

# 1

## HOTFIXED



IT WAS TWO O'CLOCK, AND CONNOR'S virtual classroom was facing its thirty-third earthquake. Or was it the forty-third?

“Ahh! The sky is falling!”

“The ground is shaking!”

“NOT AGAIN!”

There were loud scrapes of pixels on pixels. Chalk items sprang from their holders. So did pencil and pen items, and the huge textbooks Ms. Vickers preferred.

They were war weapons now.

*Bang.*

Connor dived beneath his seat, just ahead of his anvil-sized poem book. Lisa was already crouched. Connor's classmate and second-best friend had turned their two desks into a fortress.

"Move over," Connor hissed.

"Move yourself," said Lisa. "I'm Level 2. Unlike you, I actually need Hit Poin — AHHH!"

Lisa broke off in a wail. A huge object bounced sharply off the desks and vaulted back in the air. Connor watched as it zoomed toward the old-fashioned blackboard.

It was a text box.

*@Everyone*

**YOUR SERVER HAS BEEN UPDATED!**

VGL v1.5.123 is a "Hotfix" release, which means no restart required. You'll barely feel a thing!

Note: Floors equipped with carpets will no longer float, or explode, and Gymnasium C has its swimming pool back, though that toxic slime sure was exciting!

Additionally, fans of our Quest regions will be pleased to find an expanded roster of Sabertooth enemies. Keep farming those drops, kids! Do ignore the occasional helmet or hockey stick. We don't get it, either!

**Will this be the last emergency Hotfix?  
Heh. Maybe!**

**Until next ti**

*Thwack.*

There was a tinkle of breaking glass. The text box sailed through the wide classroom window.

“And stay out!” Ms. Vickers roared after it. She brandished her weapon: a long wooden ruler.

Everyone stared. The text box tumbled across the sharp rocks and sloping lawns of VGL campus. When it reached the eerie blue of Lake Blessed, the water formed a funnel and snatched it.

“Hmph!” Ms. Vickers said smugly.

Rose-colored light pulsed from her avatar.

Aura, Connor knew. He was shocked. Aura powers were highly advanced. So were teacher avatars, of course. They were technically superusers. But still, how had Ms. Vickers learned to manipulate aura? She wasn't a gamer. She hated technology!

Connor's classmates were just as amazed.

“Ms. Vickers did that? *Our* Ms. Vickers?”

“I forgot teachers have superpowers!”

“My teacher's a beast! What a smack!”



“DISRUPTIVE ... DELINQUENT ... DESTROYING!”

Ms. Vickers’s avatar shuddered with rage.

“And they call themselves programmers? *Well*, I have another D-word for *them!*”

The class drew in gasps.

“DETENTION!” roared Ms. Vickers. “I’d fire them all! Do you pave a highway at rush hour? Of course not! So why issue a Hotfix *that triggers earthquakes* during school hours? It boggles the mind. It boils the brain cells!”

“Are they brain cells or brain pixels?” someone whispered.

BANG. Ms. Vickers slapped the blackboard with her ruler.

“Eyes on me, class. I said, EYES ON ME!”

No one dared look away. Not even Connor.

“Let this be a warning,” huffed Ms. Vickers. “Further disruption will not be tolerated in this classroom ... from anyone! We have a special visitor arriving shortly. She will make this point abundantly clear. Things are changing at this school, believe you me.”

Ms. Vickers nodded to herself.

“Those Atensoft fools, did they think we teachers would sit idly by and allow such shenanigans? Think again! Things are changing indeed. They shall see soon enough!”

And with that, she launched into her lesson. For about five minutes, anyway. Then, as she turned to her trusty Capitals of the World poster – *Fzzz!* – the entire wall sprouted hockey masks.

“WHY IS IT ... ALWAYS ... SPORTS?!”

Ms. Vickers screamed as an assortment of sticks, gloves and pucks joined the fray. They appeared inside cabinets and cubbyholes, turning her prized classroom into what could only be described as a locker room.



WHILE MS. VICKERS THREW her thirty-third, but possibly forty-third, tantrum, Connor and Lisa traded dark looks.

“Two minutes between earthquakes,” Connor whispered.

Lisa thumbed the Vid-Screen in her lap. “They’re getting quicker,” she said. “We’re up to five in one period.”

“Five? Already?” Connor groaned. “Do you think we should ...?”

“*Someone* should.”

“But how do we ...?”

“Watch and learn,” Lisa replied. She waved to banish her Vid-Screen. Then, to Connor’s horror, she sprang to her feet.

“*Hem hem*,” she said loudly.

Every avatar turned.

## 2

# BREACH



**"HALL PASS?" SAID MS. VICKERS. SHE** stopped pacing the blackboard and turned to glare up the aisle.

"I-I have to use the bathroom," Lisa insisted. "It's an emergency."

The entire class stared in amazement. Connor especially! Hadn't he tried the same trick on Mr. Lively once? It had failed miserably then, and for a simple reason: there *were* no bathrooms at VGL. It was a virtual world!

Lisa obviously knew that. *Everyone* knew. What was she thinking?

Ms. Vickers massaged her sore head, looking rattled. “Bathroom,” she said distractedly, “Y-Yes, yes of course.” She motioned to the door.

Connor almost gasped. It was then he realized what Lisa had already guessed: the constant earthquakes had scrambled Ms. Vickers’s brain!

“Uh, I have to go too,” said Connor, leaping to his feet.

This was such a blatant lie, even Ms. Vickers might have objected. But at that moment, the ground shook again. Connor rushed to join Lisa at the door. Ms. Vickers waved them out with a yelp.



ONCE THEY ENTERED THE hallway, it was all business.

*Custodian* business.

“Which way?” Connor said urgently. “You’ve got the signal, right? You’re tracking it?”

“Almost,” said Lisa. Her fingers pinched, pulled and swiped at the Vid-Screen beside her. Scenes of Gage Woods and Lake Blessed came and went with small *pops* as Lisa slapped them away.

“Will you hurry up?” Connor said impatiently.



Lisa rolled her eyes. “What I’m doing is already amazing,” she sniffed. “Mr. Oldentone had full World Map access. I can only do regional search. And that’s *with* a top-level code exploi – TAHH!”

A sudden jolt sent them spinning into the air. Connor used his reflexes and nailed a two-footed landing. Lisa wasn’t so lucky.

BANG. She hit the floor like a poem book.

“Aftershocks, I always forget,” she grumbled.

Connor dragged her back up and summoned a Vid-Screen of his own. His eyes scanned the tiny, bright text.

**@Custodian: ALERT! BREACH DETECTED!**

**@Custodian: ALERT! BREACH DETECTED!**

**@Custodian: ALERT! HEY! HELLLLLLOOOO?**

The alerts ran for multiple pages.

*Yeah, yeah.* Connor sighed and swiped past them. He wasn’t surprised. His avatar was a Custodian, after all, one of the VGL world’s sworn protectors.

The Custodian role was amazing. It unlocked numerous spells and abilities, including the license to wield a Cleaning Weapon, which was a

lot cooler than it sounded. Sadly, the Custodian role came with its share of responsibilities too.

Chores, really.

Maintaining an elementary school inside a sprawling, monster-infested game world was no easy task. Custodians were the first line of defense. The school would crumble without them. Connor had seen glimpses of this already.

Buildings ravaged. Strange weather. Fiends sneaking into the hallways.

Connor might not have been the biggest fan of fourth grade, but he loved gaming, and he loved VGL. He'd met his two best friends in the virtual world. Together they'd gone on more adventures than he'd ever dreamed of offline.

He wasn't ready to stop.

If that meant a little extra work hunting fiends so his virtual school could run smoothly and avoid disconnection, so be it. He was happy to help.

Lisa triggered *Custodian's Ear*, her secret support ability, and read the messages too.

"We really need an adult," she sighed. "Someone like Mr. Oldentone, a *full-time* Custodian. He picked the wrong month to go missing. This is too much work for just students."

“We’re *fine*,” Connor insisted. “I’ve got my broom. I can handle a breach. Just tell me where to go.”

As if on cue, Lisa’s Vid-Screen beeped loudly. Her eyes flashed as bright as the minimap.

“Found it! Reptylvania!” she cried. “There’s a barrier breach by the — ugh, that absolute dork, I *told* him not to fight without backup!”

“Glitch is there? He’s in combat?” said Connor.

“Level 5,” Lisa sniffed. “Thinks he’s Superman.”

They both took off running.