

Chapter 3

*Each seven's defined
By a symbol of old.
The third's instructions
also contains your goals.*
— Aisling 4:7, Book of Moira

Paige was lucky. The portal exited into a nearby park a few blocks away from Fyn's portal, and the park had a large pond. The evening brought a chill and Paige shivered at the thought of an outdoor bath, but she couldn't let anyone see her in her current state. She tested the pond's temperature. The cold water produced immediate goosebumps on her skin.

Gritting her teeth, she submerged herself, almost letting out a shriek. The water was freezing. She scrubbed away at her arms and her clothes, thankful she wasn't wearing white. Her hair, however, was a massive clump of tangles and clotted blood. It was near impossible to clean.

After a few minutes, Paige started to shiver uncontrollably. She got out of the pond, making the cold worse. This wasn't a good idea. She looked around, and spotted a clothes donation bin by the park's parking lot.

It was her lucky day.

“Paige! You did it!” yelled Jess. She found Paige studying in the library, surrounded by books Jess couldn’t believe anyone read voluntarily. She squealed and wrapped her arms around Paige’s neck.

“Squeezing too hard again,” grunted Paige. She tried to extricate herself from Jess’s grip and wished she put more points into MUSCLE. Jess put her backpack on a chair and sat on the table, swinging her feet as she sucked a lollipop. She picked up a book, looked briefly at the title, and tossed it aside.

“What is this stuff? Books on physics, history, thaumaturgy. How can you read this considering we have a geography exam next week? And why are we meeting here? All these college people look at me funny,” said Jess.

“You have a lollipop sticking out of your mouth,” said Paige.

“Hey! If my sister isn’t going to eat her halloween candy, I may as well have it,” said Jess.

“Halloween was eight months ago!” said Paige.

“Sugar doesn’t get old. Okay! Enough about me. How did you get out of the portal?” asked Jess. Paige was used to her sharp turns in conversation. Driving with her was just as hectic.

“Can I tell you later? It’s a long story,” said Paige. She didn’t want to relive the night’s ordeal.

“What? That’s not fair! You told me you’d tell me today and only if I come here!” said Jess.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. By the way, I hear someone has an affinity to electricity,” said Paige. She was

adept at sharp turns too.

“I do! How did you know? Oh right, the future powers. That’s going to suck for surprise birthday parties,” said Jess.

“So many different ways to christen it and yet you use ‘future powers’. Of all the nutty names to come up with. Uh, Jess? Are you okay? What are you doing? Get down!” Giddyheaded, Jess was on the chair posing like someone shooting lightning from her fingers.

“Look! Look! Who am I? I’m Laxus. Ha ha ha! I shoot electricity!”

“Jess! We need to be quiet,” said Paige.

“Oh! I brought my clothes from yesterday. Why do you need them?” asked Jess as she patted her backpack.

“The Agency has a magic forensics department and they can trace magical signatures inside portals. However, they first need a sample for comparison. Anything inside of the portal is a potential for discovery, so I’m getting rid of evidence,” explained Paige.

“So we get rid of the clothes and we’re good?”

“Kind of. They have your signature, but fortunately it will be muddled because it’s too close to the entrance. And honestly, they’ll focus their attention on my signature. I left a huge trail,” said Paige.

“How do they have my signature already?” asked Jess.

“You were tested for vanguard eligibility, remember?”

“Hold on, is that why they do the testing? To get everyone’s magic DNA? Isn’t that a human rights issue?” asked Jess.

“Probably. It’s not like they’d admit to doing it. It’s confidential.”

“Then how do you know?” asked Jess.

“Future powers,” said Paige.

“Ah, future powers. The Agency’s so sneaky! But we’re safe, right? They aren’t chasing us?”

“Yes, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“Good. I’ll leave it to you,” said Jess.

“You’re awfully accepting of all of this. Aren’t you worried the Agency will find out?” asked Paige.

“Does the Book say we get caught?” asked Jess.

“No,” said Paige.

“No worries then! I trust the Book,” said Jess as she flashed a grin.

“Sheesh. Yesterday you were a basket case, but now the Book is your best friend?” asked Paige.

“You got out of the portal, I got my magical affinity, that Book’s amazing! Wait! How far into the future can you see? Do you know which guild I get in?” asked Jess.

“I can’t see that far ahead,” said Paige.

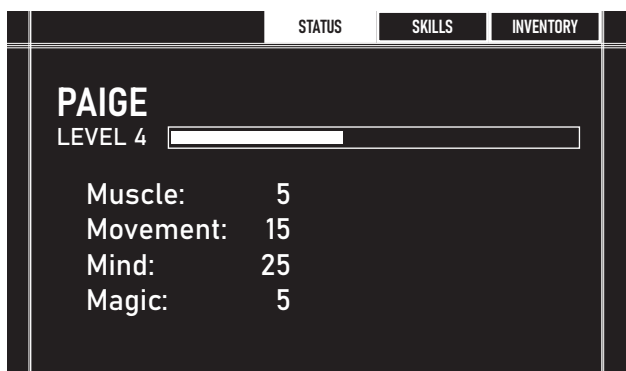
“Phooey. Anyway, you’re lucky I have to go to training, else I’d beat last night’s story out of you. I gotta go. Call me if we have another secret mission,” said Jess as she gave Paige a quick hug. She ran out towards the exit, pretending to shoot lightning out of her hands. No wonder the students were staring at her; she was sugar-sprinkled honey in a world of diabetics.*

Paige was not as calm as Jess. From reading

* Higher mental faculties didn’t make her metaphors better. That was probably an attribute she didn’t have access to.

chapter three, she knew they were still safe from the Vanguard Agency, but all of that was subject to change by chapter four. Why did she get access to the book only in chapters?

“Stats,” she whispered. Paige’s view was occupied by the opaque status screen, much to her extreme displeasure. She tried saying new words, checked for *settings* option, pinched the display, anything to decrease the size of the UI, but it still filled her entire field of vision.



Solving the last door raised her level, due to her *Pacifist* skill. She also received a brand new skill which would be advantageous in her current quest. With her newly acquired points, she put one into *MOVEMENT* and the rest into *MIND*. She knew she was severely limiting herself, but puzzle solving seemed to be her goal.

“Skills,” whispered Paige.

The dialogue box switched to the *Skills* tab. It showed the new skill she acquired, attached with a line to the *Pacifist* skill:



Paige first selected the *Pacifist* skill which she received earlier when she got rid of the rabbit-beast. A dialogue window popped up:



Since the *Puzzler* skill was attached to it, she was hoping the *Pacifist* skill indicated other skills it lead to. It didn't. She swiped it away and selected the *Puzzler* skill:



Both skills were vague on what counted towards an experience gain. Would she be able to gain experience outside of a dungeon? Could she

complete any task? Could she go on the internet and solve puzzle hunts? The *Level Up* skill displayed her stats regardless of where she was, so in theory, she should also be able to gain experience regardless of where she was.

Whatever system was employed, it was completely different from how vanguards worked. Outside of dungeons, vanguards were ordinary people. They lost their superhuman strength and reflexes, as well as their ability to perform magic. As a result, this made them vulnerable targets and every high-ranking vanguard had bodyguards.

Paige yawned. She had been studying all morning and most of the afternoon. There were so many things she wanted to test out with her abilities, but she had no time.

A portal was opening later that night.

But even before that, she was going to become a vanguard. Why did the Book schedule everything today? She checked her phone; it was almost 3pm.

Despite all of Jess's talk of vanguard testing and training, none of it was a prerequisite for becoming a vanguard. Anyone of age could apply, as long as they could pass the tests.[†]

It was almost time. Paige got up and put her books away.

Assistant Verlaigh waited outside the chairman's office. Beside her were six bodyguards for the visiting guild master from the Blood Guild. He had booked an emergency meeting with Chairman

[†] And pay for them.

Loo, a privilege only bestowed to a select few.

This particular meeting involved a lot of shouting. Verlaigh could hear the calm voice of the chairman, but the guild master was having none of it. After a few vulgar phrases, she heard the meeting coming to a close.

The door burst open. An older man exited the chairman's office, his face burning red with rage. Verlaigh had grown accustomed to this behaviour and waited patiently. The show each guild master put on tended to be the same after a meeting with the chairman. The guild master turned towards her and scowled.

"The Guilds have been under the oppression of your association for too long," the man barked.

Assistant Verlaigh bowed, but didn't utter a word. The guild master stared at her bowed head and was about to say something, but changed his mind. He sniffed sharply, signaled to his bodyguards, and left. Verlaigh waited until the Blood Guild representatives left before going into the chairman's office.

"Productive meeting, I see," said Verlaigh.

The chairman got up from the chair he was sitting on and took a deep breath. For a brief moment, Verlaigh saw the frailty in her boss, but the chairman recovered his composure.

"In the end, Guild Master Thull agreed to abide by his contract. I offered him first bidding rights on the next open portal," said Chairman Loo.

"That's unlike you, sir. It explains Master Thull's near jovial mood when he left. He didn't break anything this time," said the assistant.

"I must be getting old. Speaking of portals, I

read the reports for Fyn's. It's curious," said the chairman.

"Curious indeed, sir."

"A hair dryer?"

"That's what it says, sir."

"And the magic signature found on the hair dryer matches no vanguard in our database? So many strange details to this case," said the chairman.

The Vanguard Agency's database had the magical signature of every active vanguard in the country. Any vanguard could be identified and traced if their signature was found in a portal. The existence of the database was known only by a few key members of the Agency. If the guilds found out the database existed, there would be an uprising.

"So either the intruder was a civilian or a foreign vanguard," said Chairman Loo.

"We've checked for foreign vanguards, sir. There have been no visits from any vanguard, and none are currently in the country."

"Let me get this straight. A civilian broke into our building, bypassed all the security with the proper passcodes, and blew a fuse with a hair dryer so that only the security cameras get knocked out. They then open the first door, which no one has been able to do for the last two years, enter the portal, and kill a rabbit-beast with one of the dungeon's traps. Covered in the blood of this rabbit-beast, they leave a trail leading to the second door, which they open in a minimal amount of time, and escape. After that, we lose all track of them."

"That seems to be the running hypothesis, sir,"

said the assistant.

“And the guard, after entering the portal by mistake, is currently in the hospital suffering from PTSD,” said the chairman.

“Yes, sir.”

The second door was the most curious part of the tale. Up until this time, all dungeons were enclosed pocket dimensions that lead nowhere.

“And no new activity?” asked the chairman.

“As you’ve read, the portal exited into a park by Forest street. Our guards have moved everyone living in the area to a safe zone. We stationed the Banshee Guild in the park as well as our agents. And once businesses learned of the portal, they immediately closed shop. We are taking every precaution,” said the assistant.

“Yes, I knew you would. This is easily as frustrating as the first time Fyn’s portal appeared. The guard was the only person to find it open. Could he be lying?” asked the chairman.

“The guard insists he didn’t explore the portal. The opening took him by surprise and he was engulfed briefly, but he left immediately. Since we can’t accurately identify signatures near the entrance due to the interference of the portal, we tested further in and there is no trace of the guard, so his story holds true. I took the liberty of checking his bank account for any type of bribery, but there’s nothing.”

“What is your assessment, Assistant Verlaigh?” asked the chairman.

“I concur with your summary. All evidence points to a third party breaking into our facility and opening Fyn’s Portal, even though it’s highly improbable,” said Verlaigh.

The chairman nodded. He walked to his desk and pulled out two photos from a scattering of pages and reports.

“Let’s forget about the intruder for the moment and focus on the dungeon itself. It has two doors: the first made of iron, the second made of copper. On each of them are cryptic line drawings. The dungeon has nothing of value and the monsters wouldn’t warrant any type of price on the market. Your thoughts?” asked the chairman as he passed Verlaigh the photos.

“The doors are not there for security purposes. If the patterns are clues to opening the doors as we believe, then all of this could be a game or a challenge. If so, then more doors may appear. The end result may be a reward.”

“And when the guilds piece that together, they’ll go all out trying to find the next door. They’ll even hide it from us if they do find it. None of them were able to open Fyn’s portal, but I bet all of them will believe they can open the next one. Was our team able to decipher the second door?” asked Chairman Loo.

“No. But one side is missing. If there were two sides, like the first door, then we’re probably missing vital information,” said the assistant.

“We need to be the first to find the next door. Monitor the movements of all the guilds, but especially the Blood Guild. They’ll try to keep the second door secret, so they’ll censor their media team from broadcasting it. However, a secret is only a secret if no one knows it. We should be prepared.”

“I’m on it, sir.”



Paige was sitting in a waiting room of the illustrious Blood Guild, the richest and most reputable guild of the province. It boasted four hundred members with almost a third of the highest ranking vanguards amongst their roster. Given the number of applicants, Paige found their recruitment offices to be small. She had been waiting for almost half an hour, and in that time, watched a number of hopeful vanguards leave with a look of disappointment and sometimes tears.

Had she not read the Book, Paige wouldn't have bothered applying. The interview process was strict, rigorous, and even required an entrance exam. Paige had done none of it. She hadn't even been tested for vanguard eligibility, yet here she was, confused as ever, because none of the events that were to follow made sense.

She looked around. Everyone was dressed as if applying to their first job. Needing to stay inconspicuous, she was sporting her old favourite getup of baggy clothes, cap, and hoody. She felt horribly under-dressed and noted the haughty looks of those around her. Still, it was a small price to pay for what would come later.

Paige's thoughts were interrupted by a collective gasp. She looked up to see four bodyguards, all of whom had trouble navigating the small space of the waiting room. They were flanking a tall woman who looked only a few years older than Paige. Her hair was cut extremely short and she wore her vanguard uniform: a dark body suit lined with a number of pockets probably lined with an array of weapons. The most noticeable feature was a scar on her right cheek. As Paige watched, the woman looked directly at her.

Paige turned away. The woman made her feel uncomfortable. She instead listened to the whispers that filled the room.

“Is that Vanguard Kats?”

“Why would she be here?”

“She’s not sponsoring someone, is she?”

“Don’t be stupid, Kats wouldn’t sponsor a rookie.”

“Are they getting another assassin vanguard?”

“She’s terribly intimidating in person.”

Kats and her guards left the room, but the murmurings continued. Paige waited patiently for another ten minutes until it was her turn.

“Number 85? Please come to the desk.”

Paige got up and walked to the glass reception window. A woman, deeply engrossed in whatever phone app had taken her soul, took the ticket stub offered by Paige without even looking at it. She handed her a sheet of paper and said, “Down the corridor and to your left. Wait there.”

“Thank you,” said Paige. She exited the waiting room and walked down a corridor lined with doors on either side. It felt like a visit to the doctor, yet far more intimidating.

One of those doors opened and a hulk of a man, larger than the door he was holding, looked into the hallway.

“Are you Paige Park?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Paige.

“Come in,” said the bodyguard.

Paige walked into a small office, made even smaller by the presence of the four bodyguards who stood on either side of a desk occupied by Vanguard Kats. The furnishings were bare and only sported a small file cabinet, an office desk,

a chair for the one being interviewed, and the compulsory plant. Vanguard Kats gave a nod, indicating the chair in front of the desk. Paige immediately sat down. She knew not to hold out her hand. She placed her application form on the desk.

Kats did not make polite conversation and instead watched Paige. Paige stared at her shoes and felt awkward. She stole a glance at one of the guards. He looked extremely uncomfortable.

Kats took out a stamp from the desk and marked “Approved” on her application.

“Start tomorrow,” said Kats.

Paige nodded. She knew this was coming and yet was still surprised by the abruptness of it all.

“Return this to the front desk,” said Kats as she held out the approved application.

Paige nodded again and took the paper.

“Thank you,” said Kats in a tone indicating the interview was complete.

Paige nodded a final time and stood up. She walked faster than she would have liked to the door and exited the office.

Much was on her mind. Why would Vanguard Kats, an elite assassin-type vanguard, sponsor her? Would any of it be valid? She wasn’t yet an official vanguard. Paige set off back to the front desk. If only she could escape what was to come, but she knew it was inevitable.

The receptionist was still on her phone and accepted the form without looking.

“I’m sorry you were unable to meet our qualifications. Please review the requirements again and feel free to re—WHAT?! You were accepted? With an interview that barely lasted a minute?”

Paige felt the eyes of everyone in the room turn towards her. She tightened her hoody around her face, which was turning red.

“Sorry. Thank you,” said Paige.

“Vanguard Kats? Are you kidding me? She came to sponsor you!? Who ARE you?” asked the woman in a loud voice.

Paige walked as quickly as she could towards the exit with her head bowed low. The applicants were murmuring to themselves again, and interspersed she heard the snapping of cameras. She was glad her mom didn’t check the internet that much.

Paige sat at a coffee shop, waiting for Jess. She felt paranoid. However, if people were watching her, wouldn’t that show up in the Book? Wouldn’t it have passages about a shadowy figure in the corner listening in on every word?

Jess entered the coffee shop and threw herself onto the chair with all the grace of cement.

“Big news! Big news! It’s all over the Agency forums and social media! Kats sponsored a rookie! Now, I know you don’t know who Kats is, but she’s a top-tier assassin of the Blood Guild. You must have heard of the Blood Guild, right? I talk about them all the time. I know you don’t really pay attention to guild talk, but it’s like when people talk sports to non-sports people and they mention the one team that everyone knows like... um. Quick! Name a sports team we all know.”

“I know the Blood Guild, Jess.”

“Oh cool! I taught you something at least.

Anyway, no one knows who this rookie is! That's literally unheard of. We all keep track of each other during training and we know who the top performers are. It's a bit like *My Hero Academia*, you know? Except without the powers, because we don't have them outside of the portal. Come to think of it, why isn't there a vanguard-only school? Wouldn't that make more sense? Instead, I have to go to a normal public school and learn about trigonometry."

"Any clues on who the rookie is?" asked Paige.

"Just a few pictures and not good ones at that. Apparently, everything happened so fast that people couldn't get their phones out in time," said Jess as she showed Paige a series of blurry photos. There were a few from behind and a profile view where she could see her cap sticking out of her black hoody. Her facial features, fortunately, were completely hidden.

"What a familiar ensemble of clothes. It's like we've seen something similar before," said Paige.

"I know, right? I'm pretty sure that's a girl. Look at her butt," said Jess.

"Jess, you have to keep this secret. That's me," said Paige.

"What?!" screamed Jess.

"Shhhh! You have to keep this secret!" urged Paige.

Jess looked at the photo, and then at Paige, and then at the photo again.

"Stand up! Show me your butt!" demanded Jess.

"Could you not yell that?" asked Paige.

"But, that's impossible!" said Jess. "You just expressed interest in this a few days ago! You

didn't even know what magical affinity was!"

"I kinda knew what that was," said Paige.

"And now the most mysterious vanguard in the world has sponsored you for the most sought-after guild in the country? How did that even happen?" asked Jess.

"I don't know," said Paige.

"Did you do your super future powers? Is that what you did? Can you travel in time now? Should I call you the Doctor?" asked Jess.

"I can't travel in time. The Book said I applied and got accepted, so I went! I don't know why they would accept me though! It makes no sense and that concerns me," said Paige.

"This is so unfair!" said Jess.

"I'm sorry. I know how much you want to be in that guild," said Paige.

"Although, this is amazing at the same time!" said Jess, her face brightening in an instant.

"That was sudden," said Paige.

"This means you can sponsor me! All you need to do is get a few dungeons under your belt! Can you imagine? Being part of the Blood Guild? Well, I guess you can imagine, since you're already part of it. But I've never dreamed of having my first guild be the Blood Guild. Most rookies start off in unknown guilds and have to build up their experience. But not me! I have an in! Ha ha ha! This is fantastic!" Jess was rocking back and forth with her hands clasped to her chest.

An alarm sounded from Paige's phone. She turned it off.

"I have to go. I'll talk to you later, Jess," said Paige.

"Where are you going?" asked Jess.

“It’s guild related,” said Paige.

“Is it with Vanguard Kats? I want to meet her! Oh wait, I can’t if this is official guild business. Take a selfie with her! And put in a good word for me. We could be an adventuring party! And best buds! Can you imagine?” asked Jess.

Paige couldn’t imagine. She gathered her belongings and put on her cap.

“I thought you burned those clothes,” said Jess.

“I have more than one set,” said Paige.

“How many black hoodies do you have? And is this a new thing with you, because it’s not very flattering,” said Jess.

“I have to get going,” said Paige.

“Just promise you’ll sponsor me! Okay? I’m counting on you! Have fun storming dungeons!” said Jess. She was far too optimistic about this whole thing.

Paige had been on the subway for over an hour. She checked the time. It was almost 8pm. Her inevitable encounter would be soon. There were too many reasons to feel nervous and she couldn’t decide on which one to fret over. Should she worry about the fact she was being followed? Or should she concern herself with the attempted kidnapping? It would turn out for the better, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t unnerving.

She could have avoided it all. Paige could have chosen to act differently from the Book. But the Book told her the location of the third door, and how could she ignore that? There was leveling to be done, after all.

Paige got off the subway and headed for a multi-level parking lot at the corner of Young and Handel. She had been tailed for about half an hour. It was stressful.

She reached the lot's stairwell to the upper levels and took a deep breath. This was it. She opened the door and ascended. The place smelled strongly of urine, but it was nothing compared to the rabbit-beast. She made it to the fourth floor in good time and opened the door leading to the lot, peeking her head through.

The parking lot was filled with cars, all providing ample hiding spots for would-be killers. She continued through the door, wary of her surroundings.

Her eye caught a shadow.

Paige ducked behind a car and dashed towards the other side of the parking lot. She needed to get to pillar 4E. Her points in MOVEMENT made her fast as well as silent. She heard the footsteps of someone trying to find her.

She ran from one aisle to the next, keeping track of where her pursuers were. Their footsteps were getting more frantic.

"I lost her!" Paige heard. She waited. There was some arguing in whispered voices. Then another voice called out.

"Hey! I know you're hiding. We just want to talk. The stairwell is blocked and we're also watching the ramp down to the third level, so you don't have anywhere to go. We won't hurt you. We just want to talk. That's it."

Paige checked the time. It was 8:08. She had about six more minutes. She continued in the direction towards the other side of the parking lot.

“I see her!” yelled a voice.

Paige looked up and saw three men run towards her. She started running.

“She’s fast!”

“Cut her off!”

Paige weaved between cars, staying ahead of her pursuers. A fourth man appeared in front of her and Paige leapt over the hood of a car. She turned to see her destination in front of her and she sprinted forward.

“Catch her!”

“She has nowhere to go!”

Paige arrived at the pillar she was looking for and came to an abrupt halt. She turned around to face her assailants. It took a few seconds for them to catch up.

“You’re good at running, kid. You’re not even breathing heavy. Give us a minute,” said one of the men, holding up his hand as he bent over trying to breathe.

He and the other men were dressed in plain, black clothes, with no significant markers to indicate a guild affiliation. Their faces were not covered, but Paige didn’t recognize any of them.

“Why did you follow me here?” asked Paige.

“Our employer has an offer he’d like to present to you,” said the same man who initiated conversation.

“Couldn’t you have called me?” asked Paige. She heard the sound of a car turn the corner and saw the lights of a black van drive towards them.

“Just come with us. It’s perfectly safe,” said the man.

“You’d think you’d have a better strategy other than cornering me in a parking garage,” said

Paige.

The man sighed and took out a gun. He pointed it at Paige. She was expecting this, but Paige felt her knees almost buckle. Could she dodge bullets? Probably not. She put her hands up.

“No need for that, this isn’t a movie. Just get in the van. If you run away again, I’ll shoot you in the leg. You don’t want that, do you? Bullet wounds hurt and never heal properly afterwards,” threatened the man.

Paige looked at the time. it was 8:13.

“Is it past your curfew? Look, I don’t make it a habit to threaten kids, but I have no qualms about shooting them.”

While the lead man was talking, two of the other men had advanced and blocked her on either side. They saw how fast she was and wanted to make sure she didn’t bolt. The black van pulled up in front of her. Its headlights shone directly in her face and she blocked the light with her hand.

“I’ll come with you, I don’t want any trouble,” said Paige.

“Now was that so hard?” asked the man. He put away his gun and opened the side door.

“While waiting for me, did any of your lackeys ask why I would even be here by myself in the evening?” asked Paige as she closed her eyes.

“Just get in the car. I don’t have time for this and I don’t care,” said the man as he made a move towards her.

BOOM!

A burst of light originated from the hood of the van along with a sound like the crack of thunder. This was followed by a loud clatter of metal and debris falling to the ground.

The men couldn't shield their eyes in time and were momentarily blinded. They didn't have the advantage of a Book warning them of an impending portal materialization.

When Paige opened her eyes, she saw a silver door with the strange line-art she was accustomed to. It had materialized where the engine of the van used to be.

The van's front end was destroyed. Parts of its hood and engine had spilled onto the floor, and it was resting up against the silver door. Paige looked around to the other side of the door. Fortunately, the van didn't obscure her view of its inscription:

WORD HUNT

SEEK

EACH WORD

FIND

PASS CODE

④⑨ 5

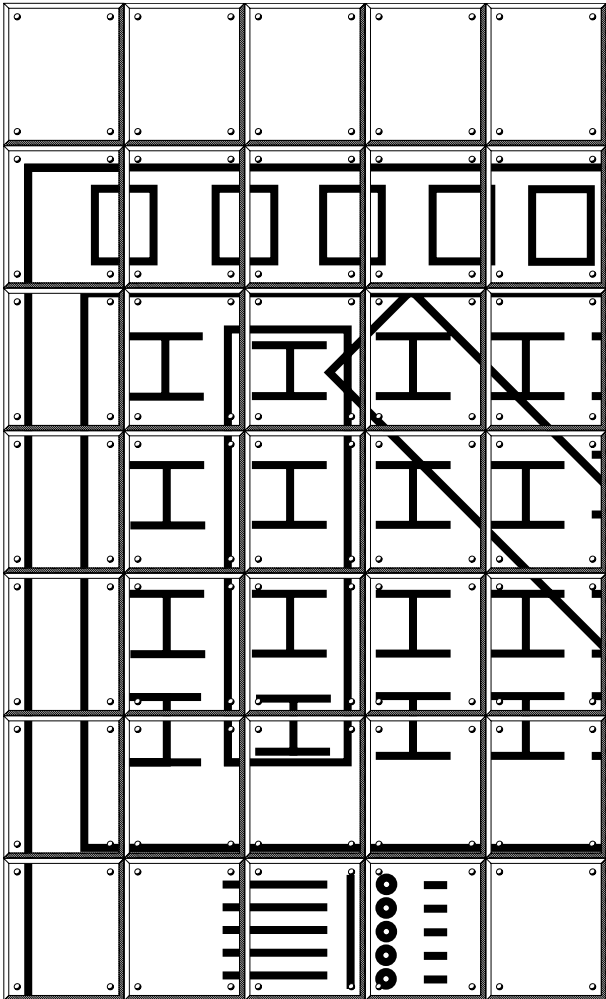
⑤① 5

⑤④ 7

⑤⑥ 11

⑥① 25

Paige spoke a word and the portal opened up, showing another dungeon. She blinked and disappeared.



...a silver door had materialized...

