

- | Pshhh! x2
- | It's the StroZero-chuu
- | Better keep an eye on y apprentice next time, ch
- | H-How does Shuwa-chan taste, Dagger-chan?
- | We sloshed!
- | Knife-chan so cute!
- | Cuteness overload
- | ￥50,000
So cute so cute so cute so cute
so cute so cute so cute
- | Now there's a proud-looking master
- | Dagger-chan, don't drink too much!
Shuwa-chan, don't do too much!

The Master and the Apprentice
#ColdSteel

VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL

AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 8

AUTHOR: NANA NANATO ILLUSTRATOR: SIOKAZUNOKO

VTUBER LEGEND:

HOW I WENT VIRAL AFTER

FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 8

LIVE <comment

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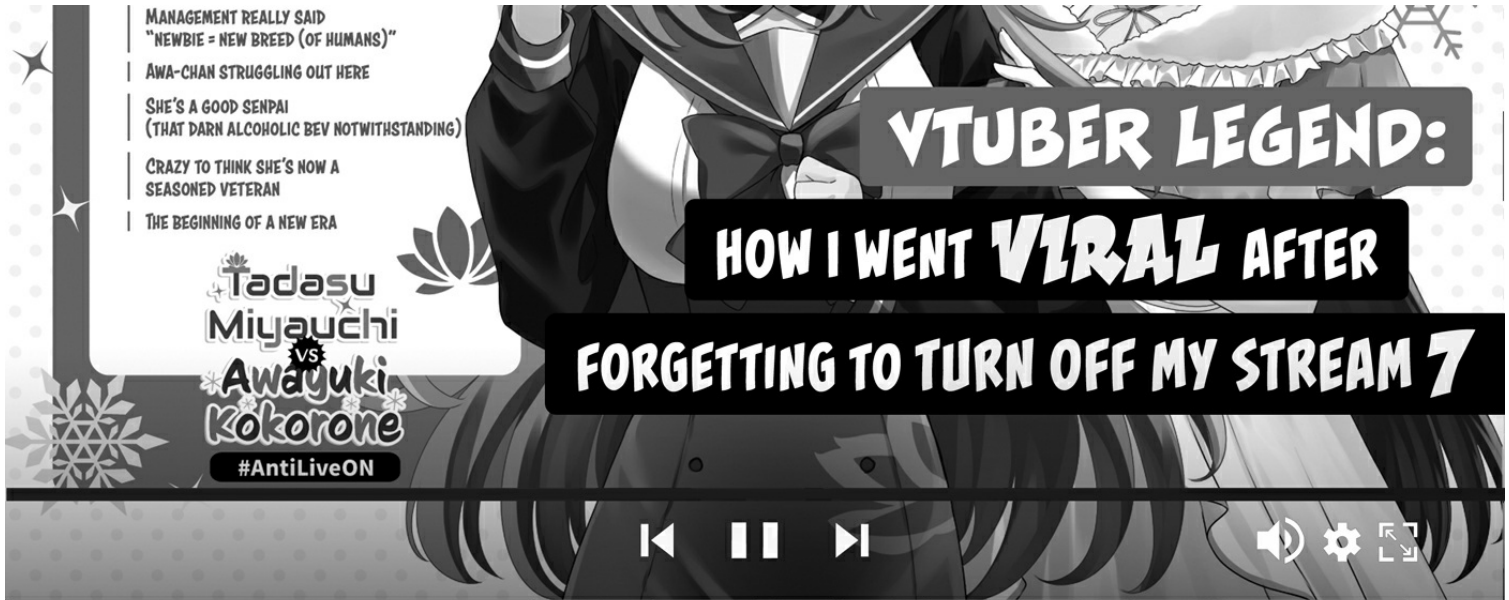
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Story Summary

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☆☆☆☆☆ **An introduction volume for all of gen five, innit?**

Let’s start with the first of the group to debut, Tadasu Miyauchi. Hadn’t expected Live-On to hire an anti, but she’s adolescent and totally bully-able, so I get the appeal. Her dialogue with Hareru was excellent—looking forward to more of that in the future.

Number two: the amnesiac(?) Dagger. She kept up the chuuni character for all of about two minutes before the cracks started to show. Her model with the hood off, though, was mwah—chef’s kiss! Live-On is good when they’re cute too, who knew.

And last but certainly not least, Churiri the alien. Alien’s a good word to describe her. I don’t think I’ve ever been as confused reading this series as I was here. But it’s clear she’s not just some weirdo off the street, as made evident by her bumbling, tsundere interactions with the rest of gen five.

The members are gen five are raw bundles of pure personal expression, yet at the same time, that doesn’t make them feel disparate. Eager to see how their dynamics develop over time.

All in all, I give the volume a zero out of five.
(Because of StroZero got ‘eeeeeeeeeeeeeeem!)



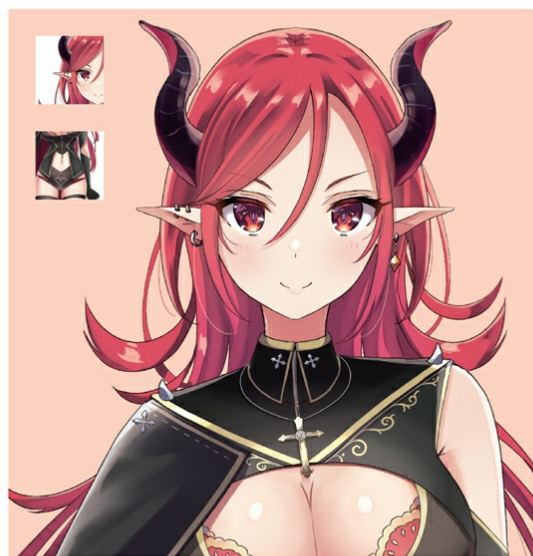
GEN 1

GEN 2

HARERU ASAGIRI

"Heya! It's me—the sunlight in everyone's hearts, Hareru Asagiri!"

An energetic high school girl who loves putting smiles on everyone's faces. Extremely curious and—carried by her momentum—frequently does or says things that nobody would have ever expected.



SEI UTSUKI

"Hey, ladies and gents! It's your girl, Sei-sama!"

In her past life, she was a succubus who lived off the vigor of men, but died of starvation since she only ever showed interest in other women. She reincarnated, bringing us to today. Her horns are a holdover from that past life.



SHION KAMINARI

"Kon-miko, everyone! It's everyone's mama, Shion Kaminari!"

A shrine maiden whose body is inhabited by a nine-tailed fox and who safeguards the people as a servant of the kami. Because of how fiercely her nine fluffy tails swing around based on her emotions, caution is needed when standing behind her.



NEKOMA HIRUNE

"Nya-nyan! I caught a whiff of something great and came running!"

A beast girl with heterochromia who loves naps—but whenever she sees someone close by eating food, she immediately gets up and goes over to them with sparkling eyes. She'll be happy if you give her something. She'll also be happy if you pet her, even if you don't give her anything.



MASHIRO IRODORI

"Kon-mashiro, everyone! It's me, Mashiro Irodori, also called Mashiron."

An illustrator who lives to draw. While she can be a little scathing with her remarks, she's actually a kind, friendly girl.



AWAYUKI KOKORONE

"Good evening, everyone. Another nice, light snow is falling tonight? I'm Awayuki Kokorone."

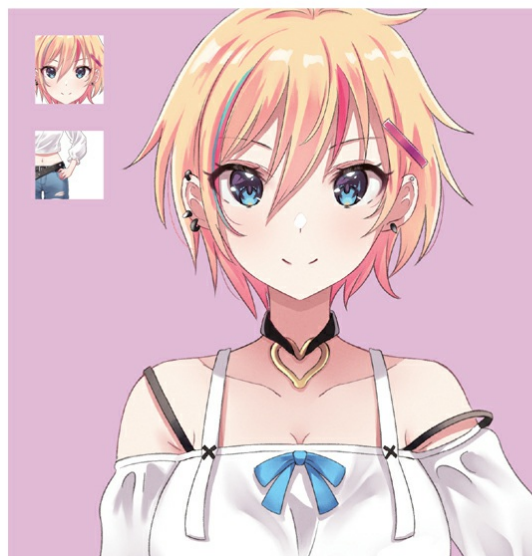
A mysterious beauty who only appears on days when a light snow is falling. Her purple eyes draw you in with the promise of something hidden deep inside them...



HIKARI MATSURIYA

"Kon-pika, everyone! The light of the festival is here for all to enjoy! It's me, Hikari Matsuriya!"

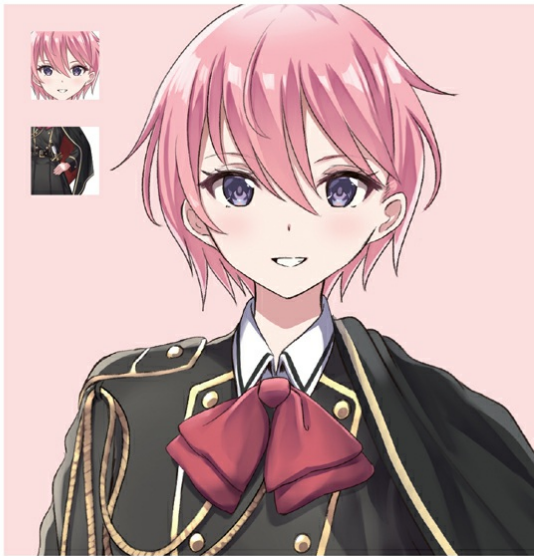
A festival girl who appears at festivals throughout Japan. Some say she's even appeared at the same time in two different festivals held in separate places.



CHAMI YANAGASE

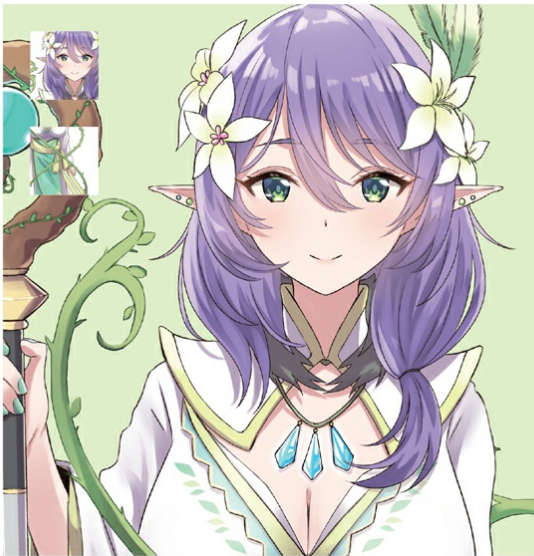
"Hello! It's Chami Yanagase-oneesan, the one who always guides everyone to the pinnacle of healing."

Originally a gloomy character, but rallied her courage and debuted as a sunny one—to thunderous applause. Inside, though, she hasn't changed, making her a gloomy character wearing the skin of a sunny one.



ALICE SOMA

“Ma’am! Alice Soma, at your service!”
A member of the Resistance, an idol group focused on self-liberation. Her cool looks make her popular with men and women alike, but inside she’s somewhat incompetent, so she works hard to protect her image.



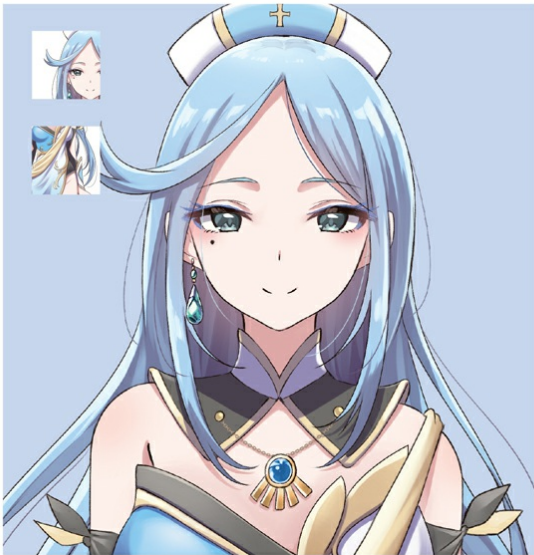
EHRAI SONOKAZE

“Heya, everyone! Are you all doing well? I am! I’m Ehrai Sonokaze, zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo!”
An elven zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo, a major theme park featuring every animal under the sun. Respected to the point of complete obedience by all the animals there, for some reason.

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The Chosen Shining Girls

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KAERU YAMATANI

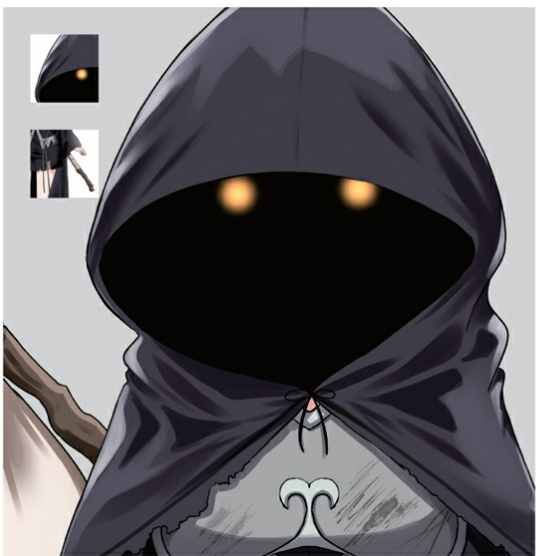
“You can cross the mountains and dales, but you can always return here. Welcome to Kaeru Yamatani’s stream.”
A mysterious, mystical woman who is said to appear before kind, loving hearts that have been grievously wounded, grant them her healing, and then return upon the wind.



TADASU MIYAUCHI

“How do you all do, everyone? It is I, the sole daughter of the venerable Miyauchi lineage, the Anti-Live-On icon herself, Tadasu Miyauchi.”

The student council president of the prestigious all girls’ school Saika Girls Academy, she takes great pride in her family name. A lover of all things clean and virtuous, she has thus come to view Live-On as the enemy.



DAGGER

“I am a wanderer of memories, a renegade in this realm. Forsaken by my past, I am a whisper without a name. I...am Dagger.”

A young girl with amnesia. She wandered the realm without purpose or end before Live-On took her in and promptly debuted her as a streamer. What few memories she retains paint a grim picture.



CHURIRI

“Good morning, class! It’s your teacher in all things love, Churiri-sensei!”

A teacher with hair of indescribable hue who works at Live-On. An alien from outer space, her real name is much longer, comprised of sounds not replicable in any human language. She teaches love.

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Afterword

Chapter One

The Valentine's Day Chocolate Cook-Off

"Welcome to the Live-On Valentine's Day Chocolate Cook-Off! Here...we...go!" Hareru-senpai declared in front of a multistation, high-class studio kitchen, the kind you've seen in cooking shows worldwide. Nekoma-senpai, Ehrai-chan, Dagger-chan, and I stood four abreast, our eyes wide and unblinking, rooted to the spot in a collective daze.

To better explain what was going on, we need to wind the clock back a few days, to when Live-On hosted its very own online rock-paper-scissors tournament.

Now hold on a second, a Live-On-hosted rock-paper-scissors tournament? you might say. I wonder what kind of shenanigans be going on in there.

But you'd be wrong. It was just a normal rock-paper-scissors tournament. It wasn't even streamed. Besides the fact that first gen wasn't participating (Hareru-senpai couldn't compete against herself), it was just each gen split up into their own brackets, duking it out among themselves, no special rules whatsoever. The winners of each bracket would be posted online, and that would be that.

But because of one specific line on the event page, we took that tournament more seriously than anything we had in our entire lives.

*The loser of each bracket will be invited to a **very special** project!*

There was a very particular and vehement aversion to losing that could only be triggered by the words "loser" and "very special project" when said in the context of Live-On. And I was sure I wasn't the only one. No doubt every single one of my colleagues saw this and was like, "Nope, hell if I'm losing this thing."

From the day of the announcement to the day of the tournament, I departed on a journey to attain enlightenment. With the help of my chat, I delved into

the Daedalian mechanics behind rock-paper-scissors, researching how I could improve my odds of winning, if even by a sliver. Personality analysis of my genmates, shitposting mind games on Cheeper to psych out my opponents, mentalism—I did it all. All this for a game of rock-paper-scissors, you say?

Yes, all this for a game of rock-paper-scissors.

“Think about me—Shuwa-chan,” I said to my chat one day. “What’s the first thing that comes to mind? Tell me. You know, better yet, I’ll tell you: StroZero. Boom. Mentalism.”

: Yooo???

: dude wtf???

: get out of my head get out of my head get out of my head!!!

: i like to be wined and dined after i get mindfucked
thank you very much

: Anya???

: Anya likes ~~peanuts~~ StroZero!

I entered the tournament bearing the fruits of my training, a strong mental visualization of my victory, and the hopes and dreams of my chat. Yes, I was armed with it all, determined to win it all...

...and I lost it all.

Yep, you already know. I was at the special project at the start of the chapter, after all. Now we fast-forward to some time before Hareru-senpai’s declaration at the start of the chapter. I was wandering the streets of Tokyo, heading to the address provided on the invitation. It’d also said to prepare to stay for a long event. A long event *and* a special venue? Yeah, things were about to go off the rails.

Upon arrival, I checked in and headed to the green room to meet up with my fellow streamers. The only girl to arrive before me was an unfamiliar face. As I

knew everyone already except the gen-five girls, I'd immediately assumed her to be the loser of their bracket: Dagger-chan. She was small. Not as small as her model, but small and cute. She looked nervous to meet me for the first time, so I tried to greet her as casually as possible.

"Hello! I'm Yuki Tanaka, aka Awayuki Kokorone!" I said.

"H-H-H-H-H-Hello! My name is Nodoka Himekawa! Fifth gen!" Dagger-chan said.

"Whoa! Your memories!"

"I mean Dagger! My name is Dagger!"

"Attagirl."

Soon after, the second-and fourth-gen losers, Nekoma-senpai and Ehrai-chan, joined us as well. We broke the ice and managed to get Dagger-chan to relax a little before our respective managers came in to lead us to the main venue.

We trudged behind them as they led us onward to some unknown destination. We were uneasy, but could you really blame us? Even now, right before the project was about to start, we still hadn't been told anything about it. Plus, we were all losers here, so it seemed more likely that a collective punishment awaited us than anything else. So we walked on, like prisoners condemned, until we finally emerged from the tunnel into the bright light of the aforementioned studio kitchen.

"Hey, there you all are! Let's go, let's go!" Hareru-senpai called out. The space was buzzing with staff members in the midst of their preparations. Hareru-senpai broke off from her task and skipped over to us. "Everything's set up, the stream's about to go live, so make sure you're ready too!"

"Huh?" Nekoma-senpai, Ehrai-chan, and I said. Our streamer lizard brains responded immediately to the word "stream" and we slipped into our personas. An occupational hazard by any other name... Dagger-chan was just one step behind us, but fell into her role all the same.

Before long, the preparations were complete, the stream went live, and we jumped straight into the opening act: "Welcome one and all to the great Live-On Valentine's Day Chocolate Cook-Off! I am your judge and host, Hareru

Asagiri. Your contestants today are the lovely losers from the other day's rock-paper-scissors tournament, and unbeknownst to them, they came all this way to face off in a competition of who can make the best homemade chocolate!"

: I WAS HERE

: oh, so that's what we're doing!

: very nice very nice

: I heard there was going to be a very special project...

: am I the only one surprised by how normal this sounds?

Even I, Awayuki Kokorone, the consummate professional, the immutable entertainer, wasn't able to process the news, standing there in complete silence. I was surprised, of course, to learn that we'd come all this way just to be told to make chocolate, but I think a greater part of me was still waiting for the introduction to go on, to get to the catch.

It never came.

Seriously? Was this it? Was this all us super losers deserved? Not some crying, shitting, throwing up, peeing, crying, screaming, passing out, waking up, throwing up again-type competition? Not even a serious normal competition—just a super warm, wholesome, buddy-buddy, lovey-dovey, slice-of-life-anime chocolate-making session?

All four of us contestants affixed Hareru-senpai with a suspicious glare.

"Heh, heh, heh..." Hareru-senpai laughed. "But of course, that's not all there is to it."

Phew. We all let out a humongous sigh of relief (terror).

"On the sheet of paper you're about to receive," Hareru-senpai continued, "you'll have ten minutes to write down all the ingredients you *think* you'll need! Absolutely no colluding! I want to hear no talking among yourselves! When time's up, hand in your lists and our wonderful staff will dash off to procure your ingredients, super speed style! You'll use those ingredients to craft your

chocolate masterpieces! Oh, and no looking up outside info either, so no smartphones, no searching, no nothing!”

Ah, interesting, interesting. In other words...

“Let’s see how delicious a chocolate our contestants can whip up without using any recipes—what do you think, folks?”

This was a contest of our current levels of knowledge.

“Before you ask, simply melting chocolate and reshaping it will not count! And when you’re jotting down your ingredients, keep it friendly for our staff—please, nothing too outlandish or tough to find! You won’t need anything else but ingredients. Our studio kitchen is decked out with every tool you could imagine and then some. That’s the magic of a studio kitchen for ya!”

This was an unfudgeable bout of how much cooking experience we each already possessed.

Gulp.

“And they’re off! Contestants, begin your magical, fairy-tale journey into the world of chocolate making—right now!”

Around twenty minutes later—ten minutes for us to draft our lists and another ten for the dispatched staff members to return with our ingredients—we were ready to get started.

Hareru-senpai continued with her MCing. “Got all your ingredients? I’m not exactly timing you guys here, but let’s try and keep things moving. You’ll each have...let’s make it an even hour to get your chocolate shaped up and set aside to rest. Let the chocolate crafting commence!”

At Hareru-senpai’s firm declaration, the L Squadron kicked into gear. *Thank God this space is big enough for all four of us to cook without bumping elbows,* I thought as we bolted into action.

Just as I started carrying out my plan, combining ingredients and mixing, Hareru-senpai made her way to my station, snapping pictures from this angle and that. She explained that the photos would be shown on stream and

updated periodically as a kind of progress report for our viewers. Though I'd been nervous and thus silent at the start of the stream, I'd settled into enough of a rhythm at this point to be able to make small talk with Hareru-senpai.

"You know, I wasn't sure what I was expecting," I said.

"About what?" Hareru-senpai asked.

"I was nervous, since you said this was going to be a competition and all, but it's really not so bad. Definitely not the punishment game I thought it would be."

"But I don't think anyone said anywhere it was going to be a punishment game?"

"I mean... Yeah, I guess that's right."

"And this is technically a company-sponsored event, so you'll be compensated for coming."

"And they called us losers!"

"Well, yeah! Wasn't it clearly stated beforehand that it was the losers of the tournament who would be invited to this very special project? I'm confused why you're confused!"

"I see. So you're saying that we are the ones who lost the battle, but not the war."

"And just so you know, the winner of this tournament will see their creation adapted for a limited-time retail release."

"What?!" It wasn't just me who said that—all four of us losers' heads swiveled around at the startling news.

"If you're curious, we originally wanted to ship a chocolate for every one of our members, but that seemed too big a leap for people who have never ventured into the world of commercial food products before," Hareru-senpai explained. "So this competition is sort of like a trial run. We get some much needed R&D experience, some good content, and next year, hopefully, a Valentine's Day chocolate product for each of you."

No way... So that's what's going on? Oh no, I'm getting nervous all over again.

What was everyone else making? I suddenly got a hankering to know. I looked around the studio. Everyone was silently going about their work, hands moving, except one Dagger-chan, who seemed to be standing in front of her ingredients in silent contemplation.

Was she okay? I knew I had my own prep to worry about, but I felt like I could spare her a helping hand, especially as her senpai and all. It was against the rules to offer direct advice when it came to the chocolate, but I could at least offer a reassuring word, right?

“Whatcha makin’ there, Dagger-chan?” I said.

“Oh, Master, hey. I’m making an authentic, super cool dark chocolate, but I just can’t seem to figure out how I’m supposed to melt these cocoa beans.”

“I’m sorry, you said melt what now?” I walked up next to her and saw what looked like almonds, but I supposed were actual, whole cocoa beans in her hands. She was trying to melt these? Not use them as decoration or garnish, but melt them? My brain didn’t compute. “What else do you have, by the way, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Nothing. Just these,” Dagger-chan replied.

“I’m sorry, you said nothing?”

All contestants, Hareru-senpai, even the staff turned to look at Dagger-chan. It was so quiet and pensive that I could pinpoint the exact moment the look on everyone’s faces morphed from “WTF did I just hear” to “You can’t be serious.” It was only the staff member in charge of Dagger-chan’s ingredients who smiled with an air of resignation.

Feeling the palpable shift in the studio’s atmosphere, Dagger-chan began to panic. “Um. Huh? G-Guys? Why are you all looking at me like that? Wh-What did I do?”

As the master, I felt it only right to address my apprentice. While I couldn’t break the rules and give her advice, I could at least give her shit. “Dagger-chan. Just curious, but...did you not ask for any actual chocolate?”

“No?” she said. “Why do I need that? Don’t you just melt cocoa beans then pour it into a mold or something to make chocolate?”

“Dagger-chan,” I said. “Chocolate is made from cocoa beans, yes, but between the whole beans and the final product, there are many, many time- and labor-intensive steps.”

“So you’re saying I...can’t make chocolate from just beans?”

“You can—or I should say, get close—but it’ll take way longer than an hour.”

“Okay, but I said I was making *dark* chocolate, not milk chocolate.”

“That doesn’t change much. And even if you were somehow able to crush up the beans and form something similar in shape to chocolate, without an inordinate amount of sugar, it certainly wouldn’t taste like it.”

A long moment of silence followed.

“There,” Dagger-chan croaked.

“There?” I asked.

“There it goes again, my darn memory loss coming around to bite me in the butt! Ha ha ha! Of course I know chocolate isn’t just cocoa beans! Or I *would’ve* known if I didn’t have amnesia! Ha ha ha! Ha ha ha! Silly me!”

If you pictured Dagger-chan on the verge of tears, you were right.

“Uh-oh, Awacchi.”

“What is it, Hareru-senpai?”

“Seeing Knife-chan like this, I... I feel funny inside. I’m not awakening to something, am I?”

“Oh, you didn’t know, senpai?”

“Know... Know what?”

“There’s an essential nutrient that can only be found in the teary eyes and quavering voice of a crying loli.”

“Gross. There goes that feeling.”

: L000000L

: this ain't your granddaddy's chocolate. or...maybe it

is?

: this isn't obligatory chocolate, this is obligatorily chocolate

: It's...it's not like I made chocolate for you or anything! (TL note: she actually didn't. that ain't chocolate)

: no thank you

: ok but if she doesn't have any other ingredients isn't she just stuck?

: >asks staff-san to buy her cocoa beans, refuses to elaborate further, leaves

: lmao the one time i actually believe she has amnesia

“Waaaaaaaah! This is what I get for pretending to like bitter things. Waaaaah!!!”

Afterward, Dagger-chan was allowed some advice as a unique exception. She was last seen toasting her cocoa beans in a frying pan in a last-ditch effort to come up with something at least slightly edible.

After that sadness interlude with Dagger-chan, everyone resumed their prep work. The sight of me pouring cream into a saucepan caught Hareru-senpai's attention, and she swung by again with her phone and a question. “What are you making, Awacchi?” she asked, her camera clicking away.

“Nama chocolate!” I said.

Heh, heh, heh. Behold my master plan. Behold the recipe that would pave the way to an Awa-chan victory—nama chocolate! My reasoning for choosing thus was simple. First: I had near-zero experience baking or making sweets or anything of the sort. Let's be real—baking is one of those things that require passion, otherwise it's just way too much of a hassle. That, however, was not to say that I hadn't dabbled, and it just so happened that my dabbling had been in

the form of nama chocolate—the simplest and most delicious treat anyone could ever want to make!

For those who didn't know, nama chocolate is a Japanese-style ganache, like a chocolate truffle almost, but not nearly as fancy. The basic process involves combining chocolate with near-boiling cream, pouring the mixture into a pan, chilling it, cutting it into cubes, and finally dusting it with cocoa powder for looks. I'd previously tried this recipe because I had leftover whipping cream that was about to expire, and I was pleasantly surprised by how delicious the final product turned out.

And yup, you can bet that if my modest efforts were good enough to fool me, they would be good enough to fool anybody—and that brings us to reason two of my rationale: it looks *super* impressive.

It's in the name—nama chocolate. Just listen to it. What do you hear? Bitter chocolate and luxurious cream, smooth and unctuous mouthfeel, all wrapped up in a deluxe little package. You'd think I'd spent thirty hours on this intricate little treat when in reality I spent thirty minutes! Name a single man on this planet who wouldn't care for a woman who could not only satisfy their hunger, but their cravings as well! My nama chocolate 'bouta bring all the boys to the yard!

Truly, I am in my seiso revival era. A comedian on the outside, a pure and innocent maiden on the inside. And no, we're not going to talk about how I was supposed to be the opposite.

Anyways, back to the work. My thoughts might have been running wild, but I was presenting the composed and professional image of a first-rate patissier. Couldn't have these people catching on to the fact that what I was doing was actually dead simple. Next, I lit the stove.

"I see!" Hareru-senpai said. "So your strategy is to make something that looks impressive to people not in the know but is actually super simple! That's a good one, Awacchi!"

"Screw it all to hell!" I threw everything down, dashed to the corner of the kitchen, and put myself in time-out. "Why, Hareru-senpai, why did you have to say the quiet part out loud?! Now chat's going to think I'm some conniving

sneak no matter how good my chocolate is!”

“S-Sorry...” she replied. “The ulterior motives were written all over your smug little face. The words kinda just came out.”

“‘Kinda just came out,’ my ass! If you knew, then praise my cooking skills instead! Flatter me! Comment on my seiso-ness! You know I can’t garner respect from my chat unless I resort to tricks like these!”

“I wanted to, but even the way you poured cream into a saucepan was so pretentious and obviously hammed up for the camera, I couldn’t help but want to take you down a peg! And also the only comment I have for your seiso-ness is that your methods aren’t seiso at all!”

“How dare you! I hate you! Hareru-senpai, you jerk, you dummy, you big meanie!”

“Holy Knife-chan level of insults, Batman.”

“Ah?” Dagger-chan said.

“Probably Drops The Act At Home! Jagen! Psychosomatic cricket woman!” I said.

“Wow, you must’ve defeated a Metal King Slime to level up so quickly! Knife-chan vocab has evolved into Jackknife-chan vocab!”

“And who might that be, I wonder~?” Ehrai-chan said.

“Oops, sorry, Bosslady.”

“I do not recall ever being called a jackknife, nor am I a bosslady!”

: twas obvious

: she tried to pull a fast one on us...

: there's gotta be someone out there who heard Dagger-chan's "Ah?" and decided life was worth living

: gotta pull your seiso card for trying to trick us

: true seiso comes from within

: splat goes the whipping cream

It wasn't supposed to be like this... It wasn't supposed to be like this!!! To think that my efforts to appear composed would backfire on me! If I'd just acted normally, maybe Hareru-senpai would've let me off the hook!

"Oh, cheer up, Awayuki-chan," Nekoma-senpai said. "Nekoma thinks it's a good idea." She wandered over to give me a pat on the back.

Oh, what a kind kitty. She just knows when I'm depressed.

"Nya. I'm sure Hareru-senpai isn't saying she doesn't appreciate your nama chocolate."

"Indeed, I do want to try it!" Hareru-senpai said.

I paused. "Really?"

"Besides, look at Dagger-chan; she only has cocoa beans," Nekoma-senpai said.

"That's true!" I said.

"Master?!" Dagger-chan cried out, reeling from my treachery.

But Nekoma-senpai was right! Even if my plan had just gone up in smoke, I was still miles and miles ahead of the person who couldn't even get started! *Wow, I feel so much better now!*

I returned to my cooking station. I should've learned from Dagger-chan's earlier mishap that nothing good ever came from pretending to be something that you're not. This time, I would drop the act. Just me, no frills.

"Uh-oh, Awacchi," Hareru-senpai said.

"Huh? What is it now?"

"Chat is being flooded with comments saying they want Shuwacchi's chocolate as well as Awacchi's."

"Huh? What does that even mean?"

"Sooo...is that a no?"

“Huh?! You want me to make another chocolate thing? Right now?!”

“Something simple will do! Pleeese?”

Well, sure. Why not, actually.

“You can request more ingredients if you want!” Hareru-senpai continued.

“No, that’s okay, actually.” I turned to my manager. “Suzuki-san! Could you grab my bag from the green room?”

She dashed away and returned with my bag in short order. From it, I pulled out a single can of StroZero.

“Awacchi, why do you carry StroZero in your bag?”

“It’s my emergency stash.”

“Is this a bit?”

“Hah, hardly. A woman as seiso as I does not do ‘bits.’ Since today’s event was a surprise, I deemed it prudent to bring a can in case the situation necessitated Shuwa-chan.”

“The consummate professional! I’m impressed, Awacchi!”

“Oh, to think the day would ever come I’d be called a professional for lugging around an alcoholic beverage at all times. Anyways, I’m just going to pour this Shuwa-can into a Shuwa-bowl of melted chocolate and call it a Shuwa-day.”

“Thanks, Awacchi! You’re the best!”

Phew, that worked out. As the saying goes, you can never be too prepared.

But then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Ehrai-chan giving me a smirk. “But I wonder: Would that product truly be different enough from StroZero for us to commercialize~? Dagger-chan’s beans might even be more viable in that regard~.”

Dagger-chan gasped. “M-Master?! Don’t tell me...you’re falling on the sword for my sake?!”

“Nope!” I said. “It’s a bit! Totally a bit! Gotcha ass, ha ha ha ha! It’s me, raging alcoholic Shuwa-chan! Can’t be seen without a tall can! There’s no chocolate-StroZero cocktail! ’Twas only a ruse!”

“Master?!” Dagger-chan cried out, reeling from my continued treachery.

: the under-bus-throwing will continue until morale improves

: A woman as seiso as you doesn't do what now?

: **Reject seiso, return to cocoa beans ¥10,000**

: return to :b:beans

: aww poor Dagger but she's so cute

: step away from the child and put that can back in your pocket, you robot tanuki, or so help me god.

: id pay to watch a gritty doraemon reboot where all his gadgets are just StroZero cans

Alice Soma: I wanted to participate...

: so you could eat Awa-chan's chocolate?

Sorry, Dagger-chan. You can look at me with those puppy-dog eyes all you like, but I am not losing to beans.

When the chocolate-making had settled into its mid-game, as I mixed together chocolate and cream, Hareru-senpai visited Nekoma-senpai's station.

“What's cookin', Nekomaaa?” Hareru-senpai said.

“Oh? Ya curious?” the cat in question replied. “I'm really putting in the effort to try and make something you'll love!”

“Really?! For me? You shouldn't have!”

“But I should! I wanted to thank you for all the hard work you do. But there's just one itsy-bitsy problem...”

“Oh no. What's wrong?”

“Nekoma is a cat. And cats can't eat chocolate. I don't know chocolate, so I'm

not sure if my creation will be palatable to a human like yourself.”

“Whoa, suddenly sticking to the backstory? That’s odd. I didn’t think you cared.”

“But I’m really, really trying. But I’m really, really not sure you’ll like it. Promise me you’ll try it?”

“Huhhh? I mean, sure, I promise! You made it for me; I’d love to try it.”

“All right, you promised! Then this bag of cat food is going straight into the mix.”

“NOW HOLD ON JUST A GOSH DARN SECOND.”

Startled, I whipped my head around to see the source of the commotion. There, I saw Nekoma-senpai dumping an entire bag labeled “kibble” into a bowl of melted chocolate.



“Nekomaaa! What do you think you’re doing?!” Hareru-senpai cried out.

“Nya ha ha ha! Making you try my favorite food, of course!”

“I’ve never seen you eat cat food in my life! And I’m human, not a cat!”

“But you promised. You lied?”

“I promised, *yes*, but this is an extenuating circumstance!”

“Lying to animals is animal abuse. First gen committing animal abuse sets a bad example for all of us.”

“I’m being extorted?! Extorted in the strangest of ways, no less?!”

Nekoma-senpai watched in delight as Hareru-senpai scrambled to stop her. Finally, Hareru-senpai seemed to catch on and glared daggers at Nekoma-senpai. “Nekomaaa! I knew something was wrong when you played up the cat angle! You tricked me!”

“Nya ha ha ha! Too slow, Miss Genius, too slow! You think I know how to make sweets? If I’m going to be exposed as a walking kitchen disaster, I’m taking you down with me!”

Hareru-senpai grunted in frustration. “Nekomaaa! How could you bare your fangs at me? I trusted you!”

“This, my dear Hareru-senpai, is sweet, sweet revenge.”

“R-Revenge? But why? I haven’t unwittingly wronged you, have I? But if I have, then—”

“*Slam Dunk.*”

“Slam what now?”

“The new *Slam Dunk* movie. By all accounts, it was supposed to be shit, the kind of flick I enjoy, so I went to watch it, but it turned out to be super entertaining, so I’m taking it out on you!!!”

“I couldn’t be more unrelated to this scenario even if I tried!!!”

Nekoma-senpai began to breathe heavily, tears welling up in her eyes. “The worst part was, I knew! A small part of me knew that a brilliant mangaka like

him couldn't direct a bad movie even if he tried, but I went to see it anyway! Oh my God. It was a freaking masterpiece! Do you know how it feels? Do you know how it feels to be the only frustrated cat in the audience while everyone around you is moved to tears? Do you?! Huh?!"

"No, I don't know how it feels! I enjoy a bad movie myself from time to time, but you can count me among those fans of the original work that were moved to tears!"

"This is all because of that 'Nekoma has strong innocent-bystander energy' BS! Well, I'm passing it on to you, Hareru-senpai! Suffer as I have suffered!"

"This can't be real life."

: and there it is

: movie did have its fair share of critics before release

: you had to be caught up on the original work to get it but it was good

: I mean yeah, how long have fans been waiting for that game to be adapted?

: well at least Sei-sama isn't here to show off her uniquely phallic version of the choco banana ¥500

Sei Utsuki: cocklate banana

: speak of the devil

: they let you out early

Sei Utsuki: who's to say they even caught me yet?

: so you admit to having warrants out for your arrest

: now all we just need is Shion-mama to come rub chocolate on her nipples and offer us a hit

: Um, yes please?

I was utterly uninvested in the conversation unfolding, but a curious detail did

pique my interest. “But, Hareru-senpai,” I said, “you ate crickets without hesitation. What’s a little cat food?”

“What?” she said. “Those crickets were at least intended for human consumption, right? Cat food is for cats!”

“I don’t get it,” I said. “So it’s not a matter of taste for you?”

“Well, eating food for cats? Isn’t that just weird? If there was people cat food, then maybe?”

“Huh? Okay, then, what about Dagger-chan’s cocoa beans?”

“That’s fine. It might not taste good, but at least people eat that.”

Hm, couldn’t say I understood. Was this some genius-level sensibility I was too Shuwa to understand? At any rate, it seemed she preferred crickets and cocoa beans to cat food.

“Actually, it kinda just sounds like you shouldn’t have volunteered to be a judge in the first place,” I said.

“And exclude myself and by extension all of gen one from the fun? No way!” Hareru-senpai said.

“Oh, okay,” I replied.

“All this fuss over nothing,” Nekoma-senpai said. “Even if it is cat food, it’s going to be coated with so much chocolate you won’t notice a thing.”

“Mmm... I don’t know about that,” Hareru-senpai said.

“But if that won’t convince you, perhaps this will...” Nekoma-senpai replied.

“What?”

“This cat food is made entirely from ingredients safe for human consumption! It’s human grade!”

“Human grade does *not* mean what you think it means!” With that final remark, Hareru-senpai let out a sigh and resumed her photo-taking. “You know what, you’re the one who’s doing us a favor by participating, so I’m just gonna let it go. But along with the cocktail from earlier, that’s another product we can’t commercialize. How did we get to the point where cocoa beans are

starting to look like a viable option...?”

“Oh no!” Nekoma-senpai said. “Dagger-chan heard you and now she’s smiling, swinging around that frying pan like a maniac!”

“Hey!” I yelled. “Stop that! It’s raining beans in here!”

Is it just me or is the actual cooking progressing veeery slowly?

“Okay! All that’s left is to chill it, cut it, and give it a sugar dusting for that extra ‘light snow’ Awayuki touch,” I said.

“Good job! That looks amazing!” Hareru-senpai said, giving me a modest round of applause.

Despite the best efforts of everyone involved, my nama chocolate neared completion. Dagger-chan had just finished toasting her beans, and Nekoma-senpai had struggled a bit with her kibble clumping in the chocolate but was now also at the chilling stage, just like me. That left only one of us: “Phew! Finally finished cutting out the cookie dough! I am beat~.”

Ehrai-chan. She paused for a brief break, sweat beading on her brow—a testament to the hard work she’d been putting in. Though she’d been quiet, her hands had been far from idle, busy crafting the most intricate treat of us all: chocolate cookies. Apparently, she’d decided to make them after realizing we had ovens at our disposal.

When I’d first heard about her plans, I’d thought, *Damn, that’s a good idea; I wish I’d come up with that.* But seeing her work convinced me I’d made the right choice by keeping things simple. Baking was tough work. Ehrai-chan might have been the slowest among us, but if it weren’t for her physical strength, rolling out the dough would’ve taken her even longer.

“All that’s left is to pipe on some animal faces and pop them into the oven~!”

So that was why she’d made her dough without chocolate—so she could lend her own flair to her cookies! And just because the rest of us were early, that by no means meant she was late. She still had plenty of time to finish up everything she’d set out to do.

“Time to draw!” Ehrai-chan said. “I got this... I got this!”

Hm? Was it just me or did she sound oddly unconfident?

“There we— No! Oh, phew. We’re good.”

Despite the occasional cry for help, Ehrai-chan beavered away decorating her cookies. At a glance, they seemed—well, let’s just say the zookeeper in question was giving it the best she had. Her animals were rather...chibi-fied, if that made sense. I’d always had the impression she was rather dexterous, but I guess not.

“That’s so cute!” Dagger-chan said.

“Really? Well, that’s a relief~.”

Oh? It seemed Ehrai-chan had a fan. Dagger-chan, for all her bluster about trying to be cool and whatnot, seemed to have a soft spot for all things cute. The chibi mascot-like drawings were right up her alley.

“Phew,” Ehrai-chan sighed. “Just one more cookie to go!”

“When you’re done, show chat a picture! I’m sure they’d like to see!” Dagger-chan said.

“Roger that~! You know what? Why don’t you choose the last animal for me, Dagger-chan?”

“Can I?!”

“My way of showing appreciation for your kind words earlier. Go ahead~.”

“Then a gorilla! For you, Ehrai-senpai!”

“No problem~!” A few seconds later, she tilted her head. “A gorilla?”

I would also be stumped if someone suddenly asked me to draw a gorilla. They’re quite a step up in difficulty from the usual animal suspects. No way of chibifying them immediately came to mind. Ehrai-chan stared down Dagger-chan for a little while, but caved instantly to her expectant face. “I could probably get away with something gorilla-adjacent...”

Ehrai-chan first traced out a little sketch, and once she was satisfied, picked up the decorating pen again. She was silent, focused to the point of near anxiety, as she moved the pen slowly across her doughy canvas. Then suddenly: “Done!” It’d taken longer than any other animal drawing so far, but there it

was: a gorilla as recognizable as any other.

“Whoa-ho-ho!” Dagger-chan exclaimed. But then her gaze shifted slightly, and a sad squeak escaped her lips. “Mr. Bear...”

“What?” Ehrai-chan followed her gaze. “Ahhh!” she yelled, discovering the crumbly remains of a former cookie bearing the smushed face of a bear. It seemed she’d propped her free hand on top of it during her moment of concentration and hadn’t even noticed.

Dagger-chan’s expression darkened as she looked at the destroyed remains of Mr. Bear with a trembling whimper.

Oh my God, how pure is that?

Ehrai-chan started to panic. Her eyes wandered briefly, seeking a solution, which she seemed to see in us.

Heh, leave it to me, Ehrai-chan! I’ll reclaim Dagger-chan’s smile in one fell swoop. But don’t blame me for what happens afterward. You asked me for help. I would not be held accountable for what was about to occur. “Oh my God... Ehrai-chan whacked Mr. Bear in cold blood...” I said.

Ehrai-chan’s eyes flew open. “What?!”

“Ehrai-chan, you’re ruthless!” Nekoma-senpai jumped in. “Poor Mr. Bear never stood a chance... I get it, drawing a gorilla can push you over the edge, but this...”

“A clean hit, right to the noggin,” Hareru-senpai followed up. “That’s why they call you Live-On’s boss lady.”

“G-Guys?!” Ehrai-chan yelped.

Nekoma-senpai and Hareru-senpai caught on instantly, but Ehrai-chan stared at us as if we’d just sold her out in the worst possible way. *It’s not us you should be looking at, Ehrai-chan!*

“But of course, we’re only talking about cookies here, aren’t we?” I said.

“Ehrai-chan! Look at Dagger-chan!” Nekoma-senpai said.

“Huh?” She turned around. “Oh...”

“Ahaaa!” Dagger-chan went :D. “The boss in the flesh...”

Behold, the amnesiac Live-On superfan in all her oxymoronic glory! By turning the accidental destruction of Mr. Bear into a world-famous Live-On yakuza bit, we managed to save the day!

: Huh?! Who's Mr. Bear?!

: What's happening???

: I think there's a cookie with a bear on it and something happened to it

: oooh.

: No, judging by everyone's reactions, I can only assume a live brown bear, enticed by the smell of sweets, busted into the studio and Boss here dispatched it with a single punch to the dome. ¥893

: ^ this

: ohhh that makes more sense

: I heard there are certain types of cat food that bears are attracted to

: Ehrai Sonokaze, the bare-handed bear-wrangling vtuber~!

: Ehrai Zoo fun fact: The bear in captivity you see, the boss captured using only her eyelashes in order to avoid harming the bear

: That's our boss fer ya! We'll follow ya to the ends of the earth!

: bro LOLLL

“Wait, wait, wait, wait—no, no, no no!” Ehrai-chan said. “Chat’s taking the bit and running with it! How did they infer so much from just audio?!”

“Let them do their thing. This is all part of protecting Dagger-chan’s smile!” I

said.

Ehrai-chan grunted, seemingly not ready to back down and accept her new reality. A beat of internal conflict later, she sniped another glance at Dagger-chan and then declared: “All right, who wants some more, huhhh?! It’s lookin’ like a bloody valentine, ain’t it, fellas?” Ehrai-chan threw her own pride to the wayside, all for the sake of Dagger-chan’s bright, bright smile.

Dagger-chan lost it. “Waaaaah!” she yelled, exploding into applause.

: SHE LEANED INTO IT?

: SHE ACTUALLY LEANED INTO IT, OF HER OWN VOLITION

: THATS GOTTA BE A WORLD FIRST

: LOOKS LIKE BEAR'S BACK ON THE MENU BOYS

: finally, proof that those ginormous humps on Ehrai-chans chest aren't fat but massive freakin pecs

: ¥50,000

“Aha ha ha...” Ehrai-chan laughed nervously. “I’ve got some damage control to do after this... Yep, damage control...” she said as she shoved her tray of cookies into the oven. With that, all active prep across the studio floor came to a close.

We took a brief break while the chocolates chilled and the cookies baked. Once they were done, we quickly moved on to plating and presentation. Now all our creations were neatly arranged before Hareru-senpai, ready for the judging phase.

“Let’s see,” Hareru-senpai said, observing the spread. “From right to left we have: the obligatorily chocolate, toasted and seasoned with Dagger-chan’s tears; Strong chocolate, or StroChoco; nama chocolate; ‘*Slam-Dunked* on by the universe and now this cat’s out for revenge’ cat food chocolate; before, finally, animal chocolate cookies (sans bear).” She looked up at all of us. “You know I

didn't ask you all to make chocolate that was a reflection of yourselves, right? Just something normal would've been fine?"

We each went down the line, giving our comments.

"I toasted them with love!" Dagger-chan said.

"Woe is me whose normal chocolate actually sounds like the abnormal one due to how outlandish everything else sounds," I said.

"Anzai-sensei... Where is my shitty movie...?" Nekoma-senpai groused.

"We better hurry it up, because I have a damage control stream to get to~," Ehrai-chan said.

"Awacchi! A comment from Shuwacchi too, if you'd please!" Hareru-senpai said.

"When I'm Sixty-Zero..." I sang, doing my best Paul McCartney impression.

"That sounds more like a funeral dirge sung by Awacchi for Shuwacchi, but—" Hareru-senpai shook her head. "You know what, forget it."

Don't ask me why my chocolate cocktail still got included in the end. You all saw me say no.

: I'll take strange ceremonial items used by a sketchy cult for \$800, Alex

: cocoa beans not looking so bad now are they

: I mean all of them look decently appetizing from the photos

: the nama chocos and cookies certainly don't look obligatory to me

: Nekomaaa's actually look not bad which is the surprising part

Kaeru Yamatani: will you still need me, will you still feed me, when i'm sixty-four? ♪

: you're not?

Kaeru Yamatani: hey mods, can we ban the guy who just called Kaeru a senior citizen?

: LMAO

: I said no such thing

Live-On Official: As requested by a talent, Kaeru Yamatani has been banned.

: L000L

: i'm dying over here

: friendly fire, friendly fire!!!

: hey, she **did** call herself that

: getting banned by your own org is just mwah, chefs kiss

Live-On Official: There seems to have been a misunderstanding. The ban has been lifted.

: all right official account, you've had your fun

: sorry kaeru-chan~

Kaeru Yamatani: ^ there's something very wrong when you're still here and i'm not

: I'll give you a super next time forgive me

Kaeru Yamatani: say less. see you on stream next time deary ☆

: good ol Kaeru-chan.

: conversing directly with a talent I know bro's heart is beating out of his chest rn

“On with the judging!” Hareru-senpai said. “I’ll go in the order I just said. Starting with Knife-chan’s...” She popped a bean in her mouth; Dagger-chan swallowed audibly. A few crunching sounds later aaand—“Need StroZero!” *GULP GULP GULP PAAAAH*—she washed it down with my StroZero-chocolate

cocktail. “All right, on to the next!”

“Ah? But where was the review?”

“Dagger-chan,” I said, “that *was* the review.”

“Shooock...” Dagger-chan said in her best imitation of a certain psychic five-year-old.

“Good heavens, that was bitter,” Hareru-senpai said. “Thanks for the StroZero, Awacchi. It really came in handy there.”

“Even if it is an unwanted child of mine, I’d appreciate you not using one of my creations as a chaser, thank you.”

“I think the cocktail lacks a sense of identity. The StroZero is mildly sweet, the chocolate is very sweet, it’s just like, what are we doing, you know?”

“Nobody asked.”

She then moved on to my nama chocolate. At least she gave this entry the time of day, thoroughly chewing and tasting it instead of spitting it out instantly.

“So what do you think?” I asked.

“It’s good!”

“Really? Yay!”

“It’s got that homey feel you just can’t get with store-bought.”

“Huzzah!”

Dagger-chan grunted in dissatisfaction. “I don’t get it. What made yours so different from mine? My chocolate was also *nama*, in a sense.”

“*Nama* can mean raw, but it can mean something else too,” I said.

“Well put, Awacchi. It’s like Tsuyoshi Kusanagi, the idol, versus Tsuyoshi Kusanagi, the naked dude loitering in a public park.”

“I’m pretty sure that actually *is* the same person...” I said.

“Oh, I was a big fan of that incident!” Dagger-chan said.

“Seems like a messed-up thing to be a big fan of...” I said.

“It’s kinda like what happened with you, Awacchi,” Hareru-senpai said.

“I... Hm? I was going to retort, but the more I thought about it, the more the similarities jumped out at me. In fact, my situation might’ve been even worse, because I wasn’t even famous to begin with?”

“Why are you saying it like it’s a bad thing?” Hareru-senpai countered. “We all like our celebrities to have a bit of a human side to them.”

I appreciate the words of wisdom, but this hardly seems like the right time and place... But I supposed I should just be happy my chocolate hadn’t flopped at the starting line. Perhaps I even stood a chance of winning?

After bestowing upon me a sprinkling of hope, Hareru-senpai moved on down the line, then froze.

Alice Soma: I would also like to try some of Awayuki-dono's nama DICK

: Hey!!!

: I was a fool to think nobody could outdo Sei-sama

: I think she'd be perfectly fine with Awayuki's nama dick or nama choco, imo.

: Oh? Is this the start of Live-On's chocolate dick joke era?

: possibly the worst era anybody could think of LOL

: Nekomaaa's next let's gooo

: the one I have the least idea of how it's going to taste

Hareru-senpai, she who’d eaten a whole cocoa bean without hesitation, stood frozen in front of Nekoma-senpai’s cat food chocolate. It seemed she really didn’t want to try this. But in the battle between pride and rationality, it appeared pride eventually won and she popped a chocolate-covered cluster of cat food into her mouth. She grimaced, chewing slowly and carefully. Then her

expression lit up. “Wait...” She began to chew faster, and even swallowed eagerly. “This isn’t bad, actually. I’d even venture to say it’s quite good...”

“What.” Among all the shocked reactions filling the room, Nekoma-senpai herself was the most surprised. Her voice was deep; she’d broken character. “Are you for real? You don’t feel sick?”

“Wait, let me try another piece... Yep, it’s good!”

“Say it ain’t so...” Nekoma-senpai began to panic. She’d set out to strike back at Hareru-senpai, but ended up treating her instead. Now she was unintentionally a good guy. “There’s no way... Underneath that chocolate, that’s still cat food you’re eating, you know?”

“Yeah, but as it turns out, your cat food is quite bland, so really, all it tastes like is chocolate. But what the cat food lacks in flavor, it makes up for in texture. It’s almost like a crunchy chocolate cluster! It kinda leaves a weird aftertaste in your mouth afterward, but that’s about it, really.”

“All my hard work... Wasted...”

“Thanks for the Valentine’s chocolate, Nekomaaa!”

“That’s not what I wanted to hear...” Nekoma-senpai dropped to her knees. Shock gave way to resentment, and she worked her jaw in frustration. “I knew I should’ve gone with a can of wet food...”

“You know what, I’m actually confused why you didn’t do that?” I said. “Sounds worse than dry food in just about every way.”

She awkwardly averted her gaze and said hesitantly, “I didn’t want it to be *too* gross. Because I’d...feel bad...”

“Aw, revenge just doesn’t suit you, Nekoma-senpai!”

“Q-Quiet!”

A conscience would always get in the way of revenge. Nekoma-senpai had the resolve to bare her fangs, but lacked the courage to bite.

: Nekomaaa cutie patootie

: wholesome, just wholesome

: Nekomaaa is never beating the innocent bystander allegations

: Here's a product name for ya, free of charge: Wevenge Choco :3

Sei Utsuki: That's a name that would have Shion rapidly approaching your location

: yikes, you're dating Live-On?

: sounds like current era Shion

: running until she reaches her destination no matter what obstacles lie along the way

: like It's My Life?

: Please take a good hard look at your life

Sei Utsuki: No, It's My Wife.

“Who would’ve thought this was a viable combination?” Hareru-senpai said. “My horizons have been broadened.”

Well, Nekoma-senpai’s plan might have failed miserably, but what matters is that we’re all getting along.

“Oof, this is a tough one,” Hareru-senpai said. “Awacchi’s nama chocolate or Nekomaaa’s, I can’t tell which one’s better.”

“Pause,” I said. *Screw getting along.* “You’re kidding, right? My nama chocolate was *that* bad?!”

“No, no, it’s not bad at all! I was just saying yours is just as good as the chocolate-covered cat food!”

“Phrasing! No... That sounds so wrong! I refuse! I can’t lose to cat food! I’d never recover!”

“Don’t worry, Master!” Dagger-chan said. “You still have my seeds of Yggdrasil!”

“Those are cocoa beans. *Cocoa beans!* You’re not helping!”

“Hmph. I think you’re all overreacting,” Dagger-chan said. “They don’t look that bad...” *CRUNCH CRUNCH... COUGH* “Water, water! I need water!”

What is this girl doing...?

Hareru-senpai also took a swig of water to reset her palate, then moved down the line. “Last but certainly not least, Bosslady’s very own chocolate cookies!”

“Bon appetit~! The art might be lacking, but I assure you the flavor is the real deal~.”

“Then don’t mind if I do.” Hareru-senpai took a bite; her eyes flew open. “More... More!!!”

It was in that very instant, in the very spark shining from Hareru-senpai’s eyes, that we knew the game was over.

The winner of the Live-On Valentine’s Day Chocolate Cook-Off: Ehrai Sonokaze!

While Hareru-senpai stayed behind to tidy up, the rest of us prepared to leave. Ehrai-chan hummed a cheerful tune, clearly in a good mood, and to be honest, so was I. I might have lost, but between everything—the prep, the effort everyone put in to protect Dagger-chan’s smile—I couldn’t really say it wasn’t time well spent. (Also the latter was kinda my fault so I really couldn’t say anything there.) As for the showdown between me and Nekoma-senpai, her creation was ultimately disqualified for being commercially unviable, which meant I won. It still hurt that we’d been about even on taste, but what could you do? And Nekoma-senpai was perfectly fine now, if you were wondering; she shook off the shock of failing at her revenge in no time flat.

A certain fighting knife, on the other hand...

“Nghhh... I want to go back in time... If only I were Kyouma Hououin...”

After placing last in today’s competition, Dagger-chan was inconsolable.

“Dagger-chan,” I said, “considering we jumped into this whole thing blind, you handled it really well. Hareru-senpai surely thinks so too.”

“Y-You really think so?”

“In terms of Live-On-ness, you placed a definite first!” Nekoma-senpai said.

“Indeed. The young newbie showed all of us up in terms of pure entertainment~,” Ehrai-chan said.

But no matter how much we tried to cheer her up, Dagger-chan still clung to her cloud of gloom, as if there was something she just couldn’t come to grips with.

Maybe I could give her something to lift her spirits? I thought as I organized my bag and found another can of StroZero—the second half of my emergency stash.

Hm... Maybe I could slip this into Dagger-chan’s bag, then when she gets home, she has a surprise waiting for her?

Of course! What a great idea! Everybody loves coming home to a surprise! Not that I was being full of myself or anything, but she said she liked me, right? Surely she’d appreciate a gift from me. And even if she didn’t, she could just drink away her worries! She’d be right as rain the very next day.

Wait. There was something urgently wrong with my train of thought. “How old are you, Dagger-chan?”

“Ah? I just turned twenty the other day!”

“Holy crap, you’re an adult!”

“Yup!”

Could’ve fooled me with that petite stature and childlike innocence.

Also, you’re supposed to have amnesia, remember? But I’ll just keep that thought to myself right now.

“But should we really be so surprised?” Nekoma-senpai said. “Hiring children is a crime, you know?”

“That’s...probably for the best,” I said. “Wait, what about Tadasu-chan?”

“L-Let’s not talk about her right now,” Dagger-chan said.

Well, if we were all adults, then no harm no foul. Covertly, I slipped my extra

can of StroZero into Dagger-chan's bag before we disbanded.

I'd been home for a while when the message from Dagger-chan came.

†Dagger†: Master! What's this?!

Along with the message was a photo of the StroZero can I'd given her. *Ho ho, found it, have you?*

Awayuki Kokorone: That is your reward for trying so hard today. It's pretty strong stuff, so make sure you take your time with it.

†Dagger†: It's a gift?! No way! You're a god, Master! Thank you!

God might be a bit much, but as long as she was happy. Thus, the Valentine's Day project that had begun with a surprise fittingly concluded with one as well.

That night, strange sounds could be heard coming from the Dagger household. The woman of the house, Dagger herself, was squatting on her kitchen floor, the refrigerator door wide open in front of her.

"Heh, heh, heh, heh..." she giggled, as she gazed upon the aluminum can reigning supreme in the center of the fridge.

"Aaaah~↑! StroZero... Master's StroZero... Such treasure. I can't believe it!"

Receiving the gift of StroZero from her beloved StroZero—the situation had completely overwritten Dagger's memories of any remnant of cocoa beans. Awayuki's plan had been a stunning success.

"Oh, but what do I do? I want to keep it forever, but at the same time, I want to drink it. What do I dooooo?"

But it bears repeating...

“Aaaah~. Master’s not only funny, but kind. I love her. I think I’m even more of a fan now. Oh, I know! I’ll have to share this with my chat later!”

...the present Dagger had received was neither a bouquet nor an accessory, but a tall, unopened can of StroZero. Don’t forget that now.

Shuwa-chan: Next Generations

“Pshhh! Hey, hey, it’s ya girl Shuwa-chan! Everyone, bring a can with you! Let’s go!”

: Pshhh!

: ¥ 220

: DODODODODODO

: no StroZero, just this giant vampire-slaying log though

: eh, potayto potahto

: if it's good enough for the residents of Higanjima, it's good enough for me

“We’ll be playing a game today! *Streamer Dreamer: From Zero to Hero*! Most of you should be familiar with it already, but just in case, allow me to explain.”

As the title might have suggested, *Streamer Dreamer* was a game about streamers. The game centered around Kyun-chan, a girl with a dream of becoming a famous streamer. You played as her boyfriend-slash-manager, and the two of you set out on a tandem journey to reach the ultimate goal of a million followers in thirty days. Basically, a raise-your-own-streamer kind of game. The game-clearing goal was a little ludicrous—unrealistic, even—but that’s what makes a game a game, right?

Also, like, wow. They were really making such video games these days. So modern, so hip! I figured as a fellow streamer, albeit a virtual one, this would be the perfect game to play!

“Heh heh heh... Lucky you, Kyun-chan. You get to be managed directly by the massively popular and critically acclaimed streamer herself, Awayuki Kokorone! Victory has never been so promised. Am I right, chat?”

: aight pack it up boys

: know yourself, Shuwa.

: no, and i'm not sorry for saying it

: anxiety

: If you want to be a manager then first put the booze away

: Kyun-chan, run!

Yeesh, I apparently struck a chord.

“There you are, the usual naysayers. Laugh it up while you still can—because this time, I’m for real. I’ve got more streaming experience than all you keyboard warriors put together. Who’s the professional here, huh? It’ll be like God Himself descended upon the earthly realm to pilot this poor girl’s mortal existence. Three trillion fans or bust!”

: you sure are a pro...at jinxing yourself!

: I put it on Sei-sama's mama you will lose

: three...trillion?

: you know what? screw it i'm in

: the way she's hyping up the chat in real time you can't argue with that

: how could you criticize shuwa-chan when you're in here right now watching her???

: oof, lets see how it goes

That was enough chitchat. “Let’s get this show on the road. Gaaaame start!” I pressed the new game button, and the screen dimmed. Then a delightful stream overlay materialized, framing the upper half of a cute girl smack-dab in the middle of my screen.

“It’s another kyun-derful night! It’s Kyun-chan, here to make your heart go kyun-kyun-kyuuun!”

Ah, so this is the main character—Kyun-chan.

“Hello, Kyun-chan. Now shush, you manipulative little vixen, and make a football team with me.”

: Hello, manager???

: Mane-chan?!?!

: ah, the old "sexually harass them on first contact" strategy

: i think this is more than just harassment...

: this would be game over if you weren't already her boyfriend

: do not let this person anywhere near a management role

“W-Woof, that really kinda just came out, didn’t it? Kyun-chan’s streaming. I don’t think she heard me. I think we’re good.”

Indeed, the overlay and the streaming thing seemed to be the game’s opener. After the cutscene ended, I was presented with a more familiar UI, where I could pick Kyun-chan’s activities for her. “I see, I see. So I just pick an activity that might benefit her or spark some sort of insight, then she streams and we watch follower number go up? Despite my succinct explanation of the game earlier, this *is* my first time playing.”

I clicked around randomly, learning all the different options I had at my disposal, when I found the in-game phone. I clicked it open to see a text from Kyun-chan:

<Kyun>: Mane-chan! Wow, that feels weird to say, but I'll just have to get used to it, won't I? Because starting today, you'll be my manager! I want to make it big! Teach me how to make it big!

“Hah. Fret not, little kitten. I am Live-On’s most esteemed and revered ace! Just do what I say and you’ll make it big in no time.”

: gross

: ace? you're the joker

: gonna throw you out on trash day with the rest of my recyclables

“Let’s see, what should we do first...?” I returned to my browsing. “Okay, so that’s the button I click if I want to stream and— Oh? Oh, oh, oh?”

My cursor stopped on one particular set of pixels. If my eyes weren’t deceiving me, it looked like an icon of a bed with hearts floating all around it.

“Hmmmmmm...”

And if I could read, then surely the text under that icon was three asterisks, implying a certain forbidden three-letter word.

“Hmmmmmm...”

And if I were to build upon that earlier assumption of already possessing the ability of literacy, then the effect of undertaking this ***-labeled activity was: “Decrease Stress and Mental Darkness, increase Affection. The time will change to tomorrow.”

“Hmmmmmm...” *CLICK*

[Love is in the air.]

: HELLLLOOOOOO?!

: ZERO HESITATION

: that can't be the right way to play this game LMAO

: there goes the very first step on this journey...

: Mane-chan?!

On to day two.

“Hmmmmmm...” *CLICK*

[Love is in the air.]

: AGAINNNNNN?!

: two days in a row sheeeeeesh

: Stop HUMMING LIKE THIS IS A HARD DECISION FOR YOU WHEN
IT'S CLEARLY NOT

: it's so over...

: we're never coming back...

For the next thirty days...

“Hmmmmmm...” *CLICK*

“Hmmmmmm...” *CLICK*

“Hmmmmmm...” *CLICK*

...Kyun-chan and I had mindblowing, endless sex.

[The end. Kyun-chan has 0 followers. She marries Mane-chan
at a shotgun wedding.]

“Whew. Now that’s the way to spend a month.”

: GAME OVER?!?!?! ALREADY?!?!!

: Shuwa-chan is a woman of focus, commitment, and sheer will

: At this rate she really is going to create a football team

: You are the scum of the scum

: And we didn't even get to see a single stream...

: unless the whole manager-streamer thing was just some sort of kinky role-play for them

: did you mayhaps think this was an eroge?

: professional streamer, ladies and gentlemen

: your profession is now assistant to the manager of serial and casual breeding

: I am shocked and appalled Shuwa-chan of all people would do such a thing - said no one ever

: your actual manager is crying right now

: okay why even have this ending

: I saw it coming when sex was an option.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough jokes. I’ll start over for real this time.”

That was a first for me—doing a whole playthrough of a game and learning absolutely nothing about how it’s meant to be played. I mean, yeah, that wasn’t the game’s fault, but still...

I started up a new game, this time actually checked out all the various actions I could take, and was shocked by what I discovered.

“There’s no option to drink StroZero?! And you want to be a big streamer, Kyun-chan?”

: mane-chan?!

: L O L

: i want to get off ms managers wild ride

: at this rate it's kyun-chan's own heart that's gonna go kyun-kyun-kyuuun

: hahaha I can't with this girl

: even if there's no option you can try talking to her

“Wait, wait, wait, I can talk to her?!” I opened up the conversation with Kyun-chan again. When I tried to send her a message, the following tutorial appeared:

[You can communicate with Kyun-chan through text. Keep it plain and simple! Convoluted and obscure sentences might confuse her!]

“Okay, okay, nice tutorial. Wait, so I can type whatever I want to her? And then she’ll respond? Teach me, you sexy motherlovers!”

: yes

: she has AI built in so she will respond yes

: FUTURE

: the chat is pretty important too. you can unlock quite a few stream ideas from it

: she's quite human. if you put her in a bad mood somehow the day will end, and there's a limit to how many messages you can send in a day, so care.

“I see... I read that the game included AI elements, but had no idea it was that

open-ended. Very high tech.”

: said the high-tech virtual streamer

: you'd think Shuwa-chan would be good with technology, wouldn't you?

: her V is the V in STRONG

: and where is the V in strong, exactly?

: snap the left part of N off then just kinda give it a good twist

: that is quite the STRONG train of thought

“All righty! Now that we know that, there’s only one thing left to do.” I began typing furiously.

Mane-chan: You should drink StroZero!

Kyun: What's StroZero?

“Oh my God, that’s so sad. She doesn’t even know what StroZero is. It’s like meeting someone who never once went to an amusement park before. I’m gonna cry.”

: Im gonna cry too because someone just equated StroZero to a precious childhood memory

: A 24-pack of StroZero is basically a yearly pass

: you should be the one to teach her

“Great idea! I’ll do that.”

Mane-chan: Hi, I'm Shuwa, founder of Hundred Yen Drink

Club dot com. What is Hundred Yen Drink Club dot com? Well, for a hundred yen a month, we send a high-quality alcoholic beverage right to your door. Yeah, a hundred yen. Are the drinks any good? No. Our drinks are Shuwa-tacular. Each can comes with the promise of instant fame and inexplicable virality in any game you choose. With just one sip, my streams went viral, my heroes became my colleagues, and I was invited to perform with my favorite idol onstage at a concert. Think I'm exaggerating? Check out my kouhais, so dedicated I need witness protection. You think you need expensive equipment? A fancy camera? What you need is StroZero. Forget about waiting for miracles. We are Hundred Yen Drink Club dot com—and the party is on.

Kyun: Huh? Keep it simple for me!

: **bro LOL ¥10,000**

: WE REALLY OUT HERE SIMPING FOR YOTUBE ADS DAMN

: god take me back. take me back to that era

: and not a single lie was spoken

: yes but its inapplicable to everyone but shuwa-chan

: the part about kouhais had me rolling. Looking at you
gen 4

: we're not in the business of removing hair, we're in
the business of removing seiso

: this commercial is for Kyun-chan's eyes only

: has targeted advertising gone too far?

: still waiting for the day they start addressing me by
my full legal name

: TLDR

: please do not advertise to the AI

“Tsk. I wanted to make sure she was really picking up what I was putting down, but fine, I’ll keep it simple this time.”

Mane-chan: Alcohol.

Kyun: Alcohol!

[New idea incoming: Drinking stream!]

“Whoa! You really *can* give her ideas! Thanks, chat!”

First step: complete! Or so I thought. The texts from Kyun-chan continued to pour in.

Kyun: Do you really think it's the right time for a drinking stream, though? I just debuted!

“What is...this? She doesn’t seem too eager. Oh, another tutorial.”

[Should Kyun-chan seem uninterested in a stream idea, the stream's success rate will suffer. A lackluster stream might fail to boost the follower count. Kyun-chan's enthusiasm for different streaming topics is shaped by her attributes, her experience, and specific events. Choose a stream topic that aligns with her current mood for better results!]

“Oh, wow, you can fail at a stream. But yeah, I guess it would be rather unrealistic if you were perfect at everything.”

: doesn't look like she's too interested

: I mean yeah, drinking on a debut stream probably isn't

the best idea

: the name "Kyun-chan" doesn't scream raging alcoholic to me

: but it seems you can still make her do the stream if you really want to?

: wat do?

“Mmm... Maybe I’ll talk to her a little more, see if I can’t change her interest level? Evangelize, Shuwa-chan, evangelize!”

Mane-chan: Just as the universe was born from an explosion of StroZero. Just as time began with a single StroZero drop. And just as life was born in the vast StroZero ocean—StroZero shall remake you anew!

Kyun: I told you I don't understand!

“Yo chat this AI is bugging out.”

: the only thing bugging out is your head

: and you thought that would convince her how?

: saying StroZero somehow beats all of accumulated human wisdom stings even coming from you, Shuwa-chan.

: so this is what it feels like to be a 15th century man hearing Galileo's theory of heliocentricity for the first time

: i'm not so sure about that one

: the earth orbits the sun that orbits the can of StroZero at its core

: I think we gotta call humanity a wash, guys

“Ah, I see whatchall mean! I need to show her proof, is what you’re saying, right? I got it, I got it!”

Mane-chan: Look at me.

Kyun: Right now?! Why?!

“That didn’t work either?! Why, why, why, why?! You’re supposed to see me, a shining example of the StroZero dream, and be so inspired you go straight from StroZero...to StroHero! AHHH! Forget that I said that, forget that I said that, forget that I said that!”

: What StroZero dream

: the dream to become an anti-humor comedian?

: you are either a dud or a shining example or a shining example of a dud, take your pick ¥2,200

: at least wait until the end of your sentence before you get embarrassed and start contradicting yourself lmao

: that was some backpedaling. how can you convince Kyun-chan if even you aren't convinced?

Kyun: You've been making fun of me, haven't you? Well, you know what? Hope it was worth it, because I'm done for today!

“Huh-waaaahhh?!”

The chat dialog closed all by itself and I couldn’t open it again. It seemed that I had made her upset.

“Aw, man... All I wanted was for her to understand the greatness of StroZero... Now what do I do? Do I just force her to do the stream anyway? But I’d feel bad making her do something she doesn’t want to...”

“Hey, Awayuki! Show her who’s boss!”

“Who said that?! Gasp. Are you...the devil on my shoulder?”

“That’s me, your inner devil. Now listen. You make her drink that can if it’s the last thing you do. Ya hear me? When has StroZero ever failed you?”

“You make a good point...”

“She said it herself: she wants to make it big. You’re her manager, aren’t ya? You gotta respect her wishes. This is for her own good. She may not understand now, but once she starts rakin’ in the followers, she’ll come around.”

“Yeah. You’re right, I’ll—”

“Wait, Awayuki-chan! Listen to me as well!”

“Gasp! You... You’re...!”

“The angel on your shoulder, yes! You must make her drink StroZero!”

“AlIIIIII righty, then.”

: LMAO

: what a bit

: It's so stupid. i love it

: isn't the angel usually supposed to be against the devil?

: where has that kind, ethical angel gone?

“But let’s keep it real, chat. You all want to see the StroZero route as much as I do, don’t you?”

: Yesn't

: ...yeah.

: a route involving alcohol I could see, but a StroZero-specific route? prove me wrong devs.

“That’s what I thought! The real fun in video games is playing them in ways they’re not meant to be played! The only way you lose is if you’re not having fun. And hey, not saying StroZero’s gonna lose—it’s a win-win-win situation! This is definitely the best way to play. Sorry, Kyun-chan, you’ve just gotta trust me on this!!!”

And thus, I made Kyun-chan go ahead with the drinking stream.

“It’s another kyun-derful night! It’s Kyun-chan, here to make your heart go kyun-kyun-kyuuun!”

After her standard stream greeting, Kyun-chan introduced herself to all the first-time viewers. Although there weren’t many to welcome at this point, the number didn’t matter—whether ten viewers or ten thousand, they were all there to see her, and being genuine was key.

Introductions came to an end, and finally, it was time to get into the content—the content I had picked.

“We’re gonna be doing a drinking stream today! Tee hee, I just hope I don’t accidentally get too tipsy and let out a side of me that’s supposed to stay hidden!”

Kyun-chan then took out a tall can of...not exactly StroZero but a generic chuhai? I guess? And started drinking.

“Heh heh heh. Attagirl. Let the StroZero flow through you. Surrender yourself to the feeling! Show them the power of dreams, no Honda!”

Confident of its success, I watched the stream unfold with arms crossed and smile smugged. But my eyes were immediately drawn to the in-game stream chat.

: oh. you drink?

: not quite what I had in mind...

: seems a bit early to start hitting the bottle

“Hm? Is it just me or is the reaction rather muted?”

The general vibe of the chat seemed apathetic. A bit turned off, even.

“No, no, no. Why am I losing heart? StroZero-chan is an entertainer through and through. We always save the best material for last. In my case, the stream didn’t really get going until after I ended it! Ha ha...ha...”

I continued to watch on, confident that the explosive breakthrough moment would come anytime now...

But it never did.

[The stream was lackluster. As a result, follower count did not grow.]

“What?” I whispered. The words made sense individually, but together, they formed a reality I refused to accept. My breath quickened, my core burned, yet I felt chills. Doom loomed over me, but I was frozen, eyes wide open. “Huh? What? ...Huh? Lackluster...? What...does that mean? StroZero-chan? What?”

I felt sheer terror. But then I remembered my viewers—they were my foundation, my bedrock. Forcing my stiff neck to turn, I looked at my chat. Someone had to deny this reality. Someone had to reassure me everything was all right...

: big oof

: well that didn't work

: kyun-chan noooo

: I don't believe it...

: StroZero...lost?

But with my loyal viewers echoing the same sentiment, I finally accepted the unmistakable truth.

SNIFF

And oh, what a heartbreaking truth it was.

“WAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!”

My tears—they flowed freely that night.

: Shuwa-chan?!

: what's wrong?!

: c-c-c-c-c-calm down!

: she's actually crying?!

: don't cry...



“I... I can’t help it, I mean... StroZero-chan... StroZero-chan...! Stro... StroZero... I... Waaaaahhh!!! StroZero-chan...lost! Waaaaahhh!!!”

: shut yo ass up LMAO

: lol. maybe I shouldn't be laughing but lol

: that's the same reaction i had as a kid when ultraman lost

: **dry those tears babygirl ¥50,000**

: woody harrelson drying tears with money.gif

: I'm not sure who I'm more upset at. you for believing StroZero couldn't lose, or me for believing you

: probably the first time i've seen a grown adult ugly-cry like this

: it's so absurd but she's crying so hard that I can feel her pain.

For a while, my tears poured out like water from a broken dam.

But time is the great equalizer. What time giveth, time can also taketh away. When at times, its inexorable flow thrusts upon us harsh choices, at others, it washes away the pain, gently soothing my heart as it did now.

“Sorry,” I said with a sniffle. “I feel much better now.” With my tears spent, I turned back to my computer screen. My mind now clear, I replayed the events in my head.

“Oh.” Suddenly, the folly of my actions became crystal clear. “It isn’t over.”

What awaited me on that computer screen wasn’t a Game Over message, but the same menu as before, inviting me to prepare for a new stream. “I see... So this is what StroZero-chan was trying to tell me. This wasn’t the end, but just the beginning!”

In my clairvoyant state, I could see that StroZero hadn’t lost. *We* hadn’t lost at

all. “Of course! Did I find success overnight after my debut? No way! The sun always shines brighter after the storm! Ha! StroZero-chan, I’m sorry I doubted you—you’re an entertainer through and through!”

Oh, what a fool I’d been.

“I’m sorry to you, chat, as well, for suddenly bursting into tears. But I’m all right now. I finally understand StroZero-chan’s hidden message. We soldier on!”

And so, I pulled myself back from the brink of despair and dived back into the game. Truly, this is the labor that love hath wrought.

: o-okay...

: is she really gonna be okay?

: nobody that's "all right" chooses to be in Live-On

: StroZero's word is bond!

: let's keep on truckin!

This time, StroZero, show Kyun-chan what live streaming is all about!

“Hm? Wait. Unless... Don’t tell me you’re afraid that I’ll be jealous, so you’re holding back for my sake, StroZero-chan? Heh heh. In that case, there’s no need for you to worry. I love you, StroZero, because you work so hard for everyone’s sake—equitably, and without bias. You have my blessing. Do for Kyun-chan what you have done for me. But if my words won’t convince you, then perhaps *this* will.”

I picked up the can of StroZero from its coaster, brought it to my lips, and gave it a gentle smooch. But the taste of the aluminum was intoxicating, drawing my lips irresistibly to the pull tab.

SMOOCH

SLURP

SLLLUURP SLLORP SLORP SLORP SLORP

: ay yo chill, chill, chill, chill!

: the sheer passion

: You're gonna get banned! You're gonna get banned for frenching a StroZero can!

: are you training for the Weird Ways to Get Banned Olympics or what?

: how indecent!

Alice Soma: blessyoublessyoublessyou. I thank the lord and pray for times like these BUT AT THE SAME TIME IT SHOULD'VE BEEN ME, NOT HIM! AAAAAABABABABABA ¥50,000

: I thank god every day for Alice-chan (crying)

: I'm sorry, ma'am, the brain rot is terminal

: in case you were wondering, no, the onyomi reading of seiso is not StroZero

The game progressed from there.

“Okay, this is it! Go get ’em, StroZero-chan! ...Oh, not yet? Okay, that’s fine. I’ll wait for you, no matter how long it takes!”

And it progressed...into one of the playthroughs of all time.

“Here! We’re halfway through the month. Perfect timing, right, StroZero-chan?! Still no?! Why?!?!?!”

I’d been so confident, so carefree when I’d kissed the can, I could have never imagined that this would be the outcome.

“This is day thirty, StroZero-chan! Please! It’s literally now or never! Please... Please! If it’s some miraculous comeback you have up your sleeve, now is the time!”

But StroZero-chan—my beloved StroZero-chan—never so much as raised a finger.

[The end. Kyun-chan has 20,000 followers. She gives up on becoming a full-time streamer and pursues it as a hobby in her spare time.]

“A...”

asdf

“Aa...”

asdfghjkl

“AaaaaAAAAAAAAA!!!”

asdfghjkl;’afwoeiajf-weifiuhaiphfaiuwefhbbb;iooirititiittiittiittii-
ajajajajajaajaajaja “BA-GYAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!!”

: L o o o o o l

: and there's the nervous breakdown

: hahaha emotions are running high today huh

: there, there

: and off the brink she goes

: can't blame her. to shuwa-chan this is like her world
turning upside down

: and StroZero is down for the count

“Excuse me as I take a dump right here on stream.”

: ?!?!?

: WHAT

: WAIT WAIT WAIT WAIT

: NOW WTF IS HAPPENING?

: TIME OUT, TIME OUT!!!

“Don’t even think about stopping me! StroZero-chan must have fallen out of
love with me on account of me having been far too seiso lately! I’ve already
played the barf card, so I’m left with no other option! To reclaim her favor, I
must take a shit right here, right now!!!”

: I can say with utmost confidence that is not the case

so sit back down

: Yeah! you're not seiso, Awayuki, don't worry!

: shit, dont shit, it wont change who you are

: you're putting yourself down too much for your infirmity

: there's an obstruction on the tracks of your train of thought and it's SHIT

“Chat, you’re”—I sighed—“not helping, I wanted to say, but your usual bullshittery is calming somehow. Forget it. No more shitting.”

: you're welcome

: phew. you were this close to adding an additional chapter into the black annals of your history

: we were on the verge of greatness—this close to seeing a woman defecate on stream to reconcile with an alcoholic beverage ¥211

: don't throw me away! (PLOP PLOP PLOP PLOP PLOP)

: can we leave the toilet behind us already

“Right. Sorry. I let my panic get the better of me and I said something I shouldn’t have. My apologies...”

Tsk. But still—why was StroZero-chan acting this way? There *must* be something more to it! Forget that. I still had time left in my stream!

“Okay. Last playthrough! This time I’m gonna get a million followers or die trying!”

First, I needed a new strategy; what I’d been trying so far hadn't been working. Virality. What was the key to virality? Quirkiness? Yes, quirkiness! If I could just give Kyun-chan a quality of her own...

And thus, I wrote down the first thing that came to mind.

Name: Papyrus the third (but likes to be called the second!)

Occupation: Maid at a maid café

Specialty dish: Beef stroganoff

Catchphrase: Made in Papyrus!

Aspirations: Papyrusize all of humanity! Or maybe FIRE

In a Nutshell: On omurice, I write 'the fourth.'

Okay, no. I mean, not completely unviable, but no. It's good to have a cohesive theme, but I wanted to hook potential viewers, not send them fleeing. But hey, maybe I should give Hareru-senpai a call, see if management wanted to use this as a character bio for their next gen. It was more than a little weird that I'd managed to come up with a perfect Live-On character off the cuff like that, but I supposed that was just how my brain worked now. *Crap, maybe this is why I've been failing miserably? It's all Live-On upstairs?*

"What should my next strategy be...?"

: I think you just needed a bit more StroZero. Shuwa-shuwa again, just a little harder this time!

: maybe be a bit more judicious about the right timing to use StroZero, that might help!

: StroZero changes a negative to a positive. use it when Kyun-chan is at her lowest!

: In academic circles, the prevailing theory is that StroZero has an effect equivalent to multiplying an object by -196, meaning that the object itself must be negative in order for it to become positive

: The concept of zero is defined as the value that

entirely neutralizes the negation effect of StroZero.
Famously, this fundamental axiom gave birth to the entirety
of mathematics. The reason we call 0 zero also originates
from StroZero. ¥2,200

: oh jeez which universe am I in?

The chat burned bright with revenge, spitting out strong arguments one after
the other, but...

“Mmm... I really hate to say it, but I think we do the last playthrough
StroZero-less.”

As expected, the chat erupted in protest. But I needed to at least say my
piece.

“You know, no matter what you think of me, I really don’t take being Kyun-
chan’s manager lightly. She placed her trust in me, handed me this role with an
open heart, and shared her dreams with me—I don’t know if you know this, but
that takes some serious courage. I owe it to her to give my absolute best. After
two unsuccessful attempts with StroZero, a third failure would be reckless. Not
just reckless, but also disrespectful to her efforts and dreams. So this time, I
want us to approach this journey as a true united front, two individuals with
one shared vision. I’m committed to understanding her aspirations, to
discovering what she truly wants, and to supporting her every step of the way!”

: well said... well said!

: oh, they grow up so fast (proud dad crying in the
audience)

: help, i've fallen for you and i cant get up

: the strongest(Zero) ikemen in the entire world!

: this is the Shuwa-chan we love!

Heh heh... New leaf status: turned. Let's launch this rocket!

And so, Kyun-chan and I ventured out on our last great journey, my hand in hers and hers in mine. When it came time to select a stream topic, I talked with her to understand what she wanted to do before making any suggestions.

“Let’s see how that goes. Kyun-chan at least *seemed* super excited.”

[The stream was a glowing success! As a result, follower count has grown substantially.]

“Let’s go!!! Nice going, Kyun-chan! Woop, woop, woop, woop!”

From there, I guided her through a proper playthrough, ensuring she took breaks when needed and supporting her when she felt low—basically, everything a manager should do for their key streamer. Throughout this process, a growing suspicion burgeoned within me, turning into a solid conviction as the game’s end screen played:

[Best ending reached! Kyun-chan achieved her goal of one million followers!]

As the image of Kyun-chan hugging me faded to black, the end credits began to roll.

: ONE MILLION FOLLOWERS WE DID IT

: CONGRATSSSSS

: ¥8,888

: nice!

: you cleared it yayyy

Yep, I’d cleared the game. Cleared it like nobody’s business. The chat was awash with cheers of congratulations and breaths of relief. But I turned a blind eye to it all. I let my gaze drift to the ceiling, letting out an exasperated sigh as

thoughts of *her* filled my brain. “I see. So this is what you meant.” I let out a wry chuckle. “StroZero-chan, I just can’t seem to beat you, can I?”

: hm?

: wha?

: still can't drop it, huh?

: StroZero never made an appearance this playthrough tho

: where did that come from lol

“Still haven’t figured it out, have ya, chat? Tsk, tsk, tsk. You see, StroZero-chan was trying to teach me all about what it means to be a manager.”

That thing I’d said earlier, about how there must’ve been something to StroZero-chan abandoning me for two consecutive playthroughs? The answer was now as clear as day to me—she was trying to teach me a lesson.

“In this game, I play the role of the manager. Managing talent isn’t about imposing your own ideas, nor is it about letting them do whatever they want without any guidance. Both extremes hinder success. True management is about the relationship between the manager and the talent. Think of it like a three-legged race. What’s most important in a three-legged race? Trust. Your relationship is built on trust. I didn’t grasp that at first. I thought I knew it all and forced Kyun-chan to follow my lead. That’s why StroZero-chan stepped in. She didn’t lose—she intentionally let me fail so I could learn this lesson myself.”

StroZero-chan had played the long con, and in the end, it had all paid off. And what a beautiful, *beautiful* con it had been.

“StroZero-chan, I apologize. I was stupid. I couldn’t see what was right in front of me. But you have shown me the way. And for that, allow me to say this...”

Now, everyone, raise your can of StroZero high into the sky, and yell at the top of your lungs!

“Bottoms up to rock bottom!”

: aiiight imma head out

: when i'm in a "try not to rationalize everything away in terms of StroZero" competition and my opponent is Awayuki Kokorone

: SIIIIIIIGH

: is this actually a PSA stream designed to show us the dangers of brainwashing?

: oh good, i was thinking it'd been a while since Awayuki made me doubt her mental soundness

“Oh! You know what? I’m going to call my manager right now and tell her how grateful I am for her. Hopefully she was watching...” I rang Suzuki-san, and she picked up in a single ring. “Oh, hello, Suzuki-san? You were watching my stream, weren’t you! Then that’ll make this short and sweet. Thank you, Suzuki-san, for alwaaaays— Sorry, what? You said you’d never thought you’d hear the words ‘make a football team with me’ come out of my mouth? No, no, no, you see, that was just... Sorry. No, sorry! I’m... I’m sorryyyyyy!!!”

I love my manager. She’s cool, collected, and sometimes even a bit of a ballbuster.

Idle Talk: The Nick in the Dagger

Two evenings after the Valentine's Day project, at the Dagger household, the woman of the house gazed upon the aluminum can reigning supreme in the center of the fridge. Although not much had changed physically for Dagger since the previous night, mentally, the situation was entirely different.

"Mmm..." Dagger grumbled. "What should I do...?"

Ever since she'd realized the can was a gift from Awayuki, Dagger had found herself drifting back to this spot. She'd come to the fridge, open the door, grin at the can, then leave, only to find herself back in front of the fridge a few minutes later. *Poor fridge*, you might think, and you'd be right.

With each successive return to the refrigerator, the grin began to fall off Dagger's face, pulling it more and more into her current frown. Now she sat quietly in front of the StroZero can, periodically moaning and grumbling.

The reason for this change was a single question at the forefront of her mind: "When should I drink this...?"

The more she stared at it, the more the can appeared almost sacred to her. And the more sacred it appeared, the more she didn't know what to do with it.

"Should I just keep it like this? But Master gave me this to drink, plus I really do want to try it..."

If we were to set aside the fact that it was a present from Awayuki, the can would be indistinguishable from the legion of other canned chuhais available at the nearby convenience store for the price of a piece of hot fried chicken. But that was the essence of it, wasn't it? The significance for Dagger didn't lie in the price or the object itself; it was the fact that it was a gift from someone she had always looked up to, making it an irreplaceable treasure.

If only this treasure weren't intended for consumption. Despite its ostensibly long shelf life, the can of StroZero would go bad one day. So wouldn't the best way to honor Awayuki's gift be to drink it while it was still as fresh as could be?

It was a present, after all—a present meant to be enjoyed, not kept.

Dagger mulled it over, and over, and over again, when finally, she arrived at the following conclusion: “I know! I can ask my senpais for advice!”

She had thought of asking her two genmates first, but as they had been the primary victims of her constant StroZero gloating, she thought she’d spare them just this once. Her senpais, though—surely they had nothing better to do. Dagger was the best communicator in all of gen five, so a casual conversation with her seniors was but a chat message away.

First, she chose the person she believed could best relate to her current predicament.

†Dagger†: Hey Alice-senpai, Master gave me a can of StroZero. What do you think I should do with it?

Alice Soma: One second, let me double-check the total amount of assets to my name.

†Dagger†: I'm not selling it no matter how much you offer me!

Alice Soma: You suck! At least tell me how you did it!

†Dagger†: She gave it to me to cheer me up after my poor performance at the valentine's thing!

Alice Soma: I see! StroZero from heaven, then.

†Dagger†: I think you mean pennies from heaven but... no I guess that does work

Alice Soma: So you're saying if I make dodgy valentine's chocolate for Awayuki-dono, I can get a can as well???

†Dagger†: I don't think you should make awful food on purpose...

Alice Soma: Who said anything about that? There's no way I'd feed my beloved anything but the best!

†Dagger†: Then how are you planning on making it dodgy? the shape?

Alice Soma: I'll slip a marriage registration form into the packaging, signed and all!

†Dagger†: You hardcore valentine's day enjoyers scare me...

Alice Soma: No problem. But since you were so kind as to answer my question, I'll answer yours as well! I think you're free to use your StroCan in any way you wish, provided you are truly grateful for Awayuki-dono's gift. It's not about how you use it; it's about acknowledging your gratitude!

†Dagger†: I see...

Thanks to her senpai Alice's (somewhat roundabout) advice, Dagger had the general direction of where to go. But now a new question tugged at her brain cells: "But how *do* I wish to use it?"

Dagger once again fell into thought. She decided to ask someone else for more advice. After bidding farewell to Alice, she hit up second gen's very own Shion Kaminari.

†Dagger†: Shion-senpai, Shion-senpai! Master gave me a can of StroZero. What do you think I should do with it?

Shion Kaminari: oh, you wanna do baby bottle play with StroZero? Come to mama's tomorrow, I'm free~

†Dagger†: No, that's not what I meant...

Shion Kaminari: Really? But your master has done it.

†Dagger†: ?! now that you mention it, she has! goo goo ga ga-ing and all!

Shion Kaminari: Then it's decided! omg I cant wait! I'm

so excited, the contractions have already started!

†Dagger†: what

Thanks to Shion's sheer, unbridled insanity, Dagger was able to come to her senses.

†Dagger†: I... I think I'll pass on the bottle thing, actually! I don't think that'll fit my cool image, you know?

Shion Kaminari: Aw. But when I said contractions, I meant yours.

†Dagger†: Please no.

As it turned out, Dagger was not ready to gaze into the abyss that was Shion Kaminari.

Shion Kaminari: Oh well. So you were asking about a can of StroZero? How did you come across it?

†Dagger†: Master gave it to me to cheer me up!

Shion Kaminari: I see. In that case, do you feel cheered up?

†Dagger†: Of course! Just the thought that she cared enough about me to give me something cheered me straight up!

Shion Kaminari: I see, I see. Then I think you can drink it, stare at it, bathe with it, suck it out of a bottle, do whatever!

†Dagger†: Really?

Shion Kaminari: Awayuki-chan gave it to you to cheer you up. Now you're cheered up! The purpose of the gift has been

fulfilled, so now it's totally up to you what you want to do with it! And just between you and me, I think Awayuki-chan didn't give you something so special just to see you brood and mull over it.

†Dagger†: you're right...

Hidden deep within that insanity somewhere was a nugget of divine knowledge, and Dagger had uncovered it. *Do what you want to do with it.* Taking this piece of advice to heart, Dagger thanked Shion and then closed her eyes to think. Alice and Shion. Both had offered their own half of the puzzle. Combining their insights, Dagger arrived at her final conclusion: “Okay! For now, I’ll just admire it and treasure it. Then I’ll brag about it to all my friends and colleagues. And when the time is right, I’ll finally drink it!”

By staying true to herself, Dagger's conclusion was unmistakably her own. With her mind clear, she put down her phone and gazed wistfully up at the ceiling. “I sure do work with some incredible senpais,” she whispered into the room. “They’re not only helpful to a newbie like me, but also slip into their act so easily off stream; it’s like second nature.”

Her gaze drifted away from the fridge to the rest of her house. “I’m sure that goes for Tadasu-chan and Sensei too—the ‘being able to improv’ part, at least. Live-On really is amazing.” A cloud of doubt began to gather over her heart once more. “Me, on the other hand...”

The truth was, Dagger had a complex, one she hadn’t revealed even to her genmates: “Take my amnesia away from me, and what am I?”

Tadasu-chan had her repressed sexuality, Churiri her objective love—two major quirks that left Dagger feeling entirely inadequate. She believed she was different from her two genmates because, unlike them, she had tried out for Live-On purely out of her love for it. To that end, she’d given it all she had, faked amnesia, and managed to get accepted. When she debuted, she was beside herself with happiness, finally interacting with the individuals she’d looked up to for so long. But as the initial high wore off and the daily grind of being a streamer settled in, the worry crept in that she wasn’t worthy of the

world she admired.

Make no mistake, Dagger was putting in the work. But she couldn't shake the fear that if she were to lose her amnesia—the lie that had landed her this role—she'd be exposed as someone without anything special to offer Live-On.

Dagger wasn't particularly shrewd. In fact, she was rather airheaded. There was no greater testament to this airheadedness than the fact that it took all of her mental capacity and then some just to keep up her chuunibyou act, leading her to say things that sometimes cast doubt on her supposed amnesia. She was beyond thankful to her chat, who more than willingly overlooked her slipups because they found them cute. But even that, Dagger reasoned, was due to her act, not any intrinsic quality of herself.

All that was to say that Dagger believed herself an imposter; that without her lie, she was nothing.

"No, no," she said, shaking her head fervently. "I don't have the time to wallow! I have to work hard—to earn my place here!"

There were, however, several things that Dagger was mistaken about.

First, that it was as easy to get into Live-On as simply faking amnesia.

Second, that there was something wrong with wanting to do something simply because you love it.

And lastly, that the gift she'd received from Awayuki was anything but a can of StroZero.

Chapter Two

The Stream-Watching Stream

“Good evening, everyone. It looks like another nice, light snow is falling tonight. It’s Awayuki Kokorone.”

A seiso stream seiso begins with a seiso introduction. On this day, this liver-resting day, Awa-chan had come out to play.

But that day of days wasn’t all there was to my temporary bout of abstinence, no—for there was an even greater reason: “Sorry to drag the mood down so quickly, everyone, but the truth is...I am tired.”

Indeed, I was in a biological state of torpor, the result of pushing myself too hard. Simply put, I was beat.

“The Valentine’s event pushed me out of my comfort zone, and it took a lot out of me. I slept last night, but when I woke up today, I felt even worse than before, to the point where my body balked at the idea of getting out of bed.”

: u ok?

: don't force yourself now...

: Kyun-chan really did take a toll on you last night, didn't she?

: you sure you're not just tired because you drank and yelled too much?

: I almost fell for it...

: this girl stinks! She stinks worse than vomit!

: calm down speedwagon. that's just how Awayuki-chan smells

: I feel like that's worse somehow

“So today, we’re just gonna relax and unwind by watching a few of our favorite streamers! No official collabs, just enjoying Live-On as a fellow viewer. You know the drill, we’ve done this before.”

Ignoring my unruly chat, I jumped straight into the day’s plan before lifting my arms skyward for a nice, big stretch. “Mmmph! You all seem to have a lot to say, but the fact of the matter is, I *am* tired. A lot happened yesterday, after all. I thought about taking the day off, but I figured if I’d be lying around watching streams anyway, might as well do it on stream myself! If I don’t feel any better tomorrow, I might take an actual day off. Thanks for understanding!”

: OK!

: take it easy today, chief

: you work hard. For what end, we won't say.

: hard work is hard work, no matter how stupid the work is

: kinda sounds like something a comedian out of material would say

If I could give one piece of advice to a budding streamer, it would be to acknowledge your own limits if you want to achieve any kind of longevity in the scene. The viewers are everything in this industry. As the episode with Hikari-chan and her throat showed, streamers constantly feel this pressing need to present their best selves to their audience—the version everyone came to see. But, I ask, is that really what the viewers want? I can only speak for myself, but what I want to see from my favorite streamers is that they are happy and thriving. I don’t want to see them put on a strong face and suffer through pain. I would even want them to show that pain, that weak side, from time to time. Because when they do, it feels like they trust me enough to be vulnerable, and that makes me happy. It brings the oshi and the osh-er closer!

I'm not saying anyone should do anything they're uncomfortable with, just that there's nothing wrong with putting the mask down once in a while. Sustainability begins with a healthy streamer-viewer relationship, and a healthy relationship starts with the ability to communicate openly! Neither party wants to see the other hurt by something that could have been easily prevented.

"Same as last time, all streamers I could possibly visit today have given me permission to tune in. No real idea of who I'm going to hit up yet. The homing pigeons will carry my messages to them, but it'll be up to the individual streamer whether to accept it or not. Don't want to be a nuisance, you know?"

: yep yep

: very important

: the thought of Awayuki-chan as just another viewer is making me giggle

: the true Live-On Official Fan Account

: strong aura

Heh heh heh. Now, with all those pesky disclaimers out of the way, it was time to watch. Finally, I'd get to observe and absorb the Live-On energy I usually emitted. Not to mention, this was a fine chance to catch a stream I normally wouldn't be able to due to conflicting schedules! *Let's go!*

"Then without further ado, let's get to watching! Who's up first? Let's see, let's see... Ooh, Alice-chan's streaming—by herself, it seems. You know, I've always been curious what she gets up to when she's not harassing me."

I couldn't help but feel a tinge of wariness. I knew Alice-chan was a good girl at heart, but the reminder of her usual antics scared me.

"The title of her stream is... 'Look Behind You.' Okay, well, that's disconcerting. Is she playing a horror game? Or a stealth game, maybe? Oh, she just started streaming a few minutes ago."

Maybe this was just my self-consciousness speaking, but I figured my

presence would be a bit of a bother to Alice-chan. If she was playing a game, however, then she'd probably be too occupied to care about me. And the thought of her actually enjoying a video game did intrigue me. Feeling optimistic, I accepted the challenge.

"Okay! I've made up my mind! Let's go watch Alice-chan! Who knows. Even if she's up to her usual antics, maybe I'll be able to enjoy them and laugh along as a fellow viewer! Pardon me, comin' through!"

I clicked open Alice-chan's stream.

"I've been expecting you, Awayuki-dono."

"Aaaaand of course you've been watching me this entire time."

Did you hear that? That was the sound of my plans crumbling before me.

: ?!?!

: how'd she know???

: she's doing the same thing as Awa-chan LMAO

: hoh that scared me

: the stream title makes sense now

: should we call this an ambush stream?

: peeping at each other's streams, what do we have here?

: a modern interpretation of Tanizaki's The Key, perhaps?

: a modern misinterpretation, more like

: hark! I see Awayuki-dono, but hear Shuwa-chan!

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Supporting my oshi," Alice-chan replied.

"Uh-huh... I'm asking why you have my stream open."

"Were you surprised?"

“I’ll say. That was a *Doki Doki Literature Club*-level jumpscare.”

“*More like Schlicky Schlicky Handicrafts Club, am I right? Ha, ha, ha, haaa!*”

“How is that ‘more like’ in any way?”

Ack. I was falling for her juvenile provocations again. That wasn’t what I wanted to say.

“Alice-chan, what are we doing here? Why are we using YouTube’s precious bandwidth like it’s our own personal video call? Do you enjoy this? Do you enjoy acting like a pair of lovesick teenagers?”

“*Gasp! Is this... Is this a confession? I humbly accept, hereby granting you full control over my life and death!*”

“I humbly decline, hereby granting you a restraining order instead.”

“*But why? Believe it or not, I rake in the big bucks. I can provide for both of us; you won’t have to lift a finger for the rest of your life.*”

“You’re gonna say that? You’re gonna say that in front of all the people that give you this money? You better shout it loud and proud in front of Shibuya Station, because that’s what it’s like right now with the viewer count.”

“*How romantic! I’ve seen this soap opera before! Starring Kazumasa Oda, right?*”

“Not sure how offering to let me mooch off of you for life is romantic in any way. And if it’s Oda-san you want to talk about, then sing ‘Kotoba ni Dekinai.’”

“*Oh, but there’s no problem! My viewers are fully in on the game plan. They support me knowing full well all of it is going to you by proxy.*”

“I have a problem with that, Alice-chan! Just so you know, I track the full amount of supers you’ve ever given me, and you’ll be getting that money back in full someday.”

“*Hmm... I can’t have that... As a fan, there is no greater shame than my oshi rejecting my funds. Oh! How about this? When the time comes, you can just give me the underwear you’re currently wearing and we’ll call it even!*”

“Ew, no. No underwear brand in the world makes a single pair of underwear

worth that much.”

“Not even your Hermès line of luxury underwear?”

“Doesn’t exist.”

: It's like spectating a tennis match. except Awa-chan is trying to dodge every single ball without returning it.

: pure music to my ears

: the vibes are right

: what was that about no collabs?

: dying at the fact that Alice-chan's channel is actually just Awayuki-chan's second channel

: Awayuki-chan pays her sugar daddy in used panties

“Awayuki-dono, let us change the subject. I attempted to warn you through my stream title, but you still forged ahead like some doe-eyed maiden. If the individual behind you hadn’t been me, you would already be pregnant by now.”

“I don’t know, having someone who has such terrifying trains of thought behind me might actually be worse.”

“You should be kinder to yourself. When tired, consider getting a massage or even Seitai therapy.”

“Why couldn’t you have just said that? That was perfectly sound advice.”

“Welcome to Alice-dono’s massage parlor. My, you have quite a bit of fluid retention in this area. Let’s work those knots and get that StroZero flowing, shall we?”

“I’m hanging up.”

“Awayuki-dono! Your line was supposed to be, ‘Wait... Is this really a massage?’”

“Yeah, yeah, we know you like massage parodies. But if my lymph nodes contained StroZero, I’d be dead.”

"I was talking about your stomach and liver."

"That is... Okay, at least that makes sense."

"I'll be loosening you up from the inside now, okay?"

"Not okay! What is this now, a psycho-horror-massage porn?!"

"That's not a genre, Awayuki-dono."

"What is this ping-ponging between serious and gag replies?! My poor brain... I no longer know why I even came here in the first place..."

Seriously... Why am I subjecting myself to this conversation? Wasn't the plan to quietly do a bit of stream watching...? Why am I now one half of an avant-garde comedy act?

"My apologies, Awayuki-dono. The truth is, I didn't think I would be picked first, and as a result, I got a little carried away. I don't wish to interfere with the rest of your stream—please, go ahead and watch somebody else."

"Oh. Really? I thought we were about to go ahead and make the impromptu collab official."

"No, no. That would be getting in the way of my oshi's wishes. And in the spirit of total honesty, this interaction wasn't what I wanted in the first place."

"Huh. You mean to say you weren't just going to wait here until I clicked on your stream?"

"Not at all. I planned on silently watching as you watched other people's streams."

"Wh-Why, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Let's just say that I didn't...hate the way you frenched the StroZero can the other day as I'd expected I might. So I'd intended on allowing my viewers to watch me watch you in frustration as you enjoyed the company of other streamers."

"NTR?! No! No NTR allowed, Alice-chan! Your character is colorful enough as is! You don't need this—trust me, you don't need this!"

"I can't do that, for I'm of the belief that I must stay true to myself. A-Ahem, in

other words, please go ahead and leave me for someone else, Awayuki-dono. It would be counterproductive if I were to add to your fatigue.”

“O-Okay, if you insist. Then let’s collab some other time, when I’m at a hundred percent.”

“Yes, ma’am! I’ll be ready and waiting!”

And with that, my first stream viewing—er, participating(?) came to an end.

“All right, it looked like the stream was gonna take a turn there for a second, but we’re back. Alice-chan’s previously undiscovered NTR tendencies were a...bit of a shock for me, I can’t lie. Maybe I’m just uncultured, but I just can’t understand how people are into that...”

: is that for better or for worse...

: the super she gave post-kiss *was* pretty concerning.

: suddenly, her fondness for mashiron makes sense

: color me concerned as well

: ignore it for now, it's only a budding tendency

“You’re right, no point wearing ourselves out over something that hasn’t happened yet. Okay. Now let’s see if some other streamers can give us a boost!”

Who to watch next? The best option was probably just to take a mulligan on that one and move on. As long as nobody called me out for having a dishonest stream title, that is. Anyways, I was done with challenges. Whomever’s stream I picked next would have to be someone who could be trusted to hold a conventional, uneventful stream.

“Ooh, Chami-chan is streaming! And from the title, it looks like she’s having an offline massage collab with Hikari-chan!”

A massage stream right after Alice-chan mentioned it? What a timely coincidence! Relaxing to the soothing sounds of a massage and enjoying some precious Chami-Hikari moments at the same time? Count me in! What could be

better for my tired, weary bones?

“That reminds me—Chami-chan mentioned she’s getting into different types of massage ASMR, not just ear massages. Maybe this is practice for her?”

The rhythmic sound of percussive shoulder tapping, the satisfying, deep pressure of a knot being expertly rolled out—just imagining these sensations was enough to make my body relax.

Hikari-chan and massages. The two words triggered a bitter(?) memory. But she was in good hands here, right? I wasn't there, Chami-chan wasn't me—Hikari-chan's "training" probably wouldn't be reinforced in any way.

“Enough waffling about! Let’s hurry up and enjoy some of the stream before it ends!” *CLICK*

The thought drifted into my mind: *The power of audio alone is quite incredible, if you think about it.*

[illegible]

“Aaaaaah! Harder, Chami-chan, harder! Step on Hikari like you mean it! Take your anger out on Hikari like you mean iiiiiiit!”

“All right. Well. I don’t know what I was expecting.”

Yep. I thought about it and the power of audio alone really is quite incredible.

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: what the hell going on in here
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: I thought we had the wrong stream for a second
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: safe to say we need to keep Hikari-chan away from
messages from now on

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: what did I just tune into
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: not in front of dummy head mic-chan!!!

“What the hell is going on with the ASMR scene these days?” Chami-chan shouted. “Adding ear licking this, ear licking that to everything like it’s standard issue! If you want to hear the sound of water that much, go take a long walk off a short pier!”

Hikari-chan squealed in pleasure.

“Hey, Hikari-chan, why do you think that is? Go on, take a guess.”

“Y-You tell me...”

“Because ear licking is the latest fad now, you stupid idiot!!!”

“Aaaaaah!” Another pained squeal. *“I’m sorry for being a stupid idiot!!!”*

“You know, I’ve really tried to keep it to myself, but I am done. I am so done! The ASMR scene needs to hear this! Ear licking is a genre of ASMR by itself, not an afterthought of a garnish you sprinkle onto everything just because you can. Yes, ear licking is painfully hot. But that is exactly why you give it the space it deserves! Just because garlic is delicious, does that mean you add it to every single goddamn dish? No! Are you stupid? Of course not! ASMR means ‘autonomous sensory meridian response,’ not ‘slobber over my ears all the goddamned time response’!”

Hikari-chan was panting for her life. *“Oh my God. I need more angry Chami-chan... More... More!”*

Now that I thought about it, “Chami-chan wasn’t me” probably wasn’t the reassurance I’d hoped it would be. With her being the way she was, I could see how my assumptions might have been naive.

But what to do about this...? For now, I guess I’ll continue watching, gather some more context.

“Um... Are there any wise people in the chat who know how this happened?”

: you

: it's because of you

: consider the implications if it weren't you

“Excuse me?! This is my fault? Explain how!”

And explain my chat did. Here, have a quick rundown of events as per them.

Chami-chan invites Hikari-chan to a massage stream.

Because of “the incident,” Hikari-chan has completely internalized that massage = pain. Chami-chan is Chami-chan, of course, and does not realize this.

Hikari-chan approaches the collab in high spirits, eager to get stepped on. When this doesn't happen and the massage turns out to be a normal one, she gets depressed.

Chami-chan wants to step on her to cheer her up, but just can't bring herself to do it.

Hikari-chan proposes the bright idea of having Chami-chan vent all her pent-up anger on her instead, and the first thing that came to mind was this ear-licking business, which brings us to the present.

“You know, I'm starting to think my influence has become so powerful that it's getting beyond my control. I'm like...a modern-day Ainz-sama.”

I was in a pickle. I really was. I'd taken every opportunity to deny my role as the instigator of Chami-chan's sexual awakening, but...even I was starting to not believe myself. The worst part was I couldn't tear my eyes (and ears) away from the stream! Chami-chan loved ear licking, didn't she? (So did I, by the way.) So why was she hating on it so much? But as I, a victim of my own morbid curiosity, listened on, her pain points concerning the industry quickly became clear: *“Nothing, I repeat, nothing turns me off harder than when the ear-licking situation is clearly just tacked-on or if it isn't in character for whoever's doing the licking. It just feels like they're being coerced into doing something they don't want to do and that is just... ICK. I'm trying to let the sound immerse me into the situation, but how can I do that when I'm constantly being reminded of the coercion or whatever is going on behind the scenes? I just want people to treat ASMR with the care and respect it deserves—tell me I'm not being too unreasonable, Hikari-chan?”*

“Hahhh... Hahhh... Ch-Chami-chan, you don’t like ear licking?”

“Hah? Do you know who you’re talking to? I am like the expert sommelier who’s been curating ear-licking works since way before it was cool to do so. I’m not being a hater, I’m not being jealous, I’m not being a contrarian. I’m just simply stating my opinion as is my right as a critic.”

“Chami-chan.”

“What is it?”

“Are you sure you’re not just a little burned out? You know, it’s like how the more you get into something, the more you get used to it, and in the end all your brain notices are the nitpicky bits that stand out?”

“...”

“...”

“You stupid...stupid...!”

“Ah! Ah. Aaaah! I’m not sure what I said to make you step on me but keep going, keep goingggg!”

“I want complete validation! No truths, only validate! Validate me like my army of viewers do! Validate me like my auditory legion of including but not limited to senpais, kouhais, classmates, big sisters, little sisters, elves, succubi, employees, proprietresses, demon lords, slimes, maids, gyarus, nuns (Catholic), shrine maidens, and elementary students!”

“Aaah! Even a degenerate Chami-chan is a cute Chami-chan. Step on me with those degenerate feet of yours!”

“Who are you calling a degenerate?!”

“Oh boy, is Chami-chan crying? Woof. Glad it’s not me dealing with her today.”

: Ahh~ My oshis are even more unbearably icky than usual today Ahh~

: but it should be you dealing with her, genmate.

: Wow, Chami-chan sure has a lot of friends!

: Chami-chan... I think I know why she is the way she is... Her chat and ASMR friends spoil her too much...

: ...elementary students?

Oh, Chami-chan. The more I get to know you, the more I don't know what to do with you.

"I just can't believe Chami-chan can act out like this and you all will *still* indulge her! Just how much do you all love pretty but airheaded older sister types? It's impure!"

: aren't you the one who changed so much they had to redo her concept art?

: I just can't believe Awa-chan can act out like this and she'll still proclaim herself seiso!

: **your seiso card, hand it over, Awa-chan. ¥220**

: says the one who's 100% pure impurities

: just because Chami-chan's not the greatest orator doesn't mean she can't seriously critique what she loves!

: and I can kinda get behind what she's saying

: (whispers) but it's hot...

"Hikari-chan, you made me angry. I won't forgive you unless you lick my ears right now."

"Hwa?"

Now just what was going on...?

"And that's not all. If you lick me, I'll step on you some more."

"Huh? But you just spent all that time complaining about ear licking."

“Were you even listening? I said it depends on the situation.”

“The situation? You suddenly want the girl you were stepping on to lick your ears? Is that kosher, situation-wise? And I don’t even think ear licking is in Hikari’s character...”

“Hikari-chan. I have a real woman I’m sexually attracted to who’s about to lick my ears right in front of me. Everything else automatically becomes secondary. I am unbelievably turned on at the possibility that I may get my ears licked for real for the first time.”

“Okay, even you Chami-chan oshi-ers have to call her out for this, right?”

: okay yeah there's hypocritical, then there's this lol

: what are we to do when the critic has succumbed to lust

: lust is the furthest emotion possible from rationality

: I respect her for being a true audio enthusiast in her solo streams

: (louder now) see, it's hot!

“Hurry up now, Hikari-chan.”

“Mmm...”

“What’s there to think about? If you lick my ears, I’ll degrade you even more!”

“It’s an attractive proposal, but... No! I can’t!”

“S-Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. Say that one more time?”

“I said no! I won’t do it, no matter what happens!”

“...Okay. Hikari-chan, spread ‘em.”

“M-My legs? What’s happening? No... Is this... Is this denki anma?!”

“You’ve been very naughty, Hikari-chan. This is your punishment.”

“N-No...! Eheh... Eheh heh! All according to plan...”

I continued to find my mind boggled at what was unfolding before me. Also,

was it just me, or did Hikari-chan whisper something real quiet at the end there?

“Hm? Oh my, it seems Awayuki-chan is watching us right now.”

“What?!”

“Aha! Perfect timing! Awayuki-chan! I was just about to teach this cheeky extrovert a lesson! Are you watching? Pay close attention now! Coochie coo! Coochie coochie coooooochie coo!”

“Aaah! ≡ Aaaaah!!! ≡”

“Aha ha ha ha! You see, Awayuki-chan? These extroverts who trample all over us introverts are now beneath my heel! Now, Hikari-chan, moan louder and show your master just how utterly pathetic you truly are!”

“Aaah! ≡ Mmmmph! ≡ Don’t... Don’t look! Hikari is too pathetic right now! Dooon’t! A-Aaahn! ≡ Mmmmmm! ≡ Ah! ≡ Master! Master, look at Hikari! Look at me with those cold, disdainful eyes!”



CLICK

I closed the stream.

But it was still too early to end my own. A quick browse later, I realized this was also when Sei-sama was usually on the prowl. I opened her stream.

“Come on, DirtyDice, baby needs a new pair of shoes... Show me that ochinchin... Show me that—ochinchin! YES. FUCK YES. OCHINCHIN, OCHINCHIN! CEE-LO? MORE LIKE SEE DEEZ NUTS GOT ’EEEEM.”

CLICK

I closed the stream. I exhaled a long breath. Then I smiled. “You know what? It’s time for bed.”

: yepppppp

: i have it on good authority sleep is the best way to rest

: Why?! (/kibaou) Hikari-chan's was perfectly lewd, wasn't it?

: but when you consider the degeneracy on display is all your fault...

: but when you consider that Alice-chan is watching this having the time of her life lol

: Awa-chan really getting tag teamed out here

: Awayuki-chan doesn't have enough holes...

: Sei-sama, behave.

Prior to this day, I’d never thought simply watching my cohorts’ streams would be something that had me reaching for the remote so quickly.

Though I had to say, the sleep I got after closing my own stream that night was fantastic and I couldn’t have felt more refreshed the next day.

Oh, but I get it now! My friends showed me that scene from hell as a roundabout way to encourage me to go to bed earlier! Thanks, everyone! You all always have my best interests in mind! Aha ha ha ha ha ha ha!

The Word Wolf Stream

Two days after my miserable failed attempt at a stream-watching stream, I felt great and was back at it again with another collab. I'd been really looking forward to this particular collab, and it wouldn't be too far-fetched of me to say I'd rested up just for the occasion!

"Welcome to the Word Wolf collaboration stream!!!" I shouted as the stream began, followed by a round of raucous applause from my fellow participants. "Let's kick things off with a cheers!"

"Ch-Cheers?! B-But I can't drink! What do I do...?" Tadasu-chan said.

"Oh, what's the big deal? Maybe I shall partake," Churiri-sensei said.

"Shuwa-chan, at least stick to the script for the introduction," Mashiron said. "Tadasu-chan, just ignore her. Sensei, please don't, because if we have two drunkards, the game isn't going to progress."

"A can of StroZero, an artist, a student, and an alien walk into a bar! What happens next? You decide!!!" I said.

: yay!!! *clap clap clap clap clap clap*

: Let's go!

: cheers!

: what a novel gathering of individuals

: where are the humans in this game of werewolf???
(StroZero on one hand, aliens on the other)

: wake up sheeple, Live-On is actually a huge reverse-werewolf death match where people (normal) are voted out and lynched and im the only one whos noticed

: ↑ this

“As the stream title clearly states, the four of us will be playing a few rounds of Word Wolf! Here’s a quick breakdown of the rules.”

The core rules mirrored classic Word Wolf:

Players who receive the same word (e.g., tennis) are villagers.

The player with a different word (e.g., ping-pong) is the werewolf.

No one knows what words the others have.

Players discuss their words within the time limit, in this case two minutes.

After the discussion, players vote to identify the werewolf. If the werewolf is voted out, villagers win; otherwise, the werewolf wins.

If voted out, the werewolf gets one guess at the villagers’ word to steal a win.

“We’ll be playing multiple rounds of course, the same rules each time. The most interesting part of this word-werewolf game is probably the fact that everybody, even the werewolf, starts off the game thinking they’re villagers, which makes the dynamic *very* different from *Amidst Us*! Lastly, a single house rule.”

A rotating GM role handles creating and distributing the prompts each round.

“There’s four of us, which means that in any given round, there will be three players and one GM. Oh, and players will obviously not be allowed to look at chat! That’s it for the rules!”

: roger dodger

: a village of village idiots

: villagers (revolting)

: the part about the GM creating prompts deserves a bigger asterisk

: a warning sign, even

: granting Live-On creative freedom? what could go wrong?

“All righty! Before we start, let’s check in with our players. I’m personally super excited to play! Seems like the perfect drinking game!”

“I’m pretty good at werewolf games,” Mashiron said. “I don’t think this one will be any different.”

“This is but another part of my effort to participate in as many Live-On events as I can to figure out their modus operandi. Players, prepare yourselves,” Tadasu-chan said.

“Human games bore me,” Churiri-sensei said. “Can I go home?”

“Are you sure you want to leave? After all that effort you put in coming up with a topic?” Tadasu-chan said, before shifting into a crude imitation of Churiri-sensei’s voice. ““Oh, Tadasu-san, what do I do? I don’t know what to do about my topics! Aaaah, but you’re also a player, so I can’t ask you, aaah!’ That was you, wasn’t it?”

“Oh?” Mashiron and I said teasingly.

Churiri-sensei exhaled sharply. “That wasn’t me.”

“It seems she would like to pretend that didn’t happen,” Tadasu-chan said.

“I bet she would,” Mashiron and I continued.

“Oh, I just... Grrr! Humans! This is why I can’t stand you lot!”

: my mushiking BL lady can't be this cute

: Is this cute nickname really what sensei has been reduced to?

: unrecognizable from her debut im dying

Everyone seems to be in it to win it! Then without further ado, let’s get started! Word Wolf...begin!

The first GM of the day was Tadasu-chan. She gave each of us our prompts via

DM. I received a single word: Piano.

“Has everyone received their prompts?” Tadasu-chan said. “Very good. You all have two minutes. The clock starts now!”

Tadasu promptly muted her mic, ready to enjoy the game from the sidelines. Personally, I was looking forward to her role more than being a player. Knowing the answers as you watched the clueless chaos unfold with your chat seemed like a much funnier prospect.

But okay. Piano, piano... Better talk about piano somehow. Talk about it in a way that can help me determine whether I'm in the majority with the villagers or in the minority as the werewolf.

Suppose I'll start with a harmless feeler question:

“It's nice, isn't it?”

“Yeah,” Mashiron said.

“Agreed,” Sensei said.

Their affirmations were quick—if they were lies, I would've expected a moment of hesitation. Okay, so everyone's prompt was at least viewed in a positive light.

“It's kinda like a really cool skill to have, no?” Mashiron asked, piggybacking off of my previous comment.

“Oh, yeah, totally!” I replied.

“I suppose so,” Sensei said.

“Have either of you dabbled in it before?” Mashiron followed up, emboldened by the string of positive responses.

Hmm... “Dabbled” and not “played,” eh? My Shuwa senses started to tingle. “Not really. Maybe like once? What about you, Sensei?”

“I actually have one—or something similar, at least,” she said.

“Really?! Nice question, me!” Mashiron said.

“Ho ho!” I added. Both of us smelled blood in the water.

“Wh-What? I can’t own one?” Sensei said.

“No, no, I didn’t mean it like that,” Mashiron said. “I think it’s super cool you own one. What do you use it for, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Um... I’m not really good at it—like at all. But I find it very fulfilling.”

“Fulfilling, you say?” Mashiron hummed inquisitively.

“Ho ho ho...” I added.

Mashiron and I were likely on the same page. Sensei didn’t seem like the type to own a piano. Though she’d tried to muddy the waters by adding “something similar,” from what I recalled, Sensei didn’t play anything in the way of instruments. Still, we were only working off a hunch. That bit about “fulfilling” was also vague enough to give her plausible deniability. But a hunch was better than nothing. Now to close off all remaining paths of escape through clever questioning.

“Tell us more, Sensei.” Mashiron pressed the attack. “You say ‘fulfilled,’ but how does it make you fulfilled? Which part of the act? What act are you referring to?”

“Oho. (´ ω `)”

“I’d rather hear more from the two of you!” Sensei said. “Awayuki-san, Mashiro-san, what do you think of it?”

“I’m not sure. After all, I’m not the person who owns one,” I said. “Though I’d love to get my hands on one if I could.”

“Ditto,” Mashiron said. “Now back to you, Sensei.”

“Oho ho ho ho ho. (* ´ ω ` *)”

“Ngh...”

Sensei was now full-blown panicking. Was this and her unwillingness to answer our questions a sign of her lycanthropic nature or what?

“I suppose I like it because of its versatility,” Sensei said. “Pure love, tainted love—it gives rise to all forms of love.”

“Is that so?” Mashiron said, humming inquisitively.

“Oh... Ohhh, fuuuuck! ':(: 變 : 〇 :) : ' : ”

“A-Awayuki-san?!” Sensei said.

“I came...”

“Y-You came?! How?!”

“Sorry, I meant you came.”

“I did not come! The prompt might be lewd but I did not come!”

“Oh? So the prompt is lewd, huh?”

“N-No! I mean...!”

Mashiron stifled a laugh. “Nice acting, Shuwa-chan.”

“Hahhh... Hahhh... The way you cornered Sensei with your words was so hot. Hahh...”

“You *were* acting, right?” I heard both of them say, before the call faded into silence.

A moment later, Tadasu-san’s voice cut in through the deafening quiet. “And that is time! No more talking! Send the name of the person you suspect to me, Miyauchi.”

“Yeah, my vote’s going to Shuwa-chan,” Mashiron said.

“Why?!” I said.

“Because you have the heart of a dog.”

“But I didn’t actually do anything! Yes, I admit, I got a little too excited to play a new werewolf game and got real close, but I stopped myself!”

“The fact that you got close is... But whatever. Because I value our relationship as genmates, I voted seriously.”

“I voted too!” I said.

“I just regret participating in this game,” Sensei said. Someone was clearly upset to see the writing on the wall.

“And the moment has arrived! Now, I shall tally the votes! The grand results are...” Tadasu-chan said in what I could only imagine was a way to drag out the

moment for as long as possible. “Two votes for Sensei, one vote for Shuwa-chan-senpai!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sensei snapped, much to the amusement of me and Mashiron.

The results did not come as a surprise to me, or anyone, for that matter. The one vote for me obviously came from Sensei. Now, all that was left was to debrief this round and move on to the next. All in all, it’d been a perfect, almost textbook round to kick things off. Really had to hand it to Tadasu-chan and her consummate professionalism.

“You received the most votes, Sensei. Why not reveal your prompt first?” Tadasu-chan said.

Sensei sighed. “Piano.”

“Huh?” I squeaked.

“What was that, Awayuki-san?”

Hm? Hm, hm, hm, hm?

“Which means this round goes to the werewolf: Mashiro-senpai!” Tadasu-chan declared.

“Wait. *I’m* the werewolf?”

Tadasu-chan’s refined, stifled laughter filled the silence. The rest of us gaped on in silence, at a loss for words. It took a moment for the shock to settle, but when it did...

“N-Now hold on just a gosh darn second!” I bellowed, my peaking microphone obliterating the silence. “Sensei had piano? *I* had piano!”

“I was the werewolf?” Mashiro said. “And I thought for sure we both had ‘guitar’...”

“So I still lost, just not in the way I expected,” Sensei said. “I thought for sure you two had the same prompt. Awayuki-san, how could you let the werewolf deceive you like that?”

“Don’t you freaking dare!” I would not let Sensei pin this one on me. “You have a freaking piano?!”

“I have a synthesizer, with a keyboard and all. It can sound like a piano if I want it to.”

“A synthesizer? More plausible but still not believable. You know how to play it?”

“Oh, no, no. I don’t play it. I use it to create love.”

“H-Huh?”

As my voice faded into a confused squeak, Sensei’s rose to an impassioned fever pitch. “A synthesizer is a generator of sound, whatever mishmash of wavelengths you want with effects layered on top. That daughter sound...is the offspring of their mother and father sounds, i.e., the fruits of their sonic love.”

“Mashiron. Translate.”

“Rawrrrr, I’m a wolf so I don’t understand! Rawrrr!”

“Huh? You trying to piss me off, woman?”

“I’m gonna cry. Can I cry? Do you know how embarrassing that was for me? I’m trying my best over here to fulfill your unreasonableness!”

“Fine. Have it your way and I’ll have mine. I hope you like my basement, because that’ll be your home for the rest of your life.”

“Never mind. Get angry, I don’t care. Just no basement please.”

“Listen to me!” Sensei roared, rudely interrupting our conversation. “Since we’re on the topic, I’ll lay it out in terms of music. That’ll surely be easier to understand, right? On a piano, you have ‘do,’ right? ‘Mi,’ right? ‘So,’ right? Lovely sounds by themselves, but when pressed in unison, form an even lovelier chord. That, in essence, is conception.”

“Mashiron. Translate.”

“I refuse, citing a credible threat to my bodily person.”

“Just listen,” Sensei said. “I’ll anthropomorphize it for you, even though I really shouldn’t have to. Imagine there’s a boy named Do. He meets a girl named Mi. They live a life called So, resulting in the birth of their child: C major. Now, it’s a major chord, meaning the story is a happy one. If it were a minor

chord, then their story would be a heart-wrenching yet poignant tragedy. But if there was a mistaken key press, creating dissonance, it would result in a bad ending, leaving a sour taste in everyone's mouths. How's that? Better?"

"Should I call up Chami-chan?"

"Better not. This isn't her field of expertise. The situation is only liable to spiral more out of control."

"I give up. Just what does it take to get through that thick human skull, I wonder?" Sensei grouched.

Call me crazy, but I feel like Mashiron and I should be the ones reacting with such utter disbelief. Though: "On a serious note, I think I understand? On a theoretical level, at least."

"Yeah, I guess," Mashiron said. "'Versatility,' indeed."

"You do?! Oh, I'm glad! Then we're on the right track. Music! Let's talk about music. Who doesn't like music? Music is like a blazing star, under which flourishes a verdant little realm. Within this cosmos, all the cute little notes dance and play, creating love, weaving stories—it is an entire, intangible universe unfolding right under our very noses!"

"We're gone so far off track that we're back on track. Sensei, you almost sound like a musical savant," I said.

"A musical savant who can't play an instrument," Mashiron added.

Well, I was all but convinced and ready to move on to the next round when Mashiron hit Sensei with a follow-up question: "Oh, but you said the prompt was lewd? How?"

"The hammers hit the strings, creating sound—dynamic sound—over and over again! What is a piano but a veritable baby factory?!"

"Yeesh," Mashiron and I both uttered. *You just had to ask, didn't you, Mashiron?*

GM Tadasu-chan seemed poised to end the round here. "Let's wrap up the discussion," she said with an amused chuckle. "An interesting game, isn't it?"

"Interesting's one way to put it," I said. "Who knew I'd have to put so much

effort into reading my fellow villagers too?”

“Yeah, well, this is Live-On Word Wolf. Should’ve known the stakes would be different. I won, but somehow still feel like I lost,” Mashiron said.

“What, so I’m supposed to change myself and how I think just to make it easier for you three? I think not!” Sensei said.

: gg! ¥5,000

: not villagers getting tricked by villagers lmao

: I wouldn't have live-on any other way

: Mashiron is too soothing

: Shuwa-chan came too huh? unexpected

: don't let sensei's antics distract you from the fact that Shuwa-chan said and did some crazy shit too

And with that, round one drew to a close. And with a new round came a new GM: Mashiron. And with a new GM came a new prompt: [StroZero]

She set me up, that woman. Before I knew it, I’d already shouted out at the top of my lungs: “Oh, me, me! This is me!” It was almost like a reflexive response. It made me happy to know I had it, but I also cursed its existence. I felt it coming—the trap set up by Mashiron, the completely different prompts she’d given the other two, the total shellacking I was about to receive...

“Indeed, it is,” Tadasu-chan said.

“Mm-hmm. Like two peas in a pod,” Sensei said.

What? I thought, a little alarmed before confidence welled up within me, my love for StroZero gushing forth: “Right?! We’re like lovers!”

“L-Lovers?” Tadasu-chan said. “I’d always suspected, but so it is...”

“...Oh. Uh-huh! Yep, yep! You and her, lovers, yep!” Sensei said.

What happened next had nothing to do with Word Wolf. I went off on a tangent expounding my StroZero love.

“It’s love, pure and simple. Even now, when our bodies intertwine, I feel the same connection as I did the first time.”

“In...intertwine?” Tadasu-chan said before turning into a blubbering mess.

“Keep going! Expose the werewolf with the power of your love!” Sensei said.

The more I ejaculated love, the more it surged back into my heart. It was all made clear to me that day: why I had been born as a woman.

“I promise to love you, to comfort you, honor and keep you, both in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, as long as I shall live! Take me to be your wife!”

Tadasu-chan squealed. “She proposed! She actually proposed! And how romantically as well! Every girl’s dream!”

“I did not think this would be the way I found out you had such a penchant for shojo tropes...” Sensei said.

I still had so much more left to say, but alas, time was not on my side. Mashiron cut in with a sharp, “And that’s time!”

Just like last round, we had to vote for who we thought the werewolf was, but... “Huh? I felt like we were all on the same page there.” Both Tadasu-chan and Sensei had seemed perfectly amenable to what I’d been saying, so... *Who do I vote for?*

“My vote’s in,” Tadasu-chan said.

“Same,” Sensei added.

“What?!” *Apparently I’m the odd one out here?!* Panicking now, I voted for Tadasu-chan because screw her. No, but seriously, because she’d seemed more flustered than Sensei had been.

“The results are in!” Mashiron announced. “One vote for Tadasu-chan. Two for Shuwa-chan!”

“Aeugh?”

“You’ve been lynched, Shuwa-chan. Why don’t you tell everyone what your prompt was?”

Finally, the reality of my situation sank in. “Wait, what?! Why me?! How?!”

“Now, now, just relax and tell everyone your prompt,” Mashiron said.

“Um... It was StroZero.”

Tadasu-chan sighed. “Just as I thought.”

“I enjoyed it for a bit but now I’m just annoyed,” Sensei said.

Tadasu-chan’s reaction to the big reveal was muted, while Sensei’s, on the other hand, was vexed for some reason, but both pointed to the same conclusion: “Well done, villagers, you have successfully lynched the werewolf,” Mashiron said.

Yep, I’d been the werewolf. And a blatantly obvious one at that.

“But...*how?*” I said. “Nothing felt off at all...”

“Now, now,” Mashiron interrupted. “It’s too early to throw in the towel. You still have a chance to steal the win.”

“Oh, right! If I can guess their prompt!”

I’d almost forgotten that was a rule, since the last round didn’t end with a villager victory. If I could just guess the villagers’ prompt, I could still snatch victory from the jaws of defeat!

...

If I could just guess the villagers’ prompt!

But I couldn’t! I had no freaking idea! I’d been just blabbing on and on about StroZero and neither of them had had much of a chance to speak! I think! If they’d been talking, I sure as hell hadn’t been listening!

“Um, um... ‘Seiso’? I guess? Since neither of them objected when I said, ‘This was me’?”

Radio silence.

“Oookay.” *Fine. I’ll take the L.* “Are you going to tell me what the right answer is now?”

“It was me,” Mashiron said.

“Sorry?”

“It was me. The prompt I gave Tadasu-chan and Sensei was ‘Mashiro Irodori.’”

My mind went blank. In other words, this whole time, this *entire* time I’d been expounding on my love for StroZero, the other two thought I was talking about Mashiron? My mind flashed back to the very start of the round—back to when I’d suspected I’d fallen into a trap of Mashiron’s making—and I realized I’d been right.

“Ma-shi-ron! You set me up!”

“Hm? Whatever could you possibly mean?”

“You mixing business with pleasure now, huh?”

“I dunnooo. Nothing in the rules said I couldn’t~.”

“You... Tease me, will you? Is this payback for the rawr thing?”

“Well, you know. Maybe from the perspective of everyone else in the room, it might’ve sounded like you were confessing your love to me. Calling me your lover...proposing to me.” Her voice trailed off into a bashful giggle.

“H-Hey! Stop getting embarrassed by your own plan! If you can’t even keep it together, how am I supposed to...?” I could feel my cheeks heat. “Are we still doing this bit or not?!”

“Sorry, sorry. Ahem.” But she couldn’t keep it together, and another bashful giggle slipped out.

“M-Mashiron!” I yelled, now completely blushing myself.

“Gross,” Sensei said. “Almost as gross as the recent trend of YoTubers pretending like they’re poor.”

“Shush,” Tadasu-chan said. “Let them have their moment.”

: sasuga) mashi(ron)

: hahaha mashiron's rare otaku laugh never ceases to entertain

: submissive shuwa-chan is cute too

: what are they doing in front of their kouhais...

: isn't this just mashiron's way of asserting her territory in front of the newcomers?

: ganbare, gen 5 squad

This round, this...unexpectedly mortifying second round ended with my total defeat. Yeah, maybe it'd been my mistake. Yeah, maybe I hadn't noticed Sensei's split second of hesitation because I'd been too focused on StroZero—but I wouldn't have gotten so embarrassed if it hadn't been for Mashiron! Why'd she have to do that? Why'd she have to go ahead and tease me like that? I usually have no problem proclaiming my love for her, but when she gets all assertive on me, it's like...

Ah, forget it! There's no more time to be embarrassed! On to the next round!

Round three: I was the GM. As GM, I wouldn't participate in the two-minute discussion period. I'd just mute myself (to the other participants; chat could still hear me) and enjoy the antics as they unfolded. As I mentioned earlier, this was the round I'd been waiting for.

To kick things off, I needed to send everyone their prompts. Before that, however, I quickly muted myself and spoke to my chat. "Heh heh heh. Are you ready, chat? We gon' make these monkeys dance. We gon' make these monkeys dance real good." GMs were allowed to share their prompts with the viewers at the start of the game, and here's what I showed them: *Villagers: Mashiro Irodori, Churiri. Prompt: A live concert.*

Werewolf: Tadasu Miyauchi. Prompt: An orgy.

: Looooo1

: awayuki cookin

: I actually gasped out loud

: we're not so different, you and I

: Tadasu-chan of all people LMAO

“Gulp.”

It was faint, but Tadasu-chan’s mic definitely picked up what sounded like a nervous gulp on her end.

Excellent. Let’s kick things off, shall we? “Okay! And the timer starts...now!” I announced, then muted myself, and on mute I would remain for the next two minutes unless something happened.

“Hm. This is... It’s a little hard for me to imagine,” Sensei said.

“I feel that,” Mashiron said. “I guess for me...it’s like a fantasy of mine?”

“Mm?!?”

Mashiron and Sensei hit it off right away. Tadasu-chan, on the other hand, could barely conceal her surprise.

“Yes... Yes...!” she stammered.

“Sometimes you just want something different, right? Like, this virtual stuff is fine too, but there’s just something special about everyone coming together, in person, all at once,” Mashiron said.

“C-Coming together...?” Tadasu-chan squeaked.

“You mean like holding our own? I don’t know... I hate crowds. But the thrill of it is tempting, I’ll admit. Ah, I don’t know. I just feel like it’s such an...out-there experience, I can’t imagine myself being in one,” Sensei said.

“I felt the same way before,” Mashiron said. “But now, I think I’m totally open to it.”

“Mmm?!?!?”

“Because you know, a certain senpai already held one,” Mashiron continued.

“Mmmmmmm?!?!?!?”

I couldn’t hold in my laughter any longer. “BAA HAAAAAAAAAAAAA.”

: shut up you're so loud LMAO

: Tadasu-chan doesn't suspect a thing hahaha
: Didn't take you to be a swinger, Mashiron
: Harerun catching mad reputational damage right now
L000L
: Come on, Miyauchi! The senpai thing was a huge hint!
: Oh. Right. Sorry. I was thinking senpai was referring
to Sei-sama for some reason haha whoopsy
: worst. GM. ever. (don't stop)
: oh this is just a trainwreck hahahaha
: **GM (Garbage Man) ¥5,353**

“Oh, really? I didn’t know that,” Sensei said.

“You didn’t?” Mashiron said. “I watched the whole thing—it was amazing. I couldn’t tear my eyes away. I was just like...imagining myself in her place, you know? How good it must feel.”

“Oh? Like how?”

“It’s hard to put into words, but it’s the atmosphere. It’s this pulsing with energy as thousands of hearts beat in harmony and thousands of bodies move in unison to her mesmerizing rhythm.”

“Mm?!” *COUGH COUGH COUGH*

I cracked again. “PFFF HAAAAAH. Oh my God. Hareru-senpai at the middle of a thousand-person orgy is too good! Hyuk hyuk hyuk hyuk hyuk!”

: Hyuk hyuk hyuk hyuk hyuk! (seiso)
: i never knew someone could be so unseiso
: this is getting out of hand. now there are thousands of
them

<Hareru Asagiri>: the warping of my beloved kouhai's

admiration turns my heart into diamond dust...

: ?!

: of course she's here

: watch out, she's here and she's got a tarantula in her hand?

<Hareru Asagiri>: but it makes for good content so it's all good!

: Oh? This is fine?

: she founded live-on after all.

<Hareru Asagiri>: i'm just glad they're hitting it off! And not talking about About Me!

: ha ha ha

: I was suddenly reminded of the time Hareru Asagiri VI (Virtual Insanity) pump-faked her retirement and made myself sad

: I sense irony in that

: At least make "I" stand for idol...

: the fact that we can joke about it now is proof of how far we've come (totally not covering for shuwa-chan by making the moment emotional)

“H-Hareru-senpai?! I-I can explain! The prompt was open-ended and they arrived at this topic of discussion entirely independently! Ha ha! Good! Glad we got that settled. Now back to the show.”

Tadasu-chan had been doing her best to hold it in, making it sound like she had a heck of a loogie to hawk, but with that last cough, something *had* to give, right? Surely Mashiron and Sensei had noticed by now that she hadn't participated in the conversation at all?

“Tadasu-san, are you okay?” Sensei said.

“I’m fine. My throat’s just a little dry,” Tadasu-chan replied.

“Oh, that’s no good. By the way, what do you think of all this?” Mashiron said.

Perfect! Sensei picked up on the cough and Mashiron hit her with the follow-up.

“What do I think of...what?” Tadasu-chan said.

“Would you ever want to, you know, be in one yourself one day?” Mashiron said.

“O-O-O-O-O-Of course not!”

“Oh?” Mashiron quipped.

“Hm...” Sensei hummed.

I cackled. “Uh-oh, Tadasu-chan’s on the back foot now. I bet her face is beet red. Fellas, you’ll be saving this one for later, won’t ya?”

: yes but did you have to say it like an 80s TV show host?

: mercilessly sexually harassing her kouhais to fill up her viewers' spank bank. Now that is the mark of a true professional

: I almost respect your uncompromising attitude towards being a menace despite no longer needing to

: if seisoness were radioactive and deadly, you'd be the demon core

: Tadasu-chan's in trouble...

“Why not? Nerves?” Mashiron pressed.

“N-Nerves? No. I’m a member of the great Miyauchi family. It wouldn’t be seemly...”

“What if management asks you to in the future?”

“They’d ask such a thing?!”

“Some might say it’s expected as part of your job.”

“It is?! But, but... I see. What you’re saying is, it is my duty to participate in one myself one day... I... I feel dizzy...”

Mashiron and Sensei both stifled a guffaw. Clearly they’d caught on that Tadasu-chan was the odd one out.

Mashiron had been the one running circles around Tadasu-chan, but now Sensei, as if taking the proverbial torch from Mashiron, seemed poised to speak. “Now, now. I’m sure management wouldn’t force you to do anything you aren’t comfortable with.”

“It’s not that, it’s just... I’ve never thought about it.”

“You’re not interested, then?”

“What?”

“Setting aside that hypothetical ask from management for a moment. You’ve never fantasized about doing something like that? I feel like we all have.”

“F-Fantasize...”

“So you haven’t?”

“Y-You have?”

“Of course.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes! I have—everyone has! So? No interest at all?”

There was an uncomfortably long pause.

Finally Tadasu-chan mumbled, “I mean... I suppose I am, a little...”

BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP

Sensei kept pressing. “You are! In what exactly, if you don’t mind me asking? Which part specifically titillates your curiosity?”

“Well, that— Wait. What is that beeping? Is that Shuwa-chan-senpai?”

“Shuwa-chan,” Mashiron said. “We can hear your alarm going off.”

“Sorry about that. I muted it. Please continue,” I said.

“Huh? What’s going on?” Tadasu-chan asked.

“The round’s over, Tadasu-san,” Sensei sighed. “Time’s up.”

“Sh-Shuwa-chan-senpai, you... You! You can’t just insert yourself into the conversation and try to extend the time! That’s against the rules!”

Whoops. Caught between my duty as GM to end the round and my desire to hear the rest of the conversation, I’d ended up both unmuting myself and letting my alarm go off.

: Tadasu-chan you dog

: oh she's interested all right (smirk)

: shuwa-chan's shamelessness can only be matched by
Tadasu-chan's ginormous amount of repressed sexual energy

: I don't think this one's strictly Shuwa-chan's fault

: the time limit be a cruel mistress, yarr

: discussion so hot the GM had to intervene

: it's not sexual harassment if it's for a game /s



The voting began and ended with a fast Tadasu-chan sweep, but it wasn't Game Over for her yet. She could still steal a win by guessing the villagers' prompt, and with Mashiron's enormous hint of a certain senpai already having held one, the odds were in Tadasu-chan's favor. It wasn't like Mashiron to slip up in a werewolf game, but I chalked it up to her being unfamiliar with this win-stealing rule. And thus, Tadasu-chan's final guess was: "A... An eighteen-plus live stream?"

"You're kidding..." I said.

Alas, I'd gravely underestimated the magnitude of blue thoughts that went on in that head of hers. But whatever. It was time for a GM change! And the last round!

"Shuwa-chan-senpai."

"Hm?"

"Don't think I'll forget this. I'll make you rue the day."

"I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

Oh, jeez. Talk about scary.

Finally, we faced down the last round of today's collab, presided over by our lovely GM Churiri-sensei. With three rounds behind us, I anticipated a complex discussion filled with mind games and bluffs. However, that expectation was shattered from the very first sentence.

"Oh, well this is nice!" Tadasu-chan said.

"Huh?" Both Mashiron and I couldn't hide our surprise. My prompt was "raw garbage," and it seemed so was Mashiron's. Apparently Churiri-sensei had picked two vastly different prompts, which was on brand to say the least.

For the next two minutes, it was an absolute Tadasu-teasing fiesta. I felt a little bad for our student council president, this being her second time as the werewolf, but that was an inevitability given that we'd all come up with our prompts separately.

By the end of the game, however, I realized my pity had been seriously

misplaced. That moment of reckoning came after the time limit was up, Tadasu-chan was voted out, and it was her chance to steal a win. The only hint she had was her own prompt, which was “earthlings.” As Mashiron and I had realized early on that she was the werewolf, both of us, learning from previous rounds, had tried our best to give absolutely nothing away. We’d given her zero additional hints, I was sure of it, and yet...

“Since it’s Churiri-sensei, I assume the topic is ‘raw garbage’?”

She guessed the correct prompt just like that. A phenomenal win-steal. All of us were dumbfounded, but it was the originator of the prompts themselves, Churiri-sensei, who was the most surprised. “How?!” she said. “How did you know?! You didn’t cheat, did you?!”

“As if I, Miyauchi, would ever resort to such underhanded tactics. I even turned you away when you came to me for help, didn’t I?”

“Then how did you know?!”

“Intuition.”

“I-Intuition?”

Tadasu-chan then went on to explain to Sensei, like it was the most obvious thing in the world, how she’d managed to pull off the Hail Mary.

“Well, first, I knew the prompts must be related somehow. The diligent person you are, I didn’t believe you’d flout the rules for a joke. From there, it was easy to surmise the corresponding phrase would be negatively connotated, given your well-known disdain for ‘earthlings.’ Thus, raw garbage.”

“No, no, no, no,” Sensei stuttered. “‘Thus,’ my ass! Garbage, maybe. Trash, maybe! But ‘raw’ garbage specifically?!”

“Either of those options wouldn’t have been scathing enough for a cynic of your caliber. But yes, you’re right. I can’t explain myself any better, because at the end of the day, it was truly just intuition.”

“I... I can’t accept this...”

“Luckily you don’t have to. I guessed it, so it’s my win.” Tadasu-chan chuckled smugly. “So? Still going to kick all of us earthlings to the curb?”

Sensei forced a breath out through clenched teeth.

“It would hurt me to think we don’t understand each other by now.”

“E-Excuse you?! We are streaming!”

“Oh? Is someone getting bashful?”

“You brat...!”

: oh no, im dying from preciousness overload. tell my family I

: **oh dear, oh my ¥50,000**

: rebutting the raw garbage and earthling association with the phrase kick to the curb is hard

: Reminder: This is the same person who guessed eighteen-plus live stream in the previous round

: I feel the love for sensei and sensei only

Mashiron and I burst into a round of applause. Even though we’d lost, it certainly didn’t feel like it.

And that was the game, coming to a fitting end thanks to our kouhais! *Good job, you two!*

“I know I’m complicit, but,” Mashiron said, “did this turn into a AwaMashi-TadaChuri flirt-off or is that just me?”

“We were not flirting!” Sensei yelled.

Tadasu-chan fell into thought. “Mashiro-senpai coaxed out a proposal from Shuwa-chan-senpai, I nailed Sensei’s prompt with a blind guess, and Sensei, albeit unintentionally, manifested her individuality to my prompt. But Shuwa-chan-senpai...”

Hm? True. What was my contribution to the stream again?

“...completely failed to read between the lines of Mashiro-senpai’s prompt, and sexually harassed the heck out of me as GM!”

The call plunged into silence, the only sound a strained exhale from my end.
Ha...ha... Isn't that strange? How silence can weigh so much?

“Mashiro-senpai, Sensei, methinks there’s a werewolf in our midst.”

“Wueh?” I said.

“Agreed,” Sensei said. “As Mashiro-san said at the start of the first round, this one has the heart of a dog.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa!” *What’s happening?!* “Girls, girls! What are we doing? Were we not ending the stream on that fuzzy, feel-good note?!”

“Awayuki-san. What is Word Wolf but a game of verbal wit to find and lynch the werewolf among us?” Sensei asked.

“It is, but not when you say it like that!”

“Shuwa-chan.”

“M-Mashiron, my savior! You’re on my side, right? You can see this isn’t right, can’t you? Help me out here!”

“Sure thing. Want to elope?”

“You don’t see jack shit!!!”

Tadasu-chan burst into laughter. “How do you like me now, Awa-chan-senpai? I told you you’d rue the day!”

: my sides

: What goes around...comes around.

: If there's one thing Live-On can be counted on to provide...it's content.

: Is this the Live-On werewolf game I've heard so much about?

: At least everyone's having fun (*´ω`*)

For reasons beyond my comprehension, the Word Wolf stream ended with me as the sole loser.

A few days later, at the crack of dawn, I was awoken by a mysterious and unexpected phone call.

RING RING RING

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I squinted at my phone's screen, the name "Dagger-chan" on the caller ID instantly snapping me awake. Just what could be the matter at this hour?

"Hello?" I bleated, only to be greeted by a panicked, almost frantic voice on the other end.

"Master, hello? I... I don't know what to do. I think... I think I'm gonna be fired."

"...What?"

It took precious seconds for my mind to process the reality that had just been presented to it.

Dagger-chan is going to be...fired?!

Chapter Three

Dagger in Crisis

"I... I messed up real bad on my stream." Dagger-chan's despondent voice continued to reach my ears through the phone.

"As have I," I responded with as much composure as I could muster.

"No, no, you don't understand. This is way, way worse."

"Actually?"

Finally feeling the urgency of the situation, I sat up straight and mulled over Dagger-chan's words seriously. Fired? Way worse than even what I'd done? Was it even possible? To get fired from Live-On, that is? This was the organization that put up with me, whose most uneventful stream was another's worst PR nightmare. This was the organization that could take one look at me and say, *Oh, you want to be a VTuber that focuses on showcasing all the different names eroge developers give LINE-like messaging apps to avoid copyright issues? Sure! Go right on ahead!* without batting an eye. How...? How was it possible to get fired from such an organization?

My own thoughts were getting me nowhere. But I could at least continue to hear Dagger-chan out. "Can you...explain what happened?"

"Yeah," Dagger-chan replied. "Do you remember the Valentine's event?"

"When we made chocolate, yeah."

"Do you remember you slipped me a gift on that day?"

"S..."

"It was a can of StroZero, yes."

"Z..."

Strange. How very strange, indeed. I know I just decided to continue to hear

Dagger-chan out, but a very big part of me suddenly wants to hang up, throw my phone out the window, and change my number.

“Master? Are you okay?”

“I’m... I’m fine! Totally fine! Ha ha ha. I did do something like that, didn’t I?” My voice had started to tremble, so I compensated by speaking extra loudly. Either way, my nervousness was seeping through.

Calm down. Calm down, Awayuki! Your very important and very adorable kouhai has come to you with this pressing issue for advice. You’ve been through something exactly like this. The least you can do is share your experiences. Don’t get all flustered now just because the SZ word was mentioned. And besides, you don’t know the story is going to end like you think it’s going to end yet! Hear her out!

“G-Go on,” I urged.

“You sure? Okay, then. So yeah, you gave me the can of StroZero, and since it was a gift from you, I didn’t want to just drink it. I wanted to save it for a special occasion.”

“Okay.”

“And then, when I shared the news with my viewers, they told me that I should drink it on my next stream.”

“Okay.”

“So I was like, ‘Yeah, that sounds like a great idea!’ and agreed. And yeah, that ‘next stream’ was yesterday.”

“Okay.”

Okay.

Okay, okay, okay, okay.

“Dagger-chan, what’s your address if you don’t mind telling me?”

“My address? Sure, but why?”

“So I can go to you right now and drop down to my knees and beg for forgiveness.”

“You... *What?!*”

“You’re right. I don’t need to do that. I can beg right now. I’m on my knees right now, Dagger-chan, begging for your forgiveness.”

“What?! No, no, that’s not what I meant! Why are you begging? Stop, stop!”

My forehead rubbed the floor as I shouted at the top of my lungs, “Because... Because this is basically all my fault, isn’t it?!”

“No! Hey, Master, listen to me! *I’m* the one who screwed up here!”

“It wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t snuck an alcoholic beverage into your bag! Why did I ever think that was a good idea?! It was basically equivalent to telling you, ‘Got a problem? Feeling down? Have a drink!’ I’m supposed to be setting a good example for you, not telling you to drown your problems in alcohol! I’m so, so sorry!!!”

“Don’t be! Your present made me really happy! What happened yesterday was entirely my fault for getting carried away! I don’t think you did anything wrong. In fact, you’re the best senpai I could’ve asked for!”

“Do you mean it? Did you really just come to me for advice, not because you want me to take responsibility?”

“Yes! You were the first person I called because I trust your advice, Master! I didn’t mean to sound like I was blaming you. Sorry if my words didn’t come across right. I’m not really thinking straight right now.”

“No, no, I’m sorry. That was my bad. I asked for the full story, I shouldn’t have reacted that way. I panicked as well, but I think I’m okay now.”

Hearing Dagger-chan calm herself, I managed to do the same. *Dagger-chan is the least cynical, least sarcastic girl out there*, I told myself. *You should’ve heard her out in full before jumping to conclusions. Calm down. Be the woman Dagger-chan thinks you are. If you can’t even listen properly, how are you going to give advice?*

“Okay, I think I get the gist of it,” I said after collecting myself. “I realize this might be painful for you, but I need you to tell me exactly what you did to ‘mess up.’ This is important—do you think you can do that for me?”

That was the crux of the issue. I had to know in detail what had happened if I was to give proper advice.

Dagger-chan whimpered quietly before acquiescing with a quiet, “All right.” It still seemed like she trusted me, despite my immature initial response.

Now, what was the source of this “mess-up” that was so bad it had Dagger-chan panicking like this?

“They say a picture’s worth a thousand words, so...here.”

I received a video link from Dagger-chan. The title of the video was “With the help of a little liquid courage, Dagger-chan finally... [Live-On].”

So this was a clip of the problematic bit in question? Seemed a bit tasteless for someone to clip it, but whatever. The title also, in true clickbaity fashion, raised more questions than it answered.

“Watch this and you should understand,” she said.

“Okay. Give me a sec.”

I clicked open the link and was greeted by a clip of Dagger-chan’s stream. The clipper had added a time stamp, indicating it was from the day after the Valentine’s event.

“Ta-da! Look, everyone, look! Look what my master gave me as a parting gift yesterday!”

Alongside Dagger-chan’s lively narration, her screen showed a photo of a single can of StroZero prominently placed in the center of her fridge. All but certainly the one I’d given her.

: LOL ¥220

: damn she really gave you a piece of herself like anpanman

: me desperately trying to figure out how this is actually a form of sexual harassment

: don't the kouhai

: say NO to underage drinking

“I might have never had StroZero before, but I am of legal drinking age, thank you very much! But look, guys, look, look, look, look! I know I’m supposed to drink it, but I just can’t bring myself to crack it open yet. For now, I just want to show it off. Nyeh heh heh heh!”

: that Laugh hahaha

: since when were you an adult?!

: actually funny how this is the least major continuity error at this point

: when Alice-chan contacts you with some absurd trade offer tomorrow, just ignore her~

: actually jealous she gave you a can personally

: Drink it on stream! ¥500

“That’s it! I’ll drink it on stream! Thanks, random viewer, for that bright idea! ...But let’s save that for next time. For now, I’m just going to look at it some more! :D”

Oh my God! Gen five is monetized! Those rascallions are really putting in the work! I mean— No! So that wasn’t the mess-up itself, but another clip showing context! Very considerate, clipper!

The video cut, switching to another clip dated to yesterday. Here we go.

“Ohhh, I’m getting nervous. Everyone ready? I’m doing it. I’m opening the first StroZero can of my life. Thank you, Master, thank you! Pshhh!”

: Pshhh! ¥220

: Right there with ya (Pshhh!)

: Thank you based StroZero master!

: She's the chuuni master, thank you very much

: And we approach the point of no return.

That was definitely the sound of a week-old can of StroZero being cracked. Of course I could tell it was week-old. Couldn't you?

GULP GULP GULP

Then she took a few audible sips.

"Whoa. That tastes like adulthood. And sadness."

I almost laughed out loud at her muted reaction. I couldn't blame her. That unique blend of bitterness and artificial-ness was an acquired taste.

: Looooool

: So this is what Shuwa-chan tastes like...

: uh-oh. why am I starting to feel aroused?

: immature palate <3

: take it slow, yeah?

"Yeah! I'll be taking it slow, of course! But I'll also be drinking every last drop. To show my appreciation!"

The video cut again. This time, the date didn't change; it just skipped to a later point in the same stream. My gut told me the blunder was coming soon. The editing seemed to suggest that alcohol had impaired her judgment, leading her to do something she wouldn't normally do.

"I wanna eat Hamburg steak."

Indeed, Dagger-chan's voice, cutting back in after an hour-long timeskip, was thick-tongued and unsteady. That was expected, but... What was that about Hamburg steak?

: hamburg steak???

: Well that came out of nowhere

: hahaha she's sloshed

: a lightweight, isn't she?

: cute

"Phew, it's hot. I'm gonna take my hood off. It's just like, I dunno... The taste of StroZero isn't that bad anymore... Now I just really want Hamburg steak."

: ???

: Like you want a drinking snack?

: blessed be thy hoodless figure...

: her brain has completely ground to a halt LOL

: you like Hamburg steak?

"I love Hamburg steak! It's been my favorite food since forever!"

: makes sense!

: a nice Hamburg steak always hits the spot, doesn't it?

: **Treat yourself to a nice Hamburg steak ¥682**

: so she regresses when drunk

: since forever? but how would you know unless you...

: o

: uh-oh, called out...

"Hmmm? Oh. My amnesia? Well, that's the thing! It's gone! I remember everything now!"

My jaw dropped.

: ?!?!

: Wha?!

: Just like that?!

: After all that time and effort spent defending it...

“Ta-da! Aaah! ↑↑” CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP

: No. No ta-da...

: this just in: StroZero found to have memory-restorative effects

: big pharma besides themselves

: honey, time for your daily StroZero injection

: I have it on good authority StroZero actually has the exact opposite effect

: **C-Congrats? ¥10,000**

: funniest part to me is that she seems happy to have her memories back. Glad to see they weren't bad memories!

: what was that she said about charred flesh or something during her debut?

“Ah? Aha ha ha ha! That was actually Hamburg steak I was talking about! Pyaaa! ↑”

I was speechless.

: L0000000L

: actual?

: factual?

: then what were the all-consuming flames? The cooking

range?

: Then the viscous hue of crimson was...

"Ketchup! I like ketchup on my steak! Fweh heh heh! :D"

: ¥50,000

: cuteness overload

: the backstory is crumbling but i'm here for it

: not hard when that backstory was held up by duct tape and paper clips to begin with.

: **Treat yourself to a nice bottle of ketchup ¥10,000**

: oh my god the dagger was the one they give you along with your steak all along

: fuck you for showing me this (food porn)

: Like a knife instead of a dagger...?

: oh my god Harerun knew all along

: ok now where's Fork

: not sure how I feel about this tbh

: shes gonna regret this one in the morning

: Awayuki-chan did it again, the bastard

: her mastery over StroZero allows her to inflict damage remotely through the use of any tall can

: is she really human?

: imagine you cut into her for the autopsy and all you find is CoroCoro comic books

: being cute is a skill. Thus Dagger-chan, you deserve a gold star for being so cute!

“I’m cute? Eheh heh... Thanks. You guys wanna know how I lost my memory? Well, it was because I ate a Hamburg steak that was soooooo delicious, it blew all my memories away! I know, I know. Cute, right? Makes sense, right? Hee hee hee—I’m so smart!”

: we knew she was ditzy but not this ditzy

: this is genius

: mascot character levels of lore

: hahaha oh my so she actually appreciates being called cute

: is... is it okay for live-on to be this cute?

: A dagger who likes Hamburg steak, call her Hamburger

: uh

: †Hamburger†

: that makes Awayuki-chan the Hamburg Master

: hamBUUUUURG /masterhamburg

: LooooL

Still speechless.

GULP GULP “Oh, that’s the last of it. Thank you so much, Master! I’m sleepy! I’m going to sleep now! So long, everyone! Bye-bye!”

: HUH?

: most abrupt stream ending

: im dying hahahaha

: g-good night?

: Sweet dreams! ¥1,000

: I can only hope she recovers from this...

The video ended.

“Master... What should I do?” Dagger-chan’s voice weakly croaked. I hadn’t said anything for a while, but she must’ve intuited the clip would be over by now.

Dagger, how can you... How can you... How can you... “How can you be so damn cute?”

“Nooo!!! Stawwwwppp!!!”

Ouch, my ears—but how else did you expect me to react to a video so adorable, Dagger-chan? The video was so relaxing, it literally gave me that same sense of relief as when you bolt up from bed thinking you’re late for work before you realize it’s Saturday.

“Did you even watch the video, Master? I’m in big trouble!”

“I did. And I have to say: you were very adorable.”

“No! Do you realize what’s happening on Cheeper right now? Hamburger-chan and Hamburg Master are trending more and more as we speak! At this rate, I’m going to be fired—fired!!!”

“Ah, so I’m caught up in this too. Welp, can’t say I don’t deserve it.”

“You don’t!!!”

The chasm between Dagger-chan’s energy and mine yawned ever wider. But could you blame me? As someone who’d experienced several character-defining arcs and emerged unscathed every time, Dagger-chan’s anxiety was flabbergasting to say the least. Like, from my point of view, she seemed to be finally poised to unleash her full Live-On potential, bringing a little bit of much-needed cuteness to the chaos, so why the worry? Sure, “cute” wasn’t exactly what Live-On was known for, but that just made her a long-overdue breath of fresh air.

Was it merely because she’d broken character? I could understand that, I guess. I hadn’t been in the clearest state of mind myself when I’d forgotten to turn my stream off, but *that* had been a true fiasco. In comparison, Dagger-

chan's incident felt like a...nothingburger.

"Oh, wait," I said. "Was that everything just now? Or was there something worse besides that clip?"

"No, that was pretty much it," Dagger-chan replied.

"Great. So when are we getting together to make Hamburg steaks?"

"Maaa-sterrr!" she pouted.

Oops. That clearly hadn't been the right thing to say to someone who thought they were on the verge of losing their job.

Okay, time to take this seriously, I thought, clearing my throat and sitting up straight. "Sorry. I didn't mean to make light of the situation."

"N-No, I'm sorry as well, for shouting."

"No, no, you're fine. You did the right thing, coming to your senpai for help. But I am still a little confused, though. Why exactly do you think that clip will get you fired?"

"Well, because the only reason I got into Live-On was because I had amnesia. That quirk is all I have!"

"What? No, it's not!"

"It is, though. I spent ages thinking about what would make me stand out when I applied to Live-On. I realized I'd lived such a carefree life, I practically had nothing to show for myself. So, on audition day, I mustered all the courage I could, pretended to have amnesia, and bumbled into their office. I believed it was my only shot at getting noticed."

"Okay, so you do have your memories, as we all thought. And wow, that part about you stumbling into the Live-On offices was real?"

"Yeah, it was! But do you see how this means that unlike Tadasu-chan or Sensei, I don't really have anything that's truly mine? It's just this facade I created for the audition. Without it, Live-On would've never let me in. And then what did I do yesterday? Outright rejected the one thing that got me this job. Now I feel like I don't deserve to be here."

“Hmm...” I bit my tongue. There was so much I wanted to say, but that could wait. For now, all Dagger-chan needed to know was: “You won’t be fired.”

“How do you know?!” she countered. “You don’t know what they do with dead weight like me!”

“You’re right, I don’t. But I also know they can’t fire you just like that. Live-On is a legitimate company, believe it or not—there are hoops and red tape. Not to mention the flak they’d catch from the public. Besides, they haven’t called you up yet, have they?”

“N-No, they haven’t. But even if they’d forgive me, I wouldn’t if I became a burden to the company I love so much.”

“Mmm...”

One of the thoughts I’d kept to myself was that Dagger-chan kept going on and on about how she had nothing to offer Live-On besides her amnesia—but was that *really* true? While I wasn’t nearly articulate enough to spell out what made her special, I knew for sure that she wasn’t normal, and I meant that in the best way.

Oh. But there was one overarching theme that set her apart.

“You’re incredibly adorable. Isn’t that enough?”

“I mean, like... I don’t hate it, being called adorable and all. It’s just that it doesn’t feel like a trait I should have. Aren’t memory-loss characters more cool, more mysterious, you know?”

“Ohhh. Is that why you’re so hung up on the ‘cool’ thing? I get it, but... Isn’t that stressful? Constantly pretending to be something you’re not?”

“No? Because of that act, I get to be here, with you, with everyone else I look up to, living out my dream. Why would that make me feel stressed?”

“I... I see.” *Now there’s a thought.* Live-On’s recent surge in popularity meant there were now fans who idolized it. In that case, I didn’t really know what the right move was? This was such uncharted territory, there seemed to be no precedent to work with. In fact, Dagger-chan’s “problem” felt so little like one that I was tempted to say any number of solutions could work, as long as they

were packaged and sold right.

All right, Awayuki. Take a step back, gather your thoughts. What do we know? Dagger-chan wants to remain in Live-On, but fears that without her amnesia schtick, she doesn't deserve to be here.

An idea struck.

"Why don't you just, you know, lose your memories again? In the video you linked me, didn't you say that you lost your memories by eating a super delicious Hamburg steak in the first place? Why can't we just do something like that...again...?"

Really, Awayuki? I swear the idea had sounded fine in my mind, but as soon as I put it into words, oh man did the stupidity of it all ever strike me. I mean, yeah, if her intact memories were the issue, all we had to do was lose them again. Nothing wrong with that logic—it was just, holy cow was that a brand-new sentence.

"Master..."

Uh-oh, was she mad at me? She was mad at me, wasn't she? *Quick, say something!*

"Y-You know what? Forget that just now," I backtracked.

"Are you a genius?"

"Hm?" My head tilted of its own accord.

"That's exactly what we need to do! You're a genius!"

"D-Do what?"

This confirmed it.

"Make it!" she said.

"Make what?!"

I had indeed been correct all along.

"Make the memory-loss-inducing Hamburg steak...to end all memory-loss-inducing Hamburg steaks!"

“Pardon?”

There wasn’t anything normal about this girl. Like, at all.

“Master, I prepared all the ingredients and equipment!”

“Thank you!”

“Awayuki-senpai,” Tadasu-chan said, “I apologize on behalf of our Dagger-chan. She’s always such a handful. If there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to let me know.”

“I’m hungry, so hurry up and make me a steak,” Sensei said.

There we were, Dagger-chan and I in aprons in her kitchen, Tadasu-chan and Sensei sitting at the dining table. To explain how we’d ended up there, we need to rewind the clock a little—back to our earlier phone call.

“Really? I mean, *really* really?” I’d lost count of how many times I’d repeated that same phrase.

Because after I’d suggested the idea, Dagger-chan refined it further. She proposed we go big: hold an official collab stream, make the ultimate Hamburg steak there, and eat it live to lose her memories again.

“Really!” Dagger-chan exclaimed. “This is the best idea I’ve ever come up with!”

Really. With Dagger-chan so energetic and me full of doubts, it felt like we had swapped roles from our earlier conversation.

I was completely overwhelmed by Dagger-chan’s “Hamburg steak caused me memory loss once, why not twice!” momentum and could only nod my head in agreement. Somehow, I just knew from previous experiences that it was futile to resist a Live-On streamer once they had their sights set on something. Her arguments were compelling. The logic made sense. My mind was convinced, and yet I couldn’t stop the feeling of impending doom from taking root in my body. Was something wrong with me?

But in the end, after countless similar back-and-forths, I was finally persuaded

and managed to convince myself that if a game like *Evertale* can get away with the bullshit it puts out in its ads, we should be fine.

“Okay, let’s do it,” I said. “But, um, how are we going to make this ultimate Hamburg steak?”

“Heh heh heh, Master.”

“Wh-What is it?”

“That which does not exist, we must only create.”

“Why can you only be a chuuni when it doesn’t freaking matter?!” I yelled, my voice echoing off into the distance.

So that was why I was at Dagger-chan’s house—to experiment a bit and perfect the ultimate Hamburg steak! (Tadasu-chan and Sensei were here to eat any extra “experiments.”) In other words, this was a practice session for the offline cooking collab Dagger-chan and I had scheduled. Time to earn my keep and make up for the fiasco I’d caused!

“Okay!” I said. “Before we get started, I assume all we have to do is make a Hamburg steak you really like, Dagger-chan?”

“I think so! Make one so delicious and memory-wiping, not even StroZero can do anything about it!”

“I feel like that’s just more on you, but okay,” Sensei said. “Also, in the worst-case scenario, if the steak turns out horrible and inedible, can’t you just, you know, *say* it was delicious? Like, ‘Oh my God! Yum yum! Huh? Where’d my memories go?’”

“Sensei, the viewers know when they’re being lied to,” Tadasu-chan said. “It is our duty as streamers to at least give it our all before calling it quits.”

“Yep, yep!” Dagger-chan said. “Not like we’re advertising this as a stream to regain my amnesia! It’ll be a cooking stream through and through!”

“Nobody said anything about not trying. I said ‘in the worst case,’ didn’t I?” Sensei said.

As gen five conversed among themselves, I couldn’t help but sneak glances at

Tadasu-chan and Sensei. This was my first time meeting them in the flesh! (Before you ask, no. The little missed connection with Sensei in the video rental store did not count.) We'd introduced ourselves when we met. Tadasu Miyauchi's real name was Samane Minamoto and Churiri-sensei's was Mari Okabayashi. First impressions were that they were both exactly the same online as they were offline.

"In fact, do you even need to make the steaks yourselves in the first place?" Sensei asked.

"Now, now. That sort of endearing, heartwarming charm is what Dagger-chan is all about, isn't it?" Tadasu-chan added.

It seemed Dagger-chan had confided in neither of them about feeling unworthy without her amnesia. Not completely surprising, since Dagger-chan had drawn comparisons between them and her during our phone call. Or maybe she just didn't want to stir the pot any more than necessary after she and I had worked out the perfect plan.

Right. This was for Dagger-chan's sake. I would give her my all, find her that *raison d'être* she needed.

"Okay. Then let's get started, shall we?" I said.

First up, we cut the ingredients.

"Whoa, this knife is super easy to cut with!" I said.

"Heh heh heh. Master, that is an element I procured from the very depths of the dark web."

"Th-The dark web?!"

"Didn't you say you bought that from Amazon?"

"Seeeenseeei!"

Next up, we combined everything to form a ground meat mixture.

"Hahhh. Hahhh." *SQUELCH SQUELCH SQUELCH SQUELCH SQUELCH*

“N-No, Dagger-chan, stop that! Your labored breathing... Your filthy hands... Your deft fingers, working that meat... That wet, slicky sound... THAT WET, SLICKY SOUND! LEWD. YOU’RE SO LEWD.”

“Shut. Up!!!”



After that, we rolled the mixture into oblong shapes.

“Master.”

“Yes, dear?”

“I made a star!”

“Look at that! Good job, sweetie!”

“What are you, her mother?!” the other two shouted.

And then we put them in the frying pan.

“Hear that sizzle!” I said. “Wait—Dagger-chan, the part of you regaining your memories has already been clipped to the moon and back. How are you going to deal with that?”

“Oh, that? That’s easy. I just won’t watch them!”

“Genius.”

“Wh-What was that, Awayuki-san?” Sensei said like she couldn’t believe her ears.

“Awayuki-senpai has certainly become adept at handling Dagger-chan, hasn’t she?”

Lastly, we gave it a dash of Dagger-chan’s favorite condiment—ketchup.

“And there we have it!” I said. “Ultimate Hamburg Steak Mark I, ready for your tasting pleasure!”

“Then don’t mind if I do! Let’s go!” Dagger-chan said.

She gave it a taste, shared her thoughts, and we adjusted the recipe. This went on and on, with even Tadasu-chan and Churiri-sensei caving to the temptation and joining us partway. I admit I’d had my reservations, but I soon discovered that cooking with friends was an absolute delight. The kitchen buzzed with energy, and seeing others enjoying my food was a wonderful incentive.

At last, after countless attempts, Dagger-chan took a bite...and remained

completely silent. Her eyes widened, gleaming with pure delight, and in that instant, we immediately knew that we had succeeded.

As the day's endeavor drew to a close, gen five offered to clean up so I could make an early exit. Dagger-chan walked me to the door.

"All right. The recipe's set. All we gotta do now is make it again on stream," I said.

"Yep! Thanks for all your help!"

"Don't thank me until it's over," I chuckled as we reached the door. "Okay, well, I'll be seeing you."

"M-Master, wait!"

"Hm? What's up?"

"I, um, need to apologize. Sorry that it's so late. I was working up the courage all day."

"Oh. For what?"

I'd never seen Dagger-chan so fidgety before. Something bad must've happened.

"For um, being disingenuous. While it's absolutely true that I suggested we do this ultimate Hamburg steak thing because I thought it was the best way for me to move past my problem, that wasn't the only reason..."

"I see?"

"The other reason was that... I thought that by doing this... I could get you to make me a Hamburg steak. I'm sorry. Sorry for having ulterior motives!" Her cheeks turned beet red and her head dropped down to face the floor.

I, um... Hm.

"Dagger-chan."

"Yeah?" She bashfully looked up at me.

"I promise you this. On the day of the stream, you will get to eat that ultimate steak you've been searching for."

“Wh-Whoa—Master?”

“‘Whoa’ what? It’s a promise.”

“N-No, not that.”

“Then what? Whatever it is you’re worrying about, don’t. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Y-Your nose is...gushing blood.”

Bwo ho haAAAHHHH!!! This kouhai of mine is too cute! Too freaking cute! Whoa mama! Hummina hummina hummina bazoooooooooing! eyes pop out AWOOOOOOOOOGA! AWOOOOOOOOOGA!

And finally, the day of reckoning arrived.

“HAMBUUUUURG!”

“H-Hi everyone, it’s me, Dagger. Together with my master, I’ll be celebrating the regaining of my memories by making a Hamburg steak today...”

“HAMBUUUUURG!”

“M-Master? You know we’re live, right?”

I knew. And I didn’t care. Today, I was Master Hamburg.

: woop woop!!! ¥1,000

: first stream after regaining your memories, let's go!!!

: already cute ¥20,000

: Cute (cute)

: cute commenters need no longer hold back lmao

: maybe she remembers her real name now

: she does, and it's Hamburger-chan

: she's american???

: so many people watching rn

: Wait... A celebratory Hamburg steak? Uh-oh...

: Okay but what's up with HAMBUUURG next to you?

: That's the StroZero-chuuni-hamburg master

: Okay, Awayuki-chan. Let's get you back to Sei-sama's stream

: Awayuki: personality changes when drunk. Dagger: personality changes when drunk

: A master and her apprentice!

: Awayuki's personality dies more so than changes

: explain how Dagger-chan's metamorphosis into Hamburger-chan also means you turn into the Hamburg master, Awayuki?

“Are you worried about me, Dagger-chan? Don’t—for I am locked in. All of me is here to craft the ultimate Hamburg steak. And I’m not even drunk, so you know I’m serious.”

“That just makes me more worried! Seriously, are you okay? Your eyes are so bloodshot it’s scary!”

“A natural bodily response to a dear kouhai of mine saying she wants to eat my Hamburg steak.”

“I... I did say that offline, but I didn’t think you’d end up like this!”

My dear Dagger-chan, there is no cause for alarm, I thought with an inward smirk. For you see, I’ve realized something.

Why am I so head over heels about Hamburg steak right now? Why do I want you to eat my meat so bad right now?

Because, Dagger-chan, that StroZero I gave you on that fated day—that can of StroZero that you drank in full—has now been reborn inside you. It is now ready. It yearns to be free. It pines for the fjords. And release it I shall.

“Dagger-chan. I bestow upon you another can of StroZero.”

“That just raises more concerns!!!”

: what is going on hahahaha

: How very un-awa-chan of you today, Awa-chan.

: Wait, this is Awa-chan?! Awa-chan acting out without the use of StroZero???

: You may be onto something. Awa is still there but she's...just barely hanging on.

: Oh what I would pay to see what she said during her interview to get her hired

And thus kicked off the cooking. At the beginning, Dagger-chan, my sous chef slash camerawoman, was visibly nervous. The chat seemed a little too eager to see all the ways this stream could go wrong. But as time passed, their attitudes gradually changed—their skepticism melting in the face of my stunning performance.

I went about my work with poise and composure. To me, this was obvious. Expected, even. Why, you ask? Well, think of it this way: the Hamburg steak was to Dagger-chan what StroZero was to me. In essence, I was preparing StroZero. The real mistake would be to doubt that I, Awayuki Kokorone, could ever falter in making StroZero.

Soon, I was finished.

“Eat up, my darling.”

On a plate of purest white sat a sumptuous slab of meat. Succulent juices leaked out from within; a brown, seared exterior lay under a sultry, red-hot display of tomato ketchup. It was an audacious display of culinary seduction—the ultimate Hamburg steak.

“Wow...” Dagger-chan whispered.

: get in mah belly!!!

: holy mother of restaurant quality

: I can smell it through the screen

: who let her cook... (thank you)

: there's no doubt that it's good but is anyone else alarmed by the fact that it is...so good?

: just how much time have you spent on perfecting this...

: just when I think we're going to get a relatable, down-to-earth home cooking episode, you surprise me with this.

sasuga Live-On

"It almost seems too good to eat," Dagger-chan said.

"But it's not," I said. "I made it for you. Dig in before it gets cold."

"R-Right..."

Dagger-chan grasped her cutlery with trembling hands. She cut out a bite-size piece, stabbed it with her fork, and conveyed it to her mouth, taking a tentative bite. It was the exact same recipe as before, only executed better, so if there was any change in flavor, it would only be an intensification of its previous, already delicious taste.

"Mmmph?!" Her eyes flew open, gleaming with unadulterated delight.

Looks like my steak came out perfect. Now all that was left was for her to declare she'd lost her memories again, and that would be the end of this tumultuous chapter.

Hmph. I smirked inwardly. *What a fun little project. Can't believe I was so hesitant at the beginning.*

"Mmmmm!" Dagger-chan hummed, still enjoying her steak.

Anytime now, I silently urged. No need to let me know how good it is! In fact, the longer you enjoy it, the less believable the memory loss is going to be!

She flashed me a thumbs-up.

No! No thumbs-up! Hurry up and say the line! I know you like the steak, stop just making a face like it's the best thing you've ever eaten! What was this girl

doing? Don't tell me the only thing she'd forgotten was the plan!

I looked at her, making a face to say, *Come on! What are you doing?!*

She held out a forkful my way. "Say, 'Aaah.'"

"No!" I yelled. I added my arms to the effort, gesturing wildly in an effort to get her to understand.

"O-Oh! M-My head! My memories! Wh-What's happening?!"

Finally, with only a little bit of finagling, Dagger-chan managed to reclaim and revert to her most comfortable, memory-deficient state.

: WHAT

: they fkin got us again boys

: i am dying LMAOOO

: hol up

: I knew something was up

As expected, the chat did not take the twist lying down, but as the stream progressed and their surprise wore off, they comfortably settled into a state of contentment as they watched over their adorable mascot, Dagger-chan.

In the end, the ultimate Hamburg steak plan was what we in the industry called a smashing success.

Dagger-chan still not normal, though.

After the stream ended, Dagger-chan approached me as I was getting ready to leave and apologized. "This is probably too little, too late, but I'm sorry for dragging you into my mess, Master."

"Too late, yes. Too little, no," I reassured her. "I told you it's fine. I'm partially responsible, after all."

She looked relieved. "You really are a master, Master! I've always been like

this, you know. When I find something I want to do, I just hyperfixate and get tunnel vision...”

“I’m well aware.”

“Oh...”

“I don’t think that’s a bad thing. It just means you have drive.”

“But I make so much trouble for everyone.”

“It’s not trouble. Think about it—did I, Tadasu-chan, Sensei, or even the viewers seem even slightly upset about how everything turned out?”

“I guess not...”

There was a brief pause.

“Master?”

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking,” I said, jarred back to reality. Specifically, I’d been thinking about how recent events, today’s stream, and my remarks just now had brought me one step closer to my other goal: uncovering exactly what made Dagger-chan tick.

Dagger-chan was no normal girl. That had already been evident the moment she’d made it into Live-On. But what specifically set her apart? What was that unique talent that earned her a place here? I felt like I was on the verge of answering this question, just one puzzle piece away.

Just then, Dagger-chan glanced at her phone. “Oh! My manager just texted me. She said, ‘Good job, Little Miss Chaos!’” She tilted the screen towards me. “All right! Guess who’s not getting fired today!”

At that moment, the final puzzle piece clicked into place, delivered unexpectedly by the very men and women Dagger-chan had feared would discard her.

“Little Miss...Chaos?” I said.

“Yeah! She calls me that whenever she has something nice to say about me. I don’t really get it. Seems like a weird turn of phrase.”

Of course. How had I missed it?

“Dagger-chan,” I said. “I finally figured it out.”

“Ah? Figured what out?”

“The reason you’re here—in Live-On.”

“What? We’ve been over this. I don’t have anything like that. That’s why we went to such lengths to do something as inexplicable as recover my amnesia in the first place, remember?”

“Yes, but no! I get it now—after seeing that text! You, Dagger-chan, are warm and fuzzy chaos!”

Her eyes shot open. “Ah?”

...And she tilted her head in confusion. Darn. Really thought that would’ve been a proper eureka moment. Oh, well. My bad for trying to sound dramatic.

“L-Let me explain,” I said. “First, you’re here in Live-On because you embody ‘chaos,’ like so many of your peers.”

“Huh? But I’m not like you with StroZero. I’m not like Sei-sama with her filthy humor. And I’m definitely not like Alice-chan with her complete rejection of reality!”

“Yes, but you have your own brand of chaos, no less potent or unique than any of theirs. The only difference is in how it manifests.”

“M-Manifests?”

“That’s right. You, Dagger-chan, have the all-important ability to leverage your chaos to create heartwarmingness!”

Her eyes shot open again. “Leverage my what to create *what?!?*”

“Heartwarmingness! Unlike the rest of us, who are only capable of leveraging chaos to create other things—mainly comedy—you’re different! That makes you not only deserving of your place here, but utterly irreplaceable!”

She paused for a moment. “I think Tadasu-chan and Sensei also said something similar once...” She gestured towards her phone again. “So this text that I *thought* was praising me for keeping up my act...”

“Is actually praising you for being *you*! She’s saying, ‘Great Live-Onning, Live-

Onner!' I'm sure of it!"

"Heartwarmingness, huh? I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"Why? What's wrong with heartwarmingness?"

"You're right... You're right!!!" Her voice jumped an octave, and she started bouncing on the balls of her feet like a little bunny.

Good. It seemed she'd finally begun to recognize her worth. "But don't just take my word for it. Talk with your genmates, your manager. You might be surprised to hear what they have to say."

"Now that I think about it, I don't think I've actually ever discussed this with them before. My genmates are...well, they're *them*. And discussing the whole 'getting fired' thing with my manager really wasn't going to happen."

"Right..."

"So should I still talk to them?"

"Absolutely," I answered immediately, as if to give her a swift shove from behind. "Because this is Live-On, isn't it? Your beloved, dearest Live-On!"

"True!"

That smile that spread across Dagger-chan's face as she embraced herself was blinding, radiant—a blessing upon this poor, tired soul.

"Wait." She paused. "Doesn't this mean I can stop pretending to have amnesia?"

"It...might," I said hesitantly. "Yeah. I guess it does." I felt a pang of disappointment. "Are you going to?"

"Nope!" she said decisively, as if to cut through my dismay with her resolve. She followed up with a vigorous shake of her head. "Call me sentimental, but the amnesia's what got me into Live-On, so I'm sticking with it. Plus, accepting it completely means I can now have fun with it, instead of dancing around it like some kind of land mine. But most importantly," she added, her voice swelling with gratitude, "it's something Tadasu-chan, Sensei, and you, Master, have worked so hard to protect! How could I just throw something like that away?"

There it was. That cheat ability from Dagger-chan I'd come to expect. The uncanny capability to carry out precision strikes on my emotions every time. In a good way, of course.

I remembered Dagger-chan had once said that joining Live-On was a dream come true. That had made me worry. It'd made me worry that when the initial high wore off, when the honeymoon began to lose its luster, that she would find herself in a tough position. But now, with her newfound attitude, she'd be all right. And while that day might still come—no one knows when tribulation will rear its ugly head—I was confident that when it did, Dagger-chan could now meet it with her head held high, whipping together some more of her chaos to bring the matter to a warm and fuzzy ending.

Dagger-chan was a whirlwind of chaos, warmth, and wholesomeness. A whirlwind that, as gen five had so aptly put it during their debut, would take Live-On by storm.



A few days later, a message came from Dagger-chan saying she had talked with her genmates and manager. I was happy to hear they had echoed much of the same sentiments I had, like I'd predicted.

I expelled a sigh of relief. Well, that was it—a bow neatly tied on this chapter. Thinking about it now, it'd been a hell of a thing we'd done. I mean, *regaining* someone's original character instead of liberating them from its shackles? Talk about Opposite Day here at Live-On.

In the end, Dagger-chan not only regained her amnesia, but also gained a new sense of worth. What was that if not a huge win? And yay. Go me for living up to my name as Master, woo...

It was just that, um...

"I wonder when I, the master, will regain my seisoness."

Idle Talk: Sei Utsuki's Castella Q&A

"Let's answer a few Castellastellas, shall we?"

Q: Question for Sei-sama and Shion-san, the happy couple: If Shion-san is everyone's mama, then what does that make Sei-sama? Also a mama? Papa? Something else? Eager to hear your thoughts.

"Mmm. It's gotta be fuck buddy."

: I hope Shion sees this and dumps your ass

: it doesn't "gotta be" anything.

: you *want* to be called fuck buddy by everyone?

: the first-time viewers would be so confused

"It's hotter that way."

: Shion, dump her ass

: lol

: why did we ever think we could outdo her

"Though in practical terms, I suppose I am somewhat of a father figure here? I remember a comment saying as much during Mana-san's graduation."

: trueeee

: my father is a dirty old man ¥4,545

: you've got the dad patented lack of finesse down pat as well

“Oh, but I’m known to have quite the finesse—in bed, that is.”

: Sigh...

: uh-oh. Shion-mama...

<**Shion Kaminari**>: become baby and I'll forgive you

“Ha ha ha. Now look what you’ve done, viewers. I’ll have to return to baby because of you.”

: there she is!

: when mother speaks, everyone listens

: *whip crack*

: return to baby. now there's a concept

Q: Because of you, Sex-sama, I can no longer take anyone seriously who’s named Hijiri (using the Sei kanji). How will you take responsibility for this?

“To think that I can violate not only bodies, but names as well. I am terrified of my own power.”

: you're liable to get sued for reputational damage so let's change your name back to Ikuiku Binbin-maru

: bring back Ikubin-maru

: the only conspiracy theory I believe in is that Sei-sama is so dumb she misread the characters for Ikuiku Binbin-maru as Sei Utsuki.

“How rude. Hasn’t anyone taught you all that you should talk someone up in front of their partner?”

: Ikuiku Gingin-maru

“No, not like that.”

Q: TIL that you were the first president of the World Anti-Doping Agency, Sei-sama. Didn't know you held such a strong stance against steroid abuse in the Olympics!

“Speaking of names, another interesting Castella. Now, I ask, is it really *me* who misreads names?”

: Just looked it up. lol

: Language is a wonderful thing

: My apologies, Mr. Pound.

Q: Sei-sama, I am a sixteen-year-old high school girl who would like to have sesbian lex with you. How can I go about arranging this?

“As much as I'd like to say yes, I'm not entirely sure the decision lies within my purview. Talk to my manager.”

: what the hell are you making your manager do???

: hasn't anyone ever taught you you should reject advances made in front of your partner?

: and she's giving *us* shit

: keep going, i'm boutta be born

: what

Q: Attention Sei-sama. To ensure your continued monetization, I'm asking the boss to throw you into her solitary confinement room where you will perform an apology stream. This is not a question.

“By all means. Nothing gets me off faster than doing it in a confined, solitary

space. Call that remorseturbation.”

: and not a single shred of remorse was found lmao

: damn... asserting dominance over the boss like that

: is it prison rules where the loser gets shanked

Q: Awayuki-chan still refuses to watch her first stream. As the originator of the idea, will you do something about that?

“She has been putting that off, hasn’t she? I actually was curious myself and just asked her the other day. She apologized and said when she tries, she just can’t. Handle the emotions, the shame, that is. She swore that she’ll get around to it one day.”

: oh yeah that was supposed to happen wasn't it?

: hope she does it soon

: sure sounds like she's just trying her best to worm her way out of it

: sus

: she's only making it worse for herself the longer she puts it off lol

“Heh. It’s Awayuki-kun we’re talking about, I’m sure she’ll make good on her promise. As the one who planted the idea in her head, I ask for your continued patience. Okay. Last Castella.”

Q: In a world that clamors for ever-increasing levels of diversity, do you have any ambitions, desires, or dreams about the kind of world you’d like to see?

“That’s a great question. I suppose I long for a world where people accept one another for what they are. Does that answer your question?”

Idle Talk: Shion Kaminari's Castella Q&A

“Time to answer a few Castellás!”

Q: A little bit of context: A while ago Shuwa-chan was talking about managers, and there was a comment that said, “Don't forget about Kaeru's manager who learned to type in babyspeak and is now best buds with Shion-chan.” It still makes me laugh to this day. Here's my question: How are things with Kaeru's manager? Any interesting happenings lately?

“Oh, yes, Kaeru-chan’s manager! We’re good friends! Any interesting happenings, you say? Let’s see... This isn’t exactly recent, but when we hang out, and we happen to come across a kindergarten or preschool, we both just halt for a few seconds. It’s really funny.”

: Yes officer that's her

: just straight up criminal lol

: preschools aren't amusement parks

: okay but seriously please don't just solicit childcare facilities like that

: hey i do the same when i see an all girls school

“It isn’t as bad as it sounds, I swear! It’s really only for a few seconds. Then we shake our heads no and leave right after! We definitely don’t linger to savor the moment with weird expressions on our faces!”

: that's Sei-sama's partner all right

: exposing yourself more hahaha

: this duo probably drools at the sound of crying infants

Q: She's Kaeru-chan's top-mommy, she makes Hamburg steaks with Dagger-chan—what is your take on the opinion that Awa-chan is actually the mother of Live-On?

“Awayuki Kokorone. Report to the Baby Guidance Office immediately.”

: that made me jump

: not the schoolmarm voice lmao

: of course Live-On would have a baby guidance office

: they don't guide babies to become productive members of society there, they guide productive members of society to become babies

: ¥1,188

“Don't you worry, everyone. Awayuki-chan simply needs to be...reminded of her place. Give her a week in my care at the guidance office and she won't even be able to verbalize the fact that she's *my* child.”

: you're gonna...take away her ability to speak?

: what are you, a vocal cord parasite?

: she's doing it. she's finally engaging in ethnic cleansing

: the only thing she's engaging in is character cleansing

: yandere shion-mama I think I'm in love

Q: We know that Shion-mama is everyone's mama, but does that make Shion-mama's mama's mama Shion-mama?

“No idea what you just said, but yes! Shion-mama is the mama of everything!”

: You've said that many times before, but this is the first time it's actually unsettled me.

: Wait, the mama of everything? Not everyone?

: motherhood's a hell of a drug

Q: Question for a member of the Common Sense Squad (skull emoji). Who's the easiest and who's the hardest to deal with in gen four?

“Don't laugh! I *am* a member of the Common Sense Squad! Let's see, gen four? Well, there's nobody quicker on the uptake than Ehrai-chan, is there?”

: Quick on the uptake (terms and conditions apply)

: I know I didn't just hear someone bad-mouthing the boss?

: she is quite sharp, isn't she?

“Which makes her the hardest to baby. Sigh.”

: bro LOL

: so she's the hardest to deal with hahaha

: the reversal

“Alice-chan only has Awayuki-chan on the brain, Kaeru-chan's a baby but refuses to accept me as her mother...”

: TRIPLE KILL

: gen 4, we need to talk

: That's *your* problem!

“They're all such handfuls, I love them! That's right, I, Shion-mama, love all

my children equally! No picking favorites!”

: the reversal reversal

: shion-mama, I just want to talk

: are the kids good? Is the mom good? at this point I no longer know

Q: Caregiving’s a hard line of work, innit?

“It absolutely is. The caregiving industry in Japan needs a comprehensive overhaul yesterday, but despite that, there seems to be a lack of meaningful dialogue and actionable solutions. It’s a difficult and multifaceted problem for sure.”

: Huh? I mean yes I agree, but what's with the seriousness all of a sudden?

: Shion-mama?

: Oh? the common sense squad strikes back?

“What do you mean? I’ve been serious this whole time?”

: ah

: <oh...>

: gaga googoo ¥50,000

Idle Talk: Kaeru Yamatani's Castella Q&A

"You can cross the mountains and dales, but you can always return here. Welcome to Kaeru Yamatani's stream. Today, we'll be answering a few Castellas."

: oy

: You okay? Baby want a super? ¥500

: now that's a big girl! ¥200

: sus greeting

: cross the mountains and dales known as adulthood, this uber has returned to force her viewers to baby her

: she didn't cross jack

: but at least she's home

"Good to see that Kaeru's chat is still as split between two extremes as ever. Kaeru only did her official greeting because she received the following Castella:

Q: My only wish is to see Gagabriel use her official greeting, even once. (The MonSlay one doesn't count.) Now that's done, it's back to your regularly scheduled programming."

Q: Gagabriel, you often say you are a baby. But are you a baby forever à la Sazae-san or will you eventually grow up someday?

"Kaeru is a baby for as long as she says she is a baby. Even when she is decrepit and old, as long as she says she is a baby, a baby is what she is. Her retirement home is not a retirement home, it is a kindergarten."

: yup, she crazy

: I tried to understand you. I really tried.

: I wonder how she gets the confidence to say such things

: She has the confidence to say such things because she is a baby. A baby has yet to have their imagination beaten out of them by society

: **hear hear! ¥8,888**

: society didn't beat anything out of her. society simply wants nothing to do with her.

: Retirement home: "I'm...a kindergarten?"

: "goo-goo... ga-ga..." the baby rasped

: nope, we're keeping you in the weird-folks home (Live-On) forever.

Q: Hi Gagabriel. If Shuwa-chan is your mommy, and Shuwa-chan's mother is Mashiron, then does that make Mashiron your grandmother???

"Careful, that kind of talk will earn you a scolding from Mashiro-senpai. Kaeru's advice is to not think too deeply about the Live-On family tree. It's looking more and more like the Sefirot these days."

Q: Dear Gagabriel. I couldn't decide whether to send you a baby bottle or pacifier so have this shitpost instead. Enjoy.

"I'd rather you send Kaeru a mommy instead. Also, is it just Kaeru or has the name Gagabriel caught on way too fast? The other day, a staff member referred to Kaeru as Gagabriel-san and only corrected themselves after Kaeru gaga'd in reply."

: cease this disparagement of the Kabbalah

: cuz Gagabriel just rolls off the tongue

: Just what is going over there at Live-On HQ?

Q: Word on the street is that your manager is friends, or should I say

“buddies by way of shared common interest,” with Shion-mama. Is there anything you would like to say to her?

“Your chat messages are getting too hard to understand.”

: LOL

: rude!

: you should be grateful she's even humoring you!

“Don’t misunderstand. Kaeru’s grateful to be treated like a baby, but the baby talk has gotten so advanced that even she has to really look at it to understand sometimes. For example, ‘Time to go down-down!’ means ‘Please download the following file.’ It’s amazing Kaeru even managed to figure that out, wouldn’t you agree?”

: I have no idea what my expectations even were and they were still blown out of the water

: even a baby could decipher that (literally)

: Your mother's glad to see you and your manager getting along

Q: My name is MC Mommy and I’m here to say, this is how you raise a child, the real Kaeru way. Neverland vibes like Peter Pan. If you wearin’ diapers, yeah, Huggies’s the brand!

“Kaeru would die in Neverland.”

: true

: not the serious response all of a sudden

: so *that* you admit to...

“I do not fear Neverland, however, for Kaeru is a baby. The next Castella will be the last.”

Q: What were your first impressions upon meeting Awayuki-san?

“Top-mommy. Top-mommy then, top-mommy now.”

Epilogue

A month after Dagger's incident, when the winds of March gave way to the fragrances of April, another day unfolded at Churiri's house. She had invited her genmates over for dinner, and the trio was bustling around the kitchen, preparing the meal. By no means was this a rare sight. Given Churiri's utter lack of life skills, Tadasu and Dagger frequently found themselves at her house, helping with chores or meals, or simply passing the time. This week, however, there had been a slight deviation from the norm.

"Tadasu-san," Churiri said. "Just what is the meaning of this? You haven't come here at all, streamed at all, posted on socials at all, or even sent me so much as a message!"

"Now, now," Dagger said. "No need to sound so confrontational. Just tell her how you really feel—you were worried about her."

"I... I wasn't worried!" Churiri snapped. "I get moody when things don't go according to schedule, that's all!"

"Mm-hmm," Dagger hummed before shifting her attention to Tadasu. "Unlike Sensei, however, *I'm* not too emotionally constipated to say that I was worried. What's going on?"

Tadasu, however, seemed unaware of the concerned looks directed at her, her gaze lost to the ceiling.

"Tadasu-chan?" Dagger said.

"H-Hey," Churiri said. "Don't tell me something's actually wrong with you? Do you feel ill?" Her indifferent facade faltered as she clasped Tadasu's shoulders. "Have you lost weight?"

"Wha?" Only then, noticing the pressure on her frame and the familiar face right in front of her, did Tadasu react. "Oh, um, my apologies. No, I'm fine. Where were we? Right, dinner." With that, Tadasu reclaimed some of her usual energy—at least for the moment.

“T-Tadasu-chan!” Dagger yelled. “The pot’s boiling over!”

“Hm?” Tadasu glanced down at the pot in front of her. “Ack! Crap! What do I do, what do I do?!”

“Turn the burner off!” Dagger said.

Tadasu hurriedly did so.

“Are you okay?” Sensei said. “Did it burn you?”

“No, I’m fine,” Tadasu said.

“That’s it! You’re banned from the kitchen today, Tadasu-chan!” Dagger said. “I can handle the rest. Go take a seat!”

Normally it was unthinkable for Tadasu to let a pot boil over. This lapse was the tipping point, and she found herself ousted from the kitchen.

Taking a seat at the dinner table, Tadasu let out a big sigh.

“What happened after your graduation ceremony?” Churiri asked, visibly concerned.

There was one day that stood out as the beginning of Tadasu’s odd behavior, and that was the day of her school’s graduation ceremony.

Actually, Tadasu-san has seemed a little preoccupied ever since we hashed it out with Dagger-san post her incident, Churiri thought, reflecting on the past month.

Tadasu remained silent. It wasn’t so much that she didn’t want to talk, but rather that she was unsure of how to approach the subject.

Is she worried about her future postgraduation? Churiri continued to ponder. *No, that can’t be it. She already decided to continue as a streamer alongside the rest of us quite some time ago.*

She thought long and hard, but in the end, decided to let the matter drop. “Whatever. Let’s just eat.” Experience had taught her that when Tadasu was like this, it was wiser to take a step back and let Tadasu open up of her own

volition.

“Sensei, could you bring these dishes to the table for me?” Dagger said.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Just one ‘yeah’ is enough. Don’t sass me, young lady.”

“Is it just me, or do our roles seem reversed here?”

Despite their prickly exchange, their actions were quick and efficient, setting the table before Tadasu could raise a finger. Then, as usual, they all dug in.

“Hey,” Dagger said. “Was my amnesia act really *that* bad?”

“It was about as believable as a politician saying, ‘I don’t recall,’” Churiri replied.

“I-I mean, maybe they really don’t recall!” Dagger pouted. “Tadasu-chan, what do you think?”

Perhaps Tadasu noticed they were trying to include her in the conversation for her sake, or perhaps it was the delicious cooking that touched her. Maybe it was both. Or maybe it was neither, and this was simply as far as Tadasu could hold it in. But regardless of the reason, her emotions spilled out.

“Hareru-senpai realized,” Tadasu whispered.

Churiri and Dagger both *hmm?*ed in confusion.

Distress pressing down upon her, Tadasu’s voice trembled. “Hareru-senpai has always realized. That’s why she said...”

“T-Tadasu-chan?” Dagger’s voice filled with a growing concern.

“It was all a lie,” Tadasu continued, now seemingly unaware of her surroundings. “I cloaked my lust in morality. I blamed Live-On, even though they didn’t do anything wrong. No, not just Live-On, but everything, everyone...” Her voice shook. “Why... Why?”

“Tadasu-chan, can you hear me?” Dagger said.

A crack in her composure had formed, and it could no longer bear the weight of her burden. “I’m so sorry. I truly am. I wish I could go back. I wish I could undo it all. I wish I could erase every single decision. Someone should have

stopped me. Why didn't they stop me? No, no. It's not them, it's me. It's all on me. Don't you dare shift this blame. You've disgraced yourself over and over. You knew better. You always knew...so why? Why did I do what I did? I have Sensei. I have Dagger-chan, so why?" Her voice crescendoed into a wail. "Ah, I can't take it anymore. I can't take it! I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't!!!"

Dagger had no idea what was going on, but rushed to Tadasu's side and shook her shoulders. "Tadasu-chan! Talk to me, please. What's happening? Are you all right?"

Churiri, meanwhile, was rooted to her seat in shock. Her eyes remained glued to Tadasu, unable to look away even for a moment. *Tadasu-san, you...* Her thoughts trailed off, choked by a sudden surge of empathy.

The paralysis that gripped her was rooted in familiarity—a haunting recognition that prevented her from jumping into action like Dagger. Churiri had seen this kind of despair before. Although she didn't know the precise events that had led to this moment, the outcome was painfully familiar.

You...

There was no mistaking it. The overwhelming desire to rewind time, to correct past errors; the crushing self-loathing paired with a terror of what lay ahead—these were emotions Churiri herself had battled time and again.

When Tadasu finally lifted her head to lock eyes with her two genmates, her expression was one of utter despair, her gaze searching, almost pleading for answers. "Tell me. Tell me what I should do..."

In that moment, Churiri's mind was besieged by flashbacks of her own darkest days. Yet it wasn't the shock of witnessing such pain that hit her hardest—it was the heart-wrenching realization that it was Tadasu, of all people, who was unraveling before her.

Tadasu-san's...having a nervous breakdown?

Afterword

Thank you so very much for picking up volume 8 of *VTuber Legend*. I'm the author, Nana Nanato.

Dagger was undeniably the star of this volume. I aimed to add a touch of warmth and fuzziness to the usual chaos, something akin to chicken soup for the soul—quite a departure for this series, TBH! The inclusion of three different Castella Q&As at the end was meant to give some of the otherwise absent characters some screen time. Hopefully I'll be able to do this for all of them one day! Just as the main volume was packed with turmoil, the epilogue hints at more to come. Expect the next volume to be an emotional roller coaster, featuring a mixed bag of senpais and kouhais. (Though, let's be honest, this is *VTuber Legend* we're talking about, so any drama will likely still be overshadowed by the comedy.)

On an unrelated note, I apologize for the delay in Awayuki revisiting her first stream! I initially planned to write it much sooner, but then some things happened, and the original plan didn't come to fruition. I then thought that was no big deal and I could revisit it later, only to promptly and completely forget about it. I only remembered this was even supposed to be a thing when I was doing some prep for the anime. Completely my fault. But I will get around to it. You have my word. For those looking forward to it, please hold on just a little while longer.

As is now tradition, I'd like to share some insights into the writing process. This time, I want to talk about "the chat." It's an element that has been around since the start of *VTuber Legend* and has brought its fair share of frustration. What could there be to think about regarding the in-universe stream chat, you ask? Well, the question of whether to make it realistic or not.

On a real stream, it's uncommon to see discussions forming between chat messages. It's almost discouraged to write a message responding to another message. There's also a time lag before messages appear, making it challenging

for the streamer to respond to specific comments. These were elements I considered reproducing when I started writing *VTuber Legend*, but in the end, I decided on a no-lag chat that I can only describe as a hybrid of YouTube, Nico Nico, and anonymous message board comments. The reasoning was simple: I believed this would be a unique and engaging narrative tool that suits the novel format.

While some may argue that a faithful recreation is the sincerest form of respect for the medium, to put it bluntly, it doesn't matter how respectful I make it if the audience doesn't find it entertaining. Because even though *VTuber Legend* has come into its own by now, it is ultimately still an entertaining literary portrayal of an audio-visual phenomenon. I beg your forgiveness on any such changes I had to make for the sake of crafting a good read. In this way, *VTuber Legend* is a result of near-constant trial and error, a reminder that personality and quirkiness can arise from how you choose to express something.

The whole reason I started writing this series was to create my ideal group of virtual streamers. At the time, the idea that a streamer might make it big by forgetting to turn off their stream was almost antithetical to the scene, where "fans" piled onto streamers at the slightest controversy. For better or for worse, I stuck to my vision, and this is what we ended up with.

But now, this creation is no longer just my own. Visions now intertwine, an important sign of growth as these humble novels expand to manga and beyond. There are limits to what one can achieve alone, so I embrace this change willingly.

I will continue to give my all to this series!

Lastly, to everyone who participated in the production of volume 8, as well as to all my readers who've supported me, thank you so very much as always. Let us meet again in volume 9.

VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL

AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 8

AUTHOR: NANA NANATO ILLUSTRATOR: SIOKAZUNOKO





"AAAAH~↑!
STROZERO...
MASTER'S
STROZERO...!"

"SUCH
TREASURE.
I CAN'T
BELIEVE IT!"

LIVE comment

- | Pshhh! x2
- | It's the StroZero-chuu
- | Better keep an eye on y
- | apprentice next time, ch
- | H-How does Shuwa-chan
- | taste, Dagger-chan?
- | We sloshed!
- | Knife-chan so cute!
- | Cuteness overload
- | ¥ 50,000
- | So cute so cute so cute so cute
- | so cute so cute so cute
- | Now there's a proud-looking master
- | Dagger-chan, don't drink too much!
- | Shuwa-chan, don't do too much!

The Master and the Apprentice
#ColdSteel

Author: NANA NANATO Illustration: SIOKAZUOKO

VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL
AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 8

VTUBER LEGEND:

HOW I WENT VIRAL AFTER

FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 8



VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL

AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 8

AUTHOR: NANA NANATO ILLUSTRATOR: SIOKAZUNOKO





"AAAAH~↑!
STROZERO...
MASTER'S
STROZERO...!"

"SUCH
TREASURE.
I CAN'T
BELIEVE IT!"



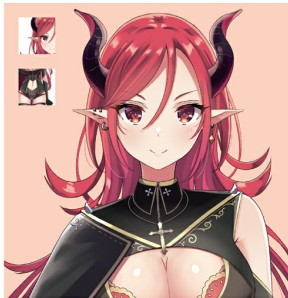
HARERU ASAGIRI

"Heya! It's me—the sunlight in everyone's hearts, Hareru Asagiri!"

An energetic high school girl who loves putting smiles on everyone's faces. Extremely curious and—carried by her momentum—frequently does or says things that nobody would have ever expected.

GEN 1

GEN 2



SEI UTSUKI

"Hey, ladies and gents! It's your girl, Sei-sama!"

In her past life, she was a succubus who lived off the vigor of men, but died of starvation since she only ever showed interest in other women. She reincarnated, bringing us to today. Her horns are a holdover from that past life.

GEN 3



MASHIRO IRODORI

"Kon-mashiro, everyone! It's me, Mashiro Irodori, also called Mashiron."

An illustrator who lives to draw. While she can be a little scathing with her remarks, she's actually a kind, friendly girl.



AWAYUKI KOKORONE

"Good evening, everyone. Another nice, light snow is falling tonight? I'm Awayuki Kokorone."

A mysterious beauty who only appears on days when a light snow is falling. Her purple eyes draw you in with the promise of something hidden deep inside them...



SHION KAMINARI

"Kon-miko, everyone! It's everyone's mama, Shion Kaminari!"

A shrine maiden whose body is inhabited by a nine-tailed fox and who safeguards the people as a servant of the kami. Because of how fiercely her nine fluffy tails swing around based on her emotions, caution is needed when standing behind her.



NEKOMA HIRUNE

"Nya-nyan! I caught a whiff of something great and came running!"

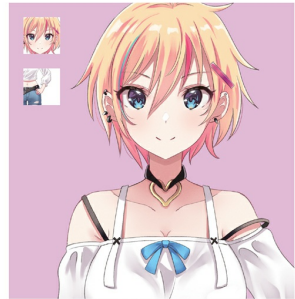
A beast girl with heterochromia who loves naps—but whenever she sees someone close by eating food, she immediately gets up and goes over to them with sparkling eyes. She'll be happy if you give her something. She'll also be happy if you pet her, even if you don't give her anything.



HIKARI MATSURIYA

"Kon-pika, everyone! The light of the festival is here for all to enjoy! It's me, Hikari Matsuriya!"

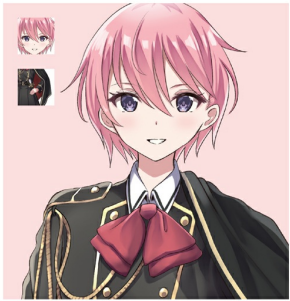
A festival girl who appears at festivals throughout Japan. Some say she's even appeared at the same time in two different festivals held in separate places.



CHAMI YANAGASE

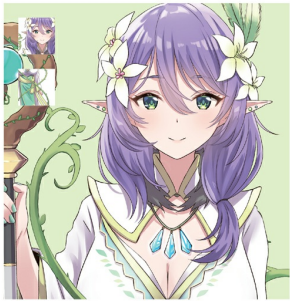
"Hello! It's Chami Yanagase-oneesan, the one who always guides everyone to the pinnacle of healing."

Originally a gloomy character, but rallied her courage and debuted as a sunny one—to thunderous applause. Inside, though, she hasn't changed, making her a gloomy character wearing the skin of a sunny one.



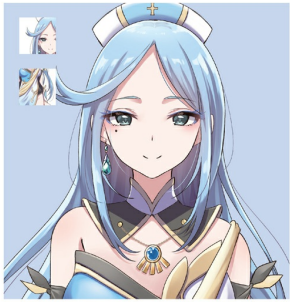
ALICE SOMA

“Ma’am! Alice Soma, at your service!”
A member of the Resistance, an idol group focused on self-liberation. Her cool looks make her popular with men and women alike, but inside she’s somewhat incompetent, so she works hard to protect her image.



EHRAI SONOKAZE

“Heya, everyone! Are you all doing well? I am! I’m Ehrai Sonokaze, zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo!”
An elven zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo, a major theme park featuring every animal under the sun. Respected to the point of complete obedience by all the animals there, for some reason.



KAERU YAMATANI

“You can cross the mountains and dales, but you can always return here. Welcome to Kaeru Yamatani’s stream.”
A mysterious, mystical woman who is said to appear before kind, loving hearts that have been grievously wounded, grant them her healing, and then return upon the wind.



TADASU MIYAUCHI

“How do you all do, everyone? It is I, the sole daughter of the venerable Miyauchi lineage, the Anti-Live-On icon herself, Tadasu Miyauchi.”
The student council president of the prestigious all girls’ school Saika Girls Academy, she takes great pride in her family name. A lover of all things clean and virtuous, she has thus come to view Live-On as the enemy.



CHURIRI

“Good morning, class! It’s your teacher in all things love, Churiri-sensei!”
A teacher with hair of indescribable hue who works at Live-On. An alien from outer space, her real name is much longer, comprised of sounds not replicable in any human language. She teaches love.



DAGGER

“I am a wanderer of memories, a renegade in this realm. Forsaken by my past, I am a whisper without a name. I...am Dagger.”
A young girl with amnesia. She wandered the realm without purpose or end before Live-On took her in and promptly debuted her as a streamer. What few memories she retains paint a grim picture.

Live-ON
Live-On

The Chosen Shining Girls

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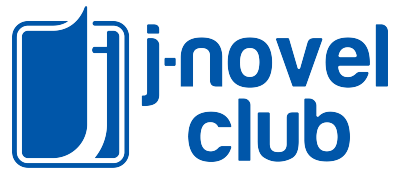
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VTuber Legend: How I Went Viral after Forgetting to Turn Off My Stream
Volume 8

by Nana Nanato

Translated by Dawson Chen Edited by Alexandra Fresch

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