

# Chapter 1

They say you should bend with your knees, not your back, but considering how badly both seemed to hate me today, I wondered if there was perhaps a secret third option. With a grunt, I loaded an armful of dirty towels into the washing machine, glaring daggers at one that had fallen free of the stack and was lying at my feet. Pain rippled up my spine as I bent for it.

I tossed the offending towels in and slammed the door, not out of anger but out of necessity. The latch didn't click into place like it should, but at least the motion itself was cathartic. I braced myself against the edge of the cart and took several deep breaths until the pain subsided.

Though I felt like I was sixty, I had just turned twenty-three a few hours ago. Happy birthday to me, I guess. I stood and poured the cheapest detergent known to man into the machine and then started it up. Once the washer was turned on, I moved to the dryer.

Opening the door, I pulled the dry towels out and folded them onto a different cart, which was bound for the locker rooms. My shift was nearly over — dawn was just an hour away — and the hard part was almost done. If the day shift would ever wash some of their fucking towels, that part of my evening wouldn't piss me off so much.

Finished with my laundry duties, I slowly wheeled the clean towels to the entrance of the locker rooms. I loaded them into the wooden cubbies where members could find them. There were only a few people in the gym right now, mostly workout junkies and early risers, who wanted to pound out a few miles on treadmills before heading to the office. For the most part, they ignored me, though I did stop to take a complaint about one of the exercise bikes not working. That was out of my jurisdiction, thank god.

Finally, back at the front desk, I couldn't help but sigh as I sat down on my stool. The muscles in my back relaxed, which quickly turned into a painful spasm, but I was used to it. Reaching into my bag, I grabbed and downed a handful of prescription painkillers with practiced familiarity, chugging them down with a swig of water.

"Morning, Jake." A lanky man with neck tattoos stopped by the desk. "Dude, you look like shit."

It was Micky, the day janitor. There was a night janitor, too, but he went home at midnight, which left me in charge of any messes until the day crew arrived.

"You're early," I answered, putting the pill bottle back into my bag.

My coworkers had stopped asking about my health months ago, which had been a relief. Nothing made random body pain worse than having a bunch of people you barely knew try and diagnose it for you.

Micky shrugged. "I figured I'd get in a quick workout before clocking in—you know—since it's free for employees and all."

I ignored the thinly veiled advice. Micky and I were roughly the same age, but where he was the picture of health, I was little more than a pale shadow who couldn't quite convince anyone that my problem wasn't a lack of effort.

Day-to-day life left my muscles aching, and anything short of spending my day off on the couch left me absolutely exhausted. My current doctor said it was a variant of chronic fatigue, which I guess was a better diagnosis than the unknown metabolic disorder my previous doctor had offered as an explanation. At least I could afford the prescriptions to help manage the pain.

Shaking off Micky's unwanted suggestion, I shrugged. "What can I say, it takes a lot of work to be as powerfully built as me."

Micky was already walking away, like he had forgotten we were talking. That happened a lot, too, but I was used to it.

Grumbling to myself, I double-checked the list my boss had left for me. I rarely interacted with the gym's owner, Big Duke Oldman, since I worked the night shift, but I prided myself on my work ethic. Sure, I was probably dying, but at least at my funeral, nobody would say I was lazy or a complainer.

I tried not to think about the fact that the primary reason for this would be that nobody cared. I watched somebody walk by carrying a towel. At least when I was dead, I wouldn't have to worry about doing laundry anymore.

I spent the end of my shift cleaning around the lobby, which was mainly sweeping up street dirt that had been tracked onto the wooden floors. My knees continued to protest, but moving helped a bit. Even though the place was mostly empty now, there was something kind of special about watching the entire world wake up all at once in the minutes before I left.

Done with the floors, I moved over to Vinnie's Juice Bar. Though it was never open while I was working, I did need to give it another wipedown in case some of the machines had leaked overnight.

Using a wet rag, I wiped everything down without bothering to inspect it. As I stretched my arms to do a final pass of the counter, something fell onto the floor. Puzzled, I knelt down to pick it up.

It was an antique key of some kind, large enough to cover my palm. The handle was fancy, with looping filigrees of bright, shiny metal. The tooting was simple, making me think of the big, novelty keys the hero would find while playing a video game. I could already hear the *du-na-nah-NAH* in my head that should play if I opened a chest with it.

What did the key even go to? It was more ornamental than anything else. Did it actually go to a door somewhere, like someone's house? Looking at the teeth, I suspected that wasn't true. I was no expert on picking locks, but imagined that whatever lock went with this key made for piss-poor security.

There wasn't a keychain or tag, which made me think it was just a pocket treasure that had been left behind. I stared at the key for a long moment, feeling the strangest sensation that it was somehow incredibly important—special even. Chalking the feeling up to my inner gremlin, I tossed it in the lost-and-found. If the owner came looking for it, the receptionist or another member of the gym staff could help them.

Micky came and took over at the desk for me just as the sun was rising. He would be the official Front Desk Guy™ for an hour until Becky or Rinaldo came in. There were even odds Micky would still be there by the time I clocked in for my next shift. I swore the guy lived at Oldman's Gym, only going home long enough to sleep and grab a fresh set of workout clothes.

Heading outside, I coughed as the cold, damp air hit my lungs.

I shuffled toward the bus stop like an old man, the cold weather seeping in through my clothes and making my body hurt even more. I sat on the bench next to a woman in a McDonald's uniform and gave her a nod in greeting.

It didn't feel like my birthday, but that was nothing new. I had plenty of foster parents who had tried to make them special, but it was always a bit awkward. When my mom was still around,

she had always tried really hard to do something, even when things had gotten really bad. I had no doubt in my mind she would have tried to do *something* for me today.

The rising sun's warmth caressed my cheek and I sighed. I was almost as old as she had been when I had last seen her. But she was gone now. All I had left to remember her were some treasured photos, a deranged diary, and some kind of inherited genetic disorder.

Persistent pain, fatigue, and muscular dystrophy were my constant companions. Some days were better than others, but I refused to let the quacks load me up like they had my mom. They still couldn't tell me what had happened to her, but my best theory was that they had drugged her out of her mind and she had wandered off in a stupor, perhaps to drown in the river by the hospital.

The bus arrived. Shaking off those dour thoughts, I slapped my cheeks to warm them up and then stood. It was my birthday, so I guess a little bit of extra self-pity would be my gift. I was about to go home and relax. I did my best to ignore the flaring pain that ran up my spine when the bus hit the pothole on Grand Street, then sank back in my seat again.

Instead of being depressed on my birthday, I thought about the pile of unsorted ROM files I had downloaded yesterday evening. Most of them were mislabeled, but I was hoping there was an original JP version of *Ninja Diatribe 3: Cookie's Revenge* in the pile.

It was a super-rare ROM, a bootleg copy from the cartridge area of console gaming. The cutting-edge, 16-bit graphics of my childhood would probably push my crappy laptop to near-meltdown conditions, but it'd be worth it to just kick back and shoot some ninjas in the face with actual ninja stars instead of cookies, like the American version had done.

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My apartment building wasn't much, just a narrow, brick building wedged between a bail bonds office and a tow-truck business. I kind of liked it, actually. Its narrow profile reminded me of a book from the outside.

My unit was in the back, so at least it was quiet. I didn't have to deal with noise from the street, just the occasional sound of raccoons raiding the dumpsters.

Opening the door, I saw that my roommate was already gone — and so was all of his stuff. Greg had taken his furniture and left his keys sitting on the kitchen counter, with a check for his half of the rest of the month. I had been hoping he'd at least stick around until after I got home from work; the dude had moved out in the middle of the night.

"Fuck," I grumbled, then shut the door quietly behind me.

I ran through roommates like most people went through toilet paper. They rarely made it three months; the one guy who was the record-holder had been on the road for most of that time. It never made any sense to me why they left. I was clean, I paid my half of the rent and utilities on time, and I kept my opinions to myself. I was even careful not to bitch about the constant pain I was in. Yet, like clockwork, they all eventually left.

When I asked Greg why he was leaving, he couldn't give a solid answer. He just didn't think *we jelled*, whatever that fucking meant.

"At least the bastard didn't eat my birthday cupcake," I said to myself as I opened the fridge and grabbed the chocolate-frosted dessert. If he had, I would have killed him. Well, I would have thought really hard about killing him, then gotten depressed over the missing confection.

My mom couldn't do much for me when I was a kid. She was in the hospital nearly my entire life, but even at her sickest, she still managed to at least get me a cupcake for my birthday. It was our little tradition, something shared just between the two of us, that I could hold onto.

Which was why, even after her disappearance, I kept the tradition alive. I cut the cupcake in half. Her half would go into the fridge for tomorrow, on the off chance that she had secretly become a time traveler and might show up later. That was one of the other possibilities I had entertained as a small child, which I fully blamed on *Time Trigger*, *Future Imperfect*.

In reality, I knew that just ensured I would have dessert for tomorrow. Hell, if Greg had stuck around, I would have even shared it with him. Mom would have understood.

I didn't do anything maudlin, like light a candle or sing *Happy Birthday* to myself. I warmed up dinner in the microwave, which was just some leftover takeout, then plated it up along with my cupcake and a glass of milk. Sitting at the table, I grabbed a book I had been reading. It was a collection of Edgar Allan Poe stories that they'd had in the free book bin at the library. I'd never had a chance to read him when I was younger, so I was trying to make up for lost time.

I had finished eating the leftovers and was nearly halfway through *The Cask of Amontillado* when I got a weird feeling of déjà vu. It was a passage about the damp tunnels that I re-read twice before remembering why it had stuck out.

It reminded me of a recurring dream I'd been having the last few weeks.

The dream was usually the same. I'd find myself wandering through a ruined library, the shelves that still stood packed with dusty, moldering tomes. The rest of the building had collapsed, crumbling into splintered wood and shredded paper. Things scurried in the shadows, creatures of ink and darkness.

Frankly, I wondered if Poe himself hadn't somehow inspired the dreams. His stuff was tame by today's standards, but I had a pretty vivid imagination. It made a weird kind of sense, actually. Despite the skittering shadows around me, I had felt at home in those dreams, like I was where I finally belonged. And best of all, the pain and fatigue of my day-to-day existence was gone.

But only in dreams, right?

I raised my cup in a mock-toast. "Nevermore!"

I took a bite of my cupcake. It wasn't much, just something from the discount baked goods at the grocery store, but it tasted delicious to me. Now that I wasn't hefting wet towels at the gym, I was already feeling better, my spirits lifting.

Once done with my cupcake, I put Poe down and checked out the apartment, just to make sure Greg hadn't fucked up the place. His bedroom was empty; the only thing left was a boxspring and mattress, which had actually been left by a roommate already long since gone and forgotten. All his crap was missing from the bathroom, too. Greg had left no sign of his presence behind.

I preferred that. At least he hadn't trashed the toilet like the guy before him. I actually shuddered at the memory.

I opened my medicine cabinet and surveyed the neat row of prescription bottles. Selecting a handful, I quickly swallowed them. It was good to know modern medicine would keep me pain-free and kicking for a bit longer—even if my meds ate up a huge chunk of my paycheck.

Retreating to my room, I took a moment to spread out on my bed and relax, going through all the breathing exercises the doctors had recommended. I slowly unwound all my sore, protesting

muscles, and took a moment to forcefully unclench my jaw. It didn't stop the pain, but it helped make it a little more tolerable.

It was also far less dangerous than yoga. The last time I had attempted downward facing dog, my arms had buckled and I ended up with a bloody nose.

Sliding off the bed, I grabbed my laptop from its home atop my dresser. It isn't much, just a flat, oblong plastic brick that had likely taken inspiration from the Nokia of its time. Someone, I forget who, had scratched the name *CRAPTOP* onto the back of the screen. As soon as I booted up the device, the fans kicked in like jet turbines, as they desperately tried to cool down the ancient CPU.

I start sorting through the ROM files, carefully scanning and then loading each one into my emulator. Most were crappy, modded bootlegs or homemade retro games, which I deleted. Though the ROMs didn't take up much space, I wasn't a digital hoarder.

That, and I craved the authentic versions of games, especially ones that took me back to the days when my mom had still been around. She had been sick a lot, and many of her final days had been spent in the hospital. While most kids hated visiting the hospital, I had loved it. Not only was it a chance to spend time with my mom instead of all my different foster families, but the nurses were always so nice to me.

This was where my love of video games had been born. The staff at the hospitals had let me hang out in their break room, which contained a hacked arcade cabinet. The machine had been loaded with hundreds of ROMs, boasting all kinds of home and arcade games. I had spent hours playing all the classics; *Space Intruder*, *Mansion of Mindlessness*, *Shining in the Doomness*, and more during some of my mother's scarier treatments.

I had particularly loved all the old-school RPGs, especially after one of the nurses had shown me the trick to saving my progress. Coming in, sometimes after weeks, to find my characters still there, still waiting for me, had gotten me through a lot of really shitty situations. Knowing those familiar faces would be there waiting, no matter what, was like having a secret family of my own.

Sadly, there wasn't a copy of *Ninja Diatribe 3: Cookie's Revenge* in the ROMS I had downloaded, but I did find a working version of *Shining Focus 2* in the archive. Booting it up, I resumed my adventure once more, determined to rid the world of darkness with the power of friendship and tactical violence.

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My footsteps were silent on the marble flooring as I walked down the aisle. Bookshelves rose into the sky on my left and right, disappearing in the darkness above. Books, scrolls, and clay tablets lay in unorganized, dusty heaps across tables, chairs, and even the floor. I carefully walked around them, drawn forward by a mysterious force. Ahead, I could see a beautiful, white light. It soothed away my pains, my loneliness.

It made me feel whole.

As I got closer, the light shifted. It cycled through different colors; white, green, red, blue, and impossibly enough, black. The colors washed over me, each granting me their own boon, their own comfort. White pushed the pain from my body and brought me hope. Green filled me with unstoppable energy and excitement. Red fed me the thrill of anger, adrenaline, and rage. Blue

stilled the waters of my mind, tempting me with the knowledge hidden in its depths. Black filled me with ambition and the desire to achieve true greatness.

I raced toward this light, eager to embrace it, to claim it for myself. But no matter how hard I ran, those vaulted halls stretched ever further, denying me my prize. My legs burned with effort, the heat radiating across my thighs like fire.

With a start, I snapped awake.

I'd fallen asleep in bed, the game I had been playing now frozen and glitched out. The Craptop had grown uncomfortably hot on my lap, jolting me from my strange dream.

Grumbling, I unplugged the laptop and let it sit by the window, hoping it would cool down. Rubbing my slightly singed legs, I shuffled toward the bathroom and yawned. My mouth tasted like ash, and I was dying for a glass of water.

Returning to bed, I heard something slide off the blanket and clatter on the floor. Puzzled, I looked at the floor, and saw the strange brass key I had found while cleaning the juice bar.

"The fuck?" I could have sworn I'd put it in lost and found.

Was I losing my mind? Being in poor health all the time sucked, but at least I had my wits. If not for losing my scholarship due to poor attendance on account of being sick all the time, I would probably be in a Doctorate program for mathematics already. I leaned over and winced as my back twinged, then scooped up the key. My fingers tingled when I held it.

"I'll just toss you in lost and found when I'm back at the gym," I told myself.

It wasn't a big deal, honestly. It would be easy enough to just drop it in the bin when I got back to work.

I leaned back in bed and held the key up to examine it. "It's not like anyone would believe that I was trying to steal a..."

Looking past the key, I stared at the battered wooden door that had suddenly appeared against my bedroom wall. It was covered in flecks of peeling blue paint and swirls of gold ornamentation. I studied the faded filigree, my eyes drifting down to the battered knob and its matching keyhole.

For a moment I was afraid I was suffering the same hallucinations that had plagued my mother. In her final days, she had mentioned a mysterious door more than once, but she had also claimed insects were crawling across her brain, and that one of her doctors was secretly Quentin Tarantino getting ready to direct a medical drama. It was just something you kind of rolled with.

But then the same, strange compulsion that had filled my dream washed over me. My fingers were tingling, the key suddenly becoming hot in my hand, and I could have sworn I saw a brief flash of light from within the keyhole.

I barely even registered crossing my bedroom and inserting the key. The lock was stiff, but *clicked* open loudly, the sound reverberating through my fogged mind. Without a glance back, I opened the door and stepped through.

## Chapter 2

My bare feet slapped against the cold marble floor. Empty shelves and toppled, shattered display cases filled the huge, circular space. Shards of glass and scraps of paper covered the

floor. Overhead, filthy skylights let in scattered rays of light, painting the chamber in shades of white and gray. Bits of plantlife, mostly withered vines and scraggly moss, completed the abandoned, ruinous look.

I was in some kind of lobby. Ahead of me was a desk, made from the same white, marbled stone as the walls and floor. The desk was massive; it wrapped around the base of a gigantic pillar that rose upward and connected with the distant ceiling above. Work stations had been built into the desk, enough for dozens of attendees. Books lay heaped on the counter, their covers faded and worn. I picked one up and looked inside, but the pages were blank.

What caught my attention next though were the stone pedestals set before each station. They were ornately carved, their sides covered in a flowing script of symbols I couldn't even begin to understand. It was like there wasn't enough light in the room, because whenever I tried to study one of the symbols, it felt like the damned thing was shifting before my eyes.

Only one of the pedestals was occupied. A black orb hovered above it, its surface composed of thousands of flowing lines of text. They seemed to be the same script that adorned the pedestals, but these were actually moving.

The lines of characters and indecipherable symbols moved like ink. The orb gave me the impression that I was looking at some form of hyper-advanced computer, currently caught up in a complex calculation.

I took a hesitant step forward, only to feel pain shoot up my leg from the base of my foot.

"Fuck!" I hopped backward, then leaned against a nearby pedestal to examine my foot.

Blood welled up around a shard of glass that was stuck in my skin. The broken glass was likely from one of the display cases. I pulled out the shard and pressed a finger against the wound, then winced. The pain was real enough. I definitely wasn't dreaming.

Pulling away my finger, I realized that my foot was bleeding quite a bit. I looked back the way I had come. Perhaps I could run back to my room and grab some bandages or... shit.

The door I had used to enter the strange realm was gone, replaced by a blank, circular section of wall. If I was getting home, I'd have to find a different way back. Unable to think of anything else, I ripped the sleeve off of my shirt and wrapped it around my injured foot.

Strangely, I wasn't nervous or afraid. Maybe it was the otherworldly location, the similarity to my dreams, or the fact that the weird little inky orb somehow called to me, but I felt oddly at ease. If I really was suffering some strange hallucination, at least it was peaceful.

I approached the orb, careful to avoid the broken glass. Whether I was suffering a mental break or not, that shit still hurt.

Up close to the orb, I studied the countless strands of black, inky text. The strange characters wound and twisted over each other, like a bundle of snakes vying for supremacy. Every now and then, despite not seeing a single word of English, I swore I could almost understand the designs forming and dissolving along its surface.

All I could think was — *Magic, real magic!*

The sphere wanted me to touch it — I was sure — to see what wonders it held. While the gamer in me screamed that this was probably a trick of some kind, I was trapped in a massive building with no food, water, or even a way home, as far as I could tell. I might as well double down and see what happened next.

I reached out and grabbed it with both hands.

My fingertips instantly sank into the orb. Desperately, I tried to jerk my hands back. The ink clung to me like spiderwebs. They surged over my hands and up my arms. The letters and characters flowed along my skin with a skittering chill. A susurrant of dark whispers filled my mind as the substance consumed me.

With a jolt, I was shoved away from the orb. Its surface rippled and boiled, and just when I thought it might explode, it melted instead. Black ink ran down the sides of the pedestal, pooling onto the floor.

I looked down at my hands, aghast, but they seemed the same as before. The voices I had heard were gone. The chamber was completely silent. Cursing, I got up. Had I gone mad? What had I been thinking?

Something *plopped*.

The puddle was bubbling. I watched in horror as the goo erupted. From the frothing ooze emerged a creature, a being of teeth and claws. It arched its spine and stretched, its maw opening wide before snapping shut.

"At last, I have awakened. Look upon me in wonder, mage, for you now gaze upon the visage of an almighty Index!"

I stared at the beast, suddenly dumbfounded.

"Impressive, aren't I?" The creature turned in place, revealing his tail and backside. "So what manner of creature am I? A griffon? Strange, I don't think I have wings. Also, you seem to be quite large for a mage. Are you some kind of giant?"

It held up a paw and popped out its claws. "Oh, oh, am I a dragon? Please tell me I'm a dragon!"

"You're a cat, dude." I looked down at the feline.

"Nonsense. I am an Index, a being of pure knowledge unique to every mage. There is no way that I would manifest as something quite so simple as..." The Index turned in place, examining its body. After a couple of turns, it took a playful swat at its own tail, then hissed in displeasure. "By the gods, a cat? I'm a simple cat?"

"How did you — not know that?"

"How could I know!" The cat hissed again, then scrunched up its features. "I'm an extension of the mage who summons me, a unique creation! Are you sure I'm not perhaps a tiger or something?" The Index spun in place again.

"I could absolutely pick you up." I knelt down to study the cat. "Can I pet you?"

"No, you cannot pet me!" The Index hissed. "What sort of mage summons an Index that is a mere..." The creature's green eyes flashed. "A housecat? I'm a freaking housecat?!?"

I shrugged. "I'm not an expert on cat breeds," I admitted. "So, I guess that's what you are. By the way, what's an Index? And why did you call me a mage? Wait, were you inside that weird orb thingy?"

"Of course I was!" The Index sounded indignant, which was a little funny. Its voice was like a child's, with just a hint of a squeak to it. "That *weird orb thingy* was the interface for the Index system here at the Halls of Magic. You are most definitely a mage, otherwise you would not have survived the binding process."

"Oh." I rubbed the back of my head. This place was weird. "Hypothetically, let's pretend I'm an idiot."

The Index narrowed its eyes at me.



“Done,” it replied.

“Why am I here?” I stood and gestured around me. “And what is this place?”

The Index just stared at me before enunciating each word very carefully. “This is the Halls of —”

I frowned. “You can speak faster than that.”

“Are you sure? You did tell me to speak to you like you’re an idiot.”

“Typical asshole cat,” I muttered.

The Index sneezed, then pawed at its nose, which was pretty cute. Its whole body was made of ink, and I really wanted to know if it felt oily to the touch.

“Okay, fine. I was being facetious. Facetious is a word that means I was treating this situation with an inappropriate amount of humor.”

I waited for the Index to continue.

“You now stand in the mythical Halls of Magic,” said the Index. “Every mage gets a personal invitation to this place on their twenty-third birthday. They are invited to study the underpinnings of the universe and learn spells that can bend or even break reality itself! This is where mages like you all come —”

The Index leapt onto the highest structure it could find and cleared its throat. “*To become the most powerful beings in all of Creation!*”

The Index’s words echoed around the circular room. After a moment, the cat opened its eyes and looked around.

“Hey, where is everybody?”

“No idea.” I replied. “So you’re an Index, huh? Do you have a name?”

The Index shook its head. “Not yet, young Jake Galdur. It is your right to choose a name for me, but I must caution you. Whatever name you choose shall be part of your legacy forevermore, and you will want to pick one—”

“I’ll just call you Dex,” I said.

It was like just accepting the default when creating a game character. Dex stared at me with actual hatred.

“You would... consign me to this form and give me the name of a simpleton?”

“Yep.” I crossed my arms. “Think of it like coming from humble beginnings.”

“Not even a title? Something grand or formal?” Dex growled. “Lord Dex? Dex the Mysterious?”

“How did you know my name?” I asked.

“I am your Index,” the cat replied. “In the moment of my creation, I was bound specifically to you. At a bare minimum, I would know your name.”

“Awesome. Tell me more about being a mage.”

Dex sighed. “On the day of your twenty-third birthday, you gain access to the Halls of Magic. This is something your family should have spent the last decade preparing you for.”

“For magic school?” I winced. “Yeah, I don’t have any family, so...”

“No matter. Society itself would have identified you at a young age, and someone would have told you —” Dex looked around the empty lobby again. “I suspect something is amiss here... Didn’t your teachers prepare you for this grandiose day?!”

“Nope — and I haven’t been a student for years now,” I told him. “They kick you out when you keep missing school and can’t keep up with all your assignments and exams.” After losing

the scholarship, there had been no way to pay for college, and I had been smart enough to realize that getting loans would just cripple me financially. My condition would never improve, and neither would my grades. And so I dropped out in my sophomore year. The job at the gym wasn't great, but it kept me fed and had decent insurance. I wasn't thriving, but I was surviving, if just barely.

The Index scowled. "You truly have no knowledge of this place?"

"I really don't."

The cat sighed. "Well then, looks like I've got my work cut out for me."

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"The Halls of Magic has existed since the beginning of time," Dex instructed, speaking in a haughty tone. "It contains all lore, all knowledge, from across the multiverse! If a story has ever been told, if a spell has ever been cast, then there's a copy of it here! It is truly the greatest archive in all of existence, a monument to wisdom!"

I scanned the ruined lobby. "I don't know—it kind of looks like a shithole to me."

"Shithole!" Dex hissed, arching his back. The fur on his body rippled with indignation.

I gestured to the devastation all around us. "We are standing in the same room, right?"

Apparently, from what the cat had said, we were in some kind of receiving lobby. It was meant to help new arrivals, partnering them with an Index that in turn would familiarize them with the Halls.

But I guessed that I was the first person to step inside the place in a long, long time. My bloody footprints were the only trail along the dusty floor. There were no other signs of activity. All the furniture and display stands had been smashed, and even the invading plant life had dried up and died.

So far, the only *living* being I had encountered was Dex, and I wasn't even sure if he counted.

Dex licked his paw, but didn't look around as I had. "I'm sure there's a logical explanation for all of this. Maybe someone's experiment got out of hand, or perhaps a cursed tome was opened? I'll just connect to the Records and verify what's going on."

His form rippled as a strange aura surrounded him.

"Records?"

"Yes. Think of them as the central information desk for the Halls," he replied. "A council of powerful mages, volunteers from across the multiverse, that work to maintain the Halls of Magic. They ensure its documents are organized and its magical resources are properly contained."

Dex bowed his head, a look of concern crossing his face. He did this for several seconds, his fur fluctuating like a sine wave. "Come on! Why isn't anyone answering?"

I looked around the ruined room. Was there anyone alive to answer? How long had it been since someone else had even been in the Halls of Magic?

"Well, it seems like they're busy at the moment," the cat said nonchalantly, though his tail twitched.

He was acting like nothing was wrong, when clearly something really, really bad had happened.

"So, what's an Index anyway?" I asked, hoping to distract him from the issue and pick up some information for myself.

The cat sat back on his haunches and drew himself to his full height. “Indexes are the guides and guardians of the Halls of Magic. We help young mages navigate its passages, search its shelves, and learn the ways of magic!”

My heart lurched to a stop. “Wait, I can learn magic?”

“Of course!” Dex gave me a skeptical look. “You might be a nincompoop, but you’re definitely a mage. You have a key, right?”

“Key?” I patted my pockets and then dug out the Brass key. “This mean this key?”

“That is your Key to the Halls of Magic. Every mage gets one for their twenty-third birthday!”

“Why twenty-three?” I asked, still feeling skeptical.

The Index shrugged. “You would have to ask the Records about that. Honestly, it probably has to do with the fact that teenagers are idiots and far more likely to kill themselves with magic. But to get back to your question, Indexes are meant to be familiars, magical assistants. We are built from shreds of stray souls and infused with knowledge of the Halls. In turn, we are then gifted to young mages, our form pulled from their subconscious.”

He looked sourly at his paws. “Seriously, you couldn’t have imagined me as a Solar Dragon, a Cerberus Wolf, or even a Polar Lemur? Why a house cat?”

In truth, if someone had come up to me and asked what form a familiar should take, I would have said a black cat. I’d read way too many spooky books and played too many video games to think of anything else. I decided to keep those thoughts to myself.

Dex glanced at the bloody rag I had wrapped around my injured foot.

“I can think of a wonderful first lesson—Cure Wounds!” he announced. “You’re a mage, you’re in the Halls of Magic, you should learn your first spell!”

My heart skipped a beat again. “My first spell?”

“Of course.” He jumped off the pedestal. “You have access to the Protection Magic domain, right? Follow me, there’s a proper Protection Magic primer around here, I am sure of it.”

Despite my misgivings, what else coil I do but follow Dex.

Magic — real magic! If a talking cat seemingly made out of ink said he could teach me magic, I had to believe him. Sure, the Halls of Magic looked like a dilapidated ruin, but the idea of learning a spell that could fix my injured foot thrilled me to the core.

Stepping forward, Dex passed through a doorway at the end of the lobby. Beyond was a huge hall, its walls and ceilings practically disappearing into the distance. I had to take a moment to marvel at the sheer size of the room; it made Grand Central Station seem like a claustrophobic hovel.

Bookshelves stretched as far as the eye could see, thousands of them. Made from stone and wood, they rose hundreds of feet into the air. They were stuffed to the brim with books. Even more books were littered across the floors in heaps.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, gazing in awe.

“I am glad you finally realize how impressive the Halls — *and I* — really are,” the Index huffed. “Every story that’s ever been recorded is here, along with every spell ever documented. If someone invented a spell, you’ll find it amongst these shelves!”

“So it’s like the Library of Congress for Magic?” I guessed.

“Sure — whatever the Library of Congress is,” the cat confirmed absently, his head swiveling back and forth. “The shelves are a bit more disorganized than they should be, but I am sure we can find the way. Follow me!”

The cat marched down the row and then suddenly turned left, forcing me to hurry to keep up with him. My injured foot ached with each step, but otherwise, I felt suspiciously good. Sure, my knees protested as I hurried to keep up, and I could feel something rasping in my lungs, but that was normal everyday pain. For the amount of effort I was putting in, I should have been on the floor, wheezing. Before I could stop and think about it, Dex began batting at a shelf.

“Why did you have to make me so short?” he complained. “I cannot reach anything!”

There were ladders running up and down the aisle. Some were short, little more than stools, while others were stories tall, riding on brass rails. I grabbed one of the shorter ones and dragged it over.

“Third shelf, right there!” Dex said, gesturing with his paws.

There were books jammed into the shelf. I couldn't help but look through the titles. Only some of them were in English; *Quantum Magic for Dummies*, *Jackalopes and Where to Find Them*, and *So You Managed to Turn Yourself Inside Out - Now What?*

Surprisingly, most of the books were blank. I opened the Jackalope one and only found empty pages.

Toward the back of the shelf I found a black, leather-bound volume. It had been hidden behind a stack of blank tomes. A warm tingle ran through my fingers and I pulled it off the shelf.

“Perfect!” Dex purred.

I warily opened the book, half-expecting something to jump out at me. Instead, I was greeted by a bunch of gibberish. The characters on the page swam in front of my eyes, squirming like they were living things. Flipping the pages, I saw there were illustrations composed solely of moving fractals, but they made no sense to me either. Just looking at the book for more than a minute gave me a stabbing headache.

“Seriously?” Dex asked incredulously when I complained about the book's nauseating effects. “You don't even have the Protection Domain? How is that possible? It's one of the Prime Domains and very beginner friendly. Virtually anyone can access it!”

“I told you, I didn't even know about magic before today,” I shot back.

He hissed in anger when he inspected the book. “Even worse, the primer is incomplete! Look, there are parts that are missing!”

Squinting, I could see he was right. The fractal was broken, with rough edges where parts were missing, like someone had erased them.

He growled, pacing off a few feet. His tail swished angrily. “It looks like we'll need to visit the Protection Aspect. Not only will that grant you access to the domain, it can teach you a few basic spells too.”

“In English, please?”

He sighed dramatically. “Magic is typically categorized via various Domains. The Prime Domains cover everything! Most mages learn their first spells by communing with the Aspects. Think of them as beings of pure magic, tutors meant to show young mages the way.”

I felt like my head was spinning. “Prime Domains? Aspects?”

“Forget it,” he sighed. “Listen, our goal is simple. Cure Wounds is part of the Protection Domain, which includes spells for shielding, healing, and blessings. We just need to find the Protection Aspect and have it teach you how to access that domain and a few starter spells.”

He walked away from me down the aisle. I tucked the book under my arm and ran after him.

# Chapter 3

“I’m getting kind of sick of asking questions, but what’s an Aspect?”

“Aspects are magical beings created by the Records, they’re kind of like Indexes,” the cat answered. “There’s one for each Prime Domain: Protection, Nature, War, Darkness, and Knowledge. Below them are an infinite spread of Subdomains, representing increasingly specialized applications of magic, like Necromancy or Pyromancy.”

He sniffed the air, then resumed walking. “Lucky for us, there’s an access point nearby where you can commune with the Protection Aspect.”

We emerged into a crossroads between shelves. I noticed right away that several had tipped over, spilling their contents everywhere. Other shelves had shattered completely, leaving mountains of toppled books.

“Damn, the cleaning crew is really slacking off,” Dex *tsked*. He turned and looked at me. “Jake, why are you still carrying that book? If you really want to haul it around, you should store it in your Spellbook.”

“Spellbook?” I repeated.

He huffed. “All mages have a Spellbook, a mystic tome that lists all the Domains they’ve mastered and spells they learned.”

The whole thing gave me a headache.

I flipped through the primer again and then held it up. “I can’t even read this.”

“It doesn’t matter. Spellbooks include spatial storage capabilities for situations just like this,” Dex answered impatiently. “Come on, this is Magic 101 stuff! Just close your eyes and imagine your Spellbook. It’ll take the form most –”

He gave a yowl as a huge, leather-bound tome appeared in my hands.

It was a thick tome, the spine nearly as wide as the palm of my hand. The aged leather along the cover was joined by brass embellishments. My name was neatly etched on a matching plate.

“Man, I could probably bash someone’s brains in with this thing,” I muttered as I hefted the tome.

Holding it in both hands, I let the pages flip open. A blue screen, with white text, appeared above the blank pages.

## **Jake Galdur**

Human Mage

## **Unlocked Domains**

None

## **Spells**

None

Dex’s fur stood on end. “What the heck is that?”

I looked at the screen in wonder, then half-closed the book and pointed to the nameplate. “My Spellbook, apparently.” Even with the book partially-closed, the floating screen still remained.

The Index hopped on my shoulder and batted a paw at the screen—it passed right through it. “I have never heard of anything like this,” he said quietly.

I chuckled. “You claim to be formed by my subconscious, but you’ve never seen an RPG menu before?”

For a moment I was afraid I was dreaming again, but the dull, throbbing pain from my cut-up foot confirmed that I was awake. I had no clue what was going on, but the screen in front of me was real.

And if that was real, then I really *could* learn magic. Holding up the smaller primer, I followed Dex’s direction and *willed* it into my storage. The primer vanished with a *pop*.

I was ecstatic — real magic!

Shaking his head, Dex led me down a narrow passage between two toppled shelves. I practically lost him in the dark, his inky form merging with the shadows.

“This just is not right,” he complained quietly, a note of uncertainty in his voice. “I cannot contact the Records, and the whole place looks like a bomb went off. What is going on here?”

“You sure seem to know a lot for a familiar that was — summoned? — less than an hour ago,” I reasoned.

“Indexes come imprinted with vast knowledge. We would not be much good as guides and tutors otherwise,” he replied. “But, the more I think about it, the more I feel as if there are gaps in my knowledge.”

He paused, his tail flicking back and forth. “But how do you remember something you never knew? It’s incredibly frustrating.”

We emerged from the collapsed shelves. Ahead of us, the passage was clogged by a mountain of books. I grabbed a few at random, but most of the pages appeared to be blank. The few that contained scraps of text were completely incomprehensible to me.

Dex scrambled up the mound, carefully leaping from book to book. I climbed after him, mindful of books shifting as I put my weight on the pile. Once again, I realized I wasn’t nearly in as much pain as I had expected. Even stranger, I felt buoyed with energy.

Normally, after finishing work, I was exhausted, barely able to drag myself back to my apartment. I don’t know how long I had slept before stumbling through the door, but it couldn’t have been enough to recover.

What was going on?

We reached the top of the heap. I took a moment to inspect our surroundings. Looking about, I saw the chamber we were in was a convoluted maze, a tangle of fallen and crooked shelves. It was also miles across and wide.

Here and there I spotted strange landmarks; a huge tree that rose from the floor to push against the ceiling, a blazing mountain spewing lava into the air, and a serene lake. Even odder, those landmarks seemed roughly merged into the rest of the room. Lava from the mountain smoldered against nearby shelves without burning them down, while several aisles had sunk into the edge of the lake.

“This is a disaster!” Dex lamented.

“How big is this place?” I asked. If not for the roof above, I would have assumed we were outside.

“As big as it needs to be,” he answered. “What we’re gazing at is but a single ring, a tiny portion of the whole. The Halls of Magic are composed of countless rings and layers, all shifting and moving. It would take –”

I wasn’t paying attention; I had spotted a white light glowing in the distance. The light was pure and soothing. My various aches and pains seemed to fade the longer I looked at it. It called to me even more strongly than Dex’s orb had when I had first entered the Halls.

“Ah, you’ve found it.” Dex said something else next, but I had already stepped toward the light, the mound shifting dangerously beneath my feet.

Leading the way, I slid down the mountain of books. Dex hopped onto a pile of books and rode one of them down in order to keep up. As we landed, we kicked up several more tomes, their pages fluttering open as they dispersed before us. It took me a moment to notice that they were all blank.

More empty, white pages were scattered around us. They were heaped like snowdrifts against the shelves.

“Oh, this is bad, really bad!” Dex said uneasily, pressing between my shins for a better look.

“What’s bad?”

“The blank pages!” he answered. “These books contained all the stories and magic of the multiverse, remember?”

I stepped away from the cat, still confused. “Yeah, so?”

The floor trembled, causing nearby shelves to shake. Books thudded to the floor in a rain of paper, as a massive hand clutched the edge of a shelf. Something huge let out a grunt and pulled, as if extricating itself from another pile of books.

“Stories are the greatest magic of all,” Dex whispered as he pressed himself into the shadows. “The reason we keep them here is to keep the magic contained. If a story manages to escape its book, it can come to life.”

The creature growled and pulled even harder this time. Books tumbled free of the shelf, some of them flapping their covers and flying away like living birds.

I tried to copy Dex and duck into the shadows as the lumbering beast stepped into view.

“An Ogre!” the cat hissed quietly.

The creature was gigantic. The top of its head reached the upper shelves. Huge, misshapen muscles ran under wart-covered skin the color of dead flesh. Its face was somehow even uglier. Small, beady eyes glared from beneath a bony brow; the creature’s mouth was a mismatched nightmare of fangs and blunt teeth.

In one hand it carried a ripped-up section of shelving, using it as a plow to push books out of its way. The floor shook under its thunderous footfalls as it shoved its way forward.

We tried our best to blend into the shadows, but the creature sniffed the air. Slowly, it rounded its monstrous head our way and closed its eyes as it inhaled deeply. Drool leaked from between its lips as the Ogre grinned at us.

“Run!” Dex scampered forward, ducking between the monster’s legs.

I dashed to keep up with him. For a brief moment, the Orge towered above me as I dodged around its ankles. The monster smelled like sweaty socks and unwashed laundry, giving me a strange flashback to the day before.

Only a few hours ago I had been working in the gym, laundering towels. How did I end up in a crazy, magical library being chased by an imaginary monster?

Then the Ogre brought its makeshift club down, obliterating the spot where I had just been standing. Stone and paper flew through the air, showering me with rubble. I ran harder than I had in my entire life, desperate to keep up with the fleeing Index.

“The Protection Aspect is just ahead!” he shouted. “We should be safe when we reach it!”

Behind us, the Ogre roared in rage. An involuntary shiver ran down my spine and I almost lost my footing.

Dex rushed down the aisle, then ducked between two fallen shelves. I scrambled after him, my knees now burning and a painful stitch running along my side. Every breath was like fire, scorching my ribs from the inside.

We’d barely cleared the gap before the ogre crashed into the shelves. Books fell around us as we kept running, trying to put more distance between the monster and ourselves. It let out a roar as it tried to push the shelves over. I could hear the wood splintering as the structure tipped behind us.

Running into another open space, I saw it was some kind of reading lounge. Ancient chairs covered in rotting leather sat around in a circle. Dex ducked behind one of them, and I hurried to join him.

Somewhere, the Ogre stomped around, bashing into shelves as it hunted for us.

“Just stay quiet,” Dex hissed. “Ogres have a great sense of hearing and smell, but they’re almost as blind as bats. As long as it doesn’t hear us or sniff us out again, it won’t find us.”

I did my best to stifle my ragged breaths. There was little I could do about my smell, sadly.

Dex glanced around the room, his expression morose. “What happened here? It’s like nobody’s been here in forever!”

“Clearly something bad,” I suggested. “Maybe the Records — died?”

“Impossible!” He gulped, his voice far too loud. Taking a breath, he continued in a lower volume. “The Records are the greatest mages who have ever lived! If something happened to them...”

He trailed off, looking at the ruins around us. Acceptance blossomed in the black cat’s eyes, followed by a hint of grief. He had only been alive for a couple of hours, but somehow everything he knew had already been turned upside down on its head.

Something behind us inhaled sharply.

Slowly, we turned around. The Ogre was shuffling down the aisle, bending to sniff at the floor. It was following the trail of bloody footprints I had inadvertently been leaving in my wake.

“Well, shit,” I whispered.

The creature lifted its head and licked its lips.

“Run!” I grabbed the cat and took off. Dex yowled in terror as the Ogre rampaged toward us. It swung the makeshift club in a wide arc, shattering the furniture we had been hiding behind into splinters.

Dex scratched his way up to my shoulder, then pointed. “There, there!”

Ahead, there was a soft, white light.

Ducking my head, I pulled on a reserve of energy I didn’t even know I had. The Ogre roared again and chased after us, smashing its way down the aisle. I sprinted as hard as I could, trying to reach the safety of the light.



“Go, go, go!” Dex yelled.

His claws dug into the fabric of my shirt so hard that it hurt.

The light grew brighter. For a moment, I swore I could feel it wash over me, like a welcoming shroud.

I tripped a moment later, my foot catching on the edge of a decayed rug. Hitting the floor hard, I tried to roll to my feet, but my exhausted body refused to cooperate. I ended up spilling forward in an awkward somersault instead. All I could do was land on my back and watch as the Ogre approached, its club raised.

My life flashed before my eyes as the creature brought its weapon down — I was disappointed to see just how short and uneventful it had been.

The air rang, like someone had struck an invisible gong. The Ogre reared back, grunting in pain as its club slipped loose from its numbed fingers.

Dex slid out of my arms and sprawled out flat on the floor. “We made it!”

I got painfully to my feet. “We did?”

I stood in a clearing between several clusters of shelves, which formed a semi-circle. Hovering overhead was a huge, white orb surrounded by bands of silver that rotated independently of each other. The orb *hummed* with power, casting pure, warm light in all directions.

As I watched, the Ogre hammered its hands against the barrier of light that surrounded the clearing. No matter how hard the creature struck, all it accomplished was recreating that single, pure tone of magic that spoke directly to my heart.

“A powerful Shield spell, perhaps even a derivative of Sanctuary,” the Index explained, officially reverting to his scholarly voice. “Aspects aren’t sentient in a manner that humans would understand, but they know how to protect themselves.”

I looked back at the hovering sphere. It was massive, filling most of the clearing. Upon further inspection, I realized that the orb itself was translucent, the light actually coming from something that fluttered around inside. I squinted in an attempt to make out what it was, but could only spot motes of light that dazzled me with comforting radiance.

“These containment vessels exist all over the Halls of Magic,” Dex explained. “Each is attuned to a specific Prime Domain, allowing aspiring mages to unlock that school of magic.”

I approached the orb slowly. The light was so bright that it actually hurt my eyes. Was this what moths went through just before they flew into the bug zapper? I was terrified but entranced at the same time.

“Jake, go ahead and touch it,” Dex said. “The Ogre won’t be able to get us while we’re here. This is a place of power, after all. The Aspect could keep this spell up indefinitely.”

As if understanding the Index’s words, the Ogre stalked off and vanished back among the shelves. I could still hear it, snuffling about, but apparently it was fine to bid its time till we left the protection of the spell.

I stepped closer to the hovering sphere.

In a way, it reminded me a bit of the pictures of biblically accurate angels that were posted online. “What is it, exactly? You never really explained that part.”

“The orb is a containment vessel. Aspects are pure embodiments of the Prime Domains,” the cat replied. “Ideals condensed down into a singularity. They act as tutors, imparting knowledge

to aspiring mages and allowing them to commune directly with their magic. In your world, an adequate comparison would be an avatar through which one would converse with a god.”

“Wait, is god real in my world?”

Dex rolled his eyes. “That’s not what I said at all. I was simply giving you an analogy that made sense.”

“That sounds like a lot of words for *I don’t know*.”

The cat growled. “Hurry up! We don’t have all day, Jake.”

“Alright.” I faced the orb. “How do I do that?”

“Just touch the containment vessel. The Aspect will reach out to you. From there, it will manifest in a manner similar to my own. It can then teach you how to access its Domain and cast basic spells like Cure Wounds.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said as I approached the orb.

The spinning rings shifted out of the way as the floating sphere descended, allowing me to safely touch its smooth surface.

A warm current of power ran through me, churning up my arm and directly into my heart.

“Still...” Dex squinted. “It’s glowing way brighter than normal. I can almost feel the sheer amount of condensed power welling inside the containment vessel. When’s the last time someone was here?”

I could barely hear him. Blood rushed through my head as my heart beat a fierce rhythm. The power that had streamed into my chest was now flowing through my head, my arms, and my legs, filling me with an impossible warmth.

For a moment, I was actually able to forget the pain and exhaustion that had been my constant companions. I even forgot the aching loneliness that had come to define my life. The light inside the sphere turned into twisting threads of energy that hovered free of the smooth, crystalline surface. They caressed my arm and slid along my skin until they brushed against my face.

*Crack!*

A fissure appeared in the sphere. Dex yowled in terror as the containment vessel began to shatter. The silver bands shuddered, then crashed to the floor. The glass shattered, sending slivers falling to the floor.

The white light was impossibly bright, almost blinding.

From within the glowing radiance, a shadow appeared. It filled my vision as it fell right toward me. Without thinking, I stretched out my arms to catch it. Whatever it was, it was much larger, and heavier, than a housecat. Together, we toppled to the floor.

I was blind, my vision full of technicolor spots. I tried to blink them away as I struggled to identify the creature in my arms; it was clearly warm and alive. If it was something really impressive—like a griffin—I was sure Dex was going to be pissed. I’d never hear the end of it.

Reaching out, I brushed a curtain of blonde hair out of my way. A beautiful pair of crystal blue eyes stared back at me in shock and confusion.

“Hello?” the stunning woman gasped. “Who are you?”