
ONLINE!
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Lady Hex and the
Raid Team Impostors
Midori Amagaeru
Illustration by
Shinichirou Otsuka

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JY
New York

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Midori Amagaeru
Translation by John Thomas Neal
Cover art by Shinichirou Otsuka

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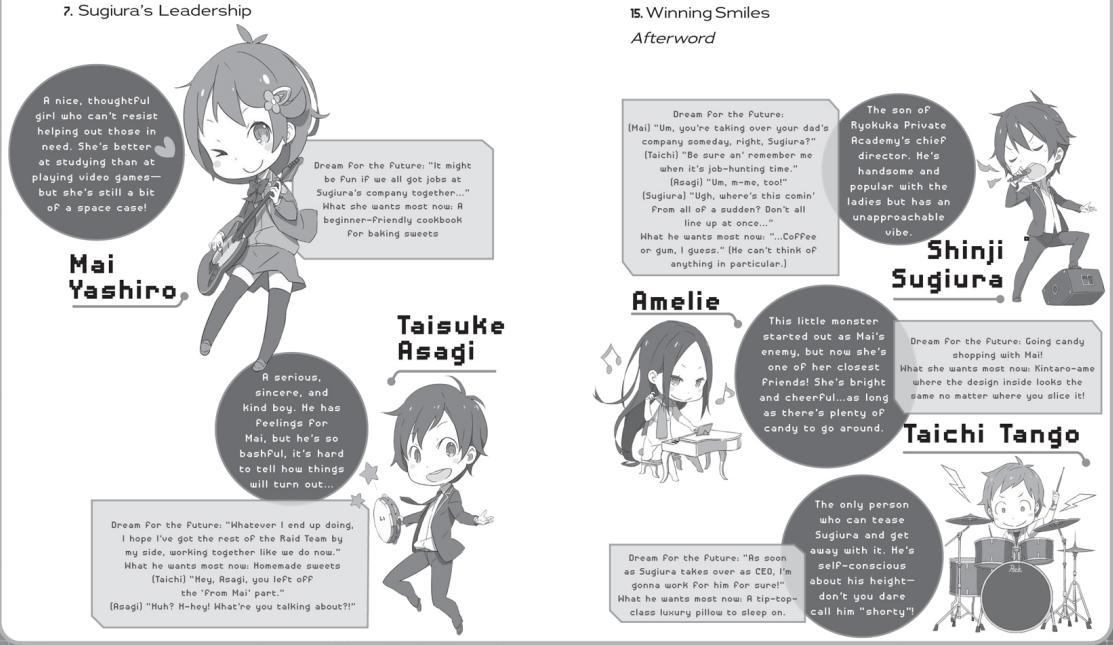
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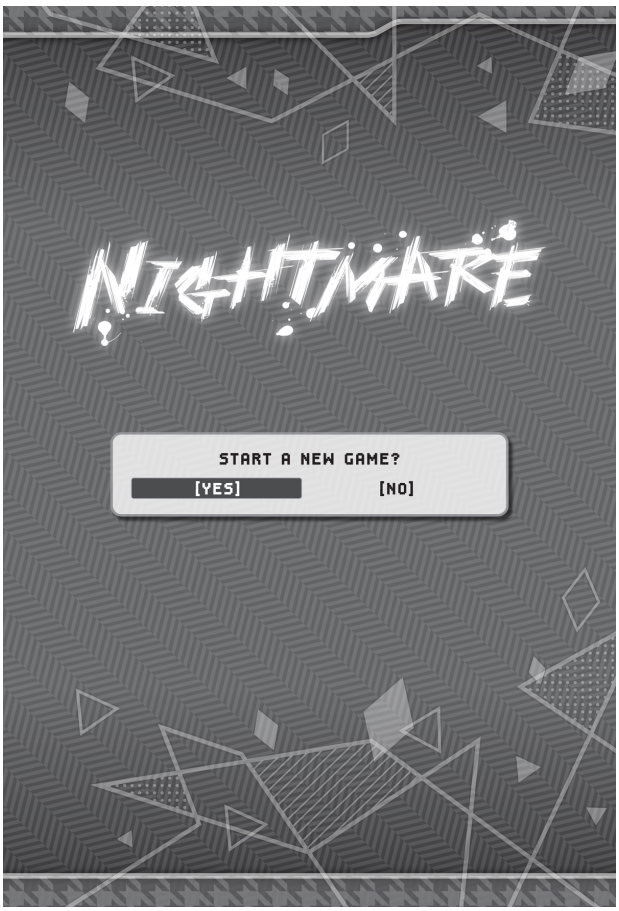
Yen Newsletter

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Afterword





Lose at the game and pay the price. If someone who'd lost a Respawn Penalty stood before you, what would you do? If you reach out to help, then maybe your kindness will come back to you when you need it most. That's as true inside the game as it is outside...

1

The Story So Far

I'm Mai Yashiro, a completely ordinary second-year high school student at Ryokuka Private Academy…or at least, I'm supposed to be. My life got flipped upside down when a wicked game called Nightmare found its way into my bag.

Once someone starts playing Nightmare, they have to earn 100 in-game points called CP every single day, or else their in-game avatar (which looks exactly like them, by the way) dies. And when our avatars die, we are penalized by losing control of a real-life body part to an actual demon before we can respawn. Whatever body part it is, we can't use it anymore. It could be our arms, mouth, or ears… And if we keep losing, one day our *hearts* might just stop.

That's the kind of terror Nightmare players like me live with every day.

On the bright side, I'm not alone. Ever since I joined the Nightmare Conquerors' Club at my school, I've made plenty of friends who support me. Heck, the last in-game event—the Gold Event, if you're wondering—required six of us to play together!

That didn't make it any easier, though. Kamisawa, the mysterious foe who taunts me at the start of every event, warned us, and he sure wasn't joking. The shapeshifting boss was a real handful, and even Tanaka (the top-ranked player in the game) and Tsubasa (a Nightmare whiz kid, and he's only in junior high) got Game Overs in the process.

If the Gold Event was that tough, I wonder what's waiting for us in the next one.

I'm not going to lie. I'm a little worried…but I've got tons of super-reliable friends who've got my back! It'll all work out okay, right?

2

Breakfast for Four

It was the morning after we beat the Gold Event.

I woke with a big *yaaawn—Boy, I sure got a good night's sleep!* I thought as I hopped out from under the covers and stretched toward my dorm ceiling.

Every event in Nightmare ended in a face-off against a fearsome boss, which usually made me such a bundle of nerves that I could barely get a wink of sleep afterwards. But it seemed like that was changing: There I was, totally well-rested. Maybe knowing that I had a group of reliable allies in my corner helped put me at ease.

I found myself growing more and more certain that together, we could beat Nightmare for sure. Though, to be honest, we still didn't even know *how* to completely beat the game yet. Which meant our only choice for the time being was to keep playing, day in and day out…

Okay, I thought, *time to start another day!* I mean, what's the point in looking back toward the past the instant I wake up? Waste of a morning, if you ask me. I slapped my cheeks to knock myself awake.

I lived in the dorms at Ryokuka Private Academy—specifically, a special section of dorms that was set aside for students who'd gotten wrapped up in playing Nightmare. I didn't head to the main school building for my daily lessons—actually, I barely ever set foot outside of the dorm building at all.

Why, you ask? Well, the dorm building had more than just living spaces. It also had classrooms where we took our lessons, and even our own cafeteria. The chief director of Ryokuka set all of this up so that the Nightmare players in the school could have the closest thing possible to a normal student life while also focusing on the game. Back when I was a normal, non-Nightmare-playing Ryokuka student, I never would have dreamed of spending all day, every day in the dorms. (Granted, I never would have dreamed of spending all day playing *any* video game, let alone this one…)

And the third floor of our dreamlike dorm was home to the Nightmare Conquerors' Club.

When I first started playing Nightmare, my only goal was to survive until the game finally ended. That all changed the moment Asagi and I joined the Black Event—the first of many dangerous in-game events. Now, along with the Conquerors' Club, I had a new goal: Beat the game.

We were certain that if we kept competing and winning in the special events, then someday, we'd figure out how to end the Nightmare for good. The whole club believed it. Who wants to constantly live in fear of some weird video game killing them, anyway? Not me, that's for sure. I was determined to beat the game and win my old life back.

Knock, knock, knock!!

Huh?!

A sudden series of sharp knocks on my door shook me out of my thoughts.

"Hey! I take it by your lack of response that you overslept. Again. Y'know, you may seem like you've got it together, but you're actually pretty sloppy." The voice on the other side of the door was Sugiura's.

Aw, man! I'd gotten so lost in thought, I'd spaced out! Was it time for homeroom already?!

Knock, knock, knock!!

Sugiura's knocking grew even more ferocious.

"Are you even awake, Mai?!"

"C-c'mon, Sugiura. Mai's got to be worn out. Think of how she feels with you banging on her door like that!"

Oh… Asagi's with him, too, I thought when I heard the second voice. *Oof, now this is really embarrassing.* I tried to shove all the awkwardness and shame deep down inside me as I called out toward the door.

"S-sorry! I'll be out in a sec…"

As soon as I said that, I realized I was still in my pajamas.

Eep! I've gotta get dressed ASAP!

"No need to rush, Mai!" Asagi replied. "There's still plenty of time."

"Huh? There is?"

"Yeah. We were talking, and we figured it might be nice for the Raid Team to get together for breakfast every now and then," Asagi said. "I guess we showed up a little too early."

Oh, is that all? I thought. That was a load off my mind. It looked like I wouldn't be late for class after all. I breathed a sigh of relief as I started getting ready for the day.

Hmm? Hang on. Did Asagi say "the Raid Team?" All of us, including the Overlord of Oversleeping himself, Taichi…? I wondered.

"Hey! Wake up! You're literally fallin' asleep standin' up!" I heard Sugiura shout. Then I heard the telltale thump of something (or someone) getting kicked.

"…Wha—?! O-ow! That hurts, man!"

I'd recognize that voice anywhere! So Taichi was with them, too.

The four of us made up the Nightmare Conquerors' Club's Raid Team: Sugiura, our leader, who was super scary; Asagi, who was super-sweet to everyone he knew; Taichi, who was super sleepy and could (and did) doze off anywhere; and yours truly.

It had to have been difficult to get Taichi to wake up early for once. Though now that I think of it, it probably took some real skill for him to literally sleep standing up.

"Sorry! Thanks for waiting," I said as I stepped out into the hallway, fully dressed in my school uniform. Asagi greeted me with a smile.

"Good morning, Mai!"

"*Hwaaaah*," Taichi yawned. Naturally, he still looked drowsy. "I mean, mornin'."

"Good morning, everyone," I said, even though "everyone" was actually one person short. Sugiura was already walking briskly down the hall.

"C'mon, sleepyheads! Unless ya want me to leave ya behind!"

"""R-right!""" we all answered as we rushed after Sugiura.

As we made our way down the dorm halls, Taichi leaned over and whispered in my ear.

"Sugiura's the one who cooked up this whole 'group breakfast' idea, just so ya know," he said. "I guess after that battle yesterday, he wants to check in and see how everybody's doing, or something."

"That makes sense."

It really did. Sugiura cared deeply about everyone in the Conquerors' Club—not that anyone would know it from how harsh he could be! Still, it made me happy to hear Taichi say so. I crossed my fingers, hoping for a nice, enjoyable breakfast.

"I said, let's go! You're laggin' behind! You wanna be late, is that it?!"

"""We're coming!""" the three of us called out in unison.

Sheesh! How impatient could Sugiura get?! Taichi, Asagi, and I shared looks and grins at this classic Sugiura behavior as we hustled down the hallway.

So there we were, at our first Raid Team breakfast meeting. What was on the menu, you ask? Well…

Taichi and I had toast and fried eggs. Meanwhile, Asagi and Sugiura both ordered the grilled salmon breakfast platter. (Sugiura was the only one who chose to start the day with an extra-large portion of rice, though.)

"Um, Sugiura? Could I ask you a favor…?" Asagi spoke up once he'd eaten about half of his breakfast.

"Whaddaya want, Asagi?"

"It's just, um… Well, the salmon platter comes with pudding, and…I was wondering…if you were gonna eat yours…"

"Huh?" Sugiura looked puzzled for a moment, but then it dawned on him. Without another word, he reached over and set his pudding cup down in front of Asagi.

"Are you sure?!"

"Yeah. I'm not that into sweet stuff anyway."

"Y-yesss! Oh man, *two* pudding cups for breakfast?! Any day that starts like this has gotta be a good one for sure…"

"Would you relax?" Sugiura snorted as he eyed Asagi, who looked positively delighted. "It's only an extra pudding cup."

Asagi chuckled sheepishly, but mentally, he was off in Pudding Land.

Seeing the two of them at that breakfast table, it was hard to believe they used to not get along at all. Like, it was really bad. Don't get me wrong, Sugiura still did his share of shouting—but the four of us spending time together like this had become completely natural.

Just as Sugiura had planned (or at least, as I assume he'd planned), our breakfast meeting was a ton of fun.

"Awright, c'mon. It's time for homeroom."

"""Yes, sir!"""

3

An Invitation from Tsubasa

Before I knew it, my lessons were over, and the school day was done.

Every time we completed an in-game event, Nightmare went down for maintenance. That meant our after-school time was finally our own—at least until Nightmare started up again. It was a much-needed chance to catch our breath instead of spending every single day worrying about survival.

So, what should I do today? I wondered. But then—

"What're you spacin' out for?"

Oof. I knew that voice, and I did not like where this was heading. I turned to see Tsubasa standing behind me, decked out in his school uniform. He didn't go to Ryokuka, but it seemed like he'd come to hang out with the Nightmare Conquerors' Club now that his own classes were done for the day.

"Oh, hi, Tsubasa. Welcome," I said, pulling my mouth into the broadest, most welcoming smile I could muster.

"Hmph," he scoffed.

Oh, come on! Kinda rude, don't you think?! But that was Tsubasa for you. For a junior high schooler, he sure could be cheeky. Cheeky or not, though, I kept talking to keep things from getting awkward.

"So, how's school going? Having fun?"

"Meh. All my classes are ridiculously easy, so I'm bored outta my skull. Seriously, I can't stop yawning," Tsubasa said as he idly

thumbed through the math textbook I'd left out on the table. "Hmm. This stuff looks like it might give me a challenge."

"Huh?!"

"Lemme borrow this for a sec." With that, Tsubasa copied a page's worth of math problems into his notebook, then started solving each one. I checked over his answers.

Gulp… He got them all right, I thought. *Seriously, is this kid really in junior high?!* I couldn't believe my eyes.

"You don't have anything goin' on right now, right, Yashiro?" Tsubasa asked, looking up from his notebook. "Ah, why do I bother asking? You totally don't."

Okay, now we're past "kinda rude" and into "super rude"! I complained internally. I had to admit, though, he wasn't wrong.

"Who, me? W-well… No, I guess I'm not busy," I said. I tried to compose myself and answer with dignity, but Tsubasa wasn't even looking at me anymore. He was rummaging around in his bag.

After searching for a bit, he pulled out a bundle of tickets.

"What are these for?"

"You remember Takimoto, right?"

I was pretty sure I did, at least. He was one of the members of Tsubasa's usual party in Nightmare, if I recalled correctly. He worked for Sugiura's father's company by day, but played in a band in his downtime.

"What about him?"

"These are tickets to a concert that's happening next week. Takimoto's band is gonna play, so I want you guys to come."

"Whoa! That's cool. Are you sure?"

"Eh, why not? The bigger the crowd, the better."

"Thanks, Tsubasa! I'll get these in Sugiura's hands right away," I said. "I bet he'll be on board with all of us going to the concert."

"Great."

Tickets in hand, I dashed off toward the table where Sugiura was sitting. But as I got close…

"What?! Hey! I said 'no!'"

…I heard just about the angriest, most piercing shout I could imagine. Sugiura was yelling into his cell phone.

Now, Sugiura yelled a lot. But this time, his face was bright red, and there was real rage in his voice. I only knew one person who could make Sugiura that angry. He had to be talking to his father.

Sugiura's dad was the CEO of a company dedicated to beating Nightmare. They printed a magazine called *Nightmare Weekly*, which published strategies and guides for players. Their website always had the most up-to-date maps and information for all the stages in the game, too, which was always a huge help. But the company always came first to Sugiura's dad, and the two of them butted heads about it all the time.

"Well, if you do it, you're doin' it without my say-so!" Sugiura gave one last parting shout and hung up. The very next instant, our eyes met.

"What?" Sugiura spat. "You got a problem, too?"

"No, but… What was that about…?"

"Ugh, my old man got it in his head to make ad posters for *Nightmare Weekly* with you, me, an' Asagi on 'em—and he wants to post 'em all over town."

"P-posters?!"

"That's not the worst of it. They're covered in this corny catchphrase. 'We're the heroes saving this world.' Embarrassing, ain't it?" Sugiura tossed a sample poster onto the table in front of him where it curled into a tube. I unrolled it to reveal drawings that had to be Asagi and me. The 'me' on the poster was winking and blowing a kiss—totally hamming it up.

Oof, I thought. *"Embarrassing" is an understatement. He wants to put these up in public? No way!*

"…Your dad's not gonna go through with this, is he?"

"Putting up normal high schoolers' pictures all over town is askin' for nothin' but trouble," Sugiura said. "But relax. I got this. I'll find some way to stop 'im."

"Um, thanks a lot!" I said with a quick bow. There was one thing I could say for Sugiura: We could always count on him to stand up to his dad for our sake, even if it meant more family fighting.

"…So? If you're over here, you want somethin' from me. What is it?"

"Right. Here," I said as I passed the bundle of concert tickets to Sugiura. I explained that Takimoto and his band would be performing.

"Huh. A show, eh? The venue's not too far from here, either."

"Yeah. What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me. Might be a good way to blow off some steam, too. An' I can dig into the club's funds to pay for everyone to get there."

"Would you do that?!"

"Sure. But we're gonna have to really go all out once Nightmare's up and runnin' again. So get your butt-kickin' boots on," Sugiura said with a quick, sharp smile.

Wait, is he joking? Or is he for real? I wondered. *Nah, if I know Sugiura, he means it.* I'd have to be extra-prepared when Nightmare came back online. But for the time being, I was super stoked to go to the show! I'd never been to a concert before. It was one thing to look forward to during the maintenance period.

4

My First Concert Ever

The next week went by in a flash. The day of Takimoto's concert had arrived. As soon as we finished the day's lessons, we gathered in the club room to wait for Sugiura.

"This should be fun, huh, Mai?" Asagi asked.

"Yeah! I'm really excited. Have you ever been to a concert before, Asagi?"

"Nope. It's my first one, too. Oh! Come to think of it, though, it's been long enough that Nightmare's maintenance period could wrap up at any time. We should at least make sure we're ready for it before we go."

"Good point," I said as I pulled out my Nightmare console.

We'd received a Gold Box as a prize for winning the last event. It wasn't the first one, either. In fact, we had a mysterious box of all sorts of colors for every event we'd completed. I didn't know what to do with them, so they were piling up in my inventory.

There's one thing I was sure of, though: The boxes had something to do with beating Nightmare for good. (If not, then I dunno what else they'd be for!) I still didn't have a clue about anything beyond that…

Oh, hey! I'd better tell Amelie about the show, I thought.

Amelie was the very first monster I'd faced after my Nightmare console appeared in my dorm room. But not long after that, she became my familiar—a monster ally in the game—and now, we get along great. Whenever I feel down, I can always count on Amelie to

cheer me up. She may be digital, but she has my back just like all my other friends.

"Hiya, Mai!" Amelie said cheerfully as she turned from her television to greet me. She waved excitedly.

"How's it going, Amelie?"

"It's going great, Mai! Like always!"

Hmm? Hang on a sec… There's a sheet of paper on the floor by Amelie's feet…, I noticed.

I zoomed in on the paper. Turns out it was a drawing of Zalbatoth and Tow'el. They were labeled ZALLY and TOWY.

Zalbatoth and Tow'el were Taichi and Sugiura's familiars, in that order. It looked like they'd met up with Amelie a few times to hang out, and they'd become friends. Kinda makes you smile, doesn't it?

"Hey, it's go time. Try and keep up."

Oops! Sugiura had arrived. I told Amelie I'd see her soon, closed my Nightmare console, and followed him out of the room—then out of the building entirely.

I saw a bus parked in front of the dorms, apparently there to take us to the concert hall.

Hold up, I thought. *Did Sugiura rent a whole bus for us?* There was no one on board other than Conquerors' Club members.

"Awww, yeeeah! Our own private bus! C'mon, Akaishi, let's claim the roomy seats in the back before anyone else does," I heard Takojima, the former bully, call out in a booming voice.

"But I'd rather sit with Youko…," Akaishi grumbled. He may have been Takojima's partner in mischief, but he had a major crush on Youko. He was clearly looking around for her, hoping to slide into the seat next to hers.

Unfortunately for him, though, Naomi was already sitting next to Youko. In the seats right across the aisle from theirs sat Kaneda and Masuda. Masuda and Youko had the aisle seats, which meant there was nobody between them. Youko looked overjoyed.

"Tch, that thief beat me to the punch again! Ugh, I ought to curse him! I ought to curse him good," Akaishi said with a grumble as he

reluctantly took a seat at the very back of the bus beside Takojima. His muttering and mumbling continued, though we could no longer understand what he was saying.

"Is it just me, or is there someone whispering behind us?" said Yoichi, grimacing uncomfortably from the seat in front of Akaishi and Takojima's bench.

"The strange one in the back, yes… 'Come down with the runs, Masuda… Get carsick, Masuda…' If he's not saying it, he's thinking it… How very spiteful…"

"Meeeow!"

"Sheesh, Rito! Brought your cat along again, didja? You know we're going to a rock concert, right?"

Rito Hirata was sitting next to Yoichi with a basket on his lap. His cat, Mewta, poked its face out of the basket—wherever Hirata went, Mewta went along with him.

"…I'll listen from outside… There's nothing wrong with that, is there…?"

"Ugh. You're way too cat-obsessed, y'know that?"

Yoichi had a point. Hirata always put Mewta's needs ahead of his own. He was a true feline fanatic.

"Hey, Mai, d'you want this?" Asagi said from the seat next to mine. He held out a can of Pudding Pop. It was Asagi's favorite drink in the whole world. It was also pretty much pure pudding smooshed into a can. Believe me, I was skeptical at first, too. But when I gave in and took that first sip, I realized how tasty it was.

"For me? Are you sure?"

"Go ahead! I've got cans for you guys, too, actually," he said, passing Pudding Pops to Taichi and Sugiura with a grin.

"Nice. Thanks, pal."

"This isn't my kinda thing, but…fine," Sugiura said. From the look on his face, I could tell he was struggling to decide whether to take a sip or not.

"It's good, I swear! Please, just give it a try. Imagine it's coffee."

"I—I don't think so."

"Drink! Drink!"

"……"

Oh, Asagi… Is this what you've become? A Pudding Pop salesman? No doubt about it—he loved Pudding Pop just as much as Hirata loved cats.

Anyway, you get the picture. It was a lively bus ride, to say the least. After twenty minutes of swaying and bumping down the road, the bus arrived at its destination without a hitch.

"Whoa! That's one huge building," Asagi said as he looked up at the concert hall. No mistaking where we were—there was even a sign that read: CONCERT. There was awe in his voice.

The building looked a bit like a giant school gymnasium. Tons of people were milling around the entrance, and they looked like the sort of folks you'd expect to see at a live music show.

"Looks like Takimoto's band isn't the only one playing."

"Sure does!"

"Hey, Mai, look over there by the entrance! See that lady in the big frog costume? She's selling froggy ice cream! Cool, huh?"

"Let's get some later!"

"R-right! We'll get some to share. It's a deal!"

"Keep your cool, you two. We're goin' in," Sugiura said, cutting us off. He led the way into the concert hall, and the club filed in behind him. At the ticket counter, we found Tsubasa's Nightmare party—minus Takimoto. Tsubasa himself was there, along with Miyazawa, Naitou, and, of course, Tanaka.

"Well, if it isn't Yashiro."

"Good evening, Tsubasa! Thanks again for the tickets," I said with a smile. I thought I was being friendly, but Tsubasa jerked his head away and wouldn't look me in the eye.

"Forget it. Go take your seats already, why don'tcha? Get a move on, or all the good ones are gonna get taken." Tsubasa was as curt

as ever. Honestly, I was used to it at that point. I was right about to turn to Asagi so we could head in together, when suddenly—

"Oh-ho-ho, you came! You really came! The God of Glasses is among us! Can I get your autograph? You can sign my rice bowl!"

Eep! Tanaka had caught hold of Asagi.

I should explain. Back in Nightmare, Asagi had a spell called Glasses Meteor—and Tanaka took a liking to Asagi the instant he saw him cast it.

Asagi didn't seem to know what to think about being called "The God of Glasses," but his confusion didn't make any difference to Tanaka.

Why is Tanaka so obsessed with glasses, anyway, I wondered. *Hmm… Beats me!* Tanaka was a real weirdo in my book, but like I said before, he also happened to be the top-ranked player in all of Nightmare. Number one. The strongest player out there.

"Geez, Tanaka, come onnn! The show's about to start! Let's get in there before we miss Takimoto's whole set!"

"Yes, indeed. Arisa's right. Let's leave the Glasses God business at that for now, shall we?"

"Oogh. Fiiine. Just one more thing, God of Glasses! Puh-leeease sign this rice bowl!" Tanaka waved his arms wildly in Asagi's direction as Miyazawa and Naitou grabbed him and dragged him toward their seats.

"I've, uh, never signed an autograph before… What'm I supposed to do, exactly?" Asagi stood dumbstruck, staring down at the rice bowl that Tanaka had shoved into his hands.

"Aw, don't sweat it. I'll scribble something for ya. He'll never know the difference," Tsubasa said. He took the bowl from Asagi's hands and quickly ran a permanent marker back and forth all over it. I could tell he'd written actual letters on it, but they were too messy to read.

"What did you write, Tsubasa…?"

"Ha-ha! It says 'stupid geezer' in my sloppiest handwriting. If you tell 'im it's Asagi's autograph, I guarantee he'll fall for it. See ya

later.” Tsubasa shot Asagi and me a nonchalant grin and headed for his own seat. He didn’t seem to notice or care that his prank had left us speechless.

“Man, that Tsubasa sure knows how to handle Tanaka, huh?” Taichi snickered from behind us. “Makes me wanna learn how to tame that wild beast of mine, too. Gotta learn how to not get my hand bit.”

Wait a sec… By “wild beast,” does he mean Sugiura?! Just as I had that thought, my eyes caught Taichi’s. He sneakily pointed a finger at Sugiura, as if to answer the question I hadn’t asked out loud. *Geez, Taichi…*

“What beast? You got a real ferocious pet, or somethin’?” Sugiura said, turning toward Taichi and looking confused.

“Nah, nothin’ like that. Not yet. There’s one I’m thinking about domesticating, though.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sugiura asked, but I don’t think he really wanted to hear the answer. He didn’t press it any further—he just stood there with the same puzzled expression on his face.

Phew. Looks like he didn’t catch on, I thought with relief. I’m all for a bit of friendly teasing, but a chill had run down my spine, and I wasn’t even the one doing the teasing.

And so we excitedly (and a little nervously) made our way into the main concert hall and to our seats. That meant there was no more talking—we didn’t want to bother any of the other concertgoers. We sat quietly and waited for Takimoto to take the stage.

Five bands came up and played their sets one by one. Then it was finally Takimoto and his band’s turn.

Huh? What’s the emcee saying? I wondered.

The name of the band was Chopstick ☆ Rockies.

Huh… That’s kind of…stupid, I decided. More than anything, it sounded like a brand of disposable chopsticks. As a band name, it didn’t make any sense at all. But right as I was about to get totally lost in that thought—

The curtain rose, and the show was on.

The singer for the Chopstick ☆ Rockies was a normal-looking middle-aged man. I mean, the kind of guy you could see anywhere—except for one thing. His clothes were printed all over with labels from disposable chopsticks.

Hmmm… I don't think anybody could call that "cool" with a straight face, I thought.

There were two bassists—one standing on either side of the stage. Takimoto sat at the drum set, behind the singer. The three of them were dressed all in black, with silver jewelry gleaming under the stage lights. The whole group looked totally rock 'n' roll—well, except for the middle-aged guy in the chopstick suit, of course!

The band started playing, and right away, the singer wailed into the mic.

In that same instant, the audience erupted into cheers that filled the concert hall.


YEAH!
YEAH!
YEAH!
YEAH!
chopsticks



Whoooa! I exclaimed internally. First off, yes, he was loud, but it wasn't only his sheer volume. There was something unique about his voice that made it superpowerful. *They didn't grab this chopstick guy off the street, that's for sure!* I guessed. *He could do with a cooler wardrobe, though…*

When all their songs were over, Chopstick Guy walked over to Takimoto's drum set, still clutching the microphone.

"Listen up, everyone. Any Nightmare players in the house? Takimoto here's one, too, and we've got something to tell you." Takimoto bowed, and the crowd fell silent. *"Takimoto got himself a job at the company that publishes* Nightmare Weekly. *So he's gonna be switching gears to focus more on that until the day he is set free from Nightmare."*

A murmur went through the crowd for a moment, and then scattered cheers of "Do your best!" and "Hang in there!" popped up throughout the auditorium.

When I first met Takimoto, I was impressed at how he somehow seemed to balance his musical hobby with Nightmare, but it seems like it wasn't that simple after all. Then again, nothing about Nightmare ever was. We're talking about a game where our lives are literally on the line.

"I'm afraid we're gonna be playing a lot fewer shows for a while. But don't you worry! The Chopstick ☆ Rockies are gonna keep rocking, and we hope you'll keep rockin' with us, too!"

Oh, I think I get it, I thought. *Maybe Tsubasa knew we wouldn't get another chance to see Takimoto play for a while, so he invited us all to come see him while we could.* Tsubasa could be a pain, but he was surprisingly thoughtful when it came to his friends.

"I just wanna make myself useful to all the other Nightmare players out there," Takimoto said into the mic. His voice was full of determination. *"I'm gonna put everything I've got into making strategy guides for you guys."*

Chopstick Guy pulled the mic back and continued. This time, he looked more serious than before.

"I believe in Takimoto. I know Nightmare's never gonna beat him. And I know you know that, too! So come on, make some noise for Takimoto!"

The entire concert hall exploded into applause. And you'd better believe I was right there with them, clapping so hard my hands hurt.

"That was amazing, huh, Mai?"

"Yeah! I'm feeling pretty pumped up now myself," I said as Asagi and I stood up from our seats. The show was over, but none of the excitement had died down.

"Same here. Anyone who can play an instrument like that is awesome in my book."

"I'm not half bad at the recorder, y'know," Taichi piped in.

"Don't be a dummy," sneered Sugiura. "Whoever heard of a cool band with a recorder player?"

"I bet if you got a hundred recorder players together, that'd be cool!"

Hmmm, maybe, I considered. *But at that point, I dunno if you'd call it a band anymore. It sounds like more like an elementary school class on music day.*

On our way out, we stopped by the greenroom where Takimoto and his band were unwinding after their show. Tsubasa and his crew were already there.

"Oh, hey, is that you, Yashiro?"

"Yeah. We wanted to drop by and say thanks for inviting us today." I bowed to Takimoto and the rest of his bandmates. "Thanks sooo much! That was a ton of fun. I feel like I've got a little extra energy now, thanks to you."

"D'you know these kids, Takimoto?"

"Yeah. I met 'em through Nightmare."

"Is that so? Good for you, gettin' more folks on your side!" Chopstick Guy said with a broad grin.

"Hey, Chopstick Guy! Gimme your autograph!" Takojima shouted, without so much as a "hello" or "thank you" or "great show" to start off with. I guessed he'd followed us. He whipped out a small plastic writing pad and thrust it toward the band leader.

Seriously?! You're calling him "Chopstick Guy"?! Okay, sure, I'd been calling him that, too—but only in my head! It's super rude to call him that to his face!

But if Chopstick Guy minded, he didn't show it. He signed Takojima's plastic writing pad right away. He even threw in an odd sketch of a pair of chopsticks next to his name.

Now that Takojima had opened the floodgates, other members of the Conquerors' Club held out their own plastic writing pads, notebooks, or whatever else they had on hand to get autographs of their own.

"Must be nice… I'm about the same age as him, and I'm standing right here, but does anyone want *my* autograph? Nooo…"

"I—I feel you."

Tanaka and Naitou stared at Chopstick Guy. Their faces showed a mix of jealousy and disgust.

"Are you guys dumb or what?" Tsubasa said. "Lemme break it to you, Gramps and Naitou. He's in a band. You're a couple of useless old weirdoes."

"Oof…"

"I am *not* a weirdo!"

Uhh, I dunno, you're both plenty weird, if you ask me…, I thought. Then again, I had to admit Tanaka kind of had a point. Being the number one player in all of Nightmare was nothing to sneeze at.

"Ah!" Miyazawa—the only woman in Tsubasa's Nightmare party (not to mention the most mature, grown-up person of the bunch)—suddenly cried out. I looked over to see her staring straight at the open Nightmare console on her arm.

I don't like where this is going, I worried.

"What's up, Arisa?"

"Th-the maintenance period is over…"

"Oh, is that all?" Tsubasa didn't look the least bit flustered. Actually, he smirked. If anything, he seemed to be looking forward to it.

"Um, Sugiura? It sounds like Nightmare's back online," I said.

Sugiura clicked his tongue and glanced up at the clock on the greenroom wall. "Eight PM, huh? We'll have time to play after we get back to the dorms. Tachi, gather everyone hangin' around outside. It's time to go. I'll tell the bus to pull up to the main entrance."

"I'm on it!" Taichi took off running.

"Someone's in a hurry," Takimoto said.

"This is no time to be laid back, Takimoto," Miyazawa said, eyes locked on her cell phone. "The company just called us in, too." She turned her phone around so we could see the text she'd received:

The maintenance period is over. All employees report to the office immediately. —Sugiura

From the looks of it, Sugiura's dad had sent the same message to everyone in the company. *Like father, like son,* I thought. There wasn't a single wasted word; he got straight to the point and typed the bare minimum needed to communicate.

"Well, that's that," Tanaka said. "Let's get back to work, Naitou."

"Roger that!"

"What're you going to do, Tsubasa?" Miyazawa said with a worried look.

Oh, right—Tsubasa's not a grown-up, let alone an employee. Even if he left with Miyazawa and the rest and headed for Sugiura's dad's company, they wouldn't let him into the office, I assumed.

"Hmm… Good question," he said. Then he pulled out his own cell phone and made a call. "Hi. I'm gonna be spending the night you-

know-where tonight. Yeah. Exactly. I'll head straight to school from there."

I could tell Tsubasa was calling home…but where was "you-know-where?" He hung up the phone and started walking. *Where could he be headed?* I wondered…

…but I didn't have to wonder for long. I watched as he boarded the bus bound for the Ryokuka dorms.

"Huh. Looks like Tsubasa's planning on crashing at you guys' place tonight," Miyazawa said with a smirk.

Wait, what?! I exclaimed to myself.

"But he doesn't have a room there or anything…"

"Meh, there's definitely an empty room for him to use. Still, I'm surprised his folks signed off on that. You'd think they'd need more convincing to let a junior high schooler stay out overnight."

"Aw, he prolly told 'em he's staying with me," Tanaka said.

Again: Wait, what?! It wasn't only Tsubasa—even his parents seemed to trust Tanaka. *Maybe he's like family to them, or something…,* I wondered. As weird as Tanaka was, I figured there was probably a proper, mature adult somewhere deep down inside him. There had to be, right…?

"But…doesn't that mean he lied to them? Is that okay?"

"Hmmm." Tanaka thought for a moment. "I could go with 'im. Then it wouldn't be a lie. No problem! Or at least, I'm pretty sure it'd be no problem…"

"Then come," Sugiura replied right away, as if it was obvious. "You can keep 'im from givin' us any headaches. I'll tell my old man you won't be comin' in."

"You mean it?!" Tanaka looked delighted. He grabbed Sugiura's hands and squeezed.

"S-sure…," Sugiura said, but his face looked anything but sure. I had to hand it to Tanaka, though—it took some talent to make Sugiura more disturbed than angry. He shook off Tanaka's hands hard and turned to shout at the rest of us. "Enough messin' around. Get on the bus, pronto. It can't leave without us."

Augh! He's right! We rushed to the bus and climbed in. *Aw, man! We didn't have time to get that froggy ice cream,* I realized. But just as I felt the disappointment start to set in—

"Here you go, Mai!" Asagi said. He was the last to board the bus, and he was holding a cup of ice cream shaped like a frog. He passed it to me.

"Huh?! A-Asagi, when did you get this…?"

"Eh-heh-heh… I promised, didn't I? Besides, I wanted to see you smile…so I ran off to buy it on my way to the bus." He plopped down into the seat next to me, his face bright red.

"Well, you'd better believe I'm smiling! Thanks sooo much, Asagi!" I couldn't wait another moment. I had to take that first bite. I swear it was the most delicious ice cream I'd ever tasted.

5

Lady Hex vs. Tsubasa

None of us managed to settle down during the bus ride, and tension still hung in the air as we returned to the club room. Since Nightmare's Auto-Death System was back in effect, we split into teams and began battling in the game to get it taken care of for the day. I had to earn my 100 CP fast, like everyone else.

Unless Nightmare was undergoing maintenance, players had to earn 100 CP every day, or else—which meant we couldn't go a single day without playing. If we didn't, then our avatars (tiny versions of us) were dead meat. And every time our avatar died, we lost the use of one of our own real-life body parts, bit by bit. Our hearts would be the last to go.

Nightmare was a truly terrifying game.

"Awright, we're gonna hit up this stage. Come with me," Sugiura said. He'd picked a stage called the Moldering Manor, which was packed with enemies with high attack stats.

"O-okay. Be right there."

"Picked a pretty tough stage, didn't you?" Taichi asked.

"Yeah. Leave the easy stuff for the rest of the club," Sugiura said. It was the right thing to say. As the Raid Team, the four of us were the most elite players in the club.

"Be careful, Mai. But, um, no matter what happens, r-remember I've got your back!"

"Thanks, Asagi!"

"Hey! Earth to Asagi! If you've got the time to stand around blushin' like that, you've got time to get your butt in gear and find the stage!" Sugiura had spoken. We logged into Nightmare and sent our avatars to the Moldering Manor. We were practically the only players in the area. It figured; most other players would be out earning their CP in easier stages.

"Awright, there. We all made our quotas," Sugiura announced.

We'd managed to defeat three ghosts that looked something like giant ogres, earning 300 CP and 8,000 experience points. Like Sugiura said, that was enough to free ourselves from the Auto-Death System for the day.

"I'm loggin' out. There's somethin' I gotta take care of," Sugiura said. "Remember, we're back to club business as usual startin' tomorrow. Taichi, go around an' make sure everyone else dealt with the Auto-Death System, too."

"You got it," Taichi said. Sugiura briskly trotted out of the club room.

"Sugiura always looks extra-busy right after maintenance ends, huh?" Asagi said.

"Sure does."

If I had to guess, I'd say Sugiura was on his way to swap information with his dad's company. The two of them fought a lot, but there was no doubt about it: If we were serious about beating Nightmare, we needed the company's intel. And I'm sure Sugiura's dad valued the information that Sugiura could give him, too. *If only they had an opportunity to put their differences aside and get along better, that'd be for the best…for them, and for the rest of us…*

"Hmmm… So, what should we do now, Mai?"

"Good question." I looked around the club room, and—*Wait, what's this?* I noticed Tsubasa sitting at a table in a far corner with his back to us. *Oh, right! Tsubasa doesn't have a squad to sit with in*

the Conquerors' Club. Still, something was odd. I got the feeling he hadn't budged in quite a while…

"What's wrong, Mai?" Asagi asked.

"Nothing… Well, it's probably nothing. Tsubasa isn't moving at all. I think he might be in a Battle of Wits…"

"What?!" Asagi blurted. In a panic, he clicked through menu after menu on his Nightmare console until he pulled up Tsubasa's status screen. "You're right! He's facing off with an enemy called Lady Hex."

"He's counting on a Battle of Wits to make his CP quota? That's way too dangerous."

"Right… I mean, sometimes there's no way to tell how long one of those battles'll drag on. It's really, really risky when the clock's ticking." Knowing Asagi shared my concerns only made me worry more. I knew Tsubasa would only get mad at us for butting in, but still… We couldn't sit back and leave him to fend for himself!

"…What do you say we go spectate, Asagi?"

"Good thinking, Mai."

We nodded to each other, then sent our requests to watch Tsubasa's Battle of Wits. Admittedly, we had no way of knowing whether he would accept our requests or not, but we had to take the chance. Luckily, he accepted right away, and Asagi and I headed into the arena.

There, we found Tsubasa sitting in a chair. In another chair across from him, with her face downcast, sat the ghost of a woman in a white robe. She also wore a headband with a lit candle tucked into it at either side of her head.

Now, I've seen my share of creepy stuff, but she took the creepy cake. Everything about her said "ghost." I was only there as an observer, and my legs were still trembling a bit. *Tsubasa's got a lot of guts to pick a fight with a monster like that all by himself,* I thought.

"You guys thought you'd drop in to watch, huh? Suit yourselves. Just stay outta it, okay?"

Is that Tsubasa's idea of a greeting?

I was starting to regret worrying so much about him.

He had three lives, and his opponent was down to two. Battles of Wits didn't use the same hit points as normal combat. Instead, players and their foes had life points. They started a Battle of Wits with three of them, and couldn't get any more. In other words, Tsubasa hadn't been hit by any attacks before we arrived. He was in the lead. But still…

"Be careful, Tsubasa!"

"Sheesh, you're a pest. It's only a Battle of Wits. Nothing to freak out about."

A p-pest? Me? That was shocking enough on its own, but "only a Battle of Wits?" "Nothing to freak out about?" I couldn't believe it. Battles of Wits could be really, really dangerous! Tsubasa was being super reckless.

"Come on, Tsubasa, don't be that way," Asagi said. "We dropped in to make sure you're okay, that's all."

"Urgh. There he is, pest number two… Listen, I'm kinda in the middle of a fight, here. If you're gonna hang around, could you at least try to keep it down?"

"F-fine… I'm sorry, Tsubasa." *Ooooooof.* For some reason, I felt the need to be extra apologetic, even though he was way younger than me.

"Phew… That's a relief," Asagi said.

"Huh? What is?" I thought back through the little spat we'd had with Tsubasa, but I couldn't think of anything that struck me as particularly comforting. Then Asagi filled me in.

"Oh, well… Tsubasa thinks I'm a pest, too. You're not the only pest, Mai. So chin up! I bet I'm a bigger pest than you!"

Whaaat?! Did Asagi really cook that up to make me feel better because he thought Tsubasa's snide remarks got me down? To be honest, I was totally used to hearing that sort of thing from Tsubasa at that point…but looking into Asagi's eyes and seeing in them the security and satisfaction he felt, I couldn't bring myself to say so. It was funny how Asagi always managed to find the strangest ways to

let his considerate nature shine through. Besides, even if I didn't need to be comforted, I was still super happy that he tried. I wondered if Asagi would keep looking out for me, first and foremost, no matter what happened.

"It looks like it's Tsubasa's turn to attack now," he said. At some point while I was lost in thought, he'd shifted his attention. Now, he was entirely engrossed in watching the battle. Flustered, I looked away from him to watch, too. Like Asagi said, it was Tsubasa's turn to go on the offensive.

In Battles of Wits, players and monsters alternated between attacking and defending every turn. Since it was Tsubasa's turn to attack, it was Lady Hex's turn to defend.

Attackers had five options: High Attack, Low Attack, Talk, Charge, and Critical Attack. A Critical Attack could wipe out an opponent's lives in one strike, but they couldn't choose it right from the beginning. Players had a Critical Gauge that they had to fill by Charging three times first.

Defenders also had five options: Jump, Crouch, Charge, Counter, and Critical Defense. You could probably guess how most of those work. A Critical Defense was the only thing that could protect players from the Critical Attack I mentioned before. And if their Critical Attack got blocked by a Critical Defense, they'd be left with a totally empty gauge. They had to charge it back up from the beginning. Timing Critical Attacks just right took a lot of strategizing.

Okay, I know I got a little ahead of myself there. Let me cap this off by going over the very basics of a Battle of Wits. A Crouch kept defenders safe from High Attacks. A Jump kept them safe from Low Attacks. But if your foe picked High Attack and you picked Jump, or they tried a Low Attack and you went with a Crouch, you got hit. It all makes sense when you picture it, right? If a ball comes sailing through the air at you, and you jump, it's still going to hit you. That's basically what Battles of Wits were like.

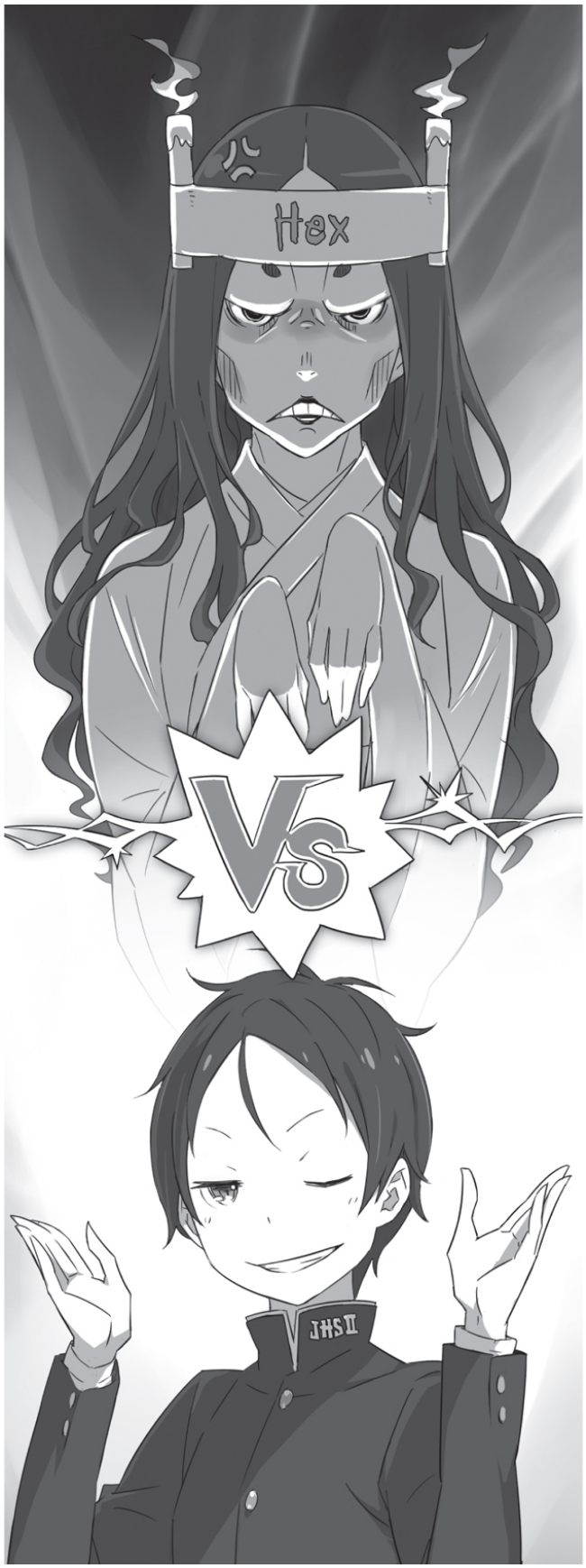
Unlike normal battles, player and monster levels didn't make a difference in Battles of Wits. A fresh newbie could win, and a high-

level veteran could lose.

"Look, lady. It's no fun for me if I beat you too quickly. So think hard for me, will ya?"

Ah-ha. I could tell Tsubasa was taunting the monster across from him.

"What's that you're saying? Tee-hee-hee… Trying to make my turn take longer so you'll have more time to think for yourself, are you? Oh, you're a sly one, hee-hee-hee… Ah, or perhaps you're hoping to steal a glance at my choice before you make your own. Is that it?"


Hex
VS
JHS II



"Awful chatty for a ghost, aren'tcha? I gotta tell ya, it's kinda silly. I mean, you're not scary at all," Tsubasa shot back with another taunt. The ghost's comments seemed to pass right through him like, well, a ghost through a wall.

Oh, right, I should mention that during a Battle of Wits, the two sides could talk freely with each other. That provided more room for strategy and trickery that could easily change the outcome.

It was important for players to stay calm throughout the fight so their foe couldn't throw them off with their comments. But I was pretty sure Tsubasa didn't have any trouble with that.

"Hee-hee-hee… Tee-hee-hee…," Lady Hex said with a snicker, but she was clearly angry. I could even see her hair standing on end.

"What d'you think Tsubasa's trying to do by making her extra upset?" Asagi asked. "I don't get it at all."

"He's probably trying to get her too focused on her anger so she's more likely to mess up," I said.

"Huh? You think so?"

"Yeah. That's what I would do, if I were him." After all, anger has a way of distracting someone from their surroundings. People tend to be less cautious, careful, and observant when they're upset. When they're angry or afraid, it's easier for their opponent to control the pace of the game. In my experience, it was fair to say that Battles of Wits tended to play out that way.

I heard Tsubasa's fingers tapping on his console.

"All right, I made my choice. Aren'tcha gonna hurry up and make yours?"

"…Hee-hee-hee…," the monster said with a snicker as she selected an action.

Hang on a sec, I thought. Something about the way Lady Hex had entered her choice caught my eye. *With hand movements like those, anyone could tell what she picked… She's easy to read…* As my thoughts trailed off, Tsubasa spoke up.

"Hmm. Counter, huh? Okay, then I guess I'll pick Charge." He pressed the button with an audible *click.*

"What?! But you already made your choice…"

"Huh? Oh, you believed me? Man, you really are a trash mob," Tsubasa said. "I'm officially tired of playing with you. I'm gonna take you out and get this over with."

"Kyeee! You lying little brat! You just said it'd be no fun for this battle to end quickly."

"I know, but…you're weak. A Battle of *Wits* is boring when your opponent doesn't have any."

"……" Lady Hex silently glared at Tsubasa with eyes full of rage.

Yikes, I thought. *That's one intimidating stare.*

All banter aside, the turn ended with Tsubasa's Critical Gauge maxed out at three charges. I was impressed that he'd managed to Charge twice already before Asagi and I arrived—without losing a single life in the process. That was really something!

Suddenly, I got a message from Tsubasa. *Let's see what this is about…*

[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
Tell you what, Mai. From here on, I'll pick whatever actions you tell me to pick. What do you think this Lady Hex is gonna do next?

END

What…? I mean, whaaat?! I exclaimed internally. I looked up from the message on my screen to see Tsubasa sitting in his seat, looking straight ahead at the monster with a mysterious, triumphant-looking grin. Then another message came in.

[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
C'mon, Mai. I'm waiting.
The battle won't continue until we pick something, but still.

END

"Sh-sheesh, that Tsubasa…" No doubt about it, he was testing me to see how I fought. What a pain, huh?

6

Scoping Mai's Skills in a Battle of Wits

"What's up, Mai?" Asagi asked. He must have noticed my face going pale.

"Look at this," I said, showing him Tsubasa's messages.

"Hmm. I wonder what that's all about… Wait! You don't think Tsubasa sees you as some kinda rival, do you?"

"Rival…? I think it's more like he wants to scope out my skills. *Haaah…* I can't believe I'm getting this kind of treatment from a junior high schooler."

"So what're you gonna do, Mai?"

"…I've got to play along for now. If we don't get this fight over with quickly, Tsubasa's not gonna shut off his Auto-Death System in time."

"Ah, good point."

Seriously, what was Tsubasa thinking, acting like he had all the time in the world? I wasn't too thrilled about having his life thrust into my hands, either… *C'mon, me! There'll be time to whine later! I've gotta get this done!* I nodded in determination and turned to face Lady Hex—Tsubasa's opponent, and now mine.

It was Tsubasa's turn to defend. He still had three lives, and Lady Hex was down to two. It looked like the ghostly woman had already chosen her attack…and without much fretting over it, either. On top of that, her Critical Gauge was already at two. I was pretty sure she'd chosen Charge again to fill it all the way.

As for Tsubasa, his Critical Gauge was already full, so picking Charge wouldn't do anything for him. It didn't make a difference what he chose for the turn.

I sent him a message telling him as much: **I bet she's going to Charge. If she does, none of your options will do anything, so pick whichever you want**.

[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
Hmph. Not bad. That's exactly what I was thinking.
You might be the sharpest one in your Conquerors' Club after all.
If you win this for me, I'll give you something good. What d'you say? Worth giving it your best shot, don'tcha think?
END

Oof. Something about that message ticked me off. But I'll admit I was curious about the "something good." I didn't like taking Tsubasa's lip, but I did wonder what it was.

Tsubasa made his choice and looked up at the screen between him and Lady Hex. Sure enough, she'd chosen Charge. So had Tsubasa.

On the screen, a red aura surrounded the cartoony avatar that represented Lady Hex to show that she was building up energy. Both she and Tsubasa were ready to use their Critical Attacks.

Meanwhile, since Tsubasa's Critical Gauge was already full, his attempt to Charge didn't do anything. A puff of smoke went up from his avatar on the screen to make it clear that his action had fizzled.

"Hee-hee… Ah-ha-ha-ha! What are you, a fool?" Lady Hex cackled as she watched Tsubasa's turn literally go up in smoke.

"Look who's talking," Tsubasa said. "I knew you were gonna Charge, so I did that on purpose. Obviously. If you couldn't figure that out, you've got bigger problems than losing a Battle of Wits."

"……Ngh!"

Yikes. She's extra mad now, I thought. Lady Hex clenched her teeth so hard that I could hear them grinding as she glared at Tsubasa. *He, uh, might've taken the taunting a bit too far this time.*

"You're truly an impudent little brat…"

"Is that so?"

"……"

The ghost glared at him with fury, but Tsubasa was unbothered. He didn't budge. *Sheesh, he must have nerves of steel…,* I figured in amazement.

[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
So, what's my next move? I'm attacking this time around.
END

……Hmm……

Tsubasa's opponent was starting to remind me of someone.

I thought back to the very first monster I ever fought in Nightmare: the Slit-Mouthed Woman I now knew as Amelie. Lady Hex was thinking the same way Amelie did in our Battle of Wits.

Tsubasa was ready and able to strike with a Critical Attack, but that's what the monster would be expecting. Could it be that simple? Part of me doubted it, but then again, Lady Hex didn't seem bright enough to outfox us, either.

…Which meant we could count on her going for a Critical Defense after all, out of a sheer urge to protect herself. I sent a message to Tsubasa, telling him to go for a High Attack.

[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
Gotcha.
Once again, that's exactly what I was thinking. Not too shabby.
END

Tsubasa's just a kid, I thought. *So how come it makes me kinda happy when he praises me like that?*

Either way, the round turned out exactly the way I expected it would. Lady Hex was now down to one life. A Critical Attack would still take her out, of course, but now a regular attack would do the job, too.

"Urrrgh… No… It can't be…"

Huh? Lady Hex seems a lot less cocky all of a sudden, I noticed. *That's not how it was with Amelie.* Amelie didn't give up until our Battle of Wits was well and truly over.

"Amazing play, Mai," Asagi said. "'Course, you always crush it in Battles of Wits."

"I wouldn't say I 'crush it,'" I said. "I'm always fighting for my life."

"Yeah, but still, you can read a monster like a book."

"Oh, I get a vague grasp on what they're thinking based on how they act and what they say, that's all."

"'That's all'? It's amazing. That's like what Hirata does."

Hirata was the leader of the Scout Squad in the Nightmare Conquerors' Club—and he could read minds. If you're looking for amazing, look no further than that. I pondered if it would even be

possible for Hirata to lose a Battle of Wits. I had to wonder, right? Then again, I feel like he'd once mentioned that people got harder to read when they were nervous. Besides, for all I knew, human brains and monster brains worked in totally different ways. *I'll have to ask Hirata about it next time I see him,* I concluded.

Another message came in from Tsubasa.

[From: Tsubasa Kaitsu]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
Looks like the monster's onto us, and there's a weirdo on the way. I'll take it from here.
Anyway, I'll send you the thing I promised later. That's cool with you, right? That's all for now.
END

Huh. It looked like Tsubasa would be finishing the fight by himself. All that stuff about "something good" aside, I guess he'd decided he'd be more satisfied with the fight if he called his own shots. It was probably for the best.

—But what was that about "a weirdo on the way"?

"*You coward…,"* Lady Hex said with a sob at Tsubasa. "*You keep checking your messages… You're getting help from someone, aren't you? That's cheating…"* It sounded like he was right; she was onto us. The way she was wailing, though, I wondered if she really was surprisingly weak, or just surprisingly sensitive. I'd been in plenty of Battles of Wits before, but I'd never seen a monster start crying when they were about to lose before. At least, not that I could recall.

Hmm… Lady Hex might be a tricky foe after all, in her own way.

"Ugh, come on! You're a real pain, y'know that?" Tsubasa groaned. "Look, no more cheating, okay? Let's keep fighting, fair and square."

"…You mean it?"

"'Course I mean it. If you don't trust me, keep your eyes glued to my hands."

Lady Hex did exactly that. She stared hard at Tsubasa's hands.

It was his turn to defend next. *What's he got up his sleeve now?* I wondered.

"Here. To show you that I'm sorry, I'll pick my action first," Tsubasa said as he moved to press a button. *Click.*

"Oooh… You liar… You're only saying that so you can trick me again, aren't you? Well, I'm not falling for it anymore…"

"You don't say," Tsubasa said, looking disinterestedly off to the side. "Fine, then. Pick whatever you want."

And then—

"Heya, Tsubasaaa! Here I am! Number one in all of Nightmaaare!"

—Tanaka's booming voice filled the arena!

Well, now I know who the weirdo is, I thought. *Sorry, Tanaka, but if the shoe fits…*

"How's it goin', Gramps? Did your stomachache clear up?" Tsubasa asked with a smirk.

"Sure did, thanks for asking! That'll teach me to eat too many beef bowls. I knew I shoulda cut myself off at number four," Tanaka said as he walked over to Asagi and me. "Oh! If it isn't Yashiro and the Glasses God himself!"

"Huh?! I—I told you, I'm no Glasses God…"

"You don't have to say it! I know that human body of yours is actually camouflage to hide your true form. Alas that you must wear contact lenses, not glasses, to complete the illusion! Whooo…"

"…Ha-ha-ha." Asagi gave a dry chuckle; he couldn't think of any other way to respond to Tanaka coming in and Tanaka-ing up the place like always. Still, you'd think a grown man would know not to

scarf down so many beef bowls, he'd make himself sick… I was starting to worry about the guy.

"Oh-ho, looks like ol' Tsubasa's gonna win this one, no sweat."

"Zip it, Gramps. Shouldn't you earn one hundred CP of your own before you start fussing over me?"

"Huh?! Oh, crud!"

"*…Haaah*," Tsubasa sighed. "Man, you really are a dummy. What're you waiting for? Cancel your spectator request and go earn those CP."

"Roger!" Tanaka said. Then he turned to us. "You heard the kid. Sorry! I'll snag my CP and be back here in two shakes. Mai, Your Holy Bespectacledness, cheer on Tsubasa for me, 'kay?" Tanaka canceled his request to watch the Battle of Wits and vanished from the arena in the blink of an eye.

Ahh, the calm after the storm…or something like that, I thought.

"Hmmm. What'd he come here for in the first place?" Asagi mumbled, still dumbstruck by this brief meeting with Tanaka. "Oh! Maybe he was so worried about Tsubasa during his Battle of Wits that he had to come and keep an eye on him, even if it meant toughing out a stomachache!"

I had the same thought myself, but that didn't keep me from sharing a look with Asagi that had "Yeah, right" written all over it.

"It's possible," Asagi said. "Tanaka may look and act like…well, like Tanaka, but he's a decent adult, deep down. He probably felt okay leaving Tsubasa behind because he saw that we were already here."

"Maybe…," I said. In the end, there was no way to know what Tanaka was thinking, and puzzling over it wouldn't do us any good. Asagi and I decided to go back to cheering for Tsubasa like Tanaka had asked.

"Oh, hey, it's Tsubasa's turn to defend now."

Tsubasa's enemy had a full gauge. She was ready to unleash a Critical Attack. Tsubasa still had all three of his lives. Any enemy without much in the way of smarts would try to go for the win with a Critical Attack in this situation, and yet—

I took a careful look at Lady Hex. She hadn't chosen her action yet. She sat there, tilting her head every now and then like she was thinking carefully. As I watched her, it struck me that she might go for a normal attack instead. If nothing else, she'd taken note of how intelligent Tsubasa was. If she went for a Critical Attack and Tsubasa stopped it with a Critical Defense, she would have to Charge her gauge up from zero before she could use another one. All the work she'd already put into filling it up would be wasted, and her chances of winning would plummet.

Timing was everything when it came to Critical Attacks, and figuring out the right timing was tough. Even monsters had to be cautious.

"What's wrong? Why don't you hurry up and pick something?" said Tsubasa. "Is all that fretting necessary?"

"…Fine, you choose first, then!"

"Huh? Didn't I tell you? I already made my choice, lady."

"In that case, I'd better not see you touching your console again."

"Fine by me," Tsubasa said. He folded his hands behind his head with a triumphant look on his face.

"Tee-hee-hee… It seems you're actually telling the truth this time," Lady Hex said. She thought for a while longer, then made her choice with the telltale *click.*

The results of the round popped up on the screen—

Tsubasa had picked Critical Defense.

And Lady Hex had picked Critical Attack.

"Wh-whoa… How'd Tsubasa pull that off while picking first? I guess he must've been confident about his guess."

"Lady Hex's face told him everything. It said, 'I want to hurry up and win this.'"

"Huh?! It did?! Man, I didn't catch that at all…" Asagi's shoulders slumped.

"Urrrgh… How in the world did you know what I'd choose…?" the monster growled.

"Uh, it'd be weirder if I somehow missed it," Tsubasa said. "You're way too easy to read."

"…Ooogh…" It was plain to see that Lady Hex had lost her will to fight. The Battle of Wits took a sharp turn in Tsubasa's favor.

In the next round, Lady Hex chose Critical Defense, while Tsubasa went with a High Attack. Tsubasa's victory was secured the moment the results went up on the screen.

"Urrrgh… I'm never picking a fight with one such as you againnn… Curse you! Consider yourself hexed*!!"*

"Now you're finally showing some spirit! Too bad it's too late," Tsubasa said. "This must be what they call sour grapes." He was still cool and in command like he'd been throughout the whole fight. He'd taken the entire battle at his own pace. To top it off, he'd won without losing a single life. No doubt about it—Tsubasa was impressive. "Let's see here. That'll keep the Auto-Death System off my back for today. C'mon, let's get outta here," he said to Asagi and me with a carefree grin.

"Yep, sounds good. Let's go, Mai."

"Right." And with that, we left the Battle of Wits and found ourselves back in the club room.

"Whaaa—?! Aw, don't tell me you guys are done already!" Tanaka shouted in surprise, clutching his Nightmare console as he watched us return from the game.

"Uh, yeah. Geez, Gramps, did it really take you that long to get your CP? Man, you stink."

"That's not it! There's too many other players around to get any good hunting done."

"Seriously? *That's* your story, stupid?" Tsubasa leaned in to peek at Tanaka's game screen.

"See? Quite a crowd, huh?"

"Sheesh. Are you ranked number one or not? You should be taking on a tougher stage with fewer players. You're totally messing things up for everyone else in this stage by hanging around." Tsubasa tapped away at his own Nightmare console as he suggested

a new hunting spot for Tanaka. It looked like they'd be heading off to another stage together.

Hee-hee. I dunno what it is, but those two make quite a pair, I thought.

"Hey, you guys. If you've already got your Auto-Death Systems shut off, then get some rest, pronto. Tomorrow, we're back to playin' Nightmare till we drop," Sugiura cut in. At some point, both he and Taichi had made their way over to our table.

"Sounds good to me," Taichi said. "I've been lookin' forward to getting some decent shut-eye for hours."

I looked at the clock. It was 11:15 PM.

"That time already, huh?"

"Come to think of it, the club room's more or less empty."

Aside from the four of us in the Raid Team, Tsubasa, and Tanaka, the only ones left in the room were Kaneda, Masuda, and Youko. Oh, and Akaishi was nodding off in a chair next to them. If I had to guess, I'd say he'd tried putting the moves on Youko again, but sleep won out in the end. As for the rest of them, it seemed likely that Masuda and Youko were helping Kaneda level up.

"Y'know, Mai, Kaneda's gaining levels fast these days," Asagi said.

"Have you been helping him level up, too?" I asked.

"Yeah. 'Course, Masuda's doing most of it. I'm only pitching in. He's really something, that Masuda. Kaneda's level keeps climbing and climbing. Masuda knows a lot of power-leveling tricks, so I've been learning a ton, too."

"Huh. I guess that's what you get when you level with the second-highest ranked player in the game."

"Yeah," Asagi said. "You'd think Tanaka would be even more amazing, since he's ranked even higher, but…"

"You'd *think*," I said. The two of us stole a glance in Tanaka's direction just in time to see him leave the club room together with Tsubasa.

That was fast! I thought. *I guess working together means they earn a hundred CP really quickly.*

Then another thought made its way into my brain. *If Tanaka took Nightmare more seriously, he could probably beat the game himself…*, I supposed.

Before I could continue that thought, though, I noticed that Youko and her party were wrapping up their game.

Huh? Is… Is Masuda giving Akaishi a piggyback ride? I wondered. It seemed he'd taken it upon himself to get the sound-asleep Akaishi back to his own dorm. *How nice can a guy get?*

"Man, talk about a stand-up dude," Taichi said. "Whenever I fall asleep in the club room, *someone* leaves me here." No prizes for guessing that the "someone" was Sugiura.

"Don't push it, dummy," Sugiura snapped. "That's all your fault for fallin' asleep in here. I don't have time to haul dead weight around the dorms." One thing was clear: There would be no piggyback rides for Taichi.

"Yeesh… Seriously, it's like night and day," I heard Taichi mutter to himself as he glanced back and forth from Masuda to Sugiura.

"Anyway, go get some sleep. I mean it. Lights out!"

Click! True to his word, Sugiura turned off the club room lights and stomped out the door. He clearly didn't care that we were still in the room.

"You went and ticked him off again, didn't you, Taichi?"

"…Looks like it," Taichi said with a laugh.

Ugh, would it kill Taichi to act like this stuff affects him, too, for once…? I thought.

"I guess we should hit the hay, too," Asagi said.

"Yep. All right, g'night." Taichi didn't budge from his chair. Instead, he leaned forward and put his head back down on the table.

I couldn't help but think, *Seriously?! You're sleeping in here?!*

"Uh, Taichi? I think you'd better head to your room."

"The club room *is* my room," Taichi said sleepily. "One of 'em, at least. But you can carry me back to my bed if you really wanna, Asagi."

"Huh?!"

"Leave that knucklehead and get movin'!"

Hmm? It was Sugiura. He must've noticed that we hadn't left the club room yet and poked his head back in to check on us. But that wasn't all. He threw a blanket roughly over Taichi.

"Oooh, thanks, pal," Taichi said. "I'll take a pillow, too, if you've got one."

"Who d'you think you're talkin' to, you goof? Your maid? You wanna pillow, use your arm!" Instead of a pillow, Sugiura wadded up a ball of paper and threw it at Taichi. Then he left the club room again—for good this time.

For all that talk, though, Sugiura was a nice guy in his own way. I mean, he brought Taichi a blanket. Even if Taichi did let it go to his head!

Asagi and I shared a quick laugh, then headed back to our own rooms for the night.

7

Sugiura's Leadership

Before I knew it, five days had gone by since Nightmare came back online. And, like always, information on how to get the tickets we'd need to enter the next event was hard to come by.

Hmmm… We've already checked all the newly added stages and come up empty-handed, I thought as I stepped into the cafeteria. But then—

"Outta the way! Move it!" I heard someone shout. I scanned the cafeteria to find the source and saw Takojima ram into Kaneda as he stood in line at the counter. It definitely wasn't an accident. Takojima kept moving while Kaneda stood there shaking with his tray in his hands.

Ugh, Takojima's back at it! I can't look away from this guy for a second, I thought as I rushed over to Kaneda.

"Are you okay, Kaneda?"

"Y-yeah… I guess," he said. He sounded miserable. I led him to a nearby table.

"Please sit down."

"Thanks for always helping me out. And sorry," he said with a weak smile. "But I think I've lost my appetite. I might just head back to my room…"

That does it! I've gotta have a word with Takojima!

I looked around for the bully and saw him strutting down the center of an aisle without a care in the world. He was in such high spirits, in fact, that he didn't see Sugiura coming from the other

direction with a big stack of papers in his arms until it was too late. They collided. Sugiura's paperwork went fluttering across the floor.

"Hey! Whoever ya are, why don'tcha watch where you're goin'?!"

"Huh? That's my line, jerk! You're the one walkin' right down the middle of the lane like some kinda dimwit! You're in everybody's way!"

Oof. Sugiura had a look on his face that would shock the meanest ogre in Hell into silence, and he was giving Takojima a death stare.

"……!! Eep! S-sorry, Sugiura! I didn't realize it was you! I didn't mean nothin' by it… I'm sorry, really. Serves me right for not watchin' where I was goin'! Ha-ha…" Takojima was terrified. He bent down and scooped up Sugiura's papers as quickly as he could. He backed down pretty quickly.

C'mon, Sugiura! Lemme see you give Takojima an extra serving of your fury! I thought.

"Takojima…"

"Eek! I m-mean, yeah?"

"I hear you pulled your weight in that Battle of Wits with the Warden of the Dead," Sugiura said.

"Huh?"

"You helped Kaneda out, didn'tcha? Not bad. Not bad at all. Keep up the good work." Sugiura huffed, then kept walking. Takojima stood still as stone in the hallway as he watched Sugiura walk away.

"Whooo… He heard that? About me? Man, I was on pins an' needles! An' that 'who-cares?' smile'a his… Sooo cool… There goes a real man's man!"

Wait, whaaat?! I thought, shocked.

Takojima wasn't staring at Sugiura in anger, but in total admiration! He was basically swooning! It looked like Sugiura's mastery of the ol' carrot-and-stick approach hadn't only won him fans among the ladies. One thing was clear: Sugiura was a natural-born leader, through and through.

Part of me understood how Takojima felt. Since Sugiura was usually super strict, whenever he gave a compliment, he really

meant it. It could make a person's whole day.

"Hey, Mai."

Wha—? I realized Sugiura was now standing right in front of me.

"What is it?"

"Are you about to have dinner?"

"Y-yeah," I said. "Or trying to, at least."

"By yourself?"

"Yeah. Everyone else seems too busy today, sooo…"

"Hmph… What about Asagi?" The barrage of questions kept coming.

"Um, well, he said the Chief Director had a job for him, so he's gonna be holed up in his room working for a while…"

"That so?" Sugiura threw himself into the chair across from mine.

……Huh? All I could do was stare blankly at him. And then—

"Hey, Kaneda, done eatin' already?" Sugiura addressed Kaneda, who was still standing frozen next to me.

"N… N-n-nooo…"

"*Tch.* What're you freakin' out for…? Am I really that scary?"

"Eeep…"

"Come on, Sugiura," I cut in. "No wonder he's scared if you go clicking your tongue like that! That'd make anyone think you're ticked off at them!"

"…Sorry, did I click my tongue just now?" he asked.

Wait, has he been completely unaware of how much he does it? I thought.

"Anyway," Sugiura continued, "have a seat, Kaneda."

"Um… O-okay…" Kaneda stiffly pulled out a chair—leaving an empty seat between Sugiura and himself—and started to sit down.

"Gimme a break! What're you all the way over there for?! Sit here," Sugiura snapped as he pulled out the chair right next to his.

"S-sorry," Kaneda said. He sat down in the chair beside Sugiura, twitching nervously the whole time.

"Awright, Mai," Sugiura said, turning toward me.

"Y-yes?"

"Pick out whatever you want," he said as he thrust a menu into my face.

"Huh?"

"I'm sayin' dinner's on me. Now hurry an' choose somethin'!"

Yikes, I thought. *He's even scarier with his eyebrows furrowed like that.* Don't get me wrong, I was grateful that he was treating me to dinner…but you usually don't scowl at someone when you treat them, right?

Then I noticed that he was brushing his hand against his right ear. And I happened to know he had a habit of touching his ear when he felt bashful about something. *Huh, I guess he's not mad. Maybe he's trying to cheer Kaneda up*, I considered. But if he was, I couldn't figure out why his face hadn't gotten the memo. Anyone who didn't know Sugiura as well as I did would think he was royally ticked off for sure. *Hee-hee-hee. Sugiura may be a born leader, but he's hopeless at this kind of thing*, I thought. Relieved, I ordered an omelet with rice.

"Is that gonna be enough for ya?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah." *Maybe Sugiura's a big eater or something. He doesn't look it, though.* I thought back to our Raid Team breakfast for a moment. *He did order an extra-large helping of rice.* I was pretty sure the omelets in the cafeteria were big enough to fill anyone up, though.

"Order somethin' too, Kaneda."

"Oh, um, no thanks… I don't have much of an appetite, so…"

"At least get dessert! I know you've got room for dessert," Sugiura said as he shoved the menu into Kaneda's chest. He really wanted Kaneda to eat for some reason. But why?

"A-are you sure?!"

"'Course I'm sure. Eat, already! Somethin' in your stomach oughtta perk you up."

That explained it, then. Sugiura was being super-duper rough about it, but he was doing his best to cheer Kaneda up in his own way. At least, I think he was.

Timidly, Kaneda took the menu from Sugiura and scanned it from top to bottom over and over again. Maybe he was having trouble deciding.

"Do you know what you want, Kaneda?"

"W-well, I've narrowed it down to fresh melon, pancakes, or ice cream, but I can't decide which to get…" It sure didn't sound like he had no appetite to me. If anything, he sounded famished. "I've got a sweet tooth," he said. "I guess I'll go with ice cream. But I dunno, I kinda want them all… Maybe I'll get all three and pay for two of 'em myself." Kaneda pulled out his wallet and checked inside it.

No sooner had he done that than Sugiura stood up and walked off to the counter to order.

"Wait!" Kaneda exclaimed. Then he turned to me and said, in a worried voice, "You d-don't think he's mad that I took too long to decide, do you…?"

"Hee-hee. I doubt it," I said. And I really did! If I knew Sugiura, he was off ordering all three of the dishes that Kaneda wanted.

"Here. Eat." Sugiura came back from the counter and set an omelet and a cup of tea on the table in front of me. Then he set down fresh melon, pancakes, and ice cream (along with another cup of tea) in front of Kaneda. Did I call it, or what?

"You mean it? I—I mean, it's so much…"

"Yeah. Go on, eat up."

"Um, thanks a lot."

"So, Kaneda," Sugiura said over the cup of coffee and plate of fried rice (which looked like an extra-large) he'd ordered for himself. "How's it goin'? There's nothin' troublin' you, is there?"

"No. Not lately… Everyone here is nice to me, so…"

"That so…? Look, if anythin' rubs ya the wrong way, you tell me. I'll be watchin' those punks like a hawk, too, so they don't think you ratted 'em out."

—Okay, when Sugiura said he'd watch them "like a hawk," I'll admit that it sounded a little scary.

"Um… Th-thank you," Kaneda said. Relief was plain on his face. As soon as we were done eating, Sugiura started working on his laptop, and a few members of the Rescue Squad walked over and offered to help Kaneda level up. Kaneda went with them. It was a real load off my mind to see him feeling better.

Now then, I thought, *what should I do next?*

But before I could decide, Sugiura looked up from his laptop and pulled out his Nightmare console.

"Awright, let's go." He tapped away at the buttons.

"Um… Go where?"

"Into Nightmare, obviously."

"Huh?!" That caught me off guard. *He wants to play Nightmare with me…? As a pair?!* I thought.

"Somethin' wrong?"

"N-no…" It looked like I was right. He meant the two of us would be playing alone. I didn't know what to do. *He wouldn't drag me off to some impossible stage full of super-tough monsters, would he…?* I worried.

"Here we go. How 'bout Haunted Doll Hall?"

"—*Bwuh*," I sputtered. I could hardly imagine a scarier-sounding stage. "Um, S-Sugiura? Could we play a different stage?"

"What're you talkin' about? I just came across some info online that says there's a fishy spot in Haunted Doll Hall."

"Oh, I see…" *Now what?* I wondered. Haunted Doll Hall wasn't one of the new stages added in the last update, but I'd still never been there before. To be honest, I'd been steering clear of it.

"Looks like the suggested player level is two hundred and eighty…," Sugiura said. Like Kaneda, I'd been doing my best to boost my level, but I was still only up to 214.

"Um, so you know, if we go there as a pair, I'm probably… definitely gonna hold you back…"

"Yeah, you got that right."

Urk. Saying it myself was one thing, but having Sugiura look me in the eye and agree that I would hold him back was a real bummer.

"Let's call two more people to help out," Sugiura continued. "Go get Youko and Masuda over there."

"Wait, you want them? Not Asagi and Taichi?"

"Asagi's got his hands full with another job, doesn't he? An' Taichi's still snoozin' in the club room. I wanna get to the spot I read about online ASAP."

"Oh, that makes sense." On top of that, Masuda and Youko were both high-ranking players who packed a real punch when it came to combat. Having them along was all the reassurance I needed.

"I'm goin' in ahead of ya," Sugiura said. Sure enough, his avatar was already arriving at Haunted Doll Hall. I could see the ramshackle old mansion on his screen.

He's sure got a lot of guts, barging in there alone, I thought. I couldn't help but respect his courage.

"Okay, I'll go get them right away," I said. I headed over to the table where Youko and Masuda were sitting, along with Akaishi, Naomi, and Hirata. They were in the middle of having dinner together. "Um, Youko? Masuda? Sorry to bug you while you're eating, but we need your help playing through this stage Sugiura heard about…"

"Hmm? You need me?" Youko asked.

"Yeah."

"No problem," she said.

"I'm good to go, too," Masuda added.

"Great, thanks a lot. Could you come with me? Sugiura's already playing."

"Okay!" Youko said. Then she stopped herself. "Actually, gimme a sec, okay?" She picked up the rest of the sandwich she'd been eating and shoved the whole thing into her mouth.

—Gulp.

"Phew! Man, that was tasty," she said. She picked up her empty tray, but before she could take it back to the counter, Masuda stopped her. It was like a reflex for him.

"I'll take that," he said. "I'm taking my own tray back anyway. Please, Youko, go on ahead and start playing."

"Wow, thanks, Masuda!" Youko gave him a little bow, blushing all the while. As soon as he left with their trays, she leaned in and whispered in my ear. "Isn't Masuda dreamy?" I could swear the pupils of her eyes were heart-shaped as she watched him walk away.

"Aw, dang it! I was right about to offer to take her tray, too… That snobby jerk with his Goody-Two-shoes act… I'll show him… I'll put a curse on him, that's what I'll do! Get stomach cramps, jerk! Stomach cramps and diarrhea, too!!" Akaishi watched Masuda walk away, too, but his eyes were far from heart-shaped. If it was possible for a stare to be *sticky*, somehow, Akaishi was pulling it off.

Akaishi's curses always seem to be stomach-based, I thought. *Not that it makes much of a difference, but he could stand to be a little more creative.*

"…That's not really what came to mind for you, is it? 'That Masuda… Just watch, I'm gonna learn whatever I can from him until I'm a real gentleman, too…' You ought to be more honest, at least with yourself," Hirata said.

"Wha—?!" Akaishi blinked in amazement; he hadn't expected to have his mind read so thoroughly.

"Now then, Suzuki, shall we get back to work?"

"Sure," Naomi answered. "Why don't you join us, Akaishi? Your squad leader, Youko, doesn't seem like she'll be back for a while."

"N-nah, I'll stick around here a bit longer."

"Oh? Okay, well, come find us if you change your mind," Naomi said. Then she looked over and shot me a smile. "Good luck, Mai! I'll be cheering for you!"

"Thanks a ton, Naomi!" I smiled back.

Naomi and Hirata stood and left the cafeteria. Mewta trotted along behind them, a fish in his mouth. *Hee-hee, how cute!* I thought. *That Mewta is sure attached to Hirata.*

8

Haunted Doll Brawl

When I got back from talking with Naomi, Hirata, and Akaishi, with Youko in tow, Masuda was already at our table—and in Haunted Doll Hall.

"Mai, Youko, what took ya so long? Hurry and get in the game," Sugiura snapped.

"R-right! Just a sec," I said. Youko and I rushed to enter the stage. Once we arrived, we found Masuda's avatar at the spawn point. He'd been waiting for us.

"Shall we?" he asked. "Which direction should we go in, Sugiura?"

Sugiura spun his computer around to show us the screen as he explained.

"This way."

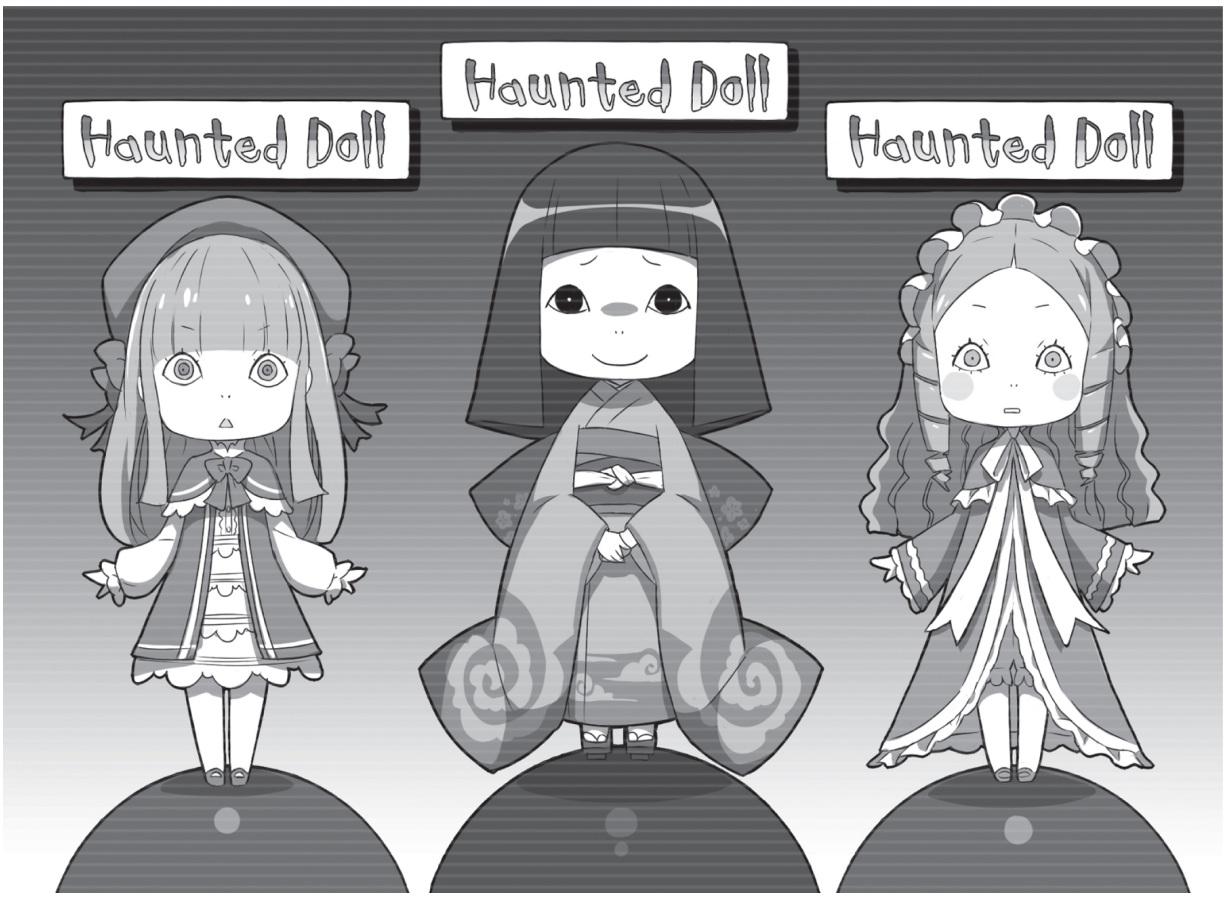
"Roger," Masuda said. Then he turned back to us. "…If you two'll be so kind as to stick with me, I'll guide you to him." Youko and I nodded and made our avatars follow along.

The inside of Haunted Doll Hall was adorned with dolls everywhere we looked. It was really, *really* creepy. Take a perfectly normal doll, one that's usually adorable, put it in a dank, dim mansion like this, and boom—instant freak-out.

"Yeeek! Look, Mai, look! Those dolls over there are moving!"

"Yikes!" Straight ahead, I saw dolls perched on top of black shapes that I couldn't quite make out, swaying from side to side as they crept toward us. Three of them! The one in the middle was a

traditional Japanese-style doll, while the two dolls on the sides looked European. All three of them gave me the creeps.


Haunted Doll
Haunted Doll
Haunted Doll

As they came closer, I saw they each had text over their heads that read: **Haunted Doll**. These were enemy monsters, no doubt about it!

"Youko, Mai—try to hit the black shapes they're riding on with long-range attacks, please," said Masuda.

"'Kay!"

"Got it," I said as I readied my bow. I took aim at one of the creeping black shapes and fired.

«Combat Results»
Mai attacked with her Brilliant Bow!
- **Direct hit on Haunted Doll 1.**
- **450 damage!**

[HP Remaining]
- **Haunted Doll 1 [HP: 1,650/2,100] (-450)**

Yikes. They're as strong as they are creepy, I thought. *Then again, I'm under-leveled, after all…*

"Oh, nice shot, Mai!" Youko exclaimed.

It was? I took another look at my screen to see what she was talking about. *Oh…!* It turned out that the shifty shapes under the dolls were black shrouds with ghosts inside. A newly exposed white ghost floated into the air, clutching the doll in its hands.

"Aw, is that it? They're regular ghosts moving the dolls around. And here I thought the dolls were moving all on their own."

"Come to think of it, I saw a strategy guide that said these guys have way lower defenses when they're exposed. It should be easy to take 'em out like this."

"Yeah. Nothing to be afraid of!"

Phew. To top it all off, the design of the ghosts was way more cute than creepy. That was a relief.

"Heh. Keep your head on straight," Sugiura snorted. "Ghosts are ghosts."

"Tease Mai all you like, but you're the one whose head's not on right, Sugiura," Youko shot back. "Barging on ahead through a stage like this all by yourself! What are you, a robot?"

Hang on, I thought. *Was Youko afraid to come here at first, too?*

"What's that s'posed to mean…?"

"Look out, Youko! The enemy's closing in!"

"Ack!" We'd gotten so caught up in conversation that we hadn't noticed the monsters were now close enough for a normal battle to begin.

[Normal Battle] «Turn 1»
Mai Yashiro joined the battle!
Youko Teranishi joined the battle!
Ryouta Masuda joined the battle!
[Action Order]

1. Ryouta Masuda (5,000/5,000)
2. Youko Teranishi (5,000/5,000)
3. Haunted Doll 1 (1,650/2,100)
4. Haunted Doll 2 (2,100/2,100)
5. Haunted Doll 3 (2,100/2,100)
6. Mai Yashiro (5,000/5,000)

Oof. It figures I'm last in line to attack. Each player and monster's speed stat determined their place in the action order, and naturally, the higher your level, the higher your stat… *Man, I've gotta get stronger soon.*

"You three got this?" Sugiura asked as his avatar backtracked to check on us.

"Totally," said Youko. "We can handle these monsters for sure. Right, Masuda and Mai?"

"Right. They'll be taken care of shortly."

"Yeah… Um, I think."

"Pffft. Just don't panic and mess it up," Sugiura snickered. He'd picked up on my lack of confidence and pounced on it. "But hey, you've got Masuda with you. I'm sure you'll be fine."

What's so funny? It's rude, is what it is! But now that I thought about it, it seemed like Sugiura was laughing a lot more than usual lately. Anyway, it was Masuda's turn to attack first.

«Turn 1: Ryouta»

- **Ryouta slashed with his Soul Breaker!**
- **1,900 damage to Haunted Doll 3!**

[Additional Weapon Effects]

Soul Break «Trigger Rate: 5% - No effect on bosses»

- **Haunted Doll 3's soul was shattered!**
- **Haunted Doll 3 vanished.**

[HP Remaining]

- **Haunted Doll 3 [HP: 0/2,100] (-2,100)**
- **Haunted Doll 3 defeated.**

Whoa! That was amazing! I exclaimed to myself. Masuda took one of the monsters from full health down to zero in one turn—all by himself.

"All right! Now it's my turn!"

«Turn 1: Youko»

- **Youko used magic!**
- **Youko cast Meteor!**

A volley of meteors fell on the Haunted Dolls!

- **1,600 damage to Haunted Doll 1!**
- **1,360 damage to Haunted Doll 2!**

[HP Remaining]

- **Haunted Doll 1 [HP: 50/2,100] (-1,600)**
- **Haunted Doll 2 [HP: 740/2,100] (-1,360)**

Whoa! Youko's spell hit every enemy at once!

"That spell of mine may have cooler graphics, but Asagi's Glasses Meteor is stronger! Like, what gives, right?"

What gives, indeed. In Nightmare, every player character had a job, but not all jobs could be strong ones.

"Glasses Meteor's a powerful spell, all right," said Masuda. "Even I'd put it high up on the tier list."

"That's why I'm not lettin' Asagi switch jobs for a good, long while."

"I hear that! We can't let him cut the club off from a spell that strong."

I wondered if Asagi's ears were burning. I couldn't help feeling a teeny, tiny bit sorry for him, because I knew he hated casting Glasses Meteor. It came with his job, which was so powerful that not only the top-ranked Tanaka, but also the number two and three

players (that's Masuda and Sugiura) rated it highly, too: Glasses-Maker.

Yes, I know it sounds really, really silly.

Anyway, now that Youko had cast her spell, it was the remaining Haunted Dolls' turn to attack. Wondering what sort of moves they had, I looked down at my Nightmare console.

«Turn 1: Haunted Doll 1»

- **Haunted Doll 1 cast Ghostly Guise!**
- **Haunted Doll 1 morphed into a menacing *hannya* mask!**
  - **No effect on Mai! (Spell nullified by Mai's Ring of Evasion Level 3)**
  - **Youko fell on her backside! (Loses one turn)**
  - **Ryouta withstood the terror!**

"Aw, man! I lose a turn?! That stinks…"

"That's a nice ring you've got, Yashiro."

"Oh, it was a gift from Asagi. He gave it to me way back when I started playing."

"Did he? Well, be sure you take care of it. It's a very good item."

"I thought it might be," I said. From the sound of it, not even Masuda had one in his inventory, despite his super-high rank. And Asagi had given me his without a second thought to keep me safe in combat.

I had to get stronger—and fast! For once, I wanted to be the one helping Asagi and all of the others out. I had to! I couldn't keep on

letting them worry about me forever! With that resolution fresh in my mind, I looked back at my Nightmare console.

«Turn 1: Haunted Doll 2»

- **Haunted Doll 2 tackled Youko!**
- **520 damage to Youko!**

[HP Remaining]

- **Youko Teranishi [HP: 4,480/5,000] (-520)**

It was my turn next. I decided to aim for the Haunted Doll with only 50 HP left. *Even a normal attack should be enough to take it down!*

«Turn 1: Mai»

- **Mai bashed Haunted Doll 1 with her Iron Staff!**
- **600 damage to Haunted Doll 1!**
- **Haunted Doll 1 vanished.**

[HP Remaining]

- **Haunted Doll 1 [HP: 0/2,100] (-600)**
- **Haunted Doll 1 defeated.**

Yesss! I beat one! I thought, celebrating in my mind.
"Nice, Yashiro. Leave the last one to me."
"Happy to!"

Masuda made short work of the remaining doll. We earned 33 CP and 17,000 experience points from the battle.

"*Tch*, done already? I was right about to jump in, too," said Sugiura as his avatar ran onto the screen. "Listen up, Masuda."

"What is it?"

"You an' me are gonna take the lead an' blow away any baddies that pop up, got it? I wanna get to the room that all the fuss is about ASAP."

"Roger that," Masuda said with his trademark smile. With that, the number two and number three ranked players in the game marched ahead, knocking out monsters left and right in the blink of an eye. Youko and I were ready to back them up with ranged attacks if we needed to, but none of the foes in Haunted Doll Hall made it past their onslaught.

This is what we should've been doing in the first place, I thought…but of course, I didn't dare say so out loud. You know how scary Sugiura could be when he was in a bad mood!

"*Haaah…* Masuda's sooo cooooool…," Youko cooed in a quiet voice.

"Nnngh… A-all right, here I come! Just you watch, Youko—I'll have you swooning for me soon!"

Whaaaaaat?! I exclaimed internally. *When did Akaishi get here? And when did he sit down next to Youko?!* Either way, if Youko noticed him, she didn't give the slightest hint.

"Oh, Akaishi, you'd better not. The recommended level for this stage is two hundred and eighty!"

"T-two hundred and eighty…?" Akaishi sputtered. He'd only recently started playing, and his level was a whopping 68. Nowhere near high enough to survive Haunted Doll Hall by any measure. No way would he make Youko swoon like that. She might roll her eyes at having to babysit him, though.

And that's not even the worst part. If he died in the game, he'd be in real trouble! He'd lose the use of whatever part of his body he had set as his Respawn Penalty.

"*Nnngh…* There's gotta be some item somewhere that'd power me up so much, you'd think I was cheating… Something that'd make me so strong, everyone else would say, 'No fair…'"

"If you'd like to get stronger, I'd be happy to help you level up, Akaishi."

Akaishi glared daggers at Masuda. "No. Thank. You. I can handle it myself!"

"Ooh, that means you're free to help *me* level up, Masuda!" Youko said.

"…I take it back," said Akaishi. "All right, Masuda! You are to help me level up! Is that clear?!"

Oof. Talk about arrogant. How much of a big shot does Akaishi think he is? I thought. If it upset Masuda, though, he didn't show it.

"Crystal. Shall the three of us meet up tomorrow for a leveling session, then?" There it was again—that breezy Masuda smile. If anything, he gave it extra breeze. There was no way Akaishi could worm his way out of this one. He silently stared at Youko's Nightmare screen while she played, without even attempting a snappy comeback.

Could I take a moment to admire how grown-up Masuda was about the whole thing? When Akaishi needled him, he knew exactly how to handle it without needling back. And as if that wasn't enough, he did it all while playing Nightmare. Having a guy like that in our party made the rest of Haunted Doll Hall feel like a cinch. We made it all the way to the room Sugiura came to check out.

9

Rally Thy Shining Soul?!

We cautiously made our way into a large, traditional Japanese-style room. A mysterious, circular magic sigil was drawn upon the tatami mat floor.

"Accordin' to my info, that magic circle only shows up at night."

"I see… If you ask me, there's got to be something up with it," I said. I tried an Examine command on the sigil.

[Put thy soul to use. The way opens only to the worthy. Rally thy shining soul, should thee hope to win what thou desire.]

"Rally thy shining soul…?" What's that supposed to mean? I wondered.

"Hmm… I give up! I'm no good at this stuff," Youko said. "I don't have a clue what that means."

"Apologies," said Masuda. "I'm giving it some thought, but nothing comes to mind for me, either."

"How 'bout you, Mai? Got a guess? This kinda stuff's the only thing you're good at, isn't it?"

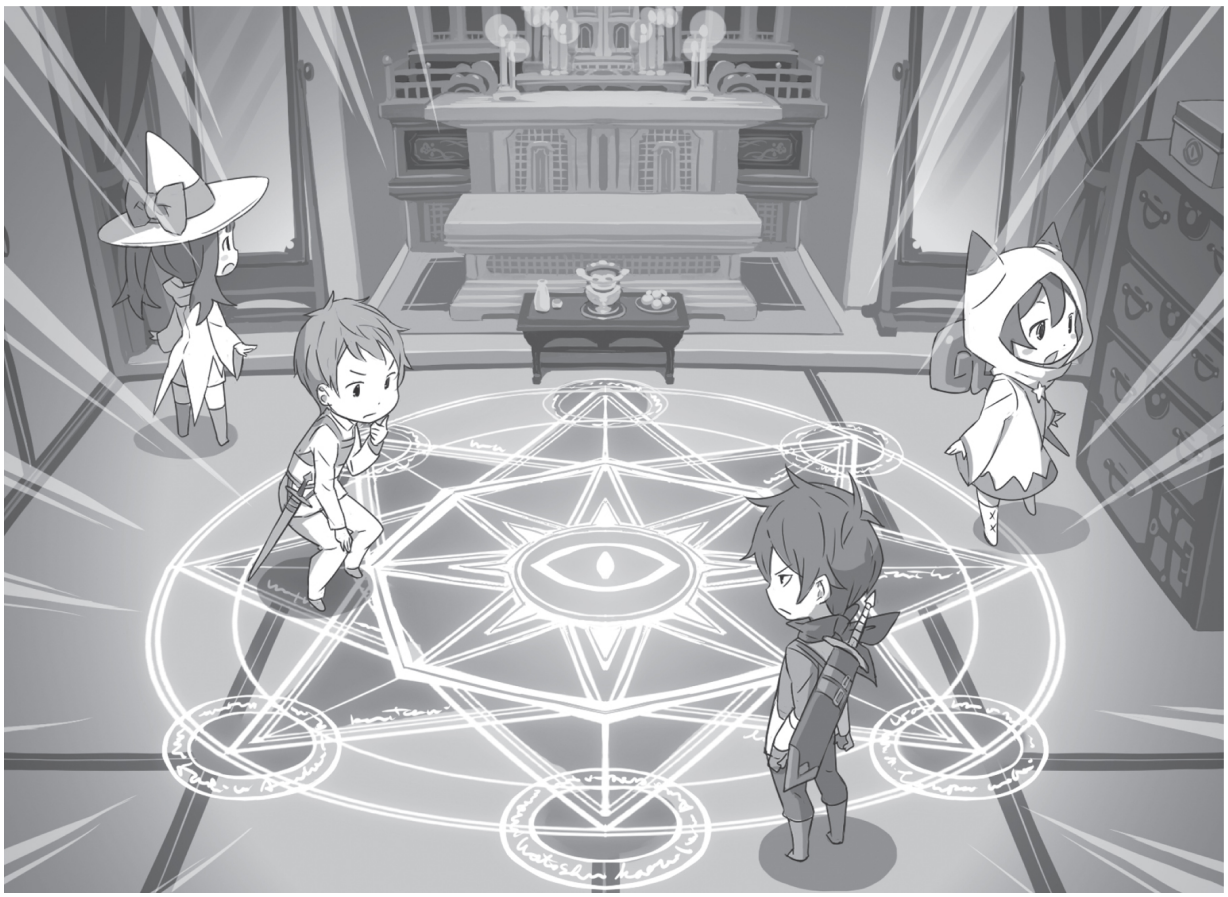
Sheesh! Did Sugiura have to put it that way? Rude!

…Okay, fine, he was right. When it came to anything else in Nightmare, I weighed my party down. But when it was time to solve a puzzle, that was my chance to shine.

"Hmm… There's probably another clue or two somewhere in the room… I get the feeling all that 'soul' stuff is gonna be the key." With puzzles like this, there were usually hints to be found somewhere in

the stage. I kept thinking about the bit about being "worthy," too. I wondered if any of us in the room were "worthy" enough. What if none of us were? Was that even possible?

"Awright, what d'you say we try searchin' every corner of the room?"



"Sounds like a plan."

Aside from the sigil on the floor, the room held a strange altar, full-length mirrors, and a chest of drawers. There were cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling, which sure didn't make the room feel any less creepy.

I examined the altar first. A Japanese doll with a bob hairstyle sat upon it.

[Move the doll, and ye shall be cursed. Move the doll?]

Under that were two choices: **YES** and **NO**.

"Hold it. That one means exactly what it says," said Sugiura. "Keep your hands off the doll unless you feel like fightin' it."

"R-right…"

If Sugiura already knew what would happen, that could only mean one thing: He'd tried to move the creepy doll before. Haunted Doll Hall wasn't a new stage. Sugiura had probably come to grind for levels a few times before all the rumors started. I was starting to think he really wasn't afraid of anything.

"Hey, guys? This full-length mirror moves. We can change the angle on it," said Youko. Her avatar tried repositioning the mirror.

"Yeah, but it doesn't do anythin'. Or it didn't last time I tried movin' it."

"You don't say…"

Wait, has Sugiura checked out most of this stage already? I wondered.

Youko left the mirror where it was. Next, she moved her avatar over toward the chest of drawers.

"Hmm. There's a square box stuck to the ceiling. It's too high up to reach without a ladder, though," said Masuda. He hummed in

thought for a moment. “If I had to guess, I’d say there are probably event tickets inside it.”

A box? On the ceiling? I tilted my avatar’s head to look upward, changing the view on the screen. *Ah-ha! There it is*, I thought. There was an odd, square-shaped box as high up as Masuda said it was.

“Huh, never noticed that before,” said Sugiura. “We’ve gotta check it out. Let’s see if we can scrounge up somethin’ to use as a ladder.”

“I’m with Sugiura!” said Youko. The two of them left the large room in search of something that could help us reach the box.

That’s weird, I thought. *I could’ve sworn this stage freaked Youko out, too…* Then again, she was a true gamer. No wonder she’d rise to a challenge.

“Hmmm… So the answer comes down to souls and people who are worthy of something… Can you think of something we’ve come across that had anything to do with souls?” The key to the puzzle had to be somewhere in the room. I knew it did.

Masuda, who’d stayed behind with me, thought about my question for a moment. “Actually, yes, come to think of it,” he said. “My sword’s called the Soul Breaker. Do you think that might qualify?”

“Soul… Ah-ha!” I was pretty sure I had it. I’d heard that Masuda’s sword was super rare. It wasn’t easy to get your hands on a weapon like that; not just any player could do it. Maybe, by earning a super-rare weapon with “Soul” right there in the name, Masuda had proven himself worthy.

To top it off, that super-rare sword of his could shoot out shockwaves to perform long-range attacks, too. *And if it can do that*, I thought, *maybe we can use it…* I looked back up at the box on the ceiling.

“Um, Masuda, do you think you could knock it off the ceiling with a blast from Soul Breaker?”

“Firing it straight up is a bit difficult,” he said. “I’m afraid Nightmare avatars don’t move that way…”

"…Oh. That's too bad." It looked like the answer wouldn't come that easily. Still, I could tell we were only a step away. I scanned the room again.

Then it hit me.

Youko said we can move one of the mirrors, didn't she? I went over to the mirror for a closer look—and I noticed that the upper part of its frame was decorated with a magic sigil that matched the big one on the floor. *Hang on… This sigil might be the key…!*

"Can you try hitting this mirror with a shockwave from Soul Breaker, Masuda?"

"It sounds like you've got an idea. I'd be happy to," he said. He sent out a shockwave that bounced off the mirror.

I knew it! The sigil allowed the mirror to reflect Soul Breaker's long-range attacks.

"Ah-ha. I think I see what you're doing," Masuda said.

"Right! Now all we have to do is move the mirror so that it reflects the attack into the sigil on the floor. That should send it straight up to hit the box."

"Roger that." Masuda moved his avatar around the room, carefully double-checking the mirror's angle and position. Then he fired another shockwave. It bounced off the mirror, hit the sigil on the floor…

…and sure enough, it bounced off the floor and struck the box on the ceiling. The box fell with a *thunk*.

"Hey, Sugiura! Youko! We got the box down!!" I cried out excitedly.

"You did?!"

"For real?!"

"Head back there on the double, Youko."

"Way ahead of you!!"

They rushed back to the room with the sigil.

"Nice work, Mai," said Sugiura once they arrived. "Now check the box."

"Sure thing." I moved my avatar over to the fallen box and hit the Examine command.

[Open the box? YES / NO]

Naturally, I picked **YES**.

Inside, we found four Vermilion Event Tickets. As always, the first two blanks for participants' names were already filled in with my name and Asagi's.

"I knew the event tickets would be in here."

"Awright!"

"Yesss!"

"Onward and upward."

The four of us swapped joyous high-fives. (Okay, three out of the four of us. There were no high-fives to be had from Sugiura.) But before we could celebrate any more, a fifth voice cut in.

"Is it just me, or is something coming out of that altar?" It was Akaishi, mumbling as he watched Youko's screen over her shoulder.

Huh? What about the altar? I wondered. I looked across the puzzle room to see something that looked like black hair creep out of the altar and stretch toward us.

"*Eeek!* What the heck is that?!"

"Wanna wreck it first an' ask questions later?"

"That may be our only option."

Wait, they wanna fight? Youko and I were frozen solid from the shock, but Sugiura and Masuda were as cool and collected as ever.

"Um, shouldn't we run for it instead?" Youko asked. "This looks like trouble with a *huuuge* capital T!"

"I'm with Youko on this one," I said. While we stood around trying to figure out what to do, more and more black hair kept seeping out of the altar. *Talk about freaky! I bet some scary ghost lady is gonna pop out any second now—*

Or so I thought!

But then who should come sliding out of the altar like the ghastly hair was his own personal playground equipment but…*Mr. Three-Sevens?!*

[Mr. Three-Sevens]
Hello! ♪

"Ugh, this guy again?! He grosses me out," said Sugiura with a look on his face that was part astonishment, part disgust.

Mr. Three-Sevens was a special enemy in Nightmare—in fact, he had been the key to finding the tickets for the last event we'd beaten. But he definitely didn't look half as important as he was. He wore a garish, rainbow-colored helmet and a long cape with a swirly paisley pattern. It did *not* look cool. He looked like a wannabe superhero playing dress-up.


Mr. Three-Sevens
is here!

[Mr. Three-Sevens]
Ha-ha-ha! We meet again!
Why don’tcha take pity on an ol’ feller and make me your familiar?!

An ol’ feller…? I thought. *If the man under the mask is really that old, he sure doesn’t act his age.* He wiggled and squirmed as he danced his way in my direction.

“Stop… H-hey, cut it out!”

“Get back or get beat!” Sugiura growled at Mr. Three-Sevens as he approached. But our leader didn’t wait for an answer—instead, he mercilessly fired off a long-range attack that sent Mr. Three-Sevens sprawling. I felt a little sorry for Mr. Three-Sevens, but I’ll admit I felt more grateful to Sugiura!

[Mr. Three-Sevens]
Gwaaaugh!!
B-but wait! Guess what! I’ve got a whopping 777 lives.
In other words, I can come back 777 times!
You haven’t seen the last of li’l ol’ me! Wa-ha-ha-ha-haaa!
Wait and see, girlie! One of these days, you’re gonna make me your pet and take real good care of me!

Wa-ha-ha-hee, three sevens for meee! ♪

And just like that, Mr. Three-Sevens skedaddled.

It suddenly struck me that, in terms of overall vibes, he had an awful lot in common with Tanaka!

"What was that all about? Man, that guy's gross," Sugiura sneered. "He's nothin' but a perv, plain an' simple."

"But he seems to have more free will than other monsters, don't you think? He's probably a Humon."

Humons were especially intelligent monsters that often served as players' familiars. Just so you know, my Amelie was a Humon, as were Sugiura and Taichi's familiars, Tow'el and Zalbatoth.

"He definitely is," said Youko. "So what're you gonna do, Mai? Gonna make that perv into your familiar?"

"What? No way!" I already had Amelie, anyway. And Mr. Three-Sevens? No, thank you! Never, nuh-uh!

"Here I thought a boss was gonna show up, but nah, it was just that trash mob," said Sugiura. "What a letdown."

"Ha-ha! I expected something stronger, too."

When Sugiura and Masuda put it that way, it's kinda lucky that it was only Mr. Three-Sevens, I supposed. *He still weirds me out, though!*

"Awright, let's get outta here."

"Right." With that, we left Haunted Doll Hall and turned our attention back to the real world.

Huh? It's awfully quiet in here, I thought. Then I realized why: Akaishi was fast asleep again.

Thwap! Sugiura slapped him across the back without a word of warning.

"W-waaaugh?! Wh-wh-what is it?!"

"Hey, sleepyhead, the fight's over. You better not make a habit'a sleepin' in spots like this unless you wanna end up like Taichi."

"…N-no way! You're done already?" Something about Akaishi's blank, stunned stare was so funny, I couldn't help but laugh. We'd been fighting our way through Nightmare, and meanwhile, he was dozing off like a baby!

Right then, Asagi and Taichi walked into the cafeteria.

"H-hey, Mai. Sorry I'm so late," said Asagi.

"Yo. Don't you guys look all nice an' buddy-buddy together?"

"Asagi! Taichi!" I excitedly filled them in on how we'd found our tickets to the next event.

"Really?! You've got the tickets already? How was it, Mai? You're not hurt, are you?" Asagi was clearly worried that I'd run into more danger than I could handle.

"Yeah, I'm fine! I had everyone here around to help me out."

"Oh, yeah? That's good, then. But still…I wish I'd been here to protect you, too… Umm—I mean, n-nothing, heh-heh. Kidding! Don't worry about it! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Asagi suddenly broke out into loud laughter. At that same instant, his cheeks went red.

"Oh-ho-ho, Asagi, my man," said Taichi. "Did I hear incorrectly, or did you just confefffmph—"

Asagi clamped a hand over Taichi's mouth and shushed him. Taichi thrashed around like it was hard to breathe with Asagi's hand holding his mouth shut. Right next to them, Sugiura let out a long, loud sigh.

Look out below, I thought. *Sugiura's probably about to drop a bomb.*

"*Pfaaah!* All right, already, I get it. I'll keep my mouth shut myself, thanks," Taichi said at last. "So, Mai, how many folks can come along this time?" Funny how he used his first moments of freedom and fresh air to ask me such a, er, sensible question. He must've been moments away from blacking out.

"Uh, it looks like four this time," I answered in a fluster.

"Oh, yeah? Then it sounds like the Raid Team rides again!"

"Yep, sure does," Sugiura said.

"Aww, I wanted to go for once!"

"Let's let the Raid Team handle the events, Youko," said Masuda. "They're the ones with all the event experience. The club has a better chance of winning if they go."

"Good point! It's not just a game, after all…" All it took was a few words from Masuda, and Youko changed her tune in a flash. He was calm and rational, and once he came to a decision, it was hard to argue with him—especially for Youko.

"While they get ready for the event, the rest of us should focus on earning as much in-game money for them as we can before they go. What do you say, Youko?"

"Sounds great," she said. "So, shall we go see who we can round up to help out in the club room?"

"Let's do it!"

Youko was beaming. It looks like she'd be happy to do anything as long as she could do it with Masuda. The two of them said their goodbyes to the group and left the cafeteria.

"Hey, wait up! I'm coming, too! I promised earlier, didn't I?!" Akaishi called out as he got up and ran after them.

That left the four of us in the Raid Team in the cafeteria. It was time to decide when we'd participate in the Vermilion Event.

"I say we do it in one week from now," said Sugiura. "Anyone got a problem with that?" Nobody raised their hand. "One week from now it is, then. We'll plug in once the club meeting's over. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Yes, sir!"

"Roger that," Taichi said to cap it off. We'd settled on an event date without a hitch. "Oh, wait, Sugiura!"

"What now?"

"Zalbatoth says he wants to talk to Tow'el, if that's cool."

"……" Without another word, Sugiura clicked through the menus on his Nightmare console and pulled up Tow'el's Room screen.

"*Zzz… Zzz…*" Tow'el was fast asleep. He looked comfortable, tucked under one of those summer blankets that's made of

breathable towel-like fabric. *Hee-hee! He's all wrapped up like a bagworm moth!* I thought.

"Hey! Rise an' shine!"

"……Hmm? Well, if it isn't Sugiura! Heh. 'Sup?"

"……"

Tow'el was starting to talk like Sugiura. It was weird.

"Oh, hi, Tow'el! Long time no see," Zalbatoth greeted his fellow Grim Reaper from Taichi's screen.

"Yo, Zalbatoth! How's it goin'?"

"Not bad. Being a familiar's fun. I've got a TV and plenty of stuff to play with, so no complaints here."

Tow'el eyed all the furniture in Zalbatoth's room with jealousy. "Hey, Sugiura," he said. "See that donut-shaped cushion he's got? I want one, too!"

"Okay, fine."

"Yesss! You mean it?! Woo-hoo!"

"Yeah, I mean it," Sugiura said to his familiar. "Earn me three hundred more CP an' I'll get it for ya."

"Ugh, again? It's the same story every time! Man, you're stingy, Sugiura… Waaah, waaah…" Tow'el started crying, but given the timing—not to mention his poor acting—it was immediately obvious that his tears were fake. That trick wouldn't work on Sugiura.

"If you've got time to act like a bonehead, you've got time to get fightin'."

"C'mon, Sugiura. Can'tcha be a little nicer?" Taichi chimed in. "I'm starting to feel a little bad for poor Tow'el here. Right, Mai?"

"Right. I'd say that's a touch too harsh…"

"*Tch.* Fine, if you say so," Sugiura grumbled. He tapped on his Nightmare console. "Here. Eat this, an' then get to work." A bag of donuts fell into the middle of Tow'el's room.

How much do those donuts cost again? I thought. *Maybe about a hundred in-game yen or so. Sugiura's ranked third in the whole game, and I know he's got a ton of money. He could spring for something pricier.*

"Awww, yeah! Niiice!" Tow'el shouted, throwing his hands up with joy. He didn't waste another second before shoving donut after donut into his mouth. "Tasty! Tasty, tasty! Oooh, and this one's *super* tasty!"

"Ha-ha, that's pretty cute," said Asagi. "It's hard to believe he's a Grim Reaper like the ones we fought in the Forest of the Dead back in the day, huh, Mai?"

"You can say that again! Just looking at him cheers me up."

"Ain't that the truth!" Tow'el said proudly. "We're the cutest Grim Reapers out there, an' don'tcha forget it!" As he boasted, donut crumbs spilled from his mouth and scattered all across his room.

"Ugh, you're a sloppy eater. If you're gonna make this kinda mess eatin' donuts, I'll have to get you unflavored *konjac* next time instead."

Whaaat? Konjac? And without any toppings or anything? That's not a snack, that's a punishment!

"Heads up, Mai. Zalbatoth says he wants to talk to Amelie next."

"Oh, okay! Sounds good," I said. I thought back to the picture Amelie drew of Zalbatoth and Tow'el. *This could be a good chance to let her show it to them*, I thought as I clicked over to Amelie's Room.

"Amelie?"

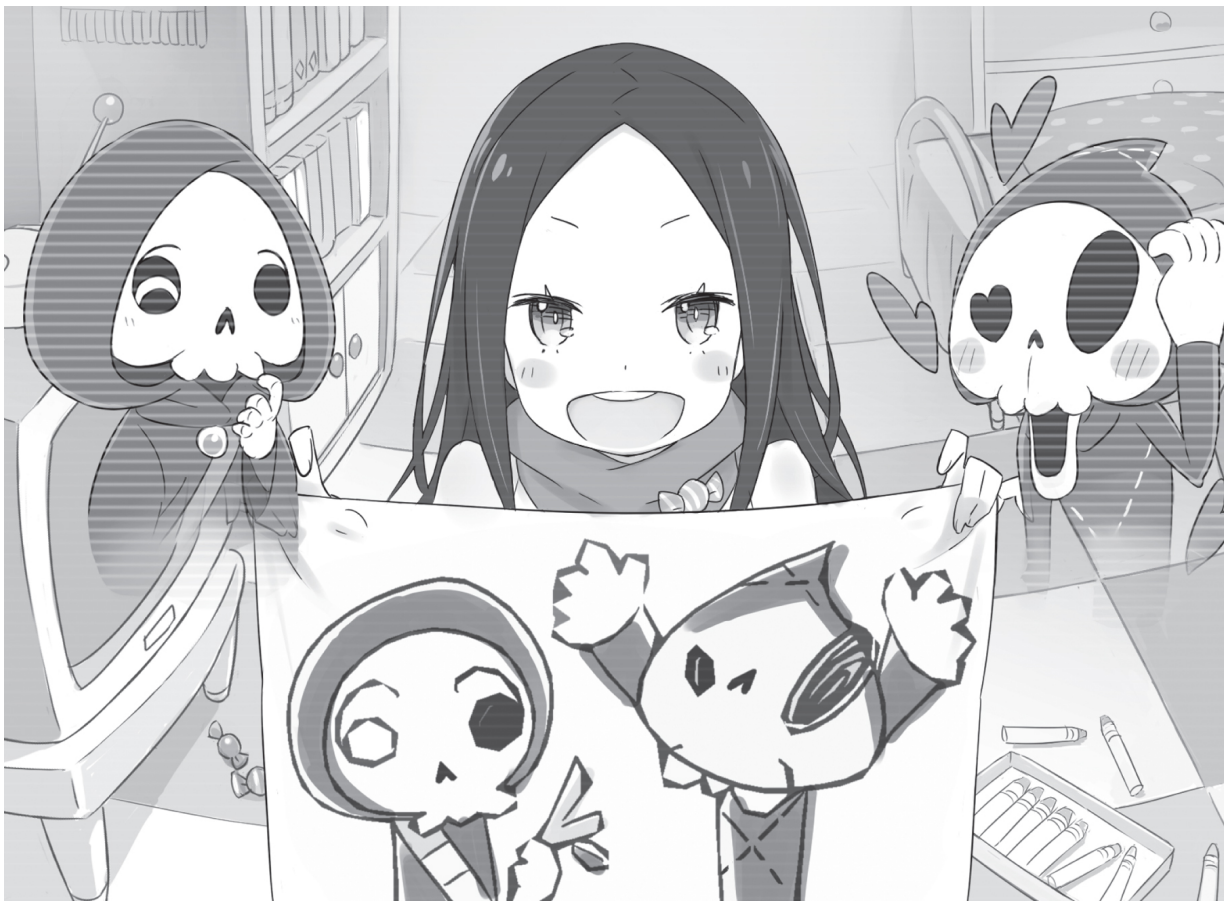
"Hmm? Oh, hi, Mai!" I caught Amelie in the middle of rolling around on the floor with her cheeks stuffed with candy.

"Remember that picture of Zalbatoth and Tow'el that you drew? Wanna show it to them?"

"Yeah!" She rolled over toward her bed and fished around underneath it. After searching for a while, she pulled out a sheet of paper. "Nice to see you guys! Look—this one's Zally, and this one's Towy!"

The two Grim Reapers stared at Amelie's drawing for a long while.

"Y'know, Zalbatoth, I don't think anybody's ever drawn my magnificent likeness before," said Tow'el.



"Me neither," said Zalbatoth. "Makes you happy, doesn't it?"

Both of them were overjoyed. They thanked Amelie over and over, and I could tell she was eager to draw them again. And for my part, I was delighted, too. It looked like I had nothing to worry about; Amelie and her fellow familiars were on track to become fast friends.

10

Entering the Vermilion Event

The days went by as they always did, and at last, the day of the event arrived. Over the past week, I'd leveled up to 234, bought new gear, and gotten all my preparations in order. Even I could tell that I was getting stronger by the day. My level used to be down in the single digits! When you think of it that way, that's a lot of progress, right?

We were all in the club room for the usual Nightmare Conquerors' Club-wide meeting. As soon as it ended, the four of us in the Raid Squad gathered.

"Another event, huh, Mai? Do your best," Naomi said, as kindly as ever. "But, um…don't push yourself too hard, okay?"

"Okay! Thanks, Naomi. I'll do what I can."

"Asagi, Sugiura, Taichi—take good care of Mai, all right?"

"Of course we will!"

"Yeah."

"We're on it!"

…Wait, what's that I feel? I wondered.

"Meeeow…" Mewta was rubbing up against my leg. *That's rare*, I thought. *Mewta usually sticks right beside Hirata…*

"…Mewta's worried about you…" Ah, there he was. "…I think he sees you guys as his friends."

"Wow, really?"

"Really… So come back safe, all right…? I wouldn't want Mewta to be sad…"

"Sure thing. You can count on us," I said as I reached down to gently pat Mewta on his little kitty head. His eyes closed—apparently, the petting felt good.

"Okay, Rito, be straight with me," Yoichi said, walking up next to Hirata. "Can you really tell how that cat's feeling?"

"Yes… Now, shall I tell your brother Taichi how you're feeling, Yoichi?"

"You better not, 'cause I'm gonna let him hear it in my own words! Got it?"

"…Are you, now?"

Yoichi walked up to Taichi and stood in front of him. "Listen, Taichi, will you please take the game seriously and not mess around for once? One time, that's all I'm asking. Also, I picked up some dumplings for you. I'll put 'em in your fridge for when you get back."

"Well, isn't that thoughtful of you, little bro! Thanks a bunch. Now I know I gotta win this thing." Taichi shot his brother a wide grin.

"Oh, right!" Youko cut in. "We've got nineteen billion yen saved up for you guys in Nightmare! That should cover six continues, if you need 'em."

"Whoa! Thanks, Youko!"

"Aw, don't mention it. It's literally the least we can do to help."

"Yashiro, Sugiura, Taichi, Asagi… I'll be right here to offer any support I can. Please give this event all you've got," said Masuda.

With encouragement like that, we've gotta nail this! I decided.

"Um… Do—do your best, okay?" Even Kaneda was cheering for us, in his own sheepish way.

"Sheesh, Kaneda, speak up! What are ya, a ghost?!" Takojima snapped—he was every bit as loud as Kaneda was quiet.

"Oogh…"

"Oh, give him a break! When it comes to cheering someone on, it's not about how loud you are! It's the thought that counts!" Youko said, scolding Takojima. Akaishi nodded furiously in agreement.

"Pffft! What's the point if they can't even hear ya? Am I right, Akaishi?"

"M-me?!" Akaishi was flustered. In his bid for backup, Takojima had put his friend on the spot. "I—I—I dunno, I mean, this time around, I'm cheering for 'em all through sheer willpower alone! Like, psychically! Thoughts and feelings are, y'know, crucial for that! Actually, isn't cheering in a loud voice kind of *out* these days? I hear what's trendy now is *whisper-cheering*, y'know, kinda like reciting a prayer or something under your breath…?"

"Huh? What the heck're you talkin' about, man? None'a that makes sense," said Takojima, staring wide-eyed at his friend.

Just then the notification light on my Nightmare console blinked. I had a new message. *Let's see, who sent it…? Oh!*

It was from Tanaka. I assumed it had something to do with the event. I'd told Tsubasa that we found the tickets, and he probably told the rest of his party.

[From: Kenichi Tanaka]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
Yo! It's me!
The day of the event's here at last, huh? Here's a cheer for you!
Beef bowl! Beef bowl! Beef bowl! Wahoo, beef bowl!
I'm going all-out today. Guess how many beef bowls I've had since breakfast?
Three! ★ Yummy yum yum!
But past experience has taught me that if I have one more, I'll get a major stomachache, so I'm leaving it there!

(Oooh! That's using your noodle! says Bystander C!)
Oh, right, I've got some messages to pass along to you. Here goes.

«From Tsubasa»
Meh, do your best. Too bad you didn't invite me along this time, though.
Don't come crying to me when you regret it.

«From Takimoto»
Thanks a lot for coming out to my show the other day.
Now it's my turn to cheer you on!
Keep on fighting for all of us!

«From Naitou»
Heeere's Naitou!
Do your best, everybody! Get out there and take down Nightmare!
And remember, I'm always accepting applications for whoever wants to be my girlfriend (lol).

«From Miyazawa»
Take care in the event! I'm sorry I can't be there fighting by your side, but I'll be working hard to find all sorts of strategies to share with you.

That's that! I'll be praying for you guys to put up a good fight! Tanaka out!
END

It wasn't only from Tanaka; everyone in Tsubasa's party had a message for us. It was just the encouragement I needed. (Sure, part of it was a little weird…but I decided not to think too much about that.) I thought back over all the kind words and support we'd received. More than ever before, I was confident we'd conquer the Vermilion Event for sure.

"Awright, time to get goin'. Asagi, Taichi, Mai—you all good to go?"

"Yeah, I'm ready."

"I'm a-okay, boss!"

"Me, too."

"Then let's do this."

"""Roger!""" The three of us nodded as we answered in unison. We made sure the event tickets were filled in with our names.

These special events were like Battles of Wits, in that we didn't play them by controlling avatars on the other side of a screen. It was like we went inside the game; we had to play as ourselves. I gulped as the usual earphones popped out of their compartment on our Nightmare consoles. I put mine into my ears.

※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 filled my ears. I wondered how many more times I'd have to hear it before I was finally free. That was the last thought on my mind before my consciousness began to drift away.

11

Playing Solo

……Ngh……

My eyes slowly opened.

—Where am I? Am I in the event already?

I found myself lying on the floor in the middle of a tiny room. There were no windows and only one door. Stuck to the door was a piece of paper that read: HALLWAY OF TRIALS.

I realized that nobody else was in there with me.

Wait, what?! All four of us joined the event… What's going on? I looked around the room in a panic, afraid that the others had left me behind. And then— *"Welcome to the World of Nightmare."* The voice I recognized as Kamisawa, Nightmare's top administrator, came out of a speaker attached to the ceiling.

"What's the big idea?" I asked him.

"Hee-hee… I must admit, I thought it'd take you longer to get here this time. Then again, you always put up more of a fight than I expect."

Is he trying to change the subject? I wondered.

"Forget that," I said. "Where are the others?!"

"…You'll find your meeting place beyond the Hallway of Trials—if you prevail, that is. It's right beyond that door."

"Hallway of Trials…?"

"Indeed. I've thought long and hard about what your weakness might be…and I've finally found the answer."

"—What's that supposed to mean?"

"You'll have to play to find out, won't you?" Kamisawa said. *"… Alas, I fear this may be our very last conversation."*

What does he mean, he's found my weakness? I didn't follow at all.

"Answer me!"

"Now, let the game begin," he said, completely ignoring my question. *"Ah, one more thing. The boss has the key to the Victory Application Point, but I wouldn't try to fight it until after you reach the meeting place, if I were you. I'm afraid that's the last bit of kindness I have to offer. And with that…"*

—Click.

As usual, Kamisawa cut off his side of the communications.

One thing was clear: I'd have to manage on my own this time. From what Kamisawa said, I knew I would run into the floor boss before I got to the meeting place and reunited with the others.

What do I do? I thought. *This is way scarier than usual!*

Actually, another thing was clear: I had to gather up my nerve and press on. There was no other way.

I opened the door to find another small room behind it. I didn't expect a boss to show up in there, but still, I couldn't be too careful. I stepped slowly into the room, trying not to make a sound.

Then I got a message. A message from Asagi!

[From: Taisuke Asagi]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
Are you okay, Mai?!
It looks like we're all going to be playing solo for a while. I wish I could teleport over to you right this second, but that's not happening. Stinks, doesn't it? I know you're probably scared, but try to stay calm and be

brave. Take it slow and steady. Know that the rest of us are doing our best, too!
I'll see you at the meeting place. That's a promise. :|
END

Asagi… That settled it. I had to give this event everything I had. No way was I gonna let Nightmare beat me. I'd made it this far thanks to all the help and support from my fellow players. Now that I was alone, it was all too easy to think, *I can't do anything. I'm scared. It's no use. I give up.* But no. I wouldn't let those thoughts win. I wouldn't surrender.

I wasn't the only one who wanted to beat Nightmare, after all. I mean, that was the whole point of the Conquerors' Club!

I looked at my inbox again. I had messages from Sugiura and Taichi waiting for me.

[From: Shinji Sugiura]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
I don't care if you mess up, but you better not give up.
Get to the meeting place, no matter what it takes.
I'll be waiting.
END

[From: Taichi Tango]
[To: Mai Yashiro]
You doing okay, Mai?

Here's a tip: If something scary pops up, just imagine something even worse. Do that, and suddenly everything around you will start looking pretty good by comparison—and boom, no more shaky legs.
Hey, I bet Asagi and Sugiura are both suuuper pale with worry 'cause you're not around right about now! You gotta make it to the meeting spot so they'll know you're okay!
END

So Sugiura and Taichi were looking out for me, too. I absolutely couldn't let them down. I had to get my head in the game.

I sent off replies to all three of them, then began to search the room. The first thing I noticed was a poster stuck to the wall… A poster of Asagi's avatar. The words "ASAGI—5,000 HP" were written under his picture.

There were more words under that, too: "INVINCIBLE. ESCAPE TO THE MEETING PLACE! YOU'LL FIND MORE DETAILS THERE."

What's Asagi's avatar doing on that poster? I wondered. It was a surprise, to say the least. *And why does it show his HP? And what's all this "invincible," "escape" stuff about?* If the poster was correct, the answers were probably waiting at the meeting place, but still… Whatever was going on, I didn't like it.

I didn't have to look far to find the next item of interest. At the base of the wall to the left of the poster, there was a treasure chest. *Is it locked…? Doesn't look like it. I could probably get it open right away,* I guessed. I carefully checked it for signs of traps, then slowly pried the lid open.

Inside, I found three Skill Chips. Before deciding whether to pick them up, I checked them one by one.

[Skill Chips]
Greatsword (∞) [Effects]
Summons a heavy weapon.
You can use a command to draw the sword and put it away again.
[Requirements]
None (Recommended for male players)
Zan Slash (3/3)
[Effects]
Can be attached to a bladed weapon as a Weapon Skill.
Fires a shockwave that allows close-range weapons to attack from a distance.
[Requirements]
None

Trash Bag (1/1)
[Effects]
A run-of-the-mill, black trash bag.
It's empty.
[Requirements]
Level 1

Hmmm. Going by the descriptions, none of the Skill Chips seemed very impressive. At least the first one, Greatsword, didn't have any

requirements that would stop me from using it, but the parts about how it was "heavy" and "recommended for male players" stuck out. Even if I could use it, I probably couldn't use it *well*. And I didn't have to think very hard to figure out that the Trash Bag was the odd man out… *Maybe I'd better search the room a little more before I pick these up*, I thought.

During events like this, each player could only carry up to ten items. If we picked up every piece of junk we found, we'd run out of space in no time.

Beep, beep, beep! An alarm rang out from my Nightmare console. I checked the screen and saw this text: **[Call Request from Taisuke Asagi]**

Whoa, that's new! I exclaimed to myself. It looked like we could use our consoles to communicate with each other during this event. Kamisawa hadn't mentioned it, so I assumed we wouldn't be able to talk to each other while we were split up.

I accepted Asagi's request right away. His face popped up on my console screen.

"Oh, there you are, Mai! Great. It's reassuring to see your face."

"Same here," I replied. "I felt kind of helpless and alone, being all by myself. Good thing we can use Nightmare's communication features this time."

"You're telling me. I figured it probably wouldn't work, but I had to give it a shot anyway. I couldn't believe I got through. Still, though… It's hard knowing I can't do anything to help you out."

"What do you mean? You're already giving me extra courage just by calling to talk to me."

On the screen, I saw Asagi look down and chuckle sheepishly. Maybe I'd made him feel bashful.

Hang on a sec— With Asagi's head tilted down, I had a clear view of the area around him. He was in a room that looked exactly like the one I was in.

"Um, Asagi?"

"Hmm? What's up?"

"There's not a poster in that room with you, is there?"

"Yeah, there is, actually!"

"What's on it?"

"Well, it's your avatar, Mai. I don't get what it means, though. Any guesses?"

"So I'm on your poster, huh? Your avatar's on the poster in my room."

"What? M-my avatar?! But why…? Oh! Maybe it means you and I'll be able to meet up and band together first."

"I sure hope that's what it means," I said. "…But I dunno. I can't say why, exactly, but I've got a bad feeling about these posters."

"You do?!" Asagi looked straight into his camera at me with wide, surprised eyes.

"I'm gonna try talking to Sugiura and Taichi. Can I call you back later?"

"Of course! While you're doing that, I'll look around and see what else I can find in this room."

"Great, thanks." I cut the call with Asagi and sent a call request to Sugiura. A moment later, there he was on my Nightmare console screen with the same stony look on his face as always.

"…What is it?"

"Hi, Sugiura! Can you describe where you are for me?"

Sure enough, he was also in a room that was arranged exactly like mine.

"There's nothin' else I can say right now," he said. *"Priority number one's gotta be gettin' all of us to that meetin' place."*

"That's what I was thinking, too."

The Greatsword Skill Chip I'd found was meant for a male player. I realized that even if I didn't think I could use it very well, I could still pick it up and trade it off to someone else when we got to the meeting place.

"One more question, Sugiura. Is there a poster in that room?" There was, and he showed me by turning his camera to face it. It

had Taichi's avatar on it. "The poster in my room shows Asagi's, and Asagi's shows mine," I explained.

"Gotcha… I take it Taichi's lookin' at a poster of me right about now?"

"That would definitely fit the pattern."

"Who knows what that's s'posed to mean? Whatever it is, we oughtta be extra cautious."

"No argument there…"

"Awright, I'm gonna head outta this room to scout out the meetin' spot. Fill Asagi an' Taichi in for me. And tell 'em I don't want any of you guys leavin' your rooms till I send you a message sayin' so, got it?"

"Got it."

Sugiura would do us all a favor and make the first move. He was always a solid leader, but it was times like these when his leadership truly shined. At the same time, though, I was worried about him.

"Um, Sugiura…? Be careful out there, okay?"

"I know, I know. Awright, already," he said. He subtly touched his ear while he said it, but his face twisted into a super-scary scowl.

I told Sugiura I'd get in touch with Taichi, and then we ended the call.

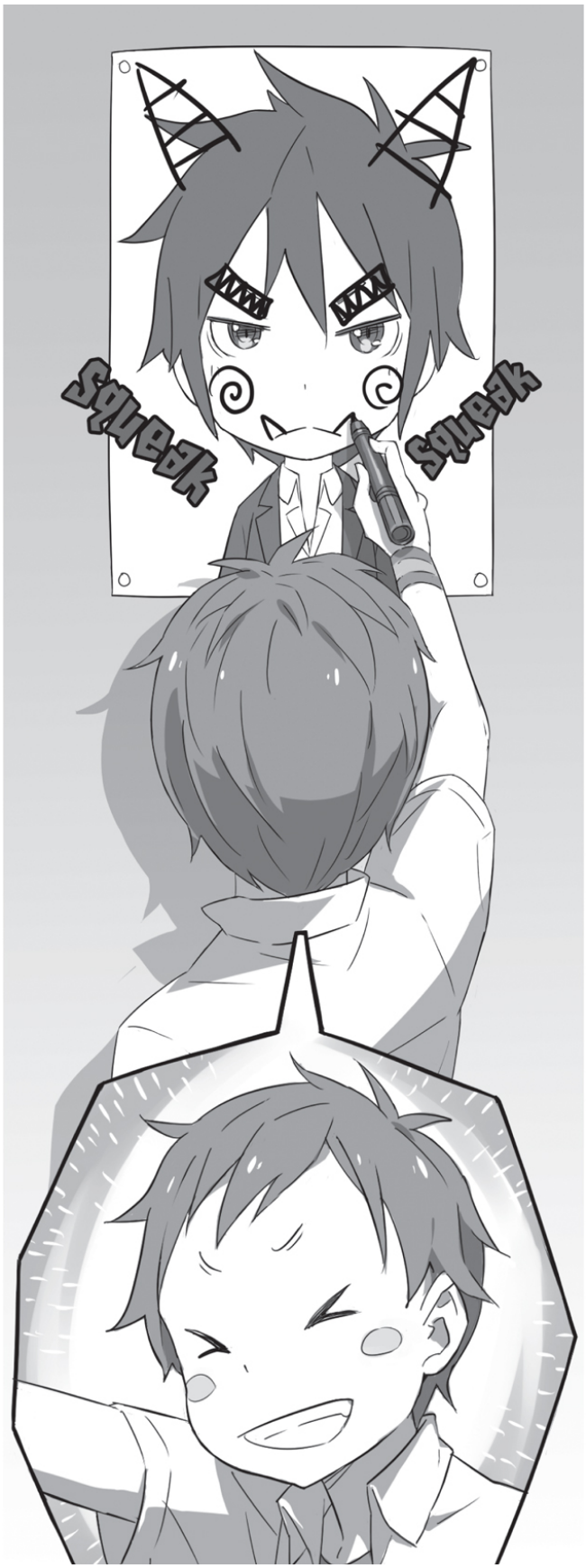
Now, then… Before putting a call in to Taichi, I sent a quick message to Asagi to tell him not to leave the room until we heard from Sugiura. A moment later, I got a reply back: **Roger! :| Hang in there, Mai! If you get worried or scared, you can call or text me any time. No problem is too small!**

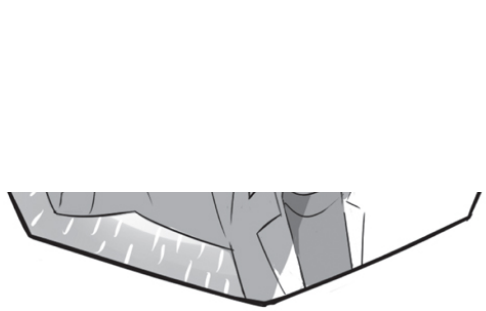
That was Asagi for you. He was always looking out for me. As I read over his message, I could feel my worries fade away.

—Oh! Right! I've gotta call Taichi ASAP! What if he leaves his room before I can tell him not to?! I quickly sent him a call request. He accepted it right away, and his face popped up on my console screen.

"Yo, Mai!" Taichi said with a grin, holding a hand up in my direction. He didn't look scared—if anything, it looked like he was

having tons of fun. I noticed he had a marker clutched in his outstretched hand.


squeak
squeak



"What's up, Taichi? Find something?"

"Oh-ho, you can tell, huh? Here. See for yourself." He hopped to one side, letting the camera show me the poster on the wall behind him.

Uh… What?! Sugiura's avatar was on the poster, like I expected… but that's not all. It was covered in graffiti; there were swirly spirals drawn on his cheeks and two horns sticking out of the top of his head. *Is he supposed to be an ogre…? O-okay, I'm not gonna lie; that's funny!* I thought. *But now is not the time!*

"T-Taichi! We're in the middle of an event! Why are you playing around?!"

"Heh-heh-heh, sorry, Mai! But, uh, don't tell Sugiura, 'kay?"

"Don't tell him…?" I asked. "You do realize that if he calls you, he's gonna see it, don't you?"

"No sweat! I'll just do this," Taichi said. He pulled the poster off the wall and stuck it back up facing backward.

"I… I see…" I had to admit, Taichi was a quick thinker when it came to worming his way out of trouble!

"Anyway, Mai, was there something you had to tell me?"

"Oh! Y-yeah!" *Get it together, me!* Taichi's little art project caught me so off guard, I'd totally forgotten why I called him in the first place. I passed Sugiura's message along.

"Roger that," Taichi said. *"Guess I'll keep searching this room, then."*

"Great. But no more graffiti, okay?!"

"Ohhh-kay," he said, then he signed off the call. Classic Taichi; he kept it light and friendly all the way through.

Right, so… Now what?

12

The Floor Boss Is… Asagi?!

I got the feeling we wouldn't get another message from Sugiura for a while, so I decided to search the room and see if I could find more than a handful of Skill Chips. I figured if I moved around and kept my body occupied, maybe it would keep my mind off of the fear and danger, too. I scanned the room for anything beyond the treasure chest.

There was a table scattered with pens and rulers, and next to that, there stood a trash can. Since there was nothing better to do, I peeked inside.

Orange Peel (1/1)
[Effects]
Just an orange peel.
[Requirements]
Level 39

Bag of Expired Flour (1/1)
[Effects]
The flour inside can be thrown at enemies—but don't expect it to do any damage.
[Requirements]

Level 5

What is this junk? No matter how you look at it, it's literally garbage. There seemed to be plenty of useless stuff to go around in the Vermilion Event. We would have to be really, really careful about which items we picked up!

I kept searching the room, but all I found were more seemingly pointless Skill Chips. To be honest, the Greatsword and Zan Slash chips I found in the treasure chest were the only ones that looked remotely useful. I decided to pick those two Skill Chips up first.

What else…? I pondered. It couldn't hurt to pick up anything that I could possibly put to work. I snagged the Orange Peel, the Bag of Expired Flour, and two more I'd found: Waste Oil and a Broken Rice Scoop. I couldn't say it made for a very reassuring arsenal, but it was better than nothing. Probably.

After I added all of that to my inventory, the notification light on my Nightmare console blinked again. I took a look at the screen and saw that a notice had popped up.

[NOTICE]
Shinji Sugiura has made his way through the Hallway of Trials!
He has arrived at the Meeting Place.
Party Members Gathered: (1/4)

—! Sugiura made it! Yesss! I cheered internally.

As a wave of relief washed over me, a call request came in from Sugiura. Naturally, I accepted it right away.

"Hey, Mai!"

"Hi, Sugiura! It looks like you made it there safe, huh?"

"Yeah. No big deal. But while I was blowin' through the Hallway of Trials, I realized somethin'. If I'm worried about any of us this time, it's you."

"Huh…? Why's that?"

"'Cause I'm pretty sure the player on the poster is gonna show up while you're headin' down the Hallway of Trials. An' this event's got four *floor bosses. You see what I'm gettin' at here?"*

Wait, does that mean…?

"Am I going to run into Asagi?"

"Not the real one. A fake."

"A fake…?" I put two and two together and realized that Sugiura must've fought a fake Taichi. "Um, what was the fake Taichi like?"

"He looked like the real thing, but he didn't talk like 'im. I figure they can't copy our personalities that well," he said. "*Look, Mai. I made a break for it an' I managed to outrun my Taichi fake. But that's not gonna work for you, is it?"*

Urk… No, it's not.

"I'm worried about Taichi, too, in that case," I said. Can you blame me? He had a fake Sugiura to deal with. Sugiura was quick, athletic, and above all, totally merciless. Just the thought of fighting a fake one had me shaking!

"Huh? Hey, what's that s'posed to mean…?"

"Um, n-nothing. You're just, y'know, a fast runner, that's all."

"Hmph. I get the feelin' that's not *all, but whatever. No time to fuss about that."*

Phew. Home free, I thought. I managed not to add an angry *real* Sugiura to our list of problems.

"Anyway, I gave Taichi an' Asagi the go-ahead to get movin'. You gear up an' head out, too."

"Okay. Got it."

"I'll be waitin' at the rendezvous," Sugiura said. Then he hung up.

I heaved a *huuuge* sigh of relief once our call ended, though I didn't have too much to feel relieved about—for one, I'm not very athletic. What's worse, I was up against a floor boss that looked like

Asagi. Talk about double trouble! But there was no way around it. I had to try.

I wonder if I'll make it to the meeting place, I thought as I slowly, quietly opened the door leading to the Hallway of Trials. Since I didn't have much hope of running to safety, I would have to try sneaking my way through without getting caught. I peeked out the door, but I didn't find what I expected. There was no hallway; the door led into another room—a way, way bigger room than the one I'd been in.

Hmm…, I thought. *It is pretty big. Maybe this whole space is the so-called "Hallway of Trials."* It was certainly starting to look that way. I'd been expecting a narrow-ish hallway—wide enough for one or two people to pass through at once—so the huge, open room was quite a surprise. *Haaah… I've got a really bad feeling about this*, I admitted to myself.

I took another look around. This giant hallway (which, again, seemed more like a long, spacious room) was randomly scattered with blocks of all colors. Well, I say "blocks," but like the hallway, they were way bigger than one might expect. If I curled into a ball, I'd probably be able to hide behind one.

Maybe I can use these blocks to get to the meeting place safely, I strategized. I looked down at the floor and saw a red arrow pointing in the direction I was supposed to go. I could still move forward or backward, left or right, freely…but the arrow pointed straight ahead. *That probably leads to where I wanna go*, I thought. *Probably.*

Slowly and steadily, I crept in that direction, taking care to stay hidden behind the blocks. It was scary, to say the least. My floor boss could show up at any time…

And then—

<!> Floor Boss Approaching <!>

—flashed on my Nightmare console screen.

He's here! But where?! In a panic, I looked all around in search of the boss. There, standing right behind a square, yellow block, in his school uniform, stood Fake Asagi. And he was looking over in my direction. *Wait… Did he catch me already?!*

No sooner had I caught on than Fake Asagi started running. I could hear his feet pounding against the floor as he made a straight line right for me.

Oh, crud! He's gonna get me! I thought. I took off running, too, in the opposite direction. In other words, right back the way I'd come. I panted hard as I ran. *It's no use… I'm already out of breath!* The distance between me and Fake Asagi got shorter and shorter with every step. There was no way I could beat Asagi, even a fake one, when it came to sheer strength.

I don't need to tell you he caught up with me. And then—

Yank!

Fake Asagi grabbed me by the arm.

"…Ack!"

To my surprise, when I turned to look at Fake Asagi, he was smiling kindly. That smile… It was the same smile Asagi always gave me. Then he leaned close to me, and I felt my back thump against the wall.

"*Heh-heh-heh. Looks like I won…*," Fake Asagi said with a chuckle. He stood right in front of me. It seemed impossible to run away now.

"A-Asagi…"

I was freaking out! He may have smiled like Asagi, but the Asagi I knew never acted like this!! I tried to shove Fake Asagi away, but he didn't even flinch. Then he tapped at the Nightmare console on his arm and equipped himself with a sword.





—! Ohhh, this is bad! He's gonna kill me!

I twisted my body away from Fake Asagi, trying as hard as I could to flee, but I was no match for his strength. He swung his sword.

<!> Entering Combat! <!> • Fake Asagi attacked!

• 850 damage to Mai!

[HP Remaining]

Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,150/5,000 (-850)]

"……!"

A wave of pain ran through my whole body. I knew it wasn't the real Asagi that hit me. I knew that, but still…it was hard to take.

Fake Asagi kept slashing and slicing, but I couldn't run away.

"Asagi, stop! Please!" I cried. I couldn't stop the flood of tears pouring down my face. I wasn't crying because of the pain, though —I couldn't bear seeing Asagi attack me with such a terrifying look on his face. Like I said, I knew it wasn't the real Asagi, but it didn't make a difference. I couldn't help but feel heartbroken.

I couldn't fight back or flee, either. My HP fell to zero in the blink of an eye. Suddenly, everything around me went blurry.

Oh… For an instant, I understood what Kamisawa meant when he said this might be the last time— But all I could focus on was the Fake Asagi in front of me. In the next moment, everything went black.

13

Help from My Friends

Ooogh…

I lifted my tear-drenched face and immediately heard the voices of the Nightmare Conquerors' Club all around me.

"Are you all right, Mai?!" Naomi asked as she squeezed my hand. From how hard she held it, I could tell I must have been shaking.

"Y-yeah… Sorry. I got a Game Over."

"That's okay, Mai. We know you played your hardest. You always do."

"Thanks, Naomi…" It was comforting to see her smiling every bit as sweetly as she usually did.

Since I was the only member of the Raid Team who'd woken up, the club must have guessed what happened. They all looked at me with worry in their eyes.

I looked down at the Nightmare console in my hands. The top part of the screen read, **[Game Over. You may continue in 59 minutes. (Continuing will cost 3,000,000,000 in-game yen.)]** But that wasn't all. Below that, it said:

[You have lost your Respawn Penalty: Left Hand. Your Respawn Penalty is only temporarily forfeited for now, but if your whole party gets a Game Over, the whole party's Respawn Penalties will be lost.]

Respawn Penalties worked a little differently during events than they did during normal gameplay. We only lost the use of our body parts if our party didn't win the event. For example, even if I died again and lost my mouth, I would still be able to talk for as long as the event lasted. Again, this was the rule for events and events alone. I figured it had to be that way, or else events would be impossible. If our legs stopped working during an event and we couldn't run anymore, we couldn't possibly win. A game's got to at least have a system to let us keep playing.

"What's going on in the game, Yashiro?" Masuda asked.

"Well, here's the thing…" I filled them in on everything from the structure of the event to how I got a Game Over.

"I see… So you've got to get past a fake Asagi. That seems quite tough."

"It is. There's no way I'll ever outrun him… If he sees me, he chases me, and if he chases me, he catches up. I can't get away."

"…So you can't win with strength or speed. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah…"

Now what? If I just waited out the hour and jumped back in blindly, I knew the same thing would happen. I had to use my downtime to think of a plan.

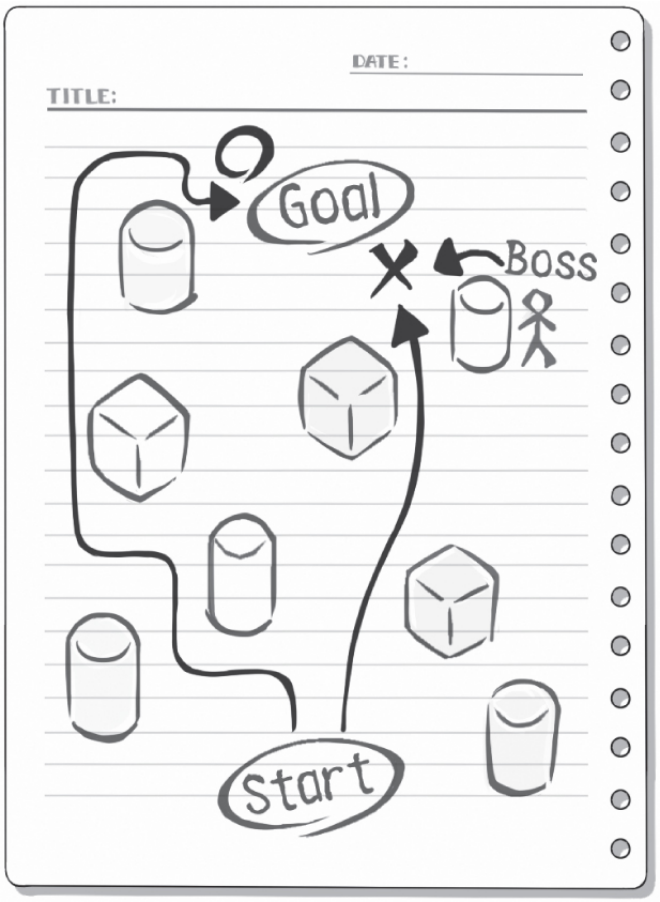
"Hey, Mai, your console's lighting up!" said Youko. A new notice flashed across the upper part of the screen.

[NOTICE]
Taisuke Asagi has made his way through the Hallway of Trials!
He has arrived at the Meeting Place.
Party Members Gathered: (2/4)

From the looks of it, Asagi made it through the hallway safely. *That's a relief…*

I looked up from Nightmare to see Masuda coming over to the table with a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Would you mind sketching the area you were in for me, Yashiro?"


DATE :
TITLE:
Goal
Boss
Start

"Oh, sure," I said. I tried to draw the Hallway of Trials as well as I could remember.

"I see. So the floor boss appeared around here?"

"That's right."

"In that case, how 'bout going this way next time?" Youko said as she traced a new route through the map I'd drawn. Her route steered clear of the spot where Fake Asagi showed up.

"That's what I was thinking," Masuda said. "There are more hiding spots on that side, too, so it should be safer. But there's one problem…"

"What is it?"

"It only works if the boss is in the same spot as before."

He made a good point. For all I knew, Fake Asagi was moving around as we spoke. It seemed I'd be better off thinking through a few different patterns to pick from. But before I could continue, a loud, sudden cry derailed my train of thought.

"Waaaugh!" Taichi jolted awake.

"Huh?!"

"……Wha—?" Taichi mumbled in confusion as he looked all around himself. A few seconds later, he seemed to figure out what happened. He heaved a huge sigh.

"A-are you okay, Taichi?"

"Floor boss got you, huh, Mai?"

"Yeah…"

"That makes two of us," said Taichi. "Sugiura came chargin' right up and beat the snot outta me."

R-right, I thought, *Taichi's boss is a fake Sugiura. Oof, talk about scary.* With a Fake Sugiura in the mix, I was lucky to get matched with Fake Asagi, in a way.

"I'm not gonna lie: It's *scary*," Taichi continued. "If this wasn't an event, no way would you ever get me back in there. Man, I'm gonna be having nightmares about this." I'd never seen him look so pale before. Even though we were in more or less the same situation, I couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

Then two messages came in—one from Asagi and one from Sugiura. Asagi's said, **I can't believe Nightmare's making you face a copy of me... I'm really sorry about that. I'm also sorry I can't do anything to help but cheer you on from here. But please hang in there, Mai! :I** It was kind, thoughtful, and comforting.

Meanwhile, Sugiura had this to say: **If he's that much like Asagi, you should be able to kick his butt. Show him no mercy.**

Sheesh, Sugiura! The fact that the boss looked like Asagi was the whole reason I couldn't fight back!

"Ha-ha, classic Sugiura. Gotta blow off some of that steam, huh?"

"Taichi, this is no time for wisecracks! If we don't think up a plan for after we respawn, it'll be a repeat performance."

"Huh. Good point, Mai. And believe me, I'd rather not let Sugiura kick my butt again."

Taichi and I spent the next hour discussing a few plans with the rest of the Conquerors' Club. We figured if we all talked it over, we'd eventually come up with a solid strategy. Not a single person scolded us for getting Game Overs. Everyone in the club was super nice—of course, that meant we couldn't let them down!

"If you can't beat 'em with brute strength, you're gonna have to whip out you-know-what," said Takojima. "Am I right, Akaishi?"

"Er, I don't know what 'you-know-what' is, actually."

Takojima smirked as he reached into a pants pocket and pulled something out.

"You know! The ol' hot-an'-spicy bomb trick!" He held up a bottle of spicy-looking red powder. "Get 'em in the eyes with this stuff, an' the rest is a cinch!"

"…Takojima, they're not going to just stumble on that kind of spice in the middle of an event. That'd be way too convenient," Akaishi said with an exasperated sigh. I started to zone out, half-listening to the two of them bickering.

Then it hit me—I *had* stumbled on an item that was kind of like Takojima's spice bomb: the Bag of Expired Flour. There should be more than enough flour to block someone's vision in there. Maybe that would work. I decided that once I got back in the game, I'd check the other Skill Chips and see if any of them might slow Fake Asagi down, too.

"Um, Taichi?"

"Hmm? What's up?"

"Let's talk Skill Chips for a sec…" I went over my idea with him.

"Gotcha! Good thinking, Mai! That should work. Man, you're sharp."

"Who, me? Nah, I wouldn't have thought of it if it wasn't for Takojima and Akaishi. Thanks a lot for the tip, guys," I said, smiling over at the two former bullies.

"Wait, for real?! Heh-heh! I always knew we were a couple'a geniuses!" Takojima guffawed in delight.

"Ha-ha, come on, that was a fluke," said Akaishi. "Besides, what do you mean, 'we'? I'm the one who gets decent test grades. And I've got better looks, too…" For some reason, he'd decided to take this as an opportunity to one-up his buddy.

"What wazzat?! You may get better grades, but there's no way you got better looks! I'm wild, bro! Ladies love wild!"

"Wha—?!"

Right when it looked like their argument was about to turn into a full-blown fight, Takojima suddenly froze. Then he sniffed at the air. He turned and followed his twitching nose to Kaneda's seat.

*Huh? Wait… Is that…*takoyaki *I smell?* I thought. It was! Kaneda was grilling *takoyaki*! But why?!

"Hey, Kaneda! Hook me up with one'a those! Then teach me how to make 'em!"

"E-eeep! I— I can't… These are for Yashiro and her party!"

"When'd you get the guts to talk back to me, huh?"

Kaneda looked as surprised about that as Takojima did.

"I'll gladly teach you later, so hold your horses, okay?!" Kaneda said as he plopped a few *takoyaki* onto plates and brought them over to Taichi and me. "Um, sorry I don't have any good advice or anything. I know it's not any real help…but you can have this *takoyaki*, if you'd like. It always cheers me up, and I thought a little pick-me-up might, y'know, bring you a tiny bit closer to victory."

"Thanks a ton, man," Taichi said as he shot a look my way. We shared a smile. "Don't mind if I do! Down the ha—aaah! Haah! Hot, hot, hot, hot…"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Slow down and savor it, Taichi! Thank you, Kaneda. This'll really help build up our courage," I said as I popped a *takoyaki* in my mouth.

My fears were trying to drag me down, but I had the hopes and well-wishes of the Nightmare Conquerors' Club to lift me up. Quitting now was not an option; I had to get back in the game and try again. I looked out across the crowded club room at each and every face around me, and my heart filled with courage.

Right at that moment, a new prompt popped up on my Nightmare screen: **You may now continue. [YES / NO]**

I knew I couldn't afford to be careless this time. Well, I could technically afford to die four more times in the game, but the floor boss would still be there!

"I'm going back in, Taichi."

"Roger that. Break a leg, Mai!"

"All right!" I picked my mouth as my next Respawn Penalty and paid the three-billion-yen price. I was heading right back into the Vermilion Event. And this time, I was gonna beat that Fake Asagi for sure!

14

Real vs. Fake

Now that my hour was over and my 3,000,000,000 yen was paid, I found myself back in the starting room—the one with nothing but a door. *All right! Gotta do my best!*

As I reached for the door, I heard Kamisawa's voice again.

"*Heh-heh. Looks like you're going through quite a struggle*," he said. He sounded like he was having the time of his life.

"……" How big of a jerk could you be?

"Again, I'll admit I do feel a bit lonely when I realize this might be goodbye… But I suppose what will be, will be."

"Don't go deciding what 'will be' just yet!" I shouted back. "Watch me. I'll win this time."

"Heh-heh… You've got spirit, I'll give you that. By all means, prove me wrong." And with that, he cut off the connection.

I opened the door and headed into the next room. This time, I saw the Skill Chips in a new light. I considered them again and made a some choices. The Bag of Expired Flour would stay, but it wasn't quite enough. All flour would do was block Fake Asagi's vision for a little while. It wouldn't slow him down for very long. If I was going to make a break for the meeting place, I needed to stop him in his tracks.

After a bit more thought, I decided to take the Bag of Expired Flour, the Waste Oil, and a Bag of Expired Pepper. Then I decided to take whatever else seemed remotely useful. At first glance, that described exactly nothing in the room. But now that I looked again,

I saw that wasn't true. There was plenty of stuff that I could use to slow Fake Asagi down with a bit of work and creativity.

I tapped on my Nightmare console and selected the Bag of Expired Flour. A bag of flour appeared in my right hand. I untied the knot that held the bag closed. *There. Now I'm ready*, I thought. I gripped the bag tightly and held my hand out of sight as I stepped carefully into the Hallway of Trials.

The giant blocks were still there. I crept along behind them like I did last time, trying to stay hidden. I still hadn't seen Fake Asagi. *Yet.* If he was waiting in the same spot as before, he would be behind a square, yellow block a bit farther down the hall.

—*Ba-thump. Ba-thump.* My heart beat louder and louder with each step. I was terrified, but that didn't matter. I had to get through the hallway. The rest of the Raid Team would be waiting for me. And most of all, I didn't want to end the game stuck in such an awful place. I gathered my courage and pressed on.


EXPIRED
FLOUR



Suddenly, a familiar message flashed across my Nightmare screen. The floor boss was approaching!

There he is! I thought as I spotted Fake Asagi in more or less the same spot where he'd showed up the first time. And like before, he sprinted straight at me. I took off running, too, checking my surroundings as I went.

All right, gotta get behind that big blue block! I darted behind it for cover and got ready to throw the flour. I had to be extra careful not to accidentally breathe it in myself.

Thump, thump, thump! I listened very closely to Fake Asagi's footsteps. I knew that he would have to slow down a bit to turn the corner around the block where I was hiding. When his pace dropped for that split second, that would be my chance to strike. All I could do was wait and listen.

Thump, thump, thump, thump…… Thump!

Now!

The instant Fake Asagi's face came around the corner of the blue block, I heaved the bag of flour at him.

"*Uwaugh!* " he grunted as a thick, white cloud filled the air.

I immediately backed up and tapped at my Nightmare console again, this time choosing the Bag of Expired Pepper. I took a deep breath, held it in so I wouldn't get a mouthful of pepper, and flung the bag at Fake Asagi right before he could put his arm all the way up to protect his eyes.

"*Urgh…! Ah… Achoo! Achooo!!* " Fake Asagi sneezed again and again as he doubled over. It was all too much for him to stay standing straight.

Yesss! It worked! I celebrated internally. Now all I had to do was finish the job. I selected the Waste Oil, and a bucket of slick, goopy oil appeared in my hand. I splashed it on the floor in front of Fake Asagi . In an instant, it spread around him in a huge, slippery puddle. *Try chasing me through that!*

"Sorry, Asagi!" I called out across the oil slick. Look, I knew it wasn't the real Asagi, but I couldn't help it. Anyway, I had my

chance to run for it, and that's exactly what I did. I gave Fake Asagi the slip and followed the red arrows to an orange door at the end of the hall. Above the door, there were huge letters that said **Meeting Place.**

Yes! Now I can finally meet up with the others!

"*Wait!*" Fake Asagi shouted at me from across the Hallway of Trials. "*Let's talk this out!* "

"Sorry, but I don't have anything to say to an Asagi impersonator!" I shouted back. Without another moment's hesitation, I flung open the orange door and nearly flew through it.

"Mai!"

"Ey, Mai!"

Asagi and Sugiura called my name and rushed over at the same time once they noticed me entering the room.

"Asagi… Sugiura…" I felt all the strength drain out of my body as it sunk in that I was finally safe. The stress melted away.

"Sorry, Mai…um, about a copy of me attacking you and giving you a Game Over and all. That must've been scary."

"Asagi…"

"Don't worry. I'm gonna stomp that faker flat. I won't let him get away with treating you like that, Mai. I'll take down that clone myself! I swear I will," said Asagi, squeezing my hands. But then—

"*Tch.*" Next to us, Sugiura clicked his tongue.

"I-is something wrong?"

"Hmph… Nah. Forget it," he snapped. He avoided my gaze, like he was trying to show that he didn't care.

……?

"Ah, right. Taichi's the only one we're waiting for now," said Asagi as he looked toward four doors set into the wall. (One of those four was the one I'd just passed through myself, by the way.)

And Taichi's up against a fake Sugiura… I imagined. I looked at the real Sugiura. He looked swift and athletic. One thing was for

sure: When he hit, he hit *hard.* Out of the four of us, Sugiura would definitely have the most fearsome fake.

"What're you lookin' at?"

"N-nothing!" I shook my head vigorously.

"Oh, right, Mai," Asagi cut in, "while we were waiting for you, we found what we think are hints for this event's boss fight. Wanna take a look?"

Asagi was right in the nick of time—one more moment, and Sugiura's mood would've taken a turn for the worse.

"Sure, where are they?"

"Check out the wall over there." He pointed at a poster that was covered in warnings. That wasn't all, though; there were pictures of our four avatars on it, too.

[CAUTION]

1. YOU MUST MATCH A BOSS, FROM HEAD TO TOE TO ARMS, TO DAMAGE THEM.
2. BEWARE THE SYMBOLS THAT FALL FROM OVERHEAD. PICK A WRONG KEY, AND YOU'LL DO SOME FALLING OF YOUR OWN—INTO THE ABYSS.

Ah-ha. The first warning made sense. I was pretty sure it meant that when we fought the bosses, each of us would have to fight our own fake. We had to use the exact same weapons—that's the kind of "arms" it meant—as our fakes, too, or else we couldn't do any damage. That must've been why Kamisawa said to not try and fight until we'd reached the meeting place.

Thinking back, I realized that the fake Asagi that I faced in the Hallway of Trials was wielding a sword. Which meant that the real Asagi needed to equip a sword, too. I thought about the Greatsword-summoning Skill Chip that I had; it was for a male player, but it didn't match up with Fake Asagi's weapon, so I'd have to hand it off to either Sugiura or Taichi.

"Asagi, what kind of weapon did the Fake Mai in your Hallway of Trials have?"

"Hmm? Oh, I think she had a staff."

"Huh. I see what you're gettin' at," Sugiura said. "Once Taichi gets his butt in here, we'll swap Skill Chips." Yep, he understood exactly what I was trying to say.

—But Taichi sure was taking a while. *Maybe he couldn't slow Fake Sugiura down with the items he had*, I thought. The thought became worry, and the worry became fear.

Then the four of us heard a loud, hard *wham* as one of the four doors flew open.

"Uwaaaagh… Yeeeeeek!!" Taichi came rushing into the meeting room. His face was white as a sheet, and he'd clearly lost a lot of HP.

Whaaat?! I exclaimed to myself. He was all the way down to 20! Talk about a close shave!

A hand reached through the door that Taichi had come in through. It had to be Fake Sugiura's hand. *This is bad! Really bad!*

Or so I thought. In a flash, Sugiura kicked the hand back through the door and slammed it shut.

"This is the meetin' place, you jerk! We're s'posed to be safe in here! We're followin' the rules, so you better follow 'em, too!" He scolded the boss through the door.

Even *I* was scared. I knew Sugiura was ruthless, but here he was, going off on a boss that looked almost exactly like himself—like it was any other monster. He was a rock-solid guy to have in our party, but this was just disturbing.

"Phew… Thanks a mil'," said Taichi. "That Fake Sugiura's a real beast. Now I know what it's like to have a demon jump right out of Hell and chase after you."

"It only felt that way 'cause you're so lazy, knucklehead," Sugiura snapped. "If you ask me, you had it comin'."

"Good thing neither of us got matched up with Fake Sugiura, huh, Asagi?" I whispered.

"You took the words right out of my mouth," he whispered back. We shared a knowing look and a quiet chuckle, which thankfully helped calm my nerves a bit.

"Hey, you two! What've you got to giggle about? The real event's just gettin' started. Hurry up an' get ready to fight!"

""Y-yessir!"" Asagi and I said together. *Oops*, I thought. We ticked him off after all. But I had to admit he was right. We had all made it to the meeting place, but that didn't mean we'd won. We still had four bosses to deal with.

"Mai, bring Taichi up to speed on the bosses."

"All right." I told Taichi everything I'd already worked out with Asagi and Sugiura.

"Gotcha. So we can't put the hurt on each other's copies—only our own."

"Exactly. And we have to fight them with the same weapons they're using."

"In that case, I'd say this Skill Chip I found belongs to you, Mai. See? It summons a staff."

"Really?! You found one?"

We worked out how to swap our weapon chips. The Greatsword chip that I had went to Sugiura. Asagi's went to Taichi, Sugiura's went to Asagi, and Taichi's went to me.

"Hey, Mai, now that you've got that staff, wouldja do me a favor?" Taichi asked. "Equip this Skill Chip on your new staff and heal me up. I'm down to twenty HP. One more hit, and I'm a goner."

"Huh? Can it do that?" I took a closer look at the Skill Chip Taichi gave me.

[Skill Chip]
Area Heal (3/3)
[Effects]
Heals all allies around you.

The closer they are to your staff, the more HP they regain.
※If you do not meet the level requirement, you cannot use this skill to its fullest. In that case, it will only heal 300 HP.
[Requirements]
Level 220

—! The Skill Chip said only players at level 220 and over could use it to its fullest. *Phew! Good thing I spent the past week grinding to level up*, I thought.

"All right, come stand by me and I'll heal you. It'll give you more HP if you're closer."

"Gotcha," said Taichi as he walked over to stand on my right.

"Oh, let me get in on that," said Asagi as he stood to my left.

"Hold yer horses, Asagi. You're at full health," Sugiura snapped.

"Oh!"

"That's right!" Taichi joined in. "Man, you'll hop on any chance to get whatcha want, won'tcha? *Tch*, same pervy Asagi as always."

"Wh-what? No, I'm not! H-how does standing by her make me a perv, anyway?! And wh-wh-what do you mean, 'as always'?!" Asagi was red in the face and so flustered he could barely get a word out. His hands flapped around in nervous circles and his foot tapped on the floor. "It's not like that, Mai!"

"Pffft… Ah-ha-ha-ha!" I couldn't help but burst into laughter. The laugh was contagious, too. Taichi guffawed as Asagi stood there with a stunned look on his face.

"Ha-ha-ha! It's a joke, man. No need to get all upset about it."

"Sh-sheesh!" For some reason, that only made his face grow redder and redder.

"Awright, enough messin' around," said Sugiura. "Are we gonna do this, or what? We can't sit around in here forever." Those words and

the serious glint in his eye were all it took for Asagi, Taichi, and me to change our tunes in an instant.

"When you're right, you're right," said Taichi. "Let's do whatever it takes to bring these fakes down."

"Yeah. We're not gonna lose this time."

"I'll do my best!"

"Mai, I want you to hang back at first. Keep an eye on the fight and back us up if our HP gets low, got it?"

"Um, about that… I think I should beat my fake first."

"Gonna explain why?"

"I don't know for sure, but I bet my fake has the same Skill Chips I do. We should make sure she goes down first so she can't heal the other fakes during the battle." If we took out the enemy healer early, we'd be the only side that could recover HP, and that would give us the upper hand.

"Makes sense. Good thinkin'. Awright then, we'll back you up while you focus on your attacks."

"Okay!"

Sugiura looked down at a large red button installed on a pedestal in front of him. The pedestal had a plaque on it that read: PRESS WITH THE FORCE OF FOUR TO FACE THE FINAL BATTLE.

"Here goes nothin'."

"Right!"

"Roger."

"You got it, boss."

Sugiura put his hand on the button first. One after another, we stacked our hands on top of his, and then all four of us pushed. The button went down with a *click*.

Suddenly, everything around us changed. In an instant, we found ourselves in the middle of a large, circular room strewn with the same colorful blocks as the Hallway of Trials.

I looked straight ahead. There, a little distance away, I saw the four fakes standing shoulder to shoulder.

Behind them was a huge LCD screen. It looked like it was there to show us the combat results as the battle went on.

"Listen up, Mai. We're gonna keep an eye on our own fakes, but we'll back you up whenever we can," said Sugiura. "Don't go gettin' sloppy on me."

"You can do it, Mai. I'll try to help you any way I can!"

"Aw, those two said all the good stuff," Taichi said with a sigh. "Well, let's do this together."

"Yeah! Thanks, guys!" As if they'd been waiting for my signal, Sugiura, Asagi, and Taichi took off running toward their own fakes. *Okay, here goes! Gotta take her down!* I thought.





I looked across the room at my fake, who was holding her staff tightly and looking back at me. She was watching to see what move I'd make. I ran toward her, and she sprinted away from me. *So she wants to play tag, huh?* There was no way for me to attack her at that distance.

Wait, hang on…, I thought. I had an idea. If I couldn't hit her myself, I could at least guide her toward the other three members of the real Raid Team. They couldn't damage any fakes but their own, but they could still grab her and slow her down. My fight (if you could call it that) with Fake Asagi in the Hallway of Trials taught me that.

But who would be the best at slowing her down? It had to be Sugiura—the most aggressive, attack-first-ask-questions-later member of the Raid Team. I herded Fake Mai in his direction.

"Sugiura!!" *I sure hope he figures out what I'm thinking,* I thought as I called out to him. I didn't have to worry for long. When he turned toward Fake Mai and me, I saw his mouth curl into a smirk.

He stepped back from his duel with Fake Sugiura and stuck out his leg to trip Fake Mai as she passed by. She fell right to the floor.

Yesss! I exclaimed internally. But I didn't get much time to celebrate. Fake Sugiura noticed me and headed in my direction. *I can't let him distract me*, I thought. *I've gotta deal with my fake while Sugiura's still slowing her down…!*

"*Leggo'a me, dang it!!* " Fake Mai shouted, thrashing her limbs and trying as hard as she could to tear herself free.

Huh? Why does she talk like that? I wondered. *I don't talk like that…plus her voice is super low!* The weirdest part was that she really did look exactly like me. Her looks matching up while everything else was wrong was…a little odd.

I ran up to my double as quickly as I could and *thwacked* her in the belly with my staff.

«Combat Results»

- **Mai attacked!**
- **600 damage to Fake Mai Yashiro!**

[HP Remaining]

- **Fake Mai Yashiro [HP: 4,400/5,000] (-600)**

"Ngh… What's the big idea, you ugly shrew?! Don't think you've won yet, dummy!"

"……" Okay, now I was ticked off! On the other hand, though, I was glad Fake Mai was so rude. That made it way easier to slap myself around.

It suddenly dawned on me that Fake Sugiura hadn't caught up to me yet. He'd been right behind me, but now it seemed like he'd given up the chase. I turned around to see what was up.

Fake Sugiura was back there, all right, but he'd found new targets. He was kneeling on top of the real Taichi and Asagi, one leg on each of them, pinning them to the floor. They couldn't move or fight back. I gasped in shock.

"Hurry and finish 'er, Mai! We don't have much time!"

"We'll keep him off of you, Mai! No matter what it takes! Don't worry!" Asagi and Taichi called out to encourage me through a flurry of attacks from their fakes.

"Get a move on, Mai! All you gotta do is unmask this fraud first, then you can go save the day!" Sugiura said.

"R-right!" I went back to attacking Fake Mai like Sugiura said. I hit her over and over again. As soon as I had her down to half of her full HP, a puff of smoke wrapped around her whole body.

"*You'll pay for this…*," Fake Mai said in her low, low voice as the smoke cleared, revealing her true form: a square of pink wrapping cloth…with eyes and a mouth. To put a bow on it, she also had, well, a bow. The square of cloth that had been Fake Mai drifted up toward the ceiling.

"What the—? You're tellin' me *that's* what these bosses really are?" Sugiura yelled in disbelief.

"We'll worry about that later, Sugiura! We've gotta go help Asagi and Taichi…!"

"Right!"

The two of us rushed to rescue our teammates. Along the way, we glanced up at the giant LCD screen to see the battle results.

—*Wait, what…?!* I thought. Asagi was down to 600 HP, and Taichi was even worse off with only 200! *Oh man, this is bad!*

I skidded to a halt and frantically tapped at my Nightmare console to use Area Heal. My staff gave off a burst of dazzlingly bright light. *Please, please, please don't be too late!* I begged.

«Combat Results»
Mai cast Area Heal!

- **Mai's surroundings were bathed in healing light!**
- **Taisuke regained 990 HP.**
- **Taichi regained 970 HP.**
- **Taisuke Asagi [HP: 1,590/5,000] (+990)**
- **Taichi Tango [HP: 1,170/5,000] (+970)**

I was still too far away to heal them very much. At this distance, it was like slapping a bandage on a broken arm. I had to get closer and try the spell again!

Meanwhile, Sugiura made his way over to Asagi, Taichi, and the fakes and started swinging.

"C'mon, you two! Get up an' pull your weight! Fight back against these fakes!"

"Roger."

"Yessir."

That gave me the time I needed to get closer and cast Area Heal again.

"Thanks, Mai. You're a lifesaver."

"You can say that again, Asagi. And hey, if you hadn't healed us up a little bit at first, there wouldn't be lives to save. Game Over, man."

"I— I dunno about that," I said. "I mean, I couldn't have done any of this without you guys! Thanks!"

Now we were all together, on our feet, and fighting. Since it was four against three, we totally had the upper hand. One by one, we exposed those fabric fakes for what they were. As each one hit half of its maximum HP, it turned into a different-colored square of cloth and floated up and away to the ceiling.

The only problem was that none of them showed any signs of coming down.

"Heh-heh-heh. Stay down there sucking your thumbs forever, dorks."

"That's right! Now the real event's starting—and it's never, ever gonna end!"

"Hya-hya-hya-hyaaa!"

"Hoo-poo-poo-poo!"

The four scraps of wrapping cloth mocked us from the safety of the ceiling, each laughing its own strange laugh.

"These overgrown dishrags are forgetting something, aren't they?" said Asagi.

"Sure are," Taichi replied. "We've got certain Skill Chips that'll do the trick."

"Awright, let's knock 'em outta the sky," Sugiura said. "But don't forget we've got a limited number of shots. You better aim carefully."

"Roger that!"

You guessed it: They each had their own Zan Slash Skill Chip, which they could use to make their weapons fire off shockwaves—shockwaves that would definitely reach the ceiling of the arena.

Taichi applied his Zan Slash chip to his katana, then swung it upward.

"Gyaaah!" one of the cloth bosses squealed. Direct hit! The ghostly wrapping cloth flapped and fluttered as it fell to the floor.

«Combat Results»

- **Taichi used Zan Slash!**
- **1,200 damage to Clothkin (Green)!**

[HP Remaining]
Clothkin (Green) [HP: 1,300/5,000] (-1,200)

Huh? The fallen enemy held up a white flag in what seemed to be its hand. An Examine command prompt popped up.

<!>
Clothkin (Green) wants to surrender.
It's carrying a key. Will you take the key?
[YES / NO]

It had to be the key we needed to unlock the Victory Application Point… Right? Then again… I thought back to the warning poster in the Meeting Place. As I recalled, the second warning on the list had read, "Beware the symbols that fall from overhead. Pick a wrong key, and you'll do some falling of your own—into the abyss."

What symbols, though? Examining the Clothkin with my Nightmare console didn't give me any graphics for the key or anything. All I had to go on was the word "key."

"What's going on, Mai?"

"It says we can take the key, but I dunno if it's okay to take this one or not."

"That poster did say there were wrong keys, come to think of it."

While Asagi and I talked it over, Taichi and Sugiura knocked the remaining Clothkins down from the ceiling. Each one held up a white flag of surrender, and I examined them all: Clothkin (Green), Clothkin (Blue), Clothkin (Pink), and Clothkin (Red). They were all wrapping cloths, but they had different accessories. The green and blue Clothkins had little bowties, and the pink and red ones had ribbons tied into bows where their heads would be. On top of that, the pink and red Clothkins looked like they were wearing lipstick and had rosy cheeks. Meanwhile, blue and green had thick eyebrows, and looked like they were made from thicker fabric.

To sum it up, it seems there were boy Clothkins and girl Clothkins. But no matter which—boy, girl, green, blue, pink, or red—all of their keys had the exact same flavor text and no graphics. There was no way to tell the keys apart by their in-game descriptions alone. *Maybe there's some hint in how the Clothkins look…*, I pondered.

"What's the holdup, Mai?"

"Aren't you gonna pick a key?" Taichi and Sugiura asked as they walked over to me. They sounded curious and confused. I explained what I'd seen and read.

"That figures. An' if we mess up, there's an abyss with our names on it."

"How're we supposed to pick the right keys?"

"That poster made it sound like these 'symbols that fall from overhead' are real bad news, right? Don't ask me what that means, though."

"'Symbols that fall from overhead…,'" I repeated. *Hmmm.* The only information we got out of the Clothkin was how they looked. We could tell if they were male or female, but that was it…

Hmm?

Ah-ha! Eureka! I knew exactly what symbol to look for. Everyone has probably seen it before, too, on a bathroom door or something. You know those symbols for "female" and "male?" ♀ means "female," and ♂ means "male."

If you think of the circle part as a head, doesn't ♂ look kind of like it's "falling from overhead?" At least, it does if you spin it around so the head's on top.

To sum it up, we wanted a key from a female Clothkin—red or pink. Taking a key from the blue or green Clothkin would be a mistake. In other words, the event was rigged so that we had a fifty-fifty shot of plummeting into the abyss if we guessed at random.

Right away, I told the others what I'd figured out.

"That's amazing, Mai! You always crack the code!"

"For real. Another event down, am I right?" Taichi and Asagi smiled at me as they heaped on the praise.

"Awright, I'm gonna grab the key from the red one," Sugiura said. "That okay?"

"More than okay. Please do."

Sugiura tapped at his Nightmare console to pick up the red Clothkin's key.

Phew… Another tough event wrapped up, I thought. But I let my guard down too soon.

Clannng!!

The floor fell away below us and we found ourselves plummeting downward—fast.

"Waaaaaaugh!"

"Eeek! Wh-what gives?! You took the wrong key, didn'tcha, Sugiura?!"

"'Course not, dummy! I took the red one, just like I said!"

Whaaat?! Why?! What's going on?! Did… Did I guess wrong? Is this all my fault? Oooh, what if it is *all my fault…?* Tears welled up in my eyes as I fell. It dawned on me that this was it. We were finished. We wouldn't be beating Nightmare after all. *Is this really how it ends? No way…*

—Huh?

"Whoa!"

As we plummeted down deeper into the pit, we saw a gigantic Clothkin drifting up below us. It spread its body out as far as it could

and caught us safely on its soft, fabric surface.

"*You got the right answer,"* the Clothkin said, *"so what'd you go get caught by a stupid little trap for? Relax, I'm gonna save ya. Kamisawa's orders.* Tch*. Why couldn'tcha have picked the wrong key so I could let you fall into the abyss, anyway?"* Then it opened its mouth wide and spat out a familiar-looking crystal.

—! It was the Victory Application Point! Asagi carefully snatched it out of the air.

"*Yeesh, you guys are heavy,"* the giant Clothkin said. *"Hurry up and win before I drop you!"*

"You heard that, Asagi!" If the Clothkin decided to drop us, we'd be heading for the abyss, key or no key.

"Loud and clear," Asagi answered. "I'm gonna apply for the win!"

"Go for it!"

Asagi went through the usual victory application process.

«Victory Report»

† Player 1 †

Mai Yashiro
HP: 5,000/5,000
<Items Held>

- **Orange Peel**
- **Staff**

† Player 2 †

Taisuke Asagi
HP: 5,000/5,000
<Items Held>

- **Banana Peel**
- **Sword**
- **Zan Slash**
- **Waste Oil**
- **Bag of Expired Flour**

† Player 3 †

Shinji Sugiura
HP: 5,000/5,000
<Items Held>

- **Waste Oil**
- **Greatsword**
- **Zan Slash**
- **Expired Sauce**
- **Ball**
- **Chipped Bowl**

† Player 4 †

Taichi Tango
HP: 5,000/5,000
<Items Held>

- **Katana**
- **Zan Slash**

※This certifies that these four players have completed the Vermilion Event.

Victory Bonus
(To be delivered later.) ※Once you return to your world, Nightmare will enter a maintenance period.

15

Winning Smiles

The four of us were met with loud cheers the moment we looked up. Cries of “”””Congratulations!”””” came from all corners of the club room. That was when it sank in that we’d beaten the event and made it home safely again.

“Welcome back, Mai,” Naomi said, greeting me with a huge grin. “I’m so glad you’re safe!”

“Good to be back! And me, too.”

“Sooo? What was the event like this time? Don’t spare any details,” Youko said, leaning in excitedly.

“That’s Mai for you,” Asagi said. “Popular as always.”

“For real! What’re we, chopped liver?” Taichi griped.

“What’s your problem, you two? If you got time to sit around whinin’, c’mere. I gotta whip up a report to my dad’s company, and you’re gonna help with the paperwork.”

“H-hey, wait! Waaaugh!”

“Eeep! Somebody, help me!”

Sugiura yanked poor Asagi and Taichi out of their seats and dragged them over to his computer.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha, I guess it’s not their lucky day.”

“I feel a little sorry for them, though. We should save some sweets and tea to take to them later.”

“Yeah, sounds like a plan,” Youko said. “I’ll set aside these burnt pancakes and let Sugiura eat ’em. Gotta get rid of ’em anyway.”

"Sheesh, Youko, isn't that cruel and unusual punishment?" I looked at the pancakes she was talking about. They barely qualified as edible.

"Aw, don't worry. Sugiura hates sweets, remember? See, it all works out! If anything, I bet he'll be begging for more bitter stuff like this."

Er… I dunno about that, Youko…, I thought.

"Would you mind if I ate those?" Masuda said, cutting in. It seemed he'd overheard us talking about Youko's plate of way-too-crispy pancakes.

"Bwuh?! N-no! I mean yes, I mind! It's a bad batch! And all those scorched bits can't be good for you," Youko sputtered.

You seemed totally fine with feeding them to Sugiura, though, I pointed out to myself.

"That's fine. I'm sure if I scrape off the burnt parts, the rest is delicious. Either way, I'm hungry," said Masuda as he took the plate of pancakes out of Youko's hands with a grin.

Youko's cheeks turned bright red as she slumped straight down to the floor. "Aw, man… If I'd known, I woulda tried way harder to bake a good batch…"

It hit me that Masuda probably swooped in and took the cruddy pancakes on purpose to save Youko from Sugiura's wrath. Our leader would've chewed her ear off if she'd plopped that plate of disasters in front of him.

"…Congratulations on another victory, Yashiro…"

"Meow."

"Another *killer* victory, you mean. I'm gonna have to start studying your moves!" said Yoichi. He and Hirata had made their way over to talk about the event.

"Heyo! What kinda monster didja face this time?!" Takojima interrupted through a mouthful of *takoyaki*.

"We can hear all about that later," Akaishi said. "For now, I simply must ask you to make me pancakes sometime, Youko."

"Urgh… I can't get a single word in… Oh! C-congratulations, Yashiro!" Kaneda said, sheepishly waving over the gathering crowd.

"Thanks, Kaneda!" I said, smiling back at him through all the bustle and noise. The club room was buzzing with voices; it seemed like everybody had something to say. But it was a comfortable racket. It let me know that I was safely back in the real world.

—Shhhk!

The club room door suddenly slid open—and who should walk through but Tsubasa's party?

"Aw, you beat it already?"

"Hey, Tsubasa, I thought the Glasses God was supposed to be here… I don't see him anywhere…"

"Shut it, Gramps."

"Awww…"

Tsubasa made his way over to me.

"Meh, you did all right, I guess," he said. "Oh, by the way, I forgot to give you your reward for the Battle of Wits the other day."

"Oh!" Now that he mentioned it, he had promised me "something good." I'd totally forgotten, too. He handed me a flyer advertising the delivery service from a restaurant called Kaitsu Beef Bowls. "Huh? Does this mean I'm getting free beef bowls?"

"Free? What are you, stupid? Of course they're not free. Be sure you pay up." Tsubasa laughed like he was looking at the world's biggest dummy. (Honestly, I felt like the world's biggest dummy for falling for it.) "But if you give 'em the number written on that flyer, it'll be ten percent off. Order for a lot of folks, and they'll give you a bigger discount, too. Call if you're in the mood for a beef bowl."

"Okay… Thanks…" *…Actually, the bowl in the photo on this flyer does look really, really good.* I decided to sneak it onto Sugiura's desk later. If I included a note about the 10 percent discount—and the even bigger group discount—I bet he'd order some for the whole Nightmare Conquerors' Club one day.

It wasn't only Tsubasa and Tanaka, either. Takimoto, Naitou, and Miyazawa were also there to congratulate us on winning the

Vermilion Event. I felt totally surrounded by friends.

"Ah, Mai! Over here! I've got a can of Pudding Pop with your name on it. Wanna have a drink?"

Oh! That's Asagi! I thought. He and Taichi must have finished helping Sugiura with the reports, because they all looked relaxed—even Sugiura, though he just glanced in my direction without a word.

"……"

"Heya, Mai, Zalbatoth's come out to play," Taichi said. "Why don't you guys get Amelie and Tow'el, and they can all hang out?"

"Hee-hee! Good idea!" I clicked over to Amelie's room on my console.

"Hi, Mai! How'd the event go?!" she asked.

"Another win!"

"Yesss! Congrats!" Amelie grinned *very* broadly.

"Thanks, Amelie. How'd you like to go over there and chat with everyone for a while?"

"Sounds great! I wanna hear all about your courageous battles and stuff!"

"Hee-hee," I giggled as I carried my console over to where Asagi, Taichi, and Sugiura were sitting.

I knew they had my back, and thanks to them and the rest of the club on my side, I could keep on fighting. I wasn't just fighting for myself—I was fighting for them, too. And having someone to fight for was the greatest buff one could get in Nightmare.

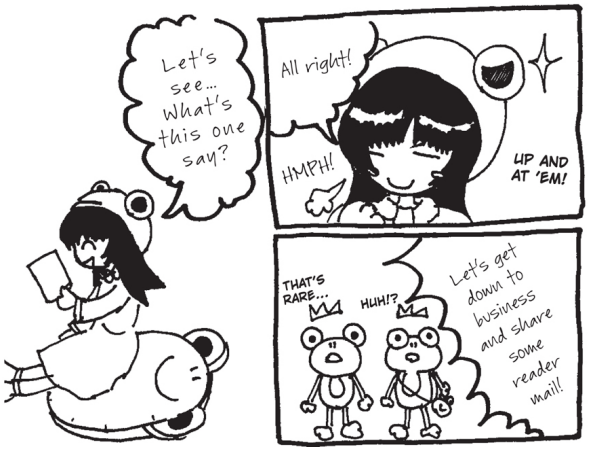
"Online! Vol. 6: Lady Hex and the Raid Team Impostors"
End

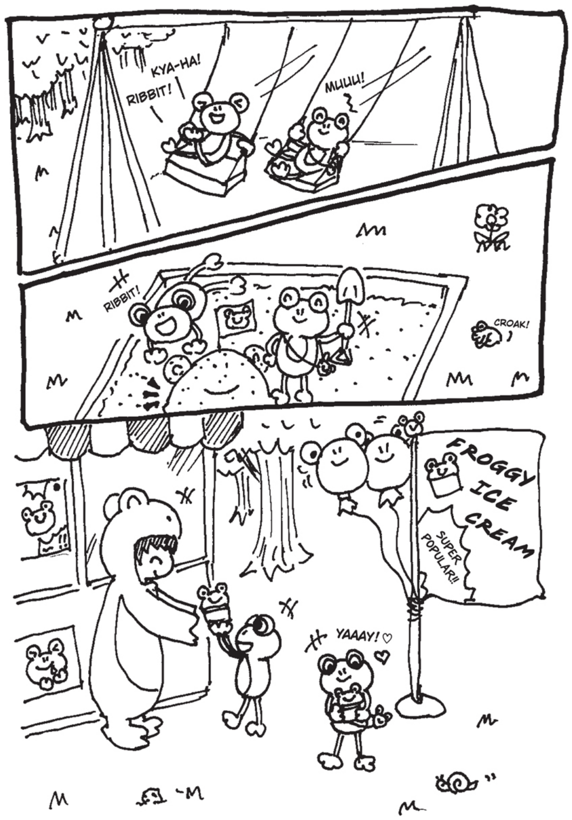
Turn the page for a fun message from the author!


"I love Online!" Eeeeee!! What an honor!! I'm so happy, I can barely handle it!
"I love the art in Online! so much, I decided to practice my own drawing skills!" Oooh!! Glad to hear it!! I love the Online! illustrations, too— they're sooo cute!!
"After I found volume 5 at my local bookstore, I had them order all the rest." Whoa!! Thanks so much!!
...OR IS THERE NO ROOM FOR US TO JUMP IN...?
RIBBIT...
MUUU...
IS IT JUST ME...
GOOD IDEA!
Hey, Kero, what d'you say we let her handle the Afterword this time while we go play?

Afterword


Thanks for reading Volume 6 of Online! And we're so happy about all the great messages you've been sending in!
Kero
Author
Pyon


Let's see... What's this one say?
All right!
HMPH!
UP AND AT 'EM!
THAT'S RARE...
HUH!?
Let's get down to business and share some reader mail!


KYA-HA!
RIBBIT!
MUUU!
RIBBIT!
CROAK!
FROGGY ICE CREAM
SUPER POPULAR!!
YAAAY!♡


We're ba—! Oh...
SHE'S ASLEEP AGAIN...
ZZZ
Okay! In that case...
...let's show off our ice cream! Ribbit!
TA-DAA!
So yummy!
As seen in the main story
FROGGY ICE CREAM
Cookies
Chocolate
There are cornflakes and sponge cake cubes inside!
If you get a lucky cup with a frog on the bottom... you win your own stuffed frog!
See you in the next volume of Online! Ribbit! ♡

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