

REKI  
KAWAHARA

ILLUSTRATION BY  
YUKIKO HORIGUCHI



# DEMONS' CREST

OTHERWORLD OF MANIFESTATION

## 2

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# DEMONS' CREST

OTHERWORLD ∞ MANIFESTATION

# 2



### *Actual Magic*

The world's first full-dive VRMMORPG, also known as *AM*. This map shows just a portion of what's believed to be a sprawling overworld.

REKI KAWAHARA

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"Th-thank  
you."

[Yuuma Ashihara]

"Are you  
okay? I was  
so happy to  
finally run  
into someone  
from our  
class that I  
couldn't stop  
myself from  
joining the  
fight."

[Sawa Ashihara]

[Kakeru Niki]

[Tomari Shimizu]

[Kenji Kondou]





“Ashi...hara...”

“...Did...I...  
h-help...?”

Fulltime Wotamaw



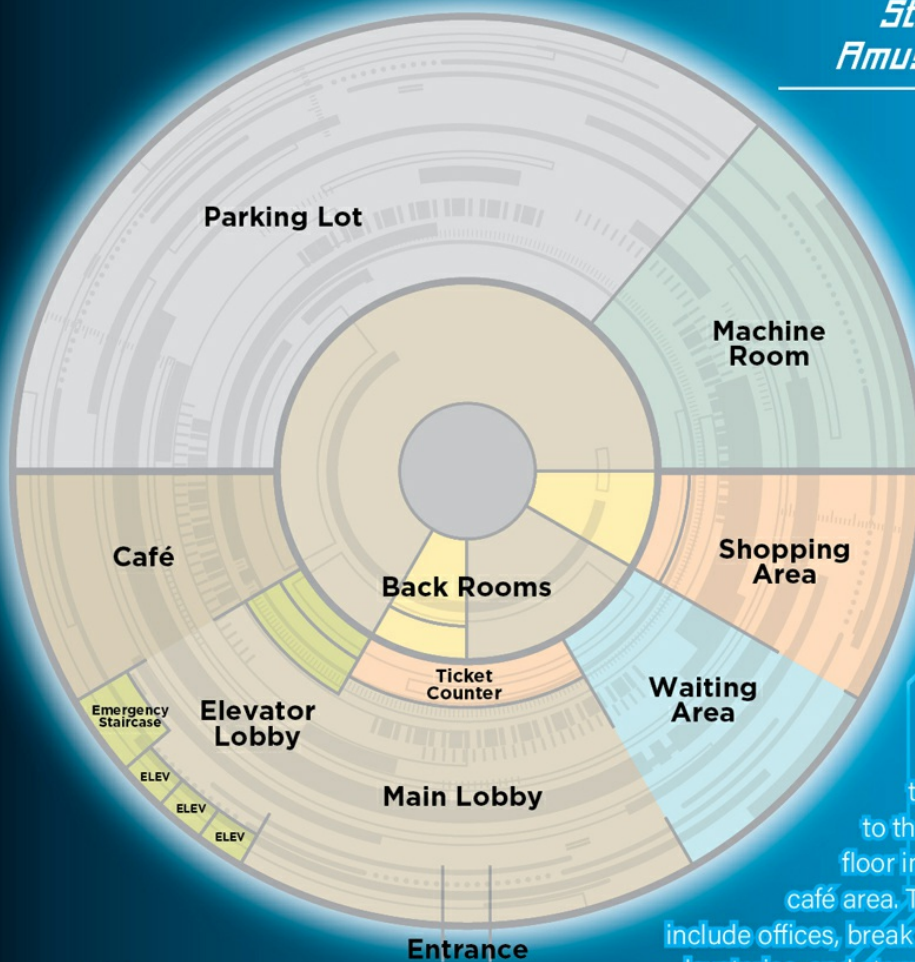
“Flamma.”

[Minagi Sano]

“Nagi...!”

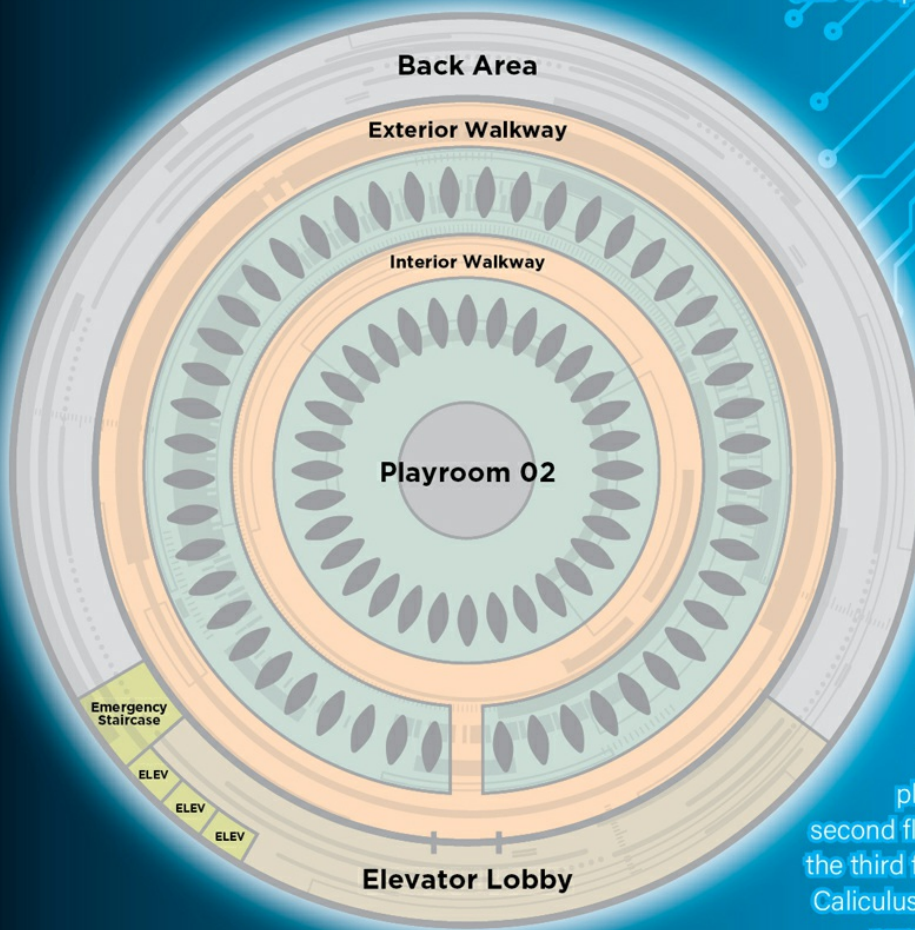


## Althea Floor Map



# 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. Sugamo's group has set up a base on this floor.



# 3F

This entire floor is a playroom, just like the second floor. Playroom 02 on the third floor contains eighty Calculus capsules, the same number as Playroom 01.



ITEMS



FRIENDS



SYSTEM

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



OPTIONS

# DEMONS' CREST

OTHERWORLD ∞ MANIFESTATION

## 2

REKI KAWAHARA

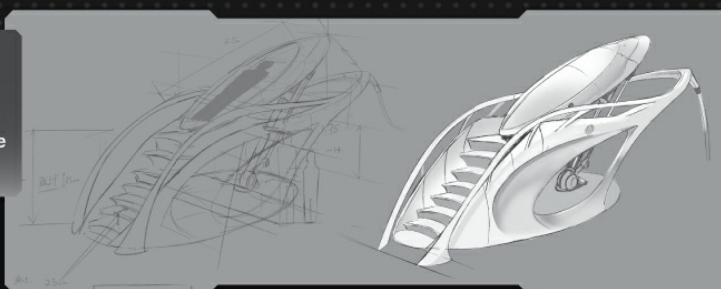
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### ***Calculus***

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. 1.1

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.

“Hey, Yu... If you had to choose between saving me or saving Sawa, which of us would you choose?”

It was two years ago, during the summer vacation of their fourth-grade year, when Minagi Sano (aka Nagi) asked Yuuma that question.

Yuuma had gone to the Yukihana Elementary School pool to swim that day with his twin sister, Sawa, and Nagi, their next-door neighbor and childhood friend. Even though they had grown up in a landlocked prefecture without beaches, the three friends were excellent swimmers. They had already done five laps of the twenty-meter course when the lifeguard, who was a classmate’s father, told them to take a break.

Sawa went to use the bathroom, while Yuuma and Nagi sat side by side underneath one of the poolside awnings. Clear sunlight sparkled on the surface of the water. Yuuma was staring absently into space, surrounded by the incessant chirping of cicadas and the joyful screams of other children, when Nagi suddenly leaned in close and asked the question.

Just the other day, the three of them had taken a course in pool safety, during which the lifeguard had told them a story about a child who had drowned at a nearby school. Yuuma assumed Nagi was thinking of that story, but he wasn’t sure how to answer her question. He stared at her silently instead.

A strand of hair poked out of Nagi’s blue swimcap, a drop of water hanging off



the end. She gazed back at Yuuma with her lightly colored eyes.

Yuuma took a deep breath. Why was his heart suddenly racing so fast?

He couldn't remember if he had answered her, or if he had just stayed quiet.

Nagi never asked him to make a choice like that again. But every now and then Yuuma remembered the buzzing of the cicadas, the smell of chlorine in the air, and the way that drop of water had clung to Nagi's hair. And whenever he did, his heart skipped a beat.

It was so warm.

Yuuma felt as if he was being immersed in a gently flowing stream of warm, pristine water.

He wished he could soak here forever. Eyes closed, body slack, blissfully asleep and unaware...

“Yu... Wake up, Yu.”

Yuuma felt someone shake him.

“Just a couple more minutes...,” he mumbled, eyes still closed.

“Yuuma, I said wake up!”

This time, whoever was speaking pinched Yuuma’s cheek hard. He forced his heavy eyelids open.

Everything was blurry. Two human shapes faded into view. Yuuma blinked several times, allowing his eyes to gradually focus.

To the right he could see a girl with long pigtails and black-rimmed glasses. She stared into his face with concern. It was the student librarian, Tomori Shimizu.

The girl to the left, meanwhile—the one who was currently pinching Yuuma’s cheek—had a bob and was dressed in a black windbreaker. She was his twin



sister, Sawa Ashihara.

“Are you up now?” Sawa asked.

Yuuma nodded slightly. Sawa finally released his cheek.

“What...”

*...happened to me?* he had begun to ask, but the words didn’t come out. It felt like the back of his throat was on fire. Tomori held an open plastic bottle to his lips.

Yuuma gulped slowly as the water trickled into his mouth. It wasn’t cold, but it was satisfying as his body started to rehydrate. Yuuma finally began to feel like himself again. He sighed deeply.

“Thank you, Shimizu,” he said, his voice dry and raspy.

As Yuuma tried to sit up, he realized his school uniform jacket had been removed and was now spread underneath him like a blanket. He ran his fingers over his clothes, but none of them were wet.

So then why did it feel like he was in warm water earlier? More importantly, what was he doing lying on the floor in a corner of the walkway...?

Yuuma started to push himself up into a sitting position, but the bones in both arms throbbed faintly. The pain was like a switch that triggered a flood of images.

The adults—so many of them—sitting against a wall with their knees up in Playroom 02.

The way they fused together to create that gigantic monster.

Yuuma’s best friend, Kenji Kondou, sailing through the air like a ragdoll after being punched by the massive creature.

And then, finally...Sawa. Sawa, transformed. Sawa, incinerating the monster with earth-shattering flame magic.

“Sawa...”

Yuuma used his core strength to sit up and then stared closely into his sister’s face.

The hood of her windbreaker was up, leaving Sawa's face half hidden in shadow. Her eyes, however, were once again their usual reddish brown. The inhuman golden glow from when she was transformed was gone, and there were no signs of the larger horns or wings, either.

For a brief moment he wondered...had that been a dream? But his arms still throbbed in pain from where the monster had kicked him, and the air in the room left a singed smell in the back of his nose. If he'd dreamed all that, then the rest of this experience had to have been a dream, too: everything that had happened since getting trapped inside the large-scale amusement complex Althea.

Sawa remained silent. Yuuma tore his gaze away from her and glanced toward the upper-left-hand corner of his vision. He could see something floating there, something that shouldn't appear in the real world—his HP bar. He should have been at less than half health, due to the damage from the monster's kick, but had already recovered to around 80 percent. He probably had Tomori's healing magic to thank for that, since she had chosen the Priest class. He had also jumped from level 9 all the way to level 11, although he didn't feel much like celebrating at the moment.

Yuuma took a look around the room.

The words *Playroom 02* had been painted on the wall to his left, and a row of half-demolished Calculus capsules stretched out to his right. There was a large craterlike pit in the floor a short distance away, in which a small, flickering fire remained.

Finally, Yuuma glanced behind him. He spotted Kenk, who was lying on his back with his jacket off, just like Yuuma had been a moment earlier.

"Kenk..." Yuuma scooted over to his side.

That gigantic monster—the Conehead Demolisher—had punched Kenk so hard that it had tossed him across the room, seriously injuring him and deleting more than half of his health. Kenk's eyes were still closed. Yuuma grabbed his shoulder to ask if he was all right, but he soon realized Kenk wasn't bleeding. In fact, he didn't even look pale.

Remembering that the HP bars of other party members were visible as well,



Yuuma glanced up and to the left again. Kenk's HP bar, which was displayed underneath his own, was now about 70 percent full. The girls, meanwhile, were almost entirely uninjured.

Yuuma had been holding his breath. He finally exhaled and turned back toward Tomori, who was still holding the open water bottle. He bowed his head.

"Thanks for healing us." Yuuma then looked over at Sawa. "Thank you, too, Sawa. If you hadn't defeated that giant monster for us, me and Kenk would've both died."

It was embarrassing thanking his own twin sister like that, but that was how Yuuma segued into asking.

".....Um, Sawa...what was that transformation earlier? How were you able to use such powerful magic...?"

"Well..."

Sawa blinked a few times, searching for the right words, then cocked her head to the side as if listening closely to something they couldn't see. Yuuma strained his ears, but all he heard was the hollow echo of the empty room.

"Fine...", Sawa whispered before lifting her head. "She says she wants to explain herself."

"Sh-she...?"

Yuuma briefly made eye contact with Tomori, but she seemed to be as much in the dark as he was.

"Who are you talking about? There's no one here but us..."

Without answering Yuuma, Sawa pushed back the hood of her windbreaker and closed her eyes. She was silent for a moment, her face downcast. Suddenly, she lifted her head again, and her eyes flew open.

"...!"

Yuuma sucked in his breath sharply. Sawa's eyes were a completely different color now—a reddish gold. They didn't glow this time, but Yuuma was pretty sure there was no one on the face of this earth with irises that were naturally

this hue. He instinctively glanced toward her temples, but her horns were the same two plant-like buds peeking out from the thicket of her hair. They were no bigger than before.

“Sawa...?” Yuuma said fearfully.

As Yuuma stared at her, Sawa’s lips twisted into a faint smile. In the eleven years and eight months of their lives together as twins, Yuuma had never before seen an expression like that on his sister’s face. It was a detached smirk, full of both pity and amusement.

The voice that came from her lips was like a whisper.

“We meet at last...brother.”

*That isn’t Sawa.*

Yuuma was sure of it. Yes, the voice faintly resembled his sister’s, but the inflection and pitch were completely different from how Sawa usually spoke.

Yuuma was about to ask her who she was when he remembered what he had witnessed just minutes earlier. Before transforming, Sawa had lifted her right hand into the air and called a name. Or something that had sounded like a name, at least.

“Are you...Valac?”

The moment Yuuma spoke that name, the smile of whoever it was standing before him deepened. She nodded.

“That’s correct. I am Valac... I am what you humans refer to as a demon.”

“A...a demon?!” gasped Tomori, who had been silent up until now. She flinched and leaned back slightly, but then quickly recovered, leaning forward again in order to ask a question of her own.

“When you say ‘demon’...does that mean you’re a monster from *Actual Magic*? You escaped from the game world to possess Sawa?”

“Hmm...”

The smile on Sawa’s—no, Valac’s—face relaxed. She tilted her head slightly and then nodded.



“I don’t particularly care for being called a monster, but I suppose what you’ve described is more or less accurate. I usually remain half-asleep inside Sawa’s heart and mind, but I can take over when she calls for me, and I can also grant her my *vires*—my power.”

“A...vires? What’s that?” asked Yuuma. He had trouble pronouncing the unfamiliar word.

Valac cocked an eyebrow. With all that she had just told him, *that* was what he wanted to focus on?

“The word *vires* originally comes from Latin,” she said. “It means strength.”

“Latin...”

Yuuma stared blankly. Tomori stepped in, asking another question.

“And this power...is the ability to use powerful magic?”

“To put it in terms from these games you children so love, you can think of it as a buff to her magic skill.”

It sounded like there might be other demons out there, ones with different *vires*, but Valac didn’t give them a chance to follow up.

“When I come to the surface, I can temporarily boost Sawa’s magic skill to its maximum value. That was how she was able to use the Infernal Spear spell earlier. I only increase her magic skill, however, not her MP. She barely had enough for a single cast.”

“The maximum value...?!?”

Yuuma was left speechless again.

In every MMORPG Yuuma had ever played, it took ages to max out skills—in fact, Yuuma couldn’t remember having ever actually done it himself. Assuming *Actual Magic* had a similar growth system, the ability to boost a skill to its maximum level would be ridiculously OP.

Yuuma glanced over his shoulder, expecting one of his friends to share in his astonishment. Kenk was still unconscious, however, and Tomori wasn’t really a gamer. She didn’t seem to realize what a big deal that would be. Sawa, meanwhile, was still swapped with Valac. And Nagi...well, they still had no idea

where Nagi was.

The whole reason they had entered this playroom in the first place was to search for Nagi. Every second mattered. But it wasn't like they could put this discussion with Valac on the back burner. Why had she possessed Sawa? Were there any physical or mental risks involved? And why were monsters from *Actual Magic* now able to talk of their own volition? There were so many questions they still needed answers to.

Yuuma could freak out about skill levels later. He remembered something. Something that had been nagging at him.

"Earlier, when Sawa used Healing Droplet, the light was pink instead of the usual white. Was that because you were buffing her skill level?" Yuuma asked apprehensively.

Valac raised an eyebrow, as if to ask if that really mattered right now, but she gave a small nod.

"It's possible. My anima is fuchsia-colored, after all."

"Anima...?"

Another strange word. Valac seemed to lose her patience.

"Aren't there more important things you should be asking right now?" she said.

"Oh...of course..."

Valac had a point. Yuuma bowed his head.

"Valac, thank you for saving us and all... But Sawa's not in any danger, is she, from being possessed? That's why she grew horns and wings, isn't it? As part of the possession?"

"If by 'danger' you mean danger to her health, you need not worry. At least, not in the short term."

"What about in the long term...?"

"Why worry about what might happen a year from now, when there's no guarantee that you'll even live to see tomorrow?"

“...”

Yuuma gritted his teeth. What Valac said was cruel but true. It had been 3:00 PM when they first became trapped inside Althea. It was now 5:20. How many times had they already teetered on the brink of death in just those two hours and twenty minutes alone?

They needed to find Nagi and figure a way out of Althea as soon as possible. They could worry about any side effects from Sawa's possession after that.

“Valac, do you know what's happening here at Althea? Or how we can get outside?”

Yuuma was nearly tripping over his own words. Valac smiled at him mockingly.

“Don't forget that I'm a demon. You've yet to pay the price for my aid earlier, and now you expect me to answer your questions? That's rather presumptuous, wouldn't you agree?”

“The price...? I don't have very much money...”

Yuuma reached toward his QREST to check how much money was left in his account, but Valac stopped him with her index finger. Although she was barely touching him, her finger felt heavy, like a bar of steel.

“Don't be ridiculous. Obviously I'm not interested in shaking down schoolchildren for their allowances...”

“Then how do I pay...?” Yuuma asked hesitantly.

*She's not gonna ask for my soul, is she...?!*

Valac withdrew her finger. “There's something that I want you to do for me. Something that will even align with your own goals.”

“What is it...?”

“I want you to go find Nagi.”

“...”

Yuuma and Tomori exchanged glances.

Valac's request didn't merely align with their goals—it *was* their goal. That



hardly seemed to qualify as repayment for what Valac had done for them. After all, she'd just said she was a demon. Sure, she wasn't asking for their souls, but Yuuma had a feeling there might still be a catch.

Tomori gathered up the courage to ask another question.

"When you say 'go find Nagi,' does that mean that you know where Sano is?"

"A general idea, yes."

"But why are you so interested in Sano...?"

Yuuma wanted to know the answer to that, too. Sawa's life was obviously important to Valac, since Sawa was the vessel the demon was possessing. But what interest could Valac possibly have in Nagi?

Valac, however, just placed a finger to Tomori's lips. "Remember what I told you earlier? Question time is over. If you want answers, you'll do as I ask."



“Fine.” Yuuma nodded, staring questioningly at this creature who had taken his sister’s form. “But tell us one thing: Where in Althea *is* Nagi?”

“Nowhere, of course.”

“...?”

Yuuma and Tomori didn’t know what to say. Valac stared at the two of them before whispering: “Nagi is not in Veras—the real world. She is located in Virtualis...inside that little sandbox you refer to as *Actual Magic*.”



“You coulda woken me up at least!”

That was the first thing out of Kenk’s mouth once Yuuma and the others gave him an abridged explanation of what had happened while he was out cold.

Yuuma had actually forgotten all about Kenk—but he wasn’t about to admit that to his friend. He tried to look as sincere as possible as he spoke.

“You were the most injured out of all of us, Kenk... I just figured you’d recover faster if we let you sleep.”

“I don’t buy that for one minute!”

Kenk stared at him angrily. Tomori, however, cut in.

“No, it’s true. It varies between individuals, but HP does regenerate faster during rest.” From her tone of voice, it seemed like she knew what she was talking about.

“Wait, really?” said Kenk, surprised.

Yuuma almost said the exact same thing, but he bit his tongue in the nick of time.

Tomori was right. In the world of *Actual Magic*, a player’s HP recovered at the same rate regardless of whether they were lying down or sprinting at top speed. But Kenk’s HP bar had overtaken Yuuma’s at some point and was now at over 90 percent. Even considering the fact that Kenk was a Warrior and Yuuma

was a magic-using class, the difference in recovery speed wasn't plausible inside *AM*.

"Hey Shimizu, does that mean that we can recover completely in just a few minutes, even if we're badly injured, so long as we lie down and rest?" asked Yuuma.

Tomori shook her head slowly. "I don't think so. Regeneration probably wouldn't be able to keep up if you're so badly injured that your HP is continuing to fall... For instance, if you'd broken a bone or severed a major artery. I have a feeling resting will only help to recover from mild injuries, say the top thirty percent of your HP bar."

"Makes sense..."

Althea was currently a mixed reality, a fusion of the natural laws of the real world and the game system of *AM*. Pitfalls awaited them around every corner if they let themselves forget that fact. But it was also something they could use to their advantage. For example, if they ever found themselves in a situation where they were unable to use healing magic, so long as they could administer first aid to stop their HP from decreasing further, as Sawa had done for Yuuma earlier in the infirmary, they could wait for the natural HP recovery granted by the game system to take care of the rest.

That meant that abilities that were underwhelming inside *AM*, like Enhanced HP Regeneration, might be invaluable in the real world. Maybe all four of them should use some of their accumulated skill points to acquire that one.

"Hey, Sawa, can you call that demon up again?" Kenk asked bluntly, interrupting Yuuma's thoughts.

Only a few minutes had passed since Sawa had taken over from Valac. She took a sip of mineral water from her inventory before replying, apparently annoyed, "There's a limit to how long we can change places. I can't bring her out again today."

"Man, really? How long can she come out per day?"

"Ten minutes."

"That's all?! You'd think she could at least do fifteen..."

“Hey, don’t blame me.”

Yuuma scrutinized Sawa as she bantered with Kenk.

Her voice and facial expressions seemed normal. At the very least, that air of detachment that had appeared while she was trading places with Valac was gone now.

Sawa had likely—in fact, almost certainly—encountered Valac as soon as reality started shifting. It would explain why Sawa seemed to know things that Yuuma did not, or why growing horns and wings didn’t scare her. Valac must have given her at least some information.

*“Sawa...is there something you know? Something you’re not telling me?”*

Yuuma had asked her that about an hour and a half earlier, while they were in the locker room on the first floor. He still remembered her reply.

*“Please... Just give me a little more time... 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.”*

To be fair, if Sawa had told him back then that she was possessed by a demon, Yuuma wasn’t sure how he would have reacted. He certainly believed her now, at least. There was another entity living inside Sawa, one that went by the name of Valac. A demon, from the world of AM.

What if it had been Yuuma who had been possessed, rather than Sawa? There was no way he would have remained so calm throughout all of this. Sawa may have been the younger twin, but mentally speaking, Yuuma had to admit that she was the slightly more mature one. Deep down inside, however, she had to be at least a little afraid.

“Are you okay...?” Yuuma asked Sawa, drawing close.

Sawa simply nodded.

Kenk was still standing around, looking sullen. Sawa pushed him out of the way in order to address the other two.

“Yu, Tomo, I know you must have a lot of questions, but right now what we need to do is focus on finding Nagi. It’s already five thirty. If we don’t make it



back to the shelter by at least seven o'clock, you know Sugamo will make another stink."

"Ah..."

Yuuma, Tomori, and Kenk frowned at the same time.

With all the crazy things that had been happening, they'd completely forgotten that the whole reason they had left the shelter in the first place was because their class president, Teruki Sugamo, had ordered them to go find food. Fortunately, Yuuma and Sawa already had loads of onigiri, snacks, and baked goods in their inventories, which they had pilfered from the employee breakroom earlier in the day. There were currently twenty-three students at the shelter, including Yuuma and his friends—no, twenty-two, since Takeshi Moro had been killed by a monster. That meant they had enough food to cover about two meals for everyone. One onigiri or baked good, plus one snack.

That should have been enough to satisfy Sugamo for the time being. But if they didn't find a way out of Althea by tomorrow morning, or if help didn't come from outside, then they were going to run out of things to eat by noon tomorrow. Supposedly there was a huge food court on the fifth floor of Althea. There'd be plenty of food waiting if they could make their way up there. But what if Althea was like one of the tower dungeons in an RPG now, where enemies got progressively stronger on each floor you went up...?

While Yuuma was still thinking, Kenk suddenly punched his right fist into the palm of his left hand and spoke. He seemed to have finally given up on getting to meet Valac.

"All right, let's go find that crybaby, Nagi! She's still in *Actual Magic*, right? All we need to do, then, is open up her Calculus and...log her out manually..."

Kenk trailed off mid-sentence. A moment later he continued speaking, seemingly perplexed.

"But wait, didn't we already check all the Calculus capsules in Playroom 01? You don't think we missed her, do you—?"

"No," Yuuma interrupted. He remembered what Valac had told them while Kenk was out cold. "Nagi's in *AM* right now, but she's not playing the game.

She's been transported to another world, just like in a manga or anime."

"Transported...?"

Kenk stared at him, open-mouthed. Yuuma understood how he felt. Yuuma had trouble believing it himself, and he had heard it straight from Valac.

"You see...um...if we use one of the Calculus capsules now to dive into *AM*, then our actual bodies—"

"Just watch me do it. That way you can see it for yourself," Sawa cut in, glancing around the room as she spoke.

Due to the Conehead Demolisher's rampage, and Valac's powerful magic, all the nearby capsules were now seriously damaged. Sawa walked toward the back of the room instead, gesturing for the others to follow. She stopped at a point with four undamaged Calculus capsules conveniently lined up in a row.

After checking to make sure that the lids of all four capsules were open, she climbed up the ramp into one of the capsules, which had been painted with the number 229—likely indicating that it was Capsule 29 of Playroom 02. Once she was standing next to the capsule, she turned back to Yuuma and the others.

"After I enter the capsule and close the lid, wait thirty seconds and then use the emergency lever to reopen the capsule and see for yourselves. Once you're convinced it works, you can use these other capsules to dive in."

"Okay... But wait," said Yuuma.

Sawa's right leg hovered, ready to step into the capsule. "What?"

"The diving part is fine, but how do we get back out? There was no LOGOUT button in the menu during the playtest, remember?"

"Ah..." Sawa furrowed her brows together for just a moment. "It's fine. I'm sure there'll be something."

"You're *sure*?"

"What reason would there be to keep us trapped in *AM*? It's not like we can escape Althea anyway. Come on, we don't have time for this right now."

"All right..."

Yuuma nodded. Sawa swung herself gently over the lip of the capsule and then lay down on the cushion inside. The QREST on her left hand blinked as it synced up with the Calculus. The lid of the capsule, which was shaped like a flower petal, closed and locked automatically, and the holo-text on the lid's surface changed from **Vacant** to **Occupied**.

After waiting for thirty seconds to pass on the clock in the bottom-right-hand corner of his vision, and then counting out another five seconds just to be safe, Yuuma grabbed the emergency lever on the side of the Calculus capsule. Pulling back hard, he heard the lock groan as it released, and the lid rose several centimeters. He placed his fingers inside the gap and slowly lifted.

"No way...," Kenk whispered hoarsely.

Yuuma wasn't sure what to say.

Sawa had entered the capsule just forty seconds earlier. They had seen it for themselves. She was gone now, without a trace. Windbreaker and all. Yuuma poked his hand into the capsule and gingerly poked the gel-mat cushioning.

This was what Valac told them would happen if they dove into *AM*, but seeing it in person was a different story. Plenty of weird and inexplicable things had been happening since they became trapped in Althea, but witnessing a person evaporate into thin air really ratcheted up the paranormal factor.

*Don't worry. It's just like a game, like when your avatar disappears after using fast travel,* Yuuma told himself.

He lifted his head. "We should go, too..."

Tomori and Kenk nodded wordlessly.

The three hurried back to the walkway and climbed up to their individual Calculus capsules, which were lined up on the left and marked 226, 227, and 228, respectively. Yuuma slid into the empty capsule and lay down. His QREST connected automatically, and the *Actual Magic* logo appeared in the middle of his field of view. Maybe it was his imagination, but the color of the logo seemed to be darker than before.

But that was a minor detail, all things considered. Yuuma shut his eyes tightly as he listened to the hydraulic whoosh of the dampers as the lid closed. He

breathed in, out, in once more, and then— “Dive in.”

As Yuuma uttered the command, a radiant burst of light appeared behind his eyelids, starting out rainbow in color but soon fusing together into pure white. He felt his body grow distant; gravity seemed to fade. He was soon enveloped in a floating sensation, almost as if his soul had been released from his body.

Yuuma could almost swear he heard someone speaking.

*Be careful, Yuuma...*

*...Valac...is not your...*

Before Yuuma could listen any closer, his legs made contact with soft ground. He adjusted his footing to avoid falling over as he landed firmly on terra virtual.

Yuuma didn't even take a look around. He had barely stood up straight and opened his eyes again before accessing his menu window. He navigated directly to the System tab, before breathing a sigh of relief. The LOGOUT button was right where it should be.

Yuuma closed the window and looked up. He gasped.

The sun shone deep red against the horizon, as the evening sky stretched from crimson, to indigo to darker blue. A fresh breeze wafted across the lush green plains. Everything was so vivid and colorful. After being trapped in the grim, drab halls of Althea for so long, the bright colors hurt Yuuma's eyes. The air was slightly chilly and smelled of fresh grass and flowers—something they had been missing during the playtest.

Kenk arrived about ten seconds later. He craned his neck around in all directions.

“I...forgot how beautiful the world is...,” muttered Kenk, taken aback.

“Don't forget it's fake,” Yuuma reminded him.

Althea was also half virtual now.

A few seconds later Tomori also dove in, but she only took a cursory glance at the scenery before turning her attention toward her own body. She was dressed in a cassock—a type of robe specific to the Priest class. She began patting herself all over.



“Shimizu, are you all right?” Yuuma asked.

“Yes, I’m fine... But these bodies—they’re our *Actual Magic* avatars, aren’t they?”

“Hmm...” Yuuma glanced at his own hands before nodding. “I think you’re right. The moles and scars on my hand are missing.”

As Yuuma checked his own body, he realized that his Yuki-hana Elementary School uniform had been replaced with light leather armor and a woolen tunic. Apparently, their real-world clothes—their equipment—didn’t make the trip with them into *AM*.

Tomori scrutinized her own hands. “Yeah...me too. But if these are our avatars, then where did our real bodies go...?”

There was no way to know the answer to that question at the moment. Yuuma exchanged a look with Kenk.

After initiating their dive inside the Calculus capsules in the real world, their bodies should have instantly disappeared from inside the capsules. But now that they were in *AM*, they were here as avatars, created from digital data. In other words, their actual bodies didn’t exist in either world right now.

Yuuma froze, overcome by a strange, existential unease.

Sawa, who had dove in earlier than the rest, finally approached, the crisp grass crunching beneath her feet.

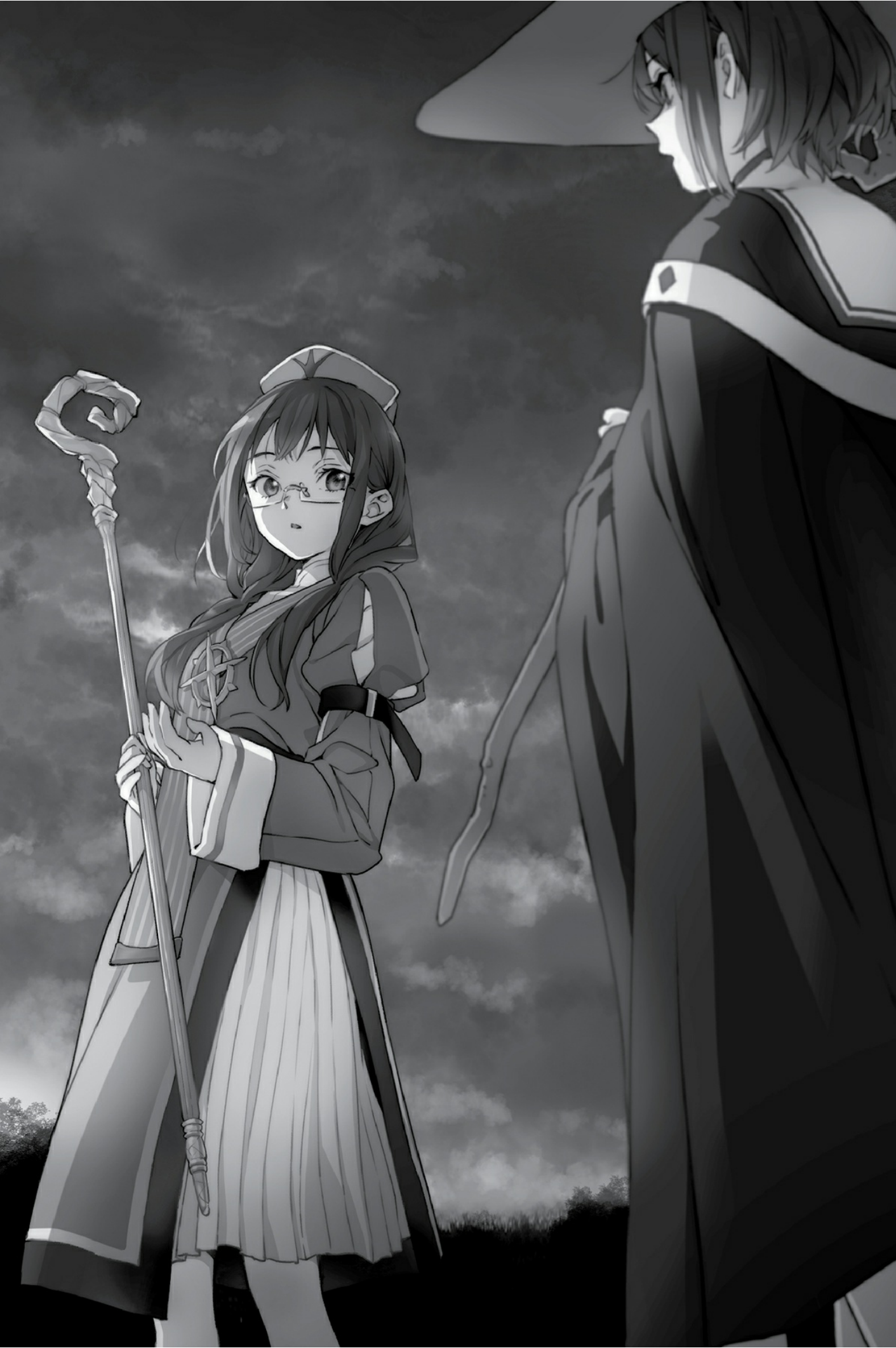
“Don’t worry, Tomo,” she said. “True, these bodies are our avatars, but they’re also real.”

“I don’t understand... What does that mean...?”

Yuuma, who was standing next to Tomori, cocked his head in confusion as well.

“I don’t entirely understand it myself...,” began Sawa, who was now dressed in Mage robes. She haltingly tried to explain. “But think of it this way. Right now, everything in Althea exists both physically and as data. That includes our human bodies. It’s why objects can still be sent to inventory there, and why people can be healed using magic. If one of us learned the high-level Teleport

spell, we could probably even teleport to different spots inside Althea.”



“Teleport...? So basically, you’re saying we teleported from Althea into the world of *AM*?” Tomori asked.

Sawa considered this for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, that’s one way to look at it. I think...the reason we turned into our avatars here is that, just like how physical existence takes precedence in the real world, data seems to take precedence in *AM*.”

“If data takes precedence...does that mean that while we’re here, we won’t bleed or feel pain when we get hurt?” asked Kenk, tentatively flexing his right hand as he spoke.

Sawa nodded again, but then she added a warning. “That’s right, but don’t get reckless. Not to state the obvious, but you can still lose hit points even if it doesn’t hurt, and I have a sneaking suspicion that if we die, that’s it for us.”

“What?! That’s not fair! I thought we were supposed to respawn at a save point!”

“Like I said earlier, these bodies are avatars, but they’re also real. If our HP runs out...I think our real life expires with it.”

“You *think*? Does that mean that Valac won’t tell you what happens if we die in here?” asked Yuuma.

Sawa frowned. “Valac popped into my head out of nowhere when we logged out of *AM* the first time. She told me all sorts of things, like how she’s a demon who’s possessing me now, and about how the real Althea and the game had fused. But it all happened so quickly. I know she told me about diving back into *AM*, and how that would work, but we ran out of time, and I never got to hear the rest.”

“Out of time...? Can’t you just call her up in your head and ask again?” said Yuuma.

“Apparently there’s all kinds of conditions that need to be in place for us to talk directly. I can change places with her, like I did earlier, but I can’t talk while that’s happening.”

“Hmmm... And you said there’s a time limit for how long you can change



places, too, right? What was it, ten minutes per day?”

“Yep.”

As Sawa nodded, Yuuma examined her head once more to make sure the long horns weren’t back, and she let out another “Hmmm.”

In they were going to successfully find Nagi, turn Sumika Watamaki back to normal, and escape Althea, Valac’s information would be indispensable. Since they had only ten minutes per day with the demon, Yuuma would have liked to have Sawa change places right at the end of the day so that they could use the full time limit to interrogate Valac, but Valac had already told them they needed to pay her “price” before she answered—i.e., complete their mission of finding Nagi.

“Well, first things first. We need to figure out where we are right now...,” muttered Yuuma, glancing around once more.

The four had materialized atop a knoll that was covered with some sort of thin, soft grass, resembling monkey grass. The plain stretched out in all directions. It was currently lit by the evening sun, and faint purple mountain ridges stood out in relief against the northern sky. Small copses and lakes were scattered across the landscape, but there was no sign of anything resembling human architecture.

Yuuma cocked his head in confusion. “When we logged out, we were in the boss room at the bottom of the playtest dungeon, weren’t we? So what are we doing here...?”

Kenk grinned with apparent self-satisfaction. “Fear not, for I have just the answers you are looking for!”

He lifted his right hand into the air and performed the pinch-out gesture to open his menu. As he did so, Yuuma finally realized what he was doing.

“Watch closely now. For you see, if you just open this bit here...,” Kenk explained theatrically.

Yuuma nudged him gently from behind. “I get it, you’re opening your map. Just hurry up already.”

“Fine, fine.”

As Kenk tapped the Map tab, his menu screen changed to a semitransparent map view. Sawa and Tomori both exclaimed in surprise.

Yuuma was just as surprised as the girls. This map was completely different from the one during the playtest; back then, it had been divided into grid-like zones, with a small town named Calcina tucked away in the southwest area, a grassy plain in the middle, a forest to the north, and beyond that, the final, weathered castle dungeon. That had been the full extent of *AM*’s world at the time.

The map they were looking at, however, showed a rounded crescent island, shaped almost like a cashew. Most of the map was fogged out, except for an area in the bottom left—or the southwest—which featured a glowing dot to indicate their current position. The area immediately surrounding that dot was colored in.

Wordlessly, Kenk placed his thumb and index finger on the dot and spread them open. The map expanded, tracing out the nearby topography in rays of light.

“Let’s see... This is the hill we’re on now. That’s that forest here and the lake there. You can see those bits farther along there and... Is that a town?”

What Kenk was pointing to on the map did, in fact, appear to be a town. A semicircular wall, facing the river, with a radial line moving away toward its center, almost like a road. The shape looked strangely familiar— “Wait, isn’t that Calcina?” said Tomori.

“You’re right!” cried Sawa.

The small bit they could see seemed to match the layout of the playtest’s starting town, Calcina. During the playtest, they hadn’t spent much time there, just enough to do some shopping, but Yuuma distinctly remembered the shape. It was like a map symbol for a lighthouse but cut in half.

“Hold on,” said Kenk. “If that’s Calcina, then this area must be the plains where we spent time leveling up, and this would have to be the forest where the last dungeon was located.” He pointed to one location after another on the

map. “So the whole playtest area is now just this little space down here? That means this map must be about five times the size of the playtest one... In terms of real distance, that would make it...um...”

“About thirty kilometers from end to end... Around the same distance from Lake Yamanaka to Lake Motosu, I believe,” said Tomori.

Tomori really did seem to know everything. Just what you’d expect from the student librarian. Yuuma, Sawa, and Kenk oohed and aahed, impressed.

Nozomi City, in Yamanashi Prefecture, where the four of them lived, was located right next to the western shore of Lake Yamanaka, one of the Fuji Five Lakes. If you continued northbound along the public lakeside highway, you would arrive at Lake Kawaguchi, Lake Sai, Lake Shoji, and then finally, Lake Motosu. It was a familiar sightseeing route for the residents of Nozomi, but even without traffic, it took nearly an hour by car. A child would need more than half a day just to traverse the entire route on foot.

Yuuma hated to admit it, but without some clue as to Nagi’s whereabouts, finding her on a map of that size would be like finding a needle in a haystack. It would take them days, at the least, but they had only an hour before they needed to log out and return to the shelter.

“Sawa, did Valac give you any insight as to where Nagi might be?” asked Yuuma.

Sawa shook her head softly. “Not a word. I don’t think she knows much more other than that Nagi is inside *AM*.”

“Huh... It’s too bad she’s not in our party anymore. Then we’d be able to see where she is on the map right now...” Yuuma glanced up and to the left.

Unfortunately, the only HP bars that were displayed there were his own, Sawa’s, Kenk’s, and Tomori’s. It made sense that their previous four-person party had been automatically disbanded after logging out, but that didn’t make them feel any better about losing contact with Nagi.

Yuuma had been feeling anxious enough even with Sawa and Kenk by his side the whole time. He could hardly imagine what it must be like for Nagi, who had been left behind inside the game, all on her own and with no idea of what was

going on. Apparently Kenk was thinking the same thing.

“C’mon, Yu, it’s not like we’re gonna find her by just standing around,” he said, shaking Yuuma by the shoulder.

Yuuma nodded. “You’re right. If Nagi didn’t log out at the end of the playtest, then she must’ve either been transported to a random location or got left behind in the boss room of that dungeon. If she was warped somewhere random, then the only way we’re going to find her is by searching the map section by section. But if she was left behind in the boss room, she’s either waiting somewhere near the dungeon or has already headed back to Calcina... If I was Nagi, which would I do...?”

Yuuma tried to picture Nagi’s face. Most of the time his crybaby childhood friend was a big scaredy-cat, but she could be surprisingly levelheaded and brave when things really mattered.

Sawa answered Yuuma’s question without hesitation. “She would probably leave the dungeon and head somewhere else, but I think she’d leave a message behind so that we would know which way she went. She’d only need a bit of wood and string to make a sign.”

“Of course...”

The idea would’ve never occurred to Yuuma, but it did sound like something Nagi would do. That settled it, then.

“Okay, let’s head to the forest dungeon first.”

“Let’s go!”

“All right!”

“Okay!”

Kenk, Sawa, and Tomori shouted in reply.

Their new starting point, the grassy hill, was located just a few kilometers east of the original playtest area.

It was unclear why they had been plonked down in the middle of nowhere, but at least they hadn’t been sent clear to the other side of the map. From there, they sprinted northwest as hard as they could, avoiding the insect-and



plant-type monsters they encountered along the way since they didn't have time to waste on random battles. They arrived at the forest less than fifteen minutes later.

While proceeding down the same road they had taken during the playtest, they soon discovered an unexpected distraction. An NPC merchant was sitting on a stump at the entrance to the forest and sucking contently on his pipe, his goods laid out neatly by his side.

Yuuma eyed him carefully from a few dozen meters away. "Should we at least see what he has for sale...?" he wondered aloud.

"Why? It's not like we've got any money," Kenk pointed out.

Yuuma had forgotten. They'd farmed a significant chunk of change—aurum, as it was known in *AM*—during the playtest, but that all disappeared once they were forcibly logged out.

There was no point in checking out the merchant's wares if they were broke.

"Why don't we just sell something?" Sawa suggested out of the blue.

"Sell what, exactly...?" Yuuma asked as he opened his inventory.

He was surprised to see that his inventory was packed full with the medicine and food they had picked up while in the real world, as well as with materials that had dropped from the monsters they fought over there.

"So equipment is off-limits, but we can still bring in items? That doesn't make much sense..."

"Maybe it's to keep data from overlapping for items currently equipped. Either way, we might as well sell anything we don't need," said Sawa.

"I guess so...", Yuuma replied, although honestly, he wasn't so sure.

The two of them had played RPGs together for years—all sorts of RPGs. Sawa was the type to sell everything she got her hands on, whereas Yuuma tended to hoard his stuff. There was no telling when something might come in handy later, even the drop items from the Tabanus Hellfly Larva.

"How about I just sell half?" said Yuuma.

“Suit yourself,” Sawa replied, unsurprised.

They approached the NPC merchant, an aging man who sported a gray beard. “Welcome,” he said, removing the pipe from his mouth. Then he suddenly furrowed his brows in realization and broke into a smile. “Or rather, welcome back, I should say.”

“Wait...you know us?” Yuuma asked.

“Course I do. You were here just past noon and purchased quite a few of my wares.”

“...Oh!”

Yuuma glanced down at the leather armor and tunic he was currently wearing. Come to think of it, this wasn't his starting equipment; he had purchased these items from an NPC merchant toward the end of the playtest. Yuuma's party had been in such a hurry at the time that his attention had been entirely focused on his own inventory screen. This was around where that merchant had been.

Still, the merchant must have had a pretty advanced NPC script if he was able to change his conversation patterns based on how much they had bought previously. Maybe he was a quest-giver.

While Yuuma was mulling this over, Tomori took a few steps forward and began speaking to the man as if he were a real person.

“Is there where you always set up shop, sir?” she asked.

Yuuma expected him to give some kind of default reply like, “Well, I don't know much about that...” It was the sort of thing NPCs usually said if they hadn't been programmed with a specific response to a question. Surprisingly, however, the old man laughed pleasantly and shrugged.

“Wouldn't have many customers if I did, not unless I wanted to sell to stray cats. I usually travel back and forth between Calcina and Solieu. The trip takes a few days. But I heard there'd be adventurers coming round from another island today to challenge the dragon that lives at the heart of this forest. I'm glad I stopped by, since quite a few of 'em made purchases. Yourselves included, of course.”

He gave an exaggerated wink, causing Tomori to giggle.

Yuuma, who was standing behind Tomori, was a little—no, more than a little—surprised by this exchange. This NPC was interacting with Tomori so naturally that Yuuma could almost believe he was human. According to what the merchant said, he had set up shop here in anticipation of all the playtesters who would be passing through on their way to the dungeon.

For a brief moment, Yuuma wondered if the merchant was actually another player just like them, or maybe even a member of the staff. If so, however, Yuuma doubted they would still be roleplaying at a time like this. Apparently, *Actual Magic's* NPCs were just more sophisticated than NPCs in other MMORPGs...

Yuuma stepped forward, next to Tomori. Something that the merchant said had caught his attention.

“Solieu... Is that the name of a town?” he asked.

“Sure is. Head five or so kilometers east from here and you’ll run into a river. Follow that about ten kilometers to the north and you should see it. It’s much bigger than Calcina, puts that town to shame. You oughta pay it a visit yourselves sometime.”

The merchant tapped his pipe on the edge of the stump he was sitting on, knocking out the ashes.

“Well then,” he said. “Care to buy anything?”

“Y-yes, please,” Yuuma replied. “Although we were hoping we might sell some things first.”

“My pleasure. What is it you’d like to sell?”

Yuuma hurriedly opened his inventory. It suddenly occurred to him that making a transparent window appear in midair like this was kind of spooky, but the merchant didn’t seem surprised. *Maybe it’s just considered another kind of magic here*, thought Yuuma as he navigated to his Inventory tab and rearranged the rows of items from Most Recent to Type.

Yuuma obviously wasn’t going to sell any of their food or medicine; those

things were too precious. That left just the material drops from the monsters in Althea. He was about to remove the Tabanus Hellfly Larva fangs when his eyes were instead drawn to an entry several rows up.

*I wonder...*

Yuuma tapped the entry and then selected **Materialize** from the pop-up window that appeared.

A narrow glass container, about fifteen centimeters tall, showed up above his window. The container was filled with small, white granules that glittered in the evening sun.

The container's cap had been plastic when Yuuma placed it in his inventory back in the real world, but now it was cork. *Strange*, thought Yuuma as he held it out for the merchant to inspect.

"What's this?" asked the merchant as he took the item from Yuuma's hands.

The merchant squinted at the container suspiciously before carefully unstoppering the cork. He tapped a few of the white granules out onto the palm of his left hand—and then licked them. His eyes, beneath his bushy eyebrows, suddenly grew wide.

"Why...it's salt! Pure white salt! Even the salt for sale in the markets of Solieu isn't this refined! How many bottles do you have?"

"Let's see..."

This was the table salt taken from the staff breakroom in Althea, a fairly commonplace item in the real world. Yuuma had a feeling, however, that pure refined salt would be pretty rare in a fantasy setting like *AM*—apparently, he had guessed correctly. Unless they happened to get stranded in blistering heat, however, as far as foodstuffs go, salt wasn't particularly valuable to Yuuma and the others right now.

"I've got four more..."

Yuuma materialized another four bottles, leaving one behind in his inventory, just in case.

The merchant tasted each of them and then nodded, satisfied. "How about



five hundred aurums for all five bottles?”

“Um...could you hold on a second?”

Yuuma retreated a few steps and huddled with his sister. They began whispering back and forth quickly, in the way that only twins can.

“Psst, Sawa, how much is an aurum worth?”

“Back in Calcina, I think there was a stall selling bread rolls for one aurum apiece.”

“So that means five hundred is a lot of money...right?”

“I think so. Why not just sell it? We don’t really have time to haggle.”

Yuuma turned back to the merchant. “We accept your price.”

“Excellent. It’s a sale, then.”

The merchant thrust his hand into the leather pouch at his waist and drew out five golden coins. When Yuuma took them, he saw they featured a relief etching of a castle, along with the number 100. Come to think of it, all the gold they had acquired during the playtest had gone directly into their inventories and had come straight out of their inventories when making purchases. This was Yuuma’s first time actually holding the raw currency in his hands.

“Hey, let me see,” said Kenk, thrusting his face forward.

Yuuma let him hold one of the coins before turning back toward the merchant.

“We’d like to make some purchases as well.”

“My pleasure, but I’m afraid I’m all out of weapons.”

The merchant’s items were lined up to his right. Just as he said, all that was left now were preserved rations. Yuuma was perusing the items—dried fruits, meats, fish, and various items in bottles he couldn’t identify—when Tomori stepped in close and whispered in his ear.

“Ashihara, since you were able to materialize salt picked up in the real world, do you think we’ll be able bring food from *AM* back into the real world as well?”

“Ah...!”

Yuuma had only been thinking about buying food to eat here, but logically speaking, it seemed pretty likely that they'd be able to carry food back with them to the real world as well. If so, that would make securing food much, much easier for them. Food in the real world was limited right now, and the only places they could get their hands on it were in Althea's shops and food court. But over here they had plenty of options, and the amount was practically unlimited.

"Sorry... How much would you charge for everything?" Yuuma asked, getting a little carried away.

The merchant looked surprised but answered quickly. "Let's see, if you're willing to buy everything, I could cut you a deal and part with it for, say, two hundred aurums."

Yuuma had no way to tell if the man was being honest or if he was trying to hustle them, but at the end of the day, they were essentially getting all this food in exchange for just two shakers of table salt. If they could ever make their way up to the food court, there would be mountains of salt there waiting for them. It would be better to just pay the man's price, for now.

"All right, we'll take it all."

Yuuma was still holding the hundred-aurum coins in his hand. He selected two and handed them back to the man, who took them with a thank-you before slipping them into his leather pouch with a practiced hand.

Kenk was still turning the gold coin Yuuma had given him over in his hand, staring at it open-mouthed. Yuuma tugged him by the sleeve to get his attention and then had him open up his inventory. They began shoveling all the food items laid out on the merchant's leather display mat into Kenk's inventory. With Sawa and Tomori's help, they were done in about half a minute. Now that the merchant was all sold out, he stood up with a refreshed look on his face.

"Whelp, I'll be heading back to Calcina, then. If we should ever run into each other someplace else, feel free to do business with me again."

"Yes, sir. Take care."

Yuuma and the others waved at the man before returning to the road.

They hadn't planned on making such a big detour, but it had paid off handsomely in the end. Not only had they gotten their hands on more food, but they had also acquired some valuable information. Namely, how to get to a town called Solieu, which was possibly the capital city of *AM*.

It might even be a good idea for them to head toward Solieu before returning to Calcina. If Solieu was really the capital, there would be a lot more people there than there would be in Calcina. Maybe even someone who could give them some clue as to how to turn Sumika Watamaki human again, or how to escape from Althea. All of that depended on whether they were lucky enough to meet up with Nagi at the forest dungeon, however. It was still too early to get their hopes up.

Yuuma began leading the others down the narrow road, running at about 60 percent speed while focusing on the task at hand. As they left the plains behind and entered the forest, their surroundings grew dark. Not dark enough that they couldn't see, but still dark enough that Yuuma wished they had brought a light...

Just then, Tomori spoke up from behind.

"Ashihara, could you slow down a little bit?"

Yuuma did as she asked. He heard her begin to chant a spell.

*"Lumen...Avis...Volate."*

A milky white light sprung up behind Yuuma. It took on the shape of a small bird and flew past him, zigzagging back and forth as it fluttered out in front of the group. It was the light-element spell, Brightbird. The light it gave off was as bright as a lantern, but unlike a lantern, it left your hands free and could even respond to hidden monsters.

The bird almost seemed to guide them as they raced through the forest, though in truth it was only trying to predict which direction they were already going. Unlike the grasslands, the path through the forest was hemmed in by ancient, mossy trees, with thorny vines growing in dense patches in between. There was no way to avoid any monsters they encountered along the path. They were forced into two battles with badger enemies known as Brutal

Badgers and one with a frog enemy known as a Rock Toad, but they had already encountered both of these enemies during the playtest and were able to handle them without too much trouble. It was 6:30 PM by the time the party reached the castle ruins, just as the purple light peeking out from gaps in the forest canopy faded entirely.

It was unlikely that the area had changed since the playtest, but the difference between day and night seemed to play tricks on their minds. It almost looked like a completely different area now. Yuuma slowed to a halt, paranoid that monsters could be hiding out in the shadows of the crumbling gates, or in the pools of darkness beneath the protruding battlements. The Brightbird, however, did not respond. Yuuma took a deep breath and stepped inside the ruins.

The front courtyard, which was surrounded by walls on three sides, was even darker than its surroundings. The night fog that crept silently through the twisted hedgerows added further to the gloom. Yuuma skirted the hedgerows as the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Once he had reached the center of the courtyard, he turned his gaze upward.

Beyond the dry and withered fountains, the castle manor awaited. The manor was around four stories high. The large entry doors had been left open. Small bonfires burned on either side of the entrance, flickering weakly.

Now would be the perfect time for Nagi to spring out and rush toward them, tears of relief on her face—unfortunately, they weren't that lucky. Yuuma scanned every nook and cranny of the expansive courtyard. There was no one waiting by the door, or anywhere else, as far as he could tell.

"You think she left? Or maybe she's still in the boss room..." whispered Kenk, trying to keep his voice down.

"First we should see if she left a message behind for us," Yuuma said in an attempt to hide his own disappointment.

"True. Should we split up and search?"

"I don't think so. Mobs could spawn in. We should stick together."

"Okay. Let's start on the ground floor of the castle, then."

Yuuma made eye contact with Sawa and Tomori as well, nodding to each of them before heading into the building, side by side with Kenk.

The moment they took a single step inside, however, the Brightbird, which had been hovering over their heads, shot up into the air.

Immediately afterward—

“GWARRGGHH!!”

A booming roar, loud enough to dispel the mist, echoed from the sky. The four friends jerked their heads upward in surprise.

A dark shadow perched atop the castle’s roof. Although humanoid in shape, it looked nearly three meters tall, with stubby legs, a long trunk, and unnaturally long, thick arms.

“Oh crap! It’s not another Conehead, is it?!” shouted Kenk, drawing his sword from his hip.

“The silhouette is different!” Sawa shouted. “Look out—here it comes!”

A moment later, the shadow leaped from the roof and into the air.

As its short, stubby legs made contact with the ground, spiderweb cracks spread out along the already cracked pavement stones beneath its feet. The ground shook as if there were an earthquake.

Yuuma and the others stumbled as the shadow leaped high into the air again. Whatever it was, it was just as massive and misshapen as the Conehead Demolisher that had nearly killed all four of them back in Playroom 02 at Althea.

“Aghh!”

Kenk screamed in panic and tried to crouch down. The shadow lifted a massive greatax in its right hand and began to swing downward, aiming straight for Kenk.

Gathering all his strength, Yuuma screamed at Kenk as loud as he could.

“Kenk, stand up and fight!!”

The Conehead Demolisher was an exception, a creature created from the



fused bodies of twenty adults. These old castle ruins, however, were the game's intro dungeon, meaning the creature before them was probably just a mini-boss. Yuuma had no idea why it hadn't shown up during the playtest, but he was confident it wouldn't have the same ridiculous level of ATK power as the Demolisher had possessed.

That confidence was evident in Yuuma's voice. Kenk's voice cracked slightly as he shouted back even louder in reply.

"Hyah... Hyahhhh!!"

Kenk stood up tall again, lifting his sword high above his head with both hands.

*Ka-clang!!* There was a sharp clash of metal as Kenk was forced backward, nearly landing on his behind.

The greatax, however, was rebuffed, its nearly fifty-centimeter-long blade leaving a cascade of sparks behind in its wake.

Yuuma dashed forward, propping Kenk up from behind before he could fall. A moment later, the Brightbird flew back down, finally illuminating the enemy.

The monster was humanoid in shape, but it wasn't human. Its head was lizard-like, its body covered in a rough, thick hide, and it was dressed in scale armor made of overlapping, tarnished steel plates. It held the single-bladed greatax in its right hand and a round shield in its left. Appearance-wise, it looked like a typical lizardman, just unusually tall and broad.

"GWARGH..."

The lizardman growled, its forked tongue twisting in the air.

"What if Nagi exited the dungeon all alone? What if she didn't notice there was a boss waiting...?" Sawa mumbled weakly as she stared up at the creature.

"No...," Yuuma whispered, trying to suppress his own fear. "If anyone would notice, it'd be Nagi. She must've slipped past without catching aggro. Either that or she's still inside. Let's hurry up and defeat this thing so that we can go find her."

"All right," said Sawa.

Tomori and Kenk nodded in unison.

The lizardman took a step forward, as if sensing its opponents were ready to fight.

A dark blue HP bar appeared above the creature's head, along with its proper name, Varanian Axbearer. Yuuma wasn't sure what a Varanian was, but this was hardly the time for vocabulary lessons.

He drew his shortsword from his left hip and began rapidly issuing orders to his party.

"Kenk, you draw aggro and focus on guarding! Shimizu, you buff and heal Kenk. Sawa, you attack with magic. If things get rough, retreat into the castle as soon as I tell you to!"

"Got it!!"

As the three shouted in unison, the lizardman—the so-called Varanian—lifted its ax once more. It turned toward its current target, Kenk.

"Come on, lizard-breath!" Kenk shouted, psyching himself up as he raised his sword in both hands.

There were many different types of weapons in *Actual Magic*, and each weapon type had its own special attacks, known as weapon arts or battle moves. These moves, which could be learned by increasing your weapon mastery skills, may not have been as flashy and impactful as magic, but they were still an invaluable skill, practically a lifeline, for frontline Warriors.

Kenk stepped forward with his right foot and slid his left foot far back into a sideways stance, lifting his two-handed sword horizontally above his face.

The wide, flat blade glowed with a faint red phosphorescence and began emitting a high-pitched buzz.

Unlike magic, weapon arts didn't require verbal components. In order to activate a weapon art, you had to use your entire body to create specific forms. To put it in different terms, weapon arts basically relied on gesture commands. But there was almost no room for error when creating a form. The position of your legs, the opening of your hips, the twist of your waist, even the position

and angle of your sword—it all had to be perfect, down to the millimeter.

Kenk was naturally athletic. He had employed the weapon art he was currently using only fifteen or sixteen times during the playtest, but he still managed to activate it on the first try. Yuuma was impressed.

Just then, after a tantalizing delay, the Varanian finally swung its ax again.

Kenk wasn't tricked by the delay. He held his form and blocked the ax with the glowing red blade of his two-handed sword.

There was another clash of metal, and sparks flew. The Varanian stumbled backward as its ax rebounded off the blade.

This time, however, Kenk was barely even knocked back. He drew his left foot in closer and dropped his hips, holding his ground and sweeping his still-glowing sword into a vertical stance next.

“Hyah!”

With a spirited shout, Kenk chopped downward.

The weapon art Kenk had used was called Guard Counter, the very first art learned by two-handed swordfighters. As the name suggested, the first half of the art gave a posture bonus when guarding. The second part, the counterattack, gave a bonus to ATK power.

Because the form required the player to hold their sword above their head, the move was difficult to use against smaller monsters. That was why they hadn't gotten much use out of it during the playtest. Now it was finally showing its worth. Kenk's slashing chop hit the Varanian on its left leg, creating a deep cut and shaving off nearly a tenth of its HP.

“GWARGHH!!”

The giant lizardman screamed in a mixture of rage and pain as it stumbled backward even further. Sawa was quick to seize on the chance and fired off a spell.

*“Flamma...Nubes...Fusione!!”*

A sparkling red cloud of fire sprang forth from Sawa's raised wand, undulating through the air toward the Varanian like a snake. It was the Fire Enhancement

spell, which added the fire element to targeted equipment. It was usually cast on weapons, allowing them to do additional damage due to the high heat. For a moment, Yuuma thought Sawa had cast the wrong spell, but she seemed to know what she was doing. The cloud of fire targeted the creature's armor, not its ax. The metal scales on the armor began to sizzle and glow. Although this gave the scale armor better fire resistance, it also caused the armor to heat up. Sawa must have decided that the Varanian's thick hide would make it difficult to attack directly with her Flame Arrow spell, and she had instead chosen to attack indirectly through the damage caused by the heat of the armor.

It seemed to be the right decision. The Varanian groaned painfully as its HP began to gradually decrease. The symbol for the Burned status ailment appeared beneath its HP bar.

A moment later, Tomori began chanting her own spell.

*"Sacre...Circulus...Circum!!"*

A sparkling pearl-white band of light expanded from her outstretched crozier—her Priest's staff—and encircled Kenk's waist to create a ring of about fifty centimeters in diameter. Unlike Holy Healing, which provided instantaneous HP recovery, this spell, Healing Circle, provided continuous regeneration. It also had a longer range and healed more damage than the utility spell Healing Droplet.

Naturally, Yuuma wasn't just standing around while everyone else took their first actions. He was busy scrutinizing the Varanian Axbearer, trying to identify its weaknesses.

The Varanian was completely covered in a dark blue hide, which was rough and horny like that of a Komodo dragon. Standard slashing attacks probably weren't going to do much against it. Battle arts like the one that Kenk had used earlier were an exception, but those required MP and couldn't be chained together, since each art had a cooldown of several seconds.

What about real lizards? What was their weakness? Their snout...? Stomach...? Tail...? None of those seemed like great options. The Varanian's snout was too high up to easily attack, its stomach was covered in scale mail, and it didn't even have a tail to begin with.

“GWRRR...”

The Varanian growled bitterly as the red-hot armor continued to sear its skin.

Both of its eyes flashed yellow. It thrust the shield in its left hand forward and stretched its right hand back, winding up with its ax. The ax began to glow yellow.

“It’s using a weapon art!” Kenk shouted.

Kenk held his two-handed sword out in front of him. Yuuma took a defensive posture as well, gripping his shortsword in his left hand.

“GWARGHH!!”

With an earthshaking roar, the Varanian swung its ax in a sideways sweep. The swipe left a trail of light behind in its wake, striking Kenk’s sword first but then carrying through to collide with Yuuma’s smaller weapon as well.

Yuuma felt like his arms were about to be ripped clean off from the impact. He was unable to hold his ground and was knocked backward in dramatic fashion, crashing into Tomori, who stood a little ways behind him.

Yuuma expected them both to hit the ground, but Tomori grunted and dug her heels in, just barely managing to keep them both on their feet.

“S-sorry!” Yuuma shouted, glancing over his shoulder.

“There’s another one coming!” he heard Sawa scream.

“...?!”

Yuuma spun back around in a panic, only to see that the Varanian had already spun around in a complete circle and was about to carry through with another sweeping pass. The glow hadn’t disappeared from its ax, and it looked like it was putting even more weight behind this next swing. It was Double Sweep—a weapon art for one-handed axes.

Yuuma was still leaning against Tomori. If they took another hit in that position, they would both be sent flying. Yuuma lifted his shortsword into the air, hoping to at least fend off a direct blow. Just then— “Not on my watch!!”

It was Kenk. He hadn’t been knocked back as far as Yuuma had been during

the first blow, and he was already dashing forward.

Kenk brandished his sword aloft, arcing backward with his body as the Varanian began to deliver its second attack.

Kenk swung his sword downward with such force that he may as well have been using a weapon art, intercepting the blade of the ax as it swung in from the right. There was an ear-piercing metallic clash and a flash of light so bright, it seemed to light up the entire courtyard. In the chaos, Kenk was tossed straight through the air, colliding hard into a stone statue that sat in the middle of one of the dry fountains. With a *thunk*, his HP bar suddenly dropped by more than 20 percent.

“Ah...!!”

Yuuma wanted to run toward his friend, but he gritted his teeth and held his ground. Kenk had risked his life with that death-defying move, and Yuuma couldn't let the opportunity he had created go to waste.

“Shimizu, take care of Kenk!” Yuuma shouted before rushing forward.

Kenk had broken the Varanian's stance mid-art, causing it to stumble backward, significantly off balance. The Fire Enhancement spell on its scale armor had already worn off, meanwhile, possibly because the armor was so large. Together with the damage Kenk had done earlier, the monster's HP had decreased by about 15 percent in total, which was less than Yuuma would have hoped for.

Was the low damage due to the unconventional way in which Sawa had used her spell, or was the Varanian actually resistant to fire? The steel plates on its armor must have been sizzling hot. Even with its thick hide, it shouldn't have been capable of enduring that much heat...

Then Yuuma's eyes suddenly went wide.

There was no way to know for sure just how high the Varanian's fire resistance might be, but if they were talking temperature, it probably hated the cold much more than it hated the heat.

“Yu, I'm gonna recast my spell!” Sawa shouted from behind Yuuma, who promptly stopped her.



“Wait! We should use cold instead of heat!” he shouted back without turning around.

“That’s a great idea and all, but none of us know any ice magic—”

Before Sawa could finish, Yuuma thrust his left hand out and began chanting the word of power for the dark element.

*“Tenebris!”*

An indigo ball of light appeared in his palm.

*“Capere Febris!”*

The light transformed into a semitransparent hand with seven long, spindly fingers.

*“Ignis!”*

With a wintry howl, almost a scream, the hand sped forward.

The Varanian, which had just recovered its footing, thrust its round shield forward in an attempt to guard. Yuuma quickly twisted his outstretched hand, bending the spell’s trajectory into an arc. The spectral hand barely avoided the shield, striking the Varanian on its left leg instead. Yuuma immediately closed his hand. The magical hand mimicked Yuuma’s gesture, its seven fingers closing tightly around the monster’s leg.

Nothing seemed to happen. No explosions. No cuts or lacerations.

“GWRARGHGH!”

The giant lizardman sneered. It took a step forward, then another, the ground shaking beneath its feet. Suddenly, it slumped toward the ground.

Yuuma glanced at the creature’s HP bar. The status ailment Burned from earlier had been replaced by a snowflake symbol. It was the status ailment Cold, which caused creatures to move more slowly.

The spell Yuuma had used, Chilling Hand, robbed targets of their warmth. Like Grasping Hand, it was a darkness spell specific to the Monster Tamer class. It didn’t do nearly as much cold damage as ice spells, so Yuuma hadn’t found many opportunities to use it during the playtest.

Unlike an ice spell such as Icy Fog, which targeted a stationary area of effect, Chilling Hand continued to affect its target even after the target moved. If all you wanted to do was apply the Cold status ailment, Chilling Hand was much more effective.

“GWRRR...”

The Varanian tried to raise its ax again, but it was moving so sluggishly that it seemed like a completely different creature. This was their chance—but Yuuma couldn’t do anything else while Chilling Hand was active.

“Sawa, aim for the head! Kenk, can you still fight?!” shouted Yuuma, keeping his casting hand outstretched.

Sawa was the first to respond: “Got it!”

She cast Flame Arrow, which struck the Varanian square in the forehead, dropping its HP by another 5 percent.

Next Kenk, who had been healed by Tomori, dashed forward in between Sawa and Yuuma.

“Hyah!”

With a shout, he leaped high in the air and brought his two-handed sword down on the Varanian’s left shoulder.

“GWARGH!”

The monster screamed in agony, dropping the round shield in its left hand. Tomori quickly raced forward, grabbing the edge of the seventy-centimeter-wide shield and dragging it away from the creature’s reach.

*I know monsters can steal weapons that players drop during battle, but I never realized I could do the same back to them...*, Yuuma thought, impressed.

He continued to keep his left hand, which he was using to cast the spell, tightly closed. It continuously drained MP while it was running, but since Yuuma was level 11, he could probably keep it active for at least another minute.

Kenk landed back on the ground. The Varanian, which was still suffering from the Cold ailment, tried to hit Kenk with its ax, but it was too slow. Kenk had plenty of time to ready his sword over his head. The blade glowed red.

As the ax swung downward, Kenk parried it to the side and counterattacked with a powerful thrust to the monster's solar plexus. Several of the steel plates popped free from the scale armor, and crimson damage effects appeared at the point of impact.

Kenk leaped out of the way as Sawa immediately cast another Flame Arrow. This time, instead of its face, she struck it in the hole Kenk had just made in its armor, which allowed the spell to do even more damage. Meanwhile, Tomori repeatedly cast the Light Enhancement spell in order to increase Sawa and Kenk's DEF.

Over the next fifty seconds they continued to rapidly whittle away the Varanian Axbearer's HP, until finally its health dropped into the red zone, below 20 percent.

Since he was still maintaining Chilling Hand, Yuuma's MP was also down to around 20 percent. At this pace, Yuuma calculated that they would just barely be able to defeat the Varanian before his Chilling Hand expired.

However, Sawa and Kenk's safety came first.

"It might change its attack pattern now that it's injured! Move back!" Yuuma shouted.

"Roger that!" shouted Kenk.

He and Sawa both created distance.

The Varanian had dropped to one knee. There were damage effects spilling out from the wounds all over its body. It continued to glare at the four of them, however, still ready to fight. It bared its needle-sharp fangs and growled angrily.

"GWRRR..."

During the boss fight with the dragon during the playtest, the dragon had rampaged around the arena blindly throughout the entire fight. In comparison, this giant lizardman was behaving in a much more humanlike manner. If it had a reason for camping out at the ruins, and for attacking them, Yuuma would have liked to have known what it was, but he doubted it would tell them, even if he asked. All it seemed capable of was fighting until the bitter end.

As if to take advantage of his moment of sympathy—Yuuma suddenly sensed something new approaching, something hostile.

“Ashihara!!” Tomori screamed, followed by a rapid cascade of footfalls.

Yuuma spun around to see two dark shadows charging in from the entrance to the courtyard.

“GRRRR!”

One of the shadows leaped forward with an angry growl, causing it to suddenly be illuminated by the Brightbird spell.

It was a wolf, thin and with an abnormally pointed muzzle. Its blue-black fur shimmered metallically, and its bizarre fangs were long and sharp like those of a deep-sea fish.

The wolf lunged for Yuuma’s neck, and he raised his left arm to block the creature’s jaws.

Yuuma’s arm disappeared, fist-first, into the wolf’s mouth. The sharp rows of fangs easily pierced through his leather glove and sank deeply into the meat of his forearm.

“Ngh...”

While there wasn’t distinct pain like there was in the real world, an unpleasant tingling sensation radiated across his avatar’s nerves. His HP bar diminished visibly, and the Chilling Hand spell was disrupted.

The other wolf bolted across the courtyard, staying low to the ground and springing at Tomori. She tried to bat it away with her crozier, but it dodged easily and sank its teeth into her left leg.

These were Barbed Wolves, the strongest of the low-level mobs that inhabited the forest. They took their name from their inward-facing barbed fangs, which they used to capture prey in an inescapable bite that did continuous damage.

“Yu!” yelled Kenk.

“Stay back!” Yuuma shouted. “You and Sawa focus on defeating the lizardman!”

“O-okay...!”

“We got this!”

Yuuma readjusted his grip on his shortsword.

If he aimed for the Barbed Wolf’s head, there was no way he would miss, since its jaws were still clamped on to his left arm. Unfortunately, another feature of Barbed Wolves was that their heads boasted particularly high defense. The dense, short fur growing there was tough as wire and could rebuff most bladed weapons.

Although not as tough as the fur on its head, the fur along the creature’s shoulders and back was also fairly strong. Yuuma decided to aim for the monster’s stomach instead, where its defense would be lowest. He pulled in hard with his left arm, and as soon as the wolf, which was attached to the arm, dug its paws into the ground to resist, he thrust with the sword in his right hand.

The wolf, however, almost seemed to have a second set of eyes along its belly. It twisted out of the way, evading the sharp point. Yuuma began to panic, striking a second and a third time, but each time the wolf avoided the blow. Yuuma’s HP, meanwhile, continued to steadily fall.

*Don’t panic*, he told himself as he glanced toward Tomori. The wolf was still biting her leg. She tried to beat it off with her crozier, but just as Yuuma suspected, hitting it on the head and back was almost completely ineffective.

Where had these two Barbed Wolves come from in the first place? During the playtest, trash mobs from the forest weren’t able to enter into the castle area. The only thing the Varanian lizardman had in common with the wolves was that they both breathed air, so Yuuma doubted the lizardman was able to summon them.

Did game logic no longer apply in *Actual Magic*? In any case, there had to be some way out of this mess.

Yuuma peered closely at the Barbed Wolf’s fangs, which were wickedly sharp and currently buried in his arm.

The slanted, barbed fangs were embedded deeply in his flesh. There was no

way he would be able to free himself using brute strength. During the playtest, one of these wolves had bitten Kenk and hadn't let go until Sawa had hit it with a Flame Arrow from close range. Its wiry fur was apparently ineffective against fire, but unfortunately, Yuuma didn't possess flame magic...

Yuuma suddenly had an idea. He held his breath.

His HP was already down to 60 percent at this point. If this didn't work, he would wind up taking even more damage per tick. In fact, he might even die.

But under the circumstances, he had to take that chance. No, not just take it—seize it!

“Ahhhh!!”

With a scream that seemed to come from the very pit of his stomach, Yuuma tossed aside the sword in his right hand and grabbed the wolf around the neck for all he was worth. Holding the creature as still as he could, he thrust forward with his left arm, pushing his arm even deeper into the creature's throat.

He shoved hard enough for the barbs to pull free, and they weren't enough to stop him. Since he was a sixth-grade boy, Yuuma's left arm was relatively slender, and he was able to push it into the wolf's mouth all the way up to the shoulder.

The fangs, which had momentarily released him, clamped down once more on his shoulder. The wolf's throat compressed tightly around his entire arm, and he could feel a horrific trembling, like wet meat, against his left hand.

This was precisely what Yuuma was aiming for. His left hand was now buried deep inside the Barbed Wolf's stomach. He spread his fingers open as wide as he could and shouted.

*“Flamma!!”*

Yuuma couldn't see his own hand, but he felt the warmth gradually spread across his palm.

*“Premis...Conmror!!”*

The wolf began thrashing around, suddenly half out of its mind. This was a natural reaction, seeing as a ball of fire had just appeared inside its stomach.



Yuuma had just cast Still Fire, which was a fire-element utility spell. The spell created a large ball of fire in the caster's hand, about the size of a tennis ball. The ball couldn't be thrown and was usually used for practical rather than offensive purposes. For instance, to create light or to catch something else on fire. If you could bring it into direct contact with a creature's internal organs, however, surely it would do as much damage, or possibly even more, than actual attack magic.

Yuuma's idea had apparently paid off. The wolf's HP bar began decreasing rapidly. The wolf danced around in agony as it repeatedly tried to cough up Yuuma's arm, but the fangs were buried so deeply that Yuuma's arm barely moved.

Yuuma's MP was almost gone now, but the Barbed Wolf's HP was decreasing at an even faster pace—and only five or six seconds later, it was depleted. The wolf stiffened unnaturally and then scattered into a cloud of crimson particle effects.

"Hah..."

Yuuma finally exhaled. He wasn't done yet, though. He picked up the sword he had thrown aside earlier and hurriedly glanced around to see how things were going.

The Varanian Axbearer had been down to about 20 percent health the last time that Yuuma had checked. Kenk and Sawa had now brought that number down to 10 percent, but the Varanian's attack patterns had changed, just as Yuuma had suspected. Both Kenk and Sawa had taken significant chunks of damage. The other wolf, meanwhile, was still clamped on to Tomori's left leg. She was already below half health, and her HP continued to drop.

Yuuma raced toward Tomori first, praying that Sawa and Kenk would be able to hold on for just a little while longer.

After a few steps, however, the strength drained from his legs, and he collapsed to one knee. He glanced at his HP bar, but there were no status ailment symbols present. Avatars didn't get tired, so if this was overexertion, it was all in his head. He had to keep going.

Yuuma gritted his teeth and willed himself to stand.

As he began to get back to his feet, however, he heard a new set of footsteps coming from behind.

Another Barbed Wolf? If so, he would just have to burn this one like he had the last.

Yuuma turned around, bracing himself for another bite, but this time it was no four-legged beast that awaited him. Instead, Yuuma was confronted by a humanoid silhouette, standing on two legs and dashing forward like the wind.

A demi-human monster? A hostile NPC? Yuuma realized it was neither. The name next to the HP bar above the newcomer's head was displayed in the font reserved for players.

Yuuma squinted, trying to make out the name, but whoever it was, they were moving too fast for Yuuma's eyes to focus. Yuuma froze. The silhouette ran past him without even glancing his way, heading straight toward Tomori instead. A moment too late, Yuuma realized that the silhouette was wielding a slender longsword in its right hand. Yuuma ordered his numb legs to begin moving again.

Just as Yuuma thought this intruder was going to attack Tomori, he realized it was another student—a member of their sixth-grade class. Yuuma had no idea what someone from their class was doing here, but surely one of their own class members wouldn't turn on them. Would they?

Fortunately, the new arrival did what Yuuma had hoped.

Still running forward, the figure brandished the longsword above their head and jumped high into the air. The blade of the sword began releasing a blue glow. It was the one-handed sword weapon art Power Smash. It was a very straightforward art, causing the next attack after activation to do extra damage. Its simplicity was what made it so versatile.

The wolf was still attached to Tomori's leg. With a flawless downward swipe, the figure brought the blade down onto the neck of the creature. The blade sliced through the creature's tough fur and sank over ten centimeters deep into the flesh beneath.

“Hyah!!”

This was the first sound the new arrival had made. Their voice was clear and strong, almost like the main character from an anime. The blade, which was already buried deep into the wolf's neck, cleaved through the remaining flesh as if struck by an invisible hammer.

The Barbed Wolf's headless body trembled slightly, from legs to tail, before scattering into an explosion of crimson light. A moment later, the head, which was still attached to Tomori's leg, dissipated as well.

Yuuma had already realized who the new arrival was at this point. Just to be sure, he glanced up at their HP bar once more. The name read **Kakeru Niki**. He was one of their classmates, although Yuuma didn't interact with him very much.

Niki was dressed in light golden armor. He stood back up after recovering from his swing and turned to the left, where Kenk and Sawa were still fighting the Varanian Axbearer. Yuuma had lots of questions he wanted to ask, but first, Kenk and Sawa needed their help.

After double-checking Tomori's HP, which was at just a little below 40 percent, Yuuma began racing toward Sawa and Kenk. He stopped suddenly, however, as Niki lifted his left hand into the air.

*"Ventus!"*

Niki's powerful casting voice carried through the air. A ball of yellow-green light appeared in his hand.

*"Colligo Pulvis!"*

The light traveled about a meter forward before turning into a swirling cyclone. It began sucking up leaves and pebbles from the ground, soon shifting from a yellow-green hue to dusty gray.

*"Ignis!!"*

The gray cyclone shot forward in an arc, enveloping the head of the Varanian just as the creature was about to swing downward with its ax.

*"GWARGGHH!!"*

The giant lizardman howled in anguish, shaking its head. The ball of wind had no real mass, however, and clung stubbornly to the creature as the flying dust and debris that it had gathered assaulted its eyes and nose. This was the Dust Eddy spell. Its attack power was almost negligible, and it could be used only if there was enough small debris and dust around, but when successful, it could block an enemy's sense of sight and smell almost entirely, making it one of the best early-level debuff spells. Naturally it wasn't available as utility magic but instead required a fairly high skill level in wind magic.

Niki had also used the one-handed sword skill, Power Smash, earlier. That meant he had to have almost equal levels in the one-handed sword and wind magic skills. Yuuma was curious as to what his build looked like, but there were more important things for them to worry about right now.

Sawa and Kenk turned around in surprise once the Dust Eddy appeared. Apparently, they hadn't noticed yet that Niki had joined the fight. Yuuma gave them the thumbs-up sign to let them know everything was all right.

"Don't hold back!!" he shouted.

Kenk and Sawa both nodded; Kenk raised his two-handed sword, and Sawa lifted her wand.

A strong, downward slash and a cast of Fire Spike—the more powerful version of Flame Arrow—shaved off the remaining 10 percent of the Varanian's hit points. The giant creature slumped to the ground and began to teeter backward, before suddenly freezing mid-fall. It clenched up momentarily before swelling up from within and exploding in a massive burst of particles.

The fanfare that was reserved for boss-level monsters played, and the battle results window appeared. Yuuma had increased another level, bringing him to 12—which was apparently the point when a character was no longer considered a beginner. Yuuma didn't even glance at the window; instead, he approached Niki.

Ever since entering the upper grades at school, Yuuma hadn't spent much time face-to-face with Niki. Staring at him up close now, Yuuma was immediately struck by how stereotypically attractive he was. It was almost intimidating.

Niki wore his long hair in an asymmetrical style, swept back on the right and hanging over his face on the left. His large eyes somehow managed to look both stern and inviting, while his mouth and nose gave off a youthful, fresh impression. If you looked up the word *handsome* in the dictionary, there would probably be a picture of Niki's face.

Niki stared at Yuuma with light brown eyes, making direct eye contact. He wore a comfortable, friendly smile on his face. He acknowledged Tomori, Sawa, and Kenk as they approached, and then he turned back toward Yuuma.

"I'm glad to see everyone's all right," said Niki.

*So you're the main character...!* Yuuma almost joked, but he just bowed perfunctorily instead. "Thank you. If you hadn't come to our rescue, we would have been in deep trouble."

"I don't know, I think you probably could have defeated those monsters without my help. I was so happy to finally run into someone from our class that I couldn't stop myself from joining the fight."

Niki scratched his head in embarrassment as he spoke.

Come to think of it, Niki was one of the students who hadn't made it downstairs to Sugamo's shelter on Althea's first floor. He was among the fifteen who had supposedly headed upstairs when everyone was fleeing from Playroom 01 on the second floor.

There were so many questions swirling through Yuuma's head that he wasn't sure which to ask first. Sawa stepped forward in Yuuma's place, speaking calmly to Niki.

"Niki, you're up to date on what's been happening, aren't you?"

His smile vanished. He nodded, his expression grave. "Yeah... I mean, I know that we're trapped inside Althea and that there are monsters roaming the place, but that's more or less it..."

"What about the students who went upstairs? Is everyone safe?"

"For now, at least." Niki nodded and took another look around. "If we're going to talk, maybe we should move somewhere safer first. I doubt another

mini-boss will show up, but more of those wolves might wander in.”

He had a point. But Yuuma and the others still had something they needed to do before they could leave this place.

“Um, Niki... We came here looking for Nagi...for Minagi Sano. We didn’t see her anywhere in the courtyard, but she might be hiding out inside the castle or down in the dungeon.”

Sawa interrupted again. “I don’t think she’s anywhere in the castle. The walls aboveground are all broken and crumbling. There’s no way she wouldn’t have heard us fighting.”

“No, I guess not,” said Yuuma. “Just the dungeon, then. Before we go anywhere, we need to search the dungeon, from the first layer all the way down to the fourth.”

“I see...” Niki glanced down for a second or two before looking back up. “Right. I’ll help you guys, then.”

“F-for real?”

“Of course. Remember our school motto: ‘Dedication and Devotion.’”

“.....Our motto?”

“There’s a big framed banner with those words written on it hanging up in the student council room. It was apparently written by the very first student council president. You should come see it sometime. Granted, the calligraphy’s so fancy that you can’t actually read it.”

Niki smiled again, this time mischievously.

Yuuma couldn’t help but grin, too. Inside, however, he was wondering how he was supposed to compete when there were guys like Niki out in the world.

Niki really had it all. He was astute, decisive, and even had the courage to smile at a time like this. And the cherry on top: He was a pro *Actual Magic* player. No wonder he was student council vice president. Unlike Teruki Sugamo. For all of Sugamo’s bluster back at the shelter, he was only president of their class, not the student body. Niki came out on top, both in terms of position and in terms of character. No wonder he was considered one of the two most



popular students in their class.

A few hours earlier, Yuuma had told himself that Niki and the others had probably already figured out how to upgrade their character class—i.e., how to activate their *Actual Magic* abilities. He could have scarcely guessed that Niki had figured out not only how to upgrade, but also that the Calculus capsules could be used to return to *AM*.

Yuuma wasn't sure if he actually knew more about games than anyone else in class...but he did consider himself the most hardcore gamer at school, so it was a blow to his ego to be upstaged so easily. He was still genuinely happy for Niki's assistance, however. Finding Nagi took first priority.

"Thanks. We could use the help."

Yuuma bowed again. Kenk, Sawa, and Tomori said thank you as well.

Niki frowned slightly and shook his head. "Don't mention it."

Their new party, which was now five members in size, passed through the front courtyard, where the remnants of their recent battle could still be seen, and into the first floor of the dilapidated castle.

Tomori's Brightbird spell, which remained in effect so long as her MP didn't bottom out, fluttered roughly two meters in front of them. Its white light stretched to the center of the spacious room; the entrance to the stairway that led down to the dragon's dungeon came into view.

Unfortunately, that entrance was now hidden beneath piles of stone and rubble that seemed to have fallen from the ceiling. The way into the dungeon was buried without a trace.

“It’s no good... It won’t budge!” shouted Kenk.

Kenk had fallen onto his backside after struggling and failing to lift even a single stone that covered the stairway entrance.

The stone in question was about forty centimeters long and wide, and about twice as high. Naturally that was too big for a normal elementary school student to move, but Kenk’s character in *AM* was a pure physical build, with enough strength to easily swing a two-handed sword. If Kenk, with all his strength, couldn’t move the stones, something other than gravity was probably keeping them in place.

“These stones are probably non-interactable...,” said Sawa, who was standing behind Kenk. She sounded a little more deflated than usual. Although she was still speaking calmly, as Sawa’s twin, Yuuma could sense the impatience eating at her as keenly as if he were feeling it himself.

Yuuma was impatient, too. It was already 6:50 PM. In order to get back to the shelter by 7:00 PM, they would need to log out by 6:55 at the latest.

“By ‘non-interactable,’ do you mean they’re just part of the terrain now?” asked Kenk, leaning backward to look up at her.

Sawa nodded, almost imperceptibly. “Yep. In fact, it’s possible the dungeon doesn’t even exist anymore.”

“You’re kidding...”

Kenk flopped down onto his back.

Yuuma wished she was kidding, but all his experience in gaming led him to suspect she was right. The sprawling dungeon beneath the castle, and the dragon that resided at its bottom level, had all just been temporary objectives for the playtest. It wasn’t hard to believe they would be scrubbed entirely once the service went live.

When the playtest ended at 3:00 PM, Nagi was the only one who hadn’t logged out. Which meant she had likely been transported to somewhere else on the map once the dungeon was erased. Transported and, for some reason, unable to use the button in her menu to log out.

But why? Maybe she was just experiencing a bug. Or maybe she was unconscious, or worse...

Yuuma forced himself to stop thinking that way. He checked the time once more.

“What *exactly* was Sug’s order again?” he asked Sawa.

“Let’s see... He was like, ‘Go find enough food for all the students in the shelter. And don’t come back till you do,’” she said, imitating Sugamo’s tone of voice.

Kenk, who was still lying on the floor, clicked his tongue in disgust.

“What a piece of work. Who does he think he is anyway?”

“Don’t ask me.”

Kenk and Sawa glared at each other. Yuuma waved his hand in between them to snap them out of it.

“In other words,” he said, “Sug never gave us a deadline.”

“That’s true... But everyone’s probably hungry by now. Sug can kick rocks for all I care, but I feel bad for everyone else.”

Sawa had a point. Yuuma’s and Sawa’s inventories were filled with the packaged baked goods and onigiri they had acquired—or rather looted—from

Althea's vending machines; Kenk's contained the heaps of dried fruit and meat they had just bought from the NPC merchant. The students in the shelter hadn't had a bite to eat since lunch, right before the playtest began. They might not be able to hold out much longer. As much as Yuuma wanted to hurry straight back for their sakes, however— "We should at least try to find some clue that points to Nagi's location..." he said, clenching his fists.

Just then, Niki rushed over. He had been standing to the side with Tomori, who gave him the rundown on everything that had happened so far.

"I think I'm up to speed with what you guys went through... I'm sorry to hear about Miura and Moro," Niki said, looking glum. He sighed, and his expression grew darker. "Two dead in just four hours. We can't lose anyone else. We need to find a way out of Althea as soon as possible."

"Y-yeah..."

Yuuma nodded, but there were two things they needed to do before escaping. The first, of course, was to find Nagi. The second was to turn Sumika Watamaki back into a human.

Tomori knew they'd used magic to capture Sumika, but she didn't know that the magic they had used was the Monster Tamer class ability, Capture—i.e., that Sumika Watamaki had been turned into a monster-summoning card. Since Tomori didn't know the truth herself, she probably told Niki that they had shut Sumika inside one of the Calculus capsules on the second floor, just like they had with Yukihiisa Miura's corpse. Yuuma had also asked her to keep the stuff about Valac a secret.

Niki had saved them from their earlier predicament. It felt wrong not telling him the truth, but Yuuma wasn't sure Niki would even believe them if they told him that Sawa was possessed by a demon, and if he did, there was no way of telling how he might react. As for Sumika, he also wanted to keep that situation under wraps as far as possible until they could find a way to turn her back. There was no way to predict what Sugamo would say if word got back to him that Sumika had actually been transformed into a card.

Yuuma turned away. Niki patted him firmly on the back.

"Don't worry," he told Yuuma. "I'll do everything I can to help find Sano."

“Th-thank you.”

Niki had apparently misread Yuuma’s silence. Yuuma was worried about Nagi; that was true. He decided to take Niki up on his offer.

“If Nagi isn’t here...the next most likely possibility is a town called Calcina. But even if we leave now, avoid battles, and sprint all the way there, it’ll still take us thirty minutes...”

“About that...,” said Tomori. She hesitated slightly before continuing. “I doubt it’ll actually matter if we make it back to the shelter by tonight.”

“But...everyone’s probably hungry.”

“I didn’t want to say anything earlier, because I’m not entirely sure...but I think Sugamo is actually hiding food, and a lot of it.”

“What?!” shouted Kenk.

He was still lying near the buried staircase. He flipped over and jumped to his feet, his eyebrows furrowing angrily.

“Sug, you piece of crap! Where do you get off telling us not to come back without food when you’ve been hoarding it all for yourself?!”

“I don’t know what you think yelling at Tomo about it is going to do,” said Sawa.

“Sorry...,” Kenk said to Tomori, but his glower did not disappear.

Yuuma was pissed, too, but he took a deep breath before asking, “Shimizu, what makes you think Sugamo is stealing food?”

“It’s just...after we fled into the shopping area and set up that barricade, once things settled down a little, Hokari and Sera suggested looking for food. Everyone split up and searched the stores, but...I mean, the gift shop in an amusement center should have stuff like cookies and pastries, shouldn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

Yuuma nodded. The same thought had crossed his mind earlier. He could even picture it—the packaging, the flaky pastries, the sweet filling. Even his avatar’s stomach was beginning to rumble.

A wistful look crossed Tomori's face as well, but she quickly regained her serious expression.

"The only souvenirs we found, however, were things like stationery and stuffed animals. All the shelves in the eat-in corner were empty. Sugamo said they probably weren't stocking perishables until the official opening, which everyone thought made sense...but while I was searching the store, I saw some kind of light flashing repeatedly, back in the eat-in corner near where Sugamo was at the time. It was pretty faint. I assumed it was just one of the emergency lights flickering, but..."

Tomori pursed her lips for a moment and then continued.

"Thinking back, it might have been the same effect that shows up when you put items into your inventory... I feel like Sugamo was taking the food on the shelves and putting it into his inventory."

"Huh...?"

Yuuma's jaw dropped. Even if Tomori's suspicions were correct, there was still a big hole in that theory that needed to be explained.

Yuuma tried arranging events chronologically, on both his and Tomori's side.

It was 3:00 PM when the *Actual Magic* playtest ended abruptly and the game world encroached into Althea.

Most of their classmates, including Tomori, had been logged out at that point and exited their Calculus capsules, which was when they were attacked by Sumika Watamaki and Yukihiisa Miura was killed. The students evacuated the playroom in a panic, but the elevators were already out of order, so they were forced to take the narrow emergency staircase instead. The stairs were too crowded, and almost 40 percent of the students wound up fleeing upstairs instead of down.

It was around that time that Yuuma, Sawa, and Kenk woke up. Yuuma wasn't sure why they had woken up later than the other students, but together the three were able to fend off Sumika's vicious assault and successfully capture her. By the time they had placed Miura's body in the empty capsule and made their way down to the first floor, the clock had reached 3:20. By the time they



defeated the Conehead Bruiser, explored the entrance and backrooms, and finally joined up with the students in the downstairs shelter, it had probably been around 3:50.

Which meant that...Tomori and the others must have been searching for food at some point between 3:20 and 3:50. But Yuuma didn't meet up with them and explain how to upgrade their classes until after that.

It had taken Yuuma only about two seconds to work everything out in his head. He spoke to Tomori again.

"Shimizu...are you saying you saw the inventory menu before Sawa, Kenk, and I arrived?"

"Yes."

"But people didn't boot up *AM* and upgrade their classes until after that. The game menu doesn't even open until you've upgraded... While you were still looking for food, no one should have been able to access their inventories, not even Sugamo."

"Unless he'd already upgraded his character class before that," said Sawa.

Yuuma frowned. So did Niki, even though he didn't entirely understand the situation. He pushed back the long strands of hair that hung down the left side of his face as he spoke, his voice filled with disgust.

"If Sawa's suspicion is correct, that means Teruki had already figured out how to awaken on his own, but he kept it to himself. Exactly what you'd expect from a guy like him..."

"Awaken? Is that what you guys are calling it?" asked Yuuma.

Niki grinned. "I guess so. And you call it a class upgrade, right?"

"Y-yeah."

Yuuma thought Niki was going to poke fun at him for picking such a childish name, but Niki's face grew serious instead.

"I hate to speak ill of our class president, but ever since Teruki was little, he's always been the type to look out for number one," Niki said with a deep sigh. "If he thought he had more to gain by keeping awakening a secret from everyone

rather than by sharing it, I wouldn't put it past him."

Yuuma suddenly remembered something that had happened earlier. His eyes went wide.

"What is it, Yu?"

Kenk stared at Yuuma questioningly.

Yuuma turned toward him and held out his right hand to Kenk.

"What? You want me to read your palm or something...?" Kenk asked.

"No. Back in the shelter, when we were teaching everyone how to upgrade their classes, I cast Skybird, remember? When I did this at Sug, he flinched even though we were at least five meters away. It was like he already knew I was going to use magic."

"For real...? But when everyone's QRESTs started changing, Sug and Mibs acted just as surprised as everyone else."

"I think Misono actually was surprised. Thinking back, though, Sug's reaction seemed a little forced..."

Tomori nodded emphatically. "I agree. It's not like Sugamo to make a big fuss in situations like that. If anything, I would've expected him to sulk."

"That's a good point," said Sawa, her face serious.

The light effect that Tomori had seen, Sugamo's reaction to Yuuma's outstretched hand, and his exaggerated shouts of surprise—all of that was circumstantial evidence. Taken together, however, things were starting to look suspicious.

"Assuming Sug had already upgraded his class on his own and was keeping it a secret from everyone else, it's pretty likely that the light that Shimizu saw was him putting something into his inventory. And since he was in the eat-in corner at the time, that something was probably food, just like Shimizu said. Still..."

Yuuma trailed off. He pictured Teruki Sugamo's face, then his boisterous laughter as he ran down the hallway on the last level of the old castle dungeon, followed by the cold, imperious look he had given Yuuma during the mock trial, when he had accused Yuuma of being responsible for Takeshi Moro's death.

During the playtest, Sugamo had been his usual self. A little bratty, maybe, and quick to throw his weight around, but still not someone you could really bring yourself to hate. During the trial, however, he had seemed like a different person, cold and mechanical as he laid out his case against Yuuma.

Aria Misono (aka Mibs) was basically Sugamo's girlfriend...but now that Yuuma thought about it, even she had seemed uneasy about Sugamo back then. It was almost as if she sensed that something wasn't right.

"Still...what?" asked Kenk.

Yuuma had trailed off earlier. He began speaking again.

"Still, even if Sug can be selfish...I never would've thought he was capable of hoarding food at a time like this. I mean, maybe he would, given the way he's been acting lately, but..." Yuuma glanced at Tomori. "If someone saw him putting the food into his inventory, then he obviously didn't do a very good job of covering his tracks. And after all the risks he took to get his hands on the food, I doubt he'd cough it up now just because everyone's hungry... How would he even explain what it was doing in his inventory?"

"I'm sure he could find a way," said Tomori. "For instance, he could empty his inventory out in the back rooms and then pretend he had just found it. However..."

Even Tomori's avatar in *AM* wore black-rimmed glasses. She adjusted them on the bridge of her nose as she continued.

"He very well might wait until the last moment possible to share, when everyone's starting to get desperate..."

"...'Cause that'd make him look like an even bigger hero," Kenk grumbled with a scowl. He glanced down and to the right. "It's seven o'clock now... I don't think we have any choice but to head back."

".....Yeah," said Yuuma, trying to suppress his own disappointment.

Not only had they failed to find Nagi, but they hadn't even found any clues as to where she might be. It was all very discouraging. But the eighteen students back at the shelter—seventeen, not counting Sugamo—were still hungry. They were probably eagerly awaiting the group's return any minute now. There was

plenty of food in Yuuma and the others' inventories. It wasn't right to just abandon their hungry classmates in order to focus on their own goals.

"We should return to the shelter," said Yuuma. "After we distribute the food, we can head back out to—"

Niki suddenly took a step forward and interrupted. There was new determination in his voice. "I'll deliver the food to the first-floor shelter. And I'll let them know you won't be back for a while. I know I said I'd help you look for Sano, but this sounds like it takes priority."

"Huh...?"

Yuuma wasn't the only one who was surprised. Sawa, Kenk, and Tomori all seemed shocked by Niki's offer.

"But Niki...aren't you diving in from one of the upper floors?" asked Sawa.

Niki nodded slowly. "Yeah. We found a staff break room on the fourth floor and turned it into a shelter. That's where I'm diving from: Playroom 03."

"The fourth floor...," Tomori muttered in faint astonishment as Yuuma and Kenk exchanged glances.

If Yuuma and the others had just skipped the third floor to investigate the fourth, they could have already met up with Niki's group in the real world. But there was no point in speculating about what might have been. They had no reason to skip floor 3 when the whole reason they were there was to look for Nagi.

Sawa was probably thinking the same thing, but her face didn't betray any emotion. "Are the fifteen students who fled upstairs all in the fourth-floor shelter?" she asked Niki.

"Of course. A few of us suffered minor injuries, but no one got seriously hurt. Or killed."

"I see. That's good—you've got the student council president with you, after all."

In response, Niki's crooked smile grew wider, more closely resembling the type of smile you would expect to see on a boy of his age. He nodded.

“Yeah, Shin always knows just what to do.”

The “Shin” whom Niki was so fondly speaking of was Shin Haizaki. He was Yuki-hana Elementary’s student council president and was said to be the smartest student the school had ever seen.

Even Yuuma, who’d barely interacted with Haizaki, felt his heart grow a little lighter from simply picturing the boy’s intelligent, capable face. If they could just meet up with him, he would know what to do. Haizaki was a rock. The one person they could always rely on.

“Was Haizaki the one who told you to dive in?” asked Yuuma.

Niki shrugged as if he was used to it. “More like he suggested it. Those of us who fled up to the fourth floor were discussing what to do next, and we mentioned how we wished we could get in contact with everyone on the first floor, but we were worried if we went down the stairs, we might get attacked again by Watamaki or some other monster. That was when Shin came up with the idea of having someone dive back into *AM* and search for other classmates, and I volunteered.”

“...”

Yuuma didn’t know what to say.

He and his party had decided to dive back into *Actual Magic* only after Valac, the demon possessing Sawa, told them it was fine. They would have never thought of entering the Calculus capsules again if it hadn’t been for her. Not only had Haizaki arrived at the idea on his own, but he’d even been able to foresee that someone from the other group might do the same.

“...But why did you dive in by yourself?” Yuuma couldn’t help asking Niki, as surprised as he was by Haizaki’s shrewdness. “Wouldn’t it have been safer to come with a party of three or four, like we did?”

A cynical smile returned to Niki’s face. “Probably, but I was the only one to raise my hand. Besides, not to act all macho or anything, but I can use the Swift Run spell, which means I travel faster on my own anyway.”



“I knew it! You’re a magic knight build...!” shouted Kenk, doing a poor job of hiding his jealousy. “How’d you manage that in a three-hour playtest? Raising magic skills on a Warrior is like pulling teeth...”

“Nah, my build sucks. Seriously, my only skills are one-handed swords and wind magic,” said Niki, trying to act humble. He checked the time again. “Anyway, I’m glad we managed to find each other. And thank you for trapping Watamaki alive. I...was worried we might be forced to kill her. Yuuma, Sawa, Kondou, Shimizu—honestly, thank you,” he said, bowing deeply. He truly seemed relieved.

Yuuma felt a lump growing in his throat. While it was true that he’d captured Sumika, she wasn’t inside a Calculus capsule like Niki assumed, but rather inside one of Yuuma’s tiny summoning cards. And she wasn’t bound by ropes—she was Yuuma’s familiar. That was a big difference.

Kenk glanced at Yuuma as if there was something he wanted to say, but Yuuma pretended not to notice.

*Why not just tell Niki the truth...?* That was probably what Kenk was thinking. Niki would understand that Yuuma just wanted to get Sumika back to normal. Yuuma doubted Niki would suggest anything crazy, like destroying the card right then and there. Nor would Haizaki, the leader of the fourth-floor shelter.

However, if they could secure a safe route between the first and the fourth floors, the two groups might be reunited soon—maybe even before the night was over. Once that happened, if Niki and Haizaki told the others the truth about Sumika, someone was bound to insist the card be destroyed. After all, Sumika had killed Yukihiisa Miura and seriously injured both Tomonori Tada and Shinta Aida.

It was still too early to let Niki in on Yuuma’s secret.

Yuuma tried to communicate all that to Kenk with just his eyes. He waited for Niki to finish bowing.

“You saved us, too,” said Yuuma. “I feel bad asking you to deliver items for us now, on top of everything else... Besides, we don’t know if the staircase is safe yet. You’re aware that there are other dangerous monsters besides Watamaki



roaming around Althea, aren't you?"

"Yeah... There was a pretty dangerous one toward the back of the fourth floor. If Shin hadn't gotten us all to awaken as soon as we ran upstairs, we would've been goners."

A shiver traveled down Niki's spine. Yuuma was curious to know just what kind of monster it was that they had encountered, but they'd never get anywhere if Yuuma stopped to ask every question that crossed his mind.

"In that case, you should know how reckless it would be to travel from the fourth floor all the way down to the first on your own," said Yuuma.

"You're probably right..." Niki nodded, but then he stopped and shook his head. "Wait a second—you guys already checked everything from the third floor down. The only area that might still be unsafe is the stairwell between the third and fourth floors. I've got an idea: After you give me the stuff, I'll log out immediately and then check that the coast is clear. If I see any sign of monsters, I'll just come straight back. How's that sound?"

"..." Yuuma made eye contact with the other three before answering. "You're the one doing us a favor, so if you're really willing to do this, we won't stop you... But don't take any risks. I mean it."

"Of course. Just gimme five minutes. If I'm not back by then, you can assume that I continued down to the first floor." Niki flashed Yuuma a confident grin.

Yuuma opened his inventory and transferred twenty onigiri, twenty bags of snacks, and ten bottles of mineral water into the now-open trade window. They both pressed OK, and the trade was complete.

"Okay, I've got the stuff. I'll deliver it to Teruki and the others. Don't worry, you can count on me," Niki said decisively. He suddenly seemed to think of something else. "One more thing... You said you were diving in from Playroom 02. Do you remember what number capsules you used?"

"Let me see... Um, numbers 226 to 229, I think. Why's that important?"

"I figure if I need to tell you something from the other side, I can leave a note on one of your capsules for when you get back."

He fiddled with his open menu window, navigated to the System tab, and placed his right hand over the LOGOUT button.

“If there’s any danger, come straight back,” Yuuma reminded him.

“Got it,” Niki replied, grinning. “Thanks for the information. It was exactly what I needed.”

When he pressed the button, his avatar was enveloped in white light and then disappeared.

The five minutes felt more like an hour, but Niki never returned.

That meant the coast must have been clear in the stairwell and Niki had headed down toward the first floor. Once he made it down, all he would need to do was pass through the elevator lobby, the main lobby, and the waiting area before arriving at the shopping area—aka Shelter Sugamo.

Those eighteen students would be so relieved to see Niki's face. Not only was he bringing food, but they would finally know that the students who had fled upstairs were doing all right. The only person who might not be too happy about Niki's arrival was Sugamo, since that might threaten his leadership.

Yuuma stood up from the stone he was sitting on. He knew it was petty, but he wished he could see Sugamo's face when Niki showed up.

"It's been five minutes. We'll just have to trust that Niki made it safely," said Yuuma. "Let's get moving."

"Finally! Actually, before we go...," Kenk began.

Kenk was still sitting. There was a whiny tone in his voice.

"...maybe we should eat first. Since we can smell stuff in *AM* now, we can probably taste as well. You know the saying: A gamer marches on his stomach!"

Kenk seemed to think he had just made a clever joke. Sawa refused to even crack a smile.

“You can last another hour, can’t you?” she told him. “Instead of using up our rations, now that we’ve finally gotten our hands on some, we should try to find something to eat once we reach Calcina. We can also try to get some more information while we’re there.”

“All right, some real food! I remember seeing a bunch of food stalls the last time we were there,” said Kenk, jumping to his feet with greedy excitement.

Tomori giggled.

The time was currently 7:10 PM. It would probably be past 8:00 by the time they arrived at Calcina. Stores shut down early in *AM*. There might be some taverns still open, but Yuuma wasn’t so sure about the food stalls. He decided not to mention that to Kenk.

“Okay then, it’s decided,” said Yuuma. “I think we should explore the castle a little bit before setting off, though. What does everyone else think?”

“But we already explored the upper floors during the playtest, didn’t we?” said Sawa.

She looked perplexed. Yuuma quickly explained.

“Yes, that’s true. But if the dungeon is gone now, what was that giant lizardman—the Varanian Axbearer—guarding? It only dropped an ax and some materials, no real treasure.”

“Oh...!”

Sawa was as familiar with games as Yuuma was. It took her a second or two, but she quickly began nodding.

“That’s right. I hadn’t thought of that. The upper floors aren’t designed as a dungeon, so it shouldn’t take us long to look around.”

Kenk and Tomori also agreed, and they all hurried toward the other end of the spacious room. Tomori cast Brightbird once more, which they used to light their way as they climbed up the wide staircase located there.

Kenk and Sawa were leading the way, their expressions serious. Yuuma spoke quietly to Tomori as the two trailed behind.

“In case I haven’t said it before, thank you again for coming with us, Shimizu.

You've been a big help."

"Have I...? All I do is stand at the back and cast a few spells..."

Tomori looked down, embarrassed. Yuuma shook his head emphatically.

"That's what a Priest does. We wouldn't have been able to beat the Varanian without your magic. It was also real smart what you did when you pulled away its shield... And what about now? Without that bird of yours, we would be forced to carry lanterns or torches while we explored," he explained, pointing to the magic bird as it flapped around over Kenk's head.

Tomori smiled softly. "It's nice of you to say that, but I need to learn to fight properly like everyone else... After all, Sawa's just got a wand while I've got this extra-long staff. What's the use of dragging it around with me if I can't even use it to fight?"

Although the croziers used by Priests served as magic staves, they were also blunt weapons, with curved metallic heads that could be used to hit enemies. Additionally, a Priest's stats were more suited to close combat than a Mage's, although ultimately that depended on your build.

"Everyone has their own playstyle. A magic-focused Priest is entirely viable. Besides, we've already got Kenk to handle the front row," said Yuuma, trying to cheer her up.

Tomori suddenly laughed again. "Just him?"

"Well...me too, I guess!"

"Tee-hee... Okay, if you say so. I'll just stick to magic, then," said Tomori softly.

Her shoulders finally relaxed, and her usual, untroubled tone of voice returned. Her face suddenly clouded over, however, as if she was remembering something.

"... But..."

"Hmm...?"

Yuuma was about to ask her what was wrong, when suddenly—

A strange sensation washed over him, faint yet unmistakable. He paused mid-

step. He was overcome by a feeling of detachment, almost like his soul was separating from his body... It lasted for only a moment, however, before the chill night air, the musky odor of dust, and the hardness of the stone beneath his boots returned.

At first, Yuuma thought he had imagined the feeling, but Kenk and Sawa, who were walking up ahead of him, and Tomori, who was by his side, all froze as well. They glanced down at their own bodies in puzzlement.

“Yuuma, did you...?”

Yuuma nodded as Sawa turned toward him.

“Yes, I felt it. Something strange. Maybe it was a long-range monster attack...? There was no damage, though, and I haven’t taken on any status effects...”

“It didn’t feel like an attack. More like...”

Kenk paused for a moment, as if looking for the words, before sighing in frustration. Yuuma sympathized—he couldn’t find the right words to describe the feeling, either.

“Well, under the circumstances, we’re bound to run into one or two things we can’t explain... Or three... Or four...,” said Yuuma.

He glanced around once more just to be sure there were no signs of danger, and then he made eye contact with Sawa. They began moving again.

The second and third floors of the old castle contained only rubble, but at the end of the fourth and highest floor, they found what they were looking for: a large treasure chest, bound in darkly gleaming iron.

Kenk let out a celebratory hoot and began to rush forward, but Yuuma grabbed him by the collar before he could take another step. He had Sawa cast *Reveal Traps* and then cautiously approached the chest himself. For a moment, he panicked, noticing the large keyhole on the front of the chest, but after everyone checked their inventory, they realized that Kenk had picked up a drop item called a *Steel Key*. Yuuma stood to the side and let Kenk do the honors.

Kenk made a show of inserting the key into the lock and turning it, until it clicked with a satisfying sound. Next, he placed both hands on the lid and began

making celebratory sound effects, like the kind you'd hear when finding treasure in a game. Sawa smacked him hard on the back.

Kenk finally lifted the lid. There was a much bigger jackpot waiting for them than expected.

It consisted of a two-handed sword, a small sword, a wand, and a crozier, all evidently high-grade equipment. The contents of the chest were probably generated based on the party that opened it. In addition to the weapons, the chest was also packed full of basic provisions, such as lanterns, binoculars, and water canteens, as well as stoppered potions in expensive-looking glass bottles. The bottom of the chest was also blanketed with a large number of coins.

The four gasped in excitement and turned to give each other high fives. No one wanted to celebrate too much, since they weren't there on a treasure hunt. But a win was still a win.

Kenk turned back toward the treasure chest. He pulled out the two-handed sword and placed it on the floor before passing the wand to Sawa, the staff to Tomori, and the small sword to Yuuma. The piles of items and coins could be divvied up later. For now, he separated them into two leather pouches he had on hand and passed one each to Yuuma and Tomori, since they had the most room in their inventories.

After collecting the treasure, the four hurried back down to the first floor. They had spent around ten minutes exploring the castle... Nagi would probably forgive them for the delay.

Before stepping outside again, they scouted the courtyard from the doorway, just to be safe. There didn't seem to be any monsters. Yuuma was worried that more Barbed Wolves or even some other monsters might wander in at regular intervals now, but that didn't seem to be the case.

"All right, let's head toward Calcina...," said Yuuma.

Sawa, Tomori, and Kenk nodded wordlessly.

*We'll find you before the night is over, I promise. Just hold on a little longer,* thought Yuuma, praying that Nagi could somehow hear him.

Yuuma turned toward the distant town and began running.



The distance from the ancient forest castle to Calcina was about five kilometers.

If it had been daytime, when they could easily spot monsters from afar and avoid them, they would have run there at full speed and arrived in less than thirty minutes. Night, however, required that they keep their eyes peeled. Even walking swiftly, it took twenty minutes just to exit the forest and another thirty to cross the plains.

By the time they had finally traversed the dozenth or so hill and caught sight of the glow of a town in the distance, the clock was already ticking past 8:00, just as Yuuma had expected.

Calcina was a small fortress town built on the northern bank of a large river known as the Cal River. It was enclosed by a semicircular stone wall, with three major roads branching off in a radial pattern from a central plaza that faced the river. Each of these roads connected to one of the town's gates.

Since they weren't wanted as criminals and could just walk in, Yuuma and the others headed for the north gate, which was the largest of the three. Yuuma tensed up a little as they walked past the guards, who were dressed in chain mail and wielding halberds, but the guards let them in without hassle. No one asked to see a pass or tried to shake them down for a bribe or anything like that. It was 8:12 PM when the party of four finally set foot onto the stone-paved streets of Calcina.

Of course, Calcina had also been their starting point during the playtest, so really, they were just coming back after an eight-hour absence. As a result, Yuuma didn't expect to feel particularly excited as he laid eyes on the large road that extended in a straight line southward from the gate.

"Huh...?"

A small gasp escaped Yuuma's lips.

The last time they were there, the quiet street had been only sparsely dotted with stalls and street vendors. Now, however, there were no stalls in sight. Instead, the street was lined on both sides with closely packed, and brightly lit, shops and taverns. Their awnings butted all the way up to the street. There were also throngs of tavern dwellers and shoppers, who strolled past leisurely

with smiles on their faces.

“Who knew Calcina got so exciting at night...?” Kenk said in amazement.

Yuuma cleared his throat gently. “I don’t think it’s a matter of day or night, Kenk... There’s not just more people. There’s also way more shops than there were before...”

“Well, better more than less. Come on, let’s go find somewhere to eat. I’m starving...!” Kenk dramatically clutched his stomach.

Sawa smacked him on the back again. “You’re not gonna starve to death. Information first, food later...”

Just then, however, Yuuma noticed a new symbol appear under Kenk’s HP bar, which was still displayed in his own field of view. It was a symbol he had never seen before. Its border was black, which meant it was a debuff rather than a buff. It was shaped like a crank but with a thick middle—probably meant to represent a stomach.

Yuuma stared in surprise. As he did so, he noticed that Kenk’s HP count, which was superimposed over the graphical bar and had been full just a moment ago, suddenly decreased by one.

“Oh. That must be the Hunger status ailment. I guess I was wrong, Kenk. It looks like you might starve to death after all,” said Sawa, cool as a cucumber.

Kenk shook his head back and forth in denial. “Nooooo!!”

Yuuma and the others rushed into the first restaurant that caught their eye, relying on guesswork to order from the unfamiliar menu. As they finished placing their order, Kenk’s HP fell by another point, to 174.

It wasn’t clear if this was fixed damage, or a percentage of max health, but either way, Kenk was losing hit points at a pace of about one HP per five minutes. At this rate, it would take 875 minutes for Kenk to die from the hunger debuff... In other words, 14 hours and 30 minutes. In the real world, you could go ten times that long without eating and survive, so long as you had water. In game terms, however, it was a pretty unforgiving damage over time.

Good luck convincing Kenk of that, however. His knee was bouncing restlessly

as he glanced back and forth between his HP bar and the door leading into the kitchen, practically ready to jump out of his skin. If he was so worried, he could have always just nibbled on some of the rations in his inventory. The debuff would have probably disappeared. But Kenk didn't seem to like that idea.

Luckily, the door to the kitchen opened before Kenk's next tick of damage, and the NPC waitress reappeared carrying fully loaded trays in each hand.

"Here you go, sweethearts, sorry for the wait!" she said cheerfully as she began laying the dishes out onto the table.

Sauces sizzled on the plates, and the mouthwatering aroma of spices filled the air. Huge, perfectly browned cuts of meat glimmered appetizingly beneath the lantern light. Yuuma felt his stomach rumble.

The waitress poured fresh lemon water into each of their glasses. "Enjoy!" she said, before stepping away. The moment she was gone, Yuuma and the others snatched up their knives and forks and descended on the food at the speed of light.

Yuuma had ordered the aged sepala sirloin steak with steamed vegetables and baked potato. Yuuma didn't know if sepala was a real kind of beef, or even what part of the cow a sirloin came from, but the dish certainly made an impact, both in terms of sight and smell.

Yuuma impaled the thick slab of meat with his fork and began cutting into it with the knife in his right hand. For a moment, the meat seemed to resist, but then the knife sank in with satisfying smoothness, almost like butter. Although nicely singed on the outside, the plump cut of meat he carved off was still pale pink in the middle, and clear fatty juice trickled out before his very eyes.

It looked incredibly delicious. But more importantly, it all seemed so real. The first time Yuuma dove into *Actual Magic* and had been confronted by the sight of the rolling, windswept plains, he'd been astonished by the quality of the world, which seemed to surpass even reality. This steak was something else altogether, though. Surely it was just a 3D model, and yet it seemed as if it had been re-created down to every last fiber and cell of meat.

With trepidation, Yuuma brought the bite of meat to his lips. What if it shattered into pieces like an ice sculpture, just like equipment did when it ran

out of durability...?

He maneuvered the chunk in between his right molars and then bit down. The meat split open with a firm yet tender mouthfeel. Hot fat and juices exploded across his tongue, blending with the sauce, which was sweet and acidic. That single bite of steak was so delicious that Yuuma thought he could have died then and there. He managed to keep it together enough to shovel in the next bite, and the next bite, and the next bite, until before long, the beautiful steak had been reduced to a mess across his plate, leaving him in a heady state of bliss.

Once Yuuma had come back down to Earth and taken a look around, he realized everyone was intent on shoveling food into their mouths: Kenk, who had ordered the same dish as Yuuma; Sawa, who had ordered the grilled fish; and Tomori, who had ordered the chicken stew. Not one to be outdone, Yuuma took another bite of his steak and then followed it with a mouthful of baked potato. Yuuma chewed with his mouth full, relishing the delectable mixture of fat and carbohydrates, before washing it all down with a healthy swig of lemon water.

In the real world, an elementary school student would never be able to enter a restaurant as fancy as this on their own, let alone afford to order a steak with the paltry allowance stored on their QREST. Not that this place was cheap, either—the sirloin steaks Yuuma and Kenk had ordered cost thirty-nine whole aurums—but they had found over three thousand aurums, in gold and silver coins, at the bottom of that chest in the castle. They could be forgiven for using 5 percent of that amount to splurge a little this once.

Yuuma had already finished off about half of his steak and wanted to savor the rest. He reached for the basket of bread on the table, which contained three different types, and he chose a thinly sliced piece of black bread, spreading it with butter before shuttling it to his mouth.

Even the bread was delicious. It was slightly sour, which complemented the whipped butter perfectly.

*Come to think of it, Nagi loves European-style bread like this.*

Sitting next to Yuuma was Kenk, who stopped his fork in midair.

“That crybaby, Nagi, would probably love a taste of that, too...,” he said.

Now that Kenk’s stomach wasn’t so empty, he was apparently beginning to feel guilty, just like Yuuma was. Obviously they had to do something about Kenk’s HP, but there was no telling what Nagi might be facing at the moment. Instead of stopping at a restaurant and ordering steak dinners, they probably should have just grabbed some quick shish kebabs or something from one of the street stalls...

“Then we’ll make sure she gets a chance to try it,” said Sawa simply, before reaching across the table with her fork and skillfully pilfering a bite of steak from Yuuma’s plate.

“Once we find Nagi, we’ll bring her to the fanciest restaurant in town...no, in this whole world, and let her help herself to anything she desires. Until then, though, we probably won’t have another chance to sit down at a restaurant like this, so you guys better fill up now while you still can...”

“Yeah...”

“Okay.”

Yuuma and Kenk nodded and began attacking their steaks once more.

Five minutes later, Yuuma had polished off every last scrap of meat, vegetable, and potato from the cast-iron plate sitting before him. He drained the last drop of lemon water from his glass and sighed deeply.

Kenk had already finished a few moments earlier. Yuuma glanced above his head, speaking in a low whisper since the girls were still eating.

“Your Hunger debuff is gone,” he said.

“I know... I thought I was gonna die,” said Kenk, grinning. He suddenly furrowed his brows together uneasily. “But...how come I’m the only one who got hit with a debuff? You guys hadn’t eaten for a while, either... Wait a second, you didn’t sneak a bite from your inventories while we were still traveling, did you...?”

“Of course not!” said Yuuma, elbowing his friend in the side.

Yuuma had his own theory.

“It’s probably just like in the real world... The amount of energy you consume is like a car’s mileage and varies depending on the size and strength of your avatar. You’re big and powerful, so you probably get hungry quicker...”

“What, really? It sounds like a smaller avatar and lower strength would be an advantage, then.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” said Tomori, cutting in.

She had just finished her chicken stew. She wiped her mouth gracefully with a napkin and took a sip of lemon water before continuing.

“I was thinking about this during the boss fight earlier, but in *Actual Magic*, it’s really a case of might makes right. With higher strength and endurance, you can carry more things, swing around heavier weapons, and can even serve as a shield to protect your friends... Classes like Mage and Priest can do a lot with their magic, obviously, but that’s only if they’re protected by a strong character like Kondou...”

Yuuma was about to disagree but stopped himself.

In MMORPGS, every class and build had its own advantages and disadvantages, and it was only by working together and covering each other’s weakness that you could start challenging really powerful enemies. A character like Kenk, with zero skill in magic, couldn’t buff or heal his friends, either. Protecting the Priest was just a natural part of party dynamics.

Still, as logical as that might be, something about Priests needing to be protected by Warriors seemed to bug Tomori. Yuuma could somewhat see where she was coming from. Of all seven classes available in *Actual Magic*, a Priest focused entirely on healing and support magic, like Tomori had chosen, was probably the least capable of surviving on their own. Yes, glass-cannon Mages were even more fragile, but their immense firepower and mobility still allowed them to deal with dangerous situations. A Priest might be able to use healing magic to hold out for longer, but eventually they would run out of MP, making it a losing battle.

Back in the castle, Tomori half jokingly said that she’d just “stick to magic” after all, but apparently the same concerns were still bothering her. It would be easy enough for Yuuma to say that he and Kenk would protect her, like he’d

said before, but that didn't seem to be what she needed to hear right now.

"Shimizu...", said Yuuma, staring directly at Tomori, who was sitting in the seat diagonally across the table. "It's entirely up to you what class and build you choose. I don't know if there's any system in place to change classes in here, but you can start putting points into STR, END, and weapon skills, and become what's called a battle priest, if that's what you want to do. Just because *AM*, and Althea, are in the states they're in, that's no reason to... What I'm trying to say is you should decide your own build, not *in spite of* everything that's happening, but *because* of it. Naturally if you want advice, I'll help however I can. But it's your choice."

"..."

It took every ounce of verbal skill Yuuma possessed to express what he was thinking. Tomori was dead silent for a moment.

Suddenly, heavy teardrops began to spill from behind her black-rimmed glasses.

"I...uh..."

In a panic, Yuuma glanced to the side and across the table. Kenk sat frozen, his fork held in midair. Sawa didn't look like she knew what to do, either.

After about ten seconds of Tomori crying, Sawa drew a clean napkin from the napkin holder on the table and handed it to Tomori. Tomori wiped her eyes with the napkin. After a few more seconds, she managed to get her breathing under control and was able to speak again.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cry all of a sudden like that... It's just, no one's ever said anything like that to me before..."

"Oh..."

She probably wasn't talking about the game anymore. Yuuma couldn't guess much more than that, however.

Tomori hesitantly glanced toward Yuuma and then immediately turned her eyes away again before continuing.

"With everything happening at Althea, I've been so afraid I wasn't good



enough... Me, Soga, and Moro were the only Priests in the shelter, and then Moro went and got himself killed... I've been so scared that it was my fault, that someone would blame me. But then, when Sugamo held that mock trial and blamed you for Moro's death instead, I actually felt relieved... I...I...I just thought..."

Tomori's tears had stopped earlier, but they suddenly welled up again as if a dam had been broken.

Once again, Yuuma was at a loss for words.

It wasn't that he was shocked by Tomori's confession. If their positions had been reversed, he might have felt the same. Besides, if anyone was going to get railroaded by Sugamo, better Yuuma than Tomori. After all, Yuuma had innate Sug resistance.

Tomori clutched the napkin to her face. Her shoulders shook slightly, but she managed to get her tears under control and to begin speaking again.

"Part of the reason I volunteered to go with everyone to find food was because I felt guilty, but that wasn't the only reason... I wanted to get away from that place. I knew that would leave Aoi responsible for taking care of everyone in the shelter all by herself, but I didn't care, I just wanted to run away... I thought, if I could at least live up to my role in this party... But when that coneheaded creature attacked us on the third floor, and when the giant lizardman attacked us at the castle, I needed everyone else to protect me..."

By that same logic, Yuuma hadn't really lived up to his role as a Monster Tamer during those two fights, either. All he had done was use his Chilling Hand spell against the Varanian. He hadn't done any summoning or capturing, like his class was supposed to do.

Pointing that out probably wouldn't do much to comfort Tomori, however. Yuuma didn't understand why she was so hung up on roles and responsibilities, but if those were the chains around her neck, it would probably take more than a few cheap words to remove them.

If nothing else, however, she could at least pick her own character build, without letting stuff like roles and responsibilities hold her back.

Yuuma clapped his hands together decisively.

“Okay then, how about this?”

“Hmm...?”

Tomori lifted her face, which was still wet with tears. Tomori, Kenk, and Sawa turned their eyes in Yuuma’s direction as well.

“I was already thinking we should do this before continuing our search for Nagi, but while we’re here, why don’t we assign all the extra skill points that we’ve saved up?!”

When the *Actual Magic* playtest ended at 3:00 PM, Yuuma, Kenk, Sawa, and Nagi had all been level 7.

After that, in Althea, they had defeated the Conehead Bruiser, the swarm of Tabanus Hellfly Larvae, and the Conehead Demolisher (although without Valac's help, the Demolisher would have wiped the floor with them). Later, in *Actual Magic*, they had defeated the Varanian Axbearer mini-boss and the two Barbed Wolf trash mobs. As a result, Yuuma, Kenk, and Sawa were now level 12, and Tomori, who had joined them along the way, was level 11.

Yuuma, Kenk, and Sawa each had 220 unused skill points. Tomori had 170. It generally took 100 points to acquire a new skill, which meant that Yuuma, Kenk, and Sawa could each acquire two new skills, while Tomori could acquire one.

Yuuma currently had three skills—utility magic, shadow magic, and Command. If Yuuma remembered correctly, Kenk's skills were Two-Handed Sword Mastery, Exceptional Strength, and Physical Resistance, while Sawa's skills were utility magic, fire magic, and Enhanced MP Regeneration.

Since they could each add two skills, Yuuma was going to suggest they all choose Enhanced HP Regeneration as one of their picks. First, however, he wanted Tomori to decide how she wanted to progress her build.

"Shimizu, what are your skills so far?" asked Yuuma.

"Let's see..." she began. "I've got holy magic, light magic, and Enhanced MP

Regeneration.”

“Oh, so you didn’t take utility magic?”

“No, I was playing with Chi...I mean Tsuda during the playtest. Since she took utility magic, I decided not to.”

“Of course...”

Yuuma nodded and stopped to think.

So far, Tomori had a magic build that was geared toward casting healing and buff spells from the back row, and not for standing on the front lines. But she was still only level 11. It wasn’t too late to change course—not yet, at least!

“Let’s see... If you picked up another type of magic or a skill like Enhanced Spell Range, you might start to get locked into being a pure caster, but right now you can still change course if you want to. For instance, if you traded your crozier in for a mace and shield and picked up skills like Shield Mastery and Physical Resistance, you could make a very capable cleric or battle priest...”

Yuuma glanced at Kenk and Sawa as he spoke, but they both just nodded wordlessly. Kenk and Sawa were both big gamers, like Yuuma, so if he had their seal of approval, that must mean there was nothing in the game system keeping the build from being viable. There was still one more hurdle that needed to be cleared, however.

Yuuma was trying to figure out how to explain, when—

“Ashihara, what was that word you said earlier? A *cleric*?”

“Ah...sorry, it’s a common character class in games. It just means a Priest who fights, like a frontline Priest.”

“Oh, okay, of course. I thought it was a name from a book or something, like Claire Morgan.”

Before Yuuma could ask who that was, Tomori was already hurrying on to her next question.

“Anyway, the fact that there’s a word for it must mean it’s not too out there... right? It’s not something that no one would ever think to play, is it?”

“Well...no, of course not. Backline healers are probably more common, but you’ll always see at least a few battle priests in any MMO. With enough growth, they can sometimes even become a specialized prestige class, like a paladin.”

“A paladin...? Like the Twelve Peers of Charlemagne?”

Yuuma blinked again. That was another name he didn’t recognize. Sawa and Kenk looked lost as well. Tomori quickly began to explain. She seemed a little self-conscious.

“Well...Charlemagne was the French name given to Charles the Great, the first emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. In the heroic epic *The Song of Roland*, Charlemagne had twelve knights under his command who were said to excel in feats of valor, and their leader was named Roland... Actually, Kondou, do you remember that steel bar you picked up in Althea, the one that you called Durendal? Durendal was originally the name of Roland’s sword!”

“It was?!”

Yuuma and Kenk both shouted at once.

“Wait. How do you know about that?” Kenk murmured a moment later.

Tomori, however, didn’t seem to hear him. She had forgotten her self-consciousness at this point and was now eagerly diving into her explanation.

“Of course, Durendal and Roland probably didn’t actually exist, but the twelve knights were all unique and had their own personalities. Especially Roland’s best friend, Oliver. He was my favorite. The Twelve Peers were also known as the paladins.”

“Whoaaa!” Yuuma and Kenk marveled.

Yuuma thought paladins were just a class name used in-game. Who knew they had such a venerable backstory? Tomori, of course. Yuuma was shocked at how knowledgeable she was, despite only being in the sixth grade like the rest of them.

Yuuma and Kenk were too busy being impressed to add anything to the conversation. Sawa, however, was determined to show she wasn’t quite as dumb as the other two.

“Wait, that sounds like the story of King Arthur. Didn’t he have the Knights of the Roundtable or something like that, too?”

“Exactly!” Tomori shouted, suddenly leaning forward in excitement. “*The Song of Roland* and the legend of King Arthur have tons of things in common. Roland’s Durendal and King Arthur’s Excalibur are treated almost the same in both stories, someone betrays the knights in both stories, and they both have the witch Morgan...”

Tomori’s eyes sparkled with excitement, but she suddenly trailed off before apologizing in a tiny voice. The change was like night and day.

“I’m sorry... I get carried away talking about this stuff...”

“You don’t need to apologize; it was interesting. When we rescue Nagi and get back to the shelter, maybe you can tell us more about Charlemagne. Nagi loves those kinds of stories, too,” said Sawa.

“O-okay...,” said Tomori.

She nodded before turning back to Yuuma.

“I’m sorry for going off on a tangent. I’ve given it a lot of thought, but...” She hesitated for a moment but then continued in a decisive tone of voice, “I think I’ll stay a normal, backline Priest.”

“Oh...”

Yuuma was almost certain she was going to say she wanted to become a battle priest. He stared closely at Tomori’s face as he spoke.

“Are you sure that’s what you want...?”

“Yes. I think my role is to make sure everyone stays healed up... Besides, I’m not sure I’d make a very good paladin anyway,” Tomori said jokingly.

She seemed to have calmed down again, at least.

The last hurdle, which Yuuma never got the chance to mention—the condition she needed to meet in order to move up to the front line—was the capability to go toe to toe with monsters, without letting fear get the better of her. The world of *AM* was very real. The mental pressure involved in standing up front and fighting with a melee weapon in your hand was entirely different

from the pressure involved in shooting off spells from the back row. Yuuma didn't doubt Tomori's bravery, but when you're low on HP and one hit away from death, the only way to know if you've got what it takes to stand your ground and trust in your friends—is to experience it for yourself.

Tomori had used that word *role* again. Something about it didn't sit easy with Yuuma, but he just nodded slowly.

"Fine. Then as your fourth skill, maybe you should choose Enhanced Spell Range... Wait, before that, you should probably choose Enhanced HP Regeneration. I was thinking we should all take that."

"What, really?" said Kenk, completely taken by surprise. "That skill is kind of underwhelming, isn't it? The regen is too little to matter in battle, and out of battle, there are plenty of other ways to heal..."

"In the world of *AM* maybe," said Yuuma.

"Of course," murmured Sawa.

Yuuma nodded briefly in her direction before turning back to Kenk. "Our avatars don't get stuff like broken bones and torn blood vessels, so as long as we have at least one HP remaining, we can heal up completely with natural regeneration. But the same isn't true in the real world. If we were to get seriously injured there, we would either need to get someone to heal us with magic, like Shimizu did for Aida earlier, or to drink a healing potion. But what if we were in a situation where neither was available? If we had Enhanced HP Regeneration, however..."

"Our natural healing might still keep us alive?"

Kenk finally seemed to understand. He glanced down at his own body and touched himself gingerly around the abdomen, as if he was remembering what happened when the Conehead Demolisher sent him flying.

"You're right; it's a lot tougher over there than it is in here. Anything we can do to raise our chance of survival in the real world, even by just a little..."

"I think it's a good idea, too. Back when the Demolisher attacked, you only had *this* much HP left," said Tomori, pinching together her index finger and thumb.

Kenk grimaced, sucking in air between his teeth.

There was no time like the present. Since everyone was already in agreement, they opened their menu windows, navigated to their Skills tabs, and selected Enhanced HP Regeneration. After pressing the OK button, they were each enveloped in an effect indicating that they had just acquired a new skill.

Next, Yuuma chose Enhanced MP Regeneration, which was an indispensable skill for magic-using classes. Kenk chose the Posture skill, which would make him harder to knock down. And Sawa chose Wand Mastery, which would both increase her magic attack power and decrease the amount of MP she used. The four of them had now used up nearly all their skill points.

According to the guidebook, reaching level 12 and acquiring five skills was the milestone that indicated a player was no longer a beginner. Tomori was still level 11, and was also new to MMORPGs to begin with, so they would need to keep looking out for her, but the next time they faced a boss monster like the Varanian Axbearer, it was on Yuuma, Sawa, and Kenk to live up to their new status as intermediates. At the very least, they had better avoid rookie mistakes, like letting a few trash adds ruin their battle plans again.

Yuuma closed his window, vowing privately that he would do better next time. He had ordered coffee for after his meal. He insisted on drinking it black, since he thought that would seem cooler—but it took only a sip for the bitterness to make his face screw up in displeasure.

“See?”

Sawa rolled her eyes, pouring in a generous lug of milk from a ceramic pitcher and then popping in three cubes of sugar. In the real world, you would need to mix that all up with a spoon, but Yuuma skipped that step and took another sip.

The smooth new flavor and rich aroma flooded his mouth. He sighed in pleasure. He could still feel some fatigue in the back of his neck, but their real mission was just getting started. The time now was 8:50 PM. He wanted them to find Nagi, and return to the shelter, before the day was over.

The other three finished their coffees and teas and set their cups down at almost the exact moment as Yuuma.



“All right, all fueled up again!” said Kenk, putting on his most dashing smile. A moment later, however, his face fell. He glanced down at his stomach and then over at Sawa.

“Hey, Sawa... When we log out, everything we just ate and drank isn’t going to disappear from our stomachs, is it?”

“Hmm...well...” Sawa thought for a moment and then shrugged. “I don’t think so. After all, if you got reset every time you logged in and out, you’d be able to cheese your way out of stuff like poison and paralysis that way.”

“That makes sense.” Kenk nodded, relieved, and then reached for the menu that was still on the table. “Hold on, you’re not planning on eating even more, are you?”

“Of course not! I just figured that we could order something to go, for Nagi.”

“Hmph... That’s not a bad idea. For you, at least.”

*Well, that was rude,* thought Yuuma. He and Kenk pored over the open menu together.

Tomori and Sawa were perusing the other menu. Yuuma glanced surreptitiously at Tomori, a little concerned, but she seemed like her normal self.

After inspecting the menu, they decided to order a sandwich on soft white bread, bursting with herbs, cheese, and thinly sliced ham, as well as the apple pie with cream, to go. It took the waitress less than three minutes to bring it out to them, wrapped in a brown paper bag.

Yuuma used the opportunity to ask for their check and was surprised to receive a paper bill like you would receive in the real world. It was neatly handwritten. Altogether, the bill for their four meals, drinks, and the two take-out orders came to 181 aurums. An aurum was probably worth about 100 yen, meaning they had just spent the equivalent of around 18,000 yen.

Yuuma was floored by the amount. Normally he would be hesitant to buy even a 200-yen roll from the convenience store. Just that one chest in the castle, however, had contained over 3,000 aurums, and he was used to playing RPGs where you bought and sold items worth 100,000 gold or 1,000,000 zeni,

or whatever currency, on a daily basis.

Yuuma tried to act nonchalant as he opened his inventory and materialized one golden coin, which was worth 100 aurums, nine silver coins, worth 10 aurums, and one copper coin, worth 1 aurum. First, he placed their total on the waitress's waxed leather tray, and then he added the extra silver coin to indicate it was a tip.

Since she was an NPC, Yuuma wasn't sure if she would understand what a tip was—but after a moment, she blinked and then bent forward slightly.

“Is that for me, handsome?”

Yuuma nodded quickly and answered her in a tiny voice. “Of course. The food was delicious.”

“Well, thank you, adventurer. If you keep throwing such big tips around, though, you're gonna find yourself without a pot to piss in.”

“Um...maybe I could ask you a few questions in private, in exchange?”

In response, the waitress quickly looked Yuuma up and down as if sizing him up, and then nodded slightly.

“Why not? Meet me out back.”

She stood back up, gave Yuuma a wink, and walked away.

Yuuma exhaled. Kenk, who was sitting next to him, seemed impressed.

“All right, Yuuma! Way to go!”

The four exited the restaurant and, after making sure that no one was watching, slipped into the narrow alleyway between the restaurant and the building next door.

It really was narrow, only about fifty meters wide, but it was a straight shot to the back road that intersected with it. It was much darker here than along the main street, and the damp cobblestones were chipped and cracked in places. It almost seemed like an entirely different part of town.

“I didn't expect there to be areas like this in Calcina...,” murmured Sawa.

“I bet there's even some hidden shops back here,” said Yuuma.

Just then, they heard the click of a lock turning. It came from what appeared to be a back door into the restaurant.

Yuuma tensed up reflexively, but it was only the waitress from earlier. She looked a little different now that she had removed her apron and bandanna, but she still sported the same red ponytail as before.

The waitress closed the door behind her, leaned against it, and placed her right hand into the pocket of her long skirt. She produced a narrow stick, tarry in color and about seven or eight centimeters long. She struck it against the nearby wall, creating a small flame on its end.

Yuuma watched, dumbfounded, as she stuck the other end of the stick into her mouth and took a long drag.

“Hah...”

She sighed softly, breathing out a narrow stream of purple smoke. A sweet aroma filled the air.

*They’ve got cigarettes in AM?!*

Yuuma was still staring in astonishment when the waitress cocked her head toward them and spoke in a husky voice.

“Now then, what is it you wanted to know, sweetie?”

The pitch and tone of her voice were completely different from when she had been serving them inside the restaurant. Yuuma was starting to wonder if it really was the same woman from before. He glanced up at her HP bar, but the only thing written there was **Serving Girl at Pomegranate Pavilion**.

It wasn’t like she had any reason to swap places with someone else, though, so Yuuma began asking his questions.

“Um... Earlier today, maybe around early evening, did another adventurer happen to come into town? A girl about the same age as us, probably on her own?”

“I’m sorry to break this to you, sweetheart, but I’ve been working inside all day since noon. I can’t check the face of every adventurer who walks in and out of town.”

There was a crackling sound as she took another puff on her stick, exhaling the smoke with evident satisfaction.

If Yuuma decided to take up smoking in *AM*, would it even affect his body in the real world...? Yuuma quickly chased the thought from his mind. He had been expecting the waitress's answer, and so he continued with his follow-up question.

"In that case, do you know of anyone who might know if she had shown up?"

"Let's see... There's a souvenir shop catty-corner across the way, called House of Stripes. The old man who runs it might know something."

"House of Stripes. Okay, thank you."

Yuuma bowed his head, and Sawa and the others followed suit.

The waitress shook out the cigarette she was holding and pushed open the rear door to the restaurant, turning back to look over her shoulder with one last comment.

"If the old man doesn't want to talk to you, just tell him Elaine sent you. I hope you find the girl."

This time the waitress stepped back inside. Yuuma shouted a thank-you as she disappeared through the door.

"Some NPCs they got here...," Kenk muttered once she was gone.

Yuuma and the others would have loved to explore the back streets, but they put their curiosity on hold for now and hurriedly returned to the main street.

It was already past 9:00, but there were still a fair amount of people out walking. Most seemed to be locals who were stopping by for something to eat on their way home, or red-faced tavern hoppers. Only a handful of the NPCs who were out looked like they might be tourists.

Yuuma peered across the street from Pomegranate Pavilion. A three-story inn sat directly across the street. There was a tavern with open-terrace seating to its right, and what looked to be a clothing shop, which had already closed for the day, to its left. There didn't seem to be anything resembling a souvenir shop, however...

“Ah... What about over there?”

Tomori pointed to a patch of darkness between the inn and the clothing shop. Squinting, Yuuma managed to make out a small, one-story building set back a short distance from the road. She was right; that could be a shop.

The group crossed the street and approached. Yes, it was definitely a shop. Its road frontage measured only about one and a half meters wide, however. Most players would probably overlook it unless they already knew it was there.

It was laid out like a train station shop, with a display counter set out in front that stretched the entire width of the store’s face, allowing customers to shop without actually entering the building. A sign reading *HOUSE OF STRIPES*, in faded letters, hung beneath the shop’s awning. Behind the display counter sat an old man, likely the owner.

The only light came from two small lamps hanging to the left and right of the signboard, leaving the old man’s face half hidden in shadow. Yuuma hesitantly approached and pretended to peruse the wares. It was all accessories. Rings and bangles, arranged in rows. They were made of red-and white-striped stonework—possibly cut sardonyx.

*That explains the name...* Or so Yuuma thought, but just then he heard a little meow. He raised his head. A black cat was lying on its side at one edge of the counter above the display case, flicking its long tail back and forth. The cat was entirely black, save for the white stripes on its tail. Maybe the cat was the inspiration for the shop’s name.

The old man had yet to move an inch. Yuuma was still pondering the store’s name when the man’s beard trembled and he finally spoke in a gravelly voice.

“I’m about to close up for today, young man.”

“Oh...sorry. I actually didn’t come to shop.”

“Then beat it. We’re closed,” the man said brusquely as he began to stand.

In a panic, Yuuma tried to get the man to stay. “We’re actually looking for someone!”

“I sell souvenirs, not people.”

“No, we don’t want to buy a person...,” Yuuma sputtered, in confusion.

Sawa cut in from behind Yuuma. “Elaine, from Pomegranate Pavilion, sent us,” she said calmly.

The old man suddenly froze and lowered himself back into his chair. “That firecracker’s nothing but trouble... So? What’s she gotten her nose into this time?”

Yuuma was both relieved that the conversation was moving forward and embarrassed that he had forgotten what the waitress had told them. He asked the old man if he had seen a young adventurer girl.

If this was part of a quest, now would be about the time they discovered some promising clue, but Nagi was a player who was acting of her own free will. It was entirely possible the old man hadn’t seen her. If so, Yuuma and the others would have to assume she hadn’t come to Calcina and start heading toward Solieu, on the other side of the map.

Yuuma waited for the man’s answer, prepared for the worst. A few seconds later— “No, I haven’t seen any adventurers around that age...”

Prepared or not, Yuuma felt a hole open up in the pit of his stomach. He heard Kenk sigh heavily behind him.

However, the old man wasn’t finished.

“...but my friend here has heard some rumors that might be related to this person you’re looking for.”

“Your friend...?”

Yuuma took a look around, but the only people present were Sawa, Kenk, Tomori, and the old man. Yuuma was still glancing around stupidly when the old man began speaking to the black cat curled up on the edge of the counter.

“You there. What was it you were telling me earlier?”

In response, the black cat lifted its head in annoyance and began meowing. “Meow meow meow, meow meow, meow meow.”

“I see... I see... Yes, of course...”

“.....”

Yuuma and the others stood frozen in place. The old man turned back toward them, cleared his throat, and slowly began speaking.

“Apparently...a little after noon today, a girl about your age supposedly washed up on the shore of Philos Island.”

“...!!”

Quickly getting over his shock at seeing an old man talk to a cat, Yuuma made eye contact and then leaned in over the display counter.

“Wh-where is Philos Island?!”

“You can see it from here during the day. It’s just across the bridge from the central plaza... Philos is that sandbank sitting in the middle of the Cal River. It’s where the lord mayor’s manor is located.”

“...O-oh...!”

The plaza had been their starting point during the playtest. Come to think of it, Yuuma remembered being able to see a large, stately building from there. Yuuma and his friends had mostly skipped the town, not wanting to waste time on sightseeing, but that building was apparently where the lord mayor of Calcina lived.

It was only about three hundred meters from the plaza either way. Yuuma wasn’t sure why Nagi would have washed up there, but once they found her, she would be able to tell them more.

“Thank you!” shouted Yuuma as he spun around, ready to race off immediately.

“Hold your horses there, young man.”

The old man called after Yuuma before he could go anywhere. Yuuma turned back around.

“Y-yes...?”

“You need a pass to cross the bridge to Philos. Besides, even if you had one, the bridge gate is already closed at this time of night.”

“Oh...”

Yuuma glanced down reflexively, but obviously he didn't have any sort of bridge pass. It wasn't like they could just give up, however.

“If it's just a sandbank, we could cross over in a boat or even swim across the river...”

“There's no ferry out there, and you'd have to be an expert swimmer just to avoid getting swept away by the current and carried down to the Great Falls. Even if you did make it across, you'd be in a world of trouble if any of the guards found you there. Just calm down and listen, will you?”

“O-okay...”

Yuuma resisted the urge to ask what the Great Falls were, and he waited for the man to continue.

The old man extended his left hand and stroked the black cat's back as he spoke.

“Anyone found trespassing on Philos Island is captured without mercy, bound, and brought before the constable for interrogation. Not even children are safe. Depending on how prisoners answer the constable's questions, they can even be put to death on the spot. According to Nanao here, the girl was unconscious when she washed up on the island and hasn't come to, so they're keeping her in the dungeon beneath the manor.”

“The dungeon...,” murmured Yuuma.

Just the thought of Nagi lying unconscious, locked away in some dank, dark dungeon, made Yuuma feel like he was about to lose his mind. If they were going to help her, however, they would first need to find a way across to Philos Island.

If they couldn't go by boat, and they couldn't swim, maybe they could force their way in through the bridge gate and attack the manor head-on... Yuuma was distraught now and hardly thinking straight.

“Who is this constable you mentioned?” Tomori asked calmly. She had stepped forward next to Yuuma at some point.



The old man frowned severely. He wasn't upset that Tomori had asked the question, however.

"Constable Oeben... He's a rank villain who takes advantage of the lord mayor's youth in order to control the strings of power in Calcina and line his own pockets. This area is known for its onyx, but that scoundrel keeps it all to himself, leaving only third-rate stones like what you see here for the rest of us."

Yuuma and Tomori glanced down at the display case, where the old man was pointing. The accessories lined up in the case all gleamed brightly. His pieces certainly didn't look inferior.

"They're very pretty..." said Tomori, apparently thinking the same thing as Yuuma.

The old man's face softened for a moment, but then his mouth quickly turned back into a frown.

"Well, obviously I'm not gonna put out any mistakes, but if you could see real top-of-the-line Calcina onyx, you'd know. The striping is one of a kind, and the shine could take your breath away..."

The old man's mouth suddenly clamped shut, and he shook his head back and forth.

"But now's not the time for such things... Oeben is a greedy brute with inhuman strength, which he needs to swing around that massive golden hammer of his. He's not stupid, either. Don't underestimate him. He's far too dangerous for a bunch of kids like you to handle. If you've got any notions in your head about charging in through the front door, you'd best give those up now."

Yuuma looked down as the old man cast a sideways glance his way.

"But this girl—Nagi...she's our friend. We can't leave her in there," he protested. "You said it yourself. Once she wakes up, they'll take her before Oeben for interrogation. We need to get her out of there before that happens..."

"All the more reason for you to simmer down and listen!"

The old man cleared his throat and then glanced past their shoulders to make sure the coast was clear. He gestured for them to come closer.

Once they had all crowded in along the barely meter-and-a-half-long display counter, he began whispering.

“There’s actually a secret tunnel underneath Philos Island that passes beneath the riverbed and connects to the other shore. It was an underground escape route, built long ago during the long war between Calcina and Solieu. Neither the current lord mayor nor the constable knows anything about it. If you can make it through that passageway, however, you can probably make it into the dungeon without being seen.”

“Why didn’t you just say that to begin with...?!” Kenk shouted in relief, but Sawa shut him up with an elbow to the side.

“Keep your voice down, you idiot!” she spat. “Sir, you said *if* we can make it through. Is there some reason we wouldn’t be able to make it through the tunnel?”

“I’m getting there. First of all, the exit from the tunnel—what would be the entrance in your case—is located on the south side of the Cal River. You’ll need to cross the bridge to the far east of town to get there. Next, the door to the entrance is sealed with blessed cleansing steel chains, so you’ll need to find some way to cut through them before you can open the door. Finally, it’s not a straightforward path. The tunnel is a maze, and the branching paths are filled with deadly traps designed to spell death for pursuers.”

The old man had explained everything in a single breath. He paused for a moment and then spoke again in a weighty voice.

“Knowing all this, do you still intend to go?”

“ ... ”

Of course, Yuuma wanted to answer him without hesitating. But if the tunnel really was full of life-threatening traps, they needed to think things through carefully. If they died in this world, would they just be logged out and unable to dive back into *AM* again? Or would they be wiped from existence entirely, without ever returning to reality?



Yuuma was still biting his lip when— “Of course we’re still going, Gramps!” said Kenk decisively.

Kenk was standing next to Yuuma. Yuuma glanced toward his friend in surprise. Kenk’s face in profile, however, was missing its usual brash, happy-go-lucky expression. Real thought seemed to have gone into his conviction.

Obviously, if that was their only way in, they were going to take it, no matter how great the danger. They knew in advance that the traps were there, so as long as they kept their wits about them and moved carefully, they would probably be able to avoid them. Yuuma, Sawa, and Tomori answered in unison as well.

“We’re going,” they said.

The old man nodded silently and pulled out a flat wooden box from beneath the counter on which the cat was sleeping. Inside, the box was filled with piles of old papers. He riffled through them for a few moments before pulling out one sheet that looked even more discolored than the rest.

“Then I’ll give you this map. If you shine a light on it, you should be able to see a tiny pinhole along the south bank of the river. That’s where you’ll find the entrance to the secret tunnel.”

The old man held the piece of paper out toward them. Yuuma took it with both hands. He resisted the urge to hold it up to the lantern light right then and there, and instead, he placed it into his inventory.

“Thank you... Once we save Nagi and make it back, we’ll bring you a reward,” said Yuuma, bowing his head.

The old man snorted, speaking in the same brusque tone he had used when they originally approached his shop. “Keep your rewards. Next time just buy something, you hear?”

“Wow... Look at all the stars...”

Sawa was walking behind Yuuma. He stopped and tilted his head upward to look.

Yuuma gasped, his mouth falling open slightly.

Countless stars were suspended in the transparent, jet-black night sky above them, twinkling quietly. No...the word *countless* hardly even did the sight justice. Nozomi City, their hometown in the real world, had some of the cleanest air in the metropolitan area and was located over a thousand meters above sea level. As a result, you could see magnitude-six-brightness stars with your naked eye on a clear day. That was nothing, however, compared to this. Yuuma could hardly believe what he was looking at was real.

Well, technically it wasn't. This was all happening inside *Actual Magic*, the world's first VRMMORPG. But it wasn't exactly a virtual world now, either. Take, for instance, the physical bodies of Yuuma and his friends. They had been entirely erased from the real world and currently existed only as data in *AM*.

Yuuma's sense of reality was already hanging by a thread. He suddenly felt it begin to slip from his grasp. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

The date was May 13, 2031. A Tuesday. The time was 9:30 PM.

Yuuma and his friends were currently in the middle of a grassy, open plain,

about a kilometer east of the town of Calcina, which was located in the southwest corner of the world of *AM*.

And they were on their way to save Yuuma's childhood friend Nagi—Minagi Sano—who was currently being held prisoner in a dungeon beneath the lord mayor's manor. Yuuma could worry about what was real and what was virtual after they had Nagi back and had safely escaped this world.

Yuuma opened his eyes again and took another look at the stars, which were almost terrifying in their beauty.

"We should free Nagi before tonight is over, so that she can see the stars, too."

"Agreed. Let's hurry."

Kenk nodded and began striding forward along the narrow path that cut through the surrounding grass. Yuuma and the others followed him from behind.

According to the map that the old man at the souvenir shop had given them, there should be a bridge about two kilometers east of Calcina, which they could use to cross over to the south side of the river. That wasn't very far. Yuuma wished they could have just sprinted all the way, but this was their first night in *AM* since diving in. They couldn't afford to be reckless. They chose to walk instead, keeping their guard up.

It was a good thing that they did. Giant rats and frogs sprang up from the grass along the path several times along the way, but thanks to their caution, they were able to avoid ambushes and defeat the monsters easily. Eventually, they spotted a triple-arched bridge up ahead and to the right. It was much grander than what they had been expecting.

Whether old-school or new, JRPG or Western, bridges were a favorite location for scripted events in roleplaying games. They began to cross the bridge cautiously. Fortunately, nothing unusual happened—the bridge didn't suddenly collapse beneath their feet, no monsters appeared to flank them in—and they were able to reach the other side without incident.

The small path lining the riverbank turned westward again. After proceeding

another two kilometers back in that direction, they spotted the lights of Calcina on the opposite shore.

Yuuma and the others stopped atop a hill that offered a particularly good vantage point and began scouting out the location.

A mass of rocks, similar in size and shape to a large boat, jutted out from the middle of the large river. The river was about two hundred meters across, with a drop of around ten meters between the bank and the surface of the water. The mass of rocks was connected to Calcina, on the opposite shore, by a magnificent stone bridge. That was Philos Island, their destination.

An imposing fortified manor had been built atop the rock formation. Despite the late hour, numerous torches and bonfires illuminated the building in reddish flame. They could see the silhouettes of halberd-carrying guards as they patrolled along the top of the wall that encircled the manor. Unless Yuuma and his party learned to fly, or could turn invisible, it would likely be impossible to sneak over the wall.

“Hey, Yu, do you think there’s really a hidden tunnel...?” asked Kenk.

Yuuma turned his eyes back toward his friends.

The south shore, like the north, was lined with gently flowing hills. There wasn’t much to break up the monotony other than a few sparsely growing hardwood trees.

“If not, we’re in trouble...”

Yuuma frowned and pulled the map out from his inventory. He would have liked to light a lantern, but if he did, the manor guards would probably notice. Instead, he held it up toward the brightest section of the band of stars splayed out across the sky overhead.

“Ah...!”

Tomori, who was standing next to Yuuma and staring up at the map, gasped slightly. Yuuma noticed it at almost the same time.

There, along the fine line meant to represent the south shore of the river, was a tiny pinhole, just like the old man had said there would be. It indicated a



location that was seemingly not far from where they currently stood. White starlight shone through the hole from the other side.

“The hole is at the base of a tree,” Yuuma muttered.

Tomori quickly glanced around and said, “It might be that tree over there.”

She was pointing at a particularly large old tree located at the base of a hill directly across from Calcina, its leafy branches sprawling in the darkness.

Sawa, Kenk, and Tomori immediately rushed toward the tree. Yuuma pocketed the map and hurried after them.

Once they got closer, he realized that the tree was much larger and more splendid than he had expected. The gnarled trunk was at least two meters in diameter, and while the tree wasn’t very tall, the long, thick branches stretched out to form a wide, dome-like canopy.

Yuuma was wondering how old it was when Sawa shouted, “Over here!” from the opposite side. He dashed over to her.

Sawa had apparently discovered a hollow at the base of the trunk. It was large enough even for an adult to squeeze through, but it was too dark to see inside.

“You don’t think there’s any bears in there, do you...?” whispered Kenk, taking a step back.

Yuuma was about to ask him what bears would be doing living on plains, but he bit his tongue before he could speak. Maybe in the virtual world, some bears did live on plains. Or maybe there was something else lurking inside. Something just as dangerous.

Yuuma glanced over his shoulder to ensure that the hill shielded them from view of anyone on Philos Island, and then he stretched his left hand out toward the hollow.

*“Lumen.”*

As Yuuma chanted the word of power for the element of light, a small glimmer appeared at his fingertip. Unlike Tomori’s Brightbird spell, this ball of light couldn’t fly far away or respond to the presence of monsters. It was still enough to light up the inside of a hollow, however.



Yuuma crouched down and held his right hand up like a lampshade to direct the light. There was nothing inside other than a pile of dead leaves. No bears or rats in sight. Yuuma was glad there weren't monsters waiting for them, but if it was just a normal hollow, they were back to square one.

Yuuma got down on all fours and crawled forward into the hole. Ten seconds had already passed since he chanted the magic word, and the light expired with a sad puff.

Remembering the items they had found earlier, Yuuma checked his inventory. The list was sorted by latest items; at the top was something called a coldfire lantern. He tapped it once, glancing over the item description that appeared.

**This lantern contains the cold flames of Sublimae. The flames give off no heat and thus cannot be used to warm chilly hands, but they continue to burn, even underwater.**

Yuuma wasn't sure what Sublimae was—maybe a person's name or a place—but as long as it provided light, he really didn't care.

"Hey, Yu, are you okay in there?" whispered Kenk quietly from outside.

"I'm fine!" Yuuma answered as he materialized the lantern. The pale blue flame was already flickering inside the lantern's narrow casing. Just like the description said, the lantern gave off practically no heat—looking closely, in fact, he could even make out a bit of frost forming inside the glass casing.

Yuuma held the lantern by its wooden handle and closed his menu window. He took another look around the hollow.

The ceiling was just barely high enough for Yuuma to possibly stand. The walls were covered in mossy bark, and the ground was carpeted in a thick layer of fallen leaves. As for a tunnel entrance or some clue as to its location...

"Ah...!"

Yuuma was searching the ground blindly when his hand came into contact with something unusual.

Yuuma drew the light closer and brushed aside the fallen leaves, discovering a steel ring attached to a solid-looking wooden board—likely the handle of a trap

door that had been built into the ground.

Yuuma grabbed the ring with his left hand and pulled. The wooden door rattled slightly, but Yuuma was unable to lift it at all.

“Kenk, come here,” Yuuma called.

Kenk poked his head into the hollow with some concern. Once he saw the trap door, which was lit up by the lantern, he seemed to quickly grasp the situation. He began crawling inside.

Yuuma moved out of the way slightly. “Leave it to me,” Kenk whispered, grabbing the ring with both hands. Taking a deep breath, Kenk dug in both heels and— “Hurrkkk!!”

Kenk pulled with all his might. The trap door resisted at first...but after a few seconds, the door seemed to reach a tipping point and started scraping free.

“Nrghh...”

Kenk’s face turned red as he managed to lift the trap door open by about thirty centimeters. He wedged his right knee underneath the heavy door and then pushed forward with all his might. The door’s sturdy hinge worked like a fulcrum, allowing the door to finally tilt backward and crash into the ground with a heavy thud.

“Hah...hah... Who knew a piece of wood could be so heavy...?”

Kenk sat on the ground, catching his breath.

“It’s a good thing you put points into Exceptional Strength. Good job, Kenk,” said Yuuma. He then peered down into the now open hole.

The square shaft had obviously been made by human hands—which was to be expected, since trap doors didn’t exactly exist in nature, either. An iron ladder descended vertically along one wall of the shaft, gleaming softly as it reflected the lantern light.

“Yu, I’ll go down first...,” said Kenk, standing back up.

Yuuma held out a hand to stop him. “No, I’ll go.”

“But why?”

“I was always faster at climbing the wall bars in gym class.”

Yuuma promptly slipped feetfirst into the opening, which measured less than sixty centimeters across either way.

Yuuma stomped on the rung several times to ensure it could hold his weight, and then he attached the lantern to a hook on his belt. Gathering his courage, he began to descend.

At first, Yuuma counted the rungs as he went, but he gave up after reaching fifty. Come to think of it, this shaft was supposed to connect to the secret tunnel they were looking for, and that tunnel needed to be deeper than the riverbed. Yuuma wouldn't be surprised if the ladder went twenty, maybe even thirty meters deep.

For the next two minutes, Yuuma continued to climb down the ladder, being careful not to slip as he went. Eventually, his right foot connected with solid ground.

Yuuma removed the lantern from his belt. As he turned around, a gasp escaped his lips.

The old man had referred to it as an escape tunnel, so Yuuma had been expecting a primitive hole in the dirt. What the lantern revealed, however, was a proper, well-made tunnel lined with closely packed, darkly colored stonework along its walls, floor, and ceiling. Naturally, the air was a little musty, but since the tunnel was over two meters wide by two meters high it wasn't enough to cause panic. There were no signs of monsters, either.

“It's fine! You can come down now!” Yuuma said, calling back up the shaft.

After a brief pause, Kenk's “Okay!” echoed down the shaft. Two minutes later the others had descended the ladder, Sawa first, followed by Tomori and then Kenk.

“There really is a tunnel...,” said Tomori, peering around, eyes wide.

Yuuma nodded. “We're lucky you spotted that tree, Shimizu.”

“Someone else would have found it even if I wasn't here...,” she said.

Yuuma was about to reply, *Well I certainly didn't*, but before he could— “Yu,

over here!” shouted Kenk.

They hurried deeper into the tunnel.

Up ahead, they found Sawa and Kenk with their necks craned backward, staring up at a solid-looking set of double doors. The doors were constructed of dully gleaming metal, rather than stone, and had U-shaped metal fittings embedded into their centers. The fittings on each door were connected by a thick chain. The fittings and the chain appeared to be made of the same faintly golden material.

“This must be the blessed cleansing steel the old man mentioned...,” said Sawa, giving the chains a light tug.

They made a cold, clinking noise but of course did not budge.

Sawa shrugged, moving away and patting Kenk on the back. “You’re up, big guy!”

“Me...?! Well, I guess I might as well give it a shot...”

Kenk opened his menu window and materialized his two-handed sword from his inventory. It appeared on his back. He drew the sword from its scabbard in one clean sweep and held it out in front, readied at mid-height.

As he lifted the sword slowly, resting it atop his right shoulder, the blade began to glow red. He was preparing the two-handed sword art Heavy Slugger. It was similar in form to the one-handed sword art that Niki had used earlier, Power Smash, but it traded in speed for power.

“Haaa...yahh!!”

With a clarion shout, Kenk swung his blade downward. It struck the chains directly in their center. There was a flash of crimson light. Orange sparks flew in every direction, and a tremendous *crack* reverberated through the tunnel.

A chunk of metal somersaulted through the air, struck against the ceiling, and then bounced off, landing on the floor in front of Yuuma’s eyes.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t a piece of the chain. It was a piece of Kenk’s blade, which had just broken in half— “Buhhh?!”

Kenk cried in despair as the half of the sword that still remained in his hands,

and the half of the blade that had implanted itself into a crack in the stones of the floor, dissipated into a cloud of silver particle effects.

“M-my Excalibur...!” Kenk sank to one knee.

“When did you name it Excalibur? Besides, that was just your starting equipment. You already got a new sword from the chest in that castle, remember?” said Sawa, sounding exasperated.

“.....Oh, I forgot about that.”

Kenk was still crouching on the floor. He fiddled with his menu.

*Come to think of it, I got a new shortsword, too. I should really check its stats sometime soon,* thought Yuuma as he walked toward his sister.

“I don’t think brute force is going to cut it,” he said. “Maybe we should try flame or ice magic...”

“I doubt basic spells from either element are going to do much damage,” Sawa replied. “There was probably an official quest we were supposed to do in order to get an item that can break the chains or something...”

Yuuma nodded; that made sense.

Their current situation also resembled a quest, but the person they were trying to rescue, Nagi, was a player, not an NPC. Normal progression probably involved acquiring a quest from someone in town that put them in conflict with the lord mayor, with lots of steps they were supposed to follow before they made their way here. Yuuma and the others had essentially achieved a level skip.

“But does that mean...we don’t have any way of breaking the chains yet...?” Yuuma asked.

“...”

Sawa was quiet. She approached the door again and tapped it.

A small window appeared, displaying the object name, **Cleansing Steel Chains**, and their durability, **30,000/30,000**. The door was obviously incredibly sturdy. Despite costing Kenk his sword, Kenk’s Heavy Slugger hadn’t chipped off even a single point of durability.

“Hey, Sawa?” said Tomori from behind. She appeared to have an idea. “That old man said that the chains were ‘blessed.’ Do you think that means they’ve been reinforced with holy magic?”

“Yeah, probably. And a pretty powerful spell, I imagine,” Sawa said as she turned around and nodded.

Tomori faced Yuuma. “Can’t you break it with your shadow magic then, Yuuma? Magic from opposite elements are supposed to cancel each other out, aren’t they?”

That was a great idea for someone who had never played an RPG before until today. Yuuma wished he could congratulate her on finding a solution. Unfortunately, he could only shake his head sadly instead.

“The opposite of shadow magic is light magic, not holy magic.”

“Huh...? So what’s the opposite of holy magic, then?”

“Curse magic, I think. But according to the guidebook, players can’t acquire curse magic at first.”

“Oh...”

Tomori glanced down, disappointed. Yuuma wanted to say something to cheer her up, but before he could do so, Sawa suddenly stepped forward, a look of resolve upon her face.

“Yu, there’s someone else who might be able to break the chain. I think she’s our only option.”

“She...?”

*Valac? But Sawa already summoned her for the day. The timer hasn’t reset yet...*

Yuuma suddenly inhaled sharply.

No, not Valac. Yuuma knew who Sawa was referring to. She meant Sumika Watamaki, who currently lay sleeping inside the monster card holster strapped to the side of Yuuma’s chest.

Sumika possessed even greater attack power than Kenk; that was true. But

Sumika's attacks were physical, just like Kenk's. Sawa seemed to agree that brute force wasn't able to break the chains, so then why—?

Yuuma suddenly recalled Sumika's status window.

Sumika had been level 17 at the time and had possessed six skills: Exceptional Strength, Sword Transformation, Blindsense, Resist Pain, Resist Dark, and Resist Cold. And she'd been listed as a Night Fiend.

*A Night Fiend.* It certainly sounded unholy.

"Sawa...are you suggesting that she, herself, belongs to the curse element?" Yuuma asked.

"We know some monsters are aligned with elements," Sawa began in a low voice. "The treants we fought in the northern woods were wood element, and that fire dragon we fought in the castle dungeon was fire element, remember? I assumed she was dark element at first, but if that were true, my Flame Arrow should have done more damage to her. Fire and dark aren't opposites, but according to the guidebook, dark creatures have a weakness to fire."

"...Yeah...true."

In addition to doing double base damage against ice element creatures, fire was also supposed to get a 50 percent bonus against wood and dark monsters. When Sawa hit Sumika with her Flame Arrow, it had knocked Sumika through the air, but there had been no special effect to indicate that Sawa had targeted a weakness.

Sawa's argument that Sumika probably didn't belong to the dark element seemed persuasive. Besides...if Sumika's current appearance wasn't the result of a curse, then what could explain it?

Yuuma turned away, feeling overwhelmed with emotion. Unfortunately, Tomori chose that very moment to interject.

"This girl you're both talking about... Who is she? I can tell by the way you're talking that you don't mean Valac, do you...?"

Yuuma continued to stare at his feet, unable to respond.

Sawa knew that Tomori would ask that question. This must have been Sawa's

way of saying it was time to let Tomori in on the truth...that Sumika had been turned into a monster card and was now one of Yuuma's familiars.

Obviously, Sawa was right. Tomori, of all people, was sure to understand Yuuma's desire to turn Sumika back to normal and would almost definitely keep it a secret from the others. Besides, if they encountered another monster, one that was stronger than the Varanian Axbearer, Yuuma might be forced to summon Sumika once again. Unless Tomori was told about Sumika in advance, there was a very good chance that Sumika's appearance would cause her to panic when the time came.

Sawa knew best, as usual, but Yuuma couldn't entirely get over his fear of telling Tomori the truth. The only reason that Yuuma had been able to capture Sumika Watamaki in the first place was because she had already been transformed into a monster. That didn't change the fact, however, that Yuuma had used his Monster Tamer powers to capture another classmate.

Yuuma gritted his teeth. What if Tomori blamed him for what he had done? Or suddenly grew afraid of him? Just then, someone touched Yuuma on his left shoulder— It was Kenk. He had approached Yuuma from behind and patted his shoulder lightly.

As hard as it was to believe, that small gesture was enough to snap Yuuma out of it. Yuuma exhaled the breath he had been holding.

Even if Tomori did blame him, or become afraid, that would be the consequences of actions he himself had chosen. It was time to face the music.

"Shimizu... The *she* we were talking about is right here..."

Yuuma reached into the holster on his right chest and drew out one of the two cards that were contained inside.

Tomori glanced at the transparent purple card, which was about ninety millimeters long by sixty millimeters wide.

Tomori's eyes furrowed in concentration and then grew wide.

"Huh...? S-Sumika Watamaki...? Is that *our* Watamaki? But why is her name written on a monster card...?"



“I told all the students in the shelter that we had restrained Watamaki, after she had been turned into a monster. I know you probably assumed that meant that we trapped her inside a Calculus capsule. That seems to be what you told Niki. But that isn’t the truth. I used my Monster Tamer spell, Capture...to turn Watamaki into a familiar.”

“A familiar...,” Tomori repeated blankly.

The only emotion on Tomori’s face, for the time being at least, was astonishment. That was sure to change before long.

“I’m going to summon Watamaki now, but you don’t need to be afraid. She won’t attack us,” Yuuma explained. His voice was surprisingly calm.

Yuuma walked toward the door and held the card up high.

*“Aperta!”*

The single word echoed through the stone walls of the tunnel.

The card in Yuuma’s left hand welled up with a dark purple, almost black light, and a faintly ominous magic circle began to appear. The card disintegrated into black rays of light that concentrated into a single point on the floor. A human shadow began to slither forth.

The figure had long, straight hair and was dressed in a short uniform jacket and high pleated skirt. Once the clinging shadows evaporated, the clothing returned to its familiar light blue and ivory white color scheme.

The girl Yuuma had summoned was thin and slender and dressed in the Yukihana Elementary School uniform. She was an object of adoration for not just their sixth-grade class, but their entire school—Sumika Watamaki.

The damage Sumika had suffered back in Althea had already healed. Her uniform, likewise, was once again unblemished and untorn. For some reason, however, the white ribbon she wore as a hairband was still stained with dark reddish blood. Fortunately, she was at least no longer clutching the right arm of Yukihiisa Miura, as she had been back in Playroom 01.

For a moment Sumika remained motionless. Her arms hung limply at her sides, and her head lolled forward. She straightened up slowly.

The coldfire lantern that Yuuma held soon illuminated Sumika's face, which bore neither eyes, nor mouth, nor nose. He heard Tomori inhale sharply behind him.

Yuuma waited for the high-pitched scream he was sure would be coming. A second passed, however, and then two, and still Tomori did not scream. Yuuma wanted to turn and see her reaction for himself, but he was too scared of what might be waiting. He began walking forward instead.

As Yuuma approached, Sumika's blank face shifted awkwardly. It was strange how she was able to detect him even without eyes, but since she also had the Blindsense skill, she was probably seeing Yuuma with some sort of sixth sense.

Strangest of all, however, was that Yuuma wasn't afraid, even though he was close enough to touch her. Back when he had summoned Sumika during the Conehead Bruiser fight, even though Yuuma knew she was his familiar, alarm bells had been ringing in his head. Now, though, he just felt helpless and sad... and something else that he couldn't describe, something that felt like some kind of pressure squeezing his chest from deep inside.

"Watamaki...," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm sorry for waking you up again... but we need your help...to save Nagi."

Yuuma didn't expect her to respond, since he hadn't issued any voice commands, but Sumika moved her head slightly in response. A movement that might possibly be interpreted as a nod. Yuuma nodded back in reply and pointed toward the massive doors that blocked the passage just two meters away.

"I want you to break the chains sealing that door... *Destroy cleansing steel chains!*"

Yuuma rephrased his first request in voice command format, just in case that was necessary, but Sumika was already moving toward the doors before he had finished.

Her black socks made hardly any noise as she walked across the stone floor and approached the heavy doors.

Yuuma wondered why she wasn't wearing shoes, but the answer soon

occurred to him. During the playtest, when they had first entered the Calculus capsules, they had been told to remove their shoes before entering their capsules. Sumika's school uniform loafers were probably still sitting next to her capsule in Playroom 01.

They should probably collect them once they returned to the real world. There was so much to do, however, that Yuuma was worried he would forget. He couldn't open up the reminder up on his QREST while in *AM*, so he just stared hard at Sumika's slender frame, trying to burn the memory into his brain.

Yuuma knew firsthand how powerful Sumika's gleaming claws could be—that lesson had been carved into his flesh, quite literally, back when she had attacked them in Playroom 01. The cleansing steel chain, however, was weighty and thick, probably a full fifteen millimeters in diameter. Physical power alone was going to be useless against them. Their only hope now was that Sumika's own curse element would neutralize and erode the holy element of the chains, just as Sawa had suggested.

Or was it?

With a strange noise, like groaning metal, Sumika's right arm began to transform.

Her five fingers began to twist into a spiral and meld together, growing longer and narrower as they fused together. Her white skin, meanwhile, took on the sheen of darkly gleaming metal. This metal soon stretched from the shoulder of her jacket to the pointed tip where her fingers fused together, measuring about seventy centimeters total—a sword.

*This must be the Sword Transformation skill.*

Yuuma had noticed the skill on Sumika's status screen earlier, but it hadn't been listed in the guidebook, so he wasn't sure what it was. He gasped as he watched it now in action.

Sumika's right hand transformed into a single-bladed straight sword. She lowered it downward across her body and then twisted hard, tensing up from head to toe. As she did, the blade began to glow with a dark purple light. A weapon art...? Naturally, Yuuma had no idea what it might be called.

*Thwoomp!* The air rippled.

Sumika's sword arm flew straight forward at a disturbing speed, striking the cleansing steel chains right down middle and creating a high-pitched ringing sound that put Kenk's blow to shame. An explosion of pure white sparks flew in every direction, showering Sumika's head and body.

Yuuma instinctively shut his eyes against the blinding light. He forced himself to open them again.

The point of Sumika's sword had created a slight nick where it pressed into the chain. Waves of gold emanated from that point, as if attempting to repel the blade.

Sumika's right foot scraped forward slightly.

The dark purple aura enveloping the blade grew stronger. The golden waves began to stutter erratically, making high-pitched, metallic cracking sounds.

"Ah...!" Sawa yelped softly.

A single crack had begun to form along one of the links of the chain, and golden light seeped out from the fissure. Sawa had been right all along. A Night Fiend was apparently a curse-alignment monster, capable of breaking through light-element protection.

It was going to work! Yuuma had barely finished that thought, however, when he clutched his left hand shut, noticing the hitch in their plans.

Sumika's HP and MP bars, which were floating above her head, were slowly but steadily decreasing. The purple aura was likely a sustained ability, which explained the MP drain. As for her HP, that was probably due to the extreme force being applied to the blade. Normally a weapon would lose durability when damaged, but since this sword was actually a part of Sumika's body, the damage was probably being reflected in her HP instead.

Despite being a supposedly inanimate object, the cleansing steel chain seemed to be doing continuous damage to Sumika. A second crack, meanwhile, had yet to appear in the chains. At this rate, Sumika might run out of HP before the chain actually broke.

Just then, Yuuma heard footsteps approach from behind. Someone ran forward and stood next to Yuuma on his right side.

“Ashihara, I’ll heal Watamaki’s HP!”

It was Tomori Shimizu. Yuuma turned to the side, seeing her determined face in profile. There was no fear or loathing in her expression, as far as Yuuma could see.

“Thank you... Wait, no!”

Yuuma was grateful, but he hastily stopped her before she could begin casting.

“If Watamaki belongs to the curse element, she might take damage from holy-element healing magic!”

“Then...how do we heal her...?”

“Pure, non-physical curse element magic might work...but none of us have any spells like that...”

There had to be something they could do! Sumika’s HP continued to fall. She barely seemed to notice, instead thrusting into the chains even harder with her transformed arm.

That made sense. After all, that was what her master, Yuuma, had ordered her to do.

But long before Sumika Watamaki had become one of Yuuma’s familiars, she had also been his sixth-grade classmate and the object of his distant admiration. Just because she was a faceless monster now didn’t mean that had changed. Yuuma had no desire to use her up and toss her aside, as if she were some kind of tool.

There had to be some way to protect her other than returning her to her card. Some way they could heal her HP despite her curse element, while still allowing her to continue attacking the chains.

When Sumika had attacked Yuuma back in the playroom, after she was turned into a monster, she hadn’t just attempted to overpower him with strikes, she had also tried to close the distance and bite him. If all she had

wanted to do was kill him, why wouldn't she have just beaten him to death with her club or swiped at him with her claws from a safer distance? Maybe her bites had some other purpose—in which case...

“...!”

Yuuma gritted his teeth, tossed the lantern aside, and rushed to Sumika's side. As he ran toward her, he rolled up the left sleeve of his tunic as far as he could, exposing the bare flesh of his arm. He reached over Sumika's shoulder with his bare arm and held it up close to her face.

“Watamaki, bite my arm!!”

As soon as the words left Yuuma's mouth, Sawa and Kenk screamed at him from behind.

“Yuumy, no!!”

“Yu, stop!! She'll bite your arm off like she did Beloshi!”

“AU...AUGGHH...”

Sumika's breath, cold as winter air, caressed the naked flesh of Yuuma's arm. Even from behind, Yuuma could faintly see the lower half of Sumika's face split open, silently exposing rows of razor-sharp teeth.

To Yuuma's surprise, however, Sumika stopped before biting him.

Her body trembled slightly. Even though her HP was already half gone, she seemed to be resisting the instinct to feed. Crimson damage effects continued to cascade off her transformed arm, where it met the chain, rising from beneath the dark purple aura of her weapon art.

“Please, Watamaki! I...I...”

Yuuma couldn't find his words. He pushed everything he was feeling to the side and delivered a voice command instead.

“Watamaki... *Use Blood Suck on me!!*”

As he did so, Yuuma gripped Sumika in his right arm and thrust his left arm against her mouth.

This time, Sumika did not resist. Her mouth flew open and latched on to

Yuuma's exposed forearm, her numerous fangs sinking into his flesh.

In *AM*, avatars usually didn't feel pain, even when injured. Instead, there was supposed to be an unpleasant numbness. Yuuma, however, could feel this pain clearly. It was sharp and cold as ice.

There was still no blood, however. Instead, a profusion of crimson light spots welled up from where Sumika's fangs met Yuuma's skin. Sumika's throat undulated as she gulped down the beads of light.

The rate at which her HP decreased began to slow and then stopped—and then began to gradually creep upward instead.

Yuuma's HP, however, began to fall dramatically. Considering the damage that Sumika was continuing to take, as well as the difference in their max HPs, the amount of healing she was receiving and the amount of damage Yuuma was taking probably balanced out perfectly.

Yuuma had guessed correctly. Sumika's bite was more than just a damaging attack. Night Fiends apparently had an innate ability to heal themselves by sucking the blood of their foes.

Naturally, if this kept this up, Yuuma would die long before Sumika was ever healed completely. But as a player, Yuuma had numerous means of healing at his disposal. Yuuma reached with his free hand toward the leather pouch at his waist, in order to retrieve a lesser healing potion. However— *"Sacre!!"*

—Tomori acted even quicker. She began to chant a holy element spell from behind.

*"Premis...Fusione!!"*

Yuuma felt a faint warmth hit his back. It permeated his core, chasing the previous chill away.

Sumika was still sucking Yuuma's blood, but his HP bar had stopped falling. It flickered at around the 70 percent line instead. In essence, Sumika's HP was being whittled away by her standoff with the cleansing steel chain, which Yuuma's HP was then compensating for, while Tomori used her own MP to regenerate Yuuma's HP.

While that might have seemed like a game of hot potato, the Priest spell, Holy Healing, was actually much more MP-efficient than utility magic healing spells. There was no way to know for sure, but at Yuuma's max HP, he was pretty sure Tomori could heal him completely, five times over, before her MP ran out.

Plus, if it came down to it, they also had the mana potions they had acquired from the chest in the old castle. That should be enough... It had to be enough. Yuuma unconsciously tightened his grip on Sumika.

Almost as if that were some sort of signal—Sumika suddenly released Yuuma's arm and howled.

“AIEEEEEEE!!”

Sumika tensed with power, the muscles along her slender body rippling like steel.

Yuuma was knocked backward, unable to hold on to her any longer.

A moment later, Sumika's right arm was enveloped in a shadowy aura, several times darker than before. It spun in a vortex around her arm, from the shoulder to the tip of the blade. Dust and grit from the floor and walls began to float into the air as the space around them compressed.

The swirling dark aura condensed at the tip of her blade, before releasing in a massive, silent explosion.

*Ka-clang!*

A high-pitched, metallic sound reverberated through the air.

A single link in the center of the cleansing steel chain, the one that had been struck by Sumika's blade, sparkled with golden light and then crumbled into dust. The remaining two ends of the chain, which were now separated, fell limply toward the ground, hanging from their fittings as if exhausted.

“It broke...!” gasped Kenk from behind them.

At almost the exact same moment, Sumika lowered her right arm and staggered in place.

Yuuma rushed forward and caught Sumika in his arms. He quickly checked her HP bar, but she still had more than half her health left. She wasn't suffering



from any debuffs or ailments, either.

Sumika shifted her face awkwardly, staring at Yuuma with nonexistent eyes as he held her. Her mouth had returned to normal size. A hoarse voice, like brittle winter wind, escaped her mouth: “Ashi...hara...”

Yuuma could sense Tomori gasping from behind.

“...Did...I...h-help...”

With that, the slit in her face that served as her mouth disappeared. The strength left her body, and her chin lolled to the side.

*Ashihara, did I help?*

That must have been what Sumika was trying to say.

She may have looked like a monster now, but Yuuma was once again reminded that the real Sumika was still in there somewhere... Maybe it was just a fragment of the original Sumika, but she was still there.

“You did, Watamaki,” he whispered. “You helped a lot. Thank you so much... We might need your help again later, but you should rest for now.”

He stroked Sumika’s bangs gently as he whispered the magic word.

*“Clause.”*

A shadowy magic circle appeared at Sumika’s feet, spinning in place as additional layers appeared. Soon the circles swallowed her completely, compressing into a flash of purple light and leaving behind a card in her place.

The card floated in midair. Yuuma grabbed it with his left hand, returned it to his card holster, and stood up straight once more.

Turning around, the first thing that caught his eye was Tomori. Her eyes, behind her black-rimmed glasses, seemed wider than usual, but Yuuma had no idea what she was thinking.



“Thank you for healing me...,” he said.

Tomori shook her head slightly. “No... If you hadn’t stopped me earlier, I would have just hurt Watamaki with my magic instead...,” she muttered, slightly dazed.

She blinked once, hard, and then glanced at Yuuma’s arm.

“Was that...was that really Watamaki?”

“It was.” Yuuma nodded firmly. “I’m sorry for keeping this a secret until now, Shimizu. I don’t know what could have happened to cause it, but Watamaki has become a monster race known as a Night Fiend, instead of a player character. That’s why I was able to capture her with my Monster Tamer Capture spell and turn her into a familiar... I swear I’ll find a way to turn her human again. I know it’s selfish of me to ask this of you...but will you help me?”

Yuuma had spoken in a rush. He stopped now and stared directly at Tomori. The right thing to do in this situation would have been to bow, but he didn’t want to put any more pressure on her than he already had.

Tomori was silent for a moment, as if having trouble processing the truth. She suddenly blinked and began speaking again. This time her voice trembled with fear.

“B-but...Watamaki attacked us in the playroom... She injured Aida and Tada, and then when Miura tried to stop her, she...she... Oh god, his arm...”

Tomori broke off mid-sentence, covering her mouth with her left hand and gagging. Yuuma froze stiffly, but Sawa rushed over and began awkwardly patting Tomori’s back.

Fortunately, it didn’t seem that vomiting had been programmed into *AM*. Tomori was able to keep down the stew she had just eaten in Calcina. After a few seconds, she was calm again. She muttered a thank-you to Sawa and managed to stand back up by using her staff for support.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for you to see that...”

“Don’t apologize... It’s my fault for bringing up bad memories...,” said Yuuma, not quite sure how to respond.

Tomori shook her head slightly. “I know you didn’t mean to. But...Monster Tamers sometimes lose control of their familiars, don’t they?”

Tomori had apparently read the guidebook closely. Yuuma nodded in reply.

“Yes. Familiars have a stat called loyalty. The max starting value for loyalty is one hundred...but if loyalty reaches zero, they turn back into enemy monsters again.”

“How high is Watamaki’s loyalty stat, right now...?”

“Let me check...”

Yuuma pulled the card out from his holster again and tapped it with his index finger.

As he skimmed the status window that appeared, he noticed that her level had risen to 18 at some point. The important piece of information was located two lines farther down.

“Currently...her loyalty is eighty-seven out of a maximum of one hundred. The last time I looked, it was sixty-four,” said Yuuma, reading the stat aloud.

Tomori looked slightly relieved, but her lips soon tightened into a grimace again.

“If that number reaches zero while she’s summoned, though, she’ll probably turn on us, right?”

“Y-yeah.” Yuuma nodded once more.

He doubted something like that would happen, but he had no proof other than his own conviction. According to the guidebook, “reasons that a familiar’s loyalty may decrease include being left hungry or at low HP for extended periods of time.” That phrase, “may include,” however, suggested that there were other reasons that the guidebook did not mention. For instance, there might be spells that could instantly drop loyalty to zero. If so, Yuuma’s control over a familiar could be instantly broken, and there would be nothing he could do about it.

Tomori stared at the card in Yuuma’s left hand before abruptly turning away and saying softly, “I’m sorry... I can’t decide yet. Can you wait for my answer

until after we've saved Sano and logged out again?"

"Of course."

Yuuma answered without hesitation, but he still felt pretty apprehensive about it. If Tomori chose not to help them, she might even decide to tell the other students in the shelter about Sumika.

There was no point worrying that far ahead, however. They had finally severed the cleansing steel chains sealing the door leading to Philos Island. Right now, their next step was to make their way through the underground passage and locate Nagi in the dungeon beneath the lord mayor's manor.

"Kenk, help me open the door," Yuuma said as he put the card away.

Kenk walked over to Yuuma's side without speaking.

They each grabbed one end of the chains that still hung from each door.

"Three...two...one!"

They began pulling at the same time, as hard as they could.

The massive metal doors resisted at first, but once they started moving, they swung outward with almost disappointing ease.

After checking for signs of monsters inside, Yuuma peeked at the reverse side of the doors. Kenk stepped closer.

"Is there something on the doors?" he asked. His voice sounded serious.

"No...I was just thinking, if this passage is for people to escape from the lord mayor's mansion, there must be some way to open the doors from the other side, right? If the chains are on the outside, how do people open the doors from inside, then...?"

As Yuuma explained, he pointed to a spot on the back of the door.

Two threaded metal bars poked through from the other side of the door, likely the opposite ends of the U-shaped metal fitting to which the cleansing steel chain had been attached. The bars were fixed to the door with massive nuts, which had protuberances to allow them to be turned by hand. If you removed the nuts, you could probably hit the bars on their ends in order to

knock the fittings out through the other side, causing them to fall to the ground, chain and all.

Kenk seemed to grasp the setup as well. He groaned and frowned.

“Seriously...? What a stupid gimmick! Why not just use a normal key instead...?”

“Because a normal key can be opened with an unlocking spell.”

“Oh... I forgot there was magic like that here.”

Sawa interrupted their banter, apparently beginning to lose patience.

“How long do you two knuckleheads plan on standing around?”

“Sorry, hold on just a second!” Yuuma shouted back.

Yuuma reached out and grabbed one of the nuts with his right hand. He was worried it would be fixed in place by the game system, but with a little elbow grease, it turned surprisingly easily.

“Ah!”

Kenk seemed to grasp what Yuuma was doing. With a small gasp, he rushed over toward the other door. The two raced to see who could remove the two nuts from each side and push their U-shaped fitting through the door first. The hunks of metal fell to the ground on the other side of the doors with a clang.

Just as expected, after stepping around to look at their handiwork, they found the loose fittings and chains lying in two piles on the floor. Although they were only fragments of the original, the two chains were about fifty centimeters long each. They might be able to use them elsewhere, and they would probably fetch a hefty sum if sold.

Yuuma gathered up the chain and fitting on his side and placed them into his inventory together with the two nuts. After confirming that Kenk had collected his own set, they raced back to Sawa and Tomori’s side.

“Sorry for the wait!”

“You know, if you go around picking up every item you see...”

Sawa trailed off mid-sentence with a sigh. She spun on her heel, facing

forward again.

“Whatever, you’re the one who has to carry it home. Chop-chop! Let’s get moving already.”

With that, Sawa began briskly walking forward. Yuuma ran after his sister without saying a word. He could feel Tomori and Kenk holding in their laughter from behind.

*“It’s not a straightforward path. The tunnel is a maze, and the branching paths are filled with deadly traps designed to spell death for pursuers.”*

A complicated and twisting labyrinth awaited them beyond the doors, just as the old man at the souvenir shop had warned. Fortunately, there didn’t seem to be any monsters inside. Unfortunately, it would probably take them two to three hours to get through the maze while avoiding traps in the normal way.

Yuuma and the others had a powerful ally on their side, however. The very first familiar that Yuuma had captured while in *AM*: the blue-furred rabbit, or Horned Great Hare, named Squeak.

For some reason, Squeak’s card had remained in Yuuma’s inventory even after the playtest ended. Yuuma drew it from his holster and summoned Squeak now.

“Squee—!”

The blue rabbit materialized with an energetic cry, while Tomori let out her own strange cry: “Fwaaa!”

Despite being the calmest and quietest of the girls in class, even Tomori seemed incapable of resisting Squeak’s adorable charm.

As much as Yuuma would have liked to let Tomori have some cuddle time, they didn’t have time for that right now. Yuuma fed Squeak several pieces of



the dried fruit they had acquired from the merchant, before issuing a voice command.

*“Squeak, Lead to End of Dungeon!”*

*“Squ-squee!”*

With a tiny cry of excitement, Squeak charged forward into the labyrinth.

Great Horned Hares had an ability called Tunnel Search, which opened up the special Monster Tamer commands Lead to Start, Lead to End, Find Items, Find Monsters, and Avoid Monsters while in underground locations. Yuuma hadn't acquired the Avoid Traps command yet, but since Lead to End followed the shortest route to a dungeon's exit, and since there were only supposed to be traps in paths that branched off from the correct route, they should be safe.

Holding the coldfire lantern aloft, the group ran after Squeak, whose white tail bounced in the distance.

About five minutes later, they finally spotted a door up ahead. Yuuma slowed his pace.

Squeak stopped before the door and began turning around on the spot crying, “Squee! Squee!” It seemed pleased with itself. This had to be the exit.

Yuuma and the others kept their guard up as they approached, but the coast seemed clear. No scripted bosses burst out from the walls or anything like that. Yuuma gave Squeak another piece of dried fruit for doing such a good job and then returned him to his card.

“Familiars sure are convenient...and cute...,” murmured Tomori jealously. She suddenly cocked her head to the side. “But why have you only captured Squeak and...and Watamaki? Wouldn't it be better to capture lots of monsters?”

“Well...Monster Tamers have a limited capacity for what familiars they can hold. The amount increases as you level up and increase your Command skill, but between Squeak and Watamaki, I've already used up most of mine...”

In fact, seeing as how Sumika was six levels higher than Yuuma—ten when she had first attacked them—it was a wonder he had been able to capture her at all. Generally, the chance of capturing a monster greatly decreased if it was

even one level higher than the Monster Tamer.

Maybe there were some factors involved that had made it easier to succeed, but if so, what? Yuuma was still mulling the question over in his mind when Kenk suddenly grew impatient.

“Let’s hurry up and go find that crybaby Nagi already! We’re almost there, aren’t we?”

“Yeah...we should be...”

Yuuma switched focus, turning back toward the door in front of them.

This door was grand and massive, just like the first, but instead of being sealed by chains, it simply had a door handle. There was no sign of a keyhole or other locking mechanism, either, which meant that it should open by simply pressing the handle.

Yuuma turned around to huddle up with the others.

“If this door leads into the dungeon, there’s a decent chance that there will be guards inside,” he said. “We should try to sneak in and avoid battles as much as possible.”

“What should we do if someone spots us?” asked Kenk.

Yuuma hesitated before answering. “If that happens, you and I should try and lure as many guards as we can to the upper floor. Sawa and Shimizu, you two can use that opportunity to search for Nagi, and if you find her, the three of you should escape through the tunnel back the way we came. The correct path should be marked on your maps now.”

“What if Nagi won’t wake up...?” Sawa said, looking grim.

Yuuma flashed her a smile. “Even as a Mage, your strength stat at level 12 should be high enough to easily carry Nagi.”

“Okay, I’ll give it a shot...”

“But what about you and Kondou?” asked Tomori, sounding worried.

Yuuma flashed her another smile. “Don’t worry about us. If worse comes to worst, we can always escape by jumping into the river.”

“You’re not serious, are you...? I can barely swim...!”

That was true. Kenk never liked to join them when they went to the pool. Yuuma placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, I’ll cast a waterbreathing spell on you before we get in the water.”

“You promise...?”

“I promise. Double, triple promise.”

There was, in fact, a wind-element utility spell called Waterbreathing, but at Yuuma’s current skill level, the effect would only last around ten seconds. Yuuma patted Kenk on the shoulder, conveniently forgetting to mention that fact. As he did so, he noticed the sword on Kenk’s back.

“Is that the new sword you found in the castle...?”

“This? Yeah, it’s cool, isn’t it?”

Kenk grinned and spun around to give Yuuma a better look, already forgetting about his aquaphobia.

The two-handed sword strapped to Kenk’s back was obviously much higher in quality than his starting weapon had been. The brown leather scabbard was reinforced with dozens of rivets, the steel guard and pommel gleamed softly, and the grip was carefully wrapped in thin leather strips. Yuuma tapped it; a small window displaying **Forged Steel Greatsword 780/780** appeared. Yuuma could only see basic information since he wasn’t the owner of the sword, but the durability was almost four times that of his own shortsword.

Yuuma and the others had acquired new weapons of their own from the ancient castle, but he already knew from the playtest how important it was to choose your timing carefully when upgrading to a new weapon. In a fulldive VR, things like weight, balance, and even the way the weapon felt in your hands could have a huge impact on how easy the weapon was to use. The risk of screwing up your form or even dropping your weapon was always higher immediately after trading up to a new weapon.

Kenk seemed aware of that fact as well. He touched the hilt of his sword, as if

to double-check its position, before turning back around.

“What about you guys? Are you gonna start using your new weapons, too?” he asked.

“Well...”

Kenk had already lost his old sword, so he had no choice but to use this new one. Since they planned on avoiding fights while in the dungeon, however, Yuuma suggested the rest of them just stick to the weapons they were used to for now. Sawa and Tomori both nodded, apparently seeing no reason to object.

After checking that everyone’s HP and MP had recovered fully, Yuuma turned back toward the door.

There was no more time to dillydally. Every decision they made from now on had to be focused on saving Nagi and getting back to Althea safely.

“I’m opening the door...,” Yuuma whispered.

He pressed down on the handle carefully.

The handle was stiff, likely because it hadn’t been used in years, but the door was unlocked, just as they had expected. Yuuma could feel the internal latching mechanism vibrate. He tried to home in on the sensation, making as little sound as possible as he turned the handle, millimeter by millimeter, until it was free of its latch.

Yuuma stood still and listened for a moment, before slowly pulling the door inward. Each time the hinges began to creak, he stopped for a moment, until eventually the door was far enough open for the largest of them, Kenk, to just barely slip through.

Yuuma poked his head halfway inside. The door seemed to lead into a small room, measuring about three meters across in all directions. The left and right walls were lined with shelves, and odd crates and barrels had been left lying in the room. There was an arch-shaped opening on the opposite wall through which Yuuma could see a staircase leading upward. There were no signs of people, but the lanterns hanging from the ceiling were lit, meaning that someone must pass through regularly.

Yuuma was still holding the coldfire lantern. He returned it to his inventory and slipped through the doorway and into the room.

Yuuma cautiously tiptoed toward the staircase. He stopped in front of the first step and peered upward, before signaling to his friends that all was clear.

The group climbed the stairs, Yuuma first, followed by Kenk, then Sawa, and then Tomori. There was another door at the top. *Not again*, thought Yuuma as he placed his hand on the door. This time, however, the handle and hinges moved smoothly. Yuuma opened the door, revealing the next area.

The ceiling was damp, and the floor was cracked in places. The stone walls were rough and irregular. Iron bars gleamed dully beneath the lamplight.

This was definitely the dungeon. Only— “It’s so big...,” muttered Sawa as she pushed Yuuma aside in order to take a peek.

There was a corridor continuing northward directly across from the door. It looked to be about fifteen meters long and had five cells lined up on each side. There was also a door at the other end, which probably led upstairs.

Another corridor stretched out perpendicularly to their left and right, with both directions ending in an entrance to another intersecting passage. Basically, the dungeon was set up like the Roman numeral III, with three vertical corridors connected by two intersecting corridors at either end.

Each vertical passage looked like it contained ten cells, for a total of thirty cells in all.

*It’s gonna be difficult checking every cell without getting spotted by the guards...*

Just as Yuuma was thinking this, he heard boots thudding along the ground, one corridor over to the left.

Glancing in the direction of the footsteps, Yuuma spotted an orange light flickering near the intersection of the corridors. He instinctively crouched, but if the owner of the footsteps took a look inside the doorway, all four of them would be discovered either way.

Yuuma signaled to the others and then rushed out of the doorway and down

the corridor directly across from the door.

Kenk, Tomori, and then Sawa followed suit. There wasn't a second to spare, but Sawa still took the time to close the door quietly behind her. She dove into the corridor after them, her feet moving softly.

Sawa reached Yuuma's position just as the footsteps grew louder.

Whoever it was had evidently turned the corner and was now slowly but surely drawing closer. They didn't have enough time to sneak all the way to the other end of the corridor. Yuuma glanced around quickly, checking that the cells on either side of them were empty.

The bars on the cells were set back about thirty centimeters from the corridor walls, which left just barely enough room to hide against the wall. Yuuma signaled to his friends, who seemed to understand. Tomori and Kenk pressed themselves against the bars on the right side, Yuuma and Sawa against the bars on the left.

A few seconds later, the owner of the footsteps entered their field of view.

It was a guard...or at least they seemed to be. But there was something strange about them. Their stocky, hunched form was garbed in unusual leather armor that almost looked like restraints, and their head and shoulders were entirely covered in an old and tattered hood. They held a large lantern in their right hand and a club with iron spikes in their left. The name **Prison Guard** was displayed beneath the HP bar that floated above their head.

The guard's thick-soled boots made heavy clomping sounds as they walked. They stopped directly in front of the door that Sawa had just shut.

The guard raised their lantern up high and turned to the left, peering down the middle corridor, where Yuuma and the others were now hiding. If the guard started walking their way, there would be nowhere left for them to run.

They would have no choice but to fight. Regardless of the guard's strange appearance, however, they were still human. Technically speaking, they were an NPC, but Yuuma still didn't like the idea of attacking a guard who was just following orders and hadn't done anything wrong.

*Please don't come this way! Please don't come this way...!*

Yuuma's prayer—the prayers of all four of them—were answered as the guard lowered their lantern and turned back to the right.

He set his club down against the wall and used that hand to open the door. After opening the door, he picked the club back up and stepped inside. They could hear the guard's boots thudding down the stairs.

As soon as the tattered cloth hood disappeared from sight, Yuuma stepped out from his hiding spot. They needed to finish searching the middle corridor before the guard returned.

Yuuma left Tomori and Kenk in charge of the right side and began checking the cells on the left side together with Sawa. The second cell was empty like the first, as was the third—as Yuuma peered into the fourth cell, however, he froze.

There, lying in a corner at the other end of the small, two-meter-long cell, sat a humanoid shape, bunched up in an unnatural position. Judging from the way the arms and legs were splayed to the side, it didn't seem like the person was alive.

*No way...*

Yuuma tried to peer closer, but the light from the lamps that hung from the dungeon ceiling weren't strong enough to reach to the back of the cell. Having no other choice, Yuuma thrust his left hand through the bars and chanted an element word of power as quietly as he could.

*"Lumen."*

Yuuma and Sawa gasped as the white ball of light illuminated the far corners of the cell.

The figure lying on the ground turned out to be a set of skeletal remains, dressed in tattered rags. Its dark, empty eye sockets stared at them begrudgingly. Judging from the decay of the skeleton's clothing, this person had probably died decades ago. It was also clearly the body of an adult.

That didn't exactly make them feel better, however. This was obviously the type of dungeon where prisoners were left to die of illness and starvation, and their bodies left to mold in corners.

Ten seconds later, just as the ball of light disappeared, they heard the guard's footsteps coming back up the stairs.

Yuuma quickly moved away from the bars and peered into the fifth cell. This one was empty as well.

He turned around toward Tomori and Kenk, who were checking the cells on the other side. They both shook their heads no. Apparently the cells on the right side had also been empty.

The guard stepped back into the corridor just as the four rushed into the horizontal passage at the end of the corridor and hid around the corner to the left.

Yuuma took a peek around the corner. The swaying light at the other end was moving sideways. Apparently, the guard was heading toward the eastern vertical corridor.

That gave them the perfect opportunity to explore the west corridor. At Yuuma's signal, they all scampered in that direction, turning another corner toward the next row of cells.

Just as Yuuma had expected, this corridor also seemed to contain five cells on each side. They began traversing the corridor, checking each cell as they went, with Sawa and Yuuma checking the left side and Tomori and Kenk checking the right.

*Please be safe! Please be safe...!* Yuuma prayed. He was about to peer into the third cell when suddenly...

"Ah...!" Tomori let out a little gasp from the other side of the corridor.

Yuuma and Sawa quickly spun on their heels, turning in her direction. Kenk and Tomori were standing in front of the third cell on the opposite side, clutching the bars with both of their hands.

Yuuma bounded over toward the cell. He stood next to Kenk, on his left, and peered inside the cell. As he did so, a cry nearly escaped him as well.

A pale, human-shaped shadow was lying on the damp stones. Unfortunately, this cell was as dark as the last one, so it was impossible to make the silhouette



out clearly.

This time, it was Sawa who thrust her hand through the bars and chanted an element word.

*“Flamma.”*

The ball of flame at her fingertip illuminated the shape of a small person—a girl.

She was wearing a Priest’s cassock that had probably once been pure white, but it was now extremely soiled. The girl’s light brown hair was longer than Sawa’s. Since she was lying face down, they couldn’t see her face, but even as an avatar, there was no way Yuuma would fail to recognize the girl who lived next door, the childhood friend he had known for more than eleven years.

As if Yuuma needed any more confirmation, an HP bar suddenly appeared above the girl’s head.

This HP bar was less than 30 percent full. Symbols for the Cold and Hungry debuffs were displayed underneath the HP bar, and beneath those, the player’s name—**Nagi**.

Kenk was still gripping the irons bars tightly with both hands. They creaked beneath his grasp. Yuuma glanced up. The expression on his friend’s face was severe. In all the time that Yuuma had known him, he had never before seen Kenk like this.

Yuuma could feel his own anger beginning to seethe. Whoever was in charge of this dungeon—most likely the NPC known as Constable Oeben—had tossed Nagi into this dungeon, comatose and soaking wet, while her HP—her very life force—continued to dwindle. Yuuma didn’t care if they were just following an NPC script. He wasn’t about to let this slide.

If they tried to just force their way through the bars, the guard, who was likely still patrolling the eastern corridor, would hear. Besides, the iron bars were pretty thick. Yuuma doubted that even Kenk would be able to damage them with his bare hands. He still grabbed his friend’s arm, though, just in case. He flashed Kenk a look meant to say, *Calm down*.

Yuuma felt some of the tension leave Kenk’s arm. Just then, Sawa made her

move. As soon as her ball of fiery light disappeared, she held her left hand up to the lock on the door located on the right side of the bars and began to chant a spell.

*“Ferrum...Clavis...”*

Sawa thrust the magic key that appeared into the lock before speaking the final word.

*“Aperta!”*

The key trembled for a moment before turning ninety degrees to the left with a dull click. Sawa quickly opened the door and slipped inside. Yuuma wanted to follow her, but he knew he would be in the way inside the narrow cell. Instead, he held back, grabbing on to Kenk’s arm like before.

Sawa crouched down on one knee, propped Nagi’s slender body up with both hands, and called out to her in a hoarse whisper.

*“Nagi... Nagi!”*

Now that Nagi was leaning on Sawa, Yuuma could see her face beneath the lamplight. It was disturbingly pale. Her eyelids, which were framed by long lashes, remained motionless even as Sawa repeatedly called out to her.

Yuuma was hoping that once they found Nagi, all five of them would be able to log out and return to Althea on the spot. Unless Nagi woke up, however, she would be unable to access her menu and thus unable to log out.

They still didn’t know why Nagi was unconscious. It might not have anything to do with the Cold and Hungry statuses; maybe it was something wrong inside her mind. If that was the case, no amount of calling her name was going to wake her.

“Sawa, we should take Nagi and return to the overworld for now,” Yuuma whispered.

Sawa nodded wordlessly, cradling Nagi as she stood back up.

Apparently Sawa’s STR at level 12 was enough to carry Nagi, but Kenk still held out his arms to take Nagi off Sawa’s hands as she stepped through the door.

“I’ll carry her,” he said.

It didn’t seem like a question. Sawa nodded again and passed Nagi to Kenk.

Tomori stepped forward and turned to Yuuma. “Should I heal Sano’s HP?” she whispered.

“No, let’s wait until we get out of here first,” Yuuma said, perking up his ears to listen.

*Thump. Thump.* He could hear the faint sound of footsteps coming from far away. Yuuma couldn’t tell which direction the footsteps were traveling in just by listening, but the guard seemed to be making a counterclockwise loop. If so, they were probably somewhere around the upper-right-hand corner of the III (the northwest corner) by this point.

Yuuma pointed south and began leading the others down the corridor.

He stopped to listen once more at the southwest corner. After confirming that the sound of the guard’s footsteps had not changed, he turned left into the southern corridor, creeping stealthily forward.

Yuuma could already see the doorway leading back to the maze of underground tunnels. Just seven meters. Even if the guard noticed that Nagi was gone, as long as they could make it through that door by then, the guard probably wouldn’t be able to follow them. Yuuma was beginning to feel hopeful. Operation Save Nagi was just seconds away from success.

Perhaps it was that hope that made Yuuma so careless.

Yuuma failed to notice that the distant footsteps were getting less distant. He was about halfway to the door when the guard suddenly burst into view at the other side of the corridor.

“...?!”

Yuuma’s eyes sprang open in disbelief. He had been sure that the guard was patrolling counterclockwise, but the guard must have turned around at some point and started walking in the opposite direction.

Yuuma’s legs froze. A second later, his brain kicked back into gear, and he shouted at the others.

“Run!!”

Throwing stealth to the wind, Yuuma made a dash straight for the door. The guard also began to lumber toward them, although he was slower and farther away. They were going to make it after all—just barely, maybe...or so Yuuma thought. But the guard reached out suddenly and placed their hand against a nearby spot on the wall.

At the guard’s touch, one of the stone blocks suddenly sank into the wall.

With a heavy *thud*, a thick plate door dropped down vertically from the ceiling, completely sealing off the doorway.

This drop-shutter was made of steel and looked to be about three centimeters thick, which would make it very difficult to break down with either weapons or magic. Yuuma wished he had checked the ceiling when they first entered, but it was too late for that now.

Their plan to escape back the way they had come, to the south shore of the river, was now ruined. Their only option would be to head upstairs, through the door on the north wall.

If the northern door had also been sealed, they were in trouble, but that seemed unlikely. After all, if no one could leave, no reinforcements could arrive, either.

That still left the problem of what to do about the hooded guard, who was standing five meters away. If the guard attacked, they would be forced to fight back, but for the moment, the guard showed no signs of moving away from the switch.

“Hey, Yu,” Kenk whispered from behind. “If we press that switch again, maybe the door will open back up.”

“...”

It was possible. In the real world, it would take a powerful motor to lift a metal plate of that size in a reasonable amount of time, but this was a virtual world. Entire mountains could be moved so long as the game system ordered it. Maybe that was the reason the guard wasn’t moving. Maybe they were protecting the switch.

“Sawa, Shimizu, take care of Nagi,” Yuuma whispered.

Sawa reached out to take Nagi back from Kenk.

“Kenk, we don’t need to defeat the guard,” Yuuma told him. “If you can just get them to move from that spot, I can press the switch.”

“Understood.”

Kenk nodded and drew his two-handed sword from his back.

The guard readied a spiked club, and their breathing sounded bizarrely heavy.

“GWRR...”

That sound was familiar...

Kenk dashed forward, yelling “Hyahh!!” as he brandished his greatsword in both hands.

The guard raised their club, but they were only gripping it in their left hand.

Kenk was a level-12 Warrior, with both the Exceptional Strength and Two-Handed Sword Mastery skills. Surely no guard would be able to stop a full-strength, downward slash from someone like Kenk without using both hands.

Yuuma started to run forward. Once Kenk knocked the guard back, all Yuuma had to do was quickly hit the switch to raise the shutter again. After that, once they bought enough time for Sawa and Tomori to escape to the tunnels with Nagi, they could just stun the guard again before running away themselves.

Yuuma had already formulated his plan. He glanced at the switch on the wall once more to make sure he knew where it was.

Meanwhile, Kenk was already swinging his sword downward in a brutal arc. The blade collided with the guard’s spiked club at about the midpoint, carrying the full weight of Kenk’s charge. The two weapons met in an explosive flash of light and sound.

The guard bent backward at the waist. They were forced a step back, and then—they stopped, planting their feet firmly.

The shock wave from the impact of the sword knocked the guard’s hood back, finally revealing their face.

Yuuma's vision seemed to contract. How could this be? Yuuma's toe caught on a corner of one of the stone blocks that was sticking up, and although he managed to avoid falling over, he stumbled briefly and skidded to a stop.

The guard's head was not human. The protruding ridge of its nose, the wide slit of its mouth, the wide-set yellow eyes on either side of its head, and of course, its bumpy, scaly skin... A lizard—the guard was a lizardman.

The name underneath the HP bar that floated above the guard's head changed from **Prison Guard** to **Varanian Prison Guard**.

“Why is there a Varanian inside Calcina...?” Yuuma muttered in disbelief.

The guard's vertically slit pupils narrowed slightly, but it made no attempt to speak.

It was less than half the height of the Varanian Axbearer they had encountered at the old castle in the forest, but judging by its face, it seemed to be the same species. Had it snuck into the dungeon, just like they had...? No—why would it be patrolling the corridors if it was an intruder?

Yuuma was still standing frozen in place when he heard a distant metallic *click*.

He glanced to the left. The door at the end of the middle corridor, the one on the northern wall, had just swung open.

The figure that appeared from the other side was huge and corpulent and was dressed up like some sort of aristocrat.

He wore a bicorn hat, reminiscent of Napoleon. His black velvet coat was decorated with ostentatious gold braiding, underneath which he wore a vest that was about to pop a button, as well as a pair of unblemished white trousers that resembled tights. For some reason, he also carried a massive, double-headed hammer. It hung loosely in his left hand.

The giant man stared at them through round, sunken eyes. His flabby double chin shook with laughter as he spoke.

“Mwa-ha, gwa-ha-ha...! When I heard we had intruders, I expected to find a master thief who had picked all of Algol clean, or perhaps some centuries-old

wizard. But what do I find instead? Mere babes, barely old enough to scratch their own chins! Tell me, how exactly did you get in here?”

Yuuma didn't have time to wonder what Algol was. He needed to think of a way out of this mess. Kenk had already drawn his sword, so Yuuma doubted the man would buy it if he said they had just wandered in by accident while out exploring. If they tried to fight their way out, however, there was no guarantee they would actually be able to defeat this strangely rotund man. Speaking of which, who was he?

Yuuma furrowed his eyebrows. An HP bar suddenly appeared above the giant man's head.

The name read **Head Warden Oeben**. A symbol resembling two overlapping human silhouettes appeared next to the name, but it was apparently neither a buff nor a debuff. Yuuma had no idea what the symbol might represent.

“That's him, the one the old man told us about...,” Sawa whispered from behind.

She was right. This was Constable Oeben. The very Oeben whom the old man at the souvenir shop had warned them about. The one who “controlled the strings of power in Calcina to line his own pockets.”

The old man had said that Oeben was “too dangerous for a bunch of kids like you to handle.” His size was certainly intimidating. It sent a shiver down Yuuma's neck. Although Oeben's appearance didn't inspire him with the same level of dread as the Conehead Demolisher's had, Yuuma was still pretty sure he didn't want to mess with Oeben if at all possible.

Yuuma glanced to his right. At some point, the lizard-headed guard had returned to its original position by the switch and was now brandishing the spiked club again. The guard clearly had no intention of allowing them to touch that switch.

Seeing as Constable Oeben didn't react to the guard's appearance, he must have already known that there was a Varanian patrolling his dungeons. Yuuma was curious as to why Oeben would employ a hostile demi-human, but he doubted Oeben would answer any questions about that.

And that was neither here nor there. Right now, the only thing that mattered was getting out of this mess... Yuuma racked his brain for a solution, but the only two ideas that occurred to him were to either press the switch and open the door to the tunnel, or to defeat Oeben and head upstairs through the north door.

“Hrm... What is this...?”

Yuuma and the others remained rooted to the spot as Oeben began to speak once more.

“That girl you’re holding—she’s the one who washed up earlier, isn’t she? Yes, now I see, you snuck into my dungeon to rescue your precious little friend, didn’t you? Mwa-ha-ha...”

Oeben chortled, his uncomfortably long tongue smacking his lower lip— “If that little girl died before she woke, I was planning on turning her into stew... Now I’ve got even more meat for the pot. Mwa-ha, gwa-ha-ha...”

“...You rotten...,” Kenk said through gritted teeth, the anger in his voice rising.

Yuuma could feel hot rage building in the pit of his own stomach. Not only had Oeben thrown Nagi into his dungeon, soaking wet, but apparently he had been planning on cooking and eating her as well. He barely qualified as human.

“...We’re fighting this guy,” Yuuma whispered.

Kenk, Sawa, and Tomori answered at once.

“All right!”

“Yes.”

“I’m ready.”

Yuuma’s decision wasn’t based purely in anger. He had taken their situation, Oeben’s behavior, and the fighting abilities of his companions into account.

“Sawa, Shimizu—”

Yuuma began relaying battle plans, but Tomori quickly cut him off.

“Call me Tomo.”

“Huh?”



“It’s shorter.”

Sure, it would take less time to say “Tomo,” but was she accounting for the mental hurdles involved in using such a personal nickname for a girl he had barely ever spoken with?

She was right, though. Shortening her name would save about half a second, which could be enough to spell the difference between life and death for them if things went south.

“Understood... Sawa, Tomo, focus on providing support from behind at first. And if the guard moves away from that switch, let us know immediately.”

They both nodded. Yuuma turned toward Kenk.

“Kenk, I’m not sure your Guard Counter will be able to fully handle Oeben’s hammer. Stick to Heavy Slugger when it comes to weapon arts and focus on dodging for defense.”

“You got it.”

*And I’ll keep my eye on the situation and manage tactics,* Yuuma told himself as he drew his shortsword from his left hip.

“Mwa-ha-ha... So the insolent lambs wish to fight!”

The man’s double-headed hammer looked well cared for, but the slightly bulbous end of each head was stained an unnatural black. Even the sides were splattered with similar stains. Were they bloodstains? If so, who knew how many beasts—or perhaps even humans—had met their end at Oeben’s hammer?

“Don’t worry, I’ll be gentle. I’ll leave you in a recognizable shape when I kill you. After all, how would I get the meat off your bones if I flattened you? Mwa-ha-ha...”

Oeben’s dialogue didn’t seem very fitting for an NPC in what was supposed to be an all-ages game.

He lifted his foot into the air. His boots resembled the ones worn by the guard but were about two times as large. He stomped forward, drawing closer.

Oeben seemed almost inhumanly large and stocky. The middle corridor was

far from narrow, but he blocked nearly 70 percent of it with his body, both side to side and floor to ceiling.

Yuuma heard Tomori begin chanting a spell from behind. Kenk held his sword in front of him, at the ready, and began pacing forward at about the same speed as Oeben. A moment later, Yuuma began moving forward as well.

The most advantageous position for them to fight Oeben would be at around the midpoint of the approximately fifteen-meter-long corridor. Any farther than that, Sawa and Tomori would have trouble providing support. Any closer and Nagi might be put in danger.

They had already crossed half of that distance, and Oeben still hadn't assumed an attack stance. The hammer continued to dangle at his side as he approached, seemingly unconcerned. With his hammer in that position, Yuuma wasn't sure how he would be able to use it or do anything other than sweep it from side to side.

Or was he just trying to keep their attention on his hammer, so that he could suddenly rush forward and attack with his hands and feet instead? Yuuma tried to warn Kenk, but before he could do so— Oeben, who had been moving forward at a slow and steady pace, darted forward so suddenly that the stones beneath his feet nearly shattered. In the same instant, he lifted the hammer up and thrust forward powerfully.

"Whoa!" Kenk shouted; he was unable to dodge properly and attempted to guard with his two-handed sword instead. The shaft of the hammer hit hard and close against Kenk's sword, just past the hammer's head. The impact was so loud, Yuuma felt it in his stomach.

If Kenk had still been wielding his starting sword, Yuuma was certain it would have been broken in two. Fortunately, Kenk's new Forged Steel Greatsword was able to withstand the blow without suffering so much as a nick. The same wasn't true for Kenk, who lost his footing and was knocked back more than three meters.

Oeben had managed to get the first surprise strike, but there was no way he would be able to pull his hammer back as quickly as he had thrust it. Yuuma stepped in close and committed, flourishing his shortsword and aiming for

Oeben's right flank, which was now wide open.

*Got him!* thought Yuuma.

But then, Oeben removed his right hand from the shaft of the hammer, attempting to guard against Yuuma's strike with the back of his hand.

That suited Yuuma just fine. The sword would do HP damage to Oeben regardless of whether Yuuma hit him in the flank or in the hand, and although Yuuma doubted he would be able to cut Oeben's hand clean off, he might still manage to inflict the Injured status ailment, which would make it harder for Oeben to wield his hammer.

"Hyah!"

Yuuma stabbed his shortsword into the back of Oeben's pudgy hand with all his might.

His shortsword may have been starting equipment, but it was still a proper iron sword, not the generic wooden stick or copper knife of other RPGs. Additionally, although Monster Tamer was technically a magic-using class, in exchange for getting less INT growth than Mages, it received a decent amount of STR and AGL. Oeben's hand was unarmored and completely exposed. Yuuma wouldn't be surprised if his attack pierced completely through to the other side of the hand.

However...

As the sword made contact, there was a dull metallic *clang!* Blue-white sparks flew through the air. Yuuma's hopes crumbled. He could feel it as it happened.

His shortsword, which had been with him since the playtest and which had seen him through so many hard times—its proper name, in his inventory, was Iron Shortsword—began to crumble into pieces, as if completely spent. It started from the point and progressed downward until only the hilt remained. Soon even the hilt scattered into particles of light that sifted from his grasp.

"Uh...!"

Yuuma was stunned.

His sword had still had plenty of durability left. How could Oeben have not

only deflected but completely destroyed it with his bare hand?

*Wait!* As the broken equipment effect faded, Yuuma thought he spotted something on the back of Oeben's hand. Oeben's sickly white skin seemed to writhe like liquid. There, something bluish, which showed up faintly from beneath Oeben's skin.

"Hmph!"

Oeben grunted hard, thrusting forward with the same rocklike fist he had just used to block Yuuma's sword. This time he was aiming for Yuuma directly.

Oeben's huge fist was as big and as round as a handball. Yuuma quickly moved to block by crossing his arms out in front of him.

As he did so, however, he remembered earlier when he had been kicked by the Conehead Demolisher. Yuuma had attempted to block in the same manner then. Instead, his arms had been snapped like twigs, and his HP had instantly dropped to near-death range. Oeben was obviously nowhere near as outrageously powerful as the Demolisher had been—but wasn't Yuuma the one who had told Kenk to "focus on dodging" just seconds ago?

"Nrk...!"

With his arms still braced, Yuuma leaped backward as hard as he could.

A moment later, Oeben's right hook made contact with Yuuma's arms.

Even as an avatar, Yuuma could feel his bones forming a shape that they should not. His HP bar, in the upper-left-hand corner of his field of vision, decreased by a little less than 5 percent. Had Yuuma not jumped back as he had, the damage probably would have been twice that amount.

Yuuma was thrown backward, unable to resist the force of the blow. Somehow he managed to land on both feet.

"I got you covered!" Kenk yelled.

Kenk had already bounced back and was now moving toward Oeben once again.

"Do it!" Yuuma shouted as he opened his menu window and navigated to his inventory.

He tapped the Darkiron Shortsword, which he had purposely moved to the top of the list so he could find it quickly, and then selected **EQUIP**.

The shortsword that appeared on his left hip was obviously high quality and featured a hilt and sheath wrapped in black leather. Darkiron was a type of metal unique to the world of *AM*—it did not reflect light and could be used as an amplifying tool for shadow and ice magic.

Yuuma gripped the hilt and drew the sword from its sheath. The entire surface of the blade was matte gray, as dark beneath the lamplight as it was in shadow. The blade, while narrow, was hefty, and just as Yuuma had expected, it felt very different in his hand compared to the starting sword. He would just have to adjust to it while fighting.

After he had finished changing his weapon, Yuuma glanced up. Kenk was currently squaring off against Oeben alone.

Yuuma had to hand it to Kenk. Kenk was focusing on defense, like Yuuma had told him to, but he was barely giving any ground. Oeben stuck to two-handed thrusts, which probably made his attacks easier to handle, but Oeben was still applying a lot of pressure. It took both courage and quick wits to hold the line against such an opponent.

Not that Kenk was avoiding damage entirely. Each glancing blow from Oeben's hammer was able to shave off a small portion of Kenk's HP. The Enhanced HP Regeneration skill Kenk had picked up earlier, however, combined with the Healing Circle spell that Tomori had already cast on him, was enough to cancel that damage out. Sawa was still holding Nagi and hadn't cast any spells yet, but there was no way of knowing when the lizard-guard might make its move. It was probably better that she remain on standby for now.

Of course, they weren't going to defeat Oeben through defense alone. That meant it was up to Yuuma to lower Oeben's HP. Yuuma doubted Oeben would be able to crush this new sword with his bare hands quite so easily.

Yuuma readied his Darkiron Shortsword and took a step forward, preparing to join the battle, when all of a sudden— Yuuma was hit with the distinct feeling that something didn't quite add up. The realization was like a cup that was filled with water, drop by drop, until suddenly it overflowed.

When Yuuma's starting sword had been destroyed, striking Oeben's hand had almost felt like trying to cut through paper and then suddenly encountering a staple...and that was putting it mildly. There was something more at play here than mere weapon stats. It had felt like hitting a brick wall.

There were plenty of other things about the way Oeben was acting that didn't make sense, either.

As a constable, Oeben should have been in charge of every single guard on Philos Island. And if what the old man at the souvenir shop said about Oeben controlling the city was true, Oeben might even be the most influential man in the entire city.

Why would a person like that show up without a single guard in tow? He was also carrying that massive two-handed hammer but could only use it to thrust because the corridor was so narrow. There were probably plenty of big open rooms in the manor upstairs. Why didn't he just wait for them up there, where he could swing the hammer around to his heart's content?

Oeben must have had some reason for needing to deal with the intruders on his own, while they were still in the dungeon. If that reason had something to do with the fact that he was employing a Varanian as a guard, then...perhaps...

"Kenk, I need an opening!" Yuuma shouted.

Kenk nodded and dropped his hips.

Oeben howled in annoyance. "Humph, you lambs are starting to get on my nerves... It's time you became another stain on my mallet!"

He stepped back with his right foot into a side stance, holding his hammer with both hands like a spear and drawing it back as far as it could go.

"Hrmph!!"

With a wild grunt, Oeben thrust the hammer forward at incredible speed, much faster than his corpulent body seemed capable of. Had Yuuma been in Kenk's place, he would have been forced to retreat backward. Kenk, however, didn't give an inch. In a stubborn display of courage, Kenk met Oeben's attack with his own Heavy Slugger.

Oeben's iron battering ram and Kenk's steel blade collided, producing a shower of light and sound like nothing Yuuma had ever before seen in this world. An explosive shock wave knocked both combatants back by nearly three meters. Both Kenk and Oeben would be stunned for the next few seconds.

*"Tenebris!"* shouted Yuuma.

He thrust his Darkiron Shortsword forward.

*"Capere Febris...Ignis!!"*

A spectral purple hand with seven fingers appeared at the end of Yuuma's blade. As Yuuma waved his sword, the hand shot forward with a wintry howl, grabbing Oeben's pudgy flank in an eagle-tight grip.

"Urggh!"

Oeben was just coming to. He let out a howl as he attempted to bat away the Chilling Hand. The Chilling Hand was incorporeal and illusionary, however, and Oeben's hand passed straight through it.

A moment later, a snowflake symbol appeared beneath Oeben's HP bar. It was the Cold ailment...but it had obviously taken effect much more quickly than usual. As the Cold status kicked in, the earlier symbol of two overlapping silhouettes also disappeared.

*Thwump.* The ground shook as Oeben sank to his left knee.

The exposed skin around his neck and hands rippled at irregular intervals. His sickly white skin grew transparent in brief patches, with something dark blue winking in and out of sight beneath.

"W-wait! You're kidding?!"

Kenk yelled in surprise, his two-handed sword still held at the ready. Yuuma could feel Sawa and Tomori gasp as well.

Oeben's face slowly began transforming.

His mouth and nose elongated, and his eyes began to migrate away from the thick bridge of his nose. Rows of sharp fangs appeared along the wide slit of his mouth, and his skin began to split into scales.

Finally, his skin turned dark blue and took on a dull sheen, while his eyes became a golden yellow.

“A Varanian...,” croaked Sawa.

That settled it. Although his portly body remained unchanged, Oeben’s face was now clearly that of a lizard. The backs of his hands, which still gripped his hammer, were covered in thick, dense scales. Likely what had caused Yuuma’s shortsword to break.

The name beneath the HP bar above Oeben’s head changed from **Head Warden Oeben** to **Oeben the Varanian Commander**. The double silhouette icon must have indicated that Oeben had been in disguise.

“You’ve seen the truth now, lambs...,” said Oeben, who was still on his knee. His voice was laced now with rasping clicks and hisses. “None of you will be allowed to leave this place alive.”

“You already said you were planning on turning us into stew!” shouted Kenk, undaunted.

He dashed toward Oeben in a fury.

Oeben was still under the effects of the cold debuff. Varanians were weak to cold; they had already seen that firsthand during their fight with the Varanian Axbearer at the castle. But why were there hostile demi-humans in the lord mayor’s manor, and how had Oeben managed to transform himself into a human? Yuuma had tons of questions, but he was pretty sure Oeben wouldn’t answer them.

This was no time for distractions; it was time to fight.

*Get him, Kenk!*

Yuuma gripped the shortsword in his right hand tighter as he mentally cheered his friend on.

Although it only worked with shadow and cold magic, the Darkiron Shortsword could be used as a magical amplifier, just like Sawa’s wand or Tomori’s staff, which made his Chilling Hand spell more powerful than it had been when used against the Axbearer. During the castle fight, two Barbed



Wolves had shown up to get in the way. This time, however, Yuuma wasn't going to let his spell expire until his MP ran out.

Oeben was still kneeling on the ground. Kenk swung his sword downward, aiming for the bicorn hat sitting atop the Varanian's head.

Oeben suddenly pursed his massive mouth, creating a funnel shape with his lips.

There was a whoosh of air as yellow gas spouted forth from Oeben's mouth, enveloping Kenk completely. A breath attack—likely poisonous gas.

“Kenk!”

Kenk's legs buckled underneath him. Through sheer willpower, however, he managed to carry through with his swing and deliver the strike.

The blade struck Oeben square in the middle of his hat, causing a crimson damage effect to burst into the air.

The strike was clearly weaker than normal, but Oeben's HP still decreased by nearly 10 percent. Unfortunately, Kenk was also left hunched down onto the floor, where his momentum had carried him, his sword planted into the ground. He hadn't lost any HP yet as far as Yuuma could tell, but a status ailment appeared beneath his HP bar. It showed two parallel, zigzag yellow lines...the symbol for paralysis.

“Tomo, quick, Kenk needs healing!” ordered Yuuma.

Tomori instantly ran forward and began to chant a spell.

*“Sacre...Pluvia...”*

She was preparing the Holy Purification spell, which had proven so useful back in the first-floor shelter at Althea, when the other students had gotten paralyzed by Tabanus Hellfly Larvae bites. It was a mainstay spell for Priests, capable of healing a variety of status effects and even of purifying curses and poison from items. Unfortunately, its range was much shorter than spells like Holy Healing and required Tomori to get close to Kenk before casting.

Yuuma hesitated. Should he release his Chilling Hand spell and protect Tomori? If Oeben delivered another poison gas attack and paralyzed Tomori,

too, they were going to be in trouble.

But if Yuuma released the spectral hand, Oeben's cold debuff would also disappear, allowing him to move once more. There was no way of knowing for sure how many seconds it would take for the debuff to fade.

Yuuma's mind raced. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. Tomori running forward, her crozier raised. Oeben, pointing his snout in her direction.

Yuuma shut everything else out and focused on Oeben's lips. The moment Oeben's mouth began to change shape, in preparation for another breath attack, Yuuma had to be ready to release his spectral hand spell and dash forward to protect Tomori.

Oeben's scaly lips began to twist and part.

This time it wasn't a breath attack, however. Instead, Oeben released a thunderous howl.

"GWR... ARGGHGH!!"

*Is he...wasting an action on intimidation? At a time like this?*

Yuuma furrowed his brow as he continued to maintain his Chilling Hand.

"Yu, the guard!" Sawa shouted sharply from behind.

Yuuma spun around quickly. The Varanian Prison Guard had begun to move forward slowly from its position at the switch. Its target was obviously Sawa, who was still holding Nagi in her left arm.

Now that Tomori had moved away from the door, Oeben had apparently decided there was no need to guard the switch anymore and had instead ordered the guard to join the fight... Pretty sophisticated thinking for an NPC. Come to think of it, the waitress back at Pomegranate Pavilion and the shopkeeper at House of Stripes had also seemed nearly indistinguishable from humans in terms of conversational ability.

NPCs with chat AIs in games were hardly rare, but chat AIs usually just specialized in keeping the conversation intact. They didn't have the ability to actually observe, investigate, and make decisions on their own. The NPCs in

*Actual Magic*, even the demon named Valac that currently possessed Sawa, seemed more like human-level intelligence AIs than chatbots. If Yuuma was expecting them to behave like normal NPCs, he would need to reevaluate... Case in point, Oeben's tricks were already giving Yuuma a run for his money.

As a Mage, Sawa was going to find it hard to defeat that guard on her own, especially while also protecting the injured Nagi. If Yuuma released his Chilling Hand in order to help her, however, Tomori might get attacked by Oeben instead.

Yuuma's party had two trump cards up their sleeves.

The first was the ability to summon Sumika Watamaki. Sumika would have no problem keeping the Varanian guard busy. However, she probably hadn't recovered from breaking the cleansing steel chains yet, so Yuuma wanted to avoid summoning her again so soon.

Their other trump card was the demon, Valac, who possessed enormous M-ATK power. Valac could easily obliterate both the guard and Constable Oeben, possibly even with a single spell. But the time now was only 10:30 PM. They still had an hour and a half left until the daily limit for summoning Valac reset.

There was no way they would be able to kite the two Varanians around the dungeon for that long. That just left Sumika...but in her current state, Sumika was absolutely ferocious. She no longer seemed to possess any sense of self-preservation. If Yuuma ordered her to attack, she would continue to do so until her last breath, no matter how powerful their enemies were. Yuuma had a feeling that if he summoned her now, it would not end well.

The guard drew closer and closer to Sawa. Yuuma watched, frozen, unable to make a decision.

Sawa held her wand ready, waiting for the right timing. She had only one chance to make her magic count. Although she was unlikely to miss at that distance, a single Flame Arrow probably wasn't going to be enough to defeat the thickly scaled Varanian.

What was Yuuma supposed to do? Immediately flank the guard, in order to protect Sawa and Nagi? Or keep using Chilling Hand to protect Tomori and Kenk?

There were no good options. Yuuma clenched his teeth so hard, they would have cracked if this had been the real world.

Then someone spoke. It was a voice Yuuma had heard countless times before, and yet something about the voice was unrecognizable.

“Fine... I’ll do it...”

Yuuma glanced around reflexively. That was when he finally noticed.

Nagi was still being cradled in Sawa’s arms, but her eyes were open.

Yuuma and Nagi had practically been raised together, but this was not the Minagi Sano that Yuuma knew. Her expression, her whole demeanor, seemed abnormal. There was something jaded and listless about her, despite the danger they were in.

Sawa froze. Nagi—or whoever was occupying her avatar—slipped free from Sawa’s grasp. She glanced down at Yuuma, who had now fallen to one knee. He noticed a faint blue light burning within her eyes.

“Despicable... It took all this time for you to come to the rescue, and now you can’t even handle a little hiccup like this on your own...”

The voice coming from Nagi’s small lips certainly sounded like her, but her manner of speaking had completely changed.

“You’ll need to do better if you hope to be worthy of becoming one of my cultors...”

“Cultor...?”

Yuuma repeated the unfamiliar word, still in shock, before suddenly remembering the situation they were in.

He tried to yell *Watch out!* but before he could: “VRAGGH!”

The guard sprang forward with a ferocious roar. It had already noticed that Nagi was awake but apparently deemed that she wasn’t a threat.

Nagi was unarmed, after all, and dressed in nothing but a muddy cassock. She didn’t even have a simple knife. With her HP already at less than 30 percent, a single punch from the Varanian would probably be enough to wipe her out.

“Nagi!”

Sawa suddenly snapped out of it and tried to throw herself in between the guard and Nagi. Before she could, however, Nagi held out her right hand to stop her. Meanwhile she extended her left hand in the guard’s direction.

The Varanian lifted its vicious spiked club into the air.



A ball of blue light appeared before Nagi's outstretched hand with a *fwip!* A thin slice of light shot forward in a spiral.

It struck the guard beneath its chin, from which a crimson damage burst and a blue-white spray of water simultaneously appeared. It hadn't been a ray of light after all, but rather a high-pressure streaming corkscrew of water—the spell Water Gimlet.

But Nagi hadn't chanted any words of power.

Yuuma almost lowered his weapon in shock but managed to catch himself just in time. Glancing down the corridor, he could see that Tomori had already reached Kenk and was standing behind him, about to cure his paralysis with Holy Purification.

Farther down the corridor, the massive and portly Constable Oeben remained hunched over. He glared at them with hateful yellow eyes. It didn't seem as if he was capable of using his paralysis breath in quick succession, but he was clearly planning on making them pay once the cold debuff wore off.

Yuuma decided he had better keep his Chilling Hand spell up after all. His remaining MP had already dipped to below 20 percent, however.

Yuuma glanced to his right again. He saw the Varanian guard raise its club into the air once more as beads of red light streamed from the cut on its throat.

The guard never got the chance to swing this time, either. Another spiral of high-pressure water shot forth from Nagi's hand, piercing the guard once more in the exact same location beneath its chin.

And then another. And another. The guard teetered and stumbled back as it was hit with one burst of water after the other, each spell firing without any words of power or cooldowns in between.

Nagi remained as lethargic as before. The fifth cast finally pierced through the back of the guard's neck, the spray of water continuing to spiral forward down the corridor behind it. The HP bar above the guard's head went into free fall and then disappeared almost anticlimactically.

The Varanian dropped its club and lantern at the same time and collapsed

forward, scattering into a cloud of red fragments just before hitting the floor.

Yuuma watched it all happen and then, mouth agape, turned his head to stare at the space above Nagi's head.

The magic in *Actual Magic* was extremely powerful, just as the game's title suggested. In a one-on-one fight between a Warrior and a Mage of the same level, however, odds were generally in the Warrior's favor. The reason for this was that casting spells required the user to chant three words of power—an element word, a form, and an activation. This gave the Warrior plenty of time to interrupt so long as they could close the distance.

If, on the other hand, a caster was able to fire off spells without verbal components or cooldowns, the Warrior would instead become a sitting duck. Which was exactly what Nagi had just done.

Nagi lowered her left hand and glanced at Yuuma with eyes that now glowed with the color of water. She spoke in a tone of voice that sounded slightly younger, and yet somehow colder, than Nagi's usual voice.

"I've helped more than enough, I think; you can take care of the big one over there on your own. And you..."

Nagi turned around and stared directly at Sawa.

"It's time you abandoned these games. We are the dominus, and they are the vas. Do not forget that...*Valac*."

Yuuma finally understood.

Nagi was possessed by a demon, just like Sawa. It was this demon, the one who had just referred to Sawa as Valac, who had defeated the guard with a silent spell.

"Um...excuse me!"

Yuuma began to ask a question before he realized what he was doing. His voice came out raspy.

"Sorry, but...who are you?"

The entity currently taking the form of Nagi narrowed her blue eyes in amusement. A smile played on her lips.



“I am Crocell.”

As soon as she’d finished speaking, several things happened at once.

Nagi fell unconscious again, almost as if a switch had been flipped. Yuuma’s MP ran out, causing the Chilling Hand to disappear. The paralysis symbol disappeared from beneath Kenk’s HP bar. And Constable Oeben let out a roar that shook the walls and ceilings of the dungeon.

“GWUARRGGHH!!”

Oeben rose to his feet with such momentum that it was hard to believe he had been under the cold debuff just moments before. He stomped both feet on the ground.

“You’ll pay...! You’ll pay for destroying my kin! Do you have any idea how hard it was to replace the original guard with one of my men without anyone noticing?!”

“Tell it to someone who cares!!” Kenk spat back.

Kenk had just recovered from his own paralysis. He motioned for Tomori to back farther away.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a lizardman? Who gave you permission to breathe poison anyway?! You could at least have the decency to be purple or green or something, so that people know you’re poisonous!”

Yuuma had the feeling this was going to be a good fight. He pulled an MP potion from his pouch and downed it in one swig. His empty MP bar slowly began to recover.

They had plenty of things to think through and discuss, but all of that would have to wait until the enemy was defeated. Thanks to Nagi, or rather Crocell, the guard in the rear had already been taken care of. Now they could focus on Oeben.

Yuuma and Tomori exchanged places, Tomori racing toward the back and Yuuma stepping up front.

“Kenk, our strategy is the same, but if you see him queuing up another breath attack, move back as fast as you can!” shouted Yuuma.

“Roger that!”

Despite being paralyzed, Kenk would have noticed the incident with Nagi. Regardless, he kept his eyes forward and his sword readied out in front.

“We’re lucky you’re here, Kenk,” Yuuma muttered to himself—something he knew he would be too embarrassed to ever say out loud. He adjusted the grip on his own shortsword.

All of Oeben’s attacks, with the exception of his poison breath, could be neutralized with Yuuma’s Chilling Hand. If they could just hold out long enough for Yuuma’s MP to recover, victory would be in the bag.

But Oeben wasn’t dumb. He glared at Yuuma as he raised his hammer into the air. It nearly scraped the ceiling above his head.

“Gwarggh!!”

Oeben released a ferocious roar as Yuuma and Kenk raced forward.

Constable Oeben—aka Oeben the Varanian Commander—was stronger than expected for the boss of a starting town. He did a decent job of holding his own against the party of four.

The most surprising part of the fight was when Oeben's HP fell below the halfway mark and he broke his two-handed hammer in two, transforming it into a one-handed hammer and a short spear. Not only did his attack patterns significantly change after that, but he was finally able to use the kind of downward swipes and sweeping attacks that the ceiling had previously prevented him from using before. It really upped the pressure, giving all four of them a run for their money. In the end, however, just as expected, he was unable to resist Yuuma's Chilling Hand spell. Once immobilized, he became easy pickings for Kenk's Heavy Sluggers and Sawa's Fire Spikes.

"My plans, my dreams, ending in a place like this... Aieegghh!"

With a bitter cry, Oeben dissipated into his death animation.

Oeben may have been an enemy, but he fought bravely. Yuuma held a half second of silence over the scattering light particles before racing over to Sawa and Nagi's side.

"Nagi!" Yuuma shouted.

His childhood friend was still unconscious. Yuuma tried to lean in closely and peer into her face, but Sawa pushed him away.

“Yu, do you have anything like a blanket on you?” she said calmly.

Yuuma quickly opened his inventory.

Scrolling through the list, Yuuma spotted an item entitled **Barbed Wolf pelt**. A blue-black bundle appeared above his menu window as he materialized the item.

Yuuma once read that actually skinning a creature and tanning the hide took an incredible amount of effort and time. The fur pelt that Yuuma spread out on the floor had been processed for them, however, and was already soft and fluffy. Sawa laid Nagi on top of the pelt, uncorked a lesser healing potion, and began trickling the lemon-colored liquid into Nagi’s parted lips, drop by drop.

In their school’s first aid class, Yuuma had been taught that you weren’t supposed to try to make an unconscious person drink water, but these potion droplets transformed into pale light and disappeared as soon as they entered Nagi’s mouth. Nagi’s HP bar finally began to inch upward. Nagi’s Cold debuff had also disappeared, possibly because Sawa was still holding her. Only the Hungry debuff remained.

Yuuma knelt next to them. He furrowed his brow.

Nagi had washed up on Philos Island in the afternoon—it had probably happened immediately after the playtest had ended. She would have likely already been suffering from the Cold ailment by that time and had probably now been hungry for several hours as well.

She seemed to have lost HP at an awfully slow rate, all things considered. Not that Yuuma was complaining. But by all rights, her health should have run out long before they ever set foot in the dungeon...

“Ngh...”

A strained sigh suddenly escaped Nagi’s lips, derailing Yuuma’s current train of thought.

A small wrinkle appeared on Nagi’s smooth brow, and her long eyelashes began to flutter. Her eyes opened slightly and then closed again...and then, finally, opened fully.

Her irises were now the same understated shade of pale blue that they had been during the playtest. The glow had disappeared. She blinked several times, looking up first at Sawa, then Yuuma, then Kenk, and finally Tomori—and a familiar smile, mild and gentle, appeared upon her face.

“Thank goodness... We’re finally back together...”

“Nagi!!” cried Sawa, her voice catching in her throat.

Nagi was still lying on the ground. Sawa hunched down and hugged her tightly.

If it had been two or maybe three years earlier, Yuuma would have leaped onto Nagi and given her hugs as well, but he could hardly act that way now that they were in the sixth grade.

Yuuma glanced toward Kenk, who was fidgeting to his right. They made eye contact for a moment and then nodded wordlessly before Yuuma turned toward Tomori, who was sitting on her knees to their left.

“Tomo...I mean, Shimizu. Thank you so much. Without you, we would have never found Nagi.”

For some reason, Tomori turned her face away for a moment. She quickly turned back and grinned. “I’m just happy that I was able to help, even if just a little.”

“A little?! Without you, we would have never made it this far, let alone beaten that stupid lizard-face...,” said Kenk, poking his head out from behind Yuuma’s shoulder.

Nagi sat up with a helping hand from Sawa.

“Are...you all right now, crybaby?” asked Kenk, worried.

Nagi glared at him. “How many times have I told you not to call me that?”

“Oh...sorry.”

Kenk cringed in embarrassment. Nagi giggled before turning her eyes in Yuuma’s direction.

Yuuma felt like he should say something, but the relief was so overpowering

that he couldn't get the words out. There was also a lingering sense of unease. Nagi had a demon residing inside her, just like Sawa. A demon named Crocell.

Nagi nodded, as if she understood. Finally, she turned toward Tomori.

"Shimizu, thank you for looking out for Sawa and the others."

Nagi bowed her head deeply. Tomori opened her mouth as if to say something but then closed it before starting over.

"You don't need to thank me; I was just fulfilling my role." Tomori sighed and then glanced at Yuuma with a smile. "I guess my job here is over now. We should head back soon."

*It doesn't have to be over...* was what Yuuma wanted to say, but instead he bit his tongue.

The maximum allowed party size in *Actual Magic* was four people. Now that Nagi was back, it seemed natural that Tomori would be the one to leave the party.

There was no reason she couldn't still travel with them, even if they weren't all in the same party, but originally Tomori had only offered to help them with Sugamo's mission. The one to go find food. Yuuma and the others had sprung the search for Nagi on her afterward. With everything Yuuma and the others had already put her through, it seemed presumptuous to expect even more help now.

"Yeah... Let's head back," Yuuma replied, unable to express what was on his mind.

He glanced at Sawa and Nagi.

"There's nothing left for us to do here, is there?" he asked them.

"Nope."

"No, we can go."

Sawa and Nagi nodded. Yuuma opened his menu window in order to log out.

It was 10:40 PM, already past their bedtime.

Right about now, the students in the shelter on the first floor of Althea had

probably already finished dinner, thanks to the food that Kakeru Niki had delivered for them, and were now getting ready for bed. They might even be sleeping by the time Yuuma and the others got back. He and his group would have to be careful not to wake them...unless everyone was too anxious and sad for sleep.

Still lost in his own thoughts, Yuuma navigated to his System tab in order to press the LOGOUT button. However— “Huh...?”

Yuuma’s eyes grew wide.

The LOGOUT button was gone. Well, the button was there, but it had been grayed out. Nothing seemed to happen when he pressed it.

“H-hold on... What’s the big deal?!” shouted Kenk, repeatedly tapping his own window. “I checked when we dove in, the LOGOUT button was there like normal!”

“We even saw Niki log out with our own eyes,” said Sawa.

Tomori nodded. Come to think of it, Sawa was right. Niki had pressed the LOGOUT button and disappeared in a flash of light, before their very eyes, just four hours earlier.

“Maybe...you can’t log out at night...?” ventured Yuuma softly.

“And how would that make any sense?” answered Sawa immediately.

Nagi scrutinized her own window before raising her head. “It’s not like we can call a GM, either, can we...?”

“We sure can’t,” Yuuma agreed.

*Hold on...*

Yuuma blinked.

Nagi had lost consciousness right after the playtest had ended, and she had stayed that way right up until a few minutes ago, hadn’t she? She shouldn’t have had any idea about what was going on. Judging from her statement, however, she seemed to be as aware of the situation at Althea as the rest of them were.

Yuuma was curious to figure out just how much she knew. He was about to

ask her, when Kenk suddenly interrupted.

“Of course! Remember what the lady told us during orientation, before the playtest? She said that if anything went wrong inside the game and we became unable to access our windows, there was a system access console somewhere in Calcina. I think she said we can log out from there.”

“Ah...!”

Now that Kenk mentioned it, Yuuma also remembered her saying something similar.

“But where is the console located...?”

“I think she said it was on the first floor of the lord mayor’s manor,” said Tomori.

Yuuma glanced up at the ceiling.

They had crossed all the way to the south bank of the Cal River, hunted around for the entrance to that underground tunnel, broken through the cleansing steel chain, and braved a labyrinthine maze of traps just to make their way here to this dungeon, without getting swarmed by guards. Now, exhausted as they were, they were expected to make their way up to the lord mayor’s manor as well?

Unfortunately, that seemed to be their only option at the moment if they wanted to log out.

“Nagi, do you think you can walk...?” asked Yuuma.

Nagi nodded without hesitation. “Absolutely... But I think I’d like to eat something first...,” she added, seemingly a little embarrassed.

“Oh, of course. Hold on a second,” Yuuma answered, flustered.

He navigated through his menu, which was still open, and materialized the sandwich and apple pie they had ordered earlier for takeout from Pomegranate Pavilion.

Once the food appeared, a loud gurgling sound filled the air. It hadn’t come from Nagi, however. The source was Kenk’s stomach.



“Don’t tell me you’re hungry again, after eating so much in town...,” said Yuuma.

“Hey, I’m a growing boy,” Kenk shot back unapologetically.

The party ended up eating with Nagi, downing some of the packaged baked goods and onigiri they were carrying in order to recover their strength. Once finished, the five exited the dungeon via the northern door, from which Oeben had appeared.

The small room on the other side of the door contained a spiral staircase. They climbed the staircase, step after step, until they eventually encountered another door.

This door was securely reinforced with iron plates and was locked tight. Not even Sawa’s Lockpick spell was strong enough to unlock it. Yuuma and the others nearly panicked until they realized that Oeben had dropped an item called Constable’s Keyring.

Oeben had dropped several other apparent quest items, including a commandant’s badge, a constable’s aiguillette, and a map of the lord mayor’s manor, as well as a variety of items Yuuma would rather not touch, including a Bicorn Hat of Greed, a Miser’s Belt, and a Tenderizing Needle of Human Transformation. They could check those out later. For now, they only materialized the map.

According to the oil paper map, the manor was three stories tall and was shaped like a ship, longer east to west and thickest in the middle. Using the coldfire lantern in order to see better, the five of them pored over the first-floor map, identifying two locations where they thought the system console might be.

The first was a point directly at the center of the Great Hall, which was in the middle of the first floor.

The other location was the chapel on the opposite side of the building from the entrance to the dungeon, where Yuuma and the others were currently located.

In order to reach the chapel, they would first need to pass through the Great

Hall, so they decided to check the hall first. They stepped through the door and out into the hallway. Unlike the basement dungeon, which had been constructed out of roughly hewn stone blocks, the floors here were covered in vermillion carpeting, and the walls and ceilings were tiled in smooth limestone. The group stood still for a moment and listened, but there didn't seem to be any guards about.

The hallway was sparsely lit by candles. Yuuma and the others chose a direction based on the map and began walking. After about two minutes, they entered the Great Hall. They peered inside, clinging to the shadows of a cathedral-like archway. The hall was about as large as a small gymnasium. There were no signs of people inside.

The walls outside had been heavily guarded. The inside of the manor, however, seemed nearly deserted by comparison. Did that have anything to do with the "plan" that Oeben had mentioned? What could have possibly motivated the Varanian to replace the manor's men with his own...?

Yuuma knew it was useless to speculate, but he couldn't stop his imagination from running wild. He scanned the hall, but there didn't seem to be anything that looked like it might be a system console.

"I guess it's not here...," Kenk muttered in disappointment.

"It must be in the chapel, then," said Sawa, uncharacteristically optimistic.

In the end, that meant they would have to walk clear across the manor. It was only a hundred or so meters in length, however, not much different than the Yuki-hana Elementary School building.

"Hey...do you think there's any connection between the Varanians and Valac?" Yuuma whispered to Sawa as they snuck along the walls of the Great Hall.

Sawa glared at him as if he were stupid. "What would Valac have to do with a bunch of stupid lizardmen?"

"It's possible, isn't it? Oeben was transformed into a human after all, wasn't he? Maybe Valac's true form is actually a lizardman...or a lizardwoman in her case, I guess."

Sawa jabbed Yuuma in the side with her fist, digging her knuckles into his ribs.

“Ow!” Yuuma cried, forgetting to keep his voice down.

Nagi, who was walking right in front of them, next to Tomori, spun around on her heel. She continued walking backward, gracefully, as she spoke.

“Would you two twins behave?”

“But she hit me...”

“In fairness, I don’t think Valac and the Varanians have anything to do with each other, either.”

“Yeah but...Valac, Varanian. They both start with the letter V...,” Yuuma insisted.

Tomori glanced back and giggled. “The two words do sound pretty similar, but I think they come from different sources...

*Varanus*

is the scientific genus name for monitor lizards, so the word *Varanian* probably comes from that.”

“Huh...”

Yuuma wasn’t the only one to be impressed. Sawa, Nagi, and even Kenk, who was walking a little farther ahead, uttered small exclamations of surprise. Yuuma never ceased to be amazed at how much Tomori seemed to know. He knew she liked to read, but not even the average bookworm would know the scientific name for monitor lizards right off the top of their head. In any case, that explained Varanians, but what about Valac...?

“Hmm...”

Yuuma suddenly stopped, a new thought occurring to him.

“Back when we were talking to Valac, the name on Sawa’s HP bar didn’t change. We never got to see it in writing, so we don’t actually know how it’s spelled. How do you know it doesn’t have something to do with the Varanians...?”

“Well...you see...”

Tomori paused. She glanced at Sawa, seeming to hesitate for a moment, but then turned her eyes back toward Yuuma. She pursed her lips slightly and then began explaining in a calm voice.

“The thing is...Valac isn’t just a proper name in *Actual Magic*, like, say, Oeben. It’s actually the name of a *real* demon.”

“A real one...?”

Yuuma wasn’t sure what she meant. He stared blankly. Tomori quickly shook her head from side to side and tried to explain further. She seemed uncharacteristically flustered.

“I don’t mean real as in *really* dangerous or *really* evil. What I meant to say was... well, there are a lot of old myths and legends about gods and demons in the world, aren’t there?”

“Like Susanoo or Satan?” asked Yuuma, thinking of names he had seen before in games.

Tomori nodded enthusiastically. “Exactly. Susanoo comes from ancient Japanese texts like the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, and Satan comes from the Bible. There was a book, written around the seventeenth century, I think, that described a type of magic called Goetia... In it, it lists a group of demons known as the seventy-two demons of King Solomon.”

“Wait, I’ve seen that in a game before!” said Kenk, interrupting.

Come to think of it, Yuuma also remembered seeing references to Solomon’s demons in games and manga before.

“So you’re saying Valac is one of Solomon’s demons...?”

“Yes...” Tomori nodded slowly before glancing at Nagi. “So is Crocell.”

“...”

Yuuma looked around uncomfortably, unsure of how to respond.

It wasn’t unusual for RPGs to take inspiration for their monsters from the myths and legends of the world. In fact, it was probably rarer for games to feature entirely original monsters made up from scratch. Krakens, basilisks, manticores, cyclopes...even Yuuma could think of several such examples.

Did that mean, then, that Valac and Crocell were monsters from the game, and that the staff of IO-Tage, the developers behind *Actual Magic*, had used Solomon's demons as inspiration when designing them?

If so, then in addition to Valac and Crocell...there could be another seventy demons waiting out there somewhere...

Yuuma heard the sound of distant bells, which yanked him back into the present.

Glancing at the bottom-right-hand corner of his field of vision, Yuuma saw that the time was now 11:00 PM. He really wanted to get back to Sugamo's shelter before midnight, but they needed to find the system console and log out before they could do so.

"...Let's keep going," Yuuma whispered.

The others nodded wordlessly.

They continued to stick close to the wall of the Great Hall, eventually passing through the archway on the east side. This hallway was deserted as well. They proceeded down the hallway carefully until they reached the end, where a slightly more lavish door awaited them. The chapel had to be through there.

The door to the dungeon from which Yuuma and the others had emerged had been made of banded wood and steel. This door to the chapel, however, was made of what looked like heavy stone. They stopped to listen for a moment before trying the highly polished brass handle. It was, of course, locked.

This time, instead of attempting to open it with magic, Yuuma immediately pulled out the Constable's Keyring. There were two keys on the ring that were more ornately shaped than the rest. Yuuma tried one of them, placing it into the lock. He had guessed right. The key turned smoothly, and the lock opened with a high-pitched click.

"Does this mean that we wouldn't have been able to log out without defeating Oeben...?" Kenk whispered.

"We still don't know if this is even the right place," Yuuma whispered back.

He gripped the handle once more and pulled the door open about twenty

centimeters. No candles had been lit inside, but there was moonlight streaming in through the window, illuminating the room in pale blue light.

The chapel resembled a small church. There were pews lined up on either side and what looked like some sort of lectern toward the back. If the system console was anywhere, it would have to be there.

Yuuma slipped in through the crack in the door and, after waiting a moment to be sure nothing unusual happened, beckoned for the others to follow. They closed the door behind them, locking it again just in case, and hurried toward the back of the room.

The five ascended to the pulpit, which was elevated about twenty centimeters from the floor, and stepped behind the lectern. There was nothing on the lectern stand...

No, not nothing. A black, rectangular tablet had been placed there. It was about one centimeter thick and was made out of something like stone or glass, with a smooth surface that reflected the moonlight.

“Finally... Try touching it, Yu,” Kenk urged.

Yuuma raised his right hand over the tablet.

*If this doesn't work...*

Yuuma brushed away the negative thoughts and brought his finger down onto the tablet's surface.

It was smooth, hard, and cold to the touch. A moment later— A pale, white version of the *Actual Magic* logo appeared on the tablet's surface. There was a startup sound...and then a transparent holo-window, about fifteen centimeters wide, appeared in the air above the tablet.

“All ri—!” Kenk started to shout, striking a victory pose, but Sawa thumped him hard on the back.

Yuuma would have usually given Kenk a hard time for something like that as well, but he decided to let it pass. He peered at the window closely.

It had many more tabs than a standard menu window; however, almost all of them were grayed out. The only tab available for selection was one labeled

**Access Management.** Crossing his fingers, Yuuma gave it a tap. The screen changed to one with multiple buttons of simple design. Most of these buttons were also grayed out, but there was one, labeled **Logout**, that still glowed blue.

“Phew...”

Yuuma sighed, this time in relief. He tapped the button. The submenu window that appeared was written entirely in English, but Yuuma could more or less understand what it was supposed to say. There were three logout options: one to log just yourself out, one to log out specific players, and one to log out all nearby players.

Yuuma pressed the third option, and a confirmation window appeared, displaying the player names in question.

“Let’s see... Yuuma, Sawa, Kenk, Tomori, Nagi... That’s everyone, right?” said Yuuma, double-checking with the others. They stood close by on either side of Yuuma, peering over his shoulder at the window.

Yuuma waited for the four of them to nod, before pressing the OK button.

Lines of white light began to swell upward from beneath their feet, enveloping their avatars.

*I have a feeling this won’t be the last time we’re here,* thought Yuuma as he gave in to the giddy floating sensation.

*Yu...*

*Wake up, Yu.*

A soft, clear voice rang in Yuuma's ears as a small hand gently shook him.

Yuuma lifted his heavy eyelids slowly. Several orange lights floated blearily before him. At first, he thought they were dungeon lamps, but the lights didn't flicker or waver, meaning they were likely LEDs or CCFLs.

Yuuma blinked several times. He realized there was a faint silhouette sitting in front of him, backlit by the dim lights. Yuuma peered up at the person, but his eyes couldn't seem to focus.

Whoever it was had soft, gently wavy hair and wore a headband made of interlocking diamond-shaped rhinestones. She also wore an indigo cardigan over a white blouse. The irises of her large eyes were slightly bluish in color—"Nagi...", Yuuma rasped.

Minagi Sano smiled in relief.

The clearness of Nagi's smile seemed to wash over him. Before Yuuma realized what he was doing, he had reached up with his right hand and grabbed her by her slender shoulder, squeezing softly to make sure she was real.

"Don't worry... It's really me."

Her voice was nearly inaudible. The voice took a moment to trickle into



Yuuma's brain, at which point his conscious mind caught up to reality and his eyes widened.

The smell of grease hung in the air. Yuuma's throat felt dry and painful. The floor was mercilessly cold and hard beneath him.

This was definitely the real world. Which meant that Yuuma and the others had successfully logged out of *Actual Magic*. And they had brought the missing Nagi back with them.

Yuuma took a deep breath. He wanted to pull Nagi in by her shoulder and hug her close. If he hadn't been able to bring himself to do that while in *Actual Magic*, however, there was absolutely no way he was going to manage to do it here in the real world. He released his hand awkwardly and exhaled.

"I, um...I'm glad you're okay," he told her.

Yuuma placed his hands on the floor and lifted himself up.

He took another look around. This was definitely the real world, but there was something strange about their location.

It was a small, round room, about three meters in diameter. The ceiling was incredibly high, and the curved wall was embedded with small lights. Judging from their shape, they looked to be LEDs.

There was a sliding door along one section of the wall and zero windows. Even if there had been windows, with Althea in the state that it was in, they would have probably been pitch-black.

Directly across from the door sat a desk, which was curved to fit the wall, and a simple office chair. Kenk lay spread-eagle on the floor in front of the desk as Sawa and Tomori sat by his side, peering down into his face— Tomori lifted her head as Yuuma crawled over.

"Oh, Ashihara. You're awake."

"Y-yeah, good morning... How long was I asleep...?"

"Just a minute or two. Does anything feel strange physically?"

Yuuma glanced down at his own body. He patted himself over his clothes, but nothing seemed to hurt.

“No, it looks like I’m fine... What about Kenk? Is he up yet?”

“We’ve been trying to wake him, but he isn’t responding...,” said Sawa.

“...”

That made Yuuma worry a little. He sat across from the girls and stared down into Kenk’s face. Kenk didn’t seem to be in any pain, but the LED lights here were like the rest of Althea’s emergency lights, making it difficult to tell if he looked pale or sickly.

“Hmm...”

Yuuma suspected that if he shook Kenk as hard as he could, then Kenk would wake up, but their bodies had temporarily disappeared from the real world after diving from the Calculus capsules on the second floor and had rematerialized in this strange room only after an approximately five-and-a-half-hour adventure in the world of *AM*. They had essentially been teleported. There was no way to know for sure whether they had suffered any negative physical or psychological effects.

After a moment’s thought, Yuuma opened his inventory and retrieved one of the sour vinegar konbu snack packs he had acquired from the first-floor break room. Opening the package, he removed a single strip of the konbu and waved it under Kenk’s nose.

“Ngh... Mmm... Guh!”

Kenk’s eyelids and mouth suddenly sprang open. Yuuma slipped the strip of konbu into Kenk’s waiting mouth before turning to Sawa and Tomori and nodding wordlessly.

Once they were sure Kenk was okay, Yuuma and the others formed a circle in the middle of the small room in order to finally celebrate their survival.

Naturally, there was no time for a toast. It was already 11:10 PM; they had just fifty minutes left until midnight.

Yuuma wanted to throw the sliding door open immediately and head outside, but there was something they needed to do first.

Yuuma reopened his menu window and checked his current equipment. Just

as expected, the weapons and armor he had equipped while in *AM* had all disappeared, replaced instead with a flat steel bar and a collarless jacket.

Yuuma had a sudden thought. He navigated to his inventory and narrowed down the item list to show just equipment. Once he did so, the Darkiron Shortsword, leather armor, and other items appeared, but they were grayed out and could not be equipped or materialized.

“It’s just like we thought. Equippable items seem to be limited to their own world and can’t be traded in and out...,” Yuuma muttered.

“Does that mean I’m stuck with that weird pinheaded hammer again?!” Kenk shouted in disappointment.

“At least you have a real weapon. All I’ve got is a steel bar,” Yuuma snapped back. That shut Kenk up.

Still, the lack of equipment available to them in the real world was a matter of major concern. There were monsters in the real world, too—in fact, creatures like the Conehead Bruiser and the Conehead Demolisher seemed to be much stronger than most of the monsters that resided in *AM*.

Yuuma was still lost in thought when Nagi suddenly had an idea.

“Hey, Yu, we can still bring material-type items from the other world, can’t we?” she said.

“Um...”

Yuuma sorted his inventory again, causing a long list of materials to appear. Unlike the equipment, these items were not grayed out.

“Yep, it looks like it.”

“So then, why don’t we just use those materials to make equipment?”

“That sounds great and all, but...”

*It’s not like there are lathes and presses just lying around. Even if there were, we wouldn’t know how to use them...,* thought Yuuma.

“Of course—we can make equipment using the Blacksmithing skill!” Tomori exclaimed.

“Ah!”

Yuuma’s, Kenk’s, and Sawa’s jaws dropped.

Yuuma had forgotten about the many crafting skills in *Actual Magic*, like Blacksmithing and Tailoring. If they could use magic in the real world, then it followed that they would also be able to use the crafting skills here as well. If Yuuma recalled correctly, using the Blacksmithing skill required an anvil and a blacksmith’s hammer, but they could just bring those over from AM.

Any class could conceivably acquire crafting skills, but Merchants were most suited to them. Yuuma was pretty sure Mimi Hariya and Shinta Aida in Sugamo’s shelter were Merchants.

Kenk had apparently had the same thought. He scowled. “Man, why didn’t we pick up blacksmithing equipment while we were in Calcina?!”

“We’ll need to go back tomorrow anyway to buy more food. We can pick up blacksmithing and tailoring tools then,” Yuuma told him. “Besides, we need to bring Nagi back to Pomegranate Pavilion so she can try the steak!”

“All right!” Kenk nodded enthusiastically. A moment later, however, his eyes glazed over. “Tomorrow...”

“What’s up?”

“Nothing... It’s just, part of me was still holding on to the thought that we might still fix everything by sunset and finally get to go home...”

Everyone—Yuuma, Sawa, Nagi, and even Tomori—averted their gazes.

Yuuma had been trying his hardest not to think about their parents, but they were probably worried sick by now. They must have raced straight to Althea and were probably outside, desperately waiting for Yuuma and Sawa to be rescued. Any moment now.

Yuuma wasn’t sure where in Althea this small room was located, but even if it was located at the very center of the tower, they couldn’t be more than fifty meters away from the parking lot, where his parents were probably waiting. If they could have traveled in a straight line, it would only take about eight seconds to sprint that distance. They were so close, and yet Yuuma couldn’t

even see their faces, let alone hear their voices...

Yuuma felt his eyes start to sting. He was resisting the urge to cry when he suddenly heard a small sniffing noise coming from somewhere nearby.

Looking up, he saw that it was Tomori. She had her head hung low as teardrops fell from her eyes and landed on the lenses of her eyeglasses. Yuuma couldn't blame her—how could he? Tomori was so calm and levelheaded that sometimes it was difficult to believe that she was the same age as the rest of them. Yuuma naturally found himself relying on her composure. But Tomori was also a newcomer to RPGs. Battling vicious monsters must have been particularly terrifying for her.

"Shimizu...", Kenk said as he scooted forward. After all, he was the one who had made Tomori cry in the first place. "I know it's easy to make promises and all, but I...we are gonna make sure you get out of here. We just need your help... for a little while longer."

"...Okay...", Tomori answered briefly, her voice still teary.

Nagi handed her a white handkerchief.

After the five party members had double-checked their equipment and potions, they opened the sliding door and cautiously exited the small room.

As they had expected, the room turned out to be located at the center of Playroom 02. In other words, Yuuma and the others had apparated into a small round room located inside the giant shaft that ran vertically through the center of Althea.

They ought to have woken up inside the same Calculus capsules they had used to dive into *AM* in the first place, just like they had after being logged out following the playtest. So then why had they appeared inside the shaft instead? And more importantly, why hadn't they been able to log out from their menu windows...?

Yuuma was still trying to make sense of the matter when Sawa, now dressed in her windbreaker again instead of Mage robes, poked him in the back to get his attention.

"Hey, Yu, why don't we check out the Calculus capsules one more time?"

“You mean the ones we used to dive in?”

“Yeah. Niki said that if he had any messages for us, he’d leave them there.”

“Oh, I forgot about that... Let’s do it.”

Yuuma nodded, and the five climbed down the south-facing stairway leading to the playroom’s interior walkway. They followed the walkway clockwise, heading toward the playroom’s northwest quadrant.

They remained on full alert as they traversed the dim walkway, which was lined on either side with tightly packed Calculus capsules. They arrived at their destination about half a minute later without encountering any more Conehead Demolishers or similar monsters.

The sight that awaited them, however, was entirely unexpected.

“Wh-what’s the meaning of this...?” said Kenk, his voice cracking.

The four Calculus capsules that Yuuma, Sawa, Kenk, and Tomori had used to dive into *Actual Magic* had been utterly destroyed.

There hadn’t been a single scratch on the virgin white surface of the capsules five and a half hours earlier; Yuuma was sure of it. Now, however, there were massive gouges in their sides, and shredded cables and exposed circuit boards crackled intermittently with sparks. The hydraulic fluid that dripped onto the ramps, from the cracks in the undersides of the capsules, looked almost like blood.

Yuuma stared in shock for at least five seconds before finally coming back to his senses and adjusting his grip on the steel bar that he was using as a weapon. It was hard to believe that damage like this could have been caused by anything other than a sizable monster. Kenk also readied his hammer, while the three girls pressed their backs together and peered around the room cautiously.

They looked everywhere, from the darkness beneath the Calculus capsules and shadows skirting the floor, all the way up to the ceiling above, but there were no signs of any monsters in hiding. Maybe whatever monster had been here had realized there was no longer any prey to be found and had moved on elsewhere.

Yuuma relaxed slightly. “Maybe this is why we weren’t able to log out...”

“That would make sense...” Sawa nodded. Her face seemed serious. “When we dive into *AM*, the capsules remain in use even though our bodies disappear from inside them. Apparently...if the capsule gets damaged during that time, we won’t be able to use our menus to log out.”

“We can still log out using the system console...but we’ll appear inside that shaft instead...”

Yuuma trailed off as something new occurred to him. He glanced at Nagi.

“Oh...! That might also explain why you weren’t able to log out on your own. Maybe your *Calculus* got damaged.”

“But we saw the cryba— I mean, we saw Nagi’s *Calculus*, and it looked fine, didn’t it?” Kenk pointed out.

Nagi glared at Kenk as if she wanted to say something, but her face eventually softened, and she began murmuring aloud as she searched her memory.

“After the dragon boss was defeated during the playtest, the floor started glowing red and then everyone disappeared... I was falling through the light, and I remember seeing some sort of system message appear, but it was just for a split second. I think it said something about a connection or something, so maybe it was a connection error message...”

“Nagi, do you...”

*...remember anything after that?* Yuuma wanted to ask, but he swallowed the words.

Sawa said that Valac had spoken to her in her head and explained all sorts of things right after being logged out. Maybe the same thing had happened to Nagi... Maybe this new demon that was possessing Nagi, Crocell, was the reason that Nagi seemed to know about all the weird things happening at Althea without Yuuma and the others needing to explain. The demon might have given her that information.

Yuuma was interested to know exactly what Crocell might have said, but they didn’t really have time to get bogged down by details at the moment.

Nagi stared at Yuuma blankly, waiting for him to finish.

“Sorry, it can wait,” Yuuma said, giving his childhood friend a quick once-over.

There didn’t seem to be any horns growing out of her head. Due to her loose cardigan, Yuuma couldn’t really tell whether there were any wings on her back, but he obviously wasn’t going to frisk her to find out. He would just have to find a way to float the question later. He took another look at the four damaged Calculus capsules.

There was no sign of any notes. If a monster had come and destroyed the capsules after a note had been placed there, it might be lying ripped up on the ground somewhere, but searching around for something like that didn’t seem very feasible.

Either way, at least they had a theory now as to why they hadn’t been able to log out from their menu windows, and as to why Nagi had been left behind inside *AM*. The next time they dove in, they would need to find a way to protect the capsules, but that could wait until later.

The time now was 11:20 PM. If they hurried, they could probably be back at the shelter by 11:30.

Staying cautious, the five retraced their steps, carefully walking over the broken automatic door as they entered the elevator lobby.

The way the orange emergency lights reflected weakly off the cold, dark gray floor and walls of Althea reminded Yuuma of the dungeon back on Philos Island. They passed the silent elevators, avoiding scattered fragments of glass and metal, and headed toward the emergency stairwell at the other end of the lobby.

Yuuma opened the thick fire door and peered inside. The stairwell was almost entirely dark, and an incessant whooshing sound echoed from within. There were no signs of monsters inside the stairwell, either.

“Niki and Haizaki’s group fled just up these stairs, right...?” whispered Kenk.

Yuuma glanced up the stairway, which in theory would eventually lead to the fourth floor.



According to what Niki had said, during the initial chaos, fifteen students had split up from the rest of the group and fled upstairs, eventually arriving at a staff room located along the exterior perimeter of Althea's fourth floor. If Yuuma and the others climbed those stairs now, they could probably reach the other group in less than three minutes.

But there was a more than 0 percent possibility that monsters were roaming the fourth floor's elevator lobby or playroom. Niki should have delivered the food for them hours ago. He had probably returned to his shelter by now and let Haizaki and the others know how everyone on the first floor was doing.

"We should try and get ourselves better equipped in the real world before trying to make it to the fourth floor," Yuuma whispered to Kenk.

"Good thinking." Kenk nodded and adjusted the grip on his two-handed hammer.

Yuuma was about to ask to borrow Sawa's LED light, since the stairs here were so dark, when he suddenly remembered he didn't need it. He opened his own inventory, tapped the item labeled **Coldfire Lantern**, and then hit the button to remove it from storage.

As he did so, a tiny sound effect played, and the lantern appeared above his window. The design, however, had changed significantly from when he had used it inside *AM*. The casing was minimalist and looked like it was made out of titanium now, and the wind guard seemed to be made of reinforced glass—the light inside, however, was not an LED, as might be expected, but rather the same bluish-white magical flame as in *AM*.

This was like the opposite of what had happened when they had taken the bottles of table salt from the real world into *AM*, when the plastic lid had turned into cork. Yuuma was curious to see how other items had changed as well, but they definitely didn't have time for that now.

Yuuma held the lantern up high. Kenk didn't say anything, but his expression made it clear what he was thinking: *Thanks, buddy. What a great idea! And that new titanium casing is super cool, too, isn't it?*

They began to descend the stairs. Unlike an LED flashlight, which was made to create a focused stream of light, the coldfire lantern cast its glow evenly in a

360-degree radius. As a result, the light wasn't quite as bright, but it was still more than enough to spot any monsters. As they continued to climb down the stairs, the thought occurred to Yuuma that they should pick up similar lanterns for the shelter, in addition to food and crafting tools, the next time they visited Calcina. They reached the first floor without incident.

They opened the first-floor fire door and stepped out into the elevator lobby. It was just as unnervingly quiet here as everywhere else.

There was a small café space on the left side of the hall, but as of today's opening ceremony, the café hadn't yet been operational, so it was unlikely there would be any drinks, let alone food. That made it a low priority for searching. They skipped it for now, heading instead toward the main lobby to the right.

As they rounded the half-destroyed partition and stepped into the lobby, Yuuma almost expected to see a massive rescue squad breaking in through the main doors—of course, that was just wishful thinking.

The glass curtain wall to the south was just as dark as it had been earlier. Not a single star was visible through the glass. Yuuma strained to listen for sound, but all he could make out was a low, unidentifiable thrumming coming from somewhere far away.

Without a word, the five began moving again. The floor of the wide lobby still bore the residues of their fight with the Conehead Bruiser. They crossed the lobby and entered the waiting area, which featured rows of benches with comfortable backrests, before finally spotting the shopping area that served as Shelter Sugamo.

The simple barricade was still in place. At the very least, it didn't look as if any more monsters of the Conehead variety had shown up. They could see a few small lights flickering from within, but no voices managed to reach their ears.

"I guess everyone's asleep already..." Tomori whispered.

"We'll have to be careful not to wake them," Sawa whispered back.

Yuuma was suddenly overcome by a powerful sensation of drowsiness. He shook himself briskly to stay awake. Glancing to the side, he could see Kenk

blinking as well. His eyelids seemed heavy.

If Sugamo was still awake, they would probably have to make a report. If it was up to Yuuma, he would prefer to curl up in a ball in the corner and go straight to sleep. He swallowed back a yawn and returned the lantern to his inventory. They relied on emergency lights as they crossed the waiting area and slipped through a gap between the grated metal shutter and assorted display racks that made up the barricade— “Ashihara, you’re late!!”

Yuuma winced as the loud, angry voice invaded his ears.

Looking up, he saw another student leaning against the counter with his arms crossed in the back left corner of the room.

The student was standing directly underneath an emergency light. As a result, Yuuma could only make out the person’s sharp jawline and heavily waxed, over-styled hair. That was still enough for Yuuma to recognize who it was. It was the shelter’s leader and president of their sixth-grade class, Teruki Sugamo.

*Not now*, Yuuma groaned internally, glancing from side to side.

An open space, about seven meters wide and ten meters deep, had been created in the center of the room by pushing the display racks all the way back. Plastic picnic tarps were spread out at intervals along the floor, with students huddled around them in groups of three and four. A few were already sleeping, but most were awake. They turned their uneasy attention toward Yuuma and the others.

Yuuma slipped through the barricade, followed by Kenk, Sawa, Tomori, and finally Nagi. As Nagi stepped inside, the faces of most of the students who were still awake lit up.

“Sano!” several of the girls cried. Nagi smiled back at them, but Sugamo’s angry voice soon put a damper on everyone’s good mood.

“Ashihara, Kondou, do you have any idea what time it is?! It’s been six and a half hours since I sent you to look for food!!” Sugamo grasped his small metal mallet, rapped it on the counter, and then shook it in the air.

If Sugamo started another mock trial, Yuuma thought he might lose his mind. He quickly took a few steps forward. As a first step, he decided to apologize.

After all, it was true that they had come back late and caused everyone to worry.

“Sorry, Sug. We wanted to come back sooner, but a lot happened along the way...”

“A lot happened? You mean like searching for your little friend Sano? Don’t tell me you prioritized finding her over your mission, did you?!”

Of course not. Well, maybe. But even if they had, there was no reason for Sugamo to get so bent out of shape over it. After all, they had still secured food and arranged for it to be sent back to the shelter.

“I’m sorry we’re late, but you got the food we sent, didn’t you...?”

“.....The *what?*”

Sugamo squinted suspiciously before furrowing his brows even further.

“What in the heck are you talking about, Ashihara? We didn’t get any food!”

“B-but...what about Niki...?”

“Niki?! We don’t even know where he is, so how in the heck would he deliver any food?!”

“...”

Yuuma instinctively made eye contact with Kenk and Sawa.

A lot of unexpected things had happened at Althea today—in fact, pretty much everything had been unexpected. Countless unforeseen events could have happened to prevent Niki from reaching the shelter.

Whatever obstacle Niki had encountered, it might have had something to do with their Calculus capsules being destroyed. What if, worst-case scenario, Niki had tried to protect their capsules from something like a Conehead Demolisher all on his own and been seriously injured...or even...

Yuuma stopped himself from finishing that thought.

“We met Niki while we were out exploring. He said he’d kill two birds with one stone by delivering the food for us while also sharing information about the other group. But...if he never made it...then—”

“Just a second, Ashihara!” shouted Sugamo, interrupting Yuuma. “Are you stupid or something?! Are you really telling me that you handed Niki enough food for twenty people? Obviously he took it and ran!!”

“...”

Yuuma was once again left speechless. He wanted to yell back just as loud, but the words wouldn’t leave his mouth at first.

Kakeru Niki had saved Tomori back when she got bitten by the Barbed Wolf. It was a life-and-death situation. And not just Tomori. Without Niki’s help, they probably would have been killed by the Varanian Axbearer. All five of them owed Niki their lives.

Yuuma wanted to shout, *Niki is a hero! Where do you get off calling him a thief? What have you ever done for the class?!* Before he could, however, someone grabbed his left arm and pulled him back.

It was Sawa. She took Yuuma’s place as he stumbled to the side.

“Don’t worry,” she calmly told Sugamo. “We still have food.”

“Huh?!”

Sugamo furrowed his brow as Sawa opened her inventory and materialized a cloth bag packed full of onigiri and packaged baked goods. She set it on the floor and opened the bag wide so that everyone could see. The students, who had been watching anxiously, began to murmur among themselves.

“Here, guys. If you haven’t eaten yet...”

“No, we’ve eaten. Not much, obviously, but still,” someone said.

Yuuma glanced to the left.

Haruki Hokari, one half of the skateboarding duo who effectively served as the shelter’s sub-leaders, approached. His hair was shaved up high on the sides. The long-haired half of the duo, Takato Sera, followed.

Kenk, who was somewhat friendly with the two, took a step toward them. “You already ate...? Did you go looking for food, too, after we left?”

That would have been a reasonable explanation, but Hokari quickly shook his

head. “No, it’s just...it’s a little hard to explain.”

Yuuma had almost forgotten. Before giving Niki the food, Tomori had mentioned how she had seen a special effect in the eat-in corner. It looked like Sugamo was putting something, possibly food, into his inventory.

In response, Yuuma had said that he doubted Sugamo would do anything so risky, and that even if he did, it would be difficult to produce the food again afterward. Perhaps Yuuma had been wrong on both accounts. From what Hokari said, it sounded as if Sugamo really had stolen the food, just to give it straight back.

But if so, how did he manage to get away with it? Yuuma waited for Hokari to continue.

However.

Instead of turning toward Sugamo, who still sat against the counter, Hokari turned to stare at a patch of darkness in front and a little to the side of the counter.

Yuuma hadn’t noticed earlier, due to the shadows from the cash register, but a boy was sitting there quietly on both knees. He looked browbeaten. Yuuma couldn’t make out his face, since he was slumped down low, but judging from his small, skinny frame and his curly hair, which was just a little too long, he appeared to be Sugamo’s friend—or maybe “lackey” would be a better description—Kai Kisanuki.

What was Kisanuki doing on the floor like that? There were also dark spots all around the collar of his white shirt. They looked like they might be blood.

“What did you do to Kisanuki?” asked Tomori, stepping forward to stand next to Sawa. There was a firm edge to her voice.

Hokari seemed to hesitate. His friend, Sera, stepped forward and answered in his place.

“Kisanuki...stole a bunch of donuts and cakes from the eat-in corner.”

“...!!”

Tomori and Yuuma both inhaled sharply.

Sera didn't acknowledge their reaction. He continued his explanation in a matter-of-fact tone.

"It was about two hours after you all left... Everyone was starting to feel hungry and on edge, when Sugamo discovered Kisanuki hiding out by one of the shelves eating a donut all by himself. Once we dragged him out of there, he admitted that he had gone into the eat-in corner when we first arrived, had hidden all the food, and then had moved it into his inventory later."

"But...!"

Tomori started to speak up, but Yuuma grabbed her wrist from behind and squeezed.

Even if Tomori came forward now and said it had been Sugamo who had hidden the food, it wasn't like they had any proof. Since Kisanuki had already confessed, there wasn't much they could do. And besides, if Tomori wasn't careful, she might wind up the new scapegoat.

Yuuma felt some of the tension leave Tomori's arm. He released his hand.

Sawa spoke in Tomori's place. Her voice was controlled but as cold as ice.

"Why is Kisanuki injured? What happened?"

"I...hit him..." came a low, gravelly voice.

It was Youichi Oono. He stepped out from behind Hokari and Sera, then glanced at Kisanuki before averting his eyes and continuing.

"I shouldn't have, I know. I'm a hundred percent in the wrong for that, and if I need to be punished, I'll accept whatever's coming. It's just—everyone was trying not to complain and press on through the hunger, while Kisanuki... He had more than forty donuts and scones and stuff...all for himself..."

Oono clenched his fists. Sera patted him on the shoulder.

"Anyway," Sera added, "Sugamo apologized and said he felt like he was partially responsible for not noticing what Kisanuki had done, and then he passed out something to eat for everyone but himself and Kisanuki. So that's where the food came from. I don't know if something happened to Niki to prevent him from coming, or if he just swiped your food, but you shouldn't

blame yourselves... We were just worried because you were late.”

It was nice of Sera to say that, but Yuuma was still focused on how angry he was at Sugamo.

*So we're supposed to buy that Kai Kisanuki had swiped forty donuts or whatever from the eat-in corner without anyone noticing? And that Sugamo just happened to catch him in the act? And he was noble enough to take part of the blame? Seriously...?*

No way that had happened. Tomori had seen someone in the eat-in corner, yes, but it wasn't Kisanuki. It was Sugamo.

Sugamo had probably used the trade function to transfer food from his own inventory directly into Kisanuki's and then ordered Kisanuki to hide in a corner and eat a piece of the food. That gave Sugamo the perfect opportunity to make a show of stumbling upon the scene, letting him paint Kisanuki as the sole culprit while also taking fake responsibility, thus setting himself up to look like a fair and just leader.

It was like those people who start fires just to get the credit for putting them out. Sugamo probably had plenty of donuts for himself in his inventory. There wasn't a doubt in Yuuma's mind.

He still had unanswered questions, however.

For instance, why would Kisanuki be so willing to do whatever Sugamo said? This went beyond normal lackeyism. Sugamo was treating him almost like a servant... No, worse than that. Servants weren't disposable.

Yuuma turned his gaze toward Kisanuki, who was still kneeling on the floor. Kisanuki remained motionless, his head hung low. Yuuma could only guess what Kisanuki was feeling.

Glancing up and to the left, Yuuma spotted Sugamo, who was still sitting against the counter.

Sugamo returned Yuuma's gaze. There was a piercing gleam in his eye... Almost as if he was saying, *I know that you know*.

Sugamo suddenly jumped off the counter and strode toward Yuuma. He



glanced down at the food Sawa had materialized and then snorted.

“You did your jobs, I’ll give you that. But don’t think this one time clears you of your responsibility for Moro’s death, Ashihara.”

“Sug, you sonofa...”

Kenk took a step toward Sugamo, but Yuuma grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back. Yuuma stepped forward in Kenk’s place and glared briefly into Sugamo’s eyes, which were located about ten centimeters higher than his own.

“Of course...we’ll go get even more food tomorrow. But make sure you protect everyone while we’re gone, Sug. I don’t know what I might do if I find you hiding in a corner again, like you did back when the caterpillars attacked.”

“...”

Sugamo’s eyes seemed to glow faintly blue.

The corners of his lips formed a crooked smile. “Watch it, Ashihara,” he whispered softly in Yuuma’s ear so that only the two of them could hear. “I can have you found guilty again, at any time I feel like it.”

Sugamo turned and walked toward the counter again. Once he was standing before it, he faced the crowd.

“Everybody, listen up!”

Sugamo waited for all the students, except Kisanuki, to turn their eyes toward him, and then he began speaking in a clear but quiet voice.

“It’s been a tough day. Miura and Moro are both dead, something terrible has happened to Sumika, and we still don’t know what’s happened to Althea. But as long as we do our best to make this shelter work, help is bound to come. Soon, I believe. Tomorrow, the day after...in three days, at the latest. So let’s not slack off until then!”

For a moment, no one said anything.

Eventually, pockets of subdued applause broke out across the room. The applause lasted for over ten seconds.

The students voted to wait until tomorrow morning to distribute the food that Sawa had materialized, and to entrust Sugamo to guard the food for them until then. They began getting ready for bed, congregating in pockets around the room.

They didn't have any bedding, but the display racks had been lined with multiple souvenirs, including large bath towels and decorative cushions, which they spread out now to create sleeping surfaces. The largest of the boys also began working on blocking off the openings in the barricade at the entrance.

Yuuma added bedding to his mental list of things to buy from Calcina, as he watched the other students prepare for sleep. As soon as Sugamo went to the back room area to use the bathroom, Yuuma approached Aria Misono, who was getting a single sleeping space ready for herself in a corner of the shelter.

"Misono."

Aria glanced at him briefly before replying bluntly. "What?"

"Um, you don't have to answer this if you don't want to...", Yuuma began, lowering his voice as much as possible, "but do you really think that Kisanuki stole that food?"

"You're right, I don't want to answer that," she said immediately.

She began removing the hairpins that secured her bangs, studiously refusing to make eye contact with Yuuma.

Yuuma had been expecting to get the cold shoulder. Instead of getting discouraged, however, he asked his next question.

"Why do you think Kisanuki is *friends* with Sugamo?" he asked, putting a peculiar emphasis on the word *friends*.

Aria froze for a moment before sighing in frustration.

Yuuma thought she was just going to ignore him again, but eventually she began speaking in a quiet, husky voice.

"Kisanuki's father works at Ruki's dad's company... You can probably figure out the rest."

"..."

Yuuma hadn't been expecting that response. It was certainly more convincing than if she had just said something like, "Because they *are* friends."

Yuuma had been in the same class as Sugamo since first grade, so he knew Sugamo's dad was the president of some company, but Kisanuki had only transferred to their school in fourth grade. Yuuma had barely spent any time with him, so naturally he didn't know that Kisanuki's dad also worked at Sugamo's dad's company.

Was Kisanuki just going along with whatever the president's little brat said, in order to protect his dad's job? Maybe his dad had even told him to. As a kid... that would have to feel pretty unfair.

Kisanuki had been allowed to move from his spot by this point and was now spreading out a thin picnic sheet on the other side of the room. Yuuma stared at him silently.

"Of course, I'm in more or less the same position," Aria muttered softly.

"Hmm...?"

"My dad runs a small company, too... It's a subcontractor for Ruki's dad's company."

"I see... Is that why you're friends with Sugamo, Mibs? Because of your dad...?"

Aria glared at him. Yuuma thought it was because he had called her Mibs, but apparently that hadn't been the reason.

"No. I hang out with Ruki...I mean Teruki...because I want to," she insisted. She stared at the hairpins she had collected in her hand as she continued. "Really...he's not such a bad guy. He can even be kind sometimes. But ever since he lost that election for school council, little by little..."

Aria trailed off. Yuuma didn't know what else to say.

It was true. Sugamo had run for student council president in February of that year but had received fewer votes than both Shin Haizaki and Kakeru Niki. And he hadn't come anywhere close to Haizaki.

As far as Yuuma could tell, Sugamo's personality hadn't particularly changed

afterward. Yes, he had started acting full of himself once he was appointed class president, but he had still done his job well. No one was closer to Sugamo than Aria was, though. If she said something had changed, then there had to be something that Yuuma was missing...

“Hey, Yu...,” Aria said suddenly.

She hadn’t called him Yu in years, not since they were little.

Yuuma straightened up. “Y-yeah?”

Aria didn’t seem to notice that she had just called him Yu. She clutched the hairpins firmly in her hand and lifted her face toward him.

Unfortunately, Yuuma didn’t hear the words that came out of Aria’s mouth.

*Bwaaam!* Just then, a giant explosion rang out, and the barricade at the entrance suddenly collapsed—no, flew—inward.

“Urrkk!”

“Arghh!”

Two deep-voiced screams filled the air. It was Oono and Sera. They had been in the process of lifting up the barrier and were now pinned underneath the parts that had fallen over. Both of their HP bars visibly decreased, although the damage wasn’t enough to be life-threatening.

Aria let go of her hairpins. Yuuma caught them in midair, placed them back into her hand, and began shouting.

“Mibs, get everyone to the back room! Kenk, come with me!”

Aria nodded, without a word, and started ushering the girls who were sitting on the floor onto their feet. The students who could still move screamed as they raced toward the back of the shelter, but most of the students had apparently already started to drift off and didn’t immediately understand what was happening.

Standing at the center of the shelter, Yuuma drew the iron bar thrust into his belt and gripped it firmly in his fingerless gloves.

The only explanation Yuuma could think of was that they were under attack

by another monster like the Conehead Bruiser. When Yuuma and the others had passed through the lobby earlier, however, there had been no signs of any living creatures.

Maybe another monster had suddenly been created from fused adults, just like the Conehead Demolisher. Yuuma hadn't spotted any survivors, though...

Kenk raced to Yuuma's side, silently readying his Bruising Hammer.

The other students hadn't finished evacuating. Oono and Sera had been knocked clear across the room and were struggling to free themselves from underneath the debris from the barricade, and the largest of the girls, Shouko Ezato, had apparently collapsed in a panic. Aria was desperately trying to pull her to her feet.

They had no choice. They would have to head outside and fight the creature in the waiting area, even though the bigger space would give a larger monster the advantage.

Yuuma was about to tell Kenk his plan—when suddenly, two humanoid-shaped shadows slipped in silently through a gap in the remnants of the barricade.

This wasn't the large monster that Yuuma had been expecting. Their enemies were human, or possibly demi-human. They also weren't much taller than Yuuma. If they were humans, they would have to be children. If they were demi-humans, something like halflings.

The reason that Yuuma couldn't tell which was because both figures were wearing outfits that concealed them from head to toe.

A black, military-style jacket and black, military-style pants, with metallic armor covering their shoulders, chests, and legs from the knees downward. Their heads were also covered in full-faced helmets, which also looked to be made of metal and featured a design reminiscent of wolves' heads.

As Yuuma stared at the two, HP bars appeared above their heads.

For some reason, however, their names were garbled and unreadable. One thing he did understand after looking at their HP bars was that they were under the effect of some sort of potion-based buff.

The two turned their eyes toward Yuuma and Kenk, raising the swords in their right hands aloft.

The points of their swords were flat, and the blades were fairly thick. At a glance, they were actually similar to Yuuma's own steel bar. Unlike his makeshift weapon, however, their two swords had been affixed with proper hilts.

As a small blessing, neither of the two looked to be a magic user.

Yuuma glanced briefly to the side, making eye contact with Sawa, who stood next to Nagi, a little farther back and to the right.

*If they attack, don't hesitate*, he willed, relying on their special bond as twins to deliver the message.

Yuuma turned his full attention back to the two figures in black.

To his left, Aria had finally managed to get Shouko to her feet and was lending her a shoulder as she attempted to usher her away.

Oono and Sera had also crawled out from underneath the barricade and were wielding metal pipes, which had probably originally been support props for the racks.

Only four of the students present—Yuuma, Sawa, Tomori, and Kenk—had experienced real combat thus far, but everyone had upgraded their class. Even if these two enemies rivaled the Varanians in power, there was no way they would be tough enough to take on all twenty students in the shelter.

"Who—?" Yuuma began to ask, when suddenly...

Another shadowy figure slipped through the barricade.

This one was also about the height of a child. Their equipment looked mostly the same, but instead of a jacket, they wore a collared short coat, and their wolf mask was also a size larger. Just like the others, the HP bar above this enemy's head was garbled.

This figure did not carry a sword, but they did wear a pair of thick gloves. The backs of them were embedded with green gemstones that glimmered beneath the emergency lights.

Now they were in trouble. Those gloves were magical amplifiers, like a wand or a staff.

“Kenk, that one’s a Mage!” Yuuma shouted, racing forward.

Instantly, the third wolf-head figure raised their left hand into the air.

*“Ventus!!”*

The voice was metallic and warped, as if a digital filter had been applied. A ball of yellowish green light appeared before the person’s hand.

As Yuuma swung downward with his steel bar, the black-clad figure standing to the left blocked with their flat sword. Yuuma’s steel bar crimped backward with a sad clang, bending nearly twenty degrees.

*If only I had my Darkiron Shortsword!*

Unfortunately, the sword was stuck inside his inventory. Their only hope now was Kenk’s Bruising Hammer.

“Hyargh!”

Kenk swung his hammer downward. The black-clad figure to the right, however, assumed a full guard stance and intercepted the blow with the tip of their sword. Kenk was level 12—no, level 13 now that they had defeated Constable Oeben—and he had swung with all his might. There was a booming crash, and sparks flew...but the enemy’s sword somehow managed to withstand the blow.

*“Tempestas!!”*

Still protected by the two swordfighters, the Mage chanted the form word of power. He appeared to be casting a mid-level, wind-element attack spell.

Sawa was already chanting her own spell from behind, and Tomori and Nagi had also started chanting defense spells. Oono and Sera approached on the left, brandishing their pipes.

But it didn’t look like they would make it in time.

Yuuma and Kenk struggled, their weapons crossed with the enemies’. The Mage in the wolf mask seemed to almost sneer at them as he chanted the final

word of activation.

*“Detergeo!!”*

The two guards instantly crouched down without telegraphing the move.

Yuuma and Kenk each stumbled forward a step, suddenly caught off balance, only to be confronted by a whirling vortex of green light—the whirlwind transformed into a powerful gust of air and accelerated forward.

The spell exploded with incredible force. It was like a bomb had gone off inside the shelter. This was Yuuma’s first time seeing it, but he was pretty sure this was the AoE wind spell, Air Blast.

Kenk, Oono, Sera, Aria, and Shouko were blasted in different directions.

*“Argghh!!”*

Yuuma screamed pathetically as he was lifted helplessly into the air. He spun sideways, like a boomerang, before hitting the ceiling, bouncing off, and crashing into one of the display racks. His HP bar staggered downward.

The range of the spell was incredibly wide, knocking over every display rack in the shelter and even reaching behind the back counter. Out of the corner of his eye, Yuuma could see that even Sawa, Tomori, and Nagi, who were all the way back by the counter, had been knocked off their feet.

A moment later, Yuuma landed on the floor on his right shoulder. His HP depleted by another notch, and a spinning star symbol appeared underneath his HP bar. He was Stunned.

That single spell had knocked out not only Yuuma but every other student in the shelter. The Air Blast spell focused less on direct damage and more on immobilizing targets within its AoE. There were probably no casualties from the spell—at least, Yuuma hoped not. But they were going to be forced to skip a turn, and the enemy was hardly going to stand by and do nothing during that time.

Just as Yuuma thought, the Mage stepped forward as his two guards stepped back. He raised both hands into the air.

*“Ventus!”*



He chanted the element word for *wind* again. A ball of green light appeared before his left hand.

*“Terra!”*

That was the element word for *earth*. A ball of brown light appeared before his right hand.

*No way.*

Magic was supposed to be cast in order. You chanted the element word of power, followed by the form, followed by activation. Otherwise, your casting resulted in spell failure, and the magic sputtered out in a wisp of smoke.

Casting two elements at once was only supposed to be possible for high-level Mages who had acquired the advanced magic skill Doublecast. There was no way any player in *Actual Magic* had reached that level yet. The playtest had started only twelve hours ago.

And yet the Mage in the wolf mask kept on calmly chanting.

*“Flatus!”*

The green ball of light transformed into a gently spinning orb of wind.

*“Nubes!”*

The brown ball of light turned into an orb of mist. It frothed, as if alive.

Instinctively, Yuuma realized what the Mage was planning to do.

*Crap. Crap, crap, crap! This is bad!*

*“Every...body...run...”*

Yuuma tried to warn the others, but he was too stunned to speak properly. They were probably all stunned as well.

He only had to move his left hand and his mouth a tiny amount in order to summon his trump card, Sumika Watamaki, but there were reasons he couldn't do that right now.

Meanwhile, it was only 11:58 PM. They still had a hundred and eighty seconds left until Sawa could summon Valac once more. That may as well have been an

eternity under the circumstances.

*“Anhelo!”*

The Mage had just finished casting the Billowing Breeze spell. All the spell did was create a gentle, fanning breeze, with zero attack power. When used in combination with other spells, however, it could create devastating effects.

The Mage chanted his second word of activation.

*“Petrifica!”*

The mist changed from brown to dark gray—the Petrify spell.

The petrifying gray mist began to waft throughout the room, carried by the magical green breeze. This was the power of Doublecast.

Usually, the Petrify spell could only create a small cloud of petrifying mist immediately in front of the caster’s own hand. It had practically zero range.

By combining it with the Billowing Breeze spell, however, the Mage in the wolf mask had increased both Petrify’s range and area of effect exponentially.

Oono and Sera, who were currently closest to the Mage, were first to be hit by the spell’s effect.

“Nr...agghh!”

“St-stop! Don’t...!”

Too stunned to move, the pair protested weakly. There was a terrible, stiff cracking noise as their bodies began to turn to stone, starting from their extremities.

Aria and Shouko were hit by the mist next.

“N-no...!”

Shouko let out a scream and tried to bat the mist away, but her legs were already beginning to turn.

Aria, meanwhile, turned toward Yuuma, reaching out to him silently with her right hand. Yuuma wished he could take it, but she was nearly five meters away.

The gray mist hung low to the ground as it billowed across the room,

swallowing up one student after the next. The air was full of weak cries and the ruthless sound of flesh turning to stone.

At last, the mist reached Yuuma.

He stared in bewilderment as the mist billowed at his toes. “Why...?” he muttered.

Not, why were they attacking? Or, why was this Mage able to use the Doublecast skill? Yuuma’s confusion lay elsewhere.

According to the guidebook, the chance of Petrify successfully turning someone to stone varied greatly depending on the density of the mist and the skill level of the caster. Yuuma doubted the caster could have reached mastery level in earth magic in just twelve hours, and the density of the mist should have been fairly low by now since it had already been spread thin by the Billowing Breeze spell.

The chance of success should have been something like less than 30 percent for Sera and Oono, less than 10 for Aria and Shouko—and less than 1 percent for himself.

But each and every student began to turn to stone the instant the mist touched them. The idea of a Petrify spell that was 100 percent effective and that reached over ten meters away was so busted that the word *cheat* didn’t even do it justice. This was totally OP.

*OP...*

Yuuma remembered having a similar thought earlier. He could hear someone speaking. The memory tugged at the back of his mind.

*“To put it in terms from these games you children so love, you can think of it as a buff to her magic skill.”*

Valac had said that. Yuuma remembered thinking at the time that something like that would be “ridiculously OP.”

Crocell, the demon possessing Nagi, could fire off spells without verbal components or cooldowns. That was also massively OP. Rapid-fire spells must have been Crocell’s power.

And the Mage in the wolf mask?

He was able to cast the Petrify spell, something that ought to have had about a 1 percent chance of success, with 100 percent guaranteed success instead.

If this was another *vires*, another power—that meant there was probably another demon inside that Mage.

What was it that Tomori had said, about Solomon's demons? That there were seventy-two of them?

If that was true...Yuuma doubted that Sawa, Nagi, and the Mage in the wolf mask were the only ones under demon possession.

All of them had probably been possessed. Every single surviving student in their class. Sugamo, Kenk, Tomori—even Yuuma himself.

Yuuma could hear that cracking noise as his body began to turn to stone. At some point, a gray, humanoid-shaped symbol had appeared beneath his HP bar.

He heard Tomori desperately chanting the Holy Purification spell behind him. Unfortunately, it wasn't going to help. Holy Purification didn't work on petrification; she would need the much more powerful Exorcism spell or the specialized Remove Petrification spell, neither of which she had yet.

Petrification could also be healed with a special item, but Yuuma doubted he would just happen to have one on hand. Even if he did, by the time he opened his inventory, materialized the item, and tried to use it on himself, it would already be too late.

If he could at least remember the item's name, though, he might be able to tell the others about it. If just one of them got away and managed to find it, they might be able to use it on Yuuma and the others later.

Yuuma was pretty sure it was some kind of needle. Not a Gold Needle, which showed up in so many other RPGs. It was something with a more gemstone-like name.

*It's no good; the petrification is almost at my chest. In a few seconds, I won't even be able to speak anymore...*

Just then, he remembered an item name he had seen recently. The memory

hit him like a bolt of lightning.

Yes, some sort of needle. He had picked it up recently. Not during the fight with the Conehead Bruiser or with the Varanian Axbearer... It had been with Oeben. Constable Oeben. The villain who said he was going to cook and eat Nagi, the one Yuuma couldn't help but feel a little sorry for in the end. He had dropped his hat, his belt—and something else. Something called the Tenderizing Needle of Human Transformation.

That definitely didn't sound like any sort of gemstone. It must have been what the Varanian had used to transform into human shape. If you stuck other monsters with it, they would probably transform into people, too. Yuuma was already human, though, and turning into a human didn't seem to have anything to do with petrification...

*No, wait.*

Oeben's transformation hadn't been a simple status effect; it had been plot-based.

In RPGs, the plot was some of the strongest magic available. It could bring characters back to life under impossible situations or even prevent other characters from returning despite having revives conveniently on hand. It was the power of a cutscene.

What if, *just maybe*, Oeben's "human transformation" was an *overriding* status effect, which *canceled out other status effects*?

*Agh, even if it is, it's too late to—!*

.....*Yuuma.*

.....*Have you forgotten?*

Yuuma could have sworn he suddenly heard someone speaking.

Of course—this was what had happened before. He knew he was out of time. He had been stuck in a desperate situation, trapped up to his waist in the Conehead Bruiser's mouth and seconds away from being bitten in two, when he had somehow managed to carry out two actions at once—readjusting the bar in the monster's teeth and summoning Sumika.

This had to be Yuuma's—or rather, the demon inside Yuuma's—vires.

Quick Action.

“Ah...!”

Yuuma gritted his teeth and opened his menu with his right hand.

The petrification had already reached to just below his armpit; he had only three seconds to make this work.

He scrolled through his storage faster than ever before, tapping on the Tenderizing Needle of Human Transformation. He selected **Materialize** from the submenu. The needle, hideous in design, appeared, and he grabbed it between his fingers.

It was too late. He could feel the Mage's eyes upon him.

“Ah... Ahhhhh!”

Somehow, Yuuma's mouth was still able to move, and he screamed.

The world turned pale blue. Everything stopped. Even the petrification creeping up his right arm stalled, just above the elbow.

A low din, like infinitely frozen interlocking gears, filled the air. Within that stillness, Yuuma summoned every ounce of will, managing to move his right hand just far enough to stick himself in the left arm with the needle.

A strange sensation filled Yuuma, like his muscles and even his bones were turning into jelly. His body, which should have been stone, began to tremble like slime.

The petrification symbol beneath Yuuma's HP bar was overwritten with the double-silhouette transformation symbol he had seen earlier.

A moment later, the jelly-like sensation disappeared as if it had never happened. The needle must have momentarily transformed Yuuma's body into jelly and then re-created him as human, consuming the petrification status in the process.

Either way, he could move again—now was his chance!

Yuuma had been knocked down earlier and was now lying face up. He leaped

to his feet and dashed forward.

As he ran, Yuuma materialized another object from his inventory. It was a four-centimeter-thick, fifty-centimeter-long silver chain—the fragment of the cleansing steel chain that had sealed the door to the dungeon underneath Philos Island.

Since it wasn't a weapon, Yuuma could still materialize it here in the real world. Despite not being a weapon, however, it was still harder and more durable than the weapons the enemies wielded.

The duo in black noticed Yuuma's approach. They raised their blocky swords.

“Hyarggh!”

With a scream of rage, Yuuma swung his chain at the guard on the left.

The guard's thick sword, which had managed to rebuff even Kenk's hammer, crumbled against the cleansing steel chain like plywood. The chain carried through, striking the guard on their left shoulder.

The black-clad guard on the right raced forward to swing at Yuuma, not even sparing a second glance for his friend who had been knocked to the ground. Yuuma was wide open; it was too late to defend or dodge. However...

*Creeaaak.* There was a noise, like gears grinding to a stop, as the world came to a halt again.

The only one still moving in the blue space was Yuuma. He turned to the right and raised his chain into the air again.

As Yuuma swung his chain, the world returned. His opponent, who likely had no idea what had just happened, was unable to avoid the chain as it swept down directly from overhead, striking him in the side of the neck and knocking him head over heels.

Behind him, the Mage in the wolf mask extended his left hand. He was probably planning on canceling his wind spell and intercepting Yuuma with a different spell...

*Wait, no.*

That left hand had been a bluff. The Mage's right hand flashed like lightning as

he drew a longsword from inside his coat.

“Hyah!”

With a spirited cry, the Mage thrust straight forward with his sword. The point was sharp enough to pierce Yuuma’s heart. Under normal circumstances, Yuuma wouldn’t have been able to avoid an attack like that.

However, Yuuma twisted his body to the right while activating his vires. While the world was still stopped, he dodged to the right once more, using Quick Action to evade twice in a row.

The wolf Mage, or rather magic knight, had put all his strength into the thrust, since missing seemed impossible. When Yuuma somehow managed to dodge instead, the Mage lost his balance.

Yuuma swung with his right fist, gripping the chain tightly and aiming for the magic knight’s head, which was still hidden entirely beneath the wolf mask.

The left half of the mask broke, and the magic knight was sent flying backward more than three meters, landing face up on the ground.

All was silent.

The chain wrapped around Yuuma’s hand made a slinking noise as he let it go slack.

Yuuma straightened up slowly as he stared into the magic knight’s now half-exposed face.

“How could you...Niki?!”

**(TO BE CONTINUED)**





# Yukihana Elementary School Class 6-1 Roll Sheet

Ver. 1.2

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	Warrior	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.



# Afterword

To all of you out there thinking, “Boy, this author sure does love making people get whipped with chains!” (and also to those of you who aren’t thinking that): Hello, it’s me. Reki Kawahara. Thank for reading *Demons’ Crest*, Volume 2: *Otherworld Manifestation*.

(Beware, the following paragraphs contain spoilers.)

Unlike Volume 1, *Reality Erosion*, which focused mainly on Yuuma and his friends’ battles inside Althea, in the real world, this volume was mainly set in the VRMMORPG, *Actual Magic* (hereafter referred to as *AM*).

Since Althea is so dark, cramped, and brutal, I would have preferred to offer up a nice, fun adventure while in the bright and sprawling world of *AM*...but such was not to be the case (LOL). However, I hope it still gave you a good glimpse into both the world and its game system. The game is mostly based on a skill level system, which is also featured in another one of my works you might be familiar with, *SAO*. Unlike *SAO*, however, *AM* also has character classes. Expect some of the classes that haven’t appeared yet, such as Thief, Hunter, and Merchant, to make bigger contributions in the next volume.

This volume also gave better insight into the “demons” mentioned in the series title. The demons possessing Sawa (Valac) and Nagi (Crocell) sure seem awfully reasonable and open to communication. Even I was kind of thrown for a loop by this while I was writing them (LOL). But don’t worry, much scarier demons will be showing up before long!

As for Nagi, it really came down to the wire as to whether or not they were going to be able to rescue her before Volume 2 ended, but I'm relieved to say they managed it in the end. But Nagi was originally the Priest in their four-person party. Tomori worked hard to fill in for Nagi while Nagi was gone, but now that she's back, what will Yuuma do...? It's a pretty common situation, even in real-world MMOs, but hopefully everything will work out for the best.

Additionally, those of you also reading the webtoon (which is being simultaneously published) might be surprised at how many differences there are between the webtoon and this volume. But remember, the webtoon isn't a comic adaptation of the novel. They are separate stories based on the plot I developed in advance. The novel version strives to be interesting in ways that only the printed word can be, while the webtoon strives to be interesting in ways that are unique to vertically scrolling comics, so I hope readers can enjoy both in their own right.

Finally, I would like to apologize from the bottom of my heart to the illustrator, Yukiko Horiguchi, to my editors, Miki and Adachi, and to all those who have worked so hard on publishing this novel, whom I know have all been pushed beyond the limits of human endurance. I am truly, deeply sorry, and I promise to...um...try harder next time!

**Reki Kawahara**

**May 2023**

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