringy. Instead, it yielded a salty-sweet effect.

After a few minutes of eating chud and swilling some water, Barrick remounted his horse, and they proceeded.

Shelby rode with Mr. Dempsey, if one could call it riding. Lenore needed no guidance from her. She smirked. Rather than trying to make the mare follow Barrick and Sculptor, she thought of their experience so far. This world was similar to Earth, with plants, animals, and society, but everything was skewed—strange underbrush, people who were part ogre, and food made from sentient trees.

"Whoa," Barrick called as he halted his steed ahead of them. "Presage and the rest of the Kin should be camped just down this path."

They trotted along and soon entered a large campsite. Several soldiers resembling Sculptor and Barrick stood as sentries.

Shelby shrank a little in the saddle. Hopefully these men were as kind as her new companions.

"Barrick, Sculptor... rookies no longer," bellowed one of the guards.

Another said with a snicker, "Well, well, broken in now, are we?"

"Aye, Sol, you're just jealous Achernar didn't send a grizzled veteran like you out, aren't you?" Barrick chided.

Sol cackled. "You can bet a hundred coogles I'd rather be with division, my dear Barrick."

"Coogles are hard to come by these days, Sol. Or haven't you heard we're in an economic contraction?"

"Oh, contraction, extension—balderdash! I'm just a soldier for division. I wouldn't know how to invest a coogle in the Companies Square if you gave it to me for free. Though I might spend some in Vixen."

A fellow with a stethoscope around his neck said, "The Square sank another five percent today, boys, so perhaps you should get on after Malefic before we lose our solitude savings, eh?"

"I made quite a bunch of coogles off of Floater Clancy's place last quarter," Sculptor boasted as his horse cantered forward. "They dug sixty acres of chud right outside Prickly Peak."

An older man wearing a well-tailored leather suit lurched up. "You speak of coogles and the Square, fooling around and bragging. Do you understand Malefic is gaining power, and that we'll be fighting for our lives? The time for gibberish and joking is gone. Peace has made you soldiers soft. I pray you'll soon grasp the circumstances. Lord Achernar has called the Kin to Azimuth, and if Biskara is involved, many lives will be lost."

The old soldier bowed before Shelby, then gave a scowl to the officers and trudged away. The troopers stood in silence for a few seconds, their expressions sobered by shame.

Barrick turned to Shelby and Mr. Dempsey. "He's Rufus Morder, a colonel in the Meridian Army. The last time Biskara gained power he lost one of his sons. Forgive me for my rudeness." He motioned Sol closer. "This is Shelby, and this here is Mr. Dempsey."

"I am honored to meet you. Name is Sol." He nodded his head once. Sol, taller than Barrick, was not as muscular and appeared more human than most. "Isn't he a bit on the gray side to be a Kin, Barrick?"

When he spoke, Shelby saw he had a gap between his teeth.

"Aye, he entered the portal with 'er," Barrick said.

"Such a thing ever happened before?"

"Pal o' mine, I sure hope so. I don't want to be the headmost interceptor in history to bring in a free independent from the mobile portal."

"Uh, no, no, Barrick," Sculptor said. "I believe I remember a reconnoiter telling me something about a whole bunch of independents, animals, vehicles, and the like advancing through the portal before. I'm certain we aren't the first ones." He peered over to Sol for reassurance.

"Oh, yes, fellas," Sol said. "I'm sure something similar to this has happened before. I do pray so for your sake, because you would never live this down. Bards will be singing rhymes and stories about your blunder for eternity."

Sol broke into a hearty laugh and then caught himself, as if recalling Rufus's comments just moments earlier. He looked off into the distance where the veteran had disappeared.

Shelby followed his gaze and gaped. She had not anticipated such a large camp. White canvas tents sprouted from the muddy ground. The pungent air smelled unusual—a mixture of horses, campfires, food, and people—but it felt almost familiar, as if she'd been in a place like this before.

Several soldiers jogged by. A few stopped and bowed to her. A couple even took their helmets off. Each had dirt on his face and armor, mud on his boots, and many of them were unshaven. Time out in the field had not been kind.

Apparently, few hot baths could be had. She felt a little sad, having hoped for a rinse after riding for so long.

Something nagged at her. "Sculptor, where are the cities?"

"Meracuse, Meridia's capital, is several hours from here. We may pass through a few

villages, but we plan to avoid most in order to avert any detection of the Kin."

She frowned.

Mr. Dempsey swept his hands across the vista. "This camp is something else, don't you think, Shelby?"

"Sure is. Aren't people going to be worried, Mr. Dempsey? I mean, didn't we leave the library wide open? And it must have been hours since we left."

"Alas, dear Shelby, we can do nothing. When we return, I'm sure I'll have a fair amount of explaining to do. No sense worrying about things out of our hands. Who even knows how time passes between here and Earth."

While she and Mr. Dempsey spoke, Barrick and Sol also exchanged a few words. Barrick, though short, still towered over Sol atop his charger. The two comrades conversed in low tones, and Sol pointed across the camp to a small hill.

Banners fluttered above some of the tents, their colorful fields igniting a sudden passion within her. Mr. Dempsey was right; she couldn't control getting home. Lord Achernar had brought her here for a reason, and no one had treated her unjustly so far. While she missed her father, she knew these people needed her and the other Kin more.

"How nice to meet you, Miss Shelby, Mr. Dempsey." Sol gave a nod to them and then scurried away.

Barrick turned to them. "That there is Salty Sol Saunders. Good soldier to have on yer side when things go awry. He told me Cumber and old Presage got a group of Kin right over the hill here. What say we head on over?" He dismounted and handed the reins of his steed to another soldier.

"The prospect would be reassuring, Barrick," Mr. Dempsey said.

Shelby and Mr. Dempsey slid off the back of Lenore.

They trudged up the small hill, and every soldier they passed said hello to Barrick and Sculptor or shot them nods of encouragement. A few smiled at Shelby and Mr. Dempsey.

When they reached the top of the slope, excitement gripped her, and Shelby twirled her ponytail around her finger. She viewed a group of others her age sitting by a fire, with an older man in blue. He spoke while they listened.

As she and Mr. Dempsey approached behind Sculptor and Barrick, everyone rose to their feet.

"Ah, my dear Shelby has arrived," said the man in blue. "Now five Kin are present. Excellent. I see an adult independent is along for the ride?"

Barrick said, more than a little embarrassed, "Oh, yes, Presage, he is Miss Pardow's friend and accompanied her through the mobile portal."

"That's quite all right. An adult independent may be useful. Welcome to our campsite. Let us make ourselves acquainted now, shall we? I am Presage." He turned to the kids around the campfire. "Kin, this here is Shelby Pardow, from Ohio. You are?" Presage nodded to Mr. Dempsey.

"Walter Dempsey. Pleased to meet you all."

"Hi," said Shelby. She scanned the other Kin. *How refreshing to see human faces.*

Presage proceeded to introduce them. "Max Tuttle, from Virginia."

Max nodded as he raised his hand up and fixed his hazel eyes on her. Handsome and athletic, he resembled the quarterback from her high school. His brown suede top was even shaped like a football jersey.

"Riley Upchurch, from Washington State."

Riley stood and flashed a pirate's smile. Her blonde hair glowed in the fiery light. She

plopped to the ground and held the front of her khaki-colored leather skirt down.

Shelby grinned back. No doubt about it. She and Riley would be quick friends.

"Emily Lawson, from Connecticut."

She waved as her flaxen hair danced past her waist, her green eyes flickering. Unlike Riley, Emily looked terrified. Shelby hoped she could talk with her soon. She knew how it felt to be insecure and abandoned. Now more than ever, they needed to reassure one another that they were among friends.

"And here we have Stuart Lesser, from New York."

He lifted his head with a taut expression and gave only a half-wave. His baggy, leather attire flapped around him as he reached for a cup of tea.

After Presage finished his introductions, the man with the stethoscope ambled up to him and whispered in his ear.

Shelby ran her fingers through her hair and began playing with her ponytail again. She gazed at Max and caught him in mid-stare. He blushed and flashed away at once. For a brief few seconds, her heart stopped. A shy smile graced her lips and she averted her eyes.

"I'll be right back, Mr. Dempsey," Shelby said. She strode over to Riley and Emily. "Do you mind if I join you?"

"Sure," answered Riley. "The tea's great. Do you want some?"

"Sounds good. I'm getting cold," Shelby admitted.

"Well, friends," Presage said, "please make yourselves comfortable around the campfire. I must attend to something. If there is anything that you desire, Cumber and Sol are more than willing to oblige. I shall return shortly." He walked off with the man who appeared to be a doctor.

Cumber explained, "He's Healer Beekman. Someone is a bit ill, so Presage will help old Beekman out."

Barrick waved and offered a kind smile. "Sculptor and I are off for a little while to freshen up. Don't worry, we'll be back to check on you soon."

Mr. Dempsey joined the circle, sat down, and pressed his hands up to the flames.

Shelby eyed a handgun Cumber had in his holster. "What shoots out of it? Bullets?"

Cumber pulled out the gun. "What? Boo-letts? This is a hand-cannon. It fires a concentrated form of air and molecules taken from the atmosphere, though most of the power comes from the person operating it. Each person shoots at different levels. Not many have the ability. Only the registered owner can fire the hand-cannon, as it's linked to their handprints. Mine can knock you back twenty feet on medium, and flatten you for days on high... if you aren't wearing armor."

Admiring the weapon, Stuart said, "Cool."

Mr. Dempsey said, "So how did everyone else arrive here? Shelby and I entered the portal from the library where I work."

"In my school computer room, doing some homework before practice," said Max.

Emily said, "On my laptop at the local park, across the street from my house."

Riley raised her head. "At my neighbor's place, feeding their dogs."

Mr. Dempsey gave Stuart a questioning stare when he didn't say anything.

"In my father's office playing a video game on his computer," Stuart muttered, though grudgingly, as if it pained him to talk.

Collectively, they sought Mr. Dempsey for guidance. As the lone human adult, he seemed the only person they could turn to. Shelby felt the same way as the others, but knew better. Mr. Dempsey comprehended about as much or as little as the rest of them.

Riley asked the question they were all wondering. “What do we do now, Mr. Dempsey?”

“This is extraordinary. It opens up a remarkable number of possibilities concerning the mysteries of the universe. As far as our next actions, I believe we simply have to do what’s right.”

Presage returned with a pair of soldiers. Cumber rushed over with two cups and a kettle. “Casselton, Borgy, come and sip some hot tea. Is the sixth Kin with you?”

Both lumbered forward, exhausted, their armor covered in mud. Casselton stared at the ground, long strands of wooly black and white hair and beard masking most of his face. Vilaborg carried a tense expression, his mahogany hair plastered backward from the temples.

“Unfortunately, they do not have the final Kin,” said Presage in a low tone.

Vilaborg looked sheepish. “The readings on the portal say he came through. We searched and then a horde of Bogmen showed. We needed to retreat, but we must go out and find him with reinforcements.” Dread was heavy in his voice.

Sol said, “Wasn’t that Kin supposed to materialize near the Cark Woods?”

“Aye, we were in the Cark.” Casselton’s eyes fixed on the ground.

“I already sent out reconnoiters to scour the Cark,” Presage said. “I pray he finds his way to safe hands.”

Shelby watched Presage as he walked off. She absorbed his fear and insecurity as he stared out into the darkness with a troubled look.

~~~

END OF SPECIAL SNEAK PREVIEW.
TO PURCHASE A FULL COPY,
PLEASE CLICK THE LINK BELOW:
Get Your Copy of THE SILVER SPHERE
THANK YOU.


~~~