

超次元ゲイム ネプテューヌ はいすくーる5

おかず

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▶ CONTENTS ◀

Recap

Prologue

Stage 1

Stage 1 - Part 1

Stage 1 - Part 2

Stage 1 - Part 3

Stage 1 - Part 4

Stage 2

Stage 2 - Part 1

Stage 2 - Part 2

Stage 2 - Part 3

Stage 2 - Part 4

Stage 3

Stage 3 - Part 1

Stage 3 - Part 2

Stage 3 - Part 3

Stage 3 - Part 4

Stage 4

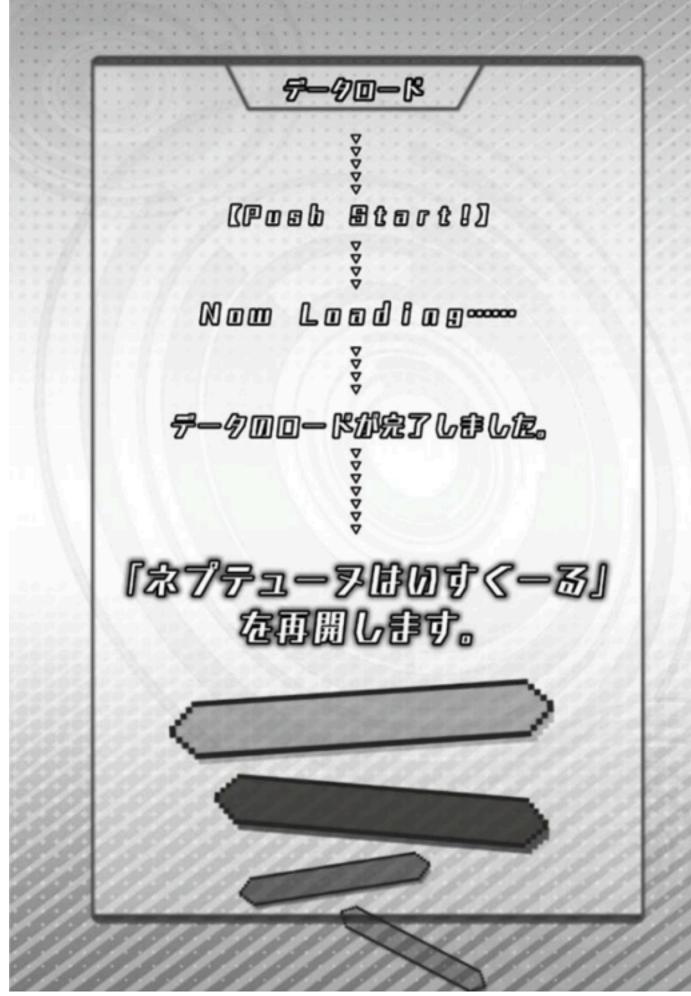
Stage 4 - Part 1

Stage 4 - Part 2 Stage 4 - Part 3

Stage 4 - Part 4

Final Stage

Epilogue



Recap

Here comes the everlasting protagonist!

Hello! Reporting in is the perfect protagonist loved by everyone, everywhere in all of Gaminudstri, Neptune~.

This might feel a little early, but to summarize what my cute little sister Nepgear did last volume...

Huh? Whaddya say, Nepgear? Do I need a cue card? Nah, no need! I'm used to it. Just sit back and watch like you're riding a huge warship!

Okay? Then let's get the video rolling. Since there's been lots going on, we should pick up the pace and fast forward. So let's push that fast forward button! Let's go!

"Bad Nep-Nep! Bad Gear-chan! Bad girls!"

"C-Compa, we can explain. We have a reason deeper than the deepest ocean trench and more complex than docking hardware..."

"We were planning to return to Celestia without telling anyone. I'm sorry."

"We didn't mean any harm! I'm telling the truth. I didn't want to cause any trouble for you guys. Sorry!"

"You better actually apologize instead of spewing nonsense."

I was relieved to have regained my memories thanks to everyone and the Magic Co. people who are back to normal... but my memories about the crisis in Celestia have also returned.

Nepgear and I thought we shouldn't trouble the others any longer, so we decided to take care of the situation back in Celestia by ourselves. So, the two of us tried to return in secret. But everyone found out and was upset with us, saying we were acting distant to them.

In the end, we all decided to band together to save Celestia... no, the entire world from catastrophe. But then, we made unlikely allies.

Magic Co.'s CFW Magic and CFW Judge. S-s-s-surprisingly, they were both Principal Arfoire's students in the past.

As requested by Principal Arfoire, Magic and Judge had set up a device to communicate with Histy in Celestia.

"Are the recent climate abnormalities due to problems with Celestia's Gamindustri management system?"

"Correct. I apologize for causing harm to the people of Gamindustri."

Our conversation with Histy was about the dangerous situation in Celestia. At this rate, the abnormal climate will worsen, and Gamindustri will be in danger, too.

As a solution, there's no other way but to use the sword that I received from the me of the other world, CPU Purple Heart, as a key to forcibly reset the system!

But, uh, Nepgear and I kinda failed when we tried that. So I fell to Gamindustri and lost my memories. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

So, Nepgear flew to the Otori Island branch, whom she's indebted to, to collect Gamindustri's data!

Huh? Was I slacking off? ... No way! I can't just let my cute little sister go through hardship alone. I can't... but... since I'm a student at the Histoire Memorial Academy, I still have to pass the final exams, according to Principal Arfoire...

Can't she just give me a free pass?

Oh well.... I should pass the baton to Nepgear now... huh? What? 'Once is enough?' 'You should do the recap instead?'

Really? You sure? Well, if you say so. What a shy girl. Since my cute little sister requested it, I'll explain it as simply as possible, okay?

Hm... so according to her, she fought a giant squid, rescued the townspeople from volcanic eruptions and collected the data with the help of Noire's little sister, Uni, and Blanc's little sisters, Rom and Ram. Huh, alright \bigstar .

... I can't? Why? I haven't heard about anything besides this.

There's a video? O-okay. Got it. I'll give a proper explanation then, so show me the video.

"That's the spirit, Uni-chan! Let's do our best!"

"If you're all counting on me... then I have no choice but to try my hardest!" "I won't forgive anyone who dares to lay even so much as a finger on my studeeeents!" Chang! Shhrrrk!

Smack! Tchhhh!

W-what the?! I heard that they had trouble with a giant squid, but I didn't know that it was *this* extreme.

A 'giant kaiju surfacing from the abyssal depths of the sea!' It feels like a spectacular movie!

Oh, it's down for the count! Brave-sensei just defeated the giant squid! Amazing! He's strong! ... Wow. Nepgear, you went through so much trouble.

Then I expect the volcanic eruption scene to be beyond my imagination, too.

"Then let's request the academy or Planeptune's government to prepare ships right away. Ones that can carry as many people as possible."

"Are we... going to flee from the island?"

"Uni-chan, do you hate running away?"

"Of course I hate it!"

"... Hm. Making a hole in the northern side of the mountain to redirect the lava, you say?"

"Obviously, people won't die as long as they evacuate by ship. But I've come to realize something. I've realized it when Mina-sensei was explaining the escape plan to everyone! There's no point in evacuating to safety if there's no home to return to!"

"If we time it right and fire both my M.P.B.L. and Uni-chan's X.M.B. at full power on the same spot..."

Sniff... Nepgear and Uni are such kind girls.

Even if the islanders evacuate safely, once the lava consumes the town, everyone would've been heartbroken. To risk your life to try and redirect the flow of lava to let everyone return to their normal lives just in case they come back to the island.... It's easier said than done. Amazing courage. As expected from my little sister!

Nepgear and Uni persuaded the worried Brave-sensei and launched their plan. How will it go?!

"M.P.B.L. Overdrive! Limiter release!"

"X.M.B., full power! Mode: Empress!"

Nepgear and Uni squeezes out all of their strength. But their opponent was a volcano that was formed over millions of years. It didn't go as they planned.

This isn't good! It's too late! But just as they were about to give up...

Rom and Ram joined in to cool down their weapons from the heat caused by the eruptions! This is burning friendship! What a deep relationship! Here comes the glorious victory flag!

In the end, the four of them concentrated their power into one attack and pierced the thick volcano! They altered the flow of lava and saved the island from impending doom! Wow! Clap clap!

Nepgear, everyone, you guys are amazing!

They all grew up so fast when I wasn't looking... *sniff....* The monitor's all blurry from my emotional tears.

"... Starting now is the beginning of the main story. Our sisters and the others have probably gathered their share of the data and have returned to the academy."

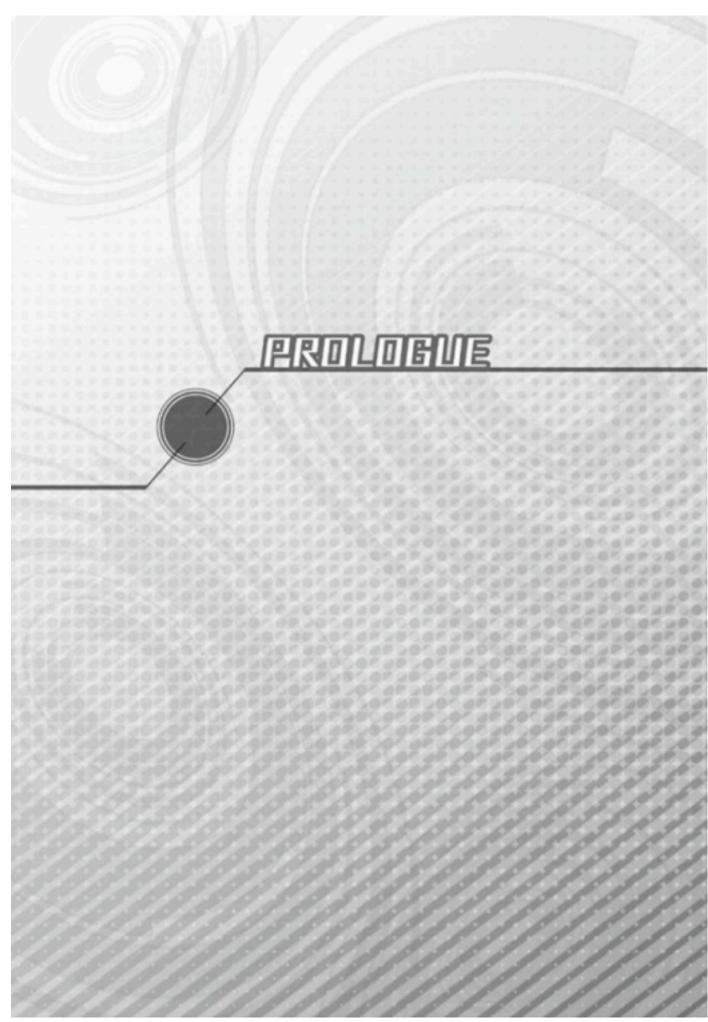
Nepgear said as she gazed at the festival after saving the island.

T-to expect this much of me...

Right. The little sisters have done such a great job. As a big sister, I shouldn't fall behind. I have to live up to her expectations.

I have to, but that's not how the world works, I guess.... There are situations... and stuff... well, the thing is... er...

Anyways! Back to the main story!



Prologue

"S-supplementary exams~?!"

In the lounge of the Planeptune dorm's ground floor, Nepgear shouts with her eyes wide open. As I face her, my vision blurs. This would be a good match if we're comparing the size of our eyes.

"Y-yeah..." I say weakly to Nepgear.

With my blurred eyesight, I can faintly see doubles of Nepgear's silhouette. "Then, the data collection..." Uni follows up after Nepgear with a blank expression. Yup, I haven't done it yet.

The atmosphere feels awkward as I sag.

"After hearing about Uni's success... I-I feel ashamed. It's because of Neptune! Why do I have to be in such an embarrassed state?" Noire says with a weak voice as she sits next to me. She takes a huge gulp of her ice coffee and sets the glass cup back down on the table aggressively. After that, you can hear the rough sound of ice being crunched echo throughout the silent lounge.

"N-Noire... did you get stuck with supplementary exams, too...?"

Uni stares at Noire's face with much more discretion than when she talked to me.

"There's no way I'd have to do that! It's all Neptune's fault! I can't trust her. Failing every single one of your classes except for the courses relevant to our major... what's wrong with your head?!"

After crunching up and swallowing her ice, Noire gives me a violent noogie.



"Ack! That hurts! I-it's not like I failed because I wanted to! Just because I'm not that great at math, doesn't mean that it effects how I live! Isn't it fine as long as I can calculate my spending money?"

"Here it comes. The stereotypical rambling of a kid who hates studying! You always say whatever you want, and you always clown around! That's why you ended up like this! And now, you've brought others into your mess, too!"

Grind grind grind!

"Uwaa, I'm sorry! Uncle! Uncle!"

As I surrender to Noire's noogie,

"W-what's up with you, Noire-san? My sister's reflecting on herself, so please stop."

The flustered Nepgear comes to my defense. At least my little sister is always on my side. I love you, Nepgear!

"Nepgear, I know that you love Neptune. But like I said before, it's necessary to be strict at times."

"Well, that's true, but..."

Hey, Noire! Don't go off filling my sister's head with stuff like that.

And you shouldn't be so easily persuaded, Nepgear.

"Anyways!"

It looks like Nepgear's teary plead worked since Noire took her fists off my head.

"As her older sister, I can't show Uni this shameful display any longer. You feel the same way, right Neptune? Don't you want to show off how cool you are to Nepgear, who thoroughly accomplished her mission?" Noire says as she backs off and stares at my eyes.

"W-well, that..."

Nepgear, Uni... and even though they're not here right now, Rom and Ram, too.... It's true that they collected their share of the data and saved Otori Island from a disaster to boot. Like Noire said, I can't fall behind them as a big sister.

"Then restrain yourself from playing games for a while. Focus properly on your supplementary lessons until you take your exams, got it? L-leaving you behind sounds harsh, s-so I'll help you out. As a friend."

"I'll help you too, Neptune. You'll be studying at night as well, right? I'll make late night meals for you. It's okay. You can do it! So let's do our best."

I-if you put it that way, I can't loaf around.

I really hate studying. After enrolling into the academy with all I got for Compa's sake, I barely did any studying this year. But I can't say that.

"... Okay. If I put my mind to it, supplementary lessons or exams or whatever will be a piece of cake!"

As if encouraging myself, I tap my chest with my fist.

"Talk is cheap. I'm warning you now: Since I'm lending you a hand, I won't be holding back. Prepare yourself."

Triumphantly crossing her arms, Noire counters my declaration with a strong statement of her own.

"... As expected of you, Noire. You've seemed to have changed recently," Uni comments as she finishes sipping on her drink.

Since she spoke quietly, I unintentionally ignored her.

"W-what's with you all of a sudden? How did I change?" Noire takes her eyes off of me and turns

to Uni, feeling uncertain about Uni's comment.

"How...? Well, during my brief visit a while back, you would've said something like 'you brought upon on yourself. I don't care.' You wouldn't help others. You'd think that you were the best.... Haven't you noticed that?" Uni answers with a serious expression.

"W-w-what are you talking about?! Haven't I... r-right! I don't care about what happens to Neptune!"

Noire shakes her head in denial.

"But you'll still help me with my supplementary lessons, right?"

"T-that's not for you to decide, Neptune.... You know that!"

"Know what?"

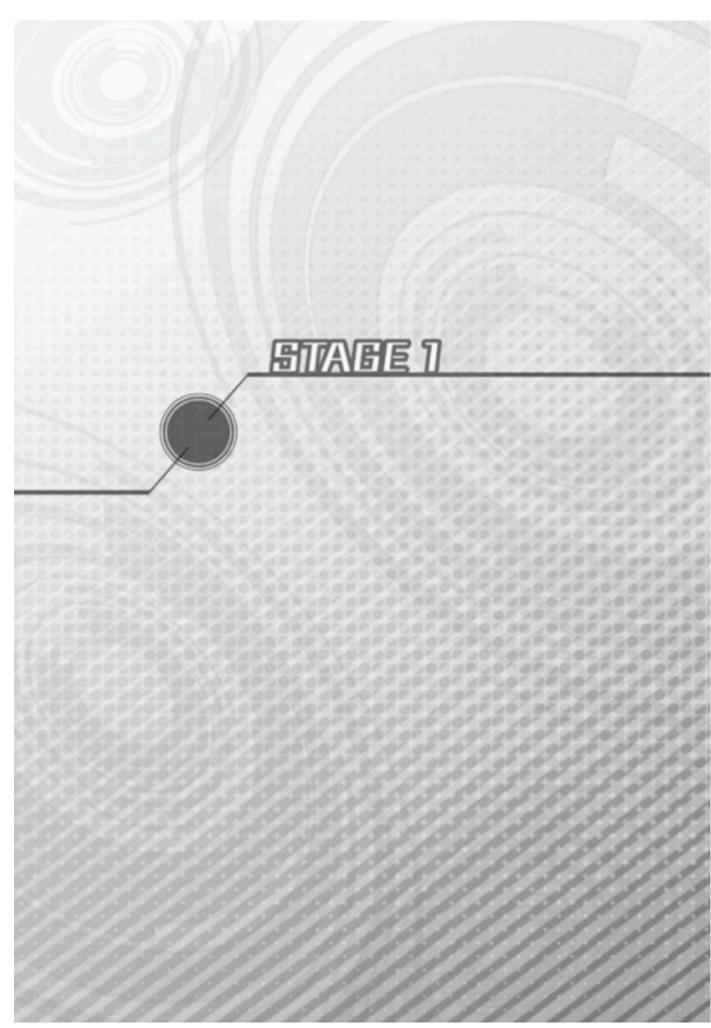
"Argh...! F-fine! Like Uni said, I don't care about whether or not you fail, Neptune! I'm not helping you! I'll just leave you behind and gather the data myself. Right. That's it..."

Ah! Hold on! Wait! You're so mean!

Wait, Noire! Noire! Heeeeeev!

What do you mean by 'what are you talking about?!' I can't just let that slide. Are you listening? Noire? Nooooire!

It's been a while since I've been the protag, but this is the state that I'm in. This'll be difficult.



Stage 1

Stage 1 - Part 1

In a dorm within a certain school, those who are concerned about the situation are gathered in V-san's room, the largest in the dorm.

"Honestly, I didn't expect you to be this pathetic."

The person who said that is I-san, who's known as school's intelligence expert. They knit their brow and let out several sighs.

"She possesses a very... unique mind."

"... It's not just her mind. She lacks cognition."

V-san, the one who provided this meeting place, and B-san, one of the participants, open their mouths to comment.

But the one who wants to complain here is probably N-san.

Like I-san, they begin to speak with an unpleasant expression.

"Speaking of the worst problem of them all, she doesn't take matters seriously if she doesn't get any help. She's too carefree. She thinks everything will work out somehow.... My head hurts from just thinking about it."

Everyone has different ways of expressing themselves, but they all share the same opinion. They never stop making harsh comments about rash behavior in these dire times that can decide the fate of the world. But among them,

"Don't say that. Let's just cooperate. She worked hard today, too. As friends, you should cheer her on until the end."

C-san, who has been acquainted with the problematic student from before enrolling into the school, sides with her. But when will that pitiful hope be fulfilled...?

... Somehow, this feels like an article in a sports magazine that's sold at a station or convenience store. It reeeeally feels that way. Listening to everyone right now is like reading hard to understand news from a newspaper.

Why, you ask? That's because of all these difficult formulae and dates that I'm forced to remember that are circling around in my head. Somehow, I'm trying to engrave them all into my brain, so I can't afford to listen to the others.

"I-I'm done. My hard drive is full. It can't store any more stuff," I mumble as I stare at an open reference book.

"Quit acting like a baby. You only did half of that assignment."

"If you delete some of that useless data, then maybe you'll have some more storage space."

N-san and B-san... no, Noire and Blanc say without mercy as they hold my shoulders. Ow... my heart hurts.

"It's not useless data! It's all my precious memories of you all," I argue.

"... Instead of reminiscing on the past, you should live for the future."

Tears drop as that answer flings back at me.

"T-then at least give me a break.... Please... snacks or something..." I beg as I look at everyone with teary eyes.

"Fine, I guess we don't have a choice. How's this: I'll give you a piece of chocolate for every ten questions solved and a bag of chips for twenty."

I-chan's answers is cold-hearted, but there's a glimpse of hope within the despair.

"... I suppose that she may need some sort of incentive."

"V-Vert... No, Vert-senpai! Vert onee-chan!"

The arbitrating I-chan who's acting like a final boss looks down on me, while Vert smiles like a beautiful goddess. She's handling a controller in her hand.

Oh? Is that it?! As expected from Vert's room! Will some 'lovely short cake,' abbreviated as SS, or 'dynamic crêpe,' or DC for short, be delivered with the press of a button?!

Even in this hopeless situation, my heart beats with excitement.

Alright, let's turn this dull mood around! I gotta get my head in the game! There's no time to whine!

Using her room's virtual space reconfiguration function, the room turns into a verdant green forest complete with a beautiful flower garden and an azure lake. It's amazing that she did this all for her interactive games.

Vert's really the best. She knows that the environment is important when it comes to snacking!

"How is it, Nep-Nep? Does the change in atmosphere help?"

"Perfect!"

Vert smiles and handles the controller again. C'mon, SS! Or DC!

In front of my beating heart, the azure lake on the wall begins to sparkle. Then, a blinding light envelopes the room. Next, a CG model of a beautiful lady in winged clothing appears from the rippling lake.

'I am a fairy of the lake. Neptune-san, what you desire is..."

What I desire is... dessert! But uh, Vert, didn't you put too much effort into this snack ordering choreography? Well, I'm personally open to this.

'What you desire is...'

What kind of dessert is there? I lean forward from my chair.

'... Classic literature workbooks?

"What?"

'Or perhaps a math drill consisting of 100 equations?'

Next thing I know, it's gonna ask me to write down my feelings in 140 words. And grade it out of 5!

... No. There's no way I can do that!

H-how...? How can you make it end like this after hyping the heck out of the poor and pitiful me?! Losing my strength to speak, let alone stand, I collapse.

"Nep-Nep, I want you to study enthusiastically, so I did my best."

"Vert, you're amazing! With this, she can study as hard as she plays. What a relief, Nep-Nep!"

'What a relief' my ass!

I won't be fooled by outer appearances.

Even if it's like a game, it's still studying. ... Huh? I'm reaping what I sow? I-I know that. But a little bit of encouragement isn't a bad thing, right?

"... Wow. I was expecting you to pull something off, but you've got quite the sense of humor. I guess that you can be cruel on your own way. Not bad, Vert," Blanc comments.

"Why don't you sympathize a little instead of calmly analyzing the situation?"

"Oh, you poor soul. R.I.P." She replies with a heartless voice.

"There's no emotion in that!"

"I've had plenty of help with my courses this semester, myself, but I need to be more mindful of my studies next time. Otherwise, I'll end up in your miserable position. You're becoming the prime example of self-reflection," Blanc adds.

Agh! I get it, I get it! Since it's come to this, I have to put my mind to it. There's the promise of chocolate and chips for every ten and twenty questions solved. Let's sloooowly earn those snacks and that break time!

And for that, planning is super critical. I was just studying history and math earlier, so I won't be able to handle continuous math equations. Like Vert said, a change in mood is important. So let's roll with classical literature. Select!

"I'll choose classical literature!"

'... 100 equation math drill, start!'

"Wait, what?!"

I didn't select that! Vert, what's going on?

"It's the time limit, Nep-Nep. It's programmed to make a random selection if you don't choose within the allotted time. That's why decision making is crucial."

Y-you should've told me that earlier!

"Yeah. If you're going to do it, then you might as well do it thoroughly. I guess your slow wits came in handy this time, huh, Nep-ko?"

N-no way.... These guys.... If I don't do something fast...

Having everyone help me study was probably a bad idea. Now that I think about it, I did something similar when I met I-chan and Noire for the first time, and when I was trying to regain my memories.

"Question 1."

Idiot! I'm an idiot! Why do humans always repeat the same mistake?!

While the hollow voice of the CG lady echoes, I curse my sad fate.

... I don't care anymore. My life points are already zero.

Stage 1 - Part 2

Hell.

Three hellish days have passed.

Normally, I'd feel really happy about school. But these three days reminded me of the struggles of student life.

I want to wear a cute idol costume and sing a cheery song for the all of the students in the world who have to suffer like this every semester.

All that studying was like falling into an abyss, but honestly, that strong yet hellish start is probably what saved me.

I remember calling my homeroom teacher and other staff members things like ghosts and demons during my supplementary lessons and independent studies. Blanc went into rage mode like, three times in the middle of all that though, so it was tough. But looking back, I appreciate their help.

So...

"... She's gone through a lot. I suppose we could be more generous to her?"

Principal Arfoire says as she grades my supplementary exam paper that I wrote in her office. I feel sort of accomplished from hearing that.

"That's good to hear, Nep-Nep."

"Thank you, Compa... everyone. Sorry for making it hard on you guys."

After happily receiving my passing grade, I bow to everyone in the office.

"I'm not helping you next time. I mean it!"

Noire, don't say that.

"... My sleep pattern's all messed up thanks to you."

Blanc, I'm in your debt.

"If only you could always keep your head in the game like that. Then there wouldn't be any need for us to babysit you," I-chan says. Though, she never left me alone that whole time.

"So this should no longer be an issue."

Yeah, yeah. That virtual space thing was perfectly merciless, but thanks to Vert, I was able to study as if I was gaming.

The end justifies the mean. As I lift my head, I see everyone looking at me with kindness. I always say this, but friends are good to have. I feel so touched...

"Alright, you guys. We don't have time to fool around. Whose fault was it exactly that your side's data collecting plans were postponed? You're all ready to leave, right?" Principal Arfoire cuts in with a strict tone, tapping the desk with her long fingernail.

"Yes, we're fine," Noire answers as we all straighten our backs and look at Principal Arfoire.

"Then follow me."

Principal Arfoire nods and picks up an ID card on her desk.

Follow where?

Without giving us time to ask, she leaves the office with the sound of high heels clacking. We hurriedly follow her from behind.

As Principal Arfoire reaches an elevator at the end of the hall,

"Walk faster."

She finally looks back and calls for us by moving her pincer-like fingernails.

Did the air get a little tense because I caused us all to fall behind schedule? Or is it because of something else?

I glance at I-chan next to me, but she just shrugs her shoulders, implying her

uncertainty. We can't just stand around, so we slowly get on the elevator.

As we pass the doors, Principal Arfoire does something strange. You know how elevator buttons show the building levels, right? And how they light up when you push the floor that you want to go to? Well, she starts pressing them all erratically.

Then amazingly, they all light up for a bit before going dark. Next, the elevator moves. It feels like it's moving downward.

"... Was that a passcode?" I-chan asks as she realizes the purpose behind the seemingly arbitrary button presses.

"Yes. Very few of the staff knows this passcode. And since the buttons contain fingerprint sensors, entering the buttons in the correct order won't even work without a registered fingerprint. ... Even a top student of the agent curriculum like you would find it difficult to crack," Principal Arfoire answers with a faint smile.

As if feeling one-upped by that,

"I've come up with a few methods... but I'll keep that to myself," I-chan replies, adjusting her trademark leaf-shaped ribbon. I'm not sure if she's serious or not though. She hates losing, but she's not the only one who's like that.

As they talk back and forth, the elevator gradually descends.

By the way...

"We're descending quite a bit. I think we've already passed the first floor," Vert says as if speaking for me. It feels like it's been forever since we got into the elevator.

I think we're all imagining a deep underground level, but what awaits us?

Ding! With that sound, the elevator stops. The door opens, revealing a short passage made of cold metal decorating the ceiling, floor, and walls. I see a heavy and sturdy metal door in the front.

It looks like Principal Arfoire is bringing us to the far side of the door lit with bright purple lights.

As she swipes the card she brought from her desk on the card reader next to the door, the door opens on both sides to the sound of air rushing out.

A bright light comes from the far side and blinds us.

"Nepu?! It's so bright!"

It's so sudden, so I blink instinctively. Eventually, my eyes adjust to the light, and I see something. That something is...!

"W-what's this?!" I shout. A little jingle that goes like 'danananaa~" echoes in my head on its own.

"Is it... a plane?"

Yes. As Compa said, there's a plane parked here.

The school's gym... no, hall... no, it's pretty wide, so can you even call it any of those? Anyways, after *probably* reaching the underground level through the elevator, we reach a wide space and find a plane.

And it isn't a passenger jet or a propeller plane. It has more of a sturdy, mechanical feeling. I guess it looks worthy of a name like super dimension fortress... no, hyper dimension fortress?

"... An airplane. No, a fighter craft?"

Right, that's the word, Blanc. Fighter craft.

It's a dark purple plane that looks exactly like a super high performance fighter from STG games.

"By the way, isn't it too big? Isn't a regular fighter supposed to be piloted by a single person?" Noire asks, looking at the large plane.

"It looks like it can house multiple people. ... Perhaps it has pod hotel rooms on the inside?" Vert follows up.

"Oh, I thought the same thing, too. Maybe using the restroom will let us race change!" I say.

"At first, we'll encounter hardships since it lacks the proper engine output to pass a mountain." "So we'll have to collect power-ups in combat. ... You ain't bad, Vert."

"When it comes to gaming knowledge, I don't lose to anyone."

Vert and I start getting into our own gaming otaku conversation.

"It's the school's top secret high speed Vertical Take-Off and Landing aircraft, or VTOL for short. I'm lending this to you guys. This plane can fly through jungles and snowy fields. ... IF, I'll leave it to you."

Principal Arfoire looks at our surprised and excited faces with a serious expression of her own, takes out another card from her suit pocket and tosses it to I-chan.

I-chan reacts to her words and catches the card midair.

"... Principal Arfoire, this is..."

"That's the plane's activation key and electronic manual. Press the round seal on the right of the card's front face."

"Round seal... here it is."

I-chan presses the card as per Principal Arfoire's instructions. We all surround

I-chan. A book-shaped hologram appears above the card.

"Like this?" I-chan ponders.

She slides it like a touch screen of a smartphone. It looks like she's doing it right. After an animation of the page flipping, words appear.

"I-chan, what's written on it? Hurry up and read it. Hurry!"

"You're being too noisy. Hang on. ... Let me see."

'This is 'The Final Hard.' Codename: Hard...'

Huh? It literally just omits two words. Oh well, I guess it doesn't matter much.

"'This is The Final Hard's manual. Read this manual and manage it properly. Table of contents: 1. Before using'.... T-this looks more like instructions for medicine than a fighter jet..."

The Final Hard!

So this aircraft is called The Final Hard. Its looks and name ring a bell.

"Skipping that part..."

"For operation, use the twin flight joysticks. If you tilt them forward at the same time, the fighter craft will move forward. If you pull left and right, then it will ascend. It will descend when you bring them close together. Moreover, if you press the dash button on the sticks..."

"... Is this a game?! What's with the dash button? A plane can't normally dash!"

Shocked by the instructions, I-chan criticizes the text as she reads it. She takes her eyes off the manual and looks at Principal Arfoire.

"A-anyways, all I have to do is operate The Final Hard and fly Neptune and the others,

right?" "Yes."

"Why me?"

"It's a simple division of roles. Aside from the four who can actually transform for the investigation, you're the only one I can leave it to. I can't allow Neptune to operate it."

"Well, I guess you have a point."

Principal Arfoire's casual words stings my heart and I-chan nods in agreement. They're both so mean.

"Understood. I'll take care of it. Though, I'm a little curious. Why is this thing underground?" I-chan asks as she dismisses the electronic manual and lifts the card in front of her face.

"I don't intend on hiding it, but do you think that we have the luxury to stand around and talk? There are no classes between now and the closing ceremony. ... But there won't even be a spring break if you idle," Principal Arfoire gives a scary reply to I-chan's question like it's nothing.

T-this is no joke. Spring break going away just because of I-chan's curiosity? No way! After being drugged through the mud by those supplementary lessons and exams, I need my break!

Resting is important. I have to protect it at all costs!

I approach I-chan slowly from behind, stretch my hand and cover her

mouth. "Uuph?!"

"Let's talk about that later! We're in a race against time."

"How can you even say that?!" I-chan shakes off my hand and shouts.

I understand how she feels. I really do, but...

"I'd like to return home to the countryside and see my family and friends over the break. It'd be really bad if we lose out on precious vacation time," Compa says.

"I have to write a novel to prepare for the event this summer."

"Every online game holds celebration campaigns during spring break. If I don't stay in front of my PC with the resolve to not leave my room, I cannot enjoy the events to their fullest extent."

See? It's not just me. Everyone's speaking up like this.

Only Noire's response is different.

"... Now's not the time to talk about such private matters. Don't you guys understand how serious this is?"

She shakes her head like how a top student would.

"That's enough. Let's hurry. IF. There's an entrance, right? Hurry up and open it."

She gets our rears in gear as we talk about our spring vacation plans.

"Agreed," I-chan says, pulling the electronic manual back up again.

"Let me see..."

'The capacity is ten people. Check for damages or scratches on the plane before boarding, open

the cover at the middle of the fuselage, and hold the power button for long enough...'

... So this *is* a gaming device! Stage 1 - Part 3

Here we are. The tropical jungle!

Ah, wait a sec! I know you're going to say. 'Neptune, didn't you fast forward a little too much?' or 'Aren't there any dramatic landing scenes?'

I know.

But there was no such thing.

I was excited to get into the fighter craft. But the interior's like a cute little cabin that has this whole 'it's my first time living alone in the city and my apartment's full of decorations' sort of vibe. So to me, that sort of killed off all chances of making any dramatic scenes. Who was the interior designer for this? At least Compa likes it a lot.

Well, that aside, the problem was the sortie scene.

If you sortie from a secret underground hangar, then there should be things like flying out from behind a waterfall with hot-blooded BGM playing or a launch pad stretching out a base disguised as a skyscraper. You know what I mean, right? But there wasn't any of that!

After the hanger ceiling opened, a platform slowly raised up, taking The Final Hard up with it. See? I was super excited. Will it be a waterfall? A building? A rocky mountain works, too.

... But it was farm. A farm. That was super anticlimactic.

We arrived at a large farm managed by students from the livestock and agriculture majors, and heard the sounds of sheep and cows. So they looked blankly at the plane that suddenly popped up out of nowhere. What kind of impression do you think we got?

- "... I see. That's reasonable. It's wide open here, so the impact of takeoffs won't harm other students," Blanc said calmly while clapping.
- "... But it's also a little boring," she added. Well, it's way more than just boring for me!

I-chan, who was definitely more excited than I was on the inside, felt cheated. "...

Hm. We're about to take off. Are you all ready? Got your seat belts checked?" The nonchalant dialogue felt so pitiful.

It was peaceful after takeoff. There weren't any dramatic scenes like a floating castle showing up after flying through intense thunder clouds.

... So it's fine. I give up. I don't want to talk about it anymore.

The important event starts right now!

I need to take pictures of rare animals living secretly in the primitive jungle or something to erase this unfulfilling feeling during our takeoff from earlier.... It'll only get worse if I don't...

"There are no animals."

After landing The Final Hard on an empty field within the jungle, we finally start the exploration! My plan sounds good, but as Compa said, there are no signs of creatures nearby.

"Huh? That's strange. I thought that things would go like, 'Ah, that's...! The legendary monster,

Gehagon! Alright, I'm gonna capture it! Woah, it's dangerous! Everyone, stay close to me, the captain!' or something like that."

Our troublesome situation makes this even more frustrating.

"It'd be pretty weird for some monster of the century to show up that easily. And quit goofing off. Let's hurry up and investigate the area."

Without understanding my feelings, Noire taps my head.

"B-but Nepgear fought against that protected species! That giant squid monster!" I pout. This is no fun.

"... They might have gotten startled and ran off from the plane landing," Blanc says.

"According to Nepgear-chan and Uni-chan, they seemed to have encountered the squid while planting these salvageable sensors and nanosensors in the environment. Why don't we do the same?" Vert suggests.

Hm.... Crawling through the jungle is more to my liking, not this passive stuff. ... But I guess that those two have a point, so I better follow them.

"Besides, can you even catch that Gehagon thing with that?"

"The hell's with that mysterious 'Gehagon' crap? Nep-ko, stop spouting out nonsense like that for once and just help me unload our stuff."

As Noire's nitpicks my comment, I-chan kicks my butt. I comply and follow her from behind.

Inside The Final Hard, there are supplies stored under the instructions of Principal Arfoire. The machine that Nepgear and the others used for collecting data, food, and clothes for the expedition. We can't go around the jungle in our school uniforms, after all.

But what bothers me are the words 'theater group equipment' written on the box of exploration clothes. Is... that right?

"The theater group pursues authenticity, so it's fine. The clothing should suffice. I guarantee it."

Yeah? Well, if the cosplay expert Noire says so, then there shouldn't be any problems, right?

Thinking in a more positive light, I change into the outfit that feels like it's straight out of a game show that's all about discovering the mysteries of the world. After that, I start searching for the Gehagon... er, I mean, I start collecting data!

"Everyone, I brought a ton of medical supplies like medicine and bandages, so do your best!" Compa says, tapping a sturdy-looking case. She looks reliable, but does she really plan to lug that case around? It looks huge. Will she be alright?

Plus, it's like she's assuming that someone will get injured. But I know that she means well, so I'll let that slide.

First, we should head into the jungle, scatter nanosensors mixed in with the food, and install sensors based on Nepgear's report...

"Come on out, Gehagon!"

"... That's not happening."

I brush off Noire's cold comment and wait for two hours.

Besides the Gehagon, we expected to observe things like rare snakes or lizards or cute monkeys and collect data, but...

"Nothing's coming! Nothing!"

We keep waiting, but it doesn't even seem like the sensors are picking up on anything. "... It seems like there are a few bugs around, but they're not enough for samples," Noire says.

"But it's still pretty weird. I didn't expect to meet animals immediately like it's a zoo, but for not even a single bird to come out? That sort of leaves a bad taste in my mouth," I reply.

Is that it? Like what Blanc said before, maybe the fighter startled them and made them run away.

Then does that mean that we shouldn't wait here? As I start to get anxious, what Principal Arfoire said before comes back to mind.

'But there won't even be a spring break if you idle.'

Idle... idle... idle... idle...

"I shouldn't just wait around! Let's attack!" I clench my fist and proclaim. I turn back and run towards The Final Hard.

"Nep-Nep? Where are you going?!"

"Wait a sec! I'll check if we have any useful things lying around!"

I pant and run to The Final Hard's storage to search for something that might turn things around.

Pots, a cauldron, a frying pan... I don't need those right now. Oh, chocolate! I'll put that in my pocket and save it for later.

Beside that... are these anesthetics? Flypaper? Huh... I said 'attack,' but maybe that's not a fitting word. How would that work?

If animals are being wary of us, then we should make them think of us as non-threats, right? How about some camouflage? Or maybe a disguise?

As I ponder with my arms crossed, a light bulb sparks above my head! I bob my head back and forth arbitrarily.

"Ouch!"

Without realizing it, I hit my head on a box behind me.

I probably tipped it off balance because the box above it just fell in front of

me. Whew, that close.... That could've been a disaster.

After brushing off my chest, I prepare to put the fallen box back. But then, I realize something.

"Huh? This box also says 'theater group equipment."

The exploration clothes that I'm wearing right now was also provided by the theater group... probably. But I guess that we have other stuff from them, too.

Danananaaaa~). With surging curiosity, I open the box like a boy wearing green clothes and a triangular hat. Then...

"T-t-this is...!"

Dananana~♪.

The jingle of acquiring treasure echoes clearly in my head. I then let out a shout.

Stage 1 - Part 4

"Boing boing boing! It's a bunny!"

"Such beautiful wings with holy light and rich colors. I am quite the bird of paradise." "A jungle predator that hunts its prey in silence. I'm a black panther."

Good. The three of them look great. Compa's, Vert's, and Noire's outfits all match their images!

Huh? Why's Blanc speaking up?

"... Koalas don't cry very often."

"Ah, I see. You're... the type that tries to be authentic, huh? As expected of you."

"What about your costume, Nep-Nep? It looks like a doughnut store mascot."

"N-no! That's not it! It's the king of beasts! A lion! Can't you see?! Gao!"

With sparkling eyes, I roar while shaking the mane around my head.

"That's a cute lion."

"Cute? C'mon Compa! I'm totally intimidating and ferocious! But your bunny costume's really adorable," I reply.

You all have probably realized it by now. These are my secret weapons that I brought from the storage. Animal costumes!

The others probably mistook these as exploration clothes when they borrowed it from the theater group and threw them into the storage without knowing any better. But this is a happy accident. Good job, whoever was responsible for this!

If animals are cautious of us, then we should let their guard down by becoming animals ourselves. We need to be like, 'We're not your enemies. Don't be afraid!' Then, they'll relax.

But there's one problem...

"I-chan, just give it up and come out."

As the others show off their selected outfits, I-chan remains hiding and wriggling under The Final Hard.

She's pretty stubborn.

"I-chan!"

"I-I can't believe this! Everyone should be criticizing Nep-ko's stupid plan at a time like this! Why are you all so happy about wearing these embarrassing costumes?!"

"Is that so? I think it's a good idea, so I'm pretty amazed considering that it came from

Neptune." "... There's good logic behind disguising ourselves as animals."

"See? Noire and Blanc say it's a good idea. You don't have to worry so much. Just trust me!" I start to get upset, so I walk around the plane and drag I-chan out.

"Huh? Here you are, complaining about it, but you've already changed. Let's go! We don't have time, so let's hurry!"

"I-I just put this on since you're all dragging me along.... T-this is bad! My cool image and all of the style points that I accumulated up until this point... my pride in the academy..."

We came all the way to the jungle, and *that's* what you're complaining about? You wore a maid outfit before, so this is fine! Tada, here we are!



As I forcefully bring her in front of everyone, Compa cheers in amazement!

"It's a penguin. I-chan, you look so cute!"

"That looks 'cool' enough. You don't have to worry."

"... N-not that kind of cool! And why am I a penguin? How can there be penguins in a jungle?!

"There's no point in complaining about the theater group's costumes. Or do you want to switch with my black panther outfit?"

"... To be fair, there aren't any rabbits or lions in the jungle, either."

"That's not the point.... Fine, I get it! I'll tag along this time. But hear me well, Nep-ko. If this doesn't work, then I'll curse you. Straight to hell!"

Wow. I-chan's eyes... she's not kidding. W-we better succeed this mission no matter what, then.

"Alright, let's go. To protect world peace and our spring vacation!"

I turn around and shout out a slogan.

This time, we delve deep into the jungle as the Histoire Memorial Academy's animal army.

Our jobs are still the same as before, but this is time, we also need to test the efficacy of these disguises. ... Failure is not an option. I'll be dragged to hell by I-chan if we fail.

I spread the nanosensors mixed in with food in places where animals will come by to eat it, and install sensors in hidden areas like bushes.... Boring. This is totally boring!

Did Nepgear and the others do the same boring thing? She's earnest. She's my little sister, but I commend her.

"Man, I'm getting tired of this. Something like a Gehagon should..."

"Shut up, Neptune! The data is being collected slowly. It looks like the disguises are working. Look over there," Noire whispers as the tedious job starts to bore me.

'Look over there?' I follow Noire's finger and... woah!

"It's a monkey!"

"I said to shut up! It'll run off if you startle it."

Ah, right, sorry. I cover my mouth with my hands to silence myself.

In front of me are monkeys gathering the food that we spread. Aww, they're so cute. Have they finally relaxed?

"Hey, should we follow those monkeys? There could be more animals."

"We should be careful about not being spotted, Nep-Nep."

"Gotcha!"

We march after the monkeys that took off with the food into the jungle. I start to hear the cries of birds overhead. It's finally starting to feel like an animal kingdom.

Looking around, I see a bunch of strange, never before seen plants and colorful flowers.

Yeah, this is it! I was waiting to see something like this. It'd be even better though if we see a gorilla with a necktie collecting bananas.

Excited by my surroundings, I start to pick up the pace.

"Nep-Nep, please slow down. You shouldn't go alone."

This is the first time ever that I'm experiencing a jungle, so I ignore Compa's voice behind me.

"It's fine! The monkeys are focused on going back home with their food, so we don't have to sweat the details."

As I forget that I'm hunched over like an animal, I take a brave step forward.

—Thuump!

"Huh?"

Up until this point, my feet were firmly planted on the ground with every step. But the ground feels unusually soft all of a sudden.

I look down to see that one of my legs is buried up to my knee.

Something suddenly surges out and wraps me. Or at least, it looks like that's what happened.

—Sshh!

With the sound of whipping wind, I feel my body start to lift into the air.

"Uwaaaa!"

The sudden change of events causes me to scream in a shrill voice like the monkeys we were chasing.

"Nep-Nep!"

"Nep-ko!"

W-w-w-wait! What's this?! What just happened?!

As I flap my arms and feet around without knowing what's going on, I feel the prickly ropes poke through my costume.

N-no. This isn't a rope.

"... Huh? A net?"

There's no mistake about it. As I relax and look closely, I notice that it's a handmade net comprised of grass and tree bark.

In other words, I'm being tangled by a net, dangling and swinging... eh?! What's going on?! I quickly realize it. It looks like I've been snared.

Hihohohoi!"

"Ti tog ew! Ti tog ew!"

Seriously, that's what I'm hearing right now.

How do I know? 'Cause the very people who caught me are popping out of the bushes, shouting those weird noises. It looks like there are more than ten of them around the net.

They're all wearing one pieces, big, weird masks, and feathered decorations. Dozens of them pop out from the bushes and the trees above simultaneously.

... I-is... is this another jungle cliché besides rare monsters of the century? Uncharted natives?!

"Where did these guys come from?! How could I have not sensed their presence?" The penguin right below me... no, I-chan, exclaims as she rushes over to save me.

"Uwaa! Stop it! Let me go!"

"Ah! Compa!"

In the distance, Compa triggered another trap, and the natives are poking at her with spears. This is dangerous! This is really bad!

"Let go of Compa! Fine, you leave me with no choice. HDD...!"

I'd be willing to forgive being snared like an animal, but I won't tolerate anyone laying a finger on Compa! Trust me, I'm scary when serious.

As I muster the strength to transform,

"Wait, Neptune! Don't provoke them!"

Noire's fierce voice halts my transformation process.

"Why are you stopping me, Noire? We have to rescue Compa!"

"Don't worry. Leave it to me. I have an idea."

"Then stop wasting time! Get on with it! Hurry!"

Unlike my nervous self, Noire slowly raises her hands above her head and glance at the natives surrounding us.

"Relax. We're not prey. Look at us. We're people like you. Understand?"

As if trying to calm the angry natives, she takes off the black panther costume to reveal her exploration clothes.

... Wait, what? The illustration earlier made it look more like sexy tights clinging perfectly to her body, unlike the baggy costumes that the rest of us are wearing. How was she wearing additional layers underneath...?

But I guess I shouldn't dwell on the details, right? In animations, cancelling HDD and reverting

back to our normal clothes happens a lot. So if you try to describe it realistically, we'd run into some problems with age limitations and stuff. So, uh, just keep that in mind, okay? Let's just skip this part.

"Got it? We're not animals. We had to disguise ourselves under certain circumstances," Noire continues, spinning on the spot. The natives look surprised.

It's hard to tell if they're understanding the situation or not...

As I wait in anxiety, Noire thinks that the misunderstanding has been completely resolved. So she smiles and takes a step toward the natives. Then...

"Snamuh! Edih tsaeb gniraew!"

"Deisehporp sa!"

"Meht hctac!"

The natives are speaking amongst themselves in a completely different language from the common continental language that we normally use. I can't understand them, but they seem to be happy about something.... So are we good now? Is diplomacy Noire's talent?

"See? I told you. You guys were surprised that we were roaming around with strange clothing, right? Sorry, we didn't mean any harm. Will you forgive us?"

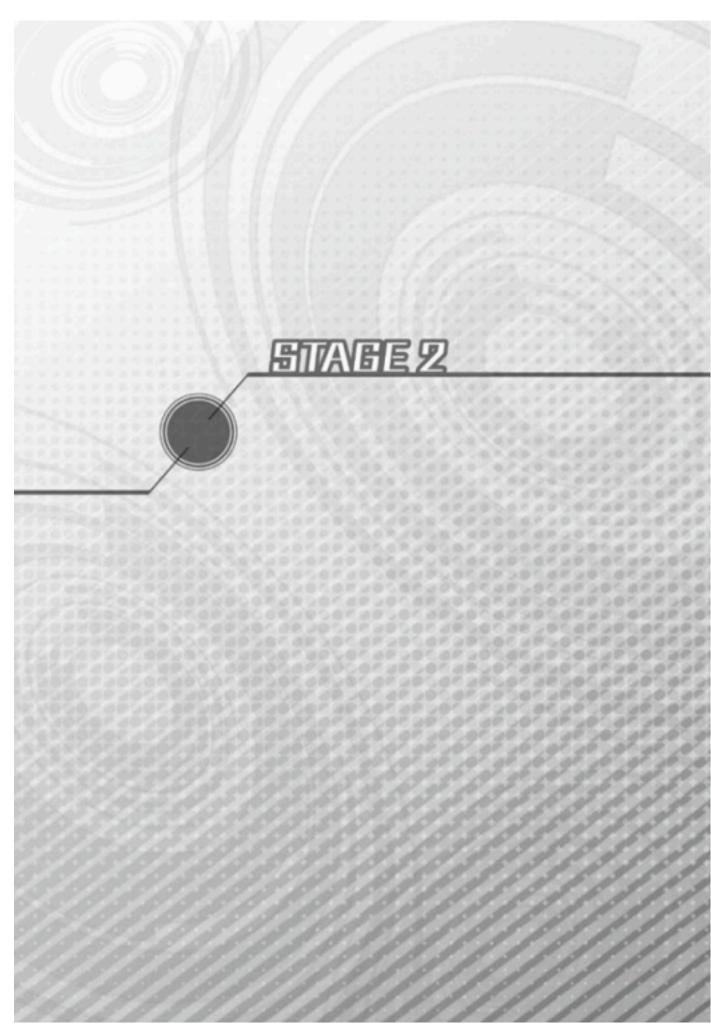
Noire smiles and extends her hand for a handshake.

And the tip of a spear points in front of her eyes in return.

Phew, I was worried that things would go south. So we're good... no! Not good! We're not good at all!

"That didn't even work!" I embrace my head and shout, watching Noire get tied in ropes in the blink of an eye as she stands still with a hard-set smile.

What's going to happen to us?!



Stage 2

Stage 2 - Part 1

Fruits of varying color and well grilled meat are stacked on a round stage made of stone and clay.

For someone like me to be stuck in a prison cell while staring at the food surrounding the bonfire lit stage... oh boy.

"Wipe your drool. You look disgusting."

Huh?! O-oh. Oh boy.

As Noire points out my pathetic image, I snap back to reality and wipe my mouth with my sleeve. A single piece would be good. Maybe they'll share? ... Nah, they probably won't.

We're being held in total captivity...

I can see the unwelcoming natives dance around the bonfire to the beat of the

music. Well, I guess they're welcoming us in a way. But as sacrifices.

"I'm not joking. Let's just activate HDD, crush this prison and run away. Hm... maybe I should take the food before saying goodbye," I suggest to everyone, shaking the wooden bars held in place by other blocks of wood.

Compa, I-chan, Noire, Vert, and Blanc.

We've all been captured. But at least they didn't take away our stuff or take some of us somewhere else or tie us to pillars.

Just for reference, I can crush a poorly made prison cell like this in an instant if I transform, alright?

When Compa and Noire were captured, I stayed quiet so as to not let them get hurt. But it doesn't matter right now, right? I can do whatever I want?

"This isn't good."

I'm starting to get hungry and violent, but I-chan straight up ignores my suggestion...

Her eyes are glued onto her cell phone.

"This looks like their village. I scanned the area as they were dragging us. There are a ton of people around here, many of which are expert hunters. Not even I couldn't sense them."

She's using a flip phone with physical buttons. Those are rare nowadays. I thought of this before, but does she hate smartphones?

"So?" I ask.

"You're dense, you know that? Alright, let's say that we cause a ruckus and break out of here. Think about what comes after. It'd be problematic if they target us while we're out in the jungle. You're not going to fight the natives, are you?" I-chan says as she hurriedly taps on the small buttons with her fingers without taking her eyes off of the screen

"Then what should we do?"

"We look for the opportunity to try conversing with them so that they'll release us peacefully. I don't know about what kind of ritual they're performing, but they've left us alone for now."

Conversing with them...

I'm pretty sure that there was a hero who died tragically after making a bold claim like that...

"Why are you looking at me like that? If you didn't get trapped, this wouldn't have

happened!"

I know that the bonfire is lighting her face, but Noire blushes for another reason and turns away from me.

"Is everyone alright?" Compa butts in, raising her hand.

"What's wrong? Are you hurt?" Blanc replies worriedly, sitting next to Compa.

"Am I hurt...?" Compa responds, tilting her head.

"You don't know if you're in pain? Okay... well, you don't seem to have a fever or anything."

As Vert stands up and touches Compa's forehead, Compa pushes away Vert's hand in shock.

"N-no. I'm not the one in pain.... Over there," Compa continues and points Vert's hand towards the outside. Everyone follows Vert's finger. Several of the villagers are sitting while hunching over, staring at the other villagers dancing.

"What's wrong with that? Aren't they just enjoying their comrades' dance?"

I don't understand what Compa means, so I tilt my head.

"What Nep-Nep said is true, but... those people look like they're in pain. They've been coughing constantly and have been fingering their noses as if they're in discomfort. They've been doing that ever since we were dragged to the village, so it bothered me."

"... Now that you mention it, you're right. Oh, over there. The woman on the far right."

Realizing the situation, Blanc takes Vert's hand from Compa points it towards the lady.

"When are you going to stop using my hand as a pointer? ... By the way, Compa, to figure that out in this kind of situation.... You are quite the aspiring nurse."

"N-no. It's nothing that deserves praise. I just knew somehow," Compa replies sheepishly.

Vert takes her hand away from Blanc and pats Compa's head.

"Illness, huh.... This is just conjecture, but if the dance is meant to pray for the villagers' recovery, then we might have a problem," I-chan mumbles, taking her eyes off her phone after listening to Compa's observation.

"W-what? And that problem would be...?" I reply to I-chan's anxiety inducing words.

"Hihohohoi!"

"Sama! Atatari! Sama! Atatari!"

As the climax arrives, they suddenly stop dancing and shout erratically is if answering my question.

Is this called a trance state? I don't know too much about it. The passionate cheering continues for a while before finally coming to a halt. Everything goes dead silent.

Within the silence, a shadow moves around the stage and comes our way.

It's a woman. She's as tall as Vert, I guess? Her figure is also similar to Vert's, so I-chan and Blanc clicks their tongues at the sight of her... or at least, they were about to.

Well, skipping that part, the young lady with such a voluptuous figure slowly walks towards us. Her dress is pretty exposing. At least the parts that should be covered *are* covered. But it's still... kind of indecent. It's hard to look at, even for a woman like me.

"Now's our chance. ... This should do the trick," I-chan comments and fiddles with her phone while glancing at the daunting lady.

At the same time, the lady stands in front of the prison holding us captive.

"Devirra evah stsaeb yloh eht. Slamina deisehporp eht," she says.

I-chan pushes her phone towards the lady as if trying to match her words.

"Ah... hahaha.... ... What's she saying?"

I give the lady a soulless smile.

Tiroring~ℷ!

Then, I-chan's phone rings.

"... Goggle's a pretty scary company. The translator can understand languages as obscure as this one."

As the ringtone sounds, I-chan takes her eyes off of the screen and shows it to us.

Huh? Something's written on it. Let's see...

'The prophesied animals. The holy beasts have arrived.'

"... What's this?"

"You don't know about it? It's a web browsing service called Goggle. This is their translation app."

"What?! You mean like 'just Goggle it'? That Goggle?"

Everyone except I-chan blinks in confusion. I-I guess that something as modern as a translator is pretty out of place in an uncharted jungle.

"I guess a more plausible translation would be... 'Welcome, holy beasts."

"That's what this lady said?"

"Probably. Then let's see if we can translate our language to theirs. Okay, let's ask... 'Are you of a high standing in the village?" I-chan replies. She then speaks those words into her phone's mic. Eventually, I hear the ringtone sound again. In the tone of a Vocaloid who's constantly used in videos uploaded on NiyaNiya video, the speaker sounds out a similar language to the one spoken by the lady.

Oh man, the lady's reaction is priceless! She was looking down at us, probably thinking something like 'what are they doing?' Then, she fell flat on her butt when she heard the phone.

This time, she fixes her gaze on the phone. She glances at us, then back at the phone again.... She nods after repeating that cycle a couple of times.

"... Amazing. It worked."

"You did it, IF-san!"

We're just as surprised as that lady.... I was honestly a little skeptical of it at first, but that's expected of the almighty Goggle that rules the technological world.

"Dear Noire, this is communication!"

"L-linguistics is an audacious field of study! And it's not like you did anything, Neptune.... Anyways, that doesn't matter right now! IF, hurry up and tell her to get us out of here."

"I'll try."

As time passes, the weird conversation through I-chan's phone and Goggle Translate continues.

"Hm.... 'Please do what I do and talk here. We can communicate properly if you do."

After giving those instructions, I-chan politely explains where we came from, why we came to the jungle, and that we don't intend to harm the villagers.

I-chan sure is reliable.

The reason why I-chan was fiddling with her phone earlier was because she was researching the villagers, their rituals, and various other things that she observed through Goggle's keywords to figure out the kind of tribe the natives belong to, and what kind of language they speak.

- "... Then, you people are not the prophesied holy beasts?"
- * These are liberal translations based on Goggle's Translate's results.

So... this lady is the village's priestess. Let's refer to her as the priestess from now on, then.

We tell her that we were captured based on a misunderstanding.

"Then what should I..."

* We're dropping these translation disclaimers. You're fine with that, right?

Suddenly, the priestess slumps her shoulders and starts crying on the spot.

"This is getting weird."

Like Blanc said, this is totally unexpected. It looks like the priestess was pretty determined to capture us.

"... Hey, I-chan, this has been bothering me, but... what's up with these 'holy beasts' and 'prophecy'? Is it related to the priestess' condition?"

"Good question. Let me ask."

Although bewildered by the priestess' sudden change in emotions, I-chan speaks through her phone again.

The priestess wipes away her tears, bites her lips and replies.

"Right now, a mysterious disease has broken out in the village. There is no cure for the disease, and the village will collapse at this rate.... In these dire times, I received a prophecy from a messenger of our god."

"... And what's that message?"

"'As we speak, there is a never before seen creature roaming the jungle. This creature is a holy beast that takes the form of humans and animals. Capture it and sacrifice it to god, or else the village will perish by Atatari's curse'.... That was what it told me."

Huh? That prophecy's pretty recent.... Wait, wasn't that given just earlier today?

And a never before seen creature... that takes the form of humans and animals...

Ah, I see. So that's why things went down the way they did...

"Maybe that's the reason why they captured us."

"And there you have it. ... Neptune, you should take responsibility and act as a sacrificial offering to their god. The village might be saved you know?"

Sheesh Noire, that's harsh. I know that that's a joke, but isn't it a little too much?

Sacrificial offerings are a no-no. Absolutely not! It might just become reality, so you can't call it a

joke!

They shouldn't be egged on by Noire's suggestion. I stretch out my hand to cover I-chan's phone mic. I-chan would probably be against any sacrifices. Yeah.

But a shadow snatches away the phone faster than I can.

"The villagers are infected with a disease, of course!"

It's Compa!

She took the phone away at the speed of an alley cat making off with some fish. It's different from her usual relaxed and peaceful self.

"I-chan, do I speak here?"

"Mhm. But Compa, what are you..."

"Hmm... what should I say to get them to understand? O-okay... 'I-I can cure the disease. Please let me out of here. I want to help everyone!'... That's what I want to say!"

Compa...

After taking away the phone from I-chan, Compa desperately speaks into the mic. I can only watch with a blank stare.



Stage 2 - Part 2

"Now, open wide. Aaaaah~."

A long line stretches out from where we were previously imprisoned. It's filled with patients waiting for Compa's examinations. It's kind of like a bunch of people lining up for a new smartphone model to be released.

"When was the last time that Compa desperately asked for something like

that?" Having I-chan as the translator assistant, Compa examines villagers'

symptoms.

It should be a professional doctor doing it, but we can't be bound by such detailed clichés at a time like this. This is a matter of being turned into sacrifices or not.

"Now that you mention it..." I answer Noire's question as she watches Compa from afar.

"It was when Principal Arfoire was possessed by that witch from the other world, and we were in a pinch because of her weird magic staff. Compa stood in front of the other world's Arfoire alone..."

"Right. It feels like that happened so long ago."

"Looking back on it, I think that that was the start of all this."

Back then, Compa risked her life to protect us. She said that she was willing to become the witch's servant if she spared our lives.

What she's doing right now is different, but Compa... she's definitely thinking the same thing as she did during the school festival.

She always acts out of desperation. Not for herself, but for other people. She's been like that ever since I lost my memories when I fell to Gamindustri.

"Even though she's in a dangerous situation, she's still concerned about the villagers' conditions.... It's admirable."

"That's called being strong-minded. But that's just like Compa."

Honestly, there are times where that side of Compa scares me. But for now, we watch Compa, feeling an emotion that far surpasses respect.

"... Here it is. Take a look," Blanc, who wasn't in the conversation, suddenly speaks up.

"Woah! You surprised me there. What's up with you all of a sudden?"

"I investigated this 'Atatari' that the priestess mentioned."

"Investigated.... Did you Goggle it?"

"No, I used an electronic dictionary. I just installed it recently on this."

Blanc shows the double screen portable console she and her sisters all carry

around. "Nowadays, people can use their portable consoles as electronic

dictionaries."

"It's not just limited to gaming devices, either. Leanbox has developed a tablet PC on which people can arrange applications into panels."

"Right, but there are many kinds of tablets."

"Speaking of tablets, isn't Lastation working hard to develop one as well? Why don't we compare and see if it holds up in the commercial market?"

"Ah, right. I heard about that, too. It's called X...Z or something?" Noire replies.

"With such a wide selection of tablets, it's hard to choose. ... Though, I have a way of making my own product," Vert adds on.

"... Can I continue?"

Right, sorry Blanc. Go ahead.

"This is a collection of books that details destroyed ancient civilizations, and the myths surrounding them."

"Ancient civilizations?"

"Yes. Read this part for more info."

"I can't read words that well. Please read it for me, Noire!"

"... Ugh, seriously? You're so..."

After receiving the console, Noire starts reading the part Blanc mentioned.

"... 'Before the foundations of civilization were laid down for the nations of Planeptune, Lowee, Lastation, and Leanbox, there was a flourishing civilization in which people believed in the existence of an entity known as Atatari. This civilization was founded near the capital of modern day Leanbox, and was well on its way to expanding its territory'... it says."

"It was a civilization in Leanbox? Well, this jungle *is* within Leanbox, although it's quite far from civilization," Vert ponders.

"Are you saying that these people believe in the same god that was worshipped in ancient times?" Blanc asks.

"Hey, don't interrupt me. I'll continue... but why am I the one reading it? Shouldn't Blanc explain?"

"No. I can't be bothered."

Blanc gives a blunt reply. ... But I'm not really in a position to criticize her. Noire shakes her head after hearing Blanc's answer and turns her eyes back at the screen.

"It's written here that Atatari was considered the god of fertility, and it gathered the faith of the masses."

"Fart?"

"Fertility. It refers to the quality of crops. Simply put, it's a god that ensures that each year has a bountiful harvest."

"Then isn't it a good god? Since they were talking about curses or whatever, I thought that it was a scary god of destruction."

"But according to the myth, this god was not known for its equity. It forced the people to harvest only tasteless crops that no one liked..."

"Like only giving eggplants when a person wants to eat tomatoes?"

"That statement will upset eggplant farmers. But yeah, I guess that that's one way of putting it."

Hm. I tilt my head. This god might seem like its frivolous and can't read the atmosphere, but I don't think that it's the kind of god that kills humans with curses.

As I voice my thoughts, the other three agree with me.

"That aside, who gave the prophecy to the priestess? It sounds very suspicious, considering that they told her our characteristics right after we entered the jungle."

"I think so too. And here's something that just came to mind. During their investigations, Uni said that something was strange. She said, 'maybe there's an enemy that we aren't aware of yet."

"A-an enemy that we aren't aware of?! Could it be that someone else besides Magic and the others were possessed by a villain from the other world?" I reply in shock.

"I'm not entirely sure..." Noire replies, slurring the end of her sentence.

"It's likely that Uni-chan made that claim on some sort of basis. ... Then I suppose that it's possible that someone gave the priestess a false prophecy to deceive her," Vert hypothesizes.

"And if this 'mysterious enemy' is the one spreading the disease in the village, then it all fits," Noire adds.

How can that be...? That's unforgivable!

I don't know why they're getting in our way, but infecting innocent people with a disease is terrible! "I hope the disease is just a simple flu..."

We better talk about the details later on with Compa and I-chan... as well as the priestess and the villagers, too, if possible. We wait for Compa to finish her treatments.

We help as much as we can to pass the time. After about two hours, the sick villagers' examinations finally end. Compa looks exhausted.

"But as a result of the treatment..."

Everyone gathers around Compa as she sits down on the ground, drinks tea from a water bottle and takes a deep breath.

Sorry to ask this of you when you're this exhausted, Compa. But I have to know.

"... Yes. Everyone's symptom at first were severe nasal congestions, followed by runny noses," Compa starts speaking after drinking a sip of tea.

"And their bodies are experiencing a case of continuous lethargy. In other words, they feel really tired. And there are people with mild fevers, too."

So far, it sounds like a simple cold...

"And I observed itchy eyes, sore throats and a decline in will and concentration."

Hm. So there are several other symptoms.

But uh, do flus cause itchy eyes?

"The name of the disease... this sy... ss... this symp...! Symp! Tom! Is..."

The name of the disease? I won't like it if it's some dangerous illness that I've never heard about.

"... Pollen allergy."

What.

The atmosphere starts to get a little awkward. I don't know how to react.

... Seriously? How should I word it? What do I say ...?

"Are you sure?" Noire asks, feeling the same way that I do.

Right, for the identity of this mysterious disease threatening the village to just be... pollen allergies, it's totally unexpected.

"Yes. Just in case, I called Chika-sensei through I-chan's phone, and she confirmed that it's an allergic reaction to pollen. Or more accurately, allergic coryza."

Feeling confident about Chika-sensei verifying her diagnosis, Compa nods to Noire's question.

"I called and asked around as well, so it's pretty much confirmed," I-chan, who was helping Compa, says next to her to confirm her diagnostics.

Er, well, I'm not skeptical just because I don't believe her, you know?

"... But the thing is..."

I can't help but feel deceived.

As I wonder about when to bring up the Atatari stuff,

"We can't just stand around like this. We should prepare injections right away." With

her break coming to an end, Compa walks away with a determined expression.

Prepare injections...? Compa, just how much medicine did you bring?

Without giving me time to ask, Compa quickly takes out medicine from the case like a dignified nurse with a strong sense of duty.

"I'll be treating everyone now, so please line up," Compa speaks loudly at the gathered villagers.

... She's burning with enthusiasm, so I better not say a word.

There's only one thing that I can do as a friend, right?

"Wait, Compa! I'll help, too! Tell me what to do!" Stage 2 - Part 3

Two days pass in the blink of an eye.

In the meantime, our jungle expedition proceeds pretty smoothly. The reason for that is because the natives who are far more knowledgeable about the jungle decided to cooperate with 'Goddess Compa-sama and her subordinates' and mobilized. I don't have to tell you why, right?

"I-I'm not a goddess. I'm just a nurse-in-training."

Even though Compa says that,

"Compa and I-chan are the MVPs, no matter who says otherwise. Until this survey effort ends, please give us our orders, Goddess Compa," Vert says to make fun of Compa.

But there's truth in her words. The rest of us nod in agreement and follow suit. It's all thanks to Compa's accumulated benevolence, after all.

But she's the one being revered.... That gives me mixed feelings.

Even though we have reliable cooperators, I'm still not entirely happy about the situation.

"Alright, I have something to say to all of you goddess subordinates, so listen up. I did a quick inventory check and found that the medical supplies loaded on The Final Hard can suppress the villagers' symptoms for two days tops. If we don't get rid of the cause, the village will go back to how it was two days ago."

Like I-chan said, we've yet to find the cause of the allergies that have been tormenting the villagers.

Honestly, we've already finished collecting all of the data that we need to send to Histy yesterday, so there's no reason for us to stay here. But that's a little cruel. Plus, there's no way 'Goddess Compa-sama' will allow that...

Each of us continue our research by bringing any kind of flower we see and spreading it to test its pollen for allergic reactions, but nothing works.

As we ponder on what to do, the next day arrives. And we've made progress.

But not in a good way.

On the third morning...

"A-a... achoo!"

I sneeze so loud that the sound of it wakes me up in shock.

I woke up from a sneeze, my eyes feel itchy, nose feels clogged as if denying air flow...

A-are these... are these the symptoms...?

After leaving my tent to wash my face with cold water and to think to myself, I see something that makes me doubt my vision.

"Everyone, wake up! It's an emergency!"

The village is dyed red.

It looks like someone poured a few tons of red flour on the village. I can't even see a meter in front of me because of all this weird red mist.

As I stare at the scene blankly, unable to process what's going on, my... my nose starts to itch.

"A... Achoo! Achoo!"

I continue sneezing. Consecutively, at that. It feels like my back muscles are convulsing, almost making me fall over.

"Nep-Nep, are you alright? Achoo!"

"I can't breathe.... Achoo!"

Following my voice, the others come out with sneezes of their own. They struggle as they sneeze again and again.

If this is our current state, then there's no need to describe the fate of the villagers.

The village that had regained its peace for three days thanks to Compa's emergency countermeasures is in total chaos.

"Uwaa! First, we should do something about all of this red stuff! Can't we just suck it all up at once and spit it out somewhere else?!"

This is beyond the scope of medicine. At this rate, everyone including us will get groggy because of our sneezing and itchy eyes!

"Sucking it up and spitting it somewhere else.... That's it, Nep-Nep!"

Vert suddenly stands up in this sudden crisis while everyone else continues sneezing,

"I might be able to do something about that. I need to transform!"

After taking a deep breath and shouting, Vert enters her HDD form and takes to the skies.

"Haaa!"

She materializes her spear in her hands. Then, she holds onto the edge of the handle with both hands and spin on the spot like a shot putter.

The long spear slices and vibrates the air, and the reddish pollen spirals upwards with the wind.

"Wait! That'll cause more damage! What are you thinking?!"

I thought that the pollen made Vert go insane, but I quickly come to realize that that's not the case.

Ignoring my voice, Vert spins her spear faster. The wind gathers with Vert at the center, and a small vortex eventually forms around her.

While watching the pollen that spread all over the village slowly get sucked into a small yet powerful vortex,

"Neptune, Noire. Let's help her."

Surprisingly, it's Blanc who just suggested that we help her. I guess she's irritated about the situation and wants to get rid of the pollen ASAP.

Naturally, I agree.

"Let's do this. We need to hurry!"

It's been a while, but the three of us... transform!

"This might be too much for you alone, Vert. Let us lend you a hand!" Blanc, who suggested we help Vert, flies towards her first.

She lets down her favorite giant axe and begins to swing it like a fan, blowing the pollen towards Vert's vortex in an instant.

Noire and I move in as well. We put our backs against each other.

"Neptune, follow my lead!"

"Alright, I'll leave it to you, Noire."

"One... two...!"

On Noire's count, I stretch out my arms are start to rotate. This is to create another vortex separate from Vert's.

"Good job, everyone! I can start to see the clearing!"

"Of course! Nep-Nep's a CPU. Do your best!"

With I-chan's and Compa's cheering, our two 'goddess cyclones' suck in the pollen. We continue with our plan while being careful not to absorb anything else besides pollen.

"Most of the pollen's been sucked into the vortex. What should we do next, Vert?"

I shout toward Vert's cyclone that's been dyed an unpleasant, blood-like color. Mine and Noire's is probably a similar shade.

"If we stop spinning, then the pollen will spread back down into the village. Take the pollen as is and ascend!"

"Got it!"

The two cyclones slowly begin to rise up into the sky. Blanc flies around to draw back any pollen that might have gotten away.

Since we're used to working together, we ascend to plane flight altitude.

"This should be fine. The airflow will disperse it."

Vert halts her rotation first, and both Noire and I follow suit. In an instant, the excessive amount of pollen that was floating in the sky like a giant carpet is scattered into the wind.

"Is this okay? It won't fall back to the village, but it looks like it'll spread out to the entire world," I ask Vert, wiping sweat off of my forehead as I take a breather.

"As it disperses, its density will thin. But this is just a temporary solution. If we don't deal with the source of the problem, then this won't solve anything in the long run," Vert replies, wiping off her own sweat as she points at the jungle.

My gaze follows her finger. I gasp as I see a reddish fog within the sea of green.

"What is that even supposed to be? Yolk surrounded by egg white?"

"Even in your transformed state, you still make such idiotic comments at a crucial moment like this. ... So, what do we do from here? Personally, I'd say to crush the source as quick as possible," Noire replies.

"Yeah. I'm in. I don't care to go through all of that a second time, My nose is still itchy, damn it!" Blanc replies.

"I concur. I'd be fine to leave the village to Compa and I-chan. How about you, Nep-Nep?" I decide as well.

Before voicing my agreement, I take in a deep breath through my nose. Compared to the jungle, there is little air up here, and it's -10°, as well. But since I'm in my transformed state, the cold and pleasant air of the high altitude flows into my lungs.

Until now, I never considered how good it is to breathe through your nose. Just being able to breathe. Something as simple as that is so refreshing.

"Let's finish this fast. Here we go!"

We fly towards the reddish fog in front of us.

"Hey, wait! Why do you get to decide on your own?! Hold on! I'm supposed to go first!"

Whenever Noire transforms, she's more aggressive than usual. But we ignore her and fly down. For now, it's more important to do something about the source of that fog.... The mass of flowers scattered on the ground.

While the source of the fog is deep within the jungle from the village's perspective, from the sky, the distance is fairly short. So we arrive in no time.

Naturally, the area is a flowerbed. I guess it's about the size of three or four large baseball fields? There are no trees in the area, and the flower field looks like a crater formed by a meteor impact.

Instead of trees, there is only a single kind of flower. They're a cute bloom that reaches up to your ankles, and are a mix of white and yellow. They populate the ground without leaving a gap empty.

It'd be a fantastic and beautiful scene if you don't know any better, but after seeing the same reddish pollen that we saw back in the village lie within the flowers, I can't stay in awe.

Instead, I feel a chill knowing that a single kind of flower has taken over this vast area, and is expanding ever outward.

"This reminds me of an old folktale from Planeptune. It's about dragons conquering the land and filling it with poisonous flowers..." I ponder.

"Isn't it about seven dragons doing something? And that's an old Loweean story, not Planeptunian. I have a children's storybook of it that Rom and Ram drew."

"What are you talking about? That story's from Lastation. Plus, isn't it an animation and not some old folktale?"

"It doesn't matter whether it's an old tale or an animation. Our problem at hand is figuring out how

to deal with these flowers," I say, interrupting the argument.

I still can't see clearly. If I cancel HDD, I'd probably get disoriented by sneezes, a runny nose, and tears.

While walking on the field of flowers that disperses red pollen with every step I take, I notice something.

"Hey, do you hear that?"

Boom! Boom! It sounds like cannon fire. I can also hear something like a large flag waving in the wind. The two sounds intersect slowly... before coming our way.

I... see something! Something's across that red fog!

Even the three who were talking about that old tale seem to have heard the noise loud and clear. They stare across the red fog as well.

It's close. It's heading right towards us. It must be about ten meters away.

"Everyone, don't let your guard down!"

As soon I warn everyone, a strong gale blows in front of us as the sound approaches.

The stacked pollen fiercely blows up into the sky. But it's not comparable to the vortexes that we made.

As the pollen rides away on the wind, we see it.

An aberration in front of us.

It has a face that resembles a dragon, and two large, lightning bolt-shaped horns on the sides of its head.

Behind the face of the huge dragon is a jaguar-like body, similar to what Noire was disguised as three days ago.... Though, she was dressed as a panther, but still. It has six legs as opposed to the four than a regular jaguar has.

It has eagle-like wings on its back, too.

Lizard, feline, and bird.... It looks like an amalgamation of prevalent animals of the jungle, but just looking at it is nauseating. It looks to be over thirty meters tall, as well. It's beyond intimidating.

"This... this creature really exists?" Blanc mumbles as she gulps from the sight of the huge beast.

"... I knew it. I thought that I'd never get the chance to see the real deal in my lifetime..." She continues.

"What are you talking about?"

"Remember the book about the myths of ancient civilizations that I showed you all on my console? This creature was mentioned in the text. 'It has a body resembling either a jaguar or lynx, and has six legs. This heteromorphic dragon with eagle wings is kin of Atatari, as detailed by the murals found in ancient ruins."

Kin of Atatari...?

My eyes widen from Blanc's unexpected answer.

Nepgear, you said that you fought a giant squid of unknown ecology. I guess that we'll be experiencing something similar to, if not more extreme than that.

Regardless of whether or not I want to experience it.

Stage 2 - Part 4

"Kin of Atatari or no, I don't care. I'll get rid of you if you get in my way!"

Noire charges at the nameless dragon known as the kin of Atatari as depicted by ancient murals, fearless of its massive size.

She shouts and kicks off of the ground, launching herself like an arrow, and swings her sword.

"The first strike!"

The kin of Atatari as depicted by ancient murals... that name is too long! She aims for the Atatari dragon's noise bridge.

Does it think that it can't dodge? Does it even intend to evade it? The Atatari dragon stands firm on the spot.

"Now!"

Noire's expecting to land a critical hit on her first strike. We can clearly see her sparkling emerald eyes from back here.

But before her blade can even reach the dragon, it opens its mouth as if trying to swallow us and bends its neck backward.

"Noire!"

"I know!"

Fire? No, a blizzard? Thinking that it's a signal for a strong breath attack, Noire quickly drops down, hides behind her blade and assumes a defensive stance.

The next thing I know, I hear the sound of cannon fire ringing in my ears.... The source of the noise are the gales that blew by when the Atatari dragon appeared.

"Kyaaa!"

Noire screams as she spins from being blown far away. But there's time no time to help her. The shockwave echoes not once, not twice, but three times. It feels like my body is being paralyzed. I can't even stand properly.

"W-what's that sound?! A thunderbolt? Is this guy an electric type?!" Blanc shouts as she covers her ears with her hands.

Electric.... It definitely sounds like thunder, but my intuition says otherwise. If it's not a thunderbolt... after enduring the third shockwave somehow, I look up.

"Blanc! Move! It's above you!" I shout.

"Above me?!"

Feeling endangered, Blanc leaps from her spot. 'That thing' falls down on where Blanc stood, sounding a splash

"Uwaa! Damn it, the hell's this?! Is it some sort of poisonous substance?!"

"No," I answer as I stare at the Atatari dragon above us.

"... It's snot."

"... What?"

Blanc's eyes go blank.

I understand how she feels, but I'm just stating my observation. But I can feel a... light headache coming on as I give her that stupid answer.

"I-it's definitely drooping. Yellowish liquid... from its large nostrils..." Vert adds discouragingly as she stares at the same yellow goop that I'm looking at.

"S-stop giving me that disgusting imagery, damn it! ... But that means that the previous explosion wasn't a breath attack, but..."

"Well, it's still technically a breath attack, right?"

""Yes. A simple sneeze could be classified as such."

My reply makes me feel even stupider.

Then that means that the Atatari dragon's sneeze turned Noire into a shooting star.

A sneeze caused by a lung capacity that surpasses the speed of sound. In the blink of an eye, it can explode with a crashing noise.... In other words, a sonic boom.

"... To think that the material that I studied for my supplementary exams would come in handy..."

"It's good that you took your studies seriously, Nep-Nep."

"That's not the problem."

As we have our goofy conversation, I sense the Atatari dragon opening its mouth wide and inhaling again.

"L-let's retreat for now."

We move behind the dragon, distancing ourselves and covering ears to endure the noise.

While calmly assessing the situation, we come to realize something.

The Atatari dragon has no intentions of harming us at all. Rather, it's a victim of the pollen, as well.

The Atatari dragon lets out another great sneeze. Twice, three times, five times. With that amount of force, a large amount of pollen floats into the air.

We bend our backs and cough from the pollen, and the Atatari dragon does the same. Regardless of its intentions, as it moves its back muscles, its large wings flap and creates a storm of pollen comparable to our cyclones. More pollen begins to float into the air.

The excessive pollen disperses through the jungle with the wind. So this is what's been causing the fog that we observed from the sky. I'm not sure if it's because of the air current, but I notice that most of it flies towards the priestess' village.

"This creature is suffering from allergic reactions, as well. Launching a preemptive strike is good and all, but Noire totally missed the mark."

"This guy's been living here in peace."

"It was an unfortunate coincidence..."

Blanc and I nod at the sighing Vert as she shakes her head.

Due to its massive size, a series of misfortunes have occurred without it knowing.

Thinking that the change in Celestia is the probable cause of the strange production of these pollen producing flowers, I feel sorry for both the Atatari dragon and the villagers. "Can't we help this poor thing?" I speak my mind. Vert and Blanc stare at the dragon a little more.

Then, I hear something else.

"How dare you do that to me?! Prepare yourself!"

After being blasted away for however far she went, Noire finally returns and shouts at the Atatari

dragon.

"No, Noire! Stop!" I exclaim as she closes in.

There's no point in fighting the Atatari dragon. We need everyone to cooperate and do something about these flowers and the pollen that they're producing.

But Noire's mind is filled with rage, so my voice doesn't reach her.

"I'll pay back what you did to me... tenfold!"

She swings her sword again and charges at the Atatari dragon.

But...

The Atatari dragon inhales again.

Huh. Déjà vu.

Another sneeze explodes.

Once again, Noire launches into the sky like a star.

"I'm serious! Why am I getting this treatment~~~?!"

Her sad screaming disappears far beyond the red fog.

"... Will she pay it back tenfold?"

"Well, she profanely confronted the kin of a god, so it's likely that it's divine punishment. To receive divine retribution even though she's a CPU Candidate... it's rather disgraceful."

"... I have an idea," Blanc mumbles as she stares at her feet instead of the direction that the pitiful Noire flew off to.

"Noire... will be back soon enough. Divine punishments aside, just lend me a hand, will

ya?" Huh? I look back at the smiling Blanc.

"It'll take a while, but I need to gather my strength. I need you guys to buy me some time so she can't come back before I finish preparing. Got it?"

There's no time to discuss in detail. We decide to believe in Blanc's words of assurance.

"It's okay, right, Vert?"

"Yes. And you, Nep-Nep?"

It feels painful trying to nudge the dragon suffering from allergies. Just as Blanc said, buying time for her is tougher than I imagined.

But since we fought together against strong opponents like Principal Arfoire and Magic Co. up to this point, I feel confident.

But this time, the opponent is a kin of a god. Saying that we're at a disadvantage would be a huge understatement.

Each of its sneezes blows away the transformed Noire coming in at full strength. This is like a comedy at this point.

Vert and I try our best, as well. I have a special handicap since I left my sword back at the academy.

To get the Atatari dragon's attention, we attack it with all we've got, but it only reacts as if trying to swat flies. This sense of lethargy is probably something you can only learn through experience.

A secret boss stronger than the final boss is all a part of the fun for recent RPGs, but actually confronting said secret boss is an entirely different matter.

All of my confidence dissipates. I don't know how to describe how powerless I feel. As exhaustion overtakes me to the point of being unable to raise an arm, the time finally comes.

"Uoooooo! Freeeeeeze!"

Blanc's shout echoes, and the surrounding temperature starts to decline rapidly.

Turning to the direction of her voice, I see Blanc with her eyes wide open. The ground starts to freeze in a radiating pattern with her standing in the middle!

The pollen in the air begins to turn into chunks of ice as soon as the chilly air that Blanc produced touches it. Ice crystals then fall to the ground.

"I see. Good idea, Blanc," Vert says, realizing Blanc's intentions.

"Not yet! Total...! Freeeeeze!"

As if covering the fallen pollen, the ice on the ground gradually thickens.

Five, seven, ten centimeters, and it's still going up! This... is amazing, Blanc! The Atatari dragon is surprised as well, so it starts moving its head to survey its surroundings.

The flowers and pollen have been covered in ice. A glacier traps everything that was irritating the village and the Atatari dragon.

I'm left speechless as I witness the scenery turn from a tropical jungle to an ice cap. "T-that should... do it. Good riddance. O-once everything's frozen... it's... no...thing." After using all of her strength, Blanc reverts back to her normal form and collapses on spot. The Atatari dragon doesn't show the same reactions as we did

—Ooooooooh!

It roars loud enough to vibrate the air for the first time.

Is it finally determined to fight us now?

"Vert, take care of Blanc!"

"Understood!"

I'm not joking. Blanc did all of this to protect you and the villagers!

Leaving the fallen Blanc to Vert, I confront the dragon alone. But then, I realize something.

"Are you... happy?"

. . .

"So, did you bring back dragon-san?"

I scratch my head and smile at Compa.

"Yeah, well... should I say that we brought *it*, or that it brought *us*? I guess the dragon's returning the favor... right, Vert?"

"That's what happened. But I'm quite exhausted. I hope you won't mind if I take my leave to rest?" I'm struggling to explain the situation, so I ask Vert for help. But she sinks down from fatigue.

"Blanc's sleeping in the tent. It looks like she won't wake up for a while."

Noire has an exhausted expression, herself, but it's for a different reason.

"Kin of Atatari or no, can't we just make it leave the village now? It's harmful trying to keep such a huge creature in a small space like this. And look around. The villagers are bowing their knees, unable to do anything," I-chan frowns and tells me to lead it away as the situation worsens her headache.

"Plus, to the priestess and the villagers, the kin of their trusted god has descended upon them. It'd cause nothing but trouble if we let it stay here."

I agree with I-chan's statement.

"Okay, let's go, then. I'll give you an injection once you get out of the village," I say, tapping on the Atatari dragon's forehead.

Garuru. The Atatari dragon wriggles its neck and gently walks out of the village with Vert and I sitting on its head.

I guess that even the kin of a god is no different from a puppy if you're friendly

enough. "I wish that you'd walk a little slower so as to not to shake so much."

The way it slows its pace according to Vert's order as she sits on its head is cute.

After leaving the village, it lets Vert and I off.

"Okay, I'll give you your shot, now. It'll hurt a little bit, but please endure it," Compa says her usual line, not caring whether her patient is a villager or a huge dragon. She lifts up a large syringe that's taller than her and injects it into the dragon's right leg.

"Okay. Noire-san, please press it."

On Compa's signal, the transformed Noire presses on the syringe's piston with all her might.

"Let's go! Press hard! Since you didn't do anything, this is the least you can do, right,

Noire?" "I-it's not like I didn't want to help...! Alright. Finished."

Even though she's exhausted, Noire uses her shoulders and back to push on the piston to inject all of the remaining medicine that we gathered into the dragon's body.

"This should be okay. Once the effect kicks in, its eyes and nose will start to recover. Just wait a little longer."

Noire removes the empty syringe, places a towel-sized piece of cotton on the injected spot, tapes it to the dragon's leg and smiles.

"Will medicine meant for humans work on a dragon...? Especially an almighty mythological creature?"

I-chan tilts her head at the scene. But it looks fine to me. Look at that! It looks happy being able to breathe through its nose.

"Yeah, yeah. It's happy to breathe."

I nod a couple of times, satisfied at how well things have turned out.

The Atatari dragon leans over, bumps its nose on my cheek, and licks my face with its huge tongue.

"Wah!"

I scream as my face gets soaked in a single lick.

I understand how you feel, but please control yourself!

But with this, the situation has been solved...!

The next morning arrives.

The priestess and the villagers have come to see us off around The Final Hard as we finish our preparations for takeoff.

"Tank kyou! Tank kyou!"

I feel moved watching them show their gratitude by trying to speak in our

language. From what I heard, they learned how to say it from Compa and I-chan.

As a sign of gratitude, we're given a ton of meat and fruits as gifts.

We're ready to depart now.

A mountainous shadow approaches us, shaking the ground with every step. It's the Atatari dragon! "Sama Atatari!"

Huh. The villagers bow down again after seeing the Atatari dragon. What does it think about this?

As I run that through my mind, Blanc, who's standing next to me, looks at the Atatari dragon's face.

"I'm sorry for covering your home in ice," she says, looking into the dragon's eyes that have become more peaceful in comparison to when we first met it.

"I'd say that it'll take around three years for it to melt. I'll come back to see you by then.... I requested the villagers to let you live around the village until then."

I think that the villagers will approve at least that much.

The Atatari dragon wriggles its neck and looks down on Blanc. It's like it's implying, 'I understand. Do not worry.'

I notice the dragon holding something in its mouth.

Quietly lowering its body, the Atatari dragon lays down what it had in its mouth in front of Blanc. It's a large object that looks like a shield used by knights in games.

"This is... your scale? Are you giving it to me?" Blanc asks in surprise.

The bowing villagers lift their heads and begin chattering amongst themselves.

"To receive a gift from our god.... You people are Atatari's equals. Please, protect us the same way that our god that protects our village. For now, and for eternity."

* This is another liberal translation.

The priestess calms down the villagers, stands in front of us, and stops us from lowering our heads in embarrassment.

"Uwaaa! It's nothing special. F-friends... right. Being your friend is enough!" I exclaim.

"I can't do that. I shall commence the ritual of welcoming for you people at the village. You are all as gods, now..."

W-we can't stay. If we do, we'll all end up being served on the village's altar.

"Your feelings are enough! We'll keep your feelings in mind! We have something else that we have to do."

We reject the priestess' and the villagers's desperate grasps and board The Final Hard.

It's been rough, but we safely completed our mission. Let's head back to the academy!

"I-chan, start the engine! Takeoff!"

"Why're you acting all high and mighty? It's not like you've done anything substantial, Nep-ko."

"At least I did more than Noire."

"Why are you trash talking me?!"

"Gah, just shut up! Get out!"

After kicking us out of the cockpit, I-chan starts The Final Hard's engines. The fighter slowly ascends.

"It's unreasonable to be treated as gods of the village. But when we visit again, then we won't have to worry about food or accommodations," I say, gazing through the window at the waving villagers and the Atatari dragon as they slowly shrink.

"Visit again...? Nep-Nep, you're going to come here again?"

"Of course, Compa! After this is all over, I'll be back to challenge it again!"

"What are you going to challenge?"

"There's one thing that I still haven't found. I haven't spotted the monster Gehagon yet!"

"A-are you still talking about that? You're real persistent, Neptune. And what's a Gehagon, anyways...?"

"A Gehagon is a Gehagon. A monster of fantasy! It's fantasy, so you won't find it in encyclopedias!"

"I said to shut up! I can't concentrate on the controls!"

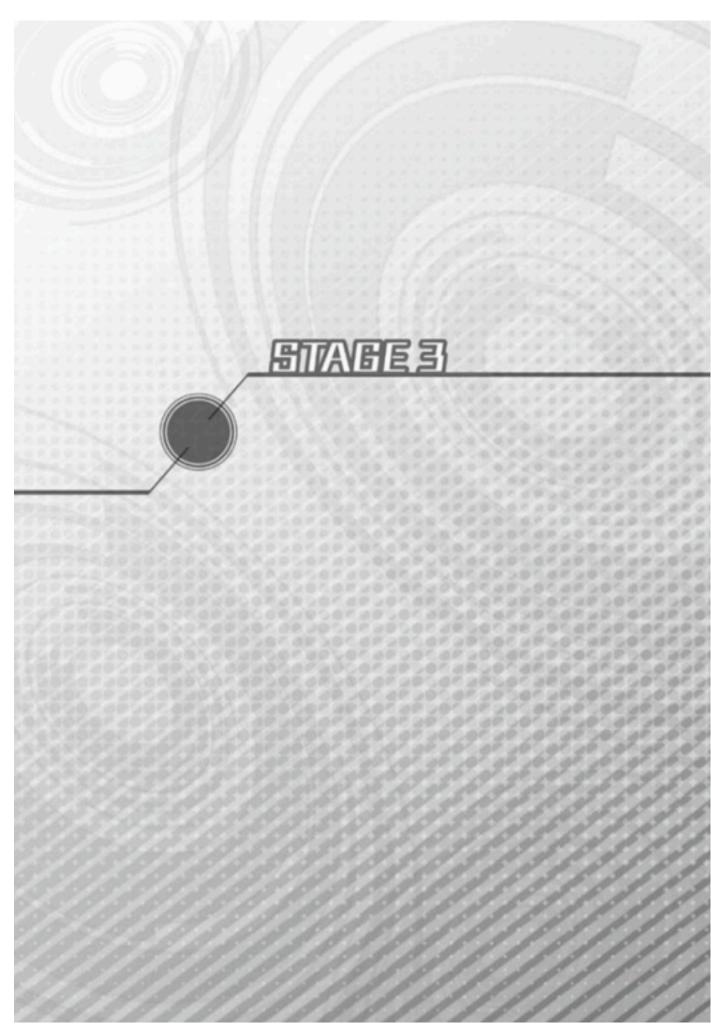
I'm not taking responsibility if we crash! With I-chan's angry words, The Final Hard speeds up and flies far away from the jungle.

"Be prepared for next time, Gehagon!"

"You're so idiotically persistent!"

Tu~rururu > . Tada~ > .

The screen fades to black, and everything goes quiet.



Stage 3

Stage 3 - Part 1

"... And that's basically what happened in the jungle arc."

After closing the slideshow on the large screen of the school's audiovisual room, I look back.

In the middle of the large classroom are the usual big sister team and both Compa and I-chan, along with Nepgear, Uni, Rom, and Ram sitting next to them.

"Nep-Nep, you're amazing! When did you take those pictures?"

Compa claps in awe.

Hehe, don't praise me like that, Compa-kun. I know that an expedition report supplemented with hundreds of photos and realistic commentary is great and all, but you'll embarrass me if you keep praising me in front of the little sisters.

I glance at Nepgear.

"That final 'tada~" and the screen fading to black... you shot it outside of the plane. And even the photo of you entering the jungle for the first time is also somehow focused on your own face..."



"... And the directing is a little exaggerated."

W-why? I thought that Nepgear and Uni would surely be moved by the great legacy of their big

sisters. So why are they smiling with uncertainty?

"Is it not captivating? ... Is it too cliché for the camera to be focused on the expedition's lead captain? ... I'll lend you the DVD, so you better give it another watch!"

"W-well, it's not that it isn't captivating... but something about how you look in that photo is odd.... It sort of bothers me.... Don't you think so, Uni-chan?"

"Y-yeah. And because of that... uh... it makes me feel that the directing is a little excessive..."

"I-is that so?"

Even if she's Noire's little sister, I can't just let that slide!

I need to object to such an unfair critique!

"It's all about the choreography! For example, dropping a large boulder that's obviously made of expanded polystyrene from a cliff would make for a great SFX to get the audience engaged! ... But uh, I barely had any time to prepare this, so I didn't have the chance to add that in during post-production..."

Yeah, that part really bothers me. If time allowed for it, I would've added in a scene of us getting chased by piranhas. While I'm reflecting on myself, I should think about my direction theory...

"... Nep-Nep, you said 'post-production' just now."

"Is this what it means to run out of ideas?"

Hey! Vert, Noire! You're both on the outfield! I'm not having any of those dull comments!

"Don't be upset, Neptune. We're still happy that you made it just for us."

"Right. Thanks, Neptune-san. Rom, Ram you guys enjoyed it too, right?

"Yeah, it was super cool! Right, Rom-chan?"

"... I'm happy that dragon-san got better. *Smile*"

"Rom, Ram, you two are such good girls! That honest sensibility's what lets you truly appreciate my work!"

"... Worrying our sisters aside, you're done giving your report, right? Move."

On the flip side, the dishonest Noire hits a sour note.

She should learn a thing or two from Rom and Ram at least. Noire kicks my sulking self away from the projector like an alley cat.

"That pointless progress report was a waste of time. Anyways, we've successfully completed collecting the jungle's data. There's only one thing left remaining... and I want your help to increase efficiency..." She begins speaking in a conceited manner.

"Oh, here you are, ladies."

Judge, who's been staying on campus lately, rudely cuts Noire off as he violently opens the door.

By the way, he still looks pretty impressive. His face is literally protruding, and he's wearing a very sophisticated suit. His top and waist support reminds me of a carpenter's outfit, and below that are loose pants and work shoes. He approaches us bow-legged.

"W-what's with that outfit?" I ask him.

It's very distinct. It looks pretty fitting for him, oddly enough.

"Well, Magic Co.'s a construction company first and foremost. This is a suit of a working man," Judge replies as he poses.

"No, I meant like why are you wearing it? I ask again.

"Cause the principal asked me to do a few things for you ladies."

"A few things?"

"She'll explain in detail. She's waiting in her office. I'm just here to run an errand for her. I can't really disobey her," he says, pointing at the door abruptly like a delinquent.

"And with that, my job here is done. It'd be awkward if people see you ladies walk with someone like me, so I'm heading out first."

Judge waves his hand and leaves the audiovisual room behind.

Since Principal Arfoire called for us, there's no choice but to go. We get up and head for her office.

It's late in the afternoon, so classes have been over for a while now. We encounter students who are preparing to go back to their dorms and others who have changed into their gym clothes for club activities. But that doesn't really matter.

"Nep-Nep, you've been really busy lately. What are you up to? Are you helping someone again?" I feel a bit awkward as the other students ask me in worry.

Honestly, I want to say 'I'm trying to save the world from crisis,' but they'll probably take it as a petty joke. So I hold myself back every time I get asked that.

"... Club activities. Ah, youth. I wish I was like them," I mumble as I glance at the students passing by.

"Wish for what? You aren't in any clubs. You always go straight to the base or our dorm after class, only to slack off and play games," I-chan says in a disappointed manner.

"Well, you're not wrong... but that's not the point. Though, it wouldn't hurt to try something new."

I can't really take those words back now.

Club activities... huh? It might be fun.

But I'm not sure of what to try out when the new semester starts. I should think it over. Well, I don't like athletic stuff that emphasizes effort, spirit or patience!

"... Hmm... club activities.... A gaming research society?" I say the first thing that comes to mind. "That's no different from what you already do!" I-chan says, complaining about my answer. R-right.

As we talk about club stuff, we arrive at the principal's office. What mission does she have in store for us next?

"Let's pick this club activity talk back up later. Since I've done so much, I won't get punished for demanding a luxurious amount of vacation time after this is all over!"

I laugh as I open the door.

"I see. Did those supplementary exams open your eyes to the responsibilities of a student? If you want it so badly, then I won't mind preparing a study camp over spring break for you," Principal Arfoire says.

"You said that you'd demand 'a luxurious amount of vacation time', right? To shout such nonsense in the staff building... whatever. Just sit down," she continues.

"Uh, excuse me, Principal Arfoire... about that study camp..."

"Sit."

... Yes, ma'am.... Stage 3 - Part 2

"I know that this is sudden, but as soon as preparations are complete, you are all to go to Celestia," Principal Arfoire says cool-headedly, ignoring my devastation from hearing those cursed words, 'study camp.'

"Magic and the others are working on a warp gate generator that connects Gamindustri to Celestia. You are all to board The Final Hard, head to Celestia ASAP, and reactivate Gamindustri's management system. ... Any questions?"

As everyone tries to process the sudden development, Noire raises her hand. "But the data collection for Purple Heart's sword... the reactivation key... it's not complete yet." Everyone in the jungle expedition team nods. Principal Arfoire looks back at us. "I've already gathered the rest," she says casually.

We stumble in shock.

"As part of the data collection process, I analyzed the kin of Atatari's dragon scale."

Principal Arfoire reveals an amazing truth with a calm voice, astonishing us all.

Remember that large shield-sized scale that Blanc received as sign of gratitude from the Atatari dragon? According to Principal Arfoire, it's composed of rocks, dirt, animal corpses and several other stuff that has taken ages to build up.

She said that it's like a stratum. But I think that something like a mille-feuille would be a better way to describe it.

So after Principal Arfoire examined it, she found that the dragon lived a nomadic life in the past, roaming all of Gamindustri before settling down in the jungle.

So in other words, a huge amount of data is contained in that scale.

"I can't say for certain since it's not in my field of expertise, but the college professors are ecstatic about the precious amount of data in that scale. Good work, Blanc," Principal Arfoire says, praising Blanc with an unusually gentle expression.

"I see. This will make for great inspiration for my novel, so please give me the data later."

I can't tell if she's happy or not. She's wearing her usual poker face.

But Rom and Ram look happy in her stead.

"... You're amazing, Blanc!"

"Of course! Our sister's the best!"

They strike victory poses and praise their big sister's achievement.

They're really cute.

"That's a relief. Maybe the Atatari dragon knew what we came to the jungle for?" I say, looking at the delighted twins.

For a scale that was given as a sign of gratitude to have such value...

Well of course the protagonist's party is special! That's what sets us apart from the rest. It's gotta

be because of how gifted I am.

My stuff is mine. Your stuff is also mine.... I can't say that, but that's how it works, because I, the everlasting protagonist Neptune, am on the team.

"Noire, you agree, right?"

"If that's the case, Neptune, then it's your fault that I got the shaft. This is something that IF would say, but I'll curse you for eternity."

"Yeah, no. It sounds weird if you say it."

"Your logic's the weird thing here!"

Noire gives me an aggressive gaze. I'm in big trouble. I think I barked up the wrong tree. "W-well, moving on..."

Quickly changing the subject to avoid Noire's complaints, I raise my hand at Principal Arfoire.

"When can we go? It's almost the end of the semester, so everyone's excited for the break. It'd be better to do it as soon as possible."

"Are you that excited about the study camp?"

"... M-moving on..."

"Nep-Nep, skipping out on your studies will surely backfire. You can't rely on procrastinating forever."

Wait, Vert, what am I supposed to do if you bring the subject back again right after I changed it?

"So, when will we start? If we must go, then it'd be best to take care of the situation as quickly as possible," she asks Principal Arfoire again.

"That depends on Magic's progress. I'm going to go test the warp gate's coordinates," Principal Arfoire replies, standing up as soon as she was asked that question.

Ignoring our question, she walks to the end of the hallway like that time when she guided us to The Final Hard.

"Walk faster."

Even her dialogue's the same. I swear, it's not like we're cutting down on creativity due to budget issues.

"Will the fight scene have better art?"

"Art? Nep-Nep, what are you talking about?"

"Er, well..."

Maybe I shouldn't be throwing in a question like that at a time like this. But I can't help

it. ... Though, at this rate, I'll end up having to study for even *more* exams...

Stage 3 - Part 3

Principal Arfoire brought us to the same place as last time. The farm that's infamous among us for its pathetically anticlimactic takeoff scene.

The wide open plain that can fit several of Planeptune's stadiums reminds me of when we first met the Atatari dragon.

"Hey, Rom-chan, look! It's a sheep! I'm gonna feed it!"

"... Me too! *Excited*"

The farm's so peaceful with no one but us around.

Since it's evening right now, I can feel the cold breeze through my uniform. The grass on one side of the farm sways with the wind as it blows by.

"You know, this is sort of like a buffet for the cows and sheep," I say, turning to the twins feeding the sheep passing through the grass field.

"Buffet?" Nepgear asks next to me.

"Yeah! There are several kinds of grass here, right? That means that this entire farm is like a restaurant from a sheep's perspective. Lazing around without a job and getting fat? I'm jealous."

"I don't think that sheep have jobs..."

"Does grass taste differently from each other?"

"... It's fine to talk about life from a sheep's perspective, but please don't say that while swallowing your saliva, Neptune."

Well, everyone's waiting. Nepgear holds my hand and tells the twins who are playing with the sheep to come along.

They both listen to Nepgear.

"Bye bye, sheep!"

"... Let's meet again."

They wipe their hands on their skirts and chase after us. We all hold each other's hands and run towards the hill where the others are waiting.

"Sorry! Did you wait for long?" I ask, tapping on Compa's shoulder as she passes the time by giving the grass a gentle kick.

"No, not at all. I just got here a moment ago," Compa smile and answers.

"Hey, stop it with the shoujo dialogue and look over there," I-chan says as she stumbles from Compa's reply.

Not giving me time to feel proud of Compa getting used to my gags after spending so much time together, I-chan gives me a ruthless noogie.

I look off into the distance as I scream from the pain.

I'm taken aback in surprise as I lay eyes on what's at the bottom of the hill.

Surrounded by hills, I see an object that's shaped like the bottom of a bowl. Something shiny is stationed there.

"It's a launch pad, Neptune!"

Before I can even answer, the overly excited Nepgear hugs me by the neck and screams.

"Ack! Not the neck! Let go of my neck!"

"So that's The Final Hard! Amazing!"

I try to tap out, but Nepgear's completely focused on the machine in front of

us. "Let's go! I want to get a closer look!"

Finally Nepgear, lets go of my neck and pulls my arm, dragging me down. T-this is bad! She's totally fixated on the machine right now!

Uwaa! Being excited is great and all, but please take it easy! I'm gonna trip! Are you listening?! Hey, Nepgear!

"Are you alright, Nep-ko? Nepgear's a gentle girl, but I guess that she can be pretty... fanatical in her own way, huh?"

Feeling worried, I-chan grabs my other hand. As they help me up, I look upon the launch pad along with Nepgear.

It looks more like a turntable than a launch pad to me.

If you were to compare it to cake, I guess it'd be like a sponge cake? And The Final Hard sitting on top would be the chocolate decoration.

There are a few poles surrounding The Final Hard, too. Sort of like birthday candles. But instead of flames on top of each of them, there are slowly rotating rings like angel halos instead.

I bring my vision back to eye level, wondering about who created this and when. Then, I see Magic wearing a suit and a yellow helmet, Judge wearing a carpenter-like outfit, and Trick wearing a plain jumper coming our way.

"Is this what you guys worked on?" Uni asks with her eyes wide open, pointing at the large cake-styled launch pad. I'll call it whatever I want, thank you very much.

"I told you that data processing's my forte. Right, Trick?" Judge replies as he trudges over.

"Well, if the young girls are going to Celestia as well, then I can't work sloppily. I've made sure to create the perfect design as per Magic Co.'s standards."

They've straighten themselves up and have their arms crossed.

Magic takes off her helmet and gives her hair a gentle brush to straighten it out.

"It looks like it's been completed all according to your specifications, Principal Arfoire," she says as she bows.

"Good work. Sorry to have rushed you all."

As we stare at the launch pad, Principal Arfoire pushes us aside and hands something over to Magic.

"Is it payment for the construction work?" I ask.

"Not with a card like that." I-chan replies, eyeing Principal Arfoire's hand.

"It could be a credit card, you know. ... Huh? What's up, I-chan? What's with the serious face?"

"Aren't you bothered, Nep-ko?"

"Huh? Whaddya you mean...?"

I-chan turns to me with an anxious expression.

"I'm commencing the test for the warp gate's deployment device. Get on the plane, all of you." Principal Arfoire claps as she instructs us all in a calm manner.

I-chan and I abruptly drop our conversation and board The Final Hard.

"W-why is the interior so cute?"

"It's a large plane, but the inside's bigger than I thought."

Similar to our reactions when we boarded it for the first time, Nepgear and Uni let out bewildered comments, shocked by the difference between the interior and exterior. Meanwhile, I-chan, the pilot, buckles up in the cockpit.

"Are you all ready? Make sure that you can monitor the situation outside."

"Understood," I-chan replies after hearing Principal Arfoire's voice through the speaker. She then flips on a switch.

A monitor on the wall behind the cockpit displays a video of the outside.

Shown on it is the sky just before sunset. It looks like the view of a camera positioned somewhere on The Final Hard.

After that, we hear Principal Arfoire's voice again. Together with I-chan in the cockpit, they go through the takeoff procedure together.

"Alright. I'll start the test for the warp gate's deployment now.

"Tell me anytime," I-chan answers.

We all stare at the monitor to focus on what's to come.

Several laser beams fire towards the sky. Are they coming from the rings on the ends of the candles?

A strange change can be seen in the sky where the lasers hit.

The calm sky begins to distort like a maelstrom, swirling with the evening glow. It kind of looks like a lollipop.

Oh~! While we cheer from the cockpit, the lollipop in the sky grows in size gradually. From the center, a rainbow light starts spreading outwards.

"Flying The Final Hard through that will take us to Celestia... correct?" Vert says, pointing at the colorful turbulence on the monitor. She then glances at Nepgear and I.

I can't give Vert a confident answer. Honestly, I don't know how Gamindustri and Celestia are even connected, and I definitely haven't seen anything like this before.

"Hey, Nepgear? You didn't use this method when you were looking for me, right?"

"Hm... well, it's different in scale, but it probably uses the same principles as the warp gate that we normally use. By fixating the dimensional conversion particles compressed by the phase observation chamber in the oval-shaped apparatus in the air..."

Blah, blah, blah...

Please, Nepgear-sama, just stop right there.

That's another mistake. If I talk to Nepgear about this sort of stuff, she won't stop talking.

"So, do those black dots there mean that the particle is affected by something?" Blanc asks something strange, interrupting Nepgear's rambling while staring at the monitor.

"Black dots?"

Huh? What's she talking about? I look at the monitor again.

Oh, I can definitely see those black dots that Blanc just mentioned. They're swirling all around the rainbow maelstrom. It looks like more are appearing... but they're too small to make out.

"What's that? IF-san, could you enhance the zoom?"

With the door to the cockpit now open, Nepgear requests of that from I-chan.

"That should be possible... here," I-chan answers, controlling the exterior camera and increasing the zoom.

The camera zooms into the black dots shown on the monitor.

"N-Neptune!"

"Nepgear!"

Nepgear and I scream simultaneously

I almost bounce back.

The black dots that the camera's picking up... those are the guys that attacked Nepgear and I back at Celestia.

Those dark, sphere-like bodies, loaded with weapons like laser cannons, beam sabers and missile launchers. Those red, eye-like sensors scanning its surroundings...

There's no mistake about it.

"Those are Guardroids!" Nepgear and I shout at the same time.

Stage 3 - Part 4

They're falling.

Hundreds of Guardroids are pouring out of the maelstrom.

They're tough to deal with. By themselves, they're nothing, but they're formidable in numbers.

But what's more dangerous is that they can equip weapons from their fallen allies. It doesn't matter if their weapons or their main bodies are destroyed. There'll be no end to them if they power up by salvaging all they can from their fallen comrades' remains.

Shocked by the situation, memories of my encounter with them resurfaces.

"If left unchecked, there'll be no end to the Guardroids! You have to stop the test and close the gate! Now!" Nepgear rushes to the cockpit and shouts into the comms system.

"... No. I'm not closing the gate."

Across the speakers, Principal Arfoire gives an unbelievable answer despite Nepgear's desperate plea.

No...? If you're not going to close it, then what will you do?!

"Close it, Principal Arfoire! They..." I can't sit back anymore. I rush to the cockpit as well and speak into the comms system.

"I know! Listen up, everyone!"

Before I can even finish talking, Principal Arfoire's shout echoes throughout the plane.

"You said that those unmanned weapons are the things that attacked you and Nepgear at Celestia, right? I don't know the details, but it seems like we've been blind-sided."

"Blind-sided? Now's not the time to speak calmly! We should..."

"Shut it. The real battle begins now. Hurry up and finish the preparations."

'The real battle begins now?!' Is she telling us to head to Celestia as is?!

I step back from the comms system in confusion. Then, I hear something.

"Leave this to me. Consider this penance for my actions against you all."

"This is for construction purposes, but this power suit's different from the rags you ladies fought!"

Magic and Judge replies instead of Principal Arfoire.

"Nep-Nep! Look over there! Magic and Judge are fighting the black objects

outside!" Just what's going on?!

I return to passenger seat and look at the monitor. Like Compa said, Magic is wearing her outfit, and Judge is in a sturdy, two-toned black and yellow power suit. They're fending off the Guardroids swarming The Final Hard.

... S-strong... *Nervous*.

Aren't they stronger than when we fought them?

"I've heard that Magic's also a CPU Candidate Program graduate. She was a problem child, but she was the best amongst her peers," Noire says and gulps as she watches Magic's battle in awe. Magic definitely excels in combat.

Her weapon of choice is still that huge scythe. She's swinging it freely to bisect the incoming Guardroids.

But Judge isn't losing to her. Although his suit looks like junk that can overheat easily, it's in a completely different league in terms of mobility. Is it really for construction? It definitely seems like he remodeled it as a hobby.

"It's likely that the situation over there is worse than we imagined. We can't deal with them everytime we open and close the gate. If you understand, then get going. We'll fend them off somehow," Principal Arfoire speaks to us again as Magic and Judge buys us time.

In that moment, the swarming Guardroids pierce through Magic's and Judge's line of defense and commences their assault. Several shots fly by the launch pad, shaking The Final Hard.

"Nepgear! Neptune-san! If we don't go now, then there won't be a next time!"

I know, Uni. I know all too much about them.

They're programmed to destroy anything on sight, be it people or objects.

I remember when we first fought the Guardroids in Celestia.

If we stay any longer, The Final Hard, the farm's sheep and cows... everyone in the academy who are living peaceful lives, oblivious to all of this...

"No.... I can't let that happen," I mumble.

I won't let anyone laying a finger on my favorite school.

"Let's go beat the final boss," I say, strengthening my resolve so everyone can hear.

I take my eyes off of the monitor, turning back to see everyone looking at me.

"I want to be able to look back on this during spring break and say, 'it sure was tough back there'. I want to keep hanging out with everyone, to play and laugh together. I can expect at least that much as a reward, right, Principal Arfoire?"

Everyone agrees.

"Pfft. Demand that after you guys finish the job."

I can't see her expression, but I know that she's smiling.

Alright, it's settled! It's time to head to Celestia and Nep up the bad guys!

"I-chan, prepare for takeoff!" I command as I tap I-chan's shoulder.

"I already did that while you were busy monologuing."

Now that's what I want to hear. As expected of I-chan!

"Alright! The Final Hard! IF! Let's do this!"

She could've just said 'takeoff.' I-chan spreads out the joysticks to the sides.

"The procedure's complete. I'm going to finish opening the gate."

As The Final Hard leaves the cake-shaped launch pad, Trick speaks through the comms system. A laser fires out from the birthday candle-like poles.

"Good. Now accelerate and rush into the gate. You'll be in Celestia in the matter of seconds." "Understood. Increasing engine output! Accelerate!"

I-chan pilots The Final Hard with finesse, controlling the twin joysticks to raise the plane towards the storming gate.

In the meantime, Magic's and Judge's combo attacks makes quick work of the incoming Guardroids, fending them off from The Final Hard.

"Principal Arfoire," I-chan stops accelerating and speaks into the comms system as we reach the gate.

"... What?"

"Do you have anything to say to Histoire-sama?"

Huh? Why are you talking about Histy here?

I don't know really know what's going on, but it looks like there's some sort of connection between I-chan and Principal Arfoire.

"... Let's meet again in the future," Principal Arfoire replies after a short silence. "I'll be sure to deliver that message. We're going in!" I-chan replies quickly. With that conversation as the signal, The Final Hard breaches the turbulence in front of us. As we pass by it, I feel like waves are keeping me afloat.

The sensation quickly vanishes, and we find ourselves in another sky.

It's an expanse of blue unlike the evening glow we were surrounding in moments ago.

"Is this Celestia?" I-chan speaks to Nepgear, who's clinging onto the back of the cockpit as I hang onto her.

"I always thought that Celestia would be above the sky.... But I guess that that's not the case."

"The sky's blue, but the sun is nowhere to be seen."

"There aren't any clouds, either."

I hear Noire's, Vert's, and Blanc's voice come from behind.

What's wrong, you guys? Why are your seatbelts off? Leaving Compa and the little sisters alone... you guys shouldn't do that as big sisters.

"Nepgear-chan, would you be so kind as to explain?"

Don't ignore me!

"Celestia lies between Gamindustri and space.... According to Histy-san, it's normally hidden by a special barrier."

Hey, Nepgear! Don't ignore me, too!

... But then again, I used to think that it was above the sky, myself.

When I fell to Gamindustri, Histy negated the barrier. ... Driving the Guardroids out back then was tough.

"Simply put, the land of Celestia is comprised of floating continents. ... Ah, there it is! It's that thing in front of us," Nepgear explains and points forward.

"I-I want to see it, as well!"

"Me too! Me too! Show me!"

"... Show me! *Excited*"

Woah, everyone's coming this way. It's getting way too cramped!

"I-chan, camera! Don't just use the front monitor! Make it show in the back, too!" I scream, gasping for air as Nepgear and the kids squeezes in on me.

"Ah, sorry. Coming through."

"You heard her! Everyone, go to the back! I'll be flattened like a pancake at this rate!" Leaving

Nepgear in the cockpit as the guide, I bring everyone else back to the passenger seats.

Whew... getting teamkilled by your party members right before the final boss. I've never heard a protagonist going through that.

After taking a deep breath to pump air back into my empty lungs, I look at the monitor.

The camera's zoomed into a floating continent in the blue sky. No, it's more like an island similar to the one that Nepgear was on.

"That's where Nepgear and I used to live."

We lived in a place called 'V-Sa Tower'... I think.

"The land's purple light... it's so beautiful. It looks like it's made of amethyst," Vert utters in awe.

Yeah. It's been a while since I looked at it from the outside. It really is beautiful.

There's a house for Nepgear and I. There's also Histy's. And there's the system that manages Gamindustri... probably.

"We can't see it from here without zooming in, but there's a black tower on the opposite end called 'Hi-Sa Tower.' That's where the overloaded system lies."

Adding onto my explanation, Nepgear goes into more detail in the cockpit.

"I see. So this Hi-Sa Tower is where those Guardroids are coming from," I-chan replies.

"... So, like that," she adds.

Like that? What?

As I-chan zooms in the camera, something like a black cloud comes our way as if surrounding Hi-Sa Tower...

That cloud... are those all Guardroids...?

"This looks bad," I mutter as if this unrealistic plot development is someone else's

business. "They're attacking!"

The dark cloud unleashes an attack too extreme to be comparable to I-chan's and Noire's bullying!

"Emergency evasion!" I-chan shouts, urgently steering The Final Hard to the right. The sudden

shock fiercely rocks the passenger seats.

"There are too many of them! Neptune and Nepgear put up a good fight against these guys!" Noire shouts nervously.

"If that army reaches Gamindustri, it'll spell trouble!" Vert shouts as well, grabbing onto her fluttering skirt.

"The gate's closed. Their target is us," Blanc speaks calmly while embracing the screaming twins.

"IF-san, there are too many! We can't fight them all" Nepgear's voice echoes. But I-chan's the one experiencing the most trouble.

"So what?! What am I supposed to do?!"

Up, down, left, right, side to side. She loses her composure while avoiding the onslaught of Guardroids.

"Head for V-Sa Tower! I-it's being swarmed by Guardroids, but Histy-san placed a defensive barrier around the whole tower!"

"A defensive barrier?!"

"I-it was after you went missing, Neptune! S-somehow, we managed to avoid an- ouch! I bit my tongue..."

"Simplify whatever you're going to say!"

The Final Hard makes another sharp turn. V-Sa Tower can't be seen on the monitor since the fighter craft's tilting to the left, but it comes back into view in the center of the monitor after the maneuver.

But unlike before, I can barely make it out. It's being obscured by a dark cloud.

... Which means...

"Whaaat?! I-chan, are you going for a frontal breakthrough!?"

The majority of the Guardroids move to block the front as if trying to hide the tower.

"Don't be a crybaby! Nepgear, sit next to me and take control of the artillery! The rest of you... hang on tight and trust me!"

You're so cool, I-chan!

You're... cool ...? Huh? Do I really think that?

"This isn't so bad. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. ... This stage is fitting for the Gust of Wind blowing across the Histoire Memorial Academy."

Oh. She's serious.

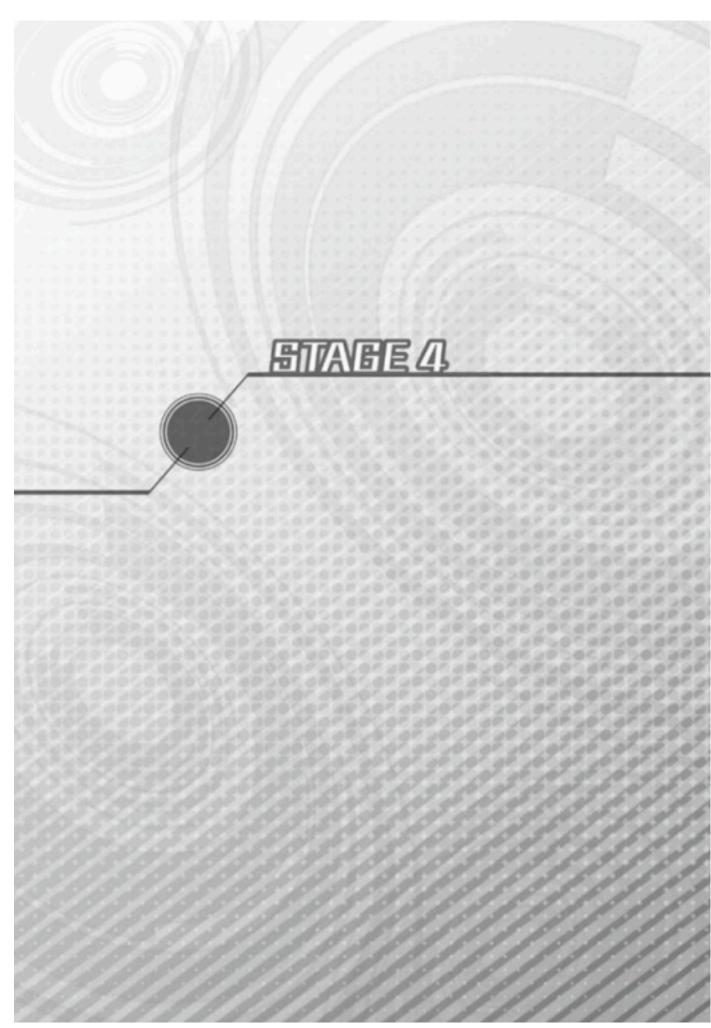
She's really going for it.

"Alright. My chest feels like it's burning up. ... Everyone, don't bite your tongue like Nepgear did! Here we gooo!"

And we're going... aaaaaaaaaah!

To the end of the world with absolute conviction! With my echoing screams, I-chan pilots The Final Hard and charges into the cloud of Guardroids!





Stage 4

Stage 4 - Part 1

Is it a flame?

Or a kaleidoscope?

No, it's an endless barrage.

If you look at it from a safe place, it would probably look like fantastic pattern of lights. But the sad truth is that they're made of things like concentrated energy shots, missiles, and beam gatling gun rounds.... Man, there's no end to it all!

Each attack is full of killing intent. They're bent on disintegrating us in midair. Geometric shapes of death fill the sky!

And in the middle of it all is The Final Hard carrying all of us.

"Uwaa! I-chan, do something! Help!"

"Just shut up!"

"Are there any shields?!"

"We have nothing like that...!"

The Final Hard makes a sharp roll to the right. Even though I'm buckled into the passenger seat, I can't shake off the unpleasant feeling of the ship rotating.

This experience makes the average roller coaster pale in comparison.... A reddish laser passes by the cockpit's window.

"Please hit!"

In charge of The Final Hard's artillery, Nepgear haphazardly fires the beam cannons. About a dozen of them get shot down, but that's only a minor setback for them. When our side fires, they retaliate ten... no, a hundredfold. This isn't a joke! Incoming!

Like a large can spilling out all kinds of candy, beams of varying colors fires from the dark cloud.

Still, I-chan fiddles with the joysticks tactfully, avoiding the continuous barrage! Perfect! It looks

like she's completely entered a sort of awakened mode on such a short notice.

If I take a look at I-chan's eyes right now, maybe I'll see a green crystal fall from above and explode in a shower of light. But I can't really check that right now.

"Seriously! This is tougher than! Whatever town's! STG game!"

The Final Hard performs elaborate maneuvers like sharp pitches and barrel rolls, putting pauses in I-chan's sentence.

"By the way, what's 'Whatever town?!"

"A theme park! In Bukuro City! My! Hometown!"

Ah! I remember! That famous! Dumpling colosseum!

"Right! I went there! As a kid! Together with! My friend! A girl named Otome!"

Oh! Now that! You mention it! Bukuro City is! The holy land of! Shoujo games!

"Yeah! You know! Quite a b- kyaaaa!"

The Final Hard starts turning over and over again.

W-we made it!

That's the miraculous evasive technique, the Super Tornado Spiral Maneuver! I just named it on the spot.

Like a thread going through a needle hole, we accurately nosedive through the web-like barrage. We barely avoid the heavy assault of lasers from the Guardroids that have no remorse toward friendly firing.

I-chan puts The Final Hard at full throttle, piercing through the Guardroid's line of

defense. We finally escape the relentless onslaught of attacks.

I've got a question for you: do you think that god exists?

The answer is yes. She's piloting a fighter aircraft right now.

Seriously, she definitely deserves that title.

Her skills are amazing enough to impress kids at the arcade, and even the most famous progamers in history. She made a perfect escape without getting so much as a single scratch.

As I come to, I can see V-Sa Tower being blanketed by the black cloud.

"T-this... is who I am. A swarm of bees, a bunch of psychics or an army of roses, it doesn't matter! Nothing can stop me now!

Striking an unusual victory pose, the ecstatic I-chan spouts nonsense about the mission's success.

"The Final Hard, do you read me?"

I'm exhausted from that whole ordeal back there... but we can hear a voice through the comms system. That voice.... Histy?

"I apologize for the lack of assistance. I have been experiencing difficulties on my end, as well. I will send you a guidance signal, so please land inside the tower."

As expected of Histy. She's spotted us! ... But then again, anyone could have figured it out given the commotion we've made.

Histy sounds nervous. We prepare for landing. We can't afford to be excited just yet.

"Signals or traffic lights, I don't care! Just hurry, Histy! I-chan just risked her life breaking through the horde of Guardroids. I don't want to get shot in the back!"

Suppressing my emotions, I shout back into the comms system in the cockpit.

I'm super excited to see again Histy after so long, especially considering what we've just went through, but we should save the greetings for later.

As if reacting to my voice, the center of V-Sa Tower opens, and a rail of light stretches out to guide The Final Hard.

"The Guardroids are returning. I cannot leave the barrier down for long. Please hurry!" Histy urges. "Got it!"

I-chan wipes the sweat off of her hands and grabs the twin joysticks

again. "This is the final push! Hang on tight!"

At the same time, the army of Guardroids that I thought we had escaped from swarms us from behind.

I guess that this is what it means to be appealing. But we have to get out of here!

The Final Hard's wings and stabilizer sustain three shots, but it's durable enough to handle it. I-chan's doing her very best, right until the end.

We barely make it inside the tower before the Guardroids can reach us.

"Close it, Histy!"

It looks like I didn't even need to say anything, because the defensive barrier activated right away. I hear the sound of Guardroids smashing against the barrier and exploding in the distance.

Whew... that was close...

"Well done. I shall make repairs to The Final Hard when I have the time. But first, would you please come see me? Neptune-san, Nepgear-san, I apologize, but please lead the others."

"I-chan, can you stand up? Are you alright?" I rush to I-chan was she sinks in her seat from the extreme tension.

"I thought I saw the gates of Hell for a second back there when I pulled off that spinning nosedive... but I'm fine. Don't come and ask me to do it again next time, though. Once is enough for me."

"There won't be a next time. That was the first and last time you'll ever have do that that. After I deliver divine punishment on that evil boss, we'll all have a happy ending!"

"... I hope you're right."

I-chan smiles and grabs my outstretched hand.

Her hand's drenched in sweat. I'm holding the hand of the god who ensured our safe arrival. Stage 4 - Part 2

"Ugh... my head's still spinning. Are you alright, Uni?"

"... No, not really."

I come to realize how amazing that breakthrough was as I look at the dazed and stubborn Lastation sisters.

Everyone's safe. What a relief.

"I've brought ice packs, you two. You'll feel all better once you rest them on your foreheads." Compa gives ice packs to Noire and Uni before walking around to distribute the rest. She's surprisingly healthy despite looking like the most frail out of all of us. "It was like rollercoaster! Right, Rom-chan?"

"... My heart is pounding."

The twins are fine, too.

It really doesn't seem like they're taking the situation seriously...

"Please don't scream near me right now."

At least they're better off than Blanc, who's resting the ice packs that she received from Compa on her forehead and the back of her neck.

"Vert, I-chan, here you go."

"Thank you, Compa. ... Ah, this feels good. It'd better if there was hot tea, but that's a luxury that we cannot afford at the moment."

"I'd prefer cold drinks. I know that now's not the time, but I'm thirsty. I wish we had lemon squash."

Right. Drinks. I want to refresh myself with some ice cold soda.

"We should have drinks. Wait here."

It doesn't feel right staying still while Compa's going around helping everyone. I should help,

too. Plus, this is Nepgear's and my house. I should be showing off my hospitable spirit! Oh,

right. On the topic of my house, I just remembered that I forgot to explain our setting.

We're now in the upper level of V-Sa Tower. I don't know who named it, but it's called the sky lounge.

With the exception of the floor and ceiling, every surface is a window made of some transparent material that looks different from glass. It's a great place where you can walk around the circular rooms and enjoy the continent's panorama.

Since it's called a lounge, I should be able to summon a fridge or counter complete with a tea set for guests...

Most of the tower's equipment can be controlled with the N-gear. How do I do it? Maybe if I do this...?

As I fiddle with my N-gear, the middle of the floor opens, and a round bar counter with chairs rises up from the ground.

"Sweet! It's working properly! I'm a genius!"

"My, this is quite the lovely bar counter. I see that there are juice, soda, and tea, as well," Vert comments.

"T-there's no alcohol. though," I reply.

"No need. Minors shouldn't be drinking, anyways. ... By the way, Neptune. You said that 'it's working properly' just now. This is your house. Are you not confident in its functionalities?"

"Er, the thing is..."

There's a reason why I'm scratching my cheek at Noire's question. Even though the purpose of the sky lounge is to serve guests, as far I as know, it's been ages since people have visited. Everybody here are the first guests in several decades.

But it looks like Histy still maintained it. Just as expected of her. She's so courteous.

I hand everyone their chosen drinks as they take their seats.

"... Nep-Nep. May I ask a question?" Vert asks as she drinks her green tea to quench her thirst.

"This has been bothering me for a while. We simply call this place Celestia, but what is it actually? We have not met anyone since landing in the tower, either. Could it be that the only residences in Celestia are you, your sister, and Histoire-sama?"

"H-hey, that's a lot of questions."

"I'm serious. Please don't dodge the question."

Right, sorry. I didn't mean to do that.

But she asked so many questions.... Which one should I answer first?

I bet that everyone else is wondering the same thing. I can feel their eyes fixated on

me. "Hm... well, the thing is..."

Honestly, I'd rather leave this to Nepgear, but for some reason, she's not here right now.... I guess I've got no choice.

Bracing for a long story, I prepare to speak, but...

"I will answer that question."

In comes Histy at the perfect time. Everyone shifts their sights towards her.

Between a set of windows that allows for an outside view, Histy and Nepgear enters through the rectangular-shaped doorway.

Along with Nepgear, Histy approaches us while sitting on an open book, floating in the air.

"A-are you... Histoire-sama?"

"R-really?"

I can see Noire and I-chan gulp in awe as this is their first time seeing Histy this closely.

Is Histy revered as a great god in Gamindustri? Like Atatari?

Now that I think about it, when my amnesiatic self enrolled into the academy, I was forced to memorize the ethos of my major. I think that there was some content about that. But it's just Histy. Nepgear and I know that she isn't some sort of god.

"You don't have to be so stiff, guys," I say, massaging Noire's and I-chan's tense shoulders.

"Yes, please do not regard me so highly. Like I said before, I am not an almighty being that people may think I am. I am simply V-Sa Tower's core, an autonomous remote terminal unit of Gamindustri's weather management system. ... Simply put, I am a cognitive A.I. with the capacity of speech," she says as if trying to ease everyone's tension.

"Right..."

"That's amazing in its own right..."

I'm not sure if I-chan and Noire really understand, but they nod with cryptic

expressions. Anyways, let's move on.

"And Nepgear, you're with Histy. I was wondering where you went," I turn to Nepgear.

"What do you mean? Goodness, Neptune, you forgot the most important thing," she says, laughing as if she's tired of my usual self.

"The most important thing?"

"Purple Heart's sword. The reactivation key. You left it on The Final Hard. I went to go fetch it and gave it to Histy-san."

Oh! I totally forgot. Haha... whoops. My bad.

Nepgear's as reliable as always.

"I see that you have not changed one bit, Neptune-san. I thought that you would at least mature a a little after your hardships on Gamindustri."

"Even if you put it that way, Histy, I really didn't go through that much trouble. After Compa found me, I enjoyed a happy school life. Plus, you know me. I don't change that easily."

"That is not something to be proud of. ... My apologies, everyone. It appears that we have gone off topic..." Histy clears her throat before continuing.

"Vert-san, correct? To answer your question, Neptune-san, Nepgear-san, and I are not the only residents of Celestia."

"Then where is everyone else?"

"Like the people of Gamindustri, they too live on continents beyond this one here in Celestia."

"Are they interacting with Gamindustri right now?" I-chan asks. Then, she takes out a card from her pocket and hands it to Histy.

"This is the manual for The Final Hard. Principal Arfoire gave it to me. If you turn to the last page of the manual, the author... Histoire-sama, your name is credited here."

What?! What's going on?

Everyone starts talking amongst themselves after hearing I-chan's shocking

revelation. Histy waits for everyone to calm down before nodding in silence.

"That is correct. I am the one who created The Final Hard. In a bygone era, monsters roamed freely across all of Gamindustri. As a result of that, the goddess of that era requested of me to create a machine to address the matter at hand, and The Final Hard was the product of that."