



ONE

As Emmentine chants, the statue of power begins to glow. Swirling runes carved into the statue burn bright white. Sizzling tendrils of magic shoot from the rock. Emmentine opens her fanged mouth wide and swallows them down like fiery spaghetti.

Status: Magic bar full

She's ready to face the Mulch Queen.

My fingers tap on the keyboard and Emmentine bounds up the mountainside with catlike grace, into the gaping maw of the cave.

Checkpoint: Entering the
Putrid Caverns

In the darkness, ghostly orbs flicker awake, lighting a maze of stalagmites that grasp like witches' fingers at Emmentine's boots. She zigzags



this way and that. One more bend, one more leap, and there it is: the green fog.

I knew from the first time I saw it that this fog was dangerous, but I'm not scared anymore. Emmentine has beaten every Mulchbeast and now there's nothing left to do but face the Mulch Queen and win.

She charges into the fog and suddenly she's falling. As tunnel walls fly past, my fingers are poised. I go over the plan in my head one more time...

Boom, Emmentine lands on the cavern floor, and *rumble*, everything shakes as a shapeless mouldering pile erupts, *poof*, into a four-armed monster. The creature rises to fill the cavern, her skin like slime, her dress made of thorns and rotting leaves.

The Mulch Queen has awoken!

Emmentine is already running as *slam*, a boulder-like fist smacks the floor behind her. Emmentine swipes with a burning claw, tearing three fiery gashes in the Mulch Queen's side. She casts dazzling lights and pellets of fire spew from

her palms. As flames punch through the Mulch Queen's skin, she wails and flails her arms.

She belches out a cloud of poison gas, but Emmentine dodges as I hammer out the key combo. A cone of repulsing flame flies from Emmentine's mouth. Layers of the Mulch Queen rip off in ashy flakes. She shrinks to a ball of brambles as her health drops to almost zero.

Bind the Mulch Queen before she
gains too much health

I know exactly what to do.

Around the cavern are four spell crystals, each resting in an alcove in the glittering wall—if I can rearrange the crystals, the curse will turn on its maker.

I have to be quick.

Emmentine runs to the purple crystal. *Flash*, she snatches it in one magma paw. She runs, *flash*, swaps it for the red crystal. Coloured light swirls and vines snake about like they're searching for something.

Run, *flash*, the light swirls faster, the vines waft higher, but the Mulch Queen is shaking now,

she's nearly recharged. Run, *flash*. The lights are spinning too fast, the vines waving too wildly.

'Put the crystallly thing in the flashy thing!' says Ryan behind me.

I jump. 'I know!' I didn't hear Ryan get home. And there's only seconds left.

The Mulch Queen roars. One more crystal, one more flash, and *whoosh!*

The vines snap around the Mulch Queen like a closing fist.

Wailing and writhing, the captured Mulch Queen sinks into the cave floor.

The cave roof cracks open and sunlight pours in. The festering mulch shrinks away. Flowers and trees sprout from the rock, but I'm barely watching now.

I stand up so fast my chair tips backwards into Ryan's stomach. I wave my stripy blanket like a flag as I leap around the living room.

'I did it! I did it! I defeated the Mulch Queen without taking any damage. Yes, yes, yes!'

'Why are you jumping, Emmy?' Ryan takes the desk chair. 'It wasn't that hard.'

'You don't understand, I think I just did a world record or something. I bound the Mulch Queen

and she's the final boss on Illusory Isles, and I did it in record time, and Emmentine kept full health the whole way through. And I videoed the whole thing for my gaming channel, and, and, and, WOOHOO!' I jump and skip and leap on the sofa and nearly trip on a cushion and land, *bang*, beside Ryan, my socks skidding on the laminate floor.

'You couldn't do it,' I tell him. 'Not even IndigoChalice could pull off a binding like that. MeowMeow thought it was impossible, but I tried and I tried and I finally did it.'

'Who are InvisibleCabbage and MooMoo?' says Ryan, clicking on NEW GAME. 'Seriously, these people have the weirdest names.'

'It's IndigoChalice and MeowMeow, and they are my two best friends on the Illusory Isles message board. Obviously.'

'You're just friends online though, right?' says Ryan as the CHARACTER BUILDER screen loads, and my stomach goes tight. 'Not real-life friends?' I try to shove him off the chair with my shoulder, but he's too heavy.

'Online friends *are* real friends.'

'What's "The Way of the Bottle"?' he says, reading off the screen. Ryan has this trick of

changing the subject just when I'm really annoyed at him. It works though.

'That means you play as an enchanter and do magic using potions,' I tell him, trying not to show that he's bothered me. Not showing you're bothered is part of the rules for little sisters. 'My character isn't an enchanter though, she's a fire elemental. Elementals can do magic with just their hands and voices. They also look way cooler. Emmentine looks like a lion.' I jump onto the sofa arm behind him. 'See, you don't even know how to play. As if I needed your help.'

'You were about to tank before I came along,' Ryan says, colouring his character's hair bright pink, then sunset orange, then pitch black. 'How do I fight that slimy woman?'

'She's called the Mulch Queen.'

'Oh, the *Mulch Queen*,' he says, not very seriously. He always talks like this with me, like everything is a big joke. Probably from being a teenager.

'She's trying to take over the Illusory Isles with her evil mulch.'

'Oh, the *mulch*,' he nods, wisely. 'So how do I fight her?'

'You can't, not yet. She's the final boss, and she's really hard to beat.' I bounce up and down on the sagging sofa arm. 'But I just did! Even though I know she isn't completely beaten because Illusory Isles II is coming out in less than a week, and everyone is saying that the Mulch Queen comes back, and I can't wait!'

The front door scrapes open.

'Hi, kiddos!' says Paul. There's a clattering noise and a big bang like something heavy crashing into the wall.

'The tattoos for the fayre are here,' Mum shouts.

'What are you up to?' Paul sticks his bald head round the living room door. 'That game again?' He winks.

'Come and see these tattoos!' Mum shouts from down the hall.

'I was actually just showing Emmy how to defeat the Munch Queen,' says Ryan.

'*Mulch Queen*,' I correct him. 'And I bound her myself actually. Do you want to see?'

When Paul comes over, Ryan jumps up from his seat, pulling at his school tie. Ryan gets like that with Paul sometimes.

I replay the video of the fight and Paul makes

impressed sounds in all the right places. When the vines snap around the Mulch Queen, Paul punches the air.

‘Nice one, Emmy! I bet you’re excited to show your friends at school,’ says Paul.

But suddenly I’m knotted up. ‘No one at school really plays Illusory Isles. No one I know, anyway.’ I try to imagine what Vanessa or Ria would say if I showed them the video. Lila might think it was cool, as long as Vanessa and Ria weren’t around...

‘You should,’ says Paul, grinning like he doesn’t know he’s said anything wrong. ‘Have you been playing too, Ryan?’

‘Just showing Emmy what to do.’ He shrugs. ‘It’s not really my thing. Babyish.’ At that I feel even more knotted up. I thought Ryan was getting into it.

‘I know full-grown men who play Illusory Isles,’ Paul protests.

Mum appears in the doorway. Her purple hair has gone extra frizzy, which makes her look like a witch. My hair does the same thing, but it just makes me look messy.

‘Are you lot coming to see these tattoos or not?’

In the kitchen, a huge cardboard box is open on

the table. It’s full of temporary tattoos: dragons, kittens, football logos. Mum is a real tattooist, with a shop and everything, but every year for the Summer Fayre at school she runs the face painting and temporary tattoo stall.

I try not to think about school, but the idea spreads in my brain like mulch slime.

‘I knew they’d arrive in time.’ Mum nudges Paul. ‘Scaremongerer. You said they wouldn’t be here for months and months.’

‘I don’t think scaremongerer is a word,’ Paul says. He’s been Mum’s boyfriend for two years now and moved in soon after Christmas.

‘Shall I sort the designs out?’ asks Ryan, picking up a sheet of rainbow unicorns.

‘No, I want to sort them,’ says Mum, plunging her tattooed arms into the box. ‘That’s the best bit.’

‘Guess I’m making dinner again,’ says Paul.

‘Emmy, could you print a sign with the prices on it, like last year?’ Mum asks.

‘I could test the tattoos,’ Ryan says. ‘Check they’re not gummy, like two years ago.’

‘Oh yeah, and get yourself a freebie,’ says Mum.

‘No, I just thought we don’t want another gummy year.’

‘Haven’t you got homework to do?’ Mum runs her hands through her hair so it sticks up even more.

‘What? I’m just trying to help.’

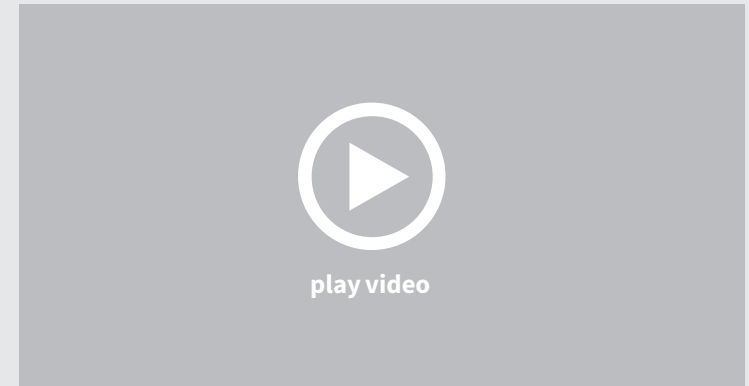
Paul sets a pan on the cooker. ‘Leave it, Kiddo. Looks like you can just chill out.’

Ryan huffs as he leaves the room.

I print out the price list for Mum. Then I edit my video and upload it on Islandr, the Illusory Isles message board. MeowMeow and IndigoChalice will drop dead in amazement when they see it. No one has defeated the Mulch Queen without taking any damage before. No one but me.

Islandr Message Boards

Video: Binding the Mulch Queen – NO DAMAGE!!!



29 views 7 likes

Emmentine

I bound the Mulch Queen without taking a single hit.
WOOHOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!

Comments

MeowMeow

OMG YOU DID IT! YOU LEGEEEEEEEND!

IndigoChalice

Right this is on. I’m gonna bind her with zero damage in even less time. Battle of the mulch, sista!