

ONLINE!

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The Haunted School
and the Knight's Riddle



Midori Amagaeru
Illustration by
Shinichirou Otsuka

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JY
New York

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Midori Amagaeru

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ONLINE! Vol. 2 YUREI GAKKO TO NAZO NO KISHI ©Midori Amagaeru 2012

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First published in Japan in 2012 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

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First JY Edition: March 2024

Edited by Yen Press Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design: Eddy Mingki
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Amagaeru, Midori, author. | Ōtsuka, Shin'ichirō, illustrator. | Neal, John (Translator), translator.

Title: Online! / Midori Amagaeru ; illustration by Shinichirou Otsuka ; translated by John Thomas Neal.

Other titles: Clear fukano!?. English Description: First JY edition. | New York : JY, 2023. | Contents: v. 1. The Devil's Unbeatable Game! | Audience: Ages 8-12 | Audience: Grades 4-6

Identifiers: LCCN 2023043895 | ISBN 9781975378622 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388959 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388973 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975388997 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975389017 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Video games—Fiction. | Supernatural—Fiction. | LCGFT: Light novels.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.A4936 On 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023043895>

ISBNs: 978-1-97538895-9 (paperback) 978-1-9753-8896-6 (ebook)

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- Afterword

Mai Yashiro

A kind, thoughtful girl who can't resist helping out those in need. She's quite popular with her classmates, but she's such a space case, she doesn't notice.

Hobbies: Studying, reading
What's on her mind lately? How her Familiar, Amelie, is doing



Taisuke Asagi

A serious, sincere, and above all bashful boy. His neat, clean, jet-black hair is his pride and joy, but he used to be a total slob!

Hobby: Taste-testing new flavors of his favorite drink, Pudding Pop
What's on his mind lately? Everyone's stats in the Nightmare Conquerors' Club



Taichi Tango

Though he may look like a sporty kid on the outside, he's actually no good at sports! (Just don't tell anyone.) He's self-conscious about his height and will do whatever it takes to grow taller.

Hobby: Napping
What's on his mind lately? Figuring out what tall people eat



Shinji Sugiura

The son of Ryokuka Private Academy's chief director. He's extremely popular with the ladies... but a real handful to deal with. An aura of unapproachability clings to him, and he's always quick with a put-down.

Hobbies: (When asked, he just silently stared. After a long silence, the interviewer gave up.)
What's on his mind lately? How to beat Nightmare



Naomi Suzuki

A kind, gentle lover of all things adorable. Her sense of smell is currently up for auction in Nightmare.

Hobbies: Cooking, gardening
What's on her mind lately? Aromatherapy

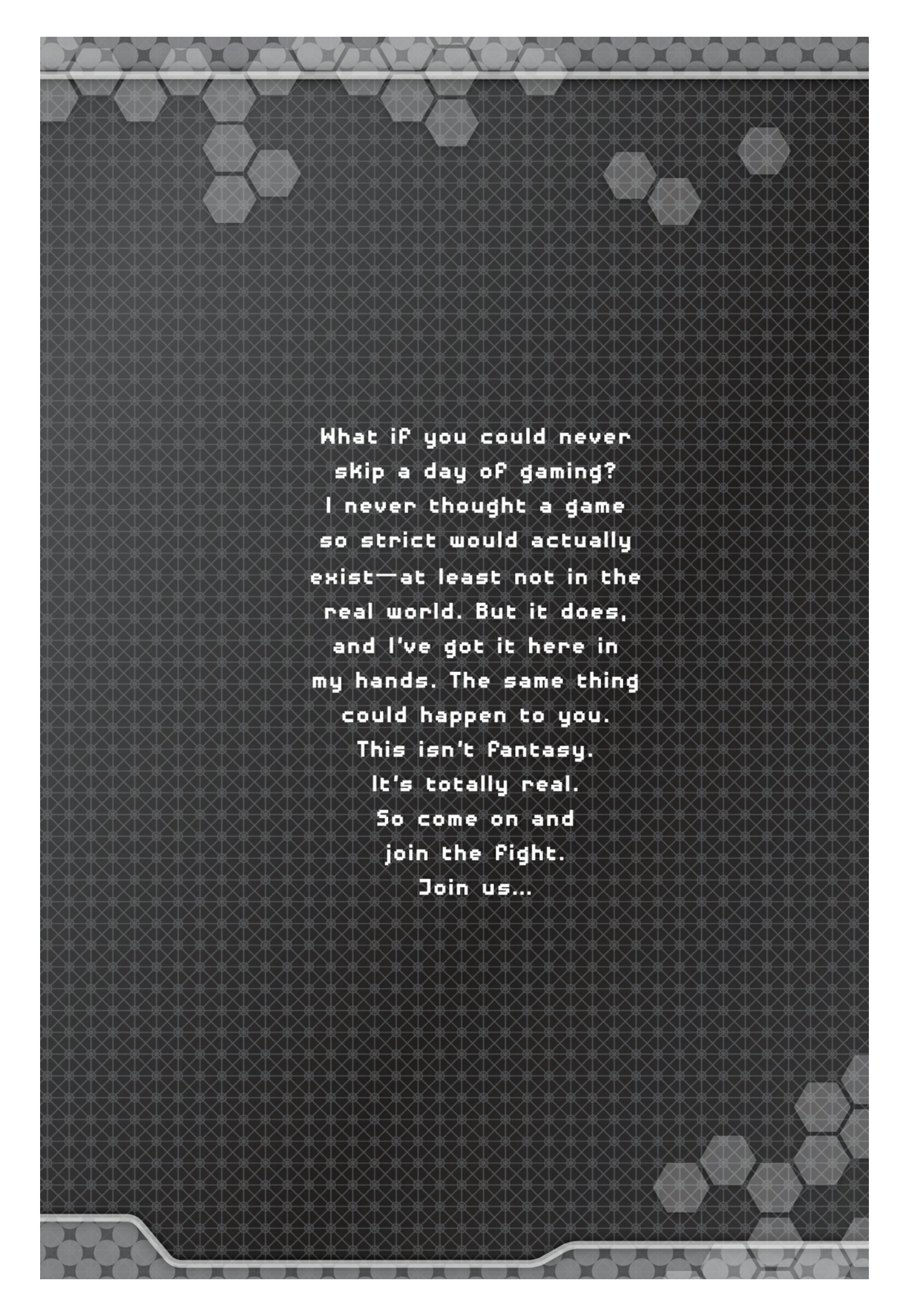


NIGHTMARE

START A NEW GAME?

[YES]

[NO]



What if you could never
skip a day of gaming?
I never thought a game
so strict would actually
exist—at least not in the
real world. But it does,
and I've got it here in
my hands. The same thing
could happen to you.
This isn't Fantasy.
It's totally real.
So come on and
join the Fight.
Join us...

1

The Story So Far

My name is Mai Yashiro.

I attend the Ryokuka Private Academy, where I'm a totally average second-year high schooler...or at least I was.

Now I've got all kinds of problems! Thanks to this weird video game called Nightmare that showed up in my room one day, my life went totally off the rails and careened into a deep, dark pit!

These days, people all over Japan are talking about Nightmare! I mean, no surprise there—it's super mysterious. Who's sending out all these game consoles? Who made the game inside them? And the mysteries don't stop there.



The instant someone turns on their Nightmare console, they get trapped in a contract with a demon. According to the contract, whenever someone gets a Game Over, the demon takes away a Respawn Penalty—the use of one of eight body parts: their eyes, legs, left arm, right arm, nose, mouth, ears, or heart. That’s how dangerous this game is!

So just don’t play, right?

Well, that’s not an option... Participation is mandatory, and what’s worse, if you don’t earn at least 100 in-game points (called CP) every day, your character gets killed automatically.

Oof... I mean, who ever heard of a game with a daily quota?

I’m not exactly the best gamer out there to begin with, so when I got roped into Nightmare, I thought I was a goner. That is, until a boy from my same year at school named Taisuke Asagi invited me to the Ryokuka Nightmare Conquerors’ Club. That’s an official school club that’s divided into squads—Main Squad, Scout Squad, and Rescue Squad—each devoted to figuring out how to survive in Nightmare.

When I first joined the club, I was assigned to the Rescue Squad, led by a boy named Taichi. But now I’m being assigned somewhere else: the Raid Team. Just as the name implies, that’s the elite team focused on actually beating the game. *Gulp...* No pressure, right? Either way, it’s not actually official until it gets announced tomorrow. So far, all I’ve heard are rumors.

One of my fellow Raid Team members is Sugiura—the leader of the whole club. His mother is the chief director of Ryokuka Private Academy, and his father is the CEO of Green Trier, Inc., a company that publishes a magazine dedicated to beating Nightmare. As you can imagine, his family is loaded—and between that and his good looks, he’s a huge hit with the ladies.

Truth be told though, Sugiura yells a lot, and he’s really harsh. I kinda have a hard time dealing with him. It just always feels like he’s watching everyone from the shadows, or something?

The next member of the Raid Team is Asagi. He’s a little shy—okay, he’s really shy—but he’s kind and reliable. The two of us recently participated in a secret

in-game challenge called a Black Event. I still get chills thinking about the Wandering Shadow, the boss we had to face in that event. It was pretty freaky!

There are three basic types of gameplay in Nightmare: Normal Battles, Battles of Wits, and Events. For Normal Battles, you control an avatar that looks exactly like you, but for the other modes, you actually get transported into the world of Nightmare!

Scary, right? It's like being in a haunted house. There's no telling what might pop out or from where.

The last member of the Raid Team is Taichi. Get this—his hobby is napping! The first time I heard that, I couldn't help blurting out "What?!" in surprise. I mean, he looks like a total jock! You'd think he'd have a lot more energy. Or maybe I just got that impression because he likes watching soccer.

Taichi's also the only member of the club who's not afraid to poke fun at Sugiura, which means Sugiura gets mad at him a lot. I think it shows that they really like each other deep down inside...or at least that's my guess. Honestly, Taichi's a pretty big deal in the Conquerors' Club. Sugiura can get pretty nasty, so I definitely wouldn't want to get on his bad side.

Anyway, including me, there are four members on the Raid Team.

Nightmare itself has been down for maintenance ever since Asagi and I beat the Black Event. During that maintenance period, everyone who lost bodily functions to the demon gets them back temporarily. That's good news for our friend from another school, Naomi; she gets to enjoy having her sense of smell again for a while.

The nerve functions of her nose, which she lost as a Respawn Penalty, are currently up for sale on the in-game Nerve Auction...and for an absolutely outrageous price! The lowest acceptable bid is 10 billion yen! No way can we afford that!

Still, I really wish we could get Naomi's nose back for her... Oh! I should talk it over with Amelie.

Who's Amelie? Well, she's a monster called a Slit-Mouthed Woman—and the first opponent I ever fought in Nightmare. Since I beat her, though, I had the

chance to tame her and make her my familiar.

So, I say she's a Slit-Mouthed Woman, but she looks more like a Slit-Mouthed Girl. When I first saw her, I was pretty scared. Now that we get along, though, she's actually super cute.

I opened my Nightmare console and clicked on the menu item **Amelie's Room**. That's where Amelie is usually lounging around in her own space, eating her favorite food—candy—and grinning the day away. She always perks me up.

Let's see how she's doing today.

"Morning, Amelie! How're you doing?"

"I'm great! Just got up, though. Give today your best shot, Mai!"

She was right. All I could do was give it my best shot, today and every day until Nightmare was beaten and over with.

And with all these friends, there's no way I'm gonna lose!

A New Outing

It was the night after Asagi and I beat the Black Event. To be honest, I was still so wired, I couldn't sleep. We'd survived and made it back safely, and it still felt like a dream. I'd had enough horror for one lifetime.

I burrowed under my blanket and thought back over what'd happened that day.

Just then, the alert light on my game console started blinking. That meant I had a message.

[From: Taisuke Asagi]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Hey, Mai! Mornin'! :|

That is, if you're even awake. Thanks for all your hard work yesterday. I mean it.

Let's keep hanging in there today, too.

END

I couldn't help but smile as I read Asagi's message. I still didn't really understand why he always went for the vacant, expressionless emoji, but I'd started to see it as kind of adorable. (Maybe he just didn't know how to use any

others.)

Anyway... My dorm was very close to my classes, but that didn't mean I could stay in bed forever. Time to get up! But just as I tossed my blanket aside to greet the day, someone started banging loudly on my door.

What the—?! They were knocking so hard, I thought they'd break right through.

"Hey! You're awake, aren't you?!"

I'd recognize that haughty voice anywhere. That's right, it was Sugiura.

"G-geez! I'm awake, already! Calm down. You're gonna break my door!"

"I'm comin' in."

"What?! D-don't! I just woke up, okay? What's the hurry anyway?"

"What, are you still in your pajamas or somethin'?"

"Yeah, I am. So?"

I heard Sugiura sigh heavily from beyond the door.

"Get ready, and make it snappy. We've got a meeting in three minutes."

Th-th-three minutes?!

"You're kidding, right?"

"What kinda lame liar do you take me for?" It wasn't the first time I'd heard Sugiura say something like that. It meant he was really mad. Like, legit mad. That wasn't good!

"Look, you beat that Black Event. Don't tell me you're gonna be late to a little meeting the very next day. Talk about embarrassing." He sighed heavily enough to hear through the door again and left. Sugiura sure never sugarcoated anything.

But—hee-hee-hee! I knew his secret. I knew that, deep down inside, he cared deeply about his fellow club members. This little outburst was just his way of showing that he was worried about me...though I do wish he'd find a gentler way to show it.

I darted out of bed and changed into my uniform.

I didn't have time for breakfast, or even to comb my hair, which remained a frizzy mess. I looked exactly like I did on the day I joined the Nightmare Conquerors' Club.

I bolted up the stairs to the third floor of the dorm building, where the Conquerors' Club had their headquarters. These were special facilities that Ryokuka Private Academy had set up specifically for Nightmare players, since the chief director wanted us to be able to prioritize the game. From the outside, the dorm building looked like a standard, whitewashed apartment building, but the third floor was stocked with an exclusive cafeteria and tons of the latest computers! It was all set up to allow us to handle our studies *and* take on Nightmare in a way that you couldn't even imagine at a normal school.

"Huh?!"

"Wha—?!"

As I dashed up the stairs, I almost slammed straight into another girl who was apparently in as much of a hurry as I was.

"S-sorry!"

"It's fine! Forget it, let's just keep moving! We're gonna be late, Mai!"

"R-right!"

The unmistakable twin ponytails. The bag covered in character key chains. No doubt about it, this was the famously game-loving Youko Teranishi. Now that I thought about it, I was pretty sure she was in the Main Squad of the Conquerors' Club. I'd talked to her a little bit before; she was always (and I mean *always*) chipper and bold.

Youko and I made it into the club room at more or less the same time.

"You're late, dang it! Hurry up and sit down," Sugiura growled as soon as we entered the room.

Yikes! He's still ticked off from before! But on the bright side, I wasn't alone. Youko and I apologized together.

“S-sorry...”

“Aw, man! I thought I made it right on time, too...”

Huh?! Youko scratched her head, completely calm in the face of Sugiura’s rage.

“Sit down, already!”

“Kay.” With that, Youko half-heartedly slumped into a chair. She didn’t seem the least bit fazed.

Meanwhile, I hurried over to the table where the other members of the Rescue Squad were gathered.

“Uh, Mai? You didn’t get any sleep last night, did ya?”

Taichi saw right through me the instant I got to my chair. His powers of observation were amazing.

“Yeah,” I answered. “I didn’t, actually.”

“If you get too sleepy, feel free to take a catnap,” he said. “Can’t have you pushing yourself too hard.”

Taichi is so nice. I thanked him for the sympathy, then turned to focus on what Sugiura was saying from his podium.

The meeting covered how Sugiura, Asagi, and Taichi were stepping down from their current positions as squad leaders and, along with me, forming the new, four-person Raid Team. The new leaders for the Rescue, Main, and Scout Squads came up to address the club in their new positions.

First was the new leader of the Rescue Squad: a tall boy with glasses who did a brief self-introduction. “Hello, everyone. I’m Yoichi Tango, a first-year student. Starting today, I’ll be leading the Rescue Squad. That is all!”

Wait, did he say “first-year”? I was surprised that someone younger than me was put in charge of a whole squad. He must be really skilled!

Yoichi firmly pushed up his glasses with two fingers. He gave off intelligent vibes. Hang on, Tango? That sounded familiar...

“Figured it out, huh? He’s my little brother.”

“Huh?” No way! I gawked, looking back and forth between Yoichi and Taichi.

“And before you say anything, I’m a completely normal height, okay?! He’s just freakishly tall.”

Come to think of it, Taichi was even shorter than me. Yoichi, on the other hand, easily had at least ten centimeters on me. I looked back at Taichi. His face was sullenly pressed against the table. Everyone knows height isn’t everything, but his short stature was the one thing Taichi was hung up about.

Wait, is he sulking...or is he sleeping? I wouldn’t put it past Taichi. He could fall asleep anytime, anywhere—and once he did, it took a lot of work to wake him back up. I didn’t bother trying to wake him and focused on the podium.

Next up came the new leader of the Main Squad.

“Let’s see... I’m Youko Teranishi, second-year student, and gaming is the only thing I’m good at! So try to keep up, and let’s rack up some serious trophies!”

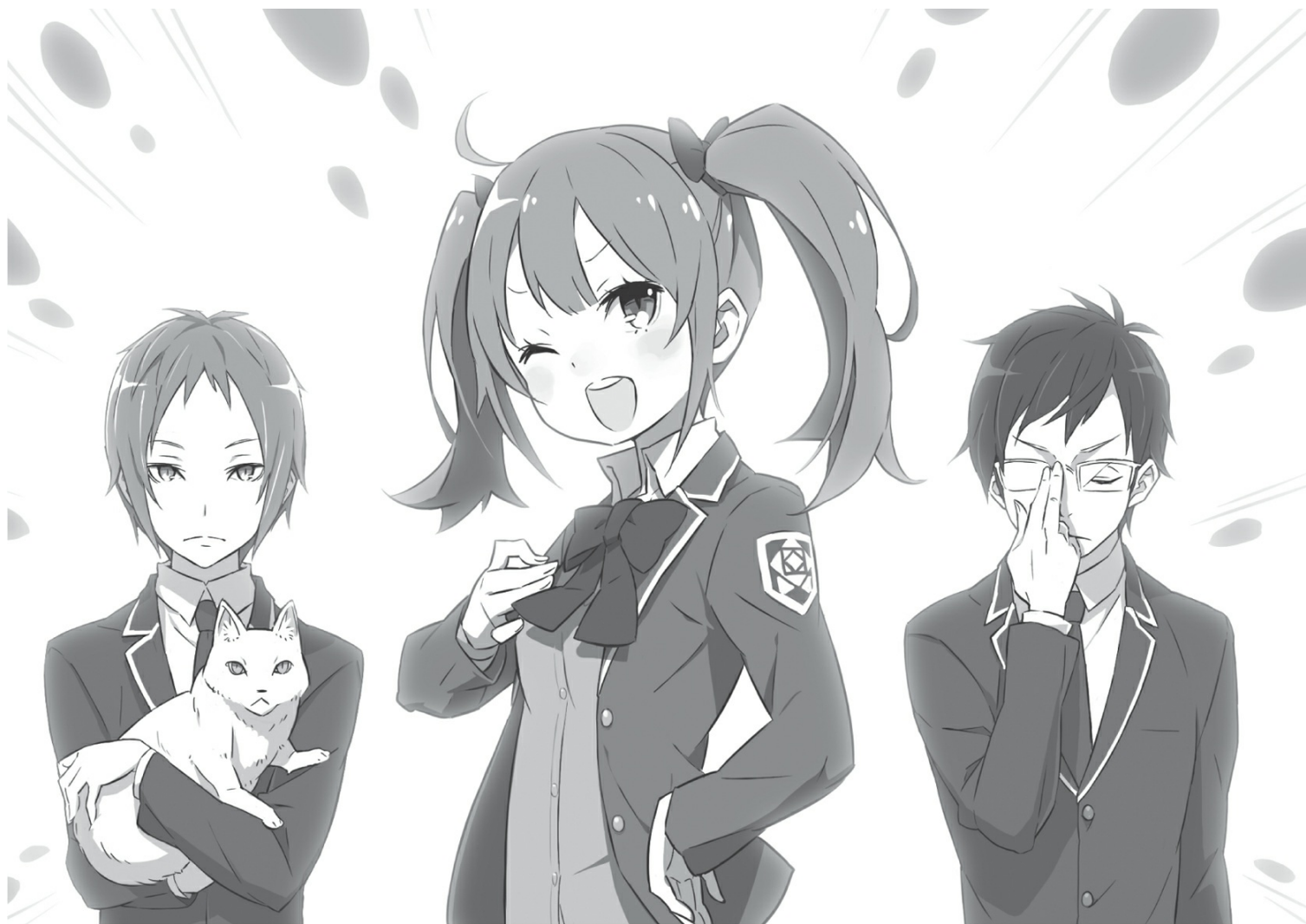
Ah, Youko was one of the new leaders! That made sense, considering what an enthusiastic gamer she was. She’d definitely brighten up the mood in the Main Squad, too.

“Hey, Teranishi! We’re here for *results*, not *trophies*! Don’t put the wrong idea in their heads!”

“Hunh! Is that right? You sure know your stuff, Sugiura!”

“...Haaah.” Sugiura sighed heavily. He sounded like he’d had quite enough.

“Still...results, achievements, what’s the difference?”



Youko's laugh filled the room as she sat back down. If she was willing to give Sugiura that kind of lip, she was probably a pretty big deal, too.

"Whatever," Sugiura continued. "Next."

That meant it was time to introduce the new Scout Squad leader.

Huh? A boy cradling a cat walked up to the podium. He had really strange vibes, to say the least...

"...I'm Rito Hirata. Third-year. My best subject is math."

Whoa. He was way paler than me and seemed to have his head in the clouds. Most of all, though, I couldn't get over the cat. What was that about?

Just as I was thinking about it, Hirata's gaze snapped toward me from the podium.

"Um... What?" I asked, unsure what to make of it. Why was he glaring at me so angrily?

"...My skin's always been this pale. I don't tan very easily... And this is Mewta. Someone threw him out, and I took him in. And one more thing... I'm not glaring at you... My eyes are naturally like this. A lot of people make that mistake. My eyes are just narrow. Like a cat's..."

Huh?! How the heck did he know what I was thinking?! As I reeled from the shock, Hirata began murmuring again.

"...It's not very precise, but I can kinda read people's thoughts."

Not very precise...? He nailed every last thought I had! There was something arcane about Hirata. That wasn't the kind of trick that just anybody could pull off.

"All right, enough introductions," said Sugiura. "Let's move on to today's schedule. Take all your lessons as usual in the morning. This afternoon, meet with your team and talk Nightmare. Got it?"

The whole club answered "Yes!" at the same time. As if waiting for that signal, the teachers entered the club room at that exact moment.

"Class will now begin. First-years, second-years, and third-years all have

different material to cover, so please report to the proper area for your grade. Your assigned teacher will tell you what to do.”

Sugiura’s mother—in other words, the chief director of the school—ensured that every student in the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club could still carry out their lessons from the dorm building without having to go all the way to campus.

The chief director was to thank for getting the Conquerors’ Club started in the first place, too. She didn’t play Nightmare herself, but she was extremely understanding. I guess that goes without saying, since her own precious son had received a Nightmare console, but still—she’d gone above and beyond to set up these facilities for us. I mean, she even took Naomi in without a second thought, and my new friend didn’t even go to Ryokuka.

Sugiura’s father—in other words, the chief director’s husband—ran a company full of employees who risked their lives to beat Nightmare. They kept up with the latest information about Nightmare, which was a huge help to the Conquerors’ Club, too. Without Green Trier’s information, Nightmare would go from dangerous to literally impossible.

But I got the impression that Sugiura’s dad himself was a little... Maybe *shady* is the right word? He’d threatened to have us expelled if we didn’t participate in the Black Event, for one. He also didn’t seem to have a problem with expecting us to risk our lives even though we didn’t work for him. He didn’t mind making a few sacrifices if that’s what it took to beat the game, which I’ve gotta admit was a little scary.

Luckily, though, we managed to beat the event, so everything worked out this time.

...Still, I wasn’t sure just how much I could trust him.

Once class was over, I met Naomi in the cafeteria for lunch. Naturally, the conversation turned to Nightmare.

“Um, Suzuki...”

“Ha-ha! Come on, don’t be so formal. I just call you Mai, right? You can call me Naomi.”

“O-okay... Well... Naomi it is.”

“Yeah, that’s more like it,” Naomi said with an adorable smile.

If the cookies she’d brought were any hint, Naomi was good at baking. We’d finished our lunches, so we sat munching on her cookies as we talked.

Then it hit me—Naomi had lost to a Slit-Mouthed Woman. And not just any Slit-Mouthed Woman, but my Amelie. Amelie was a B-Rank monster, which meant she was generally too strong for any player under level 100 to beat.

Naomi definitely wasn’t that high-level, which meant she’d been pretty reckless. Not that I’m one to talk, believe me! I seriously only managed to win where she’d lost because I had Asagi’s help. Still, I was concerned about Naomi’s Nightmare play style.

“I’ve been wondering, Naomi. How did you end up fighting Amelie in the first place? You sent me that Master Negotiator skill, too. Were you in a party with a stronger player or something?”

“Huh? Oh, well... The things is... Oh, hey! Asagi’s looking this way.”

What was that about? Maybe it was just me, but Naomi seemed a little sad? I might be overthinking it...

“Mai! Did you check your messages?!” Asagi was running toward us, red in the face. Not that blushes were rare for him.

“I haven’t read it yet,” I answered. “Why? What’s up?”

“Check ’em! Now!” Asagi huffed through ragged breaths.

“F-fine, I will,” I said, scrambling to open his message. The first one on my list of unread messages was from Kenichi Tanaka. That wasn’t the one Asagi meant. For some reason, that Tanaka guy fired off message after message about anything—what he ate that day, strange quizzes and trivia, and other stuff like that. It was enough to tick even me off! But on the other hand, he was supposedly an ace Nightmare player, which meant I couldn’t totally ignore him.

But Kenichi Tanaka wasn’t the issue here. I ignored his latest message and opened the next item in my inbox.

[From: Taisuke Asagi]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Hey, Mai! Wanna have lunch together? :|

END

Oops...! Asagi had sent me a message.

“Oh gosh! I’m sorry, Asagi!”

“Uh, sorry for what? Why are you apologizing?” Asagi asked as he glanced over at my console screen, looking confused.

The next instant, his face turned an even deeper shade of red.

“Ack! N-never mind! Forget it! Don’t even worry about that! Delete it, even!”

“Um... What?”

“Not that message! *This* message!” Asagi pointed at the next message down the list.



“Huh? You mean...this one here, from the Nightmare staff?”

[From: Nightmare]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Dear Miss Yashiro, Congratulations on completing the Black Event.

Please find your bonus for completing the event attached to this message. This item can be transferred to another player, should you so desire.

<<Attachment: Black Box>>

END

Uh, what was this?

“Did they send you the same item, Asagi?”

“Yeah. But it sounds like we can give it to someone else if we want. I dunno what to make of that. Maybe it’s not that big a deal.”

“Look at what we had to go through to earn it, though. Considering how tough that event was, it’s probably really important.” I looked Naomi square in the eyes. “Don’t you think, Naomi?”

“.....”

That was weird. She wasn’t answering.

In fact, she was staring at the screen of my game console with a troubled look on her face.

“...What’s wrong?”

“Wha—? Oh, I was just wondering what the box is for. Why? Was I spacing out? Sorry 'bout that, Mai.”

“Yeah, but it's fine.”

“I'm with you, Mai. I don't think you should hand it off to someone else. I'm sure it's important.”

“Gotcha. I'll be careful with it.” And that was the end of that discussion.

Why, you ask? Because at that moment, Sugiura and Taichi came walking over to our table.

“I'm taking this seat next to you,” said Sugiura.

“Um, be my guest.”

“This seat's empty, right?” asked Taichi. “C'mon, Asagi. Have a seat, too. Or are you just gonna keep standing behind Mai like that?”

“Uh, good point... Wait, where's my chair?” Asagi shot Sugiura an angry glance.

“What's with the face?”

“...N-nothing. What face? I wasn't making a face...”

Huh? Was Asagi planning on sitting next to me?

Taichi wound up sitting next to Naomi, while Sugiura, for some reason, sat to my immediate left. Eeek! He really made me nervous... Just having him sit next to me ramped up the pressure by a lot... I found myself wishing that Asagi had sat down more quickly and saved me from this mess...

But back on topic! The two of them came over because they had something to talk about, didn't they? I hoped they'd get to the point—and soon.

If Sugiura and Taichi felt anywhere near as awkward as I did, they didn't show it. Both of them sat and ate their lunches as if things were totally normal. They didn't say a word to us.

“Um, sooo...”

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just...”

Sugiura’s eyebrows furrowed as he glared at me. Talk about frightening!

“What’s your problem? You’re not gonna tell me I’m scary or somethin’, are you?”

“Y-yes, actually, that’s exactly—Eep!!” Everyone fell silent. Nobody even dared to make eye contact with me.

Oh maaan... I really went and did it this time...

But just then—

“*Pffft!* Heh... Heh-heh-heh—hmmph! *Koff, koff!*” Taichi struggled to choke down a giggle. He tried to cover it by coughing, but he was way too late! It probably goes without saying that Sugiura gave his friend’s chair a sharp kick.

“Listen up, Mai. From now on, you, me, Taichi, an’ Asagi are all a team. That means that we stick together as much as possible. We gotta build trust, get it?”

“Y-yessir!” Though threatening people is a pretty weird way to build their trust, if you ask me.

“Hee-hee! Well, Mai, I should probably head over to the other scouts,” said Naomi. “I’m pretty sure the new leader, Hirata, is waiting for me.”

“Roger that. See ya, Naomi!” With that, she trotted out of the cafeteria.

“So, um...”

“What, Asagi? Spit it out.”

“What’re we supposed to do until Nightmare’s done with maintenance? It’s not gonna be nonstop meetings, is it?”

“Nah. Don’t worry about that. My old man’s company has a few easy jobs they could use our help with, and we can run simulations based on their data. We’ve got tons of stuff to do.”

That’s right. Just because Nightmare was under maintenance, that didn’t mean we’d get a break!

“Either way, Mai... You’ve got real guts.”

Was that an actual compliment? Where’d that come from all of a sudden?

“Th-thank you!”

“Course, you’ve got your share of faults to balance things out.”

Huh? Geez, what’s with this guy?! He built me up just to tear me down!

Sugiura reacted to my sullen expression with a satisfied look of his own. Rude!

“Wow, Mai! Sugiura likes you.” Taichi snickered into my ear. But no way, right? That’s couldn’t possibly be it!

“He’s just teasing me for laughs. He couldn’t possibly like me.”

“You sure ’bout that? If you ask me, Sugiura’s changed quite a bit since you joined the club. He smiles a whole lot more than he used to.”

Was that true? I mean, I had a hard enough time believing he somehow used to smile *less*! On top of that, Sugiura even managed to make Asagi—cheerful, kind Asagi—act all gloomy.

Raid Team didn’t exactly seem to be off to a great start.

“Anyway. As soon as maintenance is over, all of us are headin’ straight into Normal Battles. Got that?”

There was plenty to be unsure about, but it was do or die! I guess.

Get Naomi's Nose Back!

The next week flew by.

If only things could've kept going as they had been, without any word from Nightmare at all... But no, as soon as I caught myself thinking about how peaceful it was, we got a message notifying us that the maintenance period was over.

[From: Nightmare]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Dear Miss Yashiro, Congratulations again on completing the Black Event.

Nightmare's maintenance period is now at an end. Please be aware that all players will soon lose nerve functions on any Respawn Penalties they've lost.

Several new items, maps, and system features have been added to the game. Please see the Help files for details.

END

The grace period on lost Respawn Penalties was over. Soon enough, Naomi's

nose would stop working again. She hadn't been her usual self lately—I assumed she was afraid to lose her sense of smell again, since she knew this day would come. I still wanted to do something, anything, to help her.

But the game was about to start up again. Which meant that its pesky Auto-Death System would kick in again, too.

Hang on, I should go over the Auto-Death System again. Long story short, Nightmare players have to earn at least 100 CP a day. If we don't, our characters automatically die. Once the day's over, all the CP we earned is converted to in-game cash.

That's the system that keeps us playing every single day. We can't just walk away from the game. That's what makes Nightmare such a nightmare.

The four of us on the Raid Team gathered in the club room.

"Looks like it's finally happening..."

"Yeah."

"So what do we do now?"

"We start by makin' sure the Auto-Death System doesn't catch us, obviously."

Sugiura was right. That was the only way to make sure we lived through the day.

"That settles that. Shall we?"

"Yes, sir!"

Just as we'd gotten fired up to take on the day's duties, Hirata passed right by us, muttering.

"...It's Naomi... She's calling for you...I think."

"Huh? What do you mean, Hirata?"

There was no answer. Well, there was no answer from Hirata himself. The white cat in his arms mewed instead.

Something was wrong with Naomi...and I had to go see her myself.

"Sorry, Sugiura, but can I go check on Naomi for a bit?"

“What? What’re you talkin’ about? We’re headin’ off to battle right now—”

“It’s fine, Mai. You can go,” Asagi said, interrupting Sugiura. “We’re not in that much of a hurry. We’ll wait. I’m more worried about Naomi, too.” So he wasn’t just concerned about my feelings, but about Naomi’s, too. Talk about a nice guy!

“I’ll be back.”

“Tch! Gimme a break...” Sugiura loudly clicked his tongue. I guess that was his way of showing that he’d reluctantly agreed to let me go.

I rushed over to Naomi’s table. She had her back toward me, with her shoulders slumped.

“Naomi?” I called out, and her shoulders twitched.

“Oh, Mai... I can’t smell flowers anymore...,” she mumbled, still turned away. There, on the table, was a flower. She looked at it with a grave expression on her face. “I could smell them just fine yesterday...but now I sniff and I sniff, but I’m back to nothing. I dunno why, but I thought maybe, after the maintenance, I’d get back to normal...but I was wrong. Of course I was.”

She sounded like she might burst into tears at any second.

With the maintenance period over with, all the Respawn Penalty exemptions were over, too. Even though she’d lost her sense of smell before, it had to be hard to have it snatched away again after getting it back for a while.

One thing was clear: We’d have to win her nose back by sticking to the rules of Nightmare. The nerve functions for her nose were probably still up for sale at the Nerve Auction.

“You only lost your sense of smell, right? You can still breathe through your nose, can’t you?”

“Yeah... No problems there.”

I wanted so, so badly to tell her, “Don’t you worry! We’ll have you smelling again in a jiffy!” but I couldn’t bring myself to say it. Like I mentioned before, the starting bid for Naomi’s nose was a whopping 10 billion yen. Tsubasa Kaitsu, the player who’d put it up for sale, had put such a ridiculously huge price on it

that nobody could hope to buy it back.

I mean, who could possibly need that much money?

He wasn't seriously trying to sell it. He was just being a jerk.

"Well, that's good. At least you can still breathe," I said, trying my best to comfort Naomi even just a little bit.

"...That's true." She tried to put on a brave face, but I could tell she was just trying to hide her sadness. It was hard to see her like that, but I didn't see any solution presenting itself anytime soon.

I walked back to the Raid Team table with my own shoulders slumped.

"How's Naomi doing, Mai? She lost her Respawn Penalty again, didn't she?"

"Yeah..." I filled the squad in on Naomi's situation—including the parts about how badly I wanted to help her. I knew there wasn't much we could do about it, but I just couldn't give up.

"Hmm, that's right," said Taichi. "Tsubasa Kaitsu's the one who put her nerve functions up for auction." He started tapping at his game console. "Don't get your hopes up, but we should try sending him a message."

"It's no use... Naomi's already tried that several times and hasn't gotten a single reply..."

She hadn't heard a word back from Tsubasa Kaitsu. No matter how hard she begged, he wouldn't return her Respawn Penalty.

"Naomi's not gonna send it, and neither am I. You are, Mai."

"That makes sense," said Sugiura. Somehow, Taichi had him convinced. "Try it, Mai."

"Huh? Me? But why?"

"You're the one who beat the Black Event, aren't you?" said Taichi. "Now that maintenance is over, even Kaitsu's gotta know that. And who wouldn't wanna hear what a player who beat the Black Event's got to say? I bet he'll even send a reply."

I wondered. Still, it was worth a shot. I quickly typed up a message.

[From: Mai Yashiro]

[To: Tsubasa Kaitsu]

Hello. My name is Mai Yashiro.

I'd like to ask you about Naomi Suzuki's nerve functions, which you have up for sale on the auction. Is there any way I could get you to give them back? Please reply so we can work something out.

END

I hit send. Would that really get a response?

After ten minutes of waiting, the notification light on my game console blinked.

"It's a message! From Tsubasa Kaitsu!"

I could hardly believe it. Naomi had sent him all those messages, and he hadn't replied to a single one!

"Can you show us what he sent, Mai?"

"Sure thing."

[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

You're the one who took down the Black Event, aren't you? I want details. Tell me about the Black Event, and I just might think about cutting you a deal.

END

If it was information he wanted, I was glad to give it to him...but how? I wasn't so sure that I could get everything across in a text message. I sent Tsubasa a message saying as much—and got another reply in a flash!

[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Don't sweat it. With a Battle of Wits, we'll be chatting face-to-face in no time. I'll find some small fry I can take out quick and get it set up. Go to my stat screen and join as a spectator, okay?

END

Aha. That probably would be the quickest way to set up something more direct than messages. Tsubasa came up with the idea in no time flat, too... Clearly, I was dealing with a sharp cookie.

"All right, looks like that's that... I'm comin' along, too," said Sugiura.

"Me too," added Taichi. "Could be interesting."

"Then I'm coming, too!"

"Chill out, Asagi. You don't have to tag along."

"Wha—?! Why not? I'm coming, and that's final!!"

"Are you worried about Mai or something?"

"Of course I'm worried about Mai! I mean..." Asagi cut himself off. "Augh! Look what you're making me say! Geez!"

He was staring straight down at the table, his face bright red again. Taichi

fought hard to hold back his laughter at the sight.

Don't get me wrong, I was grateful to have Asagi looking out for me. But for some reason, even I felt a bit embarrassed. I wonder why that was. Either way, I found myself looking down, red-faced, just like Asagi.

"Hey, Taichi," Sugiura sneered. "Quit messin' around and get ready to spectate this Battle of Wits, will ya?"

"Wow, Sugiura, I didn't know you were so worried about Mai, too."

"Huh? Quit talkin' nonsense," Sugiura said, reaching up to his ear.

He really didn't have to put it so harshly!

Still choking back laughter, Taichi whispered in my ear, "Y'know what it means when he touches his ear, Mai? It means he's feeling bashful. Just something you might wanna remember."



Oh, is that so? Then it hit me. Wait, what?! Sugiura? Bashful?!

His face still looked as scary as ever, if you ask me.

“Hey, someone go get Suzuki, too. We’re doin’ this to get her nerve functions, aren’t we?”

Suzuki? Suzuki who? Oh, right—Naomi!

“On it,” said Taichi as he stood up. “I’ll go get her.”

Taichi was always quick to tease people, but he was observant and thoughtful, too. I was impressed.

The three of us left at the table brought Tsubasa Kaitsu’s stat screen up on our consoles.

[Character Name] Tsubasa Kaitsu

[Age] 14

Wait, he’s still in junior high?! I was surprised to see he was younger than us.

[Level] 280

[Charm] A

[Game Ranking] 38

I was pretty sure all of those stats were really high. This guy was good.

[Title] Auction House Devil

Yeah, that made sense. He was definitely a devilish dealer.

[Job] Go-Home Club Member

Go-Home Club? What the heck was that supposed to mean? Like, a kid who's not in any school clubs or anything, so he just goes straight home after school? What kind of ridiculous job was that? Then again, I dunno. Maybe it was stronger than it sounded.

"Looks like he's taking on a Wasawasa."

"A Wasawasa...? Isn't that only a C-Rank monster?"

"Right. But it's a Battle of Wits. Ranks don't really apply there."

"All right, let's move." Sugiura sent his request to watch the battle and headed into the game before the rest of us. Right then, Taichi made it back to the table with Naomi.

"Huh? Don't tell me Sugiura went ahead without us! That's cold, even for him..." A suspicious smirk spread across Taichi's face as he eyed Sugiura's unconscious body. "Course, now's the perfect chance to get all the payback we want. Let's see... First, I'll draw a new set of eyes on his eyelids..."

Taichi pulled out a fat black marker—I'm not sure where he was keeping it. Was he actually going to go through with it? Taichi sure didn't let anything stop him.

"Cut it out, Tachi, or you'll be in for a fright when he finds out it was you. Let's just get going." There was Asagi, chiming in with the right thing—the mature thing—to do. I definitely agreed with him.

"...Shall we, then?"

"Aw, all right," said Taichi. His frown showed just how reluctant he was to let the golden opportunity pass him by. He shot Naomi a slightly bitter smile. "Don't worry, Naomi. We're gonna give it our best shot!"

"Thanks...!" Naomi was taken aback by Taichi's total nonchalance, but at the

same time, it seemed to perk her up a bit, too.

Hang on— Did Taichi plan on that from the beginning?

4

Dealing with Tsubasa Kaitsu

Battle of Wits Summary

Attacking Actions High Attack

Low Attack

Charge

Critical Attack (You must charge three times before use)

Talk

Defending Actions Critical Defense Charge

Crouch

Jump

Counter

Once we were ready, we sent our requests to watch the Battle of Wits. Kaitsu approved them right away.

<<Loading Complete>> Tsubasa Kaitsu has approved your request to spectate.

Spectators must remain a certain distance away from Battle of Wits participants until the battle is over. Thank you for your cooperation.

Please close your eyes to be transported to the Battle of Wits.

All right, time to go!

Naomi and I held hands and closed our eyes right away.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw a dark space stretching out before me—the same space where I’d faced Amelie in our own Battle of Wits. This time around, though, I was just a spectator. That took a lot of the pressure off.

“Hmm. So you’re Mai Yashiro, huh?” A boy sitting in one of the combatants’ chairs said as he turned his head to face me. Otherwise, he stayed in position. He had black hair and didn’t look particularly tall. There was a cocky, challenging expression on his face.

Most of all, he looked rude. That was my first impression of Tsubasa Kaitsu.

“Um... And you’re Tsubasa, right?”

“So? Hey, are you sure you beat the Black Event? Me an’ the old man tried, but even we couldn’t do it.”



“You mean you played the Black Event? Wait, what old man?”

It was weird—after all his auction house antics, I didn’t expect to have a real conversation with him. His snarky attitude did bug me a little bit, but I figured that was just part of being a junior high schooler... Ultimately, he seemed like a normal kid.

“Let me guess,” said Asagi. “The ‘old man’ he’s talking about is probably his dad.”

Tsubasa’s face instantly went pale. He glared even more sharply.

“The heck are you talkin’ about?” he asked. “He’s just some regular from the beef bowl place where I work, that’s all...”

“What’s a junior high schooler got a part-time job for?!”

“Isn’t that, like, against the rules?!”

Sugiura and Naomi piped in at the exact same time.

“Look, my folks run a beef bowl restaurant, and I help out sometimes,” said Tsubasa. “Don’t get the wrong idea. What are you guys, stupid?”

Pretty strong words to use with someone you’ve just met, if you ask me! Tsubasa was shaping up to be every bit as rude as I’d assumed. Still, it wouldn’t help anyone to make him any angrier. We had to ask him *politely*.

“So... We were hoping that you might do us a favor and take Naomi’s nerve functions down from the Nerve Auction. Would you please give them back to her?” I looked Tsubasa in the eye before humbly bowing my head...but he totally ignored me. His eyes were locked on his game console. “Hey, Tsubasa?!”

“...Sheesh, you’re annoying. I’m kind of in the middle of a battle, here. Can you save it for when I’m done?”

What was his deal?! Did he really think we’d popped in to get a few combat pointers from him?!

Either way, I couldn’t force him to talk to me. I looked down at my own Nightmare console and saw that he had all three lives left, and his opponent had two. In a Battle of Wits, you start with three lives, and if you go down to

zero, you lose. Each side takes turns attacking and defending.

But lives aren't the only thing you have to keep track of. There are also Critical Attacks, which instantly take your opponent's lives to zero if they hit. That makes it extra important to predict what your opponent might do and protect yourself when they go in for the kill. Each side has to try and get into the other's head—that's what makes it a Battle of Wits.

When it's your turn to go on the offensive, you have two attack options to choose from: High Attacks and Low Attacks. The defending side can Crouch to avoid a High Attack or Jump to avoid a Low Attack.

Defenders can also choose to Counter. If you Counter an attacking opponent, you'll brush off their damage and hit back at them! That means you can chip away at their lives even when it's not your turn to attack.

I know what you're thinking. Why wouldn't you just pick Counter every time? Wouldn't that make for an easy victory?

On the contrary—that would be a catastrophic strategy. If your Counter fails, you'll end up hitting each other at the same time, which can put you in a really rough spot! In the worst-case scenario, you'll end up taking damage without getting to deal any.

"Huh. I wonder what he's thinking," Taichi said. "Sorry 'bout all this, Naomi."

"It's all right, Taichi... Even if this doesn't work out, I'll be okay," she replied. "Besides, it's just a nose. At least it's not a hand or my legs."

Still, it didn't sit right with me. I tried talking to Tsubasa again.

"Hey, Tsubasa? What's the point of all this anyway? Is it fun for you?"

Tsubasa didn't move except to shoot me a brief glance. "...Point? There's no point. Just causing a little chaos. Is that wrong?"

"Seriously...? Of course it's wrong!"

"Why? Really, tell me the reason. If you can convince me before I finish this fight, I'll give her nose back, free of charge."

Why did I have to convince him?! I mean, it's obviously bad to cause problems for people!! Isn't that enough of an explanation?

“Okay, so...you make things hard for somebody. What’s left after that? It just seems kind of pointless.”

“Huh. I guess.”

...Nope. I wasn’t getting through to him at all.

“Well, let’s say someone in your family had their nerves put up for auction. Wouldn’t that be bad for your mom or dad? If someone did that to them, wouldn’t you want them to stop?”

“My folks, huh...” Aha! Tsubasa’s attitude shifted a bit. Maybe if I just kept pushing a little harder...

“Hey, kid. Get a move on. I already made my choice.” The Wasawasa sitting across from Tsubasa was clearly growing impatient—and didn’t seem to notice or care that it’d interrupted a crucial moment for me.

“Cram it,” Tsubasa shot back. “Weak monsters like you don’t get to butt in.”

The Wasawasa looked pretty frustrated, as far as fuzzy balls that float in midair go.

The results of the round popped up on the screen.

<<Action Results>>

[Tsubasa Kaitsu] Charge

[Wasawasa] Jump



It looked like it'd been Tsubasa's turn on the offensive.

"Heh. Are you really stupid enough to think I'd just stick to basic attacks?"

"D-dang it!"

The Wasawasa puffed up its body in frustration. Tsubasa had gotten under its skin.

On the screen, their mini avatars started to move. Tsubasa's character stayed in place and charged up energy to build up his Critical Gauge. Meanwhile, the Wasawasa's avatar jumped.

"Looks like it's my turn to defend now. Whatcha gonna do? Gimme your best shot." Tsubasa snickered, grinning like he had nothing to worry about. In a Battle of Wits, this kind of banter was key.

Gulp! It suddenly hit me that the battle was underway again. And as soon as it was over, so was our shot at getting Naomi's nose back. I thought fast. When I'd mentioned his mother and father, Tsubasa's face seemed to turn a little sour. Maybe things weren't going so well with his family?

"Hey, Tsubasa... Do you love your parents?"

"...I don't need to answer that now, do I?" he replied in a surprisingly quiet voice.

I had to keep asking along these lines. Like I said, this kind of banter is key!

"Is something wrong? Anything that upset you?"

"...It's just... They care more about that stupid restaurant than they do about me. No matter what I do, they're not interested...and they won't shut up about me taking over the shop someday. All I get from them is more and more stress!"

I knew it! Direct hit. Now, how should I pivot to making our case?

Just then, Sugiura, who'd been listening silently the whole time, spoke up. His voice was even deeper than usual.

"Y'know what your problem is? You wrap people who've got nothin' to do with any of that in your drama. When it's all said an' done, hurtin' strangers isn't gonna make you feel any less stupid an' empty inside... Are you cool with

lettin' your parents plan out your whole life?"

"...Of course not. Why else would I even bother studying?"

"Right. You're your own man. In the end, you gotta walk the path you wanna walk. 'Cause it's your life to live."

"It's my life..." With that, Tsubasa's eyes fell back to his console screen. It looked like he had a lot on his mind.

I've got to admit, Sugiura handled that amazingly. Top-notch convincing! Now I just had to drive it home!

"It's the same in Nightmare, Tsubasa. It may be Game Over for some players because of what you've done. In other words, you threw their whole lives off course. Don't you see that?"

"Threw their lives off course? Me?"

"You. What you do to them is just like what your parents are doing to you! If you don't want to be like them, well... You know what you have to do, right?"

"Hmm... That's one way to put it, I guess."

Tsubasa turned back toward the Wasawasa. But while his body faced his foe, he turned his head toward me. This time, he didn't look troubled at all. If anything, he looked like he'd just solved a really tricky problem.

"Fine. I'll give what's-her-name—"

"Naomi?"

"Right. I'll give her Respawn Penalty back. And everyone else's that I've got, too. I dunno... It all just seems so stupid now."

"Y-you will?! Really?!"

"Quit it with the questions or you're gonna make me change my mind! I said I'd give 'em back, so I'll give 'em back!"

Yes! Naomi and I clasped hands and grinned at each other, overjoyed.

"Thank you, Tsubasa!"

"Ugh, for what? Not like it's that big a deal," he said, avoiding my gaze.

“Ha-ha! He’s shy!” said Taichi. “Looks like we got a Sugiura Junior on our hands here.”

“Watch it. The heck’s that supposed to mean?”

“N-nothing. Oh, the Battle of Wits is still going! The round results are coming up,” Taichi said, deftly deflecting Sugiura’s anger. We all looked at the screen.



<<Action Results>>

[Tsubasa Kaitsu] Charge

[Wasawasa] High Attack

The mini avatars were on the move. Once again, Tsubasa's stood in place, building up its power. The Wasawasa's avatar drifted over to tackle him! Tsubasa's avatar took the hit head-on and fell over.

"Kya-ha-ha, idiot! Gotcha!" The Wasawasa's whole body shook as it laughed.

"...I've still got two lives left. That puts us on equal footing."

"Oh? And I guess you did that on purpose? Kya-ha-ha!"

"Yeah. I did. Where's the fun in ending it too quickly? I'm just taking it easy, here. I can't kill any time if it's not a close fight."

"Cocky, huh? Watch out, or you might regret it. Kya-ha!"

"Regret? I doubt it. Ten minutes from now, you're gonna be the one screaming. Bet on that."

...Ten minutes? Yeah, right. He's gonna end this in the next round. I could see it in Tsubasa's eyes. He was riling the Wasawasa up. I told you this sort of banter was crucial in a Battle of Wits. Tsubasa was using his words to coax the monster into doing just what he wanted it to do. When he said, "Where's the fun in ending it too quickly?" he was telling the Wasawasa that he *couldn't* end it in the next round.

But it was a bluff. With that last Charge command, Tsubasa had filled his Critical Gauge all the way up. He could use a Critical Attack—and that's just what he did!

The Wasawasa, thinking the fight would keep going, went for a Counter.

"What?! But... But you said you wouldn't end it anytime soon..."

Tsubasa laughed wickedly. “And you believed me? I’m your enemy, numbskull! Not that I expected a monster with a face like yours to be a tactical genius.”

“Tch...”

“Now get outta here. I’m tired of lookin’ at you,” Tsubasa snarled at the monster, which soon vanished with a bitter look on its face.

“...That was amazing. Especially for a junior high schooler,” said Asagi. He was actually a little overwhelmed by Tsubasa’s impressive battling.

“This guy’s pretty high-rank, too,” said Sugiura. “He’s gotta pack a lotta firepower.”

“Huh? You’re not thinking of inviting him into the club, are you?”

“Nah. Now’s not the time for that. Besides, a sudden invitation is just gonna make a guy like that make a run for it.” Still, I could tell Sugiura was thinking about inviting Tsubasa into the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club when the timing was right.

Now that the Battle of Wits was over, Tsubasa stood from his chair. “All right. Tell me about the Black Event like you promised.”

I went over everything we’d experienced during the event in detail.

“Huh. Gotcha. There’s probably another event comin’ up now that the updates are in. So now it’s up to all of us to find tickets for it and hand ’em over to you, Mai. Did I get that right? I mean, really smart players already figured that out. We’re already on the move.”

Huh? I was so surprised, all I could do was blink. “H-how’d you come up with that? Hang on, though. The Black Event tickets were nontransferrable.”

“If you ask me, the whole point of the Black Event was to find representatives. Get it? Like picking your main team of heroes in an RPG.”

Again: Huh?!! Did that mean that Asagi and I had been cast in big, heroic, main character-y roles?

“Oh wow, Mai! You’re a hero!”

“Uh... Er... I guess... Th-thanks...” I didn’t feel very heroic. What I felt was awkward.

Then it hit me: If I was some sort of player representative or hero or something, that meant I’d have to keep playing through terrifying events like the last one.

“I gotta say, Asagi strikes me as less of a hero and more of a... Is ‘zero’ too cliché?” said Taichi.

“L-lay off me! That doesn’t even make sense—and it’s kinda rude, don’t you think?!” Asagi shot back, red in the face yet again. It was getting to be something of a pattern for him. Though honestly, it was kinda cute. Kinda.

“Ha-ha! See, that’s what I mean. You’ve got zero chill. Hence the zero.”

“...Ugh. That doesn’t make me sound very cool. He’s wrong, right, Mai?”

“Huh?! I—I mean, yeah...,” I answered, startled by the conversation suddenly heading my way. And to be totally honest, Taichi wasn’t all that wrong—but don’t tell Asagi I said that.

“If you guys are done here, we gotta get goin’,” Sugiura said. Then he shot a sharp glare at Tsubasa. “An’ you better hold up your end of the deal, or else.”

“...C’mon, trust me a little,” said Tsubasa. “I haven’t done anything, so quit treating me like some kinda scammer.”

“We’ll see. Hand over the nerve functions and we’ll see if we can trust you or not.”

“Heh. Just you watch. Y’know, I gotta say, you’re not what I expected the son of Green Trier’s CEO to be like.”

“H-how’d you know?!”

“Haven’t you seen the latest *Nightmare Weekly*? It had a huge special feature about how they beat the Black Event thanks to your brilliant leadership. It barely mentioned the real stars of the show over there.”

“What...?!” The tension rose between them, but Tsubasa kept talking.

“To the world at large, you’re the big hero. Honestly, I feel sorry for Yashiro

and her friend... You didn't face any of the danger they've seen. But lucky you, getting to be a big shot, thanks to Daddy."

"Ugh, don't get me started on him..." Sugiura's face suddenly grew gloomy.

"Oh? Let me guess. Things aren't going so well with your dad, either, huh?"

"Tsubasa, that's enough!" I interrupted. "Don't worry about it, Sugiura. It doesn't bother us. Right, Asagi?"

"Right. If it weren't for you and your dad's company, we wouldn't be able to play Nightmare and still get all our studying done, after all. That's a fact."

"...Sorry, guys. My old man's dead set on making me the next CEO. That's gotta be why he's pushing so hard to make me look good," said Sugiura, practically spitting out the words.

"Oh? So you're gonna take over Green Trier, huh?"

"Only 'cause my dad decided I would! That's all!"

"Then I'm gonna tell you what you told me. In the end, you gotta walk the path you wanna walk. It's your life to live, right?"

Sugiura fell silent, lost in thought.

Whoa. Tsubasa managed to shut Sugiura down. Sugiura! Was this kid seriously only in junior high? Either way, he was exactly right. We were all meant to decide on our own futures for ourselves—not to just let our parents decide.

And we couldn't let Nightmare decide, either.

"Tell ya what," Taichi piped in to ease the tension. "Let's just head back for now."

"Good thinking."

With that, we all chose the option **Open Eyes** from the menu and stopped spectating the Battle of Wits.

Sugiura's Feelings

When we opened our eyes, we were back in the club room. Going into a Battle of Wits always meant losing consciousness in the real world. Luckily, the club room was a familiar sight, but if we'd woken up somewhere else, it would've been a bit of a shock.

"Phew. We're back. You guys okay?"

"I'm fine, boss," said Taichi.

"Me too," said Asagi. "How about you, Mai?"

"Nothing wrong over here."

"Ah!!" Naomi suddenly cried out as she looked at the screen of her game console.

"Wh-what's wrong, Naomi?!"

"Um... Sorry about that. I just got a message from Tsubasa, that's all. Look!" As she spun her console around to show me, she had a big smile on her face.

[From] Tsubasa Kaitsu [To] Naomi Suzuki Here. Sorry.

<<Attachment>> Naomi Suzuki's Nose nerve functions END

It may have only been one word long, but he'd even included an apology.

"That's great, Naomi! Now you've got all your lost Respawn Penalties back."

“Yeah. Thanks so much—all of you! I never could’ve gotten them back without your strength.” It was like a gentle breeze blew through the club room. But then Sugiura put an end to the cozy vibes by suddenly standing up and leaving.

“Uh, Sugiura?” Taichi called after him. “Where’re you off to?”

“...Nowhere,” Sugiura shot back with a trademark scary scowl. But there was no way it was “nowhere.” Once I was sure he was out of the club room, I stood up, too.

“Um... Be back in a sec! I’m gonna go check on Sugiura!”

“I dunno, Mai. You should let this particular sleeping dog lie, if you ask me,” said Taichi. “I’ve got a hunch what this is all about.”

“But...”

“All right, Mai. I’ll go with you,” Asagi said as he stood up and started heading for the door. “We better hurry, or we’ll lose sight of him.”

“Y-yeah!” It seemed like probably the right thing to do—even if it meant ignoring Taichi’s advice.

We found Sugiura the instant we stepped outside of the dorms.

“Um, Sugiura...?”

“Didn’t I tell you to cut this crap out?!”

Huh? Sugiura’s sudden shout froze me in my tracks.

“I think he’s on the phone, Mai. But who’s he talking to?”

“I’m not sure...but I think it’s his dad.” I remembered how Sugiura fought back for us when his dad said we had to play the Black Event—or get expelled. Between Sugiura’s strong words and the anger on his face, I figured this might be something similar.

“I told ya I’d follow in your footsteps! So quit throwing your weight around, already!”

Oh, Sugiura... After everything he told Tsubasa about walking his own path, too...

Did Sugiura really want to take over as the head of Green Trier? Was that really okay with him?

“I know they’re probably nothing but tools to you...but they’re important allies to me!” Sugiura shouted.

“You don’t suppose he’s...talking about us, do you?” Asagi kept his eyes on Sugiura as he whispered.

“I had the same idea.”

“Let’s get out of here, Mai.” With that, Asagi started walking briskly back down the hallway.

“Huh? Where are you going?”

“This is Sugiura’s personal business. Taichi was right. We shouldn’t be listening in.”

“But...”

“Come on, Mai. It’s Sugiura we’re talking about. He’ll manage. And if he can’t, and he comes to us for help, then we’ll do whatever we can. But I think we should leave this one alone for now.”

I wondered. Would Sugiura ever ask us for help with anything?

“You heard how he told Tsubasa to ‘walk the path he wants to walk.’ He sounded sure about that. I think he knows what he’s doing,” Asagi continued. “Besides, he’s covering for us, too. He’s pretty impressive, when you get down to it.”

That was probably true. I still hadn’t thought about my own future. Meanwhile, Sugiura was planning way further ahead than I was and looking out for us at the same time.

“Hee-hee... I gotta say, though, after seeing how much you two fought before, I didn’t expect you to defend Sugiura with me. I guess you guys must get along now.”

“I—I wouldn’t go that far. It was just a thought, that’s all!” Aha! Asagi’s cheeks were turning red yet again. Hee-hee-hee. “Still, we know he’s trustworthy. There’s no doubting that. And he definitely doesn’t play favorites. I mean, he

put me in charge of the Scout Squad.”

“That’s true,” I said. Sugiura and Asagi used to be like oil and water, but it seemed as if they butted heads with each other much less often now.

“I wouldn’t be able to see Sugiura this way if it weren’t for you, Mai. Since you joined the Conquerors’ Club, I’ve had a lot more chances to talk things through with him. If it were just me, I’d probably still be trying to keep any contact with Sugiura to a minimum... So thanks for that.” A light, breezy smile spread across Asagi’s face.

I gave him a tiny nod, trying to hide my embarrassment. I’m pretty sure it was my turn to have red cheeks. And when he saw that, of course Asagi blushed even harder.

“Umm, sooo... What do we do now?”

“Good question... Oh!”

“Something wrong?”

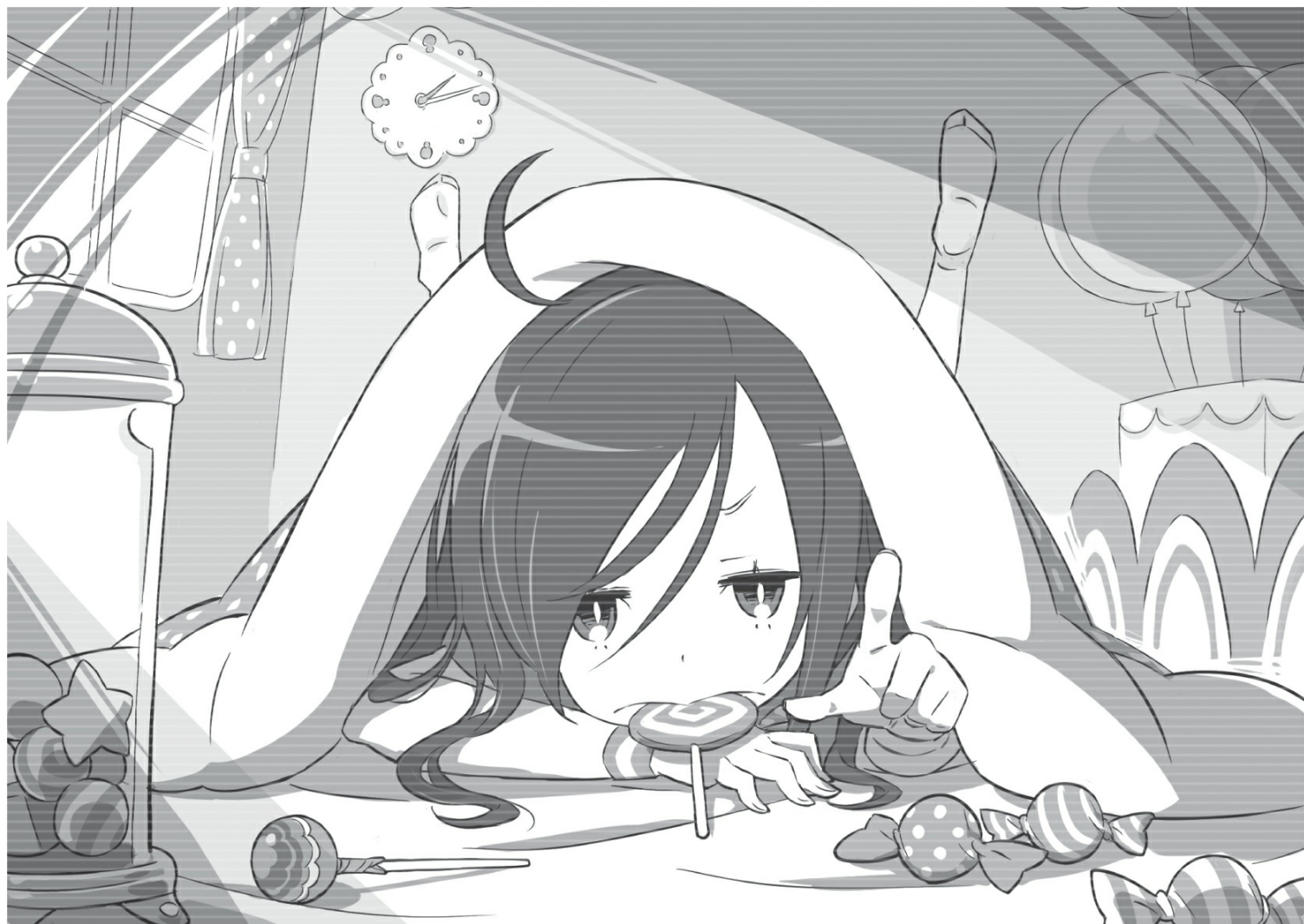
“No, just give me a moment, please,” I said as I opened my game console and clicked over to Amelie’s room. I still hadn’t checked on her for the day. I wondered if she’d be mad. “Amelie?” I looked at her bed and saw a big lump in her blanket. “Amelie, are you sleeping?”

Amelie’s face poked out from under the covers. “Nope. I’m awake. Well, I was trying to sleep, but then you dropped in, so I gave up.”

“Your familiar’s pretty amazing, Mai,” said Asagi. “It’s like she’s alive!”

“I *am* alive. Rude much?” Amelie made an indignant face and pointed at the screen in protest.

“Wait, you mean your familiar isn’t like Amelie?”



“Not at all. This type is really, really rare. So rare, I’ve never actually seen one before. They’re called Humons.”

“Humons?”

“Right. They’re monsters who can think at a more or less human level and carry actual conversations.” That described Amelie, all right. She was a Humon for sure.

“Look at this, Mai!” Amelie was fully awake. She pulled a rustling wad of candy wrappers out from under her bed.

“What’s all that?”

“My collection! I’ve got a wrapper from every kind of candy you got me! Pretty cool, huh?” Asagi had a point. There had to be something special and mysterious about Amelie for us to have conversations like this.

“Hee-hee... I’ll just have to find a bunch more candies to add to your collection.”

“All right! Thanks, Mai!” Amelie grinned widely.

“That’s really sweet,” Asagi said. “So you give her candy, huh, Mai...? That sounds nice...”

“Huh?” I said good-bye to Amelie and stared at Asagi instead.

“N-nothing! You didn’t hear anything! B-because I didn’t say anything!”

Oho, his face is red again already! Asagi blushed at the slightest thing. It was pretty endearing. “Do you want some candy, too?”

“.....” Asagi didn’t move. Actually, it was more like he was frozen solid. Did he really like candy that much? I pulled some grape-flavored hard candy out of my pocket and handed it to him.

“Here you go.”

“R-really? For me? Okay, then... Thanks, Mai.” He shyly took the candy and held it tightly in his hand. What a weirdo, right? I mean, who gets so bashful over a piece of candy?

“So what do we do now?”

“Let’s see. We should get together with the other members of the Raid Team and see what we can learn about this next event.” With that, Asagi popped the grape candy into his mouth and smiled.

“Great idea. We can try discussing things with Sugiura later.”

“Yeah.”

“Um, do you want me to throw that candy wrapper away for you?” I asked.

“Nah, it’s fine,” said Asagi, stuffing the wrapper into a pocket in his school uniform. Then, after puzzling over something for a bit, he pulled it back out.

What in the world is he doing?

“Sorry. Would you toss it for me after all? I’d like to hang on to it, but I also don’t want to be, y’know...some gross guy who hangs on to that kinda stuff.”

“.....? Uh, okay. Gotcha.”

“...Haaah.” Asagi sighed deeply. For some reason, he looked sad.

From that day onward, the Raid Team devoted ourselves to gathering information about the next event. But two weeks went by, and we hadn’t learned a single thing.

In the meantime, I focused on raising my level. Sugiura had raised his game ranking all the way up to third place—and since I was fighting along with him and the others, my level shot steadily upward.

“Congratulations on hitting level one hundred fifty, Mai!”

“Thanks a lot!”

“Where to next? I’ll let you choose this time, Mai,” said Sugiura.

“Okay! Thank you!” Truth be told, though, it was too hard for me to choose.

“Tell you what, Mai,” Taichi piped in. “You’ve already hit a pretty high level for now. What d’you say we change gears and spend today getting some new skills instead?”

“Skills, huh...?” He had a point. Except for the Master Negotiator skill that

Naomi sent me, I hadn't earned any skills at all. That settled it! "Yeah! Let's do it."

"All right, in that case, Taichi should be enough backup," said Sugiura. "I've got other stuff to do. Try an' keep up, Asagi!"

"Huh? I have to go with you?"

"Yeah. This probably ain't somethin' I can take care of on my own."

"...G-got it," Asagi said. He shot me a look that said he was sorry to leave me.

"...I can read you like a book, y'know that?" Sugiura spat.

"Huh?"

"Forget it. Let's move."

"Okay... See you later, Mai!"

"See you!" And with that, Sugiura and Asagi left the club room.

"Check it out, Mai. I already picked us out a stage to hit up." Taichi showed me the map he'd chosen: the Haunted School.

"Sheesh. Between the Forest of the Dead and now this, Nightmare sure has a lot of spooky spots."

"You got that right. Then again, it's no ordinary game."

They wouldn't have called it Nightmare if it wasn't supposed to be scary. It couldn't have been an accident that playing the game felt like having a bad dream.

"All right, let's get going! You should be able to handle all the bad guys in this stage, Mai," said Taichi, "but I'll pull my weight, too!"

"Okay!"

I chose **Haunted School** from the menu and entered the stage.

[Mai Yashiro] Level 150

Current Equipment: • **Adept's Robe**

- **Book of Prophecies**

- **Adept's Boots**

- **Ring of Evasion (level 3) Ranged Weapon:**
- **Enchanted Bow Castable Spells (Job Skills):**
- **Dark Heal**

- **Destroy**

- **Death Roulette**

Usable Skills (Weapon Skills):

- **Prophecy of Sleep**

Into the Haunted School

Our avatars stood in the entranceway of an abandoned school building.

"It looks like there are a hundred and two people in this stage," I said. Since the maintenance period had ended, we could see how many players were in a particular area. That was a new feature they'd added to Nightmare.

"Seems that way," Taichi said. "Still, it's a big stage. We probably won't bump into many of 'em." He was looking at a map of the entire area that spread across his laptop screen.

"Have you been to this stage before, Taichi?"

"Plenty of times. Heh-heh-heh... It can be pretty scary for beginners, though!" Taichi brought his hands up in front of him and wiggled his fingers, doing his best spooky ghost impression.

"Ugh, cut it out. Please," I said. "You're right, though—this stage is huge. It's not just the school building, but there's the field, a back garden, and even a pool we could explore."

"I'd steer clear of the pool if I were you. There's this super-strong ghost girl who hangs out around there," Taichi said with a creepy grin. He had me really freaked out about the whole stage. I mean, I wasn't exactly crazy about the name *Haunted School* to begin with, but he wasn't helping. "But remember, you've got me with you, Mai. If there's any spot you wanna check out, we can make it happen."

"O-okay." I moved my character up to the entrance to the school. There were huge cracks in the windows, and someone had left messages on the wall in

huge, red, spray-painted letters.

**YOU WON'T GET AWAY WITH THIS!
DIE!**

I'LL KILL YOU!

I'M ALWAYS WATCHING YOU...

"Can't say I like that graffiti."

"You can say that again... Wait, that's weird."

"What's weird, Taichi?"

"I dunno...but I don't think that fourth one was there last time I came here."

"Huh? When was that?"

"Before Nightmare went down for maintenance."

Did that mean they'd added the "I'm always watching you" bit during maintenance?

"You're just trying to scare me again, aren't you, Taichi?"

"Not this time," Taichi said. With a laugh, he snapped back to his usual sunny demeanor. "C'mon, let's take a look around!"

Sheesh! Wasn't he scared at all? Then again, he had a point. If we just stayed in the entranceway, we'd only end up wasting time. I made my way past the shoe shelves and into the hallway. It split off to the left and right. So which way should we go?

"This part of the stage is shaped like the letter H," said Taichi. "Here on the first floor, we've got the nurse's office, first-year classrooms, and the principal's

office.”

“I see. Is there anything in the classrooms?”

“Treasure chests spawn in there at random, but they never really have anything that great inside ’em. The real loot is in the third-floor music room and up on the roof.”

“Is that so?”

“Oh, and enemies don’t spawn in the second-floor home ec room, so it’s a good spot to heal up. Let’s make our way there, rest up a bit, then head to the music room.”

“Roger!” I checked the music room’s location on the laptop. We’d get there quicker if we took the hallway off to the right. Well, right it was!

“Oh! Hang on a sec,” said Taichi. He fiddled with his computer and brought up another screen. This one was full of enemy names and pictures. “Hmm... The right route may be faster, but it’s got a lot more enemies that can hit us from a distance. I think we should take the left route.”

“Gotcha. Green Trier’s Nightmare page sure is convenient, huh?”

“Yep. Fair to say they’ve got the best Nightmare strategy site out there.”

Sugiura’s dad may be a real pain, but there was no denying that his company’s site really came in handy at times like this—and I was pretty sure that without Sugiura’s dad, there would be no Green Trier to help us out. Looking over their site made that clear.

I started walking down the hall to the left. There were no lights in the school building, making it dark and gloomy. Our only sources of light were the moonlight coming in through the windows and an item that Taichi had called an Explorer’s Flashlight, and they didn’t provide much. The whole thing was starting to feel like a real test of courage.

To top it all off, who knew when the monsters would start showing up?

Anxiety sent my heart pounding. I gripped my game console so hard, it felt a bit like it was stuck to my hands. I was definitely glad I wasn’t alone. I know it was just a game, but it was still super scary.

We reached the end of the hallway and saw that it branched off to the left and right again.

“We’re going right this time,” said Taichi, giving directions while checking his computer. I followed his instructions.

Almost right away, two black shadows appeared before my eyes. What were they? Monsters?!

“Hit ‘em with Ranged Attacks, Mai!”

Gulp. I guess it was too much to hope that we’d make it all the way through without running into any enemies.

<<!>>

You feel something watching you from up ahead.

Crud! They spotted us! Our only choice was to fight.

I prepared my Enchanted Bow. Thanks to a little magic, it never ran out of arrows—but, as a tradeoff, it didn’t do a lot of damage.

- **Mai attacks with her Enchanted Bow!**
- **Direct hit on Hateful Shade 1**
- **[81 damage!]**
- **Hateful Shade 1 [HP: 819/900] (–81)**

All right! I hit it!

“Nice shot, Mai! Now it’s my turn...”

- **Taichi attacks with his Throwing Knife (level 7)!**
- **Direct hit on Hateful Shade 1**
- **[307 damage!]**
- **Hateful Shade 1 [HP: 512/900] (–307)**

Whoa! Taichi's attack was amazing! I mean, compared to that, I barely scratched the Shade.

"These guys move real slow, so as long as we keep pelting 'em with Ranged Attacks, we can take 'em down!"

"Okay!"

We alternated between attacking and backing up to keep our distance. After a few cycles, we destroyed one of the Hateful Shades. That meant there was just one left!

I looked toward the remaining Shade and noticed that it had rolled itself up into some kind of squatting position.

"Uh, Taichi? What's it doing?"

"Protecting itself from Ranged Attacks. We'll only be able to do half damage while it's balled up like that. Relax, we can still take it down. It's just gonna take longer."

"Got it."

We kept attacking, and sure enough, the second Hateful Shade vanished just like the first one. The battle earned us 12 CP and 300 experience points, but the Shades didn't drop any items.

"All right, let's keep it moving!"

"Roger!" Our avatars continued down the hall. The first-year classrooms were on our left, and windows on the right wall looked out upon the courtyard. "Looks like there are monsters out there, too."

There was a small pond in the school courtyard, and sitting close by it was a girl in a *yukata* and a white *kitsune* mask.

“Huh? That’s weird. Was there an enemy like that here before?” Taichi tilted his head in thought.

Meanwhile, it looked like the girl had noticed us. She gave us a small wave.

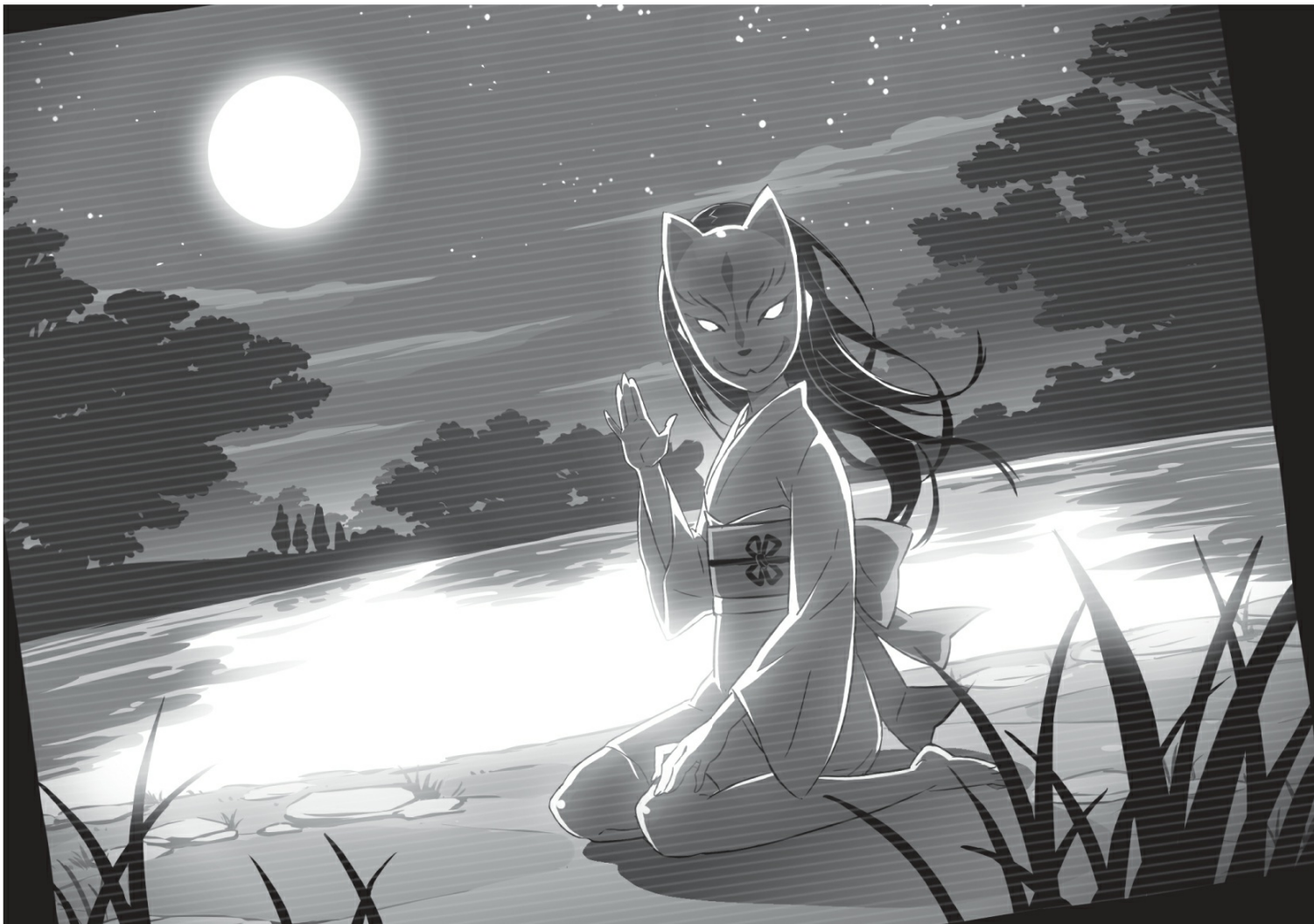
“Um, Taichi? She’s waving at us. Are you sure she’s an enemy?”

“Hmm... Not entirely. I guess she might be a support character.”

Just then, a voice suddenly called out from behind us in the club room, making both Taichi and me flinch. I knew it! Taichi was on edge, too!

“Hey, Taichi. Hey, Mai. Got a sec?” The voice belonged to the new leader of the Main Squad herself, Youko.

“Geez... What is it?”



“Okay, first off, it’s not that big a deal,” Youko said. “I just wondered if I could come along with you guys.”

“Oh, um, sure, I don’t mind,” I said, and glanced over at Taichi.

“Of course you can’t.”

Wait, what?! Taichi snickered, and Youko slapped him on the back.

“Tch! Like I care. I’ll just come along anyway!”

“Aw, c’mon, I’m kidding! No need to get all mad about it...”

“Pfft. You’re the worst, Taichi. Make sure you don’t trust this guy too much, Mai. He’s a real piece of work.”

Youko sat down next to me looking sullen. She plopped her bag down roughly on the table, and I caught a glimpse inside. She had several different handheld game consoles crammed in there.

Huh...? Did Youko play games other than Nightmare? She’d claimed games were the only thing she was good at, but I didn’t see how she could possibly have time or energy to play any other games! Personally, I could barely keep up with just Nightmare.

“So how far have you guys gotten?”

“Oh, we’re still on the first floor.” Taichi showed Youko his screen.

“Gotcha! Hang on. I’ll be there in a jiff.”

“Sure.”

Huh? Wait a second. I glanced at my console screen and noticed that, at some point, the masked girl had vanished from the courtyard.

“Taichi, the girl in the courtyard is gone.”

“For real? Maybe someone beat her while we were talking...”

I wondered if that was possible. I dunno, though. Something about it didn’t sit right.

Back in the game, our avatars met up with Youko’s, and the three of us proceeded up to the second floor.

“Are you hunting for skills too, Youko?”

“Er, who, me?” She suddenly blushed. What was that about? “I mean, no... Let’s see, where to begin? Masuda’s been here, so...”

“Who’s Masuda?” I asked. Was there anyone with that name in the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club?

“Take a look at this, Mai,” said Taichi, pulling up the player ranking screen on his laptop.

Rank 1: Kenichi Tanaka Rank 2: Ryouta Masuda Rank 3: Shinji Sugiura Rank 4: Kanae Matsukura Rank 5: Shouzaburou Akai Rank 6: Megumi Kiryuu Rank 7: Kana Imai Rank 8: Youko Teranishi Rank 9: Kouji Takezawa Rank 10: Saburou Matsui

Wha—?! Whoever this Masuda was, he was the second-highest-ranking player in the game! He was even higher ranked than Sugiura. That wasn’t all I’d learned, either...

“Whoa, Youko, you’re ranked number eight? That’s amazing!” Again, I knew she was good at games, but seeing her up that high on the list gave me a new level of respect for her skills.

“Nah, I’m really not that great. Masuda, though—now, he’s impressive.”

I mean, sure, in terms of pure rank, yeah... Either way, now I was really curious about who this Masuda guy she kept mentioning was.

“Let’s make our way to the home ec room for now,” said Taichi. “It’s not safe to sit out here and chat.”

Sure enough, at some point while we were talking, we’d wound up surrounded by Hateful Shades. We were in trouble...or so I thought. Youko blew them all away with a spell before you could say “Normal Battle.” I guess that’s an eighth-ranked player for you!!

“Phew. That could’ve gotten ugly!”

“I doubt that, with you around, Youko! That spell was incredible.”

“Oh, Mai, you know just what I wanna hear! I’ll have to give you a present later.”

“Aw, c’mon. Are you trying to steal my thunder over here...?”

“Hmm? Did you say something, Taichi?”

“N-nothing! Not at all! Ha-ha-ha...”

We continued until we finally reached the home ec room. Just as we tried to head inside, though, we heard footsteps echo down the hall we’d come through: *Takkk, takkk, takkk...*

Was it another player? Whatever it was...I had a bad feeling about it.

<<!>> You feel something watching you from behind.

Oof. An enemy. I knew it.

“Huh? Who’s that...?”

The girl in the kitsune mask was standing motionlessly farther down the hall. So she was a bad guy after all!

[]

I FOUND YOU...

I looked toward the bottom of my game screen to see a chat window, just like usual. But this time, something was wrong. Instead of an enemy name, there was a blank space.

Was it some kind of bug?

“There’s something off about this monster,” said Taichi.

“Right? Like, why’s there no name?!”

Youko’s and Taichi’s faces told me that whatever was going on, the situation

wasn't normal. The Kitsune-Masked Girl started to come closer.

[]

KYA-HA-HA-HA!

I'VE BEEN WATCHING. ALWAYS.

I'VE BEEN WAITING...

FOR YOU TO COME...

She rushed toward us like she was sliding across the floor.

"T-Taichi! Shouldn't we be running?!"

"Good call! Hurry, into the home ec room!!"

We shoved our way into the home ec classroom. We found a few more player avatars resting inside.

But what about the girl in the mask...? There wasn't any sign that she'd made it into the room. That was good. It meant Taichi was right: This was a safe spot where we could rest without worrying about enemies.

"Phew... What the heck was that?"

"Beats me. Let's look her up on Green Trier's website. She could be a rare monster. Take a look, 'kay, Mai?"

"Sure thing." I tried searching for the Kitsune-Masked Girl, but I didn't get a single hit. I pulled up the list of monsters that spawn at the Haunted School, too, but I couldn't find her anywhere.

So what was she...?

"Any luck, Mai?"

"It looks like she's an unidentified monster. There's no record of her anywhere."

Now what? The only thing we knew about the Kitsune-Masked Girl was that she was after us. She had to have been added to Nightmare during the maintenance period.

And what was with all that “watching” and “waiting” stuff? Watching who? Waiting for who?

[Miki Yano]

What’s the deal with that girl out in the courtyard?

She’s been there ever since they finished with maintenance.

She gives me the creeps.

Huh? Were the other players in the home ec room talking about the girl in the mask, too? Apparently, we were close enough to them to see their chat windows on our screens. As long as you didn’t put limits on who could read your chats, anyone nearby could see what you were talking about.

“Oh, hey, nice timing!” Taichi said. “I’m gonna do a little eavesdropping on their chat.”

“Uh, Taichi, most people consider eavesdropping rude...”

“Aw, don’t sweat the small stuff, Mai!”

He had a point. Given the circumstances, I couldn’t blame him.

[Makoto Ryuuzaki]

Same here. Can’t even get into the courtyard anymore.

I don’t get it.

We were right. They were talking about that enemy after all. But one thing seemed different: We'd seen her moving around. Why was that?

"Wait a second..."

"Hmm? What's up, Mai?"

"I dunno, I just get the feeling that the girl in the kitsune mask started moving around the stage because of me." Only one answer seemed to make any sense. The girl appeared after the Black Event. If she was waiting for someone, it had to be the one who beat that event.

And now that a player who'd beat the Black Event was close, she'd started moving. That's the only explanation that came to mind.

"I get it. You're saying that beating the Black Event makes you the key here, right?"

"Right."

"...In that case, if we can beat her, we'll probably learn something about the next event."

"But how do we do that?"

Just then, another player came rushing into the home ec room alone.

[Shuuji Manabe]

Oh shoot!

There's something really weird outside!

Weird and STRONG!

Like, "beat it and I bet it'll drop something rare" strong!

The newcomer's message caused a stir among the resting players.

The chat filled with excited messages like, **For real?** and **Let's get it!** as several

players fled the room. But at the same time, there were just as many who stayed behind with a **No way! I'm not messing with that!** or a **Nope, nope, nope.**

"What d'you say we check it out?" Taichi asked.

"Kay!" said Youko.

"Roger," I said. But I was nervous. That bad feeling hadn't gone away.

We rested in the home ec room until our HP was full again, then headed back out into the hallway. No one was there. Where had they all gone?

"Let's start by scoping out our surroundings," said Taichi.

"Got it!"

"Kay."

"Looks like we picked the wrong time to go searching for skills."

"That's for sure."

"Hey, hey! Look over there! Some players are taking on the girl with the kitsune mask."

"Whoa, you're right!"

There were three players in the fight, meaning there was room for one more to join in.

"One of us should jump in and help 'em out," said Youko.

"I nominate you, Youko," said Taichi. "You're the strongest."

"Roger that," she said, then rushed off to join the battle. We watched as the other three players' avatars fell one by one, leaving only Youko standing. The others vanished, defeated.

"What the—?!"

"Yikes, you guys," she said. "That girl's no joke!"

"Wh-what happened?"

"Her attacks hit crazy hard!! Even I took, like, three thousand damage!"

“Three thousand?!”

Youko was ranked eighth in the game! Could the Kitsune-Masked Girl really do that much damage?!

“We gotta get outta here.”

“No good. We can’t run away...”

“All right, then I guess it’s do or die time!” And with that, Taichi joined the fight. There was nothing left to do but steel myself and rush in after him.

Defeating the Kitsune-Masked Girl

[Normal Battle—Jump In]

Taichi Tango jumped into the fight!

Mai Yashiro jumped into the fight!

[Action Order]

- 1. Youko Teranishi [2,000/5,000]**
- 2. Kitsune-Masked Girl [765/800]**
- 3. Taichi Tango [5,000/5,000]**
- 4. Mai Yashiro [5,000/5,000]**

<<Turn 64: Youko>>

- Youko cast Light Heal!**
- Youko gained 2,000 HP.**
- Youko Teranishi [HP: 4,000/5,000] (+2,000 recovered)**

“I’ve got healing spells, but we’re still in trouble if this keeps up.”

“Why?”

“Cause attacks barely even work on her!” Youko was nearly sobbing. She

definitely seemed afraid.

“Let’s just do the best we can for now,” I told her. “We’ll be okay!” To be honest, I had no reason to think we’d be okay. But if there was anything I could do, it was try to reassure her.

“Yeah. You’re right.”

<<Turn 65: Kitsune-Masked Girl>>

- **The Kitsune-Masked Girl laughs behind her mask...**
- **Kitsune-Masked Girl [HP: 765/800]**

“Oh, that’s lucky,” said Taichi. “She didn’t attack this turn.”

“That’s the thing. She doesn’t attack on her own. But she’ll counter any attack you send at her. And those counterattacks took pretty much all of those other players out in one hit.”

“So how do we fight her...?” I asked.

“Either way, I’m up next,” said Taichi. He thought for a moment, then picked an action.

<<Turn 1: Taichi>>

- **Taichi took a stance to reduce damage to a minimum.**
- (Guard)**

Aha. We always had the option to guard. It was my turn next, and I used my Dark Heal spell to restore Youko to full HP.

“Thanks, Mai!”

“Don’t mention it.”

“Wait, Mai, that spell tops off the target’s HP?” Taichi asked.

“That’s right,” I said. I’d tested it out on some minor enemies before, so I knew what it did. I’ve gotta admit the word *Dark* in the name still worried me a little bit, but in the end, it seemed like a normal healing spell to me.

“In that case, leave all the attacking to me,” said Youko. “As long as Mai keeps healing me, we should be able to take her out, don’tcha think?”

Good thinking, Youko! It just might work.

“All right, let’s go with that plan!”

Sticking to that strategy, we managed to get the Kitsune-Masked Girl down to 300 HP. Yes! If we keep this up, we can win...

But just then...

[Ryouta Masuda]

Stop! Don’t beat that monster!

There’s new graffiti in the music room.

“The girl in the mask only opens her heart to those who show kindness and patience till twenty pass.”

You get what that means, right?

“Huh? Who’s that?”

“It’s Masuda!”

“Oh! You know him, right, Youko?”

“Nah. I mean, I admire him, but it’s a one-way street. But even just from his posts online, you can tell he’s really thoughtful, and gentlemanly, and... Well, everyone loves him!”

She was smiling so dreamily, it looked like her face could melt right off her

skull. You never would have guessed we were fighting for our lives.

“What’s that stuff about ‘kindness and patience,’ though...?”

“It means not to attack for twenty turns, I bet,” said Taichi.

“That makes sense,” I said. In the chat, I told Masuda that we understood his warning, and thanked him for the heads-up. Right after that, Masuda jumped into the fight himself—to stop another who didn’t know what they were doing from taking up the fourth space, I assume. I could see what Youko meant when she said he was thoughtful.

“Oh, I wonder if Masuda would join our party...”

“Why don’t you try inviting him?” I suggested. “You could at least ask to add him to your Friends list.”

“No way. I don’t have that kind of guts. What if he says no? It’d, like, crush me.”

We had five turns left to go. We all just kept guarding and let the turns pass us by.

“How ’bout if I ask him?”

“You’d do that? Really? Please, Tachi! Do it! Please!” Youko clasped her hands in front of her face as she pleaded.

“No sweat. As soon as this fight’s over, I’ll try reaching out to ’im.”

“Kay!”

One turn to go. I chose to guard without a second thought.

And then...

[Draw]

The Kitsune-Masked Girl left with a grin.

<<Dropped Item>>

[Event Ticket (Blue)]

※This item is transferrable.

“An event ticket!” Youko shouted.

“Whoa, for real? I didn’t get one,” said Taichi.

“I did,” I said. “Maybe it’s a matter of probability.”

“I received one, too,” said Masuda.

“Aw, man... I’m the only one who didn’t get anything? That stinks...”

Masuda’s avatar came over toward ours.

[Ryouta Masuda]

Excuse me if I’m wrong, but aren’t you the Mai Yashiro who beat the Black Event?

Oh! He was talking to me through the in-game chat. After sharing a brief glance with Youko, I told him that yes, that was me.

[Ryouta Masuda]

I thought so. In that case, take this. I don’t need it.

Masuda passed me his ticket for the Blue Event. Now, together with Youko’s ticket, we had three in total. I sent Masuda a quick thank-you, and he immediately responded with words of encouragement and told me that the other players were rooting for me.

“Oho, looks like you guys are getting along,” said Taichi. “This could be the perfect timing for you to ask if we can add him to our Friends lists.” It was true—that would be totally natural. I typed a message into the chat.

[Mai Yashiro]

Would you mind if we added you to our Friends lists? It kind of feels like we were meant to meet you here.

[Ryouta Masuda]

Go ahead. Actually, I was just thinking about sending you a Friend request myself.

I'm as eager as anyone to beat Nightmare, so if there's anything I can do for you, please don't hesitate to let me know!

Yesss! Youko and I looked at each other, and needless to say, she looked super happy!!

"The second-highest ranked player, huh?" said Taichi. "That's a pretty powerful friend to make. Plus, we scored another Event Ticket, too. Sugiura's gonna flip his lid."

"Yeah! I may not have found any new skills, but this little outing really paid off anyway."

"What d'you say we call it a day and split? We can come back and search for skills later."

"Sounds like a plan," I said. We said our good-byes to Masuda and left the stage.

Phew! That wore me out. I leaned back in my chair and stretched as far as I could.

"Here ya go, Mai," said Youko. "Take my Event Ticket, too."

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Now that I look at it, you and Asagi can bring one other person along this time. Your names are already on it. I figure Sugiura should be the third.”

“I see...”

“Win it for us, Mai!” she said. “Oh, but if Sugiura can’t make it, I’ll totally come along!!”

“C’mon, now!” Taichi butted in. “If Sugiura’s out, I wanna go!” I was caught between the two of them—literally.

“What’re you guys talkin’ about?” At some point during the squabble, Sugiura and Asagi walked up behind Taichi.

“Oh, uh, we just got our hands on some Event Tickets...”

“Are you kidding me?!” Sugiura blurted out. Next to him, Asagi looked equally surprised. His eyes were as big as dinner plates.

“How did you get them, Mai? Can you give us the details?”

Sugiura and Asagi leaned closer to us.

“Sure thing,” I said. Then I walked them through what had happened at the Haunted School.

“Wow. You guys not only snagged some Event Tickets, but you met the number two ranked player in the game...”

“Yeah, pretty impressive,” said Sugiura. “All right, Mai. Pass me and Asagi those tickets.”

“Huh? Um, okay.” That settled it, then. Asagi and Sugiura would be participating in the Blue Event with me after all.

“We’ll do the event tomorrow. Got it?”

“Got it.” As soon as I answered, Sugiura gathered up a stack of papers from the table and quickly left the club room. “Is Sugiura really busy or something?”

“Yeah. He’s a candidate to take over as the next CEO of Green Trier, Inc. Being busy comes with the territory. It sounds like his dad’s been passing a lot of work on to him so he can get a feel for the job.”

“That sounds rough...,” I said. “I wonder if Sugiura really wants to follow in his dad’s footsteps in the first place.”

“Yeah,” said Taichi. “I’m pretty sure he does.”

“Huh?! Really? I mean, I thought he pretty much hated his dad...”

“Sure, but Sugiura keeps saying he’s gonna beat Nightmare, no matter what it takes. Taking over Green Trier would definitely give him a leg up on that. That’s what Sugiura’s after. It’s not about what his dad wants.”

“You may be right, but still...”

“Come to think of it, though, Sugiura’s got an older brother, doesn’t he?”

Wait, really? He definitely didn’t give off “little brother” vibes. It was strange to imagine.

“Apparently, his big brother’s more easygoing and really hates getting too much attention, so he’s not gonna wanna be CEO.”

“Is that so? I guess there are all kinds of people in the world.”

“There sure are,” said Taichi. “Personally, I hope Sugiura takes the reins on Green Trier, too.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause I wanna work for him, that’s why. He’s a natural-born leader.”

I could see that. Sugiura had a way of getting the club to follow him.

“In other words, Sugiura wouldn’t be taking over Green Trier just because his dad told him to. He’s got his own reasons for it.”

“Bingo. He says he’ll outdo his dad and take the company even further, too.”

“Outdo his dad?”

“That’s just the kind of guy Sugiura is.”

Hunh. Sugiura really was always a step or two ahead of me. I was impressed.

“Sugiura may be scary,” said Taichi, “but I think I’d like to work at a company where he was the CEO.”

“But if I know Sugiura, he’d probably take stuff like company entrance exams

really seriously,” I said. “I don’t think he’d let someone coast into Green Trier, even if he knew them.”

“...Yeah, you’re right.”

“...Definitely not.” Taichi and I made eye contact and spoke at the same time.

“I guess that might make us rivals, huh, Mai? Ah, well. I’m sure it’ll all work out somehow. Ha-ha! Anyhoo, I’m gonna go let everyone know we’ve got our team for the event.” Taichi grinned all the way out of the club room.

That left Youko, Asagi, and me. Youko looked at me with a worried expression on her face.

“That’s all, like, really sudden. Are you gonna be okay, Mai?”

“Y-yeah. Sugiura and Asagi are both strong players, so...I think we’ll manage.”

I wasn’t confident about that, though. Still, there was no other choice. I wanted to break free from Nightmare as soon as I possibly could.

“Wanna try to delay our departure a bit, Mai?” Asagi asked. “I could try talking to Sugiura about it.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Are you sure? Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“I won’t.”

“And I-I’ll be right there with you.” It goes without saying that Asagi’s face was starting to turn red again. He looked down at the table. I knew I had to give him an extra-enthusiastic answer so he’d know that I knew I could count on him.

“Right! Thanks so much, Asagi!”

“I—I mean it, though. Don’t push yourself too hard. I worry about you, y’know?”

“I know you do...” Asagi was really, really concerned for me. I’ve mentioned he’s a super-nice guy, right?

...Still, he brought it up so much that it was starting to get to me. If anything, it made me feel less sure. Was I really that unreliable?

“Yeesh. C’mon, Asagi, lay off it a bit. You’re putting Mai on the spot, here. There’s such a thing as *too* protective, y’know.”

“Huh?”

Youko eyed Asagi with an exasperated look. She probably could’ve put it a bit more gently...

“You keep saying the same stuff over and over again! I get that you’re worried about her, really, but it’s too much.”

“...S-sorry.”

“Whatever. Take good care of Mai for me, ’kay?” Youko slapped Asagi hard on the back.

“*Ack—Koff—!* S-sure thing! You can count on me,” Asagi sputtered. He looked over at me, and I saw that his face had grown one shade of red darker. It was already about as red as it could be. “Y-you’re not gonna die in there. N-n-not as long as I’m around, at least.”

“Asagi...” Don’t get me wrong; I was happy to hear it. I just felt some other, more complicated stuff, too. If Asagi vanished like he did in the last event, I could be in real trouble. I didn’t want to see that happen again.

I spent the rest of the day talking with the others. I knew it wasn’t a last good-bye or anything, but I still felt myself shaking with the thought of ending up alone again.

Another event already... I was scared. I wondered where it would take place this time. But no matter where we went, or how scared I was, I refused to lose. I had to be strong enough to help everyone out.

I decided to check in on Amelie before I went to bed.

“Amelie?”

“Hmm? What’s up?” She was sitting in the center of her room.

“I’ve got to go play in a new event tomorrow.”

“Really? Like the one you played in last time?”

“Yeah...”

“Aw, you’ll do great, Mai! I’m cheering for you! I’m always by your side!” Amelie raised a fist and pumped it in the air a few times.

“Thanks, Amelie. I’ll give it my best shot.”

“You can always call for me if you get too scared! If anyone tries to get in your way, I’ll bite ’em till they learn what’s what!” She punctuated the thought by taking a huge bite out of the large lollipop she was holding.

“Hee-hee. Thanks. You really cheered me up!”

“Oh yeah? Great!” Amelie grinned.

As I left the Amelie’s Room screen, I made up my mind. I’d do anything and everything I could to win the next day’s event...

Entering the Blue Event

The atmosphere was tense—and I'd felt the same tension before. We were gathered in the club room that morning in order to enter the Blue Event. I never imagined that the Kitsune-Masked Girl would have Event Tickets to give us, but there we were.

I expanded the Event Ticket icon on my inventory screen for a closer look.

"My name and Asagi's are written on the tickets, just like Youko said!"

"You're right, they are," said Asagi. "I guess that means we have to participate, since we beat the Black Event."

"There's another blank space left this time around, though."

Taichi and Sugiura exchanged looks.

"So? Now what?" asked Taichi.

"I told you already, didn't I?" Sugiura said without a hint of doubt in his voice. "I'm goin' along. Obviously."

"That so? To be honest, I kinda thought maybe I could go..."

"Don't be a moron, Taichi," Sugiura hissed. "What kind of leader would I be if I just sat on my butt and made you guys do all the work?"

"Fair enough."

"So I'm goin'. Got that?"

"Loud and clear," said Taichi. "I wonder why it takes a team of three this time, though."

“Who knows? The Nightmare devs probably just decided at random.”

I wasn’t so sure, though...

Three. That number felt like it might be important.

“Okay, so when should we enter the event?”

“Right now, if you ask me,” said Sugiura. “Taichi, you gather up everyone’s in-game cash. If one of us gets knocked out, we’re gonna have to buy our way back in.”

“Roger that, boss!”

“All right. Okay, Asagi. Put my name on that Event Ticket and let’s get goin’.”

“You got it.”

As soon as Asagi finished entering Sugiura’s name, our game screens told us to put in our earphones and displayed a few warnings. It was all the same stuff it showed us before the Black Event.

Sugiura, Asagi, and I nodded at one another. It was time to head into Nightmare—and hopefully get one step closer to escaping it for good.

We absolutely couldn’t lose.

All three of us put in our earphones.

Beginning the game.

[You cannot withdraw from the game beyond this point.]

※Please note: If any non-participants attempt to remove a participant’s earphones or otherwise interfere with the game, the participants will be given a Game Over and lose their Respawn Penalties without exception.

Be careful.



An awful noise poured out of my earphones—just like the last event. The sound made me feel nauseous. At some point, that sick feeling gave way to drowsiness, and I felt my mind getting swallowed up by darkness.

.....

.....

.....

I heard a voice.

“Welcome to the World of Nightmare,” it said.

Slowly, carefully, I opened my eyes. The ceiling above me was blue. No, it wasn’t just the ceiling. Everything around me—the wallpaper, tables, beds, even bookshelves—was blue. It was kind of creepy.

I looked to either side and found Asagi and Sugiura lying on the floor.

“Heh-heh,” the voice laughed. *“I knew you’d find your way here.”*

“...Kamisawa?” I asked as I picked myself up off the floor.

“I’m honored that you remembered.” Kamisawa sounded as gentlemanly as ever, but I knew that he was not to be trusted. He was the top administrator of Nightmare, after all. If it wasn’t his fault that we were all in this mess, whose could it be?

“Why are you doing this, anyway?!”

“...Why? You and your friends sure do get hung up on reasons.”

“Well, none of what you’re doing here makes any sense!”

“That’s all well and good. You don’t need to understand it,” Kamisawa said with a snicker. *“Now, allow me to explain the event.”*

“Hang on! The others aren’t even awake yet!”

“Oh, are they not? How rude of me,” said Kamisawa.

Hmm? Did that mean he couldn’t see us? I decided to test that theory by picking a book up off the nearby table and tossing it.

The book hit the floor with a loud *whump!*

"...What was that noise?" asked Kamisawa.

"...Noise? Oh, right. A book just fell off one of the bookshelves."

"Did it, now? I see."

Aha! If Kamisawa couldn't see us, then where was his voice coming from? I woke Asagi and Sugiura and started checking our surroundings.

"Uuugh... Where are we?"

"We're in the Blue Event," I told Sugiura. *"Asagi, please get up, okay?"*

"...Ngh..." Asagi groaned and rubbed his eyes as he stood.

"What's with this place? The ceiling's all blue... Wait, it's not just the ceiling! Everything in the room, it's..."

"Yeah. I dunno what it is, but somethin' about the monochrome paint job makes me wanna hurl." Sugiura was right. It was definitely unsettling.

"Oh? You don't care for the decor, do you? How terribly unfortunate."

"Who's there?!"

"My name is Kamisawa, and I'm the head administrator of Nightmare. It's my pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"You're tellin' me this is all your fault...?"

Meanwhile, I'd figured out that Kamisawa's voice appeared to be coming from a blue speaker attached to the ceiling. It didn't look like we'd be able to destroy it. It was clear that we were better off not having any important conversations in this particular room—or else Kamisawa would probably overhear them.

"Now, allow me to explain the event. Please look at your battle screens. In the last event, your screens were split into two. Since there are three of you playing this time, one of those two has been split yet again."

"I take it our biggest screen shows our own information, then?"

"Precisely."

“Yeah, yeah, enough about that crap,” snapped Sugiura. “Just tell us how to win, already!”

Kamisawa sighed. *“My, my. It appears we’ve got a potty mouth. Ah, no matter. As long as you can find the key and reach the Victory Application Point, you win—no matter how vulgar you might be.”*

“Those are the same rules as the last event. I’m guessing you’re not going to tell us where the key is?” Asagi asked. The cold tone in his voice suggested he’d already given up hope of that.

“You guessed correctly.”

Yep, going by everything Kamisawa told us, the general structure of the event hadn’t changed much. Which meant...

“There’s a boss this time, too, right?”

“You’ll have to find out for yourself. Now then, let the game begin.”

What gives? Was that the whole explanation? Kamisawa sure may have sounded polite, but when it came to withholding critical details, he was as nasty as could be. As soon as he finished talking, no more sound came from the speaker.

“So what do we do now?” asked Asagi as he looked around the room.

“Good question. Let’s start by searching this room. There might be an item or two in here.”

“By items, do you mean Skill Chips?”

“Exactly. Just be careful what you pick up, please. We can only carry ten items each.”

“Right. Got it.”

Now, then. Where to begin searching? Right away, my eyes fell on a small chest with three drawers right next to a bed. I walked over to it and opened the first drawer. There was a ballpoint pen inside. I pulled open the second drawer to find a single piece from a jigsaw puzzle.

What the heck is this doing here? I picked up the piece for a closer look. There

was some sort of pattern on it, but I couldn't tell what. I wondered what we'd see if the puzzle were completed—but we didn't have time to worry about stuff like that. I put the puzzle piece back in its drawer and opened the third.

“...Wha—?!” My eyes went wide before I'd even had a chance to process what I'd found.

In the third drawer, there was a figurine shaped like a devil. More importantly, though, the bottom half of the figurine was shaped like a key! Could it possibly be the key we needed to finish the event? No way. It couldn't possibly be that easy. Even so, I gently reached out to take the key.

Huh? Why couldn't I touch it?

Something was wrong. Back in the Black Event, I picked up the key with ease, like it was any other item. I tried holding my game console close to the key in the drawer.

A blue light flashed on the console.

Demon Key (Blue) • Pick up this item? [Yes] / [No]

※Each player can carry up to ten items.

Hmm? I couldn't touch the key with my bare hands, but it looked like I could pick it up with my console, just like Skill Chips. I wondered why that was.

“Find something, Mai?” Asagi came up behind me while I was distracted by the key.

“Um, yeah. Look at this...” I pointed at the key in the drawer.

“What?! But that's... Geez, you found it already?”



“It looks like it’s the kind of item we can’t pick up with our bare hands, though.”

“Hunh. That’s weird. Ah, well. We should take it anyway.”

“You’re right,” I said. I chose **Yes** from the prompt on my game console.

Lemon Key (Blue) • Trap Item

※This item is cursed. You cannot discard it.

Hey! Was it just me, or did the item’s name change as soon as I picked it up? And hang on, did that say Trap Item...? Aw, maaan!

“Ugh, a Trap Item? Tough break.”

“Did you find anything yet, Asagi?”

“Oh, yeah. There was a map stuck to the wall, so I took it. Check it out.”

“It looks like this room is in the center of the event area,” I said, looking over the map Asagi found. There were five marks on it that seemed to indicate caves. One of them was right where we were, and there were four other marks all around it on the map.

“So there are four other rooms we haven’t checked yet, then.”

“Looks that way.”

I wondered where the floor boss was. We’d have to move very carefully.

“Hey, you guys! Take this,” said Sugiura. He tossed a couple brooms across the room at us.

Oop! I grabbed a broom and looked it over, trying to figure out what was so special about it. I must’ve looked like there were question marks flying around my head, because Sugiura explained without me asking.

“They’re the closest things to weapons we’ve got. It’s better than nothin’, am I right?”

“Right,” said Asagi, nodding.

“Let’s see what’s outside this room. Asagi, Mai, stay with me.”

“Roger that.”

“Yessir.”

With that, we ventured out of the starting room.

“What is this place...?”

Looking around, we realized that the room where we’d started was just a small chamber inside a much, much larger room. What had seemed like the background of the map was actually a huge room on its own. The ceiling was very high up.

“Whoa. It’s like some kind of dungeon.”

“Hey. What d’you think this is?” Sugiura noticed a stone statue directly in front of the room we’d just left. It was a statue of a knight with a sword at its hip and its head turned to look behind it. Weird.

**<<!!>> Floor Boss Approaching <<!!>> Ensouled Armor HP:
3,000/3,000**

What?! Hold on! The floor boss was headed our way already?!

Floor Boss: Ensouled Armor

I couldn't believe it, but the floor boss was already on the way. I hadn't steeled myself to face it yet or anything...!

Clank, clank! I heard something coming closer and closer.

"Tch. Time for a test run," said Sugiura. "We'll try hittin' it, and if it doesn't look like we can win, we'll run. Got it?"

"Yessir!"

"Got it."

Brooms at the ready, we stood with our backs to one another to make sure we had all directions covered. I swallowed a mouthful of nervous spit. Asagi and Sugiura were clearly nervous, too.

Clank, clank! The clanking got louder and louder. Soon enough, it grew distinct enough for us to tell what we were up against, even though the boss was still a good distance away.

"Armor... That's the sound of armor banging together."

"Yeah. Big armor, too."

"If I had to guess, I'd say it's twice... Nah, three times the size of one of us."



Did we really have to fight a bad guy that big?

The boss was a huge, walking suit of armor with a giant sword in one hand and a shield in the other. It seemed to have noticed us; the clanking grew agitated and started coming toward us even more quickly.

“Be careful, Mai. Don’t get in over your head.”

“O-okay.”

The armor was now standing right in front of us—and lifting its sword!

Oh crud! Here it comes! I dashed to the left and managed to dodge the attack. Meanwhile, Sugiura slammed his broom into the Ensouled Armor’s leg!

<<Combat Results>>

Shinji attacked!

- **The Ensouled Armor guards with its shield.**

Ensouled Armor

[HP: 3,000/3,000]

What was wrong? Sugiura’s attack didn’t do anything...but the armor hadn’t moved its shield at all. Still, it said it guarded with the shield. Something seemed fishy.

“Mai, let’s get outta here!”

“O-okay!”

Asagi grabbed hold of my hand and pulled me away as he broke into a run.

“Asagi! Get ’er into the closest room!”

“I’m on it!”

We ran with all our might, but the Ensouled Armor was too big. Its stride was so much longer than ours, it caught up with us almost immediately.

“Crap!” When Sugiura struck with his broom, he’d snapped it in half. Frustrated at his useless makeshift weapon, Sugiura heaved it at the boss.

Oh man! Was it gonna be Game Over already?!

<<Combat Results>>

Shinji attacked!

- **The Ensouled Armor guards with its shield.**

Ensouled Armor

[HP: 3,000/3,000]

The results were exactly the same. Now, though, the Ensouled Armor seemed to be angry with Sugiura. It turned on him and cut a broad, horizontal slash with its sword!

Shinji Sugiura [HP: 5,000/5,000]

<<!>> In Combat <<!>>

The Ensouled Armor attacks!

520 damage to Shinji!

[HP remaining: 4,480/5,000] (-520)

“.....?!”

“Sugiura?!”

“Don’t worry about me! Just run!”

“But...”

“Shut up and go with Asagi, already! I’ll catch up! Now scram!!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Asagi and I gave in to Sugiura’s pressure and made a break for the closest room we could find. We rushed into a room on our left. I was breathing hard, and my chest hurt.

“Mai, are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine...somehow.” But what about Sugiura? I looked down at my game screen to see how the fight was going for him.

His HP was down to 3,650. Did he get hit again?!

“A-Asagi, look...!!”

“That doesn’t look good... We’ve gotta go help him!”

“No, ya don’t.” The door swung open, and in staggered Sugiura, out of breath.

“Sugiura...! I’m so glad you’re okay!” Asagi and I smiled like a great weight had been lifted from our hearts.

“As long as we stay down by its legs, I don’t think its sword can reach us,” Sugiura muttered, rubbing his right ear. “That’s why I got away.”

“That’s good to know.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“If we stay low and focus our attacks, we just might be able to beat it.”

“Nah, Asagi. I thought so, too, but it’s no use.”

“Why not?” I asked. “We’ll never know until we try!”

“I already tried, all right?! The big scrap heap just blocks everything with its shield!” Sugiura’s rough voice made it clear that he was frustrated.

It seemed hopeless. If the Ensouled Armor really blocked everything, did that mean we couldn’t beat it?

“So what do we do...?”

“I’ll tell ya what we don’t do: sit around whimpering. We’ve gotta change up our approach. We’re not outta the game yet. Besides, we dunno for sure that the boss even has the key.”

Aha! Sugiura had a point. It was possible that the key was somewhere else.

“R-right! Come on, Mai! Let’s search the room!”

“Okay!”

We were looking around in the room directly left from the one where we’d started the event. Just like the first room, everything around us was totally blue—but in this case, “everything” only meant the ceiling and the wallpaper. What’s with this place? There wasn’t a single piece of furniture in sight. It was weird.

“...I guess we picked the wrong room.”

“Seems that way.”

“Tch. All right, on to the next one...” Sugiura pulled out the map and pointed to the lowest of the five cave marks. “Here. Let’s go.”

“Yes, sir!”

In other words, we were headed back outside, where the Ensouled Armor awaited. I’ll admit I was a little scared... Okay, okay, I was *really* scared. But we couldn’t win if we didn’t move, so I psyched myself up and stepped outside.

“Huh?! What’s going on now?”

A new message suddenly appeared on my game screen.

[You have betrayed the knight’s trust.]

• **Your enemy became stronger:**

Acquired Magic Sword

“We betrayed the knight’s trust? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t tell me we’re not supposed to run away from the boss... How else can we beat it?”

While we stood hesitantly in the doorway, the Ensouled Armor caught sight of us again. Its sword began to glow.

Yikes. That sure looked like a magic sword, all right.

“Mai!” Just as the armor swung its glowing sword in my direction, Asagi leaped in and shoved me out of harm’s way.

Taisuke Asagi [HP: 5,000/5,000]

<<!!>> In Combat <<!!>>

The Ensouled Armor attacks!

900 damage to Taisuke!

[HP remaining: 4,100/5,000] (–900)

The Ensouled Armor’s sword sent off a beam of light that slammed straight into Asagi’s back.

“.....!” Asagi’s face twisted in pain.

“Asagi!!” Oh man! What do I do?! That’s all my fault...

“I’m fine... It’ll take more than that to bring me down. I’m just glad you’re safe. I... I told you I’d protect you, didn’t I?”

He was still more worried about me, even at a time like this. The Ensouled Armor set its sword on the floor and rested. Maybe using that Special Move tired it out.

“Hey, looks like now’s our chance,” said Sugiura. “If we can snag that Magic Sword, we just might have a shot.”

“That’s not gonna happen, Sugiura,” said Asagi. “That sword’s way too huge

for us to use...”

“Then what’s your plan, smart guy?!”

“Well...”

I kept thinking back to the message about how we’d “betrayed the knight’s trust.” We had to think of some way to deal with it. And fighting may not be my strong suit, but thinking? That’s my jam!

I glanced over at the Ensouled Armor again. Hmm... To be honest, it didn’t really look very knightly to me. It was way too different from the knight statue we saw outside the starting room.

...Huh? Hang on a sec!

I thought back to how that statue of the knight faced toward the rear. Maybe, just maybe, it meant something. I mean, statues like that usually face the front, right? But for some reason, that particular statue showed the knight looking back... Maybe it was showing us the right room to check. Yeah, that made some kind of sense.

Looking over the map, I noticed that the knight’s head was turned to face the northernmost room. He instructed us to go there!

“Asagi! Sugiura! I know where to go! We’ve got to go to the room at the very top of the map.”

“Up there? Really?”

“We’d better listen,” Asagi told Sugiura. “Mai’s an ace when it comes to solving riddles.”

“Oh yeah? Gotcha. All right, Asagi, try an’ keep up!”

The Riddle of the Stone Statues

While our enemy rested, we ran to the topmost room on the map. Just like every other room we'd seen so far, it was totally blue. At least I was starting to get used to it.

This room, however, was much larger than the others. It made me think of a huge dining hall in a castle or something. Several tables had been lined up to create a super-long banquet table. Two chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and between them was one large lamp under a big, round cover—definitely not something you see every day.

It was strange. I mean, you'd think there'd be a bigger chandelier in the middle, right? That would look way better.

Last of all, there were three stone statues lined up in a row near the entrance. They looked like they might have some special meaning.

“What kinda room is this supposed to be?”

“Look, there are more statues.”

One of the three statues looked like a princess. Three Skill Chips sat in her outstretched hand.

Next to the princess stood a statue of an old man. He held a box, and inside that box were keys. A lot of keys.

The third and final statue was a knight. He was striking a warlike pose, but his hands were totally empty.

I decided to look over the princess statue first.

[Skill Chip]

Summon Sword (1/1)

[Effects]

Summons a weapon that you can use for five minutes.

[Requirements]

None

All three Skill Chips held the same skill. We each picked up one with our game consoles.

“Ugh, only five minutes?”

“Looks that way. We’d better save them for an emergency.”

“Yeah, good thinking.”

Next, it was time to check the old man.

“It’s probably too much to hope that one of these keys is the real thing, huh?”

“Hard to say. I mean, it’s possible, but...”

“But what?”

“But if we grabbed them all with our consoles to check, we’d run out of inventory space right away. We wouldn’t be able to pick up anything else,” I said.

“Right. And there’s no way to know that they aren’t all fakes.”

“So what do we do with ’em? Forget ’em for now an’ come back later?”

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking,” I said.

“Heh,” Sugiura snorted. “Y’know, you’re usually pretty slow, but you really shine in times like this.”

“Wh-what’s that supposed to mean...?” I mean, it was just plain uncalled for! He could’ve left the “you’re usually pretty slow” part out! I was doing the best I could!

“Settle down, Mai. It’s a compliment. Look,” Asagi whispered.

Aha! Sure enough, Sugiura was rubbing his ear. Which apparently meant he was feeling bashful about something. I made a mental note to get Taichi to tell me more of Sugiura’s signs later.

“See?”

“Yep!”

Asagi and I snickered. Sugiura watched us with a strange look on his face. “What? In case you didn’t notice, we’re in a tight spot, here. What’s so funny?”

“Um, nothing. Nothing at all.” Phew. That was a close one. If we really ticked Sugiura off, we’d probably have better chances with the Ensouled Knight. (Just kidding. Maybe.)

We continued our search. Standing in front of the third statue, I noticed a note on it.

[Knight Statue]

Please make me a proper warrior again.

“How’s he expect us to do that?”

“Maybe there’s something else we can use in this room somewhere.”

“Better take a look.” The three of us split up again and spread out to search the whole room. Was there anything else that seemed as crucial as the three statues...?

I took down a picture that hung on the wall and set it on the table behind the statues. There was something strange about it, too. Looking closely, I saw that it was actually a puzzle, made up of lots of pieces put together—but a few pieces

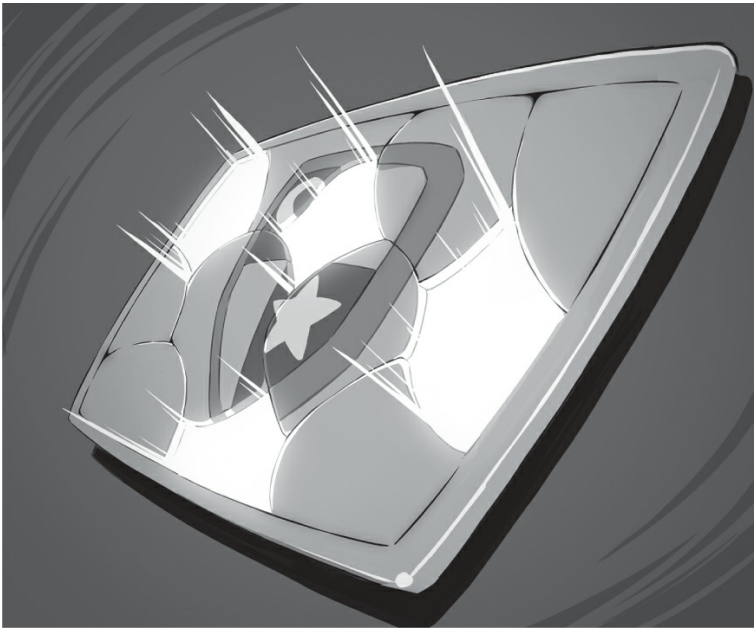
here and there were missing.

Maybe the piece in the starting room was one of them. Still, that wouldn't be enough to finish the puzzle. There were four pieces missing in total, which meant there were probably three more out there somewhere. Hmm...

"Hey, Mai! Come see this!"

"Huh?"

Asagi had found a stone slate with writing carved into it.



[Seal away the accursed shield, lest victory forever escape thee. Piece be upon the brave who fear no danger.]

Hang on...! I thought. I looked back at the puzzle. No doubt about it, it depicted a shield.

“Look, Asagi! If we can finish the puzzle and complete the picture of the shield, I bet something’ll happen!”

“So that’s the puzzle, huh...?”

“Right. We found a piece back in the starting room, remember?”

I wasn’t sure about the “fear no danger” stuff, though. Did that mean the rest of the pieces were in the other rooms? But if we went around to check, there was always a chance we could end up getting suckered by another trap room and make the boss even stronger. Besides, the last room we checked didn’t have anything that looked like a puzzle piece in it.

“The only danger I can see is that boss,” said Sugiura. “Sounds like we gotta take it out after all.” He must’ve come up behind us at some point and overheard.

“...! That must be it. It’s definitely the most dangerous thing around here.” The reasoning made sense.

“So if we’ve got to be brave and ‘fear no danger’ to earn the other pieces, then...”

“Exactly. The pieces must be out in the field where the boss is. This place and the starting room are the only rooms that aren’t traps. We’d better stay out of the rest.”

“Roger that. If we do, it’ll only make that armor stronger.”

“That’s my theory, at least.”

“All right, me an’ Asagi will go look around,” said Sugiura. “Mai, you stay here.”

“Huh?! But why...?”

“‘Cause you’re slow. If we gotta run, you’re the one who’s most likely to get snagged by that clanking clod out there.”

“.....” There was no arguing with that. Oof. Curse my unathletic body!

Still, I couldn’t just sit around in the dining hall doing nothing. Especially not if Asagi and Sugiura were outside, working hard without me.

“Um, Sugiura?”

“What? You got a problem, Asagi?”

“No, just an idea. Why don’t we distract the enemy while Mai heads back to the starting room? She can grab the first puzzle piece for us.”

“Yeah, that might work. Good thinkin’. You up for it, Mai?”

“Yes! I’ll get it done!” All right! Now I had a role to play, even if it was a minor one. Still, I decided to play it as best as possible. I knew I couldn’t press my luck and demand to be the star of the show. I knew very well that it’d be pointless—and I’d only drag everyone down with me. Strength is important, but it’s not everything. I had to trust in people other than myself.



...Yeah. They're stronger than I am, and I know I can count on them. I'll be fine!

Having convinced myself that the plan would work, I watched Asagi and Sugiura leave the dining hall. Now I just had to wait for Asagi to send me a message and let me know the coast was clear.

.....

I've gotta admit, though, I felt pretty helpless all on my own.

Oh, that's right! I know where I can get some reassurance...

"...Zzz... Zzz..."

Whoops! I peeked into Amelie's room and found her snoozing away, snoring.

"A-ha-ha! Oh, Amelie, your blankets are all over the floor!" There was something comforting about watching her. I wondered if that was what it was like to have a little sister.

I clicked on Amelie's blankets and, with the in-game menu, put them back where they belonged on her bed.

"Zzzz... Candy...? Don't mind if I do..."

"Hee-hee... You even dream about eating candy, huh?"

Just then, the message notification light on my console started blinking.

[From: Taisuke Asagi]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

.

END

Uh, what?

The entire message was just a period. It must've meant Asagi didn't have time to type any actual words. That's the kind of danger we were up against. I psyched myself up again. Even if it was just a period, it was still the signal. It was time to move...!

I opened the door and stepped out of the dining hall.

I heard the ground rumbling off in the distance. That meant Asagi and Sugiura had the Ensouled Armor's full attention.

Here goes! I took off running as fast as I could until I reached the starting room. It wasn't that far away, but the run still left me totally winded.

I hoped Asagi and Sugiura were okay.

I reached into the chest of drawers by the bed and grabbed the puzzle piece. I just had to make it back to the dining hall...

"What's all this commotion?"

Kamisawa...!

"....."

"Is somebody there?"

"....." I stayed silent as I looked up toward the speaker on the ceiling.

"Heh-heh... I see. Miss Yashiro, if I'm not mistaken. It is you, right?"

"...How could you tell?"

"Precisely because you didn't speak up. I do admire your vigilance, you know, even if we are technically enemies."

"Asagi and Sugiura are plenty vigilant, too. You can't see me, can you?"

"Oh, but you are of a whole different stock from your friends. Besides, if I'd seen you, I would've spoken up earlier."

...What was with this guy? Why did he talk like he knew us?

"All right, well, I'm gonna get out of here," I told Kamisawa.

"Ah, figured out the secret of the puzzle, have you? Bravo," Kamisawa said, but I did my best to ignore him. I didn't have time to stick around and chat

while Asagi and Sugiura were out there fighting for their lives.

I checked on their HP totals. Asagi was at 1,860 HP, and Sugiura was at 2,790. They'd taken a lot of damage!

Wh-what do I do? I felt myself starting to panic. I needed to calm down somehow. First things first, I had to get back to the room with the three statues! My job wouldn't be finished until I made it back—and I had to do my part!!

I shot out of the starting room and ran back to the dining hall. I heard the tremors again; this time, they were coming from the opposite side of the stage. I prayed that Asagi and Sugiura were okay and gripped the puzzle piece tightly as I ran.

After I made it back to the dining hall, I checked their HP again.

Huh...? What I saw on the screen made my blood run cold in an instant. Asagi's HP had fallen to 0!

Just as I was reeling from the shock, the door burst open and Sugiura came stumbling in, out of breath.

"Sugiura!!"

"...Mai, take these!" He thrust three puzzle pieces into my hands. "Asagi's gonna be back here before you know it. Don't worry 'bout that."

"O-okay, got it," I said, trying to sound as calm and composed as I could. But the truth is that I was an instant away from going into a full-blown panic. If I'd been all alone in the room, I would've freaked all the way out for sure.

Aw, man... Asagi got a Game Over again...

Asagi never ran when things got bad. I knew he'd stood his ground and fearlessly fought for us this time, too.

Since this was an event, he was unconscious, not dead. He could come back, but it would take a lot of in-game money and an hour of time. We absolutely couldn't afford to lose before he got back to us. If all of us hit 0 HP, it'd be Game Over for real. We'd fail the event.

And if we failed the event, then the demon behind Nightmare would take

away all of the Respawn Penalties we'd chosen the last time we respawned. They'd end up for sale on the Nerve Auction automatically.

At least the way events like this worked, even if you lost your feet as a Respawn Penalty, you could still run for the rest of the event. That was a unique, event-only feature. You didn't lose your Respawn Penalties in events, you only temporarily forfeited them. As long as you beat the event, you'd get them all back.

But that also made total party wipes even scarier. If everyone got a Game Over, then all of your forfeited Respawn Penalties would be taken away in the real world at once.

Sugiura let out a heavy sigh. "Asagi passed the puzzle pieces off to me and stayed behind to stop the boss! I told the idiot I'd do it, but no..."

"That's just the kind of person Asagi is. He always puts his friends first."

"...Tch. He coulda let me fend for myself, 's all I'm sayin'." But as far as Asagi was concerned, Sugiura was a true ally. And I was pretty sure Sugiura thought of him the same way.

I got the feeling that the distance between the two of them had got a lot shorter since we'd entered the Blue Event. Each of them had something the other one didn't. Nothing could be more reassuring than seeing the two of them actually work together. At least not from where I was sitting.

"C'mon, Mai. Let's finish that puzzle for now. May as well do what we can before Asagi gets back."

"Yes, sir!"

I went over to the table and fit the pieces we'd found into the empty spots on the puzzle. In no time at all, it was finished. Then a new message popped up on my console.

[Sealing Simulacrum Complete!]

The Accursed Shield is sealed away.

✕The floor boss lost its flawless defense.

All right! Now our attacks would get through to the Ensouled Armor.

“Yes! ’Bout time things started goin’ our way.”

“As soon as Asagi gets back, we can head out there and finally beat the boss!”

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about. No mercy. If we can make it hurt, it’s our fight to win,” said Sugiura. “Just one thing, though. If it takes us all out, we’re in trouble. So listen up, Mai...”

“What?”

“You an’ Asagi are gonna do the fightin’ this time. I’ve got the lowest HP out of all of us.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. If you guys get whacked, then I’ll step up to try an’ finish the job. But don’t make me use this Summon Sword chip if you can help it, you got that?” Sugiura laughed a bit as he spoke.

“Got it. I’ll give it everything I’ve got.”

“Great. You do that.”

And just like that, we were out of things to discuss. Now what? Should I come up with something else to talk about? It’d be an hour before Asagi made it back into the event. Oh man... Oh maaan... This is super awkward.

.....

But then—and I’m not sure why; maybe I just felt more comfortable now that our situation was a bit less hopeless—I suddenly felt drowsy. Huh, I guess you can get sleepy in Nightmare, too. And with that final bit of pointless pondering, my mind drifted away.

Three Working Together

“Hey! Wake up!”

Huh? Whose voice was that?

I woke up and rubbed my eyes. When I could see straight, I found Sugiura’s face right in front of mine.

“Wha—?! Eek!”

“What’s with the stupid scream? Still, I gotta hand it to ya for bein’ able to sleep in a place like this. You’re somethin’ else, Mai. I never get tired of watchin’ ya.” He snickered so hard, I could see his shoulders bobbing up and down.

Ugh. How embarrassing. As I started to get up, I noticed there was a jacket draped across my body.

“Huh? Wait, don’t tell me...”

Sugiura said nothing. He just made his usual scary face as he yanked his jacket off me. So he’d covered me up. See? I knew he was a nice guy deep down.

“Thank you.”

“S-sure,” Sugiura spat back. His answer may have been gruff, but I didn’t need to look at him to know that he was totally touching his ear.

“Hee-hee...”

“Tch! What’re you laughin’ at? Whatever it is, save it. Asagi just got revived.”

“He did?!”

“Yeah. Look.”

I checked my Nightmare console and saw that Asagi's HP was back up to 5,000.

"He's probably on his way here right now. Wanna wait a little longer?"

"Yeah!"

Asagi was back! This time around, all three of us would beat the event for sure. We waited for a while until the door to the dining hall creaked open.

"It's me—Asagi. I'm really sorry." He entered, shoulders slumped and apologetic.

"The heck are you apologizin' for?"

"Everyone in the Nightmare Conquerors' Club had to chip in a bunch of their in-game money for me...again."

"Gimme a break, moron. That's what the money's there for! Don't sweat it."

"...Thank you." Asagi walked over to me. "Sorry I kept you waiting, Mai."

"Welcome back. I'm just glad you're here again." I really was, too. Just having Asagi by my side again, I could feel strength welling up inside me.

"Uh, right... I mean, I was, y'know... I was really worried about how you were doing, Mai." Asagi scratched his head with embarrassment. I could feel some of his shyness rubbing off on me, too.

"Ahem!" Sugiura cleared his throat and glared at us. "Save that crap for later. We've got a boss to beat."

"Ah..."

"S-sorry."

Double-ugh. Now I was really embarrassed. Asagi's face turned an even deeper shade of red, but if Sugiura noticed, he didn't mention it. He began to lay out his plan for how we'd proceed.

"Gotcha! We won't let you down!" I said when he was done.

"Yeah. I'm countin' on you."

"Roger that," said Asagi. Then he looked over at me. "All right, Mai. Let's get

going. We'll put an end to this, just you and me."

I gave Sugiura and Asagi each a nod, then left the dining hall with Asagi. The telltale rumbling indicated that the Ensouled Armor was farther up on the map than we were for now.

"Swear that you won't get too far away from me," Asagi said, looking back at me as he took the lead. I nodded without a word, and we kept running.

Soon, the enemy was in our sights—and it was running in our direction, too.

"All right, here goes nothing! Let's summon those swords, Mai!"

"Got it!"

I looked at my game screen and selected the Skill Chip. As soon as I did, a sword wrapped in light appeared from my console. As I picked it up, I felt power flow through my entire body.

The Ensouled Armor wasn't holding its shield this time. It looked like the puzzle had worked. That meant we had a chance!

The boss charged in. I spun out of the way of its attack and moved in close to strike back.

<<Combat Results>>

Mai attacked!

- **305 damage to the Ensouled Armor!**

Ensouled Armor

[HP: 2,695/3,000] (–305)

"Nice one, Mai!"

All right! If we keep this up, we'll win in no time...!

But the enemy was already right on top of me. I fell to the ground, literally

under the Ensouled Armor's left boot. It was so heavy, I couldn't move...!

"Mai!" Asagi shouted as he plunged his sword into the armor's right leg.

<<Combat Results>>

Taisuke attacked!

- **340 damage to the Ensouled Armor!**

Ensouled Armor

[HP: 2,355/3,000] (-340)

"Hang on, Mai! I'm gonna save you!"

Mai Yashiro [HP: 5,000/5,000]

<<!>> In Combat <<!>>

The Ensouled Armor uses Press Attack!

800 damage to Mai!

[HP remaining: 4,200/5,000] (-800)

Ngh... Now what? I can barely breathe... I didn't have much chance of getting the boss's foot off me on my own. I tried pushing back over and over again, but the big armored boot didn't budge.

"F-forget about me, Asagi!" I called out. "Just keep attacking!"

Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,200/5,000]

<<!>> In Combat <<!>>

The Ensouled Armor uses Press Attack!

780 damage to Mai!

[HP remaining: 3,420/5,000] (–780)

As long as I could make a decent decoy, I wouldn't be a complete waste of space.

“...! Got it, Mai,” said Asagi. “I'll take this guy out before you run out of HP, I swear...!”

<<Combat Results>>

Taisuke attacked!

- **400 damage to the Ensouled Armor!**

Ensouled Armor

[HP: 1,955/3,000] (–400)

It was no use... I was taking way more damage than the boss was. But maybe...just maybe...it was okay if I lost as long as Asagi finished it off after I died...

“Crap! I don't care if we can bring you back later—That's not the problem... I just... I just...”

“Huh?”

Asagi thrust his sword at the Ensouled Armor again and again, taking out all the anger he felt toward himself on the boss. This made the armor angry. It picked Asagi up from down around its feet and slammed him into the ground.

“Waugh!”

Unfortunately, I was still trapped under its boot. I could hardly move an inch.

The Ensouled Armor was down to 300 HP. I had 1,070 left. Asagi was now at 3,820.

He almost had it! Come on, Asagi! Fight!!

I tightened my grip on my sword. Maybe there was some way I could stab the boss myself. I had to try. Just a little closer... Almost there!

“.....!”

My sword disintegrated like sand falling through my fingers.

“...Huh?”

N-no way... Were the five minutes up already?

I lifted my head a bit and saw that Asagi had also lost his sword. Of course he had.

My mind went totally blank.

We’d made it this far...but now we didn’t even have a way to fight back!

“Mai!” Asagi shouted as he rushed over to me. The Ensouled Armor stretched out its arm to grab Asagi again. It looked like Game Over for us. “*Mai!*”

“*Grrraaaaaah!!*” The Ensouled Armor suddenly let out a fearsome roar of pain.

Huh...? What happened? I checked my game screen to try and figure it out.

<<Combat Results>>

Shinji attacked!

• 478 damage to the Ensouled Armor!

Ensouled Armor

[HP: 0/3,000] (–478)

- **Shinji defeated the Ensouled Armor!**



“...! Sugiura?!” I turned back to see Sugiura standing behind me, breathing hard. “...Why?”

“I couldn’t stand just sittin’ back watchin’ my screen while you guys were out here fightin’,” he said. “I know I’m the one who told ya to do it. Sorry for breakin’ my own rules.”

“Don’t be! If you hadn’t shown up, we’d probably be looking at a Game Over screen right now. Please don’t apologize.”

“All right, if you say so.” Sugiura picked his sword up off the floor. It appeared that he’d thrown it at the Ensouled Armor in a last-ditch effort to save us. “Good thing I didn’t miss...”

“I’m sorry, Sugiura.”

“Huh? What is it now, Asagi?”

“I wasn’t strong enough. That’s why we ended up like this...”

“Aw, gimme a break. We beat the boss, didn’t we? That’s ‘strong enough’ in my book.”

“...Thank you.”

“Anyway, the bad guy’s toast. Now what...?” All three of us turned to look at where the Ensouled Armor was before it disappeared. In its place, there was a sword, a shield, and a suit of armor—which were all just the right size for us to handle. “What d’you think all that stuff’s for?”

I had a guess.

“Um... I think we’re supposed to put it on that statue of a knight.”

“...!”

“Aha! You might be right. All right, everyone grab a piece.”

Asagi took the armor, I took the shield, and Sugiura picked up the sword.

Whoops! I nearly stumbled under the weight, but Sugiura caught me and propped me up before I fell.

“Take it easy, Mai. We’re almost done here.”

“Are you okay, Mai?” Asagi piped in. “Can you walk? Don’t push yourself too hard!”

My legs were still trembling. I took a deep breath to calm myself and grinned at the boys. “It’s okay. I’ll manage. I’m just glad we took down another boss.”

“Yeah, me too,” said Asagi, chuckling. The three of us kept chatting all the way back to the dining hall, where the three statues awaited. I realized there were three of them, just like there was room for three players in the event this time around. Maybe that was why.

“All right, let’s get this statue fully equipped.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Roger.”

As soon as we put the sword, shield, and armor on the statue, we heard a strange clanging sound coming from somewhere around it.

“...Did something just happen?”

“Oh!” Asagi suddenly blurted.

“What’s wrong?”

“Look! Behind the statue! The floor opened up back there!”

“Does it lead down to a cellar?”

“Nah, look at the hole. Nobody’s small enough to fit in there.” With that, Sugiura bent down and peered into the new opening in the floor. “A key an’ a letter, though—that’ll fit.” He reached inside and pulled them out. He handed me the letter.

[Congratulations. You have found the real key. Please bring this key to the Victory Application Point located above.]

So this was the real key...which meant that all the keys that the statue of the old man held were duds after all.

Huh? Hang on, though... Where's the Victory Application Point? I looked over the map again, and sure enough, it was marked on the same room we were in. But what did the letter mean, "above"? There wasn't any door that led anywhere above us.

"Tch, you mean we gotta find it ourselves?" Sugiura sneered.

"Haaah," sighed Asagi. "Let's give it a shot."

I looked up toward the ceiling one more time. All I saw up there were the chandeliers and the light with the strange, round cover. There wasn't anything else in sight.

"Maybe there's an attic or something."

"Hey, look! There's a ladder over there!"

"All right, let's check it out!"

Still, no matter how hard we looked, we couldn't find any way to get up above the dining hall. Time passed steadily by, and we still weren't any closer to victory.

"Maybe we're in the wrong room."

"Lemme get this straight," said Sugiura. "We seriously can't get outta the event until we find that Victory Application Point? Is this some kinda joke?!"

"You don't think there just...isn't an Application Point, do you?"

"You're sayin' the Nightmare devs just set us up to trap us?"

"I mean, I can't say so for sure, but..."

"Tch..." Sugiura looked mad. The atmosphere in the dining hall was starting to turn sour.

...Had we really been tricked? I wasn't sure. If Kamisawa just wanted to trick us, he wouldn't have needed to go through all this trouble. I thought it was pretty unlikely, personally. But if it wasn't a trick, then why wasn't there an Application Point?

Think, Mai, think! Asagi and Sugiura beat the boss, now it's my turn. Thinking is my job.

How did we find it during the last event? We opened a door that led to a purple crystal floating in midair...

“...A crystal?” Shaken by a sudden realization, I looked up toward the ceiling again. That’s right! The Victory Application Point was a crystal. “I have an idea...”

“What’s up, Mai? Did you notice something?”

“That cover over the light is pretty unusual, don’t you think?” Now that I looked at it again, the big, round cover hung over a really large space on the ceiling. There had to be something hidden under it.

“Y-you think it’s behind there?!”

“Probably.”

“All right, then let’s get it open!”

“Hang on. Get this table right under it, first. That’d be safer.” We moved one of the tables in the dining hall under the light and climbed upon it. I reached up and pulled off the cover over the light.

“...!!”

Underneath the cover, there was a ring-shaped fluorescent lamp—and lodged in the middle of the ring was a crystal.

“Yesss! We win!”

Sugiura pulled out the crystal and held it in his hand.

Apply for Victory Cancel

Apply for Victory and Return

We chose **Apply for Victory and Return**. The next instant, the crystal let off a flash of light so ridiculously bright that all of us struggled to keep our eyes open. I gave in and shut mine.

<<Victory Report>> † Player 1 †

Mai Yashiro HP: 1,070/5,000

<Items Held> 1/10

• Lemon Key (Blue)

† Player 2 †

Taisuke Asagi HP: 3,820/5,000

<Items Held> 0/10

† Player 3 †

Shinji Sugiura HP: 2,790/5,000

<Items Held> 0/10

※This certifies that these three players have completed the Blue Event.

Victory Bonus (To be delivered later) ※Once you return to your world, Nightmare will enter a maintenance period.

Smile, Everyone!

When I opened my eyes again, I was back in the usual spot: the Conquerors' Club room. As my eyes adjusted, I saw that the whole club was crowded around us.

"They're awake! All three of 'em are awake...!"

"Well? How'd it go?"

"How am I supposed to know that yet?"

"Sheesh! We just gotta ask 'em!" Youko said, leaning in close to us while everyone shot her sideways glances. "Hey, you did it, right? I mean... You beat the event, didn't you?" The way she was grinning, though, you could tell she already knew the answer.

"We sure did!" I said, answering her grin with one of my own. The next instant, the whole club room erupted into cheers. Everyone was overjoyed. If I wasn't sure that we'd gone through all that trouble for a reason before, I sure was now.

"You really crushed it in there, Mai," Asagi said with a smile from the seat next to mine.

"Thanks. I'm just glad it worked out."

"I'd like to say that's the end of all this, but...I really doubt it. Still, I'm not worried. As... As long as I'm with you, I think we'll see it through to the end."

"Asagi..."

Yeah. I thought so, too. I figured I could overcome just about any trouble with

Asagi by my side.

He gave me another one of his shy looks. Naturally, his face was bright red.

“And now Nightmare’s gonna be under maintenance again for a while...”

“Yeah.”

Huh? What’s up? Asagi’s acting even more restless than usual.

“Um, Mai... Maybe if you don’t mind, we could, y’know... Go somewhere to blow off some steam...”

“C’mon, Asagi, no fair runnin’ off on your own! Lemme get in on it, too,” said Taichi.

“Huh?!”

“Or wait, are you tryin’ to go off somewhere with Mai alone? Most people would call that a date, y’know.”

“A da... D-d-d-da... I don’t... I mean, I...” Asagi turned even redder—and I blushed right along with him.

Geez, Taichi! Why’d he have to go and toss the D-word out like that with everyone watching...?

“Just saying, honesty’s the best policy.”

“Okay, no. I—I would like to go somewhere with Mai, that’s all.”

“Somewhere like on a date.”

“What?!”

Oof. Honestly, I would’ve enjoyed going somewhere with Asagi, too...but if I mentioned it now, I’d never hear the end of it from Taichi.

“All right, that’s enough of that,” Sugiura jumped in with life-saving timing. “C’mon, Taichi. Quit pushin’ people’s buttons so much.”

“Fiiine. Sorry.”

Phew. Sugiura to the rescue... Then, all of a sudden—

Pow! A party cracker went off somewhere in the club room and stole my attention.

“Congratulations on beating another event!” Everyone in the club room smiled and clapped.

“I knew you could do it, Mai! You must be pretty worn out. I prescribe something sweet!”

“What are those, Naomi?”

In her hands, she held a plate that was piled high with little cakes of all kinds. Whoa! They were almost too cute to eat—but they looked too delicious not to, too! Gimme, gimme, gimme!

“I made ’em myself! Here!”

“Hold it right there! If anyone’s gonna pack Mai and the guys full of sugar, it’s gonna be me!” Youko darted in between us with a plate of her own. It was full of cookies—or at least I think they were cookies. They were all oddly shaped, not to mention charred black.

“Um, Youko, aren’t those...a little overcooked?”

“Hmm? You think so?”

“There’s no way those are tasty.”

Honestly, I was a teeny bit scared to try them... Seriously, when I say they were charred black, I mean pitch-black. I wasn’t entirely sure they were even edible.

“Ugh. Fine. I’ll give ’em to Sugiura. He doesn’t really like sweets anyway, so they’re perfect!”

I got the feeling that wasn’t really the issue.

“...That will only make Sugiura mad,” mumbled Hirata as he passed by our table.

Next, it was Yoichi’s turn to comment. He sighed. “You’re not really going to feed those to someone, are you...? You’re impossible. No common sense whatsoever.”

“Ugh! Gimme a break! I worked really hard on these!” Youko’s eyes were tearing up. I think she honestly had been worried about us.

“Um... It’s the thought that counts. I really appreciate it,” I said.

“You do?!” Youko’s eyes glistened.

“I know, Youko,” Naomi said with a giggle. “Why don’t I teach you how to bake?”

“You mean it?! Jackpot! Teach me, teach me! I wanna cook up something really tasty for Masuda.”

“Oh? Are you planning on meeting up with Masuda again soon?”

“Nah, no plans yet,” Youko answered, “but I bet that day’s gonna come. So I gotta be ready.” Her eyes were still glistening. It was adorable.

“Would you like me to teach you, too, Mai?”

“Me?”

“If you worked at it, you could make something to give Asagi,” Naomi whispered. “He’s always helping you out, isn’t he?” She kept her voice down, but she couldn’t hide her giggles. Come to think of it, though, she was right. I was pretty sure Asagi loved sweets. It could be just the thing!

“Um, in that case...” I was just about to ask Naomi to teach me, when suddenly—

“What’re you guys talking about, Mai? Don’t leave me out!” Asagi butted in at the worst possible time. The three of us girls fell silent. “Uh, what? What’s wrong? Oh, I get it! I shouldn’t be here, should I? Whoops. Sorry. That was stupid of me. It’s girl talk time, am I right? No boys allowed. Tell you what, Mai... come find me when you’re done, okay? All right, I’m leaving! Sorry to interrupt!!”

None of us got a word in before Asagi stammered his way out of the conversation. The three of us watched him leave, then exchanged glances with each other and burst out laughing.

That Asagi sure is a funny guy.

That night, we all stayed up late celebrating our victory in the club room. The

Blue Event was over, and Nightmare was under maintenance again. All around us were expressions of relief.

I prayed that it would stay like this forever before falling asleep.

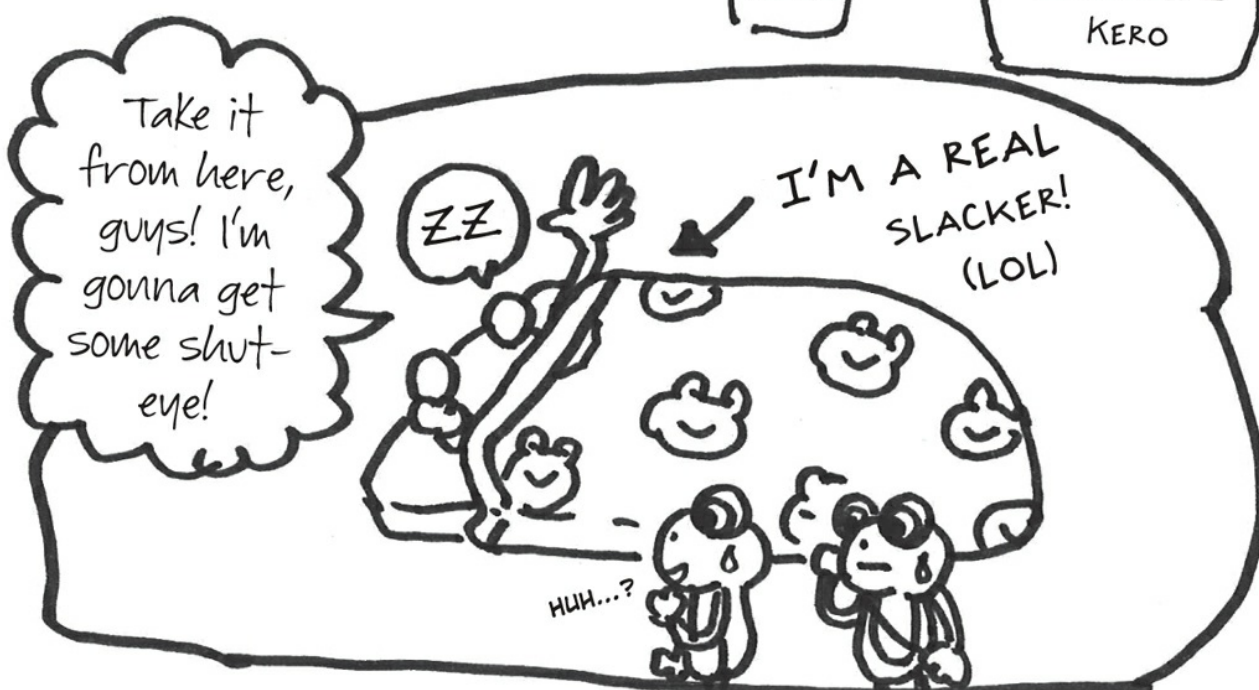
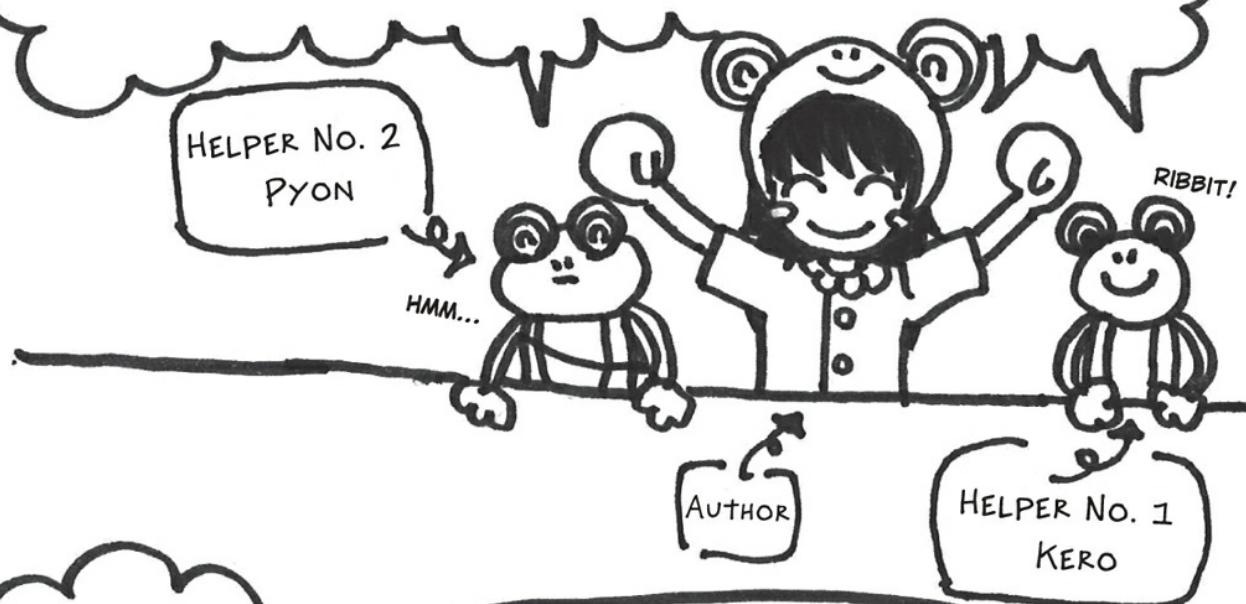
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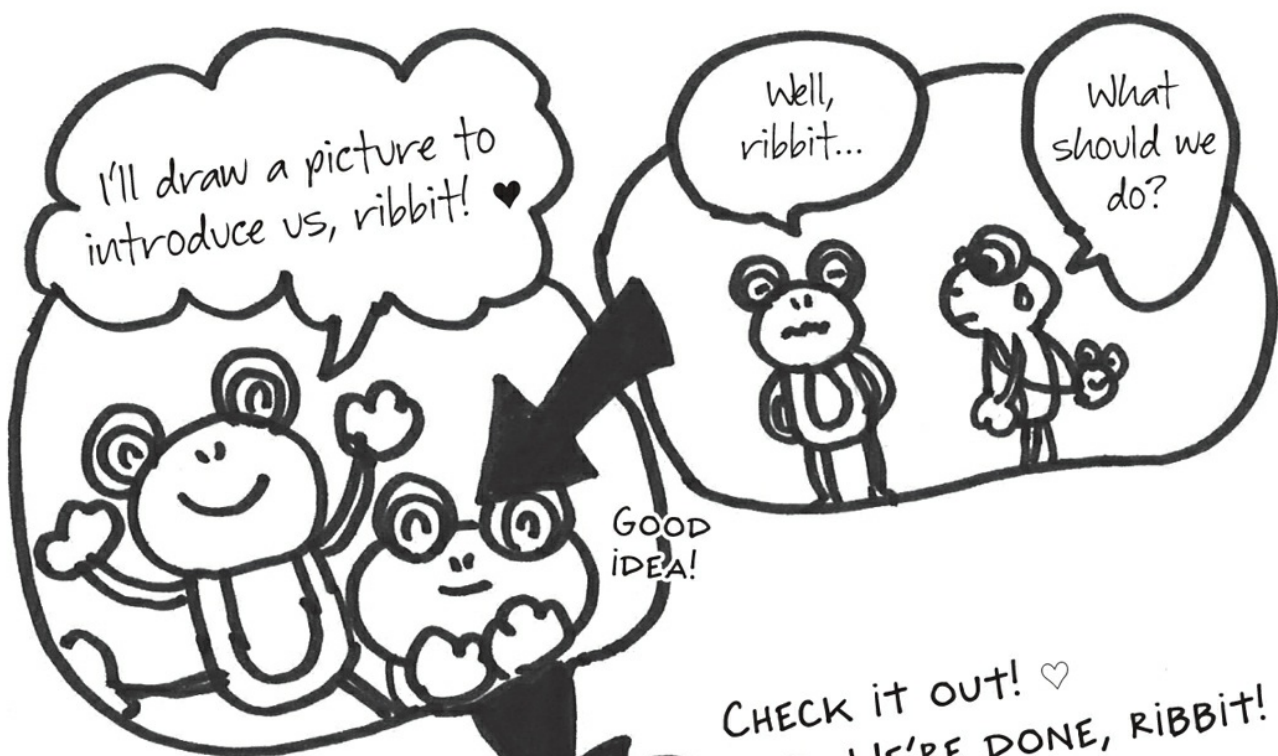
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Turn the page for a fun message from the author!

AFTERWORD

Hi, everyone! Thanks for reading Online!, Volume 2! It's me, the frog-loving Midori Amagaeru! It's been a real treat to read all your letters and feedback on Tsubasa Bunko's homepage. Thanks so much for everything!!





CHECK IT OUT! ♥
WE'RE DONE, RIBBIT! ♪



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