
KIERAN LARWOOD
JOE TODD-STANTON
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LEVEL 1: HERO TRIAL
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To Eli – Zerb would not exist without you!
K.L.




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THE COG EMPIRE


AND NOW LIVE ... TONIGHT'S EPISODE OF DUNGEON RUNNERS. OVER TO YOUR HOSTS, DIRK THE ORC AND JENNA THE GIANT...

1

THE TRIAL


Welcome back, dungeon fans, to this week's epic Dungeon Running action from the Master League! You join us as the teams are just about to enter the Armageddon Arena for the season final. If the Ultima Squad can come out on top, they will win the cup for a record-breaking FIFTH YEAR IN A ROW!

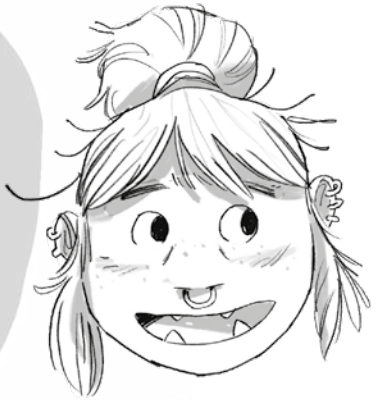


But it may not be that easy, Dirk. Don't forget that the Night Beasts are only two points behind them in the league! If they can get out of the dungeon first, or maybe find that precious loot, they may scoop the win and knock Ultima into second place.

That's right, Jenna. And also don't forget the sweet two points either team could earn by defeating the dungeon boss. Any idea what the monster is this time?



I heard a rumour that it was a FIRE-BREATHING HYDRA, Dirk. But my money's on a return of the GIANT WERE-ELEPHANT we saw last year. That sure was a battle to remember!





It certainly was, Jenna. And it looks like today's match is going to be just as nail-biting. I've brought plenty of spare undercrackers, just in case. Hey, look! The teams are getting ready... This is going to be awesome!

“Awesome,” Kit whispered. He was sitting in the inn, just up the road from his house, watching the show on their super large crystal screen. Kit could see the National Dungeon League commentators, Jenna the giant and Dirk the orc, standing in front of a ruined castle – the site of this evening’s Dungeon Run.

Torches blazed all around them, glinting on Jenna’s chainmail armour and lighting up Dirk’s bright green skin. Soon, the teams would walk out, waving at the fans – Kit’s favourite part. If only he had a better view.

Nearly everyone else from Kit’s street was squashed into the poky room, and he had just managed to find himself a tiny scrap of space on the floor, crushed in against the wall. Being a gnorf – part gnome, part dwarf – he was much smaller than the folk around him, who were mostly bulky troll-like creatures called troggles, so – luckily – he didn’t need much space.



Kit had to squint round several pairs of boots and chair legs, but he could *almost* see what was going on. How he wished his family was rich enough to afford a crystal of their own, so he could watch Dungeon Running from his bedroom.

"Nikkik krik klikklqk!" came a squeaky little voice from a hole in the wall next to him. Bending down, Kit saw a tiny creature, no bigger than his hand, with green skin, pointy ears and a mouth full of sharp fangs. It was Kleekoo, his gobrot friend.



"Yes, I know," Kit replied. "I hope the Ultima Squad wins too. I'm saving up to buy a poster of Lord Studly. He was the league's Most Valued Player last season."

Kit reached out and helped Kleekoo climb out of the wall.



The little creature's whole family lived under the inn, all of them as small as rabbits. Although Kit knew gobrots in dungeons could grow much bigger. He'd seen them battle against Dungeon Runners on the crystal screen many times.

"Oh, look," a mean voice came from somewhere up above him. It was Breg, the horrible troggle who lived next door to Kit and wouldn't ever leave him alone.



"The little kitten has found himself a green mouse to play with. Why don't you take it out into the street where you belong? This inn is for grown-ups who want to watch the match in peace, not snot-nosed toddlers."

"You're only two years older than me, Breg," Kit replied. "If I have to leave, then you do too."

Breg was about to say something horrible back, when everybody in the inn gasped at once. Something was happening on the screen. Kit jumped up to see, holding Kleekoo up high so he could get a good look as well.

The Dungeon Run action had paused for a moment, while Dirk and Jenna, the commentators, were reading out an announcement.