



# ONLINE!

3

The Reaper King and the Avian Monstrosity

Midori Amagaeru

Illustration by  
Shinichirou Otsuka







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JY  
New York



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**Midori Amagaeru**

Translation by John Thomas Neal

Cover art by Shinichirou Otsuka

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### Mai Yashiro

A nice, thoughtful girl who can't resist helping out those in need. She's better at studying than at playing video games—but she's still a bit of a space case!

What's she into lately?  
Making sweets  
What makes her upset? How totally unfair Nightmare is!

### Taisuke Asagi

A serious, sincere, and kind boy. He has feelings for Mai, but he's so bashful, it's hard to tell how things will turn out...

What's he into lately?  
Eating sweets  
What makes him upset? Vending machines that don't stock his favorite drink, Pudding Pop

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- Afterword

### Amelie

A monster that started out as Mai's enemy, but now she's one of her closest friends! She's bright and cheerful...as long as she has candy.

### Shinji Sugiura

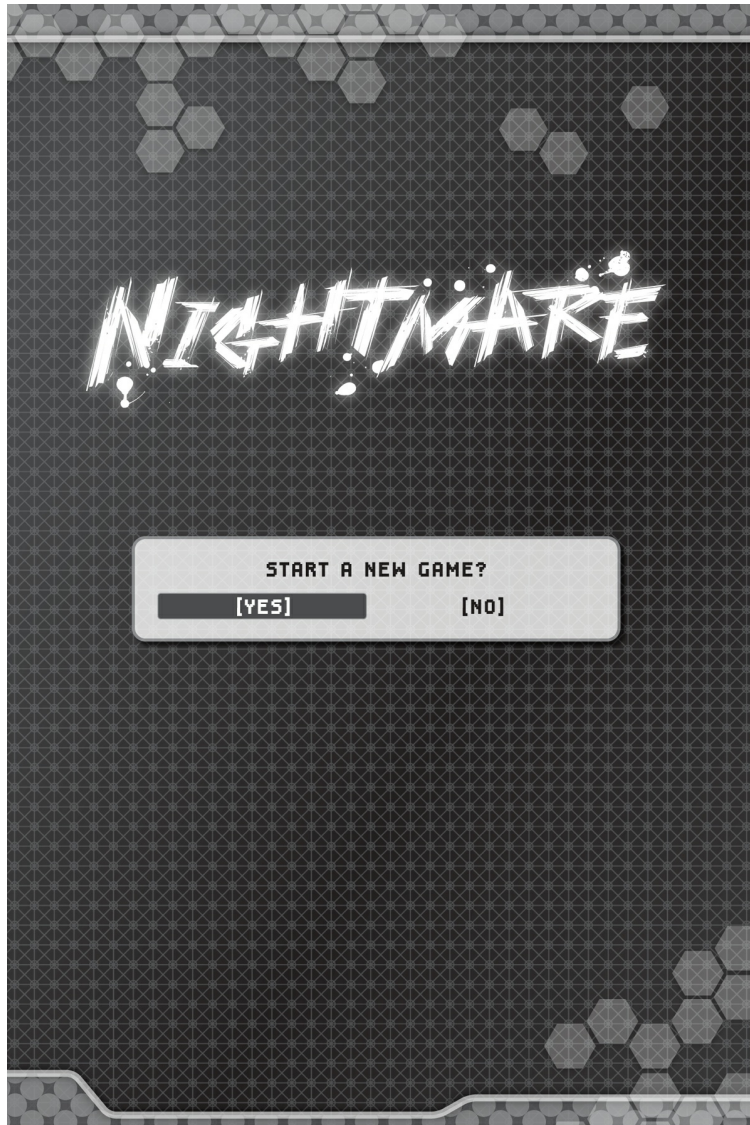
The son of Ryokuka Private Academy's chief director. He's handsome and popular with the ladies but has an unapproachable vibe.

What's he into lately? ...Is there anything other than beating Nightmare?  
What makes him upset? His father's selfishness

What's he into lately?  
Eating sweet dumplings—starting from the middle of the stick  
What makes him upset? Just don't call me "shorty," okay?!

### Taichi Tango

The only person who can tease Sugiura and get away with it. His hobby is napping, and he's nowhere near as good at sports as he looks!



**If this game shows up on your doorstep, your fate is already sealed.**

**Nobody can escape it.**

**That's what makes it such a Nightmare—like the title says.**

**But don't worry.**

**You don't have to face it alone.**

**Come join us. And together, let's take the next step toward beating the game...**

# 1

## *The Story So Far*

I'm Mai Yashiro, a typical second-year high school student at Ryokuka Private Academy...or at least I used to be. Recently, things have changed. Sure, I'm still a student, but most of my life is centered around *a certain video game*.

Trust me, it's not as fun as it sounds.

The game, called Nightmare, literally appeared out of nowhere one day. And I'm not alone in this situation, either. Lots of people have been drafted into playing like me. Across Japan, people are talking about Nightmare, asking: Who's sending out these game consoles? Who made the game in the first place?

Let's just say there are a lot more questions than answers.

You're probably wondering, "So what? What's the big deal?" Well, there's a catch: When someone first starts playing the game, they're forced into a contract with a demon. Every time a player gets a Game Over, the demon claims one of their body parts: Eyes, Legs, Left Hand, Right Hand, Nose, Mouth, Ears...and finally, Heart!

Okay then, you're about to ask, "Why play such a dangerous game in the first place?"

I sure wish it were that easy!!

Participation is mandatory. If players don't earn at least 100 in-game points called CP by the end of each day, it's an automatic Game Over. The only way to survive is to play the game every day. Seriously, whoever heard of a game with a daily quota—much less one that's actually life or death?!



Thankfully, the chief director of Ryokuka Private Academy thought of a way to support her students who have to play Nightmare while keeping up with their studies: the Nightmare Conquerors' Club—an extracurricular club dedicated to beating the game once and for all.

As you can imagine, club activities became the main focus of members' lives by default. We're still high school students, though, so like I said, we've got plenty of studying to do on the side. (Personally, I'm a lot better at studying than I am at gaming...) My days are totally packed; between Nightmare and high school, there's a lot to juggle!

By the way, the student who heads the club is none other than the chief director's son: Shinji Sugiura. He's very reliable—but he's really, *really* scary, too! Most people are afraid to approach him.

What's more, Sugiura's father is the founder of a company called Green Trier, Inc. that also strives to beat Nightmare. He wants Sugiura to follow in his footsteps as CEO...but the two of them don't seem to have a super-healthy relationship.

The Conquerors' Club is divided into four groups: the Main Squad, Scout Squad, Rescue Squad, and the Raid Team. The Raid Team is the smallest group, with only four members: Sugiura, the leader; the kind and considerate Taisuke Asagi; Taichi Tango, a jokester; and last, yours truly. We're apparently the best of the best when it comes to taking on Nightmare's challenges.

Like I said, I'm not that good at gaming. But because I was chosen for the Raid Team, I have to work extra hard not to hold my teammates back...

Pretty much everyone I've mentioned so far is a member of the Ryokuka Nightmare Conquerors' Club, but lately I've made a few more acquaintances outside of the club, too, like Tsubasa Kaitsu—a real pain in the butt of a middle schooler—and Ryouta Masuda—who's the number two ranked player in Nightmare!

The one thing we've got in common is that we're all working hard to beat Nightmare and get our normal lives back. Since we can't set the game down and run away, beating it is our only option.

Now, sure, Nightmare might be the *worst game ever*, but there is a silver

lining: It's led me to a bunch of new friends. It's thanks to them that I'm still here in the first place—and thanks to them, the game feels beatable. What better way to repay them than to conquer the game together?

## 2

### *Taking a Breather*

Thanks to the cooperation from everyone in the Nightmare Conquerors' Club, Asagi, Sugiura, and I managed to survive the Blue Event. Actually, we didn't just survive—we won! By the time night came around, that excitement and nervousness still hadn't worn off. I barely got any sleep.

I'd finished my second event...but how many more were left? How many would it take to beat the entire game and be done with it for good? I had no idea. All I knew was that our only option was to keep playing until we finally met that goal. The thought of it made me a bit gloomy, but there was one reason to celebrate: With the event wrapped up, Nightmare was currently undergoing maintenance.

During maintenance, we couldn't play Nightmare even if we wanted to. Plus, the players who'd lost Respawn Penalties had them temporarily returned. In other words, for the time being, we were free again.

Oh, right. Respawn Penalties are the bodily functions players lose whenever they get a Game Over. And when they're all out of functions to lose, their next Game Over is *literal* death. There are eight possible Respawn Penalties, including Left Hand and Right Hand, to name a few. After losing one, players have to choose which one to put on the line next.

Let's say, for example, that someone chooses their Left Hand as their Respawn Penalty when they start playing Nightmare. When they get their first Game Over, the demon takes away the use of their left hand—in real life—but they get to live and go on playing. It's possible to win back Respawn Penalties that they've lost, but it's tough. The demon sure doesn't make it easy.



By the way, if they choose their Heart as a Respawn Penalty, you guessed it—their heart stops working after the next Game Over. Which means they die for real. There's no coming back from that.

So why would someone ever choose their Heart, right? The thing is, once a player has seven other Game Overs, that's the only part left to pick. There's no other option.

Just so you know, the Respawn Penalty I'd chosen at this point was my Ears. I still had all my other nerve functions, too. Not that it was any reason to let my guard down...

*Knock, knock, knock!*

I had finally managed to calm down for the first time in who knows how long, when there came a sudden, intense knocking at my dorm room door.

"Wha—?! Wh-who's there?!" I blurted out in surprise. There was no answer. I crawled out of bed and inched nervously toward the door. I cracked the door open slightly to peek out into the hallway.

I saw someone walking away swiftly, as if nothing had happened, clutching a stack of papers. It was Sugiura.

"Sheesh! What do you want, Sugiura?!" I shouted after him so loudly, you'd think I hadn't been in bed only seconds before. I really didn't think he was the kind of guy who'd play that kind of prank, you know?

"Huh?" He spun around, sputtering.

"'Huh,' what?" I shot back. "Wh-what's your problem?"

"Your outfit," he said. "You always let beatin' an event go to your head an' get sloppy. Plus, you overslept."

"Wha...?" O-overslept? Me? Had Sugiura come to wake me up?

"We've got a meeting in five minutes. Hurry up an' get ready. And maybe it used to be trendy to wear your clothes backward, but you're the only one doin' it now."

“Eeek!”

Aww, maaan! I was still in my pajamas, and it only got worse from there. I’d somehow managed to put both my nightshirt *and* my pajama bottoms on backward. How could I have missed that? I must’ve been even more worn out than I’d thought.

But having a good reason didn’t make it any less embarrassing!

I got dressed at breakneck speed, then headed for the clubroom on the third floor of the dormitory.

“Mornin’, Mai!” a carefree voice said from behind me as I dashed up the stairs. I turned to see a girl in pigtails, carrying a bag covered with a ton of key chains and buttons of various video game characters—the famous Youko Teranishi, gamer extraordinaire.

“Oh! G-good morning, Youko. We’d better hurry, huh?”

“A-ha-ha-ha! Why? The meeting doesn’t start for another minute. Plenty of time!”

Huh?! In what world was that plenty of time? Youko sure marches to the beat of her own drum.

“It’s pretty rare for us to bump into each other in the morning like this.”

“Yeah, I usually get here a little earlier,” I said. “Aren’t you ever afraid you’re gonna be late?”

“Who, me? Nah. Oh, by the way! Got any free time after class today?”

“I should, but why? What’s up?”

The only answer Youko gave me was a suspicious grin as she picked up the pace and walked on ahead of me.

“Huh?! C’mon, Youko!”







“That settles it! I’ll come by and grab you and Nao after school! Be sure to put on your game face, Mai!” Youko spun around and pointed a finger straight at me.

Nao? Who’s Nao? Oh, maybe she means Naomi.

Naomi was another new friend of mine; it sounded like Youko was already on a nickname basis with her. Youko could skip ahead to that level of friendliness with pretty much anyone in no time. It was amazing. Hee-hee-hee. She was still far behind when it came to romance, though.

Youko seemed to have a huge crush on Masuda—the second-highest-ranked Nightmare player. She was always bright, chipper, and outgoing, but in front of Masuda, she became shy and polite.

I shook myself out of it. This was no time for that kind of thinking! I’m gonna be late! I hurried to slip into the clubroom right behind Youko, making it just in the nick of time. The others were already seated and staring straight at me.

Right on cue, Sugiura started shouting.

“Get in here and sit down! We can’t start this meeting without you!”

“Y-yessir!” It was 8:40 AM. Phew. I made it right on time.

Asagi and Taichi were already in their seats. Sleepyhead was practically Taichi’s middle name, and even he’d managed to get in before me. But then again, he was more likely to show up on time and then sleep through the meeting anyway. Just kidding! (Kind of.)

“Good work yesterday, Mai! Did you sleep well? Are you feeling okay?” Asagi whispered a barrage of questions my way. He’s a really nice guy...and such a worrywart.

The four of us—me, Taichi, Asagi, and Sugiura, who was now getting the meeting underway—made up the elite Raid Team within the Conquerors’ Club. For someone who was supposedly elite, I sure hadn’t made a very good impression the morning after our big victory in the event. I felt so pathetic...

“Are you okay, Mai? If you need a little help getting up on time, I don’t mind swinging by your dorm for a wake-up call in the mornings,” Asagi said, staring

into my eyes with a concerned look on his face. That's what I got for zoning out and not answering any of his questions, I guess. I tried to answer this time, since I didn't want to worry him even more, but then—

“Ha-ha! Give it up, Asagi. She's already got a plan for that.”

“Huh?!”

“Y'know, you could always swing by my dorm and wake *me* up if you want,” said Taichi. “My mornings're wide open.”

“Huh? Y-you want me to wake you up every day? Why would I do that? And what do you mean, Mai's got plans? With who?!”

“Promise to be my human alarm clock, and I'll tell you.”

“I...I think I'll pass. It takes ages to wake you up.”

“Suit yourself, if you really want that secret to eat you up inside forever,” Taichi said with a snicker. Asagi's face went bright red.

“Grrr... C'mon, man, that's way too mean...,” he said, his voice trailing off.

Taichi was the undefeated master of needling people.

Hang on! This was hardly the time or place for distractions! Umm, sooo... What should I be doing? *Gulp!* Sugiura had caught us getting off track.

“Hey, we're listening!” said Taichi. “Maybe we'd listen better if you hurried up and got to the point, don'tcha think? You're puttin' me to sleep, here.”

“Say that again!”

Taichi had already moved on to his next target: Sugiura. Whatever made everyone afraid of the club leader simply didn't seem to shake Taichi's nerves of steel.

## *A Sweet After-School Lesson*

Before long, the meeting ended, and classes soon followed. In a flash, the school day was done. Typically, that meant it was time to log in to Nightmare and start earning CP, but with the game undergoing maintenance, I had free time for once.

What should I do with myself? Then the notification light on my Nightmare console derailed my train of thought. A message! Maybe it was from Asagi!

I'd been spending more and more time with him after school, so I figured this probably was another invitation to hang out. My heart swelled in my chest as I opened my in-game inbox...

Nope. Nuh-uh. Couldn't have been more wrong.

The message was from Kenichi Tanaka—the top player in the whole game, and by my estimation, in the running for top weirdo in the whole world.

**[From: Kenichi Tanaka]**

**[To: Group (28 Recipients)]**

**(Today's Poem)**

**There I sat**

**Eating beef and rice**

**I thought to myself, it was mighty nice, I'll have another**

**But wouldn't you know it? Oh, brother**

**Crap!**

**I forgot to cook more rice**

**What a big dummy I am!**

**The End! This concludes today's Tanaka Real-Time News Report! (lol)**

**My heart is crying out, *Feed me! Somebody feed me!***

**END**

"...What the heck?" First of all, it was a pretty crummy poem. For one, it barely rhymed. Maybe it's supposed to be a haiku, but the number of syllables was way off. Besides, haiku are supposed to be about nature and the seasons! And don't even get me started on the sudden shift to a news report at the end. There was so much wrong with it, I didn't know where to begin. But that was Kenichi Tanaka for you.

I couldn't figure him out. But somehow, he was ranked number one in the game. I couldn't ignore his messages, no matter how weird they were. The chance that, someday, they might contain useful information was too great.

Okay, I'll fire off a really basic reply.

**I'd send you some food, but it'd go bad before it got to you.** That was all. I sent it off.

Huh? I had another new message. It must've come in while I was typing my reply to Tanaka. For a moment, I figured it'd be more bad poetry...

**[From: Nightmare]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Dear Miss Yashiro,**

**Congratulations once again on completing the Blue Event. As before, 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: Blue Box>>**

**END**

...Nope. Wrong again. This time, the message was from the Nightmare administrators.

A Blue Box? What in the world will that do? Hmm... Whatever it was, it was too much of a mystery to just guess. I was clutching my head, trying to puzzle it out, when I suddenly heard a distant voice calling out to me.

“Helloooo? Earth to Mai! Let’s get a move on!” I turned to see Youko frantically waving both arms over her head, grinning widely. “C’monnn! Hurry!”

“Oh, hi, Youko,” I said. “Go where?”

“You know where! Nao says she’s gonna teach us how to make sweets! I mean, now’s our chance, right? Who knows when Nightmare’s gonna go offline for an update again?”

“Oh, right... Making sweets...”

Come to think of it, Naomi had offered to teach us right after I finished the Blue Event. She’s a whiz in the kitchen. Meanwhile, I’m...whatever the opposite of a whiz is. Put “cooking” next to “athletics” and “video games” on the list of things I’m no good at. Seriously, studying is my only specialty. I grasped the *theory* of cooking, at least, but that’s about as far as it goes.

But this could be a chance to learn from an expert! It’s high time I started putting those theories into practice!

With that, we gathered in Naomi’s dorm room. It was super tidy, with nothing



out of place. Even the books on her shelves were carefully arranged by color and size. To top it all off, an adorable stuffed rabbit sat right in the middle of her sofa. One look around her room showed that Naomi was very neat and had good taste.

“Whoa! Your room’s so clean, you could eat off the floor! Mine looks like a disaster zone,” said Youko.

“You sure are organized, Naomi,” I added.

“Hee-hee! I guess it just comes naturally to me. There are a lot of things that don’t, though.” Naomi poured us cups of freshly brewed tea with a grin.

“Here you are!”

“Thank you, Naomi!”

“Aw, yeah! Thanks!”

While we sipped our tea, we looked over Naomi’s recipe for homemade cookies.

“Oof, this looks kinda tough,” said Youko.

“Don’t worry! I’ll teach you everything you need to know,” said Naomi. “Let’s make the best sweets we can!”

All right! With Naomi there to guide us, Youko and I were fired up and ready to take on the challenge of baking.

The air was filled with clouds of flour, I couldn’t properly crack the eggs to save my life, and our cookies ended up decidedly not...cookie-shaped. But despite the setbacks, we finally managed to get them into the oven.

Thirty long minutes later, we nervously opened the oven to discover...a whole tray full of failure. Our misshapen cookies were somehow both under-and overcooked. Actually, I’m not sure I can even call them cookies.

“Aww, man! We screwed it up!” Youko wailed.

“We sure did... Well, / did,” I said, feeling disheartened. “It’s probably my fault. I know I’m clumsy. Sorry. Baking might be too hard for me.”

“Now, now. No one bakes a perfect batch the first time,” said Naomi. “I’d be

glad to teach you guys again next time you're free! Let's try and get one more lesson in before maintenance is over." Chipper as always, Naomi comforted us as she shoved our pitiful cookies into bags and handed them over for us to take with us.





“Thank you!”

“Lucky us! Thanks, Nao!”

The cookies may have been a failure, but the cooking lesson itself was a lot of fun. Maybe it’s because all three of us were so excited to be there with one another. How long had it been since we’d been able to simply unwind with friends? Believe it or not, this used to be how I spent most of my after-school time...before I started playing Nightmare.

Now that sort of everyday fun felt like a priceless treasure.

There would be no more carefree cooking lessons once Nightmare was back online. It made me sad and more than a little frustrated to think about it.

But the truth was the truth, no matter how hard. There was no escaping Nightmare. All I could do was enjoy this time while I could. I promised myself, deep down in my heart, that I would savor every peaceful day until the maintenance period ended.



## 4

### *Asagi Unheard!*

A few days had gone by since our baking lesson.

*Knock! Knock! Knock!* There was a familiar banging on my door, once again waking me from sleep.

...? Is that Sugiura? Oh man, don't tell me I'm late again!! I frantically turned to look at the clock on my nightstand. It was 11:55 PM. I hadn't overslept—it was the middle of the night. Who the heck was knocking on my door at this hour?

C-could it be a ghost?! No! Anything but that! That's way too scary!!

I dived back under the covers, head and all, and waited for the knocking to stop.

*Knock, knock, knock! Knock, knock, knock! Knock, knock, knock!*

Whoever was pounding on my door, they were fierce and persistent. The horrible sound showed no signs of stopping. Now I knew something was up! Oh man, oh man, oh man! Somebody save meee!!

“Mai, are you asleep?! You gotta open up! Please! We've got trouble!!”

Huh...? That was Asagi's voice. And it sounded like he was panicking. Carefully, cautiously, I slipped out from under the covers and tiptoed over to the door. I reached for the doorknob. Is it really Asagi at this time of night? I mean, it's entirely possible that a ghost could copy someone's voice, right? No! Come on, Mai! It's really Asagi, and he's here about something urgent. I knew he wouldn't do anything to cause me trouble.

“Um... Asagi, is that you?”

“Oh, great! You’re awake. Listen, Mai, could you unlock your door? No, never mind, there’s no time. You’d better take a look at Nightma—”

“Why...?”

Then it happened.

I felt something flow out of the game console strapped to my arm and into my body. The sensation was overpowering. It pulsed through my whole body, ending as a sharp pain in my ears.

“...!!”

I’d felt the same horrible pain before, but I didn’t need the pain to tell me what had happened. No, what gave that away was how Asagi’s voice seemed to cut off midsentence.

My current Respawn Penalty was my Ears. Clearly, the maintenance period was over. That meant the Auto-Death System was back online—and I’d lost my Penalty already. It was the only explanation.

I pressed a hand up to one of my ears and reached for the door with the other. I was trembling visibly. Asagi must’ve come to warn me!

He was standing right outside the door, still trying to tell me something. He was trying to turn the outside doorknob, too, though it was locked. I heard the rattle of the twisting doorknob, but not a word Asagi said. It seemed I couldn’t hear people’s voices.

Was that even possible? I guess if a video game can take away hearing as a Penalty in the first place, it could be. It was like being cursed.

I slowly opened the door.

There stood Asagi, his brows furrowed with worry and his face scrunched up like he was about to cry. His mouth was flapping at a mile a minute. I’m sure that whatever he said was kind and thoughtful—not that I could hear it. I had to try to explain the situation.

“Listen, Asagi. I can hear *things*, but not people’s voices,” I said. Hang on, he can hear me—right?

Asagi did a small double take and started looking around for something. I couldn't hear my own voice, but going by his reaction, I could tell he'd heard me. At least Nightmare had only taken my hearing from me and not snagged my voice along with it.

Asagi reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. Then he pulled a ballpoint pen out of the same pocket and began writing.

I SENT YOU A MESSAGE WITH 100 CP ATTACHED, BUT I GUESS IT DIDN'T REACH YOU IN TIME. SORRY, MAI. I JUST GOT THE NOTIFICATION THAT NIGHTMARE MAINTENANCE IS OVER.

I knew it.

"So Nightmare's running again, then?"

Asagi nodded.

It felt weird. I could speak as I normally did, but I couldn't hear Asagi at all. The demon in Nightmare took my Ears, and evidently that meant losing my ability to hear people speak.

"Um... Is everyone else okay?"

Asagi wrote out his reply.

I DON'T KNOW. THE OTHERS AND I ARE GOING AROUND WAKING EVERYBODY UP, BUT I DON'T THINK WE CAN WARN EVERYONE IN TIME. ALSO, ALL THE CP CAME FROM PEOPLE OVER AT SUGIURA'S DAD'S COMPANY. HIS DAD'S HERE IN THE DORMS, TOO. COULD YOU COME TO THE CLUBROOM WITH ME?

"Okay," I said, nodding.

Sugiura's dad, huh? Truth be told, ever since I overheard him and Sugiura arguing, I'd been a little nervous about meeting him. He's the CEO of a company that publishes a magazine devoted to beating Nightmare—and if Sugiura was scary, how scary must his *dad* be?

When Asagi and I arrived at the clubroom of the Conquerors' Club, we found more than just our fellow club members. There was also a large group of strangers in black suits. Is one of them Sugiura's dad?

YOUR EAR FUNCTIONS SHOULD BE UP ON THE NERVE AUCTION ALREADY. LET'S BUY THEM BACK, Asagi wrote.

"But aren't they really, really expensive?" If players wanted to buy something that was listed on the Nerve Auction directly, without a bidding war, they could expect to pay twice whatever its starting price was.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE MONEY, MAI. SUGIURA SAYS THAT IF ANYONE LOSES A RESPAWN PENALTY THAT PUTS THEM IN A TIGHT SPOT, THEY CAN GO AHEAD AND MAKE A DIRECT PURCHASE TO GET IT BACK.

I felt bad about cutting into the club's funds to pay for my own carelessness, but I had to admit that having people write out everything they wanted to say to me would be a huge waste of time—not to mention a major pain for Asagi and the rest.

"I'm so sorry," I said. What I meant was I'd take him up on the offer. Asagi grinned and fired up his Nightmare console. A little while later, the notification light on my own console started to blink.

I had a new message—one with the nerve functions for my ears attached. The instant I opened it up, I felt a warm rush of air blow into my ears. Then I got a strange sensation, like something was leaving my body.

The hubbub of the busy clubroom suddenly washed over me. I could hear all the chatter going on around me. All right! Back to normal!

"Well? Can you hear me now?"

"Loud and clear," I told Asagi. He smiled wide.

"Great!! Oh, Mai, I'm so glad! This is great!" He squeezed my hands in his and continued to yammer on in delight. I felt his grip getting tighter and tighter every time he said the word *great*. Which was a lot. Before long, it kind of started to hurt.

Um, Asagi? I get that you're happy and all... I mean, I'm happy, too, but...ouch, already!

Asagi must have noticed me glancing down at my hands, because he suddenly flinched and let go. "Agh! S-s-s-s-sorry, Mai!!" he stammered. "I'm just so glad

you're back to normal, I got carried away..." He flailed his arms frantically. I probably don't need to mention how red his face was.

Hee-hee-hee, he sure was cute when blushing... Cute enough for me to forgive a little ache in my hands. I knew he only meant well, after all.

"Oh, right, Mai! Did you choose your next Respawn Penalty yet?"

Good thing he reminded me. I was pretty sure that if you went back into battle before choosing a Respawn Penalty, the game would pick one at random. And if you got unlucky and it went for your Heart, you'd never get a chance to win it back.

"I guess I should pick my Left Arm, huh?"

"Good thinking," said Asagi. "It's probably the least risky. I'm pretty sure that's what most people consider the smart choice. Most right-handed people, at least."

Technically, I didn't choose my Ears in the first place. They were selected automatically after I sacrificed my original Respawn Penalty to use a special skill way back when we fought a pack of Grim Reapers. If I'd been unlucky and lost my Heart instead, I wouldn't be here right now. Thinking about it made me afraid to use that skill again.

"All right, let's go find Sugiura."

"Okay!"

Sugiura was by the group of people in black suits, talking with them. He had a puzzled expression on his face that occasionally gave way to flashes of anger. I wondered if it was okay for us to butt in...and the more I wondered, the scarier the idea got. I did not want to go over there. Something about the air in that part of the room seemed wrong.

"No way! I told you already!"

See what I mean? Sugiura was already shouting.

"Come on, Shinji. Why do you think we share so much CP with your little school friends in the first place? I came all this way to see you in person this time for a reason. Do you have any idea what you'd be dealing with right now if



I hadn't rushed to the rescue?"

"...! I don't remember askin' for your help," Sugiura said. "You can't pass up a chance to flex, can you?!"

Sugiura had clearly gotten into yet another fight—and his opponent this time around was none other than his dad. I mean, that much was obvious. The man had the exact same almond-shaped eyes and slim profile as Sugiura. The apple sure hadn't fallen far from the tree.

I noticed Taichi nearby and made my way toward him to ask what was going on.

"Um... What's up with Sugiura?"

"His dad came by to say his company wants to take you and Asagi in."

"Huh? A-Asagi and me?!" What was that supposed to mean? Asagi and I exchanged glances.

"Whatever's going down, I don't like it," said Taichi. His intuition rarely steered him wrong. I was pretty sure that Asagi and I weren't ready to run off and get corporate jobs just yet.

"Me neither! But what are we supposed to do about it?"

"Leave it to Sugiura. He's not gonna throw you to the dogs."

Taichi had a point...but were we really supposed to sit back and watch from a distance? Sugiura was looking out for us, and it wasn't the first time he'd had our backs.

The people in black suits stood silently during the proceedings. After a while, they started to mill out of the clubroom. Sugiura came stomping over to us with a furious look on his face.

"Ugh! Can you believe those guys?! They wanted to *use* you—to run an article about you that made them come out smellin' like roses! Makes me sick..."

"Making you smell like the sweetest rose in the garden in the process, huh?" Taichi chimed in. "If they use Mai and Asagi, you come out looking good, too."

Huh? Was that true?

“Right. It’s the same crap every time! What’s he even thinking?”

I got the impression that Sugiura’s father really did think he had his son’s best interests at heart. He may have been going about it the wrong way, but I understood that much. He was worried about Sugiura...probably. I knew my mom and dad worried a ton about me. I figure all parents do.

“Don’t mind him. I drove him off,” said Sugiura. “For now. He’ll come back sooner or later. And when he does, leave it to me. I’ll send him packing again!”

I could tell Sugiura was dead serious. The terrifying look on his face was all the proof I needed. If Sugiura’s dad and his whole entourage in the suits did come back, they’d have to come prepared for a fight.

I definitely didn’t have the courage to say anything to Sugiura at that moment. I mumbled, “Thank you,” and left it at that.

“Anyway, that’s enough of that nonsense. You got your Ears back, right, Mai?”

“Oh! Y-yes. I’m sorry for all the trouble.”

“Good. Now go get some sleep.”

Huh?! I thought for sure he was gonna treat my newly recovered Ears to some shouting, but instead he tells me to go back to bed?

“Y-you mean it?!”

“Course I mean it. As soon as we figure out exactly who all’s missing what nerve functions, I’m sendin’ everyone else who’s still playin’ back to bed, too. I can handle all the auctions myself. All it takes is clicking ‘buy’ over and over again.”

Sugiura was looking out for everyone in the club. Once the sun came up, we’d be back up to our necks in Nightmare. For now, though, it was late, and it wouldn’t be healthy to stay up any later. But that went for Sugiura, too.

“Um, if there’s anything I can do to help, put me to work,” said Asagi. It seemed like he and I were on the same page. If there was anything I could do to take even a tiny bit of the load off Sugiura, I wanted to do it.

“That goes for me, too...”

“Don’t sweat it. Asagi, Mai—and you, too, Taichi. Go rest. We get back to work tomorrow, and I’m gonna need you guys to bring your A game. So be ready. That means *rest*.” Sugiura smirked.

Oof. I hated to think about heading back into Nightmare so soon. But for that night, I figured I should make the most of Sugiura’s unexpected kindness and go.

“Tonight’s dealin’ a serious blow to our budget. We’re gonna have to spend some time savin’ up for the next event.”

Every time someone got a Game Over during an event, they had to pay a hefty fine to start playing again. Three billion in-game yen, to be exact. During the Black and Blue Events, we’d had to pay up twice.

I could practically see the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club in-game savings plummeting before my eyes. I knew that, when the next day rolled around, we’d probably have to focus on Normal Battles for a while.

“Umm... Okay, then. If you insist, I’ll head back to my dorm now,” said Asagi, bowing his head. I followed suit.

“I insist. You too, Taichi. ‘Night.”

“.....”

Huh? At some point, Taichi had put his head down on the clubroom table. Don’t tell me...

“Gzzznh... Snerrrk. Zzzz.... Honnnk!”

I didn’t need to be told. The snoring said it all.

“Huh. Guess I didn’t have to worry. Man, what a pain...”

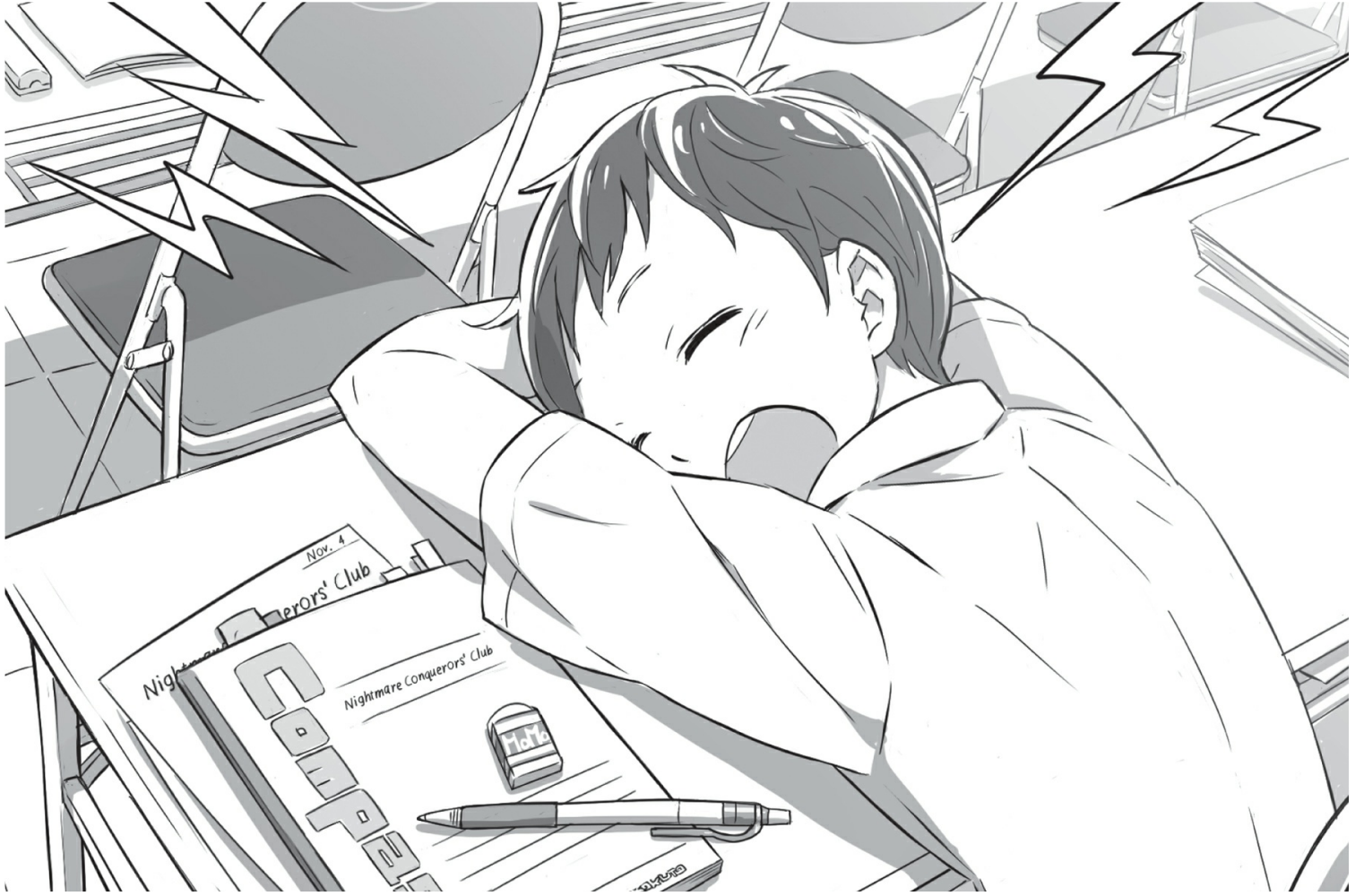
“That’s Taichi for you. The instant the coast is clear, he’s out like a light.”

To be honest, it made me a little jealous.

“All right, Mai, let’s get going,” said Asagi. “I’ll walk you back to your room.”

“Thanks!”

With that, Asagi and I left the clubroom and headed down the stairs. It was the middle of the night, and there was nobody around except for the two of us.



...This might be my chance.

I reached into my bag and yanked out the bag of cookies I'd made with Naomi's help. Not that first batch! I'd made these earlier this evening, and I was sure they'd turned out much better.

"Um, Asagi?"

"Yeah? What's up?" He turned to look at me with a curious look on his face.

"These are for you...if you want them. They're, um, my way of saying thank you for always looking out for me."

"F-for real?!" Asagi was starting to look flustered. His cheeks turned such a bright shade of red, I could see it clearly, even in the dark stairwell. And it turned out, his bashfulness was contagious. I found myself mentally begging him to hurry up and take the darn cookies! "F-for me?! Y-y-you mean it? ... Augh!"

Huh? Huuuh?!

Oh man, this was bad! Asagi slipped and went flying down the stairs!

Maybe I should have picked a safer spot for us to talk...but there's no way I could've seen this coming! I ran down the stairs after him.

"A-are you all right?!"

"Ow, ow, ow... Y-yeah, I'm fine. I guess I'm pretty good at falling. I don't think I broke any bones or anything. But you know me, I'm sturdy... Ha-ha-ha..."

Asagi looked awfully happy for someone who'd just rolled down an entire flight of stairs.

"I'm so glad you're okay! Let's get back on flat ground. Can you stand up?"

"Yea—*ack!*" A look of pained surprise shot across Asagi's face as he yelped.

"You're hurt, aren't you? Where?"

"N-nowhere, really! Ngh... S-seriously, I'm fine. It's nothing. Let's get moving, okay? I'm gonna go." Asagi's smile was totally gone; now the look on his face was one of utter despair. He sure didn't look fine. He must've taken a pretty hard hit after all.

“Are you sure it’s nothing? At least tell me where it hurts.”

“No! I mean... Okay, I’ll come out and say it. If I don’t say it now, I’ll never say it, and then I’ll regret it forever! S-so, um, Mai... Can...? Can I really have those cookies? You were trying to give them to me, right?”

“Oh!” I couldn’t believe it. I’d had to muster up so much courage to give him the cookies, and I’d totally forgotten about them! Talk about embarrassing. Then again... Asagi had just taken a sudden tumble down the stairs. “Um, sorry. I forgot. But if you’ll accept them, then yeah! They’re all yours!”

“Of course I’ll accept them! I love sweets! Thanks a lot, Mai. I’ll savor each and every one. I’ll save them so they last. Actually, I might not even eat them—”

“Uh, no, please eat them...” I had to giggle as I saw Asagi’s smile stretch across his whole face again. I was really glad I baked those cookies. I didn’t realize they’d make him this happy.

“But, um, don’t expect too much, y’know, flavor-wise... They’re probably not very good...”

“Who cares if they’re good or not? Um, I mean... Y-you made them for me, so...that’s good enough in my book.” Asagi grinned so broadly, I could practically count all his teeth. He was blushing the entire time, of course. And how could I not be happy, too, hearing him say that? I knew then and there that I had to make him another batch!

“All right, shall we keep going?”

“Uh... Sorry, Mai. Can we say our good-byes here for now? I know it’s pathetic, but...I kinda hurt where I landed, and I dunno if I’ll be able to get moving for a while...”

Huh?! Oh, geez... I knew it...

“In that case, I’ll keep you company until the pain goes away!”

“You will?! Then let’s eat your cookies while we wait, one at a time! Oh, here. Something to wash ’em down with,” Asagi said as he reached into his bag. He pulled out two cans of Pudding Pop and handed one to me.

Pudding Pop is a dessert soft drink that, as far as I can tell, is made by

squishing pudding into liquid form. It's Asagi's favorite beverage.

"Thank you," I said. But I wasn't so sure. I mean, it was pretty late to be eating all this sweet stuff... It seemed like a surefire way to gain weight. Aww, one little late-night snack won't hurt.

We sat on the stairs for a while and talked about all kinds of things.

It felt really good to sit there, chatting away, without a care in the world. I'd taken that happiness too much for granted before I started playing Nightmare. But now I know those little, peaceful moments aren't guaranteed. They're something to treasure—something to be thankful for.







## *The Sealed Château*

The next day soon arrived. Sugiura apparently went to visit his father's company and took Taichi along, so Asagi and I were the only members of the Raid Team around.

"Let's fill the time till they get back with Normal Battles. We've gotta raise all the cash we can, right?"

"Right. Sounds like a plan."

I wondered what Sugiura and Taichi had to take care of at Green Trier. I was a little worried. Mostly I hoped Sugiura could resist getting into another shouting match.

"If you've got Normal Battles on the agenda, mind if I tag along?"

Huh? I knew that voice. It was Yoichi, the leader of the Rescue Squad—and Taichi's little brother. Maybe Taichi had sent him along to watch our backs while he was out.

"Sure, you're more than welcome. The more allies we've got, the more efficiently we can fight."

"In that case, shall we invite one more?" Yoichi asked as he pushed his glasses up on his nose and glanced around the room. "Ah, Hirata, are you free?"

Hirata was in charge of the Scout Squad, and it looked like he was currently in the process of feeding his cat. Once he heard Yoichi, he sluggishly shuffled over in our direction.

"Yeah...my schedule's wide open."

His cat's name is...Mewta, I think. Mewta scampered along behind him. I giggled; the cat certainly eased the tension.

"...You like cats, don't you, Yashiro? ...That's nice."

*Gulp.* Once again, Hirata had managed to hear what I was thinking. Oh, right—he's got some sort of strange power that lets him read minds or something like that.

"I do! They're adorable. It's so much fun watching them curl up in a little ball on top of the heater and other kitty-cat stuff like that..."

"Yeah. Agreed," Hirata said as he broke into a grin so wide, his eyes narrowed. "I totally get it."

Now that I thought of it, when Hirata smiled, he looked more than a little like a sleeping cat himself.

"Let's cut the chitchat and get into the game," said Yoichi. "Do you mind if I pick a stage?"

Yoichi gave off a totally different vibe from his brother. Taichi could never be bothered to make decisions at times like this; he'd wait for someone else to pick for sure.

"Sure, please do!"

"All right, then... Let's head somewhere we can focus on earning CP more than EXP."

Any leftover CP a player had after paying their daily dues turned into in-game cash at the end of the day. If we wanted more money, we had to earn CP.

"Makes sense. So, got anywhere in mind?"

"Hmm... How about the Sealed Château?"

The Sealed Château? I wondered what kind of stage that was. Something gave me a feeling I'd tried it a few times before already, though.

"It's pretty big, but it's got a lot of treasure chests... We should be able to rake in the CP," said Hirata. I guess he'd read my mind again.

"That's settled, then. Let's get right to it. Is everyone ready to go?" Asagi

asked.

“Oh, I’d better update my gear first.”

“Me too... Just a sec...”

Yoichi and Hirata started getting ready. I took the time to give my own equipment another look.

## [Equipment]

- **Flame Bow (50 arrows) • Rapier**
- **Mage’s Robe**
- **Mage’s Boots**
- **Ring of Evasion (Level 3)**

Yep! All set! Though I wondered if I should make any changes...

Let’s see, what else? Oh, right! I decided to drop in to check on Amelie.

Amelie was the first monster I ever faced in a Battle of Wits, back when I first started playing Nightmare. Now, however, she’s my Familiar, and we get along great! I clicked **Amelie’s Room** in a flash.

“Morning, Mai!”

I did a double take. What the heck happened?! There were a ton of candy wrappers scattered across the floor of her room.

“Good morning, Amelie. What’s with the huge mess?”

“It’s every single wrapper from every single piece of candy you’ve ever given me! Pretty impressive, huh?”

“Uh... Yeah. Impressive. But now that I’m impressed, let’s go ahead and throw them out before they take over your whole room. There won’t be any space left for you at this rate.”

“Whaaat?!” Amelie didn’t like the sound of that. She shoved all the candy

wrappers into a big bag right away. “Here, Mai. Toss this out for me. I don’t wanna get kicked out of my room!”

“Hee-hee, all right. I’ll throw it out.”

“Please and thank you!”

“I take it you’re all out of candy, too. I’ll buy some more while I’m at it.”

Amelie’s head bobbed up and down gleefully.

“Huh. So she couldn’t bring herself to throw that stuff out? I get how she feels...,” Asagi mumbled from off to the side as he watched Amelie and me interact.

“What?”

“Uh, n-nothing! Forget it! A-anyway, Taichi and Yoichi say they’re good to go. Let’s get battling, shall we?”

With that, Asagi searched for information about the Sealed Château on his laptop and showed me the screen. He’d found a full map of the stage, courtesy of Sugiura’s dad’s company website.

“Looks like there’s two main routes: one underground, and one that leads up through the Château itself. Which will it be?”

“Which one will net us more CP?”

“Probably the Château exploration route... Then again, we might find more rare treasure chests in the underground route, and those could be worth serious money.”

“Hmm... Which to choose...?”

“We’ll go underground,” Yoichi said, once again setting the pace. He sure was decisive.

“All right, let’s head into the stage. Meet up at the entrance.”

“Okay!” I said as I tapped the button to enter the Sealed Château area. The other three players’ in-game avatars were already waiting for mine at the entrance.

...Huh? I mean, HUH?!

I couldn't believe my eyes. Among their avatars stood one in a tight, yellow full-body suit with an enormous, fish-shaped club slung over his shoulder.

Wh-what's with that outfit?! I took a cautious glance at Yoichi in real life.

"Is something wrong?"

"Um, n-no, not at all..."

Was that really Yoichi's avatar? It couldn't be... But then again, the name **Yoichi Tango** hung right above its head. No doubt about it; it was him.

And here I thought Yoichi was so serious, too! His avatar was totally at odds with that...

"Pfft... Keh-heh-heh!"

Wait... Was Yoichi laughing?





“Thanks. That’s exactly the reaction I was hoping for. Ha-ha... Keh-heh-heh!” Yoichi laughed so hard, tears formed in his eyes. What did he mean, the reaction he was hoping for?

“Watch out for this guy...,” Hirata murmured. “He acts serious, but that’s a front... He loves to get a rise out of people...”

“For real?!”

“He does?!”

My voice overlapped with Asagi’s. It looked like Hirata’s warning was news to him, too.

“These glasses don’t even have prescription lenses!” Yoichi said. “Oh man! A good prank makes it worth getting out of bed in the morning! Oh, hey, keep all this on the down-low, if you don’t mind. The more people know in advance, the fewer people there are left to prank.”

Aww, man! He got me! Maybe Yoichi had more in common with Taichi than I’d thought. They were brothers, after all.

I looked at Yoichi’s avatar again to find that he’d changed into proper gear.

“Huh? You’re not gonna wear the yellow tights?”

“No way! Please. I’ve got limits. That gag gear’s no good for defense or offense.”

Oh... That made sense.

“All right, let’s get going for real,” said Asagi. On his order, we stepped into the Château. Our game screens shifted to show a wide lobby with a huge chandelier overhead. Underneath stretched a luxurious-looking red carpet, and a flight of stairs led up to the second floor.

“Aha! I think I’ve been here before! I remember exploring the second floor at some point.”

“You do, Mai?”

“Yeah. There was a door up there that was sealed shut. I wonder how we get it open?”

“Ahh, right, I’ve heard of that. I’ve also heard that nobody’s ever managed to open it. I guess that’s why they call this place the Sealed Château.”

That made sense, too.

“That door on the left should lead underground. Let’s go,” said Hirata as he moved his avatar forward. The rest of us trailed behind him. He seemed like a serious, dutiful leader for once. I guess that’s what he really was, deep down inside...maybe.

A few other player avatars were gathered in the lobby. As we walked past them, I got a peek at their chats. They were swapping comments about strong enemies they’d faced, rare treasure they’d found, and stuff like that. In the lobby, they wouldn’t have to worry about monsters popping up; the real game started once you went upstairs or downstairs.

Behind the door to the left, we found a large hole in the floor. A ladder led down into the darkness. It looked rough and dangerous—the exact opposite of the rest of the Château’s first floor. I wondered if we’d be safe going down there. I followed the rest of my party down the ladder, worrying all the way.

“Man, I never get used to how creepy it is down here,” said Asagi. He was right; like I said, it was totally different from the rest of the area. It seemed less like a basement and more like a totally untouched cave. For example, the walls were rough stone, and grass poked up out of the ground all over the place. The lights were sparse, too, and it was hard to see... Then again, I guess I should be glad there was any light at all.

Then, suddenly, a warning popped up on the bottom of my game screen stating that we were in a monster’s line of sight! Oh, crud! Caught by a monster already?!

“We should be able to take this one down at long range. Everyone ready?”

“Yeah... Okay...”

“I’m good to go.”

Hirata and Yoichi stepped to the front of our party.

I still couldn’t see whatever monster we were up against. For a tense

moment, I wondered what it was. That tension lingered for a while before our enemy appeared: what looked like a cloud of fog with a face.

Devil Mist, then. I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd fought Devil Mist before—and I knew they went down easily!

- **Mai attacks with her Flame Bow!**
- **Direct hit on Devil Mist.**
- **[340 damage!]**
- **Devil Mist [HP: 1,460/1,800] (-340)**

All right! I hit it!

"If all four of us shoot at it, I bet we can take it out before it gets close enough for melee combat!"

Asagi was right. That'd be the most efficient way to fight. And sure enough, the Devil Mist went down in no time. It netted us 12 CP and 800 experience points.

"Oh, look... Treasure chests, right over there," Hirata said, pointing toward a pair of chests at the edge of the path.

"That's a good omen if I ever saw one! Let's get 'em open."

The first chest contained a healing potion (good for recovering 100 HP), and the second had a Sweet Dumpling Sword (with attack power 1). Neither one was much to write home about.

"Awww, yeah!" Yoichi suddenly shouted with joy. "A Sweet Dumpling Sword! That's the perfect thing for my collection! Heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh..."

Now that was suspicious. And a little creepy, too. Between the "Awww, yeah!" and the "Heh-heh... Heh-heh-heh," I didn't know what to make of Yoichi. I got the feeling he was a little strange. Okay, scratch that: a *lot* strange. And to think he looked so straitlaced, too. Wait, how were his grades? I couldn't quite

remember. Either way, he was a real enigma.

“...Ha-ha-ha. Yeah... I think he’s an odd one, too. Pretty funny to watch, though. But I wouldn’t wanna get paired off with him in a group of two... Talk about exhausting...”

Oh my. Apparently, Hirata had read my mind yet again.

“Come on, Mai. Let’s go a little deeper,” said Asagi.

“Oh, sure. Right behind you.”

Asagi didn’t seem to care much either way about what had happened. He was more interested in keeping the game going. Both Yoichi and Asagi *looked* serious, but Asagi seemed to be the real deal.

I followed him farther down the corridor until it split off into two directions. We could see about five or so Devil Mists floating around down the right path. I couldn’t see anything down the left path, but then Asagi spoke up.

“The right path leads to a room with treasure chests in it for sure. Wanna take it? I know there are monsters, but still, worth a shot.”

None of us argued. There may have been a few Devil Mists blocking the path, but they weren’t anything we couldn’t handle in a Normal Battle.

In the end, we walked away with 60 CP and 4,000 experience points. I did get hit in the process, though, taking my HP down from 5,000 to 4,720. That was still almost full health, though, so I figured I was doing okay.

We kept going along the path we’d chosen.

Oh! There’s someone there! Two female player avatars were standing in the corridor. They didn’t seem to be moving. Since we were on the same floor, I could see their chat. I opened up their chat window to have a look.

**[Miki Imai]**

**What are we gonna do, Yuka?!**

**[Yukari Shinohara]**

## **Don't ask me!!**

Whoops. Were they in the middle of a fight?

"What's up with them?"

"Couldn't hurt to ask. It might be something worth knowing about," Asagi said as he moved closer to the girls.

**[Taisuke Asagi]**

**Is something wrong?**

**[Miki Imai]**

**The thing is, we found a key to the sealed door in a chest... but we're too scared to open it! We're not super high-level or anything. We can't decide whether to go or not.**

Did she say a key to the sealed door?! Maybe they'd added it to the game over the last maintenance period or something.

"That's what I was thinking," said Hirata, replying to my thoughts. I was starting to get used to it. Either way, I was more concerned about that key.

**[Yukari Shinohara]**

**I'm the one who found it, anyway. The item explanation says "This key can only be used once, and then it disappears. The player will only get another chance to acquire it again if they fail." That's gotta mean there's a boss in the room, right? No way are we gonna be able to beat it.**

That certainly made it sound like a boss room. Without thinking, I chimed in to the chat.

**[Mai Yashiro]**

**So... What do you think you'll do with it?**

**[Yukari Shinohara]**

**Wait, are you guys with the group who's trying to beat the game? Your name/avatar combo looks familiar.**

I typed out, **Yes, that's us.** The instant I sent that, the two girls switched gears and got very excited.

**[Miki Imai]**

**No way! I can't believe we met you! Good luck! I'm totally cheering for you!!**

**[Yukari Shinohara]**

**Yeah, this is, like, crazy cool!**

**Hey, Miki, shouldn't we let them have the key?**

**[Miki Imai]**

**Yeah, you're right... Let's do it! Problem solved!**

And with that, the girls were back to chatting among themselves. Yukari gave me the key to the supposedly unopenable door.



**[Miki Imai]**

**Umm... Think you could help us out in return? We could really use an escort to the exit...**

Looking at their stats, I saw that both of them had less than 1,000 HP left. Their levels were in the seventies, too—way lower than ours.

“I can’t believe they got this far at those levels. That’s pretty impressive, in a way.”

Asagi and Yoichi both looked flabbergasted.

“That’s for sure,” said Yoichi. “Impressive or irresponsible. Either way, I wouldn’t do it.”

After a brief discussion, we decided to guide the girls back out of the area. We ran into three more Devil Mists along the way. That was enough to send the two girls into a panic; it seemed like they came looking for treasure and ran away from every enemy they bumped into along the way. They couldn’t stop showering us with praise for toppling the monsters without any trouble.

“These girls...don’t really get how scary Nightmare is, do they...?”

“They really don’t. That might get them into trouble sooner or later.” Nightmare wasn’t the sort of game you played casually, after all. One wrong judgment might even cost you your life.

“I’ll break it to them. You three go on ahead. When I see a couple of poor, ignorant souls like these, I can’t just leave them alone,” said Yoichi. “Keh-heh... Heh-heh... I’ll make sure they learn their lesson. Keh-heh-heh!” His creepy laughter sent a shiver down my spine.

But as sorry as I felt about whatever scare Yoichi had in store for those girls, I had to admit it was for the best. Nightmare was a matter of life and death, after all. I asked Yoichi to take care of them and left the stage.

As soon as I was out of the game, the stress melted away for a moment.

Another safe session. I'd met my CP quota for the day, so I didn't have to worry about the Auto-Death System.

"Welp, we didn't get our hands on those treasure chests, but we still scored something good."

"Yeah. We'll have to let Sugiura know as soon as he gets back."

"Sure will."

"Sorry... Mewta says he's sleepy. I'm heading back to my room."

Whoa! Hirata could even tell what animals were thinking?

"...Animals express their feelings through sounds and body language. You can figure out a lot by paying attention... Most people can manage that. They're easier to read than humans."

I wondered if that was true. Either way, we thanked Hirata for his help and saw him off.

*A Challenge from Tsubasa*

Now that we had the key to the unopenable door, Asagi and I waited in the clubroom for Sugiura and Taichi to come back. Then I noticed the light on my Nightmare console was flashing.

Hmm? Looks like I got a message. I looked and saw that it was from Tsubasa Kaitsu.

“Isn’t that the kid from the other day?”

Tsubasa was, in fact, the kid from the other day—to be more specific, he was a middle schooler who’d put Naomi’s nose nerve functions up on the Nerve Auction for a ridiculous price and given us a hard time. But we’d talked it out during a Battle of Wits, and in the end, he handed over Naomi’s Nose free of charge.

In other words, he wasn’t a bad kid, but he *was* crafty. So crafty, even a grown-up might fall for his tricks if they weren’t careful.

**[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Kibf runw bi aww.**

**Giq’a ur fiubf?**

**END**

Uh... What? Most of the message was unreadable. Had there been some kind of glitch?

“Whoa, what the heck is that? Did he slam his face on the keyboard or something?” Asagi said in surprise. I guess he’d caught a glimpse of my screen.

I wasn’t so sure. Looking over the letters in Tsubasa’s message, I couldn’t help but think they were arranged that way on purpose. Maybe he was testing me. I mean, it was Tsubasa, after all...

There was proper punctuation at the end of each line, too. The “.” and “?” made me think they were actual sentences, not random nonsense. The first letter of each line was capitalized, too. He must have typed it all out on a computer keyboard intentionally.

...Hmmm. A computer keyboard, huh?

“Hey, Asagi... There are junior high schools where the kids have access to PCs for their schoolwork, right?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure there are. Either way, plenty of younger kids these days play games and stuff on the internet at home, too.”

“That’s what I thought.” I opened up the laptop on the table and looked over the keyboard to confirm how the keys were positioned.

I looked to the right of *K*, and there was *L*.

To the right of *I*, there was *O*.

*B? N.*

*F? G*

That spelled *long*. They were real words after all! All it took to decode them was checking one key to the right on a computer keyboard. After I cracked the code, figuring out the rest was easy: “Long time no see. How’s it going?”

Like I said, Tsubasa’s crafty. But you’ve gotta be extra-crafty to come up with a riddle that I can’t solve!

**“I’m fine,”** I replied.

“Whoa! You can read that?” Asagi watched wide-eyed as I sent my reply off to Tsubasa.

**“It’s a pretty simple code,”** I said. I explained it to Asagi.

“That probably would’ve kept me up all night trying to figure it out,” he said. He looked sincerely impressed.

Hee-hee! I could imagine him clutching his head and trying to work out a riddle all night. There was something kind of adorable about it.

**“Oh, hey, you got a response.”**

**[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Hmm. Not bad. Not bad at all. Then again, I guess you can’t be *that* stupid if you’ve beaten two events already.**

**Speaking of, if you find any info about the next event, be sure and tell me.**

**That’s about it. See ya.**

**END**

He sure put out those feelers in a hurry. I wondered if that meant he wanted to participate in an event.

“Yo! Whatcha guys doin’?” came a familiar voice. I turned to see Taichi and Sugiura standing behind us.

“Sorry we’re late. My dad called me up outta nowhere...,” Sugiura said with an extremely annoyed look on his face.

“What did he want?” I asked. I was a little afraid to pry while Sugiura was in

totally-over-it mode, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious.

"....."

"Um... Sugiura?"

"Hold up. I haven't bypassed the Auto-Death System for the day yet. I'm gonna go get that taken care of."

Whoops! Just like that, Sugiura was gone. Meanwhile, Taichi was very much still there, grinning a huge, satisfied grin.

"Mai, Asagi, check this out," he said as he pulled out a new issue of *Nightmare Weekly*. It included a special feature on the Blue Event...that just so happened to praise Asagi and me every bit as highly as Sugiura.

"All the stuff about you two came from Sugiura himself. He said he didn't want the article to come out all crummy. He rejected it over and over again until he thought they got it right."

Is that so?

The article mentioned how Asagi had an eye for detail and picked up on things that Sugiura himself might miss, and how that made him a reliable ally. It said I was a "*little slow on the uptake sometimes*," but praised me for my sharp thinking. And to top it all off, it mentioned how much Sugiura believed in the two of us—and the rest of the Conquerors' Club.

Honestly, I was delighted! ...Though I wasn't sure that "slow on the uptake" stuff was necessary.

"Hmm... What now, though? There's something we really should tell Sugiura about..."

We looked over at Sugiura. He was already in the middle of playing the game. I definitely wasn't brave enough to interrupt him.

"Oh, yeah?" asked Taichi. "Whatcha got?"

"Well, first off..." I told Taichi about our whole day, starting with our mission to take on some Normal Battles.

"Whoa, really? Like, really-really?! You got your hands on the key to that

closed-off room?”

“That’s right. But we turned back for the day, since we figured there’s probably a boss in there.”

“Makes sense. The flavor text on that key sure makes it sound that way, at least. Better wait till Sugiura’s got a moment to spare and show it to him.”

Taichi and I were on the same page. We settled on waiting until Sugiura was done playing Nightmare. Taichi said he’d go fight alongside Sugiura for a bit and stood to go.

In the meantime, I decided to reply to Tsubasa.

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**I don’t have any new information on the event, but I got a key to the room nobody’s been in. Another player told me she found it in a treasure chest in the Sealed Château. It might help lead us to the next event, for all I know. I think it got added with the last update.**

**END**

Tsubasa’s reply arrived almost immediately.

**[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Nice. Sounds likely.**

**Pretty lucky that someone found it right after the**



**maintenance period ended though, huh? Either that, or it's gonna be a tough one this time around, so they raised the drop rate on the key that gives you the right to participate.**

**END**

That seemed entirely possible, now that I thought about it. That was Tsubasa for you. It was hard to think of him as a middle schooler.

A few moments later, another message came in from Tsubasa before I'd even had the chance to reply to the last one.

**[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**So when're you opening the room up? I wanna come along.**

**END**

Easy enough for him to say, but it wasn't my decision to make alone. I replied that I'd be in touch after talking to Sugiura.

Sugiura must have quickly finished earning his 100 CP for the day, because he and Taichi came over to our table at that very moment.

"Taichi gave me the short version. Did you really get your hands on a key to that sealed-off room?"

"Sure did. Here it is," I said, showing Sugiura the key.

"Well, look at that. Seems promising. It's worth checking out, at least."

"Do you remember Tsubasa? We met with him during a Battle of Wits the other day."

"Oh yeah, that kid. What about him?"

“He says he wants to come along when we go into the room. What do you say?”

Sugiura thought for a moment.

“If he tags along, one of us is gonna have to stay behind.”

He had a point. There were four of us, counting me. That was the maximum number of players in a party.

“Um, should I sit it out?” I asked. I had the lowest level on the Raid Team, after all. If any of us were dead weight, it was me.

“Nah, you don’t need to take it that far. If I’m headin’ into a spot like that, I need people I can trust with me. Tell you what, let me reply to this Tsubasa kid. You don’t need to worry about a thing.”

It seemed like Sugiura wanted to stick to the Raid Team for this mission. Anyone could see that Tsubasa was stronger than I was. If the party really wanted to put up a good fight, picking him over me was a no-brainer. But Sugiura picked me instead. Simply put, that made me happy. It meant he really trusted me.

“Gonna turn ’im down, huh?” asked Taichi.

“Nah. I’m gonna tell ’im he can come along, so long as he doesn’t mind not gettin’ in on the fightin’.”

“Gotcha. That’s probably the safest way to play it. Speaking of playing, when are we going, anyway?”

“Not until we’ve had a chance to hunker down and bring Mai’s level up a bit higher in case things get ugly. You two, gimme a hand.”

Both Asagi and Taichi nodded right away.

“Course we’ll help! What’re teammates for, am I right?”

“Yeah. Let’s get your level up, Mai!”

Taichi had a point; we were all teammates. I owed it to them to get stronger as soon as I could so I wouldn’t hold them up anymore.

“All right. We’re gonna get Mai up to level one hundred fifty. Sound good?”

“Yessir!” all three of us energetically replied at the same time.

*Top Ranker Tanaka*

Ten days went by after we got our hands on the key to the unopenable door. Thanks to a lot of help from the other members of the Conquerors' Club, I steadily climbed up to level 150.

Once our afternoon classes ended, the four Raid Team members met in the clubroom. I know I had a nervous look on my face; no surprise there. But it was a little surprising to see Asagi, Taichi, and even Sugiura right there with me. We were truly about to head off into uncharted territory.

As we started up our Nightmare consoles, Sugiura looked each of us in the eyes.

"Ready to go?"

The three of us answered in unison:

"Yeah, I think so."

"I'm all good."

"Yep, me too."

Oh, right! Tsubasa had Sugiura's approval to join us as an observer. He mentioned he wanted to bring some friends along, but I wasn't sure who they were.

"C'mon, Mai! Get a move on!"

"Y-yessir! Sorry!"

Oh man! I've got to get it together! This was no time to get lost in my own head. I had to focus on the game in front of me! Tsubasa would be there when

we logged on.

I rushed through the log-in screen and made my way to the lobby of the Sealed Château, where Tsubasa was already waiting for us.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**You're late, Yashiro. Pick up the pace! Sheesh!**

**I hope that's not a preview of what's to come, slowpoke.**

Oof. The chat box was already heating up. I mean, sure, I was the last of us to reach the meeting spot, but he didn't have to call me "slowpoke..."

"That's laying it on kinda thick," Asagi said, trying to defend me. "We're doing him a favor. You'd think he'd cut us some slack." Man, what a nice guy!

Sugiura, on the other hand...

"He's got a point. You—and only you—were a whole minute late. You don't have a leg to stand on here."

Whoa! Harsh much? But he wasn't wrong. I couldn't say anything for myself.

"Hmm? Wait a sec. Is this the same Tanaka who's at the top of the leaderboard?"

Wait, what?! I looked and saw that Tsubasa had brought two people along with him: a woman and a man. And one of them had an avatar named Kenichi Tanaka.

Huh? The avatar looked just like the one included in all of Tanaka's messages, too... No doubt about it. It was him.

Hold the phone! Tsubasa knew Tanaka?! That was a bit of a surprise... No, scratch that. It was a huge surprise!

"Never know where you're gonna make a new connection, I guess," said Sugiura.

“You can say that again. But even then, I never thought we’d run into the top-ranked player in the whole game here...”

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOooohhhhhh!**

What now?!

Tanaka’s avatar moved toward mine as he typed a long battle cry in the chat. Gripped by sudden fear, I tried to put some distance between our avatars.

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**Hey! No running away! I’m not a weirdo, y’know!**

...Sorry, but you’re checking all the weirdo boxes to me.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Hey, Gramps, quit bein’ gross. What are you even doing?**

Tsubasa jumped in without hesitation to keep Tanaka in line. It seemed like his nickname for Tanaka was “Gramps.” Tsubasa didn’t seem to mind being rude to anyone and everyone. Polite middle schoolers didn’t tell grown-ups to “quit bein’ gross.”

If nothing else, I guess it meant Tsubasa treated everyone equally. Yeah, let’s go with that.

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**There are more important matters at hand!**

**Listen well, ladies and gentlemen!**

**Miss Yashiro here is one of the few, the proud, the...  
Tanaka's Spectacled Spectaculars!**

**Impressed, eh?**

**Pew, pew!**

**Bwee-ooo, bwee-ooo!**

**Gimme an *M* ! Gimme a *Y* !**

**Huh?**

**Kapow!**

**Ka-ka-pewww!!!!**

**Whooooo!**

Ugh. So he'd noticed it was me. If I didn't have any comebacks before, now I had so many, I didn't know where to begin. It was pretty obvious that by the end of his message, he was coasting on vibes alone and banging out pure gibberish.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Oh. Gross.**

Tsubasa met Tanaka's grand announcement with stone-cold indifference. Or

maybe it was disinterest?

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**Oooooooooof. You're cold...and mean...and broooke!**

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Huh? What are you, stupid? Are you gonna start saying stuff that makes sense, or do we have to leave you here for real?**

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**I'm sorry. Seriously, I am.**

**Don't leave me behind! (Waaaah!)**

**You wouldn't abandon a poor old man, would you?**

Whoa. Tanaka was ranked number one in the whole game, and Tsubasa still managed to give him a hard time! I wondered how the two of them even knew each other. Actually, "wondered" doesn't really cover how curious I was. But this was neither the time nor the place to ask.

"Let's get a move on," said Sugiura. "We'll go on ahead and let these guys bring up the rear."

"Sounds good," I said.

We weren't heading underground this time. We took the stairs up to the second floor. The unopenable door was beyond a study up on the third floor, so we had to find the stairs that led up there.

"Let's see... First, we take a left."



“Roger that.”

We walked down the hallway and turned a corner and immediately saw a sword and a spear floating in midair. Monsters! A Cursed Sword and a Cursed Spear, to be specific. Nothing we couldn’t handle with long-range attacks. They weren’t that strong, and we should be able to take them down in a flash—

My train of thought was immediately derailed by a shock wave from behind. I had no idea what was going on. The only long-range weapons we had at our disposal were bows and guns, after all...or so I thought. I looked at the in-game combat log and saw that Tanaka had fired off the blast.

“Whoa,” said Taichi. “What the heck was that?”

“A blast from an ultra-rare weapon,” Sugiura said. “I’ve heard rumors about melee weapons that can shoot long-distance attacks, too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Plus, since it’s technically a melee weapon, it never runs out of ammo. Or so I’ve heard—I don’t have one. I don’t think anyone does except the top two players in the game.”

The top two? Tanaka and Masuda, in other words.

“Sweet! With a weapon like that, you wouldn’t have to blow cash on bows and arrows!”

“Yeah. Must be convenient.”

Except for a few magic weapons, there was a limit to how much a bow could shoot. If you ran out of arrows, that was it—no more long-distance attacks until you had a chance to buy more. Even I could tell how amazingly handy Tanaka’s weapon and its infinite ammo was.

“I hear ultra-rare weapons get stronger along with their wielders, too,” Taichi piped up.

Hmm. That’s something. If that were true, it meant you wouldn’t have to upgrade your weapon ever again once you got your hands on one. This ultra-rare weapon was looking better and better by the second.

“I get the feeling we’ll be fine if any strong monsters show up, so long as this

Tanaka guy's on our team, huh?" said Taichi.

That struck a nerve with Sugiura. "Don't be an idiot," he said with a frown. "If there's a boss in that room, we're gonna be the ones to take it down, got it? Or what, are you gonna beg these guys for help, now that we've seen how strong they are? Have a little pride! Don't take any crap from them!"

"Geez, okay, sorry," said Taichi. I flinched. Sugiura turned on him so fiercely that even Taichi felt the need to apologize.

"Sugiura's got his pride as a leader to think about," Asagi whispered in my ear. "I think we're gonna have to step up and handle this on our own."

"It looks that way," I said.

Sugiura was ranked number three in Nightmare, and he'd managed to get there without an ultra-rare weapon. That was plenty of proof that he was an amazing player. But no matter how amazing he was, he probably couldn't let himself forget that there were two players that were even more amazing. At least that was my guess. All three of them were on a level I'd never, ever reach.

But I was part of the Raid Team all the same. Whether I was high ranked or not, I still had to work hard so the four of us could beat the game together.

When the conversation died down, we found ourselves right outside the study on the third floor.

"All right, let's head in. There are probably monsters inside, so don't get sloppy."

"Got it!"

Sugiura's avatar walked up and examined the finely detailed double doors that led to the study. They slowly creaked open.

No matter how many times I saw them, I couldn't help but be surprised by the sheer number of bookshelves in the study. But there weren't just a lot of shelves; each one of them was packed tight with more books than you could probably read in your whole life.

"Yep, looks like there are monsters all over," said Taichi. "Might as well take a few of 'em out along the way."

“Right. Let’s do that.”

We didn’t bother exploring the study. Instead, we made a beeline right for the unopenable door in the back of the room—until we were interrupted by a pack of Booklings. These monsters were living books with arms and legs, and there were eight of them.

Yeesh, that’s a lot! They started shuffling toward us. It was time to start things off with a long-range attack!

- **Mai attacks with her Flame Bow!**
- **Bookling 1 dodged by jumping into the air!**
- **Bookling 1 [HP: 2,500/2,500] (No change)**

Yikes! I missed! What a drag!

Then I saw the same Bookling I’d shot at bending over backward, like it’d been hit by something else. I wondered if Asagi had stepped in to help me. Okay, maybe it was more like I *hoped* he had. But then I looked down at the combat results...

- **Tsubasa attacks with his Spark Arrow!**
- **Direct hit on Bookling 1**
- **790 damage!**
- **Bookling 1 [HP: 1,710/2,500] (-790)**

Ack! That wasn’t Asagi at all.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Man, you really are clumsy. You sure you can hack it here?**

**Ha-ha-ha!**

Aw, man! He was making a fool out of me for sure!

“Don’t let him get to you, Mai. He’s trying to get a rise out of you. If you react, you’ll give him exactly what he wants.”

“Yeah... You’re right.” I decided to be the bigger person, especially since Tsubasa was younger than I was. That’s it. I was being the bigger person in more ways than one.

“You’re way too easy to pick on, you know that?” said Sugiura.

“Huh?”

“He’s got a point, Mai,” said Taichi. “Especially for folks like Sugiura and li’l Tsubasa here.”

“Hey, what’re you groupin’ me in with that brat for?”

Oof. Sugiura’s voice had a scary edge to it. He really, really didn’t want to be lumped in with Tsubasa like that.

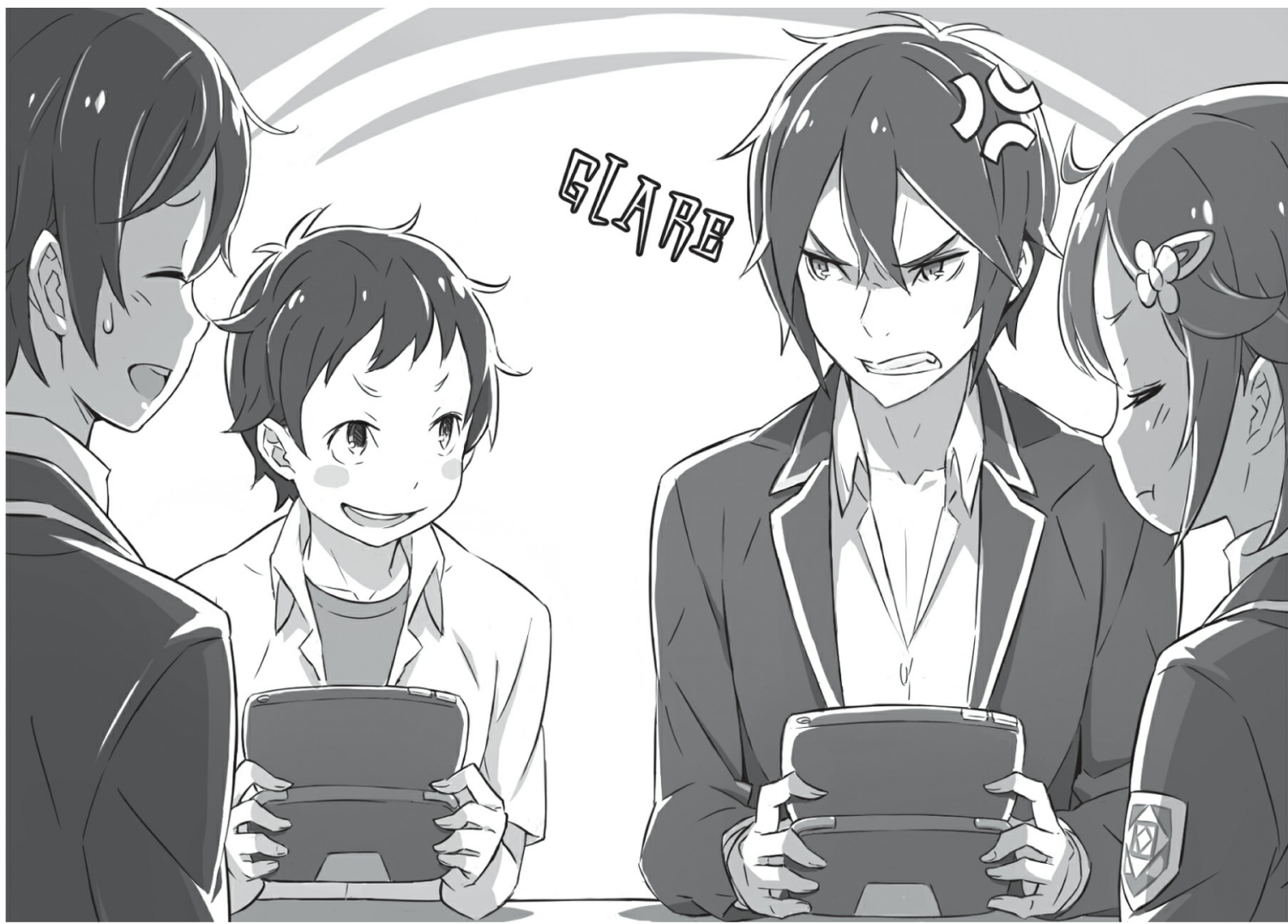
But I had to admit, I could kind of see the similarities. Not that I’d ever, ever say that to Sugiura’s face.

Anyway, back to the game. Between long-range attacks and good old-fashioned combat, we made short work of the Booklings. The Raid Team party took down five of them, and Tsubasa and his crew got the remaining three. I took a little damage in the process, so I popped a potion to regain 100 HP.

“Well, lookie here! When it comes to numbers, we’re the winners,” Taichi said. “I’m gonna pop into the chat to gloat a bit.”

“Give it a rest, or you’ll be askin’ them to make fun of you... Those small-fry Booklings are way too weak to brag about, anyway,” said Sugiura. He was spot-on, too. Tsubasa would’ve had a field day with Taichi if he brought it up. Tanaka

might get in on the action, too.



“Aww, seriously? Tch. A win’s a win, if you ask me,” said Taichi. “What d’you think, Asagi?”

“M-me? I dunno... I mean, all we did was take out two more minor monsters than they did. Hmm... Nah, I wouldn’t call that boast-worthy...”

That’s true—we wouldn’t have any business bragging until we took down whatever boss was waiting behind the door. Our teammates were the only ones with the key, either way.

“All right, we made it to the door nobody’s opened before. Ready to roll?”

I carefully double-checked my equipment and my HP. Even a little extra damage could make the difference between life and death in the situation we were about to face.

“I’m ready,” I said. “Good to go when you are.”

Asagi and Taichi nodded to show they were ready, too.

“Okay, Mai, get that door open.”

“Got it!”

## *The Reaper King Released*

The next moment was tense. A sturdy-looking iron door was the only thing between us and a super-strong enemy, for all I knew, and we were about to open it. I selected the key in my inventory and unlocked the formerly unopenable door.

<<!>>

**Open the door?**

**[Yes] / [No]**

When the prompt appeared, I didn't stop to think before choosing **Yes**.

The iron door started creaking. It sounded like the lock was covered in rust—which made sense. As the story goes, nobody had been able to open the door in a long, long time.

Finally, the door revealed a wide and horribly shabby-looking room. All the furniture was rotten, and the red carpet and curtains were worn down to threads. At the far end of the room, we could see steps leading up to a throne.

"...Something's sitting up there." Whoever or whatever it was had its head bowed.

"I don't like the look of this. That thing's totally gonna start moving."

"No doubt about that," Taichi said. "I mean, it's gotta be a boss, right?"



“Who knows?” Sugiura said. “We dunno for sure that there’s a boss fight in here. We assumed that. May as well have a look around.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

We headed into the room and walked up the steps toward the throne with Tsubasa’s party following behind us. I thought back to what I’d heard before. If we messed up here, we’d lose the key. I wondered if that meant we’d be forced out of the room, too. Hmmm... Either way, there was no way to know without seeing for ourselves.

When I moved my avatar in front of the slumped figure sitting on the throne, a command prompt that said **Examine** popped up on my screen. I hit the button.

<<!>>

**The king is rotting away.**

**Free his soul from this room?**

**[Yes] / [No]**

Another command prompt.

“What should I do?”

“Hit ‘Yes,’ duh,” Sugiura snapped.

“...Right.” I really, really didn’t want to, but I chose **Yes** all the same. Suddenly, there came a loud rumbling as the wall behind the throne sank into the floor. “Looks like a hidden room. I wonder what’s back there.”

“Well, it said you just freed the king’s soul. It’s probably something related to that.”

“That’s a safe bet.”

Sugiura’s avatar headed toward the newly revealed secret room. “What’re

you waitin' for? C'mon!"

"Oh! Hang on a sec, please!" I rushed after him, flustered. Wasn't he scared at all? I guess he didn't get to be the third-ranked player by being scared. His face didn't look even the slightest shade paler than usual.

Once we were in the secret room, I saw that the walls were bare concrete. It was totally different from the throne room. The throne room may have been shabby and rotten, but this one looked like it'd been roughly slapped together.



In the dead center of the concrete room, there sat a cube. It was wrapped in chains, and there were slips of paper that seemed to be inscribed with protective magic stuck all over it, too. Whatever was in the box, it had to be bad news.

I tiptoed up to the box and examined it.

<<!>>

**Key verified. You are qualified to attempt this challenge.**

**If you accept, you must protect the king's soul.**

**Are you ready?**

**[Participating Party]**

**Mai Yashiro *Taisuke Asagi* Shinji Sugiura / Taichi Tango**  
**[Ready] / [Cancel]**

Hmm. Something about this seemed out of step with everything around us.

“Protect the king's soul, huh? What's that supposed to mean?” asked Taichi. That's just what I'd been thinking. I wasn't getting protect or defend vibes from anything about this.

“I'm only guessing, but maybe monsters will show up, and we'll have to keep them from reaching the king's soul... That's probably it, right?”

“Yeah, that makes sense. All right, I've heard enough. Let's do this,” said Sugiura.

“Roger!” I hit **Ready**. A short distance away, Tsubasa and his party's avatars sat down to observe. My avatar began to unwrap the chains and peel off the protective seals on the box. Once they were finally off, I popped the lid off the box by myself.

Three Grim Reapers sprang out of the box.

Eek!! Grim Reapers were Rank S monsters, and now we had three of them to deal with! No way. Any party would have a tough time with that fight! But before I had time to think about anything else, combat began.

**[Normal Battle] <<Turn 1>> Mai Yashiro joined the battle!**

**Shinji Sugiura joined the battle!**

**Taisuke Asagi joined the battle!**

**Taichi Tango joined the battle!**

**[Action Order]**

**1. Shinji Sugiura (5,000/5,000) 2. Zyst (18,000/18,000)  
3. Zust'raag (8,000/8,000) 4. Taisuke Asagi (5,000/5,000)  
5. Taichi Tango (5,000/5,000) 6. Mai Yashiro  
(5,000/5,000) 7. Zalbatoth (120/120)**

That's weird. They aren't all the same strength—and they've all got their own names, too. I wondered why that was. Looking over the on-screen graphics, I could see that the Grim Reapers named Zyst and Zust'raag were both holding scythes. Zalbatoth, on the other hand, only had a wooden rod. Something told me Zalbatoth was weak.

There was one other thing that caught my eye, too. Zyst's left hand was clenched tight around an object that looked kind of like a birdcage with a blue light glowing inside it. All the other Grim Reapers had were their weapons.

"All right, might as well start with the runt," said Sugiura.

"No! H-hang on, please!" I called out. Sugiura jerked to a stop with his finger right on the button to pick his action for the round.

"Why?"

I thought back to what Tsubasa said. The key to the room in the Sealed Château had basically fallen into my hands without any effort at all. It seemed

super likely that there was some kind of catch. There could very well be some sort of trick to this fight, just like there had been with the Kitsune-Masked Girl before...and, for all we knew, attacking Zalbatoth straightaway could be bad news.

I mean, his weapon was a stick, and he only had 120 HP! There was definitely something fishy going on. Nightmare was practically begging us to attack Zalbatoth. It felt like a trap for sure.

“I think we should avoid attacking Zalbatoth for now,” I told Sugiura. “I don’t think we’ll have any chance of winning if we treat this like a regular battle.”

“Gotcha. If you say so, I’ll go along with the hunch I assume you’ve got. I’ll whale on one of the others instead.”

“Thanks, Sugiura!”

Sugiura decided to attack Zust’raag, taking his HP down from 8,000 to 7,020.

Next, it was Zyst’s turn—the Grim Reaper with the birdcage.

### **<<Turn 1: Zyst>> [Zyst]**

**Heh-heh-heh! You’d better put up a real fight... You know what happens if you don’t!**

- **Zyst swung his scythe!**
- **800 damage to all party members!**

### **[HP Remaining]**

- **Shinji Sugiura [HP: 4,200/5,000]**
- **Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,200/5,000]**
- **Taichi Tango [HP: 4,200/5,000]**
- **Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,200/5,000]**

It looked like Zyst's attack could do a fixed amount of damage to all of us, no matter what. Eight hundred was a lot of HP to lose every round.

"Put up a real fight, huh?" Asagi said. "I mean, I didn't think we weren't, to be honest." Asagi was right. There wasn't a player in the whole game who would mess around when three Grim Reapers showed up. Anyone out there would face them with all their might.

"Is it just me, or do monsters usually clam up during a fight?"

"You know, you're right..."

"Hold up!" said Taichi. "You think we might be dealing with Humons here?"

Humons are a special type of monster, like my Familiar Amelie. Unlike other monsters, they're about as smart as humans. If these Grim Reapers were Humons, they'd be a lot tougher to handle than the usual monsters.

Either way, it was Zust'raag's turn next.

### **<<Turn 1: Zust'raag>> [Zust'raag]**

**Tch... Don't get too cocky.**

- **Zust'raag stabs Shinji with his scythe!**
- **1,580 damage!**

**[HP Remaining]**

- **Shinji Sugiura [HP: 2,620/5,000] (-1,580)**

Sugiura took a huge amount of damage. Zust'raag was clearly strong... Chills ran down my spine as I thought of him turning his scythe on the rest of us.

"Tch... Pretty tough for a guy named Dust Rag," Sugiura grumbled.

D-Dust Rag? Now that I thought about it, though, "Zust'raag" was a pretty silly name for a Grim Reaper.

“Our pal Dust Rag talked, too, huh?” said Taichi. He was already on board with the new nickname.

“Hmm... Y’know, I’m starting to think that Zyst might not have been talking to us.”

“Come to think of it, it’s possible he meant for the other Grim Reapers to put up a real fight instead,” I said. In that case, then maybe Dust Rag—I mean Zust’raag—was being forced to fight against his will. His own words sure didn’t sound very friendly toward Zyst. I decided to sit back and watch how things played out a bit more.

Asagi’s turn was up next.

“What to do, what to do? Maybe we should take Zust’raag out first. He really packs a punch,” Asagi said. In any other battle, that would be common sense, but it still felt like there was a catch this time around.

“It sounds like Zyst is calling the shots and Zust’raag’s only following orders.”

“It’s probably safest to watch and wait for now, then,” said Asagi. “I could whip out a Special Move and hit all of them, but that’d probably take Zalbatoth out, so I won’t.”

“Right. Thanks.”

Asagi decided to attack Zyst, dealing 500 damage. That took Zyst’s HP down from 18,000 to 17,5000.

Did I mention Grim Reapers are really strong?

“Welp, I’m up next,” said Taichi. “I’m gonna wing it.”

**<<Turn 1: Taichi Tango>> Swipe Weapon <<Success Rate 35%>> • Taichi tried to swipe Zyst’s weapon!**

**• Miss**

“No dice. Sorry ’bout that.”



“‘Swipe Weapon’? What kind of skill is that?”

“It gives me a chance to take away a monster’s weapon for a turn. Without a weapon, they can’t use any Special Moves, and their attack power goes way, way down.”

Aha. That sounded like it could really come in handy in a fight like this one...as long as it hit.

It was my turn. I wondered if I should use it to heal Sugiura, since he was the most badly hurt out of any of us. I decided to cast Dark Heal, one of my spells as a Cursed Sage, to restore him back to full HP.

With that, it was Zalbatoth’s turn.

### **<<Turn 1: Zalbatoth>> [Zalbatoth]**

**Sorry... I don’t wanna do this, either.**

- **Zalbatoth threw a pebble at Mai!**
- **1 damage!**

### **[HP Remaining]**

- **Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,199/5,000] (-1)**

It looked like Zalbatoth was every bit as weak as I’d thought. To top it off, he apologized to us before he attacked. That settled it: Zust’raag and Zalbatoth weren’t fighting alongside Zyst willingly. If anything, they didn’t seem to want to fight at all. But why was that?

The second round began, and it was Sugiura’s turn. His attack shaved 1,600 more HP off Zyst, taking him from 17,500 to 15,900.

“Nice one, Sugiura! You hit even harder than a Grim Reaper!”

“Nah, that was barely a scratch. Nowhere near their kinda firepower,” Sugiura said. Still, no matter what he thought, he really had done more damage in one

attack than a Rank S Grim Reaper—which was pretty incredible, even if it was only by 20 points.

“No, I mean, you literally did more damage,” said Taichi. “Y’know, all things considered.”

“‘All things considered’? The heck’s that supposed to mean?”

Yikes. Sugiura’s scary face was back. Taichi really needed to learn to stop talking one sentence earlier.

“Ha-ha-ha, c’mon, I don’t mean anything by it. Now watch it, ’cause it’s the monster’s turn.”

“.....”

Sugiura was obviously still angry. Taichi’s attempt to clear the air hadn’t cleared much of anything. I had to hand it to Taichi: It took guts to tease Sugiura, especially at a time like this.

Next, it was Zyst’s turn.

**<<Turn 2: Zyst>> [Zyst]**

**Get with the program! If you want this back, hurry up and kill them!**

- **Zyst held the cage up high!**

**Zyst shakes with laughter.**

All right! He didn’t attack us this time!

“That birdcage in his hand definitely has some sort of secret.”

“Yeah, you got that right,” said Sugiura. “Not like we can reach out and steal it, though. Guess we’ve gotta take this Zyst guy down first, huh?”

“That might be a good idea.”

There was supposedly a king's soul around somewhere. I wondered if it was the blue light in Zyst's cage. If so, then Zalbatoth and Zust'raag were probably reluctantly drafted to help Zyst hang on to it.

Zust'raag's turn was next, and he attacked me, but his attack totally missed! Talk about luck!

Hang on, maybe that wasn't luck at all! Maybe he missed on purpose! Then again, I might have been overthinking it.

Then came Asagi's turn.

"Straightforward attacks don't seem to do much good. I'm gonna try to debuff them instead."

"Debuff?"

"Yeah. I picked up this One Hundred Percent Paralyzing Orb a little while back, and this looks like a good chance to use it," Asagi said. Paralyzing Orbs are items that keep monsters from moving for the next few turns. Items like that have a percentage in their name that shows how likely they are to work. If Asagi had a One Hundred Percent Paralyzing Orb, that meant it would work without a doubt.

"Wow, that's really useful!" I said. "It must be pretty rare, huh?"

"Sure is. Items with percentages this high almost never drop."

Most items like that were 10 to 30 percent effective. A 100 percent item was pretty special. I almost never got my hands on items that rare.

"I'm gonna make Zyst hold still for a bit."

"Please do!"

**<<Turn 2: Taisuke Asagi>> • Taisuke threw a Paralyzing Orb at Zyst!**

**• Direct hit!**

**Zyst cannot act for the next three turns.**

Success! No surprise there.

Then I noticed something changed on my game screen. The battle screeched to a halt. Zust'raag and Zalbatoth waited for a while, then leaned in toward the motionless Zyst. Finally, Zalbatoth reached over and took the birdcage from Zyst's hand. Then Zust'raag pulled out a rope from somewhere and tied Zyst up.

**[Zust'raag]**

**Heh-heh-heh! I dunno who you guys are, but thanks a ton!**

**Now we can put this bonehead in his place!**

**Hyaa-ha-ha!**

**[Zalbatoth]**

**We appreciate it.**

**This jerk stole the Reaper King's soul, and he's been strutting around like he's the king ever since.**

**We'll let King Deathcha decide what to do with him.**

**Don't worry. He'll get what's coming to him.**

"Reaper King, huh? I guess even Grim Reapers have leaders."

"I'm guessing that was him on the throne back there, then," Taichi said.

Aha! That made sense.

"It looks like hitting Zyst with a status ailment was all it took to end the battle."

“Sure does...but it sure took a while to figure that out. I’d call that a hard fight.” Looking back on it, I thought that the fight probably would’ve been unwinnable if we’d beaten Zalbatoth or Zust’raag first. Heck, even if we’d focused on flat out destroying Zyst, he might’ve taken the king’s soul down with him.

**[Zust’raag]**

**Come on, say something!**

**Don’t stand there silently!**

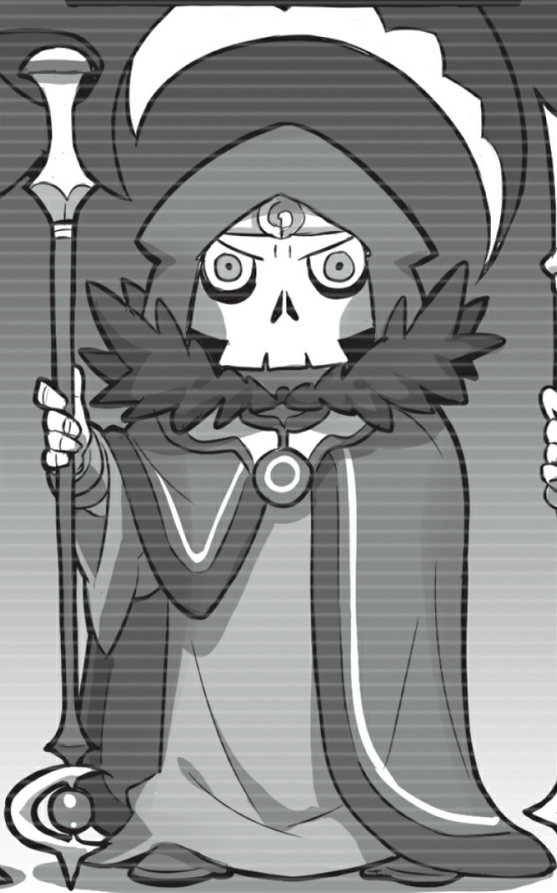
Huh? Oh, right. These Grim Reapers are Humons. They’re much smarter than regular computer-controlled monsters. It’s rude to leave them hanging.

“You’re very welcome,” I said.

ZALBATOTH



DEATHCHA, REAPER KING



ZUST'RAAG



**[Zust'raag]**

**Pffft! Way to keep the great Zust'raag waiting!**

**Tch, humans.**

**[Zalbatoth]**

**Don't worry. We're not like other Grim Reapers.**

**We don't want to fight humans if we can help it.**

**Please don't be scared.**

**Really, when you think about it, we're innocent bystanders who got wrapped up in all of this.**

**Now go on! The Reaper King awaits! His Majesty should have what you're looking for.**

"Looks like these Reapers aren't such bad guys after all," I said. Their names changed from red to yellow on my game screen. That meant they were neutral toward our party. We couldn't hurt them, and they couldn't hurt us.

We did as they said and headed for the throne. There, we found a regal-looking Grim Reaper with a splendid crown resting on its skull.

**[Deathcha, Reaper King]**

**I give thee my thanks.**

**I also bestow thee with these.**

**We have no use for them anymore.**

Deathcha pulled out three green Event Tickets and shoved them into our hands. Asagi and I shared a look.

“W-we did it, Mai,” Asagi said.

“Looks that way... Great...” I felt conflicted. On one hand, now we had to participate in yet another terrifying in-game event. But on the other hand, it brought us one step closer to beating Nightmare and being done with the game for good.

The whole Nightmare Conquerors’ Club was counting on us. It was no time to let fear win.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Aww, man! You guys won?**

**Ah, well. Grats.**

**I gotta admit, I kinda hoped you’d screw up so we could find ourselves a key and give it a shot.**

**Looks like that won’t be necessary, though.**

**...Fine, fine. You did good.**

As usual, I couldn’t tell whether Tsubasa was complimenting us or insulting us.

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**Whoa! Amazing!**



**I can't believe my eyes!**

**Tell you what, how 'bout I make you my bodyguards?**

**NPC A: Oh, wow, Mr. Tanaka! You're brilliant!**

**NPC B: Another winning idea!**

**How 'bout it? Mwheh-heh-heh!**

Uh, hard pass, Mr. Tanaka. Besides, he was way stronger than any of us. If we formed a party with him, he'd end up having to guard *us* for sure... And what was with the NPC A and NPC B stuff, anyway? Clearly, Tanaka was gonna keep Tanaka-ing, no matter what. Every line he sent to the chat was as energetic as always. Honestly, I respected that a little.

Either way, the battle was over without a hitch. We were ready to go home.

**[Zust'raag]**

**Let's see our saviors safely out, Zalbatoth!**

**[Zalbatoth]**

**Good idea. Let's go.**

Oh my. It looked like we picked up a pair of Grim Reaper guards. As we headed back out of the Sealed Château, I kept my eye on the chat and saw that the two of them kept up a steady stream of messages: **Come visit the Great Zust'raag any time! *What's that?* Come back and play with us sometime! You know where to find us!** and so on. It seemed like they were sorry to see us go.

Did they want attention? Or were they really lonely? Either way, it was a funny way for Grim Reapers to act.

Zalbatoth promised each of us a treasure—and gave us some of his prized pebbles. To be honest, they're totally useless as items. Maybe Zalbatoth just liked rocks.

Most of Zust'raag's comments were directed at Sugiura, and I could tell they were getting on his nerves. "Us hunks gotta stick together, y'know!" and so on.

Naturally, Sugiura tried to ignore him, but every now and then, he hit a boiling point and snapped for Zust'raag to "Shut up, already." That didn't stop Zust'raag, who kept needling him all the way out.

Maybe it's because I didn't expect them to be friendly at all, but something about a pair of Grim Reapers being this friendly had me all mixed up. I mean, I actually caught myself thinking it might be fun to come back and hang out with them, if you can believe that. I mulled it over again and again, and before I knew it, we'd made our way out of the stage.

## *Encouragement from Amelie*

As soon as we left the Sealed Château, I took a look at my new Green Event Ticket. Like before, it had my name and Asagi's already written on it. There was one blank space, too, which meant that one more person could go along with us.

"All right, my turn!" Taichi declared, popping up out of his seat with his hand raised like he was hoping to get picked in class.

"Nah," said Sugiura, shooting him down immediately. "I'm goin'."

"Erp. Yeah, that figures..." Taichi's arm drooped back down to his side. He looked really disappointed. "*Sigh*... Why don't any of these events have room for four people, anyway? I hate getting left out all the time."

"Don't worry, Taichi. I'm sure there'll be a four-player event sooner or later."

"Here's hoping. But if the next one pops up and it's only for two players or something, I'm gonna be really ticked off! And watch out, Mai—I bet a certain pervy someone would *looove* for it to be just the two of you."

Uhhh... What? What was *that* supposed to mean? Before I could get a word out, though—

"H-h-h-hey! What are you saying?!" Asagi sputtered. Whatever Taichi was getting at, it had Asagi red in the face. Taichi's dejected look was completely gone. His usual cheeky expression was back in its place.

"Huh? What do you mean, Asagi? Nobody said it was about you..."

"But... *Huh?!*" Asagi realized he'd fallen right into Taichi's trap. At that point,

he was as red as an apple.

“Haaah.” Sugiura sighed. “Are you guys done getting worked up over stupid stuff? You’re drivin’ me nuts, here. First things first, we gotta scrounge up the cash to participate in the event. Got it?” He stood up from his chair to leave, looking as cool as ever. I dunno, though—he seemed particularly annoyed this time.

“Whoa, Sugiura’s ticked off. Better let sleeping devils lie for a while.”

The phrase is actually “let sleeping *dogs* lie,” but I’m pretty sure Taichi knew that.

“You know he’s gonna get even madder if he hears you say stuff like that, Taichi.”

“Yeah. So don’t tell ‘im I said it,” Taichi said, grinning to show a mouthful of white teeth. It was a picture-perfect prankster’s smile.

From that day forward, we devoted ourselves to getting ready for the Green Event. That meant getting our levels up and earning as much money as possible. Things went smoothly enough for about a week or so, and then something happened.

“... Um, hey, Mai, got a minute?” I was right about to take a tea break in the club cafeteria when Youko called out to me.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Earlier today, I took a look at Masuda’s status screen...and I saw that he had three big X marks on his Respawn Penalty section.”

Wait, what?! The guy who helped us out in the fight against the Kitsune-Masked Girl? The number two ranked player in the whole game? That Masuda?! How in the world did he lose three Respawn Penalties?!

I was curious enough to check out his profile for myself. Sure enough, his Left Hand, Nose, and Legs were crossed out. I saw he’d chosen his Mouth as his next Respawn Penalty.

“What do you think happened?” I asked.

“I looked into it, and it turns out that all three Respawn Penalties got taken

away by some monster called a Fake.”

Fake... I’d never heard of that monster before. It was probably added to the game during the last maintenance period. Either way, I had to try asking Masuda what happened myself. He replied right away.

**[From: Ryouta Masuda]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**I got careless. That’s what happened. I saw they added a new stage to the game, and I thought I’d try to play it solo.**

**It’s called the Demon Zone—and I don’t recommend checking it out. To be honest, I think even Tanaka would have a hard time with the monsters here. I can only assume the whole area is a dangerous prank from the Nightmare developers.**

**I rallied a party together to take back my first Respawn Penalty, and you see how that ended up. I caused trouble for my whole Friends list. Let’s just say it didn’t end well. Long story short, I can’t burden anybody else with this. I’m going to grind for a lot more levels and try again by myself. Please don’t worry about me.**

**END**

As she read Masuda’s message, Youko looked like she was about to cry.

“I don’t think there’s anything I can do to help... I mean, if Masuda can’t beat those monsters, what hope do I have? He’s the second-best player in the game. What are the devs even thinking, adding a stage that dangerous? It’s just cruel.”

Youko was right. There was only one player with a higher rank than Masuda's: Kenichi Tanaka. But at this rate, it looked like Masuda's rank might take a nosedive... Then something hit me.

"There's probably going to be a big shake-up in the Nightmare rankings... See? You need to be ranked fifty or higher to even get into that stage."

"Huh. Good catch, Mai. Either way, this means trouble. We need to tell Sugiura. He can convince Green Trier to get the word out in *Nightmare Weekly* and on their website. They've gotta let the high-ranked players know to steer clear of the Demon Zone. I'm gonna go tell him right now before it claims any more victims!"

As I watched Youko sprint away, my brain buzzed, trying to come up with an answer to this whole problem.

...I only found one. There was a way to fight that had nothing to do with rankings—or strength in general.

I went back to Masuda's status page and clicked on his Left Arm.

## **[Fake]**

- **Respawn Penalties held: Ryouta Masuda and 3 others**

**Fight this monster to win back the Respawn Penalties it took?**

- **Battle of Wits <<Success rate 3%>>**

**Your Master Negotiator skill gives your Battle of Wits proposals a 100% success rate.**

- **Normal Battle**

It had to be a Battle of Wits... In a Battle of Wits, my lower strength wouldn't matter. Then again, if I lost, it'd get way harder to win those Respawn Penalties

back. Besides, this was a really high-ranking monster, too. Even if brute strength didn't matter in a Battle of Wits, I was sure the Fake would be much craftier than any minor enemy.

I wondered if I could possibly win. As I struggled to decide, I got a message from Asagi.

**From: Taisuke Asagi**

**To: Mai Yashiro**

**Hey, Mai. What're you up to?**

**If you're not busy, wanna play Nightmare together?**

**Lemme know what you think. :|**

**END**

...If anyone knew I was about to charge off into a Battle of Wits, they'd tell me it was too dangerous for sure. That included Asagi.

But I knew that this was something that only I could do, thanks to my Master Negotiator skill. And if it came down to a Normal Battle instead, I wasn't sure there were any players out there who had a prayer.

That settled it. It was a Battle of Wits or nothing...

I sent Asagi a quick reply: **Sorry! I can't play right now. There's something I've got to take care of.**

Masuda really helped us out back in the Ghost School. Now it was my turn to help him.

My current Respawn Penalty was my Left Hand. Even if I failed at the Battle of Wits and lost it to the monster, I could still play the game.

One try... I could stand to give it one try, right? At least that's what I told myself as I stood from my seat. I had to do this in my own dorm room.

In a Normal Battle, my avatar would do all the fighting. But Battles of Wits were different. For a Battle of Wits, my consciousness goes into the game. While I'm in there, my body in the outside world basically passes out. If everyone saw me faint in the middle of the clubroom, they'd freak out for sure—and when the shock wore off, they'd figure out I was in a Battle of Wits in seconds.

I made it back to my dorm and sat in my chair. My mind was made up, but now that I was really about to do it, my body wouldn't stop shaking. I was way, way more scared than I'd been when I went to win back Naomi's Respawn Penalty. Back then, I still thought Nightmare was just a game. I didn't realize how dangerous it was yet.

*Oh man... Am I really gonna go through with this? Maybe I should back out,* I thought. That one tiny, nagging doubt grew and grew, filling my brain with all sorts of scary scenarios and my heart with fear.

I wished I had someone to talk to about it. But I couldn't think of anyone at all...

Aha! I know!

I clicked over to Amelie's Room. I could always ask her what she thought. Amelie was always there to cheer me up, no matter what I told her.

"Amelie? Are you there?"

"Hmm?" She was rolling around, playing with the stuffed frog and duck that I'd bought for her at the in-game shop the day before. "Oh, Mai! What's up?"

"So, um, let's say there's this super-strong enemy out there. It's so strong, you probably can't win against it," I said. "But if you did manage to beat it, you'd really be helping somebody out. And nobody even stands a chance but you. What would you do, Amelie?"

"Hmm..." Amelie puzzled over the dilemma I'd dropped in her lap. "Is that something you're struggling with, Mai?"

*Gulp.* She saw right through me and figured out it was a real situation. When did Amelie get that sharp?





Penalties...

Battle  
of  
Wits

Fake...

Doubt...

Friendship

Gratitude...

STATUS  
L-HAND  
NOSE  
FOOT  
EYE  
EAR

[CHARGE]  
[HIGH ATTACK]  
[LOW ATTACK]  
[TALK]

“If you’re conflicted about it, I guess that means that part of you wants to do it,” Amelie said. “If you don’t go for it, you’ll regret it later. At least that’s what they said on TV.” She pointed to the TV set in her room.

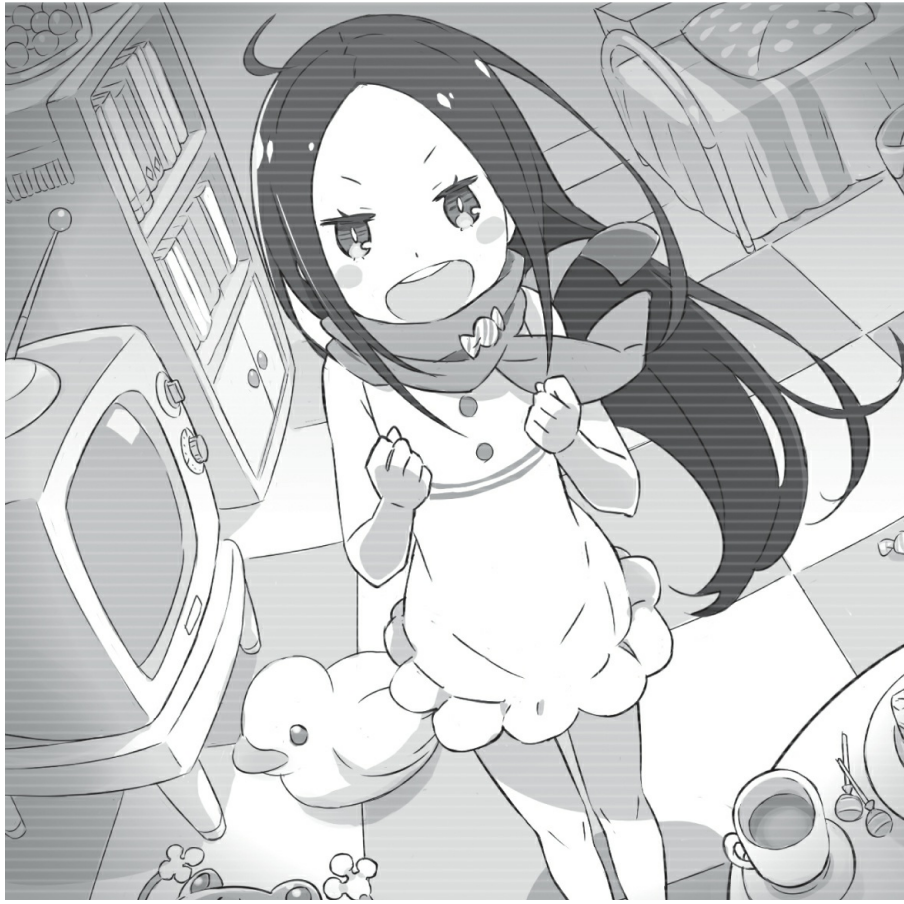
That was one way of looking at it.

“Then again...,” she continued. “If it means I’m gonna lose you, then I’m against it! Nuh-uh, no ma’am!!”

“Nah, Amelie, it’s not that bad,” I assured her. “Thanks a lot. You really helped me put things in perspective.”

Amelie held up a huge piece of candy and gave me a wide grin. “You can talk to me anytime, Mai! I’m gonna study a whole bunch more so I can help you!” I took it she meant watching more TV. It sounded like she was watching plenty already. I was glad I bought her the set.

That settled it. I hurried to log in to Nightmare before my determination could waver again.



## *A Battle of Wits with a Fake*

It was only the second time I'd ever gone into a Battle of Wits to do my own fighting. My heart pounded as I hit the button to start the battle. Typically, a monster would have a choice over whether or not to accept a Battle of Wits, but my Master Negotiator skill meant my chance of success was 100 percent.

A message showed up on my Nightmare console: **When you are ready, please close your eyes. Then the Battle of Wits will begin.** I did as it said and closed my eyes. A faint sensation, like a light electric shock, ran through my hand on the console.

I was scared. My heart was pounding.

The next instant, I found myself standing in the middle of a pitch-black space. I recognized it as the usual battleground for a Battle of Wits. There were two black chairs in front of me, and a large screen came down from above between them. Something was already sitting in the chair across from mine.

The something had an oval-shaped body, two arms, two legs, and way too many eyes and mouths. It was covered in them. It might have had a hundred eyes, for all I knew.

Ugh, gross! What is that thing? Though I knew it must be the Fake. It looked pretty strong.

*"Sit down, already,"* the Fake demanded in a growling voice. *"You're attacking first."*

I sat down and started to think. In a Battle of Wits, you and your opponent took turns attacking and defending. It was my turn to attack first.

On an attacking turn, the choices were: Charge, High Attack, Low Attack, and Talk.

The Charge command added one charge to the Critical Gauge. Once it was charged up three times, there was a new option: Critical Attack. You could only use a Critical Attack once, but if it connected with your enemy, they'd be out of the fight in one hit. The only catch was that if your opponent picked Critical Defense, your Critical Attack wouldn't do a thing.

By the way, the choices for defense were: Charge, Crouch, Jump, Counter, and Critical Defense.

I think some of that is pretty easy to figure out. If an opponent uses a High Attack, I'd want to Crouch. If it's a Low Attack, I want to Jump. That way, I can avoid their attacks entirely.

As for Counter...that was a bit riskier. If you successfully met an enemy attack with a Counter, you'd both get hit—but if your Counter failed, you'd be the only one taking damage. Those were the main three defensive options.

To sum it up, picking Counter every single time was a surefire way to lose. If you wanted to win, you had to really use your brain. That's what made it a Battle of Wits.

Hmm... How should I start off? It was hard to choose.

The Talk command would give me a chance to build up my opponent's Fear value. If I got it up to 100 by the end of the fight, I could make the monster into my Familiar. Each player could only have one Familiar at a time, though. If I made the Fake my Familiar, it'd be bye-bye, Amelie, and that was not gonna happen! Talk was out of the question.

*But what should I pick?* I wondered. I stole a glance at the Fake, but it was no use. It was covered in so many eyes and mouths, I had no idea which ones were real. It would be way too hard to read its expression and guess what it was thinking of choosing.

I decided to go with Charge for the time being and see how things played out. I hit the button to confirm my choice.

It looked like the Fake still hadn't chosen its move yet. The instant I made my

decision, however, I saw it reach over and hit a button on the device next to its chair. The monster wasn't another Nightmare player, after all. It didn't have a console to pick from.

Now for the result...

The Fake had chosen Charge, too.

Aww, man. I totally should've attacked. Battles of Wits are tough, okay?

Our avatars on the screen between us each struck a little pose as they charged energy. Blue auras surrounded both of them.

*"Now it's my turn to strike,"* said the Fake. Its many mouths and eyes moved as it talked. Maybe they were all real... Then again, with a name like Fake, I figured some of them had to be, well, fake. It's right there in the name!

Yet again, the Fake was slow to make a choice. From where I was sitting, it seemed super indecisive.

"What's wrong? Can't decide?" I asked.

*"Quiet, you...,"* the Fake said with a sneer. *"I can take all the time to think that I want."*

That was true, but still, it was taking forever! At this rate, by the time I got out of the Battle of Wits, it'd be morning. I sighed. Complaining wouldn't make the Fake choose any faster. I decided to go ahead and pick my action.

I looked over the list of defensive commands. I still had all three of the lives I'd started the Battle of Wits with. Maybe I should Counter? I got the feeling the Fake would probably pick an attack. Even if I slipped up, I had lives to spare.

All right, then, I'll Counter... Wait, no, hold on. That might be exactly what my opponent expected me to do. In that case, the Fake would pick something other than an attack. Maybe Charge again. And if it did, I'd be at a disadvantage unless I picked it again, too. If I hit Charge this round, my Critical gauge would go up to two. Okay, Charge it is!

I hit the button and looked up, expecting to see the Fake still fretting over its choice. But no—the very same instant I looked up, the Fake pressed its own button. I've gotta say, I was a little disappointed to see it choose so quickly after

all that hemming and hawing.

Something was odd.

I'd picked Charge, and the Fake picked High Attack.

*"Hee-hee-hee!"* Every one of its mouths snickered. It was like the Fake already knew what the result would be.

*"...That's weird,"* I said.

The Fake froze. *"What's weird?"*

*"Nothing. Just talking to myself."* Something was fishy for sure. I mean, the Fake started laughing before it even looked at the screen! That was basically proof that it knew the result before it saw it. On top of that, it overreacted to my comment, too.

I'm pretty sure it's cheating somehow. But how? I was pretty sure it couldn't peek at my Nightmare console from where it was sitting. If I could only see through to how it was cheating, I could probably turn it against the Fake and win.

I couldn't leave the whole battle up to luck. I had to boost my chances of winning. That was the key to victory in a Battle of Wits. Players had to use their words to rile their opponent up and get the monster playing at their pace. Sometimes they had to trick them. Words aren't the flashiest weapons out there, but sometimes they're the only ones that get the job done.

*"Now it's my turn to attack,"* I said. *"Hmm, what should I do?"* I pretended to struggle over the decision as I looked at my Nightmare screen. Without lifting my line of sight, I tried to scope out the Fake. Naturally, since I couldn't look directly at it, it was out of focus. Still, I managed to see enough.

The Fake didn't budge. But what would happen when I chose my action?

Let's assume it really was cheating. If I picked one of the attacks, it would dodge for sure. It wouldn't go for a Counter, since that had a chance of failing. There'd be no need to take that risk if it knew what I'd choose.

If I chose to Charge, then the Fake would do the same. I didn't want to help it fill its Critical Gauge any further than that. For a moment, I thought I'd go with

Low Attack, assuming the Fake would Jump.

The question was, how could it see what I picked? If I couldn't figure that out, then I'd lose for sure. And if it noticed that I'd seen through its tricks, then I wouldn't be able to turn them around and trap it. That was what really made it so difficult.

I couldn't risk looking wildly around the room or staring intently at my opponent. That would seem too suspicious.

*"Aren't you done yet? Hurry up and pick something..."* the Fake growled, clearly out of patience.

If you're in such a hurry, you go ahead and choose.

"Wait a minute," I said. "This is a big decision. Let me think it through."

*"Tch..."* I heard countless tongues clicking in frustration all at once—as many as the Fake had mouths. It was loud. And annoying. I mean, it had all those mouths and eyes, and they all moved exactly the same way—

...Huh? Hang on a sec. If they all move the same way, then they're all real mouths and eyes...or maybe they're all fake. Up until that moment, I assumed that out of all those mouths and eyes that pointed straight at me, some of them had to be real. But what if they were all fake? Maybe its real eyes were somewhere else. Somewhere they could see my Nightmare screen.

If my guess was correct, then the real Fake had to be very small.

...Hmm? Suddenly, a message popped up on the screen, telling me that someone wanted to watch the battle as a spectator. Taking a closer look, I saw that it was none other than Masuda. He must've noticed that I was trying to win his Respawn Penalties back in a Battle of Wits.

My mind raced, trying to figure out what to do. Then I realized that it'd be pretty strange for him to reject any help getting his lost Penalties back. Reassured, I clicked **Okay** to let him look in on the battle.

A tall, well-kept young man appeared in the spectator section of the arena. It was him.

Since he'd lost the use of his Legs, he couldn't move from the spot where he



first appeared. But he turned toward me and waved.

“I’m sorry, Miss Yashiro. I didn’t mean for you to try to reclaim my lost Respawn Penalties.”

“Don’t be sorry! I’m the one who should be sorry for barging in and doing it without asking. But I couldn’t sit back and watch you suffer after you helped me out before!”

Masuda shook his head. “That was nothing, really. I did what anybody would’ve done.”

“It wasn’t nothing. It was a huge help! And if you put it that way, then let’s say I’m doing what anybody would do now.”

“Thank you. If I’d known you were going to do this, I would’ve stopped you... but it’s too late now, so I’ll have to settle for cheering you on. That monster... That Fake has some of my friends’ Respawn Penalties, too. I’m not going to lie; nobody wants to see you take it down more than I do. But please promise me one thing. If you don’t win, don’t try again. This is it.”





Don't try again?

"Why not?"

"If you lose this battle, I'll get stronger and come back for revenge myself. I won't put you in any more danger than I already have."

He was worried that I'd lose a bunch of my own Respawn Penalties like he did. Even if losing my Left Hand wouldn't hurt that badly, losses tend to pile up in Nightmare, and the more players lost, the harder it got to win. Youko was right: Masuda was a gentleman through and through.

*"Get a move on, already!"* the Fake shouted. *"How long are you gonna make me wait?"*

I could tell it was really angry. That was good news for me. When monsters get angry, it's harder for them to keep a cool head, and it can really hurt their judgment. Now it'd be much easier to make the Fake play at my pace.

"If you need my help, please say the word," said Masuda. "I'll do anything I can."

"Thanks, but I got this," I said. "I want to win this one on my own. I really appreciate the thought, though!"

That was a lie.

The thing is, Masuda showing up when he did was a huge help. I sent him a message right away.

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Ryouta Masuda]**

**Sorry! I only said "I got this" so the Fake wouldn't notice what's really going on. To be honest, I'm in a bind, and I could really use some advice.**

**Here's the situation:**

- Me

**Critical Gauge: 2**

**Lives: 2**

- Fake

**Critical Gauge: 1**

**Lives: 3**

**It's my turn on the attacking side. I'm thinking of Charging so I can try to end this with one Critical Attack. What do you think?**

**END**

I tried to relax and sharpen my nerves while I waited for Masuda's reply.

I could feel someone watching me from behind. At that same moment, the Fake stopped constantly demanding that I hurry up and make a choice. Suddenly, I felt a lot more confident. I was sure that my opponent was sneaking peeks at my Nightmare console. I just had to wait for Masuda's reply to get a little more information about the situation.

I figured the Fake would believe anything it saw with its real eyes. That would be the first step toward its downfall! You know what they say: Cheaters never prosper—and I was gonna prove it!

**[From: Ryouta Masuda]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**That sounds like a smart move.**

**Charge with confidence and win!**

**I'm in your corner!**

**END**

I heard a clicking sound from the chair across from mine.

*"Hurry up and choose," the Fake said again. "I already made my move."*

...I knew it. But all the same, I really did choose the command I mentioned in my message, like Masuda suggested. I went with Charge. So did the Fake. Now I had a full Critical Gauge, but the Fake didn't look worried at all.

Of course it didn't. It was cheating, remember?

Next it was my turn to defend. Now that I had proof the Fake saw my message to Masuda, I was sure I could win. I'd done it; I had the opponent playing at my pace. As long as it didn't notice what was really going on, I had this Battle of Wits in the bag.

I chose Counter as my defensive action, and the Fake chose Charge.

"Grr...," I grunted, pretending to be frustrated. The Fake fell for it and broke into a creepy laugh. A little acting ability goes a long way in a Battle of Wits. I had my opponent believing that I'd try a Critical Attack on my next attacking turn.

Finally, it was time to strike back! I typed up another message to Masuda.

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Ryouta Masuda]**

**I get the feeling that the Fake can tell what I'm planning to do next somehow. I think it'd be safer not to use a Critical Attack next turn and see how the fight plays out for a little longer.**

**Would you keep a sharp eye on the Fake for me? It almost always picks its command after I pick mine. Don't you think that's suspicious?**

**END**

I sent the message. While I was waiting for Masuda's next reply, the Fake chose its action early. Hee-hee. It thinks I might be on to it, and it's freaking out! Unfortunately for the Fake, though, I *was* on to it. And more unfortunately for the Fake, once we pick a command, we're locked in for the turn. We can't take it back.

Without warning, I spun around to look behind me. There I saw a little devil floating in the air, clutching a device that looked kind of like a TV remote.

"Aha! So that's what you really look like, you Fake!"

"...! *Argh! H-how'd you figure it out?!*"

I made my choice for the turn: a Critical Attack. I knew my opponent had seen my last message to Masuda, taken it at face value, and Charged instead of defending.

I looked up at the screen to see the Fake's avatar trying to build up its Critical aura, but it was too late. My avatar hit it with everything she had. The Fake's avatar went flying, then crumpled to the ground and lay still.

"That's what you get for cheating your way through the whole fight," I said. "You were so busy cheating, you didn't notice you were walking straight into a trap."

"*Urrrgh,*" the Fake sobbed. "*No, no, no! I'm no cheater! You're the cheater! You're gonna regret this!*" It whimpered and cried in the chair for a moment, then faded away with those final words.

Uh, I'm pretty sure I knew who the cheater was, and it wasn't me.

But a win was a win, and I won. I heaved a sigh of relief.

The prize was a whopping 1,250 CP and 120,000 experience points. That was

enough to boost me up eight more levels on the spot. But more importantly, I got what I came for: Masuda and his friends' Respawn Penalties dropped right into my inventory.

"Amazing! How did you know the Fake wouldn't pick Critical Defense?" Masuda asked.

"Because it was cheating. All I did was use that to my advantage and trick it into beating itself."

"I see... I never had the slightest clue it was cheating in the first place. I'm impressed!"

I have to admit, the compliments flustered me a bit. But mostly I was glad that I'd won his Respawn Penalties back.

"Eh-heh-heh... I'll send you those Respawn Penalties as soon as I get out of here, okay?"

"Thank you. Oh, but first..."

"Yes?"

"Is there anything I can do to repay you at all? Let me make myself useful."

Who in the world would turn down an offer like that from the number two player in all of Nightmare? Still, he put me on the spot. I wasn't sure what to say. I mean, I'm not the leader, y'know?

"It's fine, really," I said. "I can't think of anything in particular."

"Please, I'll hardly be able to sit still until I can return the favor. Oh, come to think of it, do you have tickets for the next event yet?"

"Oh, yeah. We've already found ours."

"I see. That was fast. Consider me even more impressed. So why haven't you gone yet? Are you still deciding who to bring along?"

"No, we've got that sorted out. My party talked it over already."

"Hmm. It sounds like you guys run a tight ship. Let's see. What else could I possibly do for you...?"

"Um, seriously, I didn't do this for a reward or anything. Please don't stress



out about it.”

“On the contrary. There’s no need for you to hold back. Like I said, I want to make myself useful to you and your whole group from now on,” Masuda said with a friendly-looking grin. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll try and think of some ways to help. I hope we meet again. Perhaps in the real world next time.”

“Okay! You should come by our Nightmare Conquerors’ Club sometime,” I said. “I have a friend who’d be, um, really happy to see you.”

“I’ll take you up on that offer next time I’m in the area.” With that, Yasuda left the arena.

I made my way back to the real world, too. That Masuda really was a nice guy. I knew I had to tell Youko all about him.

## *The Green Event*

Once I was out of the game, I sent the Respawn Penalties I'd reclaimed to their rightful owners, starting with Masuda. I was sure it'd be a surprise for all of them.

A few minutes later, thank-you messages started pouring in from people I assumed were friends of Masuda's. They were all surprised, to say the least. One of them was so excited, they wrote an incredibly long message loaded with gratitude. I was delighted, too. It feels good to be helpful, you know?

Oh, and then there was the message from Masuda himself. That one was a surprise for me in a couple ways. For one, I'd spoken to him only a little while earlier. I mean, how polite can you get? But then I opened it up and—uh, whoa.

Let me rephrase: *Whooooaaa!!*

Masuda's thank-you message came with 4,700,000,000 in-game yen attached. Four point seven billion. I guess the number two ranked player makes bank.

I rushed out of my dorm, ran up the stairs, and bolted into the clubroom to share the news with the rest of the Raid Team.

"Wait, Mai, you did that by yourself?! That's crazy! Why didn't you tell me...?"

"Seriously, you idiot! No more goin' lone wolf on me. You gotta let me know before you run off an' do stuff like that. If we don't know where you are, we can't bail you out if it goes south, you got that?"

"S-sorry!"

Asagi and Sugiura didn't seem to care about the money. They were way more upset that I'd recklessly charged off into a Battle of Wits.

*Gulp.* I had to admit they had a point. I probably should have let them know. Still, I thought they'd praise me a little, teeny bit...

"Aw, c'mon, you jerks! All's well that ends well, right? She won, didn't she? Poor Mai, doing the hard work, just to get yelled at!" Youko saw me floating in a sea of disappointment and tossed me a life preserver.

"Good point. Not gonna lie, I probably woulda done the same thing in her shoes," Taichi chimed in. "Not like scary ol' Sugiura would've given you the okay in the first place, am I right? Ha-ha-ha!"

"Cram it, will ya?!"

Whoops. There Taichi went again, mouthing off to Sugiura without a shred of shame. Which, of course, only made our leader madder.

"Can you try an' keep that big mouth of yours shut for one stinkin' day?!"

*Oof.* The racket filled the clubroom. I felt Youko tugging on my sleeve.

"C'mon, Mai. I say we let Taichi take the heat and grab some grub while we can! You're hungry, aren'tcha?"

"Are you sure we can go?"

"Sure I'm sure! Get a move on, Asagi!"

"Huh? Me too?"

"What part of 'get a move on' don'tcha get?" Youko grabbed both of us by the hand and dragged us out of the clubroom and into the cafeteria. Once we claimed our seats, she continued. "I gotta thank you for winning Masuda's Respawn Penalties back, Mai. To be honest, I was kinda afraid this would be it for him. Like, no more Masuda. And I was scared, y'know?" She sounded a little like she was about to cry.

Youko admired Masuda like nobody else. I couldn't blame her for worrying so much about someone important to her.

"You're really something, Mai," Asagi said. "Look. I wanna respect your

decisions as much as I can. But seriously, come talk to me next time, okay? You're gonna give me a heart attack one of these days."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize. You didn't do anything wrong. If anything, I should be thanking you. It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Just... Y'know... Uh... Heh-heh... I guess this is a 'me' problem."

I felt sorry for making Asagi worry so much. I decided I'd ask his advice for sure next time.

"Sheesh, Asagi! You worry way, way, way too much!"

"Huh? N-no I don't, Youko. That's putting it too harshly."

"Yeah, right! You're annoying the crap out of me, and I'm an outside observer!"

I had to agree with Asagi—she didn't need to go that far. Now she was going at him so fiercely, I almost forgot she'd been on the verge of tears mere seconds ago. Asagi hung his head.

"But you know, Asagi, I think you're kind of overdoing it on the shocked reaction, too..."

"I saw this magazine article once that ranked what kind of guys girls don't like...and 'annoying guys' were way up near the top! Is... Is that really me?"

Oh my.

"You got that right!" Youko said. "Keep it up, and you'll be a total loser for life!"

Asagi ran his hands through his hair in agitation, while Youko laughed and laughed. I hoped that made it clear enough that she was only teasing.

Taichi and Sugiura walked up. Sugiura had a terrifying look on his face, while Taichi was rubbing his head. It looked like he'd finally earned himself a beating. I'm sure it hurt, but I can't say for sure that he didn't have it coming.

"All right, Mai. Between the cash you got from Masuda and everything we've

scraped together, we've got enough to revive someone twice. Are you down to enter the event tomorrow?"

"Y-yeah, I should be," I said. The time had come sooner than I'd expected, thanks to Masuda. I knew I had to thank him, but at the same time, my heart was pounding. My feelings of doubt and apprehension went through the roof.

"Masuda said he wanted to help us out somehow, right?"



“That’s right.”

“Hmm.” Sugiura’s lips curled into a satisfied smile.

“You look pretty happy about that,” I said. “Do you have any ideas?”

“You’ll see. For now, just forget it.”

Aw, man! Why’d he have to go and say that? Now I’m never gonna forget it!

“Sheesh, Sugiura, we really gotta do something about that violent streak of yours,” said Taichi, still rubbing his head. “Look at this huge bump you gave me!”

“Hmph. Quit running your mouth all the time, then. Problem solved.”

“Food for thought, Taichi,” said Asagi. “Even saints have their limits.”

“And Sugiura’s no saint, am I right? I mean, if anything, he’s a straight-up devil!”

“Hey! That’s the exact crap I’m talking about, Taichi!”

“See, look! There’s that good ol’ devilish face now!” Sure enough, Sugiura was staring daggers at Taichi. His expression was terrifying. Even scarier than before! To be honest, I had no idea a person’s face could look that scary.

Geez, Taichi, you’ve really got to get the filter between your brain and your mouth checked. Even if Sugiura *was* kinda devilish. I mean, really! But he’d never hear me say it. Everyone else in the Conquerors’ Club had the good sense to keep quiet, too. Then again, I guess honesty was one of Taichi’s strong suits, too.

“I know! Let’s go out to eat today!” Youko said. “Come on, Mai and Asagi!” She grabbed the two of us and dragged us away yet again. Down in my heart, I thanked her for the save.

Before I knew it, the sun was rising on the next day. It was time to take on the Green Event.

I wondered how things went for Taichi after we left the day before. I hope he didn’t get his face mashed up like a potato. I headed for the clubroom and

opened the door to find the rest of the Raid Team already gathered.

Someone had written GOOD LUCK IN THE EVENT, SUGIURA, YASHIRO, AND ASAGI! in huge letters across the whiteboard. In smaller letters around it were messages from the other club members. If I didn't know any better, I'd think we were upperclassmen about to graduate, not gamers about to play.

"Another event's here already, huh, Mai? Don't do anything too dangerous, okay?" Naomi said as she squeezed my hand tight. She looked worried.

"I won't. I'll give it my best shot."

"Don't be so nervous...or you'll stiffen up. Remember... Take deep breaths..."

"That's right! We're in your corner, and don't you forget it!"

"We sure are. Make it back alive, and you can have my fish club."

Hirata, Youko, and Yoichi all gave us parting words of encouragement. I appreciated the support. The fish club, not so much.

"Ready to go, Mai?" Asagi asked.

"Y-yeah!" I said. I made my way toward the table where the rest of the Raid Team were waiting.

"Guess it's go time," said Taichi. "This one's the Green Event, right?"

"Yeah. Hold down the fort while we're gone, Taichi."

"You can count on me, boss." I noticed Taichi had a fresh lump or two on his head. They looked like they'd still be there in a couple days.

"All right, dawdlin' around here won't make the event any easier. Better get a move on," said Sugiura. "Let's knock this one out quickly."

"Yessir!" Asagi and I nodded and made sure all three of our names were on the event tickets. As usual, black earphones popped out of our Nightmare consoles. We put them on.

Just like that, we were ready for the event. It was time to get in there and carve out a path to victory.



**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.**

A familiar flood of noise poured out of my earphones. No matter how many times I heard it, it always made me feel sick. The nausea turned into drowsiness, and I felt my consciousness get totally swallowed up by the darkness.

.....

I heard a voice.

*"Welcome to the World of Nightmare."*

"Kamisawa...," I said, slowly opening my eyes.

*"I must admit, I'm surprised to see you here so soon. I thought it would take longer for you to enter the event this time around... Bravo."*

Kamisawa—the top administrator of Nightmare. His voice was always there to greet us at the start of every event. That was all I knew about him.

*"Shall I go over the rules?"* he asked.

"We've got to find a key, then use it to activate the Victory Application Point. Is that it?"

*"Yes, precisely. I suppose you would know by now. This is your third event, after all. I've taken the liberty of splitting your screens into three again, so please make sure everything's in order."*

Like he said, my console screen was split three ways. The largest panel

showed my usual game screen. The other two, which were each about half the size of the main panel, showed combat information for Asagi and Sugiura.

The two of them woke up inside the game at that moment.

“Ooogh... Here we are. Man, my head is killing me...”

“What gives? Aren’t we supposed to be inside some building?” Sugiura said. It hit me that he was right; the other events had taken place indoors, but this time, we were in a forest clearing. A huge tree sprouted from the center of the clearing, covering us with its branches.

*“Not this time. Enjoy the great outdoors,”* said Kamisawa. *“If you’d like a map, you’ll find some stuck to that tree there. Feel free to take one. Now then, I hope you’ll put your best foot forward.”* With that, his transmission cut off. As always, he only gave us the bare minimum of information. There was a lot more I wanted to ask him.



“There’s a bunch of maps here. Which one do we take?”

“Huh?” I looked at the tree and saw that there were five maps stuck to it. They had a few points in common, but for the most part, each map was different from the others.

“I’m guessing only one of these is the real map.”

“Looks that way,” I said. “Maybe we should take all five for now and narrow it down as we go.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.”

When I reached to take down the maps, however, I couldn’t touch them. We’d have to pick them up with our Nightmare consoles and add them to our inventories instead.

In events like this one, each player could only carry up to ten items.

“Looks like we’ll need our consoles to carry these. Sugiura and I will take two maps each,” said Asagi.

“All right, thanks,” I said. I held out my Nightmare console to pick up the last of the five maps.

“Okay, now we gotta figure out where to go from here.”

Four paths led away from the big tree in the clearing: one each to the north, south, east, and west.

“Both of my maps say we should start out by going north from the tree,” said Asagi.

“One of mine says north, an’ the other says south,” said Sugiura.

I checked the map in my inventory. It led to the north, too. Hmmm... What’s going on here?

“Mine says north, too.”

“Then there’s a clear majority,” said Asagi. “North wins.”

“Hard to say for sure that means north is right, but it’s the only clue we’ve got,” said Sugiura. “Looks like we’re headin’ north.”

“Gotcha.”

Even if north wasn't the right direction, there was only one way to find out. Sugiura took the lead as the three of us headed up the path to the north. Before long, it led us to a small shrine. Sugiura carefully looked over the shrine and found that there was a Skill Chip inside.

## **[Skill Chip]**

### **Petit Flare (1/1)**

#### **[Effects]**

**Shoots a ball of fire at an enemy in front of you.**

#### **[Requirements]**

**Level 5 or higher**

“Doesn't sound like a very strong spell to me,” said Sugiura.

“Especially not if you only have to be level five to use it.”

“You hold on to it for now, Mai. It'll be better than nothin' when the boss shows up.”

“Okay! Thanks!” I picked up the Skill Chip like Sugiura said. We still hadn't seen any sign of the event's boss yet. I wondered what it would be. One thing was certain: Whatever it was, it was gonna be scary.

“Wherever I look, there's nothing but trees,” said Asagi. “I bet it's easy to get lost out here.”

“Wanna leave somethin' behind as a marker?”

“That's a good idea. I'll put one rock on top of this shrine. That way, if we get lost and loop back around to it, we'll know it was the first place we came.”

With that done, it was time to check our maps and figure out where to go

next. According to my map, we needed to turn right at the shrine.

“What do your maps say?” I asked.

“One of mine says to go straight past the shrine, and the other says to take a left,” said Asagi.

“Mine both say left,” said Sugiura.

Well, that was puzzling. We all had maps that led in different directions. If we each followed one, we’d have to split up.

“Looks like left is the most common route, at least. We went with the majority last time. Should we stick to that plan for now and head left?”

“Might as well,” I said. I felt uneasy about it, but we had to go somewhere. Left seemed like as good a direction as any. We started walking again.

“This doesn’t seem to be getting us anywhere,” Asagi said after a while.

“Yeah... I wonder where we’re heading.”

Just as we were starting to get frustrated, we caught sight of another shrine down the path ahead of us. Right behind it loomed a huge cliff. Dead end.

“Another shrine, huh?” said Sugiura. “Hold up. What’s that stuck to it?”

On the shrine was a sheet of paper with this message written on it: SHOULD YOU WISH TO SEE THE BOSS, START BY STRAYING FROM THE GROUP. BUT TAKE CARE NOT TO APPROACH UNPREPARED.

“What the heck’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, the part about not approaching unprepared is easy enough to figure out. We’ve got to get ready before we face the boss,” said Asagi. “I don’t get the part about straying from the group, though. Any guesses, Mai?”

Were we really supposed to split up the party? Did one of us have to fight the boss alone?

Sugiura must have been thinking the same thing.

“Listen up,” he said. “Whatever happens out here—even if it looks like splittin’ up might help us beat the boss—no goin’ rogue. Don’t let some piece of paper trip you up. I’m talkin’ to you, Mai!”

“G-got it!” Ouch. I guess he was still upset about the Battle of Wits the day before.

“You always try to run off an’ do stuff on your own. Come to think of it, it was a mistake lettin’ you take one of the maps. Better lemme hold all of them, to be safe.”

He wants my map? Wait—maps! That’s it!

“Hang on! What if it doesn’t mean straying from a group of people? What if it means the maps instead?”

“In that case, ‘straying from the group’ could mean following the path that’s only marked on one map, not most of them.”

“Right! Yes, yes, yes! That’s it exactly!”

“One of my maps said to go south at the very beginning, when all the others said to go north. It probably woulda led us straight to the boss,” said Sugiura.

“Huh. That makes a lot of sense,” said Asagi. “I think you nailed it, Mai. Man, you sure solved that riddle in no time.”

“Well, this sort of thing is my specialty! There’s other stuff I can’t do so well...”

“Like cooking and sports, yeah? Since you’re so clumsy. Ah, well. There’s a hole for every peg, an’ you may not be good at anything but studyin’, but that’s just what we need out here.”

Ugh, Sugiura... Did he really need to come out and call me clumsy to my face like that? Seriously?

“Trust me, I know,” he continued. “I tried one of those cookies you made earlier, and the inside was basically raw batter, even though the outside was burned to a crisp. And why were they salty? Did you seriously put salt in ’em? Honestly, they were so nasty, I was almost impressed.” Sugiura was barely holding back a snicker.

Hang on a sec. Did he say salty and burned to a crisp? Had I really made cookies that bad? And even if I had, when did he eat one? Looking back, I ate all the cookies I made for practice myself. Wait, hang on—Youko did ask to keep some of my cookies for herself once. Don’t tell me...

“Did Youko give you that cookie?”

“Yeah. Then she took a bite of her own and went into a huge coughin’ fit in the middle of the cafeteria.”

Of course, it figures that the cookies I let Youko keep would be the worst batch I’d ever made in my whole short baking career... I guess I should’ve tasted them myself first. It’d be really hard to save face after this...

“Don’t worry about it, Mai. I’m a lousy cook, too,” said Asagi. “The other day I tried to make ramen, and I totally forgot to put water in the kettle before I heated it up.”

That’s not being a lousy cook. It’s carelessness, plain and simple... Then again, someone who’d mixed up sugar and salt shouldn’t talk. In the end, I tried to reassure myself that those salty cookies weren’t the best I could do. Sugiura was unlucky enough to get a bad batch, that’s all.



*The Five Map Mystery*

“All right, catch your breath and let’s get back on the trail,” said Sugiura. “This spot’s a dead end. Let’s head back to the first shrine.”

After a short break, we trekked back to the shrine, where we found the Skill Chip. Since we’d already been down the left path, there were two maps left to consider: mine, which said to take a right at the first shrine, and one of Asagi’s, which said to go straight.

“How ’bout we try going right first?”

We headed right and walked for a while until we came to a fork in the path. We could either keep going straight ahead or make another right turn.

“It doesn’t look like any of the maps suggest we take a right here,” I said. “Should we keep going straight?”

“I dunno. I kinda want to check it out,” said Sugiura. “I’m gonna see if there’s anything down the right path. You two stay put.” Before Asagi or I had a chance to reply, he took off jogging to the right.

What we thought would be a short wait turned into a long wait. There was no sign that Sugiura was coming back.

“What do we do now?”

“I’m starting to worry. Something might’ve happened to him. Maybe we should go check it out ourselves.”

“Yeah,” I answered. I prayed that nothing bad had happened to Sugiura as we took our first steps down the right path. As soon as we started walking, a

strange fog surrounded us. “Huh?! What’s going on?”

“Mai? Mai, where are you?!”

All I could see around me was pure white fog. Asagi should’ve been in front of me, but I had no idea where he was. That’s how thick the fog was.

“I’m right here, Asagi!” I called out. “Asagi?” That’s weird. Why isn’t he answering? “Asagi?!” I shouted his name one more time, but there was still no answer.

Now I was scared. What happened to him? At this point, I was shivering with fear. If a monster showed up, there was no way I’d be able to run away through the fog. Fighting back was out of the question, too. That would be the end of it. All I could do was hope for the fog to fade away quickly.

I wondered if Asagi and Sugiura were okay. I called out to them again and again, but neither of them answered.

I tried to stay hidden in the fog and hold my breath for as long as I could. Slowly but steadily, more and more of the woods came into view. Finally, the fog faded completely away, and I could see again—and I was shocked by what I saw.

...Where am I?

I was totally alone, and a view I’d never seen before stretched out in front of me. I knew for sure that I wasn’t where I’d been before the fog appeared. For one, the trees were different. Wherever I was now, they had red berries that they didn’t have before.

As I looked around, I got a notification from my Nightmare console. Sugiura had sent me a message. Phew! At least he’s safe!

**[From: Shinji Sugiura]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**I dunno how, but it looks like you got warped away somewhere.**

**I'm at the shrine with the rock. Think you can get back here?**

**END**

I scrolled through my inbox and saw that I had a message from Asagi, too. That was another relief! All three of us were safe!

**[From: Taisuke Asagi]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Where are you, Mai?**

**I got teleported back to the starting tree. Sugiura says he's at the first shrine we found. I think we get teleported away if we go down a path that isn't part of the correct route or something.**

**END**

Unfortunately, unlike Asagi and Sugiura, I didn't recognize where I'd been sent at all. I sent a reply to Asagi, saying I'd look around for some sort of landmark and asking him to regroup with Sugiura in the meantime. Asagi seemed confused, but he agreed to go along with that plan. I was lost and afraid, but at least we could communicate. Naturally, I really wanted them to come and find me, but I knew they'd probably just end up getting lost, too.

I had to find a landmark to guide the way.

I don't know if you've ever been out in the woods by yourself, but it's way freakier than when you're with a group. For all I knew, there could be something hiding in the shadow of any tree. Paths could lead right into traps... Of course I was scared. But it helped to know that, no matter what happened,

there was one friend who would never leave my side. That's right: Amelie.

I clicked through to Amelie's Room on my console.

"Hmm? What's up, Mai?" Amelie looked up from her hot plate, which she was using to grill up some mochi. She was waiting with a wooden bowl and a pair of chopsticks in hand to scoop it up the instant it was ready. It was a very old-fashioned way to eat mochi, and to be honest, I didn't mean to buy her the set. I accidentally clicked on it in the in-game store right before I joined the Green Event. Even so, she hadn't wasted any time putting it to use... That was kind of adorable.

"I'm in the middle of an event right now, Amelie."

"You mean with a big, scary bad guy and all that?" With her chopsticks in her right hand and her bowl in the left, she stood up and got ready to strike. I caught her glancing nervously to either side and had to giggle. Was she pretending they were a sword and shield?

"You mean the floor boss," I said. "I think it'll be a while before it shows up, at least."

"Oh yeah?" Amelie asked. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I was hoping you'd keep me company while I explore a bit," I said. "I'm too scared to do it all on my own."

"You got it, Mai!"

"Hee-hee... Thanks, Amelie." As always, she had pep to spare. Just having her with me made me feel a lot braver. I searched the forest around me for clues and landmarks, chatting with Amelie the whole time.

Hmm? Before long, I found a cave. We hadn't seen one of those. That was proof that, wherever I was, we hadn't passed through the area before.

I peeked into the cave, and to my surprise, there were a whole bunch of Skill Chips floating around. The cave didn't look very deep. I could see all the way to the back wall from where I was standing at the entrance. Going inside seemed like the right idea.

Since we hadn't been by this cave before, that meant it was either straight

ahead from where Sugiura and Asagi were, or else it was off to the right. I thanked Amelie and promised her I'd be back to visit her soon. Then I pulled up my map from my inventory screen.

Tracing the route north from the starting tree, I noticed the symbol that stood for the first shrine we found. East from there, there was another symbol that looked like a cave. There were no other cave symbols anywhere on the map. That had to be where I was. In that case, if I went west, I'd get back to the shrine with the rock where Sugiura and Asagi were waiting. I decided to go regroup with them.

Sure enough, after walking west for a while, I saw Asagi and Sugiura in the distance.

"Oh! Mai! Thank goodness you're okay," said Asagi.

"Yeah... Somehow. I guess that'll teach us to take paths that aren't on the maps."

"You got that right," said Sugiura. "All right, let's keep that little lesson in mind and get back to exploring."

"Um, well, I found this cave to the east that had a lot of Skill Chips floating around in it. I think we should head there first and pick them up."

"For real? Good plan."

"Those Skill Chips should come in handy when it's time to face the floor boss," Asagi said.

"Yeah. Let's go."

## *Four Types of Skill Chips*

I led Asagi and Sugiura back to the cave. After checking for traps, we tried collecting the Skill Chips.

“There’s a lot of them floating around in here, but it looks like there’s only four different types altogether.”

“Seems that way.”

### **[Skill Chip]**

#### **Victory Flare (1/1) [Effects]**

**Causes a huge explosion.**

#### **[Requirements]**

**Level 50 or higher**

### **[Skill Chip]**

#### **Retry (1/1)**

#### **[Effects]**

**Retry.**

#### **[Requirements]**

**Level 1 or higher**

**[Skill Chip]**

**Show-Stopping Slayer Sword ( $\infty/\infty$ ) [Effects]**

**Summons a sword.**

**[Requirements]**

**Level 1 or higher**

**[Skill Chip]**

**Thud (1/1)**

**[Effects]**

**Creates a hole in the ground so that enemies trip, fall, and take damage.**

**[Requirements]**

**Level 100 or higher**

“Should we take as many of them as we can hold?” Asagi asked.

Sugiura thought about it for a while, then answered, “Nah. There’s still a few spots we haven’t explored yet. There might be items we’ll wanna snag there.” He was talking about the path that led north from the shrine with the rock.

“How about we go explore a bit more, then decide and come back?”

“Yeah, that sounds like the way to do it.”

And so we turned back out of the cave, headed back to the shrine, and took the north path. There weren’t any monsters around, so it was an easy trip. We eventually reached a dead end, but the only thing we found there was a big sign

with a picture of a huge, birdlike monster painted on it.

Why do I say “birdlike,” you ask? Well, parts of it were like a bird, but *bird* definitely wasn’t the right word for it. It had a pair of wings like a butterfly’s and four monstrous-looking arms and legs. Overall, its body looked like a snake’s. To top it off, it had a bird’s tail.





The writing on the sign said PUJUDOP. I wondered if that was the monster's name.

"Hey, do you think that's what we're gonna have to fight?" Asagi asked.

"Yeah, probably," Sugiura answered. "I'm bettin' this Pujudop is the floor boss."

I looked closer at the sign and found more writing: THOSE WHO SLAY THE PUJUDOP SHALL WIN THE KEY. BURN YOUR SUSPICIONS AWAY, AND THE PATH WILL REVEAL ITSELF.

There was a circle drawn around the Pujudop's tail. Was whoever put up the sign trying to show us its weak point? Was that even possible?

"Well, now we know that all the remaining Skill Chips are in that cave. Let's head back and load up."

"Roger that. We should probably throw out all those useless maps first."

"Right. I'll hang on to the one that leads to the boss. We can toss the rest," said Sugiura.

With that, we arrived at the cave for the third time.

"All right, grab as many of the chips you think'll come in handy in a fight as you can."

"Got it!"

The question was, which chips were those? While I stopped to think, Sugiura started grabbing up Skill Chips. He already had the ones he wanted in mind. Soon, he had a full inventory of ten items: the map to the boss, one Show-Stopping Slayer Sword chip, five Thud chips, and three Victory Flare chips.

"Huh? You're not taking any Retry chips, Sugiura?" Come to think of it, though, going all in on offensive skills was a very Sugiura sort of strategy...

"Retry? You mean, like, a do-over? Pass. Why would I need another try?" Sheesh. That was the exact sort of sickening self-confidence you'd expect from the third-highest-ranking player in the game.

Asagi picked one Show-Stopping Slayer Sword, three Thuds, three Retries, and

three Victory Flares. That made ten for him. It seemed like a very balanced selection. I guess Asagi's personality came out in his choices, too.

But what about me?

I already had the Petit Flare chip, so I had nine slots left to fill.

I took one of the Sword chips, leaving eight to go.

Adding Asagi's and Sugiura's Skill Chips together, our party had eight Thuds, six Victory Flares, and three Retries.

It felt like we were a little too light on Retries, and like Asagi, I favored a balanced approach. I filled out my slots with five Retries, two Victory Flares, and one Thud.

With that, we were ready. All we had to do was go find the boss.

"Good to go, guys?" Sugiura asked.

I thought for a moment. To be honest, squirmy stuff gives me the creeps. I wasn't crazy about the idea of a monster that was part snake and part bug. To make matters worse, it was a floor boss, so it had to be huge. I was worried about whether I'd be able to move around and make myself useful, or whether I'd be too freaked out to move.

"Relax, Mai. Sugiura and I will be right there with you. There's no reason to panic. Just decide to do it. That'll be enough." It was a huge comfort to have Asagi there, smiling his usual smile. He made me feel a bit like I could actually pull it off.

"An' while Asagi's shakin' in his sneakers next to ya, I'll rush in and sucker punch the thing. So don't worry."

"Aw, c'mon, Sugiura! You know I can hold my own!"

"Ha-ha! I guess we'll find out, won't we?" Sugiura cracked a slight smile.

Asagi and Sugiura were talking like it was the most normal thing in the world. There was something new and refreshing about that. Back when the Conquerors' Club first started, I couldn't have imagined the day would come when they'd casually chat like this.

I'll tell you what it was. It was proof that we'd truly become a team. And now, as a team, we were carrying the hopes of the whole entire Nightmare Conquerors' Club on our shoulders. I've gotta give this my best shot!

Eventually, we made our way back to the clearing where we first entered the event.

"All we've got to do now is head south, and we'll find the boss."

"There's only one path, too, so there's no gettin' lost this time."

*"Oh? Ready to try your luck with the boss already, are you?"*

That voice!! It was Kamisawa!

*"You work awfully quickly. Why don't I give you a little hint, as a reward? If you treat this boss battle like a normal fight, you'll never win. Never, ever."*

Kamisawa was supposed to be our enemy, and here he was giving us hints. He must have been confident.

"Are you so sure we can't win that you're willing to give us information like that? You might be surprised. We might be done with this event in no time, for all you know," I blurted out angrily.

Kamisawa snorted at my little rant. *"I get bored, too, you know. I've got to do something nice every now and then, or it's no fun. Oh, and one more thing while I'm at it. I think you'll find this floor boss quite powerful. It may be so powerful, you won't even get a chance to use my hint."*

Okay, now he's just being rude. It sounded like he was sure that Nightmare was going to win after all.

"Let's go, Mai. I'm starting to hate this place," said Asagi.

"Yeah. Don't give that jerk what he wants. Time to move."

*"Do take care,"* Kamisawa called out after us as we left the clearing and started walking toward the boss area. I was still scared, but that didn't change anything. I had to do this if I ever wanted to beat Nightmare for good.

***Unbeatable?! The Pujudop***

“Huh? What gives? There’s nothin’ here.”

The southern path ended at a wide, open, overgrown lawn. The tall grass was dotted here and there with wooden planks that were set into the ground like manhole covers.

Sugiura was right, though. There was no floor boss to be found.

“Wait a sec! Do you hear that? It’s kind of a hollow, rumbling sound... I think the ground’s shaking a little.”

I tried to focus all my attention toward my feet.

*Rumble, rumble... Rumble...*

No doubt about it, the ground was shaking! Not only that, but the rumbling was getting louder and louder.

“Sugiura, Asagi, watch out! Something’s coming!”

The next moment, a particularly large, round wooden manhole cover in the center of the lawn split apart with a loud crack. The thing that broke it leaped out of the ground and rose up into the air.

It had the body of a snake, the wings of a butterfly, the arms and legs of a beast, and the tail of a bird. It flew like a bird, but it looked more like a serpent than anything else.

This was it. The floor boss. The Pujudop.

“It’s huge... Can we really beat that thing?”

“Don’t be stupid! We can, and we’re gonna! You think I’m gonna lose to that?!” Sugiura spat. Still, the Pujudop looked to be at least five times the size of any one of us. It took a lot of courage to even think about fighting it. I mean, even if we could hit it, what were the chances that our swords would do any real damage to something that big?

“There was a circle around its tail on that sign, right?”

“Yeah, I remember that.”

“So we aim for the tail. Simple as that. I’m goin’ in!” Sugiura used a Show-Stopping Slayer Sword Skill Chip to summon a sword. He took off running toward the Pujudop, leaving us behind. Then he fired off a Victory Flare to try to knock the boss out of the sky. A huge, V-shaped burst of flame blazed all around the Pujudop.

## **<<Combat Results>> Shinji cast Victory Flare!**

- **10 damage to Pujudop!**

**Pujudop [HP: 9,990/10,000] (-10)**

What? Why?! Victory Flare didn’t work at all!

Even though Sugiura’s spell barely put a dent in its HP, the Pujudop looked upset. It swooped down to the ground and immediately headed toward Sugiura.

“Tch! Tough guy, huh? I’m gonna slice that tail right off your butt!” Sugiura didn’t flinch. He ran to meet the Pujudop.

“Let’s go help out!” Asagi said.

“Okay!”

Asagi and I summoned swords of our own, and soon enough, we were running toward the Pujudop, too. Sugiura needed our support!

“*Fools. You’re better off dead,*” the Pujudop said with a sneer as it snapped its tail up several feet into the air. Then it slammed it back down to the ground.

“.....!”

A cloud of dust filled the air! The Pujudop must have hit the ground extremely hard to kick up enough dust to cover the lawn. My eyes watered. I couldn't keep them open through all the dust.

Then I felt something wrapping around my whole body.

“Eeeeeek!” I cried out as it lifted me up into the air. “Hey! What’s going on?! Leggo of me!!” I furiously wiped at my eyes and kicked wildly, but the only thing my legs hit was air.

“Hang in there, Mai! I’m coming to save you—!”







Before Asagi could finish his sentence, the Pujudop whipped me down toward the ground.

“Eeeeeek!!”

The boss slammed me into the lawn, back-first. Needless to say, it really, really hurt!

To make matters worse, I still couldn't see very well, due to the dust in my eyes. I wasn't totally sure what was going on, but I knew that I was in a lot of pain.

**<<Combat Results>> Pujudop lifted Mai up and slammed her down!**

- **2,800 damage to Mai!**

## Mai Yashiro

**[HP: 2,200/5,000] (-2,800)**

“Hey, are you okay?!”

“M-Mai!”

Finally, my vision started to clear. I could see Sugiura and Asagi well enough to make out the worried looks on their faces. Aside from that, and aside from the pain, I was stunned by how strong the Pujudop was. It was in a whole different class from any of the bosses we’d fought before. One more attack like that, and it’d be Game Over for me. That would be that.

“Asagi, get Mai to safety!”

“Roger that!” Asagi said. “...Can you stand up, Mai?”

My legs shook. I couldn’t get them to move the way I wanted them to. The impact was more of a shock than I’d expected. I could hardly make heads or tails of what was going on. I thought I was up for the challenge, but I’d underestimated the boss’s strength by a lot.

The idea of getting a Game Over terrified me.

I knew that, even if I did get a Game Over, we had enough in-game money to revive me twice over, thanks to Masuda. But would two tries be enough to beat the Pujudop? On top of that, whenever someone got a Game Over in an event, they had to wait an hour before rejoining the game. I wasn’t sure if Asagi and Sugiura would be able to get away and survive for the hour it’d take to get a party of three together again.

Now I understood what made Kamisawa so cocky.

We might not win this one...

“I know you’re shaking, Mai, but I need you to tough it out for a bit. Um, I promise I won’t do anything weird, so...hold on tight, okay?” Asagi lifted me up and made a break for a far corner of the lawn. Once we were far enough away from the boss, he set me down gently on the grass and turned to check on Sugiura. “Stay here, Mai. I’ve gotta go help Sugiura.”

“Asagi...”

“It’ll be fine. We’ll hold it off so it stays away from you. Stay here and keep an eye out. If you notice anything that looks important, lemme know right away. You always catch the little stuff that Sugiura and I totally miss,” said Asagi. “You’re the brains of the operation! Let us handle the fighting, and we won’t let you down. We’re gonna win this as a team!”

With that, he called out to let Sugiura know he was on his way and ran off.

I felt super guilty. My legs were still shaking so hard, anyone could see I was totally useless. But Asagi still tried to find a way for me to help out. “We’re gonna win this as a team,” he’d said, and he wanted me to stay a part of that team.

I knew I couldn’t let all that kindness go to waste. I promised myself I’d do whatever I could to help until my legs finally stopped quivering.

I watched the Pujudop’s movements carefully. It didn’t show any signs of spreading another dust cloud. I wondered if maybe it could only use that attack once, like how we could only use our Skill Chips one time each.

Oh! Asagi landed a direct hit on the Pujudop’s tail with his sword! Awesome!

I took a look at my Nightmare console to see how much damage he’d done. Yet again, he’d only shaved off ten of the Pujudop’s HP.

Wasn’t the tail supposed to be its weak point? If attacking it only did ten damage points, then how were we supposed to fight this thing?!

Next, Sugiura gave one of his Thud Skill Chips a try.

Maybe that’ll work... Nope! Ten damage points again!

I didn’t know what Retry would do, but there was a chance it might undo the tiny amount of damage we’d done.

Right after Sugiura attacked, the Pujudop picked him up and slammed him into the ground, hitting him for 1,800 damage points.

*“Pft-ha-ha! You don’t stand a chance against me in my strongest form,”* the Pujudop said, and laughed with its mouth open wide. It seemed to be enjoying itself.

Wait a second... Did it say this is its “strongest form?” That phrase stuck out to me. I couldn’t ignore it. If the Pujudop was in its strongest form, that meant it had other forms, too. If it had other forms, then there was probably a way to force it to change into a weaker one, right? I wondered if that was the key to victory. The Pujudop was already the strongest it could be—it said so itself.

Unfortunately, I was missing an important detail. I had no idea how to make it change forms. Think, Mai, think! Thinking is the best way I’ve got to help the team! There had to be some kind of hint somewhere...

“Ugh! I’m gettin’ sick an’ tired of this bird-butt!”

““Bird-butt’...? What kind of a name is that? It’s called a Pujudop...”

“Who cares what it’s called? It’s got a bird butt. My name’s way easier to remember,” Sugiura snapped back. “Now forget that an’ keep hittin’ the tail, you numbskull!”

“All right, already!”

Even at a distance, I could hear Sugiura’s and Asagi’s whole conversation. Little did Sugiura know, he’d given me the hint I was looking for.

Bird-butt...

Butt... Rear end... Ending...

I realized what the circle around the Pujudop’s tail on the warning sign really meant. The tail wasn’t a weak point. It was the starting point of a puzzle! In the game of *shiritori*, players take turns thinking of words that start with the letter that the previous word ended with. Before long, you end up with a whole chain of words.

Maybe the boss’s strange name was supposed to be the starting word in a game of shiritori. In that case, the next word in the chain was probably on one of our Skill Chips. The more I thought about it, the more certain I was that if we picked the right Skill Chip, we could make the boss transform.

I focused all the strength I could into my wobbly legs and pushed myself up.

Pujudop... *P*... Petit Flare! I had that Skill Chip in my inventory. I’d found our ace in the hole!

“Asagi! Sugiura! Lead the boss over this way!” I shouted as loudly as I could.

“Huh?! Why, Mai?!”

“Shut up and look at her face, Asagi! It’s got pride written all over it!” Sugiura said. “That’s her ‘I have a plan’ face, and you know it.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right! I guess we’re gonna win this after all!”

“Haah... Save the declarations till it’s a done deal.”

“If Mai thinks she’s got this, I believe in her,” Asagi said. The two of them carried on like this, taunting and goading the Pujudop all the while, as they ran in my direction.

Just a little closer... Hold it together, Mai. No freaking out. Aim straight and true.

...Now!

**<<Combat Results>> Mai cast Petit Flare!**

- **500 damage to Pujudop!**

## **Pujudop**

**[HP: 9,470/10,000] (-500) Pujudop's name changed to Euserpent.**

Yesss! It worked! Not only did I deal damage, but I also managed to burn off the boss's butterfly wings!

The Pujudop's name changed to Euserpent, too. It looked like my guess was right on the money. Pujudop... *P...* Petit Flare... *E...* Euserpent...

The next Skill Chip had to start with *T*. There was only one choice: Thud.

"Cast Thud! Hurry! Now!" I shouted to Sugiura. I may have been a little bossy in the moment, but he didn't seem angry. Actually, he smiled.

"Heh, All right. I don't get it, but if you say so, Thud it is."

**<<Combat Results>> Shinji cast Thud!**

- 5,400 damage to Euserpent!**

## Euserpent

**[HP: 4,070/10,000] (-5,400) Euserpent's name changed to Dollsnake.**

As the boss's name changed again, it lost its arms and legs.

"That's what I'm talkin' about!"

"Awesome, Mai! You did it!!"

"Nah, we're not done yet! What's next, Mai? C'mon, say the word an' we'll do it! Spit it out!"

"Um, let me see..."

Hmm... The boss's name was now Dollsnake. I was confused. None of the Skill Chips we had started with *E*.

"Hey, Mai! What's the holdup?"

"It's a game of shiritori! I'm trying to figure out our next move!"

"Shiritori? Seriously?"

"Yeah. We're supposed to pick our skills so they form a chain with all the boss's names."

"I get it," Sugiura said. "Yeah, that checks out so far."

"But now we've gotta follow 'Dollsnake,'" said Asagi. "Does anyone have a Skill Chip that starts with *E*?"

"I don't think so, sorry! Let me think a little more. I'm pretty sure I'm on the right track with this shiritori stuff. I think the Show-Stopping Slayer Sword's supposed to come last in the chain. It's in the name, after all."

The three of us gathered together in formation as the Dollsnake hissed, "*How dare you...? How dare you leave me in this lowly ssstate?!* " Then it picked up a large rock in its mouth and spat it right at me.



Yikes! Look out!

I thought I was well out of range of the boss's attacks, but I was wrong. Not only did it hit me for 430 damage points, but my clothes ended up caught between the rock and the ground. I couldn't move.

I started to panic. There I was, back to being totally useless. Right when I thought the end was in sight, too!

"Hang on, Mai! I'll get you free!" Asagi grunted as he tried to lift the heavy boulder.

"Don't worry about me! We've got bigger problems for now!"

"She's right, Asagi! Beatin' the boss takes priority."

"That's so cruel, Sugiura! What if it attacks Mai and she can't defend herself...?"

Asagi had a point. I was a sitting duck...but I hated to think I was holding them back.

"Duh, you moron! We gotta keep this bird-butt distracted so that doesn't happen! Are you gonna help me, or what?!"

"R-right! Sorry!"

"Listen up, Mai. We'll keep it off your case while you put your brain into overdrive. You already made it way madder than it was before, which proves you're on the right track. Keep thinking."

"Got it!"

"C'mon, Asagi! Let's clobber it!" The two of them resumed their Normal Battle against the boss.

I had to think fast. I went over our Skill Chips again. We had Thud, Victory Flare, Retry, and Show-Stopping Slayer Sword. Our last move was Thud, and Dollsnake was next in the chain. Now we needed a skill that started with *E*, but none of the remaining chips did.

Like I told the guys, I was pretty sure Show-Stopping Slayer Sword had to be the finishing move. That left only two options: Victory Flare and Retry.

I remembered what Sugiura said back in the cave: “Retry? You mean, like, a do-over? Pass. Why would I need another try?”

Maybe the Retry chip really would give us a do-over... It was worth a shot.

“Asagi, Retry!” I shouted. “Use a Retry chip, please!”

“Retry? Are you sure...?”

“Yes! I think it’ll change the boss’s name again!”

“Got it, Mai! I’ll use Retry, then I’ll be right over to help you out!”

“No, don’t! It’s fine. We can deal with the rock after we beat the boss,” I said. “I really appreciate the thought, but for now, forget about me and keep fighting!”

Even if I did get back to the battle, there was no way my strength would make a difference next to Asagi and Sugiura. Coming over to help me would leave Asagi wide open to attacks. I had to stay put and trust the two of them to handle the fighting.

“You got it, Mai. We’ll get this boss taken care of ASAP. Hang in there a little longer.”

“Okay. Good luck!”

Asagi used a Retry Skill Chip, and sure enough, the boss’s name changed again. This time, it changed from Dollsnake to Scalev.

“Oh, so that’s what Retry’s for,” said Sugiura. “Since we couldn’t keep the shiritori game goin’, it gave us a do-over.”

The boss was much less intimidating now that we’d figured out how to beat it. The next letter was V. Sugiura cast Victory Flare for massive damage, taking the boss down from 4,070 HP to 920. It changed shape again. This time, it was nothing but a giant snake.

“Huh. Now its name is ‘Ermless,’ and there’s only one Skill Chip that starts with S!” Sugiura said as he held his Show-Stopping Slayer Sword up high.

The boss gave off a hissing shriek as it started to slither away. It was headed straight for a large hole in the ground.

“Don’t let it crawl back to its nest! Let’s end this, Asagi!”

“Roger!” Asagi leaped into position in front of the snake, while Sugiura struck from the rear. They tore through the boss with their Show-Stopping Slayer Swords at the same time.

*“Curssssssssss! Cursssssse yooooooooou!!”*

And with that, the boss’s HP fell to zero. We won!

All that was left in the boss’s place was a single scrap of paper and a key.

“Are you all right, Mai?”

“Can you stand?”

Asagi and Sugiura worked together to lift the heavy rock so I could pull myself free.

“Thanks, guys...”

I picked up the scrap of paper and looked it over. There was a star drawn on it, but that was all. Other than that, it was blank.

Suddenly, I remembered the writing on the sign: THOSE WHO SLAY THE PUJUDOP SHALL WIN THE KEY. BURN YOUR SUSPICIONS AWAY, AND THE PATH WILL REVEAL ITSELF.

“Is there anything with a star on it around here?”

“...Maybe that’s it,” Sugiura said, pointing at one of the wooden manhole covers on the lawn. Sure enough, there was a star carved on it. That was suspicious enough for me.

“I bet you’re right,” I said. “I’m gonna try burning through it.” I used a Victory Flare chip I had left to torch the manhole cover. Since it was made of wood, it burned away in an instant.

“Hey, look! There’s a crystal down there!”

“That’s exactly what we’re after!” It wasn’t just any crystal. It was the Victory Application Point.

## **Apply for Victory**

**Cancel**

## Apply for Victory and Return

Without a second thought, we picked “Apply for Victory and Return.” The crystal gave off a flash of light so bright, I couldn’t stand to keep my eyes open.

<<Victory Report>> † Player 1 †

**Mai Yashiro**

**HP: 2,200/5,000**

**<Items Held> 9/10**

- Retry × 5**
- Victory Flare × 2**
- Thud × 1**
- Show-Stopping Slayer Sword**

**† Player 2 †**

**Taisuke Asagi**

**HP: 5,000/5,000**

**<Items Held> 8/10**

- **Thud × 3**
- **Retry × 1**
- **Victory Flare × 3**
- **Show-Stopping Slayer Sword**

**† Player 3 †**



**Shinji Sugiura**

**HP: 3,200/5,000**

**<Items Held> 6/10**

- **Map**
- **Thud × 3**
- **Victory Flare × 1**
- **Show-Stopping Slayer Sword**

**※This certifies that these three players have completed the Green Event.**

## **Victory Bonus**

**(To be delivered later)**

**※Once you return to your world, Nightmare will enter a maintenance period.**

*A Life Worth Protecting*

A moment later, I could open my eyes again.

I looked up and found the three of us surrounded by the cheering Conquerors' Club. We'd really done it.

"Mai! Sugiura! Asagi! Welcome back!" Taichi exclaimed, clapping each one of us a little too hard on the shoulder.

"Ease up, Taichi! That hurts!"

"Someone's gotta make sure you're not all ghosts."

Ha-ha-ha, very funny, Taichi. Still, behind the jokey facade, I could tell Taichi was worried about us.

"I'm sooo glad you're safe! I'm sorry I never do anything but sit back and watch you do all the work, Mai. But hey! Have some treats! Maybe that'll help make up for it," Naomi said, gesturing at a large lineup of cakes and cookies that she'd arranged on the table.

"Did you make all of these, Naomi?"

"Um, no, not quite. Youko helped this time," she said with a smile.

"Darn right I did! See? Those over there are mine!" Youko pointed to a batch of cookies and cupcakes on one side of the table. I don't mean to talk trash about anybody...but it was easy to tell which ones were hers at a glance. They were the ones that were burned solid black.

Then again, it's wrong to judge a book by its cover, right? Maybe they taste better than they look.

“...They don’t,” whispered Hirata. I guess that answered that.

“Anything worth doing is worth giving your undivided attention to up to the very end. This is what happens when you don’t. Baking times are only rough suggestions, after all. How long baked goods should stay in the oven really depends on several factors, such as the type of dough you use, and how thickly you spread it,” Yoichi said. He punctuated his lecture by adjusting his glasses.

“Sheesh! I messed up a little bit. Big deal. No need to be rude about it,” said Youko in a huff. “Besides, who cares about all that complicated stuff right now? It’s time to party!”

“Heh-heh-heh, you’ve got that right.”

The clubroom was full of smiling faces. It was moments like this that made all the hard work in Nightmare worth it.

“Well, Mai, we made it through another event.”

“We sure did, Asagi! Thanks so much for everything.”

This time around, we didn’t get a single Game Over. We had enough money to pay for a couple revivals, but it was even better that we didn’t need to.

“Who, me? Nah, I barely did anything. You’re the one who got us out of that jam with all your quick thinking. You really are something, Mai. We would’ve seen that Game Over screen a bunch of times if it weren’t for you.”

I still mostly felt like all I did was drag the party down, so I was really glad to hear Asagi say they needed me. “Same to you,” I said, “but I wonder how many more of these events we’ve got to win.”

“It doesn’t matter how many. Bring ’em on. As long as we all work together... and as long as I’m with you, Mai, we’ll beat every last one,” he said with a bashful grin.

I felt the exact same way. If there was one thing Nightmare made all too clear, it was the importance of having friends you could trust.

We still had a long, hard fight ahead of us...but I had a lot to fight for.

Everyone in the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club talked and celebrated in the clubroom until the middle of the night. Then I slipped off to my dorm and finally

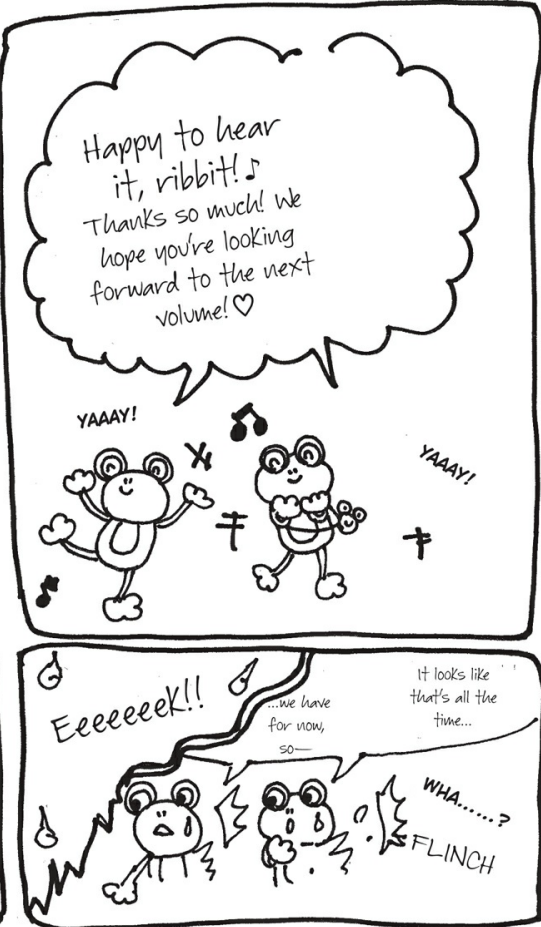
fell asleep, praying that I wouldn't miss out on more days like these.

*"Online! Vol. 3: The Reaper King and the Avian Monstrosity"*

*End*

*Turn the page for a fun message from the author!*







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