

Looking back, Max noticed the camp had vanished, along with the child. He found himself surrounded by dense forest and a small pool of water. The moon's gentle light shimmered on the water's edge, casting a partial glow on his face. A sinister fog slithered out from the forest's depths, shrouding his surroundings. The water transformed into a mirror-like surface, enticing him to lean closer. In doing so, he witnessed his reflection stretching infinitely into the distance. Each mirrored image seemed to communicate with the one before it. Max strained to hear them, but their words remained silent. The pounding sensation he had felt earlier had ceased.

*What is this? ... Hello, is anyone there? Why can't I speak?*

A feeling of relaxation came over him. he knew that he could move, but didn't. The reflection darkened. He bent over to get a better look. A set of veiny purple eyes looked back at him, mimicking his every move.

“Hello, Max. It is nice to meet you.”

*Who's there?*

“I’m the one true King. They’ve fooled you, a mere child, into believing you’re some savior. I assure you’re not. I am the one that will save us all.”

*Wait, you can hear my thoughts? Why can't I speak?*

The Defeated snickered. “Yes, I’ve trapped your mind in the shadow realm. I’ll release you if you agree to leave this world.”

*I can't abandon my friends, and what guarantees that you'll never harm anyone?*

“You don’t, ahahaha.”

“Max... Max,” a familiar voice called out, riding the wind. Max's hair fluttered as twigs and leaves scattered on the forest floor. Another gust of wind came, carrying echoes of the voice. “Max... Max.” The water rippled, distorting the image, while part of the dark fog was carried away.

“Max, don't listen to that voice. Do as I say, or your family and friends will pay the price,” The Defeated warned.

“Max, use your wand. Expurgo, expurgo.” The voice urged, fading away with the breeze.

Max reached into his robe, pulling out his wand.

*Expurgo? What does that mean? Hmm...* Max studied his

wand, still unsure how it worked.