

Chapter 4

*For each seven doors,
Find matches it holds.
The fourth's like the third.
See what doesn't unfold.*
— Proverb 8:2, Book of Moira

It was an easy job.

Find the girl. Intimidate her. Bring her to the address provided. Wait for the interrogator.

But now, Jim was standing with his back against a wall, inside a portal, praying the inevitable death would be painless. His men were standing on either side of him, just as terrified as he was. None of them were vanguards and considering the portal had just appeared, a rescue party would arrive too late.

They all stood in silence, listening to the noises that surrounded them. It was a mixture of rustling, slithering, crunching, and slurping. Jim wished he could die to something less horrifying.

But the noises indicated a safe, if somewhat temporary, state. When they spoke, the noises stopped. When they took a step, the noises stopped. Noises meant the creatures making the noises were too busy to pay attention to them.

There were drills for situations like this. Well, probably not exactly like this, but the Vanguard

Agency had given Emergency Portal Safety training to every civilian as a free service. Drills were performed in schools and in the workplace. People could be certified as a Portal Evacuation Experts. There were steps to be taken in the unfortunate event one was engulfed by a portal.

Step 1: Don't panic.

Step 2: Locate the portal entrance.

Step 3: Stare at the portal.

Step 4: Blink.

Jim was stopped at Step 2. He scanned the landscape, but the portal entrance was nowhere to be seen. He always assumed the portal dumped you by the entrance, but they were inside of a massive cavern with no portal exit in sight. Was this normal? He didn't know. He wasn't a vanguard and wasn't paid enough to be here.

The noises stopped.

One of his men cursed.


"Shut up!" Jim hissed. They all stayed very still. The noises didn't come back. Maybe it meant the creatures had left. They continued to wait.

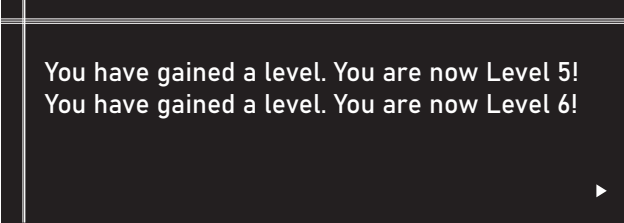
There was one small entrance on the opposite side of the cavern which looked to be a kilometer away. When they tried to move to it earlier, the noises would start. Was it safe to move now?

After a few minutes, Jim relaxed. His men didn't look as certain.

"I think they left," said Jim. The men breathed in sharply at the sound of his voice, but the cavern remained quiet.

"Let's walk calmly towards that door. No running," said Jim. The other men nodded and walked towards the only exit they could see.





You have gained a level. You are now Level 5!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 6!

“Yes!” said Paige. She wasn’t sure why she gained two levels. Perhaps it was because she outwitted her would-be kidnappers on top of solving the third door. Maybe the third door was of a higher difficulty. She wasn’t complaining, however. She’d take all the levels she could.

She swiped away the prompt, and the screen to allocate her points came up. Another complaint about the game system she had was its inability to postpone this decision until a later time. It would have been handy to read ahead in the Book to see what challenges were coming up first. If it looked like she needed more speed, she could allocate accordingly.

She split her points evenly: five into both MIND and MOVEMENT. After verifying her selection, a prompt appeared:



You have gained a new skill: Malleable Traits.

“Oooh! A new skill? Skills!”

Paige’s skill panel opened and she selected the *Malleable Traits* icon:



Why didn’t they give this skill before she had distributed her points? She caught herself. She was criticizing the system more and more, and she didn’t have time for that. She switched to her inventory to read the next chapter, but stopped.

Reading the Book in an uncleared portal would be pushing her luck a bit too much. She hadn’t even explored her location. She closed the dialogue windows and looked around. She was in a small cave tunnel, barely large enough to stretch her arms in.

It was very unlike the first dungeon she explored. Where the first one had constructed passageways made from stone, this looked to be a natural formation in the rock. Where was she? And why was she not near the entrance of the portal? From what she had studied, portals offered the entrance and the exit from a dungeon. People accidentally engulfed by a portal could quickly escape. But the portal was nowhere in sight. She wondered if she should start searching for the portal.

And then she heard gunshots.

They fell from above. Why? Jim didn't know. All he knew was they were in immediate danger. On the ground lay four large, muscular, humanoid creatures. Their skin was white and hairless, with the roughened, weathered look of a rhinoceros hide. Each of them had pointy ears and square jaws that held massive lower teeth. They wore little clothing but were armed with spears.

Jim took out his gun and shot a couple of rounds into the closest creature to him. It had no effect. The creature looked up; its eyes flashed with anger. Jim wasn't making good choices today.

With the remains of its weapon, the monster pointed at Jim. It was a spear, or at least half of one. Jim noticed the shaft was broken and then registered each of the creatures were injured.

This wasn't lost on his other men either. One of them took this as an opportunity to flee and bolted towards the exit. He didn't get further than twenty feet when a spear impaled him through his shoulder blades.

"Blain!" Jim screamed as his man collapsed. His gun fell out of his hand as he realized his chance of survival was zero. His focus returned back to the monsters who were now all standing and radiating menace.

Jim didn't know what to do. If he ran, they'd run a spear through him. If he stayed, they'd run a spear through him. His only option was to fight.

He wet himself instead.

The monsters spotted this embarrassing situation and laughed. Jim was spared a few more seconds of life. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his remaining men cowering on the floor. He

wanted to join them.

A creature walked up to him and occupied far more personal space than Jim would've liked. He swallowed and looked up; it was the one he shot. The creature's threatening glare bore down on him. Teeth masked most of its mouth, but Jim thought he caught it smile. It wasn't friendly.

Jim tightly shut his eyes.

He felt an intense pain on his chest as he was knocked back. Then he heard a gunshot, followed by an agonizing cry of pain.

"Look alive, jerk," said the voice of a girl.

Jim opened his eyes. Someone had kicked him to the ground. He was out of harm's way as the creature who had been threatening him was holding its face and flailing about.

The other creatures were crouched in a battle position, spears out, trying to hit a shape that moved too fast between them.

Jim heard another shot and a second creature howled and grabbed its face. Its free arm swung around and stabbed the neck of the third monster who fell to its knees as its blood sprayed the surrounding area.

The fourth creature roared in anger and beat its chest, providing an opening for an attack. Jim saw a blur jump on its back. It was Paige and she had a gun pointed at its face.

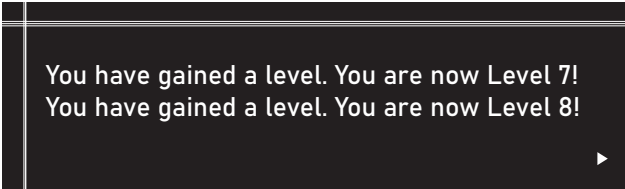
"When did she have a gun? Is that my gun? When did she take my gun?" thought Jim. Paige shot the monster in its eye and jumped to the ground, rolling away to avoid the thrashing.

"Let's go," said the girl as she got up and ran towards the entrance. Jim and his men needed no prompting and ran after her. Jim noticed Paige

staring at the ceiling. He followed her gaze, but saw nothing.

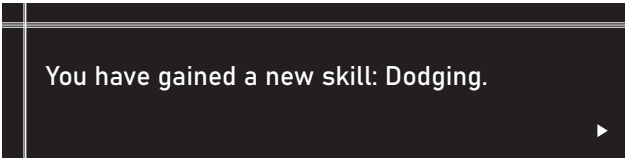
“Don’t look. Run!” shouted Paige.

It didn’t take too long to reach the entrance to the tunnel he had observed earlier. As he and his men ran inside, Jim let out an audible cry of joy when he spotted the portal. Paige was standing beside it, not even winded. Wasting no time, he and his men blinked and disappeared.



You have gained a level. You are now Level 7!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 8!

“Sweet!” said Paige. She hadn’t left yet; she was basking in her level gain. That would be four levels in total from this encounter. She wondered if saving her kidnappers was similar to an escort mission. Why didn’t the game system have an interface for quests? If she knew what she had to do, then she wouldn’t have had to figure it all out herself. Maybe her difficulty level was set too high. She went to the next prompt:

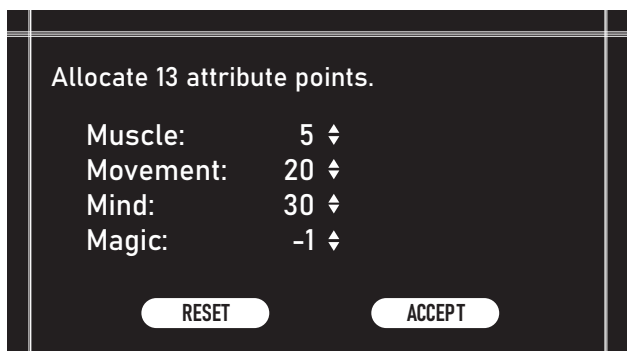


You have gained a new skill: Dodging.

“That will be useful,” thought Paige as she swiped the prompt away. The window for allocating points opened up next, but now there was a minor difference: beside the numbers of each at-

tribute field, there was a down arrow. She could lower the points of one and raise the value of another. That was pretty brilliant.

However, deciding on the attribute to subtract from would be difficult. It obviously couldn't be MOVEMENT or MIND. And she couldn't lower her MUSCLE; she was already having problems with the weight of her backpack for school. That left the final attribute: MAGIC. It was already so low. How bad would it be if it were lower? She clicked down three times on MAGIC. It jumped to -1 and her allocation points showed 13:

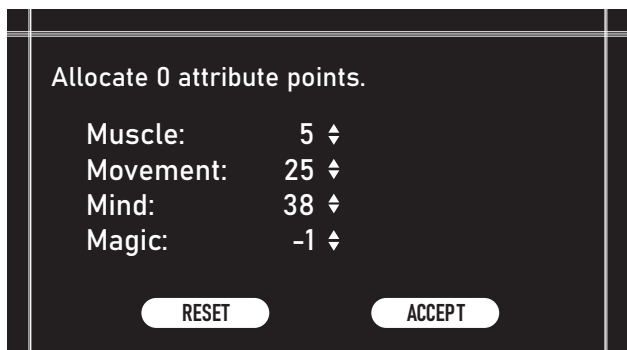


"Crap!" uttered Paige. She didn't mean for her MAGIC to go into the negative.

"Two to one ratio? That's pretty severe," thought Paige. She was just about to hit the reset button when she hesitated. Did she really need magic? People loved magic and anyone would kill to have a bit of sorcery in their lives. However, she wasn't other people; she always chose another class.

And magic didn't help her dad.

She kept the negative MAGIC attribute and put 8 points into her MIND and the rest into MOVEMENT:



Even though she wasn't a fan of magic, lowering this attribute into the negatives seemed very risky. There was one other reason: she had a theory she wanted to test. She accepted her choice and the window went away. Paige held her breath. Her MAGIC was now negative. Would she implode inside the portal?

She waited a few seconds. She didn't feel any different. It would probably be bad when someone cast magic at her.

"Wait, can I still travel via portals?" Paige said out loud. She blinked at the portal in front of her...

...and found herself back in the parking lot.

"Phew. That still works," thought Paige.

She looked around. Nothing had changed. The men who tried to kidnap her had enough sense to get away from the portal and were further down the lot, either collapsed on the ground, or throw-

ing up. She sighed and walked towards them.

Paige looked at the gun in her hands. Thoughts went back to her father who took her to the gun range when she was younger. She shook her head and pulled a cloth from her pocket. The last thing she needed was to be caught using a firearm. She wiped off her prints.

“For hired thugs, you sure have weak constitutions,” said Paige. She held out the gun towards its owner. Jim snatched it away from her and clutched it like a security blanket.

“Now, now, you’re safe. Don’t worry,” said Paige.

“You’re giving this back to me?” asked Jim.

“How would I explain a gun to my mom?”

“But we could try and kidnap you again,” said Jim.

Paige’s moves were sudden. Jim heard a click as a gun was placed against his temple. She was behind him with her mouth close to his ear.

“I wouldn’t,” she whispered.

Jim froze. His hands were empty; the gun he was holding was gone. He remembered the image of Paige mercilessly shooting the creatures in the eye. Who was this girl? He had never seen anyone move so fast in his life. He didn’t understand; vanguards weren’t supposed to retain their abilities outside of the portal.

“Don’t make me clean your gun again,” said Paige. She was standing beside him wiping her fingerprints off the gun again.

“Wait! Why were you able to shoot those things and I couldn’t?” asked Jim.

“You were aiming at the wrong place. Orcs have very tough skin, but their eyes are still vulnerable. Still, even shooting them point-blank in

the eye didn't kill them. In fact, had they been at full strength, we all would have died," said Paige. She dropped the gun in Jim's lap.

"Orcs? Those were orcs? And how are you so fast outside the portal? Where were you when we first went in, and then how did you just appear?" asked Jim.

"Look, I'm glad you're so hungry for knowledge, but the Agency is bound to show up and I don't want them knowing I was here. Let's make a deal. Since I saved your lives, how about you say nothing about me to the Agency."

"But they won't believe we took down four of those monsters on our own! We're not vanguards!"

"Tell them you were able to escape because the giant spider came back for its prey," said Paige.

"Giant spider? What are you talking about?" asked Jim.

"Why do you think those orcs were injured? They were webbed up above you the whole time. They were able to free themselves and fell in front of you. That's when you shot them."

"They were monsters!"

"I'm not judging. They would have killed you regardless. Anyway, I have to go. Remember, you don't know me. Oh, and when they ask about the door? Insist it was open."

"Wait!" said Jim, but she ran down the ramp towards the third level. He had so many question and he didn't really understand the last part about the door.

Jim didn't want to face the Agency, but he couldn't abandon the body of one of his men in the portal. He knew the Agency was very good to victims of accidental portal engulfment, even

for people like him. Sure, they would be held for questioning and possibly thrown in jail, but then he wouldn't need to face his employer any time soon. And hopefully, someone else would be hired to take care of Paige Park.

Jim heard sirens. The Vanguard Agency would be here soon. He went to check on his men.

It was four in the morning when Verlaigh knocked on the chairman's open door. Chairman Loo had been waiting all night, periodically getting small updates about the latest door that appeared.

"The Guild of Knives has finally cleared the dungeon, chairman. They needed a number of high level vanguards to take down the giant spider, but they were able to do it with minimal injuries."

"Did we find anything?" asked the chairman.

"No, sir. There were a number of bodies wrapped in the spider's cocoons hanging from the ceiling of the main cavern, but they still haven't located the civilian's body. Off this cavern, above the main floor, was a network of tunnels but they contained nothing. The guild did find some orcs who were caught by the spider. We won't be able to check them out though, because the guild will claim all spoils from this dungeon," said Assistant Verlaigh.

"If only that portal wasn't such a high level, we could have taken it ourselves instead of relying on a guild," said the chairman.

"Clearing out portals isn't our purpose, Chair-

man,” said Verlaigh.

“I know, I know, but I don’t trust a word those thugs told us. If we didn’t have to give it up to the guild, then we could investigate all we want! About those thugs, they’re still claiming the door was open when it first appeared?” asked the chairman.

“Yes,” said the assistant.

“Door was open my foot. They were armed! That means they were on the job to take down a vanguard. And it’s possible the vanguard they were hunting was the one who opened the portal! I can’t believe the key to finding out the identity of the vanguard is in our hands, and yet we can’t do anything about it!” said the chairman. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face in frustration.

“Go home, Verlaigh. It’s late and we’ve been at this all night. I have to get some sleep before the media shows up tomorrow. This has been a good week for them and a horrible one for us.”

“You need anything else?” asked the assistant.

“Answers. I need answers. Who is the vanguard? Why can they solve the puzzles? Why did this portal open up in a place not near the entrance? We know nothing and the situation seems to be getting worse.”

“I’ll let you know if we find anything else.”

“Thank you, Verlaigh. Get some rest.”

“You too, Chairman.”

Paige stifled a yawn. It had been a late night, and the events from the portal exhausted her far

more than she expected. The Book didn't tell her who hired the vanguard hunters and she couldn't do any investigating because she had to show up for orientation with the Blood Guild.

She was standing with four other recruits in front of yet another portal. This one, however, looked normal. In front of them was a higher ranked vanguard barking out orders. Or perhaps he was trying to motivate them. She wasn't too sure since she had stopped paying attention.

Vanguard Kats, along with her four bodyguards, was also with them and stood off to the side. Even after reading the whole chapter, Paige still wasn't sure what her motivation was.

"Recruits, you are on probation. Just because you were accepted doesn't mean we can't cancel it at a moment's notice. This guild was built on the principles of loyalty, bravery, and persistence. If any of you are found wanting, you will be dismissed on the spot."

Vanguard Sergeant Ando looked at the recruits before him with disgust. It looked to be another babysitting session with rich brats and their delusions of glory. He hated being the recruitment trainer for the Blood Guild, but it would be at least a year before he could be promoted. If only there were a recruit that excelled, then he, too, would be noticed and possibly promoted sooner. His only hope was Vanguard Kats' recruit. There had to be a reason why she sponsored an unknown. He just had to figure out which one it was. He wasn't going to ask Kats, of course. That would be too uncomfortable and Ando did his best to interact with her as little as possible.

"You there! What's your specialty?"

Paige realized she was being addressed.

“Strategy, sir,” answered Paige.

“Strategy? Strategy?! That’s your specialty? We’re not here to play chess, Einstein. We’re here to slay beasts. What will your precious strategy do when you are facing the maw of a hundred tooth Minotaur, hunh? What is your name, vanguard, if you’re even fit to be referred to by that title!”

“Vanguard Park, sir,” said Paige.

Sergeant Ando stopped. He recognized the name: it was Vanguard Kats’ recruit. He looked at Park from head to foot. She was tall with arms and legs that looked too thin to be functional as appendages. Coupled with the aura of a menacing dandelion, Sergeant Ando couldn’t see how this person had become a vanguard.

Sargent Ando stopped himself from glancing at Kats. He didn’t want to start anything, but bitterness filled his mouth. Kats joined the guild two years ago and advanced to the rank of captain. He had been with the guild for three years and still had to deal with spoilt, rich kids.

He feared Vanguard Kats, though. Assassins were not to be trifled with. Maybe she’d get demoted because of her poor sponsoring choice. He turned to the next rookie.

“You! What’s your name and specialty?”

“Vanguard Gale, sir. Healing, sir,” replied the boy. Ando wondered if he was old enough to be a vanguard. He didn’t even look thirteen.

“Are they sending us kids now? You better keep up, Gale. We don’t break for nap time in the dungeon,” shouted Sergeant Ando.

Paige tuned out again as Sergeant Ando went into the the rules and regulations for entering a

portal. Paige didn't realize blinking would be so complicated.

One didn't step into a portal, even though a door existed. Instead, a person would need to acknowledge the portal and blink. This would initiate a transference where the portal would engulf the person into the alternate dimension. There was also the necessity to be within a certain radius of the portal. Depending on the magical level, this could range anywhere between two feet and twenty feet.

After a few minutes, Vanguard Kats walked up to the portal and stopped within a few feet in front of it.

"Come," she said.

Sergeant Ando faltered in his well-practiced speech that even he wasn't listening to.

"Uh, Captain?" he asked.

"I'm not talking to you," said the assassin.

"I was instructed to take them—"

"Read your briefing notes. I'm taking Vanguard Park," said Kats, uttering more words than Paige had ever heard her speak.

Sergeant Ando never looked at the briefing notes. They usually held information like names, which he would never remember, and other inane personal facts like allergies or special requirements for low-light environments. Being a vanguard wasn't pre-school, it was war! Parents should keep their children at home if they wanted to coddle them.

"Come," said Kats again. Paige immediately jumped to her side.

One blink, and she was inside the portal.

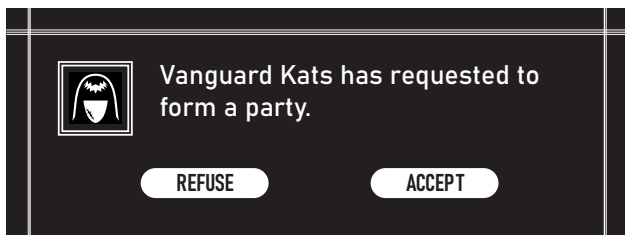
The dungeon was similar to the one she was in

last night. It looked like a natural tunnel through a cave as opposed to a constructed dungeon with hewn passages. It was also similar in one other regard: the portal entrance was nowhere to be seen.

Paige found Kats looking around the room. All portals transported people to the entrance of the dungeon where they could exit via the same portal. For Paige, two-thirds of the portals she had entered were not like this, but this was normally abnormal.

After a few minutes of searching, Vanguard Kats simply shrugged and proceeded with the training. Nothing phased this woman.

“We’re forming a separate party from the others,” said Vanguard Kats. No sooner had she finished her sentence, the sound in the room completely cut out. A prompt appeared before her eyes:



Time had stopped.

As Paige examined her surroundings, the prompt, with the little cute icon of Kats,* stayed in the center of her vision, but at least it was small enough that she could see around it. Kats was

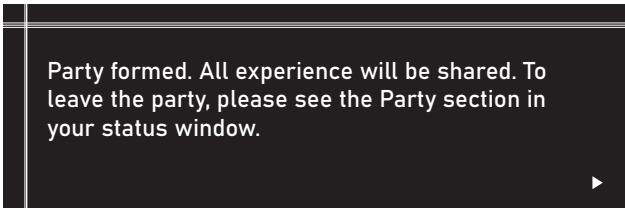
* Paige wondered what her icon would look like. It would probably be boring, like a book or a brain. Neither of those sounded exciting or cute.

frozen in place, her eyes still locked on Paige in a penetrating stare that unnerved her. She tested moving. She could still move her arms and limbs, but her feet were firmly planted and she couldn't walk anywhere.

Paige knew the system could stop time and had tried to take advantage of this earlier, but she found out time stopped in only two situations: when forming a party, and when gaining a level. The inventory panel didn't stop time, but she really wished it did. The amount of potential napping hours lost was depressing to Paige.

Paige checked she was standing in the exact same way before accepting the party invitation. The difficult part was remembering her position before time stopped. If Kats noticed her body suddenly shifting in space, especially since Kats' eyes were always trained on her, that would surely raise questions. Paige calmed, and prepared herself.

"Accept," said Paige.



Party formed. All experience will be shared. To leave the party, please see the Party section in your status window.

"Dismiss," said Paige.

The prompt disappeared and time began flowing. Paige could hear sound return to the dungeon and wondered why light didn't stop also. She

didn't have time to ponder that thought, because she was too busy being uncomfortable. Kats' gaze was penetrating.

Kats removed a long dagger which had been sheathed on her back and held it out to Paige.

"Use this," she said.

"Thank you," was all Paige could muster. She had practiced with a stick earlier in an attempt to not look awkward wielding a weapon. That was two hours of her life she wasn't getting back.

"Let's go," said Kats.

"Yes, sir," said Paige.

"Just call me Kats," said Kats.

"Yes, Vanguard Kats," stuttered Paige.

Kats and Paige walked through the tunnels of the dungeon in complete silence. Kats didn't say anything, and Paige wasn't going to be the one nervously trying to make conversation.

Again, the dungeon was a simple cave system, just like the second dungeon Paige had entered. Had she not known she was inside of a different dimension, Paige could have mistaken their expedition as a fun spelunking trip back home. She wondered if Kats knew what their destination was. Were they looking for something, or waiting for an attack? Still, there really was only one way to go: forward.

"Party," whispered Paige to herself. If Kats heard her, and Paige was sure she did, she made no comment. Possibly Kats thought Paige was just as eccentric as the rest of the world thought Kats was. The *Party* window appeared:



Paige tapped Kats' icon to open up her profile. The lack of information it displayed was disappointing.



Vanguard Kats didn't have a level. From what Paige had researched, normal vanguards didn't level nor collect experience. Either the *Level Up* skill was unique to her, or kept secret.

Her rumination was interrupted by the battle cry of a creature which sounded like a mashup between a turkey and an old man clearing his throat. She dismissed the prompt and saw the shadows of long necks and reptilian heads. Kats had stopped

walking. Both she and Paige recognized what was approaching: lizard-men.

Lizard-men were fierce creatures with a camouflage skill and the ability to poison their enemies with a projectile tongue. They were a much higher level of creature than Kats or the Blood Guild had anticipated.

The lizard-men saw them standing there and charged with their primitive spears. When they closed the distance by half, the lizard-men camouflaged and disappeared.

Kats dashed towards them. Even with her MOVEMENT speed as high as it was, Paige could barely follow Kats. The lizard men were confused by the blur before them and threw their spears in desperation, missing Kats entirely.

Using the wall as a springboard, Kats leapt upwards and did a half-flip so her feet landed on the ceiling. She then jumped downwards, arms outstretched to grab the heads of two lizards which she smashed into the ground. With her momentum, Kats rolled to the other two lizard-men and slapped them from underneath. These last two lizard-men fell unconscious.

Paige knew this battle was coming and yet was still stunned by how Kats executed her attack. It had happened within a matter of seconds and Kats didn't even use a weapon.

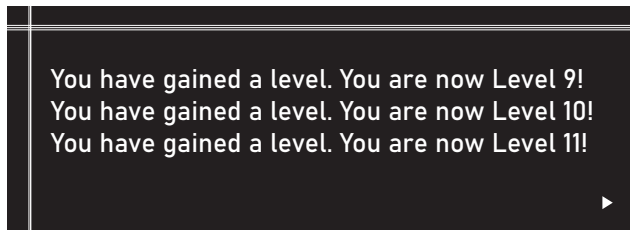
"Kill them. They're not dead," said Kats.

Paige didn't have the strength to pierce their skin, so she went over to a lizard-man with its tongue sticking out. Using the knife Kats gave her, she sawed off the tongue. It was difficult, but she was successful. As a test, she tried to cut the throat of the lizard-man. She couldn't even

scratch it. Was Kats watching her and judging? She probably was, but Paige didn't turn around to verify.

Continuing, she positioned the tongue so the tip was pointing away from her. With a quick cut, she slit the tip, which cut easily, and poison poured out. She dipped her knife in the poison, coating it as best she could, and then jammed it into the eye of the lizard-man.

Lizard-men were fine with ingesting their own poison, but once it entered directly into their bloodstream, it was just as deadly to them as it was to anyone else. The beast convulsed and died.



You have gained a level. You are now Level 9!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 10!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 11!

Paige did a little dance inside her head. She had fifteen points this time. She wanted to throw them into movement just so she wouldn't feel so slow around Kats, but spending the next hour sawing at tongues was a waste of everyone's time.

She needed another twenty-five points to bring her MUSCLE to 30. She didn't know why that was the magic number to slice lizard-men skin, but the Book told her it was and it had never failed her before. She bit her lip and decreased her MAGIC so she would have enough for her MUSCLE:

Allocate 0 attribute points.

Muscle:	30	↕
Movement:	25	↕
Mind:	38	↕
Magic:	-21	↕

RESET

ACCEPT

“This can’t be healthy,” thought Paige to herself. She accepted the allocation.

Her clothes felt tighter. She checked her arms. They looked bigger. This was bound to be noticeable. She turned around to see Kats looking at her with a gaze far more intense than before.

Paige smiled and said, “Sorry! I admit that was my first kill as a vanguard. I had a moment, you know? To myself.”

Kats watched her.

“Yay! First kill! Yay me! Yay...death!”

Paige looked around to see what could interrupt the awkwardness of their interaction. There were three other lizard-men still unconscious.

“Right! Ha! I should kill them too,” said Paige. She bent down and sliced the throats of each of the lizard-men. The Book was right, she was able to pierce their skin. That was a relief, and gruesome at the same time.

Paige jumped another four levels:

You have gained a level. You are now Level 12!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 13!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 14!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 15!

The lizard-men must have been formidable if she was able to level that much even with sharing experience with Kats. Still, the first lizard-man jumped her three levels, but the next three kills only gave her four levels.

She debated being greedy again. Her MAGIC was already low, so what did it matter now? Probably everything, but the Book didn't show any negative effects in this chapter. She decreased her MAGIC further and allocated her points:

Allocate 0 attribute points.

Muscle:	30	↕
Movement:	40	↕
Mind:	60	↕
Magic:	-45	↕

RESET

ACCEPT

“This will be interesting,” she thought as she accepted her points.

Kats was still watching her. Paige wished Kats would stop being so creepy, but she also knew

how weird she looked. Just a few minutes ago, Paige could barely cut off a tongue and now she was slicing necks like a samurai.

If Kats found this strange, she didn't let it show. Her face remained as stony as ever.

There was another gurgling roar. Running down the passage were another eight lizard men. They went into camouflage mode, but Paige's heightened senses from her improved MIND could now detect them.

Kats wasn't busy trying to detect things. She immediately pounced and rendered all eight creatures unconscious in under a minute.

"You're still faster than me," whispered Paige.

"Kill them again," said Kats.

Paige nodded and went to kill the unconscious creatures. Why did Kats ask her to kill them? Did she know she needed experience points? How would she know that? And how did Kats make them unconscious? From her vantage point, all Kats did was slap the lizard-men and they fell over. What skills did Kats have? And why didn't she kill anything herself?

Maybe Paige was thinking too much, but that was the main point of putting her points into MIND. She filed her questions away for another day and killed some lizards.

Paige jumped another three levels.

"I'm getting the hang of this killing thing now," said Paige. She gave Kats a smile and then wondered if this was something to brag about. They had been walking for almost half an hour,

following the same pattern Kats had set from the beginning: she would slap them, Paige would kill them. Leveling became less and less frequent. After a number of encounters, she had only gained five more levels.

Not once did Kats look like she was struggling. If she was bored by killing creatures way below her skill level, she showed it in neither expression nor effort. Her movements were fast and precise, and each of her attacks were efficient.

“Get ready,” said Kats.

Kats and Paige rounded a corner where a group of eight lizard-men were doing whatever monsters did before vanguards came around and slaughtered them.

Kats’ speed was incredible, but Paige had advanced enough to keep up with her. In a matter of ten seconds, six of the lizard-men were on the ground, unconscious. Kats still didn’t kill them. However, she left two very confused, and very angry lizard-men behind.

“These are yours,” Kats said. Paige turned to look at Kats, but she had disappeared.

This took Paige back a bit. She remembered this happening in the chapter, but reading about it and experiencing it were two different things. Kats didn’t move behind something, nor did she fade into non-existence. She was gone.

She wasn’t even invisible, because Paige would still be able to sense her heartbeat, her breathing, or any of those bodily functions required for existing. But none of that was there. Kats had ceased to be.

The two remaining lizard-men focused their attention on the prey in front of them. They

rushed Paige. One held out a spear to gore her and the other shot out its projectile tongue.

Paige ran towards the spear, turning her torso to avoid impalement. She caught the tongue of the second lizard-man and sliced it off with her dagger. The second creature screamed as Paige tossed its tongue at the first and, at the same time, threw her dagger which sliced through the tongue and embedded itself straight into its eye. Letting go of the spear it was holding, Paige grabbed this spear and threw it at the lizard without a tongue. The blade pierced its neck and pinned the lizard against the wall.

Paige finally knew how Kats felt, minus the slapping.

“Very good,” said Kats. She was suddenly beside her. Whatever skill Kats possessed that allowed her to nullify her existence was terrifying.

“Thank you,” said Paige. Kats gave Paige a cloth.

“Wipe off your dagger with this and then toss it. It will remove the poison.”

Paige nodded in thanks. Kats was getting downright chatty. Maybe the next step in their relationship would be selfies.

She cleaned off her dagger and then killed the remaining lizard-men. She didn’t level. She hoped for harder monsters.

They continued to walk down the passageway. If Kats had a destination, she didn’t bother telling Paige. Paige didn’t need to know, though, since she knew what was coming next. She took out some ear plugs and put them in.

“SCREEEEEE!”

Kats covered her ears. Paige held out her hand

and offered her a pair as well.

“They’re not used,” said Paige, not that Kats could hear. Kats put the earplugs in, giving Paige a look that indicated she was curious to know why Paige had them. Paige smiled and tried to look like a person who naturally carried earplugs around.

Kats looked ahead. The tunnel they were in sloped upwards. They continued forward and reached a bend in the passageway. As they turned, the corridor opened up to a gigantic stone chamber, and on the opposite side, Paige saw a massive metal wall with cryptic line-art carved on its surface.

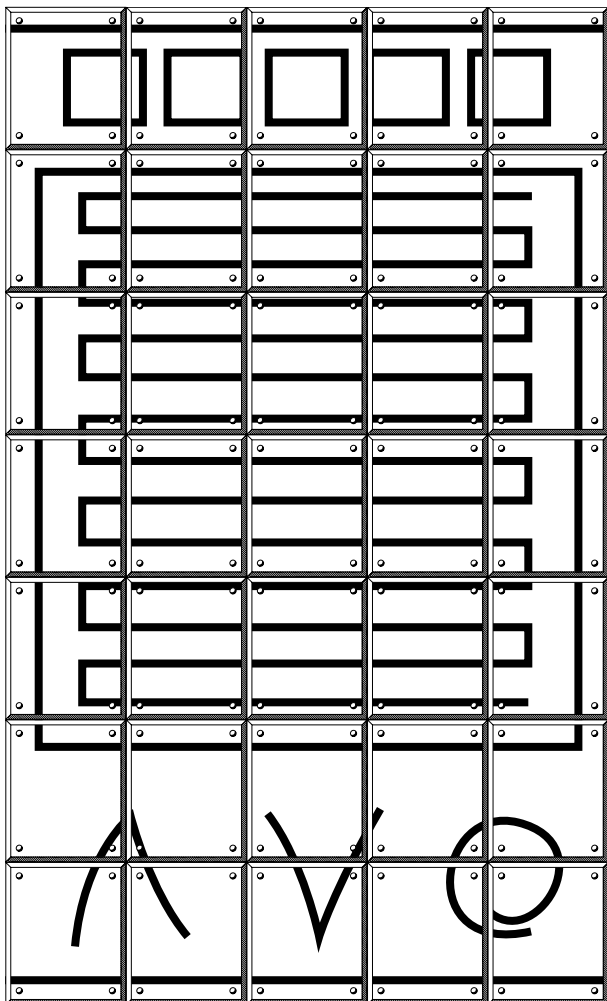
It was the fourth door.

The muffled screeching had gotten much louder now that they were close to its source. The passage they were in was about forty feet above the floor of the cavern, looking over a huge pit in front of the gigantic door. In the pit were hundreds of lizard-folk screaming in pain, and amongst them, Paige and Kats could see five engorged lizard queens.

They were in a state of constant birthing. Paige watched as a full-grown lizard-man slid out of the birthing canal of one of the queens. It and the queen screamed in agony.

This wasn’t a normal setup for lizard-men. Normal lizards didn’t have queen lizards who spawned worker lizards. Yet here it was, occurring before her eyes, at great cost and anguish to the creatures involved. And to top it all off, the ground was littered with weapons for the lizards to pick up. Why was this here?

Paige saw the other Blood Guild recruits in the



It was the fourth door.

corner, fighting off some lizard-men. Despite the pain the beasts were experiencing, they seemed to have sensed the intruders and were lashing out blindly. The lizard-men weren't attacking with any type of cognizant strategy, however, which was the only saving grace for the new recruits.

Kats saw them too. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a vial containing a deep purple liquid. Paige recognized it as a stamina and healing potion. Kats gave her the vial and also offered a second dagger. Paige accepted.

"Party," said Paige. She was going to get some serious experience and she didn't want any to be shared with Kats, so she left the party she had formed with Kats. Paige felt a bit guilty, being an experience hog, but it's not like Kats could utilize it. If it was being shared, then it was being wasted. She swiped away the dialogue windows.

Kats was looking at her.

Paige giggled and pretended to wave.

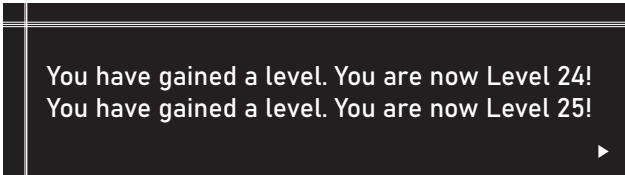
Kats nodded to signal she was going in and leapt into the pit of a hundred screaming lizard-men.

"Sheesh, this woman doesn't hesitate," said Paige. She looked over the edge. It was a long way down. Paige jumped.

A couple lizard-man had the wherewithal to leap up and intercept her. She smiled to herself. With her speed as fast as Kats', everything was in slow-motion. She used the monsters as stepping stones, jumping off each of them to break her descent. She landed on the ground, surrounded by a group of unconscious lizard-men. Kats was a few meters away, weaponless as always, rendering every lizard-man she touched unconscious.

Paige did her best to keep up. She slit the throat of monster after monster, but Kats was a demon. Her hands spun around, felling scores of lizards. It would have been easier if other lizards weren't also trying to kill her. While Paige was slitting throats, she still had to block, dodge, and keep herself from getting impaled, poisoned, or sliced.

It did pay off, of course. A prompt appeared:



You have gained a level. You are now Level 24!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 25!

Leveling was her only respite. The stoppage of time offered an island oasis in a sea of insanity. After catching her breath, she swiped the prompt away.



You have gained a new skill: Reptile Killer.

A new skill! She wouldn't have time to check it at the moment. Things were a bit hectic. She dismissed the prompt to allocate her new points.

Her MIND allowed her to sense attacks and plan the next one. Her MOVEMENT allowed her to keep up with the attacks. Her MUSCLE allowed her to complete the attacks.

Her MAGIC offered nothing.

She had slowly been whittling away at her MAGIC and putting the points into MIND and MOVEMENT:

Allocate 0 attribute points.

Muscle:	35	◆
Movement:	65	◆
Mind:	100	◆
Magic:	-85	◆

RESET ACCEPT

Would the Blood Guild kick her out if they discovered she had negative magic? She hoped they wouldn't test her. She accepted her choice and continued fighting.

There was no end to the lizard-men, but eventually, she and Kats made it to one of the queens. The fighting became fiercer as the creatures sensed a danger to their queen, but Kats was like the wind. Nothing could touch her. She weaved in and out of tongues, claws, swords, and spears as if she were dancing. She left a path open to the queen and Paige rushed in.

The queen was over twelve feet tall and about eight feet wide. Using a few unconscious lizard bodies as a springboard, she leapt up and wrapped her arm around the neck of the queen, driving her dagger deep into its skin. With the momentum of the jump, she spun around the queen; the dagger cutting her around like a very inaccurate lathe.

The queen gushed out very disgusting liquids and died.

Paige was jumping off the queen as a leveling notification appeared and stopped time. She swiped it away and quickly allocated her points. Paige didn't like hanging in the air.

As time flowed, she landed and rolled towards Kats, but Kats had stopped fighting. Around them, scores of lizard-men were now flailing their arms about and looked to be wailing. Paige removed her earplugs. The lizard-men were no longer screaming, but moaning instead. Paige felt sorry for the lizard-beasts. It wasn't their fault they were being reproduced at an unnatural pace.

Without the lizard-men resisting, the rest of the queens would be easier to kill. Across the room, through a throng of lizard-men, Paige saw the other Blood Guild recruits. They were taking down a now undefended lizard queen. It was time to finish off all of them and she ran to another queen.

After a few minutes, all the queens were dead and no more lizard-men were being spawned. Paige and the other Blood Guild members spent another ten minutes killing the remaining lizard-men. Kats stood by and watched. And why wasn't she killing anything? She was an assassin! She also had an amazing ability to not look disheveled. Was that an assassin skill as well? The assassin class had to be nerfed.

After the last lizard-men died, Paige stood exhausted. She had gained another four levels. Her shoulders were slumped and the daggers hung loose in her hands. She didn't want to see anything resembling a lizard for as long as she lived.

Sergeant Ando staggered towards them. He looked weary but also angry. He was glaring at Kats who was standing beside Paige.

“You didn’t drink the potion,” Kats said to Paige as they both watched the sergeant struggle across the floor. It was a tiring battle.

Paige felt guilty. It’s not that she was ungrateful, she didn’t want to waste it. She was the type to save all her potions in video games, only to have a bag full of unused potions in the end.

Sergeant Ando was panting really hard by the time he reached them. The other recruits were lying on the ground a hundred or so meters away. Paige was glad to see that none of them were injured.

“Where were you? We were fighting for ten minutes before you came,” barked Sergeant Ando.

“You lived,” said Kats.

“No thanks to you! I only had four rookies with me who were not yet tested in battle! We would never have taken any of these creatures on but we didn’t materialize near the portal entrance! I’ve never seen that happen before, but if you had not gone off on your own, we would have been saved a ton of heartache,” said the Sergeant.

“I found the portal exit through that tunnel. Please take your party and go,” said Kats as she pointed to a tunnel on a wall opposite the large door.

“What? I’m talking to you right now!” shouted the Sergeant.

Kats took out an envelope with the red seal of the Blood Guild. Sergeant Ando looked at it. First with surprise, and then an attentive salute.

“We’ll be on our way, sir!” said the sergeant

with the clipped discipline of a soldier. He turned around and gathered his recruits.

Paige watched him and his party hobble towards the tunnel. They were slow due to their exhaustion, but Kats didn't seem to be in a hurry. What was that envelope? Where did Kats put it? Did she have dimensional pockets?

"What was that?" asked Paige.

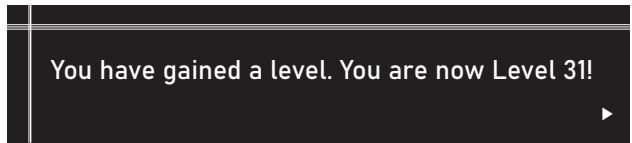
"Blood Guild Special Directive," said Kats as if that explained everything. She walked towards the massive door, avoiding all the lizard-men that lay on the floor.

Paige followed behind. The door was massive. She examined the material that made up the door. It was lead. So far, every door was made from a different metal. She wondered why.

Paige said a word.

After a few seconds, there came the muffled sound of multiple locks and gears turning,[†] as well as a metal bar being retracted. If Kats was surprised Paige knew how to open the door, she didn't show it. They both stood patiently until the door finished unlocking.

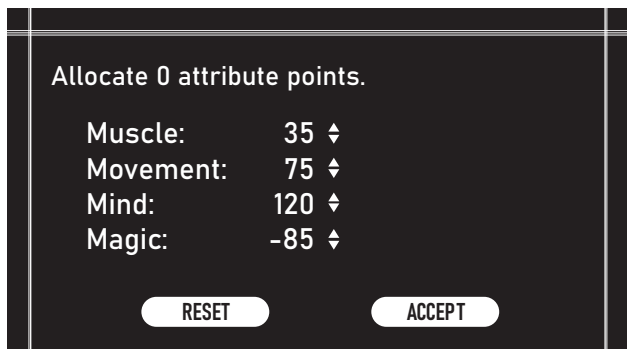
THOOM!



You have gained a level. You are now Level 31!

[†] This was new. Previous doors shimmered and offered a portal. This door required unlocking and opening. Even the door graphic appeared on a different page. She had wondered about taking this into account when working out the answer for this puzzle, but she needn't have worried. For all intents and purposes, it was puzzling as usual.

Time stopped as it always did for a level gain. Paige used to be excited about getting new levels, but the constant prompting was getting annoying. Still, she shouldn't complain. More levels meant more points. With the battle over and the door unlocked, she stopped to look at the allocation window. Her finger automatically raised the MIND attribute:



She liked being super smart; it made solving the doors easy. She selected *Accept* on the window and time started up again.

Paige watched the current door open outwards. It was slow, progressing at a speed just faster than landscape erosion. It was also thick. Even after a full two minutes, only ten feet of the door's width was exposed and it still hadn't fully pulled out. She didn't know what could power the movement of such heavy doors, nor why they needed to be so thick.

"It still hasn't opened enough for us to see inside," said Paige. Kats nodded. Paige was happy she got a response from her. They waited a few more minutes until a sliver of space appeared be-

tween the door and the wall. A vile stench hit her with the impact of a splash of sewage.

Paige threw up.

Kats handed her a cloth which Paige gladly accepted. How was she able to withstand this miasmatic odour? As soon as the crack was large enough for a human to squeeze through, Kats went in.

“We’re not worried about any danger? Or smells? We’re just walking in? Fine. Let’s do that,” said Paige as she followed behind, holding her nose.

She peeked into the room. It was massive, far larger than the room she was in. She couldn’t see the other side and couldn’t trace the source of the ghastly smell.

Paige walked in and examined the other side of the door. Her past self was only able to solve this door because she had found an inscription. It probably would have also been easier if she had a physical representation of the book, but visualizing things in her head was easy.

“There it is,” said Paige. Carved neatly into the metal of the door were verses from some unknown book.

“No soul,” said Kats, who was staring upwards.

Paige turned towards Kats to see what she was referring to and caught her smiling.

“Kats is smiling. This is new,” thought Paige. And then Kats ran off.

- 71 IT BEGINS AT THE VALLEY OF
SOSSU, WHICH IS DIRECT-
LY BETWEEN MOUNT NAHRT
AND MOUNT HESSE.
- 73 OTODE IS VISIBLE AND HIGH
IN THE NIGHT SKY, ALONG WITH
74 BELSH.
- 75 FROM THERE, TRAVEL TO THE
MOUNTAINS OF TOOTRI AND
LOOK FAR BELOW INTO THE
VALLEY OF HEN ADO.
- 77 CAN YOU SEE THEM? OSYGE IS
ON THE EASTERN BORDER? SO
78 IS TERE. THEY WILL EVEN-
TUALLY CURL UP TOGETHER
AND MEET.
- 80 WEST OF OTUK VALLEY, IS
THE MOUNTAIN RANGE OF
TYONIL. ON IT ARE DHEOS
AND HALT WHO TRAVEL EAST
TO MEET THEIR RESPECTIVE
LOVERS AHSTA AND TERE.

Carved neatly into the metal of the door were verses...