

Chapter 1

The System told the world it was coming a week in advance. It was a cruel joke. Humans couldn't stop killing each other for a single day, much less unite to face an apocalypse. If anything, the warning just made things worse.

Governments tried to reach out and assure everyone that everything would be alright – that all people had to do was fall in line and they would be protected. The police and armies came out in force to control the riots that sprung up in just about every city.

That didn't last long. When people got a magical message in their head telling them that the world as they knew it was going to end, threats from talking heads hardly held the weight they once did.

By the time the week came to its end, the world was on fire. It was chaos. Supply chains collapsed. Soldiers deserted. Communities divided. Everyone was desperate to find a way to survive for just a moment longer.

And, as the world collapsed, Alex had a pizza party with his best friend.

“To us.” Alex laughed as he raised a red plastic cup full of flat soda to the air. The smell of burnt rubber and ash filtered through their window from the distant fires on the street below. “It's been shit, but sometimes it was slightly less so.”

“As eloquent as always.” Teddy pushed his glasses back up his nose, then matched Alex's grin and raised his own glass. “I rather liked it myself.”

“That’s because you were actually good at school.” Alex downed his soda. He considered throwing his cup behind him but opted to set it down by his side. The end of the world didn’t mean he had to start littering.

Teddy tossed his cup over his shoulder. He brushed his long, blonde hair away from his face, tying it back behind his head in a bun. Despite the impending apocalypse, it was still somehow perfectly taken care of. While everyone else had rushed to the stores to steal food and other necessities, Teddy had bought every last bottle of shampoo he could get his hands on.

“So, what do you think is going to happen?” Teddy asked, finishing his work and letting his hands drop.

Alex shrugged. The smell of smoke grew stronger. A restaurant had completely been engulfed in flame and thick black clouds were rising up from it in a pillar that aimed to claw its way into the heavens. “Aliens?”

“I’m hoping it’s more demons and wizards and the like. If I die, I’d rather die to a cool orc than a tentacle monster.”

“Neither will make you any less dead. I’d rather live through this whole thing myself.” Alex took a bite of frozen pizza. It tasted like wet cardboard that someone had slapped with a sausage. The electricity to their college dorm was long gone, but he’d let the pizza sit out in the sun for a day to warm it. It wasn’t exactly cooked, but food poisoning was the least of his worries.

“Like that’s going to happen.”

“Says the guy that constantly carries around four sets of his glasses in case one of them breaks.”

“And look how it paid off.” Teddy shot Alex a smug look. “I’m a genius. Twilight Zone had a message in it, man.”

“If I was the last guy alive, I think I’d just kill myself. That sounds awful.”

Teddy tilted his head slightly askew, then inclined it in agreement. “Fair point, man.”

A twinge of nervous excitement swirled in Alex’s stomach, but he didn’t let it show on his face. He’d never tell Teddy – or anyone else for that matter – but the day he’d gotten the message from the System had been one of the most exciting ones he’d had in years.

Life is a waste. Wake up, go to school, take shitty exams for a subject that I don’t care about, and then go to bed. Rinse and repeat until I get a job and then spend the rest of my life slaving away for something that doesn’t even matter.

That’s not how things should be. In just a few minutes, everyone gets screwed. No more work. Just a fight for survival – and that means we’re all on even ground. The System wouldn’t warn us it was happening if we didn’t have a way to survive. That means we’re going to get challenged, but there should be a way through.

A challenge that isn’t ripping my hair out trying to make a piece of code run correctly... I think I’m actually looking forward to the end of the world.

A bulky watch on Teddy’s wrist let out a shrill beep. He’d sworn by the thing for years, claiming it was the greatest watch ever made. He claimed it was somehow hooked up to the *true* clocks that were always perfectly accurate. Alex was convinced the damn thing was slow by a

few seconds, but he didn't have the heart to tell Teddy. They both fell silent, looking down at the piece of plastic as it went off, its shrill scream breaking their calm. Teddy reached down and turned it off.

“One minute until the end.” Some of Teddy's bravado faded away and he set his droopy pizza down, swallowing. “What are the chances that this whole thing is just a really elaborate prank and the apocalypse never happens?”

Alex looked out the window. The street was littered with shattered barricades and broken glass from protests and fights between the campus police and students. Cars sat abandoned, most of them demolished. Distant sirens rang, but most of them had already run out of battery or had their electricity cut.

“I think it already did.”

“In that case, I've changed my mind. I hope I get magic. It would be badass to start slinging fireballs around.”

“You'd probably blow yourself up.”

“Probably,” Teddy agreed.

The two of them fell silent. Seconds ticked by on the watch.

10.

9.

8.

“Alex?”

“Yeah?” Alex raised his eyes from the watch. Staring at it wouldn’t change anything.

“It’s been—”

The rest of Teddy’s sentence vanished in an earth-shattering roar. Brilliant blue light lit up the day with such intensity that it momentarily blinded Alex. He threw his hands up, crying out in surprise.

I knew his goddamn watch was off.

A booming roar slammed into Alex’s mind, echoing through his very being. Golden letters scrawled through the air before him.

Welcome, Planet 274-50, colloquially known as Earth.

Your warning period has ended. Earth will now begin to be assimilated into the Infinium. Please sit or lie down for the first stage of Initialization to avoid being injured.

Other stages of Initialization will follow.

Alex blinked the letters away as a rumble shook the building. Blood rushed in his ears as his spine tingled and his hair stood on end. He and Teddy exchanged a wild-eyed look, but they didn’t have time to say anything.

As quickly as the first message had faded, a new one appeared before Alex.

Initialization has begun.

Welcome, Alex Vaya. Please remain still while your information is processed. You are number 2,105,294,612 in the queue.

The smell of ozone bit at Alex's nostrils. Energy crackled through the room, tiny arcs of blue light dancing along the walls and racing around their feet.

Alex's hair stood on end. More and more energy gathered around them. Out of the corner of his eye, Alex saw a flash of dark energy through his window. A black beam carved through the air, ripping through the ground. A pillar of black crystal erupted where the energy had struck and a car that had been unfortunate enough to be in its path warped in on itself before getting sucked into an obelisk. Rings of blue light flickered around the rippling black object, humming a shrill whistle.

It was the very same energy that was filling the room.

Oh, shit.

"We need to move!" Alex yelled.

Teddy didn't need to be told twice. He and Alex lurched to their feet. The energy gathering around them grew even stronger. It screamed in Alex's ears like a raging siren. Flashes of blue light swirled around him, forcing him to squint.

A sliver of black light slipped through the air, directly in front of Teddy's path. The world slowed, but not nearly fast enough. A dark disk expanded, carving clean through the ground and slicing apart everything in its path.

Alex lunged and shoved Teddy out of the way just as the darkness roared out between them, forming into a crackling obelisk of energy. He hit the ground with a grunt, rolling to the side an instant before the black crystal finished taking form.

A flicker of blue energy arced past Alex's arms and the smell of burnt hair filled the room. He let out a hiss of pain and shook his arm off.

"Alex!" Teddy yelled. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Alex yelled back, stepping around the obelisk. His heart slammed violently in his chest. Dark swirls of smoke twisted and shimmered within the strange object that had materialized in their room. It was oddly mesmerizing – but not nearly enough to get Alex to stand around for a second longer.

Teddy scrambled to his feet and darted around the obelisk. Alex felt energy crackle at his back and jumped forward, just barely managing to avoid another obelisk as it slammed into place in their room, roaring with violent energy.

"Holy shit," Alex breathed. "That was a close call. We need to get out of here."

"Yeah," Teddy agreed, steadying Alex. For a moment, it looked like he wanted to say something. Teddy's mouth opened for just an instant before he closed it, pressing his lips together as his features darkened.

Then Teddy shoved him.

Alex's back hit the churning energy and a roar filled his mind, the words stolen from his mouth as it opened in shock. The determined look in Teddy's eyes was the last thing Alex saw before the darkness took him.

Alex was surprised to find his eyes open. He was sprawled across cold, clammy floor, his body intact and somehow entirely unsevered.

It was silent. The sirens had vanished and the crackle of energy and flame was gone. It was so silent that he could hear the thump of his heart like a metronome. Alex groaned and pushed himself upright, the taste of iron stinging his clammy tongue. For a moment, it looked like he was still in his dorm room, but something was deeply *wrong* with all of it.

The same ratty walls rose up around him, and he could see the door to his room in the far wall, but that was where the similarities ended. The knitted Shrek rug he'd found in a thrift store had been replaced by warped, glittering stone. None of the furniture was quite where it should have been and all of it was just slightly wrong. A cabinet twisted like a spiral staircase, a desk with three legs that sat askew and partially lodged in the wall — a mirror that definitely hadn't been there before, its reflection nothing but a black void.

What the hell was that? Did Teddy just try to kill me?

Did he succeed?

I don't feel dead.

Alex swallowed as the dim light revealed shadows that were just long enough to be noticeably out of place. His skin prickled. The feeling of being watched gripped at him and he turned in a slow circle, but the room seemed to be empty. It certainly didn't *feel* empty, though. Alex was denied the opportunity to look around for any longer when a flash of blocky golden lettering appeared before him.

[Trial Assigned: The Mirrorlands]

Objective: *Escape.*

No sooner than Alex had read the words did they vanish, replaced by new, considerably fancier ones.

Alex Vaya. It is now your turn in queue. Please select your class.

You may choose –

ERROR.

All living beings must obtain a class before departing their origin area. You may not leave Planet 274-50 until you have selected a class.

ERROR. Current location is [FORBIDDEN]. Dimension mismatch.

Attempting to manually assign class...

ERROR. No available classes are available to select from location [FORBIDDEN]. Dimension mismatch.

Anomaly detected.

Alex stared at the golden letters, then swallowed heavily. He'd had a week to process that the apocalypse was coming. There was no room to wonder if he was hallucinating or somehow asleep.

Of course, he hadn't expected his best friend to shove him through a portal into hell, but no plan ever held up through first contact. Panic wouldn't help him now.

This was real life. He'd mentally prepared himself to fight. He'd prepared himself to die. Teddy could be dealt with later. Right now, his concern was survival and getting angry wasn't going to help anything.

I'm punching that asshole in the face if I ever see him again, though.

The System wasn't satisfied with leaving Alex to his thoughts. The floating messages disappeared as a new one replaced them.

Title Acquired.

Anomaly (FORBIDDEN): You were successfully marked as an Anomaly by the System.

This Title cannot be removed.

ERROR. [Alex Vaya] has not finished the first stage of Initialization and cannot earn Title Fragments. Removing Title Fragment...

ERROR. Title [Anomaly] cannot be removed.

Setting origin for [Alex Vaya] to [Mirrorlands].

Title Fragment Acquired.

Mirrorlander: Granted to all native Mirrorlanders, however few of them there may be.

Alex squinted, the sudden glare of flashing letters in the darkness stinging his eyes. It felt simultaneously burning hot and freezing cold. His internal organs lurched and he stumbled, catching himself on the wall as the world swam before him.

As quickly as the sensation had started, it vanished. A loud ding echoed through Alex's mind – the very same noise that had heralded the beginning of the nightmare that the world had been plunged into for the past week.

You have access to [4] new Classes.

Please select your class. Your choice will unlock the power latent within you and allow it to take shape according to your soul's desires. Though many classes start with the same name, no two ever remain identical.

You may choose from the following options:

Reaper [Mirrorlands]

Hunter [Mirrorlands]

Mancer [Mirrorlands]

Evoker [Mirrorlands]

This time, the glowing letters didn't float away on their own. It finally looked like the System had figured itself out and was running properly again – for what good that was. As far as Alex could tell, the black obelisk had somehow sucked him into a location that wasn't on Earth before he'd had a chance to select his class, which had thrown the System for a loop. Despite everything that had happened, he let out a snort of amusement. It was funny, in a bleak way.

At least I actually get to choose a class. For a good few seconds there, I thought I was going to end up with nothing.

Alex turned his attention toward the four class names floating in the air before him. As soon as his mind brushed over them, the writing shifted and new information shimmered to life beneath each of them.

Reaper [Mirrorlands]: A close-range fighter with an aggressive combat style. The Reaper focuses on draining energy from their opponents and thrives in the chaos of battle. [Anomaly] has granted you a Class Modification: Gain an appropriate, randomly selected

Mirrorlands Weapon upon selecting this Class. The weapon will scale and grow together with you.

Hunter [Mirrorlands]: A long range fighter with a stealth-based fighting style. Hunters possess abilities that allow them to conceal themselves, setting up traps and striking from the darkness. Anomaly has granted you a Class Modification: Gain an appropriate, randomly selected Mirrorlands Weapon upon selecting this Class. The weapon will scale and grow together with you.

Mancer [Mirrorlands]: A versatile Class that calls on the Way to wield powerful magic at the cost of their defenses. Mancers have immense destructive force and can specialize into many different branches but are vulnerable to most types of attacks. Anomaly has granted you a Class Modification: The Core & first Auxiliary Skill granted by this class will both be improved.

Evoker [Mirrorlands]: A versatile Class that draws power from the inhabitants of the Mirrorlands, summoning and utilizing their abilities at will. Evokers can wield enormous power but are limited by their ability to capture and control inhabitants of the Mirrorlands. Anomaly has granted you a Class Modification: Gain a randomly selected Mirrorlands Inhabitant of increased rarity. The first Auxiliary Skill granted by this class will be improved.

Alex's eyes raced over the words, drinking them all in. He re-read each of the classes several times. The System didn't seem to have a time limit on anything, but he didn't want to sit around for long enough to find out if it did.

These hardly seem like proper starting classes. There's no way these were what I was supposed to get as my first class. I guess I've got the Anomaly Title Fragment to thank for that. I

bet I didn't get access to any normal classes because I got yanked off Earth before the System initialized, or whatever it was talking about.

And, if Alex hadn't gotten the title... he shuddered. The System would have still been stuck spamming him with errors, and he never would have gotten any sort of class.

The first two classes give a scaling weapon. That basically sounds like the equivalent of a legendary weapon or something once I get strong enough, but it didn't say anything about the weapons other than they would be appropriate, which means they could initially suck or just not be something I can use. I'm a terrible shot and I've never swung a sword, so I'll probably just cross both of those classes off.

The shadows at the corner of Alex's vision shifted. He stiffened, jerking his head toward them, but nothing was there. He turned his gaze back to the shimmering letters, clenching his fists.

That left Mancer and Evoker. A squishy mage and a summoner. It only took a few moments for Alex to make his decision.

Magic is tempting, but I don't relish the idea of having to worry about dying in a single blow. Mancers sound like they need a frontline to do anything, especially when they're weak and don't have much power to work with yet.

It feels like Evokers are kind of mages as well, but they're more like some weird mix between a warlock and a Pokémon Trainer. That's definitely the safer move, and I can't deny that it actually seems kind of cool. I wouldn't mind showing up leading a horde of monsters, and using their abilities almost seems like I'd have some Blue Mage powers as well. That's a good balance.

A grin tugged at Alex's lips and he focused on his chosen class. Cool wasn't really the best criteria with which to base his decision, but the world had ended a few minutes ago. Having at least a little fun as everything burned around him felt like the least he could aim for.

The words floating in the air didn't react in the slightest under Alex's gaze. He frowned and reached out, expecting his finger to pass clean through them. Instead, it made contact, a faint static energy pushing back against his skin.

You have selected Evoker [Mirrorlands].

The prickling feeling covering Alex's body intensified a hundred-fold. He scrambled back on all fours, batting at himself and letting out a startled curse as what felt like thousands of spiders suddenly crawled beneath his skin and along the insides of his organs.

As quickly as the awful sensation arrived, it vanished. The golden lettering faded away as new messages took the previous one's place.

Soul Manifestation Unlocked: [Spatial Mirrors] (Novice 1) – Spatial Mirrors contain the Evoker's bonded creatures. They can only contain bonded creatures that originate from the Mirrorlands. The creatures stored within Spatial Mirrors can be summoned at will. Upon death, the creature's energy will return to the Spatial Mirror until it recovers.

An invisible band coiled around Alex's chest even as the System's message shimmered, locking in place almost as if it had frozen. For an instant, his lungs refused to draw breath. Then his teeth clenched and he forced himself to inhale. There was a sharp pop as the pressure in his ears changed.

*The Improved Auxiliary Skill has insufficient strength to overwrite Singularity Core.
Your innate skill has taken priority.*

Auxiliary Skill Unlocked: [Requiem to the King] (Novice 1) – Even in death, all must serve. When a bonded creature is slain in battle, a portion of their energy and abilities will empower their summoner. This effect will remain until the bonded creature reforms in their Spatial Mirror.

Alex took in the messages, not sure if he was supposed to be excited or terrified. He had absolutely no idea what a Singularity Core was or what it did, but it seemed that it had somehow provided a skill stronger than what the System had been planning on giving him.

And then there was Soul Manifestation. It certainly seemed like a skill, but it clearly had more relevance to it than just a random ability if it got a whole unique title. Whatever they were, he got the feeling he wasn't going to find answers just sitting around like a duck. He needed to get moving.

Where's my free summon? I thought I got—

A pebble clattered across the floor behind Alex. He spun, his hand waving through the gold letters and blowing them away. A jolt of ice raced through his veins and shot straight into his heart.

Staring at him from the shadows of a doorway, burning with hunger, were two slanted red eyes. Alex took a step back, raising his hands in what he hoped was a soothing motion. The eyes bored into him, and the world was utterly silent.

He almost wished that the monster would do something – make noise, attack – anything. Instead, it just watched him silently, as if it were reveling in his growing fear. The darkness was split apart as a new message from the System arrived before him.

Congratulations on acquiring your new class. Would you like to view the Class Guide? They will aid you in summoning your first [Mirrorlands] inhabitant.

WARNING: The Class Guide will remove you from your current location until it has concluded. Ensure you are prepared before proceeding. Are you prepared to proceed?
[Yes/No]

Alex mashed his finger against *yes* without a second of hesitation.

Anything that gets me the hell out of here for even a few minutes.

The world shattered, falling apart around him like planes of broken glass.

Chapter 2

Fractals of shimmering mirrors glittered around Alex, piecing themselves into place one by one like a jigsaw puzzle. He floated in their midst, unable to move so much as an eyebrow. His reflection peered back at him from every direction, frozen in horror in a sea of black.

Color washed across the mirrors, splitting the darkness. The mirrors disappeared, melting into the background as a plain stone room took form around Alex. Solid ground formed beneath Alex's feet. Control returned to him as the last of the mirrors vanished.

Alex glanced over his shoulder. The room had no door. It didn't even have furniture. Aside from him, it was completely empty.

"Hello?" Alex called.

His voice didn't even echo. There was no response, and there certainly wasn't any sign of the promised Class Guide. A harrowing thought struck Alex and he swore under his breath.

I got scammed out of the Class Guide because I'm stuck in the Mirrorlands, didn't I?

He waited for a few more seconds, the hope that he was wrong and that someone would show up to tell him what in the world was going on dwindling quickly. Finally, he sighed.

Always look on the bright side. Challenge is a good thing.

"Forget it. I'll just do this myself. It does kind of take the fun out of something when someone tells you how to do it." Alex rubbed his hands together. "How do I access my Spatial Mirror things? That seems to be what everything for my Class is tied up to."

Alex tried picturing the messages that the System had been sending him, but nothing happened. He waved his hand in the air, trying to picture a large mirror appearing before him, half expecting that to meet equal success.

To his surprise, his fingers pressed against something cold. Alex latched onto it, pulling a silvery metal box the size of a deck of playing cards out from nothingness. Alex's reflection looked back at him from it. The harder he focused on it, the less of himself he actually saw.

Tiny letters flashed across the back of the box, nearly making Alex drop it in surprise.

Alex Vaya [Human]

Class: Evoker [Mirrorlands]

Stage: Novice 1

Title Fragments:

[Anomaly]

[Mirrorlander]

Active Titles:

[0/5]

Soul Manifestation:

[Spatial Mirrors] (Novice 1)

Auxiliary Skills:

[Requiem to the King] (Novice 1)

Alex spent a minute looking through the letters on the box.

When he turned his attention to any of the skills, the descriptions expanded to the full ones that he'd seen when he'd first chosen the Class. There wasn't a single mention of the Singularity Core that had gotten him his Auxiliary Skill anywhere in his status page. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not, but he couldn't dwell on it.

The only thing that really surprised him in his status page was a lack of any actual stats. He'd been expecting a list of dungeons and dragons style values such as dexterity or constitution, but nothing of the sort seemed to be present.

That stuff doesn't matter right now. I just need to figure out how to summon my first monster. I can figure out the other things later, assuming I don't get my throat ripped out the moment I get booted out of this Class Guide thing.

Alex ran his finger along the box, searching for a seam. As if waiting for that very thought, the back of it popped open. He turned the box around, pushing the top up to reveal a single, glittering mirror in its center. A thin trim of purple metal ran around the edge of the mirror, and a swirl of dark energy spun at the mirror's center, almost as if he were looking through a window into another dimension.

Gotcha.

Alex pulled the mirror free with two fingers and examined it closer. As soon as it was free of the box, letters shimmered to life across its surface.

Spatial Mirror

Stored Energy: System Gift – 1

Bonded Creature: None

“Well,” Alex said to himself, “There’s the free monster. I just need to figure out how to actually get it.”

He turned the mirror left and right, trying to get a better look at the swirling darkness in its center. No matter how he turned the mirror, it always seemed to peer back at him like some emotionless eye.

Alex grimaced, then brushed his fingers against the surface of the mirror. It rippled in response, sending a faint tingle down his wrist. Alex yanked his hand back. Tiny waves passed over the surface of the mirror like a lake before going still again.

Narrowing his eyes, Alex touched the mirror again. Cool energy pressed back against his hand, gently pulling it in. This time, Alex didn't resist.

Even though his hand was far too large to fit into the card-sized mirror, it still somehow plunged into it. Ice raced up Alex's veins and through his shoulder, coiling around his heart. His fist closed around a crackling ball of static electricity.

It bucked, trying to slip free. Alex didn't let it. He tightened his grip as the freezing sensation intensified.

The energy doesn't do anything for me when it's inside the mirror, which means my best bet is to pull it out.

The cold wound deeper into Alex's body. His fingers felt like they were about to freeze off, but the energy finally stopped fighting against him and he felt it settle comfortably into his palm.

Alex yanked his hand back. For a moment, the mirror resisted him. Then, with a pop, it pulled free. As soon as the energy left the confines of the mirror, the freezing cold was banished.

What took its place was shooting pain. Alex let out a slew of curses and yanked his hand back. A mote of black and purple flame rose into the air, floating at eye level as it pulsated. Faint waves of force rolled off it, pushing Alex back.

It began to shimmer, motes of white light appearing around the energy and orbiting it at increasing speeds. The light intensified and Alex took a step back, raising a hand to cover his eyes and squinting.

Colors flashed at a rapid pace, moving through every color of the rainbow and then some. They grew brighter and brighter as they cycled past before finally snapping to a halt, frozen a dark blue.

A rush of wind swirled past him and buffeted his hair. There was a brilliant flash and a wave of heat slammed into Alex, nearly bowling him over. He managed to keep his footing under him and forced his eyes open, blinking furiously to see past the dots floating in his vision.

Standing before him, in a sea of fading purple and black dots, was a gaunt humanoid. It was just a little over four feet tall, with gangly limbs covered with stretched grey skin and a large maw. Shards of shimmering silver jutted out of it at odd angles, forming rough spikes along its back and claws at its fingertips.

The monster's teeth, just like its claws, were rows of mismatching shards that had been shoved into a long, lipless mouth. Two motes of yellow light marked its eyes, which had no real shape beyond their glow.

Alex didn't even dare to move. He'd been promised a monster, but he'd been expecting something like a giant fluffy dog with big teeth or something, not... whatever this demon was. But the longer he looked at it, the more excited Alex got.

Glass ground against itself as the monster worked its jaw, staring expectantly at him. One of its claws hung low enough that it actually touched the ground. It was sharp enough that it cut straight into the stone, passing through it like nothing.

The mirror in Alex's hand warmed. It took a force of will just to tear his eyes away from the monster and look down. The writing upon its surface had changed.

Spatial Mirror

Stored Energy: None

Bonded Creature: Shardwalker (Novice 1)

That's interesting. So this ugly little creature is my improved summon? It certainly looks scary. But... does that mean this creepy little guy is stronger than average? He's just a Novice, same as me. Maybe he's just rare. Rare is good.

Alex cleared his throat and looked back to the Shardwalker watching him expectantly.

“Hello?”

The monster didn't respond. Its claws twitched slightly, carving through the ground again.

“I'm Alex.”

The monster continued to stare.

Not much of a conversationalist, huh? For that matter, does this thing even have any thoughts?

“Can you do something if you understand me?”

As he was starting to get used to, the monster remained in place. Alex chewed his lower lip, then changed his strategy.

“Raise your hand.”

The monster lifted a hand into the air in a blur. Alex jumped back before he realized that the Shardwalker was just following his orders, not attacking him. He suddenly found himself glad that nobody else was there to see him stumble around.

It follows my orders, then. Doesn't seem like it's intelligent. Not yet, at least. That's honestly a relief. I'm not sure how I'd feel about forcing an intelligent creature to do my bidding.

Alex held the card-sized mirror up and sent it a pointed look. “Can... you get back in this? Or are you just stuck walking around outside?”

No sooner than he had finished speaking did the Shardwalker vanish in a shimmer of light. The surface of the mirror in his hand changed, his reflection disappearing as the monster appeared in its place.

The Shardwalker stared out of the mirror at Alex, then sat down on the nothingness surrounding it. Alex carefully slid the card back into the box and snapped it shut. A loud crack echoed through the still room and Alex spun around, raising his hands defensively.

A gap ran along one of the walls, revealing an endless expanse of darkness outside his room – one that didn't seem all that dissimilar from the one that the Shardwalker currently sat in. The room was falling apart.

Shit. I'm going to get pulled back to the Mirrorlands really soon. I need to get a hold of the rest of my Class. I've got my monster, so I just have to figure out how to summon it.

Alex snapped the box open and pulled the mirror back out of it. He held it before him, flipping the card so that the Shardwalker faced away from him. If the summoning just had the Shardwalker jump out of the card, he didn't want it cutting him to ribbons on the way out.

“I’m going to call you Glint,” Alex proclaimed. “And I’d like a little help. Can you get out here?”

Not like it’ll actually work that way. I’ll probably have to do something special to summon Glint —

With the sound of shattering glass, a claw carved through the air in front of Alex. Glint pulled itself out from a tear in space, dropping to the ground. Light shimmered across the pieces of glass covering its body.

Despite his situation, a slight grin flickered across Alex’s face. He held the card up.

“I think you’re going to be a dude. Do you mind, Glint?”

Glint turned toward Alex and watched him mutely. He seemed to enjoy doing that, and that was just fine with Alex. Silence was the same as approval, after all.

“Looking forward to working with you then. I think we’re going to have quite a bit of fun together. Can you get back into the card?”

Glint vanished in a flash, reappearing within the Spatial Mirror. Alex studied it for a second, then tightened his grip. Maybe – just maybe – he actually had a chance of surviving this nightmare and making it back to the surface.

Another crack tore through the room, this time above him. Alex looked up at the crack. He stretched his arms above his head, then rolled his neck.

“Okay. Let’s do this, Glint.”

The thing that was watching me might have moved. I need to be ready the moment I get out of here.

Golden letters flashed through the air before Alex.

You have requested to leave the Class Guide. Are you prepared to return to the location you were at before it initiated? [Yes/No]

Alex reached out with his free hand and selected *yes*, keeping the other tightly wrapped around Glint's card.

For the second time that day, the world shattered around him.

But, this time, Alex was ready for it.

Chapter 3

Alex's feet hit solid ground as the warped version of his dorm materialized, painted in the unsettlingly long shadows. Even though Alex was expecting it, his heart lurched into his throat as he saw a pair of eyes waiting for him.

Instead of watching him from the darkness, they were now just a few feet away from him in the doorway leading over to the next room. A ghostly black form floated in the air, its body twisted like a rope. Parts of it were solid while others were completely translucent, and a long, jagged sword hung loosely in one of its hands.

Purple letters shimmered above the monster's head.

Shaded Hauntling (Novice 2)

The Hauntling's red eyes smoldered and its mouth split apart as it let out a low, keening wail. Alex thrust his card forward. Before he could even say Glint's name, the monster seemed to sense his desires.

Glass tinkled across the ground as Glint's claws ripped a portal through the air and the monster stepped out and stood between Alex and the apparition. The Hauntling's wail turned to a scream and it lurched toward him.

"Defend me!" Alex yelled.

Glint leapt into motion. The Hauntling's sword flashed down toward the glass monster, but Glint made no move to dodge it. A loud clang echoed through the dark, warped room as claws collided against blade.

Even though Glint's claws had carved clean through stone with no difficulty, whatever the Hauntling's blade was made from was strong enough to withstand them. The Hauntling pulled back, and Alex noted that even though the blade had survived the attack, there were several large notches in its metal.

"Go for the sword again!" Alex commanded. The Hauntling's eyes latched onto him and it flew forward, trying to run him through.

Alex threw himself into a roll, and Glint snarled behind him. Another clang echoed through the room, followed by a third. This one was accompanied by a loud crash. Alex turned just in time to see the top of the Hauntling's sword bounce off the stone ground, severed.

"Now finish it." Adrenaline pumped through Alex's veins. "Cut its head off!"

Glint leapt – and the Hauntling turned fully translucent. The Shardwalker hurtled straight through the other monster, passing it harmlessly. As soon as Glint was behind the Hauntling, the ghostly creature spun and slammed what remained of its sword into the back of the smaller creature's neck.

Glass shattered as the sword bit home, and Glint slumped like a puppet with its strings cut. Alex's stomach clenched and he swore. He didn't even bother hoping that Glint would get back up – the monster was limp and lifeless.

Shit. What am I doing? I don't know what I'm up against, and I just threw my only weapon's life away because I was too impatient to feel things out better.

The Hauntling turned its eyes toward Alex, flicking Glint from the end of its broken sword. It started to howl, not giving him time to lament his mistake any longer.

Glint's body shimmered as it flew through the air, then turned into a streamer of shimmering silver energy a moment before it hit the ground. The energy flew past the Hauntling and sank into Alex's body.

A river of prickling cold coursed across Alex's skin. Still screaming, the Hauntling charged him, rearing back to plunge its damaged weapon into his neck.

Alex grabbed the monster's arm as it slammed into him. His muscles screamed as he pushed with all his might, keeping the blade from plunging down into his skin. The Hauntling drove its other hand into his stomach, knocking the air from his lungs and sending him stumbling back into the wall.

Brick rippled behind Alex and gave way like a net. He shoved himself away from the wall and it reformed, but not before he caught a glimpse of a dim red sky outside. His heart slammed in his chest. His dorm was six stories up. If he'd completely fallen through the wall —

The hauntling's sword flashed. Alex's eyes widened and he drove his hands up with all the strength he could muster, grabbing the weapon by its hilt. His arms trembled with exertion as the monster slowly brought the sword closer to his neck. He was losing.

He thrust his hands to the side and twisted his body to the left, letting the sword flash right past his arm. In the same motion, Alex grabbed onto the solid parts of the Hauntling's throat. It might have been strong, but it had no legs to keep him from tossing it. He drove his shoulder into the wall behind him.

Brick burst out and flew back, scattering through the air like dozens of pool balls. Alex put all his weight into his shoulder as he let out a scream of defiance and twisted his body, flinging the Hauntling into the open air.

Its free hand shot out as it fell and snagged Alex by the ankle. There was a sharp tug, and then the world spun above him. His back slammed into the ground and the air drove from his lungs for the second time as the Hauntling dragged him toward his death.

Alex's hands scrabbled against the ground as he struggled to find purchase on the rug. He slipped over the edge, but his fingers found a lip in the wall a moment before he pitched down to his death. He held on for dear life as he dangled in the open air, wind howling around him. The Hauntling let out a screech. Its hand dug into the back of his pants as it started to pull itself up. The monster's sword slammed into the building just beside Alex's head, digging into the stone and acting as a handhold as the Hauntling extended a hand over him to reach for solid ground.

“I don’t think so,” Alex snarled, grabbing the hilt of the sword and flinging his body to the side. The Hauntling kept its grip on the blade, but it wasn’t anywhere near as heavy as it was strong. It flailed through the air and momentarily lost its balance.

Alex twisted himself, locking eyes with the Hauntling. The monster screamed in his face. He drove his free hand forward with a snarl, striking the monster in the chest and pushing with everything he had.

There was a loud *snik*.

The Haunting’s screech cut off abruptly. Alex stared at the monster, his heart hammering violently in his chest. It looked equally as surprised as it pitched back, sliding off his hand and plummeting through the air toward a mess of odd, twisted buildings far below.

A glittering mirror fragment had burst free from the center of his palm and driven straight through the monster’s chest. The mirror shattered, falling to the ground in a rain of shimmering silver.

Alex didn’t question his luck or stick around to properly take a look at the scenery. He grabbed the sword with both hands and braced his legs against the side of the building. With a heave, he pulled himself back into the room and pushed himself away from the wall. He rolled across the ground and laid flat, his heart slamming so hard in his chest that it threatened to break a bone. He drew in deep, shaky breaths as he steadied himself.

A rush of cool energy entered his chest, wound around his heart, and sent a shiver down his spine. It felt like he’d just downed the strongest, freshest energy drink of his life — but infinitely more satisfying. He didn’t just feel energized. He felt *stronger*.

Swallowing to try and get some moisture back in his mouth, he pushed himself upright. A small mote of greenish flame floated just beside the edge of the wall, which had already reformed as if nothing had happened.

He looked from it to his palm.

There was no trace of where the blade had emerged from on Alex's skin, but a simple thought brought another glistening blade to bear at the tip of one of his fingers. Alex dismissed it with another, staring at his body in disbelief.

So that's what it means to take on Glint's abilities? I suppose I should be happy I didn't grow spikes out of my entire body and destroy my clothes.

His hands shook as he clenched and unclenched them a few times, hardly able to believe that he was still alive.

It wasn't fear that made him tremble, though. It was excitement. A laugh slipped from Alex's lips, intensifying as the adrenaline drove his frayed nerves to the max. He was alive. And, more importantly, that fight had been fun.

"Oh, yeah. This is it," Alex murmured to himself as his laughter finally petered out. He drew in a deep breath to steady himself and let it out slowly. "That was exhilarating. I'm going to enjoy this."

He glanced around for his Spatial Mirror, only to find that it was back in the metal box. Alex had lost track of it during the fight after the Hauntling attacked him, but he knew for a fact that he hadn't returned it to the box.

It must return automatically. Convenient.

Alex pulled the mirror out and glanced over it. From the description of his abilities, he was pretty sure that Glint wasn't dead, but he wanted to make sure.

Spatial Mirror

Stored Energy: None

Bonded Creature: Shardwalker (Regenerating)

Alex breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn't completely wasted his companion's life. There wasn't much point in being a summoner if all his summons got killed in the first few seconds of a fight.

His gaze lowered to the floating mote of black light that the Hauntling had left behind. It looked remarkably similar to the energy that had been floating in his mirror – aside from the color, that was.

He extended a hand and let a finger brush across the flame. A faint shiver ran down his arm. It wasn't anything near as intense as the energy that had summoned Glint, but it was definitely of the same variant.

Alex grabbed the mote and brought it over to the mirror. It had a spot to hold energy, so he was pretty sure that—

Before he could even bring the flame all the way up to the mirror's face, it was sucked from his fingers and drawn into its silvery surface. The card rippled before returning to a plain, dark background, but the words at the top changed.

Spatial Mirror

Stored Energy:

Low Novice Grade (Shaded Hauntling) – 1

Bonded Creature: Shardwalker (Regenerating)

“Well then,” Alex said, lowering the mirror and scooting up to lean against one of the warped walls. “I guess it’s time to sit around and wait for Glint to come back. And, once he does, I’m going to check out where the hell we’re stuck. That Trial message I got right when I arrived here said I had to escape, and that means there’s a way out. And, if there’s a way out, we’re going to find it.”

Chapter 4

It took just about an hour for Glint’s status on the Spatial Mirror to return to normal. At the exact same time, Alex’s ability to create mirror shards vanished. That was far from a surprise, but at least it confirmed that the System was working properly.

That was a relief. After all the ERRORS and the Anomaly Title Fragment – whatever that meant – Alex wasn’t all that confident in the System’s structural integrity.

“Glint, come help me,” Alex requested. The card in his hand rippled and a claw cut through the air beside him. Glass tinkled to the ground to announce Glint’s arrival and the monster stared at Alex, a blank expression in his eyes.

He set the card down and it vanished into a stream of black smoke, flowing into the box at his hip. Alex glanced down at it and blinked. He drew the mirror out once more, then let go of it again.

It streamed back into the box.

“At least I know you can’t be lost,” Alex informed Glint. The monster, unsurprisingly, didn’t respond. Alex jerked his head toward the door. “Let’s go. Stay by my side, please. If you see any monsters, try to quietly alert me by pointing before doing anything else. I’d prefer stealth to attacking everything like an idiot.”

Glint nodded and they started off. It looked like Glint was more than capable of understanding long orders, so the monster was far from dumb. Perhaps it was more a question of intent rather than just words.

He’d have time to test it later. Right now, he needed to find out about where in the world – or more accurately, off it – he was. Alex and Glint headed down the warped hall, both moving as silently as they could.

Part of him wondered if the shitshow leading up to the apocalypse had been better or worse because he’d been in Texas. They’d certainly gone out with a bang — but it was a moot point now.

It was a strange feeling, heading down a place Alex should have known like the back of his hand. He’d spent months in this shitty old building and had walked down its beige walled paths more times than he could count. He probably could have drawn the uninspired pattern on the rug at his feet from memory. Even the smell of the musty walls had etched itself into his mind.

The only real signs of color had been the half-assed drawings on the whiteboards that hung from some of the other students’ doors, with the occasional one by an artist that actually looked half decent.

Now, doors twisted like spiraling breadsticks. Parts of some were entirely missing, leaving pieces floating inexplicably in the air, while others were slanted in a myriad of directions other than the one they were actually meant to. Strips of carpet had torn themselves up and stretched up the walls like climbing vines and the entire hallway smelled like absolutely nothing. There was no dust. No faint chemical stench from where people had drawn on the whiteboards with sharpies instead of erasable pens. Not even mold. There was just nothing.

The silence bore down on Alex like a twenty-pound blanket. Every step he took, no matter how silent it was, felt like its echoes had echoes. He had to alternate from looking around the funhouse-mirror hallway and watching his every move to make sure he didn't stumble over a piece of randomly slanted ground or slip and fall.

His awkward gait slowly brought him to the stairs at the end of the hall. They were fortunately still where he recalled them to be. Sure, the door leading to them was now embedded in the wall and covered with twisting wood growth, but at least it was there. Pieces of it floated in the air, shifting back and forth gently in the air and blocking his way.

Alex grimaced. Even though the door was broken to pieces, there was no way to get past it without touching its remains. He carefully braced a hand against the largest of the fragments and pushed. It resisted him for a moment before slowly shifting back through the air. Alex grabbed another piece and shoved it out of the way before hurriedly stepping through.

The pieces of the door floated back to their places, as if he'd never been there. A shiver ran down Alex's spine as he turned to look down the stairwell. The stairs, like everything else in the building, were a shitshow. Jagged black roots ran throughout the stairwell and jutted out from

the walls in random spots. Some of the stairs had been ripped free and hung suspended in the air, held in place only by a few measly roots running through them.

Fortunately, there were still enough of them left to actually use to get down. That was all he could really ask for.

Alex and Glint headed down the stairwell, avoiding the other rooms on the way down to the first floor. He did his best to avoid the roots and Glint did the same. They just looked like wood, but there was no reason to take any chances. Risk was fun when it had a reward. He wasn't trying to get himself killed.

The stairs reached their conclusion. Normally, they should have led out into a wide-open lobby that connected to some of the other dorm buildings in the cluster. Instead, Alex found a massive tree sitting dead center in the middle of the lobby.

It rose straight up through the building, ripping through the floors and sending roots and branches out in every direction. There wasn't a single leaf to be seen upon its surface, but the tree had decided to compensate for that particular failing by covering itself with howling visages of human faces pressed up against its bark as if just mere instants from breaking free.

Alex froze in place, his heart jumping in his chest. He half expected the tree to come alive and start screaming as it ripped the building down around him.

No such thing happened. It just... sat there. Watching.

He remained still for a few more seconds before swallowing and starting off once more. Alex crept out of the stairwell, gladder than ever that he'd avoided touching any of the wood.

Beyond the tree, at the far end of the room, he could see the door leading out onto the street. It hung askew as if beckoning him over.

“Don’t touch the wood,” Alex said a hushed whisper as he started to creep toward the door. He didn’t try rushing anything. The tree wasn’t moving, but its roots were practically everywhere. Slow and steady movement was his friend.

He crept past a thick branch, crouching to avoid a pair of roots that ran parallel to each other. Every movement sent thrills of adrenaline pumping through his veins. He didn’t even know if touching the tree would do anything, but he had absolutely no plan of finding out.

Step by step, he approached the door. A glance back at Glint showed that the monster was having a considerably easier time than he was. Glint just hopped past the roots without a second glance, moving through them with causal ease.

At least I don't have to worry about him.

Alex finally drew up to the exit. A delighted grin crossed his lips and he finally got his first look outside through the roots obscuring the top of the doorframe.

Dull purple-red light shone down on the street, which was so badly changed that it took Alex several moments to even realize he was in the same city. Enormous crevices ran throughout the street, dark energy glowing from somewhere deep within them.

There was a sharp, acrid smell in the air that Alex couldn’t quite place. It was almost electric, but like nothing he’d ever experienced before. He barely even paid it attention — all of his senses were nearly completely overwhelmed as he stared in disbelief.

Entire buildings had been lifted into the air and were in various stages of what he could only describe as disassembly. One of his favorite restaurants, a dingy wooden building by the name of the Dixie Chicken, hung hundreds of feet in the air. Every plank of wood that had made it up had separated and floated ominously beside one another. It was almost as if an explosion had gone off on the inside of the building, but something had locked it in both space and time just milliseconds afterward.

The other buildings along the street weren't in much better shape. The ones that had actually managed to remain on the ground had been squished and warped like taffy. He barely recognized the glass windows of the physics building across the street from him. It had been elongated and stretched into a massive arch that cast a long shadow over the street.

"Holy shit," Alex breathed despite himself. It looked like his old dorm had gotten lucky. It definitely hadn't been this close to any of these buildings back in the real world, but a short jaunt through space seemed to be a relatively fortunate hand to be dealt given the alternative.

The buildings weren't the only changes. In the near distance, where there had once been only flat land, was a jagged mountain. It rose far into the sky, its sharp peak just below where the clouds should have been. Purple crackled at its top like a miniature lightning storm and rocks swirled up from the mountain, frozen in space as they reached up toward it.

A shadow passed overhead. Alex instinctually craned his neck back. He froze in place as his blood went cold. A huge, apartment-sized plate of chitin had blocked out the sky. Not just one, but dozens. Hundreds of massive legs, each one the size of a towering tree, swirled through the air. It was an enormous centipede.

City-Eater Centipede (???)

Alex swallowed and remained locked in place, not daring to make a noise. A rippling purple portal sprang open before the City-Eater Centipede, which swam into it. The portal snapped shut behind the monster, leaving the sky empty once more.

City-Eater seems like an apt name. Holy shit. Where the hell did Teddy send me? There's absolutely no way I'm supposed to be here.

A moment later, a second thought struck him.

If a bug can get that powerful in this world... then I can too.

A flicker of excitement swirled in his stomach, but Alex crushed it. He couldn't afford to start fantasizing about the future yet. That could be something he'd worry about once he managed to find a way out of the Mirrorlands — assuming such a thing was actually possible. The idea of being stuck here for the rest of his life sent a spike of ice down Alex's spine.

He shook his head. There was no reason to panic. Panic wasn't going to help him. What he needed was a plan. And, for a plan, he was going to need information. Alex glanced left and right to check for monsters, then crept out into the street with Glint in his wake.

They kept to the shadows of the buildings, moving slowly but confidently. Alex did his best to stay out from under the sky. Flickers of purple occasionally flashed as other centipedes, not quite as large as the first but still far bigger than a building, swam above him.

Alex couldn't shake how eerily silent everything was. Even though there were monsters larger than city blocks above him, their arrivals and departures through the purple portals didn't make a single noise. The only noise in the city seemed to be him.

His only saving grace was that it didn't seem like they were all that concerned with the city below them — but that was a theory he had absolutely no desire to test. Alex continued along the streets, scanning them for literally anything he could use.

He wasn't sure what that would actually be. A flashing neon 'exit' sign certainly wouldn't have gone amiss, but he was more than willing to settle for just a clue as to where he could go.

The back of Alex's spine prickled. He couldn't place quite what it was, but something felt off. That sentiment should have been laughable considering literally *everything* was off, but he couldn't shake it.

Alex pressed himself against the twisted wall of the building beside him as he tried to figure out what was nipping at his subconscious. He re-scanned the street, adrenaline pumping in his veins and causing his heart to beat so loudly that he feared the City-Eater Centipedes might hear it.

Am I just deluding myself? I don't see —

There was a flicker of movement across the street. Alex's eyes snapped over to the window of building just a short way in front of him and his breath caught in his chest. Within the darkness behind the glass were two yellowed eyes — and they were staring right at him.

Chapter 5

The eyes vanished from the window. Alex tensed and Glint flexed his claws, ready to jump into battle at a moment's notice. He couldn't help but notice that there hadn't been any sort of identification as to what the creature within the house was.

Maybe spotting the eyes isn't enough to actually reveal it and I need to see a certain amount of the monster's body or something like that?

It was a moot point. The pressing matter was twofold. First, there was a monster that had spotted him. It was small enough to fit into a house, which was good. That led to the second part of the problem. If he got into a fight in the middle of the street, it wasn't going to be quiet.

I need to kill it without making any noise or somehow bring the fight somewhere where nothing can overhear us.

Alex's fingers twitched as his mind raced, but his opponent made their move before he did. The door to the building swung open. He couldn't make out anything in the darkness beyond, but it was a clear invitation.

It's intelligent. Does it also want to avoid the street? It wouldn't surprise me if monsters ate other monsters. Maybe it wants this fight to be just as quiet as I do. Well, I can oblige. If something wants to challenge me and is scared of the other monsters, then we're likely to be at least a bit closer in strength — and I'm not backing down from a challenge.

The idea of continuing on without investigating the house didn't so much as pass his mind. Leaving a monster behind that knew of his presence was the same as leaving his back wide open and painting a target on it. It was better to take the fight when he knew the general area from where his opponent would strike.

“Glint, you first,” Alex whispered. “Prioritize surviving and scope out what we’re up against. If it attacks or makes any aggressive moves, do your best to avoid the attack and then go for the kill. If it does look like they’re going to kill you, make sure you die in front of the doorway or where I can see it.”

Glint crossed the street and Alex followed after his monster, only pausing to scoop a rock off the ground. He wasn’t going to be very useful until Glint was dead, but he got the feeling nothing would enjoy getting pelted with a stone.

They reached the opened door and Alex hung back, letting Glint take the lead and leaving enough space for himself to reposition or flee if he had to. He didn’t know what he was up against. And, until he did, he couldn’t let himself overcommit. Alex’s grip tightened around the rock and he raised his hand, preparing to throw it at a moment’s notice.

Glint stepped into the darkness. The spined monster managed two whole steps before it spun to the right and lunged, letting out a grating snarl. He vanished from view for a brief instant before there was a loud thunk. Glint went flying back past the doorway and disappeared into the darkness on the far side.

Alex tensed.

Something made an aggressive move toward Glint if he attacked first.

Glass scraped as the protrusions jutting from Glint’s skin dug into the floor and he flashed past the doorway once more. Alex gritted his teeth, resisting the urge to charge into the darkness. He needed to bide his time for the right moment.

A metal blade carved down toward Glint and the small monster leapt out of the way before lunging forward once more. There was a wet squelch and a hiss of pain. Blood splattered across the ground.

An instant later, Glint slammed into the ground. Blood covered the end of one of the blades along his arm. He'd landed a hit. Glint rolled over and shot to his feet square in the center of the doorway.

Before he could move again, the blade flashed once more. It drove straight into Glint's chest as a humanoid form stepped out of the darkness to finish him off. And, in doing so, they moved into Alex's line of sight. He could just barely make their form out in the darkness, but it was enough.

Now!

Alex hurled his rock. He'd never been a particularly athletic student, but it flew true and sailed through the air, striking the figure in the side of the head even as they ripped their sword of Glint's limp body, which turned into a streak of blue light and flooded into Alex.

A blade of mirrored glass erupted from his palm and he took a step forward, preparing to drive it into the heavily obscured figure's neck as they staggered, a hand flying up to their head.

"Ow!" the figure cursed.

Alex skidded to a stop a moment before lunging for their neck. "What the hell?"

The figure spun toward him. "You speak common?"

They stared at each other in mute shock for nearly a second. Alex took a step back, keeping the blade protruding from his hand at the ready. “What’s common? And who are you? One sudden move and I’m running you through.”

Despite his words, he’d lost the element of surprise. Out of all the things he’d been expecting to fight, another person wasn’t one of them.

Oh, shit. Could it be some sort of monster with a trick to sound human? Damn it. I didn’t even think of that.

The shaded figure raised their sword slowly, then slid it into a sheathe and lifted their hands, palms forward. “I didn’t think there was anyone else in this cursed shithole. I thought you were a monster.”

Now that Alex was paying attention to it, the person’s voice was a little high pitched. It sounded like a woman — but that didn’t mean it was one.

Alex’s eyes narrowed. “I thought *you* were a monster. Step out into the light.”

“Are you kidding me? With all the damn spookies out there?” the figure shook their head vehemently. “You come in here. It’s safe. Or, about as safe as the Mirorlands are ever going to get.”

“Into the darkness?” Alex snorted. “That’s not happening. You can clearly see in it.”

“Oh, bleed it,” the figure muttered. “Look, give me a second. I’ve got a torch here somewhere. I hate the idea of wasting it, but I can’t pass up on the chance to talk to another person. Just don’t run me through when I reach for my pocket or I’m going to be right pissed.”

Alex blinked, then nodded. “Go ahead.”

The figure slowly lifted a hand to their side. There was a moment of silence, followed by a faint scratching noise. Light bloomed from a matchstick, pushing back the cloak of darkness to reveal a young woman.

Alex tensed. A woman she may have been, but a human she was not. Two small fangs jutted down from the corners of her pitch-black mouth and her skin was a shade of gray that should have been reserved for brick, not living flesh. The woman's hair, as black as her lips, had been tied into a ponytail and revealed two ears as pointed as daggers. Blood streamed down her upper arm from the cut that Glint had left on her.

No glowing letters appeared to identify the woman. Alex wasn't sure if that was exactly a good thing, but it seemed like it might have been a point in her favor. Thus far, the only things he'd seen information on had been monsters.

“See?” she asked. “Not a monster.”

I'm not so sure I'd go that far.

“What are you?” Alex asked warily. He shifted from foot to foot, still ready to lunge at a moment's notice. He'd be damned if a pretty face was the reason he died this early into the most interesting event in his life.

“I'd like to ask you the same damn question, but please close that bleeding door before something sees this light and rips us both apart from the asshole out.”

Alex bit back a laugh. He caught the door with his foot and slowly shut it behind him, not taking his eyes off the woman. She did have a point — the biggest threat was attracting the attention of a monster too big to fight.

But, just in case, he didn't close the door all the way and kept his foot in the doorway. It would only take him an instant to fling it open and throw himself into the street if she made any moves toward him.

"Door's closed as much as I'm going to close it," Alex said. "You first. What are you? Are you a native to the Mirrorlands?"

"A native?" the woman let out a muted snort. "I'd thank you not to associate me with the hideous... things down here. I'm from Ayrin."

Alex stared at her blankly.

"Ayrin. You know?"

"No."

"The planet Ayrin?" she tried. "We got pulled into the System a week ago."

Alex shook his head. "That means nothing to me. How'd you end up here?"

"I was midway through a dungeon when I fell into a trapdoor and onto a giant bleeding obelisk. The next thing I knew, I was in this shithole. If you're not from Ayrin... please tell me you know something about how to get out of here."

Oh, shit. She might be telling the truth.

"What color was the obelisk?"

"Black. Why?" A flicker of excitement passed through her features. "Do you know a way out of here?"

Alex blew out a breath. “We might be in a bit of a pickle. I fell into one of those just an hour ago. I’m from Earth. I don’t suppose I’d be wrong in guessing that means nothing to you?”

“Nothing,” she confirmed, her excitement snuffed like a candle. She blew out a defeated breath. “Is Earth another planet? How long has it been part of the System?”

“Er... about an hour, I think.”

The woman stared at him, matchlight dancing as it illuminated her features. Then she groaned and lowered herself into a seated position. “Bleed it all. You fell in right as the System arrived?”

No. I got pushed in.

“Yep.”

“And here I thought I was unlucky. Guess I’ve met my match.” The woman blew out a huff. “What to do. My name’s Claire.”

“I’m Alex. Why is it that you don’t have any golden letters illuminating you? Is there a way to hide them?”

“Oh, that’s because of this.” Claire held her wrist up, revealing a metal bracelet. “It conceals my information. They’re pretty common. This one is shit, so it doesn’t work against anyone of a higher Stage. Not like it matters anymore.”

Claire pulled the band off her wrist. The air above her head rippled and golden words scrawled themselves into existence.

Claire - Dhampir Warrior (Novice 3)

An actual name rather than just a generic monster title. She's also stronger than me. How big is the difference between Novice 1 and Novice 3? Either way... it seems like she might be trustworthy. Not enough to let my guard down, but I'm a summoner. If she actually is friendly, an ally would go a long way in keeping me alive.

Claire put the band back onto her wrist and the writing above her head vanished. She kept the flickering match held in the air with one hand as she dug through her pocket with the other, her features pressed thin in pain.

“Mind taking this?” Claire asked, holding the match to him. “I need to find my bandages.”

He wasn't going to say no to that. It was clear he needed the light more than she did. Alex crept closer, watching her movements with narrowed eyes as he took the candle. Claire released it and he took a step back to keep some space between them.

“You're a cautious one, aren't you?” Claire asked through a wince as she found the bandages she was searching for and started to try and wrap her wound. “Can't blame you if the System really just showed up on your planet. That's rough. I'm, uh, sorry about your spiky rat.”

“It's fine,” Alex said. “He doesn't stay dead long.”

“Doesn't stay dead? You didn't hit your head, did you?” Claire fumbled with her bandages, then let out a curse. “Damn it. Hold on. I need to concentrate on this for a second.”

Alex went to nod — and a flicker moved through the darkness behind Claire, toward the back of the room. He stiffened. “Claire? Get up.”

She glanced up at his tone, then hurriedly rose to her feet and turned to follow his gaze.

“What is it?”

Alex shifted the match to pinch it between his thumb and the bed of his hand, then ripped a portion of his t-shirt away and held it to the match until the flame caught. He then threw the burning scrap over her shoulder and toward the center of the room.

The light was so dim that it was barely worth noting at all, but it was just enough to reveal another flicker of movement — and this time, for long enough for gold letters to shimmer through the air.

Shade (Novice 4)

A shadowy form lurched back from the light with a pained hiss, retreating into the corner of the room and cringing back. The small strip didn't buy them much time. It burned away to embers with frightening speed. The glowing letters went with it, swallowed by the tiny curl of smoke that rose into the darkness — and without them or the light, the Shade was invisible once more.

“Oh shit,” Claire breathed, taking a step back and drawing her sword with a pained wince. “That not good.”

Chapter 6

Alex's backed up until his shoulders pressed up against the wall behind him. It was too dark in the room for him to cover every angle, so cutting off one of them would go a long way.

Claire followed him — and their dim light source — back. She held her sword in a tight grip, but it was clear that she wasn't in the best shape to fight. The wound Glint had left on her was still bleeding pretty badly and she'd just been smacked in the head with a pretty large rock. On top of that, now that they were closer, Alex picked up on a fair amount of dirt and marred spots on her clothes.

It looked like she'd been traveling for quite some time. While that lent quite a bit of credence to her claims of being from a different planet, it also meant she was probably quite tired.

“Why isn't the bleeding thing attacking us?” Claire asked, waving her sword through the darkness. “Maybe we should head back out onto the street. It's giving us a way out.”

Alex resisted the urge to glance at the door. It wasn't too far from them... but he wasn't so sure he believed that the Shade was just going to let them go. And, somewhere deep inside himself, he had to admit that wasn't so sure he himself wanted to leave.

Fighting a City-Eating Centipede was impossible... but he'd beaten a Novice 2 Shaded Hauntling when he'd completely butchered the fight. If there was any realistic chance that he could come out on top against the Shade, he was going to take it.

“How much stronger is a Novice 4 than a Novice 1?” Alex asked.

“A good bit,” Claire muttered. She edged toward the door then jerked back with a hiss. Something flashed through the darkness, but she managed to pull herself out of the way just in time. She hurriedly backed up into the faint light cast by the torch. “Shit. Okay. It might not be willing to let us go easily.”

Hardly a surprise. I haven't met much here yet, but I'd be willing to take a bet that everything in the Mirrorlands wants to kill us.

“Can't you see in the dark?” Alex asked. “Where's the monster?”

“I can't see in the dark. I can pick up strong heat signatures — and that bleeding thing doesn't have one.”

They both scanned the shadows, but the Shade wasn't making any more moves. Alex's eyes flicked to the match. It was already halfway burned through. The monster was probably waiting for it to go out completely.

“How much stronger is a Novice 4 than a Novice 1 and a Novice 3 working together?”

“When the Novice 3 is half-dead? My money's on the spook.”

I wish I still had Glint to work with. I need to get myself more summons as soon as possible.

“Great. I hate sides with good odds. The payout is always worse,” Alex said. “The Shade is scared of the fire. It can also put it out, but it's not getting close enough to us to actually do that.”

“I'm a big believer of talking things out, but are you going anywhere with this?” Claire asked tersely. “Because that little match isn't going to last much longer and I don't have another one. You'd best get to the point.”

“I don't have one! I'm just trying to list everything we know. Do you know if the monsters can understand us?”

“Never tried talking to them myself. I’ve got no bleeding idea. Probably not? Most of the ones back in my world couldn’t.”

“Great. Then it can’t figure out what we’re planning.”

“We don’t have a plan.”

“I just came up with one. You’re going to stab it.”

Claire snorted. “Great plan. And how are we going to do that?”

“I’m going to go for the door with my torch. When it tries to stab me, I’ll duck out of the way — and you take that moment to cut at it.”

“And if it doesn’t try to go for you?”

“Then we just walk right on out of here,” Alex replied, starting to edge toward the door. He really wished that Claire had invested in some slightly higher quality matches. This one was already almost burned all the way through. It wasn’t like he could complain, though — it wasn’t like he’d brought matches of his own.

The shadows shifted. Alex threw himself to the ground and something whooshed over his head. Claire swung her sword and a loud, otherworldly hiss of pain split the air in the room marking that her blow had been successful.

Alex scrambled back to his feet and tried to tear another piece off his shirt. Beside him, Claire ducked as a dark appendage whipped through the air where her head had been. The Shade was done waiting around.

Alex accidentally ripped his entire shirt in the process of pulling a piece free, but he barely even noticed.

I don't know if the monster can actually hear us or not, but no reason to say everything I'm going to do out loud.

Alex pressed the remains of the match to the edge of the shirt. Claire still had the monster's attention, but she was losing ground quickly. Fortunately, the flame caught to his shirt quickly. He wasn't sure if it was dirt or the cotton, but the fire engulfed the makeshift rag in seconds.

Golden letters shimmered through the air as he stepped forward and thrust the flaming rag forward, revealing a flicker of the Shade. It was really more of an amorphous blob than a being with actual form, but it shrank back from the light with a hiss.

Claire pressed the brief advantage, diving forward and driving her sword into the Shade's rippling black body. It bit deep into the shadows that made up the creature and it screamed in pain.

And, in the brief moment that it was pinned in place, Alex lunged. He slammed the flaming rag right into the center of the monster's body. The fire caught instantly, as if the Shade was made of tar. Alex pushed away from the monster, shaking his hand off as the fire singed it. A wave of heat washed over his face and he felt an arm snake around his neck, yanking him back an instant before the Shade erupted in a ball of flame.

He and Claire both staggered several steps back as fire roiled across the room and washed over the ceiling like a grease fire gone mad. It burned as quickly as it had started, and the room was plunged into darkness just seconds later.

A rush of cool energy flowed into Alex's body and he drew in a sharp breath, stiffening in surprise and delight. It was the same sensation he'd gotten after killing the Shaded Haunting, and

nothing quite compared to it. He couldn't quite find a way to describe it other than the feeling he got when he looked in a mirror after going to the gym for a few months and realizing that he'd started to show a little muscle — but magnified by a thousandfold.

The darkness was broken by a tiny flicker of light. A purple-black flame curled up from where the monster had died at their feet.

Claire flopped to the ground behind Alex, letting out a groan. “Too bleeding close.”

She'd pulled him out of the way of the fire. If she'd been planning to betray him, that would have been the time to do it. It looked like she'd been honest.

Alex scooped the tiny flame off the ground and pulled Glint's Spatial Mirror out, pressing the fire to it. With a tingle and a pop, the energy shot into it.

Spatial Mirror

Stored Energy:

Low Novice Grade (Shaded Hauntling) – 1

Low-Mid Novice Grade (Shade) - 1

Bonded Creature: Shardwalker (Regenerating)

Alex released the mirror and it transformed into a streamer of dark energy that shot back into the box at his side. He then edged over to the door and pulled it open a crack, allowing purple-red light to spill into the room.

“What are you doing?” Claire whispered. She'd gone back to trying to wrap her wound with the bandages.

“I can’t see,” Alex whispered back. “And as long as we’re quiet, we won’t draw anything’s attention. Do you need help with that?”

Claire glanced down, then grimaced. “Yeah. That might be nice. Thanks. If you could just hold the bleeding thing in place at the top of my shoulder I can do the rest.”

Alex walked over to her and crouched, doing as she’d asked. Claire wrapped the bandage around herself several times, then tucked it in on itself and let out a mixture between a sigh and a groan. “Thanks.”

“No problem. My monster was the one that cut you in the first place, so I’m partially responsible.”

Claire winced. “Ah. Yeah. Sorry again about your gopher.”

“I told you, it’s fine. He’ll be back soon enough.”

She sent him a doubtful look but didn’t press the matter. “You’re a summoner, then?”

“An Evoker,” Alex corrected, but it didn’t look like the difference meant anything to her. Now that he knew Claire wasn’t moments from betraying him, she was the best source of information he had. “Do you know anything about this place at all? How long have you been down here?”

“I’m not sure. A few days at least. It’s hard to keep track,” Claire admitted. She shifted onto her knees and then rose up to her feet. “You’ll see soon enough.”

“We’ll find a way out,” Alex said with more confidence than he felt. “Have you been down here alone this whole time? There isn’t anyone else?”

Claire's expression tightened and she looked to the side. "Not anymore. I — it doesn't matter, actually. There was someone else down here, but they died. It's just me now. You're the first new person I've seen."

That wasn't good news, but Alex didn't let it hold him up. Information was just information. It was what they did with it that mattered. He clung to the trial that the System had given to him like a raft in a violent storm.

There was no point giving a trial if it was impossible to accomplish. He just had to find out where the escape was. And, in the meantime, he had to learn everything about the System that he could.

"Do you have a class?" Alex asked.

"Yeah. Everyone does," Claire said with a sigh. "Mine is just kind of useless."

"How so?"

"I'm a Dhampir," Claire said dryly. "You saw when I took my bracelet off, didn't you?"

Alex nodded. "Yeah. What about it? I've never heard of it. What can you do? If we're going to find a way out of here, it would help to know."

"Here? Nothing. Literally nothing. Dhampirs are energy vampires." Claire rubbed at her teeth and let out a huff. "The problem is I can't eat any of the bleeding energy down here. Energy is stored in blood, and nothing down here has blood. I might as well not even have a class."

"Wait. You're telling me you were a vampire *before* the System showed up?"

"Dhampir," Claire corrected, an affronted note in her voice. "And yes. Why? What's wrong with that?"

“Er... nothing, I suppose. We just didn’t have anything like that on Earth.” He scratched at his chin. It wasn’t really all that much of a surprise if he thought about it. If there was magic in the universe, then it was perfectly realistic for there to be a world where both vampires — or Dhampirs — and matches existed. “No matter. Well... what can you tell me about the System? Anything useful?”

“Kill stuff,” Claire replied immediately. “It makes you stronger. Any challenge related to what you’re aiming for does, really. I’m far from an expert on it.”

That caught Alex’s attention. “Any challenge? What do you mean?”

“The System is a sadist or something,” Claire said with a snort. “The harder something you’re doing is, the better the reward. We figured that out pretty quickly when the easy monsters stopped giving us energy when we killed them.”

“So it’s measured by relative difficulty?” Alex asked, tilting his head to the side. He’d definitely gotten more energy from killing the Shade than he had from the Hauntling.

Claire nodded. “Yup. As far as I know, at least. The first few days of the System’s arrival were mostly a panicked blur. I really don’t have that much time on you. Honestly, I’m surprised you’re not a gibbering mess right now.”

“I’ll save that for once we’re out of here.” Alex chewed his lower lip and looked over his shoulder at the street behind them. “If it’s relative challenge... what would happen if you made a fight harder for yourself?”

“I don’t know. That sounds like a good way to get yourself killed. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we aren’t exactly in the right place to test that. The monsters here are nothing like they’re supposed to be. There’s something really bleeding wrong with them.”

“Yeah,” Alex muttered. “I’ve gathered that much.”

His thoughts were still on her answer to his question. If the only thing that mattered was challenge, then it would make logical sense that making a fight harder would result in better rewards. A grin pulled at the corner of his lips.

I can't just not test this out.

“We should get moving,” Alex said. He poked his head out of the doorway and glanced around the street to check for monsters.

“To where?” Claire asked. “It’s screwed everywhere... unless you happen to have an idea as to how we can get out of this bleeding hellhole?”

Alex’s eyes caught on the mountain in the distance once more. It towered over the city, crackles of purple energy dancing at its peak —the exact same color as the portals that the City-Eater Centipedes had been going through.

“You know, I might just have an inkling.”

Chapter 7

Alex and Claire returned to the house to rest for a little longer before leaving. Claire looked exhausted and definitely needed the breather, and Alex wasn't eager to press further without Glint to back him up.

"So what does killing monsters actually get me?" Alex whispered from where he sat beside the Dhampir. "More abilities? Or is it more like levels?"

"Just raw energy. It enters your soul and floats around in it until you refine it."

Alex tilted his head to the side. "And how do I do that? I take it that refining the energy will somehow let me use it or the like?"

"It'll let you improve your soul's Stage. That's how I'm a Novice 3. Then you can use that refined energy to get or improve your Auxiliary Skills. You're Novice 1, so you have one of them, right?"

"Yeah. Do I get one every level or something?"

"You get one at Novice 2 and 3," Claire replied. "The strongest person I knew reached Novice 5, and he said that he got to upgrade them at 4 and 5. Apparently the upgrades were really useful, but I don't know much more than that. I guess we'll find out soon enough."

"Good to know. And I can only refine energy at night?"

"Well, no. But it takes a while. At least it did for me. The System guided me through it my first time, so I'm sure it'll do the same for you as well."

I'm not so sure. It hasn't given me much of anything other than errors so far.

"Yeah, probably. I guess we'll see," Alex said. He felt a faint tingle at his side from his deck. He pulled Glint's card free to take a look at it.

Spatial Mirror

Stored Energy:

Low Novice Grade (Shaded Haunting) – 1

Low-Mid Novice Grade (Shade) - 1

Bonded Creature: Shardwalker

“Ah. There we go,” Alex said. He stretched his arms over his head, then rose to his feet and held a hand out to Claire. She took it, letting him pull her to his feet.

“Thanks,” she said. “We didn’t really rest that long. You sure you’re ready?”

“I think it might be better if I’m the one asking you that question.” Alex glanced at the bandages wrapping her arm. “I’m not the one that was injured.”

Claire touched the wound gingerly. “I’ll make it. This should be healed soon enough. I just don’t want the weight of everything suddenly slamming down on you all at once, you know? It took me a little while to really register that my life was over and everything had gone to shit.”

Alex didn’t respond immediately. He still wasn’t sure how he was meant to feel about the apocalypse. He’d nearly died more times in the last two hours than he had in the entirety of his life leading up to them... and he’d never felt more alive.

Not like I’m going to mention that. I don’t need Claire thinking I’m completely insane.

“Did you have computers in your world?” Alex asked abruptly.

Claire blinked, then shook her head. “I haven’t heard that word before.”

“What about university? Jobs?”

“We had jobs. I don’t know university either.”

“School.”

“Oh, yeah. We had academies,” Claire said. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Did you have a job?”

She shook her head and her eyes went distant as she slipped into memory. “I was in my last year of academy training. I was going to join the guard for my city.”

“I take it you were looking forward to that.”

“More than I can describe. I worked so bleeding hard for it. I never thought my whole life could just... evaporate. Poof.” Claire flicked her fingers and shook her head as her shoulders slumped. “Nothing to do about it now. I can’t complain as long as I’m still kicking. What about you?”

“I was in school. Had no damn idea what I wanted to do.”

“You were going to school for something without knowing if you wanted to do it?”

Alex gave her a wry grin and shrugged. “My world was a bit weird. Like you said, it doesn’t matter much now. I’m ready to get moving again if you are.”

“Sure. It beats sitting around and waiting for the next spooky freak of nature to rock up and turn me into a fillet.”

Alex flicked Glint’s card. It transformed into a streamer of black smoke, returning to its deck, and small claws raked through the air beside him, leaving a thin rend in reality. Glint stepped out from within it and the portal snapped shut behind him.

“Bleeding hell.” Claire’s hand darted to the hilt of her sword and she took a surprised step back before catching herself. “Your hedgehog is back. I thought you were off your rocker. It actually can’t die?”

“His name is Glint,” Alex said. “And yes. I’d be in dire straits if he didn’t. Is that not common for Evokers?”

“Hell if I know,” Claire said, releasing her sword and rubbing the back of her neck. “I’ve never worked personally with one. I know about as much about it as I do about your backside.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “That’s certainly an... odd turn of phrase. It’s interesting, actually. You’re from a whole different world, but we speak the same language.”

“I assume the System must be automatically translating our words or something. I guess that doesn’t carry through to idioms and the like,” Claire said.

He nodded. That seemed like the most reasonable conclusion. It was surprisingly hard to keep in mind that Claire wasn’t from Earth. Despite her appearance, her friendly demeanor made it easy to forget that she was, at the very least, a strong relative of a literal vampire.

“What to do. We might as well get moving,” Alex said with a nod to the street. “I’ll have Glint take up the front and find the monsters before we do. We’ll follow a bit behind him and figure out if we’re going to take fights or not. It might not be the fastest way to handle things, but I don’t think we’re in a rush.”

“I’m not so sure I’d say that. I don’t know about you, but I need to eat,” Claire said.

Alex paused. “I... kind of thought that hunger and thirst paused here or something.”

Claire shook her head. “Nope. I had some rations, but they’re gone. Have been for a day. I’d gut someone for a drink of water. You don’t have any, do you?”

That complicates things. Even if there’s water anywhere in the area, I’ve got no clue if we can actually drink it. Then again, doesn’t that mean the challenge of surviving is even harder? According to Claire, that means the reward should be way better too.

“I don’t have anything other than Glint and the clothes on my back,” Alex said apologetically. “But I suppose that means we should get moving faster rather than slower.”

Claire nodded and they stepped out onto the street. Glint took the lead as they started toward the mountain looming over them, keeping to the shadows of the buildings to avoid the enormous monsters in the air.

They didn’t make good time, but they moved along, nonetheless. Minutes ground by at an agonizingly slow speed. Every errant noise and gust of wind set Alex’s hair on end. The adrenaline pumping through his veins mixed with fear and excitement in a cocktail that definitely wasn’t good for his heart.

A purple ripple of energy washed over the street just a few dozen feet above them. Alex and Claire pressed themselves to the wall of a cracked building and hid beneath a thick, twisting root as an enormous City-Eater Centipede spiraled out from the disk of energy. Its legs swam as it passed through the sky.

Alex stared up at it in mute awe. Even though he was seeing it with his own eyes, the monster was unbelievably large. It was difficult to register just *how* large the City-Eaters could get until one was passing just above the tops of the buildings overhead.

He didn't so much as dare as draw in a breath. There was no way something as huge as a City-Eater Centipede would even want to eat him, but he wasn't about to tempt fate. There was challenge and there was suicide — and the massive bugs were undoubtedly the latter.

A portal yawned open before the City-Eater Centipede and it swam in its direction — but it didn't quite make it. Pink light lit the street as another portal carved open above the centipede. An enormous, three fingered hand stretched out from it and wrapped around the centipede.

??? (???)

Then the towering monster vanished, yanked through the portal like a piece of popcorn plucked from a bucket during a movie. The centipede didn't even get a chance to struggle. Loud cracks rang out as its body shattered under the force of the hand and it was pulled into the rippling pink energy.

The portal snapped shut behind it, leaving the street in silence once more. The golden letters that had “identified” the hand disappeared as well. Alex and Claire exchanged a wide-eyed look.

The Centipedes aren't at the top of the food chain?

A shiver ran down Alex's spine as a thought, equal parts horrifying and electrifying, ran through his head.

What if they're actually just centipedes? Are those massive things literally nothing but bugs in the grand scheme of things? And if they are... what does that make us?

“That made a lot of noise,” Claire whispered. “We should get moving before something comes to check it out and finds us.”

“Good idea,” Alex muttered back. They set back off, moving a little faster than they had before.

They made it all the way down the street and turned the corner, only to find that their luck had run out. A humanoid figure knelt by a warped house, scooping large handfuls of a torn-up root into its mouth. Curls of shadow rolled off its body, wafting away from brownish-grey flesh. It was difficult to tell exactly where the shadows ended and body began.

The monster’s gaze, two motes of dull red, snapped over to them and it rose to its feet in a smooth motion.

Wight (Novice 3)

Claire drew her sword. “I’ve got this one. I’ve fought them before. Just stay back. It won’t be too hard to take out.”

“Hold on,” Alex said, catching Claire by the shoulder before she could step forward. “You’re injured. I’ll take it myself.”

“You’re a Novice 1,” Claire pointed out, keeping her eyes on the Wight as it sized them up. “It’s dangerous.”

“Exactly,” Alex said. A smile pulled across his lips and Glint flexed his talons. “Which means I’m going to get a better reward if I take this out myself. It’s not as strong as the Shade, so I should be able to handle it.”

“You’re a bit insane, aren’t you?”

“If we want to get strong enough to survive this place, then I think a little insanity isn’t misplaced,” Alex replied.

The Wight groaned and took a hesitant step toward them. It seemed confused by their lack of action, but Alex didn't mind. If it was going to let them set the terms of the fight, he certainly wouldn't complain.

"If you're sure," Claire said doubtfully. "Just be careful. The System isn't going to register as much of a challenge if it knows I'm sitting around to back you up, so I'll actually have to back up if you want to handle it without help. Just be careful."

"Thanks." Alex nodded his appreciation, then nodded to the Wight. "Glint, come on. Let's go kill this thing."

Chapter 8

Glint darted into motion. The small Shardwalker sprinted up to the Wight, which lurched out of its spot and reached out with grasping hands.

"Dodge!" Alex hissed. "Prioritize avoiding attacks over landing them!"

Glint skipped to the side, then brought a jagged claw raking down over the Wight's arm. The humanoid monster let out a hiss of pain. Its fingers extended into tendrils that reached out for Glint, attempting to wrap him up.

Alex edged around the side of the fight as Glint leapt over the tendrils and brought his claws down across the Wight's chest. The monster staggered back, then whipped its other hand into Glint's chest.

The Shardwalker flew back and slammed into a building with enough force to crack several of the spikes on his back and leave a small dent in the stone. Glint fell to the ground amidst tinkling mirror fragments.

Alex's hands tightened. Glint was still a Novice 1 monster. No matter how clever or fast he was, the Wight outclassed him. The smartest way to handle the fight would have been to work together with Claire — but smart didn't mean beneficial.

He couldn't afford to play things safe and he couldn't constantly hide behind Claire. If he did, they'd both die the moment they ran into a monster she couldn't properly handle.

I need to take all the damn challenge I can whenever we're up against a monster I have even a sliver of a chance to take out.

Glint staggered upright and the Wight reached for him again. He dodged back, then raked his mirrored claws across the extended hand. They cut deep into the monster's body, but it didn't bleed.

The Shardwalker was forced to jump back as the Wight swung at it again. Glint just barely managed to avoid the attack. The previous one had clearly shaken him pretty badly. Even if Glint didn't seem to have emotions or desires, the monster was still a living being. He couldn't just take blows and keep going.

He's going to lose if I don't back him up, and I don't fancy my chances against that thing alone.

Alex flexed his fingers. Adrenaline pumped through his veins and he shifted from foot to foot. Glint jumped at the Wight again, only to find a grasping hand in his path. The Wight grabbed him out of the air and tendrils tightened around his body, starting to squeeze.

Now or never.

Throwing caution to the wind, Alex burst into motion. He threw himself forward, driving his shoulder into the Wight's back. The shadowy creature let out a pained grunt as he drove into it with all the force he could muster.

Its grip on Glint loosened for a brief instant and the Shardwalker took the opportunity to rip into the Wight's body, raking jagged claws down its face and torso. Alex shoved himself away, but he only made it a step before long fingers wrapped around his foot and yanked him off his feet.

All the air exploded from his lungs in a pained grunt as he hit the ground. The Wight grabbed Glint with its other hand, ripping him away from its face and pulling Alex closer. Its mouth opened in a hissing wail and its grip on his leg tightened until the bone groaned beneath it.

There was no way to break the monster's grip. It was too strong — and so Alex didn't try to escape. Instead, he gathered all the energy he could muster and shoved himself toward. He shoved himself off his free leg and slammed his fingers into the Wight's left eye.

Freezing cold washed over his hand as it let out a hiss of surprised pain. Alex dug around its head and found purchase on a chilly orb the size of his palm suspended in something liquid. He wrapped his fingers around the orb and braced his good leg against the monster's chest, ripping it free with a snarl.

Blue matter splattered across the ground. The Wight released his leg with a pained cry and he staggered back. Before it could try to attack him again, Glint jumped onto the shadowy monster's neck and dug into its throat with reckless abandon.

The Wight's final wail was lost in a gargle as it crumpled to the ground. The shadows swirled away from its body and left behind a gaunt, mostly featureless form. Glint continued ripping it apart even as they hit the street, not stopping until it was nothing but a shredded pile of flesh.

A wisp of black energy rose up from the Wight's mouth and pushed through the ravaged remains of its lips to float above its head. Adrenaline thumped in Alex's body with such intensity that his feet shook beneath him with every step he took.

Energy flooded into his body and he stiffened as it ran its course through him. It was several seconds before the rush came to a stop.

That definitely confirms what Claire said. I got more energy for that fight than I did for any of the others. Challenge is the way to go.

He summoned Glint's card to his hand and scooped the black flame off the ground, pushing it into the mirror.

Spatial Mirror

Stored Energy:

Low Novice Grade (Shaded Hauntling) – 1

Low Novice Grade (Wight) - 1

Low-Mid Novice Grade (Shade) - 1

Bonded Creature: Shardwalker (Novice 1)

Alex blew out a breath, doing his best to gather himself before turning back to Claire with a grin. “See? Had it handled.”

“You’re definitely insane,” Claire said. “Aren’t you an Evoker?”

“Yeah. And?”

“I nearly bleeding choked when you threw yourself at the Wight. What’s wrong with you? You realize you’re not meant to get close to your enemies, right?” Claire kept her voice to a muted hiss to avoid drawing too much attention to them.

“We can’t play things safe,” Alex replied. He straightened his clothes and brushed himself off. “And I’m not strong enough to just let Glint do all the work for me. You can’t get strong without a few risks, right?”

Claire shook her head, letting a smile play across her lips. “I guess I can’t argue with you there. You weren’t pulling my leg about Earth being new to the System, were you? I’m going to be pissed if you were.”

“Swear on my heart,” Alex said, pressing his hand to his chest. He nodded over his shoulder to the mountain. “And I’m more than happy to talk more on our way, but we should really get out of here before something finds us.”

Claire paled and gave him a hurried nod, suddenly reminded that there could be more than one monster on a street. The two of them set back off toward the mountain at a brisk pace with Glint as their guide.

Minutes stretched on. Alex lost track of time, though he was pretty sure it hadn't been more than an hour. Several times they slowed and ducked to the shadows to avoid a monster as it flew overhead.

The skies weren't the only thing they had to be wary of. Alex and Claire both froze in place as they turned a corner to find a massive, shambling mound of limbs and mouths covering the street before them.

??? (???)

Mutely, Alex beckoned Glint back and they crept over to the next street over. It quickly became apparent that there were a whole lot more threats than just the ones in the sky, and the vast majority of them were just masses of question marks in the eyes of the System.

Their only saving grace was that the enormous ??? monsters didn't appear to have any real interest in them. They didn't get close enough to one to test his theory out, nor did he have any plans to.

He and Claire managed to make their way through the town streets without getting into another fight over the course of another hour or two. They both slowed as they drew up to the end of the buildings.

A large, gaping canyon had split the ground at the edge of the town. Thick bridges of curling roots connected the two halves of the ground. Beyond the canyon, leading all the way up to the base of the mountain was a forest of sparse, towering trees.

They were the same ones that had ripped apart Alex's old apartment. Huge trunks of black wood laden with screaming visages that definitely hadn't been put there by any natural

means. The trees were taller than some of the buildings behind them and some were easily as wide.

“That gives me the creeps,” Claire muttered, her grip tightening on the hilt of her sword. “Whoever made those things has to be messed in the head.”

Alex nodded in mute agreement. He glanced up at the sky. They’d be fully exposed while they were running across the roots and into the trees. There weren’t as many centipedes in this area as there had been near the center of town, but it only took one.

I still don't know if they'd even bother trying to kill us, but I really don't want to try and take the risk.

The idea of having to run made his body groan in displeasure. Weariness had already started to wrap itself around him like a cloak. It had been a long day, and adrenaline could only keep him going for so long.

“I think our best shot here is speed,” Alex said, shaking his head to clear it. “We’ll have to run across the roots and get to the trees for cover as fast as possible. How are you doing on energy?”

“Not the best,” Claire said, giving him a small smile that quickly faltered. “I’m eating fumes here. I haven’t eaten or drank anything in a long time, and I’ve been up for longer than I care to remember.”

“It might be best to try and take cover for the night, or at least for a few hours,” Alex said. “We could try to search a house for food.”

“I tried doing that before we ran into each other. There isn’t a single edible thing in this town, but I wouldn’t oppose to sitting down for a bit,” Claire said.

They peered into the window of the nearest house. Its door had been somehow plastered into the wall, leaving behind an open walkway into a tiny room of what had probably once been a dingy bar.

It was dark, but it looked empty. Alex sent Glint in just in case. The Shardwalker walked a circuit around the room before returning to him.

“I think it’s relatively safe,” Alex said. He and Claire slipped inside and headed over to the far corner, putting as much distance between themselves and the entrance as possible. They did a quick check through the room, but Claire had been right — there wasn’t anything edible.

“You really need to refine all the energy you’ve gathered,” Claire whispered. “Just sit down and meditate over here. I’ll keep watch.”

“Don’t you need to rest too?”

“I need a lot of things,” Claire said with a weak grin. “I don’t think I can get any of them here. Getting you a bit stronger is the best thing we can do.”

Alex sat down against the wall, then looked back up at her as a thought struck him.

“Wait. What kind of thing can you draw energy out of? You’re a vampire, aren’t you?”

“Dhampir,” Claire corrected automatically. “And yes, but my class made it so I can only drink from monsters a lower level than me.”

“Oh, that’s it? I fought something called a Shaded Hauntling that was Novice 2. You—”

“The problem is, they still need blood,” Claire finished with a sigh. She rubbed her forehead with the back of a hand and slumped down beside him. Her eyes looked distant and glassy. “I can’t drink normal blood unless it’s got energy in it, but nothing in this bleeding place actually has blood.”

Alex glanced over to Glint. She was right. Even the Shardwalker was bloodless. “What about me?”

Claire swallowed. “It probably wouldn’t work. The System imposed limits on what I can consume and I’m currently limited to monsters due to how low of a level I am.”

“Well, how much longer can you go without food?”

“Not much,” Claire admitted. “You’d let me try to drink from you?”

“Depends on if that means you’re going to literally drain my life.”

“Nothing like that,” she said hurriedly. “It would definitely make you tired, though.”

She looks an inch from passing out. I’d rather be tired than lose an ally.

“Then go ahead. Just... don’t take too much.”

Claire swallowed again. Hunger swirled in her eyes and she moved toward him, then caught herself and clenched her jaw. “Not yet. You should meditate first. If you don’t refine your energy, I’ll end up taking a lot of it from you. I draw out unrefined energy, but I can’t remove the stuff that’s permanently part of your soul.”

“Wouldn’t that leave you with nothing to eat?”

“There’s never going to be perfect conversion. There should be at least a little bit left over, and that’ll be enough,” Claire said. She ran her tongue over her lips, then realized what she was doing and turned away, her gray skin reddening. “Sorry. That was rude. I can wait. Just meditate already.”

“Watch over us,” Alex told Glint. He was starting to trust Claire, but he wasn’t about to leave himself defenseless. Besides, having backup with her if something went wrong couldn’t hurt.

He then put his hands on his lap and let out a slow breath. The System definitely wasn’t giving him any guidance as to how he was meant to meditate, but he knew the gist of things from a class he’d attended in college for a kinesiology credit.

Alex closed his eyes and steadied his breathing, trying to focus on every breath and sink into himself. The world stilled around him and he dove into his mind, searching for the power that would let him advance to Novice 2 and hopefully give him a better way to survive the Mirrorlands.

And, deep within the reaches of his own mind, he found it.

Chapter 9

Color traced through the nothingness and a ripple passed out from beneath Alex’s feet. He stood on the surface of a dark lake. It stretched out in every direction, just barely visible. An old stone basin rested just before him, covered with dust and cracks. It rose up to his chest in height and was about three times as wide as it was tall. Above it was a huge ball of glittering blue

mist. It spun like a globe, sending shimmers of light dancing as they reflected off the surface of the dark water.

Alex stared up in mute awe. Despite everything he'd already seen today, his mouth fell agape.

“Where am I?” he breathed.

It was a supremely strange feeling. Cold stone pressed into his back from where he sat back in the Mirrorlands, and yet all his other senses told him he was standing in a lake. Alex knelt and touched the chilly water.

He rubbed his fingers together. There was no doubt that it was wet. His mind was completely convinced that this place was real. As far as he could tell, it was. He was just simultaneously existing in a spot in his own mind as well as the Mirrorlands.

Given everything that had happened today, it really wasn't that much of a stretch.

“I'm meant to condense this swirly blue stuff somehow?” Alex asked himself, looking up at the churning orb of cyan energy. A faint pressure roiled off it like a gentle sea breeze. He reached up and brushed a hand through the wispy smoke.

A cool chill ran down his arm. It carried a sharp spike of energy along with it, like the world's strongest shot of coffee. He drew in a breath and pulled his hand back, flexing his fingers and shaking his hand off.

Alex hesitated for a second, then stuck his hand back into the energy. He scooped a small portion of it free and it pooled in his palm. Electrifying lines coursed down his arm and into his body.

He pressed the pool of mist between his palms, trying to squeeze it down. It squelched out and swirled up into the air.

“Okay. Maybe it isn’t that simple,” Alex muttered as the wisps of blue light rose back to rejoin the teeming mass of power above the basin.

“What an astute observation.”

Unfamiliar words rang through Alex’s mind and he spun toward their source. A dour-faced man wearing a tailored velvet suit stood across from him. He was as thin as a rake and his face was creased with the first lines of aging. His full head of sleek black hair had been combed back to reveal slightly pointed ears.

Alex barely even registered all of those features. His gaze was instantly drawn to the man’s eyes — or rather, the lack of them. Two pitch black voids had taken their place, swallowing all the light that dared grow near the man’s face.

“Who are you? What are you doing in my mind?” Alex demanded, taking a step back and searching for some kind of weapon.

“Our very short relationship is going to go poorly if you’re always this pushy,” the man said, adjusting the gloves on his hands before letting his arms drop back to his sides.

“You need to have a relationship in the first place for it to go poorly,” Alex said, watching the man through narrowed eyes. “And I think it’s pretty fair to ask why someone’s strolling around in my head. Did the System put you here?”

The man’s lips pursed in distaste and he ignored Alex’s question completely. “Your complete lack of a Mind Palace and stark incompetence would imply that you are either the most

useless creature to be graced by the System or were only recently inducted into its *loving* embrace.”

Something about the way the man spoke told Alex that, despite his words, he didn't care for the System in the slightest.

“The latter,” Alex said. “What are you? The Class Guide I didn't get?”

“You seem to misunderstand,” the man said. “I will not be answering random questions.”

“Then get out of my head.”

“No.”

They stared at each other.

“Why—”

“I am not here to answer random questions,” the man repeated. He snapped his fingers, then nodded to the swirling ball of blue illuminating them both. “I am here to aid you in dealing with this. Nothing more. Nothing less. I will not interfere in your life. I will not answer your questions, nor will I hinder or aid you in any way, shape, or form. We will complete this task and then I will leave. That is all.”

Alex reached for the sensation of the stone pressed against his back and focused on it. The world around him shuddered, then collapsed in on itself as his eyes snapped back open.

Claire blinked in surprise. “You're back early. Really early.”

“There was a creepy guy in my head,” Alex said. “Why the hell is there someone in there? Is it normal?”

“Oh, your guide?” Claire asked. “I have no bleeding clue what they are, but mine never led me astray. Didn’t lead me much of anywhere if I’m being completely honest. Just demonstrated how to do a few basic things and then vanished. The System told me their memories would shatter, so you don’t have to worry about revealing anything to them. Everything you say will disappear when they do. Mine wasn’t creepy, though. That’s on you.”

“Ah. Thanks,” Alex said.

He closed his eyes and sank back into his mind once more. The dour faced man was still standing by the basin where he’d been before, a scowl on his features.

“I’ll thank you not to drag this on any more than it needs to be,” the man said.

“If anyone just sits around and listens to what random people popping up in their head tell them to do, they’re an idiot,” Alex said. “I was just checking to see what you were on about. So what is it that you *are* here to do?”

The man’s lip curled up in what might have been a smile. He splayed his fingers out before him. “First, you must properly refine the energy you have into the basin of your Mind Palace. Then—”

“That’s the second time you’ve said Mind Palace,” Alex said. “What is that?”

A flicker of emotion passed over the man’s face. It might have been surprised, or it might have been annoyance. It was impossible to tell which. “Disregard that. Simply condense your energy.”

“How?”

“If you cannot follow the instructions left by the System, then you are completely hopeless. Figure it out so I can be done with this.”

*Be done with this? He's stuck here? Is it some kind of weird punishment by the System?
And is it for him or me?*

“I'd be thrilled to. Unfortunately, I haven't gotten shit for instructions.” Alex matched the man's glare. “I'd gratefully accept any suggestions you have, though. I want you in my head even less than you want to be here. I can assure you of that.”

The man's head tilted to the side. “You did not receive instructions?”

“The only thing I've gotten is you, and I'm hoping the System has a good refund policy. We're going to be here a really long time if you aren't answering questions.”

“Your state of mind is what compresses the energy,” the man said after a long pause. “Use your breathing to control your consciousness. You are not enlightened enough to do it with mere intent alone. Will the energy together and into the basin.”

I guess the meditation bit was more literal than I initially thought.

Alex inclined his head in appreciation and sat down. It was a bit odd to be sitting in the exact same way in two different places, but his mind quickly forgot about it as he directed his attention to his breathing.

The empty-eyed man didn't say a word as Alex sank into his second layer of meditation. He focused on the rise and fall of his chest. And, as time started to slip by, he became increasingly aware of the tingling energy floating in the air above him.

It was surprisingly easy for him to will the energy to move. It transformed into a streamer and swirled through his mind at his command before returning to its original spot.

“Don’t play with it. Form it,” the dour-faced man said.

Alex’s eye twitched and he nearly lost his sense of peace. Fortunately, meditation seemed far easier than it ever had before the System had arrived. It wasn’t like he had all that much experience doing it back in school.

I bet it helps a lot that I’m literally already in my mind. A lot of meditation is supposed to be connecting the mind and body. That bit’s done.

He increased his attention on the mist, trying to wrap it up with his mind. He felt it tremble and start to condense, but large swathes of mist swirled out from his mental hands and curled into the air.

Alex focused on the bits of smoke that he had gathered and didn’t waste any attention on the bits that swirled back to rejoin the sphere. His lips pressed thin as he pushed the energy in on itself like he was wringing the life out of a lemon.

A single droplet of brilliant blue energy dropped from the sky and splashed into the bottom of the basin. A shiver of energy raced through Alex and he drew in a sharp breath. His eyes snapped open.

He rose to his feet. The droplet rested in the basin, just like he knew it would have — and yet, his eyes had been closed.

How did I see anything?

“You are inside your own mind,” the man said dryly. “Anything that happens in this space is known to you, should you have the awareness to perceive it.”

“Don’t tell me you can read my mind.”

“Only what you physically show me.” The guide gestured to the empty black lake around them. “Which is nothing. Now complete your task so that I may finish mine.”

Alex looked up at the ball of energy. He’d barely put a dent into it. A grimace crossed his lips and he sat back down, refocusing himself.

This is going to take a while.

Alex didn’t actually know how much time had passed when he finally squeezed the last droplet of energy into his basin. He’d lost count of the droplets as well, but when he rose to check on what his labors had reaped him, he found that the basin had barely been filled. The amount of energy within it felt pitiful at best.

“Okay. I did it.”

“So you did,” the eyeless man said. “Now use it.”

“I’d be thrilled to if I actually knew how,” Alex said, a note of exasperation entering his tone. “Trust me, I don’t want to be wasting time here. I’m sitting around surrounded by a bunch of creepy monsters waiting to rip my throat out. I need power.”

“Your attempt to wring information from me that the System did not give you is clever, but I was not born yesterday,” the man said with a sigh. “I will not humor you any further. I will grant no inspiration.”

“What, you think I’m lying? Why would I lie?” Alex asked, throwing his hands up. “Just tell me exactly what the System told you, then. That wouldn’t give me any inspiration or whatever. I just want to get the shit that everyone else got.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “You are committed to this. Did you truly not get guidance from the System?”

“Be honest with yourself. Does it look like I’m enjoying this? I want to get to the fun bit, and you’re in the way.”

To his surprise, a smirk passed over the man’s face. “That is quite apparent. Very well. Perhaps you are an apt liar, but you have my curiosity. I will retract my words and oblige this request. Drink from the well and let the energy in your mind merge with your body. You are Novice 1, so you have yet to reveal all of your Auxiliary Skills yet. You have two more.”

“Which I get at 2 and 3.”

“I am in the presence of an untold genius.”

Alex bit back a snarky remark. “So I only ever get three Auxiliary Skills?”

“And a human only ever gets 5 senses.” The man tilted his head from side to side. “It would be apt to say you get three pathways, and each one is endlessly versatile. Can a sword do nothing but cut? There are an endless number of movements and blade techniques that can be learned and mastered. Your abilities are no different. The initial Auxiliary Skills are nothing but a single step onto a path. A hint at the power that lies beyond. I would advise you to look to the future when choosing and envision what may be, not what is. Their potential is limitless, but only if you can advance far enough to grasp it.”

“What about my Soul Manifestation?” Alex pressed his luck with just one more question.

The worst that could happen was that he would be told to get lost. It didn't seem like he could leave, after all. A flicker of irritation passed over the eyeless man's features, but he blew out a sigh.

“It is the core of both you and your class. Your Soul Manifestation advances every Stage, though its true strength depends on your Mind Palace. If you make it to the Third stage, your Manifestation will evolve into a domain. And before you ask — the first five stages are Novice, Initiate, Expert, Master and Grandmaster. You can figure the upper ranks out if you make it that far. Now—”

“Wait. Just one more. Please.”

Meiderly's empty eye sockets bored into Alex. His lips pressed thin, but his head inclined slightly. “Ask.”

I lied. I've got a whole lot more than just one more. My Soul Manifestation depends on both my Stage and my Mind Palace? What does that mean? And how does it work? I want to know so much — but I'm running Meiderly's patience thin. I need to prioritize.

“What's the point of all of this? The System. What does it want? Why is it doing this?”

Meiderly's mouth curled up into a smile. “That is a very good question. Not many enjoy the answer.”

“You know it, then?”

“I know a portion of it. There are few who can claim to truly understand the System. It seeks to grow, and to grow those within its reach. The System expands endlessly throughout the

universes and changes all in its wake. I have heard it called a virus and a blessing alike. It is a subject of great debate as to what its ultimate purpose is. Many have come to simply view it as a natural law.”

“Is that how you view it?”

Meiderly’s lips pulled apart even further. Whether it was a smile or a sneer was entirely up to interpretation. “You are inquisitive. That will serve you well. The System encourages the ambitious. I will not be answering that question. If you seek to discover the System’s purpose, then seek it yourself. Now, I believe you were doing something.”

Alex had more questions than he could possibly fit into an hour, much less a few minutes, but he pushed them to the side. He’d already gotten some useful information and it was abundantly clear that pressing the man further would take him nowhere. Alex walked up to the basin and lowered his head into it, drinking the blue liquid within.

It flowed into his mouth, seemingly of its own volition. Icy chills raced through Alex’s chest and extended their tendrils throughout the rest of his body. Violent prickles bit at his insides and he took a step back from the basin, his entire body buzzing.

He doubled over, heaving, as the liquid pushed its way out of his mouth and back into the basin. It crackled as it splashed against the sides of the stone. But, this time, instead of remaining pooled within it, the blue energy sank into the stone.

The cracks sealed and knitted themselves shut as the stone itself lightened. Years of age washed away until the old basin looked new. It was still plain, but it looked refreshed and whole.

“What was that about?” Alex demanded, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“A hammer in the hands of a monkey is nothing but a stick,” the man replied. “If you wish to grow strong, you must act with understanding. Intent is just as important as power.”

Alex looked back down to the basin. A small amount of the blue energy still twinkled in its base, but far less than there had been before. The man was clearly waiting for him to say something.

And, more importantly, there was an unspoken challenge in his words. The man was telling Alex to try and figure out what the point of drinking the liquid was. Alex chewed his lower lip and drummed his fingers on the edge of the basin.

“Is it about the way I think of the magic? This is all kind of meditation, so was it some form of body-soul connection you were trying to make me think of?”

A flicker of surprise passed over the man’s features. “That... is not an inept guess. It is far from the whole, but you are correct. You and your class are one and the same. Your soul is an extension of you. When you look around your soul, what do you see?”

“A lake and a basin.”

The irritation on the eyeless man’s face told Alex that he hadn’t gotten the right answer this time around.

“Think,” the man ordered. “I given you all the information you need. Use it. If you cannot, then dip your hand into the water that remains in your basin and will yourself to advance.”

If the man had been trying to make sure Alex refused to so much as budge a step from where he stood, he'd succeeded. There was already a hint in his last answer. He'd said something accidentally.

He mentioned a Mind Palace. What is that, though?

Alex cast his gaze around his soul. It really was empty. The only thing in it was the basin that was before him. Confusion knit his brows and he dug deeper. It wasn't like there were a lot of options. This had to have something to do with the basin.

He'd drank the liquid and the basin had repaired itself and grown... more whole, for lack of a better word. It was stronger and more resilient. Alex's eyes narrowed.

Is the basin literally the palace? Or part of it? If I filled it up before it was whole, the magic water stuff probably would have started leaking through the cracks. By drinking it, I guess I patched the damage.

"Is it the Mind Palace that I'm missing?" Alex tried. "I need to build it so I can contain the energy... or something like that."

"If nothing else, you have proven the System indeed did not tell you anything," the eyeless man said. "That was the first piece of information it should have told you, and I refuse to believe a lesser being would be able to lie this well. You are mostly correct. A Mind Palace is the foundation of your soul."

"So drinking the water helped me visualize a connection between myself and my soul and also... what, reinforced my soul a bit at the cost of my power?"

“Very good.” There was a note of genuine approval in the eyeless man’s eyes. “You are correct. Congratulations. You now know what every other sentient being in the System knows. It is my turn for a question.”

Alex blinked in surprise. “What is it?”

“How is it that you came to have no knowledge of this? The System does not allow any free of its grasp.”

Claire did say that anything I tell this guy will vanish forever when he fulfills his purpose. Getting more information out of him is worth the risk.

“I fell between the cracks in the world and landed in a place called the Mirrorlands before the System Initialization completed in my world,” Alex said. “You don’t happen know how to get out of here, do you?”

The eyeless man let out a burst of laughter. “Truly? You began Initialization on your homeworld and finished it in the Mirrorlands? Now that is quite interesting. Perhaps you will become someone of worth. Perhaps not. Should we ever meet, call me by the name Meiderly. I will be curious to hear of what you have learned.”

“Didn’t we just meet?”

“I meant my true form, not this mere fragment of energy. I do not know how long I laid dormant in the Mirrorlands, but I will return to my true self once you have finished here. No memory of our conversation will remain. I would suggest you keep record of my name and utilize it if the time comes. Should we meet unannounced, I would be likely to kill you.”

Alex blinked. “What? Why?”

“Because you are not the only Anomaly.” Meiderly’s lips parted in a toothy smile. He lifted a hand and twisted it to the side, his fingers closing into his palm as he grasped the air. A mote of white light dropped from Meiderly’s palm and fell into the water at their feet. A ripple passed through the darkness before sinking into its depth and fading from view.

“What was that?” Alex asked.

“The price of my curiosity. A sliver of intent,” Meiderly replied. “Seek entrance to the Empty Court. Should you grow near one of their passageways, my gift will help guide you for a short period of time. Do not let it go to waste.”

Alex opened his mouth to ask a question, but the eyeless man lifted a finger before it could form. “No more. I will give you a final gift of knowledge, one that the System does not distribute freely. Your Mind Palace is not merely a basin to hold power. It is *you*. Do not allow your Soul Manifestation to advance until you have grown your Mind Palace until you can push no farther. It is far more than what it appears. Now drink. My energy grows thin and I will speak no more.”

Alex squinted at the eyeless man, then lowered his hand into the thin pool of energy rippling at the bottom of the basin. Cold blades pierced into his fingertips and he stiffened in surprise. A spike of ice drove through his heart and the liquid drained away, flowing into his palm and vanishing.

Gold letters traced through the darkness before Alex.

Your Stage has advanced to Novice 2.

Please select your second Auxiliary Skill from the following options.

[Mirrormancy] — Gain limited control over the medium in which you bind your monsters. This ability can influence any materials with the properties of glass or mirrors.

[Monster Medley] — Combine an existing monster with the energy gathered in your Spatial Mirrors. The results of this combination are variable and depend on the quality of the monster and energy as well as their synergy.

[Shimmering Shadows] — Gain limited understanding illusion and the reflective properties of the Mirrorlands to the point where you can manifest images entirely from your will.

Chapter 10

Alex swallowed. From what Meiderly had told him, he only got a total of three Auxiliary skills, and his choice would be with him for the rest of his life. This wasn't just choosing a skill for now. It was picking something that would be shaping his future.

Think about which one has the best scaling in the long term as well as the short term. All of these are relatively weak right now. The point is what they can become, not what they currently are. I wonder if I'll get a chance to pick one of the two abilities I don't take this time around.

He looked over to Meiderly, but the eyeless man was gone. His soul was devoid of any presence aside from his own once more.

Figures. Fine. I'll just operate off the assumption that I'll never see these again. No point getting too invested in something that isn't already in my hands. I'll just focus on the current choice.

His options boiled down to being able to use glass and mirror magic, illusions, or upgrade his monsters. He drummed his fingers against his thigh as he pondered the skills. They were all pretty easy to grasp right now but extrapolating them far into the future was far from a simple task.

I don't know what my power limits are. If I can get as strong as the City-Eater Centipedes, much less the thing that was snacking on them, then what would Mirrormancy let me do? Control a sea of glass? Summon it, maybe? Probably both.

The image of bringing down a literal tsunami of mirror shards on top of something was as appealing as it was gruesome. It was basically controlling an element... just only glass and mirrors instead.

Thank God nobody was around to hear that particular comparison. Definitely far from my finest work.

He moved on to another option. Illusion was a little harder to conceptualize. Perhaps it would just let him make his illusions take physical form, or he could blanket massive areas with his power to the point where they were indistinguishable from reality.

Illusion felt like one of the abilities that was impossible to properly judge unless he knew where the line in the sand got drawn. A child with illusion magic could just claim their illusions were completely impenetrable and anything they made turned into reality.

That was no different from just pretending to be a god and hardly even classified as illusion anymore. There was no way the system would be letting him alter reality with illusions, but they had to get stronger somehow.

Not something I'm willing to risk. I've always been shit at sleight of hand anyway. I remember trying to do a magic show for my folks when I was eight or nine. Dropped all the stupid cards and broke my nose when I tripped over my shoelace trying to catch them.

It may have been slightly unfair to place that burden on the shoulders of a whole branch of magic, but Alex had already decided that he was going to live through the apocalypse in a way that befitted him.

I don't like it, so I'm not taking it. If it was better, then I'd like it. Simple as that, really.

That left Monster Medley. It was pretty easy to tell where that path was leading. It would focus on upgrading and combining monsters that he found, much like a twisted version of Pokémon.

The upper reaches of the skill weren't hard to see either. He'd already seen the City-Eater Centipedes. If they existed, then he could control them once he got strong enough. Not just that — he'd be able to improve them as well. Any monster that he ran into became a potential building block as long as he managed to harvest its energy.

This'll also let me power Glint up right now. I've got some Energy sitting around in his card that I don't know how to use. That's clearly a core part of my class. Something tells me I'd be able to use that energy for something else, probably a skill I'll get offered down the line if I don't take this one.

The more Alex thought about it, the more Monster Medley appealed to him. He'd chosen Evoker to be a summoner, and any upgrades he made to Glint would also indirectly make him stronger as well whenever the monster died.

It was the ability that best fit with his class, not just in the future, but right now. He needed enough strength to get out of the Mirrorlands — if he didn't, all the challenges in the world wouldn't save him when there was literally nothing to drink and he just died of dehydration.

He took a moment longer to turn his attention back to Mirrormancy, just to make absolutely sure he was making the right decision. It only took a few moments for him to determine that he had.

There would be other ways for him to get control over mirrors, and that included literally just killing Glint to take the monster's powers. He was already only a step away from throwing mirror shards around whenever Glint died.

When the monster got stronger, his own powers would too. It wasn't unrealistic for Glint to get some sort of mirror control skill himself.

Actually, do monsters get skills? I have no idea. I suppose I'll find out. They definitely get something. Either way, choosing Monster Medley gets me the most strength and potential in every stage.

"I choose Monster Medley," Alex said.

The other skill options flickered and vanished, and new words scrawled out.

Alex Vaya [Human]

Class: Evoker [Mirrorlands]

Stage: Novice 2

Title Fragments:

[Anomaly]

[Mirrorlander]

Active Titles:

[0/5]

Soul Manifestation:

[Spatial Mirrors] (Novice 1)

Auxiliary Skills:

[Requiem to the King] (Novice 1)

[Monster Medley] (Novice 1)

Alex blew out a breath and waved the floating words away. He felt a little odd. It was difficult to place exactly what it was, but his motions felt smoother and his body more defined. The change was subtle enough to be nearly unnoticeable but present enough to keep him from dismissing it as mere confusion.

Now that I think about it, this makes sense. If the soul and the body are linked, then improving the soul would logically improve the body as well. But if that's true... the inverse applies as well. I guess it's time to start working out more seriously. I'm just glad that my head feels the same as it did before.

That was definitely for the best. Alex wasn't sure how he felt about the skills he took actually changing how he saw the world or filling his mind with information about how they worked. If it had stuffed a bunch of knowledge into his head, it would have made him question how much of himself was actually *him*.

That line of thought had fortunately been avoided. For better or for worse, he'd reached Novice 2 and had a new skill to show for it. There was only one last thing left to do. He didn't know if he could summon his cards inside his soul, but —

Glint's card snapped into his hands like it had always been there. Alex nearly dropped it in surprise.

"Well, I suppose that answers that question," he said with a chuckle. There were currently three different forms of energy stored within the card — two Low Grades and one Low-Mid Grade.

"Now, how do I combine you with Glint?" Alex muttered to himself. He focused his attention on the new skill, trying to draw its powers out. In response, a tingling sensation erupted along the fingertips of his right hand and he felt them sink slightly into the card.

He hurriedly swapped the mirror over to his left hand before his arm could sink into it completely. When nothing happened, he brushed his tingling fingers across its surface. Ripples passed through the card's silver surface and the prickling sensation grew stronger.

"Glint, can you come out in here?"

Glass shattered and claws raked through the darkness beside Alex as Glint took form inside his mind. Alex gave his mute companion an impressed glance. He'd been a bit optimistic hoping the monster would be able to enter his literal soul, but evidently that was fair game.

“Which one of these energy flames do you want?” Alex asked, turning the card toward Glint. “Is there one that suits you better?”

Glint studied the mirror but made no move to do anything.

“Is that too complex of a request?” A frown crossed Alex's face. “Can you point out which one would work with you, regardless of desire?”

Still, Glint was still. Alex blew out a huff and turned the mirror back to himself. It didn't look like his monsters were going to be able to give him much help with his decisions. If that was the case, then all he could do was experiment.

And if I'm going to combine Glint with something, then I'm definitely using the better one. Can I just... pull it out?

Alex pressed his fingertips into the mirror. It rippled, then gave way. His arm sank into what felt like a freezing cold pool. Alex focused his thoughts on the Low-Grade Novice belonging to the Shaded Hauntling and his hand wrapped around a mote of warm energy. He pulled it free, revealing a dark ball of fire as he unfurled his fingers.

“Well, that worked.”

He held the mote of flame up before his face. Rather than warmth, it gave off a faint pressure.

I wonder which aspect Glint will take on if I give him this. It's not like you can boil a monster down to a single thing. Will he just consume the energy and get stronger?

Alex studied the heatless fire, but he wasn't getting any answers by looking at it. The only way to learn was to do. He crouched down before Glint and held the flame out.

"Here. Merge with this," Alex said.

Glint extended his clawed hands, taking the flame from Alex. He lifted it to his mouth and swallowed the fire whole. Alex's fingers tingled, but the sensation soon passed. Glint stared at him expectantly.

Not enough, huh?

Alex took out the second Low-Grade Novice flame and fed it to Glint, achieving the same result as the first. His eyes narrowed and he pulled out the Low-Mid-Grade flame, nearly stumbling over the length of the thought, and extended his hand for the third time.

Glint plucked it from his fingers and devoured it whole.

This time, the tingling sensation running down Alex's fingers intensified as something pulled at his chest. His stomach clenched and his breath caught in his throat as energy rushed out of his body, leaving behind a sudden wave of weariness.

It passed as quickly as it had come. He shook his head off and squinted through his disorientation. A dozen cracks rang out and Alex drew in a surprised breath. A tremor shook the shards of glass along Glint's back. The Shardwalker hunched over with a hiss and ripples passed over his grey skin.

Glint was changing.

Chapter 11

The tips of the mirror shards jutting out of Glint's body darkened. A cacophony of cracks marked a multitude of small adjustments to the glistening protrusions jutting from the Shardwalker's body.

Alex couldn't spot the majority of them himself, but he did spot Glint's claws growing more honed. Where they had once just been jagged glass, they were now slightly crescent-shaped.

The dull yellow light coming from his eyes had grown just slightly brighter. Alex might have been reaching, but he almost wanted to say that there seemed to be just a flicker of intelligence behind Glint's eyes.

All the noise finally faded away and left Glint standing before Alex expectantly, largely unconcerned with his new body.

Glint - Shardwalker (Novice 2)

"Well, look at you." A smile split Alex's mouth. "Caught up with me already? I hope you aren't abandoning the whole mind-body bit that Meiderly just told us about. I don't suppose you understand me more now?"

Glint stared at him mutely. A second passed before Alex let out a sigh and shook his head. "Okay, fair enough. I can't say I'm surprised. We'll just have to see how you hold up in a fight. You can head back."

Glint rippled, then transformed into a streamer of black smoke that flew back into the card in Alex's left hand. He released the card and it vanished, disappearing from his mind as if it had never been there.

It doesn't look like these combinations actually changed Glint. They just made him stronger. Nothing to complain about there. The skill says the results are variable, so either getting new abilities is really rare, or I'm not using strong enough energy to trigger the change. I'll have to try this again when I get something better to feed him.

Alex cast his gaze around his soul once more. Aside from the faint basin in its center, there was nothing. A small frown flickered across his face as his eyes caught on something that he'd missed before.

Carved into the top of the basin were designs, so faint that he could barely make them out. Alex approached it and ran his fingers over them in an attempt to see if he could make them out.

From what he could tell, it was just two circles. A large one, with two slightly smaller ones just below it. Further studies revealed nothing.

I don't want to just start randomly reaching for things, but I'd imagine they represent something in my soul. Doesn't take a huge stretch to guess that might be my Soul Manifestation and the two Auxiliary Skills I've got. Not sure what that means yet, but I imagine I'll find out as I get stronger.

Meiderly put a lot of emphasis on making my Mind Palace stronger. It sounded like the System might not have let on about its importance to everyone else. I should keep that knowledge to myself for now until I learn a little more about what the System told everyone else.

Alex let himself slip out of his meditation. He wasn't sure how long he'd been in it and didn't want to waste any more time than he had to. Sensation trickled back as his attention returned to the real world.

Claire sat beside him, her eyes fluttering in attempt to keep herself awake. Her face was pale and she started slightly as Alex moved.

"Oh, huh. You did it," Claire said in a strained tone. "I forgot how long the first level takes. Did everything turn out okay?"

"Pretty well, yeah. How long has it been?" Alex asked.

"Five hours, maybe?" Claire's shoulder twitched in what might have been meant to be a shrug. "Kind of lost count. Not that long."

She did her best to keep the exhaustion from showing in her voice and tone, but her best wasn't nearly enough. Her words had started to slur and it looked like a light breeze would be enough to knock her over.

"Do you want to try eating? I've got no idea if it'll work, but it'll be a lot easier than having to sling you over my shoulder and carry you out of here," Alex said.

The smallest corner of her mouth quirked up for an instant. "You mean you wouldn't just ditch me back here?"

Of course not. Imagine the challenge reward I'd get if I lugged an unconscious person out of the Mirrorlands. Then again, we'd probably both just end up dead.

Claire shifted to lean against the wall and dragged herself over to Alex, who scooted closer to save what little remained of her energy.

“How does this work?” Alex asked. “And if you can drink my blood, make sure you leave enough for me to operate normally. I’m not letting you turn me into a shriveled husk.”

“Noted,” Claire said wearily. She took his arm and turned it over, bringing his wrist up to her lips. An involuntary shiver ran down Alex’s spine as her mouth opened to reveal the rest of her fangs.

There was something deeply ingrained into his mind that screamed in protest against letting anything with long fangs get anywhere near him. Before he could get any second thoughts, Claire bit down on his wrist.

It felt like getting two shots at once, and not small ones. Alex suppressed a pained hiss. He hadn’t consumed all that much vampire media before the apocalypse, but the things he had seen had all implied getting bitten would feel good or pleasurable.

That most certainly wasn’t the case. Claire’s wet lips pressed against his skin and she swallowed greedily as his blood ran into her mouth.

If I ever get blood drawn again, I’m giving whoever does it a written apology about all the complaints I used to give my mom about getting bloodwork done. That was a thousand times better than this.

Just as Alex was preparing to pull his hand back out of fear that Claire had no plans of stopping, her fangs slipped out of his arm. She pressed her hand over the wound as she lifted her head and ran her tongue along her lips, swallowing once more before letting out a relieved sigh.

“Bleeding hell,” Claire said through a poorly repressed groan. “That was incredible. Thank you.”

Alex glanced down at his hand. He could still feel the two puncture wounds throbbing. They weren't really all that big, but they were still there.

"That's not going to close or something, is it?"

"I mean... it will eventually?" Claire offered, giving him a weak grin. "I can't heal you if that's what you're asking."

"Everything I read about vampires said that was supposed to feel good," Alex grumbled. "And usually you've got some kind of magical stuff in your fangs that makes the wound seal up after."

Claire scrunched her nose. "I'm going to forgive that because you probably just saved my life, but I'm serious about not being a vampire. I'm a Dhampir. Very different. And you were getting bit. What did you expect? Sunshine and rainbows?"

"Point taken," Alex said. Claire released his hand and pulled her bandages out, wrapping the bite for him.

"I wonder..." Claire muttered as she worked. "You're human, right?"

"I certainly hope so."

"Your blood has a lot of energy. It didn't taste great — no offense — but it was actually pretty good. More than what I've ever felt in a human. I wonder if it's because you aren't from my world? Maybe you don't count as human." Claire finished wrapping his arm. "And if it helps, you won't get infected. My saliva is poisonous. Nothing that'll affect a human, but it kills any germs that try to live in my mouth."

“Lovely,” Alex said. He pushed himself to his feet and a small wave of dizziness passed over him. It passed quickly and he shook his head. “Bleh. Never liked the feeling of losing blood.”

“Sorry,” Claire said sheepishly. “I won’t need to feed again for a few days. You must have really had a lot of energy left over after you ranked up. Everything went well, right?”

Alex’s brow furrowed. Unless he’d somehow missed it, reaching Novice 2 had drained every single scrap of energy that he had. There was no blue mist or water left anywhere in his soul.

“Yeah. It went well. I got my second Auxiliary Skill. Just one more and I can start upgrading them.”

“I’m looking forward to that bit myself,” Claire muttered. “I just don’t have enough energy to make it yet. Oh — I don’t think I ever told you what I could actually do. Should probably do that properly before we run into our next spook. It’s not all that useful down here, but my Soul Manifestation is Siphon. It lets me drain power from a monster and strengthen myself in the process.”

“What about your Auxiliaries?”

“Two of them are self-buffs. The first lets me take on minor traits from monsters I drain while the second just lets me evolve my own body temporarily when I drink enough blood,” Claire replied. “The third one is a blood manipulation skill. It doesn’t do much now, and it doesn’t work when the blood is still inside someone’s body. I already tried.”

Alex nodded. “And you’ve seen just about everything I can do myself.”

“Didn’t you just get a new skill?”

In response, Alex pulled Glint’s card from his deck. Sensing his mental call, Glint’s claws carved through the air and he stepped into the cave. The mirrors on his back rippling slightly as he shook himself off and waited for a command.

“Bleed me. He got even creepier,” Claire said. “You took something that makes him stronger?”

“A skill that lets me combine him with the energy that dead monsters leave behind,” Alex said with a nod. There was no reason not to share information — the more they knew about what the other could do, the more they’d be able to rely on each other in a fight. “Anything else? You don’t know about Titles or the like, do you?”

“Unfortunately not. I don’t have any. Do you?”

That’s interesting. She didn’t get the Anomaly Title Fragment, then. So the only people who get it are the ones that actually get a class inside the Mirrorlands.

Given what I could see of Claire, the only thing she can see about me is my name and that I’m a human. That means she has no way to tell if I’ve got titles or not.

He wasn’t keen on straight out lying, but he wasn’t so sure he wanted to give any information that wasn’t related to fighting out either. Not yet. He hadn’t known Claire for that long. The best way to handle it was to give some of the truth, but not all. “I got one for being stupid enough to fall into the Mirrorlands less than a day into the apocalypse. It isn’t really doing anything, though.”

Claire let out a snort. “At least you got something out of it. Well, we’ve got some more time to find a way out of here now.”

“Not really,” Alex said with a shake of his head. “You might be good, but I’m not. There’s no water here that you saw, right?”

“None. Nothing that looks potable, at least.”

“Then I’ve got two more days and a bit, max. Humans don’t live for longer than that without being able to drink water, and blood isn’t going to do it for me.”

“Oh, shit. That slipped right past my mind,” Claire said, her eyes widening slightly. “Is there anything else you can drink? I don’t know human physiology very well.”

I don't care how bad things get. I am not about to pull a Bear Grylls.

“Lots of things, but nothing I suspect you’ve got on or in you — or at least nothing that I’m willing to try drinking,” Alex said dryly. “As long as we make it out, it doesn’t matter. If you think about it, I’m actually lucky.”

“Seriously? How?”

“When we make it out of here, my reward is going to be better than yours because the challenge was harder.”

Claire stared at him. Then she shook her head. “Yeah. You’re off your bleeding rocker... but you won’t see me complaining. I’m in good shape again thanks to you, so if we’ve only got two days, we don’t have time to waste standing around.”

“Agreed.” Alex directed his gaze out of the house they’d sheltered in and out over to the mountain beyond the forest of face-barked trees. The storm of crackling purple energy churned on at its peak, uncaring.

That’s a fair bit to get through in just two days. Some challenge, huh?

A grin pulled across Alex’s lips. He’d be damned if he died of something as lame as dehydration in the midst of an apocalypse. The System wasn’t going to get rid of him that easily.

“Let’s get to it. We have a mountain to climb.”

Chapter 12

Before Alex and Claire could think about scaling the mountain, they had to actually get to it. Between them and their best guess at freedom was a forest of trees stuffed chock-full of human faces.

The two of them peered out of the doorway of their temporary shelter and studied the pathways of roots spanning the chasm over to the forest. Luckily, there didn’t seem to be any monsters in the immediate area.

“How are you with balance?” Claire asked. “Those roots are big, but they aren’t huge.”

“The less you talk about it, the less I think I’ll worry about it,” Alex replied. “Some things are best done without thinking. This is one of them. It’s not like we don’t walk in straight lines all the time. It’s just that now we’re going to *have* to.”

“The roots aren’t straight.”

“My point remains the same,” Alex grumbled. “I say we just sprint. Sneaking isn’t going to do us any good when we’re in the middle of the open, and the sooner we can get across the better.”

Claire nodded. “Yeah. I’m with that. Just be ready for there to be a whole bunch of ugly little shits waiting around on the far side. That forest is way too creepy to be empty.”

“Who knows. Maybe they’ll be just as creeped out as we are,” Alex said with a smirk. “Come on. The coast is clear right now.”

They stepped out of the house and took a second to scan the sky to confirm it was clear before making for the chasm. Adrenaline started to pump through Alex’s veins. At this point, he was surprised his body had any left to make.

“You realize there’s a good chance the forest is alive and will try to kill us, right?” Claire asked.

“There are faces in the trees. If it doesn’t, I’m going to be disappointed. That means we just have to be faster than the forest. We can see the whole base of the mountain, and the forest surrounds the entire thing. There’s no other way up there. If I’m going to die, I’m going to do it doing something, not just sitting around. Besides, maybe we’ll get lucky and the faces will just be decorative.”

Neither of them believed that, but there was nothing to be done. They couldn’t just stick around and wait until Alex died of dehydration. With him gone, it wasn’t like Claire would last much longer on her own.

Alex broke into a jog, then a sprint. Glint ran in front of him. Alex wasn't so sure running across the wood would actually be safer than walking it, but the less time he spent suspended with nowhere to dodge, the better.

His foot landed on the trunk of the tree and he was off. Fortunately, it had good purchase and the branch was still as wide as two people laying side by side. There was enough room for him to run relatively normally — and that was what he did.

If the trees really were aware, he needed to get to land before they started moving their roots around.

I just hope it doesn't wake the whole forest up. If it does, we're going to be sprinting for quite —

The roots shuddered. Alex's footing slipped.

“Glint! Arm!”

The monster spun, digging one claw into the wood to increase the speed of his turn as he stuck his hand out to ward Alex. He grabbed onto the monster's grey flesh and Glint yanked him up, tossing him onto the branch.

It continued to tremble beneath Alex, but he didn't wait around to see what else would happen. He lurched to his feet and scrambled the rest of the way across the gap before diving onto the ground.

Claire was just a few steps behind him and Glint. She pulled him to his feet, panic in her eyes as loud creaks echoed out from the forest around them.

“The trees!” Claire hissed. “They're—”

Alex grabbed her by the arm and took off. “Stop wasting time talking and run! Are you really surprised? We already covered this!”

She didn’t bother wasting words on a response. Their feet slammed into the packed dirt as the trees cracked and groaned. The faces in the bark worked and blinked, low moans picking up like howling wind.

Roots twisted through the ground in their path and rose up before them. Alex ducked and weaved past them, not letting himself slow for long enough to take a proper look at what the forest had to offer.

The faces went from moans to howls, and it quickly became quite apparent why there weren’t any other monsters there. They’d been correct. The forest *was* the monster. There wasn’t even any form of identification to reveal what kind of monster it was, but Alex didn’t care.

A root whistled past his head and he dropped to the ground, skidding a foot on his knees before launching back to his feet and breaking back into a sprint.

“Cut anything in front of us!” Alex yelled. Glint accelerated, bounding past Alex despite his shorter legs, and tore into a root as it lifted to bind the monster’s legs.

Unfortunately, the small monster wasn’t anywhere near enough to actually take on the entire forest on his own. There were hundreds of trees in their path, and every single one of them seemed to have woken up at the same time.

Roots reached for Alex and Claire from every direction. Their only saving grace was that their enemies, no matter how numerous, were still trees. The roots moved slowly and the trees weren’t close enough to each other to completely wall off his path.

With Glint tearing up the path before them, it was manageable. Alex bounded over an extending root and twisted out of the way of a brittle, leafless branch that reached for his neck. His breath came out in short bursts as he pressed himself, moving as fast as his body would allow him to.

Trees whipped by. Blood pumped, more adrenaline than oxygen, and the edge of the forest drew closer with every step. Alex pushed himself even harder, unable to keep a grin from starting to form on his lips.

There was no doubt in his mind that if even a single tree managed to trip him up, he was dead. The roots would have him bound completely in seconds. But, despite that, racing through the forest was *fun*.

Alex let out an involuntary cackle. He dove forward, clearing a branch and hitting the ground in a roll. Roots rose in his path and he launched himself forward in a slide. He slipped just beneath them and Glint carved the path ahead open as he leapt back to his feet.

Claire's footsteps marked her presence behind Alex as he broke back into a run. The edge of the forest drew closer and closer — and then he was upon it. The trees gave one last desperate attempt to hold him back, but Glint carved a path through them.

He launched himself through the thin hole and landed on the other side of the forest, rolling across barren dirt and scrambling until he was at the base of the mountain. Alex turned back as Claire skidded to a stop beside him. The forest continued to creak and in moan in fury — but the trees didn't seem like they could actually rip themselves free of the ground. They slowly fell silent and the forest returned to its former state.

“Goddamn,” Alex breathed, as flopping back on the dirt and pressing a hand to his hammering chest. “What a rush.”

Claire dropped down beside him with a disbelieving huff. “That’s not the word I’d use, but it sure did get my heart beating.”

A grin pulled across Alex’s face. “I want to do that again.”

“You’re insane,” Claire said, but she couldn’t keep a small laugh from slipping out from her lips.

Alex took a moment to catch his breath before he rolled over and pushed himself to his feet. Glint stood beside them, waiting mutely for more orders.

I wonder if I could have him just go kill some of those trees. Would that count as challenge? There are a whole lot of them... but given how they were acting, would killing a single tree even count? It seemed more like a hive mind.

If that’s the case, I’d probably have to kill all of them to get the reward. No point getting Glint killed here and wasting a ton of time waiting for him to come back when there’s more than enough challenge still waiting for us. I’ll eat my socks if this mountain is any less riddled with monsters than the rest of the Mirrorlands.

Alex brushed the dirt off his clothes and blew out a breath to steady himself as he squinted up at the mountain before them. The storm crackled in the distance. They were fortunate that the mountain wasn’t restrictively steep, but it still looked like it would be at least a day of climbing before they reached the top.

“Well, might as well get going,” Alex said, adjusting his ruffled shirt and blowing out a breath. “That mountain isn’t going to climb itself.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re somehow already bored?” Claire asked.

“I haven’t the faintest idea.” Alex grinned. “You aren’t telling me you want to sit around here longer, are you?”

Claire started to shake her head, but they both froze as a loud crack split the air. Alex spun back to the forest as a branchy hand wrapped around a trunk and pushed, causing the wood to creak and groan until it let out a crunch and ripped in two.

A crouched, wooden humanoid stepped out from the forest. It straightened, gnarled body unfurling to easily eight or nine feet tall. It had long, spindly fingers and jagged growths protruding from all over its chest. The monster had no eyes and its mouth was nothing but a rough hole in the center of its face full of jagged spines.

Ent Harvester (Novice 4)

A low moan escaped the monster’s mouth hole and it started stumbling in their direction. Claire let out a curse and lowered into a fighting stance.

“I knew that was too easy. Shit. Get ready.”

“Hold on,” Alex said, squinting at the monster as it lumbered closer. It was a relatively high level, but it wasn’t all that fast — which was made apparent by the fact that it had only shown up after they’d gotten out of the forest.

“What? Do you want to run?”

“Run? Hell no.” Alex kept his eyes on the monster. “Glint, get closer to that thing, but focus avoiding getting hit.”

Glint scampered to follow his commands. As soon as the Shardwalker grew near the Ent, the tall monster swung a spindly arm. Glint hopped back, easily avoiding the strike. The wooden fingers raked through the ground and cut through it like butter.

“It’s pretty slow, isn’t it?” Alex observed.

“Yeah. It does look like Glint is perfectly matched against a monster like this. Just have him finish it off. It’ll be easy energy for you.”

“That would be a waste, wouldn’t it? If we’re faster than it is, then we have a huge advantage as long as we don’t get hit. That means we can try something.”

“Try what?” Claire’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

A grin stretched across Alex’s lips. “Making the fight a little more interesting.”

Chapter 13

“If you even try to suggest stabbing yourself, I’m leaving you right bleeding here,” Claire said flatly.

“I’m not completely insane,” Alex said. The Ent swung at Glint again, but the Shardwalker dodged out of the way once more. “But don’t you think we’d get a better reward if we won this with some sort of handicap?”

“I — I guess so,” Claire admitted. “What kind of hairbrained idiot makes a fight harder for themselves, though? You do realize that your life is the thing you’re betting here, right?”

“We’re in an apocalypse. It’s getting bet anyway,” Alex replied, his gaze focused on the Ent Harvester. “Might as well up the ante. It’s not like I can lose anything more, so why not make the rewards better? Even if this fight isn’t necessarily the biggest threat, not getting all the power we can could lead to us finding something too strong to defeat in the future. It’s about more than the present.”

Glint avoided another series of strikes from the Ent, keeping just out of range. Claire blew out a breath. “Well, shit. I can’t believe you’re making me admit this, but you’ve got a point. A stupid one. I don’t think we should both do it, though. We need a way to make sure we can actually win this fight if things go wrong.”

Alex looked to the sky. There weren’t any City-Eaters in the area. As far as he could tell, aside from the Ent, the base of the mountain was actually rather empty of monsters. There was one thing he could do that immediately came to mind.

“Do you think you could kill that if you had to?” Alex asked.

“With how fast it is? Probably. It wouldn’t be easy. Why?”

Alex steadied his nerves and flexed his fingers. His heart started to thump in anticipation of the upcoming fight. “I’ve got an idea. I’ll probably need you to back me up, though. I might not be able to handle this on my own.”

“Right. Whenever you’re ready,” Claire said, drawing her sword and lowering into a fighting stance. “And for the record, if this gets us killed, I’m haunting you.”

“Glint, stand still.”

The Shardwalker froze in place. An instant later, the Ent’s claws carved straight through Glint. Claire let out a series of curses as Glint disintegrated, blowing away into energy that swirled into Alex.

“You got him killed on purpose?” Claire asked in disbelief. “That’s a bit more than a tiny handicap, don’t you think?”

“It’s slow,” Alex replied. He raised a hand and a spike of glass jutted out of his palm, glistening in the dull purple light that permeated the Mirrorlands. “Now get ready. I’ll try to avoid its first attack. If we sandwich it, we’ll have the best chance of taking it down.”

The Ent lumbered in their direction. It let out a creaking groan as it drew closer. Claire shifted to the side and Alex took a step forward, drawing the monster’s attention to himself.

It barely even acknowledged Claire as she looped around behind it. The monster’s attention was fully focused on Alex. He grinned and waved to it.

“Come on, then. Let’s—”

The Ent swung. Alex flung himself back, hitting the ground in a roll and springing back to his feet as a wave of adrenaline slammed into him. It was a whole lot easier to watch something else dodge the monster’s attack than doing it himself.

More groans escaped the Ent’s mouth as it lurched toward him, swinging again. Alex jumped back, making sure to leave enough space to keep out of the way of the monster’s gangly arms.

Claire dashed at it from behind and brought her sword down on its back, carving through the wood with crunch. She leapt away as the Ent howled and spun in her direction. Alex took the opportunity to dart forward and drive his palm into its back, extending a mirror shard from his palm in the process.

The blade pierced deep into the monster and he snapped it off, already flinging himself away. No matter how slow the Ent Harvester was, its arms were still incredibly long. He wasn't a moment too soon. Thin fingers tore up the ground behind Alex, just barely missing his back.

He and Claire wove in and out, effectively nipping at the towering monster. None of their attacks were all that effective with the short amount of time they had to execute them, but striking it over and over again in the same area was having an effect remarkably reminiscent of chopping down a tree.

The Ent's body creaked dangerously with every step it took. It didn't seem even slightly concerned with its own health. It just kept swinging away, desperately trying to catch one of them off guard.

Alex's mirror blade carved across the Ent's already damaged side. It dug deep through the wood. Even as the Ent turned toward him, Claire thrust her blade into its other side. Alex worked his blade even deeper, wedging it into the Ent as hard as he could.

A loud snap split the air. The upper half of the Ent's body pitched back. Alex and Claire scrambled away as huge piece of living lumber hit the ground with a resounding crash. For a brief second, the only sound was the sound of their labored breathing.

Cold energy drove into Alex's chest like a spike. He inhaled sharply as he felt power course through his body and gather in his soul. A wisp of smoldering brown fire rose up from the dead Ent's body and a grin stretched across his lips.

"See?" he asked, wiping his face with the back of a sleeve. "Tell me that wasn't a lot of energy. There's no way we would have gotten that much if we'd just had Glint handle it himself."

Claire let out a disbelieving laugh and shook her head. "You are a menace. What kind of psychopathic Evoker kills his own summoned creature?"

"This one," Alex replied. "Don't worry. I checked to make sure Glint wasn't intelligent. As far as I can tell, he doesn't have any thoughts of his own and dying doesn't seem to really affect him that much. I'm not just going around killing a sentient creature for fun."

He pulled Glint's Spatial Mirror from the box at his side and scooped the brown flame up, pressing it into the mirror.

Spatial Mirror

Stored Energy:

Low-Mid Novice Grade (Ent Harvester) - 1

Bonded Creature: Shardwalker (Regenerating)

"It'll be about an hour before Glint is back. We should probably wait for him to return before we continue," Alex said as released the mirror and let it flow back to the box at his side.

"What happened to being in a rush?" Claire asked as they headed over take shelter by a large rock at the base of the mountain.

“I’ve got two days. It’s about finding a balance. If we just sprint ahead the whole time, we’re probably going to run into something we can’t fight. You can’t tell me that the energy we just got isn’t useful.”

Claire blew out a breath and inclined her head in defeat. “I don’t understand how you’re simultaneously insane and yet still somehow have a point. That energy might actually be enough for me to make it to Novice 4. You probably got a lot more than I did because you shouldered half the challenge yourself, but the System definitely registered that as a decent fight.”

“Probably means we would have been completely dead if we ever got hit,” Alex said. “I bet that thing would have been absolutely devastating if it had caught us while we were in the forest. Getting tripped up by a root while fighting it definitely wouldn’t have gone well.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if the System was counting that mad dash through the forest as part of our challenge rewards,” Claire admitted. “Can you watch over me until Glint is back? I think I should be able to do this pretty quickly.”

Alex nodded. Claire sat down in the boulder’s shadow and let her eyes shut as she started to meditate. Her breathing stilled and her features relaxed as she sank deeper into herself. Alex studied her for a few moments.

Maybe I’m just paranoid after my best friend shoved me into hell, but she really seems to trust people easily. Maybe that’s just because she doesn’t have much of a choice. I had Glint to keep an eye on me, but she has nothing like that in her class.

The Mirrorlands seemed like the absolute worst place that Claire could have landed. She was so limited by having to fight enemies with actual blood that her abilities didn’t even work here.

I'll need to make sure to avoid specifying into something so badly that a certain type of opponent makes me completely helpless.

Alex ran his tongue along his lips. They were parched. He'd had a little to drink before he'd fallen into the Mirrorlands, but not nearly enough. With any luck they'd make it to the mountain sooner than his deadline of two days.

He settled in to wait. It would have been stupid to push ahead without Glint and if Claire could get a useful upgrade from reaching Novice 4, the detour would have been worth it.

Minutes ticked by. Alex kept his eyes moving to make sure he didn't get lazy and miss something sneaking up on them. Fortunately, the base of the mountain appeared to be as abandoned as it appeared.

Aside from him and Claire, there was nothing. Eventually, a full hour passed. Alex resummoned Glint as soon as he was able to and had the monster stand guard beside him.

It was a short while longer before Claire stirred. Her eyes fluttered open and she blinked, squinting up at him. "How long was I?"

"Pretty much on time. Just a bit over an hour. Did you make it?"

A grin crossed over her lips and she nodded, rising to her feet. "Yeah. I'm a bit stronger now, just from the body improvements you get by advancing. I... uh, still don't have anything new that's going to make all that much of a difference here, though. Not in most cases, at least. I upgraded the skill that lets me grow a lot stronger when I drink blood."

"By most cases, do you mean no cases?" Alex asked dryly. "No monsters here have blood."

Claire shot him a pointed look. Her cheeks colored slightly, and Alex realized what she was thinking.

“You’re going to power up by drinking *my* blood?”

“Well, if it’s an emergency... it’s better than nothing, right?” Claire asked sheepishly. “Sorry. I was hoping I’d get a more suitable option, but there wasn’t one. Everything I’ve got is just too blood related. It was that or getting better at controlling blood, and I think that would have been even worse. I won’t drink your blood if you don’t let me.”

Alex blew out a huff and shook his head. “I mean, you’re right. A powerup is a powerup. If we’re in a pinch, it might come in use.”

“And hey, if I drink enough of your blood, you might be dizzy enough for the challenge of whatever we’re doing to go up,” Claire said with a smirk that quickly faded as she saw Alex’s eyes light up. “That was a joke!”

“One that I have noted.” Alex wet his lips again.

“Are you thirsty?” Claire asked with a worried frown.

“A bit,” Alex admitted. “Nothing to do about it.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to try—”

“Unless whatever you’re about to offer me is water or something completely equivalent to it, then the answer is no. I’m not nearly that desperate,” Alex said with a shake of his head. He looked up to the mountain rising over them. “That’s one challenge I think I’m going to push off to later. If you’re ready, let’s just get moving and try to get up this mountain before night falls... if that even happens here.”

“If you’re sure. And it doesn’t. Not from what I’ve seen so far, at least.”

With that, they started back up the mountain toward the storm crackling in the distance and — hopefully — a way out of the Mirrorlands.

Chapter 14

It didn’t take long for Alex and Claire to realize something might have been wrong, and it took a few hours to prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

There wasn’t a single monster on the mountainside. It was completely barren — but that wasn’t to say it hadn’t been warped. The mountain was every bit as twisted as the rest of the Mirrorlands.

Trees curved in odd paths, forming around the sloping path that led up to the peak of the mountain. Rocks had been arranged and packed down in a way that resembled a road, many of them floating mid-air or merged unnaturally with a tree trunk.

Islands large enough to house several trees cast shadows over Alex and Claire as they passed beneath them, but despite it all, there wasn’t a single sign of hostile life. That should have been reassuring.

Instead, all it did was set Alex’s hair on end to the point where he almost completely forgot about just how thirsty he was getting. There weren’t even any City-Eaters in the air above them.

There was only the path — and the storm in the distance.

“You reckon there’s a reason this place is abandoned? If even the monsters are smart enough to avoid it, I get the inkling that there might be,” Claire muttered to Alex, keeping her voice low as if speaking louder than a whisper would bring the sky crashing down on top of them.

“I think we’re going to find out soon enough,” Alex whispered back. “At this point, there’s no path but forward — unless you’ve got a better idea as to how we’re going to get out of here?”

Claire shook her head, and so they pressed on. It wasn’t long before the exact time of how long they’d been walking was lost to Alex. His legs burned and his throat turned so dry that it hurt.

It had definitely been hours. Exactly how many, Alex wasn’t sure. His body definitely wasn’t pleased with him, but the mere idea of stopping made him grimace. If the way out of the Mirrorlands really was so close, then he refused to rest until it was within his grasp.

Claire seemed to be of a similar mind. Neither of them said a word as they drew closer to the peak of the mountain. With their increased proximity to it, Alex could actually make out the peak itself.

There was a large outcropping just beneath the churning storm, surrounded by a ring of jutting, spiked rocks that almost resembled a crown at the top of the mountain. He couldn’t tell what was beyond them, but it was so high up that it literally brushed the crackling purple energy.

If there’s any way out of the Mirrorlands, then it’s got to be this. The only question is if we can actually pass through it.

The winding path wrapped around the peak of the mountain, then finally arrived at its final bend. A knot clenched Alex's stomach as they rounded it and stepped onto a strait stretch that led up to the crown.

The smell of electricity had grown a hundred times stronger, joined by something in between honey and cinnamon that seemed to be coming from a large patch of brilliant blue grass covering the top of the mountain.

Dark purple cracks shimmered in the air at the far side of the rock formation, arcs of energy crackling around them. There was no doubt about it. It was the exact same color as the portal that had sucked him into the Mirrorlands in the first place.

There was just one problem.

Sitting between him and the way out of the Mirrorlands was a towering, red skinned demon. It was humanoid and easily ten feet tall, even with its legs crossed in a yogi pose beneath it.

A wide menacing grin of straight teeth stretched across its face and two curved tusks protruding from the corners of its mouth. The skin on its face was smooth and glossy, almost reminiscent of an Oni mask. That comparison was only made stronger by a pair of huge horns that jutted out of the top of its head. Flowing hair like pure white gossamer rose to frame its face, suspended in the air by an intangible wind.

??? (???)

The nameless demon sat before the crackling storm, but it wasn't a guardian.

It was a prisoner.

Enormous shackles bound the monster from almost every direction. Each link was several feet wide and covered in flowing designs and patterns that burned with faint white light. They were secured to the ground by massive white stones that were scattered throughout the mountain's crown.

Alex and Claire both froze in place. The demon's glowing eyes were staring straight at them, but it made no move to so much as acknowledge their presence.

"You know what?" Claire whispered. "I think I figured out why the rest of the mountain is empty."

"It's bound," Alex muttered back. "We can get around it."

"Can we?" Claire asked. "It's right in the middle of the way and those chains aren't all completely tight. It could definitely reach us if we try to sneak past."

She was right. Alex shifted from foot to foot, ready to throw himself to the side and avoid an attack at a moment's notice — not that he suspected he had even the slightest chance of avoiding any form of blow made by the huge monster. It was such a high level that he couldn't even see what it was.

Those chains are definitely some kind of magic. Are they enough to keep the demon from attacking us? I can't tell if it just doesn't give a shit that we're here or if it's biding its time until we get closer.

Someone definitely bound that thing here on purpose. That doesn't speak well for the chances of it being willing to let us stroll right past.

"If you drink enough of my blood, do you grow wings?"

Claire let out a muted snort. “I wish. No.”

“Damn,” Alex muttered. He studied the jutting rocks that made up the sides of the crown. The wind around them howled, but there was a chance they could try to make their way around the demon by climbing onto the rocks.

Claire followed his gaze and immediately shook her head. “Those winds are being cut by the rocks right now. If we climb that, we’ll get blown right off. You think we can use the forest strategy again?”

Alex squinted at the demon. It still hadn’t moved once. If it hadn’t been identified by the system as a living being, he might have started to suspect that it was just an incredibly realistic statue.

“Only one way to find out,” Alex said. “Glint, walk over to the spatial cracks but stay as close to the rocks at the edges as you can. Be cautious and attempt to avoid making too much noise.”

Glint set off without an instant of hesitation. His summoned companion edged his way along the very corner of the stones, slipping one foot in front of the other like a dancer, pressing his side to the jagged rocks and making his way toward the beckoning energy across the platform.

Now that I think about it, this isn't the most effective test. The only thing this might actually prove is that the demon doesn't kill literally everything that passes it. If its intelligent, it could let Glint by and then just wait for us to follow to kill us.

That would be a whole lot of effort to kill something that it shouldn't see as anything more than a bug. It's probably more likely that it'll either be completely passive or —

A ripple passed through the chains and a crack split the air in its wake, and only once both had passed did Alex realize that Glint was dead. The Shardwalker's remains disintegrated into a stream of energy that flowed back over to the box resting at Alex's side.

Alex dove behind a rock and Claire hit the ground beside him a second later. When nothing happened, he poked his head out to look at the demon once more.

It hadn't budged from its spot. It remained in place, staring at them with its glowing eyes, a mocking grin stretched across its lips. If it wasn't for the faint sway in the chains holding the monster down, it would have been impossible to tell that it had even moved.

"Bleeding hell," Claire breathed. "Okay. I don't think we can stroll past it normally. Is Glint okay?"

"No. He's dead, but he'll get over it," Alex said. He swallowed. "It actively chose to do that. No clue if it was a warning or it just likes killing things, but we might have to turn to alternative measures."

"That sounds great. What are those?" Claire asked. "Because I'm flat out of ideas. The thing is right the middle of the way."

"Maybe the wind isn't that bad?" Alex approached the edge of the spiked rocks. Claire watched with concern as he pulled himself up, then stuck his hand out between the spines and into the open air to feel how strong the wind was.

A violent gale slammed into his arm almost instantly, nearly slamming it straight into the wall. Alex just barely managed to yank his hand back before it was impaled on one of the many jutting stones, but he still got a small cut for his troubles.

He cursed and shook his hand off. “Okay. You were right about that. We’re not climbing around it. We’d get ripped to shreds.”

They fell silent and looked back to the demon. It matched their gaze — or rather, it just stared. Alex wasn’t sure if it was looking at them or past them. There was no reason for them to even register on its radar other than a mild form of amusement. It was probably pretty boring being chained up on the top of a desolate mountain.

Huh. That’s a thought.

Alex’s head tilted askew and Claire sent him a curious glance. “What is it?”

“I was just thinking. There are probably two possible reasons this thing would have killed Glint. Either it’s somehow bound to defend the storm, or it’s just bored and has nothing else to do. It’s not like any of us would pose a challenge to it no matter how chained it is.”

“That’s true,” Claire allowed. “Are you thinking we can just... give it something else to do?”

“It couldn’t hurt.”

“Right. Treat the massive terrifying demon like it’s a stupid baby that won’t stop bothering its parents,” Claire said with a dry laugh. “Couldn’t possibly go wrong. It seems like a sound enough idea. What in the bleeding hells do we give it, though? I don’t see a toy anywhere.”

That was definitely the crux of the matter. A few minutes ago, he would have suggested Glint. It was pretty clear that wouldn't work. It had taken the demon less than a second to kill the Shardwalker.

"I have an idea," Claire said.

Alex looked to her. "What is it?"

"What if we somehow lured a City-Eater over here? Something big enough that this guy is actually distracted."

"Now that's an idea," Alex said with a grin. "But how are we going to outrun it? They can teleport and move pretty quickly for something their size. If we actually managed to get their attention, I don't think we'd even get a chance to lure it anywhere."

"Damn it. Good point." Claire's nose scrunched and she pursed her lips, blowing out a breath. Her eyes flicked down to his cut arm. "Are you going to eat that? You're distracting me."

It was Alex's turn to sigh. At least one of them could eat. He held his arm out to her.

"Thanks," Claire said once she'd finished. She definitely eyed the cut for a moment longer than she had to, but didn't try to drink any more. "Unfortunately, I am not feeling enlightened."

"Unless drinking more of my blood is going to make your brain bigger, I'm keeping the rest of it."

"Fair enough."

They joined the demon in its silence. There was always the option of giving up and heading back down the mountain, but that was the equivalent of giving up and dying. The spatial rift behind the monster was their best chance of getting out of the Mirrorlands.

Alex nudged a rock with his foot. Then he paused.

“Did you get a good idea?” Claire asked.

Alex picked the rock up and tossed it in his palm. “I’m not sure it qualifies as good, but I got an idea.”

Claire looked from the rock to the demon. Her eyes widened. “You can’t be—”

Alex threw his rock.

Chapter 15

The stone sailed through the air and thunked into the demon’s head, dropped to the ground, and laid at its feet. It didn’t so much as flinch.

Alex picked up another rock.

“Is this a plan or are you just bored?”

“Yes,” Alex replied, tossing the second stone. It bounced off the demon’s chest and landed beside the first stone. “It can’t move and it killed Glint. I think I’m justified in doing this. It helps me think.”

He picked up another stone. Claire hesitated for a second, then picked up her own rock. She shrugged to him and they both flung their projectiles. It was a good way to jog the brain juices. It increased blood flow — or something like that.

The Demon remained in place as they pelted it with stones. They were well out of reach of its chains and it couldn't move even if it wanted to. He was surprised to find that assaulting the monster with a hail of stones was actually somewhat therapeutic.

He wasn't sure how long he and Claire threw stones, but they soon cleared the front of the mountain pass out from every single loose stone and relocated them to piles around the demon.

“We're running out,” Claire observed.

“It's fine. It's a big mountain. There are more stones. I think I might figure something out pretty soon.”

“Really?”

“No, but I don't have a better idea right now. I'm kind of banking on the mounting dread building up until the point where I have no choice but to figure a way out of this. Until then, I'm throwing rocks.”

Alex turned to walk down the slope a bit and pick up another rock — and from behind him, he heard a heavy groan and a gravelly voice.

“If I were not chained here, I would pitch the pair of you off this mountain and memorize your screams.”

He spun back toward the demon, then shot a wide-eyed look at Claire.

“You heard that, right?” Alex asked.

“Yeah,” Claire said, swallowing. “It moved.”

“More than moved. It said something!”

“What are you talking about?” Claire’s brow furrowed. “It didn’t say anything, but I definitely heard its grunting.”

“No, it spoke,” Alex insisted. He locked eyes with the demon. “I am not nearly insane enough to start hallucinating that badly. You said something, didn’t you?”

The demon’s head slowly tilted to the side, an unnatural movement that somehow froze the rest of its body perfectly in place until its neck was at a perfect ninety-degree angle.

“You... heard me?”

“There!” Alex exclaimed. He thrust a finger in the demon’s direction and sent a wild look at Claire. “You heard it, right?”

She shook her head. “I — no. It’s just grunting and growling, Alex. Is it using some form of telepathy?”

“Impossible,” the demon said. It leaned forward and the chains went taut, preventing it from moving any farther. “You understand me?”

“Yes, I understand you,” Alex said. “What the hell gives? You could speak this whole time? Why haven’t you said anything? We wasted so much time flinging shit at your head!”

“A human that knows Wayspeak. Curious.” the demon asked, his head tilting to the side in apparent curiosity. The chains creaked and it leaned back, returning to its relaxed position, resting its palms on its knees, and studying Alex with its burning eyes.

Alex’s brow furrowed. He sent another glance at Claire, who shook her head helplessly. He looked back to the demon. “I have no clue what you’re talking about. Aren’t you speaking English?”

“No,” the demon replied. “You are speak in common, but I reply in Wayspeak.”

“What is Wayspeak?” Alex asked hesitantly. If the demon could talk, then it could reason. There was a chance they could convince it to let them use the portal behind it.

“The language of the Mirrorlands. One known only by its inhabitants. So how would you have come to learn it?” Chains creaked as the demon shifted its position to observe Alex better. “You could not have made it here through the normal routes. I smell the weakness on your breath like carrion. You don’t belong here, boy. But what gave you comprehension? A rare class, perhaps? A Title?”

Holy shit. He figured it out fast.

“Does it matter?” Alex asked, choosing his words carefully. He had absolutely no idea if anything he’d come to learn about demons back on Earth was true, but any information was better than nothing.

I think demons were supposed to be sly. Arrogant too. Really self-important, and possibly big fans of contracts. I don’t think they usually straight up lie, though. I might be able to trust the demon’s word if it actually gives it to me — or was it devils that liked contracts and didn’t

outright lie? Is there even a difference? Gah. Either way, I should be careful with what I agree to and what information I give up.

A low chuckle slipped from the demons lips. “No. It does not. A human child that knows Wayspeak arriving to be a bothersome pest — you are an Anomaly.”

“You say that in a way that makes me think it means more than I understand.”

“Most things do,” the demon said. It leaned forward once more. “How refreshing. I haven’t had a conversation in years. If only you had chosen a better opener. Tell me, Anomaly, why is it that you have come to bother me? Do you long for early death so badly? Step closer and I can grant it.”

“Actually, I’d much prefer if you just got out of the way,” Alex said. He nodded to the spatial rift humming behind the demon. “I’m trying to get over there, and given what you did to my summoned companion, I’m not keen on getting anywhere near you.”

“You are in no position to make demands of me.”

Alex walked back over to the edge of the path, picked up a rock, and returned to stand where he had been before. He sent it a pointed look.

“A threat?” The demon’s voice was incredulous. “You threaten me with a rock? Did you not see how effective the last hundred you threw were?”

“I can’t hurt you,” Alex agreed. “But I can stand here and fling shit at your head for hours on end.”

“Is that so? You are dry. Not long for this world, I suspect.” The demon’s glassy lips curled up in a smirk. “A few hours would be nothing more than a blip in my memory.”

“Eh. Fair enough.” Alex shrugged and tossed his rock to the side. He turned to Claire and nodded back in the direction that they’d come. “Oh well. Let’s get going. He’s not going to let us pass.”

It looked like Claire wanted to ask a thousand questions, but they died on her lips as she inclined her head and fell in step behind Alex.

“It won’t work,” the demon said, its voice rushing down the mountain peak like a cold gale. “Even if you managed to survive the other inhabitants of the Mirrorlands, you would die long before you reached another portal. There are none within the shadow of the mountain.”

Alex paused to look over his shoulder at the demon. “Then I’ll find that out for myself, won’t I? If you aren’t going to let me use your portal, I’ll find another one. There’s always a different way. Why should I waste my time here? Sit and rot.”

A bark of laughter escaped the demon’s mouth. The chains groaned and shuddered as they fought to keep the enormous monster held down to the ground. “Such passion. When did I say you couldn’t use my portal? It is mine, mind you.”

“You squashed my companion. And if you’ve got a portal, why don’t you use it?”

“Your companion was a buzzing little insect without consciousness. I have squashed a countless number of its ilk.” The demon nodded down toward the crooked city beyond the forest at the base of the mountain. “The bugs provide no entertainment.”

A chill raced down the back of Alex’s neck and wrapped around his arms. The enormous City-Eater Centipedes, so powerful that he couldn’t even make out their strength, were just as worthless as Glint in the demon’s eyes.

What kind of monster is this? How do I get that powerful?

“Does that imply that I do?” Alex asked.

“I will not impair your path to the portal,” the demon said, his words rolling out like the purr of a cat and setting all of Alex’s hair on end. Malice positively dripped from every word he spoke. “Should you be brave enough to approach it, that is. If you wish to leave, then leave.”

Alex’s lips peeled back in something between a snarl and a smile. If that was the game the demon wanted to play, then he’d play. Something told him that the line about there being no more portals was true. He hadn’t seen any more back in the city.

The one before them might be the only chance they had, and he’d be damned if he got scared out of taking it.

“Wait here,” Alex told Claire.

“Hold on.” Claire sent a concerned glance back at the demon. “I don’t really get what’s going on. I can only hear half a conversation. If you’re going to do something stupid, then I’m coming too. I don’t want to get stuck here alone again.”

“No, I need you to stay back. If the demon kills me, fling rocks at his head,” Alex replied, setting his jaw and spinning back to the demon. He strode toward it.

“Oh? You’re approaching me?” the demon’s laughter echoed through the mountain peak.

There’s no way that was a — ah, fuck it.

“I can’t use your portal unless I come closer,” Alex replied, locking eyes with the demon. His heart bucked in terror, but the excitement and adrenaline pumping through his body strangled its fear. “Or are you so much of a coward that you have to lie to someone weaker than you?”

“Come find out, boy.”

Alex stepped into the demon’s range.

Berith watched the boy approach with an emotion that could have only been described as piddling amusement. That was an ill omen. He’d been trapped on this cursed mountaintop for so long that he’d actually gotten to the point where a whelp of an Anomaly could hold his interest for a flicker of an instant.

Anything was better than the delirium of silence. There had been a short period of a few millennia when Berith had gotten used to it. Then he’d gotten bored. More than anything else, he wanted to find something to kill.

Something *worth* killing.

An Anomaly that had been born no more than a few days ago was far from that. The mere effort it would take Berith to kill him wasn’t worth sacrificing the entertainment — no matter how piddling or pathetic it was — that he was about to get. A grinding rattle filled the air as Berith shifted. The boy stiffened, but he didn’t miss a step as he continued his advance. Berith’s neck twisted one hundred and eighty degrees so he could continue to trace the boy as he walked right up to the rift.

I’ll give the human one thing. He’s bolder than most. There aren’t many brave or stupid enough to stride right past me, even with my word protecting them. Oh well. Unfortunate for him. It’s been a while since I’ve seen something pop.

“Go on,” Berith said, unable to keep the grin from his tone. “Have I not kept my word? The portal is all yours.”

The boy didn’t have to be told twice. He reached up to touch the swirling magic — and a bolt of energy threw his hand back, burning his palm. He stumbled and almost tripped over his own feet, yelping in pain and shaking his hand off furiously.

Berith roared with laughter and the boy spun toward him, cradling his burnt hand. Accusation burned in his eyes as he thrust his unhurt hand toward Berith. “You said I could use the portal!”

“I am not stopping you,” Berith replied through his mirth. “That would be your own lack of power. The portal is perfectly functional. You have nothing to blame but your weakness if you can’t use it.”

He tried not to think too much about how far he’d fallen to find something this pathetic entertaining. There was just nothing better to do in this barren wasteland. Even a droplet of moisture was an ocean to a man trapped in the desert. It was actually somewhat impressive the boy hadn’t been turned to a charred mark on the ground just from touching the rift.

The boy looked from Berith to the portal. Then he set his jaw. A flicker of surprise passed through the demon.

Is he an idiot? He couldn’t possibly be thinking of—

With a cry, the boy drove his hand into the portal. A flicker of energy crackled within it. Berith blinked. A loud snap split the air and a wave of purple magic ripped out of the portal and

slammed into the boy like a hammer. It picked him off his feet and launched him back, sending him tumbling across the ground in a flail of limbs until he slammed into a large stone.

Smoke curled up from the boy's clothes as he let out a pained cough, driving a fist into the ground and staggering back to his feet. He wiped his face with the back of a hand and strode back toward the portal.

Did I just see the portal react to him? No, of course not. I have grown addled sitting here for so long. The boy does not have Mirrorlands blood in his veins. He's nothing but an Anomaly. The portal will not open for him.

The boy let out a furious cry as he drove his fist into the portal once more. Energy screamed out and drove into him, but he dug his feet into the ground and pushed even harder. A deep thrum rolled across the mountaintop. The portal started to bend. Crackles of energy raced out within the portal like a spiderweb. Berith's eyes widened.

Is he resistant to the rift energy?

A second loud snap tore through the air. Energy whipped into him and picked him off his feet, sending him hurtling through the air for the second time. The Dhampir he'd come with dashed forward into Berith's shadow, bracing her feet and catching him before he could slam into the rocks for a second time.

They both skidded back several feet and the smell of burnt flesh and hair drifted into the air before the winds ripped it away. Smoke drifted off charred skin, but Berith was surprised to realize that the boy's hand was fairly intact aside from some cosmetic damage.

“Alex!” the Dhampir exclaimed, steadying him. “Are you okay? What are you—”

“I’m fine. Thanks for the catch,” the boy said through a gritted jaw, pushing back to his feet. “One more time. I felt it. I almost had it that time.”

The boy strode forward once more, coming to a stop before the portal while the Dhampir watched him with a mixture of awe and concern. It was as if he’d completely forgotten the rest of them were there.

Berith found himself leaning forward, the interest in him starting to build to something beyond just a hint of curiosity. This was not normal.

A roar of defiance split the air. Alex drove his fist forward. It slammed into the portal for the fourth time. Power hummed and churned, dancing around him like a miniature hurricane as he pressed his hand deeper into the portal.

The churning energy bent. Then it began to give way. It should have been impossible, but he could deny it no longer. The human was going to open the portal on his own.

Berith’s eyes widened.

He’s no mere Anomaly. The boy is an Incarnation.

Chapter 16

Alex’s right hand burned like he’d shoved it into a pot of boiling water. His nerves screamed and his flesh crackled like fried chicken that had been left in a pan for too long. His left hand clenched so tightly that his fingernails bit into his palm. He gritted his teeth, not even daring to draw in a breath and lose focus, and pushed against the portal even harder.

“I would suggest stopping,” the demon’s voice split through Alex’s concentration. “If you continue, you will die.”

Alex’s teeth gritted. Electric power thumped against his arm, now buried nearly all the way up until his shoulder. He couldn’t even feel his fingers anymore.

“I’m not giving up,” Alex snarled. “I’m going to open the damn portal.”

His concentration faltered. Answering the demon had only taken a brief flicker of thought, but he didn’t have it to spare. A powerful force slammed into Alex’s chest and folded his knees like they were made of paper. His hand flew from the portal as it snapped back to a flat shape and all the air was knocked from his lungs as he was slammed into the ground.

Alex let out a pained groan. His arm burned in agony at his side. He vaguely made Claire’s concerned features out above him as he dug his good hand into the vibrant blue grass and shoved himself upright, his breaths coming in ragged gasps as he tried not to think about the source of the fatty, fried smell lingering in the air.

“Why?” Alex rasped.

“You should be grateful that I warned you at all,” the demon said. “Perhaps I simply should have watched.”

“Not that. Why can’t I open the damn portal? What unfair bastard puts a portal on the top of a fucking mountain and then doesn’t let anyone use it?”

“Me,” the demon said through a bark of laughter. “I told you. The portal is mine. And even if you could open it, it would lead to nowhere. Tell me. What world do you hail from?”

“Earth,” Alex rasped through his gritted teeth as he resisted the urge to clench his charred arm. He was pretty sure that would only make it worse.

“How original. And are all those who come from your planet as arrogant as you?” Chains rattled as the demon tilted its head to the side. “Or are you unique in believing that all roads through the universe lead to your home planet?”

Alex’s stomach sank. “I was kind of hoping to wing it. Why wouldn’t it go back to Earth? Shouldn’t a hole in reality go two ways?”

“You slipped through the cracks between worlds,” the demon said. “It was no luck that you landed in the Mirrorlands. It is the vastness of space that connects everything. It is where all that falls lands. The wastebin of existence, a catch-all for anything and everything. Those passageways are a one-way trip.”

The demon’s words rang against Alex’s ears, joining in with the wind howling beyond the crown of the mountain. His good tightened at his sides. They’d come all the way up here just to find that there was no way forward.

I won't accept that. There has to be another way.

“I refuse to believe that there isn’t a way to open the portal back up in the other direction,” Alex said. For some reason, the pain in his charred arm was starting to recede. There was a good chance it might have been shock. “If there’s magic, then it has to be possible.”

“Oh, it’s possible,” the demon agreed. The chains holding it rattled as the demon contorted itself to move so its whole body was facing them. “Just not for you.”

“Hold on,” Alex said, flexing his stinging hand. He looked back to the portal. “I don’t know that you’re telling the truth. I could have just done something wrong.”

“You could have,” the demon agreed. “Perhaps you should try again. Maybe use your other hand this time around — or better yet, toss the girl in first. See what happens.”

I swear the portal felt like it was opening. I don’t trust this monster. It could be lying... but I’ve got a good way to find out.

Alex let his head thunk back against the grass.

“What are you doing?” Claire whispered. “What’s going on? And are you okay?”

“Resting, I’m arguing with a demon, and no,” Alex replied. “I need an hour.”

“You’re just going to lie there? In defeat? You gave up faster than I expected,” the demon said, derision dripping from its words. “Perhaps I—

“I didn’t give up.” Alex glanced at the monster out of the corners of his eyes. “I’m just resting.”

“Resting,” the demon repeated. “Directly before me? Do you *want* me to crush you for your insolence?”

“Why would you?” Alex countered. “You get nothing from it. I reckon anything I do now is more entertaining than just squishing me, and an hour is nothing to you, right?”

The demon didn’t respond.

Alex sank back into the grass with a groan. He had an hour to kill.

Time dragged its heels through the mud, but Alex's waiting finally came to an end. The pain in his hand had receded even further, but he was pretty sure it was because the nerves in it had been burnt to a crisp. He still couldn't feel his fingers. That was a problem for later.

That's an hour. Glint, sorry buddy, but I need you again.

The air beside Alex shattered as Glint's claws raked through it, forming an entrance for him to emerge from his Spatial Mirror. The Shardwalker stepped out and looked to Alex for his orders.

"Can you open that spatial rift?" Alex asked, pointing at the buzzing energy.

Glint didn't budge.

"Open the spatial rift," Alex amended, changing his request to a command. Still, Glint did nothing.

Could just be too complex.

"Try cutting the spatial rift."

Glint strode up to the swirling energy and brought his claws down. They struck the purple magic and sheared through it — or rather, the magic sheared through Glint. By the time the Shardwalker's hand stopped moving, its claws had completely vanished, reduced to small stubs. Alex winced.

"Okay. Uh... shove yourself into the rift."

Glint threw himself into the energy without a flicker of hesitation. There was a sharp hiss followed by the very brief smell of burnt meat. Alex summoned Glint's card to his hand to check on the monster. It was dead.

Was the demon telling the truth?

“Have something you need to talk out?” Claire asked with a worried frown. “That can’t be a healthy coping mechanism.”

Alex burst into laughter. “Noted. And I was just testing something. Glint can’t feel pain, so I wouldn’t feel bad about it.”

“Are you done?” the demon asked.

“Depends on what you’re offering,” Alex replied.

“Who said I was offering?”

“You said it wasn’t possible for *me* to open the portal an hour ago. This is your portal though, right? So you can open it.”

“I could.”

“Will you?”

“Perhaps.” The demon’s head tilted to the side. “Tell me your Soul Manifestation.”

Alex hesitated. He wasn’t so sure he wanted to go about sharing the details of how his class worked with clearly malicious, chained entities. They were usually chained for a reason. That said, he’d already given away his ability to summon Glint. “It... lets me summon monsters. I’m an Evoker.”

“A fool could tell that you are an Evoker,” the demon said dryly. “Being an Evoker is nothing unique. Being an Anomaly is slightly unique — but your Soul Manifestation, like every

other, is *completely* unique. Unique and remarkably uninteresting, I suspect, but I will be the judge of that. You will tell me what it is if you desire my assistance.”

Alex summoned his status and read back over everything he knew, trying to see if revealing details about his abilities could somehow come back to bite him in the ass. Nothing he found implied it.

His ability to use Glint’s powers when the monster died was his real unique ability, and the demon wasn’t asking for that.

“My Soul Manifestation gives me cards called Spatial Mirrors that I can use to store Mirrorlands monsters. Whenever they die, they return to the mirrors and stay there until they reform an hour later. Why does that matter?”

The demon didn’t respond immediately. It tilted its head to the side in thought, and the chains holding its arms swayed slightly as it twitched.

“What?” Alex asked, unnerved by the demon’s lack of response more than everything else it had done.

“That could work,” the demon mused, voice little more than a whisper. It swallowed.
“Yes. You could work.”

“You’re going to have to give at least a little bit of explanation before I start agreeing to anything. I’m not joking when I say you’d have to kill me before I willingly give you control of my body or some shit like that.”

“I am not going to steal your body from you... but we could help each other. Quid pro quo,” the demon said. It leaned forward and the chains tightened, binding and stopping it from getting any closer. “I suspect my desires are not too difficult to discern.”

“You want to get out of here.”

“Every prisoner longs to be free. I am no exception.”

“Most prisoners also have a reason for being imprisoned,” Alex said slowly. “And I’m going to be real, I don’t think there’s jack shit I’m going to be able to do to break those chains. I only have one Spatial Mirror as well and it’s got Glint, so you can’t get into one of those.”

The demon let out a derisive snort. “I have no desire to trade one prison for another. I will not be trapped within one of your cards. It is a moot point. They have no hope of containing my power, even if we had both been willing.”

“Then—”

“You are still Novice 2. You have yet to achieve your third Auxiliary skill,” the demon said, cutting Alex off mid-sentence. “For that reason alone, there is something that can be done.”

“Are you going to say what it is, or are you just going to keep blue-balling me?” Alex asked.

The demon’s lips split apart in a smile. “I asked about your Soul Manifestation because I needed to confirm that your soul would have similarities to mine. I can give you the power to unlock one of my own Auxiliary skills. It will let you travel through the Rifts at will. To sweeten the deal, I’ll even help you use it the first time around.”

Alex fought to keep the eagerness from his voice. “And what do you want in return?”

“Far less than what I offer,” the demon replied. The chains holding it rattled, which ended up being far closer to a thunderous roar due to their size. “Carry a small piece of me with you until we can find a way to break the chains binding me.”

“Let’s say I agree. What will happen when the chains get broken?”

“I suspect I shall try to kill you.” Excitement flashed in the demon’s eyes and it extended a hand toward him, only stopping when the chains jerked taut. “But by then, you should have at least grown strong enough to attempt running away.”

Alex’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not running anywhere.”

A laugh echoed from the demon’s glassy lips. “I can already feel the thrill of battle. You seem to enjoy challenges. How about it? A challenge for the ages. Just take this prisoner’s hand.”

Claire sent Alex a worried look but said nothing as he looked at the huge hand, several times larger than his head, waiting before him. She had no way to know what they were speaking about, but it probably wasn’t too hard to guess.

Alex’s jaw clenched. The demon was probably trapped there for a reason — but if he was honest, he cared more about surviving than what it had done.

There was only one way forward. He stepped forward and pressed his burnt palm to the demon’s. Huge fingers closed around Alex’s arm, and a name burned itself into his mind like it had been branded by an iron.

Berith.

“Alex,” Berith breathed, his name curling from the demon’s lips like twisting smoke. “This is going to be fun.”

