

REKI
KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY
YUKIKO HORIGUCHI

DEMONS' CREST

REALITY ∞ EROSION 1



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Althea

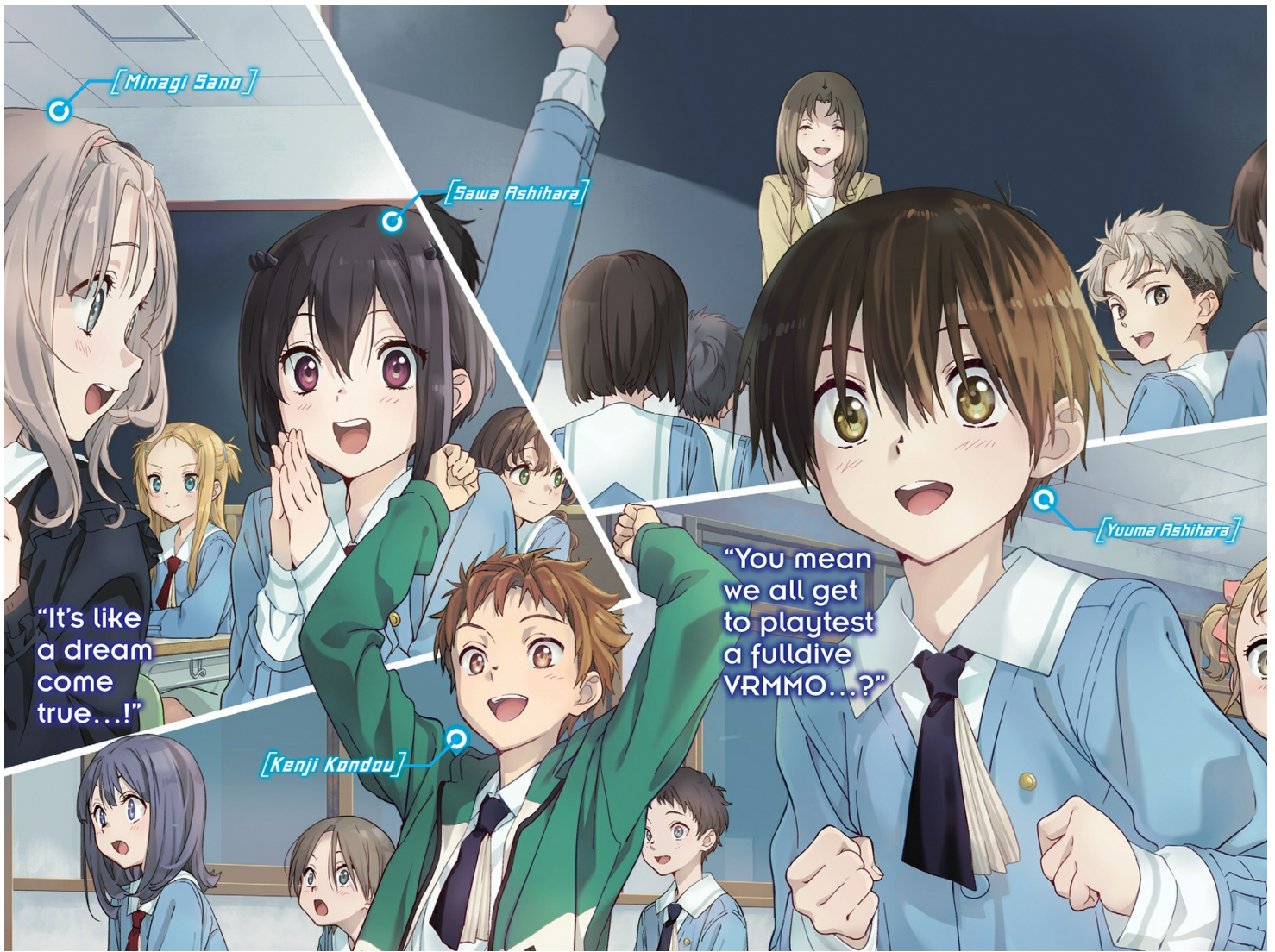
A large-scale amusement center built by US company IO-Tage and located in Nozomi City, Yamanashi Prefecture. The center's main attraction is *Actual Magic*, the world's first Full-dive VRMMORPG.

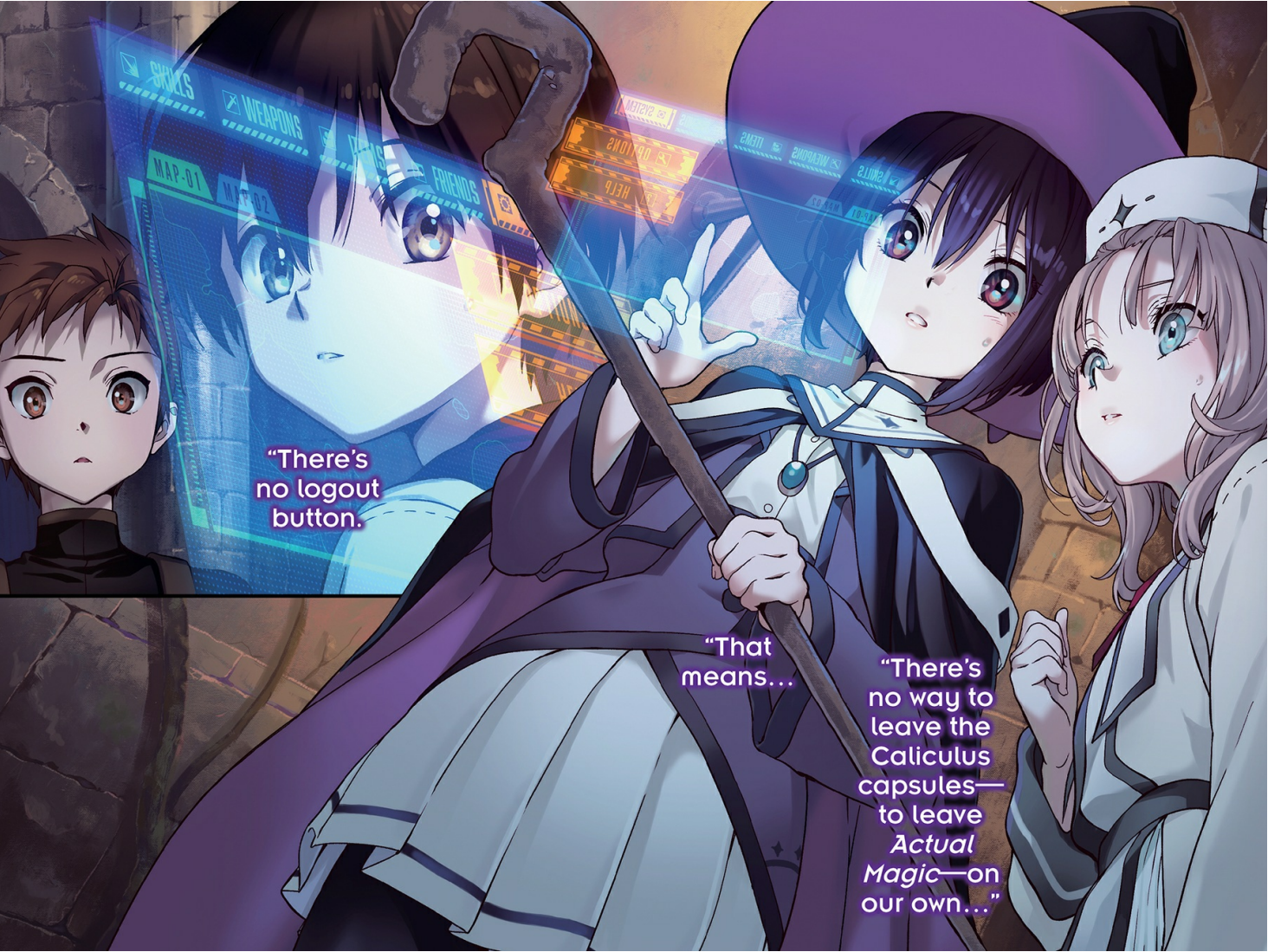
DEMONS' CREST

REALITY ∞ EROSION 1

REKI KAWAHARA

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"There's
no logout
button."

"That
means..."

"There's
no way to
leave the
Calculus
capsules—
to leave
*Actual
Magic*—on
our own..."



"GWAR...
GWWARRR!"

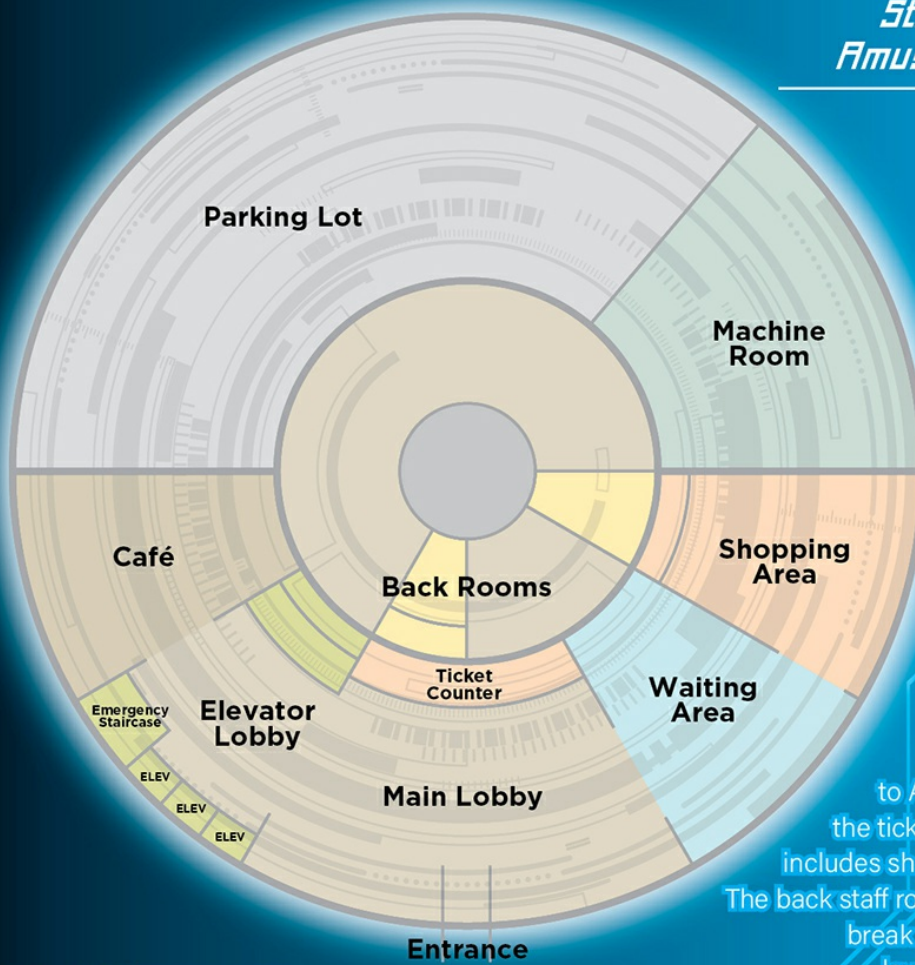
"I'll draw
aggro!"

"Kenk,
you run
interference
from the
side!"

*I need to
think for
myself.
There's
gotta be
a way to
defeat that
thing.*

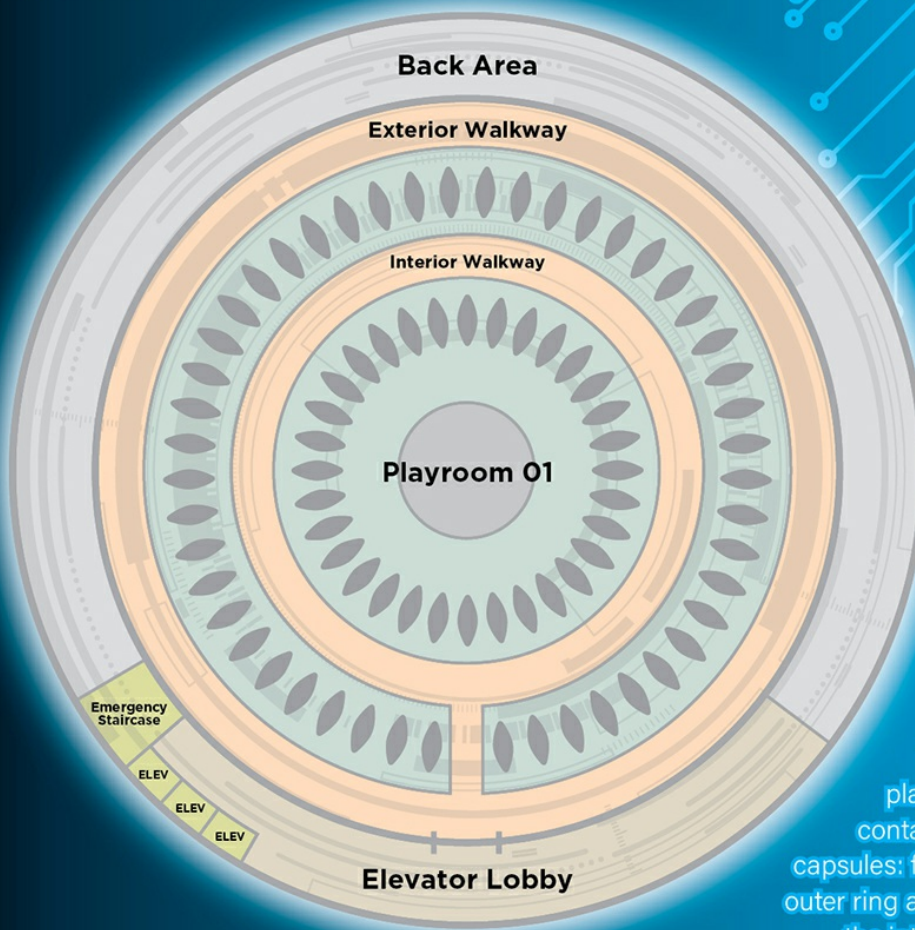
[Conehead Bruiser]

Althea Floor Map



1F

The main entrance to Althea. In addition to the ticket counter, this floor includes shops and a café area. The back staff rooms include offices, break rooms, an infirmary, lavatories, and storage.



2F

This entire floor is a playroom. Playroom 01 contains eighty Calculus capsules: forty-eight along the outer ring and thirty-two within the interior. There are nine playrooms in Althea.



ITEMS



FRIENDS



SYSTEM

This is a game...and it's reality.



OPTIONS

DEMONS' CREST

REALITY ∞ EROSION

1

REKI KAWAHARA

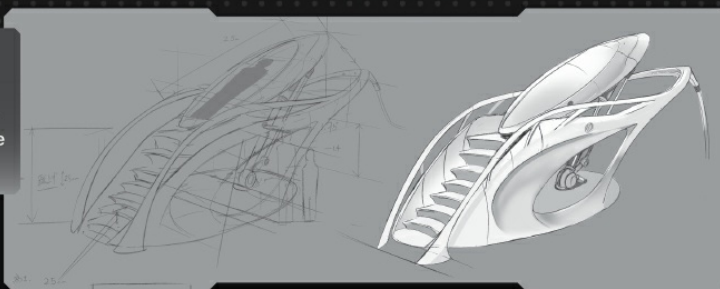
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Calculus

A capsule device for fulldive VR experiences. Developed by IO-Tage, the devices sever the user's connection to their physical body while inside, preventing any movement.



NEW YORK



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Yukihana Elementary School Class 6-1 Roll Sheet

Ver. 1.0

Girls

Homeroom Teacher: Yukari Ebisawa

Student Number	Name	Sex	Character Class	Notes
1	Sawa Ashihara	F	Mage	Twin sister of Yuuma Ashihara.
2	Kanami Iida	F	Unknown	On the swim team.
3	Shouko Ezato	F	Unknown	Laid-back personality.
4	Sayu Kenjou	F	Unknown	Dreams of being a pop star.
5	Minagi Sano	F	Priest	Childhood friend of Yuuma and Sawa.
6	Tomori Shimizu	F	Unknown	Student librarian.
7	Mami Shimonosono	F	Unknown	Loves black magic.
8	Aoi Soga	F	Unknown	Likes to bake.
9	Saki Chikamori	F	Unknown	Looks up to the stylish Ren Fujikawa.
10	Chise Tsuda	F	Unknown	Class pet keeper.
11	Kyouka Teragami	F	Unknown	Leader of the girls.
12	Misato Nakajima	F	Unknown	On the volleyball team.
13	Chinami Nushiro	F	Unknown	Shortest girl in the class.
14	Kimiko Nobori	F	Unknown	Likes Gothic Lolita fashion.
15	Mimi Hariya	F	Unknown	From Kyoto. Likes Japanese sweets.
16	Ren Fujikawa	F	Unknown	Very beautiful. Considers Sumika Watamaki her rival.
17	Karin Henmi	F	Unknown	Loves fortune-telling.
18	Aria Misono	F	Mage	The girliest, most superficial student in the class.
19	Shizu Metoki	F	Unknown	Attends a kendo dojo.
20	Yukimi Yumura	F	Unknown	Hates herself and wants to change.
21	Sumika Watamaki	F	Priest	Most idolized girl in the class.

Boys

Student Number	Name	Sex	Character Class	Notes
22	Shinta Aida	M	Unknown	Likes card games.
23	Yuuma Ashihara	M	Monster Tamer	Mediocre at sports and school.
24	Youichi Oono	M	Unknown	Captain of the basketball team.
25	Akihisa Kaji	M	Unknown	Wants to be a streamer.
26	Kai Kisanuki	M	Unknown	On the soccer team.
27	Kenji Kondou	M	Warrior	Yuuma Ashihara's best friend.
28	Teruki Sugamo	M	Warrior	Class president and captain of the soccer team.
29	Takato Sera	M	Unknown	Likes skateboarding.
30	Masato Takio	M	Unknown	Likes anime, games, and manga.
31	Tomonori Tada	M	Unknown	Likes card games. Friends with Shinta Aida.
32	Shuutarou Toojima	M	Unknown	Trades cryptocurrency.
33	Kakeru Niki	M	Unknown	Friends with Shin Haizaki. Has excellent grades.
34	Ryuugo Nunono	M	Unknown	Attends the same kendo dojo as Shizu Metoki.
35	Shin Haizaki	M	Unknown	Has the best grades in the class.
36	Haruki Hokari	M	Unknown	Likes skateboarding. Friends with Takato Sera.
37	Yukihisa Miura	M	Unknown	On the basketball team.
38	Kouji Mukaibara	M	Unknown	Good at editing videos.
39	Takeshi Moro	M	Unknown	Obsessed with voice actors.
40	Kennosuke Yatsushashi	M	Unknown	Son of a city council member.
41	Naruo Wakasa	M	Unknown	Military buff.

Yuuma opened his eyes. Everything was dark.

He blinked several times but still nothing. His own frantic breathing and the pounding of his heart echoed in his ears. He seemed to be lying on top of something soft, but it felt different from his bed at home.

The first hints of panic began to grip his chest, spreading like ice water and leaving the palms of his hands and the soles of his feet damp and clammy.

He blinked again and tried to think.

Yuuma... His name was Yuuma. Yuuma Ashihara. He was eleven years old and in the sixth grade at Yukihana Elementary School.

The date...was May 13, 2031. A Tuesday. The afternoon maybe?

And the place...

Yuuma balled his clammy hands into fists and tried to remember, but for the life of him, he couldn't recall what he was doing in this darkness. He knew that *something* had happened. Not here but in another place. Somewhere bright and exciting... But where?

A series of images suddenly raced through the back of Yuuma's mind.

A grassy plain stretching out as far as the eye could see. A girl smiling happily. And a sky so blue, it made your heart ache.

And then suddenly, a flash of light against the blue. And...

“Ah... Ahhh...!”

Yuuma shouted in a hoarse voice, reaching up reflexively to protect his head.

Instead, his hands came into contact with something just above him. He flinched and pulled back, then he reached out once more in trepidation.

It was some kind of wall. Slightly curved and lined with thin padding... No, not a wall. A *lid*. He was completely enveloped, as if in a cocoon.

Yuuma realized what it was. He finally remembered what he was doing there.

He was inside a Calculus—a full-body capsule designed to virtually simulate physical stimuli for the person inside while also scanning their brain for motor commands.

That’s right: Yuuma had entered the Calculus capsule of his own free will in order to play a virtual game. A true fulldive VRMMORPG.

Yuuma wasn’t sure why the Calculus had lost power, but he knew there should be an emergency exit lever somewhere inside. There’d been an orientation before entering the game; Yuuma had been too excited to listen closely, but he tried to think back to what he had been told. He reached down with his left hand.

Fumbling around the curved surface of the capsule’s interior, his fingers found a lever shaped like a car door handle. He gripped it apprehensively and pressed down on the lock release button on the lever’s tip, just as he’d been told.

Now all he had to do was pull up on the handle and the lid should open.

Yuuma took a deep breath and prepared himself. It was probably paranoia, but it felt like the oxygen inside the capsule was growing thin.

Suddenly, Yuuma heard what sounded like a scream coming from somewhere far away.

No, not far away. These Calculus capsules were meant to be soundproof. The fact that he was able to hear the scream even from inside his pod meant that it must have come from someone very close by. Someone close by and screaming bloody murder.

Yuuma strained to hear more. His left hand, slick with sweat, still gripped the

handle. After several seconds, however, he still heard nothing.

What was happening out there? At this facility?

Don't.

Something told Yuuma not to open the lid yet. He took his hand off the lever... but then immediately gripped it again.

The building he was in was called Althea. It was an amusement complex that had just been built in Nozomi City, Yamanashi Prefecture. Yuuma hadn't come to Althea all on his own, however; his entire sixth-grade class, Homeroom 6-1 of Yukihana Elementary School, had been invited there that day for Althea's grand opening.

They had come by chartered bus, chaperoned by two of their teachers. There were forty-one students in total, including Yuuma; his best friend, Kenji Kondou; Yuuma's next-door neighbor and childhood friend, Minagi Sano; and of course, Yuuma's own twin sister, Sawa.

Many other adults were also present for the event, but if whatever was happening now was affecting the whole center, it was entirely possible that no one was able to keep the students safe. Minagi was the quiet type; she might be holed up somewhere alone and crying at that very moment. And Sawa had always been headstrong—who knew what kind of trouble she might be causing? Yuuma couldn't leave Kenji to look after both girls on his own. Kenji was far too laid-back for that.

Yuuma steeled his nerves and at last pulled the emergency lever.

The lock released with a *thud*, and the lid of the Calculus shuddered open by a few centimeters. Thin wisps of light seeped into the previously pitch-black capsule. Yuuma had been holding his breath. He finally exhaled.

The weak orange light streaming in through the crack in the lid was probably the emergency lighting. Apparently the entire building had lost power. Yuuma pressed his nose to the opening to get a breath of fresh air.

He inhaled...

“...!”

...and his face scrunched up involuntarily. A strange smell hung in the chilly air. Not so foul that it would make one retch but raw and metallic. It clung to the back of Yuuma's nose, making him feel slightly nauseous. He paused, straining his ears, but all remained quiet.

Gathering up his courage, Yuuma pushed on the lid of the capsule with his right hand. The lid lifted with a hydraulic *whoosh*, and more of the room suddenly became visible.

Yuuma sat up slowly, the capsule's cushion still beneath him.

The first thing that caught his eye was a gently curved wall, located just five meters in front of the capsule. The words `PLAYROOM 01` were written on the wall, lit faintly by the orange glow of the emergency lighting.

Yuuma remembered that Althea had nine playrooms, each of which was equipped with eighty Calculus capsules. He and his classmates had been placed in Playroom 01, which was located on the center's second floor.

Next, Yuuma looked to the left and to the right. There were rows of capsules on either side of him, identical in design to the one that Yuuma was sitting in, all positioned to face outward.

During orientation, Yuuma remembered being told that *calculus* meant "bud." That made sense. The narrow capsules were arranged in a circular pattern that honestly made him think of lily buds. As if together they all formed a single closed flower. When Yuuma and his classmates had entered the room, however, the capsules had appeared stark white under the glaring fluorescent lights. Now, under these orange emergency lights, they reminded Yuuma of insectile cocoons.

The capsules were lined up as far as Yuuma could see. He counted more than twenty in total before they curved out of sight. About 70 percent of the capsules were open; the rest remained closed. Several of the open capsules were also badly damaged, as if something had happened to them.

The capsule directly to Yuuma's right, the one that Kenji had been using, was open and empty. The two capsules on Yuuma's left, containing Sawa and Minagi, remained closed. There was no way to tell from the outside if the two girls were still inside.

Yuuma started to examine the rest of the room.

The massive playroom was over thirty meters in diameter. There had been eighty players in the room, including Yuuma's classmates, but at the moment, there wasn't a single person in sight. There were no voices or other sounds, either. Yuuma began to wonder if he had just imagined the scream earlier. The strange metallic odor, however, still hung thickly in the air.

First things first. I should probably open Sawa's and Minagi's pods.

With that thought, Yuuma hoisted his legs out of the left side of the Calculus capsule and placed his feet into the sneakers waiting there. He grabbed on to the handrail and hoisted himself to his feet. After some momentary dizziness, he carefully proceeded along the narrow platform that wrapped around the capsule.

Yuuma stopped at the edge of the platform and peered down at the walkway below. There was nobody there. He began to creep down the short staircase attached to the pod, instinctively trying to remain as quiet as possible.

The rubber-lined walkway below was littered with bits of plastic, metal pipes, and other items, probably from the broken Calculus capsules. Yuuma immediately headed toward the capsule to his left, avoiding the debris as he walked.

Each Calculus capsule was raised approximately two meters off the ground, probably to protect the privacy of the player inside. At just 152 centimeters tall, Yuuma was too short to reach the pods with his hands even if he stretched onto his tiptoes. He would need to climb up to the platform in order to pull the exterior emergency release lever located on the side of the capsule. He was just beginning to climb the stairs to his sister, Sawa's capsule, when— *Splash*.

A wet sound caught his ear. Yuuma turned to the left to see what had made it.

"Ah..."

A hollow noise escaped Yuuma's lips.

There was someone standing there at the other end of the curved walkway, just a few dozen meters away.

He could just barely see the person's silhouette underneath the dim emergency lights, but he could still make out their lower half. A pair of long, slender legs wrapped in knee-high black socks, no shoes, and above those delicate knees, the hem of a pleated skirt—part of the Yuki-hana Elementary School uniform. The figure's upper half remained hidden in darkness.

But it was enough for Yuuma to know who those legs belonged to.

Sumika Watamaki. Grade six, student number 21.

There wasn't a boy at school, let alone in Yuuma's own class—not even a boy in the fourth or fifth grade—who wasn't at least a little bit interested in Sumika. She was smart, cute, and kind. In fact, she even modeled for a major fashion magazine. She had the kind of looks that could leave a person tongue-tied. No boy was entirely immune to her charms—no red-blooded schoolboy, at least.

But did Yuuma dream of Sumika, like all the other boys? Of maybe, just maybe, someday becoming her boyfriend...? No! Of course not! Yuuma was content to admire her beauty from afar. He would never be so presumptuous. Sure...maybe there was that time in the fourth grade when he had lost one of his QREST eyelenses, and Sumika helped him look for it. But it wasn't like that made him special or anything. It wasn't like he had a crush... That would be silly!

Either way, Yuuma knew this was Sumika just from her knee-high socks. He stepped away from the staircase and back toward the center of the walkway.

“Wa-Watamaki...?”

As Yuuma called out Sumika's name, he realized that the lights in the playroom weren't the only thing that had gone dark. His QREST, attached to the back of his left hand, had also switched off.

QRESTs were multilayer thin-film devices powered by the wearer's own bioelectrical energy. The battery couldn't run out because there was no battery, and he didn't remember having turned it off.

Yuuma pressed on the center of his QREST with his right index finger as he took a step forward. Sumika took a step forward as well, in time with Yuuma.

Her black socks made a wet, sloshing noise.

“...?”

Glancing down, Yuuma noticed a pool of murky black liquid spreading out beneath Sumika’s feet. Was it oil? Yuuma didn’t detect the solvent, chemical smell of oil. However, the metallic odor from earlier seemed stronger than ever. Yuuma scrunched up his nose involuntarily.

Splosh.

Sumika took another step forward.

The dim emergency lights from the ceiling had now reached her chest, revealing a light blue jacket with a slightly higher waist than the boys’ uniform and a dark red school tie—both splattered with the mysterious black liquid.

No, it’s not black.

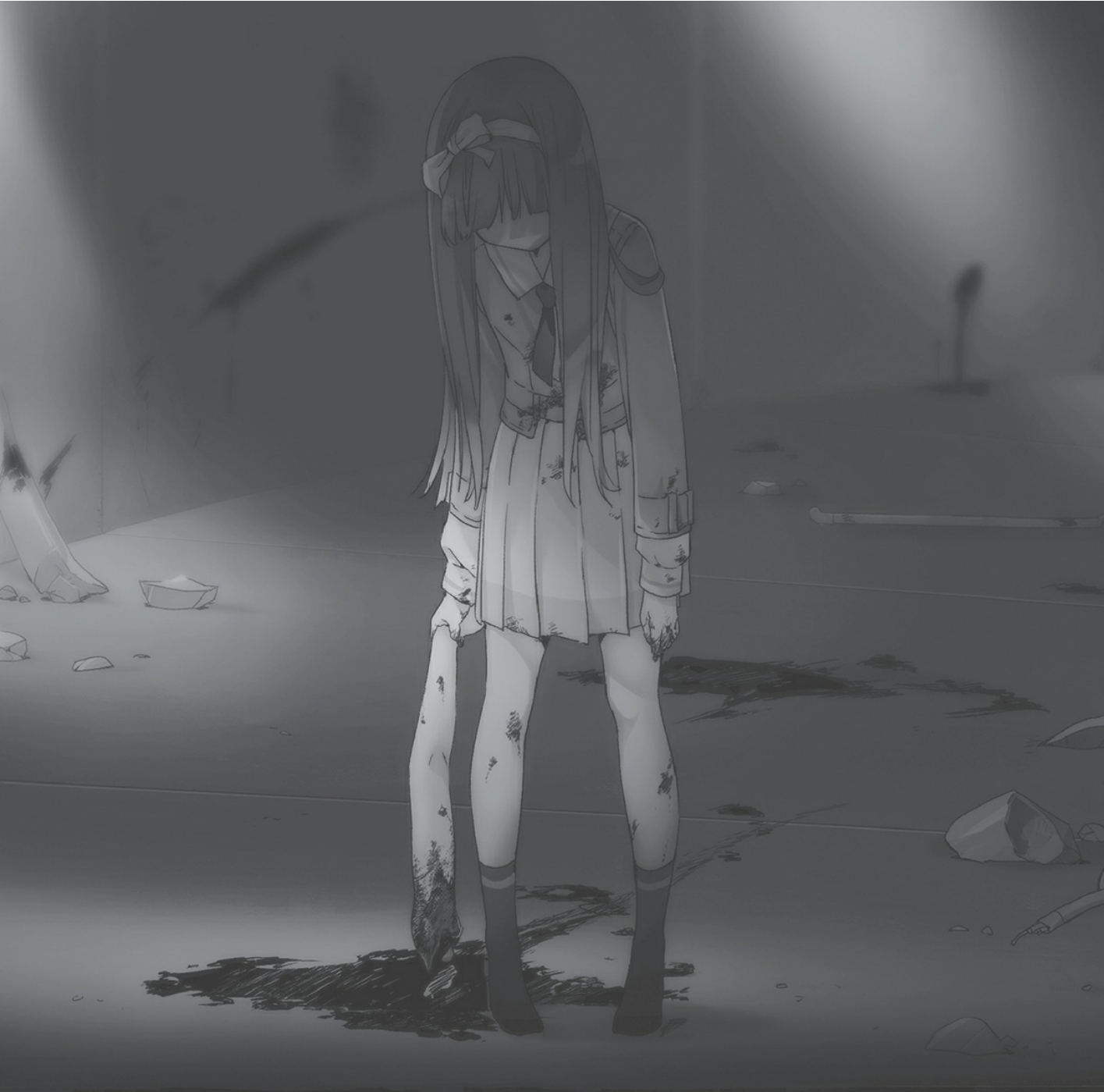
The liquid only looked black because of the dark orange emergency lights. Was it...blood? Was Sumika hurt?

“W-Watamaki... Are you okay?” asked Yuuma, stepping closer.

His voice sounded hoarse. They were less than ten meters apart now, but Sumika somehow seemed far away.

What was taking his QREST so long to boot up? It usually took less than a second. Once his lenses had reconnected, he could turn on low-light vision correction.

Sumika stood silently. Yuuma still couldn’t see her very well, but it looked as if she was holding something in her right hand. Some kind of club, white and thick and slightly bent in the middle. That same black liquid was dribbling from its end.



The outline of the club was rounded. It didn't look machine made. It almost looked organic. Like...an arm. A human arm. Like a child's arm that had been ripped from its shoulder.

A chill ran down the back of Yuuma's neck. His first bizarre thought was that maybe Sumika's own arm had been dismembered during whatever had happened, and now she was carrying it with her as she walked around. He peered toward where Sumika's left arm should be, however, and quickly breathed a sigh of relief. It was still intact.

But then, whose arm was it?

"...Wata...maki...?"

The voice that came from Yuuma's lips was so weak that it surprised even himself. As if in response, Sumika took another step forward. She was now fully bathed in the emergency glow.

Her head was hanging low, her face still hidden in shadow. But something... didn't seem right. It wasn't just the strange arm she was holding. Or the blood splatters all over her uniform. There was something else. Something that was hard to put into words. Something was wrong about the way she was standing there.

Just then, Yuuma's QREST finally finished booting up. The vision enhancement in his eyelenses turned on automatically, magnifying the orange lights and brightening his vision.

Sumika lifted her head with a sudden jerk, as if sensing the change.

Her face, beneath its curtain of soft bangs— Yuuma sucked in a breath, ready to scream. Time crawled to a halt. Yuuma finally remembered everything that had happened before he'd opened his eyes inside the Caliculus.

And he remembered what had happened to him during the playtest of *Actual Magic*—the world's first fulldive VRMMORPG.

“Yu! It’s coming your way!”

The voice belonged to Yuuma’s best friend, Kenji Kondou (or Kenk, as Yuuma liked to call him). In response, Yuuma tightened his grip on the shortsword in his right hand.

Yuuma and his friends were in the middle of a vast grassy plain. There were no boulders or puddles of water around for Yuuma to trip on this time. The conditions were perfect. His sister, Sawa, and his childhood friend, Minagi, were watching from a short distance away. Everything was in his favor; if Yuuma messed up now, he would never live it down.

“Okay, leave it to me!” Yuuma shouted back.

He stared intently at a small shadow that was currently making a beeline his way.

It had already been two hours since the game had started, but Yuuma was only just starting to get the hang of moving around in fulldive.

This world—*Actual Magic* (or *AM* for short)—seemed incredibly real. Not just the blue sky and the white clouds, or the way the purple mountains stretched out translucently in the distance. Not the vivid green plains surrounding them, either. It was everything, from the chill of the air on his skin to the way the ground pushed back against his feet—it all felt real, down to the tiniest detail. He knew that everything he saw was actually being displayed by his QREST

eyelenses and that everything he heard was coming through his QREST earpiece. He also knew his sense of touch and his balance were being fed to him by the Calculus capsule. And yet it all seemed so real. It was astounding.

It was hard to believe this world was digital. Maybe that was why Yuuma hadn't been able to stop himself from trying to move around like he would in the real world. But that wasn't the right way to move in *Actual Magic*. Compared to the Yuuma of the real world, he was far stronger and more agile inside this digital world, and he could easily take a fall or two without hurting himself. His connection to his physical body, meanwhile, had been cut off by the Calculus. There was no danger of banging his actual arms and legs against the capsule's walls.

The trick to playing the game was to get over those psychological hang-ups and push your new virtual abilities to their limit. Until Yuuma could get the hang of that, there was no chance of beating any monsters in the game.

“Squeee!”

The shrieking creature currently barreling toward Yuuma was a nearly sixty-centimeter-tall pale blue rabbit. Within the game of *Actual Magic*, the creature was apparently classified as a “small” monster, but it was nearly the same size as Minagi (Nagi)'s pet Saint Bernard, Donk. A silver horn, about the size of a large carrot, also protruded from the charging blue rabbit's head—a horn that was currently pointed straight toward Yuuma. If he got hit in the stomach with that thing, it could easily poke a hole straight through him.

Yuuma started to freak out again and moved to protect his stomach with his left hand. But if he did that, he wouldn't be able to use the magic spell he had just spent a whole hour learning. He wished he at least had metal armor, like Kenk, instead of the leather armor he was wearing... But it had been Yuuma's own choice to be a backline character. It was too late to cry about that now!

Besides, the blue rabbit wasn't even trying to attack Yuuma.

The rabbit's health bar and its monster name, Horned Great Hare, floated above its head. The health bar, now red, was already 80 percent empty. Kenk had used his two-handed greatsword to reduce the monster to critical health, which was why it was now running away in the direction that Yuuma happened

to be waiting.

The monster may have looked big, but at the end of the day, it was still a rabbit, so it was bounding forward at a speed that seemed far too fast for its bulky frame. It was already less than thirty meters away. The range on Yuuma's spell, however, was only ten meters. He needed to wait a little longer.

"Squee...!" The blue rabbit squealed again before suddenly veering off sharply to the left.

"Crap!" Yuuma cursed and began running.

The rabbit picked up speed. Yuuma chased it as hard as he could, his sides aching.

The first time he fought one of these rabbits, the exact same thing happened, and he tripped over a rock when he attempted to give chase. The second time, Yuuma tried to be more careful, but instead the creature just got away. Obviously it was important to avoid obstacles, but it was even more important to make good use of his avatar's abilities. Yuuma wasn't very athletic in the real world, but if he wanted to play the game right, he was going to need to get over his fears.

Stop holding back! You know you can run faster than this!

Yuuma scolded himself in his head and willed his feet to go faster. He began to lurch forward. He had never run this fast in the real world. His vision blurred, and he felt the wind whistle past his ears, but he just gritted his teeth and focused on sprinting.

"Go, Yu!"

"You're almost there!"

He could hear Sawa and Nagi cheering him on from behind.

So embarrassing! Yuuma bent forward and ran even harder.

He was getting closer and closer to the fleeing rabbit. Yuuma guessed it was less than fifteen meters away at this point.

Now!

He raised his left hand into the air and dashed harder.

Now came the hard part. The spell he wanted to cast had four words of power, and he had to chant them perfectly, without fumbling, while still running at full speed.

“Tenebris!”

Yuuma called out the first word—the element. The element for this spell was “dark.” A ball of deep indigo light appeared before his outstretched hand.

“Capere Anima!”

The next two words were the form. The light changed shape, becoming a phantom hand, complete with long, wicked claws several times the size of Yuuma’s actual hand.

As he chanted the words, a targeting reticle appeared in the middle of his field of vision. He moved his left hand slightly, lining up the rabbit in his crosshairs.

The monster was less than ten meters away. This time there was no escaping! Yuuma chanted the last word.

“Ignis!”

The word of activation echoed faintly as Yuuma cast the spell. The glowing indigo hand shot forward, its claws closing as it snatched the entire rabbit in an eagle grip.

Fwip! A strange sound effect played, and the rabbit disappeared in a cloud of indigo smoke.

“I...I did it!”

As Yuuma was still shouting in victory, he stumbled over a small divot in the ground and landed face-first in the grass before rolling head over heels. The HP bar floating over his own head decreased by a tiny fraction owing to the fall. Yuuma could no longer say he beat the rabbit without taking damage—but that was a small price to pay for victory!

Yuuma jerked into a sitting position and quickly looked up in anticipation. He

was met by the sight of a large, sparkling object, which descended toward him.

It was a card, slightly larger than an ordinary playing card. He tossed aside the shortsword he was holding and reached up with both hands to receive the card. As it entered Yuuma's hands, the light surrounding it disappeared with a faint twinkle.

The card was made of a strange transparent purple material and featured an image of the rabbit on one side with the words **HORNED GREAT HARE** beneath it.

"Y-yesss...!!"

Still holding the card in his left hand, Yuuma pumped his right fist into the air, shouting louder than he had probably ever shouted before in the real world.

Finally. This was the real strength of the character class Yuuma had chosen—Monster Tamer. Monster Tamers could use a capture spell to catch monsters and transform them into cards. Monster-catching character classes were a common feature in console and QREST RPGs, but Yuuma had no idea that capturing a monster for real would be so hard. Well, not for real, since *Actual Magic* was still a game. But it was still way harder than in any ordinary game.

"Nice job, Yu!"

Yuuma turned in the direction of the voice. It was Kenk. He was walking toward Yuuma and flashing two thumbs-up, his huge sword strapped to his back.

Kenk was pretty big for an elementary school student. His avatar had the same large frame and short, spiky hair as he did in the real world. Even his face, which looked slightly grown up for his age, was pretty similar to Kenk's actual face. Equipped with imposing metal armor and his two-handed greatsword, Kenk's avatar looked every bit the Warrior.

With a bit of help from Kenk, Yuuma stood up, and they gave each other a high five—a one-handed high five, since Yuuma was still clutching the monster card in his other hand.

"Thanks, Kenk! That was a great assist!"

Kenk grinned from ear to ear. "I know, right?! It's way harder than it looks to

whittle down a monster's hit points and then herd it in the direction you want it to go. Takes skill!"

While Kenk was still patting himself on the back, the two girls ran up from behind. They were quick to rain on Kenk's parade.

"Don't be such a blowhard!"

"There was a fifty-fifty chance it was gonna go that way anyway..."

Turning around, Yuuma caught sight of Sawa and Nagi. They strolled leisurely toward him.

Sawa had chosen the Mage class, which specialized in offensive magic. His childhood friend Nagi, meanwhile, had chosen the Priest class, which used recovery magic. Both were pretty standard classes for an RPG. Like Kenk, their avatars reflected their appearance in the real world. The robes they wore, however—part of their gear as magic-using classes—looked surprisingly natural on them. Cute, even.

Not like that, though! Sawa's my bratty little sister. We've been together since birth! And obviously I don't think about Nagi that way, either!

As he was thinking this, Yuuma waved to the two girls with his free hand. "I finally got it!" he said, raising the purple card in his left hand.

The girls crowded around in fascination.

"Huh... So that's a monster card. Look, it's even got a picture of old flopears on it!"

"Flopears?! You've gotta be kidding..."

Why couldn't Sawa ever just talk normal? Yuuma was about to start a fight when Nagi suddenly leaned in closer, her face drawing near to his. Yuuma shut his mouth reflexively.

The two girls looked very different. Sawa was the sharp, cool type—and that was putting it nicely. If you wanted to be mean, you might say she looked harsh. Nagi's features, meanwhile, were soft and gentle. By the time Yuuma was old enough to be aware of what was going on around him, he had probably already seen more of Nagi's face than he had his own. And yet for some reason these

days, he seemed to lose his train of thought whenever Nagi suddenly got too close.

Nagi, however, didn't seem to notice Yuuma's reaction.

"You should try summoning it, Yu!" she said with her usual pleasant smile.

"What? Like now?!"

"Well, according to the display, we only have fifty minutes left..."

"What?! Already?!" shouted Kenk.

It was true. Glancing down at the display in the lower-right corner of his field of vision, Yuuma saw that the display read 2:10 PM.

"What are we gonna do?! I made a bet with Sugamo and the others over who would beat the boss first!"

"Not again... What did you bet this time, Kenk?" asked Sawa.

A trickle of sweat ran down Kenk's brow. "Tomorrow's chocolate pudding at lunch..."

"Ha! Well, don't expect me to share any of mine!" Sawa grinned.

"Actually...I bet all four of our puddings...", Kenk mumbled.

"You did *what*...?!"

Sawa grabbed Kenk by the collar, easily lifting him into the air with a single arm, heavy armor and all.

"Kenji Kondou! Who gave you the right to bet *my* chocolate pudding?!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! My bad! Just please, don't use my real name while we're in game!!"

Kenk flailed about in a panic. Nagi stood to the side and tutted. She didn't seem very concerned. Yuuma just sighed deeply.

"You've really done it now, Kenk," he said. "Chocolate pudding is currently in the lead for first place in Sawa's 2031 School Lunch Dessert Rankings."

"Hey!" Sawa tossed the dangling Kenk aside and rounded on Yuuma next. "That's supposed to be top secret information, Yuummy!"

Sawa usually called her brother Yu, just like his friends. They were twins, after all, even if technically he was her older brother. In the heat of the moment, however, she seemed to forget and called him Yuummy, her childhood nickname for him. Yuuma gently pushed her back with both hands.

“C’mon, you can work things out with Kenk later. What’s done is done. For now, let’s look on the bright side and try to find a solution. Speaking of which. Hey, Kenk, if we win...do we get their four puddings instead?”

Yuuma glanced toward his friend, Kenk the Warrior, who was now lying in the grass in a heap. Kenk perked up, nodding enthusiastically.

“Of course! If we win, we get the chocolate puddings of Sugamo and his three other party members!”

“Humph...” Sawa’s anger dissipated.

“Well, that’s okay, then,” Nagi said with a smile.

Yuuma had managed to dispel his sister’s anger in record time. Before anything else could happen, he raised his right hand into the air, bringing his fingers together and then quickly opening them in the pinch-out gesture.

A chime sounded, and a menu appeared in midair. It was similar to the QREST holo-windows they used in the real world, although seeing the flat UI here in this fantasy setting made it seem a little out of place. But *Actual Magic* was still a game, and a game needed menus, after all.

“Let’s see... This is the starting town, and I think this is the grassy plains where we are now. If the boss dungeon is here...”

As Kenk pointed to locations on the map, Sawa clicked her tongue in a very unladylike manner. “Tsk...! Look how far it is to the dungeon. I don’t think we’re gonna make it all the way to the boss in just fifty minutes...”

“It’ll also take time to fight through the dungeon,” Nagi pointed out calmly.

“It does look tough, but we’ve gained a lot of levels fighting in the grasslands,” said Yuuma, letting his gaze roam from the map to the far-off mountains. “Plus Sugamo and his party have probably already cleared out the monsters in the dungeon. If we make a rush for it, we might still be able to catch up!”

“Sorry to break it to you, Yu...,” said Sawa in an even tone. “But how are we supposed to rush through the dungeon when we don’t even know the way? We’ll just wind up luring mobs until we get cornered in a dead end and they party-wipe us.”

Yuuma and Sawa had been playing video games together ever since they were little, but Sawa had spent way more time in MMOs than Yuuma had.

“Au contraire,” said Yuuma, wagging his finger back and forth. He was still holding the purple monster card in his left hand, and he thrust it into their faces once more. “Did it ever occur to you that there might be a reason I wanted to go after this little blue pain-in-the-neck first, instead of one of the easier monsters near town? For you see— Nrk!”

He was interrupted suddenly by a jab to the stomach from Sawa’s finger. It didn’t actually hurt, but he could feel his organs squish like jelly.

“Would you get to the point? We’re running out of time!” Sawa chided.

“Ha, that’s Saps for you!” said Kenk, using his old nickname for Sawa. “Impatient as ever— Urk!”

Sawa shut Kenk up with a quick jab to the kidney. Yuuma used that opportunity to quickly explain his plan.

“The blue rabbit...I mean the Horned Great Hare...has an ability called Tunnel Search.”

“Yu, sorry to interrupt,” said Nagi, “but maybe you should wait to explain until we get there?”

Yuuma fell silent. Then he nodded. “Good point.”

Ever since they were little, Yuuma had had a tendency to fall into the role of leader when all four of them hung out together. The truth, however, was that whenever the going got tough, it was usually Nagi who displayed the better sense of judgment.

Weird, since she kinda looks more like the mascot character, thought Yuuma. Not that I’d say that to her face!

He pulled the still-groaning Kenk back to his feet and then pointed in the

direction of the final boss dungeon. “All right, let’s get moving, then! We should do our best to just avoid any monsters we see along the way. And if we do catch aggro, just make a break for it!”

Yuuma’s three friends shouted back with varying levels of enthusiasm: “Let’s do this!!”

“Okay, okay.”

“Here we go.”

Yuuma began running northward, cutting a path through the green plains.

Maybe it was the increase in his base stats from two hours of level grinding—or maybe it was because, after that last fight, he finally understood how to use his avatar correctly—but Yuuma was able to keep up with his friends the entire way there. In fact, he even pulled ahead of them several times during their five-kilometer run to the dungeon.

After leaving the grasslands and entering the forest, they were lucky enough to encounter a peddler NPC. They used nearly all the gold they had farmed while leveling up to upgrade their equipment. Sawa and Nagi had wanted to try on all the different designs, but the two boys hurried them along, and they were able to get in and out with barely any time lost.

The time was 2:25 PM. Their playtest—what the school was calling a “social studies field trip”—was scheduled to end at 3:00. That meant they had thirty-five minutes left. Yuuma and his party had arrived at their final destination, the dilapidated castle located in the forest.

The castle was half in ruins, crumbling and covered in moss, but according to the guide that the playtesters had all been given before starting, there was an entrance to a dungeon on the first floor of the castle. A sprawling, three-layer-deep underground labyrinth.

Yuuma and his friends stopped before the castle for a brief moment. The avatars of other playtesters passed them, one after another, some young, some old, some male, and some female. It seemed as if all seven hundred players, who up until now had been scattered across the map, were now beginning to converge on this one location.

“You know, the thought just occurred to me...,” noted Sawa, twirling her wand deftly in between her fingers. “But forget about Sugamo and the others—what if someone else already defeated the boss? We might be late to the party...”

“Sawa, I’m surprised at you,” Nagi replied, gently correcting Sawa’s mistake. “It said right in the guidebook that they made the boss room an instance dungeon for the test period.”

“An instant dungeon?” said Kenk. “Like, just add water?”

Kenk was a big gamer, but he barely knew anything about MMORPGs. Sawa rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue at him in an exaggerated manner.

“You need to go back and repeat first grade,” she said.

“First grade...?!”

“Instancing is when a separate map is generated for just your character or party. So in this case, after fighting through the dungeon and entering the boss room, you’d be teleported to a special map just for you,” explained Sawa, ignoring the fact that she was the one who had been wrong in the first place.

Kenk simply nodded. “So in other words, there are as many bosses in there as there are parties?”

“Exactly!” It was Nagi who answered this time. “When you beat the boss, your clear time gets recorded. Apparently, the fastest players receive some kind of special bonus award.”

“Wait, really?! Then what are we doing just standing around for?!” Kenk reached out in a hurry, grabbing Yuuma by his short cloak and attempting to pull him along. “C’mon, Yu! Quit twiddling your thumbs and let’s go already!”

“I wasn’t twiddling my thumbs!” Yuuma protested, yanking the hem of his cloak from Kenk’s grasp and slamming the small guidebook shut. “I was double-checking my spell to make sure I don’t fumble it.”

“Your spell...? Oh! You mean to summon your pet?” said Kenk.

Sawa and Nagi crowded in close.

“You’re finally gonna summon ol’ flopears?!”

“Summon it, Yu! Hurry!”

“Okay, I’m doing it...”

Yuuma tucked the guidebook back into the pouch at his waist and took a short step away from the other three. Using his left hand, he drew the purple monster card from the special card holster strapped to the right side of his chest, then raised the card high in the air.

Within *Actual Magic*, even the simplest spells generally required at least three words of power—an element, a form, and the word of activation. There were several exceptions to this rule, however. For instance, a Monster Tamer could summon captured monsters and return them to their cards with only a single word.

However, great care was still required when casting these spells. According to the guidebook, although the chance was small, fumbling a summon spell could result in the card itself being destroyed... Those were some pretty big consequences! After all the trouble they had gone through just to capture the dang thing, Yuuma didn’t want to mess it up now because of a careless mistake.

Yuuma was just a virtual avatar in a virtual world, but he still felt his mouth go dry with performance anxiety. He drew in a deep breath and then shouted the unfamiliar word.

“Aperta!”

The activation system recognized the command, and the card in his left hand began glowing with an intense purple light. A complex magic circle appeared, expanding outward in three dimensions, as the card seemed to dissolve into thin air.

A powerful, blinding light appeared in the center of the magic circle, releasing a beam that shot diagonally toward the ground. The light seemed to converge and grow larger as it hit the ground, until finally...

Fwop!

The monster appeared with an almost comical sound.

It was a rabbit. With soft blue fur and a silver horn. And it was about twenty

centimeters long.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Yuuma and Kenk stared at the rabbit in silence for several moments until Kenk finally spoke.

“Is it just me...or did that rabbit get smaller?” He cocked his head.

“No... It *definitely* got smaller,” said Yuuma.

Why do enemies in games always get weaker the moment they join your side...?

The blue rabbit, which was now just a third of its former size, didn't seem particularly concerned over what its new master thought of it. It tilted its head quizzically to the side and stared up at Yuuma with big round eyes.

“Squee?” it chirped.

The two girls screamed in unison:

“It's...so...*cuuuute*!!”

Their reaction was so over the top that Yuuma almost expected to see hearts and sparkles shoot out of their eyes.

The blue rabbit took a few hops forward. Sawa scooped it up in her arms and hugged it tightly to her chest. Nagi, who hadn't been as quick on the draw as Sawa, stared at Sawa enviously, reaching forward and patting the rabbit's head repeatedly, her hand a blur.

The tip of the rabbit's horn, which had once been as sharp as the tip of a lance, was now rounded and smooth. Yuuma began to wonder if he had chosen the right monster. But he hadn't selected the Horned Great Hare for mere battle prowess alone, of course. According to something he'd heard from one of the NPCs in the starting town, this rabbit possessed a uniquely powerful special ability.

The girls were still busy squealing over the rabbit when Yuuma reached in between them, grabbed the creature by its long ears, and plucked it free from

Sawa's chest.

"Yuuma! Don't hold him like that! You'll hurt him!" she yelled.

"Look, we didn't go through all the trouble of capturing him just to turn him into a lap pet." Yuuma held up the rabbit and stared into its face. "I know you're only level 1, buddy, but I'm counting on you, all right?"



“Squee!”

“Nicely said!”

Yuuma nodded and placed the rabbit back on the ground.

Monster Tamers could control their captured familiars using voice commands. Yuuma was still level 7, so he had access to only five commands. Apparently, once a Monster Tamer leveled up, they could start giving pretty complicated commands—at least eventually.

But Yuuma didn’t need the rabbit to do anything too complicated at the moment. He drew in a breath to give his first command but then stopped, perplexed.

In order to issue a command in *Actual Magic*, users had to start by saying the pet’s name. Not its monster name, like Horned Great Hare, but its own personal name. Naturally, as the Monster Tamer, Yuuma was the one who had to choose the name.

As Yuuma stood there frozen, a grin appeared on Sawa’s face.

“You haven’t thought of a name yet, have you, Yu...?”

“Uhh...”

Nagi was standing beside Sawa. She smiled. “It’s okay. You’re really good at thinking up names, Yu... I’m sure you’ll come up with something super cute, just like you did for Donk.”

“Uhhhh...”

It was true; Yuuma had been the one to come up with the name *Donk* for Nagi’s pet Saint Bernard. Nagi and her family lived next door. But it was Nagi’s father who had actually given the dog the nice, fancy name of Donald. Yuuma had still been in kindergarten at the time and couldn’t pronounce *Donald*. That was why he said Donk instead, and before anyone knew it, the name had stuck.

The truth was that Yuuma was really bad at choosing names. Half the time, when playing RPGs, he just stuck with his real name. How was he supposed to think up a name for his familiar on the spot? Vexed, Yuuma stared down at the bunny with its big, round eyes.

“C’mon, Yu! We’re running out of time!” whined Kenk, hopping from one foot to the other like an impatient child.

Kenk had a point. It was already past 2:30. They had less than thirty minutes left before the playtest would end. In order to be able to defeat the boss and record their time, they would need to get through the dungeon in twenty minutes at the most.

“Hm... Hrm...”

The rabbit stared up at Yuuma. “Squee?”

“Th-that’s it! Your name is Squeak!” shouted Yuuma, deciding on the spur of the moment.

“Squeak? Really? *Squeak?*”

“Well, it’s better than Butterball, I guess...”

Neither Sawa nor Nagi seemed pleased. Ignoring them, Yuuma opened his menu and navigated to the Pets tab—a special section that was available only to Monster Tamers. Naturally, the sole monster on his list at the moment was this Horned Great Hare. Yuuma tapped on its empty name field and typed out **Squeak**. Pet names couldn’t be changed, so they would be stuck calling this rabbit Squeak for the foreseeable future.

Despite whatever the girls might have thought, the blue rabbit seemed pleased with its new name.

“Sq-squee!” it cried, bouncing happily in place. Yuuma didn’t like how much smaller it had become, but it sure was cute.

He breathed in once more and issued his first voice command to the familiar.

“Squeak! Follow me!”

It was important to say it just like that, and not something else like “Come with me.” To issue the Follow command, one had to say “Follow” and then the target of the command.

Fortunately, Squeak seemed to recognize the command. “Sq-squee!” it shouted, and began bouncing in circles around his feet.

Sawa and Nagi continued to stare jealously at Yuuma's pet. Kenk, meanwhile, looked like he was about to jump out of his skin from impatience. Yuuma locked eyes with each of them in turn.

"All right," he said. "Let's go conquer this dungeon."

The four players stepped through the castle gates just as the parade of incoming players was petering out. They first passed through a desolate front courtyard, filled with withered hedgerows and bone-dry fountains, before arriving at the castle proper. There, in the middle of the sprawling great hall, they discovered a dank stairway leading down into darkness. A clammy wind rose up from somewhere deep in the shadows, carrying with it the groaning wails of distant monsters.

"Ugh... I didn't expect the dungeon to be so...dungeony," said Kenk in a hushed tone as he peered down into the darkness.

Nagi, who was standing next to him, giggled slightly. "You're not scared, are you, Kenk?"

"N-no, I'm not scared! I'm the dungeon slayer of Yuki-hana Elementary!"

"In that case, we should go," said Yuuma. "We've only got twenty-five minutes left."

The two boys had played together since they were little, so Yuuma knew how much Kenk hated dark, cramped spaces. This was no time for coddling, however. Yuuma patted Kenk hard on the back, jostling him toward the stairs.

They made their way quickly, but carefully, down the worn stone stairs—Kenk first, followed by Yuuma, then Nagi, and then Sawa. After seeing the quality of the images created by his eyelenses and how closely they matched reality, Yuuma thought he would be over his surprise at this point. But once again, the hardness of the cold stone beneath his feet, and the dim heat from the torches ensconced along the wall, took Yuuma's breath away. Two and a half hours had already passed since the playtest had begun, but he was still finding it hard to believe that these were all just virtual sensations, created by the Calculus.

What if the Calculus was some kind of cross-dimensional device, and they had actually been transported to another world? Yuuma let his imagination

wander as they continued down the stairs. Eventually, they arrived at level ground.

It was a large room, maybe twenty meters across. As the starting point for the dungeon, it was surprisingly bright. There were three other parties there, besides Yuuma and his friends, resting against the wall and getting their inventories in order. Considering how little time was left, it looked like these parties had already given up on reaching the boss.

But Yuuma and his friends weren't going to abandon their mission so easily. After all, there were four chocolate puddings on the line! Chocolate pudding had had to beat out a lot of other desserts in order to come first in Sawa's School Lunch Dessert Rankings!

"...Hey, Yu? The boss room is on the third floor. Do you really think we can make it there in just ten minutes? We don't even have a map," said Sawa.

According to the tutorial at the start of the game, ignoring sidequests and going straight for the main objectives could net users a dungeon map. As an avid gamer, however, Yuuma knew it was always better not to follow the main path. Instead, his party had spent most of their three hours leveling up, farming gold, and capturing the blue rabbit.

That had been Yuuma's plan. Not one of his three friends had voiced any objections, so it was up to Yuuma not to let them down.

There were arched doorways in the wall of the square room: one straight ahead, one to the left, and one to the right. Without a map, it was impossible to tell which one would lead to the next staircase. Unless...

Yuuma glanced down at the familiar bouncing around at his feet. It twitched its black nose. He gave it a new order.

"Squeak! Lead us to the end of the dungeon!"

"Squeee...!"

With a squeal, the blue rabbit hopped twice in place and then began bounding toward the doorway on the right.

"That way!"

Yuuma chased Squeak, and Kenk and the others followed.

The archway led into a long, winding stone hallway. Just the type of hallway one would expect to see in a dungeon. After a few moments, they reached a crossroads. Another party was fighting some sort of slime monster up ahead.

Before they reached the monster, however, Squeak turned left, proceeding deeper into the dungeon without hesitation. It was almost as if it knew where it was going—and that was because it did! Horned Great Hares were so difficult to capture because of their special ability, Tunnel Search. While in underground passageways such as dungeons, the Horned Great Hare could use five special commands: Lead to Start, Lead to End, Find Items, Find Monsters, and Avoid Monsters. Lead to End caused it to take the shortest path to the boss room.

Unfortunately, Lead to End and Avoid Monsters couldn't be used at the same time. Yuuma's party would have to fight any monsters they encountered along the way. But with playtime almost at an end and the dungeon now swarming with players, the mobs were being picked off faster than they could respawn. Yuuma and his party made it through the first and second layers with barely a fight.

The four of them raced down the long stairway and arrived at the third layer, then breathed a sigh of relief when they saw what awaited them.

While the first and second floors had been sprawling labyrinths, the third floor seemed to be just one long passageway that stretched off into the distance. Squinting, they spotted a giant door at the end of the path. Squeak began to rush toward it, hopping at breakneck speed.

"Squeak, stop!" Yuuma shouted. The blue rabbit stopped in place.

Squeak looked up at him with its huge round eyes. Yuuma picked up the rabbit, cradling it in his arms.

"You did great, Squeak. Until next time!"

He then delivered another command.

"Clause!"

Squeak was enveloped in a magic circle similar to the one that had appeared

when Yuuma had summoned it. The rabbit grew rapidly smaller and smaller inside the purple light until it disappeared with a *pop*. Yuuma reached to grab the card, which had appeared in a cloud of twinkling smoke, and returned it to its holster.

Yuuma had said, “Until next time,” but in truth this was probably the last they would see of Squeak. As explained during orientation, any stat increases or items gained during the playtest would be reset once the game went live.

He stroked his card holster absently. They had spent less than an hour together, but he had to admit, it felt surprisingly sad to say goodbye.

The time was now 2:48 PM. As long as they managed to rush down the hallway in two minutes or less, the party could still arrive at the boss room with ten minutes still left to spare—just as planned.

Yuuma made eye contact with Sawa, Nagi, and Kenk. They nodded at each other and began running toward the door.

The pathway was maybe five hundred meters long. Along the way, they encountered several other parties who had gotten there first and were busy fighting large, dangerous-looking monsters. Luckily, Yuuma and his friends were able to slip right past them.

The door had started off as a speck in the distance before it loomed larger and larger until finally they could make out a dragon relief on its surface, which glimmered in the light from their torches. Just then— “Wait right there, Kenji Kondou!” shouted an angry voice from behind them.

Yuuma and his friends glanced over their shoulders as they continued to run. Another party was hot on their heels. And leading that party was none other than...

“Ugh, it’s Sugamo!” said Kenk, groaning.

Yuuma groaned internally as well.

According to the pecking order of their class (Yukihana Elementary School Homeroom 6-1), Teruki Sugamo was considered pretty hot stuff. He was tall, fairly good looking, captain of the soccer team, got good grades, was on the school council, and his father was even the president of some company. If it

wasn't for his personality, he would have been perfect. Unfortunately, Sugamo also needed to be the center of attention and to boss people around. No matter the occasion, he was never happy unless he was in charge. For people like Yuuma and Kenk, who liked to do their own thing, interacting with Sugamo was like mixing oil and water.

As a result, Yuuma and his friends did their best not to have anything to do with him. Sugamo, however, seemed to have a chip on his shoulder whenever it came to Kenk. Maybe Sugamo just couldn't stand the fact that Kenk was a little bit taller than him.

"If anyone's gonna enter that boss room first, it's us, Kondou!"

Sugamo began to sprint forward at an insane pace, leaving his party members in the dust in order to race neck and neck with Kenk. Sugamo's silver platemail was probably a good 30 percent heavier than Kenk's armor and made awkward clanking noises as he ran. Even Yuuma was impressed that Sugamo had the skill and determination to sprint in armor like that. If only Sugamo could have kept his mouth shut while doing it.

"Uh...Sug? You know the boss room is a separate instance, right? It doesn't actually matter who enters first," said Yuuma.

Sugamo glanced toward Yuuma as if just noticing he was there. "I told you back in fourth grade not to call me that anymore, Ashihara!" he growled menacingly.

One of his party members also chimed in.

"Like, seriously, Ashihara? You should call him by his character name, Lucius. Not by one of your dumb nicknames!"

Yuuma didn't need to glance back in order to know who was yelling at him. That voice could belong only to Aria Misono, one of the queen bees of the sixth grade. She was a bit of a superficial girly-girl type. Yuuma was pretty sure Sugamo and Aria weren't dating, but they always seemed to be hanging out together in class, talking loudly about clothes or music or whatever.

"Sure, sure. You got it, Mibs," Yuuma replied.

"Call me that again and see what happens!" roared Aria, going from girly-girl

to goblin mode in the blink of an eye.

Nozomi City had been built around ten years earlier as a public-private smart city on the eastern foot of Mount Fuji, overlooking Lake Yamanaka. Despite how new it was, however, Nozomi City was no better equipped to resist declining birthrates than anywhere else. For the past five years, there had been only one class for each grade at Yukihana Elementary School, and as of the following year, the school was scheduled to be shut down, with the remaining students merged into another school. That was why Yuuma's class had been invited to Althea's grand opening.

In other words, they had all been in the same class together, ever since first grade—not just Yuuma, Sawa, Nagi, and Kenk, but Sugamo and Aria as well.

They never used to mind being called Sug and Mibs..., thought Yuuma.

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a nod.

"Don't call me ma'am! It's weird. Like I told you before, if you really want to use a nickname, you can call me Ria."

"I would never dream of it, ma'am."

I'd sooner call them ma'am and sir than Lucius and Ria. Yuuma shrugged.

At his left, Sawa and Nagi heaved awkward sighs. This was followed by an amused giggle from somewhere toward the back.

"Ah...!"

It had been only the faintest of giggles. And not even the real thing, of course—just a synthetic voice produced by the game system. But there was no mistaking that laugh. Yuuma and Kenk both turned to stare, their eyes growing wide.

Aria was still directly behind them, wearing a slightly revealing Mage's outfit. But there was another girl behind her, dressed in graceful, streaming Priest's robes... The most beautiful girl in their class. Someone who wasn't just at the top of the pecking order, but in a league of her own. It was her—Sumika Watamaki!



“W-Watamaki...!” babbled Yuuma.

“What’re you doing in Sug’s party?!” shouted Kenk.

A wave of displeasure seemed to emanate from Sawa and Nagi. But there was no time to worry about that right now. Sugamo, meanwhile, was too busy laughing in their faces to notice that Kenk had insulted him.

“Ha-ha-ha! Who else’s party would she join? Unlike you chumps, we haven’t just been goofing around. Have you even done any quests? No? Because that’s what makes us us and you you. So move out of the way!”

Sugamo bashed shoulders with Kenk, forcefully pushing Kenk aside as Sugamo jostled for the lead. He was dressed in a long, heroic cloak and equipped with a fancy sword and shield. His equipment gleamed under the torchlight.

Judging from what Sugamo had said, he and his party had probably gone through the entire main quest. All their impressive gear must have been quest rewards. In MMORPGs, however, the players’ skills and abilities were what mattered most, not the stats on their gear. Obviously that held doubly so now that they were in the world’s first VRMMO.

Kenk was still trying to push ahead of Sugamo. Yuuma grabbed Kenk by the belt and pulled him backward, whispering into his ear.

“It’s okay. Just let them go first. It’s a separate instance inside either way.”

“Fine... You’re right, I guess.” Kenk slowed down reluctantly.

“Later, losers!” Aria shouted as she passed them.

Sumika followed her. “Good luck, guys!” she called with a smile.

Last up was the fourth member of Sugamo’s party, a boy named Kai Kisanuki. He didn’t even make eye contact as he passed Yuuma’s group.

Kisanuki always seemed to be hanging out around Sugamo, but he was much smaller and quieter and tended not to draw attention to himself. There were rumors that Sugamo bullied him behind the scenes, but that seemed hard to believe, seeing as he had been invited into Sugamo’s party alongside Sumika. Kisanuki was dressed in a hooded cloak and leather armor, but that alone wasn’t enough to tell which class he had chosen.

“Don’t forget about our bet, Kondou! You’re gonna owe me those chocolate puddings!” shouted Sugamo, still sprinting in front of his party as he drew the sword from his back.

As if responding to their approach, the double doors with the dragon relief began to shudder open with a heavy, ominous sound. It was dark inside. Yuuma couldn’t see a thing.

“...Sug’s got some nerve, shouting Kenk’s real name like that in game! He’s such a noob, I can’t stand it!” hissed Sawa as Sugamo’s party pulled away. Apparently she had been biting her tongue until they left. Kenk turned to her in surprise.

“But didn’t *you* just use my—?” Kenk started to say, but quickly turned his attention back toward the door after seeing the look in Sawa’s eyes.

Sugamo and Aria whooped and hollered as their party charged headfirst into the blackness beyond the doors. Two or three seconds later, Yuuma and his party followed suit. Everything went black for a moment, and then red light began pouring in from above as the four friends were teleported into the boss room.

The boss was a dragon-type enemy. It certainly looked impressive, but it wasn’t nearly as powerful as they had expected.

The developers had probably temporarily scaled its difficulty down for the launch event. As the party’s Warrior, Kenk tanked the blows from the dragon’s two front claws and tail while Sawa, the Mage, used her Waterwall spell to mitigate its fire breath. Nagi, a Priest, was able to easily heal the remaining chip damage.

The only one without a clear role to play in the fight was the Monster Tamer, Yuuma. First he tried flanking the dragon from the side with his shortsword, and then he tried attacking it with low-level magic, but neither seemed to do much damage. In the end, most of the boss’s HP was whittled down by Kenk and Sawa. About four and a half minutes after the fight had begun, it was over, and the dragon scattered into a giant ball of red particle effects.

Unlike trash mobs, once the boss was defeated, a fanfare played and the results were displayed on-screen. Everyone increased in level. There were no

gold, equipment, or material drops, however. Instead, silver cards floated slowly down from the ceiling—one for each of them.

Written on the cards was the word *Congratulations*, and beneath that CLEAR
TIME: 4 MINUTES 33 SECONDS.

“We did it, right? We beat them!” shouted Kenk, striking a victory pose.

Naturally he meant Sugamo’s party, not the dragon. Yuuma was also about 70 percent sure they must have won Kenk’s bet, but he chose to shake his head instead.

“We don’t know that yet. Their gear looked a lot stronger than ours.”

“Gear is for the weak! VRMMOs are all about skill!” said Kenk before Sawa promptly cut him off.

“You’re as much a noob as Sug is. You’ve only been playing for about three hours.”

“Speaking of which,” said Nagi, a worried look on her face, “the playtest is almost over... Should we just wait here? Or do we have to make it back to town ourselves?”

“Back to town?! We’d never make it that far...” Yuuma walked over to her and shook his head again. “Even if we ran as fast as we could, it would still take us more than twenty minutes to get back to the starting town from here. We can probably just wait, can’t we?”

“I guess so...” Nagi cocked her head. Her hair, which curled toward her face, swayed slightly. “But don’t you think they should have made an announcement by now? Speaking of which...”

Nagi’s avatar had eyes that tilted downward slightly, just like her eyes in the real world. They now glimmered with faint uneasiness.

“...how are we supposed to get out of here? When we’re ready to leave the game?”

Kenk interjected quickly, “Hold on—you mean you weren’t listening during orientation?” he asked, obviously taking great pleasure in knowing something the others didn’t for a change. “Inside the curric...the curricu—”

“The Caliculus,” said Sawa, throwing Kenk a bone.

Kenk cleared his throat and continued, “Inside the Caliculus, there’s a lever toward the bottom left they said you can pull in order to open the lid. Don’t you remember?”

“Kenk, sweetie, I’m talking about before that...,” said Nagi, an exasperated look on her face.

Kenk blinked. “B-before...?”

“We can’t move our real bodies at the moment. Before we can pull the lever, we first have to log out of *Actual Magic* and disable the BSIS.”

BSIS was the acronym for the Caliculus’s Brain Signal Intercept and Scan function. It was the part of the Caliculus that read motor commands issued by the brain and relayed them to the user’s avatar. It also interrupted those signals before they could be sent to one’s actual body. Nagi had clearly been paying much closer attention during orientation than either Yuuma or Kenk; the woman running the orientation had mentioned the BSIS just once.

But more importantly, Nagi was right. This wasn’t like in an anime or a novel. Yuuma and the others hadn’t actually been transported to another world; they were still lying prone in their own respective capsules, seeing sights and listening to sounds that were created entirely by their QRESTs. They couldn’t leave the capsules of their own accord, however, because the BSIS (pronounced *bee-sis*) had effectively paralyzed their bodies. There was no way to operate the emergency escape levers unless the BSIS was first disabled.

“Come to think of it...they didn’t explain how to log out...,” said Sawa, furrowing her brow.

She made the pinch-out gesture with her right hand to open the menu and navigated to the System tab, but then she immediately shook her head.

“There’s no logout button. They didn’t say anything about an exit point, either... That means...there’s no way to leave the Caliculus—to leave *Actual Magic*—on our own...”

Yuuma began to grow a little uneasy. His sister was the smarter one, always doing better than him on tests. He tried putting on a calm façade to dispel his

own worries.

“I mean, I know we’re special guests, but we’re still test players, right? Maybe they just didn’t want us logging out willy-nilly...because of test stuff. Besides, the test should be over soon anyways...shouldn’t it?”

“Yeah. Of course. Test stuff. You’re probably just worrying over nothing, Nagi,” said Kenk, matching Yuuma’s tone.

The two girls sighed in unison. *Boys...*

Just then:

Red light suddenly sprung up beneath their feet, enveloping their avatars. Everything went red as the ground beneath their feet seemed to melt away.

“Au—augh...!” Kenk yelled.

“Y-Yu!”

“Yuummy!”

Nagi and Sawa shouted, both reaching out at once.

Instinctively, Yuuma tried to grab their hands, but the light changed from red to white. It suddenly grew intense, obliterating the girls from view.

Yuuma felt as if he were floating. Was he moving upward? Downward? Confused, he attempted to scream, but even his voice was gone.

At last, the white light disappeared, traveling upward, and darkness closed in from below. Instinct told him to run, but it was like his body was gone. Nothing of Yuuma remained but his own untethered consciousness. The thick darkness seemed to swallow him whole.

Kenk!

Nagi!

Sawa...!!

Even with no voice, he attempted to scream the names of his three friends. No one answered him. He felt like his mind would continue falling forever into the inky void.

Anybody...!!

Yuuma poured every ounce of will into his last scream. This time, it seemed as if something had heard him. He glanced downward, in the direction he was falling.

That was when he saw *it*.

Yuuma's memories ended there.

QREST: Quantum lamellaR Expansive System Terminals. Pronounced like the word *crest*, as in insignia or peak, these devices were first released in 2028 and immediately changed people's lives.

Just 0.3 millimeters thick and 5 centimeters in diameter, QRESTs were multilayer, thin-film computers. Capable of flexing, expanding, and contracting, they could be worn almost anywhere on the body. And because QRESTs were powered by bioelectrical energy, there was no risk of batteries ever running out. When connected wirelessly with the companion earpieces, which were worn in both ears and doubled as both speakers and earphones, and with the eyelenses, which were worn in both eyes and doubled as cameras and displays, QRESTs allowed for truly ubiquitous networking.

In many ways, QRESTs represented the fusion of humans and smartphones. Their popularization revolutionized all aspects of life, including daily activities, business, and even computer gaming.

The virtual QREST screen, which could be freely adjusted to fill any size within eyesight, eliminated the need for physical monitors and led to the release of many augmented reality (AR) games, wherein information was overlain on items and locations in the real world. However, gamers had long since despaired of ever receiving a truly immersive (fulldive) VR gaming experience. Even with QRESTs, many hurdles to VR gaming still remained.

In order to allow players to move around freely in a virtual world created by

the QREST earpieces and eyepieces, there needed to be a way to restrict the movements of their actual physical bodies while still imparting stimuli related to touch, depth, and equilibrium.

It was IO-Tage, a telecom company headquartered in the United States, that finally broke through that hurdle. The Calculus. It involved placing a person within a capsule-shaped device and using hybrid ultrasonic and electric field biomedical communication protocols to simultaneously read motor commands from the brain and deliver sensory nervous signals.

Using the Calculus, IO-Tage also developed *Actual Magic*, the world's first fulldive VRMMORPG, and announced they would be opening large-scale amusement centers featuring *Actual Magic* as well as other attractions in major cities around the world. Nozomi City, a smart city located on the eastern foot of Mount Fuji with a population of around 140,000, was chosen as the first location for Japan.

The center built in Nozomi City was named Althea, and its grand opening was held on May 13, 2031. Seven hundred and ten residents of Nozomi City were invited to the event, including forty-one sixth-grade students from Yuki-hana Elementary School.

The event commenced at 11:30 AM. After an orientation led by a woman who worked at the center, the guests were split into groups of eighty and led to their respective playrooms, where they soon entered their capsules. The guests were both delighted and astonished by *Actual Magic*, a fulldive VR game achieved through a combination of QREST and Calculus technology. Once the clock display in *Actual Magic* reached 3:00 PM, the play session came to an end, and the 710 players left Althea with new and lasting memories as well as expensive launch event gifts...

At least, that was what should have happened.

“Augghhh!!”

Yuuma Ashihara was unaware that a broken scream had escaped his lips.

He was currently sitting in a heap in the middle of the walkway in Playroom 01, having stumbled backward onto his rear end as his classmate, Sumika Watamaki, trudged toward him, step by awful step.

Sumika had been the undisputed beauty of Yuuma's class—no, of the whole school. Her face had been perfection. There was no trace of that beauty now. In fact, she didn't even look human.

Beneath a curtain of soft black bangs, her face appeared pale and sickly in the orange glow of the emergency lights—but it had no eyes, no nose, and no mouth.

They had vanished. Not gone, as if lost in some terrible accident, or gone as if obscured by something. Gone, as in there was just flat white skin where her eyes and nose and mouth should have been.

At first, Yuuma thought it might be visual overwriting from his QREST. But current-generation eyelenses still produced a slight noise where altered images met actual vision. There was nothing strange like that about the outline of Sumika's face. And besides, Yuuma had Accept All turned off for visual information.

Unless... Maybe *everything* Yuuma was seeing now was fake. Maybe he was still inside the Calculus, staring at a virtual world created entirely by his QREST.

Suddenly, as if to deny Yuuma's wishful thinking, Sumika Watamaki began walking faster. Her flat white face was growing closer. The mysterious detached arm she held in her right hand dangled back and forth, splattering fresh blood from its severed end.

I don't want to see what happens if she gets any closer! Yuuma thought instinctively.

Summoning all his willpower, he attempted to scramble back to his feet, but his legs wouldn't obey. Sumika was less than five meters away at this point.

Her face, as smooth and white as a boiled egg, began to change.

A small slit appeared toward the bottom of it. The slit then opened vertically to a width of about five centimeters without a sound.

Well, at least she has a mouth, Yuuma thought in a daze. But wait. Why was it still spreading? It looked like it was about to reach her ears.

The giant slash of a mouth that now bisected Sumika's doll-like face was lined

with rows of small and very sharp-looking teeth—no, not teeth. *Fangs.*

Yuuma had swallowed his scream earlier, but now it began seeping out in staggered yelps. His stomach flipped, and every hair on his body stood on end.

Her blood-spattered white pleated skirt and long silken hair—the envy of every girl in school—whipped back and forth as the thing that had once been Sumika Watamaki continued marching straight toward him.

Yuuma never doubted that this was Sumika and not some other creature attempting to impersonate her. He realized now what had made him so sure: the faint scent that invaded his nostrils.

It was Sumika's perfume, a blend of fresh citrus and milky sweet notes. He had smelled it a thousand times before as he passed Sumika's desk in class. And this smooth-faced monster now had the same scent.

I didn't have a crush on Sumika. I really didn't... But I respected her. Sumika represented something...more.

Yuuma couldn't help himself. He whispered her name.

"...Watamaki..."

Sumika suddenly crouched low, as if ready to pounce.

"Argggghhhh!"

Someone screamed. Not Yuuma—someone else. They charged past him on the right, straight toward Sumika.

Sumika furiously swung the arm she was holding at this person.

Yuuma remembered reading once that the weight of a human arm was about 6 percent of a person's total body weight. Assuming the arm belonged to a sixth-grade boy, whose average body weight was around 40 kilograms, 6 percent of that would be...2.4 kilograms. Child's arm or not, that was still a lot heavier than, say, a full two-liter bottle. Heavy enough to do some serious damage...

All those calculations ran through Yuuma's head in the blink of an eye. It was as if time were frozen. Whoever was attempting to save him was about to have their skull cracked in half by a severed arm.

Yuuma waited for the sound of the blow. But it never came.

Instead, whoever was now facing off against Sumika blocked the arm using a long, thin rod that they wielded in both hands. From where he was lying, Yuuma could make out only the person's silhouette. They turned slightly and shouted at Yuuma.

"Yu, run! Get outta here and call for some grown-ups—anyone!"

Yuuma finally recognized who it was.

It was his best friend, Kenji Kondou—Kenk. Yuuma had assumed that Kenk had long since escaped the playroom, but he was still there. And he'd come to Yuuma's rescue, just like he had so many times before, since they were little.

"Kenk...", Yuuma groaned hoarsely. He planted both hands on the floor and began to push himself to his feet. But he wasn't trying to run away. He was trying to come to his friend's aid.

Yuuma still didn't know what was going on. However, there was one thing that he did know—or had decided, at least, in his own mind—and that was that this was no virtual world. It was the real, raw world. And if Yuuma didn't start acting like it was real, either he, Kenk, or both of them were going to wind up dead. As dead as whomever that arm had once belonged to.

This newfound sense of determination seemed to do the trick. This time Yuuma's legs obeyed his orders, and he managed to stumble back to his feet.

Yuuma scanned the floor around his feet, spotting a metal pipe maybe fifty centimeters long—probably from one of the broken Calculus capsules. He quickly scooped it up. It was light, possibly aluminum, and not nearly as long as he would have liked, but it was still a lot better than nothing.

Kenk's own metal pipe looked a lot stronger. He was still standing between Yuuma and Sumika and had somehow managed to hold off her onslaught. In addition to the gruesome makeshift club she was wielding, Sumika was also raining down blows with her left hand, which sported a set of razor-sharp claws. How Kenk had managed to withstand her attacks so far with just a measly pipe for protection was a mystery.

Either way, Yuuma doubted Kenk would last much longer. Kenk might have

been big for a sixth-grader, but he wasn't particularly athletic. He didn't have any experience in kendo or martial arts, either.

"D-don't worry, Kenk! I'm coming!" shouted Yuuma, gripping his aluminum pipe tighter.

"What are you doing?!" Kenk shouted back, his voice sounding strained. "Get out of here, Yu...!"

"I'm not leaving you behind!"

I never thought I'd say a line like that in the real world, Yuuma thought as he inched forward, hugging the left wall. Sumika was situated toward the inside of the walkway, so Yuuma was hoping this position would keep him out of range of any swings from her arm-cudgel.

Yuuma knew that was game thinking, but game thinking was the only thing that was allowing him to place one foot in front of the other at the moment. With rapid, shallow breaths, he managed to shuffle another five, then six meters forward, circling around behind Sumika.

She was completely defenseless from this angle, just as Yuuma had predicted. In fact, from the back, she looked almost no different from the original Sumika. Same lustrous black hair. Same surprisingly narrow back and hips. Same long, slender legs.

The tip of the aluminum pipe Yuuma was holding was sharp and jagged, as if it had been broken off with tremendous force. If Yuuma could just stab Sumika in the torso with it, as hard as he could, that would surely be enough to stop her attack.

No, more than that... It would seriously injure Sumika. It might even kill her.

Yuuma had already crouched forward, preparing to make a running charge. Suddenly, he froze.

Kill her...? Kill Watamaki...?

No. That thing isn't Sumika Watamaki anymore. I don't know what happened, but Watamaki's a monster now. She's already killed one person and torn off their arm, and she's going to kill me and Kenk next. Unless... Unless...

“Yu! Hurry up and run!” Kenk hollered. He was nearly at his breaking point.

Yuuma glanced past Sumika, catching sight of his friend’s face, and his eyes went wide.

There were countless scratches across Kenk’s face, chest, and arms, with rivulets of blood streaming from where he’d been cut. His favorite nylon hoodie, which he was still wearing, had been hideously shredded in multiple places. Blocking the blows from Sumika’s arm-cudgel apparently took all his strength—he didn’t have enough energy left to completely avoid the swipes from her clawed left hand.

None of Kenk’s injuries looked too serious, but Yuuma doubted he would last much longer. Sumika was attacking with inhuman strength and speed. It was a miracle that Kenk had managed to defend himself against her monstrous flurry of blows for this long.

Yuuma couldn’t abandon his friend now. Even if that meant killing Sumika.

“No! I’m not running!” Yuuma shouted back at Kenk.

This time he dashed forward.

Sumika was only three meters away, but the distance felt almost insurmountable. With each step, she grew closer. Her back was still turned; Yuuma caught a glimpse of her white shirt peeking out from beneath the hem of her short jacket. That was where Yuuma chose to aim, thrusting with the sharp tip of the aluminum pipe— Sumika’s black hair cascaded through the air, carrying with it a whiff of her sweet perfume.

Yuuma’s arms betrayed him, shrinking back before he could deliver the final blow.

As if sensing his momentary hesitation, Sumika suddenly whipped around, her hideous club spinning in a savage arc. Yuuma barely even saw it coming.

“Nrk...!”

Yuuma was struck on his right shoulder with incredible force. He careened helplessly through the air before colliding, spine first, with a metal frame supporting one of the Calculus capsules. The pipe he had been holding fell to

the ground with a useless clang before rolling away.

Sumika continued her spinning motion, sweeping the arm back around to hit Kenk next. It sent him slamming against the wall on the opposite side of the walkway.

Yuuma's right shoulder and back felt like they were on fire. All he could do was double over and gasp in pain.

Soon, inches from his face—

“GGHGGH...”

—Yuuma heard monstrous wheezing.

Summoning the last of his strength, Yuuma lifted his head and peered upward through swollen eyes. Everything was blurry, but he could still make out a pale white face slowly drawing near.

A gaping mouth and countless fangs. And superimposed over it, the memory of Sumika Watamaki's beauty.

Yuuma could see it now—her beautiful smile, her shimmering pink lips. They were so close...

“Yu...!” Kenk yelled.

But Yuuma could no longer hear anything.

“GGHGGH...”

Not his friend's voice or the creature's hideous breathing. He just stared wide-eyed, nearly blind, and waited.

The moment Sumika's lips were about to brush his face— *“Flamma!!”*

A new voice boomed in the darkness. Sumika jerked her head up as if she'd been slapped across the face.

The voice shouted again.

“Sagitta!!”

There was no mistaking that voice. Yuuma had heard it a thousand times since he was born. No, a million times. It was his twin sister, Sawa!

But the words she was speaking were words of power for elements and forms, like the ones used to cast spells in *Actual Magic*. Why was Sawa using words of power from the game? This was the real world—what good would that do?

Before Yuuma could finish that thought, however, Sawa chanted the third and final word of power—the activation.

“Ignis!!”

A burst of dazzling orange light suddenly flared to life in the corner of Yuuma’s left eye.

The Flame Arrow that shot forward was around thirty centimeters long. It struck Sumika in the left shoulder with a *whoosh*. She was knocked backward, flipping head over heels several times before skidding to a halt. The magic arrow penetrating her shoulder continued burning brightly for a few moments before it disappeared, leaving behind a cloud of foul-smelling smoke.

Yuuma didn’t understand what had just happened.

He tore his gaze away from Sumika, where she still lay on the ground, and to the left, toward where the arrow had come from.

There was someone standing there, in an open Calculus capsule, just a few meters away. Yuuma could only make out a person-shaped shadow. Whoever it was, they were out of range of the emergency lights. But Yuuma knew immediately from the silhouette that it had to be his twin sister, Sawa.

Something was different, however. Sawa should have been wearing the same school uniform as all the other Yuki-hana Elementary students. The outline of this silhouette was oddly close-fitting. There was also something strange sticking out from her back on each side... Something that almost looked like tiny wings.

“Sawa...?”

Yuuma’s voice was weak and broken. The figure immediately turned its head and spoke in a commanding voice.

“Yuummy, start Actual Magic now!”

It was Sawa's voice, but Yuuma didn't understand what she was saying. The full-dive VRMMORPG, *Actual Magic*, could be activated only while inside a Calculus capsule. He'd actually tried to start up the client program installed on their QRESTs while still in orientation, except all that happened was that an error message appeared.

But Sawa wouldn't have told him to start the game for no reason. Not under these circumstances. Besides, she only ever called him Yuummy when the stakes were high and she forgot herself.

"O-okay..." Yuuma replied, the word barely escaping his lips.

He swiped his palm across his field of vision from left to right, opening his virtual desktop and displaying around twenty icons for apps installed on his QREST.

The newest icon was displayed in the bottom right—the icon for *Actual Magic*. Two concentric circles and a pentagram. Yuuma tapped it, still in shock.

The icon sparkled to life, transforming into blue flames, and then—it disappeared.

"Wha—?"

Yuuma panicked. Did he just uninstall it? A moment later, however, something unexpected happened, and another startled cry escaped his lips.

"Ah... Ahh...?!"

Yuuma's left arm felt like it was on fire.

Rolling the sleeves of his shirt and jacket up past the elbow, he could see his arm glowing blue. A complicated pattern of circuits, almost resembling a crest, had appeared in dazzling blue light where the QREST attached to the back of his hand.

Yuuma wondered if something had gone wrong with his QREST's multilayer thin-film array. He instinctively tried to remove it. QRESTs were just 0.3 millimeters thick but were flexible and durable enough to be repeatedly attached and removed.

However, no matter how many times he ran his fingers over the back of his

hand, he couldn't seem to find the edge of the membrane. The blue light, as well as the pain—like being branded with hot metal—continued to grow stronger and stronger. Yuuma stopped trying to remove the QREST and balled his left hand up into a fist, clutching it to his chest with his other hand.

All thoughts of Sawa's strange appearance, or of Sumika or Kenk, who still lay in a heap on the ground, flew from Yuuma's mind. All he could think of now was finding some way to stop the pain. But the light and pain didn't stop; they just continued to grow, bubbling and spilling over, as if his QREST were mocking him — That was when Yuuma looked at his hand again.

The circuitry pattern on his QREST, which was still pulsating with vibrant blue light, should have been only about five centimeters in diameter. Instead, it had spread from his hand to his wrist and was now creeping up his arm like some sort of living creature.

"Aughh...?!" Yuuma exclaimed in shock, squeezing his wrist in an attempt to stop it. The pattern, however, continued to swell and grow. Once it had reached near his elbow, it began encircling both sides of the arm before finally stopping. The blue light grew fainter, and the burning pain finally started to recede.

Yuuma stared open-mouthed at his QREST, which now resembled something more like a flashy tattoo.

This couldn't be happening. QRESTs were just thin-film computers. Electronic devices. There was no way they could grow larger or change shape on your skin. That wasn't possible!

Yuuma scratched at his arm repeatedly in instinctive denial. But the QREST substrate, which usually came off so easily, refused to budge no matter how hard he clawed at it.

Did it...fuse with my skin...?

Yuuma stared at his arm in amazement as he continued to run his fingers up and down the QREST.

"There's no time for that now, Yuummy!" shouted Sawa, a sense of urgency in her voice. A creaking sound came from the other direction almost simultaneously.

Yuuma raised his head in surprise. There, just meters from where he stood—
—was Sumika Watamaki, already pushing herself back to her feet.

Her left shoulder, where she'd been hit with the Flame Arrow, was hideously burned. The viscous-looking black fluid that seeped from the wound was trickling down her arm and dripping onto the floor. The injury looked terrible, but the fact that Sumika was able to take a direct hit from one of Sawa's spells and remain standing was proof that she was no longer human...or at the very least, no ordinary sixth-grade girl.

Hold on...

Yuuma tripped over his own thoughts.

"Spells...? Magic...?"

He twisted his neck around awkwardly to stare at his sister, who was still standing inside the Calculus capsule.

Sawa had just used *magic*. Honest-to-goodness magic. The same basic fire spell Flame Arrow she'd cast countless times while still inside the game.

But they weren't inside *Actual Magic* now. This was the real world, where Yuuma had lived for eleven years. A world ruled by the irrefutable laws of physics, where magic and miracles did not exist.

Yuuma glanced to the right, spotting Kenk. He had been knocked aside at the same time as Yuuma but was still lying in a heap on the other side of the walkway. Yuuma couldn't tell if he was out cold or if he was just too stunned to move. He didn't see any blood, at least.

Yuuma then turned his gaze forward again.

Inhuman black fluid continued to drip from Sumika's left arm. She was holding the unidentified severed arm in her right hand. Her face, now only a mouth, remained fixed in Yuuma's direction.

He realized there was something else floating over her head. Something that hadn't been there a few seconds earlier.

A long yellow bar. Not something physical or tangible. It appeared vivid and clear, even amid the gloomy darkness.

It was an HP bar, projected there by his eyelenses. The design was exactly the same as the HP bars from *Actual Magic*. It even included the name **Sumika Watamaki** displayed underneath.

Usually HP bars were blue. The fact that Sumika's bar was yellow meant that over half her health was already gone, whether because of Sawa's single Flame Arrow or because her hit points had already been low to begin with. If the display was to be believed, then Sumika could certainly die.

...What does that make me...?

With his gaze still fixated on Sumika, Yuuma fearfully flicked his eyes to the upper left, toward the corner of his vision, where his own HP and MP bars would be located.

The name that was displayed there was **Yuuma Ashihara**. That wasn't the name he had used in game. It was his real, actual name. The font and design of the HP bar, however, were exactly the same as in *Actual Magic*.

Was this still the game...? Were they in *Actual Magic*...?

Maybe this is all part of the grand opening...a messed-up surprise that the developers had planned all along? Yuuma was having trouble processing things.

Sawa, however, seemed to sense what he was thinking.

"Yuummy, this is real! If you die now, you die for real!" she shouted sharply.

Yuuma knew immediately that his twin sister wasn't lying or playing a prank. This truly was the real world. But there was magic. And HP bars floating over their heads.

No, no... Strange as all that was, none of it could compare to the idea that Sumika Watamaki—sweet and gentle Sumika Watamaki—might actually be a bloodthirsty monster.

Something unthinkable must have occurred.

Right now, however, they needed to find a way out of this mess. Sumika was clearly planning to kill Yuuma. And once she had finished him off, she would go for Kenk and Sawa next. Yuuma couldn't let that happen. For his best friend's sake, for his sister's sake—and for Sumika's sake.

Yuuma gathered his strength and stood back up, keeping his eyes fixed on Sumika as she continued to creep closer. His right shoulder, where Sumika had clobbered him with her arm-cudgel, and his back, which had collided with the frame of the Calculus, both throbbed painfully, but he was still able to move.

“Yuummy!” Sawa shouted from behind him. “It’ll take fifty seconds until I can cast again! You need to do whatever you can to get her HP down into the red by then!”

“Wh-what do you mean, whatever I can...?!”

“Don’t worry—now that *AM* is running, your stats have all increased. Grab that metal bar over there! It’s to your right!”

“My right...?”

Yuuma glanced down toward his feet, as he was told. There, at the edge of the walkway, was a steel bar about fifty centimeters long. He dove forward and scooped it up.

It looked like a broken-off piece of one of the Calculus’s support frames. This was much heavier than the aluminum pipe that had been sent skidding away earlier. It wasn’t a pipe, either; it was a solid flat bar with a severed end that was sharp like a sword.

The steel bar felt like it weighed roughly one whole kilogram. With his normal strength, Yuuma would have never been able to swing around a piece of metal like that. Holding it now in both hands, however, it almost felt like an extension of his own arm—just like the equipment in *Actual Magic* had felt. Yuuma still wasn’t sure what Sawa had meant when she said his “stats” had increased, but at least now he could put up a fight.

A fight...?

Against Watamaki...?

Yuuma told himself again that it wasn’t Sumika anymore. Just then...

“AUEGGHHEEE!!”

Sumika dashed forward with a monstrous roar, hurtling herself straight at Yuuma.

She swung the severed arm high into the air and then brought it crashing down toward Yuuma's head. Earlier, a similar blow had sent Yuuma flying helplessly through the air. This time, he was able to block it with his metal bar.

The impact was incredible. A sharp pain raced down Yuuma's injured right arm...

"Ahhh...!!"

...but Yuuma didn't buckle. He let out a cry of fury, like no sound he had ever made before in the real world, and countered hard, knocking Sumika back and causing her arms to flail to the sides. Hardening his heart against what he was about to do, Yuuma brandished his metal bar and struck Sumika on her already burned shoulder.

"NRRGGH!"

The dull thud of the strike, and Sumika's scream of agony, echoed in Yuuma's ear. She staggered backward once more as another tenth of her HP disappeared.

As a monster, Sumika's STR was outrageous. Her DEF, however, didn't seem to be very high. Another blow would probably be enough to land her in the red.

About half of the fifty-second recovery time Sawa had mentioned had already passed. He could probably get one more hit in by then, and then Sawa could use Flame Arrow while Sumika was still stunned to land the final blow— *The final blow...?*

Am I trying to kill her...?

Yuuma's own voice screamed back at him in his head: *What else are you supposed to do?! If you don't kill her first, then you and Kenk and Sawa are all going to wind up dead!*

Still, he hesitated.

Did they really have to kill her? Was that the only way? And then what? Once they killed Sumika, would everything just be over...?

"AUGHH!!" Sumika screamed. She seemed to smell Yuuma's hesitation. Regaining her footing, she hurled herself at Yuuma, brandishing the arm-cudgel

in her right arm and swinging with her left claw.

Yuuma was no less hesitant than before, but his body seemed to react for him. This time, instead of blocking the club, he dodged it by leaping to the right and then leaning back hard to stay out of reach of the claw.

Yuuma immediately followed up by swinging the iron bar like a baseball bat. The heavy metal hit Sumika squarely on her left side. Yuuma could feel an unpleasant crunch, as if her ribs had broken.

“GYAGH!”

Sumika coughed in pain, and inky black fluid sprayed from her mouth. She was tossed through the air, landing on her back and bouncing once before lying still. Her yellow HP bar shrank by another two-tenths, turning crimson red.

“Yuummy, move out of the way! I’ll finish her with my magic!” shouted Sawa.

Yuuma stared at Sumika, who still lay collapsed on the ground.

“Sawa, wait!” he shouted back. “We can’t kill her!”

“What are you saying?! If we don’t kill her, she’ll just keep attacking us!”

Sawa had a point. Sumika Watamaki was a monster now. There was no way for them to turn her back. Not at the moment, at least.

But as he was hitting Sumika with that last blow, an idea had popped into Yuuma’s head. How was he able to swing the iron bar around so easily? Yuuma knew he wasn’t much to speak of in the strength department. But that didn’t matter now. Because he was running *Actual Magic*, just like Sawa had told him to.

But of course...

Strength wasn’t the only thing that mattered in *AM*.

He had magic, too, just like Sawa.

“*Tenebris!!*”

Yuuma shouted the word, letting go of the iron bar and holding his left hand out straight in front of him. The QREST circuitry pattern, which stretched from the back of his hand to just below his elbow, glowed a vivid light blue.

A ball of indigo light appeared before Yuuma's palm.

"Y-Yuummy...?!" Sawa cried from behind him.

Yuuma prayed she would trust him. He spoke the next word of power—the spell's form.

"Capere Anima!!"

The ball of indigo light changed shape, transforming into a giant hand.

Surprisingly, Yuuma's vision began to cloud over. It was as if the magic hand were sucking his energy away and draining the strength from his body. His right knee buckled, and he sank to the ground.

Yuuma gritted his teeth and willed himself to keep going. If he failed now, Sawa would probably kill Sumika in order to protect him. He didn't want to make his sister do that.

The targeting reticle appeared. Yuuma's vision swam. He moved his left hand, lining up the crosshairs with the collapsed Sumika.

"Ignis...!!"

Activation. The final word.



The indigo hand made a sonorous, high-pitched sound as it flew forward and hit Sumika squarely in the chest. Its sharp, taloned fingers closed around her as if to clutch her by the heart.

A moment later—a deafening, high-pitched sound, like a large clump of glass being shattered, filled the air. It was completely different from the sound that had played when Yuuma captured Squeak. Sumika was enveloped in glittering indigo light before disappearing.

Everything went black, and Yuuma fell backward onto the floor.

“Yuummy!”

Sawa’s voice seemed so far away. Everything was growing hazy. But there was one more thing that Yuuma needed to do before he could pass out.

Summoning all his strength, he opened his eyes and extended his left hand.

Something was floating down toward him, glittering. A small transparent purple card. It was proof that Yuuma, the Monster Tamer, had just used a capture spell to capture the monster, Sumika Watamaki.

The moment his trembling fingers closed around it, Yuuma’s consciousness faded.

Drip. Drip.

A cold liquid was trickling into Yuuma's mouth.

Only half-conscious, Yuuma reflexively moved to spit out the liquid. Before he could do so, however, he realized that the liquid was actually surprisingly delicious. Not too sweet and with a refreshing acidity, like lemon peel. He swallowed greedily.

As the liquid coursed through Yuuma's body, his head began to grow clearer, and his eyes, which had been squeezed tight, started to flutter open. A sharp, hot pain shot through his right shoulder and back, however, and he groaned quietly.

"Ugh..."

"Don't move yet. Drink more," somebody whispered close by.

Drops of the bittersweet liquid continued trickling into his mouth. The pain slowly grew fainter as he desperately worked the liquid toward the back of his throat.

"That's probably enough...", the voice said.

"Just...a few more drops...", Yuuma begged, his eyes still closed and his own voice ragged.

"Later. I still need to treat Kenk."

Yuuma sensed the owner of the voice stand up. He heard footsteps slipping softly away.

Kenk...

That's right... Kenk was injured, too...

Memories from the past few moments began to flood back into Yuuma's groggy mind.

Kenk as he stood in front of Yuuma, wielding a pipe in both hands. How he came to Yuuma's rescue and then was knocked aside like a ragdoll. And then a girl with long black hair, dressed in a familiar school uniform. She materialized out of the darkness, holding something strange and white and fleshy in her right hand...

"...Kenk... Watamaki...!"

Yuuma's eyes flew wide open. He sprang up into a sitting position, as if he had just been stung. Sharp pain shot through his shoulder and back, but that was nothing compared to how bad the pain had been earlier.

Yuuma took a quick look around. The first thing that he noticed was the walkway, strewn with scraps of metal and plastic debris, and then a row of large capsules arranged overhead. Now he remembered—he was in Playroom 01, at the Althea amusement center. And those capsules were Calculus devices, fulldive VR machines used to play the VRMMORPG *Actual Magic*.

Glancing down at his own left hand, Yuuma saw a dim blue pattern of glowing circuitry that extended to just below his elbow. It seemed to be an extension of his QREST, the thin-film quantum device on the back of his left hand.

The same hand that was clutching a single card.

"So...it wasn't a dream..." he whispered.

His thoughts were interrupted by the voice from earlier.

"It's all right... It looks like he's just unconscious."

Turning in the direction of the voice, Yuuma saw a crouched figure about five meters away. The person's back was turned toward him. There was also another person laid out spread-eagle on the walkway. It was Kenk—Kenji

Kondou. Yuuma squinted, trying to make out the face of whoever was crouching next to Kenk. It was...

“...Sawa!”

Yuuma jumped to his feet, shouting his twin sister’s name.

He had been sitting with his legs sprawled out in front of him. Tossing aside the metal bar in his hand and slipping the card into his jacket pocket, he slammed the ground with both hands, lobbing himself into the air like a spring and back onto his feet.

Yuuma had always been the indoor type. Normally he would never have been able to manage such an acrobatic feat. He rushed toward his sister, not even noticing what he had done.

“Sawa! Is Kenk...”

...all right? Yuuma wanted to say, but the words caught in his throat before he could finish.

His sister’s face was currently visible in profile. It was the same face he had spent every day of the last eleven years and eight months staring at; there was no doubt about that. It looked a lot like Yuuma’s, only a little more severe in appearance. Cool as a cucumber, or maybe just full of herself, depending on the perspective.

But where was her school uniform? She’d been wearing it when they left the house that morning, when they arrived at Althea, and even when they entered the Calculus capsules. Now it was gone, every last stitch.

Instead Sawa was wearing some sort of skintight, crimson-colored bathing suit thing. Her chest was fully covered, as was everything from her hips downward, but the milky white skin of her arms and waist was exposed. The QREST on her left hand had also grown, just like Yuuma’s. Sawa’s QREST, however, gave off a red glow and reached past her elbow.

Sawa’s clothes and QREST weren’t the only things about her that had changed. Two membranous, bat-like wings jutted out from the back of her swimsuit, and the horns on the headband she always wore seemed to have gotten bigger, too.

At least she didn't grow a tail, although now she looks less like a human and more like...



Yuuma stopped himself before he could finish the thought. He tore his eyes away from his sister and focused instead on Kenk, who was still lying on the ground.

Kenk looked like he did before the VR dive—no wings or horns—but his trademark nylon hoodie was torn to shreds, and his face, chest, and forearms, where the sleeves had been rolled up, were covered with numerous scratches. His upper left arm, where he had been struck with the severed limb, was soaked in blood.

Kenk's injuries had all been caused by their class's foremost dreamgirl, Sumika Watamaki—now a monster.

Yuuma stared, mouth agape, as Sawa examined Kenk's injuries.

"He's still breathing," she said, her winged back turned toward Yuuma, "and it looks like his internal organs are probably fine. His left arm is broken, though."

"It's...b-broken...?"

"That's what I just said."

Sawa exhaled sharply. She glanced up and to the left for a moment. Yuuma followed her gaze, but there was nothing there except for the darkness of the playroom ceiling.

"...?"

Sawa returned her gaze to the ground and then reached her right hand toward Kenk's face. His mouth was pinched shut in distress. She pried it open slightly and then placed her left index finger near the opening.

"S-Sawa, what are you—?"

"Just be quiet and watch," she ordered, cutting Yuuma off. As she drew in a sharp breath— "*Sacre...*"

—the pattern encircling her left hand—her QREST circuitry—flared with a pinkish purple glow.

"...*Ros...*"

A subtle pink light gathered at the tip of her finger. The surface of the light

rippled softly, like water.

“...*Casus!*”

As Sawa spoke the final word, a glowing, pale pink dewdrop hung from her finger and dripped into Kenk’s open mouth. At first nothing happened, but after the second and third drops, Kenk’s lips trembled slightly, and he began to swallow reflexively.

Yuuma finally understood: Those were the same bittersweet droplets that he had tasted a few minutes earlier when he, too, had been unconscious. Sawa had just chanted three words of power used for casting magic in the world of *Actual Magic*. Yuuma even recognized the spell.

“Sawa... That’s the Healing Droplet spell... But we’re in the real world now...”

“Are you still stuck on that?” said Sawa, exasperated, as she continued to trickle spelldrops into Kenk’s mouth. “You saw me use Flame Arrow earlier, didn’t you? You even used your own Grasping Hand spell to...”

Sawa trailed off awkwardly.

At the mention of the Grasping Hand spell, Yuuma gasped sharply.

Grasping Hand was available only to the Monster Tamer character class. It was used to capture monsters. It had a range of just ten meters, and it wasn’t even autohit. But hitting a monster with Grasping Hand while it was already weakened would transform it into a card, and the monster could then be summoned later as a familiar.

It was all coming back to him now. Yuuma had used Grasping Hand right before he lost consciousness. Not against a random monster, but against the creature that had so gravely injured him and Kenk...

“Ugh... Urgh...”

Someone moaned weakly. Yuuma glanced down at his feet.

Kenk was still lying on the walkway. His eyebrows were pinched, and his sluggish mouth sucked desperately at the falling droplets. Yuuma felt embarrassed. That must have been what he had looked like mere moments earlier. Kenk looked like a little kid—or more like a baby.

I should film this—I'd have blackmail material on Kenk for life! Speaking of which, I wonder if normal apps still work with the QREST.

As Yuuma was musing to himself, Kenk suddenly opened his eyes.

"It's...so...delicious...!"

Kenk shouted with such force that Yuuma almost expected to see a laser beam shoot out of his mouth. Sawa hurriedly clamped her left hand over Kenk's lips.

"Shh, be quiet! What if something big hears you?!" she hissed.

Kenk blinked once, twice...maybe ten times in total, staring first at Sawa and then at Yuuma.

"Mmmphh...? Mmph...?"

Kenk tried to speak, but Sawa's hand was still clamped firmly over his mouth.

"Make another noise like that and I'll hit you with a Silence spell, got it?" she whispered before finally removing her hand.

"Sawa...? Yu...?" Kenk said, repeating his muffled words.

The twins nodded. Kenk glanced back and forth between the two. He had been friends with both of them for over five years.

"But...but you're..."

Kenk's reaction to Sawa seemed natural enough. After all, there were horns on her head, wings growing out of her back, and she was dressed in some weird bathing suit getup. But all that had changed about Yuuma was his QREST, which was currently covered by his sleeve.

At least Yuuma thought that was all that had changed. He glanced down at himself. Same shirt, same blue collarless jacket, same navy capri pants—the Yuki-hana Elementary School uniform. No changes there.

"What about you, Kenk? Are you okay?" asked Yuuma, temporarily setting aside his confusion.

Kenk patted his chest and face. Yuuma realized that the scratches that had been covering Kenk's body had now faded—and his left arm, which by all rights

should have been broken, was moving normally. Kenk's hoodie was still in tatters, though.

"Mh... Mhmm. My left arm still hurts a little, but the bone seems fine. I coulda sworn I heard it crack when Watamaki..." Kenk trailed off, his eyes suddenly going wide. His face steadily grew paler. "Yu, was that...was that really Watamaki...?"

Yuuma could see the terror in his friend's face. *No!* he wanted to shout, but he pursed his mouth shut instead.

Sumika was the most beautiful girl in school. Kenk probably had a crush on her, just like every other boy in class. Not that Yuuma and Kenk ever talked about girls. But Kenk had to stand next to Sumika for a photo at last year's school sports festival, and Yuuma knew Kenk still treasured his copy and even kept it saved right on his QREST.

However, if Yuuma tried to hide the truth now, it would just be an even greater shock when it came out later. As Kenk's friend, Yuuma owed him the truth.

"Yeah... It was her."

"But...she had no face... And she attacked us with a club..."

Kenk's memory appeared to be a little fuzzy. It wasn't a club that Sumika had been wielding but rather a human arm that had been ripped clean off the shoulder. Likely the arm of one of their classmates.

While Yuuma was still considering whether to mention the severed arm, Kenk began to stand up, cradling his own left arm. Yuuma lent him a hand, pulling Kenk slowly to his feet.

"What happened to Watamaki after that, Yu...?"

Yuuma stared into his friend's face, which was topped with a row of spiky bangs. Yuuma had never seen Kenk look so worried. Yuuma knew this wasn't going to be easy to hear.

"She's not... We didn't kill her."

"O-oh... So the two of you were able to drive her off? But how did you

manage that? She was so powerful, and..."

Kenk suddenly trailed off, blinking rapidly as if just noticing the change in Sawa. He began running his tongue along the insides of his mouth, as if to retaste the magic drops that had healed him moments earlier.

"Is this...magic? Did you just use recovery magic...? Does that mean we're still in the virtual world? Did someone use magic to turn Watamaki into a monster...?"

"..."

That had been Yuuma's own thought when he first saw the eyeless, noseless monster that Sumika had become. What if he only thought he had exited his Calculus and was still inside the capsule? Maybe this wasn't the Althea of the real world but an elaborate virtual reconstruction.

Yuuma could still see his name, Yuuma Ashihara, and his blue HP and green MP bars, displayed in the upper-left-hand corner of his field of view. About two-tenths of his HP bar was missing, and more than three-tenths of his MP bar—probably because the blows to his shoulder and back hadn't healed completely, and because he had used up MP to cast Grasping Hand.

Of course...!

When Sawa had glanced up and to the left earlier, before casting her healing spell, she hadn't been looking at the ceiling. She had been checking for own HP/MP bar. In other words, Sawa could see the *Actual Magic* UI, too, just like Yuuma.

"Sawa...", said Yuuma, glancing over his shoulder.

"What?"

"Earlier, when I started up *AM*, you said that this is the real world. And that if we die here, we die for real... Are you sure about that?"

"Yeah, I'm sure." Sawa averted her gaze in a way that seemed uncharacteristic of her.

"But how...?" asked Kenk, who was now leaning against the wall.

Sawa spoke quickly, still not looking at him or Yuuma.

“It’s these...,” she began, gesturing toward the row of capsules to the side above the walkway. “You guys should know this, but the Calculus capsules only create physical sensations like touch and balance. Sight is handled by the QREST eyelenses and sound by the earpieces. But there’s no support yet for virtual tastes and smells. In other words, if you can taste things and you can smell things, the world isn’t virtual.”

“ ... ”

Sawa had barely finished speaking as Yuuma and Kenk each took in a great big whiff of air through their noses. A thick, gloomy smell hung in the shadows. With a breath that deep, it was impossible to miss. The smell of fresh mechanical grease. The chemical scent of plastic and adhesives. And of course—the metallic stench of blood. Sawa was right. Smell was one layer that had been missing from the fields and dungeons of *Actual Magic*.

On the other hand, with all the other strange things going on, was it so far out of left field to think that the Calculus devices themselves might have been altered? In fact, wasn’t it easier to believe that someone might have patched the Calculus in secret than it was to believe that all of this could be real?

We can’t even trust our own eyes at the moment..., Yuuma thought absentmindedly.

Wait a second—eyes.

Yuuma suddenly realized there was a simple way of telling what was real from what was fake.

“Of course... Why didn’t I think of that earlier...?” he said.

“Think of what?” asked Kenk.

Yuuma pointed at his own eyes.

“Our eyelenses! If everything we’re seeing is digital, then it’ll all disappear as soon as we remove our eyelenses.”

“Hey, you’re right!”

Yuuma was already tapping the System icon in the upper-left corner of his virtual desktop.

QREST multilayer thin-film computers consisted of three components: the QREST itself, which was attached to the skin; the eyelenses, which were worn in each eye; and the earpieces, which were inserted in both ears. The eyelenses were how visual information was displayed. Once a user removed their eyelenses, everything virtual disappeared from sight.

QREST lenses were very similar in shape and material to soft contact lenses. Apparently, to remove contact lenses, you had to actually pinch the lens with your fingertips and peel it straight off your eyeball. Or so Yuuma had heard. Removing QREST lenses wasn't nearly so disgusting. You simply tilted your head downward, cupped your hand under your eye, and then with your other hand, you tapped the Remove Lens button in the System menu. The vacuum seal would break, allowing the lens to pop right out...

"Huh...?"

Yuuma's lenses weren't coming out. He kept tapping REMOVE LENS for his right eye, expecting to feel the tingle that came when the lens released or the weight of the tiny lens hitting the palm of his hand.

"Don't bother," muttered Sawa, standing next to him. Yuuma was about to ask her what she meant, but he was interrupted by Kenk groaning. Turning around quickly, he saw that Kenk had stepped away from the wall and was now squinting around the room, his open palm held upward.

"Did you get your lenses out, Kenk?!"

"Yeah, but nothing's changed. The Caliculuses are all still in pieces. And look at my hoodie! This was my favorite..."

In other words, this truly was the real world. Yuuma sighed in resignation. He had already been about 90 percent sure to begin with, but now it was 100.

"The reason you can't take your eyelenses out," said Sawa, "is because they're fused with your body, just like your QREST. So have your earpieces, by the way, so don't try to rip those out, either."

"They what...?!"

In a panic, Yuuma began probing his ear with his finger, but the tiny mic and speaker inserted into the upper fold of his ear seemed to have fused entirely

with his skin. Yuuma's jaw dropped. Sawa grabbed Yuuma's hand and forcefully pulled it away from his ear before turning toward Kenk.

"Hurry up and put your eyelens back in, Kenk. Those are one of our only lifelines right now."

"O-okay, yeah...!"

Kenk nodded rapidly and stuck the lenses back into his eyes, blinking several times.

"So then...this is actually all real?" he said. He held his arm up in the air and flexed it several times. "Well, my arm still hurts. That's pretty real. Let's see..."

Kenk suddenly grabbed his crotch.

"Yep, that's still there..."

Yuuma wasn't sure what the developers had been thinking, but there was one important piece of "equipment" that had actually been left off the avatars in *Actual Magic*. Yuuma knew exactly where Kenk was coming from. Sawa, however, scowled and kicked him in the shin. Speaking of which, Yuuma noticed that Sawa wasn't wearing her normal sneakers anymore. They seemed to have transformed into some kind of taloned boots.

"Ouch...!"

"If that's all it took to convince you, you could've left your eyelenses in and we could have skipped my whole explanation about the Caliculus, you doofus."

"I was just checking. I still need to know, though..." said Kenk, rubbing his shin and sizing Sawa up and down.

"Know what...?"

"Well...if this is the real you, even looking like that, then that must mean...that was the real Watamaki earlier, right?"

Kenk turned his eyes toward Yuuma.

"What happened to Watamaki, Yu? Where is she...?"

"..."

Yuuma bit his lip quietly for a moment before reaching into his left jacket

pocket and withdrawing a card.

It was a semitransparent purple card, with fine silver etching that displayed the figure of a young girl. The girl was standing face forward. Only her upper half was visible. The figure was slim, with long hair. But her face lacked both eyes and a nose, and her mouth was unusually large. The image was extremely detailed; she was even wearing a blood-spattered Yuki-hana Elementary School uniform.

Two words were written underneath that image, in clear bold letters: SUMIKA WATAMAKI.

Yuuma silently held the card up for Kenk to see.

Kenk furrowed his brow tightly and then opened his eyes wide. His lips began trembling violently, and he shook his head over and over again as if to deny what he was seeing.

“Kenk. I thought I was going to have to use my magic to kill Sumika in order to stop her,” Sawa explained quietly. Kenk turned toward her, his face pale. “But Yuuma refused to let that happen. He could barely even stand, but he used his Grasping Hand spell to capture her. He risked his life. He did it to save her. Isn’t that right, Yu?”

Yuuma nodded slowly. He pressed the card to his chest.

“Yeah... I figured if I managed to capture her, we’d be safe for now, and then we could look for a way to turn her back to normal while she’s still a card. I just want to find a way to turn her back. Will you help me, Kenk? Please?”

That finally seemed to shake Kenk out of his stupor. The blood returned to his face, and a glint of determination appeared in his eyes.

There’s the Kenk I know. Always ready to go the extra mile, not for himself but for his friends.

Yuuma stared into Kenk’s face. He wasn’t sure he could say the same about himself, but he pushed that thought to the back of his mind.

Kenk took a deep breath and then smacked himself vigorously on both cheeks. He winced slightly—maybe his arm still hurt—but his voice sounded

calmer now.

“All right, then. Yu. Sawa. Let’s do this. I don’t really understand what’s going on...but we’re alive, our legs still work, and we’ve got our wits about us. We can’t just sit around forever!” he said, thrusting his fist out toward Yuuma.

“That’s the spirit!” said Yuuma, fist-bumping Kenk in return. Yuuma was pretty sure he didn’t hit Kenk’s fist any harder than usual, but for some reason...

“Oww!!”

...Kenk’s face bunched up in pain.

“This is no time for jokes, Kenk...”

“It’s not a joke! That really hurt... What are you hiding in there, brass knuckles?!”

“Of course not!” said Yuuma, thrusting his open hand under Kenk’s nose for inspection.

“Of course it hurt,” said Sawa, standing next to them. “Kenk is just a normal person right now, but you’re a Monster Tamer, Yu.”

“A normal what...? Are you telling me...?” Kenk trailed off. He stared at Yu then back at Sawa. “You mean...that’s not cosplay?”

“Cosplay?! Do you really think I’d be playing dress-up at a time like this?!” Sawa kicked Kenk in the leg before turning back toward Yuuma. “It’s about time I knocked some sense into this moron. I’ll take care of his awakening—his class upgrade. You go wake up Nagi. She should still be inside her Calculus capsule. I doubt there’s any more monsters around, but be careful just in case.”

“Yeah. Okay...” Yuuma nodded as he started down the walkway.

“What do you mean by ‘class upgrade’?” he heard Kenk cry in fear from behind him. Now it made sense why Yuuma’s fist bump had hurt him so bad.

After starting up *Actual Magic* like Sawa had told him to, Yuuma’s QREST had grown larger and extended up his arm. He could now see his own HP/MP bar in the upper-left corner of his vision, and he had also been able to see Sumika’s HP during their fight. If he’d injured Kenk with the fist bump—in other words, reduced Kenk’s hit points—Yuuma suspected he would have seen Kenk’s HP bar

appear over his head, too. After his awakening, or class upgrade, or whatever Sawa had called it, he had also been able to swing around that heavy steel bar like it weighed nothing. It was all adding up.

At the time, Sawa said that his “stats” had increased. What she meant was that Yuuma was no longer just some sixth-grade boy with two left feet. He now had the skills and abilities of a level 7 Monster Tamer. It wasn’t just his Grasping Hand spell, either. He was stronger now. Strong enough even to face off against monsters.

Since Sawa could now use spells like Flame Arrow and Healing Droplet, she’d probably undergone her own awakening as a level 7 Mage. Yuuma wasn’t sure why Sawa’s clothes had also changed or why she had horns and wings now. None of that had happened to him. But since Sawa didn’t seem particularly bothered by it, Yuuma figured Sawa herself must have some idea as to what had caused it.

Yuuma walked about ten meters as he continued to think. Finally he arrived in front the Calculus capsule containing his friend, Nagi—Minagi Sano. He heard a strangled cry from behind him.

“Aughhh!!”

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a pulsating orange light flare up toward the other end of the curving walkway. Kenk must have started up *Actual Magic*; his QREST was probably snaking up his arm at that very moment.

That would mean Kenk was experiencing his own class upgrade—from sixth-grade boy to level 7 Warrior. He wouldn’t be able to use magic like Sawa and Yuuma, but his STR would be a lot higher than Yuuma’s. The next time they fist-bumped, Yuuma would be the one to feel it.

Now all they had to do was awaken Nagi as a level 7 Priest, and they would have their party from *Actual Magic* back together in the real world. Physical hitter, magic damage dealer, healer, and pet class. A balanced four-person party.

As Yuuma’s classmates had moved up in grades, the boy and girls had tended to grow apart and spend less time together. Yuuma, Sawa, Nagi, and Kenk, however, remained inseparable. As long as the four of them stayed together,

Yuuma knew they would get to the bottom of whatever was happening and find a way to change Sumika back.

Yuuma stared at the card in his left hand. *Don't worry. I'll find a way to change you back*, he whispered in his head before returning the card to his left jacket pocket. He wished he still had a card holster, like in *Actual Magic*, but he doubted he would find anything like that out here in the real world.

Yuuma bounded up the short flight of stairs and circled around the platform, coming to a stop in front of the lid to Nagi's capsule.

Kenk, Yuuma, and Sawa had all escaped their capsules on their own. Yuuma wasn't sure why Nagi hadn't made it out yet, but he wouldn't be surprised if she was sleeping in there. Nagi loved to spend as much time asleep as she could. Sometimes, when they were playing, Yuuma would think, *Gosh, Nagi's being awfully quiet*, only to realize a moment later that she had actually dozed off. She was bright and intelligent, however—in fact, her grades were as good as Sawa's—so she was always quick to catch on to what was happening once you woke her up.

Yuuma decided to tap on the capsule first. He tried calling her name.

"Nagi...? Wake up, Nagi!"

No answer. She was probably out cold.

He could try pounding on the capsule instead. Yuuma was pretty sure that would wake her up. But the playroom was massive; they hadn't explored every nook and cranny yet. Something dangerous might be out there—something like the transformed Sumika. Something that might come looking if Yuuma made too much noise. It was better to be quiet.

Yuuma was going to have to open Nagi's capsule for her.

He and Nagi lived next door to each other—they had even been bathed together sometimes when they were very young—but he still cringed at the idea of opening a girl's capsule without permission when she might be sleeping inside. However, these were extraordinary circumstances. Hoping she would forgive him, Yuuma crouched down and gripped the emergency release lever toward the bottom of the capsule.

He pressed the button on the tip of the lever to release the lock and pulled.

With a thud, the lid of the capsule opened and rose into the air by about five centimeters.

Yuuma placed his fingers into the opening and lifted the lid ever so slowly.

“Nagi...,” he called.

Yuuma’s heart skipped a beat, and his voice died in his throat. His body broke out into a cold sweat as he glanced from one end of the capsule to the next. But no matter how many times he looked, it was still the same.

The Calculus capsule was empty.

Minagi Sano had disappeared without a trace.

“And you’re sure the emergency lever on the outside hadn’t been pulled...?”

Sawa had come running over to see the capsule for herself. Yuuma nodded emphatically.

“Yes. Absolutely sure... Remember what that lady told us during orientation? About how we shouldn’t touch the levers under any circumstances because they can’t be reset without restarting the Calculus...?”

“Yeah, she did say that.”

It was Kenk who spoke. He was still dressed in his tattered hoodie and capri school pants. Like Yuuma, his QREST now reached to just below his elbow. The circuit pattern on Kenk’s QREST glowed orange. Fortunately he hadn’t grown horns or put on a swimsuit like Sawa had, but that still didn’t explain why Sawa had been the only one to change.

At the moment, however, Nagi’s disappearance took priority.

Sawa climbed onto the edge of the capsule and peered inside.

“The internal emergency lever hasn’t been pulled, either,” she said, glancing over her shoulder. “Which means...the capsule wasn’t opened before you got here, Yu. Not from the outside and not from the inside.”

“But...how is that possible?” protested Kenk, glancing back and forth between Sawa and the capsule. “Nagi was with us during the playtest, inside *Actual*

Magic, so she had to be in there, right? Did something happen to her after we beat the boss dragon...?”

There was still a faint scratch across Kenk’s right eyebrow, which twitched as he spoke. He’d always had a habit of twitching his eyebrow like that whenever he was thinking really hard.

“Remember how she was talking about something before it happened...? Something like b...beam-sys? Beamster...?”

“BSIS. Brain Signal Intercept and Scan,” said Yuuma, correcting Kenk. “But the BSIS is the reason Nagi wouldn’t have been able to get out of the capsule on her own until the power went out, just like the rest of us.”

Kenk, however, nodded enthusiastically. “Exactly, the beam system thing! It was right after that, that the floor in the boss room turned red. The floor suddenly disappeared after that, and I dropped into some kind of darkness... The next thing I knew, I was back in my Calculus capsule. I called for help, but no one came, so I used the lever to get out by myself.”

Yuuma’s memories of what had happened were mostly the same. But there was one difference. As he was falling down into that virtual darkness, he seemed to recall seeing something down there... Something had happened in there, he was sure of it, but he couldn’t seem to remember what. His head throbbed painfully, as if resisting the memory. He put the thought aside for the time being and replied to Kenk.

“Same thing happened to me... I pulled the emergency lever, the lid lifted, and I stepped outside... Your capsule was already open at the point, but Sawa’s and Nagi’s were still closed, so I just assumed they were both probably still inside...”

Hmm...? Yuuma suddenly furrowed his eyebrows, scouring his memory.

“What is it, Yu?”

Sawa stepped forward, thrusting her face close to Yuuma’s as if trying to peer into his brain. Yuuma stared back at her in turn. Up close, he realized that her hair, which should have been completely black, was now tinged purplish. Her eyes, likewise, seemed to have developed a reddish line. Sawa’s eyelenses had probably fused with her corneas, just like Yu’s had. Maybe that explained the

change.

Instinctively, Yuuma reached out and grasped his sister's hair between his fingers. Even the texture seemed different than before. It had been several years since he'd last touched Sawa's hair, but this hair felt different. It was incredibly fine and silken and felt chilly to the touch, like metal. It felt nice.

"Hey...! Knock it off, buttbrain!"

Sawa hadn't called Yuuma "buttbrain" in years. That was her old insult for him as kids. She pulled away and kicked the side of his sneakered foot lightly with her taloned boot.

"Anyway, what is it? Did you remember something?" she asked.

"Oh... Y-yeah, actually. Right before I left my capsule, I thought I heard someone scream. That wasn't you, was it, Kenk?"

"Me? A scream...?" Kenk crossed his arms, his face clouding over momentarily. "Yeah... Nah, that wasn't me. I think I got out of my Calculus capsule just a few moments before you did. It was so dark, and there was that smell. I didn't know what to do. Once I climbed down to the walkway, I was too scared to move, so I just sat huddled under my capsule instead."

"You're actually kind of a scaredy-cat, you know that, Kenk?" Sawa said point blank—no mercy.

"Nuh-uh! You are!" Kenk shouted back, sounding like a little kid.

"I don't remember you being scared back in *AM* when we entered that dungeon," Yuuma noted.

"That's 'cause I was leading the party. I had to put on a brave face... Anyway, I thought I heard a scream, too, while I was hiding. But once I came out, I saw you fighting with Watamaki. That scream wasn't you, Yu?"

Yu tried to replay events in his mind.

"Y-yeah, I'm pretty sure I shouted, too, when I saw Watamaki's face. But I definitely heard someone scream before that."

"A man or a woman?" Sawa asked curtly.

Yu shook his head softly. “It sounded high-pitched, but I was hearing it through the capsule walls...”

“I see...”

Sawa looked concerned. Yuuma’s throat tightened up for a moment when he saw her expression.

“Sawa...,” he started fearfully. “You don’t think...it was Nagi, do you...?”

“I don’t know!” Sawa shouted, suddenly losing her composure. She looked distraught, but she quickly got herself back under control. “No, it probably wasn’t her... If Nagi had exited her capsule, either the inside or the outside emergency lever would have been pulled. Since they hadn’t been...Nagi must not’ve left her capsule.”

But if she hadn’t left her capsule, where was she? Neither Yuuma nor Kenk asked the obvious question.

One strange thing after another was happening at Althea. The ordinary laws of reality were in shambles. No one could say for sure anymore that Nagi hadn’t simply disappeared from inside the sealed capsule. Still— “If she disappeared, she still has to be somewhere...,” muttered Yuuma.

Sawa’s ruby-tinted eyes widened in response. She nodded emphatically. “I agree. She’s gotta be somewhere.”

“Then what are we doing standing around?! We have to go look for her. You know what a crybaby she can be!” said Kenk.

Back when they were little, kids used to make fun of Nagi a lot and call her a crybaby. Her response was always to shout back, “I’m not a crybaby!” and then immediately burst into tears. She had actually matured a lot in the past couple of years—but she was still that same softie they had all grown up with.

“Once we find her, I’m gonna tell her you said that,” Sawa teased.

“I take it back! I take it back!” Kenk shouted in a panic.

Yuuma just patted Kenk on the shoulder. “All right: new objectives! Turn Sumika back to normal and find Nagi!”

“It’s a plan!”

Kenk turned back toward Yuuma, and they fist-bumped once more. This fist bump was pretty hard, but it didn't seem to hurt. Kenk grinned, but then suddenly his jaw dropped. He kept his fist frozen out in front of him.

"What's wrong, Kenk...?"

"It just hit me... If we can use our QRESTS, why don't we just make a phone call or send an email?"

"Ah!"

Yuuma's mouth opened in a picture-perfect look of surprise. Kenk was right—why hadn't he thought of that sooner?!

Yuuma's virtual desktop had changed into the game screen layout now that *Actual Magic* was running, but there was still a System Menu icon in the bottom left to access basic QREST functions. Both Yuuma and Kenk tapped their System icons and then their telephone apps once the home screen appeared.

A moment later...they both sighed in disappointment. The telephone app displayed a red icon indicating that they were offline. It wasn't just Nagi; there was no way for them to contact any of their classmates, let alone their teachers, their homes, or their school.

"Did you guys seriously think I wouldn't have tried that already...?" said Sawa, exasperated.

They both nodded sheepishly and swiped their home screens shut.

"Guess that would've been too easy," replied Kenk. "We'll have to look for Nagi ourselves, then."

"I suppose so," said Yuuma, trying to sound casual. He made a new mental note: Search for a landline and find out if it works.

Stepping down from the Calculus platform and returning to the walkway, Yuuma removed his jacket and held it out to Sawa. She didn't seem at all embarrassed to be wearing only a bathing suit, but she had to be cold—she just said, "no thanks," and shoved the jacket back toward him. There was no use arguing with her when she got like that. Yuuma put his jacket back on and added finding clothes in Sawa's size to his mental list of things to do.

After touching base again, the three decided that the first thing they should do was to search the playroom from top to bottom. The circular room was about thirty meters in diameter. Multiplying by 3.14, that meant that the outer walkway was around ninety-four meters long, give or take a little. So far they had explored around just one-fourth of that, and there was an interior walkway as well.

“Wish we had a flashlight...,” Kenk muttered grumpily. It had been just about five seconds since they’d begun circling around the walkway counterclockwise.

The emergency lights on the ceiling were dim and illuminated the path only in certain spots. Even with their lenses’ vision correction activated, it was impossible to make out anything beneath the rows of Calculus capsules lined up on their left. If somebody—or something—was hiding underneath one of the capsules, they would have no way of knowing until they were right on top of them.

Sawa, however, walked briskly in front of the boys, almost as if she could see in the darkness. Eventually she stopped in front of one of the more mangled capsules. Yuuma thought she was going to investigate it, but instead she reached into the pile of rubble, which had spilled out halfway into the walkway, and pulled out a long, stout steel bar—part of one of the Calculus support frames. It was about a meter in length. She held it up in her right hand.

“Kenk, here,” she said, thrusting it toward him.

“It looks—” Kenk was about to say *heavy*, but after taking the bar from her and swinging it around in the air a few times, he clearly changed his mind.

Yuuma had already retrieved the fifty-centimeter bar that he had used to fight Sumika. He didn’t think he could handle anything much heavier than that. But Kenk had been a Warrior in *AM*, so naturally his STR would be a lot higher than Yuuma’s after his awakening.

Yuuma’s head felt like it was spinning. This was supposed to be the real world. He was still having trouble getting his head around the fact that things like classes and stats now applied here.

“This is crazy... It’s like a game...,” he whispered quietly.

Sawa drew near. “It *is* a game,” she whispered back gravely. “But if you die now, that’s it.”

“It...?”

“In *AM*, when you die, you just come back. But these aren’t avatars; they’re our real bodies. What about your injury? It hasn’t healed all the way yet, has it?”

That was true. If Yuuma moved funny, he could still feel a dull pain in his back and shoulder.

Sawa spoke a little louder.

“You need to get this through your head now, too, Kenk... There’s no respawning out here in the real world. And there’s no guarantee that revival spells will work, either. Besides, we’re not nearly high enough level to use them... So whatever happens, our first priority has to be survival. Do you understand?”

“...Yeah.”

Yuuma and Kenk both nodded at the same time. Yuuma, however, still felt uneasy.

Yuuma and Sawa were twins, but Sawa had always been the more even, level-headed one. Naturally, whenever they played MMORPGs together, Sawa usually picked a backline magic-user, and Yuuma typically went with a frontline fighter. So even though the circumstances were unusual, it still felt natural that Sawa would be the one to take charge and give orders. But natural or not, Sawa seemed to be taking things a little *too* in stride. Almost as if she knew something that Yuuma and Kenk didn’t...

I’m probably just overthinking things. Sawa’s always been smart, and I know she hates to lose. She’s probably just doing what she can to keep it together. It’s hard being the leader. She probably figures that if she falls apart, we’ll all go down.

Besides, Yuuma was the older twin. And since he was Sawa’s big brother, maybe it was about time he stepped up.

Think, Yuuma! Use your head... What could have happened here? To Althea and to all the other playtesters in Actual Magic?

“Let me see that club for a minute, Kenk,” said Yuuma, stretching out his left hand while still holding the steel bar in his right.

Kenk pursed his lips in displeasure. Apparently he wasn’t upset at the idea of lending Yuuma his weapon but rather at the fact that Yuuma had referred to it as “that club.”

“I’ve dubbed it Durendal, and I’ll have you both remember that, thanks very much,” he said, holding it out to Yuuma.

“Aye-aye,” Yuuma replied, taking the club from Kenk.

It was nearly twice as heavy as the steel bar. Yuuma found it hard even to stand straight while wielding the thing without first planting his feet more firmly. Still struggling, he glanced up and to the left and then nodded.

“Just as I expected...,” he said.

“Expected what?” Kenk asked.

“The Overloaded icon just appeared underneath my HP/MP bar.”

“For real...?”

Kenk’s eyes opened wide. As Yuuma handed the club—Durendal—back to him, the icon immediately disappeared. He readjusted his grip on his metal bar and nodded.

The game system of *Actual Magic* seemed to be encroaching on this space—on everything inside Althea. Reality was being eroded, and things like the laws of physics and their own physical capabilities were being either amplified or distorted by the game. That must have been why they could wield magic now or swing around big heavy steel bars. However...this was still reality at the end of the day, and Yuuma and his friends were still flesh-and-blood humans. There would be a heavy price to pay should they forget that.

“I get it now, Sawa,” Yuuma said, summing up his train of thoughts.

Sawa smiled faintly and nodded. “Okay then, let’s get back to our search. Speaking of which: I finally found one.”

“Found one what...?”

“A capsule that hasn’t been opened.”

Yuuma turned in the direction she was pointing. A Calculus capsule sat enshrined atop an undamaged support frame, its lid still closed. They glanced around cautiously as they approached, before climbing up onto the capsule platform.

“The emergency lever hasn’t been pulled yet,” said Kenk, peering toward the bottom of the capsule. “Should I open it...?”

“Do it,” urged Sawa.

He grabbed the lever and pulled.

The lock opened with a thud, and the lid rose up slightly. Yuuma carefully lifted it up the rest of the way. This one was empty, too, just like Nagi’s. Yuuma wasn’t surprised.

“All of the closed capsules are probably empty...,” he said.

Standing up, Kenk peered around at the gloomy shadows.

Playroom 01 had forty-eight Calculus capsules situated along its outer walkway, and thirty-two along its inner walkway, for a total of eighty Calculus capsules. Of those eighty, around 30 percent remained closed. The Yukihana Elementary sixth-graders accounted for forty-one of the room’s eighty playtesters. According to the math, that meant that about twelve students, give or take, had likely vanished into thin air while still inside their Calculus capsules.

“But the people who were inside the open capsules must have gotten out just like we did. What happened to them...?” asked Kenk.

“The most likely answer would be that they’ve gone back down to the lobby on the first floor,” replied Sawa. “At least the ones who were able to make it that far,” she added under her breath, which Kenk didn’t seem to hear.

“Of course... I almost forgot there was even a door out of this place,” he muttered.

The three turned their gazes toward the south end of the playroom. The door was located directly opposite from where they stood. They couldn’t see the wall

at the moment as the ring of Calculus capsules along the inner walkway were situated a step higher than the outer ring and blocked their view, but they knew there should be a door there that would lead to the elevators.

“Maybe we should go down to the lobby, too,” Kenk suggested. “Ms. Ebbers and Frankfurt probably started gathering the other students together by now...”

Ebbers and Frankfurt! Yuuma had forgotten all about them. Those were the nicknames for their homeroom teacher, Yukari Ebisawa (Ms. Ebbers) and the school’s vice-principal, Mineji Haragishi (no one actually knew where the nickname *Frankfurt* had come from). They hadn’t joined the playtest and were instead sitting in the café in the first-floor lobby, waiting for the students to return.

There were plenty of other adults besides Ms. Ebbers and Frankfurt who wouldn’t have been inside Calculus capsules: the Althea employees, the people behind the counter in the shops, the engineers, the security guards... There had to be at least a hundred other people in total. What had happened to all of them?

Maybe nothing happened...

Maybe this is all confined to Playroom 01, and once we walk out that door and go down to the lobby, the world will be peaceful like normal, with no such thing as monsters or magic...

Yuuma gritted his teeth and shook his head. He knew that was just wishful thinking.

Sumika Watamaki, every boy’s dreamgirl, had been turned into a monster and had attempted to kill Yuuma and Kenk, only to be sealed inside a card that was currently in Yuuma’s pocket. And Minagi Sano—his childhood friend for as long as he could remember—had disappeared without a trace from inside her sealed Calculus pod. Meanwhile, his twin sister, Sawa, had sprouted horns and wings. There was no going back to normal now.

“We should go back down to the lobby, but let’s finish checking the playroom first... We might find some clue to help us figure out what’s going on,” said Yuuma, trying to take charge.

Kenk nodded, his face turning serious. Sawa just chuckled, apparently amused.

“What are you laughing about...?”

“Nothing,” she said, trying to look innocent. Yuuma elbowed her lightly in the side, and Sawa hit him back immediately. It was their usual routine. They were brother and sister, after all.

Kenk just rolled his eyes as if to say he was above such childish games. They elbowed him a few times, too, for good measure, before all three of them climbed back down to the walkway.

They continued investigating the room, but the Calculus pods on the outside perimeter all fell into one of three patterns. Either they were mostly unharmed and the lid had been opened, they were unharmed and closed but the inside was empty, or they were mangled almost beyond recognition. They would have liked to examine the damaged capsules more closely, but the staircases leading up to those platforms had been destroyed, and they couldn’t get close enough.

After exploring three-fourths of the outside walkway, they discovered a huge set of automatic doors in the wall on their right-hand side, across from a short stairway that connected to the inner walkway on their left. The automatic tinted glass doors had been toppled outward, almost as if someone had rammed a vehicle into them, and the lights in the elevator lobby beyond the doorway were dark.

“Oof... I don’t wanna think about what could’ve hit the door hard enough to do that...,” whispered Kenk, taking a step closer. Sawa reached out and grabbed the tattered hem of Kenk’s hoodie, yanking him backward.

“Ack! Whaddya think you’re doing...?!”

“Kenk, Yu, over there!” she hissed.

Sawa pointed at a spot on the floor in front of the cracked glass door. Squinting, Yuuma could vaguely discern some sort of large lump lying on the ground. It definitely wasn’t a piece of Calculus debris. It was about the size of Yuuma’s own body, with no distinct shape.

Yuuma breathed in sharply. He smelled it again, that same metallic scent from

before. A chill ran from the bottom of his spine up to the nape of his neck, and the hairs on his arms stood on end.

As much as Yuuma wanted to keep his distance, they needed to find out what it was. He gripped his steel bar tighter and took a step forward, glancing around cautiously. If only they had a light. No sooner had he thought it than Sawa whispered quietly from beside him.

“Flamma.”

A small orange flame appeared at the tip of her extended finger, illuminating their surroundings. It was the element word of power for flame magic—Sawa didn’t follow up with a word for the form, however. It took Yuuma a moment to realize what she was doing.

“Of course... If you just chant the element, you can use it as a light. Can you keep that going?”

“No, if I don’t chant the next word within ten seconds, the spell fumbles automatically and I lose some MP.”

“Then we’d better hurry...”

Ignoring his fear, Yuuma began to walk faster.

Yuuma already suspected what he would find. All the same, once the light revealed that the black lump was, in fact, a person—another child—every muscle in his body refused to carry him another step farther. Sawa reached out and caught Yuuma by the hand before he could trip over his own legs.

Sawa’s skin felt cool and dry. That skin-to-skin contact was like a splash of cold water, stopping Yuuma’s oncoming panic dead in its tracks. But Sawa had to be scared, too. Even if they were twins, Yuuma was still the big brother. It wasn’t right for him to lean on her all the time.

“Sorry,” he muttered briefly before striding boldly across the remaining two meters.

Just then, the ten seconds were up, and the flame at the end of Sawa’s finger sputtered out with a sad little *hiss*. This time, Yuuma extended his own left hand and chanted the word of power for the element of light.

“Lumen!”

A ball of white light appeared at his fingertip, illuminating the ground beneath them even more than Sawa’s flame had.

The body belonged to a boy around the same age as them. He was lying face down on the floor and was dressed in a light blue jacket and navy capri pants. That meant he was from their class.

He was dead; that much was obvious at a glance. His left leg was broken and jutted backward at a hideous angle, and the end of his fractured shin bone stuck out raggedly from a gash in the skin. His right arm was missing entirely, sleeve and all. The blood from the wound had pooled into a dark red puddle beneath his body. That had to be the source of the metallic smell.

Kenk was standing behind them. A strange retching noise suddenly escaped his lips. He ran to the other side of the walkway and began violently throwing up.

Yuuma couldn’t blame him. His own stomach felt like it might betray him as well. His eyes watered as he fought through it.

A few seconds later, the nausea had passed. Yuuma gathered up his nerve. He crouched next to the body and laid his weapon to the side. “Forgive me,” he said before using his right hand to roll the body on its side.

The body was soft, tepid—and surprisingly heavy.

Much heavier than he had imagined a body would be. Come to think of it, if the average weight of a sixth-grade boy was forty kilograms, rolling the body over with just one hand should have been a fairly difficult task, even if it was missing an arm. Yuuma lowered his hips and braced his feet, using all his amplified game strength to turn the body over.

Yuuma wanted to see the face, but the first thing that caught his attention was actually the boy’s torso. His clothing—shirt, necktie, and undershirt—had been torn open, revealing a large gaping hole in the center of his chest.

His heart is missing, Yuuma realized intuitively.

“...Must have eaten it...,” Sawa muttered quietly.

Another ten seconds had passed, and the light at the tip of Yuuma's finger disappeared. His MP bar decreased slightly. Yuuma was level 7, though. As long as *Actual Magic* was still running, a point or two of mana would probably recharge in no time.

Sawa, however, had used Flame Arrow earlier in order to attack Sumika, and then she'd used magic twice more in order to heal Yuuma and Kenk with Healing Droplet. Her MP probably hadn't recovered very far yet. Yuuma hurriedly chanted the element again, refreshing his light before she could use more of her own MP.

With the body now turned over, Yuuma's light illuminated the boy's face. The moment Yuuma saw it— He clamped his free hand over his mouth, overcome with a nausea even greater than what he had felt earlier. It wasn't just that he recognized the face. It was the expression of raw, abject terror etched there, like nothing he had ever seen before in his life.

The boy's eyes were open so wide that they looked like they were going to pop out, and his mouth was twisted into a sideways grimace, his bloodstained tongue protruding from within. It looked as if he had died in the middle of a scream.

"That scream...," Yuuma croaked hoarsely, somehow managing not to throw up. "The one that Kenk and I heard. It was him. It was Miura..."

Yukihisa Miura. Student number 37, a bit of a class clown. Sometimes the girls in class would get annoyed at him, but he never let that bring him down. It was a close-knit class, and Miura had always been ready with a joke or a prank to make them laugh. At first, Yuuma had been unsure whether the scream he'd heard had belonged to a boy or a girl, but thinking back now, the shrill pitch matched perfectly with his memory of Miura's frenetic, high-pitched laughter.

The scream that Yuuma had heard right after waking up, while still inside his Calculus capsule, had apparently belonged to Miura. Yuuma opened the lid to his capsule almost immediately after he'd heard the scream and then encountered the monstrous Sumika just moments after climbing down to the walkway. That would mean— "Is that...Beloshi...?" asked Kenk, returning to their side.

His voice sounded hoarse, but apparently there was nothing left in his stomach to throw up. Yuuma just nodded wordlessly. Beloshi had been one of Miura’s nicknames. Like Frankfurt, Yuuma wasn’t sure where it had come from. Yuuma had never really hung out with Miura, but he knew Miura and Kenk used to play minigames together on their QRESTs.

Another ten seconds passed, and Yuuma’s light went out again. Yuuma didn’t want to see Yukihiisa’s sad death mask anymore anyway. He grabbed his steel bar and stood back up.

“Do you think...Watamaki killed him?” Kenk asked.

Yuuma had been thinking the same thing mere seconds earlier.

It wasn’t just likely she had killed him; it was almost certain. Considering the timing of Sumika’s appearance, and the direction she had come from, it all lined up too perfectly... And of course, there was also Miura’s right arm. It had been torn from his shoulder. The monstrous Sumika had used a severed human arm as a club to attack Yuuma and Kenk. That arm must have been— “...!”

Yuuma suddenly had an idea. He reached into his pocket and pulled out Sumika’s monster card. In *Actual Magic*, users could tap monster cards to open the familiar’s character screen and see things like their stats. If Yuuma could see his own HP/MP bar, he figured he could probably access character screens as well.

Yuuma tapped the card with a stiff finger. There was soft *ding*, and a blue window appeared. He peered closely at the tiny letters, reading the information on the screen.

Sumika Watamaki

Night Fiend

Level: 17

HP: 75/279

MP: 38/40

Loyalty: 64

Skills:

- **Exceptional Strength (Skill Level: 31)**

- **Sword Transformation (Skill Level: 24)**
- **Blindsense (Skill Level: 48)**
- **Resist Pain (Skill Level: 42)**
- **Resist Darkness (Skill Level: 67)**
- **Resist Cold (Skill Level: 43)**

Equipment:

- **Short Jacket (DEF: 4, M-DEF: 0)**
- **Long-Sleeved Shirt (DEF: 2, M-DEF: 0)**
- **Pleated Skirt (DEF: 3, M-DEF: 0)**
- **Leather Shoes (DEF: 2, M-DEF: 1)**
- **Right Arm of Yukihiisa Miura (Blunt ATK: 18, M-ATK: 3)**

As Yuuma read the last item on the list of equipment, he retched quietly, experiencing his third and strongest wave of nausea yet. Fortunately Sawa was there to rub his back gently, and Yuuma managed to resist vomiting all over Miura's corpse. But he could feel the stomach acid in the back of his throat. He really wished he had some water right about now.

Yuuma took several deep breaths to regain his composure. Kenk was standing next to him. He peered over at Sumika's character screen.

"How can Beloshi's arm be equipment...? He's not some character in a game..."

Isn't he, though? Me, you, Sawa, Miura—we're all characters now. Or we might as well be. Actual Magic is eroding reality and forcing us to play its game.

Yuuma just nodded, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"Hey, Yu...? Couldn't we at least give him back his arm...?"

Kenk had been friends with Miura, so naturally, he wanted to put Miura properly to rest and to return his arm to its rightful place. Somewhere private, not dumped in the middle of a hallway like this. Yuuma agreed. Since they were his classmates, it was the least they could do. Unfortunately— "In order to do

that, I would need to summon Watamaki from her card...,” Yuuma said softly. Kenk opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again immediately. Yuuma watched as a jumble of emotions washed across his friend’s face.

“Sumika is one of my familiars now, and her loyalty stat is higher than I expected. If I summoned her now, she probably wouldn’t attack us... At least, I don’t think she would. But under the circumstances, there’s no way to be sure. She’s also recovered a lot of HP while in card form. If she attacked us now, we would need to damage her again before I could recapture her...”

“Yeah... Forget I asked,” Kenk said, staring down sadly at the body on the floor. “But can we at least lay him to rest somewhere?”

“How about in one of the empty Calculus capsules?” Sawa suggested.

Kenk and Yuuma made eye contact then nodded simultaneously.

“Okay. I’ll open that capsule over there. You two carry Miura’s body,” Sawa said calmly as she began to walk toward the nearest closed capsule.

Yuuma placed his weapon on the floor once more and circled around to Miura’s feet, grabbing his broken left leg and his unbroken right leg firmly in each hand. Kenk took up position at Miura’s head. He placed Durendal down on the floor and thrust his arms under Miura’s back. They took a deep breath and lifted him carefully. Once again, Yuuma’s Overburdened icon appeared in the upper-left corner of his vision.

Together, they were carrying about twenty kilograms each. Before *Actual Magic*, Yuuma would have struggled to stand while carrying that much weight. Even now, with the increased STR from his class upgrade, he was worried his knees might give out if he wasn’t careful.

“My oldest brother is a mountain climber...,” Kenk whispered, taking careful steps backward. “He told me once that while people are awake, they’re easy to lift, even by yourself, but once they’re asleep, or...or dead...they become heavier, and it’s almost impossible to carry them. I remember not believing him at the time. Like, a person has to weigh the same, whether they’re asleep or awake...”

Yuuma understood what his friend was trying to say.

Sometimes, at school, during gym class, or when they were playing out in the yard, the boys would give each other piggyback rides. It wasn't easy, but they could still move around with another kid on their back. Yet even missing one arm, even with all the blood he had lost, even with two of them carrying him, Miura's body was so heavy, they could barely lift their sneakers off the floor.

Somehow they managed to make it across the walkway. There were only seven steps up to the Calculus, but by the time they'd reached the platform, Kenk and Yuuma were completely out of breath. Using every muscle in their bodies, they managed to hoist Miura and gently place him inside the empty capsule that Sawa had opened for them using its emergency lever.

Yuuma and Kenk panted heavily as Sawa leaned over the open capsule and pressed Miura's eyes and mouth closed. In movies and anime, it always looked so easy, but Sawa had to use both hands and push hard for several seconds to get them to close.

The three stood side by side in silence for several moments before descending the staircase and returning to the walkway in front of the automatic door.

Yuuma picked up the two steel bars and handed the longer one to Kenk before casting another glance around the playroom.

They had already investigated the forty-eight Calculus capsules along the outer perimeter, but they still hadn't touched the inner thirty-two. After everything they had seen so far, Yuuma didn't expect to learn anything new from the capsules themselves, but there was always a chance they would find something else. Perhaps...even another one of their classmates' bodies.

"We should check the upper walkway, too...," Kenk said, looking glum. Apparently he had been thinking the same thing.

But Sawa suddenly cut him off sharply.

"Shh...!" She raised a finger to her lips and then pointed to the elevator lobby with her other hand. "I heard something."

"Huh...?"

Yuuma furrowed his eyebrows, but then he heard it, too.

Thud. A dull, heavy thumping sound accompanied by the high-pitched voices of children. No, not voices. Screams. It sounded like the noises were coming from far away, but the general direction was still obvious. They were coming from below. Yuuma realized instinctively that someone was being attacked by something downstairs, in the first-floor lobby.

“We have to go help them...!” Yuuma whispered urgently. He began rushing toward the elevators, but Sawa grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and pulled him back.

“Yu. Kenk. Wait.” The two turned around to stare at her. Before they could reply, however, Sawa began speaking at a rapid-fire pace. “If you want to go help, we can, but if we run into another person like Sumika who’s been changed into a monster, you can’t fool around this time. I don’t care if it’s one of our classmates. If they attack us, you can’t hesitate. You have to fight back. Healing Droplet is my only recovery spell, but that’s an ultra-slow HoT effect—it only heals over time. It won’t help in the moment against burst damage. If you think you’re in danger...”

Sawa trailed off, but it was clear what she was going to say. *If you think you’re in danger, run.* Yuuma nodded sharply. No more hesitation.

“I understand—now let’s go.”

This time it was Sawa’s turn to nod quietly. Yuuma and Kenk made eye contact before hopping over the toppled remains of the automatic door and entering the elevator lobby. There were three massive elevator doors lined up along the wall on their right, but the floor lights above the elevator doors were dark. Yuuma rushed forward and pressed the down button repeatedly, but nothing happened.

“Everyone else probably used the stairs,” said Sawa. Glancing to the right, Yuuma saw a fire door with a stairwell logo on it. It was propped half open. There were also several black smears along the wall and the floor—likely bloodstains.

“I’ll go first,” said Kenk.

He stepped toward the door, gripping Durendal in both hands, and peered inside briefly before nodding for the other two to follow.

The stairway was even darker than the playroom had been, but the emergency lights embedded in the wall continued to glow weakly. There was no need to use magic in order to see. At the moment, they were on a landing. The staircase to the right went downward; the one on the left went up.

Yuuma was curious to know what was happening on the upper floors, but the screams they heard were coming from the first floor. They needed to hurry. Yuuma, Kenk, and Sawa raced down the stairs, which were full of bloody footprints, with Kenk in the lead. They passed through another ajar fire door at the bottom of the stairs before arriving at the first-floor elevator lobby.

Yuuma could see the spacious main lobby to their right. He groaned quietly at the unexpected sight that awaited them.

“Why...?”

Why was it dark?

It shouldn't have been.

Unlike the playroom, which had no windows, the walls along Althea's first-floor lobby were mostly plate glass. When Yuuma and the other sixth-grade students had arrived at Althea at eleven that May morning, the sun had been streaming in through the glass on the east side of the building, flooding the mostly black lobby with bright light.

According to the clock displayed in the lower-right-hand corner of his vision, the current time was 3:20 PM. There was no way the sun could have already set at this time of year. Outside the giant plate glass windows that enclosed the lobby, however, all was dark. It looked like the middle of the night.

No, not even night was this dark. It was pitch-black outside. Althea had been built in the center of Nozomi City, which had a population of 140,000 people. Even in the middle of the night, the adjoining streets, and lights from nearby businesses, would have still been visible. That was all gone now. What was happening—?

“Ahhhh...!”

This time, the scream could be heard more clearly. The sound pulled Yuuma back into the present moment. This was no time to worry about what lay

outside the windows... Right now Yuuma's classmates were in trouble inside.

The first-floor lobby, which took up the entire south half of the first floor and was shaped like half of a Bundt cake, was divided by double walls. The ticket counter was located near the southernmost entrance. To the right of that was a shopping area, and to the left was the café. There were no signs of any staff members on the other side of the counter.

Or were there?

A number of large lumps, faintly illuminated by the emergency lights, lay piled up across the floor. There were fewer than ten in total, but they were likely the bodies of adults.

Yuuma's mind froze for a moment, but another scream and a loud metallic *clang* brought him back to his senses.

"That way!" he shouted, forcing his legs to move.

There were bodies slumped throughout the lobby. Yuuma cut straight across the room, passing the ticket counter and heading toward the shopping area. As they drew closer, new sounds began to emerge. It was chaos. Huge thuds and crashes, accompanied by multiple screams and the deep, guttural grunts of some vicious, slovenly beast.

The entrance to the shopping area was located on the other side of a trusswork partition and was closed off by a grated metal shutter. The banging sounds, and the bestial grunts, were being made by somebody—no, *something*—repeatedly ramming into the shutters to break them down.

Yuuma, Kenk, and Sawa quickly concealed themselves behind the partition, peering around the corner to see what was making all that noise.

The thing was huge. At 165 centimeters, Kenk was pretty tall for an elementary schooler. The creature, however, easily dwarfed him. It had to be at least two and half meters tall and was nearly just as wide. Every time it moved, its flesh jiggled beneath its ashen skin. Its arms and legs were short but enormously thick, and as for its head—whatever it was, it certainly wasn't human.

Its head, which jutted out from the fleshy folds of its neck, was shaped like a

tricorn hat fashioned out of meat. Of its two-and-a-half-meter height, the pointed head accounted for around fifty centimeters. There were no eyes or nose to be found on the area where its face should have been, but there was a slit-like mouth where the head joined the body. Drool sprayed from the creature's mouth in all directions with each of its fearsome, low-pitched roars.

"What the heck is that...?" Kenk asked, his voice raspy. Yuuma had no answer.

Although Sumika also hadn't had eyes or a nose when she'd attacked them, she had still been shaped like a human. But with the odd proportions of its arms and legs, its sagging leathery skin, and of course, its strange, pointed head, nothing about the creature ramming into the shutter suggested that it was human.

Could it be another player from *Actual Magic* who had been transformed into a monster just like Sumika Watamaki? Or...were actual monsters now showing up at Althea in the real world?

A barricade made of large display racks had been hastily erected inside the shutters, and the screams were coming from behind that barricade. It sounded like several children were back there, trying to hold the barricade in place. But in the short time that Yuuma and the others had been watching, the metal shutter had already begun to buckle, pushing the barricade back inch by inch. It wouldn't last much longer.

"...We have to do something," Yuuma whispered despite himself.

"That pinhead's HP and physical defense are probably pretty high," Sawa replied sharply. "We're not going to be able to defeat it with a couple of metal sticks."

"But...we can't just leave. Those must be our classmates in there..."

"I know. We'll have to fight it with magic... My MP is still less than half full, though."



Yuuma could hear the frustration in Sawa's voice. If this were the world of *Actual Magic*, she could have just drunk an MP potion, but there was obviously nothing like that in the real world. And while MP regeneration depended on your class and skill loadout, at low levels it was far too slow to rely upon.

Yuuma could use some magic as well, but he was limited to Grasping Hand, a dark-type spell available only to Monster Tamers, and low-level utility magic. He didn't have a single attack spell. Kenk, meanwhile, was a pure Warrior, focused entirely on physical attacks.

Yuuma was about to ask his sister what they should do, but he caught himself before he could speak.

Sawa's face, in profile, looked pinched and stressed. A small bead of sweat trickled down her forehead. They were in an extreme situation, and nothing made sense. Sawa had stepped up to lead them, but she had to be just as scared inside as they were. One of her classmates had been turned into a monster, another had been brutally murdered, her best friend Nagi was missing...and horns and wings were growing out of her body. Sawa was doing her best, but Yuuma needed to stop relying on her for everything.

I need to think for myself. There's gotta be a way to defeat that thing.

Sawa was right. The pinhead creature was protected by tough, ashen skin and a thick layer of fat. Smacking it with their blunt steel bars probably wasn't going to do much damage. Usually, magic would be the solution for a creature like that; but of the three of them, Sawa was the only one who could use offensive magic, and at the moment she was out of MP, so that wasn't an option.

If they were still in the game world, now would be the time to retreat and come back later with full MP and better gear. But there were no weapon shops selling swords and spears, or item shops selling potions, in the real-world Althea. They would just have to make do with what they had here...

What we have here.

Yuuma had a stroke of inspiration.

Even if the game system was eroding reality, it was still the real world. Which meant there were things here that they didn't have in the game world. In a

building this big, there had to be...

“Sawa. Kenk. Do you think you can lure that thing around the lobby for two... no, one minute?” whispered Yuuma.

Sawa gave it some thought. Two seconds later, she nodded. One more second passed, and Kenk nodded as well.

“Probably. It doesn’t look very fast. Why? Do you have an idea?” asked Sawa, but there was no time for Yuuma to explain his whole plan.

“Just do it; you’ll see. You too, Kenk. If it seems like you’re in trouble, use the staircase and flee back up to the second fl—”

Yuuma was suddenly interrupted by a deafening screech of metal. He felt his heart almost leap out his chest. After one blow too many, the shutter had finally been torn free from the ceiling bracket and had come crashing down toward the ground. Now the only thing protecting the students in the shopping area was their makeshift barricade. It wouldn’t matter how hard they pushed back on the other side; they were just kids. One more charge from that creature, maybe two, and they were goners.

“I’ll draw aggro! Kenk, you run interference from the side!” shouted Sawa.

She reached down and picked up a small, oval car key fob that was lying on the ground nearby—one of the victims had probably dropped it. She hurled it at the creature.

Sawa had always been better at playing catch than Yuuma. The fob flew through the air in a straight line before striking the pinhead creature dead center on the side of its head.

“GWAR...?”

The giant creature, which had been preparing to charge at the barricade again, stopped and groaned, turning its featureless face toward the three.

“Come ’n’ get me, ya big freak!” shouted Kenk.

“GWAR... GWWWARRR!”

The creature instantly roared in response, out of either anger or delight. It was impossible to tell which. Ignoring the barricade in favor of its new target, it

lowered its body, pointing its horned head toward them and stomping in place several times— “Yu, go!”

Sawa shoved Yuuma with her left hand. Yuuma turned away, not waiting for the giant creature to charge, and began running. Behind him, he heard a ferocious roar as the earth began to tremble.

Sawa! Kenk! Hang in there!

Yuuma prayed silently as he sprinted toward the ticket counter. He leaped over the black counter and landed on the other side. He ran another ten meters along the inside of the curved counter before finding what he was looking for, on the wall to his right. A silver door with the words STAFF ONLY. Usually the door was magnetically locked, but with the building’s power currently out...

“Come on, open...,” Yuuma whispered, pushing down on the door lever with his left hand.

It turned easily, and the door swung open several centimeters. Eight seconds had passed. He could barely stop himself from charging inside, but he forced himself to stop and search for signs of life. No strange sounds or smells emanated from the doorway.

Yuuma pushed the door fully open. As he did, he heard a massive roar coming from the lobby behind him. A moment later he heard Sawa shout, taunting the creature.

“This way, you bonehead!”

They’ll be all right. Sawa and Kenk believe in me. I have to believe in them, too.

Gathering his resolve, Yuuma stepped inside the room.

The emergency lights in the back room were out. It was almost completely dark. Having no choice, Yuuma chanted the element word of power for light, which created a ten-second torch in his left hand. He rushed forward, gripping his steel bar tightly in his right hand.

The plaque on the first door on Yuuma’s right read OFFICE—that was the wrong room. The next door was the break room—wrong again. Finally, he reached the

third door. The infirmary.

I knew it!

As Yuuma opened the door, his light disappeared. Fortunately, the room inside was still lit by dim orange emergency lights.

The empty infirmary was larger than Yuuma had expected. On the left side of the room were three beds equipped with privacy curtains. On the right were a desk and a trolley, used for examinations, and beyond that a white cabinet. Yuuma crossed the room without hesitation and opened the glass door of the cabinet.

He found what he was looking for on the larger bottom shelf. Switching the iron bar to his left hand, he nabbed the white plastic container and pulled it free from the shelf. The label said it contained five liters. Yuuma wasn't sure if that would be enough, but he had promised Sawa and Kenk that he would be back in one minute. Half of that time had already passed. If five liters weren't enough, they would just have to find a backup plan. Yuuma rushed out of the infirmary, dangling the container behind him at arm's length.

Yuuma ran back down the dark hallway, yanking open the metal door and stumbling out into the area behind the counter.

He was greeted by the sight of the giant, ashen-skinned beast charging past him, from left to right, at incredible speed.

It was crouched over, the tip of its horned head pointed forward, on a direct collision course for the tiny Sawa. Her back was against the wall. She waited until just the right moment before diving to the right.

Slam! With a deafening crash, the giant creature collided headfirst with the wall separating the main lobby from the elevators. Its pointed head drilled through the wall's cosmetic plastic panels and embedded itself straight through into the underlying concrete. For a brief moment the creature seemed stuck, but it placed both hands on the wall and pulled its head free, leaving behind a gaping, thirty-centimeter-wide hole.

Regardless of how much the game system might have buffed their stats, no elementary school kid's body was going to stand up to a blow like that. Sawa

quickly got back to her feet and rushed toward the center of the lobby. With great lumbering steps, the huge creature began to turn, changing directions. It crouched down, ready to charge again.

Sawa's eyes flickered in Yuuma's direction, noticing his return. She clapped her hands together and shouted, "This way, you stupid ogre!"

"GWARR!"

The creature groaned and lowered its pointed head. It stamped the ground several times with its elephantine feet and began charging viciously toward her. Sawa moved backward slowly, still drawing aggro, step by nimble step.

That is, until one of her feet got caught on the arm of a corpse lying on the floor.

"Ah!" she yelped in surprise, falling backward and landing on her behind. The charging beast lowered its head even farther as it stampeded toward her, the tip of its head glinting darkly as it scraped along the ground.

Yuuma leaped over the counter in a panic and chased after the giant creature. But it was too far away. Sawa tried to stand back up, but the claws of her boot had become tangled in the threads of the corpse's sleeve.

Sawa, get up! Run, Sawa, run!

Barely five meters separated the monster from Sawa. Yuuma's vision narrowed. His arms and legs felt numb. *No, no, no!* he kept shouting in his head as time slowed to a crawl.

Just then—

"Arrhhhh!!"

A dark figure ran forward, screaming at the top of its lungs as it charged toward the creature's right flank.

It was Kenk—wielding Durendal in both hands, he struck the creature on its pointed head, just moments before Sawa would have been impaled. The metal bar made contact with a *clang*, sending sparks flying. Despite the pompous name Kenk had given it, Durendal was still just a hunk of metal. It bounced back easily, and Kenk was sent flying as he collided with the creature's right

shoulder. He flew through the air and landed in a heap.

Kenk's desperate blitz had not been in vain, however. The creature's pointed horn was already as low as it could go. Thanks to Kenk's blow, the horn struck the floor, tearing up the tiles and underlay and catching on the concrete slab below.

The creature flipped head over heels, just thirty centimeters from where Sawa still lay sprawled on the ground. Its own horn became a fulcrum. It was launched into the air, passing over Sawa entirely and landing on its back behind her.

The ground shook like an earthquake. Yuuma was almost thrown off his feet, but he managed to keep running. This was their last and only chance. Sawa and Kenk had risked their lives to create this opening. He couldn't let it go to waste. It was now or never!

Yuuma raced past Sawa and Kenk on their left and made a beeline for the creature while it was still trying to get up. He took the white plastic container he was carrying and shoved it forcefully into the creature's twenty-centimeter-wide mouth.

"MWRMPH!"

With a muffled roar, the creature bit down on the container with incredible force. The container began to crumple.

Yuuma dragged Sawa back to her feet and retreated in Kenk's direction.

He could see at a glance that his sister wasn't hurt. Kenk didn't appear to be bleeding, either. Sawa and Kenk had stalled the creature for a full minute, just like they had promised. Now it was Yuuma's turn.

The ashen-skinned creature used its stubby arms to lift itself to its feet. With more stamping of its massive legs, it began to change directions again. If they had still been in the game and had a way to attack properly, the slow speed at which the creature turned would have clearly been its weak point. All they could do now, however, was watch on in useless silence.

"Yu, what was in that container...?" Sawa asked, her voice raspy.

“Five liters of rubbing alcohol,” Yuuma whispered back.

Sawa’s red-tinted eyes grew wide and then narrowed again in understanding.

“In place of magic... Of course! But how are you going to ignite it?”

Yuuma’s heart suddenly skipped a beat.

Sawa was right. Alcohol was an accelerant. But you still needed a source of flame in order to light it on fire. But Yuuma didn’t have a lighter, and he was pretty sure Sawa and Kenk wouldn’t have one, either.

Maybe he could strike his steel bar against another piece of metal to make a spark. But the creature was over two meters tall. Yuuma probably wouldn’t be able reach the creature’s mouth, even if he stood on his toes. And it wasn’t like the creature was going to just sit still and let him try.

Yuuma froze. Sawa sighed quietly, standing next to him.

“You didn’t think of that, did you...?” she muttered. “If we can distract it for another minute, I think I should have enough MP to fire off a single Flame Arrow by then.”

But Yuuma had a different idea. He remembered something he had seen just a few seconds earlier. He formulated a new plan.

“I’ve got an idea first...,” he whispered. “If it doesn’t work, then we can try your magic.”

“An idea...?” Sawa repeated doubtfully.

Yuuma glanced at Sawa and at Kenk, who was still sprawled out on the floor. He switched the steel pipe from his left hand to his right.

Meanwhile, the creature’s jaws and teeth had finally crushed through the plastic container in its mouth. Clear liquid spilled out, half of it pouring toward the back of its throat, the other half spewing out the front.

“RRAWWRWRR!”

The creature whipped about in a rage, getting alcohol all over the place, even on its own head.

Now!

Brandishing his right arm high in the air, Yuuma threw the metal bar at the creature's head as hard as he could.

The tip of the creature's head gleamed like rusted iron. The metal bar spun until it made impact; a few meager white sparks flew through the air, just like when Kenk had struck the creature with Durendal earlier. With the mist the creature had created from biting down on the container, it was more than enough to ignite the alcohol.

Fwoosh! The creature's entire upper body burst into flames.

The dark lobby was suddenly lit up brightly by the flames, which burned blue like the alcohol burners from science class. The creature moaned and howled as it waved its arms about, but the fire continued to burn.

A blue gauge appeared above the creature's head. Its HP bar. Its monster name, Conehead Bruiser, was displayed beneath the HP bar, as well as the symbol for the Burned status ailment. Apparently, HP bars appeared only if you attacked or took damage from a creature yourself.

Yuuma's steel bar had bounced off the creature and landed nearby. He picked it up and retreated several steps.

The creature's upper body was now enveloped in flames, and a column of fire escaped its mouth—apparently the alcohol it had swallowed had also ignited. Its HP bar was decreasing much more slowly than Yuuma would have expected, however. In all likelihood, it wasn't that the fire damage was low, but rather that its HP was extremely high, just like Sawa had conjectured. It would have taken several castings of Flame Arrow to defeat the beast. Unlike magic fire, however, which disappeared after several seconds, five liters of rubbing alcohol weren't going to burn away so easily.

The creature's ashen skin finally began to blacken, like charcoal, in places. The stench was horrendous. Yuuma covered his nose with his left hand. The creature's burnt skin began to slough off, revealing new flames—not blue like the alcohol fires, but crimson red. Its thick layers of fat must have begun to catch fire.

“AGRH! GWRAWR...!”

The creature writhed in agony, its screams horrendous. Its HP bar began depleting rapidly now that its own fat and flesh had started to burn. The bar turned yellow, indicating that half its HP was gone.

“I know it’s just a monster...but it almost seems like a real creature...,” muttered Kenk, who was still lying on the floor.

“That’s because it *is* real,” Sawa said quietly. “It’s not just some 3D object in a game. At least, not right now... But I have a feeling that only applies while it’s still alive.”

“What’s that supposed to mean...?” Yuuma asked.

His question, however, was drowned out by the sound the giant creature—the Conehead Bruiser—made as it collapsed.

The Bruiser’s HP bar dipped past 20 percent, turning red. Nearly all the skin on its upper body had been burned to shreds, and the flames from its burning fat stretched three to four meters high into the air. Yuuma began to worry that the lobby itself might catch on fire. Just then— A distorted alarm suddenly began blaring. Several jets of high-pressured water appeared from the ceiling, hosing down the creature with pinpoint accuracy. The building’s fire system had kicked in and activated the sprinkler system.

Yuuma froze. He hadn’t been expecting that. His vision was soon obscured by billowing white smoke. The flames quickly began to shrink, hidden by the smoke. The Bruiser’s HP bar, however, remained clearly visible. About one-tenth of its hit points still remained.

Now what? Do we whittle it down with physical attacks? Or should we find more alcohol and light it on fire again once the sprinklers stop?

Yuuma hesitated. It was only for a second or two.

But long enough to be fatal.

“GWWRAARR!”

With an angry roar, a massive hand shot out from the smoke, grabbing Yuuma around the chest in its iron grip.

“Yu!!”

“Yuummy!!”

He heard Sawa and Kenk shout from somewhere behind him. He twisted around as far as he could and reached out desperately. Their fingertips nearly touched, they were just centimeters away, when— Yuuma was swung upward with so much sudden force that the blood drained from his head.

“GWARRRR!”

With a triumphant roar, the Bruiser, which had now gotten back to its feet, lifted Yuuma like a trophy. The fire had already gone out, but the sprinklers continued to spray. Pressurized jets pummeled Yuuma’s head and shoulders.

“Aghh!”

An instinctive scream escaped his lips. But the real danger wasn’t from above—it was from below.

“GWRAA...”

The charred Bruiser opened its mouth, which was located at the base of its pointed head. At first the opening seemed too small. It was only twenty centimeters wide. But with a series of disgusting pops and ratcheting noises, the mouth grew larger, soon stretching to three times its size.

This can’t be happening.

A shudder ran down Yuuma’s spine. A moment later, the monster let go.

Yuuma’s bottom half disappeared inside the creature’s mouth, which gaped open like a bottomless pit. A row of misshapen teeth, each as large as a child’s fist, began to close shut around Yuuma like a guillotine— *K-klang!*

With a metallic sound, the creature’s teeth stopped just moments before they would have gnawed Yuuma in half. Yuuma had moved almost entirely by instinct, wedging the steel bar he was carrying in between the creature’s upper and lower jaws.

“GWAARR!”

The creature screamed in rage. Yuuma’s body vibrated with the force of its roar. Sparks appeared in intervals as the creature’s teeth scraped against the steel.

Yuuma stared on in shock as the five-centimeter-wide, six-millimeter-thick bar of steel began to buckle in the middle.

“Yu, hurry! Run!!” Kenk shouted.

But Yuuma had already been pushing on the outside of the Bruiser’s jaws with both hands, desperately trying to work his lower half free. It was no good. His legs were trapped in the creature’s blubbery, undulating flesh. He couldn’t get free.

As Yuuma struggled, the steel bar continued to bend. Before long, the edges of the creature’s teeth were in contact with Yuuma’s stomach and back.

“Agh...!”

Yuuma’s stomach twisted in knots from pure terror. He clutched desperately at the creature’s mouth, trying to pry its jaws open. But even pushing with all his strength, Yuuma just continued to sink farther down, centimeter by terrifying centimeter. The steel bar buckled between the creature’s viselike teeth.

“Yu!”

“Yuummy, don’t give up!!”

Yuuma could hear a dull thudding. Kenk and Sawa were beating on the creature’s leg. The Bruiser, however, barely seemed to notice. It remained stubbornly focused on biting through the steel bar in its teeth.

Yuuma started registering the pain in his midsection.

Less than fifteen centimeters were now separating the creature’s top and bottom teeth. Another ten seconds and the creature would break through his skin. Another twenty and it would split him in two.

In the virtual world, even after the most gruesome death, avatars would just disappear in a flash of particle effects as the user respawned immediately at the last hub or waypoint.

But this was the real world. Once Yuuma’s guts were torn out and scattered across the floor, there would be no coming back. Just like the adults whose bodies now littered the lobby floor. Or like Yukihiisa Miura, whose life had come

to an end in the playroom upstairs.

“Ah...! Ahhhh...!”

Yuuma began screaming, overcome by fear.

The HP bar above Yuuma’s head began to shrink. He could feel the muscles in his stomach and back being crushed, his internal organs being compressed.

“Ah...! Ah...! Ahhhhhh...!!”

His own screams sounded like they belonged to someone else. There was a sharp cinching noise as the steel bar bent.

And then all went black.

Whoosh.

Whoo.....oosh.

Each time the strange sound reached Yuuma's ears, he felt his legs become immersed in lukewarm water.

He seemed to be lying on top of damp sand. The wind caressing his cheeks carried a familiar scent. It was...

The tide.

Yuuma opened his eyes.

Was it...dusk? The sky was red. No, Yuuma realized immediately, something was different. The sky that stretched out above him, filling his entire field of vision, was drenched in an unnaturally vivid shade of crimson red. There was no gradation in the color. A sunset could never look like that.

Yuuma sat up slowly and glanced around.

White sand dunes stretched out to his left and his right, as far as the eye could see. Before him stretched an endless plane of water—the ocean. Waves lapped at the shore, continuously washing over Yuuma's bare feet. Glancing down at his own body, Yuuma realized he was entirely naked. Yet for some reason, he didn't seem to care.

He lifted his head once more.

Shooting stars—meteorites—raced across the crimson sky, emitting a sound like distant thunder as they fell in an arc before disappearing beyond the horizon. Squinting, Yuuma could see great plumes of smoke rising into the sky from that direction.

“The stars...are falling...,” he whispered.

“They are,” someone said from beside him.

Glancing over, Yuuma saw another boy where earlier there had been no one.

He had the same build as Yuuma and the same haircut. And just like Yuuma, he wasn't wearing any clothing. That was all Yuuma could see. The boy's slim, naked body was semitransparent, and his outline shimmered like summer haze. Yuuma couldn't make out the boy's face clearly.

The boy didn't remind Yuuma of anyone that he knew, and he certainly didn't recognize his voice. Yet for some reason, Yuuma wasn't too worried about who he might be. He turned his attention back to the horizon.

“There's so many of them... Is it all right that so many stars are falling...?”

“Does it look all right?” the boy said, his mouth twisting up into a sardonic grin. “That meteor storm is what was responsible for what your people call the P-T Boundary...the massive extinction event that occurred at the end of the Permian Period. Soon the earth's very crust will split, and the mantle will explode into massive volcanic eruptions that will reach all the way up to space. Once that happens, ninety-five percent of the life on this planet will cease to exist.”

“That's terrible... We have to do something...!”

Yuuma started to stand, but the boy just laughed delightedly.

“Ha-ha-ha... Sorry to break it to you, but there's nothing you can do about it. At this point, it would take an angel or a demon to put a stop to that. And besides...everything you're seeing now happened two hundred and fifty million years ago. In fact, if it weren't for this massive extinction event, your people—modern-day humans—would have never even been born...Yuuma.”

At the sound of his name, Yuuma sat back down in the wet sand and turned

to stare at the boy's face again.

“Who...are you...?”



“Does it matter? And more importantly, is that really what you should be worried about at this moment?” said the boy, another sarcastic smile appearing on his imperceptible face. “You’re dying.”

“ ... ”

Yuuma finally remembered.

His lower body was being chewed in half by the Conehead Bruiser—no, was about to be chewed in half. He reached down with his right hand and stroked his naked belly, but there was no wound and no pain.

“Am I...dead? Is this the afterlife...?”

The boy shrugged. “I just told you: You’re dying. There’s still a thread of life holding you up... It’s about to be severed, but it’s still intact.”

“But...there’s no way I’ll get out of a situation like that...”

“When you go back, fix the angle of the steel bar. And then use your Monster Tamer powers. Do both at the same time.”

Yuuma stared hard into the boy’s face. It shimmered like an illusion. Yuuma couldn’t read the boy’s expression, but he knew that he wasn’t smiling anymore.

“How do you know all this...?”

“Does it matter? Do you want to survive, or don’t you?”

“Of course I want to survive... But how can I do two things at once...? And what do you mean by Monster Tamer powers? Are you saying—?”

“Is this the time for hesitation? That huge creature is going to kill your friend and your sister after it’s done with you.”

“ ... ”

The boy was right. Yuuma knew Sawa and Kenk probably wouldn’t run away once Yuuma was dead—they wouldn’t be able to. They wouldn’t be thinking straight. Instead they would attack the creature in a rage, and it would retaliate with deadly force.

“Okay... No more thinking.” Yuuma nodded.

The boy stretched out his left hand and patted Yuuma lightly on the back.

“Don’t hesitate, Yuuma. I staked everything on you. Now get ready to wake up in three...two...one...*zero*.”

The pain was blinding.

But he was still alive.

Without a moment's hesitation, Yuuma reached down, grabbed the steel bar just past where it had been bent, and turned with all his strength. The bar wedged into the giant creature's teeth again with a *clang* just moments before Yuuma would have been torn in two. Sparks flew through the air.

But the angle wasn't strong enough. It would take only seconds before the bar came loose again. No sooner had Yuuma had that thought than...

The world turned a light shade of blue, and everything stopped.

The Conehead Bruiser. Sawa and Kenk, beating at the creature's legs below. Even the water shooting out of the sprinklers on the ceiling. It had all frozen.

The only thing that moved now was Yuuma. He reached into his left pocket and pulled out the card tucked inside. He thrust it into the air and screamed: "*Aperta!!*"

Magic circles convened, black light welled up, and from inside the light —*fwoomp!* A human figure appeared.

A faceless young girl dressed in the Yukiwana Elementary School uniform.
Sumika Watamaki.

Time started up again.

The metal bar that Yuuma had wedged back in between the Bruiser's teeth popped free with a painful screech.

It was too late now, Yuuma knew. He was about to be chomped in half. Just then— Two hands shot forward at incredible speed and latched on to the creature's teeth, one hand on the top row and one hand on the bottom, preventing them from closing.

Without being given any orders, Yuuma's summoned familiar, Sumika, had leaped onto the creature's shoulder and was now holding its jaws apart.

"GWA! GWARR!"

The creature screamed in rage. Yuuma could hear its jaw creak and groan. He had no way of judging just how strong the monster's bite was, but considering how easily it had bent that piece of steel, it was significantly stronger than a tiger or an alligator's jaws, at the very least.

And yet Sumika's slender arms had stopped it in its tracks—no, not just stopped. With each creak and groan, the creature's jaws opened another millimeter.

Yuuma had been on the brink of evisceration. Finally, the pressure on his midsection began to relax, and he was able to inhale again with a great noisy gasp.

As if waiting for that moment, Sumika opened her mouth wide—a slit stretching from ear to ear—and shrieked.

"AUGHHHHH!!"

There was a *crunch*. Yuuma could see the bones on the back of Sumika's hands jutting out from under her skin. She lowered her body for leverage, flexed both shoulders, and pried the creature's mouth open with all her strength.

A sickening sound of ripping flesh and tendons, cartilage splintering—and the Conehead Bruiser's top and bottom jaws split open by nearly an entire meter.

"GWAARWRWRW!"

With a powerful scream—perhaps rage or perhaps fear—the Bruiser suddenly froze in an unnatural position. Its HP bar, which still floated over the monster’s head, had one-tenth remaining. The remainder lingered and then vanished. A moment later, the ashen-skinned creature exploded into countless gloomy particles.

Yuuma was suddenly left floundering in midair. Someone caught him before he could hit the ground, but he was too focused on the fragments of the Bruiser to realize that it had been Kenk.

The slimy, semitransparent fragments created a vortex, whirling together like a cloud of flies before floating upward. A black ring about thirty centimeters wide hovered above the cloud. The fragments were being pulled into the ring with incredible momentum.

Yuuma thought he could see some sort of emblem or crest inside the ring, but before he could look any closer, the last of the fragments had already been sucked inside, and the ring, too, disappeared.

The sprinkler system had already shut off at some point. The spacious lobby descended into a dead silence, belying the battle that had raged moments earlier.

The silence was broken by the splash of wet feet walking toward them.

Yuuma turned his attention away from the ceiling. A human figure approached.

“Watamaki...”

“Sumika...”

Kenk was still holding Yuuma. Sawa stood next to them. The twins whispered Sumika’s name at the same time, their voices hoarse.

Sumika Watamaki was now one of Yuuma’s familiars, and she had just saved him from being eaten by the Conehead Bruiser, so Yuuma doubted she saw them as enemies. However, she had also just slaughtered the monster of her own volition, without waiting for orders. Even now, she seemed to be moving of her own accord.

Yuuma hesitated. Should he issue the Stop command before she could get any closer?

Sumika's hand, however, shot forward before Yuuma could speak. It moved at lightning speed, gripping him by the throat.

"Yuummy!" Sawa cried in a choked voice, but Yuuma held his hand up to let her know it was okay. Sumika's arms had enough strength to tear the Conehead Bruiser's jaw from its socket. By contrast, she was barely even touching him now.

Sumika moved her hand slowly from Yuuma's neck to his left cheek, her empty face drawing closer— "Aaaa...", she groaned.

Her mouth, with its row of countless fangs, twitched awkwardly.

"Ashi...ha...ra....."

"...!"

Yuuma's eyes widened.

Sumika Watamaki was no longer human, inside or out. Her status window, which listed her race as Night Fiend, had made that much clear. She had already brutally murdered Yukihiisa Miura by the time Yuuma had captured her; she'd even tried to kill Yuuma and Kenk as well. Yuuma couldn't let himself forget that.

But the real Sumika also lay buried somewhere inside. Which meant there still had to be some way to turn her back. Yuuma was now surer of that than ever. He reached up with his left hand and placed it over Sumika's right, which remained pressed against his cheek.

"Thank you, Watamaki...", he whispered before chanting the word of power to send her back to her monster card: "*Clause!*"

A magic circle appeared, floating upward and swallowing Sumika feet first. It contracted once it had reached her head, and a small card appeared in a sudden burst of light.

"You can put me down now, Kenk," Yuuma said, grabbing the card with his left hand.

“But your stomach and back are bleeding... Are you sure your insides are all right?”

“Ugh, don’t mention my insides.” Yuuma grimaced.

Glancing down at his own body, he could see that the front of his shirt was now horribly shredded and stained with blood. His back throbbed painfully as well. His HP bar, however, was still at 70 percent and showed no signs of depleting further, so his internal organs must have been okay.

“I’m fine. The bleeding has stopped. It looks like upgrading our classes didn’t just give us more strength, but more durability as well.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right... My left arm doesn’t hurt anymore, neither,” Kenk said, finally setting Yuuma down.

Back on his own two feet again, Yuuma glanced around the lobby.

Puddles had formed in the divots left all over the floor from the Conehead Bruiser’s onslaught, but no new monsters seemed to have shown up. The danger was over—for now.

A familiar fanfare played, and a purple message window suddenly appeared in the center of Yuuma’s vision.

Yuuma Ashihara

Level 7 → 8

+3 stat points

+40 skill points

Item: Bruising Hammer x1

Item: Gray Leather Gloves x1

Item: Lesser Healing Potion x3

Yuuma had seen this window before. It had appeared in *Actual Magic* many times as they progressed from level 1 to level 7.

Although the insubstantial game window had seemed natural enough when it appeared in the world of *AM*, here in the real world it was far too surreal. Yuuma stared at it in open-mouthed disbelief. Once again, he was coming face-

to-face with the fact that this was both reality and a game, as hard as that was to understand.

Kenk's voice finally shook him back to his senses.

"All right! I gained a level!"

Kenk faced his own message box, which only he could see, and struck a victory pose. Yuuma stared at his friend for a moment before they both made eye contact and suddenly broke out into grins. This casual interaction they'd shared countless times ever since they were little helped to slightly calm Yuuma's nerves.

"Did you get experience, too?" he managed to ask Kenk in his usual voice.

"Wait, you mean you also went up a level? I guess that must mean there's EXP splitting..."

"It probably works the same way as it does in *AM*," Sawa interjected. "As long as a player scores at least one point of damage against an enemy, they get an equal share of the experience, and party members also get experience even if they didn't do any damage. There was also a party bonus in the game."

"Oh, that makes sense. Too bad we didn't form a party, then, before fighting that thing. Er...speaking of which. Can we even form parties here?" Kenk asked.

Yuuma glanced at his own HP bar.

Actual Magic wasn't for casuals, so there were no free heals after leveling up. Yuuma's HP and MP still weren't full. But it did seem as if the game system was still functioning in the real world.

"Probably... Item drops also showed up, along with the level-up box. But there were no objects... The actual items didn't appear. Which means they must've gone into my inventory, just like they would in *AM*. If we can use our inventories, then we can probably use all the other game features as well."

"Did you say item drops?!" shouted Kenk, interrupting Yuuma's thought-out conjecture. He sounded excited. "What did you get?! That pinhead seemed pretty high level... It must've dropped some killer loot!"

This hardly seemed like the time for that, but Yuuma raised his right hand into

the air and brought his fingers together. This felt like another step along the path of no return. But if they were going to survive whatever was happening, find Nagi, and return Sumika to her former self, this was the only way. Resolved, Yuuma spread his fingers, making the pinch-out gesture.

The menu screen opened with a chime that was slightly more distorted than it had originally sounded in the game. Yuuma navigated to his Inventory tab using his blood-and soot-stained fingers.

At the end of the three-hour playtest, Yuuma's inventory had been packed full of item drops and consumables bought from curio shops. Those should have all been lost when they were logged out, so Yuuma didn't expect to see anything on his inventory list other than the equipment and potions that the Conehead Bruiser had dropped a moment earlier. Surprisingly, two items that he had acquired in *AM* were still present.

The first was the Playtest Certification of Completion—the card that had dropped from the sky after defeating the dragon boss of the dungeon. It showed their clear time. The second item was listed as **Monster Card: Squeak**. Yuuma gasped when he saw it.

All the other weapons and equipment he had gathered during the playtest had vanished, just like he had been told they would during orientation. Why was Squeak's card still there? Maybe captured monsters were treated as party members instead of items. That would give Monster Tamers a significant advantage when the game started up for real.

But game balance didn't really matter now. He was just glad Squeak's card hadn't been destroyed. Still smiling, he removed two of the potions from his inventory, causing them to materialize in midair.

"Aw, man...! Those are just lesser pots...," said Kenk. The disappointment on his face was obvious.

Lesser pots were how players referred to lesser healing potions. Yuuma offered Kenk one of the small bottles, which were filled with a pale yellow liquid.

"Don't underestimate how important healing potions are now, Kenk. Injuries don't heal in the real world just by slapping bandages and ointments on them.

Potions work like magic: They heal you the instant you drink them.”

“But we don’t even know if they’ll work until we try drinking them. For all we know, this might just be lemon soda...”

“I thought you liked lemon soda.”

Yuuma then shoved one bottle into Kenk’s hand and passed the other bottle to Sawa.

Sawa simply said, “Thank you,” apparently already grasping how precious potions were under these circumstances.

Yuuma suddenly realized Sawa didn’t have any pockets or pouches on her new costume in which to store things like potions. Sawa just opened her inventory and placed the potion there instead, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The potion disappeared in a puff of light, just as it would have in *AM*.

Placing the potion in inventory eliminated any danger of dropping or breaking it, but in combat, when every second counted, the time it took to open the menu and materialize a potion could spell the difference between life or death. They would need to find Sawa some other clothing, and a pack, as soon as possible— Speaking of which.

“Sawa, what happened to the bags we brought with us from school?”

“We left them on the bus, remember? They said there’ll be lockers when Althea opens for real, but they weren’t ready in time for the playtest.”

“Oh yeah...”

Yuuma nodded and gazed outside.

The ten-meter-tall plate glass windows remained as pitch black as before. Still, the parking lot had to be waiting outside, as well as the bus that had brought them—forty-one sixth-grade students and two teacher chaperones—all here. Since the elevators weren’t working, the automatic doors at the entrance probably wouldn’t work, either. But surely even a child could break down a glass door. If they could just get to the parking lot and retrieve their bags, then they could carry around potions and other items without needing to

materialize them from their inventory. Plus, there were snacks and water in their bags.

Yuuma nearly smacked himself in the forehead. What was he thinking?!

Once they made it outside, there would be no need to grab their bags and come back in; surely their QRESTS would go back online, and then they'd be able to call police or firefighters or whoever else for help. The adults would figure out what was going on. They'd be able to find a way to locate Nagi and turn Sumika back to normal. Wouldn't they...?

"...Let's head outside," Yuuma whispered.

Kenk was still staring at his lesser healing potion. He glanced up. "Huh...? But how will we get through the automatic doors?"

"The doors and the walls are all glass. Even we should be able to break through them. Here, Kenk, you can try using this."

Yuuma's inventory was still open. He ran his finger along the list of items. There it was, right at the top: the Bruising Hammer. He tapped it and then selected REMOVE from the submenu that popped up next.

An item appeared in the window. It looked just like Yuuma had expected.

The hammer was massive. The shaft was nearly a meter long and was fitted with a metal head. The head of the hammer was long and conical, one end rounded and blunt, the other pointed—in other words, its design closely resembled the head of the Conehead Bruiser that had dropped it.

"You didn't tell me it dropped a weapon, too!" shouted Kenk, momentarily overjoyed. When he caught sight of the floating hammer, however, his face fell. "Ugh, it's a two-handed hammer... Even worse, it looks like that pinhead thing from before."

"Well, it makes sense that a coneheaded monster would drop a coneheaded weapon," said Yuuma, reaching out to lift the hammer from his inventory window.

The weapon, however, was even heavier than it looked. Yuuma struggled to lift it even using two hands. The Overloaded icon instantly appeared

underneath his HP bar.

“H-hurry up... Take it!” he urged, barely managing to keep his balance as he held the weapon toward Kenk.

“Just a sec,” said Kenk, opening his own inventory and placing Durendal into storage. He reached out and gripped the handle of the hammer firmly with both hands. Yuuma let go carefully, but Kenk was able to keep his balance.

“Think you can use it?” Yuuma asked.

“Y-yeah. It weighs a ton, but I think I can manage.”

“It’d be easier if you hadn’t dumped all your skill points into Two-Handed Sword Mastery. Why don’t you take some of those points you just got and put them into hammers?”

“No way! I was planning to pick up some magic next, too, like you and Sawa!” Kenk protested, rejecting Yuuma’s earnest advice.

He adjusted his grip on the hammer and stepped forward, striking a stance. Even without points in hammer mastery, the move looked natural enough. He was a Warrior, after all.

“What do you think? Can you break the glass with that?” Yuuma asked him.

“Yeah, probably. It’s sure heavy enough, at least. But...”

Kenk trailed off, gesturing toward the shopping area with a flick of his now disheveled bangs. Yuuma followed his gaze. The screaming had died down by this point, but they could still hear faint sniffing coming from behind the makeshift barrier that blocked the entrance. It sounded like there were girls back there, crying.

“...Shouldn’t we first let them know that we defeated the monster?”

“Hmm...” Yuuma furrowed his brows in thought.

Obviously Kenk had a point. But defeating the Conehead Bruiser still hadn’t solved all their problems. Yuuma couldn’t help feeling that the best way to calm down their stressed-out classmates at the moment would be to secure a way out of this mess.

Yuuma glanced toward Sawa for her opinion. She nodded wordlessly; Yuuma took that to mean that she agreed. He then turned back toward Kenk.

“No, I think we should create an exit first. Everyone will probably rest easier knowing there’s a way out.”

“Yeah... You’re probably right.”

Kenk nodded emphatically and adjusted his grip on the pointed hammer. He began walking swiftly toward the main lobby entrance. Yuuma and Sawa followed.

The entrance foyer was shaped like a wide tunnel, which bisected the surrounding glass walls. There was a set of automatic doors in the middle of the wall at the other end. The walls on the inside of the foyer and the ceiling overhead were pitch black. When they had walked through there four hours and forty minutes earlier, their hearts dancing with anticipation, they had been surrounded by colorful dazzling lights, and exciting music had played from embedded loudspeakers. Now there was neither sound nor light, only the dim glow of the emergency lighting.

The tunnel was only a few meters in length, but it now felt eerily long. A row of three automatic doors waited at the end, blocking their exit. The doors were pitch black, just like the plate glass exterior walls, and did not respond even as Yuuma, Kenk, and Sawa drew near.

“This glass was clear when we got here, wasn’t it...? Why does it look so black?” said Kenk, cocking his head and leaning in to stare. His nose almost touched the glass.

It didn’t look as if the glass itself had changed color so much as if some kind of jet-black film had been applied to the outside. But if sunlight was still streaming onto the door, the glass should have felt warm. Yuuma tried touching it with his hands; the glass felt cool.

“Well, I’m sure it will make more sense once we break the glass. You’re up, Kenk. But be careful... Don’t hurt yourself on the broken glass.”

Yuuma took a step back, standing next to Sawa and leaving the rest to his friend. As usual, Sawa looked grim, but she didn’t try to stop Kenk from

breaking the glass.

“Here goes! Prepare to get roflstomped, door!”

Kenk lifted the hammer high in the air. Yuuma and Sawa had barely finished rolling their eyes when...

“Hyahh!!”

...he brought the blunt end crushing down against the glass of the automatic door with all his might.

Either Kenk was a natural or his character class was doing most of the work. Regardless, the strike was delivered perfectly. Even the toughest double-glazed security glass would be sure to crack under a blow that true. Yuuma was sure of it. Unfortunately...

...instead of the high-pitched sound of shattering glass he'd expected, a hollow warble like thumping a pile of thick rubber reverberated through the tunnel. The hammer bounced back immediately, flying from Kenk's hands and landing on the floor. Kenk, too, fell off his feet in a dramatic fashion, collapsing onto his rear.

“Yow!”

Yuuma rushed over toward him.

“Kenk, are you okay?!”

“Y-yeah... But what the heck happened? That didn't even feel like glass...” He flexed his stinging hands to check if they still worked.

Yuuma approached the automatic door again and peered at the spot where Kenk had struck the glass with his hammer. He tried looking at it from every angle, but he couldn't even find a scratch, let alone a crack.

“You've gotta be kidding me...,” Yuuma groaned.

Sawa was now standing next to him. She reached out and stroked the glass.

“It's probably protected by something like magic,” she said. “I doubt there's anything we can do at the moment to break it.”

“Magic...? What kind of magic...?”

“If you remember, back in *AM*, Nagi used support magic to buff our defenses. Try to imagine a more powerful version of that, cast on glass. Don’t you think it could do something like this?”

“Yeah, that makes sense...” Yuuma nodded.

He placed his own left hand against the glass and then tapped on it with his other hand. Even with the strongest glass, he would have expected to feel the vibrations. Tapping the glass of this door, however, was like tapping thick concrete—no, worse than that. It was like he wasn’t tapping it at all.

“The other glass... Not just the glass—all the walls and doors are probably the same...,” muttered Yuuma.

Sawa nodded silently. Kenk stood up and joined them.

“You mean we’re completely trapped in here? There’s no way for us to leave Althea...?” he groaned.

Kenk wasn’t moving. His voice sounded serious. Even in the gloomy tunnel, Yuuma knew his friend’s face had gone pale. Kenk was always the resilient and upbeat one, but one of his few shortcomings was how homesick he got. If he went on a trip without his family, it usually took about three days before he became noticeably down in the dumps.

But that was also one of the things that made Kenk so great—how much he appreciated his mother, who wasn’t in very good health. As far as Yuuma knew, Kenk had never once gotten an attitude with her. Kenk himself liked to say that his “rebellious period” would never come. He was probably taking being trapped in this strange and unpredictable situation, unable to contact his family, much harder than Yuuma could imagine.

Of course, realizing they were stuck came as a pretty big shock for Yuuma as well. Just moments earlier, he had been telling himself that once they got outside, the grown-ups would come to the rescue and all their problems would be solved.

Oddly enough, though, the shock hadn’t overwhelmed him. Maybe deep down, he’d already expected what was coming. With all the strange things that were going on, it had probably been too much to hope that just breaking a

window could make it all go away.

And besides—unlike Kenk, who was completely cut off from his family—Yuuma still had Sawa with him. She was his twin sister, almost like an extension of himself. The person he had shared an unspoken bond with, ever since birth. Yuuma had it easy compared to Kenk, so it was up to Yuuma to cheer his friend up.

Yuuma stepped away from the door and patted his friend on the back, adding a little extra oomph to his arm.

“If there’s a magic spell affecting the glass, then there must be a way to dispel it, too. Easy, right? And besides, even if we had broken the glass, it’s not like we were about to run away on our own, were we? We still have to find Nagi and turn Watamaki back to normal!”

At the mention of the two girls’ names, the color began to return to Kenk’s face. He blinked and nodded slightly several times before patting Yuuma on the back in return.

“Of course not! First things first: We go find Nagi and get our party back together again!” shouted Kenk. He scooped the hammer back up off the floor, gave the dark glass one last angry glare, and then spun around on his heel. “Okay then, what are we waiting for? Let’s head back and let the rest of them know it’s safe.”

“Okay... Let’s go,” Yuuma said, shaking off his own fleeting hesitation.

The reason they’d been attempting to break down the doors in the first place was so that they could let their classmates know there was already an escape route, but those plans had just crumbled. Instead, they were going to have to tell everyone that Althea had been sealed with a supernatural force, that they were all trapped inside, and that in order to get outside, they were going to need to either get to the bottom of why the glass wouldn’t break or find another way out.

Yuuma grabbed Kenk by the hoodie before he could walk away and opened his own menu once more.

“Hold on—before we do that, we should form a party, just the three of us.

That way we'll be able to see each other's HP, and if we do wind up in another fight, we'll all get the EXP bonus."

"Good thinking... Just wait until the next monster shows up. I'll introduce 'em to some pure physical damage!"

Yuuma grimaced. At least Kenk was feeling better. He navigated to the Party tab and tapped INVITE. He pointed the cursor toward Kenk and Sawa and clicked. That would send Kenk and Sawa a party invite message from Yuuma.

"Okay, got it!"

Kenk gestured with his right hand, and a sound effect played. His HP/MP bar appeared underneath Yuuma's own. Just like Yuuma, Kenk's real name, **Kenji Kondou**, was displayed. And underneath that—nothing. Where was Sawa's HP/MP bar? He glanced over at her, but her hand was still frozen in midair.

"What are you waiting for...?"

"... I'm doing it...!" she said.

She sounded aggravated for some reason. Sawa moved her finger, and this time her HP bar appeared along with the name **Sawa Ashihara**.

Sawa's HP was full, but like she had said earlier, her MP had recovered by only about 20 percent. Being a Mage meant her total MP would be pretty high, but that regen still seemed slow. Just then— A wave of digital static ran across Sawa's name. Letters of the alphabet appeared and disappeared at random, with no clear rhyme or reason—was Yuuma seeing things? The moment he tried to look closer, they were gone. The static and letters subsided as quickly as they had appeared, and his sister's name was displayed normally once more: **Sawa Ashihara**.

"Did you just see that...?"

Yuuma frantically glanced over at Sawa, but she appeared to be oblivious.

Sawa stared back at Yuuma with her usual placid expression. "See what?"

"...Never mind."

He switched from the Party tab to his Inventory tab and selected the other item the pinhead creature had dropped, the gray leather gloves, causing them

to materialize.

They were a sturdy pair of gray leather gloves, just as the name suggested. The thumbs and index fingers were cut out, probably to allow the wearer to use their UI menu.

“Hey, Kenk, these gloves dropped, too. Do you want them?”

“Gloves?!” Kenk swung his head around to take a closer look but then recoiled immediately. “Eww... They’re made out of that thing’s skin! Hard pass...”

“No, come on, they’re not skin...,” Yuuma started to protest, but now that Kenk had mentioned it, the texture did seem pretty similar. He no longer wanted to touch them, either. He forced himself to reach out and pluck them from the inventory window, reminding himself that it was for the increased defense.

“Fine, then I’ll equip them.”

“Be my guest!”

He tried offering them to Sawa as well, but she took one glance and said, “They’re all yours.” It looked like Yuuma was stuck with them.

He worked both hands into the ashen-colored gloves. They felt stiff at first, but after opening and closing his hands a few times, they quickly loosened up.

Now if he only had a sword. But there was no use wishing for what he didn’t have. The steel bar Yuuma had found in the playroom earlier had already been broken by the Bruiser, and Kenk’s weapon, Durendal, was too heavy for Yuuma. He would have to fight barehanded for now.

“Okay, then...let’s head to the shopping area,” Yuuma announced. He started back toward the lobby, but Sawa stopped him.

“Wait a second, Yu,” she said.

Yuuma’s right leg was already extended in mid-stride. He took a step backward.

“What is it?”

“That rubbing alcohol from before—where did you find it?”

“Oh, that... There’s a door to the back rooms past the counter. There was an infirmary there.”

“Of course. An infirmary...” Sawa nodded seriously. She was silent for several seconds, as if in thought, before speaking again. “Kenk, maybe *you* should go see the other students first.”

“Me? But what’ll you two do?”

Kenk had slung the hammer over his right shoulder. Sawa gestured toward herself.

“Look at what I’m wearing. And Yu’s shirt is covered in blood. We should check the infirmary to see if there’s anything else to wear.”

“Y-yeah, of course,” answered Kenk, his eyes suddenly darting around uncomfortably to avoid looking at her. Yuuma tried removing his jacket and offering it to Sawa again, but she stopped him with a hard glare.

“Okay, I’ll go ahead,” said Kenk. “But you guys better not take too long. I don’t know how I’m gonna explain all of this on my own.”

“Fine, just give us five minutes.”

Sawa nodded and began walking.

The three of them returned to the lobby, which was littered with the bodies of adults, and split up in front of the ticket counter. With Nagi still missing, Yuuma felt uneasy getting separated from Kenk and Sawa, but at least they could see each other’s hit points now that they were a party. Yuuma and Sawa watched Kenk walk back toward the shopping center, his hammer still slung over his shoulder, before heading toward the back room.

As they walked, Yuuma casually scanned the bodies on the ground, trying to see their clothes and identify their genders and ages. There was no sign of their teachers, Ms. Ebbers and Frankfurt, however.

Yuuma and Sawa climbed over the swinging door at the end of the ticket counter and opened the door to the staff room behind the counter. It was Yuuma’s second time entering the back rooms, but he kept his eyes peeled just

in case. They passed the office and break room before arriving at the infirmary.

As Yuuma was glancing around the dim space, he finally realized something.

“Uh, Sawa...? Why would there be clothes in the infirmary...?”

“That was just an excuse,” she said bluntly before making a beeline for the cabinet at the back of the room. “Hurry up.”

“Huh...?”

An excuse for what? Yuuma wanted to ask, but he bit his tongue and rushed after her.

Sawa swung the glass cabinet open without hesitation. Inside was packed full of small vials and boxes and other medical supplies. She reached in with her left hand and removed one of the items, checking the label before opening her menu with her right hand.

She switched to her Inventory tab and placed the vial of medicine inside.

“W-wait...!”

Yuuma expected the vial to slip through the window and land on the floor and break. After all, the vial was originally from the real world. It hadn’t been dropped by a monster like the other items.

However...

The vial disappeared in a puff of light as it was swallowed up by the purple menu window.

“How...?!”

Yuuma rushed forward in amazement, peering over Sawa’s shoulder at her inventory screen. Unlike Yuuma’s inventory, the only item in Sawa’s was the Playtest Certificate of Completion. A new entry appeared in the list: **Antibiotics (48)**.

“I guess that’s settled then. Physical items from the real world can be placed into inventory,” she murmured calmly.

Yuuma stared for a moment but then accepted what he had seen. He nodded. “Well, since we were able to materialize the weapon and potions, I guess the

reverse makes sense, too... But if all you wanted to do was try putting items into your inventory, why did we have to come all the way back here for that...?”

“This wasn’t just an experiment, you buttbrain. Open up your inventory, Yuuma. We should take everything here.”

Sawa began shoving every last item from inside the cabinet into her inventory. Yuuma wasn’t really sure what was going on, but he did as he was told and opened his own menu, taking the masks, bandages, gauze, and other items on the bottom shelf and converting them into entries on his item list.

In just a few seconds, the cabinets were bare, and their inventories were filled to about 30 percent capacity from medical items alone.

“Sawa, why are we—?”

“Questions can wait till later. Come with me!” Sawa raised her left hand to silence Yuuma while closing her menu screen with her right. She exited the infirmary and traveled a few steps back in the direction they had come, this time to the break room next door.

The infirmary wasn’t exactly small, but the break room was even bigger. Four stylish tables had been placed in the center. A counter and stools ran along the left wall, and there were vending machines with food, drinks, and snacks along the back wall. But no signs of people.

There should have been plenty of workers in the break room and other back rooms when everything happened. Where were they all...? Yuuma was about to ask the question out loud, but Sawa had already grabbed him by the hand and was rushing toward the back of the room. She seemed to have her sights set on the vending machines.

“Wait...are you hungry?”

As soon as Yuuma asked the question, he immediately became aware of his own empty stomach. He had eaten the lunch their mom had packed for him while still on the bus, but that had already been four and a half hours ago.

The vending machines were packed tightly with onigiri, packaged baked goods, and snacks. Unfortunately, the power was off.

Sawa pounded on the vending machine buttons several times, ignoring Yuuma's question, and then immediately strode away. Yuuma thought she had given up, when— “We'll have to break the glass.”

“Break the what...?!” Yuuma did a double take. Had Sawa lost her mind? “You can't do that! Just because things have gotten crazy, that doesn't mean we can —”

“That's *exactly* what it means.” Sawa spun around and fixed Yuuma with her red-tinted eyes. “Yuuma, don't freak out, but...there's a good chance we won't be getting out of here for a while.”

“A...while...?”

“Two days, three days, ten... Maybe even longer if things don't go our way.”

“What?!” Yuuma cried out in shock. He shook his head. “I—I know things look grim...but there's no way we'll be trapped in here for that long. Is there? People outside must have noticed by now that something isn't right. We weren't able to break the glass on our own, but they've got all kinds of tools and machines out there... Like what if they used a bulldozer?!”

“...”

Sawa was silent for a few moments. Eventually she averted her gaze and nodded weakly.

“Yeah... You're right. There's probably nothing to worry about. But there's still no way to know for sure. Think about it. There's all sorts of things happening right now that don't make any sense. The game logic of *Actual Magic* has overwritten the logic of the real world. What if whatever spell that is reinforcing the glass is one of *AM*'s strongest spells? Do you really think a bulldozer is going to be able to break through it?”

“One of its strongest...?”

This time it was Yuuma's turn to fall silent.

Yuuma and his friends had spent only three hours in *Actual Magic*, but the strongest spells in other RPGs they had ever played had always been cataclysmic in power. Firestorms that could sweep away entire armies of

monsters at once, massive boulders of ice that could crash through thick castle walls, and barriers of light that could block even an ancient dragon's fire breath.

It was impossible to compare the supernatural forces of games to the heavy machinery of the real world, but in a head-to-head battle, Yuuma had a feeling he knew which would win. Even the heaviest bulldozer would probably be powerless against magic of that level.

"You're probably right...", he whispered. "But listen," he continued, speaking louder. "Even if we are trapped here for a week, there has to be other food. The shopping area will have snacks and stuff for sale, too, and...what about upstairs? There's a huge restaurant on the top floor, remember? There must be other things to eat right now, without having to break the vending machines—"

"It's not to eat right now," said Sawa, cutting him off. She looked like she was close to losing her composure. "Safe shelter, food, water, and medicine. These are the most valuable things in Althea at the moment. By tomorrow...maybe even by tonight, food could already be growing scarce. People will probably split what they find at first, but once the truth starts to set in, there's going to be trouble. Especially considering that we've all got hiding places now that no one else can find—our own inventories."

It took Yuuma a moment to understand what his sister was saying.

He mulled over her words for several seconds, but something about them didn't sit right with him. He opened and closed his mouth several times before finally speaking.

"Are you really suggesting that we take all the food and medicine for ourselves? That we hoard it...?"

He was almost afraid to hear her answer.

"Of course not!" Sawa shouted, shaking her head back and forth and causing her purple-tinted hair to whip about her face. "It's not for just us; we can distribute it fairly. But we need to secure it before someone else hoards it first!"

"But...why now? Why not come back later with everyone?"

"What if it's too late by then?!" Sawa shouted, her voice growing strangled.

She bit her lip and took another deep breath. She glanced down at her own strangely dressed body and then quickly looked away.

“But you’re right... There’s another reason.”

“...?”

“Once things get bad and everyone is forced to negotiate, holding the food and medicine will give us the upper hand. Someone could always attack us for it... But even with that risk, it’s still more of an advantage to have the resources than not to.”

“...”

Yuuma stared at Sawa.

In that moment, for possibly the first time since he was born, Yuuma became keenly aware of the fact that his sister was a separate person and not, in fact, a part of him.

Of course, Yuuma and his sister had fought before. They had even once spent three days not speaking to each other. By the time they entered the fifth grade, they’d stopped taking baths together, and once they entered the sixth grade, their parents set up an accordion-style divider down the middle of their room. Despite all that, however, Sawa still felt like one half of his own self. It was like they shared the same train of thought. He always knew what she was thinking and feeling, and he believed she knew him, too.

But right now, he couldn’t understand what she was saying.

Negotiations? Upper hand? Risk? Advantage? When had Sawa ever used words like that in the real world? Who was this girl with her horns and wings...?

“Sawa...”

...is that really you? he was about to ask, but he bit his lip to stop himself from finishing the question.

If there was one thing that Yuuma knew for sure, it was that Sawa was trying to look out for them. For Yuuma, Kenk, Nagi...and even Sumika. He never doubted her intentions. Yuuma had spent most of his life avoiding using his brain too hard. If Sawa really believed that securing food and medicine was

what it would take to keep them safe, what right did he have to get all high-and-mighty with her?

“Fine...,” was all he said.

Sawa’s face had been strained. A look of relief momentarily washed across it, but then she tensed up again. She turned back toward the vending machines.

“We need to break the glass to get at what’s inside, but I don’t want bits of glass to get all over the food...”

Yuuma tilted his head slightly. “Will all that food even fit into our inventories in the first place? And if it is covered in glass, will it still be that way when we take it back out?”

“Ah...good point. Let’s try an experiment.”

Sawa quickly opened her menu. She grabbed one of the cylindrical caddies containing saltshakers and wet naps from the table. Using one of the wet naps, she moistened the outside of the container and then sprinkled salt on it. She then placed the salt-covered container over her Inventory tab.

“Ah...!”

Yuuma gasped as the cylindrical container disappeared in a puff of light and a shower of salt crystals fell through the menu window and scattered onto the floor. Apparently, the game system hadn’t recognized the small salt crystals as items.

“Yes!”

Sawa snapped her fingers and let out a small cry of success. She turned toward Yuuma with a triumphant smile.

“That means that any bits of glass stuck to the baked goods should probably disappear as well. Plus, there’s even better news.”

Sawa was smiling like her old self again. Yuuma couldn’t stop his own lips from curling into a grin.

“What do you mean, better news?”

“You mean you haven’t figured it out yet? You’re so slow! Here, take off your

jacket. And your shirt and undershirt as well.”

“...?”

Yuuma wasn’t sure where this was going, but he removed the monster card from his pocket and then took off his jacket and his shirt. He was wearing a tank top underneath, but he was hesitant to remove it because it was now stuck to the wounds on his stomach and back. Sawa ripped it off him impatiently, showing no mercy.

“Ow...”

She ignored the look on his face and instead focused on the state of his wounds.

“It looks like they’re closing up, but we should disinfect them just to be safe.”

“They’re fine.”

“No, they’re not,” Sawa said bluntly.

She removed one of the bottles of disinfectant she had taken from the infirmary moments earlier and squirted some of the fluid onto the cuts on Yuuma’s stomach and back. Yuuma wasn’t ready for the pain and doubled over despite himself. It did seem to cause his HP bar to creep upward slightly, however.

Sawa nodded briefly, as if she’d expected that to happen, and then stuffed Yuuma’s clothes into her own inventory.

“Hey...”

As the clothing disappeared in a puff of light, some sort of blackish grit fell through the window and scattered over the floor. Yuuma finally understood what Sawa had meant. The black grit that Yuuma saw was the dirt and blood that had been stuck to his clothing.

Sawa tapped at her inventory, causing the jacket to immediately rematerialize. The jacket appeared spread out with both arms visible. All the bloodstains, the grime from crawling around the playroom floor, and the soot from when he had been grabbed by the Conehead Bruiser—even the water from the sprinklers, which hadn’t quite dried—were gone now. The same was

true for his shirt and tank top.

“Ta-da!”

“Oh, so *that’s* what you meant...” Yuuma took the items from her and pulled the tank top over his head. “Putting items through storage removes the dirt.”

“Exactly. I was worried hygiene might start to become a problem if we’re stuck in here for too long, but it looks like we won’t have to worry about doing laundry... I doubt we can stick a whole person in storage, though. We’ll still need to find a way to bathe.”

Sawa’s clothes, meanwhile, barely seemed dirty at all—if that bathing suit could even be called clothing. Kenk didn’t really count, but Yuuma didn’t want all the other boys in class to see his sister dressed like that, too.

“About your own clothes...”

“Later! First let’s get that food out of there.”

Tossing the saltshaker and wet tissues into her inventory, Sawa closed her menu and dragged a chair out from under the table. The seat and backrest were made of plastic, but the frame was metal and looked like it would work well enough to break the glass on a vending machine—unless the vending machine had also been reinforced with magic.

“Wait! Wait!” said Yuuma, hurriedly stopping her. “If you hit the glass with that, it’s gonna make a lot of noise.”

“What other choice do we have? It’s not like we’re gonna jimmy it open with a credit card instead.”

She sounded like some kind of burglar. Ignoring her comment, Yuuma squeezed his right hand, which was still stuffed into one of the ashen gray gloves, and waved it in front of her face.

“I can probably take care of it with this.”

Yuuma turned around and placed his fist against the glass. *Here goes nothing*, he thought. His stock as a big brother was starting to reach an all-time low, so it was about time he carried through with something. His idea was to push off with his foot in order to transmit his full weight into the glass and create a burst

of force.

“Yah...!”

Yuuma’s battle cry still needed work, but fortunately it was lost in the sound of shattering glass. Cracks spidered out in all directions, and the glass cascaded into shards and dust. Some of the fragments flew inward and landed on the items inside, but much less so than would have happened if they had hit the glass with a chair. And thanks to the defensive value of the gloves, which were made out of monster’s skin, Yuuma didn’t feel any pain at all.

“Nice job, Yuummy!” cried Sawa, pushing him toward the next machine. “I’ll grab these. You take care of the next one!”

Sawa reached through the broken glass window and began stuffing onigiri and sandwiches into her inventory.

“Roger that,” said Yuuma, clenching his fist once again.

After they had collected all the snacks and other food from both vending machines, Yuuma’s inventory was about 60 percent full. Maximum carry weight was based on STR and VIT, and could be further affected by the Carry skill, equipped items, or magical effects, meaning he could use the stat and skill points he had earned earlier from defeating the Conehead Bruiser to significantly increase his carry weight if he wanted. But those points were one of their only lifelines at the moment, and Yuuma wasn’t eager to squander them. They headed toward the last vending machine, figuring they could pass Kenk his share in secret once they’d filled him in later.

The first two vending machines were the glass-fronted type, with robot arms that retrieved the requested item. It was easy to break the glass and empty them out. The remaining vending machine was for drinks, however, and wasn’t so simple. The bottles and cans on display behind the clear front cover were just empty samples. They would need to wrench open the sturdier metal door behind the display in order to get at the items inside.

It was firmly locked. Yuuma gave it a shake before turning toward Sawa.

“We’d need a crowbar or something to get this one open... Guess we’ll just have to do with tap water.”

“I guess so... The emergency generator seems to be running, so the taps probably still work.” She began to nod but then suddenly shook her head. “No, we can’t carry water without containers. We’re going to need bottled drinks, after all. Move out of the way... I’ll just use magic.”

“You’ll what...?”

Yuuma’s eyes widened. Sawa had him take a step back. She held her left hand over the keyhole located on the front-right side of the vending machine and immediately began chanting a spell.

“Ferrum!”

That was the element. A gray light appeared at her fingertip.

“Clavis!”

Next was the form. The light extended into a long, narrow shape, like a key, with multiple indents and protrusions.

She was casting Lockpick, a utility spell that Yuuma had also learned. More difficult locks required a higher level of skill. Yuuma wasn’t sure if locks in the game and locks in the real world were comparable, but vending machines used anti-theft dimple key locks, which were supposedly pretty difficult to pick. Yuuma guessed it would take a pretty high skill level to open one.

Yuuma watched on nervously as Sawa inserted the magic key into the lock.

“Aperta!”

Sawa chanted the activation word. There was a small series of metallic *clinks*, followed by a heavy *clunk*, and the lock opened with a crisp, satisfying sound.

“Wow, nice job... How many points did you put into utility magic?” asked Yuuma, impressed.

Sawa just opened the front panel of the vending machine, as if she didn’t want to waste any time answering questions. The machine must have had a backup battery, as fortunately the control board still had power. Sawa pressed the buttons inside, causing all the machine’s bottles of mineral water and sports drinks to come tumbling out.

By the time they had divvied up the twenty-plus plastic bottles between them and sent them all to storage, Yuuma's inventory was already more than 90 percent full. A yellow warning symbol appeared beneath his HP bar. He could still move normally for now, but if he surpassed 100 percent, the Overloaded icon would appear and he would only be able to trudge around slowly, like he had while holding the pointed hammer.

Sawa's HP bar was visible underneath Yuuma's, but there was no similar warning symbol beneath her bar. Strange. Since she was a Mage, her carrying capacity should have been much lower than his carrying capacity as a Monster Tamer. But Sawa had already slammed the vending machine shut and closed her menu, so Yuuma never got the chance to ask her about it.

"There. That should take care of food, water, and medicine for a while. Thanks for your help, Yu."

"Of course. But how did—?"

"There's one more thing I still need. Come help me look," she said, cutting him off and hurrying out of the room.

Yuuma assumed she would head toward the office next, on their left, but instead she turned right, venturing farther down the hallway. They passed the infirmary, entering an area where not even Yuuma had been before.

If anything was hiding out along the gloomy hallway, which was lit only by sparse emergency lighting, it would be hard to spot. Yuuma doubted they would come across another monster, but they still didn't know what had actually caused the Conehead Bruiser to show up in the real world and wreak havoc on the lobby. They had to be prepared for the possibility that the same thing could happen again.

"Hey Sawa... If we're gonna explore further, shouldn't we try to find a weapon first...?"

Sawa rejected his proposal out of hand. "Don't worry, this shouldn't take long to find... Here, this ought to do."

She stopped in front of a door. The sign on it read, **WOMEN'S LOCKER ROOM.**

"..."

There were similarly named rooms near the gym and pool at school, but any boy who accidentally—or intentionally—lingered too near those doors was sure to find himself targeted by the piercing gaze of every single girl in the vicinity. Not even *Actual Magic* had freeze spells that powerful. Every fiber in Yuuma's body was currently broadcasting the message that he did not want to go in there. Unfortunately, Sawa didn't seem to care. She just turned the knob and shoved Yuuma inside.

The room was lined with rows of gray lockers and was currently empty of people. A faintly sweet aroma hung in the air, making Yuuma even more uncomfortable than before.

"What are you looking for...?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"For clothes, of course, you idiot," Sawa replied immediately. She sounded exasperated.

"See... I *knew* you were uncomfortable in that thing..."

"Just help me look. Tell me if you find anything in the lockers you think I can use. Something to cover up the wings on my back."

"Sure..." Yuuma nodded and attempted to open the nearest locker, but the handle resisted his fingers with a stiff clank.

"It's locked."

"Of course it's locked. It'll take too much MP to open every single locker with magic. We'll just have to force them," said Sawa, hooking her fingers into one of the locker handles and yanking backward. The door bent, and the metal latch gave way with a *snap*.

"See? Piece of cake," she bragged, checking inside.

Upon realizing that there was nothing inside that she could use, Sawa immediately moved on to the next locker. Yuuma stared at her, dumbstruck.

Piece of cake? This from the same girl who once brought a penny she found on the street to the police station, so that they could find the real owner?

Yuuma shook his head and tried not to focus on such thoughts. There was no time to waste right now. He began searching the next row over, telling himself

that there was nothing wrong with riffling through other people's things under these circumstances. After all, an RPG was currently taking over reality.

Most of the items hanging in the lockers were things like blazers and cardigans, the kind of fashion you'd expect to see women wearing on their way to and from work. In the fifth locker, however, he finally found a piece of clothing that looked like something Sawa could use: a black hooded windbreaker with magenta stripes. Yuuma grabbed it, hanger and all, and rushed back to Sawa's side.

"How about this?"

Sawa took the windbreaker from him. She removed it from the hanger and held it up to her body, nodding.

"Nice. It's pretty big, but that works out better."

Sawa quickly slipped it over her shoulders and zipped it up. It did a good job of hiding the wings on her back. The hem also reached halfway down her thighs, so at a glance, you would never know she was wearing only a bathing suit underneath.

"It's perfect. But that still leaves these. Maybe you could hide them with the hood..." said Yuuma, reaching out casually toward Sawa's head and lightly touching the short horns that grew there— "Ngh...!" Sawa flinched, a small grunt escaping her lips.

"Wait... You can feel that?"

"Don't touch them like that. I mean, I can feel them like in the same way as you can feel your hair. But it's a new sensation. You surprised me."

"I guess that makes sense..." Yuuma peered closer at her head.

The twins were almost exactly the same height, so it was hard to see the top of her head without standing on his toes, but it almost looked as if the horned headband she always liked to wear had fused directly with her head. These horns were larger and consisted of three bumps in a row, with the largest on the outside and the smallest on the inside. The largest bump was about three centimeters long.

“Ugh... Would you please stop staring? It’s fine, okay? Now let’s hurry back,” said Sawa, turning to leave. Yuuma grabbed her by the shoulder before she could go.

“No, it’s *not* fine,” he said. It came out much harsher than he had expected, but he continued speaking anyway. “We don’t actually know if we should be worried about your horns and wings yet, do we? The only thing that happened to me and Kenk is that our QRESTs grew bigger. Why did you grow horns and not us? It doesn’t make sense. What if it’s a sign of something worse?”

Sawa stared into Yuuma’s face for several moments with her dusk-colored eyes before sighing softly.

“Yuuma, come here.”

Removing her shoulder from Yuuma’s grasp, Sawa took Yuuma by the hand and led him deeper into the locker room. A simple bench had been placed there, across from a large full-length dressing mirror affixed to the wall.

Sawa ushered him in front of the mirror. They were too far away from the emergency lights to see anything but dim shadows of themselves in the mirror. Sawa, however, raised her hands and pressed a switch of some sort. A bright light appeared in her hands with a *click*. She was holding a small LED flashlight.

“Where did you get that from...?”

“It was in one of the lockers. Now look closely.”

“Look closely at what...?”

Yuuma turned his eyes back to the mirror. His own reflection stood waiting.

He was neither large nor small for a sixth-grade boy. His hair was slightly longer than average for his class, but he hadn’t grown it out for style’s sake. He simply couldn’t be bothered going to the barber— “Huh...?”

Yuuma gasped slightly and pressed his face closer to the mirror.

No, he wasn’t just imagining things. His hair, lit by the LED flashlight, shimmered with a faint blue tinge. It was a metallic sheen, similar to the purple tint now affecting Sawa’s hair.

Yuuma reached up in surprise and began tussling his hair roughly, but none of

the color came off on his fingers. It wasn't dyed or stained. The color of the hair itself had changed.

"It's not just me, Yuuma... It may not be as noticeable, but you've changed, too," Sawa said, flicking off the light. "The same is probably true for Kenk and the rest of our class. For everyone who was inside the Calculus capsules when this all happened..."

"Everyone...?" Yuuma repeated, reaching for his scalp once more.

This time he wasn't searching his hair but the skin underneath. He felt around carefully, but nothing seemed to have changed.

Wait...

There, toward the front, on the right side of his scalp, underneath the skin, he could feel a slight bump.

It was about a centimeter in diameter and maybe five millimeters tall. He didn't feel any pain when he pressed it, but there was an odd sensation, as if some nerve had linked the protrusion to a place deeper inside his brain. Hurriedly running his hand over to the left side of his head, he found a similar bump in the same position on the opposite side.

It was clearly more than just a bump on the skull. It felt more like some kind of bud... If left to grow, it would probably become a pointed horn, just like Sawa's.

Yes, grow. What if the changes weren't over yet? What if their hair and eyes kept changing color, they grew horns and spouted wings...and then what? Was that all? Or were there even more changes coming?

Yuuma lowered his hand and fingered the card resting inside his pocket.

"Maybe this is what happened to Watamaki...", he murmured. "What if the changes keep going, and we wind up just like her...?"

Sumika had turned into a monster, but she didn't have horns or wings. Instead, her eyes and nose had disappeared, and she had gained enormous strength and a gaping mouth full of razor-sharp fangs. At first glance, it didn't seem to be the same kind of transformation as what Yuuma and Sawa were

experiencing, but for all they knew, Sumika might just represent the final form of whatever was happening to them.

One other thing was bothering Yuuma as well.

Sawa appeared to be much farther along in her transformation than Yuuma was. So why did she seem so calm about everything?

When Sawa came to his rescue against Sumika by casting Flame Arrow, her transformation was already at the same stage as it was now. But Sawa had only just escaped from her Calculus capsule, hadn't she? Why didn't she show any signs of being surprised or upset over the changes happening to her? How had she remained so calm, while Yuuma, despite being her twin, had been ready to freak out a moment ago over a couple of bumps on his head and the fact that his hair had turned a little blue?

"I doubt we'll wind up like Sumika..." said Sawa, sounding just as calm as ever. "Whatever happened to her seems unusual. There's no reason that'll happen to us, too... But..."

Yuuma didn't wait for her to continue. He suddenly turned, grabbing her small shoulders, which were lost inside the windbreaker.

"Sawa...is there something you know? Something you're not telling me? About what's happening to us...? About what's happening here at Althea..." he asked, speaking in a rush.

Sawa's response caught him by surprise.

Instead of brushing off Yuuma's hand, she took a step closer, pressing her upper body close to his and wrapping both arms around his back. Her eyes were closed. She lowered her chin and pressed her face against Yuuma's. The tip of her rounded horns became entangled in his hair.

"Please... Just give me a little more time..."

With their faces so close, it almost sounded as if her voice were coming from inside his own head.

"Once things settle down, I'll tell you everything I know. But there's more I need to investigate first. Please—just wait a little longer."

Sawa lifted her head back up and pulled her face away. She opened her eyes and stared back at him. Even in the dim light, her vermilion irises glowed as if with a light of their own. Their faces were only centimeters away.

Sawa's eyes seemed to exert some sort of magnetism. They shone wetly in the light. Yuuma found himself moving closer, as if being drawn in. The moment their noses touched, however, he came back to his senses and pulled away with a start.

"Fine. Okay..." He nodded slightly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like I was doubting you... I know you're doing everything you can to help us. Me, Kenk, and Nagi..."

Sawa smiled faintly in response.

While riffling through the lockers, they came across several miscellaneous items that seemed potentially useful. They gathered them up and exited the women's locker room. The hallway continued even farther, but they gave up the search for now and headed back toward the lobby.

The floor was littered with dozens of bodies, likely victims of the Conehead Bruiser. Yuuma wished they didn't have to leave them there, but there was nothing he could do for them at the moment except say a silent prayer in his head. They exited the ticket counter and headed toward the shopping area.

Some time had already passed since they had parted with Kenk. Surely he must have explained the situation by now... Or so Yuuma thought. As they were slipping under the trusswork frame that divided the lobby, however— "Stop trying to make excuses! I know you're a monster, too, Kondou...!"

Yuuma heard shouting. It sounded like somebody was ready to fight. He breathed in sharply as he took in the scene that awaited them.

The barricade of display racks in front of the shopping area had been moved out of the way slightly, and four students stood around the entrance, each waving some sort of stick or club. Behind them stood Kenk, surrounded, his back pressed against the wall.

The smart thing to do, if Yuuma had been thinking clearly, would have been to find a hiding spot and scout out the situation, like they had done when spotting the Conehead Bruiser in the lobby.

But as soon as he saw that his friend was in trouble, he couldn't help getting involved.

"Hey, what do you guys think you're doing?!"

The four students ganging up on Kenk spun around, startled. Yuuma realized immediately that they were all boys from his class.

Haruki Hokari, student number 36.

Takato Sera, student number 29.

Youichi Oono, student number 24.

And of course, Teruki Sugamo, student number 28.

Hokari and Sera were always hanging out together. Hokari's hair was shaved up high on the side, while Sera's hair was long. They were both good at skateboarding and liked to dress up in street gear, even though they were only in elementary school. They were the two troublemakers of the class. Oono, meanwhile, was on the basketball team, and Sugamo was the soccer team's star player. In other words, these four boys represented the top of the popularity food chain.

As soon as Sugamo saw Yuuma and Sawa, he pointed the mop he was gripping in both hands in their direction.

“It’s the Ashihara twins! Don’t come any closer! I’m on to you...!”

Sugamo’s voice was just on the cusp of dropping. Yuuma knew from the sound of it that Sugamo had been the one accusing Kenk of being a monster.

Yuuma was about to retort by asking what proof he had for saying something like that, but the words died on his tongue. Sawa had grown horns and wings, and even Yuuma’s own hair had changed color slightly. It wasn’t going to be easy to explain those changes, and Yuuma really didn’t want to try.

Sugamo and the other three boys, however, didn’t seem to be displaying any changes yet. At least not from what Yuuma could see from this distance. Fortunately that meant that they were probably unaware that people could sprout horns and wings or have their hair change color. Sawa was doing a pretty good job of hiding her horns and wings under the windbreaker, and it would be hard to notice the change in Yuuma’s hair without shining a light on it directly. Yuuma decided to go on the offensive.

“...Where do you get off, Sug, calling us monsters?!” Yuuma shouted, balling his hands into fists.

Sugamo shouted back, his voice even angrier. “How else do you explain it?! You killed that crazy giant beast, didn’t you?! Only another monster could do something like that!”

Yuuma was almost tempted to agree.

At first, Yuuma had just assumed that Sugamo’s emotions were getting the better of him, but his reasoning made a lot of sense. How was Yuuma supposed to refute that? Sure, most of the Conehead Bruiser’s HP had been whittled away by the burning alcohol, but even Yuuma was surprised that had worked. And that was before even mentioning that Sumika Watamaki had delivered the final blow. Yuuma probably wouldn’t believe them, either, if he were in Sugamo’s shoes.

Come to think of it...something doesn’t add up. What made me think to summon Watamaki at a time like that?

He had already been waist deep in the Bruiser's mouth at that point. The situation seemed hopeless. Yet somehow he had managed to readjust the bent metal bar while also pulling out Sumika's monster card and summoning her at the same time? Talk about an amazing feat—impossible really. But something had felt strange. It was like everything else had stopped. What was that all about?



A voice. He could hear it now in the back of his mind. The voice of a boy, about the same age as Yuuma. But it wasn't Ken's voice or the voice of anyone else in their class. So then, whose was it...?

"Well? Say something already!"

Yuuma was pulled back to reality by more shouting.

This time it had been Youichi Oono. He stood next to Sugamo, wielding a deck brush. His lower, raspier voice was almost done dropping. It grew angrier with each word he spoke.

"You're all gonna turn into monsters, too. I know it! We're not letting you through those barricades. There's injured people back there!"

Sawa leaned in closer to Yuuma and whispered, "We should probably deal with him instead of Sug."

Yuuma agreed. Oono was the tallest boy in class; he was popular, good at sports, and had gotten almost as many votes as Sugamo in the election for class president. Oono seemed more like someone who could be reasoned with—at least Yuuma hoped so. Oono usually looked honest and trusting, but at the moment he appeared to be the wariest out of all four boys.

Yuuma and Ken weren't friendly enough with Oono to hang out or anything, but they weren't exactly on bad terms, either. So why was he treating them so suspiciously now?

Granted, Sugamo's argument that only a monster could defeat another monster was pretty persuasive, but it still seemed unfair of Oono to insist they were "gonna turn into monsters, too." Unless, of course, he had already seen that happen once before.

Oono spoke again, confirming Yuuma's suspicions.

"You can't fool me! You're gonna change into monsters and attack us, just like...just like...Watamaki did!!"

Yuuma could sense the rage and grief in Oono's voice. He felt a lump grow in his own throat and resisted the urge to reflexively touch the card resting in his left pocket.

“Oono...are you saying you saw Watamaki transform?!”

“Yeah, I saw it! Everyone here did! We all saw how Watamaki turned into a faceless monster when she exited her Calculus capsule...and how she attacked Beloshi!”

True, Yukihiisa Miura—aka Beloshi—hung out with a different group in class, but he and Oono were both on the basketball team. They were probably friends outside of school. Yuuma had even heard Miura call Oono by his nickname, Yoi, several times while in class.

Sugamo and Hokari were standing on either side of Oono, their faces as white as sheets. Yuuma guessed they had also witnessed Sumika kill Miura.

But if they were all there to see it, then why had Yuuma, Sawa, and Kenk woken up later than everyone else? By the time Yuuma had exited his capsule, all his classmates were gone. Only Sumika remained, roaming the playroom in a monstrous form.

No, that's not exactly true.

Yuuma had heard Miura scream while he was still inside the Calculus. Which meant that Miura had still been alive at that moment... That must have been when Sumika had attacked him while Oono and the others watched.

“...What's that supposed to mean, Yoi?” asked Kenk, calling Oono by the same nickname that Miura had used.

Kenk was still standing against the wall, behind the others and to their right. The four boys spun back around again, clutching their mops and brooms.

Now that Yuuma had calmed down a little, he realized that the boys' makeshift weapons were actually pretty ragged looking. Kenk, meanwhile, held a proper weapon in his right hand—the massive hammer that had dropped from the Conehead Bruiser. A few random cleaning supplies were hardly going to be a match for the hammer in terms of attack power. Kenk's hammer remained lowered as he spoke.

“Are you saying you all just ran away and left Beloshi to die? How many of you were there? You're all big and tough. Are you saying you used him as bait so you could run away?”

Even from this distance, Yuuma could see Oono's face flush red and the muscles in his neck clench. A tremor ran from his neck down to his shoulders, to his arms, and finally to his hands. The deck brush he was holding shook with anger.

But it was Haruki Hokari—the half of the skateboarding duo with the shaved sides—who shouted angrily.

“Yeah, well, where the hell were you, Kondou?! Where do you get off?! Watamaki almost killed Tada and Aida! They're over in the store right now and seriously injured! We were all about to die until Miura jumped in to save us... What else could we do besides run?!”

Takato Sera, the long-haired skater, spoke next. His tone was menacing.

“We made it to the lobby by the skin of our teeth, just to find that huge thing stomping around next... Ms. Ebbers and Frankfurt were nowhere to be seen, and we were carrying Tada and Aida. We never thought we'd make it into that store alive. I'm glad you took care of the monster and all, but Sug is right. I don't know how you did it, but it ain't normal. What happens if we let the three of you inside and you turn into faceless freaks next? There'd be nowhere to run. Until you can prove that you're human just like us, we're not letting you through.”

Sera's expression and tone of voice may have seemed threatening, but his words were logical enough. Looking more closely, Yuuma noticed that Sera's and Hokari's baggy T-shirts and Oono's school jacket were slashed up in multiple places and stained with what looked like blood. They must have been the ones who had carried the injured Tomonori Tada and Shinta Aida downstairs and who had set up the barricade.

I always thought of Oono as just some meathead and Hokari and Sera as a couple of troublemakers. Maybe all this time I've been looking down my nose at them without really meaning to...

“It wasn't just the monster with the pointed head,” said Yuuma, feeling guilty for the way he had treated them.

“Huh?”

The boys stared at him suspiciously as he revealed the truth. Or a part of the truth, at least.

“We also neutralized Watamaki while we were upstairs in the playroom. And we laid Miura to rest in one of the Calculus capsules.”

Oono’s face suddenly fell. “You mean Beloshi’s...dead...?”

Yuuma nodded wordlessly. The anger slowly drained from Oono’s body, and the tip of his deck brush wilted toward the floor. His eyes welled up with tears.

Sugamo, however, only gripped his mop tighter, becoming more hostile than before.

“Forget about Miura... What do you mean, you *neutralized* Watamaki, Ashihara? What did you do to her?!”

Oono glared at Sugamo out of the corners of his eyes, which were still wet with tears. Hokari’s and Sera’s lips also curled up in disgust. Sugamo, however, was too busy chastising Yuuma to even notice he had just told them all to “forget about” Miura’s death.

“You didn’t kill her like you did that pointy-headed creature, did you?! I don’t care if she was a monster. Watamaki was... She was our *friend*!”

Our “friend”? That’s rich coming from the guy who was just calling us monsters a minute ago.

“We didn’t kill her,” said Yuuma, resisting the urge to retort. “But it’s hard to explain what happened to her.”

“Don’t try to talk your way out of this! I know what you—”

Sera suddenly cut Sugamo off. “Sug, why don’t you just shut up for a minute?” he said in a low voice.

“*Me...?! I...I’m class president, I’ll have you know! If anyone should shut up, it should be you all!!*”

Oono was also starting to make his displeasure known. “Class president?! When Watamaki attacked Beloshi, you didn’t do a thing—you just ran away. And then you left the three of us to hold the barricade while you hid in the back.”

“Well...”

Sugamo seemed tongue-tied for a moment, but he soon regained his usual overbearing attitude.

“That’s ‘cause I’m the leader! The class needs me. If I die, who’ll be left to take charge?! Wasn’t it *me* who found this safe spot?!”

“Safe...?!” A mixture of anger and disgust crossed Oono’s face. He exchanged a look with the skateboarding duo before turning back toward Sugamo. “Okay then, you go back to your ‘safe spot’ while we deal with Kondou and Ashihara. We wouldn’t want any danger to come to *our leader*, after all.”

Oono chose his words carefully, but the undertone in his voice was unmistakable. Sugamo still put on a show of arrogance, although he clearly knew better than to argue.

“F-fine, if you really want to take care of this situation, I guess I will allow it. But don’t you dare let them in here. None of them!” he spat before disappearing back inside the shopping area.

Looking closer, Yuuma realized that the hastily built barricade consisted of just a couple of steel display racks, which could hardly be expected to stop anything. The metal shutter must have done most of the work in keeping the Conehead Bruiser out. Now that the shutter was destroyed, the barricade would hardly protect them if a similar monster showed up. In fact, never mind the barricade. Considering the size of the hole the Bruiser had put into the concrete earlier, with just one strike of its head, it could have probably just busted down the wall separating the shop from the lobby if it had wanted to.

“Some safe spot...,” Sawa murmured from behind Yuuna. She apparently had the same thought.

Kenk rushed over to join them. He seemed to have relaxed now that Sugamo was gone.

“Hey, Yu, I was thinking: How do we know there’s just one of those pinhead creatures walking around? I don’t think that barricade would last ten seconds if another one showed up...”

As Kenk’s gaze turned from the shopping area back to Sawa, he did a double

take, sizing her up and down.

“Uh, Sawa...Is that really the only clothes you could find? That’s just a windbreaker. Why aren’t you wearing anything underneath it?!”

“Stop hassling me. I can’t get my legs into pants with my feet like this, and I’m not about to wear some stupid skirt.”

“So just take your boots off first!”

Kenk looked exasperated. Yuuma nudged Kenk’s left knee, urging him to be quiet.

Oono, Hokari, and Sera were huddled a few meters away, whispering quietly to each other. They shuffled over cautiously, still gripping their mops and brooms, and stopped about three meters from where Yuuma and the others stood. Oono began speaking first, keeping his voice as low as possible so as not to be overheard. Sugamo was probably still watching them from inside the barrier.

“Ashihara...what happened to Watamaki? If it’s true that you didn’t kill her, then how were you able to subdue her?”

Yuuma had been dreading that question. He took a deep breath, steeled his nerves, and answered in a single word.

“Magic.”

“Wha...?”

They stared slack-jawed for a moment before their faces contorted with anger.

“This is no time for your stupid jokes, Ashihara!” Hokari growled.

With his hair in an undercut, Hokari looked pretty scary for an elementary school kid. If he’d spoken to Yuuma like that just yesterday, Yuuma would have probably been shaking in his boots. Well, maybe not shaking but cringing, at least. But after facing off against Sumika Watamaki—who had been turned into a monster—and the Conehead Bruiser—which had been a monster all along—Hokari suddenly didn’t seem so bad.

Or maybe it was the new boost to his physical abilities, from upgrading his

character class, that made Yuuma feel so brave. If that was the case, Yuuma was going to lose his newfound advantage over Hokari and the other boys once he explained everything. But it wasn't like they could keep it a secret forever. And besides, someone in class was bound to try starting up *Actual Magic* eventually, with or without Yuuma's help.

"It's not a joke," Yuuma said softly.

He lifted his left hand and rolled up his jacket and shirtsleeves, revealing the huge circuitry pattern extending from the back of his hand to just below his elbow.

"Wh-what is that...?" murmured Sera, comparing his own left hand with Yuuma's. Oono's, Hokari's, and Sera's QRESTs were all still normal size, indicating that none of them had upgraded their character classes yet.

"Once your own QRESTs change, you'll be able to use magic, too," said Yuuma. "And it's not just magic. Your strength and durability increase, too. Enough to fight monsters like that creature that was running around before."

"What...?"

The anger faded from their faces, but they still looked like they only half believed him. No, less than half—maybe 10 percent. Kenk thrust the giant hammer he was holding in their direction.

"Don't believe him? Try holding this. If you *think* you can hold it, that is."

Kenk knelt down and placed the hammer on the floor, kicking it over to Oono and the others.

Yuuma wasn't sure if Kenk's potshot had been intentional. Either way, it seemed to have hit its mark. Oono and Kenk were almost the same height, but Kenk didn't even take gym class, let alone do any sports.

Oono took a step forward, crouched down, and reached for the hammer, probably convinced that there was no chance Kenk could best him in a feat of strength. He gripped the glittering black handle and began to stand— "Urk!"

A groan escaped Oono's lips as he fell to one knee. He blinked several times, visibly shocked, before dropping the deck brush and gripping the weapon more

firmly with both hands. The result, however, remained the same. He could lift the hammer's shaft, but he couldn't get the metal head to rise even a millimeter from the floor.

"No way!"

"You're kidding!"

Hokari and Sera exchanged glances from behind Oono and then stepped forward. Oono sat back, out of breath, as they tried to lift the hammer as well. The results were the same.

"Satisfied yet?" asked Kenk.

The three stared in amazement before backing away. Kenk stepped forward in their place. He reached down, grabbed the hammer by the shaft, and lifted it easily into the air, almost as if it were a mere plastic toy. Yuuma knew it had probably taken him a lot of effort to lift it like that, but the other three boys didn't know that.

Kenk returned to Yuuma's side. A few moments later, Hokari spoke.

"So if our QRESTs get bigger, we'll be able to lift the hammer, too...?"

"Maybe," Yuuma replied.

If they had chosen a class like Mage or Priest during the playtest, then there was a chance their strength wouldn't actually be boosted very high even after upgrading their character class. The boys, however, were too excited to notice.

"Tell us what to do!" Hokari begged.

"Is it an in-app purchase? Where do I sign up?!" asked Sera.

Yuuma almost laughed at the question but forced himself to put on a serious face.

"I'll tell you... But this is very important, so I want everyone to hear. Either let us inside the shopping area or bring everyone else out here."

Oono, Hokari, and Sera exchanged glances and then whispered furtively to each other once more. Yuuma was worried they were going to say no, but after a few seconds, they had apparently come to an agreement. Oono turned back

toward Yuuma and nodded.

“Fine... But I’m pretty sure Sug’s gonna have something to say about it.”

“Well, don’t expect us to convince him,” said Kenk. “That’s *your* job.”

Hokari scratched the side of his clean-shaven head. “Fair enough... Wait here a second.”

The skateboarding duo slipped back inside through a gap in the barricade. Immediately they could hear loud voices from within—more than a discussion but not quite an argument. Eventually one half of the skateboarding duo, Sera, poked his head out and gestured for them to follow.

Yuuma exhaled despite himself. All this commotion just to rejoin their classmates. He didn’t even want to imagine how upset they would be once he had explained the bad news—that they were trapped in Althea, that the place was infested with monsters, and that the game system of *Actual Magic* was encroaching on the real world.

But Yuuma and his friends had no choice. If they were going to accomplish their goals of restoring Sumika Watamaki to normal and finding Minagi Sano, then they would need a safe base, somewhere they could rest. At the moment, the shopping area seemed like their best option.

Yuuma stepped over the broken metal shutters, following Oono as he slipped through a gap in the barricade. He almost expected another earful from Sugamo the moment they entered, but Sugamo was nowhere nearby. After checking to be sure that Kenk and Sawa had followed as well, Yuuma glanced around.

The long, fan-shaped shopping area took up about one-sixth of the first-floor lobby. The area extended back another twenty meters or so but seemed larger, likely owing to the dimness of the emergency lighting and the fact that most of the display racks had been pushed back against the walls on the left and right. The cash registers were located along the back wall. A large pile of mismatched towels and blankets had been laid out on the floor in front of the registers, with two boys lying on top of them. They were probably the two injured boys Oono had mentioned, as there were a couple of girls tending to them. The other students stood huddled in small groups around the room. Yuuma did a quick

headcount: seventeen in total.

Adding Oono, Hokari, and Sera, who were still standing nearby, as well as Yuuma, Sawa, and Kenk made twenty-three. Nagi was missing, Sumika was now a card, and Yukihiisa Miura was dead. That still only brought the count to twenty-six. There were forty-one students in their class, so that left fifteen students unaccounted for.

“...Where is everyone else?” Yuuma asked Oono.

Had they all been killed by the Conehead Bruiser...? Yuuma shuddered. Oono, however, just muttered that he didn’t know.

“What do you mean, you don’t know? Didn’t you all come down from the second-floor playroom together?” asked Sawa.

Hokari shook his head swiftly in response. “When we left the playroom, the elevators weren’t working. We all tried to go down the staircase, but it was so cramped. We were like sardines in there. Some of the people in the back ran up to the third floor instead. Out of the girls, I know Fujikawa and Teragami ran up instead of down, and as for the boys, I know Niki and Haizaki ran up as well. There might have been more; I don’t know.”

“The third floor...,” said Sawa, biting her lip. She had her hood pulled all the way up.

Yuuma understood immediately why his sister seemed worried. They had already taken care of Sumika Watamaki on the second floor and the Conehead Bruiser rampaging on the first. If the other fifteen students had all fled upstairs, why hadn’t they come back down yet? Something had to be preventing them from doing so.

“Even if there’s another monster on the third floor, I doubt Niki and Haizaki would get taken out so easily...,” said Kenk.

Yuuma nodded briefly. Those two boys were also stars of the class, like Oono and Sugamo, but for very different reasons.

Kakeru Niki, student number 33.

Shin Haizaki, student number 35.

They were the class brainiacs, constantly competing for the highest score on tests. But that didn't mean they weren't good at sports, too. They were fairly tall, stylish, and very popular with the girls. Knowing those two, there was a pretty good chance they had already figured out how to upgrade their character classes on their own. In fact, they might even know things that Yuuma and the others hadn't discovered yet. It was probably a good idea to join up with them as soon as possible—but first, they had other things to do.

Yuuma glanced around the shopping area, making eye contact with the other students who had noticed them. Everyone looked apprehensive. They remained huddled against the walls or beside the display racks. They were probably afraid that Yuuma's group would turn into monsters, just like Sumika Watamaki had.

One person's glare in particular seemed especially hostile. Yuuma directed his eyes toward the small eat-in corner in the back-right part of the room. Teruki Sugamo sat there sulking, an irate expression on his face. Next to him stood Aria Misono and Kai Kisanuki, both of whom had been in Sugamo's party during the playtest.

"Well...? Aren't you going to tell us how to power up our QRESTs?" asked Sera, eager to hear more. He seemed barely able to contain himself.

Yuuma nodded slightly. "Okay, I'll tell you... Have everyone gather in front of the registers."

I don't think I've ever had this many people staring at me at once in my entire life.

But then Yuuma immediately changed his mind. After all, it had been five years and three months since his first day at Yuki-hana Elementary School, and every year since then, he had to get up in front of the class and talk about what he did over the summer. And every day during afternoon homeroom, everyone had to report on their club and committee activities. There was even a time in the fifth grade when for some reason he'd been chosen to represent his class for a special Voice of the Students event the school was holding, and he'd had to read out loud in front of the entire school. Only about one-tenth that number of students was staring at him now. This should have been easy in comparison—right?

Yuuma wiped his sweaty palms on the seat of his pants and gazed at the faces of his classmates. There were twenty of them in total, excluding Sawa and Ken.

Not a single one of them looked relaxed. Yuuma could see a mixture of hesitation, confusion, anger, worry, and fear in their eyes...with just a glimmer of hope. Maybe word had already spread that he and the others had defeated the giant monster. Maybe they hoped Yuuma's group would solve everything.

If so, unfortunately, they were about to be disappointed. Yuuma could only share the truth, uncertain as it might be—that they were trapped inside Althea and that even more monsters could be waiting out there.

“Come on, how long are you gonna keep us waiting...? Say something already!” shouted Teruki Sugamo, still sulking in the eat-in corner. He didn’t bother to conceal the irritation in his voice.

“Yeah, we haven’t got all day!” added Aria Misono. She was standing next to Sugamo.

Kai Kisanuki, for his part, remained silent. His eyes, which were hidden behind his long bangs, were unreadable.

Yuuma glanced at them briefly before taking a deep breath.

“I’m sure you’ve all noticed by now,” he began, “but something completely out of the ordinary is happening at Althea.” He stared into the faces of his twenty silent classmates and forced his mouth to continue speaking. “Sumika Watamaki turned into a monster, and there are giant creatures roaming around... Somehow we managed to take care of the one that was rampaging outside in the lobby, but there could still be more of them out there. If another one attacks, this barricade won’t be enough to stop it.”

“Somehow, yeah, but how?! How were you able to defeat that freak?!” shouted Hokari—one half of the skateboarding duo. His friend, Sera, was about to speak up when a new voice interrupted.

“If that’s true, shouldn’t we go outside before another monster shows up?”

It was a girl with black-framed glasses and low pigtails that rested on either shoulder.

Her name was Tomori Shimizu, student number 6. The student librarian always had her nose buried in a difficult-looking book. She refused to tell anyone why she still wore eyeglasses when QREST eyelenses could also correct vision... At least, that was what Nagi had once told Yuuma.

Many of the other students nodded enthusiastically. Several even started to stand up, as if ready to leave immediately. Tomori, however, continued to calmly voice her opinion.

“I’m assuming the reason you think there might still be monsters out there is because Fujikawa and the others who fled to the third floor haven’t come back down yet? I’m worried, too, but we’re just children. There’s nothing we can do

here. We should go find some adults and get help.”

Tomori was the quiet type and barely spoke, even during recess. Her argument, however, was extremely convincing. Not even the control freak, Sugamo, tried to object. Yuuma wished they could take her advice. He really did.

“Unfortunately, we can’t do that,” he said. “After defeating that pinhead creature, we scouted out the entrance. The automatic doors won’t open, and the glass has turned completely black. When we tried to break it, it wouldn’t even budge.”

“...”

Tomori’s eyes narrowed behind her black-rimmed glasses. The other students began to murmur restlessly, until one of them became confrontational. Naturally, it was Sugamo.

“Of course a shrimp like you wasn’t able to break the door. It’s reinforced glass. Just give me or Oono a shot at it and—”

“It wasn’t me. Kenk hit it with this hammer. It didn’t even crack.”

Yuuma glanced over as Kenk stepped forward and held up his Bruising Hammer with both hands. While none of the other students would likely realize this was a “real” weapon, which had been dropped by the Bruiser, its size and weight were more than obvious.

Moments earlier, Oono had attempted to pick up the weapon but had been unable to lift it even a centimeter off the floor. He glanced over at Sugamo out of the corner of his eye.

“I believe them,” he said. “After all, if we were able to get out through the automatic doors, then the adults...security guards or police...would be able to get inside as well. They would’ve been here by now.”

“That makes sense...,” said Tomori. She nodded, even though it had been her suggestion to leave in the first place. Yuuma was a little surprised. Sugamo could learn a thing or two from her about being more flexible.

“I don’t think it’s just the doors,” Yuuma said, continuing his explanation. “All

the glass in the lobby has turned black. We can't see anything outside, and our QRESTs won't connect online. Until we figure out what's causing this, I don't think we'll be able to escape Althea."

Tomori pursed her lips tightly in response. Sugamo's face fell in despair. Looks of shock and alarm appeared on the faces of their other classmates as well.

No escape.

That was the kind of phrase that got thrown out all the time in manga and games, but it wasn't an easy pill to swallow now that it was happening for real. Even Yuuma, who had touched the black glass for himself and had seen firsthand how it hadn't even budged when hit with Kenk's hammer, found it hard to accept the situation. He knew it would take more than mere words to satisfy his classmates.

"If anyone doesn't believe me...we can make time to go to the entrance later so that you can see for yourself. But right now this evacuation center, this shelter here, is far too important. Our first priority should be keeping it safe. Or ensuring that everyone has the *power* to keep it safe."

Yuuma was finally getting to the most important part. He took a deep breath. Unfortunately, that was the moment Sugamo chose to interrupt again.

"Tch! Quit trying to act all important," he hissed. The rancor in his voice was obvious. "You can give us the runaround all you like, but at the end of the day, where did you wind up? Here! But who found the shopping area and made it into a shelter? It was me! The class president! So if anyone's going to decide what we do next, it should obviously be me—"

Sugamo suddenly fell silent. He had been interrupted by Yuuma, who raised his right hand in Sugamo's direction.

Yuuma was standing in the middle of the shopping area while Sugamo sat sulking in the eat-in corner. There were five meters separating them, but even at that distance, Sugamo couldn't help flinching, as if sensing that something was coming.

I guess he's not as dumb as he looks, Yuuma thought before chanting the word of power for the element of wind.

“Ventus!”

A soft green ball of light appeared at the tip of Yuuma’s open hand, illuminating the dim shopping area. Sugamo flinched again, losing his balance dramatically and falling backward onto the floor, chair and all. However, none of his classmates were paying him any attention.

They were all staring wide-eyed at Yuuma. Gasps escaped their lips. Most of them had probably been persuaded already, but Yuuma had to be sure. He didn’t want anybody claiming later that he had used an LED light or that it had all been a trick.

“Avis!”

Yuuma chanted the spell’s form, and the ball of light turned into a spinning vortex and took on the shape of a small bird. He was casting a wind-based utility spell, Skybird. Its attack power was practically zero, but it could be used to distract and partially blind monsters or even to knock down items from far away.

Yuuma glanced around the room before deciding to aim for one of the display racks pushed against the walls.

“Ignis!”

As Yuuma chanted the activation word, the small, glowing green bird flapped its wings and shot forward energetically. It swooped over Tomori’s head before striking its target—the top shelf of the display rack—and dissolving into a torrent of wind. One of the small, Althea-shaped cushions on display was knocked onto the floor, landing with a dry sound.

The twenty students watching Yuuma continued to stare in silence for a moment, even after his demonstration had ended. Eventually, the room broke out into murmurs.

“Was that...magic? Like, magic from the game...?”

“It was... I used that same spell in *Actual Magic*...”

“But this is the real world... It has to be some kind of trick...”

“Maybe it was an AR holo from his QREST...”

The students whispered to each other, half in wonder and half in disbelief, but it was Tomori who finally silenced them. She was standing in front of Yuuma.

“I felt it. QRESTs don’t support physical sensation on their own, so AR holos can’t create wind,” she said, stroking her cheek, “And even if it was trick, using something like an LED flashlight and a mini fan, that still wouldn’t explain how the light turned into a bird and flew away or why the cushion fell down. It wasn’t a trick... It was real magic.”

The lenses of Tomori’s black-framed glasses reflected the light as she spoke. Not a single student tried to argue with her—not even Sugamo, who was still sprawled out on his rear and staring with his mouth agape. His entourage, Aria Misono and Kai Kisanuki, didn’t seem to have anything to say, either.

Youichi Oono, from the basketball team, was next to speak.

“So then...you used magic to defeat that monster? And to defeat...t-to kill Watamaki?”

“No,” Yuuma replied quickly, before the other students could get upset. “It’s true that we killed the monster that was trying to break in here, but we didn’t kill Watamaki. I used magic to...restrain her, so she couldn’t move anymore. I plan to find a way to turn her back to normal.”

Yuuma didn’t know how to explain yet that he had used a capture spell to turn her into a card, so he chose the word *restrain* instead. Fortunately, no one asked any follow-up questions. He had actually used rubbing alcohol, not magic, to defeat the Conehead Bruiser, but that was probably too much information right now. At the moment, the important thing to do was to prepare everyone for their awakening.

A flurry of emotions colored Oono’s face. When he spoke again, his voice almost sounded pleading.

“Back to normal...? You can turn Watamaki back to normal...?”

“I can’t promise for sure. But there must be a way. I still have faith.”

Yuuma meant what he said. Oono let out a long, drawn-out sigh and then nodded slowly, as if sensing Yuuma's conviction.

"Okay... I trust you, Ashihara. I'll do whatever you say."

"Thank you, Oono," said Yuuma, trying to hide his embarrassment. He glanced around at the other students.

Hokari, Sera, and Tomori all seemed convinced. As much as he hated to put it this way, with Oono and the three of them taken care of, the rest of his classmates were mostly in the bag. Tomori was hardly the leader on the girls' side, but the two students most likely to fill that role—Ren Fujikawa and Kyouka Teragami—weren't present at the moment. They were among the fifteen students who had gone up to the third floor.

Naturally, Yuuma was still a little worried about Sugamo's group, but in light of the situation, Sugamo's selfish attitude and behavior seemed to have already earned him the ill will of the rest of the class. And even though the superficial girly-girl, Aria Misono, was considered to be toward the top of their class hierarchy, she didn't quite mesh with the other girls.

Yuuma had never really cared about popularity contests before, but now that everyone was about to upgrade their character class, it was time to start taking those matters more seriously.

Pretty soon the students would be able to do things like command magic or possess superhuman strength, and it would be pretty easy for them to get carried away trying out their new powers. Yuuma didn't want their makeshift shelter to get destroyed. So until the other students understood just how serious the situation was, and learned to act that way, it was of vital importance that Yuuma, Sawa, and Kenk remain in charge.

Yuuma glanced around at his classmates' faces once more before speaking.

"Okay, everyone, listen up. I'm going to explain how to use magic."

Even the two injured boys lying on the blankets, Tomonori Tada and Shinta Aida, stared in rapt attention. The silence was almost deafening. Yuuma began to feel strangely uneasy, as if he was overlooking something very important.

But there was no more time to stall. Balling his hands up into fists, he shook

off his nerves and delivered one last warning.

“We call it a *class upgrade*, but once you do it, the QREST on your left hand will grow larger, until it reaches up to your elbow. It will feel hot, but you’ll just have to push through it. It won’t actually burn you... Is everyone ready? Then tap on the *Actual Magic* icon on your virtual desktops.”

Hokari’s eyes went wide. “The *Actual Magic* icon...? But *Actual Magic* only runs inside the Calculus capsules!”

“Just try it. What do you have to lose?” said Yuuma.

The students glanced at each other apprehensively. No one moved. Sugamo was clearly waiting to see what everyone else would do. Not even Oono seemed to want to go first.

It was the student librarian, Tomori Shimizu, who finally broke the stalemate. She lifted the slender index finger of her right hand into the air, in front of her glasses, and then swiped left. Her finger stopped for a moment, and then she raised her left hand as well. The hand hovered in the air for a moment before finally tapping the invisible icon.

Dazzling emerald green light suddenly flared up from the QREST on Tomori’s left hand. A strangled scream escaped her lips.

“Ng... Ahh...!”

Seeing this, the faces of the other students grew even more concerned. Many of them, however, began tapping their own icons, not wanting to be the last to do so. That included Oono, who groaned as his own left hand was enveloped in red light. However, he quickly began shouting to the other students, his voice carrying through the room.

“It’s...it’s all right! It burns, but it’s not too much to handle!”

The remaining students who were still waiting to see how things turned out began tapping their own icons, one after another. Brilliant wellsprings of light illuminated the dim room as the screams of the girls and the shouts of the boys reverberated off the high ceiling. Even the three students sulking in the eat-in corner eventually tapped their icons. Sugamo and Aria writhed and moaned dramatically while Kai Kisanuki, standing next to them, simply stared at the

blazing gray light being emitted from his own left hand.

It took about three minutes for everyone's QRESTs, including those who were injured, to finish transforming.

Once the light had disappeared from the arm of the last student, silence descended upon the shopping area once more.

Yuuma stared out at the still-dazed faces of the twenty students. He began to speak.

"Now that that's done, you are all no longer ordinary elementary school students... You've upgraded to whatever class you were during the *Actual Magic* playtest. If you look toward the upper left, you should see your own HP bar."

Everyone did as instructed before turning back toward Yuuma.

"People who chose Mage or Priest should be able to use their class spells now, Warriors should be much stronger, and classes like Thief or Ranger should be able to move much faster. But remember, as far magic goes, MP can't be restored as easily in game. If you want to test your magic out, you should stick to just the element word for now."

In response, several students began chanting the words of power for elements such as fire (Flamma), ice (Glacies), and light (Lumen). Colorful balls of light appeared and illuminated their faces for about ten seconds before fizzling out with a hiss.

"This is unbelievable...", croaked Oono.

Apparently he had chosen the Warrior class—strength, not magic—and wanted to test his new abilities. He took several steps forward and extended his right arm out toward Kenk.

"Let me hold that hammer again."

"Sure. Just don't drop it."

With zero signs of hesitation, Kenk thrust the handle of his Bruising Hammer toward Oono. He grabbed it firmly in both hands and lifted it carefully—up, and then down, and then back up again—pumping it in the air several times with a

look of amazement on his face. A few moments ago, he hadn't even been able to lift the hammer off the ground, and now it felt light enough to swing around with relatively little effort.

"No way..." Oono whispered before handing the hammer back to Kenk and turning toward Yuuma. "Ashihara...I'm sorry I called you a monster earlier..." he said bashfully.

"Don't worry... It was a normal reaction."

Oono nodded slightly and returned to his original position. Though no less surprised than before, the other students, likewise, no longer suspected that Yuuma was just playing a trick.

That was one major task out of the way, getting all the other students to upgrade their class. The next task was to get everyone to use their new powers to fortify the shelter's defenses.

The number of students capable of fighting had just increased drastically, but if another monster as powerful as the Conehead Bruiser appeared, they would still be hard-pressed to defeat it without anyone getting injured. Their top priority had to be on strengthening the barricade to ensure that no monsters could get in too easily... No, there was one other thing that needed to be handled first.

"Everyone, listen!" Yuuma shouted in a loud voice.

The students, who were murmuring excitedly among themselves, turned suddenly to stare at full attention. Yuuma was going to have to start getting used to this sooner rather than later.

"Has anyone here chosen Priest as their class? Raise your hands!"

The first to do so was Tomori Shimizu. Next was a girl with short hair who had been tending to the injuries of the two boys—though under the circumstances, she hadn't been able to do much more than dab their wounds with a wet handkerchief. And finally, a stout, heavyset boy raised his hand.

Yuuma had been hoping for five or six Priests, but there were just seven character classes in *Actual Magic*, after all—Warrior, Mage, Priest, Thief, Ranger, Merchant, and Monster Tamer. Twenty divided by seven was actually

less than three, so he could hardly complain.

The girl with the short hair was Aoi Soga, student number 8. The heavysset boy was Takeshi Moro, student number 39. Together with Tomori, that made three Priests. They were the shelter's lifeline. If another monster attacked, protecting them would be priority number one, but if Yuuma just came out and said that, it might seem unfair to the other students. First he needed them to understand for themselves just how important those three now were.

"Okay then... Shimizu, Soga, and Moro. You three should all be able to use recovery magic, right? I want you to heal the injured students."

Tomori blinked several times behind her black-framed glasses. "Oh... That's right. We can use magic to heal them now..."

She rushed toward the two injured boys, who were lying in front of the cash registers, her skirt fluttering as she moved.

Yuuma could tell at a glance that Shinta Aida, student number 22, was gravely injured. The left arm of his T-shirt had been tattered to ribbons, as if it had been savagely slashed by Sumika's claws, and there were several lacerations running from his shoulder to his upper arm. Someone had tied a white towel tightly around the arm, but the bleeding still hadn't stopped.

Aida had also changed his character class, so his VIT should have increased as well. But unlike their avatars in *Actual Magic*, their bodies here suffered actual injuries and so probably weren't as quick to heal. Aida was a bit of a class clown, like Yukihiisa Miura, the student who had died—though not quite at Miura's level. Yuuma was pretty sure Aida had been a member of the school's broadcasting club.

Tomori flinched for a moment as she spotted the blood-drenched towel, but she continued toward Aida with determination, crouching down at his side. She extended both hands toward his injured left shoulder and began casting a spell, her lips moving somewhat awkwardly.

"Sacre!"

The circuitry pattern that extended from the back of her left hand to just below her elbow pulsated with emerald green energy as a ball of white light

appeared before her extended hands.

Strange, thought Yuuma, staring at the ball of light. It was the word of power for the holy element. But when Sawa had chanted that same word in order to heal Yuuma, after he had been injured during his fight with Sumika, the light that appeared in her hands had been rosy pink. Of course, holy energy was usually white in the game, which would mean this was actually the normal color.

Tomori narrowed her eyes in concentration and chanted the form.

“Premis!”

As she spoke, the white light in her hands began flowing, forming a vortex of sorts. Yuuma guessed she was casting Holy Healing, a spell available only to the Priest class. The spell that Sawa had used, Healing Droplet, created dewdrops that dripped from the caster’s fingers and needed to be drunk directly by the target of the spell. Holy Healing, however, had a fairly long range and could be cast directly on a player. It wasn’t autohit, so Tomori still had to be careful when aiming the spell, but at this distance, there was no need to worry.

“Fusione!”

Once Tomori had chanted the word of activation, the flowing light extended from her hands and landed on Aida’s left shoulder. Aida’s body shook as if in surprise, and then his face suddenly relaxed. A small sigh escaped his lips.

After several seconds, the light disappeared. The portion of the wound that extended from beneath the towel had closed up almost entirely, with just a brownish scab remaining. Aida raised his arm gingerly and moved it back and forth several times before blinking repeatedly.

“It doesn’t hurt!” he cried, but then immediately flinched and winced. “Okay, maybe it hurts a little.”

“...Does it hurt, or does it not?” asked Tomori, her face absolutely serious.

Several students giggled softly. Aida wore his hair in a faux-hawk; he scratched at the side of his shaved head and smiled bashfully.

“No, no, I’m fine! Earlier my arm was, like, *wham, bam*, but now it’s just a

little boo-boo. Thanks, Shimizu. I owe you one. Boy, magic sure is something...”

It sure was. Yuuma had also been healed by magic, so he knew how Aida felt. The other students had also just witnessed a miracle. Aida’s wound, which had been so deep that the tendons and muscle underneath were exposed, had closed up before their very eyes. Another reminder of just how strange the situation was. The giggles soon faded off into silence.

It was Tomonori Tada, the other injured boy lying next to Aida, who finally broke that silence. He wasn’t bleeding like Aida had been, but his right arm was wrapped in a splint using magazine paper instead of tape. It looked like he’d broken a bone.

“Isn’t anyone gonna heal me?” he cried out plaintively, cradling his injured arm.

The other students burst into laughter again. Tada’s eyebrows, which were droopy to begin with, tilted down into an exaggerated frown. That made the students laugh even harder. Yuuma couldn’t help breaking out into a grin, too.

Even Tomori seemed a little amused. She began casting Holy Healing once more, using it to heal Tomonori Tada’s arm. After she was done, Tada spun his healed arm around in circles like a windmill. “It really doesn’t hurt!” he shouted.

For the third, and loudest, time yet, the students all burst out into laughter. The tension in the shelter finally seemed to dissipate— Just then.

“Yuummy!”

Sawa was standing toward the back, trying to go unnoticed. She shouted suddenly, a hint of panic in her voice.

At almost the exact same moment, several of the vents covering the ducts in the ceiling burst free of their hinges.

Multiple dark shapes plopped down into the room.

Thump. Thump. They made a heavy sound as they hit the floor one after another.

The twenty-plus students stared at the shapes in surprise. Whatever the things were, they were oblong shaped, dark gray in color, and about fifty

centimeters long and ten centimeters wide. Their bodies looked soft and spongy overall, with a segmented surface and multiple leglike protuberances along the bottom. There was a row of four eyes on one end, and underneath them was a mouth that sported six sharp fangs.

They were insects—giant caterpillars. And there were at least ten of them.

Yuuma broke out into goose bumps. These creatures were hideous. Between the vague undulations of their segmented bodies, and the way they glistened wetly in the dim light, they seemed so real. But no caterpillar in the real world could get this big. In other words, they were supernatural creatures, just like the Conehead Bruiser from before. They were monsters.

Yuuma froze. Even though he knew they were monsters, he didn't immediately know what to do.

One of the bugs, which was writhing on the ground just a meter from where he stood, suddenly pointed its four gross eyes in Yuuma's direction— Like a spring, it coiled up tight and launched itself into the air, moving at a speed far faster than its sluglike body suggested it could move.

"Aughh...!"

With a shout, Yuuma thrust both hands out reflexively and caught the bug in midair. It felt heavy, spongy, and far too real beneath his fingers. Like a giant version of the rhino beetles some kids kept as pets. The captured insect writhed in his grasp, its segmented body stretching out as its six-fanged mouth chomped wildly, mere centimeters from Yuuma's face.



A moment later, he heard several screams.

One after another, the ten-plus insects had leaped into the air, hurtling themselves at nearby students and knocking them to the ground. The students who hadn't been attacked either froze in fear or began screaming themselves, unable to help their other classmates.

Yuuma had to do something—but he couldn't think. It was all he could do just to keep the chomping bug away from his face. In *Actual Magic*, he would have just slammed the creature on the ground and stamped it to death, or even crushed it between his fingers while it was still in his hands. But the real thing was so gross and raw and disgusting that he couldn't will himself to move.

Before long, the caterpillar stopped trying to bite Yuuma's face and began twisting side to side instead.

It's gonna bite my arm, he realized in terror. Just then: "Yu, hold it still!"

It was Sawa. She circled around in front of Yu and then kicked straight upward.

With a dull *thump*, the caterpillar was booted vertically into the air, splattering against one of the exposed pipes on the ceiling before bouncing back toward the ground.

"Kenk!"

"Aughh!"

Kenk dashed forward with a scream of rage. He brought his giant hammer high into the air and then swung it down.

The sound of the impact reverberated like an explosion as the expensive-looking floor tiles shattered in a radial pattern, leaving a crater in the floor.

He missed!

Yuuma gritted his teeth. The hammer had struck the ground just two centimeters from the insect's head. Barely a miss, but under the circumstances, it might as well have been a whole meter...or so Yuuma thought. Just then: The air shimmered like summer haze as a shockwave emanated from the point of impact, catching the creature in its blast. Its round, plump body was crushed

flat before exploding with a terrifying little *splat*. Instead of gore and ichor, gloomy fragments, just like those that had appeared when they had killed the Conehead Bruiser, went flying in all directions. The bug was definitely dead.

“Huh...?”

Instead of excitement, a cry of confusion escaped Kenk’s lips. Apparently he realized he had missed. Sawa, who was standing next to them, seemed surprised as well, but a look of understanding soon crossed her face.

“It must be splash damage...,” she whispered.

Splash damage referred to AoE damage that was added to many special weapon techniques and even to normal attacks for some giant-size weapons. In the real world, the only things that could create shock waves of similar force were explosives; but just like the monsters, it seemed weapons like Kenk’s Bruising Hammer were supernatural in that they had special effects in the real world, too.

That wasn’t important right now, though. The caterpillars were so weak that they could even be killed by splash damage. Yuuma had to let the other students know.

“Everyone! These bugs are pushovers; just find something hard to use and hit them with it...!” he shouted, turning to look over his shoulder.

The sight that awaited him was like a scene out of hell.

A dozen or so students were lying on the ground, with the caterpillar creatures attached to their necks and chests. The creatures made a horrible slurping sound as they fed. They seemed to be drinking the students’ blood.

Since they weren’t in his party, he couldn’t see the HP bars of the students currently being feasted upon. Their arms and legs twitched occasionally, letting Yuuma know they were still alive, but it was only a matter of time before there would be deaths on their hands.

There had to be around ten students who were still unharmed, but they had all either frozen in place, screaming, or had huddled up in a corner. None of them looked ready to fight. Peering around the room, Yuuma hoped that Oono, Hokari, and Sera were okay—but they had already fallen victim to the

caterpillars, either because their big size made them easy targets or because they'd put themselves in the way to protect the girls.

What about Sugamo? He was always eager to assert himself, wasn't he? Yuuma glanced over toward the eat-in corner. Unfortunately, Sugamo had tipped a round table over on its side and was hiding behind it together with Aria Misono and Kai Kisanuki. Yuuma doubted he would come back out until the danger was past. It was Sugamo, after all.

All these thoughts ran through Yuuma's head in a millisecond. He turned toward Sawa and Kenk and shouted, "We're gonna have to do it ourselves! Sawa, you kick the bugs off the students! Kenk, you hit them with your hammer!"

"Got it... But what about you?!"

"I'll see what I can do with these!" Yuuma shouted, waving his balled fist in Sawa's direction before rushing toward one of the girls who was currently lying on the floor being attacked by a caterpillar.

She had fallen face up, with an insect attached to her neck. It was drinking her blood. Her hair was in disarray, covering her face, but Yuuma could see the temples of her eyeglasses where they protruded from her ears. There was only one girl in their class who wore eyeglasses, and that was the student librarian, Tomori Shimizu. Yuuma chose to help her first because, as one of only three Priests in their group, she was one of their most valuable members.

The creature was entirely absorbed in drinking Tomori's blood. Praying Tomori was still alive, Yuuma wound up with his sneakered foot and booted the creature in its side as hard as he could. Torn free from Tomori's neck, it flew through the air in a straight line before smacking against one of the display racks in the back, its six-fanged mouth stained with fresh blood—Tomori's blood.

Since Yuuma had attacked it, an appropriately sized HP bar appeared over the caterpillar's head. Yuuma wasn't specialized in close combat and kicked it only with his ordinary sneakers, but the caterpillar's HP bar still went down by about 20 percent. He was right—the creatures had almost zero defense. The monster's name, *Tabanus Hellfly Larva*, appeared underneath its HP bar. Yuuma

wasn't sure what a Tabanus was, but he wasn't exactly in a position to look it up.

All that mattered now was saving the other students. Every second counted. Yuuma leaped over Tomori and dashed toward the caterpillar he had just kicked into the display rack.

"Hyah!" he shouted, thrusting his fist toward the creature.

Unfortunately, the benefits of upgrading his class didn't include making Yuuma any more graceful. He was still wearing the ashen leather gloves. Despite his awkward punch, he somehow managed to hit the creature. His fist sank deep into its spongy body. For a brief moment nothing happened, and then its gray skin expanded like a balloon, and it exploded with a giant *pop*.

As soft as those caterpillars might have been, there was no way they were weak enough to be entirely obliterated by one limp punch from Yuuma. The leather gloves, which had been dropped by the Conehead Bruiser, must have had their own supernatural strength, just like Kenk's hammer.

We've still got a chance!

Ignoring the gloomy, insubstantial fragments that spun through the air, Yuuma searched for the other two Priests—Aoi Soga and Takeshi Moro.

He found Aoi almost immediately. Fortunately, it seemed she had not been attacked by one of the caterpillars and was instead huddled in a corner with several other girls. He couldn't spot Moro anywhere, though. Moro was the heaviest kid in the class, and the room was only about ten meters deep. He should have been pretty hard to miss.

Reluctantly, Yuuma ran toward the closest boy being attacked instead. It was the basketball player, Youichi Oono. He was lying face down, with a caterpillar attached to the nape of his neck. Maybe it was because Yuuma had already smooshed one of the creatures, but he had mostly gotten over his sense of revulsion by that point. He grabbed the caterpillar by its neck with his left hand and pulled it free from Oono, then he immediately lobbed it onto the floor and splattered it with his right fist.

Sawa and Kenk seemed to be making good progress as well. There were about

seven or eight bugs remaining. They needed to get rid of them as quickly as possible so they could look for Moro and start treating the students who had been bitten.

Takato Sera had also been knocked down. He was lying on the ground next to Oono. Yuuma grabbed the caterpillar attached to Sera's neck and was about to yank it free when— "Eeeek!!"

A high-pitched shriek reverberated through the shopping area.

Yuuma turned to see what had happened. The last time he looked, Sugamo had still been hiding in the eat-in corner. He was now collapsed on the floor, with a caterpillar attached to his back; Aria Misono stood next to him, screaming helplessly. She couldn't seem to build up enough courage to touch the creature with her bare hands.

She lifted her head, and her eyes met Yuuma's.

"Ashihara, help him! Help Ruki!!"

Yuuma wasn't so immature that he would try to get back at Sugamo at a time like this. Besides, Sugamo had upgraded his character class, too. He was now a valuable fighting resource, just like everyone else. Yuuma would have to help him eventually. But a lot of the other students were already running out of time. They needed help first.

Since Sugamo had been hiding, the caterpillar hadn't gotten to him as soon as the others. It had probably only just started sucking his blood.

"Sug should be fine for a little while longer!" Yuuma shouted back at Aria. "I promise I'll save him, but he'll have to wait!"

Surprisingly, Aria didn't argue.

"O-okay... But hurry!"

There was no time to respond. Yuuma was still holding the bug he had torn free from Sera. He grabbed it around the middle and squished it to death between his fingers, feeling like he might be sick.

He saved Haruki Hokari next, followed by a girl named Chinami Nushiro, at which point Kenk shouted to him from across the room.

“We got rid of all the bugs on this side, Yu!”

“Okay!” Yuuma yelled back, dashing over toward the eat-in corner.

The caterpillar on Sugamo’s back had sunk its six sharp fangs in just below the shoulder blade and was slurping away at his blood through several tentacles that extended from deep within its mouth.

The bloodsucking caterpillars were about fifty centimeters long. Much larger than any cabbageworms or inchworms found in the real world. But they still weighed only four kilograms at most. Maybe large enough to hold down a smaller student, but it didn’t make sense that bigger students like Oono and Sugamo couldn’t get free on their own. Yuuma didn’t have time to worry about that at the moment, however.

“Hurry! Hurry!” said Aria, urging him on. She was almost in tears.

Yuuma grabbed the creature in a viselike grip around the back of what seemed like its neck. It struggled for a moment until its fangs slipped free from Sugamo’s back, at which point it was easy to pull off.

This was the last bug. It didn’t seem to be very high level, so if Yuuma damaged it a little, he could have probably captured it instead. But the revulsion on Aria’s face was obvious.

“Hurry up and kill it!” she pleaded. Giving up on the idea of capturing it, Yuuma turned around and swung his fist into the ground, bug and all.

With a *splat*, its exoskeleton exploded. The gloomy black fragments that spilled out from inside formed a vortex, spinning up into the air, only to be sucked into the same mysterious black ring that had appeared for the pinhead creature earlier.

“Whew...” Yuuma sighed softly.

As if waiting for that moment, the level-up fanfare played, audible only to Yuuma’s ears. A message box appeared.

Yuuma Ashihara

Level 8 → 9

+3 stat points

+40 skill points

Item: Tabanus Hellfly Larva Fang x5

Item: Tabanus Hellfly Larva Venom Gland x1

It had taken a mere single hit to kill each bug. The fact that Yuuma had leveled up from killing just six of them must have meant either that he still had a lot of experience points left over from defeating the Conehead Bruiser or that the creatures were dangerous in a way that wasn't immediately apparent. Either way, now was hardly the time to celebrate.

The screaming and shouting of the other students slowly died down and then ceased entirely. The silence lasted only a moment, however, before Aria started shrieking again.

“Ruki!”

Her scream apparently broke the floodgates as student after student began rushing toward their injured classmates' sides. Yuuma knelt down as well and stared into Sugamo's face. His eyes remained closed. Yuuma wished he could check Sugamo's HP bar, but in *Actual Magic*, another player's health bar was visible only if they joined your party or if they became an enemy.

Yuuma tried placing his fingers against Sugamo's neck. His pulse was fast, but it still seemed strong. His back had almost stopped bleeding as well.

So why isn't he waking up—?

“It's probably poison,” Sawa said quietly.

Yuuma hadn't realized she was standing behind them. He nodded and stood up.

“Yeah... I think you're right.”

“P-poison...? Is Ruki gonna die?” asked Aria as she slumped down to the floor on the other side of Sugamo, her eyes welling up with tears.

At some point, the other member of Sugamo's entourage, Kai Kisanuki, had emerged from his hiding spot behind the table. He stared down at Sugamo's face through his long bangs.

Yuuma hesitated for a moment and then shook his head. “No... I doubt a monster of that level would have fatal poison, and if it was just normal DoT poison, he’d still be able to move. It must be paralytic poison.”

“Paralytic...?”

“I don’t think his life is in danger. Just hold on, okay?” said Yuuma, turning away to search for Aoi Soga.

He spotted her immediately. She was kneeling down next to Tomori and pressing a handkerchief to the wound on Tomori’s neck. Yuuma raced over to her side.

“A-Ashihara... T-T-Tomori, she...!” Aoi managed between sobs.

The girl sitting to her right began speaking. Tears were streaming down her face as well.

“Tomo protected me...but then I...I just ran...,” said the girl. Tomo was her nickname for Tomori.

The girl, who wore her hair in a ponytail hanging down her back, was named Chise Tsuda. Student number 10. She was their class’s petkeeper. If Yuuma recalled correctly, she was Tomori’s closest friend in class.

“It’s not your fault, Tsuda. I didn’t do anything, either,” said a third girl, comforting Chise.

This girl’s hair was tied back in a braid. Her name was Mimi Hariya. She was friends with Aoi. Yuuma was pretty sure they were both in the cooking club.

Yuuma knelt down across from the three girls and took Tomori’s wrist in his hand, confirming that she still had a pulse.

“I think she’s been poisoned. Soga, do you know any antidote spells?”

“Antidote spells...?” Aoi looked baffled for a moment but then stared at the giant QREST on her left hand and nodded quickly. “Y-yes! I’d just learned it, but I think I should be able to cast it.”

“Can you try casting it on Shimizu, then?”

“Okay...”

Chise took over responsibility for holding the cloth against Tomori's wound as Aoi sat up on her knees. Aoi placed both hands over Tomori's chest and began chanting the spell.

"Sacre!"

The QREST on Aoi's left hand pulsed with a yellow glow, and a ball of white light appeared.

"Pluvia!"

The ball split into several small droplets of light, which floated in the air like raindrops.

"Tersus!"

The droplets of light formed wispy tails as they rained down, permeating Tomori's body. Nagi had used the same spell, Holy Purification, back in *Actual Magic* to heal Yuuma and Kenk whenever they had been poisoned.

Yuuma took a deep breath to calm himself as he waited for the magic to take effect. He wished they could start searching for Nagi already.

After about five seconds, the shower of light ceased, and Aoi lowered her hands.

The other students had gathered around at some point. After several tense moments of waiting, Tomori's eyelids began to flutter, and then suddenly—she opened her eyes.

"Haah...haah...," Tomori panted, taking several deep breaths before looking up at Aoi. "Thank you, Soga. And you too, Chi. I'm glad you're all right."

"Tomo!"

Chise hugged Tomori tightly, tears streaming down her face once more. Yuuma wished he could let them have their moment, but now wasn't the time for that.

"Shimizu, were you still conscious while you were knocked down?"

Tomori nodded, still lying on the ground. "Yes. I couldn't open my eyes or speak, but I could still hear people's voices. You were the one who killed the

bug that attacked me, weren't you? Thank you, Ashihara."

"Don't mention it... Once you're able to move again, can you and Soga go around and cure everyone's poison?"

"Of course. I think I'm fine now," she said, standing up with help from Chise. The bite wound on her neck looked painful, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

Yuuma stood up as well and glanced around the shopping area. Things appeared to have calmed down a bit.

There were twelve more students who had been bitten by the caterpillars and remained paralyzed. Curing them on their own would probably use up all of Tomori's and Aoi's MP.

They could use Takeshi Moro's help right about now, but Yuuma still couldn't seem to locate the other Priest. Yuuma was still scanning the room, wondering where Moro could have gone, when Kenk and Sawa came rushing over.

"We can't find Moro anywhere," Kenk whispered worriedly. His hammer was slung over his shoulder.

"Do you think he left the shelter?" said Yuuma.

"I took a peek out into the lobby," Sawa replied, "but he was nowhere in sight."

"You don't think...he went up to the second floor, do you...?"

Yuuma bit his lip, glancing around at the shopping area one last time.

This time, he noticed something he hadn't seen before. The display racks pushed against the wall had made it hard to spot, but there was a nondescript door behind the cash registers and counter.

Of course a store would have a back room—why hadn't he thought to look there? Since the incident had happened during business hours, the door would probably be unlocked as well.

"Sawa, Kenk... Over there..."

Yuuma gestured toward the door with his chin. Sawa's and Kenk's expressions

turned grim.

The students who were still on their feet were either taking care of their paralyzed friends or standing around and watching as Tomori and Aoi used their antidote magic. Yuuma and the others slipped between them, crossing the room and approaching the door behind the counter.

As they drew closer, they could see that the door wasn't closed entirely. It had swung inward by about half a centimeter.

Yuuma listened first for noise and then gently nudged the door with the toe of his shoe. The latch was only partially in the hole. It made a metallic clicking sound as it popped up the rest of the way, and the door swung open another three centimeters.

It was pitch-black inside. Nothing seemed to be moving. There was probably a light switch somewhere on the wall, but with all of Althea now on emergency power, Yuuma doubted the lights would work.

He would have to rely on just the vision correction from his QREST. Gathering up his courage, Yuuma began to step inside when Sawa pulled him back by the shoulder.

"Wh-what is it...?"

"I'll go first," she said, slipping the small LED flashlight out from the pocket of her windbreaker and switching it on. A round beam of white light flooded the room.

"Nice! Where'd you find that at, Saps...?" said Kenk, sounding jealous.

Sawa ignored him, slipping sideways through the crack in the door. Yuuma followed.

As soon as they entered the back room, Yuuma's night vision turned on, magnifying the LED light. The room was long and narrow. The area toward the front seemed to be the break room space, while the back was lined with rows of steel racks for storing inventory. Unlike the teachers' room at school, there were no office desks with computers and flat-screen monitors. They must have been planning on handling business administration completely through QREST.

Sawa glanced around carefully as she proceeded toward the back of the room. As the LED light traveled over the ceiling, they spotted another exposed vent cover—the same kind installed on the ceiling in the shop area. It had come undone.

Keeping their guard up, Sawa, Yuuma, and Kenk passed through the break room area and entered the storage area in the back. Sawa was still holding the light in her left hand as they tiptoed down one of the aiseways, which was boxed in on either side by storage racks. They had gone only about three meters when— Sawa flinched suddenly in surprise. Yuuma leaped in front of her to protect her.

The white circle of light had just revealed a body, lying face down on the floor. It was a heavyset boy dressed in the Yukiwana Elementary School uniform. Takeshi Moro, no doubt about it.

Yuuma's gaze, however, was not drawn to Moro but rather to the thing on Moro's back.

It resembled the *Tabanus Hellfly Larva* in both color and fleshy substance—but now it looked almost completely different. It had swelled up to about twice its original size, a ball with neither eyes nor mouth nor legs. Multiple tentacles extended from its underside. They had wormed their way into Moro's back like the roots of some grotesque tree.

"Wh-what the heck...is that...?" croaked Kenk, peering down the aisle over Yuuma's left shoulder.

"I think...it's one of those things from before? Maybe it's growing, from the blood...," whispered Yuuma, still in shock.

As soon as he said that, Yuuma knew instinctively it was true. The bugs were larvae. And when larvae feed, they turn into pupae. That round thing on Moro's back was a pupa. The *Tabanus Hellfly Larva's* cocoon.

As if confirming Yuuma's suspicion, the upper surface of the ball split with a dry *crack*. Sawa shouted, immediate panic in her voice.

"Kenk, crush it!!"

"You don't have to tell me twice!!"

Kenk dashed forward, brandishing the Bruising Hammer. He was already a natural with the weapon, swinging it deftly in a powerful horizontal swipe.

The hammer hit the pupa sack with a powerful thwack and embedded itself deeply. The already cracked surface of the skin ruptured from the force of the blow, and some sort of slimy mass careened out of its center and smacked into the rack on the left.

It fell to the floor with a *splat*. It was a huge winged insect, about eighty centimeters in length. Its giant compound eyes resembled a fly's, but its body was long and narrow, and its mouth was filled with knifelike protrusions. A wasp—no, a horsefly maybe.

The creature lay trembling on the floor. Without hesitation, Kenk raised his hammer high into the air and brought it down in a single, finishing blow.

The HP bar displayed over the insect's head—including its proper name, Tabanus Hellfly—dissipated instantly, and the creature scattered into gloomy particles.

Kenk breathed heavily, the head of his hammer still resting at the point of impact.

"Nice job," said Sawa approvingly. "A few more seconds and it would have gotten free."

"I hate horseflies..."

"I'm pretty sure everyone does."

As the two continued their exchange, Yuuma crouched down by Moro's side. Moro had probably been paralyzed, like the others. In order to cure him, they would need to either carry him back to the shopping area or have Tomori or Aoi come in here.

Let's see if me and Kenk can carry him first.

Yuuma slipped a hand under Moro's neck, hoping to turn him over...

"Ah...!"

As he did so, a gasp escaped his lips.

Cold. Moro's skin was cold. Not an ounce of body heat remained. He was completely and utterly cold.

"What is it, Yu?" asked Sawa.

Unable to respond, Yuuma reached out and touched Moro's neck. He tried pressing harder, but he couldn't find a pulse. Moro's skin almost felt fake. It reminded him very much of how Yukihiisa Miura's skin had felt when they found him in the playroom on the second floor.

Yuuma glanced up at his sister and his best friend. They had fallen silent, sensing something was wrong.

"...He's dead."

“It’s no good... His HP won’t come back.”

Tomori Shimizu shook her head softly and lowered her hands.

She had been attempting to use the Holy Healing spell on Takeshi Moro’s body, which Yuuma and Kenk had carried back inside the shop. Even after she cast the spell, however, Moro’s face remained pale and his eyes never opened.

Moans and sniffles began to escape from the students gathered around. Two boys stepped forward from the crowd and knelt down next to Moro’s body.

“You weren’t supposed to go and die on us...,” one of the boys moaned.

He sounded heartbroken. He was thinner than Moro, and he wore his hair in a moppish bowl cut. Naruo Wakasa, student number 41.

The other boy kneeling next to him, with his mouth open in shock, was Masato Takio. His hair was also in a bowl cut, but it was less of a mop and more of a helmet. Together with Moro, the three of them had been the geeks of the class, into obscure things, although each had their own unique obsession. Wakasa was into military stuff, Takio was into anime, and Moro had been obsessed with voice actors. During lunch, they always crowded around Moro’s desk to nerd out together. Sometimes Sugamo would give them a hard time, yelling stuff like “Shut up, you geeks!” but they would just laugh in his face and tell him that he was a geek, too—just a geek for soccer. As a closeted game nerd, Yuuma had always been jealous of how comfortable they were with

themselves.

There were no tears in Wakasa's and Takio's eyes, but no one could doubt how close their friendship with Moro had been. Yuuma, too, felt overcome with remorse, but his grief was at least as logical—or rather, calculating—as it was emotional.

Priests were far too valuable at the moment. They'd had just three in the shelter to begin with, and thanks to Yuuma's carelessness, they were now down to two.

Come to think of it, Moro had been standing near the counter when those giant caterpillars fell out of the ventilation ducts and invaded the shopping area. He probably climbed over the counter as soon as trouble hit and then fled through the door to the back room.

Unfortunately, one of the bugs had apparently come through the ceiling in the back, too. Moro had probably fled to the storage area, but the creature must have chased him down and bitten him on the back. It had drained too much of his blood while he was still paralyzed, and now...Moro was dead.

Yuuma finally understood why the caterpillars—the *Tabanus Hellfly Larvae*—had given him so much experience despite being so easy to kill. Getting bitten and paralyzed by one while alone was almost certainly a death sentence. And it had taken only a few minutes for the pupa that fed on Moro's corpse to grow into an adult insect. Those adult flies were likely far more dangerous than the larva versions had been.

If the creatures attacked again, Yuuma and the others would probably be able to react better, but that wasn't going to bring Moro back to life. Tomori Shimizu and Aoi Soga would have to take care of healing the remaining nineteen students all on their own now.

We have to protect Shimizu and Soga no matter what. They might not like it, but someone should be guarding them both at all times—students from the Warrior class. We need to get everyone up to speed as soon as possible, and any spell casters should raise their utility magic skill level high enough to at least learn Healing Droplet. That's objective number one.

No—there are other things that probably need to be done first.

Yuuma stepped away from Moro's body and approached Sawa.

"There was a bathroom in the break room area in the back," he whispered. "People will probably start needing to go soon. Everyone should go together. You take the girls first, and then I'll take the boys."

"Okay... Good thinking."

Sawa nodded and headed over toward Tomori.

Next, he called over the tallest and strongest of the boys—Kenk, Oono, Sera, and Hokari. Sugamo would have fallen into that category as well, but he was still lying down in the eat-in corner, being fussed over by Aria.

"You saved our butts again, Ashihara...," Oono said as he drew near. He seemed embarrassed. Sera and Hokari hung their heads in frustration as well.

"Even after changing class, I still couldn't do anything..."

"When I saw those big caterpillar freaks, I just froze..."

"It was no one's fault... There was no way to know they were poisonous. Besides, you protected the girls. Thank you." Yuuma smiled at them. It still felt strange. "But the next time another big melee monster shows up, it's you guys' turn," he added.

"You can count on us!"

The three boys grinned back at him. There was something else Yuuma needed to mention.

"I know there's a lot for us to do right now, but we should probably start by finding some way to seal up those ducts in the ceiling. I'm willing to bet there are more of those bugs still out there."

"That's a good point," said Kenk, joining them and nodding. "The ventilation system isn't working now anyways, with the power off. We should just shove something big and bulky up where the ducts enter the room and seal them off at the source."

"Something big and bulky...," said Sera, glancing around the shopping area before suddenly snapping his fingers. "What about those?"

He pointed toward one of the display shelves. Most of the shelves were still full but mostly with just small miscellaneous merchandise. The shelves that Sera was pointing to, however, contained several stuffed animals large enough to hug with both hands.

They rushed over to the shelves, and Yuuma picked up one of the stuffed animals. It was an eagle, Althea's mascot. Yuuma was pretty sure it was named Nasr. It was kind of cute. The girls would probably balk at the idea of stuffing the plushies into a bunch of dirty vents, but fortunately all ten of the girls—except for Aria Misono—were in the back area using the bathroom. The five boys grabbed two stuffed animals each and hurried over to where the complicated network of ducts first entered the room.

The exposed rectangular ceiling ducts were just above the registers and counter. The nearest vent cover had already been knocked loose. Since Oono was the tallest, he climbed up on top of the counter while Yuuma handed up stuffed animals for him to shove, one at a time, into the square vent hole.

Oono had to really push in order to get the tenth stuffed animal into the hole. He climbed back down from the counter after he was done.

"There, that should do it for now. I wish we could solidify it with something like glue, though..."

"We'll have to look for some later. Thanks, Oono," said Yuuma. He glanced at the clock in the lower-right-hand corner of his vision.

It was 4:40 PM, around when the sun would usually start to set. With the electricity and lights off, however, there was no sense of time inside Althea. The clocks in their stomachs, however, would not be so easily fooled. Students were probably going to start asking for something to eat soon.

Yuuma's and Sawa's inventories were currently full with the large amount of onigiri, baked goods, and other food they had secured from the vending machines in the break room at the center of the first floor. But with twenty-three mouths to feed—no, twenty-two now—that food wouldn't last long. Even with strict rationing, the food probably wouldn't last a whole day.

Yuuma was still hoping that things would settle down by then and that firefighters and police would come to their rescue. But he remembered what

Sawa had said back in the break room.

“There’s a good chance we won’t be getting out of here for a while. Two days, three days, ten... Maybe even longer if things don’t go our way.”

Did Sawa have a good reason for thinking that was true? She clearly seemed to know something that he didn’t. As her twin brother, Yuuma didn’t mean to doubt her. She must have had her reasons for not sharing what she knew. But if she was right, and all twenty-two of them were going to be stuck in here for days, it was vital that they find a way to regularly replenish their food and water supplies.

Come to think of it, the fact that there was an eat-in corner in the shop must mean there was also a stock of snacks and other simple food being kept somewhere. They should probably move that all into one spot as well, before fights occurred. But who could they trust to manage it...?

Yuuma was still worrying over various details when the girls returned from the back room.

After making eye contact with Sawa, who was at the front of the group, Yuuma raised his right hand and shouted so that the others could hear.

“Any boys that need to use the bathroom should come with me. It will be safer if we go in a group!”

Several of the boys began to walk toward Yuuma. The very first to reach him was Teruki Sugamo, despite the fact that he had been lying on his back only moments earlier.

Well, Yuuma figured, *even Sug needs to use the bathroom*. He was about to ask if Sugamo was feeling better, when suddenly— “Ashihara!!” Sugamo shouted, his tone accusatory. “Just who do you think you are, bossing everyone around?!”

“I...I’m not trying to boss anyone around—”

Sugamo didn’t seem interested in listening. “You think you can just appoint yourself leader and tell everyone else what to do! But let’s not forget! The reason that Moro died...”

Sugamo thrust a finger toward the corpse of Takeshi Moro, which was still lying on the floor near the left wall.

“...is because of you!”

“Because of me?!”

Yuuma hadn’t meant to shout, but he didn’t understand how anyone could possibly reach that conclusion.

“Sug!”

“You no-good creep...”

Kenk and Sawa marched in Sugamo’s direction, but he ignored them, striding past Yuuma and heading toward the counter. Yuuma realized Sugamo was holding a small metal mallet—probably meant for breaking the glass to escape during emergencies, such as in the event of a fire. Sugamo used it to strike the counter as hard as he could.

Dong! A high-pitched metallic ring echoed throughout the room. Everyone fell silent.

Yuuma wanted to tell Sugamo to stop. That all that noise was going to attract monsters. But for some reason, he couldn’t seem to get the words out. There was something deep in Sugamo’s eyes. They smoldered faintly in the dim emergency lighting. Something that intimidated Yuuma into silence.

“His ratio is increasing...,” Sawa whispered from behind Yuuma.

Yuuma was about to ask her what she meant, but Sugamo was already shouting again.

“Everybody, listen to me!!”

Everyone—the girls who had just returned from the back room and the boys who were preparing to take their turn—turned to stare at Sugamo with serious expressions on their faces.

He rapped the mallet on the counter once more and began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Yuki-hana Elementary School Class 6-1, it is time for us to hold a class meeting... No, not a meeting. A trial.”

Silence descended again. Several seconds passed before one of the girls finally spoke.

“Is this really the time for that?” she admonished. She had a rich, mellifluous voice. “There’s tons of important things we need to do and not a lot of time.”

The speaker was Sayu Kenjou, student number 4. Her slightly wavy hair was gathered into a side ponytail with a white scrunchie. Cute and a talented singer, Sayu was probably the most idolized girl in their class—with the exception of Sumika Watamaki, of course.

Most boys were quick to take Sayu’s side. Sugamo, however, remained unswayed.

“Could anything be more important right now? Our dear friend, our classmate—Takeshi Moro—is dead. Unless we get to the bottom of why that happened, the very same thing could happen again.”

“Get to the bottom of *what*, Sug...?!” shouted Sera.

Before he could finish, however, Sugamo rapped his mallet on the counter, silencing him. “Student council is in session, and this trial has already begun! If anyone wishes to speak, raise your hand and wait until you are called. You may refer to me as Class President or Your Honor.”

Sera clicked his tongue and then raised his right hand to about shoulder level. Sugamo pointed the hammer toward him and called his name: “Takato Sera.”

“*Your Honor*, you said you wanted to get to the bottom of what killed Moro, but the answer is obvious. It was one of those big stinking bug freaks.”

Several students nodded in agreement. Of course, none of them had actually seen the caterpillar attack Moro, but the body showed six bite wounds arranged in a circle on his back, and the Tabanus Hellfly Larva sported six fangs. What else could have made that mark? There was even an identical wound, still visible, on Sugamo’s neck.

But apparently that was not what Sugamo had meant.

“True, it was one of the insects that drained Moro of his blood. Nonetheless, it was Yuuma Ashihara who truly killed him!”

“What’s that supposed...”

...to mean? Yuuma began to say, but Sugamo pounded his mallet angrily.

“Ashihara, when those insects attacked us, the first person you helped was Tomori Shimizu, was it not?”

“Well, yeah... Because Shimizu is a Priest...”

“And after that, you saved Youichi Oono. At which point Ria...*ahem*...Aria Misono asked you to pull off the bug that had attacked me. But you ignored her, didn’t you, and helped Takato Sera and Haruki Hokari instead! All people who had already sided with you! The truth is you were picking and choosing who to help, weren’t you, Ashihara?! All the better to position yourself as leader! Takeshi Moro wasn’t fortunate enough to be chosen. That was why he was forced to flee into the back room. *That* was what killed him.”

Sugamo’s tone was icy. As he finished speaking, Yuuma could swear he saw a faint red glint in his eyes.

Sugamo had gotten at least one fact wrong when describing Moro’s death: Moro had fled to the back room immediately, as soon as the bugs had shown up. Not that Yuuma saw any point in trying to correct Sugamo.

Yuuma and Kenk had always seemed to rub Sugamo the wrong way, but that still didn’t explain the way he was acting. Yuuma had waited to save Sugamo only because he figured Sugamo still had plenty of HP left. Yuuma had nonetheless gone back to save him later.

Yuuma wondered what Aria thought about all of this. He glanced over toward the eat-in corner, where she stood frozen, looking uneasy. Their gazes met. She, too, seemed to think that Sugamo was acting strangely.

Yuuma turned back, staring into Sugamo’s eyes again. The red glint he had seen earlier must have just been an illusion, a trick of the light. Still, Sugamo wasn’t acting like his normal self...

“Sug, you sonofa...”

It was Kenk who spoke. He stepped forward, his giant hammer still in his right hand. Yuuma reached out in a panic and grabbed his friend’s arm, stopping him.

“Kenk, quit it!”

“But we can’t let him get away with this!” said Kenk, still trying to push forward. Yuuma struggled to hold him back.

Spurred on by Kenk’s outburst, student after student began to raise their hands. Oono, Sera, Hokari, Tomori, Aoi, and five other students all raised their hands high.

Sugamo, however, just banged his mallet repeatedly on the counter.

“Enough! Everyone, open your ISSS voting modules!”

ISSS (commonly pronounced “ice”) stood for Integrated Study Support System. It was a support app installed on their QRESTs, which they used at school for everything from test taking to homework. Not just for core subjects, either, but even for things like art, music, and gym classes. It had a range of extra features, including a tool that could be used for taking votes.

Apparently, Sugamo was planning to use the ISSS to decide whether Yuuma should be held responsible for what had happened to Moro. But their QRESTs were offline. Most of the ISSS’s features should have still been unavailable...or so Yuuma thought, but a dialog box suddenly appeared, asking him to approve an ad hoc connection. Of course; as long as they were this close, they could just connect their QRESTs directly to use the voting module.

Yuuma approved the connection and started up his module. A prompt appeared in thick bold letters, likely set up by Sugamo.

ANONYMOUS VOTE: Do you think Yuuma Ashihara is responsible for Moro’s death?

☐ **YES** ☒ **NO**

Underneath the prompt were large ☐ and ☒ buttons, with a short, thirty-second timer, indicating the time in which they had to cast their vote.

Yuuma quickly pressed the ☒ button and waited for the timer to run out.

Naturally he felt a little worried, but it was hard to believe that a majority of the twenty-two students in the room—twenty, excluding Sugamo and himself—would actually press the ☐ button. Obviously those bloodsucking caterpillars

had been responsible for Moro's death. The idea that Yuuma wouldn't have helped him on purpose was just nasty speculation. The other students had to know that... Even Sugamo probably knew better than to believe that.

So then, why on earth was he insisting on this crazy vote?

The counter beneath the prompt window continued to tick away. Finally it reached 0, and the ○ and × buttons were replaced with a Show Results button.

Ignoring his misgivings, Yuuma pressed `SHOW RESULTS`. There was a brief moment of digital static—and then a giant ○ appeared, filling the entire screen.

Yuuma Ashihara had been found guilty.

There were still no signs of anyone, or anything, in the spacious lobby.

Yuuma and the others glanced around cautiously, just in case, as they made their way toward the elevators.

Their party once again consisted of the same lineup as during the playtest: Warrior, Mage, Monster Tamer, and Priest. But this time, instead of Nagi, their Priest was Tomori Shimizu.

“Sorry for getting you wrapped up in our spat with Sugamo...,” Sawa said apologetically.

The two girls were bringing up the rear of the party. Tomori just chuckled.

“You didn’t get me wrapped up in anything. I was the one who chose to go with you. Besides, we’re a party now. You don’t need to apologize.”

“Thank you, Tomori—”

“Tomori is what strangers call me.”

“...Tomo.”

“That’s better. No more formalities, okay?”

“Okay. Speaking of which...” Sawa faltered for a moment before continuing. “You’re actually a much better communicator than I would’ve thought... Sorry, that came out wrong.”

“Ha. Don’t worry—I know I’m always reading books by myself in class. It’s only natural that people would assume I’m socially inept.” Tomori chuckled again.

Yuuma knew it wasn’t right to listen in on girl talk, but he couldn’t help eavesdropping. Sawa was pretty shy with new people, in her own strange way. If it hadn’t been for Tomori volunteering herself, Yuuma doubted Sawa would have asked her to come with them. Not that Yuuma would have asked, either.

After Yuuma was voted guilty, Teruki Sugamo had delivered Yuuma’s sentence: Leave the shelter and find food.

Yuuma almost did a double take when he heard that. Had Sugamo’s whole mock trial just been an excuse to order Yuuma and his friends to locate food? Although on second thought, it was no easy mission. The shelter was much safer now that the barricade had been fortified and the ducts had been blocked. He was being asked to leave that safety in order to venture into the depths of Althea, where who knew what sorts of monsters might be roaming about. What if something even more powerful than the Conehead Bruiser attacked them? There was a nonzero percent chance they would all be killed. Probably more like a 30 percent chance, to be honest.

It was unclear why Tomori would want to join them on such a mission. They were taking their lives in their hands. Yuuma felt there was something he needed to say before they ascended the stairs.

He stopped in front of the deserted ticket counter and turned to face Tomori.

“Um, Shimizu...? If the reason you chose to come with us is because I saved you when the caterpillars attacked, you don’t need to feel like you owe us anything. I was just saving the Priests first, that’s all...”

Tomori wasn’t the only one to laugh uncomfortably at what Yuuma had said. Even Sawa and Kenk grimaced.

“You know, Yuuma, that was probably something you should have kept to yourself,” Tomori told him.

“Yeah, read the room,” added Kenk, nodding sagely. Like he was one to talk! Yuuma nudged him gently in the ribs before continuing.

“Honestly, though, you don’t owe us anything. If at any point you think you’re in danger, you should prioritize your own safety. There’s other people who can replace us three, but you and Soga are our only Priests...”

“Yes, Dad,” answered Tomori playfully. Her face suddenly grew more serious. “Come to think of it, Sano was a Priest, too, wasn’t she? I remember seeing her in the same starting gear at the beginning of the playtest.”

“Y-yes...she was...”

“In that case, we should try to meet up with her... Maybe she went up to the third floor, like Fujikawa, Haizaki, and the others.”

“...”

Yuuma lowered his eyes, not sure how to answer.

Neither the outside nor the inside emergency lever on Nagi’s Calculus capsule had been pulled. In other words, she’d vanished from inside her capsule while its lid was still closed, like some sort of disappearing act.

But it was also possible that Yuuma and his friends were missing something. Maybe she had pulled the internal lever to open the lid, closed it behind her after she’d left, and then the lever had somehow reset. She might have fled with the other students up to the third floor... Anything was possible.

“Yeah, maybe...”

“Then we should go look for her,” said Tomori, glancing toward the east side of the lobby, where the shopping area was located. Her next words caught Yuuma by surprise. “Besides, if she’s with Fujikawa and the others, it might be better if we abandoned Sugamo’s shelter and joined them instead.”

“What...?”

“It’s just...I don’t think I can forgive them. Not Sugamo or any of the other students who picked yes. It’s sad that Moro died, but obviously there’s no reason to blame you for that.”

“...”

Yuuma didn’t know what to say.

It came as more than a shock to learn that over half of the other students in the shelter blamed him for Moro's death. In fact, Yuuma felt betrayed. But he wasn't ready to abandon them for it. At the very least, he still had faith in Oono, Sera, and Hokari. He believed they were his friends. And if Tomori was being honest, she probably felt the same.

"But...Tsuda and Soga are still in the shelter..."

Tomori nodded. "I know. I trust Chi, Aoi, and Mimi, at least. But if we do find another shelter upstairs, maybe we should go back to the original shelter just long enough to let them in on it in secret—"

"Hold on a second, Tomo," Sawa interrupted. However, it wasn't to poke holes in Tomori's crazy plan. Not *exactly*.

"Listen. You too, Yu. There were twenty-two students in the shelter in total. Twenty if you exclude Sugamo, who almost definitely pressed yes, and Yu, who I assume pressed no. And I'm pretty sure me, Kenk, and Tomo also pressed no... So if you add Oono, Sera, Hokari, Tsuda, Soga, Hariya—and also Kenjou, since she defended Yu during the trial—that's ten out of twenty already. Half the students. Do you honestly think it's possible that every single one of the remaining students pressed yes...?"

"Hrm..." Kenk counted on his fingers as he listed more names. "The remaining ten students include the two boys who were injured, Tada and Aida, and Moro's buddies Takio and Wakasa, and Kisanuki, of course. And then on the girls' side there's Ezato, Shimonosono, Nushiro, Nobori, and of course, Mibs—Aria Misono. Well, Kisanuki and Misono probably pressed yes, I guess. And if Takio and Wakasa were still in shock over Moro's death, I guess they might've gotten swept up by what Sug was saying. But would the other six really buy into that sort of nonsense...?"

Now that Kenk said it out loud, it didn't make sense.

Shouko Ezato and Chinami Nushiro were friends with Aria. They were a clique. So they might have been on her side from the beginning. But Mami Shimonosono and Kimiko Nobori were more the levelheaded type, and even if Tada and Aida were easy to sway, Tomori was the one who had healed them with her magic when they were so badly injured. It was hard to think that any

one of those four would have pressed ○.

“Wait, wait!” shouted Sawa, interrupting suddenly. She lowered her voice and began speaking more rapidly. “I made a mistake earlier. The ISSS voting tool shows if it was a draw. So if ten people had pressed no—eleven counting Yu—then there’s no way yes should have been displayed.”

“So then...what happened? Do you think Sugamo messed with the module?” asked Tomori.

That can’t be possible! Can it...?

Yuuma didn’t care how good Sugamo’s grades were, or whether his dad was the president of a company or whatever—there was no way he had the skills necessary to hack the ISSS. But there were also supernatural forces at play in Althea. Nothing was entirely out of the realm of possibility anymore—and besides, Yuuma remembered how strange Sugamo’s eyes had been. The way they smoldered with a pale red light.

“There’s no way to say for sure yet...but we should keep that possibility in mind,” Sawa said, responding to Tomori’s question. “Besides, even if Sugamo didn’t mess with the app and more than half the students really did choose yes, it would be too dangerous to recruit Oono, Soga, and the others and bring them to a new shelter. Not dangerous for us, dangerous for the people left behind.”

Tomori blinked several times before finally looking down in shame. “You’re right... I can’t forgive them for picking yes, but that doesn’t mean I want them to die. That’s not who I want to be. Still, there’s one thing you need to keep in mind, Ashihara, and that’s that there’s no reason for us to follow Sugamo’s orders anymore. Do you understand? Absolutely no reason at all.”

Tomori’s eyes, which were usually hidden behind her glasses, shone now with steely resolve. Yuuma nodded slowly.

“Yes, Mom,” he said, repeating her own joke back to her.

Tomori smacked him playfully on the arm before clapping her hands to bring an end to the discussion.

“Okay then, let’s go find Sano and some food!”

“About that, Tomo...,” said Sawa, glancing furtively around the deserted lobby before opening her menu. She navigated to her inventory and materialized one of the items stored there.

An umeboshi onigiri, still wrapped in plastic, appeared in the window.

Tomori’s eyes went wide, but she remained silent. Kenk, however, shouted “Onigiri!” way too loud, prompting Yuuma to elbow him in the ribs again. Sawa pressed on the top of the onigiri, sending it back to storage, and turned to Tomori.

“Before entering Sug’s shelter, we actually found food and water in the staff rooms in the back, so we could just kill some time here and then head back to the shelter. But I was hoping to use this opportunity to search for Nagi. What do you say? Will you help us, Tomo?”

“Of course!” Tomori nodded.

She didn’t even have to think about it.

After crossing the elevator lobby and entering the stairwell, the four stopped to listen. The building’s air conditioners shouldn’t have been running, but they could hear the faint sound of rushing wind above them. There didn’t appear to be any immediate danger, however, so they began climbing the steps with Kenk in the lead.

The second-floor elevator lobby was still littered with large shards of glass and the bloodstains from Yukihiisa Miura. Tomori’s face blanched when she saw the blood, but she didn’t seem afraid.

The sprawling playroom was visible through the broken automatic doorway. The round-domed outlines of the empty Calculus capsules rose in orderly formation from out of the shadows, almost like gravestones... Yuuma shook off that gruesome thought and turned toward Tomori.

“Shimizu, when the playtest ended and you exited your capsule, did you see anyone who wasn’t from our class?”

“Oh... Now that you mention it, that is strange. I didn’t see a single adult player...”

Tomori furrowed her brow.

It didn't make sense. There were eighty Calculus capsules installed in Playroom 01 but only forty-one of them were being used by students from their sixth-grade class. The other thirty-nine had contained adults who had been separately invited. There should have been plenty of adults around when Tomori exited her capsule. Why hadn't there been even one?

A lot of things about Althea didn't add up, though. Maybe if they explored more of the building, it would help them understand.

"Let's go farther up," Yuuma suggested. "There could be monsters there, so if we do get attacked, remember, don't try to be a hero—just run."

"He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day!" said Kenk.

Yuuma just rolled his eyes and shoved Kenk forward. They returned to the stairwell and began climbing to the third floor.

The ceilings of the playrooms were about three times as high as the classrooms at Yuki-hana Elementary School, so even going up just one floor involved around sixty steps. The old Yuuma would have been out of breath before climbing even half that height, but thanks to his class upgrade, he wasn't even breathing heavily.

If they didn't escape Althea soon, Yuuma was going to have trouble getting used to his old body again once they finally turned back. They hurried up the stairs, arriving at the third floor.

Before going any farther, they scouted out the elevator lobby from the safety of the stairwell. The automatic doors here had been smashed in, just like on the second floor, and the ground was littered with countless shards of glass. Not a peep could be heard.

They nodded at each other wordlessly and exited the stairwell, Kenk in the lead, being careful to avoid the glass as they crossed the elevator lobby.

Playroom 02, which they were seeing for the first time, differed very little from Playroom 01 on the floor below. The room was lit only by dim emergency lighting, and more than a few of the Calculus capsules had been broken. Debris from the capsules littered the walkways.

Yuuma checked once more for any unusual sights or sounds before stepping out into the curved walkway. Glancing around, he saw a flat steel bar lying on the floor, similar in size to the one that had been bent by the Conehead Bruiser earlier. He picked it up for himself. Next he discovered an aluminum bar, about a meter long and probably weighing around three hundred grams. He passed it to Tomori.

“Could you use this in place of a staff?”

“Yes...I think so. Spells have a longer range when using staves, so it will make it easier for me to cast from cover. Thank you,” said Tomori, gripping the pipe with glee. She looked less like a Priest at the moment and more like a bookworm who had just discovered a newfound taste for violence. But this time, Yuuma knew better than to say that part out loud.

“Okay, let’s circle the outside perimeter first,” he suggested.

They began proceeding counterclockwise along the walkway, Kenk once again in the lead.

There should have been eighty playtesters in this playroom as well. It was hard to believe they would have all gone upstairs instead of down toward the first floor, where the exit was. The bodies of several adults, killed by the Conehead Bruiser, had covered the lobby floor, but Yuuma didn’t think there had been more than a dozen bodies. He would’ve expected more adults—hundreds even, considering that there were nine playrooms—to have made their way down to the lobby. Where had they, or their bodies, all gone?

The group had traveled approximately half the length of the outside walkway, with Yuuma lost in his thoughts, when suddenly— Kenk stopped on a dime, directly in front of Yuuma. Yuuma nearly ran face-first into him.

“Hey, what’s the big—”

...idea? Yuuma was about to say. Before he could finish, Kenk hushed him.

“Shh!”

Yuuma quickly motioned for the girls to stop. He stepped forward to Kenk’s left. A scream of shock nearly escaped his lips, but he managed to swallow it just in time.

There was someone sitting there, against the walkway, where the wall gently curved out of view. More than one person; there were ten—no, twenty—people, sitting there on their haunches with their arms around their knees.

From the looks of it, they were all adults, each wearing different clothes. There was one man in a rough hoodie, another in a suit. A woman in a stylish dress. Another in the Althea uniform. But regardless of how they were dressed, they were all stuck in the same pose, staring with dull vacant eyes at a single point in space.

Sawa and Tomori must have also spotted them. He heard them both inhale sharply from behind. The scene was so eerie that it was strange that no one in the group had screamed.

Maybe the room had been attacked by monsters, and these were the survivors. Maybe they were all just too shell shocked now to move.

Gathering his courage, Yuuma took several steps forward and whispered to the closest man.

“Are you...are you all right...?”

At first there was no response, but eventually the man turned his head stiffly to the left to stare at Yuuma.

He looked to be in his thirties and was dressed in jeans, a hoodie, and a baseball cap. His jaw was covered by a neatly trimmed beard. He looked fairly active and in shape. His face, however, was utterly blank.

The man’s lips trembled, and a strangely distorted voice came from somewhere deep in his chest: “So...hungry...”

“You’re hungry...? We have some snacks, but we should really get out of here first and go back down to the lobby...”

Before Yuuma could say anything more, the man spoke again.

“So...hungry...”

The exact same words, again and again.

“So hungry...”

The third time he spoke, his voice had doubled in volume. It hurt Yuuma's ears.

It took Yuuma a moment to realize that the woman next to him had also spoken, saying the same words, in the same tone, at the same speed.

"So...hungry..."

"So...hungry..."

"So...hungry..."

It spread like a game of telephone, from one person to the next. Soon, all twenty of the adults were listlessly repeating themselves, over and over again.

"Yu...I don't like the looks of this. I think we should get the heck outta here," Kenk whispered from behind.

"Agreed," Yuuma replied quietly.

What had Yuuma told them earlier? Don't try to be a hero? This definitely seemed like one of those times.

He and Kenk slowly crept back the way they'd come. They had just reached Sawa and Tomori's position when suddenly— —a sea of red lights, both dazzling and dark, flared into existence.

"Ngh...!"

Yuuma shielded his eyes, trying to make out the source of the light. It was coming from the left hands of the adults sitting on the floor—from their QRESTs. All twenty of their QRESTs had flared to life at the same moment with the exact same color. But how was that possible? Players chose their QREST color at the time of purchase, and there were over a hundred options available. Statistically, it was nearly impossible that all twenty of those people would have the same QREST color.

The truly unbelievable thing, however, was what happened next.

The line of adults began to shrink before Yuuma's very eyes. The distance between one adult and the next grew smaller and smaller as they drew closer and closer together. Soon the row, which had been nearly twenty meters long to begin with, was only ten meters long, and then it was only five.

Five hundred divided by twenty was twenty-five. The gap between each adult was only twenty-five centimeters. Yuuma stared on, dumbfounded, while his brain did the math.

That was when he noticed what was happening.

The adults were beginning to fuse together inside the red light. Their clothes and bodies melted like Play-Doh, mashing together to form a single mass.

“...Run!!”

Yuuma screamed as loud as he could and began racing back down the walkway toward the elevator lobby.

The four of them made a confused dash for it, Sawa and Tomori in front of Yuuma and Kenk beside him to his right. Behind them, the red light started to rapidly fade.

Suddenly, the light disappeared entirely. All was quiet, and then— —the floor beneath them shook violently.

Tomori stumbled and fell. Sawa immediately pulled her back up, but before they could begin running again, a huge shadow passed over their heads.

Thwump—!! Something landed in the middle of the walkway in front of them with a huge crash. It was a ghastly, ashen-colored clump of meat, at least two meters wide and two meters high. Its spongy, fleshy texture looked familiar.

Not this—not again!

Two bizarrely plump arms sprouted from each side of the fleshy lump, as if to mock Yuuma’s denial. Next, two legs thrust out from the bottom of the lump, like something from a bad dream. Finally, the top of the lump began to rise upward into a sharp point, stretching to form an oblong head that was nearly a meter long.

A giant, fat, coneheaded monster. It was probably at least three and a half meters tall, from head to toe. A full two to three times the size of Yuuma, who was only 152 centimeters.

Tomori must have taken damage when she’d been knocked down by the tremor, because the creature’s HP bar was already visible over its head. Its

monster name, displayed underneath the HP bar, was Conehead Demolisher. That eliminated any remaining doubt—this creature was a stronger version of the Conehead Bruiser that Yuuma had killed earlier.

The massive monster was already blocking the walkway. There was no way they would be able to defeat it.

A long, slit-like mouth appeared at the base of its eyeless, noseless head, just like with the Bruiser from before.

“BWUHRUHRU...” It breathed heavily, almost as if it was laughing.

A chill ran up Yuuma’s spine. But not only from fear.

The Conehead Demolisher. He knew what it was *made of*: people. Twenty different people. He’d seen them melt and fuse together before his very eyes, clothes and all, and become a lump of meat that was the exact same color as the Demolisher.

In which case, the Conehead Bruiser had probably been made of people as well. That was why there had been so few adults in the lobby. Some of the adults who’d fled there from upstairs must have been turned into a monster and then killed the others. Those bloodsuckers, the Tabanus Hellfly Larvae, had also probably been people.

How many...? How many people have I killed?

Yuuma stood frozen, unable to process the question.

He heard a voice. It sounded like it was coming from somewhere far away.

“Yu...!”

It was Kenk. His voice shook as he yelled Yuuma’s name. Looking up, Yuuma saw Kenk gripping his hammer with trembling hands.

Despite his fear, Kenk took a step forward, his feet moving like lead. Sawa and Tomori were still about a meter ahead of them. Kenk was trying to protect them.

Think later. Right now, you have to move!!

Somehow, Yuuma managed to kickstart his brain again. He shouted hoarsely

at Kenk and the girls.

“Go back...! Run the other way...!”

Immediately, Sawa and Tomori spun around and began running.

As soon as the girls passed them on either side, Yuuma and Kenk spun around on their heels as well and followed. The walkway made a full circle around the outside perimeter of the playroom and connected with the elevator lobby on the other end. Even if the giant creature chased them, as long as they got to the elevators first, they could still flee via the stairs.

It took only three seconds before those plans fell apart.

A giant, gaping hole awaited in the middle of the walkway. The floor must have been destroyed by the Conehead Demolisher earlier, from the opposite force created by its almost ten-meter-long jump. The floor before them had been turned into a crater, with the edges of smashed floor panels sticking up like spikes. It wouldn't be easy to make their way through— *Thud. Thud.* The floor shook with each stomp as the creature approached. Yuuma could feel his skin vibrate from the force of the creature's low-pitched growls.

“Haah... Hyaaaaaa—!!”

Kenk suddenly screamed, brandishing his Bruising Hammer and turning back the other way to charge at the monster.

“Kenk...”

...don't! Yuuma wanted to shout, but he never got the chance.

Kenk swung his hammer downward as hard as he could, aiming for the Conehead Bruiser's left leg. But before his blow could connect, the creature's massive, boulder-like left fist whipped forward in a scooping motion.

Wham! Kenk shot through the air with incredible force, whizzing past Yuuma on the right and crashing into the wall far behind them. Yuuma could see Kenk's HP bar in the upper-left-hand corner of his vision. Nearly 90 percent of it disappeared instantaneously.

“Ah...ahhhh...!!”

A scream of rage erupted from Yuuma's lips.

He couldn't let Kenk's foolish act of bravery go to waste. At the very least, he needed to buy Sawa and Tomori enough time to escape.

Yuuma charged, heading straight toward the creature.

He doubted the steel bar he was holding would even scratch the creature. What he was really hoping to do was to bait the creature and draw it away. The Demolisher was much bigger than the Bruiser had been, but that also meant there was plenty of space between its legs. If Yuuma could just slide in between them, he might be able to lead the monster back toward the entrance.

Yuuma's mind was made up. Summoning what little courage he had, he charged toward the creature's feet.

The Demolisher towered over him. Maybe he was seeing things, but for a moment, Yuuma thought he saw it grin.

With perfect timing, almost as if it had seen through Yuuma's plan, the creature drew back its right leg and kicked, batting Yuuma away like a fly.

The force was incomprehensible. Once, when Yuuma was little, he had fallen off the wall surrounding their house and hit the asphalt below. That felt like nothing compared to this. Yuuma had lifted his arms up reflexively to block. He felt his bones shatter as he was catapulted through the air at an acute angle, colliding with the wall at a point high above the ground and then crashing to the floor on the other side of the crater.

Yuuma's vision swam. The one thing that remained clear was his HP bar: It was silently withering away. He didn't care. Instead, he turned his head toward Sawa and Tomori, willing his eyes to focus. They stood a few dozen meters away, their backs turned to him.

...Run!

...Run!

He was too weak to make a sound. All he could do was pray.

He saw the shadow of the creature shambling closer. Its long, black tongue flicked at the streams of drool that ran from its jagged, slit-like mouth.

...RUN!!

Everything was fading. Yuuma clung desperately to consciousness.

Suddenly—Sawa raised her right hand high into the air and shouted: “Come, Valac!!”

What was she saying? Yuuma didn’t understand.

It seemed to be some sort of keyword; Sawa’s body erupted with crimson light.

Her short hair fluttered wildly, and her windbreaker whipped free from her body.

Two long, thin protuberances began to grow from her head. Horns. The short, three-centimeter nubs that had been sitting over her temples were transforming into sharp-pointed horns nearly twenty centimeters long.

The wings on her back also began to change. With a flapping sound, like the unfurling of a sail, her two wings—which had previously been tiny and bat-like, more like clothing accessories—unfolded to a meter wide.

“GWUHARRRR?!”

The creature froze in surprise and then immediately began to charge at even greater speed. It thrust both hands forward as it approached, as if to snatch both girls at once.

Sawa wrapped her left hand around Tomori, who stood rooted to the spot. Sawa then gave a single flap of her wings.

The two girls rose weightlessly into the air, soaring across the crater that blocked the walkway and landing in front of Yuuma.

Sawa set Tomori down and then was airborne again. This time she hovered about three meters off the ground, pointing her left hand at the creature as it continued to thunder toward them.

“Infernus!!”

Sawa’s voice seemed to echo slightly with power as she cast her spell. The first word was the element. It was how all magic spells began—but Yuuma didn’t recognize the one she had just used.

The circuitry pattern of Sawa's QREST, which stretched from her left hand to barely below her elbow, flared to life with a fiery magenta glow.

A single point of crimson light appeared before her left hand. In a moment, the ball had expanded into a massive, beach-ball-sized orb of fire. It was raw magical energy; she had yet to chant the form. The *Actual Magic* guidebook had included video of the most powerful fire spell in the game, Bolide—and this was already much larger than the form for that spell.

“Magnus Hasta!!”

The form. The swirling ball of fire suddenly transformed into a long, narrow great spear, around three meters in length.

The Conehead Demolisher staggered sideways, its feet caught in the crater that it had created. As if Sawa had been waiting for that opening— *“Ignis!!”*

With a maelstrom of fiery sparks, and a deafening roar that seemed to shake the entire building, the massive spear shot through the air.

It struck the Conehead Demolisher squarely in its massive chest before burrowing deeply into the creature's flesh and disappearing.

The Demolisher threw both arms out wide. Seething black patches began to blister and bubble up all along the surface of its three-and-a-half-meter-tall frame, as if it were being boiled alive from the inside—a moment later, it opened its mouth wide, and a column of flame shot forth. Shoulder, stomach, back; flames erupted across its body, one after another, until finally the Demolisher was completely engulfed in a vortex of flames.

“GWAURRGGGHHH!!”

The creature's death cry, a mixture of rage and possibly fear, was lost amid the tremendous explosive roar.

The crater had now grown even deeper and wider. The raging column of fire that shot upward reached nearly to the ceiling. The Conehead Demolisher's massive body crumbled in upon itself, incinerated inside the crimson flames. Even the last remaining fragments of charcoal were eventually consumed in pyrotechnic brilliance.

Sawa floated silently to the ground, lit from behind by the pulsating glare of the crimson flames.

Her hair had turned a purplish red color that closely matched her QREST. Sharp, tripart horns extended from her scalp, while dark, obsidian wings unfolded triumphantly from her back. And her eyes—her eyes shone with a reddish gold light.

As Yuuma's consciousness began fading, a single ancient word floated up from the deepest recesses of his mind: *Demon*.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



Yukihana Elementary School Class 6-1 Roll Sheet

Ver. 1.1

Girls

Homeroom Teacher: Yukari Ebisawa

Student Number	Name	Sex	Character Class	Notes
1	Sawa Ashihara	F	Mage	Twin sister of Yuuma Ashihara.
2	Kanami Iida	F	Unknown	On the swim team.
3	Shouko Ezato	F	Unknown	Laid-back personality.
4	Sayu Kenjou	F	Unknown	Dreams of being a pop star.
5	Minagi Sano	F	Priest	Childhood friend of Yuuma and Sawa.
6	Tomori Shimizu	F	Priest	Student librarian.
7	Mami Shimonosono	F	Unknown	Loves black magic.
8	Aoi Soga	F	Priest	Likes to bake.
9	Saki Chikamori	F	Unknown	Looks up to the stylish Ren Fujikawa.
10	Chise Tsuda	F	Unknown	Class pet keeper.
11	Kyouka Teragami	F	Unknown	Leader of the girls.
12	Misato Nakajima	F	Unknown	On the volleyball team.
13	Chinami Nushiro	F	Unknown	Shortest girl in the class.
14	Kimiko Nobori	F	Unknown	Likes Gothic Lolita fashion.
15	Mimi Hariya	F	Unknown	From Kyoto. Likes Japanese sweets.
16	Ren Fujikawa	F	Unknown	Very beautiful. Considers Sumika Watamaki her rival.
17	Karin Henmi	F	Unknown	Loves fortune-telling.
18	Aria Misono	F	Mage	The girliest, most superficial student in the class.
19	Shizu Metoki	F	Unknown	Attends a kendo dojo.
20	Yukimi Yumura	F	Unknown	Hates herself and wants to change.
21	Sumika Watamaki	F	Priest	Most idolized girl in the class.

Boys

Student Number	Name	Sex	Character Class	Notes
22	Shinta Aida	M	Unknown	Likes card games.
23	Yuuma Ashihara	M	Monster Tamer	Mediocre at sports and school.
24	Youichi Oono	M	Warrior	Captain of the basketball team.
25	Akihisa Kaji	M	Unknown	Wants to be a streamer.
26	Kai Kisanuki	M	Unknown	On the soccer team.
27	Kenji Kondou	M	Warrior	Yuuma Ashihara's best friend.
28	Teruki Sugamo	M	Warrior	Class president and captain of the soccer team.
29	Takato Sera	M	Unknown	Likes skateboarding.
30	Masato Takio	M	Unknown	Likes anime, games, and manga.
31	Tomonori Tada	M	Unknown	Likes card games. Friends with Shinta Aida.
32	Shuutarou Toojima	M	Unknown	Trades cryptocurrency.
33	Kakeru Niki	M	Unknown	Friends with Shin Haizaki. Has excellent grades.
34	Ryuugo Nunono	M	Unknown	Attends the same kendo dojo as Shizu Metoki.
35	Shin Haizaki	M	Unknown	Has the best grades in the class.
36	Haruki Hokari	M	Unknown	Likes skateboarding. Friends with Takato Sera.
37	Yukihisa Miura	M	Unknown	On the basketball team.
38	Kouji Mukaibara	M	Unknown	Good at editing videos.
39	Takeshi Moro	M	Unknown	Obsessed with voice actors.
40	Kennosuke Yatsunashi	M	Unknown	Son of a city council member.
41	Naruo Wakasa	M	Unknown	Military buff.



Afterword

Hello again, or possibly for the first time. It's me, Reki Kawahara. Thank you for picking up this copy of *Demons' Crest*, Volume 1: *Reality∞Erosion*.

This book marks my first time publishing a completely new work through Dengeki Bunko (as opposed to online serialization or ebook versions of previous books). And while it's full of familiar keywords such as *fulldive* and *VRMMO*, it is very different in flavor from past works such as *Accel World* and *Sword Art Online*... But now that you've read it, what did you think?

Before touching on the content of the actual story, allow me to explain why I chose to begin a new series at this time.

The oldest note I have on hand with ideas for *Demons' Crest* is time-stamped November 2016. In other words, I actually had the idea for this work six years ago. It started as a simple idea: "a story about an entire elementary school class who get trapped inside an enclosed space, working together to escape and sometimes bickering with one another." Little by little, I added more meat to those bones, getting advice from producers and editors along the way and revising and brushing up my ideas. It was about three years ago, in 2019, when the idea finally took on a more recognizable shape.

Back then, however, I was getting busy with more and more nonwriting work, and the pace at which I was releasing books for my existing series—*Accel World*, *Sword Art Online*, and *The Isolator*—had slowed. That hardly seemed like the time to start a new series. And so I decided to put *Demons' Crest* back on the

shelf until at least one of those series came to a close. Before I knew it, however, three years had already passed.

Even now, in 2022, those existing series show no sign of coming to an end anytime soon. At first I thought another three years might pass before *Demons' Crest* would see the light of day... That is, until Kazuma Miki, who has been my editor since my debut, and also happens to be the current CEO of Straight Edge Inc., mentioned that they were planning on starting a webtoons business and proposed turning *Demons' Crest* into a webtoon.

I'd been interested in webtoons as a new form of expression for some time, and I was delighted by the prospect of having one of my works used as the basis for one, so I gave the okay immediately. But there was a second part to Miki's proposal...publishing a light novel through Dengeki Bunko at the same time as the webtoon. To be honest, I hesitated at first. As I mentioned earlier, I worried that if I started a new series while my three existing ones were still ongoing, I would exceed my capacity in all sorts of ways.

But the best time to release the first volume would be when the webtoon began running. With everything that needed to be done, a decision needed to be made quickly. What finally made up my mind, however, were several concept sketches created by the webtoon team. They depicted Yuuma and the other characters, set against dynamic backdrops from the two worlds that serve as settings for this work—the VRMMORPG *Actual Magic* and the large-scale amusement center Althea. When I saw their work, it made me want to create depictions with my own pen as well! Naturally, that didn't dispel my fears of taking on too much, but now that Yuuma, Sawa, and the others had gotten into my head, there was no way I was going to get them out again. Urged on by the boisterous energy of the elementary-school-age characters themselves, I decided that I would release the first volume of *Demons' Crest* in November 2022.

There were tough days ahead, to be sure. Volume 27 of *Sword Art Online* was already scheduled for release that October. My plan was to finish that manuscript early so that I would have plenty of time to hunker down with Volume 1 of *Demons' Crest*... But one task after another piled up, and before I knew it, my schedule was in shambles. As usual, my submission of *SAO*, Volume

27, came right down to the wire. But somehow I managed to submit it and to finish the *Demons' Crest* manuscript by the seat of my pants, so now here I sit, writing this afterword.

I was extremely pleased to learn that Yukiko Horiguchi had agreed to do the character designs and illustrations for *Demons' Crest*. Her depictions of Yuuma, Sawa, Kenk, Nagi, Sumika, and all the other students are incredible, and they make even me, the author, eager to discover what comes next. I can only imagine the effect they have on everyone reading!

But with that said, allow me to touch a little further on the story of *Demons' Crest*.

First, regarding the name... The truth is that ever since I first came up with the idea for this series six years ago, I referred to it by a completely different working title (something along the lines of *Code XXXXX*). We even continued to use that working title after planning for the webtoon began. But when it came time to decide on a proper title, nothing ever seemed quite right. Talking with editors and producers, we were beginning to wonder if maybe we should just use the working title as the actual one. That is, until one day, when my eyes settled on a certain passage in the book: "...pronounced like the word *crest*, as in insignia or peak." Why not something like *XXX Crest*? As soon as the thought occurred to me, I had a flash of inspiration and knew what word belonged there. *Demon*. Fortunately the editors and the webtoon team liked the name as well, and it became the current title. *Demons' Crest*, the insignia of the demons.

Moving on to the story itself... There's nothing I can write here that wouldn't be a spoiler (LOL). But I suppose that's always the case with the first volume of a series. Not to distract you with my tales of woe, but you wouldn't believe how much trouble I had coming up with backstories for all forty-one of the sixth-grade students at Yukihana Elementary School!

I've mentioned this several times in interviews before, but I don't usually like to start by writing the characters. That style of writing doesn't come naturally to me. I prefer to see what inspiration strikes as the characters show up in the normal course of writing the story...or if I'm trying to put on airs, I might say I believe that characters should not be written into the world by the author, but that they should appear there naturally, by themselves. So if left to my own

devices, I would prefer to start penning the story without writing the characters first. In this particular instance, however, I was already laying out the long-term plot from the start, so I needed to solidify the characters from the get-go. The immense pain I experienced in working out the names, personalities, and other details for forty-one characters all at once will be forever branded into my memory. But that character writing was soon put to good use in the webtoons, so in the end, I guess it was all in a hard day's work (LOL).

Speaking of the setting, the magic spells that Yuuma and the others use were a big challenge for me as well. It probably would have been easier if I had stuck with a fictional language and made all the spells one word, but instead, I decided to go the more annoying route of modeling the spellcasting after actual language, with things like elements and forms. I remember spending hours fussing over little details for some of the spellcasting scenes. But the way they depicted the buildup and “activation” process in the webtoons was really cool, so I think all that hard work paid off.

The last thing I would like to touch on is why I chose to make the protagonist an elementary school student.

My own elementary school days happened long ago, in ancient times, so my memories of back then are fuzzy, but I seem to recall the world feeling very limited at that age. When it comes to school, for instance, your own class is like a kingdom all its own...and the next class over is an entirely different kingdom. But owing to that isolation, the relationships between students in a class can be very complicated and volatile, and I seem to recall the atmosphere often being tense and charged in its own special way. By trapping forty-one classmates together inside the enclosed space of Althea, I hope to show how those dynamics play out as they either succeed, or fail, at working together—or at least that is the starting point for this work. But of course, this is me talking, so who knows what will happen? Dear readers, consider yourselves a boat in the storm as you join me on this adventure!

Although I've already rambled on long enough, I would like to end by thanking a few people.

The illustrator, Yukiko Horiguchi, for using her fine-honed brush skills to draw such lush and detailed characters, in such a vivid and fascinating way. My

editor, Kazuma Miki, for his industrious efforts in bridging the gap between the webtoon and light novel editions, and in ensuring that they were released simultaneously. My other editor, Adachi, for helping support my ever-perilous schedule. The creative team behind the webtoon version, for creating such amazing, high-quality work. And all of you who have read this far.

To everyone: Thank you. I will work my hardest to ensure that the wait for Volume 2 of *Demons' Crest* is not too long. I look forward to your ongoing support!

Reki Kawahara

September 2022

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Demons' Crest 1

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