

ONLINE!

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The Follodoll
and Nightmareland



Midori Amagaeru
Illustration by
Shinichirou Otsuka

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JY
New York

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Mai Yashiro

What's he proud of?
He's a really fast typist!
What does he have
a hard time with?
Journalists who want
to interview him
about Nightmare.

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...

Taisuke Asagi

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 proud of?
Her riddle-solving skills!
What does she have
a hard time with?
Cooking, singing, exercise...
You know what? I'm gonna
need more space...

9. Sugiura's Unlikely Weakness?
10. Sugiura vs. Zust'raag
11. Horror at Spirit Park?!
12. Showdown with Tsubasa
13. Secret Frog Cookies
14. Nightmareland
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17. Good News

Afterword

Shinji Sugiura

What's he proud of?
He can nap all afternoon and
still get a good night's sleep!
What does he have a hard time
with? Any kind of exercise.

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 proud of?
If I have to answer: my Nightmare ranking.
What does he have a hard time with?
Games that depend entirely on luck.

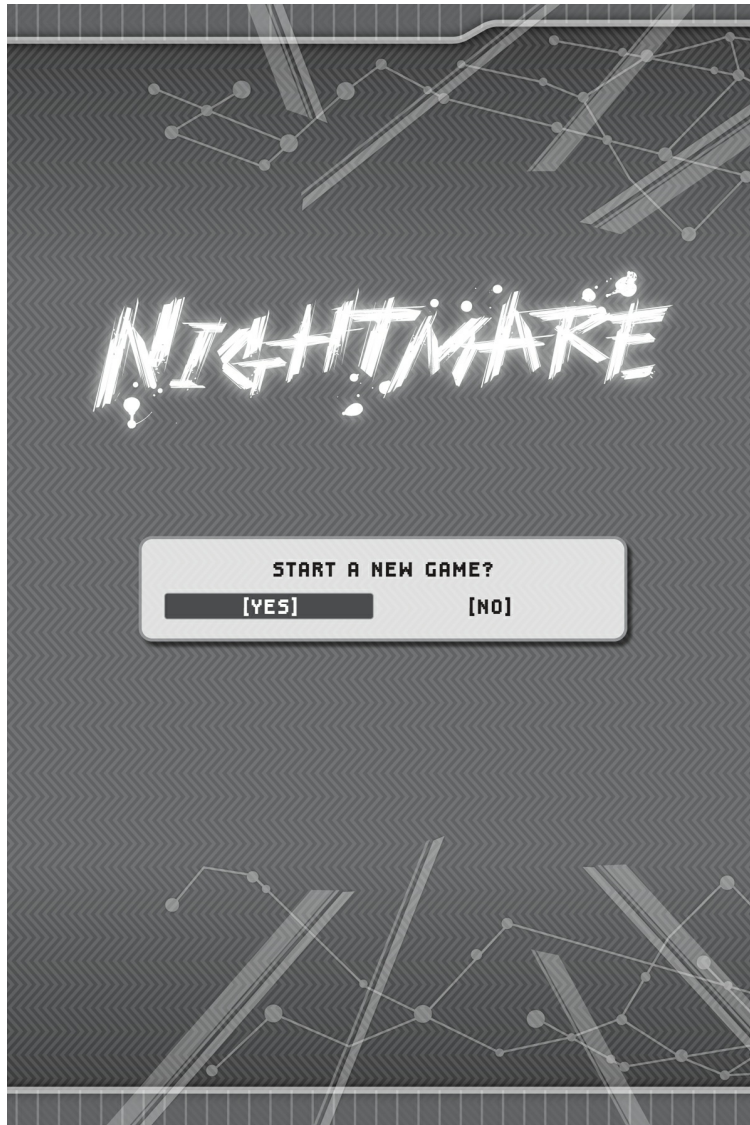
Taichi Tango

The only person
who can tease
Sugiura and get
away with it. He's
self-conscious
about his height—
don't you dare
call him "shorty"!

Amelie

This little monster
started out as Mai's
enemy, but now she's
one of her closest
friends! She's bright
and cheerful...as long
as there's plenty of
candy to go around.

What's she
proud of?
She can study
and watch TV at
the same time!
What does she have
a hard time with?
Cleaning her room.



It's like a bad dream—but it's our day-to-day life.

Have you ever felt that kind of fear? If this game ever gets its claws in you, you will. You'll learn what it's like to live day in and day out alongside terror.

But don't let it get you down!

Hang in there and keep playing, because one of these days, we're going to beat Nightmare for good...

1

The Story So Far

I'm Mai Yashiro, a totally normal second-year high school student at Ryokuka Private Academy...or at least I was, up until a little while ago.

One day, a devilish video game showed up on my doorstep: Nightmare. As soon as I started playing, my life completely changed. Not only my life, either. It turns out Nightmare consoles have made their way into all sorts of people's hands across Japan—people who soon found their lives changed against their will, just like me.

Once a Nightmare console arrives, players end up trapped in a contract with a demon. To sum it up, every time we get a Game Over, we lose the use of one of eight body parts: eyes, legs, left hand, right hand, nose, mouth, ears, or heart. The demon snatches them right up!

To make matters worse, thanks to the game's Auto-Death System, if we don't earn 100 in-game points called CP every single day, we get a Game Over, no matter what. In other words, not playing isn't an option.

A game that kills players if they don't play it every day... You've never heard of anything like it before, have you? It's definitely scary—but my friends and I aren't just sitting around being terrified of Nightmare. At least not all the time.

The chief director of Ryokuka Private Academy, where we all go to school, set up a special organization for students to fight back: the Nightmare Conquerors' Club. Most students at Ryokuka—and even a few at other neighboring schools—who received Nightmare consoles are members, me included. We're working together to beat the game for good.

The club is split up into four different groups: Main Squad, Scout Squad, Rescue Squad, and the Raid Team. The Main Squad's job is to earn in-game money for things like buying useful items. The Scout Squad mostly deals with players outside the club—both to trade useful information with and to recruit promising new allies. The Rescue Squad fights to win back our allies' Respawn Penalties (those are the body parts I mentioned before). When they have time, they also help the Scout Squad deactivate their Auto-Death Systems by donating CP.

Then there's the Raid Team—that's my group. We're like the Conquerors' Club's elite task force, and our mission is nothing less than beating Nightmare.

To be honest, though, I'm not great at video games. Being a member of the Raid Team takes me pretty far outside my comfort zone. Still, I've been working extra hard ever since I joined the team! There are four of us altogether: our leader, Sugiura; my friends Asagi and Taichi; and me.

The key to beating Nightmare lies in a series of major in-game events. Only a few people get to participate and represent the player base. Those who completed the Black Event—the very first one—can be representatives for the future events. That happens to include Asagi and me. In other words, we're locked in. Whatever events Nightmare throws at us from now on, we have to play along.

I'm not going to lie: It's super scary, and I dunno if I can pull it off. But I won't run away! I've gotta stick to it, for everybody's sake!

Besides, with Asagi beside me, I know I'll be okay!

We recently completed the Green Event, which meant that the more dangerous parts of Nightmare shut down for a maintenance period. We're free from fighting for our lives—until the updates are done, at least.

I do use some of my newfound free time to log in to Nightmare, though, to check on my super-friendly Familiar, Amelie! I clicked over to her room from the game menu, and there she was, licking an enormous lollipop.

“How’s that taste, Amelie?”

“Delicious, of course!”

“Hee-hee-hee! I’ll be sure to buy you more sometime.”

“Thanks a lot, Mai!” said Amelie, still totally focused on her candy. It’s not like it would run away if she looked away for a second...but that was part of her charm.

Nightmare is pretty scary, but I’m glad to have met Amelie. She makes a great partner and always knows the perfect way to lift my spirits.

All right! Just gotta keep doing my best!

I’m gonna beat Nightmare for sure, no matter what!

An After-School Date?!

With the Pujudop defeated—that was the monstrous, birdlike boss of the Green Event—we’d completed three events. I was relieved to be back to my usual, cheerful self again, but my heart was restless. It didn’t seem like my nerves were ever really going to go away.

Whenever we got back from an event, I was always so wound up and excited that I was awake all the next night until the sun started rising. Which of course meant I overslept the next morning, and that resulted in Sugiura yelling at me. I’d gotten stuck in a pretty pathetic pattern...or had I?

Hee-hee-hee! Not anymore.

This time around, I’d be up and ready before Sugiura came to wake me. No, I wasn’t the same old late sleeper anymore—I was a new Mai! If Sugiura thought he’d get to shout at me again, he was in for a surprise.

I hopped out from under my covers, powered through the last bits of drowsiness, took off and carefully folded my pajamas, and changed into my school uniform. I lived in the Ryokuka Private Academy dorms, so my mom and dad weren’t around. I had to handle everything myself, from washing my clothes to ironing them. I may not be a very good cook, but I’d say I’m pretty handy when it comes to laundry.

I headed over to the sink, washed my face, and fixed my hair. All right! Perfect!

I looked at my clock and saw that I still had five minutes to go before our meeting started. But then—

Knock, knock, knock!

There came a rough pounding at the door. No doubt about it, Sugiura was on the other side. Hee-hee. This'll shock him! I'm already totally ready to go!

I bounded over to my door, prepared to give the doorknob an energetic yank...and then I heard a different voice than the one I expected.

"Sh-sheesh, Sugiura! You're knocking way too hard. You're gonna beat her door to splinters like that."

Huh? That voice... Oh, crud!! H-hang on a sec! What's Asagi doing here with him?!

In a panic, I gave myself another quick inspection. My hair was in place, my uniform shirt was freshly ironed... Okay, Asagi can see me like this!

"Gimme a break," Sugiura shot back. "I gotta knock that hard, or she doesn't wake up." Can you believe him, saying stuff like that to Asagi?!

That was the last straw—I had to give him a piece of my mind. I threw the door open and stepped into view.

"For your information, I happen to be awake!" I snapped at Sugiura. "And completely ready, I might add!"

"Huh. Pigs must be flyin' outside. Awright, get a move on." Sugiura didn't sound shocked at all. He started walking briskly down the hallway.

...That's it? Aw, maaan! I'd really hoped he'd be more surprised. Without thinking, I puffed out my cheeks in a frustrated pout and glared daggers at Sugiura's back.

Then Asagi, who was standing behind me, spoke up in a gloomy voice. "...Um, Mai? Sugiura said he was gonna come by to wake you up, remember?"

"Yeah. Because I'm always, *always* late the morning after an event," I said. "He only comes by to wake me up because he likes picking on me. I know that."

I hoped Asagi would sympathize and offer me a few words of comfort, but the gloomy look didn't budge from his face.

"He's worried about you, Mai. That's all."

Sugiura was worried about me? If he was, trying to beat my door down was a funny way to show it.

“I just wish I’d noticed first,” Asagi continued. “I mean, I’m great at getting up early. I can’t believe it... I should’ve noticed you needed help! Me!” He blurted this out in a loud voice as he crouched with his head in his hands. Don’t get me wrong, I really appreciated the thought...but it was too early for an outburst like that. I was stunned speechless for a second.

“Um... Please don’t worry about it,” I said at last. “It’s my fault for never getting up on my own.”

“No, I understand. You’re worn out from always working so hard in the events. I guess I’m no match for Sugiura when it comes to supporting you like that.”

Supporting me...? Is that what Sugiura’s doing? The thought had never crossed my mind. I mean, if what he was doing was support, he could at least use some nicer words... Am I wrong?

Still, though, Sugiura was the leader of the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club, and I couldn’t deny that he always had his fellow club members in mind. I had to thank him for that, plain and simple. But not for all the sarcastic remarks!

“Shall we go, Asagi? I mean, we’ll both be late if we don’t.”

“Ack! You’re right! C’mon, Mai! Let’s hurry!”

“O-okay!”

Running in the halls was against the rules, but Asagi and I had to make an exception. Finally, tired and flustered, we slid into the clubroom. Somehow, we managed to make it inside and to our seats before the meeting started.

Phew... If we’d been late, I would’ve caught my second earful from Sugiura for the day.

In the meeting, we went over the maintenance period, since we’d just finished an event, and the next steps for our club. After that, it was time for our usual school lessons.

Members of the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club had to prioritize club activities—

how else would we ever beat the devilish game?—but we were still ordinary students who had to take ordinary classes. We were allowed to take them in the clubroom on the third floor of our dormitory, though.

Lessons wrapped up, and the school day ended in a flash. I've gotta say, it was nice to be back in my room immediately after classes. The main school building was about ten minutes away, and I used to head there and back from the dorms every day.

Now, all I had to do was walk down a few stairs, go down the hallway, and there I was: home, sweet home. That was one thing—the only thing—that made me happy to be a Nightmare player... Naturally, the bad still outweighed the good by a whole lot.

Right as I was about to head back to my dorm room, I received a message on my Nightmare console.

Huh? Who could that be?

[From: Nightmare]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Dear Miss Yashiro,

Congratulations on completing the Green 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: Green Box>>

END

A message from the Nightmare developers, with another mysterious box

attached. This was the third one. Maybe something good would happen if I collected enough of them.

I took a closer look at the Green Box. You'd think the game would give me interactive options for things to do with it, like "open," but no—nothing. It was a total mystery.

"Um, Mai? Are you busy today?" Asagi asked.

"Nope," I said. "I don't really have any plans. Why, what's up?"

"Oh, great! I was thinking maybe we should get out of the dorms for a little while. You know, to clear our heads. How about taking a little trip? I've got an assignment to hand in anyway... Um, I don't mean, like, 'Hey, let's go out, just the two of us,' but, like, y'know... I thought maybe you'd wanna come along. Y-you don't, do you? Never mind! Bad idea. Don't worry about it! You don't have to!" Asagi's hands were flapping from side to side, and his mouth was blabbing at full speed. His face flushed a light red.

"It's not a bad idea at all," I said. "What assignment is it?"

"Oh. Well, the thing is..." Asagi showed me some paperwork that he'd been clutching in his thrashing hands. "The chief director asked me to do some research. I finished my report, so I figured I'd go turn it in. It sounds like Sugiura told her I was good with computers, so she asks me to do this kinda stuff a lot lately."

That's right—Sugiura's mother was the chief director of the school we went to, Ryokuka Private Academy. (Well, again, we weren't actually *going* there anymore, but you know what I mean.) We also had her to thank for starting the Nightmare Conquerors' Club.

By the way, Sugiura's dad was the CEO of Green Trier, Inc., a company that was established to beat Nightmare as soon as it became a nationwide threat. He wanted Sugiura to follow in his footsteps, which had caused a bit of bad blood between them lately, but one thing was for sure: Sugiura has quite a pedigree!

Then again, I guess it only made sense that the head of the Nightmare Conquerors' Club would be someone special.

Then again *again*, if the chief director relied on Asagi like this, that made him pretty special, too.

I wondered if there was anything I could do that would make *me* special.

“So I guess we’re heading to school, then?” I asked.

“That’s right. I haven’t been in ages, so I kinda want to poke my head in for a bit anyway.”

Asagi had a point. Neither of us had been to the school building in a long time. Honestly, the thought of going back was starting to make me feel a twinge of nostalgia.

“I get it,” I said. “I’ll come along with you.” I texted back and forth with my old friends every now and then, but it’d been a few months since I’d gone to the school building in person.

“All right! Then let’s go together, Mai. Oh, hey, once we’re done with my errand, we can hang out in the school courtyard for a bit. I brought drinks! How about it? The flowers should be in full bloom right about now. I bet it’s nice.” Asagi’s face was still tinted red as he pulled a couple cans of Pudding Pop, his favorite drink, out of his bag.

Man, Asagi sure loves Pudding Pop. As far as I could tell, he never left home without a can or two.

“Sounds great! Let’s hurry and get going!”

“Y-yeah! Good thinking. The longer we wait, the less time I’ll have to talk to you... I mean, uh... Never mind...” Asagi’s words faded into a mutter until I couldn’t really make them out anymore. But I chuckled to myself; I didn’t need to hear his exact words to understand what he wanted to say.

“I hear that,” I said. “It’d be nice to forget about Nightmare and chat with you for a while.”

“.....!! Y-you mean it?!”

Asagi stared at me with wide, round eyes. His cheeks blushed several shades darker. “Does that make this an after-school duh...duh...?”

“Duh?”

I shot him a curious look. He backed away, trying to deny it, but his face was bright red.

“Ack! N-nothing. Sorry. Sorry. Forget it. C-c’mon, we should go before it gets da—aaaugh!”

Crash, bang, boom!

Asagi took one step back too far and fell, dramatically knocking over every desk around him as he went.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. Okay, Mai, let’s go!”

He didn’t seem hurt at all—if anything, his voice was more chipper than ever as he picked himself up and rushed out of the room.

Ack! H-hey, Asagi, wait for me!



A Bullying Victim in a Tracksuit

Asagi and I hopped on our bikes and headed to school. I hadn't ridden my bike in a long time. We rode through a lovely breeze under a beautiful setting sun.

After about ten minutes, we arrived at our school building. We biked through the gate, parked at the bike rack, and made our way to the main entrance.

"It looks like almost everyone's still here. I guess they've got club activities."

"That makes sense."

There were students running around the gym and out in the field, practicing tennis and baseball. We could hear the sounds of all sorts of instruments being played in the music room. I'll admit I was jealous. They seemed to be having so much fun. I bet they were totally wrapped up in their club activities. We were totally wrapped up in ours, too—but we were in the Nightmare Conquerors' Club, and if we didn't play, we were dead. We weren't in our club because we *wanted* to be.

Everyone at the school building that evening was enjoying their choice of club activities. Lucky them—they hadn't been sent a Nightmare console.

Well, not yet, at least. Nightmare was still spreading far and wide. I envied my old school friends a little, but I knew they also spent every day in fear that they could be next. I mean, you never know when you might find yourself being picked to play. It's scary to live—no matter how peacefully—knowing there's something dangerous out there waiting for you. Hmm... I guess I couldn't really call that peaceful.

We had to solve Nightmare's mysteries and beat it for good as soon as possible. I wanted everyone to be able to go back to their carefree, happy lives with smiles on their faces.

Just setting foot in the school building made me emotional. I wished I were there every day, even if it meant commuting between the dorms and here.

"All right, Mai. I've got to go meet with the chief director. Do you mind waiting right here for a sec?"

"Not at all. Go take care of it."

Asagi waved as if to say, "I'll be back in a jiff" as he ran off down the hall.

Now, then... What to do? An instant later, I heard a boy shouting from outside the building. I wondered what was going on. I couldn't ignore it; I can never turn a blind eye to that sort of thing.

I told Asagi I'd wait right here, but it couldn't hurt to poke my head outside for a second, right? That settled it! Just for a second.

I left the entrance hall and headed out to the school grounds. By the gate, I saw a boy wearing a tracksuit, and two other boys in school uniforms. Huh? What's going on?

Judging by the uniforms, the two boys went to my school. The boy in the tracksuit seemed to be around our age, too. He had fluffy, disheveled hair, and he was a little chubby, with a round nose. He looked like he might have been slightly taller than I was. Between his hair and his tracksuit, he reminded me of how Asagi looked when I first met him during a Battle of Wits in Nightmare.

The two boys in uniforms were talking loudly—more than loud enough to hear from where I stood by the entrance.

"Hey, Kaneda! Get movin', already! Our stuff ain't gonna lug itself!" one of them said. He had a buzz cut, and something about his face reminded me of an octopus, for some reason. He whacked the boy in the tracksuit on the back with his arm.

"E-EEK!"

"Now, now, Kaneda. Shouldn't you apologize?" said the other boy, who was

pale and slender, as he leaned in and wrapped an arm around the shoulders of the boy they called Kaneda. He flinched. It was totally obvious that he was afraid.

I took a wild guess that these two were *not* Kaneda's friends.

"I-I'm... I'm sorry..."

"Huh?! Can't hear ya, squirt!"

"Eep!"

"Ha-ha-ha. Cruel as ever, Takojima," said the slender boy.

"Like you're one to talk, Akaishi!" the boy with the octopus-like face snapped back.

Takojima and Akaishi... Tako... Like *tako*, the Japanese word for octopus? His name seemed to perfectly match his face...

Focus, Mai! This isn't the time for that! Kaneda was clearly being bullied, and that didn't sit well with me one bit. I had to stop them. Akaishi aside, Takojima looked like a textbook bully. Intimidating, to say the least.

While I fretted over what to do, they tormented Kaneda. Splashing him with tea from their bottles—on purpose, no doubt about it. Demanding he cough up change so they could buy sodas instead.

"You'll carry these for me, won't you, Kaneda?"

"Take mine, too!"

"Oogh..."

Akaishi and Takojima cackled as they loaded Kaneda down with more bags than one kid could ever hope to carry on his own.

That's it! I can't take it anymore! I stormed across the grounds toward Kaneda.

"Um, excuse me," I said. "Isn't that too much for you to carry? Here, let me help you with one of those bags."

"Huh?" Kaneda lifted his drooping head slightly. I could tell he was already on the verge of tears.



“Hey, mind your own business!” Sure enough, Takojima was the first to react. But I simply ignored him and took one of the bags weighing Kaneda down.

“Um... Th-thanks...,” he said in a voice barely louder than a whisper. But I hadn’t done anything that deserved his thanks. I couldn’t even look those bullies in the eye and tell them to leave him alone! My legs were shaking, and I felt so powerless and pathetic.

“Ah, too bad. Some weirdo had to come and spoil our fun,” said Akaishi, though his comments didn’t sting as badly as Takojima’s furious stare. “Whatever shall we do, Takojima?”

“Good question. Hey, Kaneda!” Kaneda flinched, his shoulders jerking upward, as Takojima shouted his name. “Let’s see here... Y’know, come ta think of it, it’s a real pain, not havin’ my nose work. Once maintenance is over, how’s about you go get my Respawn Penalty back for me?”

Huh? Do these two bullies play Nightmare? Hang on, does Kaneda play, too?

I took a quick look and saw that all three of them had Nightmare consoles strapped to their arms.

“There you are, Mai! Thank goodness! I wondered where you went. Sorry to keep you waiting... Uh, what’s going on?” Asagi must have finished his errand, because he came running over.

All right! I felt powerless on my own, but not anymore. I rushed to Asagi and whispered into his ear.

“I think those two guys are bullying Kaneda here.”

“What?!” Asagi’s expression turned serious and severe in an instant. “Gotcha,” he whispered back, barely sounding like himself. Then he looked Takojima and Akaishi right in the eyes with a ferocious stare and said, in a shockingly loud voice, “Don’t you know what you’re doing might cost someone their life? Don’t you get that?!”

Asagi was trembling with rage. He was usually so kind, too... I’d never seen him make a face like this before.

“Ugh, what’s this guy’s deal?”

The two bullies didn't seem to take Asagi's words to heart at all. On the contrary, they scoffed at him. Now *that* I definitely couldn't stand! I was one second away from giving them a piece of my mind when Asagi spoke again, in an even angrier tone.

"When I was in junior high, I used to get bullied, too—just like this kid! I—I even thought I'd be better off dead a few times..." Asagi's face was like a stone mask. I'd never seen him push himself this far before. And then— "Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" The two bullies shared a look and burst out laughing. "Dead? Yeah, right! Kaneda may be a weak little weenie, but he's not gonna *die*."

It was clear they weren't taking Asagi's words seriously at all, no matter how his voice wavered. His determination wasn't getting across.

Then I realized. No, that's not it... Asagi caught them off guard. They're laughing to cover up how shocked they are by his determination! Asagi had to keep up the pressure, or...

"Come on. Let's go."

Huh?! But... But we can't walk away now... Kaneda and I shared a look, as if to say, "now what?!" But Asagi wasn't having any of it.

"Drop the bags and come with us. You too, Mai. Let's get out of here." With that, Asagi started to walk briskly away toward the school courtyard.

"Um, okay," I said. Kaneda and I both followed behind him, leaving the two bullies alone to cackle and snarl insults like "wimp," "loser," and worse at our backs.

The Power of Friendship

The three of us made our way to the school courtyard and sat down at the edge of a round pond in the center. Asagi's fury must have died down, because his usual kind demeanor was back as he turned to Kaneda and asked, "Um... What was your name, again?"

"Kaneda... Kaneo Kaneda..."

"Kaneda. Right. So you got a Nightmare console, too, huh?"

At the exact instant Asagi's eyes fell on the Nightmare console strapped to Kaneda's arm, a light on it began to blink. Someone had sent Kaneda a message.

Once Kaneda saw who the message was from, his expression fell, and he started trembling. That was enough to make me certain that one of those bullies had sent it. I was right; it was Takojima, demanding that Kaneda go win back his Nose Respawn Penalty as soon as maintenance was over.

"Man, what a pain... Why can't he do it himself...?"

"Don't worry, Kaneda. You don't have to take orders from them anymore," said Asagi. "From now on, if you have any trouble, get in touch with me at this address." He tore a scrap of paper from his notebook, wrote his e-mail address on it, and handed it to Kaneda.

"...Huh?" Kaneda looked up in surprise.

"Believe me, I know how much it hurts to get picked on. I've been in your shoes before. Bullies are the worst. Whatever their deal is, it's their problem, not yours. I know some folks out there think it's the victim's fault, but..." Asagi trailed off with a distant look in his eyes—probably reliving a few unpleasant

memories. But he quickly snapped out of it and grinned at Kaneda and me. “But I don’t think so. And bullies travel in packs like that because they know they can’t do anything on their own. It’s shameful, really, picking on someone just because you don’t like them. If you *really* don’t like someone, wouldn’t it be smarter to stay away from them to begin with?”

Asagi’s words sounded much heavier than anything I’d ever heard him say. He had the same kind look in his eyes as always, but I could still sense a spark of anger shining out from somewhere deep inside them.

“Y-yeah... You’re right... If they hate me so much...I wish they’d leave me alone. That’d be fine... I could deal with that...but...” Kaneda’s words drowned in a flood of tears.

“It’s all right, man,” said Asagi. “We’re your friends. Right, Mai?”



“Yeah! Of course we are!”

That only made Kaneda cry harder.

“Huh?! Was it something I said? You don’t have to cry anymore!”

“Th-that’s not it! It’s just... Nobody’s told me they wanna be my friend in a really, really long time.”

“Ah-ha-ha, don’t mention it. Seriously, you can shoot me a message anytime you want from now on. We’re friends now, after all.” Asagi laid a gentle hand on Kaneda’s back as he spoke. Asagi was always a kind soul, but now he seemed so mature! “You did the best you could back there. Do your mom and dad know what’s going on?”

Kaneda nodded. “Yeah, for the most part. They’ve even been letting me stay home lately. But I know they really want me to hurry up and go back to school regularly... It’s a lotta pressure. It’s like... I don’t think they’re really that worried about me. I don’t get it.”

“I see...”

“I mean, I’m a wimp and a loser. My dad yelled at me the other day... He was really mad... I said I was sorry, but he just kept yelling. Maybe he’s right. Maybe I am just a good-for-nothing coward...” Kaneda started sobbing yet again as he thought back over everything he’d been through.

“That must be rough. But look, one of these days, everything around you is gonna change. It happened for me. That’s why I hope you’ll lean on me whenever you need help. I can’t sit around and let you keep feeling the way I felt...” A pained expression flashed across Asagi’s face as he relived some memories of his own. The next instant, however, he was smiling kindly at Kaneda again.

Oogh. I really wanted to help cheer Kaneda up, too, but I couldn’t find the right words. But I could imagine the pain both of them had been through for so long. The mere idea that someone would torment another person like that made me feel strangely alone. It was even worse that they were all Nightmare players. It’s bad enough that they had to actually fight for their lives in the game. How did they even have time for bullying?

I didn't understand how they managed to treat Kaneda so cruelly when their own lives were in so much danger. I simply couldn't believe it. Clearly, they didn't understand how scared they should be.

When we lose our last Respawn Penalty, actual-factual death is waiting for us. Who wouldn't be scared?

"As I was saying, Kaneda. You got a Nightmare console, too, right?"

"Yeah. It showed up out of nowhere. Like I didn't have enough problems already."

I figured he must've been playing solo, which is super dangerous.

"Have you ever heard of the Nightmare Conquerors' Club?" I asked.

"Huh...?" Kaneda looked down at the console on his arm. "You mean this Nightmare, right?"

"Right. Do you know all the rules of the game?"

"Y-yeah... I mean, I read most of the tutorials..."

Whoa, good for him. When I first started playing, I jumped right in to a fight without checking any of the help files. Come to think of it, I seem to recall Asagi getting on my case about that.

"You know where our school dorms are? Well, there's a whole student club set up there that's dedicated to beating Nightmare. Everyone there's a student who got sent a console, and we all work together to finish the game. We take our classes there, too, of course."

"Whoa! They let you study there and everything?!" Kaneda's eyes sparkled.

"Yeah. The club may be our top priority, but we're still students, after all," I said. "Anyway, here's what I'm getting at: You belong in the dorms with us!"

"Huh? Me? Live in the dorms? I dunno... My house is pretty close to the school... It sounds like I should join the club, but I don't think my parents will let me move... Do you think I could live at home and just visit the dorms?"

"Look at it this way. When you play Nightmare, sometimes dangerous stuff goes down in the middle of the night. Aren't you afraid of being by yourself

when that happens?”

“Of course I am, but I already miss a lot of school. I don’t wanna make things any harder on my parents...”

“Don’t you get that we’re talking about life and death here?!”

“Um, s-sorry.” Kaneda fell silent. I guess he hadn’t grasped how scary Nightmare really was, either.

Then Asagi broke his long silence with a suggestion. “How about this? Try staying at the dorms. Just for tonight. Your parents will let you sleep over for one night, won’t they?”

“Yeah... I think they’d be okay with that... Plus, they’d probably be glad I’ve got friends to hang out with for once.” Hanging out with friends—it is so easy to take for granted, but it’s not really a daily thing for everybody.

But even after Nightmare showed up on my doorstep, I still managed to hang out with Naomi and Youko every now and then. If Kaneda came to the dorms, he’d make more friends for sure. We’d have to introduce him to the whole club.

“Glad to hear it,” said Asagi. “Why don’t you pack your things for the night and head to the dorms? Be sure and tell your folks you’ll be with friends.”

“Yeah! Friends, huh...? Man, it’s kinda embarrassing to say it out loud,” Kaneda mumbled to himself. But then he looked up and nodded happily. His face was totally tear-free. I could tell he really trusted Asagi. I guess their shared experiences with bullying helped them understand each other.

It wasn’t only Kaneda, either. Even I thought Asagi looked more dependable than usual.

No Need to Apologize

Kaneda promised that he'd meet with us again at our dormitory and went home, leaving Asagi and me in the school courtyard. At last, we kicked back to relax with our cans of Pudding Pop and some cookies I'd made.

"Wow, Mai, these are great! You've gotten pretty good at making cookies," said Asagi. "The shape and flavor are way more consistent now!"

"You mean it?! I guess I didn't exactly have anywhere to go but up..." Don't get me wrong, I was happy about what Asagi said, but it still brought back depressing memories of all those earlier failed batches of cookies. Still, with enough practice and repetition, even a bad baker can get better—I was living proof. It's exactly like gaining levels in a game.

"N-no, no! I didn't mean it like that! I'll gladly eat anything you make, Mai! Even if it's burnt, undercooked, or both!" Asagi grinned. I wasn't convinced he'd follow through on that promise, though.

Cookie crumbs fell from Asagi's mouth, along with more dubious compliments. ("I like how they taste like flour, actually!") All the praise could only mean one thing: I'd fed him another batch of nasty snacks. I was shocked!!

All right! I should probably get more baking lessons with Naomi... I knew Asagi had a sweet tooth, and I wanted to make him all sorts of treats—treats that were so good, he'd actually mean it when he says they're delicious.

"Hey, Mai? Thanks a lot."

"For what?"

"For always being so nice to me."

I turned my head to look at him. “Of course... It’s not like I’ve done anything that special...”

“Sure you have. It must’ve been scary to jump in and help Kaneda like that, but you did it anyway. You really haven’t changed a bit. Back when I was getting bullied, you stepped in and gave me your pudding, ignoring what everyone around us thought, remember?”

That’s right. A long time ago, I saw some bullies dump out Asagi’s lunch box. He looked hungry, so I gave him my pudding. Still, though...

“That was nothing, really. It didn’t actually solve anything.”

“Back then, you told me you did it because we were friends. And you smiled. That smile gave me strength. You made me want to try harder. That’s the whole reason I told Kaneda that we were friends today. It’s all thanks to you, Mai.”

Asagi tends to turn bright red at the drop of a hat, but not this time. He looked me straight in the eye and said every word without a hint of embarrassment.

Me, though? I might have blushed a bit myself.

Fifteen minutes later, we were back at the dormitory. We stuck around the entrance, waiting for Kaneda. We’d only been waiting for five minutes when he came riding up on his bike. He had a big bag in his basket and a wide smile on his face.

“Sorry I’m late!”

“Not at all,” said Asagi. “Let’s go introduce you to our leader.”

Kaneda looked puzzled. “Leader...?”

“The head of the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club. His name’s Sugiura. I should warn you, he’s a little scary before you get to know him.”

Kaneda looked very unsure about this. “Um... Is he really that scary?”

“Ah, s-sorry!” Sensing that he was freaking Kaneda out, Asagi hurried to come up with a more thoughtful explanation. “I guess I made him sound too

intimidating. He's really a nice guy deep down inside. You'll be fine."

"Y-you mean it?" Kaneda didn't seem convinced.

I couldn't deny that it was hard to believe Sugiura could possibly be nice when you first met him. He was very blunt and more than a little grouchy. We definitely couldn't just point Kaneda in Sugiura's direction and let him go on his own.

"We'll come with you. If you interrupt him without a proper introduction, you won't get off on the right foot."

"G-got it..."

We led Kaneda up to the clubroom. Sugiura was sitting at the Raid Team's table, looking over a mountain of paperwork.

"Hey, Sugiura?"

"...What is it?" He looked up with his usual emotionless expression. When he made that face, it was hard to see what the other girls at school saw in him. "If you need somethin', spit it out already." He glared at all three of us, clearly unhappy that we'd interrupted his work.

We told Sugiura how we'd met Kaneda and why we'd brought him along.

"I see," he said. "Can't believe there are idiots who'd pull that kinda crap at this school."

Oh, he's angry. That's actually a good sign. It means he's on Kaneda's side!

"Fine, welcome aboard. It's Kaneda, right? If you're a Nightmare player, you're in the right place. You should join up, too."

"Yes! Isn't it great, Kaneda? Now you'll never bump into those bullies again!"

"Yeah... Thank you so much!"

Both Asagi and Kaneda were overjoyed. I felt like a heavy weight was lifted off my chest, too...or at least I did until Sugiura kept talking. What he said next made all three of us freeze up.

"Aren't you forgettin' somethin'? We gotta call those two bullies over here, too, y'know."

“Huh?!”

Huh, indeed! What did Sugiura want with them?

“Hang on a second, please. Why would we do that...?”

“Look, Mai. It doesn’t matter if they’re the two biggest jerks in the whole school. As long as they’re Ryokuka students, an’ as long as they’re caught up in Nightmare, we’ve gotta protect ’em. That’s the rule.”

“So you’re saying you don’t care if Kaneda gets bullied again?!” Asagi snapped. It was rare for him to push back against Sugiura like that.

“How ’bout you, dummy? Are you sayin’ you don’t care if those two die?!”

Asagi didn’t have a comeback to that. He clammed up.

Sugiura was right: It was a matter of life and death. Everything he said made perfect sense.

But what about how Kaneda felt? He started to tremble again.

“Relax,” Sugiura continued. “This’ll give me a chance to beat some manners into ’em personally. Don’t you worry ’bout a thing.”

Asagi and I nodded, but Kaneda didn’t answer. His head hung low. I couldn’t blame him; just when he had the slightest hope of escaping his bullies, that hope vanished into thin air. And even if the bullies moved into the dorms and Kaneda went back to regular school, he’d still have to face Nightmare all on his own. We couldn’t let that happen.

We left Sugiura to his paperwork and went to Asagi’s room.

“Are you okay, Kaneda? Your face is kinda pale.”

“I... I’m fine. I mean, I’m scared, but... But at least I’m not alone, so...I can do it. Or at least I can try. I wanna stay here and help beat Nightmare. And I really don’t wanna die.” Kaneda laughed, but it was a weak laugh, and the gloom didn’t budge from his face.

I really hoped he’d be able to laugh for real soon.

“You’ve got to convince your parents to let you move in here as soon as possible,” said Asagi. “If Sugiura says he’ll do something, he’ll do it. That

includes handling those bullies. But most of all, it's seriously dangerous to play Nightmare solo."

"But my mom and dad probably won't let me..."

He had a point. Some of us had lived in the dorms ever since we first started attending Ryokuka Private Academy, but if Kaneda lived close enough to stay at home, his parents probably wouldn't want him off on his own. But Asagi had a point, too: Playing Nightmare all by yourself was super dangerous.

Sugiura and his family could talk some sense into the Kanedas. If they understand it is a matter of life and death, I'm sure they'd be open to it...

"But, um... If they say no, then..." Kaneda squirmed. There was something he wanted to say, but he couldn't get it out. I wondered what it was.

"Look, Kaneda. We're on your side, no matter what. Whether you need help with Nightmare, or you just want to hang out, you can come by the dorms anytime. Or at least call me or send me a message."

Asagi's kind words brightened Kaneda's face in an instant.

"Okay! Th-thanks... I don't have anyone else I can talk to like this except for my family, so...I'm happy to hear that..." He chuckled bashfully. Once Kaneda smiled, Asagi and I found ourselves smiling, too.

"Whatever happens, let's take it easy for today," said Asagi. He opened up his mini-fridge, pulled out a couple cans of Pudding Pop, and passed them to us.

"Thank you!"

It was my second can of Pudding Pop that day. In a way, I couldn't help but be impressed that Asagi somehow never managed to run out of the stuff.

"Um... How am I supposed to drink this?"

Whoops. Kaneda had made the mistake of opening his can without shaking it first.

"Seriously?! Come on, you gotta shake it before you pop it open, man!"

"O-oh, really? Sorry about that..."

Asagi marched off to the kitchen with a serious look on his face. A look that

said, *Well, there's only one thing to do now.*

But what could that one thing be?

"Um, Yashiro? Did... Did I make Asagi mad?"

"Huh? Oh, no, I doubt it," I said, "but he really, really loves Pudding Pop."

"He gave me a can, and I wasted it! I've gotta apologize again."

The next moment, Asagi returned with a cheerful, "Thanks for waiting!"

"Um... I'm r-really sorry..."

"Don't be! Now c'mon, gimme your can." Asagi had brought a can opener back with him from the kitchen. He took Kaneda's can of Pudding Pop, popped it open without hesitation, dumped its contents into a cup, and smushed them down with a fork before passing it all back to Kaneda.

Sure enough, he was left with a flawlessly squished cup of Pudding Pop. Though to be honest, it didn't look all that appetizing. Kaneda was in a tight spot.

"There! Drink up!"

As Kaneda took the cup, his eyes welled with tears.

Yikes, I didn't think it looked *that* gross. Maybe he just hates Pudding Pop. Still, crying is a little much...

Asagi noticed something was wrong and started to panic. "Wh-why are you crying? It tastes almost as good like this, I swear! C-c'mon, take a sip! It's gonna knock your socks off!"

Yeesh, Asagi... How much do you like this stuff?!

"S-sorry again. I didn't mean to surprise you. It's just... It's been a really long time since I screwed up without someone yelling or making fun of me..."

Asagi and I shared a look.

"Kaneda, that's not normal."

"Mai's right," Asagi added. "It's okay to screw up. You didn't know you had to shake it, that's all."

Then Kaneda's cell phone screen lit up to let him know he'd received a text. He checked the screen, then let out a long, sad sigh. He began to cry again.

"It's my dad. He said no... I knew it. I really wanna stay here, but I guess I can't..."

"Aw, man..."

"There's gotta be something we can do."

"No. It's fine... I dunno why I thought it would work out."

I couldn't think of anything to say. Just as I hung my head in defeat, Asagi cried out in a loud voice.

"How long are you gonna keep that up, man?! C'mon, you've gotta have a little courage!!" Asagi's face was bright red, but this time he wasn't embarrassed. He was upset. If I thought he looked serious before, it was nothing compared to how serious he looked now.

"S-sorry."

"Don't apologize. Try to be brave. I told you, you've got people on your side here."

"Sorry... I—I mean, thanks. Nobody's been anywhere near this nice to me in a while... That alone makes this a great day in my book. I'll keep trying to get my parents' permission. If I stick at it for a while, I can probably wear them down... Thanks for everything today." With that, Kaneda bowed his head and left Asagi's room.

I know Kaneda did his best to leave on a happy note, but the whole room still felt dark and dismal after he left. Neither Asagi nor I could manage much of a smile. Why hadn't any of that gone as well as we'd hoped?

"I'm still worried about him..., " I said. "At least he's willing to try, though. Here's hoping this doesn't end with him even more down than before."

"I'll be sure to check in with him a lot. If nothing else, he'll have a friendly voice to help him feel safe. Fingers crossed he moves into the dorms soon."

"Great! Thanks, Asagi."

What did I tell you? Asagi's a genuinely nice guy. He's got a gift for feeling other people's pain like it's his own and giving them the kindness they need. I hated to think he earned that gift by going through so much pain of his own, though...

A Prediction of Troubling Days Ahead

The next week flew by in a flash.

The two bullies didn't seem to have any trouble at all getting their parents' permission to move into the dorms. (Maybe their parents were ready for a break from them, too.) They moved in and became members of the Nightmare Conquerors' Club within the week.

I'll tell you this much: I didn't feel like making nice with them, that's for sure. They're the ones who kicked off all of Kaneda's problems in the first place, for crying out loud! The idea of being in a club with them made me sick, no matter how much I thought it over.

When Sugiura was around, they were on their best behavior. It was a different story whenever Asagi and I passed by them in the halls, though. They'd glare at us, or scoff and look the other way.

They really ruined the vibe.

Asagi didn't seem to pay them any mind, but I noticed that he checked his cell phone way more often than he usually did. I wondered if he was texting someone.

The days were peaceful, for the most part, but I couldn't shake the feeling that the maintenance period would end soon. Of course, it was important to spend time with my friends, but once Nightmare started up again, we'd all have to focus on the game. We couldn't afford to get sloppy.

"Morning, Mai!"

I'd just left my dorm to head to the club meeting when I bumped into Asagi.

“Ah, good morning!”

“Wanna head to the meeting together?” he asked. “I know it’s not very far, but still.”

When Asagi and I got to the clubroom, Taichi was already sitting at the Raid Team table.

“Oh, mornin’,” he said. As he looked up at us, we noticed he had dark circles under his eyes.

“Yikes! You look worn out. What’s up?!”

“Maintenance is almost over, that’s what’s up. Sugiura an’ I have been taking shifts to make sure we’re ready.”

Wait—does that mean he’s been up working all night long?! The last maintenance period ended in the middle of the night, come to think of it. That meant the Auto-Death System came back on in the middle of the night, too, which caught a lot of players off guard.

Like I said before, Nightmare players have to earn 100 CP every day. That’s the minimum amount we have to earn to stay in the game.

“Are you gonna be okay, Taichi?” Asagi asked. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You mean it? Awright, you can take my shift tonight. It ends at three AM. Then Sugiura should come by and take over.”

“Got it.”

“Is it okay if I stay up with you, Asagi?” I asked.

“Huh? Are you sure?” Asagi’s eyes grew big and round.

“It’ll be safer if there’s two of us. This way, if one of us starts to nod off, the other one can wake them up.”

“Good point. Now that you mention it, I’d feel a lot better with you around, Mai!” His face flushed its usual shade of red, but I could tell he was glad that I’d joined in.

“Huh. I guess I better start making moves, too, then,” said Taichi.

“Whaaat?!” Asagi blurted out in a loud voice, suddenly leaping to his feet. As it turns out, Sugiura had arrived and stood right there in front of us. He glared at Asagi.

“What’s your deal?”

“N-nothing. Sorry.”

Taichi struggled to hold in his laughter as he watched Asagi pop up, only to get stared down.

“Aw, siddown, already. Man, I can read you like a book. I was kidding, y’know.”

“Sheesh. I shoulda known, the way you’re always messing with me.”

“Gotta have a hobby, am I right?”

“...Huh?!” Asagi was a split second away from jumping to his feet yet again, but Taichi clapped a hand on his shoulder to hold him down.

“Shhh. Do that again, and Sugiura’s gonna do a lot worse than glare atcha.”

“Oof...” Asagi didn’t seem too happy. But who could blame him? Taichi had him dancing to his tune, and he knew it. Taichi loved to mess with people. Not even Sugiura was immune. As it turns out, everyone was scared of our leader... except for Taichi.

And sure enough...

“Oh, come on! Keep it down, will ya?! You’re on the Raid Team, in case you forgot! You’re supposed to be settin’ an example for the other squads! Do I gotta remind you?!”

Eeek! Sugiura was really giving us an earful.

“S-sorry.”

Aw, man... Talk about embarrassing... He was staring straight at us!

About a dozen hours had passed since the morning meeting. It was ten o’clock at night; time for our shift on lookout duty to begin.

“Lookout duty” makes it sound a lot harder than it was. All we had to do was keep an eye out for any notifications from the Nightmare site. We decided to stay up in the cafeteria until our shift ended at three in the morning.

That’s about five hours from now. I’ve gotta try and stay awake till then...

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the blinking light of my Nightmare console. I knew what that meant: a message! Was it from the Nightmare administrators? Was the maintenance period over already?

I was a bundle of nerves as I opened my inbox to see who sent the message.

[From: Kenichi Tanaka]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Hiya! It’s me.

I’m having dinner!

Scarfig down a beef bowl, to be precise.

END

Part of me wanted to shoot back at the pointless message with a sarcastic *Oh, you don’t say?* but I stopped myself. Taking the bait would make *me* the stupid one.

Come on, Mr. Tanaka... Nobody needs to know that...

What was he trying to do anyway? But that was Kenichi Tanaka for you: a total weirdo. But that’s not the whole picture. Sure, every single message he sent was complete nonsense, but he was also the highest-ranking player in Nightmare, which was pretty amazing. Now you see why I couldn’t just ignore him.

I sent back a simple reply: **Beef bowl, huh? Nice. Enjoy!**

I couldn’t help but think that someday, Tanaka would send over some real,

super-useful information for us. So far, though, he hadn't. Not even once.

He messaged me back seconds after I sent it. This time, all he sent was a wicked-looking smiley face. What else can I say? I was flabbergasted. Whatever game he was playing, I decided there was no way I was gonna play along.

Hmm? The light on my Nightmare console started blinking again. Is Tanaka seriously still at it? I didn't even reply to his last message. I opened up my inbox again...

[From: Nightmare]

[To: All Players]

Good evening.

First of all, an announcement: Mai Yashiro, Taisuke Asagi, and their companion Shinji Sugiura have completed the Green Event. We offer them our sincere congratulations.

Nightmare's maintenance period is now at an end. Please be aware that all players will soon lose nerve functions on any Respawn Penalties they've lost, regardless of whether they have received this message or not.

New stages and system features have been added to the game. Please see the Help files for details.

END

“.....!”

There it was! The announcement that the maintenance period was over.

It wasn't quite as sudden or harsh as it was last time around, but there still wasn't much time. Any players who didn't have 100 CP by midnight would get a Game Over, thanks to the Auto-Death System.

Asagi had noticed the message as well.

"It's here, Mai...!"

"At last."

"Go wake up Sugiura! He probably went to sleep early so he could get up for his shift!"

"I'm on it!"

"I'll go let Taichi and the others know," said Asagi. I bolted out of the cafeteria and made my way to Sugiura's dorm.

Nightmare was back online. Our day-to-day lives were about to go back to exactly that: a terrifying dream. No matter how many times it happened, I couldn't get used to that horrible moment when I found out the game was up and running again. It always turned me into a bundle of nerves and left me short of breath. I wondered if I would ever get to live a peaceful life again. One where I wouldn't have to overcome some crisis or another every single day.

I rushed down the hall, checking the names and numbers on the plaques stuck to the wall next to each door. Aha! There it is! Sugiura's room!

Knock, knock, knock...

Without thinking, I rapped on the door hard, making a real racket. This was an emergency! It was no time to worry about making too much noise!

"Who's there?" Sugiura's reply came right away.

"It's Mai. Can I come in? We really need to talk."

"Sure. It's unlocked."

"Okay, I'm coming in."

I opened the door and stepped inside to find Sugiura wide awake and looking over paperwork—even in his own dorm room. Oof, I thought he'd be asleep, but he's in here working all night... He was probably helping his dad's company

in some way.

As I looked around, I noticed that Sugiura's room didn't have anything in it except for the bare necessities of dorm life. Everyone else's rooms were different and colorful, and packed with possessions: hobby supplies, stuffed animals, that kind of stuff. But everything in Sugiura's room was plain black.

There was something very grown-up about it. You'd never guess it was a high schooler's room.

"Enjoyin' the view?"

"Ack! N-no..." Oh, crud! This was no time to take in the sights of Sugiura's grown-up decor. I had to tell him Nightmare was back on!

"Um, Sugiura? We got a message from the Nightmare administrators saying the maintenance period is over."

As soon as I said it, Sugiura stood up. "What?! Really?!"

"Yessir."

"Tch... Dang it. They're seriously startin' up at this hour again?" Sugiura opened a desk drawer, yanked out a stick of gum, and shoved it into his mouth. I remembered something Taichi had told me: Whenever Sugiura gets frustrated, he reaches for a pack of gum. "Awright, Mai. We're gonna split up an' gather the club in the cafeteria. Once everyone's there, we start scroungin' for CP."

"Roger!"

At that moment, I could see Sugiura's determination as a leader: Nightmare may have come back online in the middle of the night, but this time around, nobody would lose a single Respawn Penalty if he could help it.

Battle with the Tunnel Hag

Ten minutes later, the whole Nightmare Conquerors' Club was in the cafeteria. Naturally, that included the two bullies. Somehow, Takojima had been assigned to the Scout Squad, while Akaishi was on the Main Squad. As far as I could tell, the decision had been made just a few minutes earlier.

From that night onward, the whole club would be working hard to beat Nightmare. I crossed my fingers that we could at least count on those two to do their parts...

"Hey, you! Quit spacin' out an' answer me, now!"

Oof. It sounded like Takojima was already shouting at Hirata, the leader of the Scout Squad, loudly enough for everyone to hear. Gimme a break! That's no way for a newbie to talk to the head of their own squad!

If it bothered Hirata, he didn't show it. He looked as calm and composed as ever. Good going! I silently cheered Hirata on. You don't have to listen to a thing a jerk like that says!

"How'd a guy like that become a leader anyway,' hmm? 'I'd make a way better leader than him.' I wonder. You're a bit too confident, I'd say... But that's none of my business."

Ah-ha-ha... Clearly, Hirata was wasting no time showing Takojima that he could read minds.

"Hey, how d'you know what I'm thinking?" Hirata continued. "Hmm... Honestly, I'm not sure myself... I was born this way..."

"Eep! What are you, some kinda monster?!" Takojima looked at Hirata with

fear in his eyes. He seemed very surprised, to say the least.

Meanwhile, Akaishi had apparently fallen head over heels in love with Youko, leader of the Main Squad.

“You’re cute, you know? Just my type, in fact,” he told her. “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Kenji Akaishi. Charmed, I’m sure.”

Yeesh! Who comes out and tells a girl that she’s just his type the instant he meets her?! Whatever you could say about Akaishi, he had guts. It was impressive, in a way.

“Kay. Nice to meet you.” Youko left it at that, but Akaishi was persistent.

“You know, I do believe this is love at first sight. By the way, what’s your type?”

I couldn’t believe it. It’s bad enough that he carried on like that right in front of everyone, but could he have picked a worse possible time? We were all right about to dive back into Nightmare!

My earlier hunch was right: Neither of these guys grasped how scary Nightmare really was—and they didn’t have any manners, either.

As you can imagine, Youko was not happy, and she didn’t hide it. “Geez, what’s your problem? Don’t even bother asking me that. I’m not interested.”

“Ah, playing hard to get, are you? I’ll get through to your soft side yet.”

“*Sigh...* Whatever. I’m off to earn some CP,” Youko said.

“Yes, ma’am!” Akaishi was in high spirits, even though Youko was clearly fed up with him already.

Still, part of me thought that maybe their assignments were for the best. They both gave off different vibes than they had when I first caught them picking on Kaneda. Maybe it was best if they had something else to focus on.

No matter how he tried, though, I doubted Akaishi’s lovey-dovey dreams would ever come true. Youko was already head over heels with Masuda.

At that point, Sugiura finished taking attendance and making sure everyone was in the right place. He returned to his seat with the rest of us on the Raid

Team.

“Awright. Ready to get fightin’, too?”

“Yessir!”

“You know it.”

“Which stage should we play?” asked Taichi.

Sugiura opened his laptop and started searching for something. “Let’s see. The Woodland Tunnel Ruins should be about our speed. How ’bout that?”



The Woodland Tunnel Ruins was like a one-way street. There was only one path, and it was loaded with monsters along the way. It was the perfect stage if you wanted to earn a lot of CP and experience points in a short amount of time.

“Good call. Let’s do it.”

“Yeah. Enter the stage as soon as you’re ready to roll.”

“Got it!”

“Roger.”

As soon as we all agreed, Taichi and Asagi were in the stage. I guess they were already prepared to play.

“Don’t rush it, Mai,” said Asagi. “There’s still more than an hour to go until midnight. Pick out all your equipment and stuff at your own pace.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

I could always count on Asagi to be super thoughtful. On the other hand...

“Hmph. You’re always the last one in. That’s just how it’s gonna be all the time, huh?”

...I could always count on Sugiura for a cutting remark or two. Sure, I took a while to get ready, but I felt bad about it. He could at least pretend he didn’t enjoy picking on me for it, right?

I felt my three teammates’ eyes on me as I checked my in-game equipment and bought more arrows to make up for the ones I’d used last time. Finally, I selected **Woodland Tunnel Ruins** from the list of stages and got into the game.

Sugiura and the others’ avatars were waiting at the entrance, but they weren’t the only ones. There were tons of other players gathered in the area, too. I could make out other Conquerors’ Club members’ avatars here and there among the crowd.

“It’s pretty crowded,” said Taichi.

“Looks like everyone learned their lesson from the last late-night surprise. There may be a ton of baddies in the tunnel, but with this many people around, it’s not gonna be a very efficient spot to farm CP after all. At least not for a bit.”

That was true. No matter how many monsters there were, as long as there were more players hunting them, there wouldn't be much point. Considering how long it took monsters to respawn, there was a real chance we'd have to compete with other players over them. Usually, that was all part of the fun. But now, with an hour left to earn 100 CP and our lives on the line, it was hard to see the appeal.

"We're outta options. Let's head to a slightly higher-level stage. We'll be fine, since there's four of us."

"Right," said Asagi. "It wouldn't be right for the Raid Team to swoop in and steal other club members' kills anyway."

"Plus, we've got Mr. Ranked-Third-in-the-Game with us," Taichi said, gesturing at Sugiura. "He'll save the day if the going gets tough." He shot me a glance.

Oh, right. I've got the lowest level out of all of us.

"I'm sorry, Sugiura... I'm sure I'll be fine, but...please help me out if I'm not."

"You got it. Get behind me if things get dangerous."

Asagi was mumbling with a dismayed look on his face. I could barely make out his voice through Sugiura's words: "Urgh, great... My spot got stolen yet again..."

"Aw, don't take it so hard, man. Not like we can help it," said Taichi. "Sugiura's on a whole different level than all of us."

"Then I've gotta get stronger, too. I can't keep Mai safe if I don't!"

"Whoa! Sheesh, Asagi, cool it with the sudden shouts before you gimme a heart attack."

"I-I'm kidding anyway. I mean, um... That's just something I decided on my own, that's all. Don't worry about it, Mai..." Asagi's face was bright red again.

"Don't worry about it"? He could say so, but it didn't change the fact that I could feel my own face getting hotter. I'm sure it was turning red, too.

"Whoo, this whole situation's got everyone feelin' the heat!"

“T-Taichi!”

“Cram it, all of ya! Here. I found another tunnel dungeon for us,” Sugiura said as he showed us the stage he’d picked out: the **Haunted Tunnel Ruins**. It was a more difficult stage than the one we’d just left, but we were short on time and even shorter on choices. We entered the stage right away.

The mouth of the tunnel was in plain view from the stage entrance. We could see that the upper part of the tunnel was covered in moss. The ground was thick with wild grass growing every which way. To be honest, the sight of it made me uneasy.

Nightmare had so many more types of stages than typical online games, so it was no surprise that I’d never been to this particular place before.

“Awright, I’m goin’ in. Try to keep up,” said Sugiura. As usual, he was eager to push on ahead.

“Aw, come on! Wait up, Sugiura! Go easy on us, will ya?”

“Hmph! I know you’re not whinin’ about a stage this easy, Taichi.” Sugiura smirked. Oof. That’s our Sugiura.

“Let’s stay with ’em, Mai,” said Asagi.

“Yeah!”

“Just be sure you stick close to me the whole way, okay?”

“Sure thing! Thanks!”

Asagi grinned at my reply. I honestly felt safe and secure with our party together like this. It helped that I managed to totally ignore Taichi’s constant teasing. Our avatars proceeded into the tunnel.

There were no lights on inside, leaving it pitch-black. I opened my inventory screen, selected a flashlight, and turned it on. The tunnel ahead of me came blinking into view. I still couldn’t see any monsters.

Ooogh. The sound effects in this stage sure give me the creeps. The constant *whoosh* of wind through the tunnel was only the beginning. Every now and then, we could hear a woman’s voice cutting through the breeze. Even though I wasn’t actually walking around in the dark tunnel in real life, I didn’t like it one

bit.

Then we heard another sound: a loud *bang*, like a gunshot, coming from up ahead.

“Huh?!”

“Mai! Asagi! There’s a monster, dead ahead! Sugiura’s fightin’ it already!”

“Got it! We’ll be there ASAP!”

“Roger that. I’m heading over, too.”

Our avatars broke into a run toward Sugiura’s. We found him in the middle of a battle with what looked like the ghost of an old woman.

“Let’s see here... I’m pretty sure that’s a Tunnel Hag,” Asagi told me.

“It is,” said Taichi. “Like the name says, they only spawn in tunnels like this one. They never follow players outside of the tunnels, but they’re pretty dang strong. Don’t underestimate ’em.”

“Okay!”

The Tunnel Hag’s maximum HP was 6,000, but Sugiura had already worn this one down to 2,800.

All right! Time to make myself useful with an attack of my own!

★ ★ ★

- **Mai attacks with her Flame Bow!**
- **Direct hit on Tunnel Hag.**
- **[300 damage!]**
- **Tunnel Hag [HP: 2,500/6,000] (-300)**

It appeared the Tunnel Hag’s defensive power was nothing to sneeze at. Not that I expected anything different, but I could tell that she’d be a tough fight for me if I weren’t in a party of four.

Thanks to Taichi, Asagi, and Sugiura keeping cool heads and pelting the hag with ranged attacks, we managed to take her down. Each of us earned 40 CP and 6,000 experience points, which was a whole lot for beating one monster!

I'd already had some experience fighting higher-level monsters when Sugiura helped me level up, but they were still in a whole other class than the ones I was used to dealing with.

"Awright, let's get one thing straight," said Sugiura. "I don't want any of you comin' back to this dungeon without me, got it? If we can't get the job done with ranged attacks alone, we're all in trouble."

"You're the boss."

"Roger."

"Got it."

The three of us answered one by one. You could say one thing for Sugiura: He was a super-reliable leader.

"We'll take out two more of those hags an' head out. Awright, I'm goin' a little deeper," Sugiura said as he charged farther down the tunnel. The three of us followed behind him. "Tch! Four of 'em, incoming!"

Whaaat?! Four more enemies popped up out of nowhere?!

"Um, are we gonna be okay?"

"Eh, we'll manage. Let's take out as many of 'em as we can from a distance."

"Y-yessir!"

All four monsters stood in a row. Two of them were Tunnel Hags like the one we'd just fought. The other two enemies were wearing black robes.

"Hang on... Are those...Grim Reapers?"

"Huh? Where, Mai?"

"Right there! The two monsters on the left side! I'm pretty sure those are Grim... Ah!" Before I could finish speaking, the robed figures vanished, as if they'd been sucked into the tunnel walls. "They, uh, disappeared..."

"I wonder what they were—and what happened just now. Grim Reapers

aren't supposed to spawn in this dungeon."

"That's what I thought. Maybe my eyes played a trick on me."

"Hey, you two! Cut the chitchat and take out those hags, pronto!" Sugiura shouted angrily.

"S-sorry!" I looked up to see that the Tunnel Hags were closing in. The one on the right had only 1,200 HP left, but the other was still at full health. The two of them were rushing right for Sugiura.

"Tch, that didn't work, huh? Whatever. Time for a Normal Battle, then!"

Two Tunnel Hags approached!

Initiating a Normal Battle...

[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. Taisuke Asagi (5,000/5,000)**
- 3. Tunnel Hag 1 (1,200/6,000)**
- 4. Tunnel Hag 2 (6,000/6,000)**
- 5. Taichi Tango (5,000/5,000)**
- 6. Mai Yashiro (5,000/5,000)**

It was Sugiura's turn to attack first.

<<Turn 1: Shinji>>

- **Shinji used Multi-Stab! <<Hit Rate 20%>>**

Shinji stabbed at Tunnel Hag 1 ten times!

Three hits!

- **4,580 damage to Tunnel Hag 1!**

[HP Remaining]

- **Tunnel Hag 1 [HP: 1,200/6,000] (-4,580)**
- **Tunnel Hag 1 defeated.**

Wh-whoa! Ten attacks in one?!

“What was that, Sugiura?! That skill is incredible!”

“Nah, not really. You have no idea how often it whiffs every single hit at the worst possible moment.”

“Ha-ha! That’s ’cause you’re unlucky, Sugiura. Case in point, someone always swoops in to snag the good stuff before you can!”

“T-Taichi!” Asagi tried to cover Taichi’s mouth, but it was too late.

Sugiura kicked Taichi’s chair as hard as he could, sending him tumbling to the floor. Typical Taichi. He was never gonna learn his lesson, huh...? On the bright side, though, Taichi’s tumble probably did a lot to cut the tension. Sorry, Taichi... But thanks, I think.

“Let ’im get up on his own, Asagi,” Sugiura barked. “Hurry up and choose a move, already!” Whoops—Sugiura’s mood had taken a sudden turn for the worse.



“Okay!” Asagi replied in a loud voice, then picked out a command.

<<Turn 1: Taisuke>>

- **Taisuke slashed at Tunnel Hag 2!**

Hit!

- **820 damage to Tunnel Hag 2!**

[HP Remaining]

- **Tunnel Hag 2 [HP: 5,180/6,000] (-820)**

“Looks like I’m not ready for this, after all...,” Asagi mumbled.

Taichi, on his feet again, picked up the chair that Sugiura had sent flying and sat back down with us.

“Nah, you’re doin’ plenty of damage. There’s four of us, after all. We’re definitely up to the challenge at this level.”

“Yeah, I guess so...,” Asagi replied hesitantly.

“Asagi, my man, if you keep comparin’ yourself to people over every little thing, you’re only gonna stress yourself out,” said Taichi. “All we gotta do is take it easy and handle this Raid Team–style. We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Asagi smiled. I could tell he was surprised to have Taichi comforting him, rather than teasing him, for once.

Then it was the monsters’ turn. I’d never fought a Tunnel Hag in a Normal Battle before. I wondered what kind of attacks they’d dish out.

<<Turn 1: Tunnel Hag 2>>

- **Tunnel Hag 2 sang a Lullaby! <<Hit Rate 30%>>**

- **Shinji fell asleep!**
- **Taisuke covered his ears in time!**
- **No effect on Mai! (Skill nullified by Mai's Ring of Evasion (level 3))**
- **Taichi covered his ears in time!**

"Tch, dang it... How come I'm the only one who got put to sleep?"

"What'd I tell ya? Your bad luck strikes aga—" Before Taichi could finish his sentence, Sugiura stopped him with a furious glare. Even I could feel the heat! "N-never mind."

"You'd think Taichi'd learn by now. This only happens, oh, every time," Asagi whispered to me. "He can't help himself."

"Hee-hee-hee... I guess not. It's kind of respectable, in a way," I said. Sugiura's luck aside, though, my avatar was still awake only because the Ring of Evasion that Asagi gave me nullified the Tunnel Hag's skill. The ring must be pretty powerful. Sugiura didn't have one; Asagi didn't have one of his own, either... I wondered if it was some sort of super-good, extra-hard-to-get item.

"Hold up, Asagi," said Taichi. "You gave Mai your Ring of Evasion?"

"Oh, yeah. I figured that might be better than me holding on to it."

It looked like my hunch was right: Asagi originally used it for himself, and he only had one.

"Um... Are you sure I can have this?" I asked.

"O-of course, Mai! Honestly, I breathe a little easier knowing you've got it," Asagi said. He was looking down at the table, but I could tell he'd turned red all the way to his ears.

"And believe me, this guy's a grade-A worrywart!" Taichi chimed in. "Annoying, isn't it?"

"Wh-what's so annoying about it?! C-c'mon, Mai, I don't annoy you, do I?"

“Oh man! Your face is sooo red!”

Asagi gave a long, frustrated groan and started pummeling Taichi.

“Geez! Will you two please stop chitchatting and pick your combat actions? This monster is really strong! You might get us all killed!”

Taichi and Asagi both stared at me wide-eyed, surprised by my sudden scolding outburst. Sugiura, on the other hand, seemed to appreciate it.

“Nice one, Mai. Good to see you know the score.”

Taichi quickly turned to his console and tried to pick a command. However...

“Huh? It’s not my turn.”

“Course not, idiot. You wasted so much time pickin’ a move, the game skipped you!” Sugiura was right. All that showed on the screen for Taichi’s turn was **Taichi stared into space**. That was it. The end of his turn.

“Whew. See that, Mai? In online games like this, you’ve gotta decide what you wanna do quickly, before time runs out,” said Taichi. “Keep that in mind on your next turn.” He was acting awfully pompous for someone who’d just made that exact mistake.

Sure enough, Sugiura snapped at him.

“Dang it, Taichi!”

Sheesh... This is no time to get distracted by Taichi being Taichi! Gotta keep my head in the game! Let’s see here... Which skill should I use? I checked over the commands I had available.

My in-game job was Cursed Sage. I know, I know, it sounds ominous, right? Anyway, my job granted me three skills: Dark Heal, Destroy, and Death Roulette. A healing spell wouldn’t be super useful at the moment, and the other two had huge drawbacks. One called in creepy creatures instead of doing damage directly, and the other spun a giant roulette wheel—only my betting chips were my Respawn Penalties, and the stakes were life and death. Dark Heal was the only one of my job skills that really had any practical use.

The weapon I had equipped was an Elemental Staff. It came with a couple skills of its own: Petit Heal, which restored 800 HP, and Shining Spotlight, which

shone a bright light into enemies' eyes to blind them.

We didn't need any healing magic to begin with, and even if we did, Dark Heal was much stronger. Petit Heal was out.

That left Shining Spotlight. I wasn't sure if blinding the hag would be useful, but the staff didn't offer much in the way of attack power, so I thought it might be worth a shot.

<<Turn 1: Mai>>

- **Mai cast Shining Spotlight! <<Success Rate 50%>>**

A shower of light shone down on Tunnel Hag 2!

- **100 damage to Tunnel Hag 2!**

Tunnel Hag 2's eyes were blinded! (Tunnel Hag 2's next attack will miss.)

[HP Remaining]

- **Tunnel Hag 2 [HP: 5,080/6,000] (-100)**

My skill didn't do much damage, but it did tilt the battle in our favor.

"Awright, this is goin' our way! Keep your attacks focused and take 'er out!"

""""Yessir!"""" The three of us replied all at once.

The second turn began. Unfortunately, Sugiura's avatar was still fast asleep.

"Check it out! He's snoring!"

"Cram it, Taichi!" Sugiura shot Taichi another angry glare. At this point, I'm sure I don't need to tell you how scary his face looked.

It was Asagi's turn to attack again. He dealt 880 points of damage! The Tunnel Hag went from 5,080 HP down to 4,200.

Next, it was the hag's turn. She tried to attack Taichi, but thanks to my Shining Spotlight, she missed.

"Ha-ha! These Tunnel Hags are basically free CP!" Taichi laughed.

"Don't get too cocky," Sugiura warned. "Next thing you know, you'll be back here tryin' to take 'em on solo and gettin' in way over your head."

Talk about a leader! His avatar may have been asleep, but he was wide awake and ready with advice to keep us on track.

Not that I would've dreamed of going solo, personally. Sure, it earned you a bit more experience points and CP, but the idea of it was still too scary for me. I wasn't up to the challenge at all.

Speaking of playing solo, I'd guess that Masuda—you know, the number two ranked player and Youko's major crush—did it quite a bit. He acted like a total gentleman, but I got the feeling he was pretty tough, too. I don't think you earn a higher rank than Sugiura without a lot of guts.

"Okay, my turn! And I'm not gonna miss my chance to attack this time!" Taichi declared. True to his word, he took the Tunnel Hag down to 3,650 HP.

"Just a little bit more, and she's down for the count! Give it your best shot, Mai!"

"Will do!"

All right! My turn was up next, and I decided to go for an attack, too. I was curious about how much damage I could deal.

<<Turn 2: Mai>>

- **Mai bashed Tunnel Hag 2 with her weapon!**

Critical hit!

- **400 damage to Tunnel Hag 2!**

[HP Remaining]

• Tunnel Hag 2 [HP: 3,250/6,000] (-400)

Oof. My attack barely scratched the monster at all. Not that I was expecting it to do much damage, compared to the rest of the party. Still, at least a regular attack did more damage than Shining Spotlight.

Now the third turn began. Sugiura's avatar was awake now, and it was his chance to attack.

"Awright, watch me finish 'er off in one go," he said as he chose Multi-Stab again.

How hard would it hit...?

Three thousand two hundred and forty-nine points of damage!

Wait, whaaat?! That left the Tunnel Hag with exactly 1 HP left. What were the odds? He hadn't finished her off, but I dunno, something about it felt like a really lucky shot.

"Crud... Why won't she go down?!"

"Here comes Asagi, swooping in for the good stuff, right on schedule!" said Taichi.

"Eh-heh-heh... Sorry. Allow me to finish her off for you."

"...Tch."

Just as Taichi said, Asagi dealt the final blow to the weakened Tunnel Hag. We all earned 80 CP and 12,000 experience points from the battle. That very instant, our Auto-Death Systems were deactivated. I sighed deeply in relief.

"There. Our mission's complete. What d'ya say we call it a night?"

"Sure thing, boss."

"Roger."

"Okay!"

Our party turned to head back out of the tunnel, when suddenly, something slinked out from against the dark walls: two Grim Reapers!

They're the same ones I saw before! Wh-what now?!

Reunion with the Grim Reapers

Another battle? Already?! We haven't even had a chance to rest yet! I was freaking out. To make matters worse, Grim Reapers were Rank S monsters. I checked the names of these new monsters on my Nightmare console, afraid they'd tell me what I already knew...but the window didn't say Grim Reaper. No, it said **Zalbatoth** and **Zust'raag**.

They were two monsters we'd met in a previous battle. Though we'd technically fought against them once, after we helped them free their leader, the Reaper King, we all became friends... Or at least I thought we did. Their names on my screen weren't a nice, neutral yellow—they were red.

Red names meant they were hostile.

"Do you think they're gonna attack us?"

"Tch. The numbskulls better not. Hang on. I'm gonna try askin' 'em what's up."

[Shinji Sugiura]

Hey, you! Yeah, you!

You here to kill us or what?

[Zust'raag]

No! The great Zust'raag and Zalbatoth only came to watch you fight.

Isn't that right, Zalbatoth?

[Zalbatoth]

Yep.

Standing around in the Reaper King's throne room all day turned out to be pretty boring.

[Mai Yashiro]

Then why are your names red?

I'm pretty sure they were yellow last time we met.

It made a really big difference whether a monster's name was red or yellow. If it was yellow, that meant they were neutral toward players. Your attacks couldn't hurt them, and their attacks couldn't hurt you. But if their names were displayed in red, that special rule didn't apply.

[Zalbatoth]

Oh, that?

I think we only get yellow names while we are in the Sealed Château.

[Zust'raag]

Oh, what's the color of a name matter?

As long as we don't attack each other, there's no problem, right?

Whaaat?! There were all sorts of problems with that! For one...

"Maybe in our case, but what if other players show up and attack you?"

"Good point," said Zust'raag. "That would put us in a pickle, I suppose. Especially Zalbatoth here."

Zalbatoth had a measly 120 HP. One attack would be enough to put him in grave danger.

"We should send these guys back to their original stage, shouldn't we?"

"Yeah. This tunnel's way too dangerous for 'em."

[Shinji Sugiura]

No more messin' around. Hurry on back to your own stage.

[Zust'raag]

What?! Talk about coldhearted.

We made it all the way here, and you want us to just go back?

Come on, play with us! Please? Please?

[Zalbatoth]

Look, Zust'raag, they're not gonna play with us, and you

know it.

We can't bother them any more than we already have.

We're here to watch and learn from their battles, remember?

Ah... Sugiura didn't spell it out for them enough.

The two Grim Reapers weren't happy with our suggestion. It didn't sound like they'd change their minds anytime soon. We had to get them out of there somehow, and quick. What if other players saw them...?

"This isn't good," said Taichi. "Someone else just entered the stage."

Aw, crud! Sure enough, there were a few other players' avatars hanging around the entrance to the tunnel. This might get ugly!

"What's the plan?" Sugiura asked. "They're headin' right this way!"

The newcomers were a party of four, just like we were.

Grim Reapers didn't drop CP or experience points when you beat them. Any Nightmare player knew that. Maybe we didn't need to worry. Surely the newcomers wouldn't pick a fight with Reapers for no reason, right?

[Masashi Taiju]

Hey, look! A couple Grim Reapers are blocking those guys' way out! They need help!

[Chie Nitta]

You're right! Let's help 'em!

There's four of us! We can do this!

We could read their party's chat. You could always read other players' chats when they were in the same dungeon as you. It came in handy, but not usually like this. This time, it was a warning.

Four player avatars were sprinting in our direction.

This is bad! Really, really bad!

The next instant, Sugiura slammed right into Zalbatoth and Zust'raag.

Oh! I get it! Good thinking, Sugiura! A normal battle began between us and the Grim Reapers right away. Luckily, we were already a full party of four. That meant no other players could join the fight.

[Zust'raag]

Yeeeeeeek!

What is your problem?! Are you trying to kill the great Zust'raag and Zalbatoth?!

[Shinji Sugiura]

Think for once, wouldja, bonehead?!

Look around you! This is happenin' 'cause you two are strutting around a dungeon like a couple morons!

Don't even think about attacking us, or it'll be lights out for ya, got that?

Back in the real world, Sugiura turned to us.

"Listen up. Stick to purely defensive commands or 'Ignore' only. Once the coast is clear, we'll run away from the battle." We nodded. Sugiura entered his

first defensive command.

[Shinji Sugiura]

Heads up! I know it says these Grim Reapers are hostile, but they're on our side. Just ignore us and go fight somewhere else. Sorry.

Sugiura used the Shout feature to send that message to the overall chat for the level. The four newcomers passed right by us—confused, I'm sure.

"Pretty crazy, huh?" said Taichi.

"Yeah... Maintenance just ended, and they already trekked over to watch us fight. I guess these Reapers must really like us."

"It's risky for them to leave their stage, though. If we made them into Familiars, we could keep them under control, and they'd be safer, too. It's win-win."

I thought about my Familiar, Amelie. The biggest, most important order I'd given her was not to get herself killed.

"Familiars, eh? We could do that, but someone would have to fight them for real and lose a Respawn Penalty for it to work."

That was a good point. You couldn't make a monster into your Familiar without facing it in a Battle of Wits. In a Battle of Wits, you could use the Talk command to negotiate and make a foe into your Familiar. Unfortunately, you could only enter a Battle of Wits with monsters who'd taken a player's Respawn Penalties...

"Hang on a sec. Don't they sell Battle of Wits Negotiation Cards in the shop menu?"

"Oh! Now that you mention it, I think I've seen those before!"

"I'm pretty sure those let you call any monster out for a Battle of Wits," said

Taichi.

Unfortunately, though, I was pretty sure those items cost somewhere around 10 million in-game yen apiece... That's why I noticed them in the first place. I remembered going to the shop to buy candy for Amelie and being shocked at their huge price tag.

"They don't even guarantee that the monster will accept the Battle of Wits with a one hundred percent success rate, either. It could fail, and then we'd be stuck in a regular battle and lose the card," Asagi said with a troubled look on his face.

"Yeah, that's why so few players buy 'em. There's no way to know if you're gonna get your money's worth."

"There's no point fussin' over it here and now," said Sugiura. "Let's ask 'em what they think first."

[Shinji Sugiura]

You guys wanna be Familiars?

[Zust'raag]

Oooh! Familiars get their very own rooms, don't they?!

I definitely want that!

[Zalbatoth]

We're going to need King Deathcha's permission first, though.

[Zust'raag]

Then let's go ask him right away!

Hyaa-ha-ha!

Zalbatoth and Zust'raag fled from the battle. They vanished into the tunnel once again.

"Man, they do whatever suits 'em, huh? Where are we supposed to meet 'em after they get permission anyway? Here? 'Cause I was thinkin' we were all about to leave, myself."

"I think they can tell what stage we're in anytime," said Asagi.

"That's how it sounded to me. Should we move to another stage where other players are less likely to show up?"

"Good thinkin'. Awright, let's head out for now. We've gotta go item shoppin' anyway."

With that, the four of us left the Haunted Tunnel Ruins.

Sugiura's Unlikely Weakness?

A heavy sigh slipped past my lips. Sure, we'd earned all the CP we needed for the day, but another problem popped up pretty much immediately.

I glanced around the clubroom. It looked like the other members of the Nightmare Conquerors' Club had all managed to earn the 100 CP they needed, too. We'd avoided the huge wave of lost Respawn Penalties that had hit us the last time Nightmare came back online in the middle of the night.

That helped me chill out a little. I was really glad everyone was safe.

In Nightmare, any battle could be deadly if things went wrong, so you could never really relax. That made me feel even more relieved that the whole club made it through the night unharmed.

Ack! What about Kaneda? He's at home playing alone...

"Hey, Asagi? Do you think Kaneda's okay?"

"Don't worry. I sent him 100 CP, so he should be good for the day," Asagi said. By the time I'd realized Kaneda might need our help, Asagi had already given him a hand. Asagi was a nice guy and always looked out for the people around him. He must've been extra concerned for Kaneda, who was going through the same troubles he'd been through himself.

"I sure hope Kaneda can move into the dorms soon," I said.

"Yeah. Until then, I'll keep earning extra CP and sending it his way to make sure he's safe." Keeping yourself alive in Nightmare is hard enough on its own, and here Asagi was, saying he'd support someone else like it was nearly nothing. I was seriously impressed! He really made me want to step up my

game to help Kaneda, too. The first way I could do that was by making sure I didn't hold Asagi back.

"Hey, Mai, we're goin' item shopping," said Sugiura. "I figure those Reapers aren't gonna be back for a while."

"Okay! Got it!"

Sugiura and Taichi opened the in-game item shop to buy their Negotiation Cards. Asagi already had a Familiar of his own, like I did. That meant it fell on Sugiura and Taichi to handle the Battles of Wits with the two Grim Reapers.

"Who do you think Sugiura will pick, Zalbatoth or Zust'raag?"

"Hmm... That's a stumper. Zalbatoth's more serious. He'd probably be way less of a hassle to have as a Familiar," said Asagi.

"True. But on the other hand, I get the feeling Zust'raag really likes Sugiura."

"You know, I got that same feeling myself."

I remembered how Zust'raag had tried almost obnoxiously hard to get in Sugiura's good graces after our first fight with them.

"Either way, Taichi would probably get along fine with either of them," said Asagi.

I wasn't so sure. Taichi seemed like the type to leave a Familiar completely unattended while he napped all day. I must've done a bad job of keeping those doubts off my face, because Asagi brought it up before I could.

"I know Taichi looks lazy, but he's actually a solid caretaker. I've seen him blend right in with a group of little kids and keep 'em entertained, and he's great with pets, too. I heard he took in a turtle and a frog recently."

Hunh? I didn't see that coming. Turtle aside, I'd always heard frogs were tough pets to keep...especially because they eat live bugs. If Taichi had a pet frog, bugs probably didn't freak him out. Personally, I think ladybugs are kinda cute, but once you get into caterpillars and spiders and stuff, count me out. Touching them is totally out of the question!

Oogh... I'm giving myself chills just thinking about it.

“Huh? You’re still awake, Mai?” A sleepy-sounding voice called out to me. “You already have all the CP you need, don’t you?” It was Naomi.

“Yeah, I do, but something else came up...” I explained the situation with Zalbatoth and Zust’raag to her.

“Whoa! They’re gonna make Grim Reapers into Familiars? Isn’t that, like, amazing?!” Naomi’s eyes were big to begin with, but now they were extra-wide and extra-round. Now that she mentioned it, I didn’t think anyone had a Grim Reaper for a Familiar yet. They didn’t appear as regular enemies in any of the stages that were available. “I was gonna go hit the hay, but now I wanna stay up and watch the Battle of Wits!”

“Huh! Sounds promising. Should be worth a watch! Count me in!” Youko suddenly cut into the conversation. I guess she overheard us somehow.

“If Youko’s in, then I’m in, too. We can’t leave poor little Youko alone without someone to defend her, after all,” said a voice that set my teeth on edge. Well, I guess it was the words he said that did it. Anyway, it was Akaishi, trailing close behind Youko.

“Trust me, I don’t need you around,” said Youko. “And hey, weren’t you and that Takojima guy the ones who bullied Kaneda? For your information, bullies who pick on people weaker than them are not my type. I only like proper, kind gentlemen!”

“Heh-heh, gentlemen, you say? Why, I’m a perfect gentleman,” Akaishi said. “Don’t worry. My bullying days are over. I’m a changed man, now that I’ve met you. I never much cared for doing whatever Takojima said anyway. From this day forth, consider Takojima my enemy!”

Once Akaishi opened his big mouth, nothing could shut him up. He was clearly the kind of guy who’d say whatever it took to get what he wanted. Worse than that, everything he said gave me chills—in a bad way. He had to be a grade-A narcissist to rattle off corny phrases like those, right?

Then again, was it possible that there was more to Akaishi than being a natural-born bully? Only one thing was crystal clear: He was definitely the type to put love over friendship.

“Mai! Asagi! Nao! Little help, here? Do something about this guy!”

The three of us exchanged looks. Help? Help how...? I got the feeling that nothing we could do would help very much. And as bad as I felt for Youko, if Akaishi kept all his attention on her, that would probably make it easier for Kaneda to move into the dorms.

Just then, Sugiura and Taichi wrapped up their shopping.

“Awright, we’re good to go,” said Taichi.

“Asagi, find us a stage without a lotta other players in it.”

“I already found one,” Asagi told Sugiura. “How about this dungeon? It’s a ruined building. Those aren’t very popular.”

Ruined buildings tended to have strong enemies, but the CP and experience point rewards were too low to be worth the trouble. They never had treasure chests, either. Among Nightmare players, they were universally considered a waste of time.

“Makes sense. Sure. Let’s go there.”

“Yessir!”

“Hey, what’s with the crowd?” Taichi asked, noticing all the onlookers around our table.

“Um, sorry,” said Naomi. “It sounded interesting, so I thought maybe I could watch. You don’t see a Battle of Wits against Grim Reapers every day.”

“That’s right! It’d totally stink to miss it!” Youko added.

“Ha-ha, fair enough,” said Taichi.

“So be sure and approve us as spectators, ’kay?”

“You got it.”

“Hey, they’re here!” Sugiura snapped. He’d already entered the stage. I checked my screen and saw Zalbatoth and Zust’raag approaching.

“Okay, we’d better hurry over there, too,” said Asagi. “Just in case. You never

know, other players might drop in, too.”

“Got it!”

Asagi and I headed into the stage next, with Taichi bringing up the rear.

[Zust’raag]

Hyaa-ha-ha-ha! We got King Deathcha’s approval!

Now hurry up and take us through the procedure, already!

[Zalbatoth]

Sorry about him. Please do, though.

In the chat, I explained to Zust’raag and Zalbatoth that we had to negotiate with them in a Battle of Wits to make them into Familiars.

[Zust’raag]

Understood!

Go on, then! Challenge me to this Battle of Wits, so that I, the great Zust’raag, may join your crew!

Hmm? He sure is acting high-and-mighty about all of this.

“Hey, Taichi. Which one are you gonna use your item on?” Sugiura asked.

“You mean it? I get to pick?”

“Sure. I’ll take either one. Who cares?”

“All righty, then...” Taichi moved his avatar in front of Zalbatoth. “Here goes!”

<!>

Taichi used a Battle of Wits Negotiation Card on Zalbatoth.
<<Success Rate 18%>>

Success.

Now entering a Battle of Wits.

When you are ready, please close your eyes.

Then the Battle of Wits will begin.

END

“Awright! It worked!” Taichi said. It was lucky that he succeeded on the first try, given the 18 percent success rate. “I’m gonna go ahead and start my battle.”

Icons appeared over Taichi’s avatar and Zalbatoth’s head. They looked like a pair of crossed swords. Apparently, that meant they were engaged in a Battle of Wits.

“That’s our cue, Nao! Ready to get your spectate on?”

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

Youko and Naomi went in after Taichi so they could watch his battle.

“H-hey! Wait a minute! Where are you going?! Don’t leave me all alone...”

Oh, right. Akaishi’s a total Nightmare newbie. He doesn’t get what’s going on. Just as I was arguing with myself over whether to fill him in...

“Hey, pipe down, will ya?! If you don’t need to be here, then scram and go to bed!” Sugiura shouted.

Akaishi couldn’t possibly hope to resist that kind of pressure. He whimpered and whined, but before long, he backed down and left. When it came to mean

looks, Sugiura simply couldn't be beat.

The clubroom was totally empty except for us. Everyone else was back in their dorm rooms, sleeping. That made sense—it was already after midnight. From the next morning onward, the whole club would be back to fighting for their lives in Nightmare, day in and day out.

“Tch! Darnit!”

Sugiura furiously clicked his tongue, then growled loudly enough for his anger to echo through the empty clubroom.

“What’s the matter?”

“...I missed. I’m gonna go buy another card.”

That wasn’t too surprising. It only had an 18 percent success rate, after all.

“Tch!” Another tongue click.



Oof. Two misses in a row.

“This could get ugly,” Asagi said. “What if Sugiura gets so mad, he quits?”

“That’s certainly possible...”

We tried to believe that the third time would be the charm. As it turned out, it wasn’t. Sugiura had already wasted 30 million in-game yen on Negotiation Cards. But with roughly a 20 percent chance of success, if he tried five times, he should succeed at least once. If the fourth try didn’t work out, then the fifth would for sure, right?

Wrong.

In fact, Sugiura tried and failed a whopping ten times!

“Argh! I blew through all the in-game cash I had left over from the last event!”

“A hundred million gone... It’d be a huge waste to give up at this point, though.”

Even I was getting nervous, and I was only watching as Sugiura burned through item after item. Would he end up spending more than 200 million? I’ll admit I was worried, but at last, he succeeded on his fourteenth try.

“Haaah,” Sugiura sighed. “This Familiar cost me a fortune.”

“Then you’d better take really good care of him to get your money’s worth!”

“Oh, I will. I’m gonna work ’im to the bone.”

Gulp! That sounded scary. It was probably a good thing Sugiura wound up recruiting Zust’raag, the stronger of the two Reapers. He’d probably lose Zalbatoth in a heartbeat.

“See ya,” Sugiura said. “You guys can go get some sleep. Or stay up playin’ Nightmare, whatever.” With that, he was finally off to the Battle of Wits he’d been hoping for. (I think.)

Sugiura vs. Zust'raag

Now alone in the clubroom, Asagi and I shared a look.

"I think I'm gonna watch Sugiura's Battle of Wits," Asagi said. "Wanna join me, Mai? If you're not too sleepy."

"Sounds good!" I knew that the days of uncertainty would start again the next morning, but I also knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep for a while. I decided to go with Asagi to watch Sugiura's fight. We opened our Nightmare consoles, navigated over to Sugiura's profile, and sent a request to spectate as quickly as we could. Sugiura approved our requests just as quickly.

We were transported to the usual battleground for a Battle of Wits; pitch-black darkness stretched on forever all around us. Right in the middle, there were two chairs with a screen between them. Sugiura took one of the chairs, and Zust'raag was already seated in the other.

As spectators, we couldn't get too close until one of them won the Battle of Wits. I got as close as the game would let me so Sugiura could hear me cheering.

"Go, Sugiura! You got this!"

"I know."

Tch! Honestly, would it kill him to be friendly for once? I waved at him, but he didn't even wave back. Totally heartless.

"Look, Mai, Sugiura's touching his ear," Asagi whispered, as if he were revealing some terribly interesting secret. I looked closer and saw that Sugiura was gently brushing his ear with his left hand. I remembered what Taichi told

me that meant: He was feeling bashful.

Huh. Maybe he feels lonely down there all by himself.

“That’s weird... Hey, Mai. Sugiura’s missing one of his lives already.”

I turned my eyes to the screen between the two chairs.

Players and monsters both started a Battle of Wits with three lives. Sure enough, Sugiura only had two left. Zust’raag, however, still had all three.

Wait, what?! What happened?! Why’s Sugiura missing one of his lives?! Don’t tell me Zust’raag betrayed him!

“Hyaaa-ha-ha! Did you witness my amazing strength? Once I’ve defeated you, you’ll have to do everything I say!”

Aw, maaan! I was afraid of that!

“Pfft. All you did was shave off one of my lives. Don’t get cocky yet, bonehead.”

Oof... Things had clearly gotten heated. Sparks were practically flying between them.

“I wonder if Sugiura remembered to use the Talk command,” said Asagi. “If he takes Zust’raag down without it, this whole thing’s pointless.”

“You’re right. Here, let me check,” I said, as I turned to my own Nightmare console and picked **Battle of Wits Records** from the menu.

[First Attacker: Shinji Sugiura]

[Attacker] Charge—Talk—High Attack—Low Attack

[Defender] Charge—Counter—Jump—Crouch—Critical Defense

<<Turn 1>>

[Shinji] Talk (Threaten)—Success—Zust'raag's Fear increased.

※If you increase a monster's Fear to 100 or more before winning the battle, you can adopt the monster as a Familiar.

[Zust'raag] Jump

<<Turn 2>>

[Shinji] Charge—Critical Gauge increased by 1.

※When your Critical Gauge is at 3, you can empty it to perform a Critical Attack.

Critical Attacks can be nullified by Critical Defense.

[Zust'raag] Charge—Critical Gauge increased by 1.

<<Turn 3>>

[Shinji] Talk—Success—Zust'raag's fear increased to 100.

※Zust'raag can now be adopted as a Familiar.

[Zust'raag] Crouch

<<Turn 4>>

[Shinji] Counter—Failure—Shinji lost 1 life.

Lives: 3—>2

[Zust'raag] High Attack—Success

That was the last of the record. I was all caught up. Now it was Turn 5 and Sugiura's turn to attack. Both Sugiura and Zust'raag had one point in their Critical Gauges. I thought over the situation. I doubted Sugiura would make any huge mistakes, and he'd already used the Talk command plenty of times. As long as he won the battle, he should be able to make Zust'raag his Familiar. And yet...

"What's the big idea, Zust'raag?! Why are you attacking him?!"

"Ha! A duel between real men is no place for mercy!" the Grim Reaper harshly shouted back. *"Isn't that right, Sugiura?"*

Whaaat?! Gimme a break! It was unlikely that Sugiura would lose, but what if he did?

"Relax, Mai. You know I'm takin' this seriously," Sugiura said calmly.

I guess he noticed how worried I was.

"What's going on, Asagi?"

"Hmm... I'm not sure. But Sugiura seems confident. Maybe we should trust him, sit back, and watch."

For his move on Turn 5, Sugiura chose High Attack. Across the screen, Zust'raag picked Jump. As you can probably guess, a Jump doesn't let you avoid a High Attack—only a Low one. Sugiura's attack scored a direct hit, and now both sides had two lives left.

"Not bad! Not bad at all!" Zust'raag crowed. *"I'd expect no less from a man almost as handsome as the great Zust'raag himself!"*

"....."

Sugiura decided to let Zust'raag's overconfident bragging slide. Actually, was it overconfident? I wasn't sure.

"Do you think Zust'raag is handsome?" I asked Asagi.

"I couldn't say. I honestly don't know what counts as handsome for a Grim Reaper," he replied.

You could always count on Asagi to take things seriously. Now that he mentioned it, for all I knew, Zust'raag might have been a real hunk in other Reapers' eyes.

"Aha! It's my turn next," the handsome (?) Grim Reaper cried. "I hope you've said your prayers, because I'm about to finish you off! Hyaaa-ha-ha!"

"Shut up and pick somethin', already!"

Huh? Did he say he's gonna finish Sugiura off in the next turn? That can't be right. They both still had two lives left, and neither of them had a full gauge to spend on a battle-ending Critical Attack. It simply wasn't possible.

"Feast your eyes on the great Zust'raag's ace in the hole!"

He'd already picked out his next move. He brought a bony hand up to cover his mouth as he gave a sinister snicker. By the look of his face, you'd think he was playing old maid, watching his opponent squirm as they reached for one of the last two cards. He was certainly enjoying himself.

"Dang it, Dust Rag... What'd you pick?"

"Want a hint? I'll have to charge you for it! Hyaaa-ha-ha-ha!"

Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! He practically came right out and said it! No way. It had to be a trap. He obviously hadn't actually chosen Charge.

"Hey, Mai? Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Asagi asked.

"I'm pretty sure I am," I said. It was only a hunch, but I got the feeling that Sugiura and Zust'raag had decided on a ground rule of their own for the battle: If one of them went down to one life, that side lost. They could pick the Charge command all they wanted, but Critical Attacks were off limits.

The question was, why'd they come up with an extra rule like that?

Before I could come up with an answer, Taichi, Naomi, and Youko all entered the battleground. Taichi's own Battle of Wits must have ended.

"Oh, Taichi! How'd it go? Did you win?"

"Course I did. Zalbatoth's pretty weak, so I went ahead and set it so he wouldn't have to do any fighting."

“That was fast, Taichi,” I said. “I take it you didn’t change his name, then?”

“Yep. I figured, if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

“Hey! Hang on a sec! Why’s Sugiura treating this like a real fight?” Youko didn’t even try to hide the surprise in her voice.

“Good question,” said Naomi. “Did something go wrong...?”

“Oh, right! Here’s the thing...” I told them all what I’d been thinking around the time they arrived. Though I stressed that it was just a guess.

“Hmm, gotcha,” said Taichi. “I wouldn’t put that past Sugiura. Seems like something he’d do.”

“Sheesh! That’s so confusing! This can’t be good for my heart...”

“I know, right? I’m on pins and needles!” Naomi said. “I guess there’s nothing we can do but watch how it turns out.”

Asagi and I nodded. We watched as Sugiura struggled over his options and finally decided. Both he and Zust’raag turned their heads toward the screen. Zust’raag’s avatar—which looked like a miniature version of himself—floated through the air toward Sugiura’s with its scythe raised.

Sugiura’s avatar stood still, waiting as he approached. I couldn’t figure out what his stance meant. Was he about to Crouch? Jump? Or maybe Counter?

Zust’raag’s avatar swung his scythe downward, swiftly slashing at Sugiura’s feet. A Low Attack! But what was Sugiura’s avatar going to do...?

—!!!

Yesss! He jumped right over the scythe! Zust’raag’s Low Attack missed!

“Not bad,” said Zust’raag. “You managed to avoid my All-Out Abysmal Ankle Annihilator.”

“.....”

Sugiura sighed. His expression made it clear that he’d had quite enough...not of the fight, so much as of Zust’raag himself.

“All right, now it’s my turn to defend! I’m going to give you a taste of my other ace in the hole!”

Give him a taste? Then it hit me. I considered Zust'raag's personality for a moment. He wasn't the type who could pull off any particularly crafty tricks. If anything, he was the type to accidentally spill the beans without realizing it. There was only one way for the defending side to give their attacker a taste of *anything* in a Battle of Wits: by choosing Counter.

That meant it would be best for Sugiura to avoid attacking in the coming turn, and to Charge instead, just in case. But it was Sugiura's Battle of Wits, not mine, and I was pretty sure he wouldn't want me butting in. He was the third-highest-ranking player in the game, after all. I decided to leave the fighting to him.

"Awright, I know what I'm gonna do. This oughtta settle it," Sugiura said, posing thoughtfully with his hand to his chin. He pressed the button to make his selection, then looked up at the screen.

Here it was: the moment of truth.

Sugiura's avatar brandished his spear and charged forward. It looked like he'd chosen either a High Attack or a Low Attack, though I wasn't sure which yet. Meanwhile, Zust'raag's avatar held his scythe outward, bracing for the oncoming attack.

And then...

...Sugiura's spear stabbed upward for a High Attack. Zust'raag's scythe swooped around the spear, then swung straight for Sugiura!

Zust'raag landed a direct hit on Sugiura, but he still failed to Counter the High Attack. Both of them got hit, and the turn was over. In other words, both Sugiura and Zust'raag went down to one life at the same time.

"Aw, man! A tie?! Seriously?!"

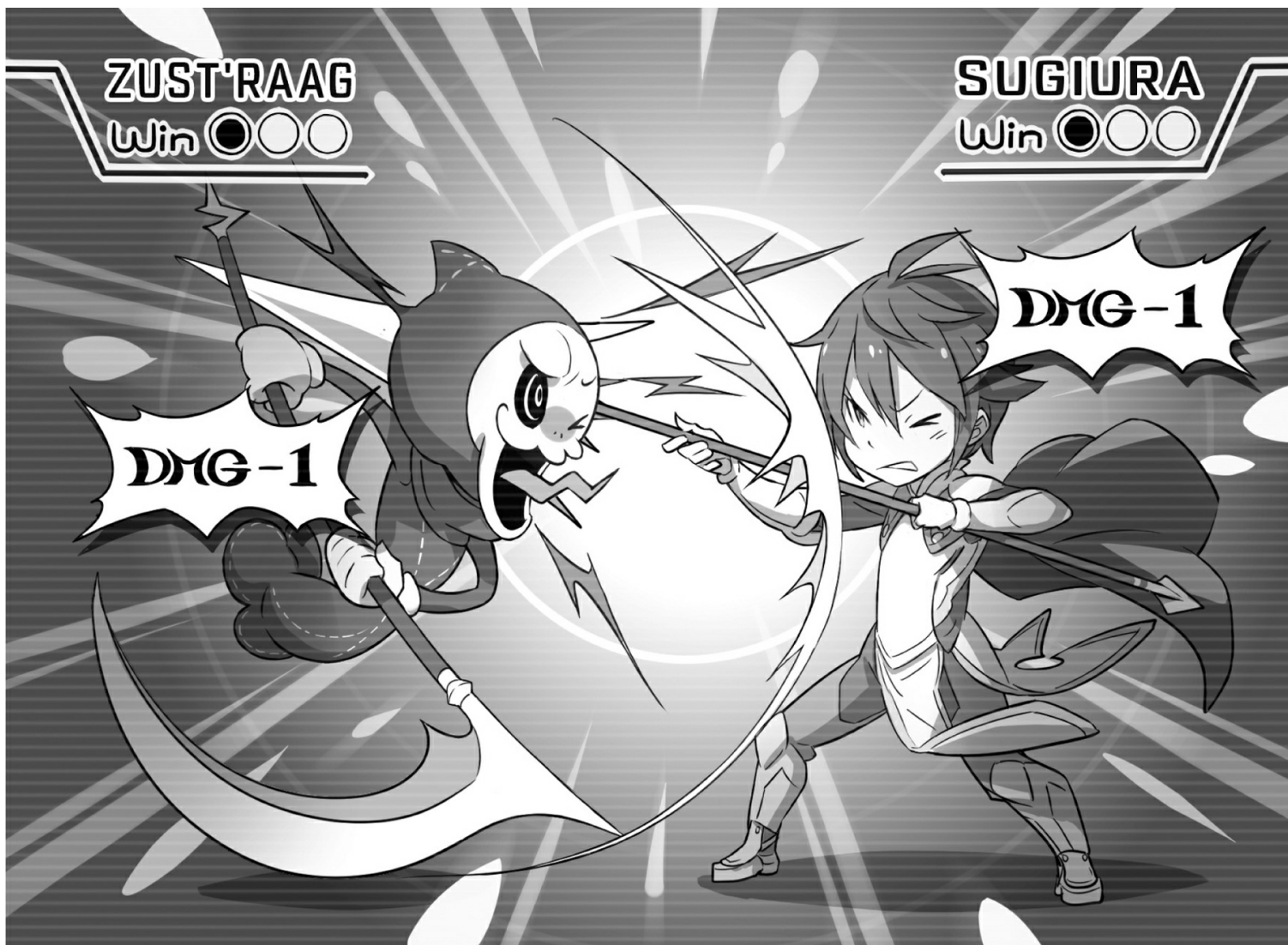
"The deal was I'd buy you 10 million yen's worth of furniture for your new room if you won. A tie means the deal's off," Sugiura said with a cocky grin.

ZUST'RAAG
Win ○○○

SUGIURA
Win ○○○

DMG-1

DMG-1



“Drat! Okay, fine! I promise I’ll only Charge for the rest of the fight, so go on and finish it up however you want,” Zust’raag fumed, angrily stomping the ground. *“There go all my dreams of a super-luxurious suite...”*

Huh? That’s what they were fighting over? It was honestly kind of a buzzkill.

Sugiura did as Zust’raag said and mercilessly took him down to zero lives.

“Awright, looks like you’re my Familiar from now on.”

“I suppose it does.”

“You wanna keep your name as is?”

“Why should the great Zust’raag change his name? Is there some problem with it?”

“Nah. If you’re cool with it, I don’t care... It sounds a lot like ‘dust rag,’ that’s all.”

Zust’raag cocked his head to the side.

“And what, pray tell, is a dust rag?”

“Are you serious?! Y’know, a dust rag. A nasty old cloth you wipe up spills with.”

That knocked the smug look off Zust’raag’s skull in an instant.

“What?! No way! You humans would make me a laughingstock! Come up with a new name! A grand name! A cool name! A name that’s the exact opposite of a dust rag, if you can!”

Sugiura struck his thinking pose again, putting his hand to his chin. He seemed to be taking this super seriously. Why wouldn’t he? He was naming his own Familiar, after all. After considering it for a long time, he finally spoke.

“...How ’bout ‘Towel’?”

Whaaat?! That’s your idea of a grand, cool, opposite-of-a-dust-rag name?! Was Sugiura messing around, or did he have a really skewed sense of style?!

“Oooh, I like that!” the former Zust’raag said. “I’ll take it. From this day forth, I shall be ‘Tow’el’!”

Yikes. Ah, well. If he likes it, that's all that matters. And I supposed "Tow'el" was better than "Towel," if only by a teeny, tiny amount.

Sugiura did exactly as he was asked and typed in "Tow'el" as his Familiar's name. Tow'el was overjoyed. He couldn't help but immediately start bragging about his cool new name... For all I knew, he was one of the more handsome Grim Reapers, but I was pretty sure he wasn't one of the smartest.

Anyway, with that settled, we all left the arena and put the Battle of Wits behind us.

Horror at Spirit Park?!

When we got back to the clubroom, it was already one AM.

“That sure took a long time.”

“Yeah... We’d better get some sleep.”

“Awright, let’s call it a night,” said Sugiura. “Startin’ tomorrow, we’re back on the hunt for any info we can find that’ll help us get our hands on tickets for the next event. That and grindin’ to get our levels up.”

“Roger that,” said Taichi. “I’m gonna go snag some shuteye.”

“See you later, Mai! We’re off to bed, too.”

“See ya! ’Night!”

Naomi and Youko followed Taichi out of the clubroom.

“I guess we should head back to our rooms, too,” said Asagi.

“Yeah.” With that, we said good night to Sugiura and went our separate ways.

Even though I knew how late it was, I opened my Nightmare console and clicked over to Amelie’s room as soon as I got back to my dorm.

“Zzz... Zzz...” I wanted to tell her all about what had happened that day, but I should’ve known she’d be fast asleep. I decided it could wait until morning.

Amelie had fallen from her bed. She was lying on the floor with her arms and legs spread out, but she was still sleeping soundly. I clicked on her, and a few options popped up on the screen:

Return her to bed. *Pinch her cheek.* Do nothing.

Pinch her cheek? Yeah, right, like I'd do that! Poor Amelie... I tapped on **Return her to bed** and tucked her back in. I chuckled to myself as I watched her snooze away. She looked nice and cozy. Before long, I decided I'd better get to sleep, too—I didn't want to oversleep in the morning.

A week had passed since the Battle of Wits. We were all totally focused on finding clues that would help us reach the next big in-game event. But no matter how hard we looked, nothing caught our eyes.

We were positive that we had to play through these events in order to beat Nightmare itself...but not just anyone could join them. In fact, out of everyone in the school dorms, only Asagi and I were approved to play. If the Event Tickets we found had space for a companion or two, then we could bring other players along.

Anyway, we were stressing about not having any clues, or any idea what to do next at all, when I suddenly got a message from Masuda.

[From: Ryouta Masuda]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Dear Mai,

I'm sure you've already heard from Sugiura, but all the paperwork for my school transfer is finally complete. I should be joining you around noon today.

I look forward to living, studying, and playing alongside you soon.

P.S. I've found a spot that might have something to do with the next event.

END

Wait, what?! Masuda's transferring to Ryokuka? I definitely hadn't heard that from Sugiura. He must've reached out to Masuda about it without cluing me in. It made sense, though. Even though he was the second-highest-ranked player in the game, Masuda was still a student. At Ryokuka Private Academy, he'd be able to focus on Nightmare *and* get his studies done. Transferring was a no-brainer.

Oh man! Youko's gonna flip! I could already imagine a huge smile spreading across her face when she found out.

Masuda arrived at the clubroom during our lunch break.

"Hello, everyone. I'm Ryouta Masuda, and I want to beat Nightmare as much as the rest of you. You can count on me to do everything I can to help make that happen," he said, addressing the club. "I heard that, here at Ryokuka, we can conquer both Nightmare and our schoolwork. So I said, 'Sign me up.'" He smiled pleasantly.

My eyes glanced over at Youko like they had a mind of their own. She was staring at Masuda with rapt attention, one hand clasped over her mouth. Ah-ha-ha, her eyes are practically heart-shaped! She looked absolutely delighted. Good for her.

After our last lesson of the day, Masuda came over to where Asagi and I were chatting.

"Good afternoon. I'd say 'Nice to meet you,' but I don't think it applies." He chuckled a bit, then continued. "I'm glad we'll be playing together more. I wanted to thank you for all your hard work completing the events."

"Don't mention it!" said Asagi. "We'll do whatever it takes to beat Nightmare. We're just glad to make ourselves useful—for everyone's sake. Right, Mai?"

"Um, yes. Asagi is correct," I said.

I couldn't help it. Masuda's polite, gentlemanly manner seemed to be contagious.

“I was hoping I could have a moment of your time, if you don’t mind. There’s something I’d like to discuss,” said Masuda. Thinking back to his message, I had a hunch I already knew what it was: the next event.

“Please, go ahead,” Asagi said as he pulled out the chair next to his. Masuda sat down and started talking.

“I think I know where the tickets for the next event are. They’re in a place called Spirit Park...”

Spirit Park. That name really gave me the willies. Look, I’m just not great with ghosts, okay?

“What makes you think the Event Tickets are there?”

“There’s a new enemy in that stage now, and it only shows up at certain times. I tried to beat it myself, but it ran away—and it’s fast—so I didn’t get the chance to finish it off. It’s already a hot topic among Nightmare players.”

A new enemy that hadn’t appeared up until now...and only appeared at certain times, too? It did sound suspicious.

“It should be spawning in Spirit Park right about now,” Masuda added.

“What do you think, Mai? Should we check it out?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Oh, may I join you?” Masuda asked.

“Of course you can!”

With that, all three of us started up our Nightmare consoles and entered the Spirit Park stage. A strange gloom filled the park. The stage was just dark enough for something to be lurking around unnoticed. As if that wasn’t creepy enough, the park benches were broken, and a trash bin had been turned over. Several empty soda cans rolled along the ground.

Despite the gloom, there were a surprising number of other players’ avatars standing around the stage.

“I guess they’re all trying to help find those Event Tickets, too.”

“Yeah... That’s awfully nice of them.”

“It’s only right, Mai,” Masuda said. “As far as the rest of us are concerned, by completing the events, the two of you are bringing every player closer to finishing the game.” He flashed his usual pleasant smile, as if to say, *We’ll do whatever it takes to help you out.*

“What kind of enemy are we looking for anyway?”

“I should mention that, shouldn’t I? It’s kind of like a zombie, but it carries something like a cloth bundle on its back— Ah!”

Masuda’s avatar suddenly took off running farther into the park. He must have noticed something there.

“What’s up, Masuda?”

“I saw it. Follow me, please!”

“Huh?! Really?” Asagi said. “I didn’t see a thing...”

“Neither did I.”

“It moves faster than player avatars do, so it’s hard to catch if you’re not used to its movement patterns. It took me a lot of hard work to nab it last time.”

We followed Masuda’s avatar deeper into the park. He led us to a spot with evenly spaced trees lined up in a row.

“If we wait here for a bit, it should pass through.”

“Got it.”

“Am I the only one who’s a little nervous?”

“No, I am, too.”

After we waited for a while, a dark blur suddenly streaked between us, like a shadow passing through for an instant.

“It’s here! That’s it!”

Huh?! That shadowy blur was the enemy we were after? Sheesh, he wasn’t kidding when he said it was fast! I rushed to get my bow ready for a long-distance attack, but I couldn’t get a clear shot. It was hopping all around, avoiding me every time.

There was a name over the blur on my screen: **Zombieman**.

“It got away...”

“Where should we go next?”

“Let’s see... This way!” Masuda said as his avatar broke into a run, heading for a rest area in the park. Like you’d expect from a place called Spirit Park, everything there was worn-out and rotting.

“Hmm? Hang on a sec... Isn’t that Tsubasa and his party?” Asagi said. “Look, over in the corner of the rest area! I think it’s him!”

“Wha—?!” Asagi’s words took me totally off guard. I looked toward the corner. Sure enough, there was Tsubasa. Next to him were Tanaka and three other avatars, two male and one female.

“I bet they’re here to find the Event Tickets, too.”

They must have noticed us, because Tsubasa struck up a conversation in the chat.

[Tsubasa Kaitsu]

Aww, too bad, Mai.

If you’re looking for Zombieman, we already caught him.

Get this: We talked with him and bought the Event Tickets off him, too.

I don’t think he’ll be back.

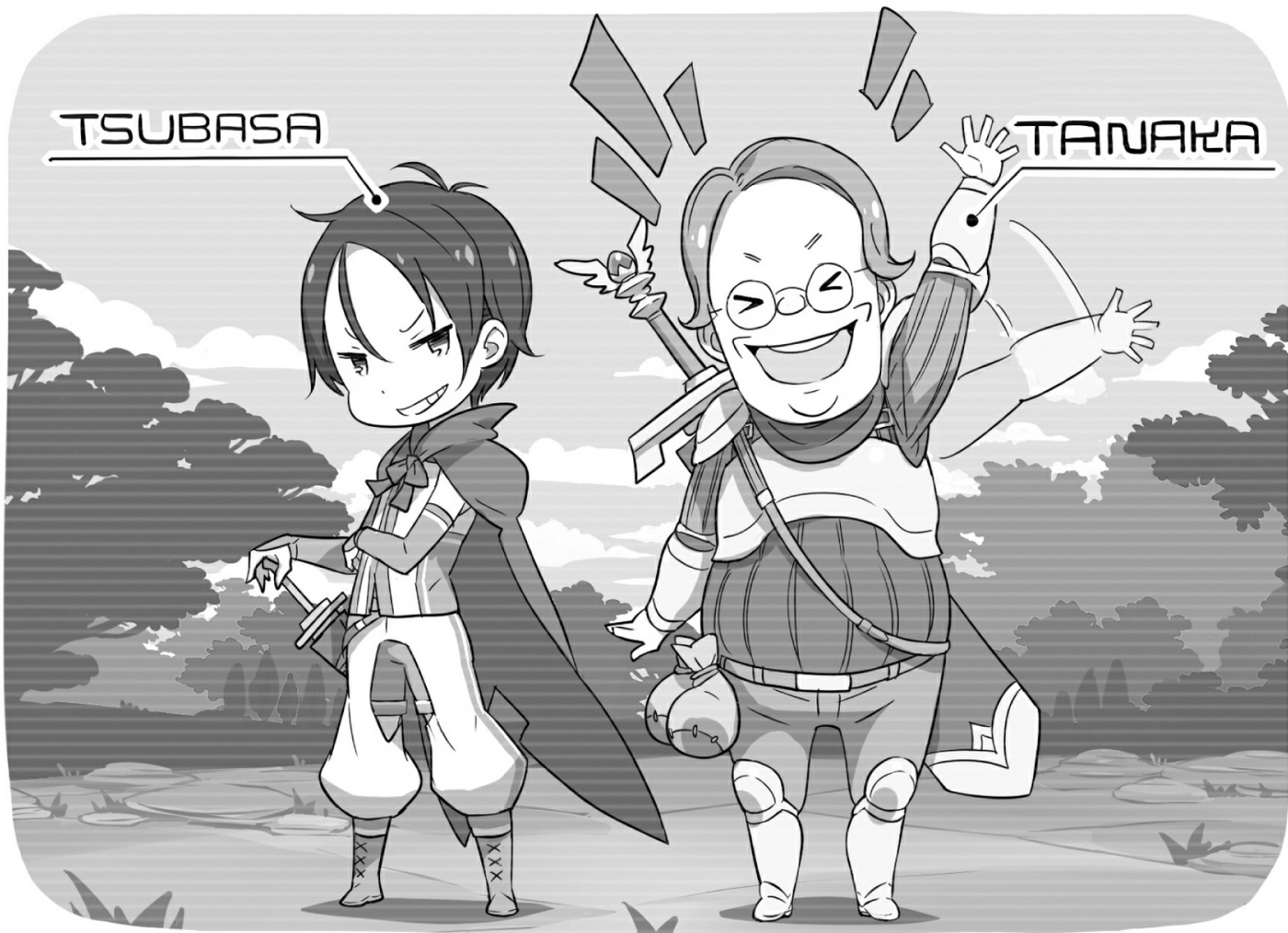
Wh-whaaat?! Well, I guess it wasn’t that big of a surprise, with Tanaka in their party. He was the top-ranked player in the whole game, after all.

“Sounds like Zombieman came through here already,” Masuda said. “Ah, well. The two of you have to participate in the event, no matter what. I’m sure these guys will give you the tickets. They’d have to be huge jerks not to.”

Masuda didn't realize how huge these jerks could be. I doubted they'd give us the Event Tickets for free... If I knew Tsubasa, he'd come up with some outrageous condition for sure.

[Kenichi Tanaka]

Heya, Mai!



I'm feelin' good, just so ya know!

You need these Event Tickets, don'tcha?

Yes! Sure, Tanaka was a weirdo, but it looked like he'd hand over the tickets without a fuss. At least he was a *nice* weirdo. I started typing *Yes, please!* in the chat, but before I could finish and hit send...

[Tsubasa Kaitsu]

Hey, Gramps! What makes you think that's your choice to make?

Not like it matters. I'm the one holding the Event Tickets anyway.

[Kenichi Tanaka]

S-sowwy! (Waah! Waaah!)

I fowgot! (Tee-hee! ♥ Tee-hee-hee!)

"...I guess I gave them too much credit," said Masuda.

"I guess so."

I was already tired of dealing with these guys. I cut to the chase and asked them what they wanted.

[Tsubasa Kaitsu]

Here's the thing. Only two people can participate in the

event this time around.

If none of us can tag along, the only thing we can do with these tickets is hand 'em over to you, Mai. But I don't wanna give 'em away for free, y'know? So let's have a little contest.

If you win, the tickets are all yours, no strings attached. But if I win, you gotta do one thing I ask, no matter what it is. What do you say?

Well, you can't refuse, can you? Let's do it, right here, right now.

"It looks like I've gotta accept," I said. Ugh, this turned into a real headache!

I glanced over at Asagi, who had a concerned look on his face.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," he muttered. He wasn't the only one. Tsubasa was only a junior high schooler, but he was very clever. He wouldn't challenge anyone to a fight he didn't think he could win.

"I'm sorry, Mai. If only I'd gotten those tickets earlier..."

Masuda hung his head in shame. I could tell he really meant it from the bottom of his heart.

"D-don't be sorry! It's not your fault at all! And it's definitely not your fault Tsubasa's such a pain in the butt." I grinned at Masuda to make sure he knew he didn't have anything to feel bad about. "I'd better find out what he wants."

"You're too kind. Let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

Challenging Tsubasa was my only option. I opened the in-game chat again and asked him what sort of contest he had in mind.

Showdown with Tsubasa

[Tsubasa Kaitsu]

Whoever finds the rarest item in this stage in one hour wins.

You can swap other players in and out of your party as much as you like, but you've gotta be the party leader. You can go solo, too, if you really want to.

We'll both send someone over to observe each other's parties and make sure everything's fair and square.

That's it. That's all the rules.

I see... Those rules left a lot up to luck, but that meant I had a fair shot at winning, too.

"That's bad news...", Masuda blurted, derailing my train of thought.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'bad news'?"

"They've got the top-ranked player Tanaka himself on their side. He's almost certainly got a skill that boosts his luck. I've watched him play before, because I had to see for myself how strong the number one player could be. Unless he's changed his skills around since then, he should still have it equipped."

A luck-boosting skill? What kind of skill was that...?

“You mean, like, a skill that doubles the CP and experience he earns every now and then, or bumps his regular drops up to rare drops? Something like that?” I remembered seeing skills like those on the Green Trier home page before. I took a moment to applaud myself for doing my homework—but only a really short moment, I swear. It was hardly the time to pat myself on the back.

“Exactly. If they send anyone other than Tanaka to be their observer, then we can be sure he’ll use it.”

Oof. What’d I tell you? Tsubasa wouldn’t pick any fight he didn’t think he’d win. And if we lost, we’d have to do whatever he asked. I had a strong feeling he’d call in that favor to come along with us to an event at some point in the future. He’d sent me a message saying he wanted to go with us on the last one, after all...but Sugiura would never go along with it.

Sugiura wouldn’t have been too crazy about the contest itself, either. I could hear his furious voice clearly in my head: “Whaddaya think you’re doin’, agreein’ to this kinda stuff without me?!”

“What about our observer? Whoever we pick, only two of us will be left behind. That could be rough.”

“You’re right,” said Masuda. “I’m happy to go call for more allies, if you don’t mind.”

Aha! In that case, Sugiura might be a good pick. I bet if we get him involved now, he’ll only be a little furious.

“I’ll go get Sugiura. He’s our club leader and all,” I said. Neither Masuda nor Asagi had any problem with inviting Sugiura along. I asked Tsubasa to wait a bit, then got up to find Sugiura.

It didn’t take long at all. The instant I stood up, Sugiura and Taichi came walking into the clubroom. Talk about perfect timing!

Without saying a word, Sugiura sat down in an empty chair and pulled a huge stack of papers out of his bag. Taichi had an armful of papers, too, and he spread them out on the table as he took a seat.

“E-excuse me...,” I said sheepishly, knowing I was interrupting Sugiura in the middle of his work.

“What?”

“Um... Gosh, that looks like a lot of work. Are you helping your dad out again?”

“Yeah. Who knows how bad he might screw up if I don’t pitch in? Anyway, what d’you want? You’re talkin’ to me ‘cause you need somethin’, right?”

That was Sugiura for you—sharp as ever. I explained the situation to Sugiura and Taichi.

“Seriously?! That twerp again? Of all the players who could get their grubby hands on those Event Tickets, it had to be him, huh?!”

“Welp, sounds like we gotta play along with this contest,” Taichi chimed in.

“Yeah. But I don’t like it. ‘Specially not with that guy Tanaka an’ his lucky skill involved. We’re at a real disadvantage, no matter how you slice it.”

...Phew. Good thing I asked for permission instead of forgiveness. He’s not furious at all... Well, not with me, at least. I gave a quiet sigh of relief.

“Hey, Mai!” Sugiura suddenly said.

“Huh?!” I flinched.

“Since you gotta be the party leader, I want you to make Asagi the observer. Masuda an’ me have the real firepower. We’ll focus on blastin’ away as many monsters as we can and win by overwhelming them. You got that?”

“Y-yessir!”

Sugiura turned his gaze toward Asagi.

“Asagi, keep your eyes on the enemy. An’ make sure we’re all in the loop about anything that goes down.”

“Roger that!” Asagi’s avatar ran off to tell Tsubasa’s team that he’d be our observer.

“Uh, boss... One question,” said Taichi.

“What?” Sugiura replied as he looked through the stage menu, finally entering Spirit Park with the rest of us.

“It’s no big deal, really. Just wonderin’, what’s my job this time?”

“Oh. Sorry. I forgot about you.”

“Aw, geez, Sugiura! You’re such a meanie!” Taichi said in a silly voice, a bright grin stretching across his face. But it didn’t last long before—*bam!*

Sugiura pulled another massive stack of paperwork out of his bag and slammed it down on the table right before Taichi’s eyes.

“While we’re playin’ Nightmare, I need you to check all this for typos.”

“...Huh?! Aww!” Taichi’s goofy grin was gone, leaving behind a look of total shock. “C’mon, don’t leave me outta the contest! You can’t do this to me...”



“I can’t? Why, got a problem with it?”

Aaand there it was: Sugiura’s classic extra-scary mean mug. Once he gave you that look, there was nothing else you could say.

“Urgh... Fine. I guess someone’s gotta do it...”

With a defeated look, Taichi hurriedly began searching the stack of papers for mistakes. Taichi always knew the right way to get under Sugiura’s skin. Maybe Sugiura was taking this opportunity to get a little revenge. Sugiura had a smirk that said *Pfft, serves you right* all over his face.

Ha-ha-ha! I didn’t want to laugh out loud and hurt Taichi’s feelings, but I had to admit, it was a little funny seeing it happening to someone else.

Either way, now I had Sugiura (ranked number three) and Masuda (ranked number two) in my party. With a lineup like that, we had to have a shot at winning, right?

“Awright, let’s get ready to knock some heads.”

“Yeah!”

Then the observer from Tsubasa’s party arrived. She was a long-haired girl who, judging by her looks, was older than we were.

[Arisa Miyazawa]

Hi. I’m going to be watching you guys play. Good luck! ☆

They didn’t send Tanaka after all. There was no doubt about it: He’d be using his luck-boosting skill after all. I greeted the other team’s observer politely in the chat.

[Tsubasa Kaitsu]

One more thing: I’m gonna have my teammate Naitou stand

right here to act as a landmark. Meet back next to him in one hour.

All right, get to it!

Oh, and don't forget, observers can't do anything but defend!

One of the boys from Tsubasa's party—Naitou, I suppose—left the group and stood on the spot where Tsubasa sent him. With that, the contest was on.

"Let's start by takin' out a bunch of those monsters over there!" said Sugiura.

"Sounds good!"

We took out enemy after enemy, but none of them dropped anything but normal items. Asagi piped in with a report.

"Uh, Mai? This could be bad. Their party already picked up two rare items."

"What?!" That many already? I could tell this was gonna be a rough contest without a luck-boosting skill of our own...

Sugiura's expression became sharp and serious. He thought for a moment, then suddenly clapped Taichi on the shoulder.

"Forget the paperwork. Do it later. Go to the Green Trier home page and look up the drop rates for enemies in this stage."

"On it, boss!" Taichi grinned from ear to ear. He must've been really struggling with that stack of papers.

"How would that help us now, Sugiura?"

"If we stick to the monsters with higher drop rates, we're more likely to win this thing, obviously."

Aha. Can't argue with that.

"Hey, Mai," Taichi said. "Come take a look at this."

I wondered what he wanted me for as I headed over. I kept one eye on my

Nightmare console to make sure I didn't miss any combat turns, but I put most of my attention on the screen of Taichi's computer. It showed a list of various items from the game.

"You gotta swear not to tell Sugiura everything I'm about to tell you, okay? Let him know that this enemy right here has the highest rare item drop rate in the stage. That's all." He pointed at a monster called a Shifty Specter. It had a 25 percent chance of dropping a normal potion. For its rare drop, it had a 3 percent chance of dropping an item called a Miser God's Ornament.

Huh? He wanted me to say this was the enemy with the highest rare drop rate? I could see that there were plenty of enemies with higher rates on the list.

On top of that, the Miser God's Ornament wasn't exactly a great item. The instant you picked one up, you lost 100 yen. It didn't do anything useful, either. You couldn't even sell it back at the shop menu; you had to throw it away. Rare item or not, I'd take a normal drop over a Miser God's Ornament any day of the week.

If anything, beating a Shifty Specter and picking up a Miser God's Ornament would only prove that we really were unlucky.

...Hang on. Unlucky, huh? Oh, Taichi, don't tell me...

"Way, way back, Sugiura came to this stage to boost his levels. Totally solo grinding," Taichi whispered into my ear. "Anyway, in one hour, he picked up thirty-eight of these things."

Th-th-thirty-eight?! How unlucky could Sugiura possibly be?!

Then again, with data like that to back it up, betting on Sugiura's rotten luck was the safest bet we had. This contest was no longer about team versus team—it was about Tanaka's good luck skill versus, well, Sugiura's bad luck. (As far as I knew, there was no actual bad luck skill.)

Come on, Sugiura! Win this for us!

"Um, Sugiura?"

"...What?"

“Taichi says Shifty Specters have the best rare item drop rates.”

“Oh yeah? Good to know.” He changed his target to the nearest Shifty Specter.

Next to him, Taichi struggled to choke back a wicked laugh. Come on, Taichi! What if Sugiura catches on?!

“Ouch. Tsubasa’s team just picked up their fifth rare item.”

“That many?! We’ve got to step it up. I’d hate to lose,” said Masuda. He attacked five monsters at once; the last one was a Shifty Specter, which he took down to 0 HP.

What’s it gonna drop...? Nothing, I guess... Or so I thought.

“Hey, check this out. We got three Miser God’s Ornaments... These things are rare, right?”

That’s our Sugiura! He picked up three of them at once! That put three points on the scoreboard for us, and neither Masuda nor I found a single one.

Whoa! Sugiura’s awful luck really might win this for us! I glanced over at him.

“...What?”

“N-nothing! I was just thinking how lucky you are.”

Taichi couldn’t hold back his laughter any longer. It came out in a single burst.

“What’re you laughin’ at?”

“I guess bad luck’s a kinda luck after all... I—I mean, nothing! Nothing at all! Keh-heh-heh...”

“.....”

Without saying a word, Sugiura angrily dropped even more papers onto the pile in front of Taichi. After fuming for a while, he spoke. “I want these done today, got it? No more slackin’ off for you.”

“Aw, c’monnn!” Taichi looked like he was about to cry, but to be fair, he’d probably brought it on himself.

“You know, I think we might be able to pull this off. We’ve still got plenty of

time.”

“Right!”

I’d always been glad to have Sugiura along for a Nightmare session, but I got the feeling it was going to be difficult to thank him with a straight face this time. He wasn’t the type to play along with strange schemes for long, and he already seemed to have noticed that something was up. I decided not to push my luck. I sure didn’t want him taking any anger out on me.

Our specter hunt continued, and with surprisingly fruitful results. As the end of the hour approached, we had a whopping forty-two Miser God’s Ornaments. Wouldn’t you know it, Sugiura himself found every single one of them.

“Oh, you broke your record!”

“What was that?” Sugiura snapped.

Whoops! I realized too late that I’d said that out loud. I sputtered out a flustered “N-n-nothing!” hoping to dodge the question.

We made our way back toward Naitou and saw that Tsubasa’s team was already there with him.

[Tsubasa Kaitsu]

Arisa kept me filled in on your progress, so you can spare me the details.

We got twenty rares. You guys won by a landslide.

I’ll send the Event Tickets to your inbox like I promised.

One question, though: How’d you score so many rares? I don’t get it.

Tsubasa looked unhappy with the results. He must’ve been positive he’d had the contest in the bag. I doubted he would accept any explanation we could

offer, even if it was the truth. I mean, I wouldn't have believed that Sugiura's sheer bad luck could win out over an in-game skill if I hadn't seen it for myself.

The important thing, though, was that we won.

As he turned to leave, Tsubasa told me, **I'm comin' along with you on the next event after this one, got that?**

Now I knew for sure that was exactly what he was after.

With the contest over, we decided to leave Spirit Park and take a breather. I checked my messages and saw that Tsubasa had sent the Event Tickets. At least he kept his word.

"Well, it's official. We're playing in another event."

"Yeah..." That meant Nightmare had yet another terrifying challenge waiting for me. But if that's what it took to beat the game, then I had to take it on.

"No companions this time, I see. Just you two..." Sugiura said with a scowl.

"Unfortunately. With only two players in an event, it's way scarier when one of us gets a Game Over. If the remaining player can't survive on their own until their teammate respawns in an hour, then it's Game Over for everyone."

The rules of the game were a little different during events. If you got knocked out in an event, you wouldn't lose a Respawn Penalty for good. Instead, you'd only temporarily forfeit it. But if both players got a Game Over at the same time, then the demon that collected Respawn Penalties would take everything you'd forfeited at once.

"We've gotta stay super sharp this time."

"Asagi, Mai, listen up," said Sugiura. "I may not like it, but you guys are gonna be on your own in there. You decide when you're ready to play, but lemme know the day you pick, got that? We're gonna be there in the room while you do it."

Asagi and I nodded.

Sugiura and Taichi left the clubroom for a short break, leaving Asagi, Masuda, and me behind. I could've sworn there was something I meant to ask Masuda... Oh, right!

“So, Masuda, have you decided what role you’re going to play in the Conquerors’ Club?”

“Am I going to join Main, Scout, or Rescue Squad, you mean?”

“Right.”

Masuda thought for a moment. “I haven’t made my final decision yet, but as of now, I think I might join the Rescue Squad.”

If he did, that would put him in a totally different squad from Youko.

“You know, Main Squad could really use your help,” I said. “Isn’t that right, Asagi?” I shot Asagi a look that I hoped he would understand meant *pretty please back me up on this*. Luckily, he got the message loud and clear. He nodded.

“That’s right. I think Main Squad would be the perfect fit for you, since you’ve got that super-rare weapon and all. Not to mention you’re ranked number two in the whole game.”

Exactly! This was Ryouta Masuda we were talking about. Mr. Top Two himself! If he wasn’t Main Squad material, no one was... Actually, when I put it that way, it might’ve been better to have him with us in the Raid Team.

Masuda considered what Asagi said for a moment. “You’ve got a point. With a weapon like mine, I suppose I should be fighting on the front lines. I’ll think it over a bit more in my dorm.”

Yes! It might work out after all. Masuda stood up from his chair and left the clubroom.

“Boy, you’re really pitching in for Youko, huh, Mai?”

“Of course.”

Knowing how she felt about Masuda, I couldn’t help but try and nudge things her way. And maybe it wasn’t any of my business, but I definitely wanted her to get closer to Masuda if Akaishi was the alternative.

“I get it, too,” Asagi said. “How should I put this...? Youko and I have... something in common, so I can’t help but feel involved. I’m happy to see things go well for her, y’know? It’s like, if she’s got a shot, then so do I... Y-you know

what? Never mind! It's nothing for you to worry about, Mai!!”

Asagi glanced over at Youko, who was sitting across the clubroom, focused intently on her Nightmare console. Then he turned away, flustered, his face blushing red.

Youko and Asagi have something in common? Do they really?

Secret Frog Cookies

That evening, Asagi and I talked about our next steps over dinner in the cafeteria.

“Do you have any preference for when we join the event, Mai?”

“No, not really.”

“All right, how about we do it five days from now? That’ll give us time to gain a few more levels and make sure we’re in good shape for it.”

“Good idea... Let’s give this event our best shot.”

“Yeah. I know we’ll beat it, no sweat,” said Asagi. Then he suddenly stopped eating, his chopstick hand frozen on the way to his mouth. “Y’know, Mai. I’ve been thinking a lot lately, and...I’m really glad you’re my partner for all these events.”

“Huh?”

“If you were anyone else, I don’t think I’d try so hard, y’know? But I wanna push myself to show you I can do it.”

“Oh, come on! All I ever do is hold you back...”

“What are you talking about, Mai? You’re the one who keeps coming up with the brilliant ideas. It’s a real relief, having you around!”

I was super happy to hear that Asagi thought of me that way, even if I still didn’t really believe it. Look, I stink at games, and Nightmare was no exception. I knew I put him through all sorts of trouble when we played together.

“I feel the exact same way about you,” I said. “It’s always super reassuring to

have you by my side.”

“Y-you mean it...?! Great...!” Asagi’s face brightened up. I couldn’t see my own expression, but I imagine it looked about as bright as his did. “Let’s give this next event everything we’ve got. I swear I’ll keep you safe, Mai.” He flushed redder and redder before my eyes. Finally, his bashfulness took over and he looked down to hide his face.

I felt my own face soften as I watched him. I couldn’t help but give him an enormous grin (well, enormous for me, at least).

“Yeah, I mean it! Thanks for everything!”

We kept talking for a little while longer. I swear the cafeteria felt a little warmer than usual.

For the next five days, we focused on raising our levels as high as we could. Mine climbed all the way up to 187.

Before I knew it, the day of the event arrived. I woke up that morning and immediately booted up the game to check on Amelie.

“Good morning, Amelie!”



“Morning, Mai,” Amelie said, still tucked soundly in her bed. I got the feeling my voice had woken her up. She poked her head out from under the covers. She had a slight case of bed head, which made her look funnier than usual.

“Oh, sorry, did I wake you?”

“Oh, it’s fine! I was about to get up anyway,” she said, squirming her way out of bed. She walked over to the middle of her room and plopped down on a candy-shaped cushion.

“I wanted to let you know I’m playing in another event today, Amelie. I’ll give it my best shot.”

“Gotcha. If you need any help at all, lemme know, okay? I’ll beat down any bad guys you want!”

To show me she meant business, she picked up the candy-shaped cushion she’d been sitting on and heaved it across her room as hard as she could.

“Hee-hee-hee... Thanks, Amelie. I’ll do that.”

Amelie grinned back at me. Whenever I was nervous, chatting with her always seemed to calm me down a bit. Now that my morning jitters had settled down, it was time to change into my school uniform...

Knock, knock, knock! There came a soft tapping at my door.

“Yes?”

“It’s me, Mai. Are you ready?”

“Huh? Oh! Not yet.”

“Okay. I’ll wait out here.”

Yikes! Asagi’s right outside my door! I better hurry! I rushed to get dressed as quickly as I could, bumping into nearly every piece of furniture in my dorm along the way, and sending my clock and a bunch of school supplies to the floor with a *crash* and a *bang*!

“T-take a deep breath, Mai! You don’t have to rush!” Asagi said from the other side of the door.

“Um... Right...” Man, was I embarrassed! It’s really not like me to oversleep

like that, I swear. Anyway, I got myself together and headed out into the hall.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Don’t be. If anything, I should be sorry for catching you off guard,” said Asagi. “Oh, um, these are for you. If you want them, I mean. It’s okay if you don’t. But if you do, they’re all yours!” He held out a small box.

“...What is it?”

“I went into town for a bit on our last day off from class. While I was out, I saw these, and I thought, ‘I should get those for Mai’...”

Asagi bought something for me? I felt my cheeks warming. My heart pounded as I opened the lid. Waiting inside the box were a bunch of frog-shaped cookies, each carefully wrapped in its own little bag.

“I figured they might be good luck. You know, maybe they’ll help you hop back home safely. And hey, you made cookies for me before, remember? I wanted to return the favor...”

Hee-hee! Each frog cookie had big, round, adorable eyes. I picked one frog out of the box and handed it back to Asagi.



“You eat one too, okay? For good luck,” I said. “What’s the point if we don’t hop back home safely together, right?”

“Right! Thanks!” Asagi smiled as he took the cookie. He kept smiling, but his face tightened as he continued in a more serious tone. “I mean it, Mai. Let’s hop back home safely this time, too.”

“Yeah!”

Nightmare was a scary game—and we were about to head into another one of the scariest missions it had to offer. I knew we’d have to face another terrifying boss while we were at it. But I also knew that we would make it back together. No doubt about it.

“Now, then. Shall we?”

“Sure!”

We entered the clubroom to find a familiar message written in large letters on the whiteboard: “GOOD LUCK IN THE EVENT, ASAGI AND YASHIRO! COME BACK SAFE!” All around it, in smaller letters, each member of the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club had written a message of their own.

Before we started playing, Sugiura led a club meeting, where he explained how much in-game money we’d gathered to use in this event, how many members could participate, and other details like that. As soon as the meeting was over, the whole club gathered around the table where Asagi and I sat and cheered. A “Break a leg!” here, a “We’re rooting for you!” there.

“Asagi! Mai! You got this!”

“Thanks, Taichi.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Course, I feel a little conflicted, watching Asagi’s wicked little wishes come true like this...”

“Wha—? But—! Argh, it’s not like that, Taichi! It’s just a coincidence!”

Asagi’s face was a deep, burning red.

“Keep an eye on Mai, Asagi. You know she’s got lousy reflexes.”

This time, it was Sugiura speaking. He already had a particularly frightening look on his face, though I couldn’t figure out why. I guess he was bitter that he couldn’t join us for the event. He’d spent more time researching Nightmare than any of us, to be fair.

“G-got it. Mai’s in good hands with me,” Asagi said.

Sugiura’s face had clearly kicked his own nerves up a notch.

“She better be.”

“Right! I, uh, guess we should get going, huh, Mai?”

“I guess so.”

This time around, Asagi and I had to enter the event on our own. We couldn’t bring a companion to help out. All that was left to do was to find the Event Tickets on our inventory screens and click Use. According to the tickets’ description, that would send us into the Yellow Event.

At last, we took our seats, opened our Nightmare consoles, and pulled out the special black earphones inside—earphones we had to use to enter the events.

The game is starting.

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

※Please note: If any nonparticipants 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.

The usual flood of static poured out of my earphones. This happened every time, but it never failed to make me queasy. The sick feeling soon turned into drowsiness, which I knew meant I was about to be drawn into the event. I was used to it at this point.

I felt my consciousness get swallowed up by the darkness.

.....

.....

.....

Nightmareland

I heard a muffled voice coming from who-knows-where.

“Welcome to the World of Nightmare. Heh-heh... I’ve been waiting for you.”

I slowly opened my eyes. I knew that voice. It was Kamisawa, the top administrator of Nightmare.

“What d’you mean, waiting for us? And why do you keep making all these new events for us to struggle through? What’s in it for you? You’re relentless!”

“I’m relentless? That’s rich, coming from you. I’ll have you know that you’ve pushed us on the developers’ side into quite a corner.”

“Huh?” I definitely didn’t expect him to say that. “Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?” I could take a guess, though. If we kept completing these events, then one day, we’d actually be free from Nightmare for good. What else could it mean?

“Kindly think on it yourself,” said Kamisawa. *“Are you quite familiar with the rules of the event already? If so, I’ll be on my way.”*

Huh?! It wasn’t like Kamisawa to leave without a speech.

“We usually have to search for a key and then use it to unlock the Victory Application Point to win. I take it the rules are the same this time around?”

“Indeed. I will warn you, though. I think you’ll find the boss to be rather persistent. Good-bye.”

With that, Kamisawa’s transmission ended. One thing sure hadn’t changed: He was as rude as ever.

If I had the Nightmare devs in a corner, I had no choice but to keep pushing. I wondered if I'd really gotten that much stronger.

Anyway, with Kamisawa's introduction over, the Yellow Event had officially begun. Whatever happened next, Asagi and I couldn't afford to lose. I looked all around the starting room to try and get a sense of the situation. It was a small room, about the size of an eight-tatami mat, one-person apartment—one hundred and thirty three square feet, give or take. There was a table in the middle of the room, and clothes racks and a dresser lined up along the walls. As organized as it seemed, it was hard to call it *clean*, since everything was caked in a layer of dust.

Asagi was still asleep, half-lying on the floor with his back propped up against the dresser. I tried gently shaking him by the shoulder.

"Asagi?"

"...Nnh," he groaned as his eyes opened slightly. Great—he woke up without any trouble. "Where are we? Are we in the event already?"

"Looks like it."

"How are you holding up, Mai?"

"I'm fine...for now. The event's barely started. We'll just have to do our best."

"Yeah!" said Asagi. "...Hey, is it just me, or is this room surprisingly normal?"

"It seems that way, at least."

"All right. First things first, let's split up and search the room," said Asagi. He started poking around the dresser, so I searched for another spot to check. I started off by seeing what was on the table. All that I found was a chipped cup and a single scrap of paper. The paper made me curious, so I reached down to turn it over...and my hand passed right through it.

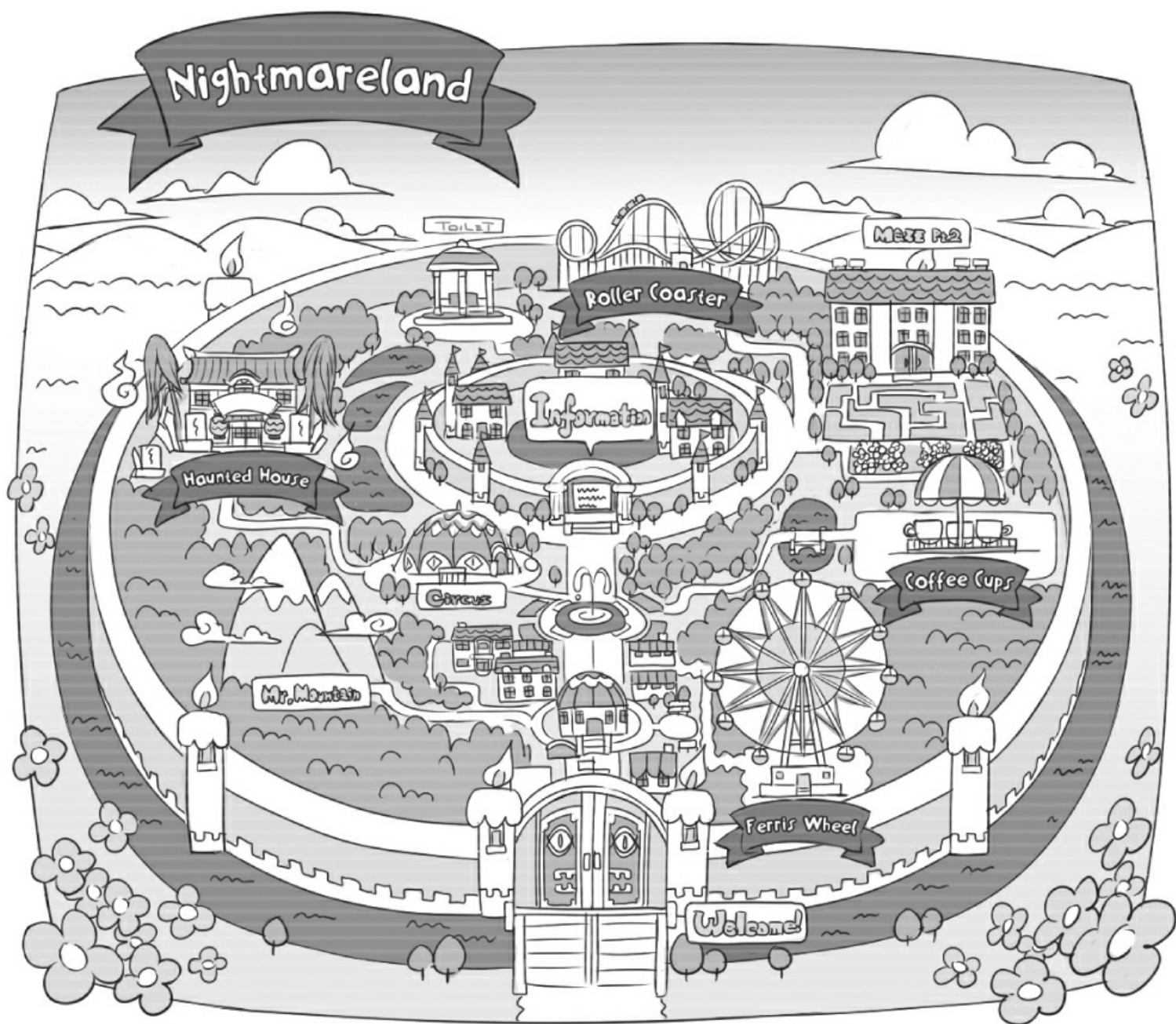
Aha. Same as always, then. That meant the scrap of paper was an in-game item, and I had to use my Nightmare console to access it and pick it up. I held my console out toward the paper.

<!>

Pick up the Park Map?

[YES] / [NO]

Nightmareland



Yesss! A map! That should make things a bit easier! But what did it mean by *Park Map*? What park?

“Find something, Mai?”

“Yeah, a map. How about you, Asagi?”

“There are two items called Staff Uniforms in the dresser. I figure we should probably pick them up, just in case. Bring your console over here, Mai.”

“Staff Uniforms?” I wondered how we could use items like that.

During an event, we could hold up to ten items. Every now and then, we’d come across trap items that didn’t do anything at all except take up one of those precious item slots. Once you picked up a trap item, you couldn’t throw it away. It cut the number of useful items you could carry down to nine. I was a little suspicious of these Staff Uniforms, but if I took one along with the map, I’d still have eight slots left for more items. Besides, there was always a chance they might be helpful. I nervously held out my Nightmare console and picked up one of the Staff Uniforms.

“Can I see that map, Mai?”

“Sure thing,” I said. I pulled up the Park Map on my Nightmare console screen and zoomed in. It was dotted with little illustrations of a Ferris wheel, a roller coaster, and other things like that.

“Hang on, this is...”

“...an amusement park, right?”

Asagi and I stared at each other for a moment. Then it hit us.

The Yellow Event takes place in an amusement park?!

“Amusement park or not, we’re still playing Nightmare. We can’t let our guard down.”

“You can say that again.”

Aw, man... This would be a lot of fun, if only it were a real-world amusement park. I hadn’t been to one in ages!

“I guess this must be a changing room for park staff, then,” said Asagi.

“It looks like it. That would explain the Staff Uniforms we found.”

“Yeah... But I don’t think we’re going to figure anything out waiting around in here. Wanna check outside?”

“Good idea.”

Scanning the dust-covered furniture that filled the staff room, I got the feeling that it wasn’t a very well-kept amusement park. We would have to proceed very carefully.

We stepped outside and found ourselves in a small gift shop with all sorts of souvenirs on display. They were all caked in a layer of dust, too.

Oh, that doll is cute! I caught myself getting distracted and snapped back to reality. Come on, me! We’re in the middle of an event, here!

“Everything okay, Mai?”

“Ah! Y-yeah, sorry. I’m coming.”

Asagi had already made it past the counter and to the door leading outside. There was no way I could tell him I was distracted by all the souvenirs! I jogged over to catch up with him, and together, we stepped out of the gift shop.

Outside, the moon was in full view in the night sky. There didn’t seem to be anyone else in the park, but all the lights were on.

“Look, Mai! There’s the Ferris wheel right there.” Sure enough, right behind a wooden sign with old-timey lettering, a huge Ferris wheel strewn with lights loomed. Naturally, there wasn’t a single person riding it. Honestly, it was kind of creepy.

“The question is, where do we go now?”

I pulled up the Park Map again and looked it over.

“Here, Asagi. Check out the map. This Ferris wheel is here, in the south part of the park. The roller coaster is to the north, the haunted house is in the west, and the coffee cups are over in the east. Personally, I’d rather steer clear of the haunted house.”

“Yeah. Me too. It’s gotta be real spooky.”

“...Then again, I get the feeling we’ll have to go there eventually, don’t you?”

“Ugh... Let’s cross that bridge when we get to it,” Asagi said, groaning. “All right! How ’bout we start with the Ferris wheel?”

“Sounds like a plan!”

We tried to put the haunted house completely out of our minds as we headed for the nearby Ferris wheel.

“I’m gonna go first, Mai. It could be dangerous. Follow behind me, okay?”

“Huh?! O-okay. Thank you.” Seconds before, I’d thought Asagi was exactly as freaked out as I was. In a flash, his fearful expression had turned into a look of solemn determination. If he wanted to take the lead, I wasn’t about to stop him. I stayed safely in the rear. It wasn’t long at all before we reached the base of the huge Ferris wheel.

There wasn’t a park employee manning the ride, and it stood completely still. Riding it seemed out of the question.

“Well, this is a dead end,” I said. “I don’t see clues anywhere.”

“No items, either, from the looks of it.”

“Not at all.”

“Hmm... I guess we should head to another attraction. Let’s see... How ’bout the coffee cups?”

“Y-yeah! Let’s go there!”

We reached the east end of the park and found the coffee cup ride. Cup-shaped cars, large enough for two people to share, sat on rotatable platforms under a canopy with a sleek, modern-looking sign. The cups weren’t spinning now, though. Actually, none of the attractions we’d passed seemed to be up and running.

“What kind of boss do you think we’ll be up against this time, Mai?”

“I’ve been wondering that, too.”

“Which do you think’ll be scarier, the boss or the haunted house?”

“Y-yeesh, where’s that question coming from? Hmm... I’m gonna go with the boss. At least a house can’t chase us.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking. Plus, no matter how scary the boss is, we’ll have to take it down sooner or later,” said Asagi. “When you think about it, we’ll never win if we chicken out from a little haunted house.”

Huh? What’s Asagi getting at?

“Here’s what I’m trying to say...,” he continued. “We can’t put the haunted house off forever. Let’s head over there right now!”

“Oogh...,” I groaned. “F-fine.”

“Look at it this way, Mai. If we get there, and it’s closed off like everything else is, we can check it off the list without going inside. Let’s get it over with!”

He had a point. Besides, we would have to go there eventually anyway. Asagi was right—might as well get it over with.

We left the coffee cup ride and walked across to the west side and the haunted house. Along the way, we passed through the very center of the park, where we noticed a huge sign. It said, “GATHER THE OLD-TIME SYMBOLS, AND WHAT YOU DESIRE SHALL BE YOURS!” Right under the sign, there was a box that was the exact right size and shape to hold some sheets of paper.

“What do you think that means?”

“...Good question.”

Old-time symbols, huh...? At first, it sounded like we had to search the amusement park for old-fashioned things and bring them back here. But that didn’t seem right. I took another look at the box under the sign. The slot cut in it was very thin—so thin, I couldn’t imagine anything but paper fitting into it.

“Huh?! Hey, Mai! Come take a look at this chest!”

I rushed to the back side of the sign and found Asagi pointing at a treasure chest. We peeked inside and found a whole bunch of Skill Chips!

“Wh-whoa! That’s a lot of chips!”

“Yeah... There’s more than enough for us to take as many as we want, use them up, and come back here for a refill.”

“Nice!” I said. But at the same time, I had a thought that wasn’t so nice: If the game set out this many Skill Chips for us to use, that probably meant the boss was gonna be *really* tough.

Sorting through the chips, we found that most of them fit into three basic types. Some summoned weapons, others were attack spells, and there were even skills that healed 1,000 HP. None of them had any level restrictions or anything. Both Asagi and I could use whichever we wanted.

“This is the first time we’ve found healing magic chips in an event, isn’t it?”

“Y’know, I think you’re right. We’d better load up on them,” Asagi said. He took one weapon summoning chip, four attack spell chips, and three healing spell chips. “I’ve got room for one more, but I’m gonna leave an item slot open for now. Just in case.”

“Got it.” Now it was my turn to choose which Skill Chips to take. I could carry eight more items. I definitely wanted a weapon summoning chip, which left seven slots. I filled them up with four healing spell chips and three attack spell chips.

The attack spell was Ice Blast. It sent shards of ice flying toward an enemy. Spells that anyone—even lowly level-one players—could use were never very powerful, so I didn’t expect too much from Ice Blast.

Is this really going to keep us safe? I couldn’t shake my doubts as we finished loading up with Skill Chips and headed for the haunted house.

“Urgh... I’ve got a bad feeling about this...”

The attraction was easy to spot, even without the sign that read HAUNTED HOUSE in big, antique iron letters. It was a large, traditional Japanese-style manor with more dolls than I could count arranged around the entrance.

“Um, Asagi... They’re not going to start moving, are they?”

“I don’t think so... I mean, I’m sure we’ll be fine...but I dunno...”

Asagi and I couldn’t bring ourselves to say another word. We stood there,

staring at each other in silence. Neither of us took a step forward. Finally, Asagi started to mumble.

“I-I-I’m gonna go in alone and check it out. I can’t let you go in there until I know it’s safe, Mai. S-s-so wait right here, okay? I’ll be fine. I p-p-promise.”

Asagi was every bit as scared as I was. Was he really going in there alone? For me?

“Oh! Th-then again, what if the boss drops in on you while I’m gone? Oh, man... What do we do?”

I couldn’t help but notice that Asagi wasn’t thinking about himself at all. He was totally focused on keeping me safe. What a nice guy, right? But this was no time to take advantage of that niceness. I didn’t want to send him off into danger, either!

“U-um, Asagi? I’ll be fine. I wanna do my best, too!” I tried to put on a brave face, but my voice wavered a bit throughout my grand declaration.

“...Are you sure you’ll be okay, Mai?”

I stared Asagi in the eyes and said it one more time, as clearly as I could. “Yes. I’d rather go in there with you than wait out here alone. I don’t want to sit around here worrying about what might happen to you. I couldn’t take it.”

“M-Mai... You’re worried about me? Th-thanks, that means a lot!” I probably don’t need to tell you that Asagi’s cheeks were starting to turn red. “So, uh... Shall we see what the haunted house has in store for us?”

“Yeah. Let’s go,” I said. I’m not going to lie—I was terrified. But that wouldn’t stop me from trying! We didn’t have a choice!

Asagi used one of his Skill Chips to summon a sword.

“Yikes! Are you allowed to take a sword in there?!”

“Uh, Mai... Maybe it’s against the rules to swing a sword around in a real amusement park, but this is Nightmare, remember? The most important rule here is ‘Stay alive.’”

“R-right. Good point.”

Asagi chuckled. “All right, let’s get going. And, um... I know this might gross you out, but, er... Sorry!!” he stammered as he grabbed my hand and squeezed it tight.

—!

Asagi stared straight ahead, bracing himself for whatever was waiting for us inside the haunted house. But I heard him whisper, in a voice so faint I almost couldn’t make it out, “I’ll protect you, Mai. I swear I will.”

Infiltrating the Haunted House!

We stepped past the crowd of dolls and into the house without any fuss. Once we were inside, we saw that blue lamps lit the path through the attraction. As long as we followed the route, it would probably lead us to the exit.

“So far, so good, huh?”

“Y-yeah...” I glanced nervously all around us as we walked. The haunted house was dungeon-themed. We passed tons of dank cells, and each and every one of them gave me the creeps. *Oh, man! That mannequin looks like it’s gonna start moving any second!* I thought, daring to peek at a particularly eerie display.

The mannequins in the cells did, in fact, move, though I couldn’t tell what sort of mechanism powered them. They banged on the bars of their cells over and over again, like they were demanding to be let out. Every single time it happened, I flinched so hard, it felt like my heart was going to stop.

I could tell Asagi had a bad case of the jitters, too, but he tried as hard as he could to put on a brave face while I freaked out. Every now and then, his grip on my hand got tighter. As scared as I was, I squeezed back to try and help him feel braver.

And so, flinching and squeezing, we made our way steadily through the haunted house without stopping until we found ourselves in front of a prison cell that was bigger than all the others.

“Hmm? Check this out,” Asagi said. On a table in front of the cell, there sat a few pieces of paper. “There’s something written on them.”

STAMP STATION SCRAMBLE: STARTING POINT

“PLEASE PUT A STAMP ON THIS SHEET AND TAKE IT TO PROVE THAT YOU’VE VISITED THIS ATTRACTION.

AFTER YOU’RE DONE, PLEASE GO TO THE COFFEE CUPS NEXT!”

“Hunh. I guess this means we have to visit all the attractions in a certain order.”

“I think you’re right.”

“Figures they’d make it start at the haunted house. Nobody’d think to come here first.”

“Yeah. The Nightmare developers can be real jerks.”

“I’m gonna stamp one for you, too, Mai.”

“Thanks,” I said. I heard the *thump, thump* of the rubber stamp hitting two sheets of paper.

“All right. Next stop, coffee cups!”

I didn’t get a chance to reply before the enormous cell door in front of us swung open.

“Huh?!”

<!> Floor Boss Approaching <!>

Follodoll

[HP: 15,000/15,000]

“Yikes! Mai, it’s the boss!”

My nerves skyrocketed in an instant. Of all the places for the boss to show up, it had to be in the middle of a haunted house!

The upper half of its body was a mannequin, like the others in the cells we’d passed. But instead of legs, it had one enormous wheel, like a giant unicycle.

Including the wheel, it stood about twice as tall as we did. It held a sword in each hand, and it looked like it knew how to use them.

The floor boss—the Follodoll—rolled slowly out of its cell.

“C’mon, Mai! Run for it!” Asagi yanked hard on my hand. We ran as fast as we could toward a door on the far side of the hall, but on its giant wheel, the Follodoll gained on us with terrifying speed.

“Oh, man!”

We reached the far room, and Asagi pushed me through to safety. Then he planted himself in front of the door and drew his sword.



The Follodoll rolled after us, fiercely scraping the walls on both sides of the hall with its swords as it came.

“Asagi...”

“Don’t worry, Mai! I can handle this!”

The Follodoll zoomed toward Asagi with its swords held high. It swung them down hard, and Asagi held his own sword up to block the attack.

“.....Ngh!” Asagi gritted his teeth as he pushed back against the boss’s swords. He was really struggling. I had to do something, anything to help him! I decided to use one of my Ice Blast chips.

Combat Results Mai cast Ice Blast.

- **40 damage to Follodoll!**

Follodoll

HP: 14,960/15,000 (-40)

What?! That was useless!

The Follodoll didn't fall back by even a single inch. It withstood my crummy spell and kept bearing down on Asagi, trying to slash at him. It was an event boss, all right. There's no way this fight would be easy.

"Hey, Mai! Try that attack again, but aim for the wheel next time, okay?!"

The wheel...? For a moment, I was puzzled, but then it hit me. Aha! Even if I can't do much damage, I might be able to throw it out of balance!

I steeled my nerves and concentrated on the Follodoll's wheel.

Combat Results Mai cast Ice Blast.

- **30 damage to Follodoll!**

Follodoll

HP: 14,930/15,000 (-30)

My spell scored a direct hit on the Follodoll's wheel, and just as I expected, it teetered off-balance.

"Nice shot, Mai! Thanks!" Asagi seized the opening and kicked the wheel hard, sending the boss crashing to the ground!

Yesss!

"These hallways are too cramped. Let's get outside!"

"You got it!"

Asagi shoved the door shut behind us, and we ran as fast as we could, following the blue lights along the haunted house route. Finally, we reached the exit and left the attraction.

"Man, that thing was fast..."

"I know you're worn out, Mai, but hang in there a little longer, okay?"

"O-okay! I got this!"

Asagi and I struggled to hold in our gasps as we jogged back toward the coffee cup ride. Asagi slowed his pace so he wouldn't leave me behind—as usual, I was a slowpoke.

Suddenly, we heard the Follodoll's wheel rolling up the park pathway behind us.

"Asagi...!" I looked back and saw the creepy mannequin scraping its swords together with a sickening *screech* as it got closer and closer.

"It caught up to us already, huh? That was fast..." Asagi spun around to stand between me and the approaching boss, sword at the ready. He swung his sword at the wheel.

This time, however, the Follodoll hopped into the air to avoid Asagi's attack. As it came back down, it slashed at Asagi from above.

".....!"

Combat Results Follodoll slashed at Taisuke.

- **380 damage to Taisuke!**

Taisuke Asagi

HP: 4,620/5,000 (-380)

Each of the Follodoll's individual slashes didn't do too much damage on its own, but with a sword in either hand, it could keep the damage coming nearly nonstop. New combat results filled up the screen of my Nightmare console. By the time they stopped scrolling, the Follodoll had hit Asagi ten times, dealing 3,800 damage. That brought Asagi down to 1,200 HP.

".....! Waaaugh!"

Asagi's face twisted in pain...but somehow, he managed to get back on his feet and strike back at the wheel. This time, it was a direct hit! The Follodoll toppled over with a loud *clang!*

"We gotta run for it, Mai!"

"Right—but are you sure you're okay?!"

"I'm fine. I'm not worn out. Getting hit in Nightmare hurts, but not for too long... Still, that was close. One more slipup, and I coulda been a goner."

"You can say that again..."

Talk about scary. If it'd been me in the Follodoll's sights, I'm not sure I could've fought my way out like Asagi did.

While we ran, I used all my healing spell chips on Asagi. Each one only restored 1,000 HP, which was too little for comfort. If I restocked my inventory with enough of them to heal a whole lot of damage, that wouldn't leave much room for anything else.

"Thanks, Mai. You're a huge help."

"It's nothing, really. I'm the one who should be thanking you."

"For what? I told you I'd protect you, didn't I?" Asagi changed the subject. "Hey, you used up a bunch of your Skill Chips. Let's go pick up some more."

We inched our way across the park, sticking closely to the buildings to stay out of sight and frequently stopping to catch our breath. Well, *my* breath.

“Sorry I’m not stronger...,” I said, panting.

I didn’t get much exercise, and my reflexes weren’t great to begin with. Times like this, that really came back to bite me. Meanwhile, Asagi wasn’t even a little winded.

“Don’t sweat it, Mai. Everybody’s different. And, um, I don’t wanna push you too hard,” he said. He looked at me with his usual smile, with a familiar tint of red in his cheeks. I couldn’t have been more grateful. “Hey, we can see the sign from here!”

“Oh, you’re right.”

Asagi checked his Nightmare console.

“All right, no sign of the boss around here. Let’s go!”

We sprinted for the chest behind the sign. I picked up the same number of healing spell chips and attack spell chips as the last time.

“That should do it,” said Asagi. “Ready to head for the coffee cups?”

“I’m ready if you are.”

We couldn’t afford to relax for a single second—not with the Follodoll roaming the park. We knew it could show up at any moment. We started running again, heading east toward the coffee cups. Before long, I caught sight of a pond ahead of us in the distance. A bridge stretched across it.

...Hmm? It was too far away to tell what it was, but there was definitely something standing in front of the bridge.

“Wait a sec, Asagi!” I reached out and tugged on his clothes to hold him back.

“Huh? What’s wrong, Mai?”

“Would you come over here for a second?” I led him over to some nearby bushes for cover, then pointed at the thing in front of the bridge. “Look over there. I can’t be positive at this distance, but I’m pretty sure that’s the boss.”

Asagi followed my finger with his eyes. “You’re right! It’s waiting to ambush us...”

“We’re in trouble, huh...?”

Going by the Park Map, we couldn't reach the coffee cups without crossing that bridge. No wonder the Follodoll picked that spot for an ambush.

Now what?

"There's only one thing we can do. Listen, Mai. I'll distract it while you—"

"Wait a sec, Asagi!" I glanced all around us, looking for something that might help. I noticed that the building right behind us had a water wheel. Right next to it, half-hidden by another bush, was a bucket.

"Do you have a better plan, Mai?"

"Yeah. With a bit of magic, we could send that bucket flying, which would make a lot of noise. If we're lucky, the boss might go investigate the noise."

"Oh, right on! Good thinking, Mai. Let's give it a shot!"

Asagi aimed an Ice Blast at the bucket and let it rip. The ice shards crashed straight into the bucket and sent it flying far, far away, where it landed with a loud *clannng!*

I looked back to the bridge and saw the Follodoll react immediately. It zoomed away in the direction of the sound at high speed.

"It worked! Great shot, Asagi!"

"Yeah... I thought for sure it'd take more than one try! Now c'mon, let's move!"

We dashed across the bridge and reached the coffee cup ride. When we got there, we noticed something that hadn't been there before: a table with a few sheets of paper and a rubber stamp on it. This time, the papers said: "PLEASE GO TO THE ROLLER COASTER NEXT!"

"I guess we don't actually have to ride the coffee cups."

"Yeah," I said. "They're totally busted anyway. Too bad, though..."

"Huh? Wh-why's it too bad?" Asagi sputtered.

He froze in place for a while, like he was thinking through something really puzzling. After a moment, his head slumped.

Huh? What's gotten into him now? Don't tell me he broke down like the

coffee cups...

“Umm... Asagi?”

“Ah!”

His head snapped back up so suddenly that it made me flinch. His face was slightly red.

“Is...? Is everything okay?”

“W-well... Hey, Mai? D’you think you’d wanna go to an amusement park with me sometime? Not here. In the real world... *Gulp!* Y-you don’t have to if you don’t want to! Or if you’re busy! But, y’know, if you have some f-free time...”

Whaaat?! Is he seriously asking me out—here?! Now?! He must’ve been more easygoing than I’d thought. But I had to admit, going to an amusement park—a real one—with Asagi sounded like a ton of fun!

“Great idea! I’m in.”

“Really?! You mean it?!” Asagi blinked in surprise. I don’t think he expected me to answer right away. “So, um, when do you wanna go?”

“Ah-ha-ha... Don’t get ahead of yourself. We’ve got to win this event first!”

“R-right. Good point. I’m really looking forward to it, though,” said Asagi.

I could tell he meant it, too. To see the smile on his face, you’d never guess he was caught in the middle of a deadly game.

Facing the Follodoll!

We finished up at the coffee cup stamp station and headed toward the roller coaster. As we approached, we realized that the entrance to the ride itself was beyond a wall with ROLLER COASTER written on it in futuristic-looking letters. There was only one way in that we could see: a gap in the wall that was wide enough for one person at a time.

And what happened to be blocking the only entrance? You guessed it: the Follodoll. It was there waiting for us.

I had to hand it to the boss: It was clever.

“Ugh, what a pain...,” said Asagi. “Should we get rid of it the same way we did last time?”

He aimed an Ice Blast at a column a little ways away from the boss and let it fly.

Clang!

Huh? What gives?! The Follodoll didn’t react at all. It didn’t move a single muscle.

“I think it learned how that trick works.”

“Right... Like I said, what a pain. If we can’t use that strategy again, then what...?”

I examined the wall around the roller coaster platform. It was low enough for one of us to climb over, as long as the other one helped push them up. The question was, how would they get back? Hmm... There’s gotta be a way

through...

“Hey, Mai, there’s a door over there!” Asagi pointed at a sturdy-looking door we’d missed before. It wasn’t too close to the main ride entrance, where the Follodoll was standing guard. “Let’s give it a try.”

“Yeah!”

We crept slowly toward the door, trying very hard not to make any noises that would alert the boss. As we got closer, we noticed a piece of paper stuck to the door that said:

“SERVICE CORRIDOR—STAFF ONLY—AN ALARM WILL SOUND IF ANYONE OTHER THAN NIGHTMARELAND STAFF ENTERS!”

“Hey, Mai, see that...?”

“Yeah! I know what we can use!” So *this* was what the Staff Uniforms we found were for! We opened up our inventory screens and scrolled to the Staff Uniforms. As soon as we clicked Use, our outfits changed. Like, in a flash! It was exactly like a superhero transformation scene in a TV show.

Our new uniforms had matching jackets, but I wore a skirt, while Asagi had a pair of pants. We had tags pinned to our chests with our own names on them, along with logos that said NIGHTMARELAND.

“We should be able to take the service corridor without setting off the alarm now, right? Let’s go!”

“Okay!”

Sure enough, we opened the door without any trouble. No alarm rang out, and as far as we could tell, the Follodoll hadn’t noticed us at all.

Yesss! Success! We followed the service corridor to the roller coaster, and there it was: another stamp station. Once we’d collected our roller coaster stamps, we hurried back out the way we came.

“One attraction left—the Ferris wheel. Let’s hurry!”

“Right!”

We rushed south to the Ferris wheel. This time, the boss was nowhere in

sight. I wondered if it was still waiting for us back at the roller coaster entrance. Either way, we headed straight for the table in front of the Ferris wheel and made our final stamps. We checked our freshly stamped sheets.

“CONGRATULATIONS! YOU’VE FINISHED THE STAMP STATION SCRAMBLE!

PLEASE PROCEED TO THE SIGN IN THE CENTER OF THE PARK!”

As soon as we finished reading, the Ferris wheel started to move.

...What? Why?



“Uh, Mai... You don’t think this means anything, do you?”

I quickly scanned the scene all around us. I still couldn’t see the Follodoll anywhere.

“Maybe we should ride it,” I suggested.

“Wha—?! Now?! A-are you sure? I’d be glad to and all, but...this isn’t a real amusement park, and, um... Wh-what am I saying? Yeah! Let’s ride!”

Hmm? I think he might’ve misunderstood what I meant...

“I can’t say for sure,” I explained, “but I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the Ferris wheel started up again now, of all times. I bet it’s got something to do with completing the event.”

“Huh? Oh! Oh, r-right, of course! I... I think so, too. All right, then, let’s ride!” Asagi’s mouth was running at a mile a minute. You already know his cheeks were bright red.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, Asagi...,” I said, giggling. “You sure know how to calm my nerves.” I didn’t mean to laugh, honest! It just slipped out.

Asagi walked across the ride platform toward the lowest car on the Ferris wheel, mumbling, “Right, yeah, that’s exactly what I was trying to do, yep...”

Ah-ha-ha... Asagi wasn’t really graceful as he climbed into the car. At one point, both his arms and legs were sticking out before he settled in. But despite his floundering—or maybe because of it—I didn’t feel quite so nervous anymore. Actually, I felt pretty good as I joined him on the Ferris wheel. Our car rose higher and higher above the park.

“Wow... All the buildings look so small from up here...”

“Look outside the park. It’s totally surrounded by a forest.”

“Yeah... ’Course, if you built an amusement park in the middle of a huge forest in the real world, nobody would show up.”

Our car reached the very top of the Ferris wheel, and I scanned the park. I could see every other attraction we’d already visited.

...Wait a second. The streetlights around each attraction form words!

The lights to the west, around the haunted house, spelled out *new*. The ones around the coffee cups spelled *old*. In the north, by the roller coaster, they spelled *way*. And directly below us, I had to squint, but I could swear they spelled *time*.

I thought back to what the sign had said: “*Gather the old-time symbols.*”

That was it! I got it!

More importantly, I realized I’d had it wrong. I thought that maybe we’d need the stamps from the attractions with old-timey lettering on the signs, or something like that...which would have been close, but not quite the answer we were looking for.

I was so glad we rode the Ferris wheel. Who knows? If we’d made a mistake, we might’ve had to follow the whole route over again from the beginning.

“Aha... I think I get it now,” said Asagi. He’d figured it out, too. We had to put our stamped sheets from the attractions whose words formed *old-time* in the box. That meant the stamps from the coffee cups and the Ferris wheel. Now that we knew the answer, there was no time to waste!

We got off the Ferris wheel, ran to the box in the middle of the park, and inserted the correct stamped sheets.

We heard a long, low *rummmble* as a stage rose up behind us. The stage itself was covered in dirt and muck, but there was a large gemstone floating right in the middle of it. The Victory Application Point!

“Well, there’s the application point...but we still don’t have the key...”

“Right... I guess that means we’ve gotta beat the boss after all.”

The Follodoll was tough. Really tough. We’d managed to make it this far without really fighting it, but I should’ve known that finishing the event wouldn’t be that easy. I wasn’t convinced it was even possible for the two of us to beat it. I mean, our attack spells barely tickled it...

I looked at the sign again. It promised, “WHAT YOU DESIRE SHALL BE YOURS.” Sure, we desired the Victory Application Point...but giving it to us without the key felt more than a little mean. Asagi and I stood in the center of the park with

no clue what to do. But we didn't stand there for long before ominous letters showed up on our Nightmare screens.

<<!>> Floor Boss Approaching <<!>>

"Uh oh! We've got company!" Asagi shouted. I turned my head to see the Follodoll rolling straight for us, swinging both of its swords wildly and picking up speed. No doubt about it: It was zooming in to attack.

"Run for it, Mai!"

"B-but...!"

"I'll hold it off! Now go... Please!" Asagi readied his sword and leaped at the Follodoll.

I was scared. My legs trembled as I remembered how badly Asagi had been hurt the last time the Follodoll hit him. And yet, despite everything, Asagi didn't hesitate for a second before he jumped back in for round two. One thing was certain: He was really, really brave.

What was I supposed to do? Run away and leave him to fight alone? No way. Even if I got away safely, the odds that Asagi would get his own chance to escape seemed slim to none. Come on, Mai! This is no time to get all flustered!

I wasn't sure I could be much help. In fact, I was pretty sure I couldn't. But I summoned a sword with my Skill Chip anyway.

I checked my console. Asagi was down to 3,700 HP. The boss was at 14,090. It was overwhelming. I used my healing spells to bring Asagi back up to full health, but the boss cut away at him so quickly that his HP plummeted back down immediately. Soon, I was all out of healing spell chips! I decided to make a run for the chest behind the sign and grab some more. I ran as fast as I could toward the very center of the park.

"Augh!" As it turned out, I ran too fast to watch my step. I slipped in the mud and toppled to the ground. *Ick*. My whole body was covered in mud. *Yuck*. I really wished I had better reflexes. As if things weren't bad enough already, the

mud was so sticky, I couldn't pick myself back up again. Oh, man... What if the boss attacks me while I'm stuck here...?

Hang on a sec. I'm stuck...and I can't get back up on my own... Aha! That's it!

The scariest thing about the Follodoll was its speed. No matter how many times we knocked it over, it picked itself back up in an instant and kept coming. But what if it fell over in the mud? Then I bet it'd be a sitting duck.

Yeah! It had to work! I was sure of it!

"Eeeeeek!!" I screamed as loudly as I could, thrashing around in the mud.

"Mai! Are you okay?!"

From the sound of his voice, I could tell Asagi was really worried. Sorry, Asagi, but I need you to fall for it, too.



The Follodoll stopped attacking Asagi and froze in place for a moment. It had noticed me struggling, too. So far, so good! Now I had to make sure it took the bait. Defenseless, in no armor stronger than my Nightmareland uniform, I put on my best “Please, *please* don’t attack me!” face and crawled farther into the patch of mud.

“.....! Mai!” Asagi came running to help me, but the Follodoll was faster. It rolled into the mud at top speed. Mission accomplished!

I saw a look of total despair on Asagi’s face. He really was worried about me, down to the bottom of his heart. I’m so, sooo sorry, Asagi, but I’ve gotta do this if we want to win!

And then—*KER-SPLUSH!!*

The Follodoll’s wheel got stuck in the mud, exactly as I thought it would. The boss fell hard down onto the muddy ground.

“Huh...? It... It fell?!”

“Now, Asagi! Attack it now! Please!”

In the blink of an eye, the despair vanished from Asagi’s face as he figured out exactly what I’d done.

“I get it! So that’s what all this mud is for! I hear you loud and clear, Mai—leave the rest to me!”

Asagi made his way through the mud slowly and steadily. That way, he wouldn’t slip and fall like the Follodoll (and I) had. The boss was still on the ground when Asagi reached it. He slashed at it again and again with his sword. Try as it might, the Follodoll couldn’t pull itself out of the mud to fight back.

All right! Just a little more!

“Hooooaaah!” Asagi let out a loud war cry as he hit the Follodoll with his sword one last time.

Yes! I checked my console and saw that the boss’s HP had finally fallen all the way to zero. The monster vanished, leaving a key in its place. Asagi scrambled

to pluck the key out of the mud before it could sink out of sight.

“Haah... Haah... We did it...” His shoulders heaved as he caught his breath. He must’ve hit the Follodoll with all the strength he had.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. ’Course I am. Thanks a lot, Mai... What’d I tell you? It’s a real relief to have you around.”

I grinned as Asagi trudged toward me through the mud.

“C’mon. Let’s go home,” he said, stretching out a hand. I took it, and he pulled me back to my feet. Hand in hand, we walked over to the Victory Application Point.

<<Victory Report>> † Player 1 †

Mai Yashiro

HP: 5,000/5,000

<Items Held> 6/10

- Park Map**
- Staff Uniform**
- Sword**
- Ice Blast chip x3**

† Player 2 †

Taisuke Asagi

HP: 2,300/5,000

<Items Held> 6/10

- **Sword**
- **Staff Uniform**
- **Ice Blast chip x3**
- **Thousand Heal chip x1**

※This certifies that these two players have completed the Yellow Event.

Victory Bonus

**(To be delivered later) ※Once you return to your world,
Nightmare will enter a maintenance period.**

Good News

Slowly, cautiously, my eyes blinked open.

The first thing I saw was Taichi and Sugiura, leaning in close, observing Asagi and me.

“Eek!”

“Whoa!”

Startled and dumbfounded, Asagi and I both jolted awake with a shout.

“Ugh, what’re you two so jumpy for?” Sugiura sneered. “...So did you win, or what?”

You’d think he could guess the answer, since Asagi and I both woke up at the same time, but I guess he had to make sure. Asagi and I nodded.

“Yeah.”

“You know we did!”

We’d barely gotten the words out before the whole clubroom erupted into cheers.

“Great job, Mai!”

Youko, Hirata, and Yoichi were the first to approach me.

“Congratulations, Mai! That was seriously amazing!”

“...Congrats,” said Hirata, cradling his cat Mewta in his arms. Mewta meowed.

Hee-hee! I guess that’s kitty speech for *congratulations*.

“Congratulations on another event well played,” said Yoichi. “As leaders of the Main, Rescue, and Scout squads, we wanted to give you this.” He handed me a gift-wrapped box.

“Uh, Yoichi? Where’d the box come from?” Youko asked. “I don’t remember us deciding to get ’em a present!”

“...Yoichi’s laughing on the inside,” said Hirata. “Yashiro, Asagi... I wouldn’t open that if I were you...unless you like nasty surprises...”

“Dang it, Rito! Spoil *all* my fun, why don’t you?! I worked so hard on that prank, too...”

I knew Yoichi loved pranks, but seriously?! Seconds after we got back from an event?! Actually, I wouldn’t put it past him. That sort of thing was right up his alley.

“...It’s what you get for trying to rope us into it... You’ve only got yourself to blame...”

“For real! Ugh, Yoichi, you’re the worst!” Youko joined in on the scolding. “Anyway, you two can forget about Yoichi’s stupid little joke. Nao’s got some *real* presents waiting for you: more of her famous sweets! Let’s go grab a few.”

Asagi and I followed Youko to a table where Naomi had set out a huge spread of treats she’d baked: cookies, madeleines, financiers, and more.

“Wow, look at all this,” Asagi said. “I feel like I’m in a pastry shop. You could seriously sell this stuff.”

“I know, right?! You’re amazing, Naomi!”

Naomi grinned, bathing happily in the flood of compliments. “I’m glad you like them,” she said. “I’m not a very good Nightmare player, but I figure maybe I can help out in other ways. If that means baking, then I’m gonna bake my heart out!”

“It’s a big help for sure! Your tasty sweets are just the pick-me-up we need after a Nightmare sesh! Isn’t that right, Asagi?”

“Yeah, sure is! Especially after an event like that one. Whenever I’m worn out, something sweet really hits the spot.” Asagi had a serious sweet tooth. I could

tell he was overjoyed.

“Pardon me, Yashiro and Asagi... I’d like to offer my own belated congratulations, if I may.”

“Muh... Muh... M-M-Masuda!!”

He’d called out to Asagi and me, but going by Youko’s reaction, you’d think he was talking to her and her alone.

“Ah-ha-ha, thank you!” I bowed my head politely, though I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Youko, who had turned an Asagi-like shade of red.

“Ah, by the way, I’ve chosen a squad to join,” Masuda said.

“R-r-really?! Wh-wh-which one?!” Youko hung on his every word. No one could have been more interested in his decision than she was, though I was pretty curious myself.

“First, I should thank Yashiro and Asagi. I’ve decided to take their advice and join the Main Squad. Unless I’m mistaken, you’re the Main Squad leader, aren’t you, Youko? I’m looking forward to playing with you more.”

“Yesss! I mean, yes, I am. You can count on me!!” Youko looked even happier than Asagi did with a plate of freshly baked cookies. I couldn’t blame her. It was hard to spend every day fighting for your life in Nightmare. You had to hold on tight to happiness wherever you found it.

Naomi, Asagi, and I shared a knowing look and smiled. It felt so, so good to have the event over with.

Oh, right! I’ve gotta tell Amelie! I opened my console and clicked through to Amelie’s Room.

“Hey, Amelie! We beat the event!”

“You did?!” I’d interrupted her in the middle of training, apparently. She stood in the middle of her room, punching the air. “Already?! Aww, and here I was, getting ready to smash some bad guys for you!”

She looked sincerely disappointed, though I have to admit it made for an adorable sight. Heartwarming, really.

I held one of Naomi's madeleines up to my Nightmare screen.

"Whoa, what's that huge thing?" Amelie asked.

"It's called a madeleine," I said. "It's super sweet and super delicious, too."

"Is it some kinda cake?"

"Yeah, exactly."

That was all Amelie needed to hear. She stared at the madeleine with drool dripping from her wide mouth. Now that I thought about it, I was pretty sure they sold madeleines at the in-game shop menu, too.

"I'll send you one later, Amelie—candy, too."

"Ooh! Please do!" Amelie was delighted. So delighted, in fact, that she started running laps around her room. Now she was *really* adorable.

"Hey, Mai," Asagi said. I lifted my face up from my Nightmare console. "Is it just me, or do all our troubles melt away at the Conquerors' Club? I don't even mean Nightmare, necessarily. It feels like everyone mellows out here a bit." He was looking over at the two bullies, Takojima and Akaishi. It was true; they looked a lot calmer and happier than they had when we first met them. They were even smiling. "As long as we're around to keep an eye on things, it should be pretty smooth sailing when Kaneda moves in."

"Hang on," I said. "What do you mean, *when* he moves in?"

"Confession time. Ever since he came by, I've been swinging by Kaneda's place every now and then to help him convince his folks to let him join. He just sent me a text that says he should be here soon." Asagi grinned from ear to ear as he said it.

Whaaat?! When did Asagi do that?! I totally didn't notice!

"It was a lotta work, but I couldn't leave him alone to fend for himself, y'know?" He chuckled. There was a bit of the old Asagi bashfulness I knew so well in the laugh, but somehow, his smile looked different than usual. More grown-up.

Not only had Asagi been staying on top of his daily Nightmare routine, he'd also made time to help Kaneda. It had to be even harder than I could imagine to

juggle all that. I was amazed. I'm serious—how cool was that? Asagi knew how to take action, and he was super kind, too. There was a lot I could learn from him.

"I can't wait for Kaneda to get here!"

"Yeah. Same."

The next moment, Sugiura came stomping over with his scary expression in full force. I racked my brain, trying to figure out what he could possibly be angry about *now*, but I couldn't think of anything...

"Nice work, Asagi. Neither of you got a single Game Over. Didn't think ya had it in you."

"I didn't do it alone," Asagi said. "If it weren't for Mai..."

"You got that right," Sugiura interrupted. "Say what you will about 'er, at least she's got brains." With that, he patted me on the head, then quickly walked straight out of the clubroom.

Hey! Whaddaya mean, "*at least* she's got brains"?! Rude much?

"Where's he off to in such a hurry?"

"He's gotta go tell Green Trier the event's over," said Taichi. "I bet they're gathering a bunch of materials on how you prepared for it as we speak. They're sending someone here to interview you guys tomorrow, y'know."

"They are...?" I asked. Wait, when did Taichi show up?

"Sugiura must have his hands full," said Asagi. "He's probably heading over there in advance so he doesn't have to deal with his dad barging in uninvited, like he did last time."

"Dang, Asagi! Someone's getting sharper!" said Taichi. "You pretty much nailed it. Sugiura's been keeping a sharp lookout twenty-four seven to make sure his dad doesn't do anything sketchy."

I could definitely imagine Sugiura's proactive approach getting results.

"Anyway, don't sweat it for now," Taichi continued. "Try and enjoy the rest of the day. You guys have earned it, am I right? C'mon, have a seat and tell me all

about the event! Oh, hey, Mai... Asagi didn't pull any funny business, did he?"

Asagi's cheeks went crimson in an instant.

"B—! What—? What're you saying?! What do you mean, 'funny business'?"

"Hmm, how suspicious," Taichi said with a smirk. "Now get comfy, 'cause I'm not letting either of you escape to bed early tonight!" True to his word, he asked us question after question about the event. When his curiosity was finally satisfied, it was the middle of the night. Free at last, Asagi and I headed back to our rooms.

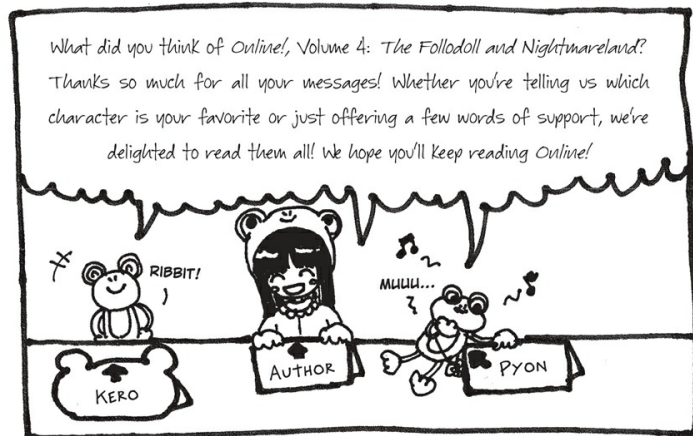
I couldn't get to sleep right away, though. I was too busy thinking about how glad I was to survive the day. About how grateful I was that Nightmare hadn't taken any of the people who were important to me.

And about how I wouldn't have traded the life I'd found with them for the world...

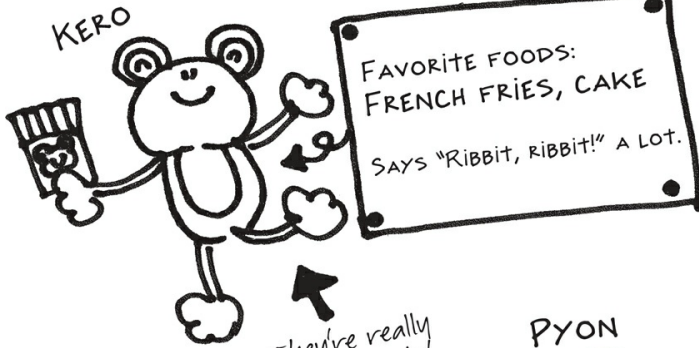
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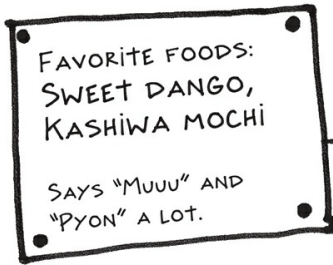
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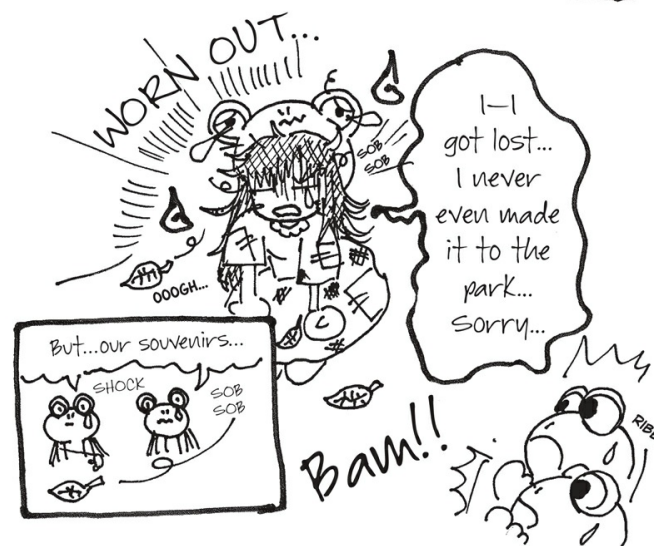
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