

The Final Level

By Elena Lo, Grade 8

I've been here for as long as I've known. I recall nothing from my childhood. I'm barely sure of my name. *Iftos*. Iftos, what? What's my last name?

Who knows. They named me like an outcast, cold, like I'm some sort of demon. Am I? They threw me into this place as if I was garbage. *Worthless*, the swarms of voices bicker in my head. I don't remember how I got here. I know there are different levels to this place, each getting more and more horrifying. I haven't progressed very much, despite being here for limitlessly long.

The canopy of this place never ends. There is no sky, sometimes no ground. Moss muffled footsteps, and critters occasionally chirped. It's mostly quite damp. Isolated to keep you away from the world. It smells earthy, the air cool, sometimes floral if you step into a room with flowers.

This dungeon is organized in rooms. Gates lock you in if you do not succeed in beating the hardships given. It's designed like a harsh, unforgiving maze. Battles to be fought in each room, never catching a break.

I peer into another door, and I see a couple of creatures hiding behind fallen logs. I don't have much. Just a humble handmade bow and an old fashioned leather sheathed knife from a dead body. Although I may not remember my childhood, I know we were taught about these depths, where people die. No one finds their escape.

With years of practice twirling this weapon in my hands, I throw the knife with precision. It nails one of the creatures in the head, and it drops to the grass. The cluster of glowing bugs dissipates at the action, and the other creature hisses.

The gate slowly lowers shut when I draw my bow and slip inside.

I don't know if there is a way to escape, but I have to find it. I have to find it to stop living like this, suffering. I quite often forget why I'm even trying, because it only gets harder. What if there's nothing to beat, and I just dig myself further down?

No one ever studies the way to get out, how to progress. But I know the ropes. I can cope with this because I've lived this way for so long. It's just annoying and inconvenient to live like this. I'm not exactly dying. I can live life just fine, but it stings every time I fight a monster.

I'm so tired.

What could the final level of this dungeon be? *Freedom.*

The monster I call a "Vine" swings around in the sparse trees in this room. It whips the vines on its body at me, dangerous, but not enough to kill. I got hit with them once, it had me sick.

On the floor is a "Gremling". It's the thing I threw a knife at. They're notoriously pesky, and hurl what looks like coconuts at you. It doesn't matter whether they're coconuts or not, they hit just as hard. I grab one to fling at the Vine.

It bounces off its face, and I cleanly finish it with an arrow.

I can tell another one is behind me, and in a heartbeat, ducked before it swings at me. Pivoting, I strike it with my heel in one smooth hook kick. Then, I twist over to my other foot and kick the tangled plant monster one more time. It grunts in pain, rolling over temporarily. You can hit a specific spot on its body, (although I'm not sure how to describe it since they're like... tangled balls of yarn) which stuns it. Before I have the chance to blink, a Needler shoots me.

The small thorn is lodged into my arm, I winced at the pain, just for a second before regaining my focus. Now I'm mad. I quickly draw my bow. Deep breath in, and shoot. My first arrow misses, and it zips among the branches as if dancing.

Stop moving—

I scowl, and then shoot again. It barely pins down the miniature thing's arms, and I end the fight. I hear it crunch like autumn leaves, then it twitches a couple times. Death quickly blankets the body.

Needlers aren't lethal. Nowhere as painful as a Vine. They're infuriatingly tough to catch though due to their diminutive size and nimbleness.

AH SH... shrooms, the second Vine is back.

The thing was so weak, it whimpered and then scrambled in fear.

I'm curious as to whether I can open these doors without killing every creature or forcing them to surrender. It'd be nice if I had a key and didn't have to fight.

The Vine doesn't even glance back and is gone in seconds.

“Uh,” I stare dumbfoundedly, “Okay...?”

I let my mind settle, silence stirring around, leaves uncomfortably rustling. I hear the stone door click and then raise.

Lately, the more doors I go through, the more of these strange glowing bug things appear. It's like they're following me. Like someone is always next to my ear. The next room I walk into is surprisingly one of the advancing rooms, filled with supplies for the next floor. There are only one of these on each level. I wonder if these floors go up or down? Usually all that happens is you get sucked into a void and suddenly you're in a different place. It's hard to tell if you're going in circles.

I hungrily gnawed at the apple presented to me, never examining it to see whether it would kill me or not. It's okay here, plants are nice to be around.

I pick a peony up and smell it. The aroma is sweet, but citrusy and sharp at the same time. Very faintly spicy like cloves.

Next to the peony are only ferns. Most are green, but some are a contrasting sienna. Others are a mix of both. One time, I saw a plant with white leaves, almost like wings of an angel. I bury the apple core after finishing the juicy flesh.

When I'm done resting, I open the door, which seems like nothing. An abyss. It really looks like a portal to the void.

You can tell which doors will bring you somewhere else, because they dress all fancy. This one is covered in ghostly orchids. They glower upon you, despite having no eyes. But they're beautiful.

I hesitantly leap into the portal.

Drip, drop. Plip.

The water leaking from stalactites steadily taps the stone below, like a never ending metronome.

Tip. Tap. Tip. Tap.

I can't hear my own thoughts. I can't break these stone walls. There's minimal vegetation. Rock potatoes maybe. This dungeon level is just a cave. Possibly dripleaves, mostly rocks. Stalagmites growing from bottom to top. Columns of rock as if that would decorate this banal place at all. Some that look like they've eroded with the water. Where is the water coming from? Every room I've walked into never has enemies. Only fairies.

They won't shut up. This level is even colder than the last. It's so... lonely. This unrelenting pain is all I ever feel. I don't see why anything would change now.

I've always been lonely...

The fairies still glow like the bugs did. Their light is a soft blue, illuminating around them. Although the light never spreads into the rest of the air. They're basically fireflies. Only, they're even more annoying, because they can speak. They whisper into my soul. Sure, not having to fight like I had hoped for is nice. But not when the fairies are driving every ounce of sanity out of me. They laugh. They chant. They sing and whisper, and it's so freaking annoying.

Every time I get pissed, I snap and crush one with my hand. The juices smear in my palm and it's disgusting.

It feels like I've walked for all of eternity. I had reached a couple dead ends, either with jammed doors, or rooms that would normally trap you in all directions and shove you in with a bunch of monsters. Those are empty, but echo strange noises.

Maybe I am lost, despite being here for most of my life. I've yet to explore these levels very deeply, but it seems like there's nothing to explore. The fairies don't guide me either, they only dimly glow to fly around my face.

"You should rest," they smile, "Rest and everything will be fine. Everything will be fine..."

Wind tickles the back of my neck, eerily as if to respond to their whispers. Their voices are so high pitched, wispy and creepy. They're torturing me. Why?

"This is a dream, wake up wake up, don't drown don't drown," fairies murmur, overlapping like a discordant melody.

I wonder how long it is before I break and drop dead.

"SHUT UP! SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP! GOD FUCK OFF—" I snatch one out of the air, and the body squelches. My reaction never gets any better. I'm losing my mind, psychotic breakdowns and hallucinations are what decorate these walls, not the stones. These "fairies" are devilish. I can't tell which place is the next room. I'm directionless, wandering in the winding paths that seem to stretch forever. Each and every puddle mirrors my misery.

"I'm only trying to help, are you okay?" Voices trill and echo like waves inside of my head. Drip drop. Drip drop. *"Why are you so tired, don't you want to keep walking? Inside... Iftos. Iftos."*

For a second, I wonder if they're truly trying to help. But they don't know my story. They have no right to say anything.

Their voices slur whenever they say my name, then they fade out in a creepy way. It feels like they're hitting me with arrows, but they don't really exist. Like I'm being pushed around, but it's mental.

"I'm in your walls, I'm in your brain."

Within the depths of my mind, I hear a rope fraying. It's slow at first, and alarmingly speeds up. It cracks and creaks until it snaps.

Distantly, the snap turns into a roar. Sound ricocheting through the endless rooms, I feel the vibrations travel seamlessly uninterrupted past my body. Noise doesn't travel between these

prison-like rooms very often. How much more loud and obnoxious could this place be? I just want it to stop. *Please.*

The roaring of whatever is coming only grows. It does not waver. The room beside me looked wrong. Tense. Like it's about to violently explode.

It's so loud, the dungeon itself could be echoing and screaming. My legs don't carry me fast enough to sprint from this churning disaster. It's as if this wave is coming specifically at me.

I am the target of a perfect shooter, and the bullet is coming right for me.

My head pounds with escalating panic, and my hands shake without command. My breathing is jagged, but I have to control it. I have to move. My mind races, but it doesn't really get anywhere. *Move. Move, move, move—*

Strangled by an imaginary rope, I only freeze. Ice runs through my veins and adrenaline pulses in my skull. My heart drops further than the dungeons, fluttering as if to threaten my life.

I imagine the very ocean floods out into the room I'm in, and I find myself stumbling on slippery wet stone. How can there be a tsunami in a dungeon? A cave? Maybe it's a flood?

My head spins and I feel sick. Do I race against something where the reality is that I will never win?

I don't care. My chest pounds faster than the tsunami and my running combined. The screeching monster of water slams into the wall, and then into me. I cough. I gag. My entire body burns as if this raging current was flames, no amount of struggling ever doing anything. I feel something stab at my body, cutting the same parts of me over and over again, as if carving me, *sculpting me.*

Help— I'm going to drown—

I choke, lurching water out of my system, even though it only seeps back in. I've lost hold of anything at all. I flail, desperately trying to resurface and take a breath. I'm successful once, and I had only gasped. Something in the water dragged me back down, or at least it feels like that.

My consciousness is slipping from my grasp. Haze creeps into my thinking. Pain mutes for a moment and I'm peaceful. Sounds are muffled, far away, giving me relief for a moment.

The only thing I could think was that *I'm scared*, like a child.

Many things collide with my body, and then my head makes contact with the wall. The force of the impact almost immediately knocks me out.

I awake to burning, trapped in another dungeon room. Where the hell am I?

In hell, I guess.

It's rather *not* wet here. Too dry and hot.

How did I get here?

I groan and attempt to sit up. I see the cuts on my shoulder. Cuts on my wrist. Scrapes on my knees and ankles. My head throbs in pain when I try observing my surroundings. My eyes could only flicker around for a couple seconds, and then they sting.

What I could make out was only a thick layer of gray and a faint light, the shade of a muted orange. It's so dense, even if that light was super bright, I'd only get a glimpse.

The floor is covered in ashes, having burned more bones than I could probably comprehend. Crackling of hot lava is the only thing I can hear. Fireflies land on my injuries, and they sear my skin, even with the tiny legs they have. Must I have something annoying me every single floor?

I smush it, like I did the fairies.

Majority of my items remain with me, the knife and the bow. There aren't any clues about how much time has passed. My knife looks dull and dead. It looks about as alive as I do. I can already feel the moisture leaving my body, although I only awoke minutes ago.

How did I get here? Did the rapids throw me around a couple levels? I had no say in this. The rapids were so powerful, it spiraled beyond my abilities and control. How could I conquer such a threat? *I can't.*

Now because I was weak, a burden to myself, I don't even know where I am.

When I try to take a good breath, I can't. *Is the air not there?* Uncontrollably, I start hacking. It throws my entire body when I cough, and I feel my pulse going up again. Spasms. My body is not mine.

STOP-

I'm momentarily paralyzed, and then I retch. I retch everything up until there's nothing left, and then I can smell.

Smoke. Nowhere near as pleasant as the earthy scent of moss and wood was. The sharp atrocious scent made me feel more sick.

Ominously, I see something flash in the corner of my eye.

"Now what the fuck—" I begin to say, wiping my mouth and drawing my knife. I don't get a chance to though, because I was thrown onto the ground.

A relatively big, vermillion scaled canine looms over my head, about the size of a wolf. With claws as long as my knife and eyes reflecting the infernos and hell, it looks ready to maul me. Fangs snapping and drooling at the sight of my beaten self, I'm admittedly intimidated. I've never seen this thing before, and fear blares in my chest, despite always being able to fight.

I trap its muzzle and redirect it, then twist my legs around the creature's paws. With much effort, I throw it down, flipping our positions. I then take the knife to its throat.

One moment's hesitation and I'm dead. It's kill or be killed.

I close my eyes and impale it as deeply as I possibly can. It yelps, and then lets out a guttural growl, heat glowing from underneath the scales. Hostility raging in its eyes, the heat of the scales rips off a chunk of my skin just at contact.

"Why are you not dead?!" I strain, toiling to drag my knife down further, and then axe-kick into the abdomen of the beast. I kicked it several times, and will continue as long as it takes. It isn't the only one to make a last ditch effort though, because somehow, the entire canine explodes in my face. I'm thrown to the very back of the room, tossed into flames.

Coughing, I find everything is now bloody, my hands smeared with the red liquid. The blaze around me dances and leaps unpredictably, consuming everything in its path at a terrifying speed. A wave of blistering intensity hits me all at once, and I struggle to get up in the condition I'm in. Not that it matters, every corner I go to is disorienting. Time is stretching, and I think maybe I'm in a dream. I hear howling deeper in this smoking room.

A massive, hellish magma warrior appears, majestic armor and a spear in hand. I very slowly pick up the bow and arrow. I attempted to shoot at it. It hopelessly flicks off the warrior.

All the tools I've known won't *work*.

It stomps, and the hounds yowl in response. They respect the warrior as the leader. The way they chant reminds me of the fairies, but more terrifying. Like they're celebrating my death.

Are they? *Should I be dead?* After all, I'm stuck here.

I don't know where the doors are. Heat has made it so hard to breathe, it's like I'm trying to breathe in lead. It's so heavy. The pressure on my shoulders and the pain I'm physically in is unbearable. I'm not surviving. I can't do it.

I'm going to die. I'm going to fucking die with no story to tell, because I wasn't worth anything after all. I'm already dead.

DO I WANT TO DIE?

Their narrowed eyes look for the finish. I heave, and they pin me down. Despaired in a corner, I have no more energy to try. Couldn't even beg.

Why was I given such a cruel fate?

The last thing I feel is a piercing, lethal blow to my heart.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Steady. The never ending metronome. Where am I? Please tell me it's not the stone dungeon. Have I restarted? I've never died before. What happens when I die?

There's a needle in my wrist, rather different to the thorns that were embedded in my arm. Attached to it is something that also drips. It doesn't make noise. The light is white and blinding. I'm lying down in a soft, comparably comfortable bed. My chest aches.

I frantically look around, unable to move.

"Oh god, Iftos you're alive. You're alive." Someone says the last part in a sobbing whisper, her voice breaking. I know who she is. How do I know who she is? I just stare at her dark brown eyes for a moment. They're so bloodshot. My sense of isolation wanes a little looking at her though.

"Hi," I rasp, my voice giving out on me. I find myself smiling. I want to comfort her. I want to comfort my friend. I'm not smiling out of happiness, but to ease her pain.

She weeps, a hint of grief the only thing striking through to me, “Why didn’t you tell me you needed help? I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry I couldn’t help...”

A woman whom I don’t recognize walks in. Her face is tired. She’s wearing a medical scrub? Oh, she’s a nurse.

“Iftos, do you remember what happened?”

“I felt like hell,” I answered weakly.

Her gaze softens, as if in sympathy for me. “You stabbed yourself... deeply in the chest,” She quietly says, “You have a punctured lung and internal bleeding. If you’d been sent here a moment later, we would have lost you. The surgeon has stopped your bleeding.”

The sympathy given to me, it almost comes as a shock. It contrasts so much from what I went through in the dungeons...

“...Wait, what?” I didn’t stab myself. I was in the dungeons. Right?

The nurse stares at me, and she looks confused. Maybe in disbelief that I don’t remember what happened.

“Please don’t try ever again...” My friend sobs, choking on the words. There are more friends behind her. Family too, maybe. I frown at the thought of so many people, surrounding me here with worried faces. How many people did I hurt?

I’m dismayed, puzzled in the environment.

The dungeons... were in my mind? I stabbed myself? Did I really try... to kill myself?

“How do you feel right now?” The nurse asks.

Another person walks into the room. Ah, the doctor who suggested bullshit to me. Who never cared how I felt. Who only administered drugs to where all I could do was hallucinate. *I remember you*, my mind seethes with resentment. The fairies. Fairies that betray you.

A jarring moment of clarity hits me, and I see the truth. The dungeons were inside my mind.
My depression, illness.

No, the dungeons *were* my mind.

It had worsened just like that. Plants and leaves that made me think I had it. That I was irrational, and could cope. The snare that my mind set up had trapped me.

I look down at my wrist. Cuts.

The caves were when everything came crashing down, and it all floods my memories, just like the rapids. That was the self harm, blood flooding like that tsunami. And every beast I had faced was a fragment of my pain, that look of hatred was mine.

My mental state deteriorated, terrible like the dungeons. The infernos were my suicide. It had gotten so bad. I descended so far.

The final level was tormenting. It was agony, but also finality. Is it freedom too? I had found it.
It's true...

The final level was myself.