Chapter 17 Portal

I flew through my homework. It was definitely a boon in losing my dyslexia. I was in mostly intermediate classes so it was not like the work was too difficult. All of my teachers used the school portal to post work for the entire term. If you were ambitious you could do as much homework as you wanted. I figured I could get through all my work for the rest of the term in a week if I wanted. Maybe I could take harder courses next semester? What the hell was I thinking? Where was this motivation coming from?

Our school was a private high school. Rob and his sister attended the school on full scholarship because the Monroe’s were big donors to the school. They had built the new science wing a few years ago that cost a few million. Most full scholarship students were athletes so this was a big boon for my friend and his sister. When you looked online you could see the annual cost for local students was a little over $36,000, $45,000 if you lived in the dormitories. It was an investment in your child’s future the website advertised. The school did have numerous connections to colleges and helped students get into elite and higher-end universities.

My family wasn’t super rich, just well off. My parents had argued over money like every other parental unit out there. When Paige got her scholarship though things had loosened up. Paige got her new Jeep on her 18th birthday and we went on a vacation to Hawaii to celebrate. I know they had saved over $160k for Paige’s college fund thinking she was going to attend an ivy. Most of that was now diverted to Paige’s wedding fund though. My college fund? Well, no one ever mentioned it in the house.

My friend Rob needed the scholarships to attend college. Without it, he would be headed for a public university or community college. I thought about creating a phantom scholarship for him with my money. I knew he wouldn’t have much trouble getting into a great college. Just paying for it would be the issue.

I started to get ahead in my schoolwork and paused. The only thing I had left for the coming week was my paper due on Friday which I hadn’t started. I pulled up the notes online for the paper. It was a simple 10-page paper and the subject was flexible. That was the benefit of being in an intermediate English class. I could do the paper on a book or I could choose a random subject and research it. The paper was more about writing and grammar. Maybe I could do a paper on demons? It would be good to know more about the mythology. I went and reserved three books from the public library.

It was lunchtime so I headed downstairs to get something to eat and planned to pick up the books at the library. Dad was in the kitchen, having returned from the dealership. He worked most weekends in the morning. That was when new car shoppers usually came through. “Hey Caleb! Finished the paperwork for the hockey team. If you want we can go to Moriarty’s and get your jerseys. I talked with your mother and we want to get you all new pads for Christmas.” He was excited and I smiled at him. I had told them I didn’t need new equipment but maybe I should size up.

“Thanks dad that would be awesome. I am headed to the library to get some books for a paper and I can head over to Moriarty’s after and pick everything out.” He looked a little disappointed because it was clear this was an opportunity for father-son time. But I didn’t want him to see my larger body. I planned to slowly grow into it with my chronomancy ability over the next few weeks.

I tried to salvage the situation, “It will be great to have you and mom attend my games.” He brightened a little. “The coach said I had a chance to make the first line of forwards so I should get a lot of ice time.” Dad’s eyebrows raised in surprise. He probably thought I would be mostly a practice player and rarely see the ice.

I opened the fridge and was disappointed. One thing my family was not good at was cooking. We ordered take-out almost every night. Mom and dad had every local food delivery app on their phones. I checked the cartons and found some fried rice that looked good. I poured into a bowl and microwaved it and ate it. Dad had disappeared from the kitchen and I heard the TV turn on. Soon the pregame football program rang out from the living room. I checked my phone and the Redskins didn’t play till 4.

“Dad I will be back before the game!” I yelled over, finishing my rice. As I was about to head out the doorbell rang and I heard my mother say she would get it. The door opened and I paused as I identified the voice at the door talking. It was Iris! I pulled my phone out and she had texted me. I had it on silent mode because of all the texts I had been getting. Iris said she was coming over in the text. That was right I had invited her over and she wanted to look for a portal this evening.

I could hear them move to the living room and the tv mute as my dad joined the conversation. Iris was introducing herself as my girlfriend so I moved into the room quickly. “Hi Caleb! Your parents are so nice! I came over early to help with your homework as I promised. Should we head up to your room?”

Iris was dressed conservatively in jeans and a loose-fitting tee shirt with a navy windbreaker. She looked pretty with no makeup and her hair in a ponytail. She had a glow to her.

“Iris I actually need to head to the public library for some books to work on the paper you are here to help me with.” Iris's eyebrow arched and my mom looked surprised as well.

Mom spoke, “Oh Caleb Iris is such a beauty! You are so lucky! You too enjoy your afternoon together!” Mom was excited as I had never brought a girl to the house before.

“If you don’t make it back for the game that is ok Caleb,” my dad said conspiratorially.

I made to leave with Iris and mom said, “Oh Caleb I almost forgot aunt Amelia asked if you could help her stage a house Friday afternoon. What should I tell her?” Amelia was not my real aunt. She had been mom’s double partner for rowing when they tried to make the Olympic team after college. They came close but didn’t make it.

Amelia was about as hot as a forty-year-old woman could be. She ran and worked out religiously. I heard her complain to my mother when she visited that her husband didn’t appreciate all the effort she went through to maintain her body. She had no kids and was our surrogate aunt. I had fantasized about her many times.

“Sure I can text Rob to make sure he can come as well,” I said. Rob always helped with the staging of houses and Amelia usually gave us each $60 for the few hours of work. Her real estate company had a large box truck with items that

“She said it wasn’t a big job and just needed one person. She said it should only take a few hours. What should I tell her?” mom asked.

“Yeah, I can help. Hockey practice starts Saturday morning so this might be the last time I can help till the season is over. Rob probably can help after this though.” Mom nodded and picked up her phone to call Amelia and headed to the other room.

I moved out the front door with Iris. She spoke first as we headed down the walk to her light gray truck, “So are we going to the library for real?”

“Yeah, I reserved some books on demons to write my term paper.” She looked at me with a questioning gaze. “Research for my new life,” I replied.

“You won't find anything but snippets of the truth. My parent's library is a much better resource.” She retorted as we got into her truck.

“Yeah but I need books that I can reference and it would be good to know what people in this world actually thought about demons,” I said. She nodded like I was smarter than I appeared.

We drove to the library and I ran inside and found the books waiting on the reserved shelf behind the desk. Using my driver’s license the attendant checked them out under my library card. I lost my library card long ago. We had gotten them on a fourth-grade class field trip to the library.

Back in the truck, Iris asked, “So are we going back to your room to work on the paper, or we going to go and look for the portal?” She looked at me and she was leaving the choice to me.

“I have to stop at Moriarty’s first but we can go look for your portal after. My paper isn’t due till Friday and since I no longer need much sleep I shouldn’t have much trouble finishing the paper.” She smiled at my words.

When we got to Moriatry’s I spent an hour trying on new pads and selected my jersey number, 69. He would sew the raised numbers on my home and away jersey and they would be ready next weekend. My practice jerseys just had heat-pressed numbers and I could get them anytime after Wednesday with everything else I had picked out. He still needed to confirm the payment for the practice and game gear from the school. $910.44 was the total for the new pads and helmet. Curious I checked online and found with the 15% discount I got brought the gear down to the regular price I could get if I ordered everything online. I wasn’t surprised by Moriarty’s markup. He had been around for 40 years and everyone who played hockey in 50 miles bought their gear here. At least the staff was knowledgeable and the gear was all top-end. I added two more sticks to the pile, increasing the amount by another $700. Four sticks should get me through the season. I gave him $800 in cash and told the clerk my dad would come by and pay the balance. I was sure dad would pay for everything but felt a little guilty with the amount being so high after he had just dropped $2400 for me to join the team.

Back in the truck, I was surprised Iris didn’t look irritated at the time I had spent inside. She asked nicely, “Are you ready to go search?”

“You have the wheel,” I said and relaxed in my seat after putting on my seatbelt. Iris pulled out a sheet and handed it to me. It had two circles on a map. One was north about six miles out of town and the other was west about ten miles. “Is this where the portals are?”

“I think so,” Iris said. “It is the only evidence I found that I could access. I know they talked about there being two possible portals. I searched a few times but my spell requires me to get within 20 feet of a portal gateway to identify it. I am hoping your more powerful abyssal eyes will have a greater range.” Iris sounded hopeful.

On the drive I inquired about magic and if I could learn any spells like her. The conversation was informative. Since I had a sizable aether pool I should be able to learn spells. Casting spells required being able to pull the aether from your core and shape it into a spell form. Iris said it took her four years to learn how to draw on her own core and then it took a few months to learn how to form a simple spell. All her spells were lower tier 1 spells, simple magic. Upper-tier 1 magic was out of her reach as they were too complex. She promised to loan me a few books on exercises to teach me how to work my aether in my core. But working one’s aether core was different for everyone so she wasn’t sure how much she could help.

She parked the truck in a parking lot for a supermarket and pulled up her phone's GPS. We had to walk from here to search. We talked idly as we walked. The focus was on the demis who went to our high school. Two trolls, three cat people, one orc, a siren, a dwarf, three elves, four werewolves, and one merwoman. Most were just half breeds according to Iris. I learned about the students. Iris had spent three years identifying each and every one who was not human. She knew a few other students who potentially had magic but she was certain they were human.

We had walked for a while and I noticed a shimmering blueish line in the distance. It looked like a lightning bolt frozen in the sky and headed toward the ground, “Do you see that Iris? She looked where I indicated.

“No, what do you see?” She asked with some excitement.

“It’s like a crooked line in the sky. Is that what we are looking for?” I asked.

“You lead,” Iris said and got behind me. We walked through some fields and into a small grove of trees.

The line in the sky met the ground around here and the line was wider as we approached. I turned off my abyssal sight and looked again. Nothing. I activated my sight again and approached the fascinating line. It was wide…maybe 10 feet. When I got within 10 feet Iris squealed.

“I can see it!...You saw that almost a quarter mile away! I can't believe we found it so quickly! I looked in this area about a dozen times and walked through this grove at least twice! You are really amazing Caleb!” Her bright smile lit her face while she stared at the tear in reality.

Iris had tears coming down her cheeks so I was quiet. After a few minutes passed I asked, “So how do we use it?”

She wiped the tears and turned to me, “We can’t yet. It requires 100 aether to open it for a few minutes. I don’t have enough aether.” She looked at me expectantly.

I checked my mind space, “It will take me maybe three days to get up to 100 aether.” She nodded. Before I realized it she had wrapped her arms around my neck pulled herself to me and kissed me. It was a brief thank-you kiss. I tried to continue but she released her hold on me. It was a bit of a tease but I could tell she was emotional. A chance to find her parents.

On the walk back to the truck Iris kept talking about preparations. She wanted to set a day for our first foray into the transit. To needle her I asked her to refer to it as a dungeon.

We decided on two weeks. That way I would have enough aether to open the portal and enough remaining aether to get us out when we were finished. I agreed. I didn’t ask when she wanted to work on expanding her aether core. She dropped me off at my house and was eager to work on her own preparations so went home.

As I entered my house my dad and mom asked me how my date went. I told them she stole a kiss and we had fun. I went upstairs and dropped off my library books. I returned downstairs to watch the rest of the Redskins game with dad. He didn’t pry but said Iris was quite the looker. The Redskins lost 33-10.