



SAGE GUARINO  
AUTHOR

THROWN INTO A  
**DEATHMATCH**  
WITH A FINAL BOSS!  
**SPECIAL EDITION**

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DEATHMATCH  
WITH A FINAL BOSS!  
SPECIAL EDITION**

Sage Guarino  
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Email: Sagesnovels@gmail.com

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Story by Sage Guarino.

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Illustrations by Raven Art.

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*This Novel is Dedicated to the  
Following Level 7 Supporters:*

*Daniel Rego  
and  
Alvin Giang*

*Your belief in the project and support is the  
reason this novel is in the hands of so many  
people.*

*Thank you for everything!*

*-Sage Guarino*





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EPILOGUE





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START

# PROLOGUE

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GAME

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START GAME



*Dungeon Crawlers 3: Test of Courage*—the most anticipated game of the year. The game had been released about two weeks ago, and within the first twenty-four hours it had managed to break the sales record for any given game on launch, coming in just shy of grossing one hundred billion yen. Being the broke college student I was, I wasn't able to afford it on launch day, but after two weeks of working hard at the local pizzeria—and begging my folks for some cash—I finally had enough.

The reason the game is so popular within the gaming community at large was because of the new co-op system that had been implemented into the campaign setting. *Dungeon Crawlers 1* and *2*, while great games in themselves, had lost a lot of sales due to a lack of

a multiplayer option. While many gamers were getting a hard-on for all the new features that Manticore—the company behind the Dungeon Crawler series—were adding, I was getting excited over something else.

Zamuru: the busty purple-skinned genie on the cover and the game's final boss. She'd made an appearance in *Dungeon Crawlers 1*, back when Manticore was still releasing 8-bit games. She was the ideal archetype of a beautiful woman with a freaky side; the type of girl who'd make you a stack of syrup-covered pan cakes in the morning, then dominate you in a skin-tight latex outfit at night.

The second I'd seen her sprite I'd fallen in love. Needless to say I'd gone out and purchased all of the Zamuru merchandise I could find—from figurines to dakimakuras, I had it all. I even had an 8-bit nightlight of her that I kept on my nightstand. Her purplish glow was the reason I had so many restful nights.

That said, *Dungeon Crawlers 3* had taken a leap forward beyond all the rest. While other companies were still releasing 8-bit games, Manticore had decided it was time to go fully three-dimensional. For the first time in history a dream of mine had come true: I was finally able to witness Zamuru's breasts in all their three-dimensional glory! *God, thank you for boob physics!*

I stood in line at my local comic shop, waiting to get my hands on the game. Excitement bubbled up with each step closer to the counter I took. As I stood there, eagerly waiting, an employee came out of the back room clutching a handful of tickets.

"I need everybody to listen up! We have limited stock of *Dungeon Crawlers 3*, and I'm going to hand out a ticket to each person in line. I have one ticket for every copy of the game that we have left, so if you don't get a ticket you won't have an opportunity to purchase the game today."

With that news, the people in line began to panic, myself included. Fearing that they wouldn't be able to purchase a copy, some of the customers went as far as to start pushing their way to the front of the line. In short order, the store descended into chaos, but I was determined to get my hands on a copy of the game.

Those two weeks I'd spent working at the pizzeria had been the most infuriating time of my life, and nothing I could do would bring back the dignity I'd lost begging my parents for the extra funds. I'd worked far too hard for far too long to just give up now!

I recalled all the anime I'd watched, and put to good use the skills I'd learned to help me stand my ground. I planted my feet steadily on the hard tile floor, and bent my knees slightly for support. I used my body as a wall to prevent anyone from shoving their way past me.

Their heavy bodies pressed hard against my arms, bending them slightly in an unnatural way. Through all the pain and suffering I remained stolid and immovable. No amount of pain was enough for me to give up whatever chance I had of making my purchase.

The employee with the tickets made his way down the line. My heart raced as I tried to count how many remained in his hands. He handed a ticket to the person in front of me, and because of the cuffs of his oversized jacket, I was unable to see if any were left.

I prayed to God that there was one left. *Please ... please!*

My heart stopped. There was a single ticket left, and he was offering it to me. A lone tear formed in the corner of my eye. I wiped it away, and snatched the ticket from his hand. “Thank you,” I gushed, almost bawling now.

He looked at me with a disgusted expression on his face, as if he’d really had enough of his job. “Otakus ... I swear.” He positioned his arm behind my back, blocking off the remaining guests. “That’s it, folks! That was the last ticket.” The customers with no ticket started to get angry. “I ask that you all keep calm—”

“Shut it, loser!”

The angry guests started to pile on the employee. I felt bad for him, and thought about helping—but then again, it was his choice to work in retail. There was nothing I could do about that.

I tuned out his screams for help, and approached the counter when my ticket number was called. I was on the verge of exploding. Joy was bouncing through my body from the tips of my littlest toes to the edges of my massive grin.

“Here you are, sir. The last copy of *Dungeon Crawlers 3*.”



I sifted through my keys like a madman, trying to get my apartment door open as quickly as possible. The sound of my erratic key juggling woke my cat from his afternoon slumber. He meowed as I burst through the door, trying to get my attention. It’d been hours since I’d last fed him, and while any responsible pet owner would have taken the time to make sure he’d had his fill, I had more pressing plans. I shoved him aside, saying “Sorry Mr. MooMoo!” and headed for my desk.

I plopped myself deep within my chair and pulled the game out of the bag. I undid the brown wrapping paper, tearing at it like a lunatic until the game’s cover was revealed, and stared, mesmerized, at the image of Zamuru on the cover. I drooled as I pressed my nose against her image and took a deep whiff. I moaned with delight—the freshly pressed plastic on her box smelled of divine greatness. “I wish I could get closer to her.”

I peeled the plastic packing strip off the edge of the box and cracked it open. The shiny silver disc reflected my awe back at me. I popped it out of its bindings and slid it into my computer. I booted up Dream, the gaming application used to run all of Manticore’s games, and installed and launched the software.

Mr. MooMoo circled through my legs as the game launched, meowing in annoyance as he did so. I prodded him out of the way with my feet and rolled my eyes. “I’ll feed you later, leave me alone! Daddy has a game to play!”

I had a week-long break from school thanks to the holidays. During this time I planned to do nothing but play the game. If I started now I would be sure to reach the final boss before the break was over. The thought of seeing Zamuru in all her glory sent a tingling

sensation through my fingertips.

The moment the game finished loading, I spammed the mouse, clicking through all the rules and skipping right past the tutorials. I had no time for any of that nonsense. I was on a mission!

I'd managed to skip through all the prompt screens, and was finally able to design my character. "Let's see ... I should start by choosing a character class."

I clicked the button indicating the class selection. I was brought to a page with a long list of classes. Lines of text flooded my screen as I scrolled endlessly down the list. There were four class options, each of which had anywhere from one to three sub-options.

My eyes twitched as I stared at all the information. I tried to take it in, but there was just too much. Each subclass had its own list of stats and special abilities, all of which I was just too lazy to read through.

I scrolled until a specific class caught my attention—*the Gambler Class*: a sub-option in the Specialist Class category. I was too lazy to read the specifics on it, but the name sounded interesting enough, so I chose it.

From there I went to the character creation window. I input my name into the box—Kenny—and went on to design my perfect character: teal hair, baby blue eyes, an athletic build, and a mage outfit.

I decorated my character from head to toe with gold accessories and removed the silly mage hat that came standard with the outfit. I wanted my character to look his very best when meeting Zamuru for the first time. Since I wouldn't be able to meet her in the flesh, I would project a small bit of me through this character of mine. Teeheehee...!

I loaded up the campaign's matchmaking menu and joined the queue. At the top of the screen in the right hand corner, I noticed a small button. *Advanced Matchmaking?* This must be one of those new features everyone is so excited about.

I clicked the button and was instantly put into a lobby with two other players, both of whom were level 50—the max level in the game! I scoffed, "What kind of shitty matchmaking system is this?! At this rate I'll be dropped into a boss battle and end up wrecked."

I tried to back out of the lobby, but the button wasn't working. My irritation only grew as I clicked it over and over. Mr. MooMoo was still meowing like crazy at my feet. "Shut up, Mr. MooMoo! I'll feed you in a second. Just let me figure this out first!" As I spammed the back button, I noticed some activity in the chat log.

Max-Dungeon Master-Lvl 50: "Must be beginner's luck that you got paired up with us, Kenny! I hope you brought your A-Game, cause we're not the type to carry weak players!"

Ariel-Dungeon Master-Lvl 50: "Right on, Max! Come on, Kenny! Show us what you got!"

My brow was twitching so hard it nearly fell off of my face. Are all players this

*cringey?*

After a minute of spam-clicking the back button, I was finally removed from the lobby, a mere second before the match loaded. I wiped the sweat from my forehead and sighed in relief. “Finally. Let’s turn this stupid ‘Advanced Matchmaking’ option off.”

Before I could do so, a transparent pop-up window had taken up the entire screen. “What the heck is this?”

**[Members of your previous party have entered a deathmatch. Would you like to join?]**

**[Yes] [No]**

“Well if that ain’t the easiest decision of my life. *No—*”

As I was seconds away from clicking the button, Mr. Moo Moo jumped onto my desk and then onto my keyboard, stepping on the keys with his deadly yet oddly adorable paws. He meowed at me in anger and started scratching at my face. “Hey! Get out of the way—oh, come on!”

Through his little tantrum, Mr. MooMoo had somehow managed to click ‘Yes,’ and before I knew it I was loading back into their game. I sighed. My computer was slow, and I knew that loading both into and out of the match would take ages.

I locked eyes with the endlessly spinning circle, then back at Mr. MooMoo. I grabbed him under his cute fuzzy arms and lifted him up. “Well, I guess you win. I’ll go get you some food, little guy.”

The moment I stood up, a raging headache pulsed through my skull. I rubbed my forehead, trying to ease the pain. I’d experienced migraines before, but this felt slightly different. “Why does my head hurt so mu—”

Before I could finish speaking, I felt my feet being swept out from under me as a strong whirlwind consumed my body and sucked me *into* my computer screen! I reached out my hand in a panic and grabbed the edge of my computer from the inside. The wind was so strong I could hardly hear myself scream.

“Wh—wh-what the he—hell is hap—pening to me?!”

Only my one hand remained latched onto the edge of my screen. My fingers were slowly losing their grip. A rainbow colored atmosphere circled and engulfed my body, making me nauseous as I held on for dear life. My eyes began to roll back in their sockets, and I tried my best to remain conscious.

Just outside the computer, on the other side of the screen was Mr. MooMoo. I pushed through the strong winds and reached my arm out for him, but I guess the lack of food had pushed him over the edge. He lifted his paw and revealed his freshly-sharpened claws.

“D—Don’t do it! I said don’t do—”

I tried to stop him, but it was too late. He’d been pushed too far! Mr. MooMoo took

his anger out on my fingers, slicing away at them as I tried to maintain my grip. The pain was unbearable, and I instinctively let go of the screen's edge, allowing myself to get sucked deeper into the rainbow void within.

I screamed as I was tossed through the abyss, falling for what felt like an endless amount of time. I'd gone so far down that I could no longer see my apartment beyond the other side of my screen. My eyes spun, as did my body. I held onto my consciousness with every aching ounce of strength I had left.

My stomach turned in on itself and my lunch came back into my mouth for a second round. I tried to hold it in, but before I knew it I'd crash-landed into something hard, where I belched on impact.

My insides had become my outsides faster than I could blink. I latched my hand onto my stomach tightly, but it did nothing to ease the pain. My vision was blurred; this did not come as a shock to me, as my eyes had been spinning in circles for what felt like hours now. I rested my hand on my head. When I did so, a portion of my hair fell into view. "W—why is my hair ... teal? Maybe I'm just seeing things."

I groaned as I wiped the haze from my eyes. That crash had been the furthest thing from a soft landing. I glanced down at my partially-digested breakfast, only to find that I'd landed in a pile of gold coins. *What ... the heck?*

I blinked as fast as I could, batting away the rest of the fog and clearing my eyesight. My hands looked much larger and firmer than they usually did. That's when I noticed that my outfit had changed entirely, too. I was no longer wearing my kawaii Zamuru shirt. Instead, my arms were covered in a raven-black fabric lined with gold edging.

My heart was beating out of my chest. I had no idea what was going on. I glanced down at the rest of my outfit in shock. I was dressed entirely differently than how I had been moments ago. It was as if someone had tossed me straight into a fairytale. "Wh—wh—wh—what's going on?!"

I scooped up a handful of coins; looking deep within their reflected surface at the teal-haired boy staring back at me, and that's when I realized that the teal-haired boy reflected in those coins ... was me!

I dropped the coins and lunged backwards in fear. Confusion and anxiety raced through me as if they were competing to see which one of them could break me first. Then, from out of nowhere, I heard someone calling out to me.

"Kenny!"

I whipped my head to the right, where I caught sight of a tall, muscular man. He was holding a car-sized claymore, and was stanced as if he was ready to fight, but he wasn't looking at me. In fact, he was facing the other way.

Standing only a few feet to his right was a girl who was dressed in clothes similar to mine. She had on a large puffy hat that complemented her soft-blue hair, and under her low-hanging jacket was a white sleeveless blouse, exposing her shoulders and allowing me the slightest glimpse of side boob. I glanced at her in shock, watching as the tiniest drop of sweat ran down her armpit, falling victim to the crease under her breasts. If it

hadn't been for my confusion, I might have just fainted. She, too, looked prepared to fight, and in her hands she tightly gripped a long staff with a blue orb at the top of it.

The sight of them had quickly jogged my memory. It was brief, but I knew them from somewhere.

“...M—Max? Ariel?! W—What the hell is going on—?”

The ground began to rumble. I glanced at the center of the room between Max and Ariel, where a small, golden, ruby-engraved lamp rested. The top of the lamp was rattling and shaking, as if something were trying to break free from it. *W—Wait a second ... that lamp....*

Without giving me a moment to finish my thought, the top of the lamp burst open, and out of it emerged an enormous purple figure with an even bigger pair of breasts hanging off of her. “I recognize those boobs.”—*Crap, there's other people around!* —“I mean that face! It's—”

“Zamuru....” Max’s deep voice echoed through the dungeon as Zamuru’s name rolled off his lips.

It was at that very moment that all the pieces of the puzzle came together, leaving me to draw a single conclusion as I stood shaking, staring at the tips of those mighty purple mountains. “We’re in the game!”

A transparent pop-up screen, similar to the one that had gotten me into this mess, appeared before me.

**[Your party has been selected to participate in this week's special event: Zamuru —Final Boss. The deathmatch will begin in T-5 seconds.]**

The timer started counting down while I stood frozen in disbelief. “You have got to be kidding me....”

**[You may now begin the battle!]**



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LEVEL 1

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# DEATHMATCH

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V-001

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CONTINUE GAME



“When I said, ‘I wish I could get closer to her,’ this is not what I meant!”

An explosion erupted on the ground beneath my feet. My perfectly conceived outfit began to go up in flames as the heat of a dozen fireballs left burn marks on my leather boots. I was running for my life—from the love of my life.

The instant the battle began, Zamuru had started launching fireballs at the three of us. Thankfully Ariel had chosen the Archon class for her character; a sub-option under the Mage class that granted the player the ability to use advanced magic. She’d put up a magical barrier that had allowed the three of us to escape.

Ariel's barrier had at first been holding steady against Zamuru's attacks, but then it had begun to crack under the pressure. I'd spotted a pile of large boulders on the far side of the dungeon that we could use for cover, but after about thirty seconds of running, I started to feel heavy and sluggish. *What ... the heck?*

It felt like a large weight had been dropped onto my chest, and I could hardly breathe. At first, I'd taken off running much faster than Max and Ariel, but in almost no time, the two of them had managed to speed past me and had made it to cover first.

By the time I'd caught up to them, Ariel's barrier had shattered and I was completely out of breath.

Struggling to breathe, I asked them if they knew what was up with me. Ariel asked me what class I'd chosen, to which I replied, "I chose the Gambler class."

Max and Ariel glanced at one another, then palmed their faces. "It's hopeless ... he's a Gambler," said Ariel.

Max pressed his back against the boulder and slid down until his butt hit the floor. "Why would you pick that class?" he asked, sounding defeated.

"I—I don't know! The name sounded cool, I guess. W—What's wrong with it?"

"It's called the 'Gambler class' because everything is a gamble! All of your stats are randomly generated with every attack you make—!"

A fireball hit the ground between Max and me. The heat was so strong for a brief moment that I felt as if I were roasting.

The second the flame died down I glanced back over at Max and picked up where we'd left off. "...Meaning?"

"What do you mean, 'meaning?' Look, I don't have time for this, alright? The three of us, for whatever reason, were teleported into a game ... *a game!* I sound like I'm crazy. And now, we have a giant purple genie launching fireballs at us. Look, just summon your shoulder fairy and check your stats. This is all stuff that she should have gone over with you in the first place."

I blinked twice in confusion. I was trying my best to understand exactly what it was that he was talking about. *Shoulder fairy? What the fuck is that?!*

Both Ariel and Max were staring at me, waiting for me to summon my fairy—whatever that meant. I didn't want to look stupid in front of them, so I started wiggling my fingers and humming. "Oh ... shoulder ... fairy ... come out, come out, wherever you are ... *ohhh!*"

Their jaws slackened as they watched me sing. I even saw Ariel's eyes twitch ever-so-slightly. "You did play the tutorials and read the rules ... right?" she asked me.

Another fireball flew past the boulder, landing inches away from my feet. I jumped back in fear. Irritated, I shouted back at her: "No, I didn't read the fucking rules! And I'm pretty sure there's nothing in the tutorials about getting sucked into the game! Just

saying!"

Zamuru was growing impatient. The power of her attacks had greatly increased, and she was no longer aiming beyond the boulders, she was aiming *at* them. Rocks and debris shot off the granite and into our eyes with every passing attack. She was chipping away at the boulders, and was doing so quickly.

Annoyed, Max quickly showed me how to summon my shoulder fairy. "Wave your right arm in a circle like this, and at the same time snap your left finger, like this."

*Seems easy enough.* I waved my arm as he'd shown me and snapped my finger, as well. "You mean like th—"

A small cloud of smoke burst out of thin air about half a foot from my face. My heart nearly dropped from the shock of it. From the smoke emerged a tiny woman with long, curly pink hair, and sprouting out of her back was a pair of tiny translucent wings that were fluttering so fast, my eyes were hardly able to keep up. "Oh shit!"

"Did it work?" Max asked.

"Y—Yeah. You don't see the tiny person flying right here?"

He snickered. "If you'd played the tutorials, you'd know that only the player can see their designated shoulder fairy. So no, I can't see the tiny person flying right there."

I squinted my eyes and glared at him. "Alright, I didn't need the attitude. Now what?"

"...Talk to it, you moron!"

"Jeez! Okay, I'll ... talk to it." *Talk to it ... blah, blah, blah!*

I cleared my throat and said hello to the tiny fairy floating before me. She wiped her eyes and greeted me with a yawn before saying hello. "Hello ... Master. My name is ... is...."

*Uh ... is she falling asleep?*

"...is Lillian."

"Listen, that's cool and all, but right now there is a gorgeous purple babe shooting fireballs at us, can we hurry this up? Who are you, and how do I check my stats?"

"I'm sorry, master. It's your fault that I'm so tired all the time."

"*My* fault? How is it *my* fault?"

"Each player is ... is ... is granted a shoulder fairy based on the ... the stats of their class. Your luck stat ... is low. That luck stat was ... was taken into account when I ... I was born. Because of your crappy ... luck, I'm always sleepy."

I looked at her with pure disbelief swarming inside. "This is a joke, right...?"

"You made me this way, master. Now you have to take responsibility!"

I facepalmed. I couldn't believe it; not only was my stamina supposedly low, but my luck stat was shot, too!

She explained further. "Shoulder fairies ... are essentially a player's way of accessing ... other menus. For instance, by summoning your fairy ... you ... you can check your stats, visit the item shop... and ask questions in-game ... that the game devs might have already answered online. You can also ask for advice, tips ... or even update your stats mid-battle after leveling up."

"That's great.... Now show me my stats, please."

"Sure ... thing." Lillian opened a tab displaying all of my stats. It read the following:

**[Gambler class:**

**Attack: random damage**

**Defense: random**

**Attack speed: random**

**Magical attribute: high**

**Mana level: lower than average**

**Ranged/close combat skills**

**Luck: low**

**Stamina drain: random (stamina drain is determined after the player makes an attack)]**

"How are your stats looking?" Ariel asked.

"I'm fucked."

A barrage of fireballs blasted the boulders. The three of us kept inching our bodies downward as the boulders crumbled to stay hidden behind cover, but that wasn't going to last us much longer.

"Lillian, why were the three of us teleported into the game, and how can we get out?" I asked, as a fireball skimmed my hair. A loud scream escaped from the depths of my soul as it lit my hair ablaze. "Put it out! Please, put it out!" I started to panic.

"If you would stop moving, I could do something about it!" Ariel put out her leg and tripped me. I crashed face-first into the hard dungeon floor, after which I was assaulted by that adorable girl and her staff.

"...Did you have to summon that much water?"

"It felt necessary," she said.

I turned back to Lillian, who was now fast asleep, and flicked her in the butt. Her eyes bounced open and she turned around to slap me. For a tiny woman, her slap really hurt.

“Can you answer my questions or not?”

“I don’t know, master. I’m sorry … but I don’t know why you … you and your friends were teleported into … into the game—”

“Damn it!”

“…but …”

“But?”

“…but, what I can tell you is that … when you were summoned … I felt this strange feeling inside of me. And that same feeling … is … is coming from … her.” With her eyes closed and a yawn rolling off of her tongue, Lillian pointed at Zamuru.

I’m not the brightest light bulb in the pack, but I’m not the dullest one, either. If I was understanding Lillian correctly, then whatever strange phenomenon had sucked us into the game was also coming from Zamuru. In other words, our only chance of escaping this living hell and returning home … was to defeat Zamuru and win the deathmatch.

Despair and loss of hope hit me hard. I just wanted to lie in my bed, snuggle against my Zamuru dakimakura, and wake up from this fever dream. My mind started drifting, and I lost sight of what was going on in front of me. *Yes … yes, I’ll just wait here safely in my thoughts until someone saves me. My peaceful thoughts—*

A painful sting struck my cheek, which forced me back into reality. I looked down at the hand on my chest, then up at the face in front of me. It was Max. “This isn’t the time to give up hope. If you want to survive, then get up now! Ariel spotted what appears to be a cave in the dungeon wall not too far from here. If we can get in there, we can take shelter, and maybe even make some sense of all this madness!”

My eyes rolled over to where he was pointing, and sure enough there did appear to be a human-sized hole in the wall of the dungeon. Hitting me out of nowhere was a sense of determination and a will to live. If we could just make it to that cave, then we could possibly strategize a way to get out of here.

I looked up at him and nodded. I was ready—me and my lack of stamina. “Let’s do this thing!”

Max lifted me up with one swoop of his arm. At standing height, we were now taller than the remains of the boulders. Zamuru had a clear shot on all three of us, and she knew it. A glorious, magnificent grin stretched from cheek to cheek, revealing her devilish smile. I’d fallen in love with her once, and after seeing her expression, I fell in love again.

I turned from her and took a deep breath. *Not now, babe … not now.*

I made a rapid dash for the cave, sluggishly dodging and weaving past each of her fireballs as my stamina continued to drain. Ariel and Max, on the other hand, were dodging her attacks as if it were child’s play. “Oh, come on!” *These level fifties and their damn stamina!*

I barely made it to the entrance. Max grabbed my arm and pulled me into the cave moments before I would have been hit by a fireball. To nearly die by the hands of the love of your life was truly an eye-opening experience. “I need to get out more,” I said, through all my gasping and wheezing.

The cave entrance was small enough to give all of us a feeling of safety and security. We dropped to the floor and sighed with relief. After regaining a little of my stamina, I was able to speak properly again. I told the other two about what Lillian had said regarding the feeling she’d had. Thankfully, these two were rather smart and came to the same conclusion I had.

“I guess this means we won’t be going home unless we defeat her.” Max let out a depressed sigh.

Ariel chimed in. “Yeah, I guess so. Well, we’d better start planning then. There’s no point in sitting here crying about it—if we want to get home, then we’re gonna need a strategy.”

I rolled my eyes. I hate high-spirited groups of people. As if a strategy would keep us from being killed. Zamuru was an unstoppable beast, and no-one knew that better than I. “Oh, yeah? What do you suggest we do then, huh? Take her to a fancy restaurant, with expensive steak and fancy cutlery, get her drunk on the wine until she can barely speak, then attack her in her most vulnerable state?”

“...Who hurt you, dude?” Max asked.

I sighed as I straightened my posture. “Look, all I’m saying is that Zamuru is no normal boss. She’s *the* final boss of this entire game! There hasn’t been a single party with less than five maxed-out players who have been able to defeat her. Trust me, I’ve watched all the streams—I’d know.”

“Well, we can’t just give up! We have to try *something*,” Ariel said.

“I’m not against it, okay? I’m not exactly enjoying it here,” I said, wringing water out of my jacket. “All I’m saying is that it’s going to be hard. At least you have a giant claymore and you have your staff. I don’t even have a weapon!”

“Well, that’s an easy fix!” said Max. “Just visit the item shop—every new player is given a starting weapon for free when signing up.”

I lifted a brow. “Really, huh? Maybe I should have played the tutorials.”

Almost as if they had something against me, the two of them snickered in sync. “No kidding....”

I summoned Lillian. She was sleeping when she materialized, and judging from the way things had panned out, I figured it’d just be best to get used to it. I navigated through the menus until I found the item shop. From there, I clicked on the ‘Free Weapon’ button, where I was greeted with a mystery box.

“What’s this?” I asked Lillian.

"It's the Gambler ... class starter weapon. You're a Gambler ... remember? Everything is a gamble."

While I had to admit that being a Gambler did have its drawbacks, this did seem rather useful. The mystery box's description claimed that as a Gambler I had a chance to pull any of the weapons from the in-game item shop, including legendary or mythical ones.

Taking into account my low luck stat, my hopes weren't high. Even though I'd been screwed over in terms of my shoulder fairy and my starting stamina, maybe there was still hope for a good weapon.

I clicked on the mystery box icon and instantly a tiny brown box decorated with a red ribbon appeared from thin air and fell into my lap.

"What's that?" Ariel and Max asked in unison.

"I don't know. As a Gambler, even my starting weapon seems to be a mystery." I peeled back the red ribbon and opened the lid on the box. A bright yellow hue blinded me as I tried to look inside. I wasn't able to see anything, so I figured 'what the heck,' and reached inside the box.

As I did so, my hands were greeted by a cold metal rod—what I assumed was a handle of some sorts. I grabbed a hold of the hilt and slowly pulled out the weapon.

What I drew out from that shiny magical void was a sword known as *The Walker*. The Walker, according to the in-game stats table, was an Epic sword, ranking above the Rare and under the Legendary classes. The sword had been given its name because of its special abilities.

**[When striking an enemy, The Walker has a 35 percent chance of rendering them immobile for 25 seconds. Additionally, The Walker has a 15 percent chance of increasing a player's attack by 5 percent for every 10 enemies that are killed. This effect is stackable up to 5X.]**

The three of us stared at the pop-up window in awe. This sword was more than decent, it was great! "Finally, my luck has turned around!"

I could see the jealousy oozing out of Max as he gazed at my mighty blade. "Woah dude! That's an awesome sword!"

"Yeah, it is—!"

"Wait! What does that say at the bottom? You see it, right? That super small text at the bottom of the pop-up?"

"Oh, yeah. Look at that, Kenny. Ariel is right, there is something down there. What does it say?"

At the very bottom of the pop-up tab was a small line of text. It was so small, I had to get close and squint my eyes to read it.

**[If wielded by a member of the 'Gambler Class,' all effects are halved and all**

**requirements are doubled.]**

*I should have known....*

I was annoyed, even more so than I was before. Both Max and Ariel were holding in their laughter as they pretended that my suffering wasn't funny. "Can we please just assess what's going on, now?"

"Well for starters, I think this cave is probably the most secure spot in the entire dungeon. The entrance is small enough to prevent both Zamuru and her attacks from getting in here. I say we make this our base of operations. Set up a medical station, stack it with potions from the item shop and maybe even a campfire so we have food to eat."

Ariel had made a good point—I hadn't thought about needing food since we'd gotten here. "Do video game characters have to eat? Is that something we'll need to do?"



“I don’t know, but I’d rather not find out the hard way.”

“She’s right; let’s focus on setting up a medical station. Maybe I’ll use my wish to ask for some supplies.”

“Your wish...?” I glanced at Ariel. “What is he talking about?”

“A wish is a favor from your shoulder fairy.... You can ask for anything, from a good weapon to supplies, or even for your fairy to cast some sort of spell. It’s essentially a ‘get out of jail free’ card, depending on how you use it.”

“Yeah, but they don’t come cheap, that’s the problem,” Max added. “Each player is only allowed one wish per deathmatch, and the cost is half your defense. By making a wish, you lower your defense cap to fifty percent of what it was. So if your defense caps out around fifty points, it becomes twenty-five points.”

“I don’t know about you boys, but with what’s going on outside, I’d like my defense to remain as is.”

We stood around thinking of a plan and what we could use our wishes for, and then it hit me. “Wait a minute ... why don’t we just wish to go home?”

“We tried that already, back when you were throwing up on those coins. Ariel tried wishing that we would all return to the real world. As you can see, it didn’t work, and her wish is still available for use.”

I racked my brain thinking of all the possible ways we could use our wishes to leave the game and return home. “What if we just wish that Zamuru’s health would drop to zero? That would still count as a win, right?” I asked.

I could sense Max’s growing irritation as he responded to my questions. “Gosh, kid ... I really wish you’d played those tutorials. Wishes can’t be used to affect a boss in any way, whatsoever. To put it simply, no, we can’t just drop her health to zero.”

“Well, what the fuck is the point of the wish system then? It seems like a useless pile of crap to me!”

I began to argue with Max, unknowingly distracting myself from the slight rumbling of the floor.

“Guys.... Guys!”

“Huh? W—What?”

“You’re going to want to check this out.”

Max and I glanced outside the cave, and what we saw had made me nearly soiling my pants. “We are *so* dead.”

A massive horde of what appeared to be easily over three hundred skeleton hounds was headed our way. Each of them had a pair of green eyes that glowed with hunger, and—the worst part—they were small enough to fit through the cave’s opening.

“What are those things?” Ariel asked.

My lips trembled as I struggled to utter the name. “Skeleton hounds....”

“What...? What’s a skeleton hound?”

“It was an attack introduced in the original *Dungeon Crawlers* game. Basically, Zamuru can summon a horde of skeleton hounds to do her bidding. Back then, it was thirty-five at most, but this ... this is just absurd!”

“I guess this means the cave is no good—we’ll have to find a better base, somewhere higher up,” said Max.

“Wait ... hold on. If memory serves me right,”—which it did, because I was a Zamuru geek—“then she should have a cooldown after using this attack. It can only be used once every twenty-four in-game hours. If we can fend these hounds off, then we have a chance of saving the base.”

“So what do we do, then?” Ariel asked.

“I guess we have no choice.” Max gripped his claymore with both hands and planted his feet firmly on the stone floor. “We fight.”



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LEVEL 2

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# A GLORIOUS SAVE

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V-001

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CONTINUE GAME



The sound of bones clacking against one another was enough to send fear shooting through my entire body. The hairs on my arms stood on end as goosebumps started to form. *Even in-game characters can get scared, huh?*

All the signs were telling me that it was time I got serious. There was only one reasonable thing to do: I placed a hand on both Max and Ariel's backs, then pushed them gently out of the cave. "Well, good luck out there! Come and get me when you're done."

"What are you doing?! You can't just hide in the cave, you have to come help us!" Max demanded.

I plopped my butt on the ground. "I'm a neet, I'm not cut out for this. You two are

both level fifties, you go do it!"

The two of them glanced at each other in disbelief, taken aback. "Kenny, none of us knows what will happen if we die here. If something happens, we may never be able to get back home. We need all the help we can get. I guess what I'm saying is—in a way, we need you."

The hounds were getting closer. The cartilage of their paws smacking against the hard stone ground echoed throughout the dungeon. I was genuinely scared.

"Max is right; we need your help, Kenny. So please join us." Ariel reached out her hand. Her warm smile awoke something in me—courage, maybe? I wasn't sure what it was, but there was something about a beautiful girl reaching out to me that made me feel all tingly inside.

I peered over my shoulder at the hounds. They were nearing the cave's entrance. A bead of sweat ran down my face, but no matter how close the hounds got, Ariel stood patiently waiting for me to grab her hand.

"Guys! They're getting closer! If we don't do something now, they're gonna end up killing us!" Max was starting to panic, and I didn't blame him. After all, he was the only one prepared to fight.

I was hesitant, but all it took to convince me was the warmth of Ariel's smile. With that, I grabbed hold of her hand and pulled myself up. "Let's do this." *Gosh, I'm such a pushover when it comes to pretty girls!*

The three of us darted out of the cave, where we were instantly met with a fireball from Zamuru. A dazzling eruption like a thousand fireflies struck the barrier Ariel had managed to summon at the last second. "I'll defend us against Zamuru's attacks, you two take down those skeleton hounds!"

"Roger that!" I shouted.

Fending off Zamuru was no easy task—her mobility was something else, and this was no ordinary dungeon, either. This was *The Genie's Lair*, a dungeon specifically designed to challenge players by making it nearly impossible to block all of Zamuru's attacks.

Scattered amongst the piles of golden coins were dozens of lamps that Zamuru could jump to at will, allowing her to essentially teleport between sections of the dungeon in an instant. That skill alone was what made it so hard for streamers with less than five party members to take her down.

It was because of that skill that I found it so hard for me to place my trust in Ariel. She was responsible not just for her own life, but mine and Max's as well. If she slipped up, even just once, we were all dead.

That wasn't the only thing that had me worried—although he made it seem like my class selection had been the absolute worst choice, Max's wasn't so great either. Back in the cave when we were trying to make sense of everything, he'd explained that he had chosen the Barbarian Class—a sub-option of the Fighter Class.

Barbarian Class players had a strong attack stat, a high attack speed stat, and a high stamina stat. All of which sounded great until you realized that they have zero magical attributes, and no mana level. To put it simply, he couldn't use any magic at all. His character was built for dealing heavy blows on bosses, not dealing with hordes of their minions. But that's where I came in.

While looking at my stats earlier, I'd noticed that my magical attribute was high. Given that knowledge, I had to be able to use some sort of magic. I summoned Lillian and woke her up. As per usual, I was greeted with a yawn and a sleepy look. I asked her how I could attack with magic—and how to control what attacks I used, to which she replied that I couldn't, because I was a Gambler Class.

“Attacking with magic is the easy part. Do you see that bar in the top left corner of ... of ... of your vision? That is your mana bar. As long as your ... mana levels are ... within reason ... you can ... can attack whenever you want to. Just hold one arm out in front of you ... and channel your energy to your hand. If done correctly ... you ... you will have successfully cast a spell. But ... because you’re a Gambler ... each spell will be cast at ... random.”

*So that’s what that bar is? I thought I had something in my eye.* The hounds were getting closer, almost within range. I reached out my arm and focused on forcing all of my energy into my hand. Before I could form an attack, a strong wind coming from above pushed me back slightly, breaking my concentration.

My eyes flew up at the blast. About three feet above my head was a magical barrier that had prevented one of Zamuru’s fireballs from striking me down. My stomach sank and I glanced over at Ariel. She gave me a thumbs up, then quickly went back to defending us.

I gulped. If it hadn’t been for her fast reaction, I would have died just now. I took a deep breath then held my arm out once again, only this time I could feel it. The mana was circling around the tips of my fingers, begging to be used. I channeled all of my energy into the attack, praying for something good to happen.

The hounds reached Max, who was only a few feet ahead of me. Just as they did so a dozen bright red boat buoys flew out from my hand. The buoys bounced along the dungeon’s floor, exploding in a giant watery eruption only after making contact with some of the hounds. The water blasts came together, forming a huge wave strong enough to sweep the hounds off of their feet and carry them backwards about twenty feet or so.

“That, master, was an attack ... called *Bouncing Buoys*. It’s an intermediate spell ... that temporarily knocks enemies back, putting ... distance between them and the player.”

The initial explosion had killed some of the hounds, but the water remaining on the ground did nothing to affect them afterwards. I stared at my hand in awe. Immediately following the attack, I noticed my mana bar had dropped about 30 percent. This was followed by a tiny message in the top right-hand corner of my vision.

#### [STAMINA DRAIN: 5%]

*Alright!* I still had a decent amount of mana left, so I decided to give it another go. I followed the same steps as before, only this time I forced even more energy into my attack. “Max, get out of the way!”

Max jumped to one side, expecting another massive attack, but instead he was left disappointed as he watched my body drop to the ground. “What the hell are you doing?!” he shouted.

“I don’t know!” I turned to Lillian. “What just happened?”

“That, Master ... is a special skill called ... *Player Stamina Drain*. It is useful in PVP ... and can be used to drain your ... opponent’s stamina. It appears that the spell ... has backfired and directed ... itself at you, instead.”

“Are you fucking serious?!” I sent Lillian away and shouted to Max what had just happened. He facepalmed and then motioned at me to hide behind a nearby pile of golden coins until he could get to me.

“What about you?” I asked.

He shouted back, “I’ll be alright! Just find cover!” The hounds were inches away from Max. He swung his claymore around his body, letting go of it when he reached a full rotation. The weapon was sent wheeling through the hounds, bashing them into piles of bones on impact.

His attack was impressive, but it left me confused. Just as I thought he'd tossed away his only weapon, his claymore changed direction midair, and started flying back to him. He reached out his hands, and just at the right moment he caught his claymore by the hilt before it could fly past him.

My jaw dropped. He'd just easily taken out about two dozen of the hounds with a single toss. I didn't know what kind of claymore he was wielding, but it clearly made up for his lack of magic. It essentially provided him with the splash damage effect that he was missing out on as a Barbarian Class player.

"Pick up your jaw and get to cover!" he shouted.

*Oh, right!* I'd gotten so lost in awe at his attack that I'd forgotten about the danger all around me. I was so wiped of stamina that I could barely crawl. "What kind of magical attack is this? Who would ever use this skill?!"

One of Zamuru's fireballs slipped past Ariel and exploded in a pile of coins nearby. The coins smacked me in the face as I struggled to find safer cover. Ariel glanced at me and apologized for her slip-up. As scared as I was, I wasn't mad at her. Fending off Zamuru took skill, and she was holding up quite well.

Zamuru jumped between lamps, firing off barrages of fireballs as she did so. She was moving so fast that I was shocked that Ariel had been holding her off for as long as she had.

My character's muscles were aching—a pain that felt very real. I huffed and puffed as I positioned myself sitting upright against a huge pile of coins. I focused on my breathing as much as possible. I figured that maybe if I could control it, I'd be able to build up my stamina faster.

Zamuru's laughter as she jumped between the lamps caressed my ears, filling them with all her seductive glory. "If I weren't so worried about dying, I'd be basking in her laughter right about now," I said to myself.

Max made his way over to me a few moments after that. Although I couldn't see his fairy, I could tell that he was talking to her and shuffling through the player menus. After a few taps on his pop-ups, three tiny fruits appeared in his hand. "What's that?"

"They're called Govayan berries." He handed them to me. "Eating them will restore ten percent of your stamina."

I snatched the fruits from him and started munching away. Instantly, I felt my stamina coming back to me. It felt as if new life had blossomed within my soul. "Where did you get them?" I asked, as the delicious berry juice spilled from my mouth.

"It's a relatively cheap item that can be purchased in the item shop,"—he paused mid sentence and swung his claymore, tossing it over the pile of coins and at the hounds charging us—"and it costs twenty-five coins for a bundle of three."

I immediately sank my hands into the pile of coins I was resting on and started stuffing them into my pockets. If the fruit cost coins, then I had plenty.

"What are you doing?" Max asked me.

"What's it look like? I'm stuffing my pockets with coins so I can buy more of those magical fruits! Then maybe I'll be able to achieve something!"

"That's not how it works—!" He lifted his hand and caught his returning claymore, only to toss it back into the horde of hounds once more, all the while not taking his eyes off me. "Your fairy didn't explain any of this to you?" he shouted.

"No, she's useless," I groaned. I summoned her again. "She is literally half asleep right now!"

"Hey! You made me ... like this, master! Take some ... re responsibility...."

Another fireball slipped past Ariel. This time, it missed Max and me by inches. The

heat from it sucked all the air from my lungs. I was left with a dry throat and a wicked cough. Max and I both looked at each other with fear in our eyes. We'd both almost died just then.

"The only way to earn coins is by killing enemies. You blew some up before, right? So you should have earned a few."

I frantically shuffled through the player menus until I found the item shop. At the bottom of the screen was a section displaying the amount of coins I'd collected. At the moment, I only had fifteen. It was clear that if I wanted to survive, I was going to need to get more.

I clenched my hands around my sword and took a deep breath. I was trying to calm myself down and build up my courage. A rough breeze brushed my neck as Max's claymore flew back into his hand. I opened my eyes, and turned to him. He could sense the determination I had within.

"You ready?"

"Not really, but let's do this thing anyway."

The two of us ran out from behind the heaps of coins and charged the hounds. I rushed at them with fear welling up within me. The closer I got to them, the more menacing they looked. With every swing of my sword I thought about Ariel, and how hard she was fighting to protect us. I had to win, no matter what. Her struggle would not be in vain!

I pushed through my fear and chopped away at the hounds' sturdy bones. Although my character's class had halved the sword's effects and doubled its requirements, it was holding up quite well, almost on a par with Max's claymore.

Once again the shockwave from a nearby explosion deflected by Ariel's barrier threw me ever so slightly off balance, but I managed to swiftly regain my footing. I figured that using any form of magic would be fruitless right now. The last thing I wanted was to risk being hit with another self-sabotaging attack. Plus, my stamina drain was still at five percent for every attack. Using another spell would reset the drain to another random percentage, and that was a risk I wasn't willing to take.

I fought my way through the horde of hounds, collecting coins and occasionally stopping to admire Zamuru in all her purple glory. The delightful smell left by her magical trail as she teleported between the lamps nearby was like fuel for my engine.

Distracted by the sight, I didn't notice that one of the skeleton hounds had jumped over the rest and lunged at me. I lifted up my sword just in time. The hound latched its jaws around my sword, gnawing at it, trying to get to me. I fell onto my back and kicked at its body with my feet.

Gloopy green saliva rolled off of its slavering jaws and dripped onto my face. The slimy drool rolled down the side of my cheek and into my mouth. I started to spit like a lunatic, trying to force it out. *It's in my mouth! Blah! It's in my mouth!*

It took everything I had to shove the damned hound off of me. But it quickly got back up and lunged at me again. This time I was prepared for it, and chopped its body in two. I wiped the green drool off of my mouth, and spat the rest out on the floor. "How can a creature with no saliva glands even drool? It's just bone!"

My irritation was quickly overshadowed by joy. At the bottom of my vision was a small pop up that changed my mood entirely.

### [Player Level Increased. You are now Level 4!]

I wasted no time summoning Lillian. The moment she appeared I shot over to my stats menu and dumped two points into luck and two points into my mana levels. With that, I was ready to fight again.

### [Ariel's Point of View]



My Archon Class was practically all that was saving our lives. If it weren't for my high mana stat, I wouldn't have been able to protect my teammates from Zamuru's fireballs for as long as I had. That said, with every barrier I put up I lost two percent of my own mana level.

Archon Class mages have a special skill known as *Sweeper*. It is a mobility skill that allows us to jump high and far without draining stamina or taking any damage. I was using it to keep up with Zamuru's insane mobility.

I'd refrained from using social media the week prior to *Dungeon Crawlers 3*'s launch as a way to avoid seeing spoilers about the bosses, or any of the other mobs I might encounter. Until now it had made the gameplay better for me, as I enjoyed the challenge of figuring things out on my own. But that was then, and the me *now*—the one who is currently stuck in the game—wishes she'd watched the streams like Kenny had done. If I'd done so, then maybe I would have picked up on something useful that we could use to defeat Zamuru. *No point in wishing I'd done the opposite now, I guess.*

Maniacal laughter echoed through the dungeon as Zamuru blasted six fireballs directly at Max and Kenny. I glanced at the boys and summoned a barrier as fast as the game would allow, and just in the nick of time too. By the time I'd looked back up, Zamuru had already teleported from her previous lamp to another one right across the dungeon.

She was charging for another attack. Keeping up with her was nearly impossible. If it hadn't been for my fast attack speed stat, both Max and Kenny would have surely been reduced to ash by now.

Sweat was dripping from my pores as I worked my character to the bone. My mana level had been reduced to a dangerous degree, and my stamina was nearly depleted. Between defending against Zamuru's attacks and watching her every move, I found myself struggling to navigate to the item shop so I could purchase more Govayan berries.

I needed to buy myself some time, otherwise I'd have no way of purchasing the berries. I glanced over at Kenny and Max. They were both struggling like me, but they were fighting with all they had. I watched as Max tossed his claymore through the horde of hounds. It was slight, but upon watching their comrades die, I saw that the remaining hounds would take a brief moment before attacking again—and that's when it hit me: "Mob delay!"

I watched the hounds more, and noticed that they all had a slight delay before attacking. If what I was seeing was accurate, then that meant Zamuru might have a delay too! Currently she was in an attack phase, but if I could manage to interrupt it, then I could possibly buy myself some time to access the item shop before her next attack. I was betting everything I had on this being the right course of action.

I watched Zamuru teleport between lamps and used that information to predict which lamps she had the highest odds of teleporting to. I gathered the rest of my mana and powered it into my staff, and released a fireball at the space above each of the lamps.

I had no way of telling if my assumptions had been correct, but it appeared that luck was on my side. One of the fireballs had hit the ceiling above the lamp where Zamuru had teleported. The rocky structure lining the top of the dungeon began to crumble. Interrupting her laughter and renewed attack was a jagged boulder that struck Zamuru's cheek, scraping her skin and drawing blood.

The moment she paused in shock, I summoned my shoulder fairy and quickly made my way to the item shop. I was slightly distracted by what sounded like the cries of a grown man in the distance, but I regained my focus and spam-purchased thirty berries.

Since I'd used the last of my mana and stamina on the fireball attack, I was hardly able to move. I was flying towards the ground, but managed to quickly devour some of the berries. My stamina was replenished just enough to where I was able to prevent myself from experiencing a crash landing.

The moment my feet hit the ground, my eyes flicked upwards, and I prepared to defend against another one of Zamuru's attacks ... but it was too late. During my fall she had launched a fireball directly at me. It was only a few feet from my face, close enough to where I wouldn't be able to summon a barrier in time, and just far enough away that I was forced to realize that I was going to die.

All movement slowed as I took my final breath. My heart was beating faster than I'd ever experienced before, in my entire lifetime on earth. I was frozen with fear, unable to escape and raging with panic. My stomach sank as the fireball came within reach.

Just before the point of certain death, a car-sized blade crossed between my face and the fireball, deflecting it and saving my life.



#### **[Kenny's Point of View] A few moments earlier....**

A large boulder struck Zamuru's face, tearing apart her skin and my heart alike. I screamed in agony at the sight. Zamuru's attacks were delayed ever so slightly. Ariel must have attacked her on purpose to buy some time—*she must be out of stamina*.

I called out to Max and redirected his attention from the hounds to Zamuru. Ariel was still falling to the ground, and by the time she'd landed Zamuru had recovered from her attack delay.

Zamuru's eyes narrowed in anger. The gold and jewels hanging from her breasts and down her body swayed elegantly as she charged up a massive fireball—about six times the size of an ordinary one—and launched it directly at Ariel.

Ariel was frozen with fear, and we both knew it. Max tossed his claymore inches in front of her face, deflecting the fireball's blast at the very last moment, and saving her life. The problem was that Max's claymore was now headed directly at me.

I didn't know if friendly fire was disabled or not, but I wasn't about to risk finding out, so I did what any reasonable person would have done: I ducked down and grabbed a hold of the hard metal handle. Not my best idea, it turned out.

I was lifted off of the ground and hurled across the dungeon. The claymore was going to return to Max whether I liked it or not. I grew nauseous as I was spun all around the dungeon, but I managed to somehow hold back my vomit.

As the weapon flew back to Max, I quickly summoned Lillian, returned my sword to my item box, then reached out my hand and snatched Ariel by the collar of her blouse—just in time to save her from being struck down by a second fireball.

Doing so lifted her shirt ever so slightly, allowing me a peek at her underboob, where I saw a tiny heart-outline tattoo. *The character customizations in this game are great!*

Ariel and I both screamed our hearts out as we hurtled into Max. The three of us hit the ground hard and rolled backwards, landing in a pile of gold coins and other sundry treasures. As my luck would have it a few coins flew into my mouth, and I started to choke on them.

I burst free from the depths of the coin pile alongside Max and Ariel, spitting out

gold. The three of us were instantly drawn to a ruby encrusted lamp as we emerged. I reached for it and dusted it off.

The lamp started rattling in my hands. A few moments later, out of the nozzle, front and center, emerged the love of my life, Zamuru—brimming with anger and ready to kill.

Max nudged my shoulder. “Look what you did . . . you just had to dust off that lamp, didn’t you . . . ?”



LEVEL 3

# FRIENDS

V-001

CONTINUE GAME



“What do we *do*!?” Ariel screamed.

My state of panic matched hers. “I don’t know!”

“Get rid of the lamp!”

I called upon Lillian and opened my item box. There were only two things in my inventory: The Walker sword, and nine Govayan berries. I spam clicked the sword until it had finally summoned.

I dug my way out of the coin pile and threw the lamp on the ground. Zamuru was charging up for an attack. I only had a few seconds to do something before all three of us ended up dead.

Without a single thought, I snatched the sword floating before me and smashed the

blade down into the lamp as hard as I could. It didn't shatter as I'd hoped it would, but I noticed a fine hairline crack had appeared after I'd hit it with my sword.

The moment after I hit it, we all prepared for the worst. I squinted my eyes, and hid my face behind my sword. Just when I thought that my life was over, nothing actually happened. *Huh...?*

I opened one eye, and to my surprise, Zamuru was frozen. "What the...?"

"T—T—The sword! Y—Your sword! It must have immobilized her!" Max said, pointing at me as a wave of relief washed over him.

*He's right ... It must be the sword's special skill.* "The sword immobilizes the enemy for twenty-five seconds ... but with my Gambler Class, that's halved." I glanced up at Ariel. "How long has it been?"

"About eight seconds...." At that moment, it clicked for all three of us. We only had four and a half seconds left before Zamuru would be able to move again. "Run...!"

We made a rapid dash for the cave. There were only a few skeleton hounds left, so we figured that if we could take them out on our way, we'd be able to rest for a few moments.

Apparently the sword's skill coming into play had acted as a magical attack. In other words my stamina drain had been reset to a random percentage, and it was draining like crazy.

I opened the item shop mid run and purchased as many Govayan berries as I could get my hands on. I sank my teeth into each one, gnawing away at them with the hopes of making it to the cave alive.

Both Ariel and Max were great players—they knew exactly how to communicate with one another without saying a word. Almost instinctively, Max led the way, tossing his claymore and taking out the hounds blocking us, while Ariel provided us with more defense via her barriers. I felt a bit out of place. After all, the only reason I'd bought this game was because Manticore had brought back Zamuru. I wasn't so much into the game as I was into *her*.

Watching these two was inspiring. During my hasty berry-eating rush to the cave, I decided that it was time I actually got serious. If I wanted to be on par with their skills, I'd have to embrace my Gambler Class and keep leveling up.

We'd made it a decent distance before Zamuru resumed mobility. As she'd done before, she began to launch fireballs at us. There were only two skeleton hounds left in the dungeon, both of which were now blocking the cave's entrance.

Max's claymore was currently circling the dungeon as he'd thrown it a few seconds ago to take out another, larger group of hounds. With Ariel focused on saving our asses, there was nobody left to take out these hounds but me.

I picked up my pace, running as fast as my legs would take me, all the while shoving berries into my mouth. I embraced my shitty luck and forced every last drop of mana I had into the tips of my fingers, and cast a spell.

In an instant, the three of us were encased in a sticky pink translucent bubble. And seeing as we were inside of a bubble, Ariel was unable to put up any protective barriers. The bubble acted as a guard for her magic, preventing it from reaching the outside.

One of Zamuru's stray fireballs landed behind us, exploding on the ground and sending us flying toward the skeleton hounds. We crashed through them. Their bones shattered on impact, pieces flying in every direction. Through all the madness, the bubble itself exploded, leaving the three of us covered in sticky goop.

"Is this ... bubble gum?" *What kind of spells are in this game?!*

"Who cares, we gotta move!"

Max was right; the three of us were still out in the open. Just because the hounds had been defeated, didn't mean that we were safe. The pressure was still on us.

Zamuru had started hopping between the lamps faster than I could follow her. Both Max and I had taken on a defensive position to aid Ariel. Thankfully, using the bubble attack had decreased my stamina drain to ten percent—just enough to keep going without the need to stuff my face full of berries.

We stood with our backs to one another and our weapons held high. Fireballs by the dozens came flying at us; Max's claymore was large enough to deflect them, and my sword was sharp enough to cut through them.

Ariel used an array of water-based spells and barriers to counter the attacks. Zamuru zipped around the room, firing volleys at us every time she changed lamps. I was starstruck—I couldn't believe that the game devs would go so far as to give such an unbeatable skill to any boss in their game. Now I understood the ratings, because every gamer and their mothers were most likely enjoying the challenge. There hadn't been a game with a boss this impossibly hard to beat released in ages.

I slashed at each oncoming attack with all my might, not having much time to prepare myself between swings. Zamuru's attacks were coming in so fast that my arms didn't have a second to rest. Sweat and tears ran down my face as a mighty scream erupted from my lungs.

Level four or not, I wasn't about to give up and die. Not here, not like this! I was going to fend off all of her attacks, and I was going to make it out of here alive. "Yahhhh!"

The three of us screamed together as we pooled our strength into a mutual defense. Zamuru might be amazingly strong—and very attractive—but she was still just an in-game mob. And all in-game mobs, especially bosses, have cooldowns between their attacks. We just had to hold her off until then.

Although my stamina drain wasn't the worst, I was still losing stamina like crazy from all the attacks I was deflecting. I prayed and prayed, and then prayed some more that her cooldown would happen soon ... and then finally it did.

Zamuru's rapid teleportation and fireball attacks came to a halt. We wasted no time and rushed again toward the cave. I glanced up, past Zamuru's glorious twin purple mountains and into her eyes. That's when I saw it—the swirl of power inside of them.

I'd seen that same swirl somewhere before. I squinted and tried my best to think back—I searched through my memories, recalling every single stream I'd ever watched. My eyes burst open as realization struck. If I was correct, Zamuru was casting a spell of her own, one that had been introduced in the original *Dungeon Crawlers*. A spell so strong it had the power to collapse the entire dungeon. *An attack like that, this early on in the deathmatch?!*

I tried to call out to Max and Ariel, to warn them of our peril ... but it was too late. Zamuru had launched a powerful ball of pure-white energy directly at us. The floor began to crumble, and I was tossed high into the air.

My body was sent flying into the cave, where I slammed into the back wall with tremendous force. Blood shot from my mouth on impact, and all the wind was knocked out of me. *Curse this game's blood graphics!*

The feeling of pain was far too realistic. I was lying on the ground with tears pouring from my eyes as I struggled to remain conscious. I couldn't move a single limb and my vision had hazed. *Are all my bones ... broken?*

I started to hyperventilate; I was panicking like crazy. Thoughts of death raced through my mind, followed by vivid memories. I saw myself working at the pizzeria for those two weeks. I also saw my school career, and the memories I'd made with my

friends in the Anime Club.

I summoned Lillian. Her yawn quickly faded away and her usual tired mood had turned to worry. She reached out for me as my vision darkened. “Master...! Master!”

Her voice grew silent as more blood poured from my mouth. She’d said that she had knowledge of the game. If that were true, then she should be able to answer my question. I struggled to speak, the words barely leaving my lips. “Am ... am I ... going to ... die?”

Her lips were moving in answer, but it was already too late; I could no longer hear what she was saying. Just as my eyes were closing, and I found myself sagging into death’s dark grip, a figure walked into view.



It was dark, and I found myself unwittingly licking my lips. *Huh? Have I ... been sleeping?* I scraped at the crust on my eyelids and peeled them open. I felt like I’d been unconscious for ages. My vision was blurry—nothing a few rubs to the eyes couldn’t fix.

I sat up slowly and started to blink. I heard a fire crackling in the background as I did so. I glanced down at my half-naked body as a giant yawn escaped my lips.

I noticed that my chest was wrapped in blood-stained bandages, and that I was bruised all over. *Did I get into a fight at school or something? What is all of this—?*

The memories of being sucked into the game hit me with full force. I jumped up out of my futon—which I had no memory of getting into—and stumbled through the cave, calling out for Max and Ariel.

*What happened to them? D—Did they die? Are they okay? I—I gotta find them—!*

The second I made it around the rock wall my panic eased and my mind was put at rest. Max and Ariel were both huddled by a small fire they’d made in the cave. Their look of shock as I walked up to them was sharp and clear.

“Kenny.... You’re awake!” Max exclaimed.

I stumbled to the ground and sat beside them. Hanging over the fire appeared to be some sort of meat dish, one that smelled delicious. “W—What happened to me?”

Ariel shuffled her body closer and seized my hands in hers. Then, hesitantly, she glanced up into my eyes. “Kenny ... you ... you died.”

It took me a moment to process what she’d just said. I blinked a few times, all the while staring at her in confusion. I laughed nervously while brushing her off. “Pfft! That can’t be.... I’m here. See?” I lifted my arms and showed them my healed body, indicating that I was still clearly very much alive.

Max sighed, then told me the news. “Kenny ... Ariel used her wish to save your life —”

“What?!?”

“She asked her shoulder fairy for a revive potion, and I used my wish to get you that futon to rest in and this campfire to keep us warm. It gets cold in this cave, I didn’t want you to freeze.”

I was taken aback by what Max had said. “You both used up your wishes...? For me?”

“Yeah—”

I lunged onto Max. I snatched at his collar and shook him back and forth as hard as I could. “Why would you do something so stupid?! Huh?!?”

“Get off of him!” Ariel wrapped her arms under mine and pulled me off of Max.

“You both had one wish ... *one wish!* And you wasted it on me?! But why? I don’t get it! You could have used those to help get you out of here—!”

“Because, Kenny,”—tears were running down Ariel’s face—“because we couldn’t just let you die....” She took off into a deeper part of the cave, crying bitterly. Max looked at me in sheer disappointment, then left to go comfort her.

The thought of my death had scared me so much that I just couldn’t fathom using my only wish to save another person’s life. I was disappointed in myself ... and in my own behavior. These two had used their most valuable possessions to save my life, and I’d thanked them by yelling at them. I sat staring at the fire. *I’m such an asshole....*

I got up and put my clothes back on, which Ariel had folded neatly next to my futon. I sighed just looking at it, realizing what a piece of scum I truly was. *While all I ever saw when I looked at her were her boobs, she saw someone worth saving.*

There was a water bucket next to my futon that I used to wash my face. I rested my face in my palms and sighed again. I knew I had to make things right. How I was going to do that, though, was beyond me. “Well I guess it doesn’t hurt to start with an apology.”

I nervously stumbled my way over to where Ariel was crouched. Max had managed to comfort her to the point where she’d stopped crying. Once he saw me, he got up and went to a different area of the cave.

Ariel’s eyes were locked on the ground, which made it hard to approach her. But I was already here, so there was no going back. I sat down beside her, close enough so that I knew she could feel my presence.

I struggled to find the proper words for what I needed to say, but I managed to get something out. “I guess it didn’t occur to me—the feelings that you and Max were experiencing. Ever since I got here, I’ve done nothing but freak out ... and had nothing but bad luck.”

She giggled at that last part, and wiped her face dry.

“I’m sure you two have been feeling the same way—being thrown into a video game with complete strangers isn’t exactly as fun as it sounds. I never once stopped to consider how you felt.... What I’m trying to say is ... I’m scum.”

She laughed again, this time a little louder, followed by a small smile.

“I’m the type of person who wouldn’t have hesitated to save my wish if it meant saving my own life, so when Max told me that you used your wish for me ... I don’t know. I—I got angry, *for* you. I guess I just assumed that everybody thought the same way.” I glanced at Ariel for a brief moment. “I’m sorry.”

A strange feeling came over me as I spoke. I felt as if I owed my life to Ariel and Max—no, it was more than that. I felt that ... that I’d finally found people who were worth giving my life for. Nobody in the real world—including the few friends that I had—had made me feel this way.

“Can we please go back to being friends?” I asked her.

She sniffled, then laughed. “...Yeah, sure—”

“Guys! Guys, get over here, now!”

Ariel and I frantically rushed to where Max was standing. “What is it?” I asked, worried.

“Look!” He was pointing to a golden lamp sitting in the middle of the room. Hovering above the lamp was a pop-up screen with a button on it.

### [Start Minigame]

“Minigame? I haven’t heard anything about the final battle having minigames in it.”

“Wait a second ... I read an article about this. There is an upcoming DLC that’s supposed to introduce minigames into boss fights. It’s not supposed to be out for another month or so, but maybe ... I don’t know, maybe it got released early?” I suggested.

“It might be worth it. We could get some decent loot,” said Ariel.

“I did hear that minigames are a good way for players to gain rare power-ups or skills that can’t be purchased in the item shop,” I added.

“Do you think we should try it?” Ariel asked. “There’s three of us, and if we can get something valuable out of it, then maybe it’ll be worth it.”

Max brushed her off. “Listen, I don’t know about you guys, but my hands are totally full dealing with Zamuru. I’m gonna get rid of this thing.”

Max reached for the lamp. I tried to stop him, but his hands had already touched it. “No, wait! Don’t touch it—!”

A puff of smoke clouded my vision. When it faded, I found myself no longer in the cave, but in a labyrinth instead. And to make matters worse … I was alone.

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LEVEL 4

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# INSIDE THE LAMP-ARIEL

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V-001

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CONTINUE GAME



Fear consumed me before I had been given the chance to open my eyes. Water flooded my lungs as the cold abyss tried stripping me of my very life. I began to hyperventilate—but it only caused me to take in more water.

There was water in every direction. I had no idea what was happening to me, but what I did know was that if I didn't do something, I was going to die. I was struggling to determine up from down and left from right. I grew dizzy as the water rocked me along.

There was very little light, wherever I was. In fact, it was so dark that the furthest I could see was to my elbows and the middle of my torso. My legs and even my hands were out of sight. The one thing I was able to recognize was the stiff rod grazing my fingertips—it was my staff.

I tightened my grip and flooded my mana into the staff. The orb at the tip began to glow, illuminating the empty space around me. There was nothing around me, not a single thing that could help me determine where I was or how to get out of here.

My lungs had started to ache and my chest had tensed up. I'd run out of oxygen, and my body was facing the consequences. I needed to do something soon, or this would be it for me.

I tried to calm myself down by closing my eyes for a brief moment. The light from my staff was so bright that it pierced through my eyelids, making it hard to focus. That's when it hit me.

I let go of my staff. It slowly began to sink, falling down along my body, past my feet and deeper into the abyss—or so it appeared. But the staff was buoyant. It wasn't sinking, it was actually rising!

I quickly flipped my body toward what I now knew was up, and frantically pulled with my arms, swimming as fast as I could to the surface ... if there was one. The more I swam upwards, the more I could see. It felt like an eternity had passed before I saw it—the surface!

There was a clutch of wooden objects floating along the water's edge. *If I can just reach one of those objects, I could pull myself up and get out of here!*

A glimmer of hope ran through me as I pushed forward, pulling myself up with every ounce of energy I had left. My lungs were full of water and my consciousness was fading. The feeling was like something I'd never felt before. My entire body was cold, yet my insides were burning.

I yearned for just one mouthful of fresh air. So much so that through all the pain and struggling I was able to breach the surface, where I grabbed hold of a wooden raft floating there and pulled myself free.

The moment I did so, water came forth, spilling out of my mouth as I gasped for air. It was as if a dam had been breached. I latched my hand onto my stomach; my abdomen was screaming with pain. The salty water was doing my lips no justice. They were left crusted, cracked, and begging for a sip of fresh water.

Although I was grateful to be alive, being aboard this makeshift platform was no safe harbor. Wherever I was, I was in the midst of a raging storm. Raindrops as strong as hailstones fell from the sky, beating me down as they did so. I brushed my sopping wet hair out of my face and tossed it over my head. In doing this, I realized that my hat was missing.

The sound of thunder boomed in the distance. I glanced up at the sky, but there was nothing to be seen: no clouds, no stars, no moon ... no nothing. *Where am I?*

A bright light floating in the distance caught my attention—it was my staff. I lay prone on the splintered raft and paddled my way over to it. I scooped it out of the water and managed to regain my balance.

As this was going on, a loud, indescribable noise came roaring up from under the water. Only then did a pop-up screen appear, displaying a horrifying message.

**[Minigame: The Lost Serpent. Objective: Defeat the Serpent. Reward: 1 Special Item. You may begin!]**

The pop-up closed as quickly as it had appeared, leaving me standing balanced on my platform, frozen with fear. My jaw slacked as the feeling of impending death consumed me. I had no idea where Max and Kenny were, and I was alone ... and now, I had to take down a serpent!

"This ... this is just a bad dream ... right?" I found myself asking aloud as if I were going crazy, and a small titter left my lips as I glanced up.

Off in the distance, about three miles out, the waves began to break—and what emerged from those waves was the devil himself.

Rising miles high above the water's surface was a massive sea serpent. Its body was covered in sharp blue scales, and its back was lined with jagged orange spikes. The teeth emerging from its mouth were like no others I'd ever seen, second in length only to the pair of curving horns extruding from the back of its head.



The force of its breath alone was enough to blow gales away from its face. The beast stared at me with malice in its eyes, and the worst part of it all was that I'd found my hat. It was stuck in all its glory on a small spike atop the serpent's head, where it mocked

my despair.

My arms slackened as I fell to my knees. I'd nearly dropped my staff when I felt a pair of tiny hands alongside my own. I was too scared to take my eyes off the serpent, but I recognized the voice beside me. It was Ruby, my shoulder fairy.

I hadn't summoned her, but my near death experience must have caused her to self-summon. My eyes flinched as I slowly glanced down at her. Her name suited her perfectly: her ruby-red hair shone brightly. It was an enchanting color, enough to soothe my worries and calm me down just a little.

I'd been very fortunate in being granted her. She was very supportive, but also analytical. Whenever I needed to evaluate something in-game, I called upon her, and now was no different.

This serpent was just an in-game mini-boss. I needed to remind myself that I'd taken down dozens of these by myself without dying prior to being transported into the game. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, and then asked Ruby to analyze the situation.

"The minigame currently in play is a *Zone Rush* game...."

In a *Zone Rush*, the player only has ten minutes to complete the given task. If the challenge is not completed within that timespan, the game is over and the player loses.

"...Would you like me to display the remaining time on your HUD?"

"Yes. Please do."

A timer appeared in the top right portion of my view. There were nine minutes and thirty-three seconds left in the match. If I wanted to take down that serpent in time, I was going to need more information.

"Ruby, analyze its stats."

"Sure thing. Here is a display of the Serpent's current stats."

**[Lost Serpent:**

**Level: 35**

**Health: 5,000 pts**

**Attack: Very High**

**Defense: Average**

**Attack Speed: Slow**

**Movement Speed: High**

**Can use Magic: No]**

The first thing I took note of was its health. Five thousand points was one tenth of what Zamuru boasted. That was cause enough for a sigh of relief.

The next thing I took note of was the lack of attack speed. Given that I was fighting against a serpent—in water, nonetheless—I would have assumed its attack speed would be much higher, but thankfully the game devs had given the player a little more wiggle room.

All that said, its attack damage was still very high. One hit from that thing could cost me my life, and I'd used my one wish on Kenny, and since I was alone there was no-one to save me if things went south. I was going to have to be strategic and play all my cards.

The serpent wasted no time diving into the rocky ocean. I stared out into the water, trying to pick up any sign of its presence. It was no use; the rain and waves made it impossible to detect the beast. If I was going to beat the serpent, I was going to have to think like one. *If I was the serpent in this situation, what would I do?*

I pondered for a few seconds, until I felt an unusual sway in the planks beneath my feet. Without a second thought, I pointed my staff down at the boards and blasted a fireball into them. The force was enough to send me flying into the sky.

Just as my feet had left the planks, the serpent emerged from the water. Its jaws

engulfed the platform, swallowing it whole. It launched itself at me, using its long body as leverage to reach my height. I blasted a second fireball down its open mouth, striking it square on the tongue.

The blast did little to no damage, but that hadn't been my goal. I'd used the force of the blast a second time to launch myself even higher, to where I was just barely escaping the serpent's reach.

The creature clamped its jaws shut. My feet were mere inches away from being taken off. I knew this was just a game, but even so I was still scared. The same fear that had consumed me back when Zamuru had almost killed me began to course through me once again. Only this time it was different.

I recalled the feeling of courage and bravery radiating off of Kenny and Max back when they'd saved me. A feeling that I knew I needed if I wanted to win this by myself.

I lifted my staff high above my head and began to chant a spell. Not all spells require chanting, but the more powerful ones do. "Goddess Athena, grant me your power, and aid me in my task of annihilating this unholy beast!"

A powerful surge of energy burst forth from my staff towards the serpent. However, the beast's swift movement and fast reflexes allowed it to dodge the attack almost entirely, though I did manage to graze the creature.

I'd stricken it in the left eye before it could bob out of the way. The serpent let out a cry of anger and pain as it dove back into the water.

I glanced at my mana and stamina bars. My attack spell had used up a quarter of my mana, and about half of my stamina. As I plummeted down towards the water I summoned Ruby and asked her to display the serpent's stats once more.

Its health had dropped from five thousand points to four thousand. Hitting it with the same attack four more times would be the best way to defeat it quickly, but that just wasn't an option. I didn't have the stamina or mana levels to do so.

I navigated to my item box and sifted through my items. I was looking for one item in particular—a Golden Raspberry.

A Golden Raspberry is a special item that can only be obtained in minigames such as this one. This item allows the player to take no fall damage for the entirety of a match. I only had one, and as I soared towards the water—an object that most definitely did not prevent fall damage—I felt there was no better time to use it.

The item appeared in my hand moments before I hit the water. I didn't bother chewing it; I had no time. Instead, I swallowed the berry whole and hoped for the best.

A golden aura surrounded me as I hit the water. The feeling of the bones in my body remaining intact was nothing short of a blessing.

I must have been submerged below the surface at least fifty feet deep. The water was still just as cold and dark as it was when I first got here, but the feeling of not knowing when the serpent would attack made it all the more murky.

I didn't move. Instead I remained still, trying my best not to make any disturbance under the water that the serpent could detect. I siphoned just enough mana into my staff to where I could see about three feet ahead of me.

I pivoted my head slowly as I looked for the creature, squinting my eyes as I did so. It wasn't until I had made a full rotation that I saw the beast. There it was—only an arm's length away from me.

We were face to face, and the serpent remained as still as driftwood ... and so did I. The shock of its appearance had caused me to choke violently. A tiny bubble escaped my mouth and rose toward the surface, and all the while both the serpent and I remained staring at one another.

At first I was terrified, but as nothing happened, after a few moments I came to realize what was going on. The serpent's eyes were on the side of its head, and for an apex predator, that was very strange.

My last attack had taken out its left eye, and only the right one remained. That being the case, it dawned on me that the serpent may not be able to see me in my current position.

As carefully as I could while still holding my breath, I swam over to the side with the missing eye. Now that I was so close, I was able to see every tiny bit of detail on the creature. The scales along its body were sharp and jagged, yes, but they were also scarred and damaged.

I swam above its head and snatched up my hat. I had started to run out of oxygen again, so I did what I had to. I pointed my staff downward at the creature, and blasted it again with a spell—only this time, I'd imbued the fireball with poison, to leave a bleeding effect.

The blast startled the creature and flung me toward the surface. The second I breached the water, I took in a huge gasp of air. The creature followed behind me into the air once more, but that was no use. I blasted it again with the same type of attack. The bleed effect was working wonders as I watched its health rapidly draining.

Just when this had started to look easy, I was quickly proven wrong. The moment I landed back in the water, I grabbed a hold of the raft floating by and used it to balance myself. While that was happening, the serpent began to swiftly circle me.

The fast movement of the serpent caused the ocean around me to swirl. A massive whirlpool formed at the center of the serpent's gyre—a whirlpool where I was now trapped.

The rainwater smacked hard into my face as I was forcibly sucked into the center of the whirlpool. I had to act fast; time was ticking, and the match was almost over.

I took one last look at the serpent's health and my own stats. It was at two thousand health with a slow bleed effect, and my stamina and mana levels had been halved.

Two more hits was all that I needed. I called upon the Goddess Athena and struck the serpent once again, disrupting its circular swimming.

The blast forced a roar of agony from the serpent's mouth ... and angered it as well. The serpent dove under the water's surface, deep into the ocean.

The attack had caused my movements to slow. Before I could react, the serpent emerged from the water, mouth wide open, surrounding my body. I tried to blast myself out of its mouth like I'd done before, but I failed in the second attempt.

The serpent's jaws snapped shut, and before I knew it I was being swallowed. Deep within the serpent's stomach was a pit of acid that I knew I was hurtling towards—a pit of acid that was sure to kill me.

*Please ... not like this.* I found myself wondering how Max and Kenny were doing amidst all of this. I forced all of my remaining mana into my staff, and blasted the inside of the serpent's stomach. The blast caused an instant reaction upon hitting the acid. The serpent's body was blown into pieces from the inside out and once again I was sent flying—only this time, it was through the depths of the ocean.

The match timer was ten seconds away from timing out. Water blasted into my eyes as I struggled to watch the serpent's health bar.

[1,879 pts/5,000 pts]

[7 Seconds Remaining....]

[1,375 pts/5,000 pts]

[4 Seconds Remaining....]

**[694 pts/5,000 pts]**

**[2 Seconds Remaining....]**

I couldn't watch any longer; the anxiety was killing me. I shut my eyes and hoped for the best.

Seemingly out of nowhere the water had vanished and my body was dry. *Am I dead?* I hesitantly opened my eyes, only to find myself in a tiny room with a treasure chest in the center of it.

I dropped to my knees and covered my mouth with both my hands. Tears welled up and out of my eyes as I read the minigame completion message above the chest.

*I... I did it.* I couldn't believe it. Excitement swelled within me until I could no longer contain the feeling inside. "I did it!" I screamed, tossing both hands in the air.

Ruby had once again self-summoned herself to applaud me. "Congratulations Ariel! You beat the minigame. What are you waiting for, silly? Go collect your reward!"

Ruby's smile was pure gold, and the tears of joy rolling down her face made me feel all the more accomplished.

I approached the chest. A small golden key appeared from thin air as I did so. I reached out and grabbed it, then slipped it into the lock and opened the chest.

I reached into the blinding light seeping free from the chest and grabbed a hold of the item inside—an item that was sure to change the tide of the game.

**[You will be returned to the main battle in T-5 seconds.]**



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LEVEL 5

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# INSIDE THE LAMP-MAX

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V-001

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CONTINUE GAME



“Nothing bad is going to happen from me... touching the ... lamp.... Uhh ... guys?”

In the blink of an eye, the eerie cave walls had vanished, leaving a large square room in its place. A room that I found myself centered in.

I reached behind my back and drew my claymore from its bindings. It seemed wherever I’d been teleported to, Kenny and Ariel had not followed me. The room was large and the walls were white—it wasn’t hard to see that there was nothing here but empty space.

I glanced around the corners of the room, looking for anything that might give me a clue as to where I was. “What is going on—?!”

The sudden sight of a little round creature wearing a red mage’s hat had startled me.

I jumped back, and readied my weapon. Upon further inspection, I came to realize that the creature was only a cat, and a chunky little one at that.

“A cat...?” I was confused, but I knew not to let my guard down. I was trapped inside a video game, after all. Who knew what kind of power this tiny creature might possess?

I broke out in a nervous sweat as the cat and I faced off against each other. The cat—rising now on its hind legs—placed both its front paws together and shut its eyes. After a brief moment a bright light began to illuminate where its paws touched.

In an instant the light vanished, and the cat was now holding a tiny wand-like device that sported the same color scheme as the fluffy mage hat on its head.

“A *magic* cat?!” *What is going on here?*

Not too long afterwards, a tiny transparent text bubble appeared just above the cat’s head.

**[Minigame: The Magic Cat God. Objective: Defeat The Magic Cat God in Combat. Reward: 1-2 Special Items. You may begin!]**

“A *magic* cat god?!” *I don’t remember hearing anything about a mini-boss like this.* I summoned Sylphie—my shoulder fairy—and asked her what the deal was with this cat.

“*The Magic Cat God:* a new minigame mini-boss that was added in the most recent update. More information can be found about this mini-boss in the 1.07 Patch Notes. Would you like me to explain further?”

I wanted to hear more, but it was clear from the look on the cat’s face that I wasn’t going to have much time to stand around and chat with Sylphie. “No thank you, Sylphie. Before you go, please display the enemy’s health and attack bars on my HUD.”

“Sure thing!”

**[The Magic Cat God:**

**Health: 50 pts**

**Attack: Very low]**

“Only fifty health points?! But how?” *Something isn’t right here.*

The cat had only fifty health points. Even Kenny at level four could deal that amount of damage with a single punch. I stood my ground, waiting to see what kind of surprise the cat had in store for me.

The tiny cat lifted his wand and waved it above his head. Suddenly, eleven clouds of smoke appeared, then just as quickly vanished, leaving behind eleven colorful and rather large porcelain pots in their place.

I’d been confused before, but now I was even more so. After he’d summoned the pots, nothing further had happened. I waited patiently until I couldn’t any longer. I figured it’d be better to defeat the cat before it had the chance to attack. This had to be some sort of trap, right?

I took a cautious half-step towards the cat, barely getting my foot off the ground. The moment I did so, the lids burst off of the pots. King cobras the size of school buses came slithering out of each of them. *So this is how you plan to defeat me then, huh?*

I summoned Sylphie once again and asked her to display health bars for the king cobras. Eleven little messages appeared in the upper left portion of my vision.

**[King Cobra:**

**Health: 1,000 pts]**

“Yeah ... that makes way more sense—*whoa!*”

One of the king cobras had launched a fireball directly at my face. I somehow avoided it without a scratch, but only barely. It was clear that these were no ordinary king cobras—and that this battle wasn’t going to be easy.

It was at times like these that I had a few feelings of regret regarding my character’s

class. In theory, having a strong attack, fast strike speed and a high stamina stat was the best thing you could ask for, but when facing enemies like these king cobras, especially when alone, a little bit of magic could go a long way.



I sighed in annoyance—not because of the situation, but because of my own actions. *I shouldn't have touched that damn pot.*

A fireball landed not too far from my feet. The blast was followed by an immense amount of wind pressure, but I'd seen it coming and shoved my claymore into the solid white floor seconds before the blast. Doing so had helped me hold my ground against the wind and keep my stance.

The very second the wind settled, I made a dash for one of the king cobras. As I did so, background music with an Egyptian flavor started to play from somewhere overhead. *This must be the in-game soundtrack.* I found myself grooving along with it. *Honestly, it's not that bad!*

The music only fueled my desire to win. The cobras began launching fireballs at me by the dozens, and I was fending them off as best I could with just my claymore. I must have done so for three minutes straight before they paused to reset their attack.

I was given only five seconds to move before facing a barrage of fireballs once again. I swung the claymore as fast as I could, praying that none of the attacks would hit me as I did so. The heat from the blasts was intense, so much so that it was causing my stamina to drain like crazy. If I didn't do anything about it, and fast, I was going to run out of stamina soon.

I asked Sylphie to access the item shop. Once the tab was open, I simultaneously fended off the cobras' fireballs while flipping through the pages of endless items until I found what I was looking for.

For 2,750 coins, I was able to purchase a heat resistance potion. It was a pricey item, which only lasted for five minutes, but it was worth the money—especially since my life was on the line.

My arms were burning from exhaustion and my movements had slowed. Thankfully the potion spawned as the cobras' mob delay took effect. I popped the cork on the bottle and tipped it back. The bright blue liquid went down smoothly, and a moment later I was back to feeling energized. The heat exhaustion and burning sensation on my skin I'd been feeling had simultaneously vanished, even though my stamina was still low.

I chomped down on a pair of Govayan berries to replenish my lost stamina, licked the juice from my lips and readied my claymore for the next horde of fireballs headed my way.

Once again I was caught in a heated battle of playing defense. Thankfully this wasn't a *Zone Rush* minigame, so I didn't have to worry about a timer counting down the match.

Although I didn't have a timer in effect, that didn't mean this battle would be easier. Non-Zone Rush minigames typically featured harder mini-bosses, and these cobras were definitely living up to that status.

Even with the potion in use, all this defense was taking a toll on my body. I was sweating like a madman and panting from exhaustion. I decided that it was time I switched things up and applied an offensive push.

The cobras were pelting me from a distance, and I had no real way of reaching them. It was clear that moving a few feet nearer every time they reset their attacks was going to take too long, and I'd be out of stamina by the time I reached even one. *If only I could get closer to them somehow....* And that's when it hit me.

I seized the next attack reset to make my move. Knowing that as long as my claymore was soaring through the air, it would eventually return to me, I used my knowledge of the weapon to my advantage. I tossed it at one of the king cobras while maintaining my position.

The cobra dodged the claymore and opened its mouth wide to charge an attack. Before

the fireball could finish forming, the claymore changed direction and started heading back to my hands. The cobra didn't expect the sudden change in direction.

As the claymore flew towards me, it struck the cobra on the back of the head. The hit was a major blow, dealing three hundred points of damage. The sight of a successful attack brought me joy. My newly formed smile was interrupted by the sight of the claymore quickly approaching me.

Suddenly time slowed. What I was about to attempt could mean the difference between life or death. I was scared, but I knew I needed to carry on. If I didn't take this risk now, I might not be given the chance to again.

I reached out my hand, only to pull it away just as the handle was about to greet my palm. With time still slowed, I stood frozen at the sight of the claymore's blade flying past my face. It wasn't the claymore that had made me freeze up, but the fireball it had blocked from hitting me at the very last second.

I could see every last spark dissipate before time returned to normal speed. The claymore soared to the other side of the room, striking another one of the king cobras as it did so. The cobra hissed, and another one fired an attack. Before it could hit me, the claymore came hurtling back to my hands, and blocked the next strike as it did so. Once again I'd somehow managed to block the fireball, and strike another one of the cobras. I thanked my high luck stat for that.

I had successfully pulled off a long-range attack that used no stamina at all while defending myself as a non-magic user. I couldn't help but shout with the pure joy that was running through me: "It's working!" *I love it when a plan comes together!*

Again and again, almost like clockwork, the claymore would strike one of the cobras, attempt to fly back to my hands, block a fireball and repeat. I was caught in the middle of an elegant dance between attack patterns and perfect timing. One wrong move and I was done for. *I wish I'd thought of this back when I spent an entire week grinding to get to level fifty.*

I'd killed three of the king cobras before the rest started to catch on to my attack pattern. The remaining eight started to switch up their movements, and launch attacks at different times. By now my heat resistance potion had also worn off, and the effect of their fireballs was coming back.

The entire time I was struggling to survive, the tiny cat just kept floating comfortably above me, out of harm's way, and mocking me with his cute cat chubbiness.

The cobras had all by now taken some damage from my attacks; that said, they still had a good amount of health remaining. My strategy had saved me for a few minutes, but had quickly fallen apart due to their adaptability and pattern recognition. *Damn you, game devs!*

I felt like Kenny, chomping away on Govayan berries every two minutes, trying to restore my stamina. The difference between him and me was that I had a good amount of in-game currency and could afford to keep buying them.

The worst part about this minigame was that it was staged in an empty room. I had nowhere to hide or to run. It was just me and the king cobras in an all-out battle. Things weren't looking good, but even so I was determined to win.

The fear of dying and never seeing my family again hit me hard. Kenny had already died in the game once before. Because of that, Ariel and I had used our wishes to bring him back and make sure he recovered properly. In the end I was left without a wish, meaning I had no escape in the event that things took a turn for the worst.

I shed a few tears, thinking about all the people I would be leaving behind if I died here—my mom, my dad, and most importantly—my little sister, Freya.

She was seven years younger than me, and honestly, like any little sister, very annoying at times. She was the clingy type—the sort to wake you up extremely early so you could be the first online at the comic shops, and the type to force you to stay up late to watch another episode of an hour long show, even though your eyes were clearly burning from watching three episodes already, and you didn't even like the show! Even so, I loved her more than anything.

She'd asked me to take her for ice cream about three times this week, and each time I'd blown her off so I could grind out levels in this game. But right now there was nothing more I wanted than to see her eyes gleaming with joy as she sank her teeth into a vanilla cone, like the crazy lunatic she was.

*Come on, Max. You have to win ... for Freya! I've played all the tutorials and read all the in-game tips and rules. Think ... there has to be something—!*

“Sylphie!”

“Yes, master?”

“Open my item box.... It’s time to make it rain.”

Sylphie opened my item box as I asked. I shuffled through the tabs and filtered to the weapons I had tagged as fodder. All the weapons in this tab were common and rare drops that were useless towards the end-game.

I'd been breaking them down into XP to level up my main claymore faster. I'd reached the level cap recently, and they'd been sitting here taking up slots ever since.

The best part about this game was that it allowed you to sum mon a weapon from your inventory without unequipping your main weapon. This feature was added so that players could trade weapons without the need for a trading menu. Just toss the weapon on the ground and the other player could pick it up—boom, trade complete!—but in my case, it could be used for so much more.

In the top right corner of the item box, next to the trash icon, there was a tiny down arrow. Pressing that icon ... dropped all items at once.

*Click!*

The king cobras' blasts were interrupted by the instant spawning of nearly one hundred claymores above them in the air. The blades rained down on the cobras, striking their large bodies by the dozen.

The weapons may not have been strong by themselves, but when paired with so many others plummeting down from above, they did some serious damage.

I watched in awe as the shining blades took out the cobras and smashed their porcelain pots into pieces. I nearly shed a tear. *Thank God I played the tutorials!*

The cat god's eyes snapped wide open at the sight and his little smirk vanished. What was a godsend for me was now a nightmare for him. He did his best to dodge and weave through all of the claymores. The last one to fall missed him by just an inch, clipping only the hair on his tail. Just when he thought he'd survived, I was there, waiting for him.

He turned his little head, greeting the edge of my claymore with the tip of his nose. I could sense the fear within him—the same fear I'd felt moments ago. The cat ripped his hat off of his head and covered his mouth with it, lifting it up with his tiny paws just to where his nose could barely be seen. He widened his eyes and played innocent. He really was adorable. I almost fell for it, too, but I already lived with the cutest little sister known to man, and no being could top that.

I grinned. “I’m gonna enjoy this.”



After taking care of *The Magic Cat God*, I was teleported into a room similar to the one that I'd just been in. Only this time there were no enemies, just a treasure chest at the center.

I approached the chest, snatched the little gold key hovering above it out of the air, and busted open the lock. I reached my hand into the bright light, and pulled out the items inside.

The items were small and chilling to the touch. I read their descriptions, then almost laughed at how much of a game changer they were going to be. "Oh, yeah.... *This* is what I'm talking about!"

**[You will be returned to the main battle in T-5 seconds.]**





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LEVEL 6

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## INSIDE THE LAMP-KENNY

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PART 1

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CONTINUE GAME



I'd been walking through heaps of mud for an hour now, and I was covered in it from the waist down. The weight of the mud had made my boots ten times heavier. It was a struggle even to walk properly.

I'd bought as many Govayan berries as I could afford, and launched a series of spells before jumping into this mud. The spells weren't to defend myself against any possible enemies, but to reset my stamina levels until I was randomly given a high stat instead of a slow draining effect.

If I hadn't thought of doing so, I'd have been out of stamina by now. This mud pit must be three miles long, and with every twenty steps I took I had to eat one of the berries just so I could stay upright. To make matters worse, the whole environment felt

like a sauna. *Damn ... why is it so hot in here?*

I rested my hand on the cobblestone wall and wiped the sweat from my brow. “I wonder what Ariel and Max are up to right about now?”

I wasn’t sure where they were, but what I was sure of was that they weren’t here with me. The only sounds I heard were my loud and obnoxious moans—and rightfully so.

“There’s so much mud ... so much mud!” I sighed.

Without me calling for her, Lillian summoned herself. “Could you please ... be quiet! All of your complaining is interrupting ... my ... nap!”

I glared at her. “...Yeah, no, I’m fine! Don’t ask how I’m feeling or anything. I’m great.”

“Okay. Well, I’ll be going—”

“Ask if I need any help, would ya?!” This sleepy fairy was something else. “Lillian, please tell me what’s going on here.”

“Sure thing ... master. You are in the middle of a minigame...”

*That much is obvious.*

“...The objective of this game is to escape the labyrinth. Fortunately, this labyrinth ... is mostly a straight path with a ... few turns here and there. All you have ... to do is make it to the ... center of the labyrinth ... and you will win the ... minigame.”

Her continued yawns made me jealous. *I wish I could take a nap too, but no, I’m stuck knee-deep in all this mud!*

“Is there anything important you think I should know about this minigame?” I prodded.

“Hmm ... I don’t think so—”

I leaned my hand against the wall. One of the stones pushed inward, followed by the sound of gears rotating, and before I knew it—or could even react—a giant metal arrow had impaled the cobblestone wall inches from my face.

My eyes were aligned with the arrow’s shaft. “What the fuck was that?! You didn’t think to tell me that this place was booby-trapped?!”

“I’m sorry, master ... I’m so sleepy. I’m not at my ... best when I’m tired. You did this ... to me! Take some ... responsibility.”

I facepalmed. *There’s got to be a way to fix this.* I opened the item shop and flipped through the tabs of stamina related items looking for something of use. *There has to be something appropriate for this situation.*

I spotted a yellow potion that looked quite appealing.

It cost me the remainder of my coins, but it was totally worth it. The potion spawned in midair, and I snatched it with one hand and scooped up Lillian with the other.

“Hey! Master ... when I said to take responsibility ... this is ... is not what I meant.” She squirmed in my hand.

“Oh shut up! This will surely fix you.”

I popped the cork off the potion with my thumb and shoved the bottle in her mouth. The second the liquid hit her tongue she was shot full of energy, maybe even a little too full.

“Master! What is this? It tasted great. A—And I have so much energy!” Lillian said, puffing her muscles out proudly.

*This might have been a mistake....* “It’s an *Energizer* potion. Think of it as drinking three cups of coffee.”

“What’s coffee?”

*Oh yeah... this game doesn’t have any coffee in it.* “Nevermind that. Now that you have some energy, could you please lead the way?”

“Sure thing, Master. Follow me!” Lillian took off at lightning speed.

“Hey! Wait up! I’m stuck in the mud, damnit!”



I’d somehow found a way out of the mud pit without setting off any more booby traps. Just when I thought I’d have a second to take a breath, the floor suddenly began to fall into what appeared to be a dark, bottomless void.

“Jump, Master, jump!”

Lillian rooted for me as I jumped from ledge to ledge. Fighting Zamuru had been scary in its own way. At least with her I could dodge her attacks and hide behind walls. With this there was no hiding. I either fell to my death, or I didn’t. Adrenaline was surging through my body, flushing my veins and powering me to move on.

Before I could jump to the section of flooring just ahead of me, it also fell into the void. “Shit!” Immediately after that, the platform I was standing on started to rumble.

“Master, you have to jump, now!”

I froze. “I—I—I can’t!”

The next section of flooring was double the distance compared to what I had been jumping across, and now everything around it was falling, too. I was just too scared. Staring at the distance and all the nothingness beneath left me unable to move.

I took a step back. A few drops of sweat slipped off my hair, rolling down my face. “I can’t move Lillian! I—I can’t!”

The platform beneath me was now shaking rapidly. It was going to drop any second now.

*What do I do—My wish! D—Do I use my wish? “Lillian, I want to use my—”*

The platform crumbled, falling into the abyss, and I fell along with it. I tried to grab hold of the stone edges poking out of the wall. The piece I grabbed slid into the wall, and out from the other wall shot a giant metal arrow, similar to the one from earlier.

The arrow pierced the edge of my sleeve and pinned it into the cobblestone wall, saving my life. Immediately after, I got a notification.

**[Player Level Increased. You are now Level 7!]**

Without hesitation, I flooded my luck stat with all my available points. I wasted no time waiting for my sleeve to shred. I twisted myself and snatched the thick shaft, pulling myself up so that I was standing on top of it.

I could see a feeling of relief washing over Lillian. She wiped a few tears from her eyes, then called out to me and told me to jump once more. This time I wouldn’t let fear almost kill me.

I took a deep breath, and when I was ready, I leaped from my spot on top of the arrow. I kicked my legs midair as I soared towards the platform.

My feet came just short of the platform, but I was still able to catch it with my upper body. Hitting the stone chest-first knocked the wind out of me. I was in pain, but I had more important things to focus on. I pulled myself up with a groan and made a dash for the next platform.

The second I jumped, the floor crumbled away. I was running as if I’d been on the track team for fourteen years, jumping from platform to platform without hesitation.

The end of this trial was in sight: I could see the sturdy platform taunting me in the distance. Meanwhile, my stamina was plummeting, and my body was taking a beating. I began to slow down almost entirely. If it weren’t for the stack of berries I’d purchased previously, I’d be dead.

I replenished my stamina as I ran and made one last leap, landing on the platform with perfect accuracy. The very second I landed the entirety of the labyrinth behind me crumbled into the void, leaving nothing but empty space behind.

Lillian latched herself onto my arm and congratulated me as I stood there in shock. My breathing was heavy, and I felt like I was going to faint—I pressed my back against the nearest wall and slid down it.

*Woosh!*

An arrow, to no one's surprise, had again pierced the wall right beside my head. I was too fatigued to care. I didn't even flinch. *I gotta stop touching these walls....*



I followed Lillian through the rest of the labyrinth. We took a few breaks here and there, but I kept pushing on. I wanted to get out of this thing as quickly as possible.

Eventually we'd made it to the next trial. There was a wooden table with a slingshot and a bucket of rocks. About twenty-five feet out from it there was a tiny wooden stool with an empty milk bottle resting on it. The goal of the game was to knock the milk bottle off of the stool before running out of stones. If you ran out of stones you'd lose, and the game would be over.

If given the opportunity to, I would have skipped this trial, but there was a giant metal gate blocking the path that wouldn't open unless I won. I grabbed one of the rocks from the basket and started to walk towards the milk bottle.

“What are you doing, Master?”

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m not gonna risk my life over my shitty aim. I’m just gonna go knock it over with th—!”

Suddenly, the floor beneath me dropped away. I screamed for my life as I fell down a large tunnel, and before I knew it my butt had smacked against the ground, and I found myself back where the trial had started.

The pain in my haunches was nothing to casually ignore. “Ow! What the hell was that?!?” I sighed irritably. *I guess there’s no cheating in this game then, huh?*

I stood up and dusted myself off. I walked reluctantly over to the table and picked up the slingshot. I’d never used a slingshot before, so I toyed around with the rubber strap until I felt comfortable enough to try it out. “Here goes nothing.”

I placed a rock in the little leather pad and pulled back on the rubber strap, stopping when it wouldn’t go back any further. The tension was vibrating through the slingshot and up my arm. I closed one eye and focused on the milk bottle. Then I released....

The rock shot through the air, soaring like an eagle at immense speed, landing what I thought was going to be a direct shot.

*Woosh!*

The rock flew past the bottle and skipped along the floor.

“Master ... you suck.”

I snarled. “I know, okay! I’ve never been a good shot at anything.”

I grabbed another one of the stones and loaded it into the slingshot. My last shot had been a little low and a bit to the left, so this time I aimed counter to where that one had gone. “And ... fire!”

The rock was flung off the leather pouch with great speed and spiraled into the ceiling. From there, it began ricocheting off of the walls, bouncing back and forth until it eventually flew back, hitting me in the face.

“Gwah!” I was knocked to the ground, where I was met with Lillian’s laughter.

"How do you explain that one?" she asked, barely able to get the question out.

I groaned. "I blame that one on my low luck stat."

I got back up, grabbed another rock, and fired off a third shot. This went on for some time. Each time I launched the rock into the air I'd either missed entirely, almost made it or ended up hitting myself with it.

I was frustrated and growing impatient, and Lillian's laughter did nothing to ease my feelings. I eventually got so angry that I snatched her up, loaded *her* into the slingshot, and flung her at the milk bottle.

"Wahhhh!" she screamed.

Her body flew through the air and smacked into the bottle, knocking it clean off the table and smashing it into pieces. "How's that for a shot!"

She lifted a tiny thumb up in the air. I laughed, then carried on through the now-open gate to the next trial.



I did a few more trials, and during that time the Energizer potion started to wear off and Lillian was back to her old, sleepy self.

"Lava ... there always has to be lava!"

In front of me was a giant lava lake with miniature gushing fumaroles spread throughout, and a small stone ship with a lousy little sail bobbing on the surface. Upon the lake's surface there were lava goblins. It was just as the name suggested: they were a bright red variety of goblins that were immune to the effects of the lava.

On the other side of the lake was a finish line sporting a checkered flag. Judging from the look of it this was the last trial, and it was clear what I had to do. I glanced at the lake with a blank stare before speaking my mind: "I give up."

"What?!"

I plopped my butt down and began to beg God for forgiveness. "God, whatever it was that I did for me to end up here, please, I hereby repent for my sins!"

"Master! You can't ... give up now. You're so ... so close."

I jolted up from the ground. "You seriously want me to hop in that little stone boat and sail across this magma-lake like some kind of pirate?! I'll get killed!"

Lillian yawned, then wiped the haze from her eyes. "You'll have to decide ... for ... for yourself, master. I need ... a nap."

"Wait, wait, wait! No, don't—"

Lillian had returned to her sleeping place, which meant she wasn't going to be of any help. The rest was up to me. If I wanted to make it out of here, if I wanted to make it home ... I was going to have to cross this lake.

I equipped my sword and walked over to the boat. A fragment of lava jumped out of the lake and skimmed my boot, melting the surface of it in seconds. I gulped, then quickly leaped into the boat.

I used the tip of my sword to push the boat off into the lake. I then raised the sail and set off. On the stern of the boat was a stone rudder that I used to control the direction in which I was headed.

Literally seconds after I'd set sail, one of the fumaroles erupted, sending lava high into the sky. I quickly lifted my hand and channeled my mana into a spell. The leveling of my luck stat must have paid off, because an octagon-shaped barrier was summoned above me, blocking the lava from raining down onto me or the boat.

**[Stamina Drain: 75%]**

“Well shit....”

All of the goblins were sleeping peacefully on the surrounding boulders. The last thing I wanted to do was wake any of them from their slumber. I did my best to steer the boat clear of any more lava vents, and to keep quiet while doing so.

All was well until a small glob of lava started to bubble near the boat. When it exploded, a piece of it landed on my arm, burning it in an instant.

I screamed in agony, then shouted every swear word in the dictionary—and some that weren’t. By the time I was done yelling, every single goblin had woken up, and they were staring at me like they were intent on a meal.

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LEVEL 7

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## INSIDE THE LAMP-KENNY

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PART 2

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CONTINUE GAME



Fear consumed me. I sank my sword into the lava and swung away, paddling as fast as my arms would allow. The little red goblins swarmed me from every direction. I was surrounded.

With no other options available, I readied my sword. The goblins were charging at me from every direction. I swung at them, and they pulled back in fear each time. Behind me, one of the goblins had jumped into the boat, and grabbed me by the back of my collar.

For tiny creatures, they really were strong. The goblin lifted me into the air, and slammed me down into the boat's hard stone hull. My breath was knocked out from the impact. I wheezed from the pain and sudden loss of oxygen.

I rolled onto my side, where I saw an army of goblins piling into the boat. I clenched my throbbing stomach. I was in so much pain, but if I gave up here, I was sure to die.

I dropped the sword and lifted my hand in front of my face. The goblins started punching and clawing at me. My health bar was dropping fast as blood trickled out of my wounds.

More and more goblins were piling into the boat. Some of them had lava running off of their bodies. The lava splashed off them and spattered onto my skin and clothes, burning right through them.

I wanted to scream, but I was afraid that if I opened my mouth, bits of lava would drip down my throat as well. I was consumed by panic. My eyes darted back and forth. I was only level seven. These goblins, though common mobs, were part of a minigame in the final boss level. I had no idea what their stats were, but what I did know was that they packed a serious punch.

The pain became too much for me. Tears started to roll down my cheeks as they bombarded me with more and more attacks. I reached for where I'd dropped my sword. The goblins' feet were in the way, and I could only just barely reach it with my fingertips.

I inched it closer the best I could, but it was no use. A goblin had seen what I was doing and had kicked it out of reach. Death was inching closer every second. I had only one option left.

I moved both my hands in front of my face and flooded them with mana. The tingling sensation increased in intensity as I poured every last drop I had into the center of my palms.

My hands started to glow. The light was so blinding that it caused the goblins to pause their assault and take a step back. That half second of relief from the light alone had saved my life.

I fueled my attack until the mana had become too much for me to contain. A warrior's scream broke free of my lips as I released my attack. A beam of magic burst from my palms, spreading outwards like the spokes of an umbrella.

The attack sliced through every physical form it touched. All of the goblins, the taller surrounding boulders, and even the mast of my boat were cut in two before I could even blink.

### [Stamina Drain: 13%]

I rolled the goblins' severed limbs off of me, then turned onto my side. Tiny mana sparkles were trickling down from the atmosphere and onto my body. I summoned Lillian, who was sound asleep, and quickly opened the item shop. I took a look at the amount of coins I had just collected.

Each of the goblins had dropped fifty coins each. I had been given 3,250 coins, and my XP had just *skyrocketed*.

### [Player Level Increased. You are now Level 16!]

*Holy shit ... my level has more than doubled.* If it weren't for the sheer amount of pain I was experiencing, or the fact that I was still trapped inside a video game, this would have been cause for celebration.

I looked through the item shop for anything that would help recover my health. I ended up finding a *Potion of Recovery*. It cost me half of what I'd earned just now, but I wasn't worried. The only thing I cared about was easing my pain and regaining my health.

While purchasing the potion, I felt the lake suddenly start to rumble. *Must be another one of the lava vents.* I paid no attention to it, biting down on the cork and popping the bottle open.

The moment the potion hit my tongue, I gagged. The taste was just so awful. It reminded me of the bad medicine that doctors had forced me to take when I had gotten a cold as a kid.

The taste might have been the furthest thing from good, but the feeling of recovery it provided was very different. It felt as if I were being reborn. The wounds on my arms started to close, the blood on my body suddenly disappeared, and all my cuts magically healed. *If only medicine in the real world worked this efficiently.*

The lake was still rumbling, so much that it sent shivers through my bones. I kept trying to ignore it. The boat's mast might have fallen, but that didn't stop it from continuing to sail. "The boat must be target locked," I mumbled, meaning that it moved towards its target—in this case, the finish line—regardless of conditions.

*I guess it's nothing but smooth sailing from here on out.* Or so I thought.

The rumbling sensation was growing so strong that I finally decided to turn around and see what was happening. What I expected to see were a few of the fumaroles erupting, but instead what I saw left me speechless.

On the far side of the lava lake, back where I had originally set sail from, was a giant red goblin, standing at the height of the average tree. My jaw slacked, and I struggled to speak as I stood in awe.

The goblin, taking note of his dead comrades, came immediately charging at me. Lava shot up from where the goblin had stomped, flying into the air and nearly hitting me. If crapping yourself was a feature in this game it would have happened ages ago.

I buried my sword in the lava again and started to paddle like crazy. Through all my screams and tears, I'd managed to summon Lillian.

"Good morning ... Master. Why did—"

"What the fuck is that thing?!" I shouted.

Lillian turned around and yawned, then wiped her eyes. The moment she saw the goblin, she too, nearly shit herself. "Run!"

"I can't run!"

"Paddle!"

My arms were moving at sonic speed. I huffed and puffed as I paddled the boat, barely making a difference.

"That is a Goblin King! One of the ... most aggressive mobs in the game! I've ... displayed its stats ... on your HUD."

"You can do that?!"

"Yes!"

"Why didn't you tell me?!"

"You never ... asked."

*... You have got to be kidding me.*

The Goblin King's stats appeared in the upper corner of my view. I did my best to read them as I panicked, while paddling for my life.

**[Goblin King:**

**Level: 30**

**Health: 6,550 pts**

**Attack: Very High**

**Defense: Very High**

**Attack Speed: Slow**

**Movement Speed: Slow**

**Can use Magic: Yes]**

"There's no hope." I cried, seeing how far I still was from the other end of the lake.

“There’s one thing I should … mention about the … Goblin King.”

“Hurry up, spit it out! I’m gonna die over here!”

He was quickly gaining on us. He might have been slow, but this boat was slower.

“The Goblin King has … a special ability … where it can … summon magical bombs.... It launches them at … the player as its main … form of attack—!”

As Lillian finished, a tiny cannonball-like bomb with a small fuse landed just shy of the boat’s bow. The surrounding lava lit the fuse. Lillian and I froze, glanced at one another, then back at the bomb.

“...Blow!”

The two of us blew on the fuse as if we were trying to blow out candles on a birthday cake. “Faster, faster!” Lillian shouted.

My cheeks were turning red and the fuse was still lit. It was inches away from igniting the bomb.

“Well, I’m out … of here! Good luck!” Lillian said, returning to her sleeping place.

“Oh, no you don’t! I’m not dying alone!” I summoned her again.

She refused to stay and I refused to let her go. I must have summoned her seven times before the Goblin King reached us. *Oh shit ... I forgot all about him!*

The fuse had nearly reached the bomb. The Goblin King lifted his fists in the air and was ready to smack them down on our boat. Without thinking, I instinctively snatched the bomb out of the lava, tossed it into the air, and smacked it with my sword like a baseball seconds before it exploded.

The bomb caromed off my sword and hit the Goblin King, and the blast that followed knocked him flat on his back. His fall caused the lava to ripple. The small waves pushed the boat closer to the finish line. Even so, I still had half the lake to cover before I made it.

Two large teeth extruded from the bottom of the Goblin King’s jaw, which it used to pull the pin from two giant grenades it had summoned in both of its hands.

“This has got to be some kind of cruel joke.” *When I had loaded up this game, I was hoping to sink my imagination into two glorious three dimensional purple mountains. The last thing I’d wanted was for my tombstone to read, ‘Turned Into Goblin Chow!’*

A portion of my mana had replenished. I reached both of my hands out and fired off an attack. Two giant nets formed in the air, catching the grenades and halting their trajectory.

### [Stamina Drain: 22%]

The grenades exploded in mid air, leaving behind a cloud of black smoke. The Goblin King burst through the cloud, charging at me once again. That’s when I remembered that my sword had a stackable stun effect on it.

Thanks to being a Gambler Class, that percentage was halved. Even so, I still had a seventeen and a half percent chance of rendering him immobile. *I only need one lucky hit.*

“Kenny! Don’t tell me … you’re gonna risk it?! Even with you dumping … all your points into your … luck stat, it’s still low!”

“Well, it’s a good thing I just leveled up!” I still hadn’t used the points I’d gotten from defeating the regular red goblins. I hadn’t had the chance, given the situation I was in. So I quickly opened my player stats table and dumped every last point into my luck stat.

“Kenny, look! Do you see … what I see?”

I sure did. My luck stat was no longer incredibly low, but now it was lower than average! “Let’s *gooooo!* I’m finally getting somewhere—”

“Kenny, look out!”

I had been distracted by my stats table for too long and hadn't noticed that the Goblin King had gotten close again. He slammed his fists down at me. I jumped backwards, landing on the bow of the boat.

The Goblin King's attack forced the stern of the boat down, into the lava, and sent the bow flying up, and me along with it. I soared into the air alongside globs of red hot magma.

I was hanging in the air slightly above the Goblin King's head. He tried to swat me out of the sky, but thanks to his slow attack speed, I gracefully managed to dodge it.

I lifted *The Walker* sword high above my head. I gripped the handle with all my might and let all the air free from my lungs with one ferocious roar.

I slammed it down, rotating my body as I did so, until I was spiraling straight at the Goblin King. Seventeen and a half percent was about the same as a one-in-six chance of causing an effect. So all I had to do in theory was land six hits, and I was determined to do so.

The blade stabbed into the beast's head, slicing clean through the skin, but having no real effect. I wasn't worried, though. Thanks to my spiraling rotation, I was slicing into the Goblin King with every turn. Before I knew it I'd landed about ten blows to his chest and legs before landing back in the boat.

The Goblin King tried to roar, but the sword's skill had taken effect, and he froze mid-scream. I noticed that his health had dropped to 5108 points. That attack had done some serious damage, but the goal of this minigame wasn't to defeat him, it was to survive. "Now's my chance!"

I lunged off of the boat onto a nearby rock floating in the lava. I nearly slipped off of it, but thankfully I was able to catch myself. This lake and the rocks floating in it weren't all that different from the trial where the floor had fallen out from under me. It was the same concept—jump, and don't dare miss the ledge.

I began to sprint across the lake, hopping from rock to rock, sinking my teeth into those God-sent Govayan berries as I did so. I also drank a speed potion. It only lasted for thirty seconds, but that was all I needed.

As I neared the finish line, the stun effect of my sword wore off, and the Goblin King was back in action. He lifted his hand and summoned a giant wooden slingshot, similar to the one I'd used in that godawful accuracy trial. I didn't need to watch him shoot to know he was more competent than I was, too.

He then summoned a chunky bomb, one with a big white skull and crossbones painted on it, and loaded it into the pouch. The heat of his breath was enough to light the fuse. He then shut his right eye and pulled back the strap, lining up for the shot.

*Woosh!*

The bomb ripped through the air. The wind pressure coming off of it forced the lava beneath it to part down the middle and shoot up into the sky.

A drop of sweat beaded and ran down the side of my face as the bomb came flying at me, but I quickly realized that it wasn't actually aimed *at* me. It was aimed at a thick patch of lava in the distance.

There was nobody around to save me. I had to react fast, or it was all going to be over. I picked up a flat piece of stone that my previous attack on the smaller goblins had knocked loose. I tossed the slate onto a nearby bubbling vent, then jumped on top of it.

Just as the bomb hit the lava patch, the fumarole erupted. I was flung up and away, right towards the edge of the lake. The blast from the bomb followed closely behind, shooting pools of lava directly at me.

I wrapped my fingers around the edge of the stone slate and held on for dear life. I

hit the ground just past the lakeshore and went skipping across it. The lava was still hot on my tail.

I bounced across the ground until the slate broke in two, but I was ready for it. I jumped off the stone and reached out my arm. The lava, which by now was almost fully covering the tips of my boots, seemingly vanished the second my finger crossed the finish line, along with the whole terrible labyrinth, and the Goblin King as well.

My body slid across a hard white floor, stopping only when my head smashed into a hard object. I rubbed the welt, and managed a sigh. “*Ow....*”

I sat up, then faced the object I’d smashed into. It was a treasure chest, and floating above it was a tiny golden key.

Lillian self-summoned to applaud me. “Congratulations, Kenny! You did it!” For once she wasn’t yawning. She was genuinely excited for me.

I sat on the ground and stared at the chest, wiping away my tears of joy. “Yeah ... I did it.” I was proud of myself. I’d passed the trials and survived the labyrinth all by myself, all while conquering my fears along the way.

“Well, what ... are you waiting for? Open ... it.” Lillian said, now yawning the way she usually did.

I reached for the key—it was cold to the touch. I undid the lock on the chest and flipped the lid open. A bright light seeped out from inside of it. I reached into the light for whatever my prize would be.

I was hoping for a powerful weapon exclusive to Gambler Class players, or better yet, an infinite stamina potion, but what I got was nothing of the sort.

“A ... giant *steak*?! What is *wrong* with this game?!”

**[You will be returned to the main battle in T-5 seconds.]**



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LEVEL 8

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# THERE'S NO "I" IN TEAM

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V-001

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CONTINUE GAME



A burst of smoke immediately fogged my vision. When it faded, I found myself back in the cave with Max and Ariel.

Ariel threw herself into both Max's and my arms. Tears of relief ran down her face as she said, "I'm so glad to see you two! Being alone was so ... so scary."

It was clear from the look in Max's eyes and Ariel's explosion of relief that the two of them had also been through a lot.

During the minigame I hadn't been given any time to rest. I'd had to push all my

emotions to the side and focus on surviving. But now that the minigame was finally over, the emotions I'd bottled up hit me like a truck, and judging from the tears running down both my teammates' faces, it had hit them hard, too.

We embraced each other in a three-person group hug as we all cried our hearts out. This was the first time since we'd arrived here that we'd allowed ourselves to be this vulnerable with one another. It felt ... nice.

Fast forward a few minutes into our crying session, I accidentally slapped Ariel on the thigh with the steak I'd won.

"Kenny.... Uhh, what was that I felt run across my thigh just now?"

Tears were still flowing out from my eyes and I struggled to speak. "Oh, that? It's my reward for finishing the minigame. Can you believe it? All they gave me was a ten pound premium ribeye steak."

"A ribeye steak?" Ariel pulled out of the group hug and took a look at the chunk of meat dangling from my hands.

"Yeah, a steak. Why?" I asked, wiping my sniffles away.

"Oh my god, this is great!" she said.

"It is...?" I asked. "Why is that?"

Ariel's face glowed with excitement. She approached me, shoving her face in mine as her eyes widened. She was close, very close. Her face was a hair's width from touching mine. She grabbed the steak from my hands as a smile formed on her lips.

"Why, you ask? Because this means that we can finally have something good to *eat!*" Each word she spoke contained more excitement than the last.

"I'm gonna go get the fire started!" she said, rambling on about the endless number of dishes she could cook with a steak of its size. Ariel ran off to where Max had built the campfire to start cooking, leaving the two of us by ourselves.

"She must love to cook, huh?" I asked.

"I guess so."

I was confused by his response. "You don't know? Aren't you two friends back in the real world?"

"Only virtually. We only met each other just last week. I'd joined a random lobby to take on one of the early game bosses, and she happened to be in the same lobby. We added each other in-game, and we were playing the campaign together, but that's about it."

I was shocked. Judging by how friendly they were with one another, I guess I'd just assumed that they were lifelong pals, maybe even childhood best friends. "So you don't know much about her, then?"

Max shook his head. "Honestly, I don't know much at all."

*Interesting....*



There wasn't a single word in the dictionary to describe the sheer amount of joy radiating from Ariel as she started to prep the steak. She had over seven in-game tabs open to sections of spices and sauces that I didn't even know were in the game.

"I'm taking a guess here, but—Ariel, are you into cooking?" I asked.

"Huh? How did you know?"

"I just had a hunch."

Ariel tossed the steak into a pan she'd purchased from the item shop and set it up over the campfire hearth, which she then lit with her magic. "Yeah, I love cooking. My mom is one of the best chefs in all of Tokyo. You may have heard of her—Emi Hayashi?"

"*Your mom is Emi Hayashi?!*" Both Max and I blurted out in unison.

Ariel blushed. "Yeah, that's my mom!"

"I heard you have to book a table in one of her restaurants like six months in advance!" Max said.

"Yeah! And I heard the food is so delicious that a man actually *died* because he couldn't handle the incredible taste! And instead of suing, his family forgave Emi Hayashi because even though he died he was divinely happy and had the most delicious food in his mouth!"

"Are the rumors true?" we asked.

Ariel started to giggle, which eventually became full-on laughter. "Yes—well, the second one isn't true, but the rumor about booking the tables so far in advance is."

Ariel purchased some parsley from the item shop and began to chop fine pieces of it into a small bowl. The steak simmering in the pan was an absolute blessing to my nostrils.

"My dream is to one day become a chef worthy of cooking in the same kitchen as my mom. It's hard though, balancing college and culinary school."

"I can only imagine." *And I complained about having to balance college and a part-time job at a pizzeria. I can't imagine her struggles.*

"What college do you go to?" Max asked.

"I go to the University of Tokyo."

"What?! No way, me too!" said Max.

“Same here.” I added. “What are you guys studying?”

“Business. I figured learning how to properly market myself and my cooking could help me achieve my dreams.”

*That's such a mature way of thinking.* “And you?” I asked Max.

“Architecture. My days are full of geometry, trigonometry, and a whole lot of wanting to smash my head on a desk while doing homework-ology.”

Ariel and I couldn't help laughing. “Dude, I totally get it. I'm studying engineering. My surveying professor is a total douchebag when it comes to grading the homework—it doesn't matter how much work you show, if even one part of the answer is wrong, he gives a zero.”

“Wait, are you talking about Professor Sato?”

“Yeah.... You know him?”

“Yeah, dude! I'm taking surveying with him, too. I'm in his Monday and Thursday, three to five p.m. class.”

“What? No way! I'm in that class too! You're talking about the giant lecture hall with over eighty students, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, that's the one!” Max said.

The three of us had a lot more in common than I'd previously imagined. *To think they even go to the same university.*

Before I knew it, the three of us were munching on the steak Ariel had cooked for us and sharing stories of our hopes, dreams, goals and ambitions in the real world. Eventually the topic of our minigames came up.

“Say, what challenge did you face?” Ariel asked Max.

“You're not gonna believe it—it was so strange. I was trapped in this giant empty room, then out of nowhere a cat with a mage hat and a tiny wand appeared. My goal was to beat the little dude.”

“What was his health like?” I asked.

“He only had fifty health points—”

“That's it?! Man I was trapped in a labyrinth—”

“And I had to take on a huge serpent in the middle of an endless ocean—”

“Woah, woah! Shots fired!” Max said, laughing. “Easy now, I wasn't finished. Sure the little dude had no health, but the second I took a step in his direction he summoned his minions. Eleven giant king cobras with one thousand health points each! And they could all use magic! I was facing fireball after fireball with almost no breaks or mob delay.”

“Damn! How’d you make it out of there?” I asked.

“Well, as much as I’d like to say it was because of my quick thinking, I can’t take all the credit. It was my younger sister who saved me. I was on the brink of death and I’d almost given up hope. Then suddenly out of nowhere I saw her face—she’d been begging me to take her to get an ice cream all week long, but I’d been blowing her off so I could grind levels in this stupid game. I couldn’t die knowing the last memory she’d have of me was being tossed aside so I could play a video game. So I did what I had to do to survive, to make it back to her.”

The room went silent. Ariel tried to lighten things up with a joke: “Someone has a major sister complex, I see!”

“Oh, stop it!” Max snickered.

We all laughed. I’d never imagined seeing such a huge, muscular guy blushing so brightly before. It was an eye-opening thing to see and hear about others’ real world pain.

“What about you, Ariel? You mentioned a giant serpent?” Max asked.

“Yeah. It must’ve been the most terrifying experience of my entire life. After teleporting into the minigame, when I came to, I couldn’t breathe. I had spawned into the challenge beneath the water. I was so discombobulated, and if it wasn’t for the light on my staff I wouldn’t have known which way to swim toward the surface. I followed the light to the top, where I was able to crawl aboard a platform of wooden planks floating in the ocean. Just when I thought I would have a moment to breathe, a giant serpent burst out of the water and started to attack me!”

Max and I were on the edge of our seats. “How did you beat it?” I asked.

“Honestly speaking … it was thanks to you guys.”

“Us?” Max asked. “What do you mean?”

“Both of you saved me from Zamuru when we first got here. The looks on your faces in that moment are etched into my memory. You both had a look of bravery and determination, a look of refusing death and defeat against all odds. I decided that what you two had was what I needed in order to win. So I pushed my fears to the back of my mind and embraced the battle.”

I was speechless—so was Max. We didn’t know what to say.

“Thank you, both of you. If it weren’t for your strength, I might have never beaten the minigame in time.”

“You don’t have to thank—”

Max gently rested his hand on my arm. He spoke no words aloud, but it only took one glance at Ariel to understand what he was saying. Thanking us was her way of affirming that she wasn’t ready to give up, and that she would fight until the very end if it meant that there was a chance we could all go home.

“In the final stretch, I found myself trapped in the jaws of the serpent. The in-game timer had almost run out, so I launched an attack into the serpent’s stomach and shut my eyes. I couldn’t watch, it was all too much. But thankfully, I ended up beating the minigame.”

“Wait a minute, you had a *Zone Rush*?” Max asked.

Ariel nodded. “Yeah.”

“Damn, and I thought I had it tough. At least I didn’t have to worry about the game running out of time. What about you, Kenny? What was your game like?”

“Oh, don’t even get me started! I’m getting sick and tired of this terrible luck stat! And let me tell you something, there is no reason why any in-game class needs a random, constant stamina drain effect stat! What is the point? Jeez, where do I even start?”

Max turned to Ariel and whispered, “I may have lit a fuse.”

She whispered back, “Hear him out.”

“...First, I found myself knees-deep in a giant stretch of mud that I was forced to walk through, which by the way, was very stamina-draining! And I couldn’t even lean on the walls. The second I did—bang! An arrow would impale the wall mere inches away from my face. Then, out of nowhere, as I was casually walking, the floor began to crumble and started to drop into an endless void. Like, who the hell designed this game? I had to jump from platform to platform without falling—oh, uh, of course, that wasn’t that hard of a task for a man such as myself, it was a breeze, actually....”

Ariel and Max glanced at one another, and were clearly holding back their laughter.

“...Then—get this, I’m faced with a trial where I have to knock over a milk bottle with a slingshot, so I did what any person would do. I picked up one of the rocks and was planning on walking over to the bottle and knocking it over, but *nooooooo*—the devs put in an anti-cheat system that left my butt sore. And to make matters worse, Lillian, my own shoulder fairy, was laughing at me the entire time. So I shot her into the milk bottle—”

Ariel gasped. “You did not!”

“Oh, I did. Believe me, it was the best shot I took all day.”

Max laughed, “It seems like you had a very long miniga—”

“And *then*, after a bunch of other tiring tasks, I made it to the final trial, where I had to sail across a goblin infested lava lake on a poor excuse for a stony boat. Just as I thought it was all over and I was going to die, I recalled the entire reason I purchased this game in the first place—to see my magnificent Zamuru in all her glory. So I manned up, killed all the goblins with a single blow, and set sail for the finish line.”

“Wow. You really had a lot to deal wi—”

“And *then*, spawning out of nowhere, was the Goblin King himself, who decided that

he was gonna take care of business. He tossed bomb after bomb after bomb at me, oh, but of course, I was fearless....”

A giggle escaped Max’s lips.

“I stood my ground and fought him off, slaying him entirely, just before taking a peaceful stroll to the finish line where I claimed victory.”

Max and Ariel burst out laughing. They gripped their stomachs as they rolled along the floor.

“Hey! What’s so funny?”

“Come on dude, we know you didn’t slay the Goblin King. You don’t need to lie.” Max said, laughing.

“Oh, yeah? What makes you so sure I didn’t?” I asked, aggravated. I didn’t slay the Goblin King, but even so, he had no right to doubt me!

Ariel pointed behind me. I glanced back, only to find that I’d been betrayed by my own shoulder fairy. Even though Max and Ariel couldn’t see Lillian, what they could see was the replay tab she’d opened from the minigame.

The replay showed me running and screaming for my life like a baby for the entirety of the labyrinth. Lillian had even gone so far as to crop out the parts where I’d acted brave and heroically.

My jaw dropped. “It’s a lie!” I said, pointing at the tab. “Don’t look at it!”

Everyone was laughing, even Lillian. I sent her back to her sleeping place and closed all the tabs. I was a little annoyed at first, but watching everyone laugh and bond over it all eased my aggravation. The next thing I knew, I was falling over laughing alongside them. *This is nice....*



A few hours of chatting had passed by. Our stomachs were full and we were ready to pass out.

“Does anybody find it strange that Zamuru hasn’t sent any more minions to attack us yet?” I asked.

Ariel agreed. “Yeah, Kenny’s right. It is strange.”

“My guess is the game won’t resume until we leave the cave. Zamuru must think we are still participating in the minigames.”

“Max, I hope you’re right, because I could really use a nap right now. That steak was delicious. Thank you, Ariel.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, her eyes lighting up with bliss.

“So it’s clear that all I got from beating the minigame was a steak. What about you two? Get anything good?”

Max reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of magic rings. “I was given these.”

**[Defender Ring: While wearing this item, before taking damage, the Defender Ring has a 35% chance of displaying a shield around the player’s body, preventing all damage.]**

**[The God of Fire: While wearing this item, when striking an enemy, The God of Fire Ring has a 45% chance of setting the enemy ablaze. All effects are halved on bosses.]**

My jaw dropped. “Are … are you serious?”

Ariel butted in. “Oh, and I got this!” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a round stone with a sapphire crest in the middle of it.

**[Teleportation Stone: When this artifact is in play, if the player is about to face damage, they will be teleported out of harm’s way. This artifact can only be used ten times in a single match, and has a cooldown rate of three minutes between each teleportation.]**

My jaw dropped even further, then a single tear shed from my right eye. “And … all I got … was a steak?” *Curse my luck!*

Max patted my back. “Cheer up, Kenny. That steak might have just been the most useful item we could have gotten.”



“How so? It’s just a steak.”

“It’s more than that,” said Ariel. “That steak of yours helped bring us closer together. Before we were just a bunch of strangers who were trapped in a video game together, but now we’re a team! A real team.”

I understood what she was saying. Ariel was right, that steak had brought us together. I would have liked a weapon or a cool artifact, but this had been useful too. In fact, it was the first time in ages I’d felt so close to people.

I thought about it for a moment, and smiled. “Yeah, you’re right. Hey guys, I think it’s time we head home. What do ya say?”

I clenched my fist and reached out my arm. Ariel smiled and reached out her arm, connecting her fist with mine. We both looked at Max, waiting for him to join in. He looked at the two of us and smiled in turn.

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s go kick some ass!” He bumped his hand against ours, and with that we had just formed an official party.





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LEVEL 9

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## LAST MINUTE PREPARATIONS

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V-001

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CONTINUE GAME



My body—aching. My hair—drenched. My stamina—beyond low. Ariel and Max had suggested that I increase my player level before we took on Zamuru again. Something about me needing to increase my stats and still learn the basics. They were right, but even so, I hadn't consented to this kind of torture!

“Come on, Kenny! Let’s go! Come on, it’s just a push up! You got it. Only ten left! Let’s go. Move, move, move, move!”

My arms trembled under the pressure. I’d been doing this for about an hour now, and I was ready to roll over and give up! “Is it really necessary?” I asked, biting down on my lip. “And does Ariel really need to be sitting on my back the entire time I do this?”

“What are you trying to say? That I weigh a lot?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m saying!”

“Kenny!” Max shouted.

“What? All I’m saying is that she could have slimmed down her character a little bit when creating her. This shit ain’t easy in the slightest!” With that, my wobbly arms gave out and I dropped to the floor, where my back was crushed beneath the pressure of Ariel’s body.

Ariel pouted. “Hmph! That’s what you get.”

“Just for that comment, now it’s fifteen more. Let’s go. Move it, move it!” Max commanded.

I whimpered. *Why, God? Why me?!*

Even though I hated training, I really did need to increase my player level. Currently I was at level sixteen. With each level-up came skill points, and with those I could upgrade my luck and mana stats—the only two stats I could apply skill points to as a Gambler Class player.

With the way things had gone so far, increasing my luck stat out of the lower-than-average range didn’t sound too bad. If I could just get it to average, or even better, *above* average, I’d be less of a burden on the team.

I had thirty-four levels to go before my player level would cap. More XP was required to reach the next level for each time I leveled up, which amounted to a law of diminishing returns. Normally, the way you’d level up in games was by defeating enemies, taking on guild quests, completing special tasks, doing research and earning achievements. They were all great ways to earn XP.

The problem was that I’d been thrown into the *final* boss battle without prior warning—or any training! I still blamed the crappy matchmaking for this issue. Because of this I hadn’t been given the opportunity to level up like Max and Ariel had been given.



On the other hand, being thrown into a boss battle did give me the opportunity to collect a lot of XP straight off the bat. While killing the skeleton hounds and taking on the mobs in the minigame I'd been able to level up very fast, but now because we were

back in the cave there were no means for grinding XP except for working out.

Working out was the worst way of gaining XP. You did so much, only to be rewarded with very little. It was a total waste of time, but to these two, it was a necessity that I level up.

My lungs burned but I pressed on, powering through the last push up. My teeth were chattering and my entire body had tensed. I made a disturbing grunting groan, a noise I'd never made in my life, while pushing as hard as I could.

The second I'd lifted myself high enough, Max called the set, and I dropped to the ground, once again being crushed under Ariel's weight, but it wasn't for nothing.

### [Player Level Increased. You are now Level 19!]

Ariel clapped and Max cheered. Their praise almost made the pain I'd suffered worth it ... almost. I lifted my fist in the air and cracked a smile. "What do you guys think is best? Tossing my points into luck or mana?"

"Woah, woah, woah! What are you doing?!" Max asked frantically.

"I'm increasing my stats.... Should I not?"

"No! Don't you remember—" Max facepalmed, then sighed. "That's right. You didn't play the tutorials."

I glanced at Ariel. "What is he going on about?"

"In this game, all player stats are based on a scale system. For instance, if you put one point into luck, your stat increases by one level. Do you understand?"

"Well, yeah. That's how most games work."

"Right, but in this game, if you stack your points your skill's level has a chance to scale when you increase them exponentially. So say if you put ten points into a skill at once, there's a possibility your skill will increase anywhere from ten to one hundred levels, depending on if it hits a '1X' or '2X' multiplier."

"I'm so lost...."

"The tutorial really did a better job at explaining it.... How do I go about this—?"

"It's like flipping a coin," Max put in. "Think of it this way: for every point you put in, one coin is flipped. Each coin has a '1X' multiplier side, and a '2X' multiplier side, each basing off the previous multiplier. If you use one point, the best you could get is two levels, but if you use three points at the same time, the best you could get is eight levels. If the first point hits the '2X' multiplier, it will turn into two levels, if that hits, then it will turn to four, and if that hits, it will scale to eight levels—whereas, if you were to put all of those points in at separate times, the most you would have gotten would be six levels, given each of them hit the '2X' multiplier. You see?"

I blinked twice, completely dumbfounded. "...You mean all this time, there was a way to maximize my luck stat...? Why didn't anybody tell me this any sooner?!"

"Some of us were busy avoiding death. Next time you start a game, you should really read the rules."

"Noted."

"It's actually best if you hold off and save your points until after you reach level fifty. It's not like you'll be needing them anyway. There are no dangerous creatures in this cave."

Max was right; there was no need to use my points right this moment. They would be better saved than used immediately. With that decided, it was back to the living hell they called a workout.

I did it all, from calisthenics to weight lifting, to proper movement and hand-eye coordination training. Max and I were in a part of the cave that was just big enough that he could throw his claymore in a way where it would keep flying around the tight,

cramped room.

My goal was to avoid the claymore and focus on dodging attacks with little to no stamina left. While I focused on this task, Ariel decided to do some training on her own.

“Are you ready?”

“Not really—I feel like a piece of gum stuck to the ground.”

“Good! That means your stamina is just where we want it.”

“Hey, what’s the point of doing this?” I asked. “I have enough in-game currency to buy a ton of Govayan berries. Why bother?”

“There might be a time when you’re stuck out there and can’t get to the item shop quickly enough. This *is* Zamuru we’re talking about, and she’s not some run-of-the-mill boss. She’s the final boss of the entire game.”

*Solid argument.* “Alright, if you say so.”

Max started to swing his body, building momentum as he did so. He let go of the claymore and the giant blade started to spin around the room, ultimately frisbeeing back to him, where he would catch it and toss it again.

As he did this, I’d jump around the room and dodge it the best I could. As a form of life insurance I had my sword equipped, so that I could block the claymore in the event I couldn’t dodge it in time.

I was only allowed to eat a Govayan berry when my stamina hit zero. Other than that, there were no exceptions.

Shockingly, our blades clashed only a few times. I’d mostly managed to keep up with his attacks and dodge past them. Maybe it was because I had increased my luck stat, or maybe he was just going easy on me. Either way, even with my stamina low, I was starting to feel a rhythm.

“Look at you, dodging all of my attacks!” Max said, looking ever so proud.

“Just trying my best!”



### **[Ariel's Point of View]**

I decided that it would be best if I left the boys alone to train. They hadn’t had much time to bond, just the two of them, without a girl present. Coming from someone with two younger brothers I knew how important it was for boys to have their alone time.

In the meantime I decided to do some training myself. My player level might be maxed out, but any in-game skills my character owned hadn’t exactly been transferred over when I got tossed into the game. Dodging an attack wasn’t as easy as pressing the space-bar; I actually had to jump out of the way.

I trudged deeper into the cave until I found a section perfect for practicing my magic spells. The cave opened up into a wider area where a ton of stalactites hung from the ceiling, each one perfect for practicing my long ranged shots.

I first surrounded my body with a transparent shield made of pure mana. I then wandered over to a section that didn’t have too many stalactites hanging from it. Once I felt comfortable I shot a ball of fire at the ceiling.

My attack hit the stalactites and they crumbled and started to fall. As they dropped to the ground I did my best to dodge them, but occasionally a piece would still hit me. I took those strikes as a sign that I needed to work harder.

If there was one thing I could take away from my battle with the serpent, it was to always prepare myself for the unexpected. If I hadn’t been careful about preserving my mana during the battle then I might not have had enough to save myself when the

serpent had me in its jaws.

I gave myself props for my smart thinking, but I mainly based my survival on luck. If it had happened any other way, if I'd had to block any more hits or had launched any more attacks, I might not have gotten as lucky as I had. Which led me to my training.

I needed to become a better fighter. Not only for me, but for them too. The boys had already saved me once, so I wouldn't put myself in a situation where they'd have to do it again.

I kept launching fireball after fireball. A downpour of stalactites came with each attack, each one bigger than the last. I jumped and dodged out of the way, growing stronger as a fighter each time I did so.

About an hour had passed. I decided that it was time I took a break and checked on Kenny and Max. As I was leaving the cave, I heard a strange, almost rickety sound, and I decided to check it out.

I followed the trail of the sound through the cave. After a bit of walking, I found myself back at the entrance. That's when I saw it—the source of the strange sound.



### ***[Kenny's Point of View]***

Max helped me train for another few hours. It was the most tiring experience of my entire life, but by the end of it we'd managed to level me up quite a bit.

#### **[Player Level Increased. You are now Level 25!]**

“Alright!” I said, sharing my celebration with Max in the form of a crisp high-five. “Man, this ain’t easy at all.”

“What are we thinking?” I asked, panting. “Another two in-game days before I hit level fifty?”

“Maybe even sooner if we keep grinding all through today. You’re already halfway there, so let’s take a break, replenish your stamina, then we can—”

The sudden rumbling under the ground, followed by Ariel screaming both our names left us shocked. “What could that be?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t sound good.”

We bolted through the cave until we’d caught up with Ariel. The second I turned the corner I felt my heart sink. A sea of skeleton hounds was again charging toward the cave.

*Has it been that long already? I summoned Lillian and opened the game logs. Shit! It has been. Fuck, the minigame must not have paused the boss’s in-game timer.*

“How did this happen?” Ariel asked. “I thought she would be paused until we left the cave?”

“The in-game day cycle must have reset her. It’s been a full twenty-four hours since we returned from the minigames!” I shouted.

“We gotta move! There’s no way we can fend them all off if they flood the cave.”

Ariel agreed. “Max is right, we need to go!”

“But I’m only level twenty-five! W—What should I do? D—D—Do I use my skill points?”

“It looks like you don’t have a choice. Dump them into whichever stat you want—just do it now, and quickly!”

I listened to Max’s urging and quickly opened my stats table. I dumped seventy percent of my points into luck, and the remainder into mana. After that, I asked Lillian to display my stats.

I crossed my fingers and prayed. *Please, please, please, please, please!*

[Gambler Class:

**Attack: Average - High Ranged Damage**

**Defense: Random**

**Attack Speed: Random**

**Magical Attribute: High**

**Mana Level: Average**

**Ranged/Close Combat Skills**

**Luck: Above Average**

**Stamina Drain: Less than Average]**

I was overflowing with joy. *It worked.... It actually worked!*

Not only had those two stats increased, but leveling up my luck stat must have rerolled all of my other stats, too. The damage rate remained random, but my attack was now set to filter out anything that did less than average damage.

Just when I thought things couldn't get any better, Lillian directed my attention to the bottom of my stats table. "Kenny, look! Your stamina drain ... it's ... it's—"

The joy rushing through me burst free from my eyes as tiny tears. "It's less than average! Let's *gooooooo!*" I squealed.

"Ever heard a man scream *that* with joy?" Max whispered.

"No ... no I haven't." Ariel replied.



The three of us bolted out of the cave. We made a run for any cover we could find. One of the lamps sitting on a pile of gold on the other side of the dungeon began to rattle, and Zamuru emerged from it, laughing maniacally. Even though we were facing near certain death, I still couldn't get over how voluptuous her in-game model looked. *I wonder if the game devs have a donation page...? I'd very much like to show my support.*

The skeleton hounds were coming up fast. I started pouring my mana into my fist, preparing for an attack. I glanced behind me to let Max and Ariel know my plan, and then stopped to do a double take. I'd just encountered the last thing I'd ever thought I'd see in this world.

Standing proudly on all four legs and equipped with a bright blue, fashionable mage hat, was very a familiar being.

"*Mr. MooMoo?!*"

"Who is Mr. MooMoo?" Ariel asked, shouting from behind cover.

"My cat!"





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LEVEL 10

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# THE ENDGAME

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V-001

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CONTINUE GAME



Mr. MooMoo, looking as calm as ever, strutted past the three of us and into the center of the dungeon. His fur shone brighter than the whitest of pearls, and his claws appeared freshly trimmed and manicured. Not only that, but the way he licked his lips told me he'd just enjoyed a fresh, filling meal.

I stared in awe as he strolled past us. I thought I was seeing things, so I purchased a cleansing potion and poured it into my eyes, then wiped it away. Nevertheless, he was still there.

“Kenny, what is your cat doing in the game?!” Ariel shouted.

I was just as thunderstruck as she was. “He must have been sucked into the computer behind me. I’m not sure how I didn’t notice him.”

Ariel was just as confused as me. “And how did a cat even manage to survive this long on its own?”

“I have no idea—!”

The skeleton hounds were gaining on us. The force of their strides was enough to shake the huge pile of coins I was hiding behind, interrupting my train of thought.

I peered past the treasure into the middle of the dungeon. There had to be hundreds of them, even more than the last horde we’d faced. I glanced back at Mr. MooMoo. The hounds were getting too close, and if there was anything I knew about dogs, it was that cats were one of their favorite meals.

Max lifted his claymore high above his head. He was getting ready to toss it at the hounds, with the hope of taking a good chunk of them out. I called out for Mr. MooMoo, but he ignored my every cry.

My heart rate was steadily increasing. I knew that if I went out there to save Mr. MooMoo before Max tossed his claymore, there was a high chance that I wouldn’t make it back.

I seized my head with both hands. Thoughts flooded my mind. *What should I do? Is my love for my cat worth more than my own life?*

My heart pounded and sweat seeped down my face as I struggled to make a decision. I started to breathe irregularly just thinking about running into the horde of skeleton hounds unarmed.

The hounds were getting closer. I needed to make a decision, and quickly. Max had begun spinning in a circle and had almost reached his maximum speed. Mr. MooMoo might have been an annoying little brat, but he was *my* annoying little brat. *Oh ... screw it!*

I darted out from behind the coins and made a run for him. I couldn’t let him die, not like this, not here.

Max noticed me and called out: “Kenny! What are you doing? Get back, or you’ll get hit!”

I was a little over ten feet from Mr. MooMoo when the hounds reached him. I jumped for him and stretched my arm as far as I could, hoping to save him, all the while tearing up. “Mr. MooMoo!” I cried in agony.

Just when I thought it was all over, the unexpected happened. Mr. MooMoo opened his tiny feline mouth and began to suck in air. A strong gust of wind started to swirl around his mouth, eventually turning into a full-on whirlwind.

The charging hounds screeched as they started piling into his mouth one by one. Mr. MooMoo’s body started to grow in size as more and more of the hounds got sucked into his gut. The hounds in the back of the pack stopped in their tracks, and now made a dash in the opposite direction, but it was no use. Their attempts to escape were futile.

Mr. MooMoo was sucking in air so fast that the whirlwind had grown in size and increased in power. Nearly every single skeleton hound was flying into his mouth.

I took two steps back before falling to the ground, landing on my backside. I was unable to take my eyes off of him. I was shaken, but also a little appalled. I knew he had a large appetite, but *this* was ridiculous. Even Zamuru seemed taken aback. Her brow had a slight twitch, and she had a look of surprise and disgust on her face.

Mr. MooMoo didn’t stop until every last one of the skeleton hounds had been sucked in. He clamped his jaws shut, trapping them inside the depths of his stomach. By now he had grown almost as large as Zamuru herself. His body had become round and plump, like a fuzzy peach, but his arms and legs had remained the same size, so he teetered in place, unable to walk.

"That's one hell of a cat..." said Ariel, astounded by the sight.

Max butted in. "Dude ... your cat is level fifty."

"What?!" I shouted.

"Yeah. I just had Sylphie bring up his stats. Take a look." Max flipped his screen and pushed his pop-up window in my direction. I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

**[Mr. MooMoo - Lvl: 50 - Generalist Class:**

**Attack: Average - High Ranged Damage**

**Defense: Average - High Ranged Damage**

**Attack Speed: Average - High Ranged**

**Magical Attribute: High**

**Mana Level: Low**

**Ranged/Close Combat Skills**

**Luck: Above Average**

**Stamina Drain: High]**

"But how—?!"

The instant annihilation of her skeleton hound army had pissed off Zamuru and caught her completely on the back foot. She charged up a large fireball and shot it straight at Mr. MooMoo. The fireball ripped through the air so fast that none of us had any time to react.

The fireball plunged into Mr. MooMoo's stomach. His body ate the shot, retracting in almost like rubber, then flexing outwards, launching the fireball right back at her. The fireball blasted her square in the eye. Zamuru screamed in pain as she covered her face with her hands.

The fireball must have upset Mr. MooMoo's stomach. It started to rumble loudly, and before I could process what was happening a giant gust of wind came pouring out of his mouth in the form of a massive burp. With each passing second that he was burping, his body shrunk, not stopping until he had returned to his normal cat size.

He licked his tiny lips then flopped onto his side, where he immediately passed out. I ran over to Mr. MooMoo and gave his tummy a gentle rub. *Poor guy, he must be completely out of stamina.*

This set Zamuru into a full blown rage. She teleported from one lamp to the next, circling the dungeon at a dizzying speed and shooting fireballs everywhere as she did so. I'd never seen her so angry before, not even in the streams I'd watched.

I scooped up Mr. MooMoo and ran back with him into the cave, where I placed him safely down inside. I grabbed a Govayan berry out of my item box and placed it next to him, along with a bowl of water I'd purchased.

I gently rubbed his head and whispered in his ear. "You did a good job, Mr. MooMoo. I'm sure you're probably full by now, but make sure to eat this berry and drink this water when you wake up. It'll help replenish your stamina." I gave him one last belly rub, followed by a tiny kiss on the forehead before returning to the dungeon.

Following my exit from the cave I was met by another barrage of Zamuru's fireballs. Each one hit the ground just inches away from me as I dodged frantically. Some of them even hit the piles of gold, sending coins flying everywhere like shrapnel. If it were possible to take these coins back with me, I'd be running around like a lunatic, collecting them all right now. Imagine the returns on all this gold! *Man ... I hate being a broke college student!*

"Kenny! Look out!"

"Huh?"

Ariel summoned a shield above my head, just in time to prevent a fireball from

obliterating me. “Thanks! I owe you one!” I shouted across to her.

“Consider us even!” she said, smiling and winking.

*God, her character is so hot....*



### **[Max's Point of View]**

Ariel was defending us from Zamuru’s fireballs with an array of defensive spells, and Kenny was running for his life as usual, dodging and weaving around the dungeon floor. We were in the same place as we’d been when we first got here. Though I was grateful to Kenny’s cat for speeding things up with the skeleton hounds, at this rate we were never going to defeat Zamuru.

*If only there were some way we could slow her down.* I stood back and watched Zamuru from a distance, trying to analyze her every move, looking for patterns and anything else worth noting.

That’s when I saw it—there was a tiny lamp not far from where I was standing. The light was reflecting off of it slightly differently than from the rest of the lamps. I squinted my eyes and noticed that there was a fine hair-line crack on the surface of the lamp. *Wait a second.... Is that the crack Kenny made?*

Back when we’d first got here, Kenny had smacked his sword into one of Zamuru’s lamps as a last-ditch effort to immobilize her for a few seconds, buying us critical time to escape.

It was as if a light bulb had blinked on above my head. If my theory was right, Kenny causing damage meant that the lamps could be broken.

Running out into the open was too risky, but luckily for me I didn’t actually have to do that. I lifted my claymore above my head and tossed it like a Viking hatchet at the lamp. The blade went soaring through the air.

I watched from the safety of cover as my claymore hit Zamuru’s lamp, visibly causing it to crack even more before returning to me. The lamp hadn’t fully broken, but it was certainly getting there.

I tossed my claymore again and again until eventually the lamp shattered. The moment it broke Zamuru let out a piercing cry. I watched as her health dropped by *two thousand* points!

“What just happened?” Kenny asked, still busy dodging and calling out to me and Ariel.

I waved at them frantically, shouting back as I did so. “Break the lamps! They’re linked to her health!”



### **[Kenny's Point of View]**

*The lamps are linked to her health....?* I summoned Lillian.

“Hello ... Master.... How can I—”

“I don’t have time for this. Lillian, display Zamuru’s health, and the damage logs!”

“Okay....”

**[Zamuru:**

**Base Health: 50,000 pts**

— 350 pts

— 790 pts

- 550 pts
- 1,322 pts
- 2,000 pts

**Remaining Health: 44,998 pts]**

“Holy shit....” We’d done some damage to her before, but *this* was something else. Between Mr. MooMoo striking her with her own fireball, and Max destroying one of her lamps, we’d knocked off 3322 health points. *If there’s twelve lamps and each of them is worth two thousand points, that’s nearly half of her health.*

I was planning on alerting Max and Ariel, but it appeared they’d already figured it out themselves. I sprinted to the nearest lamp and lifted my sword, preparing to smash it, when all of a sudden Zamuru emerged right in front of me.

Ariel cried out to me, but it was too late. “Kenny!”

Zamuru swatted at my body with her hand. I positioned my sword in a way that blocked her from hitting me, but even so it wasn’t enough to stop the force of her slap from sending me flying into the air.

I was soaring across the dungeon faster than I could process. I grew dizzy and was unable to see where I was heading. I nearly fainted. Ariel noticed this and summoned a shield around my body.

Although her magic was strong, the force of the impact was stronger. Ariel’s shield shattered as I smacked into the dungeon wall. It felt as if every bone in my body had just shattered. Blood spatter shot out of my mouth as I slid down the wall, falling into a pile of coins that toppled in on me right afterwards, burying me alive.

My vision was hazed by the blood running down my face, and the weight of the coins made it nearly impossible to breathe. I gasped for air. At this point, the irritation from the blood had forced my eyes shut, and all I heard was the sound of explosions going off all around the dungeon.



### **[Ariel’s Point of View]**

My lip quivered in disbelief. *T—There’s no way.... Please tell me he’s not dead again. I failed.... I told myself that I was going to protect them, and ... and I failed.*

I stood frozen. I was no better a mage than I was when I got here. My eyes widened as I watched Kenny’s lifeless body sink into the coin pile he’d crashed down into.

At first I was sad, then that sadness quickly turned into self hatred, which then morphed into white-hot rage directed at Zamuru. I screamed, then used every last ounce of mana I had left to shatter as many of her lamps as I could.

*Bang! One lamp exploded!*

*Bang! Another lamp exploded!*

*Bang! And another one!*

The lamps started to shatter one after the other. Zamuru was screaming in agony. The sound of her pain was music to my ears. I wanted her to experience the pain we’d all been through, tenfold!

*Bang! “Four lamps!”*

*Bang! “Five lamps!”*

*Bang! “Six lamps!”*

I’d smashed as many of her lamps that I could before my mana was almost depleted. All this time I was so focused on making her feel pain that I hadn’t even noticed Max calling out to me. He was trying to warn me, but it was already too late.

Zamuru had teleported to a lamp behind me, just out of view. I glanced back at her just in time to watch her fists come crashing down on top of me. I froze and thought it was all over. Then the next thing I knew I'd been teleported to the other end of the dungeon.

My heart was racing and I was hyperventilating. Confusion hit me hard. *Am I dead?* That's when I remembered. I scrambled through my pockets and pulled out the Teleportation Stone. A tear ran down my face as I dropped to my knees, hugging the stone tightly. A notification then popped up on my HUD.

**[Teleportation Stone: Effect in play. Cooldown Timer: 2 minutes 53 seconds remaining. Uses remaining: 9/10.]**

It then hit me: I'd promised myself that I wasn't going to be weak anymore, that I wasn't going to freeze up in fear. I rose to my feet and picked up my staff. I straightened my hat and wiped my running nose. "Zamuru!" I called out. "It's time for you to die!"



### ***[Max's Point of View]***

For a moment I thought I'd lost Ariel and my heart had skipped a beat. If it weren't for that stone of hers, she'd for sure have been dead.

I checked the game's notification logs and noticed that there was no death notification for Kenny. I sighed in relief. "Thank God he's still alive under those coins somewhere—down but not out." *That said, I'm sure with all the damage he took he must have a bleed effect on him. There's no telling if he'll be able to hold onto his life for much longer.*

Thanks to Ariel's blasts, Zamuru was down to roughly thirty-three thousand health points. It was only a little more than half, but it was something. Watching Kenny getting hurt and nearly dying after one of Zamuru's attacks for a second time had lit a fire in Ariel; she was attacking back with every ounce of power she had.

I decided it was best I used this opportunity to check on Kenny. Who knew if I'd ever get a better opening? He had fallen into the pile of gold on the other side of the dungeon. If I wanted to get close to him, I was going to have to improvise.

I tossed my claymore in the opposite direction of where Kenny was. It spun around the dungeon, then came back toward me. Just before it could reach my hand, I jumped into the air.

The claymore flew under my body. I planted my feet on the blade, and took off into the sky. The quick rotation of the sword was enough to cause me to feel like belching pure bile, but I held it in.

I went soaring past Ariel. Time slowed as we locked eyes. I saw the need for revenge within her glance. Time quickly returned to its normal speed.

The claymore crashed into a pile of coins, sending me flying off it. I hit the ground hard and went tumbling about twenty feet or so. My body was bruised with every roll I took, but it was still nothing compared to the hit Kenny had received.

I struggled to my feet. The Defender Ring around my finger started to glow. I quickly turned around, coming face to face with a fireball. The ring's effect had activated, summoning a shield around my body just in time to save me.

I gulped, then exhaled in relief. I wiped the sweat from my brow then turned around. Out of the pile of golden coins emerged a bloody hand—it was Kenny's.

I ran over to him and grabbed a hold of his hand. I dug at the coins with one hand while lifting him with the other. He emerged from the coins covered in blood and bruises, but what was most notable about him wasn't all the damage he'd just taken, but the big pearly white smile stretching across his face.

I pulled him out of the coins entirely, then opened the item shop, where I purchased a pouch of *Healing Dust*. Healing Dust wouldn't do much for him, but it would reverse any bleed effects that he might have.

"Ouch! That *hurts...*" Kenny moaned, as I placed him gently on my lap. "For once in my life I get to finally experience a lap pillow ... and it's from another dude! Why...?"

"Stop complaining," I said, chuckling.

Kenny was a good guy. He was a little weird and had some odd fetishes, but he always knew how to make light of any given moment. *I wish I had that ability.*

I sprinkled the yellow dust onto his body. Immediately his wounds started to close and the blood stopped pouring out of him. "Why the smile?" I asked. "How could anybody be smiling at a time like this?"

"That's simple," he said. "It's because I know how to kill Zamuru."



#### ***[Kenny's Point of View] A few moments earlier...***

I'd thought I was done for. The coins had crushed my body, and I could feel myself slipping into death's strong grip once again. It was only then that I heard a familiar, yawning voice.

"Lillian? Is ... is that you?" I asked, coughing up blood.

"Kenny! Kenny ... you still have your wish! Do you want to use it to save ... yourself? You don't look so ... good. I think you should use it."

*My wish, huh? I had forgotten all about that thing.... "Save myself, huh?"*

If Lillian had asked me that question when I had first gotten here, my answer would have been an immediate yes. But then ... I'd met those two. *There has to be a better way to use my wish ... for all of us.*

I got to thinking about my wish and how I could use it. *I can't wish for us to go home, I can't wish for Zamuru's health to drop, and I can't wish for anything that affects Zamuru directly. What can I use it for? Wait a minute....*

It hit me—the perfect use for my wish. I glanced at the coins piled on top of me, through the blood in my eyes, and saw a thin ray of sunlight peeking through. I took that light as a sign to keep going.

I forced every last bit of strength I had left into pushing my way through the coins. My muscles were screaming and my body was begging for me to stop, but I didn't. I kept on going, pushing until my hand had breached the top of the pile. *It's time to end this.*

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LEVEL 11

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# KENNY'S WISH

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V-001

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CONTINUE GAME



Whatever powder Max had sprinkled all over me was working wonders. The slow depletion of my health bar started to come to a halt, and before I knew it my health had even begun increasing.

My wounds magically vanished and the blood on my body dried up, leaving not a single trace of its existence behind. Even the blood on my clothes had entirely vanished.  
*Woah....*

I scarfed down a couple of Govayan berries and got back to my feet. Ariel was fighting Zamuru all by herself, buying time for Max and me. This was not the time to sit around and rest—I needed to put my plan into action. What I had in mind was a huge gamble, but if it meant that we could possibly defeat Zamuru, then it was a risk I was willing

to take.

“So what’s your plan?” Max asked.

“First we help Ariel. What I have in mind won’t work unless we first take out all of Zamuru’s lamps. How many are left?”

*Boom!*

“What was that?” Max shouted.

“Check the game logs!”

“...Ariel just took out another lamp. That means there’s only four more! I don’t know how she’s still going—if she keeps this up, she’ll end up overworking herself. She can’t possibly have much mana left.”

“I guess it’s time we start pulling our weight, then!”

Max and I sprinted back to where the action was. The light being emitted off of Zamuru’s fireballs was caressing her voluptuous purple curves in ways that caused me to wipe the drool off my lips.

As I got closer to Ariel, I could feel the fatigue radiating off of her. She was covered head to toe in sweat, and her face was beet red. She was breathing heavily, putting her all into destroying Zamuru’s lamps. She’d done more than enough, but to her that would never be the case.

I sprinted forward as fast as I could. She was on the verge of falling down unconscious; her movements made that clear. And just as I had the thought, sure enough she did. After releasing one last attack at Zamuru, Ariel stumbled back and slipped off the giant boulder she’d been standing on.

I was tired, thirsty and only at half my stamina, but I pushed on. *I gotta make it ... I gotta make it!* Her body picked up speed with every stride closer to her I took. I was huffing and puffing with all my might. *Come on! Get there!*

No matter how fast I ran, it wouldn’t be enough to make it to her in time, so I did the only thing I could think of. I dropped down onto my butt and slid across the hard dungeon floor, racing along and reaching my arms out as far as I could, catching Ariel seconds before she plummeted into the ground.

She was barely conscious. I opened the item shop and purchased an *Energizer* potion.

Ariel opened her eyes ever so slightly, blushing as she did so. “W—What’s going on? Did ... did we win?”

“Nope, not yet. But we’re going to, and we need your help,” I said, admiring how cute she looked up close. She really was a beauty.

The popping sound of the cork shooting free from the glass bottle was nice and crisp. I flipped up the bottle and plunked it into her mouth.

Seconds after the liquid hit her lips, her eyes sprang open and she was jittery with energy. She looked like she’d just taken five espresso shots back to back.

“Wh—Wh—what did y—you do to m—m—me?!”

“I popped you full of energy! Now let’s go!”

I turned back, only to find that Max was facing Zamuru head on. He must have gone for one of the lamps, only to be stopped in his tracks by her.

She swatted her hand down, attempting to crush him. Max lifted his claymore high beside him, then swung it underhand, as if he was aiming for a home run in baseball. His blade was engulfed in flames as he took the strike. *That must be the power of his ‘God of Fire’ ring....*

The flames encased Zamuru’s hand as the hit connected. That blow alone had dealt over one thousand damage. Zamuru exploded with anger, but that wasn’t even the worst part.

The exchange of force was enough to overload Max's claymore. The blade shattered moments after he'd defended himself from Zamuru's attack. I watched as the fear dawned on him. He did have the Defender Ring, but there was only a 35 percent chance that it would put up a shield to save him. I needed to act fast.

"Ariel, do you still have that *Teleportation Stone*?"

"Y—yeah."

"Give it to me!"

Ariel handed me the stone. I opened the item shop and purchased the first slingshot I could find. It was a clunky, pathetic little thing, made from sticks and rope, but it would have to do. I knew I was a terrible shot, and I never hit my target. The only difference was that this time I *needed* to.

I shut my right eye and focused on Max. He was running as fast as he could. Zamuru's fiery fist was coming down hard at him. I controlled my breathing, slowing down my heart rate and giving myself maximum focus.

I inhaled one last time, then as I exhaled I let go of the stone. The little leather pouch carried the stone to the other end of the slingshot, shooting it across the dungeon with all its might.

The stone traveled through the air, spiraling downward as it did so. It hit the ground just before reaching Max. A sense of defeat almost consumed me, but then the unimaginable happened, and the Teleportation Stone ricocheted off the floor and clunked Max directly in the face, busting him right in the nose.

"Bwah—!" he screamed, as Zamuru's fist came crashing down.

A cloud of dust arose from under her fist. Max was nowhere in sight.

"Did he make it?" asked Ariel, frantically.

"I don't see him."

The sudden touch of an ice cold palm patting each of our shoulders scared the living hell out of me and Ariel.

"Yeah. I made it," Max said.

Ariel quickly turned around and hugged Max. We signed in relief. "What are you going to do now?" I asked. "You have no weapon."

"I won't lie. It sucked seeing that claymore shatter. It was my favorite sword, but I guess that's what the item shop is for."

Max purchased another claymore, similar to his previous one, only this one didn't have a return ability attached to it.

We ran back onto the battlefield. Ariel summoned a large shield above us. We used the safety of her shield to take out the remaining lamps, until there was only one remaining —Zamuru's main lamp.



Zamuru had a little under eighteen-thousand health points left. Our bringing her health down so low had caused her to shift into phase two of her boss fight. Her attack patterns were no longer the same, as she could no longer teleport from lamp to lamp. Instead

... it got *worse*.

Zamuru let out a loud roar before pounding both her fists into two large piles of gold on either side of her. Out from the piles of gold she pulled two giant, ruby-encrusted greatswords. Each sword was freshly sharpened and plated with gold.

Zamuru stood tall with a sword in either hand, smiling smugly as if she'd just won. The golden chains hanging from her breasts and her arms swayed abruptly as she lifted one of her swords, pointing it at us. And for the first time since we'd been here, she spoke. It was only five words, but the sound of her voice nearly brought me to my knees.

"It's time you all *died*!"

Zamuru slammed both of her swords into the ground. The floor began to crumble, and a shockwave of rock, golden coins, and debris was sent flying in our direction.

Ariel summoned about six shields in front of us, each of which broke under the pressure, except for the very last one. She cried out in pain. "I can't hold it much longer! Somebody do something!"

Without thinking, I cast a spell. I envisioned the bubble gum ball that'd saved us from dying way back. I prayed that my luck would allow it, and it did. Ariel's barrier broke just as my spell took effect. The three of us were encased in a sticky ball of bubble gum and sent flying back.

When the bubble popped, we were all left sitting in another sticky-pink mess. I quickly got up and cleaned myself off, pulling the gum out from behind my ears and from my hair. Although Zamuru hadn't reached the level of health I'd hoped for, it was time I put my plan into action. I had no choice.

"Ariel! How long until you charge up your most powerful spell?"

"Uhh ... about one minute."

"Got it. Start charging it now! Max, I need you to get me close to Zamuru. Toss your claymore."

"But this one doesn't have a return effect!" he exclaimed, confused and worried.

"I know. I don't need to come back. I just need to get there." I was serious, and he could tell. The look on my face was enough to silence any further concerns he had. He knew that I wasn't going to take no for an answer.

Max spun his body as fast as his legs would allow it. After reaching his top speed, he released the claymore. He let it go in a way where it wasn't spinning. That made it easier for me to snatch a hold of the handle. The moment I grabbed it, my feet were lifted from the ground and I was sent flying in Zamuru's direction.

I inhaled and shut my eyes. If what I was about to do didn't work, then I was going to die. I called out for Lillian, who was shocked upon being summoned.

"Master! What is going on?"

"Lillian.... I'd like to use my wish."

The world had slowed down. I was catching every little detail of my surroundings at once. From the scratches under Zamuru's right eye, to the golden coins rattling on the ground. I saw it all.

Zamuru's swords were crashing down upon me. She'd swung them in an 'X' like formation, hoping to slice me in the center of it. With her current swing, she was right on path for a direct hit.

You see, I'd thought about every single possibility of how I could use my wish. I had been told that I couldn't use my wish to affect the boss directly, but nobody ever said anything about affecting the player. "Lillian. I wish ... that I won't miss."

I let go of Max's claymore and positioned myself to strike with my sword. I was flying through the air, sword held high, ready to end it all.

Zamuru's blades crossed over one another. I should have been caught directly in the middle of them. My body felt light and started to fade, turning transparent enough to where I could see the floor through my own skin.

Next thing I knew, I'd begun to phase through Zamuru's swords. At first she was smiling, thinking she'd gotten me. Only after seeing me phase through her swords entirely did her eyes widen. Fear had struck her as she realized what had just happened.

My body returned to a solid phase. I gripped my sword with all my might as I soared through the air, directly at the center of her glorious purple chest.

Every fiber in my body was rolling over, knowing what I was about to do. I slammed my sword into the center of her breasts, screaming with all my might as I did so. I was betting everything I had, praying that this would work.

The attack itself only did about eight hundred damage. Zamuru screamed with pain. She then dropped her swords and tried to pull me free of her chest. Before she could grab me, though, her body froze, and The Walker's immobilizing ability took effect.

I let go of the handle. As I fell to the ground, I called out to Ariel: "You have twelve seconds! Light her up!"

Ariel's entire body was shaking, and the mana she was pouring into her staff could be seen wrapping around her arms. She screamed with all her might as a giant white beam came breaching out of her staff. The spell was so powerful that the orb on top of her staff shattered the moment she cast it.

The beam of light hit my sword. The spell ran through the handle, up the blade, and dispersed throughout Zamuru's body. I crashed landed into a pile of coins, my body taking a hit, but I was so focused on what was happening that I didn't even notice.

The mana swarming inside of Zamuru was too much for her body to handle. Her skin started to tear, exposing the bright light from Ariel's spell within.

The Walker's effect had worn off just in time for Zamuru to cry out in pain one last time before her entire body exploded.

A single tear fell from my right eye as I watched the love of my life shatter into nothing but a cloud of stardust. I was filled with both joy and pain.

"Yessssssssssssssss!" Our cheers erupted, filling and echoing through the dungeon for what felt like minutes.

The three of us ran to each other, meeting in the middle of the dungeon where we dropped to our knees in a giant group hug. Even Mr. MooMoo had joined us, running his tiny cat body through our legs and purring up a storm.

Tears and snot fell from our faces as a wave of emotion washed over us. We'd done it. We had actually *done* it. The game was finally over.

"You idiot! That was so stupid and dangerous. You almost died!" Max said, sniffling.

"How did you know that would work?" Ariel asked, wiping her nose.

"I didn't, but I trusted you guys and I used the information you gave me to do what I did—after all, you two played the tutorials, so you knew all the rules, what you could and couldn't do. I just had to piece the information together in order for us to win."

I smiled; they smiled back. We cried for a little longer. The stardust that once was Zamuru's body swirled above us and slowly came together to form a shining ruby key, which then floated over to us.

"Go ahead, Kenny. You should be the one to grab it." said Ariel.

Max nodded in agreement. I looked at them. The only thing running through my mind was how grateful I was to have the two of them by my side. I wiped one last tear from my face and grabbed the key.

In an instant, the three of us—and Mr. MooMoo—were teleported to a white room,

similar to the reward rooms in the minigames. Only this time there was no treasure chest. Instead there was a single door, with one word above it: ‘Exit.’

“This is it guys … back to reality.” I said. *Or so I hope.*

“Yeah.... Say, do you think we’ll ever see each other in the real world?” asked Max.

“I guess there is only one way to find out.” said Ariel, smiling.

I slid the key into the door lock and turned the knob. There was nothing but a black void ahead of us. We grabbed each other’s hands and stared into the abyss.

“Let’s go home, guys.”

With each other, hand in hand, we set off into the void.

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END

# EPILOGUE

GAME

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END GAME



*Ring! Ring! Ring!*

“Just one more minute...” I groaned, rolling over in my bed and tucking myself deeper under my blankets.

“Meow!” Mr. MooMoo wasn’t having it. He clawed at my face, forcing me from my slumber. I swatted at him and then rolled over to my alarm clock to press the snooze button. Then my eyes blasted open again.

“Nine o’clock! Shit! I’m gonna be late!”

I darted out of bed, snatched my clothes off the dresser, stuffed my legs into my pants and raced out the door, stopping only to pour some cat food into Mr. MooMoo’s bowl. *I won’t make the mistake of not feeding him again!*



I wiped the sweat from my brow as I ran through the streets of Tokyo nonstop until I reached my destination. I turned the corner of a busy intersection and sighed with relief, knowing I'd made it just in time.

I walked through the shiny glass doors of one of the highest-rated restaurants that I'd ever been in, where I was greeted by the hostess.

"Hello. How may I help you?"

"Hi. I have a reservation. I'm meeting some friends here—oh, actually, that's one of them right there!" I said, pointing into the dining room.

"Great! Please follow me, right this way."

I followed the hostess to a very classy looking table. "Max!"

"Kenny!" Max got up from his chair and snatched me in his arms. He was just as jacked in real life as he was in the game.

"And who's this?" I asked.

"This is my little sister, Freya. Once she heard I was meeting up with you, she begged me to come along."

"Big bro, *this* is Kenny?! The guy you talk so much about? My brother says that you're a real hero, but I don't know if I see it ...."

Max's face turned beet red. "Hey now! Be nice, Freya."

I laughed. "Don't worry about it. It's nice to meet you too, Freya."

We took our seats and started chatting. The sound of silverware being placed on our table interrupted our small talk. I glanced to my left.

"One teriyaki chicken dish, and one karaage bowl—the usual for you two."

"A fine meal served from the chef herself. Who could ask for anything better?" said Max.

"But who's the steak for?"

"It's for you, Ariel. Come on, join us! Today, we celebrate your new promotion to sous chef!" I lifted my glass and motioned Ariel to sit.

Ariel blushed. "You know I can't. I'm working!"

"The food's on me!" I said, smiling with my most convincing smile.

"Ohhhh, alright. But only for a few!" she said, laughing.

We dug into the food, enjoying each other's company. We shared some laughs and told tales of our cripplingly busy college lives.

*Buzz! Buzz! Buzz!*

Each of us had gotten a notification at the same time. "That's strange." I pulled out my phone. It was a notification from Manticore.

**[Dungeon Crawlers 3: Test of Courage - Check out our latest update....]**

I scrolled down the page, reading every last word as I did so. Manticore had added a free DLC that featured a brand new level—and a new final boss supposedly harder than Zamuru.

**[Introducing Ushka: Zamuru's evil older sister.]**

My eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. I thought Zamuru had been hot, but holy smokes.... Ushka was not only stronger and much more powerful, but even bustier, too! I could feel the money for all of her merchandise flying out of my wallet.

"Guys, look!" said Max.

**[The first party to take down Ushka will receive a cash prize of 700 Million Yen!  
So ready your weapons, players, and let the hunt begin!]**

My eyes shot up from my phone. “You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking....”

Max nodded. “Yes, I am.”

Ariel slapped his shoulder. “Are you crazy?! We nearly died last time. We can’t go back!”

“Hey now. Seven hundred million yen is a lot of money. Enough for you to open your own restaurant.” Max said, in an enticing voice.

“Okay, I’m in.”

“Ariel?!”

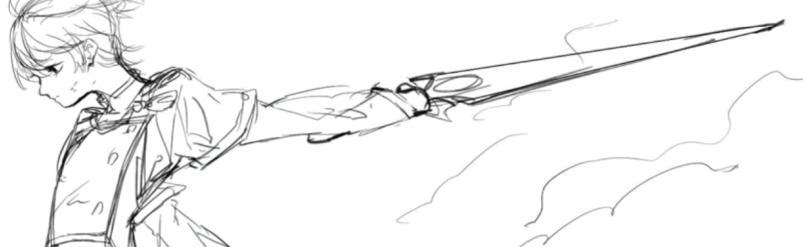
“What...? It is a lot of money. So, Kenny—are you with us?”

I looked down at my phone. I took one look at Ushka, then glanced back up. A smile formed on my lips. “Of course I’m in.”

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## CONCEPT ART

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# Kenny

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CONCEPT ART

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Max

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CONCEPT ART

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Arieb

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CONCEPT ART

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Lillian

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**CONCEPT ART**

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**Zamuru**

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# **THANK YOU TO THE FOLLOWING:**

**Daniel Rego  
Alvin Giang  
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Daniel Luskey  
Robert McLean  
Jon Estel  
Kenny Lim  
Eli Horowitz  
Santos Sandoval  
Niels Boumans**



# PATCH NOTES

.....VERSION 001.....

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Till next time. Much Love,  
- Sage



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