

Chapter 1

*Seven doors were created
Will contain all you need.
To get through the first,
Find each beneath.*
— Faye 2:6, Book of Moira

“Its blood was thick and vile in her mouth. She glanced up to see dark lines hanging where they struck. Its wounds rained blue around her.

She remembered this. She also remembered her thought.

*‘Your mind is strong. And use the eye.’
And then it grabbed her leg again.”*

Paige opened her eyes. Beside her bed was her clock, but she didn't want to look at it yet. She dreamt the exact same dream every night for a year and it made no more sense than when she first dreamt it. But today it began, and it started with her clock.

“Okay. Deep breaths,” she thought to herself. “Just look at the clock, Paige. Not so hard. And even if it says 6:34, that means nothing.”

She glanced at the clock. It read 6:34am.

Butterflies danced in her stomach.

“So what if it's 6:34am? It's the morning! This is just a coincidence. Just a—”

Paige stopped talking. She recognized the words

she was saying like some twisted form of Déjà vu. She shook her head and got out of bed.

“Just a coincidence,” Paige muttered as she sat down at her computer. A few shakes on the mouse and the screen broke out of sleep mode. Her browser was open, as it always was, and logged into the community forums for the Vanguard Agency. She refreshed the screen and navigated to a message she wrote months ago:

Does anyone else have a recurring dream where they read the same book over and over again? I know it sounds strange, but instead of doing stuff in my dreams, I just read a book.

The message itself had been long buried, overtaken by posts involving the latest drama in meme form. She checked for a response every day. And every day, she was disappointed.

She couldn't include everything, of course. She couldn't write how the Book* was a written account of

* Whoever wrote the Book thought it was of enough importance to warrant capitalization. This inevitably led to the question of the author's identity, and Paige did spend an entire night pondering this conundrum which resulted in a failed calculus midterm and being grounded for a week. One would think that reading a footnote of such massive failure would have been enough to warn Paige away from this disaster, but she remained obstinate in her disbelief and suffered the consequences.†

† Paige was also not impressed by the Book's sassy comments and usually skipped the footnotes.

her future. Who would believe that? She also wanted to update the post and inform them the Book started today, May 17, 2020, but she wanted to restrict the people who thought she was crazy to just herself.

The clock alarm grabbed her attention. It was a quarter to seven and Jess would be by to pick her up soon. Paige stood and resolved to face whatever was coming.

“Throw what you have at me. I’m ready,” said Paige at her mirror. Her reflection didn’t look convinced.



Waiting outside, Paige looked up to see Jess waving across the street. Jess wore the same thing she always wore: all black except for her favourite red leather jacket. Her dark, long hair was tied back, highlighting angular cheekbones. Paige had never noticed the features of her friends before, but now that it was written in a book, she made these observations. Did the Book follow her? Or did she follow the Book? This line of thought made her uneasy.

“Paige! How goes your morning? I had strange dreams about legumes. I didn’t even know they were called legumes until my dream. How is that possible? You dream about anything fun?”

Jess was always random in the morning. Still, her greeting matched what was written in the Book. Paige wondered why she was still doubting its words. Was she scared of being disappointed?

“Uh, hello? Paige? You there? If you were dreaming about something steamy, then you don’t need to tell me. I’m totally lying. I wanna know about the steaminess!” Jess said as she grabbed Paige’s shoulders.

“You read books, right, Jess?” asked Paige.

“Hey! You’re not getting out of telling me the steaminess by deflection. That’s my skill, and I am the king,” said Jess.

“How often do they describe people? If a book described you wearing your favourite leather jacket, and your dark hair tied back, highlighting angular cheekbones, is that normal?”

“*This* isn’t normal, Paige. What’s up with you this morning?” said Jess.

“I think I may have to become a vanguard, Jess.”

“What? A vanguard? Where is this coming from? And what do you mean you ‘have to’? That doesn’t make sense,” said Jess.

“You have to be one to get access to portals right?”

“Portals? Now you want to enter portals, too? Paige, you do realize becoming a vanguard is like training for the Olympics. You get tested at a young age and then you train. You don’t suddenly decide to become one on a whim.”

“I’ve been training,” said Paige.

“You joined track team! That’s not the same thing. There’s more to being a vanguard than running, you know. You need to train with the Agency,” said Jess.

“Like my mom would allow that. She hates the fact you’re doing it, and you’re not her kid,” said Paige.

Jess’s entire life revolved around becoming a vanguard: the first group of warriors who entered and cleared the portals. Every morning and evening, Jess made sure her schedule was reserved for training and this year, she was finally of age to apply to a guild.

“How is it you only mention this now? After all the years we’ve known each other?” asked Jess.

“I didn’t know for sure until today,” said Paige.

“Are you kidding me? Paige, entering a portal isn’t like your fantasy, RPG, wonderlands. People die in

there. Do you know how long it's taken me to learn how to use weapons properly? You must have been tested and found lacking, no? That's why you weren't enrolled at a younger age."

"You put it so nicely. And no, my mom got an exemption for me," said Paige.

"Oh. Right, sorry I brought that up. Well, you should respect her wishes. You're very good on the track team. If you need another hobby, why not do something else? Maybe you could start a podcast."

"Jess, listen to me. I know how to solve Fyn's Portal," said Paige.

Jess stopped, wondering if she heard correctly.

"What? Fyn's portal? As in Agatha Fyn's Portal? The only portal to appear with a locked, iron door? The only portal the Agency has restricted all access to?" asked Jess.

"Didn't know there was more than one," said Paige.

"Paige, nobody can solve Fyn's portal. Why are you being so random today?"

Over three years ago, Agatha Fyn was your standard unmarried lady who lived with a bunch of rabbits in a small, downtown bungalow coveted by multiple condo developers. They had offered to buy her out numerous times, but she refused to the utmost of her ability, which was surprisingly able given the number of intimidating men deployed to entice her eviction.

This was all brought to a halt once the portal appeared. It took with it half her bathroom and a few rabbits. The Vanguard Agency immediately stepped in and blocked off the whole street, making it completely restricted to humans, lawyers, and pets. Agatha Fyn did get a generous settlement, but passed away a few months later, unable to accept the loss of her precious claw-foot bath tub, which was gifted to

her by a suitor who eventually dumped her in favour of marrying rich. Agatha wasn't the same after that.

Jess checked the time. It was almost time for her training to start.

"Look, I don't want to be late. Tonight, we can talk about solving Fyn's portal and then figure out how to find Atlantis when that's done," said Jess.

"Ha ha. We're talking after school," said Paige.

"I train after school. You know that. I always have training after school," said Jess.

"One of the assistant coaches is going to fracture her collarbone. They'll have to cancel your session because the only one who can drive her to the hospital is the head coach," said Paige.

"Yeah, okay. You're being weird, and I should know. Anyway, I gotta go. See you," said Jess as she waved and ran down the street.



The end of the last period came sooner than she wanted and Paige stared out the window of her class, mulling over what was to come. Jess would not be arriving for a bit, giving Paige too much time to ferment in her anxiety. Her pencil tapped incessantly on the top of her desk, not endearing her to her teacher.

"Don't we have somewhere to be, Paige?"

"Oh! Uh, sorry, Miss Sullivan," said Paige.

Looking sheepish, Paige stowed her pencil away. Miss Sullivan tended to use the royal 'we' whenever she felt a disciplining was called for. Still, she was concerned for Paige.

"You okay? You've been distracted all day," said Miss Sullivan.

"I'm fine," said Paige.

“The mantra of this generation. Well, if you ever feel like talking, you know where I am.”

“Thank you, Miss Sullivan,” said Paige.

“I have to leave now, so have a good weekend.”

“You too,” said Paige.

As soon as Miss Sullivan left, Paige got up and started pacing. She liked it when people talked to her, because it provided a distraction from the Book. She didn't know why she called it the Book, considering she only had access to the first chapter. Whenever she tried to turn the page in her dreams, she'd wake up.

She returned to brooding over what horrors she would face and the one question that kept pressing all day: what happens in Chapter 2?

She knew Chapter 1 ended with her entering the portal, but then what? Would she be attacked by monsters? Would she die? All of these questions she would find out at six o'clock tonight and she was terrified.

But, at the same time, excited.

Physicists claimed portals were gateways to pocket dimensions. Alarmists claimed portals signaled the end times. Nerds claimed the portals for themselves and flooded the internet with advice and gate-keeping. For beyond the portals lay trap-laden dungeons populated with magical creatures who, for inexplicable reasons, wanted all humans dead. It was as clichéd as any plot ripped from a video game, including the trope of newly acquired powers for those that entered the portal.

In the beginning, basement-dwelling gamers, armed with years of experience in role-playing campaigns, swarmed newly opened portals only to be met with unsurpassable obstacles such as death. Destiny isn't inclusive; only a select few manifested the superhuman strength, speed, and magic needed to kill

monsters.

To bring order and analytics to the casualties, the government stepped in and formed the Vanguard Agency: an organization charged with overseeing the management of eligible people who were willing to enter portals and slay the monsters within. Furthermore, once cleared of monsters, the portal would mysteriously close. It was a system that some had deemed too convenient, but the portals provided a lucrative industry which overhauled society world-wide.

Paige was never tested for vanguard eligibility. Considering only 10% of people developed any abilities within the portal, testing became mandatory at a young age, similar to a military draft. However, exceptions were made on rare occasions and her family was exempt. Paige did try to get tested, but it required parental consent, and she couldn't even broach the subject of vanguards with her mom let alone get permission for testing.

And now she would be entering an unknown portal with no weapons, no training, and no clue. No sane person would do this, yet she was compelled to go.

Fyn's portal was a mystery, a puzzle. A normal portal was a glowing hole occupying space in the most un-Newtonian way possible. But for Fyn's portal, a large iron door hung in the air, with no visible mechanisms for opening. On its front was carved a strange drawing and on the back an equally strange symbol.

All manner of attempts were made to open the door. Despite being made of iron, metal workers could not destroy the door. Cryptographers could not discern the correlation between the drawing and the symbol. Detailed photographs were released to the public and a reward was offered.

Little was accomplished. It remained closed.

Paige heard her friend running through the hallway outside her classroom. She picked up her school books and walked out to meet her.

“How did you know, Paige?” asked Jess when she saw her. She had stopped running and rested against the wall, panting.

“Ran all the way here, I see. Aren’t you in vanguard training? How did such a short run exhaust you?” asked Paige.

“I don’t know how you knew, but you were right. The assistant coach had to go to the hospital,” said Jess, ignoring Paige’s question.

“Let’s go somewhere a bit more private,” said Paige.

“Private? Aren’t you done with being weird? Why on earth do you think you can solve Fyn’s portal?” asked Jess.

“Shhh. Let’s talk about this when we get to the music room,” said Paige.

“Really? I ran all this way to get your answer and now we need to be ‘private’ in the music room? Fine, I’ll play your game, Paige. This better be good,” said Jess.

“Trust me on this,” said Paige.

With hands in her pockets, Jess sulked the whole way, not understanding the need for secrecy, strange stories of books, nor band rooms. The unmistakable scent of cork, spit, and weed met their noses and Paige took further precautions. She searched the music room, for stragglers, teachers, anyone who could later be a witness. Trespassing into Agency grounds brought with it criminal charges, hefty fines, and extreme punishment from her mother.

“Here we are, Jess. This is the most private room in this school. You’d think the band would practice given how horrible they sound, but whatever,” Paige said.

“Paige! This isn’t important right now! Get serious, why do you think you can solve Fyn’s portal?”

“I don’t think. I know,” said Paige.

“Paige, enough. This isn’t a movie. Unsolved ancient mysteries that have eluded experts for millennia are not suddenly solved by a plucky young protagonist because of her determination and tragic backstory.”

“Ooh! You think I’m plucky!” said Paige.

“No! I’m saying there’s no way you can solve Fyn’s Portal. Look, I love you and I’m your biggest cheerleader, but marks aren’t exactly something you’re known for, unless we’re talking about the lowest ones.”

“Ouch, Jess,” said Paige.

“Do you remember those geeks in the library trying to solve the portal? They had all these formulas, and tools, and so many spreadsheets, but they were completely stumped. And yet you, who use spreadsheets solely for cell art, have solved the most perplexing puzzle of this generation.”

“My 8-bit portraits are brilliant,” said Paige.

“I don’t know why—” *“I don’t know why—”*

Jess stopped. Paige was speaking with her in unison.

“How are you—
Paige, would you—
Quit copying me!” *“How are you—
Paige, would you—
Quit copying me!”*

“That’s how I can solve it,” said Paige.

“I don’t know how—
Stop it!” *“I don’t know how—
Stop it!”*

Paige gave her innocent doe eyes. Jess opened her mouth to speak, but thought better against it.

“I know the future, Jess,” said Paige.

Jess gave her the I-would-retort-sarcastically-except-you-would-speak-in-unison-again look.

“Remember when I first told you I was dreaming about a book?” asked Paige.

“Yes. Your weirdness— “*Yes. Your weirdness—*
Ahhhhh!” *Ahhhhh!*”

“Jess, I still have the dream. The same dream, with the same stupid book, and the same problem of not being able to turn to the next chapter.”

Jess gave her another look.

“The thing is, the Book says I go to the portal tonight. Not only do I solve its puzzle, I enter the portal,” said Paige.

Jess frowned.

“I won’t copy you anymore, Jess,” said Paige.

“How did you figure out the answer?” blurted out Jess.

“It’s written in the Book. Actually, it’s probably more accurate to say the *real* puzzle is in the Book. No one could solve the portal because there is no puzzle on the door itself. It’s in my Book,” said Paige.

“You’re telling me the answer to Fyn’s puzzle is a puzzle within a book you can only see in your dreams.”

“That sounds pretty crazy, doesn’t it?” said Paige.

“Just a tidge. And if it’s a puzzle in your book, how did *you* figure it out?”

“I had a year to work on it,” said Paige.

Jess let out an exasperated sigh and sat on a chair.

“Paige, you’re not one for long and elaborate jokes. Can we end this now and talk about fun things?” asked Jess.

Paige pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket and gave it to Jess.

“What’s this?” asked Jess as she read the paper. Her eyes went wide as she read her exact words from the last five minutes of conversation.

“This is impossible,” said Jess, her eyes not moving from the paper.

“I need your help,” said Paige.

“Wait! How did you do this?” asked Jess as she got up to wave the paper in Paige’s face. Paige grabbed the piece of paper, and put it in her pocket. Jess still couldn’t believe what she read.

“Was that...was that *the* Book?” asked Jess.

“Of course it’s not *the* Book, don’t be ridiculous,” said Paige.

“*I’m* being ridiculous?” asked Jess.

“Jess, the Book is only available to me in my dreams, remember? I just wrote down a snippet of the conversation because you know what? I’ve memorized it. Why? Because if you only read the same twenty pages for the last year, you can’t do anything but memorize that stupid Book. I really need your help, Jess.”

Jess wanted to say something but she didn’t want Paige to repeat her. If this was all in a book, did that mean her thoughts were too?

“No. Mostly it’s my thoughts in the Book,” said Paige.

“Ahhhh! You read my mind!” said Jess.

“Literally, in fact. Wait. Did that count as literally? I always get that mixed up,” said Paige.

“Wait! Wait, wait, wait! Let’s say you’re right. Let’s say all of this is foretold in a book.”

“Sure. Let’s say that.”

“Why go along with the book? If you know what’s going to happen, why don’t you *not* do it?” asked Jess.

“I thought of it, but I’m a bit scared to break the pattern. Will some strange butterfly effect happen and my mom dies? Or you? Right now, nothing bad happens in the Book, and to be honest, this is the most interesting thing that has happened to me,” said Paige.

“But you could die! A portal leads to death!” said Jess.

“Or not! Maybe I’m being led there for a reason.”

Jess looked at Paige. Even after everything she had witnessed, she had a hard time believing her. She made up her mind. If Paige could figure out what she was thinking, she would accept it. She needed an obscure word. Maybe ‘elephant’?

“How is ‘elephant’ an obscure word?” asked Paige.

“Ahhhh!”

“I need your help, Jess,” said Paige for the third time.

“You’re still going to the portal?” asked Jess.

“Yes,” said Paige.

“And do you know what happens after that?” asked Jess.

“Of course! It’s perfectly safe,” lied Paige. She didn’t know what happened past Chapter 2, but Jess didn’t need to know that.

“Do you come out safe? How far did you go into the portal? Did you immediately come out? You don’t go in there without training and taking running lessons isn’t going to cut it!” said Jess at a rapid fire pace.

“Jess, I’ll be fine—”

“You don’t get it! A portal is not filled with first level slimes which you can kill with a stick! There are deadly monsters in there! During training, they show us nasty PSA videos of vanguards being killed and mutilated because those sickos get a kick out of horri-

fying teenagers. But they're right because swinging a sword in real life is not the same as swinging a sword with your game controller. Just because you can play *Mario Kart* doesn't mean you can race cars!"

"You do know I've read everything you've said."

"And your mom! What happens if your mom finds out? I'll tell you what happens. She'll blame me! That's what happens. It will be my fault!"

"Jess, we talk afterwards, so it's perfectly fine," lied Paige again.

"I don't believe you," said Jess.

"Trust me on this. All you need to do is talk to the guard at Fyn's Portal. He's even expecting you," said Paige.

Jess hesitated. There were so many questions vying for priority resulting in a complete halt of any question being asked.

"Fine. You know what? I don't believe you can get in the portal anyway. You're just going to be thrown into jail and I'm going to disavow any knowledge of this conversation," said Jess.

"That's the spirit. Let's go," said Paige.



Fyn's Portal was a short walk away from the subway station in the heart of downtown. The Agency had constructed a near impenetrable fortress around the portal soon after it first appeared. Security cameras were trained onto the entrance: a large and imposing locked iron gate. It was the sole access to the portal's building,

"This isn't going to work," said Jess.

"It will," said Paige, although she wasn't convinced herself. Despite knowing the outcome, she was still

nervous.

“How are you going to keep yourself from getting recorded on those security cameras?” asked Jess.

“Those aren’t being recorded. It’s only for the guard to monitor the front gate. No one has attempted to access the portal, because they realized they needed to solve the puzzle first. Sure, the security used to be heavy, but it waned over the years. Now, there’s only one guard, and he’s extremely bored. That’s why he was so willing to be interviewed for our school paper. And that’s where you come in.”

“Won’t I get in trouble once you break in?”

“I didn’t give your real name, silly. And wear this,” said Paige as she handed Jess a wig.

“A wig and sunglasses? Who’s going to be fooled by this?” asked Jess.

“It will be fine. Adults will think it’s some strange style the teens are all into. It’s also why I asked you to change your clothes and put on that ridiculous lipstick. Let’s do this,” said Paige.

“Wait! I don’t know how to do interviews! What do I ask him?”

“Since when did you have troubles talking? Just fangirl about vanguards. He used to be one, so he has many stories.”

“He used to be a vanguard? Ooooh! I can ask him anything I want?”

“See? You should learn to trust Paige,” said Paige.

“But what about you? They must record the security cameras inside that building.”

“I’ll just turn them off,” said Paige.

“Since when did you have the technical know-how to do that?” asked Paige.

Paige unzipped the jacket she was wearing. Jess could see she was hiding a small hair dryer.

“Hair drying *and* breaking and entering. Best purchase I’ve ever made,” said Paige.

“You know what? Forget I asked. Remember, when the police come knocking, I’m admitting to nothing. Maybe I can help your case for insanity though. That may lighten whatever sentence they give you,” said Jess.

“You’re a true best friend,” said Paige.

Jess bit her lip and looked at the gate. She looked up at the security cameras. Her fingers grabbed a strand of the ridiculous wig she was wearing. Why did she agree to this?

“Jess, you’re always confident. How is this a problem for you?” asked Paige.

“I’m confident when I’m not committing a felony!”

“Hurry! We don’t have much time,” said Paige.

“I’m going! I’m going!” said Jess. She walked to the front gate as naturally as she could. Was the walk suspicious? Was the guard watching and calling the cops right now?

“Girl, you owe me big time,” muttered Jess as she pressed the call button.

“Hi! I’ve been expecting you,” came a voice over the intercom. “Just give me a few minutes. I need to lock up.”

Jess waited outside, nerves raw, realizing she would never make it in a career of espionage. The gate opened far sooner than she liked and she was greeted by a short, portly, older man in a security outfit.

“Hi! You must be Kiki. Nice to meet you. Please, call me Jim,” said the guard as he held out his hand. Jess smiled and was glad the sunglasses hid the surprise in her eyes. Paige didn’t tell her what her alias was.

“Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. I know you must be very busy,” said Jess.

“Oh, not busy at all, in fact. I usually go for coffee next door, so we can hold the interview there,” said Jim.

“That’d be great! Thank you!”

Across the street, Paige watched the two converse and then leave for the coffee shop. Paige also took precautions. She wore baggy clothes and had tucked her hair up into a cap, over which she wore a hoodie. Making sure not to leave fingerprints, she put on some gloves. This was it; her start to a life of crime.

She walked up to the gate and swiped her gloved hand against the smart lock. A numeric keypad appeared on the display. She hesitated, doubting the simplicity of the password, but typed in the numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. The keypad beeped a few times in acceptance, and the door opened.

“Yes!” thought Paige. “Bootstrap paradox* to the rescue!”

She opened the gate and walked into a tiny, undecorated foyer. There wasn’t much to the interior of the building; most of it was devoted to the thickness of the walls. She continued through to the main security room, which was occupied by one large desk. She crinkled her nose, the ventilation was poor and the air hung heavy with the scent of sedentary old man. Unwashed mugs populated the surface of the desk, along with a number of well-used books. She wondered if this was the future for all retired vanguards, and she

* The bootstrap paradox is a term used to explain a theoretical paradox regarding time travel. In Paige’s case, she knew the password because she read how she typed it in. This raises the question, “Where did the knowledge of the passcode originate?” When Paige thought about the bootstrap paradox, her head hurt. This was yet another reason why she skipped footnotes.

briefly pitied Jess. Beyond the desk was her goal: a steel mesh gate that led to the portal itself. She would leave that until later.

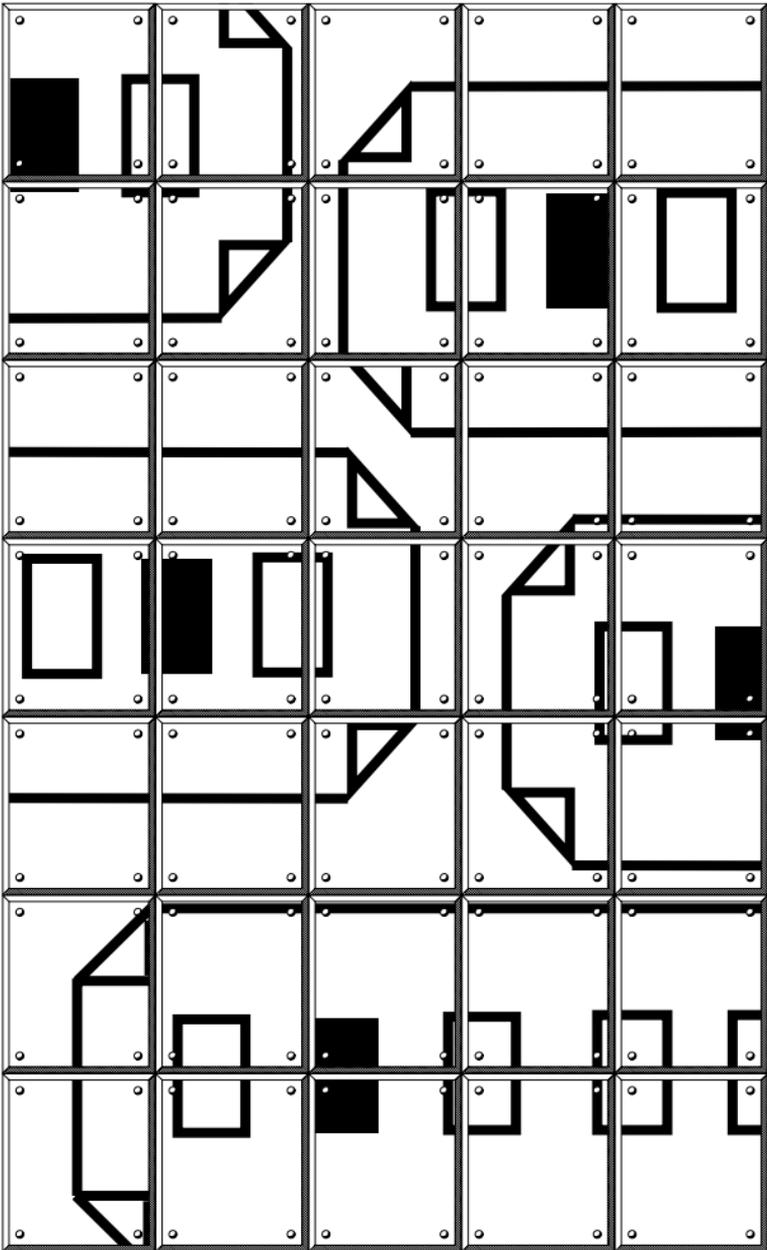
Behind her, on the wall facing the desk, were a number of monitors almost entirely inactive. Paige studied the ones showing a live feed. Two monitors displayed the outside entrance from two different angles, and another two were focused on the portal inside the building. These last two were being recorded and needed to be disabled.

To her right, Paige saw the server room door locked with another keypad. Fortunately, the password was the same as the front gate and the keypad beeped in acceptance as she keyed it in. She pulled the door open and a blast of warm air hit her face. The server room housed a variety of machines all beyond the scope of her knowledge, but she did know there was an outlet just to the left of her feet. It was hair dryer time. She plugged it into the outlet and turned it on full blast.

A few machines labeled “security” switched off, but that was it. Nothing else was affected. Paige couldn’t believe that worked. She unplugged her hair dryer and returned to the monitoring room to take a quick peek. Sure enough, every monitor was now dark.

Feeling urgency, Paige picked up the pace. The steel mesh door wasn’t unlocked and she stepped into a narrow, concrete hallway that ended with another door and another keypad. The password to this keypad was different, but it was just a reverse of the first password. Whoever set these passwords didn’t take security very seriously.

The final door opened to a view that normally would have surprised Paige, but she knew it was coming. It was Agatha’s bathroom, or at least, the remains of it. The plumbing, décor, and claw-foot bathtub had been



It didn't look like a door, nor did it look like a portal.

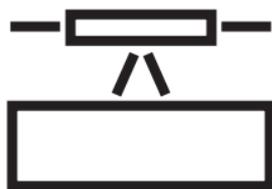
completely removed, but the 1960's wallpaper and tiling had been spared due to someone's lack of taste.

In the center of the room, sitting at a slight angle and floating a few feet off the floor, was an iron door.

Now that she could see it with her own eyes, she wondered why people called it a door. It didn't look like a door, nor did it look like a portal. It looked like the installation art she was forced to write reports on whenever they went on class trips to the museum.

Paige hesitated. This was it. If she were to speak the answer, then she would start a journey she didn't know she could complete, or survive. Six more doors remained after this one. That probably meant six more puzzles at the very least. Would she even be able to solve them?

She didn't have time to worry about the future. She went around to the back and there was the strange symbol she recalled agonizing over for a year:



Unlike other passcodes, the Book didn't tell her the answer outright. She had to solve it without the help of the bootstrap paradox and it took her an embarrassingly long time. She took a deep breath and spoke the answer out loud.

The iron door shimmered and then faded, leaving a square hole in space leading to another dimension.

Paige blinked and was engulfed by the portal.