

# Chapter 4: Start of the Isekai Journey

So what if I'd fallen into a crevasse, getting myself into a dangerous situation I'd have made fun of someone else for? It was going to be ok. I had my purse, that bulge that had knocked the air from my lungs earlier. I could call for help and...

After digging in my purse for a bit, I pulled my hand from its depths with half a cell phone. How the hell...? A shattered screen, I could understand but *broken in half?*

Screeching, I tossed my phone at the far-distant fissure, only to have it hit me on the shoulder on the way back down.

"Ok. Admittedly not the smartest thing I've done," I said. "Let's see if this dead weight has anything useful in it."

Scrambling to my knees, I dumped my purse's contents in front of me, organizing them into two piles. In the junk pile: two halves of a cell phone, several receipts, my coin purse and wallet, sunglasses, and keys. Possibly useful: my e-reader as a light source, alcohol swabs, a bottle of portable hand sanitizer, travel lotion, chap stick, sanitary bags for Beau, and a small first aid kit from the last CPR class I'd taken. All good stuff.

As I bandaged my face, I eyed the few as-of-yet unclassified items from my purse, uncertain which pile to put them in. In these circumstances, my journal, fountain pen, and ink cartridges might not necessarily be *useful*, but I thought of them as an integral part of maintaining my sanity. I had so many stories and places and *people* in my head that if I didn't release that noise at times via pen and paper, a tiny piece of me would wind into an anxious knot. Considering that, my writing implements went into the useful pile.

Identifying the second item took me a minute. It was a black cube, small enough to fit in my palm, with square buttons bristling from two of its opposing faces. With glowing, purple dots in each button, the smooth surface in between them felt seamless, except for an indentation in one side. An O-ring was floating inside it.

Yes, floating. As in not attached to anything. If I hadn't been kneeling underground, I might have been tempted to.... I don't know. Pull it? But as it was, I ignored the temptation, wondering where this had come from...

The junkie's gift. In the chaos of traveling, I'd forgotten about that encounter. Chills shot up and down my spine as I again considered the possibility that my life had changed that night.

Roughly shaking my head, I tossed the cube into the junk pile. This was reality. The junkie must have gotten his hands on a piece of tech that wasn't on the market yet. Somehow. And given it to me. For some reason.

"Quit it, overactive imagination," I said. "Focus."

Unlocking my e-reader, I swept its light over my surroundings before wincing. There was no way I could climb out of here. Those walls were too slick and the fissure too far above me. I might try it later, but for now, there must be another way out.

Maybe this underground spring emerged from the earth somewhere nearby. It was running low enough that I could follow it for a time. Thanks to my dumb decision to share my solitary plans with Allan, no one would come looking for me until later tonight. I might as well do something until then. I'd keep track of the time with my e-reader, and once evening had come, I'd follow the spring back here.

If I didn't find a way out first.

Everything—junk and useful—went back into my purse, save for my e-reader. Its glow led the way into the black.

Despite the aches and pains of imminent bruises and the worry gnawing at me, I found myself humming as I stumbled over pebbles. After all, I was alone, and this was an adventure of sorts, even if it wasn't one I'd planned. I'd never wanted to go cave diving before, but I would enjoy this once in a lifetime experience and *damn* the terror of it.

A couple of hours into my trek, I stopped to take a break. I'd never been the most physically fit person, and if this became a 'starving to death if you're not careful' sort of situation, I wanted to save my strength. I'd rather risk dying via a fall rather than go out in the throes of hunger's delirium, and that preference would involve me trying to climb out of here. At some point. Which meant I needed the ability to climb.

Finding the most comfortable looking patch of pebbles nearby, I switched my e-reader off. The device might come with an impressive battery life, but regardless, I'd save its charge when I could.

With my back to stone, I pulled the strange cube out of my purse. As I'd been walking, my thoughts had kept turning to it. Forget the mystery of how it had gotten into the junkie's hands. I wanted to know *what it was*. I couldn't think of a use for its complicated interface, and that fascinated me. Why make it so intricate?

Plus, its button's violet circles could keep darkness at bay while my other light source 'rested'. A few minutes alone, in absolute darkness, was fine and dandy—glorious if I was being honest—but I'd rather not experience the hallucinations that came with an extended stay in it.

Turning the cube in my hands, I pushed its buttons, but nothing happened. Perhaps it required the correct combination? Perhaps the O-ring...?

Curling my finger through it, I paused. Was this a good idea? I didn't know what this cube did. What if it was a weapon of some sort? What if it was something... more? Fantastic, impossible ideas cluttered my head, and I shook them free.

"This is reality, Brennan."

I tugged on the O-ring.

And nothing happened.

"See? I told you so."

Taking it in one hand, I bounced the cube on my palm, and in mid-air, it exploded.

Or rather, its buttons did, floating free of their middle ring. A burst of purple and blue light had me slamming my back into stone, squinting. I dropped the cube, and after hitting the ground, it rolled away from me.

When it stopped near the water, I crawled toward it until my nose and eyes were hovering inches from it.

"Huh."

With its buttons sprayed free of it, the cube's innards were revealed. A gridline of nearly invisible, silver wires formed hundreds of smaller boxes within the cube. Inside each of these hung an incandescent teardrop with some of them blue and some purple.

Carefully, I grabbed the central ring, taking the cube to where I'd been sitting. Once there, I bit my lip. Almost without my permission, I extended a trembling finger into the cube, all while my brain screamed *this is a bad idea* on repeat. I poked a blue teardrop.

And it turned purple.

Chuckling, I repeated the process a few more times before lowering the cube into my lap.

What the hell was this thing?

"Well," I breathed, licking my lips, "fascinating as this has been, I should get going."

Much as I'd like to continue figuring this mystery out, I'd caught my breath. It was time to once more try getting myself out of trouble.

How did I return the cube to its original size, though? It wouldn't fit in my purse like this, not with everything else in there.

I tried the O-ring. When pushing and pulling on it didn't work, I tried pressing the buttons into place, both one at a time and all together. It remained splayed with the teardrops inside of it

mocking me.

“Whatever you are,” I told it, “I’m *not* leaving you behind. And I’m certainly not carrying you like this.”

Flattening my hands on each set of buttons, I *pushed*, gritting my teeth. The cube resisted me, so I, being the barely advanced animal that I was, tried applying more force. Then, in a moment that would remain forever engraved in my brain, I heard something inside the cube shatter.

“Oh, no.”

Blue and purple sparks flashed over the cube in waves, each one coming faster than the last, and dropping it, I leapt to my feet.

“No, no, no, no, no.”

Blinding light poured from the cube, searing my eyes, and when I tried to run, I tripped on something.

“God. damn. it. No!”

I clawed at the ground, trying to get to my feet, but it only gave way beneath my fingers. Purple and blue light flashed over me while cold crept up my arms, and growling, I reached my feet again.

The light cut out.

Panting, I blinked, begging my eyes to work. Whatever had happened had doused me in ice, and I rubbed my arms, trying to return life to them.

The first clue that all my fears had come to pass was a continued source of illumination. If I were still underground, darkness would have surrounded me by now, but as the blurry shapes around me grew clearer, it appeared as if I’d found sunlight again.

When my vision returned to me, I wished it hadn’t. I spun in place, hoping something else might lie at my back, but no.

I was surrounded by snow. In all directions, rolling hills, smothered by a pile of fluffy white, spread for as far as I could see.

Still fine. Maybe the cube was a teleportation device, something that big business or the government had created. I’d rather believe a kooky conspiracy theory like that than what I was afraid of because if that was what had happened, help might be imminent. I might be standing in the northern reaches of Canada or Alaska, which would be much preferable than... than...

Swallowing, I looked up. A blue sky hung over me, just like the one I’d praised in San Jose, and angry looking clouds were billowing on the horizon. All good.

What wasn't was the sun, a tiny, white pinprick that was almost lost on its blue background.

And the two moons. One of which loomed so large that it was like it wanted to eat the sky. And of course, half of it had been shattered.

"How did this...?" I whispered with my fingers twitching. "Are you *kidding* me?"

I dragged my gaze to the horizon and once more, spun in place, forgetting how cold I was while tearing at my hair.

"A portal fantasy," I whispered before shouting. "I'm in a *fucking portal fantasy!* The *worst* kind of story!"

Screaming, I kicked at the cube that had brought me here. It flew into snow, burying so far into that white fluff that I could hardly see it. Squeezing my eyes shut, I pinched the bridge of my nose.

"I'll probably need that," I said to no one.

Sighing, I trudged through the snow drifts to retrieve the demon box. I should have known better than to play with the damn thing.

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