The girl moved through the long grass. The wind pushed the prairie grasses against her face and wove them into her hair. When she was close enough to see the lion breathing, she hoisted up her iron pike and lunged.

A hand deftly caught the pike around the middle. A boy had suddenly appeared, sitting astride the lion. He looked at her unblinkingly, his gaze telling her he would not hesitate to kill her, and wrenched the pike from her grasp. She reached for her Assassin’s Knife—just one quick slice at the lion’s chest would suffice—but the boy suddenly thrust her pike towards her, and by reflex she somersaulted backwards, barely avoiding it.

“You win,” she said flatly. “Kill him.” She wondered why the lion had not attacked either of them, but was staring away, caught in a daydream.

He did not answer. They continued to study each other. He had a confident face, with a sparkling amulet of a lion hanging around his neck and the wind tumbling his hair like the grasses in the dry season. His simple yellow shirt highlighted his powerful form beneath.

“You’re a brave girl,” he told her, “What do you call yourself?”

“Huntress one. You?”

“Lionelle.”

“Lionel?” It was rare to meet one with a common name, without a number.

“Lion*elle*.”

She eyed him warily. The lion turned to look at her, his mane blowing in unison with the boy’s. She considered her options. Now that she had been caught, if she tried to run the lion might go after her. The boy seemed to have control over him.

“Are you the—?” she started but Lionelle slid smoothly down the lion’s back and pressed a firm hand over her mouth, narrowing his left eye in the universal warning of breaking the Rule. He let his hand wander over her face and caress her hair before withdrawing it in his slow and steady manner. It was not the stiff touch of the inanimate.

“Who are you, the Lion King?”

His expression relaxed, but he didn’t answer.

She inched closer, her heart pounding. She touched the lion’s fur but he didn’t respond, probably thinking he was safe under the boy’s protective touch. She stroked the lion with her left hand, her right hand slowly rifling through her pocket, going through her crystal of paralysis, her slingshot, her healing potion 5, and her Assassin’s Knife. She fingered the crystal. One quick flick out of her pocket and then she could finish it with her knife. The boy’s face held that same confident foresight, like he knew what she was going to do. Still, she thought, he wouldn’t react fast enough to that flick of her wrist. She felt her blood pounding through her fingers, two pulses for every slow rhythmic rise of the lion’s body.

He grabbed her right elbow and threw her aside. An arrow floated in the air where she had been, moving slower and slower towards the beast. A blue shimmer in the air a claw-length from the lion swallowed it.

A boy about the same age was running towards them, full-tilt, his arms high above his head, two full-length swords waving, his hands buckling under them and then lifting them again, like an invisible puppeteer was gripping the tips of his swords and shaking them. His shirt was tie-dyed with red and blue.

“For democracy!” he shouted, pointing his two swords in front of him like tusks.

The cry was taken up as the field around them came alive with young boys, waving their maces like they were maracas. One had a Harvard sweater. One’s shirt read Abercrombie. Another wore a tie, flapping uselessly around his neck.

Lionelle’s left eye narrowed.

“No longer shall this tyrant stop our rightful crusade to the Next Level!”

Lionelle calmly rubbed the back of his lion amulet. She caught a glint of blue. The first attackers hit the shield with their maces; blue lightning shot up their weapons and up their arms, sizzling through their chest as they went fuzzy and exploded in a shower of pixels. She smelled burnt toast.

“Keep going! Exhaust his defenses!” the leader said, as he stood a ways from the action, waving his swords for all to see. Tens of boys continued to pour out, unraveling their Camouflage, shouting battle cries and dying in a glorious blue light.

Lionelle tossed a pink crystal to her and gave her back her pike. It was a seeing stone, one that would share the user’s items and knowledge with the recipient. She opened her eye wide and thrust it in, feeling that puff of wind she always got during an eye exam.

She saw the glow from Lionelle’s amulet—it was a Constructed Item, crafted by hand and imbued with the power of several different magical objects. His pockets glittered with a rainbow of magical spoils, projecting their light onto several wards hanging in the air; the attackers simply vanished when they hit them.

She saw the gap in between the wards. The attackers paid no attention to her; it would take only a second for her to slip her knife through the gap and into the lion’s chest. Was Lionelle aware of this?

As his defensive power drained away and the lights from his stones darkened, Lionelle mounted the lion, drew his sword, and gave a terrifying roar. The lion echoed his roar and shook his mane as he stood up, tearing off one head after another, the pixels dissolving in his mouth, leaving him free to grab the next attacker. Several of the weapons made contact, opening up bloody gashes in the lion’s side and turning the fur red.

A blow from a battle axe sent Lionelle down, leaving both his knees shimmering with the silver-white hue of bleeding life force, before the lion ripped apart the attacker’s body. The leader, suddenly the only one left, came at the lion with both his swords thrust forwards, right towards the widening gap between the wards.

Still sitting on the ground, she swung her pike from below, ramming it into the attacker’s chest. As the explosion sounded, a fire ball, leaf stone, and healing potion appeared where he had been and dropped to the ground amidst a sudden silence.

Biscuits and rainbow-colored orbs littered the ground. She looked at Lionelle, who was unable to rise. It was like that game when she and her cousins fought with foam swords, that whenever one part of her body got hit she could no longer move it. She would cheat so badly—after all it was hard to tell who hit what—but there was no cheating here.

His eyes asked no mercy; she could see through the pink stone the remnants of his wards flapping in the wind, liable to rip upon the slightest poke.

“That wasn’t the way the game is meant to be played,” she said.

He reached up to grab her wrist, narrowing his eyes dangerously. “I do not know this game you speak of,” he said coldly.

She smiled as she offered him her healing potion 5. “I have never seen such odd people in Hyfralia,” she said, “who wear such strange shirts and shout such odd slogans.”

When he had recovered, they collected the fallen objects that were worth carrying, and rode on the lion to Lionelle’s cave, at the lion’s slow, confident pace. With the seeing stone, she could see a glimmer showing through the lion’s skin, no doubt of his Heart Piece, which, if joined with the six she already had in her pouch, would grant her access to the next level. She knew what she had suspected all along; this was the boss level for the First Realm, and the lion the sole beast that she had to defeat. If she wanted to kill the lion it would be easier to do so after she earned Lionelle’s trust. But she also knew that she would not, as long as he was protecting him.

“Don’t you ever wonder what’s in the—” She hesitated. There was no natural way for the levels to figure into game dialogue; no one commented on the way that people suddenly disappeared when they touched a heart piece. “Afterlife?”

“I like this life too much to care about what comes after,” he said, “But I do know that if this noble creature chooses to guard its gates then I will protect him with my life.”

In the morning they woke to the sound of the breeze playing with the amulets hanging by the cave entrance, jingling the finely wrought metal leaves and flowers, twisting the string holding the squirrel skulls around each other like tetherballs, the faces clopping together for a second like they were kissing, before the wind mercilessly ripped them apart again. A neat pile of items often waited for them by the cave entrance—“Gifts from the spirits,” Lionelle told her, but she knew they were the only remains of silent midnight attackers who had been overpowered by the protective spells. It was only because she had absorbed the seeing stone that she could see the multitude of traps surrounding the entrance, and the crevice between two planes of crackling green light that barely allowed her to squeeze through sideways without being harmed.

In the afternoons she had marveled at the sight of Lionelle riding after a herd of gazelles on the lion’s back, leaping off to impale one when he was still in mid-air, until he taught her how to do it herself. When they tired they sat against the lion’s back, under the shadow of a baobab, taking turns napping while the other kept watch. Other travelers would ambush them only to find themselves whisked away by their wards, or sometimes a whole group would come, the leader shouting vengeance, and the two of them would run into battle together—killing was exhilarating when it led to cascades of snowy pixels rather than fountains of blood, and when the pain of injuries was replaced by simple numbness instantaneously curable by a healing potion.

In the evenings they sat on the edge, feet dangling over the cliff at the edge of the world, watching the sun sink into the solid layer of fog beneath. They took turns throwing the Biscuits (food value 1) that had piled up outside the cave the previous night, trying to aim for the setting sun. She imagined that these clouds separated their level from the previous one, and some astounded traveler below would see biscuits falling from the heavens.

 After dinner, Lionelle showed her how to fashion amulets from the items that they had picked up during the day, whether it was magical stones from a failed attack or a Mystical Gazelle Horn—for every one amulet that was drained of power, they made two more, until they had enough hanging from the ceiling to kill off an entire attacking army.

One morning, almost two weeks after she had met Lionelle, she found herself awake early. The night winds had died down into a breeze barely strong enough to touch the wind chimes to one another, so that she could not tell if the faint twinkles were from them or from her own imagination. She looked back at Lionelle’s sleeping form—he had kindly offered his own rush-bed to her, and slept on the floor with nothing but a pile of palm-leaves for a pillow, insisting that he preferred a hard surface anyway.

She turned to the entrance to see a gradual pre-dawn grayness sifting in, tugging the faint green sheen of the wards into a silent aurora borealis display, according to some rule of magic or optics beyond her understanding.

Feeling unusually awake, and confident that Lionelle would not wake up until midmorning, she slipped out of their dwelling and headed towards the eastern cliffs.

She wondered how long she would stay with him. Perhaps he had infinite time to spend here but she did not. If she made a rush for it today perhaps she could still complete the rest of the levels on time. She shook her head. It was a traitorous thought that would most likely be burned away by the rising sun and Lionelle’s morning smile.

She heard a whizzing noise and half a second later a rough nest of ropes slammed into her head, its momentum carrying throwing her to the ground. She tried to rise but the net was too heavy. She raised her right hand, exposing her bracelet of knotted pea-pods, the peas dangling like emerald beads, kept moist and evergreen by the force of her own heartbeat. Sensing its owner in danger, green mist leaked out and formed an eerie, luminescent cumulus cloud that wobbled in anticipation of the foe’s next move. She peered through a gap in the coils of rope surrounding her head into a familiar face.

“Had to repay your favor,” he said.

“I have wards,” she warned.

“I have counter-wards.” A gloved hand squeezed the green cloud. Sniggles of electricity climbed up the fingers and died in the thick leather hide.

“Get it over with, then.”

She heard a snap of fingers and had to bite her lip to avoid screaming as the ropes around her head turned into snakes and burrowed into the ground. When she opened her eyes a few seconds later, she found she was still alive, and the boy was offering his hand. She refused it, preferring the extra three seconds it took her to get up on her own. She assessed him as she did: he wore a coarse brown cloak, though his tie-dyed shirt of the American flag stuck out at the waist. Gone was his mob of scapegoats; gone were his dual swords, replaced by a simple quiver of arrows and a bow. He fingered one of them in his hand.

“Vortex arrows,” he said. He showed her how the orange mushroom-cap head would pop open and release its net when it closed in on an enemy. “Paralysis mode.”

He spun the head 180° and removed his hand to reveal a smooth concave arrow tapering to a four-inch needle point. It was blue, the blue of a deep mountain lake at sundown. “Lethal mode.” He grinned.

She drew back involuntarily in fright. “That’s… not right.”

“Not your ordinary medieval arrow, eh? Times are changing,” he said, “They’re releasing new weapons and enemies every day. To keep the game balanced.”

“Is it not balanced now?”

He turned around, smiled. That is, his constant half-leer widened to expose more teeth. “No one has advanced past the first level in three weeks now.” He beckoned. “Come. Walk with me.”

“Why didn’t you kill me?”

“What have I to gain? You’re not the one with the final Heart Piece.”

“You want me to help you defeat Lionelle? You can forget about it.”

“I won’t need to,” he replied. He had climbed over a hill, was walking down the opposite slope, talking to her without turning his head. “You’ve never seen the sunrise here, have you? Only the sunset.”

She felt her chest heaving, her mind suddenly panicked at what enemies the next day would bring. Take it one at a time, she told herself. He might have clever words, but he was a fool to walk away with his back turned. She had the advantage of height, if she flung the Assassin’s knife from the hilltop.

Only the prairie’s emptiness greeted her. A hand carelessly flicked the knife from her right hand and pulled at her. A gasp caught in her throat.

“There’s more to the game than killing,” he said, “You should know that.”

In the dawn light, she read the Weapons Catalogue Jake12295 had thrust in front of her.

Arrows: regular, barbed, poison, fire, water, magic, vortex, *nuclear*: *Rarity: one-of-a-kind. Situated in Mount Doom, behind a plethora of dragon guards. Level 1, sector 5, secret area in cave accessible from underwater tunnel. One use.*

She snatched the manual and tossed it towards the rising sun. It bounced off some invisible wall at the edge of the world before plummeting to the clouds below. A bit too slowly.

“Shabby physics, if you ask me.”

She found him flipping through the pages of the same book. He met her questioning gaze.

“Can’t destroy it, it’s not an in-game item,” he said, showing her the cover. Heroes of Lorelya Game Guide, updated September 1, 2020, $20.

If Lionelle were here, she knew, he wouldn’t bother with the Look. He’d roar and ride his lion straight into Jake12295’s back, butting him straight over the cliff, and watch his lanky arms try to combat the shabby effects of gravity.

But here she was, unarmed and alone with only an outdated defensive amulet.

“Realist,” she said, scornfully. She tried to smack his head but felt his wards bubbling like hot soup around her fingers. “Ow.”

He smiled tolerantly.

“Fine, live in your game world. But you know your days here are numbered. After all, fall semester’s starting in a few days. And you’ll never see Lionelle again.”

*How did he know?* She thought. Perhaps something in her face had given it away, when she’d seen the date, September 1st, reminding her that the days had passed too quickly.

“He’ll always be here.”

“Times are changing. He can last maybe a week with the new weapons, but I don’t see any more than that. But now, you’ve fallen in love with him, haven’t you? He thinks you can stay here forever, but you know better, don’t you?”

She declined to respond, preferring to stare at the rising sun, seeing how long her eyes could last. It wasn’t real, anyway.

Something clattered on her foot. It was a giant transistor, two inches long, with eight spidery legs and a single blinking red light. On its back, “.exe” was painted in white.

“You might as well enjoy your last days here,” Jake said. “This device here, gives you and anyone in close proximity a full human form. That means, all your body parts.” He smirked. “Even the undesirable ones.”

When she finally turned her head Jake was walking away along the cliffs, his arms swinging with inane cheerfulness.

“Take it if you’d like. Kick it off the edge if you’d like. It’s all the same to me.”

“Lionelle, I want you.”

“Please, don’t say that,” he said, as he lazily opened his eyes. Something flashed in his eyes—a realization that her face was close to his, too close.

She had already brought down his pants. She had already taken him inside her. All he could manage was a soft “oh” before he came. She moaned in pleasure.

She awoke to a deathly still noon air. Her shirt had been slowly soaking in sweat as she slept. A bowl of porridge had been set in front of her. Lionelle was resting against the lion’s back, languidly waving a palm frond, sending the lion’s carnivorous stench, amplified by the sweltering heat, floating over on an almost imperceptible current of air.

“Lionelle, I have to go in three days.”

“Go if you must.”

“Lionelle, before I go, will you tell me who you are?”

“What is it, Huntress1? You know I'm Lionelle. With the *elle.*”

“No, who are you, in real life?”

“But this is real,” he said, but, even with his face was in shadow against the glaring brightness, she saw the question stamped on it, that, entrapped by his own rule, he could not ask.

“I don't even know your real name. I might never see you again.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“What is your real name? At least give me a phone number, an email.”

“I don't know what an email is,” he said coldly.

“For God’s sake, I want to know who I fucked!”

“You don't want to know,” he said so quietly she almost couldn't hear.

She picked up her pike, bashed it against the ground.

“Look, if you're going to be like this, then I'm going on to the next level,” she said, “And you can sit here and guard your empty cave."

She lunged straight at the lion’s unprotected flank.

Up in a flash, he smacked her cheek as she was in midair, sending her veering off into the right wall. The pike burrowed into the stone while the blunt end caught her in the stomach as she fell to the floor. Her cheeks were on fire, her abdomen was numb, and her eyes stung with the slicing pain of glass. She heard a brief tinkle. The pain was pulsing, like a little kid was holding the dials and turning it from min to max, to some regular rhythm—whose frequency, she realized, matched exactly that of the device in her pocket.

“A piece of advice: Never announce your intentions before an ambush.”

She turned to the entrance, saw him and the lion sliding through the usual crevice. Except that there were no wards. Not a single one. She looked around in panic and then saw the pink slivers of glass on the floor—shattered remains of the seeing stone that had dislodged from her eye. Unless she chose suicide, she was now effectively Lionelle’s prisoner.

Two throbbing hours of pain later, she saw a beast ambling slowly towards the hideout. It was the lion, but his back was riderless. When he got closer she could see a long gash on his foreleg. Nevertheless, he carried himself proudly, as if he were choosing to walk slowly rather than being forced to from the pain – although, what was pain to it besides a variable in a computer program?

The lion paused in front of the cave, waiting for its eyes to focus, before ambling in, making himself as thin as possible so he could pass through the wards. He must have memorized it, she thought, as he had no seeing stone – she caught herself again, of course memorization was easy for an object in a computer program.

She scrambled up and prepared for the lion’s assault but instead he dropped a piece of bark from his mouth and sat down to lick his wounds.

She picked it up slowly and read the flaky charcoal.

“Kill him.”

Her heart went cold as she looked up into the lion’s uncomprehending eyes. She picked up her trusty pike and pointed it at him; he sat down and looked back at her warily. She locked her eyes at the lion’s heart – one seventh of which was the final Heart Piece.

“He’d never tell me to kill you,” she said, lowering her weapon, “It must be a trick.”

But then she found the loop of string wrapped around the piece of bark, with the amulet of a lion attached. It was still as golden as ever but the eyes, normally glowing with a mystical green-blue, had lost their luster.

It told her everything. Lionelle was up against the new enemies, maybe dead. The lion was lost. He would rather have the lion killed by her than by Jake.

“Take me to him,” she said urgently. She jumped astride the lion and he dutifully stood up and retraced his steps. However, they had not gone two steps before she slid off the lion’s back as if she had hit an invisible wall. She felt a burst of pain and turned to see the transistor throbbing. When she closed her eyes she could still see it, a red hot ember imprinting itself on her eyelids. She flung herself towards the retreating lion but collapsed to the ground again in agony. The pain subsided only when she crawled back to the transistor. She placed it in her pocket and hurried uneasily after the lion.

If dead bodies didn’t disappear so conveniently, the ground would be littered with them. Several of the great baobab trees had been reduced to charred trunks, their limbs vaporized and their leaves nothing but a fine gray ash settling like dew on the grass. The prairie was cut with swathes of black; she recognized them as the telltale signs of fire magic, which, by the radius of the burns, must have been quite powerful. She ran through the desolate heat looking for Lionelle but found only unnatural-looking arrows of various shapes embedded in the grass. She pulled them out and crammed them into her bag as she scanned her surroundings for their owners.

Someone yanked her hand down, and placed a hand roughly over her mouth. The air shimmered before her and the nothingness became Lionelle with a large transparent cloak draped over his head enclosing the two of them.

“Invisibility cloak,” he explained. Then, drawing his head back, “I’m sorry.”

He was bending over slightly, so that the amulets hanging from his neck blew against her face. They were cold and shapeless. All depleted of power, she realized.

“Lionelle, you’re okay!” she said in relief. “But what have they done to the prairie.”

Wordlessly, he took each of the arrows from her and snapped them in half before flinging them on the ground in anger. The lion stared at him impassively through his teepee of invisibility.

“I told you to leave,” he said.

“Why, Lionelle. Why?”

He shook her roughly by her shoulders.

“Because you don’t belong here! You said so yourself.”

“But the *lion*.”

Lionelle tore her pouch from his grasp. Six Heart Pieces tumbled out. He notched the last arrow – a barbed black one that he couldn’t break – to his bow and aimed it at the beast. Still looking at the place where he had caught a brief glimpse of Lionelle, probably, before he lowered the cloak. His eyes infinitely loyal, conditioned by machine learning: Lionelle equals friend.

As Lionelle lifted the cloak to fire, though, her pea-pod amulet, triggered by Lionelle’s theft, finally activated; a green sticky cloud sent him tumbling backwards. She released the cloud as both of them fell against the grass.

The six Heart Pieces were now, however, laid bare on the grass in front of the lion.

He bent down to sniff at them. They watched entranced, elbows against the ground, as he lowered himself onto the grass and slowly pushed the pieces toward his chest with his front legs, to join the final Heart Piece glowing in the his breast. Thousands of blue dots swirled in a cylinder around his body before he, along with all seven Heart Pieces, vanished.

She looked at Lionelle with a confusion that slowly turned to delight.

“We’ve freed him. We’ve freed him!”

A few seconds later, another lion materialized out of thin air, and calmly ambled along. Game mechanics: when the guardian of the Heart Piece is gone, another is randomly generated on the map.

Lionelle unslung his own bag of Heart Pieces to hand to Huntress1. “Well, let me not keep you,” he said. His words lingered regretfully in the air.

“But it’s still a lion.”

“Not the same one,” he said, “This is an impostor. A monster.” But she heard his strain: the distinction was artificial; the lion was the same, down to every pixel.

She pushed the bag away. “You’re coming along too.”

“There’s only one set.”

“We kill one of the other players. We gather all our amulets. We have the Cloak. They can’t shoot us if they don’t see us.” Her voice rose as it fought against Lionelle’s deathly silence. “Don’t you see? All our problems are solved. We get to the next level, and in the next world our lion be waiting to help us.”

She laid her head on Lionelle’s shoulder and looked up. He moved backwards slightly so her head rested uncomfortably against his collarbone. His face remained hostile.

“I mean, follow him to the afterlife,” she said, chagrined at her lapse into out-of-game vocabulary.

“There is no afterlife. Only suicide.”

She drew back.

“I couldn’t kill any of them,” he said, looking into his lap. “They killed each other. I barely got through alive.”

“We’ll die trying if we have to,” she said fiercely. “If you think this is beautiful,” she gestured to the rolling summer prairie, “Wait till you see the other worlds. This is just an in-between place. They scoured the whole Earth looking for inspirational scenery to build this realm. There’s the Everglace Mountains,” she remembered from the game guide she’d flipped through before entering, three weeks ago, “That climbs up all the way into outer space.”

He looked away. “Is that any place for a lion?”

“It’ll be a lucky lion to see the world.” When he didn’t respond, she continued, “Don’t you see, Lionelle, I don’t want to go. I want to go with you.”

“You don’t want me, not after what I did to you.”

“But I do, Lionelle, I do.” She said slowly, painfully, “We go together or not at all.”

“You would stay for me?” his voice was almost inaudible.

She threw her hair back. “Yes,” she said embarrassed.

He looked down at her, his mouth slightly agape; when she looked into his eyes she saw the eyeballs twitching, trying to find a way to rationalize what she just said. Discomforted, she looked away and put her hand in her pouch, feeling around idly. She closed her fingers around a cool, weightless object at the very bottom.

It was a gold pocket watch that she hadn’t touched since game start. She flipped it open. “I have two days and eleven hours left,” she said. Then, “If we stay, it would just be two days and eleven hours. But if we were to go, and if living could be calculated by intensity,” she said, her voice dropping down to a whisper, “it’ll be like we’ve experienced a whole life.”

The scene playing out on the horizon cut her short. Three arrows shot consecutively toward the lion, giving rise to sudden walls of flame as they brushed against the grass. The lion twisted his body to avoid them, then thrust his paw at the youth’s throat faster than he should have been able to. One amulet after another sent geysers of jeweled droplets into the lion’s roaring face. A flash and he was on his feet again. She recognized the glint: that of an Assassin’s Knife. A gash spread across the lion’s chest but he was still up and breathing. He took up a fighting pose. The boy exploded in a shower of sparks. A metal arrow dropped down from where his back had been. She looked to Lionelle but he had not moved. When she turned back, Jake was picking up the spoils. He strolled away past a hilltop. The lion lay down to sleep.

“That’s not right,” she said, “When did lions become so powerful?”

“Can’t you see? There is no doorway to the next world,” Lionelle said.

“Why didn’t he kill the lion?” she asked. “Why didn’t he?”

She stared at her watch, then the lion. *Tick tick tick*. Suddenly it was knocked from her hand.

“Stay here with me.” His gruff voice had lost its usual nobility of a desert prince. “Every second we have left.”

“But Lionelle-”

She gasped and collapsed against the grass. The timepiece lodged painfully against her back. Lionelle was on top of her, his mouth viciously locking on to hers, swallowing her remaining words, spitting his own into her throat over and over, *stay, stay, stay.* The timepiece lodged painfully against her back. She felt her breasts smothered under his chest; his strong hands pinned her two wrists to the ground.

Abruptly he lifted himself away, but his hands continued to hold her in place. His eyes searched hers for a reaction.

“Huntress, please.”

Then a flash of light and his grip was released. She tried to move but found herself still frozen in place. She looked at Lionelle, his mouth still open, floating prostrate a few inches away from her. The sky had become a solid, 0000FF blue, devoid of sun and clouds, hovering like a screen above her. The rest of the surroundings dimmed and froze (exactly the way that video games used to do, when you brought up the options menu), leaving them in a small bubble of light.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Lionelle said, avoiding her eyes; he had twisted his head as if answering to whatever force was holding him in place. It flung him onto the grass a few feet away, where he buried his face in the dirt and sobbed.

A bright blue circle shone between them, and a robot floated out. It had no depth, no shading – like a 2-D cardboard cutout. It was nothing but a spherical ball with a cyclopean eye, with the futuristic logo of VirtuoGames carved in the very center.

She’d seen it once before, they’d all seen it: the 3-D trailer for Heroes of Lorelia, starring a veteran player battling the game-bot in the boss level of the fifth world, whose fine metallic gray lines ran over its surface like it was some devilish thousand-piece 3-D puzzle. He darted around at hundreds of miles per hour along the alleys of the space city, his arms covered not with amulets but with ultramodern gadgets, his hands playing over them like a skilled pianist. They’d gasped when the game-bot exploded in a fireball, throwing out its thousand pieces like shrapnel, which the player only avoided by turning his feet horizontally in front of him, his extra-reinforced hoverboard positioned like a shield.

But this game-bot had no depth, nor the smooth gray lines, because it wasn’t programmed to destruct. This type of game robot removed people from game, people who would never see the other type of game-bot.

A rectangle of text hovered close by, displaying “Game robot” in painfully bright, low-resolution Courier font over a blue screen-of-death background. She moved her hand in front of her face to shield it but the rectangle of light still covered her fingers like it had been stickered onto her eyeballs.

She closed her eyes but the rectangle remained and expanded. A monotone voice droned as the text scrolled across her eyelids.

“You are being ejected from the game for violating the following game regulations:

(I.2) using software designed to ‘hack’ the rules of the game, and

(III.3) engaging in sexual misconduct.

Game violations are not subject to appeal.

Please relax all muscles during game ejection. Failure to do so may cause numbness, sensory dislocation, amnesia, paralysis, nervous system failure, or death.”

When she opened her eyes she found Lionelle yelling at him, words that she could not hear through the mute placed on game noise. The world around her faded into blackness; already she felt the dirt beneath her legs and the dry wind playing through her fingers replaced by the suffocating softness of memory foam.

