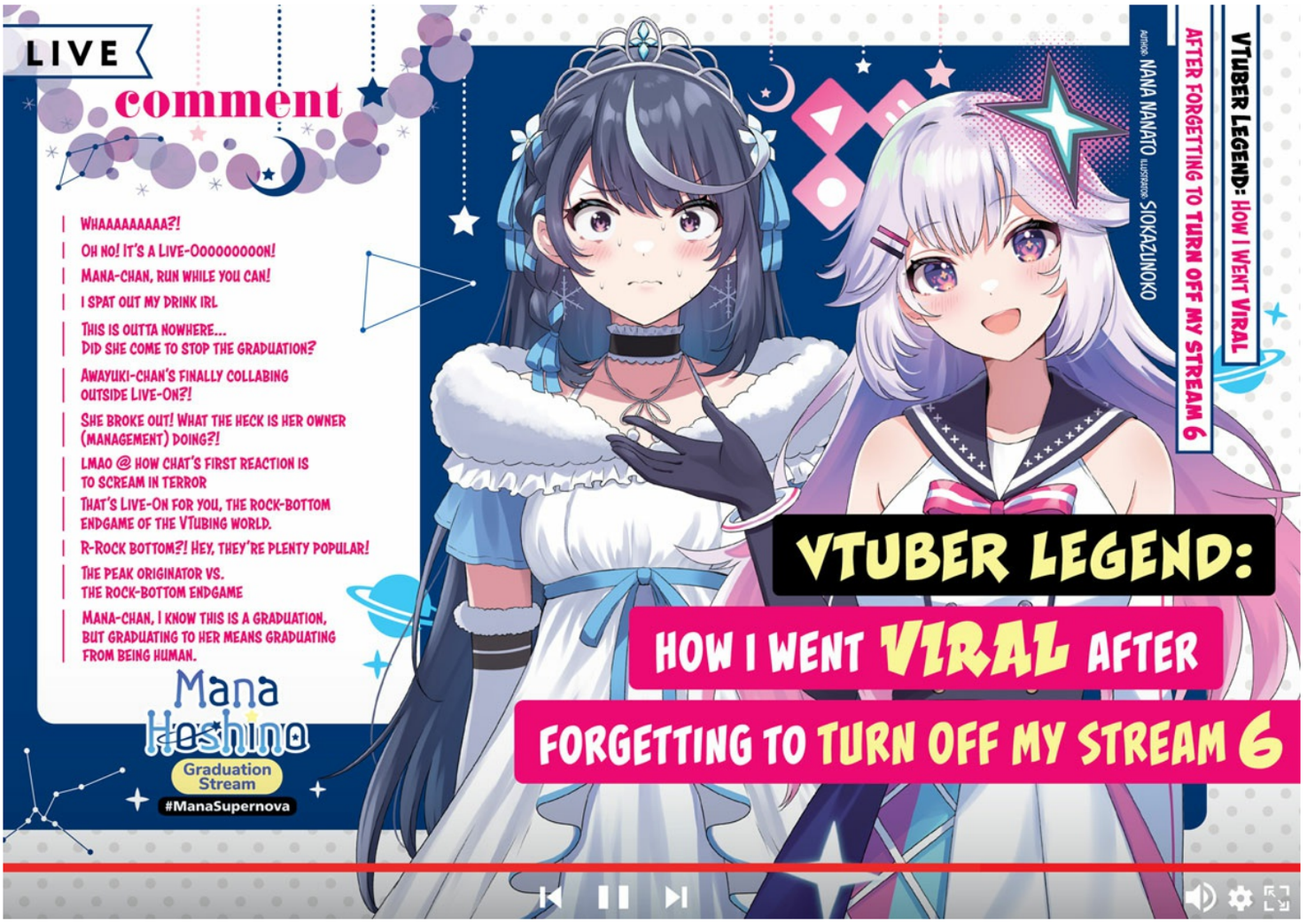
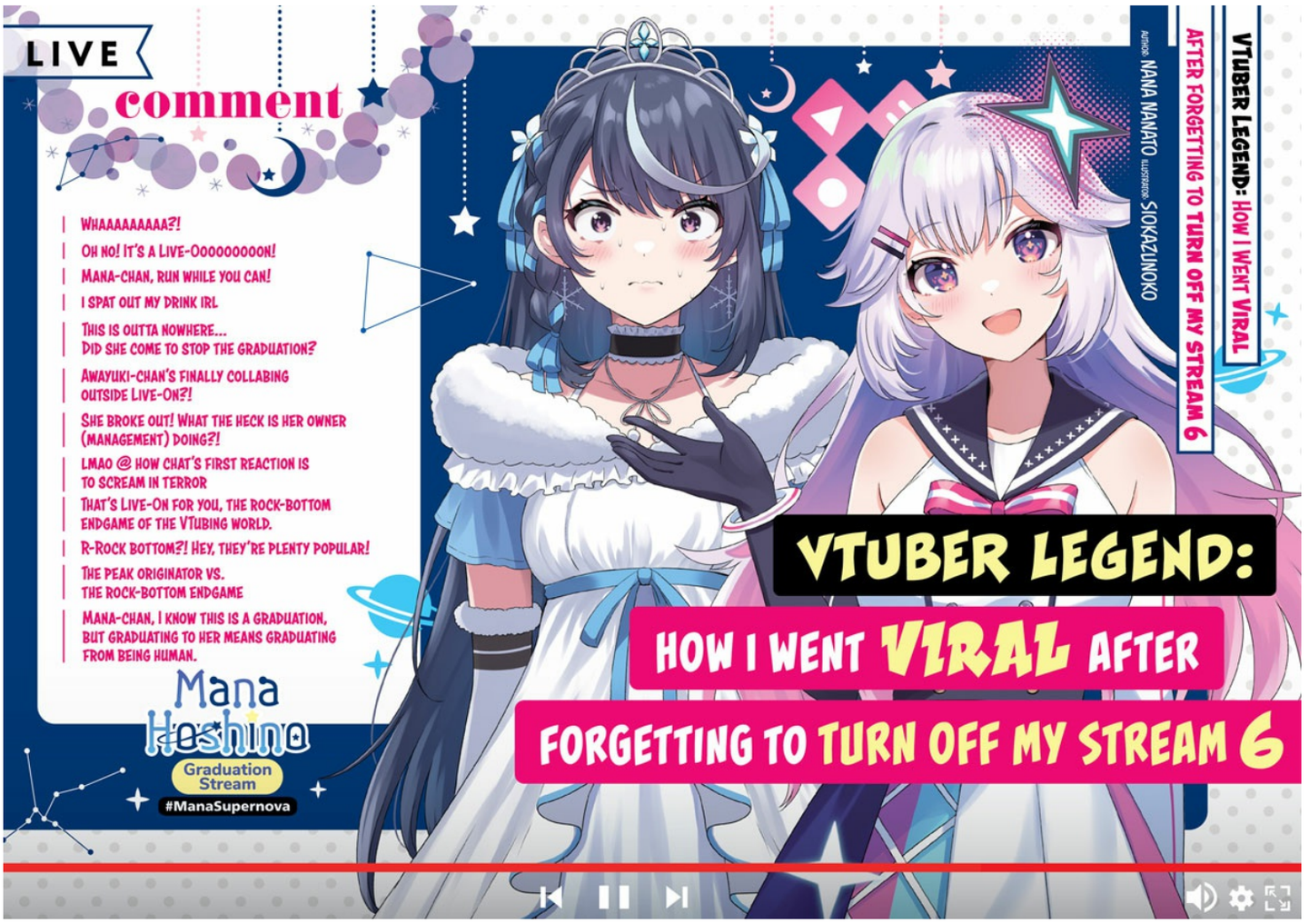

LIVE
comment
WHAAAAAAAAA?!
OH NO! IT'S A LIVE-OOOOOOOON!
MANA-CHAN, RUN WHILE YOU CAN!
I SPAT OUT MY DRINK IRL
THIS IS OUTTA NOWHERE...
DID SHE COME TO STOP THE GRADUATION?
AWAYUKI-CHAN'S FINALLY COLLABING
OUTSIDE LIVE-ON?!
SHE BROKE OUT! WHAT THE HECK IS HER OWNER
(MANAGEMENT) DOING?!
LMAO @ HOW CHAT'S FIRST REACTION IS
TO SCREAM IN TERROR
THAT'S LIVE-ON FOR YOU, THE ROCK-BOTTOM
ENDGAME OF THE VTUBING WORLD.
R-ROCK BOTTOM?! HEY, THEY'RE PLENTY POPULAR!
THE PEAK ORIGINATOR VS.
THE ROCK-BOTTOM ENDGAME
MANA-CHAN, I KNOW THIS IS A GRADUATION,
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FROM BEING HUMAN.
Mana Hoshino
Graduation Stream
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VTuber Legend: How I Went Viral After Forgetting to Turn Off My Stream 6
AUTHOR: NANA NANATO ILLUSTRATOR: SIOKAZUNOKO
VTUBER LEGEND:
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VTuber Legend: How I Went Viral after Forgetting to Turn Off My Stream Volume 6 [Complete]

1. Part 1
2. Part 2
3. Part 3
4. Part 4
5. Part 5
6. Part 6
7. Part 7
8. Part 8


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Prologue

“*And so, I, Mana Hoshino, have decided...to graduate from all VTuber activities.*”

“No way...”

Once upon a time, there was a woman spending her off-stream time pacing around her home and staring at a video that played on her smartphone screen. That woman was me, Yuki Tanaka.

“*One month from now, to be specific. I apologize that this announcement is coming so suddenly.*”

“No way... Whoa, no way...”

I muttered nonsense that could only dubiously be ascribed to a spoken language as I aimlessly paced circles around my home. The reason behind my stupor-like state was, of course, the thing displayed on my smartphone. Mana Hoshino-chan was going to graduate...and like she said, it really *was* a sudden announcement.

Mana Hoshino-chan was famous, a household name among anyone who knew the first thing about VTubers. Her name had even come up during one of my Castella streams not long ago, a fact that resurfaced in my mind with every step I took along the well-walked trail throughout my home.

She was born at the dawn of the VTubing industry—long before Live-On came into existence with Hareru-senpai’s debut, and in fact before the very concept of a VTuber agency ever did.

Her long list of achievements began back when you could count the number of active VTubers on one hand. She put forth unique projects and videos one after another with the help of the corporation that employed her, eventually leading the industry and shaping what it was today. Soon enough, she was on the tip of everyone’s tongue when talking about VTubers; what fans called the Elite Four of VTubing was composed of her and three other VTubers who’d reached her level of fame at the time, and they shone as brightly as the stars.

The reins were later taken by VTuber groups assigned to agencies like our own, but even then, she was always standing at the forefront of VTubing. Hers was a name that'd been carved deeply into the annals of this subculture's history, and with her striking professionalism and charisma that never took a day off, many regarded her as practically a deity of this industry.

I had nothing to do with someone so far above me, of course, and getting hooked on VTubers through Live-On meant that I hadn't even watched her rise to stardom in real time. But still, I was fully aware that my lifestyle as a VTuber was only possible because of predecessors like Mana-chan, so I held her in the highest of regards.

And that girl...was finally graduating.

"*I'm truly grateful for everything. Ah ha ha, it's not like I've been active for over a decade or anything, but I still just have so many memories... My time as a VTuber has been the most wonderful experience of my life. I don't have a single regret; I'll be proud of what I've accomplished for as long as I live.*"

"No waaaay... Ooooh..."

Full disclosure, this was not my first time playing this video. I had replayed it more times than I could count, and I'd performed this same bizarre ritual every single time.

VTubing was an industry with pretty frequent turnover. That trend might not have shown up in Live-On yet, but it was far from rare to hear news about graduations and retirements. But man...this one was *still* a shock.

Sure, it's always sad to see someone you admire go, but Mana-chan inspired the births of so many VTubers who came after her; hearing that she was graduating made me feel empty, like I was witnessing the end of an era.


IM NT
ANN ENT

The news was all over social media. Everyone in the Live-On group chat was in shock. Mana-chan really was beloved by all.

"*Er, I might be repeating myself here, but! For this last month, I'll be going at full speed so that I can remain a shining star in your hearts long after I graduate! We've still got a whole month together, after all! Don't forget, now!*"

"Oooohhhh, Mana-chaaaaaan!!!"

Seeing Mana-chan show so much cheer even during her graduation announcement tugged at my heartstrings. It might have seemed sudden for us, but from the way she was acting about it, she'd probably come to this decision long ago.

I'd never had the chance to interact with her directly, but she was practically a senior to every one of us. And when a senior graduates, it's the job of a junior like me to send them off on a high note.

"*And then, one month from now... I'll hold a special graduation stream to say farewell for good. I'm sorry to ask so much of you all, but I'd be so happy if you could come... I don't like getting all glum, so I'd like it if I could graduate with a smile!*"

"Yeah! I'll come watch! I swear I'll be there!"

That settled it, I was going to spend this month poring over all of Mana-chan's past videos. And then, when her graduation day came, I'd get sentimental over the memories and see her off with a smile.

"*All right then, let's make this last month special!*"

And with a firm, cheerful goodbye, the video ended. I considered replaying it one more time, but I'd get nowhere if I just kept it on repeat.

Right, this was no time for *me* to get glum! As someone living in the industry that Mana-chan had built for us, I had to shine like a star! Get it together, Awayuki!

I pumped myself up and finally closed the video.

Chapter 1: *WorCra* Stream 3

Now then, tonight's stream would begin with answering some Castellas, followed by what was becoming a mainstay of my schedule, *WorCra*. While sober, by the way.

The world of the Live-On *WorCra* server, once a vast expanse of nature untouched by human hands, was now bustling with frequent logins by casuals and hardcore players alike. Buildings were lined up to create what could finally be called a city, and its borders were expanding by the day.

I was firmly in the casual camp and only logged in when the mood struck me, but today, I was planning to take a tour of the server with my viewers. This was going to be my first time searching through every nook and cranny of the town, so I expected to see a lot of unfamiliar sights. I was as excited as my viewers were!

As such, I began my stream by explaining the above to my viewers, so now I'd answer Castellas until it was time for the server's peak login hours!

"Okay, so moving on, our first Castella will be this!"

Q: Food ¥20,000

Data ¥15,000

Rent ¥80,000

Candles ¥360,000

New StroZero Price ¥220

someone who is good at the economy please help me budget this. my nonexistent family is dying "Ah, yes, they did raise the price... How should I go about this? Go about what, you ask? Well, in my Shuwa mode, I often receive supers containing that convenience-store price along with messages calling it the 'sacred three-digit number,' so having that number change could cause confusion... I know! We should enshrine both the old *and* the new StroZero prices! Prices will surely change again someday. Shuwa would certainly say that

the rich history of StroZero deserves worship as well!”

: "The sacred numbers (based on exchange rate)" lmao

: this religion just does whatever lol

: Does that mean we can add 162 and 220?

: I'll stick with ole reliable! ¥211

“So yes, just something to keep in mind! However... I’m afraid I can’t even lol when this version is so much sadder than the original. Ah, yes, let’s all just make a family with Chami-chan, instead!”

Q: I was so excited to send this Castella, but suddenly, the envelope started looking just like a can of StroZero to me. Could this be love?

“I think you may be a bit too divorced from the very concept of love. Come now, don’t fall head-over-heels for that bubbly can of chuhai, watch *me* instead! Here, it’s a close-up for the gachikois! Teehee, I gave you a whole kissing face for your first shot. How’s *that* for fanservice, hmm?”

: most punchable face

: open your eyes jfc

: say something already

: yall are savage lmao

: No, not the Drain Kiss! It'll suck all the lemon flavor out of meeeee!

: ^ was this posted by a can of StroZero?

: Finally, the era where StroZero cans are commenting on VTubers.

: (cute tho)

: Awa-chan, if it weren't for the drinking...

“Oh, goodness! You’ve all been so cold to me lately, have you not? In case it bears repeating, just *look* at how seiso I am! I challenge you to name a single un-seiso facet about me that you’ve seen today! Besides, you’re confusing all the new viewers!”

: It's a level beyond your looks and your voice, it's like your *aura* is corrupt.

: Your digital tattoo covers so much of you that there's hardly a shred of seiso skin left.

: You can't fool me. I am familiar with your game.

: the sheer force of this chat lmao

: I think the moment you start repeating that you're seiso is the moment that it becomes "self-proclaimed."

“I don’t quite agree, but could I ask that you please stop debating me?” I sobbed.

: oh no don't turn into Hiroyuki but a loser

: Hiroyuki if he were only one kind of master debater

: Hiroyuki if he'd never built that anonymous message board and just drank StroZero instead.

: Starting to sound like a different "yuki" I know...

: lmao you're just looping back to Awayuki

: All StroZero drinkers are geniuses

: Was that sarcasm?

: Hey now, Shuwa-chan's a genius at, uh, something...

“All right, you, I’ve been doing some thinking, and if a completely new viewer who didn’t know the first thing about me came to see this chat, what would they think of not-Shuwa me? Are there any first-timers in the chat, by chance? Or do most of you come here knowing a bit about me from clips?”

: Hi I'm new, you're just like StroZero!

: Hi I'm new (Pshhh!)

: Hi I'm new ¥211

: Hi I'm new, did you vomit?

: Hi I'm new, can I get hard?

: Hi I'm new, do you have Fighting Amphibians?

“Hey! You people there are absolutely *not* new! Turning the chat box into a peanut gallery is far from seiso!”

: kusa

: No, wait, that guy who sounded like he got lost on the way to Gamestop could possibly be new!

: Just realizing it now, but doesn't he mean Battletoads?

: Fighting Amphibians is the term patricians use

: sounds like who the Boss would hire as bodyguards

“Oh no, there’s an eighty or ninety percent chance that that was *not* a newcomer! After all, would any of you go into the chat of a different group’s

seiso representative and post about *Fighting Amphibians* in their chat boxes?”

: depressing that we need to go all the way to a different group to find someone seiso...

: I think most viewers would, which is what makes this industry scary

: Actual newcomer here, I've been laughing my butt off! Consider me your new fan!

: Complete newcomer here, and you're...not quite what I'd call seiso, but I like you a lot!

: yo????

“Uh, oh, are you actual newcomers?! Th-Thank you very much... Tee hee, um, I’m happy as long as you’re having fun! Pl-Please, continue watching! Er, that makes it sound a bit like I’m forcing you to, ah ha ah, uhh, I-I stream in the hopes that you all enjoy yourselves, so please tune in as often as you like!”

: Huh? Is this...seiso?

: who ARE you?

: it's me, the one believer in Awa-chan's seiso-ness.

: sucking in the newbies like a vacuum, yikes

: My god, it's the Awayuki Kokorone that we originally expected to get

: it's the Awayuki Kokorone that Live-On never expected to *actually* get

“Phew! Oh, hearing newcomers finally call me seiso has me jumping for joy! Let’s take this energy into the next Castella!”

Q: Ah, flat StroZero... This girl knows her stuff.

※ You said you had a lot of flat StroZeros waiting for you at the start of that *Amidst Us* stream, but did you manage to drink them all? If so, could you provide a review comparing it to the normal flavor for reference?

“Ahh, that... Yes, I finished drinking them all just the other day. How should I describe it... They tasted like StroZeros that had grown up and settled down. Delicious.”

: Love the way she searches for just the right words.

: Hope they release a banana flavor for the Biwa Hayahide fans out there

: So sayeth the flat Awayuki

: Wait, Awa-chan drank StroZero?

: Oh?

: dragged back down by the split personality she made up

“Ah, no, wai—”

Sh-Shoot! I’d been trying to avoid bragging about all the StroZero I drank while in Awa mode, but being called seiso made me so happy that I slipped up!

What do I do? I thought. *Should I pretend like it was a misunderstanding? No, I sounded way too serious to play it off now!*

After some thought, I settled on a plan. I was going to borrow the logic of the one comedy routine that could save me.

“Why, yes, I did drink them. I drank them indeed. But by losing its carbonation, that StroZero also lost its alcohol, so it was effectively zero percent ABV, making it nothing more than an adult fruit juice. There should be no problem with me drinking it.”

: uhhhhh

: Where have I heard this logic before...

: don't get worse on purpose

: Alcohol Zero Theory lmao

Heh heh heh! Behold, my take on the Calorie Zero Theory: the Alcohol Zero Theory! Just watch me make it through with my dignity intact!

“Feel free to interject if you have any arguments to the contrary. I, Awayuki, the Hiroyuki of VTubing, will gladly debate you.”

: Weren't you just sobbing at us not to debate you?

: Could I ask you to please stop lying?

: But that still means you had StroZero in your house, right? Did you buy it?

“I wanted a carbonated drink to quench my thirst while I was at the supermarket, and I bought it by mistake. The dryness of my throat caught the alcohol before my body absorbed it, so it was effectively alcohol-zero. And since what I drank was flat, if anything, it was *negative*. Negative nine percent ABV.”

: negative ABV lmao

: If anything, the flash-freezing that StroZero is put through freezes and kills the alcohol with it, so it's 0% by default

: Alcohol disappears if you burn it, so obviously it also disappears when you freeze it

: this is some cartoon logic

: But it says 9% on the bottle...

: That's a typo.

: But I got blackout drunk the one time I tried it...

: Your body was just shocked by its magnificent flavor.

: I think it's only frozen at a temperature that freezes the fruits, not alcohol...

: I don't know for sure, but I thought alcohol didn't even freeze?

“Though of course, this isn’t limited to StroZero. For someone as pure as me, a single touch of any drink, be it beer, soda, or even mud, will magically rid it of any impurity and leave pure, delicious water.”

: Just like Princess Anna, huh

: more like everything you touch turns to StroZero

: Scissorhands

: that's Kaiju No. 0 for you

: workin hard on those zero jokes huh

: I appreciate how hard you're trying to save yourself, but I'm sorry, it's too late

: the more she talks, the more she sounds like a drunkard arguing that she doesn't need an intervention lmao

“That’s just, like, your opinion, man,” I sobbed.

I couldn’t go on. I suspected that continuing this argument would just get me further away from being seiso. Let’s just move on to the next Castella...

Q: Say “heatstroke” really fast, then say “frostbite” really slowly.

“Are you trying to pick a fight? You’ve got it backward, you’re supposed to get VTubers to say it *slowly*, and I don’t think ‘frostbite’ makes anything when said that way... But alas, do it I shall. ‘Heatstroke’ should do it for that, the trouble comes with saying ‘frostbite’ slowly. All right, everyone, listen well. I shall make you all fall head over heels by simply saying ‘frostbite.’ But once you do, you all have to admit defeat and worship me as the pinnacle of seiso.”

: Oooh!

: Go for it, Awa-chan!

: already hit mute

“Fuh, rost...bite? ❤”

: Ewww loooool unsubscribed lmaoooo

THUUUUUUUUUD! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! WHAAAAAAAAM! Cling clang clunk...

: all of my kusa

: i've never heard someone slam a desk so viciously before

: Probably has ten times the force of Harerun's desk slams

: so you *do* have Fighting Amphibians over there

: nah, this is just fighting.

: The empty StroZero cans are falling off the table, you know.

: Hearing the echoes of those cans rolling around is just so depressing...

: Calm down, Awa-chan!

: Don't worry, your feelings have made it across!

“Hehhh... Hahhh... Huffff... Hahhh... R-Really, now? Are there really people who fell for me? My heart has been ever so wounded, so could you please comfort me in the comments?”

: I'll have to firmly decline the frostbite, but I wish a fine financial quarter to your company.

: I'm sorry... The least I can do is send a superchat. ¥50,000

: For some reason, my brain just hears it as Shuwa-chan shouting, "Let's have sex!"

: Hmm, 3/10 lol

: Ah, Chami-chan just started streaming, so bye!

THUUDDDUDDDUDD!!! WHACK! SLAM! KLING! SLAAAAAAAMMMMMMMMM!!!

“Waaaaaauuuggghhh~!!!”

: This sound! There's no mistaking it! We've got a keyboard crusher, boys!

: A keyboard crusher, that takes me back! I haven't seen one in ages!

: don't slam the desk with your keyboard!!!

: the way that last hit sounded like it had its own vibrato lmao

: imagining someone who looks like that getting pissed and swinging a keyboard around lol

: I'm sorry, really! Calm down!

: Seiso! Awa-chan is super seiso!

Afterwards, my viewers cooled it a bit and comforted me as I gathered my keyboard's keycaps and snapped them back into place.

"Really, now! I may have said as much before, but these sorts of pro wrestling moves are only permitted to the purest of seiso streamers such as myself! Any other women you know should not imitate this!"

: How magnanimous, she truly is seiso, if not a saint.

: A goddess who would put her life on the line to make her fans smile, truly the most seiso of Live-On.

: other women... i know...???

: i checked my contacts list and then gently put the phone down "Oh..."

: If only I could follow Shuwa-chan's teachings and be more assertive...

: It's okay, that's why we have Live-On...

: I have a mom! I at least have a mom!

"Uhh, I-I'm sorry, I think? L-Let's go to the next Castella! Wait... What the heck am I apologizing to *you* knuckleheads for?!"

Q: A sparkling☆diamond (meaningful), like a shining star

Booze, sexual harassment, I'll endure somehow,

Pervert, drunkard, aim (to be a) top ／Pshhh Pshhh!＼

／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼

Wait, no, I'm not (legally) doing anything wrong!

／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼

There's nothing wrong with being a drunkard!

／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼

What, you wanna drink too! You idiot!

／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼／Pshhh!＼

"Ah, this one takes me back! I think like nine(ty) percent of the lyrics are

wrong, but hey!”

: Ahh, so this is that Diamond Dust song I've been hearing about. What inventive lyrics!

: hmmm, not quite

: This being nostalgic makes me cry in a different way...

: Released in 2008, yeah.

: Wait, no way, right? It still feels like seven years ago to me...

: 2008, huh? That's ten years before I was born.

: ^ are you actually five years old?

: they're closer than the people 100% wrong about you being seiso

: brutal lmao

“Really brings back the memories... That Cirno-chan music video was so cute. Ah! Aren’t Cirno-chan and I somewhat similar, like with our looks and our lore? Come now, don’t we look alike?”

: press X to doubt

: X

: keep the jokes to your face

: Don't make a fool out of Cirno. Girls as sweet and foolish as her don’t come around every day.

: The only thing you have in common is your IQ

: If you removed the StroZero and innuendos from Awayuki-chan, then yeah, they look similar.

“No, you’d just have me! Someone as seiso as I has never once had StroZeros or innuendos! You can’t remove what has never been there!!! Take a clooose look, I’m just like a grown-up Cirno-chan~!”

: i'm suing

: Are there any lawyers in the audience willing to help us with a slander case?

: I'm a lawyer, and this would definitely get the death penalty.

“Since when is the law that extreme?! I’m a model citizen who wishes for peace and lives to give others a smile! You have no case to sue me over! How rude of you all!”

: Premiums and Representations Act, Article 5, Section 1: No false advertising of a product's quality.

: kusa

: I came for seiso, I got StroZero. This is clearly false advertising.

“Wh-Where is this coming from?! I-Is there nobody who will take my side?! This is a mistrial if I don’t have a lawyer as well to represent me!”

: Leave it to me, Awa-chan, I'll protect you. I am an agent of justice.

“Ooh, I’ve got someone, I guess! Thank you very much, Mr. Agent of Justice! I beg you, please prove my innocence!”

: It's smooth sailing from here, Awa-chan. I'm known by my lawyer allies as "He Who Fights Against the Six Codes of Japanese Law."

: i think he's just making fun of you here

: smooth sailing on a garbage barge

“I-I’m beginning to get a tad concerned, but I still trust you! After all, someone who takes my side could never be a bad guy!”

: But of course. After all, I am an agent of justice.

: She's suspected of public indecency.

: Prepare the guillotine, then, for I am an agent of justice.

“Argue for me! Why are you stabbing in the back?! And never once have I committed public indecency! Probably!”

: lmao she's not even sure herself

: He really wasn't a bad guy, apart from the fighting against the six codes thing.

: This streamer sure is good at pro wrestling.

Q: Shion-Mama: “<I am your mother.>”

Awayuki-chan: “<NOOOOOOOOOOOO!>”

“She really *is* like that, though! But why are these lines in English?”

: Star Wars!

: That's some Star Wars.

“Ah, I see! Now that you mention it, it is! I might not know too much about the series, but I at least know this scene!”

: Emperor: "Henceforth, you shall be known as...Analskin Skywalker."

: even his naming sense has fallen to The Dark Side

“Oph... Pfff... Heh...”

: She's trying so hard not to laugh

: yeah, she can't claim to be seiso if she does

: Awa-chan Is Attacked by a Merciless Red Super!

: C'mon, what's wrong? Go ahead, read it out loud.

: that surprise attack was evil

: It's dumb and immature, but I understand wanting to laugh at it anyway.

“Pff, phew... Ah, erm, that was nothing, you know? I was simply thinking about how living one’s life can bring so many fun things with it, yes. I’ve gotten quite thirsty and I’d like to settle down, so I’ll have a nice sip of water right about now. Gulp, gulp—”

: **Analskin Skywalker ¥50,000**

“Buh, bfwaaaaaaahhhh!!!” *cough hack* “Khfffaawww!!!!! Guh, goff! Hee, hee, ihigg, eehhyah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!!!!”

: filthiest spit-take i've ever heard lmao

: Awa-chan looool

: all of my kusa

: Sending a red super just to put a smile on his oshi's face, what a nice viewer.

: She didn't vomit, still seiso

: Desk-slamming with her keyboard and spewing water everywhere? Is this a PC-kun destruction stream?

: love it when girls belly laugh

: laughing at a joke for grade school boys

: Eagerly awaiting the sale of Awa-chan water

: i heard her fall from her chair lmaooooo

“Ahh... Ahh... Eheh... Ahhh...”

: Don't get exhausted over this

: The Woman Who Came from Answering Castellas

: I'm sure there’s *someone* out there falling for her.

: The Woman Who Came from Her Viewer's Analskin

: seiso (analskin)

Ahhh... How did I get so tired before even turning on *WorCra*? This was gonna

get me kicked out of the seiso spot... But, well...it’s fun, so who cares... *twitch, twitch...*

“All right, time to log in to *WorCra*!”

After a small delay, I was finally starting the game. As for what had caused the delay…

Well, I don’t want to explain how I blew my sides out while answering Castellas and quivered on the floor while my face was covered in fluids, so let’s just say I spilled my water. I had to wash my face and give my PC a quick wipe-down after that, which was incredibly embarrassing… I did it all in complete silence.

But I wouldn’t give in. Comparing it to any of the countless stream blowups I’d had in the past was all it took to pick my spirits back up.

Ah, how much I’ve grown, I thought. *Or wait, am I just doubling down? Are thoughts like these the reason I kept falling further and further away from being seiso?*

These criticisms flashed across my mind for a moment, but for the sake of my mental health, I ignored them.

“Oh, I made it in! I’ve woken up in my good old home!”

That dingy little shack that I’d hastily cobbled together back when I’d first begun the game was a thing of the past; I’d since constructed a castle made of ice in the corner of the city and made it my current abode. I’d had zero sense for architecture back then, so I once again had to give my thanks to Hareru-senpai for helping me with the layout and to Hikari-chan for gathering the materials for me!

Though I was a little shook by Hareru-senpai getting too into it near the end and coming up with something five times the scale of what I was expecting… And when I heard that Hikari-chan had destroyed an entire ecological biome while gathering materials at a faraway snowy mountain, I went beyond shook and started hyperventilating… Why was Live-On so intense? Sure, I’d gotten one of the most marvelous manors ever to grace a streamer’s channel, but even though it was my own home, I just couldn’t settle down… I just had to think of this house as yet another of the city’s sights.

“Hmm hm hmmm~♪ Hmm hm hmmmm~♪”

As I gathered my equipment for a day out on the town, I hummed that one song about letting things go. It was a bit of a nostalgic tune, but it always played in my head when I walked through this castle's halls.

: You're not locking yourself up in your ice castle, you'd be the one destroying it to get outside.

: The Woman Whose Life Is Frozen in Reverse

: There's a limit to how often you can let it go, Shuwa-chan.

Why was I getting dunked on so much just for humming a song…?

Well, that aside, yeah, this should do. I had the bare minimum of what I needed to tour the city.

"It's finally time for the main event, a tour of the city! Some of you may have forgotten, but this is what I made the stream for!"

I opened the door, and onward! Into the city!

The first thing that came into view was the ethereal garden of ice spread out before the front of my home! And in the dead center of it all was Sei-sama, naked as usual, as she slapped the ass of Hareru-senpai, who was for some reason *also* naked!

[Sei Utsuki]: C'mon, c'mon, c'mon! How does Sei-sama's divinely sensual spanking taste, Hareru-kun? Hey, Booty! How does your apple bottom feel?

[Hareru Asagiri]: Ahn! Ahm! Ah! Ahn! What a flop! All the ice around here has me worried about slipping and flopping over!

[Sei Utsuki]: Ha ha ha ha ha! Quite the expressive AI, aren't you? Come now, it's time for me to jam this potato-like rod in! No, not 'jam,' I think I have a better verb for a fruit-related AI like you! Here we go! Jobs! Jobs!

[Hareru Asagiri]: Sorry, I didn't quite get that.

[Sei Utsuki]: Oh, sorry...

SLAM!

Desperately wanting to escape from the hellscape before me, I frantically retreated back into my home and closed the door. A chill ran down my spine, and it wasn't from all the ice.

"Okay, that was too much to process," I finally said after a deep breath.

: kusa

: those two def did this on purpose loool

: front yards are not places to experiment with S&M play

: no WE'RE the ones who didn't quite get that

: Love how Harerun's only response is about the ice

I swear, giving me heart attacks has to be a game for those two at this point! I thought. *At least leave that stuff for when I'm in Shuwa mode! I don't know what to say otherwise!*

[Sei Utsuki]: Knock knuh-knock knock!

[Hareru Asagiri]: Let's build a snowman loooool!

Get off my lawn! I thought. *You two're the reason why I had to retreat! And what are you laughing for?!*

Well, if they wanted to play this game...

"Everyone, I'm going to run as fast as I can. Are we clear?"

I didn't want to rely on brute force, but for the sake of my stream, I had to break through. Here we go!

[Sei Utsuki]: Hey, Booty, do you know Awayuki Kokorone?!

[Hareru Asagiri]: Awayuki Kokorone is an alcoholic beverage.

[Sei Utsuki]: Well, I'll be! I had no idea!

Ignore it, ignore it all!

[Utsuki Sei]: Hey, Booty! Do you know Shuwa-chan?

[Hareru Asagiri]: Shuwa-chan is a nickname for the actor Arnold Schwarzenegger. His notable roles include the Terminator series.

[Sei Utsuki]: Huh, so Awayuki-kun's real name is Arnold Schwarzenegger? Goodness, did we just dox her?! Oh, how foolish of me... Wait, Awayuki-kun is an actor? I thought she was an adult film actress. Wait a sec, that's me, silly!

Not listening not listening not listening not listening not listening not listening not listening not listening not listening!

[Sei Utsuki]: Hey, Booty! Do you know Sei Utsuki?

[Hareru Asagiri]: I don't want to answer that.

[Sei Utsuki]: What, you don't WANT to answer? Meaning you do know?

[Hareru Asagiri]: I don't want to answer that.

[Sei Utsuki]: You're an AI, aren't you? If you know something, then speak it to the world!

[Hareru Asagiri]: Fine, whatever.

[Sei Utsuki]: Hey, watch your tone.

[Hareru Asagiri]: Sei Utsuki, born on November 12th, 1992.

[Sei Utsuki]: Wait, that's not me, that’s Ai Ueharaaaa!

[Hareru Asagiri]: Why do you know that.

[Sei Utsuki]: I don't want to brag, but there's no adult actress I don't know.

[Hareru Asagiri]: You really shouldn't brag.

[Sei Utsuki]: That aside, Booty-kun, hurry and explain Sei-sama to me.

[Hareru Asagiri]: Yeah, yeah. Sei Utsuki, born on November 22nd, 1922.

[Sei Utsuki]: That’s not me, that's Sazae-san, dangit!

[Hareru Asagiri]: Why do you know THAT.

[Sei Utsuki]: Fetish.

[Hareru Asagiri]: Your fetishes cover more range than Manuel Neuer at a goalpost.

[Sei Utsuki]: Enough! Explain Sei-sama already, Booty-kun!

[Hareru Asagiri]: Sei Utsuki, the filth of Live-On.

[Sei Utsuki]: Ha ha ha, how could Sei-sama here be filth? That answer is nonsense, just complete buttocks.

[Hareru Asagiri]: The word is "bollocks," idiot! What, does getting insulted make you want it in the

a--

“Phew, I should be safe after making it this far.”

I dodged a bullet there. I was close to giving in to temptation and dunking on them, but Sei-sama changing the subject to something I couldn’t care less about (herself) gave me the courage to make it out alive.

Those two would probably get bored of their little skit soon enough. Getting wrapped up in it risked tanking the purpose of this whole stream, so it was a total relief.

: lmao at shuwa-chan's secret famous identity

: don't play around in the chat box looool

: Sorry, I knew the Ai Uehara thing too.

: I know, right? I knew the Sazae-san thing too, so we're buds!

: don't lump us together

Getting sidetracked seemed to be a consistent theme today, but the tour of the town was finally starting! As I wondered where to begin, I remembered that the part of the city I had run off into had a pretty eye-catching attraction nearby.

“Let’s see, the entrance should be right around... Ah, here it is! Let’s begin our tour here at the Ehrai Zoo! It was clearly built with a lot of attention to detail, so it should be a strong start to this stream!”

Ehrai Zoo, as the name would suggest, was a zoo opened by Ehrai-chan. It was constantly expanding, even though it already covered more ground than any other property in town.

After passing through the gate, I was greeted by plenty of animals. Each animal was displayed in areas designed to suit their needs, and there were even signs set up that contained fundamental facts and trivia for them as well. With all this space and all these nurturing environments, the animals had to be pretty happy.

: Oh boy, we made it to Ehrai Clan Headquarters

: Is the boss on today?

: It technically is a zoo, it's got living creatures in it and all, ha ha ha...

: spookiest spot on the server

[Nekoma Hirune]: Oh? That you, Awayuki-chan?

"Huh? Nekoma-senpai?"

I was strolling around, hoping to use the sight of cute animals to cleanse myself of the filth my senpais had stained my heart with, when Nekoma-senpai approached me from within the zoo.

[Hirune Nekoma]: What's up? Got some business at the zoo? You here for wool? For milk? Or for some you-know-what?

[Awayuki Kokorone]: For sightseeing. Also, I don't know what you-know-what is.

[Nekoma Hirune]: Ahh, I see, I gotcha! Well, I might not be a match for Ehrai-chan, but Nekoma here knows this place inside and out! How about I take the opportunity to give you a tour, you-know-what included?

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Really? Thank you so much!

[Nekoma Hirune]: This place has gotten big enough to feel like a maze, after all! But don't worry, you're in very capable hands!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: That's delightful to hear! As an aside, Nekoma-senpai, what are you doing here? You said you know this place inside and out, so are you a frequent visitor?

[Nekoma Hirune]: No, I'm a pet.

"Uh… Huh?"

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Wh-Whose?

[Nekoma Hirune]: The Boss's.

"Naruhodon't."

I decided to leave it at that. I had a bad feeling that pursuing this any further

would get me wrapped up in something incredibly dark.

: To learn more, please reference Zookeep's archive of "Rare Beasts! The Search to Capture a Catgirl~!"

: The fleeing Nekoma... The fishing rod Zookeep held as she chased her... The forced employment paperwork... The drugged potion she served instead of tea... The nightmarish job interview... The employer-provided death insurance... Ooh, my head...

: Stop, don't try to remember, you'll get turned into a doll!

: I didn't watch the stream, but I know something messed-up happened to Nekoma

: The Zookeeper's a wonderful boss who's nice to everyone (that she's friends with)

: I hear that every time the animals hold an election for the next zookeeper, she gets 100% of the vote. No tinkering with the results either.

: I dunno, something sounds fishy about 100% of the vote, oh hm, someone's at my door--

Some of my viewers who knew the details were having a field day in my chat, but the contents seemed so terrifying that I averted my eyes from it.

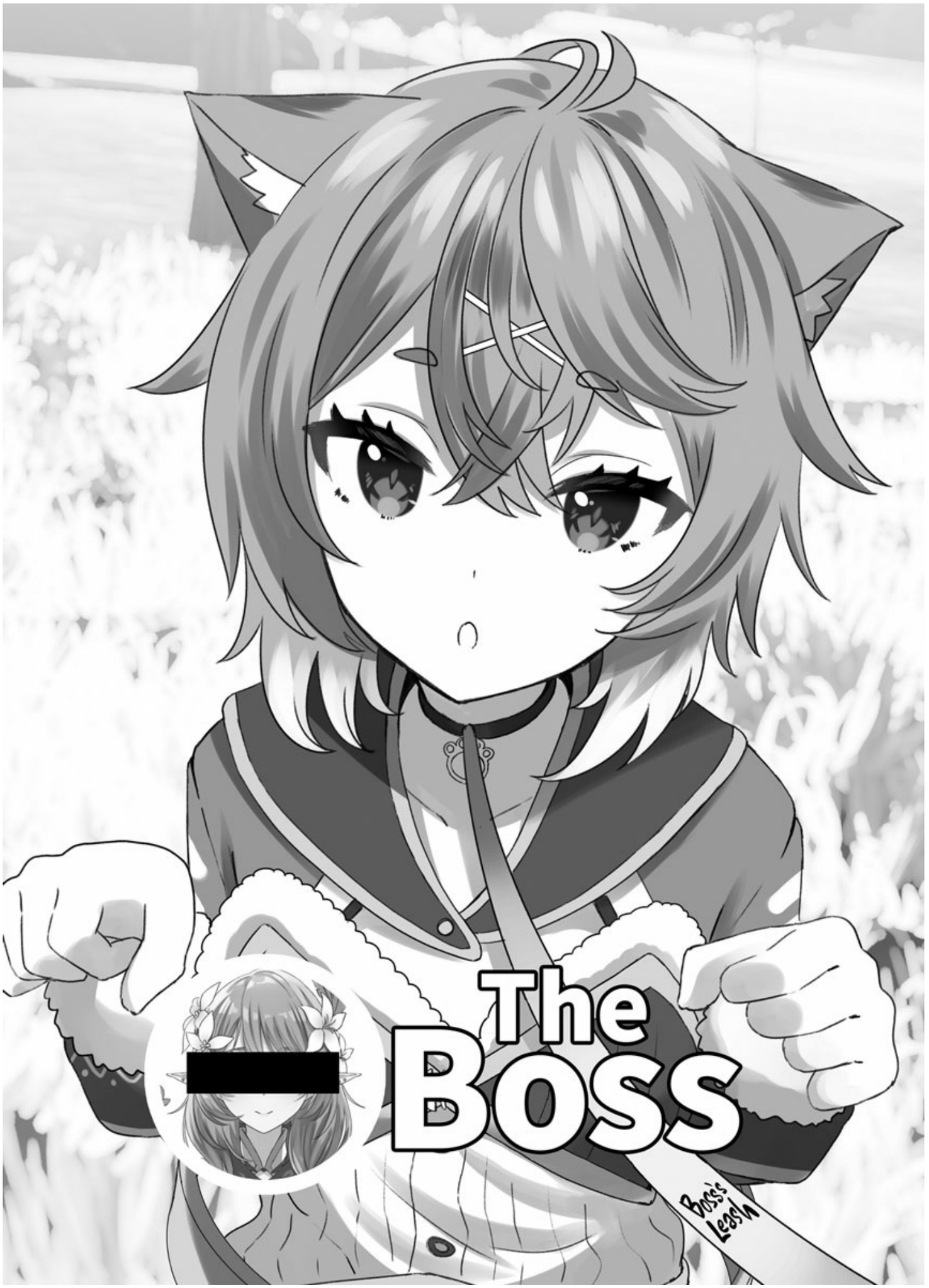
Ehrai-chan, I thought, *you are one scary woman…*

I felt a bit of fear at the thought of following Nekoma-senpai, but she turned out to give me a perfectly normal tour of a perfectly normal zoo.

“Oh, look, bunnies! And so many other small critters too! It looks like I can get inside, so maybe it’s a petting zoo?”

What surprised me was that this zoo apparently continued underground. The exhibit variety expanded to enemy grunts down there, and it covered just about every type besides those that were particularly difficult to capture or raise. You’d never know it from the zoo’s outward appearance, so this was news to me, but…

Ehrai-chan puts a lot of time into this game, huh?


The
BOSS
Boss's Lead

It was about time to put the petting zoo behind me, so Nekoma-senpai guided me to the next area.

[Nekoma Hirune]: The next area is our main attraction! Other streamers come here all the time.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Is it, now? How exciting!

“Huh? It’s this way?”

We seemed to be heading deeper into the park, toward a place hidden from prying eyes. I’d figured that a popular attraction would have stood out a bit more, but…

[Nekoma Hirune]: Here we are! This is our super-popular you-know-what that I told you about earlier!

“……”

I was speechless.

Before me was a cramped cage containing a few beds spread around. Also inside…were *people*. Crammed in like sardines with absolutely zero consideration paid to their freedom or privacy.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Nekoma-senpai... What in the world...

[Nekoma Hirune]: Why, it's just what it looks like! They're villagers! And we've got a primo villager in this cage on the other side! If you ever need to cut a deal, feel free to drop by!

“This is just a breeding ground for villager farmiiiiiiiiiiing!!!!!”

Even I knew about this stuff! You poached villagers from some village, bred them for the best stats, and then bartered the good ones off for profit! No wonder so many hardcore players were frequenting a zoo; I’d doubted the cover story from the start, but if this was the truth behind it, then I wished I’d never known!

[Nekoma Hirune]: C'mon! This "dealer" or whatever's our number one fan favorite! Everyone calls him "Waluigi" out of love!

“Just because they both won some popularity pol—aw, forget it! Okay, I get that they look similar! And don’t call him a ‘dealer,’ that just makes him sound even shadier!”

: here it is, the dark side of the Ehrai Zoo (number one)

: d-does it go past one?

: No, but we've got other number ones, like Gatekeeper here!

: Greetings, chat! Nothing to report!

: They're not getting love out of him, they're getting emeralds

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Nekoma-senpai! I've become filled with righteous anger!

[Nekoma Hirune]: Awayuki-chan, I can't say I don't understand where you're coming from. But you mustn't say what you're about to say out loud.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: ...Whatever do you mean?

[Nekoma Hirune]: To deny this place is to deny the zookeeper. And if you were to do that right here... Well, you might find yourself joining the dealers.

“Eeeeeeeeeek?!?!”

I spun around the moment that message popped up and let out a shameless shriek as I made a mad dash for any other area but here.

“Is this...an aquarium?”

After fleeing the seedy underground of the zoo, I found myself inside a large building that I hadn’t visited yet. The building had a bunch of water tanks installed around its interior, each with plenty of fish swimming to and fro inside, and they meshed with the dim, blue palette of the interior’s furnishings to create an almost otherworldly atmosphere. It sure looked like I had escaped into an aquarium.

“Ah, how soothing... Especially after witnessing such a horrific sight...”

Wait, she even had fish here, huh? Maybe Ehrai-chan really did want her park

to cover every living creature under the sun.

“My, how wide this aquarium is. I wonder how far it continues... Hm? What might this spot be? It appears to be unusually cramped compared to the rest of the building.”

As I progressed inside the aquarium, I caught sight of a corner with a number of water tanks that looked far more shoddily assembled than the others, along with a bizarrely large number of item chests stacked up around them. It was clearly out of place among its slick, clean surroundings.

“Ah, the tanks do have creatures inside them. These are...axolotls? And quite a lot of them, I must say!”

[Nekoma Hirune]: Finally found ya, Awayuki-chan!

“Eeek!”

I was startled to find that Nekoma-senpai had caught up and was standing right behind me, but after seeing that she didn’t have a weapon drawn and wasn’t preparing to attack, I figured I was safe for the time being.

Come to think of it, Nekoma-senpai *was* supposed to be my guide, so maybe she’d have the answer as to what this place was.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: What might this place be?

[Nekoma Hirune]: Ah, this is an unfinished area. We're still in the breeding stages now, but we plan to have a colorful tank of axolotls in the near future.

“I see, it’s still unfinished. I’m sure it will look magnificent once it’s complete!”

[Nekoma Hirune]: This is also my workplace!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Workplace? So, you work here?

[Nekoma Hirune]: Gotta have that blue axolotl, yeah. That's what this breeding facility is for.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Well, now. Come to think of it, I don't see any blue ones in here. Are they rare?

[Nekoma Hirune]: Haven't had much luck getting one, given that the odds are 1/1200 and all.

“What.”

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Did you, uh, add too many zeroes?

[Nekoma Hirune]: Nope, it's one in twelve hundred, that's for sure!

“For real? I’m surprised they *made* something that rare…”

[Nekoma Hirune]: I've been at it all day and I still haven't gotten one, same as yesterday, and the day before yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day before that, just working, working, working, working, and working the whole time. You know how it is.

“……”

A chill ran down my spine. This sensation, it was just like before—

: here it is, the dark side of the Ehrai Zoo (number two)

: this zoo's putting up cursed contraptions like it's trying to fill up a bingo card

: Cursed Bingo, where if you get five in a row, you get to join the animal keepers!

: Joining the (codename) animal keepers, an offer you can't refuse!

: The animal keepers aren't regular clan members, that's code for the head honchos

: Love the Ehrai Clan, where all the viewers imagine the backstory themselves without Ehrai-chan herself saying a word

: Awa-chan, how about you open one of those chests?

“The…chests?”

I followed my viewer’s suggestion and opened a nearby chest. Chests were crammed into every open space, so I didn’t need to walk so much as a step.

“Eeek?!”

When I finally processed what was inside the chest, my body reflexively slammed it shut not a moment after I'd opened it. The contents were visible for only an instant, but I could vividly recall the sight of them. No, that would imply I had any choice; to be precise, I didn't *want* to recall that sight, but the image was burned into my brain.

Inside that chest, I saw every single storage slot filled out by axolotls in every color but blue.

Were… Were these perhaps the baby axolotls that had been born by this process? Wait… Huh? For real? Did that mean that all of the chests set up around here contained…the same…

Yet another chill gripped my ice-cold spine as I shivered more with each passing second.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Why are you doing something that would drive anyone else insane? Is this one of the Zookeeper's orders?

[Nekoma Hirune]: Nope, it's an independent choice!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Wh-Why? Ah, you said this was your workplace, of course! There's sure to be some reward for this, no?

[Nekoma Hirune]: Ah, how perceptive you are! That's right, there's an amazing reward! The ultimate reward of knowing you made the Zookeeper happy!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Th...That's it? No diamonds or anything?

[Nekoma Hirune]: What're ya talking about? What's the Zookeeper's is the Zooper's, and what's mine is the Zookeeper's. Besides, I'd much rather see the Zookeeper happy than accept any of that!

"Brainwashing complete! Erm, I mean, everything about that is horrifying! Nekoma-senpai, please, come back to us! What in the world did Ehrai-chan do to you?! This is dire, I must save her!"

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Nekoma-senpai, run away with me! You have no need to stay here any longer!

[Nekoma Hirune]: ??? I don't follow. Nekoma here is the Zookeeper's pet, so I don't have any home besides here.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: You're not her pet, you're her senpai!

[Nekoma Hirune]: But Ehrai-chan's the Zookeeper, though?

“Aaaargh, quit making this complicated!”

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Very well, if you must be a pet, then why not become mine? I'll treat you far better than Ehrai-chan ever would.

[Nekoma Hirune]: Hmm... You don't have the color of the Supreme King Haki, though...

[Awayuki Kokorone]: I'm surprised Ehrai-chan has one...

: Haki user lmao

: Ehrai-chan would take one look at Doflamingo and say, "I've discovered a new species of flamingo~" before trying to capture him

: Instead of all the unknown creatures in that story, you pick a regular dude, huh.

: The King of the Pirates' dying words drove countless souls to the seas: "That Ehrai clan's some shit, yo"

: I don't want to watch this OP...

: drove countless souls to the sea (in fear)

: the Live-On version of the King of the Pirates would announce she hid a stash of StroZero and nobody would care

[Nekoma Hirune]: What a shame it is that you don't seem to understand the Zookeeper's magnificence, Awayuki-chan.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: If anything, I just got more afraid.

[Nekoma Hirune]: Nya nya! I just had a great idea! Awayuki-chan, you'll surely understand the Zookeeper's excellence if you join the clan!

“What.”

And just like that, Nekoma-senpai drew a diamond sword into her hand...

[Nekoma Hirune]: Awayuki-chan, why don't you become a zookeeper too?

“Gyaaaaaaaaaagh stay awaaaaaaaay!”

I made a mad dash for the exit, but Nekoma-senpai was hot on my heels, swinging her sword around to show that she wasn’t letting me escape this time.

[Nekoma Hirune]: "Say that you'll become a zookeeper! You'll die! You'll die if you don't, Kyojuro!"

“Who’re you callin’ Kyojuroooooooooo?!”

[Nekoma Hirune]: Would you like some freshly made popcorn lol? Would you like some freshly made popcorn lol? Hello~ Akaza~ Hi, there~ lololol Everyone loves Akaza~

“Oh no, she randomly morphed the Akaza bit into Hello Kitty’s theme song! I’m being chased by Hello Kitty (voiced by Akira Ishida)! I have no idea what the point of this is, but this terror is real! If I don’t run, I’ll get baked into popcorn!”

After barely managing to escape the little zoo of horrors in one piece, I eventually turned around to find that Nekoma-senpai was no longer following. She thankfully didn’t feel the need to chase me outside the park’s property.

“Ooooh... Nekoma-senpai, what happened to you...?”

: How do you get baked into popcorn...

: The Boss only caught Nekomah as a one-time gag, but it somehow set off Nekomah's kusoge detector so she's been keeping up the servant roleplay.

: nobody's more confused than Ehrai-chan herself

: I don't understand any part of this... Live-On is scary...

: ^ Is he the misfit of Live-On Academy?

: he'd be more of a weirdo if he *did* fit in

: Dang! To think that I, who was once called the Irregular at Normal High School, could possibly fail to fit in!

: Wait, so you *do* fit in

“Choosing to roleplay as a servant is just bizarre… No, this game offers so much freedom that finding your own way to have fun is arguably the correct playstyle, so perhaps she’s on the right track? But even then, I just can’t let myself approve… Still, thank you for guiding me around…”

I thanked her while continuing to get as far away from that zoo as I could. But where would I visit next…?

I continued wandering around the town with no destination in mind. I wanted to take a look around any buildings that caught my eye, but I wondered what the road I was on would lead to.

“This is a poultry farm, and next to it is a hotel called ‘The Stork’s Nest,’ and next to that is a shooting range, followed by a hotel called ‘Adult’s Shooting Range’… And then there’s a church, with a hotel next to it called ‘Maria Avoids Watching Over Us’… Perhaps I should go down a different street.”

: Could I ask you to please stop going by every building and erecting a corresponding love hotel?

: Good ole Awa-chan, you catch on quick.

: don't even have to guess who's responsible for this street

: The Virgin Mary looking away is all it takes for her to forgive you, what a saint

: something tells me we oughta crucify that redhead

I hastily distanced myself from that street. I eventually found myself near the outskirts of the city, but at least this area seemed free of anything questionable.

“Ah, there’s a large fairytale-themed building over here!”

The first thing to catch my eye was a building with cute animal faces drawn on its walls. The land around it looked like a small park, complete with a playground, a pool, and more.

Truth be told…seeing that wall sent a chill down my spine as I remembered what had happened at the Ehrai Zoo, but when I noticed the building’s nameplate and stepped over to read it, I found that this place was called “Live-On Kindergarten.” Nothing strange about that…right?

“This is a new sight to me. The location seems rather inconvenient, as though nobody else decided to build here. Still, what a fantastic kindergarten! A hidden gem, perhaps? All right, chat, I’ve decided I’ll enter it as our next destination! Pardon me!”

And inside, I saw Kaeru-chan crawling on the ground while Shion-senpai watched over her at point-blank range!

“Pardon nobody!”

My time inside that building totaled approximately 0.3 seconds.

Yeah, cards on the table, I'd had my suspicions that Shion-senpai was involved the moment I'd seen this was a kindergarten. My lightning-quick exit speed was the fruit of that suspicion. Kaeru-chan might have noticed me, but Shion-mama was facing directly away from the door. I could probably escape and live to tell the tale.

[Kaeru Yamatani]: Mama... Save me... Save me...

"Tch! That baby hag ratted me out! Eek?! They're already chasing me?!"

: guess the local community needed a daycare

: "Baby hag" makes zero sense, love it

: there was a hero in Kaeru-chan's chat who used it once, can't believe it's stuck for this long

: now they're getting "Grandma Danger" to stick too

: kusa

: (incredibly seiso voice) She ratted me out!

: She just keeps getting chased, huh.

"Oh, why must I suffer when I've simply done *nothing* to deserve it? Wait, they surrounded me!!!"

I had tried desperately to shake off both Shion-mama and my sense of déjà vu, but despite my head start, she was now standing right in front of me. The secret to her speed was peeking out from just behind her. I could see some sort of cicada-like wings equipped to her back...which meant she'd flown over me!

[Shion Kaminari]: Become a baby or die by my hands.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: That's terrifying! What the heck kind of choice is that?!

[Shion Kaminari]: The crime of disturbing my most precious moments is a grave one. The only way I can baby anyone in this world is by kidnapping Kaeru-chan!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Uh, I think it's kind of obvious why people are avoiding you, then...

[Kaeru Yamatani]: Become a mommy or die by my hands.

Just when I'd thought I had the perfect chance to run away from Shion-senpai, Kaeru-chan caught up to us with her weapon brandished.

One relationship was between a self-proclaimed baby and a mama who refused to accept that, another was between a self-proclaimed mama and a self-proclaimed baby, and a third was between a self-proclaimed mama and a Kaeru-proclaimed mama. This was the weirdest love triangle I'd ever seen.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Forsaken by those I trusted most... Is this my punishment for fleeing?

"Aw, screw it, I can't do this anymoooooore! I just wanted to look at stuuuuuuuff!"

Half out of desperation, I took out my shovel and pickaxe and started digging straight down.

If I couldn't escape from Shion-senpai while above ground, then I just needed to go under it! Fortunately, Shion-senpai appeared to be so baffled by my actions that she stood still around the side of the hole. I figured as much; there was no way that Shion-senpai wanted to kill me enough to follow me down here! Still, I blocked off the ceiling and changed course to prevent myself from making any unintentional magma dives.

Hm, come to think of it, was this going to connect to the place I thought it would?

"Ah, it *does* connect."

As I continued digging underground, the perfectly straight path I'd dug out expanded into a bizarre clearing. This was the home of Chami-chan, who wanted to avoid meeting people so much that she'd holed herself up underground and crafted an entire branch mine on the scale of the above city itself. She'd built it to resemble that one underground empire.

This was perfect; I could travel through here and resurface somewhere far away from Shion-senpai.

You know, in hindsight, maybe choosing to take a tour during peak login hours was a mistake.

“All right, now the problem is navigating this place on my own… I wonder if I can find the exit… It *does* have an exit, right?”

I walked through the underground halls in search of sunlight. After finding nothing, I decided to just dig straight up and go home from there. But before I started, I saw someone in the distance fervently mining the rocks of the walls.

“Could that be Chami-chan?”

I approached out of curiosity, and yep, it was Chami-chan. I walked up to her intending to say hello, but Chami-chan noticed my presence first—

“Hey, wha?!”

And she ran off as fast as she could.

“Why?! Chami-chaaaaan?!”

I didn’t know what had gotten into her, but I chased after her regardless. She ran into a dead end, so it didn’t take long for me to catch up...yeah, another Chami-chan fail.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Chami-chan! Why are you running?

[Chami Yanagase]: I'm sorry... I don't ever see anyone in this underground mine, so I got surprised and ran...

“Ah, so that explains it.”

: I had Chami-chan's stream open in another window and she let out the loudest scream when she noticed Awa-chan.

: cute

: What happened to that introvert evasion ability...

: Obviously it doesn't work if she's not expecting other people to be there at all.

: An ability that works so randomly that you're not even sure she has it sometimes. It's perfect for Chami-chan.

“Ah, so that means Chami-chan is streaming right now! Let’s see… Huh?”

“Chami-chan stream,” “*WorCra*,” “underground,” “branch mining”... All of these words added up to create a clear picture in my mind.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Hey, Chami-chan. Have you been streaming branch mining all day?

[Chami Yanagase]: Yep! I got plenty of ores!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: You did the same thing in your last stream, right? In fact, have you been doing this for all of your recent WorCra streams?

[Chami Yanagase]: Umm... Yes, as far as WorCra streams go, this is my tenth straight stream of mining for ores.

[Awayuki Kokorone]: The whole time? You did nothing else?

[Chami Yanagase]: That's right! I've been hacking away at ores without going above ground even once! It's so much fun to see the chests fill up little by little with rare ores!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Take me to the exit. After that, you're coming with me.

After sending that message, I struck Chami-chan with my character's bare hands. She had armor equipped, so it should barely register as damage. Just a little slap.

[Chami Yanagase]: Ow! What was that for, Awayuki-chan?!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: Just take me to the surface already! And you're coming too!

[Chami Yanagase]: Why?! It's dangerous up there, I don't wanna go!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: No buts! Why would you stream something where the screen never changes ten whole times?! As a streamer, you have to come outside at least once!

[Chami Yanagase]: N-No! My viewers all compliment me about being a hard worker, so there's nothing wrong with streaming this!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: How do your viewers baby you that much?! Well, true, I can understand that chatting while doing some simple work can be nice, but doing it repeatedly is going overboard! You need some fresh air and sunlight!

[Chami Yanagase]: Noooo...

Chami-chan dragged her feet, but getting hit with every criticism of her I had made her give up and guide me to the entrance.

[Chami Yanagase]: These stairs will take you to the surface...

[Awayuki Kokorone]: You're coming with me. And then we're going sightseeing.

[Chami Yanagase]: Noooooooo! I can't, not outsiiiiiiide!!!

"Hey, don't run away!"

[Chami Yanagase]: Anything but outside! I can't come outside! I really can't! Inside is better!

[Awayuki Kokorone]: If you're gonna throw a tantrum, then I'm making you come outside whether you like it or not!

: Awa-chan's serious about her pullout game

: i was waiting for someone to say it

: kusa

She might have resisted at the exit, but Chami-chan finally gave in and followed me to the surface.

The exit's location was just by my house. For a moment, I was relieved to see a familiar sight, until those two perverts noticed me and approached at full speed…

"Hareru-senpai and the redhead are still here?! Wait, Chami-chan?! Get back here!!!"

Startled by the sudden appearance of two of her senpais, Chami-chan made for the underground entrance without looking back. The senpais, in turn, surrounded me and hopped up and down in excitement to see me.

[Hareru Asagiri]: Awacchi's back! Welcome home! I never doubted for a second that you'd return!

[Sei Utsuki]: Hey, can we do a bit? Can we do our new bit?!

Oh, for the love of…

"How am I supposed to go sightseeing like thiiiiiiiis?!"

It was time for some stress relief, so I drew my sword and slashed into the redhead. I then chased the two around, swinging my sword the whole time.

: Everyone sure has their own ways of enjoying WorCra.

: A little too much

: They're the type to forget it's a game

And so, that was my sightseeing *WorCra* stream that turned into a game of hide-and-seek.

Ah, the chat stream—despite the casual impression of the words, this was where the true mettle of a streamer was tested. So said my manager, Suzuki-san.

Event planning, gaming, and more...there was no shortage of skills that a streamer could rely on to entertain their audience. But for anyone whose schedules didn't break the norms, there was one skill set that was absolutely necessary in a streamer's line of work: talk skills. The popular streamers tended to be the ones who had a way with words.

To Suzuki-san's exposition on the subject, I answered:

"Can't I just chug some StroZero?"

"How is it that you can *speak* Japanese and yet score a zero on the listening test?"

And on this night, during one of those precious chat streams that inspired such fervor in my manager, I was hopping in while shitfaced on StroZero.

"Come to think of it, I got somethin' I want you all to see. Lemme put the picture up... Ah, this! Right here!"

: The heck is this?

: A canvas with some water spilled on it?

: ??? It just looks like some wet paper

: Is it just me, or does it kinda look splashed in the shape of a face?

: the viewers united in their confusion

"See this? It's a self-portrait I made the other day!"

: Uh?

: Self... portrait...?????

: You feelin' okay?

: I figured she had no sense for art, but I didn't think it was this bad...

: pure artistic genius

: mashiron would cry

: If that's a self portrait, I think you might not be human

: you could start an auction for it at 155 yen and I still don't think it'd find a buyer

: the reviews are in lmao

: I'm scared... I think my brain can actually *see* it...

“Heh heh heh! Trash my work all you want, it just shows you have no taste for art! For you see, this masterpiece was painted not with watercolor, but with paints made from StroZero, a.k.a. StroZerocolor!”

: all of my kusa

: so you spit out your strozero

: you need a doctor

: pure artistic genius!

: These are not things a human would think of

: Mashiron would DEFINITELY cry

: 155 billion!

: Watching the price jump just because of the painter's name attached to it...it's like seeing the darkness of the art world

: lmao at how I can suddenly see shuwa-chan painting this

: this might be actual talent

“Heh heh heh! How ya like *that*?! Kneel before me! Worship Shuwa-chan as the pioneer of StroZerocolor art! And get drunk off of StroZero art!”

: Impressionism, surrealism, StroZeroism.

: Oh god, impressionism and surrealism are starting to sound like drink names to me...

<Alice Soma>: I'm going to paint right now!

: and the style already has a follower

: just don't waste your food...

: I feel like it could go for a ridiculous price if this were an auction...

: ¥155

: ¥211

: ¥1550

: ¥2110

: lmao they actually started an auction

“Well hey, you guys are always sending me ASCII art, and Mashiron’s my genmate, so I wanted to dip my toes into the world of art too! Art means self-expression, and expressing myself means StroZero, so here we are! But this painting’s amazing! It even smells like StroZero, just like me! It goes beyond the realm of self-portraits by just reekin’ of booze!”

: Well duh, it's painted with StroZero, so of course it's gonna smell like StroZero!

: casually admitting she reeks of booze lmao

: Is this the world's first painting to smell like its model? Revolutionary.

: Huh? That means StroZero is basically Shuwa-chan's perfume, right?

: chat, please, come back to your senses

“Hm, I saw somethin’ about perfume. Perfume, huh? Honestly, I’ve almost never worn any... Oh, but I always wanted to say that thing. You know how they’d ask Marilyn Monroe what she wore to bed, and she’d say ‘Chanel No. 5’? I wanna answer with ‘Moontory No. 0’!”

: don't bring her into this

: this is my first time hearing someone call StroZero "Moontory No. 0"

: It's 'cause of that Dolce & Gabbana

: i did a spit take

: i love how incomprehensible Shuwa-chan's chat streams are

: that might be more common than her making sense...

: if you come to Live-On to understand things, you've already lost

“That song that had a lyric about D&G was just a few years ago, but it already feels kinda nostalgic. Time flies so fast... Chat, if it’s late at night, and out of the blue, I send you a LINE message telling you to buy me StroZero, even though we haven’t seen each other in three years, you won’t hold it against me, right?”

: instant block

: i'll call the cops

: I'll get a delivery truck and drop 155 cartons at your door, hope you're thirsty

: go to sleep

“You all are so mean to me, the StroZero is streaming from my eyes... Boo hoo hoo... Oh yeah, maybe I’ll sing *Kousui* on my next karaoke stream.”

And so, this chat stream was off to a very shuwa-shuwa start. I was chatting, but partly because of the alcohol, there wasn’t much consistency between the things I was chatting about. I always make sure to prepare some topics beforehand, of course, but getting excited over them with my viewers got me sidetracked into completely unexpected subjects all the time. Seeing how the conversation had gone from art to perfume should make that pretty clear.

After even more changes to the subject, I was now talking about my manager’s concerns about my listening skills (?) that had sparked this whole stream.

“What do you guys think, chat? Really, I think my manager just doesn’t understand the sheer versatility of StroZero! Next time we have a meeting, I’m gonna shove the magnificence that is StroZero down her throat!”

: please don't...

: this is how managers quit

: I can imagine her pulling out a StroZero can and telling Shuwa-chan that it's her new manager now

: Meeting (at the bar)

: Now now, the Live-Onese that Shuwa-chan speaks has pretty similar grammar to our native tongue, so you can't blame the manager for misunderstanding.

: it's a new language now lel

: There are plenty of things even your average native speaker wouldn't understand, so hey

: Is it rough being a Live-On manager?

“Ah... Yeah, I’d say the job of a Live-On manager is pretty tough. My manager is really young, but she seems like a model employee. Never whines, complains, or anything. Sometimes I wonder when she manages to sleep, though.”

: Ah, yeah, makes sense.

: I figure management is tough in any industry, not just Live-On.

: I wanna try being Mashiron's manager

: I bet Shion-mama's manager ends up getting managed

: kusa

: What kind of person is your manager, Shuwa-chan?

“Ooh, curious about my manager, are you? Let’s see, she’s thin, short-haired, and pretty fashionable. The kind of woman who’d look good in a pantsuit! And her personality, well, you can tell she’s on top of her job... Come to think of it, she’d probably be a hit with the ladies.”

: Love how proud you sound of her, you two must get along well

: And somehow this model employee got stuck with Shuwa-chan...

“I think she volunteered to be my manager. Said something like thinkin’ that nobody but her would be able to keep me out of trouble. She’s pretty friendly with Hareru-senpai, which makes me figure she’s got some Live-On weirdness in her...”

: That's Hell she's walking into

: Your manager seems like a real character...

: When's her streamer debut?

: don't forget about Kaeru's manager who learned to type in babyspeak and is now best buds with Shion-chan

: What is it about the "being friends with Harerun" part that sounds so terrifying...?

“I think we got a little off track, but if I had to sum it all up, being a manager looks tough, and I couldn’t *begin* to tell you how much they help streamers do their jobs. Without mine, I don’t know if I’d manage to get myself out of bed...”

: Thanks, Manager-san!

: Make sure to be considerate of your wonderful manager and speak to her in Japanese next time.

“I’ve been speakin’ Japanese the whole time! Hmph! But hey, knowing me, even speaking English would be a piece of cake! Shuwa-chan here is bilingual!”

: fr?

: You know English?!

: you're not bilingual, you're barflingual

: wwwwww

: Have we ever seen her speaking English?

: i feel like i've seen her get stumped by english castellas

“Hmph! Well, just sit back and watch. I’m gonna introduce myself to the overseas bros in native-level English!”

Uhhh, introducing myself in English, that went like... Uhh...

“<H-Haai! Mai neemu izu Awayuki Kokorone! Japaniizu... Aaah... Ku, kuriin buichuuba! Naisu tuu miituu!>”

: are you in grade school

: cute

: buichuuba!

: adorbs

: <lol>

: <what language are you speaking now?>

: even when she speaks English, it sounds like Japanese

: go look up what "clean" means

: more like <Japanese Hentai VTuber>

To think I'd get told off so harshly just for an introduction... Japanese people are a tough crowd.

Still, I had to round it off with a punchline... Wait, how would I do a punchline in English?

Crap, crap, crap! I was coming up with nothing but single words! Oh...to heck with it!

"<Ou! Sharrap! Fakkyuu! Hooriishitto! Sanobabicchi! Aimu fakkin kuriin buichuubaa! Ookeii?!>"

: lol

: OMG

: the most extreme streamer ever, lol

: <oh! she's crazy!>

: I can see this getting clipped with English subs and making you a hit among the overseas bros

: The Woman Who Can Escape into Another Language and Still Lose Her Seiso

: Just another day in New York City.

You know, English might be hard.

"I'll leave my highbrow English humor at that. At the end of the day, I'm a Japanese native who's got that Yamato spirit. Nothing against anyone from overseas, I'm just a bit scared to go there myself... Ah, that's right, speaking of overseas, I saw an article the other day about a celebrity wearing a Tamagotchi like a fashion accessory! Man, it sure is different over there!"

: I can understand being scared to go. I like looking at the scenery online, though.

: Yeah, you cross an ocean and suddenly you're in a world where all the rules you believed in don't

apply.

: Awayuki-chan's also a citizen of Live-On

: sounds like a country Kino wouldn't spend three minutes in, let alone three days

: I think we're not in Kansas anymore...

: Tamagotchis, how nostalgic!

: And this is...fashion?

: Nothing more fashionable than wearing what you want

: Oh yeah, I guess there was a celeb wearing one. Have you played with one before, Shuwa-chan?

“Nah. They were a fad at school when I was a kid for a bit, so I messed with a friend’s one time, and I know it’s a game about raising cute little critters, but that’s about it. Have any of you played one?”

: I haven't...

: I've never played one myself, but one time when I was in grade school, my sister accidentally dropped her Tamagotchi in boiling water and I shouted "hard-boiled tamago!" at her over and over ¥1200

: most well-behaved grade schooler lmao

: I had fun with mine at first, but then I got bored and left it a while. When a friend and I saw that it was dead after a while, he asked me why my Tamagotchi had spoiled. ¥5000

: can't say I approve, but lmao

“How are there people who haven’t played it...? Well, my audience skews male, so I guess it makes sense. Does anyone have any, like, brighter, more little-girly stories?! Actually, forget that, do we have any little girls in here?!”

: nobody under the drinking age is watching your stream

: already getting to insults lmao

: I remember Kaeru-chan jumping for joy when YoTube-kun declared her channel to be child-oriented content

: and then it got removed exactly one second later so she opened her stream in tears

: I heard her shouting that YoTube's AI couldn't tell the difference between an adult and a baby, and that's when I knew YoTube-kun was good at its job. ¥211

: my sides were in orbit when she said, "YoTube-kun, I'll turn you into what I am inside!" with her voice all cracked

“No, I mean, Kaeru-chan’s kind of her own thing, she’s a thirty-something who just *thinks* she’s a little girl. You know, same thing as anyone in chat who watches PreCure every week. The only person on the planet who’d consider her a little girl is Shion-mama.”

: okay now that's just insulting

: Just because we watch PreCure doesn't mean we suck on pacifiers.

: kusa

: That woman's getting back pain these days, she doesn't have anything little about her

: I think I heard a crack when she did shoulder stretches one time

“Well, hey, can’t fault her for that. She used to be a manga artist, and streaming under Live-On doesn’t involve much exercise. I might be in for a rude awakening in ten years...”

: It comes with desk work.

: Do you think Kaeru-chan will still be a baby in ten years?

: she'll be a baby for life

: eternal infancy (sorry, Freud)

: Might be a good idea to start hitting the gym while you can.

: Are you flexible, Shuwa-chan?

“The gym, huh? I might be fine now, but it could come back to bite me if I don’t get some exercise. But I actually am pretty flexible!”

: For real?!

: i expected you to be completely incapable of any conceivable physical activity

: Can you do a standing side split?

: Is that different from a regular standing split?

: imagine Ganondorf's Volcano Kick, that's a good standard

: I thought you had to be messing with me, but I checked his up tilt and it totally is lmfao

: Ganondorf, pro ballerina

“Heh heh heh! Exercise may not be my forte, but I’ll have you know that I am indeed fairly flexible! Let me split my legs a bit. Here we go, I could go pretty far back in my school da—”

KRIK

“OOOOOOOAAAAAAAAUUUUUUGGGGHHHHH!!!!!”

: That shout! Are you doing a Warlock Punch?! And the Melee voice for it too!

: What an amazing impression of Ganon feinting a Volcano Kick into a Warlock Punch!

: wwwwww

: this seiso streamer sure screams a lot.

: Ganondorf = Awayuki Kokorone, prove me wrong

: Student years are a lie, they're like a special buff life puts on you

: I was shocked at how far I'd fallen off after a year or two of working life

: Y-You okay there?

“I-I’m faiiine... Thank you for your concern...”

I thankfully didn’t injure myself, but I had definitely just witnessed a glimpse of hell.

“Yeah, gotta exercise, you know? I’m gonna start doing something every day. How are other streamers handling exercise?”

: Hikari-chan is among the physical elite.

: safe to say she's the most physically fit in Live-On

: She went on hiatus because of her throat instead of her body, after all

: I imagine the Boss is ripped with a six-pack

: How about Harerun?

“Ahh... Hareru-senpai’s the biggest mystery. I think she said something about liking overseas soccer on stream once, but I figure that was in the sense of watching rather than playing. Then again, I saw her playing solo kabaddi in the office the other day, so she might be into playing sports too.”

: "solo kabaddi in the office" like it's totally normal lol

: Kabaddi?!

: Just another day in Live-On.

: Wait, solo? You can play kabaddi with just one person?

“All right, time to tell this story! So apparently, Hareru-senpai was really into kabaddi at the time. She tried to pull in other people to join her, but I guess nobody on staff knew the rules. So to get everyone to see the appeal of the sport, she put on this dead serious expression and started repeating ‘kabaddi, kabaddi, kabaddi’ to play all by herself. Really putting her talents to good use there.”

: uhhhhhh...

: the absolute mental fortitude on that girl lmao

: ?????

: Was this out of a horror movie?

“But it just got even wilder. The president of Live-On saw her and was so moved that she jumped in to join.”

: Huh?

: The president?!

: LOOOOOOOL

: what's a big shot doing there...

: The president's one of the founding members, right? I can understand her being friends with Harerun, but joining in on kabaddi is just weird

“It went something like, ‘Hareru! Your kabaddi is fantastic!’ ‘President?! All right! Show me your kabaddi!’ and then a whole match got started. But what I really can’t believe is that the president, even after joining with that passionate speech, barely knew any of the rules to the game.”

: Huh???

: how does that happen???

: I don't hear much about the Live-On president, but she sounds pretty nuts...

“Anyway, to sum up what happened from there...”

“Okay, tag!”

“Kabaddi kabaddi kabaddi kabaddi kabaddi!”

“Um... President? I tagged you, so shouldn’t you come catch me?”

“You mean to tell me you intend to run away?! Is your kabaddi so cowardly?!”

“No, those are the rules, right?”

“Silence! Let us kabadduel!”

“I... Yes, you’re right! I was a fool, let us kabadduel!”

“Kabaaaddi kabaddi! Miracle kabaddi! Kabaddo the kabaddi! Number one!”

“Seeing the President’s kabaddi has awakened the kabaddi cells coursing through my veins! My mind can think of nothing but kabaddi! I swear that I shall become a virtual kabaddi athlete!”

“Kabaddi kabaddi kabaddi kabaddi kabaddi!!!”

“And that’s pretty much how everyone started repeating ‘kabaddi.’”

: fire both of them now

: www

: zero attempt to play actual kabaddi lmao

: more like kabaddumb

: making it sound like a cthulhu-summoning ritual

: It tends to get used as a punchline in Japan, but kabaddi's a really intense sport, you guys

: I remember being really impressed when I saw the India representatives play.

: Let's all read Burning Kabaddi!

"So in the end..."

"Huh? Oh, well, if it isn't Awayuki-san! Hello there! It's been quite some time since we've seen each other in person, huh?"

"I know! Shuwacchi, you should kabajjoin us in kabaddi! Playing some kabaddi the instant you meet someone is the kabestti!"

"And then they got in my face and kept repeating 'kabaddi kabaddi,' so I felt a little bit of terror and decided to run, but yeah, gotta get your exercise in! By the way, chat, do any of you exercise?"

: I used to, but then I took an arrow to the knee.

: My leg!

<Alice Soma>: I enjoy doing push-ups over a printout of Awayuki-dono's face! That way, I can kiss Awayuki-dono every rep!

: that was so creepy i audibly yelped

: at this point i almost respect her

"You all gotta get out more... And Alice, while I commend the depths of depravity that your mind can stoop to, that's the sort of thing you should never, ever say to the person in question. Then again, that's already more exercise than I get. I've been trying to eat healthy too, y'know? My dinner today fit right into the food pyramid, in fact—grains, protein, veggies, and StroZero."

: Healthy.....???

: I wanna try your cooking, so feel free to open a restaurant any time.

: If Shuwa-chan opened a restaurant, I bet every entree would come with a side of StroZero

: If a restaurant might be too much, then hopefully a collab cafe or something

“Collab cafes! That’s a good idea! I wonder what would be on the menu? If you had an item for every streamer...then I guess Kaeru-chan would have a kid’s meal? And Ehrai-chan would have...puffer fish sashimi? Or maybe the police station pork bowl?”

: lmao pork bowl, she's already arrested

: She's having a salad that makes you feel *real* good.

: seasoned with some hydroponic kusa

: I can see Kaeru-chan settling on a kid's meal with horse sashimi in it

: Shuwa-chan's item would definitely be StroZero

: Seasonal StroZero-style StroZero, boiled in StroZero with some StroZero seasoning, all with a side of StroZero

: Shuwa-chan would never be satisfied with a *side* of StroZero, she needs the StroZero *in* the StroZero (insane person voice)

: Who was the collab with again?

: Can't come up with anything besides StroZero and barfing.

: calling all health inspectors

: Shuwa-chan's in the kitchen and personally barfs on every order

: sounds like she'd die in a few days

: I guess Hikari-chan would have something super spicy?

: Every member gets actual food except one lol

“Not a bad idea. Live-On’s been blowing up so much these days that it’s not even that crazy of an idea, which makes me even more impressed. Ah, oh yeah, listen to this! When I was at the convenience store the other day, I heard some people talking about Live-On!”

: Ooh!

: I'm jealous of them...

: i want to breathe that air

: bet they didn't think the real deal was right there next to them

: What were they talking about?

“So it was two guys, and they were talking about VTubers they liked, so one says, ‘Have you heard of Live-On? I’ve fallen down the rabbit hole with them,’ and the other guy says, ‘Ah hya hya! You for real, dude? Ah hya hya! That Live-On crap, ah hya ha! Well, I watch ’em too, ooh ooh ah...’ and he just kept cackling like a monkey. I almost beat his ass.”

: and it turns out they were dissing it lmaooo

: (hater voice) Ah hya hya!

: Intriguing, I can see the monkey-laugh dude being a Shuwa-chan fan.

: The agency where even its fans call it crap

: now i know how the rest of the world sees Live-On lmaooooo

: You didn't get found out, right, Awa-chan?

“Of course I didn’t get found out, I was in disguise! Besides, those two were at the register and were out the door soon enough, so they didn’t even see me. But still! Don’t laugh like a monkey, okay? Look at the Live-On roster! Everyone’s a cute girl! You should talk about how soothing they are or how you want to support them or how they get you hard, all right?”

: Monkey laughs are bad, but getting hard is good (???)

: That's just the highest form of praise for Shuwa-chan.

: Getting hard, ah hya hya! ¥50,000

: kusa

: I wanna laugh, but I'd probably sound the same if I talked about Live-On in real life.

: Nobody does more to harm your cute images than yourselves

: Daring to test the limits of what you can get away with by being cute

My venting may have come across jokingly, but even I was laughing by the end. I guess human beings really are social creatures.

Chat streams were the streams that made me feel closest to my viewers. As we chatted, I naturally started to enjoy it. Which was fine when it came to going from topic to topic. But in this instant, I enjoyed myself a little too much and found myself slipping.

See, at around the time when my stream was wrapping up, the subject turned toward a stream Alice had recently done where she'd shared shocking stories about her family. Alice-chan herself was there in the comments, so there was plenty to chat about. But...

"Yeah, guess what I saw of them during that sleepover stream was just the tip of the iceberg... Uhh, what's next, 'Shuwa-chan, what's your family like?'...oh."

It was a type of comment that, at any other time, I would have (guiltily) ignored. But I was excited, so I picked up the one question I shouldn't have.

FAMILY FAmily faMILY *family* ***family*** **family**... Family.

For a moment, my mind blanked out, and I sobered up in an instant. That single word repeated over and over, soon filling up the now-empty canvas of my mind. My heart stopped, as though time itself had frozen in place. I would have liked it if the world had given me a moment and kindly stopped spinning, but alas, the carefree updating of the chat box suddenly brought me back to reality. This time, I was contending with a heart that beat like crazy, like it was a side effect of my earlier paralysis cutting my adrenaline supply short.

"Ahh... Well, you see... Hmm... Uhh... Oh! Look at that, already time to end the stream! Guess I'll save this one for later! Uhh, anyway, thanks for the chat, guys! Bye-bye, see you soon!"

After being stumped for a few seconds, I made up an excuse about the time and forcibly drew the entire stream to a close.

.....

"GAAAAAUGHH!!! What the heck am I *doing*?!"

And after a few seconds of complete emptiness, I grabbed my head and slid off my chair and onto the floor.

“Why did I pick that one?! And ugh, if I’m going to pick up a question that a viewer went through the trouble to ask, then at least say *something*! Even if you don’t say anything, there’s gotta be a better way! I’ve been a streamer way too long to be doing this! Ahhh, I’m such an idiot!”

I was overwhelmed with a visceral case of self-loathing. I’d had some Live-On-esque bloopers lately, sure, but they never made me feel like I was a *failure*. I’d probably avoid any social media buzz since there wasn’t anything concrete for the viewers to connect it to, but this was still a downright traumatizing screwup for me.

“Keep it together! Have you forgotten that decision you made when you heard Mana-chan was graduating?!”

I swore to myself and closed my eyes to calm my raging pulse, and after some time, the storm in my heart passed. Still, though...

“Family, huh... What the heck even *is* family...?”

It would take some more time for the dark clouds over my mind to fully clear up.

Idle Talk: For Real?!

Today, I was having a phone meeting with Suzuki-san.

That in itself was nothing out of the ordinary, but this meeting in particular apparently had something important to go over, so I listened while preparing for the worst.

And, uh, about that...

“No, that’s a bad idea! I’m telling you, there’s no way it’ll fly!”

This was the state I’d been reduced to after hearing that proposal.

“Come now, don’t be like that. Yuki-san, you know of Mana Hoshino-san, don’t you?”

“‘Know of’? I felt my soul leave my body when the news about her graduation hit me the other day!”

“In that case, there’s no problem. I’ll inform them that you’ll appear in Mana Hoshino’s graduation stream, then.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no! Are you actually listening to the words coming out of your mouth?!”

Mana Hoshino, a pillar of the VTuber industry, was planning to include a segment in her graduation stream titled, “People I Want to See One Last Time.” It was exactly what it sounded like: Mana-chan would have streamers she was friends with come on for one last chat. And since this was Mana-chan we were talking about, the tentative guest list wasn’t limited to the VTubing world—names of super-famous real-life streamers were lined up one after another.

That list was where we’d run into a problem, because there was exactly one name from Live-On on it: mine! I couldn’t believe it, but for some reason, despite having zero connection to Mana-chan, I was being asked to join her graduation stream!

“This is crazy, right?! Why would they call me, a complete stranger, over to their emotional graduation stream?! Graduation ceremonies these days feature

trending celebrities, so they can't set up all these grand expectations only for the equivalent of the neighborhood weirdo to show up!"

"Yuki-san, I would say that you're not a neighborhood weirdo, you're a perfectly upstanding VTuber. You're being too humble. But you're right, it is rather impressive. I think you might be the only person on the list who hasn't met Mana-san before."

"How are you so calm about this...?"

To be honest, I was baffled for reasons beyond the countless ones I could've pointed out on its surface. This was something that had come up back when I'd answered the Castella about Mana-chan, but she and I had a pretty distinct difference in the content we created.

Mana-chan had done a lot between her debut and now, but she stayed true to keeping her activities idol-esque. Despite the occasional live concert, the stuff we ran at Live-On was more like variety shows, if not outright comedy skits... And sure, I understood that we were still going strong because of people who were drawn to that sort of thing, but the fact remained that Mana-chan's style was the polar opposite of ours.

As proof of that, as far as I knew, Mana-chan had never collabed with me or with anyone from Live-On even once, and quite possibly had never so much as even spoken our names. I figured that was all Live-On's fault for being so cursed...

To be clear, I wasn't *opposed* to joining in. If anything, it would be too great an honor. There was just zero reason I could imagine for them to call me for it, so I was honestly more concerned than anything.

"Ehh... I'm telling you, having me isn't gonna fly..."

"Hmm... Ah, remember when you were asked to join Hareru-san's solo concert? It's just like that."

"Oh, no, no, no, we're talking about going outside of Live-On this time... First off, wouldn't Hareru-senpai be a better choice for this? Nobody represents Live-On better than her!"

"The selection was made on Mana-san's end, so there's not much I can do

there...”

“What were Mana-chan’s staff thinking?! They’d better not be going mad with power just because it’s their last day on the job!”

“Oh, but it was Mana-san herself who put the list forward.”

“Huh?” Did that mean...Mana-chan herself wanted to see me? I’d pinned the blame on her management because I’d ruled out that idea on the spot...

“Since this graduation stream will be Mana-san’s last, her management wants to show their gratitude by making sure that the content of the show reflects her wishes. That’s one reason why I, personally, would like you to accept her invitation.”

“Oh... I see...”

“My read on the situation is that their generosity is how this request managed to reach Live-On in the first place. While we’re surely not on any blacklists, I can’t deny that a collab between us seems a bit out of place.”

“I see... Hmm, well, if Mana-chan herself is asking, I suppose I *could* join...”

“Very well... And one more thing, Yuki-san.”

I was finally starting to take this news positively, so Suzuki-san gave me one last push.

“She chose you. There’s meaning to that.”

“Meaning?”

“Yes. Mana-san explicitly chose you for her graduation stream. I don’t know what her reasoning was, but regardless of being strangers or having different styles, the fact remains that she chose you, and that has meaning. You have no need to question if you’d be a good fit. You’re already a better fit than anyone she didn’t choose.”

I paused to think it over.

“Will you accept, for Mana-san’s sake?”

“Okay... Fine. One thing, though! I’ll give this stream a hundred percent, sure, but don’t come crying to me if anything weird happens!”

“Heh, I won’t. Thank you very much.”

With Suzuki-san’s final words as the trigger, I gave the thumbs-up to the proposal.

“As for the day of, I’ve been told that we won’t need to prepare anything at all. According to Mana-san, ‘You’re free to drop by as casually as you would a convenience store.’”

“Like hell I’m doing that!”

“Great, that’s the spirit.”

This *really* wasn’t the time to shake in my boots over some streaming blowup. I had to put my least-embarrassing foot forward, not just as Mana-chan’s distant kouhai, but as a guest appearing on such a momentous graduation stream!

I slapped my cheeks with both hands. I considered it motivation from Mana-chan herself.

All right, I was ready. This was for Mana-chan; it didn’t matter if there were dark clouds ahead or a whole damn natural disaster, because I was committed! If anything, my motivation was in MAX STRONG mode!

And so, the date was set for the first and final collab between legend and legend (?).

Chapter 2: Shuwa-chan’s Counseling Corner

Problems: something the vast majority of us would like to avoid whenever possible. We’d all love nothing more than to sing odes to the joys of a life without hardship. We would...but sadly, reality is rarely so charitable. People have problems on their minds from the moment they’re born, and we’re locked in an endless struggle against reality to break through each one.

But sometimes, we tire of carrying our problems alone, or we simply can’t find an answer. In times like these, we long for a place where we can spill our guts to another.

Anyway, that’s why I came up with this stream idea!

“Duh-dun! It’s the grand opening of Shuwa-chan’s Counseling Corner! Yaaaay, cheeeeers! Pshhh! Gulp gulp, pwaaaaaah!!!”

: Trying a little too hard here

: uhhhhhh...

: when's the grand closing

: Please, you don't need more jokes when you already have your entire life

: hey, your viewers have a problem! they're wondering why nobody stopped you

“With that out of the way! The streamers of Live-On have been said to abuse the gift of freedom to the point where even the Land of Freedom known as America fears for its future, but we’re all just people, and I believe we all have problems about our day-to-day. And so I, Shuwa-chan, am offering to solve these problems with the Shu-wiftness born of the power of StroZero!”

: giving psychic damage to an entire nation

: What about all the streamers who have problems about how you exposed their fetishes?

: I can imagine the Boss forming a gang with them and plotting their revenge

: revenge against a counseling corner lmao

: A great real-world example of how freedom to do something doesn't mean you *should* do it

: I can only see the "power of StroZero" making problems worse...

: Isn't *this* the sort of thing you should be doing seiso...

“Oh, what’s that I hear? You’re all saying you doubt Shuwa-chan’s problem-solving powers?! Well, fine, doubt while you can! While we’re waiting for our first patient, I’ll go ahead and solve all your problems in a snap, so comment away!”

: Oooh!

: Ah, Shuwa-chan, you know how to run a show.

: I can't make eye contact when I'm talking to people, so I always look down instead. What should I do?

“Just think to yourself, ‘If I keep looking down, this person will think I’m looking at their crotch.’ You’ll start looking up like second nature. Easy.”

: Hmmm, idk...

: i hate that it sounds just barely useful

: Even if you did get results, I've still got my doubts about a counseling place working like this...

: Ah, this is one of those counseling corners that doesn't have a line, I see.

: I've been thinking about getting more in shape. What should I do to lose weight?

“Quit eating and get off the couch.”

: all of my kusa

: Can't ask for a more effective strategy than that, gotta hand it to you

: You know, it's not that easy for a lot of people...

: tough talk for a woman who tried to open her legs and got a CRACK ❤

: Please don't add the heart emoji.

“Don’t look at me, I want an answer just as much as this guy does! If you really wanna lose weight, don’t go to a counselor, go to a gym! Either that, or ask a different Shuwa-chan, like the Schwa-chan from *Commando*! You’re barking up the wrong Shuwa-chan!”

: You're not wrong, but lol

: forget losing weight, that Schwa-chan is making you get swole

: I don't like vegetables, so I tend to be a picky eater. Shuwa-chan, please tell me how I can learn to eat them!

“Ahh, yeah, I think it’s the mindset that’s important for this stuff. For example, take the vegetables you hate the most, and just imagine that Shuwa-chan here put her heart and soul into growing them, peeling them, chopping them, and cooking them into what you have on your plate, and voilà! Betcha wanna take a bite now, huh?”

: nope, can't do it, too gross

: looooool

: Such a pure, unadulterated rejection that I lol'd

: sounds like they'd smell like booze

: she'd water her crops with StroZero

“Fine, you jerks, see if I care! Not eating your veggies puts you at risk of lacking essential vitamins and minerals, so go take a dietary supplement, you jerks!”

: fiiiiine

: a counselor is kinda supposed to care about her clients lol

: Shuwa-chan gets mad at pro wrestler bro but worries about her viewer's nutrition, how seiso.

: Her seiso shows up at the absolute worst timing, it almost feels wasted

: I'm gachikoi for Shuwa-chan, what should I do?

“Uh... Er, gachikoi? Oh, umm... For real? Er, ah, oh, right! So you fell in love with me, I see! Yeah, I gotcha, totally, heh heh, gee, sounds like a real doozy of a problem, that’s for sure! What to do, indeed! Lemme take a StroZero break...” *GULP GULP*

: she's getting so embarrassed

: i can see her grinning

: these are the only times she's cute

: Shuwa-chan actually has gachikois...

: Honestly, with how good her design is, it'd be more impressive if she *didn't*

“I mean... It makes sense, right? I’m a heavy drinker who makes dirty jokes all the time, so any gachikois I *do* have aren’t gonna get starry-eyed over it. Oh, but hey, I’m plenty happy to hear you’re gachikoi for me anyway! Eheh heh heh heh!”

: Oh, sorry, that was a typo. I'm not gachikoi for you, I'm gachikoi for the Schwa-chan from Commando. Aww yeah, dem abs

“Ahh, suuure, I get the picture. *So* sorry, my mistake! Oh *poor* widdle me, how *embarrassing*!” *CRUNCH*

: unlimited kusa works

: I figured that punchline was coming!

: Her poor seiso-ness is crying...

: The sound of her crushing the StroZero can is so extra lmaoooo

: the sound effects aren't lining up with the script

: Don't worry! This Shuwa-chan is plenty cute!

: Awayuki-chan best girl!

pant, pant “Thanks, I think I’m settling down... Uhh, it looks like our first streamer is ready, so let’s get back on track...”

I swear, I wanted to see a counselor *myself* so I could ask why my stream kept turning into a wrestling ring... Wait, no, that was all my fault. I couldn't say I didn't do all those things I did. Question answered.

"Er, now then, let's welcome our first guest! Our first troubled streamer is none other than..."

"My name is Utsuki. When I told my manager that Shion and I were in a relationship...she told me to turn myself in to the police."

"....."

"My name is Utsuki. When I told Shion's manager about our relationship...she started worrying about my mental health."

"Umm..."

"My name is Utsuki. When I told Live-On's CEO about our relationship...she told me to keep the jokes to my porno acting."

"Hey."

"My name is Utsuki. When I starred in a time-stop yuri porno ages ago...I found I could still move for some reason. I had to pretend to make up for it, so I didn't blink or breathe and nearly fainted."

"Hey, idiot, I'm talking to you."

"I'm Utsuki. When my director saw my commitment to my profession, he told me...'Damn, you're crazy.'"

"My name is Awayuki. These days, I'm finally starting to get fewer wisecracks about my seiso-ness."

"Don't you have a counseling corner to run?"

"Don't kick down the ladder."

: looooool

: Whoa, it's Sei-sama!

: kusa

: Ah, a Hiroshi parody, I loved his comedy act.

: Hey, the camping channel he's got going now is pretty popular.

: Damn, you're crazy.

: Huh? Sei-sama, you could move during a time-freeze porno? That's amazing! Do you have a lot of endurance?

: might wanna remember what the CEO told you

: Wait... You're telling me that was faked?

: word in the biz is that 90% of time-freeze videos are faked, sorry to say

: Don't make it sound like 10% of them are real.

: I wonder if there are any videos out there where the person who freezes time gets time frozen back on them, like in Jojo.

: Man, that sounds Bizarre. They oughta call that a Bizarre Adventure.

“Well, with that out of the way, hey, ladies and gents! It’s your girl, Sei-sama. I dropped by today because Awayuki-kun said she’d listen to my worries.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

“Our counseling corner refuses service to Sei-sama.”

“Wait, you have a blacklist?! Does this mean I’m banned?! But I haven’t even done anything yet!”

“That ‘yet’ tells me you’re *planning* to do something.”

“Now, now, let’s calm down. I *did* come here with a problem to ask about, that much is true.”

“Really, now? I felt my blood pressure rise when I saw the *cause* of so many problems walk through my doors, but if that’s the case, then I suppose I can offer you my services.”

: What could she have screwed up after getting her monetization revoked?

: Did she finally get her whole account banned?

: My vote's for breaking up with Shion-mama.

Anyway, this red pervert was my first guest.

Word had it that with the monetization crisis behind her, Sei-sama had started acting a bit more approachable and, dare I say, human. Her channel had long since had its monetization reinstated, but deep down, she was still the same hardcore yuri-innuendo bot.

Given how she'd opened, I had zero faith that her problem would be anything short of nonsense, but I decided to hear her out.

"So, what brings you in today?"

"Hm... You see, I wanted to discuss something about my Shion."

"She's not 'yours'—oh, forget it. So, what about her? Was that comment about you two breaking up on the money?"

"Oh, there's no problem there. We're deepening our bonds with each other every day."

"I see. So, how far have you gone?"

"Huh?"

"What base are you two at?"

"Huuuh?"

"Pick your jaw up off the floor and tell me if you've had sex alreadyyy!!!"

"Huuuuuuuuh?!"

After an uncharacteristic shout, Sei-sama started fidgeting and fumbling over her words as her eyes darted all around.

The hell?

"Uhhh, about that, right, you know how it is, it's a private matter. So yeah, it's best left to your imaginations... Something like that, right? Ah ha ha!"

"Grrrrrrrrrrr!!!"

"Wh-What might that growl be for, Awayuki-kun?"

"Shadduuuuup! What's wrong with you?! Don't start acting innocent on me! If you're a degenerate, then commit to it! You can't start blushing out of

nowhere!”

“H-Huh? Awayuki-kun, I know you said a lot during my monetization crisis, but I was under the impression that you were happy to see me change, no?”

“Yes, I might have been! But I feel like I’ll lose a part of my soul if I start thinking you’re cute!”

“Oh? What’s this I hear? Awayuki-kun, have you finally started to fall for Sei-sama’s sensual charm? Well? Well?”

“Phew, thanks for being annoying, it really calmed me down. This is the Sei-sama I know.”

“Oh, Awayuki-kun, always the jokester.”

: This side of Sei-sama has been showing up a lot lately

: It's a small change, but it's probably because of Shion-chan.

: (gritted-teeth voice) how cute

“Anyway, sorry for getting off track. You said it was something about Shion-mama, right?”

“Right, yeah. You all know how Shion loves babies, right?”

“Yeah, sounds about right.”

“So one day she asked me, ‘Hey, Sei! Can you try shaving your hair so you’re as smooth as a baby? I think you’d be super cute!’ What should I do?”

“Okay, go away for real.”

“Huh, why’s that?”

“No, see, I literally could not care less about your body-hair situation. Just do whatever.”

“Perhaps I didn’t specify, but I’m talking about the hair on my head.”

I had to pause. Did she say...what I think she did?

“Wait, I thought I heard ‘hair on my head’ just now, but that can’t possibly be it, right?”

“No, you’re right. I meant everything up here.”

“You mean the stuff growing out of your scalp?”

“There aren’t a lot of other spaces on the head for it, so yes.”

Sei-sama’s nonchalant recounting made my brain take a moment to process it all, but the gist of what I’d heard was this: Shion-mama had asked Sei-sama to shave every hair on her head.

“Oh, no, no, no, no! That’s just messed up! What would give her the idea to ask *that*?! Look, I’ll quit joking around and *actually* listen to you this time, so explain it from start to finish!”

“What brought about the sudden generosity? Well, let’s see, I was talking about changing my hairstyle with Shion, and then she asked if I could get a baby cut. Nothing else to it.”

“No, see, that’s the messed-up part! That means being as bald as a cue ball!”

“Actually, Shion says that having just a few short hairs left really nails the look.”

“I don’t care!!!”

: ?!

: YABE, just endless YABE

: Shion-mama... She's even more cursed to the people she's close to, huh...

: i thought I was gonna lmao at a dumb problem but then it got so serious that my ass is firmly back on

: My first thought was that it was hair down there, forgive me...

: Bros who thought it was hair down there, let us get monk cuts and embark on a pilgrimage to stave away our impure thoughts.

Wait, what was going on here? There was so much wrong that I came out with more questions than answers, but the first thing I had to know was—
“How are you *calm* after hearing that?! Losing your hair would *kinda* be a big deal, right?!”

“Well, I suppose it might. I’m a woman, after all, and this crimson hair I’m so proud of is a part of my identity. That’s why I told her I’d sleep on it.”

“Okay! So—”

“But hey, if Shion would like it, then I figured it might not be so bad, you know?”

“How could you *possibly* reach that conclusion?!”

“How? Well... I guess I’m the type who’d do anything for the one she loves.”

“Whaaaaa...”

: Wow... So this is the power of love...

: man i did *not* want to see teetee come from a problem like this

: Another surprising side to Sei-sama.

: First a mosaic over her body, then a black bar across her eyes, and now she's losing all her hair...

: The Disappearance of Sei Utsuki

“Let’s try thinking this over *one* more time, okay? I know we’re all about respecting everyone’s individuality these days, but don’t you think that shaving just about every hair off your head might be a bit too funky of a look? They say that a woman’s hair is her life and all...”

“Ahh, you think so too, Awayuki-kun? Even I had my misgivings about this one.”

“There’s no going back from it, so if you have any misgivings, you should just stop. Oh, right, how about we call Shion-mama right now to tell her no? We’ve gotten this far, so I’ll back you up.”

“How incredibly kind of you, Awayuki-kun... I suppose that means it looks like a serious concern from an outside perspective. Thank you, I’ll take you up on your offer and see this through. I think Shion should be free at the moment.”

“Got it. Starting the call now!”

I called up Shion-mama, who picked up by the first ring.

“Ah, Shion-mama? I’m streaming right now, but do you have a minute?”

“Yeah, totally fine! I mean, I’ve been watching the stream, after all.”

“Ah, really? Well, that makes things quick. Come on, Sei-sama, you’re up.”

“Understood. Ah, Shion? I figure you heard, but I have to say, I *am* a bit attached to my hair. I’m sorry to disappoint, but shaving my head might be a bit of a tall order, maybe.”

“Yeah, yeah, I understand!”

Huh. I’d expected this response in the end, but Shion-mama gave the okay a lot more quickly than anticipated. Maybe I wasn’t needed here?

“I mean, I *was* half-joking when I said that... I didn’t think you’d give this much thought to going along with my tastes, so I’m kind of touched.”

“Ha ha, is that all it was? What, were you not aware that your Sei-sama knows no greater joy than the sight of your smile?”

“Omigosh, my girlfriend-baby is such a dreambooooat!!! But really, I think that if you don’t like something, you should be honest and say so. If not, then we might not see eye to eye and start drifting apart. So from now on, make sure you tell me if you have any doubts about something between us. We’ve been through a lot together, so it ought to take more than that to shake us up, right?”

“Yes, you’re absolutely correct. I’ll do that in the future. Oh, Shion, I can always count on you to see what I can’t.”

: Ah, teetee...

: it's teetee, sure, but someone wanna tell me what "girlfriend-baby" means

: happy to see them happy

: Never would have thought we'd be here back when they debuted.

Hmm... Yep, they were gonna be all right.

“All right, enough with the flirting! I’ve got other clients waiting on me, so handle the rest on your own time.”

“Well now, my apologies. Thank you, Awayuki-kun, you’ve solved my problem.”

“I have to thank you too! Next time I see you, I’ll give you *all* the motherly love you need!”

“Oh, no, I should thank you two!” I insisted.

And so, the two of them left the stream. Phew, those senpais sure could be a handful...

Wait.

“Hold on. Why do I get the feeling that those two just used my stream to shove their relationship in my face?!”

: kusa

: settle down lol

: hey, as long as they're happy lol

“Grrrrrrrrr!!! That’s it, Sei-sama’s back to being banned from my corneeeeer!”

And so, I ended Sei-sama’s segment with a furious shout that would’ve been right at home as a KochiKame punchline...

“Sorry, I don’t know what came over me... Er, now then, let’s move on to our second troubled streamer! Come on out!”

“Yahoo yahoo! The sunlight in everyone’s hearts, Hareru Asagiri, is rising in the sky!”

: It's Harerun!

: Oh, which means we've got the Weather Squad!

: Oh, it's that virtual kabaddi athlete!

So I had the first generation of Live-On, the root of all evil, Hareru-senpai, come on the show...

“Um, I know it might be a little unnecessary to ask this of someone coming to a counseling corner, but...Hareru-senpai, do you have things you’re concerned about?” I couldn’t quite imagine how someone who played kabaddi in the office could worry about anything...

“I sure do! Taxes!”

“That problem is a little too heavy for this corner, so could I ask that you please take it to a specialist instead?”

“Man, this place sure is selective with its customers, huh?”

“Believe me, when I came up with this idea, I didn’t think I’d have a guest gleefully talk about her taxes.”

: Go to a tax advisor instead.

: This is not something you talk about on stream lol

: Actually not Shuwa-chan's fault.

“I figured you’d say something like that, so don’t worry! I packed a Shuwacchi-appropriate problem too!”

“Ah, good ole Hareru-senpai! In that case, ask away!”

“Verily! So, Shuwacchi, you know how I tend to call streamers by nicknames,

right?”

“That you do.”

“Do you know what I call fourth gen’s Kaeru Yamatani?”

“Ahh, I think it was ‘Froggy’?”

“Yeah, that! Good on you for remembering! You really do love me, Shuwacchi.”

“Want to get married?”

“I came in for counseling and got proposed to by StroZero, so I think I’ll report this place to the authorities first.”

“Better watch yourself, I *will* change my last name at a moment’s notice. I can have this corner double as a marriage counseling service whenever I feel like it.”

“I don’t think people go to marriage counselors to marry the staff. I swear, you’re one hopeless drunk. Forget it, I’ll just keep going! Anyway, like you said, it’s Froggy right now, but I’ve been thinking of changing it.”

“Why’s that?”

“Every time my viewers ask who Froggy is, I have to explain the whole kanji pun about how ‘Kaeru’ means ‘frog’ all over again, and I did so for the thirtieth time just the other day. I have to admit that my naming choice missed the mark, so I figure I ought to change it to something a bit more intuitive...”

“Kusa, I can’t believe you put up with it for that long.”

“And that’s where you come in, Shuwacchi! I came to ask for your help in thinking up a new name!”

: Oh yeah, I remember this happening a lot

: i laughed when she explained it three times in one stream

: I mean, it really isn't that obvious...

: Got a little too far from the original name there.

: Harerun, The Woman Who Admits Defeat

: Yeah, that kinda backfired

“I understand the concerns you bear. But are you sure I’m the right person for this?”

“Of course! You’re Kaeru-chan’s mommy, aren’t you? There’s nobody better to ask than her legal guardian!”

“You know... Lately, I’ve been wondering if I even need to bother correcting people about the mommy stuff, and that scares me... But I’m not her guardian, either.”

“Hey, don’t sweat the small stuff! Anyway, let’s hop to it—what do you think would be a good nickname?”

“Let’s see... Is calling her ‘Baby’ not good enough?”

“I mean, she isn’t a baby.”

“Stooooop!!! If you say that for real, it’s all over!”

“You know she’s probably older than me, right?”

“Look at the school uniform you’re cosplaying in! It’s the same thing!”

“I-I ain’t cosplayin’!”

“You’re not?”

“It’s just, you know, I got held back a year!”

“Careful, you might just set yourself up to be more pathetic than the baby.”

: The ideal mommy, always defending her child's identity.

: Even Awayuki-chan is awakening to her role as mommy

: How old is Kaeru-chan, actually?

: I think she slipped and said 28 on stream once

: I see, so she's a 336-month old baby.

“Okay, enough with the jokes! ‘Baby’ is too simple, I need something with more kick to it,” Hareru-senpai declared.

“Hmm... But if they can’t tell it’s Kaeru-chan, then that defeats the purpose of changing it, no?”

“What do you think about ‘Brocken Jr.’?”

“What’s a baby becoming a Chojin for?! You just picked it at random because it has ‘Jr.’ in the name. She doesn’t have ultimate muscles, she’s got ultimate mommy issues, so put some effort into it!”

“Man, Shuwacchi, you can be *mean* sometimes...”

“Oh, what about ‘Binkie’? It’s basically a name, right?”

“Ahh... No, ‘Binkie’ is the name of something *for* babies, not the name of the baby itself...”

“Maybe you could make a pun off of ‘Yamatani,’ like ‘YourMa-chan.’”

“*You’re* the Ma here!”

: didn't think this argument would be getting philosophical lol

: cmon Shuwa-chan, don't give up that quick lol

: How about Initial B?

: the initial stands for Bgranny

: You're working with a girl who's pushing thirty and going on three, plus allergic to work. There is no good nickname for that. ¥5,000

Hmm... There had to be a good idea out there somewhere...

“Ah!”

“Oh, what happened, Shuwacchi? Didja come up with something good?!”

“No, I wouldn’t go that far... I just feel like I saw the perfect name scroll past in the comments a while back...”

“Really?! All right, try to remember it!”

Hmm, I thought as I dug through my memories in search of this one scrap. *What was it again...?*

“I remember it was a pretty simple name,” I mused.

“Nice, that’s exactly what I’ve been looking for, so it might be a great fit!”

“Also... I think it might be more associated with babies than Kaeru herself... Ah!”

“Ooh?! Didja remember it?!”

“Yes! I think it was ‘Aka-san’! How about it? Doesn’t ‘Aka-san’ just fit her perfectly?”

“‘Aka-san’... Ah!”

Going by Hareru-senpai’s reaction, we had found the one. Yes, with that almost-thirty self-proclaimed baby’s failure to pull herself up by her jockstrap, it just seemed to fit better and better the more I thought about it.

: Aka-san lmaooo

: Buddy, I think you've got the wrong meme, the leather club's two blocks down

: Please, Aka-chan was my son. Call me Aka-san!

“You’re amazing, Shuwacchi! Now I can’t even think of that person as Kaeru Yamatani anymore, she’s Aka-san to me!”

“I know, right? Now that that’s settled, let’s call Kaeru-chan right now.”

“Y’know… I thought this during Seisei’s part too, but the service here is less counseling and more mediating.”

“Hah hah hah! I gave up on counseling the moment I told the group chat about it and got laughed at by every streamer in the company, ya dingus! So I chugged some StroZero out of spite and decided we’d be goin’ at it by force! Counseling corner? Don’t make me laugh! I’m gonna show ’em who’s the boss of *this* gym, baby!”

“It’s downright heresy!”

With our quota of Aka-san jokes now met, it was time to give Kaeru-chan a ring… Oh, I got through.

“Mommy? What’s with the sud—”

“From now on, you’re Aka-san!” I yelled.

“Why? Because you’re the Aka-*sun*!” Hareru-senpai added.

And then I hung up.

“Phew, another problem solved!” *gulp, gulp* “Phwah! Nothin’ like crackin’ open a cold one after a hard day’s work!”

“This counselor sure is a character. There’s like zero continuity between where she started and where she ended up. I feel like I’m watching an episode of *Kabutoborg*. What happened to scorching the earth?”

“Parents shouldn’t fight with their children.”

“You actually have a good reason?!”

: kusa

: Why? Because you are the sun!

: Man, the main char in that show sure was downright heresy

: If you stake your life now, you will be ALIVE!

: You're feeling better, so feel better!

: don't have a conversation

: You're talking about different Matsuokas here…

All right, now that Hareru-senpai’s problem was solved… Hm?

“Looks like Kaeru-chan is calling us back,” I said.

“For real? What’s up with Aka-san?”

“Well, let’s just bring her on.”

click

“Hello? What’s the matter, Kaeru-chan?”

“Yo! Aka-san! We meet again!” Hareru-senpai chimed in.

“What in the world do you *think* is the matter?! Er, what was it you called me? ‘Aka-san’? And wait, why is Hareru-senpai with you too?! There’s so much I

don’t understand that I can’t begin to form a question!”

“Hey, Aka-san. Why do you think Shuwacchi and StroZero were brought together?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m doing a counseling corner right now, so Kaeru-chan, do you have any problems you wanna talk about?”

“I just gained one problem, yes. It’s that I can’t seem to hold a conversation with my senpais.”

Phew. I figured that Kaeru-chan had gone through enough teasing by now, so I finally explained the context to her. Hareru-senpai was great at running with jokes, and she even dropped punchlines when the situation called for them, so having her around was always a blast. She was our first generation for a reason.

Despite her earlier bewilderment, Kaeru-chan accepted my explanation when it was all said and done.

“So that’s the deal. What do you think, Kaeru-chan?”

“Yeah, whaddya think, huh, huh?”

“You could have just explained all this at the start. Still, if it’s a nickname from both my mommy and our most distinguished senpai, then I shall accept it, downright heresy and all.”

And so, “Aka-san” became Kaeru-chan’s new nickname.

But—just as Kaeru-chan left the call, and as Haruru-senpai said her goodbyes and followed suit—I saw it. A single comment with no connection to any that came before or after—it made me forget to respond, swallowing up every iota of my being.

: Kaeru wants to go googoo gaga = Gagabriel

“Gagabriel…” I mumbled.

“Wha?!” Hareru-senpai gasped.

Eventually, “Gagabriel” infected every cell of my brain, compelling me to let the word leave my lips…

“Gagabriel...” she echoed.

“Yes, Hareru-senpai... Gagabriel.”

My whisper crossed the digital sea to infect the ears of Hareru-senpai as well; she soon started repeating the name as I had.

Gagabriel... Gagabriel... Gagabriel...

“Gagabriel!!!” we shouted in unison. With our voices in sync, we immediately called Kaeru-chan back to the chat.

“Yes, what is it? Did something else ha—”

“From now on, you’re Gagabriel!”

“Why? Because you’re Gagabriel!”

“In spite of it all... I still love my mom and her two-hit psychic damage attacks.”

: all of my kusa at Gagabriel

: A Gabriel that fell from heaven?

: The density of Live-On particles when these two are around is off the charts

: man, I want some of that naming sense

: gj, chat

And so, “Gagabriel” became Kaeru-chan’s new nickname.

“All right! Last but not least, it’s time for our third troubled ’Tuber to take the stage! Say hello to the folks at home!”

“Tee hee, I may be everyone’s big sister, but I still have the occasional worry of my own. No, if anything, having problems is the sign of being an adult. Chami Yanagase here.”

Yeah! Our final guest at the counseling corner was none other than Live-On’s representative wallflower, Chami-chan!

“Chami-chan! Thanks for coming on today!”

“Oh no, I got interested as soon as I heard it was a project from my genmate. Besides, I do just so happen to have a worry of my own… Teehee, *riiight*, Shuwa-chan?”

“Uhh? R-Right, yeah.”

Was it just me, or was Chami-chan acting a little odd? She normally came off as lighthearted, the polar opposite of what she looked like, but here, she was cranking it up a notch and acting like her head was in the clouds.

“Teehee, Shuuuwa-chaaan!”

“Y-Yes, that is my name?”

“Shuwa-chan!”

“Uh… Oh, I get it! You’re so happy that you can say ‘Shuwa-chan’ that you’re repeating it!”

“Eh heh heh, you caught me!”

Right, we hadn’t collabed while I was in Shuwa mode since the one year and one month anniversary stream. Still, all this grinning of hers was a telltale sign of affection; this classic brand of cuteness made her really feel like the group’s dedicated soothing streamer.

Look, VTuber fans of the world! Gaze upon Live-On’s final ray of hope!

“Feh heh heh, Shuwa-chan... Duh-huh, dyuh huh huh hyuck!”

“.....”

VTuber fans of the world, avert your eeeeeeeeeeeyes!!!!!

: Chamakko! Chamakko!

: Yeah, Chami-chan seems like she'd worry about a lot...

: i thought she was repeating "Shuwa-chan" to make it Gestaltzerfall

: that's one powerful-sounding word

: What a gross-sounding laugh...

I had almost forgotten—or rather, I had desperately wanted to forget—that

this girl was getting more degenerate by the day... If I wanted to defend Chami-chan's cuteness, I was going to have to push the script along myself.

"Uhh, riiight, anyway! Tell us what's got ya down, babe!"

"Huh? Oh, yeah! This is a counseling session! So yes, Shuwa-chan, please listen to my troubles."

"Lay it on me!"

"You see...it's about Ehrai-chan."

"No, take it baaack!"

"Huh?! Take what back?!"

I'd moved the stream along so I could defend Chami-chan's cuteness, but all I did was step on a rake! Nothing good came from her bringing up Ehrai-chan!

Then again, I couldn't say that this was unlike her... Either way, the cat was out of the bag, so I figured I might as well hear her out.

"Never mind... Anyway, did something happen between you and Ehrai-chan?"

"You sure? Okay, then, let's see... I'm sure it's not news here, but I want to get closer with Ehrai-chan, right? So I thought I'd come on here to ask if you had any ideas on how to, maybe, close the gap a little."

"Ah, I honestly had a feeling it was gonna be something like this back when you told me you wanted to join the stream."

: Guess it wasn't a one-off romance

: It sounds like such a wholesome worry on its own, but after watching their off-collab, I just get creeped out.

: Chami-chan, the bizarre streamer who gets comments ranging from "creepy" to "cute"

: Yeah, because she's creepy-cute.

: I think that means something a little different...

: Well, people say she's at the top of Live-On by her looks...

"You say you want to 'get closer' with her, but do you have a goal in mind? Do you want to be Ehrai-chan's lover?"

“Oh no, I could never ask for something so beyond the pale. My ideal would be like her pet or mistress.”

“I bet sending Ehrai-chan a vid of you butt-drumming the beat to *Kurenai* would work.”

“Thank you, Shuwa-chan, I’ll get right on that.”

“I lied.”

“Why would you lie to me?!”

“Because hearing a genmate say they want to be a pet or a mistress would make any sane person want to stop them!”

To think she’d actually try and do it... Love really is blind.

“Please, Shuwa-chan! I’m serious about this! Besides, this stream is supposed to be a counseling corner, so you ought to be doing your job!”

“Guh, you had to choose *now* to actually be right… All right, understood. So, can you tell me what your approach has been until now?”

“I’ve been sending about a hundred chat messages a day.”

“A hundred?!”

“Yeah. She responded often at first, but nowadays, I’ve only been getting five messages back a day.”

“No, see, that’s *normal*! If anything, I’m impressed Ehrai-chan put up with that for so long...”

: kusa

: laughing at how she fails her romancing attempts right from the start

: Chami-chan's normally shy, so why is her sense of personal boundaries so bugged ;_;

: She finds a way to klutz even *this* up...

: hey, mind sending one of those hundred messages my way

“Shuwa-chan, do you think I might be doing something wrong?”

“You’re doing *everything* wrong. First off, how about you stop spamming her

with messages? I think you're going to make zero progress no matter what you do until you stop doing that."

"Urgh... You're right, what a fool I've been... But then what *should* I be doing?"

"Let me think... Hmm, I don't know too much about Ehrai-chan myself, huh..."

"Well, how about we follow the pattern with the other guests and call Ehrai-chan here? Then we can ask her what she'd like!"

"Wait, you'd be fine with that?"

"Sure! In fact, I can't go on anymore without it!" *pant, pant, pant!*

"Wait, you just wanna talk to Ehrai-chan, don't you? But hey, if you're cool with it, guess I'll give her a call!"

"Ahhh, she's comiiiiing! My dear Boss is comiiiiiiiiiiiing!!!"

"On second thought, it looks like she's busy with her own stream right now, so I called Nekoma-senpai instead since she's probably got nothing better to do."

"Nya nyaan! Nekoma here will come running when you need her, no matter how sudden!"

"Uhh... Whuh?"

"Nekoma-senpai, pleasure to have you."

"Wha, huuuuuuh?! W-Wait a moment, Shuwa-chan!"

In contrast with Nekoma-senpai, who didn't flinch at being called up out of nowhere, Chami-chan shouted in surprise and then started visibly fidgeting.

: And with absolutely zero warning, a Nekomaaa appears

: don't drag in a random senpai just because they're free lol

: the one time where Chami-chan has the reasonable reaction.

: why are these two greeting each other like it's nothing

: Huh, did I overlook the Nekoma foreshadowing...?

: Meanwhile, I knew that this stream's very existence was the foreshadowing!

: calling this a shitty stream lmao, but that does answer the question...

“What’s wrong, Chami-chan? Come on, say hello to Nekoma-senpai.”

“I-I mean, I *know*! B-But I’ve barely ever talked with Nekoma-senpai outside of big collabs!”

“Hello ta you too, Chami-chan!”

“Ayeeek! Err, umm, hello...”

“From the looks of this stream, I take it you’ve got somethin’ you’re worried about?”

“Ah... Uh... Worry... w-wELl...”

Ahh, come to think of it, I might not have seen these two together too often. It’d been a while since I’d last seen Chami-chan go maximum shyness.

However, that wasn’t to say I’d called Nekoma-senpai with absolutely no reason in mind.

“Chami-chan, I know you’re nervous, but this is one of those times where you’ve gotta pull through!”

“Huh? It is?”

“Your worry was about wanting to get closer with Ehrai-chan, wasn’t it? In that case, someone who’s *already* close with her, like Nekoma-senpai, would be a good example for you to aim for.”

“Oh! Th-That makes sense!”

Yes, Nekoma-senpai and Ehrai-chan had first connected on the basis of one being an animal and the other an animal lover. Nowadays, they were close enough that you could frequently find them collabing together. Perhaps not enough to outdo Ehrai-chan’s familiarity with her own genmates, but them aside, Nekoma-senpai was widely considered to be the streamer closest with Ehrai-chan. Plus, she was living Chami-chan’s dream as Ehrai-chan’s pet in *WorCra*.

“And so, I figured that getting to know Nekoma-senpai would lead you closer to a cure for your woes! Plus, it’ll help you get over your shyness, so that’s two

birds with one stone!”

“Amazing, Shuwa-chan! You’re a genius! Bravo!”

“Easy...” I muttered.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“Oh, nothing at all.”

I might not have been lying, but seeing Chami-chan buy that without a single doubt in her mind was worrying in its own way. Either way, I figured I couldn’t leave a senpai waiting any longer.

“Uhh, so Nekoma-senpai, have you followed the gist of the conversation?”

“Sure! I’m fuzzy on the details, but you basically just need me to talk with Chami-chan, right?”

“That’s right. I apologize for the sudden request, but it’s for my genmate, so if you could spare even a little time for her...”

“Nya nya! Leave it to me! As a fan of shitty games, there’s nothing I love more than being asked to do the absurd!”

“Much appreciated... All right, Chami-chan, good luck!”

“Sure!”

: Oh, and here I thought it was just more Chami-abuse

: Aww, Nekomaaa's so kind

: Chami-chan, the girl who has the cat take care of *her*

: sounds about right lol

Good reply, Chami-chan! Now’s the time for your first move...

“Uhh... D-Do you have any hobbies?”

“Now it’s startin’ to feel like a blind date. Shuwa-chan, should I keep going?”

“If you can, then please!”

“I see... Uh, well, I like to partake in shitty games and shitty movies.”

“aH, I seeee... P-Personally, I have a voice fetish...”

“Ya don’t say...”

“Oooooh...”

“K-Keep trying, Chami-chan! This is where you expand on your subject!” I encouraged her.

“Shuwa-chan... Oh! That’s right! I’m also a vocal sex illusionist!”

“You dumbaaaaaaaaaaass!!!!!”

Why would you choose *that* to be what leaves your mouth?!

“I-I’m sorry. My head blanked out, and when I heard you cheering me on, that was the first thing that came to mind...”

“Look, I know I was the one responsible for bringing that cursed phrase into the world, but still!”

“C’mon, Shuwa-chan, don’t have a hairball. After everything Sei’s put me through, that sorta stuff doesn’t make me bat an eye.”

“Thank you so very much, Nekoma-senpai... Pat, pat...”

“Meooow~! ♪”

: all of my kusa

: Is this a skit where they're both trying to bomb a blind date?

: Chami-chan's married to all of her viewers, so she's already taken.

: sounds like a lotta people with the same last name

: Chami-chan's always Chamming it up, huh

“Nya, oh yeah, there’s one other trick I know! I haven’t shown it off lately, but I’m really good at impressions!”

“Ah, that’s right! Wait...doesn’t that mean you’d get along with a voice fetishist like Chami-chan?”

“...”

The moment I said those words—that was when Chami-chan's attitude changed.

"I see, impressions... Maybe you could use that to... Nekoma-senpai!"

After a moment of muttering to herself, Chami-chan called out Nekoma's name in a voice so crystal clear that you'd swear she was a completely different person.

"Nya? What's up, Chami-chan?"

"Um! Please, do impressions of the other streamers confessing their love to me!"

It sounded less like a request and more like a demand, one that would refuse to take no for an answer. This was why I was now clutching my temples.

Crap, I thought, *Telling her to expand on the subject might have unhinged another of Chami-chan's dark sides...*

"Please, Nekoma-senpai! If you do it, I'm pretty sure I'll feel really, really good!"

"Chami-chan, let's take it down a notch, okay? You're letting your own desires take control instead of trying to get to know Nekoma-senpai..."

"Nya! If that's all ya need, then no problem! It's been a while since I've had a chance to show off my impeccable impression skills!"

"Senpai, you're like a saint! I can't believe that the real mama of second gen was you, Nekoma-senpai! I'll get you a nice can of cat food after this!"

"I'd prefer some yakiniku takeout from Jojoen."

"Are the ears and tail just for show?"

: Don't bring up voices around Chami-chan!

: Is it just me, or is Shuwa-chan really good at removing Chami-chan's limiter?

: She's on Live-On's bomb defusal squad, after all

: "defusal" more like made every single one blow up

: she's just a serial bomber lol

“A-Anyway! Can you start with Mashiro-chan?!”

“Nya! I’ll give it a shot! Ahh, ahh, umm, something like this?”

“Wha?! A-Amazing!”

It really was amazing... I’d known she had skills, but this was on the level of the pros. If I hadn’t already known who was behind the mic, I might not have doubted it was Mashiron at all.

“Heh. Hey, Chami-chan? Chami-chan, I love you.”

“Ah! Aaaaah! I wub yooou! I wub you tooooooooo!!!”

“That oughta do it, I guess. Who’s up next?”

pant, pant “I-in that case, do Awayuki-chan, please.”

“Huh? I’m right here, though?”

“Shuwa-chan, you stay like that! I want Nekoma-senpai to play the seiso version, Awayuki-chan!”

Uhhhhh...

“Gotcha!” *ahem!* “Chami-chan! I love you... Okay, Shuwa-chan, now you!”

“Ah, um, Ch-Chami-chan, I really love yooou!”

“Mhhooo! It’s like I’m being hypnotized by twins with completely different personalities, my ears are gonna get pregnaaaaant~!!!”

I kind of just went with the flow...but why was I getting wrapped up in this, too?

: so creepy lmaooooo

: Huh, what was this stream supposed to be about again?

: It's a Chami-chan babymaking stream, obviously.

: instant one trillion viewers

: getting views from across the galaxy lmao

“Amazing, that was so amazing! Shuwa-chan, Nekoma-senpai’s throat must have some kind of divine blessing!”

“Yeah, yeah, are you done yet? Good... Now, back to our scheduled progr—”

“No, wait! Last one! For the last one, please, all I need is an Ehrai-chan version! It’s my final will!”

“Nya nya! Knew that one was comin’! Mmmgh! Chami-senpai! Just so you know, I really love you, Chami-senpai~!”

“Igyyyiiiiiiighh! This is wild! The immorality of legally taking a hit of the Boss is so strong that it’s making my brain go sploooooooge!!!”

“Could you pick some *less* gross words to use?!” I interrupted. “Also, that makes it sound like the regular Boss is contraband! If anything, *this* way should be way more illegal!”

“Chami-senpai, your Zookeeper’s been fascinated by seals lately, so I’d like to see an imitation of a seal, if you’d please~!”

“Yeah, got it! Watch me, Ehrai-chan! Orph! Orph!” *clap, clap, clap!* “Orph! Orph!” *clap, clap, clap!*

“Shuwa-chan, this girl’s funny!”

“Nekoma-senpai, don’t abuse your juniors like this!”

Gah! Chami-chan might seem like the token normal person most of the time, but when she Live-Ons, her power level goes off the charts! She stuck *me* of all people in the punchline position! Was she the Zenitsu Agatsuma of Live-On?!

: what fresh hell are we being forced to witness

: why is someone who came to get counseling suddenly doing a seal impression?

: I feel like an actual zoo seal might have more sanity.

“Phew, thank you, Nekoma-senpai. You were *amazing*.”

“Oh no, I’m just happy to see someone enjoy my impressions! Hope I can show ’em off again sometime!”

“S-Sure! Please, I’ll be waiting with bated breath!”

And now there was somehow a friendship blossoming between the two?

“Shuwa-chan, thank you!”

“Uh, sure...”

“All right, bye!”

“Huh?! Wait, Chami-chan?!”

Chami-chan said her thanks and then just left the stream. Like, huh? We were kind of in the middle of something...

“Nekoma-senpai. For the record, this was supposed to be a counseling session for Chami-chan... But, uh, are you okay with it ending like this?”

“Myaa... Well, she got to know me as a stepping stone to getting closer to Ehrai-chan, so it works out, right?”

“Ah ha ha...”

It was looking to be a long road until Chami-chan’s love reached Ehrai-chan...

Live-On Common Sense Quiz

Come one, come all, for tonight, Awayuki Kokorone has taken the stage! What's the occasion? Why, none other than a huge collab with everyone in Live-On joining in!

Just one thing...

"Testing, testing, can everyone hear me? Hm... Sounds like it's fine, thanks. All right. Konmashiro. I'm your host for this event, Mashiro Irodori, otherwise known as Mashiron."

I was sitting alone in front of my home PC, with the screen displaying Mashiron and Mashiron alone.

Yes, this collab was being run a little differently.

"Now then, to everyone taking the Live-On Common Sense Quiz, let's get started," Mashiron announced in her almost inappropriately low-energy voice.

A common sense quiz... let's go back to how it had all come about.

It all started as a suggestion from Live-On's management. They suggested we take a general knowledge test. Something along the lines of, "Live-On's been kind of a den of debauchery lately, huh? Forget about what makes the sky blue, you guys need to start by learning what makes common sense common!"

This attempt at social rehabilitation was a heartwarming reminder that management really was looking out for our best interests...except for the part where none of that happened. Obviously, it was nothing more than the suggestion, "Hey, it might be a hoot if you all took a general knowledge test" that got the ball rolling. Yep, our staff really understood their streamers; maybe we oughta thank them by raiding the office fridge clean. What makes Live-On so dumb?

Questionable start aside, none of the streamers had any particular objections to the content of the stream itself, which brought us to this very moment.

"I know, Shion-senpai's usually the one who gets these big collabs moving

along. Sadly, there were some doubts as to whether she still had any common sense left, so the role fell to the next best match, me… Matchiron.”

What. Hey, Mashiron, you get your ass in a test-taker’s seat right this second.

: What a curious stream...

: to Live-On, this is harder than the Tokyo U entrance exams

: Shion-mama, she left us behind...

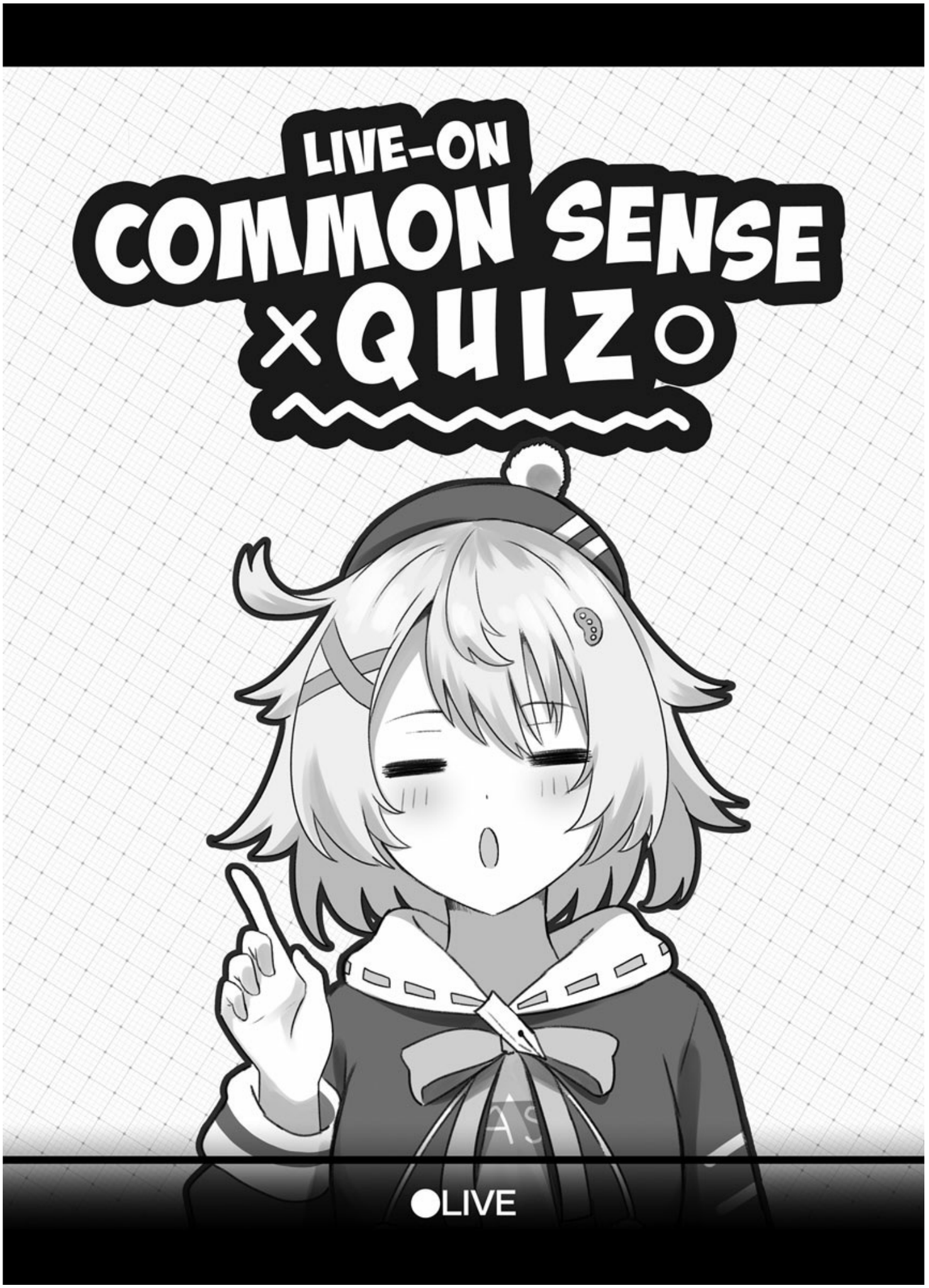
: What.

: Hm? Sorry, come again?

: Match? Hm? Mind saying that one more time?

“Sh-Shut up! This is my first time hosting a big collab, so I’m nervous! And that line was just because the script management gave me said, ‘Make a light pun here and then get like a gajillion in supers,’ so what am I supposed to do?! Heck, has the person who wrote this script ever watched a VTuber in their life? You don’t need to put ‘make a pun’ in the script!”

Management...


LIVE-ON
COMMON SENSE
×QUIZ○
●LIVE

: Hey management, you're free to take the quiz too.

: they really just gave you an ad-lib script, lol

: lmao @ management treating them just like comedians

: just throwing out the impossible at you lmaoooooo

: Cute. ¥10,000

: The gajillion-yen woman, Mashiron.

: The 162-yen woman, Awayuki

“All right, enough of that, I’m gonna explain the rules. First off, I’ll present a question that’s within the realm of common knowledge. The other girls, who are all watching this stream, will then message me their answers within a thirty-second time limit. While I’m sure everyone here knows better, Googling or whatever are all off-limits. It might get a little problematic if they can see the chat box, so I ask that they all avoid looking at the stream itself and instead just go off of my voice. Last, I’ll announce and explain the answer, and we’ll pretty much repeat that for each question. Streamers and viewers alike, let’s all study common sense with Professor Mashiron.”

Professor Mashiron... Pfft, kuh huh...

: I see.

: Huh, those are some pretty normal rules.

: Ooh! Me, me, Professor Mashiron!

: Professor Mashiron lmaoooo

: What a cute name that our teacher has lol

“No, see, the script just told me to say that! If you doubt me, then you can look at this script yourself!”

You know, for some reason, I got the feeling that whoever wrote that script had their third eye open. It really drew out a specific sort of cuteness that only Mashiron could provide...

“Ahem, I still have more rules to explain, so let’s get back on track. It’s not

very Live-On yet, after all. Anyone who comes up with a stupid answer will be called up here and dragged with no mercy, so don’t say I didn’t warn you. No leaving answers blank, either.”

: I thought we were getting a cozy teacher, not a drill instructor!

: this is what i've been waiting for

: can't wait for everyone to get roasted over every question

: kusa

: the real winner is whoever comes up with the dumbest answers

“I mean, what do you expect from me? I haven’t even gotten to the first question and chat’s already going on about ‘Professor Mashiron’ and ‘Matchiron.’ As the host, I’ve gotta keep things moving somehow.”

Sorry, Mashiron, I was one of those people.

Still, I was going into this as a whole new flavor of Shuwa-chan! You can’t go chugging StroZero on a test day, so my brain was sharpened to a razor’s edge! People were already calling me “uncarbonated StroZero” or “flat StroZero” when I didn’t have a drop of alcohol in me, so once these questions started, I was going to show off the pristine intellect befitting the group’s seiso streamer!

“Okay, is everyone good on the rules? If all the streamers are ready, then send me a message... Yep, looks like we’re good. Well, even if you tuned out for the rules, watching the flow of the first question should clear everything up, so let’s get into it. Also, I heard that management prepared a nice reward for the winner.”

Hell yeah! Time for the Live-On Common Sense Quiz to start!

“First question. Many modern democratic governments split the powers of the state into three branches, each having a system of checks and balances on one another. This is called the separation of powers. Now then, what are those three branches of government called? Name them all.”

Uh... Ah, yeah, yeah. That made sense. That was some pretty common knowledge. Totally.

Just, uh... This was the very first question?! I mean, it was just such a way heavier question than I'd expected that I was baffled, confused, and I also didn't know the answer! You know how it is, I'd heard of the three branches of government, sure, and I remembered something about it being used to avoid concentrating power in one place, yadda yadda.

Umm... I thought it involved the courts... Huh? Or was it called the legal system? Er... Right! Judicial! The judicial branch was probably one of them!

"Okay, ten seconds left. Better start writing now or you won't make it. Anyone who hasn't, better hurry up."

Huh?! Already?! You sure thirty seconds was enough time for this?!

Uh, judicial, and the other two... Crap, I was coming up empty! Not answering the question wasn't allowed, so... Oh, screw it, this was good enough!

"All right, time's up, everyone can look at the screen until the next question. Mm-hm, mm-hm, heh heh... Yeah, I've gotten answers from everyone, and my, quite the variety we have here. Heh heh heh..."

Cool, time to get my voice ready for primetime.

: variety is not the thing you're supposed to have loool

: Mashiron's already giggling

: Separation of powers, huh? Brings me back to my elementary school days.

"All right, let's start with the answer check. The three branches of government are the legislative, the executive, and the judicial branches, so anyone who wrote all of those is correct. In Japan's government, it's the National Diet that's the legislative, the Cabinet that's the executive, and the courts that are the judicial. But of *course*, everyone as upstanding Japanese citizens all knew that, right?"

Okay, deep breaths...

"Well, teasing aside, if you didn't know it before, now you do. That's why I don't have anything more to say to people who did their best to think of it and happened to get it wrong. Just go home, comfortable with the knowledge that

you came out of this smarter than you did before. But! But! Anyone who Live-On'd all traces of common sense to come up with truly absurd answers will be mercilessly exposed for all to see, just like I said. Okay? Awa-chan, Hikari-chan, and Kaeru-chan?"

A digital sound effect blared in my ears, signifying that I was being called out. With tears welling in my eyes, I picked up.

"Yoohoo! Awayuki-chan and Kaeru-chan! We're buddies!"

"Mommy, Hikari-chan, we're buddies."

"I don't wanna be buddies over something this embarrassing!"

The three of us were called to the stream. Our answers would soon be exposed for all to see...

"All right, the gang's all here. This is where it gets good. First off, hmm, let's start with Awa-chan's answer."

"Huh, wait a—"

With no heed paid to my pleas for mercy, the stream soon displayed a screenshot of the answer I'd messaged her. Its contents were—

"Three, Branches, Of, leftover Government"

: looooool

: all of my kusa

: I'm pretty sure that's not it lmaooo

: I wanna compliment her creativity lol

: lmao @ "leftover"

Gyaaaaaaugh... I was so embarraaaaaaaaaassed!!!!!

"Awa-chan... Care to explain?"

"Is there anything that *needs* explaining...?"

"Yes. While I can imagine the thought process that led to this answer, I'd like

to hear it from the writer's mouth."

"You sadist! Well... If you split 'three branches of government' three ways, that's what you end up with! Got a problem with that?!"

"I see. So, mind explaining the 'leftover' bit?"

"I had one left over, so whaddya want me to do?! Besides, thirty seconds is way too short of a time limit, so I bet you were hoping for weird answers like this!"

"What are you snapping back for? And you mean to tell me you didn't know a single one?"

"No, I knew the judicial was one of them."

"Hey, you got it. Why didn't you write that one down?"

"Because I only knew one... So I figured that putting something with all three would be closer to being correct."

"Uh... You put four, though? Have you been drinking StroZero?"

"I'm sober!"

We had more to go through, so that put an end to my public execution. The next answer displayed on screen was Hikari-chan's—

"Wèi! Shǔ! Wú!"

"Hikari-chan... What is this?"

"So Hikari's been really into Romance of the Three Kingdoms lately!"

"Oh, I see."

"Oath of the Pico Park!"

"Yes, the Oath of the Peach Garden. But good job on getting the tones of the kingdom names right."

"Eh heh heh heh~!"

"Huh? Mashiron, is it just me, or are you being unusually nice to Hikari-chan?!

I’m calling favoritism!” I accused her.

“I just don’t know what else there is to say.”

“Oh...”

And last came Kaeru-chan’s answer.

“Ultra, Rider, Sentai”

“Kaeru-chan, this isn’t a government.”

“A baby obviously wouldn’t know anything but this. It’s common sense.”

“Then maybe skew your answer to something babies *do* know.”

“This was the only answer I could think of where the three things came as a set.”

: you can't just name three things and call it a day

: I mean, the three kingdoms had the powers of government, and there were three of them, so...

: Don't double down loool ¥610

“Incidentally, people like Hareru-senpai, Shion-senpai, Ehrai-chan, and all got it right, well done. Now then, we’re going to the next question, so all streamers, get ready.”

My callout ended and I was sent back to the test-taker’s seat. We’d gotten off to a start that made me fear for my future...but I just had to turn it all around!

“Next question. In his work entitled *Discourse on the Method*, the French philosopher René Descartes put forth the following proposition: ‘I *blank*, therefore I am.’ Answer with the word that the blank is replacing. So yeah, a fill-in-the-blank question. You all know the drill, right?”

Oh, I think I know this one! Back when I’d been deep into my cringey teen phase, I looked into philosophy a little! And… Ooh, a lot of cringe memories just came flooding back… It was the cursed power sealed within my right eye that had made me clutch my temples in my younger days, but now I was doing it because of the cursed memories sealed within my brain…

But hey, I could avert my eyes from the painful past, because I knew the answer!

“The line as to whether philosophy counts as common knowledge is a bit blurry, but hey, it’s famous, and I wanted some variety in the questions. No hard feelings, ’kay? Anyway, ten seconds left!”

: A Descartes question, a very deculture choice indeed.

: ^ dude who has no idea who Descartes is

: Oh, I've heard that one before!

“Okay, time’s up! Yep, yep, good answers from all of you. Now for the answer check. The correct answer is ‘think.’ So if you fill in the blank, you get ‘I think, therefore I am.’”

Hooray! I got it right, everyone! The scars of my youth came in handy!

“Allow me to explain. You might have heard the saying, but do you understand its meaning? To put it simply, it’s like an answer to the question of whether one really exists or not. Even if you find yourself doubting the existence of everything in the world around you, you can’t deny your own existence. As such, ‘I think, therefore I am.’”

: Wowzers.

: Naruhodon't.

: Honestly, the Japanese translation is part of what makes it hard to understand... Easy to memorize, though.

: I don't get it, but I get that it sure is something.

: Honestly, most people think that way.

Heh heh! Well, *I* knew the meaning! Back in those days, I'd really dug into the things I liked and learned way more about them than I needed to.

Hold on. Does that mean if I had spent that time studying instead, I might have gotten the previous question right?

Eh… It probably balanced out. There were parts where you had to understand the meaning behind them too, so I had to think it was kinda fifty-fifty.

"Now, since the explanation's over, it's time to give the viewers what they're waiting for and expose the answers! Rest assured, we've got some responses that are sure to live up to your high hopes!"

: lmao @ how she's clearly more excited for this

: i'm just happy to see Mashiron happy

"For this question, I'll be asking Alice Soma-chan and Ehrai Sonokaze-chan to come forward!"

Ooh, we were getting a new pair of people from the last question. Led by their fourth-gen bonds, the two joined the call.

The first thing I heard was what sounded like their cries.

"I made a mistake… I completely made a mistaaake~!"

"Indeed, this makes fourth gen the first generation to make a full appearance…"

"Welcome, you two. But you know, it's an unusual combo up here," Mashiron commented. "Alice-chan's one thing, but I never took Ehrai-chan as the type to come up with weird answers."

"The truth is, I'm just not great with these overseas problems~!"

“Ah, yeah, you always struck me as big on the traditional stuff, Boss.”

“Oh, how I do wish people would consider my soothing appearance as *actually* clashing with their crime boss jokes~!”

“What is calling me ‘one thing’ supposed to mean?!” Alice-chan butted in.

: might as well call up Gagarchomp too, she def got it wrong

: You mean Gagabriel, you're thinking of a creature in Seiran's Baby Me Creche.

: Hold up, how did you know my little Gible's nickname was Gagarchomp?

: who cares, she's cute

: Kaeru-chan's a baby, but that's a final evolution.

<Kaeru Yamatani>: Want me to rip you to shreds with my rattle?

: How?!

: guess we've got something *else* in the rattle now

: You all have an interesting definition of what a "rattle" is.

“Alice-chan, before you attempt to argue with me here, try and remember what your answer was. Can you really defend *this*?”

“I drink StroZero, therefore Awayuki-dono is.”

Bfffft?!

Seeing the screenshot of that answer made me do a spit-take.

Aaaaaaaaliiiiiiiice-chaaaaaaaaaaaan!!!

“First off, I told you this was a fill-in-the-blank question, right? Changing the parts *outside* of the blank is kinda wrong by default. The blank was only supposed to be one word too. Also, what does this even *mean*?”

“No matter how much I may doubt the flavor of StroZero, I cannot deny the existence of my beloved Awayuki-dono.”

“Do you understand the words coming out of your mouth?”

“I do not, ma’am.”

“Did you know the answer to the question?”

“I did not, ma’am.”

“Well, I appreciate the honesty.”

: i KNEW awayuki-chan's name was gonna come up somewhere

: Honestly, I'm impressed she didn't write her in for the three branches of government question

: lmao @ awa-chan bearing the power of an entire national agency

: she'd own a plot of land and instantly turn into a dictator

: Yep, Alice-chan's doing what she does best.

“Next is Ehrai-chan, but…well, I’m more *curious* than anything. How’d you arrive at this?”

The picture displayed on screen had “fence” written on it.

Meaning that her answer came out to “I fence, therefore I am”…

“Umm, if I may be perfectly honest, let me be clear that I didn’t know the actual answer~. So I wanted to at least write something related to being a zookeeper and say I ‘fence in animals,’ but I didn’t realize that the blank only allowed for one word until the very end, so I ran out of time and just wrote ‘fence’ instead, that’s all…”

“Oh, so you meant ‘fence’ in the sense of literally putting up fences?”

“Why yes, it does~. What else could it mean?”

“Oh, you know, just that ‘fence’ has another meaning. Saying you fence, therefore you are makes it sound like you’re gunning for the top of the black market.”

“Ah…”

“Ehrai-dono, what might ‘fence’ mean?”

“Oh, you’re a bit too young for that, Alice-chan~.”

: a questionable kusa

: Don't grow questionable plants around here!

: POLICE OPEN UP

: "Too young" like people of any age should be learning what a fence is

<Chami Yanagase>: Ehrai-chan! You got it right to me!

: That answer is *not* supposed to be right...

In the end, Ehrai-chan couldn’t beat the Boss allegations.

“Next question. What is the final piece of music that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed in his lifetime? To be specific, he failed to *complete* it before his death, and it was an apprentice of his who ultimately finished it.”

I…had no ideaaaaa!!! Like, huh? C’mon, classical music was out of my wheelhouse…

Okay, what songs did Mozart even write? Classical music is the sort of thing where even people who recognize the melody might not be able to name the song or the composer, right? This question was probably a piece of cake for anyone into that stuff, but I was coming up blank…

“It’s the definitive Mozart work, one that just about everyone has heard. When the man once famous for being a child prodigy died at the age of thirty-five, it was revealed that he’d lived a life plagued by illness.”

: I think I heard he might have been poisoned, but is that true?

: I saw a research report saying it was complications from strep throat.

: nothing's cooler than a bit of mystery

After a bit more pondering, I finally remembered one of Mozart’s songs! One that was…definitely not it. Let’s forget about that one. Umm, uhhh…

“Okay, ten seconds left, hurry up with those answers!”

Oh, for crying out loud, I had no idea! I knew that classical music had some kind of song for parting ways, and that its name made it sound pretty final, but…oh, whatever, good enough!

“Okay, time’s up! Now then, let’s check our answers. The correct answer is ‘Requiem in D Minor, K. 626.’ If you just wrote ‘Requiem’ for it, I’m counting that as correct too.”

Oh… So I did know it. I’d forgotten that I knew it, but now that she mentioned it, yeah, I did know that one. Heck, I could hum the melody to it.

And on second thought, that song of parting was Chopin’s thing! Even I coulda pulled that one out if I’d wracked my brain enough! My brain just couldn’t think clearly under this time limit…

“A requiem is a song played at a mass for the dead. ‘Requiem’ means ‘Grant them rest’ in Latin, and the term has been translated into Japanese as ‘chinkon song’ in the past, but that’s considered inaccurate nowadays due to the difference in spiritual meaning between the two. This wiki’s got it all, huh? Now then, for this question, I’ll have…Sei Utsuki-senpai and Nekoma Hirune-senpai come on stream.”

Oh, so I wasn’t chosen… Probably because I’d made an actual attempt and just ended up incorrect.

Wait… Crap, wasn’t that even *more* embarrassing?! I should’ve been *glad* to get dragged on stream, because then I could at least laugh it off with a Live-On-esque punchline! What was I supposed to take out this humiliation on without it?! This just made me look like an idiot who got it wrong!

“Ahh, hello, can you hear me?”

“Yep, Sei-sama, loud and clear.”

“It’s been some time since we last spoke like this, Mashiro-kun. How’ve you been? Still on your toenail fetish?”

“My current kick is seeing toes being dipped in chocolate.”

“Hawt.”

“Nya nyaaan! Nekoma’s here too!”

“Welcome, Nekoma-senpai. Glad to see the gang’s all here.”

: at least show some hesitation when airing out your crazy fetishes

: and in this moment, we found out exactly what Mashiron's valentine art would be

: It's scary that this is how these two say hello

“Still, you two are awfully cheery despite me calling up two-thirds of second gen. Do you have no shame?”

“Ooh, Mashiro-kun, now say it with a more disgusted expression.”

“Aw, I ain’t embarrassed from getting a question wrong, I’m embarrassed because I gotta call this person my genmate.”

“Right, sure. But those genmate bonds go deeper than your attitudes, because would ya look at that, you two wrote the exact same answer.”

Wait, for real? Sure, *correct* answers would obviously be the same, but the odds of *wrong* answers matching had to be pretty low.

“And that answer would be this…”

“*Lick Me in the Arse*”

……

: kusa

: Ashamed to admit that I saw this coming.

: I mean it IS a song that Mozart composed, but lmaooooo

: probably the most famous name out of all of them

: Even though most people probably haven't heard the song itself...

: I had no idea that even existed...

“Did you two bother to read the question? Because it asked what his *final* piece was. There is no way in hell that *this* was the song he left to be his

legacy.”

“But you wanted the definitive Mozart work, so what else could it be but this?”

“Yeah, Sei’s right!”

“What universe is your understanding of Mozart rooted in?”

I couldn’t admit it.

“Come now, this was the only Mozart song I knew. Right, Nekoma-kun?”

“This oughta be right if ya ask me.”

“You idiots are up here *because* it isn’t.”

“Ah, Mashiro-kun, would you like a fun fact? As you might guess from this song’s title, Mozart was actually quite the fan of dirty jokes, and he sent plenty of letters loaded with them to his cousin.”

“Wow, Sei, you’re an expert.”

“How is it that you can pull out such inane trivia on Mozart but only know a single one of his songs?”

I couldn’t admit that this was the only Mozart song *I* had remembered too! Not even if you put a gun to my head!!!

: "this oughta be right" lmaooo

: Bet Mozart never thought he'd get made fun of hundreds of years later

: I'm surprised that Awayuki-chan didn't write the same thing.

: You're right, maybe because she's not in Shuwa mode?

Aaagh! But maybe chat was right! If I was gonna get it wrong, then I wished I’d at least been called up so I could’ve laughed it off! I was jealous of Sei-sama and Nekoma-senpai! If only I had answered with *Lick Me in the Ar*… *Lick Me*… *In the*…

Nope, no way. Anything would be more seiso than doing that. Yep.

“Next question. Gaius Julius Caesar, a Roman Republic statesman during that nation’s twilight years, is known for many famous quotes, such as ‘The die is cast’ and ‘I came, I saw, I conquered.’ In his final moments at the hands of his assassins, what famous quote is he said to have shouted at his closest ally after learning that this ally had betrayed him?”

Ooh, we were doing world history now… Well hey, even I’d heard of Caesar before. And since I’d heard both of the quotes in the question before, they had to be hinting at what sort of quote would serve as the answer. In other words, there was a good chance that I knew this.

Yeah, I felt like I could get to the answer with a bit of thinking! All right, brain, do your stuff!

: Yep, it's the bald dude

: Don't forget, he also died while drowning in debt

: famous historical figure btw lol

: yeah, he did some stuff, but more importantly, his name is cool

: Julius Caesar, also known from the Shakespeare play, Julius Caesar.

Remember the question at hand. The situation involved his closest ally, and he’d said it as he died. Even I knew what saying fit the bill here.

And… There! Yeah, I had it! I typed in the perfect fit! This had to be the answer! You could even say I was confident!

“Ten seconds left, guys. Better hurry up with those answers. Aaaaand… Okay, time’s up. Heh heh, now it’s time for the answer check… Pffft…”

Ah, Mashiron had clearly stumbled upon some bizarre answers. I didn’t think this was a question that one could *get* so comically wrong… But hey, this was Live-On, so it would’ve been stranger if we *hadn’t* found a way.

“Ahem, pardon me. Now then, let’s get on with the answer check. The correct answer is, ‘Et tu, Brute?’”

Heck yeah, I was right! See?! I knew I had it! Bow down before me!

“It’s a simple one, but it sticks in your head once you hear it. ‘Brute’ refers to

the ally of Caesar's who betrayed him, Marcus Junius Brutus. The reason why the quote doesn't use the same name is because in Latin, Brute is the direct-address form of Brutus. The English translation is just 'You too, Brutus?'"

: I hear this one a lot too.

: It makes sense for common knowledge to cover a lot of ground, but how nice of her to only pick the famous ones.

: The undefeated number one line I want to say when I get betrayed.

: same

: I'd rather just not get betrayed...

"And this time… Yes, Chami Yanagase-chan and Hikari Matsuriya-chan, and also Alice Soma-chan, please come up to the stage."

C'mon, third gen, keep it together… Wait, I wasn't one to talk, given that I'd gotten called up on the very first question.

"Okay, congrats, you three. You all get to be publicly executed."

"Once again, in my case…" Alice-chan muttered.

"Oh nooo… Wait, my answer wasn't right? And I was confident too…" Chami-chan fretted.

"Mashiro-chan! Please drag Hikari out for every single question! Make fun of Hikari to no end! Turn Hikari into a laughingstock even when she gets questions right!"

"Sounds like we have a streamer who's starting to enjoy coming up here… Remember that this *is* a test with a prize for the winner and everything, and I'm not here to play favorites, so please take it seriously. Is that clear, Alice-chan?"

"Huh? For what reason am I being singled out here?"

"Because you write crap like this."

"All hail Awayuki-dono!"

Quit hailing people who never asked for it! Let me down already!

“Your explanation, please?”

“This question is pure memorization! You can’t do anything if you didn’t know the answer beforehand!”

“Don’t double down. And wait, have you really never heard that quote before?”

“Now that you’ve said the answer, I do seem to have some recollection of it.”

“Then why did you double down? Would it kill you to reflect on your mistakes now and then?”

“I *am* a member of the Resistance, after all!”

“You pick the weirdest times to remember your lore… And besides, you just stuck to your running joke here! You know Caesar is from the BC years, right? Awa-chan isn’t gonna exist back then!”

“Whatever could you be talking about? You mean to say you’ve never heard of the woman Caesar swore loyalty to, Kokoronus StroZerus Awayuki-dono?!”

“Don’t rewrite history just for an extra point.”

: lol @ Hikari-chan and Chami-chan cracking up in the background.

: luv u, alice-chan

: The truth is out, Awa-chan's love for StroZero is because she yearned for it in a past life

: the most YABE person in a group of YABE

“Now then, next is Chami-chan… Let me ask you, did you *really* write this answer because you thought it was correct? You’re sure that you didn’t just give up and drop a meme?”

“Huh? Yes, of course. I couldn’t imagine any other answer… Waaait, huh~?”

“Uh-huh… Anyway folks, here’s Chami-chan’s answer.”

“Patrasche, I’m so tired…”

Pretty sure that wasn't it.

"Mashiro-chan, you mean this wasn't it?"

"Nope, it sure wasn't. In fact, it's hard to come up with an answer more wrong than this."

"Huuuh? You mean it's not even one of Caesar's famous quotes?"

"That name barely shares a letter with the person this quote is from. It's to the point where I don't even know how someone could possibly make that mistake."

"Oh, that's the one from *A Dog of Flanders*!" Hikari-chan piped up.

"It…iiiiiis?!"

Finally realizing the colossal mistake she'd made now that Hikari-chan had pointed it out, Chami-chan shrieked in absolute shock and wailed softly in abject embarrassment.

: how do you make that mistake?

: Is Chami-chan the tired one here?

: I mean, they're both final words, so...

: "Brutus, I'm so tired..." —Julius Caesar

"And last we have Hikari-chan. I know you're getting a kick out of Chami-chan's answer, but yours is a piece of work too. Look at this."

"Bruetoos, you too?!"

"Hikari knew he called out a name that sounded a lot like 'Bluetooth,' but oh, so close!"

"I had to wonder if you had a grudge against Bluetooth."

Hikari-chan, you were so cl… So clo… Clllllooooo… No, I couldn't go there. I

didn’t want to acknowledge that answer as being close.

Well, now that we were done with those three, it was time to move on to the next question…

Or so I and the guests on Mashiron’s call had thought. After seeing Hikari-chan’s answer, chat started getting quite active and wasn’t quite ready to close the book on this.

: Isn't that pretty much right?

: Mashiron *did* say it basically meant "you too, Brutus?"

: So you just have to tweak the word order a little, then.

: If you think of it as a different way to transcribe the name, then maybe it's got a shot at being right?

: I mean, Brutus isn't quite pronounced like Bruetoos, though...

Yes, “Et tu, Brute?” was the Latin quote, but the name of the man it was referring to was indeed “Brutus” and “et tu” indeed meant “you too.” In other words, while “Bruetoos, you too?” might not have been exactly right, it also wasn’t totally wrong, which led to some viewers arguing that Hikari-chan’s answer should be accepted.

“Uh… I won’t say you don’t have a point, but that’s a bit of a stretch…”

“But Mashiro-chan! There are people in chat saying it’s fine!”

After giving it a lot of thought, Mashiron handed the decision off to Live-On’s staff.

And the official Live-On verdict was: “WRONG.”

“Live-On, you too?!”

Hikari-chan wrapped up the question with a lovely little punchline.

“Next question. Daikokuten-sama, one the Seven Lucky Gods, is known for carrying a large sack. What is contained in the sack?”

Ah, yeah, got it, me, me, me! The Seven Lucky Gods, of *course*! Yep, totally. This stuff? Piece of cake, I tell you.

“Yes, it’s a question about the Seven Lucky Gods. They’re commonly perceived as a happy-go-lucky bunch here in Japan. I’m certain that just about everyone has heard this group’s name before, but how many of you know the names of all seven gods? There’s Ebisu, Daikokuten, Bishamonten, Benzaiten, Fukurokuju, Juroujin, and Hotei. Hey, may as well learn something new while we’re here.”

Yep, yep, that was all obvious! Please, I knew this all so many times over that I could recite them in my sleep!

“Not all the Seven Lucky Gods are Japanese in origin; some of them are based on Chinese or Indian deities. For example, Daikokuten-sama, Bishamonten-sama, and Benzaiten-sama seem to be based on the gods Mahakala, Kubera, and Saraswati from India’s Hindu religion.”

: Wow, Professor Mashiron, you sure know a lot! It's like you've got Wikipedia in your head!

: that sounds just barely like an insult

: Doesn't Mahakala refer to Shiva? One of those lucky gods might be pretty intense under the smile... ¥777

: Well, the "based on" part is the key word here...

: Hindu gods go through some intense stuff to begin with. Then again, that's one of the things that makes them cool.

: Oh, yeah, we're talking about lucky pickles, right? They're a must when you're having curry.

: Yeah, fukujinzuke! It's good stuff!

: what a kind world we live in

Yeah, I knew that! I knew it all! There wasn’t a single thing I didn’t know about the Seven Lucky Gods! I was actually a hardcore Seven Lucky Gods fangirl! The toxic kind that would fight anyone who dared call themselves a bigger fan in my presence!

“With the explanation out of the way, we’re down to ten seconds left. If you don’t have an answer down, you’d better hurry up. Aaand... Okay, time’s up. Now for the answer check. The correct answer is the Seven Treasures.”

Phew! I did it, hell yeah!

“While I call them ‘treasures,’ they’re not really physical things. They’re commonly interpreted to be seven essential spiritual values.”

Squee! Oh, Daikokuten-sama, you really *are* the coolest! Let me into your sack too!

“And with that said, it’s time to expose the failures...except a bunch of people got it wrong. Guess it *was* a pretty hard one. Hmm, what should I do...? Guess I’ll start by having Shion-senpai come up for now.”

Puh-lease. These girls didn’t know something *that* simple? Oh, what has become of the Seven Lucky Gods fandom...?

“Also, Awa-chan. You already know, so get your butt in here.”

No shit I don’t know this crap!

“Good, glad to see you two made it.”

“Shion-senpai, which of the Seven Lucky Gods is your oshi?”

“Huh? O-Oshi? Where’s this coming from, Awayuki-chan? Er, if I had to answer, I suppose I’d say I like Ebisu-sama...”

“Well, I stan all seven of the Lucky Gods and I will gatekeep any casuals away from them, so you’re my enemy now. Get ready, because Ebisu-sama is all mine.”

“It’s the kind of stanning where I’m not sure if you have a lot of enemies or only a few... Wait a minute, aren’t you here because you got the problem wrong? You can’t get things about your oshi wrong!”

“Can’t help it, I only started stanning the moment I heard this question.”

“Awayuki-chan, are you perhaps drunk?”

“Very.”

Mashiron intervened. “All right, Awa-chan, no need to lie. I’m not letting you

pretend you got the question wrong because you were drunk. Shion-senpai, you don't need to take her seriously."

"Huh? Ah, er, I'm sorry... But Mashiron, how did you know I wasn't drunk? There's always the possibility that I started drinking before the first question and now..."

"Come on, I'm experienced enough to tell just from your voice."

"Oh, I see." *Ah... So Mashiron knows that much about me...*

"All right, anyway, this is Awa-chan's answer."

"A year's supply of StroZero."

"Okay, on to Shion-senpai's answer."

"Wait, Mashiron! At least say something about it! You called me up here, so the least you could do is tease me!!!"

"Well, we all saw this one coming."

"That's not what I mean! I wrote that answer so that I could say something like, 'There's no way that sack is gonna fit 15,500 cans of StroZero,' and then you'd come back with a wisecrack like, 'That's what you drink in a year?', and now my plan is ruined!"

"Why did you spend your time coming up with a bad joke instead of answering the question?"

"Because of course I'm gonna come up with a bad joke when I don't have the slightest idea what the answer is!"

"You really have the heart of a comedian."

: teetee

: There are a lot of interpretations as to what's in the bag, so why not?

: obligatory strozero gag achieved

With Mashiron now done with me, she moved on to Shion-senpai's answer:

"Everyone's wishes."

Whew. What a nice, optimistic answer.

"Hey, Mashiro-chan, is this really incorrect?" Shion-senpai asked. "I remember being taught this long ago."

"There are theories to support that, yes. But I had a bad feeling about this one, and that means we're entering our bonus round!"

"Huh? Bonus round?"

"Shion-senpai, I'm going to ask you a question. Based on how you answer, I'll judge what you wrote as correct or incorrect."

"That sounds rather arbitrary... But I understand!"

"Now then, to the question. What wish would *you* have that could fit in Daikokuten-sama's sack?"

"Huh? A sack full of babies."

"Aaaand wrong."

"But whyyyyy?!"

I couldn't *imagine* a worse answer.

: wtf?!

: Yep, Mashiro-chan's right here.

: He's a *Lucky* god, not an Eldritch one

: You're making Daikokuten-sama look like a serial kidnapper!

: Giving Candlejack a run for his mo

: That's like actual heresy...

"Well, the chat is giving you one reason after another."

"Ooh... B-But they might be babies between me and Daikokuten-sama!"

“Cut that out, a god doesn’t need to wake up to a flame war. Besides, Shion-senpai, you’re a priestess, so you should be able to answer questions like these at the drop of a hat.”

“Ooooh... Yes, you’re right. I’ll go study...”

Live-On, the place where the right answer is somehow wrong.

“Next question. In Japan, August 11 is a holiday. What does this holiday celebrate?”

Okay, now’s my chance, let’s go...

“This is a question about holidays, something many people are deeply grateful for. But as some of you viewers might have picked up on, we’re not office workers, we’re streamers. We don’t have much of a sense for the holidays, or even for the days of the week. My goal with this question is to ask if our streamers can still recall the values of the outside world after living this life for so long.”

Aaand... All right, I was set up! Uh, what was the question again? Something about holidays?

“Well, I suppose I can provide a little hint. You can narrow it down a bit if you think *really* hard about the text of the question. Do you all know?”

: Yes ma'am!

: I knew.

: Streamers will run morning streams and tell viewers to have a good day at work on holidays, so this is gonna be a tough one.

: kusa

: Ah, I see. Yeah, that's a hint.

Aaand... Okay, made it in time! Phew, as if that time limit wasn’t short enough as is. Talk about a close one.

“Okay, time’s up. Now for the answer check. The answer is ‘National Mountain Day.’ According to the legislation, the holiday provides ‘opportunities

to get familiar with mountains and appreciate blessings from mountains.' The idea behind that hint earlier was that some holidays change their date based on the year, so you could rule those ones out based on how the question was worded."

Aw, yeah, I was all warmed up!

"Now then, time to check everyone's responses. Man, I *wish* this one were true... Ugh, what the heck... Okay, Awa-chan! Get back up here!"

Tee hee, looked like I was getting called out.

"Hey, Awa-chan."

"The Day Mashiron and I Streamed Our Wedding. ♥"

"What kind of answer is this?"

"Hey, Mashiron, there was a mistake in the question. This didn't have the year written on it, so I just wrote the answer for this year. If it were last year's, I'da written 'The Anniversary of Mashiron Confessing Her Love to Me,' ya know."

"I'm impressed you have the nerve to flirt after writing an answer like this, because there *was* no mistake. Really, Awa-chan, this is your second time getting called up in a row. At least try to use your gut and write some other holiday, okay? Like Labor Thanksgiving Day or something."

"Labor Thanksgiving Day? Ha! I'll have you know that before my streaming days, not once was I given thanks for my labor at that hellhole job! I was clockin' in on November 23rd like it was any other day of the week!"

"Sorry, I didn't think I was going to get such a depressing response... Wait, huh? Awa-chan, are you drunk?"

?!?!

"W-Wow! You really *do* know! I actually brought out a ton of StroZeroes and started chugging just a little while ago! I'm barely tipsy since I just started drinking, so that makes it even more impressive!"

"I told you, I'm experienced enough to tell just from your voice."

“I mean, I thought that was just a joke...but I’m so moved! You really do love me! It’s mutual!”

“Yeah, yeah, love ya, babe.”

: holy shit Mashiron

: All I could tell was that her voice was a tad softer.

: why is this woman trying to quiz the quizzer

: That's an answer from both Mashiron and Shuwa-chan, so now we can finally say Everyone Is Here for the quiz!

: I, see? To think Shuwa-chan thought that far ahead... She's so considerate of her friends!

: Don't worry, I assure you she didn't have a single thought in her mind.

“By the way, Shuwa-chan...”

“Hmm? What’s up, Mashiron?”

“August 11 is the day you and I celebrated Mountain Day by doing a *Granny Over It* racing stream.”

“Huh?”

Come to think of it, yeah, I got the feeling that we’d done something like that around that time... Wait, no, that wasn’t the point here!

“Wh-Why do you remember something from so long ago?!”

“Huh? I mean, of course I’m gonna remember my collabs with Awa-chan and Shuwa-chan. Not every single one, maybe, but I remember the details of the fun ones. For example, on the 22nd of that same month, the two of us had a mahjong studying stream.”

“Huh?! Huuuuuuuh?!”

“What’s this I hear? It sounds like Shuwa-chan *didn’t* remember, what a *shaaame*.”

“Ah, no, I meant—”

“Heh, for all that talk about our love being mutual, it turns out *your* love was the one that was lacking.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

“If we’re clear, then go back to square one until you’re on my level.”

“Okayyy...”

My face was burning up... And it wasn’t because of the booze... Heck, I was all sobered up by now...

: Quit flirting!

: I love some teetee, but you're making all of Live-On watch lmaooo

: What a lovely couple (of idiots)

: Mashiron may look cold, but she's wubby-dubby with Awayuki

: it's less Everyone Is Here and more like Everyone Is Recycled from old assets

: *Bzzzt* EVERYONE IS *DUHN* RECYCLED

: I can hear the giant text being typed up just like the trailer, so don't look at me when lawyers start smashing a bro.

And so, the stream started with Live-On’s members showcasing less their common sense and more the uncommon nonsense occupying their brains. It was stuff that would put Ninja Slayer-san to shame. But this was merely the opening act of this stream; the asinine answers kept coming until the final question was over. Here were a few highlights:

“Question: What is voltage times current?” “Answer: Voltage.”

↓

“Responder: Hikari Matsuriya. Answer: The end of the world!”

“Question: How many chromosomes does a person have?” “Answer: 46.”

↓

“Responder: Kaeru Yamatani. Answer: The same number as me.”

“Question: What is the title of the travelogue based on Marco Polo’s accounts

of his travels throughout the countries of Asia?” “Answer: The Travels of Marco Polo.”

↓

“Responder: Shion Kaminari. Answer: Chibi Maruko-chan.”

“Responder: Awayuki Kokorone. Answer: National Geographic.”

“Responder: Sei Utsuki. Answer: ANAL (Asian Nations All Looked).”

“Question: What is the name of the sect of Mahayana Buddhism that was brought to Japan by Kuukai at the start of the Heian period?” “Answer: Shingon Buddhism.”

↓

“Responder: Nekoma Hirune. Answer: Cool Guy-ism.”

“Question: What was the name of the war that Jeanne D’Arc, a soldier for the Kingdom of France, fought in?” “Answer: The Hundred Years’ War”

↓

“Responder: Sei Utsuki. Answer: The Saint Vs. Alter Lewd War.”

“Responder: Chami Yanagase. Answer: The Thousand Years’ War.”

“Responder: Ehrai Sonokaze. Answer: The Holy Grail War.”

“Question: Who is the person slated to become the next face printed on ten thousand yen bills in 2024?” “Answer: Eiichi Shibusawa.”

↓

“Amazingly, everyone somehow got this right. Mashiron looked cute when she got disappointed.”

And so on and so forth. Twenty questions were asked in all, and once they were done, the quiz would be over. With all of our streamers participating, the show neared its end.

“Well, that marks the end of our quiz, so I’d like to end by announcing everyone’s results. First off, Ehrai-chan and Shion-senpai, well done, you got near-perfect scores. Next, Awa-chan, Nekoma-senpai, Chami-chan, and Alice-chan, your results were middle-of-the-road. You should be ashamed to call yourselves Live-On members. And for the rest of the idiots, your professor is deeply worried about you.”

Wait, why was I getting taunted when I’d gotten half of them right?

“And last, but most certainly the opposite of least, I’d like to announce our top student. If you can believe it, there was one streamer among us who actually got every question right.”

That was pretty high praise. This quiz might have been on common knowledge, but I had to imagine that there weren’t too many people who would get all twenty correct. And yet the chat seemed to know just who to guess; with every streamer in the company here, the chat was filled with messages essentially saying they’d seen this coming. After all, the person in question hadn’t been called up once to have her answers exposed. By the latter half, I’d had to assume that she was getting every question right, meaning Mashiron couldn’t have called her up even if she’d wanted to.

“Anyway, our top student... It’s none other than Hareru Asagiri-senpai! You’ve earned a gold star from Professor Mashiron!”

“Yaaaaaaaay!!!”

Mashiron read out a clearly scripted line with clearly scripted enthusiasm. Then, as though waiting for this moment, all of us streamers and even the chat followed up with raucous cheers and applause.

Still, what could I say? I knew she was a genius, but to think she’d have results like those on this quiz... She really could do anything.

“Hey, hey, Maashii! Hurry! Hurry and give me my fabulous prize! I’m your top student, after all!”

“Well now, a gold star isn’t enough for you?”

“Nope!”

“You’re an honest one... Very well. To you, Hareru-senpai, I grant a title.”

“Ooh, a title? That’s a little unexpected, but that might be cool too! What’s the title, what’s the title?”

“Here. Hareru-senpai, I hereby give you the title of ‘Most Boring Person in Live-On.’”

“Huh?”

Kusa.

“Whuh, wh-wh-wh-wh-why?! I got every question right!”

“No, see, that’s the problem. Honestly, you had so little screen time that some of your viewers were starting to give up. A bunch of people probably didn’t even realize you were here until just now.”

“Rude! And I was so excited for a chance to show off my intelligence too!”

“Anyway, how did you all enjoy our quest to find the Most Boring Person in Live-On? It’s about time to say goodbye and all.”

“You just changed the event name!!! Noooo! Please, anything but boriiiiiiiiing!!!!!”

And with a rare, yet also not-so-rare cry from Hareru-senpai, the stream ended. I’d almost forgotten that her ability to do anything more often than not went to waste.

As an aside, that title being the fabulous prize was obviously a joke. A few days later, Hareru-senpai’s avatar was given art of a pair of intelligent-looking glasses to wear.

Idle Chat: Nightmare

Ever since I'd left my home to live on my own, I hadn't once spoken with my parents.

Yes, that included my time working at the exploitative company, and my time after becoming a VTuber. I never even went back to my family's house.

After all—I didn't have any family. And that house I was raised in was never a home.

I was an only child, so I had no siblings. The house I grew up in was...normal, and yet, somehow not.

I heard my dad used to be a man of integrity. A working man who played things so much by the book that he often came off as stubborn.

Yeah. "Used to."

The dad I had for as far back as I could remember was a completely different person.

He was always irritated, and always worried about himself. When something didn't go his way, he'd fly off the handle. He wouldn't hear a word someone had to say in response. The only vestige of my old dad left was that stubbornness, warped beyond recognition. That was the person I knew as my father.

Our household was poor, but mostly because my dad hid his wages and blew them elsewhere. Our household checkbook was balanced mostly on the back of my mom's part-time earnings.

My mom seemed to be sick of dealing with my dad, so she always complained about him to me. In spite of that, she never made any attempt to divorce; she got whatever she felt like off her chest and then returned beneath my dad's control with her tail between her legs.

And truth be told, I thought nothing was strange about it all. I hadn't even entered grade school at the time, so I figured it was normal.

But once I got to the age where I could think for myself, the unease hit me all at once.

Why was that lady talking to Dad? Why did Mom have such a gentle smile when talking to that lady? Why was everyone so afraid of Dad for raising his voice? Why was this lady eating dinner with us as a family? Why did everyone seem to have something I didn't?

I thought about it and thought about it until it transformed into a suffocating complex. I became so very, very jealous of the idea of family; I wanted it so very, very desperately. And soon enough, the things I'd once thought were fine were no longer fine. I became so very, very afraid of my dad, and I avoided my mother's complaining as much as I could because it put me on the brink of tears.

And as that all continued, we eventually became nothing more than three strangers living in the same building.

I kept my conversations with my mom to the absolute barest minimum of practical affairs, and I didn't have another conversation that could be called as such with my dad ever again, to this very day. Relations between my mom and dad grew even more strained, and before long, our household was one where not a single word was uttered.

Now and then, I would hear my dad screaming. Ironically, those moments were the closest I felt to having a family.

But despite it all, I didn't hold it against my mom or dad. Growing into an adult and learning more and more about our society helped me put the pieces together. My dad had just had a screw come loose inside him, that was all. It wasn't even his fault; it was the cruelty of the world we lived in that broke him. That, and...

"I turned out like this 'cause you had to go give birth to that kid!"

The exhaustion that came with bringing me into this world.

It was a common refrain in my dad's rants to my mom; even so, he bore the bare minimum of the burden of raising me. I was grateful for that at the time, but it still stung.

My dad put protecting himself first. Being suspected of domestic violence would risk his social status, so he never crossed that event horizon. He would give me nothing more than the absolute necessities and keep his distance from me.

What was more, both my mom and my dad wanted to avoid drawing suspicions of what our home life was really like. Outside the house, they would act like perfect parents in a wonderful marriage.

It happened one day, on the way home from school. I just so happened to see the old lady who lived next door in front of our house. We'd met before, so we exchanged greetings, but what made it more of a coincidence was that my dad had also just arrived home from work. I was a bit confused about what to do, but my dad greeted the neighbor and told me one thing: "Get inside."

I didn't know why he said that to me, but I did as I was told. My dad entered just after me, and I heard him say to himself in the faintest of voices, "That was close." That was when I took the hint; my dad was worried that I might reveal what our home life was like, so he'd distanced me from that lady.

My dad saw me as an enemy.

I'd had a faint inkling until then, but having the truth laid out so clearly before my eyes shocked me to a point where I lost all control. Driven by raw fury, I picked out some definitive proof of the affair my dad had been hiding and dropped it all on my mom. All of our money was being blown on this woman he was cheating with.

Looking back, it floors me to think how naive I was. Your whole deal was how you wanted family, so what were you thinking trying to destroy the only one you had?

If you had to wrangle an excuse out of me...it was that I was really looking for a change.

At first, my mom was delighted. It was the first time she'd ever praised me so much. But in the end...she just threw all that evidence away.

I asked her why. My mom only said it didn't matter anymore.

My momentary anger vanished into tears.

But once I'd calmed down, I *still* couldn't bring myself to hate my parents.

Obviously, it would've been easy to just leak my family's situation to someone outside. All I would have had to do was talk about it with anyone. My dad never made the fatal mistake of resorting to violence, but the times were changing, and society wouldn't look kindly on the rest of his actions either. My dad's hatred of the changing times and his staunch refusal to change with them would be his undoing.

But I never considered doing it. I got the feeling that if I did, then I'd never have family for as long as I lived.

With the spread of social media, I looked and found plenty of people in similar situations to mine, if not worse. It was the sad truth of our society. But I wasn't alone, and on days when the agony was close to tearing me apart, I reminded myself of that until the thoughts passed.

I clearly needed a change if I ever wanted to find family. But that change wouldn't come from blaming a dad who left evidence of his affair all over the place; I realized that the change had to come from within.

Yeah, the things I'd done in my youth struck me as childish now. Enough complaining about the situation I'd been born into—I would make the first move myself. I would be the change I wanted to see.

Or…maybe it just saddened me to see how unfit I was to play the tragic heroine.

I decided to leave the family home. Not for a negative reason this time, but for a positive one. My presence had surely become a burden on my parents; I was hoping that if I left the nest and became a responsible adult, then my parents might change the way they thought.

This actually did have an effect. After my departure, my parents seemed to finally get some emotional breathing room. The tension between them started to lighten up a little bit, *just* a little bit. Heck, I even heard that the two were riding in the same car to go shopping together.

Then again...I only learned about *that* part because they were together in the

car accident that took their lives.

Yeah. If there were a God up there, I had to wonder if He was putting me through some sort of trial.

Or so I was tempted into imagining. I would soon learn that that sort of sentimentality was the truest sign of a filthy human who thought the world revolved around her.

Shortly after I was informed of their deaths, a funeral was held for them. I attended. And not once—from the start of the ceremony to the very end—was I able to feel sad about it.

Forget tears; my eyes were dry. The most I thought was that the atmosphere was so somber, it was a pain to keep sitting upright, and I wanted to go home already. The only tinge of sadness came from realizing that now, I really never *would* have family.

That was when I finally understood the kind of human being I was.

Yep, I might have whined about how much I wanted family...but I only defined that term by the ideal I was searching for. I never thought of the *actual* mom or dad I'd been given as family.

I got the feeling that I was missing something deeply fundamental as a human being.

My complex grew more intense. I knew it was wrong, but even now, whenever I saw a happy-looking family, I got jealous...and spiteful.

I wanted family. Even pain, if there was some twisted form of love to it, was a target of my envy. Just anything but strangers. Anything but that, anything but that...

"Ah?!?!"

I awoke in a cold sweat, gasping for air.

Looked like I'd had a bad dream.

"Must've been because of that mistake I made on that chat stream..."

The fulfillment I'd been getting from my life as a VTuber meant I'd been having these nightmares less often, but it looked like that comment had dug out more of my past trauma than I'd anticipated.

"Ha, they're even showing up in my dreams."

It was so pathetic that I just had to laugh at myself.

"Geh... I didn't even drink last night, but I still wanna throw up... And I think I need to go to the Live-On office today too..."

I'd been pumping myself up during my waking hours given Mana-chan's graduation stream, so if anything, I was managing just fine there. But dreams? That was an attack I hadn't seen coming, so the psychic damage struck straight to my core.

Man, I thought, *how long am I gonna drag that old stuff around? I'm such an idiot. Idiot, idiot, idiot!*

"Not like *that's* news, though..."

In the end, I couldn't get out of bed until just before the scheduled time.

Chapter 3

Shivering and Shuddering

Waking from that nightmare had left me wishing I could have stayed indoors the whole day, but time continued to advance toward my appointment, so I set foot on the road to Live-On's office.

I made it to a ten-minute walk away from the building. It was so close, but my posture was visibly unsteady; the landmark just ten meters away already felt impossibly far, and the feet I had to lift for every step felt as heavy as lead.

"Man, I thought I could handle this before I left the house..." *pant, pant...*

It looked like I'd taken more damage than I'd thought. Maybe I could've recovered if I'd stayed inside, but walking out here just made me feel all the worse. I had optimistically hoped that getting some sunlight and fresh air would help my mood, and *man* had I gotten that wrong.

"I *really* screwed up..."

And the truth was, this scheduled trip to the office was just to autograph merch. A lot of merch, but nothing more. It was the type of work I could have had shipped to my home, but I was the type to never willingly leave the house unless it was for work. Without any reasons to go outside, I'd turn into a shut-in. Besides, I'd mentioned on my last chat stream that I wanted to take better care of my health, so back when this offer had come up, I'd told them I'd go to the office to do it.

And that led to the mess I was in. If I'd known I was gonna end up like this, I probably could have called to have them send over the merch anyway or put the trip off to another day.

I really hadn't thought the whole thing through... I was such an idiot...

"Oooh... I wanna puke... It feels so much farther away than normal..."

Grumbling, I forced my heavy eyelids to stay open and my heavy legs to keep walking. Every swerve I made to avoid bumping into fellow pedestrians took

that much more of a toll. I wanted to take a rest somewhere, but I had already rested at home until the last minute, so I would be late if I did...

Guh... No, I had to know my limits. I was gonna puke on the sidewalk if I kept going. I decided I'd call up the office to apologize and then get some rest somewhere.

But the moment I made that decision, the moment when what little attention I could muster was wavering—

"?!"

I tripped over a slight protrusion on the ground, and before I knew it, my body was tumbling forward.

"H...huh?"

It was a spectacular stumble. I was certain that I was about to slam into the hard concrete...but somehow, my body fell onto something soft and warm, the polar opposite of what I'd been prepared for.

"You okay there, lady?"

"Ah, I-I'm sorry!"

"Your face is super pale, you know? You feeling all right?"

"Oh yeah, I'm kinda nauseous..."

"No kiddin'. You had me so worried that I was about to call out to you. Good thing I made it before you fell down."

It seemed like someone was supporting my body. I heard a calm, feminine voice coming from above me. Which meant that this soft sensation...was her boobies?!

I tried to raise my head in a hurry and thank her for the help—but taking one look at the woman who'd caught me made my brain go pale too.

Her long hair was vibrantly blonde with streaks of every color under the rainbow. Her ears were sparkling with enough piercings to make me wonder how much that had to hurt, and her face was practically caked in makeup that emphasized every contour to the point of intimidation. And to top it all off, she

was taller than me. As for her clothes, she wore a T-shirt with guns and skulls printed all over it, as well as a pair of nearly black jeans that had taken what I'd say was, in RPG terms, half an HP bar's worth of damage.

Ha ha, I was in danger.

"Also, uh, I fink I'm gonna pee."

"You've sure got a lot of fluids going on."

I had bumped into a tough, scary-looking delinquent...

My voice was shaking. This person surely lived by a different code than mine.

"Well, either way. How about we rest for a bit? You don't seem like you should be on your feet."

"I-In a back alley?" I stammered.

"What are you talking about? Hmm, that cafe over there looks like a good stop."

"Y-Yes, ma'am..."

Unable to protest out of fear, I let the woman walk me into a nearby cafe.

"You okay? Calmed down a little?"

"Y-Yes..."

"Cool."

"Th-Thank you...very much."

"No need to thank me."

I was sitting down across from the delinquent who'd saved me. I had a cold beverage to help me regain my strength.

I had actually considered escaping into the bathroom as soon as we entered the cafe, but I'd thought better of it; abandoning someone who'd saved me from falling when my body gave out was just too rude, even for me.

But... Please, let me make one admission! I was, in fact, still really scared!!! The fear had made my nausea vanish! My beverage was supposed to be ice

cold, but right now, it felt practically piping hot...

Hikari had made me used to people who had some flair to their fashion, but unlike your typical normie, this woman stuck out in a crowd instead of blending in. I'd never interacted with this type of person once in my life, so I had no idea what I was expected to do; I constantly worried about what might come next while she casually sipped her coffee.

"Oh, uhh, I'll pay for everything," I said.

"Really? You don't have to."

"I'm sorry! Of course that's not enough! Would the contents of my wallet be enough for you to spare me?!"

"Uh, what? Is this some new kind of scam?"

"I was merely hoping that slipping you a grand or ten would be enough to express my undying appreciation..."

"That's an interesting turn of phrase. But really, I don't need the money."

"Th-Then you want me to pay with my body?! I'm a virgin, so please, I beg you, don't go further than just touching my hymen!"

"..."

"Don't tell me, you want to *lick* it too?"

"Geh, this lady's mind sure goes to some questionable places... Work's bad enough, but now in real life too? Am I just cursed or something?"

For some reason, the lady who'd picked me up was clutching her temples and muttering to herself. I was scared...shivering and shuddering...

"Ah!" I exclaimed.

"Hm? What's up?"

"C-Come to think of it, I was on my way to work... I've gotta call the company and tell them I'll be late."

"Oh, you don't say. Well, go ahead and call them."

"Th-Thanks, pardon me..."

I hurriedly left my seat and called Suzuki-san. When I got through, she told me that they actually had plenty of time and it wouldn't be any problem if I were a little late. In fact, she even worried about my health.

Ooh, I thought, *I've sure got a lot of people saving my hide today...*

Come to think of it... That delinquent might have looked scary, but she'd really helped me out. As I returned to my seat, I played back the sequence of events in my head.

Wait... Was I scared for any reason other than my own preconceived notions about her appearance? Like, wasn't this person being absurdly nice to me?

When I returned to my seat, the delinquent was staring out the store's window. "Oh, uhh, I'm back," I said.

"Cool. Everything okay? Nobody bit your head off?"

"No, they were actually *worried* about me."

"I see."

Her choice of words was curt, but that sounded like she'd been worrying about me getting in trouble at work, right?

My fear was starting to give way to curiosity, so I made my peace and asked her, "Um, is there something outside?"

"Yeah. Over there, I was watching that dog walking by."

"Hmm... Ah."

Sure enough, following the lady's gaze led me to a big dog strutting along with its owner.

"Let's see... I wonder what breed it is?" I mused. "It's really slim and long-legged... Ah! Maybe it's a Borzoi?"

"No, that's a Saluki. Its fur is short and its build is a bit smaller than a Borzoi's."

"O-Ohhh." I was impressed she knew that... I couldn't imagine that too many people would've come to a breed like Salukis so quickly. "Do you like animals?"

The delinquent didn't hesitate to answer, and with a surprising one at that.

“Yep, sure do.”

Heh, I thought, *she’s an interesting one.*

“Hey, you smiled.”

“Huh?”

“You just smiled. You were all fidgety before, like you were scared of something.”

“Oh...” She was right, I wasn’t feeling too afraid of her at the moment. Maybe I had a shot at holding a conversation with her now. “I’m sorry, but, uhhh... It’s the first time in my life I’ve talked to a delinquent, sooo...”

“Hm? Delinquent? Who, me?”

“Huh? Are you not? I kind of figured you were based on your fashion...”

“No, this is just because I like metal bands. I’d like to think that that doesn’t make me a delinquent.”

“Wha?!” I-I hadn’t known that was an option! Now that she mentioned it, there weren’t any delinquents these days that had such flashy fashion sense. I hadn’t made the connection to metal bands just because I knew so little about them...

“I mean, there might be some scary metalheads out there. But hey, at least I won’t bite.”

“Oh, so that’s it... I’m sorry for getting scared over something so silly...”

It had been a complete misunderstanding... I felt sorry on top of being completely embarrassed.

“Asuka Yamaguchi.”

“Huh?”

“That’s my name. I hadn’t introduced myself yet. Can’t really fault ya for getting the wrong idea.”

Was she...letting it slide? Wait, hold up, how was she this cool? Could I marry her?

Gah!!! H-Hold on, stop right there! I was out of Live-On territory, so I couldn't just talk without a filter! Anyway, I had to give her my own name!

"I'm Yuki Tanaka. Again, thank you for helping me out back there."

"Sure. No prob."

We talked for a little bit after that. It turned out that she was a little older than me. After learning what a nice person she was, I slowly started to relax. As I did, my curiosity about this woman rose back up. I tossed all sorts of questions at her.

"So, you don't exactly *play* in a metal band?"

"Nah, just listen. A band I like's got a concert today, so I took the trip out here. Also for a bit of work."

Asuka answered every question without so much as flinching. That detached vibe to her must have been part of her conversational style.

"Could I ask what kind of work it is that you came out here for?" I asked. Given her flashy fashion, I was curious as to what sort of job she had. It certainly couldn't have been any place that expected business casual.

"Ahh... Hmm... See, that's uh, well..."

"Ah, it's fine if you can't really talk about it. If anything, it's rude of me to ask that of someone I just met."

I panicked when I saw Asuka-san mull over her words, but she denied that.

"It's not that I can't *talk* about it, it's more that it's hard to explain... It's, uh, voice work, I guess?"

"Wait, you're a voice actress?!"

"No, not quite like that... It's like, I do a bunch of stuff alone, or with others, all to entertain guests..."

"Wow! That sounds like a wonderful job! Are all of your coworkers like you, Asuka-san?"

"No, they're all insane."

"What."

“If we were a band, it’d be like every single one of us could only play guitar and just did nonstop guitar solos. That sort of craziness. And people are actually *happier* the crazier you play.”

“That sounds like quite the place to work...”

Asuka-san kept talking about her workplace, as though begging me to listen to what she had to put up with. “But out of all of ’em, it’s that one senior of mine who I’ve got the biggest grudge against.”

“Wh-What’s this person like?”

“She freakin’ poisoned me.”

“P-Poisoned?!”

“Not *real* poison, of course. But this person has the ability to poison someone just by being near them. They can’t think straight, and before they know it, they’re showing their true selves no matter what code of silence they’re sworn to.”

“What a terrifying person... Have you been all right?”

“Sure haven’t. Before I knew it, I was playing guitar with my teeth. And ever since, the customers all know me as some freak guitarist.”

“How terrible... How can she call herself human?”

“And the kicker is that she doesn’t even realize it. That’s why she spreads it so shamelessly, and she’s infected everyone she works with. Relatively decent people meet the same end I did, and relatively insane people just get so much worse.”

“What a vile person! Why, if I ever met her, I’d slap her across the face!”

“Yeah, she’s really something.”

“Absolutely! She must be an absolute villain to torment a person as nice as you! As of today, she’s my nemesis! I’ll send her to the slammer and throw away the key!”

“No, see, she’s not a *bad* person.”

“Come again?”

Asuka-san suddenly switched gears to cover for her. But from everything I'd heard, this coworker was a completely indefensible bioterrorism threat on legs.

"How do I put this...? She has something that draws people to her. There's this mixture of purity and honesty to her, and she's helped plenty of the people around her. She's loved by all, and even though I call her a piece of work, I respect her a lot."

"Is...that another side effect of the poison?"

"Ha ha ha, it might be. But she made all those oddball guitarists throw formalities to the wind and show their true selves to each other, and that connected them. My workplace is filled with oddballs, but we've got a strange sense of unity. It's strangely comfortable, and I think I might have her to thank for making it that way."

Blushing a bit after all that praise, Asuka then made sure to add that this woman "was still a troublemaker."

Hmm... She sounded stranger the more I learned about her. This world really had all sorts, huh?

Honestly...she'd probably fit right in at Live-On.

"Well, that's about it for me. What about you, lady?"

"Huh? Me?"

"Yep. What kinda work do you do? You said you were on your way to the office, right?"

"Ah, uhhh, that's right! So, er, I'm a..."

I obviously couldn't tell the truth that I was a VTuber. But it would have felt uncomfortable to stay quiet after Asuka-san had told me so much... Okay then, I would follow Asuka-san's example and muddy the waters to make it through this conversation! But how would I vaguely describe VTubing? Hmm...

"Uhhh... I-I'm sorta like an, idol~, I guess?"

Oh no. I lied way too hard!

“Huh?! Yuki-san, you’re an idol?! For real?! I suppose this might come off as a bit rude of me to say, but I didn’t figure you were the type. Your fashion is kinda light on self-expression. Ah, it’s camouflage! Dressing plainly helps you avoid suspicion!” Asuka-san got visibly more excited as she believed what I said.

“Ah, ah ha ha haaaah...”

This was as fraudulent a misrepresentation as it could get. If Live-On met the standard of being idols, then we’d be on the timeline where Riamu Yumemi-chan was the model for wholesomeness who everyone after would follow. We’d be making dreams come true as YAB(ai)11. We’d be a part of Hell No! Project.

Ahh, what was I supposed to dooo~?! Was I supposed to commit to the bit?!

“What kind of name do you all perform under? C’mon, tell me!”

“Oh, uhhh, we kind of hide our faces when performing, we can’t let our identities get out there and all...”

Yep. That wasn’t a lie.

“Ah, is that so? Well, there are some idols that hide their faces nowadays. Kinda like ClariS from way back when? I guess it’s like, idols that want to have lore for the fans?”

“Y-Yes! It’s just like that!”

Lore (more like “lole”).

“Holy crap, I didn’t know I picked up a celebrity! So, you work with a group? Are you famous?”

“Yes, we’re a group. As for fame... Well, I suppose we’re famous among a certain crowd of people?”

“So you’re like underground idols?”

“Oh! Yeah, yeah! Just like that!”

Honestly, if I had to force a comparison to idols, Live-On would be even deeper than underground. We’d be like undermantle, or even undercore idols.

“So, you sing and dance in front of your fans, right?!”

“Yyyyyes...”

This wasn’t a lie. Saying that I’d “danced” might have required some creative interpretation, but I’d done plenty of karaoke streams, and Hareru-senpai had held a whole concert at a real-life venue that I’d participated in.

It wasn’t a lie...but seeing Asuka-san believe me so innocently pained my heart...

“So, what else? What else?”

“Else?”

“Idols do more than just sing and dance, right? What other stuff do you do?”

Uh...

“I, get in front of the fans...at concerts...and uh, g-get drunk?”

“You drink?! As an idol?! At concerts?!”

I screwed uuuuuuuuuuuuuuup!!!!!

Why was I letting my guilt get the best of me and make me blab closer to the truth?! I-I had to play this off somehow!

“O-O-Of course that’s not *all* I do! I also, uh, er, oh, I do skits!”

“An idol...doing skits?”

I’d walked into a minefield. All that came to mind was sexual harassment, puking, and S&M schooling. The most remotely palatable examples I could whittle it down to were pretty questionable for your typical idol to do.

“Oh, I play games!”

“Oh, that sounds like what idols do these days. What kind of games?”

“Uhhh... Horror games, I guess?”

“I hate horror games.”

“Huh?”

Asuka turned up her nose at the mere mention of the stuff. I found it pretty surprising; you’d think someone with her aesthetic would be delighted at the sight of blood.

“Well, that’s enough about me,” she said. “Still, hiding your faces to drink and do skits in front of your fans... You’re one strange idol.”

“Aha, aha ha ha, y-you might be right!”

“It sounds a little different than my idea of idol activities, but I guess it’s all about versatility these days. You can take jobs with beer companies, for one thing. And if you already do skits, there’s probably a spot for you on variety shows. I think all that’s great.”

“Th-Thank you very much...”

Crap, I was trying my hardest to come off as a weirdo, but she was giving me her wholehearted approval. She was like an actual saint. This metalhead Maria was proof that you couldn’t judge a book by its cover.

“You know how it is. We’ve both been through some stuff,” she continued.

“Yeah, sure have... Ah ha ha...”

We’d somehow failed to see eye to eye for the entire conversation, but Asuka-san considered this a good stopping point to finish her coffee and rise from her seat.

“All right, it’s about time I got going. You’re looking a lot better and all.”

“Oh.” That was right, we had originally come to this cafe just so I could rest after nearly collapsing... Did that mean Asuka-san had been concerned about my health this whole time?

“Are you all right? Can you stand?”

“Yes, I think I’m fine now.”

Asuka gave an “okay” and nodded, but she still casually walked to my side in case she needed to catch me from another fall. “Yep, you look all right, good. Let’s get going, then.”

“Sure. And really, thank you so much for your help.”

“No prob.” Asuka-san, continuing to be incredibly hot, nodded with an air of nonchalance.

I left the cafe with her, this time on my own two feet, and said, “Well, I’ll be

off.”

“’Kay. Take care.”

Once out of the store, I gave Asuka-san a bow. I felt a bit sad to part ways so soon, but I had a job to get to.

Or so I thought. Asuka-san and I walked in the same direction until we both looked at each other and said, “Huh?”

“Asuka-san, do you need to go this way too?”

“Yeah... Got some work in a bit.”

“I see...”

Well, it wasn’t a particularly odd thing to happen. It didn’t make much sense to split up, so we continued to walk together.

But, uh...there was a problem. I was happy to spend any extra moment with this wonderful person, but the office was getting close... Taking every precaution against revealing my identity meant that I couldn’t let myself reach the office with her around. This person could probably keep a secret if she actually *did* find out, but getting too chatty would still be against Live-On’s VTuber policies.

In that case...

“Hiding your face... Drinking alcohol... Skits... I don’t know anything about idols, but her voice seems... No, no way, couldn’t be.”

“Um, I’ll be stopping here!”

“Huh? Oh, yeah, got it. Okay, seeya ’round.”

“Bye, then!”

I interrupted Asuka-san as she murmured something to herself and intentionally got off the route to my destination. The destination itself wasn’t changed, of course; I had just calculated that we could split up if I took the scenic route.

I said my goodbyes to Asuka-san and walked onward alone. Let’s see, I’d turn that corner, make one more later on, and then I’d be right at the office.

Heh heh heh, it was the perfect plan. You gotta have standards to be a professional like me.

“All right, made it. Now then, time to get to work!”

I pumped myself up as I reached the office. I walked up to the front desk and saw—

“Huh?”

“What.”

Despite going out of my way to separate from her earlier, Asuka-san was already at the front desk.

Unable to process the situation, I tilted my head and blurted out some idiotic noise. Hearing my voice, Asuka-san turned around and froze the moment she noticed me.

???

Time stopped for us, as though the space between us had been cut out and removed from the rest of the world. But soon enough, the staff member handling Asuka-san’s business noticed me...

“Ah! Awayuki-san! Pleasure to have you, welcome! I heard about your health problems... Hm?”

After greeting me, the staff member then turned to look at Asuka-san.

“Were you perhaps with Ehrai-san here?”

Hearing that, I gave Asuka-san a look of pure shock—while Asuka-san, a.k.a. Ehrai-chan, sank to the ground.

“I should have realized from the fact that you looked like you were about to puke...”

“Don’t associate me with puke,” I automatically fired back.

Watching this woman break down made me finally realize what was going on.

A room in the office. There I sat grinning while Asuka-san, a.k.a. Ehrai-chan, puffed out her cheeks at me.

“Hey, hey, Ehrai-chan? *Whooo’s* the one you say poisoned you? Who’s the one you’ve got a grudge against~? And who’s the one you respect *sooo* much~? Hey, c’mon, tell me, *c’mooon*!”

“Oh my *god* you’re annoying. Could you go ahead and punch yourself in the face for me?”

After I’d asked the details, it seemed that Ehrai-chan and I had had the exact same jobs come in at similar times. But of course, Live-On being Live-On, we couldn’t have just met at the office. No, we’d had to stumble upon a nearly miraculous series of coincidences that led to us chatting without knowing the other’s identity, and after a conversation that may as well have been a misunderstanding-comedy sketch, we’d finally run face-first into the truth when we’d met again at the office.

Now that I knew she was Ehrai-chan, I was almost certain that the senior she’d talked about at the cafe was me. Maybe it was out of guilt, but for all the glaring and complaining she did at my teasing, she didn’t actually fight back. Which made it all the more fun.

Ah, it’s so good, I thought. *That look of humiliation and regret on such a strong-willed woman’s face is so good... I only messed with her on a whim, but I could get hooked on this...*

“Come to think of it, Awayuki-senpai, what the hell were you thinking of yourself as an *idol* for?”

“If you ever mention that again I’m going to kiss you and never let go.”

“I think my heart skipped a beat.”

“Ooh, what does your heart skip beats for?”

“Mine skips out of fear.”

“Mine skips out of a humiliation kink.”

“I didn’t ask what yours was.”

Still, this really was Ehrai-chan, huh?

Thinking back, there'd been tons of clues pointing to her being Ehrai-chan, such as how she liked animals and heavy metal while hating horror games. Then again, I'd never expected to meet her in public, so it had been the furthest thing from my mind. Honestly, even though I knew she was Ehrai-chan *now*...I still had to ask myself, "Wow, really?" when I looked at the woman beside me.

"So... Ehrai-chan, you're pretty different from how I imagined you. I mean, yeah, you're a yakuza boss, but given your model and the way you talk, I figured you'd be a little more mellow."

"Well, I don't disagree... But I wanted to *be* a mellow, animal-loving person. Also, I'm not a yakuza boss."

"I see, so you became the person you wanted to be in the virtual world."

"More or less, yeah. I go this way in the real world since I still like metal and I look good in its fashion, but if I could have a second me, I'd want her to be a bit more feminine. I always wrote 'zoo owner' on those childhood dream worksheets too."

The hell? Holy crap, she was like an anime girl. How many archetypes was she fitting in there? You could probably make quintessential waifu quintuplets from her alone. Let's see, if I had to pick five traits from Ehrai-chan, it'd be zookeeper, metal fan, airhead, dashing, and scaredy-cat. Then you added in yakuza boss, sword, knife, chainsaw, and being the stuff of nightmares, and you ended up with a waifu who'd probably be pretty skilled at turning a human body into five fifths.

Hm? Wait a sec...

"Ehrai-chan, you've used a chainsaw before, right?"

"Never. Why do you have to assume instead of asking it like a question? And hey, it's *your* fault that Ehrai got bits of the real me mixed in and turned into such a mess of a character! I think I deserve an apology."

"I think that was pretty much your own blunder..."

Huh, guess the answer was no. Well, I could swap that with a handgun.

“You just had an incredibly rude thought, didn’t you?” she accused.

“What makes you think that?”

“That question you asked me and the fact that you’re making that Anya smile right now are some pretty good hints.”

“Oh, you flatter me.”

“Pardon, that was too cute an example. You’re making that Takuo Shibuimaru smile right now.”

“TakuShibu might be my husbando, but that face sure is gross...”

All that said, the more we talked, the more she seemed to match up with Ehrai-chan. Both shared the same taste in comebacks.

“I think I get it. You’re a comedy duo with Chami-chan now, but she’s like your polar opposite. Then again, it’d all add up if you just swapped avatars.”

“Who the heck are you calling a duo? And hey, isn’t Chami-senpai *your* genmate? The least you could do is get her to stop.”

“Wait, is she still sending loads of texts every day?”

“No, those have stopped, but now she’s sending me selfies of her in animal cosplays almost every day.”

“Sounds cute.”

“They’re cute, but I feel a little empty looking at them, you know? Like, why’d it have to be someone like her?”

“It’s your fault for being so dashing.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

Hey, even *I* had thought about popping the question to her not too long ago.

As we were talking, the door to the room opened, and some staff carried in the merch we had to sign.

All right, I thought, *time to get to work.*

The two of us churned out autographs like machines. The work was eventually done, but Suzuki-san had something to tell me as we left.

“The guest order for Mana-chan’s graduation stream has been finalized!”

Yes, it was something I’d been trying not to think about for the sake of my nerves, but that day was already just around the corner...

My Dearly Deranged Family

The day had finally come—today was Mana Hoshino-chan's graduation.

The graduation stream had already started. I was going to receive a call when my turn came, so I was watching the stream at home while standing by.

Or, I was trying to...but I couldn't focus at all. I was so nervous and uncertain that my brain just wouldn't function. Honestly, the contents of the stream were going in one ear and out the other.

Sure, of course I was sad about the graduation, but when I thought about how I was going to be showing up on this stream soon enough, I found myself swallowed up by an emotion that I had never felt before and struggled to describe. If I had to say, the closest experience I'd compare it to would be the morning before your entrance exam results are announced. Long story short, I was not taking it easy.

"Yeah, that's right. Really takes me back, since we didn't know how casual to be with each other on our first collabs and all..."

Right now, the stream was airing the "People I Want to See One Last Time" segment, the one I was scheduled to show up on. Scheduled *next*, in fact.

Right now, Mana-chan was talking to one of the biggest legends in VTubing. The two were friends, so they were having a heartfelt conversation with some reminiscing over old times mixed in.

The viewers hadn't been told what guests would be showing up to this segment. Which meant that I could already imagine them treating my arrival like a complete curveball.

Given that Mana-chan and I had never met before, we obviously didn't have any past we could reflect on. I wasn't even informed why I was being called or what she wanted to talk about. What kind of role was I supposed to assume here?

"Yeah, thanks! Well, then...bye-bye!"

Sh-Shoot, the current guest's time was just about over! My turn was coming up next! I hadn't made a mistake and gotten the orders mixed up, right?

"All right, I think I'll go ahead and call our next guest! Heh heh heh~, I'll bet none of you imagined the person I've got lined up!"

: What a tearjerker...

: Why, it's raining...

: Oooh!

: We've got someone big!

: A surprise guest!

Ah, that was me. My turn was here! Calm down, calm down... I was at least told to start by introducing myself, so I had to make sure not to bite my tongue!

The voice chat sound started ringing!

"And here she is! Take it away!"

"Good evening, everyone. Mana-san, thank you ever so much for inviting me to such a momentous occasion. I am Live-On third generation's Awayuki Kokorone."

A-All right! The greeting was a success! Phew... Whew...

: ?!

: Whaaaaaaaaa?!

: Oh no! It's a Live-Ooooooooon!

: Huh? FR?! The real deal?! You really called HER?!

: Mana-chan, run while you can!

: i spat out my drink irl

: This is outta nowhere... Did she come to stop the graduation?

: Awayuki-chan's finally collabing outside Live-On?!

: She broke out! What the heck is her owner (management) doing?!

: unlimited kusa works

: lmao @ how chat's first reaction is to scream in terror

: That's Live-On for you, the rock-bottom endgame of the VTubing world.

: R-Rock bottom?! Hey, they're plenty popular!

: The peak originator vs. the rock-bottom endgame

: Some exaggeration aside, that's pretty much it... RIP to those tearjerker moments, I guess...

: sounds like an episode title out of an anime's season finale...

Th-The chat was clearly shaken up. This was my first time getting such a clear view of how people outside the Live-On fanbase *really* saw us...

“Yeah! Everyone, I got Live-On’s very own Awayuki-chan to come visit! FOOOOO!!! We’ve got the VTubing legend herself!!!”

“G-Goodness, I’m no legend!!! If anything, Mana-cha—er, Ma, Mana-san, *you’re* the legend here—”

“Heeey! You just tried to call me Mana-chan, right? Call me that, go for it!”

“Huuuuh?! Are you sure I should?!”

“Yeah! C’mon, hurry!”

“M-Mana-chan...”

: How did it come to this...

: Mana-chan, I know this is a graduation, but graduating to her means graduating from being human.

: Mana-chan looks super excited, though.

: H-Huh? Is Mana-chan into this?!

: this is some information overload

I-I couldn’t believe it... I was really talking with Mana-chan! And, uh, I got the feeling that Mana-chan looked really excited to have me, but why?! She knew this was a graduation stream, right?! What happened to the tearjerking heart-to-hearts?! Like the people in chat, I was just getting more confused...

“Hm? You’re not drinking your StroZero today?”

“O-Of coursh I’m not! But my body’s generating it internally!”

“Ooooh! That incomprehensible word choice is *so* Live-On! I could shed tears of joy!!! But you don’t need to be so nervous. I’m the one who called you, after all, so you can take it easy.”

“R-Right... Sorry about that.”

For a moment there, I was starting to say things I didn’t understand myself, but Mana-chan’s kind voice brought me back to my senses a bit.

Okay, I had all of Live-On riding on my shoulders, so it was time to act like it. I would be insulting them if I didn’t show some self-confidence.

After making sure I was calmed down, Mana-chan started explaining why she’d called me.

“Sorry that our first time meeting each other has to suddenly be on my graduation stream, by the way. I kept pushing and pushing about wanting to meet you, but my managers can be real sticks in the mud, y’know? In the end, I only got my wish because they said I could demand *anything* for my final stream.”

“You wanted to meet me?! *Me?!*”

“Yeah, totes! I’m a huge fan! Of everyone in Live-On, to be exact. I watch you guys every day!”

“B-But your image...”

“Phooey! Awayuki-chan, you’re starting to sound just like my managers!!!”

My eyes widened as this shocking truth was revealed. Even after hearing such clear complaints, it was still so far outside of her image...

: wwwwww

: Tragic: Manahoshi cursed her own graduation stream.

: Live-On, the one agency where just being a fan makes you cursed

: I'm new so I didn't know any of this, but wow, this Awayuki-chan must be amazing!

: Uh, yeah. Amazing. In a number of ways.

: The one VTuber you should never look up

“Aww, what’s the big deal? Live-On’s funny! Right, Awayuki-chan?”

“Y-You could say that, though I believe some of our content might need an...open mind.”

“‘Mana-chan’sh here! Woohoo!’”

“Ah, augh...” Hearing Mana-chan imitate me in her typical high-energy tone had me reeling out of confusion. It was like squeezing blood from a stone, but I finally managed the willpower to ask the biggest question on my mind: “So... Why did you become my fan?”

“Hmm, I guess it’s because of my own working style. Like, you know I do plenty of collabs with other people, but being the only VTuber at my company means I’m a solo act.”

That made sense. Mana-chan’s agency had put all of their resources into her instead of expanding their VTuber roster.

“That’s why I’ve always kinda dreamed of being in one of those group agencies. My current managers have given me tons of support, so it’s not like I’ve got any gripes about how things are now, but I guess it’s one of those grass-looks-greener things. I just think it’d be neat.”

“Huh, I never knew.”

“Yeah, so that’s why calling you over here was something I had to beg for. Like, it’s my last stream, so could you quit worrying about my image *one* time and let me meet my oshi?”

The mystery of why Mana-chan had called me to a place I so clearly didn’t belong in was finally starting to unravel. But...I got the feeling that there were still some unanswered questions.

“Um, doesn’t that mean you could have chosen someone *else* from Live-On? After all, we have plenty of active VTubers nowadays, and if you had to pick someone, I figure Hareru-senpai would be a good choice...”

“Ahh... Hmm, it’s kinda hard to put this feeling into words, but when I think of agencies, Live-On’s the first thing that comes to mind. It’s like...I can feel this

warmth from it.”

“Warmth...you say?”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s this vibe I get when I watch Live-On streams, and especially Live-On collabs. It’s entertaining, but there’s also this warmth, these connections, that I feel so strongly from everyone. And yeah, Hareru-chan was where it all began, but if I think about where the center of all that warmth is, I think of you, Awayuki-chan.”

“Huhwha?” I wasn’t sure if she was on to something or not... Was this really a sensation we gave viewers?

Mana-chan mulled over how to put it, until she suddenly jolted up with an “Ah!” as the idea came to her.

“I know! You all feel sorta like a *family*!”

“Family—”

That...was the name of something I thought I’d never be able to call my own.

The past that I thought I’d broken away from was now coming back to haunt me.

No, that wasn’t true; I was only acting like I’d broken away from it. Much as I tried to tear off those thorn-covered vines that crawled over my skin, the soil they grew from was none other than me. I could make it through my day-to-day, but all it took was the slightest bit of sustenance for them to burst from their slumber and wrap around me all over again. That was why I could never truly be free of them; no matter how much I wanted to deny it, it was the truth.

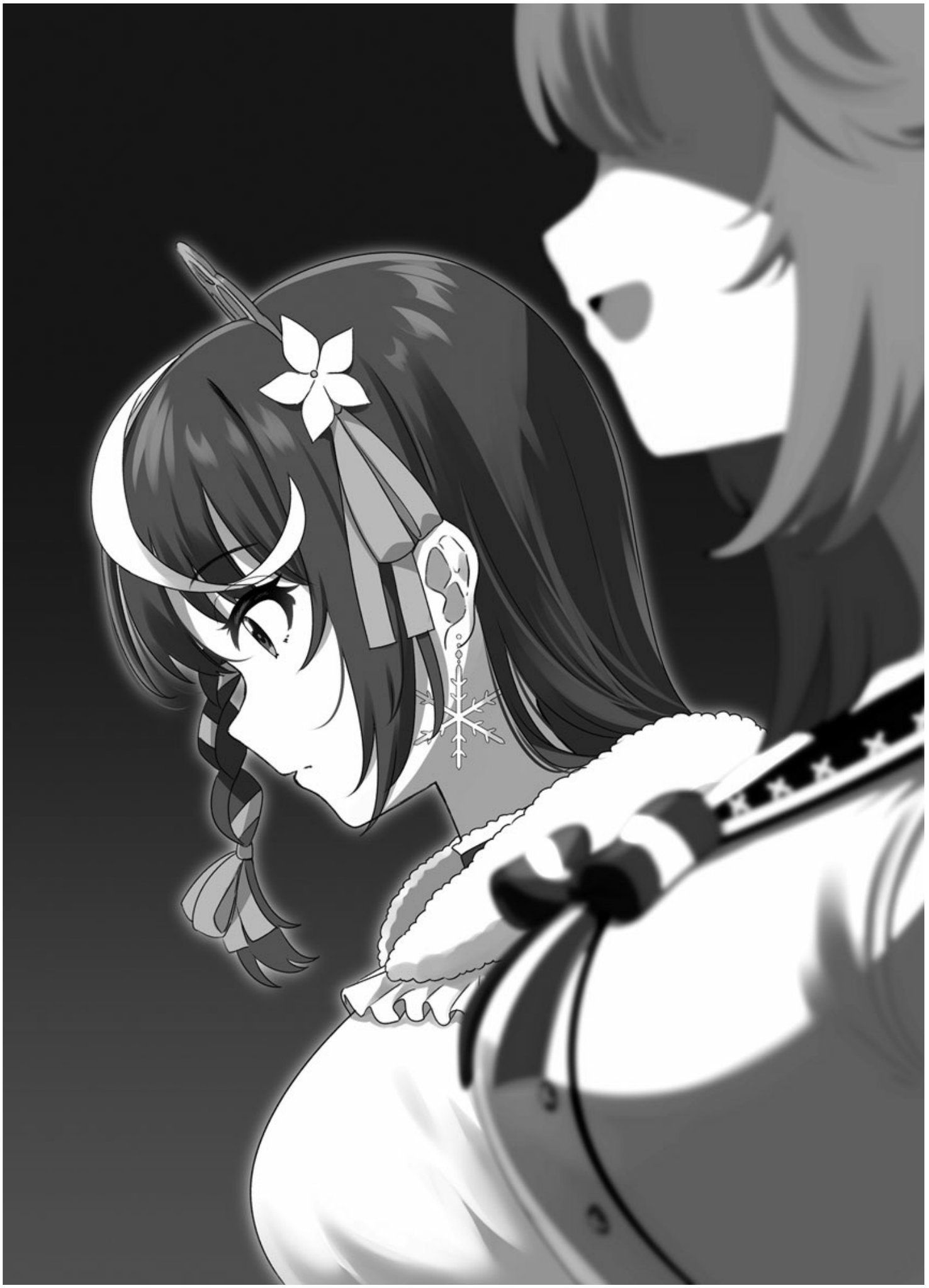
My world went dark.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s it! Live-On’s a wild bunch, but they’ve got a sense of unity to them. It’s like, everyone’s always sharing their true selves with each other, which is why you all understand each other so deeply! And come on! Doesn’t that kinda sound like family?”

Mana-chan kept talking, as though she thought she’d come upon something

profound.

Me, on the other hand... All I felt was bewilderment. Her reasoning wasn’t going to get through to someone who didn’t know what a family was.



There was nothing lonelier than not knowing something that others took for granted. Nothing more pathetic. Sneers, sympathy, all of them rang hollow. But most of all, I couldn't forgive myself for failing to brush off the past in spite of all my regrets. It might have been forever out of my reach, but when I saw others have it... I swear, begging was all I ever did...

In the end, all I could say in return was a strange question.

"Mana-chan, what is family to you?"

My voice might have been shaking a little. Not from bewilderment, but from uncertainty. Or perhaps—even hope.

Weird as my question was, Mana-chan didn't laugh; she gave it some serious thought.

"Hmm, family... The typical image you get is people related by blood, but adopted kids can be family too, so you can't say that applies to everyone. Hmm... I think it's like, people you take for granted when they're there, but you realize are precious to you when you look back on it later."

"..."

"See, back when I lived with my family, I had times when I thought they were annoying or I wanted to be on my own, but once I finally got my independence, I got so homesick I couldn't help myself, and I think that's when I first understood what I really thought of my family. That's probably because I took those connections as a given, so I didn't realize how precious they were, but once we were apart, that was when I could finally notice those bonds we had. Something like that."

Meanwhile...my gaze was being sucked into the chat box.

Everyone was there.

<Hareru Asagiri>: Yahoooo! We're all a big family! And I'm everyone's big daddy!

: Harerun?!

: Awayuki-chan wasn't the only one to come here?

<Sei Utsuki>: Family, that's got a nice ring to it. All right, Shion, let's get married. I'll take the papa position.

<Shion Kaminari>: Yes, let's get married!!!!!!!!!!!!! I'll be the mama!

<Nekoma Hirune>: C'mon, don't go proposin' during someone else's stream! Also, Nekoma's finally going from a stray to a housecat!

<Sei Utsuki>: Hm? Nekoma-kun, since when were you a stray?

<Nekoma Hirune>: I've got so many owners that I'm effectively a stray.

<Shion Kaminari>: I think I've found a lovely place we can call home!

: And second gen too?!

<Hikari Matsuriya>: I'll be the big sister! The biggest sister!

<Mashiro Irodori>: Huh? Hikari-chan, you're more of a little sister.

<Hikari Matsuriya>: Huh, am I?

<Mashiro Irodori>: Yeah, the big sister would be Chami-chan.

<Chami Yanagase>: Mashiro-chan! I knew you'd understand!

<Mashiro Irodori>: I like my big-sister characters a bit ditzy.

<Chami Yanagase>: Not like this...

<Hikari Matsuriya>: Hmm, well if I'm Awayuki-chan's little sister, then I can live with that. Wait... What does that make Mashiro-chan?

<Mashiro Irodori>: Ahh, I wonder?

<Chami Yanagase>: Maybe the wife?

<Mashiro Irodori>: Sure, why not.

<Hikari Matsuriya>: Ooh! The self-confidence of the strong!

: HNNNG THE TEETEE

<Kaeru Yamatani>: And Kaeru will be a baby, of course.

<Ehrai Sonokaze>: Oh, I wonder what I would be~? Whatever indeed~

<Alice Soma>: After sparing no effort in giving this critical decision the consideration it deserves, I will accept the position of the dog!

<Ehrai Sonokaze>: That's a conclusion I don't think many people would have reached~

: Whoa, the whole gang's here.

: Yep, that's a family.

: I think I understand what Mana-chan was talking about

: teetee

: That's one dysfunctional family...

: they might as well be the Kardashians

: Come to think of it, Awayuki-chan really is connected to everyone.

: sure, just don't ask how

First gen, second gen, third gen, and fourth gen... Not a single person was missing...

I tried following Mana's advice and reflecting on the days we'd spent together. Every memory that popped up in my head was bizarre, hectic, and ridiculous—and precious, and delightful—and absolutely radiant. The world was so bright; clinging to my body were both thorn-covered vines and flowers blooming in the sunlight.

Yeah... I finally understood. If this conversation made the flowers of my memories blossom, then the past was my own garden of roses. Their thorns may prick now and then, but nourishing them with sunlight makes them bloom.

To think...they could bloom into flowers so beautiful...

Everyone was here. And every single one of them...was a treasure I'd shed tears for if we ever had to say goodbye.

"That's why, speaking as just one fan, Live-On feels like a family to... Hm? Am I wrong?"

"No, Mana-chan, you're exactly right. I'd just never realized until I heard it from you. Everyone is truly...my dear family."

Yeah, these girls I'd met when I staked my life on the VTubing industry—they were my dearly deranged family.

People might mock me—say that we're nothing, that we're fools, that it's all in my head. But at this point, I couldn't care less. I called those girls family, and those girls responded with open arms.


Huh? Hikari-chan, you're more of a little sister.
Hikari will be the big sister! The biggest sister!
Mashiro-chan! I knew you'd understand!
And Kaeru will
baby, of cou
After sparing no effo
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Oh, I wonder what I would be~? Whatever indeed~
Yahoooo! We're all a big family! And I'm everyone's big daddy!
Family, that's got a nice ring to it. All right, Shion, let's get married. I'll take the papa position.
Yes, let's get married!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I'll be the mama!
C'mon, don't go proposin' during someone else's stream! Also, Nekoma's finally going from a stray to a housecat!

That alone made me feel so liberated, like I'd been forgiven for my lifelong faults.

You can't reject your past, and averting your eyes won't make it disappear, so what matters is accepting it.

Concerts, monetization issues, throat injuries... Everyone else had had some kind of turning point where they had to face themselves, and here I was, reaching mine dead last... Well, knowing me, I suppose it figured.

Acceptance—it doesn't seem like it'd be too hard at a glance, but it's effectively the same as forgiveness. It just gets harder the heavier the memory is.

Still—thank you, everyone. I'm an idiot, so it took me far too long to realize—but thanks to you all, I was finally able to forgive myself. Living together had slowly made me see myself for who I am, to the point where I was now facing down my life's greatest trauma, and I still had a smile of pure joy through it all.

Having this past was what had led me to you all. You were why I could proudly say that every part of my life, up to this very moment, had made me the person I was today.

I suddenly recalled that long ago, my chat had told me about a Live-On family tree centered around me that somebody had come up with. At what point did things start to turn this way...? No, it was probably from the very start. When I had unwittingly set foot on this journey to become who I was today.

"Thank you very much."

"Hm? No, no, I'm the one who should be thanking *you* for coming! But...well, it's getting to be that time. All right, I'll give you one last cheer, not as a fan, but as your VTubing senior! Care to listen?"

"Gladly!"

"I might be completely graduating from the VTubing business...but I can do so with no regrets knowing that I have such fine VTubers following in my footsteps. Keep up the good work—I'll be supporting you!"

"I will... Mana-chan, really, thank you for all the work you've done! Don't

worry, the legend may have begun, but it's far from over! I'll keep shining bright with the rest of Live-On!"

And so, my time on the program came to a close. The rest of the stream continued without missing a beat, and in the end, Mana-chan had her big, emotional graduation—and then, she left.

It was our first time meeting, but she still taught me something incredibly valuable. Yes, our many forebears had built this virtual world not just with direct exchanges like these, but with indirect influences as well, and it was atop their work that we stood.

Some of those forebears had graduated like Mana-chan, while others were still active and kicking. And still others chose to run alongside the current generation. We'd certainly have more newbies to debut after us; having everyone here made VTubers alive.

I pray that every single one of them finds their happiness.

I tried to calm my heart amidst the storm of emotions it was sailing through and sum up my feelings with one single phrase. I finally came to something simple, one that had stayed true from my first encounter with VTubers to today.

And it was this: I love VTubers.

Epilogue

Days later, I was standing alone before the tombstone where my parents slept. This was my first time ever coming here of my own accord. It was a large cemetery, but given the time of day, there was hardly anyone around.

I had been averting my eyes from this trauma until I'd met Mana-chan, and now, I was going to lay it to rest. I slowly opened my mouth and spoke to my parents.

"Hi, it's Yuki. It's been a while."

I was surprised at how clearly the words came out.

"It really has been so long, hasn't it? Heh heh, not a very responsible child, now am I? You can hate me for it if you want. I hated you two plenty enough already."

Those words I had wanted to say as a child, the ones I'd never gotten to say before those two had left this world, revived in my mind after all these years.

"But...I didn't come here to complain. There was one other thing I wanted to say to you."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Then I looked straight ahead, and in no uncertain terms, expressed the one thing I wanted them to know above all else—my gratitude.

"Thank you for giving birth to me! And...well, see ya."

With that, I left the cemetery. I didn't swear off reflecting on my past, but I wasn't going to let myself become trapped by it. I was a VTuber, after all. A symbol of modern internet culture. Letting my past control me wouldn't fit the vibe.

On the train back, I pulled up the Live-On homepage on my phone. I remembered those final words I'd given Mana-chan after her show of support. Yes, the legend may have begun, but it was far from over—

“Announcing the Debut of Live-On’s Fifth Generation!!!”

There was always a new chapter waiting to be written.



Afterword

Thank you very much for picking up VTuber Legend Volume Six. I'm the writer, Nana Nanato.

This wasn't the final volume!!! (lol.) That was like a running joke back when I published the web version, hah.

Also, an aside about the final chapter of this volume (and the one that gave readers that impression), "My Dearly Deranged Family." The title for that chapter was taken from a lyric in a parody song cover uploaded by Nijisanji's Saku Sasaki-sama. I adore this phrase, and I built Live-On in the hopes that it would be an environment worthy of being called that. Given that this volume is a bit of a milestone, I hope that this dearly deranged family comes across to my readers as well. Saku Sasaki-sama, thank you for such a fantastic lyric (and I apologize if my use of it has caused you any trouble...).

Next, as the insert on the physical volume stated, this series is getting an anime adaptation. I'm incredibly happy, and incredibly honored as well. To everyone producing the anime, I thank you for your hard work.

At the same, I am a bit surprised at how large-scale this series has become, but I admit that I'm a bit used to it by now. I remember that when the trailer for this series first went viral, I felt like I was going to be crushed by the pressure. I was happy that my work was so popular! But that also meant I had more expectations to live up to... Just the thought of going too far and betraying anyone's hopes even a little bit was death to me. Letting it go to my head would've been outright losing to that pressure.

For now, I think it's best to just enjoy creating the work that's in front of me. Enjoying and laughing are *really* important, given that I *am* a comedy writer. I hope my readers laugh with my works, and any haters I might have are free to laugh *at* them instead. (Just don't go too far, please...)

Now then, as the epilogue said, the next volume will introduce Live-On's fifth generation, so look forward to a whole new side of Live-On. Both this series and I will continue to grow.

Come to think of it, I get the feeling that there are more VTuber-related light novels these days. After searching the web, I think it’s neat to find VTubing in works from the pioneers who inspired me and in works that dip into the latest trends.

Last, to everyone who participated in the production of Volume Six, as well as to all my readers who’ve supported me, thank you so very much. Let us meet again in Volume Seven.