

Chapter 6

*From seven take twenty
To assemble your guide
The sixth reveals secrets
When you hear what's outside.*
— Prophet 7:8, Book of Moira

Paige found herself in the center of an expansive stone room. She was in some type of recessed stage and around her were stone steps leading upwards into the darkness. After closer inspection, she realized they were a bit too high for steps. It was seating. And she was in an arena.

Where was Jess? She couldn't see or sense Jess in any way. Furthermore, she didn't see an exit.

"Inventory," said Paige. The inventory panel immediately appeared, but then she heard the sound of a large, bipedal, hooved creature charging from behind. She swiped the panel away and jumped at the same time, missing being gored by a large minotaur.

"Every single time!" she shouted.

The minotaur turned to face her. It was giant, almost four times her height. The axe it wielded was double her size. It lifted its head and roared.

It was at this time that Paige leapt, unsheathed her daggers, and sliced the muscles of the arm holding the axe. The minotaur screamed in pain as the axe fell to the ground.

"I don't know why you monsters roar before attacking. It always gives me an opening," said Paige.

The minotaur grabbed the axe with its left hand and made a clumsy swing which Paige easily dodged. She dug her dagger deep into the minotaur's left forearm and jumped upwards, cutting along the length of its arm. She followed through with a downstroke attack down the back and then a slice across the calf.

Paige looked at the monster and felt a bit sorry for it. Her high MIND attribute made it easy to predict its attack, her MOVEMENT allowed her to counterattack with precision, and her MUSCLE made piercing the minotaur's skin easy. It lay huddled in the arena, its roar reduced to nothing but whimpering. Paige finished it off with a killing blow.

"Aren't we proud of ourselves?" came a raspy voice behind her.

"Not really. Wasn't much of a challenge," said Paige as she turned around. A figure, dressed in a hooded black robe with bright scarlet highlights that resembled veins, began to mutter to itself. Under the hood she could see its pointy teeth and red eyes. It was a demon.

Bright patterns and sigils appeared in the air as it recited a spell. The air shimmered and Paige saw a giant creature coalesce from tendrils of smoke. As the shape took form, she heard a roar. A roar she recognized. It was an undead cyclops.

"Ever see one of these before?" asked the summoner, its voice barely audible as the cyclops continued to bellow. It chuckled to itself as it watched Paige.

This was cut short as Paige was instantly in front of the spellcaster, her hand around its throat.

"Yes. It smelled different," said Paige. The hooded figure tried to remove Paige's grip from its throat,

but couldn't move her arm. It watched in horror as the undead cyclops disappeared.

Paige let go of the demon. It coughed, trying to catch its breath.

"How...how did you dispell it?" it asked.

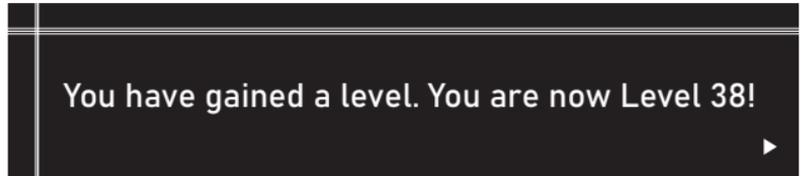
"It's a skill I have. Had you summoned an actual undead cyclops, that would have been problematic. But an illusion? Come on! At least remember to add a scent to it," said Paige.

The demon thrust its palm at Paige.

Paige cocked her head.

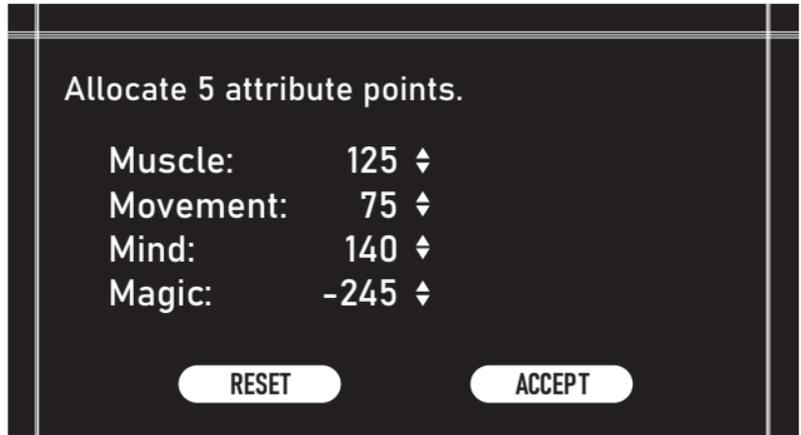
"What did you do to me?" it screamed.

Paige slapped it across the head, killing it. Time stopped as the level notification appeared:

A black rectangular notification box with a white border. The text "You have gained a level. You are now Level 38!" is centered in white. A small white right-pointing triangle is in the bottom right corner.

You have gained a level. You are now Level 38!

"Hunh. I opened a door, killed a giant minotaur, and took down a spell-casting demon. Yet I just raised one level? No more free rides," thought Paige. She advanced to the next prompt.

A black rectangular screen with a white border. The text "Allocate 5 attribute points." is at the top. Below it are four lines of text: "Muscle: 125", "Movement: 75", "Mind: 140", and "Magic: -245". Each number has a white diamond symbol to its right. At the bottom are two white rounded rectangular buttons with black text: "RESET" and "ACCEPT".

Allocate 5 attribute points.

Muscle: 125 ◆

Movement: 75 ◆

Mind: 140 ◆

Magic: -245 ◆

RESET

ACCEPT

Her MAGIC taunted her with -245. She still felt bitter putting all those points into strength, but it did make killing monsters surprisingly easy.

“Too easy? I guess they are. I could have found a stronger monster,” said a female voice.

Paige was startled. Time was stopped. Who could be speaking to her? She looked around, but the dialogue window was blocking her vision and she could only see peripherally.

“Yoo hoo! I’m right in front of you,” said the voice.

Paige focused on her peripheral vision. There was someone in front of her but she could only see a black dress. The rest of the body was obscured.

“How are you talking to me? Time has stopped,” said Paige.

“Yes, it has. Not for me though. Of course, this is the only way I can speak to you. If I talked to you in the normal flow of time, they would be able to hear, and then there’d be trouble,” said the voice.

“What? Who’s they?” asked Paige.

“Who said ‘they’? I didn’t say that!”

“Seriously? You’re doing that? Who are you?” asked Paige.

“I’m just a random person, pay no attention to me,” said the voice.

“Where’s Jess? What have you done with her?”

“You are so inquisitive. Jess is fine. Probably. I don’t really know, but I’m assuming she is. I wasn’t really paying attention to her. I was focused on you,” said the voice.

“Are you the one who gave me this power?” asked Paige.

“Not me. I just have a vested interest.”

“Why?”

“Many reasons. For the record, I am on your side.

At least...I am now.”

“You weren’t on my side before?”

“I guess I don’t really have a side. I misspoke,” said the voice.

Paige was frustrated. Who was this insane person and how did she speak to her when time was stopped?

“I said pay no attention to me,” said the voice.

Paige brow furrowed. Was she reading her mind?

“No. I mean, not really. I guess it sort of is, isn’t it? Yes, then.”

“You’re as maddening as Jess,” said Paige.

“For the record, I would never have chosen Jess,” said the voice.

“What are you even talking about? Did you choose me?” asked Paige.

“What? No! Full of ourselves, aren’t we?”

Paige let out a frustrated scream. She wasn’t following this conversation.

“Anyway, good job and all. Funny thing, I didn’t expect you to decrease your MAGIC attribute so drastically. No one expected it, actually. I thought it was kinda dumb, to be honest. Most people want all the MUSCLE OR MAGIC. But not you. And look where you are now!” said the voice.

“Hold on. You’ve seen the *Level Up* skill bestowed on someone before?” asked Paige.

“Once. Long ago. He was the first one killed, though. Such a disappointment.”

“Is-”

“Can’t answer questions along those lines,” interrupted the voice.

“I didn’t ask anything yet!” said Paige.

“You were going to.”

“So you can read minds and appear to me when time is stopped. Do you have the same power as me?”

asked Paige.

“As you? Ha! That’s cute. My dear, you have no idea of my power. Ha ha ha! Same power as you. Humans are such darlings,” the voice said to herself.

“You’re not human?” asked Paige.

“You ask such personal questions,” said the voice.

“You’re the one who came to me!” said Paige.

“Right! I had a reason, too! Hold on for a minute,” said the voice. Paige’s inventory came up. Paige was shocked. She couldn’t get anything to come up during a level dialogue box.

“What? Can I do this too?” Asked Paige.

“Nah. I’m kinda cheating. Don’t ask how. Just give me a bit.”

To Paige’s astonishment, a hand appeared through her inventory window, black as oil, and adorned with a bracelet of skulls. It tapped the *Skills* tab.

“You’ve been busy, I see. Your last skill is going to cause all sorts of havoc. Just the way I like it. Anyway, I’m giving you another skill,” said the voice.

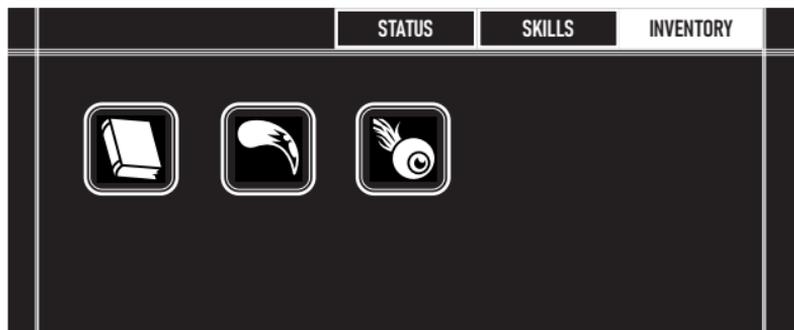
Paige saw a skill with a question mark appear beside her *Magic Disruption* skill:



“A skill to cause confusion?” asked Paige.

“What? I don’t give lame skills. This skill is unknown and you won’t be able to view it. It’s active, mind you, but I’m not going to tell you what it is. Makes for more excitement, no?” said the voice as it laughed. It sounded menacing, giving Paige shivers.

The black hand selected the *Inventory* tab and dropped an item into the slot:



“Your inventory is pitiful. You really should start looking for loot when you kill something. Useless! Anyway, you forgot this when you defeated the cyclops,” said the voice.

“What does it do?” asked Paige.

“I don’t know, and I don’t really care. However, I do care about this,” said the voice as its hand grabbed her Book.

“Hey! Give that back!” said Paige.

“Don’t worry! Don’t worry! I just want to read it. Always wanted to know what was written in it. I don’t see why they restricted this from us. I mean, seriously, we know half this stuff already,” said the voice.

Paige wanted to read the book too. Why didn’t it have the courtesy to read it with her?

“Ha, ha! Kats is so weird. Wow, maybe they re-

stricted access because they were ashamed. It reads like bad fanfic,” said the voice as it continued to read.

“That’s my life you’re making fun of,” said Paige.

“I like this part! When you meet me! Ha ha! I’m hilarious! Okay! I’m done! Do me a favour and don’t tell Moira I read this, okay? She’ll have a fit if she finds out,” said the voice as it returned the Book back to her inventory.

“As in ‘Book of Moira’ Moira?” asked Paige.

“What? I didn’t say anything about Moira,” said the voice.

“Didn’t you just read this conversation happening?”

“I’m forgetful. Anyway, I’d love to chit-chat, but existing in time is hard and existing in a pocket of time is even harder,” said the voice.

“You’re not going to answer any of my questions, are you?” asked Paige.

“Don’t worry. You’ll eventually understand in time. Unless you die. That’s a possibility. Don’t die, okay? That would be utterly boring.”

“I’ll remove it from my to do list,” said Paige. There was no response. The voice was gone.

Another variable had entered in her little quest for the Cryptex: there were other entities involved. Entities of great power. And she met one of them.

“Augh! What’s the use of having such a big brain if I still don’t know anything!” she yelled in frustration. The entity, however, did do her another favour: her inventory was still open. She opened up the Book to the latest chapter.

“You’re kidding me,” she muttered under her breath.



Assistant Verlaigh stood outside of the portal which had appeared at an exclusive club in the heart of downtown, Club 1838. It was a trendy, new club for the upper elite, nestled between an organic sushi restaurant and a vegan pet store. The entire block had been evacuated and those who were engulfed fortunately appeared right by the portal entrance. They quickly left the portal, shaken, but unharmed. To ensure no one else would be caught, Assistant Verlaigh put up a barrier to block any one from accidentally blinking in the portal's direction.

An agent of the Vanguard Agency came up to her with an electronic tablet.

"Assistant Verlaigh, we've accounted for every civilian who was engulfed by the portal except for two females in their early twenties. I have the video from the facility's security camera for visual identification. According to the bouncer, one of them is from the Blood Guild."

"Send a copy of this to the Blood Guild and inform them that one of their members has been engulfed and hasn't been located. Check to see if they know who the other one is as well. If a vanguard was pulled in, that would be one less worry. However, why didn't she exit? Was she stupid enough to take on a dungeon by herself without knowing its danger level? The magic saturation of this dungeon is off the charts," said Verlaigh. She took the tablet and dismissed the agent. She turned towards the portal, looked behind the barrier, and blinked.

Assistant Verlaigh was welcomed by the familiar scent of stone, decay, and age. The Agency had set up a temporary base at the entrance of the dungeon. There were guards stationed around a group of mages who were in the midst of casting an enchant-

ment. They were standing around a device attached to multiple thaumite gems. Above it, several images were being projected, showing a live feed of the dungeon being explored. Verlaigh signaled to one of the guards.

“We’ve got a visual on the two people still within this dungeon. It’s possible one of them is a vanguard. Have the mages found anyone or anything?” asked Verlaigh.

“Not yet, sir. This dungeon is the largest we’ve encountered so far. The mages have scouted over 20 kilometers and haven’t reached an end. Exploring this one on foot will take days.”

Assistant Verlaigh watched the images above the mages. Each of them were in control of a single feed using the *Magic Eye* spell. The spell acted like a camera drone, but it was far more reliable and had a longer reach.

Verlaigh prayed the portal was normal. Even if it was big, there was still a small chance the portal would contain low-level monsters. If that were the case, she could assign it to a guild and go home. Her eyes stared at the magical images showing various parts of the dungeon. One display showed the view of a magic eye exiting from a narrow passageway into a large cavern.

And then she saw movement.

“There. I see figures. Get closer,” ordered Assistant Verlaigh. The image began to zoom in on the creatures. It was difficult to make them out, but there were hundreds of them and they were all armed.

“That’s a large army, sir. I can’t tell what kind of creature they are.”

Assistant Verlaigh tried squinting, even though that wouldn’t have helped. The creatures were bi-

pedal, thin, and looked female.

“Are they Amazons? Why would there be an army of Amazons?” said a guard.

The creatures seemed light on the armour, except for helmets. Strange looking helmets.

“What kind of monster has that type of helmet? Wait! The helmet is moving!” said a guard.

“It’s not moving, it’s undulating,” said the assistant, her eyes growing wide as realization dawned on her.

“That’s the same thing, sir,” said the vanguard, but the assistant wasn’t listening.

“Zoom out! Get a count! We need to know the numbers. Those are gorgons!” shouted Verlaigh as she exited the portal.

The black phone rang. Vanguard Kats picked it up immediately.

“Sending you the location of a portal,” said a voice she was well acquainted with.

“Shall I bring Paige again?” asked Kats.

“She’s already inside. Wait for her,” said the voice.

“I’ll make haste,” said Kats.

Chairman Loo stood in the briefing room of the Agency with a number of retired, high-ranking vanguards. They were called up from time to time for consulting. The situation at Club 1838 was such a time.

Around him, Agency operatives were seated at computer terminals in front of a large display which

took up the entire wall. They were currently in a discussion with the vanguard branch in the UK. The guild master for the Guild of Crowns was on the main screen, providing what information she had.

“We only have one account of a party surviving an attack from gorgons. They were exploring a dungeon of narrow, twisty passages when they came upon a nest of those beasts. The close quarters didn’t help at all and the gorgons would use the maze-like caverns to ambush the vanguards at every turn. In a panic, their mage cast a darkness spell to hide himself and discovered the gorgons couldn’t turn anyone to stone. He cast a true sight enchantment on the remaining fighters and they fought back. In the end, only a few survived, but they did wipe out the three gorgons.”

“How large was the vanguard party?” Asked the chairman.

“Twenty. They weren’t highly ranked, however,” replied the guild master.

“Thank you, Guild Master Patel. We will take that into consideration,” said Chairman Loo. He turned towards an operative sitting at one of the terminals.

“How many guilds have responded to our summons? Any mage-heavy guilds?”

“The Lion Guild and the Guild of Towers are on their way. The Blood Guild, as well as the Bone Guild, are also in. More guilds have been volunteering once the larger guilds agreed to join. I’ve put the list up on the screen.”

The chairman read through the list of guilds willing to get involved. It was being updated with newer guilds being added to the list. There was safety in numbers, but the thought of securing a gorgon kill would be tempting for any of the guilds, no matter

the risk.

However, this wouldn't be just three gorgons. This would be an entire army. They had never been faced with an organized attack before, let alone one consisting of gorgons. Chairman Loo had to take every precaution he could.

"Commander Blake is on the line, sir," said another operative.

"Put him on-screen," said the chairman.

"Loo! This is the first time you've asked for the help of the military. Your vanguards can't cut it?"

"I'm assuming you've read the briefing, Commander Blake. Thank you for answering us. We plan to section off the entertainment district. The portal has an engulf radius of at least 80 feet. That means its exit radius is similar and the city could be overrun by an army of gorgons," explained the chairman.

"But no monster has been able to perform magic in this world. Does that apply to their ability to turn people into stone?" asked the commander.

"That's an unknown. I would suggest your soldiers take precautions," said the chairman.

"Hah! You want us to take mirrors into battle?" asked the commander.

"Camera, mirrors, Instagram, I don't care what you take. But this is a threat we shouldn't take lightly," said the chairman.

"The military takes nothing lightly," said Commander Blake.

"Don't I know it," said the chairman.

Jess was pacing back and forth. She had been waiting for almost five minutes, and there was no

sign of Paige. The gold door magically opened for Paige, but it refused to let her in. She blinked at it furiously with no success.

She knew Paige would be fine, but what about her? She was stuck in her first dungeon, a supposedly high level one considering the engulf radius, and she was alone.

She practiced the use of her metal whip. Once she discovered her affinity to electricity, she immediately adopted it as her weapon of choice. It was one of the first weapons a lightning wielder could use.

After a few minutes, she took out her phone to check the time. She had waited for almost eight minutes. Where was Paige? She wished they could make phone calls in dungeons, but there obviously was no reception.

“I’m only waiting ten minutes, Paige!” yelled Jess. Her voice was really loud and echoed around the cavern. She looked around. Did anyone hear that? She stood as still as possible, hoping her current silence would offset the noise she made earlier.

She heard the sound of heavy footsteps behind her, as if a large robot was walking. Jess turned around.

It wasn’t a robot, it was a stone golem.

“That’s not fair!” yelled Jess. She was about to run away, but there was another golem on her other side.

“Where did you freaks come from?” muttered Jess. She struck the closest golem with her whip. Electricity arced out but had no effect on the monster. She heard a noise behind her.

THU-DOOM!

Jess activated her shield just as a stone golem struck. Normally, the shield would have electrified anyone who tried to penetrate it, but the golems were immune.

THU-DOOM!

Jess looked around. She could probably run away in between the attacks, but what about Paige? And what if she ran into more monsters? She couldn't even take down the golems. If there were more creatures immune to her electricity, she would be dead.

THU-DOOM! THU-DOOM! THU-DOOM!

The golems' attacks were getting more desperate. There were four of them now. Where was Paige? If she came back now, she'd be killed by the golems.

THU-DOOM! THU-DOOM! SMA-DASH!

That was a different sound. Jess looked and saw the number of golems had reduced.

SMA-DASH! SMA-DASH-DASH-BASH!

Each golem exploded in succession, becoming nothing more than rubble and bits of stone. Jess let her shield down and saw Paige wiping dirt off her shoulders.

"Ahhhhh! You saved me!" screamed Jess as she wrapped her arms around her neck.

"Why do you always go for the neck? We don't have time, Jess. We gotta go!" said Paige.

"How did you get rid of those golems?" asked Jess.

"I punched them. Sorry I took so long in there," said Paige.

"You punched them? They're made of rock!"

"Jess! We can talk later. We need to go," said Paige. She grabbed Jess's wrist and started running.

"Ow! Wait!" said Jess as she was pulled behind. Paige let go and picked up the pace. Jess tried her best to keep up.

"Why are we running? Slow down!" yelled Jess in between breaths.

"We don't have time, Jess. There's yet another portal door in this dungeon. Through it, an army of

gorgons is pouring out.”

“Gorgons. You mean turn-people-into-stone gorgons?”

“Yes, turn-people-into-stone gorgons! They mean to attack our world,” said Paige.

“What are we going to do about that? They turn people to stone!” shouted Jess. Jess didn’t like how her first day in the dungeon was turning out.

“We’re fine if we don’t look at them,” said Paige.

“Don’t look at them? Wait! Wait... I can’t keep running like this,” said Jess. She slowed to a stop and rested her hands on her knees, gasping for air.

“Wasn’t running part of your training?” asked Paige.

“Yes! But not that fast for that long! How are we going to beat gorgons?”

“It won’t just be us. There will be others,” said Paige.

“Others? So we can commiserate about being turned into stone together? Why are you so calm about this?”

Paige smiled. She knew Jess was going to be safe, and that’s what mattered.

“Ok, enough resting, let’s go,” said Paige. She began running again.

“Wait! Come on, Paige! Give a girl a break!” called out Jess.

Club 1838 was far more popular with a portal than it had ever been without. Vanguards from a number of guilds were lining up to get a chance at being part of the “Gorgon War”, as it was called on the internet. The Agency had to turn the lower-ranking van-

guards away, the demand to be involved was so high. Kats shook her head. She rarely paid attention to the other vanguards, but she couldn't believe how little value they placed in their own lives. Turning into stone wasn't a simple rash that went away.

Kats had arrived almost a half an hour earlier. The Agency lackeys were doing their best to organize and disseminate information, but the vanguards ignored them. Most of them were eager to face the slaughter that was coming. The ones with experience hoped it wouldn't be theirs.

The mages were still casting their enchantments, broadcasting to those who entered the dungeon a view of the army. The magic eyes were much closer than before, and there was no mistaking the gorgons now.

Assistant Verlaigh, as a representative of the Agency, stood at the front of the crowd. She looked at the number of vanguards from a variety of guilds assembled before her. Portals were normally given to just one guild. Due to the singular nature of this latest one, the Agency had opened the invite to allow everyone to participate. Verlaigh signaled to another mage, who cast a spell to amplify her voice.

“As you can see from the magic eye images above, an army of gorgons is traveling through this dungeon towards the portal entrance to our world. It is our job to stop them. We've barricaded the portal so they should not be able to engulf from a distance, but once they take down that barrier, they will cross over. The military is waiting outside as a backup plan—”

Someone coughed out a rude remark about the usefulness of the government's army, but Assistant Verlaigh continued.

“It is still unknown if they can use their skills in our world, but we cannot take that chance. So it

stops here, with us, in this dungeon.”

The vanguards roared and cheered.

“Some of you are wondering how you are going to defeat an enemy you can’t look at. Each of you will receive the Mind’s Eye enchantment, similar to what’s being broadcast above. That will allow you to blindfold yourself, but still see the battlefield from a third-person perspective. Think of it like a video game. The enchantment forms a link between you and the mage, but it uses your magical energy. You were requested to bring any type of magic replenisher, because that is what keeps the Mind’s Eye enchantment going. Once your personal mana runs out, you will be effectively blind. Since we cannot gauge each person’s magic ability, you will be the one to decide when to pull out of battle,” said the assistant.

“No one expects to be saved by the Agency,” someone shouted. The vanguards laughed.

“A number of you will be assigned to guarding the mages. You shall not deviate from that mission! It is of utmost importance to keep them alive, for they keep the vanguards alive. The rest of you will take on the gorgons. Your goal is to clear a path to the spawning portal—the portal where the gorgons are originating from. If we can clear the path, a thaumite detonator will be planted on the portal. That should be enough to disrupt the portal and close it,” explained the Assistant Verlaigh.

“Who is tasked with carrying that detonator?” asked a vanguard.

“I am,” said Verlaigh.

The room went silent after a quick collective intake of breath. Despite the minor disdain the guilds had for the Agency, Assistant Verlaigh was well respected. Her achievements as a former vanguard

were known to vanguards and civilians alike. She had not acted as a vanguard for years, and for most of the vanguards present, this would be the first time they could witness her in battle.

The silence was interrupted by a vanguard with a message for Assistant Verlaigh. He spoke in a low voice and Verlaigh nodded. She continued to address the crowd.

“It seems the military are ready. Are you?” asked Verlaigh.

The vanguards cheered.

“There are sixty mages here, ready to link you to the Mind’s Eye. Each of you will line up and receive your enchantment.”

“Let’s fight already!” came a voice from the back.

“It seems some of you are eager for death. Then again, we *are* vanguards, after all,” said Assistant Verlaigh with a smile. The vanguards roared with another cheer.



Kats held a small disc in her hand which looked a bit like a compass, yet no needle nor cardinal points were on it. The daggers she had given to Paige were attuned to this disc, and she thought it would be a great way to keep tabs on her. She never got a chance to use it. The disc stopped working days ago and Kats couldn’t figure out why.

“This may be the first time I’ve ever talked to you, Vanguard Kats,” said Assistant Verlaigh.

Kats looked up and twitched her lip, which could have technically counted as a smile.

“From what I’ve heard, you don’t normally wait around for a battle to start. However, here you are

hanging behind. It's got me curious.," said the assistant.

"You've also heard of my communication skills?" asked Kats.

"That may have come up," said the Assistant.

Kats turned back to her compass and mentally disengaged.

The assistant didn't have time to delve into the psyche of other vanguards. She looked up to see the remaining vanguards make their way into the dungeon. There was a lot of ground to cover, but she was confident the vanguards would make good time.

Her guards were waiting. There were a number of the Agency's personal vanguards assigned to protect her and the backpack that held the thaumite detonator. If the gorgon army could be thinned out before she got there, then they'd have a chance of stopping the entire invasion. She was about to set off when an Agency associate came up to her.

"Sir, two people are approaching from the east. They're human."

Both Assistant Verlaigh and Kats looked up. Two people were running towards them. Or, at least, one of them was running. The other was doing a version of running but without the speed. Verlaigh recognized them from the security footage taken from the club. The one who was in front stopped and went back to the fatigued one. After a brief conversation, she picked her up on her back and started running again. As they got closer, she yelled out her name.

"Assistant Verlaigh! Assistant Verlaigh! I got here before you left! Well, I knew I would, but sometimes you worry even if you know the outcome. Anyway, you're just the woman I'm looking for."

Verlaigh was curious: how did this person know

her name? She watched the young girl as she approached. She wasn't out of breath, surprisingly enough, given the distance she just ran with someone on her back. She was tall and wore a black hoody and sweat pants. It was not the outfit of someone heading into battle. Was this person the one who was a member of the Blood Guild? How was she a vanguard? Verlaigh looked over and saw Vanguard Kats stand beside her.

"Vanguard Kats! Good to see you. Anyway, Assistant Verlaigh, my name is Paige, Vanguard Paige. I'm with the Blood Guild. Ask Vanguard Kats. She'll vouch for me, right?" said Paige as she looked over to Kats.

Kats nodded.

"Amazing. However, this person, the one on my back, she is a new recruit and hasn't even done her first training initiation with her guild," said Paige.

"Hey! I just took on four stone golems!" said Jess.

"Could you make sure she is safely escorted outside? This is obviously not a dungeon for a trainee," said Paige as she put Jess down.

"No! I want to get involved with the fight too!" shouted Jess as she tried to jump back onto Paige's back. Paige gently restrained her.

Assistant Verlaigh looked at Jess. She, too, wasn't dressed appropriately, sporting what looked like an outfit one would use for the gym, or potential meet-ups at the gym.

"Name and guild, vanguard," Verlaigh said to Jess.

"Vanguard Jess of the Blood Guild, sir. I am ready for any challenge my guild would send me," said Jess.

"Would you vouch for her, Vanguard Kats?" asked Assistant Verlaigh. Vanguard Kats didn't respond.

She signaled two of her personal guards over.

“Vanguard Jess, please accompany my agents and exit the portal. Since you were engulfed, you need not fear any repercussions for entering the portal without permission,” said Assistant Verlaigh.

“No! If Paige gets to be here, I should get to be here too!” shouted Jess.

“That’s Vanguard Paige,” said Paige.

“Shut it, future girl,” said Jess.

The two vanguards came on either side of Jess and gently held her shoulders. Jess did not fight back. Going against the Agency was a surefire way to get your vanguard rank stripped.

“I’m sorry about the future girl thing! Please! Vouch for me!” pleaded Jess.

“I vouch she is too young to be here,” said Paige.

“I won’t forgive you for this!” shouted Jess.

“We’ll do another dungeon together!” comforted Paige.

“Vanguard Jess, please exit the dungeon,” said one of the associates guarding her.

Jess’ shoulders slumped. There was no fighting this. The three of them walked off to the portal. Paige watched them for a bit, and then turned to Assistant Verlaigh.

“Okay! I know you have a map, could you show me that map?” asked Paige.

The assistant looked at Paige. How did she know she had a map? She just got here and wasn’t told anything about the briefing.

“I don’t know your rank and whether or not you are allowed to be here. You aren’t even dressed for battle. The Agency has already turned back-”

“I vouched for her, remember?” said Kats.

Assistant Verlaigh looked at Kats. Kats returned

a blank expression. Verlaigh sighed. She didn't have time for this, and the vanguards were the responsibility of their guild. She wasn't their baby-sitter.

"Vanguard Marg, please bring the map," said Assistant Verlaigh to another vanguard nearby. The vanguard came over with a crystal thaumite staff. She whispered to it and a 3D representation of the dungeon appeared above them.

"That's handy. I need one of those," said Paige. She looked at it for a split-second and then ran off. Kats said not a word and followed her.

"Thanks, Assistant Verlaigh," shouted back Paige.

"Wait! Where are you going?" asked Verlaigh. It was met with silence. She cocked an eyebrow. Young people today didn't take her seriously. Still, she had other things to worry about. She asked her guards if they were ready. They nodded assent.

"Let's do this."

Paige's endurance had certainly increased. They had spent the last half hour running at top speed and she didn't feel winded.

She could hear Kats behind her. She, too, was keeping up with the running, and made no sign that she was struggling. Again, she wondered who Kats was. Why did she feel the need to accompany her? And who was the anonymous voice on the phone? Why couldn't her life be novelized as a history book and less as a thriller?

The map the assistant had shown her was a brilliant rendition of the dungeon she was in. It showed everything in 3D, as opposed to a top down view, so

she knew the shortest way to get to where she needed to go. She reached a stairway, and then a small overhang, and jumped down to an area where there was another door.

The dungeon was symmetrical. The door to the minotaur was in the southeastern corner of the dungeon, while this current door was in the southwestern corner. It was made of platinum, and on its front was another line drawing. On the other side of the door was a glyph and not numbers:

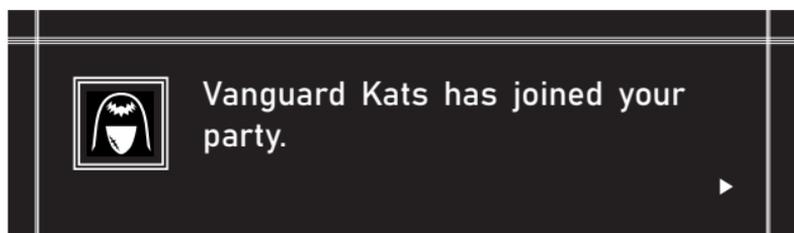


She recalled having to search more with this chapter. She turned towards Vanguard Kats.

“It’s great to do battle with you again, Vanguard Kats. Even if you don’t really say anything or acknowledge me at times. Would you be willing to join my party?” asked Paige.

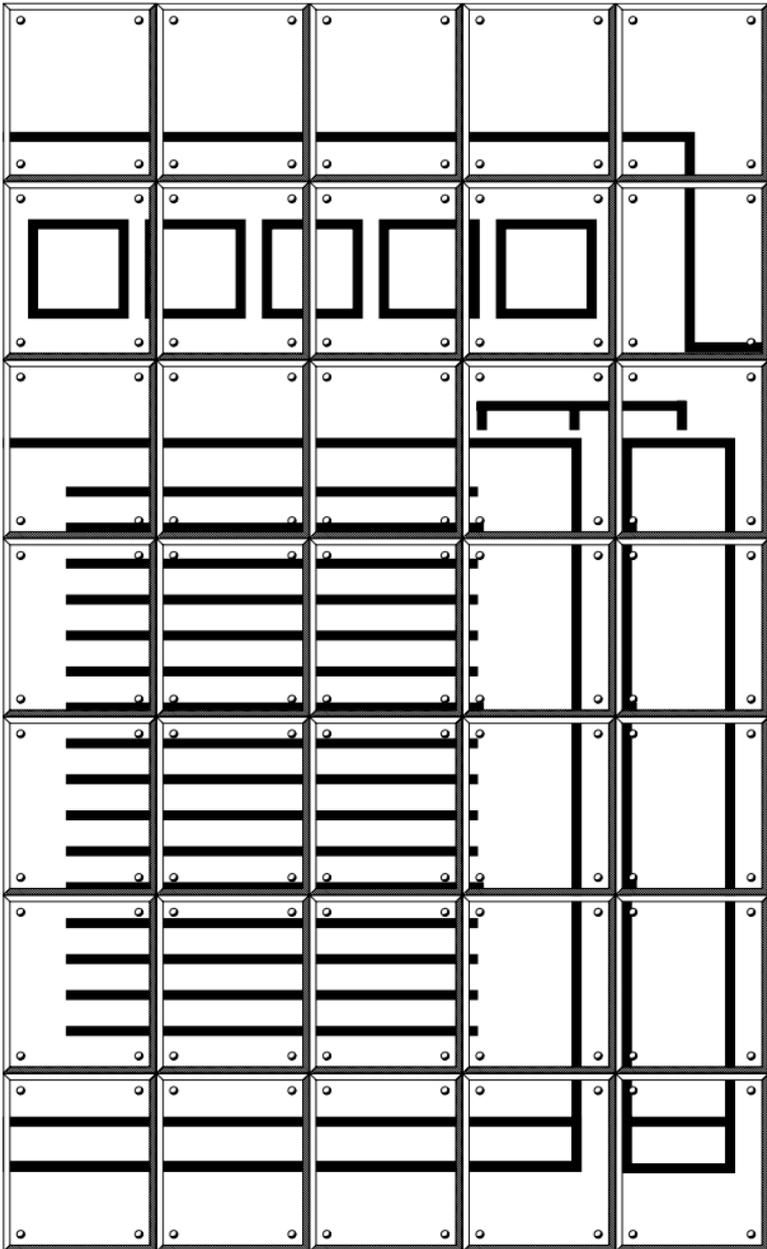
Vanguard Kats nodded.

A display prompt popped up:



“At least we have this,” thought Paige.

She said a word, and the door shimmered, revealing another portal.



... this current door was in the southwestern corner.

