

“Ladies, gentlemen, and those in between, welcome to . . . the Snakes And Ladders game show! With your host, Imiut!”

The audience cheered as Imiut came on stage, the naga slithering forward with a crowd-worthy grin on his face. Behind the curtain, Lex, one of the contestants, had her heart pounding with anticipation and nervousness.

“Welcome, everybody,” Imiut said, speaking into the lavalier mic clipped on his Egyptian garb (which was his costume for the show). “I can tell you’ve been looking forward to this as much as I have. We’re in the semifinals of Snakes And Ladders here tonight, with just four contestants remaining. And only one can get the chance to become . . . the Snakes And Ladders champion!”

The audience roared in excitement, and the naga grinned. “Sixteen contestants have already been eaten by me,” he continued, patting his currently flat stomach—soon, it would be full of prey. “Who will survive the show, and who will become naga food? Let’s . . . find . . . out!”

At that, the curtain was pulled back, and for a moment Lex was blinded by the studio spotlights shining down on her. But she had endured this more than a few times by now, and managed to just blink a few times as she waved and smiled at the audience.

“Up there we have Lex!” Imiut shouted, starting his traditional introduction of the show’s contestants. “This ring-tailed lemur has won more than a few shows like these, and she’s gunning for the prize. Give her a hand!”

Lex grinned. She loved going on these daredevil shows—the thrill of it gave her such a rush. But could she survive this one? Only time would tell.

“Next, we have Bonnie!” the naga continued, moving right along. “She’s a squirrel who has a very acrobatic side to her. She wants to win to save her house from condemnation. Everyone, a round of applause!”

Bonnie, who was more of a headstrong type, though not as fit as the other contestants, flexed at the camera and smirked. But Lex could see the nervousness underneath that cocky exterior. She wondered if Bonnie would survive the night—the squirrel had been doing great so far, but would her luck run out?

“And next to her is Ace!” Imiut said, wearing his signature smile. “He’s a crow who wants the money to help his parents take the vacation of their dreams! But can this bird fly his way to victory? Give him a cheer!”

Ace gave the audience a shy smile and waved his feathered hands. Lex thought he was a pretty mixed bag. Between him and the next competitor, she thought he had the least chance of surviving. . .

“And last but not least, don’t forget Mike!” the naga exclaimed. “This zebra’s charging his way to victory in order to get himself out of student loan debt. Let’s clap for him!”

Mike awkwardly waved at the crowd. Lex knew he hadn't been in his element since the beginning of the show, and his impulsive side had shone through more than once throughout Snakes And Ladders. Still, it had brought him to the final four, so could he be the one to win? Only time would tell. . .

"Alright, that's enough of the introductions," Imiut said, making the audience laugh out loud. "Let's introduce our game for tonight, everyone. I call it . . . Extreme Maze Climbing!"

Another curtain drew back, revealing a button at the front of the stage, and a maze behind it. The maze was made of a series of scaffolds, along with some dead ends and obstacles blocking the way. "The rules are simple," said the naga, slithering toward the button. "Two contestants will face off at a time in our upward maze. How much time do you have to complete the course? Well, that is decided when the button is pressed—it will show a random amount of time between 20 seconds and 2 minutes. The first contestant to complete the course wins, and the loser is, of course, eaten. If we run out of time before someone wins, the person who is lowest on the scaffold loses, and the person who is highest gets another amount of time to reach the top, or they also lose. We repeat the course until we have one final winner.

"So, everyone . . . are you ready to play Snakes . . . And . . . Ladders?!"

"YEAH!" the audience yelled, cheering and whooping loudly.

Imiut smiled. "Excellent. So am I.

"Now, let's not waste anymore time! Give me Ace! Give me Mike! Let's go!"

The crow and the zebra exchanged a glance and walked over to the naga, who grinned at the two. "Alright gentlemen," Imiut said. "Let's first shake hands so that we'll have a good duel." The two obeyed, and exchanged a hearty handshake. "Good. Now, Mike, will you do me the honor of pressing the button?"

Mike nodded, and walked over to the button. The zebra took a deep breath, and then, he pressed it.

Above the button was a screen, and the screen flickered for a moment before displaying "50". "Ooo, looks like you two have 50 seconds to complete the obstacle course!" the naga exclaimed. "Will that be enough time for you to get to the top? Let's find out.

"Players! Get in position!"

The two saw the footprints at the bottom of the maze, and each stood in one, with Ace on the left, and Mike on the right. Lex watched them carefully—seeing this could provide hints on how she could survive the maze when presented with the challenge. . .

"On your mark . . . get set . . . GO!"

A buzzer rang out, and the race was on. Ace and Mike grabbed on to the scaffold, and began to climb.

Ace was a slow climber, but Mike was quite a bit faster—after all, he had been a college football player at one point, Lex remembered. He made his way quickly up the scaffold, but it didn't take long for him to reach a dead end, which made the zebra pause for a long moment. "Looks like Mike is having a great head start, but he's reached one of our 'traps'!" Imiut commented. "Can he find his way around, or will he have to back up and start over? And ooo, looks like Ace is starting to catch up!"

It was true—the crow was starting to pick up some speed in the race, and was beginning to reach where Mike was. That was when the zebra snapped out of it, went around the dead end, and continued his climb. "Looks like Mike has overcome his obstacle! But Ace isn't too far behind!" the naga exclaimed. "Who can win this tense race—oh, well what's this now?"

Lex, and everyone watching, saw in amazement as Mike suddenly jumped forward in the air, reaching for a spot high up on the scaffold. The ring-tailed lemur gasped. If Mike missed, he would definitely lose the race, and possibly break his back in the process!

But, to everyone's amazement, the zebra made his jump, his hooved hand landing on the part of the scaffold he was reaching for. He re-balanced himself and continued to climb. "And with that risky move, Mike has bought himself a commanding lead!" Imiut shouted. "Goodness, he's almost at the top—and . . . that's it, folks! Mike has won the race, and with time to spare!"

On the scaffold, Ace slumped, and started to tremble. Lex almost felt sorry for him—they all knew what was going to come next.

A platform attached a pulley was brought out. Mike got on it first, then it lowered for Ace, then went to the ground. After the players got off of the platform, they stood in front of Imiut, who grinned at both men. "Good job, both of you," he said. "Mike, you may rejoin the other contestants." The zebra did so, quickly running back to everyone else.

"Good job," Bonnie said to Mike.

"Thanks," the zebra replied. Lex said nothing—she was in this to win after all, so there wasn't much of a point to being friendly. She looked forward, just in time to see Imiut lick his lips.

"And as for you, Ace," the naga said, slithering forward, "looks like I'm going to have a nice crow lunch."

The bird gulped, and started to back away, clearly scared of what would happen next. "No, please!" he begged. "I-I'll do anything else, just don't eat me!"

Imiut sighed and grabbed Ace's shoulders. "You'd think the ones who've been here the longest would know that those kind of things don't work on me," he said. "I'm too hungry for that, after all."

Then, the naga struck.

He opened his mouth nice and wide, and Lex shivered as he put his maw on display, showing fanged teeth that were dripping with drool, and a tongue that was covered with saliva. Ace screamed upon seeing it, and she saw the crow was staring into Imiut's throat, which lead to what would soon become his new home. . .

In one quick, smooth movement, the naga clamped his jaw around the crow's face, trapping Ace inside. The bird cried out in surprise and fear, and tried to pull his head back out, but Imiut latched his jaw around Ace, forcing him to stay inside. The crowd whooped and cheered upon seeing this, and Lex shivered—they all knew that the feeding had properly begun.

Imiut slobbered all over the crow, his tongue attacking his prey's face, sparing no part of the poor bird. Ace whimpered and shivered as he was eaten, and tried to pull himself out using his hands, but the naga was just too strong. "Mmmm!" Imiut exclaimed, speaking with his mouth full. "Gotta say, he's got a nice, sweet flavor, folks. I just wish I had some barbeque sauce to go with this bird."

The audience laughed, and Lex gulped. That could be her in that mouth of his—no, no, she had to think positive. She was going to /win/ this, dang it. She didn't want to be eaten by Imiut, and she was going to do everything in her power to make that a reality.

That's when the naga let his first /gulp/ ring through his microphone, sucking Ace's face down into his throat. The crow's head made a visible bulge when it landed in Imiut's esophagus, and Ace became even more frantic, his arms and legs flailing about, hands grabbing at the naga and trying to pull the body out of the hungry mouth. But Imiut just laughed at his efforts. "My my, such a desperate little morsel," cooed the naga. "But he's not getting out anytime soon, now is he, folks?"

"NO!" the audience yelled.

"And where is he going?"

"YOUR STOMACH!"

"That's right!" Imiut cried cheerfully. And so, unconcerned, he continued to eat his delicious prey.

Another gulp sucked in more of Ace, and the poor bird was pushed further down Imiut's esophagus. The throat bulge became bigger, and it traveled downward the same time Ace did, expanding his area as more of him went down into Imiut's insides. "Mmm!" exclaimed the naga again. "Really can't emphasize enough how tasty he is. If I'd

known he was going to be so good, I would've wanted him to lose a lot sooner! But I say that about every contestant, don't I, folks?"

The audience laughed—it was true, after all, that Imiut found each contestant tasty, no matter what. He seemed to like a variety of flavors, Lex noticed, which was a bad thing for his prey. That meant that Imiut would always find you delicious, no matter how you were flavored. . .

Ace was steadily swallowed down by the naga, bit by bit, the body making the throat bulge out more and more as it was lowered inside. Lex could see Imiut's tongue licking up the prey thoroughly before gulping it down, and she couldn't help but be amazed and fearful at the same time. It was terrifying, watching this predator devour the bird in such a short amount of time, but at the same time, she admired it. She had even teased the idea of becoming a predator herself once, but that had never gone anywhere, and she had abandoned the idea. And now she was trying her best just to stay alive.

It was about then that Ace reached the stomach. She could tell because a bulge that had been near the bottom of the esophagus disappeared, and then there was squirming coming from above—that always happened when the prey realized its fate. And Imiut commented as such: "Looks like he's reached my hungry belly, hasn't he, folks?" the naga said, laughing. "Goodness, I can't wait to have all of him inside—that's going to be quite the delight~!"

And so he started swallowing Ace down faster, gulping in more of the crow, sucking the bird down like a spaghetti noodle. As a result, more of Ace got emptied inside the stomach, which bulged out with the bird's presence. If she was closer, Lex knew from experience that she would be able to hear his muffled screams. . .

The next swallow shoved more of the crow into the stomach, creating a visible bulge that everybody could see, contestants and audience alike. "Goodness, he's really fattening me up!" Imiut exclaimed, slapping his belly and making the audience roar with laughter. "Can't say I'm surprised though. . . After all, that's what always happens in this game show, folks! Let's get him fully into my stomach, shall we?"

More and more of the crow was gulped down until, finally, only the bird's feet were left. Imiut opened his maw wide as he teased the toes and lingered on the last bite, before gulping it down and sending it with the rest of the meat in the gut. The throat bulge traveled down, down to the belly, and then disappeared as the stomach bloated outwards.

"Goodness me, that was—buuuuurp!" said the naga, smiling. The crowd laughed at the large belch. Imiut continued, "Goodness me, that was delicious, folks. Now, let's see how he's settling in there. Bring the microphone!"

An assistant director ran out with a dynamic microphone and held it down to Imiut's huge stomach. Ace's voice could now be faintly heard: "Oh fuck . . . let me out! Please let me out! I don't want to play this game anymore! I don't want to be food. . ." The

belly twitched and jolted as the crow squirmed around inside, clearly trying to escape. "LET ME OUT!"

"Gotta give him a hand for trying!" Imiut said as the AD ran off. "Then again, he /did/ lose at the semifinals. . . Though I must say, he was absolutely delicious.

"Now, let's move onto the next round! Give me Mike and Bonnie! They're going head to head in this next challenge!"

Mike and Bonnie looked at each other, then walked over to the host, who gave them both a wide, fanged smile. "Excellent, excellent," the naga said, nodding at them.

"Now, Bonnie, will you please press the button for us?"

"Sure thing!" the squirrel said. She walked over to where the button was, and, after taking a deep, long breath, she pressed it. The screen flickered for a moment, and Lex saw Bonnie cross her fingers.

Then, the number "110" displayed on the screen. "What a great time you managed to get!" Imiut proclaimed. "It looks like the two of you will have a minute and 50 seconds to climb to the top of our upward maze. Now, let's not waste anymore time. Players . . . get in position!"

Bonnie and Mike stood at the footprints; like before, Mike stood on the right. Lex scratched her chin, wondering who would win this. Since he had already done the race once before, Mike had the advantage for sure. But when it came to pure acrobatics, it was Bonnie who would likely take the crown. Who would prevail and win the day? Perhaps only time would be able to tell. . . Though if she had to guess, she had to give the victory to Bonnie for her good moves.

Imiut shouted into the microphone: "On your mark . . . get set . . . GO!"

The buzzer rang, echoing throughout the auditorium, and Bonnie and Mike grabbed at the wall, clamoring to begin. Once they each gained their footing, the two began to rapidly climb. "Aaaand there they go!" said the naga host, and everyone watched the squirrel and the zebra begin their climb to the top. Bonnie quickly hopped from scaffold to scaffold, making great time, and Mike tried to catch up as quick as he could, climbing at a steady but slow pace. "It looks like Bonnie is having a great start!" Imiut exclaimed. "Mike's catching up, though, and it looks like—oh, there we go, he's all caught up now! Who is going to take away this victory? Don't look away, folks, because this will be a close race!"

Bonnie continued jumping, making her way from scaffold to scaffold, climbing as quickly as she could and soon earning a commanding lead. This time, Mike did not close the gap in time, which left him hanging a bit far behind from Bonnie—not to mention he hit a dead end in the maze and had to backtrack at one point. "Well, it looks like everyone's favorite squirrel has got herself quite the lead!" the host declared. "Can Mike catch up in time to win this race? Let's find out!"

It turned out, Mike could not catch up in time—the next few seconds assured that. Bonnie did a few more skillful maneuvers, and that caused the gap between them to widen even further. The zebra attempted to close the difference with a series of jumps, but that only got him part of the way there—Bonnie was still far in front. Mike was going to have to do something risky if he really wanted to get in front and win this race . . . and that's exactly what he tried to do.

The zebra suddenly launched himself into the air, aiming for a scaffold ahead of Bonnie, his hand reaching out toward it. Lex gasped—it was another one of the zebra's impulsive moves! "Oh my, it looks like Mike is trying to get the lead!" Imiut exclaimed, leaning forward. "Will he be able to catch that platform and climb his way to victory?"

Unfortunately, he would not. Mike's grab missed the platform, and for a moment the zebra was free-falling in the air. Luckily, he managed to grab another scaffold lower on the wall, but it was further down than where he previously was, leaving him the definite loser of this race. "Ooo, it looks like Mike's maneuver didn't pay off!" the host said sadly. "As for Bonnie, she's near the top, and—there we go! Bonnie has won this race, everybody! And we all know where Mike is going now that he's lost. . ."

The platform picked up Bonnie first, then Mike, and lowered them to the ground. They stepped off in front of Imiut. "Bonnie, you may rejoin our last contestant," the naga said. The squirrel quickly did so, walking over to stand next to Lex. Lex gave Bonnie a glance, and the squirrel looked back at her. The two of them would have to duke it out for the victory. . .

. . . But for now, there were other things to be concerned about. Lex look forward at Mike, who was standing in front of the tall Imiut with ears flat against his head. "I'm not scared of you!" the zebra declared. "Understand?!"

"If you /really/ weren't scared," the naga replied, "you probably would have felt no need to declare it." Mike said nothing, and the host laughed. "Oh, lighten up, silly! After all, you're going to join the crowd inside my stomach soon. Isn't that exciting?"

Mike opened his mouth to say something in response, but before he could say anything, Imiut grabbed his shoulders and yanked him forward. The zebra tried to wrench himself out of the naga's tight grip, but Imiut proved to be the stronger one, because Mike could not get himself free. "Now," the host said, leaning forward, "let's have a little taste, shall we?"

He opened his maw, revealing those dripping teeth once again, and smiled at Mike. Then, he stuck out his tongue, leaned forward, and ran the organ up the zebra's face. Mike cringed and tried to lean away from the taste test, but Imiut refused to let his tongue leave the surface, leaning forward even as the zebra tried to lean back. "Mmmm, goodness me!" the host declared. "You are quite a delicious specimen, I must say—but I say that about all of my meals, so don't be too flattered."

"I'm not flattered, you creep!" Mike yelled. He once again tried to fight his way out of Imiut's grip, and screamed, "Somebody, please! I don't want to be food! Help me!"

The audience, for their part, just laughed at the zebra's pleas. As Lex watched, she briefly considered trying to help the zebra—but she knew if she did that, she'd just be eaten up like he was about to, and then Bonnie would be declared the winner. No, she wasn't going to participate in a futile effort. She was going to stay and win this game. In these scenarios, one had to be selfish.

"Alright, down the hatch!" Imiut said cheerfully to his prey.

Mike's eye widened. "No, no, please!"

Too late. The naga opened his maw wide, and latched it down on the zebra's face. It had begun.

This time, it was extremely fast. One second, Mike was standing there; the next, his head was crammed into the naga's throat and he was quickly swallowing. Lex watched in horror as the competitor was forced further and further into the naga, until he quickly reached the stomach.

Lex could see the gut squirming, and it inflated more and more as Mike was crammed inside. Finally, the gut was bloated outwards, and only the zebra's feet were left to swallow. Imiut laughed around them, and turned to the audience. "Wave goodbye to Mike!" he said.

The crowd shouted and waved, and then, the last of the zebra was gulped down. It was done.

The naga let out a belch and patted his bloated stomach—two people were inside now, and it was quite large. "Mmm, that was delicious," he said. "Perhaps a bit better than the crow. But that's enough about me—you all want to hear Mike, don't you? Microphone!"

The AD ran on stage and held the mic to Imiut's stomach. A moment later, Ace could be heard saying, "I can't believe you're here too. . . We're both going to get digested!"

"Not me, idiot!" Mike snapped. "I'm getting out of here!"

"How?!" the crow asked, clearly flabbergasted.

"I just am!" proclaimed the zebra. "I won't let myself get digested—not now!"

"Aw, he's still in denial, how cute!" said Imiut, as the microphone was taken away and the AD left the stage. "Now, let's not waste anymore time, and return to our game. Bonnie and Lex, you're up!"

The squirrel and the lemur walked on stage to clapping and fanfare. The two women exchanged a look, and Lex noticed the competitive spirit burning inside of Bonnie—it



was evident from her eyes. Looks like the lemur would have to fight her hardest to win this. . .

“It’s down to just our two contestants now,” said Imiut. “Whoever wins this race must overcome a final challenge, and then they will be proclaimed the winner of Snakes And Ladders. Lex, will you do me the honor of pressing the button?”

Lex nodded, and did so. “Ooo, you got 40 seconds!” the naga said. “Ladies, are you ready?!”

“Yes!” Lex shouted.

“You bet!” replied Bonnie.

“Excellent!” exclaimed Imiut. “Then step up to the scaffold . . . and prepare yourselves!”

Bonnie went to the left side, where she had been before, and Lex went on the right, standing on the footprints. She could hear her heart pounding in her chest, but forced herself to remain calm—she was going to do this. She was not going to be food.

She was going to win.

“On your mark . . . get set . . . GO!”

Upon hearing Imiut’s shouts, Lex immediately jumped onto the wall and began climbing, racing up the scaffolds and grabbing ledges as she desperately fought for the victory. The race seemed so much shorter and faster when she was climbing it—was that her speed, or was that everyone’s perspective?

The naga commentated: “Ooo, looks like this is going to be a /very/ close race, everyone! Bonnie and Lex are making nearly the same pace, with some excellent speed—oh my goodness! Lex is in the lead now!”

Upon hearing that, the lemur smiled and sped up, jumping and climbing with agile effectiveness, going higher and higher up the scaffolds. She could see the finish line ahead. . .!

“Lex is almost there! But wait, Bonnie is catching up!” Imiut shouted. “Who is going to take this one, folks? Don’t look away!”

Lex desperately kept climbing, scampering up the wall as quickly as she could. A little closer, a little closer—there! Her hand slammed on the top of the wall, just a second before Bonnie’s paw landed there.

“AND LEX HAS WON!” screamed the host in a frenzy. “What a race, what a close one! That gave me chills, folks! Congrats to our finalist!”

Lex hoisted herself up, and Bonnie went next to her. The squirrel’s face had turned pale—she knew she was the loser, and would soon become naga food.

After the platform got the two back down to the ground, Imiut slithered up to them and gave the two a big smile. “Lex, you may return to the stage,” he said to the lemur. “You’ll be facing our final challenge soon, so rest while you can!”

Lex nodded and obeyed his instructions, going back to the stage. It felt weird to be here without any other contestants, just her and her alone was left. Well, /almost/ just her—Bonnie was here, but only for a moment.

“And as for you, Bonnie. . .” Imiut went up to the squirrel and licked his lips. “I’m going to have the third course of my meal.”

The squirrel gulped, backing away. “C-Can’t we talk about this?” she begged. “Please! I’ll do anything, just don’t eat me!”

The crowd laughed. Imiut smiled. “Sorry, I’m too hungry for that offer,” he said to her, grabbing Bonnie’s shoulders. “Now, let’s send you down the hatch.”

And then, he chomped down on Bonnie. Lex watched as Imiut’s tongue swirled around Bonnie head, licking every part of the prey and not sparing a single inch. Bonnie, for her part, tried desperately to pull her head out, pushing against the naga’s chest with her hands. But her strength didn’t match Imiut (or her other competitors, for that matter), so the efforts were still as futile, and lead her nowhere. Imiut was the stronger one here, and he wasn’t going to let go of his food—not by a long shot.

The first swallow echoed in the microphone, ringing throughout the building. Bonnie was shoved forward into the naga’s esophagus, making a big bulge in Imiut’s throat. The naga was too busy tasting more of the squirrel to really notice though.

“Mmm!” exclaimed Imiut. “Goodness me, folks, does she have a spicy little flavor. Not too hot, just enough of a kick for it to really matter. That’s the kind of food I live for! Everyone, give Bonnie a nice big round of applause for that taste!”

The audience laughed and clapped, and Bonnie squirmed more, trying to push herself out again, and trying to kick herself out when that didn’t work. The host chuckled. “Well folks, she tried,” Imiut said simply. And then the naga resumed eating.

Bonnie was slowly swallowed down by the hungry snake-person, sent down the throat bit by steady bit. As the squirrel was gulped down, Imiut took his time with the feasting, licking at his prey and tasting that “spicy flavor” that apparently ran through poor Bonnie. This continued for quite a while until, finally, the squirrel reached the stomach.

When this occurred, the usual happened: Bonnie’s struggles and fighting increased tenfold, picking up speed as the squirrel tried to escape her terrible situation. Lex imagined the screams that must be leaving Bonnie’s mouth right now, and wondered what Ace and Mike must be thinking. Because soon, the three would be crammed into the stomach together. . .

More and more of Bonnie was swallowed down, sent further into the stomach. As more of her went inside, the gut began to grow, getting even bigger than it had already been before thanks to Bonnie's presence. Lex's eyes widened. She had only ever seen Imiut swallow one contestant at a time before now, and seeing his belly grow with multiple people was quite incredible. She just had to hope one of those people inside wouldn't be her. . .

Finally, only the squirrel's feet were left. The naga quickly slurped them down, and just like that, it was done.

"Let's see what she has to say!" said Imiut. The naga grinned. "Bring the mic!"

It was brought out, and held to his gut. "Oh god," Bonnie said. "I-I never thought it'd come to this. . . Help! Somebody help!"

"Delicious," Imiut said, patting his now extremely large stomach as the mic was taken away. "I do love a good squirrel snack, don't you?"

"Now, it's time for the final challenge! Lex, come back to the stage!"

Lex obeyed, nervously walking up to the naga, putting on her most performative smile. Imiut grinned at her. "Now, our last course will be revealed!"

Another part of the stage, on the far right, had been covered with curtains—but now, those curtains were pulled back. It revealed an obstacle course full of challenges, including walls, wrecking balls, and balance beams, among other things. And at the end of it lay the coveted trophy of Snakes and Ladders.

"You will have 2 minutes—120 seconds—to finish this course," explained Imiut. "If you don't complete it, you lose the show, and join the other contestants in my stomach! If you win, you become this season's Snakes And Ladders champion! Are you ready?!"

Lex swallowed down her nervousness and took a breath—she couldn't let the idea of being food get to her. She had to win! "Yes," she said, stepping up to the starting line.

"Ooo, eager—I like that!" said Imiut. "Alrighty then. On your mark . . . get set . . . GO!"

Lex ran into the obstacle course, jumping over a pole meant to trip her and sliding onto the path. She dodged the swinging wrecking balls and reached the balance beam, which she quickly but carefully started to walk across. "There she goes!" exclaimed Imiut. "Lex is having a great start so far—but will one of the challenges we've put in this course be her undoing?"

/No/, the lemur thought, reaching the other side of the balance beam. /Not if I can help it./

She ran forward and weaved between a series of walls, then jumped over another bunch of poles. "She's almost there!" exclaimed Imiut. "Just a few more challenges, and then. . .!"

Lex found the monkey bars and swung across them with ease—that was something she'd always been particularly good at. Then after landing on the ground, she climbed up the rock wall, then climbed back down, and saw the finish line was up ahead! She was going to make it, she was going to—!

“TEN SECONDS!” screamed Imiut. “9. . . 8. . .”

/Shit!/ The lemur dashed forward and, to her relief, she stomped on the finish line just as the naga was saying, “2!”

“AND SHE’S DONE IT!” the host shouted as she grabbed the trophy. “Ladies, gentlemen, and those in between, we have found our new winner of the Snakes And Ladders game show.” A platform landed beside Lex, and she hopped onto it. It started lowering her to the ground. “You know I get disappointed when I can’t have more food, folks, but hey. A new champion is a great thing! Congrats to Lex—give her a hand!”

The audience clapped for the lemur just as the platform reached the ground, and she stepped off. “Cut!” the director shouted. “Let’s set up for the outro. Lex, sit on Imiut’s coils for the shot.”

At that, the lemur froze for a second, unable to believe what she was hearing. They wanted her to sit near that stomach?! But then she returned to her stage persona, and nodded, walking forward toward the naga. He smiled at her and stretched out his coils, giving her a spot right beside his belly.

As the crew set up for the shot, the lemur couldn’t help but stare at that massive gut of his. All marvel she’d had for it had melted away—now she was just plain horrified. It squirmed to no end as the prey inside tried to escape, and now that she was close, she could hear the muffled screams of the people inside. Could Imiut hear them all the time, Lex wondered? And now that she thought about it, was there even enough air inside the belly for all its occupants?

A hand on her shoulder snapped the lemur back to reality, and Imiut smiled tiredly down at her. “We’re almost ready,” the host said. “Sit down.”

Lex obeyed, sitting as far away from that stomach as possible. The screams still leaked into her ears, but she managed to smile at the camera nevertheless. “Good,” the naga said. “You’re a natural at this—no surprise, considering you’ve done this before.”

/Yes, but never like this/, she thought to herself. She had seen the naga eat, yes, but three people? Not to mention being close to it like this? It was terrifying.

“Well, that just about wraps it up, folks!” Imiut said—it looked like the final shot had started, and it jolted Lex out of her mind. “Congrats to our champion, Lex, who managed to survive the Snakes And Ladders game show /without/ becoming my food—that’s a rare one, isn’t it folks?” The audience laughed. “Will Lex return to take on more challengers? Tune in next season to find out!”

Afterwards, Lex was led into the dressing room, where the trophy was taken away (it was just a prop, it turned out) and she was informed that the prize money would be mailed to her in 2 to 4 weeks. She was then left alone, and the lemur looked into the mirror with a sigh.

Then, her phone rang. It had been stored away in the dressing room drawer, and Lex pulled it out. "Hello?" she said, answering it.

"Lex!" The voice at the other end was unfamiliar. "My name's David Michaels—I'm the head of the studio that runs Snakes And Ladders, Whale Entertainment. I just wanted to congratulate you on your victory, and invite you to the next season!"

"Next season?!" Lex exclaimed. "No, I don't think—"

"You're always so good at these daring shows," he continued. "Why not test your luck again? You'll win even more money, too."

That was tempting. Hmm.

"So, what do you say? Want to come back?"