



# ONLINE!

5

Mr. Three-Sevens and  
Delori the Hydro-Fiend



Midori Amagaeru  
Illustration by  
Shinichirou Otsuka





# ONLINE!

**Mr. Three-Sevens and  
Delori the Hydro-Fiend**

**5**

**Midori Amagaeru**

Illustration by  
**Shinichirou Otsuka**

**JY**  
New York

## **COPYRIGHT**



**Midori Amagaeru**

Translation by John Thomas Neal

Cover art by Shinichirou Otsuka

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

ONLINE! Vol. 5 THREE SEVEN MAN TO MIZUMAJIN DERORI ©Midori Amagaeru 2014

©Shinichirō Otsuka 2014

First published in Japan in 2014 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

JY

150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor

New York, NY 10001

Visit us at [jyforkids.com](http://jyforkids.com) • [facebook.com/jyforkids](https://facebook.com/jyforkids) • [twitter.com/jyforkids](https://twitter.com/jyforkids) [jyforkids-blog.tumblr.com](http://jyforkids-blog.tumblr.com) • [instagram.com/jyforkids](https://instagram.com/jyforkids)

First JY Edition: January 2025

Edited by Yen Press Editorial: Leilah Labossiere Designed by Yen Press Design: Eddy Mingki

JY is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The JY name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Amagaeru, Midori, author. | Ōtsuka, Shin'ichirō, illustrator. | Neal, John (Translator), translator.

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

Other titles: Clear fukano!?. English

Description: First JY edition. | New York : JY, 2023. | Contents: v. 1. The Devil's Unbeatable Game! | Audience: Ages 8–12 | Audience: Grades 4–6

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

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

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

ISBNs: 978-1-97538901-7 (paperback)

978-1-9753-8902-4 (ebook)

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1. The Story So Far](#)

[2. A Typical Morning](#)

[3. An Invitation to a Theme Park](#)

[4. Me, Asagi, and the Ferris Wheel](#)

[5. Kaneda Joins the Club](#)

[6. Kaneda's Battle of Wits](#)

[7. Our Familiars](#)

[8. Fighting the Prison Phantoms](#)

[9. The Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp Showdown](#)

[10. Tsubasa's Team Hits the Scene](#)

[11. Now That's Tricky! The Gold Event](#)

[12. The Great Delo Manor Adventure](#)

[13. Tsubasa's Idea](#)

[14. Delori the Hydro-Fiend Strikes!](#)

[15. Delori's Weakness](#)

[16. Reunited with Good Friends](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

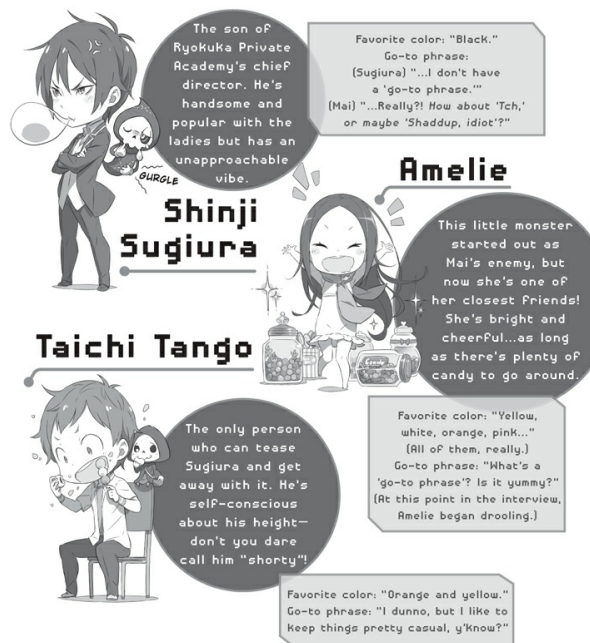
## Table of Contents

1. The Story So Far
2. A Typical Morning
3. An Invitation to a Theme Park
4. Me, Asagi, and the Ferris Wheel
5. Kaneda Joins the Club
6. Kaneda's Battle of Wits
7. Our Familiars



8. Fighting the Prison Phantoms
9. The Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp Showdown
10. Tsubasa's Team Hits the Scene
11. Now That's Tricky! The Gold Event
12. The Great Delo Manor Adventure
13. Tsubasa's Idea
14. Delori the Hydro-Fiend Strikes!
15. Delori's Weakness
16. Reunited with Good Friends

## Afterword







## **Nightmare.**

**That's the name of the terrifying game that's changed the lives of thousands of people—for the worse. If you're one of them, you may end up having to hand over part of your body to a demon...but don't give up.**

**Because if you give up, it'll all be over...**

# 1

## *The Story So Far*

I'm Mai Yashiro, a completely normal second-year high school student at Ryokuka Private Academy...or at least, I should be. I was until a devilish video game called Nightmare turned my life upside down.

There's a lot we don't know about Nightmare. Who made it? Why did it suddenly show up on our doorsteps? And why do we have to risk our lives to play it?

I guess *play* isn't exactly the right word. Because when we get a Game Over in Nightmare, we respawn, like in any other game—but as a penalty, a demon takes away the use of one of our body parts.

There are tons of people playing the game all over Japan right now. I bet there are new players starting out even as I write this.

Every single day, my friends and I focus on one goal: freeing players as soon as we can. To do that, we'll have to beat the game. Luckily, Ryokuka Private Academy has a special student organization devoted to exactly that: the Nightmare Conquerors' Club. Naturally, I'm a member, and of course, I'm not alone.

Shinji Sugiura, the club president, may be a little scary, but he's always got his club members' best interests in mind. Taichi Tango might not always know when to quit goofing off, but he's twice as tuned-in to his surroundings as anyone else. Taisuke Asagi may be the shiest person I've ever met, but he's also the kindest. And then there are my friends Naomi and Youko, and everyone else in the Conquerors' Club—every day, we're out there, giving it all we've got to beat the game.

I know that, someday, we'll finally win! It helps that I've got such a strong squad of players on my side.

...Though to be honest, I'm not so sure about the latest additions to the club: Takojima, Akaishi, and Kaneda. For starters, Takojima and Akaishi were in the middle of bullying Kaneda when we first met them—and Sugiura let them into the Nightmare Conquerors' Club anyway! Look, I have to admit that I understand his reasons. Even if they are bullies, we can't leave them to fend for themselves in a game that's literally a matter of life-and-death. Seriously, I get it.

But I dunno... I'm still kinda worried...

## 2

### *A Typical Morning*

I never got a decent night's sleep right after major in-game events. The most recent event had been the fourth one. I sighed, relieved that we'd made it out alive four times in a row.

This time, it felt like I might actually get some quality shut-eye after all. As hard as it was to believe, I might've been getting used to the constant terror that came with playing Nightmare.

I woke up the next day to the gentle light of morning shining into my room. I lived in the Ryokuka Private Academy dormitory, which also housed the Nightmare Conquerors' Club. In fact, every Nightmare player in the student body not only lived in the dorms but took classes remotely there, too. That way, we could really focus on beating the game. Our classrooms and clubrooms were one and the same.

In other words, our entire lives took place inside the dormitory building. Don't get me wrong—it had its perks. For one, I could sleep in later than I did back when I had to travel to the main school building every morning.

But of course, I still had to get ready and greet the day...before Sugiura came and rapped on my door to deliver a rude awakening, that is. I got dressed, washed my face, and did my hair.

*There! Now I'm good to go!*

*Knock, knock!* There came a knock at my dorm-room door.

*Ack, there's Sugiura!* But then I thought again. *Hang on... Is it just me, or was that knock a lot gentler than usual?*



“Good morning, Mai! You *are* awake already, aren’t you?”

*Ack again!!* It wasn’t Sugiura peeking into my room from the door, but Asagi. It looked like he’d come alone for this wake-up call.

“Good morning,” I answered. “Um, Sugiura isn’t with you, is he?”

“Nope. I guess after he saw you get up on your own last time, he decided to leave you to it.”

*Is that so...?*

Honestly, it was a little weird *not* hearing Sugiura’s usual ferocious knock.

“W-wait, you don’t mean you wanted Sugiura to come wake you up, do you?!” Asagi blurted out. Now *that* was unthinkable...but that didn’t stop his shoulders from slumping as he shot me a worried look.

“Sheesh! You know that’s not what I want! He always barges in here the morning after an event, so it’s, y’know, a little anticlimactic...,” I said.

“I dunno why...but that makes me feel a little jealous... Just a little.”

“Wh-what the heck is that supposed to mean?” I asked. I’d barely been up for a few minutes, and Asagi was already dropping bombshell after bombshell.

“Uh, n-nothing, it’s... Yeah, I guess you would be happier to see Sugiura than me now, huh? Figures... I mean... Ugh, sorry. It’s way too early for me to keep my words straight.”

I looked at Asagi, expecting to see his face turn its usual shade of embarrassed red. But instead, I found him squatting down, hunched over with his head in his hands.

“Um... Asagi? You okay?”

“I’ve gotta work harder... I’ve gotta make it so I’m *always* your go-to... So I’m the one you expect...,” I heard him mutter. Then he shook it off, slapped himself on both cheeks, and leaped back to his feet. “C’mon, Mai! Let’s go!” His kind smile returned just as suddenly as it’d left.

That was Asagi for you—a boy of a thousand faces.

He might want to work on his muttering a little, though. I knew he didn’t

mean for others to hear it, but I could make out every word he'd said.

"Asagi!" I called out as I dashed after him. He was already out of my room and heading down the hallway. He turned around in time to watch me zoom by, shouting as I went. "Thank you so much! I'm glad you feel that way!"

"Whaaat?! M-Mai! What's that mean?! Hey, Mai, hold up—!" I heard Asagi yell as I rushed past him, but I didn't stop. I kept running at full speed down the hallway. And then—

*Thump!*

*Owww!*

I'd rammed straight into somebody. Whoever it was, the impact sent me crashing down right onto my butt.

"Ugh. How many times do I gotta tell ya? No running in the hallway."

*Oh maaan, I thought. I know that voice...*

"Are you okay, Mai?!" Asagi's voice echoed down the hall as I staggered to my feet and brushed off my skirt. "*Gulp!* S-Sugiura!"

"Well, ya didn't oversleep, I'll give ya that. If anything, you're way too awake for this early in the mornin'," Sugiura growled in a very low voice. I couldn't bring myself to meet his eyes. I could feel his sharp glare on me.

*Ooogh, Sugiura's always extra scary in the morning.*

"I-it looks like you're the late one today, Sugiura," I heard Asagi say proudly from behind me. Now that I thought about it, he was right.

"It's not like you to be late, Sugiura," I chimed in. Then I took it a step too far... "Did you oversleep?"

"Don't go lumpin' me in with *someone* I could mention," Sugiura said in the same low voice. "I was so busy puttin' together the materials we're gonna use today that I lost track of time. Now get movin', or you're gonna be late anyway." He took off, walking briskly toward the clubroom.

*Go figure, I thought. Even when Sugiura's late, he's in a totally different league from a chronic oversleeper like me.*

But now I had that extra bit of drive I needed to fully wake up for the day!

Asagi and I followed Sugiura up the stairs to the third floor, where the Nightmare Conquerors' Club room awaited.

*Yes! We even managed to avoid getting in late!*

"Yo! Or should I say, mornin'!" Taichi was there to greet us as energetically as ever while we took our seats.

"Good morning!"

"Morning, Taichi," Asagi added.

The four of us—including Sugiura, who was already at the front of the room, starting to conduct the club meeting—made up a special division of the Conquerors' Club called the Raid Team. We'd gotten off to a rocky start, but I thought we'd really come together as a solid unit...probably.

Aside from the Raid Team, the club was split into three other squads: Rescue Squad, Scout Squad, and Main Squad. With all these groups working together, actually beating Nightmare didn't feel like such a distant dream.

"Oh, hey, Mai! I've got some good news for you," Taichi said with a mysterious smirk.

"Huh?" I was super curious, but I definitely wasn't going to start chatting with Taichi in the middle of an official club meeting. Sugiura would notice for sure—and he wouldn't be happy, to say the least. I'd lost count of how many times he'd told me off for that sort of thing... "Um, Taichi, can we talk about it later?"

"Awright, suit yourself. How 'bout after class? That way, we can take all the time we need."

*...? All the time we need for what?*

Now I was *really* curious. Whatever it was Taichi wanted to talk about, it sure seemed to make him happy...

## *An Invitation to a Theme Park*

Finally, the school day was over. The instant my last class ended, I stood from my seat and went to talk to Taichi.

“So what’s this ‘good news’ you mentioned?”

“Heh-heh-heh... Can’t wait to hear it, can ya? Awright, without further ado... Ta-daa!!” Taichi pulled an ad flyer out of his school bag with a flourish. “Check this out!”

COME TO THE SECOND FLOOR OF FROGMART FOR ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT SWEET DUMPLINGS

“.....”

*What? That’s his “good news”? Seriously?*

It seemed pretty clear that Taichi just wanted to scarf down some dumplings. Now, don’t get me wrong. I’ve got nothing against dumplings. It just didn’t seem like that big of a deal!

“Um, Taichi... Which part of this is the good news, exactly?”

“Whoops! Sorry, wrong side,” Taichi said as he gleefully flipped the flyer over. Either way, I was pretty sure Taichi would be heading to the second floor of FrogMart very soon. According to Asagi, sweet dumplings were one of Taichi’s favorite foods.

The back of the flyer had directions for how to get to FrogMart, which featured some sort of indoor amusement park. It also mentioned that they’d been closed for renovations, but as of that very day, their doors were open



again.

“Um, I’m still not seeing what the big news is...”

“It turns out a friend of Sugiura’s dad owns the company that runs FrogMart. Apparently, we’ve all got VIP invitations to check out the new, improved park and tell ’em what we think.”

*Whoa! That actually sounds like a ton of fun!* I thought. But then something else sprang to mind.

“Sugiura didn’t say a word about it... Are the invitations for today?”

“Yep. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s probably their way of sayin’ thanks for all the hard work we’ve put into playing Nightmare.”

I couldn’t believe it. How lucky! Sure, I’d technically spent the day before that at an amusement park, too—but that was inside Nightmare, and it hadn’t exactly been a blast. Even if it was indoors, a trip to an *actual* amusement park made for a great reward in my book.

To top it all off, Asagi had asked me to go to a real-world amusement park with him, too. I happily said yes, but I never imagined that we’d get to make good on those plans so soon!

“Hey, Taichi, is that true?!” Youko came bounding over toward us. Somehow, she’d overheard our conversation.

“Sure is. It’ll be nice to kick back an’ have a little fun while the game’s undergoing maintenance.”

“*Yeah*, it will! I really, really, really can’t wait!” Youko jumped for joy. But despite all the bouncing, her hopeful gaze stayed locked on Masuda, who’d already begun reviewing the day’s lessons.

“This could be a good chance for you and Masuda to get to know each other a little better,” I said.

“Yeah, here’s hoping,” Youko said. Her cheeks were red, which was rare for her. As energetic as she was, apparently, Youko was shy. Though honestly, the unexpected contrast only made her cuter. She was visibly squirming as a delighted smile stretched across her face. I figured she was already deep in a

daydream.

“Hold up,” Taichi said. “Where’s Asagi?”

“Sugiura called for him right after the club meeting,” I said. “He’s been gone since then.”

“They’ll probably be back any minute now,” Taichi continued, “to tell everyone we’re all headin’ to FrogMart!” He snickered strangely. Something told me that Taichi wasn’t as interested in the amusement park as he was in the inexhaustible pile of sweet dumplings with his name on it. I mean, he was drooling!

*Huh?*

I noticed that the notification light on my Nightmare console was blinking. That meant I had a new message.

**[From: Nightmare]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**Dear Miss Yashiro,**

**Congratulations on completing your fourth event. As before, please find your bonus for completing the event attached to this message. This item can be transferred to another player, should you so desire.**

**«Attachment: Yellow Box»**

**END**

Every time I finished a big in-game event, I got another one of these boxes. This was the fourth one.

*What are these even for anyway?* I thought. *It’s about time someone told me.*

As soon as I was done checking my messages, Sugiura and Asagi came into the clubroom. Sugiura somehow had an even sharper expression on his face than usual. He stood at the front of the room and bellowed:

“Everyone, listen up!” He had the whole club’s attention. “You all know about the indoor theme park round here, right? Well, they’ve invited all of us for a visit. Free of charge and reserved especially for us.” Sugiura hadn’t even finished speaking before the clubroom filled with cheers. “You’re up, Asagi,” he said, sending the other boy a signal with his eyes.

“R-right! We won’t have to pay to get into the park, but they’ve asked us to fill out a survey instead. Write any thoughts you have about the layout, park attractions, and stuff on this sheet and hand it in later.” With that, he started passing out forms.

“Aw, maaan! We gotta do a survey? What a pain in the butt.” Takojima, a new addition to the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club and certified bully, started complaining the instant the sheet was in his hands.

“Ha-ha, don’t sweat it. Just hand it in blank. Or you know, doodle on it a bit, if you feel like putting in the effort.” These sleazy suggestions came from Takojima’s fellow newbie—and accomplice in bullying—Akaishi. No surprise there.

“Good thinkin’! Awright, now I can kick back an’ have some fun!”

*Sheesh, what is their problem?! I thought. I’ve got to give them a piece of my mind!*

But before I could, Youko thumped her desk and said, with a dreamy look on her face, “Man, guys who give a hundred percent at everything they do sure are cool... Even if it’s only filling out a little survey...”

*Huh? Why’s she suddenly speaking so loudly?* I wondered. The next instant, though, I had my answer...

“Just kidding, Takojima! You can’t blow off a survey like that. Seriously, I was joking. Don’t take it seriously, okay? To be honest, I don’t think the front of the form’s gonna be enough to hold all my thoughts. No, sir! I can tell you right now, I’m going to fill up the back, too! Ha-ha-ha!”





*Ohhh! I get it!* Youko's little outburst was meant for Akaishi, and it was a direct hit. She'd found a way to make him change his tune in a flash, without making anyone angry. That Youko sure was clever.

"Hunh?" Takojima looked a little disturbed by Akaishi's instantaneous change of heart.

"Man, that guy's got a one-track mind. 'Course, that makes him easy to steer," Youko said, followed by a slight but triumphant laugh.

Asagi made his way over to us with the stack of forms.

"Here you go, Mai," he said.

"Thank you!"

"This should be a fun trip, huh? Oh, hey, they've even got a Ferris wheel—it's a small one, but y'know, still. Do you think, um... Would you wanna ride it with me?"

"Of course! I'd love to!" I gave him the brightest smile I could muster. He grinned right back at me, and I saw his cheeks flush.

"O-okay, well, I've still got a bunch of surveys to hand out, so I gotta get going... Oh, right, pass these forms to Youko and Taichi for me."

"...Hmph," Taichi grumbled. "Geez, Asagi, what are we? Chopped liver?"

"What? N-no!" Asagi's face became even redder right as he turned and bolted away like he was making a great escape.

"Ah-ha-ha... Man, that dude's fun to pick on," Taichi said, barely choking back a laugh. Ugh, that Taichi... There's nothing he loved more than ribbing people.

Once Sugiura's explanation was done, the Nightmare Conquerors' Club headed for the station and got on a train to FrogMart. It wasn't that far, but it still felt like we were going on a trip, you know?

The train was full of excited voices. The four of us in the Raid Team—that's Sugiura, Taichi, Asagi, and yours truly—sat on bench seats, grouped so we faced each other.

“...Oh, right, Mai,” Asagi said, “it sounds like Kaneda’s officially joining us tomorrow.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah. I only wish he’d been allowed in time to be here today.” Asagi sounded a little disappointed. No matter who a person was, they could count on Asagi to be kind to them—but I still got the feeling he had a particular soft spot for Kaneo Kaneda. After all, Asagi used to get bullied, just like Kaneda did...

“Aw, we’ll get ‘im some souvenirs,” Taichi piped in. “You think he likes sweet dumplings?”

“You’re only sayin’ that ‘cause *you* like ‘em, numbskull,” Sugiura said, whacking Taichi on the head.

“Hunh,” Taichi said. “You must be holding back today. That didn’t hurt a bit.”

“You want me to give ya all I’ve got, is that it?”

“Eeep!” Taichi’s arms flew up to protect his head in case Sugiura made good on his offer of another whack.

*Ah-ha-ha...*

The vibe around the four of us had been getting kind of gloomy, but Taichi masterfully swooped in to lighten the mood.

“Anyway,” Sugiura said, changing the subject, “there’ll be some folks around trying to get interviews. Only tell ‘em what they *need* to know.”

“Interviews? You mean, about Nightmare?”

“Yeah. That’s what today’s really about.”

That explained why Sugiura didn’t seem too excited about our little field trip. There he was, on the way to an amusement park, and his expression still looked grim. See, Sugiura’s father was the CEO of a company called Green Trier, Inc., which was dedicated to beating Nightmare. Since we’d recently completed another event, it made sense that they’d want to talk to us. They’d done it before.

Still, as the head of Green Trier, Sugiura’s dad had put some pretty

unreasonable demands on his son. I got the feeling Sugiura wasn't too fond of him. Then again, the whole club was getting free admission to an amusement park out of the deal. And it wasn't just free; the whole park was reserved for us. Everyone in the club was stoked about that.

*Oh! The realization hit me. Maybe that's why Sugiura agreed to this proposal from his dad in the first place.*

Sugiura could be scary, but I knew he always kept his fellow players' best interests in mind.

The train shook as it rumbled down the tracks for ten more minutes, then it came to a stop. We'd arrived at FrogMart. Frog-shaped balloons decorated the roof of the building, swaying gently in the breeze.

*Ooh, how cute!* I thought. As you probably guessed from the name, everything at FrogMart was frog-themed. The indoor amusement park was on the fifth floor of the building.

"Whoooo! Let's *go*!" I heard Takojima's rambunctious voice first.

"No, I think I'll hang back," Akaishi answered. "I believe there's a lady in need of an escort."

"Huh? The heck're you talkin' about? Move it already!"

"Waaagh!"

Takojima grabbed Akaishi roughly by the arm and dragged him off the train in a flash.

*Huh?*

I caught sight of Hirata and Yoichi a little distance away. It looked like they were discussing something.

"Mewta and I are a set," Hirata said. "They won't let me inside with him, so we'll wait here."

*Whaaat?! But you came all this way, Hirata!* I thought. Yoichi—who was Taichi's younger brother, by the way—looked similarly bothered.

"It's always *Mewta, Mewta, Mewta* with you," Yoichi said. "You should set

aside some time for the humans in your life for once. Just for today. Come enjoy yourself.”

“...No, thanks.”

“Want me to watch your cat for you?” Naomi offered ever so kindly. “We can take turns! How about that?”

“Suzuki... Are you a cat person, too?”

“Oh, yes, I love cats,” Naomi said. “Though, I guess I’m not a cat person so much as an all-adorable-animals person.”

“I think I’d be comfortable leaving Mewta with you, then...if you’re sure it’s okay.”

“Sure I’m sure!”

“Thanks. I know I can trust you,” Hirata said, smiling at Naomi.

“Hey, what about me?” Yoichi grumbled.

“...You’re thinking, *Leave the little furball and go*, aren’t you? Don’t answer. I already know.”

“*Gulp...*” Yoichi decided to cut his losses and walk away before things got any more awkward.

Oh, right, I should mention that Hirata could read people’s minds somehow. He could see through just about anything. Though to be fair to Yoichi, he just wanted to make sure Hirata had a good time. I wondered if Hirata’s mind reading told him that, too.

Meanwhile, Youko had rushed out of the train and over to Masuda. I saw them walking together. Well, Masuda was walking; Youko was practically skipping. She looked incredibly happy.

“Awright, let’s head up to the fifth floor,” Sugiura said.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Wait, where’s Taichi?” At some point, he’d totally vanished.

*Don’t tell me he’s already stuffing his face with dumplings*, I thought. Then again, if I knew Taichi, he’d probably enjoy that more than the amusement park



itself. I decided not to rat him out. “Maybe he went on ahead with other people,” I said.

“Tch. That guy...” Sugiura looked a little vexed.

The remaining three of us went up to the fifth floor of FrogMart, where a scene straight out of outer space awaited us. There was almost something strangely mystical about it.

The light from the screens of rows and rows of arcade games cut through the darkness. Overall, it was half pint-size theme park, half arcade.

*Sorry, Nightmare, I thought, but this kind of park is more my speed!*

“Open up and let us through, dang it!”

*Huh?*

I looked toward the source of the angry voice and saw that Takojima and Akaishi, who’d rushed up to the fifth floor to be first in line, were trying and failing to shove their way through the entrance gate. They took out their frustrations on the gate mechanism itself, kicking and banging on the machine.

“Sheesh, they’re already at it. I’m telling you, those two are trouble.”

“It’s not like all that violence is gonna get the gate open.”

“*Haaah*,” Sugiura groaned. “Lemme deal with those idiots.” He stomped over to Takojima and Akaishi and used his loudest, sternest voice to shout, “What d’you think you’re doin’?! Keep it down!” From where I stood, he looked like a teacher herding rowdy students on a field trip.

Takojima and Akaishi froze. When the shock wore off, they backed away, whispering to each other.

“Yeesh, man. Did you see his face? He looked like an ogre...”

“I hear that. I wouldn’t want to go up against him in a fight... So now what, Takojima?”

“We’ve gotta give up for now. But Mr. Ogre just earned himself a spot on my list.”

*Whoops. Looks like they’ve got a pretty twisted impression of Sugiura. An*

*ogre? Seriously...?* Then again, maybe they had a point. Sugiura could be frightening when he got angry. But I'd never seen him pick an actual fight. I guess that's because guys as intimidating as Sugiura tended to scare off would-be opponents before anyone started throwing punches... *Maybe that's what it really means to be the strongest guy around.*

While I was lost in thought, someone who looked to be a FrogMart employee walked up to us.

"Thank you for your patience. Here are your cards. Please swipe them at the gate to enter." The employee gave Sugiura a stack of pass cards, which he handed out to the club members. Each card bore a picture of a grinning frog. We swiped them right away and walked through the gate.

"Where should we go first, Mai?" Asagi asked.

"Good question," I said as I looked around at all the fifth floor had to offer. "Oh, doesn't that look like fun?" I pointed at an arcade game with an elaborate cabinet that was shaped like a car. We'd sit in the car and use the steering wheel to take out enemies as they popped up on the screen.

"Ooh, it's a two-seater. Looks good! Let's do it!" Asagi said as he grabbed my hand. He started to dart off toward the game but immediately stopped dead in his tracks. "Huh? Er, uh... Umm... S-sorry!! I just, um, wanted to play right away, sooo..." He stammered as he let go of my hand even more quickly than he'd grabbed it.

"Hee-hee-hee... It's fine. Now let's go get in that car," I said, taking him by the hand once again. This time, it was my turn to run off with Asagi in tow.

"H-hey, Maaai! Not so fast!"

## *Me, Asagi, and the Ferris Wheel*

Asagi and I didn't only play the driving game, of course. There were plenty of other games and rides to enjoy. Now, if there's one thing you know about me, it's that I'm lousy at video games. There's not a drop of gamer blood in my body. I nearly racked up game over after game over, but luckily, I had Asagi by my side. He swooped in and helped us snatch victory from the jaws of defeat time and again, just like he did when we played Nightmare. I could always count on Asagi to have my back.

"Look at the time," Asagi said. "Whatever we do next, it'll probably be the last thing we do."

"Aw, that went by in a blur, huh?"

"It sure did... Oh, hey, Mai—" Asagi spotted a flight of stairs that led up to the roof of FrogMart. Right in front of the stairs, there was a sign that read:

THIS WAY TO THE FERRIS WHEEL

"Oh, nice! Let's ride the Ferris wheel!"

"Ah, I guess you figured out what I was thinking," Asagi said with an embarrassed-sounding laugh.

"I followed your gaze. That gave it away," I confessed. "But seriously, I want to ride the Ferris wheel, too."

"Yeah? Great... A-actually, that's the thing I've been looking forward to the most today," Asagi said. We looked each other in the eyes and smiled.

*Huh?*

I suddenly noticed that Youko seemed to have been heading toward the Ferris wheel herself. But she was frozen in place—and totally alone.

“Asagi, look...”

“Weird. Wasn’t Youko with Masuda?”

Concerned, the two of us walked up to her.

“Hey, Youko? Where’s Masuda?” I asked.

“Oh! Hi, Mai. And you too, Asagi,” Youko said. Her shoulders were slumped; all her usual energy seemed to be gone.

“Did you wander off and get lost or something?”

“H-how did you know?!” Youko’s eyes went wide as she stared at Asagi in surprise.

“The Masuda I know definitely wouldn’t leave you all on your own. Am I right? I doubt he’d do anything that thoughtless or irresponsible.”

I was impressed. Masuda hadn’t been a member of the Conquerors’ Club for long at all, but Asagi had already figured out his best traits.

“It’s my fault,” Youko said. “He stepped away for a sec to get us some drinks, and I...I really had to go to the bathroom, so...”

“So when Masuda got back and you were gone, he went looking for you,” I said. Youko grew more and more flustered with every word.

“What do I do, Mai?! Oh, this is all my fault... You don’t think he’s mad at me, do you?” The thought clearly upset her.

I couldn’t imagine Masuda would get angry over such a simple mistake, but either way, it wasn’t long before we’d all have to get on the train and head back to the dorms. It looked like Youko might miss her chance to ride the Ferris wheel with Masuda. I really, really wanted to make that happen for her...which meant we had to find him ASAP.

First, we checked the spot where they’d agreed to meet up after he got their drinks, but unsurprisingly, Masuda wasn’t there.

“Maybe we should wait around here a bit,” Asagi said. “Though, you know

what that means, Mai...”

It meant that, in the worst-case scenario, Asagi and I would miss out on riding the Ferris wheel, too.

“I know, Asagi. But that’s okay,” I told him with a grin. I mean, what were we gonna do? Go off and have fun while our friend Youko stood around feeling lonely? Yeah, right.

“I knew you’d say that, Mai. You’re so kind,” Asagi said. “Y’know, that’s something about you that I really luh...luh...”

*Luh?*

“Really what...?”

“Oh, *there* you are! I finally found you!”

*Gah!* Youko had been found, all right. But not by Masuda. Akaishi was running toward us. *Just when I thought this couldn’t get any worse...*

“Ugh, this guy! C’mon, you two, cover for me,” Youko said with a groan as she ducked behind us.

“Come, my darling Youko! Let us ride together! I shall be your escort,” Akaishi said with a smug, slimy grin.

“First off, since when was I *your* Youko?! That’s not something you get to decide on your own, pal! Got it?!” she snapped, poking her head out from behind Asagi and me.

“What do you mean, ‘since when’? Why, since the moment we met, of course.”

“...” I couldn’t keep my jaw from dropping. *Who says stuff like that?*

“Urgh... H-hey, where’s that octopus-lookin’ friend of yours anyway? I thought you were hanging out with him.”

“Oh, don’t worry about Takojima. He’s chowing down on a tray of *takoyaki* right now. He loves the stuff, you know—when there’s *takoyaki* to be had, he barely notices anything else.” So not only did Takojima have a face like an octopus, but it was his favorite food, too? I had to admit that was pretty funny.

Akaishi continued, "Come now, my dear. Let's go."

"I said, no way! I'm already here with somebody else, you know!"

Akaishi wasn't getting the message. Despite Youko's obvious disgust, he reached out and tried to take her by the hand.

"That's enough, Akaishi—," I said, trying to stop him. But that very instant, I heard another voice that I recognized.

"Oh, good. There you are." Was that great timing, or what? Masuda came jogging over with a canned drink in either hand.

"Ah! Masuda!" One look at her face, and anyone could tell Youko was relieved. She slapped Akaishi's hand away and darted delightedly to Masuda's side.

"I'm glad you're safe," Masuda said. "I was starting to get a little worried that you'd gotten caught up in some sort of trouble." He flashed such a kind, breezy smile that anyone's heart would skip a beat—not just Youko's. It was about as far as you could possibly get from the twisted glare that Akaishi sent in Masuda's direction.

"Masuda! Think you're king of the world 'cause you're a little bit better at Nightmare than me, huh?! That's *my* Youko you're messing with, pal! I don't wanna see you talking to her, touching her, or even getting near her!"

*Uh, delusional much? Masuda's more than a "little bit better" at Nightmare,* I thought. And that wasn't even the worst of it. All that "no talking, no touching, no getting near her" stuff sounded a little scary. But if Youko heard a word of it, she didn't let on. She was completely ignoring Akaishi, absorbed in conversation with Masuda.

To be honest, I felt a teeny, tiny bit sorry for Akaishi.

"You don't think Akaishi's gonna try to get back at Masuda, do you, Asagi?" I asked.

"Hmm... Even if he does, I doubt Masuda'll have any trouble fending him off."

"Ah-ha-ha, good point," I said, laughing. With any luck, the whole matter was already settled.



“Um, anyway, Mai, we’re running out of time,” Asagi said. “We’ll have to hurry, but do you still wanna ride the Ferris wheel?”

“Yeah!!” We hadn’t lost our chance! I could feel my heart pounding.

“Would you like to ride the Ferris wheel with me, too, Youko?” Masuda asked. “Looking at the time, this is probably the last thing we’ll get to do.”

“Really?!” Youko exclaimed. Masuda was taken aback.

“Oh, sorry. Do you not want to?”

“Wha?! No! I mean, yes! I mean, I don’t not want to! I mean, yes, I wanna ride!”

*Hee-hee...* Youko’s face was bright red.

“Hold it right there! What about me?! I want to ride the Ferris wheel, too!”

*Oof.* Clearly, Akaishi wasn’t done being a pest.

“Awright, I’m in. I’ve never been on a Ferris wheel before, actually. C’mon, Akaishi, let’s ride the heck out of it!” More great timing! Takojima had walked up, and he was all smiles. The *takoyaki* he’d just scarfed down had clearly done wonders for his mood.

“Oh... Takojima... You had to show up now, huh?”

“Yeah. Sorry ’bout that, Akaishi. I was so into that *takoyaki*, I forgot I was supposed to be babysittin’ you.” Takojima chortled.

“Ha. Ha-ha-ha,” Akaishi deadpanned. He seemed to be frozen.

We neatly (well, mostly neatly, I guess) split into pairs and hurried up to the roof, where we boarded the Ferris wheel. It steadily climbed higher and higher above the FrogMart building. I gasped as the town where we lived sank farther and farther away until it looked like a miniature model. *Oh, I thought, is that Ryokuka Private Academy over there?!*

“Nice view, isn’t it?” I asked Asagi.

“Yeah. All the flowers and trees on the school grounds sure make it look extra colorful from up here,” he said.

“They really do!”

Still, in the back of my mind, I knew the joy I felt would only last until Nightmare started up again. I wondered how long the maintenance period would last this time. That was enough to put a sudden, small damper on the mood.

“Let me guess, Mai,” Asagi said. “You’re thinking about Nightmare again, aren’t you?”

“Y-yeah, sorry. I know it’s not the best time...”



“No need to apologize. If there’s anything you’re worried about, you can always talk to me. If I can help get rid of those worries, even just a little bit... Well, I dunno how you feel about it, but I’d like to try, at least...” Asagi’s cheeks were already a light shade of pink, but he looked me straight in the eye as he spoke.

“Um... Thank you,” I said. Half of me was giddy to hear him say it directly to my face...but I’m not gonna lie, I was a little embarrassed, too. Now it was my turn to look away, hoping Asagi wouldn’t notice me blushing.

The Ferris wheel car fell silent. And then—

*Clank.*

The sudden sound caught me off guard. Then I realized the Ferris wheel must have already finished a full loop. Grinning at each other, Asagi and I stepped back onto the roof of FrogMart. We saw Youko beaming with delight next to Masuda, who waved to us as we left the car. Behind us, Takojima was stepping out of the car he’d shared with Akaishi.

Akaishi climbed out next. He was slouching and sighing heavily. We didn’t need to ask why.

“That was fun, huh, Mai?”

“Sure was!”

Asagi and I had just enough time to buy a few frog-shaped donuts for Kaneda as a housewarming gift when he arrived the next day. Then we headed to the meeting spot to regroup with the rest of the Conquerors’ Club. It struck me that our trip to FrogMart was over, and we hadn’t seen Taichi once...

...but sure enough, when we got to the meeting spot, he was waiting for us with two handfuls of sweet dumplings for the road. And also sure enough, Sugiura was there, too, scolding him.

“Where *were* you this whole time?!”

In true Taichi fashion, though, he looked completely unfazed. Whatever guilt Sugiura tried to stick him with, it couldn’t win against a heap of dumplings.

*Come to think of it, I didn’t see Sugiura in the park, either, I thought. Where*

*was he? Weren't there any games he wanted to play?*

“What d’you mean, where was I? I was off buying dumplings for you, Sugiura. Y’know, to thank you for stepping in and taking that interview in my place,” Taichi said. “C’mon, let’s eat ’em together when we get back to the dorms. Which kind do you like?”

“Tch. You were already buyin’ dumplings for yourself anyway, an’ you know it.”

“Heh-heh. Busted.”

*Hang on—Sugiura gave the interview himself?!* I realized nobody had approached Asagi and me about it at all. Could it be that Sugiura sacrificed his time at FrogMart so the rest of us could enjoy ourselves? He might not have shown it, but he really did always have our best interests in mind. That was Sugiura for you; I couldn’t imagine being on his level.

## ***Kaneda Joins the Club***

The next day, Kaneda finally arrived at the dorms. He stood at the front of the clubroom, squirming with embarrassment as he introduced himself to the whole Nightmare Conquerors' Club.

"Um... I-it's nice to meet all of you..."

As the rest of the club broke into applause, I spotted Takojima leering in Kaneda's direction.

"Hey, check it out, Akaishi," he sneered. "Our old favorite toy's here."

"Hmm? Whatever do you mean?" Akaishi replied with an air of absolute innocence. "I don't see any toys. Why, it looks like little Kaneda to me. Do you mean him, perhaps?"

"Huh?" Takojima gawked at Akaishi, unable to understand his change of heart.

*Wow! I guess Youko's words really got through to him!* I thought. *Maybe that means Kaneda can relax from now on.* I hoped that Akaishi's newfound disinterest in bullying would rub off on Takojima, too.

Once the meeting's opening statements were over, Asagi and I headed to Kaneda's seat to personally welcome him to the club.

"It's great to have you here, Kaneda!"

"Oh! Yashiro and Asagi!" Kaneda greeted us with a genuine smile. His uniform really suited him.

"Welcome aboard, Kaneda," Asagi said. He held out the gift we'd bought the



day before. “Here’s a little something from us to celebrate.”

“Whoa, frog-shaped donuts! Thanks. They look great,” Kaneda said. His smile was almost blinding. He was already off to a strong start; with Asagi around to help, I got the feeling that the Conquerors’ Club would be good for Kaneda.

Then Sugiura suddenly spoke up.

“Hey, Kaneda. Remember what we talked about? I’m gonna need ya to pick a squad to join, pronto.”

“Yuh...y-y-y-yessir,” Kaneda said. His whole body went stiff with nerves. I totally got it. It was only natural for him to be nervous around Sugiura. Heck, the head of our club still scared me sometimes.

Kaneda’s choice of squad was an easy one. He picked the Rescue Squad, where he wouldn’t have to deal with Takojima or Akaishi. *So he’ll be under Yoichi, huh?* I thought. *That should be fine. I hope.* I’ll admit I was a little worried.

Since Nightmare was still undergoing maintenance, Kaneda wouldn’t be able to get any hands-on experience with the game right off the bat. We decided to go over what we could in advance, though. He had plenty to learn about Nightmare.

Before I knew it, a week had gone by.

“Hmm? *Huh?! No way!!*” Youko blurted out as the bell chimed at the end of class.

“What’s up, Youko?”

“I got a message from the Nightmare devs saying maintenance is over! The game went back online while we were in class,” Youko said.

Murmurs immediately filled the room. Clearly, she wasn’t the only one who’d noticed the message.

“Tch! Awright, listen up! Nightmare’s back up! Everyone, meet up with your squads and get to work so you don’t get caught by the Auto-Death System. Forget everything else till you’ve scored 100 CP for the day, got it?!” Sugiura wasted no time jumping into commander mode. A little while back, a

maintenance period had ended right before midnight, which had thrown the whole club into a panic. At least it was earlier in the evening this time.

Everyone did as Sugiura ordered, calmly pulling out their Nightmare consoles and entering the game.

“C’mom, Mai,” Sugiura said. “We’ve gotta earn our CP, too.”

“R-right!”

The four of us in the Raid Team logged in to earn our 100 CP together, like we always did. CP were points that we earned by defeating monsters in Nightmare. We had to earn at least 100 of them every day, or our in-game avatar was toast. It was an automatic Game Over.

And every time we got a Game Over, we had to surrender the use of one of eight body parts to a demon: our eyes, legs, left hand, right hand, nose, mouth, ears, or heart. It wasn’t easy, but we could still get by without using our eyes or feet. But if we lost everything else, and only the heart was left...that meant death. Dead-dead. In real life.

Now that the maintenance period was over, we had to play this deadly game day in and day out once again. Our lives depended on it.

“We’ve got plenty of time to rack up the CP we need,” Sugiura said, “but I don’t wanna mess around racin’ other players for monster spawns. Let’s hit up a less popular stage.”

“Got it.”

We picked a suitable stage and met our CP quotas in no time flat. The four of us wouldn’t have to worry about the Auto-Death System—at least not until the next day.

*Phew...* I realized my heart wasn’t pounding quite as hard as it used to. Death was still lurking right next door, but for better or for worse, I was starting to adjust. I couldn’t believe what I was thinking, but it was true. I was getting accustomed to the Nightmare grind.

“Awright, we’ve got our CP for the day,” Taichi said. “Sooo...now what do we do?”

“That’s for you to figure out. I’m off. Got some business to take care of,” Sugiura said. I wondered if this “business” had anything to do with his dad’s company.

I also wondered when Sugiura took breaks—if he ever did. He always seemed super busy. On top of playing Nightmare himself, he spent a lot of time swapping information about it with Green Trier.

“H-hey, Kaneda...! What do you think you’re doing?!” I heard Yoichi shout from all the way in the back of the room, near the windows.

“I wonder what’s up,” I said.

“Good question. Let’s go check it out,” Asagi said. He, Taichi, and I shared a look as we stood up and headed for the Rescue Squad table.

There, we found Kaneda slumped over with his face pressed into the table, still clutching his Nightmare console in his hands. It looked like he had passed out.

*Wait... Don’t tell me...*, I thought as I rushed to open his stat screen on my console. It showed his status as **In a Battle of Wits**.

Battles of Wits put players face-to-face with enemy monsters, but not in the same way that normal battles did. In a Battle of Wits, players had the opportunity to talk to their foe. They and the monster would take turns attacking and defending.

On each turn, the attacker would pick one option: Charge, High Attack, Low Attack, Talk, or Critical Attack. The defender had a choice to make, too: Charge, Jump, Crouch, Counter, or Critical Defense. You could probably figure out some of the rules already: A Crouch would avoid a High Attack, and so on.

Kaneda had spent some of the past week reading through the game’s Help files, but I was still pretty worried about him. It was his first Battle of Wits ever, after all.

“What happened here, Yoichi?”

“Beats me. I was right in the middle of going over his Rescue Squad duties, when someone’s Respawn Penalty details suddenly popped up on his screen. I

guess he must've clicked on it, 'cause he went straight into combat."

"Yeesh, that's bad," Taichi said. "Why aren'tcha doing anything to help him, little bro?"

"What am I supposed to do?" Yoichi asked. "If it was a normal battle, that'd be one thing, but you can't join in another player's Battle of Wits."

"Let's all get in there and spectate, at least. We should be able to give 'im some advice."

"Oh, good idea. All right, here goes," Yoichi said. He and Taichi tapped on their consoles and entered Kaneda's Battle of Wits as spectators. I remembered they were siblings. Taichi didn't usually seem like much of a big brother type, but now he was totally acting the part...

*Gulp! This is no time to get sentimental!* I thought.

"We'd better go watch, too, Mai," Asagi said. "I'm a little worried about Kaneda."

"Right!" With that, we applied to spectate the Battle of Wits, too.

## *Kaneda's Battle of Wits*

Our requests were approved right away, and we entered the Battle of Wits. We found ourselves in the usual pitch-black space, though despite the darkness, we could see people's faces and the usual game text. It was dark, but not *real* darkness, you know? That probably sounds weird. It definitely *felt* weird, no matter how many Battles of Wits I'd been through already.

In the middle of the dark space, there were two chairs with a screen hanging between them. In one chair, trembling with fear, sat Kaneda. In the other chair sat a monster called a Warden of the Dead, which had a strange, crocodile-like face.

"This could get ugly. That monster shows up in the same stage as the Fakes. I've seen it before," Masuda said. He must have joined us in the spectators' section, drawn by the commotion.

"Seriously?!" The Fakes that Masuda mentioned were enemies that only spawned in high-ranking areas. Masuda was the second highest-ranked player in the entire game, and while he'd fought Fakes before, he'd never managed to beat them. That's how scary they were. And now Kaneda was facing a monster that appeared in the exact same stages.

Then a thought hit me. I'd seen a report in Nightmare Weekly—the magazine that Green Trier put out for Nightmare players, by Nightmare players—that said the Fakes' stage was completely locked off now.

"Whoever's Respawn Penalty that Kaneda's fighting for, they probably lost it before Green Trier put that report out," Asagi quietly explained. "They couldn't head into the stage now to get it back even if they wanted to."

“That would make sense...”

Whether he’d meant to or not, Kaneda had picked a tough foe for his first battle. I hoped he’d be okay. *I wish I could do something to help*, I thought as I looked toward the chairs.

“Hey. *It’s your turn to attack, y’know. Hurry up and pick something,*” the Warden of the Dead said in a low, angry voice. Clearly intimidated, Kaneda hastily made his selection.

“Eeek... Oh man, this is scary... I wish it was over already...”

*Augh! Don’t push the button like that! It can see what you picked!* I thought as I watched Kaneda choose. If someone wanted to catch the monster off guard—and in a Battle of Wits, they did—they had to keep their hand covered or, at least, move their fingers in a way that made it hard to tell what you were selecting. But Kaneda had just reached out without thinking and poked at an action button.

Now, it was possible to hide your real action while making it look like you’d obviously chosen something else. That was one way to mislead your opponent and throw them off your game. What Kaneda was doing, however, was self-destruction, plain and simple.

I probably don’t need to tell you that the Warden of the Dead had a huge, leering grin on its crocodilian face as it chose how it would defend. The results of the round popped up on the screen between their chairs.

## «Turn 1»

**[Kaneo] High Attack—Miss**

**[Warden of the Dead] Crouch—Successfully Dodged**

*Yeah, that figures*, I thought. *It knew what was coming, so it dodged.*

“Ha-ha-ha! *Is that all you’ve got, you weakling? I’ve got better things to do than waste time fighting you, shrimp!*”



“.....Oogh...”

*Yikes!* Kaneda was already on the verge of tears. I knew all too well that he'd heard his share of insults before, so of course, the Warden of the Dead's verbal abuse would strike a nerve...but it still hurt to watch.

“Don't let it rile you up, Kaneda! That monster doesn't know a thing about you! It's not personal! It's trying to get the edge on you, that's all!”



Kaneda turned in our direction, but he couldn't lift his face to meet our eyes.

"Suh...sorry... I didn't mean to click on anything, honest... I don't know how I got here..."

"Crap... I wish I could run in there and take his place," Asagi said, biting his lip. It sounded like he meant every word.

*"You got a lotta nerve, thinking you deserved to challenge me, pip-squeak,"* the Warden of the Dead growled. *"Attack me one more time, and I'll be having a roast weenie for dinner, if you get my drift."*

"Eeep..."

"It's bluffing, Kaneda! It can't do that in a Battle of Wits—it's gotta pick from the same list of actions as you!" I shouted as loud as I could, hoping to encourage Kaneda.

*Between this monster's bad language and its cruel streak, something about it feels like Takojima Take Two,* I thought. It was just Kaneda's luck that he'd find himself facing an enemy that seemed tailored to beat him. Either way, it was his turn to defend.

I knew what I had to do.

"I'm gonna give Kaneda some backup," I told Asagi. Asagi had done the same thing for me back when I fought my first Battle of Wits. Now it was my turn to pay that forward to Kaneda. Luckily, Battles of Wits had become something of my specialty since then.

"You are, Mai? Actually, yeah, that's a good idea. I know Kaneda'll be relieved to have you in his corner."

"I'll do whatever I can to help him win!"

"Good luck, Mai."

I immediately started typing an in-game message to Kaneda. Here's what it said:

**Please try not to let the enemy know you're reading this. Don't turn back to look at me, either. Here's some advice that should help you win. I think**

**it's going to attack this turn, so you should pick Counter.**

**Whatever you pick, though, don't be so obvious about it. Please think of a way to make it harder for the monster to tell what you chose.**

The Warden of the Dead saw Kaneda as a helpless newbie, so it didn't think it needed to be careful.

If a player had more lives left than their opponent in a Battle of Wits, Counter was a more effective move than either of the evasive actions. It had a two-out-of-three chance of completely negating an enemy attack.

Kaneda stared at his console. I was pretty sure he'd noticed my message in his inbox. After a moment, he reached out a hand to touch his screen with—what appeared to be—all his fingers. With just one of them, he subtly tapped a defensive action.

*Great, I thought. Good luck guessing what Kaneda picked this time.*

The Warden of the Dead had already made its choice. I doubt it put much thought into the decision. A moment later, the screen showed the results of the round.

## **«Turn 2»**

### **[Warden of the Dead] Low Attack**

### **[Kaneo] Counter**

Kaneda may have been the one in the hot seat, but even my heart pounded as their avatars started to move across the screen. The little character representing the Warden of the Dead snorted as it swung a huge club at Kaneda's avatar. The tiny Kaneda fainted like it was dodging out of the way, then struck with a surprise counterattack.

*Yesss! The counter worked!*

Now the Warden of the Dead was down to two lives. On the other side of the

screen, Kaneda hadn't taken any damage. He still had all three lives that he'd started the Battle of Wits with; that was the max a player could have.

"I...I did it..."

The Warden of the Dead was furious. It ground its long, sharp teeth. The monster was losing its cool, which was a good sign!

I didn't see anything hinting at foul play. For all the Warden of the Dead's bluster, it seemed like a way fairer opponent than the Fake I'd had to deal with in a Battle of Wits before.

I shook my head. *C'mon, Mai! Don't get sloppy! A battle's a battle—who knows what might happen? I gotta keep focused until it's over.*

"What do you think the monster's gonna pick next, Mai?" Asagi asked.

"Let's see..." I sneaked a look at the Warden of the Dead, but it had already chosen its next move. And it didn't look worried.

It was the monster's turn to defend...and I was pretty sure that it was going to try a Counter to give Kaneda a taste of his own medicine. I had a way to get Kaneda to choose Charge, which seemed like the right call, but if he did that, the Warden would catch on to how clever he was and start thinking carefully about its own choices. It wasn't the right time for that yet. I hated to let Kaneda make a bad play, but it was too early to start ramping up the pressure. I needed him to hold back for a bit.

I sent him another message.

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Kaneo Kaneda]**

**This time, I want you to pick one of the normal attacks. The enemy will probably Counter it. This may not look like a good move, but that's the point. When you see the results go up on the screen, please tremble a bit. Not too much, though. We**

**don't want the enemy to catch on that it's an act.**

**END**

Again, Kaneda's eyes dropped down to his console like he was reading my message.

"Good going," Asagi said. "Kaneda's way calmer than he was before."

"Yeah. I think the tide's turning in his direction."

All Kaneda had to do was follow my instructions. I'm sure it was a load off his mind, too. I could imagine him thinking, *As long as I do what I'm told, I can win this*. To be specific, I'd also messaged him saying that following my directions would give him about an 80-percent shot at victory. Of course, that was a white lie. Combat was never that simple.

But that little fib was enough to give Kaneda, who was usually timid and easily intimidated, a boost in confidence and comfort. If he believed in himself, the Warden would have a tough time forcing him to match its pace. That would give Kaneda an edge... Though, I knew there'd probably come a moment when he'd have to toughen up and fight for himself.

Both sides made their moves, and the results went up on the screen. Just as I'd expected, the Warden had picked Counter; when he saw that, Kaneda twisted his face into a panicked mess, the way I'd told him to. Seeing that, the monster gloated and smirked.

"Ugh! What's Kaneda's problem? No, don't tell me, I got it—he's a moron."

"Tsk, tsk. If only he'd chosen Talk."

*Oof*. At some point, Takojima and Akaishi had joined in to gawk at Kaneda's Battle of Wits.

"Talk?! Man, you're as stupid as he is! That's the most useless thing he coulda picked. He shoulda gone for a High Attack. Not that crappy Low Attack he picked—High. Duh."

*...Uh, that would've turned out the exact same way, I thought.*

“Sorry, but have either of you guys ever fought a Battle of Wits before?” Asagi, who’d been watching the battle unfold in silence up until that moment, cut into the conversation.

“Huh? ‘Course not. Look at me! You think I’m some kinda bookworm or somethin’?”

“Ha-ha! Too true,” Akaishi said. “Takojima’s quite gifted when it comes to filling worksheets with red ink.”

“Darn right! Red’s my lucky color, y’know!” Takojima said triumphantly.

*...He’s worse than I thought.*

I mean, did he even hear what he was saying? Asagi and I looked at each other and grimaced.

Once again, the avatars on the screen began to move.

## «Turn 3»

**[Kaneo] Low Attack—The enemy Counters!**

**Lives: 3-->2**

**[Warden of the Dead] Counter—Both sides hit!**

**Lives: 2-->1**

**(Both sides lose one life.)**

Thanks to the Warden’s Counter, both sides took the hit. *Not bad*, I thought. *It cost Kaneda a life, but now he’s one hit away from winning.* All told, it was a pretty good outcome for us. Kaneda was a lucky guy!

It was the Warden’s turn to attack next, and I figured it would be on high alert for Kaneda to Counter again. A smart enemy wouldn’t risk attacking. Chances were good that it’d go for a Charge instead. Add that to the fact that the Warden probably still wasn’t taking Kaneda too seriously, and a Charge seemed



even more likely.

Newbies tended to try to win as quickly as possible, and Kaneda had the life advantage. Left to decide on his own, he'd almost certainly pick Counter in hopes of finishing the monster off. I was sure Kaneda was eager to get his first Battle of Wits over with.

"Hey, Kaneda! What're you freakin' out for?! Hurry up and finish this scaly punk off, stupid!" Takojima laid the taunts on thick. Too thick. Kaneda was shaking, for Pete's sake! Was that supposed to be encouraging?

"Look, Takojima," Masuda said, "I can't pretend I missed that." He stared daggers at the bully.

"So what if you did? Got a problem with it?" Takojima stared a few daggers of his own back.

*Yikes. It was an intimidating scene. It might not be such a good idea to get Takojima too upset...*

"Ah, pardon me. I didn't mean to make you angry," Masuda said. He flashed Takojima one of his trademark gentle smiles. "You know, I thought you'd have a nice, loud voice, and I was right. You've got real presence. I bet if you used that presence to throw the enemy off, you'd earn the Raid Team's respect."

"Respect, huh...? Ya really think so?" Takojima's fury melted away as he pictured himself being showered with praise.

*Nice one, Masuda!* I thought. Who knew a little flattery was all it took to shut Takojima up? Actually, he'd done something even better: He'd convinced Takojima to pitch in. With victory in sight, that might have been just the push Kaneda needed.

Asagi and I looked at each other for a moment, then nodded.

"It might work," Asagi said. Then he turned to Takojima. "Actually, I'd like to see you shout that monster down myself. I bet that'd be incredible."

"I know, right?" I chimed in. "You're the only one who could pull it off!"

"Awright, awright, keep your head on. I'll do it," Takojima said. "C'mon, Akaishi, let's roll."

“Huh?! Why me too...? Oh, fine...,” Akaishi said reluctantly. I heard him add under his breath, “Ugh, seriously? How embarrassing. Well, let’s get this over with.”

“Hey, you! Scaly! Yeah, I’m talkin’ to you, gator face! Idiot! Dimwit! Uhhh... Eggplant! Got somethin’ ta say? Well, don’t, ’cause I can’t take another whiff of your nasty croc breath! Nyah, nyah!”

“Um, yeah... Stupid... Gator face... Whatever,” Akaishi mumbled, topping off Takojima’s barrage of insults.

Soon, everyone in the Battle of Wits—every spectator, Kaneda, and the Warden of the Dead—was looking straight at Takojima.

*“What was that, octo-dweeb?!”* the Warden roared. It took the bait!

“Who’re you callin’ an octopus? That’s rich, comin’ from a croc! Those slimy scales of yours must be overdue for a cleanin’, pal, ’cause I can smell ’em from here!”

*“Me?! Smelly? Yeah, right! Whoever smelt it, dealt it, small fry!”* The Battle of Wits was rapidly turning into a Battle of Words. Honestly, both the Warden and Takojima were getting pretty annoying. Still, I had to admit things were looking up for Kaneda. There was no way the enemy could strategize combat tactics while also trading insults with Takojima. The Warden of the Dead’s focus on the real battle plummeted. It hadn’t been taking Kaneda seriously to begin with, and now it was desperate to shout Takojima down instead.

One other thing was clear: As far as monsters went, the Warden of the Dead wasn’t the brainy type. Generally speaking, there were three types of enemies. Some were better at normal combat, while others were more at home in Battles of Wits, and some were more or less equally suited for both. I assumed that regular battles were the Warden of the Dead’s forte.

I told Kaneda to pick Charge for his next action. He was still quivering in his seat—probably scared to see his monster foe and his bully going at it—but he stuck out a shaky hand to press the button. The Warden had already made its choice, so the results went up on the screen right away.

«Turn 4»

**[Kaneo] Charge—Critical Gauge increased by 1.**

**[Warden of the Dead] Charge—Critical Gauge increased by 1.**

Once they'd charged three times and filled their Critical Gauge, they could unleash a powerful Critical Attack. And I mean *really* powerful. If a Critical Attack hit, it took away all three of the opponent's lives, ending the Battle of Wits on the spot. As one could imagine, it was a threat that couldn't be ignored...

...but after a quick glance at the screen, the Warden of the Dead set its eyes back on Takojima. The flood of insults started flowing again.

*Just as I thought they would.*

"Hey, Takojima? Can I ask you a favor?"

"Huh? What now?"

I leaned in and whispered into Takojima's ear. Then I typed another message to Kaneda.

**[From: Mai Yashiro]**

**[To: Kaneo Kaneda]**

**Would you try pressuring the monster to pick its actions quickly? I know it's scary, but please give it a shot. If it works, you'll have a real shot at winning—and getting out of here ASAP!**

**END**

Kaneda must've read my message, because he looked up to face the enemy... and then bowed his head back down again. Then he looked up...and back down. This repeated a few more times, and I could guess why: He was trying his best to be brave, but he couldn't quite overcome his fear.

*Please, Kaneda... You got this...*

"Don't worry, Kaneda!" Asagi called out to him in a big, cheerful voice. "Remember, you've got us on your side! Relax!"

Asagi's rallying cry was exactly what Kaneda needed. His head jolted up with determination.

"Um, c-could you choose already...? P-please?"

The Warden of the Dead snapped back to attention. It looked surprised.

*"...Crap, I forgot I got a real battle goin' on here."* The monster made its choice.

*All right! Now!* I thought. I made eye contact with Takojima to give him the go-ahead. He started shouting:

"Aw, c'mon, scales for brains! Did you *seriously* pick Jump?! You would, you numbskull!"

*"What? What're you yappin' about?"*

"No, huh? Then you went with a Counter, I bet. Leavin' things up to chance is exactly the sorta thing a croco-dummy like you would do."

*"Fool! I see what you're doing—think you can throw me off with that nonsense, do ya? You don't have a clue what I picked,"* the Warden of the Dead said, guffawing. But the serious look that flitted across its scaly face a few seconds later was unmistakable. It was a textbook *I screwed up* face.

The Warden had told Takojima all we needed to know. "You don't have a clue what I picked" meant that all of Takojima's guesses were off the mark. In other words, the Warden had gone with Crouch. And now that its choice had been made, there was no taking it back. I could speak directly to Kaneda; it didn't matter if the monster heard every word.

"What are you gonna pick, Kaneda?" I asked.

Kaneda pondered the question like his life depended on it. The Warden squirmed.

“Hmm... Um, maybe a Low Attack, I guess.”

Now the Warden was really antsy. It tried to keep up a poker face but failed miserably. *All right, I thought, this battle's ours!*

“Sounds good,” I said with a smile. “Whatever you choose, hit that button with pride.”

Kaneda made his choice: a Low Attack, just as he said. And just as I thought, the Battle of Wits was over. Kaneda won.

*“This is all your fault, octo-dweeb! I’ll see you in the afterlife!”* the Warden of the Dead screamed at Takojima as it faded away into nothingness.

“Hmph. Have fun lookin’ for me. Maybe I’ll wave down at ya from heaven! Gya-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Takojima chortled.

*Well, say one thing for Takojima, he’s definitely an optimist,* I thought. But I had to admit that Kaneda had won thanks to him.

“Thanks so much for your help, Takojima!”

“Yeah, you really saved the day. Thanks,” Asagi added.

Takojima scratched his head.

“Hunh! Y’know, I never really cared unless I was the one doin’ the winnin’ before...but I gotta say, this feels pretty good, too.”

It sounded like Takojima was experiencing a new kind of joy: the joy of helping a friend get the glory. I hoped he’d keep chasing that joy, now that he’d gotten a taste of it.

## ***Our Familiars***

“Phew... What a relief. I was worried for a minute there...”

“Not like you did anything to help out, Yoichi,” Taichi said. “Wait, nah, that’s not fair. I guess you did a little praying.”

“Urgh... Don’t rub it in,” Yoichi said. The two brothers were bickering right next to Kaneda as he came to.

“I’m just sayin’, make sure you show ’im the ropes properly next time.”

“Yeah, you’re right...”

Taichi came toward Asagi and me. “Brothers, am I right? Yoichi may look like a reliable dude, but he’s still got a lot to learn before he’s solid as a rock. You see the position he puts me in?”

For all his talk, I could tell Taichi was sincerely concerned about Yoichi. *I guess he really can be brotherly from time to time*, I thought.

“I’m sure there’s plenty of stuff you could teach him, Taichi. You used to be the leader of Rescue Squad, after all.”

“Yep. And I do teach ’im, too. But you better believe I charge tuition—one sweet dumpling per lesson.”

*What?! I take all that stuff about him being brotherly back.* He was a shrewd one, that Taichi.

“Hmm? I just got a message from Kaneda,” Takojima blurted out. Then he turned to shout across the room to Kaneda, who was over by the window. “If ya got somethin’ to say, use your mouth, why don’tcha?!”

“S-sorry! Just, um, read it, please.”

“Awright, awright, let’s see here... ‘Thank you’...? What for?”

It made sense—Kaneda had to be grateful to Takojima. Still, Kaneda was Kaneda. He didn’t have the courage to thank Takojima directly. Honestly, sending a message probably took all the guts he had. Sure enough, when I looked over at Kaneda, he was nervously sneaking a peek at Takojima’s reaction.

“See? There’s your proof that Kaneda appreciates what you did.”

“Huh? What are you talkin’ about? I didn’t do anything for ‘im.”

“Aw, Takojima, it looks like you’ve made a fan out of little Kaneda,” Akaishi said with a snicker as he thumped Takojima on the shoulder.

*Sheesh. Neither of these guys have any tact whatsoever,* I thought. I could hardly stand it.

“Ugh, don’t even joke about that, man. Gross. Let’s get back to our squads, Akaishi.”

“Sure, sure.”

They headed off to their usual seats—Takoijima with the Scout Squad, and Akaishi with the Main Squad. It looked like it’d take a little more time before we could all get along as clubmates.

I thought back to something Asagi had told me: “There’s nowhere scarier than a place where bullies feel comfortable being bullies. Once the bullying starts, it spreads.”

Luckily, our clubroom wasn’t a bully-friendly environment. But at the end of the day, the problem lay with the bullies themselves. There might be just a one-in-a-million chance that Kaneda and his former bullies would ever get along, but if Kaneda was a little less afraid of Takojima, that was good enough for now. It made me sad to think that the mere sight of someone could scare him so much.

Sugiura wrapped up his errands and returned to the Raid Team area.

“Awright, what’s the plan now, guys?”

“Hey, Sugiura, quick question before we continue,” Taichi said. “How’s Tow’el doing?” His face was buried in his Nightmare console; at some point, he’d pulled it out to check on Zalbatoth, his Familiar.

*Whoa! I thought as I took in Zalbatoth’s Room. Look at all the furniture he’s got!*

“Taichi, what kind of food is this?” the little Grim Reaper asked.

“Oh, that’s called popcorn.”

“Pop...corn...? It’s the tastiest thing I’ve ever eaten.” Zalbatoth went back to happily munching away on the popcorn that Taichi had left for him. He grinned so broadly, his eyes crinkled shut as he chewed.

“Tow’el? Oh, right,” Sugiura said. He opened up Tow’el’s Room on his own console.

*Huh? There’s nothing in there but a bed,* I thought. Sugiura had given his Familiar the bare minimum.

“C’mon, Sugiura! Buy me some decent furniture, will ya? Quit being a cheapskate!”

“Shaddup, idiot. Big talk from someone who doesn’t bring in any money of their own,” Sugiura snapped back at his Familiar. “I’d need two hundred more CP to buy a TV.”

“Tch. All right, I’ll go see what I can find... Man, Zalbatoth is so lucky. It figures I’d get stuck with a master who doesn’t know how to treat a Grim Reaper like the great Tow’el,” the Familiar grumbled as he left his room. He seemed less like Sugiura’s Familiar and more like his disgruntled employee.

All this talk of Familiars made me want to check in on my own. I clicked through the Nightmare menus and into Amelie’s Room.

“Oh, hi, Mai!” Amelie looked up at me from her bed. She was lying between a stuffed duck plushie and a stuffed frog plushie; all three were huddled together like close friends. As soon as she saw me, Amelie heaved herself out from under the blankets. She was as adorable as ever. Watching her always warmed my



heart.

“Look, Amelie! We’ve got a new friend. Meet Zalbatoth,” I said, holding my Nightmare console up so that its screen faced Taichi’s.

“Um, h-hi, Zalbatoth...!” Amelie bowed bashfully.

“Nice to meet you, Amelie,” the little Grim Reaper replied.

“Aren’t you forgetting someone? Yes, of course you are. Yours truly! Go on, Sugiura, introduce me!!”

*Huh?* I thought Tow’el had left, but there he was, poking his face back through the doorway into his room.

“Tch. Fine,” Sugiura said as he reluctantly tilted his console to face Taichi’s and mine.

“Now that’s more like it! I am the great Tow’el! Charmed, I’m sure.”

“Nice to meetcha,” Amelie said, bowing once more.

Tow’el stared at Amelie’s room, clearly jealous of all the stuff I’d bought for her. “Sugiura,” he said, “don’t you think my room is a bit too...drab?”

“Don’t you start comparin’ your room to hers,” Sugiura growled back. “My console, my rules.”

“Urgh... You’re an ogre, Sugiura. A beast. No, a brute. No, the very devil himself!”

“Hmph. Keep ’em comin’. It’ll take harsher words than that to get to me.”

Tow’el’s insults may not have hit their mark on Sugiura, but they sure hit the rest of us—directly in the funny bone. I had to fight hard not to laugh, and I wasn’t alone. The whole Raid Team, minus Sugiura, struggled to hold it in. We knew Sugiura would really snap if any of us cracked up. I had to change the subject ASAP.

“Um, so... Any ideas on how we’re supposed to get our hands on tickets to the next event?”

“Good question. It’s ’bout time we started figurin’ that out,” Sugiura said. He, Taichi, and I bid adieu to our Familiars and closed their room menus.

“It’s pretty cool how all your Familiars can actually think and talk and stuff,” Asagi said. “I’m the only one without a Humon Familiar.”

Humons were a special type of Familiar. They were monsters, but like Asagi said, they could think and respond to what you said and did, like humans could.

Asagi looked a little dejected.

“If you’re that jealous, why don’tcha drop the Familiar you’ve got and go hunting for a Humon of your own?” Taichi asked.

“Nah, I’m fine,” Asagi said. “My Familiar might not be a Humon, but I’m still pretty attached to the little guy. I couldn’t just send him away.” It was a very Asagi sort of answer.

“Awright, enough about Familiars. We gotta focus on the next event now. I set up a message board on the Green Trier website so we can swap intel about it with other players,” Sugiura said as he booted up his computer and went to the website. There was already a thread waiting for us on the message board.

*Let’s see what it says...*

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu] I’ll post any event info I can find up here, but in return, you’ve gotta let me come along with you, got it? I really wanna play in an event at least once.**

**[Beef Bowl Lovin’ Tanakaman] gimme a beef bowl~**

**[Arisa] Do you remember me? I’m a member of Tsubasa’s party.**

**[Heeere’s Naitou] Heya. Thx for before btw ☆**

**[Takimoto] Good evening. Sorry I missed out on the rare item hunt a while back. I wanted to join in the fun lol**

All the posts were from members of Tsubasa’s party.

“I wonder why Tsubasa wants to play in an event so badly,” I said.

“Who knows?” Sugiura said. “He’s still in middle school, ain’t he? Maybe he’s one of those kids who like scary stuff.”

“It’s odd,” Asagi said. “Except for Tsubasa himself, everyone in his party is an adult.”

I decided to check their stat pages and see if that was true. It was; Tanaka was forty-eight, Naitou was thirty-four, Miyazawa (who posted under her given name, Arisa) was twenty, and Takimoto was twenty-five. Not only were they all older than Tsubasa, but they were older than all of us, too. Seeing Tsubasa’s name mixed in with all those adult players made him look like a big deal.

“My old man’s been tryin’ to get that whole party to work for ’im for a while now,” Sugiura said.

“For real?”

“For real. Accordin’ to the latest Nightmare rankings, every one of ’em is in the top fifty players, at least. This Tanaka guy in particular’s the number one player in the whole game. You think Green Trier’s gonna ignore that?”

“Does your dad want to hire Tsubasa, too?”

“Who, him? Nah. Can’t. He’s still a kid.”

“What?! Poor Tsubasa, being left out like that...”

“It’s not like it makes much difference at this point,” Sugiura said. “I doubt the whole party lives in the same area anyway.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right, but still...” Something about it didn’t sit right with me. Besides, if Tsubasa wasn’t part of the deal, who knew if the others would even help us out anymore? They were supposed to be a team.

“Anyway, now we can put this message board to use while we go lookin’ for those Event Tickets. Keep an eye on it,” Sugiura said.

““““Yessir,”””” we answered together.

## *Fighting the Prison Phantoms*

All the information that found its way onto the message board turned out to be fake, irrelevant, or otherwise useless. Two weeks passed, and we still didn't have a good lead on the Event Tickets.

"This ain't good," Sugiura said. "We haven't found a single decent clue."

"Right. We've got more than enough info to go around..."

"...But all of it's totally bogus," Taichi said.

As if that wasn't bad enough, whenever we played Nightmare, no matter which stage we picked, we ran into a new enemy who was...odd, to say the least. This particular enemy wore a rainbow-colored helmet, a spandex full-body suit, and a long cape. His name was Mr. Three-Sevens, and he gave us a really hard time...but not in the same way that most enemies did.

You see, whenever Mr. Three-Sevens showed up, he'd crack a whip at us, blow us kisses, or do a little dance that I could only describe as *unnerving*. There was something strange and suspicious about him.

He had 777 HP. We beat him again and again, but he never dropped any items. The only thing he ever left behind after combat was a measly 777 in-game yen. That wouldn't buy a thing in Nightmare. I get that he was sticking to a theme, what with his name being Mr. Three-Sevens and all, but still...

"Someone please tell me there's no secret to this Mr. Three-Sevens guy that we gotta figure out," Sugiura groaned.

"...What kinda secret?" Taichi asked.

“How should I know?”

I spoke up.

“Do you think we should try playing through one more stage?”

“What’s up, Mai? You get a flash of inspiration or something?”

“No, that’s not quite it...”

After the latest update, enemies had started dropping items called Advance Notices on rare occasions. These were sheets of paper that announced a time and place when enemies would spawn. However, whenever we showed up at the designated spot, the only enemy waiting for us was Mr. Three-Sevens. Every single time, we wondered if a more worthwhile monster might show up, but none ever did. There was never any sign of any monster other than Mr. Three-Sevens.



I started to think maybe he was hiding some sort of secret after all.

Without any clues to go on, we decided to roam around Nightmare, doing battle with monsters to get our hands on more Advance Notices. This took a whole lot of patience, since the Advance Notices rarely dropped.

This time around, we'd spent nearly three straight hours (don't worry—we stopped for breaks!) fighting monster after monster before one finally left behind a single Advance Notice.

"Where does it say to go?" I asked.

"The Underground Prison. That's a new stage they added in the latest update. And it says the enemy'll show up an hour from now."

"Awright, then we're headin' to the Underground Prison in thirty minutes," Sugiura said. "Rest up till then. I want you all fightin' fit."

"Okay!"

"You got it."

"Roger that."

Each of us went off to grab a drink and replenish our strength. Using our brain nonstop for hours could get pretty rough. Eventually, we'd start zoning out and losing focus.

After half an hour of rest, we headed back over to where Sugiura was waiting.

"Awright, here goes," he said. Each of us found the Underground Prison in the stage menu and went in.

As soon as we arrived in the stage, the game guided us to the entrance, which was a gloomy-looking corridor that led underground. Glancing around, I wondered if we were somewhere inside a castle—though if we were, it was a pretty worn-out, shabby one.

There were a few groups of other player characters also exploring the stage. *Maybe Advance Notices led them here, too*, I thought.

"C'mon," Sugiura said. "We're goin' downstairs."

"You got it, boss," said Taichi.

“Stay right next to me, Mai,” Asagi said. “The recommended level for this stage is kinda high.”

“O-okay,” I stammered. “Kinda high” was one way to put it. The Underground Prison was recommended for players around level 230. At level 187, I was the only one in the party who hadn’t hit level 200 yet, let alone the suggested level.

*Ooogh... How long am I gonna be deadweight?* I wondered, but I quickly shook it off. *Nuh-uh! This is no time to throw a pity party. I gotta focus on not holding the others back!* I slapped myself on the cheeks to knock away the negativity.

When we got downstairs, the game screen showed a dimly lit hallway with cells behind iron bars on either side. It wasn’t a single, long, one-way passage, either; there were several points where it branched off into different directions.

“This is gonna be a pain without a full map to check.”

“You can say that again. But I don’t think anyone at Green Trier’s finished the stage yet. There’s no map for it on the website,” Asagi said. His hands practically pulled up the Green Trier homepage and searched for the Underground Prison on their own. He was right; someone had uploaded a partial list of enemies that spawned in the area, but that was all.

*Let’s see here...*

**This stage hasn’t been completed yet. If you have any information about it, please share!**

**[Sobbing Specter]**

**HP: 2,500**

**Attack Power: High**

**[Giant Will-o’-the-Wisp]**

**HP: 14,000**



**This monster blocks the path, and you must defeat it to continue.**

**[Prison Phantom]**

**HP: 300**

**Watch out for their long-range attacks.**

Even when its guides were a work in progress, the Green Trier site sure came in handy. It was a huge improvement over going in with no information.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw shapes floating in midair inside a few of the cells. *Are those the Prison Phantoms?*

“Ugh, baddies bobbing around behind bars... I don’t like the looks of ’em.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine as long as they stay locked up,” Taichi said.

“Hold it! They’re coming for us!”

We stopped in our tracks as a ghostly shape drifted closer, like a fish looking for food. And then—*Hey!*—it heaved a stone from the cell floor straight at me.

“Look out, Mai!” Asagi cried as he leaped in to protect me with his Cover skill.

## **«Combat Results»**

**Prison Phantom threw a stone!**

**Taisuke used Cover to protect Mai.**

**• 80 damage to Taisuke!**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,920/5,000] (-80)**

“Th-thanks, Asagi.”

One stone didn't do much damage on its own, but enough hits like that would add up to some serious pain. If we couldn't move down the hall without getting pelted by rocks, we were in trouble.

"What a pain in the butt...," Sugiura grumbled. "Asagi, you keep coverin' Mai. Mai, you're on ranged-attack duty. Taichi an' I are gonna open the cells and teach these ghosts a lesson."

*Oh man, oh man, oh man... Sugiura's really mad...* As soon as he finished giving orders, he threw the bar door open and leaped into the cell.

"Welp, looks like I'm goin' in, too," Taichi said. "Take care of Mai, Asagi."

"Yeah. I've got her back," Asagi said with a smile.

*Okay! I can do this!* I thought. All I could do was try and make things a little easier on Taichi and Sugiura, but I swore to give it my best shot. I drew my bow and took aim at a phantom through the cell bars.

## «Combat Results»

### **Mai attacked with her bow!**

- **Mai's attack missed.**

### **Prison Phantom deftly avoided the attack!**

### **Prison Phantom [HP: 300/300]**

*Aaaugh! Seriously?* I couldn't believe I'd gotten off to such a weak start.

Meanwhile, a phantom from the opposite side of the hall—the cell on the right side, from our point of view—attacked Asagi.

Since Sugiura and Taichi were already in a Normal Battle with the phantoms on the left, I couldn't give them any more backup. Once a player or monster was engaged in combat, you couldn't hit or even aim at them with a ranged attack without joining the same battle yourself. I decided to help Asagi and

focus on beating the phantoms on the right instead.

## «Combat Results»

**Mai attacked with her bow!**

**Hit!**

- **173 damage to Prison Phantom!**

**Prison Phantom [HP: 127/300] (-173)**

*Yes! My arrow did more damage than I'd expected. At this rate, we'll have these phantoms down in no time. I counted four phantoms in the cell on the right, including the one I'd hit. Let's take 'em out quick!*

"Don't worry about me, Mai. I'm doing fine," Asagi said. He had 4,260 HP left. "Relax, take your time, and keep shooting."

"Okay! And, um, Asagi...thanks for always helping me out!" This wasn't the first time his kind, calm words had given me an extra boost of courage.

I took slow, steady aim and set about taking the phantoms down one by one from a distance. When there were only two left in the right cell, Sugiura and Taichi's avatars came running over. Their battle was already done.

"Nice work. We'll take 'em from here."

"Gotcha! Thanks!"

"Mai, find an item or something that'll give Asagi some of his HP back, will ya?"

"Sure thing!"

We could only cast spells or use skills during a battle. If we wanted to heal up while out in the field, we had to use healing items instead. I pulled up a few items and used them on Asagi until he was back up to full health.

"Thanks, Mai."

“Don’t mention it,” I said. “I should be thanking you.”

Sugiura and Taichi made short work of the remaining Prison Phantoms in the open cell.

*“Phew... Monsters with ranged attacks are a real pain.”*

“What’s next, boss?” Taichi asked. “Should we go door-to-door and take ‘em all out?”

“We don’t have that kinda time,” Sugiura said. “We’re gonna sprint further into the stage. I’ll scope out where the Advance Notice says to go and lead the way. You guys try an’ keep up!” Sugiura’s avatar took off running. The rest of us followed behind.

More Prison Phantoms threw stones at us as we ran down the dungeon halls.

“Man, this stage stinks,” Sugiura said. “I’m never comin’ back here without a real good reason.”

He had a point. Our HP trickled down as we ran. It was a minor pain, but a pain nonetheless—and one that might end up being a bigger problem later on.

After running for a while, we found ourselves in an open area that was a bit more spacious than the hallways around it.

*Huh?! What’s that?!* I thought as I came to a sudden halt.

A gigantic Will-o’-the-Wisp loomed right in front of the door on the far side of the chamber. It was impossible to miss, and it was pretty clear that there was no getting past it without a fight.

“Ugh, now what...?”

“I take it this is the monster that the Green Trier site said has over ten thousand HP.”

“Oh, right, it did say something about a Giant Will-o’-the-Wisp.”

“Wait! Look over there!” I shouted. “Isn’t that Tsubasa and Tanaka?!”

“Hey, you’re right. Why’s it just the two of them, though?” Usually, their party was inseparable. I wondered where the rest of them were.

“I bet they’re after the same thing we are,” said Sugiura. “Some of us should

go help 'em out. That'd be the quickest way to clear the path anyway."

"Awright, but who's gonna go?"

"Me an' Mai," Sugiura said. Then he turned to me. "You're low-level, but you've got some pretty decent healin' magic, don'tcha?"

*Who, me?* Though now that he mentioned it, my healing spell probably could come in handy. From the looks of it, both Tanaka and Tsubasa were focused entirely on dealing damage. Healing it, not so much. *All right, I'm in! We've come too far to turn back now!*

Sugiura and I charged ahead with our avatars. We rammed them into the enemy on our screens, which sent us into the battle.

## **[Normal Battle–Jump In] «Turn 14»**

**You approached the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp!**

**Normal Battle in progress.....**

**Mai Yashiro jumped into the fight!**

**Shinji Sugiura jumped into the fight!**

**[Action Order]**

- 1. Kenichi Tanaka (4,700/5,000)**
- 2. Shinji Sugiura (5,000/5,000)**
- 3. Tsubasa Kaitsu (590/5,000)**
- 4. Mai Yashiro (5,000/5,000)**
- 5. Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp (9,800/14,000)**

*Huh? This enemy's behind all of us in the action order,* I thought. Our speed determined our spot in the order, so it was possible the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp had basically no speed whatsoever.

**“Give it your best shot, Mai!”**

**“Okay!”**

Tsubasa and Tanaka must’ve noticed that we’d entered the fray, because they sent messages to the local chat.

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**Thanks for pitching in! :D :D**

**Long-range attacks don’t work on this guy**

**Just so you know!!**

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Watch yourself. This thing’s got a bunch of moves, and they’re all bad news.**

**And don’t even think about attacking it while it’s glowing white.**

**If you do, it’ll take control of you for a round and make you hit your allies.**

**“This monster sounds like a real handful,” I said.**

**“That’s one way to put it. Asagi, take notes an’ list up everything it does, will ya? I wanna send the data to my old man’s company later.”**

**“You got it, Sugiura. Leave it to me,” Asagi said. He quickly booted up his computer.**

**“How ’bout me, Sugiura? Whatcha want me to do?” Taichi asked.**

**“Watch our six and make sure nothin’ tries to sneak up behind us.”**

“Roger!”

We headed into battle with the Giant Will-o’-the-Wisp—a battle we couldn’t lose, no matter what. I had to give it my all!

## ***The Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp Showdown***

It was Tanaka's turn to attack first.

**«Turn 15: Kenichi»**

- **Kenichi attacked with his Soul Sword! «Hit Rate: 99%»**
- **1,500 damage to Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp!**

**[Additional Weapon Effects]**

**Kenichi regained 300 HP!**

**[HP Remaining]**

- **Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp [HP: 8,300/14,000] (-1,500)**
- **Kenichi Tanaka [HP: 5,000/5,000]**

*Whoa!* I'd never seen an attack that also replenished HP before. I figured Tanaka's weapon must have been super rare, like Masuda's.

But then I took another look at the actual damage output. Tanaka was the top-ranked player in Nightmare, and that was all the damage he could do? The recommended level for this stage *was* 230, right? It struck me that the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp could very well be the boss of the whole stage.



“Tch. Tough guy, huh?” From the sound of it, Sugiura had reached the same conclusion.

### «Turn 15: Shinji»

- **Shinji used Multi-Stab! «Hit Rate: 20%»**

**Shinji stabbed at Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp ten times!**

**Five hits!**

- **500 damage to Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp!**

**[HP Remaining]**

- **Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp [HP: 7,800/14,000] (-500)**

That was the same skill that Sugiura used back when we fought the Tunnel Hags. That time, he only landed three hits, but it did over 4,000 damage. He hit the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp five times and didn't even crack 1,000.

“What's with this monster?! Did they screw up and put it in the wrong stage or somethin'?”

I had to agree with Sugiura. I was starting to get nervous, and I could tell he was, too.

“On the plus side, I don't think it hits very hard,” I said. The number of turns that had already gone by was a major clue. Sure, Tsubasa was very low on HP, but I figured it could have taken control of Tanaka and used him to attack Tsubasa for a turn. That would explain why Tsubasa stayed cool and collected in the chat, despite having almost no HP left.

Tsubasa's turn was next. He launched a normal attack at the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp, dealing 140 damage. That took its HP to 7,660.

I didn't have to think twice before deciding to spend my turn healing Tsubasa. I scrolled through my list of spells and picked Dark Heal, which brought Tsubasa

back up to maximum HP.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**You didn't have to do that.**

**But since you did, I guess I should say thanks.**

**Thanks.**

*Oof, I thought. Why do I get the feeling that helping him only made things worse? But then...*

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**Hey, Tsubasa, quit being so coy.**

**Or keep lying to yourself. Hee-hee.**

**Hee-hee-hee-healing.**

...Tanaka chimed in.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Huh?**

**Are you going senile already, Gramps? No more blabbing!**

**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**Oww! 9,999 damage to Kenichi!**

**Waaah! Tsubasa's throwing a tantrum! He hit me!**

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Gross... Quit acting like an idiot already.**

*Hang on a sec*, I thought, looking over their chat. *Are Tsubasa and Tanaka playing in the same room right now?* I decided to ask them when the battle was over.

"Eyes open," Sugiura snapped. "It's showin' what the monster did on its turn."

"Huh?" I tore myself away from the chat window and saw a message that said the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp was now glowing white.

There it was! According to Tsubasa, that was the signal to stop attacking. All four of us spent Turn 16 guarding ourselves. When the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp's turn came around, it glowed white once again.

"Are you kiddin' me?! That does it! I'm never comin' back to this stage again."

*Yikes*. For a gung ho offensive specialist like Sugiura, tricky monsters like this had to be extra frustrating. But then again, Tsubasa said it had "a bunch of moves" that were "all bad news." I wondered what else it had in store.

I didn't have to wonder for very long. The answer came right away during Turn 17.

### **«Turn 17: Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp»**

- **Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp spread purple flames around the room!**

**For the next three turns, anyone who uses a skill will have their HP halved!**

“Yeah, *that* attack’s not real annoyin’ or anything...,” Sugiura grumbled.

“I’m starting to think it doesn’t have any normal attacks at all.”

The battle went into its eighteenth turn. None of us could safely activate our skills, so all four of us decided to attack. We took the Giant Will-o’-the-Wisp’s HP down to 6,800.

On the Giant Will-o’-the-Wisp’s turn, it revealed a different version of the skill from Turn 17. This one threatened to take away half the HP of any player who used a normal attack, and yet again, the effect lasted three turns. That meant that in the upcoming turn, we couldn’t use any skills *or* normal attacks.

*Hmm... Maybe magic would be more effective,* I thought. But I only had three spells to choose from: Dark Heal, Destroy, and Death Roulette. I could cast Destroy or Death Roulette, but there was a good chance either one of them would end up hurting my party instead. They were way too risky... *If only Youko were here. She’s the one to call when you need an attack spell or two.*

Then it hit me.

“Asagi, what’s that spell you’ve got? Glasses Meteor?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, that spell. Yeah, that’s what it’s called,” he answered.

“Sugiura, I’ve got a hunch that magic might be the way to go for this monster.”

“Makes sense. Awright, if you think so, I’m gonna bounce. Get ready to jump in and take my place, Asagi.”

“R-right!”

Sugiura hit the command to flee from combat. His avatar left the battlefield, and Asagi’s took its place. He came after Tsubasa in the action order. Tanaka and Tsubasa both spent their turns guarding, so Asagi’s turn came up right away.

“I really didn’t think I’d end up casting this spell again any time soon...,” Asagi said. He sounded a little reluctant to use it in front of Tsubasa and Tanaka.

“Sorry, Asagi,” I said. “I guess my big mouth kinda forced you into this.”

Asagi shook his head. “Nah, you didn’t do anything wrong. You’re counting on me, aren’t you? I don’t have too much pride to throw away if it’s for your sake!” With that, Asagi punched in his spell.

## «Turn 19: Taisuke»

- **Taisuke cast Glasses Meteor!**

**A volley of flaming glasses fell on the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp!**

- **2,050 damage to Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp!**

**[HP Remaining]**

- **Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp [HP: 4,750/14,000] (-2,050)**

*All right!* Asagi’s spell dealt way more damage than anything we’d tried so far.

“Looks like magic’s its weak point after all. Finish it off, Asagi,” Sugiura said.

“You got it!”

Glasses Meteor may have been a weird name for a spell, but it packed a surprisingly (sorry, Asagi...) hard punch. You can guess how the rest of the fight went: Asagi kept the volleys of glasses coming, and we won without any more fuss. We each got 10 CP and 23,000 experience points, which bumped me up a level to 188.

“Congratulations, Mai.”

“Yeah, congrats!”

“Thanks, guys.” I was always glad to gain another level.

“C’mon, Sugiura, congratulate ‘er! It’s a cause for celebration, don’tcha think?”

*Uh, T-Taichi? I thought. You're making Sugiura's face twitch like crazy. You might wanna cut that out.* Sugiura wasn't exactly the type to get all smiley and congratulatory anyway. In fact, I was pretty sure I knew what he was about to say...



“Mai.”

“Y-yessir?”

“It’s just one lousy level,” he said with his trademark scary face. “You better not get comfortable, ’cause you got a long way to go.” Yep, those were the exact harsh words I expected. To be honest, even if he had forced himself to say something as totally un-Sugiura-y as *congratulations*, I wouldn’t have been happy to hear it. I knew Sugiura; when you did something that was really, truly praiseworthy, that’s when he’d acknowledge you. That’s the kind of guy he was. “But don’t start freakin’ out on me. No panicking. If you wanna gain some more levels sometime, I’ll help ya out.”

“Whoo-wee, you always have the coolest lines ready to go, Sugiura! I bet Mai’s really swoonin’ now.”

*S-swooning?! What the heck are you talking about, Taichi? I don’t think of Sugiura that way, honest!*

“Hey... Nobody minds if I give ’im a good whack for that, right?”

*Smack!* Sugiura didn’t wait for anybody to answer before bringing his fist down on Taichi. Frankly, I didn’t see the point in asking for permission. I mean, crazy, right?

“Aw, why d’you gotta be that way, Sugiura? It’s a li’l friendly ribbing, that’s all.”

“Hmph.”

*Yeesh...* It’s funny how quickly good vibes could go bad.

“Y’know, you’re awfully quiet, Asagi,” Taichi said. If he was worried about catching the wrong end of Sugiura’s temper again, he didn’t show it as he turned to look at Asagi. “What’s up?”

“I’ll show you what’s up,” Asagi said in a bewildered voice, “but I dunno if you’ll get it any better than I do. Tanaka’s chatting to me, but his messages are... No, I can’t describe them. Better read for yourselves.”



**[Kenichi Tanaka]**

**Whoooooooohaaaahjkljtjhk.;p!!**

**jgbzlkdfgrpfdl!!!!!!**

**OMG You are a GLASSES GOD!**

**You MUST join Tanaka's Spectacled Spectaculars.**

**Glasses magic! I'm in tears of joy over here!!**

**I'm adding you to my friends list FER SHURE!**

It seemed that Tanaka was quite, er, taken with Asagi's spell. Asagi had earned himself a spot on Tanaka's friends list, and it sounded like a pretty high spot, too.

"Lucky you, Asagi," said Sugiura.

"You can say that again!" Taichi added.

"Really? I—I dunno... Something feels kinda fishy."

Next, a message from Tsubasa—who thankfully played it cooler than Tanaka—popped into the chat.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Don't sweat any of that stuff.**

**Wanna keep going?**

*Oh, right!* We had more of the Underground Prison to explore. Together with Tsubasa's party, we passed through the Giant Will-o'-the-Wisp's chamber and deeper into the stage.

While we walked, I asked if Tsubasa and Tanaka were playing the game from the same real-life location. It turned out my hunch was right on the money. They were, in fact, in the same place. But that wasn't all—they weren't too far from our dormitory, either.

“Hmm? What's that over there...?”

“Do you see something, Asagi?” Before he answered, I looked more closely at my own game screen. Sure enough, farther down the hallway where we were headed, I saw it, too: an enemy...wearing a cape and a rainbow-colored helmet. The text that floated over his head read **Mr. Three-Sevens**.

**[Mr. Three-Sevens]**

**Hello! ♪**

There he was, doing his weird, wiggly dance at us.

“...Man, this guy always grosses me out,” Sugiura said. “Let's get this over with.”

“Wait! Hang on for a second, please,” I said. I noticed that Mr. Three Sevens was clutching a stopwatch in his left hand as he danced. Considering who we were dealing with, I wondered if something might happen if we waited for 777 seconds. I explained my theory to the others.

“Y'know, Mai might be onto something.”

“Good eye, Mai!”

“Yeah,” Sugiura said. “But do we really gotta sit here and watch 'im do that stupid dance for 777 seconds?”

“What if any other players show up before then?” Asagi said. “It could be bad news.”

“You and me'll have to keep a look out,” Taichi said. “C'mon, Asagi, let's go.”

“Roger.” Asagi and Taichi went to stand at the entrance to the room, where

they could use the in-game chat to explain the situation to any other players who came nearby.

“Awright, just a little while longer. Who knows if anything’s really gonna happen?”

I sure didn’t. What if I was wrong?

Eventually, Mr. Three-Sevens stopped dancing. He pulled out a big, gift-wrapped box and set it on the dungeon floor. Then he climbed onto a flying saucer shaped like a puckered pair of lips and zoomed away. It looked like my guess was right after all!

“Hey, he left somethin’ behind,” Sugiura said. He wasted no time tearing Mr. Three-Sevens’s present open and looking inside. His mouth turned up into a wide, wicked-looking grin. “Jackpot. Event Tickets. There’s about a hundred or so books full of Mr. Three-Sevens’s photos in here, too, but who needs that garbage?”

*G-garbage...?* That was harsh, but Sugiura always was the type to say whatever he thought. No filter.

“How many tickets are there?”

“Six. Way more than usual.”

He was right. It was easily the most tickets we’d gotten for any of the events so far.

**[Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**Hey, what’d you get? Event Tickets? I bet they’re Event Tickets.**

**How many players can go this time?**

Tsubasa laid into us with a perfectly timed barrage of questions. If we told him there were six tickets, then I couldn’t imagine us getting out of this without

inviting him and Tanaka.

I thought about the special split-screen interface we had to use during events. Wouldn't six people be way too many to cram into it? It was entirely possible that the overall gist of this event was a little different from the others.

I glanced at Sugiura.

"Well, they can fight, so that won't be a problem... The real question is, are they gonna be here when it's go time?" He was seriously considering bringing Tanaka and Tsubasa along.

"Do you think they'd go work for Green Trier?"

"Yeah. Like I said, my dad's gunning for 'em. If Tanaka an' his crew joined Green Trier, they'd be able to clear way more stages, way more quickly. That'd have its perks for us, too."

"But what about Tsubasa?"

"He's a middle-school kid. You think he could keep up with our lessons at Ryokuka? Yeah, right. They'd probably let 'im crash in the dorms, though."

"Let me get this straight. You're saying—"

"Yeah. You used to scout players for us, Asagi, so you should have the negotiation chops. I'm gonna let you handle the rest. If they accept our conditions, they can play in the next event with us. That is, if they wanna."

—!

It sounded like Tsubasa and his crew might be joining us.

"Got it," Asagi said. "I'll give it a shot."

"Awright. Send 'em a message in Nightmare an' get the ball rollin' after we finish up here. Now let's finally get outta this stage."

Sugiura didn't get any complaints from the rest of us. As soon as we were out of the Underground Prison, Asagi sent Tsubasa a message to kick off the negotiations.

I wondered what they were discussing. I gave in to curiosity and took a peek at Asagi's console screen.

**[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**[To: Taisuke Asagi]**

**I'm in. As long as I get to play in an event, I'm down for whatever.**

**I might even come hang out in your little Conquerors' Clubhouse sometime. Not like it's far away or anything.**

**END**

*Oof, talk about a superiority complex, I thought. But that was Tsubasa for you. On the plus side, though, it looked like we'd struck a deal without a hitch.*

*"They're in, Sugiura. No problem."*

*"Awright. We're playin' the event in exactly one week. Be ready."*

*""""Yessir!"""" Asagi, Taichi, and I answered.*

*That settled it: We were officially in the next event.*

*By the way, not to change the subject too much, but that was the last we (or anyone else, as far as I've heard) saw of Mr. Three-Sevens. I guess his whole purpose in the game was to give out the Event Tickets. For a minor one-time enemy, he made quite an impression. I'm still not sure what that was all about.*

## *Tsubasa's Team Hits the Scene*

A week went by.

During that week, Green Trier, Inc., the company that Sugiura's dad owned, officially hired every member of Tsubasa's party—except for Tsubasa himself, of course. But Tsubasa wasn't alone. He came over to hang out at the Ryokuka Private Academy dorms after school several times.

Okay, well, I say "hang out," but what he really did was mess around with our computers and talk shop about Nightmare. Tsubasa was all about solving the mysteries the game had to offer. Don't get me wrong, the Nightmare Conquerors' Club was interested in that, too...but I got the sense that Tsubasa actually enjoyed Nightmare as a video game, if only a little. Personally, I couldn't imagine feeling that way at all.

"Today's event day," Sugiura announced to the club at the morning meeting. "There aren't any classes to worry about. We'll head to the event when Tsubasa and Tanaka get here this afternoon. Till then, I want everyone involved to focus on gettin' ready." He looked straight at our table.

*It's finally here, I thought. Another day I've been dreading. These events can't be good for my heart.* But no matter how scared I was, there was no getting out of it. We had to beat this event—no ifs, ands, or buts—for the sake of everyone out there who was caught up in Nightmare.

I'd spent the whole week leveling up as much as possible, and I'd made it all the way to level 208. Some of the Skill Chips found in Nightmare had a level requirement. There were other items that I still couldn't use because my level was too low. Combine that with not wanting to be a bigger burden on Asagi and

the others than I had to be, and it was really important for me to level up.

“Let’s give this event our best shot, Mai.”

“You got it, Asagi!” I still had a ton of fears and doubts, but I was sure we’d pull it off as long as we all worked together!

Asagi and I were eating lunch in the cafeteria when Naomi and Youko walked up to our table.

“Don’t push yourselves too hard, okay, you two?” Naomi said as she squeezed my hand tight. She looked really, really worried.

Youko, on the other hand, was in high spirits as always.

“Get this! The Main Squad’s saved up twelve billion nine hundred million yen for ya, so don’tcha worry.”

“Whoa, thanks!”

The rules of the game were a little different during events. If we got a Game Over, we had the option to come back to life and keep playing. The problem was that it cost three billion in-game yen every time we did it.

“Yeah, thanks a lot. But we’ll do our best not to need it.”

“That’s enough for four continues. That’ll be a huge help, especially since we’ve got more players than usual this time.”

“So this Tsubasa kid’s, like, a middle schooler, right?” Youko asked. Now she looked worried. “Is he gonna be okay?”

I totally got how she felt, but I knew Tsubasa was really smart. Not to mention better at Nightmare than I was. If anything, it was reassuring to have him in the party...even if he could stand to learn a few manners.

“Well, the thing about Tsubasa is...”

“Hey, rude much? Don’t go judging people by how old they are, will ya?”

—!

Tsubasa and his party had apparently entered the cafeteria at some point, and now they were standing right behind us.

“Heya. It’s me, Tanaka,” said the oldest member of their party. Once that very brief greeting was over, he made a beeline for Asagi and forcibly shook his hand. It must’ve been a very firm handshake, because Asagi let out a slight but painful-sounding yelp.

Tanaka was a pudgy man with glasses and a gentle smile. Even if he hadn’t introduced himself, there was no mistaking him. He looked exactly like his avatar.

“Oooh, it’s the God of Glasses himself! I’m so happy to finally meet you. There’s so much we have to discuss about spectacles!!”

“Um, er... I think you’ve got the wrong guy,” Asagi sputtered. He clearly didn’t know how to respond to being hit with the full force of Tanaka’s super-boisterous personality. It looked like Tanaka might never let go of his hand.

*Not only does he look like his avatar, I thought, but he acts exactly like he types, too.*

“Quit embarrassing me, Gramps. I’ve seriously had it up to here with you,” Tsubasa said with a sigh, watching the scene with cold, weary eyes.

“Now, now, Tsubasa. Tanaka’s just a friendly guy. That’s not a bad thing. He always helps keep things light and breezy, don’t you think?”

“What I *think* is he ticks me off, that’s what.”

“Forget Tanaka for now. We still haven’t formally introduced ourselves,” said a member of Tsubasa’s party. He bowed his spiky-haired head, as if to apologize for Tsubasa’s rudeness. He was dressed in solid black from head to toe, and his shirt had a skull and crossbones on it. He wore a bunch of silver jewelry, too. He would’ve looked really scary if it wasn’t for his soft, kind smile. “I’m Takimoto. I’m twenty-five years old, and music is my life. I play in a band and everything.”

*Whoa, that’s cool, I thought. It explains the outfit, too.*

“Are you a singer?”

“Nah, I play drums. If you’re into it, you oughtta come to our next gig.” He had a handful of flyers advertising his band’s next concert ready to hand out to us. I figured Takimoto had to be mentally tough to balance such a demanding hobby



with Nightmare.

Next, a lanky man with a sickly-looking face stepped forward to bow. He had a bandanna that read WIN THE WAR AT HOME tied around his head, and he was dressed in camouflage fatigues. There were both a toy gun and a toy sword hanging from his belt. I didn't have a clue what his outfit was supposed to be.

"Heeeere's Naitou!" he announced. "I'm thirty-four years old and, alas, still single. I love playing online games, and in case you're wondering, yes, I am always accepting applications from potential girlfrie— Oh, right. You're all still in school. Well, after you grow up, if you're ever looking for a boyfriend, think about it." Naomi, Youko, and I couldn't help but notice he was looking our way.

""""Wha—?!"""" all three of us sputtered at once.

*Yiiikes. This guy's a real character, to put it mildly,* I thought.

"Naitou, cut it out! Can't you tell they don't want to hear that?"

"Aw, I was only introducing myself!"

"Think about it! They've never seen you in person before. How are they supposed to know you're joking?"

"Fiiine..."

*Oh, so it was just a joke... Uh, yeah, how were we supposed to know that?*

The ponytailed woman who shut down Naitou's comedy routine smiled in our direction. She was simply dressed in a T-shirt and shorts. Unlike Takimoto, she didn't have a single bit of jewelry on her, but she was still super stylish. She had a kind, sisterly look about her.

"I'm pretty sure we've met, even if it was in the game. I'm Arisa Miyazawa, and I'm twenty. It's a pleasure to meet you in person."

""""Y-you too,""" we said as we bowed back to her. I was relieved there was at least one person in the party who I could have a normal conversation with.

One thing was for sure: Tsubasa's party had a totally different vibe from ours. They had plenty of oddballs, but in a way, that made them even more impressive. Imagine a crew like that coming together to take on Nightmare with such ease! And to top it all off, Tsubasa could mix it up with these older folks

and make his voice heard. He was definitely no average middle schooler.

“Enough chitchat. Let’s go,” Tsubasa said. Scratch *making his voice heard*—he was giving the orders! His party followed along; they didn’t seem to care that he was so much younger. They were a strange team for sure, but maybe they had to be a little strange in order to work with us in the first place.

“I guess each party really is different, huh?” Asagi said. He sounded impressed.

“Yeah...but I’m glad I’m in yours, Asagi!”

“Huh? Er... *Huh?! Wh-where’s that coming from, Mai? That’s my line. I’m glad you’re on my team, too!*” Asagi leaped to his feet and declared that last bit in a loud voice. I probably don’t need to tell you that his face was beet red.

*Clatter!*

“Waaaaaaaugh! Sorry, sorry, sorry!” As he’d stood to make his grand proclamation, Asagi had sent his tray of curry flying off the table. “S-s-sorry! Um, it didn’t get on anyone’s uniform, did it?”

“Hey, watch it!” Youko shouted. “You can get all lovey-dovey if you want, but don’t do it here.” She glared at Asagi as hard as she could.

*Luh...lovey-dovey?! Before I could open my mouth to object, Asagi began to stammer.*

“W-we’re not getting lovey-dovey! I... Um... I-it’s all my fault. I just had to blurt it out... I... Aaaugh!” Asagi gripped his head in his hands and slumped back down in his chair.

“Pffft!” Someone tried to stifle a laugh.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Aw, c’moon, Asagi, I’m messing with you,” Youko said. She clutched her belly, trying in vain to hold back more laughter. Seeing Asagi like that, Naomi and I couldn’t help cracking up, either.

*Hee-hee-hee... That’s one way to cut the tension before an event, I thought. Thanks, Asagi. I mean it. I think.*

**Now That's Tricky! The Gold Event**

We finished eating and returned to the clubroom, where Hirata and Yoichi were waiting.

"Best of luck this time, too..." Hirata said. Mewta meowed, as if to punctuate his thoughts.

"You've got a party of six this time, right? This'll be a cinch for you guys!" Yoichi said.

"...I wonder."

"What's your problem, Rito?"

"...I have a feeling you should be *more* careful, not *less*," Hirata said. "You beat the last event without getting a single Game Over... I'm sure the Nightmare administrators noticed..."

That was a good point. Whoever was running Nightmare, they didn't like to play fair. We had to be extra cautious.

"Um... Excuse me," a shaky voice said from behind us. I turned to see Kaneda, with Masuda by his side. "I wanted t-to wish you luck, Yashiro and Asagi. I'll be, um, cheering you on..."

"Thanks, Kaneda."

"We're gonna give it all we've got," Asagi said. "By the way, you haven't had any trouble lately, have you, Kaneda?"

"I-I'm okay. M-Masuda and Yoichi have been helping me a lot."

*Thank goodness.* It looked like the Rescue Squad was a good fit for Kaneda. He

was lucky to have not only the squad leader Yoichi looking out for him, but Masuda, too.

Kaneda continued, “Masuda’s really, really good at Nightmare, but he always takes the time to help me level up. It’s a big help, but I’m kinda afraid his ranking might go down ’cause of me...”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Masuda said in a gentle, reassuring voice. “My ranking’s not that important to me.”

Say what you will about the Nightmare Conquerors’ Club—most of the members were super nice. It was easy to believe that no matter what Nightmare threw at us, we could survive as long as we all kept sharing that cooperative spirit. There we were, about to head straight into danger yet again, and I still felt that way as my clubmates came up to talk with me and cheer me on.

“Hey, Mai, take a look at the whiteboard,” Asagi said. He pointed across the clubroom to where the whiteboard was once again filled with encouraging messages written by the entire Conquerors’ Club.

This time, though, there was also a ridiculously huge drawing of an octopus.

*Uh... What?*

There was a message by the drawing that read, “BREAK A LEG (OR EIGHT)—THE OCTO-GOD.”

*Lemme guess. That’s Takojima’s handiwork.* Looking closer, I noticed that there was another message next to it, written in much smaller letters: “DO YOUR BEST, I SUPPOSE. YOU HAVE MY SUPPORT. SINCERELY, THE CLUB’S MOST GENTLEMANLY GENTLEMAN.” *Hee-hee-hee... Who do those guys think they’re fooling?* I mean, could it be more obvious who wrote that stuff?

I scanned the clubroom with my eyes until I found Takojima and Akaishi. They were totally focused on their Nightmare consoles. When all was said and done, they were cheering for us as much as anybody else. And it sure looked like they were finally taking Nightmare seriously, too. Their levels had started to climb.

“Hey, you guys ready yet, or what?” Sugiura called out to us from his chair. “Get over here when you’re good to go.”

“Shall we, Mai?”

“Sure!”

When we arrived at the Raid Team table, Taichi stood up. “I’m gonna go get Tsubasa and Tanaka,” he said.

“Right. Do that,” Sugiura said. His eyes were glued to the Gold Event Ticket on his screen. “I don’t like the looks of the tickets this time. I sent yours already, so check your inbox.”

“Yessir,” I said. I opened up the message he’d sent and accepted my Event Ticket.

## **[Event Ticket (Gold)]**

### **Floor Boss Battlers**

- 1. Mai Yashiro**
- 2. Taisuke Asagi**

### **Support Players**

- 3.**
- 4.**
- 5.**
- 6.**

**※Please fill in the ticket, then press the Okay button.**

**The event will begin after every participant presses Okay.**

Asagi’s name and mine were already written on the tickets, like they always were. It certainly seemed like the first people to finish an event—that was us—had to participate in all the following events.

“Goin’ by the tickets, you two are gonna have to beat the boss,” Sugiura said.

“I guess that puts the rest of us on the backup bench.” He sounded a little unhappy about it.

“The gang’s all here, Sugiura,” Taichi said as he led Tsubasa and Tanaka to our table.

“Awright, no turnin’ back now. Everyone good to go?”

Everyone nodded.

“Hunh. So all I’ve gotta do is write my name in this blank, and I’m in?” Tsubasa asked. He sure didn’t look like someone who was about to risk his neck in a peril-packed Nightmare event.

*Is it just me, or does he seem excited about this?* I thought.

“I see someone’s fired up, eh, Tsubasa?” Tanaka said. He didn’t look the least bit nervous, either.

“Course I’m fired up. You’re looking at the guy who’s gonna beat Nightmare, and don’t you forget it. Try not to weigh me down, okay, Gramps?”

“Hmmm...”

“There, all done,” Sugiura said. “Who’s still puttin’ their names in? We can’t get goin’ till you’re finished.”

*Ack! Crud, it’s gotta be me,* I thought. I let myself get so distracted by Tsubasa and Tanaka that I forgot. I hurried to fill in the remaining names.

After we all pressed **Okay**, the compartments on our Nightmare consoles opened, revealing the black earphones we had to put in every time we joined an event.

**※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.

A flood of static poured out of my earphones, like it always did. I really hated this part; the noise never failed to make me queasy. The queasiness turned into drowsiness. Then I felt the darkness swallow my consciousness.

.....

I heard a voice.

*"Welcome to the World of Nightmare. It's nice to see you again."*

My eyes slowly blinked open.

"Kamisawa...!" I called out. I knew that voice; it belonged to the top administrator of the game himself. Our greatest foe.

*"You may have noticed that we've called this one the Gold Event. That's because it's rather special, if I may say so myself."*

"What's so special about it?"

*"For one thing, we've made it quite a bit more difficult than the others. And with greater difficulty comes the higher likelihood of Game Overs. We on the developers' side thought you might appreciate something a little more stimulating than the lukewarm events you've played in so far."*

"Huh?!" All those other events were "lukewarm" to him?!

*He's got to be kidding!*

"Ooogh," Asagi groaned as he woke up.

"Asagi!" I called out as I turned to him. Then I noticed something. All the others were missing. Asagi and I were the only players around. *Okay, something's fishy here! I definitely remember all of us entering the game together!* "What's going on here? Where is everybody?!"

*"I was right about to explain that,"* Kamisawa's voice replied. *"First things first, you're inside the puzzling Delo Manor... Kindly have a look at the door,*

*please.” There was a large door in front of us with a keyhole in its doorknob. “The Victory Application Point crystal you seek is in the room just beyond that door. But I’m afraid that the boss of this event has, well, eaten the key. What a pickle, eh?” Kamisawa chuckled.*

In other words, we had to defeat the boss to win this time.

“I take it the rules are the same as always?” I asked.

*“Indeed. All you have to do is get the key, unlock the door to the Victory Application Point, and claim your victory. And don’t be too worried. There’s only one boss.”*

Kamisawa was laying the politeness on thicker than usual this time. *Too thick.* I was starting to think he was hiding something.

“Why are we the only ones here?” Asagi asked. “Where’d you take the rest of our party?”

*“The others shall play their part by providing you with items. Check your Nightmare screens, if you will.”*

I did as Kamisawa said and looked down at my console. The game screen was split into four sections, and each of them showed one of the four support players. Sugiura was in the top left section, which was labeled **Attack**. Taichi’s section was labeled **Weaken**. Both Tsubasa’s and Tanaka’s sections were labeled **Skill Chips**.

*“If you wish to speak with one of your friends, tap their screen to enlarge it,”* Kamisawa explained. *“You may press the red button in the top left to show the players on the Floor Boss Battler side instead. In other words, there are two screen modes.”*

“Makes sense,” Asagi said. “You’re saying Sugiura and the others can help us out.”

*“Precisely. Assuming they don’t make any blunders themselves, that is. They can send you any items they find via the message system. Incidentally, the two of you won’t be able to find any items whatsoever on your side of the stage.”* Kamisawa’s warped laugh echoed through the air.



I felt like I had a grasp on how we'd have to play this event. To start off, Asagi and I wouldn't have the power to fight on our own until Sugiura and the rest sent some items our way. We'd have to sneak around and stay out of the boss's sight until then.

*In other words...* I turned to look down the hallway behind us.

*"Heh-heh-heh."* Kamisawa chuckled. *"You catch on quickly. The floor boss is already looking for you. I'm afraid that bumping into it would be extremely dangerous for you at the moment."*

*I knew it!! But what're we supposed to do?* There wasn't a single decent hiding place in the starting area. If the boss caught us in here, it could take us out in one hit.

"We've gotta move, Mai," Asagi said. "Come on! Let's find somewhere to hide until the others send us something we can work with."

"R-right!"

## *The Great Delo Manor Adventure*

Asagi and I hurried away from the starting area. Without a map, however, we didn't have a clue where to go. Once we left the starting spot—which was also our eventual goal—we found ourselves in a hallway that stretched to both the right and the left. Directly in front of us was a third path that led into what looked like a forest filled with trees.

*Which way do we go?*

"I dunno if I'm up to taking my chances in the woods," Asagi said. "Wanna try going left?"

"Yeah... Forests are dangerous enough, even when they're not part of an event."

We looked down the hallway to the left and saw that it continued for a while before turning to the right. The left side of the hallway, from where we stood, was lined with doors, and the right side had a lot of windows that looked out onto the forest. We turned around, checked the right hallway, and found that it matched, with windows facing the forest on the left side and doors on the right.

We had no idea when or where the floor boss might show up. My heart was already pounding with fear, but standing still and waiting for the boss wasn't an option. We had to get moving.

"Why don't we try opening the nearest door?" I suggested.

"Good idea. If we're lucky, it might turn out to be a good hiding place. Then again, there might also be enemies inside, so get ready to run just in case."

We nodded at each other, then I took a deep breath and reached for the

door. I threw it open. *Here goes!!*

“Huh? Look, Mai. It’s a totally normal room,” Asagi said. He was right. There was nothing out of the ordinary waiting for us whatsoever. No signs of monsters, either.

*Phew, that’s a relief,* I thought. *We should be able to look around the room without any trouble.* The room had a bed, a chest of drawers, a bookshelf, and other ordinary furniture. There were three pictures on the walls, too.

One picture showed drops of water freezing as they fell. Next to it was a picture of those frozen droplets being smashed by a hammer. The last picture showed... Well, it looked like two people pointing at a heart-shaped rock on the ground.

“It doesn’t look like there are any Skill Chips or anything in here.”

We checked a few more rooms after that. My heart still raced a bit as we opened the first couple of doors, since we weren’t sure what we’d find inside, but before long, we realized that each room was laid out in the exact same way. My nervousness faded a little more with every room we checked.

*But how many of these rooms are there?* I wondered.

I’d lost count of which room it was, but I pulled open the drawer in the bedside table in one of them. Inside, I found a pair of scissors, a few markers, some thread, and an assortment of candies. They may not have been Skill Chips, but I figured we could still use them somehow. I borrowed a shopping bag from the room’s chest of drawers and stuffed the newfound objects into it.

“What’re you doing with that stuff, Mai?”

“We should mark the rooms we’ve been in,” I said. “I’ll use this red marker.” I handed him a black marker.

“Gotcha!”

“I’ll head down the right hallway and number the doors there in red, starting with number one. You go left and number those doors in black, also starting with *one*, please. At some point, we may have to make a run for it—which means we might get split up. It’ll be a lot easier finding each other among all

these doors if they're marked."

"Good thinking," Asagi said. "If I can tell you, *I'm in Room Black Three*, that's a lot easier to understand."

"Exactly," I said with a smile.

"All right, let's mark the doors as we go, then."

"Sounds good."

"If you find any trouble, run for the nearest room and send me a message with the number. I'll do the same. How about that?"

"It's a deal. Let's do whatever it takes to win this." With that, we headed back out into the hallway. I turned right, while Asagi went left. We walked farther and farther apart, marking the doors we passed.

My heart was in my throat. Not only was I on my own, but for all I knew, the floor boss could also pop out at me at any second—especially as I rounded the corner at the end of the hall. But so far, no boss. Everything seemed to be going smoothly. The corridor turned, but it didn't branch off, so all I had to do was keep following it and marking off the doors one by one. Eventually, I took my marker and wrote a big, red "30" when suddenly—

"Oh! Mai!"

—there was Asagi, coming from the other direction, marking doors in black.

"Asagi! I take it there weren't any branches on your side, either."

"Nope. I had to turn a couple corners, but other than that, it was a straight shot here." Going by that, and the fact that we'd met up again, it felt safe to assume this manor was shaped like a big rectangle. Which meant the forest we saw out the windows across from the doors was actually an enclosed courtyard. Asagi continued, "Oh, hey, I see you marked thirty doors."

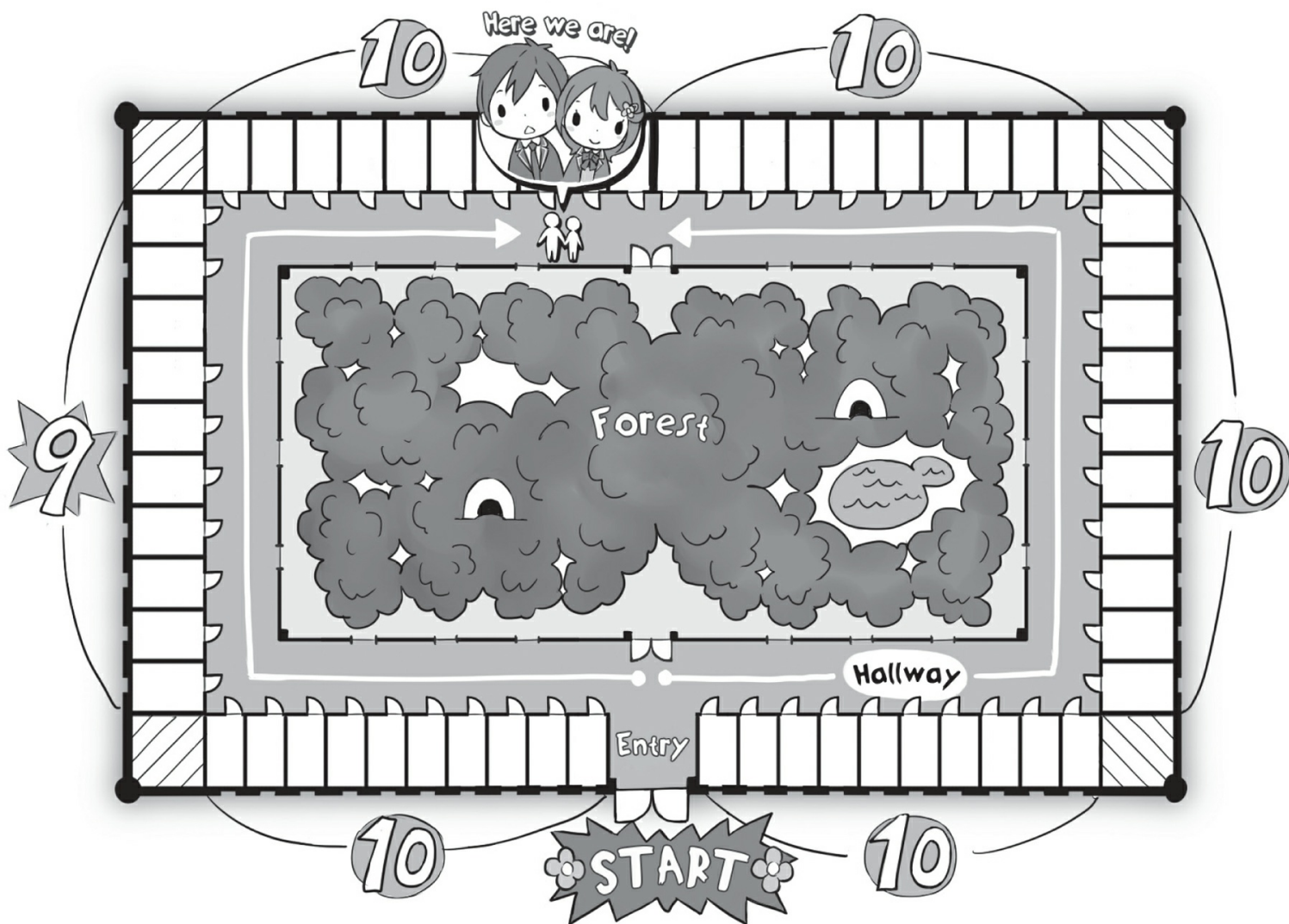
"Yeah. How about you?"

"I counted twenty-nine. Kind of an awkward number to end on, huh? Makes you wish there was one more room."

Starting at the entrance, there were twenty-nine rooms to the left with

Asagi's black labels, and thirty rooms to the right with my red labels...which meant there wasn't an equal number of rooms.

That seemed a little odd. *It's probably nothing*, I thought, but I made a mental note of it just in case. We opened Door Red Thirty and found a room that looked exactly like all the others. A totally normal room, where nothing was out of the ordinary.



“Hey, I got a message from Tsubasa,” Asagi said. “Look, Mai! He sent us some Skill Chips.”

“Wow, that was fast. Leave it to Tsubasa, I guess.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna try talking to him a bit.” Asagi tapped Tsubasa’s section of the split screen on his console. His window grew to fill the display. “Thanks for the Skill Chips, Tsubasa.”

On our screens, Tsubasa stood in front of three treasure chests. We could hear the sound of magma bubbling all around him. He seemed to be in a cave somewhere. One of the chests was already open.

*“What, that? It’s nothing. I’ve got a lotta traps and secret codes and stuff to break through, but they’re all pretty basic. It’s kind of a letdown, really.”* On one hand, it was reassuring—it definitely made him sound like a strong ally to have. On the other, it also definitely made him sound like a cocky jerk. In other words, it was classic Tsubasa! *“Those Skill Chips I just found are all attack spells, but you gotta be at least level two hundred fifty to use ‘em, so I sent ‘em all your way, Asagi. I’ll poke around and see if I can find a chest that’s easier to open. That might have some chips Yashiro can use. Sit tight.”*

Yep, it was classic Tsubasa, all right. He had a knack for saying exactly what would get on my nerves. But either way, it appeared that the strength of the items inside a chest matched how tough it was to get open.

*I guess it wouldn’t kill me to thank him, I thought. He is sending us items, after all.*

“Thanks a lot, Tsubasa. I don’t know exactly what you’ve got to deal with on your side, but be careful, okay?”

*“Huh? It’s not like I’m doing this for your sake, y’know. Don’t get it twisted,”* Tsubasa said. He looked away from his camera, like he was suddenly very interested in scanning his surroundings. Harsh words, but more than anything, he reminded me of Sugiura.

*I bet he’s just too shy to take the credit, I thought. I couldn’t help but giggle a bit.*

*“What’re you laughing at?!”* Tsubasa snapped. *“Don’t worry about me when you’ve got other folks to look out for. ‘Specially Gramps. I doubt that dummy’s gonna send you anything useful. Ha!”*

Without thinking, Asagi and I turned to look at each other. Tanaka may have been a weirdo, but he was still the top-ranked player in all of Nightmare. Surely, he wasn’t going to screw anything up.

At least, I hoped not.

...But I had to admit, if any of us knew Tanaka, it was Tsubasa. If that’s what Tsubasa had to say about him, it was a little worrying.

“Maybe we should check on Tanaka,” Asagi said.

“Yeah.”

We tapped on Tanaka’s section of our screens to see him slipping and sliding across an icy surface, struggling to his feet, and then falling again and again with a *whump, bam, thud*.

“Are you all right?!”

*“Sorry! Too slippery!”* Tanaka shouted. *“Yikes! Yeeeeeeek! Somebody, help me!”*

“Try taking your shoes off and going in your socks,” I suggested. “That should make it a little less slippery.”

*“Oh, now there’s an idea— Ack! Eeeeeep!”* Right in the middle of his sentence, Tanaka fell through a crack in the ice.

His window went dark. The words **Kenichi Tanaka was caught in a Sudden Death Trap—Game Over** scrolled across the screen.

“Hey! Tanaka?!”

“...I guess Tsubasa was right about that guy.”

Everything had happened so suddenly, so quickly, and so stupidly that all Asagi and I could do was stare in disbelief.

“Do you think he’s gonna be okay?”

“Well, I’m a little concerned, but he’ll only get sent back to the real world for



a little while,” Asagi said. “We’ve got the money to revive him. I’m sure the rest of the Conquerors’ Club can take care of him until he’s back in the game. It’ll just take time.”

“Sure thing,” I said. “Still, if there are traps around that can kill us that quickly, we all need to be extra careful. Even if we notice the holes before we fall in, poking around recklessly could be dangerous. We should alert Sugiura and the others.”

“You’re right. It’d be nice to have more items to fight with, but not if everyone gets a Game Over trying to find them for us.”

We immediately notified the rest of the group about the Sudden Death Traps.

*“So if we fall into these holes, we croak, huh? Gotcha,”* Sugiura said. He was exploring a cave with water rushing all around him. The cave floor was dotted with holes.

“Right. Please be careful,” Asagi warned.

“Have you found anything yet?” I asked.

*“Yeah. I just picked up a sword that says it deals five hundred damage, actually. Ya want it?”*

“Oh, wow! Five hundred damage? That’s a pretty solid weapon! Yes, please.”

*“Hold your horses. Accordin’ to some plaque I found over here, I can only send ya one weapon each.”*

““What?”” Asagi and I asked in unison. We shared a look.

“What do you think, Mai?”

“Let’s see... There’s a chance there are better weapons out there, even if it’s pretty slim. If we snap this one up right now, it could come back to bite us later. The floor boss can’t be far away, and I’d hate to run into it without any weapons at all, but still...”

“Yeah. We’re on the same page, Mai,” Asagi said. “But never mind what I think—your gut’s never steered us wrong before. Whatever you decide, I trust you!” He gave me a firm nod.

Sugiura could only send each of us a weapon once. Should this sword be one of them? I got the feeling it wasn't a choice to be made lightly. There had to be some deciding factor—something that would make it clear what the right call was. Until we knew what that was, it seemed safest not to have Sugiura send us any weapons.

We told Sugiura our decision and asked him to let us know if he found anything stronger.

*"Sure. Leave it to me,"* he said. Then we cut off communication. His simple words brimmed with confidence. It was times like this when it was really reassuring to have Sugiura on our side.

*Tsubasa's Idea*

“Let’s see how Taichi’s doing, Mai,” Asagi suggested. We clicked on Taichi’s window to enlarge it. “Find anything, Taichi?”

Taichi’s hair was flapping around wildly. He was in a cave, like the others, but it looked like his was especially windy.

*“Perfect timing, guys! Check this out,”* he said as he pointed to three treasure chests. There was a plaque in front of them that read:

THE RARE BOX BEARS NO NUMBER.

CHOOSE WISELY, LEST YOU EMPOWER YOUR ENEMY.

*“The chests have engravings on ‘em, too. One says Dirt, one says 10, and the last says Flame. What do you guys think? The one with the ten’s obviously out, but there’s gotta be a rare item in one of the others, right?”*

“Hmm... It sure looks that way. Any ideas, Mai?” Asagi turned to look at me.

*Uh, yeah! Gimme a hard one next time!*

“Yep. I’ve already solved it.”

*“For real?!”* Taichi gawped.

“The *Flame* chest is the one you should open,” I said. “Take a good look at the word *Dirt*. In Roman numerals, the first letter is the symbol for five hundred.”

*“Whoa, you’re right.”*

“That’s our Mai,” Asagi said. “You solved that in an instant.”

*Eh-heh-heh...* Solving puzzles was the least I could do to make up for how

much I dragged the party down when it was time to fight. But still, it felt nice to soak in the praise.

Taichi popped open the treasure chest marked FLAME. The next instant, a new message arrived in our inboxes.

**Taichi has opened a rare chest. The boss, Delori the Hydro-Fiend, has had its HP reduced from 15,000 to 13,000.**

“Thanks so much, Taichi!”

*“Aw, it’s nothing. You did all the work anyway, Mai. Welp, back to the search. There might be more stuff around here somewhere.”*

“Keep up the good work,” I said. We cut communication with Taichi.

“The boss still has a ton of HP,” said Asagi. “I don’t think that five-hundred-damage sword is gonna cut it after all.”

“That’s what I was thinking... Oh, that reminds me. I wanted to ask you something.”

“Huh? What is it?”

“What kind of Skill Chips did Taichi send you?”

“Ah, right.” Asagi tapped away at his Nightmare console and pulled the Skill Chips up on his screen. “There’s two. One deals one thousand five hundred damage to enemies, and the other deals four thousand. But the stronger one’s not a wide-range spell, so it’s probably hard to aim.”

“And even if they both hit, the boss will still have seven thousand five hundred HP left.”

“Yeah. I don’t think we’re ready for the boss fight yet,” Asagi said. We had to keep trying to avoid the boss until everyone on the support squad found something to help us fight it.

I took another look at the four-way split screen. Sugiura and Tsubasa had both lost a bit of HP. I wondered if traps had caught them by surprise, too. I couldn’t help but worry about them, but there was no direct way for us to assist them.

“We haven’t been to the courtyard yet, Mai. Maybe we should check it out.”

“Good idea.”

Asagi stared out the nearest window into the heavily forested courtyard. “It’s pretty huge. Like, huge enough to get lost in. That’s a scary thought...”

Asagi had barely finished his sentence when suddenly, the windows were blanketed in a thick, dark fog.

“Wha—?! What’s going on?!”

“I think I can guess...” I looked down at my Nightmare console screen, and sure enough, the usual message was there:

**<!> Floor Boss Approaching <!>**

Was the fog the boss?!

The fog gathered before our eyes, forming itself into a humanoid shape. We had seen similar enemies before—shadowy figures that could move about freely.



A wide, smirking mouth appeared on the foggy form's face as it slammed against the windows with its fists.

*Phew... At least it can't come inside, from the looks of it.*

Or so I thought.

The next instant, the figure spread out into a shapeless cloud with a *whoosh*. The fog started seeping into the hallway through tiny gaps in the windows. It was coming for us!

"This is bad! Run for it, Mai!!"

"R-right!"

Asagi grabbed my hand tight and took off, leading me toward the manor entrance. Once we were out of the hallway, he slammed the door shut behind us. Then he backed away from the door and pointed his Nightmare console at it.

"I'm gonna use one of those Skill Chips, Mai. That should give us a chance to make a break for it!"

"O-okay," I stammered. I wasn't sure I could go very fast, though. I was so scared, my legs were shaking.

*"Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee..."* With an unsettling laugh, the fog started to seep through the cracks around the door. It pulled itself into a humanoid shape once again. *"Found you... Found you... Uwee-hee-hee..."*

*Oh man, oh man, oh man! Gross!*

Asagi unleashed a fire spell. A swirling vortex of flame flew at the boss. It looked like it was going to be a direct hit—

—but the boss changed shape instantly. The humanoid form that loomed before us splashed down to the floor. The flame vortex missed.

The boss was now a giggling puddle on the floor. *"Hee-hee-hee..."*

"I couldn't damage it...but we can still make a break for it! Let's go, Mai!"

"R-right!" We bolted past the boss through the hallway and out into the courtyard. We knew we might get lost in the dense woods, but that probably

meant the boss would have a harder time finding us, too. It was like running through a real, vast forest, complete with ponds and caves all around. I spotted a small shack just ahead of us and pointed it out. “Look, Asagi!”

“Good catch! We can hide out in there and heal up.”

“Yeah,” I said, panting. I was all out of breath, and my heart was pounding so hard, I thought it might burst. We darted into the shack and crouched down on the floor, wheezing. Asagi was breathing as heavily as I was. *Here’s hoping we can get at least a little rest...*

“That boss isn’t gonna go down easily,” Asagi said. “That was a wide-range spell, and it still dodged it.”

“Yeah... I didn’t see that coming.”

Here’s what we knew so far:

The boss could change forms. On top of its humanlike shape, it could become a gas or a liquid, too.

It was *scarily* good at dodging.

If we didn’t figure something out soon, then it wouldn’t matter if Sugiura and the rest sent us the best weapons and spell chips they had. We’d still be toast.

“...Mai, you should see this,” Asagi said. He was staring at his Nightmare console screen, and his voice sounded strangely stiff.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everyone’s running really low on HP.”

I took a look at my own screen. Sugiura, Taichi, and Tsubasa all had even lower health than before. An icon popped up over Tsubasa. It meant he wanted to talk. I tapped on his window.

*“How’s it going, Yashiro? Put a big dent in the boss’s HP yet?”*

“Um, no... Not exactly...”

*“Those Skill Chips I sent didn’t cut it, huh? Well, there’s more. This time, I’ll even get some for you, Yashiro. But you better beat that boss on the double.”*

“R-right. I’ll try,” I said. Forget a big dent, we hadn’t even put a tiny scratch in



the boss's HP. But it really didn't feel like the time to say it.

*Then again, I thought, it's not the time to play it cool, either. Tsubasa's a smart kid. He might have some good advice.* Even if he didn't, outside points of view always came in handy when someone needed a spark of inspiration. Coming up with ideas alone was one thing, but knowing when it's time to call for backup was *real* smarts.

I explained the situation to Tsubasa.

*"Hmm. Gotcha. It sounds to me like you oughtta focus less on dealing damage and more on making the boss hold still for now. It doesn't matter how hard you hit if you can't hit in the first place, am I right?"*

"You sure are."

Tsubasa stared at his own Nightmare console.

*"Like I said, I found some new Skill Chips, but I'm gonna send you some different ones than I originally planned. I think these are the ones you're gonna want to use."* He sent messages to Asagi and me; each one had three Skill Chips labeled **Cold Field** attached.

Cold Field was a spell that did a whole...20 damage to an enemy. Even level-1 players could use the chips.

"What're we supposed to do with such a weak spell?"

*"I thought those chips were total junk at first, too. But you can't hit the boss when it's a liquid or a vapor, right? So freeze it solid."*

*Oh! I get it!* If we could use Cold Field to freeze the boss, that'd keep it in one place. Looking at Cold Field again, I noticed that it didn't specifically target enemies, but the whole area around them instead. That meant that even if it changed forms on us, it couldn't avoid the effect.

"Remember those pictures, Asagi...?" I started to ask, but he didn't have to remember them. There they were on the wall of the shack. One showed droplets of water freezing as they fell. Another showed those frozen droplets being crushed by a hammer. And the third showed two people pointing at a heart-shaped rock on the ground. We'd seen the same three pictures in every

single room we'd checked in the manor. Were they explaining how we were supposed to beat the floor boss?

"Don't tell me...," Asagi said. He'd made the same realization I had.

*"Hunh. I guess there are set items we're supposed to find for you, then,"* Tsubasa said. *"Who's gotta send you the hammer?"*

That was probably Sugiura. And he only had one chance to give us the right weapons. If he automatically sent us the most powerful weapon he'd found so far, that would be it—we'd blow our chance to beat the boss and finish the event. There'd be nothing else to do but wait for a full-party wipe—and Game Over. I suddenly got what Kamisawa meant when he said this event was harder than the others.

"Hey, Tsubasa, when you woke up at the start of the event, did anyone explain the rules to you?"

*"There was a plaque with the rules written on it, but that's all. Why do you ask?"*

I knew it! Asagi and I were the only ones who heard them straight from Kamisawa's mouth.

*"Kamisawa who?"* Tsubasa asked. *"Man, that ticks me off. I finally make it into an event, and I still don't get to play in the big leagues? What's the fun in that?"* He griped about the Nightmare developers under his breath.

"Now, now, Tsubasa..."

*"How's useless ol' Gramps doing anyway?"*

I had to admit "useless" felt a little harsh...

"Tanaka got a Game Over," Asagi said. "He's probably still standing by to be revived."

*"Hmph. Figures he'd just weigh us down. Tell ya what—try and beat the boss before Gramps gets back, why don'tcha?"*

"It'd be nice if we can."

Tsubasa changed the subject yet again.

*“Any guesses what that third picture’s all about?”* He must have meant the one that showed two people pointing at a heart-shaped rock.

“My guess is that whatever this heart-shaped thing is, the boss drops it after we smash it with the hammer,” Asagi said.

*“That’s my guess, too,”* Tsubasa said, *“though you’d think there’d be more pictures showing what happens after that.”*

*This event is supposed to be tough, I thought. Could it really be that simple? Or is there something else we’re not seeing?* I took another, closer look at the pictures on the shack wall. The only difference between these and the ones inside the manor was the frames. The first two pictures were in blue frames, but the last one, with the heart-shaped stone, was in a yellow one. *No clue what that means, though...*

The notification icon popped up on Taichi’s window. He wanted to talk. I signed off Tsubasa’s screen and switched over to Taichi’s.

*“I got another treasure box open for ya, Mai,”* he said, *“but this one only had a piece of paper in it.”*

“Is there anything on it?”

*“Yeah. It says, ‘The fiend’s weakness lies in the manor’s asymmetry. Seek it out, or else you’ll never claim victory.’ I hope that makes more sense to you than it does to me.”*

—!

“Thank you, Taichi,” I said. “I’d say you found us a major clue.”

*“So you’ve got an idea what it means?”*

“I sure do!” I was pretty sure the “asymmetry” the hint mentioned had something to do with the uneven number of rooms. We marked thirty in red, but only twenty-nine in black, remember?

“Could be the number of rooms,” Asagi said, reaching the same conclusion. “There were twenty-nine on one side and thirty on the other. But besides that, everything was exactly the same on both sides.”

“Let’s take a closer look, Asagi. There’s got to be something more to those

rooms.” There had to be. I knew it. I mean, the whole manor was perfectly symmetrical except for that one hallway that only had nine rooms. The key had to be in that hallway! “I think we should go back and check the hallway with only nine rooms again.”

“You got it, Mai,” Asagi said. “But remember, the boss is probably out there searching the woods for us as we speak. So stay right by my side, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Asagi.”

We nervously made our way out of the shack and into the wooded courtyard. We stopped for a moment and listened, but we didn’t hear any footsteps.

*That doesn’t mean the boss left, though, I thought. Talk about scary.*

I switched the display on my Nightmare console over to Asagi’s status screen and mine. On the bright side, it wasn’t showing the *Floor Boss Approaching!* message it always flashed when the boss was right about to catch us...at least not yet.

As soon as we stepped out of the woods and tried to head back into the manor, our console lights blinked. There it was: the familiar warning message.

“...! A-Asagi, look out!”

We didn’t need to look at our screens. The floor boss was right before our eyes.

## **Delori the Hydro-Fiend Strikes!**

The floor boss loomed over us in its humanoid form.

I sneaked a peek at my game screen, which told me the boss's name was Delori the Hydro-Fiend. I'd barely had time to process the name when Delori thrust a hand in our direction and attacked.

### **«Combat Results»**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend cast Black Water Blast!**

- **785 damage to Mai!**

**Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,215/5,000] (-785) • 550 damage to Taisuke!**

**Taisuke Asagi [HP: 4,450/5,000] (-550)**

Jets of black water shot out of the boss's hand and hit us with a *splaaash*!! I felt it beating against my entire body, leaving me drenched.

.....!!

I wasn't only wet, either. An awful pain coursed through my body.

"Mai?!"

"I-I'm all right," I groaned. If there was a bright side, it's that pain in Nightmare was real but temporary. If you could bear it for a moment, it went away entirely. I had something bigger to worry about: This boss could use

magic... That was completely beyond what I'd expected.

*How are we supposed to beat this thing?! I thought. All the confidence I'd just finished building up came shattering down the instant I saw it cast a spell.*

Delori the Hydro-Fiend stuck out a foggy finger and began moving it back and forth, gloating as it pointed at us.

*"Hee-hee-hee... Now, who wants a Game Over first? Eeny, meeny, miny..."*  
Delori raised its hand over its head, then brought it down with its finger pointed directly at me. *"...moe! Hee-hee-hee!"*

*—! M-m-me?!*

"Oh, no, you don't!" Asagi shouted as he jumped between the boss and me. He aimed his Nightmare console at Delori and fired off a Cold Field spell.

## «Combat Results»

### Taisuke cast Cold Field!

- 20 damage to Delori the Hydro-Fiend!

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend [HP: 9,980/10,000] (-20)**

Delori smirked smugly at us.

*...Hang on, what gives? It's not frozen!*

*"Hee-hee-hee... That's not gonna work..."*

"Oh, dang it!" Asagi spat as he grabbed hold of my hand and pulled me away.

"But..."

"C'mon, Mai! We gotta go!"

"But what if it shoots more magic at us from behind?!"

Asagi glanced behind us as we ran. He bit his lip.

"S-sorry, Mai! Um, it's just this once, I swear!" He wrapped both of his arms around me and squeezed me tight.

*Huh?! Don't tell me—*

That's right. He put his whole body on the line to keep me safe.

## «Combat Results»

### **Delori the Hydro-Fiend cast Black Water Blast!**

- **510 damage to Taisuke!**

### **Taisuke Asagi [HP: 3,940/5,000] (-510)**

"A-Asagi!!" I shouted as he collapsed to the ground where he stood. But a moment later, when he staggered back to his feet, he was more concerned with my safety than his own.

"Don't worry about me, Mai! How about you? Are you hurt?!" His worried eyes ran all over me, making sure I wasn't injured anywhere. Then he realized what he was doing. "Um, ah, aaaaugh... S-s-sorry! I didn't mean to stare, honest... Okay, I did, but not in a *weird* way!!"

"I know that, Asagi," I reassured him. "I get it. I should be the one apologizing for always dragging you down."

"What're you talking about? The whole reason I can keep fighting is because you're with me, Mai. A-anyway, it looks like you're safe. Now we've gotta run!"

The boss fired several more torrents of black water in our direction. Whenever I couldn't dodge them, Asagi was there, covering me so I wouldn't take a direct hit. His HP fell, blast by blast, until he only had 1,300 left.

*Now what do I do? I thought. And why does this keep happening? Asagi always ends up hurt because of me!* I had to do something to help him, but what? I didn't have any healing Skill Chips. It was more than I could take. I was so frustrated, it felt like my teeth itched. *Why? Why can't I do anything when it really counts?*

"All right, the hallway with only nine doors is right around this corner," Asagi said.

“Right,” I said as we turned the corner and darted down the hall. We reached the spot where a door would be if the manor were perfectly symmetrical, then put our hands against the wall.

“What the—?”

“Eeek!”

The next instant, we fell forward through what should have been a solid wall. When we opened our eyes and looked up, we found ourselves inside another normal room with nothing out of the ordinary, exactly like all the others. As it turned out, there might not have been a door, but there was a room behind the wall all the same.

“Oof... I sure wasn’t expecting that...”

Then I noticed something on the floor that hadn’t been in any of the other rooms: a heart-shaped stone.

“Asagi, look at this...”

“It’s exactly like the one in the pictures.”

I picked the stone up off the floor and looked around the room. *Huh? What’s with the pictures...?* I thought. Then it hit me. The first two pictures—the ones with the freezing droplets and the hammer—were the same as always. As for the third picture... Well, it wasn’t there. In its place, there was an empty frame.

And in the middle of the empty frame was a shallow, heart-shaped hole in the wall.

The plaque on the frame, where you’d usually find the title of a painting, said: WEAKENING APPARATUS—USE TO ACTIVATE THE BOSS’S WEAKNESS.

“If I had to guess, I’d say we should fit that stone into the hole, Mai.”

“Great minds think alike!” I said as I rushed over to the frame and placed the heart into the wall.

Nothing happened.

“That’s weird. It didn’t seem to do anything,” Asagi said. “Maybe we skipped a step or something.” His brow furrowed as he mumbled “Hmmm,” thinking



through what we might be missing.

*Skipped a step, huh...? Oh! Of course! All those pictures were there for a reason. We've got to do what they showed us.*

"Maybe we should try pointing at the stone, like in the picture."

"Aha! Good thinking, Mai."

We nodded at each other, then pointed at the heart-shaped stone together. We heard the sound of something grinding into motion (or at least, we could've sworn we did), and the frames around the droplet and hammer pictures began to shimmer with light.

"Yes! It looks like it worked," I said. If my guess was correct, then Cold Field should work to freeze the boss in place.

Speaking of the boss, we could tell that it was roaming around the hall right outside. However, it didn't appear to notice the hidden room at all. From the looks of it, we could see out into the hall, but the boss couldn't see in.

"I don't think we need to worry about the boss barging in," Asagi said. "Let's hang tight in here until Sugiura sends us that hammer, Mai."

"Sounds good to me. We should be safe enough."

Finally, we could catch our breath and relax a bit. I heaved a sigh of relief. Then I switched my Nightmare display over to the four-way split screen. *Oh, nice*, I thought, *Tanaka's back in the game*. But on the other hand, I also noticed that the other three members of the support crew all had less than half their full HP left.

"I'm gonna check in with Sugiura and see how he's doing."

"Thanks, Mai."

I tapped Sugiura's window to let him know I wanted to talk.

*"What's up? Somethin' happen on your end?"*

"No, we're fine. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay with you."

*"...With me?"* Sugiura brushed his left ear with his hand.

*Huh? Isn't that usually what he does when he feels bashful?* Before I finished

my thought, he'd already snapped back to his usual, cocky self. He flashed an aggressive-looking grin.

*"Ya don't say. No problems to report here,"* he said, brimming with his usual confidence.

*Man, Sugiura and Tsubasa really are a lot alike,* I thought. ...*Not that I'd dare tell either of them that.*

"You wouldn't happen to have found a hammer or anything like that, would you?"

*"A hammer? Nah, all I've got on me are that sword I showed you, a staff, and a spear."*

I told Sugiura everything we'd been through and why we needed a hammer.

*"Awright, I getcha. I'll find ya that hammer. Bet on that,"* came his confident reply.



“Thanks! We really appreciate it,” I said. Everything seemed to suggest that, once Sugiura found a hammer, we’d finally be on our way to beating the boss.

“Ack! Mai, Tsubasa’s in trouble...!” Asagi exclaimed.

“What?!”

I looked at Tsubasa’s section of my screen just in time to see him get caught by an arrow trap. His HP fell to zero. His body gave off a burst of light for an instant, and when the light died down, he was gone.

“.....!”

I couldn’t believe it. That was a Game Over. I was super shocked that it’d happened to Tsubasa of all people.

“Take a deep breath, Mai,” Asagi said. “It’s rough, but there’s nothing you or I can do about it...”

“I know...” A cloud of gloom fell over us in the secret room. So I did what I always did whenever things got to be too much for me to take: I clicked over to Amelie’s Room.

“Ooh! Heya, Mai!” When she noticed I was watching her, Amelie stood up from in front of her TV and trotted over to face the screen.

“I’m really glad to see you in a good mood, Amelie.” Like I said, whenever I felt nervous or insecure, a little chat with Amelie always seemed to calm me down. I didn’t really get why, but it worked.

“Lemme guess. Are you playing in an event right now?”

“Yeah, I am... How’d you know?”

“‘Cause you’ve got your usual *I’m in an event, and I’m worried about it* face on! Is there anything I can do? I hate how I can’t ever help you when you’re struggling!” Even Amelie was in tune with my emotions. Honestly, that alone lifted my spirits a little.

“You help me plenty, Amelie,” I reassured her. “Whenever I’m down, talking with you picks me right back up. You make all those bad feelings disappear. I mean it.”

Hearing that, Amelie literally jumped for joy. Then she started waving her fists around like she was shadowboxing. “Take that, bad feelings! Get outta here!”

“Hee-hee!”

*As soon as this event is over, I’m buying Amelie some new furniture and a whole bunch of candy,* I thought. It was the least I could do to thank her for cheering me up.

“You and your Familiar really get along, huh, Mai?” Asagi asked. “I’ve never seen you look at her without a smile on your face.”

“Yeah. I can hardly believe we first met as enemies in a Battle of Wits.”

*Hmm? Hold that thought.* The notification light on my Nightmare console was blinking. I had a message from Tsubasa.

**[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]**

**[To: Mai Yashiro]**

**I got a Game Over. Sorry ’bout that.**

**I’m chilling in the real world for now. You’ve got Gramps back on Skill Chip—searching duty, so I’m not gonna bother continuing. Your club says you’ve got enough cash for three more continues, but I don’t wanna use up one of them and leave you, Asagi, and Sugiura out of luck if you really need them, since Sugiura’s looking for your weapons and the rest of you gotta beat the boss.**

**Ah, well. Kick some butt for me.**

**Everyone in the clubroom’s really worried about you guys. Finish up and get back here soon so they know you’re all right, okay?**

# END

That was a surprisingly thoughtful message from Tsubasa. It was Game Over for him, but that wasn't so bad during an event. Instead of losing his Respawn Penalty entirely, he only had to forfeit it until the event was over. As long as our whole party stayed in the game, he'd eventually get it back without a fuss.

"He's not gonna continue, huh?" Asagi said. "After all that begging for a spot in the event, he's surprisingly realistic about playing his role. I don't know many other middle schoolers who'd be that mature."

"Me neither."

Now we really had to win—not only for Tsubasa's sake, but also for everyone in the Nightmare Conquerors' Club who was sitting on the edges of their seats for us. I wanted to bring them some good news.

*All right!* I was ready and raring to get back in the game. I couldn't have made that comeback on my own. Lucky for me, I didn't have to. I had Amelie and many more allies on my side giving me all the courage I needed. *Just watch! We're gonna win this one, like we won all the rest!*

## *Delori's Weakness*

I'd just finished psyching myself up to win the event when Tanaka's contact request icon popped up. *What does he want?* I wondered as I clicked on his window.

*"Hiya, kiddo! It's me!"*

"Is everything okay?" I noticed that Tanaka had taken off his shoes and now stood in his socks.

*"I found a bunch of Skill Chips I thought I'd send your way,"* he said.

"Whoa, already?!" I was seriously impressed! Hardly any time had passed at all since he got back into the event.

*"Yep. I found these treasure chests with some stuff written on 'em. I didn't really understand it, so I popped one open at random."*

*Er... You mean the riddle you're supposed to solve so you know which one's the rare chest and which ones are duds? Did he seriously ignore it and open a chest at random? What was his problem? At least he seemed pretty lucky. Wait... Don't tell me he coasted all the way to the top of the player rankings on pure luck...*

Anyway, he sent over two types of spell chips, with one labeled **Area Heal** and the other labeled **Pit Stop**. Area Heal restored all of the caster's allies to full HP as long as they were on the same floor. Pit Stop was an attack spell that, well, opened up a pit for a target to fall into. Both types of chip had a minimum level of 200, so even I could use them.

"You hang on to those, Mai," Asagi said. "I've still got the chips Tsubasa sent

us.”

“Got it.”

Asagi had two Cold Field chips and one Flame Vortex left. I had three Cold Fields, two Area Heals, and one Pit Stop. Unfortunately, our last scuffle with the boss had left Asagi low on HP.

“The only thing left to do is beat the boss, so I’m gonna go ahead and use one of these healing spells.”

“Sure. Thanks, Mai.”

I cast Area Heal, bringing us back up to full health.

“We’re gonna have a hard time getting past the boss’s long-range spells,” I said.

“Yeah... It’ll probably get a few shots off before we can freeze it. And that spell’s hard to dodge.”

“Yeah...”

“But don’t worry, Mai. Next time we see that fiend, we’ll have the power to fight back.”

“Yeah! That’s right!” I’m not going to lie. I was still scared to fight the floor boss. But I knew that, together, Asagi and I would win in the end. We just had to hold on a little longer, and the Gold Event was as good as done.

Then I got a call from Sugiura. *“Hey, Mai. Any clue what this is supposed to mean?”* He pointed at a treasure chest with a numerical lock on it. The dials were set to the digits 355. *“It looks like I can change the combo, but I dunno what for.”*

“Is there anything nearby that might give you a hint?”

*“There’s a plaque on it with two circles, too. That’s all.”*

*Two circles...?*

*“What do you think they mean? Are they supposed to be zeroes or somethin’?”*

“That’s possible,” I said, “but even if they are, there’s still a lot of different



combinations it could be. You'd have to guess at random."

*"Right. Like, even if I knew for sure the remaining digit was one, it could be 100, 010, or 001."*

Puzzles like this usually only had one correct answer. I wondered if there might be some other way to look at the problem. I thought over the digits 1 through 9, picturing each one in my head. *So, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9...and two zeroes. 00.*

*...Aha!* I had the answer.

*"It's eight, Sugiura! Change all three digits to eights!"*

*"Eight? Why?"*

*"Picture it. An eight is made up of two circles, isn't it?"*

Sugiura's eyes widened when he realized what I meant.

*"Gotcha. You might be on to somethin'."* He turned the dials on the chest until they said 888. There was a loud *clank*, and the lid of the chest popped open. *"Awright!"*

*"What's in there?"*

*"Just what you've been waitin' for,"* Sugiura said. *"I'll send it to ya right away. It's all on you two now."*

.....! That could only mean one thing. Asagi and I checked our Nightmare consoles. Sugiura sent Asagi a Skill Chip that summoned a hammer. He also sent me the chip that summoned the sword, for good measure.

*"You only need one hammer, right?"*

*"Right. Thank you so much, Sugiura!"*

*"Don't mention it. And hey, Asagi?"*

*"What is it?"*

*"Make sure you keep that clumsy partner of yours outta trouble. I can't be there to help ya take down the boss this time."*

*Gulp.* I was pretty sure I knew who Asagi's "clumsy partner" was.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep Mai safe. I swear it.”

*“That’s what I like to hear. I’m gonna hang tight right here till you guys win. No point riskin’ a Game Over like some kinda chump,”* Sugiura said as he crouched in place. He only had 860 HP left. It was clear that Asagi and I weren’t the only ones who’d had a hard time in the event. The others were working hard, too, right up to the bitter end.

“Okay, Mai, time to show everyone what they’ve been working for!” Asagi said as he summoned his new hammer.

“Yeah!” I followed along, summoning my sword. I took another look at my console, where a note said that we had to deal 1,000 damage to the boss to reveal its final form. *But what’s its final form?* I thought.

“The boss is still roaming the halls around here, Mai,” Asagi said. It must have known something was up after we suddenly vanished. There had to be a way to use its confusion to our advantage.

“Let’s get the drop on it, Asagi. Next time the boss passes through this hallway and turns the other way, I’ll jump out and hit it with the spell. Then you rush in and give it a good whack with that hammer!”

“Roger that!” Asagi said. “But promise you’ll be careful, okay?”

“Okay!”

I stood in the hidden doorway and waited for the boss to pass by. Even though we had our plan worked out, my heart was still pounding so hard, I could hear it loud and clear.

*.....Now!*

I jumped out into the hallway as soon as Delori’s back was turned. It didn’t notice as I lifted my Nightmare console and aimed right for it.

## «Combat Results»

**Mai cast Cold Field!**

- **20 damage to Delori the Hydro-Fiend!**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend [HP: 9,960/10,000] (-20)**

**[Additional Effects]**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend was frozen.**

Yesss! Delori didn't manage to turn all the way around before its body froze solid.

"Now, Asagi!"

"I'm on it!" He dashed out of the hidden room and hit the frozen fiend hard with his hammer.

### **«Combat Results»**

**Taisuke dealt a crushing blow with his hammer!**

- **1,000 damage to Delori the Hydro-Fiend!**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend [HP: 8,960/10,000] (-1,000)**

**[Additional Effects]**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend's Droplet Barrier broke down.**

The boss shattered into tiny pieces.

*"How dare you...? I'll get you for this...,"* came an angry voice from somewhere inside a blob of water at the center of the frozen wreckage. It jiggled and quivered as it spoke. The jiggling continued as it formed itself into the shape of a wild boar with enormous horns. *"Hee-hee-hee... You've given me the runaround, but now it's my turn to send you on a trip...to the great beyond! Think about what you made me do—it'll be the last thought you ever have!"* As

soon as its speech was over, the watery boar charged right for us at a tremendous speed.

“Whoa!”

“Eeek!” There was no way we could possibly dodge it! It was moving too fast! Each of us took 1,200 damage as the boss rammed into us. It kept charging down the hallway and slammed into the far wall with a splash. But that didn’t slow it at all. It immediately turned back toward us and prepared to tackle us again.

This time, Asagi stepped in front to shield me from the attack. Thanks to him, I didn’t take any more damage, but he lost another 1,200 HP.

Once again, the boss splashed to a stop against the opposite wall. There didn’t seem to be any way for us to halt its rampage.

*Wait, I thought. Maybe some magic’ll do the trick.*

“Thanks for covering me, Asagi. But are you okay?”

“Who, me? It’ll take more than that to put me down for the count,” Asagi said. “Then again, the way this is going, that might not be far off.”

“Don’t worry. Next time it charges this way, I’m gonna open up a pit for it to fall into!”

“Aha! So you’re gonna use...”

“...that Skill Chip. Yeah,” I said as I chose the Pit Stop chip from my Nightmare menu. I aimed my console at the boar as it charged us at full speed.

A huge hole opened up in the floor before our eyes. The boss noticed it, but it was too late. Just as I’d thought, it couldn’t skid to a stop in time. It fell straight into the pit.

## «Combat Results»

**Mai cast Pit Stop!**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend fell into the spiked pit!**



- **2,500 damage to Delori the Hydro-Fiend!**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend [HP: 6,460/10,000]**

**(-2,500)**

Asagi pointed his own console down into the pit. “This spell may not cover much space,” he said, “but I should be able to hit it now!” He shot a straight jet of flame at the boar as it struggled to climb back out.

### «Combat Results»

**Asagi cast Flame Vortex!**

- **4,000 damage to Delori the Hydro-Fiend!**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend [HP: 2,460/10,000] (-4,000)**

It was a strong spell for sure, but not strong enough to wipe out all the boss’s HP.

“Aw, crud,” Asagi said. “If we can’t finish it off before it climbs back up, it’s gonna try to flatten us again.”

I thought fast. We still had one more Skill Chip left that could bring us both back to full health. I came up with a plan. *It’s not gonna be fun*, I thought, *but it’s the only shot we’ve got!*

“Listen, Asagi. I say we face it head-on and finish it off the old-fashioned way. Even if it fights back, we’ve come too far to give up now.”

Asagi’s hammer could deal 1,000 damage, and my sword could deal 500. As long as Asagi hit the boss twice, victory was ours!

“Okay, got it!”

The two of us got ready to fight.

*Here goes!* The boss, now out of the hole, rushed in for another tackle. I

swung my sword right before it rammed into me. On the opposite side, Asagi also landed a direct hit. We took some damage but brought the boss down to 960 HP.

*“Wh-what? How...?”* Delori gasped as it noticed how low its HP was. Then it turned around and bolted away down the hall!

“Aw, man! We were so close, too,” Asagi said as we watched the boss flee.

As far as we could tell, once Delori started running, it couldn’t stop itself on its own. In that case, it couldn’t escape into the courtyard—there were no walls to crash into by the door. All it could do was run in a big circle through the manor’s halls.

“We should hide behind a corner and ambush it,” I said. “Then we can hit it once it slams into a stop against the wall.”

“Good thinking! That’ll make it a little safer for us, too.”

“It should, at least.” But I used my last Area Heal chip to restore all our HP just in case.

We crouched in place, hidden around a corner of the hallway, until we heard the *stomp, stomp, stomp* of stampeding feet coming our way. No doubt about it—that was the boss. Asagi and I looked each other in the eyes. We didn’t need to talk to know what came next.

Suddenly, the boss slammed into the wall across from our corner. Together, we jumped out into the middle of the hallway to strike.

*“Wh-what?!”* Delori sputtered in surprise as we dealt the finishing blow.

## «Combat Results»

**Mai slashed through Delori!**

- **1,000 damage to Delori the Hydro-Fiend!**

**Delori the Hydro-Fiend [HP: 0/10,000] (-1,000)**

As the boss vanished, we heard a metallic tinkle. A key with a boar-shaped

topper lay on the ground at my feet. *Yes! We finally beat it...!* It had to be the key to the Victory Application Point.

“We did it, Mai!”

“We sure did,” I said. My heart was still pounding as I reached down and picked up the key. “Let’s go home, Asagi.”

“Yup. We’ve gotta tell everyone the good news.”

“Yeah!” Somehow, we found the energy to sprint back to the starting area, where the locked door awaited. But before I could turn the key in the lock, Kamisawa’s voice echoed through the room.

*“Well done. I must admit, I thought you’d have a harder time with that boss than you did. But I suppose congratulations are in order all the same,”* he said. He was obviously enjoying himself, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“Come on, Mai. Let’s go.”

“You said it.” If Kamisawa was hoping for a response, he wouldn’t get it. I opened the door without another word.

There was nothing behind the locked door, except for a crystal we recognized as the Victory Application Point. Without further ado, we touched it to apply for victory and finish the event.

## «Victory Report»

† Player 1 †



**Mai Yashiro**

**HP: 5,000/5,000**

**<Items Held> 3/10**

- Cold Field chip x2**
- Sword**

**† Player 2 †**

**Taisuke Asagi**

**HP: 5,000/5,000**

**<Items Held> 3/10**

- **Cold Field chip x2**
- **Hammer**

**[Support Players]**

**Kenichi Tanaka**

**Shinji Sugiura**

# Taichi Tango

**Tsubasa Kaitsu**

**✕ This certifies that these six players have completed the Gold Event.**

## **Victory Bonus**

**(To be delivered later]**

**※Once you return to your world, Nightmare will enter a maintenance period.**

## *Reunited with Good Friends*

*Nnngh... Where am I?*

My eyes blinked open, and the familiar Nightmare Conquerors' clubroom came into view. I wasn't alone. Starting with Sugiura, the others woke up one by one. Once the other club members saw we were all awake, they erupted into a cheer.

"Awright, not bad! I coulda done better, but not bad," Takojima said through a mouthful of *takoyaki* as he slapped me on the shoulder.

Then it was Akaishi's turn to shoot his mouth off.

"I'd say you could have wrapped things up twice as quickly if only you'd brought us along."

"...Those two talk big, but deep down, they're glad you were here to handle the event for them," Hirata whispered into my ear. "Not only glad, really... Grateful."

*Pffft! Would it kill them to pay me a straightforward compliment for once?* I thought.

"That's our Rito," said Yoichi, who'd overheard Hirata. "Don't go reading my mind, you got that?"

"...Why not? Are you afraid I'll find out that you're relieved to see your brother home safe? Is that why, Yoichi...?"

"I—I said don't!" Yoichi snapped, but he couldn't keep a wry smile off his face. Hirata had read him like an open book. Hirata snickered. Taichi made a big show



of looking embarrassed by the whole scene, but it was plain to see he was really as unfazed as always.

“Congratulations, Mai!”

“That was seriously amazing!” Naomi and Youko shouted as they ran up to our table and threw their arms around me.

“Thanks, you two!”

“So? How was it? C’mon, make with the details!” Youko said.

“Please do,” Naomi added. “I’d love to hear all about it. I set out some sweets right over there, so help yourself. We can talk while we eat.”

I looked around at the freshly awakened faces of my fellow party members.

“Go on, go,” Sugiura barked.

“He’s right, Mai,” Asagi said. “After all that hard work you did, you deserve a break. Oh, but when you’re done chatting with them, come back over here, okay?”

“You heard ’im. It’s nothing but a stinky table full of dirty dudes over here without you,” Tanaka said with a guffaw.

“If anyone’s stinking up the place, it’s you, Gramps,” Tsubasa said.

“What was that?!”

“Ha-ha-ha! That’s pretty cold, Tsubasa,” Taichi said.

“So what? This old geezer deserves it for speedrunning a Game Over and making us pay the price. He’s got it coming.” Despite the harsh words, though, Tsubasa had a huge grin on his face. He honestly seemed to be in good spirits. Everyone did.

*This is it, I thought. This is what I wanted to see.*

“Come on, Mai! Snacks await!”

“Right!” I followed Youko and Naomi over to another table, where the usual platters filled with sweets awaited us. But that wasn’t all. This time, there was a tray of *takoyaki*, too.

“Get this—Kaneda made ‘em! Who knew, huh?”

*Not me, that’s for sure!* I had no idea Kaneda could cook.

“I learned from my granddad... We make *takoyaki* together a lot,” Kaneda said.

“Really? Cool!”

Kaneda gave us a sheepish but broad grin.

“I’m gonna go see if Masuda wants some,” Youko said. Before she went, she piled a plate high with sweets and plopped it down at an empty seat for him.

“Um, aren’t those kinda...burnt?” Kaneda stared at Youko’s sweets with worried eyes.

“Oh, don’t worry about Youko. Masuda would never say anything to hurt her,” Naomi said. Then she looked me in the eyes. “Isn’t that right, Mai?”

“Yeah, I’d say so.” Naomi was right; Masuda was always careful with other people’s feelings. Though, I guess he’s the one we should’ve been worried about, since he was about to be served a plate of charred cookies and all...

“Here, Masuda, have a seat!”

“May I? I’d be glad to, if you don’t mind.”

Youko nodded. Her cheeks were already red.

“Oh,” Masuda said as he eyed the plateful of sweets in front of him. “Did you make these, Youko?”

“Y-yeah... But, um, they’re probably not very good, sooo...you don’t have to eat them if you don’t want to!” Youko had obviously worked super hard to bake them for Masuda, and now there she was, so nervous that she was nearly begging him not to dig in.

Without hesitating for a second, Masuda popped a few cookies into his mouth.

“Um... How are they?”

“Exactly as crunchy as I like them,” he said with that gentle smile of his. “And there’s a real homemade warmth to them. Comfort food, you know? You can’t

buy that flavor at a store.”

*You’re a pro, Masuda!* I thought. *Talk about a perfect compliment!* Naomi, Kaneda, and I were struck speechless for a moment. Youko, meanwhile, was overjoyed. In that instant, I could almost taste her determination to become the best baker she could be. *I sure hope that determination pays off in the kitchen.*

I chatted with Naomi, Youko, and the rest for a while and told them all about the Gold Event...until Naomi interrupted:

“I think you should be getting back to your table soon, Mai. Look—Asagi and Sugiura keep glancing over at us.”

*Huh?* Asagi, I understood, but Sugiura, too? I turned my head at the perfect moment to catch both of them looking at me. We made eye contact.

I wanted to discuss the day’s battle with Asagi and the others, myself, so I excused myself. “See ya, Naomi. I’m gonna head over there for a bit.”

“Sure thing. We can always talk more tomorrow.”

I went back to my original seat, where Asagi, the rest of our event team, and I snacked and talked about this and that. While we were at it, we pulled out our Nightmare consoles and bought an in-game feast for Amelie, Tow’el, and Zalbatoth. That’s right—even Sugiura sent Tow’el some sweets, no strings attached, for once.

There was nowhere I’d rather be after an event than a room full of friends. I was as sure of it then as I ever was.

I had to keep fighting for their sake. To keep them safe, I had to see Nightmare all the way through to the end. No matter what it had in store for us next. As the long day came to an end, I swore to myself that I’d never give up.

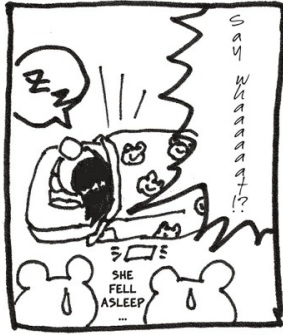
*“Online! Vol. 5: Mr. Three-Sevens and Delori the Hydro-Fiend”*

*End*

*Turn the page for a fun message from the author!*

SHE LEFT A NOTE!

Dear Kero and Pyon,  
I couldn't find my  
wallet, so I decided to  
take a nap instead.  
Take care of the  
rest, okay?



SAY WHAAAAAT!?

SHE  
FELL  
ASLEEP  
...

Aw,  
chin up,  
Pyon!  
Ribbit!

RIBBIT!

MUWU!

Pyooon!  
Now we've  
gotta share  
these letters  
from our  
readers on  
our own, Kero!



For  
starters, we  
got a whole  
bunch of  
messages  
saying they're  
looking  
forward to  
Volume 5!  
Thanks a  
bunch,  
ribbit!



Let's  
see  
here  
...



Thanks for reading Volume 5 of *Online*!  
We've loved reading all the  
kind messages you've sent, too!



KERO

AUTHOR

PYON

...and hitch  
a ride,  
ribbit! ♥

We'll just  
hop in her  
bag...

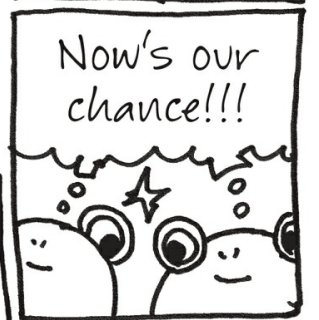


HOP

r'know, I  
think I'll  
head to  
FrogMart  
myself.  
Where'd I  
put my bag...?



Now's our  
chance!!!



HUHL?  
WHAT'S  
THE  
HOLDUP?





BONUS: HERE'S THE FROGMART FLYER YOU READ ABOUT IN THE BOOK!

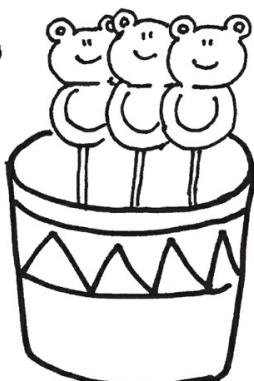
COME TO THE SECOND FLOOR OF FROGMART FOR ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT SWEET DUMPLINGS

WE'VE GOT FROGGY BUNS TOO!



### DUMPLING MENU

- SWEET SOY SAUCE
- SWEET BEAN PASTE
- THREE-FLAVOR DUMPLINGS
- MUGWORT MOCHI
- FROGGY DUMPLINGS
- FROGGY BUN



FROGGY DUMPLINGS-ON-A-STICK



What else do they say...?

A lot of you said you read *Online!* during reading time at school! Cool!



And one of you told us you got into the series after your friend loaned you a book, ribbit!

However you found *Online!*, we're so glad you're here! Please keep reading, ribbit!



**Thank you for buying this ebook, published by JY.**

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

**Sign Up**

Or visit us at [www.yenpress.com/booklink](http://www.yenpress.com/booklink)