



# ONLINE!

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The Devil's Unbeatable Game



Midori Amagaeru  
Illustration by  
Shinichirou Otsuka

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## The Devil's Unbeatable Game

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Midori Amagaeru

Illustration by  
Shinichirou Otsuka

**JY**  
New York

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### Mai Yashiro

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

Favorite Food/drink: Sweets, senbei crackers  
Strong point: Studying! (Exercise, not so much.)

### Taisuke Asagi

A serious, sincere, and above all bashful boy. His neat, clean, jet-black hair is his pride and joy, but he's also got a secret...

Favorite Food/drink: Pudding, cheese  
Strong point: Computers, hard work

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### Shinji Sugiura

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

Favorite Food/drink: Gum, coffee  
Strong point: Any and all aggressive sports (basketball, etc.)

### Naomi Suzuki

A kind, gentle lover of all things adorable. She usually steers clear of video games, but she still gets caught up in *Nightmare*...

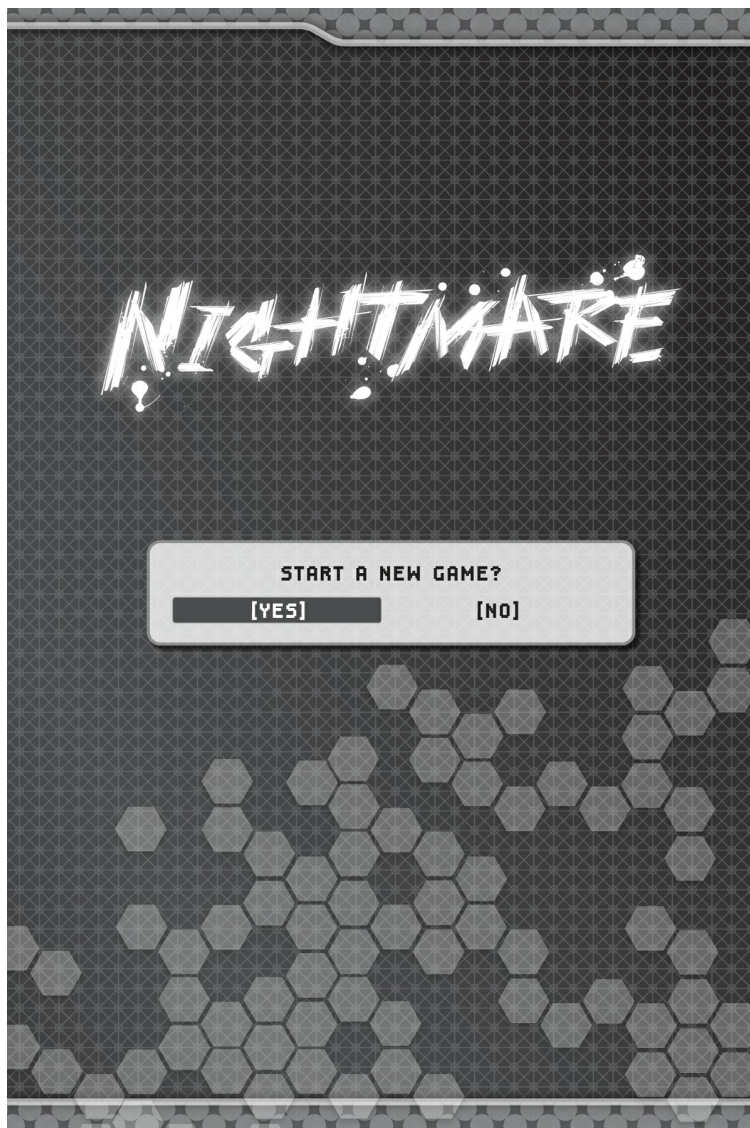
Favorite Food/drink: Milk tea  
Strong point: Organizational skills, cooking

### Taichi Tango

He may look like a sporty kid on the outside, but Taichi's number-one hobby is napping. He's self-conscious about his height and will do whatever it takes to grow taller.

Favorite Food/drink: Tricolor dango, anything that might help him grow  
Strong point: His ability to sleep anywhere





**It could happen to you...**

**Someday, this game just might fall into your hands.**

**And when it does...be sure you don't play it lightly.**

**This is no ordinary game.**

**It's cost me my life—at the very least.**

**That's all I can say to warn you.**

## *The Mysterious Box That Started It All*

I heard some people gossiping around the shoe cubbies at school.

“Hey, did you hear the rumor that’s been going around?”

The voices sounded kind of familiar. I was pretty sure they belonged to a few girls in the class next to mine.

“You know how, like, tons of kids haven’t been in school lately? Get this. I hear it’s because of a cursed video game.”

“Huh? Cursed how?”

My thoughts exactly. Now I was curious.

“They say that if you start playing the game, a demon curses you, and you, like, lose control of your body!”

Okay, that just sounded made up...

“Oh, hey, Yashiro!”

Ack! Did they notice me eavesdropping?!

“So how many kids are missing from your class, Yashiro?”

“Um... Well... I think about five were out yesterday...,” I answered.

“Five?!” the girl said, her eyes wide in shock. “I knew it! It’s gotta be the demon’s curse! It’s all because of that video game! Oh man... The curse is spreading... It’s gonna be the end of Japan as we know it!”

She spread her arms out so wide, you’d think she was on stage in a play. She must be in Drama Club. It was a bit theatrical, even for them.

I caught a glimpse of a book in her bag that was titled THE COMPLETE GUIDE

TO URBAN LEGENDS.

That explained it. She wasn't just overly dramatic; she was a horror nut, too.

But soon, the cursed video game suddenly burst back into my life.

It was a Sunday, which meant there was no class. I was lounging around my dorm room, doing pretty much nothing. Oh, right! I'm Mai Yashiro, a second-year high school student at Ryokuka Private Academy. I'm used to the dorms now, but the first time I saw them, I couldn't believe my eyes! I mean, every student has their own room. And that's not all—we've got our own private restrooms and baths, too.

And you would not believe the view from the dorms! It's gorgeous! I can see the academy itself from my window, but the real treat is all the lush, green nature and blooming flowers. It's like looking into a whole other world out there.

I absolutely love the view from my window. Whenever anything gets me down, or if something is bothering me, looking out my window is comforting.

...But that all changed recently. They'd been doing some heavy construction or something on the third floor of the dorm building, and it was super loud! Since studying requires extra focus, I tried to do as much as I could elsewhere, like at fast food restaurants and such. But for some reason, I didn't hear the construction that day. Maybe it was finally over.

In that case, I had a chance to get through some math problems without interruption! I opened my bag...only to find a strange black, rectangular box sitting there inside it.

"TO MAI YASHIRO" was written on the box in white ink.

No doubt about it, that was my name. But suspiciously, there was no hint about who sent it.

I carefully opened the box and found a black object inside. I recognized it as a handheld game console. A lot of kids in my class had one just like it.

Feeling a bit creeped out, I took the game console out of the box and



examined it. That very instant, a deep, regal male voice suddenly boomed out from it saying, “*Welcome to the entrance of Nightmare.*”

I hadn't even switched the thing on yet!



It was a clamshell console, with a hinge that swung open to reveal the screen. I opened it up and saw large red letters already glowing on the black title screen: **Nightmare**, they said.

Nightmare. In other words, a bad dream.

"Huh? There's no charger in here," I blurted out loud. Of course, I wasn't expecting anyone to answer, but...

*"This device is powered by something special. No need to worry about turning it on or off."*

I immediately threw open my window to see if there was anyone outside who might have said that. But there wasn't a soul in sight.

*"That won't do you any good. I'm not there with you."* The voice echoed throughout my dorm room with a teasing chuckle. I felt goose bumps rising up on my skin.

"Hey, how do you know what I'm doing?" I asked. "And who are you anyway?"

*"I'd be glad to answer, if you'd kindly play the game."*

Yeah, right! I didn't think about it anymore. I raised the game console over my head like I was going to smash it into a million pieces on the floor.

*"I should warn you. If you break that console, it'll explode."*

D-did he say *explode*?! I froze. I wasn't so eager to throw the console now.

*"That's right,"* continued the voice. *"I suggest you don't do anything stupid, for your own good. If you don't want to die, that is... Heh-heh-heh..."*

"I'm still not going to play the game!" I declared. The man's laughter grew even creepier.

*"In that case, I'll make you a deal. I'll kill everyone you care about instead."*

"C-c'mon... I know you're bluffing."

*"If you don't believe me, shall I start by killing just one of them? Just to prove I mean it."*

“H-hang on a sec!” The faces of people who were important to me filled my mind. No way could I risk testing the voice like that. “Fine, fine! I’ll play. But tell me one thing first: What are you after anyway?”

After a brief but heavy silence, the man said, “*Who knows? It’s just a game anyway, right?*” Chills went down my spine. Whoever this guy was, was he really threatening to kill people over a game?! “*Now, then. I’m waiting for you to begin.*”

“Hey!” I called out, but I didn’t hear the man’s voice again. I sat completely still for a while, unsure about what to do. I mean, he said that if I didn’t play the game, he’d kill everyone I cared about...

In other words, I couldn’t say no.

I psyched myself up and pressed a button to finally go past the title screen. And with that, I’d done something huge. For better or for worse—okay, just for worse—my peaceful, everyday life came crashing down in that instant.

## *The Game Begins*

I gave up on the idea of getting any math homework done, sat down on my bed, and took another look at the game screen. New letters appeared under the name **Nightmare**:

**Start a new game?**

**[Yes] / [No]**

I reluctantly pressed the **Yes** button, and another voice came out of the game console. It sounded a lot like the man's voice from before, but somehow more mechanical.

*"By starting the game, you have made a contract with a demon."*

Huh?!

*"Depending on whether you win or lose, your body may be given over to the demon, according to this contract. Should you get a Game Over, the demon sealed within this game will completely possess you,"* the mechanical male voice said, so smoothly and matter-of-factly that if you weren't really listening, you wouldn't notice how scary the words were.

But I didn't react. That was my little way of resisting: *You think this is gonna go exactly how you expect? Yeah, right!*

New letters appeared on the screen, reading **Welcome! You are the 6,925,030th player.**

Wait, that's almost seven million people! That's a crazy number of players!

Meanwhile, the total number of players kept increasing steadily. There was something fishy about this game for sure... Huh? The screen changed yet again.

## **[New Player Settings]**

**Now we'll create your avatar. Please make the following choice.**

Avatar? I guessed that meant the character who'd represent me in the game world. The names of eight different body parts were listed on the screen: Eyes, Ears, Mouth, Heart, Left Hand, Right Hand, Legs, and Nose.

**<<Before you decide>>**

**※Please note that your choice will affect your stats. Furthermore, some choices may present the risk of sudden disadvantages during gameplay.**

Wait, risk?! I had a really bad feeling about this...

### **[Eyes]**

- **Acquired Skill Limit...5**
- **CP...50**
- **Fear Resistance...20**

### **[Left Hand]**

- **Acquired Skill Limit...3**

- **CP...10**
- **Fear Resistance...45**

It looked like there were three stats my choice would affect: Acquired Skill Limit, CP, and Fear Resistance.

I put all my knowledge of video games to work figuring them out. Acquired Skill Limit probably meant the maximum number of special abilities my character would be able to learn in the game. Fear Resistance seemed easy enough to understand... It had to be my character's ability to get through scary situations, right?

CP was the main issue. I had no idea what that might stand for.

## **[Heart]**

- **Acquired Skill Limit... $\infty$**
- **CP...1,000,000**
- **Fear Resistance...1**

Wh-what?! The Heart's stats were so different from the other parts' that it seemed silly. Its Acquired Skill Limit was an infinity symbol. Its CP was a million. There was definitely something strange going on. I had a gut feeling that whatever I did, I shouldn't choose the Heart.

But then which one should I choose? I'm right-handed, if that made any difference... Gotta pick. I chose **Left Hand**.

Phew. It'd taken me about an hour just to make that one decision. I sure am indecisive. I chuckled bitterly to myself.

*"Heh-heh..."* the voice joined in. *"The Left Hand? Well, I suppose it is a safe choice."*

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

*“If you die in the game, the devil claims the body part that you chose as payment for reviving you. In other words, it stops working. Good thing you didn’t choose the Heart, eh?”*

“Huh?! Wait, when you say ‘it stops working,’ you don’t mean for real, do you? Like, even in real life?”

Come to think of it, that lined up perfectly with the rumor I’d heard—that the game makes you lose control of your body.

*“If you don’t believe me, then why not try dying once? I can’t say I recommend it, though... Anyhow, Mai Yashiro, may we meet again somewhere in the game. My name is Kamisawa, and I’m the head administrator of Nightmare. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”*

With that, our connection cut off with a popping sound.

“Hey!” I cried out. There was more that I wanted to ask him! I tried calling out to Kamisawa again and again, but he didn’t answer. All I could do was brace myself for the worst.

**[Choice: Left Hand]**

**Automatic initialization system in effect.**

**Confirming Mai Yashiro’s personal information.**

**...Loading...**

**Avatar creation is complete.**

**[Character Name] Mai Yashiro**

**[Skills] 0/3 (No skills acquired)**

**[Respawn Penalty] Left Hand**

**※Please note you will lose use of your left hand if your**



**character dies.**

**[Fear Resistance] 45**

**[Charm] A**

**※Charm ranks (high) S, A, B, C, D, E (low)**

The words on the screen made me jump. Why was my avatar's name my actual name?! I'd never played a game under my real name before. Also, what was with this Charm stat? (I'll admit that I was a little glad to see it was an A, though!) Next, I checked out the avatar the game made for me...

It looked like me.

My in-game character's hairstyle and color, eyes, nose, mouth, everything—they all looked exactly like mine. How the heck did that happen?

[Character]  
Mai Yashiro



[Response]  
×Please

[Fear Resistance]

[Charm] A  
×Charm ranks (high)



Just then, the words **You have one message** popped up on the screen. I figured there must be a feature like messaging on a cell phone.

**[From: Taisuke Asagi]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Whoa, even you're playing now, too? I'm glad I check the New Player list every day.**

**Oh, there's one thing I should tell you: Whatever you do, don't choose the Heart as your Respawn Penalty.**

**And one more thing: You should definitely look through the Help files before you start playing! That'll help you not die.**

**END**

"Taisuke...Asagi...?" Who was that? I got the feeling I'd heard the name somewhere before...

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Taisuke Asagi]**

**Thank you for the advice, Taisuke.**

**I know this might be kind of a rude question, but have we met?**

**END**

He replied right away. I was worried—what if I really did know him already? That might make things super awkward.

**[From: Taisuke Asagi]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

Sorry, but could you not use my first name? Honestly, I just...don't like it.

Anyway, you really don't remember me? Oh... Well, I guess that's not too surprising.

Oh, right! I'm sending you 100 CP. Watch out—if you don't earn 100 CP every day, your character dies. This present will cover you for today, so don't worry about fighting yet. Just focus on reading the Help files like I said.

**<<Attachment: 100 CP>>**

**END**

The instant I accepted the 100 CP that Asagi included in his mail, a new message popped up on the screen.

**[CP Minimum Reached!]**

**Mai Yashiro's Auto-Death System has been deactivated for the day.**

Auto-Death System? What the heck was that? It was just one thing after

another. There was too much that I didn't know. I decided to take Taisuke's advice and spend the day learning the rules of the game.

#### <<Help File No. 4 [Auto-Death System]>>

**Players that fail to earn at least 100 CP in a day will have their avatars killed just after midnight.**

**When you respawn, please choose another Respawn Penalty. Please be aware that previously deactivated parts cannot be activated and chosen again.**

- 1. Players who cannot choose a new Respawn Penalty will die in real life as well.**
- 2. Players who die after choosing the Heart as their Respawn Penalty cannot choose a new Respawn Penalty.**

**※Death in this game means death in real life (as the demon will take over your body).**

**※Players who try to fight or escape to the world map without choosing their next Respawn Penalty will have one chosen for them automatically. Please be aware that the Heart may be chosen for you in this case.**

I read that explanation over and over again. What it all came down to was that if I didn't want to die for real, I had to play the game every single day.

*Do I really have to make this freaky game a part of my daily life forever?* It was time to sum up everything that I knew about Nightmare. (I always take the time to review, no matter what!) I could boil it down to three main points:

1. Ignoring the game and not earning CP = dying in the game
2. Dying too much and running out of Respawn Penalties = dying in real life
3. Choosing the Heart as my Respawn Penalty and dying = dying in real

life

Just then, the little indicator light on the game console started blinking. That seemed to mean I had a new message. Unlike the others, this one had a subject line: **Please help.**

**[From: Naomi Suzuki]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Please, please...! You've got to help me!**

**I'm on the seventh of my eight Respawn Penalties. It's the Eyes, too. If midnight comes and I still don't have 100 CP, I'm going to lose them. And then all I'll have left to choose is the Heart... I'm afraid that I'm going to die!**

**Can you please, please send me CP, or maybe get back the parts that I lost?**

**END**

Huh? Something seemed odd. I hated to do this if she was really in trouble, but I just had to ask...

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Naomi Suzuki]**

**I'm not sure if I can help you (I actually just started playing myself!), but I've got to ask you something. What happens when a body part stops working, like the game says?**

**Since you sent me a message, I assume you didn't actually**

**lose the use of your hands in real life, right?**

She must've been really, really desperate for help, because she replied in less than five minutes.

**[From: Naomi Suzuki]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**You're wrong! In the real world, I can't use anything except my eyes. But there are times when all my parts get activated again! I think that's so players can still eat and do everything else we need to actually stay alive. Like, the bare minimum stuff. Here's the schedule.**

**[Morning] 30 minutes, starting at 7:00 AM**

**[Noon] 30 minutes, starting at 12:00 PM**

**[Night] 30 minutes, starting at 8:00 PM**

**I'm pretty sure this is all in the Help files.**

**END**

Aha... So that's how it was.

I looked up at the clock hanging on my wall. It was 12:32 in the afternoon. Naomi had sent her first message a little bit after twelve o'clock. It all lined up. Now that it was after twelve thirty, Naomi would be back down to only her eyes and her heart.

"I won't be able to talk to her again until eight o'clock tonight," I said to

myself. “What do I do?” I’d only just started playing Nightmare myself. Would I even be able to help Naomi? A feeling of unease like I’d never felt before welled up inside me.

But that just made me even more sure that I couldn’t abandon a person in need!

Maybe I was being naïve. Maybe I just wanted to feel cool. I think that’s what everyone used to say when I helped out a kid who was being bullied. I still remembered him, though. At least I remembered that he really liked pudding... Anyway, in the end, he was glad I helped him out!

Now that I knew Naomi was out there and needed my help, I couldn’t abandon her. Maybe if I’d known just how terrifying Nightmare was at the time, I would’ve made a different choice. But I’d made up my mind to save her.

I tried to drown out my fear by saying, “It’ll be fine. You’ll do great,” over and over again in my head.



### 3

## *My First Battle*

First, I had to check Naomi's status. I searched for Naomi Suzuki. Her stat screen showed up on my screen right away, and I noticed something strange.

Naomi's avatar had **X** marks on several parts of its body. They covered six parts: her mouth, left hand, right hand, nose, ears, and legs. Her eyes and heart were unmarked. There was no doubt about it: Those **Xs** marked the parts of her body that had been deactivated.

All of the **Xs** looked clickable, so I tried clicking the **X** on Naomi's legs. The screen immediately changed to display the words **Slit-Mouthed Woman**.

Could it be? Was that the name of an enemy that had killed Naomi?

And was it the same kind of slit-mouthed woman in urban legends? There are rumors about her all over Japan. She's supposedly a monster who looks like a woman whose mouth is split almost all the way to both ears. I think pretty much everyone has heard the story before.

To be perfectly honest, I was getting pretty scared. But still, even if I had to fight the Slit-Mouthed Woman, at least it was only a game. I could pull it off... right? Right!

**Fight this enemy?**

**[Yes] / [No]**

With shaking hands, I chose **Yes**. There was no turning back!

[!]

**You are now entering combat. When you are ready, please close your eyes.**

Huh? Why did I have to do that? What would happen when I closed my eyes? Would something pop up from behind me that moment and strike? I didn't want to get into the game like that, but I couldn't press onward without playing along! Terrified, I closed my eyes.

That same instant, a slight tingle, like a weak electric current, ran out of the game console and through my hand.

“.....tch.”

It was only a little jolt, like a burst of static electricity. Still, the timing caught me off guard.

I found myself standing in pitch-black darkness. I looked down at the black Nightmare game console gripped tightly in my hands. I knew one thing for sure—this wasn't a dream.

And then a new message appeared on the game screen.

**Propose a Battle of Wits to the Slit-Mouthed Woman?**

**[Yes] <<Success Rate 32%>>**

**※If your proposal fails, combat will begin as normal and the enemy will get the first strike. You will return to the usual game world and face it in a Normal Battle.**

**[No]**

**※You will return to the usual game world.**

I assumed that a Battle of Wits must be just what it sounded like—a fight where you use your brain. Safe bet, right? I don’t mean to brag, but I’ve scored the highest grades in my class ever since elementary school...but the other side of that coin is that for subjects that don’t rely on book smarts—P.E., home ec, music—I’m completely out of luck unless they somehow involve a written test. I’m clumsy, I can’t carry a tune, and my reflexes practically don’t exist.

So, hey, I’m not perfect. But when it comes to using my brain, I’m pretty confident.

The game said that my enemy was only 32 percent likely to accept the Battle of Wits. Still, I had no doubt that at my super-low level, I didn’t have a chance of winning a Normal Battle. The Battle of Wits was my only option.

*All right! I thought. Let’s think our way to victory!*

**...Proposing a Battle of Wits...**

**Please wait a moment.**

.....

.....

...

**Negotiation complete.**

I heard a mechanical whirring sound—like something was being hoisted up—from in front of me. When I looked to see what it was, I noticed that where there had been nothing but darkness before, two black chairs faced each other.

A large screen lowered and stopped between the chairs.

## **[Preparations Complete for Battle of Wits]**

**Please take a seat. The Battle of Wits is about to begin.**

It looked like my offer of a Battle of Wits had been successful. I sighed with relief.

The black chairs were built like little sofas for one person each. They were covered in very stiff leather and not even a little bit comfortable.

*Takkk... Takkk, takkk...*

I heard the sound of footsteps.

*Takkk-takkk, takkk...*

The footsteps grew steadily closer. It was clear that someone was coming. Was it really the Slit-Mouthed Woman?

My whole body shook as I looked away in fear. I couldn't do it after all. I couldn't, I couldn't... I was scared. I was so scared...

I covered my ears to try and block out the footsteps. But I still couldn't get rid of the feeling that someone was coming. The Slit-Mouthed Woman was nearby. Just as my shaking legs went from a slight tremble to nearly buckling in fear, the light on my game console began blinking.

## **[Enemy Appeared]**

**Combat has begun.**

**It is your turn. Please choose an action.**

I cautiously looked toward the chair across from mine. No doubt about it: Something was there! I started raising my eyes upward very slowly.

The first thing I saw was a pair of white high-heeled shoes. I peeked a little higher and saw a white dress, perfectly matching the shoes. I looked a bit higher again and saw a cute brooch shaped like a piece of candy pinned to the woman's chest. I rallied my courage and looked fully at my enemy.

Her head drooped forward, but she did look like the Slit-Mouthed Woman from all the urban legends. Her long black hair covered her face, though, so I couldn't see her expression...



Oh, man! This was really, really scary after all!

“Hee-hee... What’s wrong? I’ve already picked out what I’m going to do. Hurry up and choose your action, will you? Or are you afraid of me?” As the woman in the chair spoke, I could see her mouth gaping wide—large enough for me to see, even though she was still facing down. Abnormally large.

**<<Battle vs. Slit-Mouthed Woman>>**

**[Enemy Data File 1]**

**★Slit-Mouthed Woman**

- **Strength [B]**
- **Attack Power [B]**
- **Defense [B]**
- **Speed [A]**
- **Battle of Wits [32%]**

**★Characteristics★**

**Widely split mouth.**

All I could think as I started combat was that I wanted to get out of there—and fast.

**<<Attacking Turn>>**

**It is your turn to attack. Please choose an action.**

**[Charge] ※Increases your Critical Gauge.**

**[High Attack] ※Will miss if your enemy chooses “Crouch.”**

**[Low Attack] ※Will miss if your enemy chooses “Jump.”**

**[Talk] ※Alters your enemy’s Fear value.**

Oh no! I forgot to look at the Help files before running off to battle! I didn’t know what any of that stuff meant!

Let’s see... I decided to start with what I did know. First off, it was my turn to attack, and it looked like attackers and defenders had different options to choose from. The little hints on the game’s selection screen gave me a pretty good idea of what the different actions did. It seemed safe to assume that the Slit-Mouthed Woman and I would take turns attacking and defending until combat was over.

If I chose High Attack, and she chose Crouch... My attack probably wouldn’t hit her. But if she chose something else, my attack would get through. That’s about as much as I could guess.

So, even as the attacker, I didn’t know for sure that I’d do any damage. I only had the *chance* to do damage. But on the other hand, if I could predict what she would do, I might be able to win without getting hurt.

That made sense. It was really a Battle of Wits.

It all came down to how well I could read my opponent. That was the key to victory!

It was possible that the Slit-Mouthed Woman realized that I was new to the game. Actually, going by all her taunts at the beginning, that seemed pretty likely. And I think most beginners would go for a High Attack or Low Attack, since those were the easiest actions to understand.

*In that case, I thought, I should avoid making an obvious choice.* The risk that she’d guess it was too high. So my choice was clear...

“I’ve decided,” I said, slowly lifting my head. Looking up, I saw the Slit-Mouthed Woman grinning at me with her disturbingly wide mouth.

“.....Screen.....”



Huh? I looked at the screen, just like she said. It showed the Slit-Mouthed Woman and me—actually, it showed our avatars. Our characters on the screen were facing each other in a huge building that looked like an arena, though there was no one in the audience to watch them fight. The atmosphere made it clear that the showdown was about to begin.

To be honest, though, the Slit-Mouthed Woman's avatar was kinda cute.

## **<<Combat Results>>**

### **[Mai Yashiro - Attacker] Talk**

### **[Slit-Mouthed Woman - Defender] Crouch**

As the combat results showed up on the screen, our miniaturized characters started to move. Mine began to run toward the Slit-Mouthed Woman's. Her avatar waited until mine got right up in front of her, then crouched down in place. She was clearly anticipating a High Attack...

But that's not what happened. I'd chosen Talk. Naturally, there was no attacking involved.

My avatar came to a sudden stop in front of the Slit-Mouthed Woman's.

All right, just as I expected! Boy, did the Slit-Mouthed Woman look surprised! I'd gone with the bold plan of picking the one action I understood the least.

"I'll admit I didn't see that coming," said the Slit-Mouthed Woman. "Hee-hee... Not bad. I thought this would be an easier win for me. But it will be a win for me nonetheless."

"You don't know that yet!"

I mean, she didn't, right? The battle had barely even started.

## **<<Talk Menu>>**

**The attacker's Talk action was successful.**

**Please choose how to approach the Slit-Mouthed Woman.**

**★Threaten [Raise Fear by 50] <<Success Rate 50%>>**

**★Stare [Raise Fear by 30] <<Success Rate 70%>>**

My hands froze. I had no idea which one I should choose.

Then a message suddenly appeared at the top of my game screen: **One spectator would like to watch the battle.**

Someone wanted to come in and watch the fight? I guess that was an option. Fighting all alone was pretty discouraging. Without thinking twice, I hit the button to allow the spectator in.

## *The Lone Spectator*

The next thing I knew, a human shape was moving slowly toward us from out of the darkness.

**<<Loading Complete>>**

**Potential Spectators: 1**

**Summoned Taisuke Asagi into the playing field.**

Taisuke Asagi... Taisuke? Why did that name ring a bell...?

Oh! It was him! He was the guy who sent me the message with the CP attached earlier!

As the figure came closer, I could see that it was a man walking toward me.

.....!

W-well...

How should I put it?

The new spectator had a mop of tousled hair that he clearly hadn't styled and large, black-framed glasses. He sported a worn-out green track jacket. I'll go ahead and say it: He looked like a picture you'd find in the dictionary next to the word *geek*.

But that wasn't the problem. I don't have anything against geeks. After all, what is geekdom, if not a single-minded devotion to learning all you can about a

subject? And that's impressive! At least that's how my old junior high school homeroom teacher put it.

So, what was the problem, you ask? His track jacket! It was filthy... Too filthy... The word *filthy* almost didn't cover it! The trim on it, which had been white at some point, had gone totally yellow, and it was covered in stains from spilled food.

In the next moment, we spoke at the same time. Our voices overlapped perfectly.

"Hello..."



“Please go wash that thing!”

“...Huh?” Dirty Jacket Boy...err, I mean Asagi...blurted out in confusion.

“I know this isn’t the nicest way to start a conversation,” I said, “but that jacket is waaay too dirty! When was the last time you washed that thing?!”

“Hmm? Oh, this?... Good question. A-ha-ha, I forget.”

He forgot?! Who forgets that sort of thing?! I got the feeling that it had been well over a year since his jacket had seen the inside of a laundry hamper.

“Look, don’t worry about that. Didn’t I tell you not to do any fighting today?”

Ack! He had!

“Sorry...”

“Well, it’s too late now. Still, I at least wish you’d talked to me about it first... I could’ve helped you.” He stopped for a moment to scratch his head, then continued with a new, meaningful-sounding weight to his voice. “Now, I don’t know for sure...but if you’d chosen a Normal Battle instead, you’d probably be dead right about now. It’d probably only take one hit.”

“Wha... One hit? Seriously?!”

“Generally, you wanna at least be over level one hundred before taking on Rank B enemies. They’re pretty hard to beat otherwise.”

—!!Oh no...

“Now, a Battle of Wits doesn’t have anything to do with levels, so the playing field’s even, but there’s no guarantee that you’ll win. So in that sense, they’re kinda scarier than Normal Battles.”

“What do I do? To be honest, I...didn’t look at the Help files very much.” Ugh. Even I was shocked by how pathetic I sounded.

“That’s fine. I’m here to support you. If there’s anything you don’t know, ask away!”

Talk about reassuring words! Okay, so maybe he looked gross...but I could tell he was probably a pretty good guy. I started to feel just a bit like I might actually be able to win the battle.

Then I got a new message from Asagi, even though he was standing right in front of me.

**[From: Taisuke Asagi]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**It'd be bad news if the enemy heard what we're saying, so let's take this to text.**

**The Threaten and Stare actions that you're looking at can change her Fear Value—in either direction. If they succeed, her Fear goes up, but if they fail, it goes down instead.**

**Just so you know, if you raise an enemy's Fear Value up to the max (100), you'll be able to subdue them when combat's over. But on the other hand, if your Fear gets up to 100, then you'll have to go a whole turn without doing anything. So watch out for that.**

**By the way: Your starting Fear Value is 45 and the Slit-Mouthed Woman's is 60.**

**END**

It looked like the in-game messaging system could actually be pretty convenient.

Anyway, now I knew that the Talk action I'd chosen wasn't connected to the actual, direct fight at all. I chose Threaten and pressed the button. Its success rate was only 50 percent, but if it worked, then the Slit-Mouthed Woman's Fear value would hit the maximum in one shot.

The next moment, my mini avatar started making intimidating motions toward the Slit-Mouthed Woman's. And then...her avatar started quivering in fright.

All right! It worked!

"Tee-hee-hee... You've got pluck. I like children with pluck. But I'm afraid you simply can't win. You're going to die here. I'll finish you off quickly. Tee-hee-hee-hee-hee..." The Slit-Mouthed woman opened her mouth as widely as it would go in an unsettling leer.

Oogh... No matter how many times I see that grin, I'll never get used to it. Either way, it was my turn to defend.

### **<<Defending Turn>>**

**[Crouch] ※Avoids your enemy's High Attacks.**

**[Jump] ※Avoids your enemy's Low Attacks.**

**[Counter] ※Hits back at your enemy but may fail or lead to a stalemate.**

**[Critical Defense] ※Wards off a Critical Attack.**

**[Charge] ※Increases your Critical Gauge.**

The list offered several different actions. But which one should I pick?

The Slit-Mouthed Woman sat back deeper into her chair and looked up at the screen. She looked extremely calm and composed. I got a hunch that she probably wouldn't be attacking in this turn.

My nerves steadily calmed down. I felt like my sixth sense was getting sharper.

If she wasn't going to attack, then there was no point in defending... But then, I wondered, what should I do?



Hmm? Looking closer at the screen, I noticed that one of the options would increase my Critical Gauge. I didn't know what my Critical Gauge was, but going by the name, it sounded really powerful.

I got the feeling that the exact same Charge option was on the Attacking Turn menu, too. I wished I knew a little more about it...

"Um, Asagi? Could you tell me about the Cri—," I started to ask, but then I snapped my mouth shut midword. Hang on. I had to be extra, super-duper careful. It was better if I sent that question to Asagi in a text message instead.

"The what...?" Huh? Asagi was muttering something.

"You said Cri-something just now, didn't you?" asked the Slit-Mouthed Woman. "I wonder what that means."

Oh man! She was on to me!

"C-Christmas! Y'know, chestnuts roasting on an open fire?" I was so desperate to cover for my slipup that I blurted out something that didn't make any sense.

"Huh?" Sure enough, Asagi gave me a confused look, with his brows furrowed.

I pleaded with him in my mind, begging him to play along.

"Y'know, chestnuts!"

"I'm not sure I follow..."

"Chest! Nuts!!"

"C-calm down..."

"Chestnuuuts!!!!"

"Hey..."

"Chestnuts, chestnuts, chestnuts!!!!"

"....." Asagi fell silent. I guess he'd finally had enough.

My face was bright red with embarrassment. I wanted to find a hole to crawl into and hide... I had to clear up the misunderstanding as soon as possible, so I

hurried to type a text message to Asagi.

As soon as he read it, a look of understanding came over his face.

“Oh, I get it,” he mumbled, then immediately started tapping on his own game console to send me a reply. It seemed like he might take a while, so I decided to continue the fight while I waited.

## <<Action Results>>

### [Mai Yashiro] Charge

### [Slit-Mouthed Woman] Charge

That’s right: We chose the same action.

Then, blue auras lit up around our mini avatars. It looked like we were both building up our Critical Gauges, whatever that meant.

“Hee-hee, now that’s unexpected,” said the Slit-Mouthed Woman. “You figured out that I wouldn’t attack this round, didn’t you?”

She was right. I was pretty sure that she wouldn’t. I didn’t sense any nervousness or urgency from her at all. On top of that, she’d made her choice more or less right away, without taking the time to think about what I might do. In other words, I could tell she’d chosen either Charge or Talk.

But there was no way I was gonna let my enemy know that, right? If anything, I figured I should keep going with the flow and try provoking her a bit.

“I wonder how that happened?” I taunted. “It might be because you’re so weak. I mean, weaklings tend to talk a lot, don’t they?”

I’m sure you can imagine the killer stare the Slit-Mouthed Woman sent my way after that.

“How rude of you!” she hissed. “You’ll die for that! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, I swear!”

*So that’s how it is,* I thought. I took the sudden change in the Slit-Mouthed

Woman's attitude more calmly than I expected. She was short-tempered and a sore loser, and honestly, not that bright. Most importantly, though, it was very easy to get her riled up.

She didn't show any signs of noticing that I'd made her play at my pace. I mean, whoever loses their cool loses the fight—that's the theory behind combat, right? At that moment, the invisible tide of the battle was definitely in my favor.

**[From: Taisuke Asagi]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**A-ha-ha, I get it. You had me panicking for a minute there with all that chestnut stuff. Anyway, on to the Critical Gauge explanation.**

**Once you've charged up your Critical Gauge three times, you'll be able to use a Critical Attack. Right now, both you and the enemy have one charge, so you're both two charges away.**

**★Critical Attacks take your opponent out in one hit.**

**※However, if they use Critical Defense, then your Critical Attack won't do anything.**

**※In that case, your gauge gets reset and you'll have nothing to show for it.**

**★It takes three Normal Attacks to win a fight.**

**Again, you need either one successful Critical Attack or three successful Normal Attacks to win. Those are the two**

**paths to victory.**

**P.S. I like chestnuts, too, just so you know. :| lol**

**END**

That made sense. I could either take the slow and steady path with Normal Attacks or end it all at once with a Critical Attack. I wasn't sure what the heck that P.S. was about, though. I mean, I didn't say anything about *liking* chestnuts. Also, I was pretty sure he wasn't using that smiley face correctly at the end there, either.

I mean, come on, Asagi! Who would lol with a straight face like that?

It was no time to worry about that, though. I had a fight to finish.

I looked over at the Slit-Mouthed Woman, who looked impatient—and angry. I could tell she was thinking, *Hurry up and get going, already!* I obliged and rushed to pick my next action. As it turns out, I picked Charge, while she chose Counter.

“Going for a Critical Attack, are we? Hee-hee. You're easy to read.”

“I wonder,” I shot back. “Shouldn't you focus less on talking and more on winning?”

The Slit-Mouthed Woman had regained some of her composure. Now I had to keep pressing and provoking her. When your temper flares, it gets easier to derail your train of thought. Taking advantage of that was part of my strategy.

The more she let her emotions get the best of her, the closer I got to victory.

In the last turn, I'd managed to successfully charge my Critical Gauge up to two. If I charged it one more time, I could hit her with a Critical Attack. Meanwhile, since I didn't attack, naturally her Counter was a waste of a turn.

Next, it was my turn to defend again. My intuition told me that she would probably choose one of the attack actions. But it was no time to chicken out with one of the defensive actions. If I wanted to win, I had to take a hit. Quietly

and calmly, I pressed the button to make my choice.

Everything was riding on this turn. My hand trembled slightly—because I knew that if I messed up here, I'd lose use of my own left hand.

## *And the Winner Is...*

In the end, I chose Charge, and the Slit-Mouthed Woman chose Low Attack. Immediately, the aura around my avatar changed from yellow to red. It seemed that a blue aura around a character meant their Critical Gauge was at one, a yellow aura meant it was at two, and a red one meant it was at three. It might be a bit easier to remember if you think of it like a traffic light.

My avatar had charged up as much power as she could. Right as she stopped moving, the Slit-Mouthed Woman's avatar ran in to attack. With a lot of momentum, she started down low and swiped with her claws, slashing at my avatar. The attack knocked my avatar back, where she slammed against the wall. I could only watch as she weakly, woozily staggered to her feet; she looked exactly like me.

All of this was only happening on the screen, so of course I didn't feel any real pain at all. Still, a feeling I can't quite describe came over me after seeing it.

Meanwhile, the Slit-Mouthed Woman across from me looked very pleased about her successful attack.

"Hee-hee... A-ha-ha-ha! That's what you get! Serves you right for letting a little success go to your head!"

Instead of arguing back, I sank into silence.

"What's wrong? Nothing to say for yourself?" the Slit-Mouthed Woman continued. "Hee-hee... Or are you too scared to speak?"

I looked away from her and muttered in the weakest voice I could manage, "... Maybe I am." The Slit-Mouthed Woman gave a creepy yet satisfied laugh. I kept talking in a voice full of despair. "Please just finish me off! I just want to get out

of this spooky place as quickly as I can!”

Naturally, it was all an act. Well, okay, the part about wanting to get out of there ASAP was true.

Next, it was my turn to attack. My Critical Gauge was all the way to the max. I could use a Critical Attack to end the fight right then and there... But even if I tried that, my enemy would probably pull out a Critical Defense, just in case. Scratch that—she definitely would. She had to.

In fact, that was exactly what I was going for.

Just then, Asagi cried out in grief from behind me.

“Don’t give up, Mai! You can’t! Fight as hard as you can to the very end! Please... Please, Mai...”

I mean, wow, Asagi! Who knew you were such a pure-hearted guy?

After we chose our actions, the results went up on the screen. I’d chosen High Attack, and of course the Slit-Mouthed Woman went with Critical Defense. My High Attack landed a splendid hit on her defenseless avatar. With that, we both had two lives left.

“Wha... What? A Normal Attack?! What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking you’re nowhere near beating me!” I slowly pointed at the Slit-Mouthed Woman as I continued. “You’re only running on tracks I laid out for you.”

“No... It can’t be... You’re lying... You... You won’t make a fool of me! I’ll kill you! I’ll kill you, you...!” The Slit-Mouthed Woman’s language suddenly turned extremely coarse. That was the telltale sign that she’d completely lost her composure. Meanwhile, I was cool as a cucumber.

“We’ll have to let the fight decide that, now, won’t we? Let’s keep going.” With that, I chose my next action: Counter. The Slit-Mouthed Woman went for a High Attack.

All right! I was safe as long as my Counter was a success!

I looked up at the screen. The Slit-Mouthed Woman’s avatar ran toward mine to attack. It was a super-tense moment. I prayed for a Counter. If I couldn’t

Counter this attack, my chances of winning would plummet.

Still looking at the screen, I smiled with relief. Somehow, the Goddess of Victory must have been smiling back at me, because my Counter was a total success! The Slit-Mouthed Woman was down to one life, while I still had two. That meant my next attack could win the battle, whether it was Critical or Normal.

Yes! I had the upper hand now! I couldn't let this chance pass me by. I had to provoke the Slit-Mouthed Woman again.

"What's your plan?" I asked. "I'm one turn away from burying you for good... You're going to die, you know."

"How dare you...? You... You... You, you... You-you-you-you-you-you...!"

"I can see my victory already. You can surrender if you like."

When I said that, the Slit-Mouthed Woman's eyes snapped open.

"Don't be absurd! I'll fight to the very end! I'd rather die than surrender!"

"All right. Sorry. Then let's end this fight nice and cleanly."

My decision was already made. There was probably no chance my opponent would defend. She was emotional and erratic; her train of thought was off the tracks for repairs. A burning desire to beat me was the only thing left in her head.

Unfortunately for her, desire alone wouldn't get the job done. I did like her determination to fight to the very end, though.

The turn results went up on the screen. I'd chosen a straightforward Critical Attack. I don't know if she was trying to second-guess me or what, but she'd chosen to Counter. That couldn't save her from my Critical Attack. In other words, in this situation, her Counter was completely meaningless!

Victory was mine.

In the next instant, my avatar jumped effortlessly over the Slit-Mouthed Woman's avatar's counterattack! Then, still wrapped in its powerful aura, it struck her body with a powerful slam! The Slit-Mouthed Woman's avatar was blown away with a loud boom. She slammed against the wall and fell,



completely motionless.

Large letters appeared on the screen:

**<<Battle of Wits Complete>>**

**Winner: Mai Yashiro**

**Loser: Slit-Mouthed Woman**

I... I did it! I won!

My arms and legs began to wobble. It sank in that I'd have to go through this every single day from now on.

"Congratulations!" said Asagi. "Look at you, jumping right in and taking out a B-Rank baddie! Were you scared?"

"Yeah, a little... I mean, a lot, actually."

"A-ha-ha. My first battle was like that, too. Just promise me you won't do anything that crazy again, okay, Mai?"

"Yeah. Good idea," I said, forcing a smile. Asagi nodded in approval.

"Oh, right! Take a look at the screen, Mai."

**<< Familiar Adoption>>**

**You raised the Slit-Mouthed Woman's Fear to 100.**

**You may make her into your Familiar if you wish.**

**Subdue her?**

**[Yes] / [No]**

"That settles it!" I said. "I'm gonna subdue you!"

“Hee-hee... Very well,” said the defeated Slit-Mouthed Woman. “Give me a name and your orders, please.”

A name? My orders? I didn’t have any clue what she was talking about, and I let her know that.

“Don’t tell me... You really don’t know anything, do you?” The Slit-Mouthed Woman shot me a dumbstruck look. All I could do was nod sheepishly. Luckily for me, Asagi stepped in to toss me a life preserver.

“When you give an enemy a name, it forms a contract between you. Then they can go out and earn CP for you. They can help out with other parts of the game, too.”

In that case, all I had to do now was pick out a name.

“Hmm... How about Slit-Mouth? Nice and simple.”

“No. Horrible,” she said.

“O-okay, then... Um... Slitty?”

“Absolutely not! That sounds too...slippery. It sounds like something you’d name a fish.”

She turned down my first two ideas right away. I could tell this would be surprisingly difficult. “Well,” I asked, “is there a name you’d like to be called?” The Slit-Mouthed Woman gave me an enormous grin.

“There is, in fact! Miss Amazing Beauty Who Loves All Candy, But Hard Candy Best of All. That’s got a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Huh? I had to have heard her wrong. “No, I mean, what name would you like?”

“Miss Amazing Beauty Who Loves All Candy, But Hard Candy Best of All,” she answered again. It rolled right off her tongue. So I didn’t hear wrong. That was really the name she wanted.

“That’s way too long, no matter how you look at it! I can’t call you that whole thing every time. Tell you what, I’m gonna decide. Hmm... You like candy, right? Japanese for ‘candy’ is *ame*... How about Amelie?”

“Amelie, Amelie... How adorable! I like it. Yes, call me Amelie from now on. If you don’t, I just might bite you... Hee-hee-hee...”

She seemed to like the name. That was a relief...but hang on! What was that about biting?! “Haaah...” I sighed.

“It’s about time for me to get going, Mai,” said Asagi. “Before I do, is it okay if I add you to my Friends list?”

“Huh? Friends list? What does that do?”

“It’s pretty convenient. If you add someone to your list, it makes it easier to send them messages, for one. Actually, it’ll be easier if you try adding someone yourself. Give it a shot.” Then he continued in a small voice, “You can add me, if you want.” Then, as I started to nod, he said, “Um, never mind... Forget it!” He took back his offer in a fluster. I looked at him and saw that his face was bright red.

“I-I’m joking! Just, uh, y’know, a stupid guy getting carried away, that’s all! S-stupid, right? Right. Wh-who’d wanna add me anyway? A-ha... A-ha-ha... S-see ya! Tomorrow, maybe? Yeah! Bye!”

Then he was gone in a flurry of stutters and mysterious rambling.

What was that all about? And what did he mean, “See ya tomorrow”? He meant in the game, right? With him gone, all I had left were questions. I stood alone and bewildered in the darkness.

It was time for me to go, too.

A new option showed up on the game screen: **Open your eyes**. I selected it, and that very moment, my consciousness went all fuzzy. I felt like my body was floating for a bit, and then I opened my eyes. I was back in my dorm room again, like I’d never left it.

I looked all around me and noticed it was a little dark. I looked at my clock and saw that it was seven thirty in the evening!

Had I been dreaming? I hoped so for a moment, but then I realized that my hands were still clutching the game console.

Oh, right! It hit me that I'd won Naomi's leg nerve functions in that Battle of Wits. I had to get them back to her, and quick!

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Naomi Suzuki]**

**Good evening. I think I managed to win back the use of your legs somehow. I'm sending that your way, along with 100 CP. This should mean you don't have to fight for today.**

**Please rest and recover!**

**END**

The words **Message sent** flashed on my screen. Immediately after that, another notification came in: **You have five messages.**

Five?! I wondered who they could be from. I decided to take my time and go through them one by one.

**[From: Kenichi Tanaka]**

**[To: 100 Random Players]**

**I wanna eat katsudon.**

**END**

What was that supposed to mean?

I mean, I got that some guy named Tanaka had sent off the same message to a hundred different people at random. But why would he send something so pointless? To a hundred people, too! A hundred! I wished he'd try putting

himself in the recipients' shoes.

I decided that any message that stupid could be ignored. I clicked on to the next one.

**[From: Kenichi Tanaka]**

**[To: Group 1 (100 Recipients)]**

**lolol**

**END**

...Kenichi Tanaka again.

"Talk about a weirdo," I absentmindedly mumbled to myself. "What's this guy up to anyway?" The next message was going to be from him, too, wasn't it? I already had a bad feeling about it as I clicked it open.

**[From: Kenichi Tanaka]**

**[To: Group 1 (100 Recipients)]**

**Heyyy you! Yeah, you! Guess what? It's your lucky day. I mean it! You're really, really, really luckyyyyyy!!!1 fgshdghsd *wheezing out of breath* Sorry, I got too excited for a second there. My bad!**

**Seriously, though, it's your lucky day.**

**Why, you ask? Because today's the day I added you to my group. You're all officially members of Tanaka's Spectacled Spectaculars! Congratulations!**

**I'll be sending you special group bulletins on the regular from now on, so look forward to 'em! ROFL**

**END**

Tanaka again. I knew it. What was this, spam?

I didn't even know where to start with this message. That final ROFL was particularly hard to forgive. There wasn't much funny stuff in the message—scratch that. There wasn't anything funny in it at all. I hope you're taking notes, Tanaka.

But no, the ROFL wasn't the worst of it. Before I knew it, I heard myself shouting, "Dang it, Tanakaaa! You can't just go around adding people to weird groups without permission! Haaah... Haaah..." I was out of breath. For some reason, the sheer pointlessness of the message made me feel sick.

Could it be? Were all the other messages in my inbox from Kenichi Tanaka, too?

**[From: Kenichi Tanaka]**

**[To: Group 1 (100 Recipients)]**

**Ding donnng!♪**

**That's right, it's Tanaka time!**

**If you wanna know who I really am...be sure and read my next message! (That's right, this is a preview!)**

**Wa-ha-ha-ha-haaa!**

**END**

“You’re sending out group bulletins already?! That’s way too fast!” Without stopping to think about what I was doing, I shouted at the game screen...which was an empty-headed reaction to an empty-headed message.

And what was that about “who he really was”? I didn’t particularly care either way, but I figured I may as well check his next message.

**[From: Kenichi Tanaka]**

**[To: Group 1 (100 Recipients)]**

**Come check out my stat screen and you’ll get it! If you don’t show up, I’m not telling.**

**END**

As annoyed as I was to do exactly what this weirdo told me to do, I’d come this far, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little curious. I clicked over to Kenichi Tanaka’s stat screen, hating myself every second of the way for giving in.

**Kenichi Tanaka**

**48 years old**

Huh? F-forty-eight?! He was some middle-aged guy! I got the feeling he was probably playing the game against his will. I mean, for all I knew, there could be players older than a hundred alongside players who were still in elementary school. Still, who was this geezer—Sorry, I mean, who was this Mr. Tanaka?

**Charm: E**

Sheesh, that was low... Wait, there was a comment under his Charm rank...

**If you lost your gut and traded your glasses for contact lenses, you'd be a solid B. Try going for a jog every morning.**

What was this, health counseling? I didn't see how that was any of the game's business.

## **Game Ranking: 1**

### **Title: Unraveller of Riddles**

Wait, what? Number one? When I started, it said there were already almost seven million people playing this game!

I was also curious about his title: Unraveller of Riddles. I wondered what kind of riddles he unraveled. Maybe if you solved them, you could escape from the game somehow.

Either way, I figured that Kenichi Tanaka was a name I should remember. The day might come when I'd need to know it. But still, I wondered... What kind of weirdo would you have to be to reach rank one in this game? How would you even reach out to a person like that? I was fascinated.

But most of all, I was worn out. He was one more exhausting mystery at the very end of a long and tiring day.



## *The Unbelievable Truth*

*Beep-beep-beep! Beep-beep-beep!*

A shrill, digital sound echoed through my room. But what the heck was it...?

*Oh!!* With a start, I realized it was the alarm on my cell phone. What time was it, anyway?

Eight fifty-five in the morning. It was way, way past eight fifteen, when I absolutely had to get up. It was Monday—a school day, of course. And it took fifteen minutes to bike from the dorms to school.

It was no use. I wasn't making it to my nine o'clock class on time, no matter what.

Sheesh! Why hadn't anybody woken me up?! Then— *Bweep!*

Wasn't it a little late for wake-up alarms? I thought for a moment before realizing that this sound was different. It meant I had an email. It was from Rena, a friend of mine from class.

**Subject: Are you up yet?**

**I tried and tried to wake you up this morning, but you wouldn't budge! That's pretty rare for you, Mai. I think you might've stayed up too late last night. If you don't get here quick, Pickled Plum and Takada are gonna be the angriest teachers you've ever seen! lol**

I replied with a quick **Be there soon**, threw on my school uniform, and flew out of the dorms.

Oops! I'd totally forgotten to brush my hair or wash my face!

I somehow made it to the school building. I stopped in front of my classroom and ran my hands through my hair to try and pass it off as a little less unkempt. It didn't work. My cowlicks shot back out of place immediately.

"Haaah...", I sighed. I'd never been late to class before. But lolling around wasn't going to make my situation any better. I prepared for the worst and opened the classroom door.

"Um, good morning," I said with a sheepish bow. "I'm sorry I'm late." The classroom was silent as I stepped in. I could feel everyone's eyes on me, and it stung.

"C'mon, Yashiro! Do you have any clue what time it is?!" Pickled Plum was already red in the face, ranting and raving.

"I'm sorry. I overslept."

"For cryin' out loud... Hand in your math homework and take your seat, on the double."

"Ack...!" Oh man! I hadn't even done my math homework! I could feel my face going pale.

"Something wrong, Yashiro? Wait, don't tell me..."

"I'm afraid so..."

Pickled Plum looked frustrated. "Even you, Yashiro? What in the world is going on lately? Everyone's skipping school, forgetting their assignments, the works..."

I just knew Nightmare was to blame...but I also knew there was no way that excuse would fly.

I stuck my hand into my pocket and touched the game console. I had to make sure that no teachers saw it.

All throughout Pickled Plum's lesson, the game was the only thing I could think about. When break time rolled around, Rena came over to my seat with a devious grin on her face.

"A-ha-ha! Didja forget to brush your hair this morning, Mai? I guess I shouldn't give you a hard time, since the Plum already read you the riot act."

"Sheesh... It's not funny, okay? I had a really rough day yesterday."

"Huh? Rough like how?"

"Look, I..." That's as far as I got before I cut myself off. I didn't know whether or not Rena would believe Nightmare was real. There were plenty of rumors going around, and it was safe to assume that most of the students at Ryokuka had heard at least something about it. Still, what if Rena didn't believe me? I was afraid she'd laugh at me, and that fear kept me from saying anything else. "Sorry. Don't worry about it," I said, trying to laugh it off.

"Weird. Oh, hey! Forget that, check this out!" Rena grabbed her shoulder-length hair, which was gathered into a sideways ponytail. "Isn't this hair tie just the cutest? I saw it at the store yesterday. It looks good on me, right? Right?" Rena's big eyes sparkled. Her hair tie had huge rhinestones on it.

"Yeah, it's perfect for you. That was in a magazine lately, wasn't it? You picked it up pretty quickly."

"Course I did! I've gotta up my fashion game if I wanna get closer to Sugiura, after all!"

"Sugiura...?"

Oh yeah, Sugiura... I was pretty sure he was the son of the school's chief director. We didn't see him much, since he was in another grade, but I remembered Rena talking about him before. She said something about how he was "every girl in school's dream," but still "plays it totally cool and aloof," so he's "hard to approach."

"What kind of girls do you think Sugiura likes, anyway? I've never really heard anything, not even a whisper..."

I had no idea why Rena was asking me. I mean, there was no way I knew more

about Sugiura than she already did.

Suddenly, I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I turned around to see a male student I didn't recognize. He had smooth, jet-black hair and a tidy, stiff vibe overall. When we made eye contact, he flashed a self-conscious smile.

"You're Mai Yashiro, aren't you?"

"Um, yes."

"Thanks for yesterday."

Who was he? I had no clue, but somehow, I got the sense that I wasn't seeing him for the first time.

"Our club officially admitted you yesterday, so I'm here to pick you up," he continued. "Don't worry, it's all been cleared with the chief director. Let's head back to the dorms." Having said that, the boy immediately reached down to pick up my bag for me.

"Wait a second, please. What do you mean, go back to the dorms? Actually, let's back up a bit more... Who are you, exactly?"

"Huh?" The boy's face was filled with confusion.

"Hey, Mai, isn't that Asagi from the class next door?" Rena whispered into my ear. "Taisuke Asagi, that's him..."

"Wait a second... Was that you in the track jacket yesterday...?"

"Well, yeah. Or it's how I was back in junior high school. I thought if I looked that way, you'd recognize me... Sorry, I guess it was a little misleading."

I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but I understood one thing: This was the guy who'd helped me win my Battle of Wits in Nightmare the day before. But he looked like a totally different person. He wasn't even wearing glasses. How was I supposed to recognize him?

"See, Mai?" Rena piped up. "You've gotta at least act a little more interested in the people around you. This is why you're never gonna get a boyfriend, y'know!"

"Huh? I-I'm still just in high school! Isn't it too early to start thinking about

boyfriends?”

Rena suddenly slammed her hands down on my desk. “No way! If anything, it’s too late! If you keep up that kinda talk, there aren’t gonna be any hot guys left for you!”

“Uhhh... ’Kay.”

“Look, Mai,” Asagi said. “Just come with me for now, okay? Sorry, but we really don’t have much time.”

“Um, but what about class?”

“Don’t worry. You can finish your lessons where we’re heading.”

“Huh?”

“Come on! I’ll explain what’s going on later,” Asagi said as he grabbed my arm. Everyone in the classroom was looking right at us. It was super embarrassing... But whatever he needed me for, it had something to do with Nightmare. There was no doubt about that. So I decided to go along with him. I mean, my life’s more important than school, right?

When we left the school building, a black car was parked outside. It had the steering wheel on the left side, which meant it was a foreign car for sure. And who should step out of the driver’s seat but the chief director of Ryokuka Private Academy herself!

“I take it this girl is the last of them, Asagi?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, then. Shall we go?”

I had no idea what was going on. What was the chief director doing there? Either way, she didn’t seem to pay me any mind as we climbed into the car and drove off.

“I’m sorry to surprise you like this, Miss Yashiro. I’ve decided that all students that Nightmare has chosen will be taking their lessons at their dorms from now on. It takes too much time to go all the way to the school building and back

again, doesn't it? I ordered a few renovations to make this easier. They were completed yesterday."

Wait, why did she know about Nightmare? Was she possibly...?

"Are you a Nightmare player, too, ma'am?" I asked.

"No, I'm not. But my husband runs a company that's trying to, for lack of a better term, *beat* Nightmare. Which unfortunately means we see very little of him at home..."

The car came to a stop at a red light, and the chief director stared out the window with a lonely look in her eyes. It sounded like things were pretty complicated for her.

"What do you mean, a company that's trying to beat Nightmare?"

Asagi, sitting in the seat next to mine, reached into his bag and pulled out a magazine. "His company publishes this. It's called *Nightmare Weekly*." The magazine was filled with maps, enemy data, and other detailed information about Nightmare.

"This is amazing..."

"Everyone in my husband's company risks their lives to explore Nightmare," the chief director said. "If you weren't still high school students, I could have you work for him." Having said that, she cut off the car's engine. It looked like we'd arrived. "All right, hop on out. I've got some administrative work to take care of back at the academy. I'll let my son Shinji take over from here."

As soon as she'd made sure that we were out of the car, the chief director made a U-turn and drove away.

"This way, Mai," Asagi said, guiding me to a door that opened into a staircase that led up to the third floor of the dorms.

Up until the day before, there had been a piece of paper stuck to that door that said "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY." Now it said "NIGHTMARE CONQUERORS' CLUB."

"Um, Asagi... What is this place?"

"Until you graduate, I guess you could call it home. We'll be taking all our

lessons electronically so we can really focus on Nightmare.”

“This explains what all that construction was about...”

“Right. The Nightmare Conquerors’ Club used to meet in the student council room, but now that we’re an official club, we can move in here and start working for real. Come on in. There are eighty-five Nightmare players in our high school, and they’ve all been introduced—except you.”

I followed Asagi up the stairs to the third floor, where I saw two more doors. One of them had a piece of paper that said “DESIGNATED STUDENTS’ CAFETERIA” stuck to it; the other, “CLUB ROOM.” Asagi opened the door to the club room.

“Asagi here. I’m back,” he said, stepping in. I followed behind him.

The club room was spacious, with several round tables arranged in rows. At every table sat students engaged in lively discussion—and every one of them was holding the same kind of game console I’d received the day before! As soon as we walked into the room, all eyes were on us.

“Hey, newbie!” A boy sitting in the center of the room called out like he owned the place. “Don’t just stand there, make with the introduction!”

“C-come on, Sugiura! She’s not even up to speed yet. Take it easy on her, please.”

Huh? Did he just say “Sugiura”?

“You didn’t fill her in on the way here? Geez...” Sugiura glared at Asagi. “At least greet everyone properly, will ya? Then we can talk.”

“A-all right...”

The boy they called Sugiura had a well-proportioned face with long, thin eyes. He had a slim figure, like a model, and gave off a really grown-up vibe overall. I immediately understood why Rena and all the other girls at school liked him so much...though to be honest, his cold expression was a little scary.

“Um, well... I’m Mai Yashiro. I’m a second-year student. I’m looking forward to working with all of you.” That earned a round of applause.





“I’m Shinji Sugiura, welcome aboard. Hope you don’t mind me just callin’ you Mai, ’cause I’m gonna.” Apparently, this scary-faced guy was the chief director’s son.

“Okay...” I was so nervous, my voice almost cracked. I could tell that my face was bright red.

“Anyway, Mai, let’s figure out where you’re gonna go. Look at this.” He shoved a piece of paper in front of me.

Main Squad: Focuses on solving Nightmare’s mysteries.

Scout Squad: Interacts with other players to gather information. Scouts for skilled players and potential allies.

Rescue Squad: Recovers other members’ lost Respawn Penalties. Helps Scout Squad avoid dying to the Auto-Death System when able.

“Um... This club’s goal is to beat Nightmare, right?”

“Strictly speaking, our goal’s to survive until my old man figures out a solution,” said Sugiura. “But that’s not my style. I’m tryin’ to crush Nightmare in my own way.”

“Is the chief director okay with that?”

Sugiura glared at me. “What d’you think, moron? Course not. That’s why I keep it top-secret. You’d better not go tattling to my mom, got it?” His expression was so fierce, I couldn’t even think. I just immediately nodded. “Good! But relax. Unless you’re in the Main Squad, it’s really not that dangerous.” With that, he gave me a long look, like he was carefully studying my face. “So, speakin’ of, what’ll it be? Wanna join me in the Main Squad?”

Eek! He was all the way in my personal space!

“E-excuse me!” That voice! It was Asagi coming to my rescue!

“What?” Sugiura shot him a sharp glare.

Asagi ignored Sugiura and set something down on the table in front of me. “I

think you belong in the Scout Squad,” he told me. “You’re not cut out for combat.” His face was the very image of seriousness. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d seen it somewhere before. No... It was the face he’d used when I met him in Nightmare... Whichever it was, where had I seen it, again?

Then it hit me.

“Wait... Are you the Pudding Kid?”

“Y-yes! That’s it. That’s me. You finally remembered, huh?”

“Yeah!”

Back in junior high school, I knew a boy who got picked on a lot. One day, his lunch box got flipped all the way over, spilling everything, and it brought him to tears. All I did was give him a pudding cup I had, but he was surprisingly overjoyed... At least that’s how I remember it. And now I find out that the Pudding Kid was Asagi?!

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help you out more back then,” I said.

“What are you talking about? You really saved my skin. I mean, people basically treated me like I wasn’t even there, but you were actually nice to me. You gave me a lot of hope... You probably never noticed, but you were really important to me because of that. That’s why I want to help you out now. Why don’t you join the Scout Squad?” Asagi grinned and turned to Sugiura. “Please don’t pick on Mai anymore.” With that, he left the room.

Sugiura shouted as Asagi left. “What’s with that guy?! What’s the big idea, leaving weird stuff all over the table like that...”

Wondering what weird stuff he was talking about, I looked down at the table. There was a small, translucent plastic storage box sitting there. I lifted the lid, and inside I saw a single, misshapen lump of *kurikinton*—mashed sweet potatoes with chestnuts. There was a note on the lid that said “DEAR MAI, YOU LIKE CHESTNUTS, RIGHT? I TRIED MAKING KURIKINTON FOR YOU!”

Sugiura turned his gaze on me, smirking. “You like that stuff, huh?”

“Um, n-not really, actually...”

“Hunh. I really don’t get that guy. Well, time to throw it out.” Sugiura reached

for the container.

“Ah...!” My hand reflexively darted out to pull in the container so Sugiura couldn’t take it.

“Haaah... You’re both hopeless!. All right, Mai. Figure out what squad you wanna join and tell me by the end of the day. See ya.” With that, Sugiura left the club room.

I could feel everyone’s eyes on me. It was kind of painful... I mean, didn’t they have a game to focus on?!

That reminded me, though: I hadn’t played Nightmare yet that day, either. First things first, I had to earn my 100 CP if I didn’t want to die. I started up the game and found several messages waiting for me.

**[From: Nightmare]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Here is what your familiar Amelie (Slit-Mouthed Woman) achieved yesterday.**

**★Amelie – Rank B**

**[Monsters Defeated]**

**Will-O’-The-Wisp (Rank F) – Easy Victory**

**Severed Head (Rank D) – Easy Victory**

**Crawling Corpse (Rank B) – Desperate Battle**

**※The Crawling Corpse dropped Naomi Suzuki’s Mouth Nerve Functions. They were sent to your item inventory.**

**Bonus CP – You receive 10% of the CP that Amelie earned.**

**Total CP Earned: 1280**

**You received 128 CP.**

**END**

As soon as I finished reading the message, my Auto-Death for the day was disabled. Don't get me wrong, I was delighted to have my 100 CP for the day, not to mention winning Naomi's mouth back...but what was that about a "desperate battle"? I didn't want to force Amelie into that kind of danger.

I clicked on a menu item called **Amelie's Room**, and it took me to a room with nothing in it... Well, nothing except for Amelie! There she was, lying on the floor. Something seemed wrong, though. She was clearly worn out.

I looked for any indication of her status and found one in small letters on the screen: **HP: 98/5000 – Near Death!**

—!!

"Amelie! Are you okay?!"

Amelie heard my voice and slowly turned to face me.

"I'm fine... It's nothing..." Her voice came from the game console speakers. No matter what she said, though, it was clear from her face that she was in pain. "I just want...some candy."

"Candy? Where can I get candy?"

"They sell it at the shop... Click the Shop icon to go there..." I looked all over the screen. Just as Amelie said, there was an icon toward the top that looked like it would take me to the in-game shop. I clicked it, and two new options popped up on the screen: **Shop** and **Nerve Auction**.

Wait, Nerve Auction? What was that?

I was curious, but I decided to look into it later. For now, I had to focus on buying something for Amelie.

The Shop had way more than just candy in stock. All sorts of items were available, including several I had no clue how to use—still, I was there for

candy. But what a surprise! There were more than fifty different kinds of candy available, at every possible price. I decided to buy 1,000 yen's worth, picking several different flavors.

Just as I was about to leave the Shop menu, a selection of furniture caught my eye. I figured it must be for Familiars. I might as well get some for Amelie's room while I was at it.

- **Fluffy Bed – 30,000 yen – Restores all HP with 12 hours' rest**
- **TV – 10,000 yen – Adds Relaxed effect**

All right! I decided to buy those two pieces of furniture, too. When all my shopping was done, the screen told me I had 34,000 yen left.

I returned to Amelie's room to find everything I'd bought already in place. Amelie was lying in her new Fluffy Bed, and her TV was on. To top it all off, she was happily licking a lollipop.

Yes! She was back to normal!

"Thank you, Mai!" Amelie said when she noticed me. "The candy's delicious, the bed is fluffy, and it's fun hearing all the voices from the TV!"

"Thanks for doing your best to help me, Amelie. I really appreciate it," I told her. "But don't do anything crazy again, okay? We've only just met. I'd be sad if we had to say good-bye so soon."

Amelie stopped licking her lollipop.

"Would you be sad if I died, Mai?"

"Yeah. I'd be really sad..."

"I don't want to see you sad... That's how I feel now... I won't push myself too hard anymore."

"Great. Thanks, Amelie."

The instant I said that, Amelie proclaimed that she was going to sleep and immediately covered herself with blankets. I could still see that she was blushing; her cheeks were a deep, flustered red.

"Hee-hee... Good night, Amelie."

Now that I knew Amelie was okay, I went back to my own status screen to check my second incoming message.

“Oh, it’s from Naomi!”

**[From: Naomi Suzuki]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Hi, Mai! You added me to your Friends list, didn’t you?  
Ooh... I’m really touched!**

**I’m gonna use all the time I have with my lost Respawn  
Penalty parts today to try and get the rest of them back. I  
wanna help you as much as you’ve helped me, ASAP!**

**Wish me luck, ’cause here I go! See ya! ★**

**Let’s both hang in there, ‘kay? ♪**

**END**

Something about Naomi’s message perked me up, too. I sent her a reply right away. Of course, I attached the nerve functions for her Mouth. I couldn’t let Amelie’s brave risk go to waste.

That should give Naomi a little more breathing room, right? Then I went on to the third incoming message.

**[From: Taisuke Asagi]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**M-Mai! Did you really add me to your Friends list?! It wasn’t**

**a mistake, was it? You didn't try to add someone else but put my name in by accident, did you?**

**...No, of course not! I believe! I believe in you! Thank you, Mai! I'm really glad you added me! :| yaaay 🎵 THANK YOU!**

**END**

I'd added Asagi to my Friends list along with Naomi. I didn't expect him to be quite so excited about it, though. I felt like I owed him an apology for some reason.

Either way, the Asagi I'd just seen at school seemed like a completely different person from the guy I'd met in Nightmare the day before. The one with the filthy track jacket, black-framed glasses, and bed head that brought new meaning to the word *disheveled*. And the next day, there he was, with no glasses, in a perfectly ironed school uniform, with every strand of hair in place. The difference was so dramatic, it was hard to believe they were the same guy.

I took a look at Asagi's profile again. His Charm stat had gone from a C to a B overnight. At the same time, mine had gone down from A to B. I guess that made sense, though. I hadn't washed my face or tamed my cowlicks that morning.

Asagi's message was the last I had to read. Thanks to Amelie, I didn't have to worry about the Auto-Death System for the day, either. What was there to do?

Just as I was pondering, I heard a voice from behind.

"Uh, M-Mai? If you don't mind, I could show you how Normal Battles work. You don't know yet, right? Oh, but if you don't want to, it's all right. I just thought, y'know, maybe..."

It was Asagi. He was red in the face, like he'd just run back into the room.

## ***The Cursed Sage Gets a Taste of Combat***

A Normal Battle... That's right, I hadn't even seen one yet.

"Sure! Please show me!" I agreed without hesitation, and he seemed happy about that.

I snapped open my game console, and we went to check my stat screen. Asagi spoke up immediately.

"It's dangerous for you to stay jobless. Without a job, you won't be able to use any skills. That'll put you at a real disadvantage." He took my console and tapped away at the buttons. "Here. Pick one of these."

Looking at the screen, I saw a list of jobs. Some of them were familiar jobs you see in a lot of games, like Fighter and Priest. Others were weird, like Swindler, Beggar, and Gamer.

"By the way, what's your job, Asagi?"

"...Promise not to laugh?" Asagi said as he showed me his stat screen.

**[Character Name] Taisuke Asagi**

**[Level] 170**

Level *one hundred and seventy*? Wow!

**[Title] Precise Machine**



## [Job] Glasses-Maker

Wait, did that say Glasses-Maker?

“...Pffft... Hee-hee!”

“H-hey, I said no laughing!”

“S-sorry... It’s just... How did you end up with a job like that?”

“Well, I just couldn’t decide. I chose a job at random, and that’s what I got.”

Pffft! I took it the odds of ending up with that job were pretty much astronomical.

“Can’t you change it to something else?”

“Sure. But that costs five thousand CP.”

“Five thousand?!”

“A-anyway, what about you, Mai? Think you can pick a job?”

I scrolled through the list of what seemed to be several hundred jobs. Hmm... No good. I didn’t have the slightest clue what to choose.

“I think I’ll just pick at random, too.”

Asagi showed me how to make a random selection, and I hit the button. A sound effect played from the console as the job list spun like a slot machine. In just a few moments, I would have my job. For some reason, I felt really nervous. It was like the game was about to decide my entire fate.

Then, with an even louder sound effect, the list of jobs came to a stop. Slowly, reluctantly, I peeked at the screen...

## [Cursed Sage]

Wait, was being cursed a job? What kind of curse? What the heck did it even mean?!

As I floundered in confusion, Asagi immediately began typing into his laptop. I could see the words **Green Trier, Inc – Speedrunning the Nightmare** on the

screen. It must've been the website for Mr. Sugiura's company. Whatever Asagi was doing on the site, he was doing it very, very quickly.

"I figured as much..." Asagi muttered tensely. He turned his laptop around so that I could see the screen as he kept talking. "This is a database of every job in Nightmare. All you have to do is type in the name of a job, and it shows you all the details. But I typed in Cursed Sage, and, well..."

**[NO DATA]**

I thought that was weird. It was right there in the game's list of jobs. So why wasn't it in the database?

"It's probably some sort of rare job. It might be a secret job you can only access through random selection. Either way, I've gotta report this to Sugiura."

"That's good, then!" I said. "I guess I did something pretty useful!"

But Asagi's face didn't seem to agree. He wasn't smiling; I couldn't figure out his expression at all, really.

"Well, it's certainly amazing. But I don't like the 'Cursed' part. It sounds like some kind of debuff, don't you think?"

*Gulp...* He was right about that.

"Tell you what. Let's see how it looks in a battle against some minor enemies. Have you bought any equipment yet, Mai?"

"...Nope."

Asagi immediately began tapping away at both his laptop and game console, one after the other. I wondered what he was doing. I sneaked a peek at his laptop screen and saw that he was still on the Green Trier homepage. This time, he'd pulled up a huge list of weapon names.

"Check your inbox."

**[From: Taisuke Asagi]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**I looked up the most appropriate weapons for your level and job type. Here's a present! :|**

**<<Attachments>>**

- **Crossbow (Arrows: 50)**
- **Knife**
- **Light Robe**
- **Gym Shoes**
- **Ring of Evasion (level 3)**

**END**

"Whoa! Can I really have all this stuff?"

"Of course. Just promise me that once we start playing, you'll stay by my side, okay? ...I mean, 'cause it's dangerous."

"Okay, got it!"

After I replied, Asagi started working on his computer again.

"All the monsters I'm picking up now are low-ranking. This area should be safe."

"That company's website sure is useful."

"I'd say so, yeah. The best part is they update it frequently, too. After I graduate college, I wanna work for a company like this..." Asagi glanced at me for a moment. "Hey, Mai... What's your dream for the future?"

Hmm... I'd never actually thought about it before. What *did* I want to do, anyway?

"Um... Honestly, I haven't really given it that much thought."

"Really? Ah, well. No point in rushing. It's not something you can force yourself to decide." Asagi swooped in with reassurances. Seriously, though, I wondered what I'd become.

“All right, let’s stick to this point and boost your level a bit. Click where it says **Forest of the Dead**, okay?”

Instantly, the game screen changed to show a creepy, ominous-looking forest. Unlike the Battle of Wits, I figured a Normal Battle was more like the combat you see in typical online games.

At least it looked like I wouldn’t lose consciousness this time. I was a bit relieved about that.

Looking over the game screen, I could see the back of an avatar that looked exactly like Asagi standing right in front of my own avatar. He had a sword in his right hand and a rifle slung across his back, and he was wearing lightweight armor.

I let Asagi take the lead. He told me a lot about the game as we moved onward.

Then, suddenly, a message popped up at the bottom of the screen: **You feel someone watching you from behind.**

Was it an enemy? My hands grew unpleasantly sweaty as they gripped the game console.

“Mai, try to take out a few of the bad guys with your bow before they get any closer! Use a Ranged Attack!”

Bow? What bow? Oh, right! He meant my new crossbow.

I equipped the crossbow and set my sights to our rear. I chose an attack action, and my avatar fired. Just then, a message appeared at the bottom of the screen to describe the outcome.

**Mai attacked with her crossbow!**

**Hit Will-O’-The-Wisp.**

**50 Damage!**

**Will-O’-The-Wisp was defeated.**

“Nice shot, Mai! I can’t believe you took it out in one hit!” said Asagi, lightly slapping me on the shoulder.

“Really? Th-thank you!” I got caught up in the excitement, too. But the next moment, Asagi looked flustered. He began to apologize.

“Huh? What’re you sorry for?”

“I, uh... I just got carried away. I didn’t mean to touch you out of nowhere like that. I didn’t mean to be, like, handsy or anything...”



H-handsy? I definitely wasn't expecting to hear that.

"A-Asagi. You're, uh... Pffft, heh-heh... You're really overthinking this! I mean... Hee-hee... I never would've thought of it that way..."

"Huh? Are you sure? Phew... I was afraid you were gonna report me or something."

Way to exaggerate! Still, with that cleared up, a relieved grin filled Asagi's face. He looked so comfortable, I half expected someone to set out tea and snacks for us.

What was with this guy? He was hilarious! I couldn't hold back the laughter; it burst right out of my mouth. Meanwhile, he sat there stunned, like he had no idea what was going on.

"S-sorry. Now, where were we? In the middle of combat, right?"

I choked back my laughter and turned back to the game. Being with Asagi was a lot of fun. Even if Nightmare was dangerous—even deadly—I felt like I could handle it as long as I was playing it with him.

For a while after that, we moved deeper into the forest, beating Will-O'-The-Wisps along the way. Eventually, we came to a large clearing...and seven Will-O'-The-Wisps dropped down from the trees to ambush us.

"What do we do?! We're surrounded...!" I said, panicking. Asagi's avatar immediately moved in front of mine.

"I'll tank all the enemy attacks, Mai. You just focus on hitting them!"

**Taisuke moved to defend Mai!**

**Taisuke used Cover.**

**(Taisuke will guard until an enemy attack on Mai breaks his cover.)**

**※Taisuke must be directly adjacent to Mai to maintain**

## Cover.

Asagi used his action to cover me. I thanked him, then set about attacking the Will-O'-The-Wisps. First of all, I shot at the enemy closest to us. Then I fired at the one right next to it, but that attack missed. I kept firing my crossbow again and again and eventually took out another Will-O'-The-Wisp. But the remaining five were getting closer, and before long, they were right up next to us. My screen changed to show that I was now in melee combat.

“If you’re close to someone the game thinks is your ally, it’ll automatically let you fight together with them. When there are a lot of players around, it chooses at random, though you can form parties with people in your Friends list, and then it’ll prioritize them,” Asagi explained.

The melee battle started with the two of us facing off against a group of five Will-O'-The-Wisps.

“All right, Mai. Since I’m covering you, I’ll always attack last, regardless of my Speed stat.”

“I see... I take it that means that normally, the higher your speed stat, the earlier you get your turn to attack?”

“Right. And when it’s your turn, you have three minutes to think it through. If you don’t choose an action before time’s up, the game picks one for you automatically, so watch out.”

“Gotcha!”

“You’re up to level twenty-two now, right? In that case, you should be able to attack first. Take your best shot!”

I looked at my screen. Just as Asagai said, it was my turn to attack. My three minutes of thinking time were already counting down.

*Gulp...* The thought of a time limit flustered me. What do I do now...?

I had two combat actions to choose from: **Attack (Knife)** and **Job Skill (Magic)**. I chose to attack with my knife to start off. Then another choice popped up: **Attack** and **Special Move**.



Asagi started to explain.

“Your special move depends on what kind of weapon you’ve got equipped. Also, it’s rare, but sometimes when you use a special move, your weapon can break. Watch out for that.”

I nodded. So special moves came with a drawback... It also looked like I couldn’t use ranged weapons in melee combat. My crossbow was marked **Unusable**.

I didn’t have any spare weapons, which meant I’d be in big trouble if my knife broke. I couldn’t risk the possible drawback of a special move. It was as good a time as any to see what a Normal Attack would be like. I chose **Attack (Knife)** and pressed the button.

The combat results immediately popped up at the bottom of my screen.

**<<Turn 1: Mai>>**

**Mai tore into the enemy with her Knife!**

**<<Clean hit!>>**

**58 damage!**

**One Will-O’-The-Wisp’s vital signs stopped!**

**Will-O’-The-Wisp 1 [HP: 0/38] (–58) Defeated!**

Yes! I got one! That meant there were four left. It seemed like we could manage to win.

“Nice, Mai! Keep up the good work. It’s their turn next!”

The enemy’s turn... I looked Asagi in the eye and murmured, “I’m sorry... Even if they try to attack me, they’re just going to hit you, aren’t they?” I felt really sorry about that.

“Don’t sweat it,” Asagi said. “I mean, honestly... Part of me...kinda wants to do it... I like...” His voice trailed off and got very quiet, but I still heard his reply.

Wow, right?! What a nice guy!

“Ack! F-forget it! I didn’t say anything! Sorry, just talking to myself like a big, stupid creep! That’s all!” Red-faced, he tried to strike what he’d said from the record. Stupid? Creep? I was starting to get the feeling Asagi was a bit too hard on himself.

“Anyway, Mai, it looks like the baddies are done attacking. Check your screen.” He was right. I looked down and focused on the turn results.

**<<Turn 1: Enemy>>**

**Will-O’-The Wisp 5 tackled Taisuke!**

**Miss!**

**Taisuke dodged.**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 5,000/5,000] (No change)**

**<<Turn 1: Enemy>>**

**Will-O’-The Wisp 2 shot a Fireball at Mai!**

**※Attacks on Mai hit Taisuke due to Taisuke’s Cover!**

**<<Clean hit!>>**

**10 damage!**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,990/5,000] (–10)**

**Mai Yashiro [HP: 5,000/5,000] (No change)**

Asagi must've been pretty strong, because he took barely a scratch's worth of damage. But what if that Fireball had hit me, with my low defense stats? I got chills thinking about it.

"S-sorry! Um... Doesn't that hurt?"

"A-ha-ha! I'm fine, Mai. Besides, it's a game. It doesn't actually hurt anyway."

"Really?"

"Really. You get a little jolt when you take damage, but it's not much. It's basically the same as when your controller vibrates in other games."

What kind of game shocks you instead of just vibrating?! Did the console really have a mechanism for that...? I mean, a light electrical shock is still an electrical shock.

The last two Will-O'-The-Wisps took their turns, and the results popped up on the screen.

**<<Turn 1/Enemy>>**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp 3 tackled Mai!**

**Hit!**

**※Attacks on Mai hit Taisuke due to Taisuke's Cover!**

**5 damage!**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,985/5,000] (-5)**

**<<Turn 1/Enemy>>**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp 4 sees no chance of victory.**

**It flees as fast as it can!**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp 4 disappeared.**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,985/5,000] (No change)**

**Mai Yashiro [HP: 5,000/5,000] (No change)**

Wow, that was unexpected! I really didn't think it'd just run away like that.

"Oh! I bet it ran off because you're so strong, Asagi!"

"N-nah, I doubt it... Wait, you really think so? Thanks, Mai. That made my day."

He must've meant it, too, because he couldn't hide the grin that spread across his face. At least not at first. As soon as he noticed he was smiling, he snapped hurriedly back into a stiff expression like he'd done something wrong. Then the grin came back, and the whole thing repeated again.

"Pffft...! You're really funny, Asagi."

"Huh? Yeah, right. Wha... What's funny about me?"

Oh my. He didn't seem to have a shred of self-awareness. Then again, that was what made him so funny.

"Oh! Sorry, I'm talking too much. My three minutes are almost up. Just as a heads up, this skill I'm about to use is a little weird, but don't worry about it."

**<<Turn 1: Taisuke>>**

**Taisuke cast Glasses Meteor!**

**A volley of flaming glasses fell on the group of Will-O'-The-Wisps!**

**Direct hit on Will-O'-The-Wisp 5!**

**1,850 damage!**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp 5 [HP: 0/35] (-1,850) Defeated!**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp 2 dodged!**

**Will-O-The-Wisp 2 [HP: 35/35] Survived!**

**Direct hit on Will-O'-The-Wisp 3!**

**1,201 damage!**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp 3 [HP: 0/35] (–1,201) Defeated!**

**Enemies Left:**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp: 1**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,985/5,000] (No change)**

**Mai Yashiro [HP: 5,000/5,000] (No change)**

G-glasses Meteor?!

Leave it to a Glasses-Maker to make glasses fall from the sky, I guess. I bet no other job could do that. Sure, it was really, really powerful...but I couldn't have been the only one to notice how bad that skill name was, right?

"I told you it was weird, didn't I? Even I know that skill's uncool. I try not to use it too much."

I was relieved to know he thought it was as silly as I did. Then again, was it really any sillier than having Glasses-Maker as an in-game job in the first place?

"It's unusual. No argument there. But it also does a lot of damage. I'd think you'd want to use it a lot."

Asagi forced a smile. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Let's just say I'm a bit conflicted about it... Ha ha..."

Now we were down to one enemy—and it was my turn to attack again. I wondered what I should do next. I kept an eye on my thinking time as I considered my options. Broadly speaking, I had four choices.

#### 4. Attack (Knife) - Knife

- Special Move (with the chance my knife might break) 5. Job Skill (Magic) 6. Defend 7. Run I'd already tried a normal knife attack before, so I figured I should try something else this time. Thanks to Asagi, the fight was as good as won already, so it'd be a waste not to try something new.

We weren't in a tight spot, and Asagi was already covering for me anyway, so defending wouldn't be necessary. And since victory was ours, there was no point in running. That meant there was only one worthwhile option to try: my Job Skill. Looking closer at the menu, I saw there were three skills I could use. None of them had any explanation given whatsoever.

The first was **Dark Heal**. I assumed that was some sort of healing spell, though I was a little concerned about the *dark* part.

The second was **Destroy**. That was probably an attack spell. It sounded really strong, but also really dangerous. I mean, destroy what? Everything? I had a bad feeling about it.

The third was **Death Roulette**. Call it a hunch, but I figured I should avoid that one. Guessing from the name, it would probably kill someone at random—either friend or foe. It seemed like a pretty big gamble.

Maybe I should try Destroy after all.

Sure, I had a bad feeling about it, but I wouldn't know what it actually did until I tried it.

I had ten seconds left to choose an action.

Oh, crud...! I tapped the button in a hurry.

***A Strange Spell: Destroy***

**<<Turn 2: Mai>>**

**Mai cast Destroy!**

**The area around Mai's party is shrouded in purple fog.**

**The fog eats away at Taisuke and Mai's HP!**

**Each loses 1,000 HP**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,985] → 3,985 (−1,000)**

**Mai Yashiro [HP: 5,000] → 4,000 (−1,000)**

**The fog uses the energy it absorbed to transform into a black dragon!**

**The Ebony Dragon spewed Putrefying Breath!**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp 2 took 5,400 damage!**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp 2 [HP: 0/35] (−5,400)**

**The Will-O'-The-Wisp was destroyed without leaving a trace!**

**[Additional Effects]**

**The area will continue to putrefy for one hour.**

**Combat is over!**

**<<Monsters Defeated>>**

**Will-O'-The-Wisp: 4**

**<<Rewards>>**

**CP: 15**

**Experience Points: 50**

“Your skill seems...pretty devastating, Mai.”

He didn't have to tell me twice. Wasn't that spell too strong? I was getting scared. My hands started to tremble on the console.

Just then, Asagi's face changed color with shock, and he cried out, “M-Mai! Look at the screen! The monsters are about to get a whole lot stronger!... This could be bad. We've gotta run!”

“Huh?!”

**The putrefaction resurrected Rank SS rare monsters! Rare monsters may appear in the area for the next hour.**

Rare...monsters?! Rank SS, to boot? Even Amelie was only Rank B. There was no way I could beat a monster that strong. I mean, SS had to mean stronger than S, let alone A. Even I could tell that if a Rank SS monster caught me, I didn't have even a slim chance of winning.

In other words, getting caught = death. That's terrifying! What were we gonna do?!

“S-sorry, Asagi! This is my fault... It's because I used that skill....”

“Calm down, Mai! As long as we can escape the forest, we'll be out of the



area of effect!” He paused for a breath and then continued, “You didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sure I would’ve done the exact same thing if I were you. So don’t blame yourself, all right? No giving up! Let’s see this through to the end.”

That’s true. I hadn’t accomplished much yet.

“Okay! I’ll stick it out!”

Asagi returned to swapping back and forth between his computer and the game. The computer showed a full map of the Forest of the Dead, where we were. Without taking his eyes off the screen, he called out, “Mai, follow me! I know the safest route outta here.”

“Okay...?”

We made a break for the forest exit with all our might, changing directions every time we detected that we were headed into a monster’s field of vision. If any of them caught us, we were almost as good as dead. I wondered if we’d actually be able to make it out safely.

Every time my avatar crashed into a tree or slowed to a stop, Asagi waited patiently for me to catch up...and he always had an encouraging word.

“Just a little farther! We’re getting out of here together!”

...That’s right. We were getting out of there! I started telling myself that, too.

We made our avatars run as hard as they could through the thick forest overgrowth to the exit. I didn’t have time to think about anything else. I was totally absorbed in the escape. Almost there!

“Ngh... It’s no use...! We’re surrounded!”

I looked down at the bottom of the game screen in a flash. Monsters were around us on all sides; we would be in their sights soon. We were completely out of ways to turn.

“So that’s it, huh...?” Asagi murmured as he shot me a sideways glance. “Mai, I’m gonna charge! While they’re distracted, I want you to—”

To what? To escape? And leave him behind?

“No way!”

“Think about it. There’s no other way. As long as I can protect you, that’s enough for me...”

“I’m not giving up! I’m gonna keep looking for a way for us both to make it out alive until the very end!”

At first, Asagi didn’t say anything. He just activated his Cover command, with me as the target again.

“You’re right. I guess it’s still a little too early to give up... I’ll fight to the very end, too.”

I looked at him and smiled. He grinned right back at me.

We were in this together! As long as we did our best, there had to be a way out! I just had to think of something...

First, I decided to go over our current situation in my head.

We were surrounded by enemies on all sides, but none of them showed any signs of attacking just yet. It seemed that they reacted to our movement in some way. As long as we stayed put, the monsters wouldn’t move, either. But if we didn’t get moving, obviously we’d never make our way out of the forest.

“I wish we at least knew what kind of monsters we’re hiding from.”

It was a good point. If we knew what we were up against, we’d have a way better chance of escaping without bumping into any rare monsters.

Hang on! We didn’t need to beat them—we just needed to find out what they were!

“Hey, Asagi! Let’s try hitting the enemies around us with ranged attacks. We’ll know which ones are Rank SS if they don’t go down in one hit, right?”

“Good thinking! All right, I’ll attack the monsters to the sides. You hit the ones to our front and back.”

“Got it!” I started by taking aim at the monster directly blocking our path, hoping to finish it off in one hit.

## <<Combat Results>>

**Mai attacked with her crossbow!**

**Grim Reaper dodged!**

**Grim Reaper [HP: 18,500/18,500] (No change)**

Ack, it dodged?! Still, the enormously high HP count was enough to tell me that it was a Rank SS monster for sure.

“The one in front is Rank SS, Asagi!”

“Roger that. So’s the one to the left!”

Next, I took aim at the monster to our rear—and it turned out to be a Grim Reaper, too. The only one left to check was the one off to the right, which Asagi was attacking. If it was another Grim Reaper, well... Let’s just say I was halfway to despair, when suddenly— “Mai, run right! It’s just a Will-O’-The-Wisp! We can probably handle it!” Asagi’s shout echoed through the club room.

“.....!!”

That moment, the three Grim Reapers turned and started heading toward us all at once. I was scared... Really scared. My hands were shaking.

“At this rate, we’re headed for a dead end... All right! Come on, Mai—change of plans. Let’s head forward!”

“Okay!”

“It looks like we’ve put some distance between us and the Grim Reapers,” Asagi said as he repositioned his avatar. He’d been behind me this whole time, but now he moved to the front of our party. “I’m gonna go ahead. That way, if we run into anything dangerous, I can take the heat!”

—!! What a reliable guy!

We kept running. The edge of the map came steadily into view. That’s right—we were nearly at the exit from the Forest of the Dead.

Just a little farther... Almost there...!

I gripped my game console tightly, like I was praying.

.....

Ever wonder why life never really seems to go smoothly when you need it to? I sure did. I cursed my horrible luck, while I was at it.

We were this close to leaving the forest when suddenly, another Grim Reaper popped out from a blind spot in a thicket of trees!

“Oh, crap! Mai...!” Since Asagi had used his Cover action to protect me, he couldn’t avoid running into this enemy.

The game screen changed to the Normal Battle interface. Even though we were fighting only one Grim Reaper, I still didn’t see the slightest chance of winning. One hit from the Grim Reaper would probably—scratch that, definitely—kill me. And I was pretty sure one of its attacks would put Asagi in bad shape, too.

“I’ve got you covered, Mai! Make a break for it, and at least you’ll make it out!”

“Don’t give me that again, Asagi! I already told you, I’m not leaving you...”

“Please, just run! If you don’t, we’re both done for!”

“No...”

“Please! If I can’t keep you safe, why am I even here?”

Why was I that important to him? Either way, I realized I couldn’t change his mind. In that case, there was just one thing for me to do...

“Okay...,” I mumbled, hanging my head in shame. Asagi, on the other hand, almost looked relieved. Actually, he was even smiling slightly.

“All right. Time for battle.” And with that, our fight with an unknown enemy—a Rank SS Grim Reaper—began.

**<<Turn 1: Grim Reaper>>**

**Grim Reaper slashes at Mai with its scythe!**

**※Attacks on Mai hit Taisuke due to Taisuke's Cover!**

**Hit!**

**The scythe pierced Taisuke's chest!**

**3,800 damage!**

**※The heavy damage knocked Taisuke unconscious!**

**<<Taisuke cannot attack for one turn.>>**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 185/5000] (-3,800) Near Death!**

**Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,000/5,000] (No change)**

Asagi looked at the combat results screen with a pained expression on his face.

“Oof, it's strong. If that'd been a clean hit, I'd be a goner for sure...” As soon as he said that, I started trembling even harder. But all we could do now was finish the fight.

Since Asagi was using his Cover skill, he'd get the last turn to act. Which meant it was my turn now.

“Go on, Mai. Choose ‘Run’ and get out of here.”

Sorry, Asagi. I couldn't... I couldn't...

That was as much as I let myself think. I shook my head. Right! I'd made my decision, and I wouldn't regret it! Energetically, I looked up as I smashed the button to choose my action.

**<<Turn 1: Mai>>**

**Mai cast her Dark Forbidden Magic spell, Death Roulette!**

**Mai sacrificed her Respawn Penalty (Left Hand) to spin the wheel of Death!**

**※Mai cannot choose her next Respawn Penalty. It will be chosen at random.**

**Please stop the roulette wheel.**

The next moment, I heard a light ringing in my ears. I could feel something creeping into my body through the game console... A strange sensation came over me. Finally, a searing pain shot through my arm.

“...Ngh!”

I fought as hard as I could to endure the pain. After a while, the pain completely left my left arm...along with my ability to move it. It was like my arm was paralyzed.

That was that. I’d lost my first Respawn Penalty.

Then the game chose a new one for me at random: my ears.

“M-Mai?!” Asagi gasped in surprise.

No wonder... I’d completely ignored his pleas to run away.

I didn’t say anything. I kept all of my focus locked on my game console. Looking closely at the spinning roulette wheel on the screen, I saw these words written on it: **Grim Reaper, Taisuke, Mai, Grim Reaper, Grim Reaper, Mai, Taisuke, Grim Reaper**... There were four spots on the wheel for our enemy and four for us.

In other words, there was an equal chance that it would hit either us or the Grim Reaper. If nothing else, it was fair.

“Thanks, Mai. But I can’t believe you didn’t run...”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “But now there’s a chance the roulette could land on one

of us...”

Asagi softly shook his head. “Don’t worry about me. No matter what happens, I’m ready to face it. Just do what you think is best.” A kind smile spread across his face.

“Thank you! I... I feel like I can do this,” I said. Then I put my finger on the button to stop the roulette wheel. Naturally, my hand was shaking... But I knew I couldn’t give in and lose now! I didn’t even blink as I followed the words spinning around the wheel.

I tried listening to my gut. Now! No, now’s the time! Now!

There was no turning back from this. I waited to stop the wheel, like I was praying the whole while. Time felt like it stretched on forever.

And then I stopped the wheel. What would it be...?

“...Ha-ha...” I couldn’t help but laugh when I saw it.

## **<<Combat Results>>**

**Roulette stopped**

**Result... Grim Reaper**

**※Grim Reaper will face the Judgment of Darkness.**

**Abyssal Portal**

**A massive red door appeared before the Grim Reaper!**

**Countless dark hands stretch forth from the door and grab the Grim Reaper!**

**<<Grim Reaper is too terrified to keep fighting!>>**

**The countless hands pulled the Grim Reaper through the door.**

**The Grim Reaper was reduced to nothingness and defeated.**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 185/5,000] Near Death! (No change)**

**Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,000/5,000] (No change)**

**<<Monsters Defeated>>**

**Grim Reaper (Rare Monster!)**

**<<Rewards>>**

**CP: 0**

**Experience Points: 0**

**Item: Event Ticket (Black)**

**※All combatants receive this item.**

I'd managed to hit the Grim Reaper with my Death Roulette! My shoulders sagged as all the pressure and tension instantly gave way to relief.

"Don't get comfortable yet, Mai!" Asagi said. "We've still gotta get out of the forest as fast as we can!"

Ack! That's right! It was still too early to relax. We rushed to the exit—with several more Grim Reapers on our tail. We definitely weren't strong enough to fight them.

Somehow, we made it safely to the edge of the map in time to choose **Leave Area** from the menu and safely escape.

We... We did it! We made it out of the forest! Now we no longer had to fear that rare monsters would track us down.



## *Picking a Squad*

“Sorry! About your left arm, I mean. I couldn’t protect you well enough... I’m really, really sorry.” The instant we were out of combat, Asagi bowed his head and apologized with a grim look on his face.

“It’s not your fault! It was—”

“Nah, it’s Asagi’s fault, all right.” I heard a familiar voice coming from behind me. At some point, Sugiura had apparently returned to the club room.

“No, it’s not! He didn’t do anything wrong...” But I could tell Sugiura wasn’t interested in listening. He pressed in on Asagi.

“Don’t get carried away, weakling,” he said, then spun to face me. “So, Mai. Have you picked a squad to join yet?”

“Um... Scout Squad,” I said.

“No can do. That’s Asagi’s squad. No way am I gonna leave you in his hands. I mean, he didn’t waste any time leading a newbie straight into harm’s way, did he?” Sugiura turned to glare at Asagi, then kept talking. “You’re joining the Main Squad, Mai.”

“Wait, didn’t you say that was the most dangerous squad...?”

“Not with me lookin’ out for ya, it’s not.”

This time it was Asagi’s turn to glare daggers at Sugiura.

“Fine. I’m weaker than you are. You got me there,” Asagi said. “But I wanna protect Mai every bit as badly as you do...!”

Sugiura sighed. He looked exasperated. “How stupid are you?! I don’t care how bad you want it. Feelings don’t mean squat without the strength to back

'em up! If you die in the game, that's it! If you've got time to whine, you've got time to get your levels up."

"...Fine," Asagi said. He was all out of comebacks. He stood up from his chair.

"So, where were we?" continued Sugiura as he watched Asagi leave. "Main Squad, right?"

"No. I can't join Main Squad." To be honest, I just wasn't confident I could handle playing with Sugiura.

"Huh?"

"I... I want to join Rescue Squad!"

"...Tch." Sugiura clicked his tongue in frustration. A boy was comfortably napping on the table across from ours; Sugiura leaned in and tried to slap him awake. "Hey, Taichi! Wakey-wakey!"

The boy Sugiura called Taichi showed no signs of waking up. If anything, he fell into a deeper sleep—after the slap, he started snoring, and his snores echoed through the otherwise quiet club room.



Sugiura was at his wit's end. He gave up on slapping Taichi and started kicking him instead. "I said, wake up!"

Taichi's eyes opened. He looked around, bleary-eyed, at his surroundings and finally spoke. "O-owww! Wh-what's the big idea, Sugiura?"

Yeesh, talk about slow reflexes!

"Lemme introduce you, Mai," said Sugiura. "This is Taichi Tango. He's in charge of the Rescue Squad."

With that, Taichi stood up and looked me over.

"So, you wanna join Rescue Squad?"

"Huh? I—I mean, yes!"

Hang on. Was he shorter than me?

Taichi noticed me looking down at him and sat back down in his chair, looking flustered.

"Wh-What're you looking at? Just so you know, I am *not* tiny! I'm just a little, uh, short-statured, that's all!" He bashfully scratched his head.

Pffft! I couldn't help but laugh. After all, tiny, short-statured... What's the difference?!

"H-hey, what's there to laugh about? Didn't anybody ever teach ya manners?!"

"Get a grip, Taichi. Nobody cares," said Sugiura. "Just hurry up and show her the ropes, will ya?"

"Huh? Why me? Man, what a pain..."

Wait, what? What did he mean, "What a pain?" Maybe I'd be better off with someone else teaching me after all.

"Relax. I know he doesn't look it, but Taichi here's pretty capable when he actually tries," said Sugiura. He saw right through me. Still, I wasn't too convinced by his reassurance...

"Really?"

“Do I look like I’d bother lyin’ about something that pointless?”

He looked *scary*—that’s how he looked!

“N-no... You don’t...”

“Good.” Sugiura told Taichi that I was in his hands now and stood up. He left Taichi and me looking each other over.

“Tell ya what, let’s start over and introduce ourselves properly. I’m in my third year of high school—same class as Sugiura, actually. The name’s Taichi Tango. Nice to meetcha!” He stuck out his right hand and we shook. With that handshake, I was officially (?) a member of the Rescue Squad. “All right, have a seat.”

After I sat down, Taichi booted up the computer on the table.

“Have a look, Mai. See how many folks out there are missing Respawn Penalty parts.”

Looking at the monitor, I saw that people’s names filled the screen.

“What is this?”

“It’s a list of everyone who’s lost their Respawn Penalties, like I said. There’s too many for Sugiura’s dad and his company to handle on their own, so we volunteer to take care of the relatively easy ones. And in return, everything in the cafeteria here is totally free. The company helps out with our club funding, too.”

“So most of the job is checking this list, looking for people whose parts I think I can win back, then going and getting them... Do I have that right?”

Taichi gave a breezy laugh, grinning widely enough for me to see his teeth. “Nailed it. You’re a quick study, Mai! One thing to add: If there’s no one on the list we think we can help, then we help Scout Squad deactivate their Auto-Deaths instead. That’s another thing we do to take a bit off the company’s plate.”

To sum it up, since the students in Scout Squad didn’t actively go looking for fights, they needed us to help them out by sending CP so they met their daily quota of one hundred.

...Huh? Just then, I realized that Taichi was staring intently at me for some reason.

“I knew it...,” he said quietly, pointing at my left arm. “You haven’t moved that arm at all this whole time... I thought something was odd.” Taichi turned his game console toward me so I could see him pull up my own stat screen.

There was a large **X** mark over my avatar’s left arm. “Geez...” Taichi looked flabbergasted. “Okay, who took your left arm?”

“Well...” As I told Taichi the whole story of how it happened, his eyes grew wider and wider with surprise.

“Wait, so you fought a rare monster called a Grim Reaper? And you’ve got a rare job, on top of that? Man, I don’t get it.” Taichi looked like he was racking his brains trying to make sense of it all. Then he snapped back to normal and asked me another question. “Hold up. In the end, you won the fight, right? So why didn’t your left arm go back to normal?”

“I think that’s because I had to sacrifice it to use my magic. Technically, the Grim Reaper didn’t take it, so I didn’t win it back.”

Taichi clapped his hands together as if to show the explanation clicked for him. “Ah, yeah, that makes sense!”

“So... Do you think that means my left arm is gone for good?”

“.....”

Uh-oh. That silence might’ve been the scariest answer I could possibly get.

Still lost in thought, Taichi started fiddling with his game controls again. Then he spoke again, in a cheerful voice. “Don’t worry, Mai. I bet we can handle it!”

“You mean it?!”

“Yeah. Here, take a look at this. You’ll get it.” He showed me his screen again. He’d clicked on my left arm. It reminded me of how Naomi’s profile had told me that the Slit-Mouthed Woman had taken one of her body parts—but instead of an enemy’s name, this time it said **Nerve Auction**.

Nerve Auction...?

Come to think of it, I'd seen that before. It was one of the shopping options that'd popped up when I went to buy candy for Amelie. But what did it mean...?

"What is this Nerve Auction anyway?"

"Nothin' good," Taichi said. "To put it simply, it's a place where they sell players' nerve functions."

Wait, did I hear that right? They sell nerve functions?!

"You mean you can use in-game money to buy Respawn Penalty parts?"

"Exactly. Not everybody gives 'em back for free. There are some pretty bad folks playing Nightmare, too." Taichi pressed a few more buttons on his console before showing a new screen to me. "These days, this guy's pretty infamous for charging a whole lot for nerve functions. If you lose a Respawn Penalty, you do not want him to be the one to take down the monster that took it, that's for sure... There's probably no buyin' it back."

**[Seller] Tsubasa Kaitsu**

**[Item for Sale]**

**Naomi's nose nerve functions**

**<<Starting Bid>>**

**10,000,000,000 yen**

**<<Direct Purchase>>**

**60,000,000,000 yen**

**※You may bid more than the Starting Bid amount.**

**※After the first bid has been made, the player who makes the highest bid by the end of the day will win the item.**

**※You can skip the auction by paying the Direct Purchase price.**

**[Bidders] None**

...T-ten billion yen?!

Anybody in the world could tell that was a hard price to pay. That was shocking enough before I realized that this person was trying to sell Naomi's nose on auction—which hit me even harder.

“Wait, you don't happen to know this Tsubasa, do ya?”

“No...but I know Naomi, the rightful owner of these nerve functions.”

“You don't say...” Taichi trailed off like he was trying to find the right words.

“Um... Isn't there anything we can do?”

“Believe me, I sure wish there were. It'd be pretty tough for us right now, though... Aha!” Taichi started tapping at his game console like he'd just thought of something. He was sending me an in-game message. “Here. That's all the cash I've got right now. I want you to use it for Naomi.”

What a kind soul! I thanked Taichi and immediately opened his message.

**[From: Taichi Tango]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Here ya go! My entire savings!**

**<<Attachment>>**

**In-Game Money (1,801 yen)**

**※This money has been automatically transferred to Mai's in-game account at Taichi's request.**



**END**

...One thousand, eight hundred and one yen? Maybe I was reading it wrong. I looked again—more closely this time. Then again. And again. No matter how many times I looked, the amount was the same.

Sorry, Taichi. I guess my hopes were too high. I just didn't figure you'd have even less saved up in the game than I did...

"Unfortunately, I spent a lot of cash yesterday, which left me flat broke. I doubt that pocket change is gonna help too much..." Tachi looked a bit embarrassed as he spoke.

"Um, n-not at all! It's the thought that counts, right?" Besides, every little bit helps. A little cash to add to the fund was probably better than nothing...

"Wow, Mai. You really are super nice. Just like Asagi said." He gave another breezy, toothy grin.

Huh? Was Asagi really saying that kind of stuff about me...?

"Oh, hey! Why not have him bring this Naomi aboard? With the leader of the Scout Squad vouching for her, I bet she could join the club."

"Is that really possible?!" My eyes went wide.

"As long as there's room in the dorms, sure. But if she's an adult, she'll end up working for Sugiura's dad instead."

Huh. Did the Scout Squad really have that kind of authority?

Now that Taichi mentioned it, though, I had no clue how old Naomi was.

"Either way," Tachi added, "Sugiura and his CEO dad over at Green Trier have to give her the okay."

That made sense. Still, it seemed like a pretty good idea. Naomi likely lived alone, and she was still missing several of her nerve functions. She'd have a hard time living a normal life in that state. If worse came to worst and she wound up in the hospital, she wouldn't be able to keep playing Nightmare—which would put her in even more danger!

“I’ll try asking Asagi about it.”

“Yeah, good thinking!” And with that, Taichi put his head back down on the table.

...I guess he wanted to pick up where his nap left off. Just how much sleep did this guy need? Taichi must have sensed that I didn’t know what to do, because he mumbled a bit more without lifting his face.

“Why don’t you try talking to Asagi now?” he murmured. “We’ll get you started on your Rescue Squad duties tomorrow, no big deal.”

“Thank you! I’ll go find him now,” I said. I left the club room and closed the door behind me, ready to look for Asagi. Just then, though, I suddenly slipped and fell right on my backside. Hard, too.

“Waugh!”

A whole stack of papers went sailing into the air and fluttered down all around me.

Oh man... Talk about a screwup.

“...S-sorry!” I rushed to apologize, then I looked up and saw who I’d bumped into. It was none other than Sugiura. He sighed in frustration.

“Haaah... Look, newbie... No more runnin’ out the door, got it?”

Eek... Why did it have to be him? He was the one person in the whole world I wanted to bump into least!

I stood up and immediately started trying to gather the paperwork I’d sent flying through the air.

“Hey, Mai...”

Double-eek! I timidly looked up at Sugiura. His arms were folded. Clearly, he had no plans to help me. Let’s just say it was awkward. And yes, I know I’m the one who slammed into him... But still.

“Did Taichi show you the ropes?”

I’ll admit that’s not what I expected to come out of Sugiura’s mouth. Actually, I was bracing myself to get yelled at. But now it seemed like he was really

concerned about me in his own way. Sure, he was short on tact, but maybe he wasn't such a bad guy deep down inside.

"Yes," I answered. "Honestly, I was a little worried at first, but he went over everything really carefully for me."

"I knew he would! Like I said, he gets the job done when he actually tries." Sugiura's face creased into a broad smile.

Wait... Sugiura? Smiling? I had no idea that he could even look that delighted.

"You look happy," I said.

".....!"

That comment was all it took to put his usual sullen expression back on his face.

"Taichi's the first club member I ever taught myself. So what if I do look happy? Got a problem with that?!" A wrinkle of dissatisfaction crossed his forehead.

Ack! Now his face was really, really scary!

"N-no problem at all! Not even a little!"

"...Go on."

...? Sugiura spoke so softly, I couldn't tell what he was saying. When I asked him to repeat it, he snapped. He shouted even more loudly than before.

"I said, Quit starin' and go on and pick up this crap, idiot!"

"Y-y-yessir!"

Still cowering in fear, I gathered up all the papers on the floor and unconsciously thrust them back into Sugiura's arms. Since I couldn't use my left arm, it took a lot longer than it should have. Once the papers were out of my hand, I made a mad dash down the hallway. I had to get away.

As I ran, I heard Sugiura chuckling nastily behind me.

"Heh... What a weirdo."

I scampered as quickly as I could down to the second floor, then finally sat

down on the stairwell to rest.

...Just where was Asagi at that moment anyway?

I figured it would be quicker to explain the situation over an in-game message, so I took my game console out of my pocket.

“...Huh?”

As it turns out, there was already a message from Asagi waiting for me!

*Nerve Auction?*

[From: Taisuke Asagi]

[To: Mai Yashiro]

Sorry, Mai. I led you into a whole lot of trouble today. I don't have the right to stand by your side anymore. So I'm gonna keep my distance.

Sugiura's way, way stronger than I am anyway. If he's watching your back instead of me, it's for the best.

...You know what? No. I'm sorry.

I know all that stuff is true, but I can't just sit back and watch. No matter how weak I am, I still want to protect you. It's the only way I know how to repay what I owe you. I'd hate to think of you getting into a jam where I can't even see what's going on.

Oh, right. I got your left hand function back. I'll attach it to this message.

<<Attachment>>

Mai's Left Hand nerve functions

END

The instant I opened Asagi's message, a faint, warm feeling spread through my left arm, and a moment later, I could move it again.

.....!

After the initial surprise wore off, I held my game console in both hands and read through Asagi's message again. More than anything, even more than the fact that he'd gotten my left arm working again, the "I don't have the right to stand by your side" part is what jumped out at me.

That wasn't true! That wasn't what I thought at all! I hit Reply immediately.

Huh...? Hang on a sec. I was already on my way to see Asagi to begin with. I decided it would be better to have this conversation in person when I found him. All I wrote in my reply was **Where are you now?**

I thought through the situation as I calmly pored over the game screen. I'd completely forgotten about Naomi. I wondered how much Asagi had to spend to win my arm back at the Nerve Auction.

I checked the Nerve Auction screen again. Looking over the items up for bidding, I noticed that most sellers priced their nerve functions somewhere between 10,000 and 80,000 yen and set their auctions to stay up for two or three days.

Auctions could end early if a buyer paid the Direct Purchase price, which tended to be about two or three times the starting bid.

If Asagi had recovered my arm functions this quickly, he'd almost certainly made a direct purchase and skipped the bidding. Which means he'd probably paid 20,000 in-game yen at the very least...which wasn't an easy amount of money to part with.

If he'd really paid that much money for my sake, I had to thank him as soon as possible! I took another look at the game, but there was still no reply from Asagi. The only thing to do was check my other unread messages while I waited for him to get back to me.

**[From: Naomi Suzuki]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Thanks for winning back even more of my nerves! Honestly, I was super surprised! But don't get me wrong—I was super happy, too!**

**I did my best today, too! I went out and fought hard to win back the rest myself! And guess what? I got all of them except my nose! ♪(^^)**

**But...I think that one's gonna take a while, lol.**

**Still, enough of me is working again to make myself useful to you, Mai! (^^)**

**Get this. Right now, my school's actually been shut down for a while because of Nightmare.**

**Oh, one more thing! I want you to have this. A bad guy dropped it! ★**

**P.S. Um, it's okay if I just call you Mai, right? You can totally tell me if it isn't!>\_<**

**<<Attachment>>**

**Master Negotiator (Skill)**

**END**

Wow! Naomi managed to take back most of her nerve functions!

But of course, her nose was still missing. And it would cost her at least 10 billion yen...

That wasn't happening. I wanted to help her out somehow, but there was nothing I could do for her now. For the time being, I just sent her a reply. Here's what I said: **So you're a student, huh? Me too! And don't worry—you can call me whatever you like! We might meet each other sooner or later. If and when we do, I hope we can be friends! Oh, and thanks for the item!** ♪♪

I'm sure Naomi would have a hard time figuring out what I meant. Still, I couldn't stop myself from sending it. I didn't want Naomi to have to fight on her own...

I wondered what the Master Negotiator skill she sent me did. I went back to the club room to look it up on the Green Trier website.

## **Master Negotiator (Rare Skill)**

- **Your Battle of Wits proposals have a 100% success rate.**

**※However, Battles of Wits are only possible against monsters that have stolen nerve functions or certain other monsters.**

Huh. So I couldn't challenge just any old enemy to a Battle of Wits.

Anyway, this skill looked really useful! I felt even more grateful toward Naomi.

Oh! I jumped as I got a notification that Asagi had replied to my message. I rushed to read through it and learned that he was in his own dorm: room number 205.

"All right!" I shoved my Nightmare console into my pocket. I ran out of the club room and all the way to Asagi's dorm. When I arrived, I took a moment to steel my resolve, then knocked slowly on his door three times.

There was no answer. I tried knocking again, but still, no answer.

What was going on?

Looking around, I noticed that it was already nighttime, but the lights didn't



appear to be on in Asagi's room. I'm not proud of it...but I pushed my doubts aside and opened the door.

It was very dark inside Asagi's room. I strained my eyes to peer through the darkness as I looked around. There was a bed, a TV, a small fridge... Everything I recognized from my own simple dorm room. On the far side of the room, there was a metal table.

...Huh?

Looking more intently, I realized that Asagi was sitting at the metal table with his back to me. He was holding something in his hands and concentrating on it so hard that if he noticed I was in the room, he didn't show it. I wondered what could have fascinated him so much that he forgot to turn on the lights. I slowly moved toward him and looked over his shoulder to get a peek at what he was holding.

A game console... That's it, he was playing the game! Maybe he was following Sugiura's orders to raise his own level. As I started to speak up, I got a good look at Asagi himself and froze. My heart skipped a beat.

He looked more focused than I'd ever seen him look before. He looked like the perfect example of seriousness.



Maybe I'd better step out and try knocking again. No sooner had I thought it than Asagi flinched so dramatically that I saw his shoulders jump up.

"Waugh! Wh-who's there?! Wha... Wha... What do you want?!" Asagi flinched at the sudden sight of another person; he wasn't speaking so much as stuttering. His game console went flying out of his hands and tumbled to the floor.

"Um, sorry if I scared you. It's me, Mai."

Once he realized it was me, Asagi's terror gave way to a slightly embarrassed panic before he finally calmed down and returned to normal. The entire time, he kept talking to himself as he moved. He really is a funny guy.

He reached into the nearby mini fridge and pulled out two cans of some beverage called Pudding Pop.

"Here, if you like," he said, handing me a can. "I'm afraid it's all I've got to offer you right now."

"Thank you."



As it turns out, Pudding Pop is a sweet drink made from—you guessed it—pudding. You have to shake the can before you open it to make sure it's mixed up enough to drink. To be frank...it's exactly like drinking liquefied pudding straight out of the cup.

I was pretty sure I'd never met anyone who kept their fridge stocked with Pudding Pop before in my life. I stood there completely still, staring at the can for a while before Asagi spoke up. He looked sincere.

"There's something I wanted to talk to you about. Um... Would it be okay if I speak first?" He glanced at my left arm.

—! What else could he have to say?

"Is your left arm all better? I mean...does it still hurt or anything?"

"Not at all! I think it's completely back to normal. Thanks for getting it for me."

"Don't mention it. I just did what anyone would do... Um, but that's not it," Asagi said as his smile faded and the serious expression returned to his face. "About that message I sent... I meant what I wrote. About how I want to keep you safe as best as I can, even though I'm still weak, I mean. I can't just leave you. And I definitely don't want to hand you off to someone else. I know that's selfish."

Asagi looked me dead in the eyes. *Ba-thump*. For some reason, my heart was pounding hard in my chest.

"So I just wanted to ask how you feel about it. You probably don't think you can count on me, though..."

Without thinking, I shook my head. "That's not true! I know I can count on you!"

"Really?!" Asagi's jaw dropped open and then transformed into a massive smile. "I'm gonna get stronger. I'm not gonna stay the weak old Asagi from back in the day. I'm gonna do whatever it takes to change... I swear!" He looked pleased at his proclamation. He capped it all off by shaking his can of Pudding Pop as hard as he could. "So, what did you want to talk about, Mai?"

Oh! Right. That was a close one. I almost forgot to ask him to try and take Naomi under our wing!

“Here’s the thing...” I told him the whole story, from my very first encounter with Naomi Suzuki, through all of our back-and-forth messages in Nightmare, up to Taichi’s suggestion. In other words, I made my case for why Naomi should join the club.

“I think I get the picture. It’d be hard for me to recommend her for combat duty, but it sounds like she might fit in with the Scout Squad. Recruiting allies and managing data could be right up her alley... What do you think about that?”

“I think it’s a great idea! Would you look into it for me?”

Asagi beamed at my request.

## *Joining the Black Event*

Since we'd settled everything we had to discuss, Asagi and I decided to head to the academy cafeteria for dinner. As soon as we set foot in the dining hall, though, Asagi came to a sudden stop. Ouch! I walked right into him.

Partially to keep moving and partially out of frustration, I tried to push my way in front of him, but then... Oh.

I saw that Sugiura was headed right in our direction, fiddling with his game console as he walked.

"...Hmm?" Eventually Sugiura noticed us and looked up from the game. Our eyes met. For some reason, it felt really awkward. "Hmph. Together again, eh?"

"Is there something wrong with that?"

"Not particularly. You two have real big-bro-and-little-sis vibes, y'know," Sugiura said with a snicker. Man, what a jerk!!

"More importantly," Sugiura continued, "Taichi tells me there's someone you wanna invite to our club. Knock yourself out."

"Really?! You mean it?!" I'd been bracing myself for Sugiura to give us a way harder time about recruiting Naomi. But hooray! No problem!

"Don't get me wrong, Asagi. I still can't stand you," Sugiura continued as he walked past us. "But lucky for you, I'm not the kinda guy who lets that get in the way of giving credit where it's due."

"Huh?" Asagi spun around as Sugiura passed us, and I followed suit.

"You guys took down a Rank SS Grim Reaper. That's a huge discovery. Once we report it to Green Trier, there'll be more funds headed our way for sure. So

I'm gonna need you to fill me in on the details later." I'm pretty sure Sugiura actually smiled for a second.

Going by what Sugiura said...the Grim Reaper was an unknown monster.

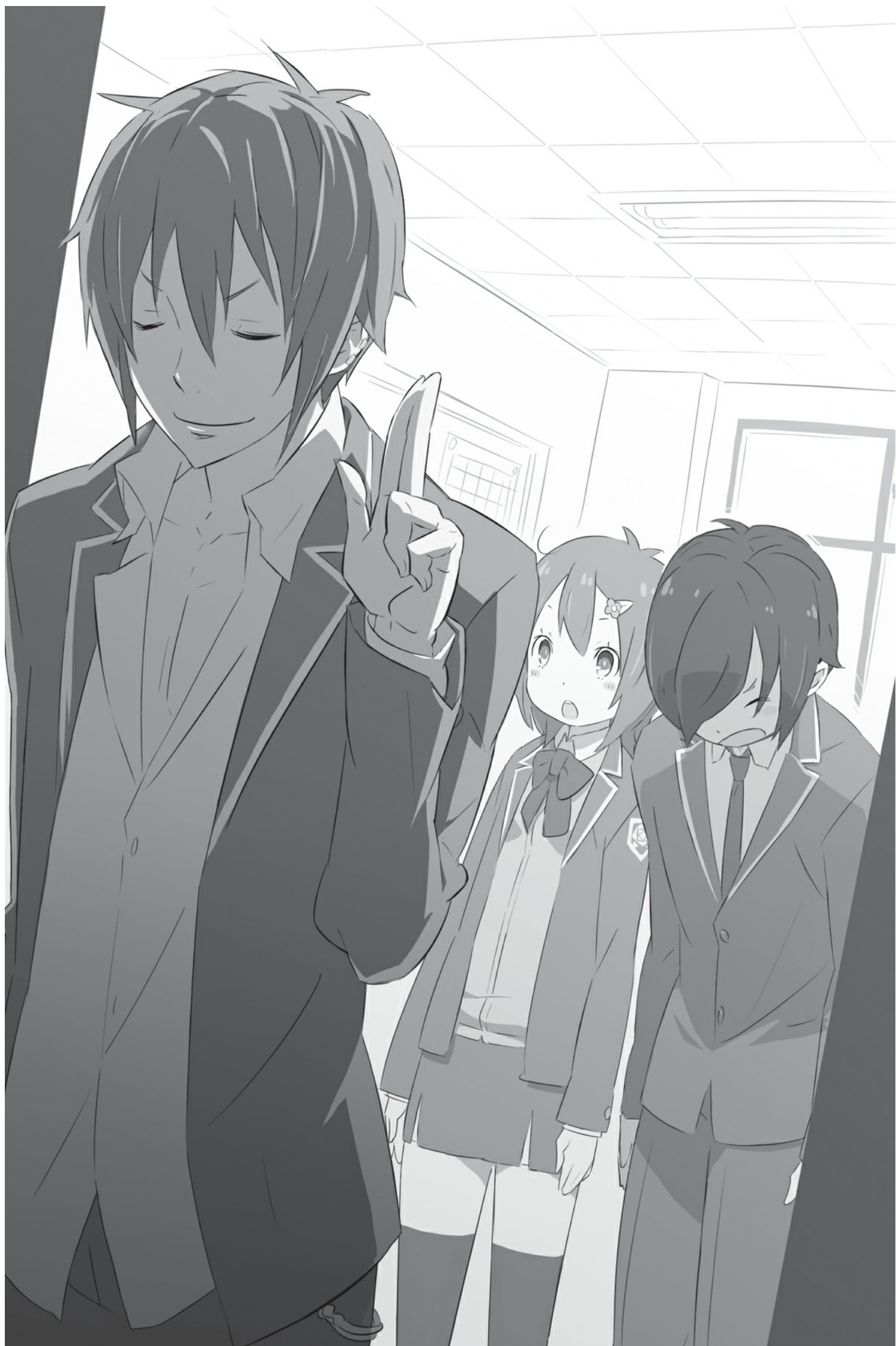
"Thank you. I'll put together a report on the new discovery and get it to you soon," Asagi said. Sugiura was already walking away, but Asagi bowed deeply toward his retreating back.

"You do that," Sugiura called back. "Just don't work too hard, got it? Challenging Rank S monsters to Battles of Wits to gain a level or thirty in a flash is asking for trouble. It's not your style, either."

"Sorry."

Sugiura turned back to face us one more time and smiled yet again. "Still, you got guts. I'll give you that." With that, he left the cafeteria. I looked over at Asagi and found him frozen in place, a dumbstruck look on his face.





“I... I don’t think I’ve ever seen Sugiura actually smile like that before,” he said. “Maybe...”

“...Maybe what?”

“Hmm. Maybe he’s not quite as big of a jerk as I thought...”

“Maybe not. I got that same feeling... One question, though.” I thought back to what Sugiura had just mentioned. “Did you really challenge a Rank S monster to a Battle of Wits?”

And if he had, was it my fault?

“I panicked,” Asagi said. “I just wanted to get as strong as I could, as fast as I could. Sugiura’s right, though. It’s not my style. Plus, if I’d died, that’d be it... Anyway, are we here to eat, or what?”

“If I’d died, that’d be it,” huh...? I’d never been in that sort of situation before. Those words hit me really hard.

Asagi ordered a cheeseburger, while I had doria gratin with meat sauce. I’m sure it’s no surprise that Nightmare dominated our dinnertime conversation.

“I’m shocked we didn’t get any experience points for beating that Grim Reaper. You’d think we’d get a bunch from a monster that strong,” Asagi muttered as he looked over his game console on the cafeteria table.

“I know, right? In the end, all we got were those Event Ticket items.” I clicked over to my item inventory screen. In addition to the column marked **Normal Items**, there was another section marked **Special Items**. There in that list I saw it: **Event Ticket (Black)**... But what in the world was it for?

“Hey, Mai. Whatever these tickets the Grim Reaper dropped are for, I get the feeling it’s something really important. What do you think?”

He had a point. We’d gotten them from one of the strongest enemies in Nightmare. On top of that, we didn’t just stumble upon the Grim Reaper as usual—we’d had to do something special to make it show up. Given all that, it seemed very likely that these tickets were an important part of unraveling Nightmare’s secrets. When I said as much to Asagi, he nodded.

We decided we needed to find out more about these Black Event Tickets. Still at our cafeteria table, we checked the game. When we expanded the graphic for the **Event Ticket (Black)** item to see it in more detail, I noticed that it had two blank lines on it. Just as I was wondering what they were for, Asagi pushed another button.

### **[Event Requirements]**

- **The number of participants is limited to the number of blanks on the ticket.**

**※This varies depending on the type of Event Ticket.**

### **[Member Registration Requirements]**

- **All participants must have the same ticket.**
- **All participants must be registered on each other's Friends lists.**

**☆Only players who meet the above requirements may participate in the event.**

“To sum it up, to participate in whatever this event is, players need matching tickets and to be mutual in-game Friends with whoever they're playing with.”

“It looks that way,” I said. “My ticket's got two blanks on it...”

“I guess we're the only ones who meet all the requirements right now.”

Asagi was exactly right.

“You want to finish this game, right, Mai? No matter how risky it might be? In that case, if there's any chance that this event's the key, I assume you want to participate.”

“Honestly? No, I don't. It's terrifying. But the idea of just staying scared

forever is even worse.” That’s truly how I felt.

“What’re you saying, Mai...?”

“I think that maybe it’d be all right to participate in this event, as long as you’re with me.”

Asagi’s eyes grew wide and round in surprise. “Are... Are you sure you don’t mind me coming along?”

“Of course I’m sure!” I nodded quickly. “I mean, if you want to.” For some reason, I felt a little bashful. How long had it been since I’d invited anyone to do something with me?

“I definitely want to!” Asagi shot back with a delighted grin. “As long as I’ve got you by my side, I can give anything my best shot.”

“...Huh?” Did that mean Asagi liked me? Like, reeeally liked me? Before I knew it, my face had turned red.

“All right, Mai! That settles it! Let’s do whatever it takes to dominate this event. We’re not gonna let a little video game beat us, are we?”

“We sure aren’t! You took the words right out of my mouth.”

“So, when should go for it?”

“Well, we should probably get Sugiura’s permission first, right?”

“I guess so, since we don’t know how dangerous it might be, after all...”

“Let’s go see him after dinner.”

Speaking of dinner, it had already gone cold. We shoveled it down as fast as we could, then left the cafeteria.

We found Sugiura, but it wasn’t long before we heard his angry shouts echo through the club room again.

“I can’t believe this crap!” His shaking hands were balled into fists. This time, however, something was different: This time, Sugiura was shouting for our sakes. “I told my old man about your tickets, and y’know what he said? To make sure you play in the event! What’s he care if any of us die? He’ll just cover it all

up anyway. As long as his precious company gets results, people's lives are irrelevant. That lousy..."

"Um... What if we say no?"

"You get expelled, that's what. But he can't force you to play along. And no way am I gonna let him just expel you without a fight. If it comes to that, I got your backs. I'll quit school right along with you."

"Sugiura..."

No matter how crass Sugiura was, he clearly cared about our safety.

I stole a glance at Asagi, and I knew exactly what he was thinking. Neither of us had changed our minds one bit.

"The thing is...the two of us already decided to participate."

"Are you for real? It's gonna be dangerous. Real dangerous. You'll be on totally uncharted turf, and I can't guarantee you'll make it back alive. You get that, right? You factor that into your decision?" Every last inch of Sugiura's face looked gravely serious as he waited for our answer.

"I'm in," said Asagi. "If we don't do this now, I don't see how we ever get rid of the constant fear of death. Besides, I don't plan on dying. If anything, I'm playing in the event so I can survive."

"How 'bout you, Mai?" Sugiura asked. He was staring straight at me.

"I-I'm gonna do it. I mean, I'm really scared...but I'd rather get it over with as soon as possible than go on living every day in fear. So please let us go." I knew my answer and my mind was made up—still, I couldn't stop my voice from shaking.

As he listened, Sugiura's face tightened up like he'd made a big decision of his own. But soon, he grinned. "All right, then. If you guys say so, then I believe in you. You've got my permission. But there are a few conditions."

"Conditions?" Asagi asked, sounding confused.

"Yeah. You gotta play with me watching," said Sugiura. "Right here in this room. You can't do anything crazy, and you've gotta come back alive. Simple as that. Got it?"

Asagi and I looked at each other, then back at Sugiura. We nodded.

“Got it. Thank you!”

“Just do your best. To be honest, banking on you two is probably the best shot we’ve got right now.” Those words, coming from Sugiura, really ramped up the pressure.

“But be sure an’ have fun, too,” Taichi cut in. “Green Trier will be happy enough if we just find out what the heck this event is anyway. If you get in any danger, you can turn tail and run. They didn’t say you had to win it or anything, so you’re not gonna get expelled for failing if you try.”

“That’s true,” I said. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

Taichi smiled. “Glad to hear it... So, when’re you gonna play in the event anyway?”

Hmm... Good question. I should probably level up a bit more first. That settled it.

“Once I hit level one hundred,” I said. “Would that be okay?” Nobody argued. And with that, I’d secured their support as I worked to boost my level. From then on, I didn’t go to class—I spent all my time on Nightmare for days and days.

At one point, Rena got concerned that I wasn’t showing up at school, and she came to visit my dorm room. It sounded like she’d heard a bit about the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club, but I got the sense that she still didn’t really believe it. She stared at my Nightmare console with wonder.

Eventually, Naomi moved into our high school dorms. Her school, it seems, was still closed—it had gotten to the point where there weren’t enough teachers or students left to keep it running. By the way, her school wasn’t all that far away from Ryokuka Private Academy. It was close enough that she could have stayed at our dorms while attending her own school, if it was open.

Either way, for now, Naomi would be with us until she was finally free from Nightmare. That was great news to me.

*Welcome to the World of Nightmares*

A week passed, and I finally reached level 100. We all gathered in the club room.

“Don’t do anything crazy, okay, Mai?” Naomi’s eyes were big, round, and on the verge of tears. She was worried about me. She was small and gentle and gave off comforting vibes.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I won’t. I promise.”

“You better!” She turned to Asagi and bowed her head. “You take good care of her, okay?”

“Of course. Relax! Whatever happens, I’ve got Mai’s back,” Asagi said. He wasn’t even talking directly to me, but I still felt myself blushing.

“Hey, man,” Sugiura loudly interjected. “You better not be all talk!” Even though by then I knew Sugiura was a decent guy deep down inside, I still couldn’t get used to his bad habit of shouting. I noticed that Sugiura was keeping his eyes glued to his paperwork, and soon, Taichi noticed, too. He snickered.

“What’s wrong, Sugiura? Are you shy? You wanted to talk to Mai, didn’t you? Man, you gotta be more hones—*ouch!*”

“I can hear you, y’know.” Sugiura’s brow was furrowed. I’d missed seeing it, but it was pretty clear he’d given Taichi a smack.

“S-sorry, Sugiura.” Taichi looked desperate to change the subject and relieve some of the awkwardness. “So, are you guys heading out?”

“What do you think?” I turned to Asagi and said, “I’m ready to go right away if

you are.”

“Yeah. Me too. Let’s enter the event before we start getting second thoughts.”

“Okay!” I nodded firmly. “Sounds like a plan.”

I brought up the information screen for the **Event Ticket (Black)** on my game console. I entered **Mai Yashiro** on the top blank line. Then I looked at Asagi.

“I’m gonna put your name in now, okay?”

“Go for it,” he said, nodding with resolve.

### [Event Participants]

- Please enter the participants’ names.

† Player 1 - Mai Yashiro

† Player 2 - Taisuke Asagi

- Checking to make sure participants meet all requirements.....

<<Requirements met!>> Approved.

*Please proceed into the event.*

The game screen changed to show an explanation of the event.

1. When your HP reaches 0, it’s Game Over.  
= You will lose your Respawn Penalty.
2. Taking damage during the event will be painful.



**= Rest assured it will not be painful in the real world.**

**3. You cannot abandon the event once it begins.**

**※You can only leave by winning or getting a game over.**

**4. The back panel of the game console has been unlocked.**

- Please open the black hatch and put on the special earphones inside.**
- The game will automatically begin once all participants are wearing their earphones.**

**※The Navigator will go over the details once the game begins.**

Finally, we were ready to play the game itself. Asagi and I looked each other in the eye without saying a word.

Asagi resolutely turned his console over and opened a small black hatch on the back. Just as the in-game explanation had said, there was a set of earphones stashed inside.

“It looks like the event begins once we’ve got these in our ears.”

“Right.”

“Ah, well. At least the explanation didn’t make it sound like we’d die right off the bat.”

That was true. Actually, it was a huge relief... But no! Snap out of it, me! We were still about to head off into totally uncharted territory. I took a deep breath to brace myself and took my own earphones out of the console.

Sugiura and Taichi immediately started talking, one after the other.

“Don’t get sloppy. I mean it.”

“Give it your best shot! We’ll be right here till the end!”

Then Naomi pressed a good luck charm into my palm.

“I’m praying for both of you to make it out safely...” With that, she reluctantly let go of my hand.

We told the three of them that it was time for us to go. Then we both put our earphones in at the same time.

**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.**

Wh-wh-whoa... I mean, whoa!

Staticky sounds started playing in my earphones. Before long, though, they gave way to an ear-piercing ringing sound so high-pitched that it made me want to cover my ears.

Oh man... It was way too loud. It almost made me sick. At the same time, I felt my consciousness growing hazy.

Huh...? Why was I so sleepy all of a sudden? Why...?

My eyelids dropped shut. I tried to fight it and stay awake, but my brain wouldn’t listen to itself. As my mind grew dim, I heard Sugiura and the others shouting...

“Hey! Mai! Asagi...?”

“What’s goin’ on?! Stay with us!”

“Oh nooo!”

...I took it that Asagi was in the same state I was. That’s the last thought I had before the darkness totally swallowed my consciousness.

.....

...I heard a voice.

*"Welcome to the World of Nightmares,"* it said. It was a strange, creepy voice, and it echoed in my brain.

—I'd heard that voice somewhere before... Wait... Could it be?!

"Who's there...? You're the voice from my console, back when I started playing, aren't you...?" My eyes jolted open as I cried out. "That's it... Kamisawa?!"

*"Well done, indeed... Heh-heh. You're exactly right. I had a feeling you would make it this far."*

"Who are you? And where are we?"

We were in a room I'd never seen before. Naturally, Sugiura, Taichi, and Naomi were nowhere to be seen. The only person next to me was Asagi, who'd joined the event with me, and he was sleeping soundly. Or at least he was until my shouting woke him.

"...Where is this place?" Asagi looked all around the room until he saw me with him.

*"Oh, it looks like our second player is awake..."* I wasn't sure where Kamisawa's voice was coming from. Asagi met the strange voice with surprise. He was alert now. He started looking around again, more cautiously. *"It's no use,"* Kamisawa continued, laughing. *"I'm not in the room with you."*

"What do you want with us?"

*"To play a game, of course. Allow me to explain."*

I have to admit, when the introduction screen mentioned there'd be a "Navigator," I didn't imagine it'd be Kamisawa... Something smelled fishy about this game—but there were only two ways out: winning or getting a Game Over. We couldn't run away now. As much as I hated to admit it, we were better off playing along.

*"For starters, please look at your game consoles. They should be running in a special mode now."*

Asagi looked at his console. “Huh? The screen’s split in two now,” he said.

“What?!” He was right! The usual single screen was gone. Now there were two screens, one right next to the other. The left screen showed my name and my HP, and the right screen showed Asagi’s.

*“To win this event, you must find the key. It’s somewhere on this floor.”*

Huh. That was a lot simpler than I expected.

*“I know what you’re thinking,” Kamisawa continued. “That sounds easy,’ right? But I’m afraid you’ll find a fiendish boss monster on the floor, too. After all, a game must have a boss. And what sort of boss is it, you ask? Well...”*

Kamisawa fell into a heavy silence.

“W-well, what...? Spit it out!” Asagi shouted, unable to take the tension anymore.

*“Heh-heh... You’ll have to see for yourself,”* Kamisawa taunted.

He was such a jerk! He may speak pretty politely, but he was totally twisted to the core!!

*“Now, then. Shall we begin the game?”*

“Hang on,” I said. “You still haven’t told us what these screens are for.” I hoped we could at least get him to explain the special two-screened mode we were dealing with.

*“Ah, I beg your pardon. You’re right, I haven’t. You there, young man—Would you mind hitting yourself?”* A silly-sounding suggestion, no matter how you think about it. *“It’ll be much easier to explain with a practical example. Now, if you please? ...We’ll be here all day if you don’t.”*

“.....” Asagi reluctantly, lightly tapped himself on the head. “There, I hit myself... Now what?”

*“Heh-heh. Thank you for your cooperation. Take a look at your game screens, if you please.”*

We looked down at our screens, just as Kamisawa said. My screen—the left half of the display—looked the same as it had before. Asagi’s screen, however...

did not.

**<<Right Screen>>**

**[Taisuke Asagi] ★ [HP: 5,000/5,000] Normal**

**Taisuke was attacked by Taisuke!**

**However, the attack had no effect on Taisuke.**

**0 damage!**

“So, let me get this straight: These screens show us how much damage we take when an enemy hits us, is that it?” I asked Kamisawa to confirm.

*“Yes, precisely. You catch on rather quickly. I suspect that this explanation will go much more smoothly than the last one,”* he said through suspicious laughter.

“What ‘last one’?” asked Asagi. “You mean we’re not the only ones playing in this event?”

*“Heh-heh...”*

“J-just say it, already!” I blurted out. Kamisawa’s silence did just the trick to keep us in constant fear... But to make things worse, breaking that silence didn’t do much to ease my chest-crushing anxiety.

*“You’ll find out soon enough... Now, let’s begin. I’ll be seeing you again later...”*

There was a sudden popping sound, and with that, Kamisawa’s voice stopped coming from my game console. That meant it was time for the event to really begin.

“Hang on, Mai,” said Asagi. He was bent over and touching a silver-colored plate that was stuck to the floor on his side of the room. “Take a look at this. See these letters?”

“It looks like someone’s name is carved there...but that’s not all.” I looked more closely at the engraving on the plate. There were two names, along with

these words:

## **[Game Over]**

- **Killed by the boss**

**(These players will begin here next time they continue.)**

“These two names must be other people who played in this event...right?”

“Yeah, I bet. And if I had to guess, the boss killed them on this spot, and that was Game Over.”

That’s when I got it. The room we were in was like a tomb for players—and a respawn point, too. As far as I could tell, there were three more plates just like it in the room.

“Should we look around in here some more? There might be something else that’s useful.” With that, we split up and started searching the room. Where should I look? The whole room was like some kind of storage closet. Furniture was piled up without much care, and all of it was covered in a thick layer of dust.

Hmm? What was that...? Something gleamed from under a table with a broken leg and caught my eye.

—!!

“Wh-whoa...! Waaaugh!”

I cried out in a way that...wasn’t very ladylike. Okay, it was more like a full-on shout. I staggered backward and crashed down on my butt.

“M-Mai? What’s wrong?! Are you okay?!”

I turned my face away and pointed under the table. “A-Asagi... Look at that...!”

Asagi cautiously peered toward where I was pointing. “Huh?” he said. “What’s with the mask?” A mask with an eerie smile on it had fallen under the table. Asagi picked it up. At that very instant, the light on my game console came on.

It wasn't the usual incoming message notification, either—this time it was blue. We glanced at each other, then looked down at our screens.





## **[Leering Foul Mask]**

**Pick up this item?**

**[Yes] / [No]**

**※Each player can carry up to ten items.**

“So this thing’s an item, huh?” Asagi said. He was already tapping away at his game console. “Let’s pick it up. Still, there’s something kinda creepy about it, isn’t there? I’d better be the one to carry it.” Have I mentioned Asagi’s a nice guy? ‘Cause he is!

He pressed the button to select **Yes**, and his console somehow sucked the creepy mask up inside of it.

“Well, it looks like we’ve got ourselves a creepy mask now.”

## **[Leering Foul Mask]**

**A pale mask with unsettlingly clammy skin**

**Parts of it are blotched with strange red stains...**

**※This item is cursed. You cannot discard it.**

“Um... A-Asagi? I don’t like the looks of that mask...”

“Don’t sweat it,” he said. “It’s just a useless trap item, meant to take up one of my inventory slots. Let’s forget it and keep searching.”

But before we could start poking around the room again, we heard a strange sound coming from the hall.

—*Creeeak... Clank, clank, clank...*

It sounded like something was being dragged down the hallway.

"I'm gonna check it out," Asagi said. "You hide in here, just in case, Mai."

"Huh? But... But..."

"Shh! It's gonna find you!" Asagi gently grasped my hand and led me into the shadows behind a bookshelf. "You should be safe here... All right, I'll be back in a sec."

Asagi let go of my hand and walked toward the door to the hallway.

*Creak... Clank...* The metallic dragging sounds came closer and closer. Whatever was making them, it had to be an enemy, no doubt about it.

I'm not gonna lie, I was scared...but no matter how scared I was, Asagi was in a much worse position. I wasn't gonna give in to fear!

I clenched my hand into a fist. I could still feel a faint trace of the warmth of Asagi's hand on it.

## **Meeting the Boss**

I'm not sure how long I waited. I was so nervous, every second felt like ten whole minutes.

...Did something happen to Asagi?

Just as I started to worry, the notification light on the game console on my arm started blinking. It was yellow this time. What did that mean?

Taking a look, I saw that something new had appeared on the split screens.

**<!> Floor Boss Approaching! <!>**

**[Wandering Shadow]**

**HP: 3,800/3,800**

The floor boss?! Was it really right out there in the hallway? The same hallway Asagi went to check?

*...Creeeak... Clank.*

I heard the sounds again. In fact, there was getting to be less time between them.

Oh... I hoped Asagi would get back quick!

I couldn't stand staying still behind the bookshelf. I gave in to the urge to go see what was going on for myself. Just as I reached for the door, though, Asagi came barreling back into the room.

“Asagi! What are you doing?! Get over here, quick...!”

“Mai, you’re supposed to be hiding!”

“What, and just let you—”

—Huh...?

Asagi suddenly grabbed hold of my hand and squeezed it hard.

“I don’t think we’re safe in here anymore, Mai. Are you good to make a run for it?”

“Y-yeah! I’m fine! I mean, I’ll try!” I tried to push down my fear and give him as bright and cheery a reply as I could.

“I’ll protect you, Mai. No matter what happens. You’re too important to me... Uh, n-never mind. I mean... Heh-heh...” His words were dead serious, but his expression was calm. Then he took a deep breath and threw the door open so hard, there was no way the boss wouldn’t hear it.

Beyond the door, the hallway stretched on to both the left and right. The hallway was lined with wooden boards. It was wide, and only lit just brightly enough to see. The whole thing felt spooky, like we were in a haunted house.

I started to look off to the right when Asagi grabbed my hand and started running, pulling me along.

“We don’t have time to look around! C’mon, we gotta go...!”

*Clank... Clang, clang, clang!!*

I heard the sound coming from behind us as we ran. It was louder than before and definitely getting more and more frequent. No doubt about it—the boss was on our trail.

My legs wobbled. Well, that’s underselling it... I’m pretty sure my whole entire body was shaking. Obviously, I’d never been through anything like this before in my life.

My mind was blank. My heart pounded so hard, I thought it would literally explode. I was sure Asagi could tell how badly I was trembling, too.

—Pathetic, huh? How long was I just gonna keep holding him back?

I breathed in short, sharp gasps. If only I'd taken my P.E. classes more seriously... Like I said, the only things I really had to be proud of in P.E. were a few meager written tests—and I doubted the boss monster would care about those!

The noises kept up their merciless pursuit. *Clank! Clang, clang!*

Oh no! They were getting closer and closer!

Just then, Asagi came to a sudden stop.

“Here, Mai—If we can hit the bad guy with this, we can make a break for it!” He lifted up a small table that had been left in the hallway and got ready to throw it.

“...O-okay!” I looked behind me. I still hadn't seen what the floor boss looked like. Once I thought about it, I remembered it was called a Wandering Shadow.

...Shadow?

I stared back toward where the sound was coming from.

*Clang, clang, clang...*

“Huh?!”

There was no monster to see. All I saw was a huge blade, almost like a halberd, drawing nearer and nearer. The boss itself was invisible, which made the massive blade it dragged around look like it was alive and moving on its own.

“All right! Now!” When the boss got within table-heaving distance, Asagi threw it as hard as he could. It struck exactly where he'd aimed around the blade. The table split in half with a loud crack.

**<<Combat Results>>**

**Taisuke attacked!**

**1 damage!**

## [Wandering Shadow]

**HP: 3,799/3,800 (-1)**

Asagi's attack was completely useless! That wasn't good... At this rate, slowing the boss down would be the least of our problems. We were up against an enemy we couldn't see...and it was coming right toward us even faster than before.

"We can't get away! If we try to run when it's this close, we'll only leave ourselves wide open for a direct attack!" Asagi shouted as he turned to face the blade. Was he really going to try to fight it?! In the very next moment, the blade swung right for him.

"Asagi!!"

The game console he'd held in his hand went tumbling to the floor as he fell face-down. I ran toward him and shook his shoulders hard.

"Asagi! H-hey? Asagi? Please, please answer me!"

Meanwhile, the Wandering Shadow's blade inched slowly in my direction.

"N-no... Please... Asagiii!"

There was no way I could face the game on my own. I was scared... So, so scared...

I knew I couldn't be strong without Asagi by my side.

"Please don't leave me, Asagi! Don't leave me alone!"

Just as tears welled up in my eyes, Asagi's hand twitched ever so slightly.

"Ngh... Mai?"

"Yes! You're okay!"

"I guess it just grazed my head and knocked me out for a bit... Sorry. I must look pretty pathetic now, after all that stuff about how I'd protect you." Asagi stood back up and glared sharply at the approaching boss. "Gotcha. I know what you are now," he said to the Wandering Shadow.

“Huh?! Wh-what do you mean?”

“I saw it. For a split second, I saw light reflect off a thread...”

“Thread?”

“Just watch,” Asagi said, brimming with confidence.

With that, he picked up a particularly pointy shard of the shattered table that he’d thrown. I watched with bated breath as he brandished it like a weapon. The next second, though, he tossed the shard straight up toward the ceiling.

Wait, what? Why throw it up there?

I heard a sharp snapping sound, like something being cut. Then the table shard crashed into the ceiling and came careening back down!

...Or it should have. But it didn’t. Why?

Just then, I heard a voice moan, *“Ooogaaah... H-how dare you...?”*

It was a dreadful voice that sent chills down my spine. I knew in an instant that it had to be the Wandering Shadow. I looked toward where the voice came from and saw the splintered chunk of the wooden table floating in midair.

“There, see that? That’s where the boss really is.”

“Huh?!”

## **<<Combat Results>>**

**Taisuke attacked!**

**51 damage to the Wandering Shadow!**

**[Wandering Shadow]**

**HP: 3,748/3,800 (–51)**

Aha. The floating shard of the table was actually stuck in the boss’s body! It hadn’t done much damage, but it had hit.

Now I got it. The huge blade was just a decoy to keep us from figuring out where the real monster was! Pretty clever, I've got to say.

Looking closely, I could see that Asagi was right—a thin thread stretched out from the spot where the chunk of wood stuck in the Shadow. It used the thread to control the blade like a puppet.

"...Ooogh..." The boss groaned as it yanked out the shard and tossed it at our feet.

"I bet if we can cut that thread, it'll take a lot of *oomph* out of its attacks," said Asagi. I figured he was probably right. With the thread cut off, the Shadow wouldn't be able to swing the blade. If things went really well, we might even be able to take it!

But something just wasn't adding up. I wondered what it was.

I fired up my brain to consider all the possibilities. Our enemy was a Wandering Shadow—a shadow that we couldn't see...

Wait. Hang on a second. If the boss itself was invisible, then...!

"A-Asagi! Wait, please! If we cut the thread, we'll lose sight of the boss completely!"

—That's right. Without the thread, we'd have no way of figuring out where the Wandering Shadow was. Even if it took a big chunk out of its attack power, that would still put the boss at an overwhelming advantage.

"Good thinking! Thanks, Mai!"

"D-don't mention it! But..." There was something else I was worried about. Actually, it was more like I'd made a mistake.

"But what?"

"Even if we don't cut the thread, the boss might just throw away the blade on its own if it thinks it's in danger now," I said, turning my face toward the floor. The knots in the wood directly below me looked like a face, mocking me. "It probably heard every word I said."

I'd given information to the enemy. We were much less likely to win now, thanks to my slipup.



“I’m sorry. I should’ve figured that any monster this crafty would be really likely to throw away its weapon eventually. I just made that happen sooner. I’m so stupid...”

“Don’t say that, Mai. This isn’t over yet...”

—*Clang.*

I heard the cruel sound of crashing metal. I was positive it was the Wandering Shadow throwing its blade aside.

“C’mon, Mai! We’re in a tight spot. Let’s retreat for now. Run!”

“What do you mean, run...? We’ll never get away! There’s no chance!”

“Then I’ll just have to make one.”

With that, Asagi turned toward the Wandering Shadow and charged. I saw him grab the boss’s blade off the floor. The next instant, I heard a dull noise and saw Asagi doubling back in pain with his hand on his belly.

“...Ngh... Waugh...!!”

“A-Asagi?!”

From the looks of things, the boss’s attack was faster. I started to run toward Asagi, but he stopped me.

“Wait! I’m fine. Listen, Mai. Can you pick up my game console? It should be somewhere near your feet.”

I looked down, and sure enough, Asagi’s console was there lying on the floor. I picked it up.

“...Thanks,” Asagi said. The moment he saw the console in my hand, he started swinging the huge blade wildly, slashing all around himself at random. I heard the weapon slice through the air.

And then...

“*Augh! Guh... Gwaaaaaugh!*” I heard the boss scream.

One of Asagi’s random slashes made contact with the Wandering Shadow. As soon as he hit the boss, Asagi darted over toward me as quickly as he could.

He grabbed me by the arm and took off running away from the boss.

“Sorry, Mai,” he said. “Hang in there...just a little longer.”

“Okay... Gotcha. I’ll do my best!” We ran for dear life, clenching our teeth all the way.

## *Strange Floor Markings*

Once again, we had our eyes locked straight ahead as we ran. The hallway was really, really long... It didn't help that it was so dark, we couldn't see the end. If we ran into a dead end, we'd be out of luck.

I tried not to let my horrible, nervous feelings hold me back as we ran. Eventually, we ran into a T-junction—the hallway stopped and split off out to the left and right. We came to a stop.

“Which way do we go, Asagi?”

“Hang on, Mai... Look at this plate. It's gotta mean something, right...?” He pointed toward a thick plate of silver on the wall. It stuck out like a sore thumb among all the wood planks around it.

Here's what was engraved on the plate:

**[10] to disappear.**

**Death awaits those left behind.**

There were large, mysterious numbers engraved on the floor to both sides, too. The floor of the branch to the left said 5 – 2 – 3 – 5 – 9. On the right was 1 – 4 – 4 – 9 – 2.

“I'm guessing that means one of these leads to a dead end.”

“Right. And if we pick the wrong branch, we're in trouble. It might even be an instant Game Over...”

I looked down and read the numbers on each side of the floor over and over

again. There was still an invisible enemy on our tail, and the longer we took to think, the closer it'd get. We had to make a big, lifesaving choice...and time was running out.

I broke out in a cold sweat under the pressure.

[10] to disappear.

That probably meant that we had to combine the numbers on each side into groups that added up to ten. Then we could set aside all of those numbers.

Death awaits those left behind.

That could mean that, after we set aside all the numbers that add up to ten, the direction that still had numbers left over was the dead end. That seemed like a solid theory. I started to test it out on the floor to the left: 5 – 2 – 3 – 5 – 9

Let's see. How could I make ten?

$$5 + 5 = 10$$

Which left 2, 3, and 9 behind. There was no way to make ten with those.

Next, I looked at the right side: 1 – 4 – 4 – 9 – 2

Well, first there was

$$4 + 4 + 2 = 10$$

and then

$$1 + 9 = 10$$

What was left over...? Nothing! If my guess was correct, the right branch was the safe path to take. I had my answer.

As far as codes go, I thought it was a pretty easy one...but I still couldn't make the final decision. I was too scared. I had no way to know that my guess was the right one. Besides, it might be a trap!

"Did you solve the riddle?" Asagi asked.

"Yeah. I think the right hallway is safe...but I'm not totally confident about that."

That's as far as I got before Asagi grabbed my hand and led me running down

the hallway to the right.

“Wait, please... What if I’m wrong?”

“Don’t sweat it. We’re short on time anyway,” he said. “Besides, I trust you, Mai. This is a choice I won’t regret.”

“Asagi... Thank you!” When it mattered most, Asagi always stepped in to make up for whatever I was missing. I mean, how reliable can you get? Even though we were running for our lives, as I followed behind him with my eyes on his big back, I caught myself thinking I wanted to stick with him forever.

We kept running until we came across three doors lined up along the hall. The hallway itself continued on past them into the eerie unknown. We came to a stop in front of the doors. The two doors on either side were made out of wood, while the one in the middle was made of iron.

“Hey, Mai! We could hide in one of these rooms until the Wandering Shadow passes by! It might be a little dangerous, but since we’re low on HP, it’s still our best shot at survival.”

We nodded at each other. Asagi reached out to open the closest wooden door. After we dashed inside, he slammed it shut again in a hurry.

“All right, now let’s find a place to hide!”

I nodded again, then took a look around the new room.

...Huh? What was that? I laid eyes on a strange sight.

We were in a large room with a bunch of glass cases in it. Each case had a picture of a different disturbing creature stuck to it. Inside each case was a wax figure that looked like it’d been modeled after the creature in the picture. All in all, there were about thirty of them.

...What were they for? Wait, they weren’t gonna start moving, were they?

I was totally distracted by the wax figures until Asagi gently pulled me by the arm. “Mai! Come on, let’s hide in there!”

“...Huh?”

Asagi was pointing toward a largish, standing box that looked like... Well, like a coffin. It was just about big enough for both of us to squeeze inside...

Asagi began trying to slide its lid to the side. It was made of wood, but solidly built—and apparently heavier than it looked. He was having a hard time moving it.

“...Ngh!” Asagi grunted, planted his feet on the floor, and heaved. Finally, the lid slid enough for a person to slide into the box. “C’mon, get in!”

“Hang on a second, please. There’s something I’ve gotta do first...”

There were several glass bottles packed in tightly below the glass cases. To be honest, when we’d first entered the room, I’d noticed them before the cases themselves. Each bottle had a lot of small, colorful candies inside it.

Candy, huh...? Just looking at it made me think of Amelie...

“Hee-hee. Just watch, okay?” Starting from around the door, I took some of the bottles and spilled out the candy inside. Just a bit! Not to the point that it looked unnatural.

When I was done scattering the candy, I ran over to Asagi and hid inside the big coffin-like box. Once Asagi was in, too, we pulled as hard as we could to put the lid back in place from inside. There was only a tiny crack left between the box and the lid for the light to get in, leaving us in the dark.

Don’t get me wrong—it was a really scary situation to begin with, but the darkness of the coffin doubled my fear. I crouched and curled into a ball to try and stop from shivering all over.

It was quiet. So quiet, it was creepy...

“I’m glad we’re playing in this event together, Mai,” Asagi suddenly whispered.

“Yeah... Me too. Definitely. I’m really glad you’re with me.” That’s probably not the sort of thing you’d usually say while gasping for breath, but it got my feelings across. Who knew that telling him how I felt would make me so nervous?

That moment, Asagi reached down to grab my arm again. He pulled me in

close.

“A-Asagi?” I stumbled, surprised. Even in the low light I could tell that his face had turned deep red.

“Look, Mai... If we make it out of here alive... I mean, if we ever break free from Nightmare... Um... There’s something I need to tell you. If you wanna hear it, I mean... Do you?” His voice and his hands were both trembling terribly. “I, uh... I guess not... Unless...?”

“Please... I want you to tell me,” I said with a smile. A look of slight surprise ran across Asagi’s face. But then it turned into a delighted smile—though he looked kinda shy, too.

“Thanks. We’re gonna make it out for sure. I’ll keep you safe to the very end. Let’s beat this thing together.”

I nodded.

The very next moment, the light on my game console started to blink!

**<!> Floor Boss Approaching <!>**

**[Wandering Shadow]**

**HP: 3,748/3,800**

The door opened with a creak. Asagi and I both gulped with apprehension.

Then I heard a soft crack—the sound of candy breaking on the other side of the room. It seemed like the boss had stepped on the candy I’d scattered on the floor.

After that came the sounds of kicking and something small rolling across the floor... I knew it! The Shadow was walking around in the room. My plan had worked! I’d hoped to find out whether the Wandering Shadow was floating through the air or walking on the ground. That was super-important info!

It had occurred to me that the Shadow might not be able to stay in midair

without that huge blade. I mean, it was the blade that had the weird thread on it, right?

If it could only walk, that was good news. We could listen for the sounds of its footsteps, or brushing against nearby stuff, to get a general idea of where it was. Best of all, we'd be able to tell when it had left the room without poking our heads out of our hiding spot!

Course, none of that mattered if it found us...but still!

I couldn't see anything in the darkness, but I could hear.

*Roll, roll... Crack!* Another piece of candy shattered.

The boss could still find us at any moment. That fear made me shiver and shake even harder. But I could feel Asagi beside me, trying to encourage me to keep it together. I squeezed his hand as hard as I could.

Huh? I could feel his pulse. His heart was beating even faster than before...

*Crack!*

The sound was louder that time—It must've been a particularly big piece of candy. Either way, the boss was close. Really close...! I wished I knew exactly where it was.

*Roll, roll... Thunk!*

At last, I heard a piece of candy roll all the way to the coffin where we were hiding and tap against it. I flinched at the sound. I held my breath and waited impatiently for the Wandering Shadow to leave.

What was going on? The room outside the coffin fell totally silent, but I knew the boss was still out there.

*Thump!*

Something bumped into the coffin. A light shock wave ran through its inside all around us.

*Thump, thump, thump...*

Did it bump into the coffin again? No... That wasn't it! It was *knocking!*

.....!



It was onto us! It thought we might be hiding inside the coffin...which we were!

*Thump... Thump, thump!*

The Wandering Shadow hit the coffin again and again, as if it were trying to check and double-check that we were inside. In my mind, I begged for it to stop. I closed my eyes and silently screamed.

*Asagi's Wish*

At last, the lid to the coffin slid juuust barely to the side.

That was it. It had found us for sure!

Just as it seemed hopeless, though, Asagi squeezed my hand tightly. I wasn't sure why, but it felt a little strange. It wasn't like the other times when he'd tried to comfort me.

A split second later, Asagi kicked the coffin lid as hard as he could, shoving it open. The impact sent a cloud of dust out into the air. Now that we were free from the darkness of the coffin, light came flooding into my eyes. Asagi pulled hard, yanking me out of the coffin by the hand, and took off sprinting toward the door. The candy all over the floor crunched under our feet. I heard the sound of more candy breaking behind us, which sent a shiver down my spine.

I heard a creepy, guttural voice murmuring behind us. I could just barely make out what it said: "...Found...you..."

No doubt about it, that was the boss—and it was headed our way.

We managed to make it to the door, but I knew it was hopeless. Even if we made it out, now that the boss was this close, it would catch up to us again in an instant.

Oh man! What were we going to do?!

"Mai!!" Suddenly, Asagi called out my name. He had a kind smile on his face.

"Huh? Asagi, what're you...?"

*Wham!*

He shoved me back out into the hall, where I fell hard on my butt again. Uh,

what had just happened?

I couldn't see Asagi anywhere. All I could see in front of me was the heavy wooden door that led into the room with the glass cases. Asagi had shut it behind me!

*Ga-chk!*

I tried, but I couldn't get the door open. I pulled the doorknob as hard as I could and in every possible direction—but it was no use! Asagi had locked the door from the inside so that I'd have a chance to run away.

"Asagi! Please, please open up... Open the door! Please!!" I shouted, but my cries echoed vainly down the silent hallway.

"Sorry, Mai...", I heard Asagi say from the other side of the door. I pressed my body to the door. I was so close, I got splinters on the palms of my hands—but I didn't care.

"Mai, you've got to listen. I don't think we'll get a Game Over as long as one of us survives. So please... Urgh!"

"A-Asagi?!"



\*

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,790/5,000]**

**<!> In Combat <!>**

**The Wandering Shadow attacks!**

**320 damage to Taisuke!**

**4,470/5,000 HP Remaining (–320)**

“N-no! Don’t die, Asagi! Please!”

“It’s okay. I’m not gonna die. You’re gonna have to be on your own for a bit, but I’ll catch up. I swear.”

**The Wandering Shadow attacks!**

**800 damage to Taisuke!**

**4,470/5,000 (–800) → 3,670/5,000 HP Remaining**

The Wandering Shadow was steadily chipping away at Asagi’s HP.

“...Waugh! H-haaah... Ngh... Haaanh...” I heard him struggling and breathing roughly on the other side of the door.

“Asagi, please... I... I can’t do this without you...”

He must have noticed how horribly my voice was shaking, because he replied as kindly as he could, “Um... Mai? There’s something I want you to do... Will you do it?”

“Of course! Anything! What is it?!”

“Run. Keep running until I get back. Don’t let it catch you... Run as fast as you can...”

## **The Wandering Shadow attacks!**

**720 damage to Taisuke!**

**3,670/5,000 (–720) → 2,950/5,000 HP Remaining**

“Kngh... Ooh... Koff! I can’t hold out much longer... Go on... Hurry...” Asagi’s voice got weaker and weaker.

I pulled myself away from the door. Then I approached it one more time and put my hands on it. “Promise me you’ll come back, okay?”

“...Yeah. I promise. I’ll be back...for sure...”

“Then I promise, too! I’ll keep running until I see you again...!”

“Thanks...Mai.” I couldn’t see Asagi, but I got the feeling that he was smiling.

Keeping my eyes on the door, I took a step back. I’m so sorry, Asagi...! Then I took off running as hard as I could down the hallway, back the way we’d come from, without looking back.

Of course, there was no boss on my heels...but I ran with all my might. There was no way I’d let Asagi down! I ran so hard that I nearly tripped over my own feet. At last, I could see the room where the event had all begun.

I dashed into the room at full speed and hid once more in the shadow of the same bookshelf.

“...Haaah,” I panted. I couldn’t help worrying about Asagi. Cautiously, nervously, I looked down at my game console.

## **The Wandering Shadow attacks!**

**920 damage to Taisuke!**

**2,950/5,000 (−920) → 2,030/5,000 HP Remaining**

**Taisuke attacks!**

**Miss!**

**The Wandering Shadow attacks!**

**1,250 damage to Taisuke!**

**2,030/5,000 (−1,250) → 780/5,000 HP Remaining**

The screen silently displayed Asagi's situation.

I stopped scrolling through the list of combat results. I couldn't stand to see any more...but at the same time, I felt like I had to know how the fight had turned out. That would be better than just blindly running away, wouldn't it...?

I tried to force my hand to stop shaking as I scrolled all the way down to the end.

**The Wandering Shadow attacks!**

**955 damage to Taisuke!**

**780/5,000 (−955) → 0/5,000 HP Remaining**

**Taisuke has 0 HP remaining.**

**Taisuke Asagi was terminated.**

...Asagi was out of the game.

Even though I expected it, I was still shocked that it had actually happened. The strength left my body, and my game console went tumbling to the floor. There I was in that dusty room with its faintly flickering fluorescent lights. Now that I was alone, it felt all the more unreal.

There was no one left in that world except me and the enemy.

“.....”

Tears streamed down my cheeks and fell silently to the floor. Suddenly, I heard a voice call out to me.

“Mai? Mai?! ...Maaaiiii!”

It sounded familiar—but where was it coming from? From my game console? I looked down to where it lay on the floor. I saw that, somehow, the game was open to the **Amelie’s Room** screen. I guess it started up when it fell.

Amelie peered up at me from the screen. She looked worried.

“What’s wrong, Mai? You don’t look so good. Oh! Hang on a second.” Amelie turned around and rummaged through her pocket. A huge wad of crumpled candy wrappers fell out of her pocket and tumbled to the floor of her room.

“Here it is! It’s all yours, Mai,” Amelie said. “This should perk you right up.” She held out a cute little bonbon wrapped in yellow paper. Since it was inside the game console, I couldn’t actually take it from her, but the thought alone made me really happy. Amelie was right; this was no time to give up hope. I had to tough it out.

“Thanks! I’m afraid I’m kinda full now, though,” I said. “Still, I really appreciate the thought!”

“Well, if you want it later, let me know.”

“I will. Thanks again, Amelie. Thanks a lot!”

That’s when I noticed that Asagi’s game console was in my pocket. I must have grabbed it by mistake in all the chaos. I decided to strap it onto my right arm. While I was doing that, I caught a glimpse at the screen, and I noticed it had changed.



**Taisuke Asagi**

**<<Unconscious>>**

**0/5,000**

**※You cannot rejoin the game for one hour.**

**To restore your consciousness, please pay 3,000,000,000 yen in-game.**

**※Respawn Penalty: Legs forfeited.**

**New Respawn Penalty: Right Hand (This will be forfeited next time you lose consciousness.)**

**※In case of a total Game Over, all forfeited Respawn Penalties will stop functioning.**

**※If you win the event, all forfeited Respawn Penalties will be returned.**

**<<Total Game Over>> → all Respawn Penalties will automatically be listed on the Nerve Auction.**

**※If your partner Mai Yashiro's HP is reduced to 0, the event will end in a Game Over.**

My eyes widened.

“He can't come back for another hour?” I gasped. “And then he has to pay three *billion*? No way...” From the looks of it, I couldn't count on Asagi coming back into the event at all. All I could do was stare numbly at the screen.

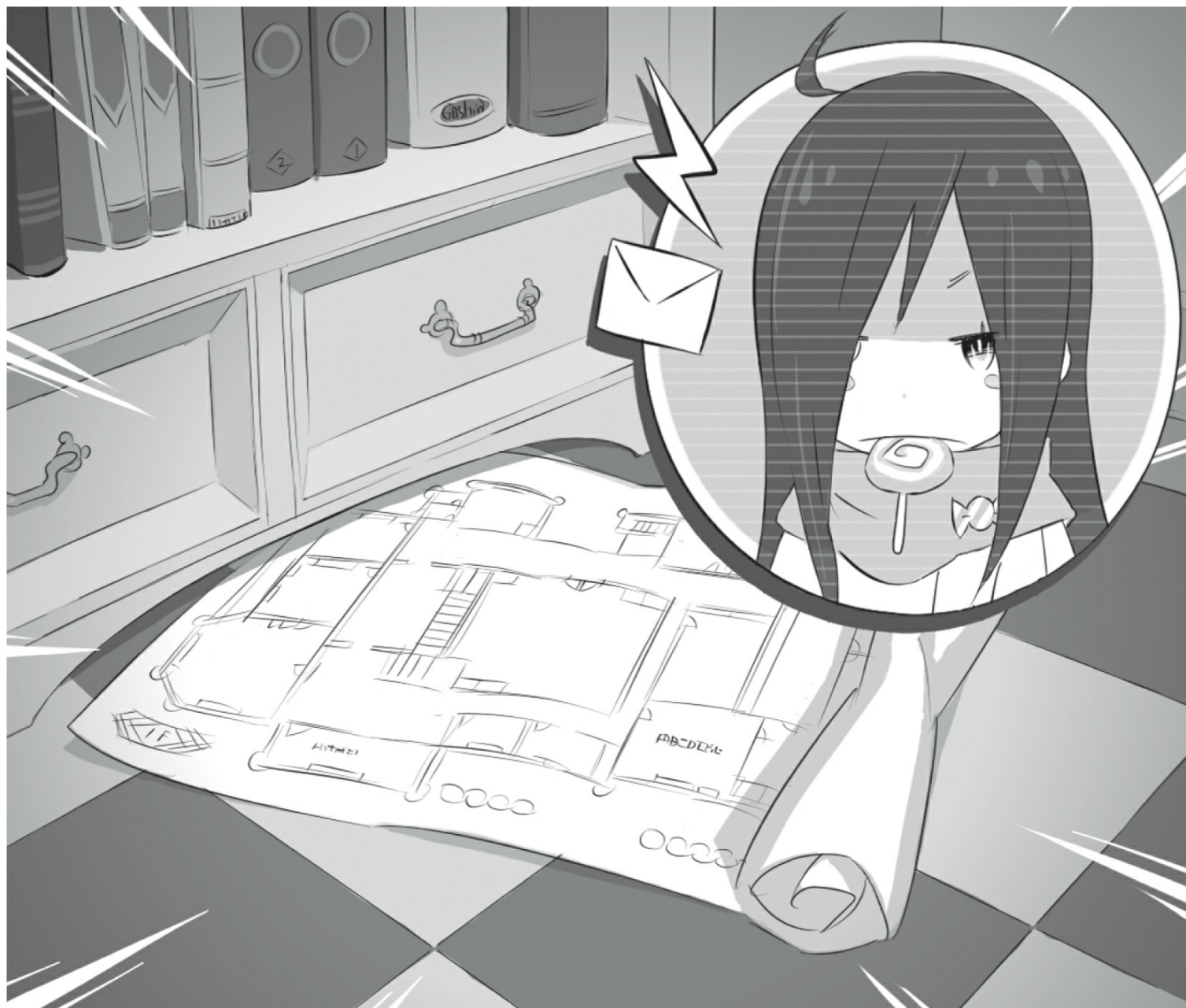
I was poking around in the bookshelf to keep my mind off the horror when Amelie called out. “Hey, Mai! It looks like you have a message.”

I stopped searching and rushed to see the game screen, but something caught my eye.

Huh? What was that?

I noticed a piece of paper wedged in the gap between the bottom of the bookshelf and the floor.

Brushing aside the dust, I picked it up and spread it out so I could see all of it.



Oh...! It was a map of this building. From the shape of the hallways to the number of doors, there was no doubt about it. At least having a map would make winning the event a bit easier.

“Mai! You’ve got a message, remember?!”

“Oh, right! Sorry, Amelie.” I quickly folded the map up and stuffed it into my pocket, then went to check my inbox. I wondered who it was from...

“A-Asagi?!”

**[From: Taisuke Asagi]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

...’:|

**You got away safely, right, Mai? I’m going to need you to hang in there for the next hour—but I swear I’ll be back when that hour’s up.**

**Please reply and let me know if this message got through, okay?**

**END**

Whoa! It was definitely not a message I was expecting to get. But there was no way he had the three billion to pay, right? That seemed impossible.

Wait, though. Hang on. I had Asagi’s game console with me. So how’d he send me a message? He’d have to have two consoles to do that—one in the real world, and one in the game with me. ...How did that work?

Maybe we hadn’t physically warped here from our original world; maybe the game only brought our minds here somehow. Did that mean we were dreaming...? But if it was a dream, then how were we controlling it so precisely?

And how could Asagi and I both be in the same dream in the first place? Maybe it really was a whole other world after all...

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Taisuke Asagi]**

**I'm waiting for you!**

**There is something I've got to ask you, though. Wherever you are right now, am I there, too?**

**One more thing... It's kinda hard to ask, but when the boss got you...was there any blood? How did it feel? Did it hurt? How much?**

**END**

I pushed the **Send** button hard and went back to searching the room. I had to get every little bit of information I could.

Feeling a little more optimistic than before, I put my ear up to a sliding closet door, just in case there was anything to hear...but there wasn't. With my ear pressed up against the door, I reached up and knocked a few times.

*Knock, knock...!*

Still no response. At the very least, it seemed unlikely that anything was alive in there. Here goes. I threw the door open. The very next moment, something came tumbling out of the closet.

*"...Eek!"*

*Tumble, tumble, tumble...* Whatever fell out of the closet noisily cascaded down toward my feet. I don't really know the words to say just how anxious and frightened I was, but I worked up the courage to look down and see what it

was. Not enough to turn my whole head down, though. Just my eyes.

“Wh-what the...?” What had fallen out of the closet and rolled toward my feet? Plain, ordinary marbles.

Phew... What was I so afraid of?

I shoved the marbles into a corner of the room so I wouldn't step on them, then peered deeper into the closet. I made sure to search every nook and cranny. Other than marbles, I found picture books, stuffed animals, and lots of other toys. I pulled some of the toys out so I could see even deeper into the closet. I could tell something had fallen down into a far corner. It was shaped like a square with notched edges. I brought up the Help screen for this particular Black Event and looked it up. It was a Skill Chip!

I tried reaching my left arm out to grab it, but it turned transparent as my hand got close. I couldn't even touch it. So I couldn't pick it up with my hands—that proved it was a Skill Chip for sure! I noticed that my game console had picked up on the chip. I looked down right away to see what I'd found.

## **[Skill Chip]**

### **Big Blaze (1/1)**

#### **[Effects]**

**Creates a wall of flame that covers a wide area.**

**※This flame will only burn specified targets. You can choose whether to target enemies, objects, or allies before creating the wall.**

#### **[Requirements]**

**1. Level 150 or higher**

**2. Flame-type equipment or a Mage-class job**

**※This skill cannot be used while wielding Cold-type equipment.**

Since I wasn't level 150 yet, I didn't meet the requirements to use the skill.

"Maybe Asagi can use it, though," I said to myself. I turned to his game console, which was still strapped to my right arm, and brought up his stat screen. He had a Mage-class job, and he wasn't using any Cold-type equipment. He could use it, all right! Without delay, I used Asagi's console to pick up the Big Blaze Skill Chip. The console sucked it up, just like it had sucked up the mask before.

Then I unintentionally put Asagi's avatar on the screen. It was like he was really there in front of me.

I wondered if he'd really make it back into the event. I could hardly wait to see him again. Did that mean I...liked him? And did he feel the same way about me?... There was definitely a lot of evidence that said he did.

But here's the thing about me: Whenever I like someone, I always end up chickening out. To be honest, I'd screwed up plenty of times before. I'd get cold feet and start acting all distant, and before I knew it, I'd be all alone with nothing but frustration and sadness.

But this time... This time, I didn't want any regrets.

Maybe I should tell Asagi how I feel. Even if he didn't feel the same way about me, I'm sure we'd still get along like we already did. Right? It's not like it would ruin anything between us... At least it probably wouldn't...

## *An Unexpected Return*

Just then, the light on my console started blinking again.

...Huh? Hang on! *Both* consoles were blinking—mine and Asagi's!

I didn't like the looks of that. I looked back and forth between both consoles and saw that the same thing was on every screen.

**<!> Floor Boss Approaching <!>**

**[Wandering Shadow]**

**HP: 3,748/5,000**

Talk about total despair.

What was I going to do? Should I hide? Or... Or...

I broke out in a cold sweat. My heart pounded hard and fast.

What should I do...? Oh, what should I do? No, wait, I didn't have time to hesitate! I made my decision. I got ready, and then I held my breath and waited for the moment to act.

The room was totally quiet...until the sound of the door creaking open broke the silence.

*Clatter...*

It was like even the air in the room changed in an instant. I heard someone bumping into something—it had to be the boss! It was in the room!



Back in the shadow of the bookshelf, I was shaking. That's right—I'd chosen to hide. I had made a few preparations first, though. I'd do whatever it took to survive until Asagi came back.

I heard the rattling of metal. That was probably the boss stepping on a broken metal bed frame I'd laid across the floor to make a barrier. In other words, I had a pretty good idea of where it was.

—Just a little longer. Maybe it was time to move. No, it was *definitely* time to move! Now or never!

I tugged on a thin thread that I held in my hand—a thread that connected to the closet where I'd found the Big Blaze Skill Chip.

—*Thunk!*

I heard the faint sound of something knocking against the closet door from the inside. That would be the toy I'd tied to the other end of my thread.

For a moment, everything was silent. And then...

...*Crack... Clank, clank, snap...!*

The loud sounds told me the boss was pushing its way through the metal bed frame. The enemy was on the move!

It was a good thing that I'd taken my jacket off and set it up so that it poked out of the closet door—right where the boss could see it. Success! I had the Wandering Shadow totally fooled.

It was time for the main event! I sprang out from my hiding spot with my hand on Asagi's game console.

**<<Big Blaze>>**

**Target: Enemies**

—Here goes...!

As I activated the skill, a huge magic circle appeared around the console and

spread out to surround me. Then, with a loud whoosh, it turned into a ring of fire that surrounded me like an aura.

Suddenly, I heard the clank of something hitting the bed frame. The enemy had noticed me, and now it was trying to make its way over. Fat chance!

I glared sharply in the boss's direction, and the flames around me surged forward. They gathered to form a huge wall of flame—a wall that made an inescapable prison for the Wandering Shadow.

**Taisuke activated Big Blaze!**

**A wall of flame that only burns Taisuke's enemies appeared!**

**The Skill Chip was spent.**

**※The spell will last for a random amount of time.**

I checked the situation on the game screen, then looked back up in the boss's direction. The metal bed frame was even more wrecked than before; it looked like the Wandering Shadow had taken out its anger on the poor, defenseless bed. But it was only mangled—it didn't show the slightest sign of singeing or melting. The wall of flame clearly hadn't damaged it. I looked back at Asagi's game console on my right arm.

Just like it said, the Big Blaze Skill Chip was gone. All that was left in Asagi's inventory was the freaky mask he picked up when we first got here. With nothing better to do, I tried clicking on it.

**[Curse activated.]**

"...‘This item cannot be discarded,’ huh...?" I wondered aloud as I read over the mask's description again. If it can't be thrown away, then... Let's see. Masks go on your face. If this mask was cursed, did that mean that if you put it on, you couldn't take it off again?

Eureka! That's it! At least, I thought it might be it...if my idea worked.

Once again, from beyond the wall of flame, I heard the sound of the bed frame being mangled. I stared toward the sound—that's where the boss had to be! As quietly as I could, I pointed Asagi's game console in that direction.

I had to take a leap of faith. The spell said the flames would only burn Asagi's enemies, right?

Come on, curse! I crossed my fingers, hoping that the curse worked on enemies.

## **Taisuke unleashed the mask's curse!**

### **Searching for targets...**

That text appeared on Asagi's screen as the mask materialized outside of his console. Now solid, it floated in midair.

*"Hee-hee... Keh-Kya-kya-kya-kya!"* A creepy laugh suddenly filled the room. It was so unpleasant, I wanted to cover my ears.

Glancing around the room, I saw the mask flash brightly and fly forward. It flew so quickly that it might be more accurate to say I saw the afterimage it left through the air. The trail of light led straight through the wall of flame. And then...

*"Gwaaaugh... Guuurgh!"* The Wandering Shadow moaned. It sounded like the mask had found a wearer. Thanks to the curse, it wouldn't be coming off again—no matter what. Now it would be much easier to see where the boss was. All I had to do was look for the mask.

Back to the wall of flame... What was that about it lasting for a random amount of time? If I didn't know how long it would stick around, that made staying put in this room pretty dangerous. I made a break for the exit and took one last look toward the boss.

The mask hung in midair, staring right in my direction. Somehow, it seemed to

be smiling at me, which gave me goose bumps.

Slowly, carefully, I made my way out of the room. The heavy door creaked shut behind me. Once it was shut all the way, I crouched in place and pulled one of the marbles from the closet out of my pocket. I carefully set it at the base of the door.

As long as the marble was where I left it, I'd know the boss was still in the room.

"There!" I said to myself. "Time to move!"

With that, I ran full speed ahead down the hallway to the left—back along our original route. The hallway stretched on and on, dim in the low light. I couldn't run very far without getting winded, though, and I kept coming thiiiis close to having to stop and catch my breath.

"Ngh! I... I can't...go on..." Scratch that. I hit my limit and collapsed. I really... really needed to get stronger.

"Mai! You've got to keep moving! ...At least walk! Whatever you do, just don't stop! If it catches you, I'll be sad!" Amelie was there on my screen, holding out a huge lollipop. "Here! This is my favorite candy! It's all yours...if you just keep walking!"

"Thanks, Amelie. You always know just what to say," I said. "You're right. I've got to push myself at least a little harder."

But just as I tried to stand up again, something slammed right into my head. The strange thing was, it didn't really hurt. Did I bump into something? As I was getting my bearings, I heard a voice call out from right above me.

"Ack... S-sorry about that, Mai." It was a familiar—and flustered—voice.

...It was just the voice I'd been hoping to hear.



“My bad! I was just trying to get to you. Man, is my timing totally off, or what? ...Ha-ha...” I looked up to see Asagi’s apologetic face looming over me. One look at his shy smile cut through all the threads of fear and stress that wrapped around me. “Lame, I know. I really wanted to make a way cooler entrance.”

“Asagi... Asagiii!”

*Whump!* Without thinking, I darted up and threw my arms around his chest.

“Wha...? U-um... M-M-Muh... Mai?” Asagi stuttered. But I could barely hear it over his heartbeat. He was back!

When I finally looked happily up into his face, I realized that he was as red as an apple!

“Oh! Sorry! I just...couldn’t help it...” Yikes! What got into me?! Now I was every bit as red as he was. I tried to pull away, but this time, he wrapped his arms around me and held me tight.

“Sorry, Mai. I bet you were terrified, huh? Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere this time.”

Oh man. My heart wouldn’t stop pounding. All I could do was nod at him again and again.

Asagi gently pulled away with a kind smile.

“H-hang on!” I said. “How did you get back here so soon, anyway? I mean, I knew you’d make it back...but there’s no way you saved up 3 billion yen in the game that easily, right?” My mouth was running a mile a minute. Whatever it took to hide how embarrassed I was!

“Right... Sugiura and the rest chipped in. They gave me pretty much everything they had.”

“Huh?”

“They said they were betting all their in-game funds for the fate of the club.”

Sugiura... Taichi... Naomi... Everyone! Wow!

“That means we’ve gotta make it back safe!”

“You said it. I’m pretty sure Sugiura’s gonna kill us if we don’t.”

Oof. Even though I wasn’t nearly as afraid of Sugiura as I used to be, I couldn’t shake the thought that he might actually do it.

“So, shall we get going? It looked like you were in a real hurry. I take it there’s something dangerous back there... Am I right?”

“Yeah! I trapped the boss back in the starting room, but I don’t know how long it’s gonna stay there!”

“You trapped it?! How?! Er, n-never mind. That story can wait until we’re somewhere safe... Can you run, Mai?”

“I think so... Yeah, I should be fine.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” Asagi said. “Tell you what—Lemme give you a piggyback ride.” He turned around and crouched so I could climb up on his back.

“I-I’m fine, really! Besides, I’m heavy... I’ll just slow you down!”

Asagi chuckled. “People survive because we make up for what our comrades are missing, y’know. At least that’s my theory. Right now you’re low on power. I’m not. So let me help you. You don’t think that’s a weird way to see the world, do you?”

“No! I think it’s wonderful!”

“Then hop on. Don’t be shy. Besides, just so you know, I’m pretty sure I can carry you and then some.”

“Really? I guess we’ll see. All right... Here I come.”

Asagi’s back swayed widely from side to side, and of course I felt every movement. Still, he ran as fast as he could with me on his back. I had to divide my attention between trying not to fall off and leading him to the safest spot I could think of. But where was that? Was there anywhere safe around here anyway? No matter what room we picked, sooner or later, the boss would come looking.

Wait, that was it!

I squirmed to pull the map I'd found under the bookcase out of my pocket and carefully looked over it.

...Huh? What were those little nooks...?

—There was one spot on the map where the Wandering Shadow was least likely to go...and that was it. It might be dangerous, but it might be our best shot at safety—there was no way of knowing which. I quietly told Asagi about my discovery.

“Asagi, I found a place that might be safe.”

“Huh?”

The place I had in mind was down the left branch at the T-intersection. The very same one we avoided earlier because it was the wrong answer to the riddle. There were several little nooks along that hallway that looked to be the perfect size for us to hide in.

“You’re right,” Asagi said. “That might not be a bad place to try.”

He came to a stop...and I realized we'd arrived at the same intersection at the end of the hall. I looked over Asagi's shoulder and down the left hallway. I couldn't see all the way to where it ended.

“If we screw up here, it could be Game Over,” Asagi reminded me. “Let's be really, really careful.”

The question was, should we go down the left hallway? Or should we stay away? Asagi didn't press me for an answer. I'm pretty sure he knew what he was doing: making sure that whatever happened to us, it wouldn't be my fault.

“Thank you.”

“Uh, for what, Mai?”

“N-nothing. Just talking to myself,” I said, laughing under my breath.



*The Secret in the Stone Walls*

...And as I laughed to myself, I noticed that we were coming up on a stretch of hallway with several indentations on the walls. It was the only part of the hallway that was built differently from the rest. For some reason, the wood planks gave way to stone walls.

“Um, Asagi? I think it’s about time I got down. Thanks for carrying me, though. I mean it.”

Asagi smiled. He looked proud of himself.

I got down from his back and looked closely at the seam between the wooden wall and the stone. Why was it built this way? Did it mean something?

*Knock, knock, knock!* I tried rapping on the stone part of the wall. It was every bit as heavy and cold as you’d expect a stone wall to be. It was the real thing.

But that didn’t answer the question of why this part of the hallway was made out of stone in the first place. What was it for? I took a step toward the nooks to see what I could from a safe distance.

Aha! Someone had built them this way! There were curious holes cut into the stone wall, one in the dead center of each nook. I’d say they were just about as big around as a soda can.

“Do you smell that, Asagi?” I asked. “Something smells a little like... gunpowder.”

I took another look around. I noticed that there were discolored patches on the wall directly across from the holes. They looked like scorch marks.

—No doubt about it: There was some sort of fire trap here. A really fiendish

one, too, from the looks of it...

“Look, Mai... There’s one of those plates again.”

Sure enough, on our side of the wall with the scorch marks, there hung a metal plate with two names engraved on it. That had to mean a pair of players had gotten a Game Over at this very spot.

Asagi reached over to a landscape painting that hung on the wall near us and took it down. It came right off the wall.

“What’re you doing with that?”

“Maybe if we toss it ahead of us, it’ll trigger the trap. Worth a try, right?”

Then he did exactly that. He heaved the painting down into the stone hallway. A moment later, we heard a strange sound. It sounded a bit like a switch being flipped.

At the exact same time, some kind of force field closed the stone section off from the wooden side, and something came shooting out of the holes.

It was a black gas that filled the entire area around the trap. Then, at last, something else tumbled out of the hole—and I heard a small explosion.

The stone hallway before us turned into a sea of black flame. It blazed higher and higher until I couldn’t see anything but blackness in front of me. We waited behind the force field as the flames steadily died down.

Finally, when the flames were all out, the force field vanished, too. The black smoke faded away, and I could see again. There was nothing left of the painting whatsoever. If we stepped into the stone hallway, we’d end up the same way. But still...

“There’s gotta be some way to disarm it, right?!”

“Y-yeah! Good thinking, Mai. Let’s look around.” I’m pretty sure he was imagining what would happen if we got caught in the trap, just like I was. But it was too terrifying for either of us to say it out loud.

“It doesn’t look like there’s anything special about this wall over here,” Asagi said, touching the wall to our left. “Course, it could be on the floor, or on the ceiling...”

“Could you try hitting the wall, Asagi?” If there was any way to shut down the trap, it would definitely be hidden. We knocked on the wooden walls, and the sound echoed down the hallway.

*Knock... Knock, knock.* All clear. *Knock, knock, knock...* Nothing here, either.

*...Tunk!*

“Huh? That sounded different...!” Asagi knocked the same spot again. He was checking the very bottom of the right side of the wall, right where it touched the floor. “That’s weird.”

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I stopped my own knocking and headed over to see what Asagi was talking about.

“Here. This part right hear sounds a bit different from the rest of the wall... Listen.”

*...Tunk...* It sounded weaker than all the other knocks.

“You’re right. Can I try touching the wall there?”

“Sure, go for it.”

“Oh! That’s it...” Make no mistake, the wall behind that spot was hollow! I tried pressing against it hard with my hands. Just as I expected, part of the wall came cleanly off. It was really well-made. I tried putting the piece back into place, and it looked like a completely normal wall. It fit the opening exactly, like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle...

I took the piece of the wall back off and peered inside the cavity. Inside, there was an electrical outlet.

Weird. What was that doing here? As far as we’d seen, nothing in the area needed to be plugged in. To make things weirder, I couldn’t figure out why anyone would hide an electrical outlet in the first place. It had to be a fake. I was sure it could be removed, just like the bit of the wall in front of it. I pulled a barrette out of my hair, stuck it into the gap between the wall and fixture, and lifted it up.

The outlet came out of the wall surprisingly easily. In its place, some sort of device with a liquid crystal display and several buttons appeared. It might be

just what we needed to shut down the trap.

Before touching anything, I took a good look at the LCD.

**<<Toggling the Trap>>**

**Status...ON**

**※Please see the manual.**

**※This device will freeze for twenty-four hours after three errors.**

**2 6 [ ] = [ ] 3 10**

**※Please fill in [ ].**

“I get it. If we make three mistakes, we won’t get to try again for a while.” Asagi had apparently come up behind me to see the device, too.

“Looks like it... That limit could be a real pain, huh?”

Next, I looked at the buttons under the LCD. There were four: One arrow pointing up: (↑) One arrow pointing down: (↓) One arrow pointing right: (→) And one button marked ENTER.

It seemed safe to assume that nothing we did would count against our limit until we pressed ENTER.

“Maybe we better check that manual,” Asagi muttered.

“There isn’t one,” I said.

“Oh, right. Well, maybe there’s a hint somewhere else, then.”

With that, Asagi started pressing buttons. Every time he pressed one of the arrow buttons, a letter would appear inside one of the blanks in the equation. When he pressed the same again, that letter would change to a different one, like in a slot machine. I watched carefully as the letters changed, but there

didn't seem to be a pattern to it.

There had to be a clue somewhere. Wherever it was, we couldn't afford to overlook it.

“No matter how many buttons I push, all it gives me are letters...”

“Hang on, Asagi. Let's try entering something in for real.”

“Huh?!”

“We should be okay if we just make one mistake. It might also be helpful to know what happens when we get an error.”

“Good point,” Asagi said. He looked thoughtfully at the display.

**2 6 [ ] = [ ] 3 10**

He slowly started pressing buttons.

**2 6 [BB FFFFFFF] = [CCC JJJJJJJJ] 3 10**

Aha! I picked up on what Asagi was thinking, and the logic behind his button presses made sense to me. Still, after he hit ENTER, a loud buzzer rang out three times, and the LCD showed the word ERROR in large letters.

Needless to say, the trap was still armed.

The word ERROR kept blinking on the LCD for just long enough to feel like it was mocking us.

—?!

Hang on a second... The numbers on the display were changing! First to four, then three... Then from three to eight... They changed and changed until they finally stopped.

$$4 \ 1 \ [ \ ] = [ \ ] \ 7 \ 7$$

It looked like the code to disable the trap changed at random every time someone got it wrong. In that case, I realized, there had to be some way we could figure it out. I clenched my fist as my doubt and fear turned into confidence.

If the problem itself changed every time, that meant that all we had to do was figure out what purpose the numbers served. If we could do that, there was a chance we could solve it without the missing manual.

“You thought the numbers pointed to each letter’s place in the alphabet, right, Asagi?”

“Right. Y’know, like A is the first letter, so 1 would be A, and so on. But it looks like I was wrong.”

“No, I think you’ve got the basic logic correct. The thing that sticks out to me, though, is this equals sign here in the middle.”

That symbol meant that both sides had to match, or at least balance each other out.

“Aha, gotcha... So we’ve gotta make both sides the same? Let’s try this...”

$$4 \ 1 \ [G \ G] = [D \ A] \ 7 \ 7$$

Yep, that’s exactly what I was thinking. I nodded to let him know we were on the same page, and he pressed ENTER right away.

This time, we didn’t hear the buzzer. Instead, there was a noise that sounded like a piece of machinery being switched off.

“Hear that? I think we did it!”

“Hold up, Mai. Let’s check first. We’ve gotta be extra sure the trap won’t go off.”

Ah! He was right. There was always a slim chance that the trap-disarming device was broken. In that case, it wouldn't matter if we'd solved the puzzle; we'd be toast anyway. I could always count on Asagi to be cautious.

"Is there anything else we can throw?... I guess this is all we've got," Asagi said, taking off his school uniform jacket. He leaned back to build power, then heaved it down the stone hallway.

...Nothing happened. It looked like we'd totally succeeded in shutting down the trap.

"All right! We should be good to go. Shall we?" He stepped into the stone hallway and walked over to pick up his jacket. He held it out to me.

What for? I shook my head no.

"Go on, Mai, put it on. If you don't mind that it's been on the floor, I mean. Or that it's a little too big for you."

What a nice guy, right?! Did I say that already?

Come to think of it, I had left my own jacket back in the room with the boss, and I was getting a little chilly in my short sleeves... I decided to face up to my feelings and accept Asagi's jacket. "A little too big" was an understatement. It was downright baggy.

Asagi took one look at me and couldn't help but laugh a bit. "Heh-heh... C-c'mon, let's go." I agreed, rolling up the sleeves around my arms.

We started walking through what had, until just a few minutes ago, been a deadly flame trap. The air in the hallway was still warm and humid. We passed several more recesses in the wall along the way.

"...Phew." I let out a sigh of relief when we were finally past the last hole. I guess all the stress from walking around on high alert caught up to me at once, because I was on the verge of collapsing.

"You okay?"

"Ah... I'm fine. Just a little worn out, that's all. It won't last."

"You know what Sugiura told me? 'That girl's just the kinda dummy who can't stop herself from doin' too much.'"

“D-dummy...? He said that? A-ha-ha...” Classic Sugiura—harsh as ever. I had to snicker.

“He also said that once you get back, he’s gonna have to put you through training every day in the gym until you get stronger.”

“E-every day?! Come on, he didn’t really say *that*, did he?”

—Now THAT was scary!

Asagi laughed it off, then stared back down the hallway.

“Want to go see how far it goes?”

“The map says it’s a dead end, though...”

Still, Asagi said he wanted to check it out, so we kept on walking through the stone hallway. The floor was rough, and I kept nearly stumbling over bumps along the way.

“Looks like a dead end after all, huh...?”

“Nah, let’s get a little closer,” said Asagi as a wall came into view at the end of the hallway. “I get the feeling there’s something carved in that wall.” Now that he mentioned it, part of the wall did seem to be strangely scraped away.

...But what was it?

Once we got right up to the wall, we clearly saw what was carved into it.



“What’s that supposed to be? Some kind of graffiti?” Asagi looked perplexed. He tapped at the wall all around the carving, but nothing happened.

“There’s something strange about it, isn’t there?”

“Huh?”

“Look closely, please. Here, see?” I pointed at the fifth notch from the top of the strange symbol.



“Hey, you’re right...! That line’s thinner than all the others. Let me guess...”



Asagi trailed off as he turned around to look at the recesses in the stone wall behind us.

“I think we’ve got the same idea... There are exactly seven nooks in the wall, too.” I turned, too, and counted all the nooks we’d passed on our way through the flame trap. Both of us had figured out that the horizontal notches in the strange carving represented those recesses in the wall. We decided to investigate the fifth one.

But first, we quickly inspected the closest one to us. It still smelled faintly of gunpowder. I peeked into the soda can–sized hole; I could tell there was a bit of open space behind it, but it was too dark to see just how far it went.

We moved on to the second nook. We looked it over and found it was exactly the same as the first one. The third and fourth weren’t really any different.

My anticipation grew as we finally reached the fifth nook. At first glance, it had the same hole in the stone wall as all the others.

“Huh? That’s weird,” said Asagi. “Hey, Mai, come here for a sec, will you?” He beckoned me over with his hand.

...? Something felt strange, but I did as Asagi asked and headed over. Once I’d gotten a good bit closer, I noticed the same weirdness that he had.

The gunpowder smell wasn’t as strong in the fifth nook as it was in the others. On top of that, the smell actually got fainter as I got closer. Maybe it wasn’t part of the flame trap at all. Was it there for some other reason?

I looked into the fifth hole. There wasn’t anything inside. But even though it was too dark to tell for sure, I got the feeling that it stretched on deeper into the wall than the others.

I pulled out the map and checked to see if there might be a room behind it. There wasn’t even a path marked on the map there, much less a whole room.

But wait, what if there was a secret room?

“Find anything, Mai?”

“Yeah. At least, maybe... I think there’s something hidden back there.”

Even if my hunch was right, we still didn’t have any way to break through the

wall and find out. What should we do, then? I took another peek into the hole.

Huh? What was that? I noticed something stuck just above the hole with plastic tape.

“What you got there, Mai?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a little box,” I said, holding it out. “I’m gonna open it.”

***On to the Final Battle***

Inside the box, there was one slip of paper, folded into fourths.

“Is there anything written on it?”

I unfolded it to find out.

**...I’ve got high hopes for you two now.**

**You’re the first ones to ever make it this far...**

**For now, you must win this Black Event. Once you do that, you can return to your own world again—and then come and go to this one as you please.**

**If you get a Game Over in an event without successfully applying for victory (think of it like saving your game), the boss’s HP will fully recover. That’s something you should be aware of.**

**It isn’t much, but here’s all the help I can offer...**

As soon as we finished reading the letter, two Skill Chips floated up out of it and into the air. Our game consoles detected the chips, so we looked to see what they were.

**[Skill Chip]**

**Dark Domination (10/10)**

**[Effect]**

**Holds a target completely still as long as it's in your field of view.**

**The effect ends when you blink.**

**[Requirements]**

**1. Cursed Sage**

**No other jobs can use this skill.**

“So you’ve got to be a Cursed Sage to use it, huh...? I guess that means it’s yours, Mai,” Asagi said as he read his game screen.

“I guess it does. Can I go ahead and take it, then?”

“Of course. Be my guest.”

My game console absorbed one of the two Skill Chips. There! It was officially mine!

But there was still one Skill Chip left. I took another look at my console to find out what it did.

**[Skill Chip]**

**Crusher (1/1)**

**※Untargeted Magic**

**[Effect]**

**Summons powerful quakes to swallow up everything around you, friend or foe.**

**[Requirements]**

**1. Level 150 or higher**

## 2. Mage-class job

That explained the remaining Skill Chip.

“Looks like you’re the only one who can use this one,” I said. “Though this Untargeted Attack bit makes it sound pretty dangerous.”

“Yeah... I’d better be careful with this one. Either way, I’m gonna pick it up.”

With both chips claimed, the only thing left was the piece of paper in our hands.

“The question is, what does all this stuff mean...? And who wrote it?”

“Whoever they are, they don’t seem like an enemy...even though all we have to go on is their word.”

“Yeah, that’s just what I was thinking. If we believe the letter, then we’d better try and win this event.”

“It definitely looks that way.”

“That means we need to beat the boss and find that key. That’s how we win, so we’ve gotta make that our next goal.”

I gave Asagi the steadiest nod I could. That settled it—I made up my mind. “Let’s go take down that boss right now.”

“Wait, what? For real? Shouldn’t we at least work out a battle plan first?”

“I’ve already got one. I’ll use my new Skill Chip to hold it still.” If nothing else worked, it would at least buy us some time to run away. And what was more...“I can use it up to ten times if I need to.”

**[10/10]** – That’s what it said right next to the name of the chip. I was pretty sure that meant I could use it ten times, at least.

“I’ll hold the boss still while you get up close and hit it with the Skill Chip you just got. How does that sound?”

Asagi listened silently as I explained my plan. When I was done, he quietly said, “Gotcha. Let’s give it a shot.”

With our plan in mind, we headed back to the room where I'd trapped the Wandering Shadow. I wondered if it was still in there. The marble would tell us soon enough.

Once we reached the door, I immediately checked for the marble.

...! What was that supposed to mean?! I realized that not only was the marble not in place in front of the door—it was nowhere to be seen at all.

"Uh, Mai? What's wrong?"

"I left a marble in front of the door, but it's gone..."

"A marble...? Wait, is that it?" Asagi pointed a finger back down the hall we'd just passed through.

Sure enough, there was the marble, off in a cranny. It was a long way away from the door. I figured the boss had not only knocked it away by opening the door, but it'd given it a direct kick, too. While we were off to the side dealing with the flame trap, the boss had passed through the same hallway we'd taken to get back to where we were. Since we hadn't bumped into it along the way, it was safe to guess it'd turned right at the T-intersection.

"I don't think the boss is in there anymore," I said, pulling out the map. The hallway that stretched before us connected back around to the same one we'd taken to get here. In other words, it was shaped like a rectangle. "If we keep moving forward, there's a good chance we'll run into it."

Asagi looked at me and nodded slightly. "That should save us some trouble looking for it. All right, let's go—but keep an eye on your screens. They'll probably let us know when the boss is close."

"Okay, gotcha!"

We kept moving down the hall, keeping a close watch on our consoles. Neither of us said a word; all we knew was that the other was getting anxious.

—All of a sudden, both of our game consoles picked something up at the same time! It had to be the floor boss, no doubt about it...! Asagi and I looked at each other and nodded with determination. It was time to put our plan to work!

We still couldn't see the mask approaching through the dark hallway. That

proved it was still some distance away.

“I’m going to go draw the boss in closer so it’ll be in range of our magic!” I said.

“Mai, no! What if something happens to you...? I’d... I’d...”

“Let me do this, Asagi. I can handle it, because I trust you. You’ve got my back, right?”

“Mai... Thanks for saying so! All right, leave the support to me!”

“Thank you. And one more thing... If something happened to you, Asagi, I couldn’t stand it, either.” I grinned at Asagi as I ran off ahead of him.

“Huh? Wait, what...? Muh... M-M-Mai...! Wh-What... What does that mean?” I heard him stammering after me in a loud voice. He sounded confused.

Sheesh, did my feelings really not get across? I looked back down the hall at him.

“Um, Asagi...?”

“N-never mind... You don’t have to answer! I mean, we’re about to fight the boss and all, so...it’s no time to get caught up on a misunderstanding or anything... That wouldn’t be very, uh, manly of me.” Asagi was looking down, but I could tell he was blushing. He was covering his ears, too.

“Er...” I started to speak, but before I could get a word out, Asagi cut me off by pointing forward in a panic.

“N-not now, Mai...! Look out!”

The leering mask came floating into view through the darkness. The boss was on its way!

I turned to the game console in my left hand and brought up the Skill Chip activation menu as quickly as I could. I kept my eyes locked on the enemy in front of me as I whispered to Asagi.

“Give me a signal when you’re ready to use your skill,” I said, in the softest voice I could manage. “It’ll have to be something the boss won’t notice, so words are out... How about clearing your throat?”

“Roger that,” Asagi whispered back.

—All right!

I slowly approached the boss. It was approaching me, too—the mask swayed closer and closer through the dimly lit hallway.

*“Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee...”* came the Wandering Shadow’s creepy laughter. I guess it was happy to finally find us.

I have to admit I was freaking out. My legs were trembling.

When I’d gotten a ways away from Asagi, I stopped. Then, for some reason... the boss stopped, too.

—Was it trying to figure out what I was up to? I could tell this wasn’t going to be easy. But I bit my lips and got ready to act. Forget the danger, it was now or never!!

The plan was in motion!

I stuck my hands into my pockets and pretended to search frantically for something. I made sure the Wandering Shadow saw it, and I really put on a show.

That’s right—I was trying to create an opening. Sure enough, the boss took the bait and dashed right for me, eager to interrupt.

Oh, crud! It was way, way faster than I thought it was! My hair flapped in the wind it sent blowing down the hall.

“Ahem!” I heard Asagi clear his throat. The signal!

In a hurry, I took my console in my hands and raised my eyes toward the boss. Time to activate my new skill...!

But I was a little too late. I felt a dull pain run through me—it almost felt like I got punched from inside my own body! The attack knocked me far backward, too.



## The Wandering Shadow attacks!

### 720 damage to Mai!

**Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,920/5,000] (−720) → 4,200/5,000**

“Mai...? Mai!! Hang in there, I’m coming!” Asagi called out bravely—though it almost sounded like a scream.

“D-don’t worry! I’m okay!” I shouted back to stop him from running over. Still lying on the floor, I looked up and glared at the boss again.

I reached for my console once more. I had to cast the spell... This time, I made it through the menu to select it. Dark Domination would hold the Wandering Shadow still for as long as I could keep my eyes on it.

As long as I didn’t blink. That was the catch behind the Skill Chip.

While I stared at the boss, I saw a black fog wrap around it. The fog grew thicker and thicker, and finally, it formed into two large hands armored in rough scales. The hands grabbed the boss and held it down; there was no way it could escape.

“...Grrrgh...” The Wandering Shadow let out a pained groan.

Yes! That oughta hold it still!

I had to keep the Dark Domination going for as long as I possibly could. I kept staring at the boss as I called out, “Asagi, now! Hit it with your spell!”

Behind me, I heard Asagi give off a loud battle cry as if to say, “Roger!” At that same instant, everything vanished from my field of vision except for the Wandering Shadow. Everything else faded into a field of solid black.

...Was that Asagi’s spell at work?

I heard a noise rumbling up from the ground. I really, really didn’t like the sound of it.

—There it was again. What’s worse, it was even louder.

I fought the urge to look down at my feet. I couldn’t let the boss out of my

sight. I had to focus on keeping the spell going.

“Mai, look out! The floor’s breaking up!” Asagi shouted. “The cracks are heading right for you, too! Get back over here—hurry!”

“What?”

A chill ran down my spine as icy sweat covered my body. My legs suddenly started shaking so hard, I thought I’d collapse. Still, I managed to take a backward step toward Asagi.

Was I gonna make it...? No! There was no time to worry! I had to make it...!

The rumbling got louder as the floor behind the boss began to collapse. Then the damage coursed down the hall in a wave, like the initial collapse set off a chain reaction.

A really, really fast chain reaction!

Oh no... I couldn’t keep up...!

“Mai! Come on! You gotta run!” Asagi cried out from behind me.

As soon as I heard him, I immediately stopped thinking and turned to run. It was the only hope I had of escaping the approaching terror...

I found Asagi in the middle of a circle on the floor. That circle was the only part of the ground that was totally uncracked.

Behind me, I could still hear the terrible sounds of the floor crumbling. Both the collapse and the floor boss were hot on my tail.

I ran as hard as I could, thinking that if I could just get to where Asagi was, I could use Dark Domination to stop the Wandering Shadow again. But then...

*...Snatch!*

I felt something grab me by the ankle.

What...?! I was caught totally off-balance and fell to the floor, where I scrambled to turn around and see what was happening.

What I saw filled me with despair.

The Wandering Shadow held tight on to my leg as it desperately clung to the edge of a crack, about to plummet into the chasm.

Oh man... Was it trying to drag me down with it?... No! It was trying to use me to climb back up!

The floor kept cracking and crumbling, and my foothold was getting closer and closer to danger.

...No way was I gonna let this Wandering Shadow have its way!

I reached my right hand out to the game console by my left arm and activated Dark Domination for the second time! I turned my head to face the boss, and it froze in place. That should keep it from climbing!

“Asagi...,” I said without thinking, keeping my eyes glued to the boss. If this was the end, I at least wanted to see his smiling face one more time.

The floor all around me suddenly began to crack. My entire body wobbled on unstable footing. That was it... I was gonna fall! I closed my eyes.

—It was no use. I squeezed my eyes shut and prepared to meet my fate.  
But I didn’t.

I felt someone grab my right arm. Could it be...?! I opened my eyes again.

“No, Mai... Not yet... Don’t give up yet...”

I saw Asagi clenching his teeth and pulling with all his might to save me. The only ground left was a circle of floor with him on it. If I had to describe it, I’d say it was like there was a donut of darkness, with Asagi right in the hole. Of course, there was nothing sweet about this donut...

“...Ngh... Grrr...” Asagi was lying prone with his feet hooked against the edge on the other side of the donut hole to brace himself. I saw his bare arms poking out a bit from his long sleeves; he was struggling so hard, his veins bulged.

“Grrrgh... Oof...” He started to pant.

“Asagi... That’s enough. Please let go.” I couldn’t bear to watch him suffering for my sake.

Gasping for breath and straining with the effort, he shook his head ever so

slightly. “No... No...way...” He tightened his grip and pulled harder.

I heard the clanging of iron hitting iron from somewhere down in the depths below. What could that be...?

I looked down toward my dangling feet. The mask—the boss—was still floating down there in the darkness. Nothing else looked any different.

As the clanging got faster and faster, though, I saw something appear from deep down in the chasm. Something big. Whatever it was, it was definitely coming up fast.



“Wh-what is that?” I gasped, straining my surprised eyes to see.

It was a colossal monster, with skin covered in dirt. It didn’t have any eyes or nose that I could see—only an enormous, chomping mouth. It had sharp, iron teeth that gnashed as it dug its way upward.

...And we were on the menu.

Asagi noticed the creature, too. “...Nnngh! Haaah... Uuurgh...! Get...up...!” He gave a terrible shout and pulled harder. My upper body just brushed against the ledge, but I was a little closer to safety.

The relentless sound of gnashing iron fangs grew steadily closer. If we stayed put much longer, whatever horrifying beast was at the end of those fangs would swallow us for sure... That was much, much scarier to me than falling. I was close enough to the surface that my body was nearly touching solid ground already. Maybe, just maybe, I could make it! I braced my knees against the side of the cliff and tried to push myself up even just a little higher.

“That’s it, Mai! You got this!” Asagi said. He changed his grip now that he could reach both of my arms, not just the right, and pulled again.

The clanging, gnashing sound suddenly changed; it sounded like something being destroyed.

“*Grgh... Gyaaaaaah!!*”The Wandering Shadow’s scream echoed throughout the entire floor. What on earth had happened? I glanced down toward my feet again.

My blood ran cold as I saw the creature rising from the chasm devour the boss.

The Wandering Shadow cried out in pain again as I saw the leering mask shatter into tiny pieces.

Then the giant monster clamped its mouth shut. I heard it swallow. The Wandering Shadow was gone...

But we didn’t have time to celebrate before the iron-fanged mouth opened wide again. I was next. My body went stiff with sheer terror. It’s no use... I can’t move! It’s all over!

No... No... I'm scared...! I immediately closed my eyes.

*Chomp!* I heard the creature's mouth closing.

...That was it. That was all.

...But for some strange reason, I didn't feel any pain. I cautiously opened my eyes again.

...!

I was lying right on Asagi, and we were both on flat ground.

—You guessed it. He pulled me up to safety at the very last moment.

"I did it...," he said. "Just in time. Once the boss let go, I could pull you up." Asagi was out of breath, but he was smiling.

Then there was a sudden flash of light. When it faded, everything around us was back to the way it'd been before. The Skill Chip's magical effects had finally worn off.

We sat slumped on the floor, like all the energy had drained out of our bodies. Neither of us wanted to get moving again for a while.

**Taisuke used his Skill Chip!**

**Taisuke activated Crusher!**

**The ground begins to collapse.**

**The quake awakened the Mech-Fiend of Earth!**

**The Mech-Fiend chewed on the Wandering Shadow!**

**1,200 damage!**

**420 damage!**

**1,422 damage!**

**2,000 damage!**

**...The Wandering Shadow's HP gauge was reduced to 0!**

**The Wandering Shadow died!**

**[Wandering Shadow]**

**HP: 0/3,800**

**Taisuke and Mai earned a hint about the key's location!**

**<<A secret awaits where an item grinned.>>**

The results of the fight showed up on our screens.

"Looks like we won."

"Yeah. Now all we have to do is find that key, and we're done." I looked down at my screen and read the hint again.

"Any guesses, Mai? What do you think this 'grinning item' is?"

There's only one thing it could be!

"We should go look where we found that mask!"

"...!! Good thinking!"

I stood up and brushed the dust off my clothes. "Come on, Asagi. Let's go!"

Asagi stood up, too. "I guess we're about to hit the goal, huh, Mai? I'm glad we did it together. Now let's find that key!"

"Yeah!" I answered with a beaming smile.



## *The Calm Before a New Storm*

Asagi and I slowly retraced our steps. There was no need to panic anymore. Without any boss on our tail, we could take all the time we wanted...

After a while, we made it back to the point where we'd started the whole event: the room where we found the mask.

When we first arrived in that room, we were full of doubt and fear. Not anymore. Now we were full of hope, because victory was in sight. I reached out to turn the doorknob.

I cracked the door open and peeked inside, just to be safe. Naturally, the Big Blaze spell had burned out. All the flames were gone. The metal bed frame, which was already broken and twisted when I first found it, was missing without a trace—or maybe it'd been smashed into bits so tiny, I couldn't see them. ... Other than that, the room looked pretty much the same.

I opened the door all the way and we stepped inside. I looked under the table with one broken leg again. That's where we'd found the creepy cursed mask, after all.

...?

Looking closely, I noticed there were two small, gray circles on the floor. I reached down to touch them.

—They were cold.

*Unlike the rest of the wooden floor, I thought, they were probably made of iron.* I thought about how far apart they were...and got an idea!

"Hey, Asagi... This table's got a drawer on it. Could you check and see if

there's anything inside?" I asked, still keeping my eyes on the metal circles.

Asagi rushed over to open the drawer. He emptied it out and passed me everything that was inside it: a U-shaped magnet, a Phillips-head screwdriver, a button, a ballpoint pen, and a hammer.

Aha! Just as I suspected.

I reached for the magnet. You see where I'm going with this, right?

If the magnet stuck to the iron circles, I could probably use it as a handle to open a panel in the floor. Sure enough, it stuck.

*...Ka-chk!*

I tugged on the magnet. I could tell that it was a strong one. I pulled it up, and sure enough, part of the floor came up with it, revealing a secret compartment underneath. Inside that compartment was... You guessed it. A key.

Specifically, a black, devil-shaped key. Looking closely, I saw that there was a letter in the compartment next to it.

## **[Notice]**

**Using this key and making a Victory Application at the nearby Victory Application Point will end the Black Event.**

**We will then perform maintenance to update the game, and certain services will be made temporarily unavailable.**

### **※Maintenance Details**

**1. During the maintenance period, all currently deactivated nerve functions except for the Heart will be activated again.**

**※They will be deactivated again when maintenance is complete.**

**2. During the maintenance period, players will not be able**

**to use combat actions.**

**※Players cannot enter combat.**

**3. The maintenance period may last for an unknown amount of time.**

**※The Auto-Death System will not be in effect for you during the maintenance period.**

**4. New features may be added and/or existing features may change.**

We finished reading and locked gazes.

“Maintenance, huh...?” Asagi murmured.

“If I’m reading it correctly, it sounds like we won’t have to play Nightmare for a while. And we’ll even get our nerve functions back...”

“Yeah. That’s a pretty sweet deal for players like us.” He fell silent for a while, then added, “...Which actually just kinda creeps me out even more.”

I knew exactly how he felt. There had to be a catch...right?

“But hey, let’s wrap up the event for now! The others are probably worried sick about us.”

“Hee-hee... Yeah, you’re right,” I said. “I wouldn’t mind getting back home soon, either.”

Next, we had to get to the Victory Application Point that the letter mentioned. It said it would be behind an iron door. We knew where we had to go, and we headed there together.

“Now that I think of it, we haven’t been here that long,” said Asagi, “but we’ve sure been through a whole lot.”

“You can say that again. I never imagined I’d end up doing all this.” When I first got wrapped up in the game, I felt like my whole world had been yanked

out from under me. Like there was no going back to the way things were.

—But standing there, at the end of the event, I felt different.

I could have everything I'd lost back again. I just had to take it. Those carefree, normal days, spent smiling together with the people who mattered most... That's what I had to win back. If that was the prize, then I could keep fighting.

I'd figured out how we could fight, in our own way.

"Well, we haven't solved the biggest riddle yet," said Asagi. "But let's keep trying once maintenance is over, Mai."

Then I realized we'd reached the goal. We stood in front of the iron door. Sure enough, there was a keyhole.

Asagi looked at me and nodded. I swallowed and nodded back. We didn't need words. I stuck the key into the keyhole and turned.

*Click!* The lock slid open.

The time had come! Together, we pushed hard on the massive iron door.

"Ngh...!"

I pushed with all the strength I could manage. Slowly but surely, the door moved. Finally, with a cloud of dust, we got it all the way open. We peered inside.

"What is this place...?"

Behind the iron door, a pitch-black world stretched on for as far as I could see. It was cold and dark. And then, right in front of us, amid all that cold darkness, I saw it— A purple crystal floated gently in midair. Was that the Victory Application Point? I reached for the game console on my arm and called for Amelie.

"Hey, Amelie... Do you think we should go ahead and end this event?"

She was nestled snug in her blankets.

"Sure! You've worked so hard, Mai. You deserve to rest," she said, poking her head out from under the covers and smiling her wide smile.

"Thanks, Amelie," I said, smiling back. If Amelie thought it was a good idea,

then why not? Asagi and I approached the purple crystal.

**[Apply for Victory]**

**[Cancel]**

**[Apply for Victory and Return]**

We didn't need to think twice before choosing Apply for Victory and Return.

That instant, the crystal let off a bright flash of light! Like, super bright...! So bright, I couldn't stand to keep my eyes open, even. I gave in and shut them.

**<<Victory Report>>**

**† Player 1 †**

**Mai Yashiro**

**HP: 4,200/5,000**

**<Items Held> 2/10**

- Light 1/1**
- Dark Domination 8/10**

**† Player 2 †**

**Taisuke Asagi**

**HP: 5,000/5,000**

**<Items Held> 0/10**

**※This certifies that these two players have completed the**

## **Black Event.**

### **[Victory Bonus]**

#### **To be delivered later**

When I opened my eyes again, the crystal was gone—and so was the endless darkness, actually. We were back in our original world... No, it's more like we were awake after a nightmare.

—Asagi and I were sitting at the table in the club room, facing each other. As soon as everyone realized we were back, a huge cheer rose up from all the other tables around us. We were surrounded by people.

“Oh, look! They’re awake!”

“Aw, yeah! They won!”

The whole room rang with joyful voices.

“Hey! Shaddup, everyone! It’s too early for all that noise,” shouted Sugiura. He stood right in front of us, scolding the crowd. Then he turned to us. “So? Did you really win?”

“Yeah,” said Asagi. “Of course we did.” He nodded at Sugiura, and I followed along.

“...Heh,” Sugiura snickered in approval. “Not bad, you. Not bad at all. Well, c’mon, hurry and spit out the details. I’ve got a plan to put together.”

Asagi and I explained everything we’d been through as quickly as we could, though we had to resort to gestures due to the commotion. Sugiura listened silently, through all the cheering and excitement, until we finished our story. Then he stood up and addressed the club.

“I don’t want any of you lettin’ your guard down just ‘cause the game’s under maintenance. Something’s coming. You can bet on that,” he chided. Then he paused for a moment. “...One more thing. I’m no longer the leader of the Main

Squad, effective immediately.”

—!! Really, Sugiura?! I was shocked. That was a huge bombshell to drop out of nowhere!

“Wh-what’re you saying?!”

“What’re they supposed to do without a leader?”

Taichi and Asagi pressed in on Sugiura, showering him with questions.

“C’mon, don’t act so surprised. And get this. Asagi, Taichi, you two are quittin’ with me.”

“What?!” both of them shouted at the same time.

Sugiura smirked. “Listen up. I’m reorganizing the club, starting now. I’ve got new positions, and I need people I trust in ’em. People I trust enough to lead the Main, Rescue, and Scout Squads.” The club room was loud before, but Sugiura’s announcement had sent the volume through the roof. He ignored the noise and kept talking. “Main Squad’s gonna shift focus to saving up in-game cash. Now that the three of us are free from our last positions, we’re gonna focus on really beating the game. You could say we’re the *real* Main Squad now. Got a problem with that?”

“Pretty sneaky, slippin’ me into Main Squad duty like that,” grumbled Taichi. He was clearly unhappy with the arrangement.

“Yeah, well,” Sugiura laughed as he slapped Taichi on the shoulder. “It’s not optional.”

“No fair... At least gimme a choice... Ah, well. I guess I’m in.” Taichi grumbled for a bit longer, but sure enough, he grudgingly accepted.

Sugiura had such a forceful way of putting things, it wasn’t surprising that none of the other club members tried to protest. Either way, we’d have to wait until the next day to learn the specifics. It was already the middle of the night!

We’d won the Black Event. Nightmare lost. There was no doubt about that.

With that victory under my belt, I was sure that no matter what happened

next—no matter what fiendish twists Nightmare had in store for us after the update—we would prevail as long as we worked together.

*“Online! The Unbeatable Game”*

*End*



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