

Chapter 5

*Each seven's symbol
Locates unique parts important.
The fifth was combined
Should be there but now isn't.*
—Aminatu 7:9, Book of Moira

Paige swore to herself.

Kats had dashed off without the preliminary assessment of danger like normal people did. This didn't give Paige any time to read ahead in the Book. She cursed Kats and her lack-of-fear-and-social-cues attitude.

That's when she heard movement. And not the sound of small animals scurrying across the floor. This was the sound of a large building suddenly realizing it had legs. Paige peered into the darkness. What was there and why did it stink so bad?

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness just when she heard a roar.

It was an undead cyclops.

The giant towered over her and she guessed it was almost three stories high. Half of it was skeletal, and pieces of rotting flesh were falling off of it with every movement. And if that weren't bad enough, it was armed with a tree.

The cyclops was a rare creature. There were only a handful of vanguards who had actually battled a

live one. Finding a cyclops that was also undead was unheard of. No one was stupid enough to bring such a thing back from the dead.

Paige saw Kats running towards the cyclops. What on earth was wrong with her? Paige was having a hard time keeping her liquids inside of her body, yet Kats seemed gleeful. At least she was brandishing weapons this time: two daggers. Paige didn't even know Kats used weapons. Maybe she'll do more than just slap the monster.

Paige looked at her own daggers. What were they going to do against a cyclops? Could she risk a quick peek at the Book? A blur from above caused her to leap to the side. The large tree wielded by the cyclops smashed against the ground, missing Paige by a few feet.

"I'm trying to read here!" screamed Paige at the cyclops. She ran in the opposite direction of both Kats and the cyclops. Fortunately, the area was immense, larger than the outside room, giving her plenty of space to dodge.

The cyclops gave a bellowing roar that echoed through the chamber. Did Kats injure it? She glanced back and saw Kats slicing at the cyclops' legs. It wasn't having any effect.

"Inventory," Paige said. She was going to read the Book if it killed her.

"AHHHH!" came a scream from behind. Paige swiped the *Inventory* screen away to see Sergeant Ando running inside.

"What are you doing here?" asked Paige.

"THAT'S AN UNDEAD CYCLOPS!" screamed Sergeant Ando.

"Yes, I know! Don't mansplain things to me! Why are you here? You were supposed to take the recruits

home!” said Paige.

“I sent them through the portal! But I have as much right to know what’s behind the door as you do! But then the dead lizard-men were being raised so I ran in here! You didn’t tell me you had an undead cyclops!”

“It was news to me too!”

“So how are you going to kill it?”

“Me? It’s my first day! What do vanguards do against the undead?”

“I don’t know! I am a trainer! I rarely go into dungeons,” argued Sergeant Ando.

“So what are we—” Paige stopped and immediately jumped and drop-kicked Sergeant Ando in the chest.

He flew back about ten feet, while Paige flew back a couple of feet. It was enough for them to clear an angled swing of a tree trunk which bounced off the ground between them.

“What was that all about! Why are you kicking me?” screamed Sergeant Ando, knowing his life had been saved but angry at being kicked.

“You survived!” shouted Paige. She jumped to her feet and pulled Ando up. They started running, although Paige saw Ando struggling with the weight of his armour.

“Animating the dead requires a lot of magical energy, right?” asked Paige.

“How would I know that? I am not the type to raise the dead in my spare time,” puffed Ando.

“Something is keeping that cyclops animated. It’s not a necromancer, because they would have the ability to focus the energy on the cyclops alone. However, the dead lizard-men are also being re-animated. That means magic is spilling from some type of thaumic

generator. Although, the amount of energy being released would be immense. Something like that wouldn't be small, and the magical energy certainly would have been noticed before anyone went in. The Blood Guild would never have sent new recruits here. Furthermore, neither the cyclops nor the lizard-men have the capacity to cast magic, so they couldn't set up a masking spell," said Paige to herself.

"I thought you didn't know anything about undead magic," said Ando.

"I only know the rudimentaries. I don't know how to cast it and don't know the exact specifics of thaumic transference mechanics," said Paige.

"Well, uh, only senior vanguards, like myself, are required to study that," said Ando. He had no idea what Paige was talking about.

"Wait! I'm a moron! Magical energy wasn't found because it was just created! Look! Look at all the lizard-men we killed!" said Paige with excitement.

Sergeant Ando didn't say anything because he didn't know why they were talking while running from an undead cyclops wielding a tree.

"Can you take on those undead lizard-men?"

"I can, but I can't break through them. You have no idea how many of them there are. We're trapped in here, but it's better than taking on that cyclops," said Ando.

"I have a plan, how long could you last against the lizards? Five minutes? Ten?"

"What do you take me for! I could battle against them all night!"

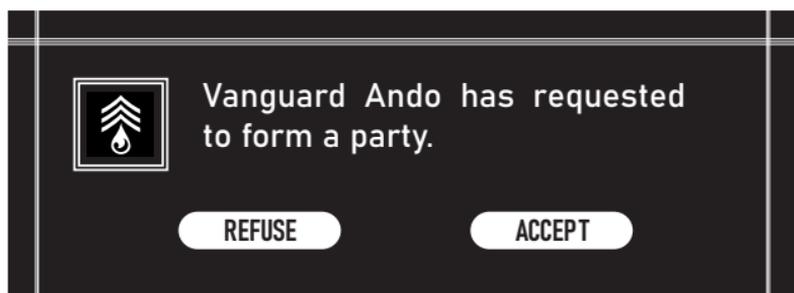
"Form a party with me," said Paige.

"What?"

"Just ask me to join your party," said Paige.

"Okay! Sure! Whatever, join my party," said

Ando. A prompt appeared in front of Paige, and time stopped.



It was a wonderful breather from all the running. She wondered why this stopped time and not her inventory. She wanted to send in recommendations to improve the interface, but how? It's not like this game, which only showed up in her mind, had a website where she could speak to a help representative.

"Accept," shouted Paige.

"Why do we need to verbally form a contract for a party?" asked Ando as time began to flow again.

Paige shoved the stamina potion into his hands.

"Last as long as you can. I have a cyclops to take down," and she ran off.

"It's your funeral," said Ando and he downed the potion. Feeling refreshed, he pulled out his sword and ran out of the room.

Paige looked around and spotted Kats keeping the cyclops occupied. The cyclops was fast, but not fast enough to hit Kats. Unfortunately, they were at a stand-off; Kats didn't do any damage to the cyclops.

Paige decided it was time for the tried-and-true method of climbing up bosses. She didn't think this would happen in real life, but then again she didn't think she'd have a book which detailed her life as a video game.

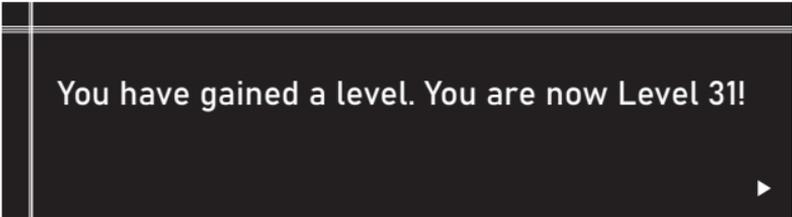
The hulking colossus planted a foot near Paige.

Paige jumped up and dug her daggers deep into the calf of the cyclops. The cyclops didn't notice, but that wasn't the purpose of her stab. She climbed up the leg of the cyclops, and made it to his thigh. The stench was even more unbearable. The next time she went on a battle, she was bringing something to block her sense of smell.

The cyclops was too busy trying to swat at Kats to have noticed Paige. Did Kats distract it on purpose? She seemed to know what to do in any given situation. She gave a silent thanks to Kats and kept climbing. Paige reached the base of the cyclops' neck which gave her a good vantage point of the room.

She looked out towards the gigantic lead door which had opened a quarter of the way by now. She could see Sergeant Ando battling the undead lizard-men. They were slower than when they were alive, but they were relentless because they couldn't die. However, not all the lizard-men were re-animated. There were still a number of them that were dead. In fact, there was a pattern. A pattern she could predict and calculate.

A notification came up:



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

“Thank you, sergeant,” whispered Paige. If her suppositions were correct, she'd need a lot of brain power. She decreased her MAGIC by another forty and placed all of it into MIND:

Allocate 0 attribute points.

Muscle: 35 ⬇

Movement: 75 ⬇

Mind: 145 ⬇

Magic: -125 ⬇

RESET

ACCEPT

She hoped it would be enough, and even if it wasn't, she had a plan.

Paige descended the cyclops as quickly as she could, jumping off before reaching the lower trunk. She ran across the dungeon floor, waving her arms, trying to get the attention of the cyclops.

“HEY! ONE EYE!” shouted Paige, trying to be as insulting as possible. It sounded better in her head.

The cyclops stopped. The fast and annoying bug it had been trying to swat for the last ten minutes had disappeared. There was another target though. Another little bug waving its arms.

The cyclops swung its tree and tried to bash the waving little bug. However, it dodged out of the way. This made him angry. Why could he not hit either of the bugs? He smashed his club at the bug again, hard enough to crack the floor. He must have gotten it this time.

But no. There was the bug, hiding in the crack, waving. But it was trapped! Trapped in the floor.

With an intense amount of bellowing, the cyclops raised its club and struck again.

The floor couldn't take the force of the hit and collapsed. A smaller room was revealed underneath the lair of the cyclops. Exposed was a huge cut gem, glowing blue. It was sitting in a reinforced receptacle that was immersed in a pool of blood.

The cyclops looked at the shiny object, wondering why it was underneath his room. And that's when it saw the bug again. With a roar, he took his tree, and swung it against the crystal.

The tree splintered and broke into two. The gem was too strong. The cyclops roared in frustration.

Paige furrowed her brow. She had hoped the crystal wasn't thaumite, but it withstood the impact of a tree swung by a cyclops. It wasn't some cheap, unstable, magic stone. It was the real deal. She'd never seen a thaumite specimen this large before, but she had been expecting it.

Thaumite was an incredibly strong material and judging by its size, it was releasing an intense amount of magical energy. If Paige could shatter it, then the energy used to keep the cyclops animated wouldn't be strong enough and their monster problems would be over.

All she needed was another thaumite shard. Which she didn't have. Where was the cyclops? She couldn't see from the lower room, but she did hear a lot of commotion as if a wrecking ball was smashing the wall.

There was another roar and Paige saw the cyclops. It was smart. It had been bashing the wall to

break a piece of it off. If a tree couldn't destroy the gem, then perhaps a stone section of the wall would. Paige was impressed it could think for itself. She waded through the blood and jumped in front of the thaumite to taunt the cyclops.

The cyclops acquiesced and smashed the stone against the thaumite trying to aim for Paige. The thaumite was unmoved, but Paige saw a small shard break off. She was quick and caught it before it fell into the surrounding pool of blood.

There was another roar. This cyclops was a poor sport. Paige heard it destroying the wall again. Hopefully it would get a bigger stone section.

Being chipped wasn't good enough. Paige needed the large thaumite gem shattered. Another thaumite, the shard she caught, could be used as a chisel to shatter the main gem, but it required precision calculation to find the optimal point to do it in one hit.

Paige would have to calculate that.

And then she would have to hold the shard in place, taking into account the angle of the incoming stone being used as a giant hammer. And then, before it hit, she'd have to jump away so as not to be crushed by the stone.

Could she do the calculations that fast?

She circled the large gem and memorized its structure to the minutest detail. Once satisfied, she hopped on top of the thaumite, splashing blood all over it.

"Darn it. I'll have to take that into consideration too, won't I?" thought Paige. She waited for the cyclops to return.

She didn't have to wait long.

The cyclops roared as if proud to have come back

with an even bigger section of the wall. Paige could feel its anger focused on her, it must be really annoyed.

With two arms, he raised the stone wall above him.

“Party,” said Paige. The Party window popped up and she selected Sergeant Ando’s profile pic.



Vanguard Ando

Level: N/A
Class: **Trainer**
Guild: **Blood Guild**

Vanguard Ando is good at memorizing training manuals if not the names of his students.

LEAVE PARTY

The cyclops swung the stone wall at Paige.

“Leave party,” said Paige.

Time stopped.

Are you sure you wish to leave Vanguard Ando's party?

NO **YES**

Paige breathed a sigh of relief. She could finally take advantage of this stupid time-stop thing. The main window had disappeared with only the Yes/No prompt blocking her vision. It was still an inconvenience, but she was able to see the majority of her

surroundings with her peripheral vision.

Now all she had to do was calculate.

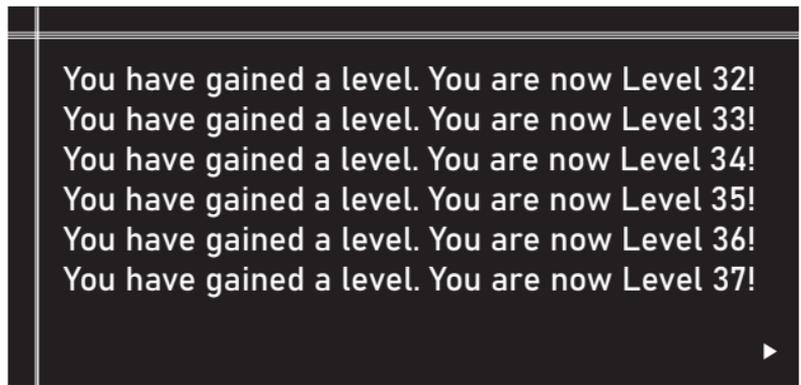
There was no way she could have calculated how to shatter the gem in a millisecond before being struck. But she could certainly do it with an infinite number of milliseconds. Not that she needed an infinite number of milliseconds; she didn't put all her points into her genius for nothing.

The cyclops put all his might into throwing the wall against the shiny blue gem. It shattered into a thousand pieces and the cyclops roared in triumph.

And then the cyclops collapsed.

She miscalculated. Well, to be fair, she calculated fine, but a hidden stone from the wall broke off and clipped her leg as she jumped away, spinning her out of control. Her current trajectory was towards some jagged rocks, and there was nothing she could do except a bit of whimpering.

Time stopped:

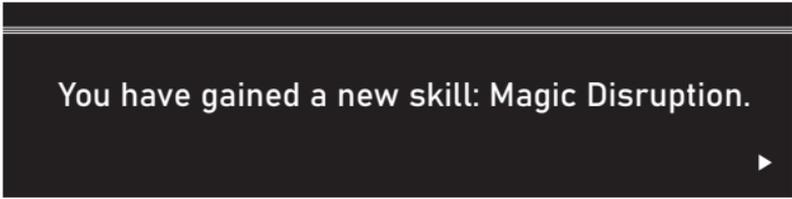


You have gained a level. You are now Level 32!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 33!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 34!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 35!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 36!
You have gained a level. You are now Level 37!

“Just six levels? I killed an undead cyclops! That’s gotta be more than just six levels, you cheapskate!” screamed Paige. The pain from her leg was intense and it was probably broken.

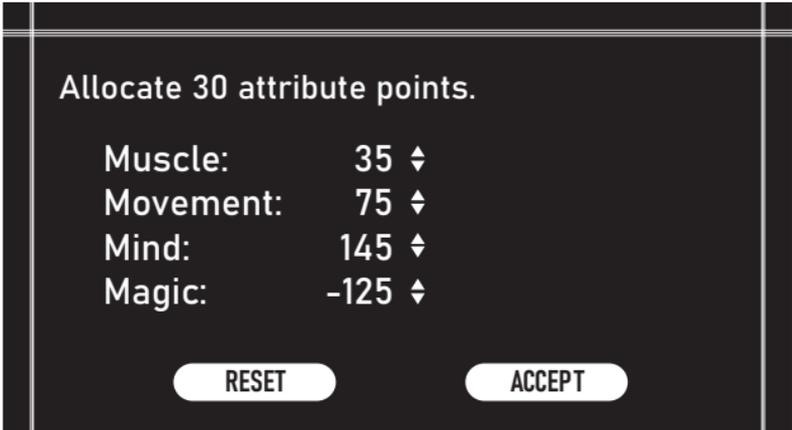
“And why didn’t you stop the pain when time was stopped?” she screamed again. She didn’t know if anyone was listening, but she didn’t care.

She tapped the dialogue window.



You have gained a new skill: Magic Disruption.

“Hunh. That’s cool. But I’m still mad! A new skill doesn’t take the pain away!” yelled Paige. She grunted and swiped to the next screen:



Allocate 30 attribute points.

Muscle: 35 ⬇

Movement: 75 ⬇

Mind: 145 ⬇

Magic: -125 ⬇

RESET

ACCEPT

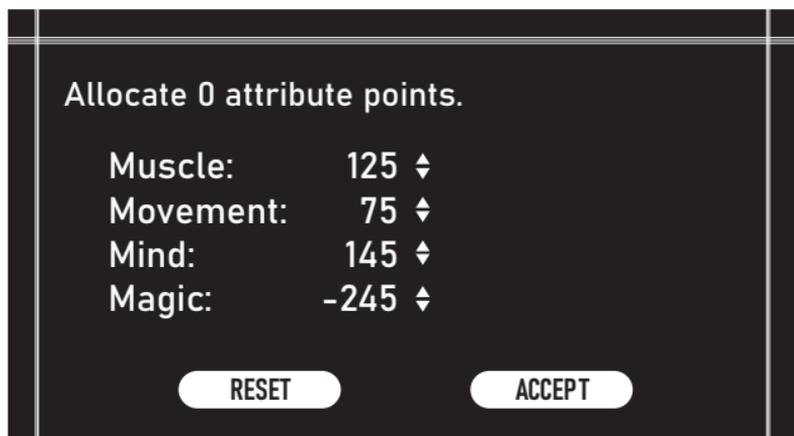
Enough complaining. She needed to not die. Could she avoid death by raising her attributes? When she got stronger, her body became more resistant to damage as well. This made sense. If you had

the strength to destroy a wall, your bones shouldn't shatter when you punched it.

If she raised her **MUSCLE**, smashing against the wall may not do any damage. But how high? If a rock could still break her leg, which really, really hurt, by the way, she would need to drastically increase it. She made some quick calculations based on the force that broke her leg and her current **MUSCLE** level. It took her a bit longer because of the pain in her leg.

She would need to boost her **MUSCLE** to 125.

That was a lot of **MAGIC** to reduce, but it was either that or death. She decreased her **MAGIC** and put everything into **MUSCLE**:



This was it. She touched the *Accept* button and verified she was sure about her allocation.

Time began to flow. She turned her head towards the wall to see how best to brace for impact.

And then she saw Kats.

“I worried for nothing,” thought Paige.

Sergeant Ando raised his mace to take down another lizard-man, but all of them went lifeless and slumped to the ground. He turned around and looked inside the door. The cyclops had fallen as well.

It had also torn down large sections of the wall and bashed up the floor, but it was dead. Well, it was always dead, but now it wasn't trying to kill anyone while dead.

The threat was over. Whatever Paige did, she won. They were safe. He let out a large cheer.

Underneath the cyclops lair, in the small room housing the now shattered thaumite gem in a pool of blood, Kats held onto Paige. She caught her before she was thrown against the jagged edges of the destroyed wall. Paige's leg hung at an angle not meant for legs.

Kats looked at the shattered gem.

It should have been impossible to shatter it, but Paige did it.

It should have been impossible to take down the cyclops, but Paige did it.

"Who are you, Paige Park?" Kats asked. "And why are you under my charge?"

Paige woke up.

Her eyes stared at a ceiling decorated with patterns. She sat up, and noticed she was attached to an IV. A heart and O2 monitor were displaying her current condition. Her right leg, the leg that was

broken, was in a full-length cast.

She was in a hospital bed, but the room looked far too elegant to be in a hospital. It was decorated with dark reds and browns, and reminded her more of a Victorian sitting room than it did a cold and dreary hospital room.

She was alone, but there was a call bell by her bed. She guessed she was in the infirmary for the Blood Guild. The guild had enough money to have private hospital wards for their members.

“Inventory,” said Paige. She wasn’t going to go another minute conscious without reading her Book.

“Is she awake yet?” asked Vanguard Ando.

“I’ve already told you, sergeant. She’s only been asleep for a few hours. You can’t go in,” said an older woman dressed in a dark red nurse’s uniform.

A chime sounded from her desk. It was Paige’s call bell.

“She’s awake!” said Ando as he ran into the room.

“Sergeant!” yelled the nurse.

The door to Paige’s room burst open and Sergeant Ando rushed in.

“You’re awake? You’re awake!” yelled the sergeant. He looked very happy to see her.

“Sergeant! You know very well to keep your voice down. And be gentle with that door!” scolded the nurse. She came over to Paige and checked her monitors.

“Hi, dear. My name is Connie. Does anything hurt?” asked the nurse.

“Not at all. Thank you. In fact, I think I’m ready to be discharged,” said Paige.

“Don’t be silly. You have a broken leg. I’m sorry, but for some reason, the healers couldn’t mend it. I’m afraid you’re going to have to get better the old fashioned way,” said Connie.

Paige smiled and nodded. She swung her legs off the bed and stood up.

“Don’t! You have a fracture!” said the nurse.

Paige jumped on her hurt leg.

The nurse tried to grab her, but Paige moved out of the way and broke the cast off her leg. Ando turned away, embarrassed to suddenly be exposed to bare flesh. He was very shy.

Connie watched Paige remove herself from the IV and monitoring equipment, and then walk around the room with no sign of pain or discomfort.

“How are you doing that? They said you had a broken leg,” said Connie.

“Maybe the healers’ magic did work? It probably just took a while. Vanguard constitution has always been a mystery, no?” said Paige.

“I guess you’re right. Still! Get in bed. You need your rest. Miss Felicity will be here later on anyway. You’ve caused quite a stir in the guild, Miss Park. They spared no expense,” said the Nurse.

“Thank you,” said Paige.

“Don’t thank me. You can thank the guild master,” said Connie. She turned towards Sergeant Ando. “You. Let’s go.”

“I just want to talk to Miss Paige, please,” said Sergeant Ando. The nurse let out an exasperated sigh and turned to Paige, who had returned back to her bed.

“Is that okay with you, Miss Park?” asked the nurse. Paige nodded.

“Don’t tire her out. I’m warning you,” said Con-

nie. Sergeant Ando was smiling, nodding, and waving bye as the nurse left the room. He did an about turn and launched immediately into questions.

“You’re okay, right? How did you do it? What did you do? I turned around and the cyclops was dead! I didn’t see what you did. And could I get anything out of Kats? Of course not. She carried you back to the portal entrance, by the way, but because you were unconscious, we couldn’t get you out.”

A person only traversed through a portal by blinking at it within its engulf radius. If the person wasn’t conscious, they couldn’t enter nor leave the dungeon. Being unconscious in a dungeon was dangerous if it was still active; however, if the dungeon collapsed, humans automatically materialized back in their own world.

“The Blood Guild brought healers, but not only could they not wake you up, they couldn’t heal your leg! Although, I guess it’s fine now. Which was weird. It was broken. I’m sure I saw bone sticking out. Anyway, they did their best to set it, put you in a cast, and then we waited over an hour for the dungeon to collapse. Well, I didn’t wait. Once the upper ranks arrived, they dragged me out for questioning. So many questions! They kept asking about the door and the cyclops but I didn’t know anything! But I want to know! So you gotta tell me what you did!” said Sergeant Ando. His eyes were bugging out in his earnestness, but Paige felt no animosity from him. In fact, she detected gratitude.

“I’m glad to see you’re okay, sergeant” said Paige.

“You don’t have to call me sergeant here! We’re friends now. Just call me Ando. So! About the cyclops?” he asked again.

“Well, as I said when we were in the dungeon, it’s

terribly difficult to animate the undead, especially something as large as a cyclops. That meant a large store of magical energy was being used. But there weren't any signs of strong magic before we went into the dungeon," said Paige.

"I know, right? It was supposed to be for beginners! How was that for beginners? Standards have certainly fallen in this guild," said Sergeant Ando.

"That means the energy had to have been generated while we were there. However, what was available to create that much magical energy? Especially to the potency required by necromancy?"

"Were there a lot of evil sacrifices happening in the cyclops room while we were fending off those lizard-men? Maybe they were sacrificing virgins!"

"The sacrifices weren't happening in another room, sergeant. We were the ones doing the sacrificing," said Paige.

"Hang on! I wasn't sacrificing virgins! I don't even know any virgins," said the sergeant.

"I slit the throats of over a hundred lizard-men. But the floor wasn't stained with blood. What I thought was cobblestone with deep grooves was more an irrigation system. That whole pit sloped down towards the massive door, and probably drained into a series of pipes or canals which fed into a small pool which housed the thaumite underneath the cyclops lair."

The sergeant face drained as he realized what Paige meant.

"Fresh blood is a powerful reagent in magic," said the sergeant.

"Yes, and not just any blood. That was innocent blood. Those creatures, although biologically manipulated to adulthood, were newborn lizard crea-

tures. And we slaughtered them,” said Paige.

“I...I never thought of that,” said Ando.

“Humans are good at acting like victims and shocked when accused of oppression. Anyway, magic couldn’t get past the lead door until it opened, and once it did, the dead lizard-men began to rise. By observing which lizard-men hadn’t been raised, I was able to calculate the flow of magic and how it leaked out the door, and from there, a probable area for the magical energy to originate,” said Paige.

“Right. Magic energy flows...like magic,” said Ando. He was not following this at all.

“I lured the cyclops to smash the floor where I thought the energy to be and discovered the thaumite gem. The cyclops smashed that too, and without the energy, the cyclops collapsed,” said Paige.

“Ah! That makes sense. Smashing is always a good solution,” said Ando. He was smiling, happy he understood something.

“Anyway, thanks for telling me. This is the first undead cyclops, you know. And because you took it down with no casualties, the Blood Guild’s image is going to skyrocket. And all that thaumite? That’s a huge profit for the guild. Seriously, this is a big deal and you did it all!” said Sergeant Ando.

Paige was feeling uncomfortable with his praise. She was still just an 18 year old kid who over a week ago had problems figuring out quadratic functions.

“Oh yeah, I misjudged your sponsor. Kats handed me a huge hunk of thaumite before she left. We are entitled to spoils, but since it was your kill, and I’m such a low rank, I would have gotten something tiny. But she gave me over ten thousand dollars worth of thaumite! I hope you’re okay with that,” said the sergeant.

“Don’t worry. You helped more than you know, sergeant. It’s well deserved,” said Paige.

“You are too kind and way too generous, but that’s the reason why I liked you from the start! To top it all off, I got promoted! Sergeant Ando, First Class! Hah! I like the sound of that! And that’s thanks to you. So even though I seem impressive and intimidating, you just remember Sergeant Ando pays back his debts. You need anything, I got your back, okay?” said Ando.

“Thank you, Sergeant Ando, First Class. Congratulations on your promotion,” said Paige.

“Sergeant? I keep telling you to call me Ando! Anyway, I better go. I am on my break and I have a ton of work I need to do. If they catch me here, I am a dead man. You! Don’t be a stranger, okay? I got your back, remember! Your back,” said Ando.

Paige bowed her head and smiled, “Thank you!”

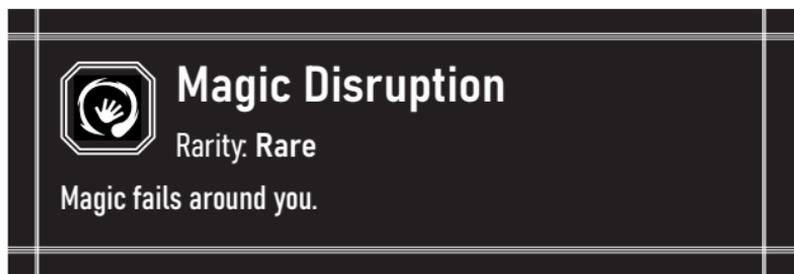
As soon as the door closed, she leaned back and whispered, “Stats.” Her vision was filled with her status panel:

	STATUS	SKILLS	INVENTORY
PAIGE			
LEVEL 37			
Muscle:	125		
Movement:	75		
Mind:	145		
Magic:	-245		

“Darn it, why did I put all of those points into MUSCLE? My poor MAGIC. I should have checked for Kats before doing that,” thought Paige. She navigated to her Skills page.



She thought she'd have more. She was almost level 40 and there were only nine skills. She had checked out her new skills earlier. The *Dodging* skill made dodging easier and the *Reptile Killer* skill gave her double the experience when killing reptiles, but Magic Disruption was interesting. She opened it up:



“What’s the point of disrupting magic if you can’t be healed? Sounds like more of a curse. At least my MUSCLE will keep me healthy,” said Paige. She was impressed at how quickly she healed. She didn’t even see any scarring on her leg.

Paige heard a knock at her door. She swiped away her skills.

“Come in,” Paige said.

A tall woman dressed in a dark blood-red suit opened the door. She had a clipboard and beside her was Connie, who looked quite annoyed.

“You are Paige Park?” asked the woman in red.

“Yes,” said Paige.

“I’m Miss Felicity. If you are feeling well, please come with me. Guild Master Thull wishes to see you. I’ll wait outside for you to get dressed,” said the woman.

“Do you mind if I take a shower first? I was wading around in a pool of blood a few hours ago and I still feel grungy,” said Paige.

“Ah, yes. Sorry. I’ll be waiting outside,” said Miss Felicity as she left the room. Nurse Connie stayed behind.

“I’m sorry, Miss Park. I told her you still needed to rest, but when she heard you were better, she insisted you should go with her,” said Connie.

“It’s okay. Thank you so much,” said Paige.

“You’re welcome, dear. Remember to get some rest, afterwards. Don’t let the higher-ups tire you out. You’ll find your Blood Guild uniform in the dresser. Your original clothes didn’t make it, I’m afraid,” said Connie.

“No worries, thanks again,” said Paige.

The nurse left the room and Paige took a quick shower. They certainly didn’t spare any expense. The shower had three shower heads. She never knew she needed three shower heads before, but now she didn’t know how she’d take a shower without them. She put on the clothes the guild prepared for her. It was tailored to her body, and not to her measure-

ments before boosting her MOVEMENT and MUSCLE. The clothes fit her current build.

She looked at her outfit in the mirror. It was a Blood Guild uniform, and a fancy one at that. A form-fitting, dark-red suit jacket with black lapels was worn over a white, collared, button-up shirt. Instead of a tie, there was a ribbon wrapped around her neck and laced around her chest. The button at the very top had a place for a pin. She found a brooch that clipped on, which had a small red jewel that looked like a drop of blood. A black, pleated dress came down to her knees, and she wore full-leg black stockings. This was finished off with dark red shoes that matched her jacket. She was very happy for the comfortable shoes. The ones she was wearing in the dungeon were getting too tight.

Paige also noticed the difference in her physique. She was taller, much taller than she used to be. And, although hidden by her jacket, she could feel the muscles in her arms and chest.

Paige exited her room and was met by Miss Felicity. The nurse gasped when she saw her and fussed over Paige: adjusting her jacket, fixing her collar, and brushing off pieces of lint that didn't exist.

"Oh, you remind me of my own daughter. That uniform looks so wonderful on you. Your mom must be very proud," said Connie.

"She is," lied Paige.

"This way," said Miss Felicity. Paige nodded and followed dutifully behind Miss Felicity.

"You've made quite the splash in this guild, haven't you?" asked Miss Felicity.

"I am very honoured to be part of the Blood Guild, Miss Felicity," said Paige.

"It's interesting you've never shown any interest

in being a vanguard until recently, Miss Park. What changed your mind?" asked Miss Felicity. Everyone had questions, but no one offered up any information to her. Having read the Book, she didn't feel the need to ask, but still, they could have told her what was going on as common courtesy.

"It's all very silly. I had a vivid, life-changing dream. It was of my father. He used to be a vanguard, until, well, until he wasn't. Anyway, I don't remember what we talked about, but when I awoke, I needed to become a vanguard," said Paige. She was getting really good at distorting the truth.

Miss Felicity and Paige walked through the hallways of the Blood Guild. Paige always thought of guilds like she thought of corporate offices. But the Blood Guild's building felt more like she was walking through an avante-garde mansion.

They stopped outside a large wooden door, the type that indicated the head of a company lay beyond, and Miss Felicity knocked on it before opening.

Paige gasped when she saw the office, in spite of herself. It was a plush display of opulence and wealth. Wooden carved arches lined a red carpeted walkway that lead towards a large oak desk. It occupied the whole back wall. The lighting in the room was dim, but strong spotlights lit up the logo of the Blood Guild, a blood drop, which was displayed prominently above the desk. Underneath the logo was the motto of the Blood Guild: "With Bravery. In Blood."

On either side of her were pedestals with artifacts encased in glass displays. Small pin lights lit up each display, giving off an atmosphere of a closed museum.

A guard appeared and opened a door off to the side. Beyond it, Paige saw what looked like a Victo-

rian drawing room, complete with bookcases, ornate chairs, and elegant couches. Standing inside was an older gentlemen also dressed in a blood red suit. There was a strong blood motif happening here and Paige wondered if she had joined a cult.

“Please enter, Miss Park,” said Miss Felicity.

“Ah, I finally get to meet you, Miss Park. I am Guild Master Thull. I’ve been waiting, most anxiously, for you.”

Paige took his hand and shook firmly.

“That’s quite the grip. You seem to possess the same strength as Miss Felicity here,” chuckled the Guild Master. Paige wasn’t trying to show off her strength; she just forgot she was strong. She gave a small smile. The chairman motioned to a chair as he sat down across from it.

“Thank you,” said Paige as she sat.

“You may be wondering why I’m meeting with you. To cut right to the chase, your performance in today’s dungeon was fascinating. You may not know this, but there has never been an encounter with an undead cyclops before. Your party, for all intents and purposes, should have been wiped out.”

If the guild master was trying to be encouraging, he was failing. Still, Paige agreed with him. There was no way she should have survived that encounter. It felt like it was constructed to ensure their death.

“But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ve heard everything Vanguard Kats reported, but there were parts even she wasn’t sure on. There were a number of strange occurrences during your training session, and it starts with entering the dungeon. You did not appear in the vicinity of the entrance portal, correct?”

“That is correct, sir,” said Paige.

“And you and Vanguard Kats took down lizard-men until you got to the pit. No surprise there, those lizard-men wouldn’t have been a challenge to her,” said the guild master.

“They certainly weren’t,” said Paige.

“And that’s when you encountered the abomination of the birthing queens? Please continue from there,” said the guild master.

Other than a few minor details,* Paige saw no need to lie about the situation. She told them everything. After she finished her tale, the Guild Master asked a number of questions.

“The door opened as you approached it?”

“Yes,” said Paige.

The Guild Master paused. Vanguard Kats had said the same thing. The guild had given her a special Blood Guild Directive to report immediately on the discovery of any door that bore a resemblance to the door of Fyn’s portal. To think they found one and opened it was beyond his expectations.

“And not only did you figure out how to take the cyclops down, but you managed to shatter the thau-mite gem,” said the Grand Master.

“Yes,” said Paige.

“A gem like that wouldn’t normally shatter. If anything, it would have been lodged from its setting, or chipped, or maybe even cut in two. In order to shatter it, you’d need to calculate the angle and force of the blow. Calculating that would be impossible without precise instruments,” said the guild master.

“When I’m in the dungeon, I get very good with

* Like solving the puzzle to open the door, being able to level and increase her attributes, and having a book that told her future. She also didn’t comment on how socially stunted Vanguard Kats was, but then they probably knew that fact.

numbers. I don't have a magical affinity, but I can perform extremely complex calculations."

"Even to the point of shattering thaumite?"

"It was a combination of that and luck," said Paige.

"Well, your luck was a boon to this guild. *Your* guild. So, as the master of the Blood Guild, I do share my extreme thanks. Your account has been deposited with your share of the dungeon loot and also a bonus," said Guild Master Thull.

"My account?" asked Paige, feigning ignorance.

"Oh yes. We opened an account for you. It's a bit unusual for a new recruit to require an account, but the money earned from the dungeon is yours. We make sure our top performers are rewarded, and we won't spare any expense for the most loyal of our members. We even offer a sponsoring program."

"Sponsoring program?" asked Paige. She hoped she was sounding surprised enough.

"Yes. Just like Vanguard Kats sponsored you, you can sponsor someone to join. Again, this only applies to higher ranking vanguards, but considering your accomplishments, we believe you deserve this honour as well. Is there anyone you feel would benefit from joining the Blood Guild?" asked Grand Master Thull.

Paige paused. She knew her next sentence, but she didn't like it. It was the only time she wished to rebel against her pre-scripted destiny.

"I do," said Paige.

"That's wonderful! Please talk to Miss Felicity afterwards. She will get all the paperwork done," said Grand Master Thull.

"Thank you very much," said Paige. She stifled a yawn.

"I am so sorry. You must be very tired. You just

had a battle and here I am making you answer my questions. Miss Felicity! Make sure she gets home safely. You are tasked with being her bodyguard for now,” said the Guild Master.

“I don’t need a bodyguard, guild master,” said Paige.

“You certainly do. However, she will be discreet. The media is in a frenzy trying to figure out which recruits went into the portal with the cyclops. No one knows your identity yet, and I would like to keep it that way. I hope that’s fine with you,” said the guild master.

“That’s perfectly fine with me,” said Paige.

“Please, come this way, Miss Park,” said Miss Felicity as she opened the door for her.

“Thank you for everything, guild master,” said Paige.

“Thank you, Miss Park,” said Guild Master Thull. Paige Park left the room and the guild master motioned Miss Felicity towards him.

“Keep her happy. She cannot leave our guild. If she’s a spy, we need to keep our eyes on her. However, if she was the catalyst in getting that door open *and* she killed the cyclops, she’s more valuable than that thaumite gem she shattered. Make sure nothing happens to her.”

Miss Felicity nodded.

Chairman Loo received a report from his intelligence network regarding the Blood Guild. He had read it over almost three times. There was much that made no sense. His door knocked.

“Come in!” said the chairman, a bit too sharply.

Assistant Verlaigh opened the door.

“Does this make sense?” asked the chairman as he waved the report in the air.

“Everyone’s stories check out. Obviously, the report from any Blood Guild member is suspect, but they seem to be very forward with the information,” said Assistant Verlaigh.

“Of course they’re forward with information! They took down an undead cyclops. What guild wouldn’t parade that news to the media? An undead cyclops. An undead cyclops! How did *we* miss it? We know who went into the dungeon?”

“Yes. We have the names of the seven people who entered the portal.”

“And the only one of note was Assassin Kats of the Blood Guild,” said the chairman.

“Yes, the other was a trainer of low ranking and the rest were new recruits,” said Assistant Verlaigh.

The chairman walked to the window and stared at the night sky. The casualty list from the last time a live cyclops was encountered was about ten vanguards. An undead one would have been far worse. How did they stop it? Did they get help inside? And what was the unholy lizard-men experiment set up in there for?

“Have they released, at least, how they killed it?” asked the chairman.

“With bravery. In blood,” said Assistant Verlaigh, echoing the Blood Guild’s motto.

“Yes. That’s not helpful. Find out everything you can about the instructor, Vanguard Kats, and each recruit.”

“Yes, sir,” said Assistant Verlaigh.



Miss Felicity drove Paige home.

“You aren’t coming in, are you?” asked Paige.

“Not unless you’d like,” said Miss Felicity.

“My mother doesn’t know I’m a vanguard. I’d appreciate it if you kept it that way,” said Paige.

“There are many secret vanguards in our guild, Miss Park. That will not be a problem. You mentioned you wished to sponsor someone?” said Miss Felicity.

“I’d like to do that in secret as well,” said Paige.

“Definitely. Send me her information and we can guarantee it. If she’s already applied, we can rush the process. I’ll give you my personal phone number. Anything you need, think of me as your personal assistant,” said Miss Felicity.

“Thank you, Miss Felicity,” said Paige.

“My pleasure, Miss Park.”

This felt weird. The rest of the ride home was uneventful and Paige was thankful for the silence. She thought of Jess. Of course she wanted to sponsor her, but was it safe? At least one person died entering a dungeon with her, and she didn’t want Jess to be the next one.

But the Book had Jess joining the Blood Guild and also joining her on the next dungeon. That was the part she didn’t like. Was it time to test going against the Book? Would events unfold badly if she did? So far, the Book helped her survive. Would it also help Jess survive?

The car stopped outside of her apartment. She didn’t tell Miss Felicity where she lived, but then again, the guild would know everything about her non-vanguard life.

“Thank you. Are you really going to shadow me?” said Paige.

“You won’t even notice I’m around. Have a good evening, Miss Park,” said Miss Felicity.

“You too,” said Paige. Everyone was so polite. She closed the door, and watched the car drive off.

Paige walked into her home. The lights were on and the smell of warm stew filled the foyer. Her mother was a nurse and mostly took the night shifts. It was rare for her to have an evening off, but it felt wonderful to come home to non-empty apartment.

“Paige! You’re home!” called Paige’s mom from the kitchen.

“Hi, mom. You didn’t have to work tonight?”

“No, I got it off. I have a conference I’m attending and will be gone all next week. I hope that’s okay!” said her mother as she came into the living room to greet Paige. She stopped as she saw her.

“Look at you. Did you grow? You’re a lot taller than I remember. And you’re so beautiful,” said her mom.

“Are you getting misty-eyed? Mom! That’s embarrassing,” said Paige.

“To think I’ve been so busy with work that I didn’t even notice these changes in my daughter. Maybe it’s time you and I have the ‘talk’.”

“Mom! I’m eighteen!”

Paige’s mom laughed.

“I’m serious. I can’t believe I didn’t notice. And when did you get those clothes? They look amazing on you. Are you doing some type of cosplay thing again?”

“Yeah. We want to do a YouTube thing, so there’s a lot of rehearsing,” said Paige.

“Well, I’ll be gone all of next week. You need money?”

“No. I’m good,” said Paige. Given the amount she

knew was sitting in her account, she'd be very good for the next few years.

"It's been so long since I had a chance to hang out with you. Why aren't we more like the *Gilmore-Girls*?" asked her mother.

"Because Rory is a horrible person and too obsessed with boys," said Paige.

"Well, there's a drama I want to see and you need to watch it with me," said her mother.

"Sure thing, mom," said Paige.

"I also have nachos! So don't get too full on dinner!"

"What kind of mom are you?" asked Paige.

"A cool one, just like Lorelai!"

"I'm not being Rory!"

Miss Felicity was wrong. Paige did notice she was around, but then again, she had the observational skills of Sherlock and the eyes of a hawk. She was like a combination of the two: Sherlhawk.†

Paige was waiting on the school grounds, wondering how Miss Felicity hid her presence amongst the students and staff.

And then she dodged.

"Oof! How did you avoid that? Did you see me coming? That was really smooth," said Jess.

"Hi, Jess!" said Paige.

"Guess what? Guess what, guess what, guess what!!" said Jess.

"I don't have to guess. You've been texting me

† High IQ didn't help her metaphors nor grant her better punning skills.

since last night,” said Paige.

“I’m in the Blood Guild! I’m in the Blood Guild! I’m now a member just like you!” yelled Jess as she danced and shot invisible lightning bolts from her fingers.

Paige smiled at Jess, but felt conflicted inside. She still had doubts about sponsoring Jess, but she was so happy.

“Pew! Pew! Pew! It was you who sponsored me, right? You and your future powers?” asked Jess.

“I’ve only been with the guild for a week, you know.”

“Fine. I know it was you. There was no other way I’d get in. Oh, speaking of secrets, was it also you with the big cyclops thing that happened last week?” asked Jess.

“No,” lied Paige.

“Aw, come on! I’m part of the guild now. You can tell me! I know it’s all hush-hush, but we’re a team!” said Jess.

Paige grabbed Jess’ wrist.

“Let’s go,” said Paige.

“Ooh, more secrets?” asked Jess.

“Yes.”

Watching Paige wasn’t hard, but it was extremely boring. Still, it gave Miss Felicity a chance to catch up on her reading. The Blood Guild had been on high alert once the doors were discovered, and she barely got a night’s sleep.

But Guild Master Thull seemed to calm down once Paige had joined and was content with only monitoring her. There were still teams studying the

strange markings on the door, but guild activity returned to normal.

Miss Felicity looked up from her book, and didn't see Paige.

That was strange.

She immediately got out of her vehicle and scanned the area. She couldn't see Paige anywhere. She messaged headquarters to track her phone and also to send her men.

Did someone take her? No, she had secured the area. Did Paige run away? Why would she do that?

She continued searching.

“You're really fast. I think I got whiplash as you carried me. Speaking of which, how could you move that fast while carrying me?” asked Jess.

“It's part of the future powers,” said Paige.

“That doesn't make sense,” said Jess.

“I had a two second window, so I had to be quick. When she looked away, we needed to get behind the school wall, and once she got out of the car, we needed to get to the other side of the school.”

“Who's this 'she' you keep talking about?”

“My bodyguard,” said Paige.

“You have a bodyguard? Why are you avoiding her?”

“We don't have much time. Let's go,” said Paige.

“What? Where are we going?”

“Clubbing,” said Paige.

“Ooh! I'm in!” Said Jess.

The club was in the heart of downtown, and despite it being a weeknight, there was a lineup to get in. Jess was sulking again. Had she known they were going to a classy club, she would have changed her clothes, but Paige didn't allow it.

“Paige! They don't just let anyone into this club. I look like I just got back from the gym, because I just did! And you are in your sweat pants again. I don't know why you never buy new clothes.”

Paige walked to the front of the line. She couldn't believe how brazen she'd become just because she knew a thing or two about the future. The bouncer held out his hand, but Paige flashed the brooch she was wearing: it was the one she got from the Blood Guild. The bouncer stepped back and opened the door for them. She heard a collective grumbling from those waiting in line.

Paige and Jess walked down the stairs of the club. Garish neon lights lined the walls and ceiling, doing their best to blind more than illuminate. The sound of EDM music pounded through the floor.

Jess was fanning her face in mock awe.

“You just showed her that brooch and they let you in? My hero! I knew the Blood Guild was influential, but wow! Can I borrow that?”

“In about five minutes, we're going to be pulled into a portal. I don't know what's coming, but I will do my best to protect you,” said Paige.

“Whoa. What? I don't need protecting, Paige. I *am* a vanguard,” said Jess.

“You've never fought in a portal. If I had it my way, you wouldn't be here,” said Paige.

“Wow! Already trying to cut me out. Why would the guild give us a portal to clear? Where's everyone else?” asked Jess. This was more excitement than she

could bear. She didn't think she'd start her training until next week. Paige and Jess reached a walkway that looked over the dance floor. The sound was deafening and Paige had to shout.

"This isn't from the Blood Guild. We're entering an unclaimed portal tonight."

"There's no such thing as an unclaimed portal. If it was unclaimed, the Agency would be here in a heartbeat and arrest everyone who dared to enter."

"And what if the portal engulfed those around?" asked Paige.

"Then we'd immediately exit. No one wants to be in a portal—"

Jess stopped. Her voice was suddenly loud because the sound around her had gone silent.

She looked at the dance floor as Paige grabbed her hand.

Two blinks and they were gone.

A red, old fashioned rotary phone sat on the chairman's desk. It was impractical and took the tech department a bit of work to integrate into their system, but the chairman loved it. He called it the bat-phone.

It was currently flashing.

"Report," said the chairman as he picked up the phone.

"A portal in a crowded club with an engulf radius of about 40 meters," came the voice of Assistant Verlaigh.

"What? That's impossible! Call the higher ranking guilds. Blockade the neighbourhood immediately. Any people engulfed?" asked the chairman.

"Yes, but they came back out," said Verlaigh.

“The media is going to have a field day with this. Text me information when you get it,” said Chairman Loo. He walked over to his closet and grabbed his public suit. He hated being questioned on TV, but that’s what his position called for. First it was Fyn’s portal, then an undead cyclops, and now a portal with an impossible engulf radius. He knew Assistant Verlaigh was the perfect woman to investigate this problem, but he was wanting answers and they weren’t coming fast enough. They hadn’t even solved the mystery of the lost hair dryer, as he liked to call it. His mobile phone started ringing. That meant the news was getting out. He picked up the phone.

“Yes, I know. Call a press conference. I’ll be down in a few minutes,” spoke the chairman.

It was going to be a long night.

Jess opened her eyes and found herself in a small cave. She looked around and saw Paige beside her and she was instantly relieved.

“You scared me for a minute. Are we in that gigantic portal? That thing was huge! How did it engulf me? We were so far from it!” Asked Jess

“The engulf radius of portals has been getting larger,” said Paige.

“Wait, where is everyone else? I’m sure there were other people sucked in. Yet it’s just us two. And where’s the portal itself?”

“I think we got pulled into a different part of the dungeon. Everyone else should be safe though,” said Paige.

“What? But that’s never happened before!” said Jess.

“Funny, almost all of my portal experiences have been that way. Anyway, we’re not near the entrance, so we have to press forward.”

“I can’t believe it! My very first adventure party with my best friend! I could die!” squealed Jess.

“Yes! Yes you could! And I wouldn’t have brought you here, but my life is dictated by a stupid book and I’m too scared to follow it and I’m too scared to not! I don’t know what happens next, Jess. The chapter ends after we get to another door, and I don’t know what happens next!” Paige said.

“Well, from what I’ve seen, you pull through with flying colours every time,” said Jess.

“I’ve just been lucky!” said Paige.

“And you’ll continue to be,” said Jess.

Paige sighed. It was too late to worry about it anyway. She had followed the Book to the letter and they were now here. She brought out an amulet and two rings from her jacket.

“Wear these,” said Paige as she handed them over to Jess. Jess didn’t question and put them on. They were crude, as if hunks of rocks decided their cheap Halloween costume was going to be jewelry, but Jess wasn’t going to argue their craftsmanship.

“Sorry they’re so ugly, but I had to put them together myself. Did you know that artificers can only make thaumite artifacts when inside of a dungeon? No wonder they’re so expensive,” said Paige.

“You made these yourself? Isn’t that hard?” asked Jess.

“I figured it out,” said Paige.

“I don’t feel them working though,” said Jess.

“Yes, they won’t work around me. Sorry. I know what my skill is in the dungeon. I disrupt magic. Here, this is a metal whip. You should be able to

channel electricity through that, right?”

“Oh! I can, but I haven’t had a chance to test that in a portal,” said Jess.

“You are in a portal now! You should be testing as I speak. And also, your electrical affinity grants you a protection shield. You have an offensive skill and a defensive one. That’s hopefully enough to protect yourself,” said Paige.

“You seem to know a lot about electricity users,” said Jess.

“Learn how to use them. We are almost to the end of the chapter. And you should be testing your powers!” said Paige.

“Okay! Okay! Sheesh, are you my trainer now?” said Jess. Paige moved away so as not to disrupt her.

Jess held out her whip and tried to think what muscle to flex. Fortunately, just thinking of flowing electricity seemed to work, and she could feel the energy pouring into the whip. That was easier than she thought. She flung the whip around, satisfied with the striking sounds it made.

“Practice that and the shield,” said Paige.

Jess nodded, but she was too fascinated by the whip to really be paying attention. It made arcs of light as she snapped it against the air or the ground. As it struck, tendrils of lightning would burst out.

Paige watched her for a moment, and then continued down the hallway. Absentmindedly, Jess followed behind, making “shwoom” noises whenever she decided to create a protective shield.

“This is so cool! Shwoom! Ha ha! It’s almost like wearing those large plastic hamster balls. Ha ha! Actually, it’s nothing like that at all. Shwoom!” said Jess.

The next door wasn’t far from their origin point.

Paige thought of many things that bothered her as both she and Jess walked towards it.

The portal doors, the Book, the undead cyclops, all of it was purposefully set up. But why?

“Whoa, that’s a door like in Fyn’s portal! Wait, is it made of gold? That thing’s made of gold!” said Jess as she ran to the door to caress it.

It hung in the middle of a small cave off of the cavern they were walking in. On one side was the drawn line-art she was familiar with.

The other had a series of numbers again.

III

I28

I35

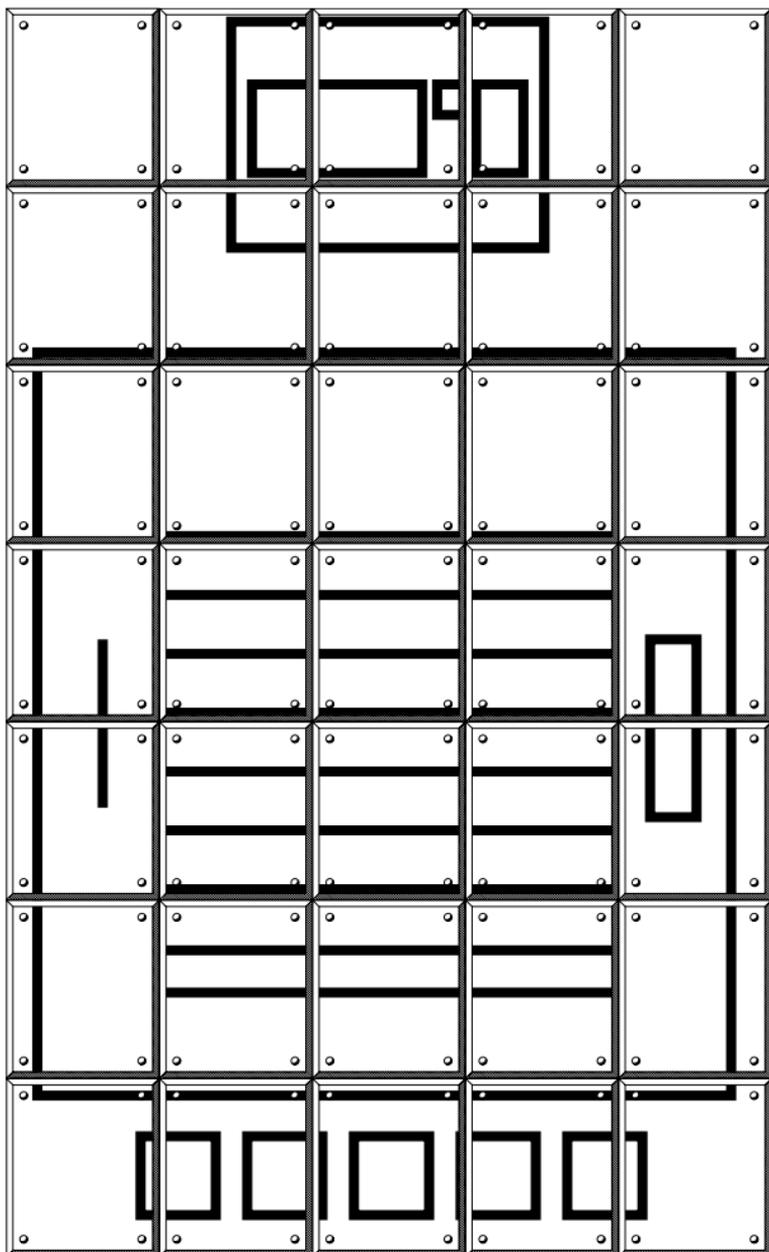
I36

I47

Paige said a word and the door shimmered, revealing another room which looked to be an arena.

“Hey! How did you know how to open the door?” asked Jess.

“Future powers,” said Paige.



On one side was the drawn line-art she was familiar with.

