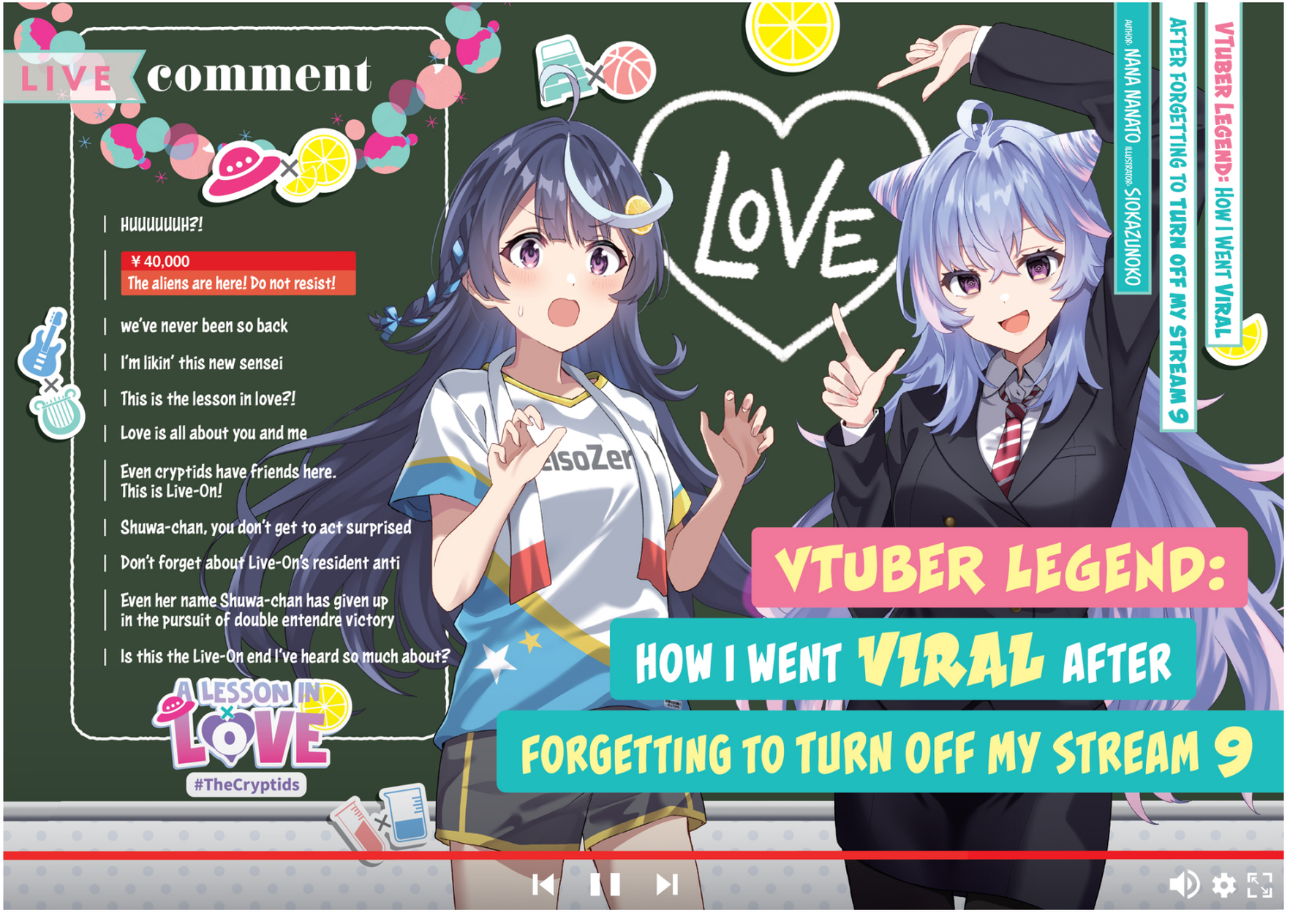
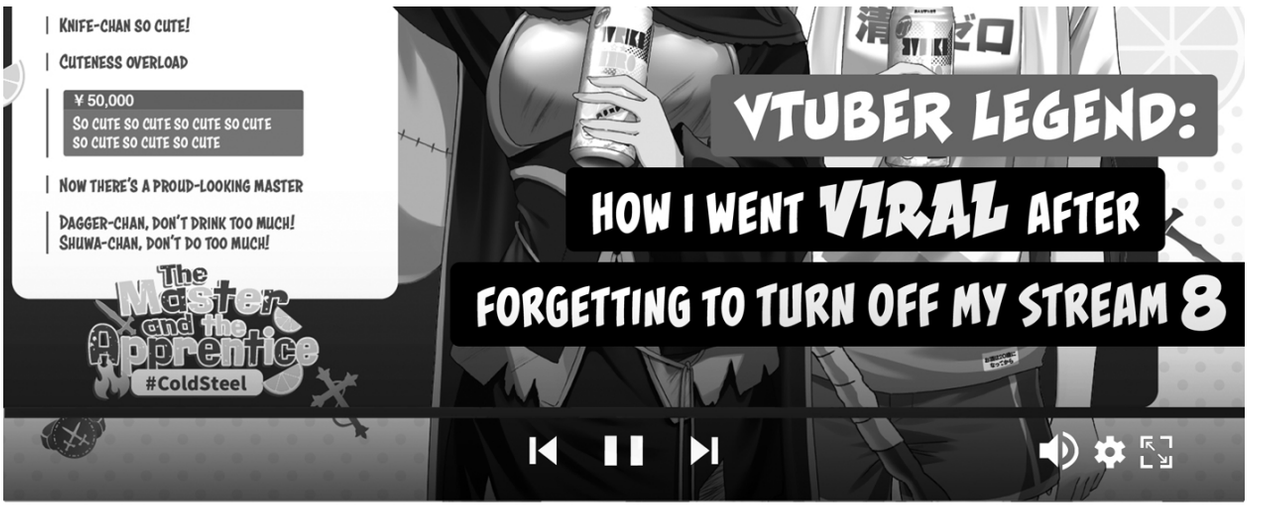

LIVE comment
HUUUUUUH?!
¥ 40,000
The aliens are here! Do not resist!
we've never been so back
I'm likin' this new sensei
This is the lesson in love?!
Love is all about you and me
Even cryptids have friends here.
This is Live-On!
Shuwa-chan, you don't get to act surprised
Don't forget about Live-On's resident anti
Even her name Shuwa-chan has given up
in the pursuit of double entendre victory
Is this the Live-On end I've heard so much about?
A LESSON IN LOVE
#TheCryptids
LOVE
VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 9
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Story Summary

999,999,999,999 views • November 20, 2023 9999 155

StroZero Clip ch
200K subscribers

Subscribed

@DG127

Who is Dagger?

For Shuwa-chan, she is StroZero.

For Shion Kaminari, she is Sei Utsuki.

For Ehrai Sonokaze, she is Takeshi Kitano.

If Dagger goes clap clap clap, I applaud.

If Dagger goes “ah?” I go “ah?”

If Dagger has a million fans, I am one of them.

If Dagger has ten fans, I am one of them.

If Dagger has only one fan, that is me.

If Dagger has no fans, I no longer exist.

If the whole world is against Dagger, I am against the whole world.

I will love Dagger until my very last breath.

GEN 1



HARERU ASAGIRI

“Heya! It’s me—the sunlight in everyone’s hearts, Hareru Asagiri!”

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

GEN 2



SEI UTSUKI

“Hey, ladies and gents! It’s your girl, Sei-sama!”

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

GEN 3



MASHIRO IRODORI

“Kon-mashiro, everyone! It’s me, Mashiro Irodori, also called Mashiron.”

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



AWAYUKI KOKORONE

“Good evening, everyone. Another nice, light snow is falling tonight? I’m Awayuki Kokorone.”

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



SHION KAMINARI

“Kon-miko, everyone! It’s everyone’s mama, Shion Kaminari!

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



NEKOMA HIRUNE

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

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



HIKARI MATSURIYA

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

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

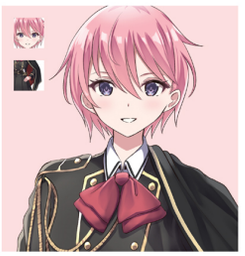


CHAMI YANAGASE

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

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

GEN 4



ALICE SOMA

"Ma'am! Alice Soma, at your service!"

A member of the Resistance, an idol group focused on self-liberation. Her cool looks make her popular with men and women alike, but inside she's somewhat incompetent, so she works hard to protect her image.



EHRAI SONOKAZE

"Heya, everyone! Are you all doing well? I am! I'm Ehrai Sonokaze, zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo!"

An elven zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo, a major theme park featuring every animal under the sun. Respected to the point of complete obedience by all the animals there, for some reason.



KAERU YAMATANI

"You can cross the mountains and dales, but you can always return here. Welcome to Kaeru Yamatani's stream."

A mysterious, mystical woman who is said to appear before kind, loving hearts that have been grievously wounded, grant them her healing, and then return upon the wind.

GEN 5



TADASU MIYAUCHI

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

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



CHURIRI

"Good morning, class! It's your teacher in all things love, Churiri-sensei!"

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



DAGGER

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

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

Live-ON

Live-On

The Chosen Shining Girls

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Prologue

“Tadasu-san has lost it.”

“Huh?”

This morning, when I’d answered Churiri-sensei’s sudden phone call, that had been the last thing I’d expected to hear.

“Lost it?” I muttered back into my phone. “You mean, like, had a nervous breakdown?”

“Yes,” Sensei replied sullenly.

“I don’t believe it… Someone as lively and spirited as her?” Whatever had happened, it certainly sounded serious. “What, um… What happened?”

“I think she realized the truth,” Sensei said. “That Live-On isn’t the evil she thought it was.”

“O-Oh?” I said, slightly taken aback. “So she’s finally stopped being an anti? Is that not actually a good thing?”

“I don’t think it is. Not entirely. To come to grips with that uncomfortable truth is to face the fact that everything she’s done until now was wrong.”

“I… That’s true…” I muttered quietly.

“And she’s someone who truly believed in her own righteousness. The realization that she had been attacking and criticizing others for, essentially, not liking what she liked really hit her hard.”

Mulling over Sensei’s words, I thought back to the collab Hareru-senpai and I had done with Tadasu-chan shortly after her debut, and the debate we’d had. There, Tadasu-chan had passionately argued that being “clean” was the highest virtue, and that Live-On, with its decided uncleanliness, was the devil incarnate and needed to be reformed, and that she had joined as part of gen five to do just that.

But over the course of that debate, Hareru-senpai had pinpointed the truth behind Tadasu-chan’s so-called righteousness: that it was little more than a way to justify her own fetishes and desires, and that her critiques of Live-On were deeply misguided. By the end of it, Tadasu-chan had taken Hareru-

senpai's words to heart and resolved to better understand Live-On by participating in streams and doing general streamer stuff to refine her views. And that had been the end of it.

Or so I'd thought. Now, it seemed, she had found her answer. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say the answer had found her.

"Mmm," I grumbled absentmindedly. "I still can't wrap my head around it. I mean, this is Tadasu-chan we're talking about—breaking down?"

"She had her graduation ceremony recently," Sensei said.

The oddness of the words snapped me back to attention. "Sorry, what?"

"Apparently, Tadasu-san's high school held their graduation ceremony recently," Sensei clarified. "And she's a graduate—a third year—so it must have made her really think about her future. I think what happened was that, right when she was at her lowest, self-confidence-wise, she was basically forced to take a good, hard look at herself. Before, we had already agreed that she would focus solely on her streaming career. Not that Dagger-san and I didn't try to convince her to go to college, but she just said she couldn't see herself balancing studies and streaming. I thought that had been the end of it, but clearly, it's still weighing on her."

"Yeah. I can imagine how it might. It's been going on for a while, then?" I asked.

"And she's just so young, you know? She doesn't have the life experience to bounce back from setbacks like these."

"Right. It's easy to forget how young she is when she acts so professionally in front of the mic, but at the end of the day, she's still just a kid."

I thought back to how I'd felt during my own high school graduation. I remembered the career planning, everyone heading off in different directions, and the deep anxiety—the feeling of being left behind by my peers, even though I was graduating right along with them. But honestly, Tadasu-chan had it way worse than I had. I mean, "VTuber" as a career choice? I'd bet good money she was the only one in her grade who had that written down. Sure, I'd felt anxiety back then, but what she was dealing with was Anxiety with a capital A.

On top of that, she'd just realized that all her criticisms of Live-On had been misguided. Not only misguided—merely a way to

force her own desires onto others. She had planned her future around fixing Live-On, only to discover it didn't need fixing. Her situation was definitely a unique one, and yeah, I could see why she was struggling with it.

But was she not blowing it out of proportion slightly? I was sure none of us other Live-Onners really held her actions against her, and personally, I thought she was young enough that taking some time to step back and reevaluate would actually be good for her. But I supposed that was just my perspective. I couldn't speak for her. She was a serious person, and that only made the situation more stressful for her.

I felt like I was starting to get a good grasp on things. "By the way, when you say 'lost it,' how lost are we talking?" I asked.

"Very," Sensei replied. "Imagine my surprise when she didn't show her face for an entire week, and then when she finally did, she just broke down in front of us."

"What?!" *Things were* that *severe?!* "Is she okay?"

"She's calmed down thanks to a little Dagger-san therapy. But it's clear she still has a lot on her mind. I don't think she's in any condition to stream. Not for a good long while, anyway."

"I see..."

"Also, she went to Hareru-san for a follow-up to their debate just the other day," Sensei said.

"You're kidding. Just how conscientious is this girl...?" I marveled. "So? How'd that go?"

"Hareru-san's advice was for her to talk to other streamers. That hearing some other perspectives might help her arrive at her own."

"Respecting her autonomy and challenging her to arrive at her own conclusion. Sounds like Hareru-senpai."

"It sounds a little irresponsible," Sensei muttered. "Can't she see that Tadasu-san's desperate for guidance?"

Something about the tone of her gripe caught my attention. Though it had struck me initially as genuine concern from one genmate to another, I couldn't help but think there was something more to it.

"Ahem," she cleared her throat. "And that brings me to the reason for my call today. Awayuki-san, you have already proven yourself resourceful and reliable with what you did for Dagger-

san. How do you think we can help Tadasu-san?"

"Hm..." I fell into thought. *So that's why she came to me, is it? Mmm... But I don't know; the situation really is quite delicate. Still, I guess it would be best if...* "We leave her alone for a while and just watch."

"Y-You can't be serious?!" Sensei exclaimed.

Oh, but I am.

"H-How can you be so heartless?!" she asked. "Do you understand what's at stake? At this rate, she might even end up leaving Live-On!"

"Yes, I understand that," I said.

"Then why would you...?" She paused. "I see. You don't like her, do you? Sure, her imagination can be a little overactive, and sometimes you just want to punt her like the brat she is, but unlike me, she's actually a good girl at heart! For all her anti behavior, she's never once hurt anyone! And, and, and, you know! This world is so cynical, so broken—she is exactly the kind of girl we need to be spotlighting! And remember? Remember when I said Japan's pension eligibility age would be raised to 120 one day?"

I chuckled, maybe a little condescendingly. "Yes, yes. I know. No, I don't hate her. In fact, I rather want to get to know her."

"Then why would you suggest something so—?"

"Because. There's nothing we can do for her."

"Huh?"

"Follow my logic for a second. Say we indulge Tadasu-chan's wishes and reform Live-On into something clean. Well, she just ruined a good thing for a lot of people. I doubt her conscience would take that lightly. Then what about if we simply placate her with kind words and convince her to stay? I'm all for kicking the can down the road every now and then, but when it's something that means this much to her? We'd be doing her a real disservice. I don't know about you, but if we put off the problem only for it to harm Tadasu-chan even more, I'd be very upset with myself."

Sensei's voice remained silent, so I continued.

"This is a deeply personal struggle for Tadasu-chan. She's looking inward, trying to figure herself out—grow. That's not a journey we can go on with her. The best thing we can do is, in fact, nothing. And by doing nothing, I mean continuing to be exactly what we are—Live-On. Perhaps even more so than before. We

stand firm and say, ‘This is who we are, this is what Live-On represents!’ And when Tadasu-chan reaches her own conclusion, we accept it—whatever it is—with grace. I believe that is the greatest support we can offer her right now.”

Another brief moment of silence followed before Sensei’s voice finally reemerged. “You’re right,” she said weakly. “You’re completely right. Sorry, I…don’t know why I lost my temper.”

“Okay! Now that Tadasu-chan’s matter has been settled, let’s move on!”

“To?” Sensei shot back quizzically.

“To *your* matter, Churiri-sensei!”

“M-My matter?”

“Yes. You.” I clapped my hands together decisively. “What do *you* want to do, Sensei?”

“Me? Um, leave her alone and just watch, like you said.”

“Yes, like *I* said. That was my opinion. I want to hear yours.”

“Oh…”

When I posed my sudden question, Sensei fell silent for a spell. It was then that I realized that, just as Tadasu-chan had turned to Hareru-senpai for advice, Sensei was now relying on me.

“I mean, I agree with you,” Sensei finally said.

“Sure. You can agree, disagree, whatever. But let’s move on from my opinion already,” I said. “I want to hear what you want to do. You, Sensei. You.”

“Uh…”

This was going nowhere. I could just see the gears grinding to a halt in her head. *Let’s see, how can I explain this…?*

“Earlier, when you talked about Hareru-senpai, I sensed a hint of frustration,” I said. “It makes me think you’ve already formed an idea of how you want to handle this situation.”

“I… I don’t think so,” she replied. “The situation’s so stressful, of course I’d sound frustrated.”

“Yeah, and that’s valid. But what I’m really getting at is *you.* This whole situation is just as much about you as it is about Tadasu-chan, isn’t it?”

Sensei fell silent.

“Albeit for different reasons, you’re both trying to answer the same question: ‘Who am I?’”

“Y-You can’t be serious, lumping me in with that sac of

hormones… Self-discovery is all well and good if you're eighteen, but I'm sensei-aged—teacher-aged!"

"Sometimes society beats our identities out of us. Why do you think you so readily agreed to my rational suggestion earlier?"

"Um, maybe because it was *rational*?"

I took a second to consider her words. "You know, if there's one thing I've learned after being a streamer for this long, it's the fact that people are anything but rational. In today's society, words like 'rational,' 'optimal,' and 'efficient' are thrown around a lot. They're treated like virtues we should all aspire to. Hell, we even expect our kids these days to think logically. Sure, from a productivity standpoint, those ideas have their merits. But we are so much more than that, aren't we? If productivity were everything, why do so many people watch us—love us—when we're the furthest thing from 'productive'?"

Sensei fell silent again. Then, a heartbeat or two later: "All right. You've made your point. Thanks." Then she said, "But wow, who knew you had it in you?"

"Had what?" I asked.

"The ability to give, you know, actual constructive advice, like a senpai."

"You take that back."

"Can you blame me? You're younger, and, well, you're *you*. I half expected you to hand me two cans of StroZero and call it a day."

"No way!" I protested. "Tadasu-chan's underage."

Sensei chuckled. "I think I'm starting to understand why people respect you now. Anyways, I'm just glad you're not the type to mock someone when they're in a vulnerable place. Thanks for listening."

"Eh, it's nothing," I mumbled, suddenly bashful. "It's all secondhand advice from Hareru-senpai anyway."

"*And* you're a tsundere."

"Nuh-uh! Nope! *You* of all people don't get to call me that!"

With that, the call ended—abruptly, as it had begun. Now all that was left was to wait, patiently, until each of the girls came to her own conclusion.

"But… Huh."

I locked my phone and set it gently on the table. Leaning all the way back in my chair, I exhaled, long and slow. After a few still

moments, I reached up, extending my hand above my head, fingers splayed, and gazed at them as if the answer might lie in the spaces between.

“She’s right,” I murmured into the silence that now filled the room. “Who knew?”

Chapter One

The Live-On Strongest Character Debate

And so, to walk the talk after my discussion with Churiri-sensei, it was immediately off to more Live-Onning. It was important to kick the shenanigans off strong with this first stream of mine:

“The strongest character debate—has there ever been a more pointless endeavor?” I said in a stiff, narrator-like voice, the first thing the viewers heard as my stream flickered to life.

```
: It bodes really well you cold-opened your stream
calling it a pointless endeavor
: you said the quiet part out loud!
: it's over
: kay, pack it up boys, stream's over
: a more fruitless endeavor does exist: your
attempts at remaining seiso
```

“What is the strongest character debate? It is a debate in which people fiercely argue over which fictional character could beat up all the others in a particular work of fiction or whatever their obsession of the week is.”

```
: aaaand she keeps going
: hey, don't ignore your chat, streamer
: lol
: is this an awa-chan type stream?
: not if I have anything to say about it ¥220
```

“But unless the creator of the work has graciously given us a power hierarchy, these debates quickly devolve into absurd what-ifs and imaginary fights. There’s no logic, no real basis—just a bunch of fans trying to kick and scream their favorite character to the top.”

: I mean yeah but did you have to say it like that?
: someone sounds rather bitter lol
: probably a veteran of a few such debates herself
: just how many skeletons does this seison't streamer have in her closet?

“And so what results from such an unwinnable and prejudiced debate? A glorious mess of shit-slinging, name-calling, and enough slander to rival the comment section of a Yahoo News article. A true breeding ground for bias and baseless hot takes—welcome to the strongest character debate.”

: yahoo news catching strays LMAO
: it's a metaphor for how unproductive and destructive these arguments are. bullets fly everywhere, harming indiscriminately
: I dunno, this feels kinda subjective
: can't deny that these arguments are liable to get out of control
: don't act like you don't get angry when someone trash-talks your oshi

“All right. Well. Good evening, everyone. It looks like another nice, light snow is falling tonight. Awayuki Kokorone here,” I said, slipping back into my usual tone, setting the stage for a nice, seiso Awa-chan stream. “So today’s event, as I just mentioned, is a strongest character debate—featuring all your faves here from Live-On! Woo-hoo! Did you all like my little dramatic cold opening there? I tried to up the stakes by sounding all serious, but I don’t know, maybe that wasn’t me. Aha ha ha…” I laughed bashfully. The opening had already been avant-garde enough; I tried not to make the introduction any more confusing for the viewers.

: oh look at you acting coy. Fine. but only because I like you.
: coy (seiso)

: Live-On doesn't need any more additional stakes, ma'am
: buckle in for another crazy stream boys

"And by the way, what I said earlier only really applies to casual debating. There's also ranked, competitive strongest character debates, but we're not going to get into that right now. Too many rules, too serious. I just want us all to have some fun, you know?"

: ranked, competitive strongest character debates...?
: Okay, but your little intro didn't make it sound fun at all...
: how are we even gauging "strength" in this context?

"Oh, that's simple. Just who would win in a fight."

: bruh LOL. because if there's anything VTubers need to be ranked on, it's their ability to throw hands
: doesn't really feel like a VTuber thing to do in the first place...
: eh, basically everything is a VTuber thing these days
: I always knew Live-On was a shonen manga!
: this strongest character debate is liable to devolve into a nastiest character debate

Still think this is all a bit too vague? Same here—welcome to the club! But don't worry, I'm sure we'll figure it out as we go. As I mentioned earlier, today's stream is all about the strongest character debate, featuring us, the members of Live-On—a generational talent of a VTubing agency that's been growing so fast, we put even shonen manga protagonists to shame! These debates aren't just for online message boards or forums—they happen on playgrounds too, between friends. I'm sure many of you have had similar discussions at some point in your lives.

No? Still don’t get it? Then…screw it, just look at this:

“Let’s jump right into it. To make our lives a little easier, I’ve taken the liberty of creating a little placeholder-y tier list beforehand! Behold!”

[S] Hareru Asagiri
[A] Shion Kaminari Ehrai Sonokaze Churiri
[B] Nekoma Hirune Mashiro Irodori Kaeru Yamatani
[C] Awayuki Kokorone Hikari Matsuriya Alice Soma
[D] Chami Yanagase Tadasu Miyauchi Dagger
[Z] Sei Utsuki
: Huh?
: cool tier list bro
: bruh what is thissss LMAO
: go ahead, put yourself in S, we won't say anything
: there's a lot to unpack here, but you have to at least separate Shuwa from Awa and the boss from the zookeeper
: Alice in C-tier? What are you smoking?
: go read the official character bios, then come back and remake this list.
: just Sei-sama casually in Z-tier LMAOOO
: this tier list already reeks of the maker's bias. (bias against herself and her ilk, but bias nonetheless)
: I'm dying. For an Awa-chan stream, the chat sure is Shuwa-riffic
: Perhaps her being Awa-chan for this stream is a precaution

Ugh, why do I even try?

“All right, all right. Calm down, everybody, calm down. Listen. I’m not saying this is the best tier list in the world, but coming from me, an actual streamer affiliated with the org, it has to mean something, right?”

: no

: if anything, your affiliation makes your opinion mean less
: mm-hm
: if we wanted your StroZero-addled take, we would've asked for it. Now give us the official take.
: StroZero-addled LOL

"Yeah, coming from the snark-lords who would say, 'Yeah, well, that's just the *official* power ranking' even if we had one. Ahem. Anyway! Enough of that, let's get this debate underway, shall we? And just so you know, I won't be holding back. If you think I can't throw down, you've got another thing coming. I'm like *PreCure* up in this. I will beat you and your mother up."

: Hoh? Them's fightin words
: I'll have you know these hands are rated E for everyone
: Then let's go
: which one are you supposed to be, Cure StroZero?
: oof that's a nasty counter...

That was the gist of the plan explained. Next, chat and I would use my tier list as a jumping-off point for impassioned debate and discussion, ultimately rearranging the tier list into one that was universally agreed upon (if such a tier list exists). Not even counting the split personalities some of the talents had, that was already fourteen streamers we had to talk about. Things could devolve pretty messily pretty fast—unless we set up some ground rules first.

"To make things easier for us, why don't we decide on the all-important S-tier first? These would be Live-On's most prolific streamers—the undefeated, as they say. Currently, I have Hareru-senpai and Hareru-senpai only in that coveted top spot. If you have any thoughts, then *please* go ahead and share them."

: i'm sensing passive aggression

: well, yeah I think Hareru goes in S
: no objections here
: wait but didn't Awa-chan call Hareru a Jagen the other day?
: so she's actually falling behind stat-wise now and deserves to be in A-tier?
: i won't stand for this Harerun slander
: no, stat-wise she's still top-tier and well-rounded. only thing that gives me pause is her horrendously accursed luck lmao
: AgreeGe. She's not nearly as dominant as she was in the early days of Live-On, but she just still kinda just feels one tier above the rest, you know what I'm saying?
: Not quite a no-holds-barred brawl, but who remembers that flawless round of *Amidst Us*? Harerun ran laps around everyone.

"I see, I see. Well! It seems the vast majority is in agreement: Hareru-senpai belongs in S-tier. And vis-à-vis the Jagen comment, she's not falling behind—the rest of us are just catching up!"

: excuses, excuses
: I sentence you to death by cricket
: I love that Hareru-senpai has just become an insect lord lmao
: Weevil Harerunderwood
: And suddenly, she's D-tier

"We really need to move on from the cricket jokes... All the more reason to keep her in S-tier, let's shut up and move on! Next, is there anyone else who deserves to be in the same tier as Hareru-senpai? Any thoughts? Anyone?"

: Ehrai-chan! (The Boss)
: what that guy said

Triggering an avalanche of nominations for Ehrai-chan.

“Ehrai-chan! I was thinking the same thing! She’s in A-tier right now, but what do we think? Move her up to S?”

: No. First we separate the zookeep from the boss.
: Nah, I think we just move her up as is. Not only is she powerful herself, but as her bio states, she commands her own bestial army.
: so she's a summoner who defies the weak summoner trope
: rito pls nerf
: I dunno, I kinda feel like if she fought Harerun as the zookeeper, she'd be on the defensive the whole time
: then she transforms into the boss, and after a lengthy struggle, delivers the killing blow
: that criminal underbelly attack does some insane burst damage, huh?
: that's how mafia works
: rito pls nerf

“Mm… Okay! You know what? We’ll split Ehrai-chan up. Ehrai Sonokaze (Boss) goes in S, and Ehrai Sonokaze (Zookeep) goes in A for now, but we’ll reevaluate when we get there. Everyone in agreement?”

And it seemed that mostly everyone was, so I decided to move on. But chat was adamant that the S-tier deck its halls with one more name, and that name was…

: Awayuki Kokorone
: you
: Shuwa-chan!
: hello? can't read your own name?
: what that guy's drinking ￥220

Me, huh? “Um, okay, sure. Let’s talk about me…”

: Let's go!!!
: where's she now? C-tier?
: nahhh C is wayyyy too low
: S, baby, S!
: SSSSSSSSS

"You know, as the woman herself, I must say I don't think I belong in S."

: scuse? ¥4,444
: SWIP (sound of raising a fist)
: Hey everyone, Awayuki's fishing for compliments!
: Aww, 'I'm secretly amazing but too humble to know it'! Me too, Awa-chan, me too.
: nobody likes a humblebragger, Awa-chan

"Wait, no. I'm not being humble. I swear I'm not!"

No, no, no no. This wasn't that. This wasn't that at all. I had a good, valid reason for not being in S-tier.

"I know we're ranking based on strength, but this is still Live-On we're talking about. To be ranked S-tier at anything in Live-On is like walking around with 'crazy' carved into your forehead! It's a mark of shame, not a badge of honor! You'd be bonkers to want to be ranked S on this thing!"

: bruhhhhh LOL
: hahahahaha okay true
: say that to the two people already locked in S-tier...
: Again, we learn this is just another one of Awa-chan's plots to convince us she's one of the better ones

"No, it's not! I am one of the better ones! That's a fact! Okay, guys, guys? Close your eyes, solemnly place your hand on your chest, take a moment to really think about it. Think about Live-On. Think about the girls at Live-On. Then think about me. What do

you see? A single water lily blooming on the surface of a murky, putrid pond. That lily—it's me."

Come on... Come on...!

: Yeah no
: No water lily, but... oh you mean this red spider lily?
: I see a lemon flower
: no no, must be this stinking corpse lily
: Shuwa is S, Awa is at least a C but probably higher
: listen we all know if we get a little bit of that alc in ya, you'd be ecstatic to be ranked S
: "forehead carving? heck yeah!"
: It really is a mystery to me why you continue to be so hung up on being seiso

Ah. No dice.

"Uuuugh... I mean, I mean, if Dagger-chan was able to regain her memories, then why can't I? I want a second chance too! Seiso sometimes is better than seiso no-times! I'm not going to make any more excuses for what Shuwa gets up to in her spare time, but when I'm trying my best, when I'm all put together for you, the least you can do is humor me! Some fans you are!"

: S-Sorry?
: it's just that that Shuwa side of you is a little *too* overpowering
: I get that you want to distance yourself from Shuwa-state but the fact of the matter is you've started to act out even in your Awa-state so the dream of seiso is drifting even further...
: making negative progress toward your goal is crazy
: Awa-chan's giving more seasoned comedian than seiso maiden these days
: Hoping to replicate what Dagger-chan did when she's the complete opposite of you is a bold move,

cotton
: A-At least you've become more dependable now!
￥10,000

“Fine… If that’s how it’s going to be, I’m going to separate myself like Ehrai-chan. Shuwa-chan can go in S. I only ask that when it comes time to debate Awa, you all treat her with the respect she deserves.”

: kaaay
: sounds good
: Roger that!
: ...yeah I think Shuwa deserves to be in S-tier
: she's weak against a few matchups but like the boss, she has outstanding burst potential which more than makes up for it
: plus her moveset is WeirdTM which makes her attacks hard to read
: Strong in the face of adversity, so S
: if you consider the fact that Shuwa-chan and boss both have transformation gimmicks, it makes the Regular High School Girl among them all the more terrifying
: i fckin love it lmao

“Oh, yeah. You know what? I’m just going to tell myself Shuwa-chan belongs in S because it stands for StroZero and call it a day. ’Kay. Here are the current standings.”

[S] Hareru Asagiri Awayuki Kokorone (Shuwa) Ehrai Sonokaze (boss)
[A] Shion Kaminari Ehrai Sonokaze (zookeep) Churiri
[B] Nekoma Hirune Mashiro Irodori Kaeru Yamatani
[C] Awayuki Kokorone (Awa) Hikari Matsuriya Alice Soma
[D] Chami Yanagase Tadasu Miyauchi Dagger
[Z] Sei Utsuki

And with that, the S-tier was all done. “Going from top to bottom, next we have A-tier. Currently, we have Shion-senpai, Ehrai-chan (zookeep), and Churiri-sensei. Thoughts?”

As with S-tier, I let chat loose and observed their discussions for a while. This time, however, opinion seemed more varied, with no clear consensus emerging. Thinking this meant perhaps the current tier was okay as it was, I decided to pick on a few comments and see if that indeed was the case.

: woof. A-tier ain't no slouch either ¥3,200
: I would've happily placed Shion-mama in either B or C before, but now...
: Shion mains eating good after that last patch
: the addition of her new Birthing move gave her some much-needed offense, but yeesh, giving her passive super armor too? Broken.
: yep, the zookeeper definitely belongs in A-tier!
: Churi-sen can... Yeah, she can hold her own
: i'm late but I think sensei's S-tier, honestly

The first comment I chose to pick on was this one about Churiri-sensei. Truth be told, her name had come up a few times during the S-tier discussion, but since it hadn’t been mentioned as often as the other three S-tier names, I’d ignored it. But now, with the discussion at a standstill, it seemed like a good time to revisit it.

I mean, Churiri-sensei was strong, but was she *S-tier* strong?

“Sensei, in my opinion, has the greatest *potential*, I think we can all agree on that. Buuuut...to me she just kinda seems like the type who’d completely fall apart the moment things get real.”

: hahahaha why is that so true
: she's the villain who burns the MC's village in the first act, and has several encounters with the MC afterward where she can't bring herself to kill them, foreshadowing her defeat
: then at the end of the second or start of the

third act, they're forced to fight for real. She's defeated, has that change of heart moment, but before she can turn to the light, something happens and she ends up sacrificing herself for the MC and dies with no redemption arc
: bro are you Churiri because you have her imagination
: she's in a league of her own when it comes to sheer incomprehensibility but I have to agree. Looking at A-tier now, among those names is right where she belongs.

"Wonderful, it seems like a lot of you agree. Then in A she goes!"

Now, let's see who's the next hottest topic of discussion...

: Mashiron is an AAA if you know what I mean
: lay off the poor girl, she's already had it hard enough with her recently released oppai mouse pad being the only one without the word "oppai" in the product name
: the Mashiro Mouse pad—get yours today!
: yall are being rude for no reason. just look at all the five-star ratings it has
: right? and the glowing reviews: "very practical!"
: I think Alice-chan deserves a shot at A!

"Ignoring the Mashiron triple-A comments so I don't get shot tonight—Alice-chan, eh? I don't exactly mind ranking her high if this was just about me and my stream, but the thing is... Has anyone ever seen her act even remotely strange when I'm *not* involved?"

: lol
: its true, she plays at a tremendous disadvantage to anyone immune to Awayuki Brainwashing
: also continually plays second fiddle to Mashiron

: but she's a must-have against all Awayuki variants, even Shuwa!
: total counter pick, no doubt

"If we don't want to put her in A, we can just leave her in C for now? Don't get me wrong, I want nothing more than to put her in S because of what she is to me, but I stopped myself, because objectivity is important in a power ranking! I am impartial and unbiased, because that is who I am. Go me."

: impartial and unbiased...?
: looks askance at Sei-sama, the shining star of Z-tier
: more like steaming dump of Z-tier
: didn't stop yourself from doing that, didja
: everyone else with a tier rating and Sex-sama out here the only one with a CERO rating lmao

And there was one final opinion of note...

: Awa deserves a shot at A-tier
: Where is she now? C?
: C seems fair for a completely deshuwalized Awa-chan

"Awa-chan... What do we do about you...?"

My name (Awa ver.) popped up every now and then. And public opinion was divided.

"Maybe we just split the difference and place me in B? It only seems like the equitable thing to do, and not just because I want to distance myself from the top ranks as much as possible."

: nobody accused you of doing that
: but now that you mention it, how dare you
: Oh I see how this ends. With one foot in S-tier, the other in Z, ShuwaAwa form together to make [S]tro[Z]ero!

: that's crazyyyy
: Awa-chan, that's what you were aiming for????

“What? No! *Hell* no! How could you even consider having me and Sex-sama in the same tier?!”

: but why not, you're two peas in a pod!
: Hell no, said the lady
: the seiso, it unravels

Despite me not being able to keep it together until the end, capping off the discussion with an unfortunate bit of outburst comedy, A-tier made it through unchanged. With the top A- and S-tiers finalized, next came the middling B- and C-tiers, whose current residents were:

[B] Nekoma Hirune Mashiro Irodori Kaeru Yamatani
[C] Awayuki Kokorone (Awa) Hikari Matsuriya Alice Soma

This was another major chunk of the tier list, and completing it meant we would be one major step closer to finishing. However, the heated debate that unfolded made the process for the previous tiers look downright smooth in comparison.

The following points in particular sparked contention:

Is Awa B-tier?

“All right, here it is, let’s talk about it again. Honestly, I don’t even know.”

: I think she'd put up a good fight across the board
: Awa-chan still takes the occasional loss, but it's not like she's shut out completely anymore
: Old Awa I would definitely say was D- or even Z-tier, but current Awa I can see in B. Impressive growth if you ask me.
: she's the type to die to every noob killer boss, but she learns and gets stronger each time

: and she has a hidden transformation mode... Damn, is she the main character?
: Embracing her inner hollow like Ichigo
: if she gets a hollow hole shaped like a zero ill die

"A-Aw shucks, everyone. I mean, if you insist *that* much, I guess I *have* to put myself up there. Eheh. Eheh heh heh… Crap, I wasn't supposed to be happy about that, was I?"

Next: *Is Hikari-chan B-tier?*

"Hikari-chan is…a fighter in every sense of the word, so maybe she does deserve to be up there."

: you mean she can take a blow. Masochists don't take damage
: she's the bane of noobs worldwide: the boss who's immune to direct damage
: those with the sadist perk can beat her by overwhelming her healing ability. those without can only win by ignoring her until she gives up
: I have to outlast Hikari-chan...?
: that'll take years off your life (literally)

"I'm going to cut you all off right there before the conversation inevitably drifts back to me! B it is!"

Next: *Is Kaeru-chan C-tier?*

"Mm, I don't know… Quite the strong baby, no?"

: strong psychically, weak af physically
: that baby would flee well before even the slightest whiff of violence
: but threaten her with employment if she loses and she's suddenly top tier
: No. She'd still just run. Fleeing isn't losing, as that baby would say
: you throw your hands out like you're protecting her, only to drop the people's elbow on her KEK

“Very convincing arguments. Sorry, I let the whole top-mommy thing color my perception. It won’t happen again. I shall remain unbiased from here on out! C it is!”

Next: *Is Mashiron C-tier?*

“Nope.”

```
: and it just happened again
: ah yes memory loss. the master has learned from the apprentice
: boys, I have a hunch we're not winning this one. better let it go
: well, she does hard counter Awayuki so I suppose B could work
: i'll allow it, in the name of love
```

Mashiron’s rank is the one thing I won’t give up! I’ll beg my chat for forgiveness if I must! Just look at this cute, adorable, †seiso† face!

…

†Seiso† looks like the tombstone marking seiso’s grave. I made myself sad and won’t be doing that again.

Next: *Is Nekoma-senpai C-tier?*

“Honestly, this was a tough one for me as well. I don’t know if it’s the cat in her, but I just can’t quite put my finger on her.”

```
: definitely not weak
: weak physically. but calm as a cucumber and wields filth as weapons
: but she's so nice though! she wouldn't hurt a fly
: yeesh this is a tough one
: I mean it's Nekoma so put her lower, why not?
```

“You guys aren’t even trying anymore! But maybe that is what Nekoma-senpai is all about—a kind, considerate, conflict-averse senpai. Yeah, you know what? I’m sure she’d be honored to be put in C-tier.”

And that was it for a while. The discussion continued, but nothing fruitful came of it. Something was just *missing*…

But then…

“Oh, right, Sei-sama. Totally forgot. All memes aside, how about putting her in B? She’s a bit of a glass cannon. Can really dish out the damage but can’t quite take it.”

```
: bruh what is wrong with me I burst out laughing just hearing Sei-sama's name
: She looked so pretty in Zed I totally forgot
: eh, B, sure.
: BBBBBBB
: she's definitely no match for any of the names in S or A so B!
```

And with that missing piece of the puzzle fitting snugly in place, those were the middle tiers, all set. Here is the current tier list reproduced for your convenience:

```
[S] Hareru Asagiri Awayuki Kokorone (Shuwa) Ehrai Sonokaze (boss)
[A] Shion Kaminari Ehrai Sonokaze (zookeep) Churiri
[B] Sei Utsuki Awayuki Kokorone (Awa) Mashiro Irodori Hikari Matsuriya
[C] Nekoma Hirune Alice Soma Kaeru Yamatani
[D] Chami Yanagase Tadasu Miyauchi Dagger
```

Finally, we reached the endgame—the all-important D-tier.

```
: D looks good as is!
: Chami is a counter to Ehrai, and Tadasu+Dagger counter Churiri, the higher-ranked champions with their lower-ranked foils. It's like poetry
: Gen five continues to be the most precious gen
: The counters make the whole list pretty balanced imo
: sign it, print it, ship it
```

Agreement right off the bat—you love to see it. It seemed that

D, like S, almost spoke for itself as an extreme.

And with that…

“The Live-On strongest character debate is officially over! Thank you for all your most valuable input!”

The tier list was complete. We took what was thought to be a fruitless discussion and not only made it bear fruit, but fruit that was practically bursting with juice. Who would’ve thought? Not me, that was for sure. With an audience as large and varied as mine, I hadn’t thought we’d be able to arrive at a single mostly palatable conclusion, let alone fourteen-plus. The strongest character debate: it was totally doable if you just tried.

This feat I owed to the wonderful audience of Live-On, whose magnanimous acceptance of others, no matter how different they might be, surprised even me. When I thought of myself earlier, the me who feared conflict, the me who hid my fear of my faves getting criticized behind a mask of cynicism, all I felt was shame.

When people talk—and I mean *really* talk—they come to an understanding. Of that, I am now abundantly sure.

```
: let's goooo
: good job team!
: woo-hoo!
: ￥8,888
: Pshh! ￥220
```

The chat was awash with messages celebrating a job well done. After a long, hard-fought battle, had there ever been a sweeter sight? The finish line was just ahead, and we had done the impossible. What better way to mark the occasion than to cross that line hand in hand, together with everyone?

“Are you ready, everyone? Here it is, the fruits of your labor, the culmination of discussion upon discussion. I proudly present to you—the definitive Live-On strength tier list!”

```
[SSS] Hareru Asagiri Shion Kaminari Sei Utsuki
Nekoma Hirune Awayuki Kokorone Mashiro Irodori
Hikari Matsuriya Chami Yanagase Alice Soma Ehrai
Sonokaze Kaeru Yamatani Tadasu Miyauchi Dagger
```

Churiri

“Just look at it. What a beauty!”

: Huh?!
: Wait...
: Hm? Hm???
: all right, who used King Crimson?
: boys! quit messing around and help us clean up the timeways!
: what...is this...
: were all of our efforts...for naught?!
: You blew it up! You blew it all to hell!
: years taken off my life (actual)
: what the FUCKKKKK
: Looks like my E-rated fists will get their turn after all. Time to shatter that (seiso) illusion!
: kids these days with their participation trophies
: this whole thing was just because you wanted to do that, wasn't it?

“Aha ha ha! I’m kidding, I’m kidding! I had this tier list prepared in case we couldn’t wrap things up nicely. Already had it made, so I figured I’d use it to fake you all out. Don’t worry, the actual tier list is the one before and it’s already saved. Forgive me!”

: you came prepared...
: bold to move forward with a stream idea you already thought was going to be a shit-show
: it do be like that sometimes
: I mean that is the correct tier list as seen by the general public

“And you know, in this tier list, we were strictly talking about who would win in a fight, but everybody who’s made it into Live-On is SSS in one way or another. So who’s to say the gag tier list is even wrong? Yep. All right. Well, I think that about wraps it up for

today. Thank you, everyone! Let’s meet again when the light snow falls!”

: truth ￥320
: even the D-listers in this tier list are a 9.9/10 on the power scale
: all members of Live-On are absolute beasts compared to the average joe
: thanks for the stream!
: whew that was fun!

And so, with that familiar farewell, the stream drew to its close. In its wake, I found myself contemplating just how crucial communication really is. Humans are, for all their sociability, often so disconnected from one another. We’re flawed, mostly because we like to think we aren’t. We’re dumb because we think we’re smart. I think that’s why dialogue is so important. Through conversation, we get to know other people, and only by knowing other people do we start truly to understand ourselves.

In that moment, I couldn’t help but wonder how Tadasu-chan and Churiri-sensei were doing. My all SSS-tier list, my final words before the stream had ended—if I was being honest, they hadn’t been entirely for the viewers. They were like little prayers from me, a small hint I hoped would reach those two, who were so lost in figuring themselves out. Maybe that was why I’d planned the stream to begin with, just to say those things, even if they weren’t listening.

Tadasu-chan especially. In her current state, I knew the chances of her tuning in were slim; my words would probably never reach her. But still, I needed to, and was glad to, have said them.

I realized how hypocritical this made me. That despite my advice to Churiri-sensei to leave her alone, I was doing the exact opposite. I know, I’m disappointed in myself too. Was I worried or not worried? Calm or not calm? Seriously, figure it out, Awayuki…

A Mother’s Madness

After the solo stream, it came time for a collab stream, my first

one after my discussion with Sensei.

For this all-important occasion, we really gave it our all to pick just the right theme. And that theme was...!

“Let’s make some babies! It’s Live-On family planning, woooo!” yelled Shion-mama.

Yep. In fact, some would say we might have even put in *too* much effort.

```
: rip headphone users
: could we have sanitized the name of the project just a little?
: this stream has a theme much like porn has a plot
: Is Shion-mama okay? Why does it sound like she's about to hyperventilate?
```

“Hello! Welcome, welcome. I am your lovely host and guide to all things motherhood, Shion Kaminari! Let’s introduce our fantastic lineup for this stream, starting with my genmates, who are *definitely* here of their own free will!”

“Ladies and gents, Sei-sama here. Shion invites me to do anything, I forget to do my due diligence and accept.”

“It’s Nekoma Hirune! Even with how much I like shitty stream projects, this was still one I wanted to skip out on!”

“Woo! Give it up for my girls!” Shion-mama said. “Lastly we have Shuwa-chan and Alice-chan—take it away!”

“Pshh! Y’all know I gotta start off this one already buzzed! It’s ya girl, Shuwa-chan!”

“I signed up as soon as I confirmed the stream name and Awayuki-dono’s attendance! Alice Soma!”

“A big thank you to all of my wonderful guests! Woo-hoo-hoo-hoo!!!” Shion-mama said.

```
: oh yeah, this gon be good
: poor genmates...
: was... was Shion-mama always like this?
: yesn't
: so when are we gonna get to, you know, explaining what the heck this is all about?
```

“Shion, some poor souls in chat are confused. It’s good that you’re excited, but let’s get back on track. You’re the host, aren’t you?” Sei-sama said.

“Oh! You’re right, Sei! My bad, my bad,” Shion-mama said. “All right, so! On today’s stream, with the help of everyone here, we’ll be making some babies!”

“Good girl,” Sei-sama said.

“Nekoma-senpai, something needs to be done about these two. Permission to interject?” I said.

“Go for it!” she said.

“Okay! Readying up my reusable, unguided, shoulder-launched, anti-tank rocket launcher.”

“Don’t push your luck...” Nekoma-senpai said.

“Ooh, ooh, Awayuki-dono! Me, me! You can interject in me! With a rocket launcher, your cock, whatever!”

“Because we’re making babies? It’s because we’re making babies, isn’t it! Ah ha ha ha! You guys are so into it, I love it!” Shion-mama said.

Crickets started chirping. Shion-mama was clearly at twice her usual levels of excitement. Like she was drunk. Except she definitely wasn’t. Terrifyingly, she was stone-cold sober.

I supposed I’d explain it to the chat, then, since clearly no one else was willing. But just as I was about to, Shion-mama abruptly began talking about it herself.

“As you all know,” she began, “I pride myself as the mother of Live-On, and I spoil all of its talents like they were my own. But recently, many of them have started pulling away from me. Now I have a lot of love to give, but not enough people around to accept it.”

If you haven’t guessed it already, let me spell it out for you.

“So you see? This is all your fault,” she said, addressing the four of us. “I’ve got all this frustration pent up. Which is why...”

Shion-mama had lost it.

“I want your babies. All of them.”

She’d lost it—completely.



: Hwa?!
: did I just hear that?
: what (terrified)
: Shion-mama's Live has never been so On???

“Okay! Let me explain how this is going to work!” she continued. “We’re gonna spin the wheel. At random, we’re going to pair up Sei, Nekoma, Shuwa-chan, and Alice-chan and have each pair conceive a child. Ideally, I would’ve liked to switch the pairs around and try out every combination, but that would’ve been a bit unfeasible…”

“Allow me to clarify,” Sei-sama said. “When Shion says ‘conceive a child,’ we mean hypothetically, of course. All she wants to do is imagine what our various offspring would possibly look like.”

“Yep, no switching around, so that means two pairs between us four, two kids total!” Nekoma-senpai added.

“Give me Awayuki-dono’s child. Give me Awayuki-dono’s child!” Alice-chan said.

GULP **GULP** **GULP** **GULP** “PA-HAAAA!”

: oh good, I was worried this stream was going to be completely off the rails ¥4,000
: sarcasm detected
: my time here has altered my perception of what is allowed or not. Here's hoping you don't get banned!
: not Shuwa-chan chugging like she used to
: hm? Shion-mama's sitting this one out?

“No one else wanted to join!” Shion-mama said. “If we just got one more, that would’ve been six, making three pairs! That would’ve been perfect! Ugh! This sucks!”

“Can’t blame them. This was one collab even Nekoma wanted to sit out, nyafter all,” Nekoma-senpai said.

“Now, now, let’s give Shion credit where it’s due,” Sei-sama said. “She sat herself out knowing full well she’d be too biased toward second gen and too incapacitated to carry out her hosting duties if she were a participant.”

“Nobody deserves credit for digging themselves out of a hole

they dug in the first place," I said. **GULP *GULP* *GULP**

"Well, I like it!" Alice-chan said. "For me, the fewer people join, the better!"

: Sei-sama has just become a Shion-approving bot lmao
: absolutely didn't think Sei-sama of all people would be so smitten lmao
: so basically Shuwa-chan is the sole reason this stream could even happen
: Wait, so when Shion said she wants babies, she wants other people's...babies?
: forgive our daughter. ¥50,000

StroZero-chan, I'll be counting on you today. Before throwing myself into the chaos that was sure to follow, I gave StroZero-chan a final, parting peck on the cheek.

"All right. Bring out the wheel!" Shion-mama said. A spinner wheel appeared on the screen, divided into quadrants, each labeled with one of our names—except for Shion-mama's. "There's only one arrow, so we'll spin it once to determine the first person, then again to complete the pair!"

"Hey, Shion-mama!" I yelled. "One name's missing! StroZero-chan's!"

"Huh?" she said. "Wait, of course! If we add StroZero, we'll have an even number and then I can participate!"

Oh? I just wanted to complain, but it seems I've struck on a good idea. And the thought that I could pair with StroZero-chan made me actually hyped for the stream!

"Nyot so fast!" Nekoma-senpai interjected. "If we add StroZero to the wheel, that means one of us is going to have to bear a child with StroZero! Shuwa-chan might be fine with that, but what about the rest of you?"

"Sounds good to me," I replied. "In fact, why *aren't* you all getting freaky with StroZero already?"

"I'm with Awayuki-dono!" Alice-chan said. "Getting with StroZero is basically equivalent to getting with Awayuki-dono!"

"I've cum to a can of StroZero thinking of Awayuki-dono before,"

Sei-sama added.

“I see. So Nekoma’s the odd one out… Nya-nya,” Nekoma-senpai mumbled defeatedly.

```
: house cat Learns About Majority Rule
: Is what Sei-sama just said allowed?
: we're actually adding StroZero?!
```

“Mmmmmm…” Shion-mama grumbled in hard thought. “Mmmm… No! We’ll keep it as is. I don’t want to throw the entire plan out of whack.”

Tsk. It seemed Shion-mama valued having a properly run stream over a child with StroZero. Shame.

“Now that that’s settled, let’s spin the wheel! Whee!” Shion-mama exclaimed, and the wheel began to turn at last. All eyes were glued to it, anticipation high as they waited to see where it would land. As the wheel picked up speed, so did Shion-mama’s enthusiasm, and she started chanting, “Impregnate, impregnate, impregnate, impregnate!”

“Shion-mama, could you not do that to the tune of ‘chug, chug, chug, chug’?!” I snapped.

```
: what is that chant lmao
: bruh LOL
: Shion-chan is completely off her rocker today
: remember, no one's truly normal, just normal-presenting
: You know you've got it bad when Shuwa-chan's the one calling you out
```

Slowly but surely, the wheel began to lose speed, its rotation growing sluggish until, at last, it landed on…!

[Sei Utsuki]

“It’s Sei!” Shion-mama said.

“Yeugh,” Nekoma-senpai said.

“Swing and a miss!” Alice-chan said.

“Would you look at the time, I have to go water my fake plants,” I said.

“Now hold on,” Sei-sama said, clearly upset. “I can understand Awayuki-kun’s and Alice-kun’s reactions, but you, Nekoma-kun?”

“Nya? What about me?” Nekoma-senpai asked.

“You don’t want to sleep with me?”

“Whether I do or do not isn’t relevant to the game…”

“Hm. Can I ask why you’ve been so opposed to this game? I thought you were always up for strange and interesting stream ideas.”

“I-I am. It’s not that, it’s just…”

Nekoma-senpai’s voice trailed off into silence. A few heartbeats later, her voice returned, this time like a burst hot-air balloon plummeting toward the ground. “I just don’t want to imagine having a child with either of you. You’re my genmates…*and* a couple! That’s so weird!”

```
: lolcat
: what is going on
: a cat is caught between a rock and a hard place
```

Even I let out an “ohhh” in understanding. Right, of course this would happen if Sei-sama and Nekoma-senpai ended up pairing. Poor Nekoma-senpai. I also desperately didn’t want to get paired with Alice-chan, but at least we weren’t genmates…

“Nekomaaa,” Shion-mama said, her tone full of warmth and understanding. “It’s okay. I don’t mind! I want to see your and Sei’s child. Please! Pretty please!”

Ope, my mistake. That wasn’t warmth and understanding in her tone. It was more of a sticky, clammy something else.

“No!” Nekoma-senpai yelled. “Guys, she is clearly not okay, do something about her!”

“Nekoma-kun,” Sei-sama said.

“Nya?”

“Rest assured, I want to have sex with you both physically and emotionally.”

“You’ve just been thinking this is about sex from the beginning when it’s not!”

Talk about a power couple…

“Hey, kouhai, help me out!” Nekoma-senpai said.

“I mean, in the end, it’s all down to luck, so not sure how I can help you out,” I said. “Want a StroZero?”

“I want to pair with Awayuki-dono, so it’s in my best interest that you get paired with Sei-dono!” Alice-chan said.

“Nyot like this… Ah! I just realized that if I’d agreed to add StroZero to the wheel, that would’ve bettered my odds!”

```
: you've heard of cutting-edge couples, bleeding-
edge couples, now get ready for fallen-off-the-edge
couples
: it's a miracle they're lovey-dovey behind the
scenes
: this cat is so cute in her misery
: is it bad that I kind of want her to get paired
with Sei-sama now?
: clearly no one here understands how thin the line
is between pitiful and adorable
```

“That’s enough time wasted, let’s spin the wheel again!” Shion-mama said. “The next person the arrow lands on will be Sei’s pair, and the two left over will pair up! Now spin, baby, spin!”

Now with just three viable quadrants remaining, the wheel spun up to top speed once more.

“There’s a baby on the way, there’s a baby on the way! ♪” Shion-mama sang.

“Sei-sama, how does it make you feel, seeing your girlfriend like this?” I asked.

“Happy, I suppose. Just look at that smile. Adorable.”

Yep. When it comes to these two, to get involved is to lose.

“Anyone but Sei. Anyone but Sei!” Nekoma prayed.

“Give me Awayuki-dono. Give me Awayuki-dono!”

Sei-sama snorted. “Forced procreation with a fellow Liver. Now you’ve got me excited.”

“I *was* okay with anyone, but after hearing that, I want anyone but Sei-sama,” I said.

The wheel gradually slowed once more. Our hopes, our dreams, our prayers all hung on that pointer!

[Nekoma Hirune]

“Nya-gyaaaaaaaaah!!!”

Now that is what we call “it’s always better to keep your damn mouth shut.”

Shion-mama squealed. “Ah ha haaa! Sei and Nekoma’s child! Little Birman-chan is born!”

“Birman? What’s that?” I asked.

“The Birman is a breed of cat also known as the Sacred Cat of Burma! Perfect for their child, don’t you think?” Shion-mama replied.

“You had that locked and loaded… You’ve fantasized about them before, haven’t you?”

“Shuwa-chan. You know what we do with perceptive brats like you?”

“Force them to have children?”

“Aha! ♡” Shion-mama started making noises of sheer bliss, the euphoria of her dream coming true proving too much for her.

“Every time… Why does this happen every single time…?” Nekoma-senpai, on the other hand, was somewhere between the fourth and fifth stages of grief.

It did seem like Nekoma-senpai was increasingly being dealt similar hands recently. Had she watched so many shitty movies and played so many shitty games that her life was now permanently debuffed to be kind of shitty?

“Whew. Mating complete,” Sei-sama said.

“What mating, the baby’s already born!” Nekoma-senpai snapped.

“Thank you for your service, Mr. Stork,” Shion-mama said.

“Go home and see your family sometimes, Mr. Stork! I do *not* remember asking for express delivery!” Nekoma-senpai snapped again.

```
: the cat that the lesbians dragged in
: congrats on your debut, Birman-chan!
: Mr. Stork: Farm-fresh babies, guaranteed!
: farm fresh...babies?
: #twosentencehorror
```

Okay, now that the baby is born… “What happens next?” I asked.

“Lots of things!” Shion-mama replied. “After the name comes Birman-chan’s appearance, personality, all that good stuff!”

“Okey dokey. Then let’s move on to appearance, shall we?” I said. *Look at me, a seasoned professional at work. When even the host starts going off the rails, you can always count on me to wrangle the stream back on track.*

Why that is even necessary—why the hosts seemingly keep going off the rails in this organization—well, that…is a different question for a different time.

“Ugh, why does Nekoma even bother…?” Nekoma-senpai muttered. It seemed she’d arrived at the same enlightenment I had a moment earlier. Without another word, this kind kitty humored her genmates and jumped right back into the discussion. “What are we talking about, appearance? Well, Nekoma’s petite and Sei’s…not so petite, so I suppose we’d end up somewhere in the middle?”

“Hello, girl next door!” Shion-mama said. “Oh, I wish I had a daughter like that so bad…”

“How about we make it so that she’s your average girl, but when she gets excited, she sprouts cat ears and a tail?” Sei-sama said. “Oh, me likey, me likey!”

“Please do not your own daughter,” I said. “What about you, Alice-chan, any thoughts?”

“…”

“Alice-chan?”

“Uh-oh.”

“‘Uh-oh’? Oh, you mean like ‘uh-oh, she’s too hot’?”

True. I could talk for hours about all the things I took issue with when it came to Sei-sama and Nekoma-senpai, but not one of those things would have to do with their models. Art and creative direction for their streamers was something Live-On absolutely did not miss, every single time.

Though, of course, the flip side of that was… “Personality, okay,” I said. “If we figure out her personality, then we can figure out the rest of her pretty easily.”

This was bound to be where things got problematic.

“Personality…” Shion-mama muttered. “Well, for Nekomaaa, that would be…”

“My love for shitty games and shitty movies.”

“And Sei’s would be…”

“My libido.”

“Mix those two things together and we get…”

“Coprophilia?”

“Okay, nope, let’s stop right there.” I felt a strong sense of duty then—a strong sense of duty to cut off Shion-mama before anything more could be said.

```
: LMAOOOO
: noooooooo
: time out, time out
: line status: crossed
: nice save, shuwa-chan
: libido is my personality is insane
```

“Nya. Nekoma agrees.”

“Fine, fine,” Sei-sama added.

“Huh? Why? What’s wrong?” Shion-mama said.

“Don’t ‘Huh? Why? What’s wrong?’ me! You and I both know why we can’t pursue that topic any further! People are eating while watching us. Hell, I’m drinking watching us!”

“Well, all right,” Shion-mama said. “But new life is precious, no matter who they might be…”

```
: Kirei Kotomine, is that you?
: we're gonna need some extra-spicy mapo tofu stat
: Live-On x Live-On = banhammer
: Not like Live-On content is safe for dinner on any other night
```

“Let’s tone it down a notch!” I said. “Really just a single notch!”

“One notch, huh?” Shion-mama said. “Then can we do something with the video game and movie aspect?”

“That’s a good idea!” I said. “Let’s explore that for a second. And what if we take ‘shitty’ not in the literal sense, but in the ‘bad’ sense?”

So, let’s see…libido times bad games and bad movies equals…

“A fetish for low-quality eroges and erotic videos?” Shion-mama

said.

“Okay, let’s just— You know what, I don’t even know anymore,” I said. *Not sure what I expected.*

“Why?” Shion-mama said. “Am I wrong?”

“No, you’re not wrong!” I said. “It’s just, we can’t do this right now.”

“An interesting thought,” Sei-sama muttered. “Are we talking ‘bad’ in the ‘amateur’ sense? No, too pedestrian, it has to be something else. What do you think, Nekoma-kun?”

“Nekoma thinks this is outside of her wheelhouse…”

“See? You got mom and mom stumped!” I said.

“I’m the mom,” Shion-mama said.

“Huh? But no, that’s Sei-sama and Nekoma-senpai’s child…”

“But this game is *my* brainchild. *I’m* the one who wants children. Thus, I take sole and unconditional custody of all children born on this stream.”

“Okay, so that just sounds like kidnapping.”

```
: that's our child
: porn directed by a director with a fundamentally
flawed understanding of what's hot and what's not?
: how did we let Shion-mama get this bad...
: kidnapping is also a line crossed
: crossing so many lines it's like a crosswalk
```

Shion-mama let out a drunk giggle. “She sounds like such a handful. I love her already.”

“Can we… Can we move on?” Nekoma-senpai said. “Nekoma’s a little tired… She’s gonna go lie down… Nya-nya…”

Shion-mama is satisfied, so mission accomplished? And good job, Nekoma-senpai. You’ve done your part, we’ll take it over from here…

Summing up the character profile for this first child, we get…

Name: Birman
Appearance: Girl next door (cat genes activate when excited/aroused)
Personality: Low-quality eroges and erotic videos
In a nutshell: GiRL NeXt DoOr



“What a first child to kick things off with,” I said. “Okay, Shion-mama, are we ready to move… Wait a second.” I remembered something. Or rather, some*one*. “Alice-chan? Are you still there?”

My attention had been so occupied by the unfolding chaos that I only just noticed Alice-chan hadn’t said much of anything. Earlier, too, when I’d asked her for a comment, she’d sounded strangely quiet and meek. Even now, she wasn’t responding to me. This was extremely unprecedented. Not that I was particularly proud of the fact, but Alice-chan had never ignored me, not once.

My concern soon spread to the others, and they all joined me, even the KO’d Nekoma-senpai, in calling her name. Still nothing. Even the chat began to worry.

Just as I began to fear that something might have actually happened to her, she finally spoke. But her voice was fragile, like it might shatter into silence at any second—nothing like the usual Alice-chan. But it was a voice I had heard once before—during that offline sleepover, when a sliver of her true self had slipped out.

“Oh, God. I’m actually paired with Awayuki-dono,” she muttered.

“Alice-chan? I thought you’d be happy?” Shion-mama said.

“Indeed. Wasn’t this what you wanted?” Sei-sama added.

Hearing her like this, the unease in their voices spiked. (Nekoma-senpai, upon hearing Alice-chan was okay, went straight back to lying down.)

Considering Alice-chan had never once sounded like this on stream before, their concern wasn’t unwarranted. But as I had witnessed firsthand during that sleepover, Alice-chan’s eccentricity simply meant she got embarrassed in equally eccentric situations. Last time, it had been because she’d met me face-to-face. So what was it this time?

“I-I-I-I-I can’t have a baby with Awa-Awa-Awayuki-dono!” she sputtered. “I can’t… I just can’t!”

“Sure, you can,” Shion-mama said. “The more kids, the merrier!”

“That might be true, but when you say it, I can feel my tubes tying themselves,” Sei-sama said.

“No! I-I-I-I-I can’t! A mere mortal like me bearing the child of a goddess? I am not worthy!”

Ah, of course. I don’t know why I thought the reason for her panic would be any less icky.

“Cold feet, Alice-chan?” I asked. “When you were practically begging to get paired with me just a moment ago?”

“Well, I didn’t think it would actually happen!” she replied. “I was rather counting on you getting paired with someone else and watching on in cuckolded frustration as you bore a child with them!”

“Darn, I was really hoping that predisposition of yours didn’t take root. Shion-mama has competition.”

“Yeah! So this… No, I can’t do it!”

: ooh a shiny rare Alice-chan
: didn't know she could be like this
: *Oshi no Ko* is a documentary
: so Alice-chan's the type to let her real self slip out when she's maxed out, huh?
: the gap is insane (adorable) lmaooo
: I mean getting pushed around by her oshi isn't exactly out of character for her

“It’s just the luck of the draw, Alice-chan,” Shion-mama said. “That’s the point of the whole game, isn’t it? Besides, I want to see your child! Please?”

“I know, but… But!”

Alice-chan’s voice was now beyond weak; it was a desperate cry for help. The sight stirred something within me, and before I could stop myself, my body moved of its own accord.

“Alice-chan,” I said with upturned eyes. “You hate the idea of having a child with me…that much?”

You thought I was gonna help her? Nope! Time for some payback, bitch! (Pshh!)

“O-O-O-O-Of course I don’t!” she stammered back. “But that’s not the issue!”

“You all heard her! There’s no problem! Bring out the baby machine!” I announced.

“Ooouuf,” Alice-chan said, followed by a series of loud noises from her mic.

“You make some interesting noises, don’t you, Alice-kun?” Sei-sama said.

“She does, but that ruckus definitely wasn’t her!” Shion-mama said. “Are you okay? Do you need help?!”

“I’m… I’m fine. Just making myself baby-ready,” Alice-chan replied.

“Oh, okay, phew. That’s a relief,” Shion-mama said.

Is it a relief? Well, I suppose it is for Shion-mama, who says things like that on the daily. But enough about her. Right now, it was all about Alice-chan. Chances like these didn’t come around often. Time to pay her back for all the BS she’d put me through! Mua ha ha ha ha!

“Awayuki-dono!” Alice-chan declared with stiff resolve. “I am prepared, body and soul, to bear your child! I am not worthy. I may never be worthy. But if that is what you want, then I am your humble vessel!”

“I dunno,” I replied with an air of ennui. “I kinda wanted to be the vessel. Let me be the one to get pregnant?”

“Absolutely not! No, no, no—that is out of the question!”

I’m pretty good at getting a rise out of her, aren’t I? Let’s keep going, let’s keep going!

“But why nooooot? I’m a girl too, aren’t I?” I pouted.

“Because any legitimate child of mine would self-terminate rather than damage your body by being carried to term!”

“I… Damn, okay, you thought that one through.”

“A true fan would never even dream of becoming a burden to their oshi! If I’m the one to carry your child, I can nourish her with supers delivered straight through the umbilical cord. She’ll be indoctrinated with my love for you, so that the moment she bursts from my belly, it will be with a proposal in her heart and a ring in her hand!”

“Jesus, your apparent biology would make even the Chimera Ant Queen blush.”

```
: Shuwa-chan's taking the piss lmao
: superchatting nourishment is crazy
: considering she already has an umbilical cord attached straight to Awayuki-chan's wallet it's not that far of a leap for her
: have we drifted off topic again?
```

: Yeah, why are we talking about who's getting who pregnant again?

“Shuwa-chan!” Shion-mama said in a scolding tone. “You’ve had your fun. Now leave poor Alice-chan alone!”

“Now, now, Shion,” Sei-sama said. “Alice-kun’s cute when she’s flustered, isn’t she?”

“But at this rate, I’m never going to see my child!”

Suddenly reappearing, Nekoma-senpai retorted to Shion-mama, “And when will *you* have had your fun, I wonder?”

“Welcome back, Nekoma-kun,” Sei-sama said.

“Okay, I’ll stop, I’ll stop,” I said. Shame. It felt like things were just starting to get interesting, but we did have a stream to get through, so what can you do?

“Excellent!” Shion-mama said. “Then let’s start conceiving the child (in our minds), shall we? Let’s see. First, a name… Oof, this is a hard one. It’s a bit on the nose, but how about just Ariyuki-chan, for now?”

Sei-sama hummed in thought. “Forget the name. The rest of her is just as difficult.”

“No kidding,” Nekoma-senpai said. “I can’t come up with anything!”

“I’m stumped too,” I said. “Also, how are we going to deal with my Awa and Shuwa sides?”

“Ooh, me, me! I have an idea!” Alice-chan said.

Oh? Well, that’s a surprise. So much for her hesitation earlier, I guess?

“Starting with her appearance,” she continued, “her beauty should be of fragility and elegance, like that of a frosty princess. And she should have purple eyes to give her a touch of mystery!”

“Nya-nya?” Nekoma-senpai purred, intrigued. “And what about her personality?”

“Yes! I was just getting to that!” Alice-chan said. “Normally, she’s seiso and reserved, just as her appearance would suggest. But she’s got a Jekyll and Hyde situation, where underneath her pristine exterior is the mind of a dirty old man who loves StroZero and women!”

“Okay, so that’s just me.”

My goodness, that came out of me smoother than glacier water

down a mountain creek.

“Alice-chan, this is as much your child as it is mine. Why are you trying to create my clone?”

“That’s not true. She has my eyes.”

“My eyes are also purple! I know you begged management to give you the same eye color! This child has absolutely none of you and all of me!”

“Well, I don’t know what you want me to say. My genes are hardcoded to defer to yours. It’s not really possible for any of my phenotypes to be expressed.”

“Get it together, Alice-chan’s genes! You had one job!”

: bruhhhh hahahaha
: congrats on the asexual reproduction
: nahhh Alice-chan is nahhhh
: Wait. So you're telling me the only thing stopping us from creating an Awayuki army is Alice-chan's physical health?
: thus begins the Les VTubers Terribles project
: i'm imagining a world where a new Awayuki Kokorone joins Live-On every year and it's cracking me up
: without warning, Live-On suspends new VTuber debuts for a few years—then unleashes hell on earth with an army of Awayukis ￥880
: the longevity of the company is assured
: this woman must be stopped!

I challenged Alice-chan at every turn until I was gasping for air, but it didn’t faze her. It truly seemed that she believed this was the way.

“The world needs more of you, Awayuki-dono!” she declared. “It is my life’s work to scatter your genes across the globe. If I can do that, my mission will be accomplished!”

“No! Hell no! That sounds like literal hell, not knowing when or where one of me does something stupid!”

“The day I see an Awa-dono and Shuwa-dono collab is the day my body voids itself of all its fluids in delight!”

“You’d freaking die!”

Nothing I could say, nothing I could do seemed to deter Alice-chan. She was on a warpath. One that made absolutely no fuckin' sense. Then, just as I was about to bow to her unyielding resolve, the other three finally saw fit to intervene.

"Now, now, Alice-chan," Shion-mama said. "I want to see both of you reflected in the happy baby. Make a mama's wish come true?"

"Ngh," Alice-chan whimpered. "But…"

"Please, Alice-chan." Sei-sama added. "Help satisfy Shion-mama, or else I'll be singing *Tamashii no Refrain* to the end of my days."

"Besides, you care about your parents, don't you?" Nekoma-senpai said. "Isn't continuing their bloodline the greatest form of respect you could pay, in a way?"

"Nghhh," she whimpered harder. "Twist my arm, why don't you? Fine. I give up on the Awayuki-dono breeding program."

"The Awayuki-dono *what* program?!" I yelled.

Shion-mama and Sei-sama tied up the legs and Nekoma-senpai went straight for the dome. Together, they brought down the juggernaut that was Alice-chan. *Teamwork makes the dream work.* But also, wasn't I supposed to be the one doing the teasing? Alice-chan had flipped the tables on me just like that. *So much for payback. Forgive my impudence, Lady Alice.*

We stepped ever closer to little Ariyuki-chan's debut into the world. But as we'd alluded to earlier, the path was far from straightforward. Take my affinity for StroZero, for instance—should she inherit that trait directly, or should it be integrated differently? And what about expressing Alice-chan's infatuation with me? Should we simply turn her into a malignant narcissist and leave it at that? These were just some of our pressing questions. Beyond that, we had to consider my dual personalities, Alice-chan's shy side, and even elements from our official bios.

For looks, we went with Alice-chan's face, but sharper, to give off a more mysterious allure. Heightwise, she was somewhere in the middle, taller than Alice-chan but shorter than me. Her lore was that she was an idol, but she carried an air of cool detachment, a smile never breaking through the perpetual frost of her expression—a trait that made her all the more captivating in certain circles.

And, of course, we gave her dual personalities for good measure.

After a lengthy discussion, we arrived at the following:

Name: Ariyuki
Appearance: An elegantly composed and serene idol, known for her unwavering poise. Her fans affectionately call her the Frost Knight.
Personality: Actually just super shy, and an extreme mama’s girl (only to Awayuki; Alice is her rival). At home, she drinks StroZero to relax, melting her icy exterior and turning her affectionate and clingy.
In a Nutshell: tHe fRoST KnIGhT



We stared at what we had brought into this world, stricken into silence.

And then: “Isn’t this just a moe manga protagonist?” Nekoma-senpai said, breaking the silence briefly before it crept back in.

Indeed, that was perhaps the best way—perhaps the only way—to encapsulate what we had created here. So why were we so silent, so repulsed by the sight in front of us? I mean, this was a cute girl. Cute girls are beloved worldwide. We should’ve been happy, rejoicing, and yet…no. I was sure the reason for our reaction was as evident to everyone else as it was to me.

As the comments touching on the weirdness of our behavior began to trickle in, I took it upon myself to clear the air.

“She’s, uh, well.”

Have you guessed it by now? The reason for our uncharacteristic silence?

“Not quite chaotic enough, is she?”

Everyone muttered their agreement.

Basically, we were like a group of seasoned hit men, and this pure, adorable girl had just wandered into our den of crime. *The heck do we do with her?*

```
: of course that's the part you all are hung up on
: chaos is not a default trait!
: though you wouldn't guess it from the way they're all agreeing with Shuwa-chan
: it's not her who doesn't have enough, it's you girls who have too much!
: lemme guess, Ariyuki-chan also eventually has an "incident" where her fans learn of her true nature?
```

“Are we…okay with this?” Sei-sama asked. “Not that there’s anything wrong with her. Which might be what’s wrong with her, actually…”

“Never would I have imagined Awayuki-dono’s and my chaos canceling each other out…” Alice-chan muttered.

“Shion? What’s the move?” Nekoma-senpai asked.

“Mmm…” she groaned in thought. “She’s not quite as rambunctious as I would like, but…can we really come up with

anything better at this point?”

Nyuh-oh. This was bad. Why was this bad? Because this girl was the grand finale of the whole stream. We couldn’t end on this weak note. If all’s well that ends well, then all’s poor that ends poor. Also, this whole thing was for Shion-mama. So if she wasn’t satisfied, none of us were.

Our pride as streamers on the line, we frantically sought any way to turn things around. But then, as if by a stroke of fate, the solution revealed itself:

Kaeru Yamatani: Holy. You guys actually went through with this. Yiiikes.

Kaeru-chan! Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes! I was sure she’d only come to make fun of us, but the second she appeared, a light bulb flashed on in my head.

“Shion-mama, look! It’s Kaeru-chan!” I said. “She must have been worried about your recent motherhood troubles and come to check up on you!”

“Huh?! Really?!” Shion-mama exclaimed.

Kaeru Yamatani: What?

“Can you hear her, Shion-mama? Kaeru-chan is crying out for help. You long for more children, yet the one who needs your care the most has been right in front of you all along.”

“Oh? *Really?*” Shion-mama said dubiously.

Kaeru Yamatani: What? Huh?

“I hear you. Your top-mommy hears you loud and clear, Kaeru-chan!” I said. “You see, Shion-mama, the reason Kaeru-chan never accepted you as her mama is because she’s been waiting for you to see it for yourself.” (“*Citation needed,*” I added quietly.) “All this time, she’s been waiting for you to become the mommy she knows you can be. So, Shion-mama—what’s it going to be? Are you going to step up to the plate?”

“Kaeru-chan,” Shion-mama whispered. “I had no idea… Yeah…

Of course! Of course I'll step up to the plate! What kind of mother would make her children worry about her?"

"Oh, thank goodness. I wasn't sure you'd understand," I said.

"I more than understand," Shion-mama replied. "Kaeru-chan, thank you. I never knew why you kept your distance, but now I do. You were hard on me because you wanted me to be your real mother. Oh! I'm so sorry I didn't see it sooner. But it's okay now. Come here!"

"Sei," Nekoma-senpai said calmly. "You okay with this?"

"Well, she's happy, isn't she?" Sei-sama replied.

"Awayuki-dono is inspirational. Confidence truly is everything..." Alice-chan said in awe.

: what is going on now lmao
: Live-On, Live-Onning as usual! ¥220
: ???
: Godspeed, Kaeru-chan. Godspeed.
Kaeru Yamatani: ? ? ?

"Kaeru-chan!" Shion-mama yelled, "My eyes are open now. From this moment on, your mommy's not going to let you out of her sight, not even for a second!"

"Another happy ending," I said, trying my hardest to keep a straight face.

At last, this madness-induced fever dream of a stream, conjured by a heartbroken mother longing for days gone by, had finally run its course.

Thank you, Kaeru-chan. Thank you. We will never forget the sacrifice you made for us on this day.

Chapter Two

Tadasu, Churiri, and Live-On, Part 1

As Awayuki and friends embodied the spirit of Live-On to its fullest, elsewhere, in less visible pastures, Tadasu and Churiri were holding up their own ends of the bargain.

Gen five's Tadasu Miyauchi was at a crossroads. She had joined Live-On driven by a deep conviction. But when she'd come to realize this conviction was nothing more than a projection of her own personal fixations, she'd had a mental breakdown.

Tadasu was a girl who was drawn to order. She believed that "manners maketh man." She prided herself on following rules, thought there was no greater ideal than to live a life of conformity. It was no surprise, then, that someone like her, who cherished such values, would look upon Live-On with a sense of unease. Its free-spirited nature stirred a burning restlessness in her, a vague but persistent sense of crisis at the idea that an entity like Live-On could not only exist in this world, but grow. Compelled by these feelings, she'd joined Live-On, hoping to root out what she saw as its core evil—but we all know how that played out.

Tadasu had hit a stumbling block almost immediately. Her first challenge—her first mistake—was to go against gen one's Hareru Asagiri. Hareru told Tadasu that her convictions were nothing more than a means to justify her own idiosyncrasies—her overactive imagination, so to speak. Tadasu denied this, yet couldn't dismiss the truth in Hareru's words. Their encounter ended with Hareru convincing Tadasu to stay and experience Live-On for a while, to give herself time to reevaluate her stance. Diligently, Tadasu took on this mission. She streamed, interacted with the Live-On community and its personalities, all while keeping Hareru's words at the back of her mind. Slowly but surely, she arrived at a conclusion.

Live-On wasn't evil. Its members were tremendously quirky and had their share of strong fixations, but they were far from malicious, let alone a societal harm. It was this realization that began the undoing of Tadasu Miyauchi.

It felt like a denial of everything she was. Those pillars of righteousness she had built her life upon—were they nothing but lies? Did they only serve to mask her own flaws? If so, what was

she doing here? Did she even have the right to criticize Live-On? Her sense of purpose crumbled, leaving her feeling like she belonged nowhere.

She knew she needed to act, but how? She couldn't continue in this state, lest she drag down her genmates, the two people she had come to love the most. Anxiety-ridden and troubled, she grappled with the truth. The answer, however, was already within her grasp. It lay in the sense of crisis and urgency she had felt all along—if only she would stop turning a blind eye to it.

But an honest self-assessment rarely comes easily. Negative thoughts spiraled, drowning out everything else, and she withdrew into the solitude of her room. Yet even that sanctuary soon became unbearable. Desperate and at her breaking point, she turned to her genmates for help. With their support and comfort, Tadasu managed to regain a semblance of calm, enough to think clearly about her next steps.

Grasping for any ideas that might lead to a better outcome, she sought out Hareru once more. During their follow-up discussion, Hareru suggested that Tadasu speak directly with other Live-On members of her choosing, in order to hear their perspectives—which brings us to now, where Tadasu stood before gen two's Sei Utsuki and gen four's Kaeru Yamatani, ready to hear what they had to say.

"I think that about sums it up," Tadasu concluded her rundown of the situation.

"I see, I see," Sei murmured.

"Hm," Kaeru hummed in thought.

An odd choice of confidantes, you might think, but Tadasu had her reasons for choosing them. You see, both of them had gone through, then overcome interpersonal issues in the past. Interpersonal relations were a major part of Tadasu's current worries; by consulting these two, Tadasu hoped to garner something from their experiences, and perhaps come to terms with herself as those two had done.

"Some advice would be good," Tadasu said curtly, before correcting herself: "Sorry, I suppose now of all times I should drop the haughty act and speak respectfully."

"I'd rather you not," Sei said. "Else it feels like Tadasu-kun as I know her is disappearing right before my very eyes."

“And Kaeru’s never been one for the whole ‘polite speech’ thing,” Kaeru added.

“Oh, really?” Tadasu said, a little taken aback. She hadn’t expected Sei and Kaeru to set aside their own on-stream personas and take her so seriously.

“So, you’re worried about your future, are you?” Sei said. “Oh, what it is to be young.”

“How precious. Kaeru doesn’t feel remotely qualified to give advice to a budding woman in such a critical time of her life.”

“That’s not true!” Tadasu said. “You can tell me anything—anything at all, I’ll take it!”

Kaeru, hesitant, stuck to her silence, but Sei’s silence spoke louder, almost as if urging her to go first. Finally, Kaeru broke it with a dissatisfied groan. “Then I’ll go first?” she grumbled.

“Please!” Tadasu said.

“Kaeru…used to be a manga-ka. Though calling myself that might be a bit of a stretch—I didn’t sell a single copy. ‘Used to try to be a manga-ka’ is probably more accurate.”

“I think I’ve heard someone say that before,” Tadasu said.

“Really? Well, that might’ve been me. I bring it up on my stream now and then. It’s not exactly a secret.”

“I’ve studied all of the Live-On talents. Otherwise, I wouldn’t feel qualified to criticize them.”

“How…diligent of you? I guess? Anyway, whenever I bring it up on stream, my viewers always make fun of me. They say things like, ‘Yeah, right, like you could ever make it as a manga-ka.’”

Tadasu’s face scrunched. “That’s awful!”

“You’d think so, but I’m okay with it,” Kaeru replied. “I mean, I *am* a failed manga-ka. If getting teased about that is what keeps me far, far away from gainful employment, then so be it. But that’s not really the point. What I wanted to say is…I once had a goal. And I went after it with everything I had. I’d be up brainstorming storyboards till the early morning, drawing manuscripts until my hands went numb. I really thought I’d break if that dream of mine didn’t come true. And, well…I did break.”

Tadasu stayed quiet, letting Kaeru’s words settle.

“For a good long while, I was absolutely heartbroken,” Kaeru continued. “But looking back now, I have no regrets. Back then, being a manga-ka was everything to me, but now? It’s nothing. I’m

a VTuber. I make baby noises for a living. People tease me about my manga-ka past, and I can laugh right along with them. Do you get what I'm trying to say?"

"I don't think I do. Could you explain?" Tadasu urged.

"Right, let me try again," she playfully scolded herself. "What I'm trying to say is that we're not defined by any one thing we choose to do. As long as we're alive, there's always a 'next.' Especially for you, Tadasu-chan. You're young. You possess endless possibilities. Like Zundamon. You can become baby too if you so desire."

"I... Sorry, I don't think I desire..."

"That's a shame. But seriously, I'm not here to tell you to work yourself to the bone. There's no point in telling someone that. If it's something you truly want, something you believe in, you'll work hard for it, no matter what anyone says. It's when you start doing things you think matter to others, not to you, that you lose your way. Honestly, Kaeru doesn't believe in 'working hard' at all. In fact, what is work, even? Because Kaeru is a baby."

"Right..."

"Um, okay! That's all from Kaeru. Sei-sama, you're up!"

Kaeru, unable to handle the embarrassment of acting even slightly serious, couldn't stick the landing and threw the baton straight to Sei, ready or not.

"You sure?" Sei teased. "But you're doing so well, Kaeru-kun. Go on, talk. For another hour at least, until I'm satisfied."

"You'll be satisfied when I punch some sense into you," Kaeru said, unamused.

"Sorry, I don't do fisting."

"Oh, don't worry, these are going straight to the jaw."

"F-F-F-F-Fisting—?!" Tadasu stammered. "What debauchery! You must be corrected!"

"Speaking of correction," Sei said. "Tadasu-kun, why do you write your given name with 'kyou' (匡)? Isn't 'sei' (正) more common? I looked it up and they seem to mean the same thing."

"Huh?!" Tadasu yelped. "Because isn't 'sei' (正) the character they use in doujins? To denote how many times someone's had..."

"Horny," both Sei and Kaeru said.

"N-No, I'm not!" a flustered Tadasu-kun shot back. "Stop changing the subject! Answer the question, Sei-sama!"

A placid meltwater lake to Tadasu's babbling brook, Sei smiled

and graciously moved on. “Very well. Tadasu-kun, you’ll be pleased to hear that I’ve distilled my wisdom down to a single sentence. And here it is: Worry away, teenage girl! While you still can. Whatever choices you make, just know that your future self will always be more than who you once were.”

With that poignant line, Tadasu’s first round of discussions drew to a close. After hanging up, she mulled over the words exchanged.

Kaeru and Sei. While both their messages resonated somewhat similarly, they remained distinct in their essence. That, of course, was obvious to Tadasu. People are all unique. Not only do individuals evolve differently based on their experiences, they all come into this world with minute variations locked into their genetic code. Even if they were to share identical experiences, they would still diverge in how they grow.

Disparate and *lonely*—to Tadasu, there were no better words to describe the human condition.

“But *why* are we like this?” she muttered into the quiet of her room.

Facing this truth stirred an uncomfortable feeling in her chest. She wasn’t satisfied with it—nor was she satisfied with the outcome of her discussions.

Kaeru and Sei, for all their words, hadn’t offered Tadasu a clear path forward. They told stories, offered perspectives, but in the end, they left the decision up to her. Just as Hareru had. Tadasu understood they did so out of consideration, out of respect for her journey. She was nothing but grateful for their willingness to carve out time from their busy schedules to listen. Yet she couldn’t suppress the thought that took root in her mind: *Couldn’t they have just given me a straightforward answer?*

When X happens, do Y, and you will never fail—that was the kind of situation that appealed to Tadasu’s nature. But “appealed” might be too strong a word. Perhaps it was more accurate to say it made her feel at ease. Whenever she saw people marching in unison to the beat of a single drum, she felt a peculiar and most exquisite sense of satisfaction. A strict private school—that had been heaven for Tadasu’s overimaginative tendencies, but at the same time, it had been like a single ray of sunshine, illuminating a warm sliver in what was otherwise a cold and chaotic world.

Had been.

Tadasu could never go back to that place. Now, she had to think for herself. The fluttering in her chest continued to tickle uncomfortably as she sat there, pondering.

"Hm?"

But perhaps this push was exactly what Tadasu needed.

"Why *did* that—"

Finally.

"—make me feel so at ease?"

Tadasu had touched upon the black box that was her essence.

Almost simultaneously with Tadasu's discussions, the other half of this soul-searching party, Churiri, was holding her own.

Heeding Awayuki's advice, Churiri picked out a few individuals for her discussions who were distinctly related to the individuals Tadasu had reached out to, and asked them for advice on what to do about Tadasu. (Though for some reason, this particular group of individuals seemed to fall more within Awayuki's sphere of influence than Tadasu's.)

"What?! We have to stop her—Tadasu-chan can't leave!"

Churiri sat there, already regretting her choice of discussion partner. She had barely finished explaining the situation when Shion came out swinging with a drastic solution instead of real advice.

"Meow, meow (Now, now), Shion, let's not get carried away quite yet."

Thankfully, the other half of the gen-two duo, Nekoma, had a cooler head and stepped in before Churiri could throw up her hands in exasperation.

"How can you be so calm?!" Shion said. "Tadasu-chan can't leave! I am *not* losing a child!"

"Okay, just relax, we'll get to it, I promise," Nekoma said. "Sorry, Sensei, Shion gets like this sometimes when she's overstimulated."

"No, it's fine," Churiri replied. "Would you believe me if I said this is far more preferable to work emails that are eighty percent fluff?"

Despite her deflection, Churiri couldn't suppress a wry smile. She had been the one seeking advice, yet, seeing Shion so worked up, she felt the urge to offer some reassurance instead.

“Shion,” Nekoma said. “Our role in discussions like these is to listen and empathize, not to jump in with solutions.”

“But, but!” Shion sputtered.

“All right, all right. How about this? You let Sensei and me talk it over first. If you still have something to add after that, then it’s your turn.”

“Okay…”

Nekoma was adept at wrangling Shion’s emotions, and watching her in action, Churiri couldn’t help but feel a twinge of respect. But there was something else too—a sense of compassion or maybe pity. Kinship, perhaps, owing to Churiri’s similar role in gen five.

“To that end, Sensei,” Nekoma said, steering the conversation back on track, “I don’t have much to add beyond what Awayuki-chan already told you. What you need to do is face yourself.”

Churiri scoffed. “You too with that nonsense.” She couldn’t help it. Her personality was as twisty and tangled as the Tokyo subway map; Nekoma’s words triggered an instinctual resistance.

“I mean, yeah?” Nekoma said. “From what I gather, you don’t even have the slightest inkling of what you want to do. How can we, not knowing that, even begin to offer you good advice?”

“Well,” Sensei began to protest, but couldn’t find the words. “I mean…”

“It’s like they say on airplanes—you gotta put on your own mask before you help others,” Nekoma declared smugly.

“Um, can I jump in yet?” Shion asked. Her voice, unlike before, was now calm and motherly.

Nekoma and Churiri nodded.

“So,” Shion began hesitantly, “this is something I wish someone told me when I was younger, but I…don’t think it’s right for someone who hasn’t figured themselves out to try and help someone else. I think not only is it disrespectful and presumptuous, but you could really hurt the other person by doing it.”

Those words stung Churiri’s heart, like disinfectant on an open wound. To Churiri, who despised herself for her sexual deviance and had turned her back on herself even more than society had, Shion’s words hit like venom. Her eyes dropped to the floor, silence gluing her lips together. Part of her wanted to argue, to push back,

but she couldn't bring herself to do it—proof of how deeply Shion's words had cut.

The silence dragged on for a moment longer. For Churiri, it was a time of stewing in her emotions. For Nekoma, it was awkward and uncomfortable. But for Shion, it seemed like the perfect moment to add a little levity.

"This is kinda like…" She giggled shyly. "This is kinda like we're giving Sensei relationship advice, isn't it? Kyaa! I'm blushing!"

"Huh?" both Nekoma and Churiri grunted, confused. Then:

"HUUUUUUUUUUUH?!" Sensei shouted in shock.

The call's awkward mood shattered instantly.

"What are you… What are you even saying?!" Churiri yelled. "This isn't a joke. I'm being completely serious here!"

"Oh, but so am I!" Shion said. "I was just thinking that you must really love Tadasu-chan a whole lot to come to us with something like this."

"D-D-D-Don't be ridiculous," Churiri replied, a stammering, blubbering mess. "Wh-Who would even think about that brat? Why, I… Ah! Earthlings! I'm in despair! Earthlings and their constant need to relate everything back to romance has left me in despair!"

"Um, I think that's a different sensei's catchphrase," Shion said.

"Did you just forget that I don't feel sexual attraction to human beings?!" Churiri continued. "My sexuality is completely different. I literally cannot fall in love with that girl!"

"Nya? Why not?" Nekoma suddenly chimed in.

Churiri blinked, startled that Nekoma had rejoined the conversation after being sidelined by Shion's off-base comment.

"Love is love. Sex is sex," Nekoma said. "You can love somebody without wanting to sleep with them. Just look at me, Shion, and Sei. I love them both, but it's not like either of them do anything for me."

Churiri's heart thumped uncomfortably. The ease with which Nekoma said that left her feeling trapped.

The discussion fizzled out from there, and the trio dispersed. Churiri's mind, however, was no more settled than it had been before. After hanging up, she drifted into recollection. She remembered the day she, Tadasu, and Dagger had first met.

Not long after her acceptance into Live-On as part of gen five,

Churiri had found herself at the Live-On offices for onboarding. Right beside her were her future genmates, Tadasu and Dagger. At the time, she had still intended to make good on her promise of joining Live-On purely to act out, and so was even more defiant than she was today. She had no time for those kids and even less intention of becoming friends with them. But they were persistent, constantly drawing her into the conversation until she eventually felt too guilty to keep brushing them off. Reluctantly, she began to interact with them.

Maybe it would just be a onetime thing, she thought. Humor them once and be done with it—but instead, it had been the beginning of something new.

Why did she keep interacting with them? Even Churiri couldn't quite understand it.

With Dagger, it was simple: Dagger possessed a childlike innocence. She was a wellspring of youth and purity, one that eroded the years of cynicism that had built up around Churiri's withered heart. She was also like a ray of sunshine. All of Churiri's worries seemed to fade away when Dagger was around, and she found great comfort in that.

Tadasu, though, was different—not as pure as Dagger, but uninhibited in her own way. While she might've seemed innocent, her imagination was clearly compensating for something. Tadasu and Dagger were similar, but something set them distinctly apart.

Churiri recalled Tadasu's behavior during that first encounter. Just like Dagger, Tadasu had tried to break the ice and befriend her. Her words were warm and welcoming, but unlike Dagger, her hands had trembled violently.

A smile, so genuine it terrified her, spread across Churiri's lips. "Of course," she murmured with a soft giggle.

There had always been something about Tadasu that endeared her to Churiri, but in a different way than Dagger. It was the way that, every time Churiri looked at Tadasu, she saw a reflection of herself—a younger, more hopeful version, still clinging to dreams.

She would not leave that girl alone. She could not leave that girl alone. If there was any chance Tadasu wouldn't end up like her, Churiri had to help. If not for Tadasu's sake, then for her own—to prove to herself that things really could have turned out differently.

Tadasu Miyauchi—a radiant bloom of youth, as delicate and pure as spring meltwater, yet one that teetered with a precariousness that was as foreboding as a single drop of crimson against snow.

Chapter Three

Awayuki Tries to Prank

New day, new stream. Hello, it is I, the consummate VTuber, Awayuki Kokorone. Did my greeting, cracked a cold one open, and now the stage was set for what I was about to reveal.

“Y’know,” I said. “Whenever I brainstorm what stream I should do next, there’s always one idea that pops into my head immediately.”

A classic—beloved, yet criticized. A staple of Japanese variety TV since time immemorial. Sure, it’s hated for being inappropriate, accused of being staged, but no matter what, it endures. Its popularity spans generations, crossing cultural divides.

I, of course, am talking about one thing:

“A prank show.”

: Pshh! ￥220
: ooh
: Im involved in production as well and I know exactly what you mean
: trueee

“I think about it a lot, but I’ve never gone through with it. I get intimidated, y’know? I’ve played my fair share of little jokes, but I’m talking a *Candid-Camera*-worthy gag, y’know? It’s gotta be big, it’s gotta have impact, especially for that very first time. The first time you do it, nobody has their guard up. They’re all unsuspecting, ripe for the taking. But do it once, and they’ll never act the same around you—act candidly—ever again.”

: mm-hm, mm-hm
: as the saying goes, fool me once, shame on you. fool me twice...
: listen if you don't think Live-Onners are acting

candidly I don't know what to tell ya
: yeah this feels more like a "surprise! this whole Live-On thing was a massive prank" reveal
: when the prankers are so deep into the the prank they don't even realize it's a prank anymore
: "It's just a prank bro!" No it's not you just committed three felonies and two misdemeanors
: [NOT SCRIPTED] [PRANK GONE WRONG]
: [PRANK GONE RIGHT]
: Prank gone...sexual?
: like you aren't pranking us every time you claim to be seiso

"But guess what! This time I've done it! I have pranked my fellow Live-Onners and lived to tell the tale!"

: that's right, Shuwa-chan, just ignore all the negativity
: ho ho!
: *clap clap clap*

"I finally came up with a prank worthy of the occasion. A prank so good, even the prankees would go, 'Ah, ya got me there! Well played, well played.' Hah, hah, hah," I chuckled smugly. "So? What do you all think it was?"

: the pretend I'm seiso for three months post VTuber debut but I'm actually a raging alcoholic prank?
: she did that one before
: the actually Live-On is a family prank?
: she did that one before too
: the I'm actually live streaming from mercury with no pants on prank?
: she's doing that one now
: ooh. Is this that anime I've been hearing so much about? The Perv from Mercury?

“No I’m not!” I snapped. “Who you callin’ a perv from Mercury?” I sighed. “Fine, I didn’t want you guys to play along with me anyway. The prank I came up with after a long, agonizing brainstorming session is…!”

Boom. I displayed it in big, blocky letters across the screen, and I read it aloud at the same time:

“The ‘What the hell? Shuwa-chan’s drinking something other than StroZero’ prank!!!”

: nani???
: oh shit?!
: now we're drinkin' with StroZero ¥10,000
: hoooly shiiiit Shuwa-chan's pulling out all the stops for this one
: I'd flip my shit if I saw that irl
: asdlfjalksdflaksfje?!?!
: you actually drank an alcoholic beverage that's not StroZero?!

“Of course I didn’t! A prank’s a prank, so I put yellow-colored soda water in a beer can!”

: shoulda known. (should I have known?)
: why do I actually feel relieved?
: What are you, the StroZero idol who can't get caught drinking anything other than StroZero?
: I can only wish I could trigger the same outcry when I tell someone I drank a different alcoholic beverage than usual lmao
: do you actually not drink anything besides StroZero?

“Mm… It’s not that I don’t drink anything else per se… It’s just that, why would I buy any other alcoholic beverage when I can buy StroZero, y’know?”

: that's my Shuwa-chan

: despite making good money now lol
: y'know? (no I don't)
: champagne? Nah, gimme that long can.
: StroZero is life
: <SEISO EXPLOSION>
: Explosion is right
: so you're saying there's a chance
: ain't nothing wrong with StroZero but also nothing wrong with switching things up every now and then. Give us a little thrill, namsayin?

"Sure, maybe next time. But for now, let's talk about how the prank went down. Quite literally, it was just me with a can of beer. I lay in wait until my unlucky target wandered into view, saw me with this unfamiliar beverage, and—boom! They lost their minds! All right, ready for story time? I even had Mashiron draw some manga-style illustrations to go with it. Check it out. Now, use your imagination while I tell you the story." I switched the graphic on the screen, away from the chunky title block and to a chibi-style illustration of me with a scheming smile on my face.

: cute hahaha
: I like that face lmao
: you even commissioned art for this
: the style is amazing
: good job Mashiron!

"Then let's dive right into it! As for the targets of the prank, they were just the streamers whose schedules just happened to line up! Big thanks to management for their help on that front. And our first target is...Dagger-chan!"

: ah?
: we're off to a good start!
: easy first target
: scumbag master preying on her apprentice

“I am sad to report, however—that I failed.”

```
: how...
: actually?
: come on, this should've been a slam dunk
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“My sincerest apologies. But here is what happened, anyway. Stay awhile and listen…”

The day of the prank, I woke up feeling a little nauseous and jittery. The plan was simple enough: The targets had booked a recording studio favored by Live-On. Management, willing to lend their credence to my scheme, had fabricated a small lie, telling the targets that I would also be there for a separate thing. When you first step into the studio, you’re greeted by a small lobby with couches and chairs—a perfect spot for me to lounge, fake can of beer in hand, waiting for my first target to arrive. The beauty of it was that, since the target was there for a recording session, it wouldn’t seem strange for me to be sitting around with a drink. It was the perfect blend of truth and lie, designed to lull them into a sense of normalcy.

“Okay,” I muttered to myself, gripping my fake beer can. Before the target arrived, management would shoot me a quick message to give me a heads-up.

Then the notification came—Dagger-chan was here!

A few beats later, the door to the studio slid open. I started lifting the can toward my mouth! I even gripped it in a specific way so that the label showing it was beer was visible for the world to see!

All I had to do was take one convincing sip. The can was but mere centimeters from my lips. I was this close—*this* close to pulling off the perfect prank.

But then I heard it.

“Ah,” Dagger-chan murmured.

It was barely a sound, a whisper. But that tiny utterance—somehow it hit harder than any shout ever could, wrenching my heart in an instant.

Immediately, all my thoughts, all my faculties were

overwhelmed by the singular urge to protect.

What I did next was…impossible to predict. I barely remembered it myself. One moment I was poised, ready, and the next, I was drenched—soaked from head to toe in yellow soda water.

Yes, somehow I had raised the can past my lips, over my head, and dumped its contents all over me.

“M-Master?!” Dagger-chan cried out in alarm.

I felt the cold soda seep through my clothes, the carbonation tingling against my skin, looking like I had just been caught in a sudden summer downpour.

“Whew,” I sighed, exhaling in relief.

“M-Master?” Dagger-chan said again, more cautious this time.

“Oh? Dagger-chan, is that you?” I said, flicking her a casual sidelong glance. “Didn’t see you there.” I maintained perfect nonchalance, like I’d completely meant to pour beer all over myself and I’d done it without even noticing she was there.

“What…are you doing?” she asked.

“What am I doing? Taking a beer shower, whatever could you mean?”

“Wh-Why?” she stammered.

I let out a coquettish giggle, my eyes drifting wistfully to the ceiling. “Just as Jesus turned water into wine, I wondered what might happen if I drenched myself in beer.”

“M-Master…”

“Heavens, is that the time? I must be going.”

With that, I turned my back on Dagger-chan and made my way farther into the studio, soda water still dripping onto the floor.

“Master…” I heard her whisper one last time. “You’re so cool…”


eisoZero
SO COOL...

“So, yep, that didn’t work out,” I said to my stream once more in the present.

: huh?
: sorry, what?
: lol
: you...poured the can of fake beer all over yourself? why?

“Why? To protect Dagger-chan’s smile, of course.”

: you had other options!
: that's the least questionable part of the story...
: your tone irks me, Awayuki
: So? What happens when you drench yourself in beer?
: What happens when Awayuki drenches herself in beer? (The proof is left as an exercise for the reader.)
: It becomes StroZero, duhhh ¥5,000

“Yeah, yeah, I had to improvise, okay?! Dagger-chan was happy, that’s all that matters.”

: †-chan, why on Earth did that make you happy?
: What Shuwa-chan did was already bad enough but the fact that Dagger-chan was fooled by it...
: Dagger-chan, if you're watching, the white unmarked van does not have candy in it
: I don't see what's cool about the illustration at all. I just see an idiot drenched in beer.
: I'm with stupid

“Ahh, forget it! You’re all annoying! You didn’t hear what I heard. That noise she made was lethal! Next! Oh, but before we move on, I just have to say I cleaned up the floor after the prank was revealed to Dagger-chan. Okay! Next target!”

Also, I left this out of my stream for obvious reasons, but after

I’d come clean to Dagger-chan, we still had some time before her session. So I asked her about her thoughts on the situation with Tadasu-chan. She said that she wanted her genmate to remain in Live-On—obviously—but that was easier said than done. After Tadasu-chan broke down in front of her, it’d been difficult to bring up the topic again. Instead, she’d been keeping things light—chatting with her about random stuff, dragging her out to have fun, just giving her some mental care, basically.

As we talked, I could see her expression slowly drop, the weight of helplessness showing through. But honestly, I thought she was managing the situation really well. When I told her that, a bit of confidence returned to her face. And yes, for the record, I was still completely soaked during all of this.

Okay, enough about Tadasu-chan. Back to the stream.

“My next target was none other than…drumroll, please…Ehrai-chan!”

```
: the don?!
: the absolute balls on this madlady
: does she not know fear...
: we all love a prank gone wrong but ya don't gotta
risk your life for it...
: at least she lived to tell the tale, clearly
```

“How did it all go down? Let’s find out!”

There I was, ready for round two. You’d think, having done this once already, I’d be more comfortable, but no. The nerves, they jangled.

One major difference this time compared to pranking Dagger-chan was the sheer level of danger. Would I be okay? Would I make it out of this lobby alive? Maybe I should’ve gone with that bulletproof vest after all. What if she walked in flanked by a gorilla bodyguard dressed in black with matching sunglasses? My worries were endless.

It was then, when I began to regret the poor life choices that had led me to this moment, that the text arrived. Ehrai-chan was here! Uh-oh! Panic! I clutched my fake beer tight.

The door opened, and this time the sound reverberated with a

weight that rattled me to my core, causing a shiver to run down my spine.

Don't forget how you flubbed it with Dagger-chan! I reminded myself. *You only get one shot at pranking your fellow streamers for the first time!*

I stomped out my fear, burying it deep inside. I closed my eyes, and as I heard footsteps approach—!

GULP GULP GULP

I'm drinking! Actually drinking! Hah. You see this, Ehrai-chan? Whaddya got for me? A handgun, a gorilla, a Godfather? Shoot me with your best shot!

"Oh, hello, Awayuki-chan."

GULP GULP GULP... GULP?

She... She said hi? Like nothing happened? Just greeted me professionally like one does when seeing a coworker at the office? Huh?

I slowly peeked my eyes open and glanced toward the door. But Ehrai-chan wasn't there. Where had she gone? I looked around frantically and spotted her—past the lobby, already in front of the door that led deeper into the studio.

In other words, I had been masterfully ignored.

Hurriedly, I rushed after her. "Hold it right there, missy!"

"Wh-What is it?" she replied, confused. "Indoor voices, Awayuki-chan~."

"Don't 'what is it?' me! You know exactly what this is! How dare you walk right on by like you didn't notice? Did you not see the can? This can! Right here! What does it say?!"

"Says it's beer. I saw it the first time, don't worry~."

"Oh, thank goodness. For a second I was thinking I would need to put on a keg backpack and drink straight from it like the cute vendors at ball games do."

"I'm pretty sure those vendors, as the name suggests, sell the beer, not drink it~."

Whew, I was worried for a second the beer can wasn't quite visible enough.

But wait, that just raises further questions!!!

"You saw it the first time?! Then what did you think? What was your reaction?!"

"Um. 'Oh, Awayuki-chan's drinking beer.'"

“Yeah! Exactly! I! Awayuki-chan! Am drinking! Beer!”

“What’s wrong with that? We’re all adults, free to enjoy a beer or two.”

“But I’ve never drunk anything other than StroZero before!”

“I know. A concerning habit~.”

“I— Hm? You’re making a lot of sense, aren’t you, Ehrai-chan?”

“As I always do. Now, if you’ll excuse me~…”

“Oh, sorry, right. Good luck on your recording session!”

“Thanks~.”

“You’re welc— Hey, wait a second!”

“Tsk. Just what is it this time~?”

Ehrai-chan had rolled a darn nat twenty on persuasion; I was just about to let her through when I caught myself.

“Do you hate me, Ehrai-chan?”

“Hate is a strong word, Awayuki-chan~.”

“Then why the nonreaction to me drinking beer? It doesn’t make sense.”

“People are complicated, always changing~. Who am I to call you out for not aligning to my expectations? It’s not like you’re hurting anyone. It’s common decency not to judge, no~?”

“…”

“Is that all? Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to do.”

With that, Ehrai-chan opened the interior door and vanished down the studio halls. I just stood there, staring after her.

“She’s so cool…” I muttered.

“So yeah, that didn’t work out either,” I said to my stream.

```
: oh-for-two, huh?
: Ehrai-chan really said uno reverse card
: the master had the same reaction as her apprentice
: the zookeepers pretty fuckin suave tho cant lie
: swagger so large you can skateboard in it
: I died when Shuwa-chan had that epiphany she was making no sense halfway through
```

“Then when I told her it was a prank later, she said, ‘I oughta smack you upside the— I mean, do better next time, Awayuki-

chan~.’”

: bro LOL she was upset
: hahahaha at least she stopped herself before she could finish the sentence
: Wait, she didn't realize it was a prank? So she meant everything she said?
: she's so cool. gonna go drop her a super real quick
: I want her as my boss
: you've heard of parasocials, now get ready for the paramafioso
: oh god the parasocials are evolving

Ehrai-chan stocks were rocketing to the moon. She’d perfectly shrugged off my plan to prank her and even raised her own reputation in the process. But hey, that’s what makes *Candid Camera* candid, isn’t it? You never know what you’re gonna get.

“Now, this next target is the last and final target of my first-ever prank show. Drumroll, please! Ta-da! It’s Hareru-senpai! Time to finally get one over on her!”

: haha, no.
: i can smell the disaster already
: oh-for-three
: Getting One Over On Her with Bennett Foddy
: If this were a ballpark this is when the people start filing out to beat the traffic

“I told you all I couldn’t be picky with my targets, okay? Her schedule happened to line up! Don’t give up before we’ve even started! If you want to bail early, fine—but don’t come crying to me if you miss the comeback of the century! Roll the tape!”

My chat seemed to think my failure was a foregone conclusion. But was that truly the case? Let’s find out.

I didn’t feel the same threat to my life when it came time to

prank Hareru-senpai, but instead, a gnawing anxiety took over. Hareru-senpai was utterly unpredictable. I had no idea how she'd react or what would happen next. I scrambled through scenarios in my mind, trying to prepare myself, but none seemed to fit. In the end, I just sat there, serene (unalert) and mindful (zoned out).

The text arrived, the door opened right after, and I lifted the can to my lips.

GULP GULP GULP

"Awacchiiiiiiiii!!!"

Before I could even register what was happening, Hareru-senpai tackled me, nearly knocking the can from my hands.

"Hareru-senpai?!" I cried in shock.

"What do you think you're doing?!" she yelled, snatching the can from me. "This is beer! Don't tell me you didn't notice that?!"

"What?" I whispered, still stunned.

"Oh, no. You actually didn't realize? Oh, no, oh no, oh no, oh no!" Her voice was frantic. "You must be exhausted if you didn't notice you weren't drinking StroZero. Why didn't you tell me? What are you still doing at work?!"

The genuine fear and worry in her tone struck me deeply, and that's when it hit me. Hareru-senpai—she wholeheartedly believed I'd bought beer by mistake.

At first, I didn't know what to feel. I guess I should've been happy to be trusted so completely. But considering I was here to betray that trust, it made me feel guilty. Honestly, I hadn't expected to get this far, and now I had no idea what to do next! *Do I come clean? Keep going? Gah!* Why couldn't she just make fun of me and judge me like Ehrai-chan had refused to do?!

"Come here!" Hareru-senpai shouted, grabbing my hand.

"Wha— Huh?!"

While I was stuck overthinking, she had already made up her mind. Before I knew it, she was dragging me by the hand into an empty toilet stall. *Now what is happening?!*

"You drank some, didn't you?" she said. "Go on, puke it out!"

"What?!" I blurted out.

"Hurry up! Before your body absorbs it!"

"Um, okay. Uhh."

My brain froze. Standing in a toilet stall, being told to vomit—it was so far beyond anything I'd imagined.

“You don’t know how to throw up?” Hareru-senpai asked. “Okay, let me help. Open wide and say, ‘Aaah!’”

“Nani?!”

A fond enjoyer of alcoholic beverages such as I obviously knew how to throw up. You just stick a finger in there and be done with it. But *help?* She wanted to help with that? Was she telling me that if I opened my mouth and said “aah,” she’d stick a finger down my throat? I would be completely at her mercy as she triggered my gag reflex and caused me to void the contents of my stomach right in front of her?

Now that’s hot.

This is like face-fucking, isn’t it? With a finger, so face-fingering? But it’s still S/M all the same, right?

But is this really okay? Can I really let Hareru-senpai do this for me?

No, no, no, of course you can’t let her do that for you! You want to dirty Hareru-senpai’s beatific fingers with your vomit? That’s enough candidness for one day—the prank stops here!

“Close your eyes, open your mouth, and say, ‘Aah,’” Hareru-senpai insisted.

“Aaaaah,” I said.

FUCK!

The horniness proved too much for me. I felt shame and regret, but it was the hot, sexy kind of shame and regret. *It was her fault for adding that part about closing my eyes! That’s erotic as hell, okay?!*

“Good girl,” she said. “Ready or not, here I come!”

My eyes were squeezed shut, fists clenched tightly on my lap as I knelt there on that public bathroom floor.

Sorry, chat. Sorry, management. Lord have mercy for I’m about to BUST…!

“And done!” Hareru-senpai said.

“Aeugh?” I mumbled, tongue half hanging out awkwardly.

Well, that wasn’t what I expected… Her fingers had only been in my mouth for a brief moment, and now, in their place, I felt that she had placed something small on my tongue. I opened my eyes and saw that Hareru-senpai had already retracted her hand.

Whatever was on my tongue made it hard to form words, but I was curious so I mumbled incoherently: “Hayeyu-shenpai? Wash dis?”

“A cricket.”

BLEUGHHH ☆Rainbow Splash!☆

“And so, on that day, I tasted cricket for the second time in my life.”

: I'm dying ￥50,000
: lmfaoooooo
: does this girl just walk around with crickets in her pockets?
: no way that's the first thing she thought of

“That’s what I thought too! I asked her about it afterward! This is what happened.”

“Why the hell did you put a cricket in my mouth?!”
“Well, the last time you threw up was because of a cricket, so I thought that’d be the fastest way…”
“Then why the hell did you tell me to close my eyes?!”
“Because I thought I’d have a hard time getting it into your mouth otherwise. Sorry, I didn’t mean to make you upset…”
“No. In fact, this is one hundred percent on me. For trying to prank you, then giving into my desires.”
“Wait. Prank me?”

“So, as you all can see, I am human garbage.”

: preach
: W self-awareness
: Harerun did nothing wrong lmao
: just goes to show how much she believed in your love for StroZero
: So no one's gonna comment on the crickets?
: i mean you gotta at least rein in the horny lmao
: there are people who find throwing up hot?
: hello, i'm people
: this is the way.
: the way? whose way? Elagabalus's way?

: fetishes come in all shapes and sizes. You stay here long enough, you come to realize that.
: Awa-chan was, in fact, not about to bust.
: And that is why she ended up throwing up
: tries to get one up on Harerun only to get one up in her stomach
: Awayuki, always full of surprises (and stomach acid)

"Sorry. But, um, what about the prank? She was completely fooled. And surprised. Can we count that as a success?"

: no lol
: that one was your biggest failure yet
: the joke was on you in the end
: if we're sticking with the ballgame metaphor, it's like leaving early, getting home, and finding out your team gave up another ten runs
: what does it say about you that no one called you out for drinking on the job?

It seemed that public consensus was not on my side.

But that was okay. It was all within scope.

"Yup. As you can see, my wholehearted first-ever prank project ended in complete and utter failure. I was frustrated. So, so frustrated! So I decided, 'You know what? This is not gonna be how it ends. I'm gonna give it one more shot—one final prank to make sure *I* get the last laugh!'"

: huh?
: one more?!
: what does it mean???

"I pranked my fellow Livers the first time, and yeah, that backfired. So this time, the prank's on you, my loyal viewers!"

: ?!?!

: Huh huh huh?!
: but if you tell us that then we know!
: wait... unless she's been pranking us this entire time?!

I flipped a switch, and spoke in a milder, more composed voice than I had all stream. “Heh, heh, heh… Look on my works, ye chat, and despair! This whole time, you thought it was Shuwa-chan streaming, but no! It was me, Awa-chan! You think I cracked one open earlier? Well, that was just soda water! You’re quaking. You’re all quaking right now, aren’t you? ‘What? It was seiso-sensei Awa-chan who said all those indecent, vulgar things?’ Well, guess what? None of you thought to call me out for it, so I win! Prank success!”

Out of nowhere, a smug Awa-chan exploded onto the scene. Chat took one look at this and reacted like:

: huh?
: o...kay?
: cool story?
: Serious question: what's the difference? literally can't tell
: Sorry, Shuwa and Awa are just the same side of the same coin now, hun
: might have fallen for this once, but now...
: and this, ladies and gentlemen, is what we call baseless confidence.
: the ole ego's gonna be feeling that one in the morning
: this good? ¥1,000
: A seiso saying weirdo things is one thing, but why would I be surprised by a weirdo saying weirdo things?
: Shuwa whipping out ole reliable: the seiso gag

“Aha ha ha! Wow! I got you all good, huh? Thank you, everyone! Let’s meet again when the light snow falls!” **SOB**

Ha ha. Who knew pranks could be so hard to pull off?

The Third-Gen Fitness Challenge

“Welcome to the Third-Gen Fitness Challenge!!!”

“Woo-hoo!”

“I’m completely sober and ready to win!”

“Does this have to be a competition? Fighting is wrong, everyone.”

“Thank you, Hikari-chan, for your energy as always; Awa-chan, for jeopardizing the age rating of this stream as always; and Chami-chan for conscientiously objecting as always! I am your host and fellow competitor, Mashiro Irodori!”

```
: an all gen three offline collab?! Yo?!
: woo-hoo!
: and they're in 3D!!!
: Awa-chan, you sound nervous
: I've never seen Chami-chan so much as stand up and yet I somehow fear for Awa-chan's placement
: chaotic introduction quota reached! ¥3,333
```

So! Here we go. Today’s stream was an offline collab featuring all the members of gen three. But this time, we were using our newish 3D models with motion tracking! Every move we made was mirrored in real time.

Standing here, being with the girls in real life, I was struck again by how different it felt to be physically present with my fellow Livers. Online collabs had their convenience, sure, but nothing compared to the magic of being together offline.

I mean, the smell—oh God, the smell. The room I was in actually smelled like women for once. But saying “for once” made me realize there was a default smell I had grown used to. And when I thought about that for a second, I realized that default smell was…StroZero.

I quickly shook the thought away. *No! Bad, Awa-chan! Bad! There’s to be no mention of alcohol today—not even the scent. I need to stay completely sober if I have any hope of succeeding in what’s about to unfold.*

“Allow me to explain the rules,” Mashiron, our emcee, said. “Since we’re all here in person, today’s collab is going to be all

about healthy exercise!”

“It was Hikari’s idea!” Hikari-chan chimed in excitedly.

“God knows it wasn’t mine,” Chami-chan muttered.

“I know I’m not one to talk, but there’s nothing wrong with a little exercise, Chami-chan,” Mashiron said.

“You’re right, but…” Chami-chan said.

“You too, Awa-chan,” Mashiron added.

“I didn’t even say anything…”

Well, that was unwarranted! I still played Long Fit on occasion. Once is an occasion, right?

“Back to the rules,” Mashiron said. “Today, we’ll be competing in a set of physical challenges chosen by management. First place in any challenge earns ten points, second place gets five, third gets three, and last place gets zero. The person with the most points at the end wins.”

“Me, me!” I raised a hand.

“Yes, Awa-chan, you have a question?”

“This is one of those punishment games, isn’t it? In that case, I’m with Chami-chan. We should keep it casual and fun, competing at our own pace!”

“It’s for the stream, Awa-chan.”

“…”

“Huh? She just stopped talking,” Hikari-chan said.

“You see that, Hikari-chan?” Mashiron said. “That’s the sight of a woman who has given everything to the stream.”

I am Awayuki Kokorone. I entertain the viewers. That is my purpose.

“All jokes aside, there’s no punishment this time,” Mashiron said. “We talked it over with management, and since Hikari-chan might throw the competition on purpose, we decided against punishments.”

“Wait, seriously?!” I said.

“N-Nice!” Chami-chan added, relieved.

“Ngh?!” Hikari-chan stammered. “Throwing the competition… O-Of course! Why didn’t Hikari think of that? I mean—what? Hikari would never do that, ha ha!”

Understandably, Chami-chan and I were relieved, though a bit surprised by the news. But Hikari-chan… Hikari-chan, where had it all gone so wrong? You didn’t use to be like this. You used to be so

pure and innocent—now you'd resort to sneaky tricks just to satisfy some twisted lust. I can't even look at you anymore!

Give her back! Give us back that pure Hikari-chan who didn't even know the meaning of the word "lust"!

Give her back, me! Gaaaaaaaaaaah!!!

"In place of the punishment," Mashiron continued, "the overall winner gets to ask a single favor of their genmates, one that cannot be refused."

All of our jaws dropped open. *What. On God's green earth. Did I just hear?*

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, hold on, pause!" I said. "How's that any better? Hikari-chan's the most fit out of all of us! No way she doesn't win and then use that privilege to ask us to do some crazy, out-of-pocket, masochist's-wet-dream-type stuff to her!"

"Uh, guys?" Chami-chan said. "Hikari-chan's already started her warm-ups!"

"Again?! We literally just did that together! Mashiron, please! There's still time—let's reconsider!"

"It's for the stream."

"Perfect argument, no notes."

"Awayuki-chan," Chami-chan said, "I respect that part of you."

Of course there'd be a catch. Who would want to see a couple of keyboard warriors exercise otherwise (cry)? But it had to be done. Come hell or high water, I absolutely could not let Hikari-chan win this thing.

```
: nothing wholesome about this upcoming workout no siree
: She Who Fights to Lose
: Damn, what a boss
: No, son, that's a masochist
: That's my streamer. Even without StroZero she's cuckoo for content ¥22,000
```

Chami-chan let out a hefty sigh. "Exercise. Why did it have to be exercise?"

"Relax, Chami-chan," I said. "We asked management for some fun, wholesome challenges, remember? Plus, this is a mocap

studio, not a gym. Even if they wanted to make us suffer, there's limits to what they can do."

"I really hope you're right..." Chami-chan muttered.

Indeed, the confined space we were in meant that anything even remotely resembling cardio was out of the question. It was why I hadn't entirely hated the idea of this off-collab. *Though, thanks to Hikari-chan, I think I might come to hate it again real soon.*

And here's a little behind-the-scenes tidbit not shared with the viewers: There had been explicit discussion between us and management to not include any bits of running or vigorous movement during the stream. VTubers were not known for their athleticism, after all. The viewers didn't need to see us struggle.

"All right. Everyone ready?" Mashiron said. "It's time to announce the first challenge. I'm a competitor too, so I'll be seeing these for the first time, just like everyone else. One of the staff is going to hand me a slip and... Ah, there it is! Thanks!"

Here we go, the first challenge. What's it gonna be?

"The first challenge is..." Mashiron unfolded the paper. "Everyone's favorite test of upper-body strength—arm wrestling!"

At the reveal of the first challenge, a murmur spread among us competitors.

"Wait, that actually sounds kind of normal," I said. "I was expecting lube wrestling or something like that."

"Fun and wholesome!" Chami-chan cried out in alarm. "Remember what you *just* said about fun and wholesome?!"

"Let's go!" Hikari-chan said. "Hikari's going to win this one for sure!"

A challenge that didn't rely on stamina at all. It seemed that the staff at Live-On still had a heart.

Mashiron continued reading the note. "And the staff left a P.S. here... 'Enjoy the opportunity to legally hold each other's hands to the fullest!'"

Goddamn it, Staff-san. This is the last time I stick up for you. Y'all are just weirdos.

"Good for you, Awa-chan," Mashiron said.

"Huh? Why me?"

```
: holy shit Awayuki-chan did you see what the
challenge is?!
```

: Awa-chan, congrats on the hand-holding (SEX)!
: Pshh!
: oof ouch my seiso hurting juice
: seiso hurting juice...sake?
: Awa-chan, sexual harassment in real life has consequences. make sure you don't go to jail now!

"Don't think I don't see you, chat!" I snapped. "They'll never catch me. Who do you think I am, Sei-sama?"

"Yeah, chat. Ease up on her," Mashiron said.

"Oh? Well, this is an unexpected face turn."

"That's the warden you're talking to, not a prisoner."

"Goddamn it, Mashiron."

Meanwhile, as we had our jaunty exchange, Chami-chan and Hikari-chan were helping the staff set up the studio for arm wrestling. When they were done, Mashiron launched into a more in-depth explanation of the rules.

"Some ground rules. There are cushions on either side of the table. To win, you need to push your opponent's hand all the way down to their cushion. Your elbow has to stay on the table the whole time. We don't have time for a round-robin, so we'll be doing single elimination."

I see, I see. There are four of us, so we'll start by splitting into two pairs. The losers of that round will wrestle for third place, and the winners will face off for first. Sounds simple enough, but that meant it was super critical I roll an easy first-round opponent.

"Says here first-round opponents are to be decided by rock-and-paper hands," Mashiron continued. "Everyone throw either rock or paper and then pair up with whoever matches you."

I needed either Chami-chan or Mashiron. I couldn't be eliminated by Hikari-chan in the first round. If I couldn't go for first, I needed at least second-place points! That meant this game of rock and paper was just as important as the arm-wrestling match itself. *Bring this one home, Awayuki!!!*

"We have our first matchups: Awa-chan versus Hikari-chan and me versus Chami-chan."

"You know what? Maybe I am the One Piece..."

“All right, that’s enough sulking, Awa-chan, come here,” Mashiron said. “You and Hikari-chan are up first.”

```
: noice
: Chami-chan and Mashiron be thanking their lucky stars rn
: that's sulking?
: the one piece is the one piece manga box set (one piece in one piece)
: did you all just catch Hikari moaning just now???
```

Am I cursed? Maybe it’s time to visit my local exorcist…

Grr, enough moping around! If this is the hand fate has dealt, then I’ll just have to beat Hikari-chan! Beat her now or beat her later, it makes no difference!

With that, I steeled myself and took my seat at the table. Hikari-chan followed, sitting across from me.

“Um, Awayuki-chan?” she said in a soft, coquettish, almost bedroom-y voice.

“Huh?” I blinked in surprise. This was very unlike Hikari-chan. So very unlike Hikari-chan right before a competition, my heart rate spiked.

“L-Let’s make it a good one. Eheh. Eheh. Eheh heh heh…” She let out a sloppy, drunk-sounding giggle.

“Guys, help! Hikari-chan’s got crazy female pig ‘fuck me’ eyes!”

“Crazy female what now eyes?” Mashiron asked.

“That’s a phrase I wish I never heard,” Chami-chan said.

Help! Why isn’t anyone helping! I can deal with “fuck me” eyes. In fact, most times they’re kinda hot, but what Hikari-chan has going on right now is a whole different ball game!

Also, what happened to the old Hikari-chan? The one that would declare “I’m not gonna lose!” with a confident look on her face?! What the hell is “Let’s make it a good one,” anyway? What am I even making good?! I don’t want to make it good!!!

No, no, I have to focus. Focus!!! If I lose my cool and lose here, then I’ll really *have to make it good for Hikari-chan!*

Yep, okay. Calm, Awayuki, calm.

As I regained a semblance of composure, Mashiron took her

place by the table as the ref.

"'On 'go,' you'll start. Now lock hands," she said.

I said nothing as I firmly grasped Hikari-chan's hand.

"Aah," she moaned quietly.

Ignore it... Ignore it!!! In fact, just close your eyes and pretend she isn't there!!!

"Ready, set...go!"

"HRRNNNNNNGGGG."

Immediately, I threw every ounce of strength into my arm, muscles straining as I tried to force her hand down.

Wait...what? I thought I'd be crushed right away, but—no—I'm holding my own! In fact, I'm actually gaining ground. Her wrist is buckling! Am I... Am I winning?

"NNNNNNNNGGGGG."

It's working. It's actually working! Her hand trembles, inching closer to the table. Just a little more...a few more inches, and victory will be mine!

"HAAAAAARRRRRGGHHH."

Keep pushing. Don't stop now! But...no...why isn't her hand moving anymore?!

Her arm refused to budge any farther. All that momentum, gone. Stunned, I opened my eyes.

...

I shouldn't have opened my eyes.

"Aah, mmm! ♡ Harder, A-Awayuki-chan, harder! Aha! ♡ If this is all you got, then I'm sorry to say you won't be beating Hikari! Oh, your nails! If you wanna win, dig those sharp nails deep into Hikari's skin! Aah! Aaaaah!"

My arm fell limp and I lost immediately.

It was time for round two: Mashiron versus Chami-chan. Hikari-chan was on commentator duty, while I took Mashiron's place as ref and backup commentator.

"Lock hands," I commanded.

"Heh." Mashiron smirked smugly as her hand clasped Chami-chan's. "This should prove easy."

"I-I can arm wrestle!" Chami-chan protested meekly.

On paper, this matchup definitely favored Mashiron. But would she truly dominate? Let's see.

“Ready, set, go!” I declared, and they were off.

The tension mounted immediately, arms straining, grunts exchanged. Mashiron seemed to take an early lead, her brow furrowed in concentration, but… Wait a second.

“HNNNNNNNG,” Mashiron groaned, her muscles quivering as she pushed with everything she had.

“U-Um?” In stark contrast, Chami-chan seemed completely unbothered, her face more curious than strained. “All right, I guess. Here I go…”

“Ah!” Mashiron gasped, eyes wide with panic as the tables turned. Slowly, steadily, Chami-chan began to push her hand down. Centimeter by centimeter, Mashiron’s hand descended toward the cushion.

“And Chami-chan is the winner!” I announced.

“I… I did it!” Chami-chan squealed, her excitement bursting out.

The match was over, just like that. An embarrassed Mashiron tried to slink away from her seat, but I arrested her with my gaze.

“What?” she mumbled defensively.

“It SeEms LucK is On mY SiDe tOdaY. Hyuk, hyuk, hyuk, hyuk!”

“You shut up or I’ll shut you up with my panties stuffed in your mouth.”

“Huh? Huh? HUH?! HUoHe? Huehuhe?”

“That’s right.”

“That was amazing, Chami-chan!” Hikari-chan exclaimed. “And you said you weren’t athletic!”

“Thanks, Hikari-chan! I thought I’d totally be last at everything, so I’m glad just to have won this one! Who knows, maybe I’ll beat you next and become the champion!”

“Oh, then you’re on, pal! Hikari won’t hold back!”

“Ah…” Chami-chan whimpered.

: Here's your prize money, Chami-chan ¥30,000

: Sorry, what was that about panties?

: is she kinky because she's an artist or is she an artist because she's kinky?

: Awa-chan's reaction is giving virgin

: Chami-chan has no idea she just poked the bear of bears lmao

: Hurry up and stuff those panties already. And go into full detail. None of that "but that's a story for another time" BS

Overconfidence. Not even once.

Mashiron might have flustered me in front of everyone, but I paid her back in full with interest by winning the third-place match right after. Hee hee.

Championship round: Hikari-chan versus Chami-chan. Mashiron was on ref and subcommentator duties while I was commentator. Before the round started, Mashiron and I engaged in a little prematch banter.

“Hm… If Hikari-chan wins here, she might just run away with the whole thing,” I said.

“We need to stop her somehow. But Chami-chan can’t beat her with raw strength alone.” Mashiron fell into thought. “Ah, I know! Hey, Awa-chan.”

“Yes?”

“I might have a good idea. C’mere.” She leaned in and whispered the secret plan into my ear.

My eyes widened. “That could work!”

“Right?” Mashiron grinned.

“Mashiron, Awayuki-chan, what are you two whispering about?” Chami-chan called out. “We’re all set over here.”

“Oops, sorry, sorry,” Mashiron said. “Then lock hands.”

As Mashiron directed the match to begin, I slipped into position as inconspicuously as I could.

“Ready, set…go!”

“Take…this!” Hikari-chan yelled.

“Urk!” Chami-chan groaned, instantly overwhelmed. No surprise there. *Sorry not sorry, Chami-chan.*

But this was where I came in. The position I’d moved into earlier? Right next to Chami-chan. My target? Her delicate, defenseless ears.

I leaned in, close enough that my breath tickled her skin. “Go, go! ♡” I whispered, soft and sugary, directly into her ear.

“HWAAAA?!”

“What’s this?” Mashiron said, giving the viewers the play-by-

play. “Awa-chan has started to whisper sweet nothings into Chami-chan’s ear!”

Indeed, this was Mashiron’s master plan! We’d give Chami-chan a monstrous strength boost by turning her on!

“Hey! That… That can’t be legal, can it?!” Hikari-chan protested.

“I don’t see why not,” Mashiron said. “Awa-chan is the main commentator, after all.”

“Go. Go! ♡ You’re gonna lose. ♡ Push back harder. ♡ Harder. ♡”

“B-But, wait! Isn’t a commentator supposed to be neutral?! She’s clearly rooting for Chami-chan!”

“She’s actually rooting for both of you. She just happens to do so right by Chami-chan’s ear.”

“Okay, then, Hikari sees no flaw in that logic!!!”

Mashiron’s arguments were half-baked at best, but Hikari-chan still went along with them. See, that was the pure, innocent Hikari-chan. The girl too good for this world, who I missed dearly but refused to show her face whenever I was around.

“Go, go! ♡” I whispered again, upping the intensity.

Chami-chan’s breaths grew ragged, her nostrils flaring like a wild ox’s. “Hff, hff, HAAAAAAAH!!!”

“Whoa?!” Hikari-chan cried out in alarm. “This power…”

Just when Chami-chan had been mere inches from defeat, her latent strength surged and she began her miraculous pushback against Hikari-chan’s iron grip. *All according to plan.*

Except for the heavy breathing and bloodshot eyes, but I’m just gonna ignore that.

```
: There it is, Awayuki-chan's awakening, limit
break, bloodlust no jutsu
: what am I even watching...
: All I can say is that physical strength < horny is
perfectly on brand for Live-On
: Yeah. These are not real human beings
: butterfly in the sky, vtubers go twice as high
: "commentator"
: I didn't know Awa-chan could sound so lewd
: yeah and it's pissing me off for some reason
```

But as I continued to whisper away and the impulsiveness of the moment faded away to rational thinking, a realization dawned on me:

Jesus Christ, isn't this incredibly freaking embarrassing?

Feeling the heat of shame creeping up, I glanced at Mashiron for help. She caught my eye for just a second before a wicked grin spread across her face. "Hm? What's wrong, Awa-chan? Want to quit already? But if you stop now, Chami-chan's going to lose."

Son of a... She set me up! This is payback for earlier, isn't it?!

Grr. Part of me wanted to quit just to spite her, but my prouder side wouldn't let my efforts go to waste. *Damn you, sunk cost fallacy! But fine, Chami-chan's going to win at this rate anyway—time to step on the gas and finish this!*

"Go. ♡ Go! ♡"

"HFF. HFF." Chami-chan's breathing intensified.

"Urk! She's...too...strong!" Hikari-chan let out through gritted teeth.

Just a few more centimeters!

"Go. ♡ Go! ♡"

"HFF. HFF. HFFF!"

"G-Gah! Hikari's going to...lose?!"

That's it! We're there! Victory is almost ours!

"Keep going. ♡ Keep going! ♡"

"I'm gonna... I'm gonna— Aaaaaaaaah! ♡"

"Huh?"

Like a snapped rubber band, Chami-chan's hand—once mere millimeters from victory—rebounded back to her own cushion, leaving everyone in the room slack-jawed. Besides Chami-chan. She lay there on the table, body gently twitching, eyes rolled back.

"I, uh. Huh?" Mashiro said. "H-Hikari-chan wins? I guess?"

"Huh? Hikari won?"

I was the first to catch on to what had happened. And when I did, I dropped my hands onto Chami-chan's slumped shoulders...

And I shook her violently.

"Hey! What the hell was that?! You were *this* close to winning—why did you give up?!"

"I... I couldn't... It wasn't my fault, okay? You were sabotaging me, whispering such lewd things into my ear!"

"I was trying to *help* you, you dolt! Give me back my dignity!

Give it baaaack!”

: LUH MUH FAOOOO ￥10,000
: And I ask again: What am I even watching?
: Chami-chan went all right
: What happened was undoubtedly lewd and yet here I am, absolutely not turned on
: every time it happens they play the lewd off for laughs...
: Waiting on that Awayuki "support" voice pack if you know what I mean
: Still waiting on the continuation to the panties thing...
: yall are precious getting this excited over arm wrestling

The first challenge…was over. The final standings were Hikari-chan in first, Chami-chan in second, me in third, and Mashiron in fourth.

“The second challenge is a competition of flexibility—limbo!”

Mashiron’s announcement of the second challenge, as had her first announcement, sent a ripple through us contestants. But this time, rather than surprise, it was more of a confused ripple.

I mean, limbo? Wasn’t that what they did on variety shows, what with the bar, and the bending backward, and the “how low can you go”?

“Staff left us a note here too. They said, ‘Please be careful not to injure yourself. And I mean *really* be careful.’”

“Oh, well, that’s ominous… I wonder if something happened during their rehearsals. Hope everyone’s back is still intact…” I said.

“But that’s two normal challenges in a row,” Chami-chan said. “I don’t know, something feels off…”

“Oh, oh, oh! Hikari knows what this means! It’s the bar. They must be running a million volts through the limbo bar, and if we touch it, we die!”

“Ah, I see, I see,” I murmured in agreement.

“I suppose death *is* a form of injury,” Chami-chan muttered. “Better heed their warning and be careful, then.”

“You guys think so?” Mashiron asked. “Oh, wait. The staff are fervently shaking their heads right now. I think that means no.”

```
: why did they immediately suspect limbo but let
death game slide?
: it's not time to heed their warning, it's time to
run. Run and don't look back
: This is a bit. This is a bit, right?
: Faced with a million volts and they're still
prepared to go through with it. now that's
dedication.
: the brainrot, it's worse than I thought...
: I had a dream that the Japanese era name changed
to Live-On last night and a nationwide state of
emergency was declared.
```

Honestly, even if we were restricted in terms of space, I’d half expected management to hit us with a few wild cards. But two normal events in a row? I had a bad feeling about this.

This time around, Hikari-chan tagged in for me to talk with Mashiron and fill time as Chami-chan and I went to help the staff set up.

“Ugh, a flexibility challenge?” Hikari-chan whimpered.

“Oh, what’s this?” Mashiron asked. “Are you not flexible, Hikari-chan?”

“Not as much as Hikari would like…”

“I see, I see… Then I reckon the rest of us have a chance here, don’t we?”

And setup complete! As the staff members moved offstage, I dipped my head to them in thanks and returned to my position.

“Some ground rules,” Mashiron said. “As you all know, to successfully limbo, you must go under the limbo bar with your backs facing the floor. That means you must bend backward, and no part of you other than your feet can touch the floor. We’ll start with the bar at a hundred centimeters and lower it in five-centimeter increments.”

“A hundred centimeters,” I muttered. “Dang, that’s low right off the bat.”

“And none of us have ever limboed before…” Chami-chan added.

“Hikari doesn’t think she can— No, no, of course she can! Be confident!”

```
: yikesss
: remember what happened the last time you tried to move in unexpected ways, Awa-chan? Crrrrack!
: just tried it myself and was able to clear 1 cm no problem
: Are you a certain mouse-hating cat named Tom?
: Thinking of the cat instead of the mouse in this case, based and Tom-pilled
: Cats are liquid after all
: That means Nekomaaa is a pool of putrid standing water
: poor kitty. even when she's not present, she amasses more innocent-bystander energy
```

“Rock-paper-scissors, loser goes first,” Mashiron proposed.

Anxious as we were, the show must always go on. We agreed with Mashiron and played a quick round of rock-paper-scissors. The order ended up being Chami-chan first, then me, Mashiron, and finally Hikari-chan. At last, a stroke of luck.

“Okay, then, here I go,” Chami-chan said hesitantly. She hovered in place, shifting her weight awkwardly, trying to figure out how to bend her back in just the right way without toppling over.

“You know, limbo might be my thing after all,” Mashiron muttered.

I looked at her, confused. “Why’s that?”

“Just look at her. Spreading her legs, sticking her lips out like that—completely shameless. It’s hot.”

“Uh.”

“The best part is that expression, like she’s being forced to pole dance against her will. And with that pose, she might as well be. Yes… Yes…!”

“And she’s off in her own little world where the chestnut flowers bloom.”

“Gonna draw this when I get back. This could be the next big fad!”

“Or the start of another ultra-specific artist’s fetish.”

“Personality-excretion lover says what?”

“I don’t know what that is, I’m seiso~.”

“S-Stop saying weird things, I’m trying to concentrate over here!” Chami-chan said. “At least cheer me on or something!”

“Go, go, Chami-chan, go!”

“M-Maybe not that, Hikari-chan. That just reminds me of earlier and I’ll lose all my strength again!”

Chami-chan, having just barely avoided digging her own grave, successfully limboed under the first bar.

: Mashiron?!
: always on the lookout for new fetish material
: artists have my respect
: sane streamer btw
: rude! Mashiron and Dagger-chan are the princesses of the Mononoke doujin circle! ¥1,000
: there hath never been a more cursed circle
: for anyone who thinks the chestnut flower joke is seiso, don't google chestnut flower smell
: Wait. Is Nekomaaa the result of personality excretion?
: NOOOO leave the poor kitty alone
: somewhere in the world, a kitty cries out in despair
: She did it!
: Nice, Chami-chan!

Then it was my turn. “Urk…!” I slipped under the pole without much issue. “Clear!”

“Oof.” And Mashiron was able to do it just as easily.

Now it came time for she who was not as flexible as she wished she could be—Hikari-chan.

“M-My body and mind are at odds right now…” she murmured in front of the bar. A unique turn of phrase, but in other words, even with the bar at its maximum height, Hikari-chan’s body sensed danger in bending that low. She tried to approach the bar in all sorts of ways, but every time, right before she hit the bar, her body recoiled from it. This continued for a while.

```
: Hikari-chan lollll
: she's starting to sound like Chiikawa...
: I'm of two minds (Awa and Shuwa)
: Oops, all Shuwa!
: One Shuwa, Two Shuwa, Red Shuwa, Blue Shuwa
: something not very small and not very cute (my penis)
```

“Hikari-chan’s probably so athletic, her body knows itself too well and refuses to even try anything it can’t do,” Mashiron said.

“Wow. I’ll never know how that feels,” Chami-chan said.

“Hmm…” I hummed in thought. We had to get Hikari-chan past this rut somehow or we’d be here all day, so I ran through my mind for ideas. *Ah. Maybe this could work?*

“Hikari-chan! How about making a game out of it? Like it’s that Resident Evil thing.”

“What Resident Evil thing?”

“Y’know, the room, with all the lasers coming at you!”

“Ah! The meat cube machine!”

“Yes, that!”

“Chami-chan, is that what that’s called?” Mashiron asked.

“I have no idea what the official name is, but it’s definitely not that.”

“Just imagine that you’re not coming at the bar—the bar is a deadly laser coming at you!” I continued. “That way, it’ll seem like you have no choice but to go under it and the mental block is gone!”

“Good idea! But why do I have to imagine? You can just move the bar toward me. That’ll make it even more like the game!”

“Uh, is that allowed?” I asked.

“Staff says…sure, why not,” Mashiron said.

“Nice! Okay then, Awayuki-chan! My life is in your hands!”

Oh, I know we’re supposed to be competitors, but Hikari-chan is just so precious you can’t resist the urge to help her!

Filled with a genuine wish to see Hikari-chan through this hurdle, I grabbed the limbo-bar setup and started moving it toward her.

“Here it comes,” she said, staring at it intently. “Here it—” She suddenly screamed. “N-No! No, no, no! Get it away from me! I don’t wanna die! Oh God, I’m gonna die, I’m gonna die!” Her voice cracked, raw with terror. “GYAAAAAAAH! Somebody! Anybody! *HELP ME!!!*”

Uh. Well, that was unexpected.

“Awa-chan,” Mashiron said. “At least set up a safe word before you go full-on sadist dominatrix.”

“Wait. This isn’t what I wanted, I swear. I legitimately thought it would help her if we made it more like a game or a movie. Swear on my life.”

“We’re not going to get banned by YoTube for this, are we?” Chami-chan asked. “That scream was…bone-chillingly real.”

“This wasn’t a sex thing, so I think we should be fine…” I said.

```
: Jesus Christ I jumped
: Even now, they remain in character. What will it take for them to break, I wonder?
: That scream was genuinely terrifying
: Seriously, clip the audio and use that for your next horror project
: Awayuki...you've gone too far this time
: We were just joking about the death game!
```

Clunk. The unexpected sound made us all jump. We looked toward its source and found that, while we had been making a fuss, Hikari had touched the bar and bumped it to the ground.

“Hikari-chan, you’re out,” Mashiron declared dispassionately, then trotted up to her. “Are you okay? Sorry, was that my fault?”

Hikari-chan looked at me. “A-Awayuki-chan.”

“Yes?” I replied hesitantly.

“Pain is good. Death is not.”

“Pain isn’t supposed to be good either.”

“No. Pain is good…”

Okay. Well, if that near-death experience wasn’t enough to cure her masochism, I don’t know what is.

The limbo challenge continued with the three of us. Each round, the bar was lowered an intimidating five centimeters.

“Aah!” With an oddly sexual moan, Chami-chan was eliminated at ninety centimeters.

“Ah!” I made it only one round further, hitting the bar at eighty-five centimeters. Which meant the winner of this challenge was…!

“Yay! Go me!”

Mashiron, who cleared even the eighty-five-centimeter bar with ease.

“Ohmigod, I’m actually kinda happy. I didn’t think I’d take first place in anything!”

Kinda happy? She was literally bouncing on the balls of her feet. But…Chami-chan and I couldn’t bring ourselves to celebrate her victory. We even stopped Hikari-chan from saying anything, gagging her and pulling her back before she got out half a syllable.

We weren’t being sore losers. Mashiron had seemed genuinely bummed about placing last in the previous challenge and we were genuinely happy for her. Under any other circumstances, we would’ve clapped for her in joy, but here and now…

Remember what I said earlier in this volume about not wanting to get shot?

Mashiron chuckled smugly. “I’ve already won, but let’s see how far I can really push it. Let’s go, eighty centimeters!”

I glanced around nervously. “Um, Mashiron? I don’t know if that’s such a good idea.”

“What are you talking about? Eighty-five was almost too easy!” She slipped under the bar again. “Hah! And so was eighty!”

Mashiron…

“Let’s do one more.”

“Mashiron, I’m serious. You should stop.”

This time, she bumped the bar. “Ah, darn it. I guess seventy-five is my limit.” Finally, she gave up on her limboing efforts and trotted over to us. “Sorry, sorry, I was just having so much fun.” She tried to move over to the emcee’s PC, where the stream chat

was open, but found me, Chami-chan, and a hastily conscripted Hikari-chan blocking her path. “Um, girls? Can I…get to the PC? I just want to see what chat is saying real quick.”

“Wh-Why would you need to do that?” I stammered.

“Yeah! Let’s just move on to the next challenge!” Chami-chan said.

“Mm-mmm-mmmph!” Hikari-chan tried to speak, muffled by our hands.

“What? Come on, I got first, I want to see the chat’s reaction! ’Scuse me!”

“Hey!” Chami-chan and I protested.

But it was too late. Using her big brain and petite body, Mashiron figured out the path of least resistance and slipped through our defenses. She stood in front of the screen, grinning widely. And then she wasn’t grinning anymore.

```
: of course you'd be good at this one, Mashiron!
: *gestures broadly at chest area*
: and they said boards were stiff
: Nice one, Mashiron! Your cutting board coming in clutch for once!
: hard to knock over a bar when there's nothing there to knock with ayyy
: That is what we call functional beauty
: unfair advantage looool
: I have two small reasons to give as to why Mashiron is so cute
```

She just stood there, staring at the screen for a while. Then, when she finally looked back up at us, there wasn’t even a smidgeon of emotion on her face.

Is this… Is this it?

“On your knees now. All of you,” she said icily.

“Mashiron?!” I yelped.

“Why us?!” Chami-chan cried.

“Sure thing!”

At least Hikari-chan was happy.

“You now have ten seconds to plead your case. Starting with

you, Awa-chan.”

“What?!”

“*Eight* seconds.”

“Um, um, um… You know how even though 3D games are the norm now, there’s still a loyal contingent of gamers who enjoy 2D games? Aha ha…”

WHAT THE FUCK AM I SAYINGGG…?

“Chami-chan?” Mashiron glared at her next.

“P-Plains make better farmland than mountains?”

CHAMI-CHAN, NOOO!!!

“Hikari-chan?”

“Bigger equals higher defense! Smaller equals higher dodge! Both are strong!”

That was probably the most generous thing any of us could’ve said, but it was still terrible!!!

Then Mashiron burst out laughing. “Aha ha ha! That was great, you girls are funny. You get a car—and you get a car, and you get a car! Everyone gets a car!”

“Y-You’re not mad?” I asked.

“W-We’re saved?” Chami-chan said hopefully.

“A car! A car!” Hikari-chan sang.

But we’d been too quick to relax.

“Good. Now, staff members, drop those cars on their heads.”

“She *is* trying to kill us!” Chami-chan and I yelled.

“Hah! I’ve been practicing my dodge rolls!” Hikari-chan also yelled, but proudly.

Well, it was good knowing you all…

```
: but honestly, a small Mashiron is the right
Mashiron
: being on the itty bitty titty committee is value
added, benefit accrued, advantages earned
: I wouldn't have Mashiron any other way
: even without the flat-chested jokes, it feels like
Mashiron is in quite the mood today
: is it because she's with her genmates? Awww,
that's adorable
```

Limbo results: Mashiron in first, me in second, Chami-chan in third, and Hikari-chan in fourth.

"Challenge number three. This will be the last challenge today."

Graciously, Mashiron moved on like nothing had happened and announced the last challenge.

"Let's quickly revisit the scores, shall we? Hikari-chan and I are tied for first with ten points, while Awa-chan and Chami-chan are close behind with eight each. It's still anyone's game."

It was obviously concerning that Hikari-chan was tied for the top spot, but the scores were close. If I could clinch this last challenge, I'd win even if Hikari-chan got second. *Let's do this thing!*

"Then without further ado, let's announce the last challenge." She paused, glancing around. "So where is it?"

Normally, this would be the moment a staff member handed Mashiron a slip of paper with the challenge on it, but instead, a group of them approached, each carrying some kind of…contraption?

The heck is that? It looked like a bizarre assembly of tubes and pipes and springs and whatnot, all attached to straps that seemed designed to fit over someone's body like an exoskeleton. The closest thing I could compare it to was the Dai League Ball Training Cast from *Star of the Giants.*

We stood there in a confused daze as the staff members came over, fitted each of us with one of these strange contraptions, and left without saying a word.

O…kay?

Only then did someone finally hand Mashiron the paper slip. "Oh, thanks," she mumbled, snapping out of her daze as she took it. "Um, let's see." She began to read aloud, "It's final, it's fun, it's Live-On! The last challenge is…Senior Citizen Beach Flags!"

Senior Citizen…Beach Flags?

We glanced around the studio, and sure enough, directly across from where each of us stood was a small, flag-shaped object.

Mashiron squinted at the page as she continued reading. "Here are the rules. What we're now wearing—reflected in our 3D models on the stream—is a Senior Citizen Experience Exoskeleton. In these suits, we'll race to grab the flags, about twenty meters away, just like in a normal Beach Flags game. The exoskeletons

simulate what it feels like to move at different ages, so we can better understand the challenges faced by our senior citizens. Furthermore…"

The color drained from her face.

"The age setting…is set to one hundred and twenty."

"What?!" we all yelled.

Immediately, we turned to the staff for an explanation. But none came. They just smiled at us—one of them held a remote control—and gestured for us to squat down.

Fuck if I didn't have about a billion questions for them, but something in my bones told me it was wise to just go along with it.

So we got low, and when we did, the one with the remote hovered their hand over the button, pressed it, and—

"Wh-Wh-Whoooooooaahhh?!" we all shouted.

Overwhelming weight had crashed down on me, paralyzing my previously limber and unencumbered body.

"My body isn't…listening to me!" Chami-chan cried out.

It was as if every muscle in my body had vanished, leaving just the brittle bones beneath. As Chami-chan so eloquently put it, even the act of standing up was a leg-shaking, knee-buckling affair. My spine refused to straighten, and moving even slightly was impossibly taxing.

What… What fresh hell is this?!

I forced my head around to glance toward the staff once again, but they were already filing out of the studio room to leave us poor saps behind. The sight of their backs filled me with panic, and in that moment, an unsettling thought crystallized out of my confusion.

"W-Wait!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, arresting them. "There's a time limit, right? Please tell me there's a time limit! This isn't—this isn't one of those things where we're just stuck here forever until someone reaches a stupid flag, is it? Tell me it's not! *Please!*"

Realizing what I was getting at, my genmates all widened their eyes in fear and looked to the staff members.

They paused. Exchanged glances among themselves. Then, with expressions of radiant satisfaction, as if they had just saved the world, they walked out of the studio and shut the door behind them.

“Come back here!” I shouted. “Come back here right now, you motherless knaves!!!”

“Whoa, these suits are awesome!” Hikari-chan said. “It’s like Hikari’s a completely different person!”

“Knew it,” Mashiron sighed. “I wish I was wrong, but alas. Two normal challenges in a row was just too good to be true for Live-On. This is where all the effort went.”

“We really ignored all the red flags, huh?” Chami-chan said. “No pun intended.”

Live-On! How come trying so hard with these absurd, nonsensical ideas is when you pull out all the stops?!

```
: Yes... Yes...!
: lol. lmao, even.
: This is what we came here to see
: This (The Looming Calamity)
: So this is how they're getting around the tiny studio room restriction LMAO
: Ah yes, I was getting worried we were going to have a totally normal off collab
: "Even if they wanted to make us suffer, there's limits to what they can do" - Awayuki Kokorone
: the fact that they came up with this idea is crazy. the fact that they actually made it is insane.
: Live-On production team member: time to put that engineering degree to good use!
: the fact that they even gave them a few normal challenges is proof that management trusts them
: there's meaning in doing something so meaningless
: not the Live-On Live-Onner Training Cast ￥50,000
```

And so there we were, knees buckling, legs shaking, left all alone in the mocap studio. Our only companions were the lively stream chat and the flags. At twenty meters, they were so close, yet so far away.

Ten minutes into the challenge, we had re-mastered the art of

simply staying upright, followed by shuffling along at a snail's pace. Progress was painfully slow, but at least it was *progress*.

Huffing, panting, sweating—and yet for all that effort, we had moved a grand total of five meters. Our bodies felt drained, like we'd just run a marathon, and we had to take a break. But that didn't change the fact that we were only a quarter of the way there. Five meters down, fifteen to go.

Was this what our senior citizens went through every day? All this exhaustion, all this effort, just to cover a distance I could normally cross in five strides? From now on, whenever I saw an old person slowly inching their way across a crosswalk, I'd never feel anything but sympathy ever again.

See? I've learned the moral of the story! So can we please turn down the level on these suits from ONE HUNDRED AND FREAKING TWENTY?! I've never even seen anyone that old in real life! How can they just add a hundred years to our ages and expect us to get used to it?!

"Awa-chan," Mashiron said. "I'm tired. Can you tell me a story?"

"Um..." I thought about it for a second. "Ah. Back when I was at my old company, the one with the terrible working conditions, there was this girl so desperate for a break, she shoved an egg up her ass just so she could lay it and claim maternity leave."

"O-Ouch. That must've hurt," Mashiron said.

"I'm certainly glad you're no longer at that company..." Chami-chan said.

"It wasn't me..."

Luckily, our vocal cords were still free to move as they pleased. It was strange—who would have thought that, when faced with a challenge with no end in sight, the natural response would be to ramble on about bizarre stories with no rhyme or reason?

But then, rising to the occasion, a challenger appeared. Hikari-chan, who had just been resting alongside the rest of us, rose to her feet and expelled a long, steadying breath. "Wasshoi! Waaaaasshoi! That flag is mine!!!!" she bellowed, before launching into a shuffle at a blistering, breakneck pace.

"Holy crap!" I said. "She must be going at least three meters per minute!"

"Three meters per—" Chami-chan gasped. "How is she doing that?!"

"No..." Mashiron muttered darkly. "She's played us all for

fools…”

“Played us all for fools?!” Chami-chan spluttered. “What do you mean?!”

“While we rested to walk the next measly few meters, *she* was resting to walk the entire distance!”

“I-Impossible! Fifteen meters in one go? No one’s ever dared attempt such madness!” I cried.

```
: impossible is right. (Wtf is this conversation)
: (holding back tears) go, Hikari-chan, go!
: oh what it is to be young again
: *takes off sunglasses slowly* My God... she's
really doing it. She's actually doing it...
: you have all inspired me to be nicer to my
neighborhood supercentenarians
: they really have to be older than 100 for you to
be nicer to them?
```

“Oh, no, you don’t. That flag is mine!” Galvanized by Hikari-chan, I cut my break short and pushed myself to my feet. I strained, grunted, and forced myself forward at top speed…but I wasn’t gaining any ground at all! *How on earth is she moving at three meters per minute?! Just what is she made of?!*

As I watched her figure inch away from me, exhaustion got the better of me and I collapsed, sprawled out on the cold, hard ground. Here, I had time to think—really think about why I, a couch potato, had thought I could catch up to Hikari-chan in a straight-up battle of endurance.

And yet, my determination to keep Hikari-chan from winning burned on. That stubbornness sustained me, and I managed to pull myself off the ground and begin to crawl after her.

It was then that The Plan came to me.

But The Plan was quite the plan. Was I really willing to go through with it? To throw away my dignity for the sake of victory?

It didn’t matter. If there was a chance to win, I had to take it.

My resolve solidified; I expelled a deep breath.

Let’s do this.

When I moved again, it was at a speed equal to—no, faster than

Hikari-chan's, prompting the two left behind to cry out in alarm.

"What?!" Chami-chan yelped.

"Awa-chan?!" followed Mashiron.

I pressed forward, aiming not just for Hikari-chan's back, but for the flag beyond her.

"Awa-chan is…" Mashiron said, but I ignored her. I just had to go faster—*faster*—and I pushed myself harder, gaining ground with each movement.

How was I managing this? Simply put, I wasn't trying to *walk* anymore.

No, when laden down like this, walking was no longer the most efficient option. I had transcended that, now using my whole body to propel myself forward.

"Awa-chan is…"

But crawling alone wouldn't get me to the speed I sought. No, I wasn't merely crawling. I used my hips as a pivot point, rocking my body up and down, using the momentum to propel myself forward!

The Plan was working. Hikari-chan's back loomed larger with each push. There was no turning back now! Screw being a senior citizen—my movements were fierce, ferocious, sensual. Like a seasoned belly dancer, I—

"Awa-chan is humping her way to victory!!!"

"*Mashiron!!!*"



I whipped my head around to glare at her so fast, my neck popped. All my efforts to pretend I wasn't doing exactly that, up in smoke.

"Did you *really* have to say it like that?! Does my dignity mean so little to you?!"

"What? I call it like I see it. What else do you want me to say? Because whatever you're doing, it's definitely not crawling. Not enough arm and leg movement for that." She glanced at Chami-chan. "Right?"

Chami-chan's head was turned a full ninety degrees away, her eyes squeezed shut. "I see nothing… I see nothing…!"

"Hey!" I yelled. "Don't avert eye contact like I'm some shameless pervert you're trying to avoid on the street!"

God, this is so embarrassing. So freaking embarrassing!!! But giving up isn't an option. If I stop now, all that awaits me—all of us—is Hikari-chan's masochistic glee and an even more humiliating fate. This isn't just for me; it's for everyone!

I forced myself onward. Resumed my…humping of the ground. *Haaaaaaaaaaah!*

"Honestly, though," came Mashiron's commentary, "this weird…ground-hump technique is working. She's actually closing in on Hikari-chan."

"I see nothing, I see nothing…" Chami-chan was chanting at this point.

```
: GROUND-HUMP TECHNIQUE
: floor humping has never looked so cool
: just imagining a 120 year-old man humping the ground at top speed is sending me
: "honey, those awful biker gangs are back." "Nah, that noise is just old man Tanaka out on his daily walk"
: Don't worry. Live-On is in good hands with Awa-chan as their seiso streamer
: ~~beach flags~~ sex on the beach
```

At around five meters to the flags, I caught up to Hikari-chan. She looked at me, wide-eyed. "What?! Where did you come from?!"

she yelped.

Almost there… Keep it together for just a tiny bit longer…

“Two can play at that game! Hikari’s going to ground-hump her way to victory too!”

“Noooooo!!!” I cried out in despair. Why must everything be so embarrassing?!

Just don’t look back. Please, Awayuki, do NOT look back!

“Hikari-chan’s totally just doing it because she wants to, isn’t she?” Chami-chan said.

“But Awa-chan’s got the edge,” Mashiron said. “Those are some fast humps.”

“HAAAAAAAAAAH,” I screamed, partly for strength, partly just to drown them out. I locked my eyes on the finish. No distractions. There was no behind. Only forward existed.

The flag crept closer… Just a bit more!

“And I think I’ll take this one, Chami-chan,” Mashiron said with a casual tone.

“Wait, what?!” Chami-chan sounded flustered.

“Victory is…” I bellowed, every muscle straining as I lunged forward.

With a triumphant shout, I grabbed the flag.

“…MIIIIIIIINE!!!”

After the race, the staff returned to help us out of our suits. I stretched my arms and legs, so glad to have my own body back again. “Phew!”

“Awayuki-chan, you were amazing!” Hikari-chan said. “You’re Hikari’s master, through and through!”

Meanwhile, Chami-chan pouted at Mashiron. “Mashiro-chan! That was a dirty move!”

“All’s fair in love and war. Gotta use your brain if you want to stay on top.”

I’d won, and Hikari-chan had come in second, but apparently, there had been another showdown happening behind us. Chami-chan and Mashiron had both been (conventionally) walking and pretty much tied until I was just about to reach my flag, when Mashiron flopped over and quite literally slid her way into a third-place finish.

With the three trials finally completed, it was time to reveal the

overall standings.

“Now, to announce the final placements.”

All eyes swiveled to Mashiron.

“In fourth place—Chami-chan with eight points!”

“I knew it,” Chami-chan sighed. “I really thought I had a chance at the beginning.”

We all clapped for her. Chami-chan might not have won, but we knew that she wasn’t much of an athlete, and she had given it her all.

“In third place with thirteen points—yours truly,” Mashiron continued. “The limbo was uh, yeah, but hey, at least I didn’t end up last.”

Mashiron’s performance, like herself, was modest. Another round of applause.

“In second place, with fifteen points… Hikari-chan! So close!”

“Ugh, almost!” Hikari-chan groaned, then broke into a big grin. “But Hikari had tons of fun, so it’s all good!”

Yes! That was the Hikari-chan I liked to see! Big round of applause!

“And finally…our grand champion, with a total of eighteen points—Awa-chan!”

What followed was the biggest round of applause yet.

```
: wooooooo!!!
: *clap clap clap clap clap* Pshhhhhh!!!
: she did it... she actually did it...
: can't say she doesn't deserve it
: Here's your prize money ¥50,000
```

“Your wish, Awa-chan. What’s it gonna be?” Mashiron said.

“Huh?”

“‘Huh?’ is not a wish, girl. Remember the grand prize? You get to ask one favor of us, anything at all, and we can’t refuse.”

“Oh… Oh! Right!” Honestly, I’d been so focused on beating Hikari-chan, I’d totally forgotten why I’d been so focused on beating Hikari-chan!

But let’s see. A wish, huh? Did I really have a—

I blinked. Then it came to me, clear as day. Oh, I had a wish. A

big, important wish.

I cleared my throat with a dramatic “Ahem.” I closed my eyes, reset my expression, and two beats later, forced it into the most pitiful, big-eyed look of pleading I could muster.

“Please, everyone—forget that the floor-humping thing ever happened.”

I learned a tough lesson that day. To gain something, you must be willing to let something else go.

Chapter Four

Tadasu, Churiri, and Live-On, Part 2

The day after the Third-Gen Fitness Challenge:

“T-T-T-Tadasu-chan, you can’t leEeEeEeaAaAve!!!” Hikari Matsuriya wailed through the phone.

Tadasu Miyauchi winced visibly, recoiling a little.

“C-Calm down, Hikari-chan!” Chami Yanagase said. “Tadasu-chan didn’t say she was going to quit yet!”

“We’re literally not even two minutes into the conversation…” Mashiro Irodori added, a little exasperated. “Sorry, Tadasu-chan. I think I understand what’s going on. Don’t mind her, I’ll take care of it. Just talk!”

“Th-Thanks…” Tadasu muttered.

For her second round of advice, she had decided to call on the other members of third gen: Hikari, Chami, and Mashiro.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” Hikari started to cry.

Last time, Tadasu had come away from the discussion desperate for someone to give her a straightforward answer. This time, though…well, with Mashiro barely managing to corral things, it felt like the conversation might not even get off the ground.

She struggled to understand why Hikari had gotten so emotional so fast. On paper, they were just fellow streamers from the same org—acquaintances, really, who hadn’t had many collaborations or even deep conversations. Yet here was Hikari, breaking down as though Tadasu’s departure would tear her world apart.

Was that really just the kind of person Hikari was? Did she truly just throw herself into everything heart-first? Tadasu was once again struck by just how different people could be. It was baffling, really—that someone who barely knew her would be willing to bawl for her like this.

Baffling, but…not at all disagreeable.

After a while, Mashiro, used to her antics, was able to coax Hikari to calm down, and the conversation resumed.

“Right,” Mashiro said. “How about this? I’ll talk first, and you, Chami-chan, and you, Hikari-chan, can take that time to gather your own thoughts. Sound good?”

“Sounds good,” the two replied in unison.

“Good. Ahem. So, Tadasu-chan. Do you mind if I talk to you a little bit about responsibility?”

“Responsibility?” Tadasu echoed, puzzled.

Mashiro nodded. When she spoke next, her tone shifted—less like a fellow Live-Onner and more like someone who’d learned her lessons the hard way. “It’s a big change, stepping out into the real world for the first time. I’m sure you’ve heard this a million times by now, but out here, everything you do has consequences, and you’ve got to be ready to own up to them. I get it now. I didn’t always, and because I didn’t, I ended up causing some real trouble for Awa-chan and the others back in the day.”

There had been an incident not long after Mashiro’s debut, a mistake on stream that could have spiraled out of control if Awayuki hadn’t stepped in. It was a lesson Mashiro still carried with her to this day.

“As you start to put yourself out there, you’ll find that—despite school being your whole world up to now—the real world is much bigger. And it’s drier too.”

“I understand what you mean about consequences,” Tadasu said. “But what do you mean by ‘drier’?”

“I don’t really know how else to describe it. It’s just…dry out here. Parched, really. If school was an oasis, then adulthood is like being tossed out into a desert that stretches as far as the eye can see. When you’re in that oasis, things have a way of working themselves out. People forgive your mistakes, you get second chances if you just explain yourself. But out here, there’s none of that.”

She paused, taking a breath before continuing. “If your choices didn’t matter before, they matter a hell of a lot more now. Make a wrong turn, wander aimlessly, and the only person who ends up exhausted is you—and that’s if you’re lucky. God forbid you’re like me and hurt not only yourself, but the people you love most.”

Tadasu frowned. She’d never been good at these kinds of conversations. It wasn’t that she wanted to argue with Mashiro’s point—it was a common sentiment. And if everyone said it, then it must be true. But there was something about it that just never sat right with her. This unplaceable feeling hung there, tickling the inside of her chest, somewhere between acceptance and rejection, unsettling her without reason.

But this time, she'd sought out the advice herself, from a senior she trusted. No matter how much it gnawed at her, she wasn't about to be rude or shut the conversation down halfway through. She steeled herself—heart and mind—to stay open, ready to accept whatever Mashiro might say next.

"But," Mashiro added, her voice softening, "while the lows can be pretty low, the highs can also be incredibly high."

Tadasu hummed softly in confusion. That wasn't what she'd been expecting at all.

"If being an adult means getting hit with the consequences when things go wrong, it also means you get to savor the moments when they don't. That success, that sense of reward, knowing it's entirely yours—it's like hitting the jackpot."

Tadasu tilted her head slightly. "So, gambling."

"Gambling? Aha ha. I guess it is, in a way. But you know—I've gone through a lot, but at the end of the day, I think I've won more often than not. If I wasn't doing this, I wouldn't have found myself among all these wonderful girls I'm privileged to call my friends. Wouldn't get to say that I draw for a living. I mean, how many people in the world can boast that? The key is that there are certain things you can find that just don't exist in the oasis."

"What kind of things?"

"The kind you find at the end of a path you chose for yourself."

Like a knife, that sentence plunged deep into Tadasu's heart.

"Look, Tadasu-chan. What I'm trying to say is that the very fact you're worrying about this means you're stepping out of that safe place—you're trying to figure out what really matters to you, what you want to take responsibility for. That's not a bad thing, not always. As long as you stay mindful and keep pushing yourself, you'll find your way to the path you truly want to walk." With a wry smile, Mashiro added, "Maybe you'll even come out of it with fewer bruises than I did."

Cutting herself off there, she turned the stage over to her genmates. "Anyways, that's all from me. Girls?"

Hikari, still sniffling, spoke next. "H-Hikari's not so good at things like this, but she'll try anyway. For Hikari, she thinks that whenever she's in a rut or overwhelmed, her thoughts drift to the people who care most about her. It's like, when we're worried... Hm, how should Hikari phrase this? It's like when we're worried,

we tend to give something to others to seek their approval, right?"

"You want to *give* something to others?" Tadasu shot back quizzically.

"Hikari doesn't mean like a physical gift! It's like effort, time, whatever!"

Tadasu's expression softened, gaze shifting slightly as if piecing together a puzzle. "I think I understand, somehow," she said after a pause.

The crux of what Hikari was trying to convey, as Tadasu understood it, was that people often try to secure a sense of belonging by offering something of themselves to those around them. It was the idea that we seek acceptance by proving our worth. Tadasu found herself understanding Hikari's message, perhaps thanks to her past conversations with Dagger, who had a similar childlike way of expressing ideas.

"Really? Nice!" Hikari's eyes lit up at the joy of being understood. "Anyway, Hikari doesn't think that's a bad thing. It's just that it's not...complete? You know? Yes, you can give, but more than that, there's a sense of... Ah, how can Hikari say this...? Ah! She knows! There's a song Hikari really likes right now, and in it, there's a lyric that means, 'Instead of focusing only on the things you've lost, why not be grateful for the things others have given you?' That's what Hikari wants to say."

Tadasu hummed, mulling over Hikari's words. She thought about, as Hikari had put it, the people who cared most about her. But to her, they felt more like "the people she hoped actually cared about her."

At the same time, following this train of thought, Tadasu thought about the people *she* cared about, the people *she* didn't want to burden or trouble. The fact that she thought of them this way, she realized, meant those people had given her something that made her want to protect them, a bond she didn't want to betray. And wasn't that exactly what Hikari was trying to convey? That meaningful connections in life were not one-sided, but built on mutual care and support?

And so it seemed that despite Hikari's roundabout explanation, her words had properly resonated with Tadasu.

"Ahhh, Hikari's head's all spinning. Chami-chan, you're up!"

"Already?! But I'm not quite ready yet!"

“It’s okay,” Tadasu reassured her. “Take your time.”

“Oh… Thanks?”

“All right, Chami-chan. You’re supposed to be the one giving advice here,” Mashiron quipped dryly, but she took that as a good sign. Tadasu was almost completely okay. She just needed one final push.

“Right,” Chami-chan nodded. “Then here goes… I think you owe it to yourself to find where you truly belong, where you shine brightest. For me, that’s Live-On, and I think, maybe—just maybe—that’s where it is for you too? I don’t mean to presume, but when you stream, when you talk about the things you love, that’s when you seem happiest, like you’re truly shining. Yeah. Anyway, that’s all from me.”

Tadasu’s eyes widened, then narrowed. “I see. Thank you.”

The call ended there. Tadasu stared at the now-inactive call screen, then squeezed her eyelids shut. She could almost feel the electric pulse of her synapses firing, scattering in different directions, diverging, trying to make sense of themselves. But they all led back to point toward one inescapable truth.

When she opened her eyes again, her mind felt crystal clear. The ticklish ache in her chest, that vague discomfort she had never wanted to name, had vanished. It wasn’t unplaceable; she had just refused to see it. It was her true self—caged for too long—ready, at last, to take flight.

Meanwhile, Churiri was engaged in her own second round of soul-searching. This time, she had reached out to gen four’s Alice Soma and Ehrai Sonokaze.

After Churiri gave a quick recap of the circumstances, Ehrai fell into a pensive silence, and Alice groaned like she was mulling over a hard test problem.

“Mmm… Sorry. I don’t think I’ll be of much help here,” Alice finally said.

“I see,” Churiri replied. “That’s all right. It’s sudden, I know. Sorry for putting you on the spot.”

“Mmm…! Ah! Wait! If I think in terms of me and Awayuki-dono, I might be able to come up with something!”

Churiri’s eyes lit up. “Oh! Like you’re me and Tadasu’s Awayuki-san? That works! So what would you do in that scenario?”

A brief moment of silence.

“Nope, still got nothing.”

“...Feels like finally finding a forum thread with your exact question, only to find everyone else is just as confused as you.”

“I mean, even hypothetically, I can’t think of a situation where I wouldn’t accept Awayuki-dono’s decision with grace.”

“Really? Even if she decided to quit VTubing? That would be it for you and her.”

“If Awayuki-dono wasn’t in the right state of mind, I’d do everything I could to calm her down and hear her out. But if it was a choice she made with a clear head, I’d accept it, even if it was hard.”

“Why, though?”

“Mm... I’m not sure if there’s a concrete reason... It’s just respect, I guess? She’s my idol. I’d do anything for her—even if that means accepting that she wants out.”

Alice-chan ended with an awkward chuckle. Churiri found herself unable to come up with a follow-up.

“Okay! Well, I’m ready over here~.” Just as the silence started to feel endless, Ehrai spoke up. “Sensei, I have a question for you. What do you think sets gen four apart from the other gens in Live-On?”

“What sets gen four apart?” Churiri echoed before falling into thought. “Sorry, I’m clueless. About as clueless as the people who like to gossip about their coworkers around the watercooler.”

“Well, the correct answer is that we are kind of...not very close.”

“Ah...”

Even for someone as new and uninformed about Live-On as Churiri, she immediately had a sense of what Ehrai was talking about. Gen four didn’t gather very often. Not that they never had a single collab together, but compared to the tight-knit second or third gens, they were clearly the odd ones out. More often than not, they had better connections with members of other gens than with each other.

“As proof of that, where is Kaeru on this fine day?” Ehrai continued. “I know she went to talk with Tadasu-chan, but still.”

“Do you not get along?” Churiri asked.

“As if!” Alice chimed in. “Just the other day, Kaeru-chan was annoying Ehrai-chan going ‘ane-san, ane-san!’ and Ehrai-chan had

to put her foot down, saying, 'If you don't quit it with that, this humidifier's gonna start puffing out Kaeru-flavored mist'!"

"Alice-chan, snitches get far more than stitches where I come from~."

"You sure are a lively bunch..." Churiri said, half exasperated.

"It's a young-people thing!" Alice-chan said.

"Ha ha ha," Churiri laughed. "Yes. But then you see a celebrity younger than you and the realities of aging set in all at once."

"Oops, sounds like I stepped on a land mine!"

"Hey, the zookeeper's talking over here!" Ehrai said. "What I wanted to ask you, Sensei, is that despite our disparate natures, do we give off any indication that we are anything but Live-On's fourth generation?"

"Um... No?" Churiri's eyebrow quirked.

"Even if we collab with the other gens more than we do with ourselves, the viewers still recognize us as gen four. Furthermore, even if one of us quits, they'll still be known as the 'ex' gen four member."

"I'm...not sure what you're getting at."

"Don't find yourself too dependent on your genmates," Ehrai stated matter-of-factly.

Churiri frowned. "I'm not dependent on them."

"Hold on, let me finish," Ehrai continued. "Say that Tadasu-chan quits. Just because she's no longer your genmate, does that mean she becomes nothing to you? And what about everything else? Do the new bonds you form with others mean nothing just because Tadasu-chan is gone? Nothing's over unless you decide it is. And when something ends, it usually means something else is starting."

"You're sounding...pretty heartless right now."

"But I'm not~! I don't want anyone to quit! I just want you to understand that life is too short to be dependent on others. Look at Alice-chan—she loves Awayuki-senpai, probably more than anyone else on this planet. But she doesn't make herself solely a burden to Awayuki-senpai. She's built her own community of like-minded people. The question you need to ask yourself, Sensei, is what kind of future you want with your genmates. And to reach that future, what kind of relationship you need to have with them."

With much to consider, Churiri ended the conversation, thanked

Ehrai and Alice for their time, and left to reflect on their words.

After a moment to collect herself, Churiri's thoughts drifted, much like after her last group conversation. But instead of recalling the early days with Tadasu and Dagger, this time her mind traveled even further back—to the years that had shaped her, the foundations of her life that had slowly eroded over time.

It hadn't been any one event that had sparked her disillusionment, but a gradual unraveling. She had always carried within her a tiny imperfection, one that was unfortunately integral to her existence: her sexuality.

Sexuality is as fundamental to an organism as a staple food is to a diet. To have a flaw at that level meant that everything built upon it was affected. In Japan, rice forms the basis of every meal. It's the foundation with which every other flavor is meant to harmonize. But what if you couldn't eat rice? What if you were deathly allergic to it? That would be terribly inconvenient. But realize that Churiri wasn't allergic to just rice—she also couldn't stomach wheat, or potatoes, or maize, and so on. Every staple the world depended on for sustenance was something she could not accept. And the only thing she craved, the only thing that felt right to her, was something others found repellent.

Indeed, she was like an alien, crash-landed on a world with nothing she could consume. Alone, isolated—though every person she encountered had the shape of someone like her, an outward resemblance that suggested belonging, they were utterly different beneath the surface.

If she absolutely had to pinpoint a single moment that felt like the final straw, it would be an episode from her early days as a new graduate, stepping into the harsh realities of adulthood. She had thought she was on good terms with her boss, had believed in the connection they shared. But when she turned to them for advice in a moment of vulnerability, she was met with nothing but cold indifference. It might have been a small thing, something that happened to countless others every day, but for Churiri, it was the moment she'd realized she might never truly belong.

It was as though humanity had cast her aside. And it was at that moment that she swore she would never again struggle just to win their acceptance.

"And yet...here I am, doing exactly that."

A bittersweet smile touched her lips. She stood, crossing the room to the curtains that were always drawn tightly over her window—and pulled them open. Sunlight flooded in, almost overwhelming her. She stood firm, squinting against the sudden brightness, refusing to close her eyes against the light.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but…”

She gazed out at the view beyond the glass.

“I need them. This ridiculous company full of wackos, the two brats I met there. I need them more than I ever realized.”

It was the same old view from the same old apartment. Nothing had changed. Yet it now seemed to sparkle with a vibrancy and life Churiri had never noticed before.



Chapter Five

Beating the Final Boss

Lately I'd been dying to beat Hareru-senpai at something.

Maybe it was all the time I'd spent battling, like the strongest character tier list, or the fitness challenge, or maybe just the sting of my first-ever prank failing miserably on her. Either way, my competitive spirit was firing on all cylinders. So the other day, I woke up and—with the help of a bit of liquid courage—sent Hareru-senpai a challenge.

She accepted straightaway.

"You come at the queen, Shuwacchi, you better not miss."

"Hyaaa! Chat, ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod! I actually did it! I actually challenged Hareru-senpai! No way! Good luck, future me, you're going to need it!"

"Well, this is unexpected, even for me. It seems the challenger is even more surprised than the one being challenged."

And so the showdown of destiny had begun. Of course, we wouldn't be throwing down in real life. Sticking to true VTuber fashion, we would face off in a video game.

The game?

Watermelon Game.

After a lengthy discussion about fairness in competition, we selected this explosively popular falling-block puzzle game as our battlefield of choice. In the game, each player drops various fruits into a container. When two of the same fruit touch, they merge into a larger fruit, earning you points. The fruit progression is: cherry, strawberry, grapes, dekopon, persimmon, apple, pear, peach, pineapple, melon, and finally, the game's namesake, watermelon. Each fruit is progressively larger and worth more points. The largest fruit that can naturally appear is the persimmon. Once your accumulated fruits overflow your container, it's game over—your score is locked in. It's the perfect game—deceptively simple, unexpectedly deep, and most of all, wildly addictive.

But here was the interesting part. We wouldn't be competing on score alone. No, that would be boring. Did you ever wonder what happens when you combine two watermelons? They're the largest fruit. If there's nothing larger, then what happens?

They disappear entirely.

That was the basis of our showdown. Whoever could make their watermelons disappear first would win. Easier said than done. The less space you have, the harder it is to combine your fruits, and the easier it is for everything to overflow. The ginormous watermelon takes up nearly half the container, making it almost impossible to combine two of them at once. This was a battle that could last for days, maybe even weeks—a true test of both wits and endurance.

But wait, you might say. *Are you crazy, Awa-chan? How can you possibly hope to win in a battle of wits against Hareru-senpai?* Now, now, my dear reader, did you forget this was a falling-block puzzle game? And what do all falling-block puzzle games have in common? That's right—the pieces you get are random. While I wouldn't dream of beating Hareru-senpai in a pure battle of wits, this game had a great equalizer: chance. In fact, I'd even say it tipped the odds in my favor, given Hareru-senpai's generational bad luck. Luck and endurance! With those on my side, I had a real shot at winning!

And so, with my (strong fizzy lemon-flavored) energy (alcoholic) drink of choice in hand, I approached the first stream of what I was sure was many to come.

"The videos make this look so easy, but... Huh? All the fruits I fail to combine just end up piling up at the bottom!"

The first few results were...dismal at best. Forget about two watermelons, I could hardly imagine myself making one at this rate. Suddenly, I got a call from Hareru-senpai, who was supposed to be doing a separate playthrough. I wonder what could have happened already.

"Hello, Shuwacchi? I did it—two watermelons cleared on my first playthrough."

"Cool. Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool. Wow, and I cleared out my schedule for weeks for this. Guess I'll sing a little song, do a little dance. Pai-pai-pai. Pai-pa-pa-pai-no-pai! Chin-chin-chin. Chin-chi-chin-no-chin! Yay."

“Sorry, I was joking.”

“Y-You! Aw, you little rascal, you, always messin’ around! I knew it couldn’t have been over already—we’re just getting started! You better watch out, because I’m not holding back!”

“Really? Because that sounded like the death rattle of a woman who completely threw her hands up in the air in defeat.”

“Ha-re-ru-sen-pai?”

“I mean, carry on, Seiso-san of Seiso Industries!”

: I'm here for the floor humping VTuber. is this the right place?
: Hey, at least this stream didn't stumble right out the gate and fall flat on its face
: no, but the streamer sure did
: you know you don't literally have to stream every stream like it's your last? it's just a saying
: she had that locked and loaded and was ready to give up so quick LMAO
: full song when ￥200
: hour loop ver inc
: Awayuki does a Weird Dance. Awayuki is drained of 999 SP (seiso points)!
: only Harerun could make such an outrageous claim and have it be believable
: I was thinking how precious these two were with their friendship being so close but that ondo ruined it
: Awa-chan plays Solemn Judgment! Pays half her LP to negate the Summon!
: I don't see "Pai-pai-pai. Pai-pa-pa-pai-no-pai! Chin-chin-chin. Chin-chi-chin-no-chin! Yay" in the flavor text...

Hareru-senpai then revealed that, while clearing the game had been a joke, she had actually managed to get a watermelon on her first stream. All I could say to that was, *Sasuga, Hareru-senpai.* Her antics sparked a series of mind games between us, but even

sasuga Hareru-senpai couldn't clear the objective on the first day and ended her stream later that night. (We were allowed to practice off stream, but the winning round had to be streamed to count.)

I was getting tired myself and would have normally ended my stream too, but considering this was Hareru-senpai, I knew my usual approach wouldn't be enough. So I pushed on and kept streaming. Endurance—that was half of my key to victory, and I needed to hold on to it. Because, as you might have guessed from my drinking while playing, I wasn't exactly counting on a strategic win. And to aid me on that front, I called in a friend!

"Good nipple, everymom. Mama called and Kaeru answered! I love boobs!"

"It's Kaeru-chan! Thanks for coming! I didn't think you'd show up this late."

"Not at all. Kaeru's sleep schedule is completely flipped right now, so she's wide awake."

"That can't be healthy for a baby..."

: Hey, if it isn't our child
: It really is. Hi pumpkin!
: Really appreciate you inviting our daughter out to play ¥10,000
: *chuckles nervously* where did all these parents come from...?
: And on this day, Shuwa-chan learned a valuable lesson. Do not summon Kaeru-chan lest you summon the horde
: What kind of mother invites her child to stay up late playing video games?

"Anyway, I invited Kaeru-chan here to keep me company and help pass the time!"

"Kaeru's honored you called, and you know she'd never hesitate to help, but...is this okay?"

"Hm? Whaddya mean?"

"This is a personal showdown, isn't it? If Kaeru helps you, it's no longer fair."

“Ahh, no, no, it’s totally fine. Me and Hareru-senpai worked this out beforehand.”

“Oh, so she has someone helping her out too?”

“No, she just said that you’d be a neutral, if not negative help, so she allowed it.”

```
: LOL
: 300 IQ play
: yes, our daughter is blatantly useless, but that's why we love her
```

“Yeah, yeah,” Kaeru sighed, “Kaeru’s useless, we get it. But don’t think she’ll hesitate to sic the authorities on you just because you’re Kaeru’s top-mommy.”

“What?! Wait, Kaeru-chan, think this through. You’re really gonna call Child Protective Services on your mommy?”

“No, the Department of Labor.”

“A (self-proclaimed) baby phoning the Department of Labor. Somehow that’s worse…”

In all seriousness, Kaeru-chan was far from useless. I’d asked for her help because I understand how valuable it is to have someone to talk to when dealing with something tedious. *Don’t come crying foul to me when I win, Hareru-senpai! You agreed to this, fair and square. Mua ha ha ha!*

And so, the joint stream between me and Kaeru-chan kicked off in earnest. We’d been around each other long enough that the chemistry was spot on, keeping me focused and allowing me to improve my gameplay at a steady pace. But would it be enough for me to reach the legendary double watermelon?

“Hello?! What in the freak was that?! The physics just sent the cherries flying when the fruit under it combined! You know how many times you have to shake a can of StroZero to get it to squirt that high? Two hundred and seventy-seven times. Two hundred and seventy-seven times, Kaeru-chan!”

“Wow, two hundred and seventy-seven times. Kaeru knows exactly how high a StroZero can shaken two hundred and seventy-seven times squirts—not. The way your mind works truly frightens Kaeru sometimes.”

“Well, I am a genius, after all.”

“Okay, then, manage to combine two fruit without sending another one into space, genius.”

“I-I did that on purpose just now, just so I could make the StroZero joke!”

“The joke was terrible. Come up with literally anything else next time.”

“Oh? Okay, you said it.”

“Hm? Yes, Kaeru did?”

Roughly ten minutes later, another cherry was blown out of the container in a similar fashion.

“Hello?! What in the freak was that?! You know how many times you have to stroke Ken Shimizu’s cock to get him to spurt that high? Three hundred and seventy-seven times. Three hundred and seventy-seven times, Kaeru-chan!”

“Okay, Kaeru takes that back, stick with the StroZero thing.”

“See what happens when you don’t listen to mommy?”

“Listen to mommy if you want to live your life on in Live-On.”

“Wait, but that sounds cool. Live your life on in…Live…On! Every kid’s dream!”

“CPS knocking down the front door in three…two… But in all seriousness, you can calculate Ken Shimizu’s ejaculatory distance based on the number of cock strokes?”

“No, I was just saying that.”

“That is a relief. Then the StroZero can thing was also random.”

“Oh, no, I actually knew that one.”

BEEP BOOP BOOP BEEP “H-Hewwo? Child Pwotective Services? My mommy’s scaring me. She’s Live-Onning and I think she might hurt me…”

“Okay, let’s not actually dox me.”

“It’s actually incredible you haven’t accidentally done that to yourself yet, mommy.”

: Rolling on the floor, laughing.

: This is why I'm here. Only one VTuber on the planet can transition seamlessly talking about StroZero to a male porn star

: Wholesome mother-daughter relationship

: But since when were they...
: Since they were connected by the brown thread of fate
: okay, calculating distance based on stroke number is actually insane
: something moves: Awa-chan: "ohmigod, that thing moved X number shakes of a StroZero can!" ¥220
: And this, boys and girls, is Live-On. This is where the hermits and recluses of society end up
: least cynical childcare worker
: I didn't end up here, I chose to be here. Rise up, hermits and recluses!
: boy am I glad the Ken Shimizu number's different than the StroZero number. If they'd been the same, that would mean Ken Shimizu is StroZero, and Shuwa-chan having StroZero inside of her would've taken on a whole different meaning.
: Tadasu-chan, is that you?
: god I miss Tadasu-chan. come back, we miss you!

I lost, but it didn't matter. As a wise man once said, we go agane!

"You know," I said. "Watching fruit shaboink each other, turning into bigger and better fruit—it's like watching Darwin's theory of evolution unfold in real time."

"That's what you're getting from this game?"

"And the way it all ends, with everyone fighting until only scraps remain, is like a reflection of human history, isn't it? Oh my God, I'll never take the humdrum of daily life for granted anymore. The message of this game is so deep, I'm going to cry."

"My mommy might actually be a genius. Now there's a terrifying thought."

"You'll understand when you're older."

"Then I don't wanna get older!"

"Whew, *Sharin no Kuni?* Killer reference."

"Kaeru loved that quote so much."

"A little too much, clearly..."

: please, no more sudden transitions into philosophy
: where my retro VN heads at
: No matter how profound it sounds, the fact that Awa-chan started out saying things like shaboinking tells you everything you need to know

Of course, I wasn't just talking. I was making good progress in the video game too. This round, things were going particularly well.

"Look at that! My first watermelon! I am not beating the genius allegations!"

"Nice job. Congrats."

"Woo! Praise me more!"

"Mommy, you're a genius."

I laughed smugly. "Yes, I am. Yes, I am!"

"The government should consider naming you a Living National Treasure."

"Yep, yep, yep! Yep, yep, yep!"

"You should allow Kaeru to suck on your titties."

"Sure thi— Wait. What?"

"She said yes!"

Then I heard the sound of a door opening, slamming shut, muted footsteps trailing away…

"H-Hey! No. Stop! Do not come over here right now. Do you know how late it is?!"

"Okay," Kaeru-chan said, suddenly reappearing. "Then we'll reschedule?"

"No! You tricked me, it doesn't count!"

"What? You're going back on your word! What a terrible mother!"

"And the baby has lectured her mother. That's a first. Fine, we'll reschedule."

"Wait, *really*?!"

"My first opening's in…ten thousand days. Does that work for you?"

"…Mommy, Kaeru knows you said ten thousand days as a way to suggest a far-off future, but doing the math, that's not even

twenty-eight years away, well within both our lifetimes.”

“Wait.”

“I’ll pencil it in, then. See you in twenty-eight years, mommy!”

“No, no, no, no, pause, pause, pause, pause, pause!!!”

: Great success ￥50,000
: hahaha poor Shuwa-chan
: you know what they say, the days are long but the years are short
: Just when you thought Kaeru-chan had been defeated, she hits back with the magnificent counter. Mwah, chefs kiss
: Kaeru-chan, you have all of us here as witnesses to the verbal contract exchanged
: RemindMe! 10,000 days
: It's weird how can I be so excited for something that my brain is terrified for
: Just do it now. You're gonna do it in 28 years anyway. What difference does it make?
: 28 years is how long it takes for a Gagabriel to mature
: It seems we were mistaken
: lol

“Not again, you stupid cherry!”

What a night. By the end of it, I had signed myself up for something outrageous and was no closer to clearing the game for it. It was getting late, though, so I decided to call it and continue another day.

Good luck, future me…

Another day of dropping fruit into a box. After playing countless rounds, I had gotten the hang of the game and could consistently earn high scores. But that elusive double watermelon still seemed impossibly out of reach. It felt close—just a few more fruits, and I’d be there—but every time I got to that point, it was as if I hit an invisible wall, stopping any further progress.

Still, I couldn't give up now. This was a test of patience. I'd recognized from the very beginning I'd need to stick with it, so stick with it I would!

Once again, Kaeru-chan came to cheer me on.

"How've you been recently, Kaeru-chan?" I asked during a dead period where no progress was to be made.

Thankfully, she was always more than willing to fill these voids with random conversation. "Kaeru's been all right," she replied. "Kaeru gains more and more viewer-mommies by the day, and she's having a blast streaming."

"That's good, that's good. What sort of streams have you been up to?"

"Kaeru just finished a collab with Dagger-chan. We were playing the new Mario game."

"Dagger-chan, eh? How's her memory?"

"Same as always."

I chuckled. "I bet."

Wait. Something felt off, but what? The conversation had been as innocuous as could be. *Ah.* But then it came to me.

"Dagger-*chan?* Didn't she use to be Dagger-mama?" I asked.

"Things change," Kaeru deflected somewhat awkwardly.

"Don't tell me you've finally come to realize you're a senpai?"

"How rude of you to even suggest the possibility. A baby knows not such responsibilities."

"Is that so? Hey, chat, can I get a second opinion?"

"H-Hey."

```
: Dagger-chan is so derpy that Kaeru-chan naturally
becomes a senpai in her presence
: more like her mom than her senpai if you ask me
: yes, her new "baby mom" duality has attracted
quite the viewership
: the mother has become the mothee...
: yeah she slipped into the -chan just like that
: she constantly stands just slightly behind Dagger-
chan looking out for her like a real mother would
```

"Chat begs to differ," I said.

“It’s not Kaeru’s fault that girl is so thoughtless. What Kaeru expects from her mothers is the ability to accept everything about Kaeru. Which Dagger-chan currently lacks, so Kaeru’s simply educating her into that role. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“‘Nothing more, nothing less,’ she says.”

“Fine, be that way. Kaeru’s sulking now. Whatever you say, Kaeru’s going to respond with ‘iya’ (no).”

“Aw, come on, I was just joking around.”

“Iya!”

“I’m sorry. Keep talking with me?”

“Iya!”

“Listen, you’re almost thirty. I promise this is more painful for you than it is for me.”

“Iya!”

“Suck on a titty?”

“<Ee-yeah!>”

“Oh my God, the baby’s gone international. Okay, you’ll get your turn in *_checks watch_* 9,999 days.”

```
: The baby character suddenly showing a motherly
side really is quite unfair in its potency
: my favorite part of the stream was when she
(figuratively) put her hands on her hips, shook her
head and with a resigned smile on her face said
"Goodness, what is Kaeru going to do with you?"
: Terrible Twos or menopause. You decide.
: Shuwa-chan really said turnabout is fair play
: So wait. Do all those in the anglosphere just
think Japanese toddlers are saying "yeah" to
everything?
: The Terrific Twos
: love me some happy babies
: Dagger-chan has already managed to cleanse one of
the most rotten personalities in all of Live-On?
Just canonize her already.
```

“Don’t worry, mommy. In front of you, at least, Kaeru will

remain a baby forever.”

“If only that wasn’t the one part that actually worried me. I really don’t get your fixation with me. I’m like the least ‘motherly’ person ever.”

“That’s what you think? Then Kaeru’s sorry to inform you that most people would agree: You are the most motherly character in all of Live-On.”

“Are you kidding me? There’s no way.”

“It’s a rare and charming trait, being oblivious to your own qualities. Here’s hoping you remain that way forever, mommy.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, let’s talk about something else.” I could sense the conversation going down a weird path, so I forcefully changed the topic. “How are things with your genmates, Kaeru-chan? Everything going well?”

“We are not quite as lovestruck with each other as you all in gen three, but gen four’s doing just fine. Just the other day, in fact, Kaeru went for a bite with her ane-san after a recording session.”

“Ah, Ehrai-chan? What’d you eat?”

“Fugu sashimi.”

“Actually? Not shying away from stereotypes, are we?”

“It was Kaeru’s idea. She certainly didn’t look happy taking me to her favorite fugu spot, but she did.”

“That’s nice. Oh, but speaking of Ehrai-chan—she doesn’t have a motherly vibe?”

“The vibe of a juvenile teenage delinquent mother, but sure.”

“Hey, mom’s a mom, right? Be they teenage, delinquent, or part of the Family…”

“She’s quite strict with Kaeru for some reason, though.”

“Aha ha. Well, who would she be strict with if not you?”

: So we're just not even going to pretend she's a zookeeper anymore?

: Behind the wholesomeness of this conversation lurks a malevolent presence ￥2,440

: there's just something delightfully absurd about ane-san being used to refer to an innocent zookeeper

: if she's a zookeeper where are the animals?

: fugu's an animal

: not when its thinly sliced and served on a cold platter raw
: Of course Ehrai-chan would have a favorite fugu spot lol
: she probably slurps it down twenty pieces at a time like Shimano

“I almost feel bad for Ehrai-chan,” I said. “She wanted to be the gentle girly girl so bad, but blew it almost immediately on her first stream.”

“Mommy, you say that like Live-On would’ve let a normal girly girl zookeeper join them in the first place.”

“Well, if you put it like that… But you know, you gotta respect her. She’s willing to say what most people won’t as long as it helps people learn about animals.”

“Yes, Kaeru won’t doubt her love for animals. Though Kaeru’s an animal too, so I wonder why she won’t love me.”

“You want her to love you? Like an animal? I’m sure that could be arranged.”

“Kaeru senses malice from your tone, so she’s going to have to ask you to stop.”

It seemed everything was going swimmingly between Kaeru and her genmates.

“What about your senpai? Everything good with them?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m proud to call you, among many others, my friends,” she replied.

“It’s nice to have coworkers who are mostly your age, isn’t it?”

“Did you know it’s considered rude to ask people their ages?”

“Oh, but you’d ask a baby their age, wouldn’t you? Kaeru-chan, how old are you? Can you show me with your fingers? How many is it?”

“Um, let’s see. Kaeru’s got no fingers up on *this* hand, and on her chopsticks-holding hand…one…two…three!”

“Huh? What are you— Oh, I see! Finger binary, huh.”

“Kaeru’s a virtual tuber, after all.”

“Yes, but maybe not *that* virtual. Oh, well. By the way, how do you feel about the person I’m competing against?”

“Hareru-senpai? She’s still intimidating in some ways, but she’s

always very up-front with Kaeru, which Kaeru really appreciates."

"She can be overly attentive, which can come off as overbearing. But it also means she tends to overthink things and hold herself back. So don't be afraid to be a bit more assertive around her."

"Well, if *you*, one of the mommies closest to her, says so, then who is Kaeru to say otherwise? Kaeru shall go on the offensive the next time she sees her."

"That's the spirit. First gen, shmirst gen! Make her your mommy all the same!"

```
: I can't blame Ehrai-chan. Getting accepted into
Live-On is already enough cause to start giving up
: she always did say she wants people to have a
deeper impression of animals that goes beyond their
cute or cool appearances
: the boss doesn't do baby play, but maybe she'll do
Child's Play?
: LMAO how in the world did you figure out it was
finger binary
: For those who still don't get it, close your left
hand into a fist and raise your right pinky, ring,
and middle fingers: 11100
: Kaeru-chan is right handed confirmed
: Now this is virtual tubing
: Kaeru-chan is twenty-(redacted) years old
: feels like that number should go up soon
considering how long she's claimed to be it
: forever twenty-(redacted)
: Yes, my name is written as 11100. No, you read it
as Kaeru Yamatani.
: Mama Harerun, huh? Can't imagine it.
```

"You know what, mommy? You really are motherly," Kaeru-chan suddenly said.

"This again?" I replied with a sigh.

"Would you really ask Kaeru how's she getting along with her

friends if you weren't a little invested?"

"..."

"Would you?"

"Shut it."

: HUH?! ￥50,000

: ?!?!

: T-Tsundere mommy!

: Mamama-ma Ma-mama!

: This is why you're my oshi!!!

That day, I felt like I had grown in some ways, but sadly, those ways were utterly unrelated to the watermelon endeavor. Back to the grind again tomorrow.

Today was more Watermelon Game. Unfortunately, Kaeru-chan was busy and couldn't join me. Hareru-senpai and I, however, had streams that lined up. So, for a change of pace, we decided to practice on call together as a little collab stream. I sipped on a can of StroZero, enjoying the conversation and casual gameplay.

"Hareru-senpai, how are things going over there?" I asked.

"I'm harvesting my grapes."

"Grapes? Why specifically grapes?"

"Ask the game that, not me! For some reason all I've been getting is grape after grape after grape. What is this, Hareru's Vineyard?! And I wouldn't even be complaining if grapes weren't so damn hard to combine!"

"True, the grapes are a bit of a pain, aren't they? It's the shape."

Compared to the other, rounder fruits, the unique shape of the grapes made them uniquely difficult to combine. Yes, it was a skill issue, but I gave Hareru-senpai a pass on this one, considering the sheer, uh, *quantity* she was dealing with.

And besides, this was exactly what I'd been hoping for when I'd chosen this game. *That's it. Keep going, Hareru-senpai's shit luck! More! More!!!*

"Drop you right here, and boom, boom, boom...boom?! No! Why did you do that?!" Hareru-senpai cried.

"What's wrong, senpai? More grapes?" I asked.

“No! It’s the physics of the game. The fruits don’t settle the way I envision in my head, so my whole strategy falls apart!”

“Wait. You’ve calculated in your head not just how the fruit drops, but how they all collapse when you combine something?”

“Yeah. It’s not too difficult. Except it is, because I just can’t seem to get my predictions right! I know it’s a game and not real fruit, so I shouldn’t expect them to move like real fruit, but they still look like fruit, so it just messes with my calculations!”

“R-Right?! When I play this game, I’m reminded of Darwin’s theory of natural selection!”

“Huh? Who said anything about Darwin?!”

```
: Hareruns screen looks like a different game
entirely LMAO
: damn, is that the new Grape Game?
: And yet she can never get a grape when she
actually wants it. Now that takes talent
: this is like knowing the sheet music to a piece by
heart but your instruments all play the wrong notes
when you try to play it
: hahaha Shuwa-chans little "look at me, I'm smart
too!" at the end was adorable
```

Okay, well, I didn’t quite understand all that, but it seemed at least that the game was proving even more difficult for Hareru-senpai than I had imagined. Nice. What was this if not Lady Luck telling me that I could win this thing?

“My condolences, senpai,” I said sarcastically.

“Grr. Yeah, well, what about you? How are you doing?”

“Not terribly, if I say so myself. In fact, I realized during my off-stream practice earlier that I might even be *good* at this game. Oof, that’s an awkward-looking space. I need a grape. Give me a grape… A grape!”

“Huh?! How come *you* get something the moment you want it?! That is ridiculous!”

“There’s nothing ridiculous about it. This was meant to be.”

“Yeah, right, buddy!”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. You still haven’t noticed yet, senpai?”

“What?! I missed something?!”

“Heh. You see, Hareru-senpai, I didn’t get the grape just now—the grape got me.”

“Ha ha ha, that doesn’t even make sense!”

“Oh, but it does. As I said, this was meant to be. The reason being…”

Hareru-senpai gulped loudly.

“Grape was once a StroZero flavor!”

“Ha ha ha, that doesn’t even make sense!”

“Oh, but it does. As I said, this was meant to be. The reason being…”

Hareru-senpai gulped loudly.

“Grape was once a StroZero flavor!”

“Ha ha ha, that doesn’t even make sense!”

“Oh, but it does. As I said, this was meant to be. The reason being…”

Hareru-senpai gulped loudly.

“Grape was once a StroZero flavor!”

“Ha ha ha, that doesn’t even make sense!”

“Huh? Are we trapped in a loop? Wait! Don’t tell me! Has my name been written into the Book of Life?!”

“Now who would do that, deface a perfectly good book?”

Darn it, this isn’t a loop. Then what was going on with this senpai of mine?

“Listen, we can’t stay here all day. Can you react with a ‘What did you say?!’ so we can move on?”

“No. Because what does that even have to do with anything, grape being a StroZero flavor?”

“Because I can affect the chances of any fruit dropping if it’s a current or past StroZero flavor? It works well for past flavors and even better for current ones.”

“So you’re telling me you think what you just said makes complete and total sense and isn’t ludicrous in the slightest?”

“Yes? Senpai, are you sure *you’re* okay? You know what, it’ll be faster just to show you. All right. Give me a grape! Nice. Give me another grape! Nice again.”

“? ? ? (⌒ ◡ ⌒) ? ? ?”

“Ohhh, you know what? I think the cause of your grape problem is also me. I’m subconsciously interfering with your gameplay

because I don’t want you to win.”

“? ? ? (◉ ◞ ◟ ◉) ? ? ?”

: Huh? Huh???
: chat is this real?
: the notion is so outlandish I refuse to even be surprised by it.
: Harerun confronts the biggest enigma of her life yet
: When the woman is too interesting
: can VTubers do that???
: it's just luck right? I mean even if the probabilities are one in a million there's still that one, right?
: apparently we are playing StroZero Game now

“What…? Could it be that I’m the crazy one?” Hareru-senpai murmured in disbelief. “Have I been playing this game wrong this whole time? Okay, let’s try it. Give me a persimmon! And…it’s a cherry.”

“Give me a dekopon! Ah, didn’t work this time.”

“Aha! See?! You can’t do it either! That just now was a coincidence. An absurd, nearly miraculous coincidence! Whew, I knew it! Yep, yep, yep, I definitely knew it! But you got me good there, Shuwacchi, I admit! You saw the one-in-a-million chance and you took it! Respect!”

“Oh, well, yeah, it doesn’t work with the dekopon that often. There’s no dekopon-flavored StroZero, right? There’s orange flavor, which is related, so I only get about a fifty-fifty chance that it works.”

“Aha ha ha! Of course, how could I have forgotten?! It’s not a StroZero flavor, so it doesn’t work all the time! Silly me—I mean, NOOOOO!!! This is messed up! This is manipulating game files! This is…!”

“If I’m manipulating game files, then so are you with Grape Mountain over there. Quit being a sore loser, senpai. It’s not my fault StroZero doesn’t love you back.”

“C-Condescend to me, will you?! We’ll see who has the last laugh

when you end up losing to me even with those reality-bending superpowers of yours! Calculate, brain, calculate!!! You've already mastered the physics in this game, don't go confounding it with reality! They are not fruit! Just pixels masquerading as fruit! I'm gonna drop you here, then you're gonna boom, boom, boom, boom—NICE! Perfect calculations!!!"

"And I'm the one who's supposedly cheating?"

: And now Live-On becomes the battle shonen it was always meant to be
: fuckkk I want to see this become an actual show so bad LMAO
: so this is a battle between two Live-On S-rankers...
: Hey Shonen Jump, heard you needed a new "big three"
: that'd be like if *Nakayoshi* serialized Death Note
: Ah yes. Shonen Jump's famous guiding principles: Friendship & Effort & Victory & Madness & Chaos
: this fulfills all five. send it and ship it
: we only need the first three fulfilled, thanks

The battle raged on as we traded blows, yet the day ended without a victor. Still, I was certain we both felt it—the day of reckoning was drawing near.

"Do you feel that buzz in the air, Kaeru-chan? Today's the day."

"Yes." Kaeru-chan nodded from right beside me.

That's right. From right beside me. We had talked about wanting to meet up at least once, so here she was, at my place, next to me, for an offline collab.

The time of reckoning was drawing near. I had a feeling that if today wasn't the day, then it would never be the day. With victory on the line, I was fired up like never before.

Now come on, game, show me what you got!

"Actually, mommy, Kaeru brought you a little previctory gift," Kaeru-chan suddenly said.

"Aw, you shouldn't have. What is it?" I asked.

“This full toddler playset.”

“Previctory? More like postpartum, get that outta here.” *So that’s what that giant box contains…* “Kaeru-chan, what did I just say about the buzz in the air? And you said, ‘Yes,’ didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“So why are you bringing in ‘gifts’ that would only sabotage my efforts?”

“To help you get buzzed.”

“Leave.”

“All right, then, Kaeru will just take this baby rattle she made for her mommy out of a StroZero can and lemon seeds and leave.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, let’s not be so hasty! Wow, is this the rattle? Oh my God, it’s so loud, I love it!”

```
: we're off to a Strong start, folks
: Kaeru-chan offline is a whole nother level of
yabai
: what happened to "leave"?
```

“And while mommy’s distracted by the rattle, dive into her arms! Ah, Shangri-La!”

“Hey! Get off me!”

“Shh. Don’t say anything, mommy. Kaeru just wants to watch you shake the rattle.”

“You know, mothers usually shake rattles to entertain the baby, not be entertained by the rattles themselves…”

“Details, details!”

Firmly wrapped around my midsection were the arms and the unmistakably mature face of a woman older than me calling me mommy this and mommy that. If I hadn’t already known Kaeru-chan was like this, I wonder how much more conflicted I would’ve felt about this…

“Since we’re here, might as well get that pesky teat-suckling promise out of the way, shall we?”

“Hell to the no! What happened to ten thousand days?!”

“You’re telling Kaeru you’d rather have an almost sexagenarian sucking on your nipples than one only in her late twenties?”

“Okay, good point.”

“Then we’re in agreement. Pardon my hands.”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey! I don’t think I’m ready! I’m really not going to enjoy this! Are you okay with that?”

“Kaeru doesn’t mind the disgust suck.”

“The disgust what?”

“It’s when you suck on the titties of a woman who’s clearly not into it.”

“Okay, good point.”

“So can Kaeru begin or what?”

“But I don’t want to be sucked, I want to suck as well!”

“Suck away—you have two nipples, don’t you?”

“Then why would I be disgusted sucking on my own boob?!”

```
: Kaeru-chan is positively vibrating with glee
: it's the long-awaited offline collab
: Shuwa-chan is the mommy who's disgusted yet horny at the same time so she's willing and not willing at the same time
: I don't like this mommy...
: I Want Me to Suck on My Own Titties with a Disgusted Face
: Sorry I don't think I'm quite degenerate enough yet to understand this
: Hi there, I'm a first time viewer. Can someone please explain to me what's going on between these two?
: Welcome to Live-On, unlike those other uptight orgs, we're freethinkers around here
: nah, we're just lewd
```

“Look, are you here to support me or not?!”

“Of course. Kaeru’s a whole buff by herself.”

“Now since when did you get so confident? Not that I’m one to talk, calling myself ‘genius’ all the time.”

“Since streaming with you. Every day is a joy with you, mommy.”

“Well, then I’m glad to hear that, aren’t I?”

Being one-half of a slapstick comedy duo was fun and all, but I

had a game to focus on, so I pulled myself back in. Then, as if it were no big deal, Kaeru-chan presented me with an actual previctory gift—snacks to keep me going! I couldn't have been more grateful. But, naturally, her support came with a twist, and I found myself grinding away while she playfully found ways to throw me off.

Though "grind" didn't really feel like the right word. This might have been a serious competition, but you'd never know from the levity in the room. Failure after failure didn't faze me; I kept going, my motivation intact.

Sure, Kaeru-chan was more helpful than I'd like to admit, but hadn't that been the plan all along? To have someone break the monotony of the grind? So even as the stream stretched on, creeping firmly into "endurance" territory, I felt anything but drained with Kaeru-chan by my side.

Then, on one of those rounds, it slipped in quietly, almost unnoticed, among the cascade of falling fruits—something magical.

"Kaeru-chan. Could this be it?"

"Barely any fruits are left over from the creation of the first watermelon. This is your best effort so far."

"Okay, then I'm going to concentrate."

"Good luck, mommy."

And just like that, Kaeru-chan quietly stopped her playful meddling. I figured it had something to do with how much she'd grown since joining Live-On, learning to play nice with others more easily.

I locked in, focused on avoiding careless mistakes, combining fruit after fruit...

```
: I WAS HERE
: those pinpoint grape placement skills are
remarkable
: Let's go!!!
: Nice!
: barring a can of StroZero suddenly dropping I
think this is the one
```

Apple, apple—pear.
Pear, pear—peach.
Peach, peach—pineapple.
Pineapple, pineapple—melon.
Melon, melon—
“LET’S FREAKING GOOOOOOOO!!!”
Watermelon.

The instant it came into existence, the second watermelon touched the first. Then both disappeared, leaving behind nothing but a wide, endless void.

I hadn’t received any messages from Hareru-senpai yet, which meant…

“I won!!! I freaking won!!! Kaeru-chan, come here, come here—it’s time!”

“Yes!”

We called Hareru-senpai, who was in the middle of her own endurance stream. We got ready, she picked up, and…

“Hey, senpai. You watching this?” I asked, my voice dripping with mockery.

“Senpai, we’ve got some *real* important news to share with you,” Kaeru-chan chimed in, her cheekiness right there alongside mine.

“You know your precious double watermelon, the one you’ve been losing sleep over, practically killing yourself to make?”

“Well, guess what?”

“We got to her first!!!” we crowed together, perfectly in sync.

: the absolute AUDACITY LMAOOOO ¥10,000
: they planned this, didn't they?
: Deference to one's superiors? What's that? ¥5,000
: Aaaand I can no longer bring myself to celebrate their victory ¥220
: not the NTR copypasta LMAOOOO
: AND HARERUN WAS SO CLOSE ON HER SIDE TOO UGHHH

An earth-shattering scream bleated from Hareru-senpai. Music. Pure music to my ears.

“Whew, that’s it, I won! I’m going to be riding this high for the rest of my life!” I said.

"*We* won, mommy. Don't forget your precious darling tyke right here."

"Not this again," I groaned, but then paused. "Actually…you know what? You're right."

Kaeru blinked. "Mommy?"

Usually, I'd toss back some sarcastic comment, but this time… Not today.

"We've been doing this for a while now, and while I'm no closer to understanding this weird dynamic we have going on, I'm starting to realize that…I don't hate it. Like that time I threw you under the bus with Shion-mama. Or this time, where—let's be real—I probably would've totally lost without you. I figure it's time to…admit it, I guess."

"Admit…it?" Kaeru-chan echoed hesitantly. "Admit what?"

"That I am proud to call you my baby, Kaeru-chan."

The words tumbled out of me somewhat haphazardly, the embarrassment getting to me in the moment. But now was the time to make my true feelings known, for who knew when I'd get another chance?

And yes, Kaeru-chan would probably make me pay for this, teasing me like never before for who knows how long, but, well… That was a small price to pay for all the help she'd given me.

So come on, Kaeru-chan—fawn over me all you want! But don't think for a second I'll cave to all your demands! I'm not the kind of parent who spoils their kid unconditionally. There will be no boob-sucking! Not today, at least!

My resolve firming, I glanced up at Kaeru-chan—only to catch a line of silver tracing its way down her cheek.

Huh?

SNIFF "Nnnh…"

Is she… Is she crying?! It was just so sudden and unexpected, I completely lost my head. "K-K-Kaeru-chan?! Wh-Wh-Wh-What's wrong?!"

What she said next only sent my mind spinning even faster. "Don't you remember? What Kaeru swore to you right before we parted on the day we first met?"

"Uh."

"Kaeru swore to you that she'd become someone you're glad to be called mommy by!"

R... Right... That rings a bell... Was that what she said when I found her collapsed on the floor at the Live-On offices?

That was so long ago I, uh, might have, totally... "Forgot! I'm sorry, Kaeru-chan, I totally forgot you said that! I didn't mean to, like, do a callback or anything!"

"N-N-Nngggggghhhhh." She whimpered even harder.

"A-Ah?! Sorry! Sorry, sorry! So sorry! I really am Dagger-chan's master, sorry!"

"No, it's..." **SNIFF** "You didn't mean to say it, but you said it anyway. That means you really meant it, doesn't it?"

"Uh? Oh. Uh. I guess?"

"W-W-WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH."

"Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey! Oh, crap, what do I do? Just calm down, Kaeru-chan, don't cry. Ah! Right, the baby rattle! Kaeru-chan, look what mommy has!" I shook that thing with all my might.

"UWAAAAAAAAH, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME MOMMY'S TREATING ME LIKE A BABY, UWAAAAAH!!!"

"Oh, for— Ahhh!!! Somebody!!! Help me!!!"

: what are these two idiots doing...
: well, it sounds like somebody forgot something they really shouldn't have forgotten
: eh, that collab was ages ago
: all the way back when gen 4 debuted LOL
: when everything you say to try and stop someone from crying just makes them cry harder
: congrats? ￥30,000
: did not think Kaeru-chan would actually find herself a mother today
: baby gift ￥50,000
: Oshi no Ko (Live-On edition)
: ♪ kimi wa kanpeki de kyuukyoku no COMEDIAN ♪ ￥10,000
: Welp, this is gonna get clipped, isn't it
: clipped and snipped and trimmed and sheared
: After that display of sore-winnerism I said I

wasn't going to celebrate but goddamnit! ￥22,000
: Guys, do something about Harerun she's actually losing her mind now
: she's still on the call??? LMAO
: Awa and Kaeru attack in tandem as mother and child!
: goku and gohan taking down super perfect cell
: precious
: soooo can I count this as a happy ending?
: its a Live-On ending if nothing

"Mommy, believe Kaeru when she says this is the happiest day of her life."

"R-Really. Well, then, I'm…glad? I guess?"

"Yes."

Kaeru-chan, in grand defiance of all my expectations, remained a blubbering mess for the rest of the stream.

I kind of hated myself for not entirely matching the seriousness of the moment, but…I'd won the challenge, my child looked as happy as could be…so, really, what more could I have asked for?

Idle Talk: Alice Soma's Castella Q&A

"I'll be answering some Castellas!"

Q: Finished my Awayuki top drinking noises compilation. Let us watch it at our next regular meeting, along with my epic seiso scream compilation.

"Unfortunately, I've made both of those already."

: is this real life?
: If I had a nickel every time someone out there made a drinking noise and screaming compilation of one specific oddball VTuber, I'd have two nickels, which isn't a lot but it's weird that it happened twice
: it's so they can show both to Awayuki and have her guess who made which one

Q: If Shuwa-chan were a StroZero flavor, what flavor would she be?

“Whatever flavor of StroZero she was drinking at the time.”

```
: Okay am I stupid or is that not what the question is asking?
: the two are not mutually exclusive but that is definitely not what the question is asking
: what is she, Kirby?
: Copy Ability confirmed
: still after that uvula, eh Alice?
```

Q: A tipsy Awayuki Kokorone is in front of you right now. Wyd?

“When is she not tipsy, am I right?”

```
: LOL
: Alice-chan running through these questions like its a home run derby
: not like Alice-chan couldn't actually see a drunk Shuwa-chan if she just went drinking with her
```

“D-Drinking with Awayuki-dono? Like in person? Won’t I be smited by the gods for such an indiscretion?”

```
: if that happens i'll tell the gods off for you
: Shuwa-chan probably the one to get smited
: let's hope the gods are the only authorities to cast judgment on you
: two girls chillin' in a bar zero feet apart cuz they're super gay
: postcoital? postmortem.
```

“If that happened in real life… No, no, it can’t!”

Q: Do you ever do any non-Shuwa-chan related streams? You’re either streaming yourself talking about Shuwa-chan or

streaming yourself survei—I mean, keeping a close eye—uh, doing a stream watchalong. Please tell me you do.

“Of course I do! Yes, I’ll admit, it was her stream of legend that got me hooked on Awayuki-dono. I’ll admit that my love for her kept growing and growing until it finally exploded when I debuted, and for a while, it was all Awayuki all the time. But now, I’m proud to say that I’ve made tons of friends here at Live-On, and I’ve come to love not just Awayuki-dono, but the entire Live-On crew!”

: she really does deserve Live-On's most improved communicator award
: aww, yer precious ¥220
: don't forget, this girl's a senpai now!
: But she still does seem to put a word in for Awayuki at the most (in)appropriate times
: girl's got a quota

Q: When you’re not streaming, what’s the thing you spend most of your time on? (You can’t say anything Awayuki-related)

“I can’t say anything Awayuki-related? Then, um… I guess… Uhh…”

: gotta think that hard, huh?
: Awayuki is her private life
: When you said "exploded," that implied the explosion period was over
: All these darn questions have to do with Awayuki

“Ah! I live at home, so I help out my parents, I guess!”

: that was the most seiso answer you could have possibly given, well done.
: what a gap
: save that answer for next time so you can answer straightaway!

Q: What was your favorite piece of children's literature growing up? Was it *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*?

"I love *Alice in Wonderland*, but I remember also being a big Kenji Miyazawa fan! In particular, I loved *Night on the Galactic Railroad*! Something about the world just drew me in."

: Awayuki's Adventures in StroZeroland
: Is that about the alternate universe where Awayuki finds employment at Moontory?
: Oh dang. A Kenji Miyazawa fan
: Who knew that the young girl who once happily read Night on the Galactic Railroad now obsesses over one Awayuki Kokorone. Life is full of surprises ￥5,000
: I wish I too can find true happiness one day ￥10,000
: a woman of great taste. both then and now.

Q: They say "if pushing doesn't work, try pulling," so why not try and change your behavior around Awayuki-dono? You might just create the perfect situation where your oshi can't help but notice the difference, thereby becoming interested in you. What do you say?

"You have a point, but that would go counter to one of Awayuki-dono's most famous teachings: 'In fact, if a man thinks a woman is charming, he should just pop one (a boner) on the spot.' Straightforwardness is the key!"

: a teaching even most cults would shun for being too out there
: a smoldering ember of a teaching liable to become the inferno to burn down Live-On
: oh don't worry, it was a raging dumpster fire even when she said it
: but aren't you a woman?
: I think if you just show her more of that sweet and charming side that you showed during Shion-mamas thing, she'd fall for you in no time...

“Th-That was just… Th-That wasn’t supposed to happen, got it?!”

Idle Talk: Ehrai Sonokaze’s Castella Q&A

“It’s time to answer a few Castellas~!”

Q: Dear Mr. Boss, just curious—what’s your go-to punishment when one of the boys steps outta line? Do you cut them up and feed them to pigs, demand they self-amputate a pinky, give ’em the ole cement shoes and throw them in the StroZero river? Just some of my thoughts, but eager to hear yours!

Q: Hey boss! You know you’re the queen, no question! Listen, we’ve had a lotta noise around the den lately—scuffles here, scuffles there. How do you wanna handle it? If you ask me, we round up all them knuckleheads, line ’em up, and you show ’em a little of that tough love, you know what I’m saying? Lay down the law, know what I’m saying? Course you know what I’m saying, you’re the boss, you always know what I’m saying!

Q: Sup zookeep, housekeep, shopkeep, gatekeep, barkeep, bar keepers friend. Whatever you want me to call you, I gotchu! So what’s it gon’ be? What? You want me to keep calling you zookeep? Oh fine, but only because I love you! You’re the boss, boss!

“And that’s all the time we have for today~!”

```
: WHAT
: I saw plenty of Q but no A???
: three strikes yer out!
: batting practice but every fourth ball is a live hand grenade
: hey that's a funny-looking ball (boom)
```

“If you all want to take a swing at these questions, then be my guest! I don’t have a ‘go-to punishment,’ I don’t ‘lay down the law,’ and I am certainly not a boss, boss!”

: Whaddya talkin' about, boss? Did you forget everything we've ever been through?
: Hey! Someone get Dagger-chan over here now!
: Dagger-chan? Are you crazy? One "ah?" from her and all the rest of them memories will be gone too!
: Then get Awayuki! She has experience with (temporary) memory recovery!
: No! Anyone but her! If she unlocks any more of the boss's hidden power, she'll end up straight in retirement!
: What's greater than a boss? a retired boss

Q: How are things with you and Chami-chan lately?
"She treated me to this lovely bird-noises ASMR yesterday."

: really
: oh wow, that's cool. didn't know Chami-chan was a bird whisperer
: that's so sweet! ¥1,000

"It really is. She made all the bird noises herself~."

: lol
: this girl really will do ASMR everything
: "the zookeeper likes animals, I'm good at ASMR, I know, animal ASMR!" - Chami-chan, probably
: Chami-chan still chamming it up
: Maybe it's time to give the kid a break?

"Mm, perhaps. I *have* been enjoying her antics lately~. She's charming in her own silly, dopey way."

: hoho!
: progress!
: you gotta become a dog to become Ehrai-chan's dawg

Q: Any tattoos, ~~boss~~ zookeeper? Think about getting any

tattoos?

"Body art, you say~?"

: body art???
: please do not censor user Castellas to your benefit~
: that euphemism LMAO
: stop trying to beat the yakuza allegations, you can't do it
: ¥1,000

"If I had to choose, maybe a small animal one would work, but honestly, I think I'm better off without one~. I'm a zookeeper. And whether we like it or not, self-expression like that is still somewhat frowned upon in Japan. I'd rather avoid anything that might be a questionable influence on young, impressionable children~."

: How upstanding!
: Ehrai, you're so *erai* (commendable) ¥8,000
: But, but... you're the boss...
: are there any children viewers in the first place?
: let's not ask that question around here

Q: Any latest animal obsession we should know about?

"Lately I've been rather partial to the red-shanked douc. It's those sad, melancholic eyes. Something about them just draws me in and steals my breath away~."

: the red-shanked what
: I looked it up. It's a monkey
: wow, they're so colorful
: It's like a patchwork of four animals in one!
: Damn... These things are so cool
: that's my zookeeper!!! ¥3,000

Q: Boss! I mean, zookeeper! Good evening!!! I remember you said you had a phase where you were big on yakuza flicks, but

what about yakuza games??? Any interest in playing those, or better yet, streaming those? I know I'd watch!

"I know I'm a big ole normie for saying this, but I'd love to play one of the *Like a Dragon* games one day~! It's not officially in the cards yet, but hopefully one day~."

: big ol normie, she says
: Yeah, I'm a N.O.R.M.I.E.: Notorious Outlaw Rebelling against Mainstream Institutions and Establishments
: never been a better time to get into *Like a Dragon*!
: or *Yakuza* as it used to be known in the west. Kinda liked that name better. It's simple.
: Z O O K E E P ¥9,680

Q: Before you were the boss, you were this meek, gentle zookeeper who was knowledgeable about animals, but otherwise, honestly didn't stand out much compared to the dumpster fires that were your two genmates. But after the boss side of you came out, your usual(?) soft-spoken, gentle side just became all the more emphasized and I love that about you. You're my favorite member of gen four! (Sorry, this isn't really a question, is it?)

"I don't care if it isn't a question, this is the best thing I've read all week~! Thank you for sending this in, thank you! It's so good to know there are people like you out there. Oh, I'm so happy. You, my friend, are now my favorite viewer and I would like to personally invite you to Ehrai Zoo!"

: heartwarming
: great question!
: personal invite?!
: run my friend, she's going to put you out on display in a pen as her "favorite viewer"
: she never said she was inviting him as a guest

“Hm, hm, hmm! ♪”

```
: She's not denying it. Sus...
: well this is rare
: she must be *really* happy
: Ehrai Zoo. You can come but you can never leave
: Eek.
```

Idle Talk: Dagger’s Castella Q&A

“Awww yeah, time for some Castellas!”

Q: Where did you come from, where did you go? Where did you come from, Live-On-Eyed Joe? (Translation: What was it that sparked your interest in Live-On, taking you from a fan to part of their talent roster?)

“I don’t know if there’s one particular thing. I was just bored on YoTube one day when I… Uh. I mean, I was lost on the streets of Tokyo when I stumbled into the Live-On offices! It was fate!”

```
: hahaha
: it's okay, we'll pretend we didn't hear that
: That's right, Dagger-chan. You got through the selection process with sheer, raw talent and no previous knowledge whatsoever
: Whenever †-chan says "Uh, I mean," it means whatever she said before it doesn't count
: she was trying to say the "lost on the streets of Tokyo" bit the whole time, just mispronounced a few words the first time!
```

Q: Do you like cheesy Hamburg steaks? If so, do you prefer the cheese in the patty or on the patty?

“Boy, do I ever! In the patty, on the patty, either-or!”

Q: Are there any foods besides Hamburg steak that you enjoy enough to make you regain your memories?

Q: So you remember now, right?

“I know of no other memory-addling elixirs than that of the

Hamburg steak! And no, I am still an amnesiac.”

: Whoa! You did it! You answered that one in character! ￥2,000
: Most wholesome chuuni ever with the Hamburg steak being the key to everything
: Slap some cheese on that bad boy and it'll have her remembering things from her past life
: probably a *GochiUsa* character in her past life

Q: Hello, I play sax, but I’m struggling to find any songs I resonate with. Any recs for a cool song I can learn?

“You play sex? What?”

: Hello?!
: Bad! Bad Dagger-chan!
: God, the dirty jokes are like jump scares with this kid
: they really do come at you from nowhere lol
: Sax! S A X!

“Oh, okay, whoops, my bad! That’s totally an ‘a’ and not an ‘e’! But what’s a sax? I’m gonna ask my master; hopefully she picks up. Hello? Master? What’s sex? Aha ha ha!” **CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP CLAP** “Sorry, that was a joke. Sax, I meant sax. Oh, it’s an instrument? Oh, it’s that golden, tube-y one? Then do you know any cool songs that include it? Oh! That works, thanks! Bye! Okay, everyone, she said ‘Loreley’ by L’arc en Ciel!”

: this little prankster...
: Awayuki's not her closest senpai for nothing
: the sheer gamut of emotions she must have just gone through now bahahaha
: just remember the french horn is also golden and tube-y but it is not the same thing
: the master and apprentice joint Q&A!
: wow, excellent song choice. now that is a hidden

gem
: trueeee
: a lot of thought went into that recommendation
: a little chuuni song for a little chuuni Dagger
: Sorry, Master, but this is what it is

Q: What's Churi-sen like on a normal day?

"She's a lot less prickly than she is on stream. This one time, I mentioned I loved eating canelé, and after that, I think she buys me some every time she goes to the convenience store."

: who's cutting onions
: now that is precious
: like a kind old grandmother who never forgets what their granddaughter said they liked to eat that one time
: What a doting, kind sensei

"Also, she's been a little different lately. Like she feels more...cool."

: hm?
: now what could that be?
: it's Live-On so it can't be good

Chapter Six

Live-On

“I’m stopping Tadasu-san.”

Churiri-sensei had asked to talk, so I’d picked up the phone—and after all this time, the first thing I heard from her was that.

“She messaged me today, saying she was going to meet with Hareru-san. It’s too little too late, but that’s what finally made up my mind. When she gets back, I’m going to talk her out of leaving.”

“Right,” I said, letting her words wash over me as I simply nodded along.

“I’ve realized something. It’s about Tadasu-san’s and Dagger-san’s happiness—it’s always been. It was through seeing them happy that I wanted to be saved myself. Surprising, isn’t it? And ironic—but I suppose I’d rather call it karma.”

She ended her words with a light giggle, at which I laughed too, making it a shared moment. Because come on, how much more “sensei” can you get than that?

“Tadasu-san is a lot like me. Dagger-san, though, couldn’t be more different,” Sensei continued. “And it was watching the two of them, so dissimilar yet happy all the same, that saved me. It showed me that there were people like them in this world—people I could learn to love.”

She paused for a second. When her voice resumed, it felt like a release, a freeing from the shackles that had chained her for all the long years of her life:

“Turns out, even if I can’t feel sexual attraction toward people, I can still love them with everything I have.”

Her words wound on like a confession, curiously in the past tense, as if she were speaking about a version of herself she no longer was.

“All I ever wanted was to belong. I tried so hard to fit in as a human, and when that didn’t work, I convinced myself I must be an alien, just to fit in *somewhere* in this cold, infinite universe. I hated myself for not belonging, for being born this way.” She took

a breath, steady now. “But after meeting the girls, after meeting everyone, I realized that people are more varied, more complex, than I’d ever imagined. And so, for the first time in my life, I felt like I might actually belong here.”

Conviction firmed up her voice. “That’s why I’m stopping her. I don’t care if she thinks leaving’s what’s best for her. I don’t even know what I’ll say yet. But for someone so similar to me, Live-On is the best place. She may not want to be here, but she needs to be. *I* need to be.”

“Right.”

“*You* saved me, Awayuki-san. Thank you. Thank you so very much.”

“...Right.”

Even through the phone, I could tell that her head was bowed low.

In the end, all I could do was nod and say “right.”

Then, when she hung up the call, I immediately called a certain someone else.

Meanwhile, at the Live-On offices...

“Hey, sorry for making you come all the way here,” Hareru said.

“Not at all. I appreciate you taking the time to see me,” Tadasu replied.

They sat across from each other in an empty conference room. Much like Awayuki and Churiri, they hadn’t spoken to each other since Tadasu’s breakdown.

“So, what’s up, Tadasu-chan? You called me out here in quite a hurry today,” Hareru said.

“I wanted to let you know that I’ve come to a decision,” Tadasu replied.

Hareru paused before speaking. “You know I didn’t exactly give you a deadline, right?”

“I know, but I’ve stopped streaming for almost a month now. I don’t wish to cause any more trouble for Live-On and its viewers. But before that, there’s something important I wanted to share with you.”

“I see. Then share away, I’m all ears!”

Tadasu was different than usual. There was a longer, wiser gaze to her that let Hareru know it was her role to listen.

“It’s about me, Tadasu Miyauchi,” Tadasu said, then looked at Hareru.

“Sure.” Hareru nodded, more solemn now, sensing the gravity of the moment.

“When I debuted as Tadasu Miyauchi, I remember I said one thing,” Tadasu began. Slowly, deliberately, almost as if reading aloud. “I said that I enjoy the process of uncovering hidden things, but not the answer awaiting me at the end of the line. I never understood why I said that. Though that implies I even tried to understand it. But now, after everything that’s happened, I finally get it. I understand why I hated finding out the answer so much.”

She paused, as if reflecting on her discovery.

“Because every time I reach that hidden truth…”

It was that fragile, self-resembling thing that had once given Churiri pause.

“I always think, ‘Oh, is that all?’”

The essence of Tadasu Miyauchi.

“There’s always something off. It’s never the way I imagined it would be. That beautiful truth in my head is always a little tarnished, a little incomplete in reality. That’s when I realized… Everything I touch loses its luster. And by extension, I was losing mine.”

Hareru said nothing.

“But even then, I wanted to be good. I believed I could be a good person. But no matter how hard I tried, that ideal was stripped away from me, bit by bit.”

She remained silent, only allowing Tadasu to pour out her heart.

“How was I supposed to keep going in a world that broke my heart at every turn? The so-called good people of this world—they’re nothing but sadists who take pleasure in yanking out every nail that dares raise its head, reveling in the joy of bending it until it snaps. There’s no meaning, no allure left in the unexplained wonders or mysteries of the world. Not when everything can be dissected and explained by science and rationality.”

Tadasu paused, as if the weight of those thoughts had taken her back to darker days.

“These thoughts consumed me, pushed me to my limit. I became disillusioned. And I knew…if I grew any more disillusioned,

I'd become a bad person. So what did I do? I rejected reality. If ignorance truly brings happiness, then that's what I'd be. I'd live in my mind, in a world where everything was perfect, where I could be the good person I once thought I was."

The girl who loved imagination more than anyone else had found herself in denial of all aspects of reality.

In a way, this was a denial of imagination itself. This was simply a way of deceiving herself, playing pretend that she could be a good person. But to become a truly good person through pretending? Though the paradox both puzzled and intrigued Hareru, she let Tadasu continue.

"The fetishism derived from my overactive imagination was nothing more than an excuse. Loving all things hidden was just a fanciful way of saying I turned a blind eye to the world, its people, and myself. That was why I enrolled myself in a strict ladies' school, so I could brainwash myself into believing it. There, in that last bastion of order in this modern world, where it was enforced to live as obedient 'good girls,' it was easiest to deceive myself. There, I could be the person I thought I was. But it wasn't to last. Graduation was approaching, and I was so close—so close to closing the loop, to fully convincing myself of my own righteousness, when *it* happened."

Tadasu's rhythmic, storytelling tone broke down. She let the moment hang before she spat out the next words with full force.

"Freaking Live-On happened!"

It had been a serious conversation up until then, but the absurdity of hearing that name in this context was too much. Both Hareru and Tadasu burst out laughing.

"That's true," Hareru said, still trying to stifle a snicker. "Totally true. Live-On happened, didn't it?"

"It's not funny!" Tadasu said through a snort. "I was seriously upset then, you know?"

"I bet you were—trying to cover yourself up with your 'good person' act the whole time, then in walks this band of merry folk who don't even try to be modest as they strut around shamelessly."

"Honestly, I thought I'd lost my mind! At least if people pretend to be normal, I could fill in the gaps with my imagination. But you guys didn't even give me that! Just full frontal, all the time! All my

plans, ruined! At the time, I thought I couldn't let you get away with it."

"But that's not why you applied, isn't it?"

With all the subtlety of a car crash, Hareru brought the conversation to a sudden, jarring halt. Tadasu was left momentarily speechless.

"You didn't join just to get revenge on us, did you? There's another reason. The *real* reason."

She couldn't help but think that Hareru had timed that line perfectly, hitting when it would hurt the most.

And of course, she wasn't wrong.

"You've seen through me from the very beginning, haven't you?" Tadasu said, letting out a laden sigh. "You truly are a terrifying opponent."

"Really? Thanks! I was starting to think I'd lost my touch after Shuwacchi wiped the floor with me."

"And just like that, the conversation's derailed. Live-On. Even the name itself invites chaos. It almost makes me wonder why—" Tadasu shook her head. "No, that chaos is exactly why I found it so damn unfair."

Tadasu's voice changed as she spoke. It became lighter, more natural. As if she'd finally set down a weight. Her true voice, the one she had turned a blind eye to for so long she had forgotten it was even there, peeked out once more.

Unfairness. In other words, envy. This was the reason Tadasu had resented Live-On.

"Why should they get to act so boldly, flaunt themselves like that, and still be loved for it? Sure, you could say I brought this on myself—that it was just a clash of philosophies, mine against Live-On's. And in the end, I lost. But I lost because I was alone. My obsession with perfection only made me intolerant—of my peers, of everyone. And what even is that 'beautiful truth' I clung to, anyway? Forcing my ideals down others' throats? It's absurd. I was immature. So, so immature..."

"Mm... Well, can't really blame yourself for not seeing the bigger picture when you're backed into a corner, can you?" Hareru said.

"But that's just it, isn't it?" Tadasu replied. "When all the excuses have run dry, when we're cornered with no escape, isn't that when we show our true selves? My seniors have helped me see it: I am

weak. A pitiful, fragile excuse for a human being."

"I see. Then this really wasn't all just a fetish thing to you."

Tadasu's self-blaming words swirled in Hareru's mind. She closed her eyes, let the weight of their conversation settle, then after a quiet breath:

"I knew it. You're a diamond in the rough."

Tadasu couldn't believe her ears. "I'm a... I'm a *what*?"

"From the moment I met you, Prez, I saw it. You were a mass of raw talent, just waiting to be refined. There was some baggage there, for sure, a little work to be done to shape and hone that talent, but if we could just get to it, there was the potential to create something incredible."

"Were you even listening to me? I'm not a diamond or a mass of talent or any of that. I'm just weak."

"No, you're not." Hareru dismissed the notion effortlessly. "You think someone weak would go to such lengths to try and prove to themselves that they're a good person?"

The question struck Tadasu silent.

"That was a sign of your strength, Prez—more than anything. You're intensely sensitive, and so is your imagination. You saw more of the world's darkness than most people ever will. And yet, despite all that, you fought to be good. Even when you were at your lowest, you didn't let go of that last spark of hope. Does that sound like weakness to you? Sure, you could've done things differently. But the heart behind it? That heart is rare, and it's worth something, Prez. That's what I see in you."

"Do I really...have the right to belong here?" Tadasu croaked weakly.

"Sure you do. You passed the selection, didn't you?" Hareru offered her a gentle smile.

Tadasu let out a soft chuckle. "Well, when you put it that way..."

"Make no mistake, I didn't bring you in out of pity. But at the same time, that's all in the past. What you choose to do now, in the future—that's entirely up to you."

"Entirely up to me," Tadasu murmured softly, letting the weight of it sink in.

"You're young; you got your whole life ahead of you. If you ask me, I would like you to stay in Live-On, of course. But if deep down you feel like you don't deserve Live-On, or maybe even like Live-On

doesn't deserve you, then that's your decision to make. You have the gift of realization right now. It's a sign that you're trying to become the shining star you really are. And if the place you shine brightest isn't Live-On, then so be it."

Silence.

"But can I leave you with one final, neutral thought? No persuasion, no pushing you in any direction."

Tadasu looked suspiciously at Hareru. "What is it?"

"Let's say...the whole world is evil, fundamentally so. You, me, everyone. But does that mean anyone's to blame for it? You, me, anyone?"

The conference room fell into a heavy stillness. Both of them knew they had said everything that needed to be said. Whatever came next would be the final word, the conclusion.

Tadasu found an endless battle within herself. Hareru waited for the outcome. Patiently, quietly—no matter how long it took.

The moment stretched on. Second after second. Minute after minute. Then, after what felt like an eternity, Tadasu looked up, eyes blazing with newfound determination.

"I will."

The words echoed in the silence, charged with finality. She stood, her voice rising with conviction.

"I, Miyauchi, will...!"

"Hm?"

Stepping outside the Live-On offices, Tadasu noticed that Churiri had texted her during the meeting.

"She wants to talk to me at home, does she?"

With no other plans for the day, she agreed and made her way to Churiri's apartment. When she arrived, she rang the doorbell and—

"Hey, you're here!"

"Dagger-chan?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's me. Come in, come in!"

To Tadasu's surprise, it wasn't Churiri who greeted her at the door, but Dagger. Before she could react, Dagger grabbed her hand and pulled her inside the apartment, leading her straight to the living room. There, standing awkwardly in the center, was a visibly nervous Churiri.

“She’s here, like you asked!” Dagger called out.

“R-Right. Welcome.”

“Hm?” Tadasu murmured, one eyebrow rising at Churiri’s unusual stiffness.

Dagger trotted over to Churiri and poked her in the side. “Hey! Say something! I only agreed to this because you’re the one who had ‘so much to say,’ remember?” Dagger whispered, though not quietly enough.

“I-I was getting to it! Don’t rush me!” Churiri whispered back.

Catching Tadasu’s confused look, Churiri cleared her throat, trying to compose herself. She locked eyes with Tadasu and, after a deep breath, spoke in a firm but slightly shaky voice.

“Tadasu-san. Please don’t quit Live-On. If you just quit, I need you to contact them right now and tell them you reconsidered.”

Tadasu’s eyes widened.

“Who cares if you’re not perfect? Who cares if you’re a little hypocritical? I’m one of the many fans who love you *exactly* as you are, and that’s more than enough reason for you to stay! The next time you’re struggling, reach out to us first—we’re here for you! So don’t you dare think about quitting on me!”

Right after receiving advice from one person, here was another telling her something completely different. *People really are all over the place,* Tadasu thought again with a sigh.

Before, she would have taken this constant push and pull as another reminder of how disjointed and complicated people were—a source of frustration, something inherently negative. But now, something inside her had changed.

Since joining Live-On, Tadasu had finally confronted what she’d been avoiding all her life: seeing people for what they truly were. In the past, those brief glimpses of others’ true selves had always seemed ugly, imperfect—*incomplete*. She’d found it easier, almost safer, to rely on her own idealized versions of people rather than deal with their flawed realities. Her imagination had always been more comfortable than the unpredictable mess of existence. But when it came to the members of Live-On, she’d realized that that old, comfortable way of thinking didn’t apply anymore.

Sure, these were strange people, chaotic in ways that made her question everything she knew about human behavior. They were brash, unruly, lacked anything resembling modesty or

mindfulness—so much so that to talk about them in any relation to the word “better” seemed laughable. And yet…could she honestly say she preferred keeping them as figments in her mind rather than the raw, vibrant reality?

Were they “good” people? Tadasu wasn’t sure if she could say yes. After all, one person’s good intentions could easily be another person’s malice. That perfect, harmonious world she’d used to cling to, that vision where everyone could understand each other, live peacefully, and fit neatly into her mind’s framework…maybe it had never existed at all.

But here was the surprising truth: People weren’t defined by whether or not they fit into those tidy little boxes. The world itself wasn’t completely painted over with the filth she’d once feared.

And how did she know this?

Because the time she’d spent with these chaotic, messy people, who didn’t even bother hiding their true selves, had been undeniably *fun*.

Because the days when she let herself voice the thoughts she’d used to bury deep down inside were filled with a sense of *freedom*.

And because even now, the raw, ugly, complicated emotions that raged in her heart were, no matter what anyone else might say, *beautiful*.

Tadasu knew herself now, in a way she hadn’t before. And even with her flaws laid bare, she could say this without hesitation: The emotions she had felt while spending time with the girls at Live-On—the joy, the anger, the sadness, the excitement, and even the kindness—were undeniably real. They were hers. Genuine and unfiltered.

“Well, then, shall we stream?” Tadasu asked simply.

“Huh?” the other two replied.

“You want me to stay in Live-On, don’t you? Then let’s stream. Come on, let’s go, get ready.”

At Tadasu’s word, the trio quickly prepared themselves for a guerrilla live stream. When they were ready, the stream hummed to life, and the one to speak first, stealing the chance away from everyone else, was Tadasu Miyauchi.

“How do you all do, everyone? Live-On gen five, Tadasu Miyauchi here.”

The young girl who couldn’t find refuge in her imagination or in

reality found it in the virtual world.


NTROL
Start Streaming
Start Recording
Monitor Mode

Against the backdrop of a sky ablaze with the colors of sunset, I stared intently at the screen of my phone.

“Awacchi! Since when did you have such a flair for the dramatic?”

The voice behind me broke through the silence, and when I turned, there stood Hareru-senpai, grinning as if she were in on a private joke.

We were on the rooftop of Live-On’s office. After my conversation with Churiri-sensei, I’d texted Hareru-senpai, asking to meet up here.

“So, what’s this consultation all about?” she asked, a playful lilt in her voice. “With everyone coming to me for advice today, I think I’ll get my confidence back any day now!”

“Tadasu-chan?” I asked knowingly.

“Yeah. Just got done with her,” she said, glancing briefly down before looking back up at me. “But before you start, let me ask you something, Awacchi. You already knew things would turn out this way, didn’t you?”

I hesitated for a moment, but there was no point dodging her. “That’s kind of what I wanted to talk about,” I admitted.

“Thought that might be the case.”

I smiled wryly. Hareru-senpai, sharp as a tack like always. But it was never a bad thing for someone to be quick on the uptake. I needed to talk to her about a lingering unease—not quite anxiety, but still unsettling—that this episode had brought about.

“I’ve been thinking about how this all played out,” I began, my words tentative. “If this had happened to the old me, I would’ve thrown myself right into the middle of things, no questions asked. But this time…I ended up moving in the background, like some kind of shadow broker.”

“Right,” she said, nodding.

“And honestly…yeah, I somehow knew how it would end. I saw it coming. And when it happened, just like I predicted…it scared me. Scared me that I was right.”

“Scared, eh?”

“It feels…weird when everything falls into place, you know? It’s never happened to me. I’m scared of where that might take me, of what I might become. I mean, if I could turn out like you, Hareru-senpai, it wouldn’t be so bad. But what if I’m already at my peak?

What if this is it, and I just end up withering away?"

"Aha ha ha ha ha ha!"

The response to my heartfelt admission? A loud and brazen laugh.

"H-Hey! I'm being serious here!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" she said, trying to catch her breath. "I just — You've really forgotten, haven't you?"

"Forgotten? What?"

"Okay, Awacchi, here's the deal," she said, her tone shifting ever so slightly. "You've got something in you. Something huge. A drive, an ambition that's going to take you to far greater heights than I've ever reached. So—no need to worry about stuff like that."

"What... What do I have?"

"Mm... Not gonna tell you, because it's more interesting that way. But you have my Harerun guarantee. You're going to be just fine."

"O...kay...?"

If this were anyone else, I would've called them out for not taking me seriously. But because this was Hareru-senpai, *the* Hareru-senpai, I actually felt reassured.

"This is just what growth feels like, Awacchi. You did good this time. What's most important when a crisis hits? The people involved. By stepping back and being hands-off, you supported them in ways that helped them grow on their own. If you'd just ordered Churi-sen to stay positive or I'd just forced Prez to stick around, none of this would have worked out as it did, right?"

"I...suppose not," I muttered, still processing her words.

"And you suppose correct! You did a good job, Awacchi!" she said, her energy and confidence cutting off any chance of further argument. She reached out and gently patted my head.

There were still things she wasn't telling me, things she'd been deliberately vague about. But I had a feeling that even if I pressed her, she wouldn't give me any more answers. So I decided to trust her. To trust the confidence she had in me—and with that, I let my lingering unease rest.

"By the way, whatcha watching there?" Hareru asked.

"Gen five's streaming," I replied.

"Ooh, guerrilla, huh?"

I shifted my phone so she could see. "They're talking about

Tadasu-chan's hiatus, explaining things in full to the viewers. A rare peek behind the curtain. Interesting stuff."

"Aw, that's sweet!" Hareru crooned.

"Sweet, among other things..."

To better illustrate what I meant, I shut up and lent my ear to what gen five was saying.

"I, Miyauchi, will no longer stand as an anti, but as a distinct member of Live-On, here to share the wonders of imagination with you all! First, about Live-On: This place? It's Eden."

"Ah?" came Dagger-chan's tiny, tentative voice.

"And as for me," Churiri-sensei added, *"know that your sensei has finally come to terms with herself. So, objective ships? Not good enough anymore. From now on, I'm setting my sights on something bigger. I'm going to have SEX with every object in the world!"*

"A-Ah?"

I let out the longest sigh. "See what I mean? Tadasu-chan, sure, you can say what she's doing is the logical next step for her, but Sensei? Why did Live-On's most unhinged member by a long shot decide she needed to be even more unhinged? Make it make sense, Hareru-senpai!"

"But *you* were the one who talked to Churi-sen, weren't you?"

"Okay, but I didn't know she would end up like this!!! I did not predict this!!! This is not my fault!!!"

At every point in time, within every society, there is a "normal" that is upheld and celebrated. Now you might say that in recent years, we've broken away from this rigid normalcy, started celebrating individuality and embracing quirks. But is that truly the case? Or have we simply redefined "normal" to fit a new world?

As new traits become "normal," old ones have to be cast aside to make room, becoming "abnormal." Yesterday's mainstream is today's pariah, and thus the cycle goes on and on and on.

I often wonder if we, as people, can ever break free from this cycle and find true acceptance. But looking around, seeing how confined and repressed everyone seems, it's hard to imagine that ever happening.

People and society may fundamentally be at odds with each other. Perhaps that's just the way it's meant to be. Because here's the strange thing: Even if society pushes individuals to suppress parts of themselves to conform, we accept it. We make peace with

it, maybe even embrace it, if it means we avoid loneliness and isolation. It’s very human—very strong—to sacrifice parts of ourselves for the chance to belong, to survive together.

Still, that doesn’t make it any less painful. Countless people struggle every day, trying to fit into a mold that feels too small, too restrictive. And that’s why Live-On matters. It’s a place where the crazy, the offbeat, the chaotic come out to play. A place where individuality isn’t just tolerated, but celebrated.

???

After thanking them for their time, she slipped quietly out of the room, leaving three figures seated in silence, lost in mental deliberation.

“She’s…interesting,” one of them remarked. “Suzuki, thoughts?”

Suzuki hesitated, and when at last she spoke, her voice lacked conviction. “She’s…unique, for sure.”

The first speaker turned to the other side of the table. “President? What do you think?”

“Mm… I’m not so sure,” the president of Live-On responded, her tone noncommittal.

Lately, to build on the momentum of the company’s recent successes, Live-On had been gearing up to debut a brand-new generation of VTubers. In this cramped, unremarkable office, they held interviews with hopeful candidates, each one vying for a spot on the next big thing.

“What about you, Hareru?” The president shifted her attention to Hareru Asagiri, who had been monitoring the interview from a separate room for privacy.

“I’m with you on this one. She’s good, but there’s just something missing,” Hareru’s voice replied, her tone apologetic.

The interview itself had been lighthearted and cordial, but with only company personnel left in the room, the atmosphere shifted, becoming far more serious. Inviting someone to join a new generation was no small matter. For the company, it wasn’t just about choosing people they could bet their future on—it was about selecting someone whose career they could feel comfortable being responsible for. When the stakes were this high, even the easygoing culture at Live-On couldn’t stop the mood from weighing down on them.

“Got it. We’ll keep her on file for now and move on to the next candidate,” the first speaker said. “Who’s up next?”

Each candidate that day had been impressive, each one surpassing expectations more so than the last. The deliberation had been tough.

But little did they know, everything would be turned on its head before the day was through.

“Let’s see… Ah, here they are.”

The candidate about to make all others seem ordinary, the one destined to elevate Live-On’s influence for years to come, was about to walk in.

“Yuki Tanaka-san.”

This was the origin of Live-On’s third generation. This was the origin of Awayuki Kokorone.

Afterword

Thank you so very much for picking up volume 9 of *VTuber Legend*. I'm the author, Nana Nanato.

In this ninth volume, Tadasu and Churiri hash out their issues with the rest of the gang and show some real growth. If you've finished reading and you're thinking, "Man, Nana Nanato is faking out a series ending *again*!"—then I hate to disappoint, but it's for real this time. Yes, it's true. *VTuber Legend* will conclude with its tenth volume. As the gen five arc wraps up, it feels like the perfect place to bring the story to a close.

That said, it's only the end of the *VTuber Legend* light novel. The manga and anime adaptations are really just getting started, so I hope you'll continue to enjoy the story in those formats as well!

On another note, some of you might have noticed that this volume features Awayuki and the others in 3D for the first time during the third-gen fitness challenge. This came about from me wanting to write a bit about Awayuki getting her 3D debut. But that conversation naturally drifted to "Well, if Awayuki's getting one, then the rest of the girls have to get one," and that soon got out of hand, so the whole thing was scrapped and the girls just ended up with their 3D models from the start. As a side note, I never actually made it a point to state whether any particular stream in the series was done in 2D or 3D—it's always been left up to your imagination. Sorry about that! Just another one of those things I never fully thought through.

And now here comes the self-promotion. By the time this book is out, the anime should be in full swing, the manga should be getting its tankobon release, the official *VTuber Legend* Live-On YouTube clips channel should be up and running, et cetera, et cetera. It's a great time to be a Live-On fan, so check those out!

As much as I'd like to end on a cheeky note like I did in the volume 7 and 8 afterwords, I'll hold back this time. Back then, I felt the need to touch on the realities of writing, but as we approach the final volume, I just want to express my heartfelt gratitude.

To my production partners and all of you, my fans—thank you,

from the bottom of my heart. We couldn’t have made it this far without your incredible support.

Let us meet again in volume 10.

VTuber Legend: How I Went Viral After Forgetting to Turn Off My Stream 9

Author: Nana Nanato Illustrator: Siokazunoko




"KAERU-CHAN, LOOK WHAT MOMMY HAS!"
"UWAAAAAAAAH, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME MOMMY'S TREATING ME LIKE A BABY, UWAAAAAH!!!"


LIVE comment
HUUUUUUH?!
¥ 40,000
The aliens are here! Do not resist!
we've never been so back
I'm likin' this new sensei
This is the lesson in love?!
Love is all about you and me
Even cryptids have friends here.
This is Live-On!
Shuwa-chan, you don't get to act surprised
Don't forget about Live-On's resident anti
Even her name Shuwa-chan has given up
in the pursuit of double entendre victory
Is this the Live-On end I've heard so much about?
A LESSON IN LOVE
#TheCryptids
LOVE
VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 9
AUTHOR NANA NANATO ILLUSTRATOR SIOKAZUNOKO
VTUBER LEGEND: HOW I WENT VIRAL AFTER FORGETTING TO TURN OFF MY STREAM 9

VTuber Legend: How I Went Viral After Forgetting to Turn Off My Stream 9

Author: Nana Nanato Illustrator: Siokazunoko




"KAERU-CHAN, LOOK WHAT MOMMY HAS!"
"UWAAAAAAAAH, THIS IS THE FIRST TIME MOMMY'S TREATING ME LIKE A BABY, UWAAAAAH!!!"

GEN 1



HARERU ASAGIRI

“Heya! It’s me—the sunlight in everyone’s hearts, Hareru Asagiri!”

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

GEN 2



SEI UTSUKI

“Hey, ladies and gents! It’s your girl, Sei-sama!”

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

GEN 3



MASHIRO IRODORI

“Kon-mashiro, everyone! It’s me, Mashiro Irodori, also called Mashiron.”

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



AWAYUKI KOKORONE

“Good evening, everyone. Another nice, light snow is falling tonight? I’m Awayuki Kokorone.”

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



SHION KAMINARI

“Kon-miko, everyone! It’s every-one’s mama, Shion Kaminari!

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



NEKOMA HIRUNE

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

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



HIKARI MATSURIYA

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

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

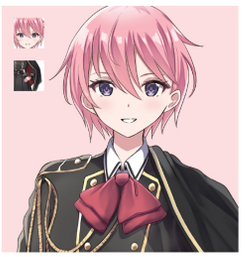


CHAMI YANAGASE

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

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

GEN 4



ALICE SOMA

“Ma’am! Alice Soma, at your service!”

A member of the Resistance, an idol group focused on self-liberation. Her cool looks make her popular with men and women alike, but inside she’s somewhat incompetent, so she works hard to protect her image.



EHRAI SONOKAZE

“Heya, everyone! Are you all doing well? I am! I’m Ehrai Sonokaze, zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo!”

An elven zookeeper at Ehrai Zoo, a major theme park featuring every animal under the sun. Respected to the point of complete obedience by all the animals there, for some reason.



KAERU YAMATANI

“You can cross the mountains and dales, but you can always return here. Welcome to Kaeru Yamatani’s stream.”

A mysterious, mystical woman who is said to appear before kind, loving hearts that have been grievously wounded, grant them her healing, and then return upon the wind.

GEN 5



TADASU MIYAUCHI

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

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



CHURIRI

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

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



DAGGER

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

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

Live-ON

Live-On

The Chosen Shining Girls

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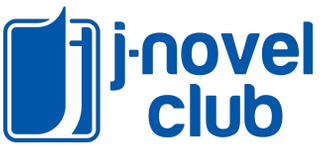
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VTuber Legend: How I Went Viral after Forgetting to Turn Off My Stream Volume 9
by Nana Nanato

Translated by Dawson Chen
Edited by Alexandra Fresch

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