

Chapter 7

*Sevens' numbers ignored
When the finale you reach.
The seventh names answers
that you will speak.*

— Moira 2:13, Book of Moira

Assistant Verlaigh inwardly mocked her current state of fitness. She was getting winded, and she had not been running for more than two hours. The thaumite detonator was heavy, but it shouldn't have caused this much fatigue. She hoped her bodyguards didn't notice anything.

The third-person view was easier to get used to than she thought. Fighting might still be a problem, but hopefully the first skirmish would settle her into a rhythm which she could get used to.

After another ten minutes of running she heard the sounds of the approaching enemy. And if she could hear the gorgons, then they could hear her. A smaller window appeared in the upper corner, showing a view up ahead. She was fortunate enough to have a mage dedicated to guiding her.

The smaller picture showed ten gorgons running towards her all armed with swords. She wondered how they got past the advance vanguards, but there were a great many tunnels and passages in this dungeon.

Ten gorgons against her fifteen vanguards. The creatures' main weapon was petrification. With that nullified, would her team have an advantage? The gorgons were still armed and capable warriors. Assistant Verlaigh wasn't going to relax.

Five of her vanguards sped up. They were the first to meet the gorgons who clashed with them head on. The gorgons were shocked to see the vanguards had no fear of their petrifying ability, and once it dawned on them the vanguards were blindfolded, it took them a few seconds to form a battle plan. However, by then, it was too late. The vanguards took down four of them and by the time the rest of her team arrived, all the gorgons were dead.

Through the view of the *Mind's Eye* enchantment, Assistant Verlaigh could see the gorgons slain before her. It was said their powers even worked while dead, so she dared not take a peek from under her blindfold. There was one aspect she didn't pick up on earlier: the gorgons were wearing goggles.

She grabbed a pair from one of the lifeless gorgons. She didn't understand the purpose of them. Were they there to block the petrification? It couldn't be, for the gorgons were fully expecting her party to turn to stone. What she needed was someone to analyze the goggles, but there was no time to send anyone back for an errand.

"Good job, everyone. Let's continue," said Verlaigh. She would have to wait until later to learn the purpose of the goggles.

Paige stepped into a colourful pasture filled with trees, flowers and an idyllic pond. The sun was high

in the sky, but a refreshing breeze gently touched her face, giving a sense of calm and peacefulness.

There was singing. A lone woman of exquisite beauty was sitting on a rock, gazing into the pond, quietly singing to herself. Was she a fairy? An elf? An angel? Whatever her identity, Paige thought of nothing else but to join and sit with her by the pond in tranquility.

As she walked closer, the woman looked up. Her face glowed, but her expression turned from shock to worry, and the ephemeral being stopped her song.

The world changed.

The sun faded and the trees melted into the craggy shapes of stone and stalactites. The pond began to boil and was transformed into a brackish slew of foul smelling water.

The woman's features slowly drained of life, and health. Rosy cheeks turned ashen and skin was drawn taut around a misshapen skull. The eyes and nose disappeared, leaving nothing behind but a large maw, permanently open and lined with teeth.

It was a siren.

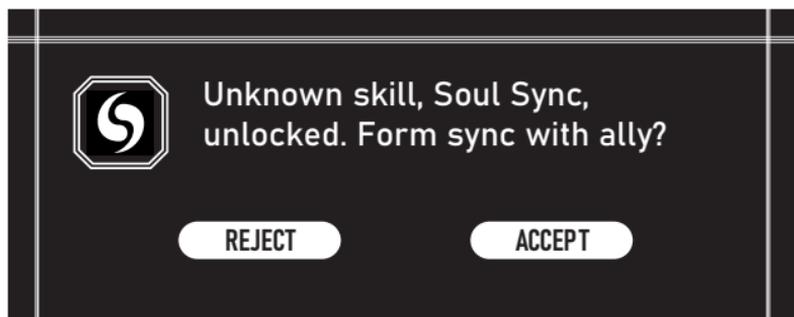
The creature started to sing again but Paige was fast. She still had the earplugs from the fight with the lizard-men and she jammed them into her ears just as the landscape started to turn beautiful.

Paige looked for Kats, who stood motionless. Her expression was the same as always, but her eyes looked peaceful. She grabbed a second pair of earplugs and put them into Kats ears.

Kats eyes focused onto Paige and then closed. Taking her cue, Paige closed her eyes, too. Kats didn't talk much, but Paige trusted her instincts at this moment. If there were sirens, there were probably gorgons as well.

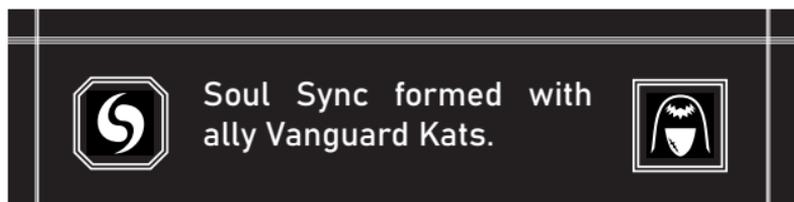
Robbed of two of her senses, Paige tried desperately to increase her awareness. What were they going to do? The gorgon kept her from seeing. And the siren kept them from hearing. If she had it her way, she wished someone kept her from smelling. The bog smell was nasty.

Paige felt Kats grab her and throw her to the ground. Was there an attack? And if so, how was Kats able to dodge it?



Interesting. She could still see the prompt, even though her eyes were closed. Paige didn't know what a soul sync was, but it sounded advantageous, especially in her current state of being both deaf and blind. And considering time wasn't stopping for this dialogue box, she quickly accepted.

"Yes," said Paige.



Paige's senses woke to a world bathed in a flowing, blue current, not unlike thick smoke. Shapes could be seen in those currents, forming eddies and

waves as they moved. In the midst of it was a glowing outline of Kats who was battling shapes of blue.

“What is this?” thought Paige.

“Paige?” came a thought. A thought that called her name but did not originate from her brain.

“Kats?” asked Paige in her head.

More shapes closed in on Kats, but she moved in and slapped each one. Paige could feel Kats’ movement, almost as if they tugged against her own limbs. She stood up and her feet and body adopted the same stance as Kats.

“How am I hearing your thoughts?” asked Kats, with the same tone as someone asking, “How does one make salad?” She had not stopped fighting, and Paige’s limbs felt called to echo her. Kats did another quick turn, and thrust her palm upwards against what was most probably the chin of blue form.

“I cast a spell. Kind of. Our souls are synchronized. Hopefully that’s not as co-dependent as that sounds,” thought Paige. All this time, she had been resisting the tugs and pulls of Kats’ movement, but decided to go along with her. Her movements didn’t mirror Kats’, however, they complemented them.

Paige unsheathed her daggers, and as Kats finished her attacks, Paige followed through with a knife thrust of her own, slicing what probably was the neck of the current creature they were fighting. What looked like blue liquid sprayed out as a result of her cut.

“That’s magical energy. What you are seeing is the flow of magic. As an assassin, I can sense and react to magical energy,” said Kats.

“That’s a thing?” thought Paige.

“Yes,” thought Kats.

“Oh. That wasn’t meant to be out loud. You can

hear my internal thoughts? This is going to be embarrassing,” thought Paige.

“For whom? You or me?” asked Kats.

As Paige felt the actions and motions of Kats, the reverse was also true. It didn’t take long for both of them to move in tandem. With each of Kats’ palm thrusts, Paige was there, cutting and slicing whatever monster was in their way, painting the ground blue.

Even though her eyes were closed and her ears plugged, Paige began to move in this environment as if she possessed all of her senses. The magic infused objects and people in different densities.

The walls, the landscape, the bog, all of it contained magic, but it was varying shades of dark blue, indicating a lower magic content.

Each living entity was a bright blue, and as they moved, she saw the disturbances of the magic that naturally permeated the air.

Paige looked down at her hands. There was darkness. She could see the blue magic force flowing inwards to her hand and dissipating. She must have looked strange to Kats.

“You don’t know the half of it,” thought Kats.

“You see all of this all the time?” ask Paige.

“Pretty much,” thought Kats.

‘Seeing’ was the wrong term to use. Paige could sense it. She could sense the flow behind her as she could in front of her. It was a bit like being Spider-man with his spider sense. It allowed her to dodge, side-step, and avoid any attack on them. On top of that, the soul sync with Kats allowed her to experience what the other was feeling, touching, and sensing.

“This is pretty OP,” thought Paige.

“It works,” thought Kats.

“This is the most I’ve heard you talk,” thought Paige.

“I’m not talking,” said Kats.

“You know, it’s hard to have internal commentaries when someone else can hear them,” said Paige.

“I’m not the one who initiated this mind link,” said Kats.

“Soul Sync,” thought Paige.

“Whatever,” thought Kats.

The battle continued with Paige and Kats flowing through the currents of magic against the hapless creatures whose normal advantages were suddenly rendered useless. The creatures made no headway against the two warriors.

“We have to figure out how to warn the rest of the vanguards about the siren,” thought Paige.

“Sirens. There are more than one,” said Kats.

“Oh, you can tell the difference between all these different shapes?” asked Paige.

“Ooof,” said both Kats and Paige as Kats flew through the air. Paige was startled by the sudden hit. She felt the hit done against Kats as if it were done to herself.

“Ooof,” said Kats again, followed by Paige. Kats was kicked in her ribs but neither of them could sense the origin.

Paige looked around. Blue shapes she could see attacked Kats with weapons. Kats got to her feet and was able to avoid them, but as she was about to counter-attack, she was thrown back again by an unseen hit.

“What’s happening?” Paige yelled in her head. “How can we not see who is attacking us?”

“We’re being attacked by creatures who can mask

their magical presence,” thought Kats.

Paige felt a blow to her head, but it didn't phase her.

“You're invulnerable?” asked Kats.

“A little bit,” thought Paige.

“Talk about OP,” thought Kats.

“It works.”

Paige felt another blow to her face, but she didn't flinch. Kats started to swing her arms in a controlled and circular motion. Paige followed suit.

She felt a hit to her stomach, and then an elbow smash against her back. But it wasn't against her, it was aimed at Kats. It seemed their attackers had given up on hitting Paige and went back to Kats.

“This is good. Now we know they're only attacking one of us,” said Paige.

“It's good for you,” said Kats as she rolled to the side and stood up. She felt a punch to her ribs, but Kats blocked the other two attacks against her. However, a blow from behind knocked her down. Paige slumped to the ground, her body screaming with pain.

“All that invulnerability wasted because I feel your pain,” thought Paige.

“I'm sorry to be a burden.”

Kats dodged to the side as bright lines, magic-infused arrows, flew through the air towards her. At least she was still able to sense the attacks from other creatures. Another punch hit Kats in the face, but the second hit she was able to block.

“Aren't you knocking them out when you block them?” asked Paige.

“No. I need to be intentional about it and aim for a certain place. Right now, I'm just trying to block the attacks. If the first hit lands, the combination and

rhythm of attacks I can predict and block,” thought Kats.

She got kicked in the leg and Kats went down, along with Paige.

“However, it’s a bit harder if there are two or more attackers against you,” thought Kats.

Paige jumped on Kats and covered her with her body. They could feel the blows as their attackers tried to get at Kats.

“This isn’t an optimal way to fight,” thought Kats.

“We’re back to being deaf and blind. Any ideas?” asked Paige.

Before Kats could answer, Paige felt a large hand grab her by the ankles. She was ripped off of Kats and slammed into the wall of the cavern.

“Ow! I think they’re aiming at the pointy parts of the cave!” said Paige.

“You okay? Crap, they’re hitting me again,” said Kats. She got up and tried to fend them off as best she could.

Paige was slammed against the floor, and then thrown into the wall. Things were getting pretty grim.

Assistant Verlaigh and her party of vanguards slew forty or more gorgons on their own. The battle wasn’t challenging at all. She felt a bit ashamed they had to call in the military. The chairman would not be let off lightly after what the government would deem as a “Horrendous misplacement of public funds and resources.”

She checked her map. They were making good time and were almost to the center of the dungeon.

Did the gorgon army thin out? The rest of the guilds should have been there by now. Closing off the portal could be an easier task than she thought.

A picture flashed rapidly in the corner of her vision. It was an alert from her mage. The *Mind's Eye* couldn't produce sound so this was the only way to get her attention.

"Halt," said Verlaigh and her party stopped. She signaled in the air to the mage providing the *Mind's Eye*. The mage switched her view to a scene of the dungeon center. There were hundreds of gorgons.

Nestled among them were vanguard statues.

Verlaigh signaled again to zoom in closer. Why were there vanguard statues? She examined the scene. The gorgons were dragging the vanguard statues, but not harming them. What were they doing? Where were they dragging them to?

Was she misreading things? Maybe these statues were older statues that had always been there. Maybe the gorgons had taken an interest in carving out statues the legit way. She took a closer at the vanguard statues.

They weren't made of stone.

"That's some type of crystal. What is this?" asked Verlaigh. Did the gorgons do that? Did they turn people into crystal now?

"Wait! Could it be? Warn me if gorgons get close. I'm removing my blindfold," said the assistant. She ripped off the cloth binding her eyes and didn't wait for them to adjust. She pulled out the goggles she took from the slain gorgons.

The lenses were thick, multi-colored, and made of a variety of different transparent materials. Did the lenses change the petrifying gaze of a gorgon? Since when did gorgons have the know-how to create mag-

ical artifacts? And how did they procure this many of them? This was a far more organized attack than either she or the Agency had imagined. She put her blindfold on and focused on the *Mind's Eye* visions.

The crystal statues didn't have blindfolds. The statues weren't even frozen in a position of battle. Each one looked to be standing in a relaxed position. Maybe they weren't her vanguards. However, there were too many statues. There was no way this many vanguards could have gone missing without the Agency's knowledge.

She signaled again and the view pulled out. What was happening here? She searched through the gorgons and the statues, looking for some type of clue, and found it.

On a raised dais, she saw creatures who were not gorgons. No nose, no eyes, round mouth of teeth, and all of them with their heads raised to the sky.

They were sirens.

Assistant Verlaigh swore. Their attack, the vanguards they assembled, were neutralized. The sirens made them remove their blindfolds, and the gorgons turned them to crystal.

What could she do? Gorgons and sirens? If she tore off strips of clothes, would that be enough to stop a siren's call?

"Does anyone have heavy duty earplugs?" asked the assistant.

"I do, sir," said a vanguard.

"That is fortuitous. How many?"

"Well, just one pair, sir. Helps me sleep," replied the vanguard.

"Pass them to me," said the assistant. "We can't move forward. There are sirens up ahead. Any closer and we'd fall under their spell."

“Sirens? Couldn’t the mages counter that?”

“Not from where they are.”

Assistant Verlaigh held the earplugs into the air. She pointed at them, hoping the mages would get the message that they needed another magic user who could remove sound. She didn’t know what good it would do though. There wasn’t enough time to go back and get mages or earplugs, and it would take a few hours for any backup to arrive.

“Can we cure them?” asked a vanguard standing beside the assistant.

“We’d better. It is fortunate they aren’t smashing them. They seem to be very careful with the statues, in fact.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know,” said Verlaigh. There was only one pair of earplugs. They couldn’t just send one person in to take out a hundred gorgons.

Then all of them stood up straight. They heard the soft sound of singing.

“Cover your ears and retreat!” ordered the assistant as she gave the earplugs back to the vanguard. The other vanguards did their best to block out the sound. A couple weren’t as successful, and their bodies became listless. They began walking to the center of the dungeon.

The vanguard with the earplugs grabbed the two entranced vanguards and dragged them with him. They all ran in the opposite direction. The hypnotized vanguards eventually regained their composure and were able to run on their own.

After a few minutes, Assistant Verlaigh held up her hand, and the vanguards came to a halt. She turned towards them.

“We are attacking. Whatever they are doing in

there, we need to stop those sirens. Vanguard, find something to block your ears so you can fight. Give me a sign you are good to go”

The vanguards ripped off clothing and found ways to plug their ears. One by one, they gave a thumbs up sign. With a nod, they ran back towards the center of the dungeon.

If they could kill all the sirens, then there was a chance some vanguards were unaffected. They could rally and take down the gorgons. She hoped there were enough of them.

Paige was blind, deaf, and was currently being smashed into a wall by an undetectable assailant of giant proportions. The creature was as strong as her and she wasn't able to free herself.

The smashing stopped and her wrists were grabbed. She was lifted into the air and stretched out. Paige looked down, and saw a number of blue shapes aiming arrows at her.

They all shot at once.

Mustering up all the strength she could, she arched her body downwards. The arrows missed and hit the creature that was holding her up. The grip on her legs loosened, and the creature began swinging her around by the arms. Paige lifted herself up and using her lower jaw, bit through a large chunk of the wrist that was holding her. Vile blood burst into her mouth and she was dropped to the floor.

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

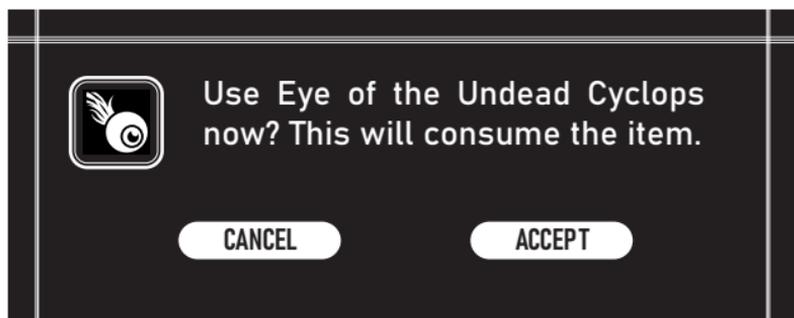
She remembered this. She also remembered her

thought.

‘Your mind is strong. And use the eye.’

And then it grabbed her leg again.

“Inventory,” she yelled. Her hands flailed as she was lifted up, but she was able to tap the eye of the undead cyclops.



“Accept! Please give me something useful!”

The world flashed for a millisecond.

And then Paige could see ghosts.

“What did you do?” asked Kats.

Paige was lifted into the air and she saw Kats running towards her. Kats leapt, and slammed her hand on the spectral figure that was holding Paige up.

It flew backwards and Paige fell to the ground.

“Kill the blue body on the ground!” thought Kats.

Paige got up and turned around. A giant blue form lay beside her. Above it hung its ghost, looking very confused as to why it wasn’t where it should be.

With a quick jab, Paige thrust her arm into the neck of the giant and tore out the jugular vein. Blue liquid sprayed the entire area.

The spirit saw its body die. After a few seconds, it disappeared.

You have gained a level. You are now Level 39!

“It’s about time! I need a break from being smashed against the wall,” thought Paige.

“What is this?” asked Kats.

“Wait? You...you’re not frozen in time?” asked Paige.

“Obviously not. Is this a regular thing with you?”

“Only when I level,” thought Paige.

“Level. You level. Is that how you are getting stronger?”

“Hold on, hold on. I’ve been curious about you since the day we’ve met and not once have you answered my questions,” thought Paige.

“We don’t have time for this,” thought Kats.

“Actually, we do. I’ve figured out a few things about you. You don’t knock your enemies unconscious. You knock out their souls. The bodies fall to the ground but aren’t dead. That’s when you get me to kill them. What I don’t understand is why you don’t kill them yourself.”

“Yes, very good. So you’re telling me time has stopped right now,” thought Kats.

“Yes. Notice the creatures have stopped moving and the magic in the air has stopped flowing? I’d open my eyes and remove the earplugs, but I’m not going to risk the gaze of the gorgon. Light doesn’t seem to stop. Okay, my turn. Why are you helping me?”

“I do what I’m told,” thought Kats.

“Yes. I know. Who’s telling you? Or let me guess. The voice on the black phone is someone whose iden-

tity you don't know," thought Paige.

"How did you learn about that?"

"I have very good sources," thought Paige.

"Interesting," thought Kats.

"What is your goal?" asked Paige.

"Same as yours," said Kats.

"No. No, it's not, because I have no goals. I don't even know if I have a will at this point. My life is being dictated to me and I follow along because it keeps me alive. I'm blindly trusting memories of things that are yet to happen. I enter dungeons, I put my friends in danger, I open doors, and I don't know why! If you ask me, that makes for a terrible story, no? How can you have a character with no goals or motivation?"

"Very poetic. I don't really understand symbolism though. This ability of yours is not based on magic?" asked Kats.

"No. I have no magical ability," said Paige.

"You have a completely different ability set than the rest of the world. Fascinating," thought Kats.

"Why do you make me do all the killing? Why can't you do it for once?" asked Paige.

"I can't kill," thought Kats.

Unlike Kats, Paige still reacted when faced with shocking news.

"But you're an assassin," thought Paige.

"Why does everyone say the same thing when I tell them I can't kill," thought Kats.

"Why did you become an assassin if you don't want to kill anyone?" asked Paige.

"It's not a matter of not wanting to. I am physically unable to kill. If I were to stab you with a knife, it would stop before it even pierces your skin. If I were to punch you in the eye, it would soften before it could do any meaningful damage. If I were to try

and push you off of a cliff, my hands would slip off of you. If I gave you poison to drink, the poison would suddenly become inert. If I tried to run a vehicle over your head—”

“I get the picture! The universe is stopping you from killing,” said Paige.

“Yes. Most people have a hard time believing that,” said Kats.

“We’re currently stuck in time because I haven’t acknowledged a game prompt informing me that I leveled. I’m pretty open to anything at this point,” said Paige.

Kats stood silent. Paige looked at Kats, or more specifically, at her soul. It looked exactly like Kats, except with a ghostly white sheen and far more expressive than what her body displayed. At the moment, her soul showed concern, worry, and fatigue. She wondered what it was that Kats so badly wanted that she was willing to risk her life with Paige.

“A weapon,” thought Kats.

“Oh. Right. You can hear me,” thought Paige.

“Yes, I can,” thought Kats.

“This weapon worth all of this?” asked Paige.

“Yes,” thought Kats.

“You’re not going to kill me with this weapon, are you? I mean, that’s exactly what would happen in stories, you know? I helped you get this far, and then when you achieve your goal, boom! You kill me,” thought Paige.

“We will probably never see each other again once I obtain my weapon,” said Kats.

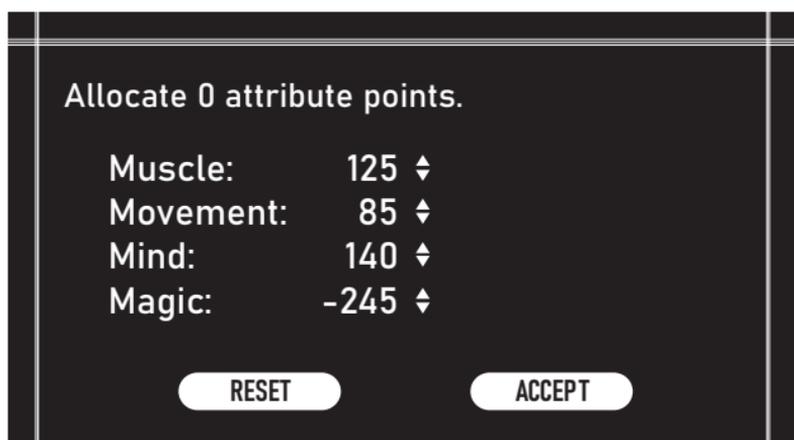
“Okay, that definitely sounds like you’re going to kill me,” said Paige.

“What? No! I’m not going to kill you,” thought Kats.

“Heh, I like seeing your soul. I can read you more,” thought Paige.

“Wonderful. Just what I wanted. How long does this time stop thing happen, anyway? I feel like we’ve been here forever,” said Kats.

“I just need to assign some attribute points,” said Paige as she accepted the leveling prompt. Her stats came up, and she threw it into MOVEMENT:



“How do you have -245 magic? That’s why all the magical energy flows into you. You’re like the black hole of magic, aren’t you? You’re some type of magic vampire,” thought Kats.

“What? No!” protested Paige.

“You feed off of magical energy,” thought Kats.

“I do not! I’m human! I live in the human world where there is no magic. If I needed to feed, wouldn’t I be dead now?” asked Paige.

“It’s still suspicious. Mages will hate you,” thought Kats.

“I’ll make sure not to ask one out, then,” thought Paige.

“When you hit the *Accept* button, will time start

running again?" asked Kats.

"Yes. Do you think we can take on these creatures now?" asked Paige.

"Definitely," thought Kats.

There were hundreds of gorgons in the central cave of the dungeon. It was far more oppressive and overwhelming than Assistant Verlaigh thought. The *Mind's Eye* only gave a glimpse of the horror which was surrounding her. She fought onward, felling gorgon after gorgon with her axe. They were no match for her experience and strength, but there were too many of them. For each one she killed, three others took their place.

She inched closer and closer to the center of the portal where the sirens were. There were about forty of them, all lined up and singing like some hellish choir. Assistant Verlaigh fought on.

Her vanguards were doing a good job of protecting her back. They were getting tired though, and she saw them sneaking into their emergency potions to down some stamina enhancers.

Was this doable? It had to be doable. She needed to take out those sirens.

As she fought, she cursed herself for her cowardice. Even now she was holding back; she was still saving her strength so she could fight through the army when they needed to escape. The thaumite detonator would be devastating and she wanted to be as clear of it as possible, but that was no longer a luxury she could afford. There was no return on this mission, and she had to come to terms with that.

She grabbed a few potions from her inner pocket

and downed them. She immediately felt invigorated, and her strength increased tenfold. Her armour bulged out as her muscles expanded. Swinging her axe, she cleaved through the gorgons.

The vanguards roared in unison, and their morale lifted. They read the lay of the land, and understood their leader's resolve. They emptied their store of potions, increased their strength and fervor, and cut huge swathes in the gorgon army before them.

And then the image started blinking an alert.

"Not now," thought Assistant Verlaigh. She glanced at the mini display within her main view and saw it, a multi-headed serpent. A hydra? Why a hydra now? How did it get here? Assistant Verlaigh screamed in frustration.

It didn't matter, she needed to keep her eye on taking out the sirens. The remaining vanguards could deal with the gorgons and the hydra.

And then her vision went dark.

"No!" she thought.

Was her mage taken out? Did they reach the entrance? She swung her axe around her in desperation. She couldn't see, but she could still kill. Every connect she made brought devastation to those around her, but to what end? She couldn't take out the sirens, she couldn't take out the portal, and there was no way to take out that hydra.

The ground shook. The gigantic beast was that close? Could she at least wound it? She ran towards the source, weapon raised. Something hit her squarely in the chest, sending her flying. She passed out before she crashed against a stone wall.



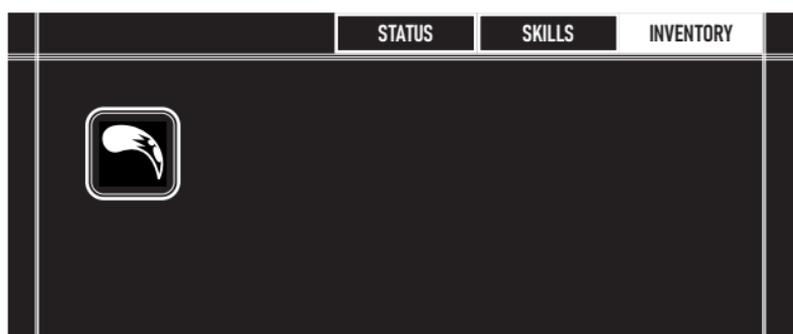
The portal Paige found had teleported them to the world where the gorgons were originating. There weren't many of the creatures left behind and the pair killed the rest of the enemies with ease.

The real battle was back in the original dungeon where the vanguards were. They needed to get back in order to help the vanguards.

"Wait, I have a book to read," thought Paige.

"What?"

"Inventory," thought Paige.



"Of course you'd have a virtual inventory," thought Kats.

"No!" screamed Paige in her head.

"It's not a virtual inventory?" asked Kats.

"It's gone! They took it! Why would they take it away! Why now?!"

"You lost some type of special weapon?" asked Kats.

"More than you know," thought Paige.

Sergeant Ando was at the center of the dungeon, huddled in a ball with his eyes closed and his ears plugged. He had learned from his last battle to al-

ways be prepared, and brought earplugs along. He was able to get them in before being overwhelmed by the songs of the sirens.

He tried to stop his enchanted allies, but they ignored him and were instantly transformed into crystal. Furthermore, once the gorgons saw he was resisting, they attacked him.

Sergeant Ando fought as fiercely as he could, but he was the only one doing it. He debated fleeing, but that's when Assistant Verlaigh and her party appeared. Invigorated, he joined them. They were making their way towards the sirens and were almost upon them when the hydra appeared.

And then their world went dark.

Now, he was huddled somewhere on the battlefield, completely blind and deaf.

Why was he still alive?

There was nothing stopping a gorgon or that hydra from killing him. He wondered how long he had been cowering. Was it five minutes? Ten? It felt like an eternity.

He didn't want to die as a crystal statue, but he was really curious. He risked a peek.

He was being ignored, but this wasn't the surprising thing. In the center of the room was a huge crystal hydra.

Paige and Kats returned to the original dungeon, prepared for an intense battle.

There was none.

Their eyes and ears were still closed, and Paige could see the air was thick with magic, so thick she could barely see the creatures moving inside of it.

However, the creatures didn't look to be fighting. She opened her eyes.

There were hundreds of gorgons, dragging crystal statues which frighteningly resembled vanguards. And in the center of it all, a gigantic, crystal sculpture of a hydra. Its heads were all focused on a singular point in front of it.

No one was paying attention to them.

"Open your eyes, Kats. Something's wrong. Does this scene make any sense to you?" thought Paige.

"Ever since I've entered this dungeon, nothing's made sense to me," thought Kats.

"They're ignoring us for some reason. They must have seen us enter, but they're too busy dragging those statues around. Those crystal statues. Statues that used to be vanguards," said Paige.

Neither of them said anything. The gorgons they had killed on the other side of the portal wore goggles, just like the gorgons on this side of the portal. Paige was able to deduce their purpose.

"Who has the finances and patience to equip hundreds of gorgons?" asked Paige.

"Where do you even get hundreds of gorgons?" asked Kats.

"Can we kill all of them?" asked Paige.

"Not before they finish doing whatever they're doing. Still, I'm not one for not trying," thought Kats as she ran towards the gorgons.

"No. No you're not," thought Paige as she closed her eyes and ran after her. At least it would net her a lot of experience points.

All of the statues were sporadically placed around the cavern, and clumped by each of the crystal statues was a cluster of gorgons. The gorgons had stopped moving and turned towards the warriors rushing

them.

Paige pondered about their motive. Were they going to threaten to smash the statues if they came closer? Kats ran to the closest group of gorgons and soul-pushed fifteen gorgons in the span of five seconds.

Paige, who had recovered her daggers, sliced her daggers from one fallen gorgon to the other. The gorgons died with no resistance.

Kats hesitated for a bit. Paige went in and killed the gorgons who hadn't even been knocked soulless.

"They're not doing anything," thought Kats.

Paige opened her eyes. The gorgons were ignoring them again. She examined the different statues scattered around the room. They were placed in a pattern that surrounded the large hydra statue. The majority of the gorgons were stationed there, along with the sirens who didn't seem to be singing.

Paige looked down. The blood of the gorgons they had killed was gone. She turned to the crystal statue. It was thaumite crystal, and it was fully charged with magic.

"Not again," thought Paige. She turned and saw hundreds of gorgons lift a blade into the air.

And then each of them thrust the blade into their own chest.



Assistant Verlaigh regained consciousness. She didn't have time to be passed out; she needed to get to a battle. She stumbled to her feet, looking for her weapons. The after-effects of taking multiple potions at once were affecting her and she swayed back and forth, as if drunk.

Where were her weapons? Well, her fists were weapons. She looked around. Her blurred vision spotted gorgons gathered in the center of the cavern with a large crystal hydra.

“Oh! Right! They could turn me to stone. Or crystal. Mage! Grant me *Mind’s Eye!*” shouted Verlaigh. No one responded.

“That’s rather rude,” said the Assistant. She felt woozy. How many potions did she take? Was it three? She couldn’t remember.

A bright light stabbed her eyes.

“Augh! This is it! I’m turning to stone! Or crystal!” thought Assistant Verlaigh. She closed her eyes, and tensed her body in anticipation of being overly tense for the rest of her life.

After a few seconds, she untensed her muscles and opened her eyes.

She could see magic.

Paige and Kats had removed their ear plugs, and were walking with eyes open. The crystal statues, which numbered in the hundreds, were all placed strategically around the room. In the center of it was the hydra who was also crystallized.

Even with her eyes open and not using the benefit of Kats’ abilities, Paige could see blue magical energy from the crystal statues feeding the hydra statue, whose multiple heads were so arranged as to aim the cumulative magical energy onto a spot in front of the hydra.

And there appeared a thaumite door, no larger than the door of a closet. On the front she could see some tiny icons and an inscription. Before she could

examine it closer, she heard a shout.

“You’re alive!”

Paige and Kats looked to see Sergeant Ando running towards them. He stopped just in front of them and looked very relieved someone more competent than himself was taking over.

“I am so glad to see you! What is all of this? Why the statues, and the dead gorgons, and everything? What’s happening?”

Before Paige could answer she was interrupted by a strangled cry.

“Get away!”

“Jess?” thought Paige. She looked up. Jess was hanging in the air by her neck, being carried by a hairy beast.

Paige dashed towards Jess, but the beast was fast. Its hand extended claws aimed at Jess’ neck. Paige stopped.

“You’re not the only one here who can move quickly. I finally get to meet you, Vanguard Paige. You’re the hairdryer girl, right? And you opened the doors. Took us awhile, but we figured it out,” said the creature in both a threatening and smug voice.

“What would a monster want with Jess? Put her down! Who are you?” asked Paige.

“That’s Chairman Loo of the Vanguard Agency, Paige. He transforms into a beast of incredible power within the dungeon,” explained Kats.

Paige looked at the chairman. He bore no resemblance to the frail, old man she saw in videos and pictures on the internet. Could she take him out?

“He’d kill her in an instant, Paige. Make no sudden moves,” thought Kats. She, Paige, and Sergeant Ando stood frozen.

“First time seeing this, Vanguard Paige? You’re

still so green. People's abilities manifest in different ways when they enter a portal. However, we don't have time for this. The power here is unstable and you need to open that door before it collapses," said the chairman.

Paige looked at the thaumite door. She noticed the magic flowing into the door flickering. It was probably her causing it.

"Do you know what this is?" questioned the chairman. He indicated the crystal statues around him using the same hand that held Jess.

"Put her down! She has nothing to do with this," said Paige.

Jess let out a choking noise as the chairman squeezed her neck.

"Stop it!" shouted Paige.

"There's not much time, Vanguard Paige. Answer my question," said the chairman.

"It's a thaumitic enhancer circle used to phase in portals. Proposed in theory in 2019 but the amount of thaumite crystals required was impractical to properly test."

"You're a bright girl, Paige. You have me at a disadvantage. I honestly don't know what powers you wield, but I do respect that power. That's why I have this little one," said the chairman.

Jess screamed again.

"Stop it! I'll open the door if you let Jess go," said Paige.

The chairman shook Jess and then bashed her on the ground.

"NO!" shouted Paige.

Jess hung limply in the chairman's grip.

"Currently, only one of us is in control of this situation, Vanguard Paige, and it isn't you. I know

you're fast, but are you fast enough to get to Jess before I crush her neck?" asked the chairman.

Paige saw a flash behind the chairman, but he too was prepared. His hand shot back and grabbed a figure who tried to attack him. Paige noted the speed of the chairman. He was probably as fast as she was. She wouldn't be able to free Jess before he killed her.

The chairman dragged the person he caught into view. It was Assistant Verlaigh.

"You shouldn't bash young girls," said Assistant Verlaigh. Her voice was slurred.

"You were trying to attack me? Impressive, Assistant Verlaigh. Fortunately, you're potion drunk and will forget any of this happened," said the chairman. He tossed her to the side. She wouldn't be a threat.

"Open this door, or the girl gets bashed again," said the chairman.

Paige looked at the door. Would she be able to solve it without her Book? She moved in closer.

"Ah ah ah! Don't get too close," said the chairman.

"Look at that inscription! It's too small to see. Also I need see behind the door," said Paige.

"If you try to trick me, Jess is dead," said the chairman.

Paige did her best not to glower. She looked behind the door. There was nothing on the back.

"First you take my Book and now there's no line-art either?" thought Paige. Why were they making this harder? She moved in closer to examine the icons. The door began to flicker and Paige moved back a little. She didn't want to negatively affect the magic of the thaumite door. Still, she could see the icons from her vantage point.

"Interesting," thought Paige. She looked at the people around her and back to the icons again.



“Although, that’s my icon? How lame,” muttered Paige. Underneath the icons were three columns of numbers:

37

3I

II

43

37

I5

55

53

65

I23

I3I

It was a good thing she memorized and could visualize the Book in her head, although it would have been easier if she had a physical copy of it.

“You figured it out?” asked the chairman.

“Yes. I don’t care about the door or what’s inside of it. Okay? I just want to go home and do normal things. Just let my friend go after this, please? I’m begging you!”

“We’ll see. Just open the door,” said the chairman.

Paige spoke the answer.

The thaumite door opened.

You have gained a level. You are now Level 40!
You have been assigned a Class.



“Oh! That’s interesting,” said Paige.

“Your powers are really strange,” said Kats.